

Jaime

The nape split under his blades and the Titan folded into a fence.

Jaime ripped his anchors free before the body finished falling, fired left, and let the swing carry him over a collapsed barn. Four down. His arms burned from shoulder to wrist. His grips were slick inside his gloves.

"Ten meter, your right," Captain Mike called.

Jaime rolled his wrist and reversed direction. The ten meter came at him with its arms out, fingers spread. Captain Mike dropped past its face and took both eyes in one pass. The Titan clawed at its face. Jaime put an anchor into its shoulder, whipped around the arm, and opened the back of its neck to the bone.

Five.

They worked the last stretch of the village as a pair. The Captain herded, Jaime killed. A seven meter stumbled through a house wall and Captain Mike sliced its ankle tendons on the way past, dropping it to its knees, and Jaime finished it before it understood why the ground had come up to meet it. Six. The seventh chased the Captain across an open yard, and that one Jaime took with the crossed anchor spin, both hooks planted in its back, his body turning through the air. Levi's drills lived in his hands now. The nape came away in one piece.

Seven.

The last two kept their distance. They circled at the edge of the village, heads swiveling, and would not commit.

Jaime landed on a chapel roof, boots skidding on the tiles, and caught the ridge with one hand. Captain Mike came down beside him a breath later. Below them the two abnormals paced through the street, looking up.

"Gas?" the Captain asked.

Jaime checked the gauge. "Under half."

"Same." Captain Mike wiped his blades on his thigh, one at a time. "They've stopped charging. Whatever set them off, it's passed."

Jaime watched the two Titans wander between the houses. An hour ago all nine had been sprinting at the column in a single body, like fingers on the same hand. Now they drifted. The change bothered him more than the charge had.

Captain Mike's head came up. His nostrils flared, once, twice, and his whole face went still.

"There." He pointed with a blade.

Far out past the village, beyond the fields, a Titan walked through the grain. Seventeen meters at least. Fur. The thing was covered in fur, arms to ankles, an animal stood up on two legs.

"What is that," Jaime said.

"I don't know." The Captain's voice stayed level. He tracked it for a long moment, blades half-raised. It walked with its hands loose at its sides, headed nowhere near them, like it was just passing through. "It's not coming this way."

"It's like nothing I've seen."

"Me neither. And I've seen twenty years of them." Captain Mike lowered his blades. "It's moving off. We're not chasing a seventeen meter on half a tank." He clapped Jaime once on the shoulder. "You did good work today. Better than good. We'll take the horses and find the others, and Erwin can decide what to do about the fur Titan."

He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, one long note.

Out past the village edge, his horse lifted its head from the grass and came. It cut across the open field at a run, mane snapping, and its line took it wide around a farmhouse and out through the grain.

It was passing near the titan with fur.

"Captain."

The Titan's hand shot down like a gun, it's fingers closing around the screaming horse, and scooped the horse off the ground the way a man picks an apple from a low branch. It straightened. It looked at the horse kicking in its fist. Then its arm went back.

"DOWN!"

Jaime got a hand into Captain Mike's harness and threw them both off the ridge. The world turned over. Something enormous struck the chapel behind them and the roof detonated, tiles bursting outward in a cloud, the sound like a cannon going off inside his skull. They fell through the debris.

Below, the closer abnormal was already lunging, jaws open, arms up to catch them out of the air.

No time to think. Jaime fired his left anchor into its collarbone, cut the fall into a swing, and let his own weight whip him around the thing's shoulder. His blades bit through the nape on the way past. The tendons gave. Then the ground, grass, his knees taking the shock, one roll, up, blades ready.

The second abnormal stood ten paces away. It did not attack. It stared at him with its head cocked, arms hanging, and stepped backward.

Jaime spun, searching, and found Captain Mike sprawled in the grass a few meters off. He crossed to him and dropped to a knee, and only then saw the blood. It sheeted down the side of the Captain's face from a gash above his ear, soaking into his collar, bright in the grey light. A shard of roof tile lay in the grass beside his head with a wet edge.

A tile. One of the tiles must have caught him on the way down.

"Captain. Captain Mike." Jaime got an arm under him. The Captain's eyes were open but they swam, blinking against the blood. He was breathing. He was trying to sit up and his arms would not agree on how.

The ground shook.

Again. Again. Jaime looked up.

The Animal Titan walked into the village and stopped over them, and its shadow swallowed the grass, the chapel wreckage, both of them. Seventeen meters of dark fur. Its face was the worst part. Under the fur it was nearly a man's face, long, bearded, and its eyes moved over Jaime.

The remaining abnormal shrank back from it the way a dog shrinks from its master.

"Remarkable."

Jaime stopped breathing.

Who said that? Jaime wondered for a moment; it could not have been Captain Mike...Jaime's purple eyes slowly looked back at the Titan's face, bearing his teeth in a grin.

It talked. The thing talked. How is that possible?

"You killed one on the way down. You are quite fast, I was hoping it would munch on you."

Beside him, Captain Mike had gone rigid. His mouth hung open. His eyes fixed on the Titan's moving lips, and nothing came out of him. No order, no curse, nothing. Twenty years of Titans, and his whole map of the world had just burned. Jaime himself felt his mouth open and close, and no words came out...

