
Episode 459 – Pack Rat continues to be aggressively unlikeable

It was a nice apartment, well-lit, spacious and well furnished. A pair of nice, plush leather couches set the scene, arranged in a neat L-shape, with a small coffee table between them. What dominated the room, however, was the massive flat-screen against one wall, so big as to loom over all else around it. By comparison, the broad windows with views out over a strangely futuristic metropolis and the other doorways leading away to gods alone knew where seemed like afterthoughts.

“And it actually took off?” Rebecca asked Rick as the pair entered.

“I’m as shocked as you are.” Rick shrugged his shoulders and wandered into the lounge.

“There were actually a lot of returning players,” Dan added, following the pair. “And the private server was almost as stable as the original game.”

“Huh.” Rebecca paused momentarily lost for words. “That is the absolute last thing I expected.”

“So you two are having a real go of this?” Tsuneo asked as he stepped through, closing the door behind him.

“Oh yeah. We’ve got together with Celena and heavy breathing guy and have formed our own team,” Dan told them.

“Your own team on the private server revival of a buggy online shooter that never left beta?” Tsuneo asked, almost as if he couldn’t believe his own words.

“Yep,” Rick declared proudly. “I called them ‘Red Team.’ I’m working on the lore now.”

“Save me,” Rebecca quietly hissed at Tsuneo.

“Well, two things strike me about this fic,” Tsuneo declared loudly, desperate to change the topic. “The first is that it’s rather ridiculously edgy, almost to the point where you’d think it was parody. The second is that it’s very, very furry.”

“Yeah, I mean it really likes to double down on both those points,” Dan agreed. “On one side, you have Pack Rat’s backstory complete with his clear murder-suicide revenge plan and some light Holocaust imagery. Plus on top of that you’ve got Saijit who is a cannibal berserker with skulls strapped to his waist, for crying out loud.”

“And then on the other side the fic really heavily loads down on the furry cliches,” Tsuneo noted. “All the featured characters are animal-like, with the fic constantly emphasising their features and abilities. More importantly then that, however, is that it’s really pushing hard on the all humans are bastards, all furries are magical angle that’s so prominent in furry fiction.”

“Yeah, and what gets me is that both of these things are pretty at odds with how Champions Online is presented,” Dan finished. “Which is a bright, colourful and cheesy world of four-colour superhero adventure supported by really unfunny, forced and dated pop culture references.”

“Those are both valid points,” Rebecca agreed. “But the simple truth is that Champions Online’s community, back when it existed, had a severe disconnect between the setting and their own interpretation.”

“How so?” Dan asked.

"There seemed to be a genuine dislike of playing actual colourful superheroes," Rick explained. "Players seemed to prefer creating either grimdark tacticoool blood-soaked vigilantes, various sorts of furry animal people or supernatural creatures such as vampires, werewolves, demons and the like."

"And even when people did play traditional superheroes, there was this need to load them up with overly convoluted, stupidly tragic pasts," Rebecca added. "Case in point, the Angels of Fury."

"Ew," Rick shuddered.

"Okay, I can understand that," Tsuneo admitted. "The question is, why? And more to the point, why does this seem to happen so often?"

"Because there are certain mindsets that are deeply ingrained into roleplay communities," Rebecca answered. "Happy, normal, well-adjusted characters are seen as 'boring' and thus don't get attention. However, angst, dark backgrounds and buckets of poorly-realised tragedy are seen as ways to make a character 'interesting' and, more to the point, to demand attention."

"Watch as every gathering turns into everyone trying to out-wangst each other," Rick noted.

"Exactly," she nodded. "It's blatant emotional manipulation; you're meant to feel bad for a character who's wallowing in tragedy, and you're a bad person if you don't drop everything to comfort them and/or have badly-written cybersex."

"And nobody will ever speak out against this sort of behaviour, of course," Tsuneo considered. "Because everyone does it."

"You have these two basic mindsets that are deeply ingrained into every roleplay community," Rebecca explained. "All roleplay is good roleplay, and all criticism is bad. The clique that got control of Champions Online's RP community were very bad about both these points. You could show them a Club Caprice full of level six blatant ERPer demonic vampire catgirls and they'd simply go 'this is fine'."

"You say 'was' there," Tsuneo noted.

"Given that the game died on launch and spent more than half its life in maintenance mode, you can imagine that the community died a little," Rick noted. "Ironically many of them fled to the fan-run City of Heroes."

"Well that explains one half of it," Dan considered. "But why was Champions Online's community so furry?"

"Simple," Rebecca nodded. "Give someone a system in which they could make a catgirl and they will invariably make a catgirl."

"Can't argue with that."

"Good morning everyone," the Voice interjected.

"And good morning to you too, Overmind," Rick shot back.

"I'd ask which one of the many, many characters called that you're referring to, but then I realise I don't actually care," Rebecca shrugged. "So I'll give you that regardless."

"Technical Victory," Rick grinned.

"So we're going to have to read more of Pack Rat today, aren't we?" Dan asked.

"We are indeed," the Voice confirmed. "I have the next five chapters lined up for today."

"Well hell," Dan sighed. "More furry incel gun porn it is."

"When you put it like that..." Rebecca considered. "Actually no, it sounds exactly like what it is. Well done, I guess."

"I'd ask if it could be worse, but then I remember Angels of Fury again," Rick sighed.

"I have a question, Voice," Dan spoke up. "How do you even find this stuff? Because I don't think any of us had incel ratman gun porn on their fanfic bingo"

"I'd be worried if we did," Tsuneo noted.

"Each fic for review is individually hand-selected based on feedback from past reviews," the Voice explained.

"So an automated fic-trawling bot," Rebecca interjected.

"No doubt," Dan shook his head.

"So here's the question," Tsuneo considered as he took his place on the couch. "Do you think we'll actually meet Doctor Medford in this chunk of fic?"

"Probably," Rebecca replied as she and the others joined him. "And I have no doubt that he will be horribly ineffectual, incredibly stupid and represent no actual threat to our alleged protagonist either."

"Based on our past track record, I can't help but agree on all those points," Tsuneo finished as the big screen turned on, converting the world over to script format.

> Chapter 7

> [[Seven chapters and counting. Wow! I honestly never thought this little story of mine would go so far.

Tsuneo: I wish it didn't

> I want to thank everyone both on and offline for their support.

Rick: And for letting me misuse – I mean, borrow their characters.

> Without your encouragement I

> definitely wouldn't be able to maintain the drive to keep writing. Thanks everyone!]]

Dan: And Capcom All Staff

> Pack Rat's breathing was deep and somewhat labored as he rested against the metal wall of the
> side office

Rebecca: There had better be some good explanation as to why this entire base is made out of bare metal

Rick: Because it's an evil organisation

Rebecca: Good point.

> her had taken temporary shelter in. He sat just across from the entrance, his form mostly
> concealed by the row of desks between him and the door.

Rick: His greatest enemy was the open-plan office

> His trusty backpack lay open at his side.

Dan: I assume the alarm is still blaring and VIPER troops are flooding the base.

Tsuneo: Yes, why?

Dan: Oh, no reason.

> Pack rummaged around in it hastily and withdrew a small pistol shaped device with a needle where
> the barrel would be.

Rebecca: Even his medical gear needs to be gun-shaped.

> He pressed the device to his thigh and pressed down hard before pulling the trigger.

Tsuneo: Seems reasonable since he was stabbed in the shoulder.

> There was the hiss of compressed gas as the device injected a cocktail of drugs and
> advanced medicines into the rat's system.

Dan: Pinned down, bleeding from multiple wounds and dosing yourself up with drugs. A pretty typical morning for Nick Nolte

> The injection would slow his bleeding and numb the
> worst of the pain from his wounds, but only for a little while.

Rebecca: In the meantime, he'd be high as a kite

> The ratling stashed the medical stimulant back into his backpack and began to zip it closed.

Tsuneo: He's surrounded and in the middle of enemy territory, but proper packing order must be maintained

> His
> ears twitched reflexively and he jerked to attention as his superb hearing picked up the sounds of a
> squad of soldiers entering the room adjacent to this one.

Rick: And it just so happens that the next room is the men's.

> The slightly mechanical sounds of their voices modulated by their helmets grated on his ears.

Dan: You get the feeling that Pack Rat would complain about anything given the chance

> "Cameras are out all along this corridor. He must be close."

> "Can't be too much fight left in that freak after what happened with him and Medford's pet."

Rebecca: When that dog goes walkies, it really goes walkies.

> "Too bad about that cat. Nice legs on that one."

> "Seriously?" the voice sounded incredulous.

> "What? Don't Judge me!"

Rick: Evil cartoonish terrorists can be furries too

> "Just don't let Medford catch you ogling any of his new batch

Dan: Even the lady Gremlin

> or he'll have 'em skin you alive."

> "Shut it you two and keep looking for the rat!"

Tsuneo: Last guy's determined to be the least cartoonishly evil goon of the bunch.

> Pack frowned and muttered a curse. This confirmed that Medford, the scientist responsible for his
> own existence, had already created more cat warriors.

Rick: And soon they'd be Autoduelling all over the interstate

Tsuneo: Cat warriors, Rick. Not Car Warriors.

Rick: So I don't need my set square then?

Tsuneo: No.

> After the beating he had already taken

> earlier the rat man cringed to think what several more of those felines could do to him.

Dan [Pack Rat]: Boy it'd be terrible if a whole bunch of sexy cat ladies jumped on me at once. I'd sure hate for that to happen

> It also meant

> that Medford was probably still on site, which filled the rat with a renewed rush of anticipation.

Rebecca: Ironically, Medford nipped out for a smoko five minutes before he attacked.

> With the search party rapidly closing in Pack planted another explosive charge on the underside of

> the drawer in a nearby desk (there was probably a lot of valuable data on the desktops in this room

> that VIPER would just hate to lose)

Rebecca: Actually, these are all just dumb terminals and everything goes straight to their cloud storage system. It prevents data loss, makes it easy for them to cut off compromised cells and reduces vulnerabilities. You really need to get with the times, Pack Rat

> and readied himself. His pack was feeling heavier than usual on

> his shoulder despite having been lightened by several ammunition reloads.

Dan: Pack Rat goes through ammo like a... Well...

Rebecca: A rat through cheese?

Dan: Yeah, I was trying not to say that.

> The red droplets

> periodically dripping from the arm of his jacket reminded him that the bleeding was only slowed for

> the time being.

Rick: He just remembered that he'd been stabbed

> Pack crouched behind a desk in the darkened office he had hidden in, rifle braced against the

> desktop. Pack was quietly thankful that it was his left shoulder, and not his right, that had taken the

> wound from the huntress' knife earlier or the recoil from his rifle would have been unbearable.

Dan: Pack Rat gets all antsy if he can't shoot people

> As it was the resultant ache was tolerable, but just barely.

Tsuneo: Being stabbed was a mild inconvenience

> Two VIPER soldiers in their trademark green and yellow armor

Rick: Complete with pointless motorcycle goggles and cute bandanna

> turned the corner and entered the

> room. Their faces were concealed by their helmets, which sported full reflective face shields. Pack

> knew from his time with viper

Rebecca: That those things got sweaty as hell.

- > that inside those helmets were advanced heads-up displays which
- > relayed pertinent information to the soldier from central command as well as providing some
- > enhanced targeting and visual capabilities.

Dan: It could also be used to livestream

- > One of the pair was, apparently, more alert then the other

Tsuneo: Actually awake, you mean.

- > and pulled up short when he spotted Pack Rat, or more likely his rifle, a short distance away.
- > He shouted a warning and dove for cover.

Rebecca: I just assume these sorts of places have an abundant supply of waist-high crates

- > His companion was not nearly so quick, and a three
- > round burst of armor piercing rounds from Pack's weapon struck him squarely in the chest. The
- > unlucky trooper fell backwards as the other opened fire with his energy rifle, lighting up the dim
- > room with crackling blue bolts of plasma.

Tsuneo: In a world where the generic bad guy goons have lasers, your gun porn seems a little pointless

- > The other two soldiers in the search party hit the door, using the frame for cover, and fired in Pack's
- > direction. The ratling was forced to duck as the sizzling bolts raced past him.

Tsuneo: I mean, he doesn't have to. You know, on our account.

- > Several struck the
- > desk he was behind and blew straight through the thin aluminum and particle board construction,

Rick: Damn you, flat-pack furniture

- > leaving gaping holes in the rodent's cover. Pack squeaked in alarm and scrambled away from the
- > ruined cover, keeping his head low. He cursed himself for having to stop and tend his wounds.

