They’d been galaxies apart before Rick had ever laid eyes on The One back at the auction, but the moment he met his gaze, he’d felt it: an intangible link that pulled him towards this mysterious Morty for some greater purpose than the Epiphanies, greater even than his thirst for revenge.

The origin story of The One True Morty.
The Auction

Chapter Summary

What few Ricks knew was that the Morty Auction held more than just No Eyes and colorful Shirt Mortys. It was a prize like no other, something that left every Rick who experienced it in awe, forever changed. The rumors ran rampant throughout the galaxies, spoken in hushed tones over transdimensional cell phones and in dirty subway bathroom stalls.

Chapter Notes

First published 3/18/16
[All fanart covers for The Citadel of Lost Children can be found here.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And the Ricks cast lots for The One True Morty, for they sought enlightenment in the most wicked of ways.”
- Mortilations 1:13

♫ — made for lovin’ you baby, you were made for lovin’ me —♫

Kssht

// —42-to-0 with the Tzhi’tums in the lead. They’re really taking—//

Kssht

// — was last reported fleeing the Pavo-21 Cluster. Authorities warn—//

Rick’s fingers danced over the radio controls, stubbornly switching between frequencies like an addict at the penny slots as he looked out through the cracked windshield. His knee steadying the steering wheel and one hand still flitting over the console, he flicked a glance at his coordinates. Good. He was making better time than he’d expected. He tapped a finger against the side of the portal gun on his thigh, still warm from his earlier escape, rapping out an unheard beat.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” he muttered.

Kssht

// — ghablagha? Gag’habla gabлага—//

A planet of swirling orange and blue, large enough to fill the entire view from his right side window, drifted by as he hurtled through space at the limits of his ship’s speed. The mishmash of junkyard parts convulsed under the strain, shaking its pilot in his seat, and metal grated on metal in the
overheated engine space beneath Rick’s feet.

Rick gave a tight-lipped grin and ran a thumb over the worn leather of the steering wheel. “Don’t worry, girl. We’re almost there. Y-you’ll maAUGHke—make it just fine.” Another shudder, and the bags on the seat beside him clinked and shifted to the seat’s edge. “You’ve gotten me outta worse scrapes before.”

Kssht

//—another crushing defeat for the Clot’os Razors in their 219th home game—//

Static licked at the edges of the sportscaster’s commentary, a telltale sign that he was fast approaching the edge of the Protected Zone. After he cleared the Gamor Asteroid Belt, then it’d just be a matter of dimension-hopping to the Citadel of Ricks. He couldn’t wait to see the look on those fuckers’ faces when Rick Sanchez of Dimension X-280 showed up.

They wouldn’t know what hit them.

Kssht

♫—just died in your arms tonight. It must've been some—♫

“Nah. Still not right.” Directing his scowl at the radio, he silently cursed himself for letting that two-timing hustler sell him this piece of shit. Hell, he could’ve slapped something better together in his sleep. “Every station in the galaxy, my ass. C’mon. This seriously all you got?”

Kssht

//—a loss in the amount of 45 trillion uzom. Bank president told police—//

Kssht

♫—can't buy me love, love—♫

“No,” he mumbled.

Kssht

//—the suspect is considered armed and dangerous—//

Kssht

♫—gonna give you up, never gonna let you down—♫

“No, no.” He flicked impatiently between the stations, searching for the right tune, something to fit the mood. It needed to have energy, solid lyrics, and a sick beat. Music lay at the heart of any good party, and Rick had every reason to celebrate today.

Kssht

//—advised to keep watch for a class-C Rick leaving the Protected Zone—//

Kssht

♫—another one bites the dust—♫
"Whoa-ho! Back up there now!" Rick twisted the knob back to the previous channel in a flurry, his eyes lighting up. "That's more like it!" He laughed loudly in the cramped cockpit, made even more cramped by the mass of black duffel bags piled atop the passenger's seat.

With a flick of another switch, the twin amplifiers installed beneath the baseboards thrummed to life, their vibrations adding to the ship's already quaking frame. Rick relished the beat as it reverberated through him, and he gave himself a mental pat on the back. Yup. This was the perfect way to end the day. Considering all the shit he'd gone through? The months of preparation? The break-in? The death count? He'd even singed his favorite coat in the crossfire. Yeah. He'd earned this.

After all, no getaway was complete without a badass soundtrack.

"And another one gone, and another one gone. Another one bites the dust!" His gravelly voice sang in tandem to the alien cover artist, and he belted out the lyrics as the ship banked and pitched wildly, a dangerous mimicry of dance in the hands of the mad scientist. As the nose dipped sharply, one of the duffel bags tumbled forward onto the floor. Its zipper, already stretched by the contents within, finally gave, and a shower of uzom medallions clattered over the metal surface.

"I'm coming, you fuckers!" he shouted over the bass, tuning his portal gun's coordinates to Dimension $\alpha$-001, to the Citadel.

To the start of everything.

~~*~~

"Do I hear 400?"

In the dim of the crowded lounge, a patron raised a tentative hand.

"400! 400 to the gentle-Rick in the back!" the auctioneer's voice boomed, cutting through the hum of muted conversations and clinking glasses. A beep emitted from his dossier, flashing a profile on its translucent screen, and he extrapolated the pertinent information with a cursory glance.

*He's new. Only a few bids. No wins yet. Sticks to low-level items.*

"400 credits from Rick E-998! Do I hear 450?" Auctioneer Rick's eyes scanned the mass of milling customers—the usual motley crowd of Ricks from every dimension on the central finite curve—before he leaned over the podium and thrust his gavel at the object up for bid on center stage. "Take a good look, fellas. This No Eye Morty is in fine condition. Note the smooth complexion of his face. Be the first Rick to take him home!" He paused for effect, framing one side of his mouth with a hand as though to hide the next comment from the Morty standing just a few feet from him. "Just make sure you hold his hand if you don’t want him wandering off on you!"

*Budum-tiss*

Seated behind a set of drums, a Rick with a Cheshire cat grin held his drumsticks high in anticipation of the next sting.

A smattering of chuckles rippled through the drone of conversation in the smoky room. Some Ricks looked up briefly from the drinks they were nursing, while others toyed with a sleek black card in their hands, taking long draws from their cigarettes. The tips blazed like miniature suns in the dark.
Obnoxious cackling erupted from a group of Ricks in one corner of the bar, who were acting for all the world like they couldn’t be bothered with the auction being conducted at the front of the lounge.

Eight levels below the grand foyer of the Citadel of Ricks, Façade Lounge cocooned its patrons within plush, crimson walls and inky black tabletops, a stark contrast to the glassy, sterile planes of the space station’s public areas. While silky jazz played overhead, muted lighting cast the bar-goers and bidders alike in a constant red haze where they sat or stood amid the tables radiating out from the curtained stage situated front and center. Nestled against the right side of the room, track lighting beneath the bar’s counter shimmered over the assortment of liquor bottles on display atop the glass shelves, their contents glistening every color of the rainbow.

Most of the patrons kept their attention on their drinks or talked in low voices with other Ricks at their table as the auction went on. The bartending Rick, busy cleaning glasses, shot a sympathetic look to the Rick onstage.

A line of sweat beaded Auctioneer Rick’s brow, and he knew it wasn’t just the heat from the stage lights overhead. Jesus. Tough crowd. He glowered at the No Eye Morty as if it were his fault the bids were so low tonight. The Council was getting antsy since the quota hadn’t been met last month, and Zeta Alpha Rick had personally promised him—how had he worded it again?—that he’d be pushing up daisies if he screwed the pooch? They’d been banking on this Morty Craze to stay strong at least through the end of the year, but they weren’t even through the first quarter yet.

Clearly, they’d overestimated a Rick’s attention span, the auctioneer mused before he cleared his throat and continued his act.

“400 going once...going twice...” He slammed the gavel down, garnering a satisfying crack. “Sold to Rick E-998! CongratulBRAUGHations, Brother!” He touched a finger to the screen, draining the winner’s funds from his account, before ushering the somewhat dumbfounded Rick forward to claim his Morty.

The poor sap doesn't look like he knows what he's doing. Auctioneer Rick sneered down at him with disdain. He was a relatively low-tier Rick. It was no wonder he’d gone for a No Eye. No one in their right mind would want a No Eye when there were far better choices available. “Newb,” he muttered under his breath.

Sheepishly taking the Morty’s hand in his own, Rick E-998 gave his latest acquisition a quick up and down with a confused look on his face before glancing around at the now empty stage as if he were expecting something more. Before he could protest, however, a pair of Guard Ricks promptly escorted him through the group of Ricks around the stage and back out to the private elevator lobby that would take him to the Citadel’s higher levels.

A string of exotic Mortys followed in short succession: A sulking Business Morty, Rabbit Morty, Mystic Morty—ooh! That brought in 850 credits!—Telekinetic Morty, and, finally, Biker Morty stood before the unimpressed throng, each auctioned off and dragged away by their new Rick with little fanfare.

Thank god that's over. Scrolling down the glowing screen, Auctioneer Rick confirmed he’d finished the last public auction for the night. About time. These public auctions were always a bore. Frankly, he found the whole thing beneath him—a complete waste of his talents. If it weren’t for the final auction item made available once a week, he wouldn’t even be doing this. A sly grin curled his lips as he read the name of the entry blinking at the bottom of his screen.

After the initial boom of the Morty Craze died down, the Council had devised the Morty Auction simply to keep the interest alive, marketing it as the new “upscale” way to get your Mortys. Why go
running around in the wild for them when you could outbid a fellow Rick instead? They knew that no Rick would turn down the opportunity to gloat over his brothers, and the swanky allure of Façade helped lend to the image of prestige. Ricks fell for it, hook, line, and sinker, practically throwing their money at the Council for the chance to bask in self-assumed glory.

Word spread like wildfire, soon drawing the richest and most intelligent Ricks in the multiverse to flock to the Citadel for a chance to bid. Besides dumping their fortunes into the Citadel’s treasury, those Ricks deemed worthy to occupy the Council’s more exclusive echelon were branded as Elite. In return for their loyalty and service, they were granted an extra perk, something that only the Council’s most devoted subjects were privy even to gaze upon. Because what few Ricks knew was that the auction held more than just No Eyes and colorful Shirt Mortys.

It was a prize like no other, something that left every Rick who experienced it in awe, forever changed. The rumors ran rampant throughout the galaxies, spoken in hushed tones over transdimensional cell phones and in dirty subway bathroom stalls.

*Now things are gonna get good.* Plastering on his trademark smile that would put Salesman Rick to shame, Auctioneer Rick addressed the audience with a flourish of his outstretched hands. He had no need for a mic as his crisp voice pierced the room.

“And that concludes tonight’s public auction, folks! You all know the rules!” He clapped twice, like a teacher calling the attention of schoolchildren. “Only private members allowed from here on out! If you don’t hold a membership—" His voice dropped a few pitches as he glared out across the lounge. "—please kindly get your ass outta here.”

This was the moment that separated the men from the boys. Or, in this case, the Elite from the common-Rick.

A handful of Guard Ricks fanned out through the crowd, weaving between the tables and making short order of anyone who didn’t carry the black card that marked them as Elite. Most of the non-Elite only grumbled halfheartedly before shuffling out to the lobby, while those who’d enjoyed their stay at the bar a little too long put up their hands in mock surrender and giggled drunkenly in their escorts’ faces. With well-practiced motions, the drummer Rick quickly packed his drumsticks away and disappeared behind stage.

On his way to the exit, one particularly volatile drunk suddenly twisted himself free of the Guards’ grasp, scrambling to the stage’s edge and grabbing at the hem of the auctioneer’s cloak. He held tight even as a pair of Guards seized him around the waist.

“W-whatvya got up—hic!—up there, huh? Huh?!?” Spittle flew from his chapped lips as he stared daggers at the auctioneer. “I know you’ve got sumfin! We all know it!”

Flinging a look of dismay at the pest, Auctioneer Rick wrenched the fabric free. He smoothed the planes of his cloak down, ignoring the screaming Rick who was dragged unceremoniously out of the room. The large cushioned doors swished quietly behind his struggling form, swallowing him whole.

You just earned yourself a one-way elevator ride up, Rick H-122. Auctioneer Rick jabbed a finger at an icon on the profile displayed on his screen, and a large X blinked over the Rick’s face. The Council had delegated a fair amount of control to Auctioneer Rick, and he wasn’t afraid to use it to put some pieces of shit in their place. The profile, now grayed out, slid over to his shit list of malcontents permanently barred from accessing the private elevator leading directly to Façade.

Rolling his shoulders and cricking his neck to the left and right, Auctioneer Rick steeled himself for the next act. Head down, he raised a single hand and snapped his fingers once. Immediately, the
stage lights lowered to a soft glow from their former glare, hushing the spectators as if the very air had been sucked out of the room. The jazz playing from the speakers was replaced with a low synthetic beat, the strong bass sending tantalizing pulses through the remaining Ricks who watched with rapt attention. The energy of the lounge turned on a dime, conversations dying mid-sentence and every pair of eyes in the room fixed on the lone figure atop the stage.

This was always Auctioneer Rick’s favorite part.

“Gentle-Rick.” He spread his arms wide, watching with satisfaction as his audience tracked his movements closely. “As members of the Elite, you are in the Council’s good graces and have earned the very exclusive privilege of participating in Façade’s, shall we say...after-hours auction.” Ricks visibly shifted in their seats, a few of the newer members clutching their black cards with ill-concealed zeal. A trio of Ricks seated at a table near the front snorted at their brethren’s blatant display of naïve optimism.

“I know you’re anxious to get started. You’ve paid good money to be here, and you’ve been patient enough to wait for this moment. But before we begin, I’m obligated to lay out the—URRP—ground rules.” This sent a ripple of grumbles through the room, a few voices rising in complaint. Auctioneer Rick raised a palm to his audience.

“Now, now. Most of you have probably heard these before, but remember that we have some new members among us.” He winked at the haughty-looking Rick seated in the middle of the trio. He was plumper than his neighbors, and lavish diamonds glittered on his gold-clad fingers. “And, after all, we can’t all be like Rick $\psi$-531 here. He’s won the auction more times than I can count. But I’m sure we appreciate the formula for harnessing zero energy he thought up last time.” Most of the room laughed, and the wealthy Rick tilted his head good-naturedly, a heavy golden necklace clinking around his thick neck.

The playful smile dropped from Auctioneer Rick’s features as he began to recite his speech by rote. “Rule number one: The winner of the auction will be allowed a maximum of four hours to spend with his prize in the designated accommodations. First-time winners are allotted only one hour. This is merely a precauAURGHtionary measure.

“Rule number two: No personal effects will be permitted in the room.” He raised his hands again to quell the mumble of questions from the audience. “We found out the hard way that some winners get a little carried away.” When the muttering died down, he continued. “The winning Rick will have free use of the tools supplied by the Council instead.” On cue, a Guard Rick rolled a pushcart out from behind the thick curtain, parking it within Auctioneer Rick’s reach before retreating backstage again. Auctioneer Rick strutted around the cart, picking up various items from its surface as he continued.

“The tools are to be returned in working order.” He paused to brandish a taser in front of the captive audience, a jolt of electricity sparking from its metal prongs. “And in the same condition as originally found...within reason.” He skipped over a set of thin metal pins laid out on a velvet cloth like fine cutlery, electing instead to pick up a cat-o-nine-tails. “All devices are routinely sterilized after each use and are guaranteed to be hygienically safe.

“Rule number three: No permanent damage is allowed. This includes excessive scarring, burning, dismemberment—” He stopped to shoot a glare at a Rick who was seated in one of the booths, his legs spread lewdly wide, showing off the gaudy belt buckle just above his crotch. Ignoring the biting glare, the seated Rick only rolled his eyes like a petulant teenager, working a worn toothpick between his teeth.

Auctioneer Rick went on, “—disfigurement, or impairment. Leaving marks of any kind is generally
discouraged, though permissible, provided it is done with the intention of achieving the desired results.” He placed particular emphasis on the last two words, sharing a knowing look with the Ricks in the audience.

“Rule number four: All proprietary information about and relating to the auction is considered confidential, and no participating Rick may disclose said information to any third parties without express permission from the Council.” He broke from script to chuckle. “Trust me, guys. You ain’t ever gonna get it, so you might as well keep yer traps shut if you know what’s good for you.”

This helped to break the tension that had been building over the course of his introductory speech, uneasy chuckles filtering through the assembly. Ricks gave one another strained smiles as though they were all friendly neighbors rather than feral dogs vying for the same piece of meat.

“Lastly, rule number five: All intellectual property obtained during the designated session is and shall be the sole and exclusive property of the Council. The Rick will be granted an indefinite interdimensional license of said intellectual property and shall pay to the Council a 40% royalty fee of all net profits derived from the distribution, sale, and use of the license.

“Any breach of the aforementioned rules will result in immediate suspension of the Rick’s Elite status, forfeiture of all licensed intellectual property, and permanent banishment from the Citadel.”

His speech over, he loosened his shoulders, shrugging back on his persona as the wisecracking auctioneer. Clasping his hands smartly together, he added, “If there are no further questions…” A pause, but no one so much as burped. In the stock-still air, Auctioneer Rick let his voice drop to silky depths, knowing he already had each ear in the lounge hanging on his every word.

“Do you want to see him?”

Twirling back and letting his long cloak fan out behind him, Auctioneer Rick stuck out one hand to the curtain and bellowed, “Bring him out!” Pulleys curled back the curtain like a widening smile, and a lone Guard Rick walked out, pushing a small figure in front of him with gentle prods of his gloved hand.

It was a Morty, draped in a simple white cloth that wrapped around his slender waist and was slung loosely over one shoulder. His bare feet faltered during the short trek across the stage, and he kept his head bowed, blinking blearily as though even the dimmed lights were too bright for his sensitive eyes. Brown hair fell to the small of his back, and unlike the dreadlock quality of a Peace Morty, this Morty’s hair had been meticulously brushed until it shone, arranged in a loose braid and tied off with a delicate, white ribbon. A rosy blush warmed his cheeks, and his plump lips glistened with a generous application of gloss. When he’d reached his mark by Auctioneer Rick’s side, he teetered in place, not looking up from a spot on the floor.

A flurry of gasps and soft whispers rose from the lounge floor, the more curious Ricks in the back pressing closer to get a better look.

“So he’s the one?”

“Is that the one everyone’s been going on about?”

“I don’t get it. This one doesn’t look so special to me.”

“You don’t know—UOAGHRP—what you’re talkin’ about. He’s the one.”

“The one.”
The more experienced Ricks present knew the boy from the reputation that preceded him. Even though this Morty had never set foot outside Façade or his own chambers, it seemed like every Morty in the Citadel knew about him, though never by name. Auctioneer Rick had seen firsthand how the Mortys would stiffen around a Rick who had recently been in The One’s company. Their young eyes would take on a glazed-over look, their lips working over the moniker as if chanting a mantra. *The One. The One. The One.* The effect would only last a moment, disappearing without the Morty ever knowing it’d happened. Whenever pressed by his Rick about it, the Morty would shrug and say he’d been daydreaming.

Standing so close to The One now, Auctioneer Rick felt a tickle run across his brain, making the hairs on his scalp stand on end as though electrocuted. His nose itched, and he blinked back the sudden wetness that pricked his eyes. He shook his head, trying to extricate the odd sensation that always overtook him when he was in close proximity to the kid. He sniffed the tickle away before launching into the next phase of the auction.

He turned and gave a curt nod to the Guard Rick who then swiftly kicked the Morty in the back of the legs, knocking him down. The boy cried out in pain as his knees smacked hard against the stage floor.

Instantly, the Ricks seated closest to the stage jerked their heads up, their nostrils flaring as if they’d caught the scent of some mouthwatering dish. A handful scrambled for the napkins at their table and began furiously jotting down notes over the elegant red letter F as they were struck by a flash of eureka. Those among them who were familiar with the routine only leered, licking their lips and husking out a low “Yeah, baby. That’s it.”

The euphoric effect had no sooner died than another wave hit them as the Guard placed one foot on the Morty’s shoulder and pinned him mercilessly to the floor. His next strangled cry got the attention of every Rick in the room, some getting up from their seats to stumble in awe toward the stage, drawn like magnets to the source of their sudden bout of clarity and acumen.

To anyone else, the commotion would have appeared strange, but Auctioneer Rick was accustomed to it. As a witness to countless auctions already, he knew full well the effect this Morty had on Ricks. Part of him sympathized with the audience’s sudden loss of control, even missed it. The mandatory inhibitors he took, however, blocked the Morty’s full impact on him. He waved impatiently at the Guard, signaling for him to back off The One and haul him to his feet, before turning to address the audience in full.

“How did you all enjoy that little sample? Consider it on the house. But if you want the full experience, get ready to open your wallets.” He rubbed his hands together appreciatively. “Shall we begin the bidding at 100,000?”

The cacophony of voices that swelled from the audience drowned out the tail-end of his speech as the participants surged eagerly to the stage, each trying to be heard in the fray. The black cards they waved wildly in their hands streamed their bids straight to Auctioneer Rick’s tablet, sparing him the need to call for higher bids as they piled one on top of the other in a fierce skirmish. 100,000 grew in just a few moments to 225,000, then a cool 300,000. A line of Guard Ricks placed before the stage kept the more overzealous bidders at bay, their rifles an effective deterrent. Unwilling to back down completely, several Ricks settled for pacing in a tight switchback like caged animals, never taking their eyes off the prize onstage.

460,000. 500,000.
Auctioneer Rick kept his eyes on his screen as the digits whirred by in a blur. The bidding Rick’s profile appeared and disappeared just as quickly alongside the figure, each higher amount pushing the newest loser lower on the list. The crowd mirrored the same as the more domineering Ricks knocked black cards out of their competitors’ hands or bodily forced them down with underhanded jabs to the gut and well-placed kicks. Soon the entire room was on the brink of an all-out brawl.

Safe behind the podium, Auctioneer Rick watched the display of savagery like a ruler looking down on his peasants from on high. Though he knew he too was merely a cog in the system, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of power in his position. Unlike the tediousness of the public auctions, this was where he really shone. He was completely in his element, the fuckin’ master of ceremonies, and he reveled in the energy of the stage.

The only bitter truth was that not all the attention was actually directed at him.

Leaving the Guards to handle crowd control, he glanced over at the object of everyone’s mad desire—the unassuming little boy in his little bedsheet. Poor Rick-ful bastard, Auctioneer Rick sneered.

The Morty seemed completely unaffected by the storm of chaos around him. In stark contrast to the heaving mass of bodies before him, he stood as still as a statue, either entirely unaware of or indifferent to the fact that he was the very cause of the bedlam. The sedatives administered to him earlier made his eyes wet with moisture, and his hands hung loosely at his sides. He didn’t even stir when the cloth on his shoulder slipped slovenly to reveal pale skin marked by week-old bruises.

600,000.

More than half of the Ricks had already backed out of the bidding war, turning their attention to the bar or exchanging consoling words with their fellow losers, promising that they’d save up enough to win someday. Others were already negotiating how they could pool their earnings and split the profits, but who did they think they were kidding? A Rick knew better than to trust a Rick.

630,000. 650,000.

The outpouring of bids had stymied to a trickle as more Ricks reached the limits of their funds. Those who’d been outbid moodily crossed their arms over their chests or distracted themselves with a hard drink. While some tried to stretch their budget, blatant overdraft bids were swiftly dismissed as the system cross-checked them against the funds listed within their profile, leaving only a small handful of bidders left, and even that number was quickly dwindling. ψ-531 still sat comfortably at his table, lazily flashing his card to squash any feeble attempts to outbid him. If Auctioneer Rick recalled correctly, this was his first visit in several weeks. He was eager for another Epiphany to pad his wallet, no doubt.

Two more Ricks dropped out of the running, and when the final figure—675,000—held for a few uninterrupted seconds, Auctioneer Rick raised his gavel to announce the end of the auction. As a courtesy to tradition, he began the countdown.

“675 going once. Going twice...”

Just as he began his downward swing, a voice interrupted his speech.

“Hold up! Coming through! Move it, buddy.” A fissure split through the crowd as a Rick barged his way through from the back. Dragging a pair of matching black bags across the floor in one hand, he swaggered to the space in front of the stage, stepping on more than a few toes and earning hisses and curses from the corridor of Ricks that framed him.
“Yeah, yeah. Sorry I’m late. We still doing this bidding thing o-or what?” He propped his hands on his hips and scrunched his nose as he squinted up at the Morty on the lit stage. A cryptic grin crossed his lips before he nodded to himself, looked over at Auctioneer Rick, and nodded again.

“All right, Brother. I’m in.”

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 1 can be found here.]

The French translation of Chapter 1 by Mikuder can be found here.
“Well, y-you’re right about that.” Rick continued rubbing his thumb in a small circle, tugging at the white fabric like an artist’s brush through paint. “I’m not like those ding-dongs,” he said, nodding his head towards the door. “C’mere,” he added gruffly, scooting back towards the audience of throw pillows that populated the bed just below the leather headboard. “W-why don’t we get, ahem, more comfortable?”

Chapter Notes

*First published 4/4/16*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The Rick who lays a heavy hand shall receive but pieces of coin, while the gentle Rick shall be granted the treasures of the world.”

- *FacePsalms 4:25*

“E-excuse me, but you can’t just—w-where did—” Auctioneer Rick sputtered, practically stumbling over his podium, the urge to storm off the stage and give the intruder a sound throttling propelling him forward. The unexpected interruption had left his composure shattered, making him trip over his tongue like a—a goddamn common-Rick! Every second spent out of character was only further tarnishing the well-oiled machine that was the Morty Auction, and it was all thanks to this pompous, little...

He glared down at the party crasher in their midst, a slender Rick wearing a drab, short-sleeved pair of coveralls in place of the trademark lab coat and slacks. The fit and design reeked of manual labor—and was that a cigarette burn on his collar? Auctioneer Rick found himself making a face at the sight of such low-class attire. Standing just beyond the periphery of the stage lights, the figure was cast in dull tones, only an odd shimmer from his right eye glistening through the darkness. When the Rick shifted, easing weight off of one leg to the other, the shimmer disappeared like a guillotine falling straight and clean.

Auctioneer Rick quickly bit down on his next words, not trusting his tongue to keep from spoiling his impeccable reputation any further with another pathetic stutter. Regardless of whoever this asshole was, he still had an auction to run. With a deep breath, he discreetly centered himself and smoothed a hand down the plane of his chest. If there was one thing he loathed, it was being upstaged. “How kind of you to join us this evening, Brother. I trust you have a membership?” He flashed his most patronizing smile at the new Rick, lacing his fingers together on the podium while he gave a slight nod. In a heartbeat, a handful of Guard Ricks encircled the intruder, their hands on their guns in an imposing display.

The Rick only snorted in derision but obediently raised his arms, one hand reaching for the chain
around his neck. “J-Jesus Christ, guys. All right already. Take a chill pill. I’ve got it right here.” With
that, he tugged free the black card from beneath his collar, pivoting at his hips to let it dangle in front
of the ring of Guards’ faces. “Look. See? We all good? I’m totally one of—EURP—one of you dick
wads.”

Without giving a response, Auctioneer Rick coolly checked his tablet. Any Rick who set foot in the
Citadel was mandatorily scanned by the station’s security system and registered into the central
database. Dimensional origin, criminal history, funds, and any noteworthy tidbits of information were
quickly tallied on any Rick who had business within the Citadel’s walls. Rogue Ricks wouldn’t get
very far without tripping the alarms.

Only a few select rooms were sequestered from the system—mainly spaces reserved for Council
business, which was always held at the highest level of confidentiality—but Façade Lounge was not
one of them. If anything, profiles on the Elite Ricks were of particular interest to the Council as they
kept routine tabs on their subjects’ activities and, more importantly, their coffers.

When Auctioneer Rick tapped the screen to bring up the registration entry, however, a crossed-out
profile flashed onto the display, rife with jittering and spasming pixels that rendered it illegible.
Damn bugs. I thought they fixed this thing. He tapped the corner of the device against his podium,
and when he checked the entry again, he was looking at a new profile. X-280? That was so low on
the totem pole, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen a Rick from that dimension. All this fuss
from an X-Rick? What’s he trying to prove?

He snorted at the three simple dashes that stood in place of the usual monetary figure in the corner of
the profile, indicating that the funds were too low even to register in the system. His earlier dismay
was swiftly replaced with the promise of cheap entertainment, and Auctioneer Rick smiled anew
with genuine delight. “All right, boys,” he said, calling off his dogs, “Let him play.”

When the Guards retreated, Rick of Dimension X-280 adjusted his collar with sharp jerks, clearly put
off but relieved all the same. “About goddamn—that’s more like it.” He crossed his arms with a pout,
legs spread wide in a defiant stance. “That any way to treat a
paying
customer?”

“Heard you, jerk! Auction’s over! Beat it!” One Rick cupped his hands around his mouth and booed
loudly, inciting more to join, and soon half of the room was crowing and jeering at him.

Even though they were well out of the running, many of the Elite were less than thrilled with the idea
of a latecomer showing them up. They’d worked their asses off to gain their prized status with the
Council, and this Rick was waving his card around on a chain like it was a freaking bus pass! The
brazen insult flayed their already bruised egos, and the Ricks standing closest to the outsider bullied
their way toward him in unmistakable threat.
Rick stood his ground, maneuvering himself between the challengers and his bags before raising his hands in fists. His eyes spat daggers as he looked about ready to jumpstart the impending fight.

“Easy on offa ‘im, broh,” a smooth voice cut through the tension, snapping the angry mob of Ricks out of their bloodlust as they turned their heads to the source of the voice. Spurs jangled with each step as a Rick in red cowboy boots and hat sauntered up to place himself between the eager brawlers. Swiping a tongue out to wiggle the toothpick at the corner of his mouth, he hooked his fingers into his belt loops before giving Rick X-280 an appreciative once-over. He didn’t fail to notice the way the Rick’s gaze rested on the ornate belt buckle at his hips before looking him properly in the face.

“And who the fuck are you supposed to be? The cavalry?” Rick’s fists remained where they were, the muscles still tense and ready to land blows at a moment’s notice. Just because he was grossly outnumbered didn’t mean he’d go down quietly.

Rick of Dimension C-165 tipped his hat up with a flick of his thumb before giving a little bow to Rick. “Now, now, pardner. Ahm on yer side, don’ ferget that.” He gave a playful smirk, and Rick caught the twinkle of mischief in his shadowed eyes. C-165 then straightened up to address the mob in a firm voice. “Now, sum o’ you fellas don’ much appreciate our li'l visitor here, ah reckon. But that don’ give ya tha right ta keep ‘im frum biddin’.” The Ricks who’d been inches from knocking the newb’s teeth out just a moment ago faltered in their step, all the fight draining out of them as they looked at the cowboy Rick with something bordering on begrudging respect. “An’ if’n ya don’ mind mah sayin’,” he continued in his twangy drawl, “ah’d wager we’d all agree thatta certain sumone’s gettin’ tah be too big fer’iz britches, ya follow?” He bowed back and pushed out his belly before patting it with both hands, a crude impersonation of the portly Rick seated behind him, oblivious to his antics. “Ain’t no finah way tah stir things up a bit than bringin’ in sum new blood.”

The grumbles from the opposing Ricks eventually ebbed away as realization dawned on them. The last bid had been from ψ-531, making it his umpteenth victory at the Morty Auction. C-165 had a point. It was time for a change, for someone to knock the fat fuck down a few pegs, and soon they were turning their demands to Auctioneer Rick to keep the auction going instead. A rhythmic chant started up, and Auctioneer Rick had to pound his gavel against the podium to regain order.

Amidst the flurry of movement around them, C-165 slid up to Rick’s side, his intentions implicit in the way he brushed suggestively against him. He could feel Rick prickle in response, obviously uncomfortable with the sudden invasion of his personal space. “Yer welcome,” he stated simply, enjoying the way Rick jerked back in surprise. Dipping his head in close for a better look, he smiled and gave a knowing, little hum of approval. “Them’s sum purdy eyes ya got there. Pardner.”

Rick stammered, but before he could get anything out, C-165 had already turned on his heel, making his way back to his booth. He gave a short wave without turning around and called over his shoulder, “Jus’ hope ya know what yer gettin’ yerself into.”

After finally wrangling the lounge’s unruly patrons back in line, Auctioneer Rick ran a hand through his hair, tousled from pounding the gavel raw, and sweat made the smooth locks stick up in messy clumps. Like this night could get any worse. First, the public auction had floundered, and now this X-Rick was threatening to ruin the delicate system he’d spent so long perfecting. He’d almost preferred that the Rick mob had throttled the X-Rick. It certainly would’ve saved him the headache. Now, however, it seemed the mysterious little troublemaker had already won the hearts of the audience, and they were actually cheering for him. How touching.

He cleared his throat and steeled himself for his next words. “The auction will continue. Rick ψ-531’s last bid of 675,000 was surpassed by Rick X-280’s 700. Do I hear 725?”

“725,” ψ-531 answered, lifting his card between two fingers. He looked somewhat amused, as
though the unexpected competitor were only a harmless delay to his inevitable win. In truth, he was actually curious to see just how badly he could humiliate the brash Rick. Storm in on his turf and outbid him? He didn’t think so.

“750,” Rick shot back, swiping an abandoned drink from a nearby table and downing its contents. The rest of the lounge-goers, content that the night’s entertainment was once again in full swing, settled back into their seats or stormed the bar. A particularly generous Rick ordered a round for everyone at his table and the next one over. The air was electric, a new energy rejuvenating the room as the patrons watched the unfolding spectacle with glee.

“800.”

“8-freakin’-50,” Rick X-280 answered. Auctioneer Rick’s face screwed up as the tablet failed to register the unintelligible amount, and he quirked his brow up at him. “Okay, okay. I meant 850. Jeezus.”

“875.”

Every eye in the room was glued to the bidding war playing out between the two Ricks as the numbers were thrown back and forth like a tennis ball in a match. They weren’t sure which was more unnerving: the fact that huge sums of money were being thrown down for a Morty—special as he was—or that both competitors seemed equally nonchalant about the matter.

“900.” Rick X-280 straddled the duffel bags at his feet, never once looking at his bidding rival. His eyes stayed fixed on The One who still wavered onstage. The boy’s eyelids were now fluttering as if he were fighting a losing battle against fatigue, and more than twice he looked about ready to topple over.

“925,” $531 practically yawned, ignoring the sweat starting to glisten on his two accomplices’ foreheads as they exchanged worried glances. The Ricks of $530 and $532 were not as comfortable with confrontation as $531, and they openly fretted over their dear brother’s competitive streak. The meeker of the two, $530, rested a cautious hand on their ringleader’s arm and leaned in close to rasp.

“B-brother, y-y-you haven’t b-bid this high s-s-since—since that time with C-165. Are you c-certain this R-Rick is w-w-worth it?” He spared a meaningful glance toward the Rick in question who was now casually digging out grime from under his fingernails with the corner of his member card.

$531’s chins jiggled as he chortled and whispered back, “Relax. I’m just having a little fun with him.” A satisfied grin dimpled his cheeks as he nestled back in his chair and gestured for 530 and 532 to do the same. “Besides,” he added, “the fool looks like he belongs in a body shop. There’s no way that grease monkey is going to one-up me in this bid. He’s delusional if he thinks he—”

“Enough with this cocktease bullshit,” Rick’s voice boomed, interrupting $531’s musings. He winked at the ring of spectators watching. “Let’s just make it an even mil’ already.” Again, Auctioneer Rick shot him a look and Rick rolled his eyes. “One million.”

A single bead of sweat dripped down the side of $531’s face as he forced his grin to hold. “One million one hundred thousand,” he countered.

“One million two.”

The veteran bidder’s Adam’s apple bobbed, and only the two Ricks next to him could make out the almost indiscernible tremors that shook his frame. “One million three.”
“A million four.” Rick of X-280 was now stretching his arms up over the back of his head. He twisted from side to side, going through some kind of calisthenics routine. They were dealing with what was a lifetime’s worth of money for many of the Ricks in the room, but he didn’t look fazed in the slightest.

The back-and-forth went on, neither competitor bending and, evidently, with no end in sight. Some Ricks stirred restlessly, their drinks long since finished, and even Auctioneer Rick’s patience was beginning to flag.

“One million...nine hundred.” After dabbing delicately at his brow with a silk handkerchief, ψ-531 splayed his hands out on the table’s surface, leaving a ring of moisture where the clammy skin touched, and slowly hoisted himself up to stand. The diamond-studded belt strained against his gut, and he tugged at the stiff collar of his expensive suit, trying to cool himself from the sudden blush of heat that spread up his throat.

“And here we go again, gents,” Rick clucked. “Two million flat.”

“Two. Million. One. Hundred. Thousand.” ψ-531 enunciated every word as if he were stabbing them into the obnoxious Rick standing a few feet from him.

“Two million two hundred,” Rick X-280 volleyed back.

“Two million five hundred!” ψ-531’s cheeks were crimson as he barked out the bid.

“Two million five hundred thousand...and one.” Rick smiled cheekily.

The spectators oohed, jabbing each other's ribs as they watched on with approval.

ψ-531 gritted his teeth, his mind too fogged with rage to see straight. He opened his mouth, ready to spit out another bid, when a frantic tugging at his sleeves snapped him back to himself. He flicked his eyes down. ψ-530 was shaking his head with pleading eyes, while ψ-532 just gave him a stern look that spoke volumes: Leave it.

Every cell rebelled as his pride lay torn open, but ψ-531 allowed himself to be pulled back down into his seat. He let his minions tend to him, petting and tucking him in until there was no evidence of his earlier disheveled state, while he glared at Auctioneer Rick, as though the MC could set this injustice straight. But the auctioneer was too distracted to meet his gaze, checking his dossier with unparalleled focus. When ψ-531 watched him turn to whisper into the ear of a Guard Rick nearby, his brow twitched, intrigued by the tension that palpably radiated from the usually composed auctioneer.

Auctioneer Rick scrubbed a hand down his face, looking over at ψ-531 who gave a quick jerk of his head to the side, indicating his resignation. With the only competitor officially out of the running, that left Rick X-280’s bid to stand unchallenged. He gripped the handle of his gavel, raising it solemnly over his head.

“2,500,001 g-going once...going twice...” His voice wavered over the incredible amount, and the entire room held its breath in anticipation.

Only the crack of the gavel against the podium could be heard above the roar that deafened the room. Auctioneer Rick’s announcement was swallowed up in the clamor that surged forward from the crowd in one great rush of cheers and movement. It seemed like every Rick in attendance was pushing his way to the front, trying to reach the winner to give him a congratulatory slap on the back or shake his hand. You wouldn’t believe it, they’d tell each other later. A newb outbidding old ψ-531!
But Rick ignored their revelry, for the most part, sparing only obligatory smiles and nods as he kept his focus on the Morty he’d just won. Looking up at him from over the pack of Ricks that swarmed him, Rick was surprised to find the Morty’s eyes were locked on his own, his sedated stupor replaced by an inquisitive focus. The One tilted his head slightly as he gazed at the Rick with unabashed curiosity, and Rick swallowed as he found his heart beginning to pound.

Auctioneer Rick let out a shaky breath, letting his shoulders relax for the first time that night. He was definitely overdue for a massage after this one. He looked over the gavel in his hand, noticing a new splinter at its corner where the impact with the podium had chipped it. $2,500,001. His mind still reeled at the amount. It was by far the highest bid the Morty Auction had ever brought in. Usually, he’d have good reason to celebrate. After all, part of his pay was based on commission from the bids. But an even bigger worry tied knots in his stomach: How was he going to explain this to the Council?

They already hated surprises enough as it was, so how would they react to hearing that not only had a previously unknown Rick waltzed in to win The One, but he’d done so without any clear indication of available funds? Either the system had truly failed, thus letting a Rick slide by on —ugh—borrowed credit, or...

Just then a jangling of coins sounded in front of the stage, accompanied by a wave of oohs and aahs. Peering over the edge of the stage, Auctioneer Rick saw the winner standing haughtily, one hand on his hip and the other, fingers splayed wide, poised above the opened duffel bag that he’d dropped to his feet. The inside was heaped to brimming with uzom, and the impact with the floor sent the golden medallions skipping and rolling in lopsided circles. One medallion knocked against the stage’s wall and tumbled over onto its side.

A shiver started from the back of Auctioneer Rick’s neck and crawled unpleasantly down his spine as he realized with horror that the system hadn’t been malfunctioning at all. It wasn’t that Rick X-280’s funds were too low to register.

They were too high.

“Sooooo, you take cash?”

~~*~~

The trek down the sterile hallway had been torture for Rick as the pair of Guard escorts had provided little better conversation than a houseplant. After the rush of the Morty Auction, the lack of stimulus was downright grating. Now, in The One’s private chamber, Rick snatched a decorative silver sphere from one of the shelves and tossed it idly between his hands as he watched a Guard Rick finish setting up the last of the designated “tools” in a corner of the room. While the Guard was busy wrangling the rope and pulley system, Rick took the opportunity to peruse what would be his quarters for the next hour.

Unlike the nondescript hallway he’d just come through, the room was warm and inviting, complete with a cushy round bed, chaise, and posh bathroom in plain view. Its aesthetic mirrored that of Façade’s: Polished, black marble made up the floor and shelves, and the familiar deep crimson blushed the silky walls and linens. Pristine porcelain white from the bathroom’s modern bathtub and sink punctuated the otherwise soft lighting that made the space glow, luxurious and tranquil.

Rick had seen more impressive love hotels in the Theta Quadrant, and he almost wrote the room off as nothing unique if not for the strangely tiled corner that stood at complete odds with the otherwise sensual décor. Leather and metal contraptions, each one buffed to shining, hung in neat rows along its walls or lay on velvet cloths. They gleamed beneath the harsh overhead spotlight around an
operating table placed in the middle. Closely-knit white tiles blanketed the corner’s floor, and an ominous drain hole buttoned its center.

Once finished with his work, the Guard joined his twin at the single entrance, stepping aside to frame the door and allow a third Rick in. The Eun-Rick was shaved completely bald and clad in a white robe, similar to The One’s. With a deep bow that had his nose nearly touching the floor, he addressed Rick. “Should you need anything, we are but a call away.” He swung a gangly arm out and to the side, gesturing to an intercom embedded in the wall by the door. It rested above a narrow console table topped only with a bowl of ripe fruits.

Rick fidgeted where he stood, unnerved by the stuffy show of decorum. Swapping the silver objet d’art for a more appetizing peach-like treat from the bowl, he gave the indigo spotted fruit a squeeze before answering dismissively, “Y-yeah. Right. I’m sure I’ve got it figured out.” He forced a grin as the Eun-Rick nodded in acknowledgment and began to shuffle backward out of the room without raising his head. The Guards soon followed after, and at long last Rick was alone with his Morty.

Finally.

Glancing at the bed against the far wall, he saw the Morty was currently perched on its edge. His hands were cradled in his lap, and despite the soft cushion of the mattress beneath him, he was rigid, the tension visible in the line of his shoulders and back. God, the kid looked like he was wound tight enough to pull a muscle. Even from across the room, Rick could tell the Morty was watching his every move out of the corner of his eye. His head may have been bowed in a patent show of submission, but Rick could sense that he was bracing himself for the pain that he was so obviously expecting.

Rick took a bite of the fruit in his hand and ambled around the perimeter of the room, taking on an air of total disinterest and maintaining as much distance as he could between himself and The One. He only had an hour, and he wasn’t going to get anywhere until he could get the kid to relax. He leaned back against the flat operating table, resting one elbow on its sleek surface like it were a bar counter rather than a torture device. See? his posture said. Everything’s cool. I’m not gonna hurt you. Beneath his weight, the table abruptly rolled back on its wheels, and Rick scrambled clumsily to right himself before regaining his balance. He cleared his throat.

“So...” he started, “this is quite a—pretty bougie place ya got here.” He puffed out his cheeks and let his lips burst over the word bougie. The words sounded painfully campy in the torture chamber he was currently occupying, and he could see the Morty squirm in place, as though troubled by the trite statement. Ignoring his flinch, Rick kept his expression impassive and continued. “You, uh, y-you like it here?”

Rick looked to the Morty to gauge his reaction. He was picking absently at the tail of his braid, the fidgeting unrest of his fingers clear even in the dim light.

“Nah, I guess you wouldn’t, huh?” Rick forced a laugh, answering his own question and idly picking up a smooth metallic rod from the display shelf. “Not when you’ve got Jigsaw as your own personal decorator, am I right?” Punching the small button on the rod’s side, the orb at its tip flickered with blue-white sparks. Disgusting. He dropped the device back onto the velvet surface with a barely concealed snarl.

Rick of Dimension X-280 was many things, but he wasn’t a sadist. Hurting others was only an inconvenient byproduct of getting what he wanted; he never derived any pleasure from it. But from the look of this room, with its perverse breed of showmanship, it was clear its typical visitors felt differently.
Abruptly, he turned away from the rows of whips and clamps, laid out like some grotesque butterfly collection, to face the Morty. He crossed his arms over his chest. “So the w-winning Rick uses this—this shit on you? That the only way he can get the spark? The aha moment? Th-th-the—what do they call it?” He rapped a finger against his temple. “Epiphany?”

When the Morty didn’t answer, Rick cursed silently to himself. You’re coming on too strong, Ricky-boy. You gotta take it slow. He hadn’t come this far, through hell and back, just to hit a wall because he didn’t know how to talk to a freakin’ kid.

Exhaling in one long breath out of his nose, he reset himself. Don’t forget why you’re here. The One was his ticket to settling the score with the Council of Ricks, and if he’d already waited years for this moment, then he could wait just a little longer.

Putting on his best attempt at a disarming smile and letting the tension ease from around his eyes, he walked casually to the bed and sat down, pretending not to notice the fight-or-flight look on the Morty’s face. With a harrumph, he flopped down on his back beside him, his weight making the small boy bounce.

As he tucked one hand behind his head, he continued in as neutral a tone as he could manage. “H-how’s it work, anyway? You get, like, the idea yourself and then tell ‘em? Or what? Y-you—I dunno—” He wiggled his other hand still holding the fruit in the air as though trying to conjure up the right image. “—zap ‘em with smart rays? Something like that?”

There was a long pause, and just when Rick was considering repeating himself, he noticed the Morty wasn’t looking at the floor, or even at him, but at the fruit in his hand. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he looked so much like one of the many stray dogs Rick had seen in his life, that a part of his heart squeezed at the sight.

Bingo. Rick nudged him firmly in the arm with a “Go ahead, kid. There’s plenty. Bet you’re hungry after that whole—” He cut himself off, knowing better than to finish the sentence. Instead, he just coughed and nudged at the Morty again until he slowly took the fruit, his small fingers brushing against Rick’s.

The Morty's first timid nibble was followed by a more confident one, and by the third bite, he was sinking his teeth into the sweet flesh as if he were afraid it might disappear. Well, shit, he really must’ve been hungry, Rick thought, amused and relieved to see the kid doing something other than jumping at every movement like a scared mouse.

“I...I-I don’t know. How it works.” The small words came out weak and rough with disuse. The Morty licked at a dribble of juice that was snaking its way down his wrist. He then seemed to catch himself and quickly added, “M-Master.”

Rick screwed his face up at the obligatory label but was nonetheless encouraged by his progress. It wasn’t like he’d expected much for an answer anyway, but at least he’d gotten a response out of him. Their short exchange completely forgotten, the Morty was now diligently licking his hands clean of the sticky juices, a small, pink tongue sweeping between his fingers to get at stray pieces of fruit.

“Well, what’s it like when you do, y’know, w-what you do?” Rick asked, getting up and walking to the sink to run some warm water. He kept his back turned while he took his time with the simple task of wetting one of the available hand towels, watching The One discreetly through the vanity mirror. “When they get this Epiphany?”

His distance and the background noise of running water seemed to help, because The One answered more readily this time, his hands still suspended in midair to keep from dirtifying his clothes. His face
contorted like he was struggling to put together words he wasn’t even allowed to voice. Finally he said, “They l-like it, very much. Sometimes they seem happy—happier, but then they also get r-rougher and they—”

“N-no, kid,” Rick cut him off, hurrying back to the bed with the towel and crouching in front of the Morty. He forced a smile to hide his grimace at the thought of what the kid was about to say. Rick then looked pointedly at him and softly enveloped his hands in the warm towel. “I meant you. What’s it feel like for you?”

Looking up at the Morty from where he knelt, Rick could make out the strange yellow halo that glowed around the dark pools of his pupils. It was both uncanny and alluring in a way that made his throat constrict against a swallow. The shutter in his right eye twitched, suddenly unsure where to focus, and he blinked quickly to quell the discomfort. Realizing that he was staring, he busied himself with dragging the dampened cloth over the boy’s hands and the space between his fingers. He worked with care, catching the way the Morty’s shoulders eased down the longer he squeezed and massaged. Despite the warmth of the cloth in his hands, goose bumps shivered over Rick's nape, and he felt an unfounded wave of comfort radiate through his mind that sat at odds with his aching joints.

“I...I feel—” A conflicted look came over the Morty's young face, and the all-encompassing feeling of contentment that had gripped Rick just moments ago lifted. “It hurts. It always only hurts.”

Disgust made the hairs on Rick’s arms bristle, and his mouth went dry at the sobering confession. The Morty started to pull his hands out of Rick’s as if the contact between them were anything but platonic.

_Fuck me. What else was I expecting?_ He kicked himself mentally, scrabbling for something to get them off the subject of torture that seemed to occupy every facet of the Morty’s existence. Easier said than done, though, considering a set from out of a slasher film was sitting just across the room from them.

Rick already knew that inflicting pain on the poor kid was the ticket to getting Epiphanies. The premise seemed straightforward enough and, in fact, wasn’t all that different from how it usually worked: The presence of a Morty camouflaged a Rick’s genius brainwaves. Apply pain to that Morty, and it amplified the effect. Any Rick with half a brain knew the basics. Rick had heard of the countless unmonitored experiments involving car batteries that ended with varying degrees of success.

But with this Morty, The One, some serious wires must’ve gotten crossed somewhere along his timeline to produce the effects he did.

“W-where you from, anyway? There anyone like you in your dimension?” Rick asked, giving the Morty’s hands one last squeeze before resuming his seat on the bed and tossing the juice-stained towel aside. He leaned back on his hands, and it was only then that he realized with a shudder that the torture corner was conveniently placed to allow anyone reclining on the bed or enjoying a bubble bath to watch the spectacle with an unobstructed view.

Instead of giving him an answer, the Morty twisted to face Rick fully for the first time since the auction. His brows were pinched in questioning suspicion as he worked over the words. “Wh-who are you?” he asked finally. Rick recoiled, wondering if the kid already had him figured out, if his cover was blown. But the Morty continued in his flat voice, devoid of accusation, “You’re not—” He looked down at the bed cover, choosing his next words with care as a blush tinged his cheekbones. “Not like the other R-R-Ricks.”
Rick quirked a lopsided grin and laid a hand on the small of The One’s back. The Morty stiffened at the touch, the tug-of-war between caution and trust plain on his features, until Rick began petting him through the robe, making his intentions clear that he wasn’t a threat. A minute, then two, and the boy visibly relaxed under Rick’s strokes. He even gave a shuddering sigh of content, and Rick felt a flash sweep across his brain like a wildfire through dry brush: *No one’s ever touched him like this before. Not since—* But before he could reach the end of the thought, it’d already fizzled and vanished, and he lacked the focus to retrieve it.

“Well, y-you’re right about that.” Rick continued rubbing his thumb in a small circle, tugging at the white fabric like an artist’s brush through paint. “I’m not like those ding-dongs,” he said, nodding his head towards the door. “C’mere,” he added gruffly, scooting back towards the audience of throw pillows that populated the bed just below the leather headboard. “W-why don’t we get, *ahem*, more comfortable?” He kept his hand on the Morty’s back, the slightest amount of pressure guiding the small boy to crawl after him. The jut of small bones beneath Rick’s fingertips made him cringe, and he focused his attention instead on the pair of slender thighs that peeked out between the folds of cloth.

“What are you doing, Ricky-boy? a voice needled at him. *Don’t you fucking stoop to their level. You didn’t ditch a GF prison just to bang some kid whose balls have barely dropped*. The scientific part of his brain quickly took charge, shushing his nagging thoughts. *I’m just doing a little experimenting,* he assured himself. If he simply approached this like any other problem to be solved through logic and a methodical process, he’d find out what made The One tick, and that would give him the edge over the Council that he needed. At the very least, the whole ordeal wouldn’t feel nearly so shameful.

He couldn’t deny that something electric passed between them, unexplained by any science he knew and yet as real as the law of gravity. They’d been galaxies apart before he’d ever laid eyes on The One back at the auction, but the moment he met his gaze, he’d felt it: an intangible link that pulled him towards this mysterious Morty for some greater purpose than the Epiphanies, greater even than his thirst for revenge. Now, in the privacy of the room, swathed in its enticing luxuries, that tug was demanding that he take bodily action. It set his nerves afire, urging him to take the kid and—and what? He wasn’t even sure, but whatever it was made his hand shake as he wrapped it around the Morty’s upper arm and pulled him forward until he was half-sprawled across Rick’s chest.

He could feel The One’s heart pounding fiercely against his own. *ScaredHurtWaitSafeRunStay*. The thoughts piled on top of each other in a jumbled heap that came out as a meaningless blur of noise, but Rick was able to home in on one thought that rang out simple and clear above them: *More.*

Emboldened by the response he’d elicited, he put that piece of information to use and continued petting the Morty’s back in longer, languid strokes, applying just enough pressure with his fingertips, so that the motion seconded as a massage.

“So—” Rick coughed when his voice came out thicker than he’d intended, and he started again. “W-what do I call you, anyway? I mean, shit, ‘The One’ is a little too—kinda pretentious, don’t ya think?” Rick wrinkled his nose and shrugged, the Morty’s head bobbing up and down on his chest with the gesture. “And you’re obviously not j-just a regular Morty either.” Rick’s other hand came up to caress his head, lean fingers raking through his hair and loosening the long strands from the braid. He knew it’d feel good, and true to form, he felt the Morty relax another degree. *Just like that. Keep doing that,* Rick told himself as he internally preened, only partially registering that the thought came about like an echo, its origins muddled.

But Rick was too busy talking to pay it much mind. “How about...Mmmortimer? Mort? Nah, you don’t look like a Mort.” His fingers kept up the steady massage, turning the Morty into putty. Rick
looked down at the boy who lay with one cheek against his chest, his small hands kneading fistfuls of Rick’s coveralls and his eyes fluttering closed as he practically quivered beneath Rick’s ministrations.

“Mouse.”

“Huh? Whuzzat?” Rick asked.

“Mouse,” the Morty repeated, shuffling to meet Rick’s eyes. “It’s what...w-what my mother used to call me.”

“Mouse, huh?” He tasted the name on his tongue. It was as small and fragile as its namesake, and he found himself smiling around the single word. It was perfect. “Mouse it is, then.”

Mouse looked away quickly as though embarrassed by the moniker, and Rick appreciated the blush that blossomed over his cheeks. He could even make out the hint of what might have been a smile. *Now we’re getting somewhere, Ricky-boy,* he mentally congratulated himself and felt a warmth spread through his chest which he tried to deny was anything but Mouse’s weight on him.

“So, Mouse, this is—sure is a lotta room for a little guy like you. Hell, not many kids your age can say they got their own private bathroom. And, shit, does that thing have jets?” Rick had expected to get a laugh from Mouse, but instead he saw a shadow of distress cross his features. In a panic, he hurried to find something to lighten the mood. “I-I mean, jeezus, y-you can probably yank it f-fifty goddamn times before you even hit lunch.” He chuckled, remembering his own harried days in the throes of puberty.

Mouse only looked up at him with an inquisitive look. “Yank what?”

Rick balked, his hands freezing in their trek across Mouse’s scalp and back. “You’re...you’re kidding me, right?”

But Mouse seemed more concerned by the fact that Rick had stopped the massage than by his question. Righting himself into a kneeling position over Rick’s hips, Mouse picked up Rick’s hand and placed it once more on his head, his request clear. “W-w-what could I yank fifty times?” he asked again.

“Aw, jeez. Look, Mouse, I-I-I didn’t mean it literally. It’s—” *Oh, boy. Now I gotta give a lesson on jerking off to Wonder Boy here?* An uncomfortable blush worked its way over Rick’s throat, and he found himself suddenly over-warm. As he petted absently at Mouse’s head, he looked pointedly away from the supple thighs that bracketed his crotch, ignoring the way the cloth rode up to reveal pale flesh crisscrossed with thin lines of paler white. He swallowed and pressed his lips together before explaining. “It’s, y’know, it’s—you—it’s when you use your hands. To feel good,” he finished lamely.

Mouse perked up at this. “Hands? I like your hands. C-could I use your hands instead?” He leaned forward and rested his palms on Rick’s shoulders before adding, “To ‘yank’ it?” Mouse gave a pleased little wriggle, grinding himself unintentionally against Rick’s crotch as he reveled in the caress of the fingers on his scalp, oblivious to the throb that pulsed through Rick’s cock at the motion.

*Shit, the kid’s a natural tease when he isn’t cowering in fear,* he half-thought, the rest of his mind suddenly occupied by a flood of disjointed impulses, little cues about how he could so easily reach out to make the kid squirm even more, where he could put his hands to undo him. He could see the images playing out in his mind as though someone else were directing the scene. The thoughts
goaded him to move, and slowly he ran his hands down from Mouse’s head to graze over his neck and chest before resting them on top of his thighs. Another shiver of lustful thoughts—shit, he hadn’t been this horny in forever—ran through him as he slid his thumbs beneath the robe, just inches from Mouse’s most intimate parts. Rick was only partially surprised to find that the kid wasn’t wearing any underwear. The skin there was plump and as soft as a petal, only the slightly raised scars interrupting its surface.

“Oh.” The simple gasp left Mouse’s eyes heavy-lidded, his limbs suddenly slackening. He spasmed in Rick’s touch and fell jerkily forward to rest his forehead against the side of Rick’s neck. *Keep going.*

“If that’s what you want, Mouse,” Rick rumbled, his heart pounding in his ears as his hands inched closer. The moment his fingertips brushed that heated morsel of flesh, he exhaled sharply and his hands converged on Mouse in a rush. One swept low to cup his balls while the other wrapped gently around his half-hard shaft. It pulsed eagerly in his grasp, but Rick kept his wits about him, running through his own time-honored routine: He smeared his thumb through the pearl of precum that dewed its tip, tracing circles around the moist glans and tugging back the foreskin.

Mouse’s hips jumped, and he gave a choked cry, tightening his grip on Rick’s shoulders. Rick could feel the burn of his cheek where it was pressed against his neck and the short puffs of breath that heated his skin.

Like a coach instructing his pupil, Rick continued in a husky tone, “You wanna start off slow, get yourself warmed up.” He stroked the full length of Mouse’s staff, his hand fisted loosely around the foreskin and giving it a firm squeeze at the end. His own cock was now rock hard, and he unconsciously tilted his hips to rub it against the inside of Mouse’s thigh while he continued. “And d-don’t forget you got other stuff to—to work with too.” By way of explanation, Rick slid two fingers back behind Mouse’s balls to massage the bare skin of his perineum with firm strokes. Working both hands in tandem, Mouse was soon bucking fervently into Rick’s grasp, moaning incoherent little nothings, half-smothered against Rick’s collar.

For all his usual control, Rick was swept up wantonly in the moment, his entire focus absorbed in every scandalous sound coming from between Mouse’s legs and lips. His mind was awash in self-affirming messages of *Amazing, oh god, need it harder, faster, faster, FASTER.* But just as he was relishing the buildup of arousal that he could practically *feel* from Mouse, other uninvited thoughts began to trickle in.

—*unauthorized*—stop him—

Rick shook his head as though to dislodge the intrusive vagaries from his mind, focusing instead on pumping Mouse until the boy was panting in hitched breaths. Mouse pulled away, first looking down in wonder at Rick’s hand around his leaking cock then up at Rick. The glow around his eyes seemed more pronounced in the sultry dim of the room, casting a yellow sheen on his flushed cheeks.

—*get in there*—suspect must be removed—they don’t pay us enough for this—

Rick’s hands faltered, and he bolted upright to look over Mouse’s shoulder, scanning the room for the intruders that weren’t there.

—the count of three. Okay, here goes.

The voice—no, *voices*—Rick realized, were plainly distinct from his own internal dialogue, and with every passing second, they were becoming clearer like a radio frequency breaking through static.
“R-Rick?” Mouse breathed his name, on the brink of his orgasm, but Rick barely registered it as he swept Mouse aside with one arm, sending the kid toppling off of his lap and onto the covers as he scrambled to the foot of the bed.

Two...

Rick swung his legs over the side and sat frozen, part of him screaming to make a run for it, while the other part struggled to sort through the barrage of foreign thoughts that battered his brain. “Mouse.” His mouth had gone dry as a mixture of fear and awe gripped him, his eyes wide. He glanced over to the boy who lay disheveled and oblivious to what was happening. “They’re com—”

Three!” A crowd of armed Guard Ricks burst through the door, swarming the room in tight formation, their weapons raised and at the ready. With military precision, they made a preliminary sweep of the quarters before forming a tight ring around the front of the bed.

Rick had made no move since they entered, stunned into paralysis as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, bringing the bigger picture into sharp relief. A wry grin pulled itself across his lips, and he slumped forward, elbows resting on his knees. Rick shook his head slowly in disbelief.

“No. Fucking. Way.”

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 2 can be found here.]

The French translation of Chapter 2 by Mikuder can be found here.
Chapter Summary

“Apprehend the defendant,” the Captain interrupted, and the echo of the voice was whisked away from Rick’s mind as trepidation settled over Mouse’s features once more. There was a finality in the Captain’s tone that seemed to want to squash the display of affection Rick and Mouse had just shared. Rick looked up to see his eyes narrow with smug satisfaction.

Chapter Notes

First published 4/26/16

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ricks beateth Ricks and Ricks cheateth Ricks. Thus providence hath decreed that Mortys be the peacemakers.”
- Morticus 5:11-12

The Guard Ricks flooded the room, their boots thundering over the marble floor like an angry storm. In quick succession, they wordlessly assembled into position at the front of the bed and its two occupants, each soldier standing equidistant from his comrade in an impressive display of military discipline.

Rick barely paid them any mind, however, regarding their arsenal of weaponry with blunt disinterest as he scrubbed a hand down his face. His fingers trembled over the sweat-sheen of his brow, the only evidence of the super-charged Epiphany that had invaded him just moments earlier. With the buzz of phantom voices now dissipated, he was left to run a mental inventory of his thoughts, checking and then re-checking that they were, in fact, all his own. He breathed out a sigh of relief when he found that he was once again “alone” in his mind. The notion of his head having seconded as a storage container for others’ thoughts was disconcerting, to say the least. While part of Rick needle at him to recognize its potential benefits, he didn’t have time to dwell on it any further as the wall of Guard Ricks parted to let one of their number through.

A Guard in high-ranking uniform stepped forward, his cap tilted smartly on his brow and both hands tucked behind his back. The insignia beneath his badge designated him as the captain, and an air of carte blanche emanated from his gait and the square of his shoulders. Every inch of him made it clear that he demanded the utmost respect from those around him and had no tolerance for insubordination.

The Captain looked down at Rick with obvious disdain, curling his lip as if Rick’s very presence offended him. “I thought I smelled an X,” he grumbled to himself, raking his eyes over Rick as though he were carrion on the side of the road. Turning to a Guard at his right, he sighed, “Give him the rundown, private.”
On cue, the lesser Guard held out a transparent screen filled with fine print that scrolled fluidly as he read. “Rick of Dimension X-280, you are hereby under arrest for violating the terms of the Citadel of Ricks, Article II, Section 1, subsection 4(b).”

“Now, look here—URP—pal,” Rick sneered, keeping his eyes on the Captain even as the man in uniform was walking away to leave the heavy lifting to his subordinates. He seriously did not have time for this. The power of telepathy, a concept long since relegated to mystics and ghost hunters had just fallen into his proverbial lap; being lectured on the importance of following the Council’s rules was just about the last thing he needed right now. “Y-you have any idea how much I just paid for an hour with Mou—” He coughed over his stumble. “I mean, The One? I expect to get my goddamn money’s wor—”

But the Guard talked over him without missing a beat. “Which states: ‘No Rick shall employ technology while on Citadel property which manipulates, hides, or otherwise makes inaccessible the amount of his personal funds, either in part or in full—”

“Hey! Captain Dickface, I’m talking to you!” Rick started to stand, intending to follow after the Captain, but the audible click of a roomful of guns being cocked and leveled at his head tempered his agitation. With a grumble, he settled for raising both hands in begrudging submission as the Guard continued his speech.

“—from being registered in the Citadel’s database. Perpetrators shall be brought before the Council for a tribunal, whereupon the offending Rick shall be interrogated and ultimately brought to—”

Ignoring the rundown of predictable bureaucratic bullshit, Rick kept his eyes trained on the Captain who was now addressing a pair of Guards bearing medical badges. Rick couldn’t make out the exchange, but the two Medics gave a curt nod before heading in Mouse’s direction.

Shit! Mouse!

Rick twisted where he sat to seek out Mouse. Amidst the frenzy of the raid, he hadn’t had the chance to check up on him, and he now saw that Mouse was lying prone and shivering on the far side of the bed where he’d been knocked over. The flush of his cheeks was still bright and the source of his plight evident between his legs as he mewled softly and squirmed against the blanket in search of some relief. The Medics dutifully circled around the bed and grabbed the Morty securely in their gloved grip, before hauling him to his feet and giving him what seemed like a routine check.

“—for however long it is deemed necessary by the Council. Resistance will be met with—” The speech became a distant buzz in the background of Rick’s attention.

Rick watched apprehensively as one Medic held Mouse firmly in place by the shoulders while the other began to inspect his neck with clinical efficiency. Mouse cringed at the touch but made no move to resist them, likely habituated to being handled in this manner. The Medic then examined his arms and torso before kneeling and lifting aside the white robe. He paused in his regimented actions, and Rick caught the furtive look that passed between the two Medics. Then it was gone, and they were positioning Mouse over the edge of the bed and spreading his legs with practiced ease. The lead Medic snapped a latex glove over one hand while his partner pinned Mouse’s wrists to the bed. Mouse gasped softly with his cheek pressed against the blanket, tears of shame glistening at the corners of his eyes as he looked pleadingly at Rick.

Rick nearly screamed where he sat. His jugular quivered beneath his racing pulse, and the muscles in his legs bunched with the urge to tackle the Medics. Before he could act on impulse, however, a prod from a nearby Guard’s rifle brought the gravity of his situation to the forefront once again. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to take a deep breath and turn away, thankful to spare Mouse the
humiliation of being watched while he was manhandled like a piece of equipment. As he focused on his own reflection in the marble floor, he considered how the Medics had reacted during their examination. Even without the help of an Epiphany—or whatever the hell that was from before—it was clear to Rick that they weren’t used to The One being in an aroused state. No shit. Seeing as how these sessions usually went, they were more accustomed to dealing with bruises and blood, not —well, boners.

“Do you understand the terms of your arrest, Rick of Dimension X-280?” the Guard in front of him finished, tucking the dossier under one arm.

Rick snapped his gaze back to the Captain who was surveying the room idly, and he dug his fingers into the comforter as he bit out his next words, “Yes. FiAUGHne. Just get them fucking off of him.” His entire frame was taut as a bowstring as he fought the compulsion to get up and punch the Captain right in his smug face.

The Captain only smirked from beneath his military cap, and with a jerk of his chin, he signaled to the pair of Medics to finish their examination and bring Mouse to him. By now, Mouse’s erection had flagged completely, and he hiccupped over his tears as he was half-dragged, stumbling, to the Captain’s side. The Captain rested a hand on Mouse’s head as he addressed Rick, his tone light but menacing like a honey-coated scorpion.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you have a problem with the way my men handle The One? Afraid we’ll trigger...an Epiphany?” He grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked up sharply, causing Mouse to wince and teeter on his tiptoes. Rick’s brain prickled in response, and his earlier ruminations tripped forward a few steps in deduction.

The Captain and the rest of the Guards remained impassive, oblivious to the fireworks display going off in Rick’s mind. “It’s a shame we have to take these bothersome inhibitors. You auction winners always seem to have so much fun.” He chuckled, apathetic to Mouse’s cries.

He’s only hurting Mouse to fuck with me, Rick realized. That fact alone made Rick’s stomach roil and a muscle pinch at the nape of his neck.

“Do you know what they do to him in here?” the Captain continued, tightening his grip and slowly wrenching Mouse’s head back until Mouse sobbed. He tsked. “Don’t think that you’re the first Elite I’ve been tasked with removing from the winner’s suite.” His grin only widened as he watched Rick redden at the reminder. “If you only knew the things I’ve seen.”

Rick seethed at the Captain’s sadistic glee while another part of him wrestled with the onslaught of realizations that each spark of Epiphany was bringing to light. The notion of making connections in reasoning on an involuntary level was still unfamiliar to Rick; and while the effect of the Epiphany was clear, sorting through the information to make sense of the message was a task in and of itself, made even more challenging by the fact that his attention was fractured between Mouse’s dilemma and his own.

“Still—” The Captain’s eyes took on a predatory look. “—I don’t think I’ve seen a Rick quite so taken by The One.” He yanked Mouse in front of him and cupped his chin in his hand, caressing a gloved thumb over one cheek in mock tenderness. He then bent forward until his lips were just inches from Mouse’s neck, his eyes never leaving Rick’s as he hummed low in his throat. “Maybe it’s about time I saw what all the hype was about.” His hand stroked down the skin of his neck and slipped under his robe to bare his shoulder to Rick. “Got a taste of him myself, hm?” Running his tongue over one canine like a wolf licking its chops, he leaned closer to press his teeth against the side of Mouse’s neck.
“Don’t you fucking dare!” Rick snarled, throwing himself at the Captain, fingers curled into eager fists. Pure rage fueled him, and he would’ve met his target if not for a Guard who stepped in to deflect his attack. The butt of the Guard’s rifle crashed into the side of Rick’s head with a solid crack, and Rick crumpled to his elbows and knees. A sticky stream of blood oozed into his right eye from the gash over his brow and dripped liberally onto the marble floor. “Fucking...Christ.” He clutched a hand over his eye, prodding the optical chassis to make sure the internal components were still in working order. There was a slight stutter in the whir of the mechanics, but Rick would have to deal with it later.

Above him, the Captain huffed a laugh, the pleasure obvious in his voice as he spoke. “Tsk, tsk. That was an attempt at battery against a uniformed Rick if I ever saw one. Looks like we’ve got a hostile on our hands, men. And you know what we do with hostiles.” There was a rumble of agreement among the ranks, and Rick could hear the popping of knuckles as they stepped forward to form a tight ring around him.

Rick never saw who threw the first blow, but a well-placed kick to his stomach, strong enough to break bone, sent his diaphragm into spasms, leaving him breathless and seeing stars. The strikes blurred together into one endless string of punches and kicks from every direction, knocking him about like a soccer ball. Instincts from his time in prison told him to assume the fetal position, and he let the blows fall on his ribs, back, and limbs while he protected his head as best he could. Before long, a rib cracked under the assault, and every feeble intake of breath felt like a knife digging into his side.

Just as quickly as the attack began, it halted. The Guards swaggered back from Rick, catching their breaths and giving each other chummy slaps on the back while Rick gasped and wretched on his side.

Heels clacked cleanly over the floor as the Captain made his way over to Rick and crouched on his haunches to look him in the face. He seemed to consider him at first, taking in the nasty cuts and bruises that colored his skin like a child’s paint project and the disheveled state of his hair. In an almost sympathetic tone, he murmured, “It certainly didn’t take much to provoke you, did it? I shouldn’t be surprised. You X-Ricks are so simple.” He snorted derisively. “Did you really think I’d put my mouth on that filthy thing? Please.” Rick’s head lolled as another wave of vertigo hit him, and the Captain grabbed him by the hair to steady him. “I really can’t understand why the Council would be so interested in you. Normally, they wouldn’t care if I decided to off a rogue Rick from the lower dimensions. But for you—” He ground his finger against Rick’s forehead, careful to avoid the blood that threatened to stain his white satin gloves. “—they made a special point about bringing you in alive. Too bad for you, they didn’t say you had to be in one piece.” His tone grew more sinister as he spat, “If I had it my way, I’d see to it that an X-Rick like you got permanently x’ed out.”

“Are you...kidding me?” Rick wheezed, grimacing against the protest in his ribs. “Was that supposed to be...punny—” The Captain’s fist made contact with his face, effectively silencing Rick and splitting his lip open.

“Rick!” Mouse’s thin voice pierced the air, the one word fraught with anguish.

In unison, every standing Rick in the room turned to the small boy with a belligerent, “What??”

“No...you...you idiots...” Rick croaked, adding weakly, “Jeezus... Ego...much?”

The Captain glowered at Mouse, who was squirming in his captor’s grip, before abruptly releasing his hold on Rick and letting him fall gracelessly to the floor. He stood and straightened his uniform, then tucked his hands elegantly behind his back as he addressed his men in a sharp tone. “Enough of
this. Take him away.”

Before the Guards could approach, however, Mouse managed to wrench free of the Guard’s grip and make a mad dash to fling himself at Rick. He reached his small arms around Rick’s neck and buried his face in his chest, his white robe settling like wings around them. Rick winced as Mouse rammed into his already bruised torso, but the relief of having him close again trumped any pain. He wrapped one shaky hand around Mouse’s middle and closed his eyes to take in the subtle nuances of the boy’s scent and form pressed against his own.

His reverie was cut short, however, when a petulant Guard barked, “You heard the Cap’n. Fun time’s over. Say goodbye to your little whore.” He sneered down at the pair, his finger on the trigger of his rifle as though he were itching for an excuse to use it.

“Call him that again,” Rick shot back with a level stare, “and I’ll shove that gun...so far up your ass...y-you’ll be spitting up bullets for a week.” His voice was disturbingly calm, underscoring the veracity of his threat, and the Guard paled. Even broken and bleeding, Rick still held an aura of mystique that belied his common appearance.

“Y-yeah? Well, let’s see how far you get w-with a bullet between the eyes,” the Guard snarled, propping his gun against the crook of his shoulder and aiming it straight at Rick’s chest where Mouse was still clinging to him. Rick instinctively curled his body to shield Mouse from the impending attack, but before it came, the Captain lunged forward to grab the rifle.

He tore it out of the Guard’s hands and swung it back around to cut him across the face. As the Guard lay dazed and wounded on the floor, the Captain roared, “Just what the hell do you think you’re doing, private?! You never raise your weapon to The One!” He slammed his foot down on the Guard’s firing hand and ground his heel cruelly into the tendons, making the private howl. “Have you forgotten your training?!"

“S-sir, no, sir!” the Guard stammered between clenched teeth, clutching futilely at the hand that was pinned beneath his superior’s heel.

“Your orders were to apprehend the defendant, not shoot him! You brainless...” the Captain growled at his charge, leaving the sentence to hang as he dragged the soldier up by his collar and tossed him to a line of waiting Guards. “Get this maggot out of my sight! I want his badge on my desk first thing tomorrow morning!” He then stormed away, barking orders into his communicator.

“I’m sorry, R-Rick! I’m sorry!” Mouse was sobbing into Rick’s chest, oblivious to the violence around them. “This is all my fault. Th-they wouldn’t be hurting you if—if I wasn’t—if I didn’t—” He sniffled and pulled back to search Rick’s face for some sign of forgiveness.

Unbelievable. The kid dealt with this kind of abuse on a daily basis, but here he was, torn up about seeing Rick take a few blows. But it wasn’t without some pride that Rick heard Mouse say his name, in place of the whole “master” business which had sat uncomfortably between them just earlier that night.

Rick opened his mouth to say something to Mouse, but words deserted him, Mouse’s compassion striking him silent. How a kid who had been through so much could still care about a sorry fuck-up like himself was beyond him. Finally, he settled for patting Mouse’s head reassuringly. But Mouse couldn’t be consoled, his small hands fluttering over the wounds that littered Rick’s face.

Cracking a smile, Rick gently eased Mouse’s hands away with a soft, “S’okay, kid. Really. I-I’ve
had worse. Trust me.” He gave his thin wrist an encouraging squeeze and ran his thumb over the hummingbird pulse.

“But...” Mouse protested, but Rick hushed him with a brush of his long fingers against his cheek. The tender caress seemed to placate Mouse for now, and the boy sighed with just the faintest smile. Rick’s heart warmed at the sight, and an inexplicable chill spread across the back of his head. *He’ll still blame himself,* Rick thought. *Poor kid...*

*Wait a minute.*

His hand twitched, not from any physical pain but from a sudden sense of urgency. With deliberate focus, he seized the thought and turned it over again in his mind before it could slip away, replaying it from a different angle to reveal the true voice that resonated from beneath. It came out soft and forlorn: *I’ll still blame myself.*

“Apprehend the defendant,” the Captain interrupted, and the echo of the voice was whisked away from Rick’s mind as trepidation settled over Mouse’s features once more. There was a finality in the Captain’s tone that seemed to want to squash the display of affection Rick and Mouse had just shared. Rick looked up to see his eyes narrow with smug satisfaction.

To Rick’s surprise, Mouse’s sniffling suddenly stopped. He turned, his face quieting into a death glare directed at the Captain and his league of approaching men. It stopped the Guards in their tracks, and even the Captain’s smirk wavered, resembling something like alarm. Before his men could pick up on their leader’s hesitation, however, the Captain quickly brushed it off and prompted them to move.

At their Captain’s command, a set of Guards seized Rick by both arms, roughly hoisting up his rag doll frame, while a third dragged the seething Mouse away with little pretense. Another Guard placed heavy handcuffs over Rick’s wrists to keep them fixed in front, and two more Guards positioned themselves at the rear, the tips of their rifles nestling into Rick’s back like snake fangs. Seeming satisfied with the arrangement, the Captain clicked his boots together, did an about-face, and began to lead the procession out of the room.

Rick stumbled and hissed as the movement jostled his fractured rib, but he did his best to stay upright and preserve some sliver of dignity despite his wretched state. The vestiges of the psionic Epiphany still left him feeling empowered, almost giddy, as though he were privy to some secret that every other Rick around him was ignorant of; and despite the grim prospects that now faced him, he felt hopeful, rather than fearful. A wry grin ghosted over his battered lips as he shuffled after his wardens.

Before he was shoved bodily out the door, Rick cast one last strained look over his shoulder at Mouse who was still slumped on the floor. *I’ll be back for you,* he promised silently. *I’ll get us both out of here.*

~~*~~

The Captain pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting off an encroaching migraine that sizzled behind his eyes. The brilliant hallway lights weren’t helping, and he kept his gaze on the polished floor as he led the group from the winner’s suite back to the Citadel’s central elevators.

He really couldn’t think of the last time a raid had gone so poorly. It was supposed to be a routine operation—get in, arrest the Rick, secure The One, get out. But, no, Rick of X-280 just had to make everything more complicated by getting The One all worked up and...emotional. He grimaced, thinking back to the way the Morty had glared at him with such open contempt.
He’d only laid eyes on the kid a handful of times before, but he never remembered him being so noisy. From what he could recall, The One was about as expressive as a coat hanger, the combination of regularly administered sedatives and physical torture conditioning him to maintain a near-constant docile state.

But the look in The One’s eyes had been nothing short of murderous just before they’d apprehended the X-Rick, the frigidity in his gaze stripping the Captain of his poise until he was almost shaking in his polished boots. His years in the military had numbed him to violence and the savageries of the front lines, but to see that same ferocity coming from a Morty was—it was unthinkable.

Mortys were little more than tools as far as he was concerned. Hell, their service to Ricks was the one constant between them across dimensions, just as a Rick’s genius was the one constant between his own kind. Slight differences could exist, but if there was one truth in the universe, it was that Mortys were designed to further a Rick’s objective, and that extended beyond the basics of acting as a human shield. Their very nature made them subservient to a Rick. It was encoded in their DNA to obey their superiors with little resistance. To that end, the Captain regarded them on par with his holster or even the commode. They were things to be utilized, not accommodated; maintained, not nurtured.

That was why any affection between a Rick and a Morty made his skin crawl. It was insulting to see a Rick lower himself to a Morty’s level, associating with and actually caring about the boy with something resembling respect. Sentiment was only good for getting yourself killed.

The Captain had never been assigned his own Morty, per se. Rather, he’d been assigned an entire fleet once he’d obtained the position as Captain of the Guard. At the Citadel of Ricks, it was his job to maintain order and carry out the Council’s directives, all with the use of Guard Mortys who accompanied him and his men on a daily basis. Even without the need for a Morty’s natural ability to camouflage genius waves within the Citadel, tradition dictated that Guard Ricks and Guard Mortys were paired up during reconnaissance and everyday rounds. While the Captain objected to the arrangement on a personal level, writing most Mortys off as hindrances rather than having anything to offer, he knew well enough that visiting Ricks and Mortys were put at ease just by seeing the familiar pattern. And while a Morty-less Rick could traverse public areas without drawing anyone’s attention, a Rick-less Morty was downright offensive to the eyes, like seeing someone without a face. In order to keep the public happy, Guard Mortys were obligated to escort their counterparts everywhere throughout the Citadel, with just one exception.

They couldn’t be anywhere near The One.

For reasons that no one had yet figured out, Mortys went haywire when around The One. They became distracted, uncommunicative, and insurgent. The Captain had studied the list of symptoms on the medical reports back when The One first came to the Citadel, and he’d been diligent to keep the Separation Rule intact during his tenure. There were a few slip-ups in the beginning, but after he’d had to put down some of his best Guard Mortys, he quickly learned to ensure that Guard Mortys and The One never shared the same space.

Unfortunately, there was still little anyone could do about the secondary effects that Ricks transmitted. Like the lingering scent of cigarette smoke or a carrier of a contagious disease, Mortys were still affected, albeit to a lesser degree, by a Rick who had been in close proximity to The One. Even the use of inhibitors that blocked a Rick’s reaction to him couldn’t stymie the effect on a Morty.

The Captain squared his shoulders, taking in a deep breath. He knew it’d been a risk when he’d almost made direct contact with The One back in the winner’s suite, nearly putting his lips on him—repulsive—but he’d only done it to rile up the X-Rick to the point that he’d attack. It had worked,
but now he would be left with the consequences.

“Sir!”

The Captain raised his eyes and caught sight of his Guard Morty unit positioned down the hall against one wall. Each Morty stood in the standard military stance, legs shoulder width apart and arms tucked behind him, eyes fixed front. One Guard Morty, sporting a few more stripes beneath his Citadel badge, stood at the front of the unit and bowed stiffly as the Captain approached.

“Sir, the unit is ready and awaiting your orders, sir.” The Guard Morty gave a smart salute. Even though he hadn’t been with the unit long, the Morty’s clipped tone didn’t hold a shred of the stutter it used to, and the Captain beamed internally to see how his hard work and discipline had paid off. The Morty of Dimension I-006 hadn’t been much to look at in the beginning, but the Captain had since honed him into one of the most capable Guard Mortys his unit had ever seen. I-006 had proven to be a natural soldier with the right encouragement, able to carry out his orders to a T and fulfill his duties thoroughly. It wasn’t long before the Captain had thought to appoint him to head of the Guard Mortys, and his instinct had been right.

“At ease, I-6.” The Captain waved a hand dismissively as he continued walking, signaling the Morty to escort him. The fleet of Guard Mortys and Guard Ricks followed after with their captive in tow. “Get your Mortys to their bunkers. They’ll be getting the rest of the night off—actually, make that tomorrow off too.”

“Sir?”

“We had some...heavy exposure during the operation.” He paused to let the implication sink in. “We’ll need them and their Ricks in quarantine until the effects have dissipated. You can expect some disruptions from your Mortys, but if any of them get out of hand, report it to me immediately. I’ll have it dealt with.”

“Yes, sir,” came the reply as I-6 walked quickly on his shorter legs to keep up. The Captain glanced down at his companion, taking in his impeccable posture and the strong line of his jaw. His eyes lingered on I-6’s neck peeking out from above the stiff collar, and for the briefest of moments he wondered what it would feel like to place his lips on that vulnerable skin.

“Permission to speak, sir.”

“Granted.”

“Are you all right, sir?”

The Captain nearly stumbled in his stride. “What?”

“Your uniform, sir. It’s—it’s got blood on it.”

Glancing down at his lapel, the Captain found the pin-size fleck of blood. He grunted, perturbed that the X-Rick had soiled his pristine uniform during his beating. “It’s nothing. The prisoner just gave us a little trouble, that’s all,” he said with a sniff.

“He’ll give you more trouble.”

The Captain bit out a laugh. “I’m sure. I can’t wait to get him to the Council and off my hands once and for all. Maybe they can set him straight before I have to.”

“He’ll give you all more trouble. For He is the Rick who shall herald the End.”
He screwed up his face. “Say again? I didn’t catch that, soldier.” When I-6 didn’t respond, he turned his head to the unit leader.

I-6 was staring straight ahead, his jaw slack and pupils wide. The light gleamed off his moist eyes, and his lips moved as he murmured to himself. If the Captain weren’t watching him so closely, he would’ve missed his next words completely. “Now that He is with The One.”

The Captain felt as if he’d been doused with cold water. His Mortys had strict orders never to speak The One’s name; I-6 knew better than this for it to be a slip of the tongue. He stopped abruptly in his tracks, and I-6 did the same a few steps ahead of him. Everything about the Guard Morty’s appearance made it seem like there was nothing amiss, but the far-off look in his eyes spoke volumes as to his compromised state.

“Say that again, I-6.”

There was a pause, then I-6 wrinkled his nose and looked directly at his superior. “Sir, I was just saying that my unit will be fine. You have no reason to worry about us.”

Like hell, I don’t.

“I-6, get your men to quarantine immediately. We won’t need you on escort to the Council Chamber, after all.”

“But, sir, a Morty without his Rick is—”

“I’m well aware of the Code. You’ll take the back routes to the guards wing. Stay out of sight, and remain in your quarters until you receive further orders. Is that understood?”

“But—”

“I said, is that understood, I-006?” It was the kind of voice the Captain reserved for only his lowest underlings, and he didn’t miss the fleeting look of betrayal that crossed I-6’s face.

Finally, I-6 nodded curtly, slipping back on the mask of stoicism. “Yes, sir. Right away, sir.” With that, I-6 turned to walk back to his unit. By now the Mortys had fanned out to stand alongside their respective Guard Ricks positioned around and behind the captive. He raised one fist in the air, and the Guard Mortys immediately drew back and to I-6’s side in neat rows. Once they were in order, I-6 led them away, and the Captain breathed a sigh of relief.

If there was one thing he could count on, it was a Morty’s loyalty.

The convoy resumed their trek until they reached the column of elevators that connected the Citadel’s lower levels to the main atrium and other floors. The Captain approached the one that would carry them directly to the Council Chamber and swiped his key card through the reader on the side of the doors. Once the digital numbers above the entrance counted down to -8, the doors parted with a quiet whir.

“In the name of all that is good and Morty, what is going on here?!” A shrill voice cut through the calm as a pair of spidery hands reached out between the elevator doors to grab the Captain by the collar. In the next second, the Captain found himself nose-to-nose with one very pissed off Eun-Rick.

“I just got back from the Council! Spill it, army-boy, where is he?! Where is that no-good Elite newb?” Mama Eun-Rick, as she was known, was adorned in gaudy jewelry, unlike the Spartanly dressed Eun-Ricks who flanked her on either side. Her large golden hoops swung wildly from her
ears and bracelets jangled on her bony wrists as she shook the Captain for emphasis. An overly pungent perfume assaulted his nose, and the Captain internally scowled at the sloppy application of makeup on the cross-dresser’s face. Eyeshadow bunched up in the creases of her wrinkled eyelids while mascara sat in clumps on her lashes. What she lacked in balls, which had long since been removed, she made up for generously in her brazen and saucy demeanor.

“Mama Eun-Rick, please,” the Captain managed, keeping his tone soothing and respectful, as one might use when speaking to a mental patient. He placed both hands on the Eun-Rick’s wrists to calm her as he cleared his throat. “We were just removing the offending Rick from the winner’s suite. Now, if you’ll kindly let us pass. We’re on our way to the Council to—”

“Good. They’ll know how to handle him, unlike some Ricks,” she interrupted, glaring at the Captain with blatant scorn. Much to the Captain’s chagrin, Mama Eun-Rick outranked him within the Citadel by leagues due to her position as The One’s personal caretaker, a fact that vexed the Captain to no end. Even before Mama Eun-Rick assumed her current position, her flamboyant style and love for theatrics sat at direct odds with the Captain’s penchant for order and discipline. As a result, every interaction between them was strained, to say the least.

“But let me see him first. I want to give him a good talking-to,” Mama Eun-Rick continued, already scanning the procession. When her eyes settled on Rick X-280, she stormed up to him and jabbed a finger in his face. “You! You’d better not have hurt my Honey-Oney, y-y-you—you animal!”

Rick X-280 crossed his eyes at the invading finger before sneering up at Mama Eun-Rick—those heels did add a good three inches. “Sorry, but I think you missed the draAUUGHg show.” The words came out muddled over his split lip, and he blew the burp into her face.

“Ooh, why you cheeky, little—” Mama Eun-Rick’s eyes narrowed as she glared contemptuously at the Rick. Sighing, the Captain crossed his arms and resigned himself to waiting it out. Once Mama Eun-Rick got worked up, there was little that could dissuade her from her tantrum.

She placed her hands on both hips and looked Rick over with a slow, accusative stare. Rick did the same, although the welt blinding his eye made him look far less intimidating. “I know you Elite like to have your little fun, but that Morty is my meal ticket, and I won’t stand to let you ruin him.” She shot her next question at the Captain. “So what did this one do? Try to cut off the kid’s willy again?”

“No, no. Nothing so...dramatic,” the Captain huffed, visibly straining to keep his patience intact. “It was simply a matter of his funds being out of order. We suspect he may be—”

He was cut short again by a flurry of Mama Eun-Rick’s hands. Bulky rings flashed like colorful beetles on the transvestite’s lanky fingers, and her acrylic nails were overgrown by at least a week. “Is that all?” She snorted. “Details. Just so long as my Honey-Oney is all right.” She snapped her fingers, calling the two accompanying Eun-Ricks to let the assembly of Guards and their captive through. “Carry on, then. Get this troublemaker out of my sight.”

The hackles on the Captain’s neck rose. He couldn’t stand it when Mama Eun-Rick acted like she ran the whole goddamn place. A glorified babysitter giving the Captain of the Guard orders? He couldn’t think of a worse joke.

“As you wish,” he replied, giving a slight bow to her before marching into the waiting elevator.

Bringing up the rear, one of the Medics who had attended to The One earlier paused to whisper quickly into Mama Eun-Rick’s ear. Her eyes widened as the Medic went on, and by the time he’d finished delivering his report, Mama Eun-Rick could only manage a shaky nod before waving him off.
Once the elevator doors had closed, she crossed one arm over her middle and tucked the opposite hand beneath her chin. Nibbling on her manicured thumb, she went over what the Medic had told her, a cloud of worry darkening her expression, before she realized what she was doing and quickly spat out the chemical taste of the acrylic.

“Come along, then, boys. We’ve got work to do,” she announced, turning smartly on her heels and sashaying towards the winner’s suite.

Mouse winced as the comb snagged on another knot.

“Tsk. What did I just say?”

“I’m sorry, M-Mama,” he stammered. “I—I’ll try not to move.”

“There’s a good boy,” his caretaker praised, but the words felt empty to Mouse’s ears as Mama Eun-Rick tugged harshly at another snarl with the next sweep of the comb. “After all the nasty excitement you’ve had today, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you’ve forgotten your manners. But this wouldn’t have to hurt so much if you’d just stop fidgeting.”

Mouse nodded obediently. Seated on the chaise’s velvet cushion, Mama Eun-Rick gradually worked the tangles out of his still damp locks. It had only been what seemed like a matter of minutes after Rick and the Guards left, that Mama and her two minions swept in to haul Mouse through the usual regimen of washing and primping that took place immediately before and after each session.

After being undressed, he’d been made to stand in the middle of the tub of lukewarm water. There, Mama Eun-Rick scrubbed him down until he was red and lathered his hair with sweet-smelling products. She then rinsed him off and rubbed essential oils of citrus and lavender along the insides of his wrists and behind his ears and knees before setting about to untangle and re-braid his unruly hair.

Meanwhile, the other two Eun-Ricks busied themselves with tidying the room and stripping the linens from the bed to change the silk sheets. They mopped up the blood on the floor with wet rags, completely unmoved by the gore. By the time they were finished, the room looked as if it’d never been touched—even the fruit Rick had taken from the bowl was replenished.

As Mama Eun-Rick prattled on, griping about Surgeon Rick’s insistent offers for reassignment surgery, Mouse let his mind wander. The way his courtier handled him was blunt and coarse, so unlike the gentleness of Rick’s touch, that Mouse marveled at how two sets of identical hands could be so vastly different. As he let himself be pulled about and dabbed at uncaringly by the trio of attendants, he found himself yearning for Rick’s company once more.

Their meeting had been unfairly cut short, but in the brief time that he’d shared with the mysterious winning Rick of X-280, Mouse had felt something other than fear and pain for the first time since—well, at least before he’d come here. Before the Last Night. Despite his initial reservations, this Rick was actually kind to him. He’d offered him fruit, which Mouse was normally forbidden from eating, and when Rick had reached out to touch him, it wasn’t to pull his hair or wrench his arm or slap him. His hands were tender when they’d held his, and his fingers—oh, his fingers had felt amazing on his head and back where they massaged him. And then—

Mouse’s toes curled at the thought of how Rick had touched him so intimately. He hadn’t known anything could feel so good, as if he were being taken apart, the reservoir of constant tension rushing out of him. If that’s what it means to “yank it,” he thought, feeling the ember of something warm his stomach, I want it again.
With a sharp *whap*, Mama Eun-Rick cuffed Mouse on the head with a heavy brush, snapping him out of his daydream. “What did I say about fidgeting?”

“S-sorry,” he murmured, rubbing at his head. His caretaker gave an irritated hum, and Mouse could practically feel her accusative look directed at his lap and the arousal hidden beneath his robe. He quickly crossed his legs in the hopes of quelling the source of her disapproval.

“Can’t be having any of that now,” she clucked, itching absently at her nose.

Mouse’s cheeks burned with shame. Ever since the start of his life at the Citadel, he’d been taught that his body was not his to own. It was merely a tool meant to serve his clients and should never be considered a source of pride or pleasure for himself. Anything having to do with the physical was left entirely to the Eun-Ricks and his clients. He ate only for sustenance, was dressed and gussied up as Mama Eun-Rick saw fit, and his personal cell housed only the barest necessities—nothing like the lavish winner’s suite which was just that, for the auction winners.

When in the company of the client-of-the-week, he was ordered to address him only as “master” and never speak unless spoken to. He was to do whatever was asked of him, and resistance was forbidden unless it was expressly requested by the winning Rick. Some Ricks preferred it when he tried to escape from them or verbally begged them to stop. Even then, however, it was only for show, just another way he used his body to satisfy a Rick’s desires. As his training had taught him, he could never actually state what he wanted.

But above all else, he was instructed time and time again never to touch himself. Mama Eun-Rick would tell him stories about the horrors that would befall him if he ever placed his hands on himself, saying how only naughty Mortys did something so dirty, and how those naughty Mortys were jettisoned out of the airlock as punishment. It was enough to keep him up at night. In the beginning, of course, he didn’t really understand what it meant; he was too young when they first brought him here to know what self-pleasure entailed. Now, however, after what Rick had done to him, he guessed that “yanking it” fell under that category.

And it had come with a price.

A wave of guilt washed over him as he thought back to the events of earlier that night. Maybe Mama Eun-Rick had been right all along. Maybe Mama Eun-Rick had been right all along. Even though there’d been no threat of an airlock after the pleasure he’d experienced at Rick’s hands, bad things had happened. Not to him, but to Rick. His stomach churned as he relived the memories of Rick’s beating. He’d been nothing but good to Mouse, and yet... Surely, that had been Mouse’s punishment for letting himself stray from his disciplining.

As much as he hated the constant pain—the torture, the neglect, the loneliness—at least he’d learned to deal with it in his own way. He could shut off his emotions, detach himself from the pain as best he could; otherwise, he’d have lost his mind a long time ago. Denying himself feelings had been his saving grace, but since his time with Rick, it was like a leak had opened in his carefully constructed dam. He felt things he’d never allowed himself to feel before, the pleasure just as intense as the accompanying heartache that made his chest squeeze.

Though he couldn’t quite explain it, something about Rick resonated with him on a level that hadn’t been accessed in years. Rick had been kind to him. He’d cared about him in a way that he hadn’t felt since before, back with his family on Earth. Although it scared him to feel so vulnerable, a new emotion glowed beneath the maelstrom, warm and thrilling. It was hope. Hope that things could be different, that he wasn’t trapped in an endless cycle of auctions and clients and hurt.

And something told him that Rick would be the one to take him away from all this.
“There. All finished,” Mama Eun-Rick announced, straightening the white ribbon at the bottom of his braid. With a groan, she stood and collected the hair care set to tuck it back into the bathroom’s many drawers. The two Eun-Ricks were waiting by the door, ready to escort her out.

Mouse hopped onto his feet to follow, but Mama Eun-Rick stopped him with a palm to his forehead. She laughed. “And just where do you think you’re going?”

“Um...m-my room?”

Mama Eun-Rick tutted. “Oh, no, Honey-Oney. Not tonight, you’re not.” She spun him around and corralled him towards the bed. Propping him up onto the mattress, she placed a hand on one jutting hip and waggled a finger at him. “Don’t think you’re turning in early just because of that troublesome X-Rick. You’ve still got a client to see.”

Mouse paled, and a cold sweat broke out all over him. “A...a client?” His voice cracked. “B-but, Mama Eun-Rick, I already—”

“Tut-tut-tut! No buts from you, young man,” Mama Eun-Rick chided, arranging the braid over his shoulder and tucking the edges of his robe beneath his thighs as though he were a doll on display. “Orders from the Council. We can’t have you wasting a perfectly good week after barely a half hour with that dud of a Rick. After all, the Council has its favorites to keep happy.” She smiled, applying gloss on his slack lips as though she were readying Mouse for a date rather than a night of unspeakable torture. The artificial strawberry scent stung his eyes.

Mouse clutched desperately at Mama Eun-Rick’s robes. “P-please! It’s—it’s already so late.” He scoured his mind for some excuse, anything to stave off the inevitable. “And I’m—I’m so tired!”

The cheerfulness disappeared from Mama Eun-Rick’s face. She gripped the edge of her robe and ripped it out of Mouse’s hands. With a vicious sneer, she leaned in and squeezed Mouse’s cheeks, her long nails biting little crescent moons into the soft flesh.

“If you didn’t have a client coming, I’d slap the sass right out of that pretty little face of yours.” She pushed Mouse’s face away as she spat venomously, “Really, what on earth has gotten into you?”

There was a knock at the door just then, and Mama Eun-Rick straightened, the smile once again smoothing her features. “Ah, that must be him now.” Mouse massaged the pinched skin of his cheek as he watched Mama Eun-Rick bustle to the door with a clamor of tapping heels and clinking jewelry.

Brushing aside her cohorts with an impatient flap of her wrist, she stole a breath before placing her hand on the door’s handle. Then she pulled the door wide open, bowing deeply and speaking in her most ingratiating voice, “Welcome, Master. We’re honored that you would grace us again with your presence.”

Mouse raised his eyes slowly to watch the client strut inside, pompous as a king returning to his castle. The Rick sniffed down at the triplet Eun-Ricks, granting them a cursory nod before settling his gaze on Mouse.

A lecherous grin spread over his lips and dimpled his cheeks.

“Should you need anything, Master, we are but a call aw—”

“Yes, yes. I’m aware. You may leave us,” ψ-531 snapped.

Without another word, the Eun-Ricks bowed in acquiescence before shuffling out of the room in the
traditional manner. Just before the door clicked shut behind them, Mama Eun-Rick shot one last glare at Mouse, her message clear: *Don’t screw this up.*

“All right, then,” ψ-531 sighed, taking his time to walk across the room and grinning at the way Mouse flinched at his every step. “I’ve had a very long night, so let’s get started.”

Towering over Mouse, ψ-531 slipped the diamond-studded belt free from his pants. Its faceted surface caught the light from the torture chamber’s overhead lamp and threw a galaxy of stars across Mouse’s trembling face. Folding the belt over once, he smacked it against the meaty flesh of his palm and licked his lips.

“No, strip.”

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 3 can be found here.]

The French translation of Chapter 3 by Mikuder can be found here.
Seated at the apex of the Rick hierarchy and with seemingly limitless power, Rick was expecting something more poised, more refined from the Council. Not...

“An’ e’ry ten seconds, it stab yo’ balls.”

All things considered, Rick’s plan was coming along better than he’d expected.

He’d made it to the Citadel after a nearly flawless bank heist, infiltrated the Elite’s circle of bidders with ease, and even won the after-hours Morty Auction on his first attempt. It was a good thing he’d decided to hack that second vault back on Va’ghnoot, after all. The extra stash of uzom had given him enough reserve to beat Mr. Double-Chin and still leave him sitting pretty for at least another auction. Maybe two, if he played his cards right.

Rick tugged at the heavy chain that linked his wrists to the floor.

Yup. Things were definitely looking up.

It’d been an hour since the Guards had left him bound and alone in the center of the Council Chamber, and the monotony was starting to grate on him. He glanced at his surroundings through his swollen eye, but he’d already taken in everything the space had to offer. The gleaming golden surfaces, vaulted windows which emitted a warm, nebulous light, and even the alien shrubbery were all designed to give visitors a sense of awe and grandeur.

Obviously, somebody was overcompensating, Rick thought.

He shifted, trying to get the blood flowing through his stiff legs, but immediately regretted it as his fractured rib made itself known with another burst of searing pain. Sucking in a breath, he carefully eased back to his original position to take the tension off his torso. This resulted in him standing slightly stooped, and he grimaced, knowing that it’d make him look even more pathetic from the Council’s view atop their elevated platform.

It was probably exactly what they had in mind. Rick was only too aware that being made to wait like
this was just another part of their mind games, an underhanded tactic to make their audience feel apprehensive and powerless in the minutes leading up to the Council’s grand entrance. While he’d never actually met the Council before, he’d seen their likenesses plastered all over billboards throughout the Citadel and on tacky paraphernalia at Salesman Rick’s chain store—mugs and T-shirts, even collectible playing cards. Here they were treated like A-list celebrities, but to Rick, they were little more than crooks.

For all that he was eager to meet his judge and jury and get his bullshit arrest dealt with, at least the quiet left him with plenty of time to think. Ignoring the aches and pains that riddled his beaten body, Rick turned his focus instead on the litany of complex developments that had been nagging for his attention over the past couple of hours. And what a couple of hours it’d been.

It hadn’t even been a full day since he’d stepped foot in the Citadel, and yet his whole world had been turned upside down after the Morty Auction. After meeting Mouse. Worry knotted his stomach as his mind flew to Mouse, wondering what had happened to the kid after Rick had been dragged from the room by the Captain and his cronies. Mouse had been distraught, frantic even, when the Guards beat Rick mercilessly, and Rick’s heart clenched, remembering the look of pure distress on the boy’s face. However, in the last moments they’d shared, the unassuming Morty took on a fierceness that impressed him. Risking his own well-being to shield Rick and then standing up to the Captain like that...

Rick grinned to himself. It’s like they say. Big things come in small packages.

But it wasn’t just Mouse’s unexpected defiance that surprised him. Rick now knew that The One had a power even greater than the sought-after Epiphanies that Elite Ricks bid for so extravagantly. While an Epiphany kicked a Rick’s genius into sixth gear, bridging the gaps in logic and accelerating the thinking process, this other ability—clairvoyance? Telepathy? It still sounded crazy to Rick to use words that he’d once scoffed at, himself. But whatever it was, it’d allowed him to trespass into that most secretive terrain known to man: the mind.

The experience had left him shaken and more than a little confused when he tried to reconcile why he’d acted the way he did toward Mouse. With Mouse’s thoughts permeating his mind the way wet ink bleeds through paper, it was hard to distinguish where his own desires ended and Mouse’s began. Had he really been so aroused by the pounding of the boy’s heart against his chest that it drove him to make his advances, or had he merely been carried away by Mouse’s reveries projected onto him? That was the tricky thing about having another’s thoughts resonate inside your head: Nothing was clear-cut. How do you discern something as intangible and fluid as thought?

He slid his eyes shut, tuning out the garish surroundings, as he tried to recall how the Resonance had felt with Mouse.

At first, he’d only been able to pick up on Mouse’s emotions—random inclinations that at the time he’d incorrectly interpreted as homegrown—before eventually “hearing” complete words which were clearly disparate from his own. Hell, considering how long it took him to realize what was even happening, Rick couldn’t be sure when the Resonances had first started. What exactly had triggered them?

He flipped through the events of earlier that evening, going over each word, each touch—

A sudden vibration rumbled to life under Rick’s feet, and he jerked his head up, his train of thought abruptly thrown off-track. From the stately belvedere situated in front of him, six golden thrones rose slowly into view, a Rick seated rigidly in each.

At last, the Council of Ricks had decided to grace him with its presence. Dressed in full regalia of
identical white surcoats and angular gold-plated collars, the Council’s visage was both regal and pious, clearly intended to invoke reverence in their constituents.

Just as the seats clicked into place, a Rick with full beard and mustache stood solemnly and jabbed a finger at him.

“Yo! Show some ‘pect, foo! Don’ make me come down dere an’ set you straight, boy!”

Rick stumbled back a few feet, physically repelled by the verbal assault, before catching at the end of the chain and falling clumsily on his bottom.

“Das more like it!” The council member crossed his arms, his fingers splayed in hokey gang signs. “You’s here fo’ committin’ some serious crimes, brotha. An’ das jus’ whack! So da Council is gonna put you in dis sick-ass Machinizzle of Unspeakable Doomizzle. Like, fer realz. It gonna swap yo’ conscious mind wicho’ unconscious mind.” The Rick was pacing back and forth as if he were onstage at a concert while he raved. “An’ all dem fantasiez you’s got? Nah, broh, dey gone. Everytin’ you tink you’s know, it gone too.”

Even as Rick struggled to make sense of what the council member was saying, his mind reeled at the bizarre first impression. The wildly gesticulating Rick on the platform hardly fit the image he had of the Council. Seated at the apex of the Rick hierarchy and with seemingly limitless power, he was expecting something more poised, more refined. Not...

“An’ e’ry ten seconds, it stab yo’ balls.”

Rick blinked.

“Hold your hoAAURGHrses, Brother Ricktiminus,” the Rick to his right piped up, flipping through a packet of papers in his hands. A mop of swirled hair sat precariously high on his head, and it shifted ever so slightly as he moved. “This might be a bitter pill to swallow, but you’re actually barking up the wrong tree.”

“Zeta Alpha’s right. I’ll explain, if I might.” A third member at the far left end of the platform with a drooping pompadour pointed at something on the top-most sheet of his packet as he Seuss’ed, “According to the itinerary, only tomorrow is that necessary. It appears that you’ve confused the two, as you are apt to do.”

“Aaaw, shee-it,” Ricktiminus pouted, slouching low in his seat. “Dang, Prime, ah can’t be keepin’ track o’ all deez here crackas, yo!”

"Now that's just the pot calling the kettle black," Zeta Alpha teased with a wiggle of his brow.

Ricktiminus just sulked in response and blushed a deep red beneath his pallid cheeks.

“In any case, maybe if you stopped to look before you leaped. That’s always been your Achilles’ heel.”

“Aaaurch-braacgh-urrp.”

Rick wrinkled his nose at the afro’ed council member who merely delivered a string of wet belches. Oddly enough, the other Ricks took it in stride, some even nodding in agreement.

“T ook the words right out of my mouth, Quantum.”

The banter carried on for another minute, each council member talking or burping loudly with little
regard for his neighbor. They reminded Rick more of a crowd of obnoxious schoolkids than the single most powerful body of Ricks in the multiverse. Were these hacks really the same ones who had served him up to the GF on a silver platter all those years back? Rick glanced furtively around him, half-expecting to find someone catching the joke on candid camera.

When the Captain of the Guard had first shoved the arrest warrant in his face, spouting on about “faulty funds,” Rick had been certain it was just a half-assed ploy by the Council to drag him out here and finish what they’d started ten years ago. Surely, they’d figured out who he was. His dimensional label had to have caught their attention. He was Rick of X-280, the guiltless victim of some political conspiracy arranged by the Council that had kept him imprisoned for the better part of a decade. After he’d scraped his way here at the risk of everything, he was going to get even with the Council who had screwed him over. Blood was going to be spilled, accusations were going to fly, and hell was going to be paid.

Yet this wasn’t quite the confrontation he’d imagined.

“Uh, hey? Hellowoo?” Rick called from the floor. His initial eagerness to finally face the Council had adrenaline fraying the ends of his nerves, and now he was just itching to get the ordeal over with. “I’m still here, y’know. We gonna—we gonna move this thing along or what?” But the Council was too caught up in their clamor to pay Rick any mind. Finally, the middle council member with shoulder-length hair stood and held his arms out to his peers to quiet them.

“Comrades, compatriots, please. Let us refrain from squandering any more invaluable time, but, rather, beseech our venerated leader Riq IV to instigate this tribunal.” He swept his hand out, palm up, to the Rick at the far right end of the platform who had remained silent over the course of the rowdy discourse. The council leader sported a goatee and wore his hair in a trio of sharp tufts on his head; his expression, impossible to read as he fixed Rick with a penetrating stare.

Riq leaned back, crossing his ankle over one knee while he delicately propped his chin on two fingers. “Thank you, Maximums Rickimus, for that eloquent introduction. It was...overly verbose, as usual,” he said, not bothering to turn and address his council-mate directly. He huffed a sigh through his nose and tapped one long finger against his cheek as though weighing his words before speaking. “Rick of X-280, I hear that you—” He paused, furrowing his brow. “Oh, get uAUGHp already. You look ridiculous.”

With his wrists still cuffed together, it took Rick a considerable amount of effort to wrangle himself to his knees and finally onto his feet. His sore muscles weren’t making it any easier either. Yet despite the complaints of his injuries, he stood as straight as he could manage, the barest tremor at the corner of his mouth betraying just how much pain he was in. He was more than willing to bear it, though, if it meant facing his captors like a man—unlike last time, when the Council had neglected to even show up for their own brother’s sentencing.

“That’s better,” Riq continued. “As I was saying, you certainly caused quite the commotion at tonight’s Morty Auction. Why, Auctioneer Rick could barely get out just how much your winning bid was worth. How much was it again, Zeta Alpha?”

“Let’s just say it cost him an arm and a leg,” Zeta Alpha answered with a shit-eating grin, looking over Rick’s bruised body with wicked delight. Rick scowled, the double meaning not lost on him. The tiresome turns of phrase were starting to irk him.

“Still, imagine our surprise when we found out one of your kind was the winner of the auction. Your little stunt was hard to ignore, especially considering it’s not every day we see a—the Citadel gets a visit from an X-Rick.” Riq’s lip curled scornfully over the word.
Rick couldn’t miss the sneers that echoed across the other council members’ faces at the mention of the dimensional slur, and he was painfully reminded that no matter where he went, his dimension’s reputation preceded him amongst Ricks. It branded him an outcast, dooming him to be ostracized and loathed by his brethren for the rest of his days.

Of all the dimensions that had been meticulously labeled and cataloged by the Council of Ricks, Dimension X sat low on the hierarchical list, its titular designation a blatant jab at all Ricks who fell along that one particular timeline. While most Ricks on the central finite curve conceived a Beth who got knocked up by a Jerry and then birthed a Summer and eventually a Morty, a cruel twist of fate had set Dimension X’s timeline along a divergent path. Beth still got knocked up by a Jerry and then birthed a Summer, but in every iteration of Dimension X, her Morty was always stillborn.

