Broken Bonds

by PoisonJack

Summary

Jack bonds Rhys and abandons their bond only a few weeks later. Axton is an omega-wellness professional, and finds Rhys succumbing to the side effects of being neglected. Axton nurses him back to health, fluffy smut ensues, Jack's ass may or may not get kicked.

We just needed more excuse for smut of this rare pairing yes yes.

Notes

FINALLY getting my very first rhys/axton fic up and it feels so goooood.

Also on my tumblr here.
Rhys had said yes to everything that Handsome Jack had ever wanted.

He’d been the perfect, submissive omega. Obedient, loyal, flattering to the alpha’s ego. He’d been head over heels in love with the older man, couldn’t believe his luck in catching the CEO’s eye and being the focus of the man’s attention. Jack had called him smart. Pretty. An omega that was making waves in his department and making the man proud to have him as a member of Hyperion.

The dinners were nice, the sex was great, and the way the alpha fawned over him and bared his teeth at any other alphas that got too close just made Rhys’ whole world light up. It was an easy thing to let the older man bond him; to let his world consist of Jack and nothing else. The man burned bright as a star at the center of Rhys’ universe, and the omega was infatuated with his bond mate.

It was two weeks after that the CEO moved on, and another one passed before Rhys began to understand the reality of his situation. Unreturned calls and messages were one thing, but seeing the alpha with someone else was another entirely.

The realization was something he willfully denied for a long time, rationalizing that Jack was the CEO, and busy, and he met with many attractive people for the good of Hyperion. Actors in his car. Models in his office. That made sense what with products needing advertising. That was to be expected of such an important alpha. He could bear with it. Even if security barred him from seeing the older man, and Jack’s secretary always dismissing him on the excuse that Jack was out. He must be working hard.

Some small, logical part of himself realized what was happening; that he was played with and discarded like the naive, lovestruck omega that he was. There was no misunderstanding or miscommunication; it was simply over. And he was stuck with a bond but no mate, desperate and sick to see the alpha CEO, but knowing he’d been discarded like old prototypes.

Coming to terms with the realization that Jack was actively avoiding him-- completely disinterested in his own mate- was what motivated Rhys to leave Hyperion weeks later.

He took up a job with Atlas, the rival technologies firm, and tried to start over; tried to forget the bond that nagged at him, pulled at him, and desperately wanted his alpha at his back.

The omega poured himself into his work, heading an entire department that was impressed as hell with his qualifications and knowledge. He made innovations and realizations that seriously bolstered the younger company’s reputation. It was a great distraction from missing the man that was like an ulcer on his heart. Everyone was nice and more than competent at their jobs, and they took his direction well. He poured himself wholeheartedly into his work.

Atlas might have been a smaller, newer company than Hyperion, but what it lacked in flash and obscene wealth, it more than made up for in quality of product and superior advances. There was a reason they were directly competing with the larger company and actually causing a dip in Hyperion’s stock, and that was the superior work ethic of it’s employees and a dedication to service that the larger company was frankly lacking.

All in all, it was a good fit for a heartbroken omega trying to forget the alpha that bonded and left
him. Atlas cared about their employees, it cared about their customers, and there was never a lack of work to bury oneself in and try to forget.

Rhys had been managing thus far, trying to will himself to get over Jack the past several months. He knew the dangers of broken bond syndrome, and what the abandonment could do to him if he couldn’t force himself to forget and get over the man. But that was hard when Jack's face was literally everywhere, from timepieces to cars to sunglasses. It made him ache and recall words of love that the alpha obviously hadn’t meant, but that he desperately wanted to believe. And it was slowly killing him.

His declining health caught the eyes of the bosses who simply thought he was working too hard. Though it was an important time for the company in terms of projects and the bottom line, Rhys was offered vacation time to recuperate. He was important, they said, and while working yourself to death might be normal back at Hyperion, they needed well-rested, fully-functioning leaders to head their teams. A little R&R was prescribed.

The omega shot that down, fear of what having so much time alone with his thoughts might do, and management offered him working from home instead-- just until he recovered, they promised. It was a good compromise, and Rhys had managed to make every deadline and goal for the month he’d been working remotely.

Until he missed one project. And then another. He hadn’t responded to emails checking in on him, and his phone went straight to voicemail. No one could get in touch with the omega and it set off alerts to upper management.

That was how Axton found himself standing outside the omega’s apartment door, checking the address to make sure he was where the company had sent him, hand poised to knock again on the blue-painted wood.

No answer. But then, they had expected that; worry that the omega had gotten too sick to answer a phone, let alone open a door.

Axton knocked again and tried the knob. To his shock, it was unlocked. The alpha cautiously opened the door, looking for any signs of foul play, and stuck his head into the dark apartment, sniffing in worry.

“Hello? Mr. Sommerset? I'm from Atlas, doing a wellness check.” He stepped through the threshold and allowed his eyes to adjust. The curtains were drawn, though light still came through the various windows enough for him to navigate. “Uh, your door was unlocked. Hello?”

He didn’t see or smell anything that set him on edge, and he opened curtains and turned on lights in the hope of finding a clue.

There were some old takeout containers on the counter of an average-sized kitchen. An open living room was filled with a comfortable looking black couch and matching plush chairs. The room was tidy, but had a lived-in feel to it; throw pillows and blankets, magazines, piles of DVDs next to a large tv.

No omega though.

“Hello? Mr. Sommerset?” he called out again as he cautiously explored the rest of the apartment.

There were four more closed doors to search in the space. One was an office that the omega department-head must have been working from, another was a linen closet with towels that fell on
his head. He found door number three to be a spacious bathroom, which meant the last door must be
the missing omega’s bedroom.

“Hello?” the alpha said again as he opened the door to hazy darkness. He was immediately struck
with the realization that he wasn’t alone; omega-tinged, oddly-familiar scent filling his nostrils and
the sound of breathing entering his ears.

“Oh, Mr. Sommerset. Hello? Excuse me, I’m from Atlas.”

The omega didn’t stir, and he approached somewhat awkwardly, though he had a duty to see if the
man in question was okay or not. Axton was on edge, something about the scent in the room
bothering his hindbrain that he couldn’t yet pin.

“Sir? Hello, sir?” He laid a warm hand on Rhys’ shoulder over the blankets, but the omega didn’t
stir. He gave him a slight shake while addressing him again, and put a hand over the other man’s
forehead.

He wasn’t hot like Axton had expected of an under-the-weather omega, but cold, skin chilled to the
touch. His breathing was shallow and his scent was off. A spike of fear went through Axton as his
nose realized something his brain took a few more moments to register.

“Shit. Hey darlin’, wake up. Hey.”

He knew broken bond syndrome when he saw it, not to mention the scent that was now impossible
to ignore to his trained nose. He was well acquainted to the horrors of the problem, the first time he'd
smelled such a scent rushing back to him. He hadn’t known what to do back then, but he did now.
This omega needed help.

“Hey, Mr. Sommerset. Rhys Sommerset. Come on now, talk to me.”

He tried in vain to get the omega to wake up. Rhys was cold to the touch, skin chilled though he'd
been under blankets. His scent held an odor that sent shivers down Axton’s spine; an omega given
up.

His training kicked in, and he brought the cold omega into his arms to warm him up; work some life
back into the unconscious man.

Axton chafed his hands over Rhys’ skin, warming it with his own body heat. He wrapped them both
up in blankets as he held the other man in his lap, cheek to chill forehead, big arms around smaller,
colder ones. The reek of despair hung heavy in the air and made his heart beat faster. He wished
they’d sent him around sooner. “Come on now, darlin’. Don’t give up on me.”

He held the other man close, wrapped in his arms, and face to his chest with a blanket tight around
both of them. He kept talking to him, saying his name, warming him up. If he could just get Rhys to
surface, to open his eyes, then he was confident he could stabilize him.

He just had to pull him out first.

The big alpha took two fingers and gently pressed the pads into the back of the omega's neck,
looking for his bonding gland. “Come on now, darlin’. Wake up. Come on.” He gently massaged the
area, knowing the intimate gesture was taboo, a spot only touched by lovers. Ask first and all that;
something to stand by.

But he also knew it would activate the nerve in emergency situations, maybe stimulate enough to
resurface the omega; enough to save him. A broken bond was an awful thing, but the tease was like
a carrot on a stick.

The omega followed it to consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

I'll try to be prompt with updates :) I know this was short and also read kind of weird, but it'll be more dialogue and my normal style of writing from here ;) This rarepair needed more in the tag >_>

my tumblr | my fic masterlist archive
Chapter 2

The first thing Axton saw was blue and brown eyes slowly blinking up at him, and then the other man began to stir.

“There ya go… Come on now. It's okay. You're okay. Wake up now.”

Confused and totally out of it, Rhys’ weak hand fell against the stranger’s broad chest, uncoordinated as sleep dragged at him. He was having a battle with consciousness, perking up a bit as alpha pheromones entered his nostrils. He smelled something he subconsciously liked, and breathed deeply of the alpha's scent.

Axton kept him close while he kept on speaking encouragements, his voice reverberating in his chest. Rhys instinctively nuzzled into him, inhaling big whiffs. It might not be the alpha that bonded him, but enough alpha smell this close should do something to alleviate symptoms. Axton held tight and didn't let go.

He knew he'd have to sit there until the omega got some warmth back into his skin and some color into those pale cheeks. Until the other man was properly coherent. It was dangerous to leave him now that he'd pulled him back from the brink. Frankly, seeing one omega succumbing to broken bond in his lifetime was one omega too many. He was glad the company had sent him.

"You're okay. I've got ya darlin'. Just stay with me."

There were steps he'd need to make. Contact his office, get a hold of the other alpha watchman to cover his shifts and duties at Atlas while he was needed here; have his action file updated with this issue. Axton knew he wouldn't be going anywhere until Rhys was stable, and that meant that he wouldn't be back for some time.

The omega moved a bit in his arms, craning his head to better look at just whoever had him. Axton watched intently, encouraging him with a smile.

“W-who are you…?” Rhys asked groggily, somewhat pushing away from Axton to better look up at the stranger holding him. He was almost convinced he was having some weird dream, though his mind wouldn’t have come up with such a pleased, crooked grin, or concerned, green eyes shining with warmth. “What're you doing… in my home?”

“I’m from Atlas,” Axton supplied softly, easily, allowing Rhys his space but not relinquishing his hold. “They sent me to check up on ya.” Rhys frowned up at him at that, and Axton made an awkward offering of explanation, frowning slightly. “You missed several deadlines and didn’t
answer any calls. I’m uh, omega wellness certified and trained to--”

“Just… stop talking,” Rhys said with annoyance, though he relaxed back into the alpha’s arms without alarm, eyes shutting and nuzzling into the warmth of the stranger’s chest. He exhaled tiredly, grateful for the solid scent surrounding him, still not certain he wasn’t dreaming.

Axton shut his mouth with a slightly self-conscious blush at being told off, but an utterly pleased smile. If the patient had attitude, then that was good. Axton hadn’t found him too late. And it meant he could still make a difference.

He tightened his hold on the omega and tucked the blankets in around him proper. Rhys’ breathing eased into a comfortable rhythm, falling back asleep in Axton’s arms, and the alpha’s lips quirked in a smile. It spoke to how exhausted and completely out of it that the omega was-- falling asleep with an unknown alpha.

Any societal conventions were completely forgotten and brushed aside for a little piece of comfort. It was yet another reason why broken bond syndrome was so dangerous. It made omegas incredibly vulnerable. Rhys’ safety with a stranger in his house came second only to the instinctual need of self-preservation-- he needed an alpha’s presence; their scent, the chemical cocktail that would ease his suffering. Didn’t matter if that person was a home-invader or a salaried employee from the same company. An alpha was an alpha as far as his body was concerned.

Axton was so grateful he’d been sent in time. This omega’s body was craving the alpha which bonded him, and if he’d been working from home as long as the company had said, then Axton highly doubted that the younger man had had any exposure to even latent alpha scent for way too long. With his condition, that would have only exacerbated things.

Well, Axton had his training, his experience, and his genuine concern to see this omega through this, and dammit, he’d do his job right.

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Rhys was lightly snoring, but it was a restful sleep, not the coma-like unconsciousness Axton had come upon.

He was gently cleaning Rhys’ skin with a wet cloth, sponging off every last trace of scent tinged with despair and hopelessness that he could appropriately get at. The amber-haired omega didn’t wake through his gentle dabbing, but that was okay. He needed rest and care, and not being alone. That Axton was there with him at all was enough. Even if he did nothing, his presence would help.

Axton grimaced as he found a hamper to toss the cloth in. He hated this smell; the scent of pure defeat, one given up. It wasn’t good for it to remain on the omega, either; something he’d learned in his training. Rhys might not consciously know what it was about his own scent being off, but his body would pick up on it. No reason to let it feed off of those signals. Getting him clean was the easiest step to getting an omega on the road to recovery. Once he was strong enough, Axton hoped he could convince him to properly bathe. Really get all that deadly scent off of him.

Rhys woke again later to the sensation of being pet. It was pleasant and gentle, soothing him almost back to sleep. The musk of the alpha holding him caught in his nostrils, and Rhys fought against the pull of sleep to open his eyes and bring into focus the face belonging to the big, warm hands.

“Hey there. Waking up?”

The alpha spoke softly, though it didn’t hide the pleasant gruffness to his voice. Rhys studied him a
few moments— the stubble on his cheeks, the scar that cut through a sandy eyebrow, the green eyes that watched him back with concern and encouraging warmth. He thought he’d dreamt this man up.

He didn’t know this stranger, but he didn't feel threatened as he might've expected. If anything, there was a weird sense of relief that he couldn't explain, and that should have worried him as well, being so comforted by a stranger. He was warm and comfortable, and confused, but he was sure on some instinctive level that he was safe.

Rhys tried to work his mouth, at a loss for words as he looked into those green eyes patiently looking down at him.

He couldn't recall what day it was, let alone how he’d gotten in the position he was currently in. Had he gone out and tried to pick someone up? That seemed unlikely. But where had this man come from?

He felt exhausted as shit, and couldn’t even remember when he’d last left his apartment. He didn't drink himself stupid last night, did he? He felt shittier than a hangover, but none of the lingering nausea or headache that normally accompanied it. Confusion was a fuzz in his brain that made it hard to comprehend things.

“What are… How… Who…?”

Rhys pulled away from the unfamiliar alpha, hands against his chest, and Axton bore with the repeated attempt in the same fashion as before.

“I’m Axton, I’m from Atlas,” the alpha informed for the second time as the omega watched him with tired eyes. “I’m the guy they call when you stop responding to their calls.” The look he received was full of sudden worry, and Axton quickly clarified. “This is a wellness check, darlin’. You had all the bigwigs really concerned. I'm here to help.”

Rhys looked at him with dawning comprehension, still wondering why this man was holding him, and bothered that he wasn’t as concerned about that as he should be. Leaving those arms wasn't a major concern at the moment. “I’ve been… tired.”

“You’re not well,” Axton spoke bluntly, still petting Rhys soothingly. “I’m sorry, I know it's, well, weird waking up to some stranger—” he gestured with a cock of his head and shrug of his shoulder, “holding ya and stuff. But I had to wake ya up, get you warm. You’re not well,” he repeated.

“…Mm.”

“Your door was unlocked, too, ya know?”

“…Was it?”

“Yeah.” Rhys sighed out in self-disappointment, and Axton gave him a tiny squeeze of encouragement. “Don’t worry though, you’re all safe and sound right now. Everything will be alright. It’s my job to make it alright.”

Rhys attempted to get up, but he was very weak and his attempt was like that of a newborn giraffe. Axton had to help him right himself to sit on the bed proper, gangly, pajama-clad legs over the edge. The omega looked like he would keel over any second now from the exertion, and Axton kept a hand on his shoulder to keep him steady as he sat next to him, tucking blankets in around the other man, observant.

“Well, thanks for stopping by and checking in on me,” Rhys offered quickly, voice soft from disuse,
not bothering to meet the other man’s eyes. “Let Atlas know I’ll… have those projects sent in today, and--”

“Slow down there, sweetheart,” Axton stopped him with a large, warm palm on Rhys’ back. He rubbed in slow, tight circles through the blanket covering the omega. “You need rest and healthy food and then more rest. I don’t know what projects you were working on, but your health is priority numero uno, got that?” Rhys spared him a look from under haunted eyes, the very ideas making him more exhausted. Axton offered him a reassuring smile. “I’m omega-wellness certified. That includes cooking, cleaning, and emotional and physical support. It’s my job to look after you and get ya to recovery.”

Rhys looked away, more tired than ever trying to comprehend just what was being told, and just wanting to crawl back into bed and be left alone. He voiced as much to Axton.

“No can do, darlin’.” He tried to make his voice as gentle and non-threatening as possible, willing the other man to accept his help. It was ultimately Rhys’ choice if he wanted him there or not, regardless of what Atlas said. He tried to put the matter as delicately as possible. “There’s no easy way to say this, but, uh… shit.” He ran the hand not petting Rhys through sandy hair. “You’ve… I think you’ve got broken bond syndrome.”

Rhys looked up sharply, the movement making him nearly dizzy. The look he saw in Axton’s big, sympathetic eyes said that he didn’t think, but knew the omega had it.

Rhys was stricken. He didn’t think… Well, no… but he’d been sure it wouldn’t get him. Rhys figured himself strong enough to withstand the threat of broken bond. That he’d just been a bit depressed maybe, and a bit overworked as well. Something else.

Apparently not. Rhys felt like he couldn’t possibly get any lower, and as if to add insult to injury, he wanted his alpha even now. It made him sick of himself.

Axton stroked his back as they sat there, and while he appreciated the touch, it made Rhys feel more pitiful as well.

The silence that stretched between them became uncomfortable. Axton stilled his hand, but didn’t remove it, watching the other man with wary concern. He needed to work on his bedside manner. “Did um… Your alpha, did they…”

“…He’s not dead if that’s what you’re asking.”

Axton bit his lip at that piece of information. Shit. Something else then. This might be hard.

Tears came unbidden to Rhys’ eyes, and he wiped at them openly, feeling pitiful and awful, and moreover, ashamed, that he’d fallen this far; that he was so weak.

“…sorry…” Rhys said, pulling away from the big alpha as his breathing hitched in near-sobs.

Axton wrapped his arm around Rhys’ shoulders and continued to pet at him reassuringly, feeling like an asshole and trying not to focus on it. “Hey, it’s okay. You don’t have anything to be sorry about. This isn’t your fault. It’s just a sickness, and we’ll get you over it, okay? Promise.”

Tears still fell, and Rhys was honestly too exhausted to even feel bad about accepting the blind comfort the bigger man was offering. He leaned into the embrace, full of self-loathing, and chased what little comfort he could get from the unfamiliar alpha’s scent. He was nearing the end of his emotional rope.
“I’m here to help you, darlin’. I’m one-hundred percent in your corner, on your side. No judgment from me at all, think of me like a pet.” He offered the crying omega a crooked grin, and it actually got a sobbed laugh from the other man. "I just want to get you better, alright? It's perfectly okay to cry."

Rhys nodded, and he went into the full-body embrace the alpha was offering him. Axton wrapped both arms around him and pet at him, hoping he was helping. Rhys' scent still stunk of despair as Axton nuzzled him, reminding the alpha to try to get him bathed as soon as possible. The way the omega shook in his arms had Axton wrapping him up tighter and pulling him closer.

“Am… am I gonna die?” Rhys whimpered, and Axton started at the blunt statement.

“Hey now, don’t think like that,” he gently chastised, voice gruff but soft as he pet the other man. He offered words of reassurance-- that he wouldn’t leave the omega- and that he’d see him through this. And as long as Axton was able, he wouldn’t let the other man die of broken bond. Not on his watch. It would be okay.

Rhys wasn't too sure of that. Here he was crying practically in a stranger's lap, scenting him and clinging in ways that Normal Rhys would have never approved of. He wasn't sure how things could possibly be okay, but he was willing to believe that the alpha from Atlas might know some things he didn't.

It was a while before the tears stopped, but whether it was due to being comforted or just from sheer exhaustion, Axton couldn't be sure. An omega in pain was an awful thing.

Rhys was a solid weight in the big alpha's arms, Axton lightly scenting him in the way a family member might-- in the way he was taught in training- trying to give the omega any reassurance he could. The way the other man clung to him and pressed close, it seemed to be doing the trick. Rhys relaxed considerably as they'd sat there a while.

His body jolted in the alpha’s arms, startling them both. Axton realized Rhys had dozed off, and was now mumbling a curse as he'd woken himself up. A falling dream then. Well those always sucked, but it was normal at least.

“It's okay, you just fell asleep,” the alpha soothed as Rhys looked up. “Don't worry. You can just rest if you want. That's what I'm here for. You’re safe. No one getting past me. You can rest.”

Rhys relaxed back into him with relief.

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Rhys wasn't sure if he was dreaming or not.

He was warm. So warm. He hadn't felt this warm in a really long time.

He registered a soothing, muted thumping in a comforting rhythm, and his nostrils were filled with a clean, musky scent that made him more alert. He realized he was laying on someone's chest-- an alpha’s chest- and through slightly addled confusion, he remembered the other man from Atlas.

Axton. The omega specialist or whatever he'd said he was. That was the musky scent. He’d been dreaming and listening to his heartbeat. And the alpha was currently speaking quietly on the phone, his voice soft and professional. Rhys listened with curiosity to the gruff tones that echoed in the man's chest.

"-you know?… Well, it's difficult to um… Yeah… Well he's suffering from broken bond syndrome,
what do you-… Yeah… Yeah I am… Of course, it's not like I'd- Yeah. Yeah I understand… Okay, I'll let him know… I'll check in with progress reports… Okay… Thanks, I appreciate it… You too. Bye.”

Axton hung up the phone and sighed. He chanced a look at the sleeping omega on his chest only to find out he wasn't sleeping anymore. He grimaced as they looked at one another. The other man looked way more coherent than he had the other times he’d surfaced. “Shit, sorry, did I wake ya up?”

“...I… think I drooled on you,” Rhys announced as he brought his head up and wiped the side of his mouth. He didn't care enough to remove himself from the alpha’s person though, staying nice and warm where he was. He was rewarded with an amused grin.

“Don't worry about it. You needed the rest.” He gave the omega a pat on the shoulder, and gave the rest of the bed a thoughtful look. “Sorry for sprawling out like this. I'll wash everything. Didn't want you to wake up with a crick in your neck from sitting up all night or something.”

Rhys frowned, less concerned about the state of his already-questionable sheets and more for how much time he'd spent dozing on an unfamiliar alpha. “Was I asleep long?”

“Only about six hours.”

That got the omega off his chest. “Six hours? I thought I just dozed off for a little bit.”

“Nah, you've been out a while. It's normal, I promise. Ya hungry?”

Normal his ass. Nothing about his life was normal lately. Present situation included. He felt like he was still dreaming. Which also would have been odd as he couldn't remember the last time he'd dreamed.

Axton was watching him expectantly, and Rhys realized the big alpha had asked him a question. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been properly hungry, either, for that matter.

“Not really.”

Axton smiled. “When was the last time you ate something?” The introspective frown was all the answer he needed. “What do you like? I have a coworker bringing by a whole mess of groceries, courtesy of the Atlas company card.” That got another frown.

“I… I don't know.”

“How about this then, darlin’: Is there anything you hate? Anything ya can't eat?”

“...well I don't like eggs. Only if they're hard boiled. And only the white.”

“Sunny side up even? Scrambled is out?”

Rhys made a face. “No.”

The alpha chuckled, and it pleasantly rocked the omega. The sensation struck Rhys so hard that the last time he'd felt such a movement, he'd been in bed with Jack. His alpha; laughing, joking, so utterly in love and stupidly naive. That Rhys had no idea what was in store for him. And his bond was reminding him that the alpha in bed with him was the wrong one.

Axton was sitting up and bringing his arms around the younger man before Rhys even realized he
was crying, and the omega clung back to the man anchoring him in the present.

“It's okay, darlin’. You let it out when you need to. It's good. It's healthy.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just… just…”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me, I promise.” Axton tried for reassuring, but his tone only seemed to make the other man cry even more. He opted to pet him instead. “You’re not the first omega I’ve helped get through a broken bond, ya know that? And you probably won’t be the last. It is something you can get through. It’s gonna be okay, you got that darlin’? It’ll be okay.”

Rhys sniffled, worried he’d end up getting snot or something on the alpha, but the other man didn’t seem concerned, keeping him close. Rhys just laid there listening to the calming beat of Axton’s heart while his own clenched inside of him.

He was scared, and he was exhausted, and he didn’t want to die. Of all the things Jack had done to him, this was truly the cruelest. He hated that the Hyperion CEO was still having an effect on his life this long after. If Atlas had sent someone, then it was serious indeed. His problem had become their problem. It made him want and hate Jack even more.

“…What's an ‘omega wellness cert’ anyways?” Rhys asked after he’d calmed down again. He listened as Axton hummed, the sound reverberating in his chest.

“It means I'm 'well in-tune to the needs and motivations of the modern-day omega'.”

“…That sounds like a quote.”

“That's exactly what it is,” Axton chuckled guiltily. “It just means I'm a little better read and practiced than the average alpha where omega biology and other stuff is concerned. Male or female omegas, issues with heats, a little psychology thrown in, stuff like that. Not just some ‘big dumb alpha’, ya know?” He gave Rhys a look as if he was in on the self-deprecating joke. Rhys felt it struck a little too close to home.

“Why would you learn about that?”

Axton shrugged. “It just made sense to me.”

He didn’t elaborate and Rhys could tell there was more to it than he was letting on. He wondered if Axton had ever bonded anyone; if he had a mate at home. He asked as much.

“Nah. Even my ex-wife was another alpha. Left me for an omega.” He laughed at that, but it wasn’t mean-spirited or vengeful. “I don’t hold it against her. She finally bonded with someone last year from what I hear. Guess I wanted to understand things a little better from that side.”

“Why she wanted an omega instead of you?” Once the words left his mouth, Rhys realized how cruel they sounded, and hastily apologized.

“Nah, you’ve got it right actually.” He laughed lightly and smiled down at Rhys. “Heats, kids, bonding… I never saw the appeal in any of it.” He laughed again. “Figured I should look into all that stuff, try to see what she saw in it. Ended up in training and a lot of advanced classes ‘cause it was interesting.”

Rhys was silent a few moments. “You… are a very open minded alpha.”

Axton snorted at the statement. “Not particularly. You must not know many nice alphas.”
“No, I guess not.”

The silence between them was heavy. Axton decided to broach the topic if possible. “Do ya wanna talk about it?” he gently pressed. After a beat, he amended with, “You don't have to. Or if ya don't want to now but find you want to later, you can. It’s okay.”

Rhys didn’t want to talk about it right now, but he appreciated the offer. “Thanks.”

They lay there awhile longer before Axton snickered to himself at a memory. Rhys looked up to see what was so funny. Axton grinned down at him conspiratorially. “You know those classes I took, there were a lot of those, uh…” he cleared his throat with an amused smirk. “I ended up doing basic Heat Services certification without even realizing it. Big dumb alpha indeed.”

“Heat services? Like the agencies?” A very light blush came over the alpha’s cheeks as he grinned. Rhys found it flattering against his green eyes.

Exactly like that. I think I was the only idiot there who didn’t realize what he was doing. When others in the class asked where I was hoping to work after this, they gave me stupid looks when I said Atlas.” He laughed at himself again.

That brought a smile to Rhys’ face. “Did you work at a heat agency?”

“Nah, not me,” Axton said with a warm smile. “I mean, I could have, but no, that’s a little too personal for me.” He chuckled again. “Excellent training though. I think everyone should take it. Dumbass alphas wouldn’t just bond omegas without thinking.”

Rhys made a noncommittal noise as he thought about that. For the millionth time, he wondered how malicious Jack’s intent with him had been, or if he just hadn’t cared enough to even think.

He didn’t want to ponder the Hyperion alpha.

“I’m thirsty.”

“On it,” Axton immediately said, gently untangling himself from the omega with a smile.

Axton got him water after some moments of opening cupboards in the kitchen hunting for the omega’s dishware. Rhys would have gotten it himself, but he was far too weak- a revelation that surprised him. Axton wanted to get some food in him that wasn’t crappy takeout as soon as possible. They moved to the couch in Rhys’ living room, the alpha insisting on helping him there. And to be honest, Rhys was grateful for that.

“If you tell me what goes where or give me direction, I can take care of a few things for ya,” the green-eyed man told him with a smile. Rhys’ brow furrowed at the offer. “It’s part of my job, darlin’. I told ya, think of me as your maid-slash-bodyguard. I’m like a swiss army knife.”

That got a little huff of laughter from the omega, and Rhys felt comfortable pointing out a few things that the alpha prompted him for. Like those old takeout containers on the kitchen counter. Rhys didn’t bother mentioning that he couldn’t remember when those were from, and he was glad the other man didn’t ask either.

Axton’s phone rang as the big alpha was tying up a trash bag, and Axton answered it with a smile. “Hey Sal… Okay that's great… Thank you… No, I will… Yeah that's perfect… I will… You know I will… Yeah, thanks. I’d appreciate that a lot… Gotcha… Bye.” He turned to acknowledge the curious expression aimed his way. “Food is here. Or, uh, the ingredients of food,” he amended with a laugh.
Rhys felt a sudden spike of agitation go through him at yet another stranger in his home. “He's coming here?”

“No, he left everything right outside your door.” Rhys was surprised, eyes flickering to said door, but visibly relaxed at the news. Axton gave him a reassuring smile. “Don't worry, you're safe. No one you don't know or want will come here without your permission… uh, present company excluded, I hope.”

Rhys smiled, but as Axton continued to watch him, he raised a curious brow. “If I told you to leave, you would?”

“Of course I would,” Axton told him, his gut clenching at the thought of being thrown out and the omega dying. “I mean, I hope you won’t; I want ya to get better. But it’s your home, not mine.”

Frankly, Rhys was surprised by that. He thought Atlas would have mandated his house-arrest. He had to remind himself once again that Atlas was not Hyperion. “I'm actually glad you're here…”

Axton grinned in genuine relief. “You let me know what you need and I'll get it done, darlin’. No questions asked, nothing too big or too small… Or even too weird. Trust me, I’ve seen it all.” He gave the younger man another grin. “I’ll even rearrange your furniture and move things around if you tell me. I'm like a live-in butler-slash-best friend.”

Rhys felt his eyes prick again, and wondered how the hell he still had tears to cry. “...I could use a friend.”

Axton came to sit next to the younger man and opened his arms to usher in the omega. Rhys went into them and cuddled close without embarrassment or restraint, inhaling his alpha scent and willing his damn eyes to stop leaking.

Axton made a pleased noise in his throat and held fast to Rhys’ shoulder and back, promising him that everything would be okay. Rhys chose to believe that he knew what he was talking about.

Chapter End Notes

This fic might end up long, as I look through my notes and stuff. We need Axton to eventually kick Jack’s ass (jackass ha!) and for douchelord to be his douchey self.

Hope y'all will stick around for that ride hahah

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I got really hung up on Axton being in a professional caretaker role, and flirty behavior being kind of a gross violation of that (cuz irl, EW) but then i reminded myself this is fun fanfiction with our known characters, and I figured out how to write around it in a non-icky way and make everything work.

Anyways, that's why the long delay happened. Back to weekly updates! Sorry about that delay! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rhys had been fed and put to bed, Axton budged up next to him rubbing his back and holding the omega as he soothed him to sleep.

“Will you stay?” Rhys had asked him as the alpha tucked blankets around him, making sure he’d be kept nice and warm all night.

Axton had smiled, given Rhys a reassuring look. “You know I’m not going anywhere, darlin’. You rest.”

“No, I mean, will you stay with me?” Rhys had asked worriedly. The smile he’d received was both relieved and warm.

“It’s actually best if I stay as close to you as possible while you’re getting your strength back.” Axton’s voice was firm but gentle as he had patted at the younger man. “It’s a social thing, it’ll help with bond withdrawals.”

“I really don’t care about my sheets,” Rhys had pointed out in invitation to be further cuddled.

So Axton had an extra blanket-- changed into sweatpants and a t-shirt from the travel bag Sal had dropped off with the groceries- and kept himself watchful as he’d chatted to the omega. He said encouraging things until Rhys had fallen asleep in his arms.

Axton himself was used to staying awake for long periods of time due to his training days, but Rhys was hardly a flight risk, the poor omega barely able to stand on his own. Still, the alpha slept lightly next to him, popping awake at any and every noise or movement in anticipation, but the night was uneventful despite the circumstances.

--

They’d ended up sleeping quite late if the position of the sun was anything to go by. The combination of morning sunlight and Rhys’ amused snickers jolted the alpha to action, alert but sleep-addled eyes turning to the omega’s face in assessment.

“Sorry,” Rhys told him with an amused tone, smiling with slightly-guilty pink cheeks. “You were snoring.” The big alpha blinked a few times as the words registered, and he grimaced at himself and flopped his head back into the pillow. Rhys’ smile turned into a playful smirk at his chagrin. “One of those snores that sounds like a whistle.”
“Ah shit... uh, I mean, sorry. Did I wake ya up?”

“No,” Rhys snorted. “It’s fine, really.” Truth was, the big alpha wasn’t hard to wake up to at all. Axton’s arm around him all night inspired a sort of feeling of security, and his scent was wrapped around Rhys like a blanket. He’d slept well indeed.

Axton smelled safe. And musky and warm and just right in ways Rhys had been sorely missing out on. He’d forgotten the welcoming scent of an alpha cuddling him close, and it soothed some inner part of him that was broken and ached. That Axton’s eyes were filled with warm concern and his large hands were gentle in everything they did only lented to his overall feeling of comfort and safety.

No, the snoring was absolutely fine.

The omega stretched against the bigger man as Axton gave him a pat with the arm still around him. The alpha’s spare blanket was on the floor, but the omega was still properly bundled up. Like most alphas, Axton ran hot. The loss of his blanket during the night hadn’t affected him. He hoped it hadn’t bothered the younger man. “How do you feel? Sleep okay? Any cricks in the neck or anything?”

“Best sleep of my life, actually,” Rhys remarked after a moment, pleasantly surprised. “I can’t remember the last time I actually got any sleep.” He snorted humorlessly. “Feels weird to not be exhausted.”

The alpha gave his shoulder a comforting squeeze. “I’m glad you were able to rest. That’s really good. Truth be told, I was a little scared about deeper sleep, but your body clearly needed it.” Rhys gave him a curious look, watching concern swim in those kind green eyes. Axton elaborated at Rhys’ raised brow, tone wistful. “Ya never really know what you’ll get in these situations. Not every omega’s experience is the same, but I had a good feeling about ya.”

Rhys rolled his eyes in disbelief. “Right. ‘Cause I’m so lucky.”

Axton closed his eyes a moment, the older man gathering himself before giving his attention back to Rhys. “I pulled ya out of a really deep state. That’s… It doesn’t always go that way, once you’ve slipped that far.” The younger man was looking at the alpha with wide, fearful eyes, so Axton gave him a nuzzle and held him tightly in reassurance. “You were mouthy when you woke up. That’s how I knew.”

Rhys could feel his cheeks heating-- fully blushing if Axton’s playful, amused grin was anything to go by, but the green-eyed man didn’t tease him about it. “I… was?”

“Well, I mean, you told me I was loud.” He grinned, a crooked smile of amusement. “Or more like ya told me to shut up. In nicer words though.” Rhys looked scandalized to have been so rude. “To be fair, I kind of home-invaded ya. I did knock though.”

The omega buried his hot face into Axton’s chest, the worn t-shirt soft against his flaming cheeks. He made self-displeased sounds that made Axton chuckle and pat him.

“Anyways, you’ve got a fighting spirit is what I’m tryin’ to say, darlin’. It’s good.” Rhys stubbornly kept his face in Axton’s chest, and the alpha gave the arm around the omega a squeeze before stretching with a pleased hum. “Are you hungry? You have an appetite?”

“No really,” the muffled reply came. “...Not that that mattered to you before.”

Rhys peeked up to give him a slightly teasing look, and it warmed the alpha more than he could ever
say. Joking around, having some attitude… This one was a fighter. He wouldn't die. As long as he was able to stay with the omega, he wouldn't die. The odds were definitely in his favor.

“I think I demonstrated my good value in the kitchen,” Axton said with a good-natured laugh. “Anything in particular sound good, or you leaving it up to the chef?”

“Nothing… heavy.”

“Heavy?”

“Mn.”

“...so pancakes are out?” The amused snort Rhys gave him was accompanied by a tired hum. “I'd suggest bacon and eggs but-”

“I'll eat the bacon if you eat the eggs.”

He laughed again before releasing his grasp on the other man, getting up to get started on their meals. “Deal.”

Axton ended up making them bacon, toast, a big glass of orange juice for Rhys and coffee for him, and the aforementioned eggs which only Axton ate. He tried to get some hash browns into the omega but Rhys swore up and down that he was still full from the dinner the man had made the night before.

“You can have them for lunch then,” Axton suggested with a grin.

“It's past lunch.”

“Second lunch.”

“Pfft. You're gonna make me fat,” Rhys laughed.

“And you're gonna let me, darlin’.”

They sat and chatted a while-- mostly about work, as Rhys wouldn't stray from the topic no matter how the alpha assured him things concerning his employment were okay- until the omega needed to excuse himself to the bathroom. Axton had helped him move about the apartment thus far, but Rhys shooed the other man’s presence from what he promised was a no-frills affair.

“I swear I can piss by myself.”

“You'd be the first,” the alpha had laughed. “Just don’t keel over, and holler if you need me.”

“The day I can't hold my own dick, you're the first one I'll call, Axton.”

“That just might be the most charming thing anyone's ever said to me, sweetheart.” Rhys’ face turned red as he was biting back a grin, and Axton just laughed and ran a hand through his sandy hair. “Just holler if ya fall in or something. Or whatever. Don't overexert yourself.”

Rhys had laughed but excused himself all the same. Axton took the time to tidy things up, opening the windows and getting some fresh afternoon air in. He poured more water for the other man and shook out the blankets he’d wrapped around the omega as they’d sat on his couch. The lingering scent of despair still clung to the apartment, but a shower and a few loads of laundry should fix that right up.
He inclined his head when he heard the toilet flush, some small amount of relief that things were operating normally. It wouldn’t be the first time someone had sworn they’d be okay only for him to find them weak on a tiled floor. Rhys had verve.

“Look at that, I’m toilet trained and everything,” the omega joked as he came back into the room, a wry smile on his face.

“Should I take a picture to commemorate the day?”

“Please don’t,” Rhys laughed, smiling at the way the alpha’s eyes crinkled when he grinned. He slowly moved back to the couch, collapsing into the soft material as if he’d pulled an all-nighter. Regardless of what he said, he was still weak. He hadn’t expected to be so exhausted from a simple trip down the hall until he was into his seventies. Broken bond syndrome… More like broken body. Ugh, this sucked.

Axton offered him water, taking in the younger man’s pallor and way he caught his breath. More rest and a few more meals and he’d probably get his strength back proper. He’d try something more hardy for dinner tonight.

He sat next to the omega and Rhys immediately leaned against him for support. It made the alpha swell with pride that the omega trusted him for basic comfort, and he wanted to do right by him and see him through to the other side.

Axton nuzzled the top of Rhys’ messy hair, nose slightly scrunching as he could smell the stronger scent of despair still clinging to the other man here. He certainly smelled better than Axton had found him– mostly due to the gentle washing of his skin- but better didn’t necessarily mean well. He gave his leg a gentle pat through the pajamas he wore, tone soft and not at all assuming. “You let me know when you’re feeling up to a bath.”

“So you can feel me up in the bath?” Rhys responded nonchalantly, a light breath of laughter following the quickly-spoken turn of phrase.

It was Axton’s turn to blush five shades of crimson at the word play as he stared at Rhys, and the omega snickered to himself at a job well done. The alpha's mouth was slightly agape, and Rhys genuinely laughed at his shock, shaking his head as he patted him back. “That was a joke. ‘Ha-ha’ and all that. ‘Cause of the dick jokes.” He gave him a very light, playful shove with his shoulder. “Messing with you, big guy.”

Axton’s face was hot as he chuckled, shaking his head and rubbing at his eyes at being gotten. Rhys was watching him intently, probably noticing the few false starts that the alpha had made to say something and abandoned. Axton sighed out another laugh at his focus, admitting softly with an embarrassed sort of tone: “You made me feel like a pervert there for a sec.”

The snickers the omega dissolved into was fully worth his own discomfort, the younger man apologizing through chuckles and assuring the older man he was doing a good job and thank you for caring. He wormed his way under the big alpha’s arm and snorted when Axton was a bit stiff in cuddling him back before he relaxed again.

Axton’s line of work— to Rhys’ understanding thus far- included helping omegas recover from this type of crap, and Rhys was certain that a lot of that work crossed lines with traditional intimacy in terms of familiarity. That the alpha was hyper aware of these facts hadn’t crossed Rhys’ mind until right then, and it made him smile again to think he'd gotten the man rather good. He admired the other man’s professionalism.
“I think I could probably do with a quick shower,” Rhys told him with a snort while they watched tv. “And I should probably burn these pajamas. They’ve seen better days…”

“Do you have any kind of plastic chair we could put in there?” the older man asked, and was given a sort of blank look. “Hot water and body temp and all, I don’t want you to pass out and get hurt. It’s more common than you think.”

“Shit. No, I don’t.”

Axton didn’t bother suggesting bathing together like he’d done with other omegas in his underwear when their flats didn’t have any other option, and he wasn’t even going to joke about sponge baths right now. Rhys wasn’t in that dire of a situation, he was certain, and he was still reeling from the quick sense of humor the younger man had. Still, removing that scent would only speed up the recovery process. “Well, when you’re feeling up to it, I can draw a bath for ya, help ya wash your hair, whatever you need. We mostly need to… ah… get this scent off you.”

Rhys looked up at the alpha, eyes lingering on the scar that went through Axton’s brow with interest. “What scent?”

“Omegas with broken bond have a-- uh... Their scent changes. Shouldn’t leave it on ya.”

The omega snorted, an accepting smile on his face. “I’m not surprised I smell. Can’t remember my last shower… which is pretty gross actually. Sorry.”

“It’s not like that,” Axton told him with a smile, petting his forearm. “It’s like… Ya know you should brush your teeth before bed and stuff, right? ‘Cause leaving food can cause cavities and stuff?”

“Mm.”

“This is kind of the same thing. It’s not good. Bio-feedback and stuff like that. You shouldn’t be exposed to it.”

“…that’s why you changed my sheets.”

“And because I laid all over them in my work clothes,” he added with a snort.

Rhys snorted. “You smell plenty clean.”

“Well thank you very much,” the alpha chuckled. Rhys sighed and leaned more heavily into him. “You tired?”

“Yeah… but I don’t wanna go to sleep.”

“It’s safe, I promise.”

“Nah… I’d like to lay down though.”

“Let’s get all comfy then,” the alpha told him warmly, helping to wrap him up proper in his blanket before getting comfortable behind him and wrapping an arm around the omega.

They laid on Rhys’ couch together for some time, the tv on low and one movie melting into another. The omega nuzzled under the other man’s chin, his level of comfort with Axton something almost familiar already with their close proximity. He didn’t get all squirrely on the alpha yet, at least. That usually came later when back to normal, remembering that society said they shouldn’t be so close for propriety’s sake unless they were a bonded pair.
A bunch of bullshit is what Axton thought of that. His books said that omegas \textit{thrived} on touch and closeness to others. They were naturally tactile creatures, and suppressing that wasn't good, especially with the absence of the alpha their bond was making them crave. It made Axton’s job especially worrisome; he had to be sure they kept moving forward and didn’t relapse. Touch was important for recovery, and nothing bad could ever be said about a nice proper hug. Omegas with support networks almost never went through broken bond syndrome. And according to his file, Rhys had been working from home, alone, for a month.

There was a commercial for new Hyperion sports cars as the action flick broke for ads, the blond driver speeding down a coastal highway in a red coupe with the waves breaking and the sun at their back. The car was similar to those in the film, only this one wasn’t blown up with special effects.

The shift in the omega’s scent and sudden tension in his body against Axton was as jarring as if he’d struck the older man in the chest. A wave of that scent hit Axton in the nose, and he inclined his head at Rhys’ hard, urgent voice in the quiet of the space.

“\textit{Change it.}”

Axton had the remote, sitting on his thigh, and he switched over to another channel, this one mid-commercial for some organic coffee chain that boasted vegan creamers and lattes. He waited a moment, but Rhys didn’t have anything to say about this one. He was tense as hell, and Axton wondered if his alpha had been some hot blond thing and it brought up painful memories. He decided not to remark on the person in commercial.

“Don’t like sports cars huh?” Axton tested carefully, rubbing Rhys’ shoulder through the blanket with a gentle hand.

“Don’t like Hyperion.”

The harshness in his voice was unexpected, the statement even more so, but Axton nuzzled the back of his head, scenting the delicate skin behind his ear as comfortably as possible. Rhys’ heart was racing, pulse fast in his neck. Axton would have commented further, but he was pretty sure he’d said something wrong. Rhys was as taut as a bowstring, his discomfort palpable. “...Sorry, darlin’.”

“I used to work for them,” Rhys blurted out, still tense against the other man.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

No other information was forthcoming, and Axton decided not to press, watching a commercial for a burger place come to a close and a nature documentary resume.

It wasn’t his business to pry, but if Rhys had left Atlas’ biggest competitor for the smaller company, then there had to be \textit{some} reason behind it. Even Axton had looked into working at Hyperion, but their omega support programs were virtually nonexistent. They had been very interested in his paramilitary background, offering him a rather competitive salary, but that part of his life was over.

Atlas’ medical and dental packages were a lot better than anything Hyperion offered anyways, even with a smaller salary, so it could be a simple ‘big-business small-business-feel’ type of deal for the omega. That’s how they’d hooked Axton, anyways.

Regardless, he didn’t pry, and just held the younger man close and pet at him, humming reassurances in positive tones until the tension left the omega.
By the time the next round of commercials came on, Rhys snorted to himself, a hand snaking up to rest over the one Axton had secured across his chest, voice a bit sheepish. “...Bet you didn’t think this is how you’d spend your evening.”

“Holding an omega burrito? Nah, can’t say that I did.” His carefree words succeeded in getting chuckles out of the blanket-wrapped omega, and for that Axton was utterly grateful. Getting him into better spirits and out of whatever that was was a priority. “How you doin’?”

“I’m okay…”

“Hungry? Thirsty?”

“No… I- sorry,” Rhys told him, feeling bad at having nearly snapped at the alpha earlier. “I didn’t mean to be…. Sorry. I don’t need anything.”

“You sure?”

Rhys felt bad at Axton's continued, unquestioning support. Axton’s cheek was flat against his hair, gently scenting him and lightly petting; trying to comfort and soothe him without judgment. He’d taken his mood in stride, and his kindness made Rhys ache. “…You’re doing enough already.”

“It’s my job, darlin’, it’s fine.” He smiled against the younger man’s hair, hugging him close. “If it makes ya feel any better, I am being paid, whether I’m doing the dishes or just sitting with ya watching tv. It’s the easy life,” he dismissed with a lighthearted chuckle, trying to lighten the mood with his gruff but kind tones. “Butler-slash-maid-slash-best friend, remember? I’m in your corner.”

Rhys appreciated his attempt at lightheartedness, and squeezed the alpha’s larger, warm hand. “Thanks… I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad to be here,” he told him with a smile, then immediately amended it with a little noise of realization. “I don’t mean I’m glad that you’re in this situation, but I’m glad I’m here for ya. You know.”

“Yeah, just, thanks,” Rhys snorted, dragging Axton’s hand up to his face to nuzzle his cheek against his palm. He held the alpha’s hand tightly, his gut clenching as his brain wouldn’t stop its assault against him, bonding gland almost throbbing a reminder to him that he should be with his proper alpha, not the one stroking his cheek with his thumb. “Hey, Axton… Am I going to die?”

The alpha went tense behind him, levering himself up on an elbow as he wormed the arm under them to support him. He looked down as Rhys’ face with alarm, pulling him snug against his chest. “Hey now-”

“Just tell me, honestly. I can take it, I swear.”

“No, not if I have anything to say about it, darlin’,” he immediately replied with conviction. “I’m staying by you until you can get over this, okay? You’re not-”

“What are the chances, though? How long will it take? Tell me the truth.”

Axton's face was troubled as Rhys watched him, green eyes swimming with worry and staunch resolution; whether he died or not from this damn thing, he knew the alpha would do his best to help. It was clearly written all over his face, the man an open book.

Rhys wasn’t sure exactly what kind of health insurance benefits Atlas extended in these kinds of situations, but he didn’t see prolonged ‘use’ of the alpha in his immediate future. And that eventuality
terrified him. He didn’t think seeing a damned commercial that didn’t even have Jack’s stupid face on it would have affected him this much. But here he was more aware than ever of his damn bond, missing the asshole he’d let do it, and scared his body couldn't handle the strain of left alone.

“Really, I promise,” Axton started, giving him a squeeze. “I got you, Rhys. I won’t let anything happen to you as long as you let me.”

“I don’t think Atlas will let me keep you on hand forever,” Rhys spoke up with a worried, self-effacing laugh.

Axton snorted, but offered him a reassuring smile. “Nah, I don’t think so either. But hey- listen. I promise even if they decided to kick my ass to the curb, I ain’t gonna abandon ya darlin’, not until we can pull you out of this. Right now you're first priority, and in the case they didn’t like it, well, they can shove it.”

Rhys whined in his throat, and Axton shushed him and pulled him even closer against him to nose at the younger man’s hairline. The omega appreciated the gesture, again wishing for his alpha, the one who should be taking care of him-- even though he’d been the cause. Any touch was comforting though at this point, and he was grateful for the support, clinging to the larger man and wishing he could osmos some of that unwavering certainty the bigger man seemed to have.

“And how do I get out of this?” Rhys didn’t like how pathetic his voice sounded, but he didn’t care. He was scared. Honestly scared. “There’s no cure for this as far as I’ve heard.”

“...What do you know about broken bond syndrome, sweetheart?”

“Just that I never wanted to get it. And that it’s fatal.”

“It definitely can be, and no, there’s no cure,” the alpha’s voice confirmed, voice quiet and serious, his petting of the younger man paused in thought. “But there’s a way out of it. Although it’s not always possible, especially if the alpha has died…”

Rhys made a pained noise between a whine and a snort, and Axton resumed his petting.

“Yours… didn’t die, you said?” He swallowed, mind swimming with questions he’d wait on until Rhys felt like discussing it. Only relevant information for now.

“He’s very much alive, one town over,” Rhys spoke with a sour tone, voice lacking any sort of fondness or charity for the man. “He abandoned me.”

That left Axton speechless for a few moments. His alpha was in town-- not ‘moved overseas abandoned’ like he’d mused on possibilities. His mind went back to Rhys’ strong reaction to the sports car commercial. Maybe his alpha even worked at Hyperion. It made Axton growl in his throat. “Sweet thing like you, he sounds like an asshole.”

“He’s the biggest asshole in the world.” At Axton’s snort, Rhys looked at the other man with a thinking frown. “If I could punch him right in the damn face, I would, but I-I don’t want to see him...”

His voice hitched, and Axton pressed a chaste kiss to his hair, humming and holding him close in the way his mother used to do when he was a kid.

Axton’s voice was a lot more upbeat, speaking into the younger man’s hair with encouraged hope. “That’s… That’s actually the best thing I could have possibly heard, Rhys.”
Rhys laughed, a joyless sound, but amused nonetheless. “You don’t even know who he is but you wanna see him get decked?”

“No-- well, yes-- but- uh, sorry, I just,” he chuckled in excited relief-- couldn’t help it- lips broke out in a toothy grin as he looked back down at the omega searching his eyes with worried blue and brown eyes of his own. “That attitude is perfect, darlin’. I’m very confident we’ll get ya fixed and out of danger in no time flat.”

Rhys snorted in disbelief, a somewhat patronizing frown on his face he couldn’t help for lack of hope. “Because I think he’s an asshole?”

“Well I- Look, I’m sorry if this is, uh, personal, but do you want to get back with him? Be with him?” Axton asked seriously. “Be honest with me.”

Rhys thought on that. He missed Jack; his scent, his hands, his cocky, self-assured grin. The way the alpha had made him feel like the most special person in the world, the way he’d pressed him into sheets more expensive than Rhys’ own apartment. All that swagger and the way every word he spoke sounded like Jack was in on some personal joke with the entirety of the world.

But no. Jack had fully cut him out of his life. He’d treated him like one of his many expensive playthings. He’d never acted lovey-dovey in the way Rhys had hoped he would after bonding him, and it occurred to him that the Hyperion alpha didn’t even care to pretend. Even if Rhys really wanted the older alpha, he hated him and wanted nothing to do with the man.

“No. No, I don’t,” the omega nearly sobbed out. Axton held him close and murmured encouragements, brow furrowing as Rhys took a steadying breath. “I wish I’d never let that asshole bond me in the first place.”

Axton’s grin threatened to break his face, relief there even obvious to the distressed omega watching him. The alpha realized Rhys was looking at him like he was mad, and the bigger man just pulled him close yet again to nuzzle at him affectionately.

“Darlin’, we are going to pull your ass out of the fire in no time flat.” Rhys was blinking at him with wide eyes and utter disbelief, and the other man forgot himself in his excitement. He laughed. “We’re gonna break your bond. Shatter the crap outta the thing. You're gonna be just fine.”

Rhys huffed, wishing he didn’t let himself get his hopes up. “I’ve wanted to break it, but it’s not happening,” he pointed out, the omega just getting frustrated by the alpha’s unwavering support and encouragement. “I know loads of omegas who’ve had second thoughts about bonding and were able to get out of it. I’m too weak…”

“Did they initiate it, or did their alpha?” Rhys looked at him blankly, and Axton repeated the question before continuing. “If an omega wants to break a bond, they can do it. It’ll take a while but the bond will break, every time, without a doubt.” He laughed, truly ecstatic over this development. “The ones that keep trying to get back with their alpha, that can’t let go or accept it… well, that’s another story,” he told him more solemnly, though he offered Rhys another bright smile. “You’re sure you don’t want to get him back? At all?”

“Positive,” Rhys told him, though he still didn’t share in Axton’s enthusiasm. He didn’t love Jack anymore, even if he missed him, so there was no reason he should still be bonded to the man. Axton must be mistaken, but he didn’t correct him, wanting so badly to believe.

“I caught you right at the perfect time, sweetheart,” the alpha told him confidently. “Ya just need a little support is all. Staying here working by yourself wasn’t good. Probably would have broken on
“It’s been about six months,” Rhys told him impassively. “I guess five since I’ve hoped it’ll break...”

The smile slowly drained off Axton’s face, a frown forming on Rhys’ own at the change in the alpha’s expression. Yeah, that’s why Rhys wasn’t as excited as Axton was; that look right there.

The alpha didn’t know it was inevitable. That Rhys had been trying. He hated the tiny disappointed feeling inside that told him he’d gotten his hopes up, started to believe Axton could help. He wasn’t as disappointed as he thought he’d be though; it was already a foregone conclusion in his mind. He was more concerned about letting Axton down than what he’d already known. And the alpha had been so excited for him too...

Axton stared at him blankly for so long that Rhys actually poked him, and seconds later Axton was sitting up and enveloping him in a fierce bear hug. He was pulling the younger man fully into his lap, hands shaking where they held him at the back of his head and waist as the alpha spoke into his neck, voice a growl of barely-contained rage.

“I ever meet your alpha, I’m gonna kill him.”

A shiver went up Rhys’ back at the genuine threat in his tone, and there was zero doubt in his mind that Axton intended to make good on those words. Goosebumps rose over his arms under his pajamas. “That’s how I feel...” Rhys said into the alpha’s neck, scenting him with big lungfuls as Axton held fast to him, taking advantage of this change in position.

The contact felt good; he’d missed a proper hug with the friendly intimacy of familiar scenting. He’d cut ties with friends back at Hyperion, and never really got close enough to anyone at Atlas while still missing Jack. A good hug was a luxury he hadn’t had in a while, and he relished in this one. He wrapped arms around the broad alpha’s shoulders, hugging him closer as much for Axton as for himself. Yes, he could use a proper friend. And right now Axton was the closest thing to that he had.

“Rhys,” Axton started again, speaking into the omega’s shoulder, trying to control the furious waver in his voice. “I’ve never heard of an omega that’s hung on this long. Never,” the alpha told him seriously. “Not in any of my books or from teachers or anyone in the service or anything. Not after being left by an alpha.”

“Yeah, well... Like I said, I’m lucky, huh?”

“No, you don’t understand,” Axton told him, now petting the younger man as if he could ease his own anxiety by soothing the omega in his lap. “Most don’t make it past two months if they don’t get help, and by that time, most are beyond helping.” Axton growled as he exhaled, trying to get his instincts under control, voice haunted. “The kind of knothead that could knowingly leave ya suffering for so long... I might just kill this guy so he can never hurt another omega like this again.”

Rhys snorted, his own breath coming back at him from Axton’s neck. “Good luck with that.”

“I’m just so damn proud of you, alright?” Axton spoke genuinely. “There is no way we’re not gonna break your bond. I want you to know that. You’re the strongest damn thing I’ve ever heard of.”

Rhys huffed into his neck, still holding steadfastly to the bigger man, his scent having a nice grounding effect on the omega. “If I’m so strong then why am I still bonded?”

His words actually gave Axton pause, and he pulled back to look at the older man. Axton loosened
his hold-- not by much- but enough to let them look each other in the eye.

“You haven’t seen him or contacted him at all?”

“No…” Rhys denied, though he amended at Axton’s confused look. “I mean, I did for a while. See him at work sometimes, sent him texts he ignored. But I changed my number and deleted his after I left Hyperion and moved. I’ve been with Atlas for months now.”

