

BOOK 4: WHITE-CLOTHED CALAMITY

MXTX Author Notes:

This book is set in the past timeline; this is about the first banishment after the fall of Xianle. Follows after Book 2. Not too long~

Ch.181: Lantern Night; Penny for a Wandering Soul

Xie Lian jolted awake in horror.

His body was drenched in cold sweat from the scare, and he shot up from his rest, burying his face in his hands.

The reason he awoke in shock was because of a dream. Within the dream, both his father and mother had committed suicide, had hung themselves. He saw it, but there was no joy or grief, no tears to flow, and he woodenly prepared himself another white silk band. Just as he was sticking his head into the knot, he saw below there was a white-clad man, wearing a crying-smile mask, jeering at him. His heart jolted, the knot tightened, and a crushing suffocation came. Then he woke up.

It was already daylight outside the window, and from the exterior came a voice.

“Your Highness! Are you awake?”

Xie Lian answered offhandedly, “I’m awake!”

It was only after having violently panted for a good while that he realized he wasn’t sitting on a futon. Instead, it was a sheet of straw mat under his body. Although it was layered with many batches of hay, extraordinarily soft, to him it still wasn’t quite comfortable. Even now, he still wasn’t used to such simple and crude bedding.

The one who called for him just now was Feng Xin. He went out early in the morning and had just brought back food, and was urging Xie Lian from the outside to go take his meal. Xie Lian acknowledged him and crawled up.

That sense of suffocation in the dream was too real, and his hand unconsciously felt his neck. He had only wanted to verify whether there really was a strangulation mark left behind by a knotted white silk band, yet unexpectedly, he actually felt something.

Xie Lian was shaken at first, and he rushed to grab a mirror tossed on the ground not far away. When he looked at his reflection, he realized it was the band of a black collar encircling his neck. Thus, he finally calmed, and remembered everything.

It was the cursed shackle.

Xie Lian's fingers probed at it.

Once banished to become a mortal, other than aging slower than normal humans, there weren't many other privileges. However, when Jun Wu first fabricated Xie Lian's cursed shackle, he still showed some mercy, and left him room for accommodations.

While this cursed shackle locked away his spiritual powers, it also sealed his age and flesh body at the same time, allowing him to neither age nor die. Furthermore, Jun Wu told him: if you manage to ascend again, then everything in your previous life shall be forgiven, and this thing will be removed.

But, to wear such a thing on the body was no different than a criminal whose face was branded as a sinner; no doubt, a bone-deep humiliation. Having thought this, Xie Lian reached out to the side and grabbed a white silk band, ready to pull it over his head. Yet the moment he raised his hand, he suddenly recalled that terrifying feeling of his neck slowly being strangled in his dream, and he hesitated. However, in the end, he still pulled it out and wrapped it thoroughly around his neck and the bottom half of his face before going out.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were already waiting for him outside. Feng Xin had brought back steaming-hot buns, and Mu Qing was slowly munching at them. Feng Xin passed two over to Xie Lian, but when Xie Lian saw those dull and dry crude buns he lost his appetite. He shook his head, refusing them.

"Your Highness, you have to eat something in the morning. We have to work afterwards, and it's not labour that can be done just sitting around," Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing didn't bother looking up. "Yeah, even if you don't eat this, there's nothing else to eat. You can faint again, but you'd still have to eat this in the end."

Feng Xin glared at him. "Watch your tone."

Xie Lian had only ascended for a few years, but had long forgotten what it was like to need to eat. A few days ago he nearly fainted, and it was only after that did he realize it was because he hadn't had anything to eat for several days. This was the incident Mu Qing was referring to. Sitting on the side, Xie Lian didn't want those two to start fighting so early in the morning, so he changed the subject immediately.

"Let's go. We don't even know if we'll find any work yet today."

Xie Lian of the past was of a noble and prestigious status, and since he possessed a celestial body, unneeding of mortal sustenance, naturally there was no need to worry over making a living. However, the him of now, while he was still a crown prince, the Kingdom of Xianle was

already no more; while he was still a god, he had long since been banished. Now that he was basically no different than a mortal, naturally he needed to concern himself with how to live out his days. The profession of cultivators was of course catching ghosts and performing services, but it wasn't like there were demons and monsters to be caught or rituals to be performed every day. So, a majority of the time, they still needed to find some casual, temporary work, like helping with transporting goods or some manual labour.

But even such small errand-like jobs might not be so easily grabbed. Now, there were far too many impoverished civilians who were displaced. When these paupers saw there was work, they didn't even need payment; with just a bun and half a bowl of rice, they'd be willing to labour, swarming up to fight for the work, so how could Xie Lian and company possibly compete? Even if they managed to grab something, after Xie Lian deliberated, he might still think that others needed the work more. Sure enough, after walking the streets for a good while, they still found nothing.

"Can we not find something more stable and respectable to do?" Mu Qing grumbled.

"Rubbish. If it existed, we would've long since gotten it," Feng Xin said. "Don't respectable jobs need to have faces shown? Who doesn't recognize His Highness' face? If he was recognized, how would the work remain stable?"

