
Episode 458 – Trying something new, for better or for worse

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.

“So did you get it working in the end?” Dan asked as he and Rick entered the room.

“Oh yeah,” Rick nodded.

“What was the trick?”

“Well, first I installed a third-party patch from a dubious website,” Rick explained. “Then I ran it in compatibility mode with a twenty year-old OS, deactivated then reactivated all the DLCs, took my shoes off and turned the computer ninety degrees to the left.”

“And?”

“Works like a charm,” Rick beamed.

“So after that can you use your computer otherwise?” Rebecca asked as she and Tsuneo joined them.

“Well in theory yes,” Rick admitted. “But it works best if I reboot it, redo all my graphics settings, reboot it again, disconnect my printer and wear a hat”

“That sounds like a lot of effort just to get one game running,” Tsuneo considered.”

“But it’s totally worth it,” Rick beamed. “It’s been going perfectly since I figured out the solution. And one day I might even make it out of the tutorial level.”

“Of course,” Tsuneo shook his head.

“Speaking of,” Dan spoke up, “I have some great news for you, Rick.”

“As long as it’s not great news for all readers, I’m in”

“So remember that tactical class-based Battle Royale shooter we used to play?” He asked.

“Hold on,” Rebecca interjected. “That was the one where everything was janky and bits of the landscape were just untextured pink blobs”

“Yeah,” Dan nodded.

“And the Jeep drove upside down, and if you put a hat on your head would turn invisible,” Tsuneo nodded.

“That’s the one,” Rick agreed.

“And Rick played a hobo with a shopping cart and turret mechanics that never worked out,” Rebecca noted.

“Those turrets were the worst,” he nodded.

“While Dan had an overpowered pre-order rifle,” Tsuneo finished.

"Turns out that it's less overpowered when everyone has it," Dan admitted. "But you got that right."

Rebecca tapped her chin. "Didn't it never technically leave beta before it was shut down?"

"Yes," Rick confirmed. "And even then the dataminers found piles of unused assets and even a couple of never implemented maps."

"Also if I remember, you two gave up actually trying to play that game," Tsuneo added. "In the end you spent all your time hiding in bushes hoping that nobody would notice you."

"Gods yeah," Dan noted. "We considered it a bad match if we ever had to fire a shot."

"So what's the news?" Rick asked.

"Get this, a group have set up an emulated server for it," he explained.

"No way."

"For real," Dan nodded enthusiastically. "I played a couple of matches on it myself."

"How is it?"

"Well to be honest?" Dan shrugged. "It's an unstable, buggy, laggy mess where everything is a mass of random disconnections. A lot of things don't work properly, and some stuff, like the vehicles, are at a point where anything could happen if you tried to use them."

"Huh," Rick considered. "Sounds like how the game was when it was technically live."

"Not to mention that you'd be starting over from scratch," Tsuneo noted. "Any progress or cosmetics or whatever else you would have had previously would be gone."

"Plus there's a lot of other risks you have to consider on a server setup like that," Rebecca spoke up. "For starters, you're entirely at the mercy of the people running it; if they decide to shut it down or tweak it in a way that favours one group or class or whatever else, then you have to accept it. Then there's also the fact that a setup like that is going to be a vector for all sorts of intrusions, viruses and whatever else."

"You know, you're right," Rick nodded, then turned to Dan. "So how can I get started?"

"I'll send you all the details and setup."

"All right!" Rick cheered. "I can't wait to get back to hiding in a bush while wearing a test box on my head."

"Hopeless," Rebecca sighed.

"Good morning everyone," the Voice crashed into the conversation.

"And good morning to you too, Evil von Murderskull," Dan shot back.

"Don't think that's a bit on the nose?" Rick asked.

"Eh," Dan shrugged. "It's earned by this point."

"Anyway," Tsuneo sighed, "What's on the to-do list for today, Voice?"

"I hope it's not another crossover," Rebecca sighed. "I really feel that I've had enough of those for now."

"Well then you're in luck," the Voice beamed. "Today I have something new for you that we really haven't done before."

"Well that bodes," Rick noted.

"Evil von Murderskull it is," Dan added.

"So what is this all new, all different thing?" Tsuneo asked.

"Today we have a fanfic based on Champions Online," the Voice explained.

"Well hell," Rebecca snapped.

"Oh geez, Voice," Rick winced. "What did we do to hurt you?"

"What's wrong with you two?" Tsuneo asked.

"We did a series of Champions Online character biographies a while back as a B-Team thing," Rebecca explained. "They were... not good."

"No fic has hurt me nearly that much," Rick explained. "Not even Mad Dog Squad."

"Oof," Dan winced.

"So what is this piece of debris?" Tsuneo asked.

"The fic's called Pack Rat - Sins of the Father," the Voice explained.

"Odds that the protagonist is an actual rat?" Dan asked.

"Upwards of ninety percent," Rebecca explained. "Champions Online's playerbase was really furry. And the bad sort of furry at that."

"Fun stuff," he managed with obvious resignation. "How much of this... thing is there, Voice?"

"There's three parts to the fic," the Voice explained.

"Well I guess it's on the short side," Tsuneo managed as he took his place on the couch. "At this point, it doesn't feel like there's much else to look forward to."

"Given how the Champions Online community evolved, definitely not," Rebecca explained as she and the others joined him.

"So is there anything positive you can say about said community?" Dan asked.

"Well, it's mostly dead now," Rebecca finished as the big screen turned on, converting the world over to script format. "And that's about it, really."

> Pack Rat - Sins of the Father by modus669

> Chapter 1

> [[This work of Champions Online fan fiction includes appearances by characters played by people
> other than myself.

Dan: Wait, did they already send OCs?

> I would like to personally thank doctordarkspawn, BombermanGOLD,

Dan: Bomber Man Gold, now on the N64.

> narissis, and nulion5545 for their permission and endorsement of this body of work.

Rebecca: Having other Champions Online players endorse your work is not exactly a good thing

> Again, this is purely a work of fan fiction, I do not own any rights to the Champions Online universe
> or any of the organizations, characters, or locations portrayed within.

Rick: Given how things have gone for Cryptic Studios, you very well could own them by now.

> Please don't sue me. I'm broke anyway.]]

Tsuneo: Ironically he spent all his money on costume packs

> The sharp, staccato bark of Pack Rat's assault rifle ended as the last round of his magazine
> ejected,

Rick: Not how his family was hoping Thanksgiving would go.

> the chime of the brass clattering to the concrete floor echoing in the eerie silence of the
> warehouse.

Rebecca: He just asked if you had a reservation.

> The brown-furred man-rat hybrid

Dan: Master Splinter has thrown away his badge and is not playing by your rules.

> ducked down behind the crate which was providing him cover, slamming his back against it.

Tsuneo: Maybe next time don't hide behind the crate of fuel oil and fireworks.

> His over-sized leather combat backpack strained in protest.

Rick: His backpack lodged a strenuous objection to his current activities

> He released and tossed aside the spent magazine, and withdrew a fresh one from the webbing at
> his thigh, slapping it into place.

Tsuneo: When I think of the colourful world of Champions Online with its bright costumes and over-the-top superpowers, the first things that come to mind are assault rifles, tactical accessories and shootouts in grimy warehouses

Rebecca: So about half the player characters in Champions Online

Tsuneo: Sadly I can believe that

> "It's the rat! Blast 'em!" a voice commanded from across the room.

Dan: His arch enemy is The Exterminator.

Rebecca: I would pay actual money if that was the case.

> Pack rolled his eyes. Quite the grasp of the obvious on this bunch.

Rick: Oh, they're calling out the presence of a known, armed and dangerous enemy. How very mainstream of them

> His head, basically that of a common rat perched atop a humanoid torso,

Dan: For want of any actual description, I'll assume it's a rat-sized rat head on a human sized body

> and his faintly glowing green eyes, lacking any pupils

> or irises, made it impossible to mistake the hybrid for anything resembling human.

Rick: Because the fuzzy muzzle and whiskers weren't a giveaway.

> "So much for the subtle approach," a deep voice growled nearby.

Rebecca: He could be very subtly blazing away with an assault rifle

> Sajit's muzzle curled into a cartoon-like canine grin.

Dan: Uh-oh, he smells snausages.

> Only the werewolf's striking white teeth were clearly visible in the dim late afternoon

Rick: Wow, that smile is dazzling. What's his secret?

Rebecca: Dentabone.

> light filtering in through the warehouse's dirty, discolored skylights.

Tsuneo: Look, I know you're in the middle of a gunfight, but would it kill anyone to do a bit of spring cleaning?

> His midnight black fur otherwise obscured the rest of his form.

Dan: His teeth were literally shining, even though the rest of him seemed to absorb all light from around him.

> "It made them think twice about charging didn't it," Pack Rat retorted, punctuating the sentence by jerking the slide on his rifle, chambering the first round of the new magazine.

Rebecca: I'm going to predict that we're going to get a lot of descriptions of guns in this fic. I'm also going to predict that the guns will be better realised than any of the actual characters

> Across the large cluttered room several heavily armored soldiers shuffled positions,

Rick: Get in a quick two-step during breaks in the gunfire.

> trying to flank the two animalistic heroes

Rick: I suspect that the term 'heroes' will be used advisedly

> without further exposing themselves. Their gear was colored shades of yellow and green,

Tsuneo: They were fighting the Australian Olympic team

> the hallmarks of V.I.P.E.R (or the Venomous Imperial Party of the Eternal Reptile),

Rebecca: And definitely not formed just for the cool acronym.

> a terrorist organization bent on global domination.

Rick: They're your basic snake-themed evil organisation. You know the type.

> The groans of the wounded soldier lying

> nearby seemed the cause of their caution. His leg had been perforated by one of Pack Rat's

> rounds.

Dan: Pack Rat had just realised that if you shoot at the bad guys then they will shoot at you.

> "Any suggestions,"

Tsuneo: Don't write fanfic based on your MMO characters

- > Pack Rat grumbled a query to his dark-furred companion as a stray energy bolt
- > from one of the VIPER troops weapons skipped across the top of the crate he huddled behind.

Rick: According to cover shooter rules, there must be ample crates available at all times

- > The electric-blue plasma sprayed splinters across the top of the rat's head.

Tsuneo: There you go, wooden crate beats plasma weapon. I did wonder.

- > "Now we do it my way," Sajit huffed as he hurdled over the crate, his canine legs launching the
- > werewolf through the air.

Rebecca: His wolf legs were apparently spring-loaded

- > "Crap..." Pack Rat said as he shouldered his rifle and spun, bracing it across the top of the crate.

Tsuneo: Sajit was immediately gunned down by the VIPER troopers on overwatch.

- > The skulls strapped to Sajit's belt clattered creepily

Dan: The way the skulls clattered was creepy. However, everyone was fine with the idea that he had skulls strapped to his belt in the first place

- > as he bounded across the warehouse. Each one was a repository for the werewolf's shamanic magic.

Rebecca: Were those skulls ethically sourced?

Rick: The last thing I want is a Boneghazi Werewolf

- > They seemed to glow with a dim blue radiance in the darkened room.

Rick: I'd feel somewhat wary about having radioactive skulls hanging around my waist.

- > Every leap Sajit made easily cleared two or three of the tall shelves

Tsuneo: Very high ceilings in this grimy warehouse. Makes me wonder if they're making the most optimal use of their space

- > which separated the warehouse into loose rows,

Dan: The layout of this warehouse is now the most interesting part of this fic.

- > quickly closing the distance between him and the VIPER troops.

Tsuneo: So were they shooting at each other through the rows of shelves, or...

Rebecca: Sajit's taking a detour because he saw a tennis ball.

- > The enemy soldiers quickly noted Sajit's approach and moved to level their energy rifles at him.

- > "Nuh-uh," Pack Rat snickered as he spotted the barrels of the VIPER troop's rifles sticking up from
- > behind their cover. He pulled the trigger on his own weapon in a slow, deliberate rhythm,

Tsuneo: He was shooting at them in a casual, relaxed manner.

- > sending
- > several projectiles down range with practiced accuracy. Several of the slugs struck their targets,
- > sending the enemy weapons flying far off target if not completely out of hand.

Dan: I regret pre-greasing my gun!

- > The others struck
- > near enough to the VIPER troops to force them to flinch, accomplishing the desired effect
- > regardless.

Rebecca: He's wildly spraying fire across multiple targets with pinpoint accuracy.

- > Sajit plowed into the VIPER troops as their shots flew wide. His leap added momentum to the wolf's
- > already formidable strength

Rick: I mean, how strong is he? Has he wrestled a naked starship captain yet?

Dan: Deep cut.

- > as blue plasma sizzled across the ceiling. The nearest soldier grunted
- > in pain, falling limply to the side as Sajit's claws sliced four parallel gouges through his armor,
- > tearing the flesh beneath.

Tsuneo: See, he's got four claws per hand, not three. He's a totally original character and not a Wolverine ripoff at all.

Rick: Four claws is Freddy Kruger

Tsuneo: Damn it.

- > The wolf's claws came back red and tiny droplets of castoff spattered the nearby soldiers.

Rebecca: Given that the character is a midnight black werewolf with skulls on his belt, I suppose the edginess was inevitable

Rick: I wonder how he feels about Shadow the Hedgehog

- > The four troopers behind scrambled away in a panic, trying to bring their weapons to bear

Dan: [VIPER] I lost my gun, can I go home now?

Rick: [Sajit] You're excused.

- > as Sajit moved past their wounded companion without slowing. His claws flashed again in
- > the dim light, spraying sparks as they scraped the more heavily armored bits of the next soldier.

Tsuneo: So apparently not only was the soldier wearing metal armour, but he has metal claws

- > This caused them to break cover as they back pedaled.

- > "Gotcha," Pack Rat chuckled as he squeezed the trigger.

Rebecca: [Sajit] Friendly fire! Friendly fire!

- > His rifle flashed four times in quick
- > succession. The weak, unarmored shoulder joints of the VIPER troop's protective wear erupted in
- > red blossoms. Brief howls of pain followed, followed by feeble groans as the soldiers collapsed,
- > clutching their wounds.

Rick: That was a very clever plan of yours to shoot them in entirely non-lethal ways

Dan [Pack Rat]: Sure, let's go with that

- > Pack Rat lowered his rifle, checking the magazine

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] ...wait, blanks?

- > as he stood and
- > approached his wounded opponents. The rat-man frowned when he heard Sajit emit a low, throaty
- > growl.

> "They're down man. That's enough," Pack Rat said calmly.

Rebecca: He's just hungry. Get him a Schmacko.

> Sajit was looming over the nearest soldier, eyeing his bleeding wounds hungrily.

> "Saj." Long Pause, "SAJIT!"

