Evermore

by P3ac3fulFor3st

Summary

Jack is an unprecedented disaster. So Chase has a plan.

Notes

It's been a while since I've read a solid Jack-becomes-Chase's-apprentice fic. Every one I read, the apprenticeship is already established, they're boinking each other's brains out, and Chase's honor is... Nowhere to be seen. They say you should write the story you want to read. So here's mine.

Disclaimer: Yes, Jack is underage at the start of this story. That's why it's a slow-burn romance.
Chase's Plan

If ever there was a more disaster-prone individual, it was Jack Spicer. His victories were few and far-between, his losses typically spectacular and garnering frustration with the slightest pinch of pity from both Heylin and Xiaolin alike.

Chase Young, of course, was annoyed by the mere presence of the so-called “evil boy genius”. As a villain of renowned reputation, it was embarrassing to be seen with Spicer, let alone be on a first-name basis. At one point, Chase had a glimmer of hope for the boy. He was young, impressionable… But when the boy proved to be a colossal idiot, Chase cut all ties.

Or, at the very least, he attempted to. Spicer was harder to scrape off than gum on the bottom of one’s shoe.

Chase rubbed his temple with two fingers, eyes knitted shut against the soft throb starting up in his head. One of his warriors was before him, giving a repot on a band of renegades attacking a smaller town in the Land of Nowhere.

“Cut their supply lines,” Chase ordered. “Offer them a chance to surrender. If they do, feed them. Then present the choice of citizenship or joining my forces.”

“And if they refuse, my lord?”

“Destroy them. Leave one man alive and escort him back to the border.”

“As you say, my lord.”

The warrior left, transforming into a panther as they went. Chase made notes of the order on a scroll laying before him on the table. All in a day’s work as a warlord.

The slamming of a door accompanied by a shrill screech announced Wuya’s return. Chase clenched his jaw, eyes closing as he took a deep, steadying breath.

“That boy!” She hissed. “That stupid, bumbling boy and his infernal robots!”

“I assume Spicer was at the Showdown,” Chase said delicately, rolling up his scroll. “As you have returned empty-handed and in such a pleasant mood.”

“I am at the end of my rope!”

Chase rested his chin in a hand, elbow propped on the arm of his chair as he slouched, watching Wuya pace back and forth. She ranted and raved, seethed and scathed over Jack-this and Jack-that. He leaned over to the tiger on his right.

“Wake me when she’s finished,” he muttered. The tiger snorted softly.

“I’m begging you, you’ve got to do something!”

“And what exactly do you propose I do?” Chase snapped, finally losing patience. He stood, rounding the table. “I am perfectly aware that Spicer is a menace! He rushes in without thinking, does not listen to reason-!”

“But he’ll listen to you!” Wuya insisted. “Please, Chase, the boy almost died out there today!”
That got Chase’s attention. He stared at Wuya, who he suddenly realized was very close to tears. Tears for Jack? Quite likely. Somewhere between all the Showdowns and lost Wu and betrayals, Wuya had come to care for the boy. She was... A surrogate mother, older sister, estranged cousin. Despite the lack of a proper term, without meaning to, the Heylin witch had grown attached.

Chase disapproved, obviously. Not about the attachment itself; getting one’s self attached to anyone or anything in life is unavoidable, even he knew it. But getting attached to Spicer? Now that was a dismally poor maneuver in the world of villainy.

“What happened?”

“Those stupid Xiaolin Monks are just... They’re far more advanced. And they’re learning more every day. I don’t think they realize how easily they could put Jack in a hospital or worse, in a coffin. Please, Chase. If anyone can talk some sense into Jack, it’s you.”

Chase sighed. He pondered the issue, pondered Spicer. Where would he even start? The boy was relentlessly disastrous and completely helpless. He turned back to his table. It was covered in scrolls and maps which he sifted through, brushing aside spare quills.

His eyes fell on an old document. A contract. The one that boy Jermaine had signed under his tutelage, back when he’d been fixated on turning Omi to the side of evil. An idea sparked. What if...?

He turned back to Wuya.

“What if I made Spicer my apprentice?”

Wuya gaped at him.

“Chase, we want him to leave the conflict, not encourage him to stay and fight!”

“Who said anything about encouraging him? I’m suggesting we make him quit.”

“... You’ve lost me.”

Chase huffed, rolling his eyes. He brandished the old contract.

“If I can get Spicer to sign on as my apprentice, I will work him to the bone. He will be so tired and worn down, he won’t be able to find the time or energy to leave my citadel. Wuya,” he turned to her fully and the witch’s eyebrows were raised, “I will make him quit.”

Wuya puffed out her cheeks with a sigh.

“I don’t know,” she mused, shaking her head. “You may be surprised.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning your desire to make him quit may be outweighed by Jack’s own stubbornness.”

Chase scoffed.

“I doubt it. I’ll start drawing up the contract right away.”

-oOo-

Chase was as good as his word. When he wasn’t focused on the typical duties that came with
running a large kingdom, he was piecing together an apprenticeship contract.

It was unlike any contract he’d ever drawn up before. Jermaine’s contract, since it was meant to be a temporary way to test Omi, was incredibly simple. He also had another contract, this one more legitimate, for his brief apprenticeship with Katnappe.

Typically, an apprenticeship was drawn up via negotiations between party A (Chase) and party B (the apprentice). He’d sat down with Katnappe and discussed the terms. It was this interaction more than any that made him regret taking her under his wing. The teen was… Insufferably selfish and more than a little bratty. Plus the cat puns grated on his nerves. Luckily for him, Jack replaced her relatively quickly. However, due to his ineptitude, the boy never actually got around to signing a contract.

Chase was planning on using this fact to his advantage. Jack was in the dark on the proceedings and intricacies that came with being an apprentice. He wouldn’t give the boy the option of negotiations. He would bend and break to Chase’s will.

“Jeez, Chase, are you sure you’re not trying to kill him?”

Chase rolled his eyes, letting the scroll roll back up on it’s own accord. Wuya, who was reading the new contract from across the table, straightened with a huff.

“If I am not harsh, Spicer will undoubtedly persevere, even beyond the point of exhaustion. He endures those Xiaolin pests on a regular basis. I must not give him the option of enduring me.”

“Giving him only five hours of sleep a night with three simple meals a day is not going to exhaust him, it’s going to damage his health.”

“You know as well as I do that he has the survivability of a cockroach. He’ll live, I assure you.”

Wuya crossed her arms, scowling.

“Chase, if you hurt him-!”

“Wuya,” Chase said sharply, standing, palms flat on the table. “Do you want Spicer out of the Conflict or not?”

“Yes, of course, I do!”

“Then trust me.”

-oOo-

Jack had had worse. He examined the scorched patch of skin on his shin and winced. Kimiko had cut it really close this time. He knew they didn’t like him but… If he didn’t know better, he’d think they were trying to kill him.

He turned on the cold water, sitting on the edge of the tub in a tank top and boxers. Carefully, he shifted until his leg was under the flow and he groaned through his teeth, throwing his head back, eyes squeezed shut against the pain. He shook from the chill but didn’t budge; it needed to soak.

After five minutes, he patted it dry. Under the sink was a tub of aloe vera gel and he retrieved it, smoothing a generous layer on over the burn.

Padding through his lab from the bathroom, he plopped down on the couch in the corner. He
flinched, looking at the bruise that’d blossomed on his bicep from where Clay had clipped him. It ached miserably which meant he’d have to sleep on his opposite side.

Oh, well.

Even though it was still fairly early in the afternoon, he felt rather run down. He could go to bed early, he decided, but first he needed something to eat. He picked up his phone, debating on whether he wanted a burger or pizza.

Unbeknownst to him, a swirl of black Heylin magic materialized at the far end of the lab. Chase Young, in all his armored glory, stepped out of the vortex. His expression was set, determined. He sneered at Spicer where he lay on his side, staring at that tiny, glowing screen.

“Get up, Spicer.”

Jack startled, falling off the couch with a yelp. He stared up at Chase from the floor, wide-eyed and frozen. Chase glared.

“Chase! What are you doing-?”

“I said, get up, worm.”

Jack scrambled to his feet. He swallowed his words nervously as Chase stared him down.

“I hear you were an utter disaster today, Spicer. Am I correct in my assumptions?”

“Uh…” Jack flushed. “I, um… I didn’t get the Wu, if that’s what you mean.”

“I see,” Chase hummed. His eyes flickered to the large bruise on Jack’s arm, to the shining burn on his leg. “You do realize you’re fighting a losing battle, don’t you?”

“It just wasn’t my day. I’ll get the next one.”

“Indeed. Tell me, Spicer, have you ever stopped to consider that the Xiaolin Monks have had years of training? That they are still progressing while you remain stagnant in your abilities?”

“Th-that’s…!” Jack stuttered, trying to ignore the fact that Chase had stepped closer, almost looming over him. “I-I’ve learned things! I’ve improved!”

“It appears you have failed to realize that it is not enough. You are not enough.”

There was a painful lump in Jack’s throat. Because he knew that was true.

“In lieu of that, I have a proposition for you.”

“Chase, the last time you propositioned me, I spent a couple of days as a monkey.”

Chase snapped his fingers and Jack flinched at the noise. A scroll unraveled from thin air, the cursive words glistening gold.

“I assure you, this is very different sort of proposition. Know what this is, Spicer?”

Jack eyed the scroll. He shook his head.

“It’s an apprenticeship contract.”

Jack’s eyes flashed from the scroll to Chase, unable to stifle his gasp. Chase held up a hand,
stoppering the flow of babbling thanks that threatened to burst from the boy.

“Before you accept, you must understand what this means,” he said, voice dangerously low. “You will be following the schedule I set for you. You must do everything I say, when I say, bending over backwards to do my will. You will live at the citadel and in return, I will teach you how to fight and the way of the Heylin Warrior.”

Jack’s head spun. He couldn’t believe his luck. People like him didn’t get second chances. Yet here it was. His chance.

“Mark my words, Spicer,” Chase continued. “If you fail to meet my terms, I will dismiss you. And by dismiss you, I mean you will leave the Conflict.”

Jack’s heart skipped a beat. Leave? Leave? After all the time and effort, blood and tears, that went into chasing after Shen Gong Wu and executing plans for world domination… Leave? What was left? His robotics? All he knew was how to build weapons at this point. He’d have to relearn his entire craft from the ground up!

“Those are my terms. Now you can either reject my offer and continue being a pathetic failure, or you can accept my offer and become the force of evil you’ve always dreamt of. Do we have a deal?”

“I…”

Jack’s mind spun with Chase’s offer. Never in his wildest dreams did he ever expect this. He tried to weigh the options carefully but there was just no competition. At the age of 15, his parents were never home, he had no siblings, and he’d already graduated from high school via private tutors. It was either this apprenticeship or… What? Continue getting his ass handed to him on a regular basis?

He looked up at Chase, who was waiting patiently for his answer.

“Yes. Yes, I accept,” Jack finally said resolutely. “I won’t let you down, Chase.”

Chase waved his hand, a quill appearing beside the scroll along with… A knife. Jack eyed it suspiciously.

“Uh… What’s the knife for?”

“You thought a deal with the devil would be signed without the shedding of blood?” Chase said wryly, raising an eyebrow. “Palm out, Spicer.”

Jack held out his left hand shakily, breaking into a cold sweat. Chase placed the blade against his palm and, with a flash of silver, cut a clean line across the skin. Jack hissed as the blood pooled. It dripped down onto the sign-line at the bottom of the contract.

“Now sign.”

Jack took the quill in his right hand. He scratched his name out, the crimson stain glistening in the basement’s low light…

The contract rolled up on it’s own accord, it and the instruments vanishing. Jack looked up at his new master with an excited grin. It slid right off his face at the ice in Chase’s eyes.

“Pack a bag. If you are not back here before me in 10 minutes, I will leave without you.”
Jack tore out of the lab.

-oOo-

Jack skidded to a halt in front of Chase with one minute to spare. His duffle bag was slung over his shoulder, packed with only the necessities. He was panting, having not even paused to actually get dressed, paranoid he’d be late.

The swirl of magic lifted their hair as Chase teleported them out of the lab. When the black swirls dissipated, they were standing in his throne room. Jack released a shaky breath. This was it. No turning back.

“Follow me.”

Chase led Jack through a side door, down a long hallway, around a corner. He opened a wooden door to reveal… A cell? No, a room. A room small enough to be a cell. In it was a single bed with fur coverings, a chest of drawers, and a door leading to what Jack guessed was a bathroom.

“Get dressed and meet me in the throne room. Training starts in 10 minutes.”

Chase closed the door behind him. Jack’s mind was a whirlwind. For a moment, he stared around at the dismal room. He swallowed, heart thrumming in his throat.

He tossed his duffle bag down on the bed, unzipping it and pulling out sweatpants. He tugged them on, also putting on canvas shoes. His hands shook as he tied them. Was it just him or was Chase already pissed? Jack hadn’t even had the chance to piss him off yet! This didn’t inspire confidence in the least.

Chase was waiting for Jack when he arrived. Standing in the center of the room, he was holding two staffs.

“We will go over your schedule and the rules momentarily. But first, I need to assess your… Skills.”

He sneered the last word and Jack was pretty sure that in Chase’s eyes, he had no skills to speak of. Which wasn’t true. Jack had skills, certainly. Just not any that Chase valued.

And definitely not in the way he was about to be tested.

Jack almost didn’t catch the staff that was thrown at him. But he was glad he did; one second he was clutching the staff in his clammy hands, the next Chase was swinging at him.

“Whoa!”

He jumped back, holding the staff with both hands like a shield. Chase’s staff came down on it, the other end coming around in an arc, slamming into Jack’s side. He jumped to the side with a grunt, swinging his staff experimentally, the bruise on his arm twinging sharply at the movement. Chase knocked the end out of the way with ease, turning and jabbing the end into Jack’s stomach. His air escaped in a gasp and he stumbled back. Chase nailed the back of Jack’s knees and he buckled with a cry, flat on his back, breathless. Pinned, the staff against his throat.

“Pathetic,” Chase hissed. “You know nothing. I will have to start completely from scratch.”

He pulled away and Jack rolled over onto his hands and knees, coughing.
“Get up.”

Jack obeyed, rising shakily. The burn on his leg throbbed miserably from the unexpected activity. He held the staff close to his chest, tight in his fists. Chase circled him slowly and as he did so, he spoke.

“From henceforth you will address me as either ‘sir’ or ‘master’. Your schedule will be fairly simple. You will wake early and run a mile. After breakfast, drills. After lunch, sparring with both weapons and hand-to-hand combat. After dinner, chores. And you will not be going to bed until I say you are done for the day.”

Jack was willing himself not to cry, trying to keep his shaking to a minimum. This was going to be far more intense than he’d thought it was going to be. He was so screwed. He’d either emerge a completely different person or Chase was going to murder him.

“You will eat what I give you and when I say so, sleep when I tell you, I say ‘jump’, you say ‘how high’, is that clear?”

“Crystal, sir.”

Unseen by Jack, the corner of Chase’s lips quirked up; as much as he loathed to admit it, respect was attractive in the boy’s mouth. He reached out, prying the staff from his fingers, almost gently.

“Have you eaten?”

Jack, taken aback by the question, stuttered.

“N-no.”

“No, what?”

“No, sir.”

Chase snapped his fingers. A tiger stepped forward. It bowed its head in respect.

“Take him back to his quarters then to the nearest bathroom. Spicer, I expect you to shower and wash out that awful hair gel. Make-up off, too. Dinner is at 6. You’re dismissed.”

As Jack was led away, Wuya stepped out of the shadows. She was trying to appear nonchalant but Chase could see the tell-tale sign of worry in her eyes.

“He’s not going to quit, you know.”

“We have only just begun, Wuya. Spicer has not yet experienced how harsh of a master I can be. Have a little faith.”

“Faith,” Wuya scoffed. “I’ll believe you can break him when I see it.”

“And you will,” Chase assured her, signing off on the dinner menu a lion brought him. “It is only a matter of time. And patience.”