Mu Qing stopped talking. Xie Lian, on the other hand, wrapped the white bandage covering the lower half of the face tighter. Indeed, if anyone was to recognize who he was, then they would have to either flee or they'd be beaten and chased away. And for example, if they were to enlist for a security guard job, who would possibly be comfortable enough to hire someone with an unknown background, a security guard who wouldn't even show his face? They couldn't go and take up assassination jobs, either, so their choices were very limited.

It was impossible for gods to worry over hunger. However, mortals needed to eat. Ever since Xie Lian was young, he had never had to consider these kinds of affairs, and this was truly the first time in decades that this problem gripped him. However, if gods didn't even know what starvation felt like, how could they possibly understand the feelings of a starving worshipper? How could they possibly empathize? At this point, he could only take this experience as a form of training.

Just then, there was a sudden cacophony of gongs and drums from not far in the distance, and a large crowd gathered to see what was happening. The three followed with the flow and went up to watch, and there were a few martial artists and clowns hollering with all their might within the crowd. It was a street busker.

Mu Qing tried suggesting again, "If all else fails, why don't we go busk?"

Xie Lian was also considering the same thing, but before he responded, Feng Xin was already replying as he watched.

“What foolishness are you spouting? His Highness’ body is worth a thousand gold, how can he go do something like that?”

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “We’ve carried bricks already, so how is busking any different?”

“Carrying bricks is feeding ourselves with our own physical strength,” Feng Xin said. “Busking is to entertain the masses, to amuse them by making fools of ourselves, so of course it’s different!”

Then, one of the clowns who was hopping about tripped and fell. The crowd roared with laughter as he pulled himself up and bent at the waist to bow, picking up some scattered coins tossed on the ground. Seeing this, a deep sense of rejection rolled up in Xie Lian’s mind, and he shook his head forcefully, striking out “busking” as a viable path of employment.

When Mu Qing saw, he said, “Fine. Then let’s start pawning stuff.”

“We’ve already pawned a lot of stuff,” Feng Xin said. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t have made it until now. The rest can’t be pawned.”

Suddenly, behind the crowd came waves of surprised shouts. Someone yelled, “THE SOLDIERS ARE HERE! THE SOLDIERS ARE HERE!”

Hearing that the soldiers had come, the bustling crowd watching the show broke up. Soon after, a band of soldiers strutted down the street with weapons in their hands, donned in shiny new armour, their air impressive. They were interrogating anyone who appeared suspicious. The three hid in the crowd and heard people beside them talk:

“Who are they trying to catch?”

“Don’t worry, they’re not here to arrest us. I heard they’re trying to capture the Xianle royals who escaped.”

“Apparently someone saw suspicious characters around here, so the city’s been really strict with searches lately.”

“For real?! My goodness, have they actually fled to this place?”

Hearing this, the three exchanged looks.

Xie Lian whispered, “Let’s hurry back and see.”

The other two nodded. They silently left the crowd separately, and it was only after having walked for a while without garnering attention that they met up again, dashing away.

They ran up to a desolate piece of woods up on a small mountain, and from afar Xie Lian could see a thick column of smoke coming from within the woods. His heart dropped heavily; could the Yong'an soldiers have already discovered this place and set off fires to kill?

They ran closer, and there was a broken little cottage hidden in the trees, possibly left behind by some past unknown hunter. The thick smoke was coming from inside this cottage.

Xie Lian blurted, "MOTHER! WHAT'S GOING ON, ARE YOU THERE?"

After his shout, a woman emerged in greeting and called out happily, "My son? You've come?"

It was the queen. She was dressed plainly and had thinned quite a bit, slightly different than her affluent lady appearance of the past. Seeing that his mother was fine and her face was full of delight, obviously unbothered, Xie Lian relaxed but then quickly asked, "What's with the smoke?"

The queen replied, embarrassed, "...It's not really anything. I just wanted to do a little cooking today..."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and said, "Don't! What cooking? Just settle for the food Feng Xin and Mu Qing bring you every day. This smoke is too conspicuous; where there's smoke, there's people, you'll attract the Yong'an soldiers. We bumped into them in the city earlier. This city will also tighten their security, we'll need to move to a different place again."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing entered the cottage to put the smoke out. The queen didn't dare to be negligent either, so she went to the back rooms to talk to the king.

Feng Xin came out and whispered, "Your Highness, are you not going to go see his majesty?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "No."

The two of them, father and son, one was the king of a fallen kingdom, the other was a banished god. Just who was the more pathetic, the more ashamed, really couldn't be compared. If they were to be forced to sit down to face each other, they'd only glare at one another instead of having a heart-to-heart. So, if they could avoid seeing each other, it'd be for the best.

Xie Lian called out, "Mother, why don't you pack up in a bit, and we'll leave today. We'll come pick you up in the evening. We'll leave for now."

The queen quickly came out again. "My son, you're leaving just like that? You haven't visited in so many days, why leave so fast?"

"I have to go train," Xie Lian said.