Tsuneo: Down! Back... back! Bad dog! Bad, bad dog!

> The werewolf's growl increased in intensity. His eyes were locked on the wounded prey before him.

> His eyes glowed red in the muted light. His muscles tensed to pounce. The click-clack sound of

> Pack Rat's massive revolver interrupted Sajit, and he found the barrel pressed to his temple.

Dan: Are we going to go full 'Old Yeller' in the first chapter?

> "I'm not packing silver today, Sajit, so I know this won't kill you, but you'll wake up with one hell of a
> headache."

Rebecca: If this is how you handle your team-mates then I think you might want to reconsider things

> Sajit paused and rolled his eyes over to Pack Rat.

Tsuneo: And realised he was conveniently snack-sized.

> The wounded VIPER soldiers held their breath,

> despite their pain, hoping silence alone might save them. Sajit began to growl at Pack but just as

> quickly shook his head, clearing his mind.

> "Grrr... fine... take them in if you must," Sajit chuffed as he stalked away.

Tsuneo: So... when Pack Rat's not around does he murder every bad guy he comes across?

Rebecca: That does seem to be the case

Tsuneo: I have many questions about this arrangement

> Pack Rat holstered his pistol and kicked away the trooper's energy rifles before they got any clever
> ideas.

> "You're lucky the moon isn't more full or we might all be in a world of hurt,"

Rick: Because then it'd hit your eye like a big pizza pie.

> the hybrid rat chided as he zip-tied the VIPER soldiers hands.

Dan: [Pack Rat] You naughty homicidal maniac you.

> A short van-ride later, they had arrived at Millennium City's ninth precinct,

Rick: Funnily enough, each time these two come around, the whole precinct is out to lunch.

> the closest police station. Millennium City was built over what some called the ruins of old Detroit.

Tsuneo: The mysterious, ancient lost city of Detroit

> Detroit had been nearly decimated when a super villain mastermind named Doctor Destroyer

Rick: His goal is to kill everyone who has a PHd.

> had launched a brutal assault

> on the city many years ago. His army of robots and super weapons wreaked terrible havoc on the
> town before an army of heroes rose up and eventually drove him back.

Rebecca: But really, it's Detroit. Who would notice?

> Captain Jenkins

Rick: Can we assume that he has chicken?

> shook his head as Pack Rat & Sajit dragged the trussed up VIPER mercenaries
> into the police station.

Dan: Ah, those whacky homicidal murder freaks. What hijinks have they been up to today?

> His bushy, wild mustache waggled agitatedly in contrast to the short,
> concrete-like buzz cut his graying head was sporting.

Rick: Captain Jenkins has been three days from retirement for the last fifteen years.

> "What the hell is this?"

Tsuneo: Crappy fanfic based off somebody's edgy MMO character

> he barked,

Rick: You'd think that Sajit would do all the barking

> gesturing dramatically at the wounded captives decorating the precinct's floor,

Dan: Pack Rat made sure to arrange them in a fashionable way.

> "They're bleeding all over the goddamn place!"

Tsuneo: That's what's bothering him, and not the fact that this guy shot them up with an assault rifle.

> The other officers in the station shrank away from the two feral looking heroes

Rebecca: Being fair, they're a rat-man and a werewolf. Can you imagine the smell?

> as they tossed the
> last of their prizes on the precinct floor, but Jenkins stalked forward, undeterred, and thrust a finger
> into the chest of Pack Rat's green Kevlar vest. Despite being a licensed hero,

Rick: He had stood in line at the DMV and filled in so many forms

> and officially working for UNTIL (The United Nations Tribunal on International Law),

Rebecca: In a constant war with VIPER over who has the better acronym.

> the relationship between the police
> and what they considered just another mutant vigilante was strained at times.

Rebecca: And I cannot begin to imagine why

> "You can't just go shooting people up and then drag them in here like this, you ugly freak!"

Rick: [Jenkins] Procedure says you call for pickup and preserve the crime scene when you shoot them!

> A quiet collective gasp came from the other policemen and women in the station.

Dan: Jenkins just found his ticket to a lifetime disability pension.

- > It was common
- > knowledge among those familiar with the hero scene that Pack Rat had some image issues

Dan: He was concerned about his weight and knew he was going bald early. That and the fact that he was an unholy hybrid of rodent and man.

- > and could sometimes be provoked by commenting on his appearance.

Rick: However, he considered 'you dirty rat' to be a come-on line.

- > Pack's eyes narrowed but he only slapped Jenkins' hand away in response.

Rebecca: And found himself in lock-up faster than you can say 'assaulting a police officer.'

- > "I didn't shoot people. I shot terrorists.

Tsuneo: Terrorists are people too

Rebecca: Run rings around you logically there

- > And they'll live. If you care so much about what happens to 'em, then you call the damn ambulance.

Rick: And remember, if they're not there in thirty minutes, it's free.

- > My report's in here. Take it up with UNTIL if you got a problem."

- > With that the rat commando

Rebecca: Does he have any actual formal commando training?

Dan: No, but he's not wearing any underpants

Rebecca: Thanks for that

- > slapped a folder on the nearby counter,

Tsuneo: He may be a gun-toting vigilante, but at least he does his paperwork.

- > then spun on his heel and stomped out of the station and onto the streets of Millennium City.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Stupid public servants always trying to save lives.

- > Sajit gave the the captain a cheeky smile, letting his tongue dangle from his mouth mockingly

Tsuneo: He thought it was mocking, but everyone else just assumed he wanted a treat.

- > as he turned to follow Pack Rat.
- > Several pedestrians stumbled at the sudden appearance of a black werewolf sporting a string of
- > human skulls as a belt,

Dan: It was the skulls that really bothered them. Otherwise they would have assumed he was a furry

- > and a bipedal rat wearing body armor and loaded for bear.

Tsuneo: Yes, when I think rat-based superhero, I obviously assume that his powers are guns.

Rick: You think he'd be leaning on the rat side of things for his powers instead.

Rebecca: So what, he can spread Bubonic Plague, eat his young and gnaw through garbage bags?

Rick: I mean, maybe.

- > They definitely

> didn't fit the typical mold for most of the so-called super heroes that were known to work in
> Millennium City.

Rick: Neither of them were level six demonic vampire catgirls.

> Neither Pack rat nor Sajit paid any mind to the stares as they walked away from
> Precinct 9 towards Pack Rat's van.

Tsuneo: I'm going to automatically assume its black and has the windows spray-painted over.

> After a few moments, Sajit spoke up, "Woulda been easier to just kill 'em.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Can't. It's more paperwork.

> As registered heroes we do have license to kill in self-defense you know?"

Rebecca: You get the feeling that Sajit has placed a lot of weapons on dead bodies in his time

Tsuneo: His body camera seems to be permanently off

> "Seen enough of that," Pack Rat replied flatly, "Besides, they were just goons. No need for fatalities
> in this case,"

Dan: There's a time and a place for casual murder.

> Pack rat fished a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolding and scanning it.

Rick [Pack Rat]: Damn I wish I could read.

> "Besides," Pack began again as he read, "my real target is almost within range now," his voice was
> uncharacteristically cold.

Rebecca: Because so far he's been a fountain of warmth and emotion

> "Medford..." Pack sneered as he said the name.

> Sajit shook his head as he spoke, "Your obsession with that guy will be the end of you Pack.

Rick: Good thing we have no idea who that is.

Tsuneo: Well, they'll no doubt explain –

Rick: *Good* thing we have *no* idea.

> You've already almost gotten yourself killed more than once chasing that bastard around.

Dan: Yes, but it's the almost that matters.

> I swear I am not

> hauling your clawed up, shot up, bleeding body out of another snake den in the middle of fucking

> nowhere again."

Rick: But enough about his last visit to the reptile park

> Pack Rat rolled his eyes as Sajit continued to berate him about his mistakes. It all faded into the
> background

Dan [Sajit]: Blah blah blah vengeance blah blah blah path of self destruction blah blah blah I eat
babies blah blah

Rick [Pack Rat]: You're probably right... wait what?

> as Pack concentrated on walking

Rebecca: It's hard for him.

- > and studying the paper that he had lifted from one of
- > the VIPER troops he and Sajit had cornered in the warehouse earlier.

Rebecca: It was a clue to the next Nemesis quest

Rick: And to think he didn't even need to smash up some outdoor furniture first

- > The print was partly faded
- > from a combination of being crumpled and from sweat, having been hastily tucked into a rather
- > unsavory location when the mercenary in question found himself without means of escape.

Dan: He'd found it wrapped around Christopher Walken's watch

- > The map was of the topographical variety,

Rebecca: Wow, that's primary school levels of advanced right there.

- > loaded with VIPER codes and jargon that the average person could never decipher,

Tsuneo: With complex words like 'elevation' and 'north'.

- > but that Pack Rat, having been trained by VIPER from the time he was pulled from the cloning vat,

Rick: So he's a Vat Rat?

- > could effortlessly read. The map revealed the location of a facility tucked away
- > in the Canadian wilderness.

Rick: It was literally under a rock in Canada

- > Only one keyword otherwise set the location apart from any other
- > bunker VIPER may have set up in the area. "Huntress."

Rebecca: The map had been drawn by Helena Bertinelli

- > Pack knew what that meant.

Tsuneo: It meant that his head would make a nice wall trophy.

- > He had met what must have been the first of these "huntresses" several weeks ago.

Dan: It had been a Tinder date. Turns out he should have swiped left

- > The encounter had left Pack Rat bloodied and limping.

Rick: Unfortunately, he had to talk Sajit down that time too.

- > The human-cat hybrid displayed a speed and ferocity that Pack Rat could scarcely keep up with.

Rebecca: That is, it had the agility of an arthritic grandmother.

- > The skirmish had ended in a draw with both rat and cat fleeing with terrible wounds.

Tsuneo: That sounds like a dramatic battle and certainly something that should have been in the story rather than an expository infodump

- > Director Medford, the geneticist
- > responsible for the genesis of the project formerly known as "Dubielle," created experiment number
- > 609 from a primordial mix of human, rat, and other rodent genetic material.

Rick: He was also part hamster, part European Grey Squirrel and part Capybara

- > Now known as Pack Rat
- > number 609 vowed that he would have vengeance for the six hundred and eight "failures" that
- > VIPER had euthanized before him.

Rebecca: We're just piling up the edge here, aren't we?

- > This map told him that this lab was where Medford was

Dan: Really? I thought it just said 'Texaco.'

- > producing the next wave of brainwashed cat-like super soldiers.

Tsuneo: The perfect predator, capable of stalking and dispatching their prey. Well, assuming that nobody distracts them with a ball of string, that is.

- > "...Pack? PACK!" Sajit was already shouting, "Are you even listening?"

Rick: Pack Rat had learned to tune out Sajit as soon as he started ranting about women in gaming.

- > "Of course I am," he wasn't.
- > "So what are you going to do now," Sajit's ears rolled forward inquisitively.

Tsuneo: I dunno, write another chapter of the fanfic I guess.

- > "I'm going to find my father," a vengeful smile crept across the ratling's features, "And kill him."

Rebecca: Fic, if that was meant to be a dramatic stinger, then you probably shouldn't have telegraphed it for the last page and a half

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- > Chapter 2
- > Three Days, two denied requests,

Tsuneo: Three angry rants and a night in lockup.

- > and four "ultimate cheese lovers" from Darren's Pizza later,

Rick: Haha, it's funny because he's a rat and now he's super constipated

- > Pack Rat had secured the necessary UNTIL clearance to travel to Canada

Rick: Canada is a restricted zone.

- > to investigate the VIPER lab
- > he was certain held both Director Medford and his newest strain of brainwashed, big-cat-hybrid
- > clone super soldiers.

Tsuneo: And sentence.

- > Getting permission from UNTIL, the international peace keeping force which
- > provided most of the rat commando's income,

Rebecca: I'm not sure which I am more concerned about; that the UN is paying this homicidal rat freak or how he's supplementing his income

> had been tricky.

Dan: He'd gotten as far as pretty-please-with-sugar-on-top.

> Pack's intelligence had been acquired under questionable circumstances, at best,

Rebecca: Sajit testified that it was ethical and humane waterboarding.

> but the rat's intimate knowledge of VIPER tactics, systems, and methods,

Dan: [Pack Rat] Well, VIPER are green.

Rick: And?

Dan: [Pack Rat] ...yellow?

Rick: Eh, good enough.

> along with his track record of successfully thwarting the plans of the

> terrorist group in the past gave him enough leverage to push the request through relatively quickly.

Dan: Yeah, you and every other superhero in Millennium City have punched out VIPER goons. Well done, I guess.

> Pack Rat was stuffing the last of the gear he would need for the trip into a sturdy duffel bag.

Rick: His travel bag, his twelve pound bowling ball, tennis saxophone and his lucky glow in the dark snorkel.

> His namesake, an over-sized leather backpack,

Rebecca: He would take something more modern and practical, but he insists that it's more 'authentic'

> would hold his primary weapons,

Rick: It had all his Halo guns

> ammunition, and a small stash of emergency supplies,

Tsuneo: And his emotional support chew toy.

> but for an extended solo mission of the kind he intended to

> embark on he would need a bit more than his trusty backpack would carry alone.

Dan: Which was why he was wearing pants with deep pockets

Rick: Does Pack Rat even wear pants? I mean, all we know so far is that he has a Kevlar vest

Dan: I can but hope

> Rations, cold

> weather clothing, some explosives, and extra ammunition were all arranged neatly into the extra

> bag,

Tsuneo: Meanwhile, your average superhero just flies out there, zaps some VIPER goons and is home by dinner.

> which Pack was attempting to successfully zip closed

Rick: Thrill as Pack Rat... er... packs.

> when he heard a knock at the top of the stairs.

> The rat hybrid's apartment had begun as little more than a dusty unfinished basement.

Rick: And only a basement. There was no building above it

- > Over the
- > past few years Pack had spent a large portion of his UNTIL fees furnishing, reinforcing, and
- > installing equipment.

Rebecca: But not say, getting a better apartment.

- > Now the place was like a tiny underground fortress,

Tsuneo: He carries lots of guns and has a personal fortress. Am I the only one getting a worrying vibe off of all this?

Rebecca: Check to see if he has a tinfoil hat

- > complete with a small machine shop.

Rick: Complete with a discrete smelter and industrial forge

- > Pack had to hide certain aspects of his home from his long-suffering landlord,

Dan: If his landlord is a whacky cartoon figure who keeps shouting 'PACK RAT' at every step, then this will all be worth it

- > like the presence of explosives,

Rebecca: He keeps illegal explosives in his home. This is all we need to know about him

- > and thus kept the place shut up tight with mechanical and magnetic locks.

Rick: And these renovations are up to code, right?