Rebecca: Next time he'll just let the open wounds go untreated and fester

- > "With all the bull-crap science they use to make me,

Dan: Weirdly enough, the whole project started as a new Red Bull flavour.

- > they could have at least given me enhanced
- > healing or something." Pack grumbled as he skittered to the end of the row of desks.

Tsuneo: You can tunnel through nearly anything, have super senses, incredible gun skills and have already walked off multiple severe wounds. Suck it up, Princess

- > The rat's tactical training kicked in as he assessed his situation. He was out-numbered as usual.

Rick: This happens to him a lot

- > The tight quarters of the room were too tight for explosives. A fragmentation grenade would shred
- > him as badly as the soldiers at this range.

Dan: Even though the thought had crossed his mind

- > A charge would be suicide unless...

Tsuneo: Things to consider before backing yourself into the room with only one exit.

> Pack Rat paused for a split second, calculating,

Rebecca: Apparently unconcerned about the raging gunfight going on around him

> ears twitching as he heard the soldier move to try and flank him. He

> knew their helmets were equipped with image enhancers so the dim lighting would not hinder them

> any more than it did Pack.

Tsuneo: While I appreciate the attention to detail, do we really need to know every little feature of VIPER's equipment?

Rebecca: Would you rather he write more about his guns?

Tsuneo: I withdraw my question.

> What they didn't have was superhuman senses of hearing and smell.

Dan: Jokes on you, we installed smell-o-vision in our gear

> Pack plucked a canister from the auxiliary duffel strapped to his hips. He pressed a button on one

> end and then rolled the rounded can towards the VIPER troop's position.

Rebecca: He's sending them party favours, how nice.

> As it slid across the floor several streams of thick white smoke hissed from the can,

Rick: He forgot he had this

Tsuneo: Given that he's got two guns, a rocket launcher, innumerable grenades and bombs and all manner of other crap at hand, I think that's forgivable

> filling the room at a, to the enemy soldiers, alarming rate.

> "Cover the door," one soldier shouted.

> "Where did it go?" another called out.

> Pack Rat grinned. His smoke grenades were a custom blend cooked up by the chemists at UNTIL,

Dan: Who were also trying to make a new Red Bull flavour.

> the international peacekeeping force that Pack often worked for. These canisters were filled with an

> odorless, non toxic compound

Rick: But it still bought him out in a nasty rash

> which could completely obscure normal vision without interfering with

> the rat's other superior sensory perceptions.

Dan: So, smoke.

Rick: Ah, but it's custom smoke.

Dan: What's the difference?

Rick: How much UNTIL charges him.

> The rat-man waited for a quick three count, letting the smoke fill the room fully before making his

> move. The same senses that let Pack Rat perceive his environment while burrowing through the

> earth kicked into gear.

Rebecca: Cursing once again that he can't use them without effectively blinding himself.

> With his amazingly good sense of smell, hearing, and touch he could sense

> his surroundings nearly as clearly as with sight alone. The vibrations of the enemy soldier's

> movements, the sounds of their panicked voices, even the smell of man, leather, and steel betrayed
> their locations.

Dan: That and he could tab-target between them

> Pack closed his eyes and moved from behind the desk, padding quietly towards the nearest viper
> soldier.

Dan: He is actually creeping up on tippy-toes, isn't he?

Rick: Well, he might have digitgrade legs...

Rebecca: Trust me, if he did, we'd know it by now.

> He was pivoting in place, struggling to see anything through the cloying smoke.

Tsuneo: And doing his best to make himself a target.

> Pack Rat

> brought the butt of his rifle down hard, cracking the faceplate of the trooper's helmet. The man
> staggered and clutched his face with one hand, uttering a cry of shock and pain as his nose was
> broken. The hybrid commando

Rebecca: Hybrid commando sounds like a new eco-friendly SUV line.

> swiveled his rifle around, aiming the barrel of his rifle at the chest
> plate of his stunned victim. One pull of the trigger, three depleted uranium slugs, and the soldier fell.

Rebecca: At this point he might as well say he's firing magic space bullets for all the sense it's making

> "What the hell?"

> "It's the rat!"

Tsuneo: [Soldier] You mean the guy we had pinned in the room is the one attacking us in the room?
Great observation, Harold, I'm so glad you're in charge.

> "Where?"

Dan: [Muffled] In my face.

> The two remaining troops in at the door panicked. They back away from the doorway

Tsuneo: Making you wonder why they didn't just leave the room to begin with

> and fired their weapons indiscriminately, sending crackling blue bolts sailing off into the smoke.

Dan: Gee, I sure hope there wasn't anything valuable in that room they needed to preserve.

> Pack Rat ducked

> low, creeping through the swirling mists to avoid the random pulse rifle fire. The two blinded humans
> stood near each other, almost back to back. Pack slipped unseen out the door and around them,
> approaching them from the side. The rodent hybrid vaulted over a desk and planted one booted foot
> on the knee of the soldier to his left, who emitted an extremely unmanly shriek

Rick: I can only imagine he sounded like Reb Brown

> as his knee bent at

> an unnatural ninety degree angle. As one foe crumpled to the floor his companion whirled around
> bringing his weapon to bear.

> "Ramirez! What happened? Damn it!"

> The fallen soldier was in no condition to warn his squad mate as pack slithered around the last
> remaining trooper,

Dan: I mean, smoke or no smoke, he is still right in front of him.

> staying behind him as he pivoted, just out of line of sight. After one full revolution

Rick: Three sixty degree noscope rat

> Pack struck, sweeping the legs out from beneath his opponent.

Tsuneo: Cobra Kai's Kreese nods in approval.

> The rat kicked away their weapons
> and quickly finished them with two quick bursts of fire at point-blank range, ending the immediate
> threat.

Rebecca: He didn't need to kill them, but he did anyway

Tsuneo: How very heroic

> Pack gritted his teeth against the lingering, throbbing pain of his wounds,

Dan: Pain that didn't stop him from effortlessly killing four goons

Tsuneo: His shoulder is only a mild inconvenience at most

> numbed though it was by the medical stimulant he had injected moments ago.

Rick: Pure liquid Pop Rocks.

> He had five, maybe ten minutes before the
> effects of the medicine wore off and injecting multiple doses in a short period could be just as
> dangerous as the wounds themselves.

Rebecca: And then he figured 'why the hell not'

> Pack Rat knew he had to move more quickly.

Tsuneo: Which is why he spent so long hunkered down in a side room.

Dan: And this is why you keep stimpacks on your quick slots.

> Leaving the
> decimated search party and dissipating smoke behind, the ratling moved deeper into the research
> facility,

Rick: You don't actually know where you're going, do you?

Tsuneo: He does not.

> mindful of the alarms which continued to announce his presence to the whole facility.

> "Why haven't I seen more troops?"

Dan: Because it's the weekend

> pack thought out loud, though he was afraid that he might not really want to know the answer.

> ----

> Chapter 8

> The alarms stopped. Ordinarily Pack Rat would have been grateful that his sensitive ears no longer

> had to endure the incessant, grating wail of the VIPER research facility's alarm sirens,

Tsuneo: He's really at the point where he's going to whine about every last minor thing, isn't he?

> but this worried the rat.

Dan: False alarm. We lost the cat mutant and four goons in a mess hall spill.

> The unexpected silence and the lack of resistance he was encountering in the
> sterile, antiseptic smelling corridors of the laboratory could only mean that the snakes were
> changing tactics.

Dan: They'd decided not to just throw bodies at him in a futile effort

Rick: Cunning move

> The man-rat's ears twitched agitatedly atop his snouted head as he jogged cautiously through the
> suddenly silent passages.

Rebecca: Invading a terrorist base is no reason not to get your cardio in.

> He passed through several rooms lined with rows of flashing computers,
> microscopes, and other contraptions whose functions were beyond Pack's limited medical
> knowledge.

Rick: Oh look, they have the machine that goes 'ping'.

> Pack made the, admittedly arbitrary, decision that the more fancy and delicate the
> equipment looked the more important it was and so took that as a cue to plant an explosive charge
> on the most exotic looking piece of equipment in each room as he passed through,

Tsuneo: Which is how he ended up wiring a fake pot plant to blow

> after popping a round into any security cameras he found, of course.

Rebecca: I'm glad he's focused on his objective and not wasting time.

> The extra duffel he had brought along was
> quickly losing weight as he left little presents for VIPER in his wake like some sort of demented
> Santa Clause.

Rick: A gun-toting furry hobo Santa at that

Dan: And that wouldn't even be the strangest Santa I've seen

> The dull throbbing ache in the rat's shoulder and forearm was an ever present reminder of the
> limited time he had

Tsuneo: As he sabotages yet another random device on his way.

> before the stabilizing medication he had injected a few minutes ago wore off.
> Pack's wounds now only oozed blood rather than gushed,

Rebecca: He didn't pack any bandages or anything, did he?

Tsuneo: It was either that or more bombs

Rebecca: Of course

> but even so he felt a little light headed from the blood loss sustained

Tsuneo: Although gunning down goons also makes him feel that way.

> before he had a chance to treat himself. The sleeve of his jacket was

> now a solid red mass where the huntress he fought earlier had clawed his arm,

Rick: And it clashes with the pattern.

> and a similar stain

> was slowly, steadily creeping across his left shoulder where her blade had been impaled.

Dan: And the worst part of it all is that his jacket is ruined

> Pack shook the cobwebs to clear his head and rounded a corner, coming to a large door. The

> markings on the portal indicated the room beyond was for "incubation." The rat froze. Memories of

> months spent suspended in a large glass cylinder, with tubes and wires running through his body,

> flooded his mind.

Rick: Down in the Matrix Corporation lab with the other DNAgents

Tsuneo: Well done, Rick. I have no clue at all what you said

Rick: And yet it's also entirely appropriate

> He hesitated for a moment, suddenly feeling very unsure of himself.

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] You know, maybe it's not too late to back out. Chalk this up as a misunderstanding.

> Pack's hands

> shook a little as he grasped the handles of the metal double door. He tested them and found them

> unlocked. The magnetic clamps that would normally hold the door like this secure without first

> swiping the appropriate security card in the nearby panel were disengaged.

Rebecca: Yes, actually, we did understand the term 'unlocked.'

> Pack took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

Tsuneo [Pack Rat]: Well this is an obvious trap, so I see no reason why I shouldn't just barge right on in

> The room beyond the doors was a large, brightly lit, dome-shaped affair.

Rick: Thunder, terror, techno or millennium? We need to know

> At floor level the center of

> the room was occupied by a circular row of computer consoles, arranged so their operators would

> face towards the outer walls.

Rebecca: You watch. The seating arrangements will be vital to the fic

> Lining said walls, spaced equidistant around the room, were familiar tall glass tubes.

Rick: They're just like the lava lamp that Ken got him for his birthday.

Tsuneo: Cloning tanks.

Rick: Or, I suppose they could be cloning tanks.

> Each stood about eight feet tall, about four feet in diameter, and filled with a light

> blue, bubbling fluid.

Rick: This is where 7-11 develops new Slurpee flavours

> Various machines were attached to each tube, sporting an array of blinking, beeping digital readouts.

Dan: Eat at Joe's. Eat at Joe's. Eat at Joe's.

> Pack cringed as he looked upon them, remembering his own time spent
> suspended within the warm, bubbling fluid.

Dan: He missed being stewed

> Inside each cylinder, floating lazily in their artificial
> womb, were the nascent forms of several humanoid felines. Their features were partly obscured

Rebecca: Trying to keep a teen rating.

> by the liquid and the breathing masks securely attached to their faces.

> Pack cringed when he saw the assortment of tubes, wires, electrodes, and other probes connected
> to the unconscious cat women.

Rick: But were they from the moon?

> They were the same sort of tools that had been unceremoniously
> torn from his body upon his own "birth."

Tsuneo: Pack Rat had wanted to go on wearing them wherever he went

> His gaze lingered on the sleeping forms within the tubes.

Dan: And not for the first time, duh boobs.

> Floating like this they seemed so much less dangerous, peaceful even.

Rebecca: Heck, he could sell this to a day spa.

> For a moment Pack
> wondered if he could safely get the sleeping huntresses out of their tubes and away from the facility,

Dan: You've doomed us all!

Tsuneo: The process isn't complete, you monster!

Rick: We can't survive outside our tubes!

> the thought of triggering his explosives and dooming the innocent creatures gnawing at his
> conscience.