Axton chuffed with discomfort, dropping his head to Rhys’ shoulder a moment in aggravation. This didn’t make sense. Unless Rhys was lying to him, which he really didn’t think he was, then the bond should have broken already. He looked up to meet the omega’s eyes again. “Are you still in love with him? Be honest now.”

At Rhys’ bark of hysterical laughter, Axton frowned, and pulled him close once again. Rhys went willingly, cuddling up to the big alpha for comfort and constricting his arms about his shoulders once again. The hand stroking his back was much appreciated, and Rhys absently hummed while Axton spoke.

“Are you… friends with him on social media? Keeping tabs on him online?”

Rhys snorted derisively. “Hell no. I don’t wanna see his damn face if I can help it.”

Axton felt an uneasy feeling settle in his gut. “…No contact with the alpha you want to break with should sever the bond… I don’t understand how you’ve held out for so long…” Axton nuzzled Rhys, worry eating him at this new problem that had him entirely flummoxed. He needed to make calls, get some new perspective, and he might need to make longer-term arrangements to help Rhys.

There couldn’t be an exception to the rule; an omega that couldn’t break a bond. That would be far too cruel. There had to be something. Rhys must have been exposed to the alpha in some way to keep it festering for so long. There must have been something else.

Or Rhys was lying. Everything pointed to that, but his every instinct told him that wasn’t the case, and his gut was always right.

Rhys’ scent had soured immediately following that commercial they’d seen. Maybe that was the key. The actor in the commercial was pretty famous for hyping Hyperion. It was a stretch, but prolonged and irregular exposure to his alpha via commercials could have had a pretty devastating effect. Especially for so high-profile a job.

“Your alpha… He works for Hyperion?” he posed, trying to be diplomatic in his question, connecting what dots he could. “…Rhys, was he the actor in that commercial?”

Rhys snorted unkindly. “He wishes. He is Hyperion.”

Axton shook his head slightly, turning towards the face buried in his neck. “I don’t follow.”

Rhys clung closer to the alpha, inhaling his scent to steady himself with a shaky breath, pressing close and feeling like a total idiot to even have to utter the man’s name. Axton gave him reassuring touches and encouragement, swearing he wouldn’t judge.

“It’s okay, I promise,” Axton told him, long, even strokes down the other man’s back. “I’m on your side, remember. I’m always on your side. We’ll get to the bottom of this, okay?” Rhys whimpered and the alpha shushed him with a soothing stroking of his hair. “Who’s your alpha? Let me help.”

“…He’s…” Rhys had to swallow, mouth gone dry as he spoke into the alpha’s skin, refusing to meet
his eyes for the name he hadn't uttered in months. “He’s Handsome Jack.”

Chapter End Notes

Cue Axton's brain imploding in 3...2...1...

Comments are my crack babes ;D

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I am so so sorry it's taken so long to get this update out X_X It was like pulling teeth but I get to write nothing but fun (for me at least haha) from here on out so hopefully regular weekly updates shall resume ;D

...lord willing my shifts at the bar aren't batshit insane with the holidays coming up hahaha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rhys was pressed close to Axton, chest to chest, cheek to neck, ashamed and not brave enough to meet the alpha’s eyes. Axton’s grip on him didn’t falter, but the bigger man was stunned silent. Rhys could feel the older man’s heartbeat in his own chest, not nearly as fast as his own was currently beating, but it had definitely quickened. Whatever Axton had been expecting from the younger man, it clearly wasn’t this.

Several moments of taut silence passed before Rhys became unable to bear it any longer.

“Axton, please say something.”

The alpha made a few noises of self-chastisement before holding Rhys firmly again; hastily petting down his back as if he could smooth the distress in the omega away. “Sorry, I just… Handsome Jack?”

“Yes.”

“Like the head of Hyperion? Him.”

“...yeah. Him.”

The big alpha was silent a moment as he processed the information, leaning his face towards the omega. “No offense to you, darlin’, but that guy is an asshole. Like a real asshole. I’m just… I’m sorry, I am.”

Rhys snorted, nearly crying in relief as Axton took this admission in stride as with everything else. The alpha resumed his easy petting and slow soothing of the younger man, and Rhys held on to soak up the comfort the older man offered. Axton spoke words of reassurance and comfort, even though the fact he now had a face and an attitude to go with the alpha that had abandoned Rhys left him livid.

Despite this development, it gave Axton hope and provided an explanation to everything as to why Rhys couldn't move on.

“...you can maybe understand why he stopped returning my calls… Busy president of the company and all…”

“Hey now,” Axton spoke evenly, turning to face the younger man in his arms, though Rhys refused to budge. “Come on, darlin’. Lemme look at ya.” The omega reluctantly allowed enough space
between them for the alpha to meet his eyes-- red-tinged from already-shed tears. Axton kept one arm wrapped securely around his waist, and with the other he cupped the side of Rhys’ face with a big, warm hand. “No one, no matter who they are, deserves being put through this, and no self-respecting alpha would willingly abandon their omega. You don’t deserve this, and running Hyperion isn’t an excuse.”

Rhys’ lips twitched into a smile, and he put a hand over the one Axton had on the side of his face. “Thanks… I… kind of needed to hear that.” He let go of Axton’s hand and went in for another hug, relishing in the support of the big, warm arms the kind alpha wrapped around him.

“Hear this too, darlin’: we’re definitely going to break this thing, and when it does, you’re gonna feel like a million bucks. Promise.”

The omega snorted in disbelief. “How can you be so sure? It’s been six months, like you said. It’s impossible.”

The older man nuzzled him before pulling back to look him in the face once more. Rhys’ brown and blue eyes were filled with a desperation for something to hold on to; desperate for even a sliver of hope. It made the alpha ache in sympathy for the omega.

“You managed to bond with a very high-profile alpha, sweetheart. That’s hardly normal--” Rhys snorted, and Axton quickly corrected himself. “I mean, uh, not that you’re not normal-- I promise, you’ll be right as rain. But a high-profile alpha means more exposure. The best circumstances to break a bond are when you’re isolated from the alpha that bonded you.”

“But I haven’t seen Jack in months.”

“In person, yeah. What about ads, darlin’?” At the grim set of Rhys’ lips, Axton gave him a reassuring pat. “That knothead has his fingers in so many pies, I’d be more shocked if you hadn’t been exposed to him. In normal-- uh, I mean, in average circumstances, breaking a bond usually means a media blackout… That’s why I thought maybe you were keeping tabs on social media…”

Rhys was silent in thought a few moments, sighing before resting back against Axton’s chest. “…even his stupid commercials count, then?” Axton shrugged, though Rhys knew the answer. “I wish I’d never let him bond me.”

“I’m sorry, Rhys.” The omega hugged him even harder, and Axton buried his face in the younger man’s neck for a good, proper hug. He patted his back as he released him, but Rhys still clung.

“I just… I hate him, but I miss him so much, and I really really don’t want to,” the omega admitted. Rhys’ voice was a quiet thing, holding back the tears. Axton just pet him, tried to be supportive. “I want it to be over. It’s not fair…”

“I know-”

“No,” Rhys laughed without humor, pulling away again to look at the alpha in more than slight shame. “We were only together two weeks before he stopped returning my calls.” Axton’s expression went from sympathetic to openly shocked, and Rhys laughed pitifully at his past self, shame competing with self-loathing as he waited for Axton to call him an idiot for rushing into things. “Stupid, right? To let him bond me so quick. That’s what I get.”

“No, no one deserves this.” Axton’s tones were confident, level, his words a soothing balm. “What he deserves is a good punch in the face.”

“He does,” Rhys agreed through smiling tears. “I just wish I’d never let him bond me in the first
place. God I wish I could take it back."

“That's the spirit that's gonna break it right there. Proud of you, darlin’. Keep thinking like that and you'll be golden.”

Rhys genuinely laughed at that, surprising the alpha. “...I hate that I miss him, but I wish the bond would break already. It’s- He’s not worth it. What he did... He's the absolute worst.”

Axton sighed with relief. That's exactly what he needed to hear. A pining omega would be a lot harder to save. That Rhys genuinely hated his alpha meant recovery would be that much easier. “It will. It'll shatter into a thousand pieces, I promise. You've just gotta be strong. Lean on me until we get there, okay?”

Rhys snorted. “You'll deck him for me in the mean time? Until it’s safe for me to do it myself?”

It was Axton’s turn to snort, a laugh bubbling from his chest though his tones were gruff in vengeful hopefulness. “I only hope the universe gives me a chance one day.”

His words served their purpose in making Rhys laugh, and also helped the omega to feel quite a bit better. Axton spoke encouragement after encouragement as they continued to sit together, Rhys nuzzling into his neck and shoulder while he continued to spill his guts: about how much he missed Jack, how at one point he would have traded anything to be with him. About how his bond was bugging him even now at Axton’s proximity, like a weight on the back of his neck though he swore he liked the sandy-haired man close; found comfort in his presence.

“May I?” Axton clinically moved a warm, flat palm to just barely above the omega’s bonding site, and Rhys nodded with a little blush of uncertainty.

Axton could feel the younger man’s heartbeat pound in the heated flesh as he gently pressed his palm above the gland. He removed his hand just as soon as he’d placed it, giving Rhys a reassuring nod.

“It’s a bit warm, but pretty normal considering. A lot of those feelings you’re havin’ will be from the bond itself, so don’t worry too much. Your bonding gland is a little agitated but that’s good. It'll die. The uh, the feelings I mean. Not your gland.” He paused as Rhys snorted at the idea. “Hey, I'm here to help keep you strong through everything, okay? You can talk to me, or tell me to fuck off, but I'll be here just the same, alright? I'm on your side, sweetheart.”

Rhys was silent as he digested that statement fully.

His bond to Handsome Jack would eventually die. That’s what Axton was saying. That he wouldn’t have to feel like this anymore. He’d feel normal. Not that he knew what normal even was anymore.

The discomfort at the back of his neck was a liar; it was the same thing telling him that being in Axton’s arms was wrong, and that he should be at his true alpha’s side and get his comfort from there. Just brain chemicals. It was only hormones, he told himself. Not true desire to see Jack again. Any feelings akin to that was a total and utter lie; he had no loyalty left for the Hyperion alpha or his bond.

He’d be himself again, eventually. He just had to get his strength back to finally kick Jack’s hold over him to the damn curb.

“...and anything else too, okay?”

Rhys had slightly zoned out to whatever it was Axton was telling him, the big alpha’s tone alone a comfort. “Can we just… Is it okay to just cuddle a while? I’m not tired, but I mean...”
“Hey I kick all kinds of ass at cuddling,” the alpha boasted with a grin. “Certificate in advanced cuddling and professional hugging.” He gave the omega a squeeze as proof.

Rhys smirked. “Is that actually a thing? I don't think that's a thing.”

“I'll have you know it is a thing, and I'm the best of the best. Top marks in class, darlin’.”

Rhys only laughed at that as he made himself more comfortable against the older man. He let himself be lulled by Axton’s scent and heartbeat, just drifting in the solid presence that was the other man.

He felt better. A lot better. Maybe it wasn't his alpha, but he felt safe. Some long-weary part of him relaxed after getting everything off his chest, the weight that was Handsome Jack finally out in the open.

Axton eventually moved them from the couch back to the bedroom hours later, and it was the second best sleep Rhys had had in his entire life.

--

“You know how hard it's been? Going heats alone, seeing his face everywhere… I thought I was just pathetic, honestly.”

Axton rolled his eyes with an easy grin as they sat enjoying instant coffee together on the living room couch. “No way. You’re about the most resilient thing I’ve ever seen. I bet you'd even survive the cake in the breakroom fridge on level E.”

Rhys laughed at that. “No thanks, I think one near-death experience is close enough for me. And those guys keep their bio-samples in the same fridge.” He gave a sour expression.

Axton laughed. “That’s budget cuts for ya.”

“I’ll miss that cake if they fire me after all this,” Rhys joked somewhat glumly, though accepting. He’d missed a lot of deadlines from this sickness. If Atlas were to fire him, he wouldn’t even blame them. Damn if he didn’t have a legitimate excuse though. It still worried him.

“Hey, I told ya, this is company-mandated time-off, okay? They want you on leave. It’s okay.”

Rhys snorted. “I know it’s been a long time but it still takes some getting used to that Atlas isn’t Hyperion.”

“Damn straight,” Axton said with a smirk and a raise of a scarred brow. He drank the rest of the coffee in his mug as Rhys’ eyes moved over his face pensively.

“Hey, can I ask you a personal question?” Rhys asked, looking at the big alpha’s kind face, his gaze lingering just above the older man’s green eyes. “I mean, you can tell me if you’d rather not answer the question after I ask, like that’s totally okay, but if you don’t mind, then… I mean, it’s not a big deal… at least I don’t think it is… uh…” Rhys trailed off, face flushing and feeling a bit awkward as his words weren’t coming out right.

“Well shoot, color me intrigued,” he said with a crooked grin. “I’m dyin’ to know what you wanna ask now. Shoot darlin’.”

“How… How did you get that scar?”

“Which one?” Axton gave Rhys a good-natured, crooked grin. “I’m guessin’ you mean one of the
Rhys’ brows shot into his hair at that, way more intrigued than previously. The alpha only snickered at his face, grin toothy and playful on his face. “I’ve got a couple more interesting ones, but you want the chin and the brow, huh?”

Rhys’ cheeks felt hot, but the older man just smiled.

“Got this-,” he started with a point to his chin, raising it so Rhys could see better, “-from overestimating myself in a bar fight.”

Rhys snorted at the self-deprecation while Axton gave him a grin that wasn’t regretful at all. “Were you a bouncer?” The hearty laugh he received was worth it.

“Nah, just an idiot.” He grinned at the memory, running a thumb over his chin in thought. “Someone insulted the ex-wife-- er, she was just my girlfriend at the time.” He snorted at himself. “I took a swing at someone and their buddy caught me right here with his ring. Sarah ended up laying them both out while I was holding a bar towel to my chin. We just stuck bandaids on it and went to bed at home.”

His laughs made Rhys laugh too, the omega picturing the alpha’s ex-wife to have been a powerhouse of an alpha herself.

“This one has a cooler story, but it’s kind of lame,” Axton said with a laugh as he pointed to the scar running clean through his brow. “Guy with a knife tried to mug me as I was walking back to my hotel in the bad part of a bad town.”

“Holy shit.”

The alpha shrugged, like that wasn’t even the worst part of his story. “I ended up chasing the guy for five blocks before I lost him over a fence. It was wet out, and I slipped on some leaves jumping back over. Rolled like an idiot, scraped my face on a rock or something in the path.”

“…That sounds way worse than it looks.” The bigger man gave him a questioning look and Rhys quickly explained. “I mean… it looks cool, but sounds painful. Like you’re a badass or something.”

“Sure, it does now,” Axton said with a snort. “But oh man, I was butt-ugly after that happened. Something sharp got me clean up here, yeah, but I had little scrapes like a bad rash all over this half of my face.”

Rhys moved a hand over his mouth to hide the serious laughs at Axton’s expense, but the alpha just joined in the omega’s laughter. “You should just tell that story that the knife got you instead of nature.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Rhys laughed again, the omega comfy and having a genuinely good time. He felt higher energy than he had in ages and he was sure it wasn’t just the weak coffee Axton had told him was okay to have. “So what’s the worst scar then?”

“Probably the bullet I took to the ass.”

Rhys nearly choked on his last sip of coffee. “Wh- Really?”

“Yeah.” Axton gave him a sly smile. “Can’t ever say I’m boring, right?”

“Hardly. What, uh… How did--”
Axton snorted. “I was military before all this,” he motioned in reference to caring for the omega across from him.

“Why’d you leave it?”

He was quiet a moment before answering. “...did some things that just didn't agree with me. Bodyguard work after that. Private clients with more money than sense aren’t exactly the best type of people to work for.”

“And now you’re working for Atlas.”

He grinned, green eye giving the omega a wink. "Felt like the natural next step. After all the omega classes and stuff, this is a different type of bodyguard work I guess,” he said with a laugh.

Rhys just smiled. “You look... capable, I think.”

“Well I'll take that as a compliment.” Axton offered him a smile that warmed him, and the alpha laughed. “I promise I'm plenty capable of taking care of you and more. I've got training and certificates and the bedside manner. That’s the most important part,” he said mock-seriously.

“You're just a big old teddy bear,” Rhys agreed with a grin.

Axton’s cheeks went red as he laughed, pleased. “You're not the first one to say that, actually. Maybe I can add it to my resume.”

Rhys chuckled and said he’d vouch for the man should it ever come up, and Axton thanked him kindly for the support.

Rhys felt better-- better than he had in weeks if he was being honest. The easy smiles of the big, green eyed alpha warmed some cold part of him Jack had left to die. There was life after Jack, regardless of what his bond was telling him. Jack wasn’t everything. He could have other friends and reasons to smile and laugh and go on with his life that didn’t depend on the Hyperion alpha.

He could do this. He could get through this if he was just strong. With Axton’s help, he was sure of it.

“I think I’m ready for that shower now,” Rhys said as he stretched, feeling stronger than he had in months. He took a distasteful sniff of himself and wondered how Axton had been so polite this whole time.

“You sure? Might just be the caffeine talking. I can run you a bath.”

“I’m not gonna die in my shower. It would be too humiliating,” the omega said with snort. Axton was giving him a considering look as Rhys rolled his eyes with grateful concern. “I promise I won’t put a mark on your perfect rehab record,” he laughed.

Axton’s brows knit together, thoughtfully silent without returning the joke. “Alright. Alright, but I’ll be within shouting range, okay?”

Rhys chewed on his lips as the mood had taken a sudden turn. He switched to a topic he’d been slightly curious about since Axton had more or less told him he stunk. “So...what would happen if I didn’t wash this scent off? Not that I don’t want to, I’m dying for a shower,” he added with a smirk. “But I can’t even smell what you’re talking about.”

“Its... Well, nothing good, and it wouldn’t help alleviate things,” he said with a scratch of his sandy
Rhys snorted, trying to lighten things up. “Well if I smell as bad as you say, I wouldn’t wanna be near me either.”

Axton gave him a half-smirk. “It’s not like that. It’s uh… Shoot, what’s it called… It’s on the tip of my tongue.” He was snapping his fingers as his eyes moved about the room in thought. “Psych… psychosis… no… Psycho- psychosomatic! That’s the word! It’s a psychosomatic thing. You can make yourself worse.”

“Like a disorder?”

“Well, no, not exactly. But the scent on you, it’s not good. You’re getting feedback from it.”

“So are you,” he joked self-deprecatingly, making Axton finally laugh.

“I promise, this is more for your health than my comfort.” The older man gave him a smile as he explained. “It’s like… You have a bonding gland yeah? You can bond with alphas you want to.”

“Yeah.”

“But in cases where omegas are bonded against their will-- when they didn’t want to be bonded- the bond can break pretty fast.”

“I know all of this,” he said, wondering what point the alpha was trying to make.

“So your bond works because of how you feel, right? What you like. Scents and stuff. The bond you make isn’t in your gland. It's in your brain. So when you smell like this, reinforcing that despair, well… It can make the bond linger. Make an omega want the alpha that bonded them even worse.” Rhys was giving him a confused look, and Axton ran a hand through his hair wishing he’d studied this section of his textbook more to articulate it better. “You miss your alpha, so you’re sad and want to get to him. And that sad smell makes you miss him more and make you want him more urgently, which makes you more sad, and on and on. It’s how a lot of broken bonds get bad so quickly.”

“I wish I’d known that back then,” Rhys muttered bitterly, the weighty feeling at the back of his neck making him angry at himself and Jack. “Never would have let anyone bond me if I knew that.”

“Lots of alphas are total knotheads, but they still don’t do this.” Axton sighed, looking conflicted but also wanting to be truthful to the omega. “Look Rhys, speaking plainly, Handsome Jack is probably one of the biggest assholes this side of the country just because of who he is.” He took the younger man’s hand in his own, offering him a non-judgmental smile at odds with his words; trying to offer some solace in a shitty situation. “Alphas know what we’re capable of when we bond someone. And there's no way he didn't know you’ve been suffering without him.”

Rhys’ mouth hung open in shock. This was entirely new information to him. “He… He would have known?”

Axton squeezed the hand that gripped his tightly. “When it's not a mutual break, yeah. He would've known. I've never experienced it personally, but he should have been compelled to go to you. It's like… I don't know, he would have wanted to check on you or be near you.” He remembered stories and anecdotal evidence and sections of his books from his classes. “But we don't feel it the same way an omega does, and an alpha won't die of a broken bond. It's easier for alphas to just ignore it if they want…”
Rhys looked righteously angry. If Axton had been a weaker man, the grip the omega had on his hand would have hurt as Rhys subconsciously held tight. “That… that fucking dick.”

He looked at Axton, torn between breaking something or breaking down and crying in anger. Axton opened his arms presenting him with a third option, and the omega went willingly, wrapping arms around the big alpha.

“Will he know? When it breaks?” Rhys asked after a while, breathing Axton’s scent evenly and deeply in defiance of his throbbing neck.

“He will, yeah,” he admitted reluctantly. “Things usually end in amped up aggression before sputtering out, but if he hasn't been paying attention-- I mean, not that I'd assume--”

“He won't be paying attention,” Rhys said with cold confidence. “He doesn't want anything to do with me.”

“Then he's missing out.”

Rhys snorted. “You barely know me, Ax.”


“Exactly, you’ve just proved my point,” Rhys said with a smirk.

“All I'm saying is if I had a sweet little omega like you to curl up with in the evening, I'd be distracted from everything else.” It was Rhys’ turn to snort, and Axton just chuckled.

“You do though,” Rhys joked, feeling better. “All we’ve been doing is laying around here.”

“Don’t even start, or I’ll have you move my furniture around or something.”

“Guess I’m lucky you don’t have a lawn for me to mow or pull weeds, huh?”

Rhys only snickered at that, and they sat together a bit longer discussing other things Axton could essentially do as punishment that only made the alpha laugh.

“Maybe I’ll get a cat so there’s a litter box to clean,” Rhys teased while Axton rubbed tears from laughter from his eyes.

“Still not as bad as other things I’ve done.”

“I’ll have to think up something crazy then,” Rhys joked, pulling away to give the older man a smirk. “Okay, I want this stink off me.” He rose to his feet and deposited the blanket he’d had over himself onto the couch. Axton rose too with a nod.

“I’ll be on lifeguard duty.”

Rhys snickered. “It’s a shower, not a bath. I promise I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be on… general duty then,” he amended with a laugh. “Just promise me you won’t pass out.”

“Lucky for you if I do. I have some very interesting tattoos.”
Axton just snorted and shook his head at the teasing, and Rhys grinned as the alpha hovered while he turned on the taps. He shooed him out and promised that the only thing he’d need him for would be singing-in-the-shower requests. He could hear Axton’s laughter still ringing through as the alpha moved about the place picking up after them.

Chapter End Notes

I really really appreciate the comments, you guys have been awesome and inspiring and i'll work my little butt off for a much sooner update next week ^___^ Thanks again for commenting babes, it literally makes it worth it hehehhe

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I’m actually basing some of the stuff Rhys talks about later on on technology I’m pretty sure actually exists in some shape or form right now (or it might even be old technology by now hahah) so please bear with me in this ‘modern but futuristic but actually not’ AU thing i’m doing hahaha :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’ve got some good news,” Axton said as he ended his call with the HR department at Atlas. “Er, good for you I guess.”

Rhys smiled up at the alpha from where he’d been trying to find a deck of cards in a junk drawer in the kitchen. He gave up on his search and shoved stuff back into the depths where it belonged. “Yeah?”

“They’ve okayed work on some of the projects still open in your name. The active files… Uh, they said you’d know what that meant.”

Rhys perked up. “Really? They reopened my clearance?”

The omega hurried himself to his little office as Axton followed him curiously. As Rhys took a seat at his desk and turned his computer on, the alpha smiled and stood in the doorway watching as nimble fingers worked over the keyboard.

“...some things are gone… dropped the ball… Well I can do this…” Axton’s snort drew Rhys’ attention and the omega looked up to find him grinning at him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Rhys raised an eyebrow at the smile Axton was giving him, but ignored the warm gaze of the older man to test the other limits put on his account. He smiled to himself as he was still apparently enough of an asset to Atlas that the projects allowed him weren’t small per se, but definitely required his level of expertise. He was needed.

Many of his other projects were either handed off and finished by the joint efforts of his and related departments, or were important enough that they could wait out his absence. He still had a few files marked as ‘incomplete’, but he was currently locked out of them. “...baby steps…” he muttered to himself, glad regardless that he still had a place at Atlas.

Rhys jumped when a warm hand came to rest on his shoulder, and he gave Axton a startled little sheepish smile. The alpha set down a mug of weak, instant coffee next to him with only a chuckle. Rhys hadn’t even realized he’d left his post at the doorway, let alone gone long enough to make coffee.

“Ya mind if I hang out in here?” Axton asked as it was clear Rhys had no intention of leaving the space anytime soon.

“Hm,” Rhys saw the couch cushion tucked under the older man’s other arm, a crooked grin on his
face as he looked down at the omega. Rhys gave the cushion another look before looking about the walls of the room. “If you don’t mind the floor… Sorry I don’t have any other chairs or anything.”

“Nah, floor’s good. I’m more sturdy than you’d think,” he said with a laugh.

“I don’t doubt.” Rhys smirked. “You can strip the couch if you want, probably be more comfortable. I think I’ll be a while with this.”

Axton’s face lit up at the invitation and gave him a quick nod before leaving Rhys alone. The omega felt his cheeks heat just a little at the enthusiasm, but marked it down to gratitude for the company. He ignored the sounds of Axton situating himself upon return, snorting a little at the weird nest the alpha had constructed for himself, and worked on tying up some loose ends for the company as the alpha settled in.

Rhys was truly, truly grateful for a proper distraction that wasn’t just card games; something that gave him back a modicum of normality and autonomy, and furthermore, distracted him from the ever-present throb at the base of his neck. He was important. His work to Atlas mattered. He was an asset and not worthless or someone easily ignored, that’s what this meant. He needed to remember that; he had more important things to worry about than stupid Handsome Jack or what that Hyperion asshole thought of him.

Patting himself on the back as he completed yet another essential detail to a larger project that could now move forward, Rhys smirked to himself as he realized he could hear Axton snoring. A look at the clock showed that hours had passed (which frankly shocked him) and a look at the alpha proved Axton was sleeping with his mouth open.

Rhys was feeling tired just looking at Axton, the way the alpha was totally dead to the world was endearing as it was hilarious. If he had fallen asleep on his side instead of his back, Rhys was certain his couch cushions would have a fresh trail of drool on them. Damn if the other man didn’t look comfortable as hell.

The omega put his computer to sleep before rising and stretching, creeping over quietly so as not to disturb the larger man.

Axton woke anyways as Rhys lowered himself down next to him, looking barely-coherent but alert as he instinctively opened his arms to the omega. “Y’okay?”

“Mm,” Rhys murmured as he settled down and curled up against Axton’s side with a smile. “Just taking a break.” The couch cushions weren’t that comfortable, but definitely were better than the floor.

And Axton was a way better cushion than the cushions themselves as he held Rhys against him and nuzzled the younger man close. Rhys listened to the soothing sounds of Axton’s heartbeat as the big alpha easily fell back asleep, ignoring his own heartbeat that he keenly felt throbbing in the back of his neck like a chastisement.

--

Rhys was feeling better and stronger with each passing day.

They didn’t watch tv anymore in order to avoid anything and everything Hyperion, and instead stuck to movies. No commercials meant no nasty surprises. Rhys also had a lot of tv shows on box sets and they watched several seasons of things together to pass the time.

Failing that, Rhys worked on the projects allowed to him while Axton kept him company and made
him snacks. The big alpha now had a go-to construction method for a nice comfy corner to read the books and magazines the omega had lying around or take impromptu naps, and Rhys took maybe more than a necessary few breaks budpked up next to the older man.

Rhys actually *thrived* when he was working. He genuinely enjoyed his job, snickering sometimes at little mistakes that were obvious to him but completely over Axton’s head when the alpha asked questions. Axton commended him on the ease with which he did things, asking technical questions about his work and teasing Rhys that he’d be head of the company one day.

“Wouldn’t that be just the thing,” Rhys said with an amused snort. “Making big decisions and stuff.”

“Just promise you’ll keep me on when you take over.”

Rhys laughed. “We’ll expand the omega wellness department and put you in charge, Ax.”

That got a hearty laugh, Axton’s eyes crinkling in amusement. “Sal would throw a shit fit at that, better hire on a few more workers or he’ll set up shop outside your office in protest.”

Rhys snorted. “Sal’s the other, uh, you?”

“Omega wellness services and protections officer,” the man replied with an exaggerated puff of his chest that made Rhys laugh. “Yeah, it’s just the two of us.”

“That’s not really much of a department,” Rhys noted with a frown. “Aren’t you guys stretched thin?”

“Well it’s not like a lot of omegas are, uh, *having situations* at once,” Axton remarked diplomatically.

Rhys gave him a grateful smile and a little chuckle. “You can say ‘abandoned by douchebags’, Ax. It’s not like I’m going to be offended.”

“Well I wouldn’t put it like *that,*” he responded with slightly embarrassed tones that only amused Rhys. His consideration was sweet, and the slight blush was quaint. “But yeah, broken bond syndrome isn’t something that goes around like the flu, and there’s not a *ton* on pregnancy leave. Between the two of us we get things done.”

“Still seems like you’re spread thin.”

“Maybe when the company expands they’ll hire on one more.” Rhys didn’t look satisfied by the prospect of only three, but Axton just shrugged. “It’s more than a lot of places have, if they even do,” the alpha said with a thinking frown. “Atlas was what I’ve been gunning for since I took all my training courses but it’s not the *first* place I’ve worked for.”

They sat together and mused on the statement, each to their own thoughts. Rhys huffed out and gave the older man a considering look. “Well, when I’m heading things we’ll get a whole team put together and you can manage it,” he joked with a finality that made Axton snort. “If you can train them all to be as good as you, we’ll never have any problems.”

Axton blushed from the tips of his ears to somewhere below the neck of his t-shirt, smiling with very real pleasure even while Rhys was grinning next to him. “You’re gonna end up givin’ me a big head,” he said with pleased embarrassment.

Rhys gave him a playful shove and nuzzled into his side with a snort. “Good, it’ll match the rest of you, big guy.”
Axton just laughed it off, but his face turned one shade redder to Rhys’ amusement.

--

The second week of Axton’s caregiving was coming to a close and the company, while understanding, was still a company. If Rhys was well enough to work from home proper again, he was okay to be left alone in their opinion.

The idea sent chills down Axton’s spine.

“He’s not-- No I understand that, but what you're not-- No. No…. Okay but if it's premature…. Yes, a relapse is entirely possible…. No, it can be way worse. And if that happens again there’s no guarantee that-- ….It doesn’t matter how it looks, it is abandoning him!”

Rhys was trying not to eavesdrop from the couch as the older man was on his phone in the hallway— he really was— but the growl in Axton’s voice was hard to ignore. His nervous pacing in and out of Rhys’ view kept the omega’s attention on him regardless of his intentions.

The way the alpha suddenly stood up straighter with a blank face, alert as he listened to a no-doubt dressing down of his attitude, was hard to ignore. Rhys reread the same page in his book for the fifth time since the call had begun.

“Yes. Yes, sir. Understood, I-- Yes…? ….Yes. Really? ...No no that's- that can work…. No, actually that will probably work fine…. Yes, thank you, sir.... Yes, I will.”

Axton gave Rhys a somewhat shy look as he emerged back into the living room proper, a sheepish tone to his voice as he observed the younger man curled up on the couch. “So…. how much of that did you hear?”

Rhys’ face turned red at the question, and Axton scrubbed a self-annoyed hand over his face and through his sandy-blond hair.

“Um… you’re not in trouble ’cause of me, are you?”

“No no, nothin’ like that,” Axton quickly stated. “Just, they want you working full time again and said I did my job-- But I’m not leavin’ ya darlin’, okay? I’ll see ya through this ‘til it’s done. You’re not alone,” Axton was quick to reassure.

The thought made Rhys smile even as it sent a spike of anxiety through him. “So they want you to leave me then?”

“Yes-- well no, it’s… ugh…” Axton trailed off to growl in annoyance. “They’re proposing half days,” he stated with a frown, green eyes troubled as they carefully observed the omega before him.

“Like...I’ll still get to see you?” Rhys inwardly grimaced at how pathetic his voice sounded.

The big alpha had been the only constant, dependable thing in his life for what seemed like ages, and his support and company the past two weeks made everything good instead of just tolerable. Rhys felt safe with him around, he slept better with an arm secure around him, and he genuinely enjoyed Axton’s company. The thought of him suddenly ripped away scared him.

Axton plopped himself down next to the younger man and wrapped an arm around him. “Most definitely, darlin’. Ya can’t get rid of me that easily.” Rhys’ snort turned into a laugh as Axton nuzzled the side of his face with his nose. “Best friend, remember?”
“...Just *that* now that you’re off the hook for maid stuff, huh?” Rhys teased, halfway climbing into the other man’s lap to cuddle himself close. Jokes or not, Rhys was actually pretty worried. His look of unease went unnoticed as Rhys pressed the flat of his face into Axton’s broad chest.

The older man simply chuckled. “You know I’m good for it, sweetheart.” He patted the omega’s shoulder. “Half my work day will be at the office, but the other half will be with you. Uh, I’m not sure which half, but if it’s the second half of the day-- I mean not that I’m inviting myself, but I’ve got a friend watering my plants so I don’t mind staying longer than they have me on the clock,” he finished with an awkward chuckle.

Rhys tightened the hold he had on the alpha, those words comforting. Maybe it would be okay. He wasn’t *alone*. He just needed to remind himself of that. “What **are** the chances of... getting like that again?”

The older man’s huff was felt by Rhys as he exhaled. “With a proper support network, slim. But with a high-profile alpha… I’m not really sure and I don’t wanna take chances. I’m here for ya, okay?” The alpha pet at his side and scented into his hair. “You’re a lot stronger than you think and a hell of a lot stronger than when I found you.”

Rhys actually laughed. “Yeah, look at me, taking showers every day and even cooking.”

“Progress is progress. One day at a time,” the other man said gently. “You’ll be back to normal in no time. ...normal for *you* anyways,” he teased in hope of getting a rise out of the omega.

It worked. Rhys genuinely laughed and gave Axton’s stupid big chest a playful smack that earned him a chuckle. “I’m glad to be useful again,” Rhys murmured into his neck with a smile, “but I am scared of myself. I’m not sure that… Well I knew this wasn’t **permanent** but...”

“I’m just movin’ out, not movin’ away,” Axton joked as he looked down at the younger man, green eyes meeting blue and brown. “I promised I’d see you through breakin’ this and I will.”

“I’m just worried if… I mean, what if you’re **wrong**?” Rhys voiced the worry that seemed to increase the same amount of his general strength and sense of well-being. The better he felt, the more concerned he was that all this progress was for naught. He covered the back of his neck with his own hand, feeling the pulse of warning in the gland beneath his skin. “I’m scared of-- I don’t want to-”

The alpha gave him a comforting squeeze, chuffing about his hair and pressing a chaste kiss there. “Look, I still keep in touch with a few of the omegas I’ve helped recover over the years, even now,” Axton confided in gruff tones. “And I’ve always kept in touch with any that hadn’t fully recovered with *me* until they broke their bond and I knew they were safe.” He exhaled a little regretfully. “I don’t like doin’ that-- not being there to see things out, but I’ve never fully left anyone until I know they’re safe, regardless of what the job thinks. Atlas is willing to work with me on that.”

“I’m glad... Two weeks seems kind of stingy...”

Axton chuckled humorlessly to himself. “Actually, other omega wellness agencies don’t give **nearly** the same amount of time Atlas does, but I have a pretty good retirement policy from a private job years back to offset that. Don’t worry. Your health comes first.”

Rhys pulled up and away from where he was practically clinging to look Axton in the face with shock. “Wait, they fired you?”

The alpha shrugged. “Can’t keep bringing in new accounts if I’m stuck caring for only *one* omega, right? They expect a fast turnover.” He growled to himself, the notes reverberating in his throat.
“What they qualify as ‘recovered’ is enough to make me see red. I’ve refused a lot of premature re-assignments. Cost me my job but all those omegas are doing just fine.”

At the little gasp and shocked look of horror on Rhys’ face, he elaborated with an aggravated sound. “Outside wellness agencies are usually contracted as third parties to companies that don’t have a department like Atlas does. ...Hyperion probably outsources that type of stuff since they didn’t even have a sector for it. It’s all about minimum care and saving money.” Asses, Axton mentally noted.

“Wait so they privately hire someone to check on people like you did with me?” The alpha nodded as Rhys still gaped at him. “How does that even…. Something like this can’t be forced-”

“Right you are, darlin’.” Axton patted Rhys soothingly, the anxiety in the omega’s voice also apparent in his scent. He took a breath to steady his own anger on the subject. “But don’t you worry, okay sweetheart? I promise that whatever they say, I’m not gonna leave ya alone to this. Atlas isn’t the first omega services I’ve worked for and it probably won’t be the last, but their severance pay is good and I’ve got a pretty big nest egg.” He chuckled. “Call it incentive to get you well as soon as possible,” he finished with a wink.

His words were meant to make Rhys laugh, but instead the omega threw his arms around the older man’s neck and gave him a huge bear hug proper. It was probably the wettest hug Axton had ever received as he realized that Rhys was crying, and he just rolled with it like everything else.

He shushed the younger man and told him to relax about everything, returning the hug and promising that everyone wanted him well, and he didn’t need to be so afraid because he was so damn strong.

It was enough to stop Rhys’ tears at least, even if his worries were a bit harder to silence.

--

Axton sighed as he had trouble getting to sleep that night (trouble Rhys didn’t seem to have, as the omega was half-sprawled over him and getting dangerously close to drooling all over his shirt).

One major thing the alpha liked about Atlas was the company’s interest in the well-being of its employees. It was smaller, which meant they took care of their own, but competing with the big-wigs meant that every person really counted in the scheme of things. And apparently this omega was on the up and up in the company; they needed him, and his absence was felt.

They gave Axton another week to try and turn things around, with the omega progressively getting back to his usual standards of work if he kept up to the current progress he was making right now.

Rhys could do more-involved projects under Axton’s supervision, taking breaks when the alpha gently suggested it, to see where he was in his work ethic. Axton agreed that getting back to usual habits was good, but highly disagreed with the idea that a working omega meant a working omega.

Rhys wasn’t ‘fixed’, and no deadline for such was going to make that happen.

It wasn’t enough time-- Axton knew it wasn’t enough time- to get him over the high-profile mate that had abandoned him. Maybe another week after that if Rhys progressed the same way he had been-- and Axton was very optimistic that he would.

It would be better if Rhys could come back to the office to work-- but that ran the high risk of exposure to Handsome Jack in the form of anything from coffee brands to designer slacks, or ‘natural enhancement’ advertisements on billboards.
It wasn’t exactly as if Axton could tell Atlas that their little brown and blue eyed omega was bonded by the corporate rival (not that he would anyways, violation of privacy and all).

Rhys needed to not be alone, and working in the office would be a great solution— but the risk of exposure was too high.

But they expected Axton to come back in for half of his workday from the next week on, and allowed that he spend the other half— still on the clock- caring for the omega. He hoped he could wrestle another week past that allowance out of the company, so, so sure they could beat this thing if just given the proper time.

Axton wouldn’t be allowed to stay with Rhys 24/7 at his apartment as he had, and loneliness was a surefire path to a relapse that he wanted to avoid.

They expected the man to come back in to resume his usual duties at the office; check in on other omegas on pregnancy leave, file incident reports— and his favorite of all- make for an intimidating presence in corporate meetings due to his large, broad stature and intimidating scars.

Sal was an intimidating alpha on that end, but Axton was taller than his shorter friend which Atlas used to their advantage. It would really bother him if he didn’t genuinely enjoy working for them, but Sal liked staying in the office when Axton was dragged to stupid corporate meetings with other firms.

They wanted him to resume his other duties was the thing.

He just hoped he wouldn’t be putting in his notice if things took a turn for the open-mouthed omega blissfully asleep next to him.

He ran a fond hand through Rhys’ fluffy hair and resituated them both to get comfortable, wrapping an arm around the omega and tucking his head under his chin.

Nothing would be solved tonight. His worries would have to wait.

--

“You wanna see something really cool I've been working on?” Rhys asked as he fidgeted in his desk chair in his home office.

“Yeah.” Axton got up from his nest of cushions, stretching bodily before coming to the omega’s side.

Rhys pulled up blueprints on his computer— really old stuff he'd been working on in his spare time that he'd eventually used for a development deal at Atlas. He grinned as the alpha squinted into the screen.

“Is that a hand?”

“A type of glove, yeah.”

“Creepy,” Axton teased as Rhys gave him a playful shove for his remark. “What's it for?”

“It's actually just digital interfacing for what I'm hoping might become replacement for prosthetics in a few years.”

“Cool. Why?”
Rhys smirked. “You're gonna laugh…”

“Maybe, but I still wanna know,” the alpha said with a smile.

“I want to be faster at this job. There's too much interference between my brain and my hands and I know I could do better if it was just faster.”

“Are you saying you're that much smarter than us mere mortals?” Axton teased.

“Yes,” Rhys teased right back.

Axton’s laughs echoed in the small room until he looked back at Rhys, asking in gruff tones of amusement, “So you wear this glove thing to go faster?”

“Well, kind of. A true hand would be replaced with this superior technology and enable you to do things in an hour it might take others to do in a day. There’s a lot of—” Rhys gestured to his head and back, “unnecessary stuff that happens between brain processing to hands doing it. I want to cut out those steps entirely.”

“Wait… are you saying you'd have to chop your arm off for this?” Rhys just smirked at him and Axton lost a little color from his face. “Holy shit.”

“All in the name of science. And progress.”

“Uh huh…. and when did you plan to chop off this arm?”

“After years of clinical trials and advanced testing,” the omega said with a grin. “Not anytime soon.”

Axton looked down at both Rhys’ hands and tried to imagine something other than flesh there. “What a loss.”

“You like my hands?” Rhys wiggled his fingers as he watched Axton’s face with a smile.

“Yep.”

Rhys chuckled, ignoring the pleased flush to his cheeks. “Don't you think it could have practical applications for ex-soldiers too?”

“Hell, yeah actually.”

“I’ve been trying to get it to work remotely. There’s an eye interface as well.”

“Okay wait a minute--”

“I’m not getting rid of my eye,” Rhys stated with a snort.

“That’s… a relief I guess.”

“Think of a contact lens with more power than the strongest computer you can think of.”

“...I don’t think that’s even possible.” Rhys’ grin turned ridiculously toothy. “You have one, don’t you?”

“I’m working on it, yes,” Rhys said with extreme self-pride. “The prototypes are locked up safe at work, otherwise I’d show you.”
“Sounds scary.”

“You mean cool.” Axton snorted. “It’s okay to be jealous of how cool it is, Ax.”

The big alpha just laughed and ran an affectionate hand through Rhys’ hair that the younger man leaned up into with an exaggerated look of pleasure on his face. It made Axton laugh again.

“Just make sure you don’t lop off the arm with all those cool tattoos you showed me.”

“Yeah right. You know how much that hurt to just waste? Wait, you do.”

“Yeah, and I don’t recommend it,” he said with a distasteful scrunch of his nose. It made the scar on his eyebrow crinkle and overall made Rhys snicker.

“That’s what you get for getting a tattoo on your ass, Ax.”

The alpha’s face went red at that, wondering why he’d felt the need to share that in the first place. This round of teasing clearly went to Rhys and his ridiculously high pain tolerance.

--

“They sent me an email with updates on all the new projects,” Rhys reported a few days later as Axton was sat in his corner.

“Anything difficult?”

“Not outside my usual work,” Rhys replied. “But I need some things from the office to get started on this,” he motioned to the computer as Axton gave him a considering look from the floor.

“I can get Sal to deliver it. Or I can go get whatever it is,” he proposed to the look on the omega’s face.

“Thanks, but the locks are fingerprinted only to me. And I’m not ready to lop off a finger to give you yet.”

“Gross.”

They both laughed, and Rhys leaned back in his desk chair to look unfocused between Axton and the wall. “I’d like to actually work on this stuff if I’m going to stick it out without you napping in my corner for a while.”

Axton laughed, trying to be easy with the subject. Rhys was trying to accept that he’d have to be alone for a while. Axton wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. “It’s a good corner.”

“Yeah,” Rhys agreed, thinking more to the funny nest Axton constructed daily, and crawling into it with him. “I do need to get that stuff from the lock boxes though.”

Axton huffed. "Let's make some calls, then."

--

Picking up his property meant Rhys *himself* had to go out, and for the first time in what felt like a hundred years.

Rhys was okay with that actually-- promised Axton he felt up to it and that he wasn't going to keel
over any second. Axton would be with him, he reminded, so he’d be okay, surely. He had to leave the apartment some time, and there wasn’t much of a point in putting it off when things couldn’t be helped.

Axton, however, worried like a mother hen over possible exposure to anything Hyperion, even as they prepared to leave the house for Axton’s car.

“I mean, you’re not weak, but that asshole’s ads are everywhere.”

“You want me to wear a blindfold or something?” Rhys joked as Axton fretted. He took the big alpha’s arm up in his own with a smirk, feeling stronger than ever and confident that he’d be okay. Truth be told, he was both excited and full of trepidation about stepping foot outside of his apartment for the first time in weeks. That Axton was with him meant it would be okay. “I mean, you’ll be with me to shield my eyes, right?”

Axton snorted at the joke and smirked. “Yeah, I won’t leave ya, but--”

“Then it’ll be fine.” He joked a little self-consciously, giving the older man another squeeze. “I’m not as weak as before. I think it’ll be okay.”

“You're not weak, you're stronger than a lot of soldiers I've known, Rhys.” Axton gave his shoulder a squeeze and the smile he received in return made him confident it would be okay. “We’ll use it as a test, okay? See how ya feel, hopefully not see anything Hyperion but….”

“Yeah I think it’s kind of a foregone conclusion,” the omega agreed with a snort. “...freaking Hyperion is everywhere. I guess that's why I even worked there to begin with.”

Axton gave him a crooked grin. “Can't argue with that.”

“I guess I thought there was prestige in the brand... until you realize what a knothead the president is,” Rhys said bitterly.

“Crush ‘em when you take over Atlas, darlin’.”

“That’s the plan,” Rhys said with a disbelieving laugh. He rubbed nervously at the base of his neck, a motion that didn’t go unnoticed by Axton, though the alpha didn’t comment on it. Rhys gave him a smile. “Just drive and I’ll keep my eyes closed.”

Axton snorted, but all things considered, it wasn’t the worst idea.

--

Axton was laughing as they entered the grand foyer to the building that still struck Axton with awe every time he entered. This time was no exception, and Rhys teased him about fancy places and ‘coming home’ that the older man turned pink over but laughed off.

They both handed over clearance cards to the secretary at the check-in desk in order to gain access to the elevators to his department. Axton’s clearance took a few moments longer to get approval for the floor, and Rhys laughed and told him that he’d get an all-access pass once Rhys was in charge.

“Get us a coffee machine in our office and Sal will love you forever.”

“You don’t have one already?” Rhys asked, and Axton wasn’t sure if the horror on his face was put-on or not.
“Nope, we leech off the level E breakroom.”

“Forget taking over Atlas, I know what I’m getting you for your birthday,” Rhys said with a very serious expression that only made the alpha laugh.

The elevator dinged and someone got off as the secretary was still making calls through the appropriate channels to gain the correct access. Rhys watched the person somewhat jealously, wishing his card still worked instead of having to wait.

“Guess we shouldn’t have come at lunch-time,” the omega joked.

“Yeah, ‘cause now I’m hungry too. Wanna grab a burger or something after this?”

Rhys was all toothy grin as he gave the sandy-haired alpha a sly look. “I happen to know for a fact that there’s a vending machine right around the corner next to the night guard’s closet.”

Axton grinned at the conspiratory tone Rhys was using, lowering his own voice to gruff depths. “Oh yeah?”

The whisper that he replied with sent shivers down Rhys’ spine, and the omega quickly ignored that to lean in with more information. “I also happen to know if you press B3 four times in a row and then A6, you’ll get a free bag of whatever’s in C8.” Axton’s laughs filled the foyer. “It’s usually potato chips. What do you think?”

“I think we should be dining on potato chips right now,” the alpha laughed.

“Gotcha,” Rhys said with a playful grin. He pointed a finger at the alpha, looking pointedly at the secretary with a phone still stuck to her ear and a sheepish look to her face as she was trying to get through to someone. “You wait here in case they say anything, I’ll grab the chips.”

“You sure?”

“I’m starving and plan to eat half the bag before I share with you, so yeah.”

Axton laughed til his green eyes sparkled with tears as Rhys made long, smiling strides to the machine he knew gave away free chips like a dirty secret.

He stopped halfway between the lounge and the elevators that dinged as they let someone off again, a sudden shiver of weird urgency and dread traveling up his spine to rest at the base of his neck; a low-whistle followed by a voice he knew all too well and wished to have heard for months, now anchoring him in place.

“Hooo I thought I recognized those long legs. Damn baby you’re a sight for sore eyes. Where ya been cupcake?”

Chapter End Notes

When the douchelord makes his appearance for the first time I'm pretty sure it means we're gonna get six more weeks of winter. xD

I'm legitimately overwhelmed by the comment responses I've been getting, you guys are so amazing, thank you!! I've been having trouble seeing the story in my brain without
literally typing every little detail, so I'm hoping it's not like that for you guys haha (maybe it is O_O) lolol

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Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I've been sick and it set me back several days :O Sorry about that! :D Now here's all that delicious drama i know you've all been craving hahaha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What… What are you doing here?”

“Taking care of business. What’re you doing here, kiddo? You are one sight for sore eyes, just, damn.” Jack removed the sunglasses perched on his nose to get a better look at the omega, the familiar-scar Rhys knew the depth and feel and taste of on the older man’s face hitting him with such intimate nostalgia he almost whimpered.

Rhys’ heart beat faster, legs going to jelly. Here was the man he’d wanted more than anything for over half a year. Wanting, suffering, pining after, and now that he was finally before him, the omega wanted to do nothing more than bolt.

But his legs wouldn't cooperate, and he was forced to gape at the older man in shock. Jack’s lackadaisy attitude didn't help the overwhelming wave of sheer panic hitting the younger man and rooting him to the spot; as if there hadn't been a six-month absence between them.

“You've gotten skinnier since I last saw you though. What happened to the cushion for the pushin’?” Jack’s gaze raked over him, lingering on his hips with a quick little frown gone as soon as it appeared on his face. “Stopped binging on the ice cream, huh?”

The younger man sputtered. That Jack remembered that Rhys liked to indulge in ice cream physically hurt. That he remembered anything about him was more painful than Rhys had ever expected, a tightness in his chest as Jack was casually looking his fill. As Jack’s all-too-familiar scent hit Rhys’ nostrils, it became harder to breathe, and he felt sapped of all strength.

This was his every dream and nightmare for over half a year, and now he was experiencing it in his waking reality. He didn’t know how to react to seeing the older man. He really, really didn’t.

Rhys was gaping as the Hyperion alpha looked his fill, the oily smile on the older man’s face quickly flattening into a thin-line of distaste, eyeline changing to behind the omega. As Rhys felt a hand on his shoulder, he understood why.

“A-Axton,” Rhys sputtered in sheer relief at the wall of solid, reliable alpha behind him.

Axton’s lips were a grim line, restrained fury on his face as he stood behind Rhys. His face was an open book, the alpha clearly ready for a fight as the culmination of everything wrong with Rhys was right here in front of him. The firm hand on the omega’s shoulder was comforting, though Axton’s gaze never left the other alpha.

“What are you doing here, Hyperion?” Axton’s voice was a low growl, the feeling reverberating through Rhys’ back as the omega leaned back against him for reassurance. Axton’s comforting scent was stronger, more potent in a way Rhys hadn’t smelled before-- combative and outwardly
aggressive— and it would have been clear to anyone with even a shit sense of smell that the sandy-haired alpha was, in that moment, dangerous to trifle with.

Here was a man defending his territory.

Jack sneered at the Atlas alpha. “Am I supposed to know you?” He turned back to Rhys. “Who’s this, Rhysie?”

A thrill surged through Rhys at the familiarity; one mixed with terror and fear and a culmination in his wondering for months if Jack even spared Rhys a single thought. And here the Hyperion alpha was only rubbing salt into wounds not yet healed with a once-fond nickname. He pressed back harder into Axton, the other man’s hand squeezing him tighter.

“You have no right to talk to him,” Axton growled, moving the younger man less in-front of him and more behind him.

“Uh, excuse you blondie, but I have every right to talk to him,” Jack said self-righteously, sizing Axton up though his own stance remained uncomfortably-casual. Jack wasn’t reckless enough to make threatening gestures with another alpha already on-edge. “That’s my omega you’ve got your hand on, in case you didn’t know.”

Rhys was moved further behind the alpha, Jack’s eyes watching the omega and moving back to Axton. The Hyperion alpha snorted humorlessly at the clearly-protective display that said Rhys was not his.

“You haven’t seen him for months.” Axton’s voice was more growl than words, upper lip bared as he spoke. A hand was behind himself to make sure Rhys was kept safe there, the other clenching and unclenching into a fist at his side. Olfactory-memories of Rhys’ scent when Axton had found him, the weak state the omega had been in, made Axton want to tear the other man apart right there in Atlas’ grand foyer. It was only Rhys’ presence that kept his fury on a leash. “You abandoned him.”

Axton’s indignant growl matched the expression on his face as he stood solidly before Jack. The Hyperion alpha had his hands on his hips with a haughty, confident smirk on the face Rhys was once madly in love with.

Jack snorted dismissively at Axton, though he made no moves that might be interpreted as threatening. Jack wasn’t stupid; he knew danger when he saw it. But he also felt he had the factual-highgrounds. The self-confident smirk on his face said it all.

“He’s still bonded to me, ain’t he? That means he’s mine, not yours, meathead. Those’re the facts.”

Rhys’ face heated behind Axton, and he didn’t meet Jack’s eyes over the big alpha’s shoulder.

The bond was slowly dying between them; he could feel it, he was sure. The spoken reminder of the tie he and Jack held to one another hurt deeply, especially when spoken from Jack’s own lips. The omega wanted nothing more than to sever their relationship even as his bond wanted Jack.

It didn’t fill him with any less shame over things when confronted with it, though.

“You’re like poison,” Axton growled, feeling Rhys’ hand on his back as a steadying force. The green-eyed alpha tried to keep control over himself. None of this could be any good for Rhys, and he was torn between concern and comeuppance. He wanted to punch the other alpha right in the face. “He’d be dead right now if I hadn’t found him.”

“What’re you sniffing around him for anyways? He can’t bond with you, blondie.” Jack shot an
accusing brow Rhys’ way over Axton’s shoulder. “Not messing around on me, are you sweetie?”

That struck something deep, deep inside of Rhys still loyal to his alpha; still wanting to be obedient and faithful even after all the suffering he’d been through. The realization that there was anything left inside of him to feel such made Rhys livid.

His indignation was stronger than any lingering bond between the two of them.

“I waited six months!!” Rhys cried out in indignation from behind Axton, his fingers clenching in Axton’s shirt back. It was an accusation and an excuse. His exasperation and exhaustion all coming through as he faced the CEO of the rival company. He could feel angry tears prick at his eyes, yelling at the older man in the lobby of his workplace and not giving a single damn about it. “Not a single returned call or text! You left me! You completely left me!”

“Oh baby, that's just playing hard to get.”

Axton’s warning growl wiped the smile off Jack's face as the ex-soldier bared his teeth, words barely comprehensible. “You better watch your mouth.”

Jack turned his frown from Axton’s words on Rhys and gestured dismissively to the watery-eyed omega. “Who is this assclown anyways? Your new boyfriend? Doesn’t our bond mean anything to you?”

Rhys’ face grew pink at the accusation, heart sinking, and Axton’s grew red in anger.

Jack saw the fist coming his way, but didn't fully dodge it in time. Axton’s knuckles collided with the side of the man's jaw, knocking Jack hard. The Hyperion alpha snarled and made a grab in his fall for Axton, though the sandy-haired alpha was already pulling back his other arm for a second blow that ended up thwarted by Jack’s counterattack.

They were on the floor full snarls and teeth and fists before security intervened. Axton was bodily bigger than he was, but Jack was squirrelly, and the older man did a decent job of defending himself from the younger alpha’s onslaught.

It was obvious who’d had the upper hand, though.

As security separated them, Jack was swearing up and down that he’d ruin Axton, and the Atlas alpha was trying to lunge from the three holding him back and telling him to calm his shit. Jack was bodily escorted from the building, the two who’d forced him out standing in front of the glass doors until the older man left the premises, straightening his clothes with a sneer.

Rhys stood there watching everything unfold with a racing-heart and shocked-detachment.

Axton was still lowly growling under his breath, getting a talking-down to by a much shorter, stockier man as the other two warily gave him space, watching to see if he’d take off after the Hyperion alpha. Whatever the shorter man was saying to him, it served to bring everything back from the cusp a bit. Axton’s grim expression was aimed at the floor, listening to whatever was being said to him while gathering himself. He looked up after a moment, eyes meeting Rhys’ own, and he frowned with concern.

The short man left Axton’s side while the other two tried to herd the alpha further within the facilities and out of the main lobby while the secretary at the desk thanked them. Rhys was stuck where he was, might not have moved if the shorter man hadn’t come up to him to gently lay a warm palm on his forearm.
“I’m Sal. You okay there?”

Rhys only nodded, nose picking up alpha scent from the much-shorter man before him. His scent was vaguely familiar, and Rhys realized this was the same man that dropped off supplies at his apartment. He wished he could offer him a smile, but he just didn’t have it in him.