He gave her a pointed look and she rolled her eyes.

“Will you be joining us for dinner?”

“I may as well.”
The tiger padded down the halls quietly. Jack followed, rubbing at his neck where Chase’s staff had choked him. If he’d pushed down just a little harder… He didn’t want to think of snapped necks and asphyxiation. It would definitely bruise.

Once back at Jack’s room, the tiger transformed into a tall warrior wearing furs. His eyes were narrow, dark and calculating, strands of ebony hair falling into them.

“There are towels in the wardrobe,” he spoke in a low tone, voice smooth. “Retrieve your toiletries and rejoin me.”

He waited in the hall for Jack.

“So, um…” Jack started quietly as he followed the warrior, holding his towel and toiletry bag to his chest. “What’s your name?”

“My name is of no importance,” he rumbled. “I have been assigned to your well-being and that is all you need to know.”

“Alrighty then…”

“If you have any questions at all, I will be the one to answer them for you. I would resist asking the master; he is not known for his patience.”

Jack definitely already knew that. At the end of the hallway was a door that the warrior opened and Jack couldn’t stop his jaw from dropping. Inside was a large room with several pools of water sunk right into them. Steam rose in curling swirls from the placid surfaces, so he assumed they were natural hot springs.

“This is a public bath. Don’t bother the other warriors and they won’t bother you.”

Ice cold dread washed over Jack like a wave and he shivered involuntarily.

“It’s 5:15. I would not suggest being late for dinner.”

“O-okay, thanks…”

Jack was left alone. He looked around frantically, praying he was the only one utilizing the room. It appeared he was and he finally breathed easier. Finding the pool farthest from the door, he placed his stuff in a corner and stripped down.

The water was warm, really warm, borderline hot. He gritted his teeth against the pain as it enveloped the burn on his leg. He slid in completely, relieved that he could touch the bottom. The water came up to his chest, nearly covering his shoulders. He dipped down to fully wet his hair.

His toiletry kit was an emergency one he had stashed in his helipack a long time ago. It contained shampoo, soap, sunscreen, deodorant, toothpaste, a toothbrush, make-up wipes, and eyeliner. With the chaos and unpredictability of Showdowns, it paid to be prepared. And damn, he was glad he had it.

He took a make-up wipe to his eyeliner, scrubbing his face and then body with the bar of soap. Then he shampooed his hair, getting the grime of the day out of it. He checked his phone. 5:30.

He took deep breaths to calm himself. He was in this now. No backing out. Even if Chase was an
absolute tyrant. If Jack left the conflict, he’d have nothing. Villains didn’t plan back-up careers.

Jack arrived in the dining room with 10 minutes to spare. When Chase turned to look at him, he stared for a moment; red hair hung limply around Jack’s ears, wet but brushed out. Without the harsh black eyeliner, he looked like a completely different person.

“Take a seat.”

He indicated one of the two other chairs at the table. The other was occupied by Wuya.

“Almost didn’t recognize you without your eyeliner, Jack.”

“Hello to you, too,” Jack sniffed as he sat. Chase cleared his throat and Jack took it as an order to shut his mouth. Which he did.

He looked at the bowl set before him. It was simple. Grilled chicken with some kind of sauce and green beans with eggplant over white steamed rice. Green tea in a cup. He took the chopsticks in hand then froze at the look Wuya was giving him. She was already eating but she shook her head minutely, eyeing the chopsticks.

Then Jack remembered. He looked to Chase for confirmation. The man, who’d been watching the exchange, nodded. He ate quietly.

“Which of the monks gave you that one?”

Jack looked up at Wuya then at the bruise on his bicep she’d indicated. He swallowed his mouthful.

“Clay,” he muttered with a scowl. “That southern asshole got me with the Fist of Tebigong. Surprised he didn’t break my arm, actually.”

Chase took this moment to get a better look at the bruise. It took up most of Spicer’s upper arm, horribly black and blue. The arm itself was thin, long and lanky… Chase realized he would likely hit a growth spurt in a year or so. He was only 16, after all.

It then occurred to Chase how strange it was to meet a 16 year old with plans for world domination. Where had Spicer’s obsession with evil come from? Where had Spicer’s obsession with him, Chase Young, come from?

It didn’t matter. The boy would quit. Chase would make sure of it.

“Don’t you have the Reversing Mirror?”

“Yeah, I do, but it’s getting harder to block them; they’re a lot faster than they used to be.”

“That reminds me,” Chase interjected smoothly. “Unless I approve it, you will not be going out to retrieve any Shen Gong Wu.”

Jack turned his head sharply, gaping.

“What? B-but that’s-!”

Chase set down his chopsticks with a sharp sound that rang throughout the room, effectively cutting Jack off.

“Stand.”
Jack’s chair screeched as he made to follow the order. His fists clenched, partially in fear. Part of him was pissed. He wasn’t allowed to go after Shen Gong Wu anymore? He guessed he should’ve assumed… After all, didn’t Chase repeatedly call them toys? Crutches for true power?

Chase had also stood. Wuya watched in interest.

“Allows me to reiterate what I said earlier. Your progression up until this point has not been on par with the Xiaolin monks. Severely lacking as you are in your ability to fight them, you will not be leaving to participate in Showdowns until I say you are ready. Are we clear?”

Jack felt the heat creep up his neck. Chase raised an eyebrow.

“I said… Are we clear?”

“… Yes, master.”

Wuya nearly swallowed her soup spoon. She coughed harshly. Chase nodded.

“Sit. Finish your meal.”

Jack obeyed. What the hell had he gotten himself into?
Blood and Bruises

Chapter Notes

Guys, wow! Thanks for all the warm reception on this story! Seriously, it means so much to me.

Teaching is going well. My students just turned in self-portraits and we're in the middle of a Van Gogh unit. I just bought myself the sunflower yellow Switch Lite and I am in looooolove! If anyone has game recommendations, I'm all ears!

Enjoy the chapter!

The bed in Jack’s room could hardly be called a bed. It was essentially a slab of wood held up by a metal frame and topped with a very thin pad. Jack couldn’t sleep on his side; it hurt like hell. In fact, laying on the “bed” at all hurt. The comforter he’d been given was made for the summer, light and airy, but it smelled faintly of mildew.

Needless to say, the sleeping arrangements combined with his nerves, Jack didn’t sleep very well. Which made the 5 AM wake-up call all the more abrupt.

“I’m up, I’m up!” Jack yelped as a tiger dragged him out of bed by the pant leg. It dropped his leg with a snort, transforming into the dark-haired warrior from the day before.

“Get dressed. The master is expecting you at the front door in fifteen minutes.”

Jack pulled on his clothes quickly. There was a basin on the dresser of fresh water and he washed his face and brushed his teeth. He hopped out of the room on one foot, tying his shoes before breaking into a dead sprint to the front door.

Chase was waiting there for him. He was wearing full armor and looking effortlessly fierce as usual.

“Your first task is to run a mile,” he said, not even bothering to greet the boy with a good morning. “The trail is marked with flags and ends at the river. Breakfast is at 6. I expect you there.”

He placed a hand in-between Jack’s shoulder blades, pushing him outside before closing the door behind him.

Jack swallowed, looking at his watch. He had forty-five minutes. He looked around the front porch, seeing a small red flag stuck into a rocky crag to the far right. He approached to find a set of stone stairs. They were set right into the side of the mountain citadel and went down, down, down… Disappearing into darkness. His heart hiccuped.

Jack could’ve stood there freaking out all day but he didn’t have all day. He took to the stairs at a jog.

When he made it to the bottom, he found himself standing at the edge of a dead forest. A red flag
fluttered slightly in the soft breeze from a path leading into it. Jogging forward, the trees swallowed him quickly. It plunged him into a nearly impenetrable gloom, fog thick and heavy in the air.

The path marked with flags wound through the skeletal trees for what seemed like an eternity. He reached the river. There was a bucket waiting there for him with a note written in an elegantly tidy scrawl…

*Fill it up to the line with water. Bring it back. Don’t spill a single drop.*

There was, upon closer inspection, an indented line around the inside rim of the bucket, a few inches from the lip. It was going to be absolute hell carrying it back up all those steps.

Well. Jack figured he’d better get started.

-oOo-

It was 5:55 when Jack finally made it to the dining room, him and his stupidly heavy bucket of water. Chase was sitting in his seat at the table, drinking either green tea or Lao Mang Lone, Jack was unsure. Either way, it pissed him off in a way Jack never thought it would.

He placed the bucket beside the table. Chase eyed it. Then, from out of thin air, he conjured… A mop. He handed it to Jack who looked at it in question, still panting.

“Mop the room,” he ordered. “Only then may you have breakfast.”

“Are you serious right now?” Jack gasped out. He bit his tongue at the sharp look Chase gave him. Ice shot down his spine when he found a gloved hand under his chin.

“Respect, Spicer. You *will* learn it before this apprenticeship is concluded.” Chase removed his hand, standing from the table. “Training starts at 6:30. I hope for your sake, you’ve finished by then. It will be far more difficult on an empty stomach.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack muttered.

Forcing himself to take deep breaths, Jack took the bucket to the edge of the room to get started. He plunged the mop into it, plopping it down on the floor and starting to push it in broad strokes. It was only day one and Jack already felt pretty miserable. He wouldn’t get to eat if he couldn’t get his task done on time. It was sick.

“And if it’s not up to my standards,” Chase drawled. “I’ll make you do it again later.”

Jack clenched his teeth.

“Yes, sir.”

-oOo-

After only having enough time to scarf down a baozi and a cup of lukewarm tea, Jack Spicer was thrust into training. It was unlike any type of training he’d ever heard of. He’d never had any measure of kung fu training experience before but… He had to wonder if Chase ever actually taught anyone.

His belly was flat on the mat in what Chase referred to as the gym. It was a room much like the rest of the citadel expect that it was filled with a plethora of instruments of torture—uh… Exercise
“Keep going, Spicer,” Chase ordered. “You’ve got ten more.”

Jack hated push-ups and in that moment, Jack hated Chase, too.

Arms burning, he finally reached his quota and collapsed, cheek against the mat. It was incredible
he’d managed them at all. They’d been at it for an hour. Sit-ups, chin-ups (which he could barely
do), push-ups, etc… He’d lost track of just how many he did.

Jack rolled over onto his back, gasping for breath. His legs shaking and aching, he prayed and
wished with every fibre of his being that Chase’s next orders didn’t require him standing. Even that
seemed a bit too strenuous at the moment.

“You’ll be on the circuit next,” the warlord (a title which Chase was living up to beautifully) said,
jerking his head towards an obstacle course on the far side of the room. “Take a minute. Catch your
breath.”

Jack sat up carefully, wincing and panting, grateful for his short reprieve. There was a bottle being
thrust into his hands and he took it. Chase made a noise of disgust as he guzzled the cool water
down.

“Slowly, Spicer, you’re going to make yourself sick.”

Jack forced himself to take measured sips.

“Alright, time’s up. On your feet.”

The obstacle course was a mammoth thing. Monkey bars, ropes, poles, walls, spinning clubs,
pendulums, all more than ten feet off the floor. Jack was relieved to see the safety net laid out
beneath it, something he was willing to bet was set up specially for him.

“How long should I…?”

Chase paused in the doorway and turned back. A lazy smirk rolled out across his lips.

“Until I say so.”

With a flick of long, black hair, he was gone.

After two hours of Jack running himself ragged through the obstacle course, Chase reappeared
with a drawstring bag in his hand.

“Spicer, to me.”

Jack didn’t have to be told twice. He stumbled away from the course to stand in front of Chase,
definitely more than a little bruised. Chase nodded, seemingly satisfied. He tossed the bag at Jack.

“Put that on.”

Pulling open the bag, Jack pulled out a harness. Frowning, he slipped his legs and arms into the
holes.

“What is this-?”

“Follow me.”
Jack trailed behind Chase, quiet due to pure exhaustion. Never in his life had he been so active. Never. And he thought Showdowns were tiring.

Chase led Jack out of the citadel to an area he’d never been before. It was a large rocky balcony that looked out over the forest and the mountains beyond. It was a breath-taking sight and for a moment, all Jack could do was stare in awe.

“Do you know what those mountains border, Spicer?”

“No, sir.”

Chase spoke as he busied himself. He looped a rope around the bar set into the side of the citadel, tying a series of complicated knots.

“Those are the mountains bordering the Land of Nowhere. My domain and my people.”

“Yes. My people. People who depend on me to protect and maintain their way of life. As my apprentice, they will also come to depend on you.”

Chase grabbed Jack by the front of the harness, pulling him in. He tied the other end of the rope to the metal loop over Jack’s pant waistband.

“In order to be my apprentice, I must have your complete and total trust.”

Jack looked up from Chase’s hands to his face and froze. Golden eyes bore into his own. He squeaked when his feet left the ground, Chase lifting him by the front of the harness and walking forward until Jack was dangling over…

Nothing. It was a one hundred foot drop straight down into the trees. Crimson eyes wide, Chase’s face blurred as they filled with tears and panic.

“Trust is a two-way street. When you come to trust me, you will earn my trust in return.”

“M-master,” Jack rasped out. “What-?”

“Spicer. Trust me.”

And then Chase dropped him.

-oo-

“Where’s Jack?” Wuya asked. She was soaking her feet in one of the many shallow wading pools in the citadel, painting her fingernails a deep shade of purple.

Chase smirked lightly in passing, a glint in his eye.

“Climbing back up the mountain.”

Wuya’s eyes widened as Chase ascended the stairs towards his throne room.

“So you did it? You actually threw that boy off the balcony? Chase!”

“It was a bungee cord, Wuya,” Chase groaned, turning to face her. “Spicer will be fine.”

“Oh, and that suddenly makes it okay?”
“Do you want him to quit or not?”

“… Yes.”

“I rest my case.”

Chase continued on his way to his throne room, muttering under his breath.

“Perhaps I should throw you off the mountain and teach you a solid lesson…”

-oOo-

The days didn’t get much better from there on out.

Every morning, Jack carried a bucket of water up the mountain and mopped a room of Chase’s choosing. Sometimes he got breakfast, sometimes he didn’t. Then the drills. Endless push-ups, endless loops on the obstacle course. In the afternoon, after a light lunch, they would spar. And spar. Jack’s bruises had bruises, especially after Chase introduced training with a staff. Then the chores. After dinner, Jack washed windows, scrubbed dishes, did laundry… It was never-ending.

But that wasn’t the worst part. Chase always sprung something new and terrifying on him during morning training. Something he called “character building”.

The bungee jump off the side of the citadel was just the beginning. One day had Jack digging holes in the forest (for what, he didn’t know, but he was guessing they were graves). Another had him standing in the center of the room with three books balanced on his head.

The time Chase ordered him to retrieve a key from around the neck of one of his panthers was a very difficult day. It took him three hours and several fresh salmon from the river to get the stubborn jungle cat to hand it over. And a nasty scratch on his forearm that bled all over the place and ached miserably. His chore that evening was to clean up all the blood and salmon remains.

After that particular incident, Chase was rather surprised (and just a bit impressed) when Spicer didn’t throw in the towel on the spot. The warlord was slowly becoming more frustrated. He was running Spicer ragged day after day but there was no end in sight.

He just kept going. In his irritating, stubborn, Spicer-esque way.

It was absolutely infuriating.

“My lord.”

Chase turned from watching Jack run through the obstacle course for the umpteenth time. He stepped out into the hall. The warrior went to one knee, bowing his head.

“Rise. What news do you have?”

The warrior stood again.

“The renegades in the borderlands have been contained,” he informed Chase in a deep voice. “Most of them surrendered and have been given temporary housing. The ones who refused were executed.”

“One man escorted to the border?”
“Yes, my lord.”

“Excellent. How many men surrendered?”

“Fifty exactly.”

“Keep a small sector of 10 warriors on patrol there for the next week. Report any and all incidents to me.”

“As you wish.”

“You’re dismissed.”