Rebecca: For the first time ever, he was having second thoughts about indiscriminate killing

> The rat's thoughts were interrupted

Dan: Duuuuhhhhhhhh

> as a rough, amplified voice blared down from above.

> "Welcome home, number six oh nine," a familiar voice called out from a speaker positioned
> somewhere near the domed ceiling.

Dan: [Pack Rat] I'm number 610.

Rebecca: [Medford] Wait, you are? Terribly sorry, huge misunderstanding.

> Pack Rat lifted his gaze. A metal catwalk circled the laboratory some thirty feet or so overhead,
> hugging the walls of the rounded room.

Rick: Just begging for a railing kill.

> Dangling from the center of the ceiling was an octagonal shaped structure,

Tsuneo: Why they had a UFC ring hanging over the room was another matter

> some kind of observation or control room. It was lined with long glass windows

> angled outward to afford anyone inside a clear view of the area below. A lone form could be seen in
> the control room.

Dan: It's Urkel. I can just tell.

> Its features were mostly hidden by the blaring bright lights of the control room.

> "You've performed far beyond my expectations number six oh nine.

Rebecca: Weather that says a lot about Pack Rat or his expectations is up to you

> It's satisfying to see all my hard work wasn't wasted on you," the voice chilled Pack Rat to the bone.

> "Why doncha come down here, director, and we can discuss my report card face to face," Pack

> punctuated the request by jerking the slide on his rifle, the click-clack sound echoing through the
> large room as he chambered a round.

Tsuneo: He was chilled to the bone, but not so much that he couldn't make wisecracks and load his gun

> "As much as I would like to oblige," Medford chuckled from his perch,

Dan: [Pack Rat] Wait, really?

Rebecca: [Medford] No, you buffoon.

> "it would be inappropriate to discuss your grade before the final exam, now, wouldn't it?"

Rick: I mean, you flunked the course anyway. Really this is more of a formality

> Pack Rat sneered and raised his rifle, aiming it at the form silhouetted by the bright lights above, but
> he was interrupted by the VIPER scientist's voice again.

> "Ah, ah, ahh," he chided, "let's not be overly hasty now. No sense in wasting the ammunition," the
> voice's tone moved from mocking to sinister,

Dan: I don't see why it can't be both.

> "You're going to need it. These windows are bullet proof anyhow."

Tsuneo: Doctor Medford is the rare mad scientist who's taken precautions against being destroyed by his own creation

> Slots in the walls along the catwalk circling the room opened, and from them stepped seven lithe,
> feminine forms clad in black, form-fitting, armored suits.

Rick: Literal catsuits

> Each was clearly feline but the markings

> varied from tiger stripes to leopard spots to a sleek matte black like a panther.

Rick: One of them was based on a Pallas Cat and was making faces at him

> They glared down at Pack Rat, a cold, restrained anger burning in their slit feline eyes.

Dan: I think his only resort here is hoping he tastes terrible.

> "Magnificent, aren't they, the second generation of my huntresses?

Rebecca: Not really, no.

> I should thank you six oh nine.

> Your first encounter with their older sister revealed some minor flaws in my design,

Dan: Like their propensity to cough up hairballs and shred the curtains

> which I was able to quickly correct, of course."

Rebecca: In the time it took for him to get here? Sure he may be an evil maniac, but you have to admire his work rate.

> "We're not just numbers and generations you bastard! We're people!

Dan: Yeah, you're not a number, you're a free man. We get it.

> You're making people and treating them like tools," Pack shouted up at the darkened form.

Rebecca: Wouldn't it be funny if that was just a cardboard standee and Medford wasn't even there?

> "The first huntress' rage and primal fury," Medford continued, ignoring the ratling's protests, "while

> impressive, was too uncontrollable to be of any real use to our cause.

Tsuneo: In the end they had to lure her with a rubber mousie

> My new daughters, I believe you will find, are much more even-tempered and precise."

Rick: Smash cut to one of them deliberately knocking a vase off a shelf

> The seven sisters chuckled menacingly.

Dan: They're looking at him like... Y'know...

Rebecca: Like a cat looks at a rat?

Dan: I mean, if you have to put it like that.

> "Their older sister served her purpose,

Tsuneo: She's was a proof of concept that got interest in their Kickstarter. What, you think it's cheap making mutant clone animal people?

> just as you have six oh nine. Once you are subdued I will

> use your genetic material to finish project Dubiel,"

Dan: Is it just me or does this all sound very DELTA Invasion?

Tsuneo: Just a bit

> Medford's voice was cool, confident.

Tsuneo: [Medford] Also, this is a recording.

> "Your project failed, director. I escaped, and I've been giving your boys hell ever since.

Tsuneo: Oh, they're not his. Sure, he's VIPER affiliated but not an actual VIPER member. He's a subcontracted mad scientist.

> I'm bringing

> this place down around your ears and there's nothing you can do to stop me!" Pack Rat called back.

Rebecca: The team of homicidal catgirls surrounding him notwithstanding

> "My dear creature, is that what you think happened?" Medford gave a low, bemused chuckle, "Do you truly think that you escaped?"

Rick: Quick, check for a spinning top or a repeating cat or something.

> Pack Rat started to speak but stammered over his words.

> "The experiment never ended, six oh nine, we merely moved to the next stage,

Tsuneo: Clinical trials

> an extended field test."

> "What?!" Pack shrieked.

> "You've proven time and again your ability to persevere and adapt.

Rick: Smash cut to Pack Rat tangled up in a blanket draped awkwardly over his couch and trying to reach for the remote.

> You work well alone or in groups... odd though they may be.

Dan: Just remember that his buddies are a cannibal werewolf and a space lizard man.

> As far as I'm concerned, so far, you've been a resounding success."

Tsuneo: Which makes you realise that he set the bar really, really low.

> "No! I got away. On my own..."

> "Of course, of course, with the help of a conveniently stolen security card, and a poorly locked armory," Medford mocked,

Dan: And the many, many goons you killed along the way.

> "You poor deluded creature, did you really think that one little rat could so easily escape the maze I spent so many years perfecting.

Tsuneo: And he never did find the cheese.

> Every move you've made has been by my design alone."

Rick: Ah yes, the classic moment when the villain reveals that this has been their plan all along and then you realise it makes no sense whatsoever

> Pack Rat stammered again but managed to choke out, "But... the soldiers I've killed... your men..."

> "Acceptable losses. You know the old saying. Eggs. Omelets.

Rebecca: [Medford] Chalk, dairy solids.

Tsuneo: [Medford] Poh-tay-to, toh-mah-to.

Dan: [Medford] Apples, horseradish.

> It's all part of the Great Serpent's plan."

Rick [Pack Rat]: All of it?

Dan [Medford]: Every last part.

Rick [Pack Rat]: So all the time I spent grinding low-level mobs in Westside?
Dan [Medford]: All a part of the plan
Rick [Pack Rat]: And all the time I spent in Club Caprice looking for furry ERP?
Dan [Medford]: Exactly as I had wanted
Rick [Pack Rat]: And when Saijit hocked up on my shoes and tried to sniff my buttohole?
Dan [Medford]: But of course. I left nothing to chance.
Rick [Pack Rat]: But how about Sahara and...
Dan [Medford]: My Friendzone calculations were off the chart

> "You... you..." Pack was at a loss for insults, a rare occurrence.

> The voice from above sighed, "Now now, no reason to fret over it.

Rebecca: [Medford] Just pretend it's not ridiculously stupid and move on.

> Come along quietly, won't you? We are wasting valuable time."

> "You think I'd just give up like that?" Pack barked.

Rick [Medford]: How about if I offered you this Sahara body pillow?

Dan [Pack Rat]: Damn, you got me there

> "Oh, no, of course not. You're far too strong-willed for that. Something I'll have to weed out of the
> next iteration," Medford muttered the last bit,

Tsuneo: I can only hope the cat girls are all standing around the edge of the room while this is going on, thinking 'do we need to be here for this?'

> "But I knew I would have to provide you with some appropriate motivation."

Rebecca: Because when you take away his desire to kill Medford, what does Pack Rat actually have going for him in his life?

Rick: Nothing at all. Boogie boogie, boogie boogie.

> "What could you possibly..."

> Several large screens along the walls of the domed room lit up. Images of Pack Rat spending time
> with his friends shuffled randomly across them. Ken,

Dan: Wait, there's a guy called Ken in this fic?

> Saijit, Sahara, and even Haraka, all made
> appearances. Pack's lips curled back as a low growl welled up in his throat.

Tsuneo [Pack Rat]: Okay, how's this for a deal. You kill Haraka and I'll come peacefully.

> "You've made some unusual friends in your time in the outside six oh nine.

Dan: I really think 'friends' is far too strong a word

> But I suppose that would
> be expected, I mean, no normal human would ever accept you. Let's see... a werewolf, a lizard,

Rick: [Pack Rat] Cyborg lizard.

Tsuneo: [Medford] Yes.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Who's a spaceman.

Tsuneo: [Medford] Yes, yes.

Rick: [Pack Rat] From the future.

Tsuneo: [Medford] Yes, I know this.

Rick: [Pack Rat] And another dimension.

Tsuneo: [Medford] Yes, we get it already.

Rick: [Pack Rat] He was changed by nanotech, you know.

Tsuneo: [Medford] Honestly, I'm doing them all a favour

> a cat... ironic... and this one... she's quite fascinating."

> The images froze on a still shot of Sahara. Her face was frozen in a cheeky smile

Rebecca: Her entire personality is 'tee hee'

> directed teasingly at Pack Rat who was shrugging helplessly at something Sajit had said.

> "She's a lovely little chimera, that one. I can't help but wonder what secrets might be revealed by
> dissecting-"

Dan: Medford's the only guy who looked forward to cutting up frogs in high school.

> "You keep your scaly paws off her you filthy goddamn snake!"

Tsuneo: [Medford] Technically snakes don't have paws.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Oh, you know what I mean.

> Pack screamed, aiming his rifle back

> at the control room. The seven felines on the catwalk, who had been looking extremely bored up till
> now,

Rebecca: I'm with them

> tensed, preparing to leap down.

> "Oh my," Medford's voice purred over the loudspeaker, his features still unseen, outlined only by the
> lights behind him,

Dan: I mean sure, it's ominous and all, but they're really glaring down on him and the control room's
starting to get stuffy.

> "touched a nerve have we? Has number six oh nine developed a bit of a crush
> during his field test? Oh that's rich."

Dan [Medford]: I mean, she's a malformed freak of nature ex-hooker and even then she's far too good
for you

> Medford began to laugh, a genuinely cruel, mocking sound. The huntresses all joined in, their shrill,
> caterwauling voices grating on Pack Rat's already raw, frayed nerves.

Rebecca: At least they're not singing about being jellical.

> The rat reached back and

> detached the spare duffel strapped to his waist, letting it clatter to the floor.

Dan: [Pack Rat] I drop my bag at you, sir!

> After a moment Medford had recovered his composure, now simply giggling through his words,

Rebecca: [Medford] Oh, if your unholy acts of science don't bring you joy, then what are you even
doing?

> "Now, as amusing as that was, let's end this silliness shall we?

Tsuneo: Please?

> Come back to us and I'll have no
> real need to have any interest in your little girlfriend or the others. What do you say six oh nine?
> Hm?"

Dan [Medford]: I've got a nice block of cheese if you say yes

> Pack Rat's breathing was heavy and tired sounding despite the anger welling up in him. The
> stinging throb in the rat's arm and shoulder was steadily increasing.

Tsuneo: Medford's plan is to just let him bleed out.

> He eyed the control room, with
> the silhouette of his creator leering down at him, confident in his control of the situation.

Dan: [Medford] Shall I throw in a chess metaphor here, or is that a bit too much?

> He glanced at the huntresses, all poised to tear him to shreds at a word from their "father."

Rebecca: And honestly, could you hurry it up? They've got a thing to get to.

> Then he looked at the duffel bag,

Dan: Like it was his only friend.

> now partly empty from the day's activities, lying slightly open at his feet.

Tsuneo: Yeah, he's had a busy day carousing down here, killing goons and planting explosives.

> With a weary sigh pack fell to his knees, letting his rifle clatter to the floor.

"That's it..." Medford crooned.

"Just one thing, father," the ratling croaked.

> "Yes?"

> "My name... is Pack Rat!"

Rick [Medford]: I mean, when you think about it, that's a pretty stupid name.

> Pack plunged his hands into the duffel at his feet, coming back with a hefty metal cylinder with 2
> handles attached.