“Let’s get you back to Ax, okay?” He gently applied pressure to Rhys’ arm, and the omega followed in Axton’s footsteps. “Just have a cool down. Everything is okay.”

They were escorted to an empty room and told to wait, left alone to the buzz of a coffee machine and empty chairs; a break room for lower-level staff.

Rhys took a seat, still trying to inwardly process seeing Jack after so damn long, as Axton paced. He felt shaky over the confrontation, nerves and emotions roiling his guts, and he watched Axton with uncertainty. Neither of them were okay after that, that much was clear.

Rhys’ hand was at the back of his neck, scratching nervously while Axton tried several times to say something, but kept falling flat. This wasn’t exactly a situation he’d been in before, and he didn’t know how to proceed.

He stopped in his pacing to instead gently wrap an arm around Rhys, bending at the waist to hold him. He noticed the back of Rhys’ neck, skin pink as he clawed at it, and under that the tiniest pricks of blood where his nails made indents.

“Hey now… stop that,” Axton said gently, moving the arm around Rhys to put his hand over the one the omega had at his neck. His warm palm flattened Rhys’ own, and he murmured encouragingly at the younger man as he took it in his. Rhys’ eyes darted to his as Axton gave him a gentle squeeze, eyes moving with concern over the welts the younger man had given himself. “Lemme see darlin’, okay?”

“It hurts.”

“Yeah, you got yourself a bit there. Let me see if I can find the first aid kit.”

Rhys was shaking his head as Axton rifled through cabinets to come away with a simple white supply box. “No, not that. The-- It stings. It’s throbbing or something and it hurts.” He grabbed one of Axton’s big hands spreading the man’s palm wide before placing it on the back of his neck as if to prove he wasn’t making it up.

He watched Axton’s face for confirmation as the alpha gently cupped the flesh there, feeling the pounding of Rhys’ heart strong and hot in the sensitive gland. Rhys was already wriggling his own hand back under Axton’s as he dug his fingers in angrily at the spot, words not quite making sense as he reached a near-panic state. “It hurts. I want it-- If it could come out--”

“Hey…”

Axton cupped both sides of Rhys’ cheeks, directing the omega’s gaze until they were seeing eye to fearful eye. His hands were warm and soothing and self-assured as Rhys pressed into the hold, eyes frantic and desperate for any kind of comfort. His hands came to cover Axton’s own, keeping them there and looking for any sort of solution to the wild signals running through him.

“You’re alright, okay? You’re alright.” The amount of defiant confidence mixed with resoluteness gave the otherwise easygoing man's voice an edge. “We’ll put an ice pack on it and you’ll be okay. Nothin’s changed, okay darlin’? I’m still here for ya. We’ve still got this.”
Rhys whined at that, leaning forward to bump his head into Axton’s middle and wrap his arms around the bigger man. The alpha returned the hug as Rhys quickly spilled his every worry into his t-shirt; that seeing Jack undid everything Axton was trying to help him with, that he was going to get worse again, the very real fear over dying of broken bond. It was all for naught.

“-and it doesn’t even matter if we didn’t see any commercials now because--”

“No, no, you’re stronger than that knothead and you’ll beat this.” Axton’s voice was a lot more confident than he felt, Rhys’ own fears identical to his own. The next few hours would tell him just how bad seeing that asshole would be for the omega. For now, he had to be there for him. “So much stronger than you think, Rhys.”

“At least one of is,” Rhys tried weakly for a laugh, still muttering into Axton’s middle. It came out half-sob. “You gave Jack something to think about at least.”

Instead of laughing, Axton’s brows knit together in serious thought, and he pet at Rhys to dispel his own nervous energy. “That guy… I can’t believe-- I've never wanted more to just--”

Rhys looked up, watery eyes meeting the concerned fire in Axton’s, and the alpha huffed to himself in self-chastisement for his actions throughout.

“Sorry… I'm sorry Rhys…” Axton tried to get control of himself while Rhys sat there trying not to shake from nerves, and he gently ran a hand through Rhys’ fluffy hair, still giving the younger man lingering comforting touches.

Axton couldn’t remember the last time he’d gotten angry enough to rip another alpha apart, and it was hard to calm himself down when just the thought--

He didn’t mean to startle the omega or make matters worse, but damn. Handsome Jack was a real piece of work.

Axton bent down lower to hold Rhys proper, arms around him so he could feel just how much the younger man was shaking. He nuzzled him and kissed his hair and applied all the touches that comforted him as a child, hoping it would calm away any of the shakes and nerves eating away at Rhys.

“I’m sorry for jumping at him, Rhys.”

“It’s okay,” Rhys’ voice came muffled by Axton’s neck where he tucked himself away. “It's fine, Ax.”

“No, no it was unprofessional. My instincts just took over and that was-- I shouldn't have acted that way.”

Rhys shook his head. “It's really okay.” Rhys pulled back to look at him, giving the other man a weak smile. “You're way too good, Ax. Honestly, you defend me and then apologize for it. That's just-- thank you.”

Axton’s cheeks went pink, but he still frowned to himself. “…I didn’t wanna act that way in front of you…”

Rhys snorted somewhat humorlessly. “Would have been nice if you'd knocked some of his teeth out.”

The alpha gave him an expression of surprise, brows straight up on that handsome face. It made
Rhys smiled. “Well... I'll keep that in mind.”

Rhys’ smile weakened and his eyes filled with tears, and Axton quickly brought him back in for a hug. “I just... He acted like it was nothing,” he managed to get out, breath hitching. His fingers dug into Axton’s back, holding tight, and the alpha nuzzled him close.

“Total asshole, Rhys. You’re so much better than he deserves, darlin’. Don’t forget that.” Rhys’ huff was warm against Axton’s t-shirt, and the alpha cuddled him closer, voice gruff and meaningful. “I mean it.”

Rhys muffled a ‘thanks’ into Axton’s shirt, knowing he was surely staining it with tears and possibly snot. He pulled back to scrub a hand over his cheeks, taking a deep, unsteady breath while Axton still held him. “…I think I got snot on your shirt…” he muttered.

Axton just chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, sweetheart.” He hugged him again, and Rhys melted back into the embrace. ‘I’ll get you through this. I promise.”

There was a gentle knock on the door, and Sal stuck his head in. “Hey amigo, uh, HR wants to see you…” His eyes moved to Rhys, though Axton didn’t let him go. “It’s all okay, promise buddy.”

Rhys snorted to himself and stuck his face back into Axton’s shirt. He appreciated the kindness, but he was sure HR wouldn’t look kindly upon fighting with the head of Hyperion on their own grounds.

“Rhys,” Axton spoke to the younger man’s hair before the omega looked up. “Do you want to wait in here while--”

“No.”

Axton’s eyes met Sal’s, and the other alpha nodded before leaving the room. Axton looked down to meet Rhys’ eyes with concern. “You okay?”

No, he really wasn’t. But he didn’t want to leave Axton. “I’ll be okay.”

The head alpha in HR didn’t spare them the severe set of her lips as Axton and Rhys sat across from her. If she’d taken in Rhys’ red-rimmed eyes or Axton’s tear-stained shirt, it didn’t show in her expression. She watched them with sharp blue eyes from behind no-nonsense glasses, and it made Rhys’ heart beat a little faster, concern over his job eating at him yet again.

She sighed as she steepled her fingers beneath her chin. It made Rhys worry, but the squeeze Ax gave his hand made him feel just the slightest sliver better. The woman sighed again before speaking.

“What did you think, attacking the CEO of Hyperion on Atlas grounds?” She gave Axton a growl for his behavior, attention solely on the alpha and ignoring the omega. Rhys wasn’t sure if it was a kindness or a lack of interest.

“What was he doing here?” Axton countered, voice almost soft in deference to the omega at his side.

“That has no bearing on this conversation. You’re supposed to be doing your job.” She spared Rhys a pointed glance, but her attention remained on Axton. The alpha stayed silent.

“It… it was…” Rhys started weakly, voice tapering off as her attention was drawn to him. He cleared his throat under her intense gaze. “Handsome Jack was… is my ex…”
It was like the air had been sucked out of the room with that statement. Axton’s hand gave his another squeeze as the other alpha repeated his words.

“Your ex....” She gave Axton a questioning look he returned with a nod, and the relationship between everything became clear. It showed how unnerved she was by the way she sat up straighter in her chair. Her attention was now being held by Rhys. “I’d keep that to myself, Mr. Sommerset.” She gave Axton a look and turned her attention back on the omega. "Hyperion’s been trying to buy us out every six months since we’ve had stock options. Our new exhibitions have them worried about the market share; he came in person this time.”

She removed her glasses to rub at the bridge of her nose, the first real movement that made Rhys think she was as human as the rest of them. Axton, for his part, didn’t seem all that intimidated by her.

She looked back up with a raise of one brow. “You still shouldn't have attacked him, Axton.”

“He started it,” Axton said stubbornly. She gave the alpha a severe look. “He slandered Mr. Sommerset. And Atlas.”

“Hyperion bastard...” she said under her breath, and it made Rhys breathe just that much more easily. “That may be... But if he takes any action against Atlas...”

“He won’t,” Rhys spoke up, knowing what bad press it would mean for the man; to have been attacked over an omega he’d abandoned. The heartless image would cause Hyperion’s stock to take a dive. “I can almost guarantee it.”

She looked back at Axton. “It’s your ass if he does, Axton.”

“That’s fine,” the alpha said resolutely, having trouble keeping the growl from his voice.

She exhaled in a huff, giving them both a look before making a few notes to herself. “You can go. I’ll alert security not to let that asshole back in the building if they see him,” she spoke plainly. “And you Mr. Sommerset... It’s good to see you’re doing well.”

“Thank you,” Rhys spoke up, earning a slight smile from the woman that made his heart skip a beat in shock, but he went with Axton as the older man thanked her and they left.

“You still wanna grab that stuff from your office?”

“Yeah...” Rhys replied with a sullen look. “I’m not coming all this way and seeing that knothead for nothing.”

Axton wrapped an arm around him as they got in the elevator that would take them to his prototypes.

“She was scary,” Rhys murmured as he leaned into Axton for another proper hug which the alpha was only too keen on giving.

“She’s tough as nails, but she’s got our best interests at heart. She’s the one who’s making the half-days possible. My supervisor reports directly to her... He’s kind of a hardass but she’s the one who has the end-say.”

Rhys looked up in minor shock. “Really?”

Axton nodded. “Normal circumstances, you’d just be back at work ‘til things broke. She’s not heartless, though. I’ve met her omega; totally head-over-heels.” He smiled warmly to himself. “Done
some check-ins when they were expecting their third kid. She’s good people.”

“...Atlas really is different from Hyperion.”

Axton just smiled and nodded, letting him go as they got off on Rhys’ floor to retrieve the things he’d need.

“...You think he knew you were working there?”

“Maybe, but that’s giving him too much credit…” Rhys frowned dismissively to himself as they were cuddled up together on the couch. They had some comedy box set on tv that neither were really paying attention to. After putting an ice pack on his throbbing neck and fresh changes of clothes for the both of them, he’d wanted nothing more than to be cuddled. The day had been the literal definition of exhausting. “Would it be too much to believe in coincidence that the universe is conspiring against me?”

Axton chuckled at his dramatic words and held him close. “At least you’ve got me, darlin’. That’s a hell of a force right there.”

Rhys snorted, breathing in Axton’s scent and hunkering down closer to him. He could still smell Jack in his nose, and it was discomforting. Talking about that knothead was helping somewhat at least.

“He’s a piece of work, ain’t he?”

“...Yeah.”

“How’d you fall in love with something like that?” Axton immediately cursed himself for that question: the way it came out, his tone, the judgment even if he didn’t mean it. “Shit I-- Sorry I didn’t mean it like--”

“No, you’ve got it right,” Rhys said with a humorless smile, enjoying the way Axton pet him in apology. It was a question he’d often asked of himself. “Jack can be very charming when he wants to. And he’s a good manipulator. When everything’s said and done, he is brilliant. It’s a perfect recipe for douchebag.” Axton noisily exhaled out his nose. Rhys shared some of the disgust the other alpha must feel. “He was my hero,” he offered weakly. “I was blinded by it all maybe.” He snorted humorlessly. “Definitely infatuated. Maybe the bond dragged it out further… I just want it all done.”

“No point dwelling on it I guess. Sorry, I didn’t mean to like, judge you or anything. You know I’m on your side, right?”

“Yeah,” Rhys said with a genuine smile. “I still get to see you every day, right? You have to go in tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” he replied with a gruff chuckle. “I’ll have to go in for half-days, but I’ll stick around for as long as you’ll let me, darlin’. My nights are yours, free of charge.” He grinned as Rhys snickered.

The idea of sleeping alone was daunting. He definitely wanted Axton to stay until this whole business was finally, finally done. He’d gotten so used to Axton’s presence so quickly that it felt wrong to be alone. For now, he could enjoy Axton’s big arms around him and his warmth and his scent.
“Maybe you should just move in,” Rhys said with a smirk that made Axton laugh. “I could use a live-in butler.”

“What are friends for,” the big alpha laughed harder, the movement shaking the omega. “Someone’s gotta make sure you’re eating more than those toaster pastries.”

Rhys snickered. “You’re just mad because Sal brought the cinnamon ones.”

“Strawberry or nothin’, darlin’.”

It felt good to laugh about stupid, trivial things. Made him feel normal. The big alpha was a good distraction from anything and everything Jack. Rhys chuffed into his shirt and pulled the blanket over them up to his neck, really making himself comfortable while the alpha chuckled at his movements. “Just, thank you, Ax. Seeing Jack really rattled me.”

“He’s not undoing any of this, sweetheart, so stay strong. You’ll feel like a million bucks once the bond breaks. We’ll go get ice cream or something to celebrate.”

“I’d like that.” Rhys smiled up at him. “All this healthy stuff you’re feeding me, I deserve ice cream.”

“I’ll buy.” Axton’s smile dimmer and his eyes narrowed slightly in concern. “...Does he know where you live?”

Rhys snorted. “If he did, he’s never bothered stopping by. I moved apartments when I changed jobs anyways. Changed my number, too.”

That was a secure enough answer for the other man. “Well, I'll be here if he tries anything else stupid. So don't worry.”

Rhys looked at the other man with the expression of one trying to figure something out. “You don’t think... He was yelling an awful lot of stuff about ‘getting you’, Ax.”

“Darlin’, I hope I see him again. Knock a couple of those teeth loose, make us friendship bracelets.”

Rhys dissolved into undignified snorts and snickers at that, laughing into Axton’s chest. It set the alpha off too, chuckles and easy grins down at the omega in his arms. It took a while before they calmed into easy smiles. Rhys wiped tears from his eyes that weren’t completely from amusement, but that was okay. Jack had it coming, after all.

“I've got some reports to sign and stuff to write up and file, and then it's back to our regularly scheduled program,” Axton said with a smile. “Should be back around lunchtime if ya’ve got any special requests for me to pick up.”

“You're seriously the best, you know that?” Rhys said as he rubbed his face in the alpha’s chest and held tight to Axton’s middle. The big alpha just hummed pleasantly in his throat.

“Do you want me to wake you up before I go in tomorrow?”

Rhys thought on that for a moment. “No. I'll sleep longer if I don't know you're gone. Maybe until you come back even.” He laughed a little humorlessly. “I swear I used to be like a normal person... able to live on their own and stuff.”

Axton snorted and smiled as he ran a hand through Rhys’ hair affectionately. “It's all part of the process, darlin’. I promise ya that.”
“I don’t wanna think about Jack, so maybe it’ll be good to sleep in.”

“Right. Text me when you wake up though, okay?”

“I can do that… Gotta send you my lunch order and all,” he said with a smile.

Axton laughed. “That you do.” He bumped Rhys’ head with his own in an affectionate manner, and patted him over the blanket. “We’ll beat this, okay? This is just the next step.”

“…I might end up texting you if I’m bored.” Bored was the least of Rhys’ concerns. He was scared he’d sit and dwell on Jack without Axton there to distract him.

“You text me whatever and whenever you want, and I’ll answer it. Even if it’s the punchline to that joke you can’t remember.”

“I will remember it eventually,” Rhys stubbornly muttered.

“The setup was still funny, darlin’.”

“It doesn’t count if I can’t remember the wording of the end. That was what made it work.”

Axton grinned. “Well, you text me regardless.” He gave Rhys a full-body squeeze to drive his next point home. “If you’re feeling lonely, you message me too, okay?” Rhys sniffed at that. “I mean it. I’m coming back regardless, Rhys. It’s just a half-day and you’ll be in contact the whole time if ya want.” Axton looked down until Rhys met his eyes, and he pet him with a grin. “I have excellent cell service. Hope you like cat memes.”

Rhys rolled his eyes and gave Axton’s chin a bump of his own with a smirk. “Good luck finding one I haven’t seen.”

Axton chuckled and promised it would be his sole goal the next day at work.

Chapter End Notes

We haven't seen the last of douchenozzle supreme, not by a long shot >:D

I love comments, love to see how you guys are feeling about things and if stuff is working and whatnot hehe hope you're having fun! Cuz i am! :D

my tumblr | my fic masterlist archive
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

We finally get some smut in! :D ...even if it's only a little selfish indulgence heheheh :) I'll speed things up after this promise :O

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As he quietly dressed and left the sleeping omega all tucked in and warm in bed, Axton worried about being apart from the younger man for the first time in weeks.

He was more worried than he wanted to admit, regardless of how much he reassured Rhys everything would be fine and it was all okay. This was new territory for Axton; the omegas he’d cared for in the past hadn’t had contact with exes while he’d taken care of them. And Rhys had a clusterfuck of a run-in with Handsome Jack not even twenty-four full hours earlier. It made the alpha anxious as hell, wanting to crawl back into bed and cuddle the younger man’s worries away.

Rhys seemed okay, but that could be any number of things; shock, things not quite yet fully processing, or just an act for Axton’s benefit. That the omega worried about him was touching, but Rhys’ state was of the utmost importance here.

Axton hated that Atlas still expected him to come in after that; that they were so sure Rhys was on the mend that plans could go ahead as expected and proceed with the half-days. A heated call while Rhys was in the shower only resulted in the alpha getting yelled at by his supervisor to stop making assumptions; for them to first see how Rhys fared on his own instead of assuming he was still fragile. Even after a run in with the very man who bonded him, and was trying to buy out their business.

It was one giant clusterfuck after another.

Some days Axton really wished he could punch his supervisor in his damn face. He’d be lodging a complaint with HR about ‘procedural protocol’ when he had the chance, and that such situations were indeed extenuating and dire. If Rhys was any worse for wear when he came back, he was going to chew his damn supervisor out.

Hoping Rhys slept in nice and late, Axton locked the omega in his apartment and made his way to work. He offered a sheepish smile to the building secretary at the front desk, skulking to the elevators and getting off on his floor to settle at his desk. He switched chairs with Sal, noticing the other alpha had co-opted his during his absence, and smirked as he piled stuff back on the other alpha’s desk.

A text from Rhys several hours later made the alpha feel a little better (Rhys had managed to sleep in proper), and check-ins a couple times every hour made him sure the younger man would be okay until he returned.

If Sal noticed how often he checked the clock between reports, he didn’t say anything. His smug smirk said enough as was.

--

Rhys laid in bed as the reality of everything finally sunk in.
He’d seen Jack. He’d finally seen Jack. Every single bit of want and yearning and feeling of needing coming from his bond had finally been tested, and Rhys was able to overpower the thing in his neck.

He hadn’t run to Jack’s arms like his nightmares predicted, or begged the man to take him back and be with him like they were ‘supposed’ to. He’d instead finally gotten to yell out his frustrations at the man who’d abandoned him, strong enough to deny their bond to his face, and repress the instinctual urge telling him to submit to his alpha.

It felt… good having yelled at Handsome Jack’s stupid smug mug. Even though his bonding gland still throbbed this morning, indignant and swollen and begging for an ice pack, he was glad to finally confront Jack for his absence. Even if he hadn’t gotten to say too much, he almost felt like he’d gotten a small sense of closure.

It emotionally hurt more than he wanted to acknowledge, but the fact that Axton had been there for him, that there had been witnesses to Jack’s flippancy where he was concerned, made Rhys feel more sane; more right.

It wasn't all in his head; Jack was a shit alpha. He did behave in ways a normal person simply wouldn't.

The most important takeaway was this: It wasn't Rhys. He had never been deficient, or lacking, or a bad omega in any way; it was entirely Jack being an asshole, and he didn’t deserve being bonded and abandoned the way he had been.

While his bonding gland still bothered him, it was easier to ignore when presented with cold hard facts that even Rhys’ subconscious couldn’t ignore. The omega was never more certain than now that he wanted nothing to do with Handsome Jack ever again, no matter the desperation his bond was trying to prod him to action with.

If he could never see him again, it would still be too soon. And once their bond broke, he’d be free. He’d joked with Axton about finding and burning what few pictures he had left of him and Jack, but he was now certain that once their bond broke, it would be the first thing he’d do to celebrate. He’d never have to waste another second on Jack after that, free to pursue whatever and whoever he might want without the nagging feeling that he was doing something wrong.

His mind drifted from unpleasant things to more happy hopes concerning his present future. There was a lot to look forward to, like climbing the hierarchy at Atlas. Or waiting for Axton to get off work and come back to him.

Or the insistent erection between his legs that defied every attempt at being ignored.

He squirmed amongst the covers, morning wood brushing against his underwear in a not-unpleasant way. A low-simmering arousal pleasantly thrummed through him, and he almost laughed out loud to himself at the realization.

Was being just that hopeful about the future really turning him on? That had to be pathetic. Not as pathetic as the last time he’d taken himself to hand though— a time he couldn't even properly recall.

How long had it even been since he'd gotten himself off? He hadn't felt like it for ages (something else he'd blame on Jack’s influence), but now… Well, he didn’t know where the urge came from or why, but he was certainly in a mood to indulge himself. Almost as if giving a big ‘fuck you’ to Jack for killing his arousal and drives and urges in the first place with his abandonment.

Hell, he'd do it out of sheer spite if anything else.
Rhys brushed his fingers over the fabric of his pajama pants where they jutted out, softly and then a little firmer with a smile. It felt good. Better than good. Cupping himself, he apologized to his dick for neglecting it for so long, smirking as he then wiggled out of his pajama pants to leave only his underwear on.

He laid back into the covers with a sigh, teasing the length of his cock under the much-thinner fabric of his underwear.

It was nice. Real nice. He felt silly being so enthralled by himself, but it had been a while, and he was extra-sensitive from lack of touch. Better be careful if he wanted the experience to last.

He teased his hand under the elastic band, giving himself a testing downstroke before taking himself in hand. He honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd actually jerked off, which was a travesty in its own, but also told him just how bad he must’ve been. He gave a dirty chuckle to himself as he stroked to the base and then the head, already leaking precome as he once again got his lay of the land.

He lazily stroked himself just enjoying the sensation before his mind began to wander; about how long it had been, about how he’d gotten to this state right now, and his gratitude that Axton had found him when he did to even have this little indulgent moment.

His sheets smelled like Axton, the alpha’s musky scent permeating his brain and leading to fantasy. He felt a little guilty, but the big alpha wasn’t here right now… no harm done if he thought of those strong arms and broad shoulders… The scars on his face that stretched just a bit when he showed that crooked grin or laughed at something Rhys said.

Axton was attractive. It was a foregone conclusion that Rhys would think of him, especially surrounded by his scent in his own bed. Not like the other man could read his mind, nor was here to catch him in the act.

Would the big alpha like what he saw if he did? Probably. A crooked smile would come over that handsome face and he’d tell Rhys he deserved a little treat after so long, that he’d earned it, and so, so much more. Axton would take him up with his own hand, tell him it was good for the healing process… Slowly work him over, half twists and thumbing the head every other stroke as he scented up Rhys’ neck and said sweet things in that gruff voice of his.

Rhys was leaking into his own palm, could feel himself pleasantly slick as his hand mimicked the motions in his fantasy. When was the last time he even got slick? His last heat? That had been hell. This, though… This was the very opposite.

His heart sped up, breath coming quicker as he jerked himself with one hand, the other teasing a nipple up under his pajama shirt as he clenched down on nothingness. It would be better if there was something, but for now, it all felt good, and he didn’t miss out for the lack.

If he had his choice in the matter though…

Axton would tease a finger into him-- no, two fingers- as his strokes would pick up pace. He’d growl in that pleasantly gruff voice, scent up his throat, maybe nip at his skin. He’d pet at him, big warm hands on Rhys’ body as he encouraged him, urging him toward his finish, one arm wrapped around him while the other would roll his balls with a firm thumb. Axton was probably a great kisser; would seal his mouth with Rhys’ own, feel his tongue against his own, and make pleased sounds while his fingers would work inside of him and make him see stars.

Rhys’ rhythm faltered a bit as his hips thrust into his hand, cock lurching as he felt himself at the
tipping point. His nipples were hard as he tugged and pinched at them with one hand, breathing heavy as his other was slippery with gathered slick and precome easing it quickly over his cock.

He was desperate at this point, begging the Axton in his mind to please just *fuck* him-- fingers wouldn’t be enough, not at the point he was at- and Axton would climb over him and pin him, *fuck* into him and *bite* him and--

Rhys ended up coming over his hand with a gasped moan, cock lurching with every shot of thick white over his hand and onto his stomach. He slowly stroked himself through his orgasm until he had nothing else to give, heart wildly pounding as he laughed and caught his breath. His cock softened on his hip and he’d made quite a mess, but he hadn’t felt such exhilaration in a long time. Such an endorphin rush was something he’d become unaccustomed to.

Rhys felt dirty and amazingly good at the same time. It was probably wrong to have a dirty fantasy about the man whose job was to literally take care of him. He should probably feel guilty, coming all over himself to the thought of Axton biting him… But it was his own brain and no one else would ever know, so he could imagine what he wanted, and just keep his little self-indulgent masturbation fantasies to himself.

He wiped himself off with his sheets without a care, knowing that even if he *hadn’t* dirtied them--having come on *himself-* that he wasn’t going to take a chance at leaving some small latent scent that Axton might pick up on when the other man came back. Everything was getting laundered with a nice double helping of detergent and fresh-sheets put on without anyone the wiser.

And even if he *could* pick up a scent that Rhys had had a good time in his absence, the omega was pretty sure the alpha would never mention it in the first place, so no harm done.

Rhys groped for his phone with his arguably-clean hand, pulling up Axton’s information and shooting him a text with a little self-amused snort to himself.

<< i woke up and found i’m missing one cuddly alpha snoring next to me 
<< way too quiet around here

Rhys waited a few moments after he pressed send, sudden worry through his feel-good afterglow that that was too-personal, but moments later there was typing before he got a reply that made him smile.

>> HAHA
>> Good morning to you 2 :) 
>> Or good afternoon, sleepyhead ;D

Rhys bit his lip fondly at the message, quickly typing back.

<< don’t be jealous
<< ;p

Axton was typing back, and Rhys stretched before pulling in on himself with a smile. The alpha hadn’t been lying when he’d said Rhys could contact him any time. There was hardly any wait at all before Axton was messaging him back.

>> I’m very jealous. Mornings are harder when you can’t sleep in

Rhys actually snorted, face going red at what was only to *him* a double entendre.

>> And when coffee isn’t even in the same room >;(
Rhys laughed out loud at that, thinking he’d still end up getting Axton a coffee maker for their office once this was all over. It was just cruel and wrong that they didn’t have a personal one.

<< im working on it
<< we’ll discuss the hostile corporate takeover after lunch
<< :D

More typing right back kept the smile on Rhys’ face, even as Axton asked what he wanted for lunch and teased about egg-based entrees if Rhys didn’t come to a decision before he left the office later. The omega promised to figure it out before then, and that he wouldn’t let Axton in if the alpha showed up with anything featuring eggs as the main dish.

He could imagine the way it must’ve made the older man laugh, an ‘LOL!!’ hardly doing Axton’s rich laugh justice, and he let the alpha get back to his paperwork.

Rhys shot a judgmental look at his sheets and pulled himself out of bed with more motivation than unsullied sheets would have ever garnered, stripping everything for the washer before putting his own self in the shower.

--

Axton’s phone buzzed with a new notification from Rhys since the past hour, getting the attention of his counterpart who merely smirked before tending back to his own work. Axton smiled as he picked it up, reading and responding just as quick.

<< it’s not too late for my lunch order right? :D

Axton considered making a joke about egg salad sandwiches, but thought better of it. Rhys seemed in good spirits as far as he could tell, but text was not a good indicator of tone, so he saved his jokes and teasing for when he actually saw the omega later.

>> No problemo! What do you want?

<< either takeout from the chinese place across the street or cheeseburgers from next door
<< im not sure yet

Both sounded good to Axton, frankly. The chinese place across the street from Atlas had tasty, authentic food on the cheap, but the burger place in the law firm’s courtyard that shared the plaza was artery-clogging ecstasy in grease-stained paper.

The two options also meant Axton could easily grab them food before he went to his car, no extra stops along the way necessary. Rhys had to know that it was an easy option, so he decided a tiny bit of teasing was maybe okay.

>> Well you’ve got until I leave here to decide…
>> Otherwise it’s scrambled eggs for dinner :O

Axton silently chuckled to himself in amusement imagining the sour look on Rhys’ face. He snorted at what must’ve been furious typing, the response instant, one after the other.

<< we’re out of eggs. so’s the grocery store
<< i’m pretty sure the chickens went on strike
<< it made headlines Ax. it’s all over the news
He grinned. If Rhys was feeling playful, which this clearly was, then Axton’s gut-twisting worry over him had been for naught. The likening of himself to a mother-hen made him snicker given their conversation. He was relieved Rhys seemed to be in good spirits after the day before.

>> I’m off work soon, so hope you can make up your mind by then ;)

<< wait how long is that? Are you coming home now? :O

>> About an hr and a half:
>> Clock is ticking ;)

<< you’re mean :
<< i’ll let you know before then ;)

>> Sure thing

<< get back to work

Axton laughed out loud before typing to the omega, deciding to pick up fortune cookies or an ice cream for surprise dessert. His cheeks hurts from grinning so wide, and he looked forward to what would surely be the omega’s pleasantly-surprised smile.

>> HAHA
>> You’ve got it sweetheart
>> See you soon

Axton had a smile on his face as he put his phone to the side, continuing his paperwork and hoping Rhys would come to a timely decision. He personally leaned towards the chinese food.

“Soooo…."

“What?” Axton asked indifferently, his shorter, muscular friend regarding him with a knowing grin. Sal’s hands were behind his head in amusement as he leaned his chair all the way back, all work he’d been doing halted to watch the other alpha with a smirk that made Axton’s cheeks turn pink. “What, Sal?”

The short alpha’s grin was wide and toothy. “Who’s that?”

Axton tempered his grin into a frown at the teasing look leveled his way, voice a little too stiff and businesslike to actually be so detached from the situation. It only made the other man grin wider. “The omega I’ve been taking care of. Mr. Sommerset.”

“Same from yesterday?” Sal’s voice took on a different tone of amusement as his thoughts suddenly switched gears. “You know you’re kind of everyone’s hero around here right now? I told you that, right?” Axton snorted dismissively, and the other alpha’s grin only grew. “You sucker punched Mr. Hyperion Asshole right to his weird-ass face. Everyone here wants to buy you lunch, amigo.”

Axton growled under his breath but the other alpha only barked out a laugh. Axton signed off on another incident report to hand in to their tightwad supervisor. His knuckles were slightly sore from punching Handsome Jack, but he would’ve preferred they bled with more damage. He understood he’d more or less experienced the Atlas dream, but his actions weren’t due to company loyalty.

“I would’ve broke his damn nose if you guys didn't stop me.”

Sal whistled long and low. “Not that I’m saying you shouldn’t have given him a few new scars, but
it’s not like you to go all personal on douchebag pendejos. Not for free, anyways,” he added with a smirk. “So who paid you to encourage him to leave our stocks alone?”

Axton huffed. Sal didn’t know the real reason he’d attacked Handsome Jack. The building secretary might have, though she’d been on the phone so he didn’t know just what she’d heard, but as far as HR spun it, Rhys’ private life was his own, and the mutual hatred of Hyperion was something that tied everyone together in arms at Atlas.

Sal, though… He could tell Sal. The other alpha had been helping him care for Rhys, though in a far-less direct manner. Salvador was also more discrete than anyone gave him credit for, and a brother in arms. They came from the same backgrounds and now covered each other in an office environment, and an extra-watchful pair of eyes was never something to scoff at.

“That’s not why I punched him.” Axton put everything he’d been working on down to look at his friend and coworker seriously. “Ya know with Rhys and how bad he was when I found him? That knothead’s the one who abandoned him.”

Sal’s eyebrows shot up into his hair, the chair legs coming down with a slam. “That’s who did it? Pinche hijo de la puta.”

“Ya got that right. If he shows his face around here again I’m gonna kill him,” Axton growled.

Sal raised a brow, not one to question the true intentions of what could simply be construed as trash talk, but he was concerned just the same. They both knew what the other was capable of. “...That’s not low-profile work, man.”

Axton gave the other man a grim look, speaking low for the sensitivity of the subject. “He’s had broken bond for six months, Sal.”

It was Salvador’s turn to growl under his breath, the other omega wellness officer turning beet red. It was more or less the same reaction Axton had had; such suffering was unheard of. Anyone subjecting an omega to that-- and six months was unheard of- was worse than cruel. “You need an alibi to kill that bastard, I’ve got you.”

Axton snorted humorlessly, the things he’d like to do to Handsome Jack given the chance being varied and many. Made him miss his old days of paramilitary ruthlessness and the rules of war. The way Jack clearly didn’t give a single shit about Rhys boiled his blood. Everything Rhys had said, and all the rumors he’d heard regarding the head of one of the biggest corporations out there, was all true. Handsome Jack was a heartless son of a bitch.

They each went back to their respective work documents, idle chatter about recent check-ins, or employees management was a little concerned about, filling the heavy silence. Sal had a small handful of people he was keeping tabs on (nothing as serious as Rhys, though) and Axton was due to take on some of them so as to lighten the other man’s load. Rhys was his first and foremost priority, but a few omegas on pregnancy leave either had documents needing to be picked up, Atlas gift packages delivered, or just general household assistance as provided by the company’s very generous leave benefits.

Overall, it was more of the usual, and while not overwhelming, Sal had been carrying the load for both of them. Axton was due to start making rounds again. The paperwork was the most tedious part, but he was able to breeze right through it.

Axton’s phone rang and his face lit up in a smile. Rhys must have decided on his takeout preference last-minute. He crossed his fingers on chinese food as he answered.
“Hey darlin’! I'm just finishing up here--”

“Jack’s car is outside.”

Axton froze at the bald panic in the omega’s voice at the blunt statement. His momentary silence resulted in Rhys’ voice raising an octave, wondering if he was still there on the other end of the line.

“Axton?”

“Look, lock your doors and stay away from the windows, keep your phone with you, I'll be there in five minutes, ya got that?”

“Yeah… yeah I do.”

“You just sit tight darlin’, don't answer the door for anyone but me, I'll be right there.” Axton gave Sal a few quick gestures in explanation as he was already leaving their shared office, taking the stairs and not waiting for the elevator. “I'm leaving right now, okay Rhys? I'm on my way.”

--

Rhys paced the hall of his apartment that had no window-access, nervous and scared as hell.

It had been about an hour since Rhys had first noticed the car, and though nothing particularly sinister had happened, his heart was racing and he was sweating nervous.

He’d thought it had looked familiar, but he didn’t pay it any mind until he realized it had been there idling for some time. The shock to his system when he realized exactly what he was looking at had nearly given him a heart attack, and he’d dove for his phone to immediately call Axton.

He thought his heart was going to jump out of his throat when he heard a knock on the door, shrinking in on himself until he heard the familiar voice of his alpha.

“Rhys? It's me, hey.”

The omega rushed to the door, but not soon enough for Axton as the alpha tried the locked knob, voice filled with urgency as he pounded on the door.

“Rhys?”

Relief flooded the alpha as the younger man opened the door, immediately grabbing and clinging to the other man. Rhys pressed his cheek into Axton's neck, fingers curling into the back of his jacket as he scented the alpha with worry. Axton shut the door behind them somewhat awkwardly, locking it before wrapping his arms around the omega, one hand pressing about him in inventory of any damage or concerns.

“You okay? He do anything to you?”

His voice was a comforting growl, the sound deep and pleasant against Rhys’ cheek as Axton held him. The feel of the alpha’s nose against his own skin made Rhys shiver, the concerned and possessive scenting a balm to his frayed nerves.

Jack couldn’t touch him. He wasn’t his alpha anymore. Wouldn’t be ever again once the bond broke. This alpha wouldn't let him do anything to him. Axton was more than capable of keeping him safe and protecting him from the other man. He was okay. It would be okay.

“It's just his car,” Rhys murmured, cuddling close and feeling almost silly for alarming the other man
now that he was safe in his arms. “I’m okay, it just… I was scared.”

Axton held him for several long moments, just scenting the omega until he calmed down, holding him as if to reassure them both. “I’m glad ya called me, okay? You did the right thing, darlin’. It’s okay.”

Rhys could feel Axton’s heartbeat still a little fast in the alpha’s own chest, his obvious concern and worry over him giving Rhys cause to squeeze him that much tighter. He was never more grateful for the alpha, so relieved he was here with him.

“Which car is it?” Axton murmured after a moment, gently pulling apart from Rhys to look into troubled eyes.

“It’s the yellow one with the black stripe down the side. The sports car.”

Axton growled in his throat, pressed a reassuring kiss to the top of Rhys’ fluffy hair before stalking over to the window. He narrowed his eyes at the wasp-yellow car down in the parking lot, unable to see if anyone was even inside due to the tinting. The way it was double parked though, there was clear idling. The available, open spaces further proved it didn’t belong there.

Axton pulled the blinds proper so whoever was in there knew he was in there. He gave the car a hard stare before stepping away.

“You got a baseball bat or something sweetheart?”

Rhys’ eyes widened. “Axton don’t.”

The alpha offered him a crooked, though serious grin, stepped over to the omega to put both hands on his shoulders in a reassuring squeeze, voice gruff. “It'll be fine. I doubt he's that stupid. I just want to put a few dents in that ugly car. He can explain to police what he was doing here in the first place to get them.”

“I-I don’t-” Rhys started with a nervous laugh, “I don't play any sports… I've got a mag-lite though.”

“One of those heavy flashlights?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, darlin’, that'll work.”

Axton was armed with the long flashlight similar to the ones security had back at Atlas, Rhys holding his hand and asking him to just call the police as the alpha was telling him to lock his door again. Rhys did as he asked, nervous as he shut the door to the other man, and Axton stalked off down the hallway and down several flights of stairs towards the sound of an idling engine.

By the time he'd made it to the parking lot, the sports car peeled out. Axton jogged after it with a scowl, seeing the license plate reading MR•$$$, but he couldn’t catch it before it was gone from sight. Yeah, he didn’t need to see inside the car to know it belonged to Handsome Jack. At least he had a plate for record now.

He stopped by the apartment manager’s office before returning to Rhys, the omega immediately going back into his arms and wrapping himself around the alpha, chuffing with concern.

“I watched him leave from the window.”
“He’s lucky, I’d have broken more than his damn windows,” he growled. “Knothead knows what he’s doing is wrong.” Rhys hummed in agreement and Axton nuzzled into the omega’s hair, petting to soothe and whispering reassurances until Rhys’ grip just slightly lessened.

“...how did he even know where I live?” Rhys muttered into Axton’s skin. “What was he thinking?”

“Nothing good,” Axton responded in grave tones. “Any alpha showing up after leaving their bondmate is trouble.” He gave Rhys another squeeze, just relieved he’d gotten to him in time. “He might have tried to reinforce your bond.”

Rhys’ eyes went wide with a sickening realization. He'd never even considered that Jack might try something like that. He looked up to Axton, hoping the alpha would have answers to impossible questions. “Why? Why would he even do that? He doesn’t want me.”

“I told you alphas tend to get more aggressive when a bond breaks. It’s not a pleasant feeling to have your omega break up with ya. He might try to keep it for his own comfort.” Axton nuzzled him close over the worrisome words, promising him it would be okay. “I won’t let him get to you though, okay?” Rhys nodded into his chest. “...Do you wanna watch a movie or something to get your mind off things, sugar?”

Rhys shook his head. His skin crawled at the idea of Jack returning to watch him, and return he just might do. The alpha could be unpredictable in certain ways, and the possibilities frightened him. Jack was the freaking CEO of Hyperion, didn’t he have better shit to do??

“I just really don’t want to be here right now,” Rhys admitted, not looking forward to having to be on alert the rest of the day and oncoming night, even if Axton was there with him. “Can we like go ge-”

“--you wanna stay at mine?”

They’d both spoken at the same time, and Rhys’ brows lifted in surprise at the invitation as he looked up, forgoing his own idea of escaping to a coffee house or something to kill time.

Axton’s cheeks went pink, the alpha looking into those wide, mismatched eyes full of surprise, and wondered if he’d overstepped his bounds. Surely that was too personal an offer. Was it inappropriate even given the circumstances? It was his job to care for the omega, and he did mean it when he said ‘best friend’ to lean on, but what would HR think? It was surely overstepping; suggesting Rhys come to his own place. Surely a too-intimate of an offer.

Rhys’ hopeful words reassured Axton by miles.

“Stay with you? Is... is that really okay? You’re okay with that?”

It was a damn fine option and Rhys was more than willing to jump on Axton’s offer. He was terrified of what would happen if Jack came to his door, or if he waited for the younger man to leave his apartment only to corner him. Jack was sly, cunning, and confident he could get whatever he wanted. It’s what made him such a formidable businessman. It had actually been part of what Rhys had liked about Jack-- that cocky arrogance and self-assurance.

Now it terrified him.

Rhys didn’t want to even think of the possibilities if Axton wasn’t there. The fact that the alpha would have to go back to the Atlas building tomorrow sent a thrill of terror through him that Jack might come back when Axton wasn’t there. Rhys gave the other man a look of relieved hope. “It’s really fine?”
Axton nodded, hoping the heat he felt in his cheeks wasn’t showing on his face. “Yeah. He doesn’t know where I live. And I mean, I don’t mind. If you’d feel safer, that is. I’m eight floors up, he won’t be able to watch you from any windows either.”

“This is part of the best friends package, right?” Rhys gave a somewhat awkward laugh, definitely not thinking about anything else aside from being safe somewhere Jack didn’t know about.

Axton’s reassuring smile warmed him better than anything. An excitement bubbled inside Rhys at getting to see where the big alpha lived, and he hoped the heat in his face over the matter would be mistaken for nerves.

Rhys didn’t want Axton thinking he didn’t take things seriously. After all, there were more important things than getting excited over the other man’s private living space and what it meant to be offered a spot there if he needed it.

The alpha hugged him again, and Rhys buried his face in the older man’s neck to hide his smile as Axton’s warm voice flowed over him.

“Let’s pack a bag, darlin’. For as long as you need.”

Chapter End Notes

They never did get that chinese food xD

Is this working? Like the budding element of attraction here? Does it feel at all forced or is it progressing okay? I honestly cannot tell but I hope it's coming off okay, esp. since they're like this is a work-relationship thing but hmmm thing ya know?

Comments are highly appreciated and hoarded like a goddamn smut dragon haha Inspire me babes ;D

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Chapter 8

Rhys felt raw from overstimulation as they’d loaded his bags and themselves into Axton’s car.

The space told the omega a little bit more about the man who’d been taking care of him, and filled him with anticipation over being taken to the alpha’s home. His mind was on overdrive, nose bombarded with Axton’s reassuring scent and nerves all ashambles as every hint of a yellow car on the road made him tense up. He was agitated in every sense of the word: excited, worried, still shocked over what his life was becoming. He wished he’d never let Jack bond him in the first place. Those feelings didn’t lessen any as they boarded the old elevator that would take them up to Axton’s eighth-floor loft, but the arm the alpha had across his shoulders reassured him at the very least: he’d be safe here.

“You know I talked to your apartment manager, let them know anyone asking after you is trespassing,” Axton informed as Rhys leaned into him. “Gave a description of the car, too, so if anything happens there, we’ll know.” He pressed the elevator button for his floor, the old but reliable machine moving upwards. He gave the omega a look, noting the tense expression on his face. “You wanna file a police report?”

Rhys frowned to himself, watching as the worn-out buttons lit up as the car slowly rose. He looked to Axton for confirmation. “Can they even do anything?”

The older man chuffed. “Best to report it just to have a record of it. They probably won’t do anything... Best we could get him on is menacing, though they’d take it seriously if they understood your circumstances, I’m sure of that.” He gave Rhys a reassuring look accompanied by a supportive squeeze. He wished he could do more. “They take menacing by bond pretty seriously.”

Rhys gave him a thinking frown over how commonplace his situation might actually be, as Axton seemed to know exactly what to do and how to act. Or he was just that good of a caretaker. “...you’ve done this before?”

The alpha offered him a slight smile. “Not exactly like this-” he started with a bit of a teasing smile, which was understandable-- not everyone bonded with someone notorious- “-but yeah. He’s not the first estranged alpha unhappy about a healing omega. Nothing I’m not prepared for darlin’, promise.”

“...Assholes,” Rhys muttered under his breath, not just for Jack, but for all the other knothead alphas out there that would leave an omega and then come back at that. He locked determined eyes with Axton’s greens, and nodded resolutely. “Then, yeah, I wanna do that. Police report sounds good.”

Axton gave him another squeeze before the elevator came to stop at their floor. “Gotcha.”
Getting off the old elevator revealed only three doors, which hinted Rhys to the prospective size of the units of the building. Axton’s was the third one down, and he opened the brass lock with a little jiggle and a joke about it sticking before they were let into his place.

It was big, more loft than proper apartment, exposed brick walls on one side and big windows letting in dwindling sunlight on the other. Axton flicked on lights and locked the door behind them, setting down the heavy bag he’d been carrying with the omega’s electronics next to a well-worn couch.

“Haven’t been home in a while,” the alpha said with a laugh as Rhys eyed the big stack of mail on his L-shaped kitchen counter. “Make yourself at home darlin’, ‘mi casa es su casa’ and all that.”

“Thanks,” Rhys said as the alpha put his keys on the counter with a clatter, muttering about junk mail and tossing things in the bin. Rhys set his own bag of clothing and toiletries down next to his work bag, his heart skipping an excited beat as he took everything in.

Axton had a lot more rustic design tastes than Rhys would have pegged the man for. A well-used wooden coffee table polished to show off the grain sat before the old red couch in the middle of the room. A bookshelf that matched was on the opposing wall, full of a variety of knick knacks, small, leafy potted plants, a decently-sized tv, and textbooks Rhys read related to omega wellness that made him smirk.

The walls weren’t terribly bare, but also weren’t fussily decorated; some kind of antlers— or what could possibly be driftwood— was stuck up across the wall next to what Rhys recognized as a framed map of a terrain he was familiar with. A framed certificate of some sort was next to that, hanging over another larger potted plant of a variety Rhys didn’t know the name of.

A hanging pot-rack of wood and iron hung in the kitchen over the simple composite countertop, Axton’s everyday cooking utensils and knife rack sitting amidst sugar and flour jars next to a gas stove. There were plush-top wooden barstools at the counter that matched the faded red of the couch, their seats looking well-used but comfortable just the same.

Looking about the spacious apartment, the other man had an awful lot of plants, actually. Little succulents stuck on shelves; bigger potted plants near the windows; some type of hanging, spidery plant in the corner above a plastic blue watering jug. It gave the room a pleasing atmosphere, but he couldn’t imagine the upkeep.

“Are all these plants real?”

Axton looked up from where Rhys was testing his philodendron between thumb and forefinger. The alpha huffed a laugh. “Real as real can be. My neighbor waters them for me when I’m working.” He shot Rhys a slightly teasing grin that implied Rhys was the work himself. The look that came over the omega’s face told him he hit his mark.

“I take zero responsibility for anything that died while you were gone,” Rhys shot right back with an exaggerated raise of his chin as Axton laughed.

“Nah, they’re all really low-maintenance. You’re off the hook, darlin’.”

Rhys turned to hide the grin that came to his face at Axton’s low laughter, taking his observation of the space back up while the alpha moved about and trashed expired things in his fridge while mumbling about a store list.

There was only one other door to be seen in the open floor plan, facing a well-worn distressed table with four chairs that looked out over the view from the high windows. The wall the door was in was
newer by comparison to the old exposed brick and high ceilings—what Rhys guessed must be the alpha’s bedroom and probably also a bathroom.

Rhys’ curiosity on that was quickly satisfied as Axton brought up behind him.

“Want the grand tour?”

Rhys raised an eyebrow that only made the older man’s lips twitch further up in a smile. “I’ll pretend to be surprised if you’ve got Narnia back there,” he said with a motion towards the door.

Axton snickered. “It’s sadly not that cool,” he said with a chuckle. “But it is at least bigger than a closet. Bathroom’s through here too.”

Rhys followed the alpha through the door, trying not to openly oogle the other man’s bedroom as Axton first lead him past the bed into the generously-sized connected bathroom. Rhys paid attention as Axton told him the pipes of the bath sometimes complained, and showed him the combination of knobs to twist for the shower function as it was an older building, but promised it was nothing to worry about. He had great water pressure and a huge water heater to boot, so don’t worry about any clanging in the walls.

Rhys’ prying little eyes were more interested in devouring the details of the man’s personal sleeping space as they exited the bathroom; the ruffled navy bedding and pillows on a bed just slightly smaller than Rhys’ own; the plush brown rug over newer carpet, and an open closet messy enough that Axton chuckled and quickly closed it with a bashful muttering about tidying up.

Overall it was glorious, and Rhys was more than distracted from any current problems or issues facing him as excitement to drink in details faced him. Just the overwhelming scent of the man in this smaller space was enough to put Rhys at immediate ease, and if his heart beat a little faster, he assured himself that it was due to extreme relief of being safe and had absolutely nothing to do with being in the other man’s bedroom.

“Extra towels are here, the thermostat is here, and I still haven’t found the tv remote, but it’s gotta be around here somewhere,” Axton said with a chuckle as they left the bedroom behind them. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen it, though.”

“What do I get if I find it?” Rhys asked with a smirk.

“I won’t make you get up to change channels,” he teased.

Rhys rolled his eyes. “As if you’d make me do that in the first place, Ax.”

Axton could feel his cheeks slightly heating, though the sentiment and cheekiness of the omega had him laughing, and he gave Rhys an affectionate bump of his head that was met with a playful smile. “You’ve got my number alright. And it’s because you’re a guest, not because I’m whipped. I’m a professional, after all. Butler and channel-changer. Yup.”

Rhys snorted with extra exaggeration, though he felt a further fondness for the man before him growing in his chest that had nothing to do with gratitude and everything to do with the warmth in Axton’s eyes and voice. He gave his head a little shake as if to banish such thoughts. “Keep telling yourself that, big guy.”

Axton only chuckled further. “Fair enough. Well, that does it for the grand tour. You’ve put up with me cramping your style, darlin’, so think of this place like your own, alright? As long as you need.”

“I think I can manage that.” Rhys didn’t need to mention how he was already making plans to use
the alpha’s countertop as a perfect workbench for his prototype. What he could loosely call the ‘dining-room’ table would make a great place to set up his computer for telecommuting as well. He gave another considering look about the loft before his gaze settled thoughtfully back on Axton.

“You have wifi, right?”

The alpha snorted with genuine amusement. “I know the building is old, but I have wifi, Rhys.”

Rhys definitely blushed hotly at that. No way of hiding exactly what he’d been thinking, but he still tried to awkwardly laugh himself free while Axton’s grin only grew further. “Some people don’t use wifi, no harm in asking first…” Axton’s chuckles were completely disbelieving of the weak excuse, and Rhys further dug himself deeper into a hole, cheeks absolutely flaming. “I’ve had a tough day, give me a little leeway here.”

It was only another moment of slight embarrassment before Rhys was able to hide his face in Axton’s neck, the big alpha snickering as he wrapped the omega up in a forgiving hug. “I think if anyone can use that excuse, it’s you,” he said with only minor teasing, though he gave Rhys a supportive squeeze. “But don’t worry too much about that, okay? You’re safe here, darlin’. Promise.” The younger man returned the hug, sniffing into Axton’s skin, and it made the alpha smile again until he realized his fridge was now empty and he’d been too hurried to get to Rhys to pick up food for them. “Shit, I didn’t even grab anything for lunch. You hungry? What are you in the mood for?”

“I… kind of lost my appetite to be honest,” Rhys said into his neck with a huff. The last thing he wanted was food, especially with the way his bonding gland throbbed as if to mock his efforts. Just thinking of Jack watching him made him nauseous with fear. He held himself that much closer to the alpha. “Today’s been nuts.”

“Hey, that’s okay.” Axton gave him a gentle squeeze to match the tone of his voice, nuzzling him close and scenting at his hair. “You’re safe here though, alright? You’re safe. We’ll break this thing and you’ll be nice and comfortable ‘til it happens. I’m here for ya.”

“I know,” Rhys said as he pulled back to smile. “Thanks, Ax.”

“Anytime, darlin’.” He let Rhys go with a pat, the omega’s blush still slightly pink in his cheeks, but dying down. Axton gave another frown to his kitchen before looking back at the younger man. Rhys’ smile seemed a lot more relaxed, and for that, he was glad. “In the meantime, I can make a store list if you have any requests for later? Make a market run while you get your stuff unpacked, and I’ll make something when you feel up to eating.”

Rhys gave him a thoughtful look, and then frowned at the playful glint that suddenly took Axton’s eyes. His lips took a sour turn and he raised his chin to the bigger man. “If you even mention eggs…”

The snort of laughter he was met with had Rhys rolling his eyes and leaving the alpha’s side to instead plop down on the man’s couch and unpack his bag of electronics. Axton snickered his apologies as he rooted about his cupboards and fridge to make a list. Rhys eventually forgave Axton’s amused smirks long enough to give the man input, and insisted he was going to rearrange things around the alpha’s apartment if he brought up egg-meals again. Axton only grinned.

“In all seriousness, feel free to familiarize yourself with the place, darlin’,” Axton said good-naturedly. “Feel free to poke around in whatever, you might even find the remote.”

“If I find it, I’m going to hide it somewhere and not tell you,” Rhys teased, looking over his shoulder slyly as Axton was grabbing his keys off the counter with a laugh.
The wink Rhys was given as he was told not to panty-raid the man left the omega as red as the couch he was sitting on.

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The windows looked out on a nearby park and corner shops, and the view was great-- safe from prying eyes, especially.

But Rhys wasn’t enjoying it so much as he was studying the alpha’s apartment while Axton was out. While he guiltily let himself try out the give of the bed (he’d be sleeping there, after all), peeked in the closet (he was going to be storing his clothes, he weakly justified), and opened cupboards (again… storage), he did find where the plates and cups were kept, and he had a snicker at some of the more… interesting reads Axton had on his shelf.

He was sure though that ‘Position of the Day: Sex Every Day in Every Way’ was an outlier among the omega care books, and shouldn’t be counted. Most likely a novelty gift or something, though he did allow himself a dirty smile for his fantasy about ‘alternative healing methods’ that he'd jerked himself to earlier in the day. Of all the things he shouldn’t be thinking about, that was probably right up in the top five.

He took the book down anyways for a cheeky look, seeing it was indeed 365 pages for 365 different sex positions. He flipped to his birthday and had a little laugh at the title of ‘the Infinity Knot’, wondering how limber someone had to be to get into that position before carefully putting the book back with a snicker, and smiling over various other photography books and a few adventure novels on the shelf. He pulled a few others out with interest before selecting one and getting comfortable on the couch.

Axton found him there with a big book of birds of the world opened in his lap, the omega smiling up at the green-eyed man as he came in laden with groceries. At least he’d kept himself entertained.

“Welcome back,” Rhys said with a grin, setting the book on the coffee table and getting up to help.

“Bored?” Axton asked as he looked at the bird book he honestly forgot he owned. He set the bags on the countertop as Rhys came up with a smile.

“You forgot to give me the wifi password. It was the next best thing,” Rhys told him very seriously. Axton just laughed as he began removing things from the bags, and Rhys helped, passing the alpha a carton of eggs that sent the man into snickers and made the omega just shake his head. “You’re too easily-amused,” Rhys told him dryly, though he couldn’t help the smile on his own face.

“It’s what happens when you lose the remote to the tv,” Axton said with a laugh. He held up a box of cookies with a grin before setting them down on the counter next to some vegetables. “Any luck on that end?”

“Nope. Looks like you’re still channel-changer two-point-O.”

Axton snorted at that, vowing to find it before the week ended.

They put things away together as Rhys told him random bird facts from the book-- like one ostrich egg being the same as twelve chicken eggs- and Axton brought up a few ideas for food that actually sounded good to Rhys’ nervous stomach. Together they went about making a simple late lunch, and Rhys felt like the events of the morning were far away; that he could finally allow himself to relax.

Sitting down to enjoy their food, Axton made a noise of realization and put his hand in his pocket.
“I just remembered,” the alpha said as Rhys was swallowing a particularly gooey piece of grilled cheese, the jalapeños giving it a hell of a good kick. Axton held his hand out, a small piece of metal between index finger and thumb as Rhys stared dumbly. “Here’s a key.”

Rhys took it but gave him a perplexed look. “A key?”

“You’re not on lockdown, darlin’,” Axton clarified with a warm smile. “Just, if ya wanna go out, you can. Think of this place as your own and all that.”

Rhys’ lips morphed into a thin line as he looked at the key in his hand and back to the alpha smiling at him. “I don’t think I’ll want to go anywhere if I can help it.”

“Well, just the same. There’s a little coffee shop on the corner across the street… for when the mister coffee doesn’t do it,” Axton told him with a deprecating laugh to his little coffee machine on the counter. “I don’t want you to feel trapped here.”