-oOo-

Jack hoisted the bucket up over the last step, gasping as he finally made it back up to the citadel’s porch. It was slowly getting warmer outside as the days bore into late June, making the morning trek to and from the river all the more difficult. He sat on the top step, pushing his sweaty hair back off his forehead.

He checked his watch. 5:40. He was getting better at this.

When he arrived in the dining room with the bucket of water, Chase looked at him over the top of his newspaper. He nodded in a subtle show of approval that made Jack stand just a little taller.

“Which room do I need to mop today, master?”

“Well,” Chase started, folding up his newspaper and standing. “You’ve mopped virtually every room in the citadel save for the rooms you’re not allowed in…”

He went quiet, seeming to ponder something as he examined the bucket. Then he put his foot on the lip, kicking it over. Jack jumped out of the way as river water washed across the floor.

“Clean that up. Drills at 6:30.”

And he left. Jack stood there gaping, frozen to the spot in disbelieving outrage. He grabbed the mop from it’s typical place, muttering under his breath about stupid warlords and their stupid smirks and stupid plans.

In a fit of frustration, Jack threw down the mop and the clatter echoed around the room. He gripped his hair. Bent double. Teeth gritted against the scream that threatened to burst forth…

Then he reached out. Retrieved the mop. Continued with the task. Took deep breaths.

-oOo-

Jack felt… Rough.

He sank into the bath at 10 PM, biting back a scream as his aching muscles were enveloped by hot water. His arms gave out and he fell in. A hoarse cry escaped, every limb trembling. Finally managing to lean back against the tub’s stone edge, he groaned, not quite sure if he would be able to get back out again.

Not for the first time since becoming Chase’s apprentice, Jack seriously considered leaving. Just packing his belongings and disappearing back into his parents’ basement to make robots for the rest of his sad and lonely life. While incredibly depressing in theory, that particular lifestyle was
looking more and more friendly with each passing day.

Chase was brutal. Jack felt like he wasn’t learning anything except maybe how to take orders. He had to admit, though, he was gaining a bit more stamina…

Combined with the harsh training schedule and his restless nights, Jack didn’t have much of an appetite. His stomach rolled with nervous nausea. He ate what Chase gave him but often wound up missing breakfast. He could never quite finish his meals. Maybe if he did, he’d actually build some muscle. Instead, he was just thinner. Not that there was much weight to lose in the first place; he was starting to appear rather gaunt.

Carefully, slowly, he began to wash himself, head spinning from the heat of the bath. When he finally managed to pull himself out and stand, the room swam before his eyes and he placed a battered hand on the wall to keep himself up. He waiting, closing his eyes to block it all out.

When he finally made it back to his room, he put on the sweats and tank top he’d wear the next day. Just so he could get those extra five minutes of sleep.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and grimaced. He looked a complete wreck. Bruises, cuts, and scrapes littered what he could see of his pale skin. The panther scratches stood out angrily on his arm, swollen and red. He applied the balm Chase had given him and rewrapped it gently.

Something heavy sat in his chest, something aching and raw like the wounds on his body. He didn’t know why but… He’d thought Chase would’ve bandaged him up. Instead, a warrior had brought the supplies and Jack was left to fend alone.

When his head hit the pillow, Jack faded fast. All he could think as he fell asleep was if he had any potential, any at all, Chase would be able to point him in the right direction. If Chase couldn’t, then Jack was convinced no one else could.

Surely, something good would come of all this pain. It had to.

-oOo-

Jack jumped from the monkey bars to a platform, the first of many to tackle on the obstacle course. His knees shook from the effort of holding himself up. He moved as quickly as he could.

Dodge the pendulums. Climb the wall. Swing across and grab the rope mid-air. He ignored the way the room kept warping before his eyes.

Chase was occupied, talking in quiet tones to one of his many warriors not too far away.

“The new residents have taken well to living in your domain, my lord.”

“No troubles, I take it?”

“None, my lord. They are grateful.”

Chase nodded in approval.

“Put them to work in the fields. If they don’t have work, they’ll be unable to eat. The rations we provided for them won’t last forever. Make sure to spread them out to prevent factions.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The warrior left and Chase turned his attention back to Jack. The boy was standing on one of the
circular platforms in the middle of the course. He was still, for some reason.

“Spicer!” He barked. “Did I say you could stop?”

Spicer didn’t respond nor did he move. Chase opened his mouth again, this time to berate. He never got the chance.

The boy crumpled, tumbling off the platform in a dead faint.

“Spicer!”

Chase was across the room in a split-moment, moving faster than any human could. He caught Jack as he plummeted, landing on the other side of the course, just clear of the net. Immediately, he began to check the boy’s vitals. The chest was rising and falling in shallow breaths, much shallower than they should be but still present.

Heart thrumming against his throat, Chase examined the boy in his arms. He was a mess, a bruised and battered rag doll. Now that he had quite literally collapsed from the overexertion, surely the boy would quit…

Jack shuddered lightly in his arms, drawing Chase’s attention to his face. Red eyes fluttered open. Jack licked his lips and drew in a ragged breath.

“I—I’m sorry, Master…” He rasped out weakly. “I’ll try h-harder… Promise… Just need to… Get back up…”

To his horror, Chase felt Jack try to push himself up, try to stand.

“No, Spicer,” Chase insisted, keeping Jack locked into place against his chest with an arm. “You will do no such thing. Rest.”

With permission from his master, Jack’s eyes rolled back as he went limp again.

Chase should’ve noticed before this point that Jack Spicer would never quit. As he stood, carrying the far-too-light form of his unconscious apprentice out of the room, he came to another startling realization:

The boy had potential.

-oOo-

Chase sat in his throne, sifting through all his plans littering the table before him. All of his dreams and schemes sang of his undoubtable evil genius and yet… He felt as if he’d finally gone too far.

The boy lying unconscious in his own home told that tale all too clearly.

Tangling his fingers in his hair, Chase leaned forward to rest his elbows on the surface, trying to quell the strange coil in his chest that’d been tightening since he watched Jack plummet. The boy was his responsibility. He’d looked to him, Chase Young, for guidance and instruction. And he’d failed him.

Was this guilt? Did he feel guilty for purposefully pushing Jack far beyond his limits? Had he toyed a bit harshly with his physical and emotional health?
Yes, yes, and yes.

“So… What now?”

Wuya.

Chase lifted his head, regarding her over his clasped hands. She was paler than usual, practically ashen with what he was sure was worry.

“Now,” he said quietly, “we reevaluate our intentions and then our plans.”

“I thought our intentions were to protect Jack.”

Sudden fire flashed through Chase’s senses and he saw red. With a yell, he shoved the table aside, sending papers flying everywhere, scrolls bouncing off the tiled floor.

“And look where that got him!”

Wuya didn’t bat an eye, used to and unafraid in the face of his unpredictable rage.

“I hate to be that girl,” she hummed, examining her nails, “but I told you he wasn’t going to quit.”

The room was tensely quiet save for the final flutterings of papers. Panting, Chase pinched the bridge of his nose, carefully reigning back in his temper. He waved a hand and the papers righted themselves into neat piles.

“Yes,” he huffed. “I am aware. I was wrong. I have been… Entertaining a new idea. A new angle from which to approach this.”

“Please, by all means, share with the class. Because I’m fresh out of ideas to keep that idiot boy alive.”

Chase turned the idea over in his mind again, examining it from all angles. Since putting Jack to bed, he’d thought of nothing else, and as ridiculous as it was… It had merit.

“I draw up another apprenticeship contract, this one real. This time, I take Spicer seriously, pour my knowledge into him, teach him everything I know. I cannot protect him, Wuya. But I can train him to protect himself.”

Wuya’s eyes were wide and Chase sneered at the disbelief reflected in them.

“I will mold Jack Spicer into a villain worthy of evil and, at his very core, respect. And when I am finished with him, he will bring this world to its knees.”

Chapter End Notes

Oof, poor Jack. That was a bit rough. Either way, I hope y’all enjoyed this chapter!
Wild will be updated next weekend!

Answer in the comments: What's something you've always wanted to learn?

Til next time!
ANNOUNCEMENT: I will be out of town on a retreat in the mountains this weekend (27th-29th) so Wild will not be updated until October 4th. Thank you for your patience.
Raimundo grinned as he passed the latest Shen Gong Wu from hand to hand. It was a golden fish with eyes of emerald. When activated, it spewed copious amounts of silver coins until asked (politely, they discovered) to stop. The young monks filled an entire room with coins until they figured that one out. All things considered, it was… A pretty useless Wu in a fight.

“I mean, if you’re a couple bucks short on rent, it ain’t bad,” Clay reasoned with a shrug.

“I’d rather us have it than Jack,” Kimiko chimed in as she walked by with her GamePal. “Who knows what he’d do with it!”

Omi, who was a fair distance away under the shade of a large oak tree, frowned deeply, brow furrowing together. Raimundo rest his arm atop his head, leaning casually.

“Why the long face, lil man?”

“I am thinking that it is strange Jack Spicer has been absent from the past two Showdowns,” he shared thoughtfully. “Wuya has shown her hideous facade but Spicer is hiding in action.”

“Missing in action,” Raimundo corrected.

“Whichever. My point is, I am concerned.”

“Do you think maybe he’s given up?” Clay asked, catching the Wu when Raimundo tossed it. “We kicked his butt real good the last time we saw him.”

“Spicer is too enamored with darkness to give up his dreams of world domination,” Omi sighed sadly. “So I am rightfully worried. What if he is sick? Or very badly injured? He is only human, after all… As strange as he may be.”

“Would going to check on him make you feel better?” Kimiko asked, switching off her game and giving Omi her full attention. Omi smiled weakly.

“Yes, that would be most helpful.”

-oOo-

Katnappe cursed when she dropped her frappuccino, the vanilla bean luckily blending right into the white shag carpeting. The knock on her door was completely unexpected. This was her time and her time alone. How dare anyone, anyone at all, interrupt it? Muttering darkly, she scooped one of her super-kittens off her lap (who mewed in protest) and deposited her on the floor before standing and stretching.
“Alright, alright!” She huffed as the knocking grew more insistent. “Jeez…”

Plucking her partially-spilt frappuccino back up, she stepped over the mess, long silk kimono brushing with a soft swish across her calves. She opened the door. A scowl crossed her face.

“What do you want?”

Why the Xiaolin Monks were on her doorstep was beyond her realm of understanding. Omi (bless him) blushed deeply before speaking.

“Good afternoon, Miss Katnappe. We were wondering if you had seen Jack Spicer recently.”

“Ugh,” Katnappe groaned, leaning against her doorframe. “Why would I have anything to do with that dweeb?”

“Because you’re… Cousins?” Kimiko said slowly with an eye roll. Katnappe raised an eyebrow, taking a loud sip from her frappuccino.

“And? Just because you share blood doesn’t mean you’re all buddy-buddy.”

“We’re just curious, ma’am,” Clay said, holding his hat to his chest, a slight blush high in his cheeks. “Spicer’s been missing-in-action from the past few Showdowns and, well…”

“Awww, you’re worried,” Katnappe simpered. “That’s cute. He’s probably just locked up in the basement of his with his stupid robots.”

“That’s what we thought,” Raimundo offered. “But we checked and he wasn’t there. The entire house was empty.”

Katnapped scoffed. These monks were absolutely clueless. She narrowed her eyes at them critically, wondering how much Spicer family drama she should give away.

“Well, of course,” she said delicately, deciding to just give the basics. “His parents work abroad. Diplomats. They’re rarely home. So I’m not surprised the house is empty. I’d check with Tubbimura. They’re still in contact.”

“How do we find Tubbimura?” Kimiko asked. She couldn’t help the sick feeling in her stomach. Her daddy worked hard, that much was true, but he always came home in the evening and took time out of his busy schedule for her. She wondered how often Jack saw his parents. How often Jack saw any family at all.

“He’s easy to find,” Katnappe said with a smirk. “Just follow the McDonald’s wrappers to Kyotot’s Gion District. There’s a place called En Tearoom. The ramen joint right beside it is a place Jack and Tubbimura frequent. They meet every… Wednesday night, I think.”

“How do you know all this?” Omi asked, bewildered.

“Jack never shuts up,” Katnappe huffed, finishing her frappuccino. “Good luck on your little quest. Cat-ch you later.”

And she shut the door in their faces. Grumbling, she checked her watch. They’d cut into her cat nap time. Bastards.

-oOo-

The Gion district was winding down for the evening. Traditionally dressed geishas disappeared and
along with them, the tourists that came to see them. Tubbimura preferred Gion when it was quiet. Quiet and empty. In Japanese society, where they quite valued slim figures, he was often shunned for being the size he was. He was, unfortunately, anything but slim.

It was probably the number one reason he'd been inclined to take up villainy in the first place. If the world already branded you as a bad guy… Then why the hell not?

Looking the way he did, Jack Spicer had that in common with Tubbimura. A label was slapped on him at a very young age, shelving him with the strange and unusual. After all was said and done, they had a tentative alliance. Save for the occasional spat over Shen Gong Wu, of course. Their weekly meet-ups for ramen became their common ground, their safe place.

At least, it was supposed to be.

Because somehow, the Xiaolin Monks were standing before him, souring the evening effectively.

“Tubbimura,” Raimundo greeted stifly.

“Dragon of the Wind,” Tubbimura replied, eyes narrowing. “Are you here in Gion to ruin my evening?”

“Surprisingly, no,” Kimiko said. Tubbimura looked to her and she actually smiled rather apologetically. “We’re not here to fight. We’re just looking for Jack. We heard you’d be meeting him tonight?”

“Typically, but I fail to see how that is any of your business.”

The monks exchanged glances, shifting uncomfortably. That was fair. After all, they were on opposite sides of the Conflict. Omi, not to be deterred, was the first to recover.

“Jack has been missing from Showdowns and we are concerned-!”

“Um,” Clay interrupted. “You are concerned.”

“Cutting hairs,” Omi huffed with a wave of his hand. Before Raimundo (grimacing at the minced idiom) could correct him, he carried on. “We asked Miss Katnappe and she sent us to find you since you and Jack are friends.”

At this, Tubbimura couldn’t help the nurse of laughter that came out of him.

“Jack Spicer does not have friends, Dragon of the Water. Heylin do not make… Friends. We gather allies.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re all edgy,” Raimundo groaned. “Now do you know where Spicer is?”

“I only know that he will not be meeting me here tonight,” Tubbimura said with a shrug. “I received a text early today that said he was otherwise occupied with a personal project and would be unable to meet me. Then again, this personal projects has spanned across the last month.”

“I do not like this,” Omi sighed to the other monks. Tubbimura pointedly ignored them, slurping a mouthful of ramen from the steaming blue and white ceramic bowl. Omi gave a short bow to their enemy. “Thank you for your assistance, Tubbimura.”

Tubbimura grunted.

“I reckon you’re right about one thing, partner,” Clay said as they retreated from the ramen joint,
leaving Tubbimura to his meal. “We should be worried.”

“Now what do we do?” Kimiko asked Raimundo, concern finally seeping into her tone. As creepy as she found Jack, he had still come through for them when the chips were down. Raimundo’s eyes hardened.

“I can think of two other people who might know where Spicer is. Luckily, they share the same living space which makes things far easier for us.”

“You mean…?”

“It’s time to pay Chase Young a visit.”

-oOo-

Jack was falling. Wind roared in his ears and the rocky floor rushed up to meet him and yet… He went slowly, body completely unresponsive to his wishes. Silence except the steady drum of his heartbeat. Then darkness.

Was he dead? Because that didn’t seem all that scary at the moment. With how hard Chase was pushing him, death would be the only surefire way he’d get some rest. All the same… Chase would be furious with him if he died. Yes, even in the face of death, Jack feared his master’s rage.

He shifted. If this was death, it certainly wasn’t painless. His muscles twinged with a deep-set ache that pulled a soft groan from him. That aside, whatever he was lying on was extremely comfortable. Silk brushed across his skin and he suddenly realized just how warm he was.