Rebecca: Should we kill him?

Dan [Medford]: No, let's see where he's going with this

> With a deft motion the rat hybrid extended the barrel of his rocket launcher with a
> loud -shunk- sound and aimed it at the control room.

Dan: And the laser turrets cut him down.

Rebecca: Doesn't seem like it.

Dan: Really? No laser turrets?

Rebecca: Apparently not.

Dan: Seriously, if you don't have laser turrets in your evil lab, then what are you even doing?

> A cry of surprise rose up among Medford and the Huntresses.

> "Take him down," Medford shouted.

> The cat-like cloned soldiers all sprang over the railing in unison at the command of their father. Pack
> paid no heed to them. A pull of the trigger sent a small missile and a trail of smoke streaking
> towards the control room above. The rocket raced past the descending felines and shattered the
> foremost window of the octagonal control room, the sheer force of the projectile overpowering the
> tempered bullet proof glass. A millisecond later the projectile detonated, becoming a bright bloom of
> red and yellow flame that blew out the remaining windows and filled the room with a deafening roar.

Tsuneo: So Medford has been watching Pack Rat all along

Rick: Yep

Tsuneo: And yet he didn't know that Pack Rat carried a rocket launcher on him

Rick: Seems to be the case

Tsuneo: This plan was very stupid, wasn't it?

Rick: Told you.

> The feline huntresses hit the floor, just a second before the rain of glass and debris from the control
> room, and froze. There was a look of shock and disbelief etched on their slightly muzzled faces.

> "Father!" the tiger-striped huntress cried out. The others mirrored her cry or simply howled in grief.

> Pack Rat blurted out a triumphant shout, but his victory was cut short as the seven sisters lowered
> their hateful gaze to the rat.

Rebecca: This is the part of the plan called 'now what'

> Pack gulped and tossed aside the still smoking launch tube and

> scooped his rifle up as he eased back to his feet.

Tsuneo: Somehow he has not yet been clawed to shreds.

> A chorus of low angry cat yowls began to fill the

> room as the huntresses eased forward towards the rat-man.

> "Kill..." the tiger-striped cat woman growled.

> "So much for even tempered and precise," Pack rat muttered as he turned to run.

Rick: Also, wah-wah

> ----

> Chapter 9

> Pack Rat prided himself on being, for the most part, above many of the base instinctual responses

> to stimuli

Rick: Not counting pulling his finger, of course.

> that many animal-blooded metahumans were slave to.

Dan: Despite being a rat, he had rarely chosen to spread pestilence or eat his own poop

> However, having seven enraged

> cat women charging at him and yowling for blood was more than enough to send the ratling's flight

> response screaming into the driver's seat and slamming on the gas.

Tsuneo: To be fair, that's not a rat thing

> The man-rat was tearing down

> the halls, slowing only to fire the occasional wild spray of rifle fire over his shoulder.

Dan: Oh no! You just hit the base commander's poor feeble grandmother! She was baking a pie for all

the nice terrorists.

> About two dozen steps behind, the seven sisters were bounding after their prey.

Rick: [Cat girl] You ever wish we'd been issued with guns?

Dan: [Cat girl] Heck, I don't know if I could even hold one with these claws.

> They ran along the steel floors on all fours,

Rebecca: Somehow managing not to end in a comical pileup

> snarling and spitting as they ducked and weaved to avoid Pack Rat's panicked bursts.

> "Well... you used to dream about women chasing you," Pack muttered to himself in between bursts

> of fire, "Careful what you wish for."

Rick: All this needs now is Yakkity Sacks

> The halls were again lit with swirling red lights and filled with the sounds of blaring klaxon sirens.

Tsuneo: Oh, so now we get the alarm back, huh? What did you even switch it off for?

> The rat hybrid's lungs

Rebecca: Pack Rat runs on both petrol and electricity

> were burning with each labored breath he drew in, and his exertions were

> causing his left shoulder and right forearm to throb.

Tsuneo: He's desperately trying not to stop for a good itch.

> Pack eyed the various coded wall marks as he dashed down the halls.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Let's see now... Labs, mess hall, barracks, petting zoo, armoury...

> He knew going back the way he came was futile.

Dan: There was a revolving door in the way.

> Even if he could reach the

> access hatch he used to enter the complex, he'd be torn apart before he could haul it open and dive

> back into the earth.

Tsuneo: So he didn't actually have an escape plan, did he?

Rebecca: No, he was just planning on breaking in to the heavily guarded underground base and assassinating their top researcher without being detected.

Tsuneo: Sure. How's that working out for you?

> His mind raced, clutching for any possible escape route.

Rick: VIPER bases lack well-signposted fire exits

> The markings on the walls provided the answer, and an idea dawned.

Dan: Sure, he didn't have a rubber band ball and a barbeque, but he could make it work.

> Pack took a hard left turn at the next intersection

> and sped down the passageway. The enraged mob of felines skidded a bit as they rounded the

> corner,

Tsuneo: It seems that they're mainly engineered for pratfalls

> but were quickly hot on Pack Rat's tail.

Rebecca: And to think, if they'd properly surfaced their base, he'd be dead by now.

> The rodent followed the wall markings for several more turns, heading for the elevators.

Rick: Of course! He's going to use the exit to exit! Why didn't I think of that?

> His heart

> sank, however, as he whirled around the last corner. In front of him a squad of six VIPER soldiers in

> heavy armor blocked the hall.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Noclip! Noclip!

> Three were kneeling, while the other three stood over them. All had

> their energy rifles drawn and ready.

> "There he is! Fire!" one of them commanded.

> The air crackled and sizzled as bolts of electric blue energy streaked towards the rat. Pack fought

> through his initial instinct, which was to pull up short and back pedal. His commando training told

> him that was suicide.

Dan: His years of training told him that running towards the bad thing was bad

> He'd walk right back into the waiting claws of the huntresses behind him.

> Instead, he surged forward,

Tsuneo: Yes, straight into the incoming fire.

> letting his rifle clatter to the ground and dropping to all fours. Normally

> the rat hybrid was loathed to move about in this manner.

Rick: Pack Rat's main power seems to be making life hard for himself.

> He felt it was undignified and not just a little beneath him,

Rebecca: He's a half-man half-rat who spends his time ogling furies. How much dignity can he have to begin with?

> but the oncoming plasma fire necessitated that he create a smaller target and still

> maintain his speed. Pack launched himself at the wall, planting his feet and palms against the steel

> structure, and then sprang towards the opposite side, trying to avoid the enemy fire.

> Coruscating streaks of neon blue fire sailed past the ratling.

Tsuneo: Six troopers firing automatic weapons into a narrow hallway and yet they still can't hit a thing

Rick: Stormtrooper logic at its finest

> Some of them impacted the wall and

> left sizzling holes, while others flew further down the hall and out of sight. Pack rat felt an electric jolt

> in his chest as one bolt struck him squarely, blasting a hole in his chest plate, followed by a much

> more severe, searing pain that felt surprisingly cold in his right calf.

Dan: Getting shot was mildly annoying

> Pack squealed and stumbled

> but recovered and leapt towards the soldiers. His jump was intended to carry him over the squad,

> but the pain in his calf took some of the vigor out of his legs.

Tsuneo: At least, that's what he claimed in the after-action replay.

> Instead pack cleared the line of
> kneeling soldiers and plowed head first into one of the three standing troopers.

Rebecca: When you're a member of an evil supertech terrorist group and you get hit in the face with a giant rat man, you really have to wonder where everything in your life went wrong

> Simultaneously, the seven sisters came barreling around the corner on the rat's heels.

Rick: This is one of those days that just keeps getting better.

> Several of the in-flight plasma
> bolts that had missed Pack Rat impacted near the rampaging throng of cats. A few of them
> stumbled to avoid the energy bolts, and a collective, defiant screech rose up as the felines regained
> traction

Rick: They switched to all-wheel drive mode

> and charged forward.

Tsuneo: Yes, also into the incoming fire.

> Pack Rat and his impromptu landing pad

Dan: [VIPER] I have a name, you know.

> hit the steel floors and tumbled several feet before coming
> to a stop, with the rat perched atop his surprised companion.

Rebecca: [VIPER] He didn't even buy me dinner first.

> A series of high-pitched screeches,
> followed by cries of shock and pain, erupted behind them as the sisters began to tear apart the
> soldiers in their path,

Tsuneo: Remind me, what's so good about these huntresses?

Rebecca: Well, they slip and fall when they run, they can't catch the guy they were created to kill and they'll attack their creators at the drop of a hat

Tsuneo: I'd say that there's definitely some design issues here

> choosing to simply go through them rather than over or around, such was their
> blind blood lust. Both the soldier and Pack looked at the massacre in progress, then at each other.
> A sardonic grin spread across the rodent's face.

> "Heh. Women. Go fig," Pack chuckled.

Dan: [VIPER] They're killing my friends, you jerk.

> "Tell me about it," came the metallic reply through the trooper's full-faced helmet.

Rebecca: Stop mid-massacre for some casual sexism and we're good.

> Pack almost felt bad when he shot the soldier in the leg with his revolver,

Dan: Fic, you are a terrible liar

> which he had surreptitiously drawn as the pair had topped to the ground.

Rick: [VIPER] Oh come on, was that really necessary? We were having a moment there!

- > The huge handgun shredded armor and
- > flesh, spraying crimson all over the grey metal plates of the floor.

Tsuneo: The author seems worryingly excited about the idea

- > The rat hybrid quickly hauled
- > himself to his feet, scooping up the energy rifle that had scattered a few feet away when he collided
- > with the unfortunate VIPER member now left screaming on the ground.

Dan: Oh thank god. He felt naked without a firearm.

Rick: He's already got his ridiculous revolver –

Dan: Naked without it.

- > His right forearm was
- > leaking steadily through his coat now, spattering ruby droplets on the floor as he ran, and the wound
- > his Pack's left shoulder was pulsing mercilessly. Now, as he limped along, he could clearly see a
- > sizable chunk of his right calf had been seared away by the plasma fire a moment ago.

Rebecca: He only just noticed the huge hole in his leg

- > "Taking me apart piece by piece," he grumbled as he reached his goal, the elevator doors.

Tsuneo: Plus he got shot in the chest, although I'm not sure that's even registered.

- > Some distance back, the last of the overwhelmed VIPER squad fell in a crumpled, bloody heap,
- > having outlived their usefulness as an improvised speed bump for the vengeful cat women.

Dan: They are really stupid, aren't they?

- > Pack
- > spared a glance back at the blood-soaked mob of cat hybrids. The distraction had bought him some
- > time, but not nearly as much as he would have liked.

Tsuneo: It was really nice of them to let him get away

- > He cringed as he felt the sisters return their
- > burning gazes back on him and move to catch up.

Rick: [Cat girl] What were we doing now? Oh yeah...

- > Fear and desperation lent the rat just enough strength to pry open the elevator doors and step
- > inside. The triggered alarms had placed the entire facility on lock down,

Dan: In case of murderous catgirls, do not use lift

- > so the controls were non-functional.

Tsuneo: Not very big on safety around here, are they?

Rick: It's an evil terrorist lair, what do you want?

- > Pack looked upwards and breathed a sigh of relief. The elevator car had a maintenance
- > hatch. Wasting no time jimmying it open Pack shot the locking mechanism with Wynona.

Rebecca: Shooting seems to be his solution to everything

Rick: He tried doing that once when arguing over who got the last slice of pizza.

- > He

> immediately regretted firing the fifty caliber handgun inside a small metal box, his ears ringing from
> the report,

Tsuneo: Up until now he'd been fine with firing it in enclosed spaces.

> but he pushed that aside and hopped up to haul himself up through the opened hatch
> and into the darkened elevator shaft above.

Rick: I can only imagine the huntresses are standing around and watching him.

> As he heaved himself through the hatch, Pack felt something snap inside his left shoulder,

Dan: Wondering which one of his many, many injuries it was

> and the pulsing ache on his left side erupted into a tearing, nearly blinding pain.

> The rat man screeched and flopped onto his back, panting and kicking up a cloud of settled dust.

Rick: Along with everything else that's gone wrong today, it turns out VIPER didn't tidy up his escape route.

> His original aim was to climb the shaft to the surface,

Rebecca: He just assumed that the front door would still be open

> but as he stared up from his back into the
> murky darkness above the futility of that idea washed over him like a tsunami. His right arm was
> beginning to lose feeling, whatever just gave way in his left shoulder made that arm useless for
> climbing, and his wounded calf was beginning to lose the initial numbness from the plasma burn.