“To come here takes much bravery, what with a reputation so unsavory.” Rick Prime was practically bouncing in his seat, obviously pleased with his little rhyme. The reference dug into Rick like a barb. Although the infant Morty’s death was through no fault of the Rick, the notion was still so repulsive to Ricks across the multiverse, that those of Dimension X were stigmatized. Freaks, they were called. Losers. Fuck-ups. Failures. Morty murderers. Many Ricks even went so far as to regard them as black cats—symbols of bad luck and something to avoid out of fear that somehow their own Mortys would also meet an early end. Rick could recall countless times that a Rick had glared in his direction and shielded his Morty from him when he passed by.

The superstition was so prevalent that many Dimension X Ricks opted not to associate with other Ricks, preferring to sequester themselves to their own kind and even condemn the Council of Ricks as a whole. Doing so, of course, meant forgoing the security and replacement Mortys that the Council could provide, but it was still considered a better alternative than having to endure the never-ending ridicule.

“So tell us. How did an X-Rick come into such a large—so vast a fortune?”

Rather than answering Riq immediately, Rick turned to spit, the blood-tinged saliva staining the pristine floor. “My dear Aunt Bertha left it to me.” His tone dripped with barefaced sarcasm. If they were going to play him, then he could play them right back.

Riq’s eyebrow twitched, his expression hollow.

“I’m moiling to recall that particular familial matron,” Maximums Rickimus mused aloud, rubbing at his chin. “Notwithstanding, I may merely not be as well-versed in the plethora of potential genealogical relationships across the breadth of Ricks.” He paused to take a breath. “Given the intrinsically capricious nature of dimensional planes, it is not outside the realm of possibility that such a benefactor could, in fact, exist.”

As the self-appointed intellectual of the assembly, Maximums seemed to hold some sway over his peers. They nodded enthusiastically and gave trite sounds of understanding, when it was obvious that the statement had flown right over their heads. The two to Maximums’ right even mirrored his gesture, rubbing at their own chins, as though mimicry alone could convince everyone of their intelligence. Apparently, no one else on the Council shared Riq’s misgivings.

But rather than delighting in how easily the Council had swallowed his hackneyed explanation, Rick was only left with a sense of unease. How could this possibly be the same Council who had masterminded his imprisonment the last time? He had a pretty solid grasp on the art of suspense, but this was getting ridiculous. At first, he thought they were just taking their time, enjoying a few laughs at his expense before stripping away the veneer and getting down to business. With every passing minute, however, he was beginning to suspect that perhaps they didn’t actually know who he was.
From what he’d been able to piece together about the circumstances of his prior arrest, the Galactic Federation had been given his coordinates by the Council. During his booking and sentencing, the Federation had acted for all the world like they’d orchestrated the raid on their own, but Rick had never believed that. He’d been too cunning, too smart, always one step ahead of them for too long. It didn’t make sense that his flawless track record would go up in smoke so suddenly. He’d racked his brain while pacing his cell, trying to pinpoint the moment he’d slipped up, when he’d let his guard down, but he couldn’t find any plausible explanation for it. The Federation’s raid had been airtight, all of Rick’s backup plans foiled before he even had the chance to execute them.

It wasn’t until a few years into his sentence that the warden of his cell block eventually gave voice to Rick’s suspicions:

They sold you out.

Those had been his exact words. But as for why the Council had sold him out, that information was never forthcoming. Now, as he stood in the Council Chamber before this panel of buffoons, Rick realized with a sickening sense of déjà vu that this was the second time he found himself at the mercy of the Council with no clear understanding as to why. Rick hated being left in the dark, and the growing feeling of dread in his stomach was beginning to make his palms sweat.

“W-wait a second. Do you guys—” Rick started, stopping only to wet his lips which had suddenly gone dry. He eyed the Council warily as he stammered, “D-do you guys even...”

He was met with a row of blank faces. Even Riq seemed just mildly annoyed by his pitiful stuttering. Before he could get the rest of his question out, however, Quantum Rick broke in with a raucous monologue of burps.


“Please, have some compassion. The poor thing looks ashen,” Rick Prime said, wiping away a stray fleck of Quantum’s spittle that had landed on his cheek. He turned a haughty eye to Rick. “We’ve never dealt with an X-Rick before, and as you can imagine, the subject’s quite sore. But now that you’re here, please do bend our ear. Go ahead. You are given the floor.”

“Never...dealt with?” Rick echoed part of the stanza. He looked from council member to council member, but they were just staring back at him expectantly as if the matter of Aunt Bertha had laid any concerns to rest, and now they were merely waiting to move onto the next, presumably more interesting, topic.

Rick felt as though his stomach had fallen out of him and onto the floor.

All of his hypotheses, which had built up his arrest as the key to some grand scheme, came tumbling down at that moment like a flimsy house of cards. Instead of feeling outrage—no, that would come later, when reality really sank in—it was humiliation that made his joints feel loose and his shoulders sag. He’d come in prepared for a life-changing moment of revelation. Now, he just felt like the butt of some very bad joke.

A tiny part of him had always feared that this was a possibility, much as he’d tried to deny it. Those dark, little whispers used to plague him in his cell every night, jeering at him that the truth was so much simpler than he’d wanted it to be: His imprisonment meant jack shit. It was clear that the Council not only had no recollection of ever having had him arrested, but they didn’t even remember him. For all Rick knew, ten years of his life had likely been scratched out with the arbitrary stroke of a pen.
Right on the heels of his remorse, however, it dawned on Rick that perhaps being forgotten by the Council would work in his favor. If they found out that he was a GF convict now, then in all likelihood, they’d toss him right back from where he came. And it was too soon for Rick to lose his hard-earned freedom. He hadn’t plotted his revenge for this long just to throw it all away over a tantrum.

Stealing the Council’s precious pet out from under them had been his original plan all along, but now that things had grown a bit more complicated with The One, Rick realized that his plan was in need of more time. If one thing was true about Rick, it was that he was no stranger to backpedaling his way out of a sticky situation.

“I-I meant, I was gonna ask—w-what the hell kind of a tribunal is this? I thought you brought me here because there was a problem with my money.” He puffed out his chest, hiding the fact that his reality was currently lying in pieces around him. “So? What about it?”

“Oh, that.” Riq picked a piece of lint off his sleeve. “Just a little issue we had with the exchange rate. Uzom are a bitch to convert into credits, as you can imagine, their being so rare and all. But your money is perfectly fine.”

“Then what the hell am I under arrest for? What the hell was this for?” He tucked one shoulder up to his injured eye, unable to lift his bound hands. “Your fucking Guards beat me like I was number one on the terror-Rick list!”

“Check yo’self, foo! Da Cap’n says you wuz makin’ mad static up in da hood. An’ dat brotha don’ bojangle fo’ nothin’. Hiz crew be tellin’ it like it is. Ya talk shit, ya get hit, aight?”

Rick just stared, utterly lost, before turning to one of the other council members for some help.

“As Ricktiminus was so colorfully putting it,” Riq explained, “the Captain filed a report saying that you exhibited some aggressive behavior during your arrest, which he simply met with equal force.” Riq ran his eyes up and down Rick’s form, and Rick found himself unable to suppress a chill at the unsettling intensity of that look. It felt as though he were being stripped bare where he stood. “I just wonder what he did to make you raise a fist against the Captain of the Guard.” The scoff went unsaid, but Rick heard it all the same.

“He was—” Rick quickly bit down on his tongue. He could still see the Captain yanking Mouse off the floor by his hair, remembered the glint of light off his teeth poised just over Mouse’s bare skin. A lightning flash of fury crackled through Rick, but he forced it down before it could reach his face. Of course the Council wouldn’t understand if he’d said it was because of how the Captain had been torturing Mouse. After all, that was exactly what a Rick was supposed to do with The One.

He’d read the cheesy pamphlet that the Elite received as part of their formal invitation into the ranks. After the flowery introduction, it listed tried and true methods of torture that were “guaranteed to produce results,” even going so far as to point out key parts of Morty anatomy that would elicit the most pain with the least amount of effort. He was surprised they didn’t just call it Morty Torture 101. Then again, the Council’s position mandated that they maintain their public image of classiness.

But Rick of X-280 couldn’t even fathom willingly harming Mouse like that—or any Morty, for that matter. Since his dimension’s Morty had been taken from him prematurely, he’d been denied the unique bond that Ricks and Mortys shared. While most Ricks openly abused their Mortys at the slightest affront, Rick regarded all Mortys with a certain amount of curiosity and even compassion.

“He was—” Rick repeated, looking to the side as he shrugged. “He just rubbed me the wrong way.”
Quantum Rick snorted and gave a mighty burp.

“He does have that effect on folks,” Prime agreed. “But as they say, different strokes.” Another wave of murmuring agreement rumbled across the panel of council members.

“Anyway.” Rick was eager to move the topic off of what had transpired in the winner’s suite. “So now that I’m here, what’s the point of all this? A fucking meet-and-greet?”

Zeta Alpha punched a fist into his hand. “Hit the nail right on the head.”

“Yes, something like that,” Riq answered coolly. “We wanted to personally welcome our newest member of the Elite, especially one as talented as you.”

*If by talented, you mean rolling in dough, you greedy motherfuckers.*

Riq continued, unaware of Rick’s musings. “Your performance at the Morty Auction showed us that you have just the kind of potential we like to see among the Elite. It’s our belief that we could have a very lucrative future together.”

“Oh, that sounds sorta like bullshit, y’know. I mean, coming from the guys who have me chained up like a goddamn convict.” Rick rattled the bonds around his wrists to illustrate his point, giving an annoyed *ahem.*

“Pardon the faux pas. Force of habit,” Maximums Rickimus offered simply, for once not exhausting his impressive vocabulary. With a firm double-clap of his hands, a Guard appeared at Rick’s side to remove his bindings. As Rick rubbed at where the heavy locks had bitten into his skin, he toyed with the idea of swiping the Guard’s piece strapped to his thigh, but another wave of pain quickly convinced him to forgo it. For now.

Steepling his fingers together, Riq dipped his chin as he looked down at Rick. “Better? Now, to make amends, we’d first like to extend our sincerest apologies.” Some of his council-mates fidgeted uncomfortably at the word, and Ricktiminus gave an audible groan. “Sincerest apologies,” Riq enunciated again, giving the others a dirty look before he went on. “To make up for any inconvenience we’ve caused you, we’ve arranged special accommodations for you within the Citadel, where you are invited to stay for the next—” He cocked his head. “How long did you say you would be staying with us?”

“I didn’t,” Rick shot back. He paused to think it over, crunching the numbers quickly in his head. “I figure a few weeks, if I feel like it.”

“A few weeks too soon, I imagine.” Riq grinned, but it reminded Rick more of an animal baring its teeth. “All of your needs will be met—clothing, food, entertainment. Please consider yourself our special guest during your stay. We look forward to hearing about your upcoming bids. I’m sure you won’t disappoint us.” Riq then raised his hand and gave a little wave.

Adjusting his collar with an impertinent tug, Rick turned and began to walk, or rather, limp across the chamber floor, the Guard at his side. He’d made it halfway to the exit before Rick Prime, who had been reading through the case summary, suddenly exclaimed behind him.

“2,500,001? That’s the highest bid ever, second to none!” He smacked the paper with the back of his hand. “While The One’s ability is truly paramount, I’m still astounded by this amount.”

“You’s seriously droppin’ fat Benjamins on dat kid? Is you madness?” Ricktiminus joined in. “Foo, I don’ care how hella fly yo’ Epiphany is, das jus’ cray-cray, sho’ nuff!”
“I am obligated to concur with my brethren on this matter. To allocate such a substantial portion of monetary currency when one is relatively unaccustomed to the auction would naturally be regarded as a misappropriation of one’s capital—”

“All right, Maximums. We get the picture. This isn’t the goddamn SATs.” Riq sighed wearily. “Just one moment, Rick of X-280, if you’ll please.” His voice reverberated off the high walls as he called across the chamber to Rick.

The Guard smoothly lowered his gun across Rick’s path, stopping him without having to say a word. Huffing, Rick turned stiffly to face the Council.

“What the Council is trying to ask is why a new Elite—” Riq peered closely at the report in his hands. “—who has never even previously entered the Citadel, would pay such a high bid on his very first night at the auctions.”

“Uh, same reason as every other Elite? Duh. An Epiphany.” Rick shrugged. “What do you think I —”

“And just what is it you’re working towards that you’d need an Epiphany?”

Rick had come prepared for this one. “The cure for male pattern baldness,” he lied without skipping a beat.

The council members murmured in appreciation of his answer, no doubt running mental calculations of just how much a discovery like that would bring in, not to mention what it would do for their own receding hairlines. Rick noticed Zeta Alpha creep a finger beneath his oversized wig to scratch at an itch.

However, Riq remained unimpressed. “That’s odd,” he went on, his tone dripping with feigned surprise. “You see, according to the Medics’ examination following your arrest, it appears that there was no sign of injury on The One. Not a scratch, bump, or bruise. How did you expect to get an Epiphany if you didn’t inflict pain on The One?” He placed the report on his lap and folded his hands neatly together in front of him as he pierced Rick with his gaze. “Tell us, Rick of X-280. What exactly were you doing in there for those 38 and a half minutes?”

Rick froze, his heart suddenly hammering in his chest.

A second of oppressive silence passed, then another. It was hard to come up with a worthwhile explanation when his mind was already replaying images from his time with Mouse. He could practically hear Mouse’s needy moans in his ears, feel the wetness of his arousal on his fingers.

“I...”

Some of the council members were fidgeting uncomfortably in their seats, obviously disconcerted by Rick’s silence. While their eyes were beginning to narrow with suspicion, Riq looked almost amused, like a predator patiently waiting for his prey to tire before sinking his fangs in. A sinister grin tugged at his lips, and there was a madness behind those eyes that struck Rick cold.

The mental game of cat-and-mouse was wearing Rick down and...suddenly he had his answer.

“Well, Rick of X-280? We’re waiting.”

“A-all right, already! I heard you the fourth time,” Rick snapped. “I was just taking a psychological torture route. Y’know, tear him apart from the inside. All—all that good stuff.” His eyes darted from Rick to Rick, anxiously gauging their response.
The assembly noticeably relaxed, their brows unfurrowing. Maximums and Quantum exchanged an approving nod while Zeta Alpha spoke aloud. “For a moment there, X-Rick, I thought you were just pulling our leg. But I guess there’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

“Psychological means? Perhaps it’s more effective than it seems. While not the most popular method to employ, whatever it is that you enjoy,” Rick Prime singsonged.

Without another word, Riq motioned for Rick to take his leave, that all-knowing smile still plastered on his face. It gave Rick the chills, and he was more than happy to finally be out of the Council Chamber, away from Riq and his cuckoo band of council-mates.

~~*~~

A cracked moan fell from Mouse’s lips, his throat too hoarse from screaming hours earlier to get out anything remotely human. His mouth had long since gone dry, and he panted weakly, unable to get much more than a sip of air with each inhale.

The slight shift made the rope that held him rotate, and he found himself spinning slowly from right to left as his legs dangled uselessly beneath him. Mouse was suspended three feet off the tile floor, naked and bruised. A thick coil of rope bound his arms tightly behind his back and up, forcing his head down as all his weight hung precariously from his delicate shoulders.

Strappado, $\psi$-531 had called it.

He moaned again as his shoulders settled another fraction of an inch, the strain in his muscles and tendons growing even more unbearable. This time, his laments did not go unheard, and $\psi$-531 shifted in the bed where he was currently sleeping.

After flogging Mouse ruthlessly upon his arrival and then hanging him in the torture device, $\psi$-531 had left him there, begging and crying for mercy, while he’d rolled into bed for a little power nap. That was nearly two hours ago, and now $\psi$-531 yawned widely, finally stirring from his slumber. He reached down to slip a hand beneath his robe and scratch absently at his crotch before cracking an eye open and smiling at Mouse as though greeting a lover.

Propping his chin on one hand, $\psi$-531 blinked lazily at Mouse as he admired his handiwork. His beady eyes, rich with appreciation, darted over Mouse’s naked form. “You look lovely in strappado, you know that?” he drawled, rolling the “r” with no small amount of flair. “I think I should leave you like this more often.” He took a moment to stretch leisurely. “Mmmm. It’s like I always say: Nothing beats a dream Epiphany. There’s something so much more intuitive about them. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Mouse could only stare down at the floor, too exhausted and afraid to raise his head. At this unnatural angle, the movement could easily dislocate both arms. Not bothered by the lack of response to his rhetorical question, $\psi$-531 hoisted himself from the bed, stepped into a pair of plush slippers, and plodded his way over to Mouse. The chunky gold chains that hung around $\psi$-531’s neck clinked lightly with his every step.

“Thank you so much for giving me the blueprints to nano-armor, by the way. So nice to finally have that figured out.” He pinched Mouse’s cheek. “Such a smart, smart cookie you are.”

For all the bravado that $\psi$-531 put on in public, he was unexpectedly affectionate and doting on Mouse during his private sessions. At least, as doting as a sadist could be. Of all of Mouse’s visitors, $\psi$-531 enjoyed adding a certain stroke of creativity to his choice of torture, which varied from moment to moment. He took full advantage of the stock of equipment available to him, almost using
the torture as a creative outlet, a way to further express his particular brand of brutality which Mouse was forced to endure.

Leaning back, $\psi$-531 noted the sickly pale blue that was creeping down Mouse’s arms and pouted. “I’m afraid it’s about time we took you down from there, little one. I can’t have the Council on my back about needing to get your arms amputated,” he said with a chuckle. “But first...”

He placed one finger on the center of Mouse’s back between his shoulder blades and pressed down. Mouse howled anew, his throat forcing out the last scraps of voice he had left. He was sure his shoulders were finally going to be pulled from their sockets as the pressure grew, but at the last moment, $\psi$-531 eased up with a contented sigh. He sounded like a man just finished with a satisfying meal. By then, Mouse was wheezing out thin reeds of air, hot tears running down his cheeks and onto the floor.

“Ah, of course. The Gromflomite’s defense administration! That would be the best place to apply my new invention.” $\psi$-531 patted him on the head before reaching to undo the restraints. Mouse only whimpered, knowing that his release from the contraption wouldn’t be the end of his torment.

With a few practiced moves, $\psi$-531 gradually undid the rope until Mouse fell loose-limbed into his embrace. The sudden loss of pressure on his ravaged shoulders sent an excruciating jolt of pain crackling down Mouse’s arms, and the flood of adrenaline left him twitching and spasming uncontrollably against $\psi$-531’s chest.

“P-p-please, Master. No m-more. Please...” Unable even to lift his head, Mouse murmured desperately into the collar of the silk bathrobe.

“Shh, shh. There we go. You’re all right,” $\psi$-531 cooed, smoothing a hand down Mouse’s hair and ignoring his soft pleas. He carried the boy’s slight form easily to the bathroom to stand in front of the Jacuzzi. The tub had already been filled, the jets churning the steaming hot water into frothy eddies as it hummed rhythmically. Translucent vapors whisked off the surface in a snake charmer’s dance.

“Come now. Stand up.” He swung Mouse down onto his feet, giving him just enough support for Mouse to find his bearings. Some feeling had already returned to his legs, but he still leaned heavily against the side of the tub to remain upright.

Mouse watched with unfocused eyes as $\psi$-531 loosened the sash around his waist and let the silken robe fall in a heap at his feet. His wrinkled erection stood stiffly out from his groin, the folds of belly fat hiding its base so that only the tip was visible. Stepping gingerly into the tub, $\psi$-531 slowly lowered himself into the frothy water with an appreciative sigh, the girth of his belly and fleshy pecs bobbing in the water like an archipelago of islands.

“Just splendid,” he breathed, sliding his eyes shut. He leaned his head back against the Jacuzzi’s edge, arms splayed out to either side. The water jets pummeled pleasantly at his back, adding a minute vibrato to his voice. "All those Epiphanies can be exhausting, really. Be a dear, little one, and scrub me down, would you?”

A shiver ran across Mouse’s skin despite the warm and humid air wafting from the running Jacuzzi. While $\psi$-531 rarely repeated the same method of torture, his post-session baths were a fixture in his routine. Mouse knew precisely what to expect, and with a heavy heart, he climbed gracelessly into the tub to join his master. He winced as the water stung the welts that checkered his skin where $\psi$-531’s belt had bitten into him.

With his arms still entirely numb, Mouse fumbled to grasp the folded hand towel that lay at one corner of the tub. Wetting it and then lathering it with the bodywash was even more of a struggle,
made possible only by wedging the cloth between his wrists. After much labor, he finally managed to press it flimsily against ψ-531’s neck and chest. His efforts were met with an approving hum by his master.

An unpleasant itching and popping had begun to radiate from Mouse’s fingertips, the feeling returning to his limbs in a way that made each movement another form of torture in itself. Mouse bit the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out as he worked, shakily dragging the wet cloth across ψ-531’s skin. He kept his focus on the task, careful to keep up a steady pace. ψ-531 in a good mood didn’t necessarily mean Mouse would be spared from any further torture, but when in a bad mood, the man could be downright demonic.

The winning Rick sighed sensually while Mouse worked, giving little points of instruction on where Mouse should rub harder or when to re-dampen the cloth. The work was slow going, and Mouse’s shoulders and neck still ached tremendously from the strappado. He wanted nothing more than to fall over and sleep right there, but instead he was forced to pamper his torturer, who’d already enjoyed a luxurious rest and was now basking in a jet pool with Mouse attending to him like a personal servant.

At any other time, Mouse wouldn’t have thought twice about it. He’d long since resigned himself to his fate as a tool for winning Ricks to use at their whim. It was a forlorn and troubling reality, but one that he accepted, nevertheless, as readily as he breathed air. Now, however, a tiny seed of resentment took root in Mouse’s heart.

*I hate this. I hate this. I hate all of this.*

His core quivered beneath the weight of his own scandalous thoughts. These were thoughts that could get him punished harshly by Mama Eun-Rick or, worse yet, by the Council itself if he ever gave them voice.

*I hate Rick ψ-531.*

Suddenly, the target of Mouse’s hatred grabbed his wrist with one hand and yanked him close until Mouse was only inches from ψ-531’s face. His heart pounded as ψ-531 peered into his eyes as though he were somehow able to read the very thoughts Mouse was desperately trying to squash.

“Your hands are shaking, little one. Anxious to get started, are we?” He purred with a lascivious grin. But, no, ψ-531 had only misconstrued Mouse’s barely concealed rage for impatience, and before Mouse could answer, he had pulled his hand beneath the churning water to hold it against his throbbing erection.

Mouse winced, realizing what ψ-531 was ordering him to do. It was a relatively new addition to ψ-531’s routine, and Mouse had largely hoped he would be spared it tonight. The memories of his time with Rick were still too fresh, too pure to soil them with such a vile association.

“Go on now. You know what to do,” ψ-531 nearly panted, wetting his lips with an eager lick of his tongue as he watched Mouse intensely. “Do it like—like Daddy showed you.”

“Y-yes, Master,” Mouse answered, devoid of any emotion. To detach himself mentally and emotionally from the situation was his only option, and with the ease that comes with practice, he systematically shut off every feeling, one after another. Disgust, humiliation, bitterness, fear, even that peculiar shade of envy he felt whenever he watched Ricks revel in their carnal pleasure—he cut them out of his heart as one snips loose threads from cloth.

Mouse put his half-numb hands around ψ-531’s cock, the fingers of his right hand curling over his left to tighten the grip. ψ-531’s mouth fell open in an indulgent “o,” and he leaned his head back,
arching slightly to pump up into Mouse’s hands. “Good. Good boy. Just like that.”

This wasn’t the first time Mouse had touched a Rick like this. Many of his visitors requested it, and more, during their sessions. It was a means to a Rick’s sexual gratification, Mouse knew, but that was all. Like rubbing ψ-531’s back, it was simply a chore to be carried out. Whereas before, Mouse was quite ignorant about what the act really consisted of, it took on a whole new meaning this time. Thanks to Rick, he now had a greater familiarity with what “yanking it”—if that was how all Ricks referred to it—felt like. He’d been aware that touching a Rick this way was pleasurable, but it was always only a distant notion to him, like he’d been watching something through a frosted pane of glass.

Now he saw with the utmost clarity.

Beneath the soapy water, Mouse could make out his hands disappearing beneath the great expanse of ψ-531’s stomach. But if he closed his eyes, he could almost—almost imagine it to be someone else that he was pleasing. Maybe even his Rick.

It was funny to think of the previous winning Rick as “his,” but he couldn't see it any other way. Of all the Ricks that came to Mouse, he was the only one Mouse actually did not detest. In fact, he’d thought of his Rick with an intense yearning in the hours since their parting. His Rick meant security and a raw desire, the likes of which Mouse had never felt before.

Mouse closed his eyes, blocking out the nauseating image of ψ-531 with his lustful moans of praise, and replaced him instead with his Rick. He could now see the lean face, grizzled but with a bewitching smile. While his Rick was physically identical to countless others, he had an unmistakable aura about him that made him stand apart like a piece of polished onyx among hunks of coal. Rick had held a kind of hopeless curiosity when he looked at Mouse, regarding him so keenly that it made his heart flutter at the thought of it.

In the safety of his mind, Mouse thought about Rick’s eyes—those brilliant, probing eyes. They looked at Mouse like he had more than just Epiphanies to offer, like they wanted to see inside him. As Mouse ran his fingers up and down ψ-531’s cock, he thought of how he’d seen himself reflected in those eyes when Rick had knelt in front of him. He’d seen it again while he was straddled over Rick’s hips, gripped thoroughly by heady sensations as Rick pleasured him.

The sense of touch had nearly completely returned to Mouse’s tingling hands, and he squeezed firmly, focused more intently now on the shape and feel of the cock than he’d ever been before. Usually, Mouse was disinterested in the thing, registering that aspect of Rick anatomy only insofar as to ensure he gave the proper pleasure that the winning Rick wanted. It was a duty he was obligated to perform, but now he was seeing it for what it could be—a gift.

He imagined the cock in his hand as belonging to his Rick—hard as steel, the foreskin wrapped tightly about its substantial girth. Even in the steaming water, ψ-531’s cock burned hot in his hands, beating like a drum that echoed Mouse’s steadily climbing heart rate. He stroked and tugged ψ-531 with vigor, imagining the man’s salacious utterances and grunts as his Rick’s.

The water splashed against their naked bodies as Mouse worked him sumptuously. He tried to bring to memory what Rick had done to him, and he mirrored as best he could the techniques that had undone him so completely. He ran his thumb over the slit at the head in quick circles, twisted his wrist as he brought his hand up the thick length. ψ-531 responded zealously beneath Mouse’s attentions. Moans dribbled freely from his lips, and he was spreading his legs wider, arching up into Mouse’s hands for more.

“O-oh! Oh, yes! Yes, my little one. God, you’ll be the death of me!”
Mouse clenched his eyes shut. His master’s voice cut through his fantasy, threatening to break his stride. But soon ψ-531 was only panting heavily again, and in that moment he could have sounded like any other Rick, really.

To think that Mouse could bring his Rick so much pleasure with so simple a gesture, the concept was intoxicating. It was the closest Mouse had ever felt to control, unwaveringly powerful and yet benevolent at the same time. He would give this gift to his Rick someday. Yes, he would give him just what he had given Mouse.

Lost in his reverie, Mouse took one hand off ψ-531’s cock to slip it back and beneath his testicles. He barely noticed the man’s thighs stiffen as he ran his fingertips over the skin there, just as his Rick had done to him. It was surprisingly soft and a bit hairy, and there was—

Suddenly, ψ-531’s hand was around Mouse’s throat and he was underwater. The shock of the assault stunned him for a moment, and the sudsy water managed to seep into his eyes before he could close them. His hands automatically flew up to grasp at the thick fingers holding tight to his throat, but then his lessons in the tone of Mama Eun-Rick’s voice screamed in his head—He is your master, and you are to do whatever he says! Against the instincts that howled at him, Mouse batted down the urge to claw and scratch at his captor, and he went still.

Just as his lungs began to burn with the need for air, ψ-531 yanked him back up harshly. Mouse sputtered as the water dripped down his face. Through one squinted eye, he could see ψ-531 in all his fury. His cheeks were burning red, his eyes blazing. He was breathing heavily through his nose as he trembled slightly with rage.

“You filthy little whore! Where in the hell did you learn that?!” ψ-531 shouted in Mouse’s face, his fingers clamping down on his throat by degrees. He shook Mouse roughly as he snarled.

Mouse was too faint from the lack of oxygen to conjure up a suitable response. He could only open and close his mouth like a landed fish. Even the effort to keep his eyes open was too much.

“I asked you a question, you stupid thing!”

“Master... P-please, I can’t...” The words were whisper-thin and cracked as Mouse struggled to get them out. He looped his hands around ψ-531’s wrists and tried to pry them off, but they wouldn’t budge. The blood was beginning to pound in his ears as the pressure built.

“It was a Rick, wasn’t it?” ψ-531 spat, answering his own question when the Epiphany propelled his reasoning forward. “After all, the Eun-Ricks have no business telling you how to pleasure a real Rick, those dick-less hens.” He eased his grip off of Mouse’s throat by a millimeter, just enough to let in life-giving air to Mouse’s aching lungs. “Tell me. Who taught you such a perverse little trick?”

“He... He just showed me. He showed me...h-how it c-could feel...good,” Mouse croaked, his years of conditioning compelling him to confess no matter how strongly a voice inside him told him not to give away his Rick. “For...me.”

ψ-531’s eyes widened and his face contorted as though Mouse were a dog that had suddenly started speaking. Then the squall of emotions dripped away until ψ-531 was looking at him deadpan, his eyes narrowing to slits.

“Did you enjoy your time with this Rick?”

His answer was barely a whisper. “Y-yes...”

“So. My little one has a crush on a Rick.”
In the next instant, Mouse was back underwater, this time ψ-531’s grip in his hair, holding him fast. Mouse put his hands out for leverage, feeling the hairy thighs on either side of him. Through the curtain of bubbles, he could make out ψ-531’s cock in front of his face. It was still stiff and a muddy purple with the need for release. ψ-531’s other hand slipped around his own stout shaft and began to pump.

Mouse jerked back. The roar of the jets was louder than ever, pervasive and all-consuming around him. They beat rhythmically in Mouse’s ears, smothering his senses until he was numb and disoriented. Or was it the hammering of his own floundering heart in his head? Mouse couldn’t tell anymore. He coughed out the last shallow reserve of air he had left in his lungs and began to thrash, rocking the water about in waves that beat against the sides of the tub. He kicked futilely at the floor, the walls. ψ-531’s grip on him, however, was unrelenting, suffocating him as he pleasured himself with languid strokes. He was holding him close enough that Mouse’s cheek was pressed to his cock, until his lips were crushed up against it even as he tried to wrench his head away.

His lungs screamed for air. They felt as though they were being torn inside out. His throat constricted involuntarily, clamoring for Mouse to open his mouth and take in something, anything, even if only water. He’s really going to drown me! Mouse panicked. Flashes of red and white burst before his eyes as they flew open against his will. His chest burned. His diaphragm spasmed. His limbs flailed in uncoordinated jerks. And the roaring kept getting louder and louder.

Then ψ-531 was cumming, thick streams of ejaculate unspooling from the tip in front of Mouse’s face, before being whisked away by the eddying water.

Mouse barely registered that he’d even resurfaced until his lungs kicked in, and he was gulping in great mouthfuls of air so fast it made him reel. He just lay collapsed on the soft surface beneath his cheek, chest heaving, and the deafening roar still clogging his ears. With time, it faded, and eventually he could hear ψ-531 speaking just above him.

“Yes. Send one in.” There was the click of a receiver.

A hand was stroking down his hair and back, and slowly Mouse realized that he was wedged between ψ-531’s fleshy arm and bosom. The “pillow” under him was ψ-531’s hairy chest, rising and falling with each breath. The pool’s jets must have been turned off some time ago, because the warm water now lapped gently at Mouse, lulling him into a dreamlike haze.

Within a minute, there was the distant sound of the door opening and the slapping of bare feet across the floor. Mouse tried willing his eyes to open, but the message got lost along the way. And, besides, he was too exhausted to really care who the visitor was. A Eun-Rick, most likely. No one else was allowed in besides the winning Rick and Mama’s team of Eun-Ricks.

“Yes, Master Rick. How may we b-be of service?”

“Get me through to the Council.”

“R-right away, Master.” There was a short shuffling of cloth, then Mouse felt ψ-531 lean forward to take something from the Eun-Rick. Mouse couldn’t stop the small groan that escaped him when the man settled back into place. The meaty fingers on his shoulder squeezed ever so slightly in response.

“Well? What are you waiting for, Eun-Rick? I didn’t ask for an audience.”

“Y-yes, Master. Of course, Master. A thousand pardons,” the voice trembled. Then the Eun-Rick was gone, and ψ-531 slipped back on his illusory guise as the gentle ruler again.
“Yes. Riq will be very interested to hear about this.” ψ-531’s tone was soft as he continued to himself, his hand never once stopping its rhythmic stroking down Mouse’s back. In his other hand, the trill of a call going through sang in the air. “After all, you’re our sweet, little boy, and we have a duty to keep you safe. Safe from him.”

Sleep was pulling Mouse down, the dark webbing of fatigue knitting over his mind and obscuring his ability to piece together what his master was saying. If he could rest, then he’d be able to understand. If he could just rest, he thought weakly.

“By the time Riq’s finished with him, you’ll never see that fiendish X-Rick again.”

From behind the curtain of sleep settling over Mouse, a small voice rallied out in protest from within: No! His eyelids trembled with the force of that denial, but still they wouldn’t open, and then consciousness was slipping away and away like the tears that trickled down his face.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, we soooo appreciate everyone's wonderful comments about the story. It fills us with so much joy to see them. Thank you.
[All fanart for Chapter 4 can be found here.]
The Harem

Chapter Summary

The entire space smelled of incense and heat and sex, and the blend hit the Council like an aphrodisiatic cloud as they entered, the stresses of the day melting away with each inhale.

“Home, sweet home.”

Chapter Notes

First published 7/10/16
To make up for the delay in getting this chapter out, we reached our highest word count yet. Thank you for your patience, and enjoy. m(__)m

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“While the Council of Ricks promised liberty, they themselves were the servants of corruption.”
- Morteronomy 3:13

The warm spray of water beat down on Rick’s head, soaking his hair until it hung in heavy clumps over the crests of his cheeks. He leaned forward to let the water cascade down his neck and back, grateful for the respite a shower granted after what had to be the longest day of his life. Weariness and shot nerves sloughed off him like a chameleon’s second skin to swirl down the drain along with the crimson-tinted soap suds and grime.

His skin itched where the last of his injuries were nearly finished healing, and he ran his hand idly over the semi-transparent strips that dotted his body. They released artificial biopolymers to bond with his own cells, and overnight had managed to fill out torn muscle and flesh and knit together fractured bone.

Satisfied that his ribs were finally mended, he gingerly picked at the strip on his side until it peeled away. He swatted his hand when the strip clung stubbornly to his fingers, ultimately smearing it hastily against the red marble wall of the shower stall. He took a moment to examine his side. Only a faint cloudburst of yellow bruising remained, and the slight variation in the skin’s surface made it known that the rib hadn’t set quite right.

There’s another one for the books, Rick thought wryly.

The imperfection blended seamlessly with the palimpsest of other scars and puckered flesh that riddled his rail-thin frame, each one serving as a memento of one skirmish or another from his disreputable past. Booze and his big mouth had been the artists behind many of the wounds, but it was the last ten years in prison that had filled out the majority of the canvas. Rusty shanks had left a sloppy trail of kisses down his right thigh and arm, and the gnarled spiderweb from a disgruntled warden’s taser still etched itself into one shoulder blade.
Rick’s life story written in bullet holes and phaser burns.

Appreciating the slick of the water, warm and wet on his sensitive skin, he glided a hand across the taut plane of his torso. Gooseflesh prickled over his chest, and one nipple pebbled beneath his thumb when he grazed it. The effects of the healing strips left his body thrumming with a fresh vigor, sharp and impatient.

Adrenaline buzzed at the periphery of his nerves, leftover from his rattling encounter with the Council. But there was also an implacable desire coiled in his core, taking the form of long brown hair, parted lips, and luminous eyes.

A ripple of arousal sped down the center of Rick's stomach to his groin, finding its home at the base of his cock.

He gave an involuntary groan.

Bracing one forearm against the wall beneath the showerhead, he trailed his other hand down to curl around his erection. The stiff rod of flesh pulsed to the beat of his unfurling arousal, and as he stroked it in a tight fist, his world fell away until there was nothing but what his body had reflexively been seeking out.

Mouse.

He imagined the kid just as he’d been on the bed in the winner’s suite—all desperate need and too-eager touches. Mouse had been a tightly wound spring in Rick’s hands, and a satisfied grin touched his lips as he thought of how he’d begun to unravel Mouse with just the slightest caresses along his thighs. If it weren’t for the untimely interruption by the Captain of the Guard, Rick would’ve enjoyed undoing him, layer by tantalizing layer.

When they’d first been left alone in the room, Rick and Mouse had circled each other like caged tigers, skittish and wary, neither willing to make the first move until he knew it was safe to proceed.

So much fucking time wasted, Rick cursed.

Mouse’s reasons were obvious enough. To him, Rick must’ve appeared no different than the rest of the auction winners—just another Elite Rick driven by money and glory, come to reap the rewards of his loyalty to the Council. Of course, at Mouse’s expense.

Rick, for his part, however, had been just as afraid. He’d come to the Citadel with little more than a hastily improvised plan, one that hinged on rumors and blind luck. If the Council managed to do one thing right, it was keeping a tight lid on The One. This meant that only far-fetched stories made their way around the general populace, and even those were often slurred by alcohol.

Most rumors even failed to mention that The One was, in fact, a Morty. Up until he’d laid eyes on Mouse, Rick was half-convinced that The One was actually the name of some hot, new drug. The way the Elite talked about it—the incomparable high, the rush of an Epiphany, the addiction—it made perfect sense.

Now that he’d experienced it himself, Rick realized that maybe the term “drug” fit, after all.

The intoxicating effect Mouse had on him was potent and thorough, going beyond just a physical high. While his heart raced and his breath came quickly, Rick had also felt a fundamental shift in his feelings for the mysterious boy. Rick had come to the auction with one goal in mind, but the moment he and Mouse first met, his vendetta had been quickly supplanted by a different, nobler desire.
Initially, his advances had been motivated purely by a need to get an in with the kid: Figure him out, see what he could do, and use him to put a chink in the Council’s armor. But in the end, he wound up with far more than he’d bargained for, and it was now painfully obvious that he couldn’t simply leave Mouse to suffer in the Citadel.

He no longer wanted to use Mouse. He wanted to save him.

The intensity of his own feelings for Mouse was startling. For his entire life, the scope of his concern for others was only relative to their utility to him. But with Mouse, Rick felt as though he were on the other side of the equation. Like coming across an unfinished story, he wanted to read through to Mouse’s ending, and he was more concerned with how he could take Mouse there, rather than take him for his own selfish agenda.

Rick had seen some of the most amazing phenomena the cosmos had to offer, and yet what he saw in Mouse stirred sensations in Rick that were exhilarating and stimulating.

And incredibly arousing.

“Fffuck...” Rick hissed, squeezing along his aching shaft. Images of Mouse flooded his mind, his basest fantasies taking shape: Mouse on his knees like a worshipper at his temple; Mouse’s small hands braced against Rick’s stomach as he rode him; Mouse, collapsed and sweaty on the sheets, his bedroom eyes eclipsed with unwavering adoration.

That was exactly how he wanted Mouse—open and vulnerable to him. Baring everything, hiding nothing. Not even his thoughts.

Keep going.

Mouse’s simple request, brought to clarity through the Resonance, had tipped the scales and spurred Rick into action. The Resonance was more than just the sound of a voice in his head. When it’d flitted through his mind, it had brushed against him with a silky touch, leaving his senses tingling with Mouse’s essence. He’d been given a glimpse into Mouse’s purest thoughts and emotions. Unfiltered, unguarded, unfettered.

There was no reservation in Mouse’s desires, no second guesses or ambiguity.

Rick’s heart stumbled under the weight of knowing with such absoluteness how Mouse felt toward him. To know—not guess at or hope for as he always did after another unsatisfying fuck—but to know that someone wanted him so completely. It was nothing short of incredible, and he wanted more of it.

He rested his head against his arm as he pumped his shaft in a stranglehold, wishing his fist were instead Mouse’s hot, wet hole. Practically growling, he smothered a string of curses along with Mouse’s name against the back of his wrist.

“God, Mouse, what I—what I wouldn’t do to youuu.” The promise came out between gritted teeth into a scar on his knuckle.

The water pummeling his nape and back felt like small fingers scrambling desperately at him, wanting to pull him closer. The wet pressure on his cock sent bursts of pleasure rushing across his abdomen. He bucked his hips into his fist, feeling the first telling spark in the pit of his stomach. Rick’s breath came out in short puffs, muffled against his fist, relishing the familiar tightening of his balls, the spasming of muscles, his thighs and abs clenching almost painfully.

He imagined fucking up into Mouse with the same unrelenting pace at which he stroked himself. He
wanted Mouse’s legs around him, wanted to hear the boy’s warbled moans loose themselves from a mouth slack open with pleasure. He wanted to hear Mouse beg for him, pine for him, both inside and out. He wanted to open Mouse up and lick his brain.

Suddenly, Rick’s body went taut, his hips straining forward.

Air caught in his throat as the first wave of orgasm hit, enveloping him from head to toe. Like a riptide, it tore through him, long and deep and unyielding, dragging out a guttural moan from Rick that sounded more animal than human. Hot ropes of cum pulsed from his dick in time with his pounding heart, ticking off the spikes of pleasure that ebbed and swelled inside him. His hand stuttered in its track down his shaft, the nerves along his limbs short-circuiting from the overload of sensation.

By the time the orgasm released its hold on him, cum coated his hand and oozed down the once clean marble wall in thick globs.

Rick was left breathless and near-dizzy from the mix of pleasure and heat. He felt high and loose in the best way. His throaty huffs echoed in the spacious shower stall, but he felt no compulsion to stifle them.

*Let them hear,* he thought, weakly curling the fingers of his free hand to flip the bird at the Citadel cameras, wherever they were hidden. *Fucking perverts.*

After another post-shower wash, he quickly dried off before throwing the towel over one shoulder. Carding a hand through his damp hair, he stepped out of the shower and into the bedroom. He’d slept like the dead the moment he arrived in his new personal suite—complements of the Council—and the first thing he’d done upon waking was stumble half-conscious into the bathroom to wash away the fatigue from the prior day.

Now that he was fully awake and had just enjoyed his best wank in months, he could properly appreciate his accommodations.

While the rest of the Citadel was cast in hypermodern planes, the private room had an unexpected flare of rococo to it. Gold-leafed flora curled at the edges of the furniture like burnt paper, and intricate paisley patterned the walls.

True to their word, the Council had prepared his suite with everything a high roller could need. Fine linens covered the stately bed, and even with Rick’s height, he found that the mattress and comforter came up to his hip. One entire wall was filled with a massive library of vinyl records, the sleek turntable nestled snuggly on one shelf, while a well-stocked bar hugged the other side of the room. The rows of neat glasses winked seductively at him.

Rick’s toes sank into the plush carpeting as he made his way to the sprawling desk against the suite’s far wall, and he ran two fingers across its red, wooden surface. The desk had been thoughtfully outfitted with a modest tool set and a collection of circuitry components—perfect for any Rick’s tinkering project.

*Check, check, check.* Rick ticked off the parts he’d need with a cursory glance before resting his eyes on the black card that lay alone on the desk. It encompassed all of Rick’s worldly possessions, the rest having been confiscated by the Guards in the name of security or, in the case of his coveralls, carted off to laundry in the name of hygiene.

The innocuous little card had been the keystone to his plan. Without it, he wouldn’t have been able to conceal his prison record with the Galactic Federation or gain access into the Elite’s special
auction, and for that, he owed an old friend a lot. He tapped a finger on the card’s reflective surface and thought how he would check in with his insider for an update. It’d be good to see a familiar face at the Citadel—and by that, he didn’t mean every other look-alike Rick.

But that would have to wait until later.

Rick glided over to the bar. The air brushed against his bare skin, drawing the hairs on his nape to attention as he mixed himself a Vesper. The way he leaned against the bar, naked and with a drink in one hand, he looked for all the world like the epitome of relaxed indifference, if not for the imperceptible line of sweat at his brow.

He lifted the glass to his mouth, took a small sip, lowered it, looked nonchalantly around the room, then repeated the motion, slow and deliberate.

*Ready, Ricky-boy? ‘Cuz this is gonna hurt like hell. Just mind the toddy.*

Tipping the drink to his lips one more time, he lifted his index finger from the glass and tapped it against his right temple in a code.

He’d reward himself with a proper drink after this was over.

No sooner had a high-pitched whirring started up beneath his finger than a shot of pain lanced through the muscles around his right eye. It felt like the electromagnetic pulse had stabbed him right through the sphenoid bone and pierced his brain.

Rick gritted his teeth, swallowing back the most vicious curses he knew, but holy *fuck* did he hate having to do that. Once the mind-numbing ache had subsided and his vision returned, he pushed off from the bar and stumbled back to the desk, drink sloshing from his glass and staining the 10,000€ carpet under his feet.

The micro-EMP had earned him fifteen uninterrupted minutes, and he was going to make every minute count. Assuming that whoever manned the surveillance system was as obtuse as his employers, he wouldn’t notice the video feed from Rick’s suite had been locked into a loop; for all intents and purposes, it’d look like Rick was just enjoying a long, leisurely drink at the bar.

Right now, he needed to survey the damage to his synthoptic and fix the damn thing, and he really didn’t need the Council or anyone else spying in on him while he worked.

Rick slammed the glass down on the desk, sparing a moment to center himself as he glared into the now nonfunctioning mirror mounted on the wall behind it. If there was one thing that irked him about the room, it was that there were too many goddamn mirrors. It was almost disappointing how predictable the Council could be. *Really? Installing cameras behind the mirrors? Could they get any more cliché?*

Taking a deep breath, he wedged his fingers around his right eye and pulled the orb from its socket.

A thin string of ocular lubricant dripped down his fingers as he disconnected the optic nerve cable before placing the prosthetic on the desk with a small clack. Rick suppressed a shiver as the familiar cool worked its way into his now barren right cavity. He pressed the palm of his hand to it as he looked down at the device.

Behind the artificial front of white sclera and painted blue iris, the synthoptic was composed of tightly packed hardware and circuitry in phosphor bronze. Tiny gears rotated like the inner workings of a fine watch, and a ring of lights blinked lazily in green and red, denoting which functions of the synthoptic were in what working order.
The LED light for video was blinking an angry red, and Rick cursed aloud this time as he saw the sizable dent in the side of the orb. The gears around the misshapen surface stuttered and clicked against one another in discord. Sitting down with a weary sigh, Rick grabbed a micro-precision screwdriver from the set and began the delicate process of taking apart the synthoptic to reach the data chip stored inside.

Finally setting the tiny chip onto the center of the workspace, he sat back and delivered the first command in a flat voice.

“Run external HUD.”

A spray of red lights fanned out from the chip, projecting a boot-up screen onto the mirror’s surface in front of him. Lines of code quickly raced down the display, flooding it red, before stopping at a pair of flashing chevron and a short message at the bottom:

>> HELLO RICK

“GooAUGHd to see you, ORA.”

If the operating system was up and running, then he wasn’t completely up shit creek. Not yet, at least. He took a breath, knowing that his relief might be short-lived.

“Run diagnostics.”

More lines of code appeared alongside a progress bar.

>> PRODUCT: OPTIC RECORDING APPARATUS
TESTING: OS 99% PASSED
TESTING: INTRANET 98% PASSED
TESTING: UMBILICUS 92% PASSED
TESTING: A/V CHANNEL I 13% FAIL
TESTING: A/V CHANNEL II 5% FAIL
TESTING: A/V CHANNEL III 51% CRITICAL

>> RUN REPAIR?

“Don’t worry, babe. I’m on it.” Rick had already loosened three of the tiny screws that held the synthoptic’s chassis in place. He hadn’t had to repair ORA since that prison riot back in ‘Z33, but luckily he found his memory hadn’t completely deserted him.

“All righty, then. Display video files, time codes 1007_1800 through...” Rick harrumphed and checked the clock on the wall behind him through the mirror’s reflection, his fingers tapping out the minutes and hours. How many could he get through in less than fifteen minutes? “Uh, let’s say 1008_0195.”

Four rows of miniature video thumbnails spanned the mirror, a tiny circled X in each panel’s grayed out center.

“Like finding a needle in a goddamn haystack,” Rick muttered under his breath. He worked delicately at the hardware, trying to smooth out the dented surface before giving the command. “Play
The red line of text scrolled out:

>> ERROR

"Play 1007_2032."

>> ERROR

"Shit." He scrubbed a hand over his chin. "Play 1007_2056."

One of the icons blew up to fill the screen. It showed the serene darkness of space through a dirty windshield before sputtering to a halt.

"Play 1007_2109."

Rick of C-165 was peering into the camera, that shit-eating grin still plastered to his face as he opened his mouth to say something. Then the video shattered into pixels and crashed. The next string of videos fared only slightly better until he’d reached the end of the first row.

"Play 1007_2120."

Rick watched as a sea of Ricks filled the display, the camera jostling each time they reached forward to smack Rick on the back. Their mouths were flapping, forming words, but the video ran mute. Audio’s shot. The image would intermittently blink black and then take focus again. The camera swiveled to show the interior of Façade with the Morty Auction stage in its center. Auctioneer Rick was staring dumbly at his gavel while Mouse stood quietly at his side.

"Pause playback!" Rick cried, leaning forward eagerly.

The video jerked to a stop, the wild cheering from the crowd frozen in place. A stray arm stuck out from the pack of Ricks, just barely obscuring his view of the stage. At this distance, Mouse’s features were hazy at best, but Rick still took a moment to soak in the sight.

It was hard to imagine that Mouse had ever been anything less than what he was now to Rick: fascination, intrigue, and an unequivocal attraction. Hardly a minute went by that he didn’t think about Mouse, and at the deepest levels of his consciousness, he recognized that he bore an insistent desire to be with Mouse again. It sat with a dull ache just south of his heart.

Even though the Resonance had allowed him to feel closer to the boy than he had ever felt to anyone, he still had more questions than answers about Mouse.

"Apply thermal filter."

A rainbow of color laid itself over the image, transforming the figures into muddled splotches of blues, yellows, and reds. As expected, the Ricks burned the brightest in orange and red, while Mouse glowed a cooler purple. A pretty effect, but it revealed nothing of interest.

While he continued to mend the damage to his synthoptic, Rick ran through the rest of the available filters on the A Range. It consisted of the usual variety on the light spectrum—ultraviolet, gamma, infrared.

Next came the B Range. Its filters were only known by a handful of the top quantum physic-Ricks in the multiverse. Each showed fascinating, albeit inconclusive, results, with the one constant being that
Mouse’s form always appeared in stark contrast to the Ricks’. Where the Ricks burned bright on an Illumris filter, Mouse faded like a dying candle; if the Ricks glowed a muted tone through the SDSS filter, Mouse would light up the room.

There were too many variables to account for the difference, though. Kinetic levels, brainwaves, age. He shook his head at the thought. And, as always, dimensional origin likely played a contributing factor.

By the time he reached the C Range, time was ticking away too fast for comfort, and Rick still had a few more components to replace before the synthoptic was up and running again. He almost considered passing over the two remaining filters entirely.

They were something that Rick had fashioned for his synthoptic purely at the urging of one of his more radical colleagues, rather than out of genuine interest. He’d be hard-pressed to admit they had any real scientific bearing, but, all the same, he was keen to get his hands on whatever data about Mouse that he could.

“What Kirlian filter.”

Now the auction scene was painted a deep cobalt blue. A fringe of electric white outlined the Ricks in the foreground, glowing stronger where any two Ricks made contact to form a brilliant starburst of light. Nothing surprising there. The energy output reflected that of a typical crowd of rowdy Ricks. Beyond them, however, the stage was awash in light. Rick could hardly make out Auctioneer Rick’s flimsy outline next to the voluminous mass of white where Mouse had stood.

“Well, look at you, you little firecracker.” Rick couldn’t keep the grin out of his voice as he leaned back to admire the glowing star that had once been Mouse. Mouse’s energy swallowed up half the room much in the same way that Mouse himself had swallowed up Rick so completely. It was stunning.

Now there was one final filter to try.

“What...entropic filter.”

The dazzling starscape was promptly replaced by a monochromatic image. At first glance, the scene was almost unrecognizable. Against a barren backdrop, the figures from the auction were now merely suggestions of their former selves, clusters of dark spots that formed a vague topographical map of entropy.

The concept of measuring entropy levels was tenuous at best, and it had taken Rick months of trial and error to get the synthoptic to even recognize the mathematical formulas that comprised its base. Getting the filter to display in a way that made sense to the viewer had been harder still, but if what he saw on the mirror now was any indication, then his hard work may have paid off, after all.

Ricks were creatures of chaos by nature, so it was no surprise that the entire bottom half of the image was a curtain of varying gray. The more concentrated masses of dots indicated the presence of a particularly disruptive Rick—likely one with a penchant for criminal activity or dastardly inventions. But, again, it was Mouse’s image that made Rick’s breath catch in his throat and the tools falter in his hands.

A solid black oval hovered in Mouse’s place, the dots so tightly packed together that they created a razor-sharp outline that cut against the stark white background. Rick found himself gazing deeper and deeper into that black hole, as though he could somehow find Mouse hidden inside it. The hairs on his arms and neck stood on end as an inexorable sense of dread crept down his spine.
What he was looking at couldn’t be explained. A being couldn’t be composed of such a high degree of entropy. If the filter was right, then Mouse was a walking neutrino bomb, capable of vaporizing all consciousness if detonated.

For the first time, Rick thought of Mouse with something that bordered on fear.  

*Tick, tock, Ricky-boy. Tick, tock.*

With a start, he pulled himself away from the mirror’s surface, finding that he was breathing hard. As he sat there, catching his breath, he noticed with grim irony that his own reflection appeared within the dark pit of entropy.

“Close video. L-l-let’s see what else we got.” He scrolled down to the bottom of the list as he fit another gear back into place. Given the sparse selection of files to choose from, it was evident the recording function had been knocked out completely following his run-in with the short-tempered Guard. Not looking forward to reliving anything from that episode, Rick hopped back a few files and prayed this one would work.

“Play, uuuh, 1008_0133.”

This time, the video showed he was inside the winner’s suite, and Mouse was seated right in his lap.

Rick could make out every individual eyelash that fluttered against Mouse’s cheeks as he panted, his small shoulders rising and falling. He was pink-cheeked and quaking, his hair hanging free of its braid, his delicate forehead creased in concentration. The look Mouse gave the camera as he mouthed Rick’s name was—

A shot of arousal zipped down to Rick’s cock, and he thanked god that at least the audio wasn’t working. If he had to listen to Mouse say his name like that again, he didn’t know if he’d be able to control himself. He looked away quickly. The sudden shift from fear to acute lust was making him dizzy.

Before he could give the command to pause, he glanced back to find that the video had hit a snag and was now skipping, replaying the same second of recording. At that exact moment, Mouse had been poised at the very edge of orgasm, and he was now stuck in an endless loop of bucking and heaving that made him appear as if he were riding Rick, up and down, up and down.

“E-exit HUD! Exit! Shut down! EnouURGHgh!”

The video disappeared back into its thumbnail, followed quickly by the HUD flickering off, and Rick was soon left staring at his own fiercely blushing cheeks and panting mouth in the mirror.

*What the hell? One second, I’m scared shitless. The next, I’m ready to blow a load.*

He looked down at the synthoptic, now whole once more, and shakily inserted the chip back into place. Another quick glance at the clock told him he had just under a minute before the surveillance system would be back online, so he clumsily snapped the synthoptic into his socket and teetered back to the bar with his glass.

As he settled back into his position against the counter, he ground his palm against the base of his cock, willing his erection to wane.

30 seconds.

“C’mon, Mouse, cut me a break here,” he mumbled. Apparently, a Rick’s genius wasn’t the only
thing Mouse could kick into sixth gear.

Under any other circumstances, Rick wouldn’t mind pumping the keg again, but he had a rendezvous with his insider, who didn’t like to be kept waiting.

Besides, he didn’t feel like giving the cameras another show. He wasn't feeling *that* generous.

~~*~~

“If I gotta listen to another dumbass Rick pissing contest, slap mah fro, I’m gonna bust a cap up in some sorry motha fucka!”

The doors burst open beneath Ricktiminus’s hot-tempered kick, slamming against the walls with a loud crash that made the crystal chandeliers above sway. Several of the Guards posted along the corridor immediately straightened now that they were in the presence of the Citadel’s leaders, repositioning their rifles where they’d slipped from their shoulders.

Ricktiminus stormed down the hall that connected the Council Chamber to their private quarters, with the rest of the Council following close behind. Every Rick was in just as much of a foul mood after a long day in the Council Chamber, but fatigue dampened their irritability to a steady simmer. Rick Prime rolled his head from side to side as he stretched out the kinks in his neck, while Zeta Alpha massaged a knot in one shoulder.

“Dawg, ah’m straight sick o’ dealin’ wif deez winos all day, you fill me? Dweebs can’ handle deyz colt 45 and git all fucked up til dey stuck like chuck. Peep this shit, we’s needs some prohibition shit up in here. Shee-it dayum.”

Zeta Alpha blanched at the thought. “Ban alcohol? In the Citadel? Have you lost your marbles? It’ll be a cold day in Hell when we open that can of worms. Like we don’t already have our hands full keeping the Guards on the bandwagon.” He turned to give an apologetic smile to a Guard he passed before rolling his eyes. “How’d that slogan go again, Prime? *Abstinence Prevents Accidents*?”

“The original motto had a bit more bravado. *Abstinence Prevents Accidents and in Some Instances Quells Flatulence,*” Rick Prime offered cheerfully then pouted. “Sad to say, the editor threw it away.”

Quantum Rick berated Ricktiminus sharply in his cryptic, burping way, swatting him upside the head. While Ricktiminus rubbed at the sore spot, Maximums Rickimus sniffed impertinently.

“If I may so humbly interject, the day’s agenda proffered even greater arduous undertakings than plebeian scuffles between inebriates. Nothing could be more pedestrian than reassigning dispossessed Mortys to previously unattended Ricks.” He pulled a handkerchief from his wrist and dabbed fastidiously at his brow.

“Bleargh-aarhk-raagh?”

“Oh, don’t even remiURGHnd me.”

“That X-Rick was a breath of fresh air by comparison. What a world of difference.” Zeta Alpha looked over his shoulder to the leader of the Council who was taking up the rear of the pack. “What's the matter, Riq? Cat got your tongue?”

“Hm?” Riq grunted, lost in the mire of his own thoughts. “Yes. World of difference. Right.” He had been ignoring most of his comrades’ nattering, but when the subject of the X-Rick came up, he found himself unable to tune it out.
They’d reached the end of the corridor where a line of six Attendant Mortys met them with bowed heads. Rick Prime slipped off his gloves and placed them on a silver tray held by the Attendant in front of him.

“He seemed like a nice fellow, though perhaps a touch too mellow,” Prime quipped, moving to unhinge the clasp that held his collar in place. “Must’ve had a lot of luck to have slipped through our...lottery.” He huffed, glowering at his own botched rhyme. “Fuck.” He was only marginally comforted when Quantum patted him on the shoulder with a rumbling burp of support.

To either side of him, his council-mates were piling their surcoats onto their Attendant’s tray, clearly thankful to be free of the stifling material. With every piece of official garb they shed, their moods brightened visibly. There was a certain eagerness in their movements, like they were itching to be done with this trivial step and move onto something far more appetizing.

“Now that we’re here, my brothers, there’s no need for the long faces.” Zeta Alpha rubbed his hands together as he stood before the grand entrance to their quarters. He gave a nod to his council-mates who were gathered impatiently around him. Even Riq looked ready to dart inside the minute the doors opened. “A little R&R is just what the doctor ordered.”

With a firm push, the doors swung open on silent hinges into a spacious seraglio. Pockets of light glowed dimly from the wall sconces and ringed chandeliers overhead, warming the swaths of hanging red and gold fabric. Amaranthine carpeting covered the floor, and overstuffed pillows and throw blankets crowded the circular pits that spotted the room.

And everywhere, everywhere, there were Mortys.

Mortys in varying degrees of undress were strewn across the pillows, chatting idly with one another in their adorable stuttering voices, or sitting at the edge of the shallow pool in the room’s center, their fingers dancing lazily across the water’s surface. In one of the cushioned odas, an orgy of Mortys writhed and moaned as spectators watched hungrily from the rim.

The entire space smelled of incense and heat and sex, and the blend hit the Council like an aphrodisiatic cloud as they entered, the stresses of the day melting away with each inhale.

“Home, sweet home.”

No sooner had they stepped inside than the Mortys gave little squeals of delight upon noticing that their masters had arrived. They rushed to them, the decorative gold chains around their waists and ankles tinkling like a choir of songbirds. “Master! Oh, Master!” they cried out, placing their hands on their respective council member with unadulterated worship.

Zeta Alpha kneeled to greet his welcoming party of No Eye Mortys who touched him eagerly about the face, mapping out his expression and planting chaste kisses on his cheeks and neck, wherever they could reach. He chuckled when they accidentally knocked his wig off and began to peck kisses on his bald head.

“Where mah bitches at, yo?” Ricktiminus spread his arms as wide as his smile, beckoning his own Mortys to him. A herd of Rabbit Mortys tackled him to wriggle their noses against his in a sign of welcome home, their tails twitching happily, while a blushing Unicorn Chaser Morty waited nearby, a Mini Morty seated comfortably in the crook of his arm. Ricktiminus nuzzled his face into the soft Rabbit Mortys’ fur, his usually stinging street slang deteriorating into senseless baby talk. “Aaaw, did mah shawtys miss dey daddy-waddy?”

“No, no, no! That’s not where you go!” Rick Prime could be heard above the tittering crowd as he
scolded his own Mortys of choice. With a perturbed chuff, he dragged Spoon Morty away from his utensil-wielding brothers to stand properly by a Moon Morty. Next to him, a Mascot Morty jabbed an elbow into Robot Morty’s side and rolled his eyes. Once they were neatly in place, Rick Prime nodded approvingly and patted them each on the head before scooping them up in a strong embrace.

A stutter of Super Rick Fan Mortys bustled around Maximums Rickimus, competing to be the first to touch him. They fan-boy’ed over him, chattering ceaselessly about how cool, how wonderful, how fantastic Maximums was, as if he were the only Rick they’d ever known. Maximums glowed under their excessive adulations, holding himself a little straighter as they fawned over him.

“T-tell us another story! Please, Rickimus! W-w-we want to hear all about—oh, tell us what happened after your fight with the Pramhams!” they begged, beginning to tug and pull Maximums to one of the unoccupied odas.

“Patience, my dears. Patience,” Maximums purred. He’d barely stumbled into the mass of cushions before the Mortys were climbing onto his lap and stroking at his chest and hair, unable to get enough of him. And Maximums was soaking it all in like a thirsty man at a fountain, settling even deeper into the cushions as they began to undress him.

Already being corralled off to his own oda by the No Eye Mortys, Zeta Alpha said over his shoulder, “Duty still calls, Brothers! Anyone feeling game this evening?” He shook a hand free from the clinging grasp of one of the No Eyes to indicate a nearby wall where a square dartboard hung. Its face was a grid of numbers that scrolled lazily up and down or side to side, like a constantly shifting Rubik’s Cube.

“Quantum’s not busy. For him, it should be easy,” Rick Prime suggested. He plucked a glass of wine from a passing Attendant Morty before stepping down into an oda where he’d spend the night playing word games with his motley crew of Mortys. As the curtain was drawn closed around them, he addressed his Mortys, “Now, who knows a word that rhymes with lick…”

Ricktiminus’s team of adorable Mortys wasn’t even concerned with finding privacy before they began to paw impatiently at his slacks and slide their small hands beneath his waistband. “’Bout time ah got me some cuddly. Mm-hm.” His voice had turned gravelly as he lifted his arms to make it easier for them to slip off his clothes.

Only two of the council members, Quantum and Riq, remained untethered near the dartboard where a stoic Attendant bearing a tray of darts stood at attention. Riq was busy throwing back drink after drink as quickly as the other Attendants could refill his glass. Quantum had long since given up on associating with the Mortys. They’d never managed to pick up on the subtler nuances of his belching dialect, and he was now more comfortable with unwinding in the confines of his personal chambers in solitude.

Riq wiped the booze from his lips as he grumbled, “Make it two this time, Quantum. That oughtta make them—shut the GF up for a while.” He slapped a hand on Quantum’s shoulder before stumbling off into the seraglio.

With a sigh, Quantum plucked six darts from the Attendant’s outstretched tray and, with no particular technique, thrust them one after another at the moving board. They stabbed into the numbers with a satisfying thunk.

8...0...3.

2...4...7.
The Attendant hurriedly entered the numbers into his digital notepad, gave a curt bow to Quantum, and scampered to Riq’s side. He waved the notepad over his head, trying to catch Riq’s attention.

“Sir, I still need your sign-off before I can deliver this to PR.”

At least, that’s what he would’ve said if he could speak, but instead he only managed a series of small, aspirated whines. Without so much as a sideways glance at the mute Attendant, Riq shoved him away effortlessly, sending him sprawling onto the floor. A few curious Mortys crawled over to the downed Attendant to investigate.

“D-don’t bother me, kid. I’m not in the mood.” Riq’s attention was already elsewhere, surveying the nearest pleasure pit and the assortment of Mortys still locked in an all-out orgy within. His eyes lingered over a Mullet Morty watching dreamily from the sidelines, a lock of hair twirled around his finger, then to a Hippie Morty who was busy pleasuring two Punk Mortys at the same time. A Biker Morty was in the middle of the writhing mass, his long chestnut hair streaming over his shoulders as he rode a Turbulent Juice Morty to completion. When he lolled his head back, giving Riq an unobstructed view of his smooth chin and neck, Riq made up his mind.

“You. Come with me.” Riq grabbed Biker Morty’s wrist and dragged him clean off his partner. None of the other Mortys seemed to pay it any mind, a Business Morty taking his own turn for a ride while a Sexy Devil Morty and Big Tongue Morty slobbered hungrily at his cock.

“W-what the fuck, old man?” Biker Morty cussed, tugging futilely against Riq’s grasp as he was led forcefully to the back of the seraglio. They passed curtained off odas where wet sounds and baritone moans left little to the imagination of what was occupying the other council members. The musk of sex was everywhere, seeping into Riq’s sinuses and blanketing his brain in a hazy lust that made his head pound mercilessly.

Now he was annoyed and horny as hell.

“I-I still coulda got my dick sucked!”

Ignoring Biker Morty’s tantrum, Riq called over his shoulder to the Attendant Morty who was now pinned to the floor by a threesome of Mortys donning nothing but gauzy loincloths. “See to it that no one comes into my room tonight. No one. Understood?”

With that, Riq swept into his personal bedroom, his night’s entertainment in tow, and slammed the doors shut behind him.

The Attendant only keened weakly in reply, his eyes pricking with tears as the Mortys ran their fingers over his face and groin and the jagged scar across his throat.

~~*~~

Riq IV was considered a true Rick among Ricks.

He could match wits and trade blows with the best of them. He was ruthless. He was cunning. And Riq’s particular breed of ambition made him a very gifted politician and military strategist. He rose quickly through the ranks of the Citadel, and within just a few months of his first term in office, he led consecutive victories against the Galactic Federation that won Ricks access to hundreds of new galaxies, ripe for the pillaging. The defeat of GF forces at Omega Centauri was what finally tenured his position on the Council.

By then, Ricks stopped asking what ever happened to Riq I, II, and III.
The fledgling Citadel of Ricks only assumed its role as the central government and sanctuary for Ricks across the multiverses under Riq’s guiding hand during those early years—years marked by unparalleled progress. The practice of interdimensional travel became a widespread and reliable means of transport, and Ricks were harvesting the treasures of the galaxies for their latest inventions in abundance. They had entered what historians would refer to as the Golden Age of Rick.

But for Riq, it wasn’t enough.

Ricks had more Plutonic Rock than they could use in a lifetime, but Riq continued to push the boundaries of their territory farther into GF space for even one microgram more. He broke long-standing treaties with sub-galactic dictators only to forge new ones with rival factions. The most brutal interrogation techniques of POWs were sanctioned under his governance even when GF forces were wiped out more quickly than they could be rebuilt.

Before long, Riq’s thirst for power was outmatched only by his thirst for distraction.

Unrivaled success came at the cost of complacency, and it was enough to drive Riq mad. He’d rake his fingernails up his own thighs just to feel something while sitting through another tedious Council meeting. How his fellow council members could be satisfied with the mind-numbing routine of deliberate, coordinate, and execute was completely lost on him.

While they sat comfortably in their petty game of cat-and-mouse with the GF, Riq howled in quiet agony. He battled monotony like one battles an insidious mold. He could practically feel it seeping into his bones, making him brittle.

Soon, the victory parades turned dull, and feasts of fine food and finer flesh lost their allure. Eventually, Riq couldn’t even find respite in the most sumptuous accommodations. He wandered the Citadel’s halls as an insomniac, suffocating from the need for the next thrill.

It was only when he’d found The One that he felt like he could breathe again.

“Aah...” Riq let out an indulgent sigh, cupping the back of Biker Morty’s head and pushing him farther down his cock. “M-mind the teeth, babe.”

Biker Morty whimpered something like an apology as he struggled to swallow another inch. Even in the dark, Riq could tell he was clearly favoring the right side of his mouth. His cheek had opened so easily under Riq’s fist. Bloody saliva dribbled over Biker Morty’s lips and hands to drip down Riq’s balls and join the other body fluids already staining the sheets.

For all the fuss the Morty had put up while he was being dragged into Riq’s boudoir, a few blows across the face had quieted him, and he was now gobbling down Riq’s cock like an obedient sex doll.

Such a shame. Riq really felt like destroying something alive tonight.

He wound his fingers through the long brown hair fanning over the threadbare sheets as he tried to make out the hazy outline of Biker Morty through the dark. Like the rest of his once lavish personal quarters, the lights had fallen into disrepair, cloaking the room in inky black shadows. The bed itself was filthy and tattered; the few pieces of furniture in the room, faded and splintered.

Muffled chatter filtered in through the closed doors, but Riq felt miles from the shameless revelry of the seraglio. Sequestered away in his room, he was free to lose himself in the thoughts that had been unraveling his composure since the encounter with the X-Rick.

He felt giddy and edgy since the moment he’d read the report from the Morty Auction. Auctioneer
Rick had been right to alert the Council about any fishy business taking place within the Elite, but he hadn’t realized just how big a fish he’d caught when he turned in this particular X-Rick.

_Rick of Dimension X-280_. He was relatively unremarkable as far as Ricks went. Charged earlier in life for a handful of petty larceny cases in various dimensions, but never convicted, he’d slipped beneath the radar of both the Citadel and the Galactic Federation for years.

That is, until his numbers came up in the Council’s special “lottery.” The rest of the Council may not have recognized his dimensional designation, but Riq remembered. He remembered each and every sorry Rick they shipped off to the GF to meet their quota. But X-280 would hold a special place in Riq’s memories.

_A Rick managing to escape a maximum-security GF prison with his mind still intact. Imagine that._

That’s why he couldn’t stop smiling when he saw Rick X-280 in the Council Chamber. He may have been beaten and broken physically, but Riq could sense the fire that still roared inside of him. It’d been years since Riq’s interest was piqued, and even at the risk of getting burned, he was now curious to see what this Rick would do. He’d serve as entertainment until Riq eventually grew bored of him too.

_But what had he been doing with The One?_ he asked himself again. He dug his fingers into Biker Morty’s scalp as he cursed the Council for insisting that they keep the winner’s suite exempt from the surveillance system. Of course, Riq knew all about what took place behind those closed doors, but X-280’s case had been so unusual.

He took a shaky breath. _The X-Rick is nothing_, he assured himself. _Just another Rick in the wall._ Yes, he’d never have what Riq had.

He’d never have The One the way that Riq had. He’d never be the boy’s _first_.

“Yessss...” he hissed, his cock swelling even thicker at the memory. As Biker Morty choked around him, Riq turned his face into the pillows beneath his head. They stunk of sweat and old spunk.

The One’s pillows on Earth had smelled of cookies and crayons.

It was simply by chance that their scanners had been trained on The One’s home planet when they picked up the signal. The mega-burst of Morty brainwaves short-circuited the reader and left the technicians baffled. Even Riq didn’t believe it at first, but at Mama Eun-Rick’s counsel, he’d insisted on leading the investigation himself. All five council members joined him on the excursion to the obscure dimension to seek out the source of the Morty and his strange ability.

Most Mortys were just barely hitting puberty at the time, and The One looked especially small and vulnerable tucked in his bed that night.

Riq growled as he yanked Biker Morty off of him and shoved him facedown into the mattress. The Morty’s whine turned into a sharp squeak as Riq grabbed his ass roughly in both hands. When he pulled the cheeks apart, a white glob of cum dripped from his hole, a parting gift from one of the Mortys who’d been fucking him earlier. Riq probed tentatively at the sloppy creampie with the head of his cock but paused.

_See? I can be patient._

He’d been patient with The One. _Give him some time_, they’d said. _At least wait until he's older_, they’d begged. So Riq had played along and kept his sessions with The One in line with the Council’s petty standards.
With The One in their hands, the Epiphanes propelled the Council to new heights. If they had been kings of the mountain before, they were now gods of the universe. Weapons of mass destruction, the enslavement of entire species, the annihilation of galaxies. Nothing was beyond them with the Epiphanes tickling their brains and sparking their imaginations. And, best of all, it was so fun.

Run a few thousand volts of electricity through The One, and they had the formula for vatilium. Shove stakes under his nails, and the secrets of antimatter production were clear to them. The more painful the torment, the more potent the Epiphanes.

He’d waited a whole year before taking The One to bed.

Gripping Biker Morty by the back of the neck, Riq leaned over him to rasp in his ear, “You better—n-none of this stoic bullshit.” He pressed his cock to the twitching hole. “I want to hear you scream.”

Without any more warning, Riq thrust the full length of his cock into Biker Morty until their balls met.

Ricks were far larger than Mortys, even a Turbulent Juice one, and Biker Morty shrieked as he was skewered. He scrambled for purchase on the sheets, ripping another hole in the fabric.

Cum squelched and frothed around Riq’s cock as Riq pummeled him without mercy. He grabbed the battered headboard, using his full weight to fuck into Biker Morty, making the bed creak beneath their thrashing.

Biker Morty squirmed and howled as best he could, even with his back arched to the breaking point. He clawed at Riq’s forearms and spat out every insult he knew. “Fuck you, y-y-you fucking pervert —ah! I-is this how you get off—”

Riq swiftly cuffed him in the back of the head. “No! N-no words!” He panted between thrusts. Beads of sweat rolled down his nose to drip onto Biker Morty’s back.

The One hadn’t said a word when he fucked him. He had sobbed and wailed when Riq crammed his cock into him until he was sure the kid would tear. But he’d never told Riq that he didn’t want it, that he didn’t like it. And Riq tried to be gentle. He really did. Maybe the kid didn’t understand it then, but when Riq had forced him open, he’d done it out of love.

Over the course of the year spent torturing The One, Riq had fallen deeper and deeper in love with the mysterious Morty. He loved running his fingers down The One’s ravaged back, tracing the crisscross of bloody welts left from the leather crop. He’d spend nights curled around The One’s body as it continued twitching long after the electrical currents had stopped being pumped through it.

Nothing was more exquisite than the sight of The One in the throes of agony. Riq loved seeing him completely taken apart, pushed to his limits again and again. And when The One couldn’t be pushed any further, he was at the mercy of Riq to be put back together.

And, god, was he beautiful like that. Naked, bloody, raw. Pure.

The night Riq raped The One, he was gifted with the most powerful Epiphany yet. It changed the course of the Council of Ricks’ and Galactic Federation’s future.

Riq had been a proper gentleman after he slipped his spent cock free from The One’s leaking, battered hole. He’d petted his hair, kissed him on both cheeks and forehead, and thanked him for the wonderful night.

He never called The One to his room again after that.
The beginning was always the best part for Riq, before it degenerated into the tired and the routine. Before the rot set it. He never touched The One again, glad that he would always have the beauty of the start immortalized in that perfect moment.

Riq leaned back to watch his dick disappearing into Biker Morty’s ass. With each shallow thrust, Biker Morty whimpered and shivered on his knees, struggling to remain upright. His bloodied cheek left a fresh, dark stain on the pillowcase.

With the most salacious memories of The One petering out, Riq’s pace slowed, and his erection threatened to flag. It took everything Riq had to maintain the fantasy that it was The One in his bed now, impaled by his cock, not this pathetic substitute.

Pulling Biker Morty up by his hair, Riq pinned him against the headboard as he stubbornly drove into him. The Morty’s pulse raced beneath his fingers, Riq clutching him around the neck.

Just then, there came a timid knock at the door.

“What is it?!” Riq barked, pistoning his hips. “I said no interruptions!”

The door creaked open, and an Attendant Morty peeked his head inside.

“I-I’m sorry, Riq, sir, but a phone call—” He paused, shrinking back as the stench of sex hit him full-force.

“Spit it out already! Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“A member of the, um, Elite wants to speak with you. He says it’s urgent.”


The Attendant left the door open enough to let a sliver of light into the ramshackle room and tiptoed around the garbage that littered the floor. He was careful to avert his eyes once he reached Riq’s side, trying to quell the blush that deepened every time he heard Biker Morty cry out.

“What happened to the other one?” Riq asked, taking the receiver from the Attendant with a curious look.

“Uh! Um... H-he’s—he’s indisposed.”

Riq grunted when he read the name on the call screen. “Okay. Get out.”

The Attendant couldn’t leave fast enough. He banged into a toppled chair on his way, almost tripping over a stray bottle, before barreling out the door.

Keeping one hand steady on Biker Morty’s throat, Riq unmuted the receiver and put it to his ear. He pulled his lips into a grin.

“ψ, so good to hear from you! Enjoying your time with The One, I take it? Mm-hm. Well, I should—I should hope so.” As he let the Elite Rick prattle on about how his suite’s liquor cabinet needed restocking, he nodded along, running his thumb over Biker Morty’s jugular and enjoying the way his breath hitched with every thrust of Riq’s hips.

After a few minutes, the lip service was beginning to wear on Riq’s patience. “That’s all very laughable, ψ. I’m happy for your nano-armor, really. But you actually caught me at a—hm?” Riq stifled a yawn, wondering when the Rick would ever get to his point. “Oh, really? And what’s that
you wanted to tell me?"

Riq suddenly went still as ψ-531 indulged him.

The smile fell from his face, and a distant roar began to rumble in his ears. With every word ψ said, the roar grew louder and louder like an approaching storm until it blotted out the tinny voice coming from the receiver. Riq recognized vaguely that he’d dropped it as it clattered to the floor, but the pounding in his head was now too deafening for him to care.

How could he not have realized it?

Riq wrapped both shaking hands around Biker Morty’s throat, desperate for something to cling to in the midst of the squall that was raging through him. His tongue felt thick in his mouth, and there was a grating sound that he eventually realized was his own teeth grinding against one another.

How could he have been so...so stupid?

He’d assumed he’d taken everything from The One—everything! His home, his life, his innocence, his right to himself. Riq had taken from him what could never be returned and no one else could ever take again. Right?

Riq pulled Biker Morty to his chest, nuzzling at the long hair and breathing, “You were mine. Y-you were supposed to be all mine.” His voice cracked.

Those idiot Elite could fuck The One all they wanted, but they’d never come close to having him the way Riq had. Only he was special to The One. He was the maestro of The One’s life. He set the tune, the pitch, the crescendos and diminuendos.

And now some X-Rick was going to ruin his symphony.

The X-Rick had taken the one thing that Riq never—hadn’t even thought to consider. He’d stolen it from right under Riq’s nose.

A tremor that had started in Riq’s chest crept down his arms to his hands, and soon he was shaking Biker Morty like a rag doll. He needed leverage. He needed to get the shaking to stop. Riq slammed Biker Morty’s head forward against the wall. The wet smack of flesh and caving bone roused the animalistic side in Riq. He could only think in the most basic terms now.

That goddamn—

Smack.

Sneaky—

Smack.

Conniving—

Smack.

Dirty X-Rick had stolen The One’s heart.

“What will you do, Riq?”

He pried loose his stiff fingers, letting the Biker Morty’s body fall limply off his dick and onto the floor, cum oozing down his slack thighs.
Riq was breathing hard, the roaring in his ears now a whining tinnitus. He stared straight through the black smear of blood on the wall in front of him, his mind transfixed by the question:

*What will you do?*

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 5 can be found here.]
He looked like a man with purpose now, and the transformation from slovenly hack to polished literatus was nothing short of incredible. No sooner had the Rick taken his seat across from him than he folded his hands on the tabletop and asked, “So, did you kill him?”

Pristine sheets of gold marble gave way to cheap plaster and eventually grimy concrete around Rick. The walls, which had been painted white at some point, were now stained gray by countless bodies having rubbed past them, and greasy fingerprints peppered the surface like smoky stars. Even at a glance, the small whorls were familiar to Rick because, naturally, they were all his own.

He reached across the escalator’s rubber railing to run a hand over a graffiti tag as the moving staircase continued its trek downward. The message’s paint was still fresh, and Rick’s hand came away with a magenta blush on his fingertips.

FUCK THE COUNCIL, the tag read.

As Rick descended deeper into the Citadel, the vibrant sounds of the main atrium fell away, replaced by a constant mechanical churning coming from somewhere in the bowels of the massive space station. His surroundings grew dingier with each level he passed, the bustling energy of the earlier levels’ commercial pastimes quickly fading from memory. Now, as he neared sub-level 6, the oppressive quiet rested heavy on his ears, and the air was thick with stale heat.

The escalator lurched over a kink in its gears, nearly sending Rick reeling over the edge, and he grabbed the handrail for balance.

“Cutting-edge technology, m-my ass. Am I right?”

His question was only answered by another aching squeal of the old gears beneath him.

He hadn’t come across another passenger since sub-level 4, and that Rick had been a boozy mess, draping himself over Rick and whispering all kinds of nasty in his ear. He’d had half a mind to shove
the bastard right over the side to a quick and messy death, and he might have done so if the next level’s platform hadn’t come up when it did. Rick was all too glad to dump the drunk there before he got too cocky groping Rick through his slacks.

In truth, the solitude was a welcome break after the cacophony he’d endured when he first entered the Citadel’s immense foyer. It’d been a shock to the senses. All the noise and energy of countless Ricks and Mortys in constant movement left him feeling drained from the bombardment of stimuli.


Crowds of Ricks and Mortys had traversed the floor so tightly, it was like an undulating sea of blue and brown. Having never had a Morty of his own, the sight of one was still somewhat novel to Rick, but to see dozens upon dozens of them in one space was an entirely new phenomenon in and of itself.

Every inch of the Citadel’s main atrium was covered in colorful posters that boasted services for collecting Mortys, combining Mortys, training Mortys, and even grooming Mortys. There were Morty dry cleaners with nothing but freshly pressed yellow shirts and jeans hanging from their revolving racks. A Morty salon claimed it could turn a Scruffy Morty into a Business Morty while his Rick enjoyed a drink at the bar next door. One shop advertised itself as catering to the sophisticated tastes of Elite Ricks and displayed a custom branding iron in the window next to a line of high-end leather collars and leashes sold as matching sets—Keep your Mortys safe and stylish for only 400€!

Strings of Mortys bearing Manipulator Chips trailed behind their Ricks, holding tightly to each other’s hands to keep from getting separated. While most Ricks stormed purposefully forward as though they had somewhere to be, others promenaded by at a leisurely pace. Ricks in expensive three-piece suits led their own packs of Mortys on jewel-studded leashes like they were show dogs.

The comparison wasn’t too far off the mark, Rick figured. The Morty Craze had spurred yet another means to fuel a Rick’s competitive streak, and it didn’t take him long to crack the code of this new social hierarchy that had materialized around it. Ricks with only their original Morty were at the bottom of the pecking order. Treated as witless, old-fashioned, or just plain dull, they were often lost in the crowd. Above them were those who prowled the wilder dimensions like strapping huntsmen on safari to battle and conquer the myriad Mortys. At the top sat the Ricks with both quantity and quality. They garnished their Mortys with only the finest in material goods.

With the advent of the Morty Craze, Mortys were now tooted as symbols of a Rick’s social status. Like a brand-name wristwatch, they were polished and put on display simply for the pleasure of the public eye.

Rick thought of the massive banner that had stretched high above from one end of the open space to the other. The blocky yellow letters of MORTY GAMES were flanked on one side by a Morty posed as Rosie the Riveter. He was smiling triumphantly at the viewer, one hand on his noodle-like arm.

Rick had watched the banner billow softly on its stiff cables, twisting the Morty’s smile into a quivering frown.

Though Rick had initially found himself mesmerized by the spectacle of the Morty Craze, the pompous display of exploitation sat sour in his mouth. Even now, Rick tongued at his palate to dislodge the revulsion that stuck like a stubborn coating of cough syrup.

Rick shook his head free of the memory and turned back to the scrap of paper in his hands. Dive, he’d scribbled down hastily. Or was it Live? The sweat from his hands had made the ink run,
blurring the already messy script. He pulled at the stiff collar of his dress shirt, wishing that the Citadel’s HVAC reached the lower levels.

A dingy placard lit up overhead with a tired *ding*. This was his stop. Stepping off the escalator, a directory kiosk greeted him, its flickering screen showing a simple cross section of the Citadel, each sector color coded by category.

The upper levels were reserved for Council business and commercial services. Next was the main atrium which served as the primary point of entry and the heart of the Citadel’s entertainment. The lower levels held military campuses and maintenance. Residential blocks were sprinkled throughout, with names like Cloud’s Landing and The Ricktz housing the wealthy, while the lower Ricks of society lived in cramped housing projects marked loosely 1 through 12.

His eyes skimmed over the legend’s headers: *Bars, Entertainment, Pubs, General Services, Cantinas, Accommodations, Izakaya, Eateries...* Running his finger down the column of dining establishments, Rick found the name he was looking for nestled between *Dirty Rick’s Discount Dinners* and *Dudz*.

The rest of sub-level 6 proved to be in as equal a state of decay as the information kiosk. As Rick made his way down the maze of corridors toward Dive, he passed by decrepit shops and residences packed tightly together, their fronts sagging like old skin on a grizzled face. Broken windows punctuated their gap-toothed grins. Ricks holding signs with messages like “Y lie? Need Creds 4 Booze” sat slumped beneath lampposts while others shot up k-lax with belt tourniquets. Down one alley, Rick could make out a pair of Ricks fucking desperately in the shadows. He picked up his pace when they began catcalling him to join in the fun.

As he careened around a corner in his haste, his foot suddenly slid forward, and Rick braced his hand against a wall to catch himself. He immediately felt a familiar twinge in his lower back.

“I swear to god, if I break my neck in this fucking dump...” he muttered. Rubbing at the tweaked muscle, he glared down at the paper he’d slipped on. A picture of a Morty smiled up at him from beneath his Berluti leather shoe, and Rick crouched to inspect the discarded flyer.

A generic Morty was beaming at the camera, a Manipulator Chip stapled to his ear as if he were tagged cattle. Behind him, a proud Rick clasped the Morty’s shoulder while giving a thumbs up with his other hand. *A Chipped Morty is a Happy Morty*, read the PSA.

Rick pressed his lips together. Unease burned in his stomach as he looked into the brown eyes of the poster Morty. He couldn’t possibly be the only Rick who saw through the bald-faced lie, could he? Every other Rick may have swallowed the Council’s bullshit campaign, but Rick knew better. He’d seen enough to know that behind every Photoshopped smile was a scared and abused Morty.

*Mouse’s eyes were lighter,* he thought distractedly. He couldn’t help drawing the comparison despite the disconcerting truth behind them. He shook his head quickly, cursing himself. *Stay focused, dipshit!* What the hell did that matter, when Mouse was suffering? What did any of this matter? So Mortys were suffering all over the Citadel. It was disgusting and wrong and—but he couldn’t save them *all*, could he? Rick had enough on his plate with Mouse alone, and he didn’t know how he was even going to manage that.

The thought of Mouse made his heart lurch, the sudden rush of adrenaline compelling him to move. He’d already lost enough time, and his insider was probably wondering what was keeping him. But if he was still the genius Rick remembered, he was sure that together they’d be able to figure something out to save Mouse.
Rick ground the flyer under his heel, snuffing out the Rick’s face until he could see the wet concrete beneath.

~~*~~

Dive lived up to its name.

It was an average scoop-and-serve eatery nestled alongside the other shops that made up sub-level 6’s central food court. The greasy menu advertised it as specializing in Biziwog-California cuisine, a fusion which Rick had never heard of before. It was yet another reminder of all that he’d missed during his incarceration. Mini pizzas topped with wriggling brown maggots sat alongside deep-fried Au Jus sandwiches battered in sharp green crystals, and the day’s special seemed to include a free side of purple pâté slopped into small paper cups.

A line of Ricks in stained coveralls, reminiscent of Rick’s own—Note to self: Contact laundry service—shuffled forward behind the belt stanchions, their faces were worn and set in permanent frowns. One Rick coughed violently, hocking a loogie onto his neighbor’s shoe. The queue shot Rick strange looks when he glided into line behind them, his pressed suit no doubt making him stand out like a sore thumb.

Ignoring their stares, Rick grabbed his tray and a serving of cloudy water. He tried not to think too hard about the dubious substance stuck to the glass’s bottom.

When Rick reached the food server, he came face-to-face with a scruffy-looking Rick slouched behind the counter. A spent cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth, and he wore a uniform and grungy apron that drowned his gaunt frame. He barely even looked at Rick as he systematically whacked his metal ladle against the counter, smashing the cockroaches that scurried across. Rick grimaced when he spotted two small black beetles sneaking up the server’s wrist.

Deciding that it was a losing battle, the server then used the ladle to scoop up a heap of crusty curry rice and asked gruffly, “What’ll it be?”

Suddenly unsure if this was really the Rick he was looking for, Rick began slowly, “Ten express exiles with extra sauce.” He winced internally at how lame the secret password sounded to his ears.

“Wuh?” The server screwed up his face, the cigarette waggling dangerously from his slack mouth. Spent ash fluttered down to salt a tin of black mashed potatoes.

“Ten express exiles. With. Extra. Sauce,” he tried again, watching the server’s expression closely for a spark of recognition behind those comically thick bifocals.

There was another moment of bewilderment before slowly, very slowly the server’s scowl melted into a grin.

“Cute,” he finally said.

The Rick chewed the end of his cigarette before pinching it between two fingers and putting it out in the potatoes. “Exquisite choice,” he replied, his voice turning to silk. He then yelled to the kitchen, keeping his eyes trained on Rick, “Boss! It’s time for—I’m taking my lunch break!”

“Just keep it short, Tick! Don’t forget you’re on a PIP!”

“Tick?” Rick asked aloud.

The server rolled his eyes and then turned away from the counter, pulling the hairnet off his head and
muttering “I’ll be out in five” without a backward glance.

Abandoning his tray on the counter, Rick snaked his way through the crowd of customers to the small eating area outside. Most of the tables were already occupied by blue-collar Ricks hunched over their trays and grumbling with their tired-looking companions.

A small table with two vacant chairs sat in the corner. Not exactly private, but Rick took it, giving himself a clear view of Dive's rear exit. As he waited, picking absently at his Royal Oxford sleeve, he couldn’t help overhearing the conversation from a nearby table.

“I tell ya, there’s gonna be another rent hike. Mark my words.”

“But the Council just docked our pay! Assholes!”

“If they gave me back—if I had my portal gun, I’d portal the fuck out of here,” sighed a third.

“Yeah, yeah. You ‘n’ me both.”

“It ain’t fuckin’ fair.”

“You got that right! We’re slavin’ away while those Elite cocksuckers get to live like kings. Betcha they ain’t got a worry in the world!”

Rick waved off a vagabond with a plaque around his neck that read Space AIDS. Keep away from Mortys before turning back to his eavesdropping.

The first voice had begun speaking again. “Nah. Those tools’ve got just as much reason to be pissed off as the rest of us. Council’s got ‘em all on a tight leash. Ya ever seen ‘em?” He took a drink and smacked his lips loudly. “Hell, look at that one right there.”

His companion whistled low. “Ain’t he on the wrong side o’ the tracks.”

“With threads like that, he’s gotta be.”

Once Rick realized they were talking about him, his ears began to burn red. They thought he was an Elite? The notion alone was nauseating, but he figured it was better to be mistaken for an Elite than found out as a Dimension X Rick. He ran a thumb over the onyx cuff links at his wrist as he pretended not to hear, musing to himself how his new attire made for a convincing disguise.

Rick was never one for suits, never understood the appeal of strutting around in one like a prick. His wardrobe had always favored utilitarianism over aesthetics, a reflection of his steadfast pragmatism. When his days usually ended with him stained by Titanium(III) chloride or covered in some alien’s viscera, it didn’t make sense to hold much value in apparel.

But even he couldn’t deny that the suit he’d picked out from the suite’s armoire fit him like a second skin. Tailored to perfection, it sat comfortably on his shoulders, across the chest, and everywhere that mattered, boasting its expert craftsmanship. The Council knew how to treat their guests right, and they’d clearly spared no expense using only the highest quality materials. He never knew a suit could feel so good. The satiny softness of his shirt was so foreign to Rick that he couldn’t keep from fidgeting, constantly adjusting the cuff just for an excuse to touch it.

“Poor git can hardly sit still. He’s nervous, ‘cuz the Council’s always watchin’ ‘em,” the blue-collar Rick continued. “Oh, yeah, they watch ‘em. They watch their Elite like a hog farmer watches his pigs being fattened fer slaughter.” There was a creak as the Rick adjusted himself on his metal chair. “S’no wonder he came down here. It’s to get ‘imself something he can’t up there.”
“He’s prolly got plenty o’ Mortys of his own in his castle. And there ain’t hardly any o’ those ‘round here. What could ‘e possibly be lookin’ to find?”

There was a low chuckle. “What else? Perspective.”

Just then, Dive’s rear door swung open and the server Rick from before stepped out. Rick immediately sat up straighter.

The server had changed out of his uniform and into a pair of slacks and a simple black turtleneck that hugged his physique. As he approached, Rick noticed that in place of the bottle lenses, a pair of rimless glasses now sat low on his nose. Rick could’ve sworn the man had grown another four inches since he’d last seen him, but he realized it was his ramrod straight posture that accounted for the sudden change. He looked like a man with purpose now, and the transformation from slovenly hack to polished literatus was nothing short of incredible.

No sooner had the Rick taken his seat across from him than he folded his hands on the tabletop and asked, “So, did you kill him?”

Rick stared blankly, his train of thought completely derailed by the sudden inquiry. He’d been expecting a slightly more heartwarming reunion. After all, it’d been years since he’d last seen his contact. Then again, Rick of X-010, could be more of a pragmatist than even he was. Not to mention a bit of a fanatic. When X-010 got an idea in his head, it was often difficult to dissuade him. Dread was already beginning to gnaw at Rick as he thought of how he’d have to break the news of the change in plans to his mentor.

It wasn’t that he’d forgotten the original plan. Hell, he’d probably never forget it. He’d done a lot of fucked up things in his life, but agreeing to the terms of the mission still made the top of the list. In exchange for all of X-010’s help, though, the compromise had seemed worth it. Rick told himself that if it meant getting the revenge he wanted so badly, he’d do whatever it took.

But now... He didn’t know if the pang of guilt that cut through him was for betraying X-010 or for what he’d almost been willing to do to Mouse.

“Look, X-010, about—” But his twin clamped a hand over his mouth, cutting him off with an icy glare. The Rick shook his head sternly, darting his eyes to the other customers, but they’d already turned their attention back to wrestling with their pizza maggots. Dragging his chair over so that he could sit closer to Rick, he hissed.

“I don’t go by that here.”

“What?” Rick said too loudly before ducking his head. “You mean—you mean they don’t know you’re from—”

“No. And I prefer to keep it that way.”

“What am I supposed to call you, then?” Rick thought back to what the line cook had said. “Tick?”

The Rick scowled. “Of course not. That’s just what those asswipes—whatever. It doesn’t matter.” Running a hand through his hair, he looked around the eating area with a sharp eye. He gave a friendly nod to someone—a regular, most likely—while he continued in a low tone to Rick. “Code names. Remember?”

Rick mentally kicked himself for the faux pas and held up his hand in a sign of wait as he quickly scanned through ORA’s database from behind his closed eyelids. There were blueprints, notes, maps, instructions, some hastily sketched spectrum full of letters. The breadth of information he’d
received from X-010 over the last few years was overwhelming, and it took Rick a moment to home in on what he was looking for. Finally, he came across one small image file tucked away beneath the category of Miscellaneous: an X with tiny script written above it. *What had it said again?*

“Uh, Chi...?” he offered.

That earned him a scuff across the head as the other Rick corrected him, “Not *chee*, numbskull. It’s pronounced ‘kai.’ Chi. As in ‘tie’? And, speaking of which,” Chi leaned forward, slipping Rick’s silk tie free from his jacket and rubbing it thoughtfully between his fingers, “you look just like one of them now.” He suddenly grabbed the tie in his fist and tugged, reeling Rick close until he was less than an inch from his face.

Rick bristled in surprise but kept his mouth shut. Chi was as eccentric as he was brilliant, and Rick knew better than to interrupt his mentor when he was in one of his moods. Besides, considering all that Chi had done for him, the least Rick could do was put up with his little quirks without complaint. So he simply waited as Chi closed his eyes and sniffed curiously at Rick’s neck, following the line of scent up to his ear.

The tickle of Chi’s breath on his earlobe roused memories that had lain dormant for years. It made him think back to when they’d first met a lifetime ago. Chi was the first alternate dimension Rick he’d ever seen, in fact, and when Chi had portaled into his lab that night to whisper into his ear *Boo*, Rick had nearly shat himself, literally. Chi didn’t let him live that down for years.

Rick had always fended for himself well enough, Morty or no Morty, but even he wasn’t so stubborn as to deny that he owed Chi everything. Chi had helped Rick design his first spaceship, shown him the best bars from Earth to Uazz, and even coached him on building ORA after he’d lost his eye on Sid-7.

It was no small wonder that Rick, who never met a Rick he liked, let down his usual defenses when he was with Chi. They’d been an unstoppable duo at the peak of their game. The only regret Rick had was that he’d never be the kind of partner that Chi was really hoping for.

Although Chi never said it aloud, it was implicit in the way his touch lingered longer than necessary, the way he’d make any excuse—*C’mere. Y-you gotta hear this*—just to lean in close. How many times had Rick caught Chi looking at him with a mix of sadness and hunger in his eyes? How many nights had he let Chi drink himself to oblivion until he finally gave in to his urges, taking Rick with desperate kisses and hand jobs that were always forgotten the next morning? At least, by Chi.

Chi inhaled deeply one last time then opened his eyes again. “Smell like one of them too.” He let go of the tie. “Almost didn’t recognize you, 280. Cute.”

The moment Chi released him, Rick pulled away and ran his hands down the tie to smooth it back into place. He sputtered half-aborted retorts, while Chi eased right back into his role as the ever-savvy tactician.

“I gotta say, 280. I may have outdone myself. Looks like that cute little code I set you up with worked out.” Chi nodded to Rick’s chest as though he could see the rigged black card nestled in his breast pocket. “Now that you can pass for an Elite, I take it your mission...was a success?” He coolly withdrew a cigarette carton from his pocket and lit one up. In spite of Chi’s calm exterior, Rick could feel the wild energy buzzing just beneath the surface. The intensity in his gaze, rich with expectation, was too much for him to meet.

“I...I didn’t do it,” Rick said quietly, averting his eyes.
For a moment neither Rick moved, letting the statement settle in. Chi’s expression flip-flopped between confusion and annoyance, and he ran a hand through his hair, grabbing a fistful and tugging it slightly. He shook his head, muttering under his breath, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Chi, c’mon. It wasn’t that—” Rick started.

“One job. You had one fucking job.” Chi ground out, his gaze burning into Rick as he spoke through clenched teeth.

“Y-you don’t know what he’s like! I couldn’t just—” Rick licked his lips. “And you wouldn’t have either.” He reprimanded himself for assuming Chi would so easily turn a blind eye and move ahead with Rick’s proposal, no questions asked.

“What are you talking about, 280?” Chi scoffed, rolling his eyes. “I don’t care if he’s a Morty. I know how you feel about them, but—” He took a draw from his cigarette, a pained look flickering across his face. “But I’m not you. I’m willing to do what’s necessary for the cause, whatever the cost.”

“And so am I. The mission’s still on, Chi. It just doesn’t have to go the way you think it does.”

“Yeah? And just how’s that, huh?” Chi’s knee was jostling up and down beneath the table. “That Morty, with his Epiphany thing or whatever, he’s the linchpin to the Council’s power. You know it and I know it. Taking him out is the only option. You have no idea what it’s been like around here, 280, since that fucking Morty showed up.”

“How long?”

“What?”

“How long have they had the—The One?”

“The One. Cute. Almost forgot they call him that.” Chi sighed. “I don’t know. Few years. Maybe five. Of course, you were too busy hanging out with the GF to pay much attention to poli-Ricks.”

“Yeah, yeah. V-very funny,” Rick said.

“Anyway, my guess is that the Council kept him for a while before they eventually started passing him around. Cue their groupies, the Elite. Sure, things were never perfect, but at least the Council wasn’t completely off its rocker. Then this Morty came into the picture, and overnight they started ruling with an iron fist. And not just with the GF, but in here too. Now...” Chi tapped his cigarette on the edge of the table. “Well, you’ve got eyes.”

Rick didn’t need to look to remember the poor shape of their surroundings; he could smell it. It saturated the air, crept across the floor along with the cockroaches, and clung to the other Ricks’ clothing—the unmistakable scent of despair. Even after Chi’s visual transformation, there was still the telltale line of dirt under his fingernails. It pained Rick to see his mentor reduced to this, a victim of the Council’s dictatorship.

“How’d you end up here, anyway, with the whole,” he gestured at Chi and the dilapidated restaurant behind him, “y’know, lunch lady gig? Thought you said you’d be in security. I really could’ve used that earlier.”

“You can blame that, my friend,” Chi said, sitting back, “on what’s called an ID-10-T error. Nearly had myself a cute little position with the Guards, but the whole thing went tits up when some moron in the Placement department got the assignment wrong. Now I’m stuck here, serving Biziwog
They sat in silence for a few minutes, Chi working on his cigarette and Rick meditating on what he’d learned, before Chi spoke up again, looking off across the food court. “Things are bad, 280, and they’re only going to get worse. That’s why we need to get rid of that Morty. The One. Whatever you wanna call him.”

“Mouse.”

“What?” Chi snapped his gaze back to Rick.

“His name’s Mouse.”

His companion paused, brow furrowed. He snorted. “Okaaay. What? So he gets a pet name now?”

“No. Chi, it’s not—”

“Wait. Did you learn that from one of those woo-woo Epiphanies or something?”

“Chi, listen. He’s different.”

“And here I thought they were supposed to make you smart. Couldn’t you have learned something useful? Like how to build a time machine so that none of this would’ve happened in the first place? Or a cute little mind control device? Or—oh, I don’t know—how to do your actual fucking job—”

“Listen!” Rick slammed his fist on the table, his outburst cutting through the hum of conversation around them. Shielding his face from the curious onlookers, Rick hunkered down to whisper, “It’s not just about the Epiphanies. Mouse can do more than that. He’s got...other abilities.”

In all the years they’d known each other, Rick rarely spoke back to Chi, let alone raised his voice, and he could see the surprise on Chi’s face as he watched him steadily. At last, like a teacher indulging his problem student, Chi sighed, his eyes softening. “Okay, 280. Fine. Tell me exactly what happened.”

Rick took a deep breath, placing his palms flat on the tabletop. Where to even begin? “When I won the auction—”

“How much did it run you?”

“Huh? Oh. Two... Two point five. Million.”

“Oooh, Jesus Fucking Christ,” Chi muttered, grabbing at his own hair again.

“Look, you said you were going to listen, so listen.”

Chi raised his hands in surrender and shrugged. “Fine, fine. Go on.”

“When you win the auction, they take you to this room. Everyone acts like it’s The One’s room or some shit, but I don’t think that’s it. I don’t think Mouse actually stays there. Anyway, I know what we agreed to, but I—we—there’s something more to Mouse than I think even the Council knows.”

This piqued Chi’s interest, and his dismissive pout turned into something more attentive.

“The Elite, the Council, they think he can only grant Epiphanies—which, by the way, total mind-fuck. They make your brain feel like it’s hopped up on Wixilan while going through a refractor drive.” He scratched the back of his head as though he could still feel the bizarre chill from before.
“But he can also—something happens where you can—” He shook head. “It sounds so fucking ridiculous, I can’t even say it.” But Chi waited patiently until he continued. “I think he can make you read minds.”

“Are you saying telepathy?” Chi asked.

“Yeah. It’s like telepathy. But it just sort of happens to you, a Resonance. I don’t think I was ever in control of it when it happened, so I’m still not sure how it works. He’s not really the most vocal Morty, but I swear, I could hear his thoughts.” Rick thought better than to mention under exactly what circumstances the effect was triggered. “And not just his! I heard the Guards’ thoughts before I ever saw them. They were still outside, and I think it has something to do with the proximity—something—I don’t know. But what I’m trying to say, Chi, is that we can use this.” He held Chi’s gaze. “This is why we keep him alive.”

Chi looked deep in thought, clearly wrestling with the overload of information he’d just been given. He hadn’t taken a puff from his cigarette since Rick began talking, and now it was burned down to the filter.

“Well? What do you—” Rick was interrupted again by a palm smashed against his face. He grunted in frustration, but Chi hushed him with a stiff “Quiet.”

Rick would’ve thrown more of a fit, but then he heard it: the triple chime from the Citadel’s public address system. He’d heard it go off inside the main atrium, and each time it did, every Rick around stopped in mid-step to cock an ear and heed the message. The announcements read like newspaper headlines, usually something about activities on the warfront or the latest injunction imposed by the Council of Ricks.

The three musical notes echoed ominously from the support beams hidden in the shadows, stilling all activity until the only noise was the grease popping in the fryers. From the speakers overhead came a synthesized female voice.

“Code Yellow, Capture Alert. Code Yellow, Capture Alert.”

Rick peeked out from between Chi’s fingers to watch the surrounding Ricks go pale. There was a rumble of hushed voices as they whispered to each other.

“Fuck me! A Code Yellow?”

“Haven’t heard that in a while.”

“I thought those G-Fuckers were losing their edge! How could they—”

“Shut up! It’s still on!”

The announcement crackled before continuing. “The following Ricks have been detained by the Galactic Federation: Rick of Dimension G-803 and Rick of Dimension K-247. As a precaution, all Ricks are now required to obtain visas before traveling outside of the Citadel.” There was a brief pause before a terse “That is all.”

Then it ran the same sound clip it played after every announcement: A brassy fanfare of trumpets sounded, followed by, “This message was brought to you by the Council of Ricks, providing Ricks everywhere with peace, protection, and prosperity.”

The PA system gave a final squeal of feedback and then went dead. It was like a spell being broken as the lunch crowd immediately resumed their previous grumbling, though there was an obvious
hurry to their movements. In another few minutes, the place had cleared out, leaving Rick and Chi in solitude.

When Chi removed his hand, Rick saw that it was shaking.

Rick wanted to ask about the announcement, but just then someone suddenly called out to them.

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t our good friend, Tick.”

They turned to the source of the voice. A pair of chicly dressed Ricks was sauntering casually over to their table. Going by their bespoke suits and the haughtiness that oozed from their eyes, Rick quickly gathered that they were Elite. Chi and Rick weren’t the only ones to notice them, either. The atmosphere in the food court turned sour as the few remaining shopkeepers watched the new visitors with apprehension.

“Oh, great,” Rick heard Chi mutter. “Grecos.”

When the Elite reached their table, one of them placed his hands on its surface, taking his time to swing his gaze from Chi to Rick and back again. He chucked disapprovingly.

“Tick, what have we told you about mixing with the Elite, hm? We both know you’re not allowed to be near them. Wouldn’t want them catching your fleas, remember?” He flicked Chi in the forehead with his finger.

Chi made as if to stand, but the other Elite at his back pinned him down firmly by the shoulders. He gave a halfhearted attempt to twist himself free, but soon settled for glaring instead.

“Y’know, θ-669,” Chi sneered, “for always saying you don’t want to catch fleas, you sure come down here a lot. You hoping I’ll finally suck your dick?”

Smoothing a hand over his impeccably slicked back hair, θ-669 chuckled, “Oh, Tick. Tick, Tick, Tick, Tick, Tick.” He shook his head, his tone dropping to unnerving depths. “You’re hardly in any position to be giving petty insults. This is exactly why you need us, the wise and benevolent Elite,” he ground his finger against Chi’s nose in emphasis, “to come down here and sort you lowlifes out. You should be thanking us for doing the Citadel a public service.”

“Public service?” Rick found himself saying before he could stop. “Is that what they call it these days?”

0-669 swiveled his attention to Rick, whom he hadn’t so much as glanced at since interrupting them. Now his eyes were narrowed in suspicion as he looked Rick over, his gaze lingering on his unbuttoned collar. Rick caught Chi’s piercing look from across the table, the message clear: *Play. It. Cool.*

The Elite’s very presence was making Rick’s stomach twist and his fingers clench into fists beneath the table, but he firmly marshaled his fury into some semblance of impartial regard. He was getting really sick of all this self-restraint, honestly, and was starting to think that a stiff drink or wank was in order once he got back to his suite.

As though satisfied with what he saw, 0-669 snapped his fingers and said with a smirk, “λ, seat.” On cue, his partner shoved Chi to the floor and placed a handkerchief down on the chair for 0-669 to sit on. The Elite Rick unbuttoned his jacket and propped his elbows on the table, teeth gleaming white as he smiled at Rick like they were old drinking buddies.

“Now, I’d wager that you’re new to the circle, Brother,” 0-669 began, “so I understand if you don’t
quite know how things work around here. But you really must be more careful around these
common-Ricks. They’re not like us. They’re not...Elite.” His eyes grew sultry as he slid one hand up
Rick’s thigh.

Rick stiffened at the unwanted touch, but he fought down the impulse to slug the Elite where he sat.
0-669’s brow twitched higher, misreading Rick’s tension for reciprocated interest. He hummed.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of meeting. And I make sure to know every Elite. Think of it
as a hobby of mine.”

“That means he fucks every one of them he can,” Chi said, wiping the grime off his hands. He hissed
as λ yanked him roughly up to his feet and gave him a hard shake.

“Better mind your manners, fuckface,” the grunt growled.

0-669 rolled his eyes. “Like I said, they’re not like us.” He turned back to Rick, sighing. “They’ll
sooner cut your throat than shake your hand. They really need someone to put them in their place.
Animals.” He leaned closer into Rick’s personal space then, his voice taking on a conspiratorial tone.
“Real k-lax problem around here. And the stuff’s total shit.” Peeling back his jacket to reveal a
baggie of magenta powder to Rick, he added, “On the other hand, if you’re looking for the good
stuff, I’m always willing to help a brother in need.”

“I-I’ll think about it,” Rick said, scouring his mind for an exit strategy.

“Well, aren’t you a cute one. So tell me, Stutters, you got a dimension to go with that Boy Scout
morality?”

Rick paled, his mind racing. “Uh, maybe I’d better—”

“Beta? “ 0-669’s eyes flashed with intrigue. “Ooh, I like the sound of that.” He shot his Elite
companion a knowing grin. “Well, β, hope your blood’s not too pure to indulge in a little gambling,
hm? What’re the chances I’ll see you at the next Morty Auction?” His hand slid even higher, the tips
of his fingers just brushing Rick’s flaccid cock through his slacks.

Rick jumped so high, his knees slammed into the underside of the table.