- > Pack approached the top of the stairs with his usual practiced level of caution, with his large
- > revolver held casually behind his back

Tsuneo: So at this point he is completely insanely paranoid

Rebecca: I can only assume his diet consists entirely of tinned food and bottled water

- > as he flipped on the intercom.

- > "Speak, lest ye be spoken to," the rat quipped into the microphone.

Tsuneo: Just for that, I'm going home.

- > "It's Sajit," a slightly scratchy voice replied.

- > Pack checked the peephole, confirming the presence of his werewolf friend in his human form. He
- > was clad in a dark suit and had his dark hair pulled back into a short ponytail.

Rebecca: In his human form he's just a tryhard

- > Pack took a moment to unlock the heavy steel door, opening it with a metallic squeal.

Rick: And then he had to lower the drawbridge and raise the portcullis

- > The door was only part way open when Sajit barreled his way in.

Rebecca: Didn't even wipe his feet.

- > Even in his human form the lycanthrope was bulkier than the smaller
- > rat man, who was easily shoved aside as Sajit stomped down the stairs and into the living room.

Tsuneo: Showing Pack Rat all the respect he's due.

> Sajit was quickly followed, to Pack's surprise, by the red hooded form of Ken.

Dan: Who had just gotten back from fighting Balrog.

> Ken's wiry reptilian

> features were mostly concealed by his red cowl and tight-fitting rust-red body armor.

Tsuneo: A lizard man in body armour. Very discrete.

> He gave Pack

> Rat an apologetic glance through slitted eyes as he slipped into the stairway on Sajit's heels.

Dan: Ken's regrets agreeing to be in this fic.

> Ken was an unusual case, even in a city where mutants, aliens, eldritch beings, and other

> metahumans were commonplace.

Tsuneo: Lovecraftian horrors were surprisingly well represented on the census

> He was a dimensional traveler, from a time and place far beyond our modern earth.

Dan: The mysterious alien visitor from beyond known as... Ken.

> He had been infected by a nano-machine virus

Rick: They were used to make slrpnl

> that transformed him into a reptile

Rebecca: He's from the far future in an alternate universe and was turned into a lizard man by nanotechnology. Don't think you might be overdoing it on the origin story there?

> and infused him with some rather unpleasant animalistic urges.

Tsuneo: Well he and Sajit will either get on fine or be constantly trying to out-edge each other.

Rebecca: They're roleplayers in a MMO. It's always going to be the latter.

> The virus and said urges were mostly kept in check by cybernetic implants

Dan: Cyborg interdimensional time-travelling nanotech lizardman.

Rebecca: Oh yes, that makes it so much better.

> placed strategically throughout his body that

> suppressed the nano-machines and their psychological impacts.

Rick: Downside is that he now has a dead drunken terrorist living in his head.

> Ken had been one of Pack's fast friends for some time,

Tsuneo: He had mooched more from Ken than either of them could count.

> serving as the rat's confidant as he dealt with many of the social issues that

> came along with being an animal-man

Rick: Given the range of colourful people that wander Millennium City, I'm surprised anyone even gives them a second glance.

> which fell on the "icky" side of the attractiveness scale.

Dan [Ken]: I want to say that among our people I'm considered beautiful, but no. I'm a dog.

> Pack followed ken down the stairs. Sajit's currently human eyes flared angrily as Pack walked in.

Tsuneo: [Sajit] How dare he come into his own room?

> He was already ranting before Ken and Pack had entered the living room.

Rebecca: Ironically, he was going on about lizard people.

> "What the hell, Pack," Sajit fumed, "You plan on taking on an entire VIPER facility by yourself? Are you insane?"

Rick: That way he gets all the XP and loot

> Pack Rat rested the hand holding his revolver on his hip, striking an indignant pose,

Dan: The fact that he's doing this with a loaded gun speaks volumes about him

> "Well, it's the kind of job those creeps made me for to begin with.

Tsuneo: To blow up their own facility?

Rebecca: There was feature bloat, a lot of project budget creep and failure to properly define project goals.

> So I figured I'd put all their expensive training to good use. Who the hell told you anyway?"

Rick [Sajit]: Dude, you tweeted about it five minutes ago.

> "Umm... err..." Sajit shuffled his feet, running his hand through his long, dark hair.

> "Sssaharraa told us. She's worried about you Pack,"

Rebecca: He hissed the first word but nothing else.

Rick: What if that's their name?

Rebecca: Well these are MMO players, so I will give you that

> Ken picked up the ball

Rebecca: Sajit sits back on his haunches, waiting for the toss.

> before Pack could

> glare too hard at Sajit. He slipped his hood off. The swept back spines that ran along the center line
> of his head wiggling slightly as they were set free.

Dan: As they ran off into the countryside

> "Damn it, Sahara,"

Tsuneo: Damn you for covering so much of northern Africa

> Pack Rat grunted. He had told the pretty chimera

Dan: Well, one of her heads was pretty.

> only because she had been insistently curious about his plans.

Rebecca: Whatchu doin' Pack?

Rick [Pack Rat]: Running off on a one-man mission of blood-soaked vengeance
Rebecca: Kay

- > Had it been anyone other than the effervescent girl, Pack would
- > have been livid at the breach of trust, but Sahara had a way of disarming the normally reticent rat.

Rebecca: I'm going to wager it's because she's the only girl who will talk to him

- > Almost on cue, there was another knock at the door. Sajit was still yammering about the wisdom of
- > Pack's plan

Tsuneo: Pack Rat wasn't listening which, truth be told, was pretty much the norm with those two.

- > as the rattling plodded back up the stairs to the door. He opened it without looking. A
- > flurry of chocolate colored skin and feathers blew in.

Rick: Sudden onset pidgeon attack

- > A supernatural gust of warm wind followed not a moment behind.

Dan: In short, somebody farted

- > Pack scratched his temple with the barrel of his gun,

Rebecca: Pack Rat, a model of responsible gun ownership.

- > only momentarily considering pulling the trigger.

Tsuneo: He wasn't entirely opposed to the idea either

- > Sahara scurried down the stairs, her catlike prehensile tail

Rebecca: It's either as catlike tail or a prehensile one. Not both

- > trailing behind, fanning the air agitatedly.
- > Pack always had a problem describing Sahara to others in brief terms when asked about her.

Rick: So he simply settled on 'duh boobs'

- > Unlike Pack Rat and the others, she was what they called a chimera in the metahuman community.

Rebecca: But only they're allowed to use that word.

- > Her form boasted traits from several different types of creatures,

Dan: In other words, the player hit the 'random' button on the character creation screen.

- > and yet the overall effect was far from displeasing to the eye.

Rick: The way the porcupine spines sprouted from her floppy squid head was really cute.

- > On her back, a pair of broad, powerful bird wings extended from her
- > shoulders. They were usually kept tucked against her back and out of the way. Two small sharp
- > antlers swept back from her forehead, and were known to crackle with lightning when Sahara was
- > upset or agitated.

Rebecca: She needed to be properly earthed when she was feeling really moody

- > Her skin was covered in a layer of fine velvet that was mostly a dark mocha color,

> but patterned somewhat like a tabby, with mottled stripes of white running down her back and chest.

Tsuneo: It was like a tabby in as far as it wasn't

> Sahara's ears were more like fins or frills, and extended several inches to either side of her head,
> resting just under the ends of the short pigtails which matched her skin in color.

Rick: There you have it folks, the first ever Wolpertinger-themed superhero.

> Most striking of all were her bright, violet colored, catlike eyes

Dan: That's the thing you're most likely to notice on the winged antlered furry monster

> which always seemed to sport look of youthful wonder.

Rebecca: The overall effect was far from displeasing in as far as it was a cluttered rainbow coloured mess

> "Sajit! I told you not to come running down here," Sahara swatted a clawed hand at the tailored
> sleeve of Sajit's suit.

Dan: [Sajit] Do you mind, this is Armani!

> "And you," she fumed, pivoting on her heel to face Ken, "Couldn't you stop him? Pack'll be furious at
> me if he find out I let slip..."

> "You're ssstanding in Pack'sss living rroom, Ssaharra,"

Dan: So are you going to do the hissing thing or not? Make up your mind about it.

> Ken pointed out as a grin crept across his scaled features,

Tsuneo: Aaah! Too many teeth!

> "He'sss ssstanding rright behind you."

> Sahara squealed and clapped her hands over her mouth. Her wings wrapped around her body, as if
> she could somehow hide within their folds.

Rick: Also, waah-waah.

> Pack Rat sighed as he sauntered past Sahara, rolled over the back of one of his plush black leather
> chairs that were arranged around the similarly comfortable sofa and propped himself across it,
> letting his feet dangle over the arm.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat hadn't quite figured out how chairs work

> "I'm not mad, Sahara,

Dan: He's a paranoid, vengeful, gun-toting murder machine, but he's not mad.

> just... geez, couldn't you wait until I was out of town before you started telling everyone?"

Tsuneo: But then how will we have the forced drama?

> Sahara folded her wings back and leaned over Pack Rat, resting her hands on the arm of the chair.

> "But what you're doing is, like, super crazy dangerous.

Rick: [Sahara] I just want to make sure your life insurance is paid up.

> I really really wish you wouldn't try to do this alone, Pack."

Tsuneo: I really wish you'd drag more people into your self-destructive murder rampage

> Pack faced the moral dilemma of looking into Sahara's gorgeous, pleading, violet eyes

Dan: [Ken] He never looks at me like that.

> or daring a peek down the front of the low-cut top she wore.

Rebecca: So we can add 'creep' to his list of endearing personality traits

> He thought better of both, and looked away from

> the striped beauty, trying very hard not to dwell on her curvaceous form.

Rick: Again, duh, boobs

> She had been uncommonly kind to the ratling since they had met,

Dan: Not screaming in terror and throwing things at him was a good start

> never giving a second thought to what he considered his repulsive appearance.

Tsuneo: I mean yeah, he could stand to shower a bit more often.

> Occasionally he wondered if there could be something between them,

Rick: Like a book club or a league bowling team.

> but such thoughts were quickly banished

Tsuneo: Pack thought it best to keep all his feelings bottled up inside of him.

> once Sahara had started keeping company with, to Pack's

> eyes, an extremely buff cheetah hybrid named Haraka.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Not that I was checking him out or anything!

> His exotic, slightly primitive warrior ways must have been quite attractive to the young metahuman.

Rebecca: Well that got awkward fast.

> Goddamn cats.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Stupid sexy cat boys.

> Pack found the bubbly mutant incredibly alluring,

Rick: Um, Pack rat? Hello? Earth to rat guy? We're in the middle of something here, if you could stop eyeing your colleague for a second...

> but deep down knew nothing would ever come of it, no matter how nice to him she was.

Tsuneo: He's this close to a rant about 'Chads' and 'Staceys'.

> He was, after all, just a disgusting rat, and she was... well... beautiful.

Dan: Which is why he kept a stash of disturbing Mrs Brisby fanart

> Pack frowned as Sahara peered at him, "Sahara, this is the type of thing they trained me to do,

Rick: [Pack Rat] I got a D; 'see me after class,' but still.

> plus, this is my fight. It's personal. I couldn't dream of dragging any of you into it."

> Sajit broke his momentary silence, stomping over to where Pack was lounging, "That is one hell of a
> thing for you to say to me, Pack."

> There had been a few occasions when Sajit's control over his inner wolf had slipped,

Rick: He's peed on the carpet and humped so many legs

> and Pack,

> along with Ken and Sahara, had been there to calm the werewolf down before any serious damage
> could be done.

Dan: Besides, arms grow back, right?

> A rampaging werewolf who was also a registered superhero could set human-
> metahuman relations back twenty years.

Tsuneo: It makes you wonder how stringent that registration process is given that they approved a
murderous, rampaging berserker.

> Pack withered a bit under Sajit's glare. Ken hissed uncomfortably from his place against the wall.

Dan [Ken]: Also I am here

> Sahara blinked, and then moved around the chair, laying a hand on Sajit's shoulder.

> "Oh, don't fight guys, this isn't what I wanted.

Rebecca: A common reaction of anyone who played Champions Online

> This whole thing is my fault. I should have kept quiet."

> "No, Sahara, you didn't do anything wrong,

Dan: [Pack Rat] Just betrayed my trust.

Rebecca: [Sajit] Nobody asked you.

> you're worried about a friend," Sajit protested, "Pack

> should have at least let us know what he was doing... so I could beat him senseless!"

Dan [Sajit]: As a friend, I should have physically assaulted you

> Pack rolled his eyes.

> "We all have ourrr demonsss," Ken chimed in, "Ssometimess you jussst have to face them alone or
> you'll neVERR be at peace."

Rick [Ken]: You sssseee, many yearsss ago when I wasss-

Dan [Pack Rat]: Nobody cares

> Sajit and Sahara both gave Ken a long, skeptical look.

Tsuneo: [Quiet] Where did the lizard guy come from?

Rebecca: [Quiet] I thought you invited him.

> The reptilian man eased off the wall, pacing thoughtfully around the room.

> "Thiss man, thiss Medford, he iss rressponsible for much pain, yesss?"

Rick: [Pack Rat] He's the guy who gave me that D; 'see me after class.'

> Pack Rat nodded solemnly, "Six hundred and eight lives. Rat men just like me. They were the one's
> that didn't meet his... expectations..."

Rick: Their parfaits were mediocre at best.

> Pack nearly choked on his words.

> "They... he... killed them?" Ken asked, eyes widening slightly.

Tsuneo: His Ratsack bill is immense.

> Pack nodded an affirmative.

> "You neVERR told usss that," Ken said flatly.

Rebecca: It's not the kind of thing that naturally comes up in conversation.

> "Those bastards," Sajit spat, "I officially do not feel bad about that one time I ate that VIPER trooper
> anymore."

Rick [Pack Rat]: Yeah, I mean... wait what?!

> Sahara's eyes were wide in shock, "Oh my god. Six hundred Pack Rats?"

Tsuneo: The fact that the guy standing next to her just admitted to cannibalism doesn't seem to have registered

> Her eyes were filling with tears, "How could anyone... even VIPER?"

Dan: Because they're stupid evil. Next question.

> "It was all part of Medford's project.

Rick: He was making the world's biggest ball of twine. Yeah, strange process, I know.

> His goal was to create a soldier that could be mass-produced,
> infiltrate enemy facilities underground, and was... malleable."

Tsuneo: And he chose rats for this?

> Pack was referring to the intensive brainwashing that director Medford and VIPER had subjected
> the cloned rat men to.

Rebecca: He limited their media exposure to only a few niche subreddits.

> Any sign of resistance, or any failure to perform up to expectations, and the
> subject was summarily euthanized. Pack rat had watched the bodies of a dozen of his predecessors
> hauled away for incineration.