He hadn’t slept warm since arriving at the citadel.

This wasn’t his bed.

The moment his mind made that connection, Jack’s eyes flew open. He sat up abruptly, completely disregarding his screaming muscles to gape at the room he was in.

Large, dark curtains the color of wine fell in heavy swoops from the ceiling, encircling the massive bed. Rugs made of many different kinds of fur covered the stone floor. There was an archway to the left. The glass doors set into it showed a balcony and the horizon line far beyond. Jack figured he’d just missed the sunset, minute amounts of pink and orange tinting the clouds in the deep blue expanse, stars only just starting to appear.

Jack moved himself gingerly, letting his legs hang off the side of the bed. He was still in sweatpants but he found his shoes, socks, and shirt were missing. His eyes went to his forearm. The bandages… Looked different. His patch-up job on himself had been sloppy at best. But now they looked like they’d been properly changed by a professional, by someone who knew what they were doing. He went to undo the bandages curiously.

“Leave it, Spicer.”

Jack nearly jumped out of his skin. Chase was standing in the doorway, wearing… Not his typical armor. Instead, he was wearing the black underclothes usually hidden by his armor. Jack’s mouth went dry.

“It needs to heal.”

“Where… What…?”
Chase sighed. He crossed the room. To Jack’s utter surprise, he lifted the sheets, gesturing that Jack should get back under them. Slowly, baffled, he slid back under them. Taking his wrist in hand, Chase checked Jack’s pulse.

“Are you in pain?” He asked quietly. Jack swallowed before shaking his head.

“No, sir.”

“I can’t help you if you’re not truthful, Spicer.”

Jack chewed on his lower lip.

“My torso hurts,” he admitted quietly. “Like… It’s aching.”

“I suspected you would be sore,” Chase said with a nod.

“W-what happened?”

Chase pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a deep breath. Jack watched, twisting the edge of the sheet between his fingers, waiting.

“I owe you an explanation,” he started, his voice a mere hush. “When I took you on as my apprentice, it was not with the purest of intentions.”

“We’re villains, Master. Of course, your intentions aren’t pure.”

Chase snorted lightly, the corner of his lips quirking up. He regarded Jack with a healthy dose of respect.

“True, I suppose… You do not need to call me Master.”

Jack frowned.

“But the contract-?”

“Is a sham.”

“A… What?”

“A sham. A ruse. An endeavor to make you quit and walk away from the Xiaolin/Heylin conflict.”

The silence that fell between them was palpable, so thick and heavy that Jack’s next inhale stung in his chest. He’d suspected, of course, but it certainly didn’t make it hurt any less. Who was he kidding? Did he honestly believe that Chase Young, an infamous immortal warlord, would see potential in him, Jack Spicer? He was a pasty little nobody, an evil wannabe… With no future.

Jack blinked painfully, tears starting to slide down his face for despair finally catching up with his exhaustion. He scrubbed at them uselessly as they kept coming.

“I guess I… I should go pack.”

Jack made to get up but found Chase’s hand (bare for once) in the center of his chest. It gently pushed him back into the bed.

“You are in no shape to go anywhere. That being said, I want to make you an offer.”
Jack eyed Chase warily as he sat back against the pillows, jaw set and trembling.

“Very well,” Chase said quietly. “Take your time to heal. I… We can discuss this later.”

“Why should I trust you?” Jack asked, his voice taking on a hard edge. “Y-you never took me seriously before… Why would you now?”

“Because you have proven me wrong.”

Whatever Jack had been prepared to spit out next froze on his tongue. Chase looked away, visibly uncomfortable.

“I d-did…” Jack sniffled, voice wobbling. “I did everything y-you asked of me…!”

“You did,” Chase affirmed with a nod. “Spicer, I have never seen the amount of determination you’ve shown me in the past month. You have bent to my every whim, no matter how difficult or ridiculous, and have breathed neither contempt nor defiance. I find myself impressed. Impressed, Spicer. I’ll admit, I thought making you quit would be best for your health, for your… Safety. I see now that I failed. For that, I am truly sorry.”

Jack stared at Chase. The warlord brushed his hair back and sighed, brow furrowed. Never in all his life had Jack impressed anyone. It was strange to be on the receiving end of such praise. And yet, his weary heart gobbled it right up, hungry for more. He was still upset. There was no way he couldn’t not be angry with Chase for this huge, elaborate lie that dragged him through the muck and mire. But he could understand the intentions, misguided as they were.

“So what—what now?”

His eyes were heavy, body weighed down by a weariness so deep it infected his very bones. After training the way he had for the past month, he needed the time to recuperate.

“Now, you rest,” Chase said, rather kindly considering his previous tyranny. He pulled the sheets up to Jack’s shoulders, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead, gauging the temperature.

“For how long?” Jack slurred, eyes already drifting closed. Chase’s skin was warm, a soothing balm in the cool room.

“For as long as it takes…”

-oOo-

The citadel, as it always was, was quiet. The monks’ footsteps echoed around the grand hall, not quite lost by the sound of the waterfalls. Upon their arrival, the large stone door had swung open to admit them. Omi reasoned Chase Young was probably somehow expecting them. Clay reasoned that was creepy.

Kimiko personally agreed. As handsome as Chase was (and damn, the man was handsome), he also possessed this air of omniscience that unnerved her to no end. It was like he could read minds. For a while, she was pretty convinced he could.

Lost in this thought, Kimiko ran into Raimundo’s back. One of his feet was on the first step of the staircase and his eyes were turned up. She followed his gaze to see none other than Chase Young standing at the top of the stairs, flanked by two panthers.

“For what reason have you decided to intrude upon my home?”
Omi stepped around Kimiko, jaw set. It made sense; Omi’s past affiliation with Chase was strange but useful. Somehow, he’d managed to garner the warlord’s respect. Chase inclined his chin.

“We are looking for Jack Spicer.”

“And why,” Chase inquired after a beat of silence, “would you look for Spicer here?”

It struck Kimiko that something was off. Chase, typically annoyed by the mere mention of Jack, had barely bat an eye. He hadn’t even used one of his many derogatory nicknames for the boy genius.

“We have asked Katnappe who then sent us to Tubbimura,” Omi continued. “Admittedly, you and Wuya are the only other sources of information we have access to. If you are also unaware of his whereabouts, we respectfully request permission to use our Fountain of Hui with your Eagle Scope.”

Chase cocked an eyebrow.

“Under your supervision, of course,” Omi added hastily. Raimundo cleared his throat.

“We understand that we’re on opposite sides of the Conflict, but Spicer’s been missing for over a month now and we-!”

“There will be no need to use Shen Gong Wu,” Chase smoothly cut him off. “I am well aware of Spicer’s location.”

“Where-?”

“My new apprentice,” Chase interrupted, “is currently sleeping off a rather intense training session. You will not be seeing him any time soon.”

The shock that rippled through the monks was clear. Raimundo and Kimiko shared a look, wide-eyed and united in their disbelief.

“Now what in tarnation would possess you to make Spicer your apprentice?” Clay blurted out. Chase’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Are you questioning my ability to teach? Or my sanity?”

He took a step down the stairs and the monks took a collective step back. Omi spluttered.

“C-Clay did not mean it that way!” He insisted, trying to cover for his friend. “We only meant that-!”

“That we thought you hated him,” Kimiko interjected. Chase looked at her sharply and she shrugged. “Do you truly believe in Jack’s abilities?”

“I would not have taken him under my wing otherwise,” Chase growled. Kimiko nodded.

“Thanks for the info, dude,” Raimundo said nervously, steering Omi away by the shoulder and taking Clay’s arm. “We really appreciate it. Good luck with Spicer.”

But Kimiko wasn’t done. She glared resolutely up at Chase, fists clenched.

“If you hurt him-!”
“I will do so no more than you pests already have. Be gone.”

The color drained from Kimiko’s face as Chase snapped his fingers, the panthers stepping forward, growling menacingly. The monks left quickly, shaken, unable to dispel the implications of Chase’s words from their minds.

-oOo-

The next time Jack woke, moonlight stretched across the room, casting mysterious shadows. He had to wonder what time it was, unsure even as to why he’d woken. It was impossible to truly tell with how isolated and quiet the citadel was at all hours. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, pushing his hair out of his eyes. The action didn’t hurt as much as he thought it would. His body still ached but… Noticeably less so.

A shadow moved. Jack tensed.

“Peace, young one. I am here to check your wounds.”

It was one of the tigers but in his human form, the one with dark, piercing eyes. For the past month, he’d been a constant companion to Jack, being the one to fetch him in the morning for training and drag him to and from things. Rarely did he talk. Jack didn’t even know his name.

With surprising gentleness, he took Jack’s wrist, making note of the pulse. Jack yawned as the bandages on his arm were unwrapped.

“What time is it?” He rasped out. The warrior took a damp wash cloth and swathed it across Jack’s broken skin. He barely winced; all things considered, the panther scratches were healing very well, the warm soapy water not irritating it at all.

“Late. Drink this.”

A cup was pushed into Jack’s hands. He took a hesitant sip and almost choked when he realized it was just plain water. He gulped the rest down, apparently thirstier than he’d realized.

“W-where’s Chase? Asleep?” He gasped out, chest heaving but thirst satiated.

“The master’s whereabouts are hardly your concern,” the warrior said sternly. He applied a thin layer of some kind of green cream to Jack’s wound. It made it tingle pleasantly, smelling strongly of mint. “You will do well to remember that.”

Jack couldn’t help but scowl.

“I’m hardly his apprentice anymore,” he snipped back. “Which technically makes me a guest. Which makes you an asshole.”

The hands rewrapping Jack’s wound paused and he swore for a moment he saw the ghost of a smirk.

“Indeed. Very well. The master is in his study.”

“This late at night?”

“It is not uncommon when the master has made a mistake.”

“I do not make mistakes. Only slight miscalculations.”
Jack’s head swiveled around towards the smooth timbre to find Chase had joined them. He was hovering in the doorway in his black underclothes, eyes glowing softly in the gloom. Jack shivered.

“My apologies, master,” the warrior said, bowing his head. “I seem to have forgotten my place.”

“Your place is at my side, Zhongwei. You have earned that right.”

It was glaringly obvious that Jack was missing some crucial information. Did he not fully understand the relationships between Chase and his warriors? Or was it just Zhangwei and Chase who had something different?

Before Jack could fully wrap his sleep-addled mind around it, Zhangwei had swept from the room, morphing gracefully back into a tiger as he went.

Now him and Chase remained.

“Here,” Chase said, holding out a scroll. “Since you are awake, you may as well look this over.”

Jack took it curiously, untying the leather string around it. It unrolled in his lap and he frowned. It was another apprenticeship contract but… It was quite long. With a lot of blank space. He looked up at Chase, confusion on the tip of his tongue.

“Allow me to shed some light on the nature of this document,” Chase started quietly. “The only information on that document at this point in time are my baseline requirements. It includes things such as diet, exercise, hours of sleep you should get each night… The rest is up to you. When you are fully healed, we can discuss your requirements.”


“If there is something you want or need while in this apprenticeship with me, you may ask for it. Everything is negotiable except the baseline.”

Jack opened and closed his mouth several times, trying to come up with something to say as Chase waited patiently.

“Who said I still wanted to be your apprentice?” He finally blurted out. Chase sighed but there was a flicker of understanding in his expression.

“I assumed you would still be interested.”

“No, no, I am! I really am! It’s… Just…” Jack trailed off, shrugging helplessly. “I didn’t really, um… Expect you to take me seriously.”

Chase nodded, the action causing a stray piece of hair to fall into golden glowing eyes. He pushed the hair back in a movement that made heat rise in Jack’s cheeks. He silently thanked any deity that was listening that the room was dark.

“That is understandable. My offer stands. I suggest you get more rest. It is very late, after all.”

“Okay…” Jack yawned, rolling up the scroll. It was pried gently from his fingers as he snuggled back down into the blankets. He never even heard Chase leave the room.

Chapter End Notes
Thoughts? Let me know!

Wild will be updated next weekend!

-P3ac3fulFor3st
It didn’t really truly hit Jack just how far he’d pushed himself until he had to recover. Over the next couple of weeks, he did little other than sleep and drink tea. He was surprised by how exhausted he was. If he wasn’t sleeping, Zhangwei was waking him up to eat something. Groggily, Jack worked his way through light meals. Typically it was some sort of soup or stew with vegetables over steamed rice.

And tea. Always tea. When Jack asked Chase why he was drinking so much tea, the warlord had answered quite simply: “It’s medicinal.”

Medicinal, Jack quickly learned, meant disgusting.

“Drink it all,” Chase ordered as Jack gagged on it. He chugged the rest then coughed and spluttered, face screwed up against the earthy taste. Chase rolled his eyes. “Such dramatics.”

“It’s gross!” Jack whined defensively as Chase took the ceramic cup back.

“Medicine is hardly meant to taste wonderful.”

Zhangwei might’ve spent the day looking after Jack but Chase always stopped by in the evening. At first it was just to give him tea and ask how he was feeling. Then the questions started rolling out. Not just about how Jack felt but about who he was.

The questions were sometimes personal, sometimes not. About Jack´s history with robotics, his relationships with the other Heylins, his childhood… He always stopped himself from giving too much of himself away, only feeding small spoonfuls of his life to Chase.

Being fully devoured and then spat right back out was a perfectly logical fear in Jack’s mind.

Chase, meanwhile, was well-aware of Jack’s wariness. After Jack dozed off (which was usually right in the middle of their conversations), he’d leave silently for his study to make note of what he learned. His file on Jack Spicer grew larger every night, adding to what was once a rather slim file; he hadn’t bothered to know Spicer before. But now it was imperative.

He had different scrolls for strengths, weaknesses, background, likes, dislikes, etc… And slowly, very slowly, he built up the new contract, adding to the skeleton he’d shown Spicer. It was ironic, surely, that the previous contract had been so flippant in disregarding the boy as a human being. Now Chase was insuring that this contract would be his most specified, not to mention his most serious.

“I’d like for you to look over this,” Chase announced one evening. Jack blinked, looking from the cup of tea in between his hands to the rather thick scroll in Chase’s.
“The contract?”

“Yes. I’ve personalized it according to our discussions. I believe you’ll find it goes beyond your expectations.”

Curiously, Jack took the scroll. Setting his cup of tea aside, he untied the leather strap and allowed the scroll to tumble open.

“‘So reads the Contract of Apprenticeship between Chase Young and Jack Spicer’…” Jack read under his breath.

Laid out on the scroll was a list of skills Jack could expect to learn during the apprenticeship. Some were expected, things like Kung Fu and Tai Chi. Others not so much…

“An hour of studying?” Jack echoed incredulously. He looked up at Chase for answers. The corner of the warlord’s lips quirked up.

“The hour of studying is for educating yourself on the history between the Xiaolin and Heylin, their differences, their similarities, and beliefs.”

“What about this… ‘Independent Study’ block of time at 3?”

“Ah. I took your interest in robotics into account. That time is yours and yours alone.”

Jack didn’t know what to say. He looked back at the scroll, swallowing the lump in his throat. Chase watched him closely.

“… This schedule is from Saturday to Wednesday. Where’s Thursday and Friday?”

“Thursday is when you will accompany me to the Land of Nowhere.”

Jack’s head snapped up. He stared at Chase, eyes wide.

“Why would I…?”

“That is an observation period for you. I am a ruler and a warlord, after all. You will accompany me, take notes, perhaps run a few errands. We will return by dinner.”

“And Friday?”

“A day for your to rest and recuperate. If I am going to train you seriously, you will need to take care of your mind and body.”

Jack could hear his heartbeat in his ears. Everything Chase was saying sounded legitimate. It sounded difficult. It sounded… Wonderful. He sat up a little straighter, suddenly a little braver.

“So, I get to make some requests, right?” He clarified carefully. Chase cocked an eyebrow.

“If that is what you so desire.”

“Okay, good, because like… I need a lab. A robotics lab. Or at least a space where I can create and build. My robots, they… I couldn’t just… Not… Build anymore. Y-you don’t have to provide materials and tools and such; I can just get those from home.”