Rick: All that and his nose was beginning to itch

> Pack could hear the huntresses gathering near the elevator door, snickering to each other.

Dan: He's trapped like a... Well, like...

Rebecca: Like a rat in a cage?

Dan: I mean, yeah, really...

> "You're done, vermin," one of them called out, her voice a throaty, mocking purr, "come on down
> here and will make it quick... clean."

> "We will?" another whispered.

> "Shut... up..." the first voice hissed.

Rick: Great job killing the mood there

> Pack saw what these women had just done to that squad of VIPER troops, and those were
> supposedly their own men.

Tsuneo: So far they're better at killing their own guys than the target they're actually after

> He could only imagine what mercy lay in store for the rat that just blew
> up their beloved creator.

Dan [Pack Rat]: Oh no. I hope that a pile of cartgirls don't all jump on me at once or try to step on me or tie me up. That would be just terrible.

> Gritting his teeth against the pain in his limbs, his right hand reached for a
> small device clipped to his belt, a cylindrical black metal tube

Rick: Fortunately he kept a lightsaber on him for emergencies

> with a flip-top cap. Flipping the hinged black cap open revealed a red button.

Dan: That button popped up a hand crank which, after a couple of turns, revealed a switch.

> Pack Rat held the detonator up and stared at it a moment.

Tsuneo: Took him a bit to remember what it was for.

> He brought enough explosives in his duffel bag to start world war three. About half of that was

> squirreled away in various spots along his path to the main laboratory. The rest of the payload was

> still sitting in the lab where he had dropped the bag, presumably forgotten

Dan: Pack Rat has misplaced a lot of explosives in his time

> in the mad rush of his

> attempted escape. A push of the button on this small device would be the end of it. It would be the

> end of Director Medford and his cruelty.

Tsuneo: I assumed the rocket launcher already did that.

> It would be the end of VIPER's cloning program. The end of the huntresses. The end of Pack Rat.

Rebecca: The end of the fic

Tsuneo: Go for it, Rat. You know you want to.

> "He's not coming down," a voice growled from below.

> "Probably bled so much he can't move."

Dan: But you made such a tempting offer.

> "Must be. I can smell it everywhere."

> "Katja, go up and bring the scum down."

> "Why me?"

> "Do it!"

> "Fine."

Rick: Thrill as the super-villains delegate!

> Pack heard the huntress step into the elevator car.

Tsuneo: Grumbling all the way.

> He clutched the detonator in his fist tightly. His

> hand shook as he raised his thumb over the button. The ratling clenched his eyes shut, as his digit

> descended... The few tears escaping the rat's clenched eyes could be dismissed as a response to

> the overwhelming pain of his wounds,

Rebecca: Because real rats don't cry, or some garbage like that.

> but Pack was forced to quietly admit it was more out of a sense of defeat... and regret.

Dan: He'd never gotten a chance to eat a McRib.

> "Come back."

Rick: Like Charles Brautigan, he must go home.

> Sahara's words echoed in Pack Rat's head again.

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] Oh, for – Can't you just let me blow myself up in peace?

> His eyes flew open and landed on the elevator

> cables and the counterweights far above. A crazed, delirious plan suddenly took hold, and his heart

> fluttered with a giddy sort of hope.

Tsuneo: He was going to dance his way to freedom

> The wounded rat heaved himself to his feet, clipping the

> detonator back to his belt as he stood.

Dan: Save that for when your night at the pub takes a turn.

> At that same moment a tawny, brown-furred head topped

> with a mane of wild golden hair poked up from the hatch.

Rebecca: If it sings a single word about memories then shoot it.

> The huntress looked at Pack Rat with a combination of annoyance and surprise.

Tsuneo: She was annoyed to find the man she'd been hunting

> She snarled and reached for the rodent's booted, blood-soaked ankle.

> Pack ignored the distraction

Rick: He was largely indifferent to having his leg gnawed off.

> and clamped his right hand onto the main cable anchored to the top of

> the elevator car, his iron grip locking in place firmly.

Tsuneo: He is about to get the worst rope burn ever.

> With the other hand he aimed the confiscated

> plasma rifle at the cables anchor point and squeezed the trigger.

Dan: That rare moment when every part of the plan is terrible

Rebecca: So it suits the rest of the fic

Dan: Well yes

> The huntress's claws dug into the rat hybrid's ankle,

Rick: I'd be worried if anyone else's ankle was there

> piercing the thick leather of his combat boots as a flashing blue bolt sheared

> away the heavy, taught cable. There was a reverberating metallic 'twang' which echoed through the

> elevator shaft. With a sudden lurch the cable, with rat attached, shot upwards.

Dan: And once he reaches the top, he'll open his wingsuit to fly away. Of course, he'll still be in an underground base, so...

> The black-clad huntress was likewise attached to Pack Rat and was drug along,

Tsuneo: [Huntress] If it's all the same to you, I'd rather stay down here and explode.

> releasing a surprised yelp as the pair streaked upwards towards the top of the shaft.

Rebecca: Of course, given that he's doing this with two heavily injured arms, he probably isn't going to have the best outcome

Tsuneo: Probably something he should have considered first.

> Pack Rat squealed through gritted teeth as the huntress's claws tore through his boot and into his
> left ankle.

Rick: A sensation familiar to anyone who's ever owned a cat.

> A moment later he felt a sickening pop in his right shoulder as the force of the ascent and
> the added weight of the huntress jerked his right shoulder out of socket.

Dan: Pak Rat was beginning to think this may not have been the best idea.

> He dropped the energy rifle
> and, while fighting to remain conscious reached for the detonator on his belt.

Rebecca: Because his escape wasn't already ridiculous enough, I guess.

> The huntress reached
> as well, scrabbling frantically to interfere with her victim's movements. The floors were racing by in a
> blur as the two mutants rocketed towards the surface.

Tsuneo: I'll say now that this is unlike anything we've ever seen in any of these fics. I'll also say that's not necessarily a good thing

> There was a rush of wind as the elevator's massive counterweight flew past on its descent.

Dan: Pack Rat is suddenly aware of how little shaft he has left, and that he hasn't figured out how to stop.

> Pack rat raised his left foot and brought it crashing down repeatedly into the face of the cat woman
> attached to his ankle. Each blow brought a defiant yowl from the cat woman and an agonizing pull
> against his dislocated shoulder,

Rebecca: It's at the point where he's actively making things worse on himself.

> but it gave him just enough time to press the button on the
> detonator at his belt. There was a split second delay,

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] Hold on, just gotta... mash it a few more times and... There ya go.

> followed by a dozen or so low-pitched,
> reverberating thrums as the smaller scattered charges decimated their targets.

Rick [Pack Rat]: There, I've killed you and blown up your secret lab!

Dan [Medford]: All according to plan

Rick [Pack Rat]: Damn it!

> Another brief pause
> after that was punctuated by a deafening explosion as the remaining charges in the abandoned
> duffel bag detonated.

Tsuneo: So he was carrying explosives primed and ready to detonate in his duffel bag.

Rick: Seems like it.

Tsuneo: Honestly it's a wonder he got this far.

- > The entire elevator shaft shook and rumbled from the subterranean explosion.
- > Fragments of metal began to rain down on them from above as some of the weaker structures
- > above them gave way from the force of the blast.

Dan: Somehow, despite the explosives all being below them.

- > Both Pack Rat and Katja the huntress

Rebecca: Oh now he remembers her name

- > looked back
- > down the shaft, eyes wide. A wall of flame, tinged green and blue from the strange chemicals of the
- > lab,

Dan: Well, it's either going to kill him or make him a Toxic Avenger.

- > was racing upwards towards them at a frightening rate.

Tsuneo: Downside is he's going to die horribly in flames. Upside is his arm won't be bothering him any more

- > Both animal hybrids screamed out loud,
- > all thoughts of revenge or retaliation lost amid the cacophony.

- > The concussion wave hit them before the fire.

Dan: Rat fling it is

- > Pack felt a sudden upward surge hit him from below, and then everything went white.

Tsuneo: Yeah, Mythbusters say no.

- > There was a sudden silence. An almost peaceful floating sensation washed over Pack Rat.

Rick: He was floating in a most peculiar way

- > He had just enough time to begin to appreciate it before that was snatched
- > away by crunching sounds and more pain.

Rebecca: He broke his everything

- > Then... blackness

Tsuneo: And the worst part is that this is the midpoint of the fic.

> -----

> Chapter 10

- > The darkness surrounding Pack Rat was accompanied by an oppressive, numbing chill.

Tsuneo: That would be him going into shock from blood loss.

- > He would
- > have appreciated the dulling of his pain if it were not for the claustrophobic feeling that came with it.

Rebecca: Also, hell darkness my old friend and all that.

- > Pack was perfectly at home when tunneling through the ground, where his acute senses let him
- > perceive his surroundings nearly as well as when he was on the surface.

Rick: I can only assume that he's locked himself in a fridge.

Dan: And probably not for the first time either.

> What he felt now was nothing like the welcoming embrace of the earth.

Rebecca: He'd rolled in enough mud to know

> Here, in this place, Pack Rat felt blind and deaf, completely cut off from his senses.

Tsuneo: And the dozen other senses he seems to have?

> He could perceive only the encompassing stygian black, the

> enveloping cold, and a slow, sickening, sinking sensation.

> "You stupid rat," a gruff voice admonished.

Rick: How most people greet Pack Rat

> Pack Rat turned to face the sound. Or at least he thought he turned.

Dan: He may have contorted himself into a pretzel.

> He could not really feel enough

> to be sure. At first he saw the same nothingness as before, but after a moment a pair of glowing

> white eyes could be seen fading in from the gloom.

Rick: Not entirely sure that's an improvement.

> Soon after, the familiar silhouette of Sajit's

> black-furred form was detectable as he stalked forward.

Tsuneo: He recognised the midnight-black form in the darkness

> He was in his hybrid form, and wearing his belt of human skulls strapped to his waist.

Rebecca: That's a lot less reassuring than you think it is

> The skulls clattered and rattled as he walked and were

> licked with blue ghostly tongues of translucent flame.

Dan: [Pack Rat] You know what? I'll take my chances with the exploding base, thanks.

> "Where the hell are you?" the werewolf demanded.

> "I'm right here, Sajit."

Dan: I'm really not feeling this new Scooby-Doo reboot

> "God damn it Pack haven't you learned anything about magic since we met?"

Rick: He tried, but the best he could manage were some basic card tricks

> The ratling shrugged and gaped wordlessly.

> "I'm not really here Picky.

Dan: Picky?

Rick: Now we could assume it's a typo, or we could also assume that Sajit's given him a nickname based on his fussy and anal nature.

Dan: Can we assume the latter, because it sounds much more fun.

> There is no here, not really. I'm projecting myself to you.

Tsuneo: Oh, there's a lot of projecting in this fic

> I've been trying to locate you for days but your spirit is so weak I..."

Dan: [Sajit] I've had to work out a shamanic signal booster.

Rick: [Pack Rat] How did you do that?

Dan: [Sajit] For the sake of our friendship, it's best that I don't answer that.

> "Whoa, what a minute. Days?" Pack interrupted.

> "It's been about six days since you were reported overdue," Sajit's eyes flashed angrily,

Rebecca: [Sajit] We've already divvied up your guns.

> "And the

> only reason I know that much is because you listed me as your next of kin! What the hell?"

Rick [Pack Rat]: Look, we had a civil commitment ceremony and everything. I thought it meant something to you

> "I had to put something in that blank on the UNTIL registration form when I put my request in to..."

Dan: [Pack Rat] ...legally change my name to Pacillius Rattington III. Look, it was an odd phase I was going through.

> "Where. Are. You." Sajit intoned deliberately.

> "Damned if I know. Last thing I remember was blowing up the VIPER lab."

> "Where were you when that happened?"

> "I was... er... still inside... the... um... lab?"

Dan [Sajit]: And where's that?

Rick [Pack Rat]: Um, under a rock in Canada?

> "FUCK!" Sajit threw up his hands in disgust.

Dan: He can't actually affect Pack Rat physically like this, so Sajit's just going to scream until he gets a headache.

> "Well I was almost out but there was a rabid cat woman attached to my leg in the elevator and..."

Tsuneo: And that's not even the worst excuse he's heard

> "Pack you have to give me something to go on here.

Dan: [Sajit] Crawl inside a geocache or something.

> If I don't find you soon Sahara is going to start losing feathers."