Rhys felt warm all over (due to the grilled cheese, surely) and gave the alpha a little snort. “Feels like anything but. And I am so buying you a nice coffee maker, Ax. Next available holiday. When’s your birthday?”

“Not for some time. Hence the corner shop,” he laughed.

They finished up eating, and Axton gave Rhys leave to set up his work stuff all over the tabletop while the alpha tidied up his bedroom and closet to give the omega room to hang his clothing and put away his things.

Rhys startled the man by coming up behind him as Axton was moving aside some jackets, laughing somewhat apologetically as he gave the alpha a poke.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack there.”

“I thought you looked like you were in the zone,” Rhys noted with a snicker. “Looks nice.”

“Yeah… Got space for your stuff if you wanna put it away? And I made room in the mirror cabinet for your toothbrush and stuff.”

“Thanks,” Rhys said, eyeing the closet that was much more tidy than when he’d snooped a bit while Ax had been out. “Also, wifi password?”

“Oh shoot, yeah,” the big alpha said with a laugh, then his face dropped. “It’s uh… I’ll get it for you in a sec.”

“What?” Rhys asked of the look on his face. “Is it the big nonsense default one? We do work for a tech company, Ax.”

The older man snorted. He might just be omega-wellness staff, but he did have a nice secure password and hardware that Atlas itself would have approved of. That wasn’t what he had issue with, though.“Ah, no… Lemme just… I’ll reset it.”

The way Axton moved from the bedroom to the bookshelf where everything was plugged in, Rhys started to get suspiciously amused. “Is it hard to remember?” he pressed, a big grin growing on his face as he followed. “It’s something embarrassing, isn’t it?” The look the bigger man gave him over his shoulder sent Rhys into unrepentant snickers. “Okay, don’t change it, I’m dying to know what it is.”
Axton turned and faced him and ran a hand through his hair. His cheeks were charmingly pink as he avoided looking directly at Rhys. It only made the younger man’s smile grow. “Okay so Sal is over here a lot when we have down time, right? You met him the other day.”

Rhys’ grin hadn’t moved an inch. “Uh huh…”

“And we have a few inside jokes from back in the day… I like to change the password to stuff he won’t like entering…”

“I’m liking this more and more.”

The big alpha steadied himself, taking a breath as if admitting an awful truth. “Right now it’s ‘super commander captain Axton first class’…”

Rhys snorted and Axton turned five shades of red. Truly, the omega found the other man’s face more amusing than the password itself, but this was golden. “Oh my god, Ax.”

“…in all caps…” he muttered without meeting Rhys’ eyes.

“That’s real cute, Ax. Super cute.” Rhys was grinning wide at Axton’s red ears, and he gave the alpha’s bicep a comforting squeeze. “Frankly I’m more surprised a password that long is allowed.”

“Yeah, well… It rubs Sal the wrong way, so it’s worth it. Or I thought it was until I have to tell it to anyone not him.” Axton could feel that he was blushing terribly, but he couldn’t help the smile on his face at Rhys’ clear amusement. “…Don’t mention it to Sal.”

“My lips are sealed, commander.” Rhys gave him a nudge that had the big alpha rolling his eyes, but the smile was still there. The omega took some pity on him, deciding to let the subject rest. “Okay, so now that’s settled, do you want to watch a movie or something? Atlas isn’t getting any work out of me today, I think.”

Axton exhaled with gratitude at the change of topic. “God, yes. Anything if we can never bring this up again.”

“Can I still call you ‘commander’?” Rhys asked with a teasing tilt to his lips.

“Only when we’re alone,” Axton playfully replied with a snort, gathering up a blanket from his bed to drape over the couch and asking the other man if he was in the mood for popcorn.

Rhys just barely refrained from answering with a “Yes sir!” and they got cozy on the couch with an old sci-fi movie about space exploration. He was so comfortable all wrapped up in the bigger man’s arms, surrounded by scent from the man himself and the blankets wrapped around them, that Rhys fell asleep for over half of the movie.

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The tv was repeating the same thirty second loop; a spaceship flying by and shooting stars followed by a small hovercraft.

It was currently just replaying the menu screen, and the sky outside was dark. The omega stirred and huffed as he sat up a bit, frowning at the small drool spot on Axton’s shirt, and realization that he’d missed their movie hit him with some minor disappointment.

“Have a nice nap?”
“Feel free to start taping my mouth shut,” Rhys said as he resituated himself against the other man. Axton’s chuckles went through him, a pat to his side over the blanket showed that the bigger man was keeping himself busy by playing on his phone. Rhys sighed sleepily. “I can’t believe I fell asleep. That grilled cheese knocked me out.”

“I’d think so. You were snoring a fair bit.”

Rhys was sure he had been. Axton’s couch was deceptively comfortable, and the omega was nice and warm, and he had been in the throes of a cheese-coma. “Yeah, definitely start taping my mouth shut.” He groaned as he stretched against the alpha, and then hefted himself up to a sitting position. “I missed our movie.”

“I should ruin it for you,” the alpha teased as he also sat up, “for having such a laugh earlier.”

“...but you won’t because we’re such best best friends?” Rhys tried weakly, but it got a smile from the alpha.

“Yeah, okay then.” Axton yawned and had a look at the time. “It’s not super late. You hungry again?”

“I think I could use a shower and maybe bed,” the omega said, sleep still tugging at him. “Don’t let me stop you if you’re hungry though.”

“You won’t hold it against me if I have an omelette?”

Rhys only smiled at the teasing, wiping the sleep from his eyes as Axton gave him a slight nudge. He was definitely due a fair amount of ribbing from the alpha after the laugh he’d had, especially when Axton was being so damn accommodating and nice. Rhys was a little drunk on his scent if he was being honest, the blanket and the man himself deliciously musky in his nostrils. If he was a weaker man, he would have just rolled back over and demanded they sleep right there.

“Okay, shower’s yours, and I’m gonna make a little snack.”

“Sounds good. It’s not too early for bed, right?” Rhys asked with a yawn.

“Not if you’re tired,” he said as he stood. The alpha gave a look towards his bedroom as Rhys stretched and yawned again, thinking a little too-deeply for a moment before deciding on the polite thing. “My bed is a lot smaller than yours, so I don’t mind taking the couch,” Axton proposed, watching the way Rhys’ expression took a slightly disappointed look to which he amended, “but if you’re not opposed to getting cozy…”

“At this point I feel like it's weirder to sleep alone,” Rhys said with a laugh that the alpha echoed. It made warmth bloom in his chest. “I mean, as long as you don't mind.”

Axton gave an encouraging squeeze to Rhys’ shoulder, his smile obviously pleased. “It’s whatever you need, sweetheart. As long as you don’t mind my snoring.”

Rhys snorted and he gave the man a playful bump. “You kidding? I need that sound just to get to sleep now, Ax.” Axton’s snorting laughter was more cute than undignified, and Rhys stretched again before walking back towards the alpha’s bedroom. “I won’t be long, just want a quick rinse.”

“That’s good,” Axton told him, not commenting on the way Rhys’ scent had been tinged with fear and worry when he’d chased Jack’s car off. “You make yourself cozy, darlin’. I’ll even let you have first pick of which side of the bed you want.”
“I think you know which side that is,” he said with a laugh over his shoulder, not alluding to the fact he’d sat on the bed earlier to try it out.

With himself showered and warm, and Axton fed and taking his turn, Rhys let himself get comfortable in the older man’s bed. Maybe a little more comfortable than was entirely appropriate, but as long as he heard the water running, Rhys sniffled and sniffled in the sheets and pillows, enjoying the way Axton’s scent permeated everything and entirely lulled his senses. He might’ve felt a little guilty had he realized he was so tired and comfortable that he’d fall asleep without the other man again, but knowing Axton, he’d just be grateful his shirt hadn’t seen another drool-bath.

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Axton stepped out of the bathroom all nice and clean and dry in pajama pants and t-shirt. It was good to be home, in his creaky shower and threadbare-but-utterly-soft shirt. Rhys kept a nice home and all, but it was always good to be back in your own territory. The silliest thing he had missed was his favorite lathering soap, and he felt happy and content feeling and smelling like himself.

Padding onto the carpet, he’d expected Rhys to still be up, but the omega was curled up in the lion’s share of the bed all slack-jawed asleep under the alpha’s quilt, and it was so jarringly-endearing that the alpha had to take an actual step back.

Axton didn’t expect that seeing Rhys in his own bed would have any significant effect on him (they’d been sharing Rhys’ own bed for some time now after all), but he was shocked by the utter sense of satisfaction he felt go over him at the sight. Some primal thrill went up his spine and curled deliciously over his back, purring at the idea that Rhys was here on his own terf, where he could keep an eye on the other man and keep the omega safe. He was in Axton’s own bed under Axton’s quilt that smelled like him, and it just shook him so hard he stood there a moment gaping, gathering himself.

An intrusive thought occurred to him that his ex-wife might’ve been on to something about wanting an omega at home; that this might’ve been what she had been seeking, and that realization jarred the living shit out of him.

He suddenly realized he’d blurred the lines between professional and personal and he was having trouble drawing distinctions between them. His brain knew what it was doing (right?), but his instincts were sending him far different signals. He was just so pleased at the sight before him that it was enough to tell him something had gone off script.

He needed to open some of his books from basic omega care 101 back up. Primarily the stuff about not mistaking one’s natural protective instincts for something else. Did he really need to retrain himself on such a basic, fundamental matter?

A glance to Rhys’ sleeping, slack-jawed face told him yes.

Yes he did.

Chapter End Notes

I really appreciate the comments! Some from last chapter actually heavily influenced the way I started taking this chapter :3 Spent a few hours writing this, please spend sixty seconds to leave me a nice comment if you're enjoying things :)
my tumblr | my fic masterlist archive
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I’m tempting fate here with an extra EXTRA long chapter, hoping to receive some nice, fun comments about what ya’ll liked :) This is 24 pages, 10.2k words this update. A good amount of distraction for ya’ll :)

Please don’t teach me not to ever write long chapters again by not commenting :P I spent around 10hrs writing this chapter, please spend sixty seconds to write more than five words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Staying at Axton’s was both a blessing and a curse.

Without his own familiar things to distract him, Rhys was actually able to buckle down and get quite a bit of work done. Axton had laughed when he’d come home to his kitchen counter turned into a temporary work bench, the glove-like prototype Rhys had been messing about with in delicate pieces while he tinkered with things.

A little self-indulgent ‘break’ from some of the usual projects Atlas sent him to instead work on his pet project had turned into a three-hour tinkering and coding session. When he was in the zone, it was getting done, and boy was he ever there.

The bad part about staying with Axton was that the alpha’s scent was everywhere. He thought he’d get used to it, but he’d catch a whiff and start daydreaming in ways that were fun but definitely not productive. He’d had more than one guilty wank in the alpha’s bathroom already, and he only prayed he’d get less sensitive to the strong scent of the man (though he subconsciously knew that was highly unlikely).

It was hard when he’d come to associate nice, safe, and protective feelings with the alpha. Rhys thought more about his crooked smile than was probably normal, and the best part of his day was the hug Axton gave him when he came back from work.

Axton came home to Rhys-- piled under the quilt from his bed- on the couch. The omega was doing work on his laptop, but had stopped to smile up at the green-eyed man when Axton had stepped through the door.

An instinctive rush of supremely-pleased feeling came over Axton, seeing Rhys settled on his couch and covered in his quilt.

He had to check himself a moment as Rhys raised a brow at him, and he realized he’d been staring a bit as the omega repeated himself. “Hi?"

“Hi yourself.” Axton’s voice was full of amusement as he gave the omega another once-over, and Rhys answered his question before he could even ask it.

“It got cold.”

“I can see that,” the older man laughed. “Ya know you can feel free to crank the heat up, darlin. I
know it gets drafty in here with the big windows sometimes. They're double-glazed, but still...”

“I *did*,” Rhys answered so plainly that Axton laughed. “It wouldn’t come on.”

“It's picky sometimes. I'll see what I can do.” He set down his work bag and messed with the old thermostat, eventually knocking it a few times for good measure.

“How's it coming?”

“...I think it's busted again.” He sighed. “These old buildings, ya know? I'll call the landlady, she's really good about staying on top of these things. I think we're gonna be without heat at least until tomorrow though,” he said somewhat apologetically.

“I *guess* we'll just have to cuddle for warmth.” Rhys rolled his eyes and put on an extra exaggerated voice as if terribly inconvenienced by the problem-- as if the both of them didn't relish every moment of cuddling between them.

Axton laughed. “Guess so. Nothing for it.”

“Can't be helped,” Rhys said in an extremely put-upon tone. He gave Axton a smirk and the alpha chuckled. Rhys followed in suit before dropping the dramatic tone. “Really though, I *am* freezing, so the sooner the better.”

That got a snort. “Let me put this down and pull on a t-shirt that hasn’t had cats and kids on it.” Rhys snorted. “Trust me, it’s worth it.”

A few minutes and a fresh t-shirt later, and Axton climbed onto the couch and pulled Rhys into his lap to wrap himself about the younger man. The omega hissed when his movement caused cold air to get up under his warm layers, but he cuddled close against Axton as the big alpha wrapped him up proper like a big omega burrito.

“You're like a radiator,” Rhys purred, snuggling in and forgoing any idea of work in favor of cuddling with the older man. “Forget calling the landlady, you'll do. Just sit here while I work and we’ll be golden.” Rhys gave him an appreciative, dismissive pat that made Axton shake with laughter.

“Have a good day, darlin’? Get stuff done?”

“I've got some new scripts I'm writing for the arm I'm working on. I can't believe I didn't use them in the first place.”

“Mm.”

“My brain hasn’t been functioning at one-hundred percent lately.”

Axton snorted and gave him a nuzzle. “I think you’re excused, darlin’.”

Axton’s warm breath near his ear made an excited trill go up Rhys’ spine, but he played it off as a shiver from the cold. Axton only held him that much tighter. “So uh, what about you?” Rhys looked up at him curiously. “Busy day with... cats?”

Axton’s light laughter gently shook him. “I played with one of the executive’s kids this afternoon and did some heavy lifting.”

Rhys snorted. “Code for moving furniture?”
“More or less, actually.” He laughed. “Their mate is expecting twins, and that's a big no-no to lifting anything heavier than a cat, let alone a two year old.” Rhys snorted and Axton just smirked. “I gave a lot of shoulder rides today. And she kept insisting Mittens ride with us.”

“That's way too sweet, Axton. I'm gonna get cavities.”

The big alpha just chuckled, the sound rocking Rhys as the omega buried his head in Axton’s big chest just under the man’s chin.

“They’re talking about putting me back on assignment, proper,” Axton said with a murmur of disapproval. “I told them I’m still here for you, but they’re trying to stretch their resources as far as possible. These half days were their idea in the first place.”

Rhys lightly snorted, but was pleasantly surprised at the lack of worry and concern he felt over Axton’s time being reprioritized. He was still here with Axton after all, safe in the alpha’s home. The anxiety he should have felt just wasn’t there.

Maybe it meant he actually was healing. It would be nice if the damn bond broke already, though.

A growled-sigh left Axton’s throat as he nuzzled the other man, trying to reassure him through his unpleasant news. “It might mean later hours. But I’m still here for ya darlin’, okay? And you don’t have to go anywhere if you don’t want to.”

Rhys risked his warm cocoon and gave the arms around him a squeeze, unable to stop the happy purr at the idea. He leaned his head back up with a smile to look at Axton’s frowning face, the scar through his eyebrow furrowed in a way Rhys found entirely charming. “I knew it couldn’t last forever, but it’s been a nice vacation… not having to change the channels myself and stuff,” Rhys lightly joked, the frown on Axton’s face opening up into an amused smirk. “I feel safe here, I think I can wait at home while you’re working a normal workday… As long as you don’t mind me cramping your style a little longer, that is.”

Axton smiled down at him, something inside him inappropriately pleased that Rhys referred to his place as ‘home’, and the alpha had to grab and strangle the feeling as he felt his cheeks get hot, reminding himself that Rhys was his patient, not his omega. It was okay to act as a friend but he’d better not start getting all possessive just because the other man was staying with him. This was like the most basic thing taught in his omega wellness courses.

The thing inside Axton was still defiantly satisfied that Rhys was his anything, though, and refused to not be content at the idea.

“You stay as long as you want, darlin’. I won’t be giving ya the boot.”

“How long until you start making me pay rent?” Rhys asked with a cheeky grin.

“We’ll talk about that once that remote turns up,” he teased with a wink, stroking Rhys’ arm with his thumb outside the blankets. “Better have hidden it someplace good darlin’.”

Rhys lightly laughed and looked up fondly at Axton’s invitation, the alpha’s green eyes watching him with a keen, warm smile. Rhys was incredibly aware of how close they were, and how warm he was wrapped up in the alpha’s quilt and his strong arms. The gentle, unassuming stroking of the man’s thumb over his skin as he was held shook Rhys in ways such an innocent-- and fairly usual- touch for their interactions shouldn’t have.

There was a moment in looking at the older man-- he felt his stomach suddenly drop, his heart skip a beat- and Rhys quickly ducked his head under the older man’s chin again as his heart raced in his
chest and his cheeks grew hot.

It felt like they were going to kiss. He was sure of it, but he wasn’t sure if that was just his own fantasy-fueled imagination or if the other man had felt that same charge.

Axton’s thumb was still soothingly stroking at him like nothing out of the ordinary had happened—and maybe to him nothing had—but Rhys couldn’t get his wildly beating heart under control. Axton was his caregiver, his support; a professional in his field if all those books on his shelf were worth anything. The man was the closest friend he’d had in ages, and the close contact Rhys had with him was probably the most touch he’d received in all the months previous combined; it would make sense if he was getting a little excited over it after being touch-starved for so long. It didn’t help things that Axton was incredibly attractive and a sweetheart to boot.

No, it was probably just in his head.

He chastised himself for the millionth time about his guilty fantasies; jerking off to your very-handsome friend was sure to mess with your head. It made his cheeks hot at his own weakness instead of excitement over the man holding him so tightly.

It served to warm him up at least, the way his heart was beating.

“Oh yeah, I wanted to run something by you.”

Axton’s warm voice reverberated through Rhys, but the omega didn’t turn back to look at him, still scolding himself inwardly. “Mm?”

“Since they’re going to start running me through routine, I wanted to give you Sal’s contact info.”

“Sal?” Rhys asked, shifting to give the other man an interested, curious look.

“Yeah. Just in case something happens that keeps me longer than usual,” Axton said with annoyance, thinking how bad it would be if something did happen to take his attention away from the man currently in his arms. “Not that there’s anything serious right now that needs my attention. Sal would have been busy if something came up,” he added, glad that the other employees at Atlas were in no state similar to Rhys. “But it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had to run late helping with things. Or caught in crappy traffic.”

Rhys snorted. “I think I can deal with a little waiting, Ax.” He gently leaned his head until it made contact with the older man’s face, and Axton laughed as he moved so he could put his chin on Rhys’ shoulder. “Not like I can’t text you anyways, right?”

“Well, just the same, I wanted him to stop by and introduce himself properly since, uh, there wasn’t really a chance with... uh...”

“When the jackass made a scene,” Rhys offered, smiling back at Axton.

“Yeah.” The alpha breathed out heavily. Guess there was no point in trying to be diplomatic about things. And Rhys was stronger than he was giving him credit, even with the asshole himself trying to intimidate him. “Well, I just wanted to run it by you first. No surprises or anything.”

Rhys actually turned proper (and hissed when his movements caused cold air to invade his warm sanctuary) to give Axton a goofy look. “It’s your place, Ax.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the only one living here right now, am I roomie?” he pointed out with a grin.
Rhys gave Axton’s shoulder a bump with his forehead, resting it there with a smile that reached his voice. “You’re way too considerate. Quit it or I’ll never leave.”

The flutters that sent through Axton’s chest made the possessive thing inside him practically dance with fiendish glee, and Axton gave Rhys a full hug in lieu of squeezing the feeling down, smiling as he scented at the younger man’s hair. “If you leave, then I officially have no excuse for half-days anymore, and I’ve grown accustomed to being lazy,” he teased.

He fully earned the exaggerated, affronted noise, and light smack Rhys gave his arm, though they both chuckled for a while longer after.

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Axton hadn’t failed to inform Sal that Rhys was staying with him, but he couldn’t get over the feeling he was crossing all sorts of lines when the other alpha came home with him after work.

Sal, to his credit, didn’t betray any feelings of awkwardness or act as if the arrangement was strange, and maybe, Axton told himself, it was just him and his stupid instincts messing with him, but the acute awareness of Sal knowing that Rhys was in his own space in his own flat and obviously sharing his one bed made the green-eyed alpha just the tiniest bit on edge.

Protocol in omega wellness included cuddling, scenting, and generally comforting an omega on the edge (on in the throes of) broken bond syndrome, so sharing a bed wasn’t at all out of the ordinary. Sal had been in the game a little longer than Axton and had actually taught him a thing or two about wrapping up omega-burritos, so to speak, so cohabitation wasn’t anything to feel strange about since it was a major part of the healing process.

Sharing one’s own bed though, and one’s own space with an omega being cared for… That wasn’t exactly along the lines of standard operating procedures. Especially once they were more or less back to health and strength, and playing the waiting game for the bond to break.

This was deviating from the norm pretty hard-- glaringly obvious as Axton thought about it- but if anyone’s knothead alpha deviated from normal knothead alphas, it was the one who bonded Rhys.

A little change in how they did things was to be expected, right?

Rhys was opening the door before Axton could get his keys out, and the omega had visibly tidied up their shared space as the pair of alphas came in. Rhys’ warm smile and the consideration of the state of his den only made a swell of undue pride rise in Axton’s chest, and the older man had to quash it down with all the other inappropriate feelings threatening to break loose inside him.

“Welcome home,” Rhys said with a little smile and a raised eyebrow at the expression on Axton’s face. The look turned into a grin as Axton turned to lock the door behind them, and the shorter, broader alpha stuck his hand out to Rhys with a smile.

“Hi again,” Sal said with all the intimate comfort of a friend. “I didn’t introduce myself nice-like before, given this guy—” he stuck the thumb on his free hand in Axton’s direction, “—was kicking the shit outta that pinche Hyperion bastard—”

“Thanks, Sal…” Axton slightly growled as he rolled his eyes.

“—and we’re proper professionals and all that,” the other alpha continued with a big grin aimed at his taller friend, “so better late than never, eh?”

“Yeah,” Rhys said with a smirk at Axton as the other alpha let go of his hand.
“And he still doesn’t even do the thing…” Axton pointed out. “Rhys, this is Sal,” he dragged out the words in exaggeration, a deliberate look at the other alpha as if he was slow. “He also works at Atlas. He can count to this many--” he said as he held up both hands and wiggled his fingers.

The shorter alpha snorted and called him an asshole as he gave him a backhanded slap to the shoulder with a laugh. “Ten years we’ve worked together and you don’t even know I can count this many now?” Sal said with a laugh, balancing on his heels and most likely wiggling his toes inside his black leather boots.

Axton barked out a laugh at his return, and Rhys’ chuckles stopped as the length of time hit him; Axton hadn’t been at Atlas nearly so long. That was a lot of history.

“So ten years?” Rhys asked with surprise, looking between them. “That’s a long time.”

“Yeah, well, we worked together during… uh… Well, we have combat experience together,” Axton told him with a somewhat tight expression. Not everything during those years were exactly things either were proud of. Even if there were fond memories between them.

“Excuse you, amigo, but I was your squad leader.”

“You were just the guy with the radio relaying the orders of our squad leader,” the green eyed alpha said with a roll of his eyes while the shorter alpha laughed.

Rhys gave Axton a sort of amused, private look before asking Sal, “Like his commander?”

“You got that right,” Sal said as he puffed his broad chest out for dramatic effect as Axton went just the slightest bit pink.

“Nothing like that, you didn’t even have a title,” Axton quickly countered the other alpha, refusing to meet Rhys’ eyes sparkling with amusement.

Sal shrugged with a smirk. “Still counts.”

“Shove it. Anyways, he's gonna be on hand for me while Atlas has me on duties further away from the facilities,” Axton said, clasping a hand on the shorter man’s shoulder. “Keep an eye on things in case I’m held up by moving furniture and babysitting duties,” he finished with a grin.

The shorter alpha dug into his pocket as Rhys asked if Sal’s duties included rearranging furniture. “If you’re talking the stuff here, hell yeah, just give me a call,” he said playfully with a wicked glint in his eyes for Axton’s apartment layout. “Here's my number,” the alpha said, handing him a card with Atlas’ insignia, his name, and his cell as well as their office phone.

Rhys had to admit he was impressed, and gave Axton a curious look as the sandy-haired man was already rolling his eyes at the display. “I didn't know you guys got business cards. We don’t even have them.”

Axton rolled his eyes again. “Technically we don't, but Sal thinks it's more professional to have them.”

“I feel cool with my name on a card. Don't act like you're better than that,” Sal said with an unrepentant grin. Axton snorted while Rhys smiled.

“I just want you to feel safe,” Axton said a bit more seriously. “I don’t agree with them putting me back on other assignments so quick--”
“Yeah, it’s not good,” Sal interjected, giving Rhys his own serious look. “You need anything, call me. We won’t let that fucker get near you.”

Rhys blinked at them both, a bit taken aback. There was no doubt to him that Sal would do his best to that end, and it warmed him considerably that both men were on his side. Once again, it was driven home to him just how wrong what Jack had done was, and that it wasn’t his fault that the Hyperion CEO had abandoned him. Nothing was defective or broken with him; what Jack did did not reflect on Rhys as a person.

The support of both alphas really struck a painful place inside of him that still smarted, and he somewhat overenthusiastically thanked the shorter alpha with awkward chuckles, having trouble meeting his eyes and floundering until Axton put a supportive hand on his shoulder.

Sal pulled out his phone and gave the screen a quick look, eyebrows raising at the time. “Okay man, I’ve got a date with a pool table and that guy August owes me twenty bucks from last time.” He looked at Rhys once more and smiled. “But we’re all good man. You need anything, call. Especially if Axton’s company is too boring. Just be glad you don’t share an office with him—”

“Go,” Axton said with a smirk. “You’re in fifteen minute parking, remember.”

“Yeah yeah, like they even check here.”

Axton snorted. “Kick some ass, man. I’m not buying your drinks again next time we go out.”

“Cheapskate,” Sal accused with a laugh as he said his goodbyes and left the pair behind him.

Axton locked the door behind his friend, turning back to Rhys with a somewhat bashful look. “Well, direct and to the point and all,” Axton said with a bit of a chuckle. He swept the room with a look before settling back on Rhys. “Thanks for tidying up too, darlin’. Don’t think I didn’t notice,” he mentioned with a smile before opening his arms for a hug of thanks.

Rhys immediately went into his arms, grateful for a place to hide his face after the overwhelming sense of gratitude for the man. He wrapped his own arms around the other man and held tight, indulging himself in closing his eyes as his face was safely hidden in Axton’s neck.

“...you okay, sweetheart?” Axton asked softly of the way the younger man clung, turning to nuzzle the side of his head with worry. Rhys nodded into his neck, and Axton wondered maybe if they’d done something wrong— if he wasn’t exactly up to visitors just yet. “...I know Sal can be a little much sometimes, but he’s got a good heart at the end of it all....”

Rhys let Axton’s gentle words wash over him, not paying much attention to the general content as much as he was tone.

In the simplest of terms, Rhys felt overwhelmed.

Axton wanted to make sure he was safe and protected, extending his safety net to include his friend to ensure Rhys’ own comfort and safety. He was so thorough in his care that it struck Rhys in his chest and he just didn’t know what to do with himself, or the feelings that extended so far past even the most lenient description of gratitude....

It was surely part of Axton’s whole job-- or even the very definition of it- but something thrilled inside Rhys at the thought that Axton was so invested in his well being. He felt at ease with the man, comfortable, and he looked forward to spending time with him whenever he came home from Atlas’ office.
It probably had to do with staying in the older man's own home… The alpha hadn't done anything untoward that the omega could easily think of to influence his perceptions on things. Axton’s touches were always kind and gentle, never inappropriate, and Rhys always felt reassured and comforted when the other man scented him. Axton didn’t do anything that would embarrass Rhys if anyone else saw… so why he was getting all flustered just thinking about the alpha, he had to boil down to his own wishful fantasy.

Axton was petting him as he tried to reassure him, uncertain if Sal’s presence had been too much. As he tried to tell him he could ask the office to switch their schedules, Rhys shook his head against the older man.

“No, no I’m fine,” Rhys murmured into his neck, cuddling himself just a little closer. “Just… thanks. I really mean it. Thanks for everything, Ax.”

The low rumble of the alpha’s voice as he chuckled that Rhys was more than welcome made the omega smile. Rhys might have purred in delight of being held, but Axton didn’t call him out on it. Just his scent and the warm arms and firm, capable body holding him so securely was heating things up inside the younger man he’d thought cold and dead, and Rhys was so grateful for so many things he could never voice that the least he could do was hug the daylights out of the alpha.

As Axton hugged him right back, he think he got his point across.

--

Not even a half week at his loft, and Axton was fit to burst with anxiousness.

He was getting weird on Rhys. He knew he was. His damn instincts didn't give a single shit about his job or his duties, and decided to do their own thing and try and sabotage his professional record at every turn. So far, everything had just so happened to align with common interests: protect his patient, nurse him to recovery, and support him any way he could. That consisted of cuddles, good meals, lots of touch, and plenty of emotional support.

It was what Atlas wanted, and what he-- as an omega wellness professional dedicated to his chosen field- also wanted. Everything was motivated by a desire to help and support.

But his motivations were dramatically shifting.

Axton found himself thinking more and more about how cute it was when Rhys got all red and flustered when they joked around, and the way the omega plastered himself against the alpha whenever he got home-- telling him he felt safe there, cuddling up close, sleeping in his bed, and totally busting his balls on bullshit stories and silly anecdotes about his day at work. Axton revelled in returning home, wondering if he’d see the omega bent over his laptop hard at work for Atlas, totally absorbed in his robotics without even noticing Axton’s return, or passed out on the couch with one of the alpha’s old books from his shelf.

The urge to scent long and thoroughly, to spoon a bit closer than was really necessary or appropriate in the hopes it might cause a spontaneous bond breakage, to kiss cheeks and nose with affection in ways family or friends definitely wouldn’t…. The alpha couldn't easily write off those urges or little fantasies as dedication to the job.

He could, however, blame a great deal of it on not having gotten himself off in ages.

It had been a while since he’d had any alone time, and surely that was the cause of his amped-up anxiousness as he replayed over and over what he’d thought for certain had been a heated moment
where Rhys wanted to kiss him.

He shook his head.

He had an omega in his house, under his care and protection that slept in his own bed. That was going to do things to him; he could accept that. He hadn’t jerked off in a while— not since before he’d started sleeping at Rhys’ place— since he knew his bathroom wasn’t the quietest place for a wank, even with the shower running, so he was pent-up and horny to boot.

Okay. That actually explained a lot. Anyone in the same situation would probably feel the same. Not that he didn’t feel entirely guilty about his little fantasies and desires. He’d probably feel a whole lot more disgusted with himself if he wasn’t so pent-up. He needed a break from the hormones driving him to idle touches— a literal release from whatever chemical imbalance being around the omega was causing.

His chance came in the form of Rhys singing along to a pop song on his computer as he worked on his prototype, and Axton knew it was now or never.

“I’m gonna have a shower if you’d like to use the toilet or anything,” he announced, watching as the omega looked up from where he was working with magnified eyeglasses on. It showed off the younger man’s pretty blue and brown eyes crinkling with fondness behind the glass.

“Nah, I’m good, but thanks,” Rhys said with a smile, turning back to the delicate screwdriver and pliers he was using on a silver plate.

“Getting anywhere with that?” Axton asked as he gave himself an excuse to watch the younger man a bit longer, finger-joints and multi-colored cables spread out on his kitchen counter like a feast for a metal gollum.

“I think I want to rewire a few things and change out some connectors for different materials, then the movements will be a quarter of a percent smoother,” Rhys announced with some smug self-satisfaction without looking up.

“Is that a lot?” Axton asked with a raised brow. Rhys had explained some of the finer details of his work, sure, but Axton didn’t understand nearly half of what the younger man was probably crediting him with.

Rhys looked up with a confident smile. “Oh yeah. This baby is going to be a work of art when it’s done. I’m going to buy stock in the company before it’s eventually unveiled,” he added with a proud smirk.

Axton laughed at Rhys’ enthusiasm as the omega turned back to his work bent over the kitchen countertop. “I’m counting the days ‘til you take over, darlin’. Sal’s looking forward to that coffee maker too, ya know.”

Rhys snorted in acknowledgement but didn’t look up as he continued to work with a grin, and Axton made an almost too-fast escape through the bedroom and into the bathroom to finally take hands to himself.

He could have laughed at how quickly he ripped off his pants once the bathroom door was safely locked, cock already half-hard in anticipation to quickly take his chance and get off.

Rhys bent over his countertop was… more interesting than Axton wanted to admit to himself, and was springing all kinds of ideas into his head that helped him get fully erect in record time. It would have fueled more guilt if he thought about it, but he was so desperate to just get off he rolled with the
Standing under the water was a nice feeling on its own, but the shampoo he used to ease the glide of his hand over his cock made everything deliciously slick. He guiltily imagined the slickness was from Rhys— that the younger man was finally healed, bond broken, sexual appetites returned and eager to test out his recovered libido.

He'd whisper to Axton how slick he was— no, that he hadn't been so slick in ages— and it was all because of him. Rhys would be curious if everything was still running the same, ask the alpha to take him, and demand Axton fuck him quicker than the slow he'd want to start out with.

Rhys would surely be bossy. No way he wouldn’t with the way he liked to tease the alpha and throw sarcastic, playful statements his way. Would he want it from the front or from behind? No, he’d have him on his back first for certain. He’d tell him to kiss him, to bite him. To make sure he still remembered how to kiss right, to grab Axton’s face with his hands and devour his mouth, coming apart beneath him with need before he’d demand Axton take him from behind and pound into his warm slickness.

Axton bit back a groan as he thrust into his fist, the other hand bracing himself against the wall as he passed his palm over his cockhead before speeding up his thrusts. God it had been way way too long, and Rhys was so damn pretty and smelled so nice and oooh he probably smelled even better all slick and hot with arousal, all because of him.

It was a dirty, self-indulgent fantasy Axton could hate himself over later, but for now, it made his gut clench and his cock lurch and god but it felt nice.

His thrusts sped up as he jerked himself quicker and harder, balls tightening and heart pounding as he raced towards his finish. Would Rhys let Axton kiss at his bonding site? Lick over it? Demand he bite him and bond him and make him come harder than anyone ever--

Axton came over his hand with a whimpered, restrained groan, whole body shaking and shuddering as his cock lurched and spurted thick ropes of white that were quickly washed down the stainless steel drain. His thumb and forefinger were locked around his base, giving gentle squeezes to the soft, ever so puffy skin that would normally swell to a knot as he caught his breath and squeezed his eyes shut with relief.

...What business the loose skin had puffing up, he didn't know, but it all felt damn good, and the slight swell pleased him in reassurance he was still virile and able to knot even if it'd been a long time.

....Ooooh he knew what he was definitely going to fantasize about next time.

The wicked little voice in his head wistfully hoped ‘some day’, and Axton frowned and quickly washed himself as he tried to banish such intimate, cock-hardening thoughts. The idea that something like that could ever actually happen made him blush considerably even in the privacy of his own bathroom. Now that was a dangerous thought.

He felt guilty about it all as he finished up his shower, but was also immensely relieved as he felt far more relaxed than he had in weeks. He seriously needed that. His head felt clear and he felt more in-control and better able to reign in any inappropriate leanings or impulses he thought he’d conquered long ago in his courses.

....The dirty fantasy of knotting Rhys, though, he shoved down and tried not to think of with legitimate, guilt-ridden shame.
The dirty little voice inside him schemed to dust the idea off for a rainy day.

--

Axton woke some time during the night, unsure of the time, but it was still very dark. He'd been having slight nightmares about Handsome Jack trying to steal away their coffee maker technologies, and Rhys trying to win them a new one through some convoluted game of pool Axton didn’t understand the rules to.

He was grateful for whatever had dragged him from the confusing dream, only to feel Rhys moving just barely against him in bed. Also having a nightmare?

No, that was definitely a boner poking his thigh and Rhys was definitely rutting against the previously-sleeping alpha’s leg. Axton’s heart immediately sped up, suddenly wide awake and still as he wondered what the other man was up to… but he realized the omega was asleep.

He inwardly groaned. Great. Perfect. Rhys was having a sexy dream apparently.

It was genuinely good-- well, not for him, but for Rhys- that the omega was having wet dreams. The clinical, wellness professional inside him told Axton that Rhys was well on the road to recovery. Everything broken bond might have killed off was coming back to life; healing. Rhys was getting better; nearing the end of his rehabilitation.

It happened to all of them-- some aware and others not- when the alpha was sleeping near them and keeping them reassured and safe. It wasn't as if it was a topic Axton broached with those he cared for... Either the wet dream happened while they were asleep, or the omega woke during and there was an awkward but necessary conversation of why they shouldn't be mortified and that he was actually very, genuinely proud they were healing, and that it was a normal, healthy part of recovery not to be embarrassed about… and that yes he’d sleep on the couch, please don’t be so embarrassed about things.

This though-- this omega in his own bed rutting up against him… He felt like an asshole for getting excited over it, his own heart pounding and blood headed south to plump up his cock. This wasn’t something easily ignored.

It was unprofessional, it was wrong, and he really hoped Rhys slept through this because Axton was embarrassed as hell by his body’s reaction. There might've been an instinctual twinge with the other omegas-- a physical response from the scent that was pretty easy to kill and control- but the way he was reacting specifically to Rhys...

It didn’t help at all that Rhys was making little sounds in his sleep as his hips continued rutting against the older man. Very gentle, soft movements with matching exhaled sighs of someone mostly still paralyzed with sleep.

Axton wondered if this wasn’t some form of divine punishment for jerking himself off to thoughts of the younger man. Smelling Rhys, listening to him, feeling him as his hard omega cock brushed up against him through their pajama pants…. None of this was something he could just brush off. This was going to haunt him. This would most assuredly feature in his next chance to jerk himself off.

The only upside to this, he figured, was Rhys would eventually stop, and then he could slip out of bed to have a guilty little mid-night wank to take care of things before slipping back in with none the wiser.

But of course things wouldn’t go according to plan.
Rhys woke himself up as he came, and the realization kept Axton still, his breathing deep and even and eyes closed in the hopes the younger man would think him still asleep. Any other time, Axton might be able to deal with this— but not with a raging semi thickening out at all the horribly enticing possibilities his subconscious was throwing his way.

The omega murmured something and cuddled closer against his side, only to stiffen in sudden awareness and scoot away from Axton as unobtrusively as possible.

The big alpha was panicky he’d been found out only to realize just how dark his bedroom was, and that the angle of his hips was not something Rhys would feel without… well… feeling him out. His heart absolutely thundered in his ribcage, no way to feign sleep if Rhys had cuddled closer and heard that. He thanked his lucky stars that the younger man hadn’t been cuddled to his chest as they usually preferred.

But no, Rhys was quietly slipping out of bed to feel about blindly in his extra clothing before scurrying away to the bathroom. Axton breathed a sigh of relief when the smallest click of the door was heard, adjusting his swollen cock with a tortured frown. No way to pretend he was asleep if he was tenting the entire damn quilt. He was honestly more concerned about his thundering heart than his willful boner, as the room was mostly dark and he could always tuck it out of the way.

...But if Rhys cuddled back up to him, he was most assuredly going to hear the tattoo his heart was beating in his chest. Axton prayed to cash in on some of that old military discipline and calm the fuck down.

By the time Rhys did slink back out of the bathroom, Axton had calmed somewhat, but his cuddling worry was for naught as Rhys climbed back in, but turned with his back facing the alpha as he got comfortable aside him in the small bed.

It took awhile for Rhys to fall back asleep as Axton lay there acutely listening, but eventually the younger man’s breathing evened out into uneventful light snores, and the alpha was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

The wicked thing inside him was going to hold onto this memory for future wank sessions, he knew, and haunt the waking world with it.

Axton got very little sleep the rest of the night.

--

Rhys was awake before Axton, grateful for the fact the alpha was snoring away next to him so that he could deal with his soiled underwear undisturbed from the night before.

He was so grateful Axton hadn’t woken up for that. Just the memory of having come in his pants against the older man's thigh almost made him slick with lust, something so filthy and shameful and intimate involving the alpha that Axton would never know about; his own dirty little secret orgasm.

It was so, so wrong. It was wrong enough that even that was enough to get Rhys going-- the forbidden desire of it all. His dirty little secret brought him shame and arousal both and frankly he couldn’t spend much more time in the bed the older man shared with him for fear his damn wandering mind would result in another…incident.

He didn't want to jeopardize their most excellent friendship, and never wanted Axton to be disgusted with him over something that was literally his line of work. Even though Rhys was sure Axton wouldn't be weird about it if he knew, Rhys died inside at the thought that it could possibly change
things between them.

...Like not being able to hug the other man. Rhys was sure he'd be devastated if Axton didn't hug him anymore out of disgust.

Rhys nearly jumped at a sound behind him, followed by a sleepy, half-awake voice.

“You're up early. Sabotage over my breakfast choices?” Axton asked as he came up behind him, voice thick with sleep. His face was clearly still sleep-addled, the man himself having a slow smile for the omega and he shuffled up.

Rhys snorted but smiled right back over his shoulder, fondness for the half-awake expression squeezing at his chest. “Pancakes are a classic and time-honored tradition. You eat too many omelettes, Ax.”

“...And here I thought you were up early to hide the remote in a new place.”

Rhys chuckled at the accusation, turning with a smirk of his own. “Oh Axton, I threw the remote in the trash ages ago.”

Axton chuckled and bumped his head against Rhys’ own affectionately. “I'll forgive you if you smother those pancakes in butter, sweetheart. Long day today.”

Rhys’ heart beat a little faster as the alpha quietly padded back into the bedroom-- probably for his morning shower- as the omega watched the way his t-shirt stretched over his back and the way his pajama pants clung to his rear. He poured fresh batter into the hot pan with red cheeks.

No, he was not going to start getting excited over the same pet names Axton had been using this entire time, and he was not going to oogle such a kind hearted man. Even if the alpha looked super cute all sleepy and slow and still not quite awake as he’d touched Rhys and smiled.

And he definitely wasn’t going to get all hot and bothered combining that with the dirty night he’d had. Nope. Not gonna happen.

Rhys stiffened as he stared into the pan. The realization that their sleeping together was going to be a problem hit him like a truck, jaw slack as in concern. He felt bereaved at the truth in his realization, realizing he’d passed the point of no return without ever being aware of it.

He liked Axton. Like-liked him. Maybe even a little more than just that. He'd fumbled out at some point from fond, platonic feeling for a friend, and stumbled headlong into wanting the man romantically at the very center of his being.

Dear gods that smarted. Wanting what he couldn't have-- it wasn't right to try to pursue anything given their current relationship. It was Axton’s actual job to take care of him-- to be nice and supportive and caring and especially tactile (something Rhys read, and agreed with, in one of Axton’s omega care books). Rhys couldn't take advantage of their working relationship. Axton was trapped taking care of him until his damn bond broke, and it would be really dirty of him to presume anything, or worse, manipulate things to his own benefit.

God, but a devious little part of him wanted to though.

Rhys cursed as the pancake in the pan burned, and he slid it into the bin before adding fresh batter to the pan, prepping butter for the finished ones on the plate.

--
The emails and improvements Rhys kept himself occupied with really helped distract from the reality that he was quickly falling ass-over-teakettle for Axton, and the younger man was able to continue on with his work without worry for anything but numbers and code and programming in his head.

His department was quick with anticipation when he sent in completed forms, new code, or suggestions as he hadn't been there to personally supervise their projects, and they just as eagerly got back to him with results or further issues requiring his expertise (and sometimes the fond well-wishes for his improving health and to see him back at the office soon).

His personal office was surely a dusty mess by now, but it didn’t mean he wasn’t capable of getting quality work done, dammit. Like the delicate cybernetics that were responding better and better with every recalibration and tweaking he gave things, to both the mechanical parts and the software itself.

He was currently testing the smoothness of response time to his natural movements, the glove-like gauntlet hooked up to his laptop via his own design of frankensteined cables and plugs. The feedback he was getting was promising— and more to the point, it was hard-data to give to Atlas, proving he was worth the budget provisions and his own team for further development.

Rhys gasped as a series of quick movements caused one of the joint pieces to snap, the omega cursing a blue streak as it flew off in two pieces and fell to the floor. His analytics spiked and then became unresponsive for the piece that was now broken, and Rhys carefully removed the glove and paused his program to retrieve the delicate metal.

He looked down at his open palm with dismay. That would be a problem. He himself wouldn’t back a product that couldn’t even withstand normal office wear and tear, and one could hardly function faster if one had to be super delicate with an expensive piece of machinery.

“Whatever… nothing I can’t fix with the… shit…” he trailed off in his own mutterings. He didn’t have the spare he could fix this with. It was back at his apartment in his desk drawer with early concept designs and extra tools and the like.

He picked up his phone from the countertop, contemplating it for several moments. He didn’t want to bother Axton with something that could wait, but this threw a major wrench into his whole project, and he couldn’t continue anything until it was fixed, let alone responsiveness tests.

No harm in seeing when the older man might be home at least….

It was a little later that Axton finally got back to him, telling him about an emergency at one of Atlas’ off-site facilities that had taken him from another omega check-in, and that he was going to be home a bit later than usual, but was Rhys okay and what did he need?

>> im fine, its not urgent or anything :)
>> are -you- okay?

Rhys was a little on edge as it took more than a few moments for the alpha to answer him back, and he felt silly over the many ridiculous, frightening ideas his brain came up with by the time the alpha responded

<< Nothing to worry about
<< I’ll trade stories if you order us pizza for tonight ;)
<< Be home around sixish I think

Rhys bit his lip. It was only around one in the afternoon… He really needed that piece, but he supposed it could wait so long as he found something else to do.
The thought of wanking himself into a coma so he’d be safe for sleep didn’t sound too bad…. He’d still need to figure out something to occupy himself with for the remaining three hours though, ha ha ha. He was a riot.

>> mind if we stop by my apartment after pizza?
>> i just broke a piece of my glove like a dummy :p
>> the finger wont respond now :( 

<< Please tell me it was the middle finger :D

Rhys actually snorted and shook his head.

>> LOL cute Ax
>> it was the index. cant do any tests now :|

<< Give Sal a call :) Make him work for that paycheck!
<< :P
<< He knows where your place is :)

Oh yeah. He had Sal’s number. He supposed this was exactly the type of thing he could call the other alpha over. It was work-related after all. And even if Sal couldn’t take him right now, there was no harm in asking at least.

>> omg i cant believe i forgot about sal
>> thnx Ax ilu youre the best!

Rhys bit his lip before sending that last bit, watching his screen with trepidation in wondering if it was too forward, toeing a line he’d been skirting the past several days in regards to thinking about the green-eyed alpha. The response had him riveted.

<< right back at ya darlin ;)

Rhys’ heart beat a bit wildly in his chest at that, brain going a million miles a minute over any possible subtext there; if Axton was just being friendly and casual, or if it was a hint to things Rhys wasn’t entirely certain was only in his head or not.

Regardless, he allowed himself a little antsy wiggle of happiness while grinning so wide his face nearly hurt. Subtext or not, he was excited by that stupid little winky face, and damn but he’d better ensure nothing untoward might happen in his sleep tonight...

After allowing himself a good, serious hour to indulge in several fantasies to the point he’d probably sleep like the dead, Rhys sent Salvador a message asking if he was free any time during the workday to pick up the piece he needed to work on his project.

The alpha’s response was immediate, and it made Rhys smirk imagining his enthusiasm.

>> I’d LOVE any excuse to get out of here!!
>> Let me tell my dick of a supervisor and ill be right over!

--

Sal wasn’t joking about how quick he’d meet him, and the alpha drove them to Rhys’ apartment completely without prompting from the omega (with a stop for proper coffee-- his treat thanks to killing it at the pool hall).
Parking in his own lot filled the omega with trepidation, but there were no unfamiliar cars, no one around who shouldn’t be there, and the usual peacefulness of the area was as undisturbed as it normally was. With the broad alpha at his side, Rhys felt safe and secure, and even in good spirits as Sal made jokes about permanently being his bodyguard if Rhys actually got them a coffee maker like Axton had recently been talking about.

Walking up the stairs with coffee in hand, they both stopped at the hallway that held Rhys’ own door, surprise rooting them both to the spot.

Sal looked up to Rhys to make sure he wasn’t imagining things, and Rhys looked down at Sal in slight anxiety at what they were looking at. A quick check by the alpha proved things were safe, and Rhys came to stand before the mess taking up a good part of the wall and blocking the front of his door.

There were baskets and bunches and bouquets of every kind of flower sitting in front of his door like a goddamn popup florist’s. A fire hazard for sure, and probably hadn’t been there too long if the apartment manager hadn’t called him up to complain about it. Further inspection showed two proof-of-delivery notices; one from today, and the other dated the day before.

The sight of the beautiful, expensive bouquets made Rhys’ heart beat with terror, and he knew immediately who’d sent them without even having to look at the damn golden cards on the things. He almost wanted to laugh at the absurdity of this type of terrorizing-- and that’s what it was: Jack trying to wave his damn dick around and treat Rhys like he was still his.

The throbbing Rhys was getting better and better at ignoring in his neck refused to be shoved aside as he looked at the alpha’s flowers with disdain. He rubbed at it with the fingers on his free hand.

“You even wanna know?” Sal asked as he bent to inspect one of the cards-- a cartoon bee on a flower that said ‘Bee my Buttercup’ in stylish cursive writing. The alpha snorted humorlessly.

Rhys made a face of contempt, moving one of the baskets blocking his door to the side with the toe of his boot. “They can all go straight in the trash. They're not coming in my apartment.”

“That's smart,” the shorter man agreed. “Piece of shit… This is something, right?”

“It’s definitely something...” Rhys muttered, fishing out his keys from his jacket pocket only to pause in reaching for the door. He gave Sal a suddenly frightened look. “He couldn't have gotten in or anything, you think?”

Sal made an annoyed chuffing sound under his breath, moving aside flower arrangements with a lot less care and a lot more force than Rhys had to get to the door. “I'll go in first, how about that?”

They checked Rhys’ apartment out, but nothing was moved or out of the ordinary whatsoever. Rhys’ anxious heartbeat calmed just a tad as he realized he could smell lingering scents of Axton in his home, and if anyone else had been in there, he would have definitely picked up on that as he hadn’t had any visitors since. That the green-eyed alpha’s presence was still there even though he himself wasn’t bolstered Rhys’ nerve by magnitudes.

Rhys quickly grabbed what he needed from his office, and together they took all the arrangements to the garbage bin for the complex. He shivered as he trashed them, though he took solace in the fact that Jack had probably never come within a hundred yards of the flowers themselves… especially when he might encounter an ass-beating from Axton, as far as the Hyperion CEO knew.

As much as he hated to admit it, Rhys knew that much about Jack: personal touches weren’t his
style. The alpha hadn’t set so much as a foot on his entire floor, that much he was certain.

Together they talked to the complex manager again about trespassers and unsolicited deliveries, and it helped somewhat to reassure Rhys that they were leaving a loud and detailed report about every instance of Jack’s stalking and general ill-doing where the omega was concerned. If anything, like Axton had said, there would be a report of things.

“Axton ain’t gonna like this one bit,” Sal slightly growled out as they drove back to the other alpha’s loft.

Rhys snorted. “Not any less than me, I’m sure.” He offered Sal a grateful smile. “Thanks a lot by the way. My life is a shit show right now, so I really do appreciate all the help I can get.”

“Hey man, don’t sweat it, really,” Sal told him seriously. “It might be our job, but this kind of shit you just can’t stand for, ya know?” The shorter man huffed in thought, eyes on the road. “...done enough things in life to know there’s a point where you need to try and stop bad shit from happening…”

Rhys smiled as they drove on in companionable silence. He was extremely, extremely grateful Atlas had two alphas like Sal and Axton looking out for their fellow team, as it were. True, his coworkers on his floor would probably never meet either of them unless they required some sort of assistance, but to Rhys, the pair were probably one of the most important assets Atlas possibly had.

He was most definitely going to get them a nice ass coffee maker when all this bullshit was over. Something expensive that did it all (and gave him excuses to visit Axton during working hours).

Rhys thanked Sal as the shorter man parked and took him right to Axton’s front door, ensuring he was safe and secure inside the other alpha’s apartment before leaving.

“You sure you don’t want a coffee for the road?” Rhys asked as Sal snorted with a smirk at the offer.

“That mister coffee is on his last legs,” Sal laughed. “Axton isn’t very picky when it comes to his blends, either.”

Rhys choked on a laugh as Sal had the other alpha freaking pegged. Axton wasn’t picky, that much was true.

“I will take a candybar for the road, though.”

“Candybar?” Rhys asked with a laugh as Sal raised a brow at him. Axton didn’t have any candybars, or Rhys would have made it his business to personally sample them.

“What? You haven’t found Ax’s ‘secret’ stash yet?” He said the word sarcastically which made Rhys laugh further, shaking his head as Sal lead him to the bookshelf. “Oh man, let me show you the thing.”

The other alpha got into a simple wooden box underneath another box on the bookshelf that had a pile of old National Geographic magazines stacked on it. The box looked like a simple style-choice—something Rhys just took to be a part of Axton’s general decor— but removing the piles of magazines with wildcats and frogs revealed what had to be the motherload of every chocolate-craving Rhys had ever had in his life.

“It’s the emergency box,” Sal laughed. “Guess he hasn’t had an emergency in a while… Out of sight, out of mind. They’re still good though.” The alpha chose two bars with the air of one who had every right to the goodies inside, making Rhys smirk as he thought of all the ways he was going to
tease Axton (and maybe have a good sugar-rush with the man on the weekend if he was lucky).

Rhys nearly died as Sal removed the television remote from the box with a muttered “...what the hell, Ax?””, putting everything but the slim black plastic back the way he’d found it.

“Okay, well, good luck on your cool robot-thingy,” Sal told him as he made his way to the front door. “If it works as well as you say, I hope you’re president of Atlas this time next year.”

Rhys snorted and shook his head and they stood in the door jamb. “He told you about that, huh?’

“We’re both holding out on that coffee maker, amigo.” His grin was toothy as regarded the omega one last time. “Between me and you, Axton is having more fun than he lets on. Keep his ass in line and remind him he’s supposed to be working,” Sal said gravely, though a wide grin was on his face.

“I promise I will, thanks!” Rhys said as the alpha told him to lock up, and made his way down the hall to the old elevator, the plastic of the candybar wrapper crinkling as the broad man made off with his pilfered treats.

Rhys laughed to himself as he was left alone. Yes, Jack sending him damn flower arrangements had been weird as hell, and he’d broken a vital piece of his robotic glove, but overall, Rhys thought it was a pretty fabulous day. He even had the missing remote, plopping down on the couch to check if the batteries still worked, and flicked the tv on with success.

His phone vibrated with a message about an hour later, and he looked down with a smile, hoping Axton was telling him he was coming home early, and imagining the look on the older man’s face when he told him he found the remote-- and more to the point- revealed where it had been.

The smile died on his face as he looked at the screen, blood running cold at an unknown number, though the identity of the sender couldn’t have been any clearer had his damn picture shown up as caller ID.

>> What did you think of the flowers, buttercup?

Chapter End Notes

I spent around 10hrs of free time writing this chapter-- time off work I could've spent sleeping or doing other things- please spend sixty seconds to write more than five words if you enjoyed this ;) We all know how much work goes into fic, and how much time you've spent reading. Please reward a writer with something nice to enjoy reading back :) We don't ask for nearly as much as we put out into the world :)

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is basically a continuation of the day previous! Yep, we're doing that again haha. Next chapter is the beginning of the end, I would say >:3

Axton was dirty, tired, smudged with ash, and more looking forward to a slice of pizza and a beer next to Rhys than the shower he so sorely needed.

The apartment was dark as he pocketed his keys. No welcoming scent of pizza, no Rhys working on his projects, and the omega wasn’t asleep on the empty couch either.

Had Rhys gone out? But no, Axton saw his set of keys on the counter, and the robotic gauntlet was still laid out as if the omega was half-finished with work. The bedroom door was closed, though. Was he actually napping in bed for once? The idea of Rhys curled up in his bed properly instead of passed out on the couch made Axton smirk. If anyone deserved a nice catch up on rest, it was the hardworking omega.

Axton went about setting his stuff down, quietly opening the bedroom door so as not to disturb the snoozing omega. He hoped the sound of the shower wouldn’t disturb him too much, because god it couldn’t wait. He really was filthy.

The bed was empty, lights off in here too, and his quilt was missing; bare sheets and no omega giving him pause.

Axton felt a mild thrill of concern go through him as he flicked the lights on, moving to the bathroom as the next obvious spot, and lightly knocking, but the door was cracked open and unlocked. Dark.

“Rhys?” Axton frowned at the note of audible fear in his voice, fighting down worry as he left both rooms behind to stand in his living room to see if he’d missed anything noteworthy. He removed his phone and immediately dialed the omega’s number, another spike of fear going through his belly as he heard the ringtone go off from somewhere in his kitchen.

Opening his drawers, he found the phone inside with the silverware, ending his call while staring at Rhys’ screen as his heart beat a million miles a minute.

“Fuck… fuck fuck…” Axton muttered as he shoved both phones into his pockets, scared to death over the missing omega when all of his stuff was there. Something must have happened. There was no obvious sign of foul play, but none of this was normal. If it was foul play, it would draw together with the clusterfuck at the warehouse he’d been handling all day long on the outer limits of town.