Jack held his breath, stoppering the babble of words, waiting for the rejection that would surely sting. To his astonishment, Chase nodded.
“I suppose that wouldn’t be an issue. So long as you keep the noise level to a minimum and your infernal machines away from my warriors.”

Jack’s grin lit up the room and it took all Chase had not to return the smile; the pure joy and excitement radiating off the boy was infectious.

“I can do that!”

“Spicer, I am serious.”

“So am I, I swear! After all,” Jack puffed his chest up with a smirk, “What would Jack Spicer, Evil Boy Genius, be without his robots?”

“A lot less of a nuisance,” Chase deadpanned.

“Rude.”

“Not rude, per se. Merely truthful.”

Jack huffed, rolling his eyes. Chase waved his hand, a couple of tendrils of Heylin magic swirling in-between his fingers. They settled on the contract, adding ‘provide a robotics lab’ under his own name, also adding ‘monitor noise level and robot activity’ under Jack’s name.

“Sweet,” Jack said, grinning again.

“Does everything else in the contract meet your needs?”

“Um… Could you leave an evening open for me to go meet with Tubbimura for ramen?”

Chase tapped the contract with his index finger.

“You have Fridays off. I suggest you have dinner at that point.”

Jack conceded with a nod.

“That’s fair. I’ll just ask Tubbimura if we can move our weekly meet-up…”

“Anything else?”

Jack shrugged. Chase’s brow furrowed. The boy hadn’t asked for time off to see his family. He didn’t even request permission to contact them. In fact, Spicer had never spoken of his family to Chase.

Only once, he realized. When he’d turned Spicer into a monkey. After bequeathing an entire army of primates to him, the boy had mentioned how proud his mom would be. Chase couldn’t help but wonder… Was she not proud of him usually?

“Very well.”

Chase procured a quill from thin air with an inkwell. Jack smiled wryly.

“What? No blood this time?”

“No, I do believe I am quite done with such dramatics,” he said, signing his name on the line in a lovely flourish. He offered the quill to Jack. “Remember, Spicer. If you sign this contract, you will uphold my standards. That means I will require your upmost respect, obedience, and honesty. I
know you have picked up bad habits from Wuya. Habits like betrayal and cheating. But no more. My honor code will become yours. Are we in agreement?"

Red eyes met gold and held them. For the first time in a long time, Chase detected no fear. Only determination. Pride swelled gently in his chest. Spicer was taking this seriously.

“We are.”

Jack signed. The quill de-materialized from his hand and their signatures glistened side by side.

“So do I still call you Master or…?”

“While I am your master, you do not have to call me such. However, I stand by what I’ve said before: you will learn to show me basic respect at the very least.”

“So I call you ‘sir’?” Jack asked slowly, unsurely.

“You may call me Chase if you so wish.”

And this time Chase couldn’t help it. He let his lips quirk up at Jack’s smile.

-oOo-

Jack woke up to his alarm playing a tinkling medley. It had been provided by Chase and somehow ran on magic, the small orb emitting a soft multi-colored glow and displaying the time. It had to be made of some kind of crystal. There was no snooze button. It was only when Jack sat up to rub at his eyes did the medley stop.

He definitely preferred it over the wake-up call perform by a grumpy tiger. He blinked blearily at the time. 6:30.

The fact that he was getting an extra hour and a half of sleep aside, Jack could already tell that this apprenticeship would be a lot better than the last. First of all, when Chase finally deemed him well enough to start training again, he’d moved Jack from the awful cell-like room he’d been sleeping in for the last month. Now he was in a sizable room with a bed that actually had a mattress and clean bedding. He also had his own bathroom now, which was more than Jack could’ve hoped for.

Jack looked over the schedule with a yawn. First was breakfast. Which was a really nice change; it meant he’d actually be guaranteed breakfast this time instead of having to mop an entire room.

When he made it to the table, Chase was already sitting there wearing… Wait, what? Loose pants, soft shoes… And a tank top. Jack’s eyes roved over the built muscles in the warlord’s shoulders and arms.

“I expect you to clean your plate this morning,” Chase greeted as Jack took a seat. “You will need your energy.”

“What are you all…?” Jack asked, gesturing loosely at Chase’s get-up.

“I will be accompanying you on your morning run. I doubt you run correctly and you will be on a new circuit therefore I must tag along to correct your mistakes.”

“Ahh.”

Jack looked down at his bowl and blinked in surprise. It was a deep red broth filled with noodles and tomatoes, a fried egg floating on the surface. Off to the side, separate from the soup, was an
orange.
“Smells good…” Jack murmured before picking up his spoon to sample the broth. It was thick and hot and rich and Jack had to wonder why Chase hadn’t fed him this before. He shot a quick look at the warlord. Right. Because he’d been trying to make Jack quit.

“Drink your tea, Spicer.”

Jack paused in peeling his orange and looking suspiciously down into the cup beside his bowl. He sniffed then froze, glancing up at Chase. Would that come across as rude? But to Jack’s surprise, there was a glimmer of… Approval? In Chase’s eyes.

“I am not angry, Spicer. We are in a dangerous line of work; every chance you have to check an unknown substance you may ingest, take it.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack muttered, taking a sip of what he was sure was green tea. It was.

-oOo-

“Before you do anything, stretch.”

Jack paused, fully ready to take off at a dead sprint down the trail. He frowned at Chase, who was pulling an arm across his chest.

“Stretch?”

“Yes,” Chase reaffirmed, stretching his other arm. “If you don’t stretch out your muscles before you exercise, you run the risk of pul or even spraining something.”

“Ohhh…”

Jack kneeled them flopped down on the ground, stretching his legs out in front of him. He reached forward to touch his toes, back popping, feeling a satisfying pull in his lower back. Then he spread his legs. He reached for one foot then the other.

When he reached in the middle, he felt pressure in-between his shoulder blades, pushing him further forward. A whine escaped him.

“Eventually you will be able to place your chest on the ground,” Chase said, pressing his foot harder on Jack’s back. The boy whimpered.

“Hey, that really hurts, y’know?”

“It’s meant to.”

Chase pushed a bit more.

“Chase, Chase, ow, ow, ow-!”

Rolling his eyes, Chase lifted his foot away. Jack sat up, arching and pressing his palms into his lower back, groaning. He shot Chase a glare.

“Sadistic, old-!”

“Spicer.”

Jack fell silent. The stern look Chase was giving him made him feel suddenly two feet tall. He
rubbed his arm, turning his eyes down. The finger that tapped under his chin was firm and he turned his eyes up, choosing to start at the dark green strange of hair curling around Chase’s ear. It was pointed, elvish in nature. Or demonic.

“You have much to learn,” Chase’s voice surprised Jack; it was softer than he expected. He looked up, meeting Chase’s eyes. The gold seared his soul. “I will be pushing you past your comfort zone. That is where you will grow. If you cannot keep a civil tongue in that head of yours-!”

“I will! I will, Chase! I’m sorry…”

Chase stared at him for a moment longer, as if searching for something.

“I know you are. Come along.”

And the moment was gone. Chase pushed past Jack, starting at a slow jog. Jack followed quickly, catching up and surpassing him. He couldn’t help shooting Chase a smug grin.

“I’m gonna beat you.”

“It is not a race, Spicer,” Chase said calmly, still jogging. “You should pace yourself.”

“Huh?” Jack called back, already several yards ahead. Chase rolled his eyes, deciding to simply wait until Spicer ran out of steam.

It was a different track from what Jack was used to. Instead of the front door, they went out a side door, disappearing into the woods. This particular path wasn’t difficult at all. All the same, Jack was struggling to breathe. He paused to bend in half, panting. Chase, who had somehow caught up (Jack suspected Heylin magic), paused beside him.

“You need to pace yourself,” he lectured. “If you run at a slower, more steady pace, you will be less likely to tire as fast. That, and you will build up better stamina, which you need in order to keep up with your training.”

“So I,” Jack gasped out, “Slow down?”

“Indeed,” Chase said, an amused lilt in his voice. “And another issue i’ve notice is that you seem to have trouble keeping your spine straight.”

“I have trouble being straight,” Jack gasped out, half-laughing. An unreadable emotion flickered across Chase’s face for a split-second before it went carefully blank.

“Your sexuality is meaningless to me. Straighten your back at least and let’s continue.”

When he finally caught his breath again, Jack found that Chase’s method of jogging was extremely effective. They jogged together, side by side, neither of them saying much. The path wound through the forest and Jack was surprised when the dead trees started to become more and more… Lush. The path he’d previously jogged didn’t hold a candle to this one.

Morning sunlight kissed down on the canopy of leaves above them, casting a golden green glow on the dirt path. Tiny particles of light danced where beams broke through. Jack found himself slowing to gape at the beauty around him, at the wildflowers blooming on the forest floor.

“Keep up, Spicer.”

Jack started jogging again, catching up with Chase. He couldn’t help but continue to drink in the
beauty surrounding them.

They came across a stream. Jack’s mind spun. There was no way this stream was the same one he’d been visiting over the past month. The water was crystal clear, bubbling happily, tripping over stones on its busy way through the forest. Pebbles sparkled beneath the surface.

“Spicer.”

“Hm?” He turned his head to see Chase picking up a stone. It was rather sizable, roughly half a foot in diameter. Jack blinked when Chase rested it on his head. “What-?”

“Choose your own but do so carefully; you will be carrying it back on your head.”

Jack was pretty sure Chase had lost his ever-loving mind. But he did as he was told.

Sifting through the rocks at the creek’s bank, he picked up a comically small rock. He placed it atop his head with a grin. With a roll of his eyes, Chase swiped the rock clean off Jack’s head (earning a small yelp) before bending down and selecting a much bigger rock. He placed it on Jack’s head while Jack pouted fiercely.

“Wipe that ridiculous expression off your face. You know better.”

With a sigh, Jack followed Chase away from the stream, back straight as possible in order not to drop his rock. He supposed that was true.

-oOo-

Clack!

Chase’s staff knocked against Jack’s. He was moving sluggishly on purpose, exponentially slower so Jack had time to think. So far, only a couple of minor corrections were needed.

“Bend your knees,” Chase ordered. Jack bent them slightly in response. “If you lock them, you’ll be off balance. It’ll be exceedingly easy to knock you off your feet. That, and if you block the blood flow for long enough, you’ll lose consciousness.”

“I’ll pass out?”

“Spicer, focus.”

“Sorry.”

Chase had to admit it. Spicer was doing… Well. As it would turn out, balance was something the boy already had; years of ice skating taught him that much. There was a certain grace about him, one that Chase could no longer deny. Yes, he was clumsy. Yes, he made stupid mistakes often. But the way Spicer moved?

“Spicer, watch my feet. Step where I step.”

Jack moved fluidly, placing his feet to the tiled floor with care.

“Now, block.”

Clack!

“Very good… Now with bent knees.”
After a meal of duck, tofu, and cabbage over rice, Jack followed Chase to a part of the citadel he’d never been to before. One side of the hallway was lined with tall windows, the early afternoon sunlight pouring in, illuminating the emerald rug lining the floor. Elaborate tapestries hung from the wall opposite them, each one depicting symbols that had little meaning to Jack.

He almost ran right into Chase. The warlord had paused, opening up a set of double-doors crafted from redwood. He stepped aside to let Jack enter the room. And Jack? Jack’s jaw dropped.

It was a library. A massive floor-to-ceiling bookshelf-filled libraries.

Chase smiled privately as Jack entered the library, obviously gob-smacked. He’d hoped Jack would like this room. After all, he would be conducting his studies here. Jack was naturally curious, his thirst for knowledge enlightening at best and disastrous at worst. This library contained the world’s most ancient secrets.

He stepped inside after Jack and immediately scowled. Wuya was draped across one of the plush deep blue couches, a book in hand.

“Shoo.”

“That’s nice,” she huffed. Nevertheless, she swung her legs off the couch and stood, stalking away with her book. “Good luck, Jack.”

“Do I… Need luck?” Jack asked warily, frowning as she passed by.

“Not for this,” Chase said, snatching the book from Wuya. “I’ll take that.”

“Really? You’re starting with that story?” Wuya whined. “Do you live to humiliate me?”

Chase gave her a wide smirk.

“Wuya, what else would I do with my free time?”

“Ugh. Men!”

And then she stalked from the library. Jack snorted, grinning.

“So this is like… Study time, right?”


They went to the far end of the library. A circular table was there with high-back chairs around it, the surface littered with different books and scrolls. It was clear the table was special. In what way, Jack couldn’t quite put his finger on it… But its very presence sang of old power.

“What you’re feeling is the magic imbued in this table,” Chase informed Jack, circling the table and placing the book upon it. “When I first partook in Lao Mang Lone, I traversed the world. I took wood from every land I’ve been to and eventually it would all make its way here.”

He tapped the table with two fingers.

“I crafted it by my own hand. As my apprentice, you too will craft something all your own.”

“Um… I’ve kind of been crafting for years,” Jack pointed out, unable to stop himself from grinning
in pride. Chase smiled wryly.

“Perhaps. But this is what will make your craft special.”

He shifted some books aside. There, in the center of the table, was a massive gemstone. It was a vibrant emerald green, almost transparent and set right into the table. It seemed… Flawed. Smoky tendrils of black flowed through it.

“That, Jack, is imperial jade, a physical manifestation of my power. During this apprenticeship, you will learn basic magic, just enough to aid yourself in case of emergencies.”

Jack’s head snapped up, eyes wide.

“Magical crafting is… Not to be taken lightly. But I believe it is something you could be quite skilled at given your pre-existing ability to create.

Chase opened the book he’d taken from Wuya. He slid it across the table and Jack was surprised to see an old sketch of the witch herself on the page.

“In order to study magical crafting and the relation to the Xiaolin and Heylin, we must go back to the very beginning… The birth of the Xiaolin and the way of the Heylin.”

Around 495 AD, a Buddhist monk by the name of Ba Tao arrived in China from India. The emperor at the time was quite fond of him and gave Ba Tao land close to Mount Song.”

“Mount Song… Why do I know that name?”

“Because it’s that very same mountain that borders the valley where the Xiaolin Temple now resides. Back in that time, there was a small village in that valley as well.”

Jack sank slowly into the nearest chair, drawn in by Chase’s story.

“That was my home. Dashi, Guan, and I were the first to attend to temple simply because we had no where else to go.”

“You…”

“We were orphans. We didn’t have families or homes but Ba Tao opened his temple to us. So we followed his regulations and started to train in Kung Fu and Tai Chi.”

Jack looked down at the book. Wuya’s sharply sketched eyes stared up at him.

“So where does Wuya fit into all this?”

“No many are away of this, but the Heylin way existed far before the Xiaolin way.”

“But the way Omi talks about it-!”

“I know,” Chase snapped. “There are false teachings at the temple. Propaganda. One of the many reasons why I left.”

“I thought you left because-?”

Chase held up his hand. Jack bit his lip.

“You are getting ahead of me,” Chase said, a glimmer in his eyes.
“Sorry.”

“Wuya was already an established witch of Heylin Magic. She wreaked havoc without ever having to show her ugly face, a true coward.”

Jack snickered and the corner of Chase’s lips quirked up.

“But everyone knew who Wuya was. Her name was a plague to China. Ba Tao established the temple as a retreat and a place to study Zen Buddhism, true, however… His primary concern was to rid the world of the Heylin, of evil, or Wuya. That’s where the studies in elemental magic, Kung Fu, and Tai Chi came into play.”

It was when I was in my early 20’s when Wuya attacked the Temple. At this point, Guan, Dashi, and I had been living at the Temple for roughly ten years. It was our home. And we defended it fiercely. Dashi was the first Dragon of Water, Guan the first Dragon of Earth, and I the first Dragon of Wind.”

Dashi had been studying magical crafting for a long time. We were lucky he had one such item on his person that day. A puzzle box.”

At this, Jack couldn’t help but blurt,

“The one I opened!”

