

# The First Order

Chapter 2: This world has never trusted tears

Ren Xiaosu returned later than usual because of the robbery and his sudden loss of consciousness. Since he saw the sky darkening, he knew that it would be extremely dangerous to pass through the town with his catch at this time.

During the day, people from the stronghold still came out to maintain order. But at night, those people would return back to the stronghold.

Of course, the people from the stronghold were not doing this with good intentions. They were only worried that if the town got too chaotic, it would affect the manual labor that the refugees were performing.

“Oh, looks like Ren Xiaosu got quite the harvest today!”

When Ren Xiaosu ran back into town carrying the cauldron, someone with a dirty face greeted him. It was as though he had not washed his face ever since the day he was born.

Most of the people in town looked like that. On most days, they went to the nearby coal mine to work in exchange for some food. The coal they mined would be delivered into the stronghold, and in turn, the workers would receive just enough black bread or potatoes to survive on.

It wasn't only the mining of coal. All the necessary dirty work the stronghold needed to be done would be performed by the refugees.

Since the well water in town was rationed, the amount that everyone got per day was fixed, and no one dared to even think of asking for more. Besides, barely any clean water sources existed nearby. Or rather, any clean water source was too dangerous to go to since feral beasts would gather there to drink. Hence everyone in town would always look so dirty that no one could see their faces clearly. Ren Xiaosu was no exception either.

However, Ren Xiaosu had never worked in the coal mine before. He had his own way of surviving.

Ren Xiaosu did not respond to anyone who greeted him. He just wanted to get back to his shack as quickly as possible.

As Ren Xiaosu took an alternate way into town, he could see the towering stronghold walls from a short distance away. It felt very oppressive, for he could not even see the top when he looked up.

Not many stone structures could be found in town as most people only stayed in shacks.

Ren Xiaosu had started out quite relaxed. But he went on guard the moment he entered town and even drew the bone knife from his waist. The atmosphere on the street grew tense as though some kind of danger lurked within the shacks. But with Ren Xiaosu holding a bone knife in his hand, the people with threatening intentions restrained themselves.

The first thing Ren Xiaosu learned while staying here was not to trust anyone... other than Yan Liuyuan.

Whispers came from the shack next to the road. "Ren Xiaosu has caught more game meat."

"How does that count as game? It's only a sparrow."

"But it's different from the sparrow that we saw in the ancient textbooks. I reckon that the eagles from before The Cataclysm were also around this size?"

"Don't provoke him." A voice ended the whispering from inside the shack. Someone seemed to know about Ren Xiaosu's past.

Ren Xiaosu lifted the curtain door to his shack. The warmth in it made him less tense.

When Yan Liuyuan, who was sitting in the shack and doing his homework, saw Ren Xiaosu return, he looked pleasantly surprised. "You caught a sparrow?"

"Why didn't you light the kerosene lamp?" Ren Xiaosu asked while frowning.

Yan Liuyuan was usually a wayward child, but in front of Ren Xiaosu, who was like his elder brother, he became surprisingly docile. "I wanted to save some fuel for us."

"What if you become nearsighted?" Ren Xiaosu put the sparrow down.

Yan Liuyuan's eyes lit up. "The schoolteacher mentioned something called 'spectacles' that existed before The Cataclysm but can only be found in the stronghold now. If we have something like that, we won't have to worry about being nearsighted anymore."

Ren Xiaosu treated the statement with disdain. "I've seen someone wearing the thing that you mentioned before. But to have your vision depend on something that could be

dropped at any time out here in the wilderness, that's as good as death. Don't listen to your teacher's nonsense. Not everything he says is right."

"Oh..." Yan Liuyuan nodded and said, "Then why do you still insist on sending me to school?"

Ren Xiaosu choked on his words. "Why do you keep blabbering?"

"When can I go hunting with you?" Yan Liuyuan continued to ask.

"You're only 14. Why would you want to go hunting? If you do well in school, you won't have to go hunting." Ren Xiaosu said, "Isn't it much better to learn accounting, physics, or chemistry rather than hunting?"

"Aren't you only 17?" Yan Liuyuan was unconvinced.

In this era, even savages recognized the importance of knowledge.

This was also why a teacher could survive in town. Whatever trouble happened in town, a teacher would always be the safest person since no one would target them.

However, tuition was expensive. Otherwise, Ren Xiaosu would have gone to attend classes himself as well.

Ren Xiaosu propped up the cauldron and skillfully dissected the sparrow at the same time. "What did the teacher talk about today? I can only let you eat the sparrow's offal. I have to sell off the rest of it at the market tomorrow."

"Did you get injured?" Yan Liuyuan frowned when he saw the wound on Ren Xiaosu's hand. It had been pecked by the sparrow, and the wound was still bleeding.

The big cauldron was hung on a rod, and the flicking fire in the shack's fire pit illuminated Ren Xiaosu's face every now and again. "It's just a scratch."

It fell silent in the shack. After a while, Ren Xiaosu ladled out the cooked organs of the sparrow from the pot and handed them to Yan Liuyuan. "Eat up."

Yan Liuyuan's eyes suddenly reddened. "I don't want it. You should have it instead since you need to heal your wound."

"I'll just have some soup." Ren Xiaosu said, "I still have some black bread that I can eat."

"I'm not eating. Your wound isn't a scratch at all. I saw someone in town die as a result of an infection a few days ago because we don't have access to any medicine for

treating cuts and scrapes,” Yan Liuyuan stubbornly said as tears nearly rolled down his face.

Pah!

Ren Xiaosu suddenly slapped Yan Liuyuan across the face and said, “Remember this, you and I can never cry as long as we are living in this world. This world doesn’t trust tears.”

Ren Xiaosu continued, “Look at what kind of people are around us. What will happen to me if you don’t eat well and someone rushes in and stabs me to death at night? I send you to school because I hope you won’t become someone like me, who only knows how to hunt. You have a unique skill. As long as you study hard, you will not need to work all day in the wilderness like me to earn a living. The reason I send you to school is because I don’t want you to become savages like them!”

Yan Liuyuan suddenly took the sparrow offal from Ren Xiaosu and gobbled them down. He managed to hold back his tears in the end as he wanted to learn to be as strong as Ren Xiaosu.

“Ahem, come over and help me dress the wound with a clean cloth after you’ve eaten,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“OK,” Yan Liuyuan responded.

“You’re normally full of mischief when we’re outside, so why do you behave like such a doormat whenever we’re home?” Ren Xiaosu sighed. “Did anything happen in town today?”

“Oh yes!” Yan Liuyuan said as he looked for a clean cloth, “A group of people came out of the stronghold saying that they were looking for a guide to lead them to Stronghold 112. They want to head there by going straight through the Jing Mountains.”

“They want to go to Stronghold 112?” Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment before frowning. “They’re even insisting on getting there via the Jing Mountains?”

“Do you think they’ll come looking for you? Everyone in town knows that you’re familiar with the lands outside.” Yan Liuyuan blinked and said, “I heard that they’re musicians and singers of a band in Stronghold 113 who have been invited to perform at Stronghold 112. I’ve never seen a singer before though.”

“I’m not going.” Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said, “Let those people go via the Jing Mountains if they want. I want you to stay away from them. There’s something strange about those people.”

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu had conflicted feelings. In a world like this, there were still professional singers and musicians in bands? What on earth was it like inside the stronghold?

Ren Xiaosu was suddenly looking forward to finding out.