“Mm. Feisty. You’ll be loads of fun to have at the auction.” 0-669 then made a face. “And it’ll help
get the taste of that nasty X-Rick out of my mouth.”

“X-Rick?” Rick could barely breathe.

“Really. Can you believe it? Don’t know what the Council was thinking, letting him in. The bastard
even ended up winning. I chalk it up to beginner’s luck.” Giving Rick’s thigh a quick squeeze, he
added, “Don’t worry, though. Last I heard, the Council cleaned him up good. But why talk about a
filthy X-Rick when we could be talking about us?”

Rick saw Chi visibly redden as he watched the Elite coming onto him. There was an unmistakable
shade of jealousy behind his glare, and Rick felt the sharp stab of grief for putting Chi through this.
His fists clenched tighter.

Giving a loud huff, Chi crossed his arms and glowered. “Jeez, θ, what’s the matter? You scared of
the big, bad X-Rick? Think he’s gonna put a curse on you and cook your Mortys in his cauldron or
something?”

0-669 turned in Chi’s direction. “Nearly forgot you were an X sympathizer, Tick. You’re a regular
smorgasbord of issues, you know that? Real fucked up stuff. And I’ll tell you what’s wrong with those fucking X-Ricks.” The Elite Rick stood, his lackey stiffening visibly as he sensed the tension thicken. He sneered, “They’re the dead-end link of our kind. No Mortys means no camouflage means do not pass go, do not collect a hundred dollars. Their timeline was the universe’s way of saying that X-Ricks aren’t cut out to succeed. They’re an *abomination*, plain and simple.” Buttoning his jacket again, he nodded to λ who immediately let go of Chi and joined his side.

“Congratulations, Tick, you’ve officially made me lose my appetite.”

“Right. Like you came down here for a meal. Sure.” Chi didn’t even look at him, choosing instead to stare stubbornly at the floor.

“Like I’d eat the shit you serve. It’s not even fit for your little cockroach pals.” θ-669 turned to gaze affectionately at Rick once more. “I look forward to our date, β. Just take care of yourself until then. You know what they say. If you lie down with dogs...”

The two Elite bodily shouldered Chi when they passed him, cackling loudly as they left. Once the echo of their laughter died down, Rick spoke first.

“What a fucking grade-A asshole.”

Chi didn’t say anything as he brushed away the handkerchief and flopped heavily back onto his seat as though completely drained. Quietly, he removed his glasses which had been knocked askew and gave a noncommittal grunt in reply as he cleaned them with the corner of his shirt. It unnerved Rick to see Chi so despondent and reserved after his earlier almost frenzied energy. At last, Chi began to speak, his voice tired.

“Do you know why he was so interested in you?”

Rick blanched. “Wh-who? You mean that douchebag? Chi, I-I seriously was *not* even considering —”

“I know. I don’t care about that. Do you know why he wanted you so badly?” he repeated.

“Uh, b-because he thought I was Elite, right? And like you said, he has a thing for them. If the Elite are like celebrities, then h-he’s just some gold-digger looking for a quick lay.”

Chi sighed. “It’s because he thought you were from Dimension β. There’s a difference. I hate to say this, 280, but he was right. You don’t know how things work around here.” He placed his hands apart on the table, palms facing in, as though holding something between them. “The dimensions have always been categorized by letters. Even you know this, right?”

“Riiight,” Rick said slowly.

“Alpha to omega, A to Z. The labels were incidental, really, just a means of organization. Nothing else. But some Ricks started to see it differently. They started to treat the labels as a kind of ranking. And the Grecos,” Chi moved his hands closer together on one side of his invisible spectrum, “consider themselves to be at the top.”

Rick snorted. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“No kidding. But you’d be surprised the excuses people will make to feel superior. The Grecos honestly think they’re better than the rest of us in every way, even genetically. And the sad thing is, that school of thought is self-fulfilling. The further down the list you go, the worse off Ricks are.”
“Yeah. That part’s pretty obvious.” Rick had always known he’d been dealt a tough hand, but it was only after he’d started interacting with other Ricks that the disparity became clear. Whereas he’d spent his life scraping by, hiding, doing without, and struggling just to survive, things seemed to come easily to other Ricks. He’d simply chalked it up to the luck of the draw, never attributing his lot in life solely to his dimensional designation. But maybe Chi was right. Maybe the whole unspoken hierarchy perpetuated by Ricks was further reaching than he realized.

“Haven’t you ever wondered why they hate us so much? Do you really think it’s because our Mortys were stillborn? Really? I mean, jeezus. The multiverse is a big place. I’m sure there’s plenty of messed up shit happening in other dimensions.” He scooted closer. “Think about it. What makes people want to screw each other over all the time?”

“Because people are assholes?”

“Fear, 280. They do it out of fear.”

“Chi, what does this have to do with—”

“Hear me out. I have a running theory about this. They hate all Dimension X Ricks because they fear us!” His hands were moving in earnest now, flitting about as quickly as his words. “Everyone may think we’re at the bottom of the fuckin’ dimensional dung pile, but I don’t think it was always like this. What if we’re not from Dimension X at all?”

“Whoa. Chi, buddy, you’re losing me.”

“What if we were never X? What if we’re $\chi$? Chi!” Chi was looking straight at Rick like he needed him to understand this.

Rick furrowed his brow, but waited for Chi to explain.

“Don’t you get it, 280? I think someone stole our dimension’s rank from us. The whole thing may be just one big alphabet soup circle jerk, but it means something. We used to be right up there with the rest of the Grecos, but now being an X is the fucking kiss of death. If someone went through all the trouble of moving our dimensional designation out of the Grecos to shove us all the way to the bottom of the list, then they must’ve had a pretty damn good reason. They needed to keep us down because they thought we were a threat.”

“But a threat to what?”

“That, I don’t know,” Chi said, running a shaky hand through his hair. “But they obviously did it so that it’d be easier to keep us from doing—doing something. That’s the part I can’t figure out.” He then gave a short chuckle. “But too bad for them, we’re a lot tougher than they think.”

At least Rick could agree with that. He smiled at his mentor, amused but impressed by his steadfast pride for Dimension X Ricks.

“All right, 280. I’m in.”

“Huh? W-wait. You are?”

“I know it’s crazy, but if it means making things right again and putting an end to this hierarchy bullshit, then I’ll believe you.” He leaned forward. “So we’ve got a possible mind-reading Morty on our hands. What’s our first move?”

Pride glowed in Rick’s chest to know that Chi was on his side. It reminded him of when they’d
teamed up in the past, a freaking force to be reckoned with. “That’s where you come in, Chi. You
know this place better than me. I need you to be my eyes, help me get a lay of the land.”

“Easy enough. You think I’ve been spending my golden years standing in front of a deep fryer? I’ve
been keeping busy.”

“Yeah? You finally perfect your recipe for durite-based explosives?”

Chi chuckled. “And then some.”

“Good. First I’ll want to cover the lower levels. Specifically, Façade Lounge and the surrounding
areas.”

A shadow of concern crossed Chi’s face. “Tough, but doable. There’s some heavily guarded shit
down there, but I’ve seen a fair share of sub-levels 8 and 9. Figure you’d want to start there, looking
for—”

“Mouse. Exactly. With the way the Guards were stationed around Façade and the winner’s suite, he
can’t be too far. I need to get back to him and figure out this whole Resonance thing. It’s a start, but
it could be the key to getting him out of here.” It was hard for Rick to hide his eagerness. Just voicing
his plan aloud made the whole thing seem more real, and knowing that he was at least one step closer
to saving Mouse made his heart swell with hope.

Chi looked at him with a cryptic smile. “Cute,” he said softly, then continued. “Now, sub-level 10,
however, is a whole other ballgame. They got that place locked up tighter than a Shnixtic’s anus.”

“Maybe all the more reason to get some eyes down there.”

“Oh! That reminds me. Here.” Chi held out his hand to Rick. When Rick only looked at it
questioningly, Chi rolled his eyes and snatched his hand, quickly interlacing their fingers.

“Whoa! W-what are you doing?” He yelped, blushing at the rash display of intimacy. Then he
gradually felt a faint tickle spreading out from where Chi held him and, glancing down, saw a trail of
black dots marching dutifully out from under Chi’s cuff up his own.

“What the fucking hell!” Panicked, he tried to shake off Chi’s grasp, but Chi held firmly.

“Relax. They’re a gift.” Once the small procession was over, Chi held his hand up to his own face,
peering closely at a small, black bug perched on his knuckle. “Cute, huh? They’re nanos. Built them
myself. The little buggers are perfect for reconnaissance, data collection, even demolition.” He
winked at Rick. “Don’t worry. I’ve already programmed yours to interface with ORA. In an hour
they’ll be synced via your intranet to accept commands remotely. Just give the order, and they’ll
carry it out.”

“And these bugs are supposed to...help me?” Rick shivered as he felt his new inhabitants crawl
steadily up his wrist until they formed a dotted chain around his forearm.

“Oh, ye of little faith. You forget who you’re dealing with here? I’ve known you too long and taught
you every goddamn thing you know. Don’t think I’d just let you leave without a few tricks up your
sleeve.” Chi lit another cigarette, grinning at his own clever pun. The same cool and collected calm
from before made itself at home on his features as he puffed contentedly on the cig. “So what then,
lover boy?”

“W-w-what?” Rick stammered, the blood immediately rushing to his face. “Wh-who-who ever said
anything about lo—I don’t even know—I mean, it was just one—”
Chi sighed, blowing twin streams of smoke out his nose. “Like I said, 280. I’ve known you too long.” He dropped his cigarette and snuffed it out beneath his heel before standing. “All right. I’ve got my orders. I’ll give you an update in a week. Just keep ORA’s frequency open to channel XXN44.”

Rick stood in kind to see him off. “Chi—”

“It was good seeing you again, 280. Really good.” That same pained look from before swept across Chi’s eyes once more. “Watch yourself out there.” He held out his arm, bent at the elbow, hand in a fist.

“Jeez, do we really have to do this?” Rick shuffled in place. *Passwords, code names, and now secret handshakes?* When Chi lifted his brow expectantly, however, Rick mirrored the gesture, and the two bumped the backs of their forearms, creating an X.

Just as Chi turned to depart, Rick glanced up at the silent speaker mounted on the ceiling. He thought quietly for a moment, running the calculations over in his head, before calling out to Chi. “Chi, one last thing. Get me a complete list of all Code Yellow Ricks from the last 15 years.”

~~*~~

The LED light flickered in its faux wax container, and while it gave off no actual heat, it cast shadows on the walls as artistically as any real candle could. Mama Eun-Rick would have preferred the actual thing, but safety dictated that no open flames be allowed inside personal residences.

She was convinced that the dancing flames highlighted her best features, giving others just enough of a glimpse of her painted lips and stunning eyes while hiding the wrinkles that were increasingly becoming an eyesore to her. The sterile lights found throughout the Citadel did her looks no favors whatsoever, and she abhorred how they left nothing to the imagination. So all-exposing, so unforgiving.

Mama Eun-Rick observed herself in her bedroom vanity’s mirror, turning her face this way and that, trying to find her best angle which seemed to elude her more and more each year. The edges of the vanity were crowded with the small army of flameless candles which gave off a pleasant aroma and mixed seamlessly with her after-shower bodywash. Coconut Sunset was her go-to fragrance of late, the scent reminding her of her last vacation on the beaches of Kurtu in the Peleus Galaxy.

“And, by Morty, am I overdue for another one,” she pouted at the mirror, prodding at the bags that sat heavy beneath her eyes. Her duties as The One’s personal caretaker were beginning to take their toll on her. Gone were the days when she barely had to lift a finger to keep The One in line. A few heavy-handed punishments and stern words, and the brat would be shocked into silence, doing precisely what he was told like a good little doll.

Now, however, the runt was growing into a real pain right up her ass. First there was the uproar at the after-hours Morty Auction, then the botched session with the winning Rick, then that—that tantrum he threw before his second client arrived.

She wished she could say she was at a loss as to what had gotten into the boy, but the sudden rebellious streak didn’t exactly come as a surprise.

Sighing heavily, Mama Eun-Rick cracked open the massive tome resting between her elbows and began flipping to where a tasseled bookmark sat nestled between the pages. Brightly colored tabs stuck out along the edges of the yellowed and brittle paper, marking select passages that required additional attention, and her handwritten annotations covered every inch of the margins. She ran one
long finger down the page, her acrylic fingernail scratching uncomfortably against the parchment, before finally tapping it on the latest passage she’d been decoding.

The book’s small script was incredibly neat and would have passed for printed letters if not for the subtle fluctuations in the ink’s tone, which varied from black to a rosy pink. In places where moisture had seeped into the paper, the letters had burst free of their trim outlines to form red starbursts across the page.

Mama Eun-Rick wrinkled her nose as she skimmed the water-logged page, trying and failing to repress the wave of nausea that hit her whenever she looked at those red splotches. She did her best to avoid the pages where they appeared, hating to be reminded of the unsettling truth behind their author. As she tried to focus on the scripture listed beneath Song of Mortys—by far the most challenging chapter to get through on account of the many convoluted metaphors—Mama Eun-Rick’s mind wandered back to the day she’d first come across the book.

Back then, she wasn’t known as Mama Eun-Rick, but went by her stage name instead—Rickochet. After one particularly dead night at the club, she’d gone home with a client, looking to earn a few extra credits the easy way, and had wound up alone in his living room, admiring a stunning view of the Citadel atrium while he lay inebriated and unconscious in the bathroom. Not one to turn her nose up at the finer things in life, she’d indulged herself with a tour of his flat, helping herself to his liquor cabinet and interdimensional cable until she came across the room at the end of the hall.

Mama Eun-Rick could still remember the sickening smell of rot and human feces that struck her when she’d opened the door. She was convinced that something had died in there, and she was about to flee for help when she saw the small figure huddled in the corner.

It was a Morty. But like no Morty she’d ever seen. The boy looked half-dead, emaciated and motionless as he lay in his own mess on the floor. Clutched in his spindly hands was the book, and Mama Eun-Rick remembered her horror when she’d realized he’d gnawed his fingertip to the bone to write the small letters in his own blood.

The events of the rest of that night went swiftly. Her client was arrested for damaging Citadel property, the Morty was given medical attention but died in transport, and Mama Eun-Rick suddenly found herself the owner of the mysterious book.

*The Book of Morty.*

At first, she didn’t think much of it. It was an impressive piece of craftsmanship, and how a kid that age had managed to put it together, much less fill its 400-plus pages with the kind of language it had, still baffled Mama Eun-Rick.

On the surface, the book seemed straightforward enough. Along the same vein of many religious texts, it was a conglomerate of lessons, often told as parables, to other Mortys on what was deemed the “true and proper” way to live. Things like playtime, self-love—which Mama Eun-Rick eventually figured out referred exclusively to masturbation—and daydreaming were touted as wholesome pastimes that should be fulfilled in order for a Morty to achieve self-actualization.

It described all Mortys from all dimensions as united in their innate purity, a purity which was constantly under threat of being tarnished by Ricks. Ricks, according to the Book of Morty, were misguided creatures that fed on corruption and destruction, and who needed a savior to reach their own enlightenment. But as for how exactly, Mama Eun-Rick was still no closer to figuring out that part.

Only once she’d begun to read it in its entirety, however, had the full magnitude of the book’s
importance come to light. Amidst the lessons and warnings, the book also told the story of one particular Morty. *The One True Morty.*

This One True Morty, who was taken from his home and forced to endure a life of pain and suffering at the hands of Ricks, was painted as a larger-than-life figure. Colorful excerpts described his brainwaves as “a sun reaching far beyond the cosmos,” and himself as having abilities that were both a “blessing and a curse.” It went on to say that The One True Morty would eventually lead all Mortys to salvation in what was called the Great Morty Exodus.

But that was where Mama Eun-Rick had stopped reading. The story, while somewhat interesting, was too far-fetched to give it any real credit, and no matter how fanciful it was, it didn’t pay the bills.

Besides, Ricks weren’t all *that* bad, were they?

Without putting any more thought toward it, she had left the book to collect dust on her shelf, and there it stayed relatively undisturbed for years before demanding Mama Eun-Rick’s attention again.

At that time, Mama Eun-Rick had gotten into the habit of visiting the upper levels of the Citadel to slip into bed with a high-ranking Guard. He was a kinky motherfucker, but he treated Mama Eun-Rick well and even spoiled her on occasion with lavish jewelry. He was also quite the talker and tended to run his mouth off to her about work, whether or not she was even listening.

When he’d blabbed on about the Council’s long-range surveillance program, Mama Eun-Rick had been more interested in admiring her new earrings in the reflection of her lover’s chrome dildo. But the moment he’d remarked about their latest readings, she’d frozen.

“You *wouldn’t* believe the size of these brainwaves that came through. None of the techies had ever seen anything like it before! Honestly, they thought it might’ve been a solar flare, it was so powerful. They just couldn’t figure out what could possibly reach that far out into the middle of space.”

Mama Eun-Rick had to chuckle now as she thought of how difficult it’d once been for her to interpret the Book of Morty correctly, to see all the prophetic messages in it that were coming true around her. Now it was second nature for her to read the signs.

The kidnapping, the arrangement with the GF, the Morty Auction, even the most recent disruption with the X-Rick and The One’s abrupt change in behavior... Everything had been right there. She only had to decipher it.

When she’d come to the Council with the book clasped against her chest, she’d almost lost her nerve at the door. But if there was one thing Rickochet could do well, it was convincing people to believe the unbelievable. Luckily for her, her reading of The One’s coming was spot-on.

At her advice, the Council took The One and exploited his “talents” to the tune of rampant success, while Mama Eun-Rick, for her part, did much the same.

*Personal Caretaker.* The title had been her own idea, and with it, she cinched herself as an indispensable component of The One’s captivity. She had financial security, limitless access throughout the Citadel, and higher rank than even the Captain of the Guard. She and her select team of Eun-Ricks—another gimmick she’d devised to build The One’s mystique—lived comfortably in the Council’s good graces, a lifestyle she’d grown quite accustomed to.

But it could all be taken away in a heartbeat if she didn’t maintain control over The One.

Presently, Mama Eun-Rick was poring over a series of passages that had taken on a whole new meaning with the introduction of the X-Rick. They related snippets of events to take place between
The One and his so-called Counterpart, and while the language still cast some ambiguity to their meaning, Mama Eun-Rick felt that at this point it was safe to assume the book was, indeed, referring to Rick of X-280.

_Borne of misfortune, borne of lies; two become one in all Ricks’ eyes._

_Look to the eighth composite number of the 43-aliquot tree and you shall find The One True Morty. Look to the quinary 2110, and you shall find—_ Here, the rest of the text was again ruined beyond comprehension.

_That which had been denied Him would be their own undoing by His Counterpart’s hand. Like a great tidal wave, it would cleanse the land._

_As shadow bringeth light and fire bringeth life, his Counterpart would stir within The One untold wonders._

The last of the scriptures was by far the most difficult to grasp. She nibbled at her thumbnail, mulling over her options. So far, she’d done everything in her power to actually reverse the events of the Book of Morty from coming true. Every decision she’d made on how to raise The One had been designed with the intention of directly contradicting the teachings of the book.

When the book described The One True Morty as being “surrounded by the love of his own kind,” she’d ordered that The One be sequestered from all other Mortys. When it said he was “free from vanity,” she’d ordered that he be primped regularly and that his hair be grown out. Where self-love was celebrated, she forbade The One from ever touching himself.

But it seemed no matter what course of action she took, the prophecies inevitably took shape, and it was becoming harder and harder to counter them. And now she was beginning to wonder if she even should deny the message of that last reading.

She groaned just thinking of how Riq IV would react to the news. His orders to her had been concise: Report any relevant information from the book pertaining to The One. And, to her credit, Mama Eun-Rick had been diligent in this regard. Riq may not always believe every bit of it, but she still had a duty to inform him.

If her interpretation of the reading was correct, then it was essentially saying that the X-Rick needed to continue whatever he had started with The One in order for them to obtain his “untold wonders,” whatever the hell that meant. Despite Riq’s unhealthy obsession when it came to The One, Mama Eun-Rick knew that Riq would be willing to do anything if it meant having his precious little plaything spin him even more spools of gold.

Massaging her temples in preparation for the impending headache, she stood from the vanity table and walked to the video communicator positioned by her bed. She didn’t even consider the time. Riq always seemed to be up, regardless of what hour she contacted him, so she input a call to his direct line and half-wished that he wouldn’t pick up.

On the second ring, the video monitor came to life. Only Riq’s face was weakly illuminated by the light of the monitor, the rest of his chambers cloaked in darkness. Mama Eun-Rick could tell he was shirtless and his hair mussed up, but his voice came through as clear and sharp as usual.

“What is it?”

“Master Riq, my liege, I have consulted the book.” This was how she always began any correspondence relating to the Book of Morty, a way to gauge Riq’s disposition before continuing.
“Go on.” Acid burned at the edges of his words.

She worried her hands in her lap, out of sight from the monitor, and continued in a shaky voice. “Under advisement of the book, I believe that—that is to say, it would seem that The One should be allowed to—m-must continue to associate with the X-Rick.” She paused, watching Riq’s face as it contorted into something inhuman.

“If you’re suggesting that we let a thieving X-Rick—”

She hurried onward. “M-my liege, if you wish to unlock untold wonders of The One, this must be allowed to happen. The book does not say what must occur between them, but I am afraid the X-Rick is key to realizing The One’s true potential.” Those words never failed to catch Riq’s attention. Since the moment she’d first insinuated that there was more to The One than the Epiphanies, Riq had become fixated on it. She continued. “L-let us not forget, my liege, the book promises even greater gifts from The One than what you have already seen. We may only be scratching the surface with the Epiphanies. Just imagine what more could lie within.” She knew to choose her words carefully, the double entendre sure to arouse Riq’s baser interests.

Riq turned away for a moment, giving Mama Eun-Rick a clear view of what could only be blood on his neck. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts before he turned back to her. “Your advice will be taken into consideration.” This too was a template response, but Mama Eun-Rick internally relaxed, feeling like she’d just dodged the guillotine.

“Thank you, my liege.” She placed a hand dramatically over her chest. “I live only to serve—”

But Riq had already cut the connection, the screen going black, and she was left staring at her reflection in the dead monitor.

“Asshole.”

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 6 can be found here.]
Once given voice, the words demanded they be spoken again. “I want you. I want you,” he repeated, his voice gaining strength. He’d never been so sure about anything in his life, and the resolution sat sturdily in his belly like a platform from which he was poised to take flight.

There was no greater feeling than this.

First published 9/20/16

“Whiskey. Straight.” Rick leaned heavily over the bar’s counter to be heard over the bustle of the lounge. “Make it a double,” he added as he pulled his Elite membership card from the breast pocket of his coveralls.

“We got Scotch, Xaqar, Irish—”

“You got any Tennessee?” At the bartender’s curt nod, Rick continued, “I’ll have one of those.” When he offered his card to make the purchase, however, the bartender only shook his head.

“No charge, sir,” he said, sliding the drink to Rick.

Rick raised his tumbler in a show of thanks before throwing back half of its contents. He swirled the remaining amber liquor in its glass as he looked over his shoulder to survey the lounge’s patrons, already feeling the liquid courage soothe his nerves.

Sharply dressed Ricks congregated at the small tables and booths, bursts of their boisterous laughter backdropped by the rich piano chords that flowed from the speakers. Only a handful of the room’s attendees were actually participating in the ongoing auction, the rest—clearly Elite, by the way they flaunted their black cards—blatantly ignoring the auctioneer’s trumpeting onstage. In between genial toasts, they stole quick glances at their neighbors, sizing them up like opponents in the ring.

There was no question what was on their minds: the after-hours Morty Auction.

It’d already been a week since Rick first stepped foot in Façade, seven days that he’d waited and watched and whiled away his time in preparation for tonight, for his chance to see Mouse again. Now that he was finally here, his eagerness was only outmatched by his wariness of the auction
itself. It was the one thing that stood between him and Mouse, and the buildup of anticipation set his teeth on edge. After dumping more than half of his cash reserves into the last auction, Rick didn’t know if he could handle another pissing contest with a rival high roller looking to stake a claim.

He couldn’t risk losing. Fuck waiting another week.

*I’ll all come down to this,* Rick thought, tapping the black card absentmindedly against his bottom lip.

Insane how a simple piece of plastic could dictate so much of his personal freedom. It simultaneously granted him free rein to indulge in the Citadel’s high-class amenities, while it also, in no uncertain terms, bound him to the Council’s whims.

Over the course of the past week, he’d enjoyed many of the perks offered by his faux Elite status—rich accommodations, discounted or sometimes free services—but it also meant having to endure an insufferable amount of scrutiny by the Council’s toadies. Like overly attentive waiters, they checked in on Rick with annoying frequency, delivering lavish gift baskets of Serpa Capellan delicacies—always with a baggie of black-market Glazoxx tucked away at the bottom—tickets for front row seats to the Morty Games, and even the occasional Morty prostitute.

Without exception, he left every “gift” untouched outside his suite door.

Rick knew that the officials’ visits weren’t so much about making him feel valued as an Elite, as they were simply an excuse to keep tabs on him. Their daily reports of his funds were always accompanied by invitations to the public Morty Auctions, though he had no interest in spending a single credit there—a fact that irked them to no end—and Rick never failed to miss the way they tailed him at a distance wherever he went. While not the best P.I.s, they were damned persistent. Aside from the first day he’d managed to sneak down to sub-level 6 to see Chi, Rick hadn’t been given a minute to himself. He was constantly under surveillance, both in and out of his personal suite.

More often than not, the chain that tethered the card around his neck felt more like a shackle.

“Where’s a Rick gotta go to get some privacy?” Rick grumbled into his glass before taking another swig.

“Ah kin think of a few places, pardner,” a husky voice drawled low and sultry in his ear, as a hand made itself at home on the small of Rick’s back. Rick startled, choking on his drink and spraying it all over the unsuspecting bartender. Whipping around, he fisted the stranger’s shirt in one hand while digging the edge of the Elite card—the only weapon available—into his neck.

“Look here, pal. Who do you think—” He stopped short, blinking quickly. “You again?”

It was the cowboy Rick from before. The same red hat, the same spurred boots, even the same hefty belt buckle which glowed hot red beneath Façade’s crimson lights. Rick glared up at him as he wiped the back of his hand across his wet chin. “W-what the fuAAUGHck do you want?”

“Whoa, whoa there. Why so ornery?” the Rick asked, raising his hands. He gently plucked Rick’s fingers from his chest where they were curled into his bolo tie and added with a chuckle, “Seems e’ry time we’s meet, yer smartin’ tah trade fists with me.”

“Yeah, well, when you sneak up on someone, y-you tend to get that kind of reaction,” Rick snapped, finally relinquishing the pressure on the cowboy’s jugular and turning away angrily.

“Now, hold up there, pardner.” He looped an arm smoothly around Rick, coralling him back to the
counter before he could escape. Rick tensed as he felt the thick cords of muscle hidden beneath his button-down. “Ah jus’ came tah make a propah introduction.” He tapped his card on the bar top to get the bartender’s attention. “Rick’s the name”—yeah, no shit—“and ol’ C-165’s the claim.”

With a decidedly exasperated sigh, Rick eyed the open seats along the bar. He ground out his next words, “Look, Rick Rogers. Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate what you did for me last time, but I’m not here to—I’m not interested in making friends, so do us both a favor and get lost.”

C-165 raised his brow, a lopsided grin quirking his lips. “Well, if’n that don’t beat all! ‘Rick Rogers’? Ne’er took you fer the ribbin’ sort!” He laughed loudly before turning to the bartender. “Sorry ‘bout that, bahkeep. But soons you git yerself tidied up, ya minds fetchin’ ‘im another, lessee —” he delicately sniffed Rick’s cheek, making him flinch again. “Ten’see? Bett’r yet, make that two.”

The bartender shot Rick a dirty look but filled the order without complaint. This time, he accepted the black card that C-165 handed to him.

“Don’t we—I thought Elite drink for free,” Rick mumbled, taking the proffered drink with some hesitation.

C-165 smiled, not looking at Rick as he retrieved his card after it had been swiped. “Summus pay. Summus don’t. Summus—” He let the sentence hang unfinished and merely lifted his own glass to clink it against Rick’s in a toast.

Rick furrowed his brow, unsure of what to make of the statement. He eyed him cautiously as he took a swig of the whiskey, wondering for the briefest moment if he’d possibly been slipped a roofie.

As though picking up on his suspicion, C-165 guffawed. “Aw, ya ain’t got no reason tah worry ‘bout me, pardner. Friend or no friend, ahm on yer side.” He leaned his back on the bar and gestured with his chin to the stage where Auctioneer Rick was just wrapping up another low-balled bid on a Shadow Morty. “Ya aimin’ tah play?”

Rick gave a shrug. “Maybe. What’s it to you?”

C-165 grinned into his drink. “Figur’d ya weren’t ready tah call it quits after last time. What with—” He paused, frowning. “Well, ah’ll be tha first tah say, if that ain’t the most aggravatin’ thing that kin happen to a Rick.”

When Rick just eyed him askance, C-165 elaborated.

“Aw, hell. The Council, good as their intentions may be, still tweren’t very gentleman-like tah cut yous outta yer time with The One. ‘Specially after you’d won it, fair’s fair.”

Rick nearly spit up his drink again. “W-wait. How—how did you know about that?”

“Hoo-wie!” C-165 slapped Rick hard on the back. “You playin’ possum with me? E’rybody’s wisen’d up to it, pardner. News travels fast’r’n green grass through a goose with the Elite. After that—there show you put on fer us last time, you kin bet yer last schmeckle you’ve got the attention o’ e’ry Elite in here. And it ain’t jus’ on account o’ yer britches, plain as they’s may be.” He nodded to Rick’s chest, implying the worn pair of coveralls he’d finally retrieved from laundry. “Yep. There’s sum damn fine fellers rootin’ fer ya tonight. But ya best be ‘spectin’ sum others are still mighty sore.”

“Is—is that right?” Rick replied, trying to come off as unconcerned even as a sliver of unease needled at him.
“Either way, sumthin tells me tonight’s gonna be yer night.”

With a good-natured wink and bump of their glasses, C-165 pushed off from the bar and was swallowed up by the crowd. The minute he was gone, Rick’s shoulders drooped. His muscles had been wound tight during the short exchange, and Rick realized with a wry grin that he often felt as skittish within the Citadel as he had in prison. Had he just traded one set of bars for another?

Before he could dwell on the sobering metaphor any longer, a resounding double-clap yanked Rick’s attention to the stage where Auctioneer Rick was announcing the end of the public auction.

So it begins.

There was a clamor of griping throughout the room, and Rick watched warily as a pack of Guard Ricks began sniffing out the non-Elite patrons and herding them out the door. For once, Rick was thankful for his membership card, as he clutched it to his chest like a shield and glared over the rim of his glass at the forced exodus. When a Guard prowled too close for his liking, he bristled, instinctively running through a list of possible combat scenarios. But the Guard passed over him with hardly a glance to eject a common-Rick at the end of the bar instead.

Once Façade was left in the hands of the Elite, the atmosphere prickled with tension, and Rick shivered involuntarily when the lights dimmed and a smothering hush overtook the lounge. Auctioneer Rick stood center stage, a single spotlight illuminating him and one raised hand poised as though to soothe or strike his congregation. His movements were mesmerizing, and he looked so in control that Rick was momentarily awestruck by the eccentric MC. He had missed the beginning of the auction last time, and he quickly found himself spellbound as Auctioneer Rick launched into his elegant introduction from behind the podium.

Rick considered himself familiar enough with the stately veneer that surrounded the Elite, but now hearing those same deferential praises directed at him made it another matter entirely. The finesse of Auctioneer Rick’s words was enthralling in a way that was both strangely comforting and insidiously addictive, and Rick felt himself being lulled deeper and deeper into the world that he’d only paraded around in as a visitor.

A Rick could get used to this, he mused, dismissing the whisper of guilt behind that thought.

His reverie was cut short, however, when two sets of hands suddenly gripped him brusquely about the arms.

“What the—” He started to shout but was quickly silenced by a palm over his mouth. Someone swooped in to pluck the drink from his hand as he was summarily dragged away from the bar. He tried to dig his heels into the carpeting, but the unseen abductors only hoisted him higher, indifferent to his struggles. He all but froze when twin voices rasped into his ears in stereo.

“Best you mind yourself, Xsss-Rick.”

“B-b-best you m-m-mind yourself.”

Rick jerked his head to either side to find a pair of identical Elite Ricks dutifully marching him forward. Even though all Ricks were intrinsically similar, he was still stunned by this duo’s uncanny likeness, from their trimmed hair—parted to opposite sides and glistening with scented pomade—to their matching light-gray sharkskin suits, to their diamond-studded belts. But that was where the similarities ended. One’s face was twisted into a bitter scowl; the other’s, pinched tight with worry that seemed permanently etched into his brow.
“After the fiaasssco you pulled last time, our dear brother insssisted...” the one on his left hissed into his ear.

“...that y-you g-g-get a front row seat,” the other finished.

Abruptly, they deposited him at a table by the stage, gliding into their own seats to cage him in. In spite of their wiry frames, the twins were surprisingly sturdy as they dug their fingers into Rick’s shoulders like hooks, anchoring him to the spot.

“Yessss. You won’t want to miss this, Xsss-Rick.”

The table sat just outside the stage’s ring of light, hiding it in shadow while still giving them an unhindered view of the events onstage. Auctioneer Rick was in the middle of outlining the contractual terms of the auction at this point, and though Rick found the legalese itself telling, he had the distinct feeling this wasn’t what the twins wanted him to see. Even when the hand was removed from his mouth, Rick kept his tone low.

“Look, whatever game you creeps are playing at—”

“No g-g-game here, X-Rick. Y-your first mistake w-was trumping dear brother’s b-b-bid. And now you have to p-p-pay the price.” The timider of the twins’ hands were shaking where they gripped Rick.

Holy shit. If it isn’t Mr. Double-Chin’s stooges. He’d barely paid them any mind back when he was locked in the bidding war with ψ-531, but now C-165’s warning filtered through his mind.

Ya best be ‘spectin’ sum others are still mighty sore.

“All right, Jekyll and Hyde,” Rick snorted softly. “Lemme guess. You two are gonna bid by proxy and win back that fat aAUGHss’s honor?”

ψ-532 leaned in close, his chuckle coming out more like a growl next to Rick’s earlobe. “Oh, pleassssse. Why should we have to bother winning...”

“...w-w-when our dear brother already had his t-t-time with The One?”

A hairline crack ran through Rick’s composure. “W-w-what are you—what are you talking about? In case you morons forgot, the winning bid was—”

“But did you really think they’d waste a session on some ssskeevy X-Rick?” ψ-532 pinched the back of Rick’s neck, forcing him to look him in the eyes. “It wasn’t even an hour before they dragged your sorry carcass from the winner’s ssssuite.” He smirked as a look of doubt swept Rick’s face. “Wrote you off as little more than a clerical error, if memory sssserves.”

“You’re full of shit,” Rick snapped back. “The Council, they—I-I talked with them myself. We got the whole thing sorted out.”

“But d-d-did you ever think of w-what became of The One?”

Rick stiffened, oblivious to the fiendish grin the twins shared behind him.

ψ-530 continued, his unctuous voice seeping into Rick like a winter freeze through splintered stone, forcing open his fears inch by inch. “Stupid X-Rick. S-s-s-stupid, stupid X-Rick. The C-Council likes to keep their f-favorites happy. Of course th-they granted B-Brother a full session that night.”
“Why else do you think our brother’ssss not here? He’s off-station negotiating with the Gromflomites over his latest invention as we sssspeak,” ψ-532 whispered. “Seems he got quite a few worthwhile Epiphaniessss.”

Before Rick could devise a comeback, Auctioneer Rick’s voice boomed from the stage, his dry dictation replaced by a sudden zeal. “And now, gentle-Rick, The One you’ve all been waiting for!” He thrust a hand dramatically toward the rear of the stage, commandeering the patrons’ attention. Every Rick in the room sucked in a communal breath as the curtain lifted and The One stepped warily out into the spotlight.

The twins released their hold on him, and Rick rose shakily to his feet, drawn toward Mouse like a star falling victim to a black hole’s gravitational pull.

Mouse looked even smaller than Rick remembered. His eyes were unfocused and listless, and he was wheezing as though his lungs were too weak to draw in a proper breath. He was escorted to the front of the stage by a Guard Rick and Eun-Rick with red heels and large gold hoop earrings. Rick recognized her immediately as the frazzled Mama Eun-Rick who had accosted him in the hallway shortly after his arrest. The two each had a hand on Mouse’s shoulders, and Rick realized with a stab of dread that they were the only things holding Mouse upright.

Around Rick, other Elite began pushing their way to the front, murmuring their wonder at the extraordinary reaction provoked by Mouse’s presence. Rick couldn’t tell if it was an encroaching Epiphany or the relief of seeing Mouse again that made his eyes water.

The ψ twins also stood to follow Rick, circling him in a serpentine weave as they goaded him on.

“That’s it, Xsss-Rick.”

“There’s y-your precious little M-M-Morty.”

Onstage, Auctioneer Rick was beckoning Mama Eun-Rick to his side. He made a show of taking her hand and bowing low to kiss it, but she only rolled her eyes testily before yanking it back and crossing her arms. At Auctioneer Rick’s signal, the Guard Rick moved behind Mouse, pinning one of the boy’s limp arms behind his back.

“Jusssst imagine what our brother must’ve done...”

“...t-t-to get those Epiphanyes.”

Suddenly, the Guard wrenched Mouse’s arm up brutally. Mouse’s entire body spasmed and he cried out loudly, but his voice was drowned out by the swell of gratified sighs that spread throughout the assembly.

Positioned so close to the stage, Rick and his captors were hit full-force by the Epiphany, and Rick gritted his teeth as his brain was inundated with ideas that had previously eluded him. Dream-recording devices, quadruplethink, selective nerve gas, audible autocorrect. Formulas that’d once been cast in darkness were now bathed in light like a curtain had been pulled to the side. He was stunned at how his mind felt so sharp, so clean. Shining.

“Another one.”

Rick barely heard Auctioneer Rick’s order, but he felt its effect when the Guard Rick hoisted Mouse’s small form up even higher by his wrung arm, threatening to break it.

For a moment, Rick could only stare into the middle distance, dazed by the strength of the second
wave. Still circling him, the twins were unfazed by the jolt to their own intelligence, the Epiphany causing only a minute tremor over their frames before they shrugged it off. They were far more taken by Rick’s compromised state instead.

“That’s right. Feelssss good, doesn’t it?”

“Imagine w-what more you could have. C-claim him as your prize. M-m-make him serve you.”

The Epiphany, while intense, faded quickly like a fire gobbling up a too-small supply of kindling, and Rick nearly moaned, overtaken by the urge to prolong it. He’d bumbled his way, inexperienced and clumsy, through the first Epiphany that had hit him during the Guards’ raid, but tonight his mind felt wholly attuned to the effect, ready to latch on and devour it. And now that he’d had a taste, he was hungry for more.

If this was what Epiphanies could be like, it was no wonder the Elite paid hand over fist for them. And imagine if they were invoked by his own hand...

“Again,” Auctioneer Rick said, ignoring the lusty exhalations that sang from the audience. The Guard Rick did a double take, hesitating as though they were breaking some established routine. Then he seemed to find himself again and raised his gloved hand to strike Mouse, when Rick yelled from his spot on the floor.

“That’s enough!” Rick’s fists trembled at his sides, betraying his boiling rage.

Not accustomed to dealing with interruptions during his demonstration, Auctioneer Rick glanced quickly at Mama Eun-Rick before addressing the Elite. “Gentle-Rick.” He spread his arms wide, drawing their attention away from Rick’s untimely outburst and guiding them back under his siren’s call. “Gentle-Rick, it seems that one of us is a bit too eager to get started. Guess someone never heard of ‘good things come to those who wait,’ hm?” His forced laugh garnered a few strained chuckles about the room but did little to assuage their foul moods for having been shaken from their post-Epiphany afterglows.

Gripping the edges of the podium, Auctioneer Rick peered down his nose. “Very well, sir. Shall we start the bidding at one hundred thou—”

Rick stormed up to the stage and yanked his card free from its chain to hold it high overhead. “One million!” An incredulous gasp, rife with profanities, ripped through the crowd, but Rick remained unmoved as his eyes stayed locked on Auctioneer Rick, daring him to challenge the bid. “I bid one million for The One,” he said again, each word sharp enough to cut.

Elite Ricks gave visceral snarls, throwing their drinks to the floor and hurling insults at Rick’s back as they booed. The bid sat well above what any one of them could afford, automatically cutting them from the auction before it had even properly begun. Those who had come looking for the thrill of the chase felt cheated, and they rallied against Auctioneer Rick, accusing him of running a scam.

With ophidian grace, the ψ twins slid up to either side of Rick, their taunts snaking into his ear beneath the blare of the contentious mob.

“S-spoken like a t-t-true Elite, X-Rick.”

“You’re practically one of usssss.” It was the last thing Rick heard before they slinked away.

Auctioneer Rick looked plaintively at Mama Eun-Rick for some assistance, but she just shook her head. With a weary sigh, Auctioneer Rick checked the registered amount on his tablet and began the countdown. “One million going once...”
“One’n a half million.” The jangle of spurs sounded behind Rick as C-165 sauntered up beside him. Rick looked at him aghast, but C-165 only returned a gleeful smile, tapping his chin with his card.

“T-two million!” Rick shouted, determined not to be beaten. He looked hurriedly between C-165 and Mouse whose limp form was now being cradled in the Guard’s arms. Not tonight. Not tonight! Screw-all what happens in the next auction, just please not tonight!

C-165 gave a long, low whistle. Hooking his thumbs over his belt, he kicked bashfully at the floor with the heel of his boot. The Elite, now torn between their deep-seated respect for C-165 and their dismay at the state of the auction, stilled in anticipation of what the cowboy’s next move would be.

Finally, after throwing an amused smirk at Mama Eun-Rick’s murderous glare, C-165 shrugged and waved his hands. “Aw, hell. Who’m ah kiddin’? This’s too rich fer mah blood.”

The gavel cracked down on the podium before anyone could even react. Auctioneer Rick barreled through the countdown at record speed as a roar of indignation erupted from the audience. “Two million going once, twice, sold to Rick of Dimension X-280! That concludes tonight’s auction, gentle-Rick. Thank you and good night!” Spinning his finger in the sign for “wrap it up,” the Guard Ricks swiftly advanced on the tumultuous riot, forming a human wall between Rick and the Elite who looked only too eager to tear him to shreds.

Sidling up to Rick, C-165 gave him a congenial pat on the shoulder. “Told ya it was yer lucky night, pardner,” he said, before tipping his hat once more and disappearing into the fray.

Alone in the eye of the storm, Rick kept his gaze on the stage where Mouse had been just moments earlier. In the span of time it took for Auctioneer Rick to close out the auction, Mouse was promptly carried backstage again, leaving Rick to contend with his shot nerves.

What had gotten into him? He hadn’t intended to blow through the remainder of his funds like that. He was supposed to follow the plan: feel out his competitors, dole out his bids wisely, and save his trump card for the last minute. Instead, he’d laid the plan to waste in his Gadarene rush. Now there was no doubt in his mind that another victory would be next to impossible.

Beneath it all, however, a glimmer of hope leapt for Rick’s attention. He had won. For the second time running, he had won the Morty Auction and had the rest of the night to spend uninterrupted with Mouse. The thought alone wrapped around Rick like a protective ward, and his heart pounded at the feeling of invincibility that coursed through him.

He felt like a man with nothing to lose.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve showing your mug around here again, X-Rick.” θ-669’s taunt broke through his solace. Looking over his shoulder, Rick saw the pompous Elite, along with his familiar lackey, heading his way. They’d managed to slip through the Guards’ line of defense, and the way they were approaching Rick made it clear their intentions were anything but wholesome.

Rick gave a heavy sigh, not turning to face him. “Walk away now, θ.”

θ-669 stumbled slightly at the mention of his dimension but recovered quickly. “S-so someone’s told you about me. Should’ve taken it as a warning.” He smirked.

“I mean it,” Rick said, his voice emotionless. “You’ll walk away now, if you know what’s good for you.”

The Elite scoffed. “Is that a threat?” He paused to stay his partner, λ, who was already cracking his knuckles, eager to deliver a beating. Crossing his arms, he continued, “Those are some pretty tough
words coming from a pathetic X-Rick. The Morty Auction must’ve gone to your head if you think you can talk to me that way. Well, I’ve got news for you. I’m one of the Council’s favorites. And they don’t take kindly to criminals messing with their favorites.”

Rick turned his head to look at the Elite from the corner of his eye.

“That’s right. You’re just a criminal. A lying, cheating criminal,” 0-669 continued, brandishing his hand through the air. “How else could you have gotten your hands on that amount of credits? It’s the only real explanation. And once I tell the Council about it, they’ll cancel your winning bid.” 0-669 grinned wider when Rick finally faced him. “And guess what’ll happen then. The One will be up for bid again, and who knows? Maybe I’ll be generous with my own funds. Really give him a ride—”

His rant was abruptly smashed to pieces when Rick’s fist connected with his face. Skin split, teeth shattered, and 0-669 was knocked to the ground in an unseemly heap.

λ watched in shock, unable or just unwilling to step forward as Rick stooped down and yanked 0-669 up by his lapels. Crouched over his waist, Rick pulled his fist back and began punching him again and again and again.


He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so free, all the pent-up frustration of having to play by everyone else’s rules finally released like an animal set loose from its chains. Any respect he thought he’d held for the Elite, however fleeting, was chipped away with every blow, until he was seeing them for what they really were: self-seeking Ricks hiding behind their dimension-given privilege.

Blood was gushing in a torrent from 0-669’s crushed nose, staining his suit red, and the Elite gargled pathetically as he tried to fend off Rick’s attacks with uncoordinated flails of his hands.

“λ! λ!” he howled, bloodied spittle flying. “Don’t just stand there! Help me, goddammit!” His voice cracked.

Rick shot λ a threatening look, but it was apparent the grunt had already given up all thoughts of possibly intervening. Ganging up on a common-Rick down on his luck was one thing, but he wasn’t prepared to deal with one who actually fought back. He’d gotten too complacent in his cushy status as an Elite, and now he was sorely out of his comfort zone.

“No use cryin’ for help, 0,” Rick said, patting him on the cheek and making him flinch. “This is between you and me.” He took a moment to stand and crack his back from hunching over for so long. 0-669 immediately rolled onto his stomach and began shimmying away, desperate to put some space between himself and his attacker. Blood dripped down his jaw to leave a trail of red breadcrumbs.

“No so fast, buddy,” Rick tsked, circling around to 0-669’s side and giving him a swift kick in the ribs. 0-669 wretched as his diaphragm constricted and he clawed futilely at the ground.

“Why...” he sniveled. “Why are you doing this? Y-you’re fucking crazy!”

“What’s the matter? I thought you liked me feisty.”

A glint of sour realization flickered over 0-669’s battered face. “N-no. You can’t be—”

Rick planted a foot squarely on his back before he could finish, pinning him down with a grunt. As
0-669 wheezed, Rick skirted his hands along his jacket, quickly finding his membership card tucked away in his breast pocket. He waved it in his face before stepping back.

“Hey!” 0-669 twisted around to watch Rick, his one good eye locked onto the card in his hand. “Don’t you fucking touch that! That’s mine!”

“What, this?” Rick snapped the thin plastic in half and flung the shards in 0-669’s face. “Oops.”

An angry flush traveled up the Elite’s throat and cheeks. “You! You’re—you’re nothing but a—!”

Rick only smirked down at him, his eyes steely.

“That’s right. I’m a fucking abomination.”

Mouse’s mind was spinning, a kaleidoscope of fractured images and distorted sounds assailing his senses as he lay in the in-between, not quite dreaming and yet far from fully awake. His body felt cocooned in a haze, half-registering the world as though through a mesh gauze.

His last solid memory was of Mama Eun-Rick coming to his room and ordering him to take twice his regular dosage. He’d resisted but eventually choked down the bitter pills. After that, there was only the feeling of being lifted, carried, and then finally, mercifully laid down. Something—something horrible had happened between then and now, but he couldn’t grasp exactly what it was. All he could remember were blinding lights and an animal trying to viciously tear off his arm.

He groaned unconsciously at the faint memory and nuzzled deeper into the pillow, the satin cool against his overheated skin. Satin, sweet smells, warmth. He was in the winner’s suite, that much he could decipher, and the recognition sent a shiver of terror down his spine.

Now disembodied voices drifted in and out of his periphery.

“Why is he like this?”

“Master, I assure you the effects are only temporary. The One was uncharacteristically agitated tonight. This is guaranteed to make him more cooperative for your session.” Even in his heavily sedated state, he could recognize Mama Eun-Rick’s affected tone.

“So you drugged him?”

Whoever she was with sounded angry. There were more words, then the slam of a door, the noises blurring into a rabble that scraped Mouse like broken glass. But in the next minute, the room fell quiet and he felt the bed dip as someone sat down beside him.

He’s here to hurt me, Mouse thought weakly. His body tensed and he tried, tried so hard to rouse himself to get away, but he only managed to let out a whimper.

A hand was placed on Mouse’s forehead and someone tsked, “How much did they freaking give him?” Then, gentler, “Don’t worry, Mouse. You’ll be okay. I’m here.”

Rick.

He forced his eyes open just enough to see Rick watching him closely. His face was hazy around the edges in the dim light, but Mouse could see the small smile curved on his lips and his brow creased with worry. He must’ve said something because Rick chuckled and said, “Told you I would.”
Rick disappeared from sight, but before Mouse could protest, he was back and his lips were pressed to Mouse’s.

They were cool and wet, and Mouse found himself parting his lips without thinking, eager to drink Rick in. Rick’s tongue slipped inside, and Mouse moaned as a stream of liquid dribbled into his waiting mouth. It tasted surprisingly tart, if not a little citrusy, and he scrunched his face at the flavor.

“Swallow.”

Mouse drank down the strange-tasting liquid, feeling a peculiar chill spread through his chest as it worked its way down to his stomach. There, it sent a radiating burst along his nerves which extended to the very tips of his fingers. He blinked rapidly, feeling much more awake than he had even a moment ago, and immediately attempted to sit upright. He’d only made it a few inches before dropping his head back again, dizzy.

Rick laughed softly above him. “Not so fast, killer. Give it a minute. They stuffed you full of that sedative shit. The antidote’s going to take some time.”

“I-how did you—but where—” He put a shaky hand to his head, feeling the cloud of sleepiness clear with every passing moment.

“I know you’ve got a lotta questions, Mouse.” Rick turned back from whatever he had been doing out of sight and framed Mouse with his hands where he lay. “But don’t worry—”

Before he could get another word out, Mouse threw himself into Rick’s chest, grabbing the front of his coveralls like he were a lifeline. Mouse. He’d been so afraid he’d never hear anyone call him by that name again.

“Y-you’re...you’re really my Rick, r-r-right?” he said, his voice wrung. The Guards were fierce when it came to punishing those who crossed the Council, and after Rick had been arrested that night, part of Mouse was certain that he’d lost him forever. Now to have him here again...

Rick’s breath caught in his throat before he lightly placed his hand on Mouse’s back. It instantly spread a wave of warmth through him. “Yeah, Mouse. It’s me.” Rick petted down the length of Mouse’s spine and gave a little laugh. “Accept no substitutes.”

With a half-laugh, half-sob, Mouse just gripped tighter, his cheek to Rick’s chest. He could hear Rick’s heart thumping steadily beneath his ear, the muffled beat tapping out Rick’s very life in a secret code. At the sound, the emotion that bubbled up in his heart then was so foreign, it took Mouse a moment to put into words exactly what it was. He reached deep, untangled the feeling from the knot in his core, and shook off the dust after years of disuse.

“I-I missed you, Rick,” he managed.

“Yeah... Me too, Mouse,” Rick said, hesitancy licking the edges of his words, and Mouse wondered if Rick had gone a long time without saying them either. His heart thumped in rhythm to Rick’s, strong and alert, and the quiet memories of their last time together began to trickle through his mind.

Now he really did protest aloud when Rick put his hands on Mouse’s shoulders and abruptly pushed himself away to stand. He turned and began restlessly pacing the length of the room, rambling almost nonstop. “Y-you know, chemistry’s a beautiful thing, especially when you’ve got plenty of stuff to work with,” he said, gesturing to the console sitting on the opposite wall and its stock of spirits and liquors on the bottom shelf. “Extract the right compounds, mix in a drop of aged Alpha II bourbon, and you’ve got yourself a—a pretty effective adenosine blocker.”
For a few minutes, Mouse allowed himself to simply watch Rick flit about the room as he continued to speak in a harried rush. The way Rick couldn’t keep still broadcast to Mouse that he was actually nervous, and that fact, while surprising, was enormously reassuring. Unlike his usual visitors who came with a singular purpose in mind, Rick seemed out of his element, and Mouse felt instantly at ease, a glow of endearment warming his heart.

“Rick.” Mouse’s soft voice pulled Rick from his meandering dissertation on soporifics and hydroxyls. He froze mid-explanation and cast a rueful glance at Mouse, as though shy to seek his approval. Mouse nodded, and when Rick sat down on the bed again, he started, “Rick, why—” He was treading unfamiliar ground, but the need to know outweighed his trepidation. “Why did you come back?”

Mouse’s question hung in the air as Rick stared pointedly away, his lips working in tight pouts. After a few false starts, he turned to face Mouse fully and answered, “For you, Mouse. I came back for you.”

Hope came alive in Mouse’s chest, but he knew better than to believe it. “Is it because y-you want—” He curled in on himself, unable to finish his sentence.

“Of course that’s what he wants. It’s what all Ricks come for.”

“No! This isn’t about wanting those—some dumb Epiphanies! Not those.” Rick shook his head, worrying his bottom lip. “Mouse, I said you. You’re what I came back for.” He raised his hand hesitantly before eventually placing it on Mouse’s arm. “I’m sorry I ever left you, Mouse. I wish there was something I could’ve done, but the Council, they’re fucking cra—w-whoa, Mouse, what’s wrong?”

Fat tears had welled up in Mouse’s eyes, blurring Rick’s face like a sodden watercolor, before tumbling down his cheeks. His voice wavered as he shook his head. “H-h-how can you say that, after—after everything that happened? If it w-w-weren’t for me—”

“Ssh, Mouse. Mouse, it’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

He can’t mean it. He can’t. After what happened with the Guards... They almost killed him! So why would he still come back? It doesn’t make sense. I’m nobody. Nothing. Just the Council’s stupid pet, just like Mama says. All I’m good for is Epiphanies.

“Mouse!” Rick gripped Mouse’s arm tighter. “You’re so much more than that!” He waved his hand as though gesturing to an unseen mass. “You didn’t even know me, and you protected me. Hell, you think just anyone can face down the Captain of the Guard like that?”

Mouse let out a weak laugh at the memory.

“Mouse, you’re more—more than you know. You’re going to do great things, Mouse. Really great things. But not while you’re stuck in this place. That’s why I came back for you. I want to take you away from here.”

“Away?” Mouse blinked. What was "away"? For the longest time, there had always been the Citadel, and within it only a few familiar rooms: the winner’s suite, his own room, the auction, and the Dark Room. Some of his clients mentioned the planets they’d been to, but the names were often impossible for him to pronounce, let alone imagine. He furrowed his brow, the idea of leaving the only place he knew suddenly a frightening proposition.

Rick grabbed Mouse’s hands where they lay limp in his lap. “I know what you’re thinking. The universe is a big and scary place, I won’t lie about that. But, Mouse, it can also be amazing. Shit, the
worlds I could take you to! D-did you know there’s a planet where it snows ice cream? I’m not kidding! Well, okay. It's technically some plant-casein hybrid, but tell that to your taste buds. You can just walk outside and stick out your tongue. And there's every flavor you can imagine!”

*Ice cream?* A glimpse of a memory blossomed within Mouse’s mind, and right then he could taste the creamy, cool treat as it melted down his hand and onto the sidewalk. He remembered the tinkling of a song, someone wiping his cheeks down before bopping him playfully on the nose. The flashback was more a collection of disjointed images than anything as it played through his mind, painted in swirling pastels like—

“Like Neapolitan?”

“Y-yeah! That’s right!” Rick ruffled Mouse’s hair. “Glad to know you’re not just the chocolate-or-bust type.”

“Well, it’s...it’s been a long time, I don’t really remember.” Mouse gave a playful grin. “M-maybe I’m actually the *strawberry* type.”

“Why, you little rascal,” Rick snickered, looping his arm around Mouse and giving him a noogie. “I think it’s about time someone gave you an update. There’s a hell of a lotta flavors to try out there.”

Mouse squealed, twisting in Rick’s grip before finally getting himself free. He sat there, huffing and red-cheeked from the play-fighting, and as he looked at Rick, he could suddenly picture them enjoying ice cream together on a distant planet, standing beneath an alien sky, tongues sticking out, Rick by his side. They would have their fill, and then there would be other stars to see, so many countless others. He could imagine traveling to all of them...together.

Rick was smiling back at him. “That’s right, Mouse. It can be like that. There’s so much more for you to see. I can show you everything! You don’t—” Rick faltered, his voice becoming a whisper as he gave Mouse’s hands a squeeze. “You don’t have to stay here and put up with this anymore. No one deserves to go through something so fucked up, Mouse, especially not *you*. You’re too good for this kind of life.”

Rick’s words sparked a thought in Mouse that he’d left dormant since the prior week. Somehow he’d always known that Rick would take him away from here. It’d only been a vague notion before, but now, with Rick’s words behind it, Mouse felt his future swiftly taking shape in front of him. It was a future he wanted without question, a future made even better at the thought that Rick would be a part of it.

Mouse lowered his eyes to Rick’s hands, and suddenly a wave of worry doused the fire of bliss from just moments earlier. He sat up straighter, alarmed.

“R-Rick! What happened to your hands?” he cried, holding one up to look at the bloodied and torn knuckles. His fingers smoothed tenderly over the battered flesh, and he couldn’t stop the rush of concerned sounds that tumbled from him. *His hands! Who did this to his hands?* he kept thinking. These were the hands that had shown him so much kindness, every caress leaving him feeling safe and loved. These were the hands that made him shiver with something triumphant rather than with fear.

“It’s—it’s nothing. Just a—had a run-in with—”

Mouse didn’t wait to hear the rest of what Rick had to say as he brought Rick’s hand to his lips and laid a gentle kiss on the middle knuckle. His masters had demanded this gesture of him before, but this time he did it of his own free will, and into that one small kiss, Mouse poured all of his heart.
He looked up at Rick, taking in the blush that now colored Rick's usually ashy cheeks. Mouse could recognize the look of captivation on a Rick instantly—he'd seen it countless times already—but for the first time ever it was targeted at him and only him, not the Epiphanies or the sadistic appeal of pain. Heart pounding in his ears, something within him demanded that he move, that he answer Rick’s call.

Slowly, carefully he ran one hand up Rick’s arm, reaching for his face. He leaned forward, his head tilted, eyes sliding closed.

“Wait!”

Mouse snapped his eyes open when Rick grabbed him by the wrist, stopping him out of reach. “Mouse, I—I don’t want you to feel like—” He flicked his gaze away. “Don’t think you have to do this. I didn’t come here expecting something. I’m—I’m not like them.” He sighed, sounding defeated. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

Want?

Was that what this feeling was? Want? Mouse had never been given permission to actually say, much less do, what he wanted under the charge of the Council and Mama Eun-Rick. He now felt acutely at a loss for words. Ricks always took what they wanted while Mouse always gave. It was the natural order of things.

But what did he want?

Mouse turned his brown eyes up to look into Rick’s magnificent blue where the answer had been all along.

“I want—” He cupped Rick’s face with both hands and pulled him close, his mouth trembling just beneath Rick’s as he paused to taste his breath. It still smelled of the citrusy drink from before. “I want—” A hot tear worked itself free as he clenched his eyes shut, voice shaking.

“I want...you.”

The words worked like a key fitting beneath the tumblers of a lock, easing open the deadbolt on his heart. For so long, everything in his life had been denied him. Now, at last, he held something solid in his hands, something he could take simply because he wanted it.

Once given voice, the words demanded they be spoken again. “I want you. I want you,” he repeated, his voice gaining strength. He’d never been so sure about anything in his life, and the resolution sat sturdily in his belly like a platform from which he was poised to take flight.

There was no greater feeling than this.

This time, Mouse was met with no resistance, and his lips tingled when he pressed them against Rick’s, the electricity of the touch drawing him in for more. Rick stayed compliant beneath his hesitant kiss, and Mouse realized with a flood of awe that Rick was letting him set the pace, waiting to respond to whatever Mouse wanted. His cheeks burned as he fell slowly backward, pulling Rick down with him until he was cradled atop the soft pillow again. Long arms bracketed his head as Rick propped himself on his elbows, and Mouse let his arms loop themselves loosely behind Rick's neck, a gentle reminder for him to stay.

As he paused to taste the kiss, Mouse startled when Rick mirrored the motion, his tongue brushing hesitantly along Mouse’s lips, supplicating him for entry. The hazy memory of Rick’s thick tongue in his mouth came into sharp focus, and a tingle pulsed in his groin as Mouse gasped and flicked his
tongue across Rick’s, coaxing him in. Rick reciprocated generously, and in seconds, Mouse was curling his toes and panting through the new mist of prurient desire that fogged his mind.

Mouthing at the corner of Mouse’s lips before breaking the kiss, Rick pulled back. His breath came heavy, and he rested his brow on Mouse’s forehead, gazing at him with lust-laden eyes.

“What do you—what do you want now, Mouse?”

Mouse didn’t think it could happen, but his cheeks began to burn even hotter. Just a week ago, he would’ve thought it impossible for a Rick to talk to him like this, but now in the course of a few minutes, he’d been asked to state what he wanted not once but twice. Mouse immediately thought of the last time they’d been together, how Rick had put his hands so sweetly on him, how he’d stirred up that strange, itching feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Whatever that was, he wanted that.

Before he’d even opened his mouth to answer, however, Rick cocked his head, a smile slowly spreading itself over his lips. “Of course,” he rumbled. He leaned down to whisper in Mouse’s ear. “I’ll do whatever you want, but first let me hear—I want to hear you say it.”

“I-I-I...” The combination of embarrassment and overpowering arousal made Mouse stumble over his tongue. “I want you to—to touch me.”

“Where?” Rick purred.

Somewhere, anywhere, everywhere!

With a frustrated sound, Mouse quickly scooted back toward the headboard until he was seated upright. He took Rick’s hand and held it against his throbbing prick.

“H-here,” he breathed.

“God, Mouse...” Rick’s eyes were dark with desire, and he pulled Mouse in for another kiss as he slipped his hand beneath Mouse’s robe and wrapped his fingers around his leaking cock.

Mouse’s cry was immediately swallowed by Rick’s mouth as the pleasure spiked through him. Just like before, Mouse felt an all-encompassing fire unfurl in his core, its tendrils coiling around his heart and snaking down his limbs. Rick stroked him sensually, his tongue diving into his mouth, and Mouse felt wetness trickle down the inside of his thigh as his arousal heightened.

When he clutched at Rick’s clothed shoulders in a stranglehold, he whined, now desperate to touch Rick as closely as he was touching him. He wanted—needed to feel Rick’s skin, needed to see him in his entirety.

“R-Rick,” he panted, fingers lost in Rick’s hair as Rick kissed a trail down the side of his neck. “Rick, please...”

“I know. I know, Mouse,” Rick murmured just above his racing pulse. He seemed to struggle with his own desire to continue, but eventually he withdrew his hands from between Mouse’s thighs and began pulling down the zipper of his coveralls.

“No! Wait! Wait.” Mouse scrambled forward onto his knees. “I just—” How was he supposed to say that he wanted to undress Rick himself?

As though reading his mind, Rick smiled and nodded. “You’re sure?” he said, kissing Mouse’s
eyelids softly. When Mouse just hummed in the affirmative, he lay his full length out on the bed, one arm tuck beneath his head while the other curled into Mouse’s hair to caress the nape of his neck.

Mouse swallowed, and his fingers were shaking as he reached up to grasp the zipper at Rick’s collar. It wasn’t that he hadn’t seen his fair share of undressed Ricks, but their nakedness had always been forced on him, not something that he could set the pacing or degree of. Even this small measure of control was thrilling, and Mouse’s heartbeat pulsed in his head, making him dizzy and restless. As he slid the zipper down, revealing Rick’s skin inch by inch, Mouse’s breath hitched in his throat.

Rick’s chest was littered with scars.

Driven by curiosity, Mouse pushed aside the fabric to run his hand down the plane of Rick’s torso. Small and light, jagged and deep, he traced the crisscross of disfigured skin with the tips of his fingers as if he were following stars in a constellation. As he grew bolder, Mouse stripped the coveralls from Rick’s shoulders to probe inquisitively at the raised knot on one shoulder blade and a curious ring of black dots around one forearm before helping Rick shimmy his arms free from the sleeves. The expanse of damaged flesh captivated Mouse; it was as though he were seeing a Rick for the first time. The Elite Ricks who visited him had no such scars, their unmarred skin an indication of the comfortable lives they led. To Mouse, Ricks sat at the top of the food chain, unchallenged and indestructible. Or so he’d thought. With each scar, each welt, it slowly dawned on Mouse that Ricks could also, in fact, be at someone else’s mercy.

But if Ricks were the apex predators, then who preyed on the predators?

Mouse flicked his eyes up to take in the sight of Rick lying bare-chested, his breath coming fast despite his relaxed pose. His erection strained obviously within the bottom half of the coveralls, although he made no move to free it.

When Mouse tried to meet his eyes, however, he was surprised that Rick had turned away, his mouth set in a grim line almost as if he were...ashamed? Rick gave a dry laugh. “Not much to look at, huh? Hope you weren’t expecting s-something easier on the eyes.”

Instead of replying, Mouse raised himself to his knees and began to unravel the white cloth that swaddled him. This caught Rick’s attention, and Mouse saw him swallow a lump in his throat as he followed his movements closely. When Mouse had loosened the cloth from around his shoulders and waist, he dropped it, letting it pool beneath him. He tried to keep his voice steady even as his heart beat wildly within his chest.

“S-see, Rick? I’m the same as you.”

Staying perfectly still, he let Rick see him for the wreck he was. He let him take in the mangled line work that decorated his ribs, the darkened splotches of skin that would never regain their original color. Even his cock, which still bobbed stiffly at attention, pulled to the left where a gnarled knot of scar tissue warped its base. Mouse blushed openly but didn’t hide, even as his hands twitched with the impulse to cover himself up.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful.” Rick’s voice came out gravelly.

Mouse snapped his attention back to him, stunned to see Rick drinking him in with barefaced adoration. The look of worship in his eyes was like nothing Mouse had seen before. It was awash in genuine wonder, and Mouse felt his heart clench at the thought that he could possibly be the object of such awe. Never breaking eye contact, Rick closed the space between them and pulled Mouse into a tight embrace. It was warm and dizzying and exciting in a way that had nothing to do with fear and absolutely everything to do with ecstasy. Their hearts were hammering in tandem, and as Rick
claimed his mouth again, Mouse hurried to tug the coveralls down and finally off him, the very notion of having anything between them suddenly repulsive.

Mine. You're mine.

Rick’s freed cock burned hot like a branding iron where it smacked Mouse’s thigh before eventually settling between his ass cheeks. Mouse shivered at the intimate contact and gasped into Rick's mouth. While Rick worked him with one hand, he gently rocked his hips, sliding his cock back and forth across Mouse’s pucker hole. Yes... Keep doing that. Mouse moaned as the sweet friction loosed another wash of arousal from him. He barely noticed Rick move his fingers to stroke behind Mouse’s balls before he suddenly froze.

“Mouse?” Rick asked gently.

Mouse hummed, not wanting to extricate himself from the intoxicating sensations that swept through him. The dual stimuli of staggering pleasure were turning his cognizance to mush.

“What’s this?”

Mouse peeked open his eyes to see Rick holding up two fingers in front of his face. They glistened with slick, and Mouse blushed, nuzzling Rick’s neck as he giggled.

“C’mon, Rick. It’s...you know,” he said shyly. The silly schoolyard rhyme his classmates used to chant played unbidden through his head:

*Little Fred wets the bed when he tinkles with his wiener.*
*Little Fred wets the bed when he tickles his own keister.*

He scrunched his brows together. *Unless...Ricks don’t get like that?* He tried to think back to whether he’d ever seen a Rick get wet in behind too, but he couldn’t recall. Maybe they just never showed. Maybe he’d missed it. Maybe Rick thought it was gross. “Is there—is there something wrong with it?”

Rick’s chest began to tremble, and when Mouse looked up, concerned, he realized that Rick was trying to hold in a laugh. He balked, his blush spreading up to his ears.

“Hey! What’s so funny?” Now he’s laughing at me?

“No! No, no, no. I’m not—” Rick let out a chuckle before biting the inside of his cheek. “It’s fine. Everything’s fine.” He swiftly scooped Mouse up in a bear hug, making Mouse gasp as the air was squeezed from his lungs.

What’s gotten into him?


Mouse squirmed out of the embrace and shoved Rick’s face away. “Stop it, Rick. Y—you’re acting all—all crazy.” He tried to sound upset, but he couldn’t fight the smile that ghosted along his lips. *Amazing? Incredible?* No one had ever called him that before. He was more accustomed to words like “nitwit” or “whore,” and the unexpected bout of praise had him glowing with pride.

Then Rick was kissing his palms, his wrists, his arms, as he slowly drew Mouse down again to lie flush with his chest. Mouse came willingly, sinking into the embrace as if he were finding home, and
in that moment, Mouse knew that he would follow Rick anywhere. The reverberations thrummed through Mouse’s rib cage as Rick spoke, his voice low and rough with want. “So,” he said, his fingers circling Mouse’s hole while he resumed stroking his cock. “Do you ever ‘tickle your own keister’ in bed, Mouse?”

A moan escaped Mouse as he bucked again in Rick’s grasp. Need and excitement were locked in combat at the forefront of his attention, while the more lucid side of his brain slowly processed the question. “W-what? Wait, how did you—”

“No, he never touched himself like this. It was something he’d learned to curb years ago; Mama Eun-Rick’s teachings had seen to that. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t free to think of Rick when he was alone at night.

“I...I’m not supposed to—ah!”

Rick had dipped a finger in up to the second knuckle and was now pumping it in and out in time with the hand on his shaft. Mouse shuddered against Rick’s hard chest, able to do little more than keen and wriggle his ass, unsure of whether he should move forward into Rick’s hand or back onto his finger.

It was the best kind of predicament to be in.

“But you do think of me. You think of me in your bed?”

Of course, every night for the past week, he’d fantasized about Rick coming to his room in the night. He imagined Rick sweeping in, tall and unafraid, bathed in a comforting light. He imagined Rick’s voice coming low through the darkness, his gentle words solacing him, his strong hands caressing him. But like a good little boy, Mouse had lain with his hands fixed at his sides as the wetness soaked through the sheets. How many times had he cried there alone in his dark room, quiet save for his frustrated whimpers and the constant churning and whistling of the machines just on the other side of the wall?

“That’s it, Mouse. Tell me where you sleep at night,” Rick crooned, running his thumb over Mouse’s moist slit.

Mouse shook his head vehemently, squeezing his eyes shut, the assault on his nerves warring with the thoughts that surfaced at Rick’s urging. Ricks were never to know where his actual room was. The Guards, they never let anyone near. Besides, he couldn’t tell Rick how it was always too cold there, how he’d be left alone for days between the auctions. He couldn’t tell him how he’d count down each chime of the elevator bell with dread. 3...2...1...

“Mouse—”

“I can’t! I can’t! They won’t let me!” he wailed. A roiling ball of heat was growing rapidly in Mouse’s stomach as an inexplicable tremble washed up his arms and legs to gather at his groin. He felt as if he were running to the edge of something that was already rushing toward him too fast, too fast!

“Cum for me, baby.”

The rasp of Rick’s voice in his ear was what pushed him over the precipice. His mouth fell open, though he drew no breath, as his body was seized by a pleasure like nothing he’d ever known.
It surged forth from his core, throwing his muscles into spasms and shaking free any remnant of autonomy he had until he was reduced to a quivering, crying mess. Tears leaked from his eyes and a hot liquid splattered onto his stomach as he thrust frantically into Rick’s hand. It felt like something were being ripped free from inside him.

Moan after choked moan dribbled from his lips with every wave of the orgasm, and when there was finally nothing left to give voice to and the spasms dissipated into spotty tremors, Mouse descended into the blissful void.

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 7 can be found here.]
With Mouse, there was nothing but honesty in his thoughts. His mind was an open book to Rick, and each page only galvanized his growing feelings for Mouse. To say he was merely *intrigued* by Mouse no longer cut it. *Fascinated?* Of course. *Obsessed?* Maybe. *In love?*

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First published 11/25/16

Hello again and sorry for the long hiatus! To thank you for sticking with us, we are happy to bring you the longest chapter to date! We also made some updates to chapter 7, so we recommend re-reading it if it's been a while. From here on out, we're confident that we'll be sticking to a chapter-a-month release schedule, so you can all look forward to that too. Thank you for all your support, as always, and we hope you enjoy this latest chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“In pain, He stirreth the mind;
In pleasure, He spreadeth the heart;
In fear, He serveth blind;
And in wrath, He teareth apart.”
- O Baby-diah 4:16

Rick never imagined it would feel like *that.*

As he stared up at the ceiling, his breath coming fast and strained, eyes glazed, he felt his mind begin to right itself like a tree bowing back after an unforgiving windstorm. The torrent of emotions and images that had assaulted him moments earlier drained out along with the fleeting scraps of words that echoed down the now unoccupied recesses of his brain. Once the last vestiges of the Resonance quieted, Rick sucked in a final breath and exhaled slowly.

“What a fucking ride.” The words, sounding flimsy to his own ears, hung in the quiet of the winner’s suite.

Eager to parse the impact of the Resonance into something more tangible, his mind scrambled for an analogy: a concert where every audience member was screaming into his own mic; a painting of a thousand colors all jumbled together; a book where 20 different stories overlapped the same page.

If Rick had thought the Citadel was loud enough with its constant activity and announcements, the Resonance made it a hundred times worse when he could actually hear the thoughts of every Rick within it. The onslaught of stimuli left his ears ringing and his head spinning as if he’d been swept up
in a tornado.

And at the heart of that tornado lay Mouse.

Rick’s hand paused in its trek down Mouse’s back where he was petting him in slow, mollifying strokes. As he looked down at the small boy still sprawled across his chest—breath drawing in and out steadily, shoulders clammy with dried sweat—he marveled at how a meek, little kid could be the gateway to such massive power.

Some Ricks spent a lifetime trying to gain access into the human mind. After all, it stored all the information that made the universe what it was and what it could be, and tapping into that nearly limitless source of data spelled nearly limitless power. Sure, there were truth serums and rigorous torture methods to wrest the desired information from another's brain, but the technology and labor it required made it an unwieldy and time-consuming endeavor.

But this... This was different.

To infiltrate another’s mind without their even being aware, that was what every man in a position of power craved. Why threaten or coerce your enemy into giving you what you wanted when you could simply reach in and take it? It was the ultimate form of espionage—covert, instantaneous, and undetectable. And considering how devious most Ricks were, Rick could picture a few who would be very, very pleased to get their hands on it.

An unwelcome image of Riq immediately sprang to mind, and unease curdled in his stomach at the memory of the lead councilman’s parting look. It was like Riq had wanted nothing more than to skin Rick alive and pluck his tendons like a sadistic musician.

If a man like him ever got control of Resonances, Rick didn’t want to think of the fallout.

His arms tensed around Mouse reflexively as he purged the thought of Riq being in his position, here with Mouse at his most vulnerable. Just imagining another Rick’s hands on Mouse made acid pump in Rick’s gut, his jealousy intertwined with an overwhelming desire to protect his new lover.

Mouse gave a reedy mewl as he was squeezed uncomfortably tight, and Rick startled, immediately loosening his hold. He took a deep breath and mentally chided himself for allowing the Resonance to distract him from an even greater discovery—the one that currently lay dozing in postcoital bliss in his arms. The simple reminder helped to cool the adrenaline that coursed through his body at the unsavory thought of an intruder, and he focused on the calm that always blanketed him when he was with Mouse.

Eyes closed, he envisioned Mouse’s thoughts from the Resonance. They’d dissipated into nothingness with Mouse’s slumber, but while in the throes of sex, they’d woven about Rick like a silken cocoon. Each thread caressed Rick with a satin-soft touch, wholesome and tender.

For all their gossamer translucence, there was an unfathomable depth to Mouse’s thoughts, layer after layer echoing that same unwavering chant: love. The message, while simple, was undeniable, washing over Rick like a steady tide until it filled his sinuses with its saline but cleansing touch.

Part of Rick—the jaded, distrusting part of him—refused to believe it at first, determined to find some shadow of deceit in that pure mindscape. Subversion, ulterior motives, lies—these were things Rick understood, had come to expect after years spent fighting for his very life. He’d learned long ago to burn bridges before he’d even reached them. But when he delved deeper into Mouse’s mind space, lifting figurative veils to the side in search of something to point out and accuse, it never showed itself.
With Mouse, there was nothing but honesty in his thoughts. His mind was an open book to Rick, and each page only galvanized his growing feelings for Mouse. To say he was merely *intrigued* by Mouse no longer cut it. *Fascinated*? Of course. *Obsessed*? Maybe. *In love*?

*What then, lover boy?* Chi’s tease played back in his head.

Rick had been quick to dismiss it, even balked at the idea originally, but now it badgered him until he knew he didn’t have a leg to stand on. It’d been so long since Rick had felt this way about someone. But love? Hell, it was hard enough to even love himself sometimes. And yet Mouse evoked a depth of emotions in him that hadn’t manifested in years. Or was it decades?

He pressed his palm to his right eye, the metal of his synthoptic cool beneath the fever of his skin. It whirred quietly, storing away the last batch of video feed he’d collected and—Jesus Christ, he was talking about his life in decades, *multiple* decades, while Mouse couldn’t be far past his first. How old was the kid anyway? Piecing together what he’d gleaned from Chi and Mouse’s obvious lack of life experience, he couldn’t even begin to guess.

With any other kid, Rick would never have entertained a shred of attraction. For fuck’s sake, he wasn’t a—*cradle-robber, kiddy fiddler, pedophile*. He hastily turned away from the accusatory slurs. Never having had a Morty of his own meant Rick was unused to dealing with kids in general. Whenever they’d crossed his path in the past, he’d maintained a civil tolerance toward them, maybe mild amusement, but little else.

But where he’d usually only see a kid as a headache and dead weight, Rick saw Mouse as a source of boundless possibilities that spoke to his soul.

*Soul?* Rick wrinkled his nose at his own sappiness. He considered himself a man of science, goddamn it. Words like “soul” and “fate” weren’t part of his vocabulary, and yet they were increasingly finding themselves at home on his tongue.

After all, only fate could dictate that two pariahs like themselves, who’d been unpersoned by the same cruel masters, would be brought together. And with their union, Rick felt an innate sense of connection and completeness that he’d been a stranger to for much of his life. The very notion that he could have a lover after so many years of solitude still felt like a foreign language to him, awkward along the consonants and downright blasphemous on the accent. But with Mouse, he knew that he’d become fluent in it soon enough.

So far, Mouse was proving to be a very encouraging tutor.

Nothing had been so alluring as the sight of Mouse ensnared in ecstasy’s merciless grasp, bare and trembling, and Rick’s heart began to quicken as he revisited the memories of earlier. Resting his hands on the globes of Mouse’s ass, Rick’s musings were soon eclipsed by the growing arousal that entreated him for his attention.

It stemmed, in part, from the unique scent that was mixed in with Mouse’s boyhood musk. Since he’d first noticed it, Rick found himself mystified and enraptured by it, although he couldn’t quite place the aroma. The closest he could compare it to was a cross between sour apple and a mellow white wine...or was it vermouth? It wafted from Mouse, even in his sleep, and Rick noted how it came strongest from the sheen that coated the insides of his thighs.

Gently kneading Mouse’s cheeks apart, he dipped a finger down his crack to glide it along the moistness there.

Mouse shifted under his touch, murmuring softly.
While Mouse’s biological quirk had initially caught Rick off guard, he couldn’t say he was entirely surprised. Self-lubricating orifices were a common sexual characteristic he’d seen—and personally appreciated—in countless alien species. To see it in Mouse, whom he’d assumed was from an Earth very similar to his own, only underscored the fact that he and Mouse really were from different worlds. But if the kid already had the ability to ignite a Rick’s genius through pain—and now through pleasure, as had recently been confirmed—then why couldn’t Mouse’s dimension hold a few more surprises?

Rick brought his fingers to his tongue to lick off the residue. *Yep. Definitely sweet vermouth.* He salivated at the memory of Mouse’s face at the moment orgasm had claimed him. Still sandwiched between their bellies, Rick’s cock began to stir, yearning for the release that had been building since before he’d brought Mouse to climax.

Even if it meant being left blue-balled, Rick couldn’t bring himself to deny Mouse his first proper afterglow. So when Mouse was left boneless and twitching in Rick’s arms, Rick had been content with simply holding him as he rode out the last of the Resonance’s aftershocks.

He gave a frustrated hum. The fact that their first night together had to ride on the coattails of something as life-altering as the Resonance left Rick feeling fractured, torn between two rivaling puzzles that demanded he figure them out.

There was still so much to learn about Mouse—his past, his abilities, his potential. The Epiphanies had been amazing in and of themselves, but now the Resonances made them look like parlor tricks by comparison. If this latest power had remained hidden beneath the surface all this time, what other wonders did Mouse hold? Rick sensed that he was poised to bear witness to a significant shift within Mouse, one that would not only carry Mouse out of his captivity but also transform Rick’s life forever. He toyed idly with a curl at the end of Mouse’s braid as he wondered how it would play out.

Then there were the Resonances to crack. At present, they were still like a drug-induced sensory overload, nothing like the romanticized tales of telepathy Rick had heard about his whole life. He felt as though he’d been cast haphazardly into the maelstrom of thoughts, the bombardment making it nearly impossible to pick out any one individual voice. Without the ability to home in on a specific target and decipher the information, the Resonances were more like migraines at this point. Learning how to navigate them would take focus and time.

Luckily for Rick, he was never one to shy away from a challenge.

With one arm wrapped around Mouse, Rick carefully slipped himself free from beneath Mouse’s limp body, gently rolling the boy onto his back. Dried spunk flaked off Rick’s bare stomach as he moved, and he brushed it away with mild annoyance when it snagged on his happy trail.

Mouse gave a tiny murmur and tucked one fist beneath his chin while he let the other arm flop loosely over his head to land on a pillow. Sitting back on his heels, Rick paused to take in Mouse’s sleeping form. He appreciated the way his hair stuck with sweat to his temples, the steady rise and fall of his chest, the natural blush of his limp member. That same bluster of possessiveness roiled inside Rick when his eyes rested on the scar at the base of Mouse’s cock, and he recalled Mama Eun-Rick’s misplaced accusation from their prior encounter in the hallway:

*So what did this one do? Try to cut off the kid’s willy again?*

His next exhalation housed a curse as he vowed he’d do whatever it took to keep Mouse from being hurt again. The drive which had originally fueled his vengeance was now poured into protecting Mouse. While he couldn’t undo what had been done in the past, he could strive to show Mouse that life could be more than just pain. It could be so much more than that.
Bending over to brush his lips over Mouse’s soft stomach, Rick shimmied farther down the bed until he was nestled between Mouse’s thighs. When he began planting kisses along the insides of Mouse’s legs, alternating from side to side, Mouse squirmed again, slowly rousing from sleep.

“Rick...?”

“Mm?” Rick hummed against his left thigh, sliding his hands beneath Mouse to cup his ass.

“Th-that—that tickles,” Mouse mumbled, giggling as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Oh, it won’t be tickling for long,” Rick purred, already hearing a Resonance start to whisper in his head. “Trust me.”

Mouse’s were always the first to make their presence known, a steady stream of “feels good,” “more,” and other chaste expressions that, for Rick, would’ve come out as simply “fuck, yeah.” More abstract impressions painted the backdrop of Mouse’s praises. Fragments of Rick’s earlier hand job replayed in his memory, and a cozy serenity warmed his bones. With a selfish kind of pride, Rick grinned around another open-mouthed kiss to know that Mouse’s lust was incited entirely by him.

As his nose brushed Mouse’s scant pubes, the fresh scent of Mouse’s juices besieged Rick’s senses, and he licked his lips in depraved hunger.

“W-what are you doing down ther—whooh!” Mouse let out a strangled cry, popping awake. His hands immediately scrambled down to clutch at Rick’s hair as Rick ran the flat of his tongue firm and slow across Mouse’s asshole.

As though Rick had any intention of leaving.

When Rick let out a low chuckle, Mouse’s hole fluttered beneath his warm breath, and more thoughts came barreling down on Rick one on top of the other in a fierce surge.

This time Rick stood his ground against the raging current. *Stay focused, Ricky-boy. You can do this. It’s just like chewing gum and walking at the same time.* He greedily swallowed down a mouthful of spit and Mouse’s slick. Okay. *More like eating ass and reading minds, but who’s counting?*

Mouse tasted the way he smelled, only thicker and sharper. The liquid coated his tongue like syrup, and as soon as he’d lapped up what clung to Mouse’s cheeks, a fresh wave oozed from his entrance. With an impatient grunt, Rick hoisted himself to his knees, pulling Mouse’s slight form up with him, arms clasped firmly about Mouse’s middle. The boy gave an ungainly yelp as he was suspended upside down, his legs kicking uselessly in the air above Rick’s shoulders.

Rick pointed his tongue and drove it into Mouse’s hole, diving deeper whenever the ring of muscles spasmed around him, alternating between pulling Rick in and squeezing him out. When he gave a particularly wicked swirl of his tongue, Mouse let loose an anguished moan which Rick echoed with his own.

The floodgates had been opened, and Rick was once again tackling the deluge of Resonance. Determined not to be overwhelmed this time, he clung to one particular string of thoughts, twisting it about his metaphorical fingers before it could slip away. It had its own brand of starkness, so different from Mouse’s silky embrace, and Rick was able to glide along its flat and dull surface with relative ease. It wasn’t without some hesitation that Rick left Mouse’s lyrical thoughts behind as he
sought out and ultimately found the thread’s source within the mental plane.

God, what I wouldn’t do for a drink.

Never would’ve taken this gig if it meant having to quit the sauce.

An intense thirst suddenly parched Rick’s throat as he tuned in to the disembodied thoughts. They seethed of discontent, of patience rubbed raw, and of the manacles of stifling order and discipline.

Guard Ricks.

Rick spread his range, picking up more like-minded presences that fit together like a trellis. As he flitted from one Guard to the next, he found that each shared the same tired vapidness. The years toiling beneath the Council’s rule had wrung out any spirit these Ricks had, leaving them mere husks in uniforms.

It was a disquieting notion, and Rick lingered only long enough to hear a few more of their disgruntled complaints before releasing himself and latching onto another thread of thought that whisked him away to a different part of the Citadel.

Fortunately, Rick found that while part of him traipsed through the invisible byways of the Resonance, his consciousness was never far from the winner’s suite. He was still able to focus wholly on the task at hand—as Mouse’s licentious moans attested to—and with some deliberate testing, he discovered that he could simultaneously occupy multiple spaces. Each thread he explored carried its own unique properties, and like running his fingers over a guitar’s strings, he could discern different Ricks simply from the tenor of their thoughts.

The abrasive feel of the Guard Ricks gave way to a prickliness that Rick attributed to yet another group of discontented worker Ricks. They stunk of resentment and scathing criticism for the system that oppressed them. Elite Ricks took on an oily acidity with a near constant stream of self-affirmations bolstered by a disdain for their fellow Ricks. A mellow lightness from a small collection of consciousness granted Rick a welcome respite, and he spent a few uninterrupted moments enjoying the calm that came from none other than Eun-Ricks.

It was difficult for Rick to measure time and space while in a Resonance. With his conscious mind still interacting with the real world around him, seconds seemed to pass like hours as he flew effortlessly across what had to be miles of invisible distance. Things like levels and rooms fell obsolete as Rick traversed minds that existed on a completely separate plane. No walls could keep him out, and as he pursued a remarkably vibrant thread of thought, he realized he’d even gained access to the private quarters of the Captain of the Guard. A brief tour of the Captain’s own dark secrets simmering beneath his calm exterior made Rick cluck his proverbial tongue. Talk about unresolved issues.

Meanwhile, in the winner’s suite, Mouse was howling in ecstasy, raking his blunt fingernails down Rick’s thighs as he writhed uncontrollably, his braid swishing back and forth like an impatient tail. It shook free of its ribbon, spreading across the sheets and catching the light from the bedside lamp to glow a golden brown. Mouse had resorted to wrapping his thin legs behind Rick’s neck for purchase while Rick ate him out with gusto. His complete inexperience with anilingus meant that every lick and nibble from Rick had him in a tizzy.

Rick nuzzled his face between Mouse’s ass cheeks to suckle at his soft behind. He flicked his tongue across his hole, down his perineum, and lapped long strokes at the underside of Mouse’s balls where they were drawn tight against his body. Stooping over to cradle Mouse’s head atop his lap, Rick reached around to glide a hand beneath Mouse’s pert cock, squeezing it lightly between the V of two
long fingers. Mouse bucked sharply upon contact, jettisoning Rick even further across the mental landscape of the Citadel.

Like a comet hurtling through a cluster of stars, Rick went spinning topsy-turvy into the ether before reaching out to latch onto an arbitrary thought from among the masses. It immediately bit into him, and Rick internally winced at the phantom pain.

The thread he’d snagged himself on was sharper than any others, caustic to the touch. Just following it through the network of cerebral noise left Rick’s mind prickling in response, eager to extract itself in an act of self-preservation. But Rick pushed on. He was too far gone already, compelled to see what else he could find in the hidden domain of the Citadel’s patrons. It was only when he drew closer to the source that he realized this Rick’s thoughts were not like the others.

While most threads crossed each other at odd intervals, showing a sympathetic link between their hosts, this one hung remote and alone. There were no points of intersection, no overlap with any others as it hovered solitary in the vastness of the intellectual space.

Letting his curiosity get the better of him, Rick ran his hands over the outlying stream of thought, allowing the thread to wrap around his fingers and arms like chilled mercury. By now, he’d have picked up on a litany of thoughts, but he was only greeted with silence. Was this a dud? Someone unconscious? No, there was still the subconscious plane to explore. Pushing any lingering apprehension aside, Rick dipped in even deeper.

In an unexpected rush, the thread enveloped his arms and shoulders, washing over his chest until it closed over his heart in a smothering grip. At last he heard something. It started as a distant echo that grew into a roar, and the first tangible thought that came up from the depths made Rick’s blood run cold:

\textit{C H A O S}

The letters scrawled themselves frantically on the blackboard of Rick’s mind. Rick mentally skidded backward, trying to untangle himself from the thoughts that clung to him like an insidious spider’s web, but it was too late. His mind was abruptly set ablaze in brilliant reds and thorny black as the thread vomited up flashing images of carnage and suffering too grotesque even for Rick to stomach:

A small child hung from vicious hooks while his entrails spooled on a metal spit below him. Dusty wind blew across a field, barren save for a solitary burning tree and a ring of shrieking gravestones at its base. A skull gave him a toothy grin as a phallus fucked it through the eye socket, cum dripping down its face like pearly tears. Limbless bodies that were little more than bloody stumps squirmed across a concrete floor and on tattered bedsheets like oversized maggots.

Even as Rick’s mind reeled with disgust at the scenes that swept through his mind’s eye, the host’s own twisted delight nestled in his core like a content serpent. No matter how hard Rick tried to free himself from the thread, it threw up barbs to snag him like a caught fish, dragging Rick closer to whisper menacingly into his ear.

\textit{All mine.}

It wasn’t so much a phrase as it was an all-encompassing state of being. This Rick’s yearning for control was paralleled only by his sadism, the two unquestionably linked. The clamor for possession trumped all other emotions, a bloodthirsty willingness to do anything to achieve total control. It permeated every facet of this Rick’s mind, the obsession summed up in the disturbing image of a headless body suspended by long strips of skin—a lifeless puppet on bloody strings.
Whoever this guy is, Rick thought, he’s a sociopath with a god complex.

Without Rick’s willing it, the thread took an abrupt turn and a new scene flooded his mind: rows upon rows of Ricks in Galactic Federation uniform. As if the incongruity of military alliances weren’t confusing enough, the soldiers’ turgid skin was that unmistakable shade of death, and twin black pits sat where their eyes had been. They pushed blindly past Rick as the procession marched dutifully forward through a war-torn city—no, the Citadel. Rick recognized the tall buildings and larger-than-life statues from the main atrium, only now vertical banners veiled every face, the GF emblems on them crossed out with a ragged X.

From between the neatly formed lines of soldiers, Rick caught sight of a small figure standing in the midst of the gruesome death march. It glimpsed in and out of view, but as Rick drew nearer, all his attention narrowed down to that single point of familiar long hair and white robe now splashed with red.

Oh, god.

Mouse stood with his head bowed, oblivious to the soldiers that marched by him. Like a shiv to his gut, it reminded Rick of how Mouse had appeared on the Morty Auction stage, the very definition of defenseless. A pair of hands, unsettlingly similar to Rick’s, crept over Mouse’s thin shoulders to lace themselves around his throat. As Mouse was quietly lifted off the ground and strangled by the bodiless hands, Rick called out, his voice muted and impotent within the mental projection. Beyond Mouse, the white robe stretched upwards and out until it bled into one of the massive, red banners that hung from a looming monument. Then it began to fall, slowly cascading down like a torrent of blood to reveal the gold-plated figure beneath.

Riq.

As Rick gazed up at the statue, his body froze in fear. Any other threads that Rick’s subconscious had been tracing were swiftly dashed apart, and Rick felt profoundly alone. The same stomach-churning agitation that plagued Rick during his last encounter with the council leader came back with a vengeance.

In front of him, Mouse’s eyes were wide, his mouth moving as he silently cried out one syllable again and again.

Rick... Rick...

“Rick! R-Rick! Please don’t stop!” Mouse was calling out his name in a pleading whine. “Please! I’m almost—nnngh!—almost there!”

Rick blinked, snapping out of his stupor. It took him a moment to get his bearings again. He was still kneeling on the bed, Mouse suspended in his arms, his tongue buried in Mouse’s ass. What had felt like minutes playing spectator to Riq’s horror flicks had actually only been seconds, and Mouse’s weeping hole was still clenching fitfully around his tongue, desperate for Rick’s attention.

A blaze of voracity roared within Rick, and he attacked Mouse’s ass anew, stimulating him until his nerves rang. He relished the sweet cries and the whirlwind of Resonance-driven thoughts that swathed Rick in love and encouragement as he raced to block out the unsettling revelations he’d stumbled across.

The ghost of Riq’s thoughts threatened to taint Rick’s mind, and in an ardent feat born from both fear and a desperate desire to claim Mouse as his own, Rick thrust his tongue as deep as it would go, the fat base pushing against Mouse’s inner walls as he growled low in his throat.
The vibrations propelled Mouse’s nerves into overdrive, and, for the second time that night, he was cumming. His legs tensed, toes splayed, and he arched completely off of Rick’s lap, hands grabbing fistfuls of the sheets where he braced himself. Stuttered exclamations ripped themselves from Mouse’s throat as ejaculate shot from his cock to paint his chest and neck in hot droplets.

Rather than riding the Resonance out to the furthest corners of the Citadel, Rick turned inward instead, savoring the intoxicating feel of Mouse and only Mouse in his mind. His thoughts were a sanctuary compared to the hellscape he’d witnessed, and he was quickly engrossed in the blissful sensations that rebounded off of Mouse and into himself.

After Mouse’s orgasm had swelled to its peak, it eventually ebbed, rolling out of him like mist over a mountainside. In its wake, Mouse was left drained and delirious with sex’s aftertaste, and when Rick relaxed his grip, he slid into a limp, panting heap on the sheets. Cheeks flushed, the faint glow of Mouse’s eyes shone from beneath his lashes, pulsing in time with his heart.

Even before the final remnants of Resonance left him, Rick was already on all fours, his own cock in his hand. It burned a furious red, and despite his earlier restraint, Rick knew he couldn’t go without release for much longer. He braced himself over Mouse, fisting his cock in quiet desperation.

Leaning down to lick a drop of cum from Mouse’s cheek, Rick nuzzled his neck, inhaling deeply to taste his musk on his palate and tongue. When Mouse stirred, mouth automatically seeking out Rick’s, Rick closed his lips over his in a deep kiss. He dove his tongue in, a blatant replica of his earlier anilingus, and Mouse arched into it with a needy moan.

Rick was startled out of the kiss and gave a husky groan when Mouse put his hands on his cock. He pulled away to see Mouse looking up at him with an intense focus that belied his blissed-out daze.

“Let me?” Mouse’s voice was steady despite his breathy exhalations.

“Mouse,” Rick started, unsure of what to say next. He was already painfully hard, and the thought of Mouse on him was nearly enough to drive him over the edge. His body chose to answer for him, however, and he moved to recline alongside Mouse, his eyes never leaving him.

With surprising agility, Mouse quickly picked himself up and settled in front of Rick’s erection, his hands already making themselves at home along the length of him, squeezing and stroking lightly, becoming familiar with him. The rest of Rick’s body bore the savageries of a tough life, but thankfully his cock had been spared any disfigurement, and it stood thick and long and tremulous in Mouse’s small hands. Rick held his breath as he watched, afraid that disturbing the very air would somehow wake him from this dream.

He was just about to reassure Mouse not to push himself, when in the next moment Mouse opened wide and took in the head of Rick’s engorged cock.

It was just as hot and wet as he’d imagined, and, god, how many years had it been? How long since he’d last felt a mouth on him like this? Whatever was meant to be words came out as a growl, and he thrust wantonly into the succulent wetness of his mouth.

As Mouse’s lips sealed over him completely, his skilled tongue massaged along the underside of Rick’s glans, the blend of warmth and pressure heavenly on Rick’s cock. He gave head like a pro, and though Rick wondered briefly how a kid his age could be so experienced, he knew better than to dwell on that question for too long. A tantalizing flutter of Mouse’s tongue quickly dispelled any reservations he had, urging him to just lie back and enjoy it.

Rick wasn’t the only one enjoying himself, as evidenced by the trickle of Mouse’s thoughts that
nudged at the fringes of his mind. He smiled, cupping the back of Mouse’s head appreciatively as Mouse began bobbing up and down his length in an impressive show of skill.

“Y—you’re doing just fine, Mouse. Fuck,” Rick hissed, toes curling. “More than fine. Aw, yeah, babe. Just like that.” The chain of praise flowed easily from Rick, and each mark of encouragement sparked another wave of Resonance which Rick used in turn to further stroke Mouse’s ego, feeding their cycle of mutual affection.

Gaining momentum and courage, Mouse drew off of Rick’s member to suck hard at his tip, before plunging down again, coating him in wet warmth. Rick’s hips jumped clear off the bed with another strangled “Fuck!” He wouldn’t last long like this, not with the way Mouse was working him, and he slid his hand down to grasp Mouse behind the neck, signaling for him to stop. But even at Rick’s urging, Mouse stayed put, steadfastly committed to giving Rick a—*gift*... *Gift*... Strange choice of words, but the Resonance rang stubbornly in the center of his thoughts.

“Shit, Mouse. I’m—I’m gonna cum,” Rick said through gritted teeth, his final warning. When Mouse’s answer was only a resolute *I can handle it*, Rick murmured, “Okay, babe. If you can handle it,” before he finally relented, letting the ember of orgasm in his groin spiral into a full-blown inferno. His abs contracted, and he dug his heels into the mattress on either side of Mouse as the orgasm engulfed him.

But Mouse was still on him. Not just on him, but swallowing him down, his throat enveloping Rick’s pulsating cock, his nose buried in Rick’s pubes. *Holy—!* Rick felt himself swell even thicker at the sensation of being deepthroated, and he shot load after load down Mouse’s throat. His mouth agape, a long string of curses and gibberish tumbled out of him in an incoherent mess.

Once he’d emptied the last of his reserve and his muscles released their hold, Rick flopped unceremoniously onto the sheets. Convinced he’d be able to sleep for a month, he managed to give only a slight shudder when Mouse finally slipped Rick’s spent dick free from his mouth. With all the finesse of a well-practiced routine, Mouse properly licked him clean then suckled lightly at his slit to drink down whatever remained.

“That’s it. It’s official. I’ve died a-and gone to fucking heaven,” Rick wheezed, scrubbing a hand down his face. Raising both wobbly arms, he flapped his fingers in a *c’mere* gesture to Mouse, who paused momentarily before crawling up to nestle himself between Rick’s arm and chest. With a grunt, Rick pulled back to look Mouse over quickly. “I didn’t—didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No—” Mouse’s answer came out muffled around a bubble in his throat. He coughed and tried again. “No. I-I’m all right.” *Did I do good? Tell me I did good.*

“Yeah, Mouse. You did real good.” Rick closed his eyes and yawned, the rigors of the day finally catching up with him and leaving him bone-tired. He wrapped an arm around Mouse, indulging in the feel of his warm skin against his. Sleep was looking like a very welcome reward right about now.

“You did it again, Rick.”

Rick cracked open an eye. “Hm? Did what, babe?”

Mouse squirmed out of Rick’s hold, and Rick felt an unpleasant chill where they no longer touched. “You talk to me like—like I said something, when I didn’t. I-it happened before and it happened right now.” He squinted his eyes, looking at Rick with something akin to wariness. “H-h-how are you doing that?”

*Oh, boy.* Rick tensed, knowing they’d have to have this talk eventually. *Just didn’t think it’d be so*
“Actually, Mouse, it’s—it’s, uh, because of you.” Sometimes simple and straightforward was the best approach.

“Because of me?” Mouse repeated slowly. He waited for Rick to continue.

Clearing his throat, Rick sat up so that he could talk to Mouse eye to eye. “That’s right. S-see, you know how you—well, you grant Epiphanies, right?” Mouse nodded, shifting his focus to Rick’s collarbones rather than his eyes and spurring Rick to leave the topic quickly. “It’s k-kinda like that. Except, uh, when I do this—” Rick paused to caress Mouse at the nape of his neck, massaging his fingers through Mouse’s hair until his shoulders relaxed. “Or this—” He guided Mouse to him so that their lips met. Mouse responded instantly, leaning into the kiss, and when Rick gave a languid caress of his tongue, Mouse opened his mouth to grant him access. The Resonance began popping in Rick’s mind, and he tore himself away long enough to whisper, “Th-think of something, Mouse. Anything.”

Anything? Rick could see Mouse’s thoughts stumbling under the command, unsure of what to make of it, unable to focus on any one thing. Finally, he settled on...

“Stars?” Rick asked, smiling at the image that was developing before him. “The stars you see from your room. It’s a little window, hardly bigger than your head, but you like to watch the stars outside. Don’t you?”

Mouse’s eyes went wide, his jaw falling open. “Y-you—you can really—”

“Like I said, Mouse. It’s thanks to you.” Rick gave him a quick peck on the forehead. “When I make you feel good, you make me see thoughts.”

Touching his hand to his forehead, Mouse pursed his lips, looking genuinely curious. “Is it just m-my thoughts?”

“No. I can hear others’ too. Seems to just be the Ricks, though, some of them as far as on the other side of the Citadel. But yours,” Rick tapped him playfully on the nose, “are my favorite.”

Mouse was quiet for a minute, processing what he’d just been told. He vacillated between gleeful wonder and hesitation, which Rick experienced as Resonances swelling and snuffing out in quick succession in his brain. He lay silent, however, allowing Mouse to reach his own conclusions on how he felt about it.

As a Rick, he knew that not one of his kind would be pleased with the idea of someone mucking around in his head. Every Rick had his fair share of secrets which he went to great lengths to keep, and the Resonances easily posed a threat to that. But what about a Morty? What about Mouse? Rick knew that if Mouse ever decided that he didn’t want him inside his head, he’d uphold that request, even if it sat at odds with his own selfish desires.

But he couldn’t say the same about any other Rick. Especially not Riq.

Riq wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t even give Mouse the choice. He’d take whatever he wanted from him, whether or not he liked it—

But are you really any different? whispered a voice in Rick’s head.

Hadrn’t he just touched Mouse in order to trigger a Resonance? Hadn’t he fondled him until he was a blithering mess in his arms as he waltzed around the hundreds of minds he was suddenly privy to? No, he thought doggedly. It wasn’t the same. He’d only been trying to understand what a Resonance could do. It was necessary to figure out—
And the next time? Naturally, any good experiment requires—*So he’s just an experiment to you, is he?* No. That wasn’t why—*You literally stroked the information you wanted from him.* But only so that—*You can get what you want.* No, the only thing I want is—*To satisfy your own revenge.*

“What’s it like in there? In my thoughts?” Mouse’s question broke through Rick’s barrage of self-hate. He was looking at Rick with such fascination that it made Rick blink. There wasn’t a single trace of accusation in Mouse’s voice, only interest. A small gust of Resonance carried Mouse’s sincerity with it, and Rick breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s amazing,” Rick said automatically. “I mean, it’s—shit, how do I describe it?” He raked his fingers through his hair, blushing at his obvious floundering. How was it that this kid could make him feel as though he were the child? Mouse had already happily resumed his spot against Rick’s chest, so he eased himself down, enjoying the peace that once again settled over them. With one arm wrapped around Mouse, he waved the other abstractly through the air as he spoke. “It’s like—like if you’re thinking something—bam—you mean every bit of it. No second guesses. No nothing. It’s clean. Pure.” His fingers went slack as the word hung between them. “Okay. I’ll admit it. That sounded lame.”

“It’s not lame,” Mouse said softly. “I like that.” As if his words weren’t clear enough, the echoes in his thoughts confirmed it. “But, Rick—” They whisked away suddenly as Mouse scrunched up his shoulders, his voice faltering. “I-I don’t think anyone would ever call me ‘pure.’”

“Hey, hey, hey. Don’t talk like that, Mouse.” Rick squeezed him tighter. “No matter what they did to you, th-they can’t take away what you have, Mouse. Who you are.” Gently lifting Mouse’s chin to face him, he added, “Remember what I said? You’re going to do amazing things, Mouse. N-nothing’s gonna change that.” He kissed him on the lips then pressed his forehead to his. “And I wanna be there to see every minute of it.”

“Rick—” Mouse started, but Rick cut him off with another kiss, this one slower, deeper.

“You bet I mean it,” he answered Mouse’s silent inquiry.

Mouse lowered his gaze and tapped his finger on Rick’s chest as he formulated his next question. This time, Rick waited patiently, giving Mouse time to voice it himself rather than preempting him through a Resonance. There were some things that needed to be said aloud.

“But, R-Rick.” He stalled. “What’ll you do with it? I mean, w-with being able to, y’know, read minds?”

Rick readjusted his arms around Mouse, looking up at the ceiling as he broached his answer with care. “I think the question isn’t so much what *I’m* gonna do with it, but what *others* might.”

“Others?”

“Mouse.” Rick paused to sit upright, bracing Mouse at arm’s length. He needed to know that Mouse understood what he was about to tell him. “Mouse, you have no idea how powerful the Resonance—I mean, reading minds is. You already know what Ricks are willing to do to get Epiphanies. But a Resonance, it’s—imagine it like an Epiphany times a hundred. There are people out there who would—they would kill, Mouse. Honestly *kill* for it. A lot of people will suffer if they ever find this out about you, Mouse. That’s why we have to—”

“Take me away.” Mouse was already nodding, resignation pinching his brow.

“That’s the game plan.”
“But how?”

Against all his instincts, Rick pushed forward with the ugly truth. “That...I don't know yet. It’s something we'll have to figure out together.”

Rick had assumed that Mouse would shy away from the prospect of diving headfirst into something as precarious as escaping the Citadel. But to his surprise, the boy preened instead. A swirl of Resonance solidified his suspicions: Mouse was actually glad to be entrusted with such an important task. He liked being useful, relied on. It made him feel like—

The image of a young man suddenly filled Rick’s mind. He had Mouse’s eyes and gentle smile, but he was now taller, more toned. Not just toned, buff. The figure rocked washboard abs and broad, muscular shoulders. And, most surprising, he sported an impressive mohawk.

*Is this how he wants to see himself?*

Rick bit his tongue before he could ask. He had the sense that Mouse would be embarrassed to have his personal fantasies exposed, but he couldn’t suppress a chuckle. Before Mouse could catch on, Rick quickly redirected the conversation.

Flicking his eyes down to Mouse’s torso, he coughed. “But, anyway, first I think we could both use a shower. What do ya say?”

~~*~~

Mouse ran his finger down the fogged glass, adding yet another feather to the bird’s already majestic plumage. The bird, which usually stood static with its wings tucked meekly to its sides, now boasted an extra pair that sprouted bombastically from its back. They fanned out, feathers spread, arching over the idyllic pond scene that was etched into the glass door.

“Would you look at that. You got a real knack for art, kid.”

With his back still to him, Mouse smiled bashfully at Rick’s compliment. “I-I think he looks happier this way.” Glancing over his shoulder, he met Rick’s eyes where he sat on the shower’s built-in seat. “I’ve been wanting to do this since—well, since forever.”

Mouse had rarely gone inside the winner’s suite shower stall, and he could only remember the occasional visitor opting to use it over the more luxurious Jacuzzi sitting just outside. The shower, with its earth tone tilework and unadorned walls, was much more modest than the rest of the suite, the only stroke of artistic flourish found in the detailed motif on the door.

It was only when the two began their shower that Rick had pointed out that the long-necked bird from the picture was, in fact, a “crane,” and the ringed sticks standing straight up beside it were “bamboo.” According to Rick, they were symbols of prosperity in something called an A-jun culture back on Earth.

“Yeah, well, it’s about time this place got a makeover,” Rick said, beckoning to Mouse with one hand. In his other cupped hand, he held a generous dollop of purple shampoo, its lavender scent filling the confined space. “And, speaking of which, it’s time we got you cleaned up.” Scooting back on the seat, Rick tucked one leg up and patted the space in front of him.

Mouse turned from his art and obediently took his seat between Rick’s thighs, allowing him to work the shampoo through his thick hair. “Y’know, Rick, th-they always clean me a-afterward anyway.”

Rick snorted and replied without missing a beat. “Yeah, well, I bet I can do a better job than them.”
He was busy lathering the wet locks with delicate, probing fingers until the shampoo grew into a frothy cloud. “Unless you’d prefer them over me?”

“No! N-no, of course I wouldn’t—” Mouse began hastily, then stopped himself, a smile slowly breaking over his face. “Heeey, was that a joke?” He smacked Rick playfully on the knee, grinning.

“I dunno. M-maybe I should let your Eun-Ricks have a go at it. They probably know how to deal with all this hair better than me.” As if to illustrate his point, Rick drew out two long pieces from either side of Mouse’s head and wiggled them. “I swear, Mouse, you could gag someone with this stuff if you really wanted to.” He mimed wrapping the locks around his own throat and choking.

Mouse caught his reflection in the wall-mounted mirror and giggled at the sight of his hair writhing about like snakes in the steamy air.

Rick continued. “For real, though, I think you’ve rocked the Rapunzel look long enough.” He tapped a finger to his chin thoughtfully. “What if we tried...this.” Rick swept his hands over the foamy suds atop Mouse’s head, shaping them into twin peaks. “And now my little mouse becomes a cat.”

Mouse scoffed at the sight of the new him. He looked ridiculous. “O-oh, yeah?” Two can play at that game. Grabbing the shampoo bottle and pouring a liberal amount into his hands, he turned to tackle Rick, rubbing his hair into a frothy mess. In seconds, he’d worked it into a massive afro.

This amused Rick to no end, and he slapped his thigh as he roared with laughter at his own reflection. Mouse jumped at the unexpected outburst, but gradually his timidity dissolved under the sound, and he began laughing too. Horseplay was still foreign to Mouse, and he initially stumbled like a newborn calf until the two of them were fooling around as though they’d been friends their whole lives.