“The one- Shènme?”

For the first time in Jack’s life, he saw Chase truly caught off guard. Not only had involuntary Chinese spilled from his mouth, those dark brows show up. Jack cringed. He definitely owed Chase an explanation.

“I, um… About three years ago, I received a puzzle box from Hong Kong from my dad. I opened it. That’s how I met Wuya and got involved in the whole… Heylin-Xiaolin-Shen-Gong-Wu scene.”

“I… Was not aware you were the one to release Wuya,” Chase said slowly, unblinking eyes on Jack. “An item crafted by Dashi built to contain a Heylin witch would require a lot of power to open.”

Jack shrugged, his cheeks burning.

“It came easy to me. I’ve always loved puzzles.”

After a moment of silence, Chase cleared his throat.

“As I was saying… Dashi, inspired by his victory that day, started crafting more magical items. These are what we now know as the Shen Gong Wu. Before Wuya’s downfall, he crafted rather silly Shen Gong Wu, Wu such as the Third Arm Sash and Ants in the Pants. Then they got more serious. The Fountain of Hui, the Sands of Time, and the Heart of Jong…”

In learning magical craftsmanship, you will use eventually use magic to produce your own gemstone. It will be unique to you and symbolize your graduation from your apprenticeship under me.”

Jack nodded, completely fascinated. But as fascinated as he was, he couldn’t help but wonder in the back of his mind… If the puzzle box needed power to be opened, did that mean Jack already possessed some type of power?
Chapter End Notes

Ooo Jack has some abilities?? I really like the dynamic between Chase and Jack now... Thoughts?

Next week I won't be updating Wild; the end of our next grading period is on Friday and I'll have to focus on grading art projects.

Wild update: November 8th!

-P3ac3fulFor3st
Jack’s first couple of weeks of the new apprenticeship was the strangest time of his life. Under Chase’s genuine tutelage, he found himself not only actually learning but looking forward to the days as they came.

In the morning when Jack ran his mile, Chase ran it with him. It wasn’t long before Jack realized he was missing a lot by trying to rush through the mile; he began to notice birds, the small mushrooms that grew among the moss covering the sides of trees, the glint of sunlight off the leaves when the wind blew threw the trees just so. More than once, Chase had to remind Jack to keep up, so enraptured he was by the world around him.

When they sat down for meals, the food was warm and filling, and Chase explained why they were eating particular foods. He planned a new healthy diet for Jack, one that would fit his lifestyle far better than the junk-filled one it was before. As it would turn out, food was the original medicine of the world. Jack was given green beans and salmon if he complained about cramps (which he most certainly did) and brown rice with eggs or broccoli to ensure muscular growth.

In the evenings, Chase instructed him in the different postures and walks of Tai Chi. Now, of course, Jack knew his master was the world’s leading expert on Tai Chi and paid him the most upright respect during this time; he already knew he was lucky. But these moments clenched that fact. It was like being taught to paint by Leonardo da Vinci or how to sing by Freddie Mercury.

Now that Chase was actually trying and taking him seriously, Jack found him to be a really damn good teacher.

“Shift your stance,” Chase ordered, and Jack shuffled his feet, trying to mimic his master. “Good. Now…Strike.”

His fist met Chase’s open palm and he cringed as a sharp pain shot down his arm. Disapproval flashed in Chase’s eyes.

“Controlled, Spicer,” he admonished. “You will injure yourself if you throw your entire shoulder into your punches.”

“Controlled how?” Jack huffed, frowning as he brought his fist back and shook out the pain. “Don’t you just, like… Throw one?”

“Never,” Chase said, flicking a piece of hair out of his face. “A thrown punch is a sloppy one. Your hand should strike out not unlike a venomous snake: quick, sharp, then retreating. For example…”

Jack almost flinched; after all, Chase would have had no issue punching his lights out before this
point. But to his eternal relief, Chase’s hand struck a marble pillar beside him… And Jack’s jaw dropped. Dust and bits of rock crumbled as Chase’s hand pulled back unscathed.

“With a punch, always strike and pull back quickly. With a kick…”

He spun, delivering a roundhouse kick to the already damaged pillar. In a great crunching sound, the pillar collapsed completely in a pile of marble rubble, making Jack take several steps back, throwing his hands up. He openly gaped.

“Always follow through.”


Chase smirked at Jack’s open awe, taking in the wide red eyes with satisfaction. He tapped under the boy’s chin and his mouth shut with a click.

“I do not expect you to shatter pillars, of course. The only reason I am able to perform such a feat is due to Lao Mang Lone consumption. But I believe I’ve made clear my expectations.”

“Wait, so…” Jack said slowly, eyes still on the pile of broken marble. “If I drank Lao Mang Lone, I’d be able to-?”

“You will not.”

Chase’s tone was sharp and a firm hand on Jack’s chin turned his head sharply. He blinked to find golden eyes not far from his own.

“I will say this only once, Spicer, so listen closely: you will not be partaking in Lao Mang Lone as long as you are my apprentice. I forbid it. Swear to me you will never drink it.”

Jack blinked again, brow furrowing.

“Why-?”

“Jack. Swear it to me.”

Silence. Chase’s words had an edge that made Jack curious. Why was it so important to Chase that he not drink the Lao Mang Lone? He quickly turned over the stone of history in his mind, remembering Chase’s fall to the Heylin way and… And the way he double-crossed Hannibal.

Jack looked directly into Chase’s eyes, understanding in his own.

“I swear, Master, I will never drink Lao Mang Lone.”

His chin was released. Chase stared him down a moment longer before retrieving their staffs from the nearby table.

“Good. Let us continue.”

-oOo-

When Jack woke up on the first Thursday of August, he sprung out of bed with a grin on his face. Today was the day. His first official day out in the Land of Nowhere. His first day to be publicly presented as Chase Young’s apprentice to the No-Ones.

There was a knock on the door. When he pulled it open, clad in just skinny jeans, Zhangwei was
standing there. In his arms were a folded set of clothes. He raised an eyebrow at Jack’s half-dressed appearance.

“The Master requires that you wear this today,” he said, shifting the clothes into Jack’s hands.

The material was soft. Really soft. When Jack unfolded it, he found himself holding…

“Is this… Is this a dress?”

Zhangwei looked rather insulted.

“This is a hanfu, a traditional Chinese garment. The Master had it tailored specifically for you, so I would suggest you let me assist you in putting it on.”

“Chase made this for me?”

Jack held out the hanfu in front of him, examining it. Rivers of black, cream, and deep crimson fell to the floor from his hands. It came in several different pieces, all made in the softest cotton and silk he’d ever felt. And his parents were loaded. Chase must’ve spent a fortune on it.

“Strip down.”

Jack placed the hanfu carefully on the dresser. He slid off his jeans, now only wearing boxer briefs in front of an ancient warrior he barely knew. Zhangwei seemed unfazed, barely batting an eye at Jack’s obvious discomfort.

“Arms out.”

As Zhangwei dressed Jack, he spoke.

“This is a yi,” he explained, pulling on a long cream tunic that folded over Jack’s chest and fell to his knees. “After it is tied, the chang will go on over it, then the bixi…”

“Zhangwei, good, you’ve gotten him dressed.”

Jack jerked his head to the side to see Chase standing in the doorway and he blinked. Chase was also wearing a hanfu but it was… More elaborate. Fully black silk, the pieces were embroidered with golden Chinese dragons and swirling white clouds. His hair was partially drawn up, twisted into an intricate knot and secured by a stick made of what looked like pure gold. Jack fixated on it. The end of it was a dragon, dripping red crystals from its mouth.

For the first time, Jack felt nervousness creep under his skin. There was obviously more to this presentation that he was aware of. What didn’t he know?

Chase stepped into the room.

“I’ll take it from here.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Zhangwei stepped out, leaving them alone. Jack was wildly aware that he was only wearing the yi and his underwear, heart thrumming in his throat. Placing a small ornate box on the dresser, Chase picked up the next piece of fabric, this one a dark beautiful shade of crimson. It was the chang, a skirt that went all the way down to Jack’s ankles when Chase wrapped it around his waist. He tied it securely.
“Nervous?” He asked from his place behind him. Jack sighed.

“Just a bit… More anxious, I guess. Less scared, more excited.”

“That is good,” Chase hummed. “There is no need to be nervous. You are worthy of this apprenticeship otherwise I would not have chosen you.”

The bixi was a sheer robe that stopped at Jack’s knees. It was pure black except for the hems which were intricately embroidered with a gleaming golden thread.

“This is…” Jack murmured, rubbing his fingers over the sleeve, “Beautiful.”

The word didn’t feel like enough but Chase appreciated it nonetheless.

“I am glad you like it,” he said, turning Jack to face the mirror.

Jack stared. He thought he looked like a ghost. Like some sort of ancient demon Chase had summoned to smite the world.

“I know it is not exactly your style,” Chase said, meeting Jack’s eyes in the mirror. “But it suits you. And if you hate it, it is only for today.”


Chase stepped away for a moment to retrieve the ornate box from the dresser. When he opened it, Jack gasped. Nestled in the red velvet was a shining black clip. For his hair, no doubt. It was carved to look like a great bird with two wings spread high, deep green crystals falling from clenched talons.

“How do I…? Is my hair long enough?”

Jack’s hair had grown quite a bit in the past two months. Not using gel and eating a proper diet made it shiny and healthy, the longest pieces almost reaching his shoulders. There was even an inch or so of snowy white roots starting to show at his scalp. But surely it wasn’t long enough to pull back…

Chase proved him wrong. Brushing part of Jack’s hair back out of his face, he secured the soft red strands with the clip on one side of his head. He could feel the brush of the crystals just behind his ear. Chase smiled.

“You’re ready.”

“No shoes?” Jack asked, lifting the hem of the hanfu to show his bare feet. Chase shook his head.

“No shoes; the land will need to become attune to your energy and you to it. Come along.”

As they made their way to the throne room, Jack opened his mouth at least a dozen times to ask but stopped short every time, nervous to voice his suspicions. Chase, who was watching Jack from the corner of his eye, smirked lightly.

“I cannot answer your question if you refuse to ask it,” he said smoothly. Jack’s cheeks burned.

“What are you not telling me?” He asked, unable to look Chase directly in the eye. “I feel like there’s more to this than I know.”

Chase snorted softly, as if he’d expected Jack to ask this. In the center of the throne room, he held


his hand above the floor, summoning the all-seeing eye from within it. He busied himself with it as he spoke.

“This is a ceremony. Due to tradition, I cannot give you details. What I can tell you is that the Land of Nowhere holds deep Heylin magic within the very ground itself. This ceremony is essential so it recognizes you as my apprentice.”

Jack swallowed and words started bubbling up, his shoulders hitching.

“What—what if the land refuses to recognize me? What if I—I’m not worthy and it rejects me and I—?”

“I have chosen you,” Chase interrupted him, pinning him with a stern look. Jack bit his lower lip, something rolling around in his stomach that ached terribly. “You are worthy. I have had very few apprentices in my lifetime. I assure you, I do not choose lightly.”

Jack nodded jerkily. Of course. Of course, he knew that. He was lucky. Extremely lucky.

He stepped up beside Chase when he gestured him close. Looking into the all-seeing eye, he saw that they were looking down onto empty gray fields. Immediately, he recognized it.

“The Boneyard?” He asked, rather incredulously. Chase raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that where I stole Hannibal’s stupid bird? Back when I thought it was the Bird of Paradise?”

Chase chuckled, holding out his hand and sending dark pulses of power down onto the eye.

“So you recognize it? I wondered if you would. Ready?”

“Um… Yes?”

“Let us depart then. Zhangwei.”

The warrior stepped out of the shadows. He was in his jungle cat form, a great tiger that had Jack gulping even thought he knew Zhangwei wouldn’t hurt him. Well, at least, he was sure he wouldn’t… Zhangwei slinked over to where Chase stood, sitting at his feet.

“Remember what we discussed.”

Zhangwei bowed his great head.

Chase’s magic encircled them, lifting their hair. The next moment, the throne room melted from sight, landing the three of them in the desolate landscape.

It was just as Jack remembered it. A cold breeze blew across the land, no trees to break it, a couple of small tumbleweeds rolling by. He shivered, pulling his hanfu tighter around him. He wished he were wearing shoes. The chill seemed to seep in through the soles of his feet. Wasn’t it supposed to be August? Where was the sun? He looked up to see a gloomy gray expanse.

There was a group of warriors waiting there for them, all armed and armored. They bowed in tandem to Chase. One of them stepped forward.

“Welcome back, my Lord,” he said, voice rough. “All preparations have been made.”

“Excellent. Are the people ready?” Chase asked as they walked. Jack followed, Zhangwei staying at his side as a tiger. He couldn’t help but put a hand on his back to steady his nerves.
“As ready as they could be, my Lord,” the warrior was saying. “They are eager to meet him.”

“Me?” Jack couldn’t help but squeak, stepping over a cow skull. He saw the corner of Chase’s lips quirk up.

“They will not be disappointed.”

Jack begged to differ and wanted to contest that. But getting his mouth to form any manner of coherent thought was becoming increasingly difficult.

They reached a cliffside. Remembering his last encounter with Chase as a similar place had him taking a step back, terrified at the prospect of going over the edge. Chase looked back and, seeing the hesitation, offered his hand. Jack reached out slowly, placing his hand atop Chase’s. He stepped forward beside him. The entourage of guards fell back to stand several feet behind them.

Chase closed his eyes and the wind picked up. It whipped his hanfu around him and lifted his hair, the black tendrils spiraling and shining green in the glow that enveloped him. When he spoke, his voice contained magic. The air crackled with it.

“I, Chase Young, ruler of this realm, now address the Land of Nowhere,” he spoke with authority. The sea of dark trees beneath them shivered in the wind. “I bring forth my apprentice, who has tied himself to me body and soul.”

What? Jack felt his mouth go very dry. Surely he hadn’t misunderstood their contract. That sounded, well… Rather romantic, if he were honest. Like a marriage. His face was so warm, he thought it would surely catch fire.

“I request his admittance and acceptance in this land, and your recognition of him as mine.”

The ground beneath Jack’s feet began to crack. His heart jumped up to his throat as black vines unraveled from the ground, snaking up his legs.

“Chase!” He yelped, grabbing on to his arm. The hand holding his squeezed, sending a pulse of reassurance. When Chase turned to look at him, Jack froze. The black pupils were so slitted, they drowned in gold.

“Jack,” he spoke and the powerful calm in his voice rendered Jack completely mute. He shook as the vines continued to climb him, sliding roughly over hanfu and skin. “Trust me.”

The tip of a vine rose before Jack’s face, drawing his attention to it, away from Chase’s eyes. It opened into a crimson blossom, speckled with white, deadly and captivating.

Then it shot forward, suctioning itself to Jack’s mouth. A muffled scream burst out of Jack as he struggled. His hands released Chase in favor of trying to pry the vines off him. There was a hand at the back of his head, tangling in his hair.

“Open your mouth, Jack,” Chase’s voice whispered. “Don’t be afraid.”

Don’t be afraid?! Jack’s mind was shrieking, calling Chase an absolute idiot, spinning into a panic. All the same, he certainly wasn’t in the position to do anything else than exactly what Chase told him to. Jack opened his mouth and something searing flowed into it. It was sour, sweet, and fiery all at once and he gagged, closing his eyes as tears started pouring out. There was so much of it. He had to swallow.

The moment he did, the vines unravelled. The flower released him and he gasped for breath,
bending double. Chase’s hand was at his back. Then the ground beneath his feet began to change.

It pulsed then rippled. Green grass sprang up from the previously parched and cracked ground. The cold breeze was suddenly blowing warm and when Jack looked up, his jaw dropped to see the skies brightening blue. Large white fluffy clouds blossomed. Jack stared, awed, almost forgetting the throbbing in his mouth.

Then he looked down. The sea of trees flickered. Through tears, Jack could see a very unusual city, a mix of at least a dozen different cultures in the architecture alone. And then the people. Dark-skinned, light-skinned, mixed, curly hair, straight hair, a whole spectrum of eye colors and heights. They were all looking at him.