Tsuneo: You know what makes your superhero origin story really pop? Holocaust imagery.

Rebecca: Good stuff

> Only his raw cunning had allowed him to hide that the mental conditioning wasn't taking.

Dan: Which given all we've seen of him so far probably amounted to him standing there and going 'duh'

> It was replaced, instead, by a burning desire for freedom and vengeance, in equal measure.

> "I undersstand now..." Ken said his voice barely above a whisper.

> "Well I don't." Sajit snapped,

Rick [Sajit]: No really, I have no clue what you guys are saying.

> glaring at Ken for a moment before turning to his rodent friend, "Pack,

> that place will be crawling with soldiers. One wrong move, just one, and they'll be on you like fleas

> on a cat."

Dan: [Pack Rat] Not like fleas on a rat?

Rebecca: [Sajit] Hell, I know you've already got fleas.

> Pack managed a slight grin at that. He and his canine ally were sometimes known to indulge in the

> occasional good-natured bit of cat humor together.

Rick [Sajit]: We are so much better than those dumb cats. Now let me sniff all your buttoholes

> Sahara tossed Sajit a mildly irritated glance. She was, after all, currently dating a cat person.

Tsuneo: Sajit strikes me as the sort who puts down everyone he meets and then wonders why he's still single

> "I'll be fine, there's a hidden access that I can breach.

Rebecca: All supervillain lairs must have an easily accessible back entrance. It's the law.

> It's underground at the base of the structure. Only someone like me could tunnel down to it.

Dan: Or anyone else who bought the Tunneling travel power.

> Even if I wanted to risk any of your lives doing this, I

> couldn't get you down underground to where I'm making my entrance."

Tsuneo: So he's known about this VIPER base for a while, even had a plan to break into it and seems to believe he can take it out single-handedly. So why hasn't he done it before?

Rebecca: Well, his personal enemy wasn't there beforehand.

Tsuneo: But it's still an evil terrorist base, right?

Rebecca: Nope, not personal enough.

> Part of Pack's suite of special abilities that VIPER had engineered into him was the ability to burrow

> rapidly through earth and stone.

Rick: I'd call him a tunnel rat, but I'm afraid of what Larry Hama might do to me.

> Pack's inhumanly strong hands and nails were even able to break through steel reinforced concrete.

Rebecca: But it's a nightmare when he wants to get a manicure.

> Sometimes he wished the rest of him was as powerful.

Dan: So he instead compensated for his inadequacies with his collection of firearms

> Sahara was pacing nervously, her feline tail swishing behind her.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Whoah, there goes my priceless Ming vase. Oh, and my adoptive grandma's urn.

> Little arcs of lightning were sparking up and down her small, gazelle-like antlers.

Rebecca: Mood-reactive Tesla antlers are one of the stupider superpowers I've seen

> "Packy, I have a terrible feeling about all this.

Dan: I have a terrible feeling about calling him Packy.

> Please, please take Ken with you."

> Sahara whirled around, facing Ken again, "You're a sniper, right?

Dan [Ken]: Am I? Really, I have no clue who I am or what I'm even doing here.

> You could cover Packy from a

> distance with your rifle while he finds a different way for both of you to get in," she fidgeted

> hopefully.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat has a simple and functional plan, but no, let's make it far more complicated than it needs to be

> "I could do thisss," Ken agreed.

Dan: Future dimension-hopping spaceman cyborg nanotech lizardman! His power is also guns.

Tsuneo: I'm beginning to think Sajit is the best realised character here, and that worries me.

> Pack had threatened, on more than one occasion, to marry Ken's rifle.

Rebecca: On several occasions, Ken had found Pack Rat making out with it

> The futuristic design and it's

> synergy with Ken's bionic implants made the reptilian soldier easily Pack's equal, if not his better,

> when it came to hitting a single target down range.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat got all hot and bothered just thinking about it.

> But then again, nothing quite beat the feeling of

> nailing a large target with a rocket launcher and watching the fireworks, according to the rat.

Dan: Despite his feelings for Sajit's rifle, Pack Rat will always go back to his old faithful rocket launcher.

[Pause]

Rick: In combat, right?

Dan: No, yes of course! In combat!

> "No way," Pack waved the idea away as he rolled off the plush chair and back to his feet, "Even if I

> could find another way in on the surface,

Rick: [Ken] I could knock on the door and say I'm delivering Uber Eats.

Rebecca: [Pack Rat] You're a lizard man.

Rick: [Ken] I'm a self-employed lizard man.

> Ken picking off targets from a half mile away

Dan: [Ken] One mile.

Rebecca: [Sajit] All right, you two. Put them away.

> would throw up so many alarms it'd be like a kicked hornet's nest inside once we got in.

Tsuneo: Although weaponised hornets sounds like a legitimate VIPER plan.

> No. I need to be as deep inside as possible before they know anything is up or Medford will ghost

Rebecca: He'll stop answering your emails and won't respond on Discord

> and I'll lose this chance."

> "Damn the logic, rat," Sajit interjected,

Rick [Sajit]: Stop making sense and thinking things through in a rational manner!

> "I swear if anything happens to you I'll raise you're sorry ass

> as a zombie and kill you again out of spite!"

Dan [Pack Rat]: Remind me why we hang out with this guy?

Rick [Ken]: I thought he was your friend.

> That actually worried Pack a little,

Dan: The worst part is that Sajit could make his zombified corpse do the housework.

> because there was a good chance that the mystically inclined lycanthrope could really do that.

Tsuneo: Given that he's a Werewolf shaman, does this mean Sajit's somebody's Werewolf the Apocalypse character?

Rebecca: He's got the right amount of tryhard edginess for it, at least.

> "Then for my own sake I'll just have to make sure that nothing bad happens to me," Pack snickered

> as he returned to closing up the stubborn, slightly overstuffed duffel bag.

Rebecca: Yes, I feel confident about the solo infiltration mission being pulled off by a guy who can't even pack a duffel bag.

> "You can't know that for certain, Pack. What if it's a trap? It probably is a trap you know," Sajit

> grumbled, now sitting on the back of Pack's black leather sofa, arms folded defiantly.

> "That may be true, Saj, but I do know one thing for certain.

Rick [Pack Rat]: Zebras are more closely related to donkeys then they are to horses

> If I don't do this, I'm never gonna sleep

> through the night again. I'm tired of waking up hearing the screams of voices just like mine. I'm tired

> of seeing the terror in eyes just like mine just before the lights go out. I have to stop them. I have to

> stop him."

Rebecca: Have you considered therapy instead?

> The other three went silent, each bearing a somber expression.

Dan: Punctuated only by Sajit loudly farting

> Only an upset snuffle from Sahara pierced the uncomfortable quiet.

Rick: [Sahara] Soz, hayfever. So what were we doing?

> "I only wish," Pack smiled back at his friends despite the awkward moment, "That this new breed

> wasn't based on cats."

Dan [Pack Rat]: I mean, they're probably going to be dancing around and singing about being 'jelical', whatever the hell that means

> Pack eyed Sahara, grinning, thinking about Haraka, the studly cheetah hybrid she'd been spending
> time with lately,

Dan: Thinking about his toned body and long, powerful legs...

> knowing the underlying meaning would likely fly past those present.

> "Why's it always gotta be cats?"

Rebecca: On the surface, Pack Rat claimed he was happy for her. Deep down he was a bubbling pit of resentment

> ----

> Chapter 3

> Sajit, Ken, & Sahara had gone with Pack Rat to the airfield to see him off.

Dan: Sajit was thrown out when he wouldn't check his skulls at security.

> The high tech VTOL jet

> was already fueled, humming, and ready to take off when the group arrived.

Tsuneo: They chartered this entire huge supertech jet for one rat guy. Money well spent.

> Ken & Sajit shook

> Pack's hand, clapping him on the shoulder, trying to hide their concern and worry behind the usual

> array of manly posturing and gestures.

Dan: And a round of homoerotic beach volleyball

> Sahara stood a few steps away, rolling her eyes and

> chuckling at the silly boys as they attempted to look cool.

Rebecca: Mentally she was already writing the slashfic

> Pack pulled away from Sajit and Ken and hefted his combat pack onto one shoulder. Before he

> could reach down to lift his duffel bag

Rick: And his pink Dior carry-on.

> Sahara lurched forward and threw her arms around Pack's

> torso, burying her face in his chest.

Tsuneo: Is that Ax body spray she's smelling or just his natural rat odour? We will never know.

> Her tail wagged frantically behind her. The rat froze.

Rebecca: A girl had touched him. He had no idea what to do next.

> After a long

> moment, Sahara looked up at Pack. Her bright violet eyes glimmered in the midday sunlight. Pack

> couldn't quite read the expression on her face.

Rick: I thought he'd be used to utter revulsion by now.

> A few feet away Sajit nudged ken with his elbow.
> After another moment, Sahara broke the spell with two simple words.

> "Come back."

> Pack blinked and then nodded his response wordlessly

Rebecca: Being in the vicinity of boobs always does that to him.

> as he lifted his duffel and turned to board
> the jet that would take him to Force Station Steel Head, an allied Royal Canadian Mounted Police
> installation deep in the Canadian wilderness that would be Pack's last stop in any place civilized for
> some time.

Rick: Fun facts about Canada in Champions Online. It's only settlement is one army base, it's population is primarily snow monsters, its main import is low-level characters and it's national motto is 'this is no ordinary storm'.

> Sajit, Ken, and Sahara moved away to a safe distance as the jet's engines spun up to speed,
> creating a burst of hot air which ruffled the hair and feathers of Pack's closest friends as they
> watched the jet begin to lift off.

Dan: Sahara manifests a skirt just to do the Marilyn Monroe pose.

[Pause]

Rick: Say, what does Sahara wear, anyway?

Rebecca: She has boobs, and that's all that matters to Pack Rat.

> Pack could see his friends through the window as he settled in for the flight.

Rebecca: He's into his third plastic cup of wine already.

> Sajit was sullenly glaring at the jet, the jacket of his black tailored suit held shut against
> the wash of wind from the jet's turbines.

Rick: Does he wear the skull belt with his suit?

> Ken was waving goodbye.

Dan [Ken]: Well there goessss my contribution to thisss fic

> His red cloak flapped in the
> strong breeze. Sahara stood nearby staring at the jet with that same inscrutable look from before
> etched on her features.

Rebecca: I believe the phrase 'dull surprise' comes to mind

> The brown feathers of her wings fluttered in the wind.

Tsuneo: [Sahara] Jeez, it is going to take ages to get these back under control.

> Pack watched his
> friends until the jet pivoted in air and aimed for the sky, quickly gaining speed on its way from old
> Detroit to the great white north.

> Pack found himself the only passenger aboard the flight.

Tsuneo: After word got out that Pack Rat was on the flight, there was a rash of sudden cancellations

- > The rest of the space on board was
- > reserved for military supplies destined for Force Station Steel Head.

Dan: Steel Head has its supplies flown in from Millennium City, because there is apparently nowhere closer for it to get them from

Rick: Only settlement in Canada, remember?

- > This suited the rat just fine.

Rebecca: He hated having to sit next to strangers on flights

- > He needed time to review the plan for his approach anyway.

Tsuneo: His first plan was to dress up as a sexy lady rat.

- > He unfolded a topographical map of the
- > area he would be approaching and laid it out across the top of some metal shipping crates.

Rebecca: [Pack Rat] Hold on a moment, this is a map of Pirate's World.

- > On the
- > surface the VIPER installation would resemble little more than a collection of rental cabins tucked
- > away in the wildernesses.

Dan: A nice, remote, peaceful little hobo murder shack

- > They would, superficially, seem like nothing more than a remote getaway for tourists on a budget.

Rebecca: Or for someone writing a manifesto but not wanting to fully commit to it

- > It probably even had a website, with no vacancy or booking currently available, of course.

Tsuneo: A perfectly normal Airbnb.

Rick: With a terrorist base underneath it.

Tsuneo: A perfectly normal Airbnb.

- > Pack knew, however, that the truth would lie beneath in a series of
- > interconnected bunkers where VIPER scientists would be conducting their research and preparing
- > to unleash director Medford's latest creations.

Dan: Had Pack Rat bothered telling anyone else about this facility?

- > Pack had already encountered what he assumed was the first of these huntresses during an
- > operation a few months ago. What Pack Rat had, at first, thought to be a simple armored car heist
- > along the highways outside Millennium City

Rick: Truly, is it ever a simple armoured car heist?

- > had turned out to be a VIPER mission. Afterwards he
- > had surmised that it was likely a test for their new creation.

Rebecca: Better than admitting he'd been kicked around by two guys in raccoon masks

- > Pack had taken cover from the VIPER
- > soldier's energy weapons when a feral yowl pierced the air. A blur of golden fur, wild unkempt hair,
- > and black leather

Dan: He'd been attacked by eighties Tina Turner

- > hurled itself over the car the brown-furred ratling was hiding behind. The surprised

> rodent had only a split second to throw himself to the side as the savage creature's claws cleaved
> the air where had once been huddled. The ensuing exchange of small arms fire and close quarters
> fighting had left both the aggressive feline and Pack Rat bloodied and beaten,

Rebecca: She'd ended up hissing at him and swiping her hands in the air

> with both retreating to lick their wounds as local SWAT forces arrived as backup.

Rick: For a superhero, being rescued by the cops is humiliating

> Pack frowned at the memory of that painful stalemate. He knew it was possible, even likely, that
> more such beings had been created and brought online.

Dan: Which is why he's heading into a lab that could be full of them.

> Pack didn't relish the thought that he might
> have to kill one or more of them. Killing VIPER troopers was one thing. They signed on willingly.
> They knew better.

Rebecca: You sign on with a colourful comic book villain organisation and you automatically waive all your rights. That's how it works.

> But these feline hunters were much like Pack, created as tools for the plans of evil men.

Dan: He assumes.

Rebecca: In all fairness, they could be regular agents who signed up to be turned into killer catgirls.

> He liked even less the idea of what those genetically enhanced cat warriors might do to
> him should they get the drop on him.

Tsuneo: As a compromise, he decided that should one of them try to kill him he'd have to politely ask them to stop

> Furthermore, and Pack had managed to successfully conceal his concerns from his friends, the rat
> knew that the whole thing was likely a trap.

Rebecca: Which is why he's diving in head-first without backup.

> Cornering those troops in the warehouse. The handily
> obtained intelligence report. It had all been too easy.

Dan: Those guys got shot on purpose.

> VIPER may be a sadistic power hungry group but they are certainly not stupid.

Rick: Meanwhile, VIPER were trying to take over an amusement park full of out of control robot cowboys

> Pack knew that it was probable that Medford had intentionally
> leaked the information to draw out his prodigal son. His last failed experiment. His last loose end.