With another flurry of his hands, Rick sculpted Mouse’s suds into a heaping bouffant, while Mouse had him sporting a trumpeting elephant atop his head. Mouse’s goofy bowl cut was countered by a teetering tower of suds on Rick. Mullet, beehive, pigtails—each hairstyle brought about a fresh round of laughter until they were holding their sides, they were laughing so hard.

Mouse was the first to come out of it, his cheeks now very sore. “C-c’mon, Rick.” He shook his head, sending some of the suds flying, then sat up straighter, arms crossed. “Give me some—try to give me a real hairdo.”

Tilting his head until his soap-hair slid off, Rick thought for a moment. “Okay. I think I’ve got just the one.” Rick scraped the suds away from the sides then brought his hands together, arranging the mass of purple-tinged foam into a neat row down the center of Mouse’s head.

The mohawk wobbled as Mouse turned his head to either side to give himself a better look in the mirror. When he locked eyes with his reflection, however, he stilled, suddenly not recognizing the smiling boy in the mirror. The upward curve of his lips over straight, white teeth; the way his eyes became dark crescents over the swell of his cheeks. Was this really him? Happiness bared itself so naturally on his face that he wondered how he’d gone without it for so long.

Rick leaned into the frame to gaze into the mirror alongside Mouse. He hummed, a soft smile on his lips. “Yeah. I think it fits you too.”

“Thank you,” Mouse whispered. A spate of utter contentment washed through him, and he gave a happy sigh as he relaxed into Rick’s touch. Without a word, Rick gently eased Mouse back against his chest, his heart rapping a reassuring beat through Mouse’s ribs. He maneuvered the showerhead
to wash away the suds, running his fingers along Mouse’s temples to loosen any remaining shampoo.

As Rick cupped his hand over Mouse’s brow to keep the suds from running into his eyes, Mouse tucked his chin, watching the soapy streams flow down his chest, around his belly, and between his thighs. The water veered around the unevenness of his skin and eddied at the warped flesh where C-165’s blade had tried to castrate him over a year ago.

He closed his eyes.

Every Rick—every single Rick who visited him, without fail, had left their mark on him in some way. The scars emblazoned his skin like cattle branding, claiming him inch by inch.

Mouse didn’t understand how Ricks worked sometimes. On the one hand, they treated him like he were something to treasure. Ricks would come into the winner’s suite with their hands clasped together in prayer, kneeling before him and spouting on about the wonders of the Epiphanies. But inevitably those same hands would become claws, eagerly tearing into Mouse like he were a cut of meat.

*Except for Rick.* Mouse shook his head, frustrated by the lack of names to choose from. *I mean, my Rick.* Rick—the same Rick that was currently working a rose-scented conditioner into his hair—had never lifted a finger to hurt him.

*For you, Mouse. I came back for you.*

That had been his response to Mouse’s prior question, but another matter still went unresolved, cleaving Mouse with worry.

“Rick?”

“Yes, Mouse?”

“Why did you come to see me?”

“I already told you, Mouse. For—”

“N-no! I know that.” He pressed his hands against the bench to keep from wringing them and bowed his head. “I mean...the first time.”

Rick’s hands stopped where they were rinsing the conditioner out. A second of silence passed before Rick resumed his work, gingerly squeezing the ends of Mouse’s hair until the water ran clear. Just when Mouse considered asking again, Rick spoke.

“Do you trust me, Mouse?”

Now it was Mouse’s turn to hesitate. What should’ve come out as a simple answer got caught in Mouse’s throat, tangled up in his own conflicting outlooks. Experience had shaped Mouse’s worldview so that there was no room for trust. That had been stripped from him, leaving only a constant apprehension in its place. *But for Rick?*

“Yes,” he found himself saying.

“Then trust me when I say that I’d never hurt you, Mouse. Ever.” Finished with rinsing Mouse’s hair, Rick placed both hands on Mouse’s shoulders, his eyes gazing steadily into his through the mirror. A look of severity replaced his earlier merriment. “I was supposed to kill you that first night.”
Mouse blinked, not sure what to make of Rick’s confession. A burst of questions sparked through his mind, each paving grimmer and grimmer paths. Rick’s hand on his snapped him out of his dark cloud, and the growing knot of dread untangled as Rick’s fingers laced with his own.

“Guess you can figure out that part didn’t quite go as planned.”

Mouse swallowed, scared but determined to press on. “W-why were you supposed to kill me, Rick?”

“Because I wanted to take down the Council, and you were the only way I could think of to do that.” Rick chuckled bitterly. “You may not believe this, but you probably single-handedly made the Council what they are today. Before you, they were nothing but paper pushers, but now with the Epiphanies and their Elite groupies—I don’t think you know what they’re capable of doing—”

“I think I do,” Mouse cut in. “I-if it’s anything like w-what they did to me, then I know.”

Rick cocked his head as though listening for something. Hearing nothing, he asked quietly, “What did they do to you, Mouse?”

Mouse lifted his shoulders then dropped them, more a gesture of defeat than a shrug. “I—I can’t talk about it.”

There was a second’s pause, and then Rick gave Mouse a quick squeeze. “It’s okay. You don’t have to.” Huffing a long sigh through his nose, Rick added with grim humor, “In any case, then you probably wouldn’t blame me for wanting to take them down.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” His own bitterness shocked him, but Rick only gave an impressed whistle. “So this little mouse has teeth.”

“But what did—I mean, can you tell me what they did to you, Rick?”

“Oh, just locked me up for nothing.”

“You mean you were in prison?” Mouse couldn’t hide the surprise from his voice. He already had a pretty good idea of what made Rick different from the regular Elite who visited him, but he’d never heard of an Elite going to prison before.

“Yup,” Rick replied. “Ten long, stinkin’ years in some GF shit hole. I think they left me there expecting me to kick the bucket. Thanks to a buddy of mine, though, I broke out a few months ago.”

Mouse listened with rapt attention as Rick recounted the major events of his past: the unexpected raid from the Galactic Federation, his fraudulent arrest and incarceration. Prison sounded like it’d been a daily fight for survival, but Mouse couldn’t help but note the uncanny similarities between Rick’s imprisonment and his own. Denied his freedom, tortured regularly, treated like less than human. Mouse was shocked to learn that a Rick could live such a life.

It was only once Rick began to go even further back in time, however, that Mouse’s eyes went wide. Mouse hadn’t really stopped to consider that Rick had a family too—the same family as his, in fact—and it was strange hearing him talk about his parents and sister in a way that just wasn’t quite right. It was as though he were naming characters in a play that they’d both watched, but where the director had written different stories.

The concept of the multiverse was familiar to Mouse, and he’d heard often enough from Ricks that there were apparently infinite “copies” of him walking around within the very Citadel he lived in. He’d just never had the opportunity to meet any of them, so the idea remained a distant abstraction,
like trying to imagine a color he’d never seen before.

Mouse learned that Rick had been absent for most of his daughter’s life only to reappear after her son died in childbirth. By contrast, Mouse remembered growing up in a home full of fond accounts of Grandpa Rick—though he’d never actually met the man himself. That was because Grandpa Rick had passed away on the very day Mouse had been born.

“Well, shit. If that isn’t poetic irony, I don’t know what is.”

“Yeah. I guess that is pretty weird,” Mouse agreed, his voice trailing off.

“But, uh, hey.” Rick poked him in the ribs, snapping him out of his doldrums. “At least you never had a Grandpa Rick to drive you bonkers! Talking your ear off about the ‘good old days,’ embarrassing you in front of your friends, wanting to drag you around on crazy space adventures—”

“Oh, and like you’re not?”

Rick grinned, his tongue between his teeth. “Guilty. And don’t forget about the obligatory wrestling lessons.” He looped one hand beneath Mouse’s arm, grasping him behind the neck in a half nelson. With his other hand, he skittered his fingers down his sides, eliciting peals of laughter from Mouse.

Mouse squealed, squirming in his grasp. “H-hey! Cheater! At least give me a heads up!”

“Oh-ho? You’re in no position to make demands, buster, especially when I’ve got the soapy fingers here.” He waggled his fingers in mock threat, then attacked Mouse’s ribs, tickling him mercilessly.

“All right! A-all right!” Mouse cried amid fits of laughter. “No fair!” he howled. “M-my cheeks are killing me!” In a final desperate attempt, Mouse managed to wriggle free of Rick’s hold. He whipped around and grabbed Rick’s wrists, using all his weight to pin them to the shower seat. When he looked up to glare at Rick with all the ire he could muster, Rick only smiled and pecked him on the lips. Mouse bristled in surprise.

Taking advantage of Mouse’s compromised state, Rick drew in for another kiss. Then another, each kiss coming slower and softer. They chipped away at Mouse’s faux anger until he relinquished his hold on Rick’s hands to wreath his arms around his neck.

How Rick always managed to reduce him to this astounded Mouse. “It’s really not fair, Rick.”

“What’s not fair?” Rick asked innocently.

“That you make me feel this way.” Mouse’s eyes were heavy with want as he placed his knees on either side of Rick’s thighs. His erection prodded Rick’s stomach, and Mouse wasn’t sure if it was the steam from the hot water or the blood pooling in his groin that made him dizzy.

“If that’s me being unfair, then that makes two of us,” Rick practically growled. He grabbed Mouse by the back of the head and held him as he kissed his way into Mouse’s welcoming mouth.

There was so much more Mouse would’ve said, had he been able to speak. He’d have thanked Rick for opening himself up to him, for being with him like this, here and loving and wonderful. Instead, he let his stream of moans lose themselves in Rick’s mouth.

His thighs suddenly weak with desire, Mouse sat himself down on Rick’s lap. When his cock bumped against Rick’s raging member, he thrust forward impulsively, suddenly wanting much more.

“Rick,” he spoke into the corner of Rick’s lips, his heart a jackhammer. “Rick.”
“I’m listening,” Rick said. He slid his hands over Mouse’s back and around to his chest, rolling his nipples beneath his thumbs. This sent fiery jolts of electricity down to Mouse’s groin.

Mouse gave a frustrated cry, wiggling his ass. “B—but you already know what I want! Don’t make me—”

“But I want to hear it.”

He gritted his teeth, bullying his tongue to form the words that thwarted him. “I—” He choked back another cry of arousal. “I want you—” His hands flexed as he tried to get the words out. “I want you i-insi—”

There was a sharp rapping of knuckles on the shower door.

Mouse squawked in surprise and reflexively pushed himself away from Rick, startled.

“Master Rick?” A shrill voice came through over the sound of the beating water. “Master Rick, I regret to inform you that your session is already up.”

Mama Eun-Rick! Mouse looked quickly to the door, a cold sweat of relief washing down his nape when he found it was fogged with steam. Mama Eun-Rick’s form was a shadowy mass beyond the pane.

When he turned back to Rick, Rick had a finger pressed to his lips. His gaze was focused on the door, and after giving Mouse a comforting glance, he cleared his throat and answered, “Y-yeah. We’ll be right—” He cringed at his choice of words. “I’ll be right out.”

The shadow shuffled, and Mouse could see Mama Eun-Rick was standing in profile as though she’d pressed an ear to the door. “Master, please allow me to remove The One so that you may ready yourself at your leisure. I shall see that he is attended to before your parting.”

“Rick, please don’t—” Mouse whispered to Rick. “Don’t make me go!”

“It’ll be fine, Mouse,” he whispered back. He squeezed Mouse’s arms reassuringly. “We can’t have anyone knowing what we—what happens when we’re together. Just act like everything’s normal. Can you do that for me?”

His brows crinkled in worry, but Mouse obeyed, nodding shakily. It was only when he stepped off the bench that he remembered his state of arousal.

“I’m sending him out now,” came Rick’s voice. Mouse bowed his shoulders and covered his erection with both hands, flicking Rick a pleading look. “But, uh, g-get him a towel first, would ya?”

Mama Eun-Rick snapped her fingers, and a second figure appeared. The door opened a crack, and a white towel was pushed through. “Come along now, dear.” Her voice was about as welcoming as a pit of vipers, and Mouse cowered as he took the towel from her gnarled, bejeweled fingers.

Wrapping the towel around his waist, he looked up at the glass motif, watching sullenly as condensation gathered in one spot and fell in a fat tear down the crane’s elegant beak. The sudden change from blissful and aroused to harried and apprehensive had Mouse’s stomach doing flips, and he took a shaky breath before steeling himself.

He’d barely stepped out of the stall when Mama Eun-Rick snatched him roughly by the upper arm and dragged him to the bedroom. Her nails bit into his shower-pinked skin, and he tripped over his own legs at her speedy pace.
Face twisted in disdain, she seethed, “It’s just one fucking thing after another with you. I’m breaking my back trying to make this circus run right, and here you are, ignoring the time limit like it doesn’t even matter? How can you be so irresponsible?!”

*Time limit?* Mouse had completely forgotten himself and all the rules that he normally followed with a client. The four-hour limit itself was so deeply ingrained in his psyche that he could normally sense its approach like clockwork, initiating the parting ritual well in advance of Mama Eun-Rick’s arrival.

When they reached the bed, Mama Eun-Rick wrenched Mouse around to shove him down onto it. He scrambled to keep the towel in place when it almost slipped, then glanced up quickly at her, ready for another reprimand. Instead, Mama Eun-Rick was looking at him expectantly as though she were waiting for him to do—well, something, but for the life of him, Mouse couldn’t guess what it was. Her eyes skirted over his face, torso, and even hips like she were expecting to find some kind of physical transformation. When her scan proved to be unfruitful, contempt once again settled over her features.

“How do you think the whole Citadel revolves around you? Hm?” She towered over Mouse, glaring at him as if he were a shitstain on her prized panties. She snapped her head to the other Eun-Rick standing nearby. “Get the other one and start cleaning this place up. It smells like—” Her nostrils flared as she sniffed at the air and made a face. “Just get it clean. And fetch the Rick his clothes.” She tsked at the grungy pair of coveralls crumpled on the sheets.

“Mama, p-please don’t be mad. I’m s-sorry I forgot.” The apologies tumbled from Mouse on automatic. He was used to belittling himself in order to defuse Mama Eun-Rick’s vicious temper, even as a small voice whispered inside him, *I’m not sorry.*

Turning back to Mouse, Mama Eun-Rick hissed, “You’re nothing but a pathetic, little brat. You’re not worth my time, not the Council’s time, and certainly not that stinking Rick’s time.” She jabbed a finger in the direction of the bathroom where the shower stall was tucked out of sight.

“That’s not true.” Mouse’s voice came out as a whisper coated in iron.

Mama Eun-Rick drew back and narrowed her eyes. “What did you just say?!”

Mouse swallowed. “Th-that’s not true. I’m n-not worthless. And he doesn’t stink. You do.” He pushed himself up to sit straighter, arms braced behind him.

Why, you ungrateful, little—” Mama Eun-Rick suddenly paused, shooting a glance to the bathroom before swinging her arm back and slapping Mouse hard across the face with the back of her hand. The smack reverberated through the room, and pain exploded over Mouse’s cheek, knocking him back.

His nerves burned where Mama Eun-Rick had struck him, the pain seeping deep beneath his skin until it encased his heart.

*How dare she?*

A flash of something bright and sharp began to pulse at his center.

*She has no right.*

Like fire snaking up the side of a burning building, hate smoldered and crackled inside Mouse.

*She’ll pay for that.*
Mouse slowly turned and leveled his gaze at Mama Eun-Rick to see—really see her for the first time. Where he usually saw a domineering and imposing figure, a wretched old woman stood in her place. The lines of age around her eyes suddenly stood out sharply in the accented light; her rouge lips, painfully cracked and thin. Like reading lines from a script, Mouse felt himself dipping into the pool of Mama Eun-Rick’s greatest insecurities and unconsciously projecting them back onto her.

**YOU’RE JUST A WRINKLY, OLD HAS-BEEN.**

Mama Eun-Rick suddenly froze, a line of dismay scything itself down her brow. She opened her mouth only to close it again wordlessly.

**NO AMOUNT OF MAKEUP OR JEWELRY CAN HIDE IT.**

Unable to move, her eyes flicked over to her hand where it was poised in mid-air. It trembled slightly. A crass satisfaction filled Mouse as he watched her with unfeeling eyes. From around the corner, Rick suddenly burst out from the bathroom, a cloud of steam following behind him. His hair was matted down with water, and his coveralls were still wet in places. He clutched the edge of the wall as he took in the scene.

“What in the hell is going on here?” Rick bellowed, his gaze jumping between Mama Eun-Rick’s raised hand and the patch of red skin blooming over Mouse’s cheek.

**YOU’RE ALONE AND ALWAYS WILL BE.**

Flinching back as though physically struck, Mama Eun-Rick shook her head, first looking briefly to Mouse, then to the ground, and then to Rick. “I...” she started, her voice shaky. “I have to—f-forgive me, Master. Something’s come up. I’ll, uh—” She was backing away, hands clutching at her face, desperately lifting the sagging skin of her cheeks. “I’ll have th-the other Eun-Ricks attend to—I-I have to go!”

Stumbling over her high heels, she practically dove for the door, rushing past an alarmed Eun-Rick in the process. Rick shot one last glare in her direction before kneeling in front of Mouse. He grabbed him by the hand, cupping his injured cheek with the other. One of Mama Eun-Rick’s rings had left a shallow cut, and a spatter of bruises was already turning purple beneath the red mark.

Mouse could hear Rick speaking to him, but it came through distorted as though he were hearing it underwater. The pounding of his rage-driven heart still filled his ears, but as he looked up into Rick’s concerned eyes, it began to fade like a retreating tide.

“Are you okay?” Rick was asking. “What happened? I felt an Epiphany and then...”

It took a moment for Mouse to get his mouth to move properly. “I don’t know what happened,” he croaked. It was the truth. “I just got...angry at her.” Whatever had transpired evaporated like a dream, slipping through his fingers until he was grasping at nothing, and Mouse was only left with an overwhelming exhaustion. He toppled forward into Rick’s arms, resting his head against Rick’s shoulder. “I feel sick,” he whispered.

“It’s gonna be okay, Mouse. I’ll get you—” Rick was suddenly interrupted by a hand on his shoulder. He snapped his head around, on high alert. The Eun-Rick, however, only smiled softly at him, looking pointedly at Mouse before speaking.

“Master Rick, The One requires medical attention. Please. Allow us,” he said gently, holding out a small container of translucent bandages by way of explanation. Rick looked about ready to protest, but he acquiesced when Mouse nodded his approval. Mouse let the Eun-Rick apply two bandages...
carefully over the damaged skin, wincing only slightly. He managed a small “thanks” as the Eun-Rick worked.

Once he was finished, the Eun-Rick gracefully dismissed himself, retreating to the door without another word. There, another Eun-Rick met him, and the two had a brief but heated argument before the first Eun-Rick finally pulled the second with him into the hallway. Alone again, Mouse and Rick gave twin sighs of relief before catching each other’s eyes and smiling.

“S-sometimes they can actually be nice. The other Eun-Ricks, I mean,” Mouse offered, setting about to braid his still wet hair. The familiar pattern of movement always soothed his frayed nerves.

“Compared to that bitch, sure.” Rick rose to his feet and sat beside Mouse. He stroked the back of his head and added, “She’s just one more reason we need to get you out of here.”

“If I ever get out of here, I’m never looking back. Not ever.”

“You mean *when* you get out of here.”

“But when is when?” Mouse’s voice cracked with weariness, and although he knew it wasn’t fair to ask this of Rick, he also thought that he might not survive this for much longer. There was so much happening, so many new things that scared him, and he didn’t know what would be left of him when it was over.

Rick ran his tongue over his teeth as he thought. “I’ll figure out a way, Mouse. Soon.”

Mouse had reached the end of his braid and looked down at the loose hairs glumly. Without a word, Rick held his hand out in front of him, a tattered piece of dark cloth pinched in his fingers. It matched his coveralls.

“To remember me by,” Rick said with a crooked grin. When Mouse offered his braid, Rick looped the scrap around the end and tied it off with a double knot. “There.” It was crude compared to the ribbon that usually adorned his hair, but to Mouse it was as beautiful as spun silk.

Just then, there came a polite cough from the door. The Eun-Rick from before stepped quickly inside and bowed his head low. “Master Rick, it is time,” he said from his prostrated pose.

Rick gave a nod before leaning forward to whisper in Mouse’s ear, “I’ll come for you as soon as I can. But until then, just imagine I’m with you, and y-you’ll have no reason to be afraid.” Checking to make sure that the Eun-Rick’s gaze was still fixed on the floor, Rick stole a quick kiss that had Mouse’s heart singing a high, quavering note.

As he watched Rick leave the room, head held high and gait confident, Mouse felt some of that courage flow into him as well, and he clutched the cloth around his braid in a trembling fist.

Chapter End Notes

We can't thank you enough for reading and enjoying the story. If you would like to tell us what you think, feel free to leave a comment~!
[All fanart for Chapter 8 can be found here.]
Chapter Summary

For four long years, Riq had waited, the heartache he felt in The One’s absence eased only by reminding himself that it was for a greater cause. He could endure the delayed gratification, knowing that when The One’s second renaissance came, he would be the one to claim him all over again. After all, Riq was his rightful master, and no one could take that from him. He’d bided his time, and now The One was ready for him.

At last, he would reap the rewards of his abstention.

Chapter Notes

First published 12/30/16
Hello again! We're happy to get chapter 9 out before the end of the year. We've also been receiving some lovely pieces of fanart for the story which you can find at the end notes of some chapters.

Thank you to all the wonderful readers and artists who support this story! We hope you enjoy this latest installment~!

Also a big thank-you to AndersAndrew for all her help with the French dialogue in this chapter! Auctioneer Rick wouldn't have been his suave self without it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“With His torment would come His ascent.”
- Mordecai 12:24

“All right, mate. Let’s have a go, eh?” Investment Rick chirped, punching the numbers of his handheld calculator until the plastic groaned. He pressed the calculator to his face, his gold rings shining as he squinted at the small screen. “Don’t tell me this thing is on the—urp!—bung again.” He shook the device before checking the number again. “The total for the month is—crickey!” he exclaimed, his eyes wide. “1.6 million credits! You’re making the big bickies now!”

“Well, naturally,” Auctioneer Rick said, grinning back at his accountant. He buffed his nails on his satin lapel and examined his immaculate cuticles for the hangnails he knew weren’t there. “All in a day’s hard work. Now make sure to divvy up the commission as usual: 25% to Plumbus Laboratories stocks, 15% to my HOA. Keep a reserve of another 15% for Council tax, and don’t forget your 5% cut.” The instructions matched his brisk pace as the two strode down the hallway in the direction of the Council Chamber.

Thankfully, Investment Rick was as capable with Auctioneer Rick’s finances as he was with the stock market, and he handled the large sums of money with ease, throwing in the occasional
“bonzer!” or “crash hot!” while he tallied the income. Auctioneer Rick preened at his enthusiasm; it only further emphasized the fact that they were dealing with numbers in the millions, rather than mere thousands.

And he knew exactly whom he had to thank for that.


He tuned out Investment Rick’s exuberant, albeit mystifying, accolades and allowed his thoughts to dwell once more on the topic that had been occupying his attention for the better part of the week. He would have loved to bask in the afterglow of such a boon, but he knew it had come with a hefty price. The old adage about a poisoned chalice had never been truer.

Since the moment that cocky bastard had waltzed in, Auctioneer Rick’s wallet had been generously fattened while his precious Morty Auctions lay in shambles. He’d barely held them together before losing total control and having to rely on the Guards’ interference in order to slip away in one piece. Even the public auctions weren’t immune to the trickle-down effect, with more than half of his regular attendees boycotting Façade the moment they heard about the new kid on the block.

The mystery trust fund baby.

The high roller.

The X-Rick.

He couldn’t suppress a shudder at the dimensional designation. Nothing good ever came from X-Ricks. Of course, they weren’t literal “Morty murderers,” as the urban legends went, but as far as Auctioneer Rick could see, they certainly lived up to their reputation of being bad luck. The pitiful state of his auctions was evidence enough of the X-Rick’s effect. Not only did the desertion of common-Ricks threaten to hurt his future paychecks, but the staggering number of disgruntled Elite was killing his reputation as a master of ceremonies.

Auctioneer Rick shut his eyes against the glare of the overhead lights, swallowing down the lump of dread in his throat.

54. Over 54 scathing complaints had been submitted by Elite directly to Auctioneer Rick regarding the X-Rick’s admittance to the private Morty Auction. And that was just from the first night. He hadn’t even checked his inbox after last night’s debacle, but he already knew it wasn’t going to be pretty.

No one liked having an X-Rick anywhere near his Mortys, and to the Elite, allowing such a deplorable rogue into the auctions was about as tasteful as finding a condom in the butter dish. After all, for all their fallacies, Ricks still had a little something called *class*.

The common-Ricks may have had superstitions and prejudices fueling their outrage, but the Elite had something much worse: their pride. And there was nothing more fragile or more menacing than a Rick’s pride. Some of the Council’s most prized Ricks had even threatened to renounce their Elite status—contract be damned—because they couldn’t stand the idea of an X-Rick bidding alongside them and, worse yet, winning. ψ-531 had been halfway to the shipyard after the first night, when the Council finally intervened and made amends. From what Auctioneer Rick heard, the fat bastard had even demanded a personal apology from none other than Riq IV himself.

Auctioneer Rick hid a smile behind his fingers. *What I would’ve given to see that megalomaniac groveling at ψ’s feet like a whore to her pimp.*
“Say again, mate?”

“Oh! Oh! Let me have a bAAUGHsh at this,” Investment Rick piped up, beaming so widely that the light glinted off his gold tooth. “I reckon his words were, ‘I’ll fuck your skull like a pocket pussy!’”

Auctioneer Rick nearly lost his footing as he stared confounded at Investment Rick’s cheerfully morbid announcement. The Aussie was known for his steadfast peppy spirit, but he could be chillingly perceptive sometimes. More than once, Auctioneer Rick wondered just how attuned the optimistic broker was to their tenuous circumstances.

As a Rick who worked closely with the temperamental and unpredictable Council, Auctioneer Rick did his best to keep his head down and follow the Council without drawing undue attention. *Stay down, stay quiet, stay alive.* It was his personal motto, and his years of obedience had rewarded him handsomely.

His loyalty to the Council came easily enough. It wasn’t all that different, in fact, to how he approached the stage. While he excelled at commanding an audience’s attention, he was also ever mindful of what his spectators expected of him in return. He could redirect his performance as easily as a chameleon changes its color, the desire to please governing his every move in a constant dance of give and take. Whatever they wanted from him, he would give with all of his body and heart, and, in exchange, they stroked his ego to bursting.

Maybe that was why it wasn’t too hard a decision to leave the theatre and take on the role as emcee for the Morty Auctions. Besides, the allure of prestige was too great to pass up.

And why wouldn’t he want to give everything of himself to the Council? They had already done so much for him and his kind so far. With the uniting of Ricks under the Citadel and the founding of the Council, Ricks traded in their portal guns for exclusive registration, their petty skirmishes for the triumph of war, and their self-serving independence for the promise of security.

He’d witnessed the Golden Age of Rick and the Great Rick Crusade against the Galactic Federation under the Council’s capable rule. No longer hunted down by the GF like witches in Salem, Ricks flourished, and Auctioneer Rick’s career burgeoned right along with them. Sure, there were still the occasional Code Yellows, but they were few and far between, no more than a handful a month. It was much more tolerable than when the GF was a daily threat.

And that was an improvement. Right?

Pockets of dissenters still rallied throughout the population, however, going on about how it went against a Rick’s “nature” to obey authority. But who were they to say what was natural? When dealing with Ricks from infinite realities, what made one Rick any more Rick than another? The notion that he, who was smart enough to bow his head if it meant keeping it, was anything less than a true Rick was insulting.

Luckily, Auctioneer Rick didn’t have to listen to their heresies for long, as they were silenced swiftly and without mercy by the Council. With every protest that was squashed, the fire inside the Ricks was hushed down to a flickering candle, tame and docile.

*But even candles can burn down houses.*
Auctioneer Rick cocked his head, disturbed by the unexpected audacity of his own internal dialogue. It wasn't like him to entertain thoughts of treason, yet this was the second instance in as many minutes. Whatever was causing this bizarre fit of unrest within him was undoubtedly linked to that bothersome X-Rick.

Sure, a large part of him wished for an untimely end to the X-Rick, but the secret part of Auctioneer Rick that delighted in seeing his employers squirm shivered with excitement. He had to commend the X-Rick for being the ballsy son of a bitch he was. Auctioneer Rick was many things—entertainer extraordinaire, star of screen and stage, master of fucking ceremonies—but a troublemaker he was not. He had a few reasons—Try 1.6 million reasons—not to do something as idiotic as provoking the wrath of the Council.

Poor outsider doesn’t realize he’s bitten off more than he can chew, he thought with a healthy dose of schadenfreude. But at least he’ll make some good entertainment in the meantime.

Apparently, he wasn’t the only one curious to see what the X-Rick would do. Auctioneer Rick couldn’t remember the last time the Council had moved so quickly to detain an aberrance. Even Riq, who usually abstained from such routine upsets seemed unusually invested in the X-Rick. He’d even gone so far as to put him up in one of their private suites, complete with nightly invitations to the auctions! What was it about that measly outcast that could possibly be worth Riq’s attention, he wondered.

Fortunately, he wouldn’t have to wait long to find out.

The two turned the final corner of the hallway where the Council Chamber’s main entrance was, a pair of stoic Guards positioned on either side of the massive gray doors, plasma rifles tucked stiffly against their shoulders. Just then, the chamber doors opened with a whirr, and a familiar figure stepped out—red high heels, white robe tossed elegantly over one shoulder, and gold earrings catching the light from the chandeliers to flash like stars.

The emcee’s heart leapt against his ribs like an overexcited pup, and he immediately thumped his fist against Investment Rick’s chest beside him, whose nose was still buried in his financial records.

“Oi! W-wot’s the big deal?” Investment Rick yelped, rubbing tenderly at his chest.

“Quiet! It’s her,” Auctioneer Rick whispered, eyes never leaving Mama Eun-Rick’s gazelle-like legs and slim hips. Her usually smoldering gaze was currently directed at a large book in her hands, giving Auctioneer Rick the chance to bully Investment Rick against a wall and hiss, “I need you out of here now! I need you out of here now!” He was already glossing his hair down with shaky hands, sneaking glances at her as he scolded his broker. “This could be my big break, and I can’t have you cramping my style!”

Investment Rick looked at Mama Eun-Rick then back at his client. A pitying smile softened his eyes as he spoke. “All right, chief. You don’t h-have—gotta tell me to bugger off twice. Far be it from me to keep you from enjoying a little—urp!—skirt-chasing. Just hope she doesn't go all aggro on you,” he teased before slipping away and disappearing back from where they’d come.

Huffing mouthfuls of breath into his palm and then giving it a sniff, Auctioneer Rick nodded, satisfied. He straightened up, squared his shoulders, and sauntered down the hallway, calling out in his most charming tone, “Salut, poupéééeée.”

Mama Eun-Rick’s ears pricked at the sound of his syrupy voice, and she jerked her head up to catch him making his way toward her. Whatever she’d been reading she immediately abandoned, slamming the cover shut and clutching the tome to her chest. Without a word, she turned and began walking hurriedly away from him.
“Whoa, whoa there. Where ya goin’?” Auctioneer Rick jogged to catch up. A sweet coconut fragrance met his nose when he glided up close.

“Whatever it is you want, the answer is no,” she said stiffly without looking at him.

“That’s what you always say. At least hear me out this time, ma petite Rickochet,” he purred into her ear.

“Knock it off, Richard. You know I don’t go by that anymore.” Her words had bite, but she was unable to hide the blush that glowed on her cheeks. Her old stage name must’ve hit a chord after all, because she finally stopped her retreat, much to Auctioneer Rick’s delight, and he swiftly boxed her in, all smarmy charm and foolhardy devotion. He lifted a corner of his mantle to shield them from the Guard Ricks’ prying eyes.

“Ah, but I will never forget how radiant you were atop the stage, ma chérie. Une star, une diva, une —”

“I was a stripper, Richard. And just because you were my best client doesn’t make it anything more than that. Let’s not kid ourselves,” she huffed, shrugging him off with a jerk of her shoulder.

“On the contrary, I’m being quite serious,” he said, trying to sound more put off than he was. But it was impossible to feel even a shred of offense when around the love of his life.

“Could’ve fooled me.” Mama Eun-Rick rolled her eyes. “Fine. What do you want?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Grinning, Auctioneer Rick stepped back to deliver a dramatic bow. A quick glance confirmed that he’d caught Mama Eun-Rick’s eye. She could never resist such a show of servitude, and Auctioneer Rick was more than happy to give it to her in spades.

Although Auctioneer Rick could capture the attention of the toughest crowd, Mama Eun-Rick was the only one who seemed impervious to his charm. Her rebuffs, however, only served to make him fall even more hopelessly in love with her. What had started as a simple crush back when he was a frequent patron of What’s Up Uranus had since blossomed into an infatuation that rivaled even his loyalty to the Council.

Whereas her other clients had only admired Rickochet for her lap dances, Auctioneer Rick was captivated by the gracefulness of her limbs and the sharpness of her tongue. He knew since he’d first laid eyes on her that she was the one for him, and he’d made it a personal quest to woo her, exhausting nearly every avenue at his disposal. Over the years, he’d lost track of the number of times he’d been turned down, but still he couldn’t be deterred.

He raised a hand in front of her, two silver tickets between his fingers.

Mama Eun-Rick squinted, mouthing the name on the tickets, before her eyes went wide. She snatched them from his hand, holding them up to the light. Giving them an experimental tug, she exclaimed, “They’re real! How in the hell did you manage to get front row seats to Les Morterables? It’s been sold out for weeks!”

“Let’s just say Lady Fortune paid me a visit,” Auctioneer Rick replied, already thumbing through the pages of the leather-bound book he’d lifted from Mama Eun-Rick while she was distracted. Holding it up sideways to scan the tiny, blotchy scrawl, he continued, “I thought that, maybe, if you lightened your reading load, we could go see it together.”

“Reading load? What—” Suddenly realizing that her book was missing from her arms, Mama Eun-Rick balked, frantically scrambling at him for it. “D-don’t touch that! It’s—it’s very delicate!”
Mama Eun-Rick’s uncharacteristic stutter shattered Auctioneer Rick’s focus just long enough for her to nearly steal the book back from him. At the last moment, however, he slipped it gracefully behind his back.

“Ah, ah, ah.” He wagged a finger in her face. “Not until I get an answer.”

Her expression went from panicked to deadly in a split second. She snarled, grabbing the auctioneer by his lapels and yanking him close until his nose was crushed against hers. She towered over him on her heels, and Auctioneer Rick felt a thrill race down his spine at the sight of fire in her eyes.

“This isn’t a game, Richard,” she ground out. “That book is very important.”

“More important even than me?”

“Does a Fid-Fid shit in the woods?” she scoffed, shoving him away.

Mama Eun-Rick darted her hand out again to seize the book, but Auctioneer Rick grabbed her wrist, using her momentum to close the distance between them easily. He could feel the heat of her blush as he pressed his cheek to hers and whispered.

“Do you have any idea how turned on I was to have you onstage with me last night?”

Mama Eun-Rick stilled, for once without a stinging comeback, and Auctioneer Rick pressed on, emboldened. Like blowing on a hot beverage to cool it, he continued, his voice coming fast and low and servile in her ear. “Tu étais à couper le souffle, stupéfiante, une déesse parmi les mortels. You make me feel things no one else can.” The blend of French and English always made Mama Eun-Rick go weak in the knees, and they buckled now as Auctioneer Rick spoke. “Sois à moi, Rickochet. Together we could be incroyables.”

“Riri.”

Her airy gasp set his nerves on fire. The simple pet name conjured up memories in Auctioneer Rick from years past, of nights huddled close at the strip club after hours, of breath tinged with alcohol and shaky hands seeking purchase on his arm.

It wasn’t the first instance he’d bared his deepest desires to her, but this time he thought he could sense her finally giving in. Maybe it was the way she leaned forward an imperceptible degree to rest her weight against him, or perhaps how her head canted away, exposing the column of her throat. His heart was pounding in anticipation of the moment she’d let him in at last—she, a supernova; he, a nearby planet, eager to be consumed by her final burst of energy.

When she finally spoke, it was in a trembling whisper. “It’s not—not so simple.”

“Rickochet?” He furrowed his brow. Seeing his beloved so obviously distressed made his heart seize, and he relaxed his grip on her wrist, allowing her to tuck it back into herself.

She took in a shaky breath, as though poised to tell him more. But the moment passed, and her walls were up again in the span of a heartbeat. Mama Eun-Rick’s eyes regained their usual scowl, and Auctioneer Rick grimaced as she snatched the book back from behind him.

“I envy your ignorance, Richard.” She shoved the tickets into his hands, crumpling their silver edges without regard. “While you’re playing ringmaster, you can’t even see that the whole damn tent is falling down around you. I don’t know which will botch the show first—the X-Rick or the boy.”

Something indiscernible crossed her features, but just as quickly it was replaced by her prior anger.
“And if you think that filthy X-Rick is your ‘Lady Luck,’ then you’re about to get a rude awakening.” She stiffened, catching sight of something behind Auctioneer Rick, and then cast him one final dirty look. “Here comes your wake-up call,” she said then brusquely shouldered her way past him and stormed down the hallway, her heels clicking sharply.

As Auctioneer Rick watched her departing figure, apprehension dripped in his stomach like hot lead. Though they both served the Council, Mama Eun-Rick was unquestionably privy to more information than he could ever hope to be, and he knew it was to his advantage to use her insight as a compass to the goings-on of the Citadel.

Whatever she had recently learned clearly had her spooked, and Mama Eun-Rick was not an easy woman to scare.

A muscular arm bumped him roughly from behind, jarring him from his thoughts, and he turned to look up at a grim-faced Guard Rick. “He’s waiting” was the curt command. The Guard stepped to the side, and beyond him, Auctioneer Rick saw Riq tapping his foot impatiently in front of the chamber. His council garb was freshly pressed, the gold collar sharp enough to cut.

Dipping his head in apology, Auctioneer Rick checked himself quickly before marching up to him. “My liege,” he said, bowing deeply with arms spread wide. “Forgive me for my tardiness. I was just —”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Riq snapped at him, giving him a perfunctory look-over before curling his lip as if he smelled something rancid. The head councilman had a sore spot about Citadel personnel fraternizing, and Auctioneer Rick maintained as neutral an expression as possible, even as he tried to calculate just how much Riq had seen.

Before he could formulate a cover story, however, Riq was already passing through the open doors. Auctioneer Rick hurried to follow his lead, falling in line behind him as they entered the Council Chamber. The clack of their heels echoed off the tall ceilings, and despite this being Auctioneer Rick’s umpteenth visit to the chamber, he couldn’t help but look around in awe.

Light reflected warmly off the gold surfaces and mirror-like marble floors, whetting his appetite for luxury. He’d always had a taste for the opulent, and like a raven, he was unable to resist a glittering diamond watch or the shine of a silk suit. His modest one-bedroom flat was a far cry from what he’d envisioned for himself at this stage in life, and deep down he’d hoped that his servitude would one day garner him riches on par with his employers. For now, he’d have to settle for vicariously living through the Council’s affluence as he orbited them like a lonely satellite.

The chamber floor was empty, save for a nervous-looking Attendant Morty standing beside the lowered belvedere. Lounging across the platform’s polished surface like a satisfied cat was a Rick in a red cowboy hat and boots. C-165 had one arm draped over the edge of the belvedere, his fingers tickling the Attendant’s chin as he whispered something into his ear that made the boy blush and squirm in place.

Auctioneer Rick’s hackles rose at the sight of C-165, and a bitter scoff escaped him before he could keep it in.

“Well, howdy there.” C-165 turned his attention from the Attendant to Auctioneer Rick, his eyes half-lidded in a lazy smirk. “Was wonderin’ how long yous was gonna keep us waitin’.”

*Keep us waiting? Who the hell does he think he is? When Auctioneer Rick had received the message that Riq IV wished to see him personally, he’d expected it to be a private meeting. Any humiliation*
Auctioneer Rick had felt for being late was now doubled in the unwelcome presence of his least favorite Rick in the Citadel. His only consolation, however, was the hope that C-165 was possibly here to have his ass handed to him in light of last night’s disaster.

“The good auctioneer was simply busy breaking Rule 34(b). Again.” Riq gave Auctioneer Rick a disparaging look as he summoned the Attendant to him. The small boy padded over quickly, his electronic tablet at the ready.

“Lordy! You mean yer still tryin’ ta get with the tranny?” C-165 sat up as he laughed, slapping his thigh. “Feller, that bitch’s uglier than a fistful o’ worms. Hell, she’s got enough paint on her to cover a battleship ‘n’ enough powder tah blow it up.”

“If I wanted to listen to an asshole, I’d fart, you...you asshole,” Auctioneer Rick stammered. C-165 always had the irksome effect of throwing him off his game—whether on or off the stage—and he felt like kicking himself for bungling his comeback line.

“Oh, yeah? Well, yer ass must be mighty jealous of all the shit always comin’ outta yer mouth.” Auctioneer Rick snorted. “I’d tell you to go fuck yourself, but you’d probably be disappointed.”

Ha. Nailed it.

“Enough.” Riq dismissed their tit-for-tat with a flick of his wrist. “This isn’t what I called you here for.” The Attendant had entered a code into the tablet in his hands, triggering a seat to materialize just behind Riq. The council leader reclined casually onto its gold-plated surface as he eyed his audience with detached interest.

“My liege,” Auctioneer Rick started, pointedly ignoring C-165’s snicker at the honorary address. “If this is about last night, I assure you I did my utmost to carry out your plan. Things were going just fine until this rodeo clown tried to throw the whole thing.” He jabbed a finger at C-165.

“I’m well aware, and your efforts are commended, auctioneer,” Riq replied coolly. “However, while none of us appreciated C-165’s little stunt, it still got us the results we wanted.”

“But he was just supposed to get the X-Rick to bid, not—” Auctioneer Rick flailed his arms, Riq’s blasé attitude only further aggravating his frazzled state. “Not try to bid for The One himself!”

Why is C-165 always getting away with this kind of shit? Auctioneer Rick fumed inside. He’d lost count of how many times the sly cowboy had broken the Council rules without regard, and yet he still got to keep his Elite status! Irreparably maiming The One, disrupting confidential Council matters, urinating in public—the list went on! Any other Rick would have been tossed out years ago for such transgressions, but C-165 always managed to continue about his business unscathed.

As if his unwarranted popularity among the Elite weren’t vexing enough for Auctioneer Rick, C-165 also maintained an unexplainably chummy relationship with the Council. While Auctioneer Rick struggled at every turn to gain his employers’ trust, it seemed to come naturally to the maverick. It irked Auctioneer Rick to no end, and he wished for the day that C-165 would get his comeuppance.

“That greenhorn wuz bent on biddin’ ‘fore ah ever got there, ya ninny.” C-165 hopped off the platform, his pompous leer laced with spite.

“How could you be so certain? No one knows how an X-Rick thinks.”

C-165’s eyes widened, and he held a hand to his chest. “Well, knock me down ‘n’ steal mah tooth! Yer even dumber than you look,” he chuckled. “Hell, even if’n ah tweren’t there, those meddlin’
twins got ‘im good ‘n’ primed for it. By the time ya got yer monkey tah jump through ‘is hoops, he was ready tah fork over whatever he had." C-165 flicked his hat up to Auctioneer Rick in a mock vail. "An’ ah don’t hear yer wallet complainin’ none.”

“My liege,” he began again, switching tactics. “C-165 can’t be allowed to operate so recklessly! The uproar he caused last night gravely compromised the auction’s integrity, not to mention the respectability of the Council itself!” Surely Riq had to see that Auctioneer Rick had only the Council’s best interests in mind.

“Y’all should be thankin’ me.” C-165 spread his arms wide. “Ah did mah job an’ left the sucker poorer than a church mouse. That’s two birds wi’ one stone in mah book. Ol’ X-Rick won’t be biddin’ at the auction again, ah kin guarantee you that.”

“In fact, no one will be bidding for The One again.” Riq’s voice cut straight as a razor.

“M-my liege?”

Riq interlaced his fingers, turning his head to the Attendant who was rapidly taking down his every word in shorthand. “Which brings us to the point of this meeting. Effective immediately, The One will be removed from your program and the after-hours auction suspended.”

This caught both Ricks by surprise. Auctioneer Rick sputtered like a hooked fish while C-165 only arched his brow in reserved consideration.

“But, my liege, w-why would you—the after-hours auction is one of our biggest draws! The Elite, they—they won’t stand for—”

“What the Elite want or don’t want is not your concern. You still have the public Morty Auctions to run.” Riq paused to snort. “I’m sure you can put your theatre background to use there,” he added mockingly.

Auctioneer Rick almost protested further, but his deeply ingrained obedience made him bite his tongue.

“We’ll start preparations to phase out the auction immediately. You’ll have the full support of Façade’s staff to implement the changes which I expect to see completed in a timely fashion. Any delays will result in a deduction of your commission rate.”

Riq’s words faded into the background as Auctioneer Rick stood there numbly, scrambling to make sense of what was happening.

_End the after-hours auction?_ Riq might as well have buried a knife in his chest. The weekly auction was the highlight of his emcee career, and nothing filled him with a greater sense of purpose than being up on that stage, holding an entire audience captive. And not just any audience, the _Elite_. Leading the members of high-Rick society by the nose was the closest he’d ever gotten to actually _being_ the Council.

Auctioneer Rick’s dream had been to eventually sit on the Council. It would fit him so perfectly: He could enthrall a crowd and put on a show, make people believe the impossible—or simply untrue. How was that any different from being a politician?

But now, after years of working his way up the ladder to that glittering upper echelon, he was being dumped back down to the bottom.

In contrast to his obvious distress, C-165 was leaning idly against the platform, his eyes locked on
Riq’s as they seemed to share a wordless conversation. A smile slowly spread over the cowboy’s lips, and he nodded as though he were in on some joke that Auctioneer Rick was painfully left out of.

He suddenly thought back to what Mama Eun-Rick had said.

“What about the boy?”

“Say again?” Riq sneered down his nose at Auctioneer Rick.

“What about The One? W-what will happen to him?” He tried to keep his expression passive, knowing that broaching the subject was a punishable offense.

Riq’s face contorted into a manic grin. There was a fiendish shimmer in his eyes as he answered. “The X-Rick has served his purpose, and now The One will be returned home.” The cryptic reply revealed little, but before Auctioneer Rick could inquire further, Riq stood, waving his hand in the direction of the exit. “That will be all, auctioneer.”

His tone made it clear that there was no room for debate on the matter. Gathering the fragments of his tattered pride and muttering a stolid “yes, sir,” Auctioneer Rick bowed stiffly before making his way for the door. Every step he took away from the council leader sent a pulse of resentment straight to his heart.

All his years of loyalty, and he was being shrugged off like a lowly common-Rick! He’d given everything—his allegiance, his time, his money—to the Council, and now what would he have to show for it? Hawking gimmicky Mortys to a bar full of drunk deadbeats like some hackneyed car salesman. And then when the Morty Craze died, he’d truly have nothing. He wasn’t even sure that his old acting troupe would take him back, not after the bridges he’d burned.

And what would Rickochet think?

He stopped just short of the door, his thoughts weighing so heavily on his shoulders that his perfect posture wilted to a slump. She’ll never want to see me again... Well, even less than she usually does, he thought mournfully.

Behind him, C-165’s raucous laughter boomed across the open space, and he turned sharply at the sound to see him nodding along with something Riq had said. The cowboy was resting his hand easily on Riq’s shoulder like it belonged there, like it was C-165 and not Auctioneer Rick who had toiled away for so long in the hopes of gaining the Council’s favor.

But instead this waddie had glided in and taken his place.

The only thing that grated on Auctioneer Rick’s pride worse than the council leader’s callousness was the grim suspicion that Riq had called him here in the first place just to belittle him in front of C-165. Betrayal punched him like a blow to the gut.

Auctioneer Rick balled his hands into fists, suddenly wanting nothing more than to see the entire Council Chamber filled with molten lava. He wanted to see the walls crack beneath the heat, the gold veneers melt off every surface. He could already imagine the fire licking up the belvedere to engulf the courtly thrones, eradicating them from existence, and the floor splitting open to swallow Riq and the rest of the fucking Council down with him.

Something snapped inside of Auctioneer Rick then.

The sound echoed about the cavern of his mind where ideals, which had been fixed in place for so
long, began to bow under the weight of his newfound scorn. The sound of Riq’s laughter joining C-165’s was all it took for their foundations to finally break, and like outdated buildings ready for an upgrade, they were torn down in a dust cloud of disillusionment and shame. What replaced them came together swiftly, built on beams of fortified steel forged from the fires of Auctioneer Rick’s own will to form something stronger and wilder than he had thought himself capable of.

He squared his shoulders again and strode gallantly out the chamber doors. Investment Rick was idling by the opposite wall, but he quickly jumped to attention when he saw Auctioneer Rick exit.

“So? Come off the grass, mate! How’d it go? Hope she wasn’t too niEUGHggly, eh?” He prattled on as Auctioneer Rick stormed forward without answering him. “Wot? Did you two have a blue, after all?” He winced, taking Auctioneer Rick’s silence as a yes. Placing a sympathetic hand on Auctioneer Rick to slow him, he clucked his tongue. “You poor ba—urp!—stard. Listen. Let’s drop by the pub and get a cold one, eh? Forget the whole thing ever happened. We can go over your accounts again, if ya like.”

Auctioneer Rick looked at Investment Rick with an impish smile as he announced proudly, “Actually, I think it’s time I rebalanced my portfolio.”

~~*~~

Riq let out the breath he’d been holding, trying to slow his frantically beating heart. Even as he sat stiffly on the edge of his bed, it still pounded in his chest as if he’d just run a mile.

His fingers gripped the duvet—a brand-new addition after the last one had been reduced to rags—and he found comfort in the reminder that it’d been replaced in preparation of tonight’s guest. He closed his eyes and allowed himself a smile, not caring that he likely made a strange sight: the eminent leader of the Council of Ricks sweating like a virgin on prom night.

He’d even dressed up for the occasion—or, rather, dressed down—opting to forgo his stuffy Council accoutrements for a loose-fitting button-up and simple slacks, his usually precisely styled hair allowed to fall relaxed over his head. He plucked his glass of wine from the bedside table and emptied it in a single swig, rolling the tart liquid over his tongue before swallowing. If he expected his guest to be relaxed, then he might as well be too.

The Attendants had fixed up his personal quarters as best as they could manage, given the short deadline. The bed frame was still caved in, but at least the linens were fresh. The floor was cleared of debris, the empty bottles finally removed, and the carpet given a thorough cleaning. They’d even replaced the broken bulbs, which were now set to a sultry dim, although they’d failed to remove the hunting knife that was still buried nearly up to its hilt by the wall sconce above the headboard. As for when or what compelled Riq to stick it there in the first place, he hadn’t the slightest.

He poured himself another glass.

Gloves and masks were mandatory as the Attendants worked, both for hygienic purposes as well as to keep them from leaving any trace of themselves on the furniture or linens. The Guards insisted that the Separation Rule be upheld in order to limit damages, and by the time the work was completed, any evidence that there had ever been another Morty in Riq’s room was thoroughly erased, making it ready to receive his special visitor.

It’d been four years since he’d last seen The One in person, and he couldn’t think of a better place to stage their reunion.

Just imagining The One in his room again sent another prickle of excitement zipping across his chest.
and down to his groin. For too long, he’d settled for the periodic Eun-Rick reports and surveillance
of The One’s private room to satisfy his voyeurism, but none of that could compare to actually seeing
—no, smelling, touching The One again.

He looked over at the small digital screen by his bedside. It was the closest he’d allowed himself to
sharing company with The One, and he stroked the screen’s grody surface affectionately, silently
thanking it for fueling his nightly fantasies. The grainy feed from the security camera displayed a
small and dingy room. A battered mattress was tucked in one corner with its sheets pulled halfway
onto the concrete floor. Light trickled in from a small porthole and the narrow space around the
room’s single door, which stood partially ajar now that its occupant had been removed.

Anticipation made his cock jump, and he ran a finger lazily down its swollen length, humming
appreciatively. His imagination was overrun with fantasies about how The One would satisfy him
tonight—and not just his body.

*Once awakened, The One True Morty shall raise the Citadel.*

It was this single verse that had captured Riq’s attention so thoroughly since the book’s discovery.
The Book of Morty described in myriad ways how The One would reshape the fate of all Ricks, but
nowhere else was it so clear that Riq—for he was the leader of the Council and, thereby, the entire
Citadel—would be catapulted to greater power, raised to a level he couldn’t even fathom.

He was willing to do whatever it took to ensure that the prophecy came to fruition, going so far as to
grant Mama Eun-Rick full license to carry out whatever deeds were necessary in order to fulfill the
demands of the book. The One was handled per the book’s directions—taken from his home,
stripped, and tortured. When the Book of Morty stated that The One needed to suffer at “the hands of
many” as part of his journey to self-actualization, the Morty Auctions had perfectly served that
purpose.

For four long years, Riq had waited, the heartache he felt in The One’s absence eased only by
reminding himself that it was for a greater cause. He could endure the delayed gratification, knowing
that when The One’s second renaissance came, he would be the one to claim him all over again.
After all, Riq was his rightful master, and no one could take that from him. He’d bided his time, and
now The One was ready for him.

At last, he would reap the rewards of his abstention.

The digital trill of an incoming call severed his thoughts, startling Riq out of his reverie. His nerves
immediately sprang to the foreground anew, and he jammed his finger on the intercom button,
barking, “What is it?! I specifically said no interruptions until he’s ready!”

The staticky voice on the other end of the receiver paused before speaking cautiously. “But, M-
Master Riq, The One has—He *is* ready.”

“They didn’t just bring him in?!”

“Your words were to call...f-first.”

Riq felt a surge of heat sweep up his face. His nostrils flared, and his finger shook where it held
between his clenched teeth as he stabbed them into his listener’s ear.

“Right away, Master Riq,” came the hurried reply, and the intercom promptly went dead.

Once alone again, Riq shepherded his fragmented composure into order. There it was again, that
temper his council-mates kept telling him about. He pressed his fingers to his eyes, pushing in just until he could feel his heart beating behind them. When he eased off again, black splotches danced across his vision, but at least his anger had dissipated.

He looked disdainfully at the glass in his hand, suddenly repulsed by it. No. He shouldn’t be drinking at a time like this. He needed all his faculties in full working order if he was to reach The One in any meaningful way tonight. With a snarl, he hurled the glass at the nearest wall, sending it shattering in a curtain of glass shards.

Someone gasped softly behind him, and Riq whirled around to find he had an audience. In the center of his room stood a Eun-Rick next to a small boy. The two must’ve slipped in the moment he’d hung up, and it was clear they’d seen Riq’s sudden tantrum with the wine glass. The Eun-Rick’s face was a mixture of concern and dismay, and Riq felt the compulsion to cave his teeth in just for looking at him with anything less than absolute respect.

However, every ounce of rage drained out of him as he moved his eyes to The One. The boy was taller than when he’d last seen him, not as soft. Puberty had stretched him, though he still stood shorter than the average Morty, his hunched form making him appear even smaller than he already was. The hair that had only been shoulder length when he first took him now hung thick to the small of his back, and The One’s eyes, with their faint yellow glow he remembered so well, were directed at the carpet.

Riq’s mouth went dry at the sight of him, and he swallowed uncomfortably around his tongue, which was suddenly too thick for his mouth. He shot a quick glance at the Eun-Rick before speaking. “Go—” His first attempt was a mere croak. He cleared his throat and started again. “You may go now, Eun-Rick. Leave us.”

The Eun-Rick bowed graciously, his head aligning with The One’s ear. The One twitched a nod in reply to something he said, but Riq barely paid it any mind, he was too invested in raking his eyes over The One’s face and body, taking in every detail like an art collector admiring his latest acquisition.

Once the Eun-Rick had excused himself from the room, the door hissing shut quietly behind him, Riq stepped down from the elevated platform of his bed to stand before The One. His hand quivered as he placed it hesitantly on The One’s shoulder, turning his palm inward to cup the air just off the boy’s cheek.

Riq sighed as a wave of pure bliss gushed from his heart. To have The One here before him again was even more overwhelming than he’d imagined it would be, as his pounding heart could attest to. He looked on with pride as The One slowly lifted his head. He felt like a creator welcoming his creation home.

This would be the moment The One finally gave himself to him. He would tilt his sweet head and nuzzle his master’s hand—the same hand that had torn him apart and rebuilt him a hundred times over—in the ultimate sign of devotion. He would pledge his heart to Riq. His love.

Riq practically shivered at the word. Yes, he would have The One’s love, completely and unquestionably. He would come obediently—not just willing but desperate for Riq’s touch along every intimate part of him. The One would offer all of himself before Riq’s altar.
There would be no room for distractions, no more impostors. Whatever The One thought he felt for the X-Rick was as genuine as a three-schmeckle bill. Mama Eun-Rick had assured him as much. He could forgive the boy for his mistake. He was still so young, after all, and Riq had to be patient with him.

_The gentle Rick shall be granted the treasures of the world._

He mentally recited the verse Mama Eun-Rick had given him. Now that The One was primed, he needed only to coax his true potential out like a potter massaging clay into a masterpiece. Riq didn’t know exactly how The One’s gift would be bestowed upon him, but he imagined it would take the form of loving caresses, spread legs, and an unfaltering reverence. The One was ready, too, for his own awakening. Riq could feel it in the way he now trembled beneath his touch, in the slightly acrid smell of his sweat.

“My One and Only,” he breathed when he met his gaze. “You’re finally—” He froze, the words dying on his tongue.

The One was—he was crying, fat tears rolling down his cheeks as his shoulders quaked with barely repressed pining.

Riq immediately dropped to one knee, making soft shushing noises through his smile. He didn’t think The One would be this emotional to see him again, and the display of such pure sentiment moved him.

“It’s all right. I’m here now.” He pulled The One into an embrace, squeezing him tightly as The One took in great, choking gasps. “I know you missed me, but it’s okay. We’re together now, and I’ll take good care of you.” He could feel The One’s heartbeat pounding desperately against his chest, could make out a hardened nipple through the thin cloth. “Such good care of you.” Riq stroked The One’s back, his fingers sweeping over the xylophone of his ribs and brushing the top his small rump.

It was all so familiar to Riq. He could still remember every minute detail of The One’s body from all those nights he’d held him, and even though the boy had grown some, he still felt so right in Riq’s arms. His erection twitched impatiently in his slacks.

He pulled back to gaze into The One’s face, taking his time to wipe the tears away. “And now,” he said softly. “Now I believe you have something for me.” He stood, taking The One’s hand in his and guiding him to the bed. The poor boy must’ve been exhausted, the way his feet dragged, and Riq had to tug a little more firmly than he meant to just to get him onto the mattress. A tingle spread over his scalp with the first ghosts of an Epiphany.

_My god, it’s been so long... That’s it, love. What more do you have for me?_

“I’ve waited so long for this, My One,” he said, climbing onto the bed with him. As The One clumsily scooted up the bed, tangling his legs in his hurry—his gangly limbs were uncoordinated in an endearing kind of way—Riq prowled steadily after, his knees dipping into the plush duvet on either side of him. Once he’d reached the pillows, The One shivered against the headboard, chest fluttering and eyes blown wide with obvious need. Riq dipped his head low, grazing over The One’s tense form. His voice deepened with carnal desire. “Give yourself to me, just as you were always meant—”

A knee knocked him squarely in the chin, and Riq grunted in surprise. He sat back on his heels, rubbing gingerly at his jaw and wiggling it to check that it wasn’t dislocated. With a barely restrained snarl, he addressed The One delicately. “Be more careful. I know you’re anxious to get started, but —” He pitched to the side just in time to avoid another kick. “W-what the actual fuck?” he barked,
irritation beginning to fray his patience. Riq shot his arm out to seize the slim ankle, and he yanked The One toward him so that his bare bottom was pressed to his crotch. “Calm down before you hurt yourself!”

The One began kicking with his other foot, batting ineffectually at Riq’s arm and shoulder as Riq tried to shield himself with his free hand. Riq racked his brain in bewilderment as he fended off the weak attacks. This wasn’t supposed to happen. The One was supposed to be open to him, not fear him. Clearly, the child was confused.

The verse echoing in his head was the only thing that kept his veneer of gentleness in place. “Listen to me. You’re safe now—”

“No!” The One yelled, his voice surprisingly strong despite his small frame, and Riq was taken aback by the suddenness of his outburst. “No! No! No!” He wailed, twisting on the sheets and trying to pull himself free of Riq’s grasp. When The One tried reaching for the bedside table, Riq clambered on top of him, trading his hold on his ankle for his wrists instead.

He pinned them down to the bed and shook the hysterically screaming boy hard, yelling back into his face, “I’m not the fucking X-Rick, so get your head out of your ass and calm the fuck down!”

The One suddenly stilled, going limp beneath Riq’s grasp, and Riq awarded himself a strained smile. Finally. He’s come to his senses.

“—you’re not—”

Riq cocked his head, trying to make out the quiet words.

“You’re not my Rick. You’re not him,” The One whispered, turning his face away into the pillow, eyes clenched tightly shut. “I d-don’t...want...you.”

The frail words gutted him more effectively than any blade, and Riq balked, his brain short-circuiting from the shock of it. Riq searched the boy’s face, trying to find a sign that he’d somehow misheard. This wasn’t right. None of this was right. This was supposed to be the night The One gave himself freely to Riq, and yet he was resisting him at every turn.

He slowly released The One’s wrists, watching dispassionately as he wrenched himself away and began scrambling at something on the wall. Those small hands that should have held Riq were now wrapping themselves around the hunting knife’s handle. His feet were braced against the wall when they should have been encircling Riq’s waist. Fury roared at the horizon of his mind, blotting out any more logic as The One tugged and pulled fruitlessly at the knife.

The One’s braid swung like a pendulum in front of Riq as he struggled, and Riq followed its movements, his eyes tracking down its length until they rested on the peculiar tie at its end. The dirty piece of gray, tattered cloth stood out in such contrast to the shine of his hair and pure white of his robe that Riq found himself transfixed by it.

Where had he seen that material before? A hazy figure in the same gray as the cloth filled his mind, but it stood out of focus just beyond his grasp. In his pursuit to bring the memory to the forefront, Riq reached out, grabbed the braid, and yanked down hard.

The One shrieked as he was forced belly-down onto the bed, Riq’s knee planted firmly in the center of his back. His full weight on the small boy effectively pinned him to the mattress where he struggled to breathe through the plush cover, but Riq ignored his pained cries as his first Epiphany in years hit him full force.
“Fuck...” he rasped.

The feeling of his brain being aroused by such a sudden and powerful gust of energy stunned Riq for a moment, and his mouth fell open as it swept over him. His eyes fluttered shut, an image swiftly taking shape in his mind: Rick of X-280 standing in chains before him in the Council Chamber. His memory had been ramped up to the tenth degree, and he could now recall every precise detail of the Rick—every strand of hair, every bloody scab, and every stain on those grimy coveralls.

But what stood out the most was the look of utter defiance in the Rick’s eyes. They mocked him from the past as if saying, “You’ll never get rid of me.”

Riq blinked himself back to the present. His eyes traveled from The One, who was now flailing his arms and cursing him—yes, actually cursing him—to the knife still stuck fast in the wall. Something was so very wrong with this picture, and it was up to Riq to correct it. He’d done it with the GF, he’d done it with the anti-Council terror-Ricks, and now he was going to do it with his beloved creation, starting with that wretched little tie.

He reached over The One and grasped the handle of the knife. He barely registered the resistance of the blade’s teeth through the plaster as he wrenched it free. Shreds of wallpaper fluttered down from the now gaping hole in the wall, and he tilted the knife back and forth in his hand, watching the way the light danced across its blade.

“Is this what you were looking for?” he asked calmly, holding the knife in front of The One so that he could see it. The One’s eyes went wide at the sight, and he froze immediately. “That’s better. You won’t want to move for this.” He lifted the braid in one fist as he placed the blade against the soft flesh of The One’s nape. The boy gasped, the skin around the metallic edge goose-pimpling in fear.

“Falling in love with him was your first mistake.” His hand was shaking as he pressed down hard, threatening to break the skin.

Just before he drew blood, however, he abruptly flipped the blade up instead and dragged it through the thick base of the braid in one cruel upward sweep of his arm. The hairs gave way painfully, The One howling as they snagged and tore unevenly on the serrated edge. Broken strands fluttered down like petals, and the braid that had writhed vibrantly just minutes earlier now hung lifeless in Riq’s fist. The brown locks even seemed to lose their golden luster the moment they were cut away from The One.

“Keeping a part of him with you was your second.” Riq tossed the chunk of hair to the floor, glad to be rid of it. Removing the X-Rick’s contamination was a necessary step to freeing The One from his own destructive fantasies.

The One cried plaintively into the pillows, hands clutching the base of his neck where his braid had been. His remaining hair dripped onto the sheets like dead reeds. “Y-you’re a—a monster!” he sniveled, twisting his head around just far enough to glare at Riq with undisguised hatred. “And I—I hate you!”

YOU—NEVER—HAVE HIM—

The fragmented message spasmed across Riq’s mind, and he jerked back as the sharp edge of self-doubt suddenly cleaved him. He turned his head to the side, unable to even look at The One, the fear that he would never truly have him stronger than ever. His resolve buckled, and he almost faltered, almost thought to let him go—

But then despair once again claimed The One’s features, and it was as though Riq’s bout of
uncertainty had never happened. Riq grabbed another fistful of hair from the side of his head and yanked The One up until his torso was suspended off the bed.

“I made you,” he growled low, sawing through the hair with jerky movements. “What you are.” He paused to hack off another chunk. “What you could be! And yet you still deny me?” Each snag of hair on the knife sent jolts of Epiphany through Riq, as searing and fresh as citrus, but he cast the clamoring inspirations aside in favor of hearing The One scream.

That confusing mixture of arousal, disgust, sorrow, and rage churned inside Riq as he lopped off fistful after thick fistful. With every vicious slash, The One’s scalp was left with ratty tufts that stood at odd angles. “You—we were supposed to do great things!” Strands of hair littered the bed as he continued yelling over The One’s cries of pain. “But you just won’t let that happen! That fucking X-Rick’s poisoned your simple, little brain, and you’re too goddamn stupid to see it!” His throat was starting to go raw as he roared at the top of his lungs. “As long as he’s around, you’ll never be what you were always meant to be!” Mine, mine, and mine alone. “He’s a fucking cancer that needs to be cut out!”

He brought his arm back, poised for another devastating slice, when a hand suddenly grabbed his.

“Master Riq, please! Calm yourself!”

He barely heard the plea over the roar of the storm in his head. Riq rounded on the Eun-Rick fast as a lightning strike and shoved him away with a wild growl and sweep of the blade. The Eun-Rick stumbled back, hand grasping his torn cheek, but two more Eun-Ricks took his place, wresting the knife from Riq’s grip and begging him to stop his rampage. Riq snarled like a cornered animal before he was finally dragged off of The One, cursing loudly.

“Get him out of here!” he bellowed, shrugging off the Eun-Ricks and pacing back and forth in front of his bed like a crazed beast. They immediately flew to The One’s aid, helping him up from the bed even when he tried to fight them off in his blind hysteria. His small limbs trembled, and he was shaking so badly that the Eun-Ricks had to half-carry him to the door. The way The One’s hands rested so trustingly on their arms as they held him made Riq see red.

The blade shook in Riq’s hand from the surge of adrenaline, and he thrust it aside to rake his fingers through his mane, clutching fitfully at it. Even now, left in the company of a lone Eun-Rick, his thoughts jumbled together in a blinding fever pitch of fury and noise.

But through the chaos, a lingering Epiphany suddenly cast a sunbeam of buoyant clarity.

“Eun-Rick!” he snapped, his mind racing to keep up with the Epiphany that laid out his next course of action. It was so obvious, Riq felt foolish for ever having not known the simple, inevitable truth.

The Eun-Rick hurried to where Riq stood, bowing low even as fresh blood dripped from between the fingers cupping his cheek. His speech came out partially slurred around the wound. “Yes, Master. How can we be of s-service?”

“Eun-Rick, get me the Captain of the Guard. It’s time that the X-Rick was dealt with.”

“Yes, O wise Master Riq.” The Eun-Rick raised his head to level his gaze at Riq, gravity underscoring his every word. “The time for action is now.”
[All fanart for Chapter 9 can be found here.]

2/10/19: No Laughing Otter Cosplay filmed a short skit for a bonus scene that was imagined to have happened between Chapters 8 and 9. We had written the script for it as part of a contest in the fall and are hugely satisfied with where they took it. :) Please see it here!
The Escape

Chapter Summary

Rick looked at Mouse through the net of yellow starlight hung about the room as he let the messenger bag slip off his shoulder and onto the floor. “I—” His voice strained against a lump in his throat, and he swallowed. “I’m here, Mouse.”

Chapter Notes

First published 2/1/17
Woo-hoo! We’ve reached the double digits in chapters for this story. And how fitting that it is indeed longer than any chapter to date too. :D It’s equal parts political intrigue and sensuality in this one, so we hope you enjoy~! Let us know in a Comment, or you can hit us up through many of the different ways mentioned on our AO3 Profile. Until then, take care!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Though Ricks may have the gift of knowledge to fathom all mysteries, and though they may have such power that they can move the very stars, without love, they are nothing."
- Mortilonians 2:23

Rick scraped the bottom of the paper carton with his chopsticks, nabbing the last dots of sticky rice stained brown with synthetic soy sauce. He stuffed them into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully as he eyed the delivery courier hovering by the footboard of his bed. The front of the dinged-up, white polymer vessel projected a tiny hologram of a Morty dressed as a carhop—complete with checkered shorts, paper cap, and tray. He was currently skating in a lazy figure eight while the neon sign “Enjoy Your Meal!” was lit in brilliant, yellow letters above him.

Impossibly long legs propped up on the cherrywood desk, Rick tipped his chair back and gave a restless sigh. He turned his attention away from the Morty carhop, jiggled his foot impatiently, and rewound his mentor’s message for the sixteenth time that night.

“The freight elevator arrives at sub-level 10 at 2300, 0200 and 0500 hours,” played Chi’s recorded voice through ORA’s internal audio feed.

“23, 2, 5,” Rick echoed, mumbling around the grains of rice.

“There, the engineers take roughly 9 to 12 minutes to offload the tefrag carts.”

“9 to—urrp!—12 minutes.”

Corresponding images appeared over his retina, stills taken from a reconnaissance nano. The image
was low-res and warped through the fish-eye lens but showed a passable shot of an imposing set of steel elevator doors. A pair of engineers was captured in mid-motion, directing multiple carts piled high with black shards.

“My intel says the 0500 shift is sloppy. Your run-of-the-mill k-lax junkies. They don’t finish their round for a full 15 minutes—more than enough time to get there and get inside without being seen. That’ll be your best bet.”

*You mean only bet,* Rick thought. If he missed that shift for any reason, it’d mean another full day of waiting until his next chance. A quick glance at the room’s clock told him he still had hours to go. He jiggled his foot again.

“From there, it’s a quick ride to Materials & Distribution.”

A grainy photograph revealed a sprawling warehouse filled with industrial-grade machinery. Massive vats poured liquid metal into work lines while Ricks in welding masks crouched behind showers of sparks frozen in time. Rows of towering shelves stood like sentinels down the center of the floor, disappearing into the distance. And to the far left of them—

“The loading bay,” Rick said in a hushed, almost reverent whisper.

“And then it’s a straight shot to the loading bay,” Chi’s voice continued, outlining the escape plan with stoic precision. “You’ll be posing as a Cedrite buyer, reviewing the week’s shipment. As for the Morty’s cover story, I leave that to you. Just keep it simple. Your disguise will help you blend in, but it’s far from perfect. If they ask for ID, just flash them your security pass. By the time their systems notice it’s expired, you should be long gone. Remember, the freighter you want is found in bay number 5. The CS Starfall.”

“Bay 5. CS Starfall.” Rick studied the ship’s schematics as he threw a three-pointer into the garbage with the now empty carton.

Carhop Morty immediately sprang to life, breaking out of the skating animation to squeak, “We hope you enjoyed your General Klak Bau’s Chicken, sir!” The Morty gave such a cheerful wave of his holographic hand that Rick couldn’t help but wave back.

“And that’s it, 280,” Chi was saying. “After that, you’re home free. I just hope—” This was where the recording always went silent, and Rick had to wonder if it was a glitch in the audio file. The somber tone of Chi’s voice when it picked up again, however, gave him reason to think it might be something more. “Good luck out there,” Chi said simply before the recording stopped.

>> PLAY FILE AGAIN?

    YES >> NO

Rick puffed out his cheeks and exhaled slowly as he readied his selection. He already had the plan memorized, he reminded himself. Replaying it at this point would accomplish nothing, really. He paused, chevrons still blinking before the two letters. Deleting the file was a necessity if they were to ensure his mentor’s safety in the event of his capture. But it still pained him to erase Chi’s voice so easily.

After all, it might be the last time he heard it.

Any part of the plan could go wrong—a change in the shift personnel, equipment failure, or even just an upset stomach. Rick quickly shook the barrage of *what-ifs* from his mind while rubbing absently at his belly.
“If I get the runs, I’m blaming you,” he said to Carhop Morty. The hologram, being a hologram, just kept waving in an endless loop. A second later, a screen asking him to rate his meal popped up over the small figure. Rick sighed.

*Jeez, lonely much? You miss your squeeze that bad?* the self-deprecating side of him chided. But, shit, it was true. Just two days apart, and Rick was going stir-crazy in his room, the memories of that night in the winner’s suite a near-constant companion that always left him flushed and tight in the pants.

Not that he had any time to actually rub one out since then. He and Chi had worked tirelessly to concoct tonight’s plan with help from the clues Rick had procured from the Resonance. Chi had deployed every one of his nanos and greased more than a few palms to pinpoint Mouse’s room, until eventually the location revealed itself.

A porthole, heavy churning of machinery, three elevator chimes between Mouse’s room and Façade—the mishmash of Resonances ultimately led them to a small external-facing storage closet tucked away in a corner of sub-level 10.

Things moved quickly after that. There was the means of egress to suss out, security and maintenance schedules to cross-compare, and materials to gather. The turnaround had been tight, but he and Chi had gone over the logistics with a fine-toothed comb, leaving no scenario unchecked and taking every possible contingency into account. If all went according to plan, by tomorrow morning, he would have Mouse in his arms again as they fled the Citadel. They’d leave this godforsaken madhouse behind to start somewhere new.

Rick allowed himself a soft smile, the kind that now came easily to him ever since Mouse had entered his life. He felt light, fresh, young. Rick was surprised by the unwitting transformation he’d undergone in the span of just over a week.

When he’d first come to the Citadel, revenge had been the only thing on his mind, but now his mission revolved around Mouse’s safety. He’d be lying if he said he wouldn’t always hold a grudge against the Council. If he had the time, he would have loved to make them suffer for the hell they’d put the both of them through, but as things stood now, escaping was his top priority.

With a silent “thank you,” Rick erased the files from ORA’s storage. He stood up and wiped his hands on his new slacks.

They weren’t the silky material of a three-piece Elite suit nor as grimy as his personal coveralls, but they still felt familiar against his fingers. In a mirror across the room, he took a moment to admire his disguise. The simple, brown slacks and blue sweater were standard-issue among Ricks, guaranteed to be found in countless wardrobes across the multiverse. To complete his look, Rick plucked the white lab coat from the bed and slipped it over his shoulders. Giving a few tugs of the lapels, the shoulder seams fell neatly along his frame.

With the plan so close to fruition, Rick was tempted to celebrate with a drink at the bar. But would it be more fitting to make himself a mimosa or a gin nightcap at this hour? Hell, either would work, considering how morning and night were loosely held concepts within the Citadel. Its levels operated on staggered time zones so that some part of the space station was awake at any given hour.

The slogan *It’s happy hour somewhere!* took on a very literal meaning here.

Sure, it made traveling between levels a bit disorienting, but this was also partly what made the security system so ingenious and nearly impossible to thwart. Guards could be dispatched at all hours, monitoring the activities of Citadel patrons without interruption. And security only got tighter
the closer one got to sub-level 10. If Rick tried to reach Mouse’s room on foot, they’d be on him faster than he could say “police state.”

Luckily for him, Chi was one resourceful son of a bitch.

“‘You still have one meal left, sir!’ Carhop Morty chirped in an overly enthusiastic digital voice. LED lights raced across a seam near the base of the courier, indicating the last compartment Rick hadn’t emptied yet. “Enjoy your food before it gets cold!” Whoever had animated the hologram had really gone all out with Carhop Morty, because he finished his line by twirling in place and blowing a kiss.

“Yeah, yeah. Right. How could I forget?” Rick asked rhetorically, already sliding his hands down the sides of the delivery container. He pressed a button, and the bottom drawer popped open to reveal a small package wrapped in a dirty white cloth. With the one exception of General Klak Bau’s Chicken—Chi always did make one hell of a marinade—in his Gluttony Rick-size order, the courier’s compartments had been filled with pieces of contraband to assist in Rick’s escape.

Just the sight of the bundle’s familiar shape made Rick’s trigger finger twitch with anticipation, and he smirked.

No one was going to expect him to portal in.

The use of portal guns was strictly prohibited within the Citadel. In fact, every Rick’s personal gun—his own included—was confiscated upon entry as a security measure. Visitors went through a stringent process just to get theirs back upon departure, but Citadel staff were doomed to go without theirs for the duration of their employment. And once a Rick took up residency within the Citadel, the chances of getting it back were nil.

Chi had refused to tell Rick how he’d even gotten his hands on this one. All he’d shared was that there was an entire vault of portal guns that were tabulated and kept under strict security. Access was next to impossible, with only high-ranking Guards and other Citadel officials holding the key.

As though handling a precious relic, Rick gently lifted the gun by its handle, careful to keep its shroud in place.

“Thank you for ordering from Dive, for when you need a diversion!” Carhop Morty said before blinking out of existence. Its mission completed, the empty courier hovered to the door and waited patiently until Rick let it out.

Alone once again, he sunk back into his seat and pulled a small messenger bag out from beneath the desk. Its common burlap material stood at odds with the rest of the suite’s rich decor. Keeping the bag out of the cameras’ sight, Rick slipped the portal gun into its opening to join the rest of his supplies: A change of clothes for Mouse and himself, a day’s worth of concentrated high-calorie rations, a few rolls of schmeckles, and two PIC switchboards would be his only possessions from here on out.

Chi had warned him that the gun was a salvaged piece with only enough power left for two short jumps, maximum. He’d already input the coordinates to Mouse’s room for the first jump and then—

The ringing of the phone suddenly tore Rick from his thoughts.

Who in the hell is that? He darted his eyes to the bedside table where an antique-styled phone sat on dainty, clawed feet.

In all honesty, Rick already had a pretty good guess who it was—the Council’s auditors, most likely, calling yet again for an update. Ever since learning that he’d drained his funds at the last auction,
they’d been especially short with him, constantly asking when he’d be using an Epiphany to develop something lucrative.

He rolled his eyes before picking up the receiver. Feedback squealed over the earpiece, and Rick cursed before snarling, “For the last time, no, I haven’t made any fuAUGHcking mon—”

“Go to him. Now.”

The voice on the other end was muffled by static, nothing like the clear, fiber-optic quality he usually heard from incoming calls.

“The fuck?” Rick muttered. Great. Now he was getting prank calls. “Look, pal. If this is some kinda joke, you forgot the set-up,” Rick said dryly.

“Rick of X-280, there isn’t any time. You have to leave. They’re on their way.”

“Yeah. Real original. Let me guess. Next you’ll say there’s an axe murderer standing right behind me.” Rick flipped the bird to the caller. “Newsflash. I’ve watched the same shitty horror movies you did. Now, why don’t you take a nice, long drink of go fuck yourself!” he jeered, already moving to hang up the receiver.

“Mouse needs you!” came the tinny voice.

Rick’s hand stopped in mid-air. Slowly, he put the receiver back to his ear. “Wh-who is this?”

“You must go now if you are both to live.”

Picking up the phone by the cradle with his other hand, Rick walked to the door and spied through the peephole warily. The corridor outside was empty. “I swear to god, if you don’t tell me—”

“There is no time to explain. You have two more minutes before the surveillance system is back online. We know you have the portal gun. Use it.”

“Okaaay. Let’s say I believe you—”

“Good. Now go at once.” Then the line went dead.

Rick’s heart was pounding wildly as he hung up, his mind reeling at the unexpected development. Was it all just an elaborate hoax...or an actual warning? Whoever it was had an alarming amount of intel that made it hard to write it off as an average prank call.

The caller had mentioned Mouse by name. Mouse said that only his mother had ever called him that, unless—an image of Mouse bound and tortured, their secret nickname being cruelly ripped from him suddenly filled Rick’s mind. A fresh wave of sweat broke out over his temples.

You must go now if you are both to live.

Okay, that just sounded extreme. But in a space station full of the multiverse’s biggest assholes, maybe it wasn’t too much of a stretch. Hell, his last run-in with Citadel security had left him with a broken rib and a threat on his life.

Rick turned stubbornly back to readying his supplies. No. He’d spent too long going over the plan to throw it all out the window just because he’d been spooked. But his hands were shaking and uncoordinated as the caller’s warning kept replaying in his mind: They’re coming now.

An inexplicable itch started to crawl up Rick’s nape, and he shot a look at the door, already
imagining the thunderous march of Guard boots approaching. After waiting a heartbeat, he laughed aloud. He was being ridiculous. Rick’s smile faltered, however, as the pounding grew louder and louder still. Or was it just the pounding of blood in his ears? For a minute he stood stock-still, staring at the door, daring something to happen.

*Mouse needs you.*

"Aw, fuck this," Rick cursed, his resolve finally snapping. Throwing all caution to the wind, Rick snatched the bag and slung it over his shoulder. He moved quickly to retrieve the concealed portal gun from inside. No point in trying to hide it now.

Taking a final breath and pressing his lips together, he ripped the cloth off.

The white plastic of the casing was scuffed and smudged gray from years of use; the interdimensional crystal, a mossy green where it usually glowed bright emerald. Rick could only hope that Chi was right about it having enough juice for the jump. From the looks of it, he wondered if it’d end up scattering his atomic makeup to the far corners of the universe instead.

Going on nothing more than a dubious phone call and a gut feeling that just wouldn't quit, Rick mangled the sign of the cross, leveled the gun at the nearest wall, and pulled the trigger.

~~*~~

One one thousand...two one thousand...three one thousand...

Rick knocked his head back against the wall as he counted, breathing out a curse. From around the corner, he could still make out the idle chit-chat of the Guard Ricks at the end of the hall. They couldn’t be more than 20 feet from him. Giving a shaky sigh, he prayed that his temporary refuge would hold.

He ran a hand across his brow, wiping away beads of sweat that threatened to drip into his eyes. Christ Almighty, it was hot down here. Even without his lab coat, which he’d immediately torn off and stuffed into his bag upon his arrival to sub-level 10, his shirt stuck uncomfortably close to his skin, a layer of sweat trapped between it and his chest.

Housing the Citadel’s extensive generator system, sub-level 10's boilers made the entire floor burn like an arid desert. The space station ran on tefrag, a powerful but unstable compound, and the entire bottom level was packed full of machines specially designed to properly handle the stuff. Engineers maintained them around the clock to keep the Citadel’s metaphorical heart beating.

It was strangely fitting, in a way, that Mouse was housed here as well.

*A portal jammer. A fucking portal jammer.* They’d run through lists of scenarios, and yet why hadn’t he considered a jammer? He smacked his head back again. *Because you’re a dumb, fucking moron. That’s why.*

So maybe this wasn’t exactly the most productive conversation Rick could be having, but he was pissed. He’d input the room’s coordinates correctly, but with the jammer in place, he’d been spit out into a completely different area of sub-level 10. Only luck and the fail-safe calculations programmed into the portal gun had prevented him from being portaled out into the cold embrace of space, and for that, he should have been grateful.

However, Rick had also just spent the last half hour dodging security cameras and the occasional engineer. Now he was tired, harried, and very, very cranky.
The droning of machinery hummed through the metal walls and into the back of Rick’s skull as he counted.

The droning of machinery hummed through the metal walls and into the back of Rick’s skull as he counted.

Right on time,” Rick murmured. “All right, little guy. What have you got for me?” Rick blinked, running the program to translate the reconnaissance nano’s latest feed. A screenful of information blanketed his vision.

“Just two. I can handle that,” Rick reassured himself. The third Rick—most likely an unarmed engineer on duty—didn’t even factor into his mental rehearsal of the impending brawl. If he took down the Guards quickly enough, he could be in and out before even having to deal with him.

A quick peek around the corner confirmed the positions of the two Guards. Five...ten... He could probably cross the distance in just under a dozen strides. Assuming he got to them before they reacted. Rick closed his eyes and reconsidered his options. Rushing headlong into two armed Guards would be suicide. He needed something more subtle. A diversion? Maybe a demolition nano. But so close to the hull—

Rick paused in mid-thought, suddenly realizing that the Guards had gone quiet. No, wait. Someone was talking, but the voice sounded more refined than the Guards’, almost deferential.

Shit! The engineer! Rick kicked himself for not moving sooner. Kneeling low to keep out of sight, Rick spied down the hallway.

“Good evening, Master Guards. The One True Morty bids you good tidings.”

The Guards had their backs to him as they were addressing—a Eun-Rick? Of course, Rick figured. Wherever Mouse was concerned, Eun-Ricks were never too far behind. The Eun-Rick was partially obscured by the Guards from his vantage point, but Rick sized him up quickly. Physically, he didn’t pose a threat, but now he had one more warm body to deal with.

“We come bearing an update regarding the X-Rick.”

X-Rick? Rick twitched. Why would they be reporting on me? After all, he’d lain low after the second auction. But judging by the reaction of the Guards, they seemed to be anticipating the news.

“Out with it, Eun-Rick. What is it?” they asked testily.

“We’ve received word that the X-Rick has been tracked to level 4, quadrant 6. The Captain of the
Guard is asking for all units to report there immediately for assistance. You are hereby discharged from your post, Master Guards.”

The Guards looked at each other with some surprise. “How come we didn’t hear anything about this?” One of them was already reaching for the communicator on his belt.

The Eun-Rick replied without missing a beat. “The Captain insists we maintain radio silence on the matter. Finding the X-Rick is now priority number one, and all orders are to be relayed in person, lest the transmissions be intercepted by unfavorable parties. After all, we don’t want to upset the public with any unnecessary panic, do we?” He paused to let the Guards give a few grumbled acknowledgments before continuing. “We have already arranged a replacement to cover the remainder of your shift.” The Eun-Rick bowed low, adding, “We will stand post until their arrival.”

When the Eun-Rick lifted his head again, he looked past the Guards’ shoulders—and straight at Rick.

*Oh, shit!* Rick ducked his head quickly behind the corner again. He’d looked right at him! Rick braced himself against the wall, ready to bolt the moment the Eun-Rick raised the alarm.

“You are now relieved of your post, Master Guards. We thank you graciously for your service.” There was a pause. Then, “Morty be with you.”

“M-Morty be with you too,” they grumbled awkwardly in return.

The sound of the Guards moving away came sharply to Rick’s sensitive ears even over the thrumming of his heart. The hallway then fell quiet, but he waited a full minute before daring to move. Gripping the portal gun tightly in one hand—a dubious weapon at best—he took a breath and sprang around the corner.

The Eun-Rick was facing the storage closet's door but then cocked his head and looked over his shoulder at Rick.

“Ah,” the Eun-Rick said. It was not a cry of alarm but merely an acknowledgment of an expectation fulfilled. When he turned to face Rick fully, Rick saw he had thick gauze covering his right cheek. For one long, drawn-out second, neither of them moved.

Rick swayed on his feet a fraction of a degree, torn between rushing the Eun-Rick to bludgeon his head in with the portal gun or fleeing in the opposite direction. The Eun-Rick had to know that he shouldn’t be there, and with Mouse’s room left vulnerable, he would no doubt call for the Guards’ return.

But the Eun-Rick only regarded him quietly for another moment before giving a slow nod, his eyes steeped in an unwavering calm that had Rick transfixed. Without another word, the Eun-Rick turned and departed down the hallway, his bare feet carrying him, silent as an apparition.

Rick rested a hand against the wall, suddenly gasping for air. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath. Why had the Eun-Rick let him go? One shout, and he could’ve had the Guards on him in a flash.

But as crazy as it seemed, Rick got the sense that the Eun-Rick had been—had actually been *relieved* to see him.

First the anonymous call to his suite and now an unlikely ally. Things were spiraling dangerously out of Rick’s control, and with the plan all but shot to hell, every step only took him further into uncharted territory. Luck appeared to have been on his side so far, but Rick wondered how long it
Fuckin’ A. Quit looking a gift horse in the mouth. At least you’re still here, right? Rick reminded himself as he darted quickly to the unguarded door, eyes vigilant for any more surprise visitors. He half-expected to see Guards popping out from every corner, but the hall remained still and empty.

Rick pressed a shaking hand up to the door, excitement buzzing in his veins. Just a few inches of steel now lay between him and his goal. He was so close, he could already imagine the feel of Mouse, could practically smell him. He rested his forehead against the surprisingly cool surface, thanking whatever forces had gotten him this far.

Stepping back, he looked the nondescript door over. There was nothing that set it apart from the many others that littered sub-level 10, save for the security card reader positioned above the handle. Yet another obstacle he hadn’t accounted for. He glossed a hand over the device’s face, wondering how long it’d take him to reconfigure the switchboards to interface with it.

He was just about to take the tools out from his bag when he noticed something reflective sitting atop the matte black of the reader. Rick picked it up and stared dumbfounded at the translucent key card. CITADEL SECURIGRID was written on it in red letters above an embossed Dimension α-001.

Dimension α-001 was the Citadel’s official dimension, assigned to it at its founding. Like members of a royal family assuming the title of bygone ancestors or the passing down of a coat of arms, tradition dictated that council members and high-ranking officials gave up their original dimensional designation in favor of the Citadel’s. Bearing the mark of Dimension α-001 carried with it an unparalleled level of privilege and, above all else, access.

What Rick now held in his hand was the proverbial key to the city—or, as the case may be, Citadel.

He recalled the Eun-Rick had been facing the door just minutes earlier. Was this yet another gift from him? Too drained from all that he’d already endured and just too plain tired to care about the hows and whys, Rick slid the card through the reader without another thought.

The heavy lock withdrew immediately, and the door swung inside an inch. From the small gap, a gust of cool air rushed out, kissing Rick’s overheated skin like a tender lover. He pocketed the card and pushed the heavy door into the unlit room, surprised when it didn’t make so much as a squeak.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star...” Rick’s heart seized at the wistful sound of Mouse’s quiet voice wafting out from the darkness. “How I wonder what you are...” He slipped inside, all tension flowing out of him like sand through an hourglass. “Up above the world so high...” As though in a trance, Rick closed the door behind him quietly, not wanting to startle Mouse and interrupt his lullaby.

Mouse was looking out of a small porthole against the far wall, his figure highlighted by the audience of stars outside and his white robe swathed around—wait, no. It wasn’t his robe but a bedsheet, the long, pale fabric enshrouding his head and trailing out behind Mouse like broken wings.

Rick restrained himself from rushing across the room and grabbing Mouse at that very second. There was something about witnessing Mouse in such an innocent state that made Rick want to cherish this moment. He’d never heard Mouse sing before and was pleased to find that his stuttered voice formed a smooth tenor in song.

“Like a diamond in the sky...”

Rick’s fingers moved to the wall beside him, feeling for a light switch but finding none. He grinned
as an idea struck him. Perhaps he could provide his own light show to accompany Mouse’s berceuse to the stars.

He raised his right hand aloft in front of him. At his command, the ring of dormant nanos around his arm stirred and crept slowly out from beneath his sleeve until they came to rest in the center of his palm. Then they flickered in unison before lifting off on their tiny, metallic wings, like a swarm of fireflies in the night. The bright pinpoints of light bathed the room in a golden glow, reminiscent of Mouse’s own luminescent eyes.

“Twinkle, twinkle—” Mouse stopped mid-verse when one of the nanos hovered close by and landed on his shoulder. He stared at it through the porthole’s reflection, captivated, and gave a hushed sound of awe. When he reached for the tiny firefly, it fluttered away. He climbed to his bare feet to follow—and froze at the sight of Rick standing at the door.

Rick looked at Mouse through the net of yellow starlight hung about the room as he let the messenger bag slip off his shoulder and onto the floor. “I—” His voice strained against a lump in his throat, and he swallowed. “I’m here, Mouse.”

“Rick?” Mouse croaked, taking a faulty step toward him, then another. “Rick!” In four short strides, he was across the room and throwing himself into Rick’s arms. “Y-you did it! You really came for me!” he cried in excited relief as he burrowed himself into Rick’s chest, unable to get close enough.

“Of course I came for you. It’s all I’ve—” Rick’s words were thick with emotion. “Mouse, I’m just sorry it took this long.” He slumped down to the floor, holding Mouse tightly as he rubbed his cheek against the top of his head.

The surge of invincibility that Rick always felt when with Mouse sluiced through him, making his nerves sing with fervor. The universe could implode on itself at this very moment, and Rick wouldn’t even care.

But Mouse was more impatient than Rick, already clambering up his chest and crushing his lips to Rick’s. His intentions were noble but sloppy, driven by some agitated yearning that had him diving his tongue messily into Rick’s mouth. Rick’s brow shot up at the sudden, uncharacteristic display of affection. Still, he couldn’t deny the arousal that was quickly piqued by the feeling of Mouse’s soft lips and coy tongue entangled with his own.

Rick’s hands were restless as they roamed Mouse’s small body through the sheet, wanting to map out and memorize every contour, every peak and valley. With one strong hand, he squeezed the crest of his hip appreciatively as Mouse straddled him on wobbly knees. A distant part of Rick thought it strange that he hadn’t heard a whisper of a Resonance yet, even with Mouse grabbing at him for more. His other hand smoothed beneath the fabric to cradle the back of Mouse’s head.

Then his brow pinched in confusion. Something was off as he brushed his fingers across Mouse’s barren nape. Where he would usually feel the weight of his thick braid, only cool air greeted him. He pulled away.

“Mouse, w-what happened to your h—” was all he could manage before he was smothered by another passionate assault on his lips. Rather than inciting Rick’s carnal interests, it doused him with concern. He grabbed Mouse firmly by the shoulders and held him back at arm’s length. “Mouse. What’s wrong?”

Instead of answering him, Mouse only doubled his efforts, whining incoherently as he began tugging Rick’s shirt up to pull at his belt.
“Mouse, I’m being serious here!” He seized Mouse’s wrists. “Let me see you!” The terse command made Mouse instantly go limp in his grasp, head bowed and eyes glowing weakly. Rick slowly lifted his hands to Mouse’s head, pausing briefly when Mouse cringed at his touch.

Mouse’s long mane of hair was gone, reduced to a wreck of lopsided chunks that fell helter-skelter over his ears. Rick ran his fingers through the short curls, feeling Mouse’s scalp for any sign of injury, but thankfully the damage was only cosmetic.

Rick pressed their foreheads together, letting his consciousness fan out in search of a Resonance that would tell him more. *Come on... Show me what happened...* But Mouse was silent, too traumatized to give him any leads.

Rick held Mouse’s face in his palms, refusing to let him hide any longer. “Oh, Mouse,” he said in a hushed voice, placing a chaste kiss on his brow. The loving gesture shattered Mouse’s composure, and he broke down in open sobs. His cracked warbles tore holes in Rick’s heart.

“I-I thought of you,” he began weakly, “just like y-you told me to. I imagined you w-were there with me, but—but it didn’t—I-I was still so—” His small frame bowed beneath the force of his sobs. “P-please, Rick. Just...make it all better.” Before Rick could respond, Mouse grabbed his hands and held them to his hips. “Please,” he begged again, squirming on Rick’s lap until he was grinding against his erection.

“No! You listen!” Mouse’s outburst stunned Rick into silence. His next words seemed to take all his willpower to get out, and he fumbled several tries before he finally said, “M-make me feel good, a-and then—then you’ll know the truth.”

Rick couldn’t believe what Mouse was asking for.

His heart clenched at the prospect of exploiting Mouse just to gain information from him. He wanted their shared touches to be special, sacred, something born out of affection rather than necessity. It pained him to think that their feelings for each other could be whittled down to a simple equation of cause and effect; their time together, just a means to an end.

“Is that how—is that how you think it works?”

Mouse wilted at the sound of utter disappointment in Rick’s voice. “I-I’m sorry. I just d-don’t know w-what to do.”

“It’s all right, Mouse. I do want to be with you. But—" He pressed a kiss to his temple. “—not like this.”

With some effort and more than a few protests from his old joints, Rick scooped Mouse up in his arms and hoisted himself to his feet. He made his way to the mattress in the corner.

The room really was no larger than a maintenance closet. The walls and floor, done in the same brushed cement, kept it unnaturally cool despite the massive boilers that burned just beyond them. A simple lavatory, the type found in interstellar prisons, occupied one corner. Sheets of paper and what looked like shards of charcoal littered the floor beneath the porthole.

The bed’s plain white linens glowed like a beacon in the dim. The sheets were ragged and smelled pungently of Mouse, likely not having been washed in months, and one corner of the mattress was frayed badly, the stuffing bursting out through a hole.
Rick knelt on the sagging mattress, its springs yawning beneath his weight. Mouse refused to give up his tenacious grip on his shirt, stubbornly clinging to him like a burr, despite Rick’s gentle coaxing.

“Don’t worry, Mouse. I’m not going anywhere.” A quick check to ORA’s internal clock confirmed that he was still hours ahead of the scheduled delivery time. Jump-starting the plan had proven to be a blessing in disguise. Mouse was clearly too emotionally distraught to meet the demands of a harrowing escape. They wouldn’t be going anywhere any time soon. Rick would have to figure out a way to reach the elevator, of course, but right now the thought of leaving the relative safety of Mouse’s room was the furthest thing from his mind.

“W-will you—will you do it n-now?” Mouse asked timidly, eyes askance. A fragmented Resonance—still too fraught with trepidation to be of any real use—skittered through Rick’s brain to fill out the rest of Mouse’s vague request.

Rick shook his head as he spoke. “I know you think that’s what you need, Mouse. But this—” He paused to brush Mouse’s limp dick through the sheet like a buyer inspecting a peddler’s wares, indifferent and methodical. “Touching you isn’t all it takes. Hell, anyone can do that.” There was a hint of frustration in his voice as he imagined all the other countless Ricks who had touched Mouse so callously. He hated to think he could be assumed to be anything like them.

Mouse dropped his head, shame radiating from him so fiercely that Rick didn’t need any assistance to decipher it.

“What I’m trying to say is that what you and me have, it’s different from anyone else.” He shifted off of his knees and sat cross-legged. Seating Mouse more comfortably across his lap so that he was nestled in the crook of his arm, he continued. “And that’s what makes the Resonances work. You’ve never been able to give them to anyone else because, well...” Rick faltered, suddenly unsure of how to continue.

“Because?” Mouse urged him on.

“Because I...care about you,” Rick stammered, embarrassed by his flimsy cover-up. Wow. Grown man afraid of the big, bad L word. “A-and when you’re with someone that cares about you—”

“I care!” Mouse jumped in. “I care about you too!” For the first time that night, his face was alight in a smile. “I care about you more than anyone else!”

“A-all right, Mouse. I get it. Y-you don’t have to keep—” Rick ran a hand over his face, hiding his blush. “Don’t wear it out, y’know?” Even though his true feelings for Mouse rang through him as clear as a bell, he still refused to give them a name. He envied Mouse his Resonance just then—being able to say everything he wanted without ever opening his mouth.

“But I r-really mean it,” Mouse insisted. “I care about you more than—more than Neapolitan ice cream!” He was planting kisses on Rick’s neck and cheeks, driven by a rekindled energy that hinged on confidence rather than shaky desperation like before.

Rick chuckled, trying to catch Mouse’s lips before they could flutter away. Goddamn, he’s so cute.

His grin made it impossible to kiss properly, so instead he nudged Mouse back with a persistent brush of his lips until he’d eased him down onto the scrappy pillow at the head of the mattress.

The subtle change in position roused some baser instinct inside of Rick, and he felt a heady desire wash through him as he drank in Mouse’s small form: Reed-thin and boney, covered only in a threadbare sheet and goose bumps, hair hacked to bits, he looked like a cast-off street urchin, worlds away from the cushion of luxury that Rick had first found him in.
Yet, free from the trappings of his gilded cage, he was the most beautiful thing Rick had ever seen.

Rick leaned down and pressed their lips together. This time, they shared a tender kiss, one marked by gentle caresses and breathy sighs. With it came a wisp of a Resonance, that familiar feeling of Rick’s mind making space to accommodate another’s thoughts.

“Are you happy, Mouse?”

“W-with you, always.” Mouse clung to Rick’s arms, looking up at him with longing.

“Then let’s both be happy,” Rick rasped, claiming Mouse’s lips in a fiery kiss.

He dipped his tongue into Mouse’s mouth, snuffing out any shred of his prior hesitancy and making a Resonance bloom heartily in its place. It told him in no uncertain terms that Mouse wanted this, and Rick obliged him generously. Within moments, Mouse was returning the kiss with ardor, fingers tangling themselves in Rick’s hair, every moan sending bolts of electricity straight to his groin.

Tired of their previously rushed encounters and missed chances, Rick wanted to make something complete between them tonight. For the first time since they’d found each other, they were in a safe space, unrestrained by time and free of intrusions. Here within the haven of Mouse’s bed, away from anyone who threatened to come between them, Rick’s body pulsed with the undeniable truth: He would finally have Mouse, in every meaning of the word.

If what he heard from the Resonances was any indication, then Mouse shared his yearning wholeheartedly. His usual docility replaced with a zealous need, he responded eagerly to Rick’s touch.

*Make me feel good. Make me feel good. Make it all better.*

“Don’t worry, babe. I will.”

Rick drew himself back onto his knees just long enough to peel his shirt off over his head and wrestle out of his slacks and briefs. Then he dove back into Mouse’s arms, tearing the flimsy sheet aside to bare Mouse and press their naked bodies together. Mouse’s slim hips fit snugly between Rick’s, their rigid cocks like fire-warmed pokers against each other’s bellies.

The nanos had drifted closer to the bed, casting their soft light on its inhabitants. They’d sensed the sudden elevation in their master’s biometric readings and had come to investigate. Hovering silently overhead, they formed a ring above the two lovers.

“Is this how you imagined it’d be, Mouse?”

Mouse nodded shakily, his eyes clenched shut.

“In your bed like this?”

Mouse only keened in response, but a resounding yes echoed in Rick’s head.

He probed further. “Did you imagine me kissing you?” Yes. “Touching you?” Yes!

Every affirmation made the Resonance stronger, and Rick could plainly see what Mouse had envisioned for this moment: He saw them wrapped in each other’s arms so tightly, their boundaries blurred. He saw himself holding Mouse’s thighs apart as he dipped his head down to—

*Ah*a.
Rick grinned and left a final kiss on Mouse’s forehead before slinking down his torso, past his belly. He slid his hands behind Mouse’s back, dragging his fingers down the twin columns of muscle framing his spine. Mouse couldn’t help but arch into it, giving an indulgent sigh and turning to mush beneath the sensuous contact. Once Rick reached the base of his spine, he held Mouse’s bottom aloft, watching his pert cock bob in front of him.

He kissed the tip of it before resting it on his tongue and sliding the full length into his mouth.

“Rick!” Mouse gave a warbled cry as he thrust up, seeking more of Rick’s warm and gifted mouth. Rick had no trouble taking Mouse in to the hilt, letting his chin bump against Mouse’s balls while he fluttered his tongue along the underside of the shaft. But at the Resonance’s urging, Rick changed tactics seamlessly. He drew back to swirl his tongue sumptuously around the sheathed glans, rolling back the foreskin just enough to wriggle his tip against the slit. Rick gave a throaty groan of approval as he relished Mouse’s flavor, tangy and blunt on his taste buds.

Mouse stretched his arms overhead, clawing at the edge of the mattress as he moaned “ah, ah, ah” in a rhythmic chant. He rested one foot on Rick’s shoulder and tipped his thighs even wider, granting Rick better access. Rick took the hint and pressed a digit into Mouse’s slick behind, drawing another shuddering gasp from him.

As he worked him with his tongue and finger, Rick let himself fall into Mouse’s mind, riding the swell of Resonance far inside. Peeling back the layers of his more immediate thoughts, Rick rummaged deeper in search of some explanation as to what had happened to Mouse in the time they had been apart.

Consciousness gave way to unconsciousness, strips of images and feelings sliding across each other like eels. When Rick touched the first of them, he was immediately awash in the recent memory. The scene materialized around him, the shapes and colors suggesting—a bedroom?

The image refused to reveal anything more to him, so Rick quickened his pace along Mouse’s cock while his finger pumped in and out. Mouse keened, using his foot on Rick’s shoulder as leverage to smash his crotch against his face. His legs began to tremble as he rushed to the brink, muscles tensing tight as a guitar string.

The stronger Mouse’s pleasure grew, the sharper the image formed in Rick’s mind. The Resonance breathed life into the scraps of images until they formed a crystal-clear replica of Mouse’s memory. He saw the scene through his vision, first directed at the dark carpet before swinging up to look into the face of Riq.

Riq was eyeing Mouse with a strange mix of affection and madness, his hand resting heavily on Mouse’s shoulder. Now I believe you have something for me. The echo of Riq’s words bubbled up from oblivion, muffled and harsh.

The scene played out like a scratched disc, jumping forward and stuttering at odd intervals, as Mouse’s mind refused to recall the details of the scene in full. Rick’s stomach burned at the sight of Mouse being dragged to the bed, of Riq looming over him with the clear intention of rape. But then Mouse was suddenly fighting him off, a valiant if not futile attempt, before diving for the knife.

Please, Rick. Don’t let him get me. Keep me safe from the Dark Room. I wish you were here with me. I wish you were here— Mouse’s internal plea was abruptly silenced by a horrific scream as Riq viciously sawed off his hair. Rick felt the slice of the knife as if it were against his own scalp, and he tore himself off of Mouse’s cock to gasp at the shocking burst of pain.

Mouse protested at the sudden interruption, an unwelcome cool settling on his exposed skin where
Rick’s tongue had been a second ago. “Please!” he begged, arms reaching for Rick.

Rick hauled himself up from between Mouse’s thighs and pulled him into his lap. He nuzzled at Mouse’s temple, salty with sweat as he panted, “I’m here. I’m here, Mouse. He can’t get you anymore. I won’t let him. I won’t let them.”

A fire of possessiveness and fury roiled through Rick. He knew what he had to do now. Deserting the Citadel was no longer an option so long as the Council still lived. He wouldn’t rest until those monsters had paid dearly for their crimes against Mouse, until they’d been brought to justice, their heads on fucking pikes. Rick’s rage would be the fire to cleanse every iota of them from the multiverse.

Their chests were pressed impossibly close as Rick held him, hearts beating like tribal drums against one another. He rocked cross-legged back and forth on the mattress, Mouse’s legs wrapped around Rick’s waist.

“Rick, R-Rick!” Mouse cried, his cock burning hard and hot against Rick’s stomach. He was equal parts fever and frustration, every squirm of his hips coating Rick’s shaft in his slick. The smell of Mouse hung thick in the air, and Rick’s senses were deluged with it until he could think of nothing else but burying himself in that sweet warmth.

Rick’s voice was almost unrecognizable when he spoke again, driven to new depths by his lust. “I-I’ll keep you safe, Mouse. It’ll be just you and me from now on. I won’t let anyone ever touch you again. You’re mine.”

“Please, Rick. Please...” Mouse mumbled into the flesh of Rick’s shoulder. Mouse shifted his hips, letting Rick’s cock prod firmly against his slick entrance. The small whorl of flesh fluttered at the contact, planting tempting kisses on the head in invitation. “I want—”

“I know, Mouse,” Rick choked out, his cock poised just beneath Mouse. It echoed the fierce pulsing of his heart. “I-I just need to—let me—” he gasped in his ear, not sure what he was trying to say and not caring. But he was already canting his hips and guiding the head into Mouse’s waiting hole.

He slipped past the first ring of muscle with delicious satisfaction.

Fffuck...

Rick’s toes curled beneath Mouse’s rump at the sudden envelopment of heat, at Mouse’s juices dribbling down his trembling shaft. Mouse grunted and writhed, trying to lower himself, but he was left skewered on the end of Rick’s cock. His hole clenched in frustration at only being partially filled, making Rick hiss with every spasm.

“Shh, shh. Mouse, it’s okay. Don’t rush it,” he said, even when all he wanted to do was the opposite. He slipped his fingers behind Mouse to caress the tender flesh stretched around his girth, marveling at how perfectly Mouse felt on him. It was as if nirvana itself had been narrowed down to this single point, and Rick sang his gratitude into Mouse’s ear. “God, Mouse. It’s amazing, what you do to me.”

Rick’s words just made Mouse cling more tightly to his shoulders as he squirmed clumsily on his cock.

For all that Mouse remained silent atop his perch, the Resonances firing off in Rick’s head told a different story. He was wild with unspoken demand, rallying for more. But Mouse was so small and tight and—god, Rick was certain that he couldn’t possibly take it all. Yet he was asking—no, begging Rick to fuck him into the mattress.
A feral instinct to rut pulsed hot through Rick, and his hands on Mouse’s hips quivered, fighting the urge to grab and thrust and cram every inch of himself into Mouse right then and there. If he started now, he knew he wouldn’t be able to stop. After all those days of wanting and waiting, his self-restraint was standing on nothing but toothpicks.

He gave an experimental shift of his hips, pushing into Mouse a fraction of an inch. Mouse gave a soft whimper, his limbs going tense around Rick’s neck. Another thrust, tipped inwards this time, and Mouse was loosening his hold and arching back with a deep sigh. Rick was almost thrown into a frenzy when he saw Mouse’s expression.

Mouse looked euphoric, all the tension gone from his face as he gazed into Rick’s eyes with uncompromising reverence. His kiss-swollen lips were parted as he drew in shaky breaths. All traces of his earlier distress had been erased, leaving only a sovereign tranquility. He was a prince come home to his throne.

“Keep going,” Mouse breathed.

Needing no more encouragement than that, Rick gripped Mouse’s hips and pushed him down onto his cock. Mouse gasped, kicking and struggling as he was impaled, but Rick kept going, gyrating his hips in tight circles to fit all of himself in until his balls brushed against Mouse’s ass. All hint of rationale was usurped by a craving to brand Mouse so that he would be his, absolutely and without question.

“Rick, w-wait...” Mouse wheezed, small Epiphanies going off like fireworks in Rick’s brain.

Rick bent forward, cradling him against his chest and rumbling into his ear, “I’m sorry, Mouse. I’m sorry. I’ll make it feel good. I promise.” He mouthed at Mouse’s slack lips, rousing him to kiss back even as he began to thrust, swallowing each cry he punched out of him.

Rick’s hips moved of their own accord, drunk on pent-up want and the scent of Mouse on his cock and pubes. A stream of profanities dribbled liberally from Rick as he fucked him in his lap, anchoring Mouse in place with his fingers on his hips. The Epiphanies gradually ebbed, replaced with something glorious as Mouse’s pleasure surpassed the pain.

The strength of the Resonance was so great, it pulled Rick out and away without his even willing it. He was a slave to its power, having no choice but to follow it into the Citadel mindscape farther and more penetrating than ever before. He could navigate the tapestry of thoughts with unprecedented ease now. The differences between Ricks were so glaringly clear, they might as well have been advertising their identities and innermost secrets on neon billboards.