A hand rested on his shoulder and Jack turned to see Chase with a slight smile on his face. He appeared normal again, the magic having died down with the end of the ceremony.

“Welcome to Jiāyuán, Jack.”

-oOo-

Walking the streets of Jiāyuán was surreal. Everywhere they went, Jack found himself swiveling his head, trying to get better looks at everything. Huge colorful tapestries hung above the narrow streets, shading vendors and people who passed beneath them. A group of young children barreled past them, bearing wooden swords and laughing.

It was just him, Chase, and Zhangwei. The other warriors had seemingly vanished but every once in a while, Jack caught a glimpse of one. Like they were patrolling.

“So what does Jiāyuán mean?” Jack asked over the hustle and bustle. Chase, who was walking beside him, paused to buy a rather strange looking fruit from a vendor. The woman he bought it from smiled ear from ear, expressing her thanks and honor to Chase profusely, bowing.

“Jiāyuán is Chinese for ‘home’, ‘homestead’, or ‘homeland’,” he informed him, handing over the fruit. Jack turned it over in his hands. It was soft and fuzzy like a peach but its color faded from periwinkle to deep blue violet. “Take a bite.”

Jack bit into the fruit without hesitation. It burst in his mouth, the juice running down his chin. It was the most confusing yet delicious thing he’d ever tasted. Blueberry, plum, pomegranate… How couldn’t quite pin it down. He wiped the juice from his chin.

“What is this?”

“They haven’t named it yet,” Chase chuckled. “The children call them plurps but, well… That’s hardly appetizing.”

Eventually they found their way to a building with guards on either side of the door. They bowed their heads as Chase entered, Jack and Zhangwei on his tail. A tall dark-skinned man in leather armor sat behind a large table, reading the scrolls there. He stood when he realized Chase’s presence.

“My Lord, welcome back to Jiāyuán.”

“Thank you, Chunghu,” Chase addressed with a nod. “Status report.”

Chunghu took a rather large scroll from a shelf behind him and unrolled it on the table. Jack leaned
over curiously to find it covered in annotations in a language he couldn’t understand.

“Since the acceptance of those fifty renegades, they’ve been each assigned a field to upkeep on your order. I am pleased to say that most of them have made good this responsibility. However, there are five who have neglected the land given to them.”

“Have you arrested them for squandering our resources?” Chase asked, leaning on the table.

“Not yet, my Lord,” Chunghu sighed. “We wished to run an idea by you first.”

“Very well, proceed.”

“We wanted your permission to cut off their water supply.”

“Without water, how would they grow their fields?”

“What if you decreased their rations?”

All eyes in the room turned to look at Jack. He cleared his throat nervously, suddenly wondering if he should’ve kept his mouth shut.

“T-they each receive rations every week, right?” He stuttered out, face red.

Chunghu leaned over the scroll to check an annotation and nodded.

“That is correct.”

“Locking them away and taking their water wouldn’t help the fields themselves. It’d only create more work for already working citizens. So why not send a notice with their next portion of rations, explaining that their rations would decrease by the week until their fields start showing significant progress? Someone can drop in at the end of every week, take notes, and judge whether the quota has been met or not. Then give rations based on progress. A man can survive for a long freaking time without food but only a handful of days without water.”

Jack was determined not to look at Chase. He didn’t think he could stand to see disappointment in that handsome face. Fear trickled down his spine. Was he about to be punished for speaking out? Was it even his place to say anything at all?

But he missed Chase’s subtle, proud smile. He nodded at Chunghu, who nodded back, eyes glinting.

“I think that is an excellent solution,” he announced, grinning. “Your new apprentice, I take it?”

“Yes. Might I introduce Jack Spicer, evil boy genius.”

Jack’s head shot up, eyebrows raising as he stared at Chase, hardly able to believe the words from his mouth. He grinned widely, warmth bubbling up in his chest as Chase clapped a hand on his shoulder. Chunghu smiled.

“Welcome to Jiāyuán, Master Jack. I look forward to seeing what you can do.”

“This is Chunghu, Jiāyuán’s highest ranking official. Other officials bring their information to him and he prepares reports that come directly to me.”

Chunghu nodded, folding his arms.
“If you need any information at all about Jiāyuán while here, I am the person to ask. Do not hesitate to if you must know something.”

Jack decided he quite liked Chunghu. He seemed amiable despite his high position. Plus, Chase seemed to trust him. That said a lot.

There was a soft knock at the door. When Jack turned, he blinked to find a young woman standing in the doorway. She was dressed in a purple dress, a light cloak draped over her shoulder. A long cascade of sandy brown hair fell down her back.

“Ah, Eris,” Chase greeted and, to Jack’s eternal surprise, took her hand and bent down to kiss it lightly. He straightened. “Enchanted, as always.”

“Thank you, Chase. It’s good to see you, too,” she said. Her voice was quiet but she didn’t need to speak any louder; the room was completely silent as if enraptured by her presence.

And indeed there was something about Eris that radiated power. Even Jack could feel the magic coming off her in gentle waves. She dropped her hand onto Zhangwei’s head, petting and scratching at his ears. He pressed up into her hand, eyes closing, and Jack swore he would’ve purred if tigers could purr.

“Have you renewed the border?” Chase asked her, smirking at Zhangwei’s reaction to her ministrations.

“Of course,” Eris reassured him with a small smirk of her own. “That’s why I’m here, to tell you myself.”

“Wait,” Jack had to know. “Are you responsible for the…?”

“For the enchantments that make the Land of Nowhere appear unpleasant and uninviting?” She finished for him. He nodded. “Yes.”

“I owe Eris much,” Chase admitted. “She is very powerful and I am fortunate she’s my ally.”

Jack stared at Eris. She was now kneeling and speaking quietly to Zhangwei, who sat and listened to her, nodding on occasion. He just had to wonder how extensive her power was if even Chase, who Jack thought to be extremely powerful, recognized it. He made a mental note not to cross her.

A commotion outside interrupted his thoughts. There was a voice, female, that was yelling.

“What the hell?” Chenghu muttered, stepping around the desk and opening the door. Jack peered around him curiously.

A woman was arguing quite fiercely with a guard. She was short with wide hips and a voice that simply couldn’t be ignored. Her eyes were narrowed, thick dark brows knitted together in frustration.

“Please, you must let me in! I have to speak with Chase Young! It’s important!”

“What you have to say, you can say to me,” the guard said smoothly. “I can pass your message on to the Lord.”

“I don’t know you,” she spat furiously. “I can’t trust you!”

“What is this?” Chenghu asked sharply.
“I need to speak to your Lord, please!”

“Step aside, Chenghu. I’ll handle this.”

Chase stepped outside the office. The woman seemed to falter, momentarily taken aback by his appearance. Her expression transformed from anger to surprise and it struck Jack just how young she looked. Then she knelt to one knee, bowing her head in undeniable respect.

“Speak,” he ordered, voice icy enough to freeze the warm summer air.

“My Lord, I’ve come with a warning. I fear that someone will attempt to take your life today.”

Chase’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“And just how have you come into this knowledge?”

“I am one of the fifty renegades that you have not too long ago welcomed into your kingdom, my Lord. The life you have provided for us has been good, a fair gift, but not all of us feel that way. There is talk among a select few who are bitter and wish to take their rage out on you. I can’t say exactly who (as it is but a rumor) but the word is an assassination will be attempted today.”

She was shaking. Jack could see her short brown curls trembling as she refused to look up. He knew the feeling of being on the receiving end of Chase’s rage and could practically taste her fear.

Eris placed a gentle hand on Chase’s bicep and he turned his head slightly, eyes never leaving the young woman kneeling before him.

“She speaks the truth,” she breathed in his ear. “Look at her, Chase. This girl has nothing to lose.”

“I am aware,” Chase murmured back. He addressed the young woman once again. “Rise. What is your name?”

The young woman rose. She kept her eyes down in respect.

“Rosemary,” she said shakily. Chase inclined his head.

“Rosemary, I will take your words under consideration. Go about your business. Tell no one that you have been here lest they turn their anger on you.”

She nodded and turned on the spot. Jack watched Rosemary until she vanished into the crowds, heart pounding against his sternum at her dire warning.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, what a fun chapter to write. I hope y'all enjoyed it! Thoughts?

The next chapter of Wild will be posted hopefully by next Sunday evening (Dec 8) but I can't say for certain due to my busy schedule. Watch my Tumblr for updates!

Much love!
-P3ac3fulFor3st
The rest of the day went much like this: Chase led Jack around Jiāyuán, introducing him to other city officials, tackling issues in the kingdom… Eris accompanied them. Chase walked a few paces in front of them, leaving Jack and Eris to talk, Zhangwei walking between them.

“Jack Spicer,” she said, rolling his name in her mouth as if to taste it. “What do you think of Jiāyuán so far?”

“It’s really cool,” Jack said honestly. “I really thought the Land of Nowhere would be a lot more… Death and despair, y’know? I didn’t expect to see… I don’t know…”

“An actual bustling, thriving society?” She smiled. “It’s interesting, isn’t it? No one would expect people to be happy living under the rule of a Heylin warlord and yet… Here we are.”

“But why hide it?” Jack mused aloud. “This country could be a world power if the world knew it existed.”

“Look around you, Jack. What you see is a blend of attackers over the ages. Troops are sent to attack in the name of good to bring down the mighty Chase Young and then are shocked to find the people here are healthy, safe, and generally happy. Most of them end up staying and moving their families here. If the world really knew what was here… This land would be destroyed. Devoured by the modern world.”

They entered a plaza area covered in multi-colored stepping stones with a fountain at the center. People shopped and chattered, laughter standing out. A young girl ran past, shrieking, and Jack’s eyes followed her. She weaved in and out of the crowd then cupped her small hands in the fountain, flinging water at an older boy that had to be her brother. He splashed back.

Jack suddenly found that he understood. He looked to where Chase was talking with a small group of people. Their eyes were filled with admiration. Everything Chase did, he did for his people. Jack could see that now.

“A lot of people believe Heylin to be synonymous with evil,” Eris said quietly so only Jack could hear her. “This is simply not true. The Xiaolin way is all good, all right, one way or no way. The Heylin way honors balance between Yin and Yang, something you’ll no doubt learn during your apprenticeship. Chase fancies himself evil. But I don’t think that’s quite right. Ruthless, maybe, but not evil. I don’t think an evil man could create a place such as this.”

“So how come you’re here? I mean,” Jack floundered. “Sorry, that came out rude…”

“It’s okay, Jack. I came to be here when Chase after my husband’s troops attacked this land. Chase murdered my husband.”
“Oh, I… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Eris said with a huff, shaking her head. “He was a horrid man and it was not my choice to marry him. I planned to make my own way in the world but when Chase asked me to stay, I-!”

“Chase asked you to stay?” Jack gasped at her, stopping dead in the middle of the street. Eris frowned at him. She got his drift immediately, snorting in disbelief.

“I’m not dating Chase Young, Jack.”

“Oh, my God,” Jack groaned, burying his red face in his hands. She laughed, patting his back.

“He’s not my type. Too showy.”

“Chase isn’t… Well.”

The two of them dissolved into laughter, unable to help themselves.

As they were laughing over Chase’s obvious flair for dramatics, a hooded figure stumbled forward out of the crowd, groaning. He lurched towards them.

“Help, please… Someone…”

He started to fall forward and Jack reached out to catch him on instinct. The next few moments happened so fast, he wasn’t sure exactly what happened.

There was a flash of silver. A knife catching the sunlight. Eris gasped, throwing her hand out. A burst of power hit him in the chest and the man flew back, hitting the ground hard, the knife spinning away from him. A foot trapped the blade. Chase’s foot. His eyes narrowed.

“Zhangwei, gut him.”

The man started to scramble away as fast as he could but it wasn’t fast enough. With Chase’s simple order, Zhangwei was on the assailant in an instant. With a primal roar, he brought his deadly jaws down and…

Blood splattered Jack’s bare feet. People screamed, retreating into nearby buildings, moving away from the scene in fear. Jack’s world narrowed as his heart thudded in his ears. His breath sped up. He couldn’t look away, he couldn’t look away, he couldn’t-!

“Jack,” Chase’s voice sounded so far away. “Are you hurt?”

“N-n-n…”

Chase pulled him from the main street, into a shaded back alley. Immediately, he started checking Jack for injuries. With a whimper, Jack threw himself at Chase, wrapping his shaking arms tight around his middle. Tremors ran through him.

“It’s alright,” Chase murmured. His arms encircled Jack and held him there. “You are safe. You were lucky Eris and Zhangwei were there.”

Jack sniffled, turning his head to look out of the alley. Eris’ fair skin was even paler. She had a hand on Zhangwei’s human face, her thumb swiping at the blood streaked across it. He put his hand over hers and Jack tried to read his lips, only able to make out one phrase…

“I am fine.”
Eris turned her head, hand still on Zhangwei’s face, her eyes meeting Jack’s. She softened slightly.

“Chase,” she spoke and even though she said it quietly, Chase tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Take your apprentice home.”

From his sanctuary in his master’s arms, Jack felt the wind swirl around them. Chase’s magic reacted to Eris’ words and whisked them away, Jiāyuán blurring out of sight.

Once back at the citadel, panic still clouded Jack’s senses. Warm hands cupped his face. He should be reacting, he thought faintly. But he couldn’t bring himself to do so… Like he was numb to it.

“Your pupils are enlarged… You’re in shock.”

Chase’s voice was still awfully far away. Even though his face was mere inches from his own, brow furrowed. Was Chase… Worried? It sounded like it…

Jack felt his feet leave the ground. He was being held, Chase’s arms under his knees and around his shoulders. He shivered, turning his face to press it against his shoulder.

“Are you cold?” Chase asked, keeping his tone low. Jack didn’t answer. He couldn’t do much else than shiver. Was he cold? He was having trouble telling. Chase cursed softly under his breath, carrying him down a hallway.

“Bao,” Chase called, and a tiger appeared by his side, striding along with them. “Go prepare a warm bath and inform me when it is ready.”

The tiger sprung away as Chase entered Jack’s room, laying him down on the bed. He untied Jack’s sash, tugging it free, and grabbed a pillow. Lifting Jack’s legs, he elevated them on top of it. Then, with the back of his hand, he pressed it to Jack’s forehead.

“A bit clammy. Jack, listen to me.”

His hands were on Jack’s face again.

“I need you to answer some questions, alright? What’s your full name?”

It took Jack a minute to answer; his mouth felt as thought it’d been stuffed with cotton.

“J… Jackson Thomas Spicer.”

“Good. And your age?”

“F-fifteen…”

“Who am I?”

“Chase… Chase Young… M-my master.”

“Correct.”

“Jack?”

Jack winced at hearing Wuya’s voice. He then felt her hand brushing his hair back.

“What’s wrong with him? Chase, what the hell did you do?”
“I did not do this,” Chase said sharply. “We need to keep him awake; he’s in shock.”

“Math questions.”

“Jack, what’s 850 - 20?”

Jack, as strange as he felt, couldn’t help but scowl, his eyes finally meeting Chase’s.

“830. Don’t insult me, Chase; at least make them hard…”

Chase chuckled, lips quirking up. Wuya rolled her eyes.

“If he has the mental capacity to be snarky, he’ll be fine, Chase.”

She was brushing Jack’s hair off his forehead in a repetitive soothing motion. He let his eyes drift shut.

“Don’t close your eyes,” Chase ordered. “I need you to stay awake. 634 + 50 - 25?”

Jack forced his eyes open.

“… 659.”

“The square root of 2750?”

“52.5?”

“52.4, but that’s close enough.”

“Master, the bath is ready.”

Chase removed his hands from Jack’s face, turning to address his warrior.

“Thank you, Bao.”

Jack was scooped up again. He could get used to this, he couldn’t help but think. Without his armor on, Chase’s broad chest was quite comfortable, his shoulder a perfect resting place for Jack’s head. He could feel his muscles under his skin. He smelled awfully good. Like crushed pine needles and mountain air.