> Pack could not help but chuckle a bit at that. The thought of Sahara worrying over him was
> somehow strangely comforting.

Rebecca: He finds her emotional distress to be reassuring

> "I'm serious! She hasn't eaten or slept in two days.

Tsuneo: [Sajit] And it isn't even a fad diet this time.

> Haraka is worried about her, and now he's getting mad at me and Ken for "Letting this happen."

Dan: I mean, it's not like the pair of you exactly stopped Pack Rat from running off on his insane suicidal revenge trip

> He used finger quotes.

Rick: Hey, you leave Ken out of this.

Rebecca: Yeah, the fic sure did.

> "I'll just pop right into ye olde comatose convenience store and grab you a map, how about that?"

Rebecca: He's leaving on an Astral Plane

> "Pack!" Sajit bit back his frustration, "You don't understand. I think you're dying.

Tsuneo: [Sajit] And after that quip, I'm inclined to just let you.

> I can just barely hear you. It took almost all the mojo I had to connect to you

Rick: He's getting terrible mobile reception in his out-of-body experience

> and I still can't tell where you are."

> Pack paused and looked around. He wasn't quite sure what dying felt like but, yeah, this seemed
> about right.

Dan: Something to do with being shot and stabbed repeatedly before being blown up

Tsuneo: The fact that he's only 'dying' after all that speaks volumes

> "Maybe... maybe you should just... let me go Saj," the ratline said quietly.

> "The hell you saying, Rat?" Sajit barked.

Dan: [Pack Rat] I mean, this long-distance call's gotta be costing you a fortune.

> "I'm... I'm tired man. I've been fighting VIPER for so long, hunting down Medford, tussling with
> psychotic cat girls."

Rick: He didn't need to go all the way to Canada for that. There's probably a dozen of them in Club Caprice right now

> Pack sighed deeply.

> "But it's done. I got him. Blew the whole place to hell. He won't hurt anyone else."

Dan: Smash cut to Medford offering somebody a cigarette

> "Oh please," Sajit sneered, "You think Medford was the only mad scientist that VIPER has in its
> back pocket?"

Rebecca: No, just the only one he cares about.

> "Er... well..."

Tsuneo: His entire plan was based around the idea that there was only a single mad scientist working

for the massive evil organisation

> "Forget all that Pack. Listen man, please, don't give up. Just tell me where to start looking."

Rebecca: I mean, how big can Canada be?

Rick: About a square kilometre, most of which is filled with various mobs

> Sajit's tone had shifted from annoyed to pleading.

Dan: He's sub-letting Pack Rat's basement and can't make rent without him.

> "I dunno Sajit. I mean, what have I got to come back to, really?"

Rick [Sajit]: The Black Fang Dockside Dustup?

Dan [Pack Rat]: Okay, I'm sold

> A hole in the ground to hide in?

> Getting kicked out of restaurants because I'm a health code violation?"

Dan: On the other hand, he may be Uber Eats' best customer.

> Sajit opened his mouth to speak but then just shut it again.

Rebecca: [Sajit] I mean yeah, you are pretty disgusting and all.

> "And have you seen how women look at me, Sajit?" the hurt in Pack's voice was evident, "I'm barely

> tolerated at best. Most girls look like they're about to retch at the sight of me."

Rebecca: And here we go all the way past nice guy and into the incel screed.

> "It's not that bad Pack... Sahara doesn't react that way."

Dan: She keeps it all in and heaves once Pack Rat's gone.

> "What does that matter? Even if she isn't disgusted by me that doesn't mean she'd ever...

Tsuneo: Pack Rat can't get with his one fantasy girlfriend ergo he has nothing left to live for.

> Besides,

> what would you know about it? You've got Snow, hell even Ken is with Kuro, Sahara has Haraka..."

Dan: Tom has Asuka, Shinji has Rei... hell, even John Barren ended up with a girlfriend

> Pack spat back bitterly.

Rebecca: At this point, Jack from Adventures of Jack is telling him to tone down the whiny neediness

Dan: And Artemis Knight just tips his fedora in agreement

> "Are you really telling me you're willing to let your life just slip away because you can't get laid?"

Dan: [Pack Rat] Yes.

Rebecca: [Sajit] You know what? Go for it, man. I'm done.

> "Fuck you, dog boy.

Rick: Something Sam Brady said to his troops a lot

Tsuneo: We're just swimming in the deep cuts today

> It's not that... not just that... grrr." Pack frowned, struggling with his conflicting thoughts.

Dan: He just realised they may not have guns in heaven.

> Sajit forced down the growl welling up in his throat. He never did react well to being called a dog.

> "Pack. Listen. You're not thinking straight.

Tsuneo: Was he ever? Be honest here.

> Can't you see that..." Sajit's voice suddenly seemed distant.

Rick: Sajit's trying to tell him that he's got so much to live for, but is coming up a blank.

> Pack could see his form becoming indistinct, fading.

> "Shit... losing you... gotta tell... where... Pack... Packy!"

Rebecca: When your nickname sounds like a racial slur, maybe you need to rethink things

> The lycanthrope flailed and pleaded for a response but his spectral form faded from view, leaving

> the rat man alone again with only his thoughts.

Rick [Pack Rat]: Wow. Sure is quiet in here.

> Without the distraction Sajit provided the frigid gloom

> came crashing down on the rodent with soul-crushing force.

Tsuneo: Without somebody there to throw a pity part for him, Pack Rat has nothing going on in his life

> Pack was suddenly very aware of the sound of his heart beat,

Dan: And its strange bossa nova rhythm.

> present just beneath the throbbing pain that was wracking his body. It was slowing down.

> "So this is it..." Pack mused to himself, trying to steel himself and stave off the panic he felt bubbling
> up inside.

> "Not like this... not alone..." he thought as he felt the space between heartbeats steadily grow wider.

Rebecca: Pack Rat doesn't want to die alone which is why he ran off on a one-man suicide mission

> The already oppressive dark bore down on the rat man. He wanted to thrash and kick against the

> enveloping, choking cold, but he couldn't feel his limbs. The gap between heart beats grew bigger,

> and the beats themselves seemed to grow sluggish. The ratling's terror grew even as his thoughts

> became cloudy and sluggish.

Rick [Pack Rat]: Well here I am alone in a black featureless void.

[Pause]

Rick [Pack Rat]: Is there a bathroom around here?

> He could feel himself slipping away. Scattered, disjointed images of life flashed through his mind

Dan: He realised how much it really sucked.

> like still frames from a slideshow with a madman running the machine.

Rick: So like my uncle's home movie nights.

> He saw the blurry view from within the fluid filled tube in which he was grown and birthed, with
> VIPER scientists watching him. Their cold, dispassionate expressions and the tubes connected to
> his body were the only mother he would ever know.

Dan: So tell me about your mother

Rick: She was a string of mad scientists and a giant tube filled with gunk

> The next was random images of his escape that
> once provided him a sense of triumph, now proven to be a lie and just another test, the meaning
> stolen away by the man who created him.

Tsuneo: In retrospect, the fact that when he escaped he then rang a bell and got a piece of cheese
may have been a giveaway

> He saw moments with his friends. Friendly shooting contests with Ken, which he invariably lost.

Rick: Well there you go, Ken's done something.

Rebecca: Vaguely mentioned in a flashback.

Rick: I'll take whatever I can get.

> A moment alone comforting Sajit as he agonized over
> losing control during battle and wounding an innocent.

Rebecca: Remind me, why does UNTIL allow this guy to keep working with their endorsement?

> Sahara, her beautiful face locked in frozen laughter

Dan: I imagine her default expression amounts to 'duuuuuuhhhhhhhh'

> as Sajit flailed at Pack for dumping a bucket of confetti on him.

Dan: Stolen moments in the gun cabinet with Ken's rifle.

> Then Sahara, her hand placed comfortingly on Pack's shoulder as he fought back tears,

Rebecca: The many times he asked to use her boobs for comfort.

> several elitist superheroes chortled nearby after insulting the ratling relentlessly.

Tsuneo: In retrospect, his team-up with Homelander was a terrible idea

> Sahara again...

Dan: [Pack Rat] I'm not obsessed!

> the last time he saw her, looking up at him with those huge, deep, violet eyes.

Rick: And then all the time he spent crossing Hakara's face out in pictures

> The slideshow froze, focused on those soulful portals, and
> suddenly the fear was gone, replaced only with regret. Was there something he had missed?

Rebecca: How about actually interacting with people instead of stewing in his own resentment?

Tsuneo: You might be on to something there

> Faintly, as if from far away and behind him, Pack heard Sahara's soft, melodic voice and those
> words that had haunted him since he boarded the jet for Canada.

Rebecca [Sahara]: We're just friends

> "Come back..."

> "I want to," Pack thought out loud, "I just... can't..."

Dan: [Pack Rat] I haven't paid up my health insurance.

> Fear gave way to despair. He would have been sobbing if he could move. Pack couldn't remember
> the last time he heard the low thrum of a heart beat. How long had it been? So cold..

Rick: Well maybe next time don't get drunk and lock yourself in the meat fridge.

> -----

> Chapter 11

> A burning sensation pierced through the deepening void.

Rick: That's when Pack Rat realised that he was on fire

Dan: That'd do it

> It started in Pack Rat's mouth and poured
> down his throat. The searing heat then sat like a burning coal in his stomach.

Dan: Yep, nothing for it but to heave.

> After a moment, the
> burning began to spread to his limbs and chest. Pack's heart seized and fluttered in protest.

Rebecca: His heart doesn't want to get up and go to work.

> The
> rodent's bright, solid green eyes flew open. He screeched wordlessly as his body convulsed. His
> back arched in a most unnatural manner.

Dan: Quick seizure and we're good.

> The clammy, choking darkness that enveloped him was replaced by a blinding red and white light.

Tsuneo: That's when he realised that he was inside an ambulance

> After a long, agonizing moment the shuddering spasms ceased and the ratling's vision began to
> slowly clear. Pack could again feel his limbs, but immediately regretted it.

Rebecca: That's how he usually feels about waking up in the morning.

> He could feel the sharp throb of multiple fractures in his extremities.

Dan: He'd managed to break his everything

> His shallow breaths provoked a stinging, tearing sensation.

Rebecca: Well maybe if you weren't gargling nails while you're at it.

> He tried to move his head to look around, but the blinding pain in his neck forced him to
> reconsider. He could see that he was in a dimly lit room.

Rick: It was ten foot by ten foot and lit by a single flickering torch. 2d4 Orcs were inside. Roll for initiative

> The light of a small fire cast flickering
> shadows throughout, and sent tendrils of white, oddly aromatic smoke curling towards a roof of

> arched evergreen boughs.

Dan: In short, someone had lit up their bong

> The injured rodent had only a few moments to register his surroundings, and notice that he was
> presently naked,

Rebecca: Things we did not need

> before he became aware of a presence in the room with him. Something large loomed over him.

Tsuneo: A black rectangular monolith

> His first instinct was to scramble away, but he could only fidget as his limbs
> refused to obey his commands in their shattered state.

Rebecca: His limbs have gone on strike in protest of their treatment.

> A surprised sniff came from the large figure
> towering over the prone man-rat. A large hand appeared and descended on Pack's head... and
> gently applied a pungent paste to a cut on his forehead.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Does that have gluten in that? Because I'm on this diet...

Tsuneo: Oh, forget it.

> "Shh... quiet now short-fur, you are safe here," the huge being crooned. The voice was deep and
> rumbling, and thickly accented, but clearly feminine.

Rick: Pack Rat's immediate instinct is to ask her to be his girlfriend

> "You have a strong soul short-fur. Few would survive this long with your wounds."

Dan: Which is to say that there are other people who have been smashed to pieces then blown up
and lived through it

> "Who...?" Pack croaked out.

> "Hush... the medicine has rekindled your spark, but you have precious little fuel left for the fire. Save
> your strength, short-fur."

Rick: In other words, shut up and go back to sleep.

> Pack Rat managed to move his head just a little to get a better view of the being tending his
> wounds.

Dan: Hoping it wasn't Sajit in the sexy nurse costume again.

> She sat cross-legged and cradled the comparatively tiny rat hybrid's head in her lap. She
> was massive, covered in a pelt of long, brown fur. Her face was vaguely simian, with tanned skin
> and a kind, intelligent gleam in her dark eyes.

Rebecca: Okay fic, I'll give you this much. 'Rescued by bigfoot' is a twist I did not see coming

> Her fur was woven with colorful beads and dyed
> leather cords, and she wore an intricate head dress of woven leather with birdlike patterns dyed into
> the braided strips.