Tsuneo: This is a 'free bird seed' level of cunning

> The rat sighed as he folded up the map and tucked it back into his duffel.

Dan: [Pack Rat] Probably shoulda looked at it, but oh well.

> There was a good solid chance that he wasn't going to come back from this mission.

Tsuneo: Sajit wants to know if he gets Pack Rat's stuff.

- > Regardless of that fact he was oddly
- > comfortable with the sense of impending doom that was looming over him.

Dan: But what about his friends, Edgelord the Werewolf, Future Space Lizardman and someone's Undertale OC?

Rebecca: What about them?

Dan: Good point, let's move on.

- > Pack had been in a strange place lately.

Rick: I mean, he lives in Detroit

- > Despite the rodent's best efforts to acclimate to human, and superhuman, society, Pack had
- > endured numerous prejudices.

Rebecca: This is less to do with him being a rat as it does with him carrying a revolver while grocery shopping.

- > In a world of exotic mutants, shape-shifters, aliens, and other
- > unusual beings, there was just something in the collective subconscious that shoved rats,
- > regardless of how intelligent or humanoid they may be, straight into the category of vermin.

Tsuneo: Something about the black death, reputation for carrying disease and feeding on garbage, having spread to every corner of the world as a pest species... that sort of thing.

- > This
- > apparently made most of the rules of common courtesy most intelligent beings enjoyed simply not
- > apply to the hybrid.

Rick: And I'm sure his sparkling personality has nothing to do with that.

- > Pack had long ago lost count of how many bubonic plague jokes and comments
- > about his hygiene had been carelessly tossed his direction

Rebecca: Pack Rat strikes me as the type who never washes and yet gets upset when people complain about the smell

- > in the years since his escape from the VIPER lab that had created him.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat is why people protest about GMO foods.

- > Lately a good day was simply one in which he wasn't called ugly,
- > dirty, and thrown out of a restaurant.

Rick: Pack Rat was yet to realise that a tac vest and loaded firearms was not appropriate attire

- > A great day only involved one of the three things.
- > Even with all the abuse, the man-rat still desperately craved acceptance.

Tsuneo: 'Why does nobody like me' says the paranoid, vengeful, gun-toting, basement-dwelling vigilante

- > He had found some measure of it among his three close friends.

Rebecca: And fellow furry exclusionists.

- > Sajit the werewolf was equally surly to just about everybody,

Tsuneo: Those that he didn't just eat outright.

> which put Pack on equal footing with everyone else.

Dan: They were equally unlikeable

> The good-natured squabbling

> between the two of them provided hours of entertainment for those involved.

Rebecca: And Pack Rat had only shot him through the head a couple of times.

> Ken was much more of a kindred spirit in Pack Rat's eyes.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat's only using Ken to get to his rifle.

> Having his appearance so drastically altered from his former

> human form to his current scaly state had placed Ken in a position that was much the same as

> Pack's.

Dan: [Ken] Except people like lizards way more than rats.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Shut up, Ken.

> Ken had been a shoulder to cry on more than once after particularly cruel days.

Rebecca: Ken's entire character is going to be informed, isn't it?

Tsuneo: I suspect that's as much interaction as he's ever going to get

> Sahara and Pack had become friends much more recently, and the winged girl had remained, for

> the most part, a mystery to the rat-man. She readily confessed to having worked as a prostitute

> earlier in her life

Rebecca: Thanks fic, thanks so much for that

> after running away from the orphanage

Tsuneo: She's a mystery, so here's her whole backstory.

> she had been left with as an infant.

Rick: A winged furry infant with electric antlers, mind you

> Her

> youthful appearance and demeanor, while by no means childish, wouldn't suggest at all to the

> casual observer that she had ever been in such a line of work.

Tsuneo: You have to wonder who it was who hired her given her appearance

Dan: They never said she was successful

> Pack had befriended the unusual girl mostly because of her optimistic attitude.

Rebecca: And not at all because he was leering at her.

> Pack found it infectious, feeling forced out of whatever

> funk he might be experiencing at the moment by her presence alone.

Tsuneo: He had someone else to whine at.

> She had never shied away

> from the rat hybrid, and Pack often chided himself for entertaining the odd romantic thought about

> Sahara,

Rebecca: Uh, sure. 'Romantic'.

- > especially since she had been spending time with Haraka. The whole thing would have
- > probably been easier if Haraka was more of a jerk, but as it turned out the cheetah hybrid was really
- > polite

Rick: Good day, my man. How are you faring? How goes the matters of the world? I had made a batch of delightful jam scones and was curious if you would like to partake of them with me

Dan [Rat Pack]: Gods, what a jerk.

- > and not inclined to try and eat the rat like some other cat folk.

Tsuneo: Low bars to clear

- > Pack fidgeted uneasily, suddenly a lot less at peace with himself.

Dan: He's beginning to wonder if diving alone into an obvious trap might not be a good idea.

- > Even with the support of his
- > friends one thing that Pack had a hard time getting past was the lack of female companionship.

Rebecca: Incel ratman it is.

Tsuneo: I see no other way it could go.

- > Sajit
- > and Ken were both involved in long-term relationships. Sajit's mate was another werewolf named
- > Snow,

Dan: A white werewolf called 'Snow'. How shockingly original

- > whose white fur contrasted with Sajit's black in an odd yin and yang sort of way.

Tsuneo: Sure it looks nice, but she absolutely cannot keep her fur clean.

- > Ken's girl, Kuro, was an imposing dragon lady in the literal sense of the word.

Rick: She was Doctor Kung-Fu Dragon Cop Girl.

Rebecca: Deep cut, and yet entirely apt.

- > And of course Sahara had... whatever it was she had with Haraka.

Rebecca: It turns out they have a purely platonic friendship and spent most of their time sitting on the couch chatting. Naturally, this makes Pack Rat even more resentful of them.

- > This all left Pack feeling like the fifth wheel most times.

Dan: Ken's girlfriend is liable to be even more of an informed character than... Um, Ken.

- > It weighed on him in an unhealthy sort of way,

Tsuneo: Look, even the fic admits it.

- > an oppressive sort of despair that even Sahara's viral
- > optimism was hard pressed to completely dispel. Pack at once resented the rejection he continually
- > faced, and loathed himself for being powerless to do anything meaningful about it.

Rick: He'd even tried getting a female Nemesis in the hopes that she'd give him some attention.

- > The circular logic would often quickly result in dangerous bouts of depression,

Tsuneo: And more blocks of whinging text.

> which for a heavily armed soldier of fortune could be a tricky thing to handle.

> "Come back."

> Pack Rat jerked awake. The image of Sahara's deep violet eyes burned in his mind. He took a deep
> breath and rubbed his temples, trying to shake her image and her parting words from his mind.

Rebecca [Sahara]: Is he gone yet?

> "Now is not the time, Pack," he growled at himself quietly,

Tsuneo: You can save the self-loathing for when the obviously stupid plan fails.

> "Get your head on straight."

> Pack stretched. His joints and muscles creaked in protest.

Rick: Pack Rat has the agility of an arthritic grandad.

> Being wedged between crates of

> ammunition and MRE's wasn't the most uncomfortable place he has ever slept,

Rick: In fact, his TripAdvisor review was positively beaming

> but it sure wasn't winning any awards either.

Rebecca: Although the thought of nestling his head next to high-powered munitions did help him
sleep.

> Pack crept from his position in the cargo bay of the large aircraft and padded his way up to the
> cockpit.

Tsuneo: Sorry, they're not handing out junior pilot wings.

> The UNTIL communications officer jumped a bit when the rat came into view, having likely
> almost forgotten about their furry passenger's presence.

Dan: Or at least, actively trying to ignore it.

> The soldier took a deep breath and gave Pack a sheepish look.

Rebecca: He kind of regrets putting out all the rat baits in the cargo hold.

> The rat settled into the seat across from the officer and plucked an unused

> headset from the equipment console, holding it to his ears awkwardly. These things just weren't
> made for people whose ears were perched on top of their head.

Tsuneo: Now try using air buds.

> "How long to Steel Head," Pack asked,

Dan: It depends on your system performance

> his voice carrying through the headset over the roar of the military jet's engines.

> "ETA ten minutes, sir," the communications officer replied.

> "Force Station Steelhead

Rick: Steelhead sounds like the name of some obscure Transformer

> this is UNTIL transport Zulu five niner requesting approach vector," the
> pilot's voice crackled over the headset.

> "This is Steel Head Zulu five niner.

Rebeca: You're not carrying any furies onboard, are you?

> The landing pad is clear. You have permission to land.
> Transmitting approach vector now. Please follow landing approach bravo six tango from the
> southwest," a cheerful voice replied.

Tsuneo: They're landing in Canada, so even air traffic control is nicer.

> "Roger that Steel Head, that's bravo six tango coming in from the southwest, Zulu five niner out."

Dan: Intense landing clearance action!

> Pack nodded to the communications officer and made his way back to where his gear was stashed.
> He quickly changed into his cold weather clothing, layering a heavy goose down jacket, insulated
> pants, boots, and his custom gloves over his vest and lighter clothes.

Dan: I was kind of hoping he'd pull on a beanie, just so his rat ears could stick out the top.

> He eyed his hands as he
> slipped the open-fingered gloves on. Two thick fingers and a thumb, each capped by steel-hard,
> blunted claws.

> "Not even normal for a rat," Pack grumbled.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat strikes me as the type who would get a pony and then complain it was the wrong colour

> He felt the plane slow and begin to descend as it approached the landing pad. As he shouldered his
> combat backpack and lifted his heavy duffel bag

Rebecca: He's on an infiltration mission so he packed light.

Tsuneo: Yeah, had to leave his RPG and grenade launcher behind.

> Pack tried to shake the remnants of doubt and regret from his mind.

Dan [Pack Rat]: There are people who love and care about me but eh. Whatever.

> "You've almost got him," Pack whispered to himself, "Just a little bit farther, and he won't hurt
> anyone ever again. No matter what happens to me... Medford must be stopped."

> "Come back."

> Pack winced, forcing back Sahara's words,

Rick: [Sahara] Don't forget the milk.

> focusing his thoughts on the grim task ahead.

Dan: [Grim] Picking out a floral arrangement

> As the jet

> touched down on Force Station Steel Head's landing pad he silently began to count, steeling his
> thoughts. He slowly numbered off one count for each innocent ratling slain at the whim of a
> madman.

Tsuneo: That's not unhealthy in the slightest

> "One... two... three..."

> ----

> Chapter 4

> Pack Rat spent most of the day at Force Station Steel Head preparing to head out into the
> wilderness.

Tsuneo: He'd spent hours buying supplies and haggling with NPC shopkeepers

> He first spent some time comparing maps at the base to his own. The Royal Canadian
> troops on site were very surprised to learn that VIPER had managed to slip their research facility in
> under their noses completely unnoticed.

Rick: The square kilometre around Steelhead contains ice zombies, a crashed plane, an ARGENT
base, a tower full of evil clones, an alien invasion, several other VIPER bases and an underground
bunker with an uplink to an orbital death ray cannon. Cut them a little slack

> This didn't surprise Pack at all. He knew just how skilled VIPER was at slipping into an area quietly.

Rebecca: Champions Online logic says that every square metre of space will be occupied by mobs.

> "Never underestimate VIPER's ability to slither in somewhere undetected,"

Rick: [Pack Rat] Get it? Slither?

Tsuneo: Yes.

Rick: [Pack Rat] Because a viper's a snake, and that's what snakes do?

Tsuneo: [Sigh] Yes, I got it.

> the rat chuckled to the soldier he was comparing notes with.

Dan: Yes, I just said that

> After providing the base with a copy of his maps in case his mission failed

Rick: Okay, so now we've got their location, we can send in the troops –

Dan: [Pack Rat] Only if I fail and die horribly.

Rick: Sure thing buddy, you're the boss.

> Pack headed down to the mess hall for a hot meal,

Rebecca: Sparing us another rat cheese joke, I hope.

> tastefully taken away from where the other soldiers were also there eating.

> Most of the troops there managed to avoid looking at Pack Rat altogether,

Dan: They assumed he was some sort of mutant freak, or, even worse, from Quebec

> while some of them failed

> to resist the urge to stare. Super humans were not unheard of among the Mounties, in fact some of

> their upper leadership boasted some impressive powers of their own,

Rick: They had Canada powers, such as the ability to be both incredibly polite and insufferably smug
about it

- > but the presence of a mutant
- > rat man in the mess hall was just too much for many of them so simply ignore.

Tsuneo: Sure they see literal aliens on a day to day basis, but this guy's a rat!

- > Pack Rat tried to
- > avoid making eye contact, not out of any sense of shame, but from a desire not to compromise his
- > mission with a possible scuffle.
- > After a filling but typically bland military meal

Tsuneo: Okay, so the filet mignon was slightly overcooked, but that's still not a fair description.

- > Pack hit the showers for what might be the last hot
- > water he'd be seeing for some time, possibly ever.

Dan: Why doesn't he just get his cigarette and blindfold while he's at it.

- > The Canadian troops already present cleared out
- > nervously as the rat padded quietly into the area and began to strip down. Apparently none of them
- > possessed the fortitude to deal with seeing a naked rat-man that day.

Rebecca: Them and us both

- > This suited Pack just fine. The less disgusted stares he received the better.

Dan: We'd like to say he's a nice person when you get to know him, but he's not.

- > He grabbed a towel and headed in, cranking on the hot water.

Tsuneo:: Next we'll be treated an extended scene of him brushing his teeth.

- > Pack had always taken issue with the whole "dirty rat" stereotype. Consequently he
- > compensated by keeping himself impeccably clean whenever possible.

Rick: He positively reeked of lavender

- > The pending likelihood of
- > being without access to appropriate facilities for an extended period of time made his skin crawl.

Dan: Smash cut to Pack Rat out in the wilderness rubbing snow into his fur.

- > After scrubbing himself down thoroughly Pack leaned forward and rested his palms against the
- > walls of the shower stall.

Rebecca: [Pack Rat] Okay, we've had an angsty monologue on the plane, time for an angsty monologue in the shower.

- > He stared down, standing beneath the hot spray and breathing the steam
- > in deeply. His pink, hairless tail swayed in slow arcs behind him as he let the near-scalding water
- > run over him for a time. The man-rat had the body of an Olympic gymnast.

Dan: It was stashed in his freezer back home.

- > His form was lean and toned from a combination of intensive physical training and genetic
- > engineering.

Tsuneo: As shown with his four cheese pizzas.

- > He wasn't as
- > heavily furred as one might expect of an animal-kin. Only his head, forearms, and lower legs bore a
- > coating of unruly brown fur. The rest of Pack's body, with the exception of his tail, was covered in a
- > fine layer of soft brown velvet.