But he wasn’t interested in exploring the thoughts of just anyone. No, his sights were set on the highest levels of the Citadel, passing over the banalities of the masses that hummed like flies on a rotting carcass. He picked out the target of his ire instantly. It’d have been impossible not to find them, with their egos radiating an aura of self-importance a mile wide.

The Council had done so much wrong to Mouse and to himself, and he wanted to find a way to decimate them from the inside out.

Before long, he had found their tangle of cacophonous thoughts, every thread braying as loud as a mule. Incredible. Even in this mind space, each council member struggled to be heard over his pompous brethren. To his relief, Riq appeared to be absent. Rick had no interest in spoiling his evening by delving into the madman’s deranged head a second time anyway.

Rick quickly realized that the Council’s attention was occupied not by matters of official business,
but by a lavish meal. They gushed over all manner of gastronomic delights, dish after dish sparking their appetites anew. Sights and smells of a banquet filled Rick’s senses, the aroma of succulent meats mingling with the musk of sex as he fucked Mouse with abandon.

The clinking of silverware was drowned out by Mouse’s moans of pleasure while Rick rammed into him, grunting and huffing like a bull. Slick squelched around his cock as Rick drew his length out, only to plunge it back in, milking Mouse’s sweet spot again and again.

He could nearly see the council members gathered around the stately dinner table. Napkins were tucked daintily into their collars and dishware set with fastidious care, as Mortys dressed in livery waited on them hand and foot. A fire crackled in the alabaster fireplace, and wine poured seemingly without end.

The Council were bathed in warmth and luxury, while the catalyst of their wealth was locked away in a shit hole with nothing but barren concrete walls and a shoddy bed to lie on. That same bed’s ancient springs now creaked in earnest as Rick flexed his thighs, rhythmically bouncing Mouse on his cock.

With the augmented Resonance propelling him onward, Rick dove beneath the Council’s surface thoughts, seeking out some evidence to use against them. At first it was dishearteningly bland. Internal monologues about trite to-do lists and petty complaints played through his head in a grating whine. Rick almost considered leaving after listening to Rick Prime prattle on about the latest shipment of dinner forks, when he heard something that caught his attention.

Such an extravagant gift of silverware. How nice of the GF to show they care.

The GF? Now things were getting interesting. Prime’s appreciation was accompanied by other strangely pleasant thoughts on the subject. But it didn’t make any sense. Why would the Council be talking about their sworn enemy so amicably? With a little investigating, the nugget of thought quickly branched out to a network of similar sentiments echoed by Prime’s council-mates.

They’ve done a fine job holding up their end of the bargain.

Maintaining such a high degree of propinquity with their establishment has proven to be an efficacious endeavor for all parties involved.

The entire Citadel is at our mercy at the cost of a few measly Ricks? It’s so simple, we should’ve done this sooner.

The last voice was unfamiliar to Rick until he realized that it was Quantum Rick’s. Of course the belcher spoke coherently in his mind, but Rick was surprised to hear such acidity in his words.

The longer he lingered in the nether thoughts, the more facets of the thinkers’ minds he was able to access. Rick found that he could not only dive deeper but also older, exploring memories that went back years. Like running through a database search, Rick scanned dozens upon dozens of entries centering around the topic of the Galactic Federation.

With a grunt, Rick lurched forward onto his knees, curling over Mouse on the narrow bed and rutting like an animal. He pinned his wrists to the mattress above his head with one hand while the other hoisted up Mouse’s small bottom, his hips pistoning into him rigorously. Sweat dripped down his neck with the exertion, but the sweet sound of Mouse’s cries at every slam of his hips spurred him on.

Life is a bed of roses when you’re sleeping with the enemy.
Dawg, we's livin' the good life. Daz what I'm talkin' 'bout!

Rick replayed snippets of conversations between council members and high-ranking GF officials, every exchange baffling Rick even more. There was talk of sharing caches, divvying up new territories in a matter-of-fact way, and the topic of meeting a certain “quota” popped up with surprising frequency. But as for what that quota consisted of—weapons? materials? intel?—it still eluded Rick. Whatever it was, it appeared to be something that the Council was supplying to the GF.

Rick thought about the Citadel news and the ferocity with which it proselytized the war against the GF. He couldn’t imagine that the Council had any reason to consort with them on any kind of genial terms. Yet, oddly enough, the thoughts he intercepted made it seem as if the GF were almost pals with the Council rather than an enemy.

Because that’s precisely what they are, Rick.

Rick jumped at the sudden intrusion. He immediately backpedaled out of the Council’s thoughts, scrutinizing his surroundings for the source of the voice. It sounded far more tangible than the previous ones he’d encountered, almost like someone had whispered the words into his ear. And most surprising of all, it sounded very much like a Morty.

Rick paused to search Mouse’s face for some evidence that the disembodied voice had actually come from him. But Mouse was too busy panting his name, his arousal-blushed face pinched in concentration as he struggled to endure the pleasure assailing his senses.

He shook his head. All this traipsing around minds must’ve been messing with his own. He couldn’t even tell where his thoughts ended and another’s began. Was he going crazy?

Hardly. A ripple of laughter vibrated through the voice. But it’s good to see you here. I’ve waited a long time for you. Come. Let me show you something, Rick of Dimension X-280.

The threads of thought he’d been following suddenly drew together, trading their disjointed meanderings for something that took real form before him. They bound together as tightly as steel cable and twice as strong, leading Rick down one particular memory from the past. He could practically feel the cool of the cable beneath his fingers as he followed it to its endpoint—and in the next instant, he was standing inside a room, his fingers now gliding along the surface of a metal table.

Five members of the Council sat before him, seated around a large, round conference table. A sterile light illuminated the space from above, while the rest of the room faded into blackness, as though nothing existed beyond the light’s touch. Given the nature of memory and recall, that was likely the case.

Rick looked around at the audience of council members. He noted that they lacked their official garb, and they seemed to sport fewer wrinkles and more hair. Even Zeta Alpha’s hulking wig was absent. This must’ve been years ago, he rationalized. Maybe even before the Council's tyrannical reign had begun.

They were looking at Rick expectantly, as though waiting for him to continue something he’d been saying. Rick tried to step back from the scene and away from their piercing eyes, but he was rooted to the spot. He opened his mouth to say there’d been a mistake, when—

“Gentle-Rick, as of today, the Galactic Federation threat is no more,” he suddenly found himself saying.
A roar of congratulations echoed around the table as the Council slapped each other on the back and gave whoops and “huzzahs.” Ricktiminus and Zeta Alpha high-fived each other as if they’d just heard the winning score of their favorite sports team.

Rick raised his hands to quiet them, the gravelly voice slipping out from between his lips like it’d always belonged there. “As we’ve all discussed, however, this news will be deemed strictly confidential. As far as the average Rick is concerned, we are still at war with the Galactic Federation. Updates on the warfront will continue to be broadcast just as before, with new campaigns being devised by our PR department every two to three months.”

The council members were nodding along, completely at ease with the shocking news Rick was delivering.

“Per our agreement with General Mollar, the Federation will be allowed to carry out its functions as usual. They’ll continue to unify planets under the Galactic Federation name, wage battles against dissidents—and whatever other petty, little pet projects they like to waste their time on. However, we will still hold the final say on all executive orders.”

“Sheet, dawg! Dat makes us straight-up commander-in-chief in the hood!”

“Quite.” Rick felt himself smile. “Now the only matter left to attend to is the quota.”

Prime piped up before he could continue. “Weren’t we calling it the lottery? ‘Quota’ just sounds so tottery.”

“Urrp braaaugh augh.”

Zeta Alpha pointed finger guns at Quantum Rick. “Now, that’d get my vote any day of the week!”

“Enough!” Rick slammed his palms on the table, making each council member’s whiskey tumbler clatter. “What we call it is irrelevant. What matters is selecting the dimensions to fill the order. A regular supply will ensure the Rick populace remains obedient and in our debt, while also keeping those GF pigs satisfied. Even in defeat, they have their hungry egos to feed.” The insult garnered another round of mumbles. He continued. “The pieces have already been set in place, and our first mock detainment is scheduled to be carried out tomorrow.”

“How will the fortunate—or, rather, unfortunate—candidates be solicited, Riq?”

Rick looked down at the table’s chrome surface where Riq’s face was smirking back at him.

“Just leave the Code Yellows to me.”

The scene flickered to a halt like a movie projector running out of film, leaving Rick in utter darkness. No thoughts, no memories, no input of any kind met him for a handful of blissful seconds. The stillness was both terrifying and soothing. Although his corporeal body was locked in the throes of lovemaking, Rick’s astral self lay supine in the void, feeling an emptiness echo within him. What he’d just witnessed was too momentous to put into words, and he felt akin to a toddler tasked with preparing a dissertation on quantum entanglement.

_The Council_, he started slowly, _is working with the GF. They’re trading Ricks to—to—_

_Very close, Rick._ The same Morty voice from before surfaced right beside him.

Rick went over the facts again, not liking the conclusion that was staring him in the face. _They... are the GF._
Precisely. The voice beamed with approval. And?

There were never any arrests. It’s—they’ve been selling off Ricks to the Federation.

Yes. Your brothers have been sacrificed in the name of exploitation.

Now Rick had no doubt that it wasn’t just a random thought that he was accessing. The voice was actually someone speaking to him.

Who are you?

Who I am is not important. Now that you know the truth, you must act.

The truth? The truth, it turned out, was more sinister than he’d ever imagined; the Council, more corrupt than he thought it capable. The sheer magnitude of the scam was overwhelming. But with it, he realized, he’d been given the key to the Council’s own undoing. The only question was how he’d pull it off.

The voice tinkled like a glass bell in the breeze. The answer will come in time, Rick. Go to your teacher, and then come find me. You have far greater plans to fulfill. And with that, the voice was gone.

Gasping loudly, Rick blinked back to reality. It took a moment for him to orient himself, but the first thing he noticed was that he was lying on his back, head propped on the dingy pillow. The ring of nanos still circled slowly overhead, backlighting Mouse as he continued to ride Rick. He was sweaty and flushed, his dick slapping Rick’s belly; his small hands, braced on his abs.

The earth-shattering realizations from the Resonance had rocked Rick to the core. But like a dream running through his fingers, they swiftly dissipated from the forefront of his mind. Even the strange exchange he’d had with the voice gradually bled into his own thoughts until he was convinced that he had had the conversation with himself all along. Knowledge of the Council’s scheme teetered just on the periphery of Rick’s consciousness, relegating itself to being dealt with at a later time.

Right now, the fog of desire was still thick in Rick’s head, his temporarily split attention having done little to dull his libido. His cock was still hard as steel as it pounded in and out of his lover. He heard his name said like a mantra on Mouse’s tongue, and he held onto his hips anew as he looked up at him in awe.

Mouse was an utter mess above Rick, any remnants of his subservient demeanor replaced by this debauched, lustful thing. His nest of hair, now weighed down with sweat, befitted his haggard state, and his skin glistened with a sheen of sweat.

“That’s it, Mouse,” Rick crooned, the next Resonance painting him a picture of what Mouse needed and exactly where he needed it. “I’ll give it to you just the way you want, babe.”

Rick could see Mouse’s arousal laid out like a road map through the Resonance, a mental diagram that revealed his deepest devotions. What Mouse held in the safety of his mind was enough to make even Rick blush. He was finding it harder and harder to believe that he’d never known Mouse could be such a minx.

Rick caught Mouse by the wrists, pinning them down as he tilted his hips and fucked up into him like a jackhammer. Mouse thrashed and writhed, yanking futilely in Rick’s grasp, wanting escape but also so clearly wanting more. He nearly collapsed beneath the assault, drool spilling free from his slack lips, but Rick wouldn’t spare him the luxury of rest.
Finally breaking free of Rick’s hold, Mouse clutched at his own shoulders as though to keep himself from falling apart. His breathing became more erratic; his movements, more desperate, feeling the orgasm inside him begin to peak. Mouse was close, and Rick wanted to see every beautiful moment of it.

Mouse was like a fallen angel above him. His pale skin was flushed bright with passion, a halo of golden light illuminating his curls, his arms X’ed across his chest.

“Mouse...” Rick panted. Then he was swept under by his climax, his ears muffled by the sound of his pounding heart—or was it Mouse’s? Seed pumped thick and plentiful from his cock to fill Mouse’s hole until it spilled over.

Mouse’s limbs went taut, and he stilled as his own orgasm finally overtook him. It rose like a steady tide inside of him, surging forward with all the force of an ancient sea until Mouse’s entire body was filled with its energy. Rick could see it radiating from him as clearly as the golden glow of his eyes that lit up the room.

At last, the swell of pleasure had crested and it demanded an exit, tumbling out in hot spurts to streak Rick’s abs and chest. Mouse dropped his head back, giving a long and quiet exhalation that was carried high throughout the Citadel.

~~*~~

What happened next would never be quite understood. There was no record of it having taken place, no evidence that it had ever come to pass. But for one unmistakable moment, every being in the Citadel was awash in a love so pure, few believed it even possible.

Mama Eun-Rick put down her makeup compact as she sat in front of her vanity, suddenly overcome by a contentment that warmed her cold heart. When she looked into the mirror, she saw the beauty of her own bare face, without the need for makeup to hide it—a face of someone incredible. A face worth loving.

She dropped her head back, sliding her eyes shut.

“Riri...”

The Captain of the Guard was supposed to be listening to an update in the log regarding the whereabouts of their missing target, but his attention kept drifting to the speaker instead. I-006 was simply delivering his report in his crisp and stutter-free voice, but to the Captain, it sounded like the richest symphony.

He indulged himself in a small smile as he raised his head and whispered.

“Isyx...”

ψ-530 and ψ-532 held each other tightly beneath the satin sheets. Hisses and stutters were swallowed in their open-mouthed kisses as they grabbed each other with a passion that rivaled their worst fights.

The twins breathed each other’s name in unison.
“Brother...”

From behind the doors of the Council’s seraglio, a great cry rose, swelling like a tidal bore of agony. It was a song of the utmost sorrow, sung in a dozen warbling voices.

It seeped beneath the door and echoed down the halls, long abandoned for the night, before dying like a retreating wave.

C-165 smiled at the drink nestled between his hands, recalling the memory of a lover from long ago. He lifted the glass in a toast in the middle of the empty bar.

“Here’s to you—”

The trio of Eun-Ricks stood in a circle around a small figure, their hands linked.

“Is this part of the prophecy?” the first of them asked.

“I-it’s more beautiful than we ever imagined,” sighed the second, on the verge of tears.

The final Eun-Rick knelt and pressed his forehead to their conduit’s limp hand. “Has it really begun?”

“Yes,” said the Morty. “They are now one.”

θ-669 arched into his lover’s caress, relishing the feel of λ’s sturdy hands on his hips as he was fucked from behind. He called for him, cupping the back of λ’s neck to guide his lips to his. λ was gentle as he ravished θ’s battered mouth with his tongue, rolling his hips sensually just the way his master liked it.

“Now, who do you love?” θ asked, already anticipating the time-honored answer.

“You...”

“Good boy.”

Auctioneer Rick tossed and turned in his king-size bed. He bolted upright and ran a shaky hand through his sweat-dampened hair, trying to figure out what had awoken him. All he could grasp was the sudden spite for the cold sheets beside him and the uncomfortable tent in his pants.

He huffed a lock of hair from his forehead and raised his face to the ceiling fan.

“Rickochet...”

I-6 fell to his knees, hand tugging the front of his uniform, trying to get his heart under control. Sweat
rolled into his eyes as he looked around at the rest of his unit. They were equally incapacitated, some already tearing their clothes off while others simply wept on the floor. I-6 tried to reach for his communicator but ended up cupping his throbbing erection through his pants instead.

He clenched his eyes shut as he rasped.

“Captain...”

Chi sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, fingers clutching the unfamiliar cover. It was a pattern he’d have never chosen himself. The room was still dark, leaving him feeling acutely alone even when the sleeping figure behind him shifted and murmured his name. He ignored it as he picked up his glasses on the bedside table.

Chi looked up at the ceiling, closing his eyes.

“280...”

Riq was burning the midnight oil at his desk, a mountain of paperwork his only companion. He was currently sifting through the day’s meeting minutes when a random, stray drop of water blurred the text.

He blinked and another tear plipped onto the digital screen, then another. A wave of nausea suddenly gripped him, making his mouth flood with saliva. He threw himself at the nearest trash bin, clutching the rim as he emptied the contents of his stomach.

Bleary-eyed, he wiped the sick that clung to his lips. He looked skyward, overcome with the need to utter the only name that could ever give him solace. But when he opened his mouth to speak, he was seized by another uncontrollable retching, his head back in the bin.

Far below the turmoil of longing and lust, in the deepest bowels of the Citadel, two lovers were locked in a tantric embrace. They whispered each other’s secrets and desires and the awe they shared. But their secrets were not their own; their desires, greater than mere flesh could contain; and their awe, nothing compared to that held by the cosmos that witnessed them.

A chime of joy rang throughout the universe, for with The Ones’ union, Symmetry would at last be restored.

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 10 can be found here]
They spoke in stutters and warbles, whistles and nervous laughs. The sounds were oddly melodic to Mouse, and his own vocal cords quivered, trying to call back their song.

But he had forgotten the tune.

First published 3/2/17
Hello again, and welcome to Chapter 11! :)  
This is (yet again) the longest chapter to date, and we hope you enjoy it. Feel free to let us know what you thought in a Comment or through the many different ways mentioned in our AO3 profile.

“For when He finds Himself surrounded by the love of His own kind, He shall know His calling.”
- KneeBruise 4:1

“So w-we’re leaving now?”

“Yup,” Rick answered cheerfully, pulling his top on over his head. Marbles of water still rolled down his skin from his quick wash-up, before disappearing beneath the blue sweater to be absorbed into the fibers. “Bet you’re pretty eager to get moving.”

Mouse was on the bed, watching him pack his messenger bag as he ran a hand lazily over the front of his new shirt, the fabric glowing a muted yellow in the dim of the nanos’ light.

The scratchy cotton was foreign to him, but rubbing it against his skin seemed to help dull the uncomfortable itch. And the jeans—well, the jeans were another matter entirely. Mouse couldn’t stop fidgeting, unused to any material touching him so intimately. The way they hugged his legs and bottom and crotch so closely was nothing short of violating. For the first several minutes he was wearing them, he kept tugging at the fabric until Rick told him he’d better knock it off or else it’d look like he was “grabbing his junk.”

And, apparently, grabbing your junk was frowned upon in the Citadel.

“But we’re not leaving, right?” Mouse asked. He climbed off the mattress to look out the porthole on the opposite wall. All the material covering him was making him feel overheated in the
musk-ridden air of his room, and the cool glass gave a pleasant respite when he placed his palm against it.

“Y-yeah. Looks like we’ll be sticking around for a little longer.” Rick’s voice held an apology, but it was quickly overshadowed by his enthusiastic exposition. “Like I said, Mouse, we can’t leave the Citadel. Not yet at least. After what I saw inside there—I mean, the Resonance showed me what the Council’s really been up to. Think about it. Can we really just walk away after knowing what they’re doing?”

Mouse traced a finger down the glass, linking constellations that had been his only companions for the past few years. He knew their trajectories by heart, as the Citadel spun slowly on its axis. “I guess not,” he said, resigned. “B-but I don’t really get it. Why do you care so much what happens here, Rick, when we could just leave?”

It was the one part of Rick’s plan that he still hadn’t come to terms with. As far as Mouse was concerned, he already had the only Rick that mattered right beside him. What happened to other Ricks, the Citadel, and even the Council seemed of little importance.

“We could just leave the Citadel and never look back,” Mouse added, distracted. “If they hurt each other, then let them. It’s what Ricks do, right?” Through the porthole’s reflection, Rick’s expression shifted from surprise to confusion to quiet understanding. It was only then that Mouse realized the folly of his statement. “R-Rick! Uh, I-I didn’t mean—” he sputtered.

“I know, Mouse,” Rick said, coming up behind him to place his hands on his shoulders. Stars speckled his face as he gazed at him with a mixture of regret and hopefulness. “Hell, you must think I’m crazy to ask you to stay here even a minute longer, after everything they’ve—well, you know.” He let the implication hang unspoken, and when he turned back, his voice was pinched with emotion. “Mouse, I know it’s tempting to just up and go, but think about what we’ll be allowing to happen. They’ll keep sending innocent Ricks to Galactic Federation jail, or worse! If we leave now, they could screw over hundreds—no, thousands more Ricks. Ricks just like me!”

“But they’re not like you,” Mouse countered quickly, the notion too vile to be allowed to stand unchallenged. “They’re nothing like you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I keep telling myself.” Rick ran a hand through his hair and grabbed a fistful of it in a gesture that Mouse was quickly equating to his Rick being agitated about something. “T-trust me, I’ll be the first Rick to admit that I don’t like, well, Ricks. But there’s something...” His voice trailed off as he looked away for a moment. When he spoke again, it came out measured as though he were piecing together his words as they came. “I can’t really explain it, but I just know that we need to do this. The Council has to be taken down. It’s asking a lot, I know, but just—will you help me, Mouse?”

Another protest jumped to Mouse’s tongue, but he held it in. The look of vulnerability in Rick’s eyes struck him silent as he considered his plea. He looked beyond Rick’s reflection to the starscape in the window, the very same starscape that called to him fiercely. *We could be out there today. We could leave at this very moment,* Mouse thought with no small amount of pining. The desire to leave and be done with all of it was strong, but if this was what Rick wanted—

“A-all right, Rick. I’ll help however I can,” he said finally. Rick immediately perked up, but Mouse continued quickly to curb his enthusiasm. “But I’m only doing it for you, okay? Not for any other Ricks.”

“I can live with that,” Rick grinned, nodding approvingly at Mouse’s conviction.
“S-so where do we begin?” Mouse asked, trying not to get too lost in the tender look that Rick was giving him.

Rick had gone over the basic outline of the plan earlier that night while he’d washed Mouse down with a ragged piece of cloth torn from the sheets and only the cold water from the sink. Much of Mouse’s attention, however, was taken by the round of pleasure Rick had given him during the bath, and Mouse now found it difficult to recall the details.

“Naughty, naughty, Mouse. Weren’t you listening when I told you the first time?” Rick leaned closer to rumble in his ear. “Or was it too hard to concentrate with my fingers inside you?”

Heat flashed over Mouse’s face. “S-stop it! You’re only going to make it w-worse!” he stammered.

It still surprised him how easily Rick could slip into his mind when that hot, itching feeling overcame him. Thinking ahead, he knew he’d have to keep his thoughts in check while they were walking around the Citadel.

Rick gave him a quick nip on the ear and chuckled before giving his explanation. “Well, now that we know the Council’s the freakin’ GF, shipping innocent Ricks off to some Galactic Federation clink and keeping everyone else in the Citadel scared shitless, it won’t do us any good to keep this info to ourselves.”

“So we’ll have to let all the Ricks know too?”

“Bingo. This gives us just the ammo we need. Even I couldn’t make up shit this crazy. And how do you think Ricks will react once they hear the news?”

“They’re not gonna be happy. I know that Ricks don’t r-really like surprises.”

“And this is gonna be one hell of a surprise,” Rick said, wrapping his arms around Mouse and resting his chin on his head.

Rick sounded so sure, Mouse could only hope it was really as simple as it seemed. Still, he was entrusting him with this—a chance to right wrongs, to make a difference. A flurry of pride swelled in Mouse’s chest to know that he was so integral to a plan of such magnitude.

Now that he had a grasp on the what, he raced to piece together the how, if only to serve as a distraction from his nagging unease. “But—but it’s still just the two of us. How are we supposed to make the Ricks listen?”

“What, you don’t think I know how to be persuasive? I can see it now.” Rick swept his hand in front of Mouse’s view, summoning the mental image. “We’ll storm in there, plasma guns blazing, and reveal the Council for the scum they are! It’ll be just like the Battle of Ashora!” He paused, regarding Mouse askance. “You do know how to fire an electron disintegrator, right?”

Mouse blanched at the thought of them diving headfirst into a wall of Guard Ricks. He was about to object to the outlandish plan, when he caught Rick’s playful smirk in the glass’s reflection. “Y-you jerk! I thought you were being serious!” He turned to shove Rick in the chest, only to end up deeply entrenched in Rick’s firm embrace instead.

Rick gave a hearty laugh, the baritone sound vibrating through Mouse’s smaller frame. “You really gotta get a handle on this whole ‘joking’ thing, Mouse. But, no, we’re not going in guns blazing. I may have done some stupid shit in my life, but I’m not a complete idiot. What we’re gonna do will require a little more tact than that.” Rick seized Mouse’s lips in a kiss before stooping and picking up the sheets of paper by Mouse’s feet. As he made his way back to packing his supplies, he looked
them over with an approving eye and added, “You make these?”

They were simple, little things, mostly sketchy renditions of the ships Mouse had seen through the porthole and even the occasional portraited Eun-Rick. One series of images tracked the movement of the stars over the course of several months.

“Uh, y-yes?”

“They’re good,” Rick said with a smile before tucking Mouse’s artwork delicately into his messenger bag.

Still unaccustomed to being praised, Mouse just blushed, feeling suddenly very hot. He pressed his back against the wall as he watched Rick, enjoying the simple sight of him moving. Every action exuded confidence, a confidence that Mouse hoped he could one day embody rather than just emulate.

Planes of muscle moved like waves beneath the thin fabric of Rick’s top, and Mouse swallowed. The way his fingers moved deftly over his supplies rekindled racy memories of what they’d done to him last night. Even after the first wave of ecstasy had drowned them both in a sleepy afterglow and Rick was no longer able to rouse himself to action, he’d still pleasured Mouse with his tongue and fingers, claiming he wanted to be an “expert” on the subject of him and him alone.

As thanks for all that Rick gave him, Mouse returned the favor by showing Rick everything he needed to know.

He shook his head free of the distracting fantasies before they could blossom into something more. “S-so what will we do with all this tack?”

“Tact, Mouse. It means being careful. And once we leave your room, we’re gonna need to be very careful. You can bet half of Citadel security will be looking for you once they realize you’re missing.”

“S-sorry,” he said on automatic.

Rick dismissed his apology with a wave of his hand. “Hey, it’s not your fault you’re the single most important person in this whole place.” A snap of the bag’s latches punctuated his words. “Anyway, you were right to point out that we can’t pull this thing off by ourselves, Mouse. That’s why we’re gonna get my buddy in on it too.”

“You mean Kyle—er, Chi?”

Giving an affirmative hum, Rick stood up and crossed the bag’s strap over his chest. “He’s the smartest Rick I know. And if we hope to blow the cover off this whole Council-GF thing, we’re gonna need his brains and know-how to do it.”

Mouse bowed his head, trying to ignore the peculiar flutter of inadequacy in his chest. He’d never heard Rick talk about someone else so fondly, and he was embarrassed to find he was jealous of this Chi person. A Rick.

“But wait a minute, Rick.” Mouse worried at the hem of his shirt. “You said before that you were sending Chi a message through one of your little b-bug things, right? So why don’t you just tell him all the stuff you heard about in the Resinin—Resist—the Renaissance—”

“The Resonance.”
“—Resonance and let him figure out what to do? Why do we have to see him in—in person?” Mouse trusted Rick intrinsically and knew he’d never do anything to put him in danger. But the thought of meeting another Rick and having to travel through the Citadel in order to get to him was more than a little daunting.

“I said Chi was smart, not trusting. It’s going to take more than my word alone to convince him that I just busted the scheme of the century through telepathy.” Rick readjusted the bag on his shoulder, holding a clunky white device in his hand. He scratched awkwardly at his forehead with the back of his wrist. “H-he’ll first want to see what you’re capable of.”

The nanos had left their posts about the room to gather in the seat of Rick’s palm. Mouse automatically drew toward them, wanting to stay in their light, which was now growing dimmer as they disappeared up Rick’s shirtsleeve.

Mouse crinkled his brow. “But if we have to show him how a Resonance works—”

Rick cut him off with a forced chuckle, and even Mouse could make out his blush in the low light. “Look, l-let’s just cross that bridge when we come to it,” he said hurriedly. “Chi won’t get my message for another couple of hours, but I have a few ideas how we can spend our time in the Citadel until then.” He gave Mouse a reassuring smile.

The Citadel.

Sometimes Mouse forgot that there was so much more to the space station than the few rooms he’d seen. If what his Elite clients had told him was anything to go off of, the Citadel was a massive city, home to thousands of Ricks and an equally abundant number of bars. Mouse imagined it akin to walking through a den of wolves, with Ricks constantly on the prowl to sniff him out and devour him.

“Now, let’s get crackin’,” Rick was saying. “You ready?” He reached out his hand for Mouse.

Ready? It wasn’t a question of being ready or not. Despite whatever fears Mouse may have had, this was happening and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He’d long since passed the point of no return, that pivotal juncture going as far back as when Rick had first stepped foot in the Morty Auction. The gears had begun to shift even then, and Mouse acutely felt the immensity of their actions growing with every beat of his heart.

“It’s now or never,” he said plainly.

Rick just looked at him funny before snorting. “Wow, Mouse. You watch a lotta daytime TV back home?”

“Daytime what?”

“Never mind,” Rick chuckled. When Mouse took his hand, Rick immediately slotted him against his chest, arm wrapped snugly around his middle. A blush seared Mouse’s cheeks as he heard Rick’s thrumming heart beneath his ear. “You’ll want to stay close for this,” Rick explained, giving Mouse a fleeting kiss on the lips.

He nodded jerkily, not entirely sure what he meant. But before he could ask, Rick threw open the door, aimed the white device at the hallway, and pulled the trigger. A brilliant, green vortex opened up in front of them, emitting an unearthly droning sound.

“Rick, what’s—” But his next words were swallowed up as Rick took two quick strides out the door and into the spinning green.
Mouse's ears were filled with an omnipresent rumbling as if he were nestled in the pit of a giant’s churning belly. A soft pull, like that of a creek’s current, tugged at the hairs on his forearms, but before he could even wonder whether they were actually submerged underwater, they were free of the strange sensations and stepping out onto pavement.

Well, Rick stepped out.

Mouse was overcome with such a wave of vertigo, he would’ve collapsed if he weren’t being held up. His legs felt as though they were made of sandbags, and it was only thanks to Rick’s strong hold around his waist that he didn’t wind up flat on his face.

“You okay there, Mouse?” Rick’s voice echoed distantly. The sound only worsened Mouse’s dizziness, and he pushed his way frantically out of Rick’s arms to throw himself against the nearest wall and vomit. “Okaaay. Maybe not.”

“What—” Mouse belched, and more sick bubbled up his throat. “W-what the heck was that, Rick?” He pressed his fist against his mouth, willing the nausea to subside. His insides felt like they were locked in a fistfight, liver and stomach and spleen all striving to be the victor in a losing battle.

“A portal. And a shitty one at that. Remind me to sock Chi in the cojones when I see him.”

Mouse heard Rick stuff something back into his bag but refused to take his eyes off the hallway floor. Wait, this wasn’t the hallway. He didn’t recognize this shade of gray and certainly not the array of garbage bunched up against the wall where he was currently curled over. It almost looked like they were in a—

“Hey, jackass!” A gruff voice called out from the opening of the alleyway.

Mouse heard Rick curse savagely under his breath before he looked up slowly to see a Rick, also in slacks and lab coat, glaring at them.

“You know the kid’s not allowed to drink! He can’t handle the stuff!”

“No one asked for your opinion, fuckface!” Rick stepped forward, subtly placing himself between Mouse and the potential threat. “Now get lost, or you’ll be picking up your teeth with broken fingers!” The bite in Rick’s words made Mouse's stomach burn with an unpleasant gush of adrenaline, and for a moment he didn’t recognize his Rick.

“You better watch your mouth, buddy! I could have your Scruffy assigned to me while you’re carted off to the morgue!” the stranger Rick volleyed back.

“No on your life!”

“Rick, please!” Mouse wheezed. The petty banter was making his head spin, and it already took everything he had to keep from getting sick again.

His plea seemed to do the trick, because Rick shot one last glare at the rude passerby before crouching by his side. He rubbed Mouse’s back gently, allaying his nausea with soothing words, while Mouse concentrated on simply breathing. At least the floor had stopped tipping wildly and his stomach was finally settling.

“Learn to take better care of your team, asshole, before I call MPS on you!” the Rick announced. “Now, c’mon, Morty. Let’s go.”

Morty?
Mouse looked up blearily as the Rick started making his exit, dragging a little boy behind him. A little boy who looked just like him.

Mouse blinked. His nausea dissipated like a fog in sunlight, and he straightened immediately, his eyes locked on the Morty’s. Time seemed to slow to a halt as the boy turned to face him and the two stared at each other, the very air between them crackling with unseen energy. The soothing tone of Rick’s voice beside him fell away as Mouse focused all his attention on the Morty who was speaking to him.

You’re finally here, Messiah.

I-I didn’t know anyone was expecting me. And my name’s not Messiah. It’s Mouse.


But you’re also Morty, right?

The Morty giggled in his voiceless way, then answered, We are all children of The One. And we have all been waiting for you.

“Move it, Morty! Jeezus, get your damn head out of the clouds!” the stranger Rick barked suddenly, yanking his Morty along and effectively snapping Mouse out of his daze. “Swear to god, such a pain in my ass, no good...” The grumbling faded as the pair disappeared down one branch of the alleyway.

“Good riddance,” Rick muttered. Turning to Mouse, he said gently, “Hey, Mouse. You feeling any bett—”

“Rick!” Mouse whipped around to face Rick, his eyes wide. He gripped his lapels as he sputtered, “D-d-did you see him? It was a-a-a-a—it was me! But not me! But sorta like me! A little boy! Not a Rick!”

Wrapping his fingers around Mouse’s wrists, Rick eased his hands down. “Uh, yeah. That was just a Morty. The Citadel’s full of them.” He stopped to cock his head, eyeing Mouse carefully. “Wait a minute. Have you never—is this seriously the first time you’ve met one?”

“You mean there’s more of them? And are they all like that Morty?” Mouse chirped, his lingering reservations about the Citadel fading rapidly. Rick was still looking at him funny as Mouse trotted to the end of the alleyway. It opened up to the back of a tall building, so he peered eagerly down each side in search of the Morty. “I mean, didn’t you hear all the stuff he said? It’s like he knew me!”

“What are you talking about, Mouse? He just gawked at you for a second before his asshole Rick took him away.”

“And he called me these strange names. A messy—messy something.”

“Well, can you blame him? We really ought to get that hair of yours dealt with—” Rick started, but Mouse was already making his way around the exterior of the building. “M-Mouse, wait up!”

“I mean it, Rick. It was...like...” Mouse froze as he rounded the building’s corner—and came face-to-face with the Citadel’s main atrium in all its magnificent glory.

The sheer size of the space made Mouse feel suddenly overwhelmed and out of place, and he instantly cowered at the sight of the massive buildings of gold walls and blue glass that stretched high into the air. Airborne traffic crisscrossed overhead, the blare of the vehicles’ horns diminishing to a
hum in the distance. They winked out of sight behind skyscrapers and billboards. On nearly every surface, an animated advertisement played, boasting business names or slogans like Portal Gun Pro and Just Rick It. Announcers competed for their customers’ patronage, belting out over the airwaves about happy hour specials, while a feminine voice recited a mantra of “peace, protection, and prosperity.”

But beneath the drone of Rick activity, what drew Mouse’s eyes like a beacon were the scores of Mortys before him.

Gangly and small, hulking and buff, the Mortys fell across the breadth of the familiar and alien spectrum. Some sported jangling chains, frilly collars, extra arms, or no arms at all. Some even looked like it’d be a stretch to call them a "Morty," and yet there was something that inexplicably bound them together. Mouse felt an instant kinship with them.

Distantly, he thought back to what the Ricks had told him, about the many “copies” of himself found within the Citadel. It’d sounded impossible back then and was still just as ridiculous now. How could anyone possibly mistake one Morty for another? In Mouse’s eyes, they were as different as chocolate chip was to strawberry or as cookie dough was to butter pecan.

In lines of one or two or three or more, they wove like snakes through the crowds, always with a Rick at the head. To have gone so long within the Citadel and never seen a Morty seemed impossible to Mouse now, with how the streets and shops were full of them. Their mops of curls peppered the scene, while their trill voices laced the air beneath the cacophonous announcers. They spoke in stutters and warbles, whistles and nervous laughs. The sounds were oddly melodic to Mouse, and his own vocal cords quivered, trying to call back their song.

But he had forgotten the tune.

Mouse took a tentative step forward, drawn toward the company of his brethren. However, before he could get swept away in the current of bodies, he felt Rick's gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Welcome to the Citadel, Mouse.”

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“Oh, baby bird, where in the 7 Sigmas did you get your hair done?” the barber clucked. He planted one hand on his sassy hip and grimaced, not even trying to hide his displeasure. Pulling one long tuft of hair from the center of Mouse’s head, he pouted. “It’s a tragedy!”

Mouse squirmed in his seat. He didn’t particularly enjoy the feeling of the barber gown tugging against his throat, but he still couldn’t help turning to gaze out the barbershop’s window at the parade of Mortys passing outside. One such Morty, sporting a V-neck shirt, had stopped and now had his face pressed against the glass, staring at him intensely.

The barber swiveled Mouse’s chair with a swift kick of his heeled boot to make him face the mirror again. Rick tsked from where he was seated in the empty waiting area but held his tongue. That’s right. Mouse had to navigate this on his own. He cowed his awe into order and minded the stylist who was still lamenting the state of his hair.

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The moment he and Rick had stepped out into the Citadel atrium, he was begging Rick to let them linger, for even just a minute, so that he could ogle the myriad Mortys. But Rick couldn’t be persuaded. They were on the run, Rick had to remind him. The sub-level 10 Guards would inevitably notice Mouse’s absence, and Rick wanted to reach Chi before they caught on.
The only pit stop they made along the way was to this unassuming barbershop.

“I-I don’t need, uh, anything fancy,” Mouse said to the barber, parroting what Rick had told him earlier. “J-just take a little off the sides, m-maybe? And, uh, even the whole thing out?”

Barber Rick carded his fingers through Mouse’s ravaged hair, rolling his eyes. “Well, you’re not giving me much to work with here. But they don’t say I have ‘Ricked skillz’ for nothing. Don’t worry, chickadee, I’ll have you fixed up in no time.” The barber clapped his palms against Mouse’s cheeks and turned him stubbornly forward once more. His gaze had wandered again to the bustling Citadel atrium outside and the two Mortys that were now plastered to the window, their palms tapping against the glass. “If you’ll just stop fidgeting,” he added with some exasperation.

Mouse nodded obediently. While he let the man ready his tools, he peeked about the shop through the mirror. The four other styling stations were empty next to Mouse, clumps of brown and gray hair still littering the floor and swept into tumbleweeds in the corners. A deep crack ran through the mirror as it hung askew.

Despite the sad state of the barbershop, however, Barber Rick seemed to take great pride in his work. He lay a set of customized salon tools, each engraved with the monogram of RS, on a leopard-print velvet cloth on the counter. Mouse jumped a little when the barber took out the electric razor, but he reassured himself that he meant him no harm.

His concerns were entirely laid to rest once the old barber began the process of washing his hair. He lowered a bulbous clear dome from the ceiling and positioned it over Mouse’s head to his hairline. It filled with warm water, enveloping Mouse’s scalp in a pleasant bath of swirling liquid.

Barber Rick was gentle as he slipped his hands beneath the dome to lather his hair with shampoo followed by the deep conditioning, and Mouse allowed himself to enjoy the scalp massage. He hadn’t had the opportunity for a thorough clean since the day prior, and he was grateful to have the sweat from his rigors spent in bed washed out of his hair. If Barber Rick noticed the pungent musk on him, he was too polite to say anything about it, though Mouse wondered if he applied just a touch too much strawberry scent in an attempt to hide it.

At least it’s not lavender.

It was strange to think that he’d never again be washed by Mama Eun-Rick or see the winner’s suite, for that matter. For the first time since he and Rick had left his room, Mouse felt the impact of that fact settle in fully. He was free from the auctions and would never have to answer to another Master Rick again. Things could only get better from here on out, and the exhilaration of that reality made his heart thump.

“Well, if you aren’t just the cheeriest Scruffy Morty I’ve ever seen,” Barber Rick suddenly piped up. “What’s got you so happy, dove?”

Mouse popped his eyes open, not realizing that he’d been smiling so widely. “Oh! Uh, just, uh—” He peeked to the side, trying to catch Rick’s attention. Although he liked Barber Rick, holding a conversation with a Rick was still new territory for him.

“The Citadel, huh?” The barber mistook Mouse’s glance as being directed toward the bustling Citadel outside the window behind Rick. Mouse noticed with some curiosity that a crowd of five Mortys was peering intently at him, the press of their bodies and hands causing the glass to reverberate lightly. Their Ricks were nearby, scolding them halfheartedly while they chugged from their flasks. “This your first time here, gosling?”
“No,” Mouse said at first. “I-I mean, yes! I’ve never really, uh, seen it before.”

“Yeah, it’s something else. This place is a real who’s who of who’s you ‘n’ me, eh?” he joshed, bumping Mouse’s arm with his elbow. Mouse grinned weakly in reply, only vaguely understanding the nonsensical catchphrase which he’d heard being played in campy advertisements throughout the atrium.

The wash complete, Barber Rick drained out the sudsy water from the dome before setting about cutting his hair. “Now that you’re nice and clean, pigeon, I think I can salvage this wreck,” he purred. For all his flair, the barber was surprisingly considerate with his approach, never pulling too hard and making sure to work out any knots before running the comb through the damp locks. He stood the short tufts up between his two fingers before snipping at the ends.

Despite being a Rick, Barber Rick was actually very gentle. He was also, it turned out, very talkative. “Sooo, what dimension you from?”

Rick had warned Mouse he would get this question, so he came prepared with an answer. “P...”

“P? Is that it?” Barber Rick snorted a laugh.

“Um, um,” Mouse stalled. How could I already forget?!

Mouse looked about for inspiration, temporarily alarmed that now eight Mortys were clamoring at the window, their small palms rattling the glass in its frame as they pushed on it. Rick seemed unfazed or just unaware of the gathering outside as he idly flipped through an animated magazine. When Mouse saw his inverted face in the mirror’s reflection, he remembered. Oh, right!

“P-082.”

The barber nodded as though he knew the dimension well, but Mouse suspected he would have done the same no matter what letter-number combination he gave. “And what brings you to the Citadel? Your Rick is either a lousy shot or one heck of a persuasive Morty wrangler.” He pinched Mouse’s left ear gently between two fingers and wiggled it by way of explanation.

No Manipulator Chip.

He and Rick had considered the possibility of getting one just to solidify his disguise—the Guards wouldn’t be looking for a chipped Morty—but it was Rick who rejected the idea first, instead opting to spruce up Mouse’s hair to make him harder to recognize. No doubt Scruffys and other Mortys with bedraggled looks would be especially scrutinized.

Barber Rick was still talking. “Yeah. My guess is that your Rick treats you nice. You two get along pretty well?”

Finally, a question Mouse was glad to answer. “Y-yeah. We do.”

“Well, that’s a pretty special relationship you’ve got there, cherub. Not too many Mortys could say the same.” Snip, snip. “Sure he doesn’t ride your ass all the time?”

The sudden memory of Rick draped over him, cock driving into him from behind, his strong hands gripping his buttocks sent a blush of arousal to his cheeks. “Well, he just started. But I-I really hope he does it more,” Mouse mumbled.

“Uh-huh.” Barber Rick quirked a brow. “Sounds like you actually like taking it rough.”
Rick’s thighs slapping against his bottom, his cock battering him deep inside. It was true. He’d begged Rick for more and more still, even after Rick had spent himself to the point of collapse. He had laid Mouse open in ways he didn’t know were possible, able to lure him over the edge again and again.

The images were flooding his mind, already making Mouse’s groin tingle with want. If this kept up much longer—

“Your Rick ever consider entering you in the Morty Games?”

Mouse visibly paled, abruptly ripped away from his titillating fantasies. “Th-th-the Morty what?”

“Hey! Knock it off out there!” the barber barked to the storefront, as now well over a dozen Mortys were smacking their hands on the window. “Lousy kids,” he muttered, before returning to the conversation. “The Morty Games,” he said, swapping his scissors for the electric clippers that hummed like a wasp in his hand, creating an unnerving discord with the ruckus out front. He started at his nape, shaving down the leftover hair to an even crop across the sides of Mouse’s scalp. “It’s tough enough getting through the first two rounds of opponents, so Ricks are always looking for hardy Mortys to take up the cause.”

“Opponents? So it’s—”

“Yup. You’ll find the toughest Mortys in the Citadel at the Morty Games. But, luckily, we have the good Surgeon Rick on hand to patch up the poor suckers. The Games can take a lot out of a Morty, wearing down even the strongest of them.”

“Y-you mean, they’re getting hurt during these ‘games’?” Mouse’s stomach lurched at the idea. Mortys were hurting. They were suffering, just like he had, and all for entertainment? Had Ricks taken cues from Mouse’s abilities, hoping that other Mortys could also trigger Epiphanies? The irony that his fate would befall his brethren was to the point of revolting. “W-why would Ricks do that?”

“Why not? It’s like dog fighting on steroids! Violence, gambling. What’s not to love?”

Across the small barbershop, the rattling of the glass grew louder, and Mouse had to raise his voice to be heard over it. “A-a-and how do the—the Mortys feel about all this?”

Barber Rick paused where he was cleaning up the hair on Mouse’s temples to scoff. “What should it matter what a Morty thinks? N-no offense, duckling, but, well, your kind aren’t exactly known for being independent thinkers. You do what your Rick says, and that’s that.”

Mouse stared numbly at the barber, his mouth going dry. For a moment, he could’ve sworn it was Mama Eun-Rick speaking right beside him.

_He is your master, and you are to do whatever he says!_

Mouse had always thought it was Mama’s strict disciplining that had made him obey Ricks so readily. It wasn’t some natural instinct, was it? After all, now that he was free of his captors, he vowed he’d never again bend to another Rick’s will.

In the corner of his mind, however, doubt scratched away at his resolve. What about just earlier that night? All he’d wanted to do was flee the Citadel, and yet at Rick’s urging, he’d agreed to stay with hardly any resistance. At the time, Mouse had convinced himself that his submission stemmed from a belief that he was Rick’s partner, but he now wondered if he was still playing the role of the pet.

Mouse’s tongue bumbled around his next question. “A-are all Mortys really like this?”
“Oh, you bet, penguin! You’ll be hard-pressed to find a Morty who acts out. Any self-respecting Rick won’t think twice about putting his Morty in his place. Besides, it’s always easy enough to find a replacement.” He shot an apologetic look in the mirror at Mouse. “It’s just the nature of things. You understand, right?”

Suddenly, the soft caress of Barber Rick’s fingers along his scalp felt like thorns. It was disturbing that he could hold such a callous opinion of Mortys and still act so cordially toward him. With a sick sense of dread, Mouse realized that his friendly demeanor was just a facade and that beneath the surface lay a predator.

Barber Rick ran the electric clipper behind Mouse’s ears, getting at the last stray outgrowth. “Just about finished here,” he said, tongue between his teeth.

But the buzzing from the clippers and the swarm of Mortys outside was incessant now, scattering Mouse’s thoughts beyond repair. Finally, he turned sharply to Barber Rick and started to protest. “But my Rick would never——” The edge of the trimmer bit into the soft flesh behind his ear, and he winced at the small burst of pain. “Ow!”

At the front of the shop, the rattling abruptly stopped as the Mortys went still. They stood and stared while their fed-up Ricks tried to tug them away with little success.

Barber Rick tsked. “Sorry about that, owlet. Let me——” But he froze, arm still suspended and eyes glazing over, as an Epiphany shivered through his brain.

“S-sorry!” Mouse yelped, staring wide-eyed at him.

“Kid,” Barber Rick said slowly. “Y-you’re——”

Before he could get another word out, however, Rick was there at Mouse’s side. “Wow! A-amazing job!” he announced, clapping his hands loudly to draw Barber Rick’s attention. “Really great stuff! S-super tight!” In a flurry, he whisked off Mouse’s gown, yanked him out of the seat, and corralled him toward the exit. “Thanks again!” Smacking his SECURIGRID card against the register to cover the costs, he gave a final grin over his shoulder and nudged Mouse out the door.

The Mortys, now boasting over 20 strong, gave a unified cry as they reached for Mouse. But Rick swiftly passed them, and they were soon running down the promenade and away from the mob. They left in their wake a chorus of shattering glass and Ricks shouting at their Mortys, trying to get them back in order.

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“Aw, c’mon, Mouse. Cheer up!” Rick ran his fingers through Mouse’s hair again as they walked. They’d had a fairly uneventful trek since leaving the barbershop, but Mouse was no less glum despite Rick’s attempts to lighten the mood.

“Rick!” Mouse whined. “Knock it off already!” He swatted at Rick’s hand. “Are you really gonna keep doing this all the way to the—to where Chi is?”

“Well, CentRick Park isn’t too much farther. And I can’t help it,” Rick said, tousling his locks again and making the short strip of hair flop to one side then the other. Brown fuzz hugged Mouse’s head, topped with a modest mohawk running down the middle that bounced with every step Mouse took. “You’re too freakin’ cute not to tease.”

Mouse stumbled mid-step. “C-cute?” He threw a dejected look to the floor. “Can’t you call me something, I dunno, c-cooler?”
“What, would you prefer ‘dove’ or ‘gosling’?” Rick bit his tongue between his teeth when Mouse’s face glowed red.

“Aww, man! You mean, you heard him?”

Rick looped an arm around Mouse, tucking him into his chest. Mouse’s legs nearly tangled in Rick’s own, but he stopped before either of them could stumble. “Of course I heard. You think I’d let some Rick put his hands on you without watchin’ you two real close?” He chuckled, trapping Mouse in a noogie.

Instead of fighting him, though, Mouse sagged in his hold, resting his head against Rick’s ribs. When he spoke, his voice was small. “Then you must’ve heard the other s-stuff he said too, huh, Rick?” The wavering of his voice conveyed just how much the barber’s words had affected him. When Rick had tallied the potential risks that came with traversing the Citadel, loudmouths hadn't been one of them.

“Y-yeah. I heard enough.” He squeezed Mouse tighter, hoping in vain that it would be enough to assuage Mouse’s worries. The way Mouse had remained reticent and listless after the barbershop debacle made Rick feel he was miles away, even though he was right there by his side. Before he could go on, however, Mouse spoke again.

“Rick, do you think I—am I only going along with you because y-you’re a Rick and I’m...a Morty?”

“Mouse?”

“That Rick, the barber, he said Mortys have to do what their Ricks tell them.” His eyes tracked a nearby Rick who was trundling his Morty behind him like a rag doll in a toddler’s grip. The Morty only gave an aspirated whine but followed along obediently. As they passed, the Morty caught Mouse’s gaze, and the two shared that same stare that had transfixed Mouse earlier. After another quiet moment, he added softly, “They really are just like me.”

“Mouse, that’s not how it is between you and me. Trust me, I’m not interested in having some mindless drone like the rest of these yuppies.” He knelt to look Mouse in the eye, finally drawing his attention away from the Morty. “I don’t want a yes-man, Mouse. If you’re for something, I want you to mean it. If you don’t want something, you let me know. You’re your own person, Mouse, and I want you for you.”

The speech flowed from Rick more easily than he could have ever expected, and he took a moment to commend himself.

Mouse nodded jerkily. “Rick.” His face only further screwed up in worry, however, rather than relief. “B-but the other Mortys, they d-don’t get to have this.”

“Don’t get to have what?”

“Say what they want or how they want it. They don’t even get to have who they want.” A sudden passion underscored Mouse’s words, and in the next moment, he’d closed his eyes and pursed his lips in anticipation of a kiss.

Even from a distance, the rag doll Morty was keening in a high-pitched tone and struggling to wrest himself from his Rick’s grasp to throw himself in their direction. Like a ripple effect, nearby Mortys began following suit. The behavior was peculiar but really not altogether different from the other Mortys they’d encountered in the Citadel. They seemed unnaturally drawn to Mouse, pulling away from their Ricks to practically hurl themselves at him like overzealous pups, only to be stopped short
by a stern hand or sterner leash.

The Mortys’ outbursts were beginning to draw unsavory attention. One particularly bothered Rick gave them a death glare before snapping up his communicator. Rick didn’t know if he was calling for security or not, but he didn’t want to wait around to find out.

Faint Resonances lapped at Rick’s mind, and he clamped a hand over Mouse’s mouth to quell them. “B-babe, we can’t do that here. ‘Cuz of the whole, y’know…”

Thankfully, Mouse seemed to misinterpret his reservations, because he looked away bashfully and said, “R-right. The Resonances. Sorry.”

Rick gave a strained smile. “S’okay. Listen. We can talk about it more later, all right? We’ll get to Chi first, and maybe you can talk to some Mortys there, see what they have to say.” He ruffled Mouse’s mohawk one last time before standing.

“Thanks, Rick.” Mouse visibly brightened, and he cheerfully took his hand.

Minutes later, they’d reached the main entrance to CentRick Park. A pair of larger-than-life Rick statues, complete with idolizing Mortys, framed the grand gateway. Their empty eyes seemed to follow their movements as they passed, and Rick waited until they were a good distance away before taking his hand off of Mouse’s back.

After some silence, Mouse suddenly piped up. “S-so does Chi, uh, know about me?”

Rick laughed awkwardly, looking away as he answered vaguely. “Babe, e-every Rick in the Citadel knows about you.”

“Rick.”

Shit. I guess this had to come out sooner or later.

Rick sighed, raking his fingers through his hair. “Okay. Yeah, yes. He knows about you, Mouse. B-better than you might think.” When Mouse didn’t push the point, Rick found he took the initiative himself. “Y-you know when I said that I was supposed to, y’know, take you out?” He mumbled the last words when a pack of Mortys led by a pompous Rick came too near. At Mouse’s confused expression, he clarified. “Kill you.”

“Oh,” Mouse said quietly.

“Well, that was his idea.”

Mouse’s jaw fell open. “Wait. What?!” he squeaked, his eyes darting about, as though Chi might be crouching behind the bushes, just waiting to pounce.

“But d-don’t worry. I talked with him and made it clear it wasn’t going to happen.”

“A-are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Too late to get cold feet now, Mouse. You’re about to meet him.”

At that exact moment, Rick spied Chi sitting alone on a bench alongside the park’s many footpaths. A spent cigarette was lodged between his lips, and even at this distance, Rick couldn’t miss the tension radiating from Chi’s form. His back was stiffly bent at the waist, his foot jigging nervously on the coarse gravel as if he were ready to bolt at a moment’s notice.
Behind his glasses, his eyes were so busy scanning his surroundings that Rick was almost on top of Chi before he even glanced up at him. Chi would’ve missed him entirely—his disguise did a fine job of making him utterly forgettable—if not for the slight color deviation in Rick’s right eye that Chi noticed immediately.

“Shit on a Rick!” he blurted out. Then, looking around more quietly, he hissed, “280, what the fuck are you still doing here? You should be three mega-clicks from Gizzepp by now! Christ, man, you know I don’t have clearance to the upper levels. I’m risking my goddamn neck being out here, but when I got your transmission, I thought—” Chi stopped, suddenly turning his attention to Mouse by Rick’s side.

“Chi,” Rick said, placing his hand on Mouse’s back and gently guiding him forward. “This is the—the Morty I was telling you about.”

Earlier, Rick had given Mouse some prompts on how to make the introduction go smoothly, clever one-liners that would help Chi see the validity of his claims. But Mouse couldn’t even look Chi in the face. His eyes were fixed on the ground; feet, fidgeting.

Chi remained seated as he looked Mouse over with a chillingly analytical gaze. “Mouse, huh?” His voice came out even gruffer than usual, and Mouse shrank back until he was standing on Rick’s loafers. “Cute.” Unimpressed, Chi’s eyes narrowed. “You do realize you’ve risked your fucking life and mine for this kid, right? And for what?” He glanced coldly between them, the corner of his lip curling. “He that good a lay?”

Rick’s pulse hitched at the perceptive accusation. Chi could always read him like a book. While Mouse flushed red, Rick growled a warning. He knew it was dangerous territory to challenge his curmudgeon of a mentor, but pride coaxed his tongue to move before he could stop it. “Watch it, Chi. This ‘kid’ is the key to changing everything. So drop the attitude.”

Chi snorted. “Wow, 280. Sounds like he’s really got you wrapped around his little finger.”

Schooling his rising temper, Rick spoke slowly. “Listen. We’ve got something big here, but if you can’t leave your personal hang-ups at the door—”

“I’m not the one acting out of line here,” Chi snapped. He stood and paced sharply, his cigarette waggling as he went on. “You were supposed to get the fuck out of Dodge and lay low on Denira 5 until I contacted you. Now—”

Rick tucked Mouse behind him again as he stepped forward to block Chi’s frantic pacing. “You should be glad I stayed. We could’ve left you with your thumb up your ass, serving Biziwog burgers until the cows come home. But we have a real plan now, Chi. You just have to hear us out.”

“Fine.” He shook his open palms in mock amazement. “So he’s the almighty telepathic Morty, come to bring us out of the Dark Ages.” He gave an incredulous sneer. “You really oughta tone down the theatrics, Rick. Your message played like a cheap tabloid headline.”

Great. He’s really in one of his moods.

When Chi was cooperative, he could pull a Quadratic Prismane out of thin air; when he was pissed off, he was downright vicious. At times like this, it was easier to wait out the storm rather than try to counter Chi’s scathing rants.

With an exasperated sigh, Rick slouched down onto the bench, gesturing for Mouse to join him. He spread his arms over the crest rail and raised a brow at Chi coolly as he continued his pacing. Once
his mentor had finally run out of steam, he asked, “Are we done yet? We don’t have all day, you know.”

Before replying, Chi crossed his arms moodily and glared down at Mouse. “I said I believed you when you said we had a possible mind-reading Morty on our hands. Possible. I’m gonna need to see some proof. Plenty of mentalists can master cold reading at a young age.”

“Trust me, Chi. This isn’t some cheap magic trick.”

“Then let’s see it.”

Rick was ready for this. Without another word, he got up and rounded the bench, placing his hands softly on Mouse’s shoulders. Bending low, he whispered, “Okay, Mouse. Let’s show him what you can do.”

“B-but how?” Mouse leaned his head back and looked up at Rick pleadingly.

It was like the kid could see the guilt already beginning to jeer at him. Rick quickly shook it off, reassuring himself that he wouldn’t take it too far.

“First, you need to relax. Can you do that for me?” Rick gave him a firm squeeze. Mouse nodded, and he continued. “Close your eyes, Mouse, and just listen.”

A line of worry creased Mouse’s brow. Not caring who was around, Rick smiled and kissed Mouse’s forehead, smoothing the crease away and making Mouse sigh. With obvious reluctance, Mouse eventually bowed his head, revealing the vulnerable skin of his nape in the process. The act was not only practical but symbolic, Mouse having already given himself over to him completely.

Rick flicked a knowing glance at Chi, the intensity in his eyes relaying the message: Don’t you say a fucking word.

Dipping his head so that his breath tickled Mouse’s ear, Rick began. “You’ve been so brave, Mouse, you know that? To agree to come out here to the Citadel, even with all these Ricks around. And you’ve never once said that you were afraid. You’re always—you keep surprising me, kid.” The corner of Mouse’s lips curled into a grin, his brow lifting with intrigue.

That’s it.

Rick heard Chi step closer, his curiosity superseding his pride. Knowing that he had his mentor’s attention, he continued.

“You’re more amazing than you give yourself credit for. You’ve survived so much. And even after everything you’ve been through, you still took in a tired, old Rick like me.” The first flurry of a Resonance fluttered like excited wings in Rick’s mind, and he leaned closer to set it free. “It’s like I told you before. You’re going to do incredible things, Mouse. Someday, everyone’s going to know about you.” The Resonance beat stronger now, incited by Rick’s gentle coaxing. “But no one will ever know you the way I do.” He slipped one hand to cup Mouse’s jawline. Goose bumps rose at his touch, and Rick was certain he heard Mouse gasp.

Like a rapidly unfurling net, he felt his mind begin to trace the many threads around him, radiating out from his center in all directions. He nudged Mouse a little further.

“You should’ve seen the way you looked last night. Like you belonged on my cock. That’s how I always want to see you,” he rumbled, feeling Mouse begin to loll his head. He whispered low, wanting only Mouse to hear his stream of dirty talk. “I can’t stop thinking about the way you felt
around me, Mouse. God, I wish I could take you right now. Would you like that? You want me inside you right now? Patience,” he breathed hot along his earlobe. “Trust me, the next time we’re alone together, I’m gonna make you forget your own name.”

A small whimper from Mouse backdropped Rick’s praise, the front of his jeans tenting with blatant desire.

Rick straightened swiftly, his fingers never letting up their sensual massage along the sides of Mouse’s neck and head. He scanned the immediate area before he found his target: a wobbly-kneed Rick leaning heavily against a stone plinth.

“There. That guy,” Rick said, directing Chi to follow his gaze. “He’s about to hurl.”

As if on cue, the Rick curled over and vomited, the green, bile-slicked mess sliding down the side of the white marble.

Chi only sniffed. “Hot reading. Please, the guy was giving off signals left and right.”

Rick scowled at his cavalier dismissal. “Fine,” he muttered, already following another thread. This time, he felt two that intersected abruptly and realized it was a pair of Ricks sitting on the bench across from them. They weren’t even looking at one another, each absorbed in his own paper, yet according to the Resonance— “Right over there! A drug deal in 3...2...”

Again, Rick’s reading was right. As Chi looked on, one of the Ricks placed an innocuous bundle on the bench beside him while the other did the same with a tightly rolled wad of bills. They seamlessly picked up the other’s goods, stood, and parted ways.

“All right. I’ll admit, that one took a little more legwork.” Spitting out the old cigarette, Chi bumped a new one out of his pack and nestled it between his lips. He lit it, took a puff, and looked away. “Cute but not good enough. The kid could have access to the Citadel’s security system, could’ve gotten a profile on the junkies—or on us, for that matter.” The distrust was plain on his face. “C’mon, 280. Show me something no one would know.” His gaze held both a challenge and an invitation.

And Rick knew he had to answer it.

“Chi,” he gritted out, his throat already tight. He’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but Chi was asking him to take the plunge. Before he could lose his nerve, Rick gave another murmured stream of praise and a well-placed caress over Mouse’s heated cheek and slipped into Chi’s thoughts like a diver beneath the waves.

His head nearly bowed beneath the weight of Chi’s consciousness, it was so packed with raw data. Tightly interwoven formulas and algorithms at varying stages of completion cluttered every nook and cranny. In the archives of Chi’s mind, Rick found brilliant discourses on subjects that far exceeded even his own intellect. He was enthralled by the range of information to be found, and he thought fondly that he could spend a lifetime reading through Chi’s thoughts and never grow bored.

That changed when he noticed a stray glint of something more sobering beneath the ostentatious exterior. Stripping away one corner of a theorem on the lonely runner conjecture, Rick reached into the deeper layers of Chi’s innermost thoughts.

There, he came upon a deep-seated malaise that moiled sullenly in the darkness. It sang a threnody of loss and heartache that made Rick’s curiosity bleed away into pity. He’d always suspected—always known that deep down, for all Chi’s genius, his achievements, and his passionate cause, he still felt
utterly alone.

But at the heart of that darkness sat a glowing pearl.

Its nacre surface was alive with memories, the ghostly images overlapping. Inside each of them, Rick saw himself and Chi, back when they were younger and wilder. They’d been inseparable, Rick happily following his mentor through whatever cockamamie stunt Chi had thought up. Chi’s affection for Rick colored every memory until Rick himself was half-convinced they had been lovers; hidden caresses and stolen kisses told Rick that perhaps Chi hadn’t been as far gone on those drunken nights as he’d thought.

Even as the sting of unrequited love bit into him like the barbs of a sea anemone, Rick plucked a memory from the collage. He turned his eyes to Chi. “That night on Interra.”

At those four words, Chi immediately snapped to attention. Rick slid his hand away from Mouse to walk slowly around the bench toward him.

“You’d called me out there, said you wanted to celebrate my latest con against the Alarum Gang. You never showed, though, and when I finally got in touch with you, you brushed the whole thing off. Said you’d had a nasty Viknar hangover.” He stopped just in front of Chi. “But that wasn’t the real reason, was it.”

Chi removed his cigarette with trembling fingers, the look in his eyes daring Rick to go on.

“And you never even told me.

Chi’s cigarette fell forgotten to the ground as he stared at Rick in shock. “I’ll be damned,” he breathed.

But Rick had already turned back to the bench where Mouse was still seated, head bowed and shaking. He cupped Mouse’s cheek and bent low to whisper, “I’m sorry, Mouse. But we had to do it. H-he wouldn’t have believed us otherwise.”

“Rick—” Mouse’s hands were clenched into fists on his lap.

Kneeling beside him, Rick took Mouse’s hands in his, easing his fingers open. He silently remarked how easily his gnarled hands swallowed up Mouse’s. “Shh. I know, Mouse. That wasn’t fair of me, but I promise I’ll make it up to you. I swear.”

God, he felt like such an asswipe. He’d promised himself that he would never stoop to using Mouse like this, and here he’d gone and worked him like a puppet to put on a show. This wasn’t how he ever wanted it to be, and he prayed this would be the first and last time. Worst of all, Mouse was uncomfortably aroused, and he couldn’t even do a damn thing about it.

The best he could do for now was get his mind off it.

“H-he, Mouse. Listen. I’m going to talk with Chi some more, s-so why don’t you go and cool yourself down, hm?” He gestured with his chin to a nearby park restroom. It was a squat, box-like thing with signs demarcating Ricks and Mortys on opposite walls. “Y-you’ll feel better.”
Mouse only nodded shakily before sliding off the bench on wobbly legs and teetering in the direction of the restroom.

Rick watched Mouse make slow progress past a team of chipped Mortys idling on the grass while their Rick was passed out on a nearby bench. The Mortys immediately perked up when they caught sight of Mouse and were quick to intercept him with beaming smiles and outstretched arms. From what Rick could see, it looked as though Mouse reciprocated in kind.

Just behind him, Chi mumbled, “This can’t seriously be happening.” When Rick didn’t respond, Chi clasped him by the shoulder to spin him around roughly. He pointed at Mouse who was now being swallowed into the fold of his duplicates. “280, that Morty is really—he can actually—” He paused to pull at tufts of his own hair. “Do you have any idea what we’ve got here?”

Rick wasn’t so quick to share Chi’s enthusiasm. “Glad you finally believe me.”

“Shit, 280, if I knew what that Morty was capable of, I would’ve gone in there to steal him myself! He’s every scientist’s dream,” he said wistfully. “Telepathy.”

Chi’s grin was wide as he looked to Mouse and the diverse selection of Mortys that surrounded him. They appeared to be engaged in some kind of animated exchange though their lips didn’t move. “I’d keep him close if I were you, 280. If that Morty fell into the wrong hands—”

“His name’s Mouse, Chi. Jesus Christ. And he’s not some fucking tool to pull out whenever you want. He’s a person,” Rick seethed, guilt still souring his mood.

“Sure. And I didn’t just watch you play him like a goddamn instrument.”

Rick scowled at the low blow.

“Just calling it like I see it.” It was the closest thing Rick would probably get to an apology from his mentor. “But let’s be honest. It’s not exactly the most prudish way to trigger mind reading.”

Rick reared on him, barely keeping from bashing Chi’s nose in. “I didn’t want to do that!” he roared. “And I wouldn't have had to if you weren't so fucking stubborn!”

“Watch the tone,” Chi said, his expression darkening. “Let’s not forget you’re the one who brought him here. Shit, considering what the kid can do, you know the Council won’t rest until they’ve gotten back their pet. Sooner or later, the whole damn Citadel will be looking for him. They might even be this very second.” He flicked his eyes at a trio of Guard Ricks patrolling the area farther down the footpath. “So it’d be smart to keep your voice down.”

Grinding his teeth, Rick finally relented, turning his back on Chi to glare across the park. “You think I don’t know that? So let's get to the point already. We’ve wasted enough time.”

Chi sighed and flopped down on the bench, one ankle crossed over his knee. “All right, 280. You said before that you'd found something big through that telepathy—”

“Resonance.”

“Resonance. Whatever. Well, congratulations. I’m all fuckin’ ears.”

The congregation of Mortys had apparently attracted new members, their number surpassing a dozen as they sat on the grass around Mouse like dedicated disciples. At least they’re behaving themselves, Rick thought distantly. After waiting a beat, Rick finally turned and sat down next to Chi.
“If I hadn’t shown you that the Resonances are real, you’d probably say I’m crazy,” Rick started, his elbows on his knees, fingers laced. “But you were right, Chi. Something big’s happening, way bigger than us.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense, 280. Spit it out.”

Rick took a breath. Now that he finally had an audience for the truth that had been clamoring in his head, he found it difficult to begin. “The war—the war against the GF was a success, Chi. But it ended years ago.” He raised a hand before Chi could interrupt. “And the way they’re fighting now is bogus. On the surface it may look the same—Ricks go into battle, fight, die. Same. Only catch is, the Council’s the one calling the shots. Don’t ask me how they’re doing it, but they are. They’re running the GF, and they’re keeping everyone in the fucking dark about it.”

He stopped to breathe, realizing that his heart was pounding a mile a minute.

“The Council. Running the GF.”

Pinching his nasion in anticipation of the encroaching shouting match, Rick grumbled, “I know how it sounds.”

“Go on.”

Rick blinked rapidly at him. “Chi?”

“Go on,” Chi repeated. “What else did you learn?”

“Oh, uh,” Rick stammered. “Seems they’ve been operating like this for some years now. Can’t say for certain. But they’ve got their system down tight. Chains of command, regular correspondence, even quotas.”

“Quotas?”

“The Code Yellows.” Rick’s voice was hollow as he said it. “They’re not random arrests. The Council’s been selling out Ricks to the GF to keep up the facade. It’s all been fucking staged.”

“Well, at least they’re thorough. I’ll give ‘em that.” Chi was trying to sound blasé about it, but Rick could see his knee was bouncing, agitated.

“Thorough. Right,” Rick echoed bitterly. The unsettling truth he’d been trying to deny over the past few hours finally reared its ugly head, that his own arrest had just been the byproduct of the Council’s twisted lottery.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rick caught Chi looking at him strangely. “W-what?”

“I’m impressed, 280. You’re really serious about this.”

Rick sputtered over his tongue, “O-of course I am.”

“You doing it for him?”

“What?” When Chi only nodded to Mouse who was gesticulating enthusiastically to his spellbound audience, Rick felt his cheeks redden.

“Can’t imagine you’d be doing it for our brothers,” Chi said, regarding him with newfound interest. “So where’s this sudden streak of Rick advocacy coming from?”
Why do you care so much what happens here, Rick?

Mouse had asked him the same thing just hours earlier, but he was still no closer to finding an answer. Whatever it was, he knew that it lay within the flood of Resonances he’d experienced last night. For reasons he couldn’t explain, he suddenly felt a sympathy for his fellow Ricks that he’d never had before. They’d been minutes from making their escape once and for all, but here he was, diving even deeper into the dangers of the Council. And for what?

Before he could dwell on the thought further, Chi was all business again as he continued. “So tell me if I’ve got this right. Galactic Federation hunts down Ricks. Ricks create Council for protection. Council becomes Galactic Federation. Council hunts down Ricks?”

“Talk about biting the hand that feeds.”

“Anyone else know about this?”

“I doubt it,” Rick huffed. He raised a brow as he watched the group of Mortys around Mouse. Many of them were now stroking their hands down their own bodies or petting their neighbors in a way that was teetering uncomfortably close to explicit. One pair had moved to stand over their inebriated Rick on the bench. He looked back at Chi. “No way it’d go on this long if everyone knew. It must be restricted to council members and maybe a few officials, maximum.”

Chi laughed, throwing a cheeky grin to Rick. “Let me guess. Your plan is to let the cat out of the bag then, huh?”

“You bastard,” Rick said fondly. “You’re always one step ahead of me.”

“I know,” Chi bantered back. He took a long draw of his cigarette. “Now for how to pull it off. We’ll need a little more data.” Leaning forward, he slipped a small tablet out of his back pocket. “Speaking of which, this why you wanted the backlog of Code Yellows?”

“Shit, almost forgot about that.” Rick shook his head and took the tablet from Chi. “I’d wanted to confirm a hunch I had, but I wonder how relevant it is now.” He was already scanning the entries of dates and names listed on the screen. “So these are all the Code Yellows over the past 15 years?”

“The Council’s not the only ones who can be thorough. I got you everything you wanted, right in there.”

“Great. Now let’s see what we can find.” After tweaking a line of code in ORA’s OS to interface with the device, Rick quickly ran through the entries by year.

The records from 10 to 15 years ago revealed little. Ricks were still in the midst of the First Wave against the Galactic Federation, with all the arrestees being POWs. Even Rick recognized several of the dimensions of those who had gone down in the annals as war heroes. Cross-referencing the entries against an intranet search brought up articles highlighting the Ricks’ accomplishments as well as laudatory obituaries.

The next period, five to 10 years ago, was where a shift in the trend made itself known. Code Yellows were markedly more regular, with the number of arrests consistent from year to year. Here, too, Rick ran a background check on the Ricks, and the results were nothing short of alarming. Now Ricks with a history of anti-Council activities littered the records with such frequency that it was hard to ignore. Of course the Council would cut out the whistle-blowers first. It’d just made it easier to pave the way for their imminent takeover. Strategically removing any naysayers ensured that no one could alert the public about what was happening right under their noses.
Nestled between an unruly mid-tier Greco and some faceless terror-Rick, Rick found his own arrest. His fingers gripped the device with a little more force than necessary as he looked at the entry. Ten years of a living hell whittled down to a few stagnant characters on a screen. To add insult to injury, they had flubbed his dimension. O-280. He wrinkled his nose.

By now, the pattern of Council-controlled arrests was undeniable. The last four years alone had Code Yellows coming in like clockwork, with fewer notable insurgents. Shaping the Rick populace into a docile flock of sheep was working out just like the Council had wanted. There really was no greater motivator than fear.

What was worse was that despite the regularity with which the arrests were made, the Council still staged just as many victory parades. It was embarrassing that the charade had been allowed to continue for as long as it had.

Rick was about to close down the program, satisfied with what he’d found, when something peculiar caught his eye. He would’ve overlooked the entry entirely—after all, it wasn’t a particularly attention-grabbing Rick—if not for the discrepancy he noticed between two dates.

“Chi, how reliable’s this data?” he asked, checking the numbers again. Rick of T-942’s arrest date and his death record didn’t match up. In fact, they appeared to be backward. “Chi?”

But Chi was already standing, his eyes fixed on a crowd of figures in the distance. Guard Ricks. He plucked the device from Rick’s hands with a curt, “We’re gonna have to pick this up later, 280. Looks like someone called the fuzz.”

Rick jumped to his feet, already scanning the nearby Mortys for Mouse. The assembly had turned their attention to their belligerent Ricks instead, who by this time had sobered up enough to fend off their Mortys’ advances, filling the air with harsh insults. But the Mortys couldn’t be deterred, and they teamed up on their Ricks to try to overpower them.

What the hell has Mouse been telling them?

The racket was attracting the attention of Guards from every direction, as the brawl between Mortys and their Ricks escalated within minutes to a full-blown riot. Outstatured but resilient, the Mortys were grabbing at their Ricks’ lab coats to rip them off as they attacked them—no, not attack. They were—Rick couldn’t quite tell, but it almost looked as though they were trying to drag their Ricks down to the ground with them.

Rick stepped forward, ready to dive into the fracas, when his bag bumped heavily against his hip. He stopped short, reaching inside for the portal gun. He glanced quickly at the Guards who were interrogating Ricks down the path on either side of them, slowly converging on their location.

Grabbing Chi roughly by the arm, Rick pulled him close and shoved the portal gun into his hands. “Take this.”

“What—?”

“It’s sapped, but it’ll do more good for you than me right now.”

Chi looked at Rick skeptically. “And just what I am supposed to do with a dead portal gun?”

“Nothing for now. But this might make things easier.” He slipped the SECURIGRID card from his coat pocket and placed it on top of the bundle in Chi’s open palms. “Use your imagination.”

“Where the fuck did you get this?” Chi gawked at it in disbelief.
“I’ll explain later,” Rick said hastily, tucking his bag behind his back. “Right now we gotta split up. You’ll hear from me again as soon as things settle down.” He stuck his bent arm out. Without missing a beat, Chi bumped his forearm against his, a small smile interrupting his usually severe expression.

Amidst the chaos of Ricks and Mortys fighting tooth and nail—and tongues and maybe something more—Rick dove into the fray, scooped Mouse up around the middle with one arm, and dashed in the direction of a side exit. The main entrance was already clogged with Guard Ricks. Too focused on putting distance between themselves and the commotion, however, Rick didn’t notice the two Guard Ricks that suddenly stepped into his path.

“Registration, sir,” one of them said. His sunglasses kept Rick from reading his expression, but he saw the slight arch of his brow at their unkempt state. Rick was breathing hard, coat askew and adrenaline making his thighs twitch, as he stood warily in front of them. Mouse was faring little better, his eyes directionless and his limbs made of rubber.

Rick licked his lips and shifted his hold on Mouse, putting him gently on the ground. Mouse wobbled like a newborn fawn before straightening and tucking himself to Rick’s side, partially out of sight.

“Registration,” the Guard repeated with more force. His partner was already moving his finger over the trigger of his plasma rifle.

“Right. G-got it right here,” Rick said, pulling out the security pass Chi had provided him.

The Guard took it and pulled out his mobile scanner. Rick silently cursed and swallowed as the card was swiped through the machine. When it gave an angry beep, both Guards stuck him with a loaded glare.

“Sir, you’re going to have to come with—”

“What’s going on here?” A third voice suddenly spoke, slicing through the air like a whip. It was much higher than the Guards’ and, Rick noted, reminiscent of Mouse’s. While Rick cocked his head in confusion, the two Guards parted immediately to let their comrade through.

It was a Guard Morty. He only came up to his colleagues’ chests, but even at a glance, Rick could tell that he was the one who dished out orders. His lapels were richly decorated with colorful insignia that touted his rank, and, despite his short stature, control radiated from him on par with the Captain of the Guard.

That familiar leveled gaze was currently glancing over Rick with bald-faced disinterest. He looked more annoyed than anything, and with an obvious pout, he sniffed, “Report.”

The first Guard thumped a fist to his chest and gave a curt bow. “Sir, this Rick’s identification is giving us some trouble.”

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It was a Guard Morty. He only came up to his colleagues’ chests, but even at a glance, Rick could tell that he was the one who dished out orders. His lapels were richly decorated with colorful insignia that touted his rank, and, despite his short stature, control radiated from him on par with the Captain of the Guard.

That familiar leveled gaze was currently glancing over Rick with bald-faced disinterest. He looked more annoyed than anything, and with an obvious pout, he sniffed, “Report.”

The first Guard thumped a fist to his chest and gave a curt bow. “Sir, this Rick’s identification is giving us some trouble.”

“I-I must’ve forgotten my new card in my other coat,” Rick stalled.

“Is that right?” the Guard Morty said. “Unfortunately, that’s no excuse. Rule 20(c) of the Citadel states, ‘A Rick in any public space within the Citadel must carry valid identification at all times and is subject to random searches without warning.’ That especially goes for Ricks with a Morty.” The Guard Morty shot his arm out to clasp Mouse by the shoulder just as he was trying to slink away undetected behind Rick. “And just who do we have here?”

The shift in the Guard Morty’s expression was subtle, no more than a twitch of his cheek, as he
locked eyes with Mouse. Slowly he reared back, his hand falling lax by his side.

“Sir?” ventured one of the Guards, exchanging a confused look with his partner.

“Everything all right, Brother?” the Guard Morty asked calmly, ignoring his subordinate’s inquiry.

“F-fine,” Mouse croaked.

“Good.” Then to the other Guards: “Their records check out. These two are free to go.” He tucked the expired card into his breast pocket.

“But, sir—”

“I said we’re finished here, men.” A steely glare from his chocolate brown eyes beat the other two into submission. They grumbled in the affirmative. Tucking his hands behind his back, the Guard Morty began briskly marching away, toting his underlings along with him. When his communicator trilled with an incoming message, he answered with a crisp, “Yes, Captain. This is I-006,” before leaving Rick and Mouse behind.

Rick bent over, hands braced on his knees. He sighed loudly. “Jesus Christ, that was close.”

Beside him, Mouse mumbled an agreement, still watching the departing Morty with curiosity. “Why do you think he let us go?”

“Who cares why? C’mon, Mouse. We’ve gotta get going. The next Guard might not be as lenient.” He took Mouse’s hand in his own and navigated them out of the park.

The rest of the atrium was in as equal a state of heightened security, with Guards stationed around every plaza and dotting the many commercial establishments. It took a great deal of sidestepping and strategic backtracking to keep away from the congested areas, but this also made for slow going.

Ducking into an alley for a breather, Rick leaned against a wall and exhaled a frustrated curse. They were royally fucked now. No tools, no safe place, and with Guards sniffing around every corner, it’d only be a matter of time before they were caught. Rick could bet they wouldn’t go easy on him once they found out he had The One. The fact that the entire Citadel wasn’t on complete lockdown yet told him that they didn’t know that Mouse was missing too.

The Council was already out for him, and now they’d have the perfect excuse to off him the second he was in their sights.

He bumped his head back against the stone wall. Nothing was going as he’d anticipated, and it was giving him a headache the size of Jupiter. What had he gotten them into? He knew he was running a huge risk going to see Chi, but it’d seemed worth it at the time. If it weren’t for the sudden rash of uproars from the Mortys, he and Mouse could’ve easily slipped down to sub-level 6 and used Chi’s pad as a base of operations. Now with the increase in security personnel, they wouldn’t get within two feet of the entry points between levels without being checked and detained.

Rick looked at Mouse who was mirroring his stance by his side. The sag of his shoulders broadcast just how exhausted the kid was. He wasn’t surprised. They’d constantly been on the move since the day before, and Rick knew firsthand just how little sleep Mouse had gotten last night. Suddenly the splendor of what they’d shared took on a sour note.

Rick had just closed his eyes in the hopes of blocking out the gravity of their situation for a few blessed moments, when he felt a small tug on his coat.
“Rick?” Mouse was looking up at him with a calm that took the edge off of Rick’s own frayed nerves. “Rick, i-it’s going to be okay.”

Rick almost snorted out loud. *How can he honestly think that?* “Yeah. Th-thanks, Mouse,” he said instead.

He must not have sounded too convincing, because Mouse went on. “I know, um, that you might not believe it, but it’s true. The Mortys, they told me we’ll be okay.”

*Mortys?* Rick screwed up his brow, but before he could ask anything about it, Mouse was pulling him down by his sleeves until he was kneeling in front of him. Mouse’s hands, gentle and patient on either side of his head, guided him to his chest. Mouse was still bony beneath his flimsy shirt, but Rick felt a comfort there that he couldn’t find anywhere else. His arms, which had been slack at his sides, came up to clutch at Mouse’s back.

For one long, uninterrupted moment they held each other, Mouse granting Rick the peace he didn’t know he’d been yearning for and Rick clinging to Mouse like he were his salvation.

Finally, he gave a deep breath and pulled away from the embrace. “M-Mouse,” he faltered. “I-I just want to keep you safe.”

“We believe we can arrange that.”

The strange, velvety voice shocked Rick’s eyes open. He whipped around, his muscles instantly tensing. But when he laid eyes on the speaker, he nearly swallowed his tongue.

“Y-you?”

The Eun-Rick smiled, his eyes twinkling. “Now, if you’ll kindly follow us.”

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 11 can be found here.]
Chapter Summary

What the Guard Morty lacked in stature, he made up for with aptitude and discipline, swiftly outranking his brethren by leaps and bounds. Top of his graduating class and first Morty ever to earn the position of unit leader, I-6 came to occupy a special place in the Captain’s purview—model soldier, colleague, and confidant all rolled into one.

Now if only he could keep it professional.

Chapter Notes

First published 4/29/2017

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“And the followers of The One True Morty went forth and spread His word to wash away the injustices of the land.”
- Lamentations 5:16

The Captain of the Guard rested his chin on his interlaced fingers, eyes locked on the grid of monitors that hovered in front of his desk. Surveillance footage from around the Citadel played on mute like a fractured kaleidoscope, revealing the activities of his men out on the field as they conducted their search.

On one monitor, a Guard Rick slammed his fists down on a table in a small interrogation room. The Rick being questioned responded in kind, toppling his chair and tackling the Guard in a brief but heated scuffle, before the suspect was knocked unconscious and dragged away. The Guard Rick turned to the camera and gave an apathetic shrug.

Another showed the aftermath of what had once been a peaceful plaza in the Citadel atrium. Droves of Ricks were being shoved into the backs of imposing SECURIGRID vans while their Mortys looked on, helpless. Although perhaps “helpless” wasn’t the word to describe one group of Mortys that was grappling the Guards in an uncharacteristic show of defiance. Spectator Ricks had gathered around the scene, jeering and throwing their flasks in outrage.

It was the epitome of a shitstorm.

“NUBs,” the Captain grumbled. Apparently, his units had missed the memo about being discreet. Never tearing his eyes away from the monitors, he tapped the badge on his chest, which had been droning on with inane reports, and snapped out orders for another team to intervene. A curt affirmative came back over the communicator.

He gave a weary sigh. It had been nearly 12 hours since they started the investigation, 12 hours since
they’d been given the order: Find the X-Rick, arrest him, and kill him.

And he had jack shit to show for it.

It was supposed to be an open-and-shut case. Guards were immediately dispatched to apprehend the suspect in his suite, and yet when they’d arrived, it was empty save for the Elite membership card on the desk. Surveillance couldn’t offer much of an explanation. For no apparent reason, they’d lost the feed from the suite for three minutes.

“Three minutes, and the fucking X-Rick disappears,” the Captain muttered to himself, and with a sweep of his hand, he summoned a cluster of monitors closer. The last recorded activity within the high-roller suite looped on repeat as the Captain tried to pick up some detail he’d overlooked. It showed the X-Rick enjoying his fast-food delivery at his desk with the courier hovering nearby, and in the next instant—gone.

The Captain’s elbows had begun to pulse with pins and needles where they were propped atop the desk, and he pushed himself back with a frustrated sigh. Momentum propelled the leather hover-chair back a few feet, letting him straighten his legs. The suite monitors followed after him like loyal dogs, but he batted them away with a frustrated wave of his hand.

The hours of sitting stationary at his desk had taken their toll as he stretched noisily, a string of firecrackers popping down his neck and lower lumbar. An obscene groan slipped past his lips. Such indecency would never have been permitted in public, but in the privacy of his office, the Captain allowed himself to shrug off the stranglehold of decorum.

Scrubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms, he leaned back in the chair and propped his feet up on the sprawl of useless dossiers littering the table. The sharp edge of his belt dug into his belly, and he moved his hands down, intending to undo the metal buckle. When they touched it, however, they paused, a bout of déjà vu whispering seductively into his ear.

An illicit name moaned under his breath, the clatter as he fumbled open his belt.

He quickly pulled his hands away as though burned.

Eager to get his mind off of the too-fresh memories of the prior night, he instead folded his hands chastely over his belly and set his gaze skyward. Tracing the familiar straight lines and geometric patterns of the ceiling tiles often helped to realign his scattered psyche, an exercise in self-imposed restraint. Tonight, however, he found his mind steadfastly continuing its downward trek into forbidden territory.

Small hands grasping for him, soft lips brushing his mouth, and a warbling voice calling his name. “C-Captain, Captain—”

“Captain!”

His fantasy was abruptly snuffed out, and he threw himself forward, mind reeling as if it’d been splashed with cold water. “I—!” The name was already on his tongue, but he bit it back. With a scowl, he glared down at his lapel.

“Level 4, quadrant 6 is clear, sir,” his communicator chirped. “No sign of the X-Rick. Awaiting further orders.”

“Oh, for god’s sake.” He sighed loudly, running a hand across his forehead. Cool sweat moistened his fingertips as he felt a category-5 headache coming on. He took a moment to slip back into his drill sergeant persona, allowing a calculated stoicism to settle across his features. Thankfully, his voice
came out more composed than he’d expected when he finally answered.

“If you’d remember the chain of command, private, your direct orders will come firstly from your unit leader, then lieutenant, and then me. But if you need it spelled out for you, you are to reconvene with Unit 78 and cover the rest of the CentRick Park district.”

Static hissed over the communicator before the Guard responded. “B-but, sir, we’ve just lost our unit leader.”

“What do you mean ‘lost’?”

“I-I don’t know, sir. I-006 just abandoned his post.”

The Captain paused, finger hovering over the communicator as he digested the news. When he spoke again, his voice was sharp and level. “That’s a pretty serious accusation. You’d better have your facts in order before you start throwing around claims like that.”

“W-well, it seemed pretty obvious when he—”

The whinging petered out beneath the Captain’s frigid silence. He rose to his feet, glowering across his desk at the empty office as though his next words could paralyze the Guard from all the way across the Citadel. “Do you know what the punishment is for committing slander against a superior officer, soldier?”

There was no response for a few tense moments before a quiet “yes, sir” crackled through the airwaves, bowed and defeated.

“That’s what I thought. Now get back to your duties—” He paused to open all channels and lambaste the rest of his men. “—and don’t waste my time with any more petty interruptions until you’ve found something!” A sharp tap effectively ended the discussion, and the Captain swiftly plucked the badge from his lapel to slam it facedown on the desk.

That’s better, he huffed silently. The goddamn thing had been going off like a police scanner on crack, and the senseless banter of his soldiers was picking away at his already threadbare patience. As if the sorry state of the case weren’t bad enough, now he was getting reports of deserter Guards.

And not just any Guard. I-6. 

His hands nestled in dark curls, the warm embrace of lips around his cock—

He shook his head free of the intrusive image and began to pace. Running a fretful hand through his hair, he did switchbacks as he mulled over the unprecedented turn of events.

Abandoning his post? Of all the ridiculous... I-6 was one of his most capable Guards. Among the hundreds of insipid men at his disposal, I-6 stood out like a beacon, executing his orders with an efficiency that made the Captain preen. The very notion that he would simply up and abandon his post was preposterous, and the Captain chided himself for even entertaining such a wild allegation.

He snorted.

Hell, he knew I-6 better than that. Since the day I-6 first entered his charge—one of many salvaged Mortys brought to the Citadel to be whipped into passable foot soldiers—the Captain had followed his progress closely. While he had few expectations for the runt of the litter, I-006 had proven him wrong soon enough.
What the Guard Morty lacked in stature, he made up for with aptitude and discipline, swiftly outranking his brethren by leaps and bounds. Top of his graduating class and first Morty ever to earn the position of unit leader, I-6 came to occupy a special place in the Captain’s purview—model soldier, colleague, and confidant all rolled into one.

Now if only he could keep it professional.

He scrubbed a hand down his face, trying to squash the more impure musings that invariably revealed themselves whenever he thought of I-6. They were the one deformity to his otherwise exemplary working relationship, threatening to turn it into something less noble, more obscene.

Late-night summons to his office to review reports or requests for I-6 to accompany him on the dullest of administrative tasks could all be written off under the convenient guise of the job. Until recently, it was easy enough to convince himself that his feelings for I-6 remained squarely within the confines of work.

Steadily, however, the Captain began to realize that the respect and admiration he held for I-6 were wavering dangerously close to something far more self-serving. He wanted his unit leader in a way that no commanding officer should want a subordinate and that no Rick should want a Morty.

So he’d been careful, so careful to keep his inappropriate urges in check. Like wild weeds, he’d trimmed them back and smothered them beneath the daily grind and a healthy dose of denial. As much as they tempted him with whispers of “what if” and “this could be” and “just imagine,” they were never acknowledged, let alone acted upon.

Last night, however, had changed all that.

Last night, his deepest desires had broken free with a vivid fantasy that divulged all his secrets. They flourished like thorny brambles in the pristine garden of his mind, coiled tight around his heart and buried deep in his groin. Having entered the physical realm, the Captain now found them impossible to uproot.

He nearly tripped over his own feet as he paced, recalling the strange vagary that had overtaken him. It’d only been a few hours into the investigation, and he’d been listening to a report—what it was even about escaped him now—when he was suddenly struck by an all-encompassing lust that had him grabbing at himself like his life depended on it. When he’d finally come back to his senses, he was breathing heavily in his desk chair, cock out, and his shame cooling in wet streaks across his abs.

Revulsion had been his first response. What on earth had reduced him to that, jerking off like some hormonal teen over a crush? He told himself it was merely a temporary lapse in control, and now that he’d scratched that itch, surely his fantasies would be laid to rest once and for all.

Rather than feeling satiated, however, his body was only hungrier for the real thing, as evidenced by the semi now tenting the front of his uniform slacks.

“How did it come to this?” he asked aloud, a crack in one of the ceiling tiles echoing his sentiment.


Just don’t think about it. The classic Rick motto rang through his head, and for the first time in months, he was suddenly craving a hard drink, preferably something strong enough to numb his rampaging thoughts. He peeked down at the bottom drawer of his desk where he kept a reserve of whiskey for just such an occasion. The entire military division of the Citadel government was kept bone-dry—all in the name of efficiency, of course—but after last night, he needed it, damn it.
His fingers were around the neck of the bottle and the glass tumbler was on his desk before he could talk himself out of it. He slumped back into his seat, pouring himself a generous helping of the amber liquid. *It’s just a little something to take the edge off,* he reassured himself.

The whiskey soothed where it touched his tongue, and he gave a long, satisfied sigh, appreciating the way his throat was filled with the faintly smoky aftertaste. Tension instantly eased from around his eyes, and a thin veil of lassitude quieted the spinning cyclone of his thoughts.

*Palms running down the plane of a narrow chest, pausing only to marvel at the wildly hammering heart beneath the pads of his fingertips. His hands clutching lean muscle as he fucked into that wet warmth with slow thrusts.*

“Shit...” he moaned, hand splayed over his erection. Rather than lifting the carnal fog of his mind, the drink only further seeped him in last night’s fantasies. A blush that was equal parts arousal and shame tinged his cheeks.

*Fuck it. In for a penny, in for a pound,* jeered the depraved side of him, already guiding his hand to squeeze along his length—when the office intercom buzzed.

An undignified yelp escaped him, but he managed to smother it into a half-decent grunt of annoyance. “Y-yes?” He coughed over the crack in his voice, scrambling to pin his badge back in place. “Who is it?”

There was a half-second of hesitation before the familiar voice came through the device. “Captain, it’s me.”

The Captain immediately bolted upright in his seat as though he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar—which, in a way, he had. What was I-6 doing here?

*Make him leave, make him leave!*

In reply, the doors parted beneath I-6’s SECURIGRID card, and the unit leader stepped inside. As he approached the desk, the Captain prayed the barrier of screens masked his untimely blush. He quickly bowed his head before he could give himself away, only then realizing he’d failed to hide something else: The glass of whiskey was still in his hand.

I-6 had apparently noticed it, because he gave a hushed “oh” as he neared. He knew the rules as well as the next Guard did and could have easily reported the Captain then and there for the transgression. Surprisingly, I-6 only shrugged and smiled at him through the blue glow of the monitors.

“One of those nights, Captain?” His tone was convivial, as though he weren’t put off in the least to see his superior giving in to his vice. A silent prayer of thanks echoed in the Captain’s mind.

“Mm, yes,” he said with an awkward smile. He relaxed back into his chair, nursing the glass in his lap. The act was oddly comforting, and, besides, it helped occupy his restless hands. Out of some ingrained sense of etiquette, he gestured to the bottle with a tilt of his head.

I-6 politely declined without a word, softening the blow that the Captain had just offered a Morty a drink. The whiskey must’ve been going straight to his head. He coughed around the sudden tightness in his throat and tapped his fingers against the cool glass of the tumbler, eager to move on from the topic.
“You really must remember to announce yourself before entering, I-6.”

“My apologies, Captain,” I-6 replied, stepping forward and breaking through the monitors that jittered and reassembled themselves behind him. Backlit by the unearthly glow of the screens, the straight lines of his shoulders and lithe frame were made all the more stunning.

Not trusting himself to look I-6 in the face, the Captain rested his eyes, instead, on the magnificent array of medals that shone on his chest. With his hands clasped behind him, I-6’s shoulders were pulled back, making the colorful insignia gleam proudly.

“Now, then.” He leaned forward, folding his hands on the desk. “What’s this I hear about you abandoning your post, I-6?”

I-6 cocked his head. “Pardon?”

“It seems some of your men are under the impression that you went AWOL.”

“Forgive me my candidness, sir,” I-6 replied, “but they’re mistaken. I’m right here, aren’t I? I merely chose to deliver my latest update to my commanding officer...personally.”

There was something about the way the word “personally” rolled off I-6’s tongue that made the Captain want to chase after it past his lips and down his throat. He gave a quick shake of his head, disguising it as a response to I-6’s excuse.

“A-an update? And you couldn’t have simply sent it via your badge? I need as many of my men down there on the field as possible.” Usually, his disapproving tone would have had a soldier shaking in his boots, but the words held no bite. In fact, his reprimand sounded almost conversational, and he realized with chagrin that I-6 always had a way of slipping beneath his rigid exterior. “But all right. What do you have for me, I-6?”

“Something I found in finance, sir.”

Intriguing. “Explain.”

Turning to face the screens, I-6 raised his hands and paused with a backward glance. “May I?” At the Captain’s perfunctory nod, he moved with a flourish, taking command of the digital displays like a conductor before an orchestra. The screens dipped and rose like notes on a music score as I-6 rearranged them in search of a particular monitor.

Again safe from I-6’s gaze, the Captain let his eyes follow the line of his back and the gentle curve of his buttocks beneath his uniform. When the petite Morty shifted on his feet, drawing the fabric tighter across his bottom, the Captain buried his involuntary moan into his tumbler, and he took another sip.

“Here.” I-6 zoomed in on a monitor displaying strings of numbers alongside monetary amounts—transaction records of high-ranking Citadel personnel. “A SECURIGRID card was used, sir, at exactly 06:13 in the Rickhina neighborhood.”

The Captain skimmed the list for the transaction in question until he found the corresponding cardholder’s official title. “And what does the Citadel Attorney General have to do with anything?”

“That’s just it, sir. It was his card, but it wasn’t him. He’s been off-station for the past two months, meaning—”

“Someone else is using his card?” In a space station occupied by countless doppelgangers, Ricks guarded their individuality ruthlessly, making the felony of identity theft almost unheard of.
“Not just anyone. My guess is it’s the X-Rick.” I-6 pointed to the timestamp by the transaction. “The card was used within hours of his disappearance from the high-roller suite.”

“Any activity since?”

Without needing further instruction, I-6 next brought up the card’s recent history which confirmed the Captain’s suspicions. Of course it wouldn’t be so easy as simply following a trail of breadcrumbs to their target, but this was still their first piece of real evidence since the start of the investigation.

He always could count on I-6 to deliver him a miracle.

“Well done, I-6. Send all nearby units to that location—” He reached across the desk for a digital map of the Citadel, using a stray report as a coaster. “—and get any eyewitness statements you can.”

I-6 laid his hand over the face of the map and pulled it slowly out of the Captain’s grasp. “Already on it, sir,” he said softly.

When the Captain looked up, he found I-6 disquietingly close, his umber eyes radiating confidence and a little something else that the Captain couldn’t quite place but that had his heart racing all the same.

“I-is that so.” The Captain regarded him for a moment, trying to remember if I-6 had always been this...brazen. It wasn’t an entirely unpleasant look for him, and the Captain scolded his heart for giving a disgraceful thump in his chest.

“Sir, if I might be so bold.” I-6 spoke slowly, eyes now flitting between the Captain and the glass on the desk. “I’d like to take you up on that offer for a drink. After all,” he added with a smile, “we have good reason to celebrate tonight.”

Despite himself, an incredulous grin quirked the Captain’s lips, and he was already reaching for the spare glass in the bottom drawer. “Hope you take your whiskey neat.” Uncapping the bottle, he poured a finger’s worth.

I-6 took the offered glass with an appreciative nod. “I’m not particular, sir.” An alluring scent wafted into the Captain’s nose as I-6 leaned over his desk, his glass extended in the air. “Cheers, sir, to the case.”

“To the case.” Their glasses clinked chummily, and the Captain nestled back into his seat with a content smile and another sip. Yes. This. This was just what he’d needed. A glass in hand, a break in the case, and his most trusted soldier by his side. With fondness soothing his nerves, he downed another mouthful and watched I-6 perch himself atop the desk, his own glass cradled in his lap, untouched.

“Really, I-6,” he began, his mind and body feeling looser than they had in weeks. “What would I do without you? Until you came in, the investigation was dead in the water. Riq will be breathing down my neck for an update any minute now, and yours is the first bit of good news I’ve had.”

I-6’s cheeks looked redder than before, even though the same finger’s worth of alcohol still sat in his glass. “What can I say? I was trained by the best, sir.” He forced a chuckle and fiddled with his glass again. “But you should give yourself more credit. Considering the circumstances, you’ve been able to keep the investigation pretty well on track.”

“Investigation.” The Captain scoffed at the word. “More like manhunt.”

I-6 looked away, giving the Captain a handsome view of his profile. Above the stifling collar of his
uniform, his jugular thrummed, and the Captain suddenly felt compelled to run his thumb over that pulse, if only to feel the bold reminder that I-6 was still very much a living thing. A living thing with needs.

_Jesus, Captain, get your head out of the gutter!_

I-6 was the epitome of a good soldier, his ever-reliable equal, not that sinful satyr that he fantasized of bedding. Besides, if I-6 ever caught on to his more fiendish cravings...

He frowned into his glass. Well, no point in ruining a perfectly good thing.

Looking up again, he followed I-6’s gaze to one monitor tucked away in the corner. It swayed faintly from side to side like a hypnotist's pocketwatch, and the Captain narrowed his eyes to make out the footage displayed within. It was focused on a lone Eun-Rick who was steadily making his way through the back alleys of the Celestial Quarter.

Unlike the brash Mama Eun-Rick who led them, the three Eun-Ricks of the Citadel were strange creatures, reticent and mysterious, and the Captain always found himself on edge around them. When not in the company of The One, the Eun-Ricks traveled with their own kind, so it was especially strange to see one walking in public alone.

As the Captain watched on, the Eun-Rick vanished around a corner, a Rick and scrawny, mohawked Morty trailing not too far behind him. Common-Ricks were forbidden from interacting with Eun-Ricks, yet, curiously enough, the Rick and Morty almost seemed to be following—

“How did it come to this?”

The unexpected question had the Captain nearly choking on his drink. He sputtered, “Hm? C-come to what now?”

I-6 made a vague gesture to the floating screens, inadvertently switching one to sleep mode. The sterile blue display was swiftly replaced by a soothing screensaver of undulating red ribbons that glowed pleasantly on his face. “All this, all this manpower...for what? An X-Rick?” He made a face. “Doesn’t it seem a bit extreme?”

“Mind the screens, I-6. You know they can be touchy,” the Captain scolded lightly before returning the display to its original status. “In any case, I agree. I was hoping I’d be finished with the X-Rick the first time around. But you know how Riq can get. So—so—”

“Passionate?” I-6 finished for him with a smirk.

It was a running joke between them, the delicate art of critiquing the Council without actually saying anything that could be considered slander. Euphemisms were used in place of what they both knew the other was thinking, but the truth hidden at their core still made the Captain wrinkle his nose.

There was a time when he’d genuinely respected Riq IV. The Council head had promised to bring order to what was otherwise a chaotic multiverse. Ricks, like weapons of mass destruction, needed someone like Riq to keep them in line and man the launch button.

From his position as the Captain of the Guard, he watched with pride as the Citadel thrived under Riq’s exacting rule. A shining example of Rickhood, Riq could do no wrong.

However, that original respect had slowly morphed into a wary distrust. With every inane command that Riq doled out over the past few years, the Captain’s misgivings about their “eminent leader” grew bolder.
“He’s always been passionate, but lately—” *It’s been borderline manic.* “Take a look at the order that came in and tell me something doesn’t add up.” He rooted through the mess of documents on his desk until he found the original arrest warrant. At the bottom of the one-sentence brief sat Riq’s solitary signature, the other five lines left conspicuously blank.

I-6 lifted his eyebrows at it. “So Riq’s made the X-Rick his own personal project now?”

“This isn’t the first time Riq’s acted independently. He’s snuck orders past the rest of the Council before, but I’ve never seen such blatant disregard for basic protocol.” He smacked the papers with the back of his hand in disgust before passing them to I-6. “Somehow or other, the X-Rick has managed to push all of Riq’s buttons.”

Emotions had no place in his line of work, and he abhorred the thought that his highest superior would possibly act on something so fickle and unstable. The Citadel was supposed to represent stability, logic, and the whole being greater than all its parts. But Riq’s personal vendettas clashed with that like a discordant note in a symphony.

Flipping through the pages, I-6 pursed his lips into a pout. “No reports of violence, theft, or even public indecency. Aside from that one incident with his funds, the X-Rick’s barely done anythi—oh.” He stopped short, eyes coming to rest on two particular data entries. “He participated in the auction a second time. And won.” There was a tactful pause before, “May I ask what happened that night?”

For obvious reasons, Guard Mortys were forbidden from attending the after-hours auction, leaving the Captain with the task of trying to gauge how much he could indulge I-6. Granted, last week’s auction had fallen outside of the normal parameters for several reasons, not the least of which had been Mama Eun-Rick’s personal attendance. In fact, the request for increased security had also been through *her* on behalf of the Council, rather than Façade, and given her close association with Riq, the Captain had the feeling that something bigger was brewing.

He looked down into his glass before answering. “Yes, the X-Rick won, but it was almost as though they were expecting him to.”

“How do you figure that, sir?”

“Façade security usually only requires five men. That night, we had to provide three times that amount at the Council’s request. And on the very same night the X-Rick decides to make a reappearance. After how his first auction ended, I didn’t think he’d bother showing up again, but Façade’s personnel had evidently prepared for it.” He sat forward, his hands tense and restless as though trying to wrestle his conjectures into some coherent form. “And the auction itself was—” The X-Rick being dragged to the front, getting the best seat in the house; the prolonged Epiphany demonstration; the short-lived bidding war started by the usually tenacious C-165. From start to finish, the auction hadn’t even lasted 20 minutes. “Frankly, the whole thing felt too rehearsed, too staged.”

“Or perhaps just rigged.” Another wave of I-6’s hand, and another monitor went down.

The Captain switched the red screen back to blue again with a huff. “That’s what I don’t understand. Why would Riq go through all the trouble of making sure the X-Rick won safe and sound, only to turn around and send out an order for his arrest?”

“Maybe Riq has no need for him anymore.”

“Like the ‘fearless leader’ of the Council of Ricks could have any need for an X-Rick in the first
“Perhaps it’s not what the X-Rick could do for Riq—” I-6 turned to face the Captain. “—but for someone else.”

“Exactly who else did you have in mind?”

I-6 only hung his head, eyes fixed on the ground as though he were trying to find his next words in the carpet pattern. The Captain waited, mildly perplexed, until I-6 raised his face again, eyes half-lidded as he whispered, “I can’t say His name.”

Unease darkened the Captain’s face like a storm cloud. The conversation was beginning to take a dangerous turn, and even though he enjoyed the occasional bitching session about their eccentric employer, to even broach the subject of The One was a whole other matter.

“Careful, I-6. That kind of talk could be considered treason.”

I-6 looked pointedly at the glass in the Captain’s hand, a sly grin lifting his lips. “Any more treasonous than the Captain of the Guard drinking on the job?”

To that, the Captain had no retort. He smirked at I-6’s audacity. Perhaps he’d taught the Morty a few more things during his training than he’d intended, including the art of exploitation. While I-6’s precociousness impressed him on some level, the Captain was still his superior, and he still had a duty to keep his men safe—sometimes even from themselves. He couldn’t risk where this conversation could lead if allowed to continue unchecked.

“All right, I-6,” he said smartly, standing to dump his glass’s contents into the potted plant in the corner. “That’s enough gossip for one evening. It’s time we got back to the case, and if you have nothing further to report—” The implication went unsaid, but the Captain silently prayed that they wouldn’t have to part on such an unsavory note.

“As a matter of fact, Captain, I do have one more thing.”

Approving smile already in place, the Captain looked back with a crisp “That’s more like it.”

I-6 put down his glass and began sweeping his hands over the floating wall of screens once more, effortlessly pushing them aside to find the video feed he was searching for. By the time the Captain settled himself in his seat again, the monitors were arranged in a radial burst that enveloped his desk, curving overhead and around the sides like the petals of some massive, azure lotus.

Unsure of what to make of the curiously artistic expression, the Captain looked down and began organizing papers, if only to further impress upon I-6 the fact that he was ready to resume his role as commanding officer. “Well, don’t keep me in suspense, I-6. If you have something, then let’s hear it.”

“Oh, of course, sir.” I-6’s sultry voice made the Captain’s ears perk with interest, and when he looked up at him, his poise crumbled magnificently.

The top button of I-6’s uniform was undone, a noticeable blush creeping up his neck to color his cheeks, obvious even against the blue tinge of the screens around them. And the look I-6 was giving him—

He buried his face in a random report he’d picked up, flipping through the pages without reading the text. He coughed, daring a glance up. “I-6, your uniform. It’s not to code.”
“Oh?” I-6 looked down at himself and touched his fingertips to his collar where the brass button lay open. “You’re right.” He sounded whimsical as he slipped his fingers into the opening and down. Another button popped open. “I suppose I’m feeling a little...overwarm, sir.”

The Captain nearly choked at the sliver of olive skin that peeked out from beneath the uniform. “Y-you know the protocol. If required, a soldier may remove his gloves in order to regulate his body—” He swallowed. “Body temperature.”

“Yes, sir,” I-6 murmured, tugging off the tips of his gloves with his teeth. One by one, he freed his fingers then dropped the discarded gloves on the desk. His collar, however, remained open. “Remember how I said I’d followed up with the location of that unauthorized SECURIGRID transaction?” I-6 continued casually. “It was a barbershop, of all places.”

“Odd time to want to get a haircut.” The Captain’s chuckle was short and mirthless, a pathetic attempt to distract himself from the seduction of I-6’s movements.

With a flick of his finger, I-6 summoned the monitor nestled in the heart of the flower to hover in front of the Captain. The display showed a small business’s exterior, a gaping hole where its front window once stood and large shards of glass littering the ground. A janitor was sweeping the mess into a bin.

“The barber reported the vandalism was the work of Mortys—” This made the Captain huff a laugh, but I-6 continued on, unfazed. “Mortys that had suddenly become, in his own words, insurgent.”

“I see. We’ll make a note of it in my next report.” The Captain shifted in his seat, tasting a breakthrough and anxious to reach the end of this bothersome case. Pulling the display closer for better inspection, he nearly missed it when the entire half of the monitor flower shifted to red beneath I-6’s hands. “I-6, w-what are you doing?” He struggled to keep the sternness in his voice even as the rest of the petals glowed crimson, painting the room in an undeniably sensual aura.

“You’ll want your full attention for this, sir,” I-6 said by way of explanation. “According to our security cameras, the incident occurred at 06:13, just seconds after the X-Rick’s transaction was made within the shop.” The scarlet hue lit I-6’s hair on fire as he walked slowly around the desk, fingertips dragging across its surface. “And it turns out the X-Rick wasn’t alone. He had a Morty with him.”

“A Morty?” It was no wonder they’d been hitting nothing but dead ends; they’d been too busy targeting Morty-less Ricks. “Do we have any identification on him?”

“The barber said he gave the dimension of P-082. And before you ask, yes, I’ve already looked into it, and it doesn’t check out.”

“Well, I’ll be damned. At least we can add possession of an unregistered Morty to the X-Rick’s record.” Some part of the Captain was actually relieved to have a legitimate reason to carry through with the arrest now. It somehow made the whole ordeal less reprehensible.

“But that’s not even the best part.” I-6’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone as he leaned in close. Heart beginning to pound, the Captain kept his gaze fixed on the papers gripped a little too tightly in his hands. Normally, he wouldn’t have stood for such a blatant invasion of his personal space, but the scent coming off of I-6 was addling his brain even worse than the whiskey had.