Dan: The smart watch kind of ruined the whole look.

> Something about her reminded him of Sajit.

Tsuneo: I'd imagine it's the fact that she's covered in hair
Dan: You might be on to something there

> "How did I get here?" Pack asked.

> The towering furred woman laid a finger lightly on packs lips, silencing him.

Dan: It's really important that you stay quiet.

Rick: [Pack Rat] What, in case I strain myself or something?

Dan: No, I just don't want to listen to you.

> "The earth trembled and coughed flames. She rejected the repulsive presence of the vile snake
> men. As they fled in terror our scouts watched, and you were found in the snow."

Rebecca: I mean, he actually was falling down the elevator shaft towards the explosion but you know what, fic? Let's just go with this

> The shaggy woman began to wrap Pack's right forearm in some kind of bandage. The wrap smelled
> strongly of bitter herbs, but was applied with an unexpectedly delicate touch.

Tsuneo: Waking up in a sasquatch village while they treat you with herbs. Is this how Canada's free Healthcare works?

> "We first thought you one of the snake men slaves, but you wore the clothes of the noble no-furs to
> the south."

Dan: Given that this is Canada, I can only assume they mean a Mountie uniform or a hockey jersey

> She finished wrapping the ratling's bloodied, shredded forearm and eased herself out from under
> his head.

Tsuneo: Yeeeah, that's enough touching you forever.

> She rested Pack's head on a soft stuffed pillow of some kind and rose to her feet. The full
> height of the healer was not clear while she was seated. Standing tall she filled the room with an
> immense presence and authority.

Rick: In short, the bigfoot was big

> "I've done all I can for you, brave short-fur.

Tsuneo: Here's your bill.

> We will take you to the no-fur warrior village. We must
> hurry though, your flame burns but dimly, and there is little time."

Rick: Bigfoot, sure, but do you have to do the whole mystic speak?

Rebecca: Hey, tourists pay top dollar for it. It's part of the experience.

> The immensely tall woman faced the entrance to the domed structure, which took the form of a
> simple leather flap, and uttered a few syllables in a rumbling language Pack Rat had never heard
> before.

Dan: Little known fact, but Bigfoot speaks Korean

> A moment later two tall, impossibly burly looking, creatures entered the room.

Rebecca: Why there were two old-timey strongmen there was another matter

> They also bore similar tribal markings and trinkets woven into their shaggy coats.

Dan: He couldn't tell if they were dudes or not, but thought he'd shoot his shot anyway.

> The two creatures stood attentively, waiting for word from the healer.

Rebecca: Yeah, huck him on the pile with the rest of them.

> "They will take you to the warrior-village, but you must sleep now, our home must remain unknown
> and unseen."

Rick: But you can easily find it between the Ice Zombie Burial Mound and the Alien Terraforming site anyway

> Pack Rat started to ask a question.

Rebecca: Seriously, how many times do I have to say no questions?

> He was going to ask about the huntress, Katja, who had come
> along on the ride and subsequent flight through the elevator shaft when the explosives went off,

Dan: And if she was single

> but
> the heavily furred shaman blew a puff of sweet smelling powder from her palm into the ratling's
> face.

Dan: Bigfoot village is all about the drugs.

Rebecca: Um, traditional Bigfoot remedies, thank you very much. [Pause] But yeah, they love their drugs.

> His vision immediately blurred, and within a few breaths he had slipped into a deep, mercifully
> painless sleep.

Rebecca: You go to snooze now

Rick: SNOOZE!

> Some time later, Pack became aware of a gentle, steady swaying sensation. The sound of heavy
> feet crunching snow underfoot slowly filtered in through the drugged rodent's hazy perceptions.

Dan: Still nothing particularly new for Pack Rat.

Rick: Being carried through the snow by Bigfoot while doped up to his eyeballs?

Dan: Oh yeah. This is most Thursdays.

> The
> VIPER scientists, Medford, had engineered the rat men he created to be resistant to most toxins.

Dan: Pack Rat had spent a lot of time licking hazardous waste to test if this was true

Tsuneo: You know he'd do it anyway

Dan: Well yeah

> As
> Pack came around the pain of his wounds crept back into his world like a thief in the night, stealing
> away his momentary sense of relief. The rodent uttered a pained groan as his senses returned fully.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Yep, it's all coming back. You got any more of that Bigfoot hash on you?

> The rodent could feel the presence of his clothes on his body again. At least the healer had had the
> forethought to redress him.

All: Thank you

- > Pack's vision was still a bit blurry, but he could tell that he was being
- > carried by one of the huge, furred beings he had seen earlier in the healer's hut.

Rick: [Pack Rat] You guys aren't-

Rebecca: No, we are not Wookies.

- > The other walked a few paces behind, carrying Pack Rats possessions

Rick: Why did he have to bring all his Funko Pops along with him?

- > and watching the area for any sign of trouble.
- > The rat's groan solicited a surprised grunt from both of the massive creatures. After a few more
- > moments the pair stopped. The two spoke to each other in the same, rumbling language that the rat
- > had heard earlier. The syllables vaguely reminded Pack Rat of Navajo,

Dan: Does he speak Navajo?

Tsuneo: Well no. Truth being told, right now he has no clue at all.

- > though in his current state there was no way he could be certain.
- > After a brief conversation a consensus was apparently reached and the rat hybrid was gently
- > lowered down onto the ground, resting on a blanket woven from some manner of plant material and
- > laid over a snowdrift.

Rick: You sure about that, Harry? We're still twenty miles from the base.

Rebecca: Orders are orders, Ronald. It's out of our fur now.

- > Pack ground his teeth as his shattered bones shifted. An apologetic grunt was
- > uttered by the furred giant who had been carrying him.

Rick: Canadian Uber is very different from ours

- > The other laid his backpack on the snow
- > next to him. As pack lay panting on the snow the two beings gave him a salute,

Dan: Peace out, bro.

Tsuneo: Peace out.

- > pressing their fists to their chests, and then turned to leave,

Rick: Gotta go get in some blurry photos

- > fading away into the evergreen forest that surrounded them.

Dan: Leaving behind only the fresh scent of pine

- > The rat hybrid shifted, trying to keep them in sight. He reached out, calling out in a voice still
- > slurred from the sleeping dust he had been dosed with.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Come back! You gotta get me more of that stuff!

- > "Please... don't... don't leave me."

Tsuneo [Pack Rat]: At least let me leer at you and be desperately clingy first

- > The figures were already gone, vanished into the trees and swirling snow. The rat soldier,

Dan: When you put it like that, it sounds silly

> in his pain-fueled delirium whimpered as his rescuers seemingly abandoned him to his fate.

Tsuneo: They want to clear out before he starts whining.

> After several

> moments of despair Pack Rat calmed himself enough to look around and assess the situation.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Well, there's snow. [Pause] I was hoping for something more.

> He

> had been laid to rest in a small clearing. The afternoon sun filtered down through the evergreens. A

> quiet breeze blew through the area creating small swirling eddies in the powdery snow. Pack Rat

> could not help but appreciate the tranquility of the scene, despite the aching in his body.

Rick [Pack Rat]: This is so beautiful. Also ow, ow, ow, so much pain ow

> The

> throbbing was steadily increasing in intensity, however, and could not be ignored. In moments the

> last lingering effects of the sleep dust wore off and the pain was nearly unbearable.

> Only Pack's left arm was even remotely serviceable,

Dan: Use only dealer certified Pack Rat parts

> and even its smallest movements provoked a

> tearing pain in his left shoulder where the huntress's knife had been plunged. The man-rat fought

> through the discomfort to reach into his backpack. After rummaging around for a moment

Rebecca: And hoping he didn't leave anything on his bed in Millennium City.

> he was able to find the desired item.

Rick: A mint-in-box giant Vamp [Ding!]

> He took the medical stimulant and pressed the tip of the small, pistol-

> like device to his side and pulled the trigger. The hiss of compressed air and spreading, soothing

> warmth signaled that the device had survived the explosion at the VIPER compound and seemed to

> be working.

Tsuneo: Maybe he should have checked before shooting himself up with it?

Rick: Hey, by that point what's the worst that can happen?

> Pack breathed a sigh of relief as the military grade painkillers began to take effect.

Rebecca: Enough of the serenity of the natural world. Time for drugs.

> As the pain subsided his head likewise cleared and a greater concern reared its head.

> "What the hell am I going to do now?"

Dan: Do you think the bigfoots considered what was going to happen to him after they left him?

Tsuneo: Somehow I suspect they didn't care

Dan: This is also true

> For the moment Pack Rat could only lay there and gather his thoughts.

> The sound of crunching snow, followed by a curious snuffling noise reached the rat. His ears

> pivoted atop his head, reflexively trying to home in on the source. Someone or something was

> approaching.

Dan: And true to form, he shot them without even finding out who they were.

- > Gritting his teeth against the lingering discomfort, pack's marginally functional left
- > hand went to his belt, drawing Wynona, his massive revolver.

Rebecca: Shooting people is always going to be his first option.

Rick: And yet, he wonders why he's single

- > In the back of his mind he knew that
- > firing the fifty caliber handgun would destroy what remained of the bones in his left arm and
- > shoulder,

Dan: He doesn't need a gun for that. He can wreck his life perfectly fine on his own.

- > but by this point, the rat was running on anger, stubborn pride, and military grade stimulants,

Tsuneo: Leave him alone with drugs and a loaded gun. Great work there, Bigfoot.

- > driving Pack to struggle, regardless of the consequences. He was partly hoping that the
- > approaching form was the last of the huntresses, bent on revenge.

Rick: He was hoping to be violently torn limb from limb

Tsuneo: Says a lot about him, doesn't it?

- > "Gonna take you with me..." he growled as he hauled the gun from its holster.
- > The footsteps and sniffing came closer. Pack fought to lift his weapon and point it in the direction of
- > the tree line.

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] You heard me, pines! I'm taking you with me!

- > Only the pain killers coursing through his system allowed him to bear the weapon's
- > weight, as the broken fragments of bone in the rat-man's arm shifted and ground against one
- > another.

Rebecca: That can't be helping his aim at all.

- > Pack held his breath, straining to keep the weapon aloft and ready to fire one last time.

Rebecca: He can quit his revolver habit at any time.

- > The breeze shifted slightly. A scent came with it, the scent of the approaching being or beings. The
- > smell was a familiar one, musky, and canine.

Dan [Pack Rat]: I always knew this day was coming. Come on, Scruff McGruff, I'm ready for you

- > Pack blinked in disbelief.
- > "S...Sajit?" Pack muttered weakly.
- > "Pack?" Sajit's coarse, gravelly voice called from the nearby trees.

Rebecca: Gee, what are the odds of Pack Rat's best friends being only moments away from where he was left out in the Canadian wilderness?

Tsuneo: I'd say getting better by the second.

- > The ratling let his arm drop. The gun slipped from his hand as he released his held breath and
- > panted heavily. The black-furred form of Pack rat's werewolf friend

Rick: When your only real friend is a cannibal berserker, you have to start asking yourself a lot of serious questions

> came bursting through the trees, sending snow tumbling from the evergreen branches.

Dan: I know he's a wolf-man and all, but Sajit's still got to be cold up there.

Rebecca: It's okay, the cursed souls of the innocents bound to his skulls keep him warm.

Dan: Well, that's reassuring – wait, what?

> "Pack," Sajit shouted triumphantly, "Ken! I found him!"

> Sajit ran to the wounded hybrid and fell to his knees next to him, throwing a light dusting of cool

> powder over the rodent as Sajit began to check him over. Not far behind, pushing hurriedly through

> the trees, followed Pack Rat's reptilian friend, Ken.

Rick: [Ken] I'm here too!

> His red hooded cloak was wrapped tightly around his body.

Dan: Little red riding reptile

> Beneath the cloak the angular outline of Ken's futuristic body armor could be made out.

Tsuneo: Ken was wearing the cloak that Ken was wearing

> Despite the cloak and warming unit integrated into the suit, the reptilian metahuman still

> shivered vigorously.

Dan: [Ken] Why did you drag me out into the snow? I'm a reptile dammit!

> "Why didn't Haraka let me handle talking to the Mounted Police liaison?"

> "Because he's prettier, get over here!" Sajit growled.

Dan: Any relief that Pack Rat might have felt at the rescue is immediately drowned in resentment at the thought that Haraka exists

> Ken forced a smile

Rick: [Pack Rat] Aaah! He's going to eat me!