Tsuneo: In many of our fics we have no idea what the author's OCs look like. In this fic, I wish it was the case

- > This created the illusion that he was darkly tanned, but any sort of
- > touch would reveal otherwise. Not like that ever happened.

Rebecca: It's been whole minutes since he hit us with the self-pity

- > Some impatient grumbles from outside the showers

Dan: Eh, you done in there?

Rick: Yah, some of us need the hot water too, you know.

- > reached the rat's sensitive ears and broke Pack
- > from his trance. He turned the water off, exited the shower stall, dried off, dressed, and left.

Tsuneo: Fortunately in that order.

- > He passed several uncomfortable, anxious looking soldiers who had been waiting, more or less
- > patiently, for him to finish.

Dan: They just thought about how badly he's probably clogged the shower

- > One of the men sneered and uttered a mumbled, derogatory comment as Pack slid by.

Tsuneo: He said, 'you have a nice day.'

- > The rat flashed him a glare from his bright, solid green eyes, and the rude soldier was
- > hurried into the showers by his less brazen brothers in arms.

Dan: I just told him his laces were untied.

- > "So much for civility. Guess I've worn out my welcome here," Pack mused to himself quietly.

Rick: Pack Rat chose to physically distance himself at all times and his few interactions were limited to glaring at people. Civility!

- > He walked back through the busy halls of the military base to the mostly empty section of the
- > barracks where he was allowed to rest before leaving for the VIPER installation.

Tsuneo: He's really rushing this urgent mission, isn't he?

Dan: Well, he's got a barber's appointment tomorrow at noon, and he doesn't want to show up to the VIPER base looking all shaggy.

- > He looked at the gear laid out neatly across several bunks.

Dan: Didn't he go over this when he packed?

Rick: It's always the same when you travel. No matter how hard you try, you leave something out and have to pick it up from the hotel's shop.

- > The arsenal that the ratling consistently lugged around
- > was a testament to both his organizational skills as well as his strong shoulders.

Dan: And a worrying level of obsession

- > All of Pack's
- > weapons were custom designs either based on the stash of VIPER weaponry he had absconded
- > with when he had escaped from the training facility he had been raised in or constructed from
- > scratch himself in the years since.

Rick: He'd taken all the weapon crafting perks

- > His preferred weapon, a customized assault rifle, was a sleek, futuristic looking piece of work

Tsuneo: It looked like any given gun from any given 2010s sci-fi shooter

- > which fired 7.62mm rounds at a rate that could only be described as frenzied.

Rebecca: The uncontrollable recoil makes him more of a threat to allies than enemies.

- > The mounted scope was
- > calibrated for Pack Rat's unique sense of vision, making most anyone else looking through it slightly
- > nauseous

Tsuneo: Mostly that's the smell he leaves on the rifle.

- > but affording the rodent soldier uncanny accuracy even when fired on full automatic. Pack
- > tinkered with and pampered the gun religiously,

Rebecca: It was the closest he'd ever come to physical intimacy

- > and it showed in the weapon's performance. The
- > firearm's action was smooth as silk, and had never once jammed, no matter what conditions Pack
- > was forced to do battle in,

Dan: Such as beating off soccer moms on Black Friday.

- > whether it be the dusty irradiated waste lands of Burning Sands near
- > Area 51 or the sweltering swamps of Monster Island.

Rebecca: But he'd still rubberband all over the place in Lemuria

- > Next to the rifle was his revolver which he affectionately referred to as "Wynona."

Tsuneo: Of all the Firefly references that have aged badly, that's one of the ones that's done worst

Rebecca: One of

Tsuneo: It's a broad category

- > The huge hunk of
- > steel mounted an obscenely long, thick barrel, occasionally prompting jokes about
- > overcompensation from Sajit,

Rick: Given the degree that he whines about being lonely, those jokes might be justified

- > who never did put much stock in firearms.

Dan: [Sajit] I mean, if you can't feel the crack of your enemy's bones between your fangs, are you even trying?

Rick [Pack Rat]: Heh, yeah buddy, you're so... wait a moment.

- > Wynona had been hand
- > forged from scratch by Pack Rat himself. She fired fifty caliber machine gun rounds rather than
- > more conventional loads.

Rick: Wow, that's nice. Say, don't VIPER use highly efficient energy weapons?

> As a result of its large ammunition the cylinder could only hold four rounds,

Dan: His goal was to create a weapon that was as cumbersome and impractical as possible

> but Pack considered Wynona a weapon of last resort anyway.

Rick: Which was why he carried it on him at all times.

> Firing the revolver would shatter the hand and wrist of any normal person,

Rebecca: But Pack Rat's wrists get a lot of exercise.

> but Pack's hands had been engineered to claw

> through earth and stone, thus making Wynona's recoil more than manageable for the hybrid warrior.

> The satisfying report of the monstrous handgun firing and the subsequent near disintegration of

> anything but the most heavily armored targets was music to the rat's ears.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat really doesn't get out much, does he?

> Next to the firearms lay Pack's assortment of ammunition. In a world of mutants, demons, aliens,

Rick: And other strangeness

> and other unusual creatures,

Rebecca: Including Skunk Apes, Mothman, Sheepsquatches, Ogopogo and most things you find in Club Caprice

> it paid to be prepared. Thus, the rat kept custom loads for all occasions.

Rick: Because you never know when you need to shoot Orbeez at people.

> His pride and joy was what he called the "catch all special." They were made from iron

> and silver flechettes suspended in holy water, with a penetrating core of tungsten.

Dan: That point when weapon design becomes so stupid and impractical that all you can do is smile and nod

> Thus far they had served well when facing down anything from werewolves to vampires to demons.

Tsuneo: They also cost several thousand a pop.

> Only problem was they were expensive and time-consuming to make.

Rick: It turns out that it's hard to rent time on an industrial forge.

> That, and father Connelly down at Our Lady of

> Serenity had threatened to shoot Pack if he raided the holy water font one more time.

Rebecca: And Father Connelly's got more guns than he does.

> So much for turning the other cheek.

Tsuneo: How dare he get angry about you stealing his stuff. The nerve!

> Thus Pack tended to keep those reserved for emergencies, loaded into

> Wynona's .50 caliber rounds. For facing down VIPER, however, conventional armor-piercing rounds

> were usually more than adequate, and Pack's extra duffel bag was loaded with those.

Rebecca: Given the choice between eating and buying ammo, Pack will always go for the latter

> Next to the sorted ammunition Pack Rat had laid out his heavier ordinance.

Rebecca: Settle in, folks. This is going to take some time.

> His heavy arms

> consisted first of a normal (for him) assortment of fragmentation, concussion, and smoke grenades.

Dan: There is nothing normal about this

> This was overshadowed, though, by the stack of small blocks of plastic explosives with attached
> remote detonators.

Tsuneo: And he got this through customs, right?

> Pack didn't often bring this particular type of favor to the party, but besides

Rick: Usually he bought soft drinks and some dip

> dealing with Medford he knew he would have to permanently shut down the vats and equipment the
> snake was using to create the huntresses.

Dan: Then again, Pack Rat also brings military grade explosives when he goes fishing.

> Pack had to pull some strings within the military to get hold of the explosives in that quantity,

Tsuneo: And what reasonable officer wouldn't give the crazed, gun-toting mutant vigilante a pile of explosives?

> and wasn't looking forward to the favors he'd have to do in return to make up for it later.

Rick: He's going to actually have to get his firearms certification.

> But then again, none of that would matter much if he didn't make it back. Small comfort.

Rebecca: Suicide is no excuse, young man

> Last, but certainly not least, in the rat's bag of tricks was his rocket launcher.

Dan: Furries with rocket launchers are the worst type

> The long tubular apparatus collapsed down to a fraction of its functional size when not in use.

Tsuneo: It was a convenient pocket-sized rocket launcher

> It was, in Pack's estimation, the perfect way to get the party started right

Rick: Was a bit of a bummer when he got the date of Sajit's surprise party wrong.

> as long as collateral damage wasn't a consideration. For this mission, it certainly was not.

Rick: And if there just happened to be a bus load of cancer orphans hanging out near the VIPER base then that was their problem.

Rebecca: What would a bunch of cancer orphans be doing there anyway?

Rick: They're on a day trip from St Puppy's hospital

Rebecca: Silly me.

> One quick weapons check and one immensely tedious repacking job later

Dan: And then remembering that he'd forgotten something and having to go through it all again.

- > and the bundled up
- > rodent was on his way. Pack was granted the use of one of the Mounties' snow mobiles.

Tsuneo: They're really generous with their equipment here

Rick: Who knew that all you needed to do was ask?

- > As he
- > crested a large hill just to the northwest of Steel Head he stopped the growling, tracked machine
- > and looked back through the blowing snow. The station loomed large through the blowing powder, a
- > bastion of safety in the howling Canadian tundra.

Rick: All of Canada is endless snowy wastes.

- > Pack sighed at the prospect of leaving it, and the hot water, behind.

Dan: If he could, Pack Rat would spend all day in the shower.

- > "No turning back now, Packy," he convinced himself.
- > Pack revved the engine of the snow mobile, lowered his snow goggles,

Tsuneo: Where does a giant rat-man get snow goggles anyway?

- > and sped away, throwing up
- > a spray of white powder as he steered the machine towards his goal. The rat set his jaw in grim
- > determination against regret, doubt, fear, and the biting cold of the northern wilderness.

Rebecca: And the need to find a working commode.

- > "See you real soon dad," Pack growled against the wind, "Hope you're ready for me!"

Dan: Smash cut to Doctor Medford in his underwear eating beans out of a tin

> ----

- > Chapter 5
- > Pack Rat had been forced to ditch the snow mobile several miles back.

Rebecca: The snow mobile couldn't love him back.

- > He told himself that it was
- > because the sound of the engine, as it purred across the snow drifts, could draw unwanted attention
- > from any patrols VIPER may have stationed around the research lab.

Dan: Big tracked diesel-chugging hauler throwing up snow everywhere? Naw, they get them all the time.

- > While that was partly true the real reason was that it ran out of gas.

Rebecca: Which meant that he had no reason to tell himself otherwise

- > The rodent has some suspicion that he had been the victim of
- > a prank from the less tolerant of Steel Head's soldiers.

Rick: Or he just forgot to fill it up before he left.

- > He promised himself swift revenge should he make it back in one piece.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat is just one massive ball of resentment.

- > Pack trudged towards his destination, sullenly cursing the biting wind
- > which stung his sensitive nose as he made his way across the drifts.

Rebecca: Somehow, Pack Rat was not ready for the frozen Canadian wilderness to be cold.

- > Fur or no fur Pack was a city
- > rat and this arctic explorer nonsense was for the birds. Specifically penguins.

Rick: Penguins don't live in the arctic

Dan: Well never mind then

- > Pack had momentarily taken shelter from the wind among the thick branches of a low-growing
- > evergreen tree. His map was unfolded, held in place by a few rocks while he regained his bearings.
- > The hidden research facility should have been about five miles west of his current position.

Rebecca: He tried checking the road signs for directions

- > As the
- > ratling planned his approach, noting the location the buried access hatch should be at, an unfamiliar
- > scent wafted through the air, reaching Pack Rat's acute nose. Pack picked up the faint scent of old
- > aftershave, steel, and leather.

Rick: He realised that he had found a barbershop

- > The shivering rat froze in place, whiskers twitching, ears pivoting as
- > he tried to pinpoint the source of the intrusion. After a long tense moment the faint sound of a
- > distant foot crunching through the snow reached the alert rodent's radar-like ears.

Dan: The Ratman has rodent-like ears? Now that is a shocking revelation

- > Pack crept through the branches of the tree he was huddled beneath.

Rick: Making – Ow! – absolutely no – Snap! – noise – Crunch! – whatsoever.

- > He poked his muzzle through the foliage
- > and breathed deeply, again picking up the scent of man on the wind.

Tsuneo: The whiff of over-applied body spray

- > He peeked between the
- > boughs, eyes aimed in what he was certain was the proper direction. He saw nothing.

Dan: Driving snow will do that for you.

- > Pack frowned
- > and lowered his snow goggles, then gazed again across the now. Still nothing.

Rick: Now he could see fogged-up lenses.

- > The soft sound of a boot crushing snow, closer now, again reached the rat man.

Rebecca: The real question is, what type of boots were they? How were they cut? What size were they for? We need to know these things

Tsuneo: Are you bored already?

Rebecca: Maybe a little bit.

- > Pack reached back and silently drew his rifle with smooth practiced precision. While clutching the
- > firearm in one hand, he plucked his silencer from the clip on his belt and screwed it into place. Pack

> shouldered the rifle and waited, aiming his trusty weapon at the approaching scent and sounds.

Dan: He has smell as a targeting sense?

Rick: Oh yeah. He can lock onto a freshly-baked muffin from half a click away.

> He

> slowed his breathing, clearing his mind and focusing his thoughts as his one time masters had

> trained him to do,

Dan: And instead ended up fixating on the idea that all his friends were having fun without him instead.

> then he gazed through the enhanced sight of his rifle. The moment stretched into an eternity

Tsuneo: A pretty way of saying it was dragged out too long.

> as Pack waited patiently for any sign of his target. He watched and listened while taking

> slow, deep, deliberate breaths. The sound of snow trod underfoot came again. Pack adjusted his

> aim, but still saw nothing.

> Realization dawned

Rick [Pack Rat]: It was his sled all along!

> and the man-rat tilted his weapon down slightly and fired, walking a line of fire

> across a nearby snow drift. Large puffs of loose powder erupted from the impact of the rounds as

> Pack's weapon coughed rapidly.

Dan: It should see a doctor.

> Three humanoid shapes were faintly outlined by the spray of snow.

> Their forms were otherwise completely invisible. The body posture displayed indicated significant

> surprise.

Rebecca: Very few people expect to be murdered while out in the middle of nowhere

> "Gotcha," Pack chortled to himself as he adjusted his aim and squeezed the trigger of his weapon.

> Three quick shots sailed through the air towards their targets. The jacketed rounds pierced the light-

> bending armor of the invisible men easily.

Dan: Yes, Pack Rat usually believes he's being stalked by invisible men.

> Each one spun and fell in an almost coordinated manner.

Tsuneo: They're using the same death animation.

> A heartbeat later their forms shimmered and became fully visible. The snow around the men was

> spotted with red, and a dark red stain was growing slowly beneath each one.

Rick: He shot them in their tomato juice, the fiend.

> Pack lowered his rifle and broke cover,

Tsuneo: And their backup gunned him down. The end.