“A-and what is that?”

God, he felt practically drunk on it.
I-6 sounded as though he were recounting a pleasant dream rather than a key piece of evidence. “The barber nicks the Morty with a razor and gets the brightest idea he’s had in ages.” His breath blew hot over the Captain’s ear as he dragged out the next word. “Eu-re-ka.”

The Captain froze, the reports falling forgotten from his hands. An Epiphany? Suddenly, he was all too aware of I-6’s body heat pressed against his side, his hand sliding up his arm. There was something wrong with this picture, something he had to stop before it went too far. His head was spinning.

I-6 stepped forward, nudging the Captain’s legs apart with his knee to stand between his thighs. The action was so effortless, so dominating, it shook the Captain to his core, and another emotion soared unbidden to the forefront of his senses, the very same emotion that darkened I-6’s eyes: desire.

“Captain.” I-6 leaned down, hands braced over the Captain’s white-knuckled grip. “Captain,” he said again, his breath ghosting over his lips and making them tingle as though he’d just downed a shot of vodka.

Nothing seemed real, and for a moment the Captain wondered if he had perhaps never awoken from last night’s wet dream. Maybe he was still asleep at his desk. Maybe it was merely another fantasy that was now tilting his head up with a finger beneath his chin, that was whispering his title like the refrain to some secret hymn. His hands twitched off the armrests, already reaching, already poised to receive him. Just one more inch, and he could claim those lips.

“Why would you keep Him from us?” I-6 whispered.

And then the penny dropped.

Before I-6 could close the distance, the Captain burst out of his seat with a suddenness that surprised them both. His military training took over as he grabbed I-6 by the throat with one hand, hefted him into the air, and pinned him down onto the desk in one fluid arc. It jostled the desk violently, knocking the whiskey bottle and glasses onto the carpet with a hollow thud.

I-6 grunted as the wind was knocked from his lungs. His hands flew up to where the Captain held him, but instead of trying to pry him off, he was stroking up his wrists and arms, brushing his chest with the tips of his fingers. He eyed the Captain’s lips hungrily as he huffed around his spasming diaphragm.

The Captain raked his eyes over I-6, careful not to focus on the way he writhed suggestively. Elevated body temperature, dilated pupils, unusual behavior—the signs were all there.

“You—you saw The One.” The Captain’s voice trembled nearly as badly as his hands. “You’ve been exposed.”

“Yes. I saw Him,” I-6 wheezed, steadily regaining his breath. “And He was—He was incredible. Oh, Captain.” He sounded halfway delirious. “If only you knew what I now understand. He showed me—showed me the truth!”

For a moment, the Captain only stared agape at him. It felt as if the floor had crumbled to dust beneath his feet, his reality dashed apart at the thought that I-6—his I-6 had been implicated like this.

He took a deep breath through his nose, marshaling his emotions once more and giving himself over to the Code. “Morty Smith of I-006—”

“Captain, no.” I-6 struggled against his hold.
“—you are hereby to be detained—”

“Don’t do this,” he begged, his eyes glassy.

“—in quarantine until the appointed time—” The Captain paused to look away. “Fuck,” he growled, abruptly flipping I-6 over onto his stomach. Bringing I-6’s arms back behind him, he gripped them in one large hand as he unhooked a pair of electromagnetic handcuffs from his belt. “Until the appointed time where you will be—be deemed unfit to continue your post. At that time, you will then—” Damn it. He hadn’t even batted an eye with the other Guard Mortys he’d lost, but he could barely make it through I-6’s sentencing without feeling as though his heart were being mangled.

Beneath him, I-6 was still resisting, his mewling voice threatening to sabotage the Captain’s efforts. If he stopped with the arrest now, he knew he’d never be able to go through with it. A small concert of dissenting voices within him echoed I-6’s pleas, rallying for him to reconsider, but it was quickly silenced as he slapped the manacles onto I-6’s wrists with a resounding snap.

I-6 gasped and wriggled futilely in his bindings. “Captain, no. You know what they’ll do to me. I-I’ll never see you again.”

I-6 would, in fact, never see anyone again. Affected Mortys were quickly terminated after entering detention. The Captain knew what awaited I-6 if he turned him in, and his stomach gave a vicious lurch to think that he would be the one to sentence him to his death.

The Code snarled at him to do what needed to be done, and he bent over to frisk the small body, all apathy and martial precision. He murmured bitterly by I-6’s ear, “You’ve been compromised, I-6. I-I can’t just—damn it!” He looked away. “You know I have to do this.”

“But, Captain, you don’t. You don’t have to do any of this. That’s what He taught me.” I-6 gave another airy gasp as the Captain’s hands swept down the sides of his legs to undo the holster strapped to one thigh. “He taught me that we can have anything we want. W-we just need to reach out and take it.” I-6 squirmed on the desk, managing to rub his ass against the front of the Captain’s slacks.

His hands stuttered in their frisking. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple, and he realized that he was breathing unnecessarily hard.

“I’m done with denying myself what I want,” I-6 whispered.

His fingers, which had been feeling I-6’s pockets for contraband, suddenly came across a small, hard object. He swallowed thickly and asked, “And w-what is it that you want?” as he removed the item.

“Simple.” I-6 looked plaintively back up at him. “It’s you.”

He opened his hand to reveal a small bottle of lube. His heart was in his throat in a second, and he curled over like a gentle question mark, pressing his forehead between I-6’s shoulder blades with a groan. He slammed the bottle on the desk. Unbe-fucking-lievable.

“What are you doing to me?” he gritted out against I-6’s back.

He opened his hand to reveal a small bottle of lube. His heart was in his throat in a second, and he curled over like a gentle question mark, pressing his forehead between I-6’s shoulder blades with a groan. He slammed the bottle on the desk. Unbe-fucking-lievable.

“What are you doing to me?” he gritted out against I-6’s back.

He screwed his eyes shut, trying to block out the temptation, but I-6’s voice just came clearer. Soft as silk and hot as magma, the words dripped like honey in his ear:

“I’m helping you, Captain, helping you reach your true potential. You’ve been serving the wrong masters, Captain. We all have. These masters only celebrate pain and control. But with The One—” Tears now flowed freely to wet the reports beneath his cheek. “—we can have our wildest dreams.”
Wildest dreams? the Captain repeated to himself, finding the enthralling words fitting snugly on his mind’s tongue. Before, he’d have laughed at the notion, but now he was only mesmerized by the euphoric look that had taken over I-6’s features, suddenly wanting a taste of it himself.

What I-6 was offering was mutiny in its purest form. As a soldier, he balked at it, refusing to turn his back on his life’s mission.

But there was another part of him—the neglected, touch-starved part of him—that latched onto the hope that there could be more than this. More than serving a Council that was steadily dragging the once glorious Citadel into decay. More than having to carry out senseless orders to fulfill some madman’s obsession.

More than hoarding away his rare indulgences.

More than denying his heart’s desire.

His stiff shoulders buckled before finally dropping, letting the suffocating regiment of order that governed his life roll off of him like a coat of oil. With a throaty hum, he dragged his hands down I-6’s back until they came to rest on the manacles around his wrists.

Incredible. I-6 was the one in chains, and yet it was the Captain at his mercy. Before he could stop himself, he gave an experimental tilt of his hips, his erection pressing between I-6’s ass cheeks while he clutched his wrists for leverage. I-6 responded instantly, murmuring a string of encouragement as he shifted back to meet him.

It was better than any dream, and his cock felt perfectly at home along the cleft of I-6’s pert, little ass. Without his willing it, he fell into a rhythm, slowly running his length again and again between those clothed mounds.

Only partially registering the fact that he was dry-humping one of his unit leaders, he said slowly, “Let’s say I—I let you go.” He licked his lips. “What would you do then?”

The answer was immediate. “I would serve you, Captain.” Arousal flared in the Captain’s stomach at the double entendre. “I would be everything that you wanted.” He looked back pleadingly at him.

What he wanted? What he wanted was right here in front of him, I-6 willing and yearning for him. In that moment, the Code’s last resilient grip on him failed. With a final, emphatic groan, he deactivated the manacles and chucked them aside. Drawing a surprised squeak from I-6, he flipped him over again, pausing only long enough to drink in the sight of him.

His disheveled uniform was rucked up to reveal the tawny skin of his lean belly, chest fluttering with each anxious breath. His hair was tousled; his eyes, black with arousal. This was nothing like the other compromised Mortys he’d seen. After being exposed to The One, they became unruly, crazed. But I-6 only looked...breathtaking.

“That’s right, Captain,” I-6 purred, tearing at his own uniform. The brass buttons snapped open one after another, leading the Captain’s eyes lower until they rested on the obvious bulge in his trousers. “This is what you always wanted, isn’t it?”

Rather than answer, the Captain growled I-6’s name, grabbing for him desperately. He wrenched off his gloves, unable to get enough of the feel of the smaller body against him. He dragged his lips along the pliant flesh of his neck, suckling and biting like he could devour him on the spot.

I-6 keened, arching off the desk and offering up his throat to the Captain’s ravenous tongue.
Knocking his cap off, he grabbed fistfuls of his hair and mewled a chain of “yes, yes, yes.”

The Captain was panting by the time he reached I-6’s mouth, recognizing but not caring that he probably looked as wrecked as he felt. His own confined erection twitched and jumped against I-6’s where it was sandwiched between them. I-6 gave an eager whine when he finally crushed their mouths together. Small, soft lips bloomed beneath the kiss, welcoming the Captain to dive into that sweet wetness with his tongue.

I-6 tasted of minty toothpaste and something distinctly himself, undefinable. It reminded the Captain of a mojito, and he wanted nothing more than to down him as if he were the last drink in the Citadel.

The hardy unit leader could give just as well as he could take, his tongue like a rapier fit for parrying the Captain’s advances. His hands were frantic, stroking up his chest to slide around to his back and nape. He circled his legs around the Captain’s hips, grinding his erection against him, his want manifested shamelessly as rigid heat.

How long? How long had he been wanting this? Wanting this and yet never saying anything? God, he’d been such a fucking coward.

As he ravaged I-6’s mouth, he realized all too keenly just how sublime this was. Never before had he seen so much beauty in the spontaneous, the unexpected, the off-pitch—life in all its glorious imperfection. For all that the Captain loved order, if it meant missing out on this, order could go and fuck itself.

“Yesss,” I-6 drew back to hiss. “Do you know—do you know how long I’ve wanted this? W-wanted you?” He gasped into his ear, letting the Captain grunt and mouth at him like a beast in heat. Each word that met his ears stoked the fire within him until he was blind with need.

“Jesus Christ, I-6,” the Captain panted. “If you keep this up—” It was getting hard to form sentences, every ounce of his concentration focused on prolonging the thrill that was blossoming rapidly in his core. Another wicked grind against his hard-on, and the Captain tore himself off of I-6 to gasp.

“No! Not already!”

But his pent-up need, held captive for so long, was already converging on his cock, demanding release. With a full-body quake that had every muscle contracting to the point of soreness, he stiffened and ground his hips against the small body beneath him as he stumbled over his orgasm. He thrust jerkily once, twice, three times, spilling his seed and making a mess of his trousers.

Knees buckling, he wilted over I-6 with a long, choked sob. For a moment, there was only the crashing beat of his heart in his head, just as quick as the rat-a-tat-tat beneath his cheek, as he slowly descended back to earth.

The soothing heat and slow strokes of I-6’s hands down his back invited him to stay in this cozy tranquility, untouchable and removed.

But his afterglow was cut short, humiliation hot on the heels of his climax. He buried his face in I-6’s chest, trying to get both his breathing and dignity back into some semblance of control.

“I—I’m sor—” The apology was on his tongue before he knew what he was saying, and he smothered the rest of it with an incoherent grumble. “Fuck.” He hoisted himself up, feeling wobbly and not all there. When I-6 put his hand to his chest, fingers splayed over his heart, he was certain it was to push him away, disgusted to see his commanding officer succumb to his baser needs like an animal.
But, instead, I-6’s fingers were curling into his lapels to reel him in.

I-6 pressed close to him, holding his face and cooing sweet praises in his ear, telling him that he did beautifully, that he was perfect. With each kiss, he gently prodded the Captain backward until the backs of his knees made contact with the chair. Too worn to resist, he collapsed heavily into it, I-6 following after to climb onto his lap.

“How—how can you—” he mumbled distractedly, too focused on the feel of I-6’s lips where they pressed chaste kisses to the corner of his mouth. Whenever he tried to follow, I-6 always remained an inch out of reach, leaving the Captain feeling simultaneously lost yet eager for guidance.

“My Captain.” I-6 grabbed the back of the seat for leverage as he straddled his hips. He placed another kiss on his temple. “This is just how I want to see you.” His brow. “This is who you’re meant to be.” His cheek. “They’ve made you deny yourself long enough.” He reached for the Captain’s jacket and began skillfully unfastening the buttons while the Captain sat, entranced. “The Council—they tell us that obedience is all that matters.” With the first three buttons undone, I-6 paused to kiss the Captain’s bare chest, his breath making the dusting of gray hairs shiver. “But they’re wrong. That is why they’ll never really know His true power. The Council are like children with a match.” He was shaking his head. “So stupid, reckless.”

“I-6, what are you—?” the Captain said, witless and light. He still felt partly as though he were in a dream, as though he were no longer in control of himself.

Normally, such vulnerability would have been repulsive, but instead it felt—he watched in a daze as I-6 delicately removed his badge from his lapel and tossed it over his shoulder—liberating. Things like “duty” and “obligation” fell away like flotsam beneath the beating of a ceaseless wave. With every swell and crash of the heaving force that was I-6, his immaculately constructed persona retreated in favor of this new, brilliant reality.

“We’ll never be who we’re meant to be, Captain, until we’re free. And He’ll take us there.”

“You mean the—The One?”

I-6 moaned as though the name alone were an erogenous zone that had been stimulated. And the Captain would’ve given anything to hear it again. He placed his hands on I-6’s thighs, his thumbs grazing his erection.

“Tell me. What does The One do?”

Another provocative moan dripped from I-6 before he answered. “He is desire. He is joy incarnate. He wants us all to reach our—our enlightenment.” His hips gave an involuntary twitch when the Captain cupped him through his pants. “But enlightenment isn’t found in rules or order.”

The heat radiating from I-6’s cock parched the Captain’s throat, and he swallowed. It fit like a small bird in his palm, thrumming with a pulse of its own. “Where is it found, then?”

“Pleasure.” I-6’s voice snagged on a crack in his voice, and he grabbed the Captain’s face to kiss him fiercely. He rose up onto his knees, pressing himself as close as he could, and the Captain enveloped him with a strong, two-armed embrace.

“I-6, I-6.” It was all he could think to say. But the arbitrary combination of letter and number didn’t do it justice, and his lover was far too precious to go by the same name as the countless other Mortys. Drunk on the moniker that he’d called him in his dreams, he felt his tongue forming the word on its own, the syllables blending together to birth something entirely new: “Isyx.”
Isyx smiled into the kiss and crooned, “Thank you, my Captain. It’s beautiful.”

Cocooned in the sultry, red glow of the lotus and sequestered away from the demands of the Citadel, time passed in a seamless sequence of pleasure the rest of that night, moments measured only in heartbeats and gasps.

Somewhere in a corner of the room, his badge lay abandoned, left to buzz like some tiresome gnat with the panicky outcries of the Guard Ricks. But it could wait. Everything could wait while the Captain basked in the glory that was his lover—comrade turned companion in every meaning of the word.

Isyx lived up to his promise and served the Captain well, worshipping him and being worshipped in return until the two knew each other more intimately than they’d ever known any other being. Every kiss, every embrace, long overdue, carried with it a promise of a new beginning with their love as the only guiding force.

All the while, Isyx whispered into the Captain’s ears teachings of The One True Morty—his journey, his purpose, and his grand design. He would replace the self-destructive dictators to serve as a benevolent savior, returning the Citadel to its former grandeur.

Through Isyx’s words, the Captain finally saw the truth in its many facets like a perfectly cut diamond, as beautiful as it was sharp. And he knew with absolute clarity that he would devote himself to this new creed, trading in his false idolatry to bring the child king to his rightful throne. It was a mission he would carry out with pride.

~~*~~

Write, right.

Funny how the English language allowed homophones to exist, as though they were just innocent, little things intended to trip up schoolchildren. Get one wrong, lose a few points on a pop quiz. Big whoop.

No, know.

No one really thought they were of any concern. In fact, they were touted as one of the oldest and most widely accepted forms of humor—puns. “Nice to meat you,” goes the butcher, and everyone enjoys a good round of belly laughs.

Aye, eye.

No harm done, and no one loses an eye. Context alone could dispel any possible misunderstandings, right? After all, how often did someone pick up a book on fairy tails by mistake? Or believe that the weather forecast actually called for reign?

A slight slip-up in spelling, and you could find yourself with an entirely different meaning—some harmless, some just embarrassing.

And some that could wipe out an entire population of 100,000 strong.

Whine, wine.

Mama Eun-Rick hadn’t touched her glass of ruby port on the bedside table as she pored over the Book of Morty in her lap. Bundled up in a plush, white bathrobe over her silk chemise, she was
intent on spending the rest of her evening in bed, reviewing her latest annotations.

She was currently occupied by one passage that had been circled and highlighted several times over, warping the page horrifically and making the text bleed.

*Once awakened, The One True Morty shall raze the Citadel.*

The word “raze” had been heavily underlined in red with the word “raise” written above it. At some later point in time, the word had been scratched out and a pair of blue question marks scrawled after it. Above that, “RAZE” was written yet again where it intended to stay.

This was not an anomaly. Throughout her years of interpreting the book, Mama Eun-Rick had accumulated nearly a dozen similar instances where homophones were the one thing standing between an accurate reading and utter disaster.

She narrowed her eyes at the page, muttering something under her breath about how Mortys were going to be the death of her.

The half-dead Morty who had first written the book was quite the accomplished author, Mama Eun-Rick had to admit. He had written hundreds of pages of grandiloquent text taking the form of poems and narratives, parables and allegories. But even he had one major flaw that caused Mama Eun-Rick’s acid reflux to act up.

He was an atrocious speller.

It had begun simply enough. An “e” forgotten in the middle of the word “forsee.” A silly “k” in “panik.” They were mistakes any child would make and, for the most part, were easy enough to decipher. It was when these errors began to alter entire meanings that Mama Eun-Rick began to worry.

*Council, counsel.*

Riq had not been so understanding whenever she’d had to come running into the Council Chamber to rectify a misreading thanks to an inopportune typo. He was already short on patience, and when it came to matters regarding The One, he was particularly unforgiving. Her last visit was a harsh reminder of that.

She absentmindedly ran a hand over the side of her neck where his fingers had pressed a half-ring of bruises into her skin.

“Fucking lunatic,” she cursed bitterly, finally taking a sip of her wine. Blackberry and cinnamon burst along her tongue, temporarily lifting the drudgery that came with studying the book. It was by no means an uplifting read, made all the more dreary by the fact that her livelihood hinged on its enigmatic scriptures.

*Dissent, descent.*

The very message of the Book of Morty had taken on a more sinister tone than she’d first realized. What had begun as a simple account of how The One True Morty came to be, now seemed more and more to tell a different story—a story of great upheaval, revolution, and an end of times. Nestled between the lessons for every good Morty to follow were play-by-plays of how Ricks would pay for their abuses. They would pay *dearly*.

Mama Eun-Rick swallowed another mouthful of the sweet wine, eyes never leaving the page as she reached out to place the glass back on the nightstand. She miscalculated the distance, however, and
the glass toppled over the edge to spill onto the floor.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” she huffed, jumping out of bed. Too impatient to run to the bathroom for towels, she shrugged her bathrobe off and began to dab hastily at the puddle, quickly staining the fabric red. After a few minutes, she realized the effort was futile. Now both the carpet and her favorite robe were ruined.

_Idle, idol._

The Citadel was fucked. She knew it as clearly as she knew her own reflection, her suspicions cemented by the most recent passages she’d read. The book painted a daunting picture for the Council and all who served under their nefarious rule.

The events of the book were coming to fruition faster than she could keep up with. The X-Rick, the night of the second auction, Riq’s premature reunion with The One. It was all just as the book had foretold, right down to Riq stupidly hacking off the kid’s hair.

“Why do I even try anymore?” Didn’t Riq realize he was rushing The One right along his destined path? And now they were all going to suffer for his shortsightedness.

For a time, Mama Eun-Rick thought she could prevent it—she’d managed this much, and she was just a stripper with an eye for riddles—but they were well past the point of no return. If she tried to clean up the mess when the proverbial hit the fan, she’d only end up covered in shit.

She threw the soiled robe to the floor and fumed at the blood-red stain on the carpet, fists clenched. There was no point in playing the martyr anymore. The Citadel was a sinking ship, and Mama Eun-Rick knew that there was only one way to survive a sinking ship. After all, she hadn't gotten this far on integrity alone.

Suddenly, a melodious chime broke through the tension of the room followed by a digitized feminine voice. “You have a guest.”

“Of all the—” She whirled on the door with a close-mouthed shriek. Now was not the time for an uninvited guest—a whiny Eun-Rick, no doubt—and she flung the door open, ready to throttle him where he stood.

She was met, instead, by Auctioneer Rick.

_Wring, ring._

“R-Riri!” she sputtered as he stared dumbfounded at her. That’s when she realized she was only wearing her slinky chemise and not a spot of makeup on.

Her hands immediately flew to cover her chest where a patch of sheer material revealed her—well, nothing. Realizing that her sense of humility was misplaced, Mama Eun-Rick shifted on her feet and crossed her arms defiantly over her chest.

Auctioneer Rick only blinked and lifted his lips in a beguiling smile. “Chère Rickochet, vous êtes ravissante, comme d'habitude. Forgive me for dropping by at such a late hour. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

She tried to muster her usual, impertinent scowl, but instead found herself glancing up bashfully at Auctioneer Rick. Too shy to look him in the face, her eyes flitted over his manly chin, broad chest, and cocky tilt of his hips.
“N-no, I was just—” She waved behind herself vaguely. “Just had a little trouble with the— with the wine.”

Auctioneer Rick propped his forearm on the doorframe, peering into her room and nodding as if he’d known that was the case all along.

Why she was even telling him all this instead of telling him off puzzled her, but suddenly she felt an inexplicable desire to stay near him, enthralled rather than annoyed as she usually was. With his gaze directed elsewhere, she took the opportunity to look him over.

There was something different about Auctioneer Rick tonight, and Mama Eun-Rick knew very well it was more than just the absence of his signature auctioneer’s mantle. There was a decidedly alluring shift in his overall demeanor, though she couldn’t quite pin down what accounted for the change.

Whatever it was, it reminded her of the fantasy that had gripped her the night before, and she felt her body temperature rise despite the fact that she was standing in her nightie, barefoot at the door.

“—get on your knees.”

She snapped back to attention, eyes wide. “W-what?”

“I said, if you want to get that stain out, you’ll really have to get on your knees.” Auctioneer Rick was gesturing to the mess by the bedside.

“Oh. Oh, that. I-I’ve got it covered. Don’t worry about it.” She cleared her throat. “What about you? Don’t you have tomorrow’s silly auction to prepare for?”

His smile only faltered momentarily when he glanced down at her neck, and she quickly cupped her hand over the fresh bruises, pretending to rub at a stiff muscle. When he spoke again, it was sprightly and brisk. “I realized that’s not really my scene anymore. Thought I’d take some time away.”

Now, that was surprising. “Really.” She readjusted her arms around herself, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe and recognizing that the pose now had her partially tucked beneath his arm. It was warm there, and she felt something begin to unravel inside her, loose and delightful. “And what’ll you be doing with yourself?”

He looked away, pursing his lips. “Not sure yet. Might do some traveling. I hear Kurtu is nice this time of year.”

“You don’t say. Kurtu?” Mama Eun-Rick replied, tilting her head demurely.

Red tinted Auctioneer Rick’s ears, and he coughed politely before speaking. “Anyway, assez parlé de moi. I came to ask if you might like to go out and grab a drink with me. I know a fabulous little wine bar that you’d enjoy.”

She blinked at him. How many times had she heard the same invitation before? And how many times had she refused? But somehow this time was different. There was no showy bow. No flashy gift. Just Riri in all his simple, endearing charm.

Misinterpreting her hesitation as a silent decline, Auctioneer Rick rambled on, already drawing himself away. “Although I realize you’ve still got the rest of your wine to enjoy. Right. Say no more. It was silly of me to even ask.”

Mama Eun-Rick looked down at her feet, voice small. “I’m not really in the mood to go out tonight.”
He forced a chuckle, his steadfast smile still in place even when the happiness left his eyes. “Ah, I-I should’ve guessed. Well, my dear, sorry for bothering you. Bonne soirée and sweet dreams.”

“Riri, wait.” She grabbed his sleeve with one hand, catching them both off guard. “I—” she stammered, eyes fixed on where she clung to him. Swallowing, she drew him closer, a fierce blush burning her cheeks. “I-I said I didn’t feel like going out tonight, but maybe—” She dared a look up at him. “Maybe you’d like to come in?”

A stunned wonder came over his face, and for a heartbeat, the two of them stood in silence. Then Auctioneer Rick slowly lifted his hand to cup her cheek, and she put her hand over his.

“Ce serait un honor,” he breathed as she pulled him inside and closed the door.

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 12 can be found here.]

10/16/17 Update: We are honored to share that TCoLC has inspired one of the most choice pieces of literature we have ever read in this fandom. The Age of Beauty by KLaxAddict is a true work of art that explores Mama Eun-Rick's and Auctioneer Rick's past. It is a pleasure to the senses and sure to satisfy you. Please check it out today.♡
He doubled over onto the floor as it cleaved him, reducing his spite to a paralyzing fear that had every muscle tensed to aching. His knuckles were white as he clawed at the rug; his eyes, wide.

Above him, Mouse’s voice came hard and unmoving. “They’re my friends, Rick, and you can’t talk to them that way.”

“M-Master, your tea,” the Eun-Rick said, holding out a metal tray topped with a row of teacups. Their lacquered surfaces were organic in design, sculpted by shaky hands as evidenced by the irregularity of the cast. Veins of hammered copper gleamed intermittently along their uneven sides, adding a hint of glamour to the otherwise humble make. At their bottoms, dark tea leaves swirled loosely, smelling boldly of malt.

Rick’s stomach rumbled in anticipation, but rather than accepting the offer, he just eyed the cups warily. He turned his head to the side and scoffed, “Look, this isn’t—not really the best time for a, uh, tea party. We’re sorta on the lam, remember?”

He gestured between himself and Mouse, who was currently kneeling atop a burgundy ikat pillow beside him. While Mouse fit snugly in his seat, looking for all the world like he belonged there, Rick’s own floor pillow was worn down to the threads, an uncomfortable pancake. He shifted again as he scowled at the Eun-Rick and his equally oblivious twin who sat opposite them.

“A-a thousand pardons, Master.” The Eun-Rick bowed deeply, an impressive feat considering he was still balancing the tray precariously on his fingertips. “W-we know you must be exhausted after your trying journey, Master. But, please, we wish only to provide you s-some comfort.”

These guys have barely said two words since we got here, but apparently there’s always room for tea.
The Eun-Rick that had led them here—even now, Rick couldn’t be entirely certain which one it was—had been equally quiet the entire way over. After following their enigmatic guide through the back alleys of the Citadel, Rick and Mouse eventually found themselves in this small, windowless loft. It was the size of a walk-in closet and looked like the lovechild between a gypsy wagon and hippie van.

Hanging paper lanterns glowed softly overhead and pale wax candles of every size burned on shallow tin plates. Their flames cast the room in burnt orange and claret hues and glinted off the colorful beaded curtain that hung over the room’s single entrance. Thick, woven fabrics of batik design draped the walls, and an abundance of floor pillows gave the room a distinctly bohemian aesthetic. The cozy garret had been cobbled together from salvaged parts, no two pieces of furnishings matching, and everything was softened by years of gentle use like an oft-read book.

At any other time, Rick would’ve found the space relaxing, but given the circumstances—

He curled his lip. “For the last time, quit calling me ‘Master.’ This isn’t the freakin’ winner’s suite, so you can drop the Mr. Beauregard routine.” Agitation made a muscle in his neck twinge as he leaned forward and pinned the Eun-Rick with what he hoped was an intimidating glare. “And don’t expect us to drink any of this shit until you tell us what we’re doing here.”

Just hours earlier, he and Mouse had been inches away from being sniffed out by Guards in the Citadel atrium, and now here they were, playing guest to a pair of Eun-Ricks who seemed more concerned with manners than the manhunt.

“We assure you,” the second Eun-Rick’s voice intercepted smoothly, “despite its name, you’ll find your Assam tea tastes nothing like shit.” He gave a beatific smile as he puffed away contentedly on a tall, jade hookah through a tasseled hose. His trademark white robe was gathered between his thin legs as he rested one arm on a tucked knee. “And as for why you are here,” he continued, voice pleasantly muffled by the shisha, “it is as we said before.”

“Right, right.” Rick brushed the haze aside with his hand, his words dripping with sarcasm. “‘You must meet the author.’” Great. Sounds like another douchebag. “Still doesn’t tell us a whole lot.”

Now that they’d finally gotten settled into, well, wherever this was, Rick had hoped they’d be a bit more cooperative. But no matter how much he’d pushed the point about this “author,” the Eun-Ricks somehow managed to evade the subject while not outright denying him an answer. The usual response ran along the lines of “You will find out soon” or “Patience” or—worst yet—“All in good time.”

It had Rick caged in the frustrating position of chasing dead ends while also not having enough actual ammo to accuse the Eun-Ricks of foul play.

Just a vague in-between.

In fact, everything about the Eun-Ricks was vague. Incomplete, in a way. The two often answered for the other without any predictable pattern, to the point that Rick felt as though he weren’t even conversing with a whole person at any given time. And then there was the gimmicky “we” business. Rick didn’t know if the Eun-Ricks were trying to channel some sort of “royaler than thou” angle or what, but it was confusing as hell.

With their matching shaved heads and plain white robes blurring the lines of their individuality, only the polarity in their expressions gave them away: The tea-server Eun-Rick’s mouth was pulled in a downward arc, his eyes glistening with nascent tears. He looked perpetually on the verge of weeping. His twin, on the other hand, sat like a content cat, a gentle smile affixed to his face as he
took another slow draw of the peach-scented tobacco.

“This author a bestseller or something? Don’t tell me we’re here for a book signing.” Rick forced a laugh at his own lame joke, even as a succession of more and more sinister scenarios played through his mind. His eyes flitted to the curtained exit for the hundredth time that evening.

The fortuitous arrival of the Eun-Rick in that dark, little alley had seemed like a godsend at the time. After all, it was either that or face a battalion of Guard Ricks. But steadily, Rick began to suspect that the Eun-Ricks’ show of hospitality may have been just that: a show.

*Of course it is,* he corrected himself. *These guys get their paychecks directly from the Council. For all we know, they could’ve just led us here to hand-deliver us to the Captain of the Guard himself, drugged with whatever’s in this—*

“H-here, Master,” the doleful Eun-Rick repeated, interrupting Rick’s bleak musings. “May it suit your taste.”

“I already told you—” Rick snarled, whipping around to give him a piece of his mind. But he stopped short when he realized it wasn’t himself that was being addressed.

“Thank you,” Mouse said graciously, reaching past Rick to pluck his own cup from the tray. The irony of Mouse being called the same title as the winning Ricks wasn’t lost on Rick, but either Mouse missed the reference or just didn’t mind it.

The tearful Eun-Rick heaved a half-choked sob as he gazed at Mouse, his smile quivering with emotion. The look in his eyes was neither covetous nor lewd, only rich with saudade, like how a father might look when beholding his missing son after years apart.

It still made jealousy flare hot in Rick’s belly.

“Hey. Enough with the waterworks,” he snapped, startling Weepy out of his daze. “I-I think we’re all—we’re good here, okay? So, uh, go?” A flick of his hand succinctly dismissed him.

“O-of course, Master. A thousand pardons,” Weepy sniffled again. He bowed meekly beneath the brunt of Rick’s scathing jab and retreated to the opposite side of the frayed rug where he served his smiling brother and then finally himself before setting the brass tray in the center. In addition to Rick’s neglected cup, two more stood untouched beside a shallow bowl of almonds.

“If we may propose a toast,” Smiles began, lifting his cup to their small circle. Weepy lifted his in kind. “To your safe journey. And your safe arrival to come. Morty be with you.”

Rick just rolled his eyes. Like they’d really be stupid enough to drink their—

“M-Morty be with you,” Mouse echoed next to him. He was already tipping the cup to his lips.

“Mouse!” Rick shot his hand out to stop him, but Mouse pulled his cup out of his reach at the last moment with an indignant yelp.

Holding the drink aloft, he stammered, “W-what are you doing? What’s wrong?”

“Mouse,” Rick hissed, leaning close to whisper and placing his hand over the cup’s mouth. “You can’t just drink anything they put in front of you. We don’t know what’s in there.” Worry and outrage battled each other at Mouse’s ignorance.

Mouse furrowed his brows, peering into the cup innocently. “But it’s just tea. Jeez, Rick, y-you’re
acting like they’re the bad guys.” He smiled at the smoking Eun-Rick who nodded amicably. “I mean, they saved us from getting caught. C-can’t we just, you know, relax for once?” He squeezed Rick’s hand before lifting it from his cup. “We can trust them.”

Rick just watched, stunned, as Mouse then blew gently on his tea and drank.

This was ridiculous. Mouse was feeding right out of their hands—literally! He was composed and relaxed, while Rick was a thread stretched too thin, brittle and prone to snapping. Exhaustion had his equilibrium slipping horribly off-center, his heartbeat flimsy and scattered. He was running on fumes at this point after so many hours of being on high alert, and though his senses were muted, his paranoia had been sharpened to a razor’s edge.

“Th-the Master is right,” Weepy offered meekly, unable to make eye contact with Rick’s seething gaze.

“We promised you both safe refuge, and we intend to do good on that promise.” Smiles bowed his head, a thick cloud of vapor pouring from his parted lips. “You are our esteemed guests. No harm will come to you here.”

“See, Rick?” Mouse elbowed him gently as he hummed happily into the steam that rose off his tea’s surface.

The aroma made Rick’s stomach give another envious growl.

Mouse may have trusted these guys, but to Rick, they were no different from any other Rick—cunning and dangerous. He glanced at the two remaining cups, not liking how the numbers would soon be stacked against them.

Another snide remark was already on his tongue, when Mouse spoke up first. “Where are we anyway?”

Smiles immediately perked up, his eyes taking on a shade of affection that made Rick want to shove that hookah pipe straight down his throat.

Sweeping one arm through the air, he began to orate. “We are in the Citadel’s oldest quarter. It was here that the Citadel first came to be, where the original founding Ricks gathered while they searched the stars for a safe haven from the Galactic Federation.”

Mouse was hooked, scooting closer to listen with rapt attention. Even Rick found himself drifting forward, his own curiosity piqued. The origins of the Citadel were not something he was familiar with, given his being ostracized as an X-Rick.

Smiles blew another stream of vapor into the air, shaping it into a wispy rendition of a spacecraft. “Their ships formed the Citadel’s very core—it’s heart, if you will—and from that first fleet eventually grew the impressive Citadel we know today.”

“Ships?” Mouse asked excitedly.

Smiles nodded. “Even now, relics from the founders’ vessels can still be found among us.” He beckoned to Mouse. Before Rick could get a word in, Mouse was scurrying over to plant himself between Smiles and Weepy as they lifted a corner of a wall tapestry.

Beneath the tapestry was a solid sheet of metal belonging to the side of a spaceship’s fuselage. Age had colored the metal a rusty red, and the tail end of the ship’s name could be made out emblazoned on it in chipped white paint.
Mouse ran his hand down a vertical column of rivets, making a fascinated little “oh,” while Rick tried not to focus on how close the Eun-Ricks were to Mouse where he was crouched between them.

To keep his rampaging neurosis from getting the better of him, Rick looked about the room, taking in new details he’d failed to notice before: The beads at the doorway had the telltale shape of hex nuts, a gutted satellite dish served as the lampshade for the overhead light, and coated wires were woven through bald patches in the rug.

Suddenly the hodgepodge quality of the room, as well as the neighborhood they’d traversed to get here, made much more sense.

The brightly lit streets of the commercial district had gradually given way to broken neon signs announcing their entry into the Celestial Quarter, a miniature scrap metal city in the middle of otherwise immaculate surroundings. Majestic Rickmansions devolved into a mishmash heap of cramped shanties, crude homes carved out from the metal husks of dead ships. Rickety, narrow stairs led the weary travelers single file between corroded metal walls covered in rust and moss that leaned drunkenly against one another.

In this kingdom of wreckage and decay, there was a tangible energy in the air. As they’d neared the Eun-Ricks' unassuming home, the surrounding low-hanging balconies had been strewn with happy partygoers and lovesick bards on acoustic guitars.

Even now, Rick could hear their drunken chorus muffled through the walls.

Apparently, Mouse heard it too because he’d pressed his ear against the metal sheet—tucking himself even closer beneath the Eun-Rick’s outstretched arm, too trusting, too vulnerable.

“O-okay, Mouse.” Rick cleared his throat and shuffled forward to tap Mouse’s leg quickly. “Don’t let—wouldn’t want your tea to get cold, right?”

Mouse gave a distracted hum but thankfully came back to the safety of Rick’s side. While Mouse happily nibbled on an almond to go with his tea, Rick leaned back against a wooden chest and eyed the Eun-Ricks, measuring them up.

He could still remember the way the Celestial Quarter residents had nodded respectfully to the Eun-Rick and his guests as they passed by. No doubt the Eun-Ricks were held in high regard here.

“Gotta say, I never expected Council lackeys to be living in the slums.” He picked at one of the tassels on the corner of his pillow until it came loose. “Thought they would’ve put you up in, y’know, The Ricktz or something. You two must’ve fucked up real bad,” he chuckled gruffly. “This the Council’s way of breaking your balls?”

The Eun-Ricks shifted uncomfortably at the coarse gibe. Finally Weepy responded. “Th-there is still a difference between being under the C-Council’s employ and being under their s-spell.”

Rick quirked a brow.

An ominous cloud of smoke from the hookah haloed Smiles’s head, and he added, “And those who call the Celestial Quarter home do not always adhere to the Council’s standards.” The brevity of his statement spoke volumes.

Anti-Council Ricks? Rick’s mind immediately flew to the obituary entries he’d scanned through earlier with Chi, remembering the high number of fallen dissidents. How many of them had also been residents of the Celestial Quarter?
At the time, the long list of names had seemed like proof enough that his fight against the Council would have to be taken up single-handedly, but now hope fluttered in his chest to know that their stranglehold on the Citadel wasn’t as far-reaching as he’d once thought.

But as he watched his reticent hosts, a darker suspicion floated to the surface.

On his arm, Mouse tugged his sleeve excitedly. “Rick! Did you hear that? Other Ricks want to fight the Council too! We don’t have to do it alone after a—”

Rick coughed loudly and frantically clamped a palm over Mouse’s mouth. The kid’s keen perception was usually a benefit, but now was not the time.

They couldn’t be revealing too much of their plan when they didn’t yet know where their dubious rescuers stood. After all, if what the Eun-Ricks said was true, and they were sitting squarely in a hotbed of rebel activity, then why shouldn’t Rick suspect that the Eun-Ricks were, in fact, Council spies specifically set up here to keep an eye on any malcontents?

It was the most plausible explanation he could think of. And if they managed to deliver both the infamous X-Rick and the Council’s prized pet back to them? They’d surely be sitting pretty then—

Mouse grunted with annoyance before finally shaking off Rick’s hand. He drew back sharply, shooting him a frigid glare. “Rick, I was talking!”

SELFISH ASSHOLE!

Rick snapped his hand away as though physically bitten, the damning statement searing him in his most derisive tone. But as quickly as the insult had surfaced, it left.

What the hell...?

Next to him, Mouse made a small pained grunt and pressed a palm to his forehead. Shaking it off, he asked, “S-so if you guys are, um, also against the Council, then is that why you’re helping us?”

Concern flashed across the Eun-Ricks’ faces—there and gone again—before Weepy answered. “We all have a purpose that must be fulfilled, dear Master, and ours converges with yours when it comes to the fate of the Council.” There was an obvious portent to his delivery, though Rick was at a loss as to what he meant.

Still, he was shocked that the Eun-Ricks weren’t even fazed by the fact that he and Mouse had plans to stage a coup against their employers.

Just like every other piece of drivel the Eun-Ricks spouted, Mouse was quick to eat it up. Eyes shining with wonder, awestruck smile—to see that adoration directed at someone other than himself made Rick’s stomach roil with renewed disdain.

He gave a low whistle. “Wow. You must have some real cojones to give the middle finger to your bosses.”

Smiles choked on his next draw from the hookah pipe, falling into a fit of coughing.

“You guys think up all this on your own?”

“Although our reasons—ahem!—may differ, we merely follow the teachings of the book.” Smiles coughed again, punching his own chest.
Weepy, who was dabbing at his eyes, spoke to Mouse, his voice small and shaking. “A book that
tells—tells *your* story, M-Master.” Sharing a silent nod with his brother, he crawled to a nearby
ottoman and reached inside, removing a short stack of loosely bound papers from within. He placed
it in front of Mouse.

As Mouse picked it up, Rick craned his neck over to make out the title, his curiosity superseding his
suspicions.

At the top of the first page was written *Rickelations*.

“The Book of Morty,” Smiles started, resting his chin in his hands as he looked at Mouse, “tells of
the tragedies and miracles of The One True Morty. Everything that has and ever will happen to Him
is revealed within its pages.”

While Mouse made an impressed sound, Rick just snorted, looking at the papers dubiously. The
pages crackled loudly when handled, the heavy scrawl that filled each sheet warping their surfaces.
So tightly packed together, the words flowed in undulating lines, barely legible, across the page.
“Not much of a ‘book,’ if you ask me. And this Rick’s handwriting is shit. Looks like a four-year-old
wrote it.”

The two Eun-Ricks shared a confused look.

“But w-why would anyone write about me?” Mouse asked, shrugging his shoulders. “Nobody’s
even supposed to know that I-I exist.” He tilted the stack this way and that, even peeking underneath
it as though the answer might somehow be there. “I-I’m barely even—I’m...I’m nobody.”

“Oh, Master.” There was such genuine fondness in Smiles’s words, that it made Weepy sob anew
and Rick grimace. “You are more than you know. Destined to do great things.” With his exhalation,
a stream of lilac snaked its way across the open air to unfurl like caressing fingers against Mouse’s
chest.

Rick’s eye twitched to hear his very own words spoken again to Mouse. Who were they to butter up
Mouse like this? As far as he could tell, the Eun-Ricks had just been silent witnesses to Mouse’s
torture, attending to him with all the care of blind tailors.

“W-what sorts of things?” Mouse asked, as trusting as a kid being lured right into the back of a
creep’s van.

“That, Master, you will learn in time,” Smiles said softly. He reached forward, inches from running
his hand along Mouse’s short mohawk, when Rick deflected it with a sharp swipe of his arm.

The Eun-Ricks blinked, and even Mouse gave a shocked sound of dismay.

“Funny,” Rick growled, tucking Mouse close to his side while he kept his eyes trained on Smiles’s
unnerving grin. His tone darkened as his thumb grazed a particularly prominent scar on Mouse’s
arm. “For saying you’re all about helping us, you never seemed to give a damn about Mouse
before.”

“Rick, that’s not true,” Mouse said in protest. “They—”

“Mouse, you don’t know what you’re talking about, so just shut it. They may act like they’re relaxed
as Hindu cows, but they’re still Ricks.”
“B-but they’re not like—”

Rick only tightened his grip, his attention back on the Eun-Ricks. If he had a knife, the conversation would’ve already been over. As things were, he’d work with what he had. “You pathetic fucks were always five feet from him. You could’ve gotten him out of there, could’ve done something,” he ground out, disgust catching fire in his throat.

Undeterred by Rick’s visceral accusations, Smiles responded calmly, as though he were expecting to dissuade Rick with just the cadence of his voice. “We know this might be hard to understand, Master, but there was a reason for our...inaction. The One True Morty needs to be allowed to follow his path, even if it is fraught with suffering.”

“Yeah, it’s called the Council having you by the balls,” Rick spat. “You never lifted a damn finger because you were just looking out for yourselves.”

“Rick!” Mouse squirmed out of Rick’s hold. “Stop it! You’re not listening!”

But Rick was too far into his mission, determined to expose the Eun-Ricks for the phonies they were. “You love being balls deep in this cushy little get-up you’ve got, cleaning up after the winning Ricks when they’re done with—” Rick just sneered venomously, unable even to finish.

“M-Master, please, that is not—”

“You have the balls to sit here and justify what you did?”

“Rick!”

“Bet you were also hoping to get your dicks wet while you were at it—”

“Rick, that’s enough!” Mouse yelled, jumping to his feet, his small hands in fists.

MAYBE MOUSE LIKES THEM BETTER THAN YOU!

Rick froze as the sharp blade of doubt suddenly scythed through him. That ugly whisper of jealousy goading him on had swelled to a bomb’s blast in his head, making his mind reel. He doubled over onto the floor as it cleaved him, reducing his spite to a paralyzing fear that had every muscle tensed to aching. His knuckles were white as he clawed at the rug; his eyes, wide.

Above him, Mouse’s voice came hard and unmoving. “They’re my friends, Rick, and you can’t talk to them that way.”

HE ALREADY HATES YOU, YOU FUCKING LOSER!

In his periphery, he saw the Eun-Ricks shrink back from him as though he were a festering wound oozing out where he lay. Their flurry of gasps tore at Rick’s ears like frenzied buzzards.

“Is it happening again?” he heard one whisper.

“Y-yes. Just as we’d seen before. It is as the book explained.”

“A fascinating thing!”

“No. It is a—a vile thing. To have one’s w-worst fears turned onto oneself? Th-there is no greater hell than that.”

HE’S JUST PUTTING UP WITH YOUR SORRY ASS!
Their words faded beneath the storm of tinnitus clogging Rick’s ears. It was a cacophony of self-reprimands that gouged at his consciousness, leaving him numb and empty. Above him, he heard Mouse speaking to one of the Eun-Ricks.

Rick cracked open an eye against the raging panic. He saw Mouse standing before the Eun-Rick, just inches away. But when he tried to call out, Get the fuck away from him!, only a reedy whine escaped him, drool spilling over his bottom lip as he clenched his teeth.

The Eun-Rick gave a short bow before turning to Rick. Then he wordlessly balled up the fabric of his robe and lifted.

Rick flinched automatically, but where he expected to see a set of unmentionables, similar to his own, there was nothing there. The last thing he saw before unconsciousness dragged him under was only a wiry, gray bush sitting beneath the soft paunch of the eunuch’s belly.

Won’t let this disease take you away.
It’s been killing you every day.
But don’t throw in the towel, gonna make you pristine.
The fight’s not over yet, if you know what I mean.

The melody was somber, typical of any love song. But the lyrics seemed to hold a whisper of something more—something stronger, untethered, and daring. A war cry sung in a chorus of hardy baritones.

As consciousness clawed its way back to Rick, the music faded, growing distorted as it echoed down a metal chute in the floor just beside his ear. Rick thought it might have been nice to follow it, to hear the next verse, but when he willed his body to move, it wouldn’t. His bones were leaden, and his fingers tingled where they twitched.

“Rick?” Mouse’s voice flitted into range, pleasant and calm with an undercurrent of concern that drew Rick even further out of the darkness. He sighed at the gentle touch of Mouse’s hand on his forehead. “Wake up, Rick.”

The sound of his own name came like a salve to burned skin. It held none of the biting anger from before, and with it, the crippling anxiety that had gutted Rick so suddenly felt as if it had been nothing more than a passing caprice. Now he was only left with a receding headache and deep-seated nausea as he willed himself to wakefulness.

“Mmmouse, I’m shorry,” he mumbled around his tongue, still sluggish and clumsy. “I shouldn’t have —” He let his head loll from side to side on the warm pillow beneath it. The world pitched wildly with the movement, and Rick screwed his eyes shut even tighter. “It’s just—I needed to know they didn’t—” Touch you, fuck you. “—hurt you,” he finally managed.

It was true. The distrust he’d harbored against the Eun-Ricks had been driven not by the desire to keep himself and Mouse safe from any actual threat, but to protect his own fragile ego. Infinitely patient and self-assured, the Eun-Ricks were the antithesis to Rick, and he’d selfishly wanted to keep Mouse from finding security or comfort in them instead of him.

“It’s okay, Rick. I-I understand.” Mouse’s cool fingers stroked rhythmically over his hair, soothing his vertigo. The pillow beneath Rick’s head shifted, and Mouse’s voice sounded closer, pinched with regret. “And I’m sorry for getting angry.”
Gradually, the nausea seeped out of him like sap from a cut tree, and Rick opened his eyes to find he was lying supine on the floor, his head in Mouse’s lap. Spots of sidereal light overhead revealed themselves to be paper lanterns, their hazy glow backlighting Mouse’s form above him. But in place of the golden brown eyes he was expecting to see, a pair of ice-blue peered back at him instead.

He blinked, and it was Mouse once again.

Forgetting the strange vision immediately, Rick grabbed Mouse’s hand from his forehead and pressed it firmly over his pounding heart. There was comfort in the weight of Mouse surrounding him like this, the simple reminder that he was still here, still with him, still his.

He hadn’t lost him yet.

“Mouse.” He held the back of Mouse’s hand to his lips, kissing a small knuckle. “Thank god. I thought you’d—” The insecurities from before sounded once again in his mind. While just as repulsive, however, Rick found they were nowhere near as potent now, even silly. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter anymore.” He huffed, “God, I was a royal piece of shit to you, wasn’t I?”

“Yeah, Rick. You kinda were,” Mouse chuckled good-humoredly. “And I—I guess I can’t blame you for being worried.” His eyes dimmed as his smile left him. “But I wish you’d just listened to me.”

“I swear I won’t be like that again.” He reached up with his other hand to cup Mouse’s cheek. “You mean too much to me, Mouse, and I’m always fucking it up.” His fingers brushed the small adhesive strip behind Mouse’s ear.

The Eun-Ricks had placed it there upon their arrival, and while Rick had stewed with jealousy over it at the time, he finally accepted its simple and innocent message: *We are here to help.*

It was now clear to Rick that he wasn’t the only one in Mouse’s life. There had been others and may still be many more. Curling his fingers around the back of Mouse’s neck, he tugged gently, drawing Mouse down toward him. But at least *this* wouldn’t change. No one would ever take his place here.

“Why do you even put up with me?” he murmured, affection dropping his voice by half an octave.

“Oh, R-Rick...”

“Hm?” Rick paused just inches from Mouse’s lips, taking a moment to appreciate the nervous blush on his cheeks.

“N-now’s not really—not really the best time,” Mouse stammered. It was only when Mouse flicked his gaze meaningfully to something in front of him that Rick finally got the hint.

He shuffled awkwardly to his elbows and looked around. Indeed, their little reconciliation had been witnessed by more parties than Rick would’ve liked.

The two Eun-Ricks from before were still seated cross-legged on the other side of the small area rug, smiling or sniffling in their trademark way. They nodded when Rick’s eyes passed over them, Smiles giving a little, friendly wave as if to say *Don’t mind us.*

But during Rick’s short absence, a third Eun-Rick had appeared, nestled squarely between his brothers and completing the circle around the tea tray. His face was impassive as stone, and a bandage covered one cheek. Rick recognized him immediately as the Eun-Rick who had helped in the hallway outside of Mouse’s room.
Mouse’s voice came from behind him. “Rick, I’d like you to meet the Author.”

“So you—you’re the guy we’ve all been waiting for. You Eun-Ricks sure wear a lotta hats.” Rick roused himself off of Mouse’s lap, wincing as the headache, having been disturbed, gave a cranky throb. “Council staff, rebel sympathizers, and now prophetic writers. But hey. I really ought to thank you for that whole door lock...thing.”

The stoic-looking Eun-Rick arched an elegant brow.

“Rick, not him. Him.” Mouse extended his arm and pointed to the center Eun-Rick—or, more precisely, to the small Morty tucked in his lap.

Rick’s mouth fell open. Well, I’ll be damned...

Waif-like and languid in the Eun-Rick’s arms, Rick hadn’t even noticed he was there. The Author was smaller even than Mouse; his legs, dried-up sticks where they flopped over the side of his carrier’s knees. Beneath a simpler version of the Eun-Rick’s robes—barely more than white muslin that left his feeble limbs exposed—his skin was sallow; his hair, limp and dull.

But his eyes—the Author’s eyes were an ice cavern of fierce blue that burned into Rick’s own like glacial fire. As cold as Mouse’s amber brown eyes were warm, they sent a chill down into Rick’s core the longer he held that gaze.

The Author smiled, nothing more than a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth.

At last, we meet.

Rick jolted as the voice reverberated through his mind. His scalp bristled at the impromptu Resonance: that same strange, hollow feeling of another’s thoughts sliding against his own. Only this time, without the tempest of pleasure to accompany it, the voice rubbed to the point of chafing. It made his teeth itch.

And unlike the typical threads of thought that Rick merely intercepted, this was being spoken directly to him. Just like before.

“Y-you!” Rick shouted, bolting upright.

Stupid decision. His thoughts, which had been gradually slipping back into place were once again splintered beyond recognition. Whatever had overtaken him before had now left him brutally shattered apart and then slapped hastily back together again. He was fragmented.

Broken.

“I-it’s you,” Rick croaked again, clutching his hands to his head. “The one I heard in my head last night. How are you doing that?”

“That is the voice of the mind,” Smiles answered whimsically, unfazed by Rick’s obvious pain. He had abandoned his hookah in favor of massaging the Author’s atrophied legs where they lay lifeless over the grim Eun-Rick’s lap. “Far superior to the voice of the tongue. We may never learn to speak it, but the Author,” he said with pride, “is fluent in both.”

The Author waved a hand through the air, rolling his eyes playfully. It was then that Rick noticed his small fingers were wrapped in bandages. “Please. I’m no author, only the writer.”

The Author’s voice was as willowy as the rest of him, reminding Rick of crystal wind chimes in a
summer’s breeze. It was delicate and light, by far the most beautiful thing about this Morty whose sickly frame was propped up only with the help of the Eun-Rick’s arms around him.

Mouse scooted next to Rick, assuming his place on his pillow again. Reaching forward, he took Rick’s cup from the tray and offered it. “Here. I-it’ll make you feel better.”

To his surprise, the tea was still warm enough to let off a faint column of steam. Rick had to wonder just how little time had passed during his unexpected fainting spell. Judging by the tea, it could have only been a few minutes, and yet with the sudden introduction of not one but two new visitors, he felt keenly out of the loop.

As if sensing his discomfort, Mouse slipped his hand into Rick’s palm. “It feels funny when he talks in your head, doesn’t it? He did it to me too when he first came in.” He scratched at the back of his head, as though remembering the peculiar sensation. “B-but he says he won’t do that anymore, ’cause he has something he wants to tell us. Both of us.”

Rick sipped his tea. Mouse was right; it was much better having something warm in his stomach. He immediately felt embarrassed for how he’d acted before. He’d been hotheaded and belligerent while their hosts had remained steadfastly cordial and courteous.

“Well, I said I’d listen. So...” Rick squeezed Mouse’s hand before turning to the Author and his band of Eun-Ricks. “All right,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Now that we’re all here, let’s get this started. First things first.” He pointed both forefingers at the Author. “Who are you?”

The Author regarded him calmly through his sapphire gaze, before nodding to Weepy who placed his tea back on the tray. From behind him, Weepy produced a small wooden box.

On its cover was engraved the Citadel emblem. Flecks of gold leaf still clung to its worn surface, evidence that it had once held some more regal purpose. From inside, the Author retrieved a deck of cards. They were larger than average playing cards, prodigious in his hands. Their faces were bare save for a single red letter. Not bothering to shuffle them, the Author then leaned forward and laid the first card faceup in front of Rick and Mouse.

When he lifted his hand away from the card on the rug, it revealed the letter I.

He began to speak.

“Who am I? I am a Morty. But to those who know my purpose, I am the Author of the Book of Morty.” He raised his eyes. “I trust you have already seen it. Or, rather, the little I was able to salvage.”

Mouse picked up the papers from beside him and hugged them to his chest. “Y-yes. So you—you must’ve known me f-from my dimension, then?”

“Dimension? I have no dimension,” he replied, placing the N card down some distance from the first.

“No dimension,” Mouse echoed, spellbound.

Rick wasn’t so easily duped. The whole card routine was kooky enough, but now the kid apparently had his cosmology facts wrong.

“Newsflash, kid,” he said, shaking his head. “Everyone has to have a dimension. You ever heard of *ex nihilo nihil fit*?” Rick may have agreed to play along, but that didn’t mean he was about to let himself be given the runaround.
“Nothing comes from nothing.” The answer came effortlessly.

*Shit. So the kid knows his Parmenides.*

“R-right. Exactly.” Rick crossed his arms, refusing to be beaten by a gimp in a bedsheet. “Then *obviously* you should know that everything comes into existence from something.”

“Yes. And purpose brought me into existence.”

“No. Look, if you’re here, and we’re swapping metaphysics Wiki facts, then something caused you to be here, i.e., a dimension.”

A shadow of pained disappointment passed over the Author’s face before Weepy answered. “After everything that has happened, you still don’t see that *cause* is oftentimes less significant than *reason*?”

Rick pursed his lips. All the lofty talk was starting to get tiresome, and now what was this about “reason”? Rick was a scientist at heart; causality, he could get. It was a basic principle of metaphysics that he subscribed to. But reason—that was the whimsical stuff of therapists and dreamers.

“Why do you think *you* are here, Master?” For the first time since his entrance, the Eun-Rick in the center spoke. His voice was gravelly and blunt, capable of transforming even the lightest subject into a sobering eulogy.

“Because one of you baldies brought us.”

“And?”

“Aaaand...what?” Rick snorted a laugh through his nose. “Mouse and I were up shit creek without a paddle before you showed up—or maybe it was you.” He gestured between the two Eun-Ricks that flanked the Author. “And now you keep saying you have something to tell us, but all I’m getting are word games.” He shook his head. “So can we just get on with it?”

“Those were merely causes. Your actions, our encounters—all random events that were generated from thousands of causations. Happenstance.” The intensity of Grim’s explanation grew, though his voice remained level. “Any infinite combination of these things could have brought you here. Just as any infinite combination of events could have caused a boy to come into existence.” He and the Author shared a meaningful look.

“Or a stripper to find a book.”

“Wha?” Rick wrinkled his nose at Smiles’s strange non sequitur.

“Even if w-we had taken too long to infiltrate y-your room’s security system—”

“Or couldn’t patch into your direct phone line—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold up.” The conversation was being batted back and forth like a ball in a three-way tennis match and at a pace that Rick could hardly keep up with. “Are you saying that was all you?”

Grim picked up the line of discourse. “Whatever the circumstance, cause can only go so far. It explains why you are here right now yet goes no further. Reason, on the other hand, is much more powerful than that. It sets us up for events that have yet to happen. It gives us purpose for the future,
oftentimes a future that we may never even see ourselves.” Rick didn’t miss the way Grim’s hands tightened about the Author’s shoulders.

“Just as you have come here for a reason.” The Author continued his monologue, taking out the next card.

*Finally, back to business.*

“I came into being to serve a reason, a single purpose.” He laid an O on the floor. “To aid in the fulfillment of The Ones’ mission.” When he swung his gaze between Mouse and Rick expectantly, Rick only returned a blank look.

“Uh, what are you looking at me for? Mouse is your guy, right here.” He jabbed a thumb at Mouse who was staring down at his palms.

“Rick, h-he didn’t just say One.” Mouse laid his hand on Rick’s thigh, a mix of fear and fascination in his eyes. “He said...Ones.”

Rick snorted. “Okaaay? So then who’s the other—” Realization hit like a sucker punch to the chin, and his tongue went limp.

*No way.*

Now every pair of eyes in the room was trained on him.

*No fucking way.*

“You can’t seriously be implying—”

The U card joined the others along the wobbly line.

“Yes. You are The One True Rick.”

For a moment, no one breathed, letting the full impact of the statement settle on Rick like a thick blanket of snow.

Abruptly, he let out a short laugh. Then another. He clasped a hand over his face as he tittered inanely to himself for a full minute.

As if the idea of The One True Morty weren’t hard enough to swallow, now there was apparently one for Ricks too? He didn’t know what it even meant to be “The One True” anything. Most days, he could barely get by being *a* Rick, so how in the hell was he supposed to be The One *True* Rick?

The phrase “cosmic joke” kept popping up in his head, complete with spinning newspaper touting the headline: *Dead-End X-Rick Bones Kid, Gets Mystical Title from Cripple.*

“Oh, he finally said, dropping his hand. “Great. So I’m The One True Rick. Glad to join the team.” Mouse didn’t return his playful chuckle when he punched him in the shoulder. “So what’s the fancy title come with? Do I get psychic powers too now? A-am I supposed to be, like, the leader of the Ricks or something?” Another bitter laugh escaped him. “Jeeezus,” he breathed, gripping his own knee a little too firmly as he took another shaky drink.

Ignoring Rick’s sarcasm, the Author answered him matter-of-factly. “Do not take your position lightly. You have an important purpose to fulfill as the Counterpart to The One True Morty.” He laid an E card down next in introduction. “You already know what The One True Morty is capable of.”
“Yeah, yeah. Epiphanies, Resonances—” Glad to have the topic shifted away from himself, he ruffled Mouse’s mohawk. “Hell, the kid’s got enough ESP, he’s one letter away from having his own sports network.”

The Author shook his head. “I’m referring to something that even Mouse himself does not know of. Think back.” He pointed a bandaged finger to the card then to his right temple and gave a double tap. “You saw it yourself, remember?”

The peculiar gesture baffled Rick for a moment until his mind gradually settled on a memory—a posh suite, a wall of code on a mirror, and a breathtaking display of white and black.

“Entropy,” Rick said softly, finally understanding the significance of the card.

“Yes.” The Author tilted his head, eyelids sliding shut. “How had you put it? A walking neutrino bomb? The One True Morty is capable of as much destruction as he is life. He spreads liberty to the tune of chaos.”

Rick looked curiously at Mouse, so small and unassuming in his cheap jeans and shirt. Despite what the entropic filter revealed, he’d never seen any evidence of Mouse’s chaos in practice. “You’re talking about the wrong kid here. Mouse wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“You have witnessed this chaos manifest in more ways than you realize.” Under any other circumstances, the know-it-all attitude would have had Rick peeved, but considering how absurd everything he’d heard so far was, he was actually grateful for the extra handholding.

Smiles, who had been working the Author’s toes, piped in with, “Why do you think he’s been kept away from other Mortys?”

Rick thought for a moment. It had seemed strange to him that Mouse had never encountered another Morty until their jaunt through the Citadel. And when he had finally met them, the other Mortys just seemed excited—wait, not just excited. Enamored, frenzied. At the time, he’d dismissed it as just quirky behavior on the part of the Mortys, but now he wondered if there was something more to it. He shifted in his seat, trying to put into words what it was he’d seen.

“I guess because they—they tend to get, I dunno, riled up around him.” When the Author remained silent, waiting for more of an answer, Rick rested back on his hands with an exasperated sigh. “You tell me, kid. He must say something pretty wild to them, because they start going bonkers.”

“He is *awakening* them.” The Author enunciated the word slowly and deliberately. “Mortys have fallen victim to the control of Ricks. They have lost themselves. But The One True Morty brings them back to who they are meant to be. He gives them agency, the courage to take what they want.”

_They don’t even get to have who they want._

Mouse’s insightful statement from just earlier now took on a new meaning. What had seemed like a disproportionate concern for those he’d never even met before now made perfect sense. Rick already knew Mouse’s capacity for compassion was staggering, and he now wondered if that was something Mouse had always naturally possessed or if it was because of his destined role as The One True Morty.

“Mouse.” At the sound of his name, Mouse lifted his eyes to the Author. “For all the years that you have been denied your desires, you grant them for your brethren, and they are all the freer for it,” he ended with a smile.

When the Author’s eyes came to rest on him again, Rick squirmed beneath that telling gaze. He was
already anticipating another life-shattering revelation.

“Do you wish to know your purpose, Rick?”

Rick tried to suppress the shiver that crawled up his back on small, biting claws. A sudden flash of Ricks going berserk in the same manner as the Mortys painted a frightening picture in his mind. But Ricks certainly had no problem taking what they wanted—to a fault, in fact. And he’d never noticed anything out of the ordinary whenever he met another Rick.

Now he really was curious. He nodded once.

The Author next laid down a card with the letter S on it. “As The One True Morty awakens His brethren, so does The One True Rick awaken Him in turn.”

That’s it? Rick thought, looking at the strange S. Considering the more drastic scenarios he could imagine, this one seemed easy.

“A lock or a key is useless without the other, but together they can accomplish great things. So it is with The One True Morty and his Counterpart. Now that you have been brought together, it has already begun.” The look in his eyes was intense then as he directed his next question to Mouse.

“Did you feel it, Mouse? Do you remember the moment it happened?”

Rick could’ve sworn he saw the Author’s pale cheeks redden.

“Y-you mean when—when we—” Mouse paused, wringing his hands in his lap.

The coy look Mouse shot in his direction made Rick’s heart rate jump, and Rick didn’t need to guess what scene had been provoked by the letter S. The surrounding Eun-Ricks looked away politely, as though Mouse’s arousal were somehow visible.

Just as the hint of a Resonance began to sound in his head—a distant maelstrom of questions topped with more questions, coupled with a plea for Rick to take him away from it all—the Author spoke up.

“Now that you have been united, you can begin to restore the Symmetry.”

“Symmetry?” Mouse sounded slightly out of breath as he repeated the word, clearly eager to distract himself from the unchaste thoughts in his head. “Y-you mean like shapes being balanced on either side?”

“Nah, Mouse,” Rick said slowly. “I don’t think he’s just talking about shapes.” To the audience in front of them, he sighed. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned tonight, it’s that you guys never have a simple answer. So how about you spare us the 20 Questions gig and tell us what you mean?”

“When I say Symmetry,” the Author elaborated, “I do refer to a balance. That’s right, Mouse. But it is a kind of balance that transcends mere form. Everything in life adheres to the rules of symmetry. In the arts, it gives us beauty; in mathematics, it allows us to fathom everything from the tiniest arrangement of atoms to the farthest expanses of the universe.”

Smiles piped up when he saw the confused look on Mouse’s face. “Even the ancient Greeks were able to measure the circumference of the Earth with just a few, scant miles.”

“And in our day-to-day lives, symmetry comes in the form of reciprocity, empathy—” The Author paused to glance at Rick. “—revenge. But when symmetry is broken down, that balance is lost, and life falls to ruin. That is what has happened here in the Citadel.”
Rick had an idea of what he meant by the “symmetry” that had been thrown out of balance. He’d seen it in the black shine of the Elite membership card, in the lines of cockroaches beneath Dive’s tables, in the plush of his private suite’s bed, and in the open-mouthed cries of the Mortys on leashes.

On the surface, it was easy to blame the Morty Craze for the mile-wide gap between Elite and common-Ricks, with Mortys shoved to the bottom of the dung pile. Decrepitude was just as rampant as gluttonous vanity within the Citadel with no room for any in-between.

But Chi had told him things had started going bad even before that, when—

The Author laid the $R$ card down next. “It all began with the Rick that you know as Riq.”

At the very mention of the name, the Eun-Ricks bowed their heads in unison, mumbling something in hushed tones. While Rick couldn’t make out what they were saying, he had the sense it wasn’t a sign of respect so much as a desperate prayer.

Mouse visibly trembled beside him, and even Rick had a sudden uptick of adrenaline that made his heart pound.

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Rick laughed bitterly, hoping that a little lightheartedness would put Mouse’s worries at ease. “So what did that psycho do?” As the Author placed the $V$ card beside the others—again, in no particular order that Rick could discern—he tried answering his own question. “Rig the votes to nab the seat as council head? O-or maybe vaporize anyone who stood in his way? What? You gonna tell me he’s a vampire or something?”

“He was vain,” came the simple answer.

Too simple. “Yeah, and what Rick isn’t vain?” He fumed, clutching a fistful of his hair. “Jeezus, tell me something I don’t know. What about the Code Yellows? What about the goddamn Galactic Federation conspiracy? You’re not gonna tell me that’s how Riq fucked up your precious Symmetry?”

Rick’s tirade fell on deaf ears as the Author continued, undaunted.

“Yes. All Ricks are vain to a degree, and all Ricks seek power. But Riq—Riq’s vanity knew no bounds...” With that, the Author suddenly wilted against Grim’s chest with a sigh, as though the very topic had grown too heavy for him to bear.

While Weepy fretted over the Author, wiping his sweat-sheened brow, Grim continued with the explanation seamlessly. “The Symmetry of the cosmos would normally never allow a single Rick to amass so much power. But Riq found a way to circumvent the laws of nature.”

“He knew he could never accomplish all that he wanted alone,” Smiles chimed in with an excitement that bordered on panic.

“But he was too distrustful to seek the help of others.” Weepy, too, had grown more agitated over the course of the conversation. Tears ran freely down his cheeks as he tended to the Author.

Even Grim’s authoritative tone did little to diffuse the energy that was steadily rising. “He scoured the universe for a way—”

“A way to duplicate—”

“As they say, when you want something done right—”
“Multiplicity would be the key—”

By now, the Eun-Ricks were talking over each other so quickly and so sporadically that Rick found it impossible to follow. Just as the cross-talk reached an apex, Rick slammed his hands on the floor hard enough to make the cups rattle on the tray.

“Time out! Would everyone just shut the fuck up!”

No one breathed.

Rick looked pointedly at the Author. “What are they going on about? What did Riq do?”

Still curled in the crook of Grim’s arm, the Author kept his eyes closed as he let another card slip from his hand to fall loosely next to the others.

E.

“What do you mean ‘ask him’? He’s not exactly in earshot.” He licked his lips, brow furrowed as he tried to wrestle with this latest riddle. “I mean, your Eun-Ricks haven’t been making much sense. They’re just—” The E card stared mutely back at him. “Just—” His voice trailed off.

*The Eun-Ricks?*

As Rick looked between one Eun-Rick and another, trying to see past their identical features for some sort of answer, the Author’s quiet voice reached his ears. “Riq had intended to create more of himself.”

Cloning? Rick sniffed. The technology was simple enough, but no Rick had ever wasted his time with it. The process was widely regarded as superfluous. Why clone yourself, when there were dozens more of you just a portal jump away?

Egotistical prick doesn't know when to quit.

“But the cloning experiment was a failure. Rather than being one man made into four, he became one man divided. Riq became...”

“Riq I,” Grim said.

“II,” Smiles added, holding up two fingers in a mockery of the peace sign.

“III,” Weepy hiccuped around another sob.

“And IV,” the Author finally finished. “The Riq that you know as the council leader.”

For a while, no one spoke, and a pregnant pause filled the room. Mouse was the first to break the silence, his panicked gasp stabbing through Rick’s shock.

“N-no! How can you be Riq, w-when he’s a—” Fright and dismay distorted his features as he stumbled back. He pressed himself against the wall, hand raised in front of him, ready to fend off an attack.

Rick was quick to pull Mouse under his arm, murmuring quiet encouragement as he ran a hand down his trembling back.
From what he’d been able to piece together, Riq had been the ringleader to Mouse’s suffering, and it was no wonder that being in the same room as Riq—or three-fourths of him, evidently—had him so shaken.

“We are each only one part of Riq, dear Master,” Smiles offered, trying to dispel Mouse’s fears.

Grim added, “And as such, we are incapable of the kind of wickedness that fuels him.”

“Just as Riq IV is equally incapable of—of feeling true sorrow.”

“Or joy!”

“Or patience.”

As each Eun-Rick spoke in turn, realization dawned on Rick. The strange, niggling feeling he’d had while in their presence, that incompleteness, suddenly made sense. Their temperaments weren’t merely eccentricities to write off—they were temperaments!

Happiness, sadness, stoicism—and with Riq, rage—the Eun-Ricks were distilled essences of pure emotion, each a single facet of the whole.

“It was impossible to sustain any semblance of harmony after that. Before long, one of the four parts over—overpowered the others—” The Author’s breath had suddenly become labored, and he stopped short to cough fitfully.

Grim was quick to lean the Author forward as he wheezed, holding him easily with a splayed palm over his chest. With his other hand, he pressed the tips of his fingers against two points on the Author’s back just below the nape. Rick and Mouse exchanged anxious looks.

Weepy turned away to bury his face in his robe. “He knew this w-would happen,” he sobbed.

“Because it must happen.” Grim’s reply was callous even as he continued stroking the Author’s back. Gradually, his coughing eased.

“W-what’s wrong with—” Mouse started, drawing himself away from Rick, but then he fell quiet as his eyes glazed over. When he lifted his head again, Rick saw tears on his cheeks. “H-he’s dying.”

“Whoa. Jeez, Mouse. It’s—it’s just a little cough.” Rick wrapped his hand around Mouse to pull him into a half-hug, suddenly feeling compelled to protect him. Seeing another Morty so similar to his lover giving what sounded like a death rattle made his heart seize. “No need to jump to extremes.”

“No. It is as The One True Morty says,” Smiles said, a tinge of worry coloring his composure. “The Author is not meant for this world much longer. As he nears the completion of his purpose, his life nears its end.” He gave Rick a pitying smile. “We knew what it would mean bringing you here, but —”

“No!” Although weak, the Author’s voice cut off the Eun-Rick’s sentence, small but sharp as a dagger. “This is how it h-has to—has to be.” He stopped to suppress another spasm. The Eun-Ricks waited patiently until the Author roused himself back into a sitting position. His pale cheeks were splotched pink from the exertion, but he still held an air of aplomb, bony and ragged as he was, atop his throne.

“Let me help!” Mouse startled Rick with his sudden outburst. “If it’ll make it easier—” His eyes were locked straight ahead on an unseen speaker as he held a hand to his own chest. “But I could—it’s too much!” His voice cracked, brows scrunched tightly together. He was clearly losing the
argument. Before long, Mouse only bowed his head, resignation clear in the curve of his back. “All right. We’re listening,” he said softly.

After taking another minute for recovery, the Author resumed his exposition.

“Riq IV overpowered his other selves. He considered himself superior to the rest, and in his spite, he had Riq I, II, and III banished from the Citadel. But not before—” He lowered his eyes. “Well, you saw how twisted his sense of humor can be. He called it a parting gesture.”

Rick cringed at the memory of the Eun-Rick lifting his robe.

He raised a hand. “Wait. Maybe I’m stating the obvious here, but if Riq wanted them out of the picture, then how are they still even here? That maniac doesn’t seem the type to do anything half-assed.” He winced to himself. Too close?

While the Author took another drink to soothe his throat, Grim answered. “The division resulted in corrupting his memories of his own origins, and now Riq IV believes he is and has always been the only Riq. It is also what has allowed us to remain here in safety.” He ran a finger down the bandage on his cheek. “Well, relatively speaking.”

An H was placed next in the line of letters, which by now had grown substantially long. “In the beginning, Riq I, II, and III were just as ignorant, their identities hidden even from themselves. Until I called them to me.”

Smiles touched his forehead to the back of the Author’s limp hand. “And we are only too grateful for having heard you.”

The Author smiled weakly in return before continuing. “The Book of Morty was taken from me, and I was—” He paused, eyes downcast as though looking into the past. “Mouse is not the only one who has suffered as part of his purpose,” he finished bleakly.

Grim shooed his brother off to raise the Author’s hand to his own bowed forehead. “After the Author gifted us with his teachings, the truth was made clear. We then lived in hiding until taking up our positions.”

“A-and watched the Master, The One, ever close at hand.” The gesture was repeated by Weepy.

“And, uh, the Bitch-Rick? She in on all of this too?” It was hard for Rick to imagine how the Eun-Ricks would still tolerate playing servants for that broad in light of everything they knew.

“Ah, the one you know as Mama Eun-Rick.” With a shake of his head, the Author’s voice was surprisingly full of fondness rather than spite. “She is just another misguided Rick, brought into your path for a reason.”

Misguided? Well, that’s one word for it.

“There are many more, just like her, who are now realizing the fallacy of the Council. Yet another symptom of your union.”

The Author laid out the next card from his nearly depleted pile.

W.

“The purpose for which you have traveled your entire lives to fulfill is this: to restore Symmetry that Riq has torn asunder by making him—”
“Whole,” Mouse completed the sentence for him.

“Yes,” the Author replied, sounding as delighted as Rick was surprised.

“And just how exactly do we do that?” Up until a few minutes ago, Rick had never known it was even possible to split oneself into four different walking personalities, so the idea of rejoining them sounded equally implausible. Somehow he doubted that this came with easy-to-follow instructions.

“It is only when The One True Rick and The One True Morty work in unity that this can ultimately be achieved.”

*Called it.*

Rick was just about to roll his eyes, when he felt Mouse nudge him in the side. It was then that he realized the Author had placed the last and final card, L. Spread out before them was now the phrase:

**LUVISNOWHERE**

“Look closely. What do you both see?”

Beside him, Mouse gasped, but Rick just crossed his arms. Even with the blatant misspelling, the message was clear. He reached out to move the cards apart to create a space between the words:

**LUV IS NOWHERE**

The Eun-Ricks sucked in a sharp inhale, having watched the exchange closely.

“No, Rick,” Mouse said. He readjusted the cards himself. “It goes like this.”

**LUV IS NOW HERE**

Rick stared, perplexed by the new message and inexplicably embarrassed by it. It was strange that he hadn’t seen that before, but he’d simply gone with the first thing that stood out to him.

In Grim’s lap, the Author cocked his head, studying the cards, his voice treading carefully. “This is unexpected,” he said at last with a small smile. “It seems that although The One True Rick is meant to awaken The One True Morty, so must The One True Morty awaken The One True Rick.” Then he paused and closed his eyes. “But for now, it is time you rested. You will find sanctuary here for the night. One of the Eun-Ricks will show you to your quarters.” At the word, Smiles rose to his feet and padded his way to the entrance.

The energy of the room had soured so strongly, Rick could almost taste it. As he got up, looking at the message Mouse had left on the floor, he couldn’t shake the feeling that the odd, little word game carried more weight than he thought. Even Mouse had gone quiet, his shoulders hunched while he clutched the *Rickelations* papers in his arms.

“Thanks again, uh, for the tea. I guess,” Rick said nervously. Smiles held the curtain of metal nuts to the side with a bow. Just as they were about to step through to leave, the Author called out weakly behind them.

“Just remember, Rick. There will still be many trials for you both to face. You won’t want to have any regrets when your bond is truly tested.”

As the curtain swung closed behind them, Rick mulled over the Author’s ominous words. He squeezed Mouse's shoulders, hoping to reassure him as much as himself.
Chapter End Notes

6/27/17 Update: A fan put together an amazing playlist inspired by the story!! Thank you, rick-this-is-fucked-up, and we hope you enjoy the 13-song playlist here (on 8tracks.com) or here (on youtube). The cover art is also completely original and stunning! ☆

[All fanart for Chapter 13 can be found here.]
The Last Night

Chapter Summary

_Come._
Mouse spread his knees wider, the invitation louder than any Resonance.

Chapter Notes

_First published 7/30/2017_
We're happy to have gotten this out just in time for Season 3 Episode 2's debut! Enjoy and feel free to let us know what you thought in a comment or hit us up in one of the many different ways mentioned on our AO3 profile. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

_“The One True Rick said unto Him, ‘When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid. For I shall be with thee, and thy sleep shall be sweet.’”_  
- Sexodus 7:25-7:26

The dream was always the same.

A mass of splintered moments whittled down to a handful of images that repeated on loop: a ring of shadowed faces; gnarled hands reaching for him; wordless voices no more than grating, white noise. And then a dazzling, green whirlpool.

Without fail, Mouse would always awaken in a cold sweat. Whether curled up in his meager bed, his teeth chattering, or nestled in the satin sheets of the winner’s bed with a warm body splayed across him, the dream would leave him shaking and his heart pumping with adrenaline.

In those brief moments of in-between, before consciousness took him away entirely, Mouse would look back at the whirlpool, and he’d wonder why it left him so panicked. Yet the harder Mouse tried to chase after the dream, the more quickly it would slip through his fingers. In the end, the memory would fade to nothingness, and Mouse would forget it’d ever been.

Just as it happened when Mouse awoke this time.

For a moment, he lay still on his side, eyes closed, waiting for the phantom terror to retreat and for his heart to cease its wild pounding. He was in no rush to greet the day—the sight of his barren, little room would only remind him of the nightmare he _couldn’t_ wake from.

He shifted against the coarse sheets and—no, not coarse. Soft—silky, even—and warm.

The winner’s suite, then?

He squirmed again, and something tickled his cheek. It was fur, softer than any rabbit’s coat, and it
made Mouse feel an inexplicable calm. The bed in the winner’s suite didn’t have fur. And with that strange but soothing touch came the gradual realization of where he was.

With a deep breath, he took in the smells around him—something sharp like spices and a hint of that dry kind of musk unique to old books.

*The Eun-Ricks’ home.*

That’s right. After giving Mouse and Rick use of the modest bathroom to relieve themselves and wash up, the Eun-Rick with the kind eyes had shown them here. From the way he had moved about with such familiarity, it was clear that they were occupying *his* bedroom for tonight, but when Mouse tried to apologize for putting him out, he would hear nothing of it.

The Eun-Rick had just peeled back the covers to the bed, giving Mouse a knowing smile, and left them with a generous nose-to-floor bow.

Now Mouse willed his eyelids to open.

Blue brindled fur filled his vision where it was curled up in his loose fist. Each exhalation made the fine hairs quiver, the color shifting from cerulean to zaffre beneath the glow of a nearby candle—or, rather, candles. Three stout spires rose from a shared pool of melted wax on the nightstand—a mama, papa, and baby candle all in one. They greeted Mouse with a back-and-forth wave of their flames.

Sleep cocooning his mind, Mouse looked around slowly to take in his surroundings. The bedroom was no bigger than the sitting area he’d been in earlier and equally as cozy. Skyscrapers of books made a miniature metropolis in the crowded space, standing sentinel to the room’s single bed.

On the small table near Mouse was a bundle of papers, bound with twine. *The Book of Morty.* He’d set it there, intending to read it, before sleep overtook him. Beside the book was a wooden pencil, no doubt belonging to the smiling Eun-Rick. Even from where Mouse lay, he could make out the peculiar pockmarks that riddled its sides.

They were bite marks.

Mouse had seen it often enough with his clients to know that it was a quirk among all Ricks: They had a tendency to bite or chew or simply mouth whatever was within reach, dragging random objects across their bottom lips.

*An oral fixation,* Rick had called it.

To Mouse, it’d sounded like a treatment for some kind of disease.

*What are they trying to fix?*

That was last night. They had been lying together side by side, loose and playful and electric with afterglow. Mouse had asked the question when he caught Rick absentmindedly running Mouse’s knuckles across his lips while they chatted in low whispers. Rick had only chuckled in reply, already planting kisses on the pads of Mouse’s fingers.

*Something that can’t be fixed, Mouse.*

He’d then had no shame showing off the full extent of his “fixation” to him the rest of that night.

Mouse shivered again, this time not from a cold sweat but from a wave of heat that suddenly rushed through him at the memory.
Had it really just been last night? It’d felt like ages, and he marveled at how far they’d come. A little over a day ago—if even that—he’d still been the Council’s pet, trapped in a cycle of auctions and torture. Of winning Ricks and nasty pills. Of loneliness and denial.

But now that was behind him. Now he was safe and warm, standing at the precipice of a new chapter.

And it had all started with six simple words: *If that’s what you want, Mouse.*

Rick’s answer to Mouse’s silent request had been the catalyst for everything that had happened. For the first time in his life, someone had listened to him, had let his wants have a voice. It was the momentous first step in transforming Mouse from slave…

*For all the years that you have been denied your desires, you grant them for your brethren, and they are all the freer for it.*

...to savior.

The One True Morty, destined to bring freedom to all Mortys.

Though they wore no visible chains, the Mortys were just like him: captives within the Citadel. It’d wrung his heart to see them silenced into submission, but now he was going to set them free. It was just as Rick had said. He really was meant for something greater.

But greatness wouldn’t come with death-defying heroics or delivering rousing speeches to a crowd of thousands. No, it would be much subtler than that.

*He gives them agency, the courage to take what they want.*

The Author’s explanation of Mouse’s role as The One True Morty had bewildered him at first, but he was beginning to understand. Too often, he’d been distracted by his own pleasure at the time to realize it, but thinking back on it, he could see it in the blown-wide eyes of the Mortys that surrounded him at CentRick Park, their fingers restless and roaming, their minds illuminated by the same mysterious message:

*The One True Morty’s desires awaken our own.*

Whenever Mouse pursued what he wanted, he invariably inspired it in others too.

Mouse could feel something inside of him growing, rising to fulfill his purpose. It felt like something too big to fit, making his skin prickle as he squirmed beneath the sheets.

Heat swiftly swept his frame with a fierceness that had his body pulsing all over. He arched, letting it undulate through him as he stretched luxuriously. Earlier, he’d been only too glad to be rid of his stifling shirt and jeans before tumbling into bed naked, and now every nerve was hungry for stimulation. They sang at the slide of soft fabric against his skin, inciting but not quite enough. He needed something weightier, something hotter, something alive.

Reflexively, his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, uncertain of what to do, even as another part of him screamed for attention—the part that now lay thick and heavy on his thigh.

“Hey, babe. Glad to see you up.” Rick’s voice came from across the room.

With a start, Mouse sat upright. The blanket pooled at his waist, letting in the cool air of the room. Part of him thought to pull the cover back over himself, wanting to give in to that knee-jerk impulse
to hide, but then his eyes locked on Rick, and all thoughts of modesty left him.

With an arm slung casually over the top of a dresser, Rick’s lithe frame was made all the longer by a provocative tilt of his hips and cant of his neck. His legs were crossed as he slouched back, a tiger in repose. But the intensity of his gaze and that cunning grin belied his relaxed posture. Rick looked like a man on a mission, and his sights were currently set on Mouse.

It set Mouse’s blood running hot.

“Whoa, there,” Rick purred. “What’s got you so hot and bothered?” He suddenly scowled. “W-what? No! N-not you!” He pressed a pair of fingers to his right temple, flapping his other hand in Mouse’s direction as he ducked his head. “I was talking to Mouse.” Rick laughed at something that was said across the wireless communication. “Yeah, you wish, Chi. Anyway, like I was saying...”

While Rick returned to his conversation, Mouse dropped back onto the pillows with an exasperated huff.

Rick had mentioned that he’d be getting in touch with Chi during Mouse’s impromptu nap, and it looked like he was still in the middle of it. Even though Mouse knew perfectly well that it was necessary—it’s not like he’d forgotten they were on a mission to overthrow the Council itself—he lacked his usual patience.

Mouse’s fever had been piqued by that brief but heated look, and he wished that Rick would touch him and soothe away this maddening itch inside him like he usually did. Instead, he was left to—

Take care of it himself.

Now, there was an idea. Not touching himself was something that had been instilled in him thanks to Mama Eun-Rick’s disciplining, to the point where he felt like a stranger in his own body. Sure, he could bring a Rick to climax easily enough—the winning Ricks had been cruel but thorough teachers on the matter—but none of that had ever translated to himself.

Then, over the past week, Rick had shown Mouse splendors he'd never known. With the slightest touch, he could reduce Mouse to a shaking, sweating mess. True to his word, Rick was becoming an expert on the subject of him, and Mouse had come to associate Rick with the sole source of his pleasure.

But what about when Rick wasn’t available? Mouse paused to think, a blush warming his face. It was almost embarrassing that he was only now realizing that the solution had been in his own hands all along.

“Trust me, Chi. It’s a good thing. This means we can jumpstart things even sooner. You send out the call yet?”

Rick’s one-sided conversation continued as Mouse propped the pillows up so that he could recline comfortably against the headboard. Although the term “comfortable” was relative. He was so new to this, the prospect of what he was about to attempt filled him with anxiety.

For living with this body his entire life, he felt as if he were meeting it for the first time. Gripping the corner of the cushion behind him, he let his free hand wander aimlessly down his front. He didn’t know where to start, but he figured he would start simple: neck, collar, down one shoulder.

Initially, his skin bristled where he passed over it, his body resisting this unfamiliar visitor. But as he traced the same paths that Rick had taken before, mind focused on thoughts of his lover’s skilled hands and even more skilled tongue, his skin gradually loosened beneath his caresses. While not as
intense as Rick’s touch, it was still satisfying in its own way, and he sunk deeper into the cushions with a content sigh.

This was nice.

A choked cough made him glance up, and he caught Rick staring at him. Rick’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, brow inching closer to his hairline.

Mouse allowed himself a mischievous grin, remembering that his thoughts weren’t so private, after all, thanks to the Resonance.

Yes. This was going to be very nice.

He paused to wrestle the sheets the rest of the way off him then spread his legs out on top of the blanket. The fur was soft and luxurious behind his thighs, and he wriggled in place just to relish the tactile caress.

Much better.

From beyond the foot of the bed, Rick blushed harder, and his posture stiffened. There was something about having Rick look but not touch that made Mouse’s heart crowd his throat. This was a whole other level of control he hadn’t considered before. To be wanted was amazing enough already, but this was different—this was controlling his pleasure from every angle.

A short excursion across his chest revealed that he had a ticklish spot in the center of his sternum and that he preferred a featherlight touch to his nipples. Soon his hand wandered lower, following the dip and swell of his tummy, the brush of happy trail below his belly button.

His cock twitched just south of it, and he swallowed, hand coming to a stop. Now he was really entering forbidden territory. But he knew to take cues from Rick. Indulging himself in the private theater of his mind, he replayed the memories of how Rick had touched him and stroked his hand down his length. Fingers wrapping around him. Just. Like.

This.

A loud clatter interrupted his expedition. When Mouse peeked over, Rick was clutching clumsily to the side of the dresser, legs wobbly beneath him.

“Y-yeah! Yeah. I’m here,” Rick stammered over ORA’s intranet. “Right. The thi—the gun! So you got the gun working again?” Rick ran his hand through his hair, before sliding it down to pull at the collar of his coveralls as he huffed out a mouthful of air.

Come.

Mouse spread his knees wider, the invitation louder than any Resonance.

Rick’s cheeks burned brighter, if that were even possible, his eyes fixed on the steady up-and-down rhythm of Mouse’s hand on his cock. “Yes! Yes, already! I get that you’re a f-fuckin’ genius, Chi!” He was already stumbling forward, his steps uncertain but with conquest obvious in his eyes.

Come to me, Rick.

“Look, Chi. Just tell them it’s a go. Prep supplies for at least a hundred of our brothers.” Whether Rick was nodding to Chi or to Mouse, it wasn’t clear, but he barreled through the rest of the conversation, eager to wrap it up. “I don’t care anymore! Just make sure it happens. Now I really
Rick barely made it to the foot of the bed before collapsing to his knees, arms splayed out in front of him. He buried his face in the fur throw, going limp as though he’d died on the spot.

“Mouse, y-you can’t just—this poor old man’s heart can’t take so much cockteasing!” he grumbled, his words muffled in the thick plush. He turned his head to the side, looking up at Mouse, a beggar at the steps of a cathedral. “Fuck yeah, I’m about ready to start begging,” he groaned.

It was incredible to see Rick succumb like this. Just hours earlier, in the Author’s tearoom, Rick had been uncooperative and irritable—a rabid animal in a trap. Now he was on his knees at Mouse’s command.

“Was I—was I interrupting? It sounded important.”

Rick grunted, raking a hand through his hair. “Of course. Fuck, Mouse. We’re supposed to be leading a revolution, and here you are just—what’s gotten into you, babe?” Still prostrate on the bed, he reached forward and ran a finger along the inside of Mouse’s ankle.

It was as good as if Rick had wrapped his lips around his cock itself, which now gave a sympathetic twitch in response. Mouse tried to suppress a gasp and failed. It didn’t make sense. He’d been by Rick’s side every moment for the past day, and still that single touch sent a new flood of wetness trickling down his behind.

“Y-you’re the one who’s making me—making me like this,” he huffed. To illustrate his point, he twisted his fist to the head of his cock while the other hand smoothed down to circle his anus. Rick’s eyes followed the entire time as Mouse slid his fingers through the warm slick there and then held them up to Rick.

Rick was already moving before even needing to be given the order. Moaning his gratitude, he shimmied onto the bed on his elbows until he was within reach. Then he stretched forward, stuck out his tongue, and licked.

The sight—the feel of Rick lapping at his fingers to savor every trace of his wetness had Mouse’s stomach doing flips. If he thought he was turned on before, now he was almost delirious with need. His breath came faster, the thick haze of lust filling his brain. Suffocating.

Ever since the talk with the Author, Mouse had felt insatiable, as if a bonfire had been lit inside him, cajoling him to feed it, stoke it, make it blaze. At the heart of that inferno, however, one thought rang louder above all else: He wanted Rick.

Rick smirked, propping his chin on one hand. “You sure? Looks like you’ve got things under control just fine,” he drawled, tracing his finger up Mouse’s inner thigh while staying clear of his pulsating hole.

“Mm!” His hand continuing its steady pace, Mouse squirmed, subtly trying to direct Rick’s fingers to touch him where he wanted. But Rick stubbornly remained just out of reach. With that cocky smirk in place, Rick chuckled from between Mouse’s legs, letting the occasional puff of air tickle his privates.

“Yeah. You won’t even need me at this rate.”

“No!” The protest was swift. “I-I need you! I’ll always need you, Rick. Because y-you’re my—”

For a moment, Rick looked confused. Then realization smoothed his brow as he figured out the steps
of the dance. He nodded slowly. “That’s right. I’m your Counterpart.”

Mouse keened, the simple word striking a chord within him. Yes. Rick wasn’t like any other Rick. Mouse had always known it himself, but to have the Author echo the same sentiment in more grandiose terms felt like having the very cosmos itself validate him.

And the only thing greater than being told that he had a destiny waiting for him was knowing that he wouldn’t have to face that destiny alone.

“The Counterpart to The One True Morty,” Rick continued as he crept up to brace himself over Mouse.

Rick’s body heat was palpable through his clothes, and Mouse quickened his pace along his shaft as he drank in his scent. His cock swelled thicker, his heart swelling in kind. He couldn’t even string two words together, though his mind was running a mile a minute, repeating the same phrase again and again.

“I know, Mouse.” Rick sounded husky as he pressed his forehead to Mouse’s. “But ‘One True Rick’ is just so—kinda pretentious, don’t ya think?” He winked.

“R-Rick,” Mouse panted around a quivering smile, eyes shining with want.

Then Rick’s fingers pressed against his entrance, drawing a shuddering moan from Mouse. Clasping a hand around Rick’s wrist, Mouse pulled him forward, guiding him in. His hole clenched fiercely around Rick’s fingers, slick oozing out from under them to run in hot rivulets down his bottom as Rick pumped in and out.

Mouse gazed up at Rick, enraptured by the way the candles’ flames colored his skin and made the hollow of his throat more pronounced when he swallowed. They glittered like torches within his eyes, now made storm-gray blue by Rick’s own lust.

"Th-then what should I c-call you?" His voice was warbled, and he didn’t care.

“Why don’t you just call me...yours?”

Any attempt at maintaining self-control dissipated beneath that smoldering gaze, and Mouse felt his heart pound at the base of his cock, a drum following the beat of his burgeoning orgasm.

He panted Rick’s name again, his hole beginning to clamp down around Rick’s invading fingers. His muscles drew tight, and his hand began to lose all sense of rhythm or technique. Now was just about friction.

Rick curled his fingers inside him, and that was all it took.

Like a wire wound too tight, Mouse snapped. Throwing his head back against the pillow, his orgasm ripped through him. Distantly, he registered that Rick’s hand moved with him. Still nestled in up to the knuckle, Rick kneaded him on the inside as Mouse’s climax pulsed wave after wave from his cock.

Part of his soul felt as if it were being dragged down through his core and out along with his release. Drawn clear off the bed as though to follow after, he arched and strained, his legs quaking where they held him aloft. Then, like a candle snuffed out by a heavy sigh, the orgasm left him, and he crashed back onto the bed.

Spent, Mouse flopped his arms to either side, hands curled in weak fists. His chest heaved with each
breathe as he stared numbly at the ceiling. Dark wooden rafters crossed the breadth of it, charcoal portraits hanging from the occasional crooked nail. They were the same ones Mouse had drawn, and it amazed him that the Eun-Ricks had never thrown them out when they’d cleaned his room but had instead kept every single one.

Rick slipped his fingers from Mouse, a string of slick dangling off their tips before catching on the inside of his thigh. Mouse shivered lightly when cool air brushed his twitching entrance.

The mattress dipped as Rick sat back on his heels. He chuckled and then said, “I swear, I’ll never get tired of seeing you like this—”

Something banged loudly on the other side of the wall, startling Rick mid-sentence. Mouse turned his head lazily in the direction of the sound, already imagining what was occupying their hosts.

Rick made a face. “Really? All—all four of them?”

“They can’t help themselves,” Mouse sighed. He then shakily pushed himself up to his knees. Clutching the front of Rick’s coat, he pressed his cum-smeared belly against it then drew him closer to huff against his lips, “Not when I’m like this.”

They kissed, Mouse diving his tongue inside to taste Rick completely as he grasped Rick’s lapels. Rather than pull him forward, however, he pushed back, tugging the garment off of Rick’s shoulders and making him gasp in surprise.

He chuckled around the kiss. “And what exactly is ‘this’?” The question came out a growl as he shrugged off the coat. “‘Insatiable’? Yeah, I’d say that’s about right.” He almost lowered his hands to his belt but stopped, already knowing to let Mouse take the lead.

The gesture would never lose its potency to Mouse, whose heart thrilled at the invitation for him to make a move.

“They feel what I feel.” He cupped Rick’s erection. “And right now, I feel like having you.”

Rick gave a guttural moan, the bulge in his pants hefting forward eagerly. “Babe.” He shook his head, laughing. “I dunno how I feel about e-everyone—the whole Citadel knowing about it every time we’re about to—” He grunted as Mouse popped open the button to his pants.

“R-remember your promise, Rick?”

*The next time we’re alone together, I’m gonna make you forget your own name.*

The scrape of the zipper was loud in the quiet room. Rick nodded, just a stiff twitch of his head up and down, focused on Mouse relieving him of his trousers. Rick was quick to shimmy out of them, letting his shoes tumble forgotten to the floor.

While Rick was busy shucking off his top, Mouse slipped his fingers over the band of his underwear and peeled them over the crest of his hips and down.

“You’re going to—y-you’re gonna keep your promise, right, Rick?”

Once freed, Rick’s erect cock bobbed between his thighs like a wolf sniffing out its prey. Its musk, appetizing as a four-course meal, filled Mouse’s sinuses as he lay back and held Rick close with his arms looped around his neck.

This was different from their prior embraces. This time, they were content to simply lie there and
explore each other, every scar and wrinkle mapped out with care, wanting to memorize and be
memorized. The once raging pyre was now a crackling hearth, warm and comforting yet strong
enough to see them through the night.

The Resonances still sang with Mouse’s most torrid desire, however, and before long, Rick had to
answer it.

Cradled in Rick’s arms, Mouse let himself be rolled onto his side, spooned against his chest. With
each deep inhale, Mouse was rocked forward, the soothing movement almost lulling him to sleep.

He didn’t want to sleep, though.

“But you’ll need your rest,” Rick pointed out playfully, resting his chin in the center of Mouse’s
mohawk. He slipped a leg between Mouse’s thighs where the slick was beginning to cool into a
tacky mess. “No, it’s not disgusting.” Then he chuckled. “And, yes, people would think I’m crazy
for talking to myself out loud like this.”

Mouse giggled and cuddled into Rick’s embrace, reaching back to kiss the bottom of his jaw. Rick’s
appreciation came in the form of a deep hum and gentle prodding of rigid flesh at his backside.

These were the cues Mouse had to go by, with no thoughts to guide him, the way Rick had.

Not for the first time, Mouse wished he could read Rick’s mind just as easily as Rick was reading
his. So often the Resonances were a blessing, sparing Mouse the struggle to find the words to say.
Years of being denied a voice made it difficult for Mouse to have the courage to speak, let alone
articulate his thoughts. But with just the right caress down his side or a sweet suckle at his earlobe, as
Rick was doing now, Mouse could share his every wish without the cumbersome weight of words.

*Like my feelings for Rick.*

Rick’s hand stumbled almost imperceptibly along its trek.

*Does Rick feel the same way?*

A row of red-lettered cards sprang to mind, parsed into two different messages. It’d seemed like an
innocent difference in understanding at the time, but Mouse’s and Rick’s interpretations of the cards
had prompted the Author to leave them with a rather dire message: *You won’t want to have any
regrets when your bond is truly tested.*

What had he meant by that? Was there something Rick hadn’t done yet? Or Mouse, for that matter?

Something that hadn’t been...said?

*Love is nowhere. Love is now here. Love is now here. Love is now here.*

“Mouse.” Rick’s voice was pinched as he suddenly hugged Mouse tighter.

*Love is nowhere. Love is now here. Love is now here.*

*Love is now here.*

He furrowed his brow, on the verge of—of something. A breakthrough. Something important.

*Love is—*

“Mouse, I—”
Something that needed words.

A collage of thoughts jumbled together in his head, cluttering up the pathway between his mind and his tongue. One second the answer was there, and the next it would disappear, Mouse only catching glimpses of it through a thick grove of questions.

He twisted in Rick’s grasp, his search for Rick’s mouth mirroring his hunt for the right words. He wanted to kiss him while he said them. He wanted to breathe them onto his lips.

Finally, he pierced through the chaos and grabbed onto the one truth he was searching for.

He opened his eyes.

“I love you, Rick.”

Clarity came to him like dawn dispelling the night. He could practically see the gnarled clot inside his mind begin to unwind, laying itself out straight and clear. The answer in all its simplicity.

“I love you,” he said again, enjoying the weightlessness of those words on his tongue. Glorious and crisp and alive.

_Say you love me too._

“I—” Rick nestled his face in the back of Mouse’s neck, his breath hot across his skin. “You know I __”

_Say it._ Mouse squirmed against Rick’s burning rod. He angled his hips, lifted, felt the tip nudging him in avid greeting.

“Rick, say it.” It came out more as a plea than a command. He was already rearing back, lowering down, welcoming Rick’s cock like a sword to its sheath. Rick moaned a curse, clutching Mouse across the chest. His calloused fingers reached up to caress his throat as he restrained himself from bucking up on automatic.

“Fuck!” he gasped. His shaft slid in to the hilt with little resistance, coated in wet heat, Mouse nestled comfortably in his lap. They were a lock and key united. Rick nuzzled Mouse’s nape, kissing and mouthing along every inch he could reach. “O-of course I love you. I love you so—so fucking much, Mouse!” He gritted his teeth as Mouse clenched around him in answer.

Although smothered, the words rang clear as bells in Mouse’s ear. Alight with pure joy, he reached back to caress Rick’s cheek, his other hand gripping Rick’s arm around his chest. As he entwined their fingers and began to move, he inundated Rick with unspoken praise. His deepest feelings for Rick played out as a symphonic performance in his mindscape.

Mouse arched back in rhythm with Rick’s thrusts, the two rocking back and forth to the song of love. Their love.

Like a piano gradually brought back into tune, with every utterance, the words came easier to Rick.

“I love you, Mouse. And I was a fucking coward,” he gritted out, clutching Mouse as though he were a drowning man. “I don’t just care about you. You’re so much more to me than that. And I couldn’t—wouldn’t even say it.”

Mouse shook his head, clenching his eyes shut. “I-I know, Rick.” Fingers dug into Rick's forearm as he braced himself against the assault on his nerves. "I-I've always known. Just—I n-n-needed to hear
you say it."

Still refusing to relinquish his hold, Rick stroked his fingers up Mouse’s throat to dip them into his panting mouth. Mouse moaned, lapping at them with uncoordinated licks, tasting Rick’s sweat and the blunt sweetness of his own slick on them. Being filled at both ends by Rick made his heart tremble with borderline fear and outright elation.

Nothing could compare to this, Rick’s long fingers and even longer cock making him sing. Pleasure struck up its chorus once more within him, and he accompanied it as best he could in quivering moans and hitched gasps.

"I’m so lucky to have you. Hell, the whole damn multiverse is lucky to have you. With you in it, it’ll never be the same.” He nuzzled his nose behind Mouse’s ear and breathed deeply. “You just don’t know it yet.”

You just don’t know it yet.

The same words, spoken in Rick’s voice, echoed in his head—but it wasn’t Rick. Instead of being reassuring, the words suddenly turned caustic and invasive. They sliced through Mouse’s subconscious like a viper through the grass, tearing him from the pleasure that filled him. He jerked his head to the side beneath the phantom strike with a gasp.

Rick noticed the reaction immediately. “Mouse?” He withdrew his fingers from Mouse’s mouth.

A ring of faceless strangers in the dark. Spidery hands reaching out to hurt him.

Mouse mewled, burrowing his face into the pillow. He wanted to hide from the frightening images. They were strange and disturbing and oddly familiar. Like something from an old, old dream.

Behind him, Rick was silent, and even his movements had slowed as though he were preoccupied with something else. Mouse could imagine—could almost feel Rick searching his mind for an explanation of what had gone wrong. He was opening too many doors, peeling back strips of wallpaper, lifting the floorboards.

He was going to find out. He was going to see it for himself.

“‘No!’ Mouse shouted, eyes flying open. He flailed his arms, pushing against Rick to free himself. From what exactly, he didn’t know, but an unplaceable guilt, sour and ridiculing, was already bubbling up from some hidden depth.

Rick only clung tighter.

“Mouse, calm down!” His arms were a straightjacket around him, locking Mouse firmly in place despite his struggles. “Mouse, it’s okay. Tell me what it is. I’m—I’m here, Mouse.” His voice sounded broken. He was already beginning to see it.

The Last Night.

Mouse sobbed, dragging his nails along the back of Rick’s hand where it was wrapped around his cock. But Rick hushed and cooed to him, angled his hips the way Mouse liked it, stroked him with just the right pressure. There was nothing Mouse could do, but—

“Show me, Mouse. It won’t change anything. I’ll still—I’ll be right here.”

Each word was picking away at Mouse’s walls, letting in the memories that he’d suppressed for so
“Please. Let me in,” Rick whispered, his grasp firm but gentle.

And with that, Mouse let go.

Like the teeth of some gruesomely grinning monster, the memories were revealed to him. He was frightened to look into that waiting maw, but he knew he wasn’t alone. With his eyes and cock leaking salty tears, he let Rick reach inside and pull the memory from its resting place to lay it bare:

Daddy had hit Mommy.

Mouse didn’t even remember why. There didn’t ever seem to be a reason for it, as far as Mouse could tell. All he knew was that he’d had enough of it and had tried to protect Mommy that day.

The smack of Daddy’s hand had been fire across his face. The force of it threw him against the wall where he’d crumpled like a rag doll. Oh, how he’d cried. He’d never felt pain like that before, and even after Mommy kissed it all better and he told her it was okay, it still kept him awake that night in his bed.

_I hate Daddy!_ He’d meant it with every fiber of his being.

His rage was too fierce to allow for sleep, so he remained curled on his side, touching his cheek where it was still tender. He shut his eyes tight and wished and wished and wished that he’d never see him again!

Daddy was always mean. Always angry and then yelling at Mommy and Summer and him. It wasn’t fair! Mommy was always nice to Mouse. She even took Mouse for ice cream whenever Daddy was in a really bad mood. She didn’t do anything wrong.

Daddy was the one who was wrong. Daddy was the problem.

Mouse tightened his hands into fists, his teeth clenched.

“I hate Daddy, and I wish he’d go away forever!”

“Consider it done,” came a voice from the darkness.

Mouse bolted upright, blanket clutched up to his nose. He peered up at six tall figures looming in a circle around his bed. They were old men—much, much older than Daddy—with pale hair and sunken eyes. In the dim glow of his elephant nightlight, Mouse could make out their matching white lab coats.

The one right beside him, the one who had spoken, clasped his hands behind his back. “Your daddy won’t be bothering you again. Or the rest of them, for that matter.” He then paused to look around, the pointy beard on his chin standing out in profile. “Where is your Rick, boy?”

“R-Rick?” He didn’t know what to think of these men, but he knew that if he didn’t answer them, they’d get mad. They might even hit him like Daddy did. And he didn’t like the way they were staring. “Y-you mean Grandpa Rick?” Mommy didn’t talk about him often, but he knew that she missed him very much. He dropped the blanket. “Mommy says h-he’s in Heaven.”

This made the man narrow his eyes. The others looked at one another, murmuring something.
“Um, w-were you Grandpa Rick’s friends?”

“We’re here to take you away, Morty,” the man said sharply, ignoring his question. “You have something very important to do, and you can’t stay here any longer.”

“Wait, how do you know my—hey!” He yelped as the man grabbed him by the wrist and abruptly yanked him out of bed, his pillow and sheets tumbling to the floor. His panicked whimpers went unheard as the man calmly reached into his coat for something, speckles of red obvious on his pristine sleeve. He then pulled out a white gun and aimed it forward.

In the next second, there was a green whirlpool floating in the center of his bedroom. It was perfectly round and...alive. Spots of bright light swirled on its surface as it emitted a low, eerie rumble. A hungry beast growling for food.

“No! I don’t want to go!” Mouse tugged futilely against the ironclad grip, twisting and kicking as he yelled, “Mommy! Summer! Help me!”

The man snarled back, “Your family isn’t coming for you, so shut up!” He clamped down on Mouse’s wrist until the bones creaked. “Before I make you!”

Mouse cried out and collapsed to the floor. Arm limp in the man’s grasp, he cowered beneath the pain that exploded through his wrist.

A sharp inhale spread throughout the room as all the men stiffened. Even his captor above him went still as a statue, eyes distant and glassy.

“Brothers, am I crazy, or did my mind...just get less hazy?” said one, putting a hand to his head.

“Dope, man! Dat was the shit!”

“A most unprecedented development,” another said in reply to his burping colleague who stood beside him.

“Like a bolt from the blue!”

Oblivious to the chatter of his cohorts, the leader looked closely at Mouse. He tilted Mouse’s chin to the side to inspect the bruise on his cheek, left from earlier. When he grazed it, Mouse flinched. Then the man slapped him across the face. Hard.

Again, they all grinned, their gleeful laughter clashing harshly with Mouse’s cries as he sniveled into the carpet.

In the next moment, Mouse was picked up off the floor, a blow landing squarely in his stomach. The wind was knocked from him, but even as he gasped for air, the attacks kept coming.

He remembered being yanked and prodded. Dropped and stepped on. Smacked and kicked. He was certain he even passed out during it. Twice. How long did it last? Minutes? Hours? To Mouse, it seemed without end. These unnamed assailants couldn’t get enough of Mouse’s torment, of seeing how far they could push him, how cruelly they could twist him.

When they finally seemed to have had their fill, they stooped to wipe the sweat from their brows, chuckling to themselves in great, wheezing breaths. Through his swollen black eye, Mouse watched in a daze as they readjusted their clothes and smiled at each other.

He didn’t move, hoping he could convince them he was dead. Maybe then they’d finally leave him
alone.

“I’ve not felt such unparalleled invigoration in ages! Truly a testament to the ingenuity of the Morty race!” one of them said, rubbing his hands together.

Another burped loudly, a short but wet belch.

“Well, Riq,” said one, slapping the leader on the back. “And here I thought the trip out here was just another one of your harebrained ideas. But this little runt really knocked my socks off! Whoever your little birdy is that tipped you off is all good in my book!”

The one named Riq, the one who had first laid hands on him, smirked. He then crouched in front of Mouse and reached for him. Behind him, the green whirlpool appeared again, bathing the room in its brilliant, emerald glow.