He was contemplating calling Sal to see if Rhys was out with him, but it wouldn’t have made sense for his stuff to be here… and his phone among the spoons in the drawer of all places. It was unnatural and deeply disturbing.

The alpha’s heart was pounding in his throat as heavy steps lead him back to his bedroom. He dropped to his knees on the side of his bed in search of the old but pristine gun and combat knife
safely stowed there, mind going a million miles a minute as he tried to strategize his next move without being overwhelmed with worry for the younger man.

He nearly jumped, pulling his hand back like he’d been burned, as he encountered not a locked cedar box, but something soft and warm. Axton dropped further until he could see under the bed, heart threatening to crawl out of his throat as the alpha was reaching out yet again with one hand, the other retrieving and shining the light on his phone under the bed to see better.

That was Rhys all wrapped up; it was clearly Rhys. He appeared unharmed, fully curled up in Axton’s quilt and somehow ensconced under what was frankly not a place most people could fit. But it was him. He was there, and for the most part, he appeared unharmed.

Relief flowed through Axton like the dousing of a fire, and the older man’s fear was replaced with a different type of concern. He put his phone down and got into a better position to reach for the younger man. He managed to place a hand over the omega, giving Rhys a gentle shake until the omega’s face popped into view, blinking red-rimmed, brown and blue eyes with sleep-addled confusion.

Axton sighed a heavy sound of relief.

“Ax…?”

“...god you had me scared there, darlin’…” Axton murmured as he gave the younger man’s side a squeeze within the small space, the clear worry writ on his face as Rhys was giving him slow, barely-coherent blinks. “What are you doing under here, sweetheart?”

Rhys blinked at him again as if unsure if he was awake, but the hand he reached out with was solidly clasped by Axton, and the action was like the running of an electric current through the omega. He felt instantly alert, that no, he wasn’t dreaming, and Axton was actually here. He wasn’t fully awake yet but damn if his body wasn’t running pell mell into full-alert to get to the alpha.

He was pulling wadded-up cotton balls out of his ears before using Axton’s strength to slide him out of the space like an eel. The alpha hauled him directly into his embrace, and Rhys pulled himself the rest of the way nearly into Axton’s lap.

Half the quilt came with him to tangle most of his lower half, but Rhys wrapped arms around the older man with such clear relief that it did little to make the alpha feel his worrying was for naught. Such a strong reaction from the younger man just barely tempered his concern. The scenting of the omega was immediate, and concerned, gentle hands took inventory for injury as Rhys clung.

“Are you okay?” Axton was petting the top of Rhys’ head and back, other arm holding the omega as he scented and tried to discern any wrongdoing. Rhys’ scent was more or less normal, for the most part. He didn’t smell blood at least. “Okay, Rhys? What happened? Are you alright?”

“I’m okay… I am.” Rhys murmured, voice sleepy and relieved as he cuddled close, explaining himself by way of asking a question. “Did you hear from Sal today at all?”

“No, I’ve been on-site cleaning up a security breach this whole time. What happened, sugar? Why were you under the bed?” Axton couldn’t fully cover the note of worry in his tone even though his voice was gentle. Unused adrenaline was still surging through him and it was hard to keep it out of his voice. His nose was in the younger man’s hair, detecting the old smell of distress, but nothing was immediately apparent or off otherwise.

Rhys was kneading his fingers at the back of Axton’s shirt, still trying to convince himself he was
awake. “We picked up that part I needed at my apartment today, and there were flowers outside my door. Loads of them. And Jack got my number somehow,” he muttered into Axton’s neck, his face pressed against the alpha’s warm skin as if he could osmosis a normal freaking life from touching the older man. His eyes still stung from the panicked crying he’d done earlier. “He texted me, and it just-.” Rhys could feel Axton’s face turning against his own head in shock as the omega just concentrated on the alpha’s scent.

“He texted you?”

Rhys nodded, pressing his face further into Axton’s skin and breathing. He wrinkled his nose at the odd twinges of smoke and other puzzling things he could smell, but didn’t let it deter him from his touching. “…I’m glad you’re back.”

“Did you say anything back? What did he send you?” Axton growled as he pet the younger man, trying his damndest to comfort and reassure the clinging omega. Made a lot of damn sense now what he was doing hiding. That kind of invasion must have been jarring as hell. He felt ashamed he hadn’t been there for the younger man.

“I stopped looking at it after the first two… It…” Rhys’ laugh was tired, awkward in its falseness, and he felt incredibly stupid the more he felt safe in Axton’s hold; as if waking up from a particularly frightening nightmare and realizing it was all pretend… even though it really wasn’t. “I would have messaged you or something but I just… I didn’t want my phone anywhere near me… and I didn’t turn it off in case you called, and I didn’t want to even see it-” he gave a rueful look at his impromptu earplugs next to them, “-but I didn’t want it to go straight to voicemail and worry you if you did call for something, and I just… Sorry, I know this is all so stupid… doesn’t even make sense…”

“Hey now, it’s not stupid sugar, okay? Not one bit.”

Axton’ gave him an extra good hug, sitting there not mentioning that the offending item was so close and in his pocket. It was clear now why the omega was hiding under his bed. Small, easily-defendable places were the location of choice for a frightened omega. If his closet were bigger, he might’ve even found Rhys in there. He wasn’t shaking at least, but he was plastered pretty close against Axton’s chest.

If the alpha wasn’t so concerned about the younger man, he might have been more than passingly interested in the fact that Rhys was wrapped up in his own quilt, smelling of the alpha, and was currently scenting him as if his life depended on it. That he could be a comfort made him genuinely pleased and more than a little possessive over ensuring the other man’s happiness and safety. If he could serve that purpose for the other man, he’d be more than satisfied.

The reminder of his general dirty state made him wrinkle his nose at himself, but he didn’t dissuade Rhys’ clinging. That’s why showers existed, after all.

“Are ya okay though? He didn’t do anything to you?” Rhys shook his head, and Axton pressed a comforting kiss to the crown of the younger man’s head as he continued to gently pet him. “You can call me for anything, sweetheart, and I’d-”

“It… it was just a text message, Ax… Not like some big issue--”

“Nothing is too big or too small where this is concerned, okay darlin’? You’re still my first priority. I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you.”

Rhys just shook his head in Axton’s neck, snorting despite himself. “…Can we get my number
changed? I’d block it but I don’t think that would stop him… just get another burner phone or something…”

“Absolutely, sweetheart.” Axton pressed another kiss to the top of Rhys’ head. “Do you mind if I look at the messages?” Maybe persuade the other alpha it was hazardous to his health to continue to harass Rhys.

Rhys shook his head no. He sure as hell didn’t mind, and he knew Axton would erase them for him in his stead. He didn’t want those messages on his phone. He didn’t want any of it there, the Hyperion alpha’s texts feeling like an invasion of his privacy. Not that he answered any of them. He didn’t want those texts to be anywhere near his normal conversations, regardless. Their presence made his phone feel unclean.

“It’s…” Rhys snorted self-deprecatingly as he admitted the fact, “I threw it in the fork drawer… I was going to block the number, but then I thought of what you said about evidence for the police, but I didn’t want to silence it unless maybe it was you messaging me, and then I didn’t even want to go near it let alone hear it and--”

“Rhys, darlin’, I promise you don’t have to explain yourself to me, okay? You did the right thing.” Axton was looking down at him, and Rhys looked up at him with such obvious embarrassment that the alpha cuddled him right back, petting at the back of his head reassuringly. No judgement here, only comfort. “How’s your neck feel, sweetheart? Are you really okay?”

“It bugs the same for the most part… I was trying to sleep it away but I just didn’t-- I wanted to text you but I didn’t want to touch my phone, and I couldn’t get comfortable anywhere that felt right and I *know* it seems weird but--”

“*Rhys,*” Axton started seriously, though his voice was kind and gentle, bordering on playfully hopeful to make the omega feel better, “Your cyber-hand is in pieces all over my kitchen, and between us my bathroom has more products than a high-end salon… I *want* you to be comfortable here. If being under the bed made ya feel safe, then don’t worry about it, okay? I’m the last person to mind it, ya know? If it made you feel safe, then I’m glad.”

Rhys wasn’t proud of the sound he made at the alpha’s acceptance of what he felt was seriously humiliating behavior-- being under someone’s bed was hardly dignified, and made him feel like a child- but he couldn’t force himself to care too much. Not when he was so desperate with relief that Axton had finally come back home; that he didn’t have to be scared of Jack’s harassment when he was with the big, green-eyed alpha.

“…when will it freaking break?” Rhys whined, curled so close he was pretty much in Axton’s lap. “My neck never stops throbbing and I’m sick to death of this. I wish I’d never even heard of Handsome freaking Jack. ...Asshole. ...Knothead…”

Axton made a noise of understanding in his throat. “You are *so* close, sweetheart, I promise,” Axton murmured, his voice thick with something that made Rhys latch on and listen with concerned hope. “You’re stronger and better every day. You really are.”

Rhys snorted. “I don’t feel like it.”

Axton gave him a squeeze and snuffled into his hair. “Your scent smells better all the time; don’t have that stink on you that usually comes with broken bond anymore.”

Rhys snorted again, smiling despite himself at the opening to joke. “Well I *have* been showering regularly, Axton.”
He chuckled, the irony of the moment not lost on him. “And don’t we all appreciate that.” He grinned at Rhys as the omega peeked out, repositioning himself to better hold the younger man. “You’re gonna beat this, darlin’. Gonna beat the shit right out of it and go on to put proper coffee makers on every floor of Atlas.”

Rhys brushed him off with a laugh of ‘yeah, right’, pushing against his encouraging and confident cuddles. Axton gave him a promising smile. “Really, sugar. You’re hitting all the points on the checklist, like clockwork. I’d give it two weeks max.”

All expression melted from Rhys’ face as he fully pulled back to look the alpha in the face, searching for any sign of embellishment or well-meaning lie. Only two weeks? Two weeks and he’d feel better? Be free? No more throbbing neck? No more sense of guilt that followed him everywhere like a shadow?

“Are you serious?!”

The way Rhys regarded Axton made the older man really feel for him. There was desperation in those pretty eyes, and something that wanted to hope against hope and believe him. Rhys wanted his freedom from this thing that had been hanging like a noose around his neck for so long, and it made Axton ache with sympathy for the omega. “Serious.” Rhys looked at him with further disbelief, and Axton gave them both a little shake as they sat there on his bedroom floor. “I mean it, sweetheart. You’re going to be free of that asshole before you know it. You’ve been strong this long. It’s just going to be a little bit longer before you’re free.”

The smile that broke onto Rhys’ face was so wide and large, he tried to hide in Axton’s neck; he didn’t want to show his hopeful anticipation, but the alpha just continued petting him and told him it was okay, and that yes, really, he should be free from that monster’s influence in no time flat. All signs pointed to recovery nearly finished. The time he’d been abandoned by the Hyperion alpha might’ve been longer than any other, but his recovery was progressing just like any other omega Axton had helped.

He was going to get through this, and it was going to be sooner than he thought possible.

“...You smell like a campfire,” Rhys commented as he pulled slightly away, still sat on the bedroom floor together in the rumpled quilt. His eyes searched about Axton’s face in a way that informed the alpha that he was dirtier than previously thought. “And you’re dirty,” Rhys said plainly, sticking out a thumb to wipe at a smudge on the older man’s cheek with a thinking frown.

Axton’s heart picked up a bit of speed at the gesture, but he ignored it to groan. “Shit, yeah I’m pretty filthy actually. You uh, you should probably wash your... Well, I guess wash your everything after touching me,” he finished with an awkward laugh. He gave the blanket puddled about them a discriminating look. “Probably wash this too. I... had a long day of dirty work.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

“Of course--”

“After you shower?” Rhys added with a cheeky smile, eyes lingering once more on certain parts of Axton’s face. “You really are a mess. ...But you’re in good company.”

“Well aren’t you a sweetheart,” the alpha said with a laugh as they both got to their feet. “Did you still feel up for pizza? I can order it before jumping in real quick. There’s a place around the corner, wouldn’t take too long.”
The idea of going anywhere near his phone made Rhys’ stomach drop, but the idea of pizza made his mouth water, appetite fully back despite Jack’s assholery. “Yeah… yes please.”

Axton showered and ordered them food, and as soon as the alpha was out, Rhys was quick to claim the shower himself after discovering smudges not only all over his face, but on his nice blue shirt too.

At least the redness of his cheeks was something only he was privy to as he looked in the bathroom mirror, realizing just how deeply he’d rubbed up against the alpha; how close they’d been. Well, if Axton didn’t care, he told his red face, then neither did he.

--

Axton dealt with Handsome Jack’s texts the moment Rhys got in the shower after him.

He was lucky there was nothing particularly-breakable near him, because Axton was livid by the invasive, manipulative messages. His only comfort was that Rhys wouldn’t hear his furious growls over the noise of the shower as he tried to keep himself calm.

>> What did you think of the flowers, buttercup?
>> You KNOW there’s more where that came from ;D

>> How’d you like a nice little shoppin spree? No strings attached or anything! I’d just love to see that gorgeous face ;)
>> Come on. I’ll get ya sum reeeeeal nice stuff
>> I bet you could use an ice cream break right right cupcake?

Axton growled at the sheer nerve, but the further attempts at coercing Rhys into meeting with him really got the alpha’s hackles up. As if anything he could say would possibly lure the omega. The insult to Rhys’ intelligence pissed him off that much more. Was Jack that stupid, or did he actually think Rhys was that gullible?

>> Remember how good we were together, Rhysie? Don’t you remember how head over heels you were for me? Let’s try again <3
>> It’ll be different this time, I swear. Just talk to me sweet pea :
>> I promise it’ll be different babe! Come on I’ll be a new man! YOUR new man!

Axton promised himself, really promised himself, that the next time he got so much as a whiff of Jack or that stupid yellow car of his, both the vehicle and the Hyperion CEO would be leaving with more than a few dents and missing pieces. A monster like that didn’t deserve to even be within Rhys’ notice. That the knothead would leave such a sweetheart to wither from broken bond, only to try now and win him over with cheap promises made Axton’s blood boil.

The only consolation was that it was obviously the actions of a desperate, idiot man. And Rhys would be free of any and all ties to him soon.

Axton’s fingers couldn’t fly over the letters fast enough, growling as he sent a reply he sure as hell wouldn’t mind others seeing, and blocked the number shortly after.

<< Text him again and you won’t have any fingers left to type with fuckface

Axton growled as he sent the message, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up as he really absorbed Jack’s statements; how they must’ve affected Rhys to the point of hiding beneath his bed in the smallest place available in the loft. God but he wanted to rip the other alpha apart. So much manipulation and dirty, dirty tactics. It wasn’t unheard of by alphas to resort to such measures, but Handsome Jack was a piece of work all his own. The real kicker to that knothead would be when
Rhys’ bond finally shattered, and he’d realize just what a fuckhead he was; rejecting his bondmate only to be properly rejected right back. That was gonna deliciously sting.

The idea of how pleased Rhys would be when it finally happened eased the angry growls in his throat. He was going to throw him a damn party when it happened. Or take him out somewhere special.

...No undertones or anything devious. Axton would be genuinely relieved and so happy for Rhys when the omega’s misery was over. That deserved a night out and some fancy ice cream at the very least. That triple-caramel chocolate fudge ice cream Rhys liked best. Something to properly celebrate the end to what must have been a horrific six months before Axton entered the picture.

The pizza arrived shortly after Axton dealt with Rhys’ phone, and the omega was done showering just as the alpha was setting up things on the coffee table for them to be comfy on the couch. Once clean and dry, Rhys cuddled right back up against Axton, safely nuzzled under his arm at his side with pizza in his lap and a beer in his free hand.

“So what happened to you? You said you’d tell me,” Rhys prompted as he chewed deliciously gooey cheese. He felt secure and safe with Axton’s arms around him, the pair sharing another big, spare quilt as they sat on the couch and scarfed pizza like it was their last meal.

“There was an alarm at one of the storage facilities, but no one was there,” Axton informed between a bite followed by a drag off his beer. “The electrical was all fucked u-- uh, I mean, some kind of electrical fire. Tripped the alarms maybe when they shorted. ...or someone did it. We didn't find anyone though.”

“At the off-site storage building or the warehouse?”

“The warehouse.”

“I've been there,” Rhys remarked, not paying attention to the movie they’d put on, gaze distant as he recalled Atlas’ primary storehouse. “I’ve dropped off outdated hard copies of plans and older stuff I compiled when I first started. It's pretty far.”

“Yeah. I was the closest one to it or they would've sent Sal. They're still trying to figure out what happened exactly but, I dunno.” He took another well-earned draught from his beer as Rhys reached for another slice of pizza. “Spent most of my day helping cleanup and secure stuff. Not too much was lost. Nothing important I think anyways.”

“You said it was a security breach?”

“That’s what they’re saying, but I don’t know. Alarms were tripped but that could have been everything short-circuiting. If the security cameras caught anything, they didn’t tell me about it. That building is in serious need of some upgrades.”

“Wait, they called you for that?” Rhys asked with some confusion. That wasn't exactly Axton’s area of expertise. He wasn't an electrician as far as Rhys was aware, or a firefighter, although with the alpha’s generous build, Rhys wouldn't put it past the man's abilities. His opinions on how Axton looked all smudged up dirty and well-worked, however, was his own business.

Axton chuckled. “Not called me for the fire so much as… Well, if they suspect it was sabotage and all…. I was sent in in case anyone was caught in places they shouldn't be…”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been used for intimidation,” he said with a snort. “And I have… training their other field guys don’t have.”

“Catching bad guys, huh?” Rhys asked somewhat wistfully. He still wished Axton had gotten a bit more time using Jack as a punching bag before they’d been separated.

The smile Axton gave him was kind, but it was tight around the lips. “...I told you before that I have paramilitary training; it’s why Hyperion was so interested in me…. but truthfully I was… probably closer to a mercenary a lot of the time… mostly….”

His voice wasn't necessarily proud of the fact, and the implications left hanging there made Rhys look up into his face where Axton avoided meeting his eyes. The big alpha had mentioned his background in many varied things, but this seemed like an admission of shame rather than a confident display of a skill-set.

It didn’t change Rhys’ opinion of the man.

“Like…. Were you an assassin?” Rhys tried to make his voice as passive as possible-- lacking judgment to keep the conversation flowing- wondering how deep his understanding of a mercenary and the truth of the matter actually was. This wasn't something Axton needed to tell him, and frankly it wasn't his business, but the idea that the older man was opening up another part of himself to Rhys thrilled the omega even as the possibilities somewhat terrified him.

Axton’s green eyes still refused to meet Rhys’ own, instead looking down judgmentally like the pepperonis on his pizza slice had mortally offended him. “Sometimes…” he admitted none too proudly. “That was around the time I got out of that business… There’s no glory in settling the scores of rich assholes… no matter which side they're on…”

“....and Atlas wants you for that type of thing?” Rhys asked with furrowed brow of concern, wondering if there was something to his employer that he’d completely managed to miss. The competition their company received was cutthroat, yes, but it was still civilized as far as Rhys knew.

Axton actually laughed.

“No, they’re all above board, darlin’, promise. But still, I mean, I guess I have a mean face with the scars and all?”

Rhys made a noise of disgust. “Pfft, good luck on that front, Ax. Anyone sees you and they'll just try to get in on some expert cuddling. You give off that kind of aura, I’ll have you know. You're hardly scary.” Rhys wedged in even closer against the man and pressed his face into his skin, causing the alpha to snort and give him an appreciative squeeze as Rhys spoke into his shoulder. “Those scars aren’t scary, just kind of badass. And ridiculous if they knew just how uncoordinated you really are,” he added with an exaggerated sigh.

Axton laughed as he gave Rhys a fond little squeeze in response. “So I’m not intimidating, darlin’? Better tell the higher-ups.”

“I already know you're a big sweetheart. Don't waste your time, you'll just ruin your street cred more.”

They both laughed, Axton slightly moving to nuzzle him better while Rhys purred at the treatment. The alpha’s chest felt so tight then, he just wanted to squeeze Rhys close and never ever let him go.

He did have to let him go to get more beer though, and again when Rhys decided the ice cream in the fridge was a good way to finish off dinner, but the pair settled back in against one another until
they eventually went to bed. And even then, Axton made sure Rhys was safe and comfortable in his arms as they slept.

--

Rhys felt worlds better the next day. Axton cuddled him fully throughout the night, and the omega was ever grateful he'd had an intense day for no nighttime ‘accidents’ to have happened.

Waking up to Axton would set anyone off though, to be fair. All cute and sleepy with a slight bedhead and just barely coherent until he got some coffee into him. Axton’s face all relaxed and slack-jawed was something Rhys thought anyone would easily fall in love with, and boy was it dangerous to tread even a toe down that path of thinking…. No matter how appealing it was.

The alpha was loathe to leave him, no matter how much Rhys swore up and down that he'd be safe from text messages in Axton’s own home.

They'd taken care of getting Rhys’ number changed, and armed with screen caps of the text messages Jack had sent (along with print-outs) they’d gone together to further add to the police report regarding Jack’s stalking.

The omega felt a lot better over things than Axton had expected… even if the police weren’t much help since Jack hadn't ‘done’ anything officially illegal, and more to the point, they couldn’t technically prove it was even him.

It pissed Axton off a fair deal, though the reaction wasn't unexpected. If anything escalated though where the Hyperion alpha was concerned, then Rhys had options concerning actions to take. It didn’t make Axton any less concerned, but it was what it was.

“I promise I'll be fine, Ax. Go to work,” Rhys told him as he sat at the alpha’s kitchen counter reassembling his broken finger piece. “Don't work too hard… playing with babies and cats and stuff while some of us do real work,” Rhys teased.

“You'd think different after seeing how sharp kitten claws can be. And baby fingernails. Like needles,” the alpha said with a laugh.

“Boo hoo, cute little fluffy kittens,” Rhys said, words dripping with sarcasm. He gave Axton a sly look after a moment to which the alpha only shook his head with a grin, giving Rhys’ own head a nuzzle before finally taking his leave to the office.

Axton looked through his files at work first thing as he got in. Check ins, paperwork, some inventory deliveries his brawn was loaned to at later dates, a few things that needed his personal reports on the warehouse yesterday, and stacked on the very top, a memo that told him to contact HR as soon as he got in.

When he stepped into the office, he didn’t know what he'd been expecting, but he'd be lying if he said it was a total and complete shock that the head of HR stared him with a less than pleased expression.

“I told you it'd be your ass if anything came of that fight, Axton.” The woman behind the desk looked fit to be tied, frustrated even, as she sat looking at the other alpha seated across from her. “Handsome Jack called up personally this morning threatening to sue if you were still employed by the end of the day.”

Axton didn’t so much as blink, stoic at the information as a few beats passed in which he analyzed the position he was in.
Nope. Wouldn’t do a single damn thing different. “Are you firing me?”

She snorted, leaning back in her chair as if Axton’s question had been an answer she was looking for, entire demeanor changed. “No, not if I have a choice. But you need to understand that we might have to take action if Mr. Sommerset doesn’t wish to get involved in this,” she told him sternly, the grim set of her jaw anything but pleased by such matters. “You attacked him, Axton. It's on our security footage. It’s our footage, we won’t be releasing it to him without a court order, but it is there.”

Axton grunted. “Let him sue. We’ll countersue.”

She sighed heavily, though she agreed with his attitude entirely on the matter. “That’s not your decision to make. It would be the choice of Mr. Sommerset. If he got involved.”

“He’s loyal to this company. And he hates that asshole,” Axton shortly growled out without meaning to. It got a raised brow, and he cleared his voice, checking himself as he sat straighter in his seat. “He’d countersue. And I have proper licensure for diagnosing and treating broken bond from asshole alphas. All my certs are up to date and registered. It’d be opening himself up for ripping Hyperion a new one in the media,” he said with utter confidence. “It’s an empty threat by an impotent alpha…”

She slightly growled under her breath, flicking through some papers on her desk containing Axton’s ongoing reports and check-ins concerning Rhys’ progress. “We don’t condone stalking, and we take threatening our employees very seriously,” she said as she looked through things before meeting Axton’s eyes once again. “Hyperion is nervous about our new technologies expanding into their market, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to back off. And I’m sure as hell not negotiating with that asshole on this matter.”

Her voice as it finished turned into a growl, and Axton sat up just a that much straighter, knowing she meant business. Handsome Jack could yowl and bitch all he wanted, but she wouldn’t give an inch if she didn’t have to. And Axton knew Rhys would be willing to put the nail in Hyperion’s coffin himself if Jack didn’t back off.

The media would go ballistic.

“You're still on half-days, essentially, unless your services are needed elsewhere, Axton. I want you making sure Mr. Sommerset is healthy and well-rid of that beast in time for the cybernetics fair this year.” She leaned across the desk, eyes steely and looking fierce as hell as determined eyes met one another. “We’re not taking another hit on our storage facilities lying down. We want Mr. Sommerset to destroy Hyperion at this year’s expo. Make sure he's up to one-hundred percent if it's the last thing you do.”

Axton couldn’t stop the smirk curling onto his face. If Atlas had plans for Rhys, then Rhys was indeed as important to the company and as smart as Axton always thought he was.

...Coffee makers on every floor seemed less like a joke and more of a reality the way his superior’s eyes bored into him.

“You think Hyperion was behind the fire?”

“It’s definitely not above them,” she stated. “He’s one ballsy knothead to think he can threaten us after attacking our warehouse.”

Axton cleared his throat before speaking more confidentially. “Handsome Jack texted Rhys yesterday. I may have threatened him not to try that again.”
She huffed at the new information. “Any chance he’d use it as leverage against us?”

“Not without incriminating himself,” Axton said with a wry snort.

“Hmph.” Her tone was satisfied with that, and the smirk that drew across her face eased the worry in Axton’s gut. “We need Mr. Sommerset to be better than good. I can’t think of a single thing that would stick in their craw more than the omega he spurned causing a drop in their stock. Make sure he’s well-cared for.”

“That goes without saying.”

“Mm, good. I’d sooner trust a viper with my pup than Handsome Jack. Get his bond broken. And Mr. Sommerset would be advised not to leave without you guarding his person. If you need more than a half day for his care, I want you to utilize it. Consider your services extremely valued as of this morning.”

“Wait, you think he needs a bodyguard?” Axton was mildly alarmed at that. He could admit to himself that his motivations for protecting Rhys were becoming skewed, yes, but the fact that someone else saw the need just as dire was a huge red flag. “Like normally?”

“Not as much as I think you do, Axton. Handsome Jack himself personally called to threaten us, and the things he said are enough I’d advise you to start carrying a weapon again.”

Oh. That wasn’t actually much of anything new, considering. “Well yeah, I gave that bastard a black eye last time we… spoke.”

Her lips twitched at the corners, a smile threatening to break loose while he sat there unrepentantly. “Intimidation tactics won’t work with us and his team of lawyers don’t scare me. Do your job and do it well, and you’ll have a job here as long as you want.”

“My first priority is to keep Rhys safe. He’ll be rid of that knothead before we know it.”

“Keep yourself safe, Axton. Hyperion is a many-headed snake. I’m just glad we moved dedicated storage the day before yesterday. Someone is telling tales they should be keeping to themselves, and I intend to shut them up.”

He frowned but nodded before she gave him leave to go, and Axton again thought about the other reason Atlas had hired him— his brawn, his less-than-honorable skills, and his dexterity with handling nasty situations. If it came down to it, he’d probably be the one helping to tie up loose ends, and he’d be glad to do it too. Anyone helping Hyperion get one over on them was no friend of his.

Rhys would be safe. He’d keep him safe no matter what. And Axton would tear Handsome Jack apart tooth and nail to keep him that way.

Chapter End Notes

I know it feels short, but that was 6.4k and 15 pages xD I’ve been stressed, sick, saw two doctors today, had blood taken, and open the bar tomorrow morning xD Give me some fabulous comments to read on my lunch break tomorrow? :)

I appreciate the FUCK out of the comments last chapter holy shit ya’ll i know it took two weeks to get this update out but i was excited to write it the entire time <3 i’m still
behind on replying :) Between work, life happening, keeping the tumblr machine updated, and writing, i didn't get the amount of free time i would have liked to go any faster than I have :O

Please make my free time spent writing this worth it? :)

my tumblr | my fic masterlist archive
Rhys didn’t know if he’d officially worked the mister coffee maker past its capacities with his copious pots as he worked, or if the old thing had had enough with his productive week, but the coffee maker refused to work.

Rhys could feel his last cup already wearing off, antsy, and he remembered the coffee place Axton had mentioned just across the way from his building.

The idea of going outside made him a bit nervous, and following that realization, he snorted at himself in disgust. Since when was he afraid of being out by himself? Fuck Jack’s weirdo deliveries to his apartment, and fuck being scared of seeing the man’s stupid advertisements everywhere. Jack couldn’t get to him here. No amount of effort on the Hyperion alpha’s part was going to undo breaking this goddamn bond, and he’d fight all of Hyperion himself for a proper cup of coffee.

He snorted at himself, rallied, and grabbed his wallet with the defiant intent of getting something strong and caffeinated in his veins made by a proper barista that wasn’t a mess in the kitchen… no offense to Axton’s coffee making skills, of course.

The sun felt like a blessing on his skin, and Rhys squinted at the light and patiently waited at the crosswalk outside Axton’s building, the mecca across the street calling him with brightly-painted promises of gourmet coffee and lunch options.

Rhys’ mouth watered as soon as he stepped into the shop, the scents of dark roasts and baked sweets hitting him with such pleasure it bordered on sinful. His caffeine options were written in colorful chalk on one board, and old-school plastic letters on another showed that the shop may be small, but wasn’t lacking in variety-- or customers- whatsoever. It made his adventures with Axton’s coffee maker seem crude in comparison.

...Not that instant hadn’t been fine before, and the generic blends of actual beans Axton kept had been a big improvement on that front, but the menu here was decadent. The slices of cake on display next to cute breads and iced buns also had his mouth watering, and it became apparent why the small coffee shop was so bustling and busy for a mom and pop type place-- they had every freakin’ base covered.

Rhys was practically gleeful by the time his turn at the counter came, the alpha behind the counter smiling as she greeted him with genuine pleasure. “Hi, welcome to Lee’s. What can I get for you today?”

“Hi! Could I get the cafe crema… and uh… a slice of the chocolate cake please?”
“The deluxe mocha cake or the--”

“There’s more than one kind?”

The cashier laughed good-naturedly, and Rhys felt himself blush a little at his excitement, chuckling awkwardly as she advised him her own preference and different flavor profiles to choose from. She laughed again when asking if he wanted whipped cream on top, and Rhys was practically salivating as she punched everything in.

“Oh, the Better than Best mocha chocolate cake, and a cafe crema, whipped cream on both,” she said with a smile and a wink that made Rhys grin. “For here or to go?”

“To go, please,”

He bounced on his heels after paying, watching those enjoying their various treats around him with such close observation that he almost didn't hear his number when called. Loaded down with his goodies, he gave a polite smile and a thank you, and made his exit back to Axton’s apartment without incident.

As he sat in Axton’s kitchen, fork brandished in hand, he unboxed the cake and made a sound that actually echoed in the space. It was every bit as decadent as it had looked, and the coffee was like ambrosia compared to the pots he'd drained from Axton’s coffee maker. If the caffeine didn't get him going, then the sugar surely would, because god, there was a right proper dessert to write home about. He treasured every rich bite and might have licked the frosting from the to-go container… not that anyone would ever know.

...He was just glad he’d caught the smudge of chocolate on his face before Axton got home, knowing the smile the alpha had for him wasn't due to amusement at eating like a three-year-old… A three year old playing with robot parts all over the older man’s kitchen… geez.

“Hey hi! Check this out,” Rhys said excitedly as soon as Axton crossed the threshold.

“Hi darlin’. Whatcha got?”

Rhys’ fingers quickly flew over his laptop keys before the glove on his right hand came to life, joints moving with him with such fluidity that Axton could have easily believed it was an actual cloth glove and not various delicate metal parts all working together at once. Lights glowed up and down the forearm, the palm itself a soft but brilliant gleam.

“Looks cool. I like all the blue. Futuristic and stuff.”

Rhys bashfully chuckled, looking down at his arm as Axton set his stuff down and came to inspect for himself. “The lights are purely cosmetic,” Rhys snickered, self-enjoyment from his little unnecessary additions. “They don’t serve a purpose… yet.”

Axton snorted with a grin. “Flashlight maybe?”

“I’d use that for an excuse,” the omega laughed as the older man came him a little affectionate nudge. “Might make them indicator lights once the eye-part is done… That’s a way coming though…”

The alpha sat down on a bar stool, picking up Rhys’ empty paper coffee cup amongst his various delicate tools. “Ventured out to Lee’s, huh?”

“Oh, uh, yeah… I might have killed your coffee maker.” His statement got a snicker from the alpha. “Well, I did say I’d get you a new one. Any specific model on your wishlist?”
“Nah, I got this one darlin’.” Axton got up, brushing him off with a smile as he approached the dead machine. “It has issues sometimes. Did it stop dispensing altogether, or heating up?” He flipped the switch and the little green indicator lamp came on.

Rhys came to stand next to him, crossing his arms with judgment against the little machine. “It heats up, I made some this morning after you left, but it wouldn’t work after that.” He didn’t mention that the ‘some’ had been two or three pots before it had crapped out on him.

“Sometimes the suction has problems. Or it could be the hard-water clogging things. These pipes, ya know,” the big alpha said with a smirk.

Rhys leaned against the counter and watched as Axton unplugged and messed with the machine, frowning when the older man was able to get the drip going again after only a few minutes of messing with it.

“Just needs a little love,” the alpha chuckled, and Rhys’ cheeks turned a little pink as Axton’s grin grew, ready to tease. “Built a crazy-complicated cyber hand, but defeated by a mister coffee… What would Atlas say?”

“To be fair, I don’t work with hydromechanics,” Rhys said with an exaggerated raise of his nose. It only widened the smirk on Axton’s face as the alpha gave him a purposely-condescending pat.

“The indignity of it all,” Axton teased, getting a snort from the omega. “At least you know the glory of Lee’s.”

“It was so good though,” Rhys gushed, dropping arms and all acts of indignation as Axton rummaged through the fridge for dinner ideas.

“Did you try the cake?” he asked as he took out lettuce, cheese, and tortillas.

“Oh my god you didn’t warn me about the cake, Ax. I’m glad I didn’t eat in, I would have bought everything they had.”

Axton gave him a smirk over his shoulder as he removed some beef from the bottom shelf. “So I take it there’s none left, huh?”

Rhys rolled his eyes at the playful statement. “Look Ax, I love ya and all, but there was no way I would have shared even a bite.” That got a hard laugh from the older man. “I got the Better than Best mocha, and let me tell you, it earned the name.” He made a yummy sound in his throat, wishing he’d gotten more than a single slice. He was half-pressed to make Axton head down there with him for dessert.

Axton’s chuckles took on an extra edge of amusement as he stood up to lean in slyly, scarred-brow raised with a smirk. “That's their Better than Sex cake.” The alpha laughed as Rhys’ pink-cheeked chuckles joined him, the omega more than a little flustered.

“You could say that again.”

“No, that’s what it’s really called,” the older man laughed. “One of the cashiers said they had to change the name to be more friendly, but that’s what it’s actually called.” He snorted to himself, shaking his head. “I looked it up online, I didn’t believe them.”

“Well… it definitely deserves the name,” the omega stated seriously, cheeks still pink but uncaring, making Axton laugh anew. “It should come with a warning. I mean, like, they should ID you before selling that stuff.”
Axton’s chuckles had him wiping his eyes, looking at Rhys with a barely-contained smile as he couldn’t resist. “Did you need a cigarette after?”

Rhys didn’t miss a beat. “If I said yes, would you think any less of me?”

Axton had to stop what he was doing, he was laughing so hard, and Rhys’ own snickers joined his, moving the bigger man aside so he could start their dinner without any laughter-induced accidents.

--

Rhys was a little ashamed of how much his mind was distracted by the name of a piece of cake, but it was probably more to the fact that it was Axton’s voice replaying in his mind, and he couldn’t help it if he skipped the cake association entirely and kept linking Axton and better than sex, which morphed into best at sex in his stupid, stupid obsessed little crushing mind.

They had been flirting. Surely that was flirting. It had been a long, long time since Rhys had played the dating game, and yeah, he reminded himself, Axton was his caregiver, not a potential boyfriend, but surely, surely that had been flirting…?

Or it wasn’t, and he was imagining things, in which case he was in deep shit because this crush was digging its hooks in deeper and rooting itself, and damn, if he didn’t have the bond throbbing in his neck to annoyingly distract him, Axton would have been all he was thinking about 24/7.

As they settled in for bed, Rhys’ damn little dirty mind still couldn’t get over Axton’s laugh or sly little look when he’d told him the cake name, and he grew horrified as he lay cuddled with the older man to find he was getting aroused, and-- shit- he hadn’t taken measures to ensure he wouldn’t have any little slip-ups during sleep, and here he was awake, and warm, and Axton’s scent was so nice, and damn it all….

What would Axton think if he suddenly smelled the scent of arousal on him? Rhys could hide a boner, maybe if he turned and pivoted his hips away from the older man, yeah, but if he got slick and excited? What would Axton do? Play it off? Or be polite and act like he didn't scent anything?

Rhys had to stop that line of thought right there as he found himself getting very interested indeed in the alternatives of what Axton might hopefully do with such a discovery. Even the idea of the big alpha ignoring it and cuddling him close like everything was normal, knowing, acting like he didn't smell anything when they would both know he did was serving to turn Rhys on.

The omega carefully extricated himself from the half-awake alpha as unobtrusively as possible and got out of bed to splash cold water on his face, trying to get his damn self under control. There was little to no luck in that, and he spent more time than was probably normal willing his half-chub away in shaming himself in the older man’s bathroom-- there was no way he was going to jerk himself through this one with the alpha right on the other side of the door.

Axton was snoozing by the time he finally rejoined him in bed, smelling no less good or safe, and damn but it was going to be a hard-- but hopefully not hard- night.

--

Most of Rhys’ night was spent tossing and turning with concern over possibly embarrassing himself, scared of getting another damn hard-on or having a wet dream or worse, his overactive imagination somehow getting him so slick he’d leak onto the sheets (which, yeah, improbable outside of a heat, but he still worried). Any time he nodded off, he eventually woke with hyperawareness to his own body’s state, relieved nothing was amiss only to nod off and have the whole process repeat itself.
Tragically, his unpeaceful night didn't go unmissed by the alpha.

Axton offered Rhys a kind smile as the omega blinked at him tiredly across the kitchen counter the next morning, a fresh pot of coffee on the warmer. “I can take the couch if you're not sleepin’ well, sweetheart.”

“...huh?”

“You tossed and turned all night, darlin’.” Axton chose to diplomatically leave out mention of the slight bags under Rhys’ eyes…. Or the suspicion of why Rhys suddenly wasn’t sleeping well. No reason to embarrass him when it only meant he was properly recovering, after all.

Rhys felt his face go crimson, but the knowledge that his pants had been clean this morning somewhat reassured him there was no subtext in Axton’s offer; he’d simply noticed that Rhys had tossed all night. “Sorry. Did I keep you up all night? I can sleep on the couch, Ax. This is your place after--”

“Rhys, take the bed,” Axton said with a smile. “You know how comfy the couch is, and I get up earlier than you-- don’t wanna disturb all that beauty sleep. We need you climbing the company ranks in the name of fine coffee, remember.” He gave him a wink that made the omega frown, and laughed at his expression. “It’s fine, I promise. Let’s just be grateful it’s been comfortable until now, huh?” He laughed to fill the space. “My bed’s a lot smaller than yours.”

“I… guess. Yeah, huh?” Rhys awkwardly laughed, more awake now and regretting his damn body’s stupid-ass reactions to his overactive imagination. “I’m just surprised one of us hasn’t tumbled over the side so far. Heh heh… heh.”

“Exactly,” Axton laughed, his bright smile not fully reaching his eyes. The alpha grabbed up his work bag and slid a mug of coffee across to the younger man. “I’d tell ya to go back to bed, but I know you won’t,” he said with a knowing, much more genuine smirk.

Rhys took the mug, their fingers just briefly touching before Axton gave him a salute and warm smile, leaving the apartment alone to the omega and his thundering heart.

Well... Balls.

--

Things were awkward as they prepared for bed that night.

Rhys didn't like it, but there wasn't a real way to take it back. He didn't want to end up humping the other man in his sleep or something… again. But he couldn't come up with a way to make sure his stupid body wouldn’t do anything untoward to ensure he’d sleep well next to the other man.

God, if only his damn bond would break, he could feel safe at his own freaking apartment again and just be a normal person and him and Axton would be on equal footing as friends, not as caregiver and… what the hell was he to the alpha? A patient? God he hoped it was more than that. Once his bond broke, he could ask him out or something… see how this went from there… see how much his deepening crush was returned… if it was at all.

One thing was for certain: if he ever saw Jack again he was going to kick him right in the freaking balls for ever putting him in this hellish situation.

As Rhys tossed and turned far worse without Axton in the alpha's bed, the alpha was having trouble himself getting to sleep, regardless of how comfortable his old couch actually was.
Axton laid awake and pondered sleeping alone for the first time in over a month. It felt **weird.** And it felt lonely. *None* of this was normal in his experience with the other omegas he’d helped recover, and he supposed that said a damn lot about how mixed his signals were getting and how many lines his motivations must be crossing. Rhys getting squirrely on him was a damn shame (for many selfish reasons), but not unexpected, Axton supposed. They all did eventually towards the end of their rehabilitation. Rhys was no different from the other omegas in that matter. They normally started worrying about their bodies reacting in normal ways— the fact they even *did* a tell to their recovery status- and didn’t cuddle as close; started keeping their distance as their pre-bonding selves might have done.

*It was good,* he told himself, *if Rhys couldn’t sleep well in trying not to cuddle as close.* It meant he wasn’t hung up on the asshole who bonded him anymore. His body’s normal responses weren’t being overridden by the whims of a gland in his neck anymore. He didn’t need to be coddled anymore. He was getting better.

It didn’t mean Axton had to be happy about the distance between them. He wished he’d enjoyed holding the younger man more; just scenting him lazily and keeping him melded against him. Damn, he’d really tricked himself into thinking this would last a lot longer— of course he was *glad* Rhys was healing- but he *liked* cuddling the omega, and scenting him, and nuzzling that fluffy bedhead of his.

Worse, he was pretty positive he’d been flirting with the younger man, and worse *still,* he felt like Rhys had been flirting *back.*

It might’ve just been wishful thinking on his part. After all, the omega was smart as hell, he had a quick wit which more often than not had Axton in stitches laughing, and he hadn’t yet shied away from meeting any jokes or teasing the alpha had done thus far. Maybe this was just what *normal,* *unbonded* Rhys was normally like, and Axton was misconstruing it for something else.

He made a frustrated noise where he lay, staring at the ceiling. Would it be weird, after Rhys’ bond finally broke, to ask the other man out? Would Rhys think he was a pervert all along, sharing his bed and cuddling with him *as per omega-wellness standards,* only for Axton to ultimately have other motives?

Different possibilities and scenarios drove the alpha nuts for more than half the night. The following morning and afternoon didn’t prove to be any less difficult, and he was distracted and grumpy with Sal all day at the office.

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Rhys was smiling to himself as he worked on his glove, pleased with the progress he was making, and further pleased at the images he’d sent to Atlas regarding it’s construction phases and where he’d like to go from there.

He could feel that it was time for a break— or maybe time for more caffeine if the way he yawned told him anything- and he plopped himself down on the couch with a promise to himself to only watch a *little* tv. He wasn’t concerned about ads from Hyperion— that’s what the remote was for, after all- but searching about the place found it to be nowhere. Did he set it down elsewhere?

Rhys checked back near Axton’s candy stash where he *knew* Sal had set the remote, but it wasn’t there.

No wait, that was right, Rhys had sat on the couch and watched some tv with it before king douchelord had bombarded his phone with texts.
...but where had he left the remote then? He’d had a busy, involved week, and yeah, his stuff was kind of all over Axton’s loft as he worked and they hung out together, but he was sure he’d left it on the coffee table. Had Axton put it back in a proper place?

Checking the candy stash yielded no results, but it did trigger a chocolate craving that the alpha’s hoard just wouldn’t satisfy, followed by thoughts of Better than Se-- Better than Best cake, and sweet, rich coffee.

Knowing the improvised fix Axton had done to the coffee maker wouldn’t quite live up to his standards after his little trip across the street, Rhys plotted his little mid-day treat-break. His bank-account could use some gentle spending, and dammit, he deserved to treat himself to something good. He was working his ass off on his pet project, and his department was keeping him on his toes with their emails and check-ins and cross-checks for clients and other big interdepartmental projects. After the night he’d had tossing and turning and missing the big alpha’s arms and Axton’s warmth and scent, he deserved some freaking gourmet coffee and more than a single slice of cake.

He was back across the street before he knew it, placing his order with the friendly alpha at Lee’s-- this time the double mocha cake and a cinnamon roll- and ordered the same coffee.

“Okay, got it all! For here or to go?”

Rhys was going to say to go, but the friendly smile of the cashier, the warmth and comfortable atmosphere of the coffee shop, and the welcoming safety of a semi-public place actually had him reconsidering enjoying the coffeehouse this time. Proper glass mugs and plates coupled with plush couches, tables and chairs that didn’t match but all came together to provide a homey atmosphere, Rhys found himself wishing he’d brought one of Axton’s books with him to indulge for a while. Lord knew he’d earned it.

“For here, please.”

“Sure thing!” She handed him a little cardboard ticket with a smiling cup of coffee on it and the number 23, ringing up his total and asking him to sit anywhere he’d like while she gathered his order.

Rhys found his choice spot and draped his jacket over the back of a well-worn, crushed velvet chair that had probably belonged in a parlor at some point, and sat and smiled to himself as he took in the different stylistic lamps and what appeared to be local art for sale on the walls. He wondered how often Axton stopped in here, or if he could persuade him to come out and sit together. That old loveseat was definitely built for two. Or maybe the small patio out back would be nicer for private conversation under the old bulbs strung up in the small tree.

...god, he really needed to get his little crush under control.

Cheeks heating as a few less pure thoughts entered his mind, he cleared his throat self-consciously and looked about with slight-guilt, though the idea that anyone there could read his mind was ludicrous.

He smirked to himself at the thought of taking a picture of the cake when it came and sending it to Axton just to make him jealous. Or maybe he’d also get a piece to go before he left and hide it to surprise the alpha with later.

His grin was wide as he considered the reaction that would get after a long day, pleased with himself at being able to give the alpha a surprise. Axton would probably pull him into a hug, kiss the top of his head, and knowing the older man, generously share the piece even though Rhys already had his
“Don’t you look happy. Order something sweet, kiddo?”

Rhys’ blood ran cold at that voice, face paling as he turned so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash. Standing like he owned the place was Jack, looking about the coffee house like a hawk tracking prey, gaze settling on Rhys, but eyes still casually checking the place out.

The behaviour didn’t go missed by the omega.

Rhys jumped out of the chair like it was on fire, immediately distancing himself from the alpha and ignoring the looks his quick movements had garnered from other patrons. “What in the hell are you doing here?!“ Rhys’ voice was weaker than he would have preferred; scared, startled, caught completely off guard, and some small, tiny part of him not wanting to disrupt the gentle atmosphere of the lovely shop.

“Hoping to maybe apologize, and also buy you coffee, cupcake.”

Jack winked and Rhys took another step back, painfully aware of the way his bonding gland throbbed with his racing heart. A million questions went through his mind—mainly of how Jack had found him and how long he’d been there without Rhys’ immediate notice. The thought that Jack had been able to sneak up on him frightened him to his bones.

Jack didn’t seem at all disturbed by Rhys’ reaction to him, smiling as charmingly as ever, but the sight rang false to the younger man’s eyes.

“You’re lookin’ good, princess. How about we split a piece of cake? That sweet tooth of yours is still alive and kickin’, right babe?”

Rhys was gaping, blinking in stunned silence at the older man’s audacity. He swallowed over the lump in his throat, ignored the burning in the back of his neck, and raised his lips in a clear threat to the older man, voice small but no less a snarl. “There is no way in hell I’d share anything with you, let alone my time, you goddamn stalker.”

“Geez Rhysie, talk about harsh. You never gave me a chance to explain myself,” Jack said with with a slight accusation bordering on request. “And I know, I have a lot of explaining to do. Craploads of friggin’ explaining. Come on, you know me, kitten. Let me start making up to you. I know we can salvage this if you just let me try.”

“I know you’re a monster. I want nothing to do with you! Stay the hell out of my life or I’m calling the cops. Do you hear me?”

“Seriously?” Jack said with surprise as if Rhys was overreacting— as if he hadn’t just surprised him in an out-of-town coffee shop- looking at him with hurt eyes that the omega didn’t believe for a minute. “Seriously kiddo, five minutes, and you get free cake and shit out of it. After that, if you don’t want anything to do with me, then fine. I’ll leave you alone, okay? Cross my heart and hope to lose my stock options. I need to apologize, sweetheart. I’m a changed man, really.”

Rhys put one of the plush red chairs with old wooden arms between them as he backed up near the big cafe windows, planning to quickly make his exit around Jack and hightail his ass right back to Axton’s apartment. “Fuck you, Jack.”

Rhys watched as the alpha frowned at that, taken somewhat aback at Rhys’ words as the omega gave him a wide berth as he made to bypass him. Jack reached out, grabbing his wrist and making Rhys gasp in shock and fear that the older man touched him at all. His bonding gland made its own
opinion on the matter known, and Rhys tugged his arm without a second thought as to the volume of his voice, panicked at Jack’s firm grip and the way his neck positively burned.

“Let go of me!”

“Rhysie, pumpkin, don’t make a scene now,” Jack said under his breath as if nothing weird was happening at all; a simple lover’s spat gone a bit dramatic, surely; one’s omega pissed that an alpha needed to make up for and calm in view of everyone. “Just talk to me, baby. I’ll do whatever you want to make things right.”

Rhys wasn’t having it, his voice rising in urgency and panic as he tugged for ownership of his wrist. “I said let go of me, Jack! Don’t touch me!”

All eyes were on the pair—something Jack couldn’t ignore no matter how he wanted to paint things—and Rhys looked out for help as one of the baristas was coming from behind the counter to hopefully save him.

It was the comment of one of the patrons that ultimately took Jack’s attention from Rhys, and the omega took the comment of “Hey, isn’t that Handsome Jack? From Hyperion?” to rake the nails of his other hand across Jack’s arm. The alpha let go with a hissed shout of surprise and pain as Rhys ran like the devil himself was on his heels (and for all he knew, he was).

Rhys didn’t look back to see if Jack followed, nearly getting hit by a car (and yelled at by the driver) as he ran across the road and slammed through the building’s doors to press the elevator button with shaking fingers, his eyes on his back the entire time.

The elevator car was making its way to the ground floor, and let him in with its easy gate as Rhys pushed the button for the 8th floor probably somewhere around fifty times.

He was shaking by the time he arrived on his floor, and smartly punched the button for the sixth floor in case Jack gave chase. He was scared, hands shaking as he looked for Axton’s key in his pants pocket, realizing as he further paled that it—along with his phone and wallet—were left in his jacket pocket on the back of the coffee house chair.

He was about to cry out of fear and panic and utter helplessness, and he jumped when a concerned voice spoke up—a little shriek startling a bespectacled beta—on the landing just above on the top floor.

“Sorry, I, man, you nearly gave me a heart attack. You okay?”

“S-same,” Rhys replied, the neighbor’s arms full of groceries. “I-- I--”

“You looking for Axton?”

Rhys blinked back tears he hadn’t realized were even there, the back of his neck absolutely searing as he regarded the other man. “Yeah, I- yeah....”

The short man gave him a worried look, looking behind Rhys as if to try and infer what had obviously upset the omega. Nothing was there though, and his eyes were full of concern. “He usually works late.”

“Yeah, I know, I um, I'm kind of staying with him, but—” Rhys had to swallow, still so scared any second the elevator would whirl to life and Jack would pop out like a monster from his worst nightmares, “I-I lost my key and I… I...” His voice hitched and he felt embarrassed and ashamed and frightened and helpless, on the edge of an anxiety attack, surely, as the shorter man’s next words
threw him an unexpected distraction.

“Oh, crap, are you Rhys?”

The omega stopped a moment, brought up short by the stranger knowing his name. “I... Yeah…”

“Shoot, yeah, here, let me put my groceries down, I've got a spare key.”

Rhys frowned, wary, but the beta seemed genuinely harmless, and honestly anything was better than being exposed and in view in the hallway. He followed the other man into his apartment but kept the path between himself and the door open as the beta was opening drawers in his kitchen and digging through a fruit-bowl filled with odds and ends.

The beta dumped an array of paper clips, capless pens, and a bunch of change onto the counter before frowning at himself.

“Shoot, I must have left it in my locker at work.” He met Rhys’ eyes with an apologetic, sheepish smile. “Axton asks me to water his plants sometimes when he's on assignment, but since he's been back…” Like during the time he'd spent with Rhys. That made sense at least. “My copy is at work and the office is locked now, but you're welcome to hang out here until he comes home if you want?”

Rhys looked around, considering his options. The beta was smaller than him, glasses and a smile that was open and welcoming. He didn’t seem like much of a threat.

Hell, he’d wait with Satan himself before taking the chance that Jack might pursue him inside the building.

“I... Is that really okay?”

“Yeah man, absolutely. Sorry I left the key… Axton being back, I figured I wouldn't need it. Uhh… I was gonna make pizza for dinner if you wanna hang around til he's off work?”

Rhys watched him unpack grocery bags with minor surprise. “Wait, you’re going to make pizza?”

“Yeah.” The beta smiled, all-confidence for his cooking ability. “I promise I make it good!”

Rhys made a face. “Not like anchovies and stuff, right?”

“Ew, no. But I am going to put pineapple on it.”

Rhys snorted. “I can live with pineapple.”

The beta smiled, rolling his eyes at himself before introducing himself. “Sorry, I'm Vaughn, by the way.” He stuck out his hand somewhat awkwardly, though his smile was genuine. “And we already know you're Rhys.”

“Yeah,” the omega said somewhat shakily, taking deep breaths and calming himself as he was out of immediate danger. “Nice to properly meet you,” Rhys somewhat muttered.

“So don't take this the wrong way, man, but you look-- uh, looked-freaked. Are you okay? It’s not any of my business, but is everything alright?”

Rhys shook his head as if to banish the adrenaline still tingling up his back. “I don’t even know where to start…”
“Anything I can do?”

His voice was kind, eyes obviously concerned, and Rhys felt relieved for the momentary safety. “If you have an ice pack, that would be heaven...”

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“He’s... I don't know what the hell he’s trying to do. He doesn't want me, I'm sure of that much. It's some sick power game for him or something.”

They were in the kitchen as Vaughn was sprinkling cheese onto the fresh pizza dough and pre-cooked, homemade sauce. Rhys was holding an ice pack to his neck as he spoke, gratefully sipping tea the beta made him as he intently listened. Vaughn wrinkled his nose at the disregard Handsome Jack held for someone he'd bonded. Rhys hadn’t told him much thus far-- just the details so he understood why the CEO of freaking Hyperion was stalking him- but it was helping ease the adrenaline from his system. Frazzled didn't even begin to cover how the omega felt.

“So I just... Shit.” Rhys sat up straighter with concern suddenly far more wild. “All my stuff... I just ran.”

“Your stuff?”

“My keys, phone, wallet--”

“Wait, you left it all at Lee’s?”

“I ran, I wasn’t thinking straight and I- Wait, you don’t think--”

“Oh, no no! I was just gonna say I can go grab it for you, bro. They know me there. I wish I’d put two-and-two together sooner! Let me go get it for you.”

“Really? Would you?” Relief poured through Rhys like water on a campfire, and he was so grateful he wanted to hug the beta into next week. “I mean, leaving a stranger you just met in your apartment and all...”

Vaughn laughed. “I’m a pretty good judge of people. I don’t think you’ll rob me blind. Plus, someone's gotta watch the pizza.”

Rhys laughed, but he was floored by the level of kindness and trust being give him.

“I’ve got games you can play while I run down there if you want? Shouldn't take more than ten minutes but, I mean, you don't even have phone games to play right now sooo....”

“Well I mean, if you’re sur-- Is that a Nintendo?”

“Um, excuse you, it's a Super Nintendo.”

“You got Mario?”

The beta’s grin was wide, smug as hell as he left the kitchen to open a cabinet filled with games. “You mean original, classic, or spin offs?”

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“That guy is a real dick, bro.”
“Tell me about it. It’s been a freaking grade-A nightmare. Everywhere I look he’s there. I even had to get my number changed,” Rhys said with aggravation as he brandished his phone for effect.

The one positive of Jack’s very-public harassment was that the alpha had apparently left in a hurry after being recognized, and the kind alpha barista had grabbed Rhys’ jacket and hidden it away behind the counter. The omega had his keys and wallet and phone, everything undisturbed and accounted for, but he chose to sit and stay with Vaughn instead of worrying himself to pieces alone until Axton came home.

The beta was a great listener and also a seriously good cook. And that had nothing to do with the fact that Rhys and Axton ate way more pizza than was probably healthy for grown men to do.

“The whole bonding thing in general… No offense but I’m really glad I was born a beta. I don’t even know how I’d handle things in your shoes, bro.”

Rhys snorted. “None taken. The only good thing to have come out of this is Axton. I don’t know what I’d do without him.” He was pretty sure he knew what would have become of him without him.

“Mm.” Vaughn swallowed his bite of pizza and gave Rhys a curious look. “So like, is Axton your boyfriend then?”

Rhys sputtered at the question, and the beta looked at him owlishly.

“I'm guessing that's a nooo. Sorry, just, I don't know. He's never had anyone from work come back here before to stay. Not that I know of anyways. Thought maybe you were waiting for that bond to break so he can bond you.”