> dashing a few short yards to check his enemies for signs of

> life. His aim had been true. His shots had pierced cleanly through their vitals. He put another round

> into each one's torso for good measure. Not something he normally did,

Rebecca: Normally he left them to bleed out

> but VIPER soldiers held a special place in Pack's heart.

Tsuneo: Our hero, the casual killer

> He knelt over the fallen men. Their full-faced helmets, tight-fitting
> armor suits, and cloaking devices identified these men as VIPER infiltrators.

Rick: You know it's a good thing that these guys turned out to be VIPER goons and not something else, given that Pack Rat killed them without even verifying their identity

Dan: I get the feeling that's happened to him before

> These trained martial
> artists were often used to penetrate enemy facilities, quietly eliminate a target, and exit unnoticed.

Tsuneo: Why they were on patrol in the blinding snow is another matter.

> Pack hissed through his teeth, agitated by the development. Infiltrators in the area could only mean
> that security at the research facility was tighter than he had anticipated.

Tsuneo: Oh and that VIPER will notice when three of their agents fail to report in or the like. If anything, he's just making this harder on himself.

> Pack could no longer afford
> to travel above ground. He could be spotted too easily and it had been pure luck that these three
> had approached from upwind.

Dan: Because despite his obsessive showering, Pack Rat knows that he still reeks.

> Pack rat slung his rifle and ran back to where his map and duffel bag
> were lying. He quickly stashed the map in his coat, and then spent a moment strapping the heavy
> extra bag to clips on his belt, securing it to his posterior tightly.

> "I hate having to do this," he complained quietly, "It's so dirty..."

Rebecca: 'Its so dirty' says the Rat Man who lives in a paranoid survivalist basement and just murdered three guys

> Pack tightened his goggles, and with one last frustrated sigh

Dan: [Pack Rat] Ugh, this blood-soaked vengeance trip is not turning out how I planned.

> crouched low and tore into the ground
> with his claws. His inhumanly strong hands gouged huge chunks of earth away with frightening
> speed. The rat-man leaned forward, letting instinct draw him into the embrace of the earth.

Rick: Only thing to do now is dig a burrow and fill it with garbage

> A spray
> of dirt, roots, and small rocks exited behind the burrowing rodent as he plunged into the ground,
> quickly leaving the bright, snowy surface behind. A few moments later, only a disturbed patch of
> ground and a rapidly fading rumble would mark the rat's passing.

Dan: That and the three bodies he left nearby

Tsuneo: Its the little things that give you away

> Once underground, Pack instinctively steered in the direction of the VIPER research facility.

Rick: But he should have made a left turn at Albuquerque

> His
> unusual physiology and custom designed genes afforded him almost impossible speeds when
> tunneling through the earth. The rat man had endured more than his fair share of Bugs Bunny jokes
> as a result,

Rick: Damnit!

> and so was usually loathe to employ this particular talent without a very good reason.

Dan: He doesn't use his power because he's afraid people will make fun of him.

> This qualified. Pack knew that the patrol he encountered would be missed before too long.

Tsuneo: Fic, calling your characters on their own stupidity is not a good look.

> Even if
> they weren't found the facility would be on alert once VIPER suspected something was amiss. And
> if that happened before he found director Medford, Pack could lose his only chance at vengeance.

Rebecca: Not to stop evil or right wrongs, mind you.

> Pack Rat practically swam through the earth towards his destination, a sense of urgency, bordering
> on panic, driving him onward.

Rick: Only to get run over by the Storm Force Mole Machine going in the other direction

> "Damn... should have let that patrol just walk by," Pack cursed his itchy trigger finger.

Dan: I mean, it would have been dead easy to hide in the snow...

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] Yes.

Dan: Keep ahead of them while circling to your objective...

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] Yeah...

Dan: Really, just made things worse in every way.

Tsuneo: [Pack Rat] Okay, okay!

> He never had been able to resist taking down VIPER troops when the opportunity arose.

Rebecca: Given the choice between murdering VIPER goons and going on a date with Sahara, he'd unquestionably chose the former

Tsuneo: And then whine that he's still single

Rebecca: Of course

> Considering the years of
> abuse and attempted brainwashing it was an almost reflexive response to their presence.

Dan: You get the feeling he's practiced that line a lot.

> "Can't be helped now," he murmured to the dirt as he passed unseen through the tundra, his
> destination looming closer and closer...

> ----

> Chapter 6
> The earth, ice, and stone parted before Pack Rat as he tunneled towards his destination. His
> genetically enhanced senses flooded his mind with a torrent of information as he moved easily
> through the ground.

Rick: He was using smell-o-vision

- > The burrowing rodent could perceive his environment and the nearby surface
- > nearly as well as if he were standing in the open. The trees, the footfalls of the animals above,

Dan: He was currently burrowing under a line-dancing class

- > the
- > low vibrating, mechanical hum of the underground VIPER research lab, were all clear to Pack Rat
- > as he approached his target.

Rebecca: Made him almost wonder why he didn't tunnel his way in from the start and completely avoid detection.

Dan: Because he needed to make it harder on himself.

Rebecca: You're right, silly me.

- > An almost giddy sense of anticipation gripped the rodent as he neared the VIPER facility.

Tsuneo: He hadn't been this happy since the time he ran a maze and got a piece of cheese

- > He could
- > feel the weight of the false cabins on the surface, and hear the thrum of their concealed elevator
- > entrances as they ferried personnel into the labs below.

Dan: Do you think anyone gets suspicious about all these guys in green uniforms going to an isolated cabin in the woods?

Rebecca: Nah, they just say it's hired out for an off-site meeting

- > Pack knew from his time spent in similar
- > installations as a young rat that VIPER tended to use a limited number of modular designs for most
- > of their structures. It reduced construction costs.

Rick: And let the game developers re-use assets.

- > If this lab followed that pattern there would be an
- > access hatch he could use to bypass the external security.

Rebecca: The best way to protect your secret base is to leave it entirely unsecured

- > The ratling circled the area cautiously, occasionally poking his head up to check for activity along
- > the surface.

Tsuneo: But I thought he could sense everything perfectly while underground anyway

Dan: Maybe he just needed some air

- > As expected VIPER troops disguised as tourists meandered around the cabins.

Rick: I can't imagine that this zombie, alien and clone-infested corner of Canada sees much tourism

- > Pack
- > could also feel, but not see, the steps of several more groups of invisible infiltrators patrolling the
- > perimeter of the false cabins.

Dan: Wow, that would have been useful in his previous encounter with those same guys.

- > If taking out that patrol a few miles back had alerted VIPER to the rat's
- > presence they weren't letting on yet.

Dan: Maybe they just didn't like them

- > Pack was unsure whether to be worried or relieved.

Rebecca: So he settled on blind indifference.

- > He opted
- > for the former and slid back into the soil, diving deep down into the earth, angling for the exterior of
- > the large modular structure of the underground laboratory.

Rebecca: It was a generic pre-fab secret underground lair

- > Pack Rat felt his way along the exterior walls of the smallish octagonal structure

Rick: Turns out he'd found VIPER's UFC ring.

- > he knew would hold the hatch he sought. After a few moments, he found what he was looking for.

Dan: A frost-free fridge [Ding!]

- > The small hatch
- > would have originally been used by workers to make it easy to get in and out during assembly.

Dan: So how do you reckon they passed off the massive excavation required to install this secret underground base?

Rebecca: Said the cabins need lots of plumbing.

- > Securing such a small opening, once the room was assembled deep underground, would not be a
- > priority. Any kind of major assault would originate from the surface, so most of the security would be
- > focused topside at the main entrance and escape tunnels.

Tsuneo: And since absolutely nobody in the world, especially not one of their own creations with a vengeful streak, could dig down there they thought nothing of it

- > Pack cleared away the dirt around the heavy lever that latched and sealed the small portal. He
- > listened at the hatch for a long moment, senses straining for any sign of activity in the room beyond.

Dan: Given that this is a generic evil organisation, I can only assume their secret lair is staffed entirely by lazy and inattentive guards

- > Hearing no sounds beyond, he gripped the lever and heaved. The latch groaned in protest for a
- > moment before it finally lurched and gave way.

Rick: [Shouting] Making sure his entrance is as loud as possible!

- > A shiver of panic raced up Pack's spine at the noise.
- > He waited another moment. Long tense seconds ticked away in his head as the ratling strained to
- > hear any sign that someone inside was alerted by the noise.

Dan: Hey Mick, do you know if we have any unused access hatches to this base?

Rick: Sorry Dave, can't think of a one.

Dan: 'cause I could swear I just heard a hatch being wrenched open from the outside.

Rick: Naw, if we had anything like that, say leftover from construction, I'm sure they would have been welded shut long ago.

Dan: You're right, Mick. I guess it was nothing.

- > Nothing.

Rick: The entire base had gone out for lunch

- > Releasing his held breath Pack finished clicking open the release and pushed the hatch in carefully.

[They all make loud creaking and groaning noises]

> The little doorway was positioned partway up the wall. As the rat eased through the hatch a stream
> of loose dirt and pebbles trickled in behind him.

Rebecca: You could at least have the decency to clean up after yourself

> Pack cautiously closed the small door behind him
> as his senses adjusted. There was always a period of a few seconds when Pack emerged from the
> earth as his senses switched from hyper-sensitive touch and tactile mode back to being more sight
> and scent oriented.

Dan: He also had a super sense of taste, but he found that it didn't have much practical use.

> The darkened room Pack had entered quickly came into focus. It was a storage room of some kind.
> Large wooden crates were stacked along the plain brushed steel walls

Tsuneo: He immediately smashed them all to look for power-ups and health packs

> and in the center of the room. Pack Rat looked over the labels on the crates.

Rebecca: [Pack Rat] Do not open until Christmas. Aw, that's sweet!

> They appeared to be medical supplies, all fairly mundane in nature.

Rick: He'd stumbled onto VIPER's secret Aspirin stash

> A single metal door lead from the room. Pack adjusted his gear and shook
> the dust from his fur, quietly cursing his disheveled and dirty state.

Dan: First thing's first: find VIPER's shower block.

> After re-securing his gear he left
> a single explosive charge tucked behind several of the supply crates, well out of sight. These
> supplies were likely part of the cloning and genetic engineering process,

Tsuneo: Actually its their supply of Funyuns.

> and there was no sense in
> taking the risk of them getting put to any use by VIPER when this was all said and done.

Rebecca: The truth was that he just looked for excuses to blow things up.

> Pack approached the door and listened. Only the quit hum of the fluorescent lighting beyond the
> door could be heard. Pack eased the door open, peeking out.

Dan: I feel like I should be getting out my grid paper.

> The hallway looked empty, but Pack
> quickly noted the security camera at the intersection nearby, its small, black dome protruding
> innocuously from the ceiling. The hybrid hero

Tsuneo: For very generous use of the term 'hero'

> cursed under his breath.

Rebecca: The idea that the secret evil lair might have security systems had not occurred to him

> There was no way for him to clear the length of the hallway without the camera picking him up.

Tsuneo: So he put on a janitor's costume and hoped.

> If this facility was anything like the
> one he was created in, he reasoned, the main research lab would be straight down that hallway.

Dan: All evil lairs follow the exact same layout

> To
> either side would be living facilities for the scientists, and barracks for the soldiers housed at the site.
> Pack pondered for a moment. He could shoot the camera, but that would raise an alarm. He could
> lay down a cloud of smoke with a grenade, but ultimately that would produce the same effect.

Rebecca: Pack Rat really didn't plan this out, did he?

> Pack stared hard at the hallway and the camera for a long moment.

Rick: Hey Dave?

Dan: Yeah Mick?

Rick: That funny looking rat guy's been staring at the camera for five minutes now.

Dan: Think we should do something about it?

Rick: Dunno.

> "Fuck it," was the final conclusion.

Tsuneo: This fic in a nutshell.

> Pack slung his rifle off his shoulder, slipped the barrel through the crack in the door, and peered
> through his scope, centering the finely tuned cross hairs on the small black dome that housed the
> camera. Pack took a deep breath, released slowly, and gently squeezed the trigger. The rifle
> coughed once through the silencer, and the small black dome shattered. A small spray of sparks
> marked the passing of the security camera.

Rebecca: Security Camera quietly passed away this morning in its sleep. A memorial service will be held this Friday

> Pack waited a single heartbeat, and then bolted into the hallway.

Dan: Right into the other camera's view.

> The rat reached the intersection and threw his back against the wall to his right, checking corners in
> a practiced manner. The hallways to the left and right remained empty, for the moment, and nothing
> appeared immediately ahead,

Rick: The evil lair had real staffing problems that they've been trying to address for ages.

> but that hallway had a gentle curve to it that obscured line of sight past thirty feet or so.

Dan: And after that there was a sharp left and then a hairpin turn and a climb.

> Markings along the wall indicated that the hallway ahead lead to the labs as expected,

Rebecca: Follow the green line for crimes against God, follow the blue line for things man was not meant to know and follow the red line for orbital mind control lasers.

> so the ratling disregarded the other two paths and forged on ahead.

Rick: Odds are they were blocked off with fake doors anyway and weren't actually a part of the map

> Only a few steps down the gently curving hallway klaxon sirens began to blare.

Dan: Oh, that's nothing. Just reminding the base that their bake sale is coming.

> Small red lights
> tucked into the ceiling began to flash. Pack swore out loud and picked up the pace. He had hopes to
> have more time before the alarm was raised.

Tsuneo: Maybe if he hadn't shot that camera. Or, for that matter, killed that patrol.

Rebecca: You really feel like pack Rat doesn't think these things through

> A few more hurried steps and the rattling's acute
> hearing picked up the sound of booted feet on the steel floor ahead, a squad of VIPER soldiers by
> the sound of their armor and weapons rattling.

Dan: Different types of goons make different noises

> Pack skidded to a halt. This hallway was completely exposed, no cover at all.

Rebecca: So he flattened himself to the floor and hoped they mistook him for a novelty rug.

> He scanned for doorways he might be able to duck into, and finding none, went to plan B.

Rick: Plan B is the reason he packed his tuba.

> "Alarms are already set off, so who cares?" Pack chuckled to himself as he plucked a grenade from
> his belt.

Rick: Wait until he realises he broke into an ARGENT base by mistake. Won't he be embarrassed.

> The metallic chime of the grenades arming pin flying away echoed in between the wail of the
> alarms. Pack had whipped the grenade in a hard sidearm pitch,

Dan: But it wasn't in the strike zone, so they get a walk.

> and the rounded explosive went
> spinning down the hall, hugging the curve and skittering out of sight around the bend.

Tsuneo: Um, they're coming up behind you, so...

> Pack heard a
> startled cry and held his head, protecting his sensitive ears as the munitions exploded.

Rick: In short, aaaah, boom.