Mouse cringed, but then Riq cupped his chin gently in his hand, his gaze keen with affection as he spoke. “As I said before, my little one, you have something very important to do. This may all be new for you, but I promise you, soon this will be your entire life.” He leaned closer to whisper by his ear, “You just don’t know it yet.”

It was there the scene ended, slipping back into the wormhole of Mouse’s consciousness. It’d only taken a handful of seconds for it to play out in his mind’s eye, and when it’d silenced itself, the sounds of their lovemaking came to the forefront once again.

His moans punctuated the slap-slap-slap of Rick’s pistoning hips, and for a moment he was perplexed by how Rick could still want to touch him, want to make love to him after knowing what he’d done.

Mouse bit his bottom lip, determined not to crack, as he heard his younger self recite the lines that he’d told himself since it happened: I wished for Daddy to go away, and they did just that. I made them come. I asked for it.

I deserved it.

“Mouse, don’t even—you’re wrong!” Rick’s quick retort stopped the retreating memory in its tracks. Slowly, painfully, it was dragged into the open air, unable to hide. No matter how hard Mouse resisted, still it came in all its wretched shame.

Mouse squeezed his eyes shut, a hot tear working its way free. “W-what are you doing, Rick? You already know!” He bumped his head against Rick’s chest, the urge to run weaker than before but still tempting. His entire body rang with exquisite arousal, but he was torn between the physical pleasure and the emotional pain within his mind. “Rick, I don’t want to see it anymore! P-please don’t make me!”

“Mouse,” Rick panted, sliding in and out of him in a way that blindsided Mouse with stimulation. “It happened, Mouse, all right? And—and that’ll never change. I get that. But it—” He spat out a curse. “That doesn’t mean it has to define you.” He left open-mouthed kisses along Mouse’s neck, brushing that sensitive spot behind his ear that always made Mouse shiver.

And Rick was right. As he murmured his healing reassurances, Rick was suddenly there beside his memories—no, in his memories. Mouse could see him standing inside his room with that ominous green portal and the Council who were delighting in Mouse’s pain.
But the memory wasn’t playing out the same way this time. It had been altered.

Now Rick was picking Mouse up, taking him out of reach of his attackers to hold him gently in his arms. The council members still continued their assault, but now they were just kicking at empty air, Mouse’s cries missing from the recording.

“There’s more than—more than all that shit that happened to you. There’s still this.” The sensation of Rick’s hand sliding lovingly across his chest bled into the memory. “There’s still us,” Rick said to Mouse—both of them.

The Mouse from that night looked up at Rick. What he saw in those eyes was a safety and love like he’d never known or would ever know again. He saw his other half, the missing piece to complete him and finally make him whole.

Back in the Eun-Rick’s bedroom, Mouse gasped. He blinked, eyes wide, as a dark corner of his heart finally sloughed off to disappear into the ether. He’d carried the memory around like a cancer—a terrible, dead thing inside of him. It had wracked him with guilt, but now that it’d been cut out, it could never plague him again. In its wake was left an airy lightness, a space that could be filled with all the glory he and Rick would share.

Within the memory, the young Mouse wrapped his shaking arms around Rick’s neck and smiled into his collar as they walked through the portal.

Together.

~~*~~

The Author gasped, the sound loud in the darkness. He shivered as another bead of sweat traveled down the back of his neck to seep into the cushion beneath him.

Immediately, a pair of hands crested his shoulders to cup his chin, the other splaying over his heart. Fingertips brushed his lips as a voice quivered, “A-are you certain we sh-should continue?” The pad of a thumb slipped inside to rest on his tongue.

The Author’s only answer was to suckle on the digit and moan.

“Your body won’t be able to take another one.” A second pair of lips pressed themselves to his side, marking a trail of wet kisses across his ribs, just above where his belly button would’ve been. The Author could feel the outline of a smile against his skin. “Surely, it will be too much.”

He lolled his head to the side, letting the first’s thumb slip from between his lips. “N-no. I want it. Please. Let me have this.” He wondered how his voice could even be heard over the drumbeat of his heart.

A third figure shifted from between his thighs, little more than a dark blue shape in the dim. Even with every candle in the room extinguished, the Author could make out the sheen of wetness on his face and fingertips. Elegant as a cat, he slid up the Author’s side, cradling him gently in the crook of his arm as he gazed into his face.

“Then you mean for this to be the end.”

The Author reached up, shaky fingers brushing the bandage over one cheek. “Oh, my dear, dear friend. This isn’t the end.”

Just as his strength flagged and his hand dropped, the Eun-Rick caught it in his own. “You have
done so much, dedicated your life to the prophecy.” He bent down to kiss the Author’s cheeks, one then the other. “You have earned your rest.”

“This is my last night, my friend. And I can think of no better way to spend it.”

The Eun-Rick only nodded solemnly, kissing him at the same time his brothers did. The three Eun-Ricks then moved over and around him, keeping their hands or lips on him as they traded positions—ready to pleasure the Author anew.

~~*~~

Riq awoke with a start, his eyes wide in the darkness. He blinked once, trying to place himself. With a sigh and a headache, he remembered.

Sitting upright, he scowled as he shrugged off a pair of sticky hands wrapped around his arm, another from his bare waist. He stood, everything stinking of musk and vodka and a touch of vomit.

The seraglio was a mess of broken wine bottles and torn clothing, compliments of his fellow councilmen. Riq had merely suggested they share a toast in celebration—over what, he hadn’t elaborated—but of course the Council had been unable to keep it to just one toast. By the night’s end, the alcohol had been pouring, and the Council had indulged in their Morty harem with a little too much gusto.

As Riq stumbled through the room, kicking prone Mortys that yelped and curled into themselves to nurse their bruised ribs, he thought of how they’d started the night with giggles and eager stutters. He’d broken at least one of them since then. Maybe a few more.

He put a hand to his forehead. Fuck, it was too early to do basic math. Or maybe too late. What the hell time was it, anyway?

*Way past time for an update.*

It’d been hours since he’d last heard from the Captain of the Guard on how the X-Rick’s arrest was coming along. No doubt he’d have good news to share, and he wanted this hangover to be worth something.

Once he’d finally reached his room and tossed out a stray Morty who’d made himself too comfortable in his bed, he sat himself in front of the video communicator.

He swayed heavily as he punched the screen for any notifications. No new messages. Odd. Then he input the direct line to the Captain’s badge.

By now, the X-Rick had likely been detained, per his orders, and the Captain would be standing by for the go-ahead to prepare the execution. Riq was looking forward to it tremendously, and he wondered if he would grant the prisoner his own personal “send-off” or not even grace him with his presence.

*Leave the fucker to rot.* His sneer melted into a cruel smirk, imagining the poor bastard sitting bewildered in his cell without a clue why he was there. He’d die a painful and drawn-out death, only learning in the end that he should have never crossed Riq.

The line rang ten times before Riq finally jabbed the end-call button.

It wasn’t like the Captain to fail to answer a call. Riq was just considering contacting the second-in-command, when the light from the small screen on his bedside table caught his eye.
Immediately his mood brightened. Even though he’d spent himself no fewer than three times already that night, just thinking about The One never failed to bring blood rushing to his groin.

Leaving the arrest update for later, he turned his attention to the surveillance monitor of The One’s room. As he settled down in front of the screen, he adjusted himself in his slacks, pleased to find that his zipper was already down. Well, no point in wasting a good thing. He’d just put his fingers through the opening, when he paused.

Something was off.

He peered closer at the screen, blinking and rubbing his eyes to shake off the sleep that still pulled at them. Clearly, he was seeing things. He looked again.

The One’s bedroom was empty.

Shock sobered him up faster than if he’d been doused with ice water.

Immediately his erection died, and his heart began to pound as he stared at the empty bed and open door. On automatic, his fingers flew back over to the video communicator by his side, dialing for Mama Eun-Rick. Riq knew for a fact it wasn’t auction night, and the bitch always kept tabs on where the kid was. She would have the answer. She had to.

“H-hello...?” Mama Eun-Rick’s voice was rough and much lower than her normally elevated pitch. Once the camera brought her into focus, Riq saw that her hair was disheveled, one strap of her cheap lingerie falling off her shoulder. Fresh hickies dotted her collar and chest, and her lips were swollen.

“Yes, Master Riq, what can I—”

“Where is he?” he asked flatly, a vein in his temple pulsing.

“What? Where’s—”

“WHERE IS HE?” He exploded, jumping to his feet and gripping the screen. The plastic frame creaked and threatened to crack. “Where is The One, you old hag?! He’s not in his room! Tell me you fucking know where he is or—”

“Rickochet, ma chérie? Who on earth is making all that racket?” Another voice came from behind Mama Eun-Rick, followed by a hand snaking up from the bedsheets to loop around her waist.

She batted at her bedmate, even while a smile graced her lips. The two exchanged some more words in French as Riq looked on, appalled. The blatant display of disrespect normally would have had him ordering for her head on a plate—both of theirs! But at the moment, there were more pressing matters demanding his attention. He would deal with these loafers later.

“I’m not paying you to sleep around, Eun-Rick! Now, get your tranny ass out of bed and bring him to me RIGHT NOW!”

Mama Eun-Rick turned from her lover who was now necking her with abandon. She leveled her gaze at Riq through the monitor, her voice icy. “I don’t know where your precious Morty is. You want him, go find him yourself.” Then she raised a middle finger to him and added, “You psychotic bag of shit.”

The screen went black, her final fuck-you.

Riq just blinked. He didn’t know which was more shocking—the fact that Mama Eun-Rick had hung up on him or that The One was now officially unaccounted for.
With a shrill yell, he banged his fist on the bedside table, knocking the surveillance monitor to the floor. The display flickered with damaged pixels, the video feed of The One’s room running in rewind at top speed.

Then it hit him. The One wasn’t the only thing unaccounted for.

Cursing viciously, he called the Captain’s second-in-command. As the call went through, he kept his eyes locked on the toppled monitor.

“Yes, Riq, sir. This is Rick of—”

“I don’t give a shit who you are. Tell me you have him!”

The Guard Rick stumbled awkwardly over his words at the sudden command. “W-who, sir?”

“‘Who, sir?’” Riq mimed, his voice nasally and high. “THE X-RICK, YOU FUCKTARD!” He paced in front of the monitor, hating the Guard’s asinine expression and wishing he could throttle him where he stood. But, no, he needed answers first. He took a deep breath, quaking beneath his barely restrained temper. “Tell me you have the X-Rick.”

“Sir,” the Guard began, “we haven’t found the X-Rick since your order came in. But we’re doing everything in our power to—”

Riq was about to launch into another tirade, when something on the surveillance monitor stunned him into silence. The feed had righted itself and begun to play forward again. Now the room was occupied, but The One...wasn’t alone.

With every second of recording—the tiny lovers locked in the throes of sex—Riq’s heartbeat grew louder and louder until he could barely even hear the Guard over the chaos raging through him.

“Sir?”

At this point, Riq was no longer himself, and calmly he opened his mouth, tears streaming down his impassive face as he delivered the order:

“Yes. I’d like to issue a Code Black.”

Chapter End Notes

[All fanart for Chapter 14 can be found here.]
The Betrayal

Chapter Summary

“Eun-Rick! Where will we be safe?!”
The Eun-Rick pressed his lips into a thin line, his feet never stepping over the threshold.
“Nowhere,” he finally said.

Chapter Notes

First published 8/31/17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There fell upon the Citadel a darkness not unlike the shadow of death.”
- Ezekiel 5:21

“The truth which had befallen The Ones was immense indeed. It rang through Their souls like the
great tolling of a bell, shaking Them to Their very cores, much as the ground shaketh beneath a
meteor’s wrath. It was a truth so mighty as to learn all things seen and unseen, all things future and
past.

“The cosmos doth decree, and so ever shall it be: The Ones shall know the truth, and the truth shall
set all free.

“On the night of the truth’s reveal, The Ones took refuge in the haven of allies. The One True Morty
found rest to quench His body, but His soul thirsted still. For as fire burneth brighter when fed, so too
was He lit aflame, now given claim to His fate. Thus The One True Morty rejoiced and sought
pleasure in Himself, His hands guided by the teachings of His Counterpart. With effer—efferve—”

“Effervescence,” Rick supplied, taking a quick glance at the papers in Mouse’s hands. With ORA
cupped in his palm, he twisted loose another bolt, and a panel of the synthoptic’s outer casing
popped open, revealing its delicate internal wiring.

“Effervescence and love,” Mouse continued reading. “The Ones then joined in each other’s arms
once more to assuage Their doubts, for they were plentiful. The One True Rick did give of Himself
as no Rick giveth, bringing joy to The One True Morty with His mouth and hands and mighty s-s-
staff—” Mouse tilted his head and put the bundle of papers down on his naked lap. “Staff?” he asked
with a frown.

Rick chuckled. “That’s, uh—I’ll give you one guess.” He bent his arm stiffly in front of him and
made a fist. “Like a baby’s arm holding an apple,” he said, winking at Mouse.

A second later, realization pinked Mouse’s cheeks, and he gave a breathy, little “oh.” He then
hurriedly buried his nose back in the abridged version of the Book of Morty, eager to read on.
Little perv, Rick thought endearingly, already hearing a Resonance confirm his suspicions.

“A-as a key fitteth a lock, so did The Ones unite, completely and without room for want. The One True Morty felt an ecstasy that did maketh His blood run hot and His heart raceth and His s-staff—staff extendeth.”

God, even the archaic lisp sounded sexy.

Mouse squirmed in place at the less-than-subtle euphemism, and Rick felt a jump in his own pulse as he listened to him read aloud. More than once, his fingers had slipped while trying to concentrate on the delicate process of reprogramming ORA’s output variables. His depth perception was already shot with one lid closed over his empty eye socket, making the task that much harder.

1.53.11.7.63. He mentally recited the LP sequence, seeking respite in the sterile dullness of numbers.

“Th-They would share a love, unbridled and f-fathomless—” Mouse was getting more breathless by the moment. “—souls rushing as shooting stars toward climax to stain the sheets with evidence of Their union—”

Rick dropped his tools and slapped a hand over the page, masking his sudden embarrassment behind a cough. “Oookay, I think that’s enough reading for one morning.” He tried to play it cool, forcing a strained, little laugh as he plucked the Book of Morty from Mouse’s stunned grasp.

Another word from the sex-steeped pages, and Rick wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep his hands to himself. Then again, judging by the scandalous fantasies playing through Mouse’s mind, maybe it was Mouse he should be worried about.

After last night’s lovemaking, Rick felt deliciously sated but drained. He mentally patted himself on the back for being able to keep up with the kid’s pubescent vigor, but now he was paying for it with dull aches that had made nests in his muscles overnight. And he was pretty sure he’d pulled something.

What he needed right now was a break, not another tumble in the sheets.

“It’s really real,” Mouse said at last. He hadn’t moved from where he sat, his hands resting chastely on the bed’s duvet. A fresh hickey, kissed into the cradle of his hip, blushed proudly in the candlelight, making Rick swallow. “The book is real, Rick.”

“Y-yeah. A real piece of science friction, if you know what I mean.” He pulled his eyes from the allure of Mouse’s bared flesh and laughed at his own pun. “The thing reads like it was written by a monk with his mind in the gutter.”

“But it’s just like the Author said! E-everything that happened is written in here!” He was already scrabbling for the papers that Rick held overhead.

Rick rolled his eyes then bopped Mouse on the nose with the butt of his screwdriver. “Babe, the Author calls us The One True Morty and One True Rick, for crying out loud. To him, we’re the literal OTP of the multiverse!”

“The what of the multiverse?”

“Uuh, never mind.” Rick shrugged. “And are you really going to tell me you didn’t sneak a peek at it before you went all sex mink on me last night?” he lilted playfully, nuzzling Mouse’s neck as he strained to reach the papers. Finally, Rick surrendered them back to him. He’d never get sick of teasing the kid.
“I didn't! Last night, I just—I wanted to, you know?” Mouse clutched the papers in his hands and tucked his knees up, but he could only hide so much of his arousal behind the flimsy shield. An orgy of Rick-Mouse pairings in various stages of debauched union appeared through another Resonance.

“Well, I'm proud you came up with all that on your own,” Rick continued, stooping back over his work. “Look, Mouse. You're seeing what you want to see. Th-that's the way these kinds of books work: specific-sounding enough that everyone feels like it's written for them, but general enough that any schmuck who picks it up can relate.” He burped. “Not to mention, they prey off of humanity’s biggest insecurity—the future—promising that they have the answer all wrapped up in a pretty package.”

“I-like you don't also want to know how things will turn out? If w-what we’re gonna do will even work?”

Mouse was, as always, able to give voice to what Rick was too proud to admit.

He knew that what they were attempting to do was about as sane as handling isotope 322 barehanded: an X-Rick with a prison record and a stunted kid, trying to start a revolution? Yeah, it was insane. But when going up against a council of psycho dictators, even a prediction from an erotic fanfic could feel like the validation he needed.

He answered without looking up, feigning indifference as he completed inputting the configuration code he'd received from Chi. “Fine. If you really want to know so badly, then why not just skip to the end? Let's see what Rickelations has to say.”

For a moment, Mouse sat in silence, staring numbly at the book. Then, slowly and with the utmost care, he turned the aged sheets to the last page.

And gasped.

Oh, shit! Moment of truth! Sucking in a deep breath, Rick looked over to see what the book had revealed about their entire future and saw—it was blank.

Relief and disappointment clashed inside his chest, and he heaved a sigh. He hadn’t yet prepared himself for how he’d respond if the book had held something, so in a way, he was grateful to be spared one more life-altering revelation. For now, things could be allowed to follow the status quo—still uncertain in its own right, but at least it was familiar. With a shrug, he patted Mouse on the shoulder.

“Well, there you have it. Looks like we don't get to take the easy way out of this one, Mouse.”

“I—I don’t understand.” Mouse traced the two words at the top of the last page: And then. They were all that remained of the chapter, which had been torn from its maker prematurely. “It was supposed to tell us everything.”

“Yeah? W-well, why would you want some crusty, old papers telling you how to run your life, anyway?” Finished with the remote interface protocol, Rick snapped ORA’s casing shut and pressed the synthoptic back into place. As he blinked rapidly to readjust the extraocular muscles around it, he threw off the covers and stood to stretch. “I've never had some book predict my future, and I'm not about to start now.”

Behind him, he could feel Mouse’s eyes on his naked body, but no Resonances sounded. At least, none as strong as before. While no words or images revealed themselves, Rick could still feel Mouse somewhere in the corner of his mind. It was a near-constant presence now, like the way sunlight
warms a room from a corner window. Had it always been like this, and Rick was only now becoming conscious of it?

Whatever it was, he liked to think it meant they were linked in a way that could never be severed.

“Rick.” The heaviness in Mouse’s voice plucked a somber note on the invisible string between them.

“Hey, hey. Babe. Mouse, no,” he said, turning back to Mouse and attempting to soothe his despondency. With anyone else, Rick wouldn’t have cared enough one way or another what they thought. But with Mouse, he wanted to spare the kid the disappointment that false hopes inevitably brought. It’d be a tough lesson to learn, but one that Mouse needed to hear. “Look, so you don’t get to see what’ll happen.” He gently took the papers from Mouse’s limp hands and tossed them onto the nightstand, out of reach of them both. “That just means our future’s not written yet. As it should be.”

“But the Author said—”

“The Author said a lot of things, and not all of them made sense.” Rick paced by the bed, mindful of the stacks of books that flanked it. Titles like Many Lives, Many Masters and Parapsychology: An Advanced Reading graced their covers. He cringed.

His deep-seated scientific approach made it hard for him to swallow much of what the Author had told them. But Mouse? Mouse obviously believed more in the hookah pipe dream than he did.

“What about the Symmetry? A-and the Eun-Ricks?” Mouse reached out to grasp Rick's wrist, like he wanted, needed Rick to understand. His voice was level and lower than his usual treble. “What about Riq?”

Rick blinked. It was the first time Mouse had said his tormentor's name without flinching. Instead of fear, a regal indifference encompassed his features. Pride burned brightly in Rick's heart to see his little Mouse not so little anymore. In fact, he was nothing like his namesake now. Perhaps it was a trick of the candlelight, but Mouse’s face seemed to have lost some of that gaunt desperation. He even sat up a little straighter, a little stronger. Still cautious but with an unmistakable courage underneath, Mouse was growing more and more into—

The One True Morty.

Maybe the Author had been right about some things.

“What do you think about what the Author said?” Mouse asked. The unwavering confidence in his gaze made it clear he’d already reached his own answer to the question.

Rick carded a hand through his hair. They were like two stars on opposite ends of the same orbit—perihelion and aphelion—with too great a distance between them.

But he was willing to relent if it meant closing that distance even an inch.

“I think—I think the Author laid on the theatrics a bit too thick.” Rick bit out a chuckle. “I mean, he was talking through Playskool tarot cards, for crying out loud! Miss Cleo must be rolling over in her grave, am I right?”

The joke flew straight over Mouse’s head.

Waving his hands in the air as if to erase his blunder, Rick flopped back down onto the bed. “Okay, wrong reference. Lemme try again.” He turned to face Mouse and passed his hand between his chest and Mouse’s—running along that invisible line. “This? This, I believe in. One True Morty? One
“True Rick?” He swallowed a bitter lump of embarrassment, delivering his next line to the carpet. “Yeah. I think I can live with that.”

“Yeah,” Mouse echoed, his smile bright but dampened by uncertainty. It was as though he could see Rick stepping carefully around the metaphorical minefield of the conversation.

“I’m not saying I subscribe to the whole destiny thing, but there’s one thing I know for sure: We’re gonna turn this Citadel around. And that means—”

“Making Riq whole again.”

“—taking out the Counc—wait, what?” Rick furrowed his brow.

“Well, it’s what the Author said. We have to combine the Eun-Ricks together with Riq. To make them all...” Mouse trailed off, fitting his hands together, the fingers interlacing to create a ball.

Rick was already shaking his head. “Mouse,” he said, trying to keep the incredulity out of his voice. After all, he couldn’t blame the kid for wanting to believe in such a fairy-tale solution. “C’mon, Mouse. He didn’t mean it literally. The Author wasn’t really—obviously, he was talking in metaphors. Same thing with the whole Symmetry bit.”

“But, Rick, you saw it yourself! The Eun-Ricks. They’ve—”

“Got really strong personalities. Yeah, I know.” He pecked a kiss on the crown of Mouse’s head before getting up again. “But there’s no way they’re actually split from the same person. It’s too—no Rick could ever be that redundant! Riq has an entire Citadel of suck-ups at his disposal. Did he really need to make three more of himself?”

Even as the words left his mouth, Rick couldn’t shake the doubt that clung to his tongue like a nasty coating of sickness. There had been a moment—a good handful of moments, in fact—when Rick had believed the Eun-Ricks’ story. They’d sounded so sure about it, talking about the paranormal as easily as reciting the periodic table, that Rick had been on board with it.

Then they’d left that crowded little room, he’d gotten in contact with Chi, and the solidness of reality supplanted his earlier delusions.

“I’m willing to overlook their quirks, so long as they’re fighting on the same side as us. They want to take out Riq just as badly as we do.”

He made his way to the row of wooden knobs on the back of the door where his trusted coveralls hung. Wrinkled but fresh, he slung them over one shoulder as he looked back at Mouse with a smirk.

“And I know just how we’re going to do that.” He hoped that his bravado could make up for all his own hidden pockets of unease. Cocky grin and a line worthy of an action hero? Hell, he almost had himself convinced.

Mouse regarded him quietly for a moment, and Rick subtly probed Mouse’s thoughts for some insight as to what he was thinking. For the first time in a long time, he was completely unreadable.

“You see what’s happening, right?”

There was so much sureness in Mouse’s non sequitur that Rick froze, and for a moment he didn’t recognize the boy on the bed.

He quirked a grin. “And what’s that, babe?”
Was that fear that made his voice quiver? No, not fear. Awe. It was the kind of humility that struck one dumb when looking into the mouth of an abyss—that irrational sense of inadequacy in the face of something greater than oneself.

That was what Rick felt as Mouse spoke.

“We’re on the same path, Rick, even if we may have different ideas of how to do it. I think that—” Here, he became Mouse again, the tension in the air breaking as Rick caught his toes wriggling beneath the covers. “I think things are happening the way they’re supposed to. Y-you have your idea of what to do. And I—I have mine. And that’s okay.”

Rick wasn’t sure what to make of Mouse’s little speech, but he smiled encouragingly at him and nodded once. “Sounds fine by me, babe.”

Apparently, it was the right thing to say, because Mouse’s face broke into a grin. He looped his arms around his knees and looked attentively at Rick. “O-okay, then, Rick. Tell me your plan.”

“Oh, I’ll do better than that. I’ll show you.” Rick stepped into the pant legs of his coveralls, zipping them up to his waist before taking a seat on a small ottoman at the foot of the bed. Resting his elbows on his knees, he faced a blank space on a nearby wall and gave ORA the order to activate the external HUD.

Unlike the limited emergency mode from before, this time the display was filled with colorful graphics that moved at his command. Rick could hear Mouse breathe a quiet “wow” and the squeak of mattress springs that betrayed his crawl across the bed.

“Check it out.” Data popped up from their respective folders, taking the form of graphs, lists, and newspaper articles. Profiles of look-alike Ricks filled one half of the display in a grid.

“What is all this, Rick?” Mouse had perched himself on the edge of the bed, leaning close enough that Rick could feel his breath tickle his nape.

“Everything I’ve gathered about the Code Yellows. Like I saw in the Resonance, the Council’s been publicizing them as prisoners of war with the Galactic Federation,” he said, scrolling down through the arrest entries, Rick after Rick grayed out and stamped with a red X, “when they’ve actually been hand-delivering them straight to a GF maximum security facility. Just like I was. When you look at the numbers, anyone can see the entire war’s been bogus, an excuse to keep Ricks running scared.”

Rick then went on to explain how the intel came together: the timeline of arrests, the decidedly non-random victims, the correlations that no one else had drawn.

Ricks may be chaotic and bullheaded, but they were still creatures of habit, and their predilection for science made them suckers for hard evidence. They’d listen to numbers because numbers were the only thing in the multiverse that didn’t lie. Combined, they formed an irrefutable argument that was watertight.

Well, almost watertight.

Mouse, who had been looking over the data intently, pointed at the screen. “What about those darker ones?”

Three of the Code Yellow profiles were marked with a deeper shade of gray. Rick made a frustrated noise in his throat. “Something wonky with their arrest records and obituaries. The data’s bunk for one reason or another. Probably just a—URRP—typographical error.”
“Yeah. This one says he was arrested after he died,” Mouse said, almost contemplative.

“Like I said. Bunk.” Rick quickly flipped the display, bringing up a timeline graph instead. “B-but anyway, they’re just outliers. Every data set’s got ‘em.”

The “outliers” had been too few and far between to take into account, and like any good argument, Rick acknowledged them with the equivalent of a footnote and moved on. Armed with nothing but a list of obits and a PowerPoint presentation, he needed to make his pitch as solid as possible to convince the Citadel populace. They’d only have one shot at this.

“Then we infiltrate the control center and link up to the communications mainframe,” he said, wrapping up his explanation. “There won’t be a Rick in the Citadel who doesn’t hear the news.” He couldn’t help but smile. The act of giving his plan voice made it more grounded in reality, already.

“Do you really think the Ricks will listen?” Mouse hopped off the bed, stooping to pick up his clothes from the floor. “The R-Ricks I know—they were—they never seemed to care about what happened to other Ricks. They might not even want anything to change.”

Giving the silent command to shut down the HUD, Rick blinked a few times before turning to Mouse. He shook his head. “Oh, they’re gonna wanna hear this. You get a wild animal cornered for long enough, and it’ll fight. And as for those Elite asswipes—they’ve got more schmeckles than sense. They may be sitting cushy now, but they’ll be smelling it when the shit really hits the fan.”

“At least w-we’re not completely on our own now.”

Mouse's back was to Rick as he shimmied into his jeans, and Rick's brain struggled to stick to the conversation rather than start going down the rabbit hole of temptation.

He stood, shrugging one sleeve of his coveralls on. “You got that right. The Eun-Ricks weren’t kidding about this place. There’s a whole network of rebels here who’d be happy to see the Council choke on its own bullshit buffet. Plus Chi should be calling a few of our buddies to help out.”

Mouse paused, arms in his shirt, when he looked up at Rick and asked, “Why do you call him ‘Chi’? His name’s Rick, too, isn’t it?”

It was a simple question, but Rick hesitated. He still wasn’t used to Mouse talking about other Ricks so casually, especially one that had basically put out a hit on him.

“W-well, you know how the whole ‘Rick’ thing can get old and all, so he picked a code name for himself, and it stuck.”

“But what does it mean?”

“It’s just another way to say ‘X.’ Here.” Having shouldered the other sleeve on, Rick took Mouse’s hand. “This is an X. Also happens to mean ‘10,’ Chi’s dimensional number.” He traced the shape across the soft flesh of his palm.

Mouse’s fingers twitched. “Tickles,” he said.

“And this is the Greek letter χ, Chi.” Again, he made the same shape.

“That’s...pretty confusing.” Mouse peered closely at his hand as though the letters were branded into the skin. “If they look so similar, how can you even tell the difference?”

What if we were never X? What if we’re χ? Chi!
Chi’s frenzied voice suddenly reverberated through his memories like a wailing ghost down a haunted corridor. At the time, it’d sounded like another far-fetched conspiracy theory about originally being part of the Greco tier. Rick always knew Chi had strong feelings of pride for their dimension, but now, after everything that had happened, was there more merit to it than he’d thought?

In the past week alone, so much of what he thought was real had been turned on its head, not the least of which had been his own lot in life. He’d been a disenfranchised X-Rick, fresh out of jail and looking for one last hurrah in the name of revenge. Now, however, he touted the title of The One True Rick and was on a mission to bring an end to the Council itself, the very same Council who’d tried to snuff him out once already and was trying to again.

They needed to keep us down...

“Because they thought we were a threat,” Rick murmured to himself, and for a brief moment, he almost had it. Something more lay just beneath the surface of those words, something that so clearly connected the Council, himself, and all his brothers in one all-defining truth. It was so obvious, the final piece of the puzzle right there—

“What? A threat to who?”

Poof, it was gone. And Rick was left with the uncomfortable feeling of an opportunity missed.

Mouse had already taken back his hand and was wresting into his shirt, the process much more cumbersome than it would have been for someone accustomed to wearing clothes. He’d gotten as far as sticking an elbow through one sleeve opening, his head still trapped inside, before Rick intervened.

“Uh, n-nothing. Here.” Shaking himself free of his daydream, he slid his hands up Mouse’s ribs to let him know he was there. “Let me.” Mouse startled, arms bent awkwardly overhead, but turned obediently toward his voice.

Rick crouched before him and curled his fingers beneath the hem of his shirt. He started lifting it, when he paused partway.

“R-Rick? Rick, c’mon,” Mouse whined, writhing in front of him. The fine lanugo on the plane of his chest shivered beneath Rick’s hot breath, and he saw Mouse’s nipples pebble to attention.

“Just—just a minute.” He drew closer, thoroughly and utterly captivated. His nose skimmed Mouse’s skin to breathe in last night’s musk. It still clung to him, intoxicating and inviting. Without even thinking, he parted his lips and ran his tongue up the center of his chest. Mouse giggled nervously and twisted in his cloth trap.

“Rick?” He sounded simultaneously confused yet eager.

The tenor of Mouse’s presence then took on a heated note in Rick’s mind, calm shifting to hedonic in a heartbeat, and a bluster of Resonance fanned the fire of Rick’s sudden arousal. With Mouse’s unspoken wants driving him forward, and even at the protest of his aching muscles, Rick hoisted Mouse up to drop him back onto the bed.

Rick knew he shouldn’t be doing this. He shouldn’t be dragging his lips up Mouse’s neck, shouldn’t be peeling Mouse’s shirt up just high enough to find his lips while Mouse lay, blindfolded and vulnerable. Shouldn’t be slotting their mouths together so perfectly, so deliciously.

There was something reassuring in this, indulging in the flesh. It was familiar and primal and right here, right now. It let them forget, even for a few minutes, that they would be facing the unknown.
Fear of what would come fueled their sudden appetite for intimacy. Rick knew the kind of hell that would break out once they incited the ire of the multiverse’s biggest assholes—all 100,000 of them. Oppression and resentment had made the Ricks kegs of gunpowder; he was simply cutting the fuse shorter.

They spoke in whispers, though there was no one to hide from.

“I’m scared.”

“I know.”

“You?”

“...Yeah.”

At last, Rick helped guide Mouse’s arms and then head through the shirt’s openings.

“And then what?” Mouse asked, linking his hands behind Rick’s neck again as he lay back on the mattress beneath him. He was trying to keep his voice under control, even while his heart beat wildly. *So cute.* “W-what will we do after we’ve delivered the message? Things could get—get dangerous.”

Fleets of Guard Ricks closing in on them came to mind before the Resonance fell out of frequency. Mouse’s imagination could be incredibly vivid, and this vision spared no details: The Ricks had fangs in place of teeth, a wild bloodlust in their eyes, as Mouse was brutally torn away from him. The last image Rick sensed before it faded completely was of Riq’s hands around Mouse’s throat.

Rick smoothed a hand lovingly down Mouse’s neck, a quiet reminder that there was nothing there. When Mouse reached up to clutch at him, Rick interwove their fingers. “I’ll be right there with you. No one’s going to come between us.”

“But h-how will we escape?”

Rick playfully rubbed their noses together, putting on his best *I’ve got this* smile. “Where there’s a will, there’s a getaway.”

No sooner had he said those words than the calm was shattered by an earsplitting alarm. Mouse lunged upward with a startled shout, crashing his forehead against Rick, who swore and stumbled back onto the floor.

The alarm gashed at Rick’s senses like someone ruthlessly stabbing knives into his ears. “What in the fucking hell?!” He sat up groggily, rubbing his forehead and trying to get his bearings. He blinked and scrubbed at his eyes, but his vision was shot.

The room seemed darker somehow. Although the candles still burned pleasantly, their flames were muted, as if a pall had been thrown over them. Beyond their small ring of light, everything else was drenched in oily black. Shadows were more pronounced, cutting. And, strangely, objects which had previously disappeared into the background now popped out with an unearthly fluorescence. Mystified, Rick held up one hand in front of his eyes, noticing how the crescents of his fingernails had turned a faint violet.

He didn’t have time to dwell on it, however, because Mouse was already on his feet, hands clamped over his ears. Terror pinched the flesh around his eyes as he shouted over the disorienting clamor, “Th-they know!”
At that exact moment, the door was thrown open and Grim’s silhouette filled the frame. His once white robe was glowing purple, but it was his expression that made Rick’s stomach drop.

“It’s not safe here anymore. You have to go.” An undercurrent of dread and panic cut through his usually calm voice, and Rick knew there was no point in asking questions.

Mouse was right.

The Council knew he was missing.

Riq knew.

Rick had barely wrangled on his shoes before Mouse was tugging him by the wrist out the door. They stumbled down the short stairwell to the home’s lower level, while the air was filled with the monotonous drone of the PA recording, a deceptively sultry female voice that delivered the message:

“This is a Code Black. Repeat. This is a Code Black.” The digital words, loud enough to echo over the expanse of the Citadel atrium, were unnervingly calm and did little to soften the blare of the accompanying alarm. “All Citadel patrons are required to vacate their residences and submit to security protocol. Failure to comply will be met with lethal force.”

“What the hell is going on? What’s a Code Black?” Rick roared over the PA to be heard. He’d finally caught up with Mouse and linked their hands as they ran after the Eun-Rick.

“The Council has enacted martial law,” Grim explained, weaving through a winding hallway in the direction of the rear exit. “They’ll be looking for this.” He angled his head and pointed to a faint green collar around his neck. It had to have been some kind of transparent material, because Rick could barely make it out. “The registration mark. That’s how they’ll find you. They’ll find Him. There’s no stopping them now.”

“Then why not just give us one of those—those collar things?!” Rick countered, dodging an overstuffed chest to keep up.

Grim shot him a sympathetic look and kept up his relentless pace.

Just then, Mouse’s grip on his wrist pulled him up short. Rick tore his eyes from their guide to look back impatiently.

“Mouse, what the hell? We gotta go!”

“The Author,” Mouse said softly, his gaze fixed on the inside of one of the rooms they’d just passed. “H-he’s—” He took a small step forward, but Rick was quick to intercept.

Smothering a curse, he yanked Mouse along with a frustrated, “We don’t have time for that!” But from the corner of his eye, he could see the other two Eun-Ricks kneeling before something inside the dimly lit room. Like Grim, their robes also glowed a ghostly purple, and there was a sheet of the same shade swaddling a small body on the floor between them. The Eun-Ricks were stone-still, their heads bowed in mourning.

A warbled cry bubbled up Mouse’s throat, but Rick tore him away from the scene before it could emblazon itself on his psyche any further.

When Grim had reached the back door, he ushered Rick and Mouse out into the narrow back alley but didn’t follow. Despite it having to be some time in the early morning, it was black as pitch outside, and Rick could now hear the sound of shouting and blasters going off in the distance.
Rick turned to look back at Grim, and his jaw fell. The Eun-Rick’s robe was now violet, washing his pale skin in a bluish hue. Around his neck, the collar burned portal-green. It hugged the skin so closely, Rick realized it was a tattoo. But how had he never noticed it before? Even more striking, however, was the small glowing mark below the Eun-Rick’s right eye—a single vertical bar in matching green.

Rick tugged Mouse close to his side as he stared, shouting over the alarm and his own rising panic, “Where are we supposed to go now?” Both ends of the alley looked equally ominous—long, ebony tunnels with pieces of trash on the ground that were lit up like fallen stars. “Eun-Rick! Where will we be safe?!”

The Eun-Rick pressed his lips into a thin line, his feet never stepping over the threshold. “Nowhere,” he finally said.

Then he shut the door, leaving Rick and Mouse to face the Code Black on their own.

~~*~~

“This is a real fuckin’ bomb you dropped on us here, Riq. A Code Black? Have you lost your goddamn marbles?!”

Hands clasped behind his back, Riq continued gazing calmly out the Council Chamber window. Normally, at this time of day, he would’ve been able to see the holographic dawn beginning to creep up the lip of the main atrium dome. As it was, however, the activated ultraviolet ions in the air coated everything in black, the only pinpoints of light coming from the Ricks who scurried across the ground like radioactive cockroaches.

Through the reflection of the glass, Zeta Alpha fumed. His robe was currently lit up like a Christmas tree bulb, an obnoxious purple in place of its usually sterile white.

“This is a madhouse you’re creating. Think what it will do for our popularity rating!” Rick Prime wailed behind him.

Prime was always one to care more about public image than practicality. Didn’t he see what he was trying to accomplish here? Disdain curled Riq’s lip, and he finally turned from the view to pin his sniveling council-mate with a look of measured condescension.

Even while Prime shrank back beneath Riq’s razor-sharp scowl, Zeta suddenly decided he was an alpha and stepped forward defiantly. He looked ridiculous with his teeth glowing pale blue in the dark. “Riq, we had a gentleman’s agreement that the Council is to be of one voice in order to dish out a Code Black. You can’t just cherry-pick the rules! Who died and made you king?”

But Riq was already shouldering past him across the grand foyer, not even sparing him, or the rest of the assembled council, a glance. Stepping onto the lowered belvedere, Riq took his usual seat, the golden throne now electric yellow beneath the fluorescent illumination. The rest of the Council gathered in front of him like a pack of baying dogs, their matching green collars glowing in a row.

Settling back, Riq ignored their yapping as he picked nonchalantly at his fingernails.

“Gentle-Rick, gentle-Rick. Listen to yourselves.” Riq chuckled. “Always asking questions. So many, many questions. It’s like that’s all you’re ever good for.”

“I do proclaim, this behavior is unbecoming of the Council and detrimental to its efficacy.” The single green line below Maximums’ right eye warped as he glowered.

“Foshiggity!” Ricktiminus chimed in, emboldened by his council-mate’s reprimand.
Ricktiminus was below him. They were all below him.

“There’s no reason to panic, good Ricks,” Riq said through clenched teeth. This was getting so damn tiresome. “We have a dangerous Rick in our midst, and I am merely taking measures to sniff him out immediately. My intel tells me he managed to avoid being registered in the Citadel’s central database—him and his... Morty.” His hands were balled into fists as he forced himself to say the word, like it didn’t mean the entire fucking world to him.

*Patience,* he chided himself. Once his stomach settled again, he crossed an ankle over one knee and continued. “This is also our chance to suss out other unregistered while we’re at it. Clean up house. You, along with every Citadel official, already received the ‘green light’ during registration. You’ll be spared from scrutiny while the Code Black is in effect. As for everyone else...”

A cannonade of gunfire from somewhere outside the Council Chamber finished his statement for him. Riq caught Zeta and Prime running trembling hands over the green mark beneath their right eyes, their gaze trained on the floor, submissive.

Maximums, however, was not so easily convinced. With a shake of his glossy hair, he said proudly, “As the Council’s appointed second-in-command, I am rescinding your contumacious order and forthright exacting a cessation of the Code Black.”

“Oh, are you?” Riq bared his teeth in a grin. *Idiots.* He tapped his finger against a panel on the armrest of his seat, his patience wearing thin. One, two. One, two.

“Yes. And if you think—” Maximums was cut off by a gentle hand on his shoulder. Quantum shook his head and urged him back as he took his place to face Riq one-on-one. The most reticent of the Council of Ricks was never one for heroics, but whatever possessed him now made Riq narrow his eyes.

One, two. One, two, he tapped out.

Quantum then launched into a soliloquy of burps so thick, it had brightly colored spittle flying from his lips. He opined for a full three minutes, his council-mates humbled around him. They held their fists up to their mouths to bite their knuckles, some even sniffling back tears. With each booming belch, Riq’s frown only deepened.

When Quantum finally reached the end of his speech, he held his ground, daring the council leader to refute him.

Riq sighed, looking Quantum over as though he were scat on the sole of his boot. He’d had enough of this sunk-cost fallacy shit.

He shrugged. “Fuck it.”

One, two, three taps on the armrest panel, and a blaster ejected from the hidden compartment into his hand. Without a second thought, Riq shot off a rapid-fire series of plasma bullets straight into Quantum’s chest.

Black blood spewed from his ruptured sternum, spraying the shocked faces of his council-mates. Then Quantum dropped like a lead balloon to the floor with a squelch.

The remaining Council turned in abject horror to stare at Riq as he blew away imaginary smoke from his blaster.

“I never knew what the fuck he was saying, anyway.” His trigger finger twitched. “Anyone else
have something they want to add?”

For once, the Council vote was unanimous.

Riq smirked. “I didn’t think so.”

Whack.

Rick hadn’t even thought about Citadel registration.

Whack.

When he and Chi had first hashed out the plan to get back at the Council, it’d been dismissed outright. After all, Chi had never gotten registered, and he’d been living in the Citadel for years. The code he’d worked into Rick’s Elite membership card served as enough camouflage, overlaying his ex-convict identity with a bourgeois persona and bypassing the registration procedure entirely.

Whack.

They’d planned on Rick being in and out of the Citadel so fast, there was supposed to be no risk of having his cover blown. Besides, the idea of having to subject himself to the process, being held in place around the neck like an animal, didn’t make it any more appealing.

Whack.

The Guard Rick’s nose caved beneath Rick’s fist.

But what they hadn’t planned on was a Code Black.

“Rick! Rick, come on! H-he’s already—he’s not moving anymore!” Mouse’s shrill cries broke through the deafening pounding of Rick’s heartbeat in his ears.

He stopped, and the Guard Rick groaned, spitting up blood that clung to his lower lip. It was black. Nearby, another Guard lay on the ground in as equally bad shape. Rick didn’t remember doing that to him. His fist, torn and bloody, pulsated beneath the brass knuckles he’d improvised out of a garbage lid handle.

More adrenaline than blood pumped through his veins as his survival instincts were kicked into overdrive. His senses felt simultaneously keen and numb, as though he were operating on minimal life support.

Run, hide, fight.

The mantra from his days in prison echoed in his head.

“Rick!” Mouse called again. He tugged on his arm, trying to draw him off, but what finally roused Rick’s legs to move was the sound of more voices coming from down the alley. More threats.

Rick grabbed Mouse, and they ran.

To where, it didn’t matter. There didn’t seem to be anywhere that wasn’t teeming with Guards in the middle of a crackdown. The cloud that was the Code Black was insidiously thorough. It seeped into every nook and cranny of the Citadel—a dark and smothering poison.
It had been even worse in the Celestial Quarter, with platoons of Guard Ricks swarming the area within minutes after Rick and Mouse had left the Eun-Ricks’ home. Just before they’d made their escape, Rick had caught sight of their hosts being solemnly escorted away as part of some regal procession, each member of the entourage bearing the same green mark on his cheek.

Navigating the back alleys had been disorienting at first. Everything was either plunged into darkness or lit up to blinding brilliance under the ultraviolet effects, but it was only once their eyes had adjusted that the full impact of the Code Black came to light.

The Citadel was under complete lockdown.

Commercial establishments were closed and barred from access, turning the once bustling entertainment districts into ghost towns. Citadel residents were dragged bodily from their homes, and the streets were crowded with them as they lined up like witless draft animals to be searched by heavily armed Guard Ricks.

It was the collar they were looking for.

Guards would demand that the Rick and his Morty show their registration mark or simply wrench their heads back to reveal the green band that decapitated them across the neck. It was no wonder, Rick thought, that Chi wore his turtleneck high and close-fitting.

The green band was checked for authenticity, and then the Guard would stamp the “passed” registree’s right cheek with a straight, vertical green bar before moving on to the next.

The Ricks would bitch and moan, calling it an invasion of their privacy and threatening to pursue legal action, but they knew the Code Black superseded their personal rights, and in the end, they would subject themselves to the searches with little spectacle. Anyone who resisted was summarily beaten into submission—the Mortys more often than their Ricks.

Each time Mouse heard one cry out in pain or protest, he would curl over on the spot, his hands fisting the front of his shirt. He’d been sick twice as they made slow but steady progress out of the Celestial Quarter and into the bedlam that was the main atrium.

Witnessing their first public execution taught them the full extent of the Code Black’s wrath.

Ricks and Mortys had knelt in a row, hands on the backs of their heads and a Guard behind each one. It was only when the Guard Ricks were delivering their last rites that Rick realized what they were about to do. He’d managed to shield Mouse’s eyes just before there was the zap-zap-zap of plasma rifles going off followed by the heavy slapping of bodies on the ground.

Then they ran some more. Past empty bars and broken windows, toppled plumbus displays and blood-streaked walls. Past more Guards with overheated rifles and faces twisted in sick delight, past stairwells sardined with unregistered Ricks and Mortys in hiding.

But Rick already knew that hiding was useless. He hadn’t even made it halfway down the block before he’d heard their chorus of screams echo off the building walls. And then dead silence.

Once they’d made it to an empty plaza in a high-class neighborhood, Rick finally trotted to a stop to catch his breath. The place had already been combed through by Guards, and any Elite Ricks residing on the upper floors kept their blinds tightly drawn, shutting out the chaos.

Mouse was far worse for wear and practically threw himself to the ground to gasp and wheeze. He’d forgotten to put on his shoes when they’d fled the Eun-Ricks’ home, and the soles of his feet were badly scuffed and filthy.
“I can’t do it anymore!” Mouse said, his voice reedy and cracked around the edges.

“C’mon, babe. Just—just a little further.” But Rick knew it was bullshit, and Mouse seemed to know it too.

Mouse curled his arms over his head, fingers digging divots into the flesh of his nape. He sobbed, “It hurts—! Rick, it hurts so much!”

“H-hey.” Rick dropped to one knee beside him. “We’ll find you some shoes. It’ll be—” When he placed a hand on Mouse’s back, he felt him quaking fiercely, his heart hammering too fast to be healthy. And Rick knew it wasn’t his feet that Mouse was talking about.

Every blow that fell on his brethren fell on Mouse, their suffering becoming his own. He was going to be torn apart at this rate.

Rick was about to say more, when a pair of Guards stepped into view from around a nearby building. They had a hapless Rick and Morty at gunpoint and were nudging them backwards into the plaza, preparing them for a private execution.

Immediately, Rick scooped up Mouse and dove for the closest cover—the narrow space between a café and cigar lounge. It could hardly be called an alley, with barely enough room for Rick to stand chest-to-chest with Mouse.

“What the fuck?! He’s my Morty!” the Rick was yelling.

Rick peered around the corner to see the Rick and his Morty—a shivering, little thing whose blue shirt glowed warmly in the blacklight. Without any warning, one of the Guards swiftly grabbed the boy around the throat and held him aloft.

“Wait!” The Rick’s eyes kept flicking nervously between his strangled Morty and the rifle aimed at his chest. His tongue peeked out to lick his lips. “H-he’s from one of the wild dimensions. G-316! You can check my portal gun history. I caught him fair and square! I-I just haven’t had time to register him yet—”

Apparently, the Guards didn’t care for his explanation, because the butt of one of their rifles did an effective job shutting him up and breaking his teeth in the process. The Rick collapsed to the ground, black dribbling onto the pavement. As he groaned and held both hands over his bleeding mouth, the lead Guard signaled to his partner.

At his silent command, the second Guard drove his fist into the dangling Morty’s stomach. Even from his hiding spot a few yards away, Rick could hear something wet pop. Then the Guard dropped him to the ground.

Up against Rick’s chest, Mouse began to whimper as if he, too, had been punched in the gut. The sound was like the death rattle of something drowning and barely keeping its head above water.

Unable to drag his eyes from the scene, Rick wrapped his arms around Mouse and held him close, feeling him shiver under his hands.

Out in the plaza, the Morty gave a long, high-pitched yowl and doubled over in pain, his sneakers skidding across the pavement as he kicked.

“Hey!” the Rick gargled, managing to rise unsteadily to his feet. “Th-the fuck are you doing to my Morty?!” Flecks of blood and what Rick could only assume were splinters of teeth flew from his mouth. He’d almost made it to his Morty’s side, was already reaching out for him, when the lead
Guard took out his blaster, aimed it at the prone Morty, and discharged a single shot into his head. Mouse squeaked at the sound of the blaster, and Rick quickly crouched down on his haunches to hush him gently.

“H-he—heii—” Mouse keened, the panicked sound like shards of glass embedding themselves into Rick’s heart. Torn between sympathy and self-preservation, Rick clamped a hand over Mouse’s mouth and shook his head.

Then he looked back.

Unable to form words anymore, the Rick shrieked over the dead body of his Morty. His blood-splattered face was twisted into a horror mask of rage.

“No Epiphanies detected, Riq, sir. Another dud,” the Guard reported calmly into his badge. Then he leveled his gun at the Rick.

“W-what are you—b-but I’m registered! See?” He yanked down the collar of his shirt to bare his green-striped neck. “I’m registered!”

“For obstructing justice.”

Rick turned away before he had to see his doppelganger’s face get blown to bits, though the sound of flesh opening beneath the phaser’s burn left little to the imagination.

He then felt a warm wetness on his fingers. Mouse's frame was wracked by full-body heaves as he cried. Rick tried hushing him with as quiet a voice as he could manage, holding Mouse’s face between his hands. He pressed their foreheads together.

“It’s okay. I’m right here. I’m right here.

“Look at this goddamn mess,” one of the Guards said. “I told you not to fuck up their faces!”

“You try shooting a Morty when he’s wriggling all over the place. And hey, at least I left you the choiURRPce bits. You sick fuck.”

There was the clatter of a belt buckle then the telltale disk-scratch of a zipper being lowered. “Don’t judge. You know you like to watch. Now, gimme a hand with his jeans.”

“Only if I get this end.”

The rustle of cloth was deafening in the still air, followed by the Guards huffing and grunting with effort. Mouse crumbled to his knees, his hands around Rick’s wrists. He looked straight through Rick, unseeing, as his whimpers rose to faint babbling.

“Mouse. Please. You gotta be quiet, babe,” Rick rasped in earnest. Sliding down to the ground, he pulled Mouse onto his lap. That link that tied them to one another was now a tenuous bridge, splintered and too precarious to cross. There was no place for words as he crushed Mouse to his chest, hoping to calm him.

Mouse’s sobs grew louder still.

“You—you hear something?” one of the Guards grunted between pants, and Rick could hear the sound of pavement being ground underfoot, a boot turning on its heel.

I'm sorry!
In an act of desperation, Rick covered Mouse’s lips with his own, swallowing his cries. He gripped the back of his head and held him captive as he filled Mouse’s mouth with his tongue to silence him.

Mouse pushed against Rick, beat at his chest with his small fists. He tried to pull away, but Rick held fast, smothering him so that they could both stay alive another minute, another second.

*Smack, smack, smack.* The Guards had fallen into that unmistakable rhythm, flesh colliding with flesh in a grotesque mockery of sex, because there was nothing human about it and the Morty was dead and his blood was still drying on the pavement. These were monsters rutting, plain and simple.

He lost track of how long they stayed like that—Rick fighting to ignore the perversion happening right behind them, and Mouse fighting against something he didn’t understand.

As the Guards reached their noisy, sickening climaxes in quick succession, Mouse’s punches weakened, slowed. Stopped.

He’d fainted.

For a moment, there was a blessed quiet, interrupted only by the heavy breathing of the two Guards. Rick didn’t dare move as they finally tucked themselves in and moved away, leaving the stench of fresh blood and debauchery in their wake.

One minute. Two.

At last, he dared to breathe. When he pulled back, Mouse looked as though he were asleep, but his brows were knit too tightly to be the work of any peaceful dreaming. Rick tried shaking him awake, but he wouldn’t stir. A gentle press of his fingers to his jugular revealed a strong and steady heartbeat. *Thank god.*

For a few minutes, he sat there, the regular stream of ORA’s connection status updates his only company. Her servers were unavailable, and even the personalized signal that allowed Rick to command his nanos had been compromised. The Code Black had thoroughly shut down all means of communication.

For the first time since he came to the Citadel, Rick felt truly, completely alone.

In the dingy alleyway with the crackle of blasters echoing through the empty plaza, Rick cradled Mouse’s limp body close and rocked him slowly. He told him that he was sorry, that he didn’t know what the hell to do anymore. With each quake of his shoulders, Mouse’s head lolled against his chest.

Déjà vu sat sour on Rick’s tongue, an unwelcome visitor. It hadn’t been that long since the last time he and Mouse had found themselves trapped in an alley, at wit’s end, hiding from certain death, and Rick didn’t know if he had enough luck to get them out of the same situation alive twice.

Suddenly, the firm barrel of a gun against his head made a torrent of hot then cold wash through his body, and his stomach convulsed painfully. He squeezed his eyes shut.

*Well, Ricky-boy. This is it. You get to die in the gutter, right where you belong. Worthless piece of—*

“Well, ah’ll be. If’n it ain’t mah good pal, X-ey.”

Rick startled at the familiar Southern twang, and he snapped his head up.

“Good tah see ya, pardner,” C-165 said with a grin. His signature red cowboy boots and gallon hat
were swallowed up in the blackness, giving him the appearance of a legless, floating ghoul. But his belt buckle—as big as his fist—glowed like a hot coal just above his crotch. The only other luminescence came from the green pass mark under his eye that crinkled into a zigzag with the force of his smile. He rolled a worn toothpick between his lips.

C-165 tapped Rick on the head once more with what was, in fact, not a gun but an apple and then tossed it up and down in one hand as if he’d just come back from a pleasant trip to the market. With a little grunt, he squatted in front of him. “Dun’ mind mah pryin’, but ah’d say yer havin’ a li’l trouble there, ain’t thaht right? Pardner?” A nod of his head and tip of his hat, and Rick followed his gaze to Mouse who lay curled in his arms.

Rick twisted away, shielding Mouse on automatic, as his shot nerves got another fresh dose of adrenaline. *Danger! Liar! Run!* his brain screamed, but before he could put that thought into action, C-165 had grabbed Rick by the arm and hauled him to his feet without breaking a sweat.

He’d almost forgotten how strong the guy was.

The moment he was up, Rick took a step back, holding Mouse out of the cowboy’s view. “H-how the fuck did you know we were—I mean, I was here?” The plaza had been empty, save for the encounter with the Guards, just minutes earlier.

C-165 shrugged, glancing off to the side as he answered, “Jus’ lucky, ah guess.” His eyes glittered with mischief. “An’ speakin’ o’ guessin’, ahm guessin’ ah came at jus’ the right time.” He tapped a long finger to the green band around his neck. “Looks like sumbody fergot to put on their choker,” he teased. “‘N’ it’s a right gala we’re havin’ tanight!”

A flash of gunfire went off somewhere in the distance behind him, illuminating his grin. The juxtaposition between the carnage and his deranged amusement made Rick balk.

C-165 then cocked his head, a renewed interest lighting his eyes as he slinked forward. “Now, who’s yer li’l buddy there, hm?”

“N-no one,” Rick stammered, feeling his hackles rise as the cowboy stepped into his personal bubble. A corner of his lip twitched, the start of a sneer.

Normally, he wouldn’t let some stinking Rick near him, especially with Mouse so vulnerable. However, he felt frozen in place as C-165 allowed himself a closer look. Even when the cowboy raised a hand to touch Mouse, all Rick could do was swallow thickly and work his mouth like a beached fish.

What was the matter with him?

“My, my.” With surprising gentleness, C-165 tilted Mouse’s head to bare his unmarked neck. He clucked his tongue, running a finger down the slender throat. Rick didn’t miss the way C-165’s hand mirrored his own tender caress from just hours earlier. “Well, ain’t you jus’ full o’ surprises.” C-165 looked as if he were about to say more but instead merely tapped the apple against his pursed lips in thought. He then reached into his breast pocket and retrieved a small applicator—the same kind used by the Guards.

Rick looked at it warily.

“No need ta git in a tizzy, pardner,” C-165 said calmly, his hands raised in surrender. “Mama always sayd ah had them sticky fingers. Yer in uh bad box, and ahm just tryin’ tah help. If yous aimin’ tah get outta here above snakes with’n yer li’l feller too, yer gonna need this.” He waggled the applicator
in a manner that said, *See? It don’t bite.*

Part of Rick seethed at the idea of relying on anyone else for help, but a whimpered moan from Mouse reminded him that he was *not* in a position to be picky. Besides, C-165 had never actually done anything to outright hurt him before. Sure, he could use a lesson on personal space, and there was that peculiar standoff during the last Morty Auction. But just like everything else about this Rick, it seemed he’d only done it to get a rise out of him. Evidently, the cowboy had a penchant for hijinks. C-165 was harder to read than a Triangulum Theorem, but he didn’t seem to mean them any real harm.

“F-fine. But make it quick,” Rick bit out. Then he let himself and Mouse be stamped on the cheek, the garish mark now all that stood between them and persecution. It hung like a solitary tear beneath their eyes. “Th-thanks.”

“No problema, compadre.” C-165 tucked the applicator away and took a few steps toward an exit, his spurs jangling. He stopped and tossed over his shoulder, “You comin’ or what?”

“Coming where?”

The cowboy let out a laugh, shaking his head. “Ah got a ship sittin’ in the dockin’ bay. Ol’ Rick Rogers here’l show you ‘n’ yours a ride outta this roundup, no questions as’d.” He tipped his hat again, his face completely in shadow. “So ah suggest we make tracks.”

Rick wavered in place, the promise of freedom sitting in staunch opposition to all he’d been working toward, all that he’d promised Mouse. Now that they had the pass marks, travel would be that much easier. Guards would be able to tell with just a glance that he and Mouse were off-limits, leaving them to traverse the Citadel without risk. But would the plan to overthrow the Council or their own survival take priority? There was only room enough for one.

As if on cue, Mouse gave another weak, little groan and nuzzled unconsciously into his chest.

No. They needed safety. Now.

“All right. Let’s go.”

An ear-to-ear grin split C-165’s lips to reveal the icy glow of his teeth. “All right, pardner. I kin set with that.”

Without another word, they left the plaza together.

~~*~~

The difference the little stamp made was instantaneous.

Rick’s muscles were still tense as wound-up springs when they passed their first squadron of armed Guards, but amazingly enough they looked right through Rick as if he were an apparition.

Whereas Rick avoided eye contact, C-165 brazenly nodded to the officers as if they were pals. And was that a nod of esteem they were giving him in return? Just who in the hell was this C-165 guy, Rick wondered, and why did it seem like he had the respect of damn near everyone that crossed his path?

Rick puffed up his chest and stood a little taller as they walked without interruption across the stretch of atrium, C-165’s poise contagious and comforting.
The further they walked, the more apparent C-165’s sway over Citadel security became. He was a wolf among lapdogs, perfectly at ease, and crowds parted to let him through without question. In fact, the very energy of the Guards was subdued now, lacking the ruthlessness it’d held before. They gave him one look and then backed down, mumbling something into their badges before returning to their searches—wait. Not even. Most seemed to have abandoned the task, and at one point when Rick looked back from where they’d come, he could’ve sworn the Guards had disbanded entirely, the Code Black still coloring the scenery but not nearly as deadly now.

When they reached the doors to an elevator bank, C-165 swiped a card through the reader, and the doors opened invitingly.

Once inside, the lights flickered to life, dispelling the ultraviolet ions that painted the air. For the first time since the Code Black came into effect, Rick could finally see things the way they originally were. C-165’s hat and boots reclaimed their familiar color, as bloodred as the apple in his hand, white was properly white, and everyone’s teeth finally stopped glowing.

“Huh.” Rick glanced around, trying to squash how fucking relieved he felt to have things back to normal. “So the Code Black d-doesn’t work in elevators, I guess?”

“Hm?” C-165 hummed. “Well, ah’ll be durned.” He punched a button at the bottom of the columns of floor numbers, a red ring lighting up around it.

Rick chose to act as though nothing were out of the ordinary—like it were perfectly normal that he was riding in an elevator with a Rick he barely knew while the whole Citadel had become a slaughterhouse—and he shrugged, trying to work out a kink in his shoulder. The movement shifted Mouse in his arms who murmured in his sleep. He scrunched his eyes against the brightness of the elevator’s glaring lights but didn’t wake up.

“Will ya look at ‘im. Ain’t he a beaut.” Sidling up to Rick’s side, C-165 leaned in close, as if he were cooing over a shiny Rolex. “Anyone ever tell you ya got a purdy li’l thing there?”

“Anyone ever tell you that sounds creepy as hell?” Rick tried to keep his tone light even though he wanted to slug him where he stood. C-165 had just done him a solid, and he still needed his help getting out of this hellhole. “H-he’s just a Morty. You seen one, you seen ‘em all. Y-ya know what I mean?” He coughed, trying to move on from the subject. “Anyway, tell me about this ride of yours. It a dual-thruster? Your dimension discover class-III hyperdrive yet?”

C-165 continued, undeterred. “Oh, sumthin tells me he ain’t like other Mortys.”

As the elevator whooshed downward, a chime sounded, marking the passage of each level.

1...2...3...

Rick really didn’t like the way C-165 had avoided his questions, but he chalked it up to just another symptom of his domineering personality.

C-165 kept talking. “Now, what’s an X-Rick like yerself doin’ with an unregistered Morty?” He crossed his arms and leaned back, looking like he were in an old-time saloon rather than a space-age elevator. “If’n you’s got one bit o’ sense—an’ ah know you’s do—then you know better’n anyone that that kin land you in a whole heap o’ trouble.”

4...5...

*That a threat?* said the paranoid part of Rick. “Yeah. I sorta guessed—finally figured that one out.” He hoped his nonchalant grin didn’t look as flimsy as it felt.
For some reason, a line of sweat began to bead his brow, even though the temperature in the elevator hadn’t changed.

With a shrug, C-165 turned to the side, looking whimsically at nothing when he spoke again. “Ah once had uh Morty just like ‘im. He was special. Ain’t no doubt about that.”

"Right. So, y-you got a name for this ship?” Rick started again, trying to steer them back into safer waters. “Maybe the Bucking Bronco?” he said with a chuckle.

“Yep,” C-165 said, examining his apple, as he continued his own conversation. “We used tah have some wild times t’gether. Ah’ll tell ya that.” As he chuckled, he withdrew a small knife from the holster at his hip. It was more handle than blade, really. It didn’t even clear three inches.

A fruit knife.

He pressed the blade against the side of his snack, the squelch as it bit into the flesh sounding lewd to Rick’s ears. Then he began to peel it, the carmine skin unwinding in a single strip.

“Ah really took a fancy to tha boy. Thought we had sumthin special. Sumthin real special.” When C-165 looked at Rick again, all the mirth had left that Cheshire Cat grin, and Rick felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. “So one day...”

“One day, ah thought ah’d try’n take parta ‘im with me.”

The light from above glinted off the blade to flash in Rick’s eyes, temporarily blinding him. Dread pinched at the back of his neck, and a shiver of something oily and nefarious dripped down his spine. Rick tried to take a step away, but he found that his back was already against the elevator wall.

“That got his master right mad,” C-165 said with a manic glee in his eyes. He then held the skinned apple to his mouth and took a juicy, obscene bite.

"Sub-level 10. Please watch your step while exiting,” came the sultry elevator announcer.

The moment the doors swished open, a line of deadly-looking Guard Ricks with equally deadly-looking plasma rifles greeted him. At his back, he felt the bite of C-165’s blade press against his kidney.

“See, his master don’t like people takin’ ‘is things.”

With an encouraging shove, Rick stumbled out of the elevator, gripping Mouse closer to him. It was only when he looked up again that he realized the lights were normal here as well.

The Code Black had been lifted, meaning the Council had found what they were looking for.

“Good of you to finally join us, Rick of X-280.”

It was a Rick’s voice, just like any other, and yet it made his blood run cold and his balls retreat. The cadence carried an unparalleled arrogance and evil, as if the Devil himself had ascended from Hell to
address mere mortals.

Then the sea of Guards parted, and Riq IV stepped forward in all his infamous glory. Towering and pristine in his regal council garb, he was the epitome of control, while Rick cowered pathetically before him. His eyes, black and dead as a shark’s, gleamed with unholy avarice as they landed on Mouse.

“And you brought me a gift.”

“Oh, god,” Rick croaked, his bowels threatening to go loose on him.

“You don’t know the half of it.”

Chapter End Notes

9/14/17 Update: rlcks1nchez did a very cool cosplay photoshoot as Mouse (before and after style :) ) -- including that cute little moment where Mouse gets stuck in his t-shirt. Squeeeal! ^^

[All fanart for Chapter 15 can be found here.]
“Why don’t you just kill me already?” he croaked, and there was a hint of challenge in that voice. Like he was really expecting Riq to grant him freedom through death. Like there wasn’t so much worse in store for him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“*He forced himself on The One True Morty, for he was stronger, and cleaved unto His body so that they would be of one flesh.*”
- *Wubbakkuk 9:4*

Long before his seat on the Council, long before the Citadel was anything more than a mass of spare ship parts, Riq always got what he wanted.

Money, status, the respect and affection of others—nothing was beyond his reach. He didn't let guilt or fear of failure hold him back from indulging in all of life’s successes; no noble deed was too lofty nor nefarious activity too incriminating. Where others stumbled or got cold feet, Riq strode on through life, confident and capable and winning. Always winning.

But as the years went by and his ambitions grew greater, Riq began to suspect that perhaps there was something he was missing out on. He’d already mastered all that the practical world had to offer. What of the *fantastic*, that which lay beyond the laws of science?

Between the discovery of the Book of Morty and his continued elevation above his inferior brethren, Riq started to entertain the idea that his role in the universe transcended that which was reserved for mere man. He’d written off the concept of gods, of an unseen higher power that stood defiantly in the face of science, but what if he were, in fact, that higher power?

What then would be within his reach?

Riq leaned forward to brush the back of his fingers against The One’s forehead.

Although the young boy lay like a pretty corpse on the bed, the skin beneath Riq’s fingers was warm. He traced the sorrowful peak of his small brows to wander down one cheek, recreating the
trail of tears long gone dry. The One’s slack lips were parted, soft puffs of breath warming Riq’s thumb as he ran it across them.

Other Ricks would never attain the level that Riq did, their humanity being what held them back. They considered themselves human and acted accordingly. Humans had self-imposed limits as to what they could achieve. Humans were slaves to their basic biology—hunger, hormones, circadian rhythms. It’s what kept them simple creatures, locked in a cycle of pleasure sprees and petty pissing contests.

But Riq knew he was much more than that. He was destined to occupy a higher place in the universe, one unreined by the shortcomings of humanity. It was why Riq had risen from among so many to become a leader, conqueror—and soon god.

“The One True Rick,” he murmured, relishing the sound of his own destined title. Within it held the promise of godhood, of being far above his infinite copies. For what did it mean to be “the one” unless it meant being the only one?

His legend had been laid out in the pages of the Book of Morty, sprinkled throughout stories of The One and his tribulations. Steadfast by his side was The One True Rick, a Rick beyond measure, brought to a greater level of being through the power their bond would create.

Yes, Riq would become The One True Morty’s rightful Counterpart, and tonight would be the advent of their consummation.

This time, he would make certain of it. This time, there would be no mistakes. Their last encounter in his personal suite had been messy and unscripted. He’d been too overzealous; The One, still compromised by the impostor’s influence. And the setting was all wrong. His reunion with The One was to be a momentous occasion, and Riq’s own bedraggled bed of sullied, pungent sheets would never do it justice. This required finesse and a hint of poetic irony.

On the luxurious silken bedsheets of the winner’s suite, The One now quivered in fever-wrought sleep as Riq explored his body with the reverent touch of a wine connoisseur surveying his most prized bottle of Syrah.

Years had gone into its production, and soon he would taste the fruits of his labor.

He’d just bent over for a closer whiff, when he bumped into a Eun-Rick running a damp sponge along The One’s neck. He slapped at his hand, and the pathetic thing yelped, nearly dropping his sponge as he stammered an apology. He then bowed his head and hurriedly moved on to The One’s legs to continue the bath.

Riq had ordered the trio of Eun-Ricks to clean The One of contaminants, but he still loathed any interruptions on the tour of his estate. They hovered around him, bathing The One’s skin, trimming his nails, or adjusting his clothes—now more vigilant to remain clear of Riq’s path.

Moving lower still, Riq smoothed a hand down The One’s reed-thin collarbone, briefly teasing his chest as he slipped beneath the gold-trimmed robe that the Eun-Ricks had adorned him in. As it shifted, the trim caught the lamplight to glisten sharply. Two strips of sunlight in the dim.

His abominable T-shirt and jeans had promptly been removed the moment they’d entered the winner’s suite, and even his homely, plain white robe was considered far too plebeian to grace Riq’s presence. As with any prized possession, Riq made sure The One wore only the finest, and the frictionless silk of the Lyfis worm was the most suitable choice. For himself, he had forsaken his Council garb, now irrelevant and beneath him, in favor of a matching robe which he had cinched
loosely around his waist with a gold sash.

While the book had insisted that The Ones came from humble beginnings and donned humble clothes, Riq refused to be mistaken for a pauper when he was already a king and would become so much more than that tonight.

The One echoed his excitement in the heartbeat pounding in his chest, and Riq leaned towards it, drawn to that sign of life like a wolf on the trail of a rabbit. His weight pressed into the mattress, enough to make The One’s head loll to the side. Eyes still locked in sleep, The One turned to face him. Eager. Seeking. Riq’s heart leapt, falling head over heels in lust all over again.

Sucking in a deep breath to cool his libido, he walked his fingers down The One’s ribs then belly, kicking aside the robe until it slid off his narrow hips. The sight of his bared member beneath a blush of pubes made him pause and gaze at it longingly. Plump and smooth, he had the inexplicable urge to put his lips around it, to feel its rubbery weight on his tongue. He wondered if it would pop like a grape if he bit into it, if he could drink him down that way. Instead, his fingers tiptoed along its base, stirring the fine, brown hairs and tracing the spiderweb burst of a scar on one side.

He frowned. Never before had Riq held such contempt for those pompous Elite asswipes. The after-hours Morty Auction was designed to appease their egos, give them a taste of his divine leftovers. But they couldn’t even play with their new toy without ruining it. It’d taken two days too many to ferret out the identity of the Elite who had dared maim The One like this, with Riq just inches from decimating their entire registry in his hunt for retribution.

As always, it was his reliable righthand man, C-165, who had delivered the culprit. Despite Auctioneer Rick’s stubborn protests, C-165 had stepped forward with the trembling Elite Rick in tow. 018 had denied the allegations adamantly, but justice was swiftly exacted within hours of his detainment, and Riq had felt a sense of completion after he’d jettisoned him into Xulla’s first sun. Sure, it’d meant losing a high-earning Elite, but to harm The One so irrevocably was as bad as insulting Riq himself. And that was an offense punishable by death. If that sniveling double-crosser were still around, Riq would gladly gut him like the snake he was.

A miserable cry of pain suddenly disrupted his musings.

“Now, now, C-165,” Riq said, raising his hand. “That’ll be enough. Remember, I want him alive to see this.” Hefting himself to one elbow, he looked dispassionately at the scene playing out across the room.

In the tiled corner of the winner’s suite sat the X-Rick. His ankles and wrists were strapped firmly to a metal chair, his head hanging loose as blow after blow from C-165’s knuckles landed. The front of his coveralls was soaked with blood, and the tiles beneath his spread legs resembled a bouquet of red and white tulips, their wiry stems flowing down to the single drain hole.

After delivering another skull-cracking punch, C-165 stopped and gave a loud whoop. “Aw, hell fire! You knows ah’m jus’ gettin’ warmed up,” he panted around the toothpick in his mouth. He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, pacing in front of their prisoner like a dog on a leash.

Shirtless but still sporting his cowboy hat, C-165’s skin glistened with the sweat of exertion. He was fitter than most Ricks, his arms hewn to sinewy marble, and he boasted an Adonis belt that rippled with each inhalation. He’d been going at the X-Rick for the better part of an hour, and there was an unmistakable, adrenaline-induced bounce to his step as he paced. Riq’s ever-loyal bloodhound.
C-165. Now he was an Elite Riq could trust. He’d done a good job delivering the X-Rick and The One to him, without laying a finger on either one of them. Their respective suffering and sanctification would be carried out at Riq’s command, and it was only once they’d entered the winner’s suite that C-165 was given free rein to reap the rewards of his self-restraint. His directive had been simple: Make the X-Rick hurt.

As with everything, though, C-165 did it to the nth degree. If Riq didn’t intervene, the maverick might kill the X-Rick before Riq had finished what he set out to do. It was just one of the many ways Riq considered C-165 similar to himself: They were both men of extremes. This was perhaps why, for rarely trusting anyone, Riq trusted his hired gun.

He peeled himself away from the inviting space by The One’s side, stopping only long enough to sniff and add, “And for god’s sake, Eun-Rick, don’t forget to clean his feet. Just because yours are filthy doesn’t mean his have to be.” A chorus of servile “yes, Master” answered him. He then slipped off the edge of the bed, readjusted his chub like the gentleman he was, and strode across the floor to where the X-Rick sat slouched in his seat.

“Well, X-Rick,” Riq started. “I hope C-165 was able to knock some sense into you. Are you ready to start listening now?”

The X-Rick didn’t answer or move. Riq flicked a glance at C-165, who grabbed a fistful of the X-Rick’s hair and wrenched his head back. The prisoner hissed, his hands flexing in their bindings. With all the gashes and bruises, his face was hardly recognizable—despite it being Riq’s own. Blood had glued his left eye shut with the other hidden beneath a swollen brow.

Riq grimaced then twirled a finger in the air, looking away. “Hit him with the juice again. I don’t want him passing out on me.”

“Yessiree.” C-165 reached behind the chair for a bag of lime-green liquid that hung from a hook. A translucent tube snaked down from the bag, around the seat, and into a needle taped to the inside of the X-Rick’s arm. C-165 twisted open a valve at the bottom of the bag, letting a length of the regenerative serum bleed down the tube. Moments after it reached its insertion point, the X-Rick spasmed once—a full-body twitch—before giving a long moan.

When C-165 yanked the X-Rick’s head up again, the bruises had faded significantly, and the swelling had all but disappeared. The fast-acting restorative had been one of the most useful inventions to come out of Riq’s farm of Elites. No doubt it could save countless numbers across the multiverse from suffering, able to turn the tide of any battle—or simply serve as an aid to his interrogation techniques.

There was fire once again in the X-Rick’s eyes when he glared up at Riq, and he sneered before spitting a thick globule of blood from his healed lips. It hit the tiles with a wet smack. “Why don’t you just kill me already?” he croaked, and there was a hint of challenge in that voice. Like he was really expecting Riq to grant him freedom through death. Like there wasn’t so much worse in store for him.

Riq barked out a laugh, too strained and too short to hold any humor. “And have you miss out on our little reunion?” He raised his arms to the room as a whole—the setting for the X-Rick’s inevitable demise. Here, pleasure and persecution would be partners for the night. “No, you don’t get to die yet.”

The elixir must have worked its way through the X-Rick’s system, because he was able to put some sass into his next words. “What else do you want from me, O Mighty Cunt-cil Leader? I already admitted it was a dumb move trying to kidnap your pet Morty.” He gave his best attempt at a shrug,
even when the movement caused him obvious pain.

Riq had to clasp his hands behind his back to keep from striking the X-Rick himself. Just the mere mention of his transgression made red flash before his eyes. There were many things Riq could not stand, but to have something of his stolen from him—even an attempt—was unforgivable. “Agreed. Very dumb move for a very smart man, Rick of X-280.”

Clearly unnerved by Riq’s steady gaze, the X-Rick licked his lips and looked to the side. “Yeah, well, maybe not smart enough. M-maybe that’s why I tried to keep your little toy for myself. Couldn’t pass up the chance to get a-all those Epiphanies, you know?”

“Epiphanies?” Riq arched his brow, amazed at how piss-poor a liar the X-Rick was. Surely, he could do better than that. Riq didn’t miss the way his eyes darted behind him to The One lying on the bed. He didn’t miss the sweat that glistened on his temple. “Oh, I get the sense it wasn’t just the Epiphanies you were after. I think you were after something more than that. Something more...intimate.” With a snap of his fingers, he addressed the Eun-Ricks who were still attending to The One. “Eun-Ricks. Ready the Munlockus horn.”

This made the X-Rick’s smirk slide off his face into a tight-lipped grimace. He swallowed but said nothing.

“Ah, yes. You know exactly what that is, don’t you?” Riq had sauntered back to the bedside where a Eun-Rick now stood holding a small, open case. Inside lay a single glass syringe. He plucked it from its velvet bedding and held it to the light, the clear liquid inside warping the wallpaper pattern behind it. “Of course. What Rick didn’t fall into a little Munlockus mayhem during his dirty 30s? God, you never forget your first sex bender while hopped up on this stuff. But I’m sure your memory of it is hazy by now.” He placed the syringe back in its case. “Maybe you’d like a refresher?”

The X-Rick jolted forward as though he’d completely forgotten that he was still strapped in place. He struggled uselessly against the restraints before slumping back, chest heaving. “What—are you going to do with that?”

“Don’t worry, pardner,” C-165 drawled, resting one arm casually over the back of the chair. The promise of entertainment was alight in his eyes. “Yous ain’t the only one who needs a little—” He flicked the needle head embedded in the X-Rick’s arm, making him grunt in discomfort. “—help tonight.”

As if conscious that he was the topic of their discussion, The One gave a soft groan from the bed. His brows knitted together as he slowly roused from sleep.

“Do it now,” Riq said, nodding to the Eun-Rick who held the syringe. One of his brothers was already dabbing at the inside of The One’s arm with a cotton swab, filling the air with the eye-watering smell of antiseptic. When the sniffing Eun-Rick didn’t move, still standing by the bed, needle raised like some shellshocked junkie, Riq growled, “That was an order, not a suggestion.”

The Eun-Rick looked back at Riq, eyes shimmery and hands trembling. “B-b-but, M-Master, we can’t—we can’t—” he began to sputter, backing away from the bed. Riq felt impatience begin to fester at the show of disobedience, but in the next second, the Eun-Rick’s twin stepped in. He wrapped a strong hand around his brother’s wrist.

“Forgive us, Master. It will be done.” The laceration down the Eun-Rick’s right cheek had healed horribly into a fleshy, pink worm that glistened when he spoke. His usually grim face looked even grimmer as he took the syringe from his brother’s limp hand. “As it must, Brother.”
Once relieved of his task, the weeping dolt turned away to sob on the shoulder of the third Eun-Rick who had stood to console him.

Riq pulled a face at the excessive display of sentiment. “Get him out of here,” he sneered, waving at the two meeker Eun-Ricks who clung to each other and ducked their heads in tandem. They moved swiftly to the exit, their shoulders drawn high, eyes fixed on the floor.

The remaining, competent Eun-Rick took his seat on the bed, the perfect embodiment of discipline and medical indifference as he flicked the syringe to dispel any bubbles.

“Today, Eun-Rick,” Riq said from just behind his shoulder, anticipation making his hands flex as if they could already feel The One in their grasp.

When the Eun-Rick turned over the limp arm to reveal the paler flesh, The One stirred and blinked his eyes blearily. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but the Eun-Rick hushed him gently as he felt for the vein.

“Don’t you fucking dare—Mouse!” the X-Rick shouted from across the room.

Mouse?

But it was too late. The Eun-Rick slipped the needle into The One’s arm and pushed down the plunger.

“Ah...!” The One’s cry was weak, but the accompanying Epiphany still sent a flash of clarity through Riq’s brain, and the X-Rick’s strange outburst came to light.

After the tickle of Epiphany had faded, Riq smirked back at him. “Is that what you call him? Mouse.” His lips pursed into a kiss around the single syllable. There was something undeniably appealing about the name.

The X-Rick glared, slouched but stiff as a blade in his seat. “Why are you doing this?” he bit out.

“Very good, Eun-Rick,” Riq answered instead, eyes locked on the small mark left behind by the needle. Blood swelled at the exit point, a perfect red pearl. Riq slowly pushed the Eun-Rick aside to press into it with his thumb and bring it to his lips. He swirled his tongue over the pad a few times, relishing the sharp copper libation. “You are dismissed,” he added, distracted.

Unlike his artless brothers, this Eun-Rick paid his proper respects, bowing until his nose nearly brushed the floor and shuffling backward as he made his way out of the room.

The drug was already taking effect, as evidenced by the way The One’s—or, rather, Mouse’s—breathing had become labored. A coat of sweat came shining to the surface, every pore releasing pheromones into the air in response to the aphrodisiac. Riq inhaled deeply, certain he could already taste his musk mixing with the blood on his tongue. He took his seat by Mouse’s hip.

Please don’t do this, he heard the X-Rick say. He sounded so sincere, his true, pathetic nature crying out plaintively.

“Oh, but I will.” He ran his hand over Mouse’s shorn hair, pleased with the way he nuzzled into his palm on automatic. “You’ve wronged me, X-Rick,” he said, keeping his voice level despite the vitriol that burned just behind his tongue. “You’ve wronged me in a very bad way. And now you’ll have to pay for that.”

“But I already said—” His teeth knocked hard against each other as C-165 smacked him upside the
“Hey, now. Settle down, compadre. The chief’s talkin’, ‘n’ yous’d do right tah listen tah him,” C-165 chided. “Ya might even learn a thing’er two.”

Leaving Mouse in his drugged-out daze, Riq turned his head to address his audience. “Do you know the story of Prometheus?” He ignored the X-Rick’s confused look at his non sequitur and began to recite one of his favorite stories. “Prometheus was a trickster who took pity on the humans living at the foot of Mount Olympus. They were simple, sad creatures then, blind at night and victims to the cold.

“Being the bad egg that he was, Prometheus thought he’d help man and also cheat the gods of Mount Olympus. So one day, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to man so that he could warm his home, cook his meat, and feel safe at night. Mankind considered Prometheus his savior. But Zeus—Zeus was outraged. And do you know what he did to Prometheus for stealing from him?”

C-165 reached down and dug his fingers into the X-Rick’s flesh just beneath his ribs, where his liver was. It wasn’t hard enough to cause any real damage, but the X-Rick still yelped like a child.

“We’s got ourselves a li’l squawker, naw don’t we?” C-165 cackled gleefully, scuffing him across the head again.

After cursing at his captor, the X-Rick spat, “Nice fucking story. So what? You’re saying you’re—you’re some kind of god now?”

Riq hummed at the word. “Really, X-Rick. You make it sound like a bad thing.” He watched as Mouse’s fingers clutched at the duvet, his chest tense and quivering as he started to pant. “I’m simply answering the call of fate. The universe needs The One True Rick, and I intend to fulfill that role.”

“The One True...” The X-Rick snorted. “Y-you honestly believe that bullshit?”

Riq’s mood instantly soured. “Show some gratitude. That ‘bullshit’—” He flicked a hand toward the bedside table where the confiscated chapter from the Book of Morty sat. “—was the only thing keeping you alive this far. I could’ve had you wiped off the face of the Citadel the moment you stepped inside.”

“Yeah? Well, why didn’t you?” Again, that challenge.

Rather than answering, Riq said to C-165, “I think our Prometheus needs another reminder of his place. If you’d be so kind.”

“Mah pleasure, chief.” C-165 tipped his hat before selecting a metal wand with an orb on one end from the suite’s collection of torture devices. Without any preamble, he flicked on its switch and jammed the sparking orb beneath the X-Rick’s ribs. “Lessee how tha hardest workin’ liver in the galaxy handles this!”

This time it wasn’t just his fingers pretending to be the talons of the Caucasus eagle, and the X-Rick howled as he was electrocuted, his back arching off the chair as he tried in vain to escape.

As the X-Rick bucked and twitched, Riq sighed. “This is precisely why you’re not fit to be The One True Rick. You have nothing, and you still act like somehow you’re in charge here. Well, let me make something very clear.” He raised his voice over the sound of the X-Rick screaming anew as C-165 shifted his attention to his groin. “Your punishment will be long, and it will be hellish. And as long as I keep you pumped full of that serum, you’ll have no say in the matter.”
Just then, Mouse gave a breathy whine, turning onto his side and burying his hands between his legs. The urge to reach out and touch him was strong, but Riq knew that the events of the book had to be allowed to run their course. This latest chapter that he’d retrieved from the X-Rick’s person after his capture held even more promise than any before it, the final buildup to what would be The Ones’ proper reuniting.

“Thus The One True Morty rejoiced and sought pleasure in Himself,” he echoed, watching Mouse begin to squirm and rub his palms against his erection. And The Ones then joined in each other’s arms.

Having tired of his toy, C-165 switched off the wand and tapped the head of it against his calloused palm as he circled the X-Rick’s seat, considering his next move. Smoke rose in waves from the X-Rick’s hunched shoulders, only the occasional fibrillation in his arms indicating he was still alive.

Riq continued. “The Book of Morty may have been right about many things, but it was wrong to choose you. You were only supposed to ready The One for his ordained master.” The memory of their first botched reunion jittered through his mind, and he shook his head free of it. “And you couldn’t even do that right. You fuck-up.”

C-165 then gripped the wand in both hands like a sledgehammer, hefted it over his head, and slammed it down onto the back of the X-Rick’s right hand. The crunch of bones was audible even from across the room. Unable to scream, the X-Rick only whinged through clenched teeth. His jaw was locked shut from the voltage that passed through him. With a loud yee-haw, C-165 reared back and delivered another devastating blow to his left hand this time. The X-Rick twisted in his seat, huffing fitfully through his nose.

Mouse had begun to moan, suddenly unable to keep still where he lay, twisting and writhing, his erection tenting the front of his robe as he fucked the air with uncoordinated thrusts of his hips. Riq watched him, intrigued. No doubt the transition from unconsciousness to aphrodisiatic high was dizzying, to say the least, but his body was taking to the drug as well as could be expected.

He looked so ravishing that even C-165 had to comment on it, a quiet little Mm-MM, he looks good enough tah eat muttered under breath. Riq pinned him with a perplexed look, watching him stand idly by the X-Rick as he tossed the electric wand end over end in one hand before throwing it back onto the tool counter. When Riq met his eyes, the mercenary just gave an amicable wink, chewing on his toothpick with a lewd smack of his lips. He waggled his brow, head cocked.

It wasn’t like C-165 to overstep his boundaries like this, and Riq was temporarily thrown by his brazenness. Shrugging off the strange anomaly, he cleared his throat and picked himself up to walk back to where the X-Rick sat, limp and gibbering to himself.

He lifted his nose, glowered down at the X-Rick, and said in his most condescending tone, “No, you’re not deserving of the title of One True Rick. You’re just a petty convict, a failure. An X-Rick. And you’ll—” He was about to continue, when the X-Rick gave a half-chuckle, half-grunt.

“Y-yeah. Well, this X-Rick al-almost—almost got away with it.”

“Don’t get cocky, X-Rick.” A quick nod from Riq, and C-165 unsheathed his small blade and pressed it against his throat. “The last idiot who ‘almost got away with it’ begged for death before I shot him into a sun.”

Larynx squeezed beneath the sharp blade, the X-Rick gurgled uncomfortably before he managed a strained, “Funny. I see him standing right he—”
He hadn’t even finished his sentence before C-165 made his move.

*Don’t go spillin’ the beans now, compadre!*

Fast as a rattlesnake, his knife glinted like a fang and sliced across the X-Rick’s throat. Blood spewed from his severed carotid artery, a rich fountain of red that splashed beyond the edge of the torture chamber’s white tiles to coat the black marble.

“Jesus Christ! A little warning next time?!” Riq barked, stepping clear of the spray. After the initial gush, it poured down the X-Rick’s front in a red waterfall.

“Pardon me, chief,” C-165 said, cleaning off his blade on his pant leg before slipping it into his holster. He lifted his lips in what was supposed to be an apologetic grin but looked more like depraved delight, all the while leaving the X-Rick to choke on his own blood. “‘Ah was jus’ gettin’ sour on how’s he was runnin’ his mouth.”

Riq rolled his eyes. He had always known his dog had a feral streak that he’d never managed to break him of. It was a risk he accepted every time he employed C-165’s mercenary skills, but as long as his crosshairs were trained on the target of his choosing, he could live with it.

*Damn squealer bleeds like a stuck pig,* he heard C-165 say.

“Yes. Well, as fitting as that title is—”

*Nearly’s bad as when ah tried tah lop off the kid’s pecker.*

Riq stopped, his ears suddenly burning. He turned to face C-165 who was busy opening the tap for the regenerative serum, indifferent to what he’d just admitted and without a shred of remorse.

“What did you just say?”

C-165 hummed and gave a distracted “Say what, chief?”, not even bothering to look up from his work. Behind Riq, Mouse gave another lusty moan.

*Damn, he’s louder thanna cat in heat. Ah'd gladly scratch his itch.*

“What. Did you. Just say?” Riq stalked slowly toward C-165, mindful to sidestep the pool of blood that glistened scarlet beneath the accent lighting.

Oblivious to the death glare his employer was giving him, C-165 let out a short chuckle. “Ah ain’t said nothin’, chief. You’s must be hearin’ things.” His lips were moving, yet what Riq heard was very different: The sooner you get yer rocks off, the sooner ah’ll have my turn with the lil’ shaver. ‘N’ this time, mah trusty blade, Kindness, ain’t gonna miss.

He took a step forward. For a moment, Riq doubted his ears, but then his paranoia goaded him on—that persistent, nagging suspicion that told him no one could be trusted.

That’s right. The cowboy’s been playing you for a fool, Riq, a voice singsonged inside of him.

Now nearly chest to chest with C-165, Riq’s lips twitched into an empty grin. “Is that a fact?” he said, garnering another confused look from C-165.

He’s the one who cut Mouse. And he’s been sitting pretty right beside you this whole time!

“And did you just think you were going to get away with it?” Riq’s hand slunk down to grasp the handle of C-165’s blade sheathed at his waist. “You backstabbing snake.”
He’s been making a laughing stock out of you!

C-165 swallowed, bewilderment in his eyes. He tried to back up a half-step but was stopped by the X-Rick’s chair. ‘C-c’mon now, chief. Whatchu splashin’ ‘bout? Ain’t no reason tah be throwin’ around fightin’ words.’

Ya jingled ol’ mush-head. Ah got half a mind tah slice you up six ways from Sunday—

Make him bleed!

Face twisting into something inhuman, Riq wrenched the knife from its sleeve, grabbed C-165 behind the neck, and stabbed the knife into his chest. The flat blade punched easily through the bands of muscle and slipped between two ribs to plunge into his heart. With a snarl, he tugged the knife back and forth, driving it even deeper as C-165’s legs began to buckle. He let go with a huff and was already turning away as C-165 stared down at the Cupid’s arrow made of stag horn sticking out of his chest.

What in tarnation?

Then he stupidly, stupidly grasped the hilt and pulled it out. Immediately, fresh blood oozed from the narrow hole, rich with oxygen, as it torrented down his six-pack. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a bubble of blood that filled his mouth. His eyes rolled back in his head, two white marbles, before he hit the floor with a crack, falling face-first into the X-Rick’s blood.

“This is why you don’t mess in godly affairs,” Riq said, partially out of breath. He ran a shaky hand through his disheveled hair, now clumped with sweat. His sleeve came away damp when he wiped at his brow. “Fuck.” He should’ve known better than to put any stock in a Rick.

At that moment, Mouse keened needily from the bed. I want you.

The message rushed through his head like a tide crashing on the shore, washing away any annoyance Riq felt for C-165’s loss. In its place, he felt an instant calm overtake him. It strengthened with every step as he made his way back to the bed, drawn toward it like an undertow. The allure of Mouse’s supplication wrapped around him in a smothering caress, thick with the scent of arousal. Riq inhaled it as though he were taking in his first breath of life-giving air.

Still locked to his chair, the X-Rick’s pitiful gurgling had petered out to a low groan. The serum had closed the hole in his throat, but it couldn’t replace the blood that he’d lost, and he now slumped over in his seat, weak with anemia. “Y-you’re a real...piece of work...” he wheezed to Riq’s back. “You sadistic...fucker.”

As though in a trance, Riq tucked up his robe and crawled across the bed on his knees toward his prize. Half-curled on his side, Mouse’s eyes were unfocused and quivering with nystagmus until they landed on Riq.

Riq’s throat tightened with emotion as he loosened the golden sash from around his waist. “I’m not entirely cruel, my dear X-Rick. Before you leave your miserable life behind, I’ll let you see something spectacular. You will bear witness to the birth of a god.”

“And you think...Mouse will want...anything to do with...you?” The X-Rick strained to be heard, to remain relevant, even when all of Riq’s attention was already narrowed down to the delightful wonder that was waiting for him.

“Oh, it’s not even a question, X-Rick,” Riq replied, dropping his robe to his knees. His erection jutted out proudly, boasting a few extra inches over his look-alikes’ thanks to pricey enhancements,
and blood pulsed through the network of thick veins along its sides.

With no effort at all, Riq pulled Mouse up. His limbs were wet noodles as he sagged into his master’s embrace, and he moaned at the slightest contact, his cock leaking liberally and twitching within the frame of his open robe.

_I want you. I want you. I want you._

At the sound of Mouse's voice, Riq closed his eyes, feeling tears burn behind his lids. “Don’t you hear him? He’s already begging for me.”

It was at that moment that the X-Rick finally realized he could not stop what was about to happen. His demeanor turned on a dime, his facade as the victim replaced by a feral animal. “Ffuckyou!” he yelled with surprising force, given the sallow of his cheeks. He thrashed and kicked, only managing to squirm like a trapped vermin in the chair. Spittle flew from his mouth as he howled, “Mouse! Mouse, don’t listen to him! Get away from him! Mouse!”

“R-Rick?” Mouse turned sluggishly in the direction of the voice, but Riq was quick to intervene.

“Now, now. Don’t worry.” Slipping a hand beneath his chin, he steered his face toward him to coo, “I’m right here, Mouse.”

Drug-laced recognition glittered in Mouse’s glowing eyes, and his cheeks blushed that unmistakable Munlockus maroon. “Rick?” He blinked slowly. “Rick...!” Then, with an energy that was so unlike his earlier stupor, he threw himself against Riq—all desperate hands and mouth.

The aphrodisiac had worked better than expected, and Riq was caught off guard by the sheer passion of Mouse’s advances. He was grabbing Riq by the ears to tug him close, licking shamelessly at his lips. The second Riq opened his mouth, Mouse dove in, lapping at his tongue in invitation to dance.

So overwhelmed by the tidal wave of affection he’d yearned for so long, Riq’s heart lurched, propelling him forward to grab Mouse’s arms and return the kiss with equal fervor. It was messy, but he was delicious. The perfect blend of soft and wet, innocent and devoted—ambrosia made flesh.

Riq couldn’t press himself close enough, every inch where Mouse touched him feeling simultaneously soothing and electric. His fingernails dug in too deeply where they gripped him, and Mouse squeaked into the kiss, setting off Epiphanies that babbled in his head like an unruly crowd. Everything was sharper and clearer, and Riq felt more alive than he had in ages. It was almost like the sterile temple of his mind was now a pit of lust-drunk worshippers, their imaginary voices singing his praises.

“R-Rick, I don’t know w-what’s wrong with meeee.” Mouse broke the kiss and keened, clambering onto Riq’s lap to rut against his stomach. Fingers tangled in his hair, anchoring him in place, he breathed against Riq’s lips, “But I need you. P-please, Rick. I want you right now.”

Riq’s ears were filled with those sweet words, buzzing with Mouse’s needy confessions until they seemed to echo throughout his head. _Give it to me. Give it to me_, Mouse repeated. It was intoxicating, if not a little disorienting, to hear his pleas consume him so thoroughly—almost as if Mouse were calling from inside him.

“Y-yes, my dear Mouse. Anything you want.” And he would do anything for the boy in his lap. His love had been rekindled to the rightful inferno it had once been, that it was always meant to be. Yes, he would show him just how much he loved him. He would devour him, make him his, and Mouse—Mouse would make ichor run in his veins.
As they kissed, he slid his hand down the small of Mouse’s back to cup one cheek through the silk robe. It fit perfectly in his palm, and he squeezed it appreciatively. He’d just crept one finger down the cleft of his ass, when the boorish curses of the X-Rick interrupted the moment.

“Cock-sucking piece of shit! I’ll fucking kill you when I get my hands on you!” he roared. His voice was frayed horribly around the edges. The flesh of his throat still needed mending from C-165’s blade, but he didn’t hold back as he tore into his larynx anew to shriek, “Que te jodan! Que te jodan! Hijo de puta!”

Letting Mouse suckle at his neck, Riq turned a peeved look at the unwelcome disruption. “Almost forgot.” With Mouse still latched to him like a hungry kitten, he leaned back to retrieve a remote from the bedside table. The way he stretched made it difficult for Mouse to reach him, and he had to settle for lavishing Riq’s broad chest with affection instead. It was better than any whore he’d ever had, because this was The One, and The One loved him. That reminder was the one thing keeping Riq’s temper in check, and he said with just a small amount of annoyance to the X-Rick, “It’s time you rested that throat of yours.”

“What are you—” But then the X-Rick seemed to catch on that he was about to lose his one and only foothold in this twisted game. Desperation was clear in his eyes as Riq pointed the remote at a small sensor at the base of the torture chamber. “Mouse, it’s going to be okay!” he shouted. “Don’t forget I lov—”

With a click, the X-Rick’s voice went dead, the sound barrier having been activated. A faint, blue film settled over the X-Rick and his chair and C-165’s corpse, sealing off that portion of the room so that while sound could still enter, none could leave—a useful feature for an Elite client who preferred to torture The One in peace and quiet.

“That’s better.” Riq dropped the remote and had just turned back to Mouse again when—

*Cheating bastard! He hates you! You’d never get Mouse to touch you if you didn’t drug him, and you know it! Keep your fucking hands off him!*

Riq looked up sharply, expecting to see a glitch in the sound barrier. Maybe the seal was incomplete or he’d, in fact, accidentally switched it off again. But to his surprise, the blue film was still in place. And even more surprising, while the X-Rick was throwing every insult he knew at him, his lips were pressed together in a deep frown. So how was he able to...?

He didn’t need to wonder much longer, as Mouse gave another wanton moan, ass wriggling under Riq’s fingers. *I want you inside me,* he mewed, even with his mouth working sloppy hickey across Riq’s chest. With that fresh burst of Mouse’s pleasure, the X-Rick’s “voice” became clearer until it sounded as though he were speaking right beside him.

*He doesn’t want you!*

Riq looked from Mouse to the X-Rick, and with perfect clarity, the pieces came together.

A wicked grin scythed Riq’s face, and he dropped his head back to laugh, a cruel, throaty laugh that deepened with each cackle. “Oh,” he said, suddenly feeling giddy as a schoolboy. “Oh, that is *rich.*” His eyes slid to the X-Rick who looked at him confused for a moment before realization dawned on his battered face. He went a lovely shade of white.

*Oh, no.*

*Oh, yes.* Riq thought back, already enjoying his new revelation. The idea was ludicrous, and yet...
He finally answered Mouse’s pleas by stripping off his robe and latching his teeth around one hard nipple as he pressed two fingers into his puckered hole. Mouse caterwauled at the touch, and immediately Riq felt his mind not prickle so much as expand.

It became simultaneously vast yet full, occupied by unfamiliar thoughts that clashed with his own. His mind was already a cacophonous place, yet these new presences were like disembodied ghouls within the landscape, disruptive and strange. They were a chaos to his own chaos, taking the form of loose ribbons that snaked and fluttered in an unseen breeze. Curious to see where they led, he reached out and grabbed one.

It writhed in his hand, and slowly, patiently, he followed it back to its source—Mouse’s mind. There, he found his thoughts spinning a lyrical tune around and around in one spot, an endless chant of want, need, want, need, want, need along with a plethora of lusty visions that made Riq’s dick twitch.

While part of him wandered Mouse’s mindscape, his body was fully in the moment, heaving and eager for its eventual reward. He swirled his fingers through the peculiar, warm liquid that coated Mouse’s hole then rubbed it between thumb and forefinger. It was far more viscous than sweat and certainly didn’t smell like it, he thought, as he held it to his nose. If anything, it smelled tart. A natural lubricant, then, he figured. A depraved chuckle slipped past his lips again. Oh, he was going to enjoy himself tonight. He pushed his fingers inside that tight whorl of flesh, drawing out more of the slick as well as Mouse’s moans.

The redundant chant became a shuddering shout, the images dancing faster. Pretty but, ultimately, it couldn’t hold Riq’s attention for long. The Munlockus horn had either dumbed Mouse down to this vapid thing, or the kid didn’t hold much in the way of intellect. He plucked absentmindedly at the ribbon just to hear that hymn of praise again.

A different thread chimed for his attention. Not bothering to probe Mouse’s thoughts any deeper, he turned his sights, instead, to the other presence currently buzzing around like a trapped fly: the X-Rick. Silenced in real life yet unable to hide now, his most private thoughts would be put on display for Riq’s entertainment and exploitation.

How had the Book of Morty put it? Untold wonders, indeed. Riq had to commend the writer for pulling off such subtle wordplay. Never in a million years would he have guessed that the fateful passage had been referring to telepathy. And he realized, bitterly, that despite all his assumed power and control, this was the one thing that had always eluded him—the dark and deceitful world of others’ minds.

However, now with this—“Resonance” the X-Rick called it?—nothing was beyond his reach. Granted access to the secrets of anyone he chose, he would know without question where his constituents stood, immune to lip service or lies. And those who even dreamed of crossing him—

The corpse of C-165 caught his eye where it lay cold on the white tiles.

—would never even have the chance.

“It’s no wonder you didn’t want to stick around for this, X-Rick. And here I thought you just dreaded having to see your little crush beg for my cock. But it looks like I’m going to be learning a whole lot more about you tonight.”

While Mouse fucked himself on his fingers, the X-Rick’s mind was splayed open beneath the force of the Resonance.
On its surface, he was first met with a coating of panicked threats—spiny, obnoxious things that Riq batted away effortlessly. Where one was knocked aside, however, two more sprouted up in its place. He tried scaling over or around them, the nonsensical theorems layered behind insults layered behind dramatizations of his supposedly gruesome death. Distracting him.

“What is it you’re trying to hide from me?” he growled, grabbing Mouse by the base of his mohawk and wrenching his head out from where it was buried in his crotch. He’d been mouthing wantonly at the side of Riq’s cock, but foreplay wouldn’t be necessary, and Riq was impatient to skip the hors d’oeuvres and get to the main course. “There’s no point in fighting. Before tonight is over, X-Rick, you’ll be showing me everything.” To Mouse, he crooned, “Now, love, show me everything.”

Mouse’s eyelids fluttered as Riq looked him over, and with a shaky nod, he turned around and lowered his chest to the bed, ass in the air, thighs spread. Head nestled in the duvet, he reached back to hold his cheeks apart, presenting himself to his master. Slick glistened invitingly from his twitching hole.

I want it. Please put it in me. I want it in me. That’s all I want, he whined on repeat, although not a single coherent word left his pleasure-numbed lips.

“Of course, my love,” Riq purred. “I’ll give it to you just like you want.” He was already advancing on his knees, his cock gripped in his hand and pointed at his target.

Tears of frustration and relief shone in Mouse’s eyes as he wrapped his fingers around Riq’s hand and joined him in guiding him to his entrance. “Yes! Please, Rick! I-I want all of you!” he panted aloud as the bulbous head of his cock began to press its way in. With a grunt, Mouse bore back and down, trying to take him in, but even thoroughly lubed, the ring of muscle stretched to near-breaking point around his girth.

Riq glanced over to see the X-Rick straining forward as far as he could go in his bindings. His eyes held murder in them, and his mouth was frozen open in one long, voiceless scream—trying to block out the sound of his lover’s betrayal.

Sex was always so much better when someone was suffering for it. And just to make his point, Riq nudged his hips forward again, still meeting resistance. He could see the small hole struggling to fit him. Mouse sobbed and shook his head frantically. “I-I can’t. Rick, you’re too—too big!”

Riq choked at the flattering comment. “Not too big for my—my baby boy. Now, come on. I know you can do it.” He’d had to insist on the matter the first time as well; he knew he could handle it.

Against the inaudible protests of Cabrón! Too much. Stay away from him! It hurts. I’ll fucking kill you! But I want it. Riq dug his fingers into Mouse’s slim hips and thrust forward, hard.

With a shriek and a lewd squelch, Mouse was impaled on Riq’s shaft, his ass relenting to and accommodating the unforgiving size of him only by sheer miracle. His muscles spasmed around the invading member, sending jolts of pleasure through Riq, who sighed into the steamy wetness.

He was perfect. Utterly perfect. So small and frail but so brave to take all of him like this. For a moment, he stilled, relishing the feel of Mouse pulsing and alive around him, the sweet sound of his cries as he hiccuped and sobbed and moaned into the sheets. It was a beautiful symphony of pleasure and pain, with Riq as the conductor.

Epiphanies sparked and jumped amidst the Resonance, creating a duplex of both enlightenment and insight that sent Riq’s mind reeling. He dropped his head back, eyes closed.
All knowledge, all secrets, all desires were now his. This was what it truly meant to be a god.

As Mouse babbled, high on the flood of endorphins, Riq drew out slowly then punched back in, each thrust bringing him another bout of pleasure that spanned the physical and mental realms. A spiderweb of thoughts—the entirety of the Citadel—hung before him now, grand and luminous. Catapulted through the Citadel, Riq caught a glimpse of the inner workings of every Rick within his domain. He saw their anger and joys, their lack of satisfaction and their petty indulgences as plainly as if they wore a placard stating them around their necks. Some spoke highly of him—they praised him by name. Others cursed him like the Devil he was.

He would tour his domain to eradicate the dissidents, in time. Right now, however, his sights were set on one Rick in particular.

Like a hand stroking up a lover’s thigh, he followed the X-Rick’s thread of thoughts into his psyche. “That’s right. I’m in you,” he crowed, all too aware of the double entendre. “I’m inside you, so let’s see what. Makes. You. Tick.” He punctuated each word with a brutal stab of his hips, jostling Mouse like a rag doll who thrashed and clawed at the sheets.

As easily as stripping meat from bone, Riq tore into the X-Rick’s mind, feeling him cringe somewhere on the periphery of his senses. Making himself at home, he brushed aside the superfluous noise of the X-Rick demanding that he leave, that he go fuck himself, and other unmentionables that didn’t bear acknowledging.

His resilience—and a sumptuous stroke along Mouse’s cock that left the boy crying—paid off, and he finally found the X-Rick’s little treasure trove of mutiny. There were excited lines of exposition and splintered conversations that played before him like a reenactment.

He saw the X-Rick speaking in earnest with a bespectacled Rick, words like “GF conspiracy,” “Code Yellows,” and “selling out” hovering over their ghostly forms like cigarette smoke. Just beside them was a wall filled with more linear information, points of data that intersected with profiles of Code Yellow Ricks.

Even if Riq weren’t already so intimately knowledgeable about the subject matter, it wouldn’t have taken him long to see what the X-Rick was planning: The Galactic Federation was revealed as the puppet enemy it was; the Code Yellows, just a convenient excuse to target dissidents and propagate fear. With only a few key pieces of data, the X-Rick had thoroughly dismantled the complex system that Riq had toiled to keep secret. Or maybe not so secret, after all.

“Oh, X-Rick,” he tsked, hips never pausing in their ruthless pace. “An unrequited love? The poor Rickless bastard. He stuck his neck out for you, and now he’s going to lose it. Maybe I should pay a special visit to your dear Chi. Before I kill him, I’ll let him know that you were just off the mark this whole time. The facts were staring you right in the face, and you didn’t even see them.”

This caught the X-Rick’s attention. He’d been twisted to the side, eyes clenched tightly shut, but now he slowly unwound and turned to face him.
“That’s right. You missed something.” One hand braced on Mouse’s back, Riq pistoned into his dripping, hot hole as he glared at the object of his hatred. “You think you’re so fucking smart. Thought you’d figured everything out, huh? About the Code Yellows? The GF?”

Sweat trickled down his temple, and he paused to flip Mouse onto his back, tossing one slim leg over his shoulder. He leaned back on his knees, fucking into Mouse at a new angle that drove the boy nearly mad with pleasure. Now each time he thrust into him, he could see Mouse’s expression pinch with effort.

“R-Rick! I’m going to—oh, god!” he cried, both inside and out.

_That’s right, my love. Now you’re catching on._

“Didn’t you notice the patterns?” he said. “It wasn’t just terror-Ricks who got a one-way ticket to GF prison. And you—you tried to reason them away with a damn footnote? Those outliers ruining your precious thesis—they were your X-Rick brothers! Or should I say χ-Ricks?” He laughed loudly at the X-Rick’s stupefied expression. “It seems your friend was actually onto something. What did he call it? An ‘alphabet soup circle jerk’? How witty. When the Book of Morty said your kind would try and claim the title of One True Rick, I needed to get you out of the way.” Each thrust of his hips jostled Mouse forward inch by inch. "All of you. And bless a Rick’s weakness for superstitions! A little relabeling here, a little urban legends there, and X-Ricks are now as sympathetic as the bubonic plague! After that, it was just a matter of slipping one in whenever a deceased Rick showed up on our lottery. And the truth is, nobody bats an eye when a filthy X-Rick goes missing.”

Mouse continued to mewl as he was pounded. Head hanging over the edge of the bed, he gazed upside down across the room in the direction of the X-Rick, although his eyes were still fogged by lust. His hands flexed on either side of him as though he were trying to grasp something that wasn’t there.

By now, the X-Rick was watching intently, his shoulders squared and his head stiff as he looked directly at them, hardly even blinking.

_The fuck?_ The nasty motherfucker actually liked watching his lover take it from another Rick. Bet he was a sporting a hard-on underneath those coveralls of his. Let him go out with a bang. He’d be dead before the night was over anyway. And it was too fun spelling out to the X-Rick just why his master plan was doomed to fail before it’d even properly begun.