“Oh my god, Vaughn.”

“What? He’s a good guy,” the beta remarked unrepentantly. “Your face is red by the way.”

“It's not-- I don't-- it's not like that.”

“Sure it’s not. Hey, he's real attractive for an alpha. I wouldn't blame you.” Vaughn gave him a teasing smirk. “Hey, bet if you two did it, it would break your bond to king douchebag.”

Rhys had to throw one of the beta’s throw pillows at the other man, making all kinds of nervous squeaks and flustered sounds as he was unable to deal with the statement, let alone the wistful thoughts it spun in his head. Vaughn only chuckled, undeterred.

Rhys’ phone ringing saved him for all of two seconds before he saw who was calling, face going red again. He waved Vaughn off dismissively as the beta grinned widely but stayed silent as Axton’s anxious voice came through.

“Rhys? Where are you?! Are you okay?!”

“Hi, yeah, I'm at Vaughn’s down the hall.”

There was silence a moment broken only by Axton’s quickness of breath before the alpha’s curious but relieved tone came through. “What are you doing there?”

“I, uh, locked myself out,” he said simply, this conversation one he wanted to have in person. Maybe when they were alone. The look he gave Vaughn was acknowledged as the beta nodded at him. Rhys would bring up the subject in his own time. “He let me wait with him. Um, we're playing
There was a knock on the door that echoed through the phone, and the beta paused his game to get up and answer it.

Axton was there with a smile and the phone to his ear, ending the call with a laugh as Vaughn invited him in and offered him pizza.

“Yeah actually, I'm starving.” The sandy haired alpha plopped down on the couch next to Rhys with a slice, giving the younger man an acknowledging bump to the head with his nose before eating half the slice in one bite. Rhys pressed himself to the man’s side immediately, the alpha enveloping him in a hug and swallowing with a smile as he held Rhys close. The younger man inhaled deeply, so, so relieved to have the alpha at his side again that he felt a million times better than he had since having to see Jack. With Axton’s arm around him and pressed in nice and close, Rhys knew he was safe from anything and everything.

Rhys’ eyes swiveled to Vaughn as the beta watched the overly-familiar display with a sort of teasing, **knowing** look on his face that made Rhys’ face go red again, but the beta didn't remark on anything. Rhys came to the conclusion that he liked Vaughn a great deal right then.

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“I’m glad you came here,” Axton told Rhys as the pair were leaving Vaughn’s loft. “Thanks dude,” Axton told the beta with a wink.

“No problem,” the beta said with a smile. He looked pointedly at Rhys. “Really, I’d look in to a restraining order, bro.”

Rhys considered that course of action yet again, wondering if **this** was enough for the police to do something. Jack didn’t do anything illegal **his ass**. This was stalking as clear as it came. “No kidding. Thanks for the pizza by the way. And Mario.”

“No problem.” Vaughn looked to Axton with a smile. “Say hi to your plants for me.”

That got a snort out of Axton, and they said their final goodbyes before finally returning back to Axton’s own loft. It filled Rhys with all kinds of relief to be enveloped by familiar and safe scents.

“So how do you like Vaughn?” Axton asked, taking off his jacket and tossing it over a bar stool.

“I really like him. He kicked my ass in Super Mario but only because I haven’t played in **ages**. I was stuck on level three.”

Axton snorted. “Yeah, he gets to use it more so he has an unfair advantage… It’ll be forever before he actually dies and you get to play.” Rhys gave him an amused tilt of his lips. “Yours isn’t the first ass he’s kicked, and it won’t be the last,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh.

They chuckled about it while Axton set about shuffling in his fridge for beer. He settled next to Rhys on the couch, passing the omega a bottle before giving him a gentle nuzzle. “I’m really, really glad he was home, but you could have called me, darlin’,” Axton said with a warm smile. “I’d have come straight home to let ya back in. Wouldn’t have been a problem. And I would have laughed at your need for coffee only a little bit.”

“Well I…” He was going to mention that he **would** have, had Vaughn not been there at the right time. Once he was safe with the beta though, he didn’t think much of bothering Axton when the
alpha would be home in two hours anyways. The abridged version of how his day had gone was about to get much longer now that they were alone. “I would’ve, but I was already chatting with Vaughn and playing video games, and you were gonna be home soon anyways…. Didn’t seem like I needed to inconvenience you.”

Axton gave him a headbump and a smile. “You’re never an inconvenience, darlin’.”

Rhys felt his heart lurch, but just leaned into the older man instead of acknowledging the clenching in his chest, breathing deep of Axton’s scent as the older man kept a firm arm around him and nuzzled the side of his head.

“You can call for anything, remember? I’m supposed to be with you— uh, like, I should be here when you need me anyways.” Axton felt his face get extremely hot, even if he forced a casual chuckle. He was glad Rhys seemed more interested in his lap than the alpha’s face. “Um, if for some reason you ever get locked out again— and I can’t be reached—” he added with a little laugh, “-you go to Vaughn’s. He might be small but he knows jiu jitsu.”

Rhys’ mouth fell open, looking up at Axton with shocked surprise. “Seriously?”

“Dude’s ripped.” He took a slug of his beer as they sat on the old couch together. “I pulled something last time we arm-wrestled. He does a lot of stuff just for exercise, but I’m not sure I’d win in a fight against him. Not a fair one, anyways,” he added with a smirk.

“Seriously?”

“Yup. Vaughn’s the man.”

Rhys couldn’t stop himself from blurting, secure enough to say it but not expecting to blush so damn hard. “He, uh—” Rhys chuckled a little, “-he thought I was your boyfriend,” Rhys admitted with red cheeks, “like locked-out or something…”

Axton— to his credit- did not spontaneously combust as the thing inside him did the happiest fucking dance ever in his heart, and instead chose to lightly tease the omega to cover his genuine pleasure at such an assumption. “We’re cute as hell together, I’m not surprised.” He chuckled as Rhys sputtered, taking his teasing one step further and nuzzling the man way too close to be even slightly proper. “What’s your sign, darlin’?”

Rhys pushed him off with a genuine laugh, relieved though his heart beat like crazy and his cheeks felt hot. He was sure the slight pink in Axton’s cheeks was from the beer and nothing else. The butterflies in his flip-flopping stomach didn’t care about that one bit. “That was cheesy as hell.”

“Cut me some slack, it’s been a long day playing with kittens,” the alpha laughed with gruff tones. It had been a long day, and it was about time to turn in. Axton gave the pillow next to him a few punches to reshape it. The intention was clear.

“Can…” Rhys cleared his throat, looking at the older man and forging through, “Can we sleep like normal?” Axton looked at him a beat too long, and Rhys quickly made excuses, feeling stupid and maybe a little too hyped from the day. “It’s just, I’m a little freaked, and—”

Axton put down his beer and enveloped him in a hug in which Rhys immediately burrowed close. “Of course, darlin’. I’ve got you, okay? I’ve got you.”

“No, there’s more than just that— Well, I already went over it with Vaughn and I just—” Rhys felt tears prick at his eyes, which was stupid as he’d already been through everything that happened at the coffee shop with Vaughn, but telling Axton was different. It was almost too much for some
reason. Or he’d had ample time to really let everything sink in.

At the waiver in his voice and seeing the tears in his eyes, Axton was immediately petting and murmuring reassurances to him, scenting him gently and keeping him tight in his arms as Rhys realized he was shaking.

“Fuck, what is it sweetheart? What is it? Whatever it is, Rhys, I’m here for you, okay? I am entirely, one-hundred percent here for you.” He placed a kiss to Rhys’ forehead, the motion so familial and comforting in its reassurance that it made Rhys cry in earnest as all he wanted was to feel safe and secure and never have to see Jack again. He was scared and frustrated literally to tears, his bonding gland still throbbing more than normal, and his voice hitched and he shook as he tried to tell Axton the more complete version of his day.

“Jack… Jack was at the coffee shop today. It’s how I forgot my key because I just… I ran and left-”

“What?”

“Jack was there. I don’t know how he found me… He must be actually stalking me or something but he… he just…”

“Rhys, tell me what happened.” Axton was having trouble keeping his voice calm and clear, not wanting to further upset the younger man in his arms, but he could feel a furious surge of possessive need to protect Rhys.

The omega relayed the brief interlude, Axton’s unending growls oddly a source of rumbling comfort as he kept himself pressed close. He said his neck was on fire, and Axton inspected it as gently and unobtrusively as he could. He could actually see a red irritation there, as if the omega had been stung, or was having an allergic reaction. The alpha never wanted more to beat the ever-loving shit out of Handsome Jack.

“It’s swollen. Like really swollen, sugar.”

“Feels awful.”

“I bet. Your body is rejecting the bond though, darlin’. That’s clear as day.” The alpha pet a hand through Rhys’ hair, and the younger man whimpered.

Rhys’ voice was pitifully hopeful, and he didn’t even care. “Is it?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m no expert at biology, but it should bother you more at the very end. That’s how it’s happened with all the other omegas I’ve helped recover. Only, uh, their alphas never got hands on them so this is a little…” He huffed in annoyance with himself, looking at Rhys with a mixture of upset and guilt. “I am so, so sorry, sugar. I should've been here.”

“Axton, don't even take any blame for Jack’s bullshit, okay?”

“This is twice now. I won’t let him get to you, alright? I’m staying with you until this damn thing actually breaks.” His voice was gruff with anger and emotion both, and Rhys cuddled close enough to hear the older man’s strong heartbeat in his chest.

“…I’m not gonna lie and say I wouldn’t like that,” Rhys said with a slight smile, hugging the alpha with gratitude as Axton hugged him right back. He breathed the older man’s scent, running his nose just along Axton’s neck to rest his head safely under the older man’s chin. “…I just wish this damn bond would break already…”
Axton pet him, grounding himself with Rhys’ own scent and grateful the younger man had stopped shaking, eyes dry. “Me too, sugar. Me too.”

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Waking back up next to Axton was probably better than most medicines and vacations out there. Rhys felt a million times better, and safer, with the alpha by his side, and vowed to hide the extra bed sheets on the couch so Axton would sleep by his side until necessity proved unneeded.

He scooted closer to better fit against the older man, nuzzling his face into the crook of Axton’s shoulder as the alpha breathed in deep in coming to consciousness, his arm contracting to bring Rhys in closer.

“...mornin’ darlin’...” he murmured, still mostly half-asleep.

“Mmm,” Rhys acknowledged right back, not moving to get up or start the day.

They laid there sleepily for some time-- Axton didn’t have to be at work for at least another hour- but as time passed and eventual wakefulness caught up to him, Rhys gave Axton a poke that got an amused huff and the capture of his hand in the alpha’s own against his chest.

“You’ll be late for work,” Rhys told him softly, though the omega didn’t bother budging from where he was, too comfortable and a bit anxious about being left alone without the man for the day. Rhys was relishing in the extra time he got with the older man.

“Mm, no… not goin’ anywhere today,” Axton’s sleepy voice informed.

“You have the day off?”

“No. Texted Sal last night. I’m not leaving you today, sweetheart.”

Rhys felt like his chest would burst from relief and excitement and the statement all. A sleepy kiss was pressed to his fluffy bedhead, and Axton breathed in deep again and pulled Rhys almost intimately-closer.

“You can sleep more if you want, I’ll watch for nightmares.” Rhys felt heat come to his cheeks, and Axton gave him a bit of a nuzzle. “I know you tossed all night again, Rhys. It’s okay, I promise. You can rest easy.”

Rhys cuddled himself close without shame, not giving a flying shit about his stupid body’s reactions- though he was certain last night’s had actually been from nightmares- and he just enjoyed Axton’s presence and scent and warmth.

He fell back asleep, and they snoozed past noon.

--

Rhys worried about Axton’s job, but the alpha promised it was taken care of-- Atlas knew and they authorized things; Axton could stay home.

The alpha kept fairly close all day-- something that didn’t go missed by the omega.

He sat at the table while Rhys tried to get work done. He pulled up a stool while the omega tinkered with his hand prototype. And he helped him with lunch when Rhys set about to make grilled cheese.

“Planning a cheese-coma, darlin’?”
“Maybe… You wanna grab us some beer and make for a real sleep-time snack?”

Axton huffed out a laugh as he agreed, but their little moment was interrupted by the ring of his phone.

Work was calling, but it didn’t take the smile from his voice. Not immediately, anyways.

“Hello? ...Yeah, we’re both here… I was authorized to be here tod-- Yeah. Yes. Yes sir, I did. ...I am… Okay, when? ...And the Director requested this personally? ...no, I understand, but she-- Yes…. Yes… Understood. Goodbye.”

Axton dragged a hand through his hair with annoyance and a huff. “...God I hate that dick,” he growled out about his superior.

“Are you in trouble?” Rhys said with concern, his doubts about Axton taking the day to stay with him coming to a head. He removed the pan from the heat, stowing his plans as he looked at the older man.

“No, not exactly, I don’t think,” the alpha said with furrowed brow. “They want us both at the office. HR.”

Rhys blinked as he frowned. “Why?”

Axton tried to keep the growl out of his voice, but he couldn’t help it. “Hyperion.”

Rhys could feel the blood drain from his face, worry about his job and security and everything coming together in a perfect clusterfuck. What was Jack trying now? What else could he do?

Rhys couldn’t suppress the shiver that went through him, and before he’d even realized he’d moved, Axton was embracing him, the alpha’s face in his neck and hand at the back of his head as if he could shield him from reality, worry over the way the younger man had gone stark white. “Don’t worry, it’ll be okay, I promise. Whatever happens, it’ll be okay. I’m with you, alright? I’m with you.”

Arms wrapped around Axton’s neck, disturbed and on edge with uncertainty, as Rhys hugged himself closer against the older man, he breathed his scent in and allowed himself to believe that Axton could– and moreover, would- keep him safe through whatever was awaiting them back at Atlas.

Chapter End Notes

Lots has happened this chapter :) I'd super appreciate thoughts, feelings, and comments! 22 pages ya'll. Nearly 10k words.

...I don't want to say I'll hold the incoming smut hostage for some quality comments....but i'm petty as fuck and the smut was written last year, i can certainly hold on to it for longer AHAHA >:3

You'll notice we only have 2 more chapters left...please leave me some fun things to read, I like knowing your thoughts/feelings on wtf i'm writing haha :D (it's one of the reasons this fic and not All Sales Final is getting updated faster too-- comment quality is A+ guys, keep it coming!!!)
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

The chapter in which we earn that 'M' rating BAHAHAAHHA

Please consider leaving a nice long review if you haven't totally imploded by the end of this chapter, yeah? :D I spent hours writing this. The average reading speed is about 200 words per minute. At around 9.6k words, that's about 45 minutes of reading enjoyment I've given you, for hours of work put into it. Can you be assed to spend 60 seconds to leave a comment? :) Ya know, if your brain didn't explode by the end haha

The ride to Atlas was nerve-wracking, even as Axton assured Rhys they were meeting with the head of HR again, not his dick of a direct-superior, and more to the point, he didn't think they were in any trouble. Regardless of how much his supervisor bitched, Axton did have his leave authorized.

Rhys’ leg bounced in nervousness as they had taken a seat across from the intimidating alpha at the desk, her expression no less severe than usual. No doubt Atlas kept her very busy indeed.

She huffed, wasting no time on pleasantries as both men sat across from her with varying expressions of concern and discomfort. “We received another call from Handsome Jack.”

Rhys sat up straighter, mind going to how he’d scratched the man the day before. He wondered if Jack was threatening legal action from Rhys having defended himself. He kept silent on the matter as he waited for the other shoe to drop, heart speeding up, but she just as abruptly changed subjects.

“How do you feel, Mr. Sommerset?”

“I-- Good? I’m fine,” he answered quickly, a bit thrown. Apparently that wasn’t the answer she was looking for, as her eyes left him to look to Axton.

“The bond isn’t broken yet,” he supplied gently, an encouraging look to the omega at his side. “It’s getting there, though.”

“At lightspeed if Hyperion’s tantrums are any indicator,” she informed, looking between the pair. A slight curve of unkindness lit her face. “Handsome Jack was in a real snit this time.”

“He’s… He’s still stalking me,” Rhys spoke up, not knowing how much Jack might’ve given away, but not allowing any lie the Hyperion alpha might’ve told tarnish his own reputation. “I ran into him yesterday…. I… scratched him.”

She frowned, and it was the first genuine show of unease since they’d sat down. She looked at Axton and back to Rhys. “Where’d this take place?”

“Across the street from--” Rhys caught himself, hoping the sudden heat he felt in nearly volunteering their little cohabitation wasn’t showing on his cheeks. They hadn’t discussed it, but sitting here now, he didn’t think it to be anyone’s business that he’d been staying with Axton. The man was still doing his job, after all. Though the fact it gave Rhys a warm feeling told him to be discrete. Next to him, Axton didn’t betray anything. “From home. I was grabbing coffee and he ambushed me.”
“He’s getting bold.” She turned to Axton. “I’m pulling you from any other duties until this is finished, Axton. And let’s hope it’s finished soon.” She looked at Rhys, what amounted to a kind smile on her face. “Your department is looking forward to your work being presented at the expo. I don’t want you to waste any thoughts for Hyperion unless it’s about making their stocks take a dive.”

Rhys couldn’t help the amused snort that left him at that.

Axton only grunted in agreement, though inside he was thrilled to remain with Rhys full-time. That Handsome Jack was a clear and present enough threat to Rhys to warrant Axton’s presence, however, wasn’t something to exactly celebrate. The suggestion to dust off weapons floated to the surface of his thoughts again, eclipsed once more by excitement to stay by Rhys’ side all day every day. He watched the younger man next to him, somewhat beaming at the idea of dealing Hyperion a major blow.

“I’m looking forward to showing it off,” Rhys commented with a proud little smile that bled off his face at her next words.

“He tried to insinuate he had rights to your work.” The woman gave Rhys a stern, unblinking expression, daring him to lie to her, and the younger man nearly had a heart attack at the claim. “He alleges that the work you’ve done here originated at Hyperion, and therefore belongs to them.”

“That’s an outright lie!” Rhys stated heatedly, leaning forward. “Everything I’ve done is dated to post-Hyperion. And I wasn’t even doing the same work in the same field there. He’s a liar,” he stated again in trying to convince her.

Her eyes said she believed him, but her words were contrary; worried. There was a lot riding on the next tech expo, and nasty surprises like this could ruin them. “Can you prove it?”

“I can,” he stated emphatically. “All the original drafts and designs are in my possession. Everything Atlas even has are second drafts. I don’t even know how Jack knows about any of this….”

Axton had an idea. The break-in at the warehouse, the sector where the fire occurred… everything not found was presumed to have been destroyed by the flames. Lord knows he dug through enough ash to have assumed the same.

Axton looked at the alpha across the desk from him with sharp concern, drawing her concerned gaze. “What storage areas were burned in the fire at the off-site warehouse? What was it that was lost exactly?”

“Delivery invoices from the past seven years, paper copies of tax forms, and old hardware patents.” She gave Rhys a sudden look of realization. “The outdated paper-copies for patents earlier this year were there.”

“Those’re copies though, right?” Axton asked again, hand going over Rhys’ own hopefully. He’d seen those papers in Rhys’ home office. Crude things in pencil compared to sleek outprints.

The omega gave Axton a confident smile before turning back to the HR head. “I have the originals,” Rhys told them with certain confidence. “Whatever Jack is claiming to know about is definitely outdated. I have digital copies of everything as well.”

“Any way he knows you have the originals?”

“Not a chance.” Rhys gave the two looking at him with legitimate concern a smirk. “He would never be able to fabricate anything about my designs, even if I handed over the old prototypes on a silver platter. I was in another department there,” he stated again.
He snorted to himself at how ludicrous the situation was. Jack was brilliant, yeah, but even he wouldn’t have been able to come up with the things Rhys was working on; things diametrically opposed that somehow worked out. He wasn’t proud to admit it, but some of his breakthroughs had been complete accidents that he knew the Hyperion alpha would never be able to replicate.

“Is there any way he might try to substantiate these claims? Prove you worked on it while employed by Hyperion?”

“No ma’am. It would be like the company painter put in charge of doing the corporate taxes. If he even tried to go to court, he’d look like a laughingstock. No one has the technology that I do, and he can’t prove it ever started there. I’d stake my life on that.”

The HR head hummed a moment in thought, brows knitting together slightly. “Your patents are all filed, right?”

“Absolutely. And I have documents in a lockbox at the bank.”

She gave him a pensive look, this particular issue out of her field of expertise. Corporate espionage and damage control, she could handle. Bio-mechanical interfaces and programming were more out in left field. “Is there any way he could reverse-engineer your designs by the time the tech expo comes to town? Considering the worst in that Hyperion was behind our warehouse fire?”

Rhys couldn't stop the laugh that left him, the idea so ludicrous it bordered on insane. He quickly collected himself with a muttered apology, ears growing a little hot at the unprofessional outburst. “What old things Atlas does have on file have been refined. My older models had technical and electrical issues that I invented new processes to fix. Some more... explodey than others.” He grinned as a mean smile curled onto her face and Axton gave an unkind chuckle next to him. “He is more than welcome to try to copy my tech. He couldn't replicate it without it blowing up in his face.”

Not to mention that some of the actual fixes had been frustrated last-ditch attempts with materials that were theoretically incompatible, or shouldn’t have withstood the things he used them for. Rhys had installed them to give himself a legitimate reason to give up and scrap the project for something else. That things had worked was a happy accident, and Jack’s own pride was too large to even consider such amateur mistakes.

“As long as you can prove everything, should it come to that, that’s good enough for me,” she told them. The set of her shoulders relaxed a bit, tension leaving as the bombshell to hit her office was proving to be all bark and no bite. “As things are, Handsome Jack seems to be blowing smoke up our collective asses.”

Rhys grinned while Axton tried to stifle a laugh. Yes, he began to see why the big alpha at his side liked the alpha across from them so much. She was scary, intimidating for sure, but when those moments broke through, Rhys found himself reassured that it was she looking out for Atlas’ collective wellbeing.

“You should know, he requested a meeting with you to discuss the reclamation of the project back under Hyperion, which I of course denied. You should also know he offered to deny any and all claims of ownership from Atlas if he met with you, privately, to denounce it on paper.” Her eyes moved to Axton’s own as the other alpha straightened in his seat. “An easy fix to a messy situation.”

“Hell no,” Axton growled out without thinking.

Her voice was level, but no less lacking in authority. “That’s not your decision to make, Axton.”
The alpha gave a cowed look to the omega next to him-- overstepping his bounds maybe- but he was pretty sure they were on the same page. Rhys’ stern, unyielding response proved him right.

“Hell. No,” Rhys growled out as well. He swallowed, clearing his throat so as not to be disrespectful in putting his foot down. “I’m sorry, I know it might calm things down here, but I’m not doing that. Especially when it’s unnecessary.”

She sniffed. “That’s what I figured. He did threaten to sue for the plans if you wouldn’t agree to meet with him.”

“Well I’ll see him in court then if he wants to see me so bad.”

The smirk on her face took a wicked edge; she liked his attitude. “If what you’ve said is true, I don’t think any of us will.”

She opened one of her desk drawers, pulling out a few documents she wanted him to look over and sign-- verifying some dates, activities, and overall making sure their asses were covered in case Jack did try to pull something. It actually put Rhys more at ease than he had been throughout the discussion. Between the steps Atlas was taking and his own evidence and materials, he was secure in the knowledge his company was safe, and furthermore, that that knothead was going to be even further powerless to do anything about it. There was a sort of snide satisfaction in that, knowing that monster was impotent to do anything about it.

“Just focus on breaking your bond, Mr. Sommerset. You can leave Handsome Jack to our legal department.”

“Thanks for that,” Rhys genuinely said with a small smile.

“Axton, a word?” she said as they moved to leave her office.

Rhys gave the big alpha a worried look, but he just smiled and told Rhys it was fine, just wait right there.

True to his word, Axton was back out of the office in under a minute, and they took their leave.

“I hope that wasn’t anything bad,” Rhys said as they rode the elevator back down to the main floor.

“Nah, just a little heart to heart,” Axton chuckled. Rhys leaned his head on the man, and the big alpha offered him a squeeze and a laugh. “She suggested I should maybe move you to a more ‘secure location’, if you’d have it, since Handsome Jack knows where you live.” Rhys snorted at that, the big alpha all amused grins. The director was either a lot more perceptive than he gave her credit for, or it was just an amusing coincidence. “How about it? Wanna be roomies? Have a sleepover?”

“Geez I don’t know. Don’t really wanna cramp your style.”

They chuckled a bit before Rhys was brought back down by the serious threat Jack was posing-- serious enough if the head of HR put Axtion on full-time watch and wanted Rhys to be MIA for a while. The omega was scowling by the time they were leaving the lobby.

“I just really can’t believe that asshole,” Rhys growled out, livid that Jack would try to lay claim to his work. “After everything-- everything- he thinks he can steal my stuff?”

“We won’t let him near you again,” Axton growled. “That’s for damn sure.”
“That utter asshole... Why do any of this? Going after my damn work....”

“It means he's feeling your bond weakening and he's grasping at straws. He’s getting desperate,” Axton commented with a smirk. “Must not feel nice, you breaking away from him.”

Desperate didn’t even begin to cut it. As they left the Atlas building, Rhys stopped to openly gape into the distance at something they hadn’t noticed when their backs had been turned to enter. It made his heart speed up at the audacity.

Axton turned his gaze to where Rhys was staring, the omega stopped with a frown on his face at the looming billboard advertising Hyperion sunglasses with Jack’s own person for the actual model in lieu of the professionals and actors they usually utilized.

That was ballsy. Or the last act of a desperate man. Yeah, the billboard was far enough away to not be considered a direct challenge to Atlas, but the fact that it faced their company at all made the hair on his arms stand in aggravation. This was a dick-waving contest if they’d ever seen it.

“What in the hell? How long has that been there?”

“It wasn’t there a few days ago...” Axton muttered, a growl in his voice. “I’d have thought the director would’ve mentioned that...”

Rhys snorted. “Maybe she was trying to be nice since it’s obvious we didn’t catch this eyesore when we came in... God...”

They continued to look at it a moment, each to their own thoughts, as the omega lifted his arm to give the billboard the finger, smirking at Axton next to him. The alpha did the same, a grin on his face, and the pair flipped off the billboard together for a few moments before snickers turned into full laughter, leaving the plaza in considerably better spirits.

Rhys felt emotionally exhausted when they got back to Axton’s apartment, having a much-deserved sit while the alpha heated up some leftovers for a simple lunch neither particularly felt hungry for anymore. They sat on the couch while the microwave whirred away.

Rhys hugged Axton close, indulging himself with eyes closed and inhaling deeply of his scent. It calmed and grounded him, and a pleased purr rumbled in his throat as the older man held him back.

“Can we do something fun tonight?” Rhys asked, then looked up to the alpha’s face. “Maybe invite Vaughn down the hall over and watch shitty movies or something? Like normal people without a CEO stalking them?”

The initial racing of Axton’s heart at that request had him chuckling through an adrenaline spike, his cheeks heating just a tad that he hoped went unnoticed. “Hell yeah. We’re running low on beer, though. And popcorn.”

“And ice cream,” Rhys added with a smirk, then raised his brows to seriously look at Axton. “And candy.”

The older man shook his head, nuzzled Rhys once before releasing him, and together they ate day-old lasagna with a beer each, and planned an evening store trip for goodies before shooting a text to his beta neighbor down the hall.

--

Vaughn came over after work, and they watched some horror-flick that the beta swore up and down was as fun as it was cheesy, and not to judge it by the name. Rhys swore it didn’t scare him at all,
even if he was almost in Axton’s lap from one-too-many jumpscares, and Axton commented on the tactical decisions being made by the heroes on screen, who in his opinion, were morons. For a B-grade horror flick, that didn’t hit too far off the mark.

The beta’s idea of something far more scary took prominence later when they were discussing Vaughn’s workout regimen, and he and Axton arm-wrestled as the smaller man’s strength was brought into question by Rhys’ curiosity. Surely Axton had been exaggerating, but one loss and lots of laughter later, and Vaughn was proclaimed King Powerhouse (all hail). Questions about protein-powders and diet came up, and with it, Rhys’ curiosity was peaked, and the three moved the little get-together to Vaughn’s place to sample his protein supplements and play video games.

It was a nice, normal end to a nice normal night for once. Even if Axton wouldn’t try some of Vaughn’s protein powder creations. And even if the beta played the lion’s share of the vintage games so well that Rhys barely got a shot.

That was okay though. He was able to spend his time instead leaned up against the alpha as Axton tried to conquer swimming levels to no avail, and the alpha wrapped an arm over his shoulders whenever Vaughn’s reign proved long and skillful.

Yup. A nice night next to the man who was taking care of him, who he was hopelessly crushing on, without sparing even a moment to think of the Hyperion jackass trying to worm back into his good graces no matter how his gland screamed at him. It might not have been a date, but as he got to sleep all cuddled up in the alpha’s arms anyways, he considered it a night well-spent indeed.

--

Rhys woke up the next morning stretched out next to the alpha as per rote, and he immediately felt that something was off.

He sat up rubbing his eyes, looking over the sandy-haired man lightly snoring with his mouth agape.

“Axton…” Rhys spoke lightly, not wanting to alarm the other man even as he began feeling a rising panic. “Ax.”

A particularly loud snore jolted him awake to which Rhys couldn’t stifle a laugh.

“What? What's wrong?”

“I don't know.”

The alpha blinked unfocused green eyes, not yet awake but fully on-alert. “Did you hear a noise?”

“No, nothing like that. I feel weird.”

Axton relaxed back into the pillow, closing his eyes in dismissal. “I told ya not to put protein powder on that pizza…”

“No,” Rhys said again, fingers curling around the alpha’s bicep as he relaxed in the pillows. “I think… I can't feel… My neck feels weird.”

Axton's eyes snapped back open to land on him. “Did it break?”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

The alpha sat up, crooking a leg under himself as he rubbed at his eyes. “C’mere darlin’, lemme see.”
Rhys did so without question, baring the back of his neck for the alpha without a second thought as Axton gave a thoughtful hum.

Axton's fingers felt about his neck systematically, pressing as if searching for something almost imperceptible, the pads warm and gentle against his flesh.

Rhys was biting his lips to keep himself quiet. It was a highly sensitive area, and though Axton was methodical in his probing, clinical in his touches, it didn't make them feel any less good. His heart rate picked up, nostrils flaring with the alpha’s scent, exquisitely aware of even the softest of touches to the skin at the base of his neck from the sleepy man’s hands. God but it felt good.

Rhys couldn't block the sound he made in his throat, somewhere between a whimper and a whine, but he remained still, hoping the alpha hadn't heard it.

But of course he did.

“Shit, sorry, did I hurt you?” Axton stilled his fingers in their probing, trying to find any evidence that the bond had finally broken. He wasn't good at this, but there were ways to tell. He just didn't have too much practice himself. They usually left that up to a third party professional, and that involved scans and stuff aside.

Rhys shook his head no, refusing to look up. His cheeks were on fire, he was half-hard, slightly slick, and it felt so damn good. He hoped Axton wouldn't look at him. He was still too-asleep to scent Rhys’ arousal; he hoped that he could get himself under control by the time the alpha was done checking him. The butterflies in his stomach were excited and anticipating that he wouldn’t.

Axton made a noncommittal noise as he resumed his touches outward to where the edge of Rhys’ bonding gland would be located. He was half muttering to himself in half-formed, sleep-addled thoughts, trying to remember the anatomy section of his textbook. If he’d paid more attention, he would have known by now.

“...should be a little swollen…”

Rhys’ breath was coming faster as he tried to calm his racing, excited heart, lower half pulsing, clenching down on nothing as he was stimulated out of his goddamn mind.

Did Axton have any idea what he was doing to him? Judging by his sleepy sounds and muttered textbook-sounding words, Rhys didn't think so. The alpha was only half-awake. He should probably stop him— it was wrong not to stop him- but he really, really didn't want to. He offered up a prayer of thanks that the alpha didn't register the little gasp of pleasure that left him; that the man’s touches didn't linger too long in any one particular place or he might literally and figuratively lose it.

Though the excitement of how he might touch next didn’t exactly lower his arousal.

“...shoulda paid more attention in class…”

The alpha’s large, warm thumb pressed firmly on the outer edge of where his bonding gland should be as Axton muttered something about “that’s definitely a little swollen but” when Rhys couldn't bite back on the cry of pleasure that left his lips.

“A-Axton!”

Immediately those big hands were gone, and Rhys was left breathing heavy and embarrassed as the alpha froze with awareness, turning to look at the omega.
Rhys met his eyes from under messy bed hair, and he looked *wrecked* with need. Eyes dilated, face flushed, lips swollen from where he must have bitten them. He was breathing hard too, a clear look of *want* written all over his face, and fuck, he had a hardon that had nothing to do with morning wood.

Axton jumped off the bed as if it was made of snakes, hands raised as he quickly apologized in sheer shocked horror at what he'd done to the other man.

“Fuck, fuck *fuck* I'm sorry, I shouldn't have--- Dammit Rhys, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to!”

The omega smelled different, he realized. A brightness to his scent, not easy to quantify. He smelled *good*, available in ways a bonded omega didn't always smell to ward off other alphas. His bonding gland was swollen from a fresh break; Axton was just too much of an amateur in diagnosing those indicators to immediately tell the difference.

Rhys gave him a confused look, crushing understanding on his face as the alpha kept his distance, dashing any hopes Axton might continue. *None* of that had been intentional.

He felt kind of dirty for enjoying it as much as he had, and couldn’t help the hope Axton might touch him *more*.

“Shit, I didn't mean to take advantage of ya darlin’ I swear I wasn't even thinking!”

“I... You didn't,” Rhys managed far more evenly than the worried alpha, face hot as he was still unbearably turned on, and unable to meet the other man's eyes as he tried to steady his breath, his hardon somewhat flagging, but not nearly enough. He bit his lip, trying to tell himself that what he felt was just a reaction to stimulus, not to take it any way, and handle damage control because Axton looked torn between self-flagellation and implosion for what he’d done. Axton hadn’t meant anything by it. It was an accident, and he shouldn't look too much into it. As long as he looked at it that way, things didn't have to be... awkward.

“I'm really sorry Rhys, I wouldn't-- You know I wouldn't--”

“It's really okay, Ax.” He tried for a noncommittal laugh that came out far more breathy than intended. “I promise, it's not your fault,” he said with a husky tone and embarrassed smile, trying to keep his dejection from his face. He liked Axton, valued him as a true friend, and he didn't want things to be weird between them if the alpha wasn't interested in more... *fun* things.

Damn but if his reaction didn’t sting, though.

“I just, I wasn't thinking. I wouldn't-- not without asking first-- I-- Will you forgive me?”

Rhys tried to laugh it off, the distress so over the top he looked like he might self-destruct. Axton was just too damn *good* for his own good; way too sweet of an alpha.

Rhys could make light of it all, make a joke out of it, and they could go back to being friends. There was no reason for things to be weird. Axton was much too good of a man for Rhys to even slightly try to push something the other wasn’t feeling.

“Of course I forgive you,” he told him easily, smirking to himself as the other man whined, throwing in a slightly teasing tone to show there was no harm done. “It just felt *really* good is all,” he chuckled, as if he was only embarrassed about being turned on within an inch of his life-- something they could laugh about as friends. “I would’ve told you to stop otherwise, buuuut I didn't really want to. So, sorry about that, it’s kinda my fault,” he admitted with a forced laugh, heart rate picking up at
his honest admission of liking the alpha’s advances, though unintentional they were. His face was burning, but he didn't regret his admission.

“Oh. Ooh.”

Rhys chanced a look up at that suddenly comprehending tone, and saw that Axton’s cheeks were pink, the alpha completely flushing with new understanding.

The omega offered him a sort of shy, encouraging smile, and Axton looked away, blushing even harder, suddenly self-consciously biting his lips in realization that Rhys wasn't at all put off by what had taken place. With the way the younger man was looking up at him, and the way he’d spoken, it wasn’t too far fetched to believe he might even return the little crush the alpha had been nursing for a while now.

Rhys watched as the gears turned, Axton’s understanding now a little shy as he clearly tried to come to terms. The blush on the green-eyed alpha’s face was endearing as all hell, and probably the cutest thing Rhys had ever seen. He tried not to get his hopes up too high as Axton ran through things.

“You, uh… it was… Nice?” Axton’s confused tones asked, head cocked as he looked at the omega-- *really* looked at him-- as he figured things out. Of course it felt nice, but that wasn’t what they were talking about. That Rhys was receptive to it, hadn’t wanted him to stop, really threw the alpha through a loop. Rhys nodded and offered him another sheepish smile, and Axton felt himself turning even redder.

The omega bit his lower lip again, smiling despite himself, chancing to press his luck further; test the waters, so to speak. He wanted to let him know he’d liked it; more would be welcomed and boy how. “Really nice. Really *really* nice.”

The air was charged between them in ways that his gut told him was *good*. Axton didn’t seem like he was about to bolt if Rhys was reading the situation properly. He figured he’d already gotten himself across to just how not upset he was, so why not bait the line a little and see if Axton might bite?

A shiver of anticipation went up Rhys’ back as he gazed at the older man.

“You uh, sure you’re done checking this?” Rhys asked in what he hoped was a clear offer, pointing a finger at the back of his neck in hopes Axton would take the bait.

“Yeah you're definitely-- oh. *Oh* I uh… No… maybe... not?” Axton hated how his voice seemed to crack, heart threatening to beat out his chest at the inviting smile Rhys was giving him. This went beyond unprofessional, and Axton found himself caring less and less where that smile was concerned.

Rhys *wanted* him. The idea thrilled Axton to the core. That Rhys was willing to bare his neck to the alpha was a very intimate gesture indeed; it was a vulnerable spot for all omegas, and Rhys was no different. The invitation was obvious as he smiled at the alpha.

Axton’s feet seemed glued to the floor though, waiting for-- he didn’t know, something obvious to prove to himself he wasn’t just imagining all this-- and he blessed the omega for patting the bed next to him in invitation that the alpha willingly accepted to sit next to him.

Rhys smiled somewhat shyly considering he was still slightly hard in the older man’s own bed as Axton sat next to him. Axton took the hand Rhys had on the bed in his own, offering the omega what was probably the reddest-faced smile anyone had ever had. He was still checking, making sure. Axton's thumb brushed over the back of Rhys’ hand.
“It… uh, you liked it then?”

“Yes,” Rhys said, voice a little breathy at the admission as he gave Axton’s fingers a squeeze. “I-I liked it-- I like… you…”

His voice was bashful, testing, as if seeking permission that his confession was okay-- and not just okay, but accepted- looking up with pink cheeks hopeful that the sentiment would be returned.

The way Axton’s eyes softened and he linked their fingers bespoke words that the older man was currently choking on, heart frantically beating in his chest. Rhys liked him. Like-liked. God, that was everything he ever wanted.

“Rhys…”

He didn’t know what to say, even as the younger man was watching him patiently with burning blue and brown eyes. He was nervous and excited and scared, but Rhys gave his hand a squeeze, and Axton felt encouraged by the movement, moving to take the omega’s cheeks up in both hands.

“Can- Can I kiss you, darlin’?”

“God please,” Rhys sighed out, putting his own hands over Axton’s on his face as his eyes were on the alpha’s lips. As their mouths met, Rhys wrapped his arms up under Axton’s shoulders to hold the other man. Rhys whined into the kiss, pulling Axton bodily to him. He kissed him a few more times before breaking apart to gasp the older man's name, nuzzling him with his nose. His heart was trying to beat clean out his chest.

“Shit darlin’…”

“Mm hmm,” Rhys murmured with a laugh, turning his cheek further into Axton's palm still there, eyes closed in pleasure.

Axton stroked Rhys’ face with his thumb, a hand moving to the back of his neck, nuzzling their noses against one another lightly, voice soft and uncertain. “...Is this really okay? I don’t wanna like-- I didn’t mean to rile you up with--. I like you, Rhys. I don’t wanna manipulate you in any way, darlin’.”

“Trust me, you’re not,” Rhys said with a smirk. Their lips met again and Rhys’ little laugh caught Axton off guard. “Sorry,” the omega said with a sort of somber smile. “I just… I didn’t think I’d feel like this again.” His fingers fidgeted on Axton’s back. “I thought maybe that part of me was defective.”

“No sweetheart, nothing wrong with you at all.” The alpha hugged him closer, kissing him again and reassuring him. Axton pulled his arms around his shoulders to try to wrap himself proper around the omega, wanting to hug and comfort him and smother him in affection and scent both. He hugged him without restraint; without needing to worry for how certain touches would be construed. He liked him. That fact was something they were both happy to broadcast, and Axton kissed and hugged the younger man with real affection as Rhys kissed and laughed about right now.

Rhys bowled the older man over into the bed with a laugh, kissing and hugging and rubbing on the alpha in ways that bordered more closely on territorial than sexual. The thought occurred to Axton-- imagining Rhys wanting him so bad that he wanted to smell of the alpha- and it was making him hard as he lay under the omega rubbing his cheek against his own and cuddling him close. Rhys wanted to smell like him; he wanted his scent to dictate that he belonged to Axton. Now there was some dangerous food for thought, and it made the wicked little thing inside Axton gleeful with alpha pride that Rhys found him acceptable.
Axton’s hands instinctively moved to the younger man’s hips over his pajama bottoms, and Rhys gave a little pleased snort and sat up as Axton paused, not yet putting his hands anywhere less than savory. The omega watched him expectantly as he sat next to the older man, Axton watching him with a still-concerned expression.

“Is this really okay? It’s not a- a problem? I promise I’ve been professional the entire time, but right now--”

“The only problem we’re gonna have is if you stop kissing me,” Rhys told him with a smirk that brightened a smile across the alpha’s face. That smile turned to a gasp as Rhys properly climbed over the other man to loom over him on hands and knees.

Axton chuckled as Rhys touched their foreheads together, smiling as he relocated his hands to the younger man’s face again. “No problem at all you sweet thing.” He kissed Rhys’ lips again, the omega murmuring in pleasure at the touches of mouth and hands both, and the younger man moved his body lower until he was properly sitting and kissing while Axton held him close.

Neither were overrushed kissing the other, taking their time exploring the texture and softness of the others lips, snickering at mentions of stubble burn or pleased little gasps of satisfaction.

Axton growled as he got more comfortable under the younger man, green eyes dilated as he felt Rhys’ cock hard against his own. The alpha moaned and kissed from the omega’s neck to his jaw. His moving beneath him hadn't been a pointed action, but it sped up his train of thought where things might be headed.

“Not to assume anything with how far ya wanna go,” he excused himself in restrained tones for the way his cock strained against Rhys’, “but I’d be more than satisfied just kissin’ ya forever, sweetheart. More than enough for me.”

Rhys groaned and ground down against the bigger man, pulling him more solidly against him as they both made sounds of want. “You’re the sweetest man alive, Ax,” he purred, writhing on top of him in seeking out friction. It got a pleased growl from the other man as he teased kisses to Rhys’ jaw. “But I want you-- like I really really want you--” Axton’s laughs turned to gruff murmurs as he kissed Rhys’ lips. “Can we have sex?”

The alpha groaned deeply as he brought Rhys down firm against his chest, turning his head to nip at soft inked skin as he pet the omega with his other hand. He didn't want to let him go; wanted to keep him safe and tight in his arms, close against his heart. “That would be a dream come true, sugar. Heh, as a matter of fact, I happen to have a certificate in sex. I’m pretty damn great at it.”

Rhys snorted as Axton snickered, the omega laughing as he looked down at the bigger man. “You do not!”

“I do so.”

“No you don’t. Show me.”

The alpha laughed. “Well it’s printed out somewhere in my--”

Rhys stopped him with a kiss to the lips; one that Axton deepened before they broke apart again. “I meant show me the skills, handsome.”

Axton’s cheeks actually went red at that, and they both shared a good laugh that slowly turned back to writhing against one another moaning in pleasure. Rhys had a hand up Axton’s t-shirt, and the older man’s fingers had dipped below the waistband of Rhys’ pajama pants. The omega pressed
himself into those big hands with a throaty hum.

“How do you like to be loved, sweetheart?” Axton asked gruffly in his ear, teasing the lobe with his teeth as Rhys bodily shivered. The younger man quickly scrambled off of the alpha, tugging his shirt off like it had mortally offended him, before happily settling on his back and impatiently tugging the bigger man back over him.

The older man grinned as he pulled his own shirt over his head to toss away while Rhys was all hands. Axton smiled down with aroused amusement as he gladly went where Rhys moved him. The additional skin contact was delicious, and the press of their lips only broke for gasping and little pleased snickers here and there as they groped one another. Axton then launched his campaign of getting the pair of them naked and kissing every inch of the omega if Rhys would allow it.

The growl Rhys gave in trying to tug the older man’s pajama pants off while also not wanting to stop kissing him made a delicious shiver go up Axton’s back and pause in his doings to really hug and kiss the daylights out of the younger man. Stripped down to their underwear was a cause for celebration in the form of more kisses, surely. And all that naked skin was just begging to be touched.

Rhys’ hands over Axton’s chest unhampered by shirt was like something out of a dream, and the purrs the younger man gave that sometimes took the form of his name made Axton’s cock flex again him. God but the alpha was built. Rhys’ fingers trailed up and over muscles and hot flesh while squirming under the older man.

“Axton, please?”

“I must have died in my sleep or something,” the alpha murmured against Rhys’ throat, and the omega laughed as he moved to capture the older man’s lips again.

“You’re way too sweet, big guy,” Rhys purred, a hand in Axton’s hair while he studied the older man’s face with extreme fondness. “And I want you way too bad, so if this is a dream, can we please get to the good part already before one of us wakes up?”

Axton actually chuckled at that, sealing their mouths together once more before kissing down Rhys’ jaw to his collarbone, bringing his attention to the un-inked nipple on the younger man’s tattooed form while Rhys moaned, hands urging Axton for more. He licked over the younger man’s skin, swirling his tongue and sucking on the sensitive flesh while Rhys moaned his name.

The sound the older man got as his thumbs sunk into the sides of Rhys’ underwear to tug them down nearly made the alpha come in his pants. God but that was a noise of pure, unadulterated want if he’d ever heard it in his entire life, and it was directed at him. Rhys was whining at him, lifting his lower half so the alpha could remove his underwear, the omega’s cock springing free that made Axton’s mouth go dry.

“A-Axton, please, you know it’s been a long time,” Rhys chuckled, voice deep and husky with want. “I won’t survive at this rate.”

“You’re a lot stronger than you think, sugar,” the older man said with a snort, doubting his own restraint as his eyes were focused on the prize. He continued to kiss his way down Rhys’ body from where he’d left off, moans driving him onward as he skirted the younger man’s cock. God but he smelled delicious. He didn’t even realize he was purring in his throat until Rhys said something.

“Axton?”
The alpha met lust-dilated eyes, Rhys’ smile bringing one to his own face. “Yeah?”

The omega’s eyes flit to his own cock before looking back at the older man with a playful tease. “Any day now.”

“Knew you’d be bossy,” he chuckled, running a palm up Rhys’ thigh in a playful stroke. “Thought you wanted to see those skills?”

Rhys was rubbing the side of Axton’s cheek with a thumb before the older man turned to kiss the digit, making the omega shiver and laugh. “Changed my mind, I want you too bad right now.”

“Oh darlin’.” Axton pressed a kiss to the younger man’s hip, groaning as Rhys spread his legs just enough that scent filled the older man’s nostrils and _fuck_ when had he ever been this hard before in his entire life?

His thumb gently caressed Rhys’ innermost thigh before teasing over his balls in a way that made the omega gasp with pleasure and thrust his hips towards nothing. Axton knew he wanted to put every last one of his official ‘skills’ to work for the younger man, but truth was that he wanted Rhys just as bad as the omega wanted him.

Rhys’ cock was leaking already, twitching with every movement that brought Axton’s hands that much closer to it. At this point, he wasn't sure he wouldn't immediately go off if Axton touched him there or not.

As the alpha’s thumb ventured further below, he found the omega to be slick, hot, and Rhys made a series of strangled, aroused noises as the older man finally _finally_ wrapped his hand around the omega’s cock. The sounds Rhys made Axton found cute, sexy, and amusing as he encircled the other man’s entrance before pressing the pad of his thumb in with his other hand. Rhys’ breathing hitched along with his voice as he bore down on the welcome intrusion.

“Jesus fucking christ Axton,” Rhys sighed out, and the older man kissed the top of his thigh with a laugh while Rhys reached at him and _begged_ for more, desperately needing to kiss the alpha's lips once more. “Please, just, I need you so bad-- and what the hell? get those _off_,” the younger man growled in want at the offending sight of Axton’s underwear, tented as they were, still restraining the older man’s cock.

“Consider it done,” Axton said with a laugh, pulling away slightly to disentangle himself and toss his underwear away. Rhys sat up, chasing him in unwillingness to allow him the space in which to _remove_ said clothing, but instead shivered with needy anticipation at finally getting a look at what he’d been grinding against.

Axton’s cock was long and thick, slightly curving upwards with a thick, weeping head. The alpha removed himself to dig about in a bedside drawer with a few curses as he searched, finally coming away with a condom and catching the look on the younger man’s face.

Axton gave him a smirk as Rhys looked up, and Rhys reached for him with a grin, the alpha laughing with pink cheeks. “Talk about making a guy self-conscious…”

Rhys snickered as he pulled him into a kiss, and Axton wrapped both arms around his back, their lips and bodies pressed together with a pleased hum as Rhys broke to smile against him.

“I'm just excited,” he said with a slight chuckle, giving the alpha a squeeze and another kiss. He ran fingers from the nape of Axton’s neck up through sandy hair, making the older man purr and peck his lips again.
“You're way too sweet, sugar,” Axton murmured, nuzzling him and stroking a thumb over heated skin. He kissed from the omega's jaw down to his neck, and Rhys gave him more room to claim more skin. As the younger man started rubbing up against him, covering himself in Axton’s scent again, it made the alpha groan. “How… how you doin’, sweetheart?”

“I'm ready for you, I'm so ready, I'm beyond ready, Axton please, inside,” he whined, grinding himself against the other man.

“Fuck, just, gimme a sec, love;” Axton murmured gruffly, pulling back to open the condom so he could finally sheath himself inside the younger man. Rhys shivered as he unabashedly watched as the bigger man rolled the condom on, body clenching in anticipation, and quick to pull him back down on top of him once it was in place. The alpha met Rhys’ lips as he trailed a hand down between them, testing the omega’s readiness with one, and then two fingers.

Rhys moaned into his mouth as a third was inserted with a little stretch that made his fingers dig into Axton’s skin, rocking his hips for more, deeper, and nearly biting Axton as the older man removed his hand to replace it with the tip of his cock.

Axton moaned hard as the heat of the younger man could be felt against his cockhead, just that small contact and the knowledge of finally getting to have the younger man enough to seriously bring his stamina and restraint into question. He wouldn’t even be embarrassed if he came before he got inside the other man at this point. Finally getting to love Rhys in his own bed was his fantasy made reality.

“Oh Axton, yes, finally, please, just, yes;” Rhys babbled, holding him close and trying to force the man deeper as the alpha shook to control his entry. Axton was gentle as he eased his way into the omega with heavy gasps, and though Rhys wanted him inside him faster, dammit, he let the other man take him nice and slow, letting himself relish in the way the alpha’s cock sank into him inch by inch, stretching him deliciously and oh how he wanted him fucking him already.

Rhys gasped and arched his back as Axton took his time-- accidentally hurting Rhys the last thing he ever wanted to do- grunting with control while Rhys writhed beneath him. Axton was going to have fingerprint bruises tomorrow if the way the younger man was grabbing him was any indication.

“That's so nice,” the omega muttered to himself, earning a husky chuckle that got Axton Rhys’ full attention. “More Ax, please.”

Rhys was scared he was going to come any second, it felt so damn good, though he’d prefer to do so while the older man was actively fucking him. The stretch of the alpha’s cock was stimulating forgotten parts of himself, lighting him up and satisfying him in ways he hadn't felt in ages. As the alpha was still slowly easing into that slickness, giving the omega plenty of time to adjust, Rhys whined out a warning as he grasped at the older man.

“A-Axton, I'm going to-- hoooorr,” Rhys grinned and lightly laughed in excited pleasure as he tried to speak, “I'm definitely going to come before you're even-- aaaaaah,” Rhys felt his body clench as the older man was finally sheathed fully inside him, and Rhys was coming between them in gasped cries resembling Axton’s name while the older man kissed his cheeks and lips.

Axton mostly groaned as Rhys’ body spasmed around him, more slickness leaking from the younger man and his scent of satisfaction and arousal both making the alpha preen on instinctive levels. He lowered his head to kiss and lick at the younger man’s neck and throat, trying and just barely succeeding in ignoring the wonderful pulsing around his cock for a second, moving back to Rhys’ lips as Rhys directed his head with a purr and eager hands.

“That's so good, Rhys. That's so so good, sweetheart,” Axton told him with deep, gruff tones of
shaky control, genuinely happy and proud the younger man had climaxed. It was good for him-- all part of the process in reality- and praising him wasn't a part of training Axton could easily turn off. Especially when he was genuinely happy for the omega.

He was especially pleased he'd been the one to cause it.

“M-more, please,” Rhys begged, kissing Axton’s cheeks and lips and nose as he squirmed, cock still hard between them and ready for another go. “I-I want… I’d like you to…”

Rhys’ cheeks were turning red at whatever request he wanted to make, even if Axton’s twitching cock was currently inside him, and the younger man was covered in his own release. Axton smiled, moving just slightly for some slight relief inside the omega. It made Rhys groan, and once he’d started minutely thrusting, he found he didn’t want to stop.

“What do you want me to do, sugar? Just name it.”

“Everything. *Again.* Just kiss me,” Rhys sighed out as Axton’s hips slowly moved against him. The omega began to mutter incomprehensible things against Axton’s lips that made the older man groan hard, and as Rhys’ body got fully used to him, he began fucking him in earnest.

The sound of the bed creaking made the pair share a few snickers, and the obscene sound of flesh on flesh was doing things for Rhys he’d forgotten he’d liked. Legs wrapped around the older man, Rhys held him to himself with moans and gasps and kisses, punctuated every now and then with a noise of surprise and pleasure as the alpha brushed against his prostate. With every thrust inside him, Rhys felt himself being brought closer to another orgasm, and every sound Axton made as he rutted inside him Rhys tried to commit to memory. That this powerhouse of an alpha was all turned on by *him,* that this sweet, sweet man was fucking into *him,* was making Rhys dizzy with want and arousal both.

Rhys could feel the way Axton’s cock began to swell just the slightest bit thicker inside him, rhythm beginning to falter, and an erotic pleasure of the knowledge the alpha’s knot was swelling made him whimper. *God* he wanted nothing more than that. The idea that he had Axton riled enough to knot almost made his cock go off right then. This was the stuff literally out of his fantasies.

Axton’s thrusts quickly became less deep, more restrained, and Rhys looked up with aroused concern, voice shaky with pleasure as the alpha seemed to be holding back from pushing that growing knot in and out of him. And he was so close to another orgasm, too. “…Ax?”

“Rhys, I...*aaah...* Sorry-- this hasn’t happened in a long time and I-- *mmm-*”

Axton’s voice shook with strained control and pleasure both as his hips met Rhys’ ass once more, the sound confusing Rhys enough to bring him a bit out of his blissful haze to touch the alpha’s face as Axton was having trouble using his words.

“I haven’t--- I’m *not doing it on purpose,*” Axton groaned out, dropping his head to Rhys’ shoulder as he shook with restraint, trying hard to get his throbbing cock under control when all he desperately wanted to do was *come.* It was an intimate thing to knot someone, and he hadn't asked for the omega’s permission-- hell, it had been a long time since that was even a *concern,* and he was swelling and pulsing and *god* he was so damn close.

“You mean your knot?” Rhys asked thickly. He got a heavy groan in reply, Axton’s whole body shaking. Rhys gave a breathy moan and pressed a hard kiss against Axton’s stubbly cheek with a lust-thick voice. “I want it.”
“Fuck,” Axton cursed as he thrust faster into the omega with relief, his increased girth making Rhys’ moans increase in frequency as the younger man grabbed at Axton’s ass in meeting the thrusts of those hips and grinding his cock between them. He came again with a shout of Axton’s name on his lips, body pulsing around the knot Axton was still working in and out of him. The alpha was quickly swelling, knot catching on Rhys’ hole until he could no longer pull out, and Axton was crying out his release with a deep groan that Rhys hoped would be seared into his memory forever.

Rhys felt so full, and so utterly, utterly satisfied as his heart beat hard against his ribs and he tried to catch his breath. He was so happy he couldn’t stop the little snickers from coming, and Axton was smiling at him quizzically after a few moments, breath still heaving, but cuddly as hell. The alpha gave his cheek a kiss and a stroke that made Rhys smile harder.

“I feel like a million bucks,” the omega informed with a laugh that the alpha echoed. “Ten million bucks.”

“Mmm, told ya so, sweetheart.”

“I don’t know how much of it’s you or the bond gone,” Rhys added with a chuckle and a grin as he rubbed hands down Axton’s muscular back, delicious in post-coital bliss, “but I just… I feel so good. So damn good, Ax.”

Axton felt a tightness in his chest at those words, and pressed another kiss to the younger man’s lips as he hunkered down atop him, uncaring of the mess between them. It was evidence that he’d gotten the other man off. Him. No way he was gonna do anything about that right now.

“Mm you've got a huge knot.” Axton groaned and Rhys felt his cock pulse inside him. The omega pressed his lips against Axton’s cheek with a fond smile. “Big just like the rest of you.”

“Geez honey, take pity,” Axton moaned.

“Sorry,” Rhys teased in a voice that wasn’t at all repentant. He angled his head for the alpha’s lips again, kissing him and moving him to really press every inch of Axton’s face in adoring kisses. “I've just wanted this for so long… Don't laugh,” Rhys chuckled at Axton’s sound of amusement.