> and moved as quickly as he could manage to join Sajit at Pack Rat's side.

> "You're... really here?" Pack Rat asked weakly.

Tsuneo: [Sajit] Nope, just a hallucination brought on by blood loss and hypothermia. You're a gonner, man.

> "Yeah rat buddy, we're here."

> "How?"

> "Sssajit may have threatened to eat the receptionist at UNTIL headquarters if ssshe did not find

> sssomeone who knew where you went," Ken hissed through chattering teeth.

Tsuneo: Yes, threatening members of an armed governmental force is a great way to get results

> "Hey, don't blame me," Sajit Protested,

Dan: [Sajit] Ken said she was a snack, and I got carried away.

> "Sahara begged me to come looking for you.

Rick: [Pack Rat] So where is Sahara then?

Rebecca: [Ken] Back home on the couch. [Pause] Oddly enough.

> I couldn't say no... I mean... that look in her eyes."

Dan [Sajit]: Me, I was all for leaving you to die

> "Yeah, yeah, I know," Pack sighed, knowing full well the effect Sahara could have on people.

Rebecca: He'd once killed a man just because Sahara had asked him to

> "Man... you're a wreck," Sajit winced while checking the rat over.

> "These woundsss have b-been t-treated and b-bandaged," Ken chattered, looking at Pack, "Who d-
> did thissss?"

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] Not me, I didn't even bother to bring bandages! Ha ha, it's a miracle I'm still alive.

> "Wouldn't believe me if I told you, man."

Rick: You're talking to a shaman werewolf and a time-travelling space lizard man. I think they can handle the idea that bigfoot exists

> "We ssshould g-get him b-back to sssteel head," Ken said, looking at Sajit as he worried over Pack
> Rat.

> "Right," Sajit nodded, "Brace yourself Packy. There's no way to do this comfortably."

Tsuneo: [Sajit] We're going to have to throw you there.

> Sajit's tone was apologetic as he reached down and hauled the man-rat up onto his shoulder. Pack
> squealed as he was lifted. Every broken bone ground and shifted, sending waves of piercing pain
> coursing through the rat's body in spite of the military class painkillers in his system.

Tsuneo: At this point, Sajit's actively making this worse

> Ken winced sympathetically as he gathered up Pack's equipment, staggering just a bit under the
> oddly balanced weight of the rat commando's signature backpack.

> "How d-does he run and j-jump and cartwheel while carrying thisss thing?" Ken mused.

Rebecca: 'Carrying Pack Rat's stuff' is about the be all and end all of Ken's personality

Rick [Ken]: Actually I've got a lengthy page on a fan wiki with my complex backstory and long crimefighting career

Rebecca: Yeah, but nobody cares

Rick [Ken]: This is also true

> The three made their way back through the snow, with Sajit carrying Pack Rat and Ken following
> just behind.

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] You guys have got a snowmobile or something, right?

Dan: [Sajit] Heck no! After you abandoned that one in the middle of nowhere, they don't let them out to furries anymore. Nope, we've got a twenty-mile hike to civilization ahead of us. Hope you're comfortable.

> The huge, shaggy creatures that had first carried the rat had deposited him only a
> couple of miles from Force Station Steelhead.

Tsuneo: So their plan really was to abandon him in the woods and hope somebody came along

- > Even this short hike was excruciating, though, when
- > suffering from multiple severe fractures, unknown internal injuries,

Dan: He's ruptured things that he didn't even know he had.

- > and being carried on the back of a werewolf.

Rebecca: Pack Rat survived his near-death experience only to be killed through his friends' ineptitude

- > Before long the tall guard towers of the base came into view, and the ratling's heart leaped.

Rick: [Sajit] We'd have called in a medevac, but we didn't.

- > Perched atop the nearest of the towers was the unmistakable outline of Sahara's form.

Dan: Given what she looks like, you'd hope so

- > She was crouched at
- > the edge of the tower's roof with a pair of binoculars pressed to her eyes, scanning.
- > It only took a moment for Sahara to spot the darkly colored trio as they trudged through the bright
- > white snow.

Tsuneo: [Sahara] Crap, they found him. I mean, yay!

- > She unfurled her massive brown wings and with one mighty beat took to the sky. Pack
- > lost track of her for a moment, but the rush of warm air and the sound of crunching snow heralded
- > her arrival.

Tsuneo: So since she can fly, shouldn't she have been on the search party?

Rebecca: What, and spare their cold-blooded friend a miles-long trudge through sub-zero temperatures?

Tsuneo: You're right, what was I thinking?

- > Ken breathed a sigh of relief as the supernaturally warmed wind that accompanied the
- > unusual chimera washed over the area.

Rick: And by that he means her devastating farts

- > Sahara was dressed in warm, white colored winter wear.
- > Her parka had clearly been hastily modified to accommodate her large wings, and bore some
- > comical looking tufts of shredded padding at the back.

Tsuneo: I have a lot of questions as to how you'd get a parka on over that, none of which the fic is going to answer.

- > "Ohmigawd! Packy!" Sahara gasped

Rebecca: Her character in a nutshell

Rick [Ken]: I've lead a superteam and saved the world several times over

Rebecca: Again, nobody cares

- > as she got a good look at her wounded friend for the first time. Her long tail wagged furiously.

Tsuneo: Does that mean she's angry or happy?

- > "What happened to you?"

Tsuneo: He was a victim of his own stupidity

> "He was too close to the explosives when they went off,"

Dan: Making you wonder how he got to that point to begin with

> Sajit growled as he adjusted Pack's weight on his shoulders.

Rick: [Sajit] You know, he's a lot heavier than he looks.

> Sahara clapped one hand over her mouth in shock and her animated tail froze in place.

> "You could have been killed Packy!" her expression was annoyed, and perhaps a little disappointed.

Tsuneo: Disappointed that he wasn't killed, that is

Rebecca: I mean, it'd make things so much easier for her and Hakara

> "S...sorry..." Pack struggled to speak clearly through the discomfort of being carried in his current
> state.

Rick: Nah, being slung over a werewolf's shoulders is the only way to travel.

> Sahara's demeanor immediately softened upon seeing how much pain the ratling was suffering.

Rebecca: While she genuinely hoped he'd learned his lesson, a small part of her knew that he hadn't.

> "We've got to get him to the infirmary, fast," Sajit said.

> "I'll tell them to get everything ready," Sahara said with a nod.

Dan: In other words, later, losers.

> The winged girl took a quick dash forward, unfurled her wings and took flight, kicking up a cloud of
> white powder as her powerful wings stirred the air.

Tsuneo: Sprayed right in their faces.

> Ken whimpered dejectedly as the warm breeze that accompanied Sahara left with her.

Dan [Ken]: Nothing to do but freeze to death, I guess.

> Sajit and Ken double-timed it back to Force Station Steelhead.

Rebecca: Up until this point, they'd been entirely casual about saving their friend's life.

> By the time they cleared the gates a

> medical team was already rushing to meet them. Sahara was barely a step behind. The soldiers all
> gawked at the bizarre gathering of metahumans

Rick: Please, they probably see regular shipments of low-level wierdoes coming up from Millennium City

> as they followed the triage team into the medical

> center. Pack was laid on a gurney with a pained squeal and rolled inside.

> Sahara's huge, violet eyes were lined with tears the moment the wounded rat was out of sight.

Dan: [Sahara] Nooo! It's so tragic!

Rick: [Sajit] It's alright, they said he'd pull through.

Dan: [Sahara] Noooo!

> She threw her arms around the nearest person, who happened to be Ken, and cried into his chest.

Dan [Ken]: I'm contributing!

> The scaled man blinked for a moment, unsure how to react

Tsuneo: The idea of human contact was alien to him

> and looked at Sajit. The werewolf stayed silent but nodded at Ken,

Rebecca: [Sajit] Leave me out of this, man.

> who wrapped his arms around the distraught girl and hissed to her as

> comfortingly as he could manage.

Rebecca: I can think of a lot of ways to describe that, but comforting would be none of them.

> A nurse led the trio to a waiting room.

On that final comment, the big screen turned off, reverting the world back to prose format. "And that was the second portion of Pack Rat – Sins of the Father," Tsuneo considered. "With a plot twist so stupid that it makes you feel dumber for having read it."

"I have to agree there," Rebecca nodded. "The 'it was my plan all along' plot twist is, frankly, one of the most overused and, more importantly, misused ones out there. It takes very careful writing and a well-constructed story to pull it off and, frankly, this fic had neither of them."

"Well yeah," Rick nodded. "I mean, Doctor Medford's plan seems a bit..."

"Stupid?" Dan asked.

"Overly complicated for no actual benefit?" Tsuneo added.

"Actively counterproductive?" Rebecca finished.

"All of the above," he nodded. "He lets Pack Rat escape for no reason at all, then lures Pack Rat back to his base while letting him kill his men and plant bombs all over the place. He then gets ambiguously blown up by a weapon that he had to know Pack Rat was carrying, and then his Huntresses fail spectacularly to stop the escape."

"Their inability to handle simple matters like turning corners did not exactly inspire confidence," Rebecca noted.

"And then finally Pack Rat blows up the base and kills all the Huntresses," Rick shrugged. "All of which could have been easily avoided by not letting him escape in the first place."

"I mean, yeah, maybe he was watching Pack Rat all along, but it's not like he did anything with any of that," Dan noted. "He found out that there's a girl the rat pines over, but failed to notice his habit of carrying a metric ton of explosives on him at all times."

"And that brings it around to the main point," Tsuneo nodded. "Medford's motivation is self-undermining. He wanted to see how resourceful Pack Rat was, so he gave him all the tools he needed and enabled his own escape. Pack Rat didn't escape on his own, he escaped because Medford let him"

"Plus I don't see what was gained by luring him back to the base to begin with," Rick noted.

"Especially since again he forced that conclusion but seemed completely unprepared for it."

"Medford is the worst kind of scientist," Rebecca shrugged. "He wants a result and forces it, and in doing so invalidates those results."

"Tell you what though," Dan added, "Those Huntresses are kind of useless. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that they were actively making things worse."

"However, you know what I feel's the worst part of this chunk?" Tsuneo spoke up. "We've killed the major villain and blown up his base. And yet, we're still only two-thirds of the way through it."

"That is worrying," Rebecca agreed.

"Well I can see you're all getting really engaged with the fic," the Voice spoke up. "And so you'll be delighted to know that we'll be covering the conclusion next time."

"Upside, it's the last part of the fic," Dan considered. "Downside is that it's still more of this fic."

"So I'll be looking forward to seeing you all then," the Voice continued. "As I have no doubt that you'll have some really interesting reviews."

"That's one way to put it, admittedly," Rebecca replied.

"But we are good for now?" Tsuneo asked.

"We are, yes," the Voice finished. "Thank you all, and I will see you again soon."

"Well there you have it," Dan shrugged. "Possibly the stupidest plot twist we've ever seen in one of these. And that's coming from a guy who read 'The Death Games'."

"So out of morbid curiosity," Tsuneo asked, "was City of Heroes' RP community as bad as Champions Online's?"

"Mostly," Rebecca nodded. "On the upside, the bad RPer's got funnelled into one server, but on the downside that server was an utter garbage fire."

"But on the other hand, it had Ascendant," Rick offered. "Which I like to think balances things."

Author's notes:

I did not see the 'this was my plan all along' twist coming, largely because it was so stupid and made no sense whatsoever. Of course, it also would have helped if it had some buildup, if Doctor Medford had any actual presence in the fic before then and if that was at the climax of the fic rather than halfway through it, so there you go. Really, I can't think of any way in which it didn't fail as a plot twist or actively make the story worse.

On the other hand, I did not see 'rescued by bigfoot' coming, so there is that.

I really have no idea what Ken is doing in the fic at all. Saijit's there to be Pack Rat's buddy. Sahara's there as his obvious love interest (and to help show just how loathsome Pack Rat actually is) and Hakara is obviously meant to be the romantic rival. But Ken? Nope, he's just there, being a future space nanotech lizardman or something. You could remove him from the fic and it'd make no difference whatsoever.

Ascendant's phone call to NC Soft Customer Service may be the best thing to ever come out of a Roleplay community.

Next time, no there is still more of this

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Pack Rat – Sins of the Father written by modus669

Rebecca Bartley and Rick R. Mortis created by Rick R. (natch)
Tsuneo Tateo and Dan created by Zogster

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> The extra duffel he had brought along was quickly losing weight as he left little presents for VIPER
> in his wake like some sort of demented Santa Clause.