“Even if you found out that the Council’s been running the GF for years, who’s going to listen to a measly X-Rick like you? You think you can just waltz in—” He hissed. “—and save the fuckin’ day? Well, newsflash. Ricks are idiots. They were dumb enough to believe the Council when we announced the Code Yellows and our staged GF war, and they’re dumb enough to keep believing it. After all, I am the fucking Council, and what I say goes. So if I say there’s a threat, then there’s a threat. If you defy me, I’ll make it so that you never were. And best of all, X-Rick, the Citadel will keep dancing like a puppet on my strings, and there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

Frozen in place, the X-Rick simply stared at Riq before slowly lowering his head. This was it. He’d finally managed to break him; he could see it in the droop of his shoulders, the limp curl of his fingers. The X-Rick had lost once and for all, and even Mouse would never accept him as—

_My Rick…_

Riq snapped his attention back to Mouse who was still gazing across the room from over the bed’s edge. With a frustrated huff, he yanked him back up. No, he should be keeping his eyes on him and him alone, not the damned X-Rick. How dare that heathen continue to corrupt The One’s mind?!
Determined to get to the root of Mouse’s delusion, Riq looped the familiar ribbon of Resonance around two fingers and tugged Mouse’s mind toward himself. To his relief, he found Mouse still singing for him in a drunken tune. The Munlockus horn had lost its fever pitch and was now a low and constant hum like a swarm of lazy bees. *My Rick*, played the chant. *My Rick.*

Yes. *I’m yours. And, more importantly, you are mine.*

Nestled snugly in his mind, Riq saw the two of them make love through Mouse’s eyes, following up the strong muscles of Riq’s thighs. His lean belly. Mighty cock. Ah, Mouse was reveling in Riq, idolizing him as the god he was. He was admiring his sturdy hands. Scarred chest—

*Wait.*

His bare chin—

*No.*

His gentle face—

*No! No! No!* Where Riq’s face was supposed to be, with its handsome goatee and penetrating eyes, the X-Rick was staring back at him. Brought into stark relief, his irises appeared two-toned, one a paler blue than the other. This would’ve told Riq something—something of great importance—if he weren’t so distracted by the genuine love that radiated from the X-Rick’s lips as they were lifted in that fucking sappy smile.

*Mouse,* he mouthed, and in real life, Mouse arched as though in reply, running his hands across his own chest and up his neck.

“Oh, Rick...I love you,” Mouse moaned.

Riq could feel Mouse’s arousal beginning to peak as he was fucked by—himself? The X-Rick? He didn’t know anymore. Brows furrowed in concentration, Mouse’s muscles began to tremble, contract. They squeezed desperately along Riq’s length, and a lowing dripped from his lips as he clutched at his own shoulders in a hideous X.

“No!” Riq roared, grabbing Mouse’s wrists and pinning them to either side of him. “Don’t think of him! It’s me!” He shook him. “*I’m The One True Rick! I’m the one you love!*”

Mouse’s eyes flew open just long enough to register Riq’s face. His lips pulled down in disgust. “Y-you—” It was all he managed before his entire body seized, his fists straining against Riq’s hold. He wrenched his head to the side, breath hitched.

The Resonance that came with his orgasm was immense, and Riq felt his mind swell to its absolute limit. It kept reaching outward until his brain was stretched to the diameter of a fiber optic cable. Clear and vibrant and unsettlingly empty. Where before there had been the countless voices of other Ricks yammering away inside him, they were now suspended at a distance, leaving Riq in a globe of nothingness.

In the next moment, Riq was yanked back, his mind funneling down and down into the boy beneath him.

When he next opened his eyes, he was blinded by a piercing light. Blinking rapidly to adjust to the brightness, a curtain of gold greeted him. It moved, shifting and shimmering like scales on a fish, and
it took Riq a moment to realize that the scales were, in fact, petals—flashing, gold petals that spun in a noiseless cyclone around him.

Incredible. What was this strange place? He wasn’t even certain he was still in Mouse’s mind, as the steady chants from before were now nowhere to be heard. Clearly, however, he was in no physical reality. When he reached out to the curtain of petals, his hand touched nothing. But it was the sight of his own fingers that made him go still.

They were knobby and gray, liver spots dotting the backs of his wrists and up his forearms. When he looked down, he hardly recognized himself. Near-translucent skin stretched over withered muscles, and his stomach was caved in to reveal the sickly bowl of his pelvis. He looked twice his age—a wizened old man one step from the grave.

It was then he realized he wasn’t alone. Directly in front of him within the petal storm was Mouse. Wait, not quite. It was Mouse, but he was older. His naked body no longer held the gawkiness of a teenager but was fleshed out and muscular.

He was as he was meant to be—free of any worldly possessions, a creature of pure energy taking the form of this young man. The One True Morty. Any imperfections had been erased from his skin which seemed to emit a heavenly glow as he stood with his head bowed.

My One, Riq tried calling out to him, the sound both gargantuan and diminutive in this strange mindscape. He took a wobbly step forward but came no closer. Another step, and still the scenery didn’t move, as if he were trapped on an invisible treadmill that kept him in place. He called out again, and this time The One slowly lifted his head. When he opened his eyes, two pools of golden light glowed in their place.

Awestruck yet terrified, Riq drew back instinctively. His skin prickled as if the air itself held a charge, and his ears began to ring from the smothering silence. The golden light grew brighter and brighter still until it burned his retinas. He couldn’t breathe.

The One opened his mouth to utter a single word: “Impostor.”

Riq blinked again and found himself once more in the winner’s suite, cock now shriveling where it was still buried inside Mouse and sweat growing cold and clammy along his back. The aftershock of his orgasm—he didn’t even remember cumming—had his breath coming staccato. It’d just been a strange vision, then. He was still here with The One. They were still—

Beneath him, Mouse was staring at him, his eyes sharp with a kind of sober and unforgiving clarity. There was no more masquerade, and Riq suddenly felt exposed—even shameful—for the sin he’d committed.

A desecration.

He only saw it coming from the corner of his eye, little more than a blur of flesh flying at him at full speed. And then there was a burst of pain as the X-Rick’s fist connected with his nose, and he was thrown off his mount.

Sputtering on the floor, he looked up in shock at the X-Rick who now stood over him, heaving. His wrists were shredded to hell, and dried blood blackened his grimy coveralls. His neck, though filthy, was healed, and his once broken hands were now clenched in trembling fists, the tendons shifting like guitar strings beneath the skin.

They looked ready to play.
The nanos hadn’t even completed chewing through the straps around his wrists before Rick had torn himself free from the chair. He didn’t pay it any mind as he yanked out the needle from his arm, figuring that he still had enough serum in his system to repair the damage.

Blind to anything but Mouse being violated on the bed by that monster, he bounded across the room, reared back his fist, and threw all of his weight into a punch that knocked Riq clear off the bed. Never had the bruising of his own knuckles felt so good.

He teetered with the force of it, nearly joining Riq on the ground who now lay sprawled and sputtering in shock. “Maybe—maybe you didn’t hear me the first time.” After righting himself, Rick stalked closer, each step making Riq scurry back.

“How the hell did you—”

“I told you not to touch him.” Adrenaline and blood loss had Rick’s head spinning and darkness closing in on the fringes of his eyesight. He stumbled to the side, leaning on the bed for support, then blinked like an owl to get his vision back in focus. When his eyes settled on Riq again, he saw that his look of dismay had morphed into glee.

“Feeling a little lightheaded, hm?” One hand braced beneath him, Riq crouched, the muscles of his legs coiled and ready to spring. “Don’t let me down, X-Rick. I’ve been wanting to take care of you myself for a long time now.” His dick swung lewdly between his thighs, Mouse’s slick drying along its length.

“Trust me, the feeling’s mutual.” Rick’s upper lip curled, transforming his smirk into a predatory warning.

Riq returned it with an equally toothy grin, two beasts facing off in a territorial duel. Then with an inhuman bellow, Riq lunged forward and grappled Rick around the middle. The two stumbled back, Rick smacking his head against the marble floor. He barely had enough time to get his bearings before Riq yanked him up by his coveralls in his fists.

Quickly wrapping his hands around his wrists, Rick heaved them both to the side, and they rolled across the floor in a tangle of flailing limbs. Riq had devolved into a snarling, clawing creature, and Rick was reminded once again that he was wrestling with a madman. He got in one good kick to Riq’s gut before finally gaining the upper hand and pinning him with an arm across his throat.

“You're going to pay for what you did! To Mouse! To my brothers! To everyone!” Rick punched him in the kidneys with each victim listed. He had just straddled Riq’s stomach, readying his fist to deliver another blow, when a wave of vertigo plowed through him. His cheeks flashed hot then cold, and he felt as though his head had been emptied, everything around him suddenly going distant. It was the anemia. His fist dropped like a stone to his side as he wavered drunkenly, and he felt himself slide off of Riq and onto the floor. While he lay braced on his shaky arms, barely hanging onto consciousness, Riq scrambled to a crouch again.

“Mother...fucker!”

When Riq spoke, it sounded hollow and muffled to Rick’s ears. Rick could see the bastard’s lips moving but couldn’t make sense of the words. He must’ve said as much, because Riq spat on him and then grabbed his discarded gold sash off the floor.

“Won’t you ever just fucking shut up?!” he seethed, snapping the cloth taut before tackling Rick
again to wrap it around his neck. Rick tried to grasp at the sash to pry it off, but he couldn’t seem to get a grip. Riq pulled down with his full weight, just beginning to squeeze Rick’s trachea, when the frictionless silk unraveled and slipped free of his hands, causing him to fall forward and bash his forehead against Rick’s.

Dizzy, the two old men clutched at each other about their heaving shoulders, swapping feeble punches as they struggled to regain their stamina. At last, Rick lost his grip and fell onto his back. Spots still obscured Rick’s vision as he stared up at the ceiling, catching Riq getting to his feet from the corner of his eye. Riq swung his leg back and sent a mean kick straight into Rick’s ribs. Regret and déjà vu blossomed through him along with the pain, and he curled onto his side to hack.

“I’m going to break you. I’m going to break every damn bone in your body!” Another well-aimed kick echoed Riq’s promise. “And then I’m gonna burn you alive and piss on the ashes!”

Abruptly, Rick felt the ground fall away from him as he was yanked up by the collar. He opened one bleary eye to see Riq glaring into his face. Blood dripped from his nose. Nice. At least you got in that one good punch, Ricky-boy.

“And no one will even care that you’re gone!” Riq reared back, fist raised in the air—

And then nothing.

The moment Riq’s grasp went slack on his coveralls, Rick shoved him away and dropped to his hands and knees. Sweat dripped down his forehead as he peeked an eye open to see Riq stumbling back, hand to his head. He curled over as though a dozen sandbags had been heaped onto his shoulders, knees wobbly with the effort just to remain standing.

In a heartbeat, Riq had gone from wild animal to cowering child, and the change was so jarring, Rick blinked in surprise. There was something eerily familiar about the terror that warped every facet of his being. His face was wretched; his back, hunched like a whipped dog. Rick had felt the same absolute terror grip himself back in the Eun-Ricks’ tea room, his psyche shattered to pieces and tormented by his own fears.

A Mind Break.

“No. Why... Why would you—” Riq whimpered before he was suddenly seized by a full-body convulsion. His arms locked to his sides, and he fell to his knees as if he’d been wrapped in an anaconda’s deadly embrace. His eyes, wide and pleading, were fixed on something over Rick’s shoulder.

Rick, it’s okay now.

It was Mouse. Even though Rick was too weak to turn his head, he could feel him all the same—a soothing presence that seemed to make the very air hum with energy.

You’ve done enough.

The hem of Mouse’s robe gently brushed his cheek as he passed. Silent on his bare feet, Mouse towered above Rick, regal and majestic in his gold-trimmed robe, his mohawk standing tall and trembling with an electric charge.

An immeasurable calm and sense of control radiated from him like heat from a fire—a source of as much solace as destruction. Although he knew the boy and loved him with all his being, Rick still felt the compulsion to confess his deepest fears to him and beg for his forgiveness.
Now rest, the message chimed soothingly inside his head.

God, did Rick want to rest. Everything was spinning, spinning like the gold petals he was hallucinating around Mouse now. He felt like he could close his eyes and sleep for ten years straight. Another ten years as empty and hopeless as the years he’d spent in prison, before he was anything more than an X-Rick on the sole of the multiverse’s shoe. Before the Citadel, before any of this.

Before Mouse.

Just as his eyes began to flutter shut, an alien scenery appeared in his mind’s eye. Gently rolling hills topped with white. Snowflakes made of ice cream falling from the sky. Mouse was standing beside him as they looked out across the landscape, his eyes happy crescent moons while he squeezed his hand. He smiled back at him.

That’s right, Mouse. It can be like that.

Mouse was now standing before Riq who lay pinned to the marble floor by some invisible force.

I can show you everything.

Yes, there was so much more to see. They’d come too far, survived too much to give up now.

The thought roused a bluster of energy within Rick, and he blinked himself to full consciousness again. He couldn’t miss this. He wouldn’t leave Mouse to deal with Riq on his own.

Hauling himself up, he reached out and placed a trembling hand on Mouse’s shoulder. He leaned forward heavily, the hair on his fingers quivering in the tense air.

“You’ve got this, Mouse,” he husked. “Rip him limb from limb.”

Chapter End Notes

If it's been a while since you've read previous chapters, be sure to scope them out to enjoy all the lovely fanart we've been receiving as well. ❤ As always, thank you to all our wonderful readers and talented artists too!! And for leaving a Kudos or Comment to let us know what you thought. ☆

[All fanart for Chapter 16 can be found here.]
The Exodus

Chapter Summary

In the center of this phenomenon, Mouse whispered against Rick’s lips, “This is our citadel of lost children. It’s time we led them home.”

Chapter Notes

First published 1/26/2018
At long last, the climax to TCoLC! Thank you for kindly overlooking our delay in delivering what is, without a doubt, the longest chapter of the saga—and for good reason too! Every loose thread is finally wrapped up in this chapter; and with the many references made to subtle details that were dropped along the way, some readers might benefit from re-reading the story so as not to miss out! ^^;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Once awakened, The One True Morty shall raze the Citadel.”
- Holy Strip’ture 2:4

Clarity filled Mouse. It sang in the hollow of his bones, quivered at the base of every hair—a clarity so thorough and complete, it felt impossible for Mouse to have ever been without it. It was the kind of clarity that came with knowing.

When he’d alighted nimbly from the bed, sliding off the silken sheets and onto the bloodied marble floor, the savageries of what he’d just endured lay far from his mind; his body, untouched. All the fear and despair that had plagued him sloughed away like great sheets of glacial ice into an ocean, leaving him with a sense of weightless serenity and the knowledge of who he truly was—and what he now had to do.

He felt The One True Morty, the version of himself that he was destined to become, float to the surface of his consciousness, glide along his flesh, and occupy every sense. It tingled like a lover’s kiss, featherlight and airy yet full of promise. He closed his eyes as he gave himself over to The One True Morty, ready to become a vessel to carry out His duty. He did not pause or wonder how it was even possible to do this. To pursue the question would be to chase off a dream—every trace of it dashed apart the instant it was mangled into words.

“Rip him limb from limb,” Rick said, placing a shaky hand on his shoulder.

It wasn’t so much spoken as breathed past Mouse’s ear, a mere movement of sound waves through the air. Unnecessary. What need did He have for words, when words were such poor conduits of meaning? The One True Morty was already intimately familiar with every minutiae of His Counterpart’s intentions. At last, Their motives were aligned, a lock and key uniting to unleash a shared purpose.
Save this pitiable soul is what He heard instead.

His heart burned with the message. Save him! Yes, He would save Riq IV from his ego and arrogance so that he could be made whole again. It would be His first great feat as The One True Morty in His mission to restore Symmetry.

Mouse entwined his fingers with Rick’s, a faint hum of electricity dancing along their skin where they touched, and he wished for him to rest. He heard the soft thump as Rick dropped to the floor behind him, all consciousness snuffed out. Rick would not need to witness this, and sleep would be his reward for all that he’d done already.

With that, Mouse took a step forward, entrusting himself wholly to The One True Morty’s sovereignty. When He opened His eyes again, He looked down at Riq through golden pools of light.

Riq was a quivering, hunched over thing at His feet, all that was left of the once proud council leader. Naked and shivering, he was the very definition of “wretched.” Tears, mucus, and drool wetted his face. A ghastly storm of bruises colored his ashen skin, and his lips were peeled back in a macabre grimace beneath the pain of his earlier beating and the agony of his own fears. It seemed to take Riq all he had just to draw in one lungful of air after another as he lay prone in the throes of the Mind Break.

YOU ARE NO ONE.

His gentle reminder had gouged a mortal wound through Riq’s psyche, and The One True Morty’s heart went out to this pitiable soul. Compassion rose within Him, warm and almost giddy, and He gave a smoke-laced sigh as He watched Riq claw at the glittering floor of the winner’s suite. Any hatred He held for Riq had melted wordlessly into love, a virtuous love that would burn as it reformed him.

He knew He would have to hurt Riq in order to heal him. Just as Mouse had been brutally torn apart and put back together under Riq’s unforgiving hand, so would He do the same to Riq.

He dragged a phantom blade across that fragile mind once more.

YOU ARE INCOMPLETE.

Riq let out another anguished whimper and screwed his eyes shut. His breath hitched over a daisy chain of sobs, his knobby spine quaking with each inhalation. “No. No,” he moaned miserably, his head rocking in a lopsided wobble. “My One... It can’t be true...”

But The One True Morty only ever spoke the truth, and He slowly shook His head at this broken creature’s denial. Then He knelt before Riq, His robe forming a placid lake around Him, and placed one hand on Riq’s head. Riq jolted at the touch and gave a weak cry as though he had been stuck with a dagger instead.

Mouse would never have willingly touched such a vile monster, overcome with loathing and disgust, but The One True Morty felt only an endless patience, like an instructor determined to bring his pupil out of the darkness and into the light.

Through the palm of His hand, The One True Morty could not only see but feel the chaos that raged within Riq. It was as palpable as if He held the working end of a branding iron, and if Mouse were not who He was, if He were not The One True Morty, the vitriol of that sick mind would have burned Him beyond measure. As it was, it had all the effectiveness of a birthday candle in the blaze of The One True Morty’s cleansing pyre.
“My One...” Riq whimpered again, his tear-stained eyes rolling up to Him. With a groan, he struggled to sit upright, grasping The One True Morty’s wrist in one hand. The fingers trembled where they held, and He looked on with calm regard as Riq got to his knees and braced his other hand on His shoulder. Time did not flow in a linear path here, and the effect of being so close to a being of such limitless entropy was changing Riq’s physical form, warping it before His very eyes.

On each exhalation, Riq appeared to age in leaps and bounds, his life force sucked out of him like air through a straw. With every inhale, however, sagging flesh would tighten, pallid skin grew rosy, and old muscle bulged with fresh vitality.

Riq took a deep breath, his spine popping as his posture straightened. “You—you still love me...don’t you?” He squeezed The One True Morty’s shoulder tighter for good measure, a manic strength behind his fingers. When Riq looked into His face, his brow was a woeful point stabbing at his hairline, and his mouth was pulled down in a dreary puddle. “T-tell me you love me,” he exhaled in a hollow rasp, shrinking and withering, unable to keep his head up.

His plea was so heartbroken, two tears fell freely from The One True Morty’s eyes and dampened His cheeks. “I love you,” He said, as a priest would say to a sinner. He said it because it was the truth, because The One True Morty was love incarnate, so that even He could love His tormentor-turned-disciple. He lifted His hands to cup Riq’s cheeks and drew him closer. “But you are sick.”

BROKEN DEMENTED MURDEROUS PSYCHOPATH.

Riq wrenched his head to the side, but The One True Morty held fast. He moved His face with Riq’s, refusing to let him hide as He closed the distance.

“And I’m going to heal you.”

Again, they were just spoken words, and they held no power. But what did was the kiss that followed. The One True Morty pressed His lips to Riq’s, feeling the man slacken instantly. Riq loosed a moan into His mouth, the simple promise of physical comfort making him dimwitted and obedient. Through the crack in his defenses, The One True Morty parted His lips and exhaled into him.

His breath carried heat from His entropic core, and Riq swallowed it down with a startled gasp. It did not burn as a conventional fire burns, but as it traveled down Riq’s throat, it seared him away from reality like embers through paper. Wisps of smoke curled out from the corners of his mouth as The One True Morty kissed him, and the physical plane unraveled, transporting them to the world within Riq’s head.

When The One True Morty finally pulled back, He was standing eye-to-eye with Riq. They were now the same height, Riq brought back to a younger era; Himself, having aged to adulthood to match.

Around the two men lay a barren field, wind-whipped and stark. Dust slithered across bald patches of earth, and there was an arid crispness in the air. Beside them stood a tree, its trunk blackened and cracked, great bricks of char piled at its base. A crown of fire lit its branches, heat rolling off of it in waves, and the smell of burnt wood perfumed the desert breeze.

“Where in the world...?” Riq stared agape at their surroundings, turning a full circle to take in the field, the limitless horizon, and the burning tree. His nakedness had carried over from the winner’s suite, and when a gust of wind threw the tree’s flames in his direction, he raised his arms and stumbled back for safety. Once his eyes caught sight of his own flesh, however, he froze. “My hand —my hands!” He turned them over, searching for the wrinkles he was so accustomed to seeing.
With a shaky laugh, he touched his cheeks and neck, feeling the youthful skin spring back beneath his fingers. A hesitant smile spread over his face as he turned to The One True Morty. “My One, is this yet another gif—” Distracted by his sudden transformation, Riq tripped over a cluster of stones near the base of the tree, and he went down sharply in a cloud of dust.

The One True Morty’s voice was deeper than His younger self when He spoke, reverberating through the air in infinite folds yet clear to the mind’s ear. “It is no gift. This space represents the very moment when Symmetry first fell out of balance.”

To this, Riq only made a confused face.

His arm swept through the air, gesturing to the strange scene around them. There was nothing real about the whispering air or scorched tree or cracked earth beneath them, but it was here that He would carry out Riq’s lesson, a place without interruption and free from the distractions of the real world.

He began His lecture slowly. “It was here that you first betrayed yourself and your brethren. Young and determined, you abandoned your humanity in the hopes of becoming something more—only to become something less.”

“Less? What are you talking about? I’ve never felt better!” Riq barked a laugh from where he sat, grabbing one of the stones to right himself. The return of his youth had also evidently given back some of his pompousness.

The One True Morty smiled at His pupil’s naiveté, and He gestured to the stone slabs that surrounded him. Three crooked teeth stuck up from the dry earth—unmarked tombstones of plain granite. Wind and time had worn them down to pockmarked nubs, but the fact that they still stood proved that they had not been entirely forgotten.

“You lost the parts of yourself that make a man complete,” The One True Morty continued, willing the names to appear across the stones’ fronts with just a thought. The identities of those who lay buried beneath wavered into existence, etched into the granite like accusatory headlines: Riq I. Riq II. Riq III.

Riq’s right eye twitched as he pondered over The One True Morty’s words. He looked at the tombstones, the memory of his other selves flickering across his face like a faulty circuit struggling to catch a current. The connection had been severed for years, but The One True Morty coaxed it back together again. As clarity finally dawned on him, Riq’s jaw worked and his hackles stood on end. With a sneer, Riq slammed his fist against the tombstone of Riq II that he’d been holding onto for support a moment ago.

“Those pathetic defects were just weighing me down. I didn’t need them or their emotional baggage!” he spat, disdain written in the gnarl of his brow. “They’re dead and gone! And like this —” He spread his arms and added with a haughty smirk, “—I’m the best Riq of them all.”

The One True Morty arched a brow. The outburst, He had been expecting; the degree of Riq’s stubbornness, He had not. Even after facing the truth memorialized in this twisted mindscape, Riq still believed that his actions had been righteous.

The wind tangled itself in The One True Morty’s robe, sending it fluttering against His legs. He squinted against the bite of sand whipping through the air as He spoke. “Nothing you have done is deserving of applause. Death and destruction are all that have followed you. But no longer. It is time to be rejoined.” No sooner had the words left His mouth than ghostly apparitions of Riq’s other parts wavered into view above their gravestones. They were each identical to Riq, with only their
expressions—a maudlin frown here, eyes creased with joy there—differentiating them. As Riq’s face twisted from confidence to fear to rage, the wind continued climbing.

The One True Morty raised his voice to be heard over the howling sough. “You’ve carried on this charade for long enough, but this cannot be allowed to go on. Be made whole again.”

“No!” Riq leapt to his feet and walked straight through Riq III’s form. The translucent mirage was whisked apart before reassembling itself in his wake. Riq began to pace in front of the tombstones. Although fury seethed within him, he made no motion to lash out. Perhaps some part of him knew that in this mindscape the laws of physics only went so far. After all, the group of them were still just projections here, playing out Riq’s lesson in terms that his earthly mind could understand. As he paced, he shook his head. “I’m never going back to those schmucks! Leaving them was the best thing I could’ve done! I had to cut them out! It was the only way I could be a leader!”

“You became a tyrant,” The One True Morty countered smoothly.

“I was ambitious!”

“You were ruthless.”

“Those idiots needed to be put in their place!”

“You lacked compassion for your brothers.”

“But I wanted—I had to be strong if I was going to be The One True Rick.”

And therein lay the crux of Riq’s error. The One True Morty sighed.

Riq now stood toward the bleak horizon, looking down at his palms as he curled and uncurled his fingers. It wasn’t the sight of taut skin that held his gaze, however. Through his eyes, The One True Morty saw that Riq was looking at all he had hoped to attain, all he had lost. And He knew that, more than anything, Riq longed to hold Him in his hands—a prize he could never have.

“That role was never meant for you,” The One True Morty said softly, even as the wind picked up more speed, buffeting His mohawk in its gales. “You tried to take what wasn’t yours.” He stepped up behind Riq and wrapped His arms around him, hands splayed over his bare chest.

He was teacher and guardian and savior all in one as He held Riq. This would be His ultimate teaching, and He delivered it slowly so that His message would not be lost.

“How could you be the ‘one’ anything when you are but a fraction of a man?” He spoke by His ear, His breath catching fire to throw sparks into the air. “How could you be a ‘true’ Rick, when everything you ever said or did—”

At The One True Morty’s bidding, images of Riq’s sins rose to the proverbial surface, unapologetic and ugly: the countless Ricks who had been incarcerated by a make-believe enemy; the countless more Ricks and Mortys who had been subjugated by Riq’s caste system, pigeonholed as second-class citizens or left squabbling over petty entitlements; the luckless Dimension X Ricks who were stripped of their Rickhood and cast out by their brothers. The list went on.

“—was all based on lies?”

So much suffering. So much contempt. It was the antithesis of all that The One True Morty and One True Rick stood for.
No, there was no One True Rick to be found in him.

He felt Riq's will begin to vacillate, unsteady and precarious. Riq was so close to the edge now, so close, one last push all he needed before he would take the plunge. And The One True Morty would be right there to catch him.

Through the shrieking tempest, He gently turned Riq toward Himself and pressed their brows together.

“You will never be my Counterpart.”

Abruptly, the wind died as though a switch had been flipped. In the sudden quiet, The One True Morty’s words hung like the last lyrics of a requiem.

All tension loosened from Riq’s face, his expression dissipating into utter despondency. His mouth fell open, and his eyes shone with tears. A desolate sound cracked from somewhere in his throat. It was the sound of defeat, of Riq stripped of his defenses. He was fully and truly broken now. And when The One True Morty lifted his chin and locked His lips to his once more, he did not resist, even as this time, his breath was stolen right out of him.

As The One True Morty giveth, so doth He taketh away.

He inhaled, pulling Riq’s essence from him and purging him of all his impurities.

With Riq fully under His command, He slipped a hand into Riq’s chest like a hot blade through ore, and where their flesh met, embers sprang to life. They formed a ridge of brilliant orange that followed the contours of The One True Morty’s fingers, His knuckles, wrist, forearm. Gray smoke poured out from where Riq burned, and the dying man tore himself from the kiss to raise his face skyward. He gave a long and tired and miserable moan, thick with soot.

The One True Morty’s fingers brushed against Riq’s heart before He grasped the weakly pumping organ in a gentle hold. “I'm in you,” He said, savoring the sweet irony that Riq’s earlier words could be served right back to him. Flesh sizzled and charred beneath a cloud of acrid smoke, and lines of fire raced outward from where The One True Morty’s hand was embedded in his chest. “I’m in you, and I will cleanse you with my fire.”

Riq made an odd, strangled gurgle. His head dropped back like a man possessed as smoke billowed out of the fissures that starred from his center. Sections of flesh peeled back like the waking petals of a flower, curling over themselves until his entire chest was open to reveal the abyss within. From over The One True Morty’s shoulder, the disembodied spirits of Riq’s missing parts were drawn toward that black maw, eager to fill the void. As they siphoned into him, Riq’s eyes rolled back in his head, his mouth hanging open as if he were taking a giant, jaw-cracking yawn.

To complete Riq’s evisceration, The One True Morty gently removed His hand from Riq’s chest, His fingers still clutched around his heart—or what was left of it. A writhing lotus of flames now danced within The One True Morty’s palm, waving and bowing to its new master. It dared not burn Him but merely pulsed contentedly, waiting to be taken home.

The One True Morty curled His ring finger down to tuck it beneath His thumb, the three remaining fingers standing straight and true. Surya mudra, Mudra of the Sun, the Hand of Benediction. The gesture was as old as the stars, an everlasting symbol of unity and fire.

Now the diaphanous, orange tongues rose from His palm and climbed His raised fingers, perching on the tip of His forefinger to form a single vigil flame. He smiled at it, the very pith of Riq IV’s soul,
at last cleansed of all malice and madness.

Bringing it close to His lips, He took a deep breath—

And blew it out.

Although Rick had promised himself that he would stay by Mouse’s side to the end, unconsciousness had claimed him instead. After giving his last words of encouragement, he’d almost immediately slipped under, a fierce flash of light the final, parting image before he was smothered in darkness.

Now Rick blinked slowly, allowing the world to come into focus. A steep cliff of black glittered to one side of him, stained with strange splotches of red. Further away, a lake of satin swam into view. *Wait. Not a lake. A bed.* The thought stumbled drunkenly through his head, managing to relay the message in a world that had tipped wildly off-kilter. He blinked again, realizing that he was lying on his side, and pushed himself up onto his elbows. The cliffside now became the floor, and the lake became the luxurious, crimson bed of the winner’s suite.

Sitting atop its covers was a Rick.

The unfamiliar Rick slouched languidly on the edge of the bed with his elbows propped on spread knees, watching Rick steadily. He wore a Eun-Rick’s white robe, but unlike a Eun-Rick, this Rick wasn’t bald. In fact, there was nothing particularly remarkable about him that made him stand out from any other Rick, save for the faint scar that wriggled down his right cheek. The minute Rick met his gaze, he opened his mouth to speak, when suddenly the room shook violently.

Elegant trinkets toppled off their shelves, metal shackles rattled against one another in the torture chamber, and even the lamps flanking the bed tap-danced across their nightstands. Rick, still sapped of energy and unsteady, fell to the floor again, curling his arms over his head as chunks of plaster fell from the ceiling. Flecks sprinkled down to pepper his hair. When the short tremor passed, Rick peeked open an eye and saw the other Rick braced over something beside him on the bed.

He was murmuring something to himself, but when he straightened again, Rick saw that it was Mouse he had been addressing.

“Mouse!” Rick fumbled to his feet, only managing to crouch on one knee. Blood spun in his head, and for a moment, he imagined it swirling down and out like used toilet water through a drain. “Aw, Jesus,” he gritted out, sick and tired of always feeling sick and tired. The last time he’d felt at his best seemed like a millennium ago, before the hell that was the Code Black, before C-165’s cutting blade, and before his scuffle with Riq. He’d just managed to beat back sleep, but it was already trying to pull him down again.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to go much farther, because Mouse jumped off the bed and rushed over to him with a relieved “Rick!”

Rick’s lightheadedness lifted the moment he felt Mouse’s cool hands on him, and he reached up without looking, grabbing Mouse brusquely about the elbow, his upper arms, shoulders—scaling him until he had wrapped his arms around Mouse, crushing him in a tight embrace. Mouse’s delicate arms necklaced him, holding on just as securely.

No words could express how it felt to have Mouse in his arms again, only that it carried with it an unmatched solace.
Rick could think of no better use for his small reserve of energy. He buried his nose in the crook of Mouse’s neck, inhaling that familiar scent, and found strength there. His hands skirted over Mouse’s body, making sure that he was still in one piece, that he was still his Mouse.

*Are you okay?* he wanted to ask, but the question sounded ridiculous after what had happened. What he’d seen.

“Mouse. Mouse, I’m s—”

“I—I’m sorry, Rick!” Mouse beat him to the punch, leaving Rick baffled. What could he possibly have to apologize for? “I told him—I said that I wanted it. I thought I did!” Mouse was shaking his head. “I th-thought he was you, and...” he trailed off, burying his face in Rick’s shoulder. “I swear I didn’t mean any of it.”

*The Munlockus horn.* A half-sob, half-growl seethed out from between clenched teeth as Rick doubled his hold on Mouse. “Of course you didn’t mean it. That wasn’t even you! That shit he put in you, it was—it messed with your head. You don’t have to apologize for a thing!” He looked up, blinking to keep the tears at bay. “Christ, I’m the one who said I wouldn’t let them touch you again. And I couldn’t even—I let him—I let that bastard—” It was all too repulsive to give voice to.

“And that bastard wishes he could take it all back,” a voice interrupted.

For the life of him, Rick couldn’t understand why every heartfelt reunion had to be made into a spectacle by some nosy third party. By now, he should’ve been used to it, but that didn’t stop him from glaring at the unwelcome guest on the bed.

Said unwelcome guest was now leaning back on the heels of his hands, watching Rick and Mouse’s Kodak moment with something like amusement and a hint of embarrassment. “No, go on. Don’t let me stop you,” he said playfully, waving one hand in their direction. “Please, continue.”

“Mouse?” Rick started warily. He maneuvered Mouse around and behind himself as he got to his feet. “Who the hell is this guy?”

Mouse ducked out from under Rick’s hold to stand defiantly between them. “Rick, I can explain. That’s—”

“The same fuckin’ guy you were just talking about.” He twirled his hand in front of him, letting it tumble down in a flamboyant bow. “Former *Cunt-cil* leader, at your service.”

*Riq!* A spike of adrenaline shot through Rick. Fists ready, he nearly pounced on Riq perched so nonchalantly on the bed—the very stage of his heinous crime. But Mouse seemed to have anticipated this reaction, because he held out his arms, impeding Rick’s attack.

“Rick, don’t. H-he’s not really—he’s not *him.*”

Mind buzzing, Rick tried to sidestep Mouse, but he stood his ground, unwilling to give Rick an inch. The temptation to toss Mouse aside and throttle Riq where he sat was strong, but he would have to settle for a glower instead.

Riq flinched at the look of murder in Rick’s eyes but otherwise stayed put. He must’ve trusted Rick not to follow through with his attack, because he spoke without fear. “Relax, dawg. The kid’s right. I’m not here to cause any more trouble. That shit’s behind me.” There was a look of begrudging shame, even guilt, on his face that knocked the wind out of Rick’s sails.

Tempering his emotions, Rick willed his muscles to uncoil, though his teeth were still set on edge.
Even when he visibly relaxed, Mouse waited patiently in place until Rick at last relented a step. He darted his eyes around, taking in the wrecked state of the room.

Once posh and refined, the winner’s suite looked as though a tornado had passed through it. Opulent wallpaper hung in strips, the velvet chaise was overturned, and someone or something had burned long furrows straight through the bed linens and into the mattress beneath.

*What the hell happened while I was out?*

He shifted his weight, feeling plaster crunch underfoot, and glanced up to see menacing cracks zigzagging through the ceiling. Taking a deep breath, he trained his eyes on Riq again.

“Sorry, but I’ve met more than a couple of you ‘Riqs’ in the past few days, so you’re gonna have to be a little more specific.” As he eyed Riq askance, he noticed that his simple white attire was not actually that of a Eun-Rick’s. It was his original Council garb, only now free of the sharp gold fraise and other adornments. The alteration had the dramatic effect of making Riq appear harmless—and he was indeed unarmed—which eased down Rick’s defenses. Rolling his shoulders, he put his hands on his hips and enunciated, “Tell me once and for all. Who. Are. You?”

Throughout Rick’s drawn-out inquiry, Riq’s eyes had been locked on a sidewall where another fault line fissured down from the ceiling. Without turning, he answered. “I’m the original Riq. The old Riq. Or maybe I’m the new Riq.” Realization sparkled in his eyes. “On second thought—wait a minute. I’ve got this.” He stopped to count off on his fingers. “Riq I plus II plus III plus IV equals—well, shit,” he snorted, resignation visible in the tired lines of his face.

“Ten,” Rick finished the equation for him. *Riq X.* And then he finally saw it, the multifacetedness of Riq’s face. It was a shifting canvas of emotions, like a man testing out and becoming reacquainted with the full range of his expressions. In it, Rick could read the story of Riq’s coming to terms with all his parts, at last made whole.

“Ain’t irony a bitch?” Riq grinned, all at once amused, embarrassed, bitter, and remorseful.

The moment didn’t last long, as another shudder rocked the room. While Rick wobbled on his feet, Mouse was quick to move, pulling him in the direction of the exit. Rick resisted his hold, however, mind racing with possibilities. Whatever the cause, seismic activity and space stations did not mix.

Riq must’ve read the confusion on his face, because he elaborated. “And that,” he said, pointing a finger skyward, “is all your doing, thank ya very much.”

“What?”

“Our little soothsayer here told me all about your coup.” He threw a playful wink at Mouse.

His lighthearted humor was not returned. Instead of responding to Riq, Mouse looked up at Rick. “We have to go,” he said, voice small but firm.

“Mouse, wait. W-what’s he talking about?”

The steeliness Mouse had reserved for Riq melted into that familiar brew of warmth when their eyes met, but the self-assurance Mouse exuded was like nothing Rick had seen in him before. It was all too clear to Rick that something of significance had taken place in the short time he was out—most likely the same thing that had torn the room to shreds.

A loud laugh from Riq shattered Rick’s train of thought. It was painfully incongruous with the mood,
considering Rick was simultaneously grappling with a whole new Riq, Mouse’s evolution, and the Citadel potentially coming down around them. Riq clapped his hands once together sharply as he beamed. “It’s mission accomplished, Rick! You got your message out just fine.” Another distant rumble. “And it sounds like Chi’s been making good use of it.”

With his attention still fractured, it took Rick a moment to process what Riq had just said: Chi had gotten his message.

When the Code Black was at its worst, the unregistered had been slaughtered like cattle, and Rick had feared for the welfare of his mentor. He’d only learned that he was still alive when Riq himself had pried into his thoughts, divulging his plan and outing Chi’s role in it.

He stuck his neck out for you, and now he’s going to lose it.

What had started as an excuse for Riq to gloat had ended up serving as an unplanned confession. Keeping ORA focused on Riq had been a test of Rick’s endurance—every second spent watching him defile Mouse, gut-wrenching—but it sounded like it had paid off.

A sly grin quirked Riq’s lips. “You’re quick on your feet, Rick, I’ll give you that. Took a real stroke of genius to improvise like you did. You got Riq IV right where you wanted him, and now—” He glanced upwards again, as though seeing through the layers and layers of Citadel to where the metaphorical fuse Rick had lit had apparently reached the powder keg. “Well, Hell hath no fury like a Rick scorned.”

Another blast punctuated his cryptic warning.

“Now, Rick! We really have to go!” Mouse tugged at him more firmly now.

But Rick still had to know. He couldn’t leave when the very head of the snake they’d been trying to crush was still fanged and able to strike. “If you really know everything, then why are you just letting us go? Letting any of this happen? How do I know you won’t sic your dogs on us the second we turn our backs?” His fists quaked almost as badly as the ground beneath his feet.

Riq sighed, contrition curling his shoulders. It wasn’t the reaction Rick had been expecting—far more submissive than the cocky sociopath he’d come to know and hate. “Stopping you is the last thing I want to do. I’ve already done enough terrible shit, and the list’s gotten too long. Too fucking long.” He shook his head, all repentance and self-reproach. “It’s time I did something right for once. I tried to ignore what the book said, but things are turning out just the way they’re meant to. And now here we are.” He then cupped his face in his hands. “Go on, you two. Do what needs to be done.”

The finality behind those words rang like an anvil struck, and Rick felt all sense of unease shudder apart beneath it. There was no threat here, not anymore.

He began to draw back, pulled toward the door with Mouse’s steadfast grip on his hand. The further he withdrew from the bed, the smaller Riq appeared—just a tired, old man with his fair share of mistakes, trying in his final moments to make things right.

Just as they reached the door, Rick paused to glance around the room one last time.

So much had happened here. It was here that he’d first met Mouse, and the course of his life had been altered forever. How different he’d been then, haggard and desperate for retribution, before Mouse had changed him.

It was here that he’d learned of Mouse’s untapped power—the Resonances. Wielding the potential to
be both healing and destructive, the Resonances let him see into Mouse, and mere fascination became a resounding love. It was that love that made Rick stronger than he could have ever been on his own. And it had given him a new mission: rescue Mouse and take down the Council for all their crimes.

This had also been the site for unspeakable torture for Mouse. So much so that any act of gentleness and love they’d shared could never completely erase the room’s long history of atrocities.

Torn apart this way seemed like a fitting end for it, all the suite’s vileness made visible in the cracked walls and ruined furnishings, scarred in the exact same way that Mouse had been.

They’d shared so much here—struggles, dreams of their future, and unparalleled pleasure. Now there was nothing left in it that Rick could possibly want or need.

Mouse squeezed his hand, shaking him from his thoughts. When Rick looked down at him, there was tranquility in Mouse’s eyes—no trace of trepidation or confusion or regret, but, rather, a knowing confidence. Not for the first time, Rick felt helpless by comparison, and he knew that he would have to entrust himself to Mouse to get through this.

They were about to take the final step through the doorway when a thought snagged him. He looked back. Riq hadn’t moved from where he sat, his hands still clasped in front of him in what now looked like prayer, his eyes closed.

“What about you? Aren’t you going too?”

Riq turned his eyes to him before heaving a sigh. “What can I say? The captain goes down with the ship.” He then smiled to himself, spread his arms wide, and lay back down onto the mattress. The shredded cover welcomed him into its embrace, feathers from the downy mattress giving Riq X a pair of tattered wings.

It was the last they would ever see of him.

~~*~~

Leaving the winner’s suite behind, Rick and Mouse ran down the labyrinth of sub-level 8’s halls in search of the central elevators. The trip was surreal, nothing at all like the serene opulence that usually cushioned Elite Ricks and Façade patrons alike.

The ivory white walls of the corridors were now dyed red from emergency strobe lights that flashed hysterically overhead, and a nasal alarm brayed from the PA system’s speakers at every corner, though there was no one around to hear it.

The entirety of sub-level 8 appeared to be abandoned.

Some kind of a skirmish had broken out here, its aftermath painted onto the walls in military-grade phaser burns and dried blood splatters. As for the scale of the skirmish or who made up the opposing sides, Rick couldn’t tell. But he had a sense that Chi would be able to fill him in once they reached their rendezvous point: the main atrium. Now it was just a matter of getting up there.

For never having explored sub-level 8 before, Mouse moved with adept swiftness, navigating the many twists and turns without hesitation. Whenever Rick tried guiding them in a wrong direction, Mouse would patiently tug him back on track, never leading them to a dead end—or at least not a permanent one. Power had been cut from many of the automatic doors that partitioned off each section of hall from the next, and Rick was tasked with having to pry them open by hand.
This made for slow progress, yet rather than grow exhausted by the continued effort, the more distance Rick put between himself and the winner’s suite, the more invigorated he felt. Strength returned to him by degrees, shaking off the fatigue and anemia that had bogged him down. It sounded ludicrous, but Rick actually felt younger than he had in years.

However, he still had the security doors to contend with, and by the time the fifth such obstacle appeared in a row, he was sweating.

“Stupid motherfucking—hnngh!” He wedged his fingers between the door’s two flat panels and strained to pull them apart, arms shaking. The security partition doors had grown more frequent, meaning that they were getting closer to the level’s center. “God, what I wouldn’t give for my portal gun!”

Waiting patiently by his side, Mouse said, “This should be the last one, Rick.”


“No. I mean it.

With an unexpected hiss, the doors slid open easily, sending Rick stumbling forward onto his knees—and face-to-face with a pair of shiny Guard boots. His nose nearly touching the leather, Rick stared at his own shocked expression in its spit-shined reflection. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to a gleaming belt buckle, imposing insignia pinned to a broad chest, and then higher still to the unmistakable officer’s cap sitting askew atop the Captain of the Guard’s head.

Stony blue eyes peered down at Rick from on high, a smirk on his lips. “This is no time to be lying down on the job.”

There was a cockiness to his tone that Rick remembered all too well, and when the Captain offered a gloved hand to him, Rick eyed it warily. He hadn’t forgotten their last brutal encounter, and his healed ribs spasmed with phantom pain.

“Up and at ‘em,” a higher voice piped up beside him. It was a Guard Morty slipping a card into his back pocket as he nodded politely. Before Rick could resist, the Captain and his partner grabbed him under the arms and lifted him to his feet.

“Much better,” the Guard Morty said, grinning. Then he caught sight of something that made his eyes go glassy, and an awed gasp escaped him. “The One...” he hushed, bowing deeply in a resplendent display of respect.

From behind Rick, Mouse stepped forward until he was standing between Rick and the Guards. Another bolt of déjà vu shot through Rick, although this time, there was no need for Mouse to protect him, and by the way the Captain of the Guard lowered his head in deference, it was clear he meant them no harm.

“Thank you for coming.” Mouse smiled warmly at them, not disturbed in the least when they each took one of Mouse’s hands and held it to their foreheads. Normally, a rash of panic and jealousy would have had Rick’s blood pounding, but instead he felt a kinship with these two.

He understood completely what drove them to revere Mouse in this way; he’d felt the same urge himself enough times to know.
When the Guard Morty straightened again, his cheeks were peonies and his eyes were full of adoration. He then turned to his commanding officer and placed his hands on his uniform jacket. Deftly, he began to unbutton it while the Captain watched on approvingly. Once he’d bared his chest, he slipped one hand inside, eyes fixed on his superior’s. Mouse looked away bashfully at the intimate exchange, while Rick just balked.

Suddenly, the Captain grabbed the Guard Morty around the waist, and he crooked a finger beneath his chin. They hovered inches apart, sharing a heated breath, before the Captain dipped his head by his ear to whisper something. Whatever he said had his underling arching into him. The Guard Morty murmured back into his collar before finally turning away, his hand coming free of his superior’s jacket.

Between his fingers was a SECURIGRID card.

“You’ll find this works better than your last ‘security pass,’” he said with a wink, his voice notably rougher than just a minute ago. While he had no trouble holding Mouse’s gaze, Rick found himself unable to look into those bedroom eyes. “This should make reaching the others much easier.”

Stunned, Rick took the card. The flimsy, transparent plastic glowed red beneath the emergency lights, the embossed α-001 as comforting as a psalm. It would mean safe transport and uninterrupted access to the higher levels.

Then something about what the Guard Morty had said made him stop short. “W—wait. What do you mean ‘others’?”

The Captain answered instead, casually buttoning up his jacket again. “Other fighters, other believers. You’ve amassed an army up there—” His eyes flicked to the ceiling. “—and it’s about time you joined in.” He looked between Mouse and Rick and smiled. “They have been awaiting your arrival. Both of yours.”

Then without another word, the two bowed deeply again and began to walk in the direction that Mouse and Rick had just come from.

“Wait. That’s where—” Rick started to call out, but Mouse was already moving forward, gliding through the open doors with purpose. Just ahead lay the bank of elevators.

“They have a job to do, Rick,” he said without looking back. “And so do we.” He sounded so calm even as another rumble shook the corridor, making Rick lurch to the side. He slouched against the wall for support until the tremor passed, watching the Guard pair move down the hallway.

Something that transcended professionalism crackled faintly between them, perceptible in their matching strides and the way the Guard Morty's shoulder brushed against his commander’s arm.

Rick caught up to Mouse by the elevator doors. An angry, red X blinked over the panel of numbers, and, true to form, nothing reacted when they tried pushing the buttons. With the Citadel in a state of lockdown—or meltdown or whatever it was—only the highest level of security would grant access for interlevel travel.

*Here goes everything.*

He swiped the key card through the reader, and the doors parted effortlessly. The white overhead light within, once off-putting and sterile, promised a respite from the hectic strobe effect of the emergency lights. It welcomed them like a beacon. Nondescript elevator music played softly over the loudspeakers as the two began their ascent.
Rick swayed on his feet beside Mouse, unsure of what to say—if there was anything to say at all at this point. They were now headed straight into the unknown, the atrium promising to be the culmination of all they had worked toward. But as for what that was exactly, Rick still wasn’t sure. Only vague warnings from Riq X and then the Captain had clued him in that the Citadel was in the midst of a war, a war triggered by himself.

Why should he be afraid, then, when it was what he wanted?

Originally, his own false imprisonment had been reason enough to tear the council leaders from their throne of lies. Then he’d seen what they’d done to Mouse, to his own brothers, and everyone under their power. He had worked hard alongside Chi and Mouse to find a way to expose the Council for all their corruption.

For a while, the fruits of their labor had amounted to data sets—bland but unquestionable connections between variables that all pointed to the Council’s culpability as the puppeteers behind the GF war and Code Yellows. It wasn’t the flashiest incriminating evidence, but it was all they’d had. After all, how else could Rick expose what he’d only seen in someone’s mind?

Now, however, after what ORA had recorded in the winner’s suite—

He reached out to grab Mouse’s hand in his own, knowing that his palm was clammy with sweat but holding on all the same. It seemed that no matter the circumstance, Rick always innately sought out comfort through the small but powerful gesture. Mouse returned it generously with a tight squeeze back, dipping his chin to his chest and smiling softly.

Having Riq IV, the council leader himself, spell out their crimes had come with a hefty price. It was the smoking gun they had needed, but if the bomb blasts that grew steadily louder over the course of their ascent were any indication, then they’d just put a few extra rounds in the chamber of trigger-happy Ricks. The thought that he and Mouse would be walking headfirst into that gunfight threatened to shake Rick of his resolve.

The mundane elevator Muzak ended and was soon followed by a jauntert tune. It sounded sorely out of place against the accompaniment of bursting artillery just a few levels away.

“Not exactly ‘Ride of the Valkyries,’ is it?” Rick forced a chuckle and tried to put on a brave face. “But, hey. I’ll take what I can get.”

“Would you prefer ‘Another One Bites the Dust’?” Mouse asked cheekily.

“Hey, how do you know about—”

Just then, the elevator lurched to a stop. It had finally reached level 0, the Citadel atrium. Both sets of doors remained closed, however, requiring yet another top-level access pass to override the emergency fail-safe. From the other side of the steel doors, the sound of muted gunfire and shouting reached their ears.

The stage had been set, and now it was time for the directors of this performance to step out from behind the curtain and address their audience.

Pressing his lips together, Rick tapped the SECURIGRID card against his palm before giving Mouse a you ready? look. Then he lifted the card and swiped it through the reader.

The door slowly groaned open, metal scraping harshly against metal. Something had warped the frame badly, and the left panel ground to an early halt—which was just as good, because at that moment, the nose of a shiny rifle barrel slipped inside. Standard-issue security model.
“Identify yourselves! A-are you loyal to the Council, or are you turn-labcoats?!” The Guard’s rifle shook with each word, probing further inside like the snout of a wolf.

Then there was the startling blast of a laser firing at close range, and Rick dropped to a crouch, wrapping a protective arm around Mouse. A moment passed then two, and still nothing happened. When Rick peeked his head up, the body of the Guard was crumpled at the foot of the elevator doors, wisps of foul-smelling smoke snaking in through the opening.

He was dead, a phaser’s hole in his back.

Rick slowly detached himself from Mouse’s side and crept closer to the door to investigate, when a pair of hands hooked around the edge of the crooked metal and began to pull it to the side. Their mystery savior grunted with the effort until at last the door slid open the rest of the way.

“Aha!” came a hearty laugh. It was the kind of laugh one associated with styled hair and bleached teeth. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!”

“Y-you!” Rick stumbled back for a moment as he gawked at, of all people, Auctioneer Rick standing cocksure in the center of the elevator entrance.

He had one arm propped casually against the frame of the doorway, exuding swagger and bravado. His trademark auctioneer’s mantle was now bundled around his neck, its edges dirtied and singed, while a heavy ammunition belt holding plasma recharge cells crossed his chest.

He looked like a man who had spent years on the battlefield rather than the stage, the spitting image of a seasoned mercenary. His face, however, was oiled with sweat, and the impressive plasma rifle slung over one shoulder rattled ever so slightly with adrenaline-wracked nerves.

Before Rick could say anything more, Auctioneer Rick caught sight of Mouse behind Rick, and he cocked his head. “Well, well, well. Look who we have here.” He then called back over his shoulder to someone, “Rickochet, viens voir! Seems you were right again!” He then stuck out his hand and pulled Rick, stumbling, out of the elevator car and into the open.

The first thing Rick noticed was the state of the concrete floor beneath his feet. It was fractured horribly, deep chasms splitting open the foundation and rubble making it hard for Rick to find his footing. Pockmarks acned the once level ground, and on closer inspection he realized they were bullet wounds. When he finally looked up, he froze.

The Citadel was in chaos.

From his place atop the raised elevator plaza, Rick witnessed a city devastated by war.

Regal buildings that had once stood proudly along the skyline were now disemboweled cripples, their glass faces melted off as great fires poured out from their windows. Black smoke crept up their sides, filling the air with a hazy veil that smelled of burning rubber and copper.

Even the atrium’s dome, which usually reflected the time of day in its holographic display, was switching spastically from midnight to noon to dawn in no natural pattern. It would mellow over a lazy afternoon sky for a few peaceful moments and then jitter through hours’ worth of solar and lunar cycles in mere seconds. The sun plummeted and ricocheted off the horizon like a giant, bouncing ball. An enormous crack that streaked up from the dome’s lip was no doubt the cause for the malfunction.

The effect was disorienting, and Rick squinted his eyes against the flashes of sunlight that raced across the broken sky. Looking back at the cityscape, he then noticed the billboards that dotted the
scene. Usually spouting product or business slogans of the Citadel’s many commercial interests, the massive screens were all tuned to the same channel, displaying an all-too-familiar face:

Riq IV.

Blown up to fill the entire monitor, Riq’s eyes gleamed maniacally as he recited his speech from the winner’s suite. His voice boomed over the loudspeakers. “...newsflash. Ricks are idiots. They were dumb enough to believe the Council when we announced the Code Yellows and our staged GF war.” Now Riq’s goatee and cruel smirk came into the frame. “And they’re dumb enough to keep believing…”

His damning testimony played on loop throughout the atrium and likely beyond. Chi had evidently succeeded in infiltrating the Citadel communication system to televise ORA’s recording, and with the image of their famed leader boasting about the atrocities he’d committed against them, every Rick who had ever been wronged by the Council was now rising in revolt.

Years of being kept paralyzed through fear and despair had crushed their spirits, but now they’d been reinvigorated. In a unified riot against the Council and any who still served them, the rebel Ricks had taken to the streets to fight. They were demanding that their oppressors be brought to justice and that blood be their payment. Their response to Riq’s taunting message was broadcast loud and clear by a Rick on a megaphone:

“The Council’s a fraud! There is no GF! They’ve been feeding us nothing but lies!” He punched his fist into the air as he shouted to be heard over the rabble. “We've been fighting each other when we should've been fighting them! Rise up, my brothers!”

From the corner of Rick’s eye, a hover vehicle trailing smoke careened through the air and corkscrewed into the side of a skyscraper, its nose stabbing one of the billboard screens. Shards of crystal and concrete cascaded down from where it impacted, crushing a row of parked cars on the curb and sending Ricks and Mortys scattering.

The destruction did little to interrupt the gunfire and brawls that littered the Citadel floor. Feedback squealed from the megaphone as a Guard Rick fought with the rebel for control of it. The eventual victor, the Guard bashed it over the rebel’s head—only to go down with a laser blast through the chest. Rick watched in horror as a platoon of Guards mowed down an opposing side of lesser-equipped Ricks without mercy. Further away, there was the telltale green of portals blinking in and out of existence.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find Auctioneer Rick appraising the scene alongside him. “That’s one hell of a mess, huh?” he said, not a hint of worry in his voice. “I always knew Riq was one sleazy son of a bitch, but that—” He pointed at one of the surviving screens where Riq’s pixelated image was currently preaching about X-Ricks being as sympathetic as the bubonic plague. “Fuck, I had no idea he’d screw your kind over so badly.” His brow pinched in genuine sympathy.

“W-what—when—what are you doing here anyway?”

“Funny story, actually,” Auctioneer Rick chirped, shifting his plasma rifle from his shoulder into his hands again. He discharged it without looking away from Rick, taking down yet another Guard a few yards off. “Me and the missus were on our way outta here when that recording started playing. And then before long—this.” He waved at the war zone in front of them. “All hell broke loose. But we figured we’d do our civic duty before completely jumping ship.” He then waggled his brow. “I always did want to see those Council jerk-offs get what’s coming to them. Oh! Hey there, kid. Love what you did with the hair.”
Mouse had stepped up to Rick’s side, looking at Auctioneer Rick with something like pride. He giggled when he tousled his mohawk.

“Missus?” Rick asked.

“Riri, are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to help me with these Mortys? I’ve only got two arms.”

They all turned in the direction of the voice.

Mama Eun-Rick, in a slinky, red halter dress and matching high heels, stormed up the short stairway toward them, a hefty plasma cannon in her arms. The silk scarf around her neck whipped wildly as a nearby explosion sent hot air rolling past her, and she paused to twist at the hip and fire off a quick series of blasts from her cannon. She looked like an Oscar night attendee on Judgment Day.

Around her long legs, a stutter of Mortys huddled and shivered like baby rabbits—to say nothing of the Rabbit Mortys that were among them. With a perturbed flip of her soot-stained hair, she marched up the last few steps to Rick and company. She squinted her eyes at Mouse before addressing Auctioneer Rick.

“I always said Mortys would be the death of me. How many times have I said it?”

“Oui, chérie.”

“We could’ve been halfway to Kurtu by now, but thanks to this—this—” She stuck a finger in Rick’s and Mouse’s faces. “I know you two are responsible for this mess. Don’t think I read through that stinking tome for shits and giggles. The Book of Morty said you’d make a royal shitstorm of things, so I expect you to man up and take responsibility!”

“Now, now, ma petite Rickochet,” Auctioneer Rick practically cooed as he glided up beside her and delicately lowered her hand. He pecked her on the cheek. “You’re scaring the children.”

Rick, who had been watching the outrageous exchange, glanced down at the Mortys who clutched at her dress. The savageries of the coup were patent in their hollow eyes; their cheeks, stained with dirt. They only dared peeks at Rick from behind Mama Eun-Rick’s one-piece. A few of the Mortys were wearing little more than loincloths, and their ankles were fettered by what looked like golden chains.

When their eyes settled on Mouse, however, their meekness dissipated. They uncoiled from Mama Eun-Rick to stare openly, their eyes wide as they stepped toward him.

Mama Eun-Rick watched with annoyance as they swarmed Mouse, eager to pet his hands, shoulders, cheeks. She huffed and tapped her foot impatiently.

Beside her, Auctioneer Rick continued. “It’s complete anarchy out there, X-Rick—” A sharp kick from Mama Eun-Rick had him wincing before he corrected himself. “Erm, One True Rick—I still think it’s a corny title,” he hissed back at her. “In any case, the Council has their Guards and loyalists on their side, but they’re up against some stiff competition, yours truly included.” Incredibly, he seemed to be treating the whole thing as just another form of entertainment, where he was again trying to steal the limelight.

“And you two are on...our side?” Rick was surprised by how calm he sounded.

“But of course! Rickochet filled me in on the deets. It seems these petite Mortys will be needing some help from your...petite mort. Oops.” He grinned sheepishly, bat ting his eyes at Mama Eun-Rick. “Pardon my French.”
“What did he say?” Rick cast a confused look to Mama Eun-Rick who was busy herding the Mortys back to herself. They went reluctantly, but there was a noticeable pep in their step. Mouse, for his part, was not shy when it came to doting on his kin, and he held their hands until the tips of their fingers finally fell away from him.

“Nothing important, as usual,” Mama Eun-Rick sniffed. “Just showing off what a cunning linguist he can be.”

“Oh là là! Comment tu me flatters!” Auctioneer Rick said, placing a hand to his chest. “So glad to be given credit where credit is due.” It was only then that Rick noticed the blush that reddened Mama Eun-Rick’s cheeks at her own inadvertent pun. “Anyway, we’re not alone. You’ve got your run-of-the-mill disgruntled workers, the whole damn engineering department, more than a handful of anti-Council Ricks—they’ve been in this game the longest—and a couple of newcomers.” He winked at Rick. “You’ll be happy to hear the Citadel’s getting a hard lesson in diversity training, starting with your fellow Dimension X Ricks.”

“Dimension X Ricks?” Rick echoed, internally wincing at how everything he’d said for the last ten minutes had been nothing but questions. He followed Auctioneer Rick’s outstretched arm to the smattering of portals that continued to appear across the atrium’s main square and beyond the commercial establishments that ringed it. He squinted, now able to make out the figures of Ricks pouring out one after another, each armed with his own portal gun and blaster.

Chi had done it. Their brothers had answered the call to arms, and now they were joining them in full force to take down the ruling body that had tried to wipe out their kind. They’d come to the very place that had ostracized them, underdogs finally biting the hand that had wronged them.

As Rick surveyed the war-torn landscape that had once been the magnificent Citadel, he thought back to something the Author had said: Liberty really would come to the tune of chaos.

“Be careful out there, Mama!”

Rick turned back to find that Auctioneer Rick and Mama Eun-Rick were already making their exit, keeping the Mortys safely between them. They were headed toward CentRick Park where a convoy of other refugees had banded together to seek protection from the firefight.

Mama Eun-Rick turned smoothly to look over her shoulder. For having never shown a shred of kindness toward Mouse before, there was gentleness in her eyes as she replied, “Boy, I ain’t your mama.”

Then they were gone.

For a few moments, Rick and Mouse didn't move. Gunfire crackled and popped in the distance, and by a ruined shopping arcade, a gold statue of Riq was looped with ropes and dragged off its impressive plinth. It gonged against the ground, the pointed tufts of its hair stabbing into the cement. A rally of Mortys began kicking at its head while their Ricks fended off encroaching Guards.

Overhead, the sky had suddenly stopped its spastic light show and was now displaying an idyllic sunset, warm oranges and yellows blending seamlessly with the conflagration that rampaged through the city.

Heat from the fires blew across the atrium like a tropical breeze. It carded through Rick’s hair, fluttered beneath the wings of Mouse’s robe.

Distantly, Rick knew that they should be heading straight for those portals, that Chi would be there to greet them—but right now he felt an inexplicable calm overtake him. The two of them gazed out
at the faux sunset, the peaceful glowing ball of red locked in place just above the bloodied horizon. It cast tangerine and apricot hues on Mouse’s face until he glowed golden in the rich colors.

He looked so beautiful like that, so far removed from the death and carnage that stormed around them, that Rick’s breath caught in his throat. That anything could harm such a beautiful creature seemed like the greatest injustice in the universe, and a stab of guilt wracked through him at the thought of how he’d failed him. He’d failed Mouse, and that failure could never be undone. A brutal gust of remorse blew beneath his ribs, and his heart ached terribly. He didn’t know if it was the sight of such a stunning sunset or the reminder of Mouse’s tragedy that had fresh tears springing to his eyes.

“There’s no need to be sad,” Mouse said calmly, giving his hand a squeeze. “You’ll always have my forgiveness, Rick. You don’t even have to ask for it.” Another squeeze, as tight as the words that slipped out of him. “I love you, Rick.”

A nearby high-class condominium, now home to a pocket of snipers, suddenly buckled on its foundation and collapsed straight down in a cloud of smoke and twisted metal.

Rick’s heart broke open for Mouse at that moment. “I love you too.” He turned away from the havoc, not even flinching when a piece of stray shrapnel zipped by his head. The ground shook, but his feet were steady as he gazed into Mouse’s eyes. Nothing else seemed to matter—the revolution, the chaos all falling away like specks of mote. It was all so inconsequential compared to the love that was swelling within him. It was what compelled him to then deliver his deepest vows without his even willing it: “And I’ll strive in every way to always be worthy of you.”

“You always have been and always will be.” Mouse began to descend the stairs, Rick matching him step for step, all his attention focused on his lover.

Guard Ricks scurried across the central promenade, completely unconcerned with the blood-soaked Rick and his mohawked Morty. A few feet away, a disheveled Elite Rick limped weakly in the opposite direction, his suit torn at the shoulders and a fancy silver pistol hanging loosely in one hand. He stopped to scrub the back of his sleeve across his nose, glanced at the descending pair through a swollen eye, and then continued limping on his way.

“I will be your ally in times of trouble,” Rick promised.

“I, your partner in adventure,” Mouse returned with a smile.

“Your lover.”

“And your friend.”

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. The plaza was cluttered with debris and thick with the smell of death. Even as the fire-heated air buffeted against them, Rick and Mouse were unmoved, too fully taken by the wonder they held for each other.

A reckless scuffle suddenly broke out right beside them, two warring Ricks locked in a fight of blaster versus blade. Just as the rebel Rick gained the upper hand against his opponent and dragged his knife across his jugular, the Elite discharged a blaster round directly into his stomach. At point-blank range, the plasma bullet tore through his insides and out his back. A spray of blood landed on Mouse’s face, but he made no move to wipe it away.

Mouse continued walking hand in hand with Rick past a pile of burning wreckage festooned with Morty Games banners that had been torn down in the riots. It formed a Panigrahana fire, backlighting
Mouse so that his entire body seemed to glow. “You once told me the multiverse would never be the same.”

“I meant every word of it.” Rick had been amazed by Mouse then, and he was amazed by him now, his perfect missing piece after a lifetime of waiting for something he didn’t even know he’d been waiting for. The screams of his dying brothers and enemies alike faded into the background as he held onto Mouse’s every word. He recognized that they were walking abreast along the promenade, neither guiding the other. There was no need to pull or be pulled. They knew precisely where they were meant to be. And that was right here, by each other’s side.

Somewhere off to their left, an elegant fountain was being repurposed as a torture device for the council members. They had been herded together by a mob of Dimension X Ricks and were now bound with their arms behind their backs. Bent over the fountain’s edge, their heads were systematically dunked underwater while they struggled.

With Riq IV unavailable, they had nominated Maximums Rickimus as the surrogate council leader, and he spat up dirty fountain water as he was hoisted roughly to his feet by a pair of fists twisted in his surcoat. The apparent ringleader of the executioners was barking angrily into Maximums’ face, his teeth bared. Whatever he was saying couldn't be heard over the sound of the other council members’ gurgled wails.

Rick passed the scene, unconcerned.

“And you were right, Rick. The multiverse will never be the same. Because from now on, I will walk with you, hand in hand, wherever our journey leads us.” Eyes locked on Rick’s, Mouse slowed to a halt. “Together, we will overcome any hardship.” He stood on tiptoe, reaching for him. Rick bowed in kind, meeting him halfway. “Any obstacle.” Electricity danced between their lips as Mouse breathed, “For we will be equal in all things.” His last words were barely a whisper. “All things.”

They kissed.

Behind them, an abandoned stockpile of ammunition suddenly ignited, going off in a fireworks display of applauding cartridges and whistling missiles. A pair of rockets spiraled up and up into the air only to take a nosedive and burst high above in red and green embers. Shrapnel fell like smoldering party streamers before fizzling out.

Abruptly, the Citadel went silent as every Rick and Morty in the atrium stopped to stare at the spectacle in wonder. Time moved like molasses as ash drifted from the sky—fluffy, gray snowflakes that spun in a downward spiral. The air itself was smothered in a euphoric hush, and the giant video billboards featuring Riq IV’s face flickered to black.

Even the X-Rick who was still holding Maximums paused. His breath caught in his throat, and the hand tangled in Maximums’ glossy mane loosened. He blinked slowly, leaned in closer to the very man he had been on the verge of killing, and pressed his lips to his instead.

It was true love’s kiss.

A communal sigh echoed throughout the atrium, backdropped by the clatter of rifles and guns falling to the floor en masse. Atop a café balcony, the rebel Rick with the megaphone kept bellowing out his message to any who would heed it, but it was taking on a new note: “…not what Ricks are about! We won’t stand by a Council based on hate!” His voice faltered as he finished. “But by a savior based on love.” Then he dropped the megaphone, falling to his knees and tearing off his shirt.

As The Ones kissed, the screams and cries of war morphed into lustful moans, and Ricks and Mortys
everywhere gave up their weapons to grasp at each other instead. They sank to the ground, wrapped tightly in the arms of whoever was within reach. Guards and rebels, Elite and X-Ricks, even the council members. Their titles fell away like dandelion fluff in the wind as they were overcome by a love, pure and complete.

In the center of this phenomenon, Mouse whispered against Rick’s lips, “This is our citadel of lost children. It’s time we led them home.” When he kissed Rick again, he poured all of himself into it. He pressed against him, burying his hands in his hair as his tongue tumbled into his waiting mouth. Rick could only whimper his gratitude. Mouse’s lips burned delightfully where they blazed a trail across his cheek, then down his chin and neck, making Rick’s skin blush with the heat.

While Mouse was ravenous, desire driving him to bare Rick as quickly as possible, Rick countered, slow and cautious, stripping off Mouse’s robe with care. Like so, they eased themselves down to the ground, their discarded clothes serving as a makeshift nest to cushion them.

A flurry of thoughts flew through Rick’s mind, whispering to him in their silken tones. They were the prayers of every Rick and Morty around him. The voices spoke of regret and loss, but mostly they spoke of a love that was boundless and all-consuming. Boundaries fell away, flesh and minds yearning to reach a singularity between them all. They had been without a love like this for so long, and now they were asking their saviors for guidance.

Rick and Mouse would show them the way.

Amidst the chorus of Resonances, Mouse’s thoughts sang in a piercing note, perfectly attuned to Rick’s ears. It told him all he needed to know about Mouse’s enduring love for him and how he wanted nothing more in the world than to be united with his lover, here and now. Rick’s heart pounded like a drum in his chest, and his head rang with the message. Words had no place between them; Rick needed only to listen to Mouse’s mind to know exactly what to do.

As Mouse silently rolled onto his stomach, Rick nuzzled at the back of his neck, sliding into position behind him. Slick was plentiful where it dribbled down the insides of Mouse’s thighs, and with just a tentative probe, Rick knew he was ready to receive him. The Resonance song blustered into an epic anthem as he gradually pushed his way inside, and Mouse gave a lyrical sigh when at last they were joined.

Eight levels below, the Captain and Isyx stood before Riq. He had not moved since they’d first arrived, and although he lay supine on the torn covers, the Captain still addressed him in a firm tone. “It’s time for you to go. It’s becoming unstable.”

Riq did not respond and his eyes remained closed, but Isyx continued regardless. “The tefrag won’t last much longer. We must give Them as much time as we can. The meltdown cannot be stopped, but it can be delayed.” No reply came, and neither Isyx nor the Captain had been expecting one. Without another word, they took Riq by the wrists and gently helped him to his feet.

Riq blinked blearily as if he had been asleep for ages. His voice was hoarse as he groaned, “But I’m tired. I’m just so, so tired. Can’t I rest?” His head lolled to the side, and he gave a plaintive look to the messengers who had come to deliver him his final task. It would be the ultimate atonement for all his sins.

“Oh, you’ll find your rest, sir. When it’s over,” the Captain said, leading him to the door. Riq was to make his way to sub-level 10 where he would tend to the heart of the Citadel, now on the brink of failure. It was a duty he was destined to carry out since long before, every action leading to this
moment.

He would manage the rest of his journey alone.

As Riq shuffled wearily down the hallway, Isyx slipped his gloveless hand into the Captain’s. They
linked fingers, Isyx looking up demurely at his lover. Within the ebony pools of his eyes, his
message was clear. Even from this distance, they were not immune to The Ones’ union far above
them, and the Captain and Isyx were only too eager to join the dance.

Effortlessly, the Captain hoisted Isyx into his arms, sweeping his tongue into his mouth as he carried
him to the bed. Between breathy sighs, Isyx smiled at the thought that The One's grand design had
been set in motion.

Mouse squeezed Rick deliciously, reaching back to adorn his lover’s throat with kissful praise. He
 gyrated himself on Rick’s cock until their hips were pressed flush against each other, two beings
made one. Satisfied whispers fluttered around them like birds' wings, fanning their lust. Rick ran his
hands up Mouse’s chest and rolled his nipples beneath his thumbs before dipping his head down to
suckle at his nape. At first, Rick only lapped and mouthed at it, but when he finally took it between
his teeth, Mouse yowled ecstatically. He then grasped Mouse’s rigid cock in his hand, and Mouse’s
cries grew louder, drawing the attention of onlookers.

As Rick curled over Mouse’s back, fucking him with deliberate and measured thrusts, he soon
realized that their lovemaking wouldn’t be alone. Other Mortys and Ricks had wandered away from
the writhing orgies that filled the atrium. Drawn to them like moths to a flame, they smoothly added
themselves to Rick and Mouse’s coitus with reverent caresses. They kissed the sweat from Rick’s
brow, stuttered words of encouragement, or reached for where Rick and Mouse were connected. A
more daring pair of Mortys held Rick by the hips and guided his thrusts as he slipped in and out of
Mouse, their pants echoing Mouse’s while they watched in rhapsody.

Some Mortys wiped the blood off Mouse’s cheeks like attentive mothers only to carefully smear it
across each other’s faces, drawing stripes of warpaint—or perhaps lovepaint—beneath their eyes and
dotting their foreheads with the pads of their fingers.

*Mouse has made the Mortys in his image*, Rick thought dreamily. They moaned as Mouse moaned.
They yearned as Mouse yearned. And they loved as Mouse loved.

The Ricks had to give their all just to keep up with their young partners’ gusto. They appeased them
with tempting kisses and promises of more, luring their overly enthusiastic lovers to the ground
where they could ravish them. Elite Ricks were compelled to exalt their Mortys, trading in their
expensive three-piece suits for their Mortys’ matching collars and leashes. Low-class worker Ricks
who had been all but forbidden from touching a Morty sobbed openly as they took their newfound
lovers into their arms. Their cries joined the multitude of others that resounded throughout the
Citadel.

A dam had been broken, all restraints cast aside to welcome a flood of desire that swept the Citadel.
It was as the book had said—a great tidal wave that would cleanse the land, and within that churning
sea, all would find the love they sought.

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It started with a single Morty stepping timidly up to a row of Dimension X Ricks.
He’d already stripped himself bare, his sun-kissed skin goosebumped with chill and desire. He only came up to the Ricks’ chests, yet the formidable throng of rebel fighters yielded to him like the Red Sea beneath Moses’s staff. The Ricks’ will to fight deserted them utterly, and now they watched on, fascinated, humbled, and aroused as the Morty stepped between them.

The brave visitor came toe-to-toe with a rugged Dimension X Rick whose chest was heaving with ill-restrained desire. He trembled when the Morty’s fingers grazed him, his heartbeat racing beneath his touch. They shared an amorous look, their eyes filled with wonder for each other, and then the Morty sank to his knees, his nimble fingers already unfastening the Rick’s belt.

Other Mortys followed suit, stepping through the chasm of Ricks to find lovers of their own. For having never touched a Morty before, the Ricks were guided by a latent instinct that told them to grab and stroke, lick and suck, and soon they fell into a bacchanalian jumble, Mortys on Ricks and Ricks on Mortys. In one stuttering, rasping, cursing, giggling voice, they sang:

*Love is now here.*

Fountain water wetted the pavement as drenched clothes were tossed to the ground with a slap. Hair still dripping into their eyes and wrists bound behind them, the council members were on their knees, naked, before their baptizers.

They prostrated themselves before the Dimension X Ricks, freed of anything that marked them as former rulers and pressed so closely to their brothers that it was impossible to tell where one Rick ended and another began. They were no longer leaders or slaves, tyrants or outcasts.

Prejudice had poisoned the Council, but now they placed their lips on those they’d once spat on, praised those they’d once vilified. Still just as competitive as ever, they fought each other to please their new lovers, tongues racing to be the first to run across hairy balls and tight whorls of anal flesh. In singles and pairs, they ravished the Dimension X Ricks, and spread their legs to drink them in fully, loving and receiving love in turn.

Like a great hydra, they wove about each other in a mass of pleasure that had every atom quaking with the same thrilling mantra:

*Love is now here.*

Chi had never known a love like this before. He’d only ever yearned after one Rick all his life, yet a force unyielding and unrestrained now had his heart pounding for—anyone, everyone. It was indiscriminate.

However, even as a pit of lovemakers delighted in one another before him and his cock pulsed with need, his heart remained guarded.

At last, his life’s work had been achieved: His Dimension X kin had been reprieved after a lifetime of rejection, and now they were celebrated as honorary guests at this table of plenty. He watched as one such brother was drawn down into the bed of supple bodies, and while part of him hungered to join the feast, he realized he did not know where to start.

As though hearing his plea for aid, a pair of hands crept over his shoulders from behind. Long fingers slipped down the front of his pants, gently massaging his heft. Chi turned to one side, his question swallowed by a hungry former-Elite whose swollen lips lavished him with kisses. He had
mischief in his eyes behind the veil of lust, and as he moved his gaze from Chi to his partner on the opposite side of him, Chi broke the kiss to follow it. There he met eyes with another former-Elite, this one marked by a thick, muscular neck and a cocky grin. He growled a promise of debauchery as he licked lasciviously up Chi’s cheek, making short work of Chi’s belt.

He had known these two, eons ago, but how and under what circumstances seemed irrelevant now. They were no longer Elite nor Grecos. They were just another pair of Ricks, just like him, and Chi was touched by their generous display of affection.

Slinking to his knees, θ-669 took Chi’s cock into his mouth and down his throat while his partner slid behind Chi to mouth at his ass. Skilled and artful, θ-669 tongued along Chi’s cock, sucked hard at the head, every lick and groan sending bolts of mind-blowing pleasure up Chi’s frame. From behind, λ probed Chi’s cleft with his pointed tongue, wiggling it into the tight fist of his anus until he had Chi’s knees trembling where he stood.

He slid his eyes closed as the pleasure mounted.

Then there was cool air on his cock and backside, and when he looked down in surprise, he found a smiling Morty had taken θ’s place and now had two small hands wrapped around him, while the two former-Elite watched on hungrily.

The Morty pumped him with care, the lubricating spit squelching between his fingers, as he fixed Chi with a half-lidded gaze steeped in want. An aspirated warble from him meant nothing to Chi’s ears, but the Morty gave off enough signals to tell Chi exactly what he wanted. Leaving a peck on the glossy head of Chi’s cock, the Morty lowered himself to his back, legs spread—an invitation to join him in something amazing.

Chi practically threw himself to his knees, wrangling his pants down just far enough before he tackled the Morty. He looped his arms beneath the Morty’s shoulders for leverage, huffing and panting at his throat while he thrust blindly. His cock strained against the small entrance, slipped off course once, before finally breaching the tight ring of flesh.

The moment his cock was buried fully within the silently whining Morty, he gasped. White-hot sparks flashed before his eyes, and he gulped for air as if he’d been punched in the gut. Then he began to move, and all semblance of dignity fled him. The sex was sloppy and crude, and he was sorely inexperienced, but the Morty lauded him without words, speaking through encouraging strokes along the back of his neck and face instead.

Following their example, λ and θ took each other in their arms, λ sliding into his lover and master. The feeling was like coming home. Swapping wet kisses, they watched and crooned their approval as Chi and his new lover fucked beside them. Together, their collective moans delivered the same overpowering message:

*Love is now here.*

While the rest of the Citadel was awash in its wild revelry, the power source of the space station was rapidly unhinging far beneath them.

On sub-level 10, Riq stood alone before a massive tank of tefrag. Through the small observation window, he could see waves of iridescent blue pulse over the black crystalline surfaces. Their already unstable ions were gobbling up their half-life at an alarming rate as they trembled with surplus energy.
Vapor rolled off of the tank’s metal sides, and the pipes at its top rattled like a giant, unwatched tea kettle. Needles on the pressure gauges were plunged deep in the red, pushed to their limits. With the engineers who monitored the Citadel’s boilers either dead or deserters, the intricate cooling system had fallen into disarray, and the entire Citadel was on the fast track to becoming a giant nuclear power plant on the verge of a meltdown.

Riq rested his hands on the control panel. A maze of dials and knobs of all colors dotted its front, completely meaningless to him. There was no way a single man could do what normally took a team of trained engineers. But he had been chosen to fulfill this small part of The Ones’ path. Even if it meant he would be no more than the little Dutch hero of Haarlem, with his finger in the leaking dike, he would serve his saviors in whatever way was asked of him.

Steam was hissing frantically from one of the many couplings, the steel pipes trembling with the need for release. Destiny guided Riq as he casually wrapped his fingers around an overheated valve and turned it. Immediately, the hissing abated, and the needle on the pressure gauge receded. In the next moment, however, a second coupling on another boiler began to hiss.

Riq looked at it blandly and sighed. It was going to be a difficult night.

Although he would toil long and without rest, however, his mind rang with the electrifying proof that his efforts would not be in vain:

*Love is now here.*

Rickochet and her Riri tumbled across the grass like a pair of caduceus serpents, arms and legs twisted so fully around one another, it was unclear whether they were fighting or fucking. She had never been one to take anything lying down, and this was no exception.

Nipping and clawing, she refused to surrender without a fight, and Riri was tasked with *winning* the right to mount her. It was only once he’d managed to pin her down by the wrists with his full weight that she surrendered. His erection nudging enticingly at her entrance had her losing all will to resist him.

Her back zipper had torn when he tugged at it too roughly at the start of their tumble, and now her dress was rucked up to her waist to reveal her slim thighs and lace panties.

He placed one gentle hand over her crotch—she remained blessedly pliant beneath him, watching him with expectant eyes—and felt for the nub of what remained from her castration. The heat coming off the small knot of flesh made him swallow, and he gently rubbed his thumb over it, a series of slow and mindful circles that had Rickochet bucking fitfully, not to kick him off but in elation.

She keened appreciatively.

As he worked her, drawing a sheen of liquid excitement from her dick, Riri continued his devout exploration of her body.

Last night had not been nearly long enough for them to learn all they could about each other, but Riri was adept enough to employ all he’d picked up while in Rickochet’s bed. He knew where she liked to be petted and pinched, caressed and kissed. He ran his tongue adoringly up her neck, relishing the thrumming pulse beneath lean muscle, until he reached her mouth. There they tangoed for dominance, although there was no loser in this scrimmage.
With his fingers covered in her precum, he slid them down and back, teasing her open. Once she was ready and he hefted her into his lap, she wordlessly wrapped her legs around him. Pushed him in.

Such divine connection.

From nearby, the ragged group of Mortys who had unwittingly come under their charge watched with adoration. They were locked in their own orgy of love, one where there were no masters. They reveled in each other, worshipping each other’s bodies and, therefore, worshipping their own. Even as they gave freely of themselves, some still had the clarity of mind and generosity of heart to honor their new guardians’ reverie. They moaned shamelessly, happy to let the entire Citadel hear their gushing adulations:

*Love is now here.*

That same adulation thrummed through Isyx’s blood as he sat nestled in his Captain’s lap. He squirmed and writhed, an impatient minx, meeting the circular thrusts of the Captain’s hips while he raked red ribbons down his back. Isyx crushed their lips together, the room loud with the sound of slapping flesh.

Shaking thumbs pressed bruises into Isyx’s hips where they clutched, and the Captain hissed at the tight rings of muscle that squeezed along the length of him. One hand scrambled for purchase on the back of Isyx’s neck, struggling to match the speedy pace he’d set. His old heart was pushed into overdrive, slamming itself against the inside of his ribs.

Yet something inside the Captain drove him to make love to his Isyx regardless of his body’s aches. It was as though the cosmos itself were watching, wanting to bear witness to the extent of their devotion to each other—and the Captain was more than willing to give it a show.

Breaking free of the kiss, he dropped onto his back, his chest heaving with exertion. The suite’s cracked ceiling spun like a kaleidoscope.

Isyx fell forward with him, lacing their fingers together as he continued lifting and lowering himself on his cock. His lust had only just been piqued, and he was still hungry to ride the Captain until he’d had his fill. With a harried wiggle of his ass, he ground his cock against his Captain’s stomach, the friction of coarse pubes pleasing but not enough.

Isyx whined, and his Captain obliged him. Wrapping one hand around his pulsing member, the Captain pulled Isyx to him, fucking his mouth with his tongue to the same rhythm that he fucked him with his cock. Isyx was skewered on both ends, able to find gratification backward and forward, up and down. He was caught in a gyroscope of unending pleasure.

Wrapped in an impassioned embrace, they called each other’s names, ears filled with the same blessed words:

*Love is now here.*

Rick’s orgasm was fast approaching. The combination of Mouse’s tight hole and the company of other lovers showering them with glory was pushing him to the brink. He was dizzy with ecstasy, the feel of so many tongues and hands making every nerve sing in jubilation, and his thighs began to shake as he pistoned into Mouse from behind.
Unable to keep his eyes on the tantalizing sight of his cock pummeling in and out of Mouse’s ass, he wrenched his head to either side where a Rick and a Morty greeted him respectively. They opened their mouths and stuck out their tongues, drinking in their savior’s sloppy kisses, each patiently waiting his turn to worship.

There, the fire was building. It surged like an inferno inside of Mouse, quickly spreading to Rick and threatening to burn down his flagging stamina. Rick’s steady thrusts devolved into staccato jerks, careless and uncoordinated. Breath caught and fingers clenched. As his body was ensnared in a fiery stranglehold, the Resonances reached a fever pitch inside him, all voices of all beings yearning to share in his climax.

The crescendo had built and built, but only once it reached its highest, quivering note did Rick find his release. It came in the form of clamped muscles and a long, sultry moan.

The orgasm roared through them both, inundating every nerve ending with rapture and seizing every muscle. Pulled taut as violin strings, pleasure reverberated across their surfaces until they thumped with it, inside and out. Rick pushed and pushed even when he could get no closer, wanting to merge their two bodies until they were inexorably linked.

Rick’s and Mouse’s gasps of pleasure radiated outward in an unfurling wave, a wall of sound that was multiplied a hundred times over, growing louder with each voice that joined it. It echoed off the glass dome overhead and filled the entire Citadel with an unending hymn of joy, a truth that could never again be denied:

*Love is now here!*

It rang in Riq’s ears where he stood hunched over the control panel. Tears fell from his eyes, sizzling on the overheated surface as he looked up at the raging boiler. The coolant pipes hissed and groaned as they tore themselves off of the metal sidings, the buildup of pressure now impossible to tame. Copper-smelling steam hung thick in the air, and Riq’s skin blistered red beneath the heat.

There was no swaying the tefrag from its march toward self-annihilation. Cobalt waves of energy danced faster and faster over the surface of the tefrag shards, throwing off strings of bright-blue electricity. They arched and wove around each other, entangling themselves like ardent lovers as they raced up the walls of the boilers. For a moment, the currents seemed to gather together in one place, resembling a figure of frenetic energy. The figure smiled and blew Riq a kiss.

It was the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen, bringing more tears to his eyes that evaporated on the spot. Then the dancing light temporarily collapsed in on itself, a dramatic pause in its exhilarating performance. It became an orb of blinding white, pulsing like an infant’s heart, before it exploded and mercifully tore Riq to shreds.

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Something awoke Rick.

He opened his eyes and saw a small heap of burning rubble crackling beside him. The fire was gobbling up the meager pile of kindling like a hungry child, its tongues flapping in the air, crying for more food.

Rick lay curled on one side, his entire body tingling with sex’s sweet afterglow. Mouse was tucked snugly against his chest, his breathing steady beneath Rick’s arm. Sweat clung to them, cooling on
the plane of goose bumps that forested their skin. But it was still warm where they touched and deep in the pockets between them, and Rick felt no compulsion to move and disrupt such a perfect moment.

Slowly, his surroundings came back to him, and he recognized that more bodies shared their intimate space. A Morty’s head rested against his back, another small form huddled around his feet. A Rick dozing opposite him had a Rick and Morty looped beneath each arm, their heads bobbing up and down with every breath. Without having to look, Rick could feel the many others—hundreds upon thousands of others basking in their postcoital bliss, sharing the same dreamless sleep. Musk hung thick in the air, the smell of sex and satisfaction.

Another rumble shook the ground beneath Rick, and now he slowly raised his head, realizing it was what had awoken him in the first place. Tiny flecks of slate shivered and convulsed on the ground in front of him, and as he watched them, curious, a deafening alarm suddenly split the air.

Rick sat bolt upright, his heart leaping to his throat. Mouse curled in on himself, grousing plainly for having been so rudely jostled from sleep. He soon quieted once the PA squealed to life, and the two cocked an ear to listen.

“Attention. Hull breach detected on sub-level 10. Repeat. Hull breach detected on—” The recording interrupted itself as an update came in. “Hull breach detected on sub-level 9 and sub-level 10. Repeat, hull breach detected on sub-level 9 and sub-level 10. All citizens are advised to evacuate the surrounding areas immediately and make their way to the nearest Citadel-sanctioned escape pod.”

The message played in its stiff, bored tone, slowly rousing the other Citadel patrons from their blissed-out slumber. Murmurs of confusion rippled across the atrium, everyone equally unsure of what to make of the strange announcement. Just as some shakily got to their feet, another thunderous explosion rocked the entire floor.

A column of fire erupted from the central elevator bank, shooting a trio of empty elevator cars 40 feet straight into the air. They arched high overhead before they came crashing down on unwitting groups of Ricks and Mortys still wrapped cozily in each other’s arms.

Those closest to them watched, stunned.

Panicked screams then began to break out as fire spewed from the gaping pit that had once been the main elevator shaft. Like a gullet connecting the Citadel’s belly to the atrium, more wreckage from the decimated lower levels was vomited up the vertical shaft with each fiery belch. It rained down on unsuspecting victims like hellfire and brimstone.

“Attention. Hull breach detected on sub-level 8, sub-level 9, and sub-level 10—”

The announcement continued undaunted as Rick and Mouse hastily fumbled back into their clothes. An ear-piercing klaxon had begun to blare in a mournful, undulating wave. It waoped on and on like the Citadel itself were crying.

“Mouse, come on!” Rick yelled, grabbing Mouse by the hand, but Mouse was already on his feet and running. The euphoria that had bathed the Citadel populace in selflessness and love was cast aside in the face of danger, every instinct now focused on the imperative to survive. What they had all shared, that cosmic apotheosis, now seemed like a passing daydream, and chaos once again took center stage.

“Hull breach detected on—” The floor was wracked by another explosion as one more level was wiped out. “Hull b-b-b-reeeeeach-ch-ch detected on-n-n-n sub-level 6. Sub-level f-f-f-f—” A high-
pitched buzz tore over the sound waves before the PA warning cut off prematurely. It would never sound again.

Overhead, the holographic dusk that had held uninterrupted for the duration of the lovefest was now fading to black, the Citadel’s auxiliary power finally failing with a low drone before going quiet. As the atrium dome gradually dimmed into the star-filled cosmos, Rick and Mouse raced across the crowded promenade, leaping over refuse and prone bodies—some still huddled together in fear, wishing for the nightmare to end. Sinkholes were cracking open underfoot by the minute, dotting the atrium with deadly trapdoors that led to pits of molten steel. Rick wrenched his eyes away when a hapless Rick was swallowed whole by one and disappeared.

Braver Ricks and Mortys tugged their brothers to their feet to make for the escape pods located on the atrium’s perimeter while others, like Rick and Mouse, headed straight in search of a portal.

Dimension X Ricks, who had all arrived with their own portal guns intact, shepherded as many Mortys and Ricks as they could into open portals that then winked shut to safety. In the chaos, a well-meaning Rick tried to corral a line of Mortys through his portal, when a falling piece of building suddenly crushed him and his portal gun. Instantly, the portal shut, tearing a Morty who was in mid-jump in two.

Where the largest gathering of portals was, Chi would be there too.

As Rick and Mouse made it over the crest of a caved-in eatery, Chi came into view. A massive security vault sat askew beside him. The way the concrete was shattered beneath it gave the impression that it had been transported from elsewhere and abruptly dropped into place. PORTAL GUN REGISTRY was emblazoned across the top of its front. Through the vault’s open door, Rick could see mostly emptied racks. They’d once held confiscated portal guns. Now only a handful of them remained, each tagged with a plastic strip bearing a letter and three digits—dimensional designations identifying their original owners.

“280!” Chi called out to him, busy doling out portal guns to the throng of Ricks that swamped him. “About time you fucking showed up! C’mon, c’mon! Keep it moving, fellas! We don’t exactly have all day!”

Rick and Mouse jogged to a stop in front of him. Chi looked rougher than the last time Rick had seen him, but considering the Citadel was falling apart at the seams, he was no worse for wear. In the fading light, Rick could make out that Chi’s glasses had a crack in one lens and his belt was undone beneath his untucked black turtleneck.

From behind him, Rick caught sight of a small Morty sharing Chi’s task of handing out portal guns without a word. When his armful ran out, he tugged on Chi’s sleeve, made a series of gestures in the air, and Chi nodded in understanding. Amidst the hectic movement of the surrounding Ricks, there was something about the pair that seemed unaffected and in control. In that small exchange, Rick saw an invisible thread that he’d not seen between Chi and anyone else before.

When the Morty tilted his head just so, a jagged scar interrupted the smooth profile of his throat.

As Chi turned back from his newfound protégé, Rick suddenly grabbed him in a fierce embrace, all his relief at seeing him alive and well suddenly overtaking him. Chi stiffened at first, his hands curling away from Rick as though afraid to make contact.

“Chi, I thought—thank god you’re all right.”

Chi snorted, his hands coming up to rest tentatively on Rick’s back. “You mean thank you. And o-of
course I’m all right.” His reply dissolved into a relieved chuckle as he returned Rick’s hug. “Okay, okay. Enough sappy stuff.” He pushed himself away, crossing his arms. “If it wasn’t for that card you gave me, I would’ve had a helluva lot harder time getting here.”

With a nod to the lopsided vault, Rick added, “And I see the gun didn’t hurt either. I’m impressed you managed to move something that size on a sapped crystal.”

“Give me some credit. I’m the smartest Rick you know. I could revive a spent isotope 322 in my sleep.” He then grabbed Rick’s wrist and slapped something into the palm of his hand. “And don’t think I didn’t come with a gift to pay you back.”

Chi and his gifts. Rick shook his head before looking down at his hand. From the weight alone, he already knew what it was: his own portal gun, the handwritten label boasting the dimension $\chi-280$ with pride.

Chi’s gaze then landed on Mouse, and his eyes softened. He lowered his chin, a mere twitch downward, but Rick recognized it as Chi’s own version of a genuine bow. Chi had always been a man of few words when it came to emotional situations, which made the gesture all the more powerful. Seeing the mute Morty take his hand and bow to Mouse in kind told Rick that Chi had found a fitting partner.

Pride bloomed in Rick’s chest and constricted his throat. For decades, the two of them had shared an unshakable friendship, but Rick had also sensed a kind of self-restraint on Chi’s part, a dark cloud of denial behind his eyes that saddened every smile. Now, however, Chi looked like a man completely at peace with himself, fulfilled in a way he’d always deserved.

“Chi, you should know that—” He was cut short by an explosion that threw them all to their knees.

“Save the sentiment for later!” Chi yelled, unholstering his own gun and pulling the silent Morty close to his side. He shot the gun overhead, opening a portal that swallowed a decent-sized chunk of marble from a nearby facade that would’ve crushed them both.

“Where will we go?” Rick yelled back.

“I’ve already programmed our guns with their own jump point. With this many asswipes portaling out, I couldn’t risk us taking up the same shit hole. Your gun’s already got the necessary coordinates. Don’t worry, 280. I’ll be in touch after this is all over. Now go!” And with that, he and his Morty stepped into another portal and out of sight.

A few dozen more portals opened and shut around them, soon leaving Rick and Mouse alone with the empty vault. The air was now so thick with smoke, it was difficult to see the stars through the spiderwebbed dome. With the electricity long since lost following the destruction of the utility districts, the only source of light came from stars outside and the still raging fires.

Rick took Mouse’s hand and aimed his portal gun straight ahead. It felt like an eternity since he’d last fired it, and there was something reassuring in the familiar kickback when he pulled the trigger. Mouse’s fingers twitched in his hold when the green vortex swirled into existence, and Rick murmured softly, “Don’t worry. I’ll check it out first. Make sure the coast is clear.” He then stepped forward and stuck his head through.

For a split second, it felt like dipping his head underwater, a strong current passing over his skin and plugging his ears. Good. It was the sign of a stable jump, unlike the broken-down relic Chi had supplied him with before, and Rick breathed easier for it. The moment the sensation passed, he opened his eyes.
A dark room greeted him, the smell of cigarettes and booze thick in the quiet air. Worn stools sat empty around the central counter, and directly ahead of him was a familiar booth. He’d spent too many drunken nights here not to recognize the sleaziest bar on Interra.

*Of course you’d choose this place.*

With the bar closed for the day, it would make a suitable refuge until Rick got himself and Mouse back in order. A quick birdbath in the washroom wouldn’t be a bad start. Bloodstains never made a good impression on anyone, no matter what the color.

Satisfied with their jump point, Rick stepped all the way through and pulled Mouse’s hand forward to join him—but he wouldn’t budge. He made a face as he felt Mouse tug on his hand, wondering if he had something he wanted to show him back in the Citadel. Now really wasn’t the time, and he pulled Mouse forward more firmly.

“C’mon, Mouse,” he chided as one of Mouse’s ears cleared the portal. “This is no time t—”

“Rick! Help meeel!” Mouse screamed the moment his mouth had broken through the barrier. His face was contorted in fear; his pupils, blown wide with panic. Then he was yanked back through the green and was gone.

Without a second thought, Rick plunged back into the Citadel. Sound clamored to life in his ears as yet another blast erupted nearby. It was closer than any before it, and a barrage of heat slapped his face with the force of it.

He squinted through the thick smoke, and with his hand still grasped firmly around Mouse’s, he looked past his shoulder to what had snagged him. A pair of beady eyes set in a mound of burned, doughy flesh glared back at Rick. The remnants of an expensive suit still clung to him in tatters, and a once lavish diamond-studded belt was now pockmarked with ugly holes.

ψ-531 stooped with one leg bent unnaturally at the knee, and a trail of blood glistened from a gash on his forehead. His usually polished hair now stood free of its product and was singed black at the tips. He looked like he’d been through hell and back—which, considering their surroundings, was an apt description—but he still had his thick fingers wrapped around Mouse’s forearm in a crushing hold.

Blood stained ψ-531’s teeth as he snarled at Mouse, “You...y-you harlot! What have you done?!” He gave Mouse a mean shake. “I had everything going for me! Everything! And then you had to go and ruin it!”

The ground beneath them had begun to swell. Fissures of orange cracked across its bulging surface, lines of flames leaping at the smoky air. As the pressure grew, so did the curvature of the ground, and Rick realized that they were standing on top of a giant volcano about to blow. They only had seconds before the entire floor went up.

Mouse looked frantically between ψ-531 and Rick. “Riiiick!” he shrieked.

Finally snapping out of his stupor, Rick wrapped both hands around Mouse’s arm, dug his heels into the ground, and pulled. Partial jumps were best to be avoided, and as Rick’s upper body materialized in and out of Interra’s bar, he had a pretty good idea why that was. The sensation of his atoms being rearranged several times over was making him nauseous. “Fucking son of a bitch! Let go of him, you fat fuck!”

ψ-531 either didn’t hear Rick or simply didn’t care to acknowledge him. His crazed eyes were fixed on Mouse. “I should’ve killed you when I had the chance,” ψ-531 seethed, climbing hand over hand
up Mouse’s arm. The rotund Elite was no match for Rick’s muscle power, but manic rage had made him iron-strong. He refused to yield as Mouse was suspended in a desperate tug-of-war between them. “Should’ve made you choke on my dick, you miserable little whor—”

ψ-531 never got to deliver the rest of his threat, because at that moment, his head exploded in a glorious spray of blood and brains. From around his headless stump, the collar of spent demolition nanos fell to the ground, dead. ψ-531’s blubbery form crashed to the ground, his shirt collar immediately catching fire. Even in death, his hand was locked around Mouse’s arm.

The ground chasmed open between them, magma rushing up in a fiery spume.

There’s no more time! Rick shouted silently, and with a final heave, he yanked on Mouse with all his might. ψ-531’s death grip finally gave way like a thread snapping, and the two stumbled back through the closing portal.

On the other side, blessed silence swaddled them in a blanket of safety. In the span of a millisecond, they had leapt galaxies away from the burning Citadel where the final detonation had pulverized the grand atrium. Only crumbs now remained, set adrift to wander harmlessly through space.

Rick lay on his back in the empty bar, Mouse sprawled across his chest. Their hearts hammered wildly against each other, both knowing that they had just escaped death by a hair’s breadth. Smoke curled faintly off their clothes, the acrid stench of burnt fibers tainting the air. Rick lifted his arms and wrapped them tightly around Mouse, burying his face in his mohawk.

“We did it, Mouse,” he huffed, tears of relief stinging where they seeped out from under his lashes. “We fucking did it. Everything’s going to be okay now.” It was a far cry from the escape Rick had originally envisioned—a clandestine departure under the cover of night, subtle and safe—but at least they were still here. In one piece. “Right, Mouse?”

A heartbeat passed, and Mouse didn’t respond.

Rick pulled back to look him over. “Mouse?” He shook him gently. Maybe the jump had been too much for the little guy. Shimmying up to a sitting position, Rick grabbed Mouse by the shoulders and held him at arm’s length. Light pulsed dimly from beneath Mouse’s lids, his eyes cast to one side. “Mouse, you o...kay?” Rick’s question petered out as his little finger dipped into something wet and warm below Mouse’s left shoulder.

No.

He followed Mouse’s gaze, all hope beginning to falter.

No, god, please no.

“R-Rick...it hurts.”

The entire left sleeve of Mouse’s robe had been cut clean off when the portal had closed, its edges scorched. Rick’s fingers inched lower, feeling for his arm but finding nothing. All that remained was a bloody stump.

Chapter End Notes
As always, we can be contacted on Twitter at @futagogo or Discord futagogo#9830.

[All fanart for Chapter 17 can be found here.]
The Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Mouse and Rick shared all things in their lives—their work, their leisure, their meals—and at the end of each day, they shared a warm bed. The nights were spent sometimes passionately, sometimes quietly, but always blissfully dream-free.

Chapter Notes

Published on 1/27/2018.

Of course, we couldn't end the story on anything but a happy note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"His life would be recorded in words, His purpose in deeds, and His love in all Mortys’ hearts."
- Mouse 1:1

Mouse put his pen down and rolled his shoulder to work out the stiff joint. He’d been seated, writing diligently at his desk, for the entire day, and now his body was hounding him for a break. The candle that had melted past the -6 mark was indication enough that he was overdue for one anyway.

He pushed himself away from the simple wooden table and leaned back in his chair to stretch his arms overhead. The gears of his left arm whirred and clicked as he flexed pneumatic muscles and mechanical tendons.

It was the third model Rick had built for him, each iteration designed to fit his growing size. He hadn’t had to get a new one for the past two years, however, and the hardware was now as much a part of himself as his original arm—even the shiny gold color. Buffed to brilliance, the phosphor bronze was the perfect combination of lightweight and strong while also rust- and water-resistant. Initially, the material had only been chosen out of convenience, the prototype's shell having been salvaged from ORA, but they both agreed they liked how it gleamed in the sunlight.

So the gold had stayed.

There was a knock at the room’s single entrance. “Hey, buddy. How’s it going? Your sermon coming along all right?” Rick was leaning against the doorjamb with an impish smile on his face.

Mouse already knew what he was there for without his having to say anything. It was a time-honored tradition between them—their favorite way to wrap up the day. And today, Mouse had something special to show Rick too. He smiled at his lover.

Even after moving halfway across the multiverse spectrum to this quiet corner of the Glaycias Galaxy, Rick hadn’t lost his preference for practical attire, and with winter in full swing, his insulated coveralls were hard on the eyes but good at their job. His newest ORA was also a vast improvement.
over the previous one, and now there was no difference between the synthoptic and his real eye. To Mouse, though, it didn’t matter because they both shone warmly at him.

It was only when Mouse noticed the bundle of wool blankets and scarves in Rick’s arms that he realized how cold he’d gotten in the room. The fire in the hearth behind him had died down to a few smoldering cinders, and even with a thick robe swathed around him, he felt the chill prickle against his shorn temples and nip at his nose.

“Same old, shame old. I’m still having trouble getting the new parochial inductees to take the teachings of Sacrimortys in moderation,” he answered, getting up from his seat. He shuffled over, arms scooping up the hem of his robe to wrap it more tightly around himself. Rick had already unraveled a blanket by the time he reached him, and Mouse leaned in for a quick kiss as Rick draped it over his shoulders.

“Aah, let me guess. Sacrimortys 4:23: ‘A Morty should have love for himself and all other Mortys.’” The Book of Morty quote came easily from Rick’s lips—after all, he’d helped Mouse with the wording.

“Exactly. They seem to think it gives them free license to neglect their Ricks in the meantime.”

Rick tsked at that and quietly guided Mouse out of his study and through the rest of the house. The cabin was small but cozy, with just enough for the two of them. Drapes of heavy fabrics hung over the log walls to keep out the drafts, and natural light poured in through the windows which were beginning to pile high with snow.

Frequent missionary trips to spread the word of Mortyism kept them out of the house often enough that a quiet week at home came as a rare respite.

“Maybe you need to hold another retreat sometime. After all, not everyone learns through readings alone. They might benefit from a more hands-on approach,” Rick purred, pulling the front door open for him. “We could give them a live demonstration. I have a few favorite sermons that could give those students a workout.” Even through the thick layers of cloth, Mouse could feel Rick groping at his backside like a cheeky horndog. Rick shot his hands up in surrender. “‘Cheeky horndog’? Don’t you mean ‘devoted partner’? ‘Passionate lover’?”

Mouse chuckled and reeled Rick outside by his scarf, kicking the door shut behind them. Beneath the portico of fronds heaped with sweet-smelling snow, he touched their noses together, a small victory fluttering through him at the reminder that they were now the same height. “Who ever said they had to be mutually exclusive?” he teased as he pecked Rick on the lips. Then he took Rick’s gloved hand in his metal one and walked with him around the southeast corner of the house.

Their boots crunched through the pink layer of ice that had crystallized overnight as they made their way to their favorite hillcrest. It always gave them the most stunning views of the Neapolitan Valley, and this evening was no exception.

The setting sun glinted off the strips of pink and brown—strawberry and chocolate, as far as Mouse’s taste buds were concerned—that painted the mountainsides. A gust of frigid wind brought with it the scent of pecan from the surrounding snow-covered boughs, and the first of the night’s ice cream flurries was beginning to circle down from the sky.

Mouse closed his eyes, lifted his face, and stuck out his tongue. *Strawberry.* He felt a squeeze at his hand, and when he looked over, Rick was regarding him with curiosity.

“So? What’s this thing you wanted to show me?”
Mouse blinked before finally remembering. He blew an exasperated huff. “I swear, mind reading just takes all the fun out of things sometimes,” he pouted. “Can’t I have a big reveal for once?” Slipping off his one glove, he dipped his hand—oh, that was cold!—down the front of his robe.

It had stayed close to his heart for the past few days, rolling between the cleft of his pecs like a hefty, glass marble. He held it out to Rick, who peered closely at the bead of vivid magenta dangling on its golden chain.

“What is it?” he asked. But when he tried to reach for it, Mouse gently closed his fingers around it.

“It’s a part of me. I mean—well, I made it.”

Rick arched his brow. “Mouse.” He smirked. “Are you saying you laid an egg?”

“Oh, of course not!” Mouse blushed and shoved him playfully with his elbow. “God, you’re such a kid.”

The snowfall was beginning to thicken, and he held his prized creation against his chest to keep it warm.

The last few years had been dedicated to spreading The One’s word and helping ensure that the balance between Ricks and Mortys remained intact throughout the multiverse. What had transpired in the Citadel was only a small feat. Elsewhere, there were still countless versions of themselves that had fallen off the righteous path and were in need of their guidance.

Mortys were often easier to persuade than Ricks. They were quick to take up the mantle of their savior, even going so far as to mimic The One True Morty’s appearance. The spiritual leaders dressed in white robes, shaved their heads, and tattooed their faces with red ink to honor Mouse’s miracle on the night of the Great Morty Exodus. Even his prosthetic was worshipped as a means to enlightenment, his followers claiming that they had been saved by his Golden Touch.

Rick and Mouse’s mission seemed all the more important once they’d heard that plans for the Neo Citadel were already underway. However, Auctioneer Rick, now simply “Richard”—It’s pronounced Ree-shard, mon petit chou—had been proud to share that his new Council included the voices of both Ricks and Mortys, and it was already on its way to serving the populace as a true and just democracy.

Even Chi had found his place among the leadership as Director of Interdimensional Relations. Meanwhile, the former council members filled their own niche, relegated to janitorial duty to instill in them a sense of humility. The Captain of the Guard would not be returning to his post, opting instead to take an early retirement with his trusted second-in-command, a Morty who proved to be one of Mouse’s most loyal followers.

When not proselytizing, Mouse passed his time in peace and meditation. He had years of reflection to make up for, and as he approached himself with forgiveness and sensitivity, he looked back on the journey that had brought him here. It had been full of hardship, a long and arduous march, but now he felt gratitude for all that had happened—and all who had led him to his Counterpart.

Mouse and Rick shared all things in their lives—their work, their leisure, their meals—and at the end of each day, they shared a warm bed. The nights were spent sometimes passionately, sometimes quietly, but always blissfully dream-free.

Save for that one night.

It had come to Mouse a few nights prior—a dream bearing a message that made a chill race across the back of his head whenever he recalled it. In the dream, he heard a voice that was both familiar
and alien, humble yet regal. It said unto him:

“Place your golden finger upon your tongue, and you will birth your own keeper. He will be there at the beginning to set all events in motion. He will know where the cards fall and will be a guide to you in your darkest hour.”

And when Mouse had awoken the next morning, he’d found this tiny pink egg sitting lightly on his tongue. At first it was no bigger than a humming bird’s egg, but day by day it grew larger, and its purpose became clearer to Mouse.

“Does this mean we’re keeping it?” Rick joked, wrapping an arm around Mouse’s shoulder and gazing at the treasure in his hand.

To the outside observer, they likely made an odd pair, but they wouldn’t have it any other way. Just Rick and Mouse versus the universe.

“No. He’s not staying for long. I’ll be sending him back soon. He has an important purpose to fulfill,” Mouse said wistfully. He held the egg up to his face to peer at the small fetus that lay curled within, dreaming peacefully. “And he has my story to write.”

Chapter End Notes

Our most sincere thanks to every person who has ever read this fanfiction. Whether you’ve been with us since the earliest chapter releases or discovered Rick and Mouse’s story only after it was completed, thank you for your readership and your support.

This story has most definitely shaped the way we’ll remember the last couple years. We shared so many laughs and long walks, building this story from conception to completion, and we learned much along the way about ourselves, the writing process, and more.

We want to thank our ever-supportive husbands and all the amazing friendships we have made in the RM fandom throughout this journey.

We have been blessed to have such enthusiastic and generous readers, and we have treasured (and will continue to treasure!) every word of encouragement, kudos, comment, fanart, fanfic, cosplay, playlist, RP, OC, comic, translation, animation, and more that TCoLC has inspired. It warms our hearts like nothing else.

☆ 140 copies of this fic were printed and distributed to readers (for free) but now only a handful of copies remain for posterity. To track the progress of that project please visit the blog here. ☆

Our goal had simply been to write a story that had to be told, and we are very happy to have seen it through to its end. Thank you and see you in our next fanfic! ❤

[All fanart for Chapter 18 can be found here and all ”Other” fanart made for the story found here.]
4/26/18 Update: We were delighted to have this story featured in a VICE article to represent the rickmörty community's creative writing side. :D What a wonderful post-birthday gift~!

Works inspired by this one: The Age of Beauty by KLaxAddict

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!