“I'm not laughing at you sugar, just… ditto.”

“‘Ditto’?” Rhys said with an outraged laugh. “Nah-uh, you're not getting away with that.” Rhys squirmed beneath him, receiving a moan for his movements, trying to milk the alpha for more words of praise and desire, but Axton just grinned at him in a way-too-satisfied manner while the omega continued to pester him with a laugh.

God but Axton loved Rhys. He legitimately loved this smart, strong little omega. He loved him to the moon and back.

He wrapped his arms under the younger man and held him tight, scared this was all some wonderful, cruel dream, and that Rhys would vanish like so much starlight in the dawn.

As Rhys embraced the alpha back, still laughing and telling him that being cuddly and wonderful wasn’t going to get him off the hook, Axton just grinned and buried his face into the omega’s neck. He could be content in the knowledge that the younger man was currently pinned beneath him in ways that even dreams wouldn’t dare to snatch from his grasp, and with the way Rhys clung to him, it was clear that the younger man wasn’t going anywhere, come hell or high water.
One more chapter to go, totally unwritten, but we'll get there. Hope you're all having fun xD I'll give ya'll some time to process things AHAHA but please leave me a nice comment? :D ...real talk, it really hurts my feelings to put hours of work into something only to get less than ten words comments that took literally 5 seconds to type out :( Writing comments can be hard, but weaving stories together is harder D:

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Chapter 13

Well... it's been 9 months... ya'll still here? D: ahaahaha god it's been a fuck of a year for me but hell, finally got an update xD

I'm really really sorry for the time since my last update, but know that I never abandon work! You guys have left some of the best comments I've ever gotten on any fic and I did ya dirty by waiting so long between updates, but I can't control the bullshit in life, and it just made it hard to get to this :X The good news is, it's been so long between updates that i'm distanced enough to just write it and the end is in sight :D This was supposed to be the last chapter, but we needed a between to savor and enjoy them finally together (this chapter), some drama to wrap things up (next chapter) and a sort of epilogue of sorts (the last and probably very short chapter). I've got it all in sight and the outline is there.

This fic should be done by January :) I'll attempt to get another update out this month, and again, thank you for the AMAZING comments. This is a rarepair and I feel truly blessed to have gotten such awesome feedback. More rhaxton will be in the works from me, stay tuned once this fic is done HAHA :D

Rhys lay cuddled in Axton’s arms just listening to the other man’s strong heart beat and thinking how goddamn lucky he was.

He was satisfied, happier than he could remember being in recent memory, and still shocked as all hell that in the span of one morning his whole world had been turned upside down.

His bond to Jack was dead, Axton just made love to him, and he felt more safe, secure, and whole than he had in months. Things couldn’t have shifted more dramatically if he’d been named President of Atlas, and even then, it was a close second to how he felt right now.

Rhys snickered to himself, not for the first time since they’d been laying sated together. Axton inclined his head toward him with a questioning smirk, and Rhys smiled. "...I can't believe I'm fixed."

The big alpha pressed a kiss to his head and gave him a squeeze with the arm around his waist. “Nothing broken about you in the first place, Rhys.”

The omega smiled wider and rested his chin on Axton’s shoulder to grin at him. “You know what I mean. I can't believe this is done. I feel... God it's so different, Ax.”

The smile on the alpha’s face quirked to the side. “Told you you were strong enough, darlin’.”

“Don't act like you didn't play a major part in this, big guy,” Rhys purred, fingers kneading where he had a hand at the base of Axton’s neck.

It made the bigger man laugh, putting on a very serious tone in amusement with furrowed brows,
though he couldn’t temper his smile. “Just doing my duty to make the company proud, sir.”

Rhys laughed until tears were in his eyes, and then gave Axton a low-burning look. “How d’you feel about doing some more duty?” he purred, lifting himself up halfway on top of the alpha.

Axton gave a husky chuckle as he gazed fondly at the omega waggling his brows at him. He was still a little floored that Rhys had allowed him to love him, and wanted him *again*. Even if this was only a fleeting thing, he was grateful as hell for the privilege. Rhys was a right sweetheart of an omega. He pressed a kiss to his chin. “Any day of the week, darlin’.” He stretched and Rhys chose to take advantage of the moment to hunker down completely on the alpha’s torso. Axton relaxed and nuzzled a kiss to his crown as he stroked his back. “I’m proud of you, you know?”

“Mm.”

“I really mean that,” he said a bit softer as he pet him. “No omega has ever suffered through broken bond syndrome nearly as long as you had to. I’m sorry you had to.”

Rhys gave him a lopsided grin. “Well, if I knew it was going to end up like *this*, I think I could’ve held out even longer, big guy,” he lightly joked as Axton smirked. Rhys hummed as he rubbed his back; big strong hands firm but gentle on his skin. He gave a smirk as Axton’s hand came to rest on his ass, but didn’t hurry him for more. “What did you think did it? Did it just like, go? Do they do that?”

Axton shrugged. “More or less, probably. It was gettin’ weaker and weaker. I’m actually surprised what with that knothead stalking you…” Axton’s voice was regretful with a spike of anger for the Hyperion alpha.

“It’s okay,” Rhys said to the harassment Axton still wished he could have stopped. He pet the bigger man as if it was *him* who needed reassurance. “I’m all good *now*, Ax. Better than good, even.” He flexed an ass cheek under Axton’s hand, making the older man chuckle. “Uh, how *did* the other omegas’ bonds break? While they were asleep like me?”

Axton considered all the omegas he’d help break a bond. Some had slept through the event, yeah. “No, not all. I mean, it's happened. Some notice it right away, others it takes them a minute. Some wake up like you and don't realize it until later.”

Rhys was stroking Axton’s throat pensively with his thumb, watching the movement of the skin as Axton spoke. “And theirs just… went, huh?” Axton hummed in agreement. Rhys huffed, muttering a little absentmindedly to himself as he focused on the other man’s pulse jumping evenly under his thumb. “…I heard bonds can also break if you’re interested in someone else…”

Axton chose that moment to meet his eyes, and Rhys’ cheeks went so totally pink in realization of what he’d said that the grin on the man's face was nearly blinding. Axton gave his asscheek a fond squeeze. “You tryin’ to tell me somethin’ there, sweetheart?”

“Don’t tease,” Rhys said with a shy smile, not denying it, but looking away and hand moving to Axton’s strong chest where he could feel the quickened beat of his heart. “Not that… I don't wanna make anything weird, but like… I guess I am...?” He couldn't say it. His face was on fire, he was naked in bed next to the other man, half-hard with the big alpha’s big hand on his ass, and he couldn't tell him he *liked* him. How lame was that?

“Well if that’s the case, it’s mutual, darlin’,” Axton murmured, pulling the omega close and really cuddling and kissing him. His heart was beating hard in his chest, and he knew Rhys could probably hear it if not *feel* it, but he didn't care. They were kind of well past the lines of professional-- and
indeed, Rhys’ bond was broken, so his job was done- so admitting his little crush was pretty much okay in his book. And if Rhys actually liked him back? Then hot-fuckin’-damn.

Rhys could feel the way his own heart sped up at that simple statement, and he could hear Axton’s own trying to escape his ribs. He liked him back? Like-liked him? He looked up to meet Axton’s eyes, a bright, fond smile on his own face as his stomach did somersaults. “So like, if I wanted to buy you coffee some time…?”

Axton laughed and it shook them in the bed. “With a side of Better than Sex cake?” Rhys snorted and the alpha pressed a laughing kiss to his cheek. The seriousness was broken through, tone more playful. “How does the cake stack up, sweetheart?” He gave the younger man a squeeze.

Rhys put on an exaggeratedly-serious expression, utterly ignoring that Axton was probably more than aware of his hardening cock against his thigh, and the big alpha wasn’t even doing anything to him yet. “You’re good Ax, but that cake earned its title.” The way Axton’s face scrunched up in laughter warmed Rhys, and he cuddled up into the hug given for the gentle teasing.

“Save judgment until you’ve had all the skills of the certificate, darlin’.,” He returned the kiss Rhys pressed to his lips, and groaned a little as the omega ground himself against his thigh. “…I’ll do you one better than a slice of cake, sweetheart. How’s that sound?”

Rhys dragged his hands up Axton’s chest to hold his grinning face between his hands. “Can I have you for dessert instead?”

“Heh, count on it, sugar.”

Rhys grinned into the kiss he tugged the other man into, sighing and whimpering slightly as he felt Axton’s tongue against his own, and slick begin to leak out of him once again. He sighed as they broke, looking into Axton’s dilated eyes. He wanted him. He wanted him again and again and again if he had any say in the matter. “…really though, I totally believe you have a certificate in sex now, by the way. Without a doubt.”

Axton chuckled, cheeks blushing just a bit at the praise. “You haven’t had even the half of it darlin’. You’re just such a damn sweetheart, I only gave ya a little sample.”

A needy noise left Rhys unbidden at the idea. Axton was a great kisser, and an even better lover, but if that was him going easy on him, then Rhys was eager to see what else he might do. “Axton…” He ground himself against the older man, feeling Axton’s own length against his thigh as he moved more atop the other man. The alpha wasn’t immune to Rhys any more than the omega was to him. Rhys gave a needy sigh as he kissed at the alpha’s chest. “Axton…”

“Mm… want some more, sweetheart?” Axton asked just a little smugly as he nuzzled the younger man, and Rhys gave a husky chuckle.

“Yes please,” Rhys said with a laugh.

“Mmm… then on your belly for me, darlin’.”

Rhys was only too quick to comply, rolling off him and over, and striking a pose that made the alpha laugh.

“You’re so damn cute, Rhys. You have no idea.”

“Think so, huh?” Rhys asked with a knowing grin as Axton was getting to his knees and moving
down the end of the bed. He appreciated the view of the other man’s naked flesh, anticipation going up his spine.

“Hell yeah.” Axton’s hands closed around Rhys’ ankles, and the younger man inhaled sharply as he pushed them up his calves, over the sensitive backs of his knees, to cup the sides of the omega’s ass. Rhys hummed in pleasure as Axton kneaded the flesh appreciatively before moving further up.

Axton kissed up his spine, hands caressing his sides and inhaling the sweet scent of the omega. Rhys made a little moan as Axton was more or less laying completely over him, the weight of his cock resting on the cleft of his ass and the hair on his chest tickling the omega’s skin. Rhys turned his head so Axton could kiss his lips, and then the older man returned to kissing his skin, his shoulder, his back. It was heaven, and he was ready to take things to cloud nine.

“...Ax?”

“What is it, love?”

His voice was a husky growl that made Rhys’ belly do flip flops in addition to the acrobatics already done for what he was about to request. “...would you touch me, please?”

“Oh sweetheart, I’ve got ya,” Axton promised, kissing his shoulder as he dragged a hand down towards his slick hole. Rhys’ quick intake of breath and light little laugh made the alpha smirk.

“Heh, I-I meant....” Rhys inclined his head to offer up his neck to the older man, looking back after a moment’s pause with a red, aroused expression to make sure Axton got his meaning.

Axton groaned in a near painful delight as he realized what it was Rhys wanted. He redoubled his efforts further north and dragged his nose carefully over the omega's bonding gland, kissing on the hot skin while Rhys shivered and moaned, pressing his ass more fully into Axton’s groin.

“Fuck, Rhys,”

His most intimate spot being lavved over by the alpha’s tongue made Axton go rock hard, a tightness in his chest at the level of trust-- something only granted to a serious lover- that was being allowed to him.

Rhys trusted him fully. Trusted him not to bite. Trusted him to a very vulnerable place where he could do irreparable change or damage. Trusted him not to hurt him. Axton wanted nothing more than to treat Rhys like a damn prince, treat him with as much reverence as was befitting the level of trust being given to him. He wished he knew a way to put into exact words just how damn much he cared about him, loved him.

The way he laved over the sensitive skin was a good starting point. The omega desperately moaning the alpha's name and writhing beneath him was better than any drug.

“A-Axton that's so-- nmmnggh.... That's soooo nice... oh... Ax...”

Axton placed gentle, sucking kisses on his skin, a hand at the omega’s waist stroking and kneading in gentle circles. He could feel Rhys’ hips trying to grind into the bed, and the knowledge that he had him so turned on already, as well as loving on the most delicate spot on the younger man, made Axton’s cock jump between them.

“...Rhys.... Shit yeah darlin’.” He gently scraped his teeth over the skin-- just for tactile difference, just to tease- and Rhys made a strangled noise of pleasure as his hips jolted into the mattress beneath them. The husky growl of his voice was almost a purr. “You like that you sweet thing?”
Rhys was panting, voice a bubbly mixture of happiness and sheer dripping want. “Heh... Ax... If you do that again, I'm gonna wreck the sheets...” he laughed, ass pressing back into the older man.

“Sheets are already halfway there,” he growled out a laugh, pressing another kiss to Rhys’ shoulder. “What do you want, love?”

“You,” Rhys sighed out, arching his back and trying to reach around behind him to grab the older man with his elbow in the sheets. His palm met Axton’s face, and the alpha rubbed his cheek into the omega’s hand. It made Rhys’ heart skip a beat at the sweetness, and his cock flex beneath him. “...Inside me, sooner than later.”

The laugh that got was expected, but the cherry on top was the way Axton ground himself against Rhys’ ass at those words. He was completely hard against him, deliciously hot and silken, and Rhys pushed back against the length to urge him on. The omega chuckled, and Axton pet down his back once more.

“I love it when you're bossy.”

“I think I’m getting the idea,” Rhys laughed, trying to follow after Axton’s cock with his ass as the older man moved to sit back on his calves over Rhys’ outstretched legs.

Axton wanted to play with him some more, really give him a proper intro to the tricks and teases he knew, but the way Rhys writhed against the mattress, and the heat and slickness of him.... Rhys wasn't going to last long through a single fucking at all. Especially not if he kept rutting against the mattress like he was. Axton wondered just how many orgasms he’d be able to wrench out of the younger man in a single day.

Axton’s hands slightly spread the cheeks of Rhys’ ass as he kneaded the flesh. It got pleased hums and purrs from the other man, hitched gasps as his thumbs inched closer to the omega’s hole. As he spread him proper before him, a sweet little whine left Rhys, accompanied by a pleased growl from Axton as he saw just how aroused the omega was.

“...You're so slick, sweetheart...”

Rhys chuckled and threw an almost impatient look behind him. “Tell me about it.”

Axton laughed and bent to kiss his lips once before moving back to massage at his ass again. He quickly rolled another condom on, then brought his attention right back to that pretty backside. He dipped his thumbs low, low under his ass and near inner thighs to ghost his touch just over Rhys’ balls. The noise it got was worth it, and as he dragged a thumb up and over teasingly, he circled that slick hole before pressing a thumb in. Rhys moaned as pushed back for more.

“A-Axton, seriously.” Rhys laughed unsteadily, breathing heavy already as the other man toyed with him. “Don't tease me.”

“Oh no?” He pressed his thumb in a little deeper, his cock protesting impatiently as Rhys’ body squeezed him, and the alpha chuckled. “Even though you love it?”

Rhys snorted, looking behind himself to catch the older man’s eye. The look there made a bolt of want go through him. “I’d rather come with you inside me, but that's not- not gonna happen at this rate,” he chuckled.

“I hear ya loud and clear, love.” He removed his thumb-- and got a petulant noise for it that made him smirk- only to take his cock in hand and drag it teasingly from Rhys’ balls to above that slick hole. “Better be careful, don't want you going off too soon again.”
“You ass,” Rhys moaned out as Axton slowly, slowly pushed in just his cockhead. He wanted to laugh and cry and beg and mostly just dig his teeth into the older man as Axton teased him further with the slowness in which he pushed his cock inside. He instead decided to give the bedsheets a deathgrip with both hands. “This is… aaahh… This is so good it's bad…”

“Heh… You askin’ me to slam it on home?”

Rhys snorted. “You do that and I'm definitely, definitely going to-- ooooh Axton!”

The older man didn't slam himself inside that slick heat like he'd suggested, but he did move more swiftly to fully sheath himself in Rhys’ body. The omega was still opened up, just as slick as before, and the difference between the slowness he'd been moving and the quickness of that slide was tangling Rhys’ senses up in delicious knots. Rhys was moaning and pressing back into the older man for more as Axton kissed just shy of his neck.

“A-Axton will you-- I'm so close I'm so close--”

“...Tell me what you need, honey…”

Rhys angled his head, and Axton immediately knew what to do. He was already thrusting, short, measured strokes, and Rhys was almost shaking beneath him before Axton began kissing and sucking and licking on that spot on the back of his neck. With his lips on that sensitive area and the alpha’s cock sliding in and out of his body, Rhys was jerking with strangled shouts as he was coming, fists balled in the sheets as white stars exploded behind his eyes and he existed only in the spots Axton was touching him.

The alpha was groaning as he thrust through the tremors in the omega, and Rhys was grunting and purring as he felt Axton’s big hands on him, the wet slide of the older man’s cock in and out of him. The sounds and reactions Rhys gave was growing the older man’s ego out of proportion if he was being honest; that he could make such an absolute treasure like Rhys go to pieces was too much for any man.

He moaned as Rhys’ body squeezed him. He wasn’t quite as wound up as he'd gotten the younger man, but he was quickly getting there. Rhys’ body was heaven. And Rhys definitely wasn't out for the count even if he'd already come.

“Oooh Axton… more please...”

The way Rhys pushed back into him to meet his thrusts, the look of lazy pleasure on his face as he looked behind himself to meet Axton’s eyes, god it was going to undo the older man.

Axton leaned over again to kiss his lips, cock flexing inside the younger man with need when the tip of Rhys’ tongue touched his own. His groaned as they broke their kiss.

“Oh sweetheart...”

“Mmm… Where's my nice fat knot?”

He was doing it on purpose, Axton knew, the demanding purr in his voice not fooling anyone. Rhys clenched down on him and it made Axton’s voice stutter his pleasure and he gripped Rhys’ thighs hard. Rhys was trying to rile him up, make him knot him, and Axton had to say it was working.

“'M gonna knot you so good, love, make you feel so good…”

Axton’s voice was more growl than anything, and it sent pleased little thrills through Rhys as he
could feel the smoky coil of arousal building again. Surely he couldn't come again so soon. Surely. But as Axton pressed him harder into the bed, the angle shifted and his cock was nudging that delicious bundle of nerves inside him with every other stroke. Rhys was overstimulated with the pleasure of it all.

“Fuck, Axton--”

“That's right… ahh… That's right sweetheart. Mmm… bet- heh- bet we can get another one…”

His thrusts quickened, and Rhys was certain his eyes were gonna roll into the back of his head in pleasure and never come back out. He was getting hard again, Axton’s balls slapping against his flesh that only increased his pleasure, and as the older man's thrusts started to become erratic-- the thick pull of his cock becoming even thicker-- Axton chose that moment to bite his shoulder.

Rhys positively shrieked in pleasure, overwhelmed between the body on top of him and the mattress beneath him as a second orgasm took him by surprise. Axton’s tongue was lavving over the bite and Rhys was jerking beneath him as Axton gave another two thrusts before grinding himself hard against Rhys’ ass, moaning out as he came.

His knot was snug, his breathing was heavy, and his heart threatened to break clean out of his chest. And Axton pressed kisses and scented along the other man’s skin as Rhys laid there beneath him, more puddle than man, chuckling and snickering in absolute bliss.


Rhys found himself to be made of goo and snickers only as he laid there blissed out of his goddamn mind. Axton's voice was a gentle thing in his head and his kisses were sweet against his overheated skin. Maybe he’d died, because no one had a right to feel so damn good. And he had to think a moment to gather his sentences. “That… was the best sex I've ever had. Ever.”

Axton chuckled as Rhys laid there beneath him, cheek pressed into the sheets as he caught his breath. Axton smoothed a large palm up and down Rhys’ side, kissing the younger man’s skin with fondness. “You're a right sweetheart… makes a guy wanna do his best, honey.”

“...I don't think you understand me…” Rhys said, still in a happy daze, and voice reflective of it. “The best, Axton. With a capital T…” he purred, rubbing his face into the sheets.

“You tryin’ to give me a big head, babe?”

“...you've already got one.” His body clenched over Axton’s knot and the alpha let loose a quick flurry of curses. It made Rhys chuckle. “…you're hot when you talk dirty.”

Axton brought his hand over one of Rhys’ to entwine their fingers. He smirked to himself, so self-pleased and satisfied and goddamn in love with the younger man he almost couldn't stand it. He kissed Rhys’ cheek. “Cursin’ a blue streak ain’t dirty talk, sweetheart… But I can show you those skills sometime, too.” He pressed kisses into Rhys’ skin as he continued to love on him.

“Jesus, bet you could kill a man with those skills.”

“What a hell of a way to go though, eh?”

They snickered together as they lay there. It was the best Rhys had felt in ages, and Axton's affectionate touches and pleased, husky little chuckles really cinched it. The man was more responsible for his sudden turnaround than he ever wanted to admit. “If everyone thought this was
part of the treatment, they'd give you the majority of the budget at Atlas, Ax. Like, I'm just saying. All this?” he tapped his fingers in Axton’s own hand, “Magic.”

The alpha snorted. “This is a house specialty, only for those I especially like.” He nuzzled Rhys close, closing his eyes and inhaling his scent. The brightness to Rhys’ smell, the warmth of his skin against Axton’s own, this had to be heaven. It was like night and day, the little light notes to Rhys’ personal scent. Oh, he still smelled like himself, but it was more defined. Untainted. He laid heavily upon the younger man as Rhys snickered.

“Axton….”

The sweetness in Rhys’ voice had Axton working his arms up under the happily-limp omega to properly embrace him from above. “You're such a sweetheart, Rhys…”

“Heh... You're the sweetie, Ax…”

Axton felt like he'd either burst or implode with the feelings running through him. He chuckled as Rhys pressed up into him.

“And as much as I love it, you're heavy.”

The alpha burst out laughing, the sound hitched by moans as tremors and Rhys’ body tugged at his knot. “Okay darlin’, let's fix that.”

They carefully moved to be situated on their sides, chuckling a little at the state of the sheets, and maneuvering until they were comfortable ‘til the time his knot would go down.

“That better, sweetheart?”

“Mm hmmm.” Rhys held the arms Axton had around him as the alpha spooned him, and he relished in the little kisses Axton peppered his skin with. “You're the best hugger, too.”

“Heh, now that is all natural,” Axton said with a laugh.

Rhys looked behind him with a raised brow and smile. “No certificate?”

“No certificate.”

“Excellent,” Rhys said with a laugh, enjoying the fit of the big alpha’s body against his, and the pleasure of just laying together in post-coital bliss. “Soooo…. we don't have to tell work that my bond broke today, right?” Rhys said with a devious little smile.

“What, not in a hurry to get back to the office?”

Rhys grinned over his shoulder. “Actually, I am, but, I mean, if you're okay with it, I think it would just be fun to hang out and stuff today. I’ll make up for it by working extra hard tomorrow. Promise.”

At his pink cheeks, Axton leaned to touch their noses together with a fond look. “That sounds like the best idea ever.”

“And more making out and stuff and-- I mean-- you'reveryattractiveAxton.”

He laughed as Rhys ran his words together, a pleased little growl in his throat as he kissed up the younger man’s neck and rewrapped his arms around him to hold him even closer. “I think maybe we should change these sheets first… and have some breakfast… Then more making out and fun stuff.”
Rhys snickered as he plucked up an edge of the alpha’s sheets with a smile. “Yeeehah these sheets? Definitely seen better days. What a mess….” he laughed.

“Not in my experience,” Axton said with a grin before dragging his nose over Rhys’ skin again. “You’re the sweetest little thing ever to crawl into this bed. Best damn days these sheets have ever had, sugar.”

Rhys rolled his eyes playfully, ready to tease. “Well to be fair, I was already that way before we had sex, Axton.”

The alpha laughed hard before gathering him even closer in his arms for a hearty squeeze. Rhys had such a smart mouth on him, and Axton loved it.

“Okay… laundry, breakfast, and a shower I think.”

“In that order?” Rhys asked cheekily.

“Mm… I’d be willing to leave breakfast for last iiiif you’d like to join me in the shower?”

Rhys’ brows shot up in excitement, and Axton groaned as he felt him pulse around him once more. He only hoped a little bit that the omega would have some mercy on him in the shower.

Overall, it was probably one of the top ten best mornings of his entire damn life.

--

“Watch this.”

Axton was washing up their dishes from lunch while Rhys fiddled around with his prototype. The glove was sitting on the counter, not on Rhys’ hand, and the omega was typing away as everything was hooked up to his computer.

After a few final presses of keys, the glove twitched before clenching into a fist all on its own. It made the alpha jump.

“Friggin’ hell-”

“Cool, right?”

The smug smirk on Rhys’ face could’ve melted ice and boiled water. Axton was floored, and the other man was pleased as punch with the reaction. If Axton was this impressed, he couldn’t wait until the unveiling at the tech expo. Atlas stock was going to rise like crazy, he was certain.

“Is that-- It looked like there was a hand in there…”

“Well, realism is what I’m going for… If it’s gonna eventually replace an actual hand. The responsiveness to stimulus and touch is more important than the metal skeleton it’ll eventually go on.”

The alpha shivered. Impressed didn’t even cut it. “You’re like an evil genius. Just uh, minus the evil,” he said with a grin.

“Can you almost taste your personal coffee maker?” That got a deep belt of laughter from the alpha, and Rhys ran the lighting protocol he’d written in for the little diodes lining the piece. “I’m not joking, I’m buying a ton of stock before I show this baby off… Buy you a fancy new mister coffee too.”
Axton snorted with a look at his poor abused machine. The pot was half-empty with what Rhys had already drank this morning. To be fair, though, he had tired the other man out. The thought made something primal in him incredibly, incredibly satisfied. “Yeah… He’s been a tough little soldier but he’s only got so many more fixes in him,” he said with a smile.

Rhys powered everything down and gave Axton a look that succeeded in bringing a wonderful shade of pink to the alpha’s cheeks. They both snickered a moment, and Axton came around the counter to wrap arms around the younger man.

“What do you say I buy you a slice of cake since we haven't had dessert?”

Rhys gave him a look of contemplation. “Wait, do you actually wanna go down to Lee’s, or did you have something more fun in mind?” At Axton’s amused snort, Rhys’ own cheeks went pink.

“How about after the cake, I treat ya reeeeal nice, sweetheart?”

Rhys’ belly did a whole array of acrobatics as Axton touched his forehead to Rhys’ own. His heart had sped up and damn he got excited over the alpha easily. “Yes please… just, don’t say stuff like that when we’re out or you’ll never be able to go back there again,” Rhys said with a laugh. “Or at least, I won’t.”

Axton took half a step back to aim an amused grin down at Rhys’ crotch between them before kissing Rhys and hugging him close. “I don’t know… My reputation might go up a few notches if it’s a sweet thing like you.” He pressed another kiss to Rhys’ hot cheek before letting him go to grab his keys. “You want some now?” he asked as he spun the key ring on his finger, a playful, wicked sort of grin on his face.

“If I thought you were doing this on purpose, I’d have a few words for that…”

“As if you don't like it….”

Rhys bit his lower lip in trying to hide his grin, but hopped off his stool and linked his arm in Axton’s own. “I want some to take home, too. For a snack. After.”

“Goddamn, honey,” Axton laughed. “I don’t know if cake like that should be eaten after the act…”

“Well,” Rhys told him with a grin, “let’s find out.”

They sat together at Lee’s under the tree out back in the same manner Rhys had fantasized about before-- before everything went to hell that time.

He was having fun though, and thoughts of Jack were far from his mind, safe with Axton under the wary eyes of the thoughtful barista who’d saved his stuff before.

“Rhys… Can I ask ya something serious?”

He felt heat come to his face, but there was nothing for it. “…yeah…?”

“Look… I’m not good at this… but, uh, I like ya, darlin’. I really do.”

Rhys offered a light snort to deescalate the seriousness of things. “No kidding? The best sex I’ve ever had wasn't just a big show, huh?”

It was Axton’s turn to snort, his face properly red with pleasure and amusement. He gazed off into
the tree above them before his toothy grin tempered down to an easy smile, and then looked back at the other man. “Could I... possibly take ya on a proper date? Whenever, uh, whenever’s good?”

“Oooh like dinner and a movie?”

“Something like that,” Axton agreed with a nod.

“How about tonight? You cook, I'll choose the movie.” Rhys had a playful grin on his face, knowing that wasn’t exactly how Axton had meant, and the alpha rolled his eyes but grabbed Rhys’ hand in his anyways.

“That's not what I meant and you know it, but yeah, I’d like that too.” He kissed Rhys’ knuckles through a smile and the omega’s face quickly cycled through several emotions as he gripped Axton’s hand.

“Ax I told you not in public.”

“Am I making you... uncomfortable?” he asked with a wicked smirk.

Yes, actually, his pants were getting just a tad tighter, and he really liked this place. Didn't wanna permanently scar any of the baristas’ eyes. He snorted. “Jokes on you. If we can't leave, then I'm just ordering more cake and then I'll get fat and that's gonna be on you, big guy.”

Axton’s smile tugged at the scar on his chin, he was grinning so wide. “I'd like you regardless of what you look like, sweetheart.”

Rhys leaned in close, lowering his voice. “Ax, you're either gonna make me hard or make me cry, so knock it off,” he said with a happy smile as he gave the older man’s hand a squeeze. Axton placed a gentle kiss on his cheek and patted his hand, and changed the subject to more mundane matters; that his car was due for an oil change soon, if they thought the cottage cheese in the fridge was growing its own sentience, and how the weather was getting colder.

“We’re gonna have to resort to cuddling if the heat goes out again,” the alpha mentioned as they gathered up their stuff to leave. He held Rhys’ to-go slice of Better than Sex cake while the omega got up from the bench with a smirk and looped his arm through Axton’s own. “What an inconvenience that’ll be, right?”

Rhys snorted, pressing a kiss to the other man’s stubbly cheek. “So inconvenient, Ax. I mean, I don’t know how you expect me to live like that,” Rhys said with a dramatic roll of his eyes while the alpha chuckled.

They left the shop and went back to the apartment, putting away the slice of cake for later, and cuddled up on the couch together to watch a movie. That of course devolved into stripping one another and making love on the couch, and the movie ended up going largely ignored as the pair laid together, breath caught and warm and cuddled under a blanket.

Rhys never wanted this to end, giddy as hell and thinking for the first time in his life, things were turning out right. Rhys snuggled up against Axton, both cuddling one another in post coital bliss. Axton’s knot was big and snug in the omega, the alpha sucking light kisses onto the other man's shoulder as Rhys lazily worried the skin of Axton’s neck with his teeth.

Rhys was deliciously exhausted and sore from riding the other man's cock. His legs felt like jelly and his whole body was mush as he laid against Axton’s chest. He was practically purring he was so satisfied with himself. And Axton’s self-pleased hum only made Rhys smile, letting him know the feeling was more than mutual.
“I liked that,” Axton’s post-sex gravelly-tones purred. He stroked a big hand down Rhys’ back, eventually settling around his waist to keep him close.

“Me too.” Rhys was quiet a moment, giving the bigger man a wicked little smirk. “You know, I've been dying to do that.”

Axton snorted with disbelief. “What?”

“Yeah,” Rhys affirmed unrepentantly, a smirk on his face as he pulled back enough to meet Axton’s gaze. “You're easy on the eyes, you're strong and kind and you're just a big, perfect alpha.” He rubbed his hands over the warm skin of Axton’s shoulders, the other man blushing at the praise and admission. “I've been wondering what it would be like to ride you for ages.” Axton groaned at such easily-shared sentiment, his cock twitching inside Rhys which made the omega snicker. “I just didn't want to make anything awkward… I mean… You’ve been taking really good care of me.” Rhys snickered. “Though this definitely goes beyond the call of duty, heh heh.”

Axton laughed and kissed his cheek, tone joking. “Glad at least one of us was being professional. Though I won’t lie… Best damn job I’ve ever taken, Rhys.”

The omega snorted with amusement, but his smile tempered a little in thought. “Axton, I—” Rhys started, sitting up as much as he could to really look at the other man. His face went just the slightest bit red, about as close as he was going to get to saying how he really felt; how seeing Axton made him so happy; how the alpha brightened up a room; that he was so gentle and kind and especially funny when he was being an ass on purpose, and that Rhys looked forward to seeing him when he was just by himself.

Instead, Rhys was only able to get out the most basic of words. “I don’t know about the future, but I— Even if it’s just screwing around, I like being around you.”

It was way too soon to be making declarations to the other man, but damn if he was having trouble keeping it all inside. He was practically bursting at the seams with fondness for the alpha, and he just wanted to be a part of his life so very very badly.

It worried him, of course, in ways that he didn’t think he’d ever be able to turn off again. He’d rushed into the thing with Jack, and here he was doing it again.

But Axton wasn’t Jack. About as far from it as one could get. The sandy-haired alpha was kind and gentle, considerate almost to a fault, and so sweet it almost made Rhys hurt. Hell, Rhys had been with Jack for even less time than he’d known Axton. Maybe he’d learned from the experience in his cautiousness, but looking at the handsome man he was sitting on, maybe he hadn’t.

But no. Again, Axton was not Jack. The training, the thoughtfulness, the way he’d opened up his home and his life to him beyond the call of duty… No. It was okay, he told himself, to feel the way he did. And unlike Jack, Rhys instinctively knew Axton wouldn’t cause him any harm.

Axton was blushing from his cheeks down his chest and probably also where Rhys’ body was sitting on him. The words the other man had said were exactly what Axton wanted to hear; he felt exactly the same, but didn’t want to pressure the other man, especially with his freshly-broken bond.

He was here for it though, whatever Rhys might want, and the fact that they both seemed to be on the same page both excited and terrified the alpha with anticipation for the future. Yeah, it was fast as hell, but it was something. It was hope.

“Rhys, I-- I’m the same as you,” Axton said, voice cracking and embarrassed of the fact as he
cleared his throat. Rhys’ eyes were on him, and he chuckled a little shyly. Silly, he knew, when his knot was currently tying them together, but he wanted whatever Rhys would give him, and that they were both on the same page-- Well, it was intimidating and exciting. “Don’t wanna force ya into nothin’, or push myself on ya, but… yeah. I really like being around you too. It’s uh… it’s kind of the highlight of my day, even if we’re just sittin’ doing nothin’.”

Rhys’ body clenched around his cock, and Axton’s eyelids fluttered a moment in pleasure while the omega looked down at him, biting his lips mischievously as he rubbed a hand across Axton’s chest. “Even sitting, huh? Like right now?”

“Geez, Rhys…”

Rhys laughed at Axton’s pleasure-deep tone. His own tone tempered down to something more serious, but he smile softly even as his heart was threatening to beat out of his chest. “Really though, yeah. I-I feel the same way. Let’s just… I don’t know… Have fun and see where things take us?” he proposed optimistically, and laughed as Axton’s arms wrapped back around him to bring him down into a hug.

“I can do that. More than do that,” Axton practically purred as he nuzzled the other man, bringing a hand up to run fingers through the back of Rhys’ hair and keep him close. He didn’t have anything else he could say-- oh he had things he wanted to, but it was far too soon for that, and it wasn’t fair to the recovering omega.

Hope though, Axton had in abundance. And optimism in the future? He had that in spades.

But regardless of how the pair felt for one another, and how sweet the kisses and warm the intentions, they couldn’t control the future, and little did they know that this was only the calm before the storm.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter wasn't longer. I felt it was done and done enough to not fall into my same... uh, pitfalls that I do in holding off to write more content only to result in long delays in getting work up xD Taking no chances, getting this sucker up! haha! Again, thank you very much for all the comments you’ve all left. This is a rarepair, and I think we all feel that, and I just really really appreciate the extra effort ya'll have always given in commenting on this fic T_T Sure doesn't feel like a rarepair with you guys here :) You're perfect and awesome and i appreciate the shit out of you.

Most of the drama and nonsense I was talking about for the next chapter is more or less written already, but it needs to be edited and second- and third-drafted and stuff. But what I'm saying is, we're about done. This story should be finished and complete by some time in January (realistically) so we're in the home stretch now!

my tumblr | my fic masterlist archive
(Just an FYI: you'll need to be logged in to tumblr for my blog to show up since it's marked explicit :D I'll get pillowfort info up soon and re-update all cross-platform links to stuff after I get my registration link)

Please leave kudos and a comment if you enjoyed! ao3 FAQ: Can I post comments anonymously, or if I don’t have an Archive account?
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I really really appreciate how long you've all stuck with me through creative hiatuses and the long, long runtime of this fic. This has been my first ever rhys/axton fic, and i have a better idea of how to write axton and their interactions, and as we quickly approach the close, i'm excited to write more of the pairing in the future. :D I super SUPER appreciate all the fabulous comments and insights, notes that let me know i've hit the mark on stuff (or not, haha) and every little encouragement. It all means the world, and has kept me going through both the good and bad times :D <3

There will be things herein that make you very happy (if i did my job right haha). Enjoy it while you can >:3 MWAHAHA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One day of keeping his recovery secret had multiplied into several, and Rhys was taking full advantage of enjoying his alone time with Axton.

The alpha still had to check in with work, though, and Rhys did work on his own projects and emailed questions from his team, but those were the in-between times of cuddling and kissing and loving on each other.

The omega wasn’t sure if the breaking of his bond had revitalized him, or it was just Axton, but he found it very hard indeed to keep his hands off the other man. And of course, Axton was anything if not enthusiastic about Rhys himself.

Rhys snickered as they lay together in the alpha’s bed, the omega suddenly chuckling after having just taken Axton’s knot. Axton met his eyes with a lazy smirk and amused tone, waiting to be let in on what was so funny.

“It’s just that- It's like they’re paying us to have sex,” Rhys snickered wickedly, Axton’s own satisfied chuckles joining him as Rhys was giddy at the thought. He looked at the bedroom clock for elaboration and grinned at Axton’s face. “We’re still on company time right now.”

Axton’s rich laughter filled the room as both were amused by the novelty of the idea. “Well, I have been up for vacation time for a while now. And honestly, the company does owe me for some unpaid overtime… not that I haven’t enjoyed it,” Axton teased with a smirk as Rhys prodded him in retribution.

“That better not be me you’re referring to, big guy,” the omega said with a grin.

“I wouldn’t exactly call you overtime,” Axton said with a teasing smirk. “Maybe over-time and under-time and fun-time, though…” He nuzzled Rhys as the other man laughed and hugged him close. The alpha’s chuckles shook them both a bit, and his voice was warm in his ear. “Enjoy it while it lasts and all, right? Then back to the daily grind. I know ya have a private office but those walls aren’t that thick.”

Rhys snorted. “Don’t even put the idea into my head, Ax.” The alpha chuckled again and pressed a
kiss to the side of his face, and the omega smiled up at him, heart picking up a little speed. “Can we… maybe cook a nice dinner together tonight? Something a little-- I don’t know…” he trailed off, suddenly shy despite the fact Axton’s knot was still inside of him. “Like a… like a date?”

Axton’s face brightened. The sweet little shy look the other man was giving him made a swell of protective fondness rush through him, and he gave Rhys an appreciative squeeze. “Yeah. That would be fun. Probably need a run to the market, though.”

Rhys smirked in thought, brushing fingers gently through Axton’s hair. “Oooh, I’m gonna get you more candy for your secret stash.”

“I don’t have a secret stash,” Axton still denied, which only made the omega snicker and the alpha grin.

“Once I find where you moved it, I’m gonna make you eat those words. And I’ll eat the candy.”

“Can’t find what doesn’t exist,” the alpha obstinately teased, touching their foreheads together. He raised his scarred brow with a grin. “Just like the remote.”

Rhys rolled his eyes at the playful statement. “Okay I know you took that… I just don’t know all your secret spots yet.”

Axton waggled his brows at the other man, neither confirming nor denying he’d hidden the remote. “You’re more than welcome to find them all, darlin’.”

Rhys snorted and rewarded the teasing with plastering Axton’s face with kisses. They lounged around a little longer, discussing dinner plans and gently stroking one another’s skin. Rhys knew this lazy downtime wouldn’t last-- they’d be back to work soon, both of them- but for now, he felt like he deserved this little respite with the world’s sweetest alpha.

A little while later, they dressed and took dismal inventory of the fridge and cupboards, tossing some of the older take-out containers, and made a store list. It was a far-handsier affair than entirely necessary, but one that was fun and filled them with anticipation to return all the sooner to their little love nest as they stepped out the door.

Grocery shopping was an entirely un-erotic affair in itself, but the furtive little glances they gave one another, or the lingering touches while arm-in-arm, had both on edge all the way home.

Axton made passionate love to Rhys after they got back-- groceries left on the counter and work more or less forgotten entirely- and the omega thrilled at the way the alpha touched and scented him. This was heaven. Truly this was heaven.

Axton was speaking words that were getting Rhys harder and slicker than he’d ever been before. Dirty talk, Axton had said, was a personal specialty, and boy was he being treated to it now. But even having been forewarned, it didn’t prepare Rhys for the actual experience of those words coupled with Axton’s gruff tones and confident hand on his body.

His heart beat quick with the dirty things that tumbled from Axton’s mouth. They were possessive words that made everything inside Rhys thrill at both the taboo, and the clear odds with the alpha’s own true character. It was just pillow talk, yeah, but he was aroused out of his goddamn mind with it; loved the alpha telling him he was right where he should be, underneath him, with his cock in him. The way Axton held his wrists down with a firm hold that loosened immediately if Rhys so much as tugged. It was dirty, it was fun, and moreover it was safe. Nothing bad was going to happen to him in Axton’s care, he knew, and that only enhanced the experience tenfold.
Axton was everything an alpha *should* be. Strong, kind, intelligent, capable, and sweeter than honey. To belong to an alpha like *that*…

The idea that he'd ever thought *Handsome Jack* would be a good mate made him laugh at his naïveté. Axton was the exact opposite in every way; attentive, protective, and so, so warm. To bond with someone like *that*—

Not-- Not that he was imagining Axton promising himself to him to already… Not after less than two months. Of course not.

Rhys doubted himself. Did he learn *nothing* from the past six months? Making the same mistake he’d made in letting Jack in too deep too soon?

But no. Axton wasn’t anything like Jack. His pillow talk might’ve been the stuff of dirty fantasies, and he might’ve growled against Rhys’ throat while ‘holding’ him, but Axton was a sweetheart. A little bedroom play and some deliciously purred words of fancy weren’t the same as actually letting the green-eyed alpha bind himself to Rhys’ own being.

The thought of letting Axton sink his teeth into his neck and bonding him made Rhys come with a shout all over himself, his moans sending Axton over the edge as well. The alpha gathered him up in his arms and pressed kisses about his skin once they’d caught their breath, and Rhys just couldn’t stop laughing in pure happiness.

It was the most fun he’d had in so long, and the stark differences between Axton and Jack-- no matter how much he *didn’t* want to think of the Hyperion alpha- were like night and day.

And even as Axton chuckled along with him without knowing why— just high on satisfaction and the fun of it all himself- Rhys couldn’t explain the happiness he felt right at that moment, nor the excitement that he was looking forward into the future.

Rhys had plans to have Axton demonstrate *all* the prowess of that sex certificate. And he was certain when he told him so that the expression on Axton’s face alone would be worth it.

--

Axton had kept up with his progress reports to HR about Rhys’ recovery, and so far they’d managed to enjoy an entire week of bond-free indulgence learning every which way to please one another.

But the professional, engineering-nerd inside Rhys was eager to get back to work, despite everything else. And it turned out work was just as eager to see *him* back in the office as well.

The HR director needed to see Rhys again to ascertain his condition, and to see if Atlas wanted to recommend a rehabilitation program further than just what Axton could provide if his condition hadn’t progressed further. Rhys was important to the future of the company, and if they had to go out of house to secure his health, then Atlas was prepared to do as much.

It was enough of an insult to the alpha’s own skills that Axton volunteered for the two of them to check in at Atlas plaza itself, realizing they’d had their fun, but it was time to go back to work and report their success.

The alpha in HR was just as business-like as usual, but Rhys thought her smile seemed a little kinder this time round.

*Or* he was just seeing things here through a Jack-less lens for the first time in *months*, and it was *glorious*.
Her attention was solely focused upon Rhys, the conversation she’d had with Axton on the phone already appraising her of the situation with his bond. She was pleased on a multitude of levels, but no more than that Handsome Jack was finally put in his place and the bright young man they were all anticipating great things from was back in action.

“How are you feeling overall, Mr. Sommerset?”

Rhys offered a genuine smile. “Truthfully? Better than I can even remember."

The blue-haired woman smiled back, the look in her eyes slightly sly. “When do you think you can be back to work?”

Rhys looked to Axton at that, the alpha giving him a reassuring, confident smile. He gave his attention back to the director. “Soon, I think. Telecommuting is fine and all, but I miss this place. And my team.” Not to mention, the full run of the special lab to run a gamut of tests on his prototype.

“They miss you too.” Her lips quirked in a grin. “Your desk is probably covered in dust.”

“Probably,” the omega agreed with a smirk.

There were a few documents produced for Rhys to read over and sign—details of his work-from-home, his recovery, and his projected return to work date all needing his acknowledgment. All fairly sterile and devoid of unnecessary details (to which Rhys was grateful; he wanted nothing of Jack in his files), and he gladly wrapped things up with the other alpha before relaxing back into his seat.

“Excellent. So we’ll see you back next Monday morning,” she reiterated as the omega gave her a bright smile. “Try to regain your strength.”

“I look forward to it,” Rhys said, and he really, really meant that. There’d never been a time he’d been working for Atlas that Jack’s douchebag shadow hadn’t been hanging over him. Now that he was free from any and all distraction? Oh he had every desire to see Hyperion’s stock prices nose dive right into the ground, and the motivation and focus to actually make it happen.

Axton rose first and Rhys followed, but the blue-haired alpha spoke up again. “You look good, Mr. Sommerset. You really do.”

Such praise actually brought a little blush to his cheeks, and made Axton chuckle and give the junction of shoulder and neck a squeeze as they made to leave.

The move didn’t go unnoticed by the director, her sharp eyes observant to the familiarity. “Axton, can I have one last word, please?”

The warm hand just shy of Rhys’ neck left, and the big alpha turned to give Rhys a look and a smile as the omega showed himself out. Rhys gave a final little wave before discreetly shutting the door behind him, and waiting as per rote in the hall for Axton.

The alpha didn’t keep him waiting too long, and rejoined him with a very-red face as Rhys stood off the wall he’d been leaning against.

“What?” Rhys asked with uncertain amusement, watching the color on Axton’s face and the way the older man avoided his eyes. “Are we in trouble?”

“She uh… heh, well,” Axton started, trying to push down the feelings threatening to burst from his chest, and also gather his words through minor embarrassment. “I kind of got the talk.”
“The talk?” Rhys asked with confusion, looping his arm with Axton’s own to entwine their fingers. Axton’s nervous chuckles only increased at the contact.

“Yeah… Off the record of course but… You uh… you smell like me, y’know…”

Rhys frowned. “Well of course I do. We’re around each other nonstop. At this point it would be weird if I didn’t.”

“No, uh, not-- not like just being close,” Axton stammered with increasing chuckles. Rhys’ own cheeks began to feel hot at the implication; that they’d been found out. “You uh… you’ve got a ‘happy’ omega-scent…” Axton said somewhat lamely, feeling a whole lot less cool than the matter would have dictated, and more dumb that he hadn’t even realized that of course the change in Rhys’ scent would be impossible to ignore.

“Well, that’s good though, right?” Rhys asked with a little smile and a squeeze of Axton’s hand, still not understanding the problem or what ‘talk’ he might’ve received. It didn’t seem like they were in trouble. Or at least, he hoped. “I mean, I sure as hell feel different after having that damn bond gone. Nothing wrong with that.”

Axton shook his head with a little chuckle. He couldn’t meet Rhys’ eyes, he was blushing so hard, and just stated it bluntly. “No, what I meant is, uh, we smell like sex. We very obviously smell like sex.”

“Oh.” Rhys snorted at that, a little relieved even if the alpha was embarrassed, squeezing Axton’s hand again before drawing himself close. “Guess we shouldn’t have had that fun on the couch this morning. Or just not after a shower.” Axton laughed at that and ran his free-hand through his hair. But he still didn’t meet Rhys’ eyes. Rhys frowned as he considered that the HR director knew what they’d been up to. “Is uh… Is that bad? We could’ve been more discrete I guess but-- There’s no rules against dating coworkers, right?”

“No, no not that at all!” Axton quickly denied, meeting Rhys’ gaze again and being very aware of the heat in his cheeks. The sly yet protective look Maya had given him had had an edge to it; he was a caregiver, and his idea of ‘care’ had better not be jeopardizing their most promising employee. “Just… She more or less told me not to take advantage of the situation…” Axton’s eyes drifted away from Rhys’ own again, wrestling with an old idea of shame and worry over taking advantage of Rhys in any way. “You’re freshly un-bonded, so I shouldn’t be getting any cute ideas…”

Rhys’ belly did a flurry of excited twists and acrobatics at the idea of Axton and bonding together in the same sentence, but his own face felt hot, too. He wondered just how much the blue-haired alpha knew. He laughed and moved to hug the other man tightly. “Axton. That’s-- I think it’s nice she cares but… Well, let’s just say if anyone is taking advantage of anything, I take full-responsibility for prioritizing your personal time.”

Axton’s slightly-nervous chuckles turned relieved, and he wrapped his arms around Rhys to give him a proper hug. ‘Feeling is more than mutual, darlin’, believe me. I-- I’m happy to take things slow, y’know. It hasn’t been that long but--’

“How do we take it slower from having sex?” Rhys asked with a wicked little smirk that only got a grin in response. He cuddled close and scented up Axton’s neck before pulling back to look at him again. The look reflected in his gaze made Rhys’ skip a beat, and his voice was softer as he spoke. He fiddled with the alpha’s shirt collar, studying the fabric. “I’m fine with whatever, Ax. This is… It’s definitely different, but in the best of ways,” Rhys said with a sort of shy smile. “I can go at whatever pace you need. I’m just happy to be around you.”
Axton snorted, his heart picking up speed and a fond smile on his face as Rhys misunderstood. “It’s more about me going at your pace, Rhys. I uh, don’t wanna be some pushy knothead, and we are going kinda fast…”

Rhys frowned, wondering if they’d been going too fast indeed. But it all felt so right. “Is it-- Am I coming on too strong?” Rhys asked with self-conscious worry, and Axton barked out a laugh.

“No. Hell no. If anyone is, it’s me. I don’t mean to-- I don’t want to push you when you’re just freshly unbonded, and--”

Rhys snorted and squeezed the other man. “Yeah right.” He hugged him tightly and spoke into his neck. “I’m extremely happy right now, Ax. We’ve been putting up with each other longer than most people-- like, in sheer quantity of hours alone, it’s- I think it’s safe to say we work well together.”

Axton pulled back at those words, his heart going crazy in his chest and telling himself to calm the hell down. “Is it all really okay?”

“Well I mean, no one is more aware of us than us, right? With exception to smelling the way we do,” Rhys said with a grin, “but, well, if we need to cool stuff off at any point, we can... That’s not a problem. But otherwise…” He raised his chin and puckered his lips for a kiss, and the alpha laughed and gladly obliged him by pecking a quick kiss there.

“You make a lot of really good arguments, ya know that darlin’?”

Rhys snickered. “How do you think I got where I am?” He pulled away from the other man to take his hand up again in his own, and tugged the alpha towards the elevators. “Let’s grab my tools, and then let’s enjoy what free time we have left until Monday.”

They entered the elevator hand in hand, watching the numbers go up and musing on how crispy Rhys’ poor office plants would be and if Axton could possibly save them. Rhys told him the ficus in that office was fake, but the cactuses were real, and if they were crispy, well, he had no hope at all.

Axton laughed as Rhys tugged him by his belt to give the alpha a kiss just as the elevator doors opened to his floor. Rhys looked at the alpha with a smirk as they stepped into the hall. “I am going to get that coffee maker for you and Sal if it’s the last thing I do. Should probably be the first thing I do, actually.”

“Better yet, put it in your office. Give me a reason to come up and see ya all the time,” the alpha said with a wink.

It made the omega laugh, and he tugged the other man in the direction of his office.

There were a lot of unfamiliar scents and voices in the hallway-- uncharacteristic for this time of day-- and Rhys looked down a ways with curiosity to see a small tour group.

Literally.

Many little children were outside the general lab with a few employees Rhys knew, along with a small woman who was probably a parent, and a great hulk of a man amidst the group listening intently to what was being instructed by one of the betas from Rhys’ own team.

Axton perked up with a grin as he recognized some faces, following Rhys’ gaze. “Oh hey… That’s Maya’s babies and her mate. Shit, I guess take your kid to work day was today…” He grinned as Rhys raised a brow at him. “Me and Sal tossed a coin for it, but guess he wins anyways. I wonder if he has another group downstairs right now.”
“You wanted to do the tour?”

“I like kids,” Axton said with a grin. “Sal got to do it last time, but… I guess we’ve been busy.”

Rhys smirked as he turned his attention back to the excited little voices, and saw a beta he knew gesturing and smiling at the little audience. “I got to lead the tour group a few months back.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You’d be surprised how bonkers kids go for sending light through a prism,” Rhys said with a light chuckle, hearing the tiny voices and seeing raised hands as the beta laughed and ushered them all into the lab.

“If you were leading my tour, I’d have been bonkers too,” Axton teased.

Rhys laughed and kissed his cheek before pushing the alpha away. “Go say hi like I know you clearly want to. I’ll grab my stuff, and then let’s go home.”

A full-body shiver went up Axton’s back, the alpha shaking it off and giving Rhys a smiling pat as he moved to let him go, but the omega grabbed his arm to stop him with amusement.

“Are you that excited for the tour group?”

“Heh, nah, just… stupid alpha thing,” Axton brushed off with a chuckle. “Don’t worry, I’ll be quick.”

“Haha, right Ax,” Rhys laughed, not letting the alpha go. “You’re not getting off that easy. What ‘stupid alpha thing’?” The way Axton’s cheeks flushed utterly beguiled Rhys, who laughed easily at the clear embarrassment on the older man’s face. Now he was intrigued. “Come on big guy, I’m kind of the expert on ‘stupid alpha things’, nothing you say is going to shock me.”

“...I just…” He ran a hand through his hair and looked away with embarrassment. “I can’t help but like it when you call my place ‘home’,” he admitted with red cheeks and a grin. “...Told you it was dumb.”

“You are without a doubt too cute for words. Now go say hi so we can go home.”

Another shiver passed over the alpha, delighting the omega as Axton’s throaty chuckles teased the other man. “...now you’re doing it on purpose.”

Rhys snickered as he gave the other man a squeeze, and the alpha jaunted off down the hallway with a clear spring in his step towards the room the tiny tour group had disappeared into. He privately allowed himself to indulge in a line of thought that it would be so, so easy to fall in love with this man if he wasn’t already halfway there.

He’d be keeping the image of Axton eager to join the kids close to his heart, and maybe indulge in a few new fantasies about the alpha fueled by watching his ass as he left.

Rhys unlocked his office door, smiling at the frosted glass, and he was pleased to find his cactuses to be just how he’d left them. Hell, they’d probably benefited from his absence and lack of over-watering, actually. But it felt good to be back in here. Different. Maybe even more optimistic if he had to put a name to it, and that in of itself was very exciting indeed.

He shut the door and sat at his thankfully dust-free desk, thinking about how much his life had inevitably changed for the better, and all the luck he’d had with Axton-- and getting lucky with
Axton. Rhys snickered as he toyed with the little fantasy of fucking in his very office, but knew he’d never risk his career or position for such a fun whim.

...Didn’t mean he couldn’t entice the alpha to some heavy kissing before they left, though. Just for fun. And to say he’d done it once.

Rhys pulled open his desk to grab a few tools he needed for fine-tweaking of his gauntlet, and looked up as the door opened, a warm smile on his face only for his heart to jump into his throat and the blood to drain from his face.

“Heya buttercup.”

Rhys was shocked. This had to be a bad dream. Was he hallucinating? This wasn’t possible. How did Handsome Jack even get up here? At his goddamn place of work? At this time and place and his own fucking office. “No. No, it is impossible for you to be here right now.”

“Not when you know the receptionist is new and you’re good at hacking a simple elevator protocol. Thought you’d never come back,” Jack informed as he inspected the plastic ficus, pinching a leaf between thumb and forefinger before letting go. Jack smirked, body language casual and at ease in ways Rhys’ mind just wouldn’t have supplied. His voice was informal, easygoing, as if he belonged there; as if they were old friends.

Rhys’ heart was hammering in his chest as he realized Jack was really here and in his office. He could feel a blush of indignation blooming up the sides of his throat, heat stealing into his face. The awareness of it grounded him, and he latched on to the feeling, even more aware of another fact: that he couldn’t feel Jack at all. Not a twinge, not one regret or longing. He was stronger than their last interaction. This was his turf, and Jack didn’t belong here.

He held steadfastly to the feeling as the alpha looked about Rhys’ office with interest.

“Man, you are on the up and up aren’tcha pumpkin? I didn’t think someone pretty like you had the brains to work up this high. I knew I had good taste”

“You don’t have good anything,” Rhys seethed, the dull-ache he’d felt when previously seeing Jack now replaced with a low-burning ire. He was surprised by the amount of venom in his voice-- and apparently Jack was too if the way his eyes snapped to him was any indication. “Now leave.”

The Hyperion alpha huffed, looking mildly inconvenienced. “What happened to the Rhysie who was head over heels for me?” Jack asked plainly, not at all intimidated by his words.

It made the omega bristle, and he realized with some shock there was no lingering sense of guilt over hearing those words. It was testament to just how badly Jack had fucked him up. And of how much he’d already begun to heal.