As they walked, Wuya started in on Chase.

“I swear, if this was one of your stupid exercises-!”

“A man tried to murder him in Jiāyuán today,” Chase cut her off. Wuya stopped dead in the hallway for a moment before catching up again.

“Who was he? I’ll have him dead before dinner.”

“No need; Zhangwei handled him.”

“Damn, he gets to have all the fun… Will he be alright?”

“Jack will be fine.”

Only then did she leave.
They arrived in a huge bathroom. Jack blinked as he took in all the black marble, the tub that was sunk into the floor… Chase set him on his feet, removing Jack’s hanfu layer by layer. Jack only barely registered what was happening. He considered it hazily. On any other day, he’d be freaking out.

He thanked the universe Chase had the decency to leave him in his underwear.

The water was warm. Not hot, not cold, just… Warm. A sigh of relief escaped Jack’s lips; the chill that had settled over him was fleeting. There was a bench built into the side of the tub where he sat, leaning against the side. Chase kneeled by the tub’s edge. No doubt staying for the worry that Jack might drown. Which was laughable to Jack but not at all unfounded.

“You did very well today, Jack,” Chase was saying. “You conducted yourself in action and speech that I would expect from my apprentice. You should be proud of yourself.”

“It wasn’t you they were trying to kill,” Jack finally managed to form a coherent thought and have it exit his mouth fully formed. “It was me. But why? I’m not that much of a threat.”

“Perhaps not now,” Chase partially agreed. “But you have already shown progress after a month. Imagine how much of a threat you’ll be after a year.”

“Eris saved me.”

“Yes, she did. You are fortunate she was with you. As soon as you are finished here, I want you to eat something.”

Right on cue, Jack’s stomach rumbled. True, they’d eaten a brief breakfast before leaving for the Land of Nowhere. But other than the… Plurp, was it? He hadn’t had anything else. He nodded.

Chase stood with a sigh.

“Then I want you to go to bed.”


“Nonetheless,” Chase insisted with a frown. “I want you to rest for at least an hour. Someone in Jiāyuán attempted to take your life today. That means I have much work to do…”

-oOo-

Under normal circumstances, Chase would’ve handled it all himself and done his own digging. But having an apprentice rewrote his own rules. With Jack fed and sent to bed with strict orders to stay in his room, Chase sent for Zhangwei.

As he waited, he sifted through his notes and scrolls on the table. Where had he gone wrong? What other holes were there in his security, in his ranks?

When Zhangwei stepped out of the shadows, Chase couldn’t help but smirk a little bit. Anyone else would’ve missed the subtle details but him? He knew Zhangwei. Normally unruffled by even the most chaotic of events, his warrior seemed flustered. There was a slight blush high in his cheeks and one of his boots was unlaced.

“Did I interrupt something?”

“My Lord, with all due respect, your messengers should learn to knock.”
Chase couldn’t help but laugh.

“I am guessing you and Eris-?”

“It is not polite to speak of a lady’s affairs,” Zhangwei said smoothly. “Especially one that could curse both of us into next week.”

Chase nodded in agreement, still chuckling.

“You are correct, of course. Besides… We have more pressing matters to discuss.”

“The assassin. His name was Hugo Smith, a renegade soldier… Blood type A,” Zhangwei added after a pause, taking a moment to run his tongue over his teeth, tasting the kill. Chase snorted before his brow furrowed in thought.

“That other renegade… The one who gave us a forewarning. I wish to speak to her.”

“Yes, my Lord. Will that be all?”

“Yes, my Lord. Will that be all?”

“Not quite,” Chase said, pacing the throne room. “We need to examine our inner-city security. There was obviously a breach that allowed that man to get far closer to Jack than we intended.”

“When did you start calling him Jack?” Zhangwei asked delicately, examining his nails. “I was under the impression you referred to him by his last name.”

Chase frowned.

“I refer to him as both. How many warriors are on duty in Jiāyuán?”

“You have five officials and five guards per official.”

“There’s only twenty-five warriors in the city?” Chase looked at Zhangwei with raised eyebrows. “I want that number doubled by sunset, on rotations throughout the streets. Our officials can handle themselves. Make sure the new guards never take the same rotation or route twice. If assailants are willing to threaten my apprentice, then my people must be protected and guard rounds cannot be predictable.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Chase leaned over his table, unrolling a scroll. Taking a quill, he dipped it in an ink well and scribbled down a quick note.

“What was the name of the young woman who came to warn us? Rosalina? Roselyn?”

“Rosemary, my Lord,” Zhangwei corrected. “Will you press her for information since the threat turned out to be very real?”

“Not quite what I had in mind… Here,” Chase rolled up the scroll and held it out to him. “Take this to Chenghu.”

He snapped his fingers. From the corners of the room, from behind pillars and out of shadows crept a multitude of jungle cats. Zhangwei counted twenty-five silently and nodded, accepting the scroll.

“He will distribute the warriors. You will find and bring Rosemary to me.”

“Yes, my Lord.”
Rosemary had never had a day quite like this one before. It was late afternoon when she finally left the cobblestone roads for a dirt path that wound out of Jiāyuán.

In her hand was a bag filled with tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, plums, and beans. She would buy herself meat but… She couldn’t bring herself to purchase the chicken carcasses available with the prospect of de-feathering and deboning it herself looming over her head.

Eventually she came across her home. It was a modest place, several rooms under one roof that held bunks. Group housing for the renegades.

It really wasn’t that bad. They had modern plumbing, a bathhouse, a kitchen… Work to fill the day that no one quite enforced. Some of her colleagues scoffed at the prospect and lazed about in their bunks all day.

Rosemary knew better. For the past couple of months, she’d tended to the field she’d been assigned. Sure enough, when the time for harvest came, the field gleamed with golden stalks of wheat that swayed gently in the summer breeze. Working from dawn to dusk, she picked the grain by hand and took it to the mill to be ground into flour. As the one to grow the crop, she received not only payment for her labor but a small portion of the grain itself.

Her money was carefully saved. Now she was in the month when she needed to clear her fields and prepare them for a winter crop. Surely, with another successful wheat harvest, she’d be able to purchase her own home.

When Rosemary stepped into the kitchen, she almost dropped her bag. She’d nearly crashed into… The blood drained from her face as she found herself looking up at one of Chase Young’s warriors. The tall Chinese one with sharp, dark eyes.

She was so dead. Why had she even revealed the stupid murder plot to Chase Young? Now she was going to take the fall for everything!

“The Master summons your presence. Follow me.”

And he walked out. Did Rosemary have any other choice than to follow? She figured no.

The pair walked in silence along the dirt path, winding back the way Rosemary had just come. She trailed behind the warrior, struggling to keep up with his long strides. Damn, he was tall; he had to be at least a foot taller than Rosemary herself.

He stole a backwards glance at her, sensing her fear and hesitation.

“Relax,” he rumbled as they reached Jiāyuán’s official headquarters. “The Master did not appear angry.”

“M-maybe not with you…” Rosemary squeaked. “I didn’t exactly make a good first impression.”

“Perhaps,” the warrior agreed. He took an offered stone from the town official, tucking it into a pocket. Rosemary had been in the Land of Nowhere long enough to recognize a teleport anchor point. The warrior reached out and rested a hand on her shoulder and warmth rushed to her face, his eyes flashing up to meet hers.

They might’ve been dark. But there in those depths was an undeniable warmth. Framed by stray strands of black hair, Rosemary had to admit that this warrior, intimidating as he was, was also
breathtaking.

“Do as he says. Only speak when spoken to. Understand?”

“Y… Yes, I understand.”

“Brace yourself.”

A very strange sensations washed over Rosemary. She felt the wind around them pick up and crackle with some kind of energy… Then they were gone.

When the wind finally died down, she opened her eyes to look up at the warrior. He was looking at something beyond her and she turned. A sharp gasp escaped her and she took a step back. Her back hit the warrior’s chest.

“Easy…” He muttered. His hands rested naturally on her waist to hold her steady, a warm but gentle feeling in the unfamiliar place.

The circular room had a high ceiling that looked as if it were made of glass (Rosemary could see the afternoon sun above them) with pillars of marble holding it up. A mighty crimson throne sat against one of them, the walls made of stained glass in varying shades of blue and green, a large wooden table in the center of the room. The warlord himself stood behind it, wearing… Not the hanfu Rosemary had seen him wearing in Jiāyuán. Instead, he was wearing armor, a combination of traditional Chinese gear and modern plates she’d never seen before. He seemed to be occupied, skimming over the many scrolls scattered on the table.

Dangerous golden eyes looked up. Rosemary bowed her head instantly, dropping her gaze, heart pounding.

“Thank you, Zhangwei. That will be all.”

Rosemary heard the warrior (Zhangwei?) retreat. A door closed. Now she was alone with Chase Young. She dared not look at him, at the man who legitimately changed her entire life. She wondered if he would take it.

“You are afraid. Why?”

Rosemary flinched at his blunt question.

“I…” She cleared her throat but it did nothing to stopper the trembling in her voice. “My information was flawed. Y-you’re apprentice nearly paid for that… I… I am nobody. My life is inconsequential. I-I…”

“You fear that I will make an example of you and end your life due to your inaccurate warning.”

She nodded, still unable to look at him.

“That is not my reason for summoning you.”

Her head jerked up at last and she yelped, falling backwards. She scrambled away, back from the man who’d somehow managed to put himself mere inches in front of her without making a sound. Her back eventually hit a pillar and she brought her arms up instinctively. Tremors wracked her frame. In those brief moments, she hadn’t seen Chase Young standing over her.

There were a lot of things that surprised Rosemary since becoming a resident in the Land of
Nowhere. But none shocked her as much as the warlord kneeling on one knee before her. There
was so much she’d suspected him to be. Kind was not one of them.

“I wish to reward you for your help,” he said quietly and her anxiety began to slowly unravel. “But
before I can… I must know why you chose to help me.”

And so, gathering every ounce of her meager courage, Rosemary started to speak.

-oOo-

As it turned out, Chase had been right to send him to bed. Instead of resting for an hour, Jack
passed out in bed, groaning and griping when Zhangwei dragged him out three hours later.

“You will not sleep tonight if you continue to sleep now,” Zhangwei lectured. “The Master has
urgent business to discuss with you.”

“Right now?” Jack yawned, pulling on a tank top. Zhangwei nodded.

“Yes, I imagine it may have something to do with… What did the Master say… A robotics lab?”

He laughed when Jack nearly tripped over his feet in his excitement to get out the door, leaving
him behind. Jack raced to the throne room, skidding in around a pillar.

“Chase!”

“Don’t yell, Spicer, I’m right here.”

Indeed, he was. Chase was sitting at the table, writing in a scroll. A young lioness was curled up on
top of his feet, snoozing, one of her ears flicking.

“Zhangwei said something about my lab?”

The corner of Chase’s lips quirked up. He pulled over a scroll of paper and unrolled it.

“According to our contract, I owe you a robotics lab here in the citadel, correct?”

“Yeah, I just- I didn’t think-!”

“That I would stay true to my word?”

Jack, formerly terrified at the very idea of accusing Chase of being a liar, hesitated before nodding.
Chase inclined his head.

“Understandable. I am not always trustworthy. That is what makes me a worthy Heylin Warrior.
You, too, will eventually learn who to lie to and who is worthy of your truth. However, under these
circumstances- the ones in which you find yourself my apprentice- I intend to keep my promises to
you.”

Jack half-laughed. Then he held his fist aloft, the pinky finger extended.

“Pinky-promise?”

Chase’s eyebrow arched.

“And what, pray tell, is a ‘pinky-promise’?”
“It’s actually a fascinating story,” Jack said, hand faltering slightly. “Tubbimura told me it came from Japan where it’s called ‘yubikiri’ which means-!”


“Exactly! In Japan, if you break a pinky-promise, you have to cut off your pinky finger. There’s more to the original saying but I can’t remember all of it. Something about swallowing needles…? I don’t know, but I do know it’s considered a serious bind of trust.”

“I see,” Chase snorted softly. He rolled up the scroll, deciding to indulge his apprentice’s quirky whim, even if it was a bit ridiculous to take such a thing so seriously. “I suppose, if it helps you believe I will keep my promises, then I see no harm in a pinky-promise.”

He held out his gloved fist, pinky extended. Jack linked his with Chase’s, face breaking into a wide, goofy grin.

“Awesome! So when do we get my stuff?”

“First, let me show you where it will be.”

As they walked, the lioness followed at Chase’s feet, almost pressed right against his leg. Jack watched in interest, following on her other side. He’d never seen a lioness that young in the citadel before.

When they finally arrived, Chase unlocked and pushed open a door, stepping aside. He gestured, and Jack glanced at him before entering. It was a large room with small windows along the top of the far wall. It was empty but… There was a hum in the air. Something Jack could sense but couldn’t see. He turned to look at Chase, the question on his lips. Chase, with a smirk, beat him to it.

“You can feel it, can’t you?” He asked, and when Jack nodded, he continued. “What you’re feeling is Heylin Magic. There’s remnants of it from what the room was used for before now.”

“What was it used for?”

“It was one of my rooms.”

Wuya had arrived. She leaned against the doorway, hand on her hip.

“How’s your head?”

“I’m fine, Wuya.”

“Oh, sure… Teenagers who almost get stabbed are fine.”

Jack rolled his eyes, holding his arms out.

“Look at me; I’m completely unscathed.”

Wuya eyed him critically for a moment longer before sighing.

“Chase said you needed a lab close to your room with a high concentration of Heylin Magic particles. Before today, I used this space for experimental spells.”

Jack smirked lightly.
“So he kicked you out and gave me the room? Looks like Chase has a favorite gueeest,” he sang, “and it’s not youuu.”

“Oh, please,” Wuya scoffed. “The only reason why you’re getting this room is because you can’t produce Heylin Magic without a source yet.”

“Hold the phone, I thought this room was supposed to be my lab,” Jack said slowly, frowning. “My robotics lab. What does magic have to do with anything?”

“If you look around long enough, you’ll notice there are no electrical outlets. As Heylin Magic is, in fact, part of your training, I will be starting you with the basics by helping you enable your machines to run off magic,” Chase paused to watch Jack practically vibrate with excitement before continuing. “That’s why I picked this room; the heavy presence of magic already permeating the air will make the process easier on you as a beginner.”

“Holy shit… Holy shit! This is awesome! It’s gonna be so awesome! When can we start?”

“We will work on moving and enchanting and setting up your lab during your free time on the weekends. We start tomorrow.”

“Yeeesss!” Jack screeched victoriously, arms in the air. Wuya winced.

“Great,” she sighed. “Now those damn robots will be all over the place… Wait. Please, tell me you didn’t make another one…”

Her eyes had fallen on Chase’s hand, which was resting atop the lioness’ head. He rubbed her forehead, and she closed her eyes, pushing up into his hand.

“The last I checked, Wuya, you were my guest, not my mother. Besides, I needed a new escort for Jack.”

“What about Zhangwei?” Jack asked, looking between Chase and the lioness. “He’s great! And I just got used to him!”

“Zhangwei has other duties besides protecting you,” Chase said smoothly. “He’s still assigned to you. Just not exclusively. There are moments I need him for more delicate operations. No, this lioness will do nicely when he is unavailable.”

Now, dinner.”

Jack followed Chase from his future lab, babbling away to him and Wuya, sharing his plans. When they made it to the dining room, Chase addressed the lioness.

“Rosemary, your room will be across the hall from Jack’s. You may go settle in now if you wish. I expect you back in the dining room in one hour.”

The lioness nodded. She rubbed against his leg languidly one more time before bounding off, tripping over her paws. Chase shook his head with a private smile; it always took new warriors a while to adjust to having four legs.

Chapter End Notes
Let it be known that Rosemary will be appearing often in this story, as will Eris and Zhangwei.
Hope y'all enjoyed this! Let me know what you thought!

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