> Pack jogged
> past the shredded, fallen forms of several viper troops lying motionless and sped towards the
> research lab. Only the faintest twinge of regret stung the back of his mind.

Rebecca: There you go. By his own admission, Pack Rat is a psychopath

> Pack forced aside any qualms about his methods by quietly reminding himself who and what he
> was up against.

Tsuneo: I mean, other superheroes follow the ethos of the genre and punch the bad guys out, but he's entirely okay with casual killing.

Rick: Pack Rat strikes me as the sort who has a Punisher skull decal on his car.

> As he forged on he could hear voices behind him. Troops from the barracks most
> likely, Pack thought.

Rebecca: No, troops from the gymnasium where they were having a sleepover.

> He picked up his pace, pausing only briefly to shoot out another two tiny

> security cameras along his path.

Rick: You monster, that camera had a family!

> No sense giving the enemy any unnecessary advantages.

Dan: By the time you're lobbing explosives around willy-nilly, it's a bit pointless to cover your tracks.

> A few moments later, the brown-furred rat man reached another intersection. He could still hear the
> voices behind him as the VIPER troops from the barracks mustered to pursue him. As Pack threw
> his back against the wall

Rebecca: And threw out his back with all the guns he was carrying.

> to do his usual corner check something even more alarming than the
> soldiers chasing him reached him.

Rick: It was Jack, who was also whining about how girls don't like him

Rebecca: Who also has a large collection of guns that he devotes way too much attention to

Rick: Well when you put it like that...

> The scent of feline was on the air.

Dan: It was Mr Tiddles, the base commander's Siamese cat.

> Pack had never truly had a

> problem with cat folks in general, other than the cat jokes he shared in good fun with Sajit.

Tsuneo: Please ignore all the time spent complaining about Haraka

> This was

> a good thing because Millennium City boasted an unusually large number of cat hybrids of various
> breed.

Rebecca: Although few of them ever left Club Caprice or their Penthouse hideouts

> In this situation, though, with his blood pounding, adrenaline flowing, and knowing what he
> was up against, the smell instantly set his teeth on edge.

Dan: Still, despite his visceral reaction, he claimed that he wasn't biased against cats at all.

> No sooner had Pack Rat processed this new information were his fears confirmed. A tall, wiry form
> whirled around the corner.

Rick: Aaah! They've set Jeff Goldblum on him!

Dan: Aaah!

> The feline huntress was bounding on all fours at speeds Pack Rat could never hope to match.

Rebecca: His pack-a-day habit certainly didn't help.

> The only thing that saved the rat in that moment was the smooth metal floor of
> the VIPER compound. The cat woman skided across the brushed steel flooring as she attempted to
> wheel around on Pack Rat.

Tsuneo: Undone by her evil lair's questionable aesthetic choices

> The momentary slide sent her about fifteen feet off course as her bare
> clawed feet and hands failed to gain purchase for just one second.

Rebecca: And it instantly goes from threatening to comedic

- > The shape was familiar to Pack,
- > he had faced this opponent once before on the streets of Millennium City.

Rick: Although what Wayland Talos was doing there was another matter.

- > The genetically enhanced hunter bore golden fur with tabby-like marking and stripes,

Tsuneo: So their genetically engineered killing machine is based on a house cat, not say a lion or something?

Rebecca: It's mostly worked, except for their tendency to get distracted by laser pointers and balls of wool.

- > with a mane of wild, unkempt honey-colored hair tied back with a cord of some kind.

Dan: Figuring out what sort of hair-tie she used was now his primary goal

- > Her slightly muzzled face was locked in a sneer,
- > revealing sharp fangs and a hateful green-eyed gaze.

Rick: He sees a dangerous enemy, she sees a chew toy.

- > Pack Rat swung his rifle around, leveling the barrel at his assailant. In an instant the cat's claws
- > regained traction

Rebecca: On the brushed steel flooring, look just wear sneakers already!

- > and she hurled herself towards the wall. Pack's shot missed by inches, followed by
- > three more impossibly close shots that failed to find their mark, each one sparking against the wall
- > behind the cat.

Tsuneo: Their finish will never be the same.

- > The cat-girl's acrobatic display kept her a fraction of a second ahead of the skilled
- > marksman as she bounced from wall to wall, closing in on her prey. The cat plucked a large knife
- > from a sheath

Dan: Has horrible killer fangs and claws, but still uses a knife

- > on the thigh of her tight black tactical suit

Rebecca: Because we've got to make the catgirl as tacticool as possible, I guess.

- > as one last tumble brought her within arm's
- > reach of the rodent. Her low growl turned into a feral shriek as the blade lashed out at the rat.

Rick: You think this is bad? Try giving her a heartworm tablet

- > Pack brought his rifle up to block the incoming attack. The knife struck the rat's weapon with brutal
- > force, sending up a spray of sparks as it scraped along the metal surface of the gun.

Tsuneo: And he just got it detailed!

- > Pack was
- > momentarily pinned to the wall by the impact, and the knife's edge was chillingly close to his throat
- > as he was driven back.

Rebecca: He's had worse first dates.

> The brown-furred commando

Tsuneo: Brown-furred commando is a phrase I'd hoped to never hear.

> regained his footing and wrenched his rifle to the left, deflecting the
> huntress to one side as she tried to force her weapon past Pack's gun and into his jugular. Both
> combatants staggered a step or two before righting themselves.

Dan: VIPER goons are gathered in the halls around them, placing bets on the fight.

> The enraged feline was a split
> second faster, and launched back towards her prey. Pack Rat was forced to block a flurry of quick
> slashes with his firearm. A little voice in the back of his head chided him for letting his precious rifle
> take such a beating,

Rick: Given a choice between saving his own life and protecting his gun, Pack Rat will always go for the latter

> while a louder and, thankfully, more sensible voice was screaming at him to
> stop backpedaling and do something!

Dan: So he dropped on one knee and proposed. She never saw it coming.

> Pack launched forward in between the furious cat's attacks planting the length of his rifle across her
> chest and shoving with all the ratly might he could muster.

Rebecca: Ratly might.

Tsuneo: Ratly might is the equivalent of an enraged capybara trying to get to some sugar cane.

> Again the steel flooring worked to his
> advantage as the cat girl's clawed feet failed to catch on the smooth metal.

Dan: I'm really wondering why they installed that in the first place

Rick: Imagine how many random goons slip and fall each year

Tsuneo: It's worrying that your secret weapon's performance could be improved by a rug.

> Pack seized the
> advantage and surged several steps, slamming his feline opponent against the wall, pinning her.
> The huntress growled, and though her range of motion was restricted, she managed to rake the
> claws of her left hand across Pack Rat's right arm.

Rebecca: Oh yeah, claws! Not sure why I bothered with this silly knife after all.

> The material of pack's cold weather jacket was
> shredded as four shallow gashes were opened in his arm.

Rick: And this coat's a rental!

> The ratling squealed as a red stain began
> to spread, blood soaking the downy material of his coat.

Tsuneo: Not only is he in severe pain, but now he also needs to do his laundry

> "You won't get to father! I won't let you!" the raging cat woman shrieked and spat.

Dan: He gets them squeaky toys and everything!

> "Damn it, woman! He's using you just like he tried to use me!" Pack punctuated the statement with a
> knee to the cat's abdomen.

> "Father loves us! He's proud of us!"

Rick: Random Catgirl #4691, you are my favourite

> the Huntress howled as she struggled to force the rat away from her.

Rebecca: This is how women usually respond to Pack Rat.

> "We don't have to do this! I don't want to f-" Pack's sentence was cutoff by a squeak of pain when
> the cat wiggled a hand free and plunged her knife into the rat hybrid's shoulder.

Dan: In *his* shoulder. We don't need to be reminded that he's a rat every other sentence. We're painfully aware already.

> The blade had slipped past the plates of his armored vest and bit deeply into the muscle.

> Pack kned the cat woman hard in the stomach again then kicked away.

Tsuneo: The knife buried in his shoulder doesn't seem to be bothering him one bit

> He let go of his rifle, letting
> it clatter to the floor as the momentum of his kick carry him back a few steps. The predatory feline
> recovered from the knee to her midsection and was on top of the rat in an instant, fangs bared and
> claws ready to shred him to pieces.

> Wynona, on the other hand, had other ideas.

Rebecca: His revolver had achieved self-awareness and was questioning its life

> The over sized revolver roared, its report drowning out
> even the blaring alarms for a moment. The huntress staggered back a step, clutching her stomach.
> The wall behind her was spattered with red droplets in a wide spray pattern.

Dan: A Jackson Pollock of your very own.

> Pack winced as the
> recoil from his custom fifty caliber handgun made his left shoulder ache, despite having fired with
> his right hand.

Tsuneo: Pack Rat was a very confused person.

> There was a long, quiet moment, broken only by the blaring of the facilities alarms.

Dan: And the gunfire of the dozen or so VIPER agents who arrived while they were fighting.

> Pack Rat and his enemy locked gazes.

Rebecca: Before she bounded off to chase a butterfly.

> Blood dribbled from the tears on the rat's forearm, and began to pour from
> between the fingers of the huntress where she clutched her stomach. The feline bore a look of
> shock and surprise.

Rebecca: Hit by a fifty-calibre round at point-blank range, she should be less 'shocked' and more 'reduced to mince'

> A sympathetic, regretful look passed over the rodent's face, even as he held the
> revolver leveled at the cat.

Rick: You won't feel the same way when you see what she did to the couch.

> "I'm sorry..." Pack whispered.

Tsuneo: I'm sorry I shot you as a part of my blood-soaked murder rampage

> The cat's expression turned from surprise to hatred. She shrieked a desperate, gurgling yowl and
> lunged forward, reaching out for pack with claws coated in her own crimson blood.

Dan: This catgirl's almost as resilient as Tom Dyrón

> The ratling
> grimaced as he pulled the trigger again. Wynona's barrel flashed. The massive round struck the
> huntress in the chest, painting the wall behind her with more ruby red droplets.

Rebecca: Maybe a dozen more and she might slow down a bit

> Pack stared as the
> cat woman fell back against the wall and slid to the floor, smearing blood as she collapsed.

Rebecca: Still not his worst first date.

> She
> gasped a few final, rasping breathes and then was gone. Her eyes were glazed over and blank.

Tsuneo: Remember, he's here to save them.

> Pack hesitated for a moment. Mixed emotions were running wild through his mind

Dan: The phrase 'murder boner' applies here

> until the sounds
> of booted feet rushing down the hall behind him and the stinging pain of the knife in his shoulder
> snapped him to attention.

Tsuneo [Pack Rat]: Oh yeah, that thing. I was wondering why my arm was so sore.

> Pack reached around his neck awkwardly, struggling for a moment to
> grasp the blade buried in his shoulder. He hissed as he pulled the knife out and tossed it aside.

Rebecca: And passed out from blood loss.

> Scooping up his rifle and holstering Wynona, Pack made a move towards the labs, a righteous
> anger welling up within him and driving him forward.

Tsuneo: And to think, all of this could have been avoided if he wasn't so obsessed with ridiculously lethal guns.

> "Medford! Where are you?"

Rick: North of Boston

> Pack shouted as he strode onward.

With that final comment, the big screen turned off, reverting the world back to prose format. "And that was the series of server disconnects that comprised the first third of Pack Rat: Sins of the Father," Tsuneo considered. "A piece of work that's a real piece of work."

"I must admit that the fic surprised me," Dan spoke up.

"Really?" Rick asked.

"Oh yes," Dan nodded. "Because I did not see 'incel ratman' coming at all."

"This much is true," Rick agreed. "I mean, it's a surprise. Not a good one, mind you, but a surprise no less."

"It's a new low for us," Rebecca considered. "I really thought that after Adventures of Jack, we'd reached the peak of whiny, needy male characters who are desperate of any female companionship. But no, an actual incel screed in the middle of the fic."

"He really went all the way past 'nice guy' without looking back," Tsuneo added. "Nope, all down to how he's ugly, unloved and how no woman will give him the time of day because of all the stupid sexy catboys."

"All the while he's living in his basement, building bombs and rearranging his gun collection while brooding over his suicidal revenge plan." Rick considered. "So it does seem that he might be the source of the problem."

"Utter lack of self-awareness," Dan agreed. "But then, it's not like the rest of the cast are that likeable either."

"Well no," Rebecca nodded. "Saijit is so desperately edgy it verges on satire. A midnight black berserker cannibal werewolf with a skull belt reads like somebody's Sonic the Hedgehog OC."

"On the other side, we have Sahara the magical dream girl," Tsuneo considered, "Who seems to be less a character as she is a literal object of desire for Pack Rat. She certainly doesn't appear to have any personality of her own."

"I was kind of taken by Ken," Rick admitted. "Mostly because he has this stupidly overdone backstory of being a time-travelling future nanotech space lizardman and whatever else, but what does he actually do for the fic? Nothing at all."

"I mean, it's one thing to have an informed character" Tsuneo offered. "But to have such an overly elaborate backstory that is utterly irrelevant to the fic? That's a strange sort of accomplishment."

"Well I can see that you're already really excited for the fic," the Voice beamed.

"There are many words I would use," Rebecca considered. "Excited is none of them."

"Fantastic," the Voice continued. "So you'll be pleased to know that we'll be going on with part two next time."

"Thrilling," Tsuneo sighed.

"But for now, we're done," the Voice concluded. "Until then."

"Well there you have it," Rebecca shrugged. "More proof of just how awful the Champions Online community actually was."

"Well I'm not going to dwell on it too hard," Rick admitted. "I'm gonna go home and set myself up to get back to the game."

"All right," Dan beamed. "We'll be squatting in bushes in no time."

"Can't wait."

"Think you'll go back to shopping cart turret hobo?" He asked.

"Well I mean it never even worked remotely right before," Rick considered. "And I can only imagine that on this server it'll be even more stupidly janky."

"Probably," Dan nodded.

"So yeah," Rick finished. "Can't wait."

Author's notes:

Champions Online generated very little actual fanfic in its five minutes of relevance. Most of the fan output was limited to character bios (such as the Angels of Fury ones we covered ages ago), wiki pages and the like, which really didn't leave much for us to work with. I stumbled onto this nugget of joy by pure chance, but I suspect that we really won't see too much more like it. Of course, weather that's a bad thing is up to you.

Likewise, I happened to find Ken's full wiki biography. It's very long, and goes on for ages on about how he's lead a superhero team, saved the world many times and is supposedly some great pillar of the superhuman community. All of which makes his being relegated to a background element of the fic that much funnier.

I bet nobody had 'incel ratman' on their fanfic bingo.

Next time, the plot is resolved and the fic is only halfway through.

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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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> Pack had to hide certain aspects of his home from his long-suffering landlord, like the presence of
> explosives,