“Head over heels for you?” Rhys laughed without humor, months of indignation surfacing. “I nearly died because you’re a narcissistic sociopath who doesn’t care for anyone but himself,” he growled out, looking the older man right in the eyes. “Now get the fuck out of my office and out of my life.”

The alpha made a noise of derision. “That’s awfully harsh for someone you were mated to.”

“I’m calling security.”

Jack moved, his hand trying to cover Rhys’ own over his desk phone, and Rhys pulled his hand back as if burned, not allowing Jack to touch him. The alpha frowned but kept his hand on the receiver as he looked plaintively at the younger man, tone one of quick back-peddling.
Rhysie, sweet pea! No no here, hear me out. Marry me, babe.”

Rhys felt like he’d been punched in the gut at the easiness with which those shocking words were thrown out, and he was glad he was still seated. Even more glad that his desk was between them.

Jack offered him a smile that once would have melted him, but just kept him shocked in place with reserved fury at the sheer nerve. His brain was overwhelmed still by the fact the Hyperion alpha had even made it into his building, and what he might’ve been planning to sabotage or steal. That the alpha was offering marriage made the younger man clench his hands into fists as Jack acted like everything was still the same.

Digging in his pocket for a small box of yellow velvet, the Hyperion alpha revealed a ring with a diamond bigger than Rhys had ever seen up close before. Jack’s eyes went to the box and back to Rhys’ face, a confident smirk on his face. “24 karats of sorry right here, baby! What do you say? Marry me, Rhysie. Let’s start this over.”

Rhys stood gaping-- not at the size or decadence of the ring, but at the sheer audacity Jack had. He turned his gaze back to the alpha’s mismatched eyes from where he’d been considering making another grab for the phone. “....I cannot honestly believe you.”

“What we had was special. You can't deny it kitten. Come on. Have I ever been this serious before? Marry me. You, me, an entire floor solely dedicated to your designs and research, unlimited budget. How’s all that sound? Pretty good, right?”

“Sounds like you were unable to replicate the work you stole,” Rhys accused, tone sour.

“Oh come off that already,” Jack said with a carefree wave of his hand. “Not everything is about that, cupcake. Sometimes things are about making amends. Think of how beautiful that’d be, kitten.”

Rhys snorted, both at the proposal, and in attempt to get the older man’s scent out of his nostrils. The Hyperion alpha clearly wasn’t getting it. “Eat. Shit. Jack.”

Jack rolled his eyes as if Rhys was being dramatic. “Come on babe. Hear me out. I’m hot, you’re hot, we’d be the biggest thing in the tabloids for months just with how damn good-looking we are. Go public with a huge flashy wedding, celebs, models, the works. Then we unveil that new tech of yours and have every government in the world begging us to upgrade their military contracts. Think about it Rhysie! Hyperion stock would rise so high I’d buy you Atlas. Put you in charge of the whole damn thing. How about that, honey?”

Rhys scoffed, upper lip curling. “You think you’re ever going to own even the smallest piece of Atlas?”

“Buttercup, it’s inevitable, come on. If we shack up, it’ll shake up the industry! I always knew you were smart as hell, babe. Why do you think I chose to bond with you?”

There was a holier-than-thou tone to that statement which made Rhys’ thinly veiled disgust ripen over with insult. His muscles tensed, his belly doing sick flip-flops, and he sneered at the Hyperion alpha. “You are poison, Jack, and Atlas is going to crush Hyperion, and you, into the ground.”

“Pfft, come on Rhys. You don’t even have proof that that arm design even belongs to you,” Jack quickly changed topics, trying to intimidate him in vain. “Who’s everyone going to believe created that thing? The small-time securities firm that sometimes dabbles in prosthetics and other bull, or a major leader in innovative technology since Dahl went belly-up?”

Those words didn’t scare Rhys. With the work the HR director was taking care of, and his own
confidence that Jack would never replicate his own, the words the alpha spoke rang hollow. “No one would ever believe you, Jack. You could never pass off my work as your own and you know it.” Or you wouldn’t even be here, a bitter little voice in his head chimed in.

“Well, how about you delay all that, we put marriage on the backburner for now, and we discuss things over dinner?” the older man purred. “Give me a chance to make you fall in love with me again, cupcake.”

Rhys snorted at the absurdity, and Jack frowned at the unexpected reaction. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Jack floundered a little like a petulant toddler. He wasn’t used to not getting his way, and it showed. “Come on Rhysie. What do I have to do? I’m way more handsome and rich than that asshole that’s been sniffing around where he shouldn’t. Can he give you an entire department and unlimited funding? Use your brain. What is it you want? Name it.”

Rhys couldn’t believe the quickness with which Jack changed his tactics to try and manipulate him. First trying to butter him up, then blackmail, and now trying to compare himself to Axton? He hated to think his old self might’ve jumped at the chance for a reconciliation. How those doe-eyes in a viper’s head would have gotten their way out of desperation alone when he was suffering over the bond.

But Rhys was stronger than that, now. His bond to Jack was dead, and his mind wasn’t clouded by hormonal judgment.

“What I want isn’t you. You’re too much of an asshole to even see that. Now get out of my office.”

Jack rolled his eyes as if Rhys was the one being melodramatic, and ignored the omega’s command. “You’re clearly still mad, babe. I get that. But come on. That big jughead over me?” The severe, personal hate in his voice for Axton sent a shiver through Rhys. “Just marry me, babe. Be my omega again, and I’ll let you play at your own designs all you want. Resources you couldn’t even dream of. Just leave this behind sweetpea. Be mine.”

The omega frowned at the doggedness of Jack’s tone. “You might actually, truly be legitimately crazy,” Rhys stated, looking at the man as if he was as much. Jack huffed at that, and Rhys picked up the phone on his desk again, dialing out and speaking in as a voice on the other side answered. “Hello, this is Sommerset in cybernetics, I need security up--”

The phone was yanked from his hands and slammed down, and the omega didn't bother trying to get it back, instead moving quickly around the desk to leave the office as his instincts were screaming that Jack was no idle threat.

He wasn’t fast enough though, as Jack caught him by the wrist. Rhys swung his opposite wrist in trying to connect with the older man’s scarred face, but Jack caught that too. He tried kicking, biting, and struggling while cursing up a damn storm to get his hands free, but Jack was bigger and stronger than him, telling him to stop acting like a damn idiot.

Jack had to wrest him against the desk as Rhys kicked at his shins, knocking over pictures and jarring his pencils and tools as Rhys fought against the treatment. The alpha jerked back every time the omega tried to bite him, and attempted to turn the younger man so his back was against Jack’s chest to get away from those snapping teeth.

“Rhysie, pumpkin, I’m gonna need ya to stop being so difficult,” Jack said with falsely-cheery tone as he pinned the omega to the desk belly-down. “Just think of how much you’re going to want me
again. And I’ll be right there, baby, anytime you want it. I’ll fix all of this. Gonna be everything I should have, okay? The only alpha for you.”

Rhys felt a full fledged red-alert panic alight in him, kicking and screaming and fighting as his neck was nearly exposed to Jack’s angle. His skin prickled and his body went hot and cold in fear. Every terror that Jack would re-bond him screamed through Rhys until he himself was actually crying out.

“A-AXTON! AXTON!”

“...are you frickin’ kidding me?” Jack muttered to himself with disgust as Rhys still tried to whip back and snap at him; protect his neck.

The alpha was digging a hand into the younger man’s collar to pull the fabric down at the back, making a cold terror run through the omega. Jack wrinkled his nose at the strong scent of the other alpha he carried, and hefted his weight against the younger man to try and stop his struggling.

“Geez you stink. You really let that guy fuck you? Really?” Jack snorted to himself. “Boy won’t it stick in his craw when you’re mine again. You want that asshole to bond you, don’t you buttercup? Bet he wants to… Frickin’ lughead.”

Rhys went scarlet beneath him with unfettered rage. How dare Jack try to judge him, or even presume anything about him. And the feel of his fingertips against Rhys’ sensitive bonding gland enraged him further. The omega bucked beneath him to try to throw the older man off. “Get the fuck off me!”

Jack ignored him as he used the heft of his body to pin Rhys’ slighter frame, a large hand sliding up Rhys upper back, over Rhys’ neck in warning to cradle the back of his head firmly in place as terror went through him. “...Won’t think he’s such hot shit when you’re mine again, will he? No one punches Handsome Jack and gets away with it.”

Rhys looked behind himself at that, wide-eyed with fear, incredulous at Jack’s statement. The alpha’s grin was toothy as much as Rhys could see, and he felt extremely aware of the cool air on the back of his neck, and the unguarded, large swath of skin exposed to the older man.

Rhys squeaked out Axton’s name helplessly, trying for louder but becoming paralyzed with fear at the thought of Jack trying to bond him away from Axton. Not again. He couldn’t go through all that again. Never again.

“You’re not gonna want that chump anymore, cupcake,” Jack murmured more to himself than anything else, his breath warm on the back of Rhys’ neck as the omega flailed in panic. “Would you knock that squirming shit off already?”

Noise followed by Axton’s frantic voice could be heard outside the glass of the locked door as it shuddered with his immediate attempts to get in, and Rhys felt a glimmer of hope, relief, rush through him, finding his voice again and crying out for help.

The Atlas alpha wasted no time breaking it down, the safety-glass shattering into neat little squares as he busted through and nearly fell to the floor with the sheer force of his movement.

The sight of Rhys pinned and snarling in panic by the alpha who’d bonded and abandoned him had Axton seeing red, and some switch just flicked inside the big alpha’s head that immediately became apparent to the other two in the room.

Jack must have had some sense of self-preservation, because he shoved Rhys away from him as Axton barreled towards him, Jack’s own snarls and darting as Axton was a rain of fists and teeth
Rhys was shaking so hard with adrenaline he couldn’t make his damn useless legs work, instead budging himself up against the far wall where his neck wasn’t exposed to anything but the light blue paint. And he sat there and watched as Axton absolutely took Jack apart.

“You motherfucker I warned you!” Axton’s growls came against Jack’s own.

There was a lot of fists as clothing was grabbed to try and topple one another. Fists connected with jaws and teeth snapped with intent to rip flesh. The cactuses that hadn’t fallen from Rhys’ desk shattered to the floor, the office quickly becoming a mess as Jack and Axton tried to destroy one another in a storm of absolute fury. Jack landed several good punches to Axton’s own person, but the Atlas alpha was raging.

They were both bleeding, and Rhys was pretty sure Jack’s nose had been broken, and it became clear as he watched the way they went at one another that Axton intended to kill Jack.

Rhys hated Jack, and wished no small amount of bad things to happen to him, but he wasn’t sure if Axton could live with that on his hands. There was no way Rhys would be able to separate them. And definitely not with the swiftness in which they were attacking one another.

The phone had been ripped from his desk at some point. Surely someone heard the sounds echoing from his office. Should he run and get security? Did he even have time?

But wait, no, the sounds of heavy boots on linoleum echoed to join the sounds of Axton pummeling Jack, and men familiar and not joined up in the room to shout and grab and snarl their own at the connected alphas.

Jack was already on the floor by the time the hulk of a man Rhys had seen earlier pulled Axton off him like it was absolutely nothing. Axton tried to take a swing at him, but was easily pinned by strong, lean arms that forcibly held his back against his broad chest in a firm but constricting bear hug. It left Jack breathing hard and heavy in pain, trying to muster himself up, but he couldn’t do it.

Rhys marveled at the man holding Axton as he recognized other Atlas personnel quickly filling his office. The one holding on to Axton seemed less concerned about the Hyperion CEO on the ground, and more about forcibly calming the angry alpha trapped against him, calm and even tones speaking to him.

Axton was still trying to get at Jack, even as Finch and Kroger were more or less dragging the bloody Hyperion CEO out of the office, the older man cursing up a damn storm and yowling, leaving a trail of blood in his wake as he was removed somewhere more secure as they called an ambulance.

At some point Sal had arrived on scene, as Rhys could hear his voice somewhere down the hall. The omega’s mind drifted to the thought of the tour groups there at Atlas, of the children of his coworkers being exposed to the violence. God, he hoped they were someplace away from the sounds and smells and sights of the fight. He felt… responsible, in a way.

Rhys could hear the hulk of a man still murmuring to Axton before he let the alpha’s feet touch the ground again, large hand on Axton’s shoulder before the man turned to look down at the frazzled but uninjured omega.

The omega looked up with somewhat wide eyes, realizing he was nodding absentmindedly as the other man asked if he was alright before taking his leave of the small, ruined office. Rhys almost
laughed to himself a bit hysterically, nerves a bit frazzled, as he belatedly realized the huge man that had just subdued Axton’s attack was also an omega.

Rhys was pretty positive Axton would have killed Jack if he hadn’t been pulled off the bleeding, yowling CEO of Hyperion. He was glad for Axton’s sake that that hadn’t happened, but damn did he think Jack had deserved every last scratch.

The room smelled of sweat and the air held a tang of copper to it, the very-real scent of aggression. Sal was in the room now instead of the hallway, blocking Axton’s restless form from leaving as the larger alpha snarled at everyone present. The smaller alpha yelled down the hall how they’d better get Jack out of the damn building before he let Axton loose and joined him in finishing the job. It was hard for the other alpha to just ignore all the mingled scents of violence and fear and blood in the office, but he held his ground and held his friend there.

Axton had a few false starts to go after Jack-- still wouldn’t calm down; maybe he couldn’t- as Sal tried to get him to a calm enough state that he didn’t need to physically restrain him. Glass was still all over the floor amidst blood and hair-- somehow not enough- and the more he told him to calm down, the more livid Axton became.

“Don’t fucking tell me to calm down! How the hell did that fucker even get into the building?!?”

Sal stood up straight, laying a cautious palm on Axton’s arm. “We’ll find out amigo, but you need to calm your-”

Axton shunted the hand off him, still quaking with the need to fight. “You calm down when some fuckhead has your omega pinned, asshole!”

Rhys’ face went crimson at the declaration-- and so did Sal’s, though if Axton realized what he’d growled out, he didn’t make any notice of it, still struggling against his comrade.

Sal growled at Axton not to call him an asshole, and Axton bared his teeth at his friend as the two were growling at each other when Finch finally returned to tell them Jack had been removed from the premises, and that the police were going to handle things from here. Sal spoke to Finch about securities, and he said Kroger was already on finding the weak link. The building was swarming with activity, and things would be set to rights.

That Jack was gone took some considerable fuel from Axton’s fire, and the alpha took a few moments to calm when he finally looked to Rhys.

The omega offered him a little wary smile, not really having anything to comment on the situation, but apparently it was his turn to be further noticed, and he was ready for it, but not yet ready to get to his feet.

Axton crouched down to Rhys, who moved forward to grab him around the middle and pull him to his knees. The alpha went willingly, a hand smoothing over the top of Rhys’ head to run down to the back of his neck as he placed a kiss on his hair. He then enveloped the omega with both arms, scenting along his neck as Rhys held the older man.

“Are you okay? Can you stand?” Axton’ voice was still gruff from adrenaline, nearly a growl, but lower, softer for the other man in his arms, and full of concern. Rhys’ lips were against his neck, the omega holding the alpha back as tight as he could as if Axton was the one needing reassurance.

“I’m fine. I really am, Ax, I promise,” Rhys spoke, still shaky himself with adrenaline, and a little relieved he was still sitting there, even if he felt kind of dumb. “That was-- it was scary but I’m fine.
Are you okay?"

Axton was petting him again, beginning to shake from the adrenaline still coursing through him. He wanted to break every bone in Jack’s body, even if his own was starting to smart with the blows and wounds he’d sustained. He chuffed in still-roiling fury, his injuries the least of his concerns. “That chilled me, hearing you like that.”

“Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. We know he’s been stalking you, I should’ve--”

“Axton, love,” Rhys said with an admiring smile and a press of his lips against his cheek. “You were there when I needed you. Exactly when I needed you. Thank you,” he told him with another kiss to his lips, relief heavy within him. Everything was okay.

Axton hummed in concern, but pressed in to the kiss before breaking to look at the other man again. “Rhys… are you okay, though? Really?”

“I am. He just-- he scared me, but that’s about it.” The omega offered a watery smile. “I don’t know what in the hell was going through his head.” Rhys was minorly trembling now, and trying to concentrate on the comforting fact that Axton was possessively scenting him. Safe. He sighed, body still shaky from the action, but feeling utterly comforted by the alpha. “I don’t think he even understands how the hell a bond works…”

“I’m so glad I got in in time.”

Rhys burrowed his head deep, pressed so close to the other man and feeling so, so safe and right. God, but he loved Axton. He loved him and didn’t want to be with anyone but him. Fearful relief swept through him again as the alpha held him tight. “...What would have happened to me? If he’d succeeded?”

The alpha chuffed warm air over his neck, a soothing palm making tight circles on the omega’s back. “It might be another month to break it again,” Axton said gruffly. “I don’t want you to ever go through that pain ever again.”

That was… all? God, Jack really was a fucking idiot. Did he really think forcibly bonding him would take Rhys from Axton? Make him want Jack? Yeah, right.

Rhys actually laughed, the sound causing Axton to pull away and look at him with concern. The omega just smiled, putting a hand to the back of the alpha’s neck to pull him back close enough to touch their foreheads. “I’m fine, I promise,” he said to that worried look-- one that said Rhys had cracked. The younger man just gave a slight shake of his head. “That’s just so damn anticlimactic, Axton.” Axton frowned, but Rhys just smirked and pulled him into a hug, nuzzling into his neck. “After the hell of the past six months, a single month is such a joke. Especially now that I’ve got you.”

His words made Axton’s belly do all kinds of flip-flops, warm as he held the other man in his arms and scented up his neck. He relished in the way Rhys held him, and the way his scent had gone back to normal from the stink of fear that had permeated the office. The omega’s voice was soft on Axton’s ear.

“...To finish the job?”
“Axton!” Rhys laughed, and yes, it was a grim thing to laugh about, but Jack would live, and he was an asshole anyways, so they could make fun. He stroked the other man’s jaw gently with his thumb. “...You're pretty banged up, big guy.”

“Nah, let’s just go home. I've had worse.”

“My turn to take care of you?” Rhys proposed with a wry little grin that made axton laugh. He gently touched the other man’s face, concern swimming in his eyes and his heart burgeoning with warmth and gratitude and love for the other man. “Thanks for saving me, handsome.”

Axton touched his forehead to Rhys’ own. “I’ll always keep you safe, baby, promise. As long as you’ll let me.”

Chapter End Notes

Axton went all goliath on Jack and kicked ass and got to be the sweetheart hero awwww how sweet and happy :)

Enjoy it. I get REALLY mean next chapter >:3

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Please leave kudos and a comment if you enjoyed! I LOVE THEM. ao3 FAQ: Can I post comments anonymously, or if I don't have an Archive account?
By the time they’d gotten back to Axton’s loft, the adrenaline of the whole ordeal with Jack had long since worn off, and the green-eyed alpha was sore as hell.

Axton leaned against Rhys as the omega tried to offer his support, and with all urgency gone, he was keenly feeling the pain of the fight by the time they crossed his threshold.

Axton was grateful for the warm arm the omega had around him, but not only for the assistance. It kept Rhys near, reassuring his instincts that the other man was okay. And back in his home and surrounded by his own reassuring scent, the alpha could finally, fully relax.

“Nice and easy,” Rhys coaxed as he helped the big alpha to the couch once his stuff was dropped near the door. “That’s right.”

The playful smirk on Axton’s face was partial grimace as his muscles complained, but his tone was amused. “Heh, you gonna play nursemaid with me, darlin’?”

Rhys grinned as he sat with him. “Maybe a little. How do you feel?” he asked after some very handsy, not-totally-needed assistance sitting the alpha down on the couch; little touches about the alpha’s person, straightening his t-shirt, and fleeting caresses of fingers about his face before meeting his eyes again.

Axton was in a far better humor than the light hissing he’d made upon settling down would indicate, the mirth in his eyes palpable. “Like a million bucks.”

“Axton…” Rhys admonished softly, a concerned hand on the man’s thigh as the alpha grinned at him.

“What? I’ve got the best nurse around, who wouldn’t feel awesome?”

Rhys snorted as his eyes took in the other man’s face. “You’re getting some gnarly bruises.”

“Just kiss ‘em better.”
“It’s gonna take more than a few kisses to bring down the swelling, big guy. And no jokes,” Rhys laughed, gentle fingers probing near smarting skin and skirting areas that had been bandaged back at Atlas. It had been a quick job to stick some plasters and stuff on the alpha, Axton having been adamant that he didn’t want to go to the hospital. But there was a first aid kit in the kitchen Rhys could patch him up with, and the alpha’s injuries weren’t nearly as severe as the ones he’d given Jack. Nothing Rhys couldn’t handle. “I’ll text Vaughn and ask him to bring over those giant ice packs he has in his fridge after he’s home. I don’t think the frozen broccoli we have is gonna cut it.”

“Hell, I’ll take the broccoli until then.” Rhys chuckled and fetched the first aid kit—along with the frozen veggies—before rejoining the larger man back on the couch. The big alpha gratefully pressed the icy bag against his cheek as Rhys opened the first aid kit, choosing ointments and gauze as he went. Axton avoided Rhys’ eyes as something nagged at him, mood dipping as he remembered, and speaking with minor shame while the omega picked out items to use on his injuries. “Look, Rhys, about—about before,” Axton started, unable to look him in the face.

Rhys looked up from what he was doing at the shift in mood, but seeing Axton’s red face, he just smiled. If it was about what he thought it was—what he’d been replaying over and over in his mind on the ride home—the other man didn’t need to say a single thing. He set the items he’d chosen aside to stroke the alpha’s thigh with a smile. “It’s okay, Ax.”

“No, look, I- sorry. I didn’t mean to call you my omega before, or—ya know, be like that—”

“Ax—”

“I was just— I’m sorry, Rhys. I really, really like you, but I didn't mean to—”

“Axton,” Rhys interrupted firmly but gently, a hand on Axton’s own. He smiled up at him reassuringly, rubbing his thumb over his skin. “It's okay. Really. I, uh, kind of liked it.” He chuckled a little, cheeks pink at the thought, giving the alpha’s hand a squeeze that the other man returned. “Not to, like, presume anything, but if you were interested in… in properly… in being my boyfriend… well, I mean— I know we haven't known each other that long, but technically we've been living together for weeks and weeks and we haven't driven each other nuts yet and in terms of actual hours spent together, that like, you know, is more than most other people— even if we spaced it out over a longer timeline, well I just— Please say something before I make a further ass out of myself,” he finished with an awkward little chuckle and hot, embarrassed cheeks as his heart beat like crazy in his ribs.

Axton grabbed him against him before he actually spoke any words, surprising the omega a little in concern but also making him crazy happy as he knew what that hug meant. Rhys tried to be careful against the alpha, his smaller bulk not putting pressure on any tender spots he knew about, but if Axton felt any discomfort, he sure didn’t care.

“Yes, yes I— hell, I would love to be your boyfriend, sweetheart,” Axton said between laughs of happiness as he hugged Rhys against his aching body. Rhys hugged him back a little, and Axton hissed at a particularly tender spot that Rhys was quick to apologize over and soothe, but Axton just hugged him at a different angle and kissed about his face, the alpha beaming.

First he got to beat the crap out of Handsome Jack, and now he got to be Rhys’ Official Boyfriend? Axton wondered if he wasn’t a bit punch drunk, and if the asshole Hyperion alpha hadn’t managed to ring his bell and make him hallucinate his fondest wishes.

But no, Rhys was laughing and pressing careful little kisses to his cheek, and it was the happiest Axton had felt in such a long time; just a little closer to the omega he had his heart set on.
Said omega’s hands were gentle on him, smile taking a wicked, playful edge. Rhys was so happy, so excited by this turn of events, that what he really wanted to do was shout from the rooftop of this very building to let everyone know Axton was his proper boyfriend. But having the man right here under his palms, covered in dry blood not his own and reeking of a victorious fight to protect him, Rhys wanted to treat the alpha real nice. A little fun and pleasure for him, just for him, and all he’d have to do is sit back and relax.

“Hey so, to celebrate, how would you like a little… physical therapy?” Rhys asked, stroking his thumb up and down the side of the alpha’s neck with a smile on his face, heart beating like crazy that Axton wanted him.

Axton’s eyes widened with interest, and Rhys slipped off the couch to go to his knees before him, a sly sort of glimmer to his eyes as he rubbed the flat of his palms up and down the other man’s thighs. “I’ll be very thorough.”

“Shit, darlin’,” Axton breathed out, a little floored as he leaned forward to kiss Rhys’ lips before willingly leaning back and spreading his legs so the younger man could get to the zipper on his pants. “If this is your idea of physical therapy, I’ll fight anyone any day of the week for ya.”

Rhys lightly chuffed in amusement, Axton’s hand brushing once through his hair, and the omega nuzzled his palm fondly before going for his zipper. “Let me thank you proper,” Rhys sighed as he undid the button before carefully unzipping Axton’s pants.

The alpha’s hands were on Rhys’ forearms as he hummed appreciatively, smiling down warmly at the omega palming him over his underwear through the opening he’d created. His cock was already half-hard just from Rhys asking if he’d be his boyfriend-- and god he still couldn’t believe that-- but having the other man between his legs wanting to please was doing it for him on another level entirely.

“I’m gonna make my alpha feel real good,” Rhys said with a wicked little smirk as Axton shut his eyes, leaned his head back and groaned. Rhys snickered, knowing it was the words more than his thumb stroking up and down the hardening length behind cloth, but as far as he was concerned, if Axton would be his alpha, he’d be pretty goddamn happy for a very long time.

Rhys removed Axton’s burgeoning cock from his underwear, the scent of the other man’s arousal hitting him and making his belly do acrobatics. His scent was especially strong, probably from fighting Jack-- to protect him- and it made the omega feel a world of emotions he couldn’t quite put words to.

But that was okay. He didn’t need words for what he had planned.

Axton’s hands were light on Rhys’ head as the omega ghosted his breath over the other man’s shaft, getting pleasing little hitches of breath and groans of pleasure from the alpha at his teasing. He was hard, cock throbbing in Rhys’ warm hand, and the single minded focus that the omega had on him was only upping the other man’s arousal.

Finally popping the head into his mouth after more teasing than necessary, Axton’s hips thrust forward of their own volition, and Rhys tugged him in encouragement.

“Rhys, love, fuck…”

Rhys looked up at him, lips sealed around his cock, and the utterly besotted expression on Axton’s face made something inside him ache with fondness. And the thing Rhys was doing with his tongue on the underside of his cock was making Axton thrrob and his breaths hitch, gut coiling in pleasure.
And judging by the moans Rhys was giving as he worked, the other man was getting off on blowing him too.

Rhys breathed through his nose carefully, remembering to relax his throat at the micro-thrusts the alpha quite couldn’t help. They’d done quite a bit of loving on one another this last week, but hadn’t quite gotten to this yet, and the novelty of it made it an even more erotic experience.

It had been a while. Rhys hadn’t done this since— no, he wasn’t going to think about Jack, not spare even a second. He was going to enjoy the very real weight of Axton’s cock on his tongue, the intimate taste of the man as he sucked that velvety skin in and out of his mouth, and enjoyed the gentle but firm fingers Axton threaded through his hair as the other man made soft, gentle noises of pure pleasure for his movements.

“I-I’m close, darlin’, I’m real close...” Axton warned, breath short and voice hollow with the strain of holding off.

Rhys merely closed his palm around the base of Axton’s cock where he was starting to swell-- flattered that Axton wanted him badly enough even now to knot- but he didn’t pull off, instead increasing his efforts to get the alpha to come down his throat.

He met the other man’s eyes to let him know it was okay, squeezed his thigh with his free hand, and hummed in affirmation. The vibrations went right through the other man.

“Oh fuck love, I- oooh- shit,” he cursed as Rhys took him deeper, humming, and Axton was coming hard down his throat with hitched hips and choked groans. As his hands fell from Rhys’ mussed-hair and back to the couch, the omega pulled off his cock, giving a light cough, and then gave his thigh a quick squeeze.

Rhys smiled as he wiped the tears from his eyes with his free hand, lips red from his efforts. Axton looked absolutely wrecked, and it was a beautiful thing. His mouth hanging agape as he caught his breath, the way Rhys could feel his heartbeat as he still held the alpha’s knot in his other hand. He wanted to kiss him, but he didn’t want to leave the satisfied alpha in order to clean his mouth first.

He was shocked when Axton hauled him back up to the couch to kiss the ever-loving daylights out of him, both arms around him and pressing him sideways into the couch at an awkward but pleasing angle as his lips descended upon his own.

“Oh sweetheart... baby... I think I’m cured...” Axton purred when he broke from Rhys’ lips.

Rhys laughed, thrilled and delighted and so so pleasantly surprised, and kissed him again in response.

Jack had never allowed him to kiss him after a blowjob. He’d kissed Rhys after blowing the omega, which wasn’t often in the brief time they’d been together, but never the other way around.

Axton didn’t care. Axton wanted to share his enthusiasm and gratitude and fondness for the omega. Axton needed to kiss him to show his appreciation. Axton liked him.

God, the difference between the two alphas was night and day, and the realization almost hurt.

“Mm, it was worth a shot, but I still think we're gonna need those ice packs, big guy,” Rhys purred with a smug smirk. Axton’s satisfied chuckles shook him, and the big alpha’s palm teased close enough the omega’s own hardon that Rhys snatched it up to kiss it. “That was for you, handsome. Not me.”
“Yeah, well, maybe I wanna return the favor, darlin’,” Axton’s pleased, husky tones came, giving Rhys’ hand a squeeze in his own. It made the omega’s heart pick up speed for different reasons entirely.

Rhys had a little trouble keeping his voice steady, he was so pleased. “You’re such a sweetheart, Ax, you know that?”

“Heh, even when I’m trying to get into your pants?” he teased with a waggle of his brows and a trill of his fingers against Rhys’ leg.

Rhys snorted and gave him another kiss. It was tempting of course, but his arousal would die down, and Axton needed rest after the way he’d taken Jack apart. The fact that he was so keen on Rhys’ own pleasure though… Now there was a novelty.

This was all so… new. So different. Yeah, if the thumping in his chest was any indication, he was head over heels and falling faster than ever with zero regrets.

“You’ve been in my pants a few times today already,” Rhys laughed, kissing his chin. “Don’t think I don’t want you to, but you should be taking it easy. Got a couple good bruises here, honey,” he said as he lightly traced around the spots Axton’s face was darkened, but the skin thankfully unbroken. A few places Jack’s rings had caught the alpha had left some pretty gnarly scratches, but he’d be okay in the end. Nothing the ointment and ice-packs couldn’t remedy. “Won’t have any cool new scars though, sorry,” he added as he dragged a finger neatly off Axton’s scarred chin.

It made the alpha laugh.

Rhys removed himself from Axton’s lap (not without trouble, of course), and the other man tucked himself back in, smirking the whole time and trying to pull Rhys back into his lap in vain.

Rhys had Axton remove his shirt (not without the omega’s help, as he was more sore than he wanted to admit), and Rhys took inventory of all the hurt places the other man had. He wanted to be careful when touching him, and also make sure he didn’t inadvertently hurt the alpha. The idea of sleeping on the couch came to him, but he knew Axton would never allow it, wanting him close. And as he wanted to stay right next to his gallant champion anyways, he’d just have to be very very careful in that small bed with the other man and not jostle his injuries.

Rhys gave the alpha the equivalent of a sponge bath, the two of them making jokes while Axton held thawing broccoli to his face after downing some painkillers.

It was funny, now that the shoe was on the other foot. Axton had taken such good care of him-- had really been there for him- and now it was Rhys getting him clean and making sure he was comfortable with blankets and pillows, and all the touches that would have been much out of line in another circumstance. He could nuzzle him and kiss him and tell him how much he appreciated him, and the alpha’s blushes alone were entirely worth it.

Rhys was pretty proud of himself when all was said and done. Axton had his shoes off, a fresh pair of comfy sweatpants on, and he was nice and clean with the comforter and pillows from the bed. They’d forgoned another t-shirt since it hurt the alpha to stretch that way to get it on, but a button-up pajama top was warmer anyways, and the weather was getting colder. Even if Rhys made jokes about wanting an excuse to keep the alpha shirtless, he wanted his comfort to be number one right now.

“Any preferences for dinner?” the omega asked with a smile, proud of the nest he’d stuck the alpha in and his subsequent comfort. He stood before him feeling rather accomplished.
“Is this part of your nursemaid duties?” Axton asked with an appreciative grin, trying but failing to tug the omega back down with him even as Rhys laughed and batted him off.

“You know it is,” he chuckled. “Don’t even think of getting up from that couch, Axton. You need rest. You’ve earned it,” he added sternly, fighting the smile that wanted to break forth over Axton’s own crooked grin of amusement at his tone. He took up the alpha’s hand to kiss it before moving into the kitchen. Rhys didn’t want the other man to have to raise a finger after the way he’d fought Jack for him. Even if he tried to insist.

“I’m sure I can help with somethin’, darlin’.”

“You’ve been cooking for me for a while now, Ax. I can afford to get it right at least once,” Rhys teased with a laugh the other man returned, groaning a little at the aches the laughter gave him. Rhys gave a pointed raise of his brow at the alpha, and Axton smirked.

“Okay, that’s fair. Guess omelettes are off the menu, right?” That made the omega snort, ignoring Axton as he opened the fridge and cupboards, obviously decided upon something to start with. “How about you let me handle dessert?” Axton suggested lasciviously, making Rhys snort as he paused to look at the other man watching him from the couch, cheeks pink with pleasure.

“Nah, I’m afraid that’s definitely a two-person job,” Rhys promised with a wink that made Axton ‘oooh’ in anticipation. The omega chuckled. “After Vaughn drops the ice packs off, what would you say to a massage?”

“A sensual massage? Lookin’ forward to it, sweetheart,” the alpha purred, thinking that while beating up Handsome Jack had been a reward in of itself, the fact that Rhys wanted to sweeten the pot only made the alpha love him that much harder.

He was such a sweet omega. An absolute honey. Axton was going to make him as happy as he could for as long as he’d have him. Rhys deserved nice things and soft gestures. He deserved to have his days filled with happiness now that all this horrible business was finished. If the cops hadn’t been taking Jack’s menacing by bond seriously before, they sure as hell were going to now. And while Rhys understandably didn’t want to go to the press with things, the threat that he could, and do real damage to Hyperion by revealing Jack’s true nature, was comforting as well. The omega didn’t have to do anything but let himself be loved by Axton after this, and the alpha was fully dedicated to the idea.

“You know what would be fun for dessert?”

“No, what?” Rhys asked obviously, grinning up at the alpha from where he was pulling pieces of instant biscuit-dough apart and putting it on a tray.

“Me and you on this couch, some trashy B-movie, and a bottle of something strong.”

Rhys chuckled and raised a brow at the other man. “Are these the ingredients of the dessert? ‘Cuz you know you don’t gotta liquor me up to make it happen.”

It was Axton’s turn to chuckle and waggle his brows. “Nah, more about setting the mood for dessert.”

Rhys laughed, grinning ear to ear as his heart picked up a little speed. “If my hands weren’t covered in oil, I’d kiss you proper for that idea.”

“Don’t need your hands for kissin’, last time I checked.” The chuckles and pink cheeks that that got from the omega flattered the alpha a fair bit, and watching the omega struggle with not coming over
and doing just that was endearing as hell.

“I’ll show you just how much I do need them after Vaughn’s stopped by.”

“Kinky.”

Rhys barked out a laugh. “You know what I mean.” His phone vibrated on the countertop; Vaughn, saying he’d just gotten home, and would be over in a few. “Well speak of the devil. He just got home.”

“I’m telling him you said that.”

An amused and entirely-unattractive sound came from Rhys’ mouth at the quick reply, and he was shaking his head with laughter. “Better not say that. We need those ice packs.”

Axton was still snickering as he watched the omega mill about his kitchen, the absolute image of domesticity, and he loved it. He wanted to pull himself up and kiss the other man, wrap his arms around him and completely put their dinner to a standstill. He didn’t want to break the spell of such a gorgeous thing happening in his kitchen though, and he watched him a while longer until a knock came at the door.

“And there’s your ice packs!” Rhys announced, breaking from his task to wash his hands. Axton grinned to himself, spell broken by his neighbor, and decided to pull himself up anyways. His movement didn’t go missed by the omega running his hands under the taps. “Axton-”

“I’ve got it, love, don’t worry,” he said with a wide grin, getting a sort of curious look from the omega before Rhys’ cheeks heated again, and he finished washing up with a smile, biting his lower lip.

Rhys thrilled every time Axton called him that, and he might’ve oogled him a bit more than was proper considering the stiff movements of the alpha as he tried to stretch his aches a little.

Damn he was gorgeous. He really really was. Vaughn was ripped himself, yeah, but the soft edges of Axton’s form spoke to muscles earned through occupation as opposed to intention. The bruises there were a damn painful shame, and the way Axton clearly was trying not to wince as he got the door bespoke how sore he’d be tomorrow. Rhys was going to soothe what he could once Vaughn left, and maybe coerce the alpha into a bath. A nice hot soak would do him some good.

And it also gave Rhys an excuse to get naked with him again.

Axton opened the door with a welcoming grin as Rhys was drying his hands, the greeting just past his lips before an explosion violently thundered throughout the loft.

Axton was holding his gut, the explosion a shot of gunfire.

It wasn’t Vaughn standing there. It was Jack. Bandaged, wobbly and banged-up, but holding a smoking gun. His every nightmare come true, and it was standing right in the threshold of Axton’s front door.

“Yeah, fuck you jarhead.”

There was shrieking and yowling moments later: Vaughn beating the ever loving shit out of Jack in the hallway.

But Rhys wasn’t paying attention to that. He was shaking in fear as he immediately went to help
Axton, the amount of blood seeping from him making Rhys sick and terrified.

The alpha was staggering backwards in shock to the couch, falling to it stiffly as he tried to keep pressure on his wound, and Rhys felt helpless and stupid like he was watching the culmination of everything he’d ever wanted slip right through his fingers.

“No no no Axton, no,” he repeated in horror, scared to touch but not knowing what else to do. “Axton, Axton what do I do? What do I do?”

The alpha was blinking rapidly in trying to deal with the pain, not wanting to go into shock and knowing he was. It had been a long time since he’d been shot, but the pain was worse than he remembered. “A-apply pressure-- I- did it exit? Did it exit?”

“I don’t know,” Rhys’ hands were shaking as he tore his own shirt over his head and pressed it against Axton’s abdomen, the alpha’s grunts and hisses of pain as he held back from screaming making chills go up Rhys’ spine. Rhys’ hands were warm and wet with deep red and his heart felt lodged in his throat. They needed an ambulance and they needed it now.

Axton was gasping, biting back screams as he felt spikes of electric hot pain and the cold of fear. This wasn’t how he wanted to go. This wasn’t how it was supposed to end. Who’d keep Jack from Rhys now? Who’d keep him safe? “Rhys-- see if-- did it exit?”

Rhys’ hands were beginning to shake with fear. Fuck, he didn’t know. Axton was so big, and he didn’t want to remove a hand from holding pressure to try and see. He held one hand over Axton’s abdomen while the other he tried to get under him as gingerly as possible.

He couldn’t tell. If there was another wound, Axton was losing blood even faster than he knew, but he couldn’t tell if the bullet had exited or not.

“Rhys! I called an ambulance! They’re on their way,” Vaughn huffed, out of breath as he still held his phone up to his ear.

Rhys’ eyes widened as he wondered if Jack had run off. “Jack-?”

“Knocked him the fuck out. Shit, here.” Vaughn assisted as best he could, listening to the dispatcher on the other end for what they should do and how to keep Axton stable until the paramedics could arrive.

There was no exit wound, they discovered, which meant the bullet was still inside. They were holding Rhys’ bloody t-shirt hard against Axton as Vaughn grabbed a dishtowel, folded it and replaced the sodden shirt. The alpha grunted at the pain as they held it there, telling him harder when Rhys tried to let up, and Vaughn adjusted pressure and confirmed with the lady on the other of the call about what was happening.

“Axton, Axton please,” Rhys said, feeling his whole body start to shake as the panic was actually setting in. “You can get through this, okay? You’re gonna be fine.”

Axton tried to smile but it came out a grimace, teeth pink with blood as Rhys felt a chill of pure icy fear go straight up his spine. He didn’t know much, but he knew that was not good.

“Axton just- just stay awake and stay with me, okay?”

Axton’s eyes watched him as long as they could before he realized in panic that he was going into shock. His body shook and he went cold and frightened, vision fading like some vintage movie before sight and sound all went black.
Axton was in surgery for what felt like days. Rhys was ashambles in the waiting room, Vaughn at his side trying to be supportive while also a nervous wreck. Both had bleary, red eyes from crying, and Rhys was exhausted from the second interview he’d given the same detective who’d come down to the hospital.

But everything went well considering, a nurse telling him ages later that the surgeons were done, and Axton was stable and doing well. Better than was expected, even.

It was days before they took him off the drugs keeping him in an artificial coma to heal, but Rhys was there when he eventually woke up. And seeing those bleary green eyes looking at him was the best feeling in the entire world.

“Hey there, big guy,” the omega softly said with tear-blurred eyes, holding the alpha’s hand as Axton slowly came to, and not all at once.

Axton made a few grumbled sounds, fingers twitching in Rhys’ hand, though he obviously wasn’t coherent. The omega didn’t care about that though. The fact that he was awake at all was a godsend, and he was still pumped full of enough painkillers to knock out a horse.

Didn’t mean the alpha couldn’t surface from it though. “Reee…”

“Hi baby,” Rhys again spoke softly, voice wavering. He rubbed his thumb over the back of Axton’s hand as the alpha closed his eyes for a long while, breathing deeply. Rhys thought for sure he’d gone back to sleep, but then Axton opened his eyes again and smiled at the omega. It made Rhys smile too, so relieved his eyes began to swim. “Welcome back.”

“I jus’ had a dream about you,” the alpha spoke slowly, his voice a little less controlled than normal, as if drunk.

Rhys chuckled even as his eyes brimmed with tears. Axton was living the high life— literally. “I bet you did.”

“…You… Okay?”

Tears began to leak down Rhys’ face as he nodded. “I’m okay, yeah. Everything is okay.”

Axton’s eyes closed with a long exhale; one of some simmering relief. “Tha’s good.”

He fell asleep again for some time, and Rhys sat there crying, happy, and rejoiced in the knowledge that he was going to be okay.

It took a while before the sedatives wore off enough for Axton to be properly coherent, and he was still in pain, but not as bad as he remembered it should feel. It was the little things that counted, he supposed.

Having Rhys at his bedside, holding his hand though, definitely added a little something to the whole experience.

“Hey sleepyhead,” Rhys spoke softly as Axton finally woke up feeling human once more. Rhys looked the same as he felt, and that was saying something.

The alpha frowned as his brain caught back up with everything; where he supposed he was, what had happened, and why his middle hurt so bad. “…Did that asshole shoot me?”
A noise escaped Rhys’ lips in somber amusement at the indignity of that question, and tears freely fell down his face as he moved a little closer to the alpha, touching his arm with both hands. “He did, yeah.”

A low, annoyed growl rumbled out of Axton’s throat as he closed his eyes. “…Toldja we should’ve finished the job.”

Rhys laughed, shaking a little in relief and upset both as tears didn’t stop. “The police have him right now. He’s-- Well, let’s not talk about him.” Rhys wiped his eyes before bringing the back of Axton’s hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss there. “How are you feeling, big guy?”

A crooked, weak smile took the alpha’s face. “Same as last time you asked me that question: million bucks.”

Rhys snorted and shook his head. “There’s no way you feel like a million bucks.”

“I feel like shit,” he admitted with a smile, giving the omega’s hand a squeeze. “Forgot what it feels like, gettin’ shot. I’ve gone soft I guess.”

Rhys felt there was no end to his tears, and he tried moving even closer, restraining himself from enveloping the big alpha in a hug like he so desperately wanted. Plenty of time for that afterwards, after all. And the big alpha was still held together by literal threads. “Axton, I uh… I know this isn’t the best time to put this on you, but if they ask, you’re my fiancé,” Rhys noted, wiping his cheeks with a smile.

Axton grinned, thinking he’d heard him wrong, or his painkillers were looping him out something fierce. “…Did we get married while I was all drugged out?”

Rhys’ eyes filled with more tears, remembering the way the staff had shooed Vaughn from the place, only allowing Rhys’ presence as the declared lie had left his lips. He’d been almost exclusively by the alpha’s side since then, sticking steadfastly to his lie to not let the alpha out of his sight. “It’s the only way they’d let me stay with you,” he replied by way of explanation. It got a smiled huff from the other man, but that quiet acceptance was a bit premature.

Rhys looked a little cagey, watching him with more tears brimming and a sort of desperate look to his face. “Atlas is… uh… Axton, don’t take this the wrong way, because it’s not how I’d do it in any other circumstance, okay? But so they’ll let me take care of you, will you marry me? It’s okay if-- Look, just say yes so I can take care of you. Even if-- I mean it’s fast and too soon and just-- damn it’s fast I know-- but Atlas will let me take care of you for the long haul if they think you’re my fiancé, and I--”

“I died on the operating table, didn’t I?” Rhys frowned, cut short as Axton grinned crookedly as he spoke. “Can’t be heaven, ‘cuz this does hurt like a bitch, but it’s definitely not hell if you’re here.”

Rhys’ breath hitched as he shook his head, starting to sob a little in earnest as the alpha gave his hand a comforting squeeze. Axton only grinned, amused but light sounds coming from his battered body as the omega wiped at his eyes and wiped his nose on his shirt. Rhys knew he must look a total mess, but if Axton thought so, he sure didn’t show it.

“Is it… is it okay?” Rhys asked as his breathing hitched, needing to hear that he hadn’t overstepped himself-- that Axton would let him care for him during his recovery. “Just ‘til you’re better, I-I promise I’m not trying to push you into anything, I just wanna take care of you and--”

“Mmm…” Axton closed his eyes a moment, tired, but he still held Rhys’ hand in his own. “…We’re
gonna need rings.”

“Axton…” Rhys wondered if he’d ever stop crying at this point. The squeeze the alpha gave his hand made him sick with nerves, and happy, and relieved, and just exhausted all around.

That the alpha wasn’t opposed to the little white lie was a great relief unto itself though, and the call Rhys later put through to the HR director confirmed that yes, Axton had woken up, and yes, Rhys was “going public” with their “engagement”, and to please begin any necessary paperwork to make things go as smooth as possible.

The alpha back at Atlas only smirked smugly to herself. Not as big a phone call as the omega might have thought, but then, she was very perceptive, and Rhys and Axton were about as obvious as an elephant in the room.

--

Rhys was sitting next to Axton on the alpha’s small bed, nuzzling the man’s palm as he was back from his half-day at work.

It wasn’t easy leaving the big alpha every day, even as Axton got strong enough to do most things on his own, but coming back to him was one of the omega’s most eager pleasures, and he was keen to indulge it every chance he got.

Axton would be lying if he said he didn’t feel the same way.

“-and the glove is gonna be the featured showcase at the expo. Look at the display they have planned,” Rhys said as he showed photos from his phone. “Our stock is going to skyrocket.”

“Does that mean coffee makers on every floor?” Axton teased.

“Not as fancy as the nice one I got you, but yeah,” Rhys said with a grin. It cooled a bit on his face in thought, the idea of finally meting out some sort of late-vengeance on Jack right where it would hurt him the most: the CEO’s bottom line. “This will hurt Jack even worse than the scandal. We’re going to crush Hyperion, Ax.”

“Damn right you are, baby,” Axton growled appreciatively, pressing a kiss to Rhys’ cheek.

“It’s less than he deserves,” Rhys muttered regretfully as he returned the nuzzle, “but it’s something.” He pulled back to look in the other man’s green eyes, offering a smile in a sort of consolation. “The attorney said Jack is pleading temporary insanity. On the plus, Hyperion stock took another nosedive this morning.”

Axton just settled back into the pillows, pulling Rhys with him against his chest with a chuckle and a smile. “Nice.” He rubbed the omega’s back as they lay there, content to enjoy his scent and warmth and company. He missed Rhys so much when the omega was gone, and that hadn’t waned once since their positions as caregivers had switched.

He threaded their fingers together as he held their hands between them, a warmth blooming in his chest as he looked at Rhys’ hand. The omega wore Axton’s ring– his actual wedding ring from his previous marriage- on his finger to further the rumor they were engaged. It was the only ring the alpha had had available when they’d eventually discharged him from the hospital, and while he thought it was maybe a little tacky, Rhys did point out that it was Axton’s own ring, not his ex-wife’s, and it didn’t matter anyways, since they weren’t actually engaged, but if he wanted to get him something nicer later, then Rhys certainly wasn’t averse to the idea, and he liked garnets, by the way.
Seeing the simple ring on the omega’s finger filled him with pride, and even though Axton knew it was just to reap the benefits of letting the Atlas omega care for him at home, he liked to let his mind run away with the idea and imagine Rhys marrying him for real some day.

Baby steps, though. Baby steps.

“You’re going to be Atlas’ crown jewel after this, sweetheart,” Axton told him fondly, a hand rubbing circles into the omega’s back as he held him to him. “Bet you’re running the company in ten years.”

“Ten? More like five, come on now,” Rhys teased back, though it was true; he did have big plans. “Especially now that Hyperion is being dragged through the mud. And good riddance.”

“Yeah. Maya keeps asking when I wanna come back in for some lighter work.”

“Nothing you can’t do from here,” Rhys said stubbornly, making the alpha chuckle. The omega gave him a frown with no heat behind it. “You were shot, need I remind you?”

“Never spent this much time down when I was shot in the ass,” he laughed. “Actually, don’t think I spent any time down. Get it? I couldn’t sit.”

“Hardy-har-har,” Rhys replied but moved to press a kiss to his cheek. “Your material needs work.”

“I’m rusty, so shoot me.” Rhys batted him at those words, only making the alpha laugh in earnest, and he kissed Rhys’ lips with his own, smiling into the touch.

Axton’s phone vibrated on the bedside table, and he leaned to grab it while Rhys grumbled at him, and kept his arms around the alpha until Axton settled back down with him.

“Is that Vaughn?” Rhys asked.

“Nah, it’s Sal.”

“Vaughn said he was going to make pizza and set up that new game system that he just got if you’re still up to it.”

“I am, yeah,” Axton agreed with a grin, opening the message from the other alpha to snort at the quickly-snapped photo of Sal’s TV screen. “Hey, check this out baby: Guardianship of Hyperion is being handed down to Handsome Jack’s daughter while the CEO is in rehabilitation.” Axton frowned to himself, snorting. “Too little too-late for them. I didn't even know Handsome Jack had a daughter.”

“...Neither did I,” Rhys muttered, feeling foolish yet again thanks to Jack. “God, I can't believe I let that man bond me. I didn't even know anything about him.”

“Don't blame yourself for that, baby,” Axton growled supportively, hugging him close.

Rhys sighed and returned the hug, inhaling the alpha’s scent appreciatively. “One good thing came of it all, I guess.”

“Yeah? What?” Rhys rolled his eyes at that question, and Axton’s cheeks went red as he realized what he meant. The alpha smiled shyly. It was totally sappy, and he loved it. He decided to tease the omega, even as he could feel the heat in his own cheeks betraying his pleased embarrassment. “Just one, huh?”
Rhys looked at him several moments, a million different things going through his mind that he wanted to say. Axton’s smile grew, more and more amused as it was clear that Rhys was rendered momentarily speechless in choosing what he wanted best to say. The alpha lightly chuckled, and Rhys studied his face, smiling as he carefully chose his words. “I am so, so glad to have met you, Axton.”

“Ditto.”

Rhys rolled his eyes, trying not to smile in outrage at the simple word, but laughter ultimately erupting from him as Axton cuddled him close and Rhys returned his penitent kisses.

Axton was loving this. He wanted Rhys. He wanted him in every sense of the word. He wanted to possess him. To belong to him. To stay always with him if the other man would only grant him the privilege. And after living together for a few months now, the thought of being in separate apartments was agonizing.

Axton brushed his lips against Rhys’ forehead, heart rate picking up incredibly. “You know, we could make it a thing. This, I mean. A real one. I uh, I like waking up to you, Rhys,” he stuttered out, having trouble gathering his words the same way Rhys had his. “I’d prefer if we could keep it that way.” He nuzzled the younger man. “You know, once I’m all healed… You don’t have to but- You could, you could stay here. You can stay. With me.”

“Are you asking me to actually move in?” Rhys joked lightly. Axton just nodded his head, purring deeply in his throat. That woke Rhys up better than an espresso from across the street. “Wait, are you being serious?”

Axton could feel his cheeks heating and hear the blood rushing in his ears. Yeah, he realized he was absolutely serious. He wanted to share his life with the other man, and without knowing how long that might be, he didn’t want to waste time. “I love you, Rhys. I don’t want to be apart from you.”

Rhys snorted, utterly, utterly pleased as he could feel his eyes already swimming at those desperately-desired words. His voice was soft; strained with happiness. “You’re nuts.”

Rhys thought his heart might explode clean out his chest, or that he might have a heart attack any moment with how hard it was thudding. It was everything he wanted, and the confirmation of his own returned feelings as well. His brain kept reminding him that he’d been told he was loved and left before, but this was Axton. There was no way he’d hurt him.

It couldn’t silence the misgivings the younger man still held over from what he’d suffered under Jack, though. Even as he was ready to accept anything and everything Axton might be offering. “What do you… what do you want out of this?”

“I dunno… didn’t think that far.” Axton offered the other man a crooked grin, feeling the way Rhys’ heart beat against his chest. No doubt the omega could feel his own as well. “Just being around you all the time sounds plenty for me. See where things take us? No pressure. Hell, I mean, I shouldn’t even be pressing you but I just– I want you to know how I feel and where I stand.”

The warm smile Axton gave him was so full of fondness that Rhys had to kiss that crooked grin to keep himself from crying.

Of course the most perfect alpha out there wouldn’t want to force him into anything. Axton didn’t expect immediate and binding loyalty of the omega. He didn’t want to add Rhys to some list of conquests. No pressure except to be with one another. Just as Rhys would come to expect from Axton.
“I… think I could definitely move more stuff over here…” Rhys said with a smirk. “I mean, my stuff is all over your bathroom already.”

“You’re already moved in sweetheart. There ya go,” Axton said with a chuckle as they laid together, wiping his thumb under Rhys’ eye to catch the unshed tears there.

Rhys hugged him tightly but gently, and Axton cuddled him closely, thinking that even if Rhys decided he didn’t want him down the line, that he would absolutely cherish the way the younger man clung to him now, and the warmth he felt in his chest as he inhaled the omega’s scent.

Rhys pulled away from the other man, looking Axton in the face as he couldn’t keep it in anymore, even if his instincts were telling him to do otherwise: “I love you a real lot.”

There. He said it. The thing that had been fluttering around nervous inside of him for so so long now. It was out and free. And judging by the look it made surface on the alpha’s face, it had been the perfect response.

“Rhys, love…."

Rhys laughed, a little shocked at himself. But now that he’d said it, his brain was making a direct call between his heart and his mouth without filter, and the omega was shocked that he meant every single word: “If you wanna make this real-” Rhys proposed, lifting his hand where Axton’s own wedding band was safe and secure, “-I-I’d love to marry you. If you’d have me.”

Axton’s mouth hung open, and Rhys quickly filled the slight pause before he could even say anything.

“I’m not asking you to bond with me,” Rhys added quickly, smiling nervously. “But… if you’d like… Would you… consider getting married?”

Axton must’ve been far better and further healed than Rhys expected, because the words had only been out of his mouth for three seconds total before the alpha was pressing his back into the mattress, and pressing his face with kisses and laughter and half-stuttered words and phrases as the alpha blinked back tears.

“Is that a yes?” Rhys asked, chuckling a little self-consciously but more or less certain that Axton would have him.

Axton was sniffling, blinking away tears as his grin was as wide as his face, gathering Rhys in his arms and pulling him from where he’d been kissing the daylights out of him to hugging him bodily. “I was married before, you know, but I’ve never felt this happy in my entire life, Rhys. And that’s the honest truth.”

Rhys couldn’t help the watery chuckle that escaped him, Axton’s own surge of emotions affecting him as well. The alpha’s voice was wavering with feeling, but there was such brightness there, such happiness, that Rhys knew without a doubt that this was the right choice. The most perfect choice he could’ve made.

“Is it too late to tell you I’m kind of obsessed with you?” Rhys chuckled, reaching to wipe one of his eyes while Axton only laughed.

“Hell no. I love you, sweetheart. I wanna be with you for the rest of my life, whatever it throws at us.”

“That’s a pretty long time,” Rhys teased as if he was warning the other man what he was in for. “We
haven’t known each other that long; you could be the kind of man who has secret candy stashes he denies.”

“Could be,” Axton laughed brightly, touching their foreheads together and returning the grin Rhys had for him. “Guess we should be glad to have a head start, right baby?”

“I’m gonna find that stash.”

“You’ve got a lifetime to do it, sweetheart.”

Rhys rolled his eyes and laughed, pressing his lips to Axton’s one more time before hugging him tightly so they fit neatly together. Their scents mingled, and their voices snickering and happy and filled with what was unmistakably love just filled Rhys with the highest of hopes for their entwined futures. The worst had already been thrown their way, and they’d both survived it.

Whatever else may come, he knew they could handle it together.

Chapter End Notes

SUPER MEGA FUN HAPPY ENDING xD hahaha Did anyone see Jack showing back up coming? xD Or did ya'll think I had something else cool planned? hehehe (yeah, no tech expo, sorry!!) I super SUPER appreciate any and all comments! There’s just shy of 200 subscribers to this bad boy, I would really really appreciate a comment if you enjoyed this fic :) If the actual interest is still there and enough, I have more fics planned for this pairing :D If not, well, then i simply won't LOLOL

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