But then his Master's voice echoed in his ears like a bell. When the other man surprises you, brat, don't show him your face. Show him a wall.

Jaime made his face a wall.

"I didn't expect to hear a Titan talk," he finally said.

The Beast's mouth curved. Slow, wide, a man's smile stretched across a monster's face.

"And I didn't expect one of you to talk back. The big one seems to have lost his tongue."
Its eyes went to Captain Mike, then returned. **"That equipment on your hips. The one that lets you fly around. What is it?"**

Movement, at the edge of his vision. Two more abnormals came around the wreck of the chapel and stopped. They did not lunge. They did not drift. They stood like posted sentries, and the one that had backed away stood with them, and all three waited.

Titans did not wait.

Jaime looked up at the Beast and the pieces fit with a cold click. They froze when it arrived. They stand when it stands. It commands them. Which meant the nine that charged the column had been sent. And it meant the only way out of this field ran through this thing's permission.

So buy the permission. This was the Underground. This was every negotiation Kenny ever dragged him through. A bigger man, a knife out of reach, and nothing to trade but words.

"It's called ODM Gear," Jaime said.

"ODM Gear." The Titan said with a smile. **"I've never seen such a thing. How does it work?"**

"I'll tell you." Jaime kept his voice easy. "If you answer a question of mine first. Information for information. It's only fair."

The Beast laughed, sounding amused.

"Fair. You're lying in the grass, boy. Your captain is bleeding into his collar and my friends are standing all around you. You don't have the upper hand here. You'll die soon."

"That's more reason to trade." Jaime held its eyes. "A dying man can't tell tales. Whatever you give me goes into the ground with me within the hour. It costs you nothing." He let a beat pass. "All I want is one answer. I don't want to die without knowing the truth."

The Beast studied him. The smile came back, smaller.

"All right. I'll play. What do you want to know?"

"The word Devil." Jaime said it plainly. "What does it mean to you?"

The smile went away.

The Beast's brow came down, and it stared at him, and for the first time, the titan was looking at him with something more than just amusement.

"Why do you want to know that?" A pause. **"Where did you hear it?"**

"You answer first. Then I answer. That was the deal."

"We are all Devils."

Jaime waited for more. Nothing came.

We are all Devils. It explained nothing and his mind ran through it anyway. Annie in the cell, her voice barely above the lantern's hiss, *it's normal treatment for a devil*. Bertholdt two years ago, the kick, the shout, *you devil*, and the apology afterward that had never sat right. Ymir in the lamplight saying *the people out there might not be happy to see them at all*. Devil. Why devils? What had anyone behind these walls done to earn that word from a talking monster, from a girl who loved him, from a boy too timid to raise his voice? He was missing something. The word was a keyhole, and he could feel the whole hidden room waiting on the other side of it.

"Now." The Beast leaned down, and its shadow deepened. **"Your turn. Where did you hear that word?"**

The abnormals had moved. A step, maybe two, each of them, tightening the ring the way a ceiling lowers in a bad dream. Captain Mike's blood had reached the grass. The gas gauge sat under half, the forest stood four hundred meters east, and Jaime ran the arithmetic the way Kenny taught him, fast and without hope, and found exactly one card left in his hand.

Play it.

"Before I answer that," Jaime said, "some advice. Between traders."

"Advice."

"Your allies inside the walls." He let it sit for one breath. "They might not be as loyal as you think. Especially the tall one."

The amusement drained out of it. The eyes looked down at Jaime without any humor at all. The long face no longer belonged to a curious man.

It knows exactly who I mean.

Jaime moved.

He came off the ground with Captain Mike's harness in his fist, fired both anchors east, and blew the gas release wide open. Vapor exploded from his tanks in a white wall, swallowing the grass, the abnormals, the Beast's legs, and Jaime shot through his own cloud with the Captain's weight wrenching his shoulder half out of its socket. Behind him, through the steam, the ground boomed. He did not look. He fired again, again, dragging them both low and fast across the field, and the treeline rushed up and took them in.

The first rock came through the canopy like a ball from a cannon.

It sheared a trunk off two meters above his head and the tree went sideways in a burst of splinters. Then another, and another, whistling down through the branches, and the forest

around them came apart in pieces. Jaime dove between two trunks, cut left, put an oak at his back and heard it explode a half-second later. He weaved. He kept the biggest trees between them and the field and flew crooked, no straight lines, nothing the thrower could lead.

A rock came through a gap.

Jaime heard screaming. He looked down and saw the blood falling in chunks behind, and Captain Mike's leg was falling like a raindrop, slowly, before touching the grass, painting it all in red.

Jaime kept flying.

His shoulder tore at its socket, his forearms shook, the gas needle crawled toward empty, and he kept flying, deeper, the barrage thinning behind them, the crashes falling away one by one until there was only the hiss of his lines and the Captain's ragged breathing against his neck.

Green light through the trunks ahead. He put another kilometer behind them anyway.

His mind would not stay on the flying. It kept going back to the field, to the moment the amusement died in that long face. He had thrown the words out as a gambler's bluff, a coin flipped at a stranger. The tall one. And the Beast had not looked confused. It had not asked, what tall one. It had gone cold and dangerous in the space of a breath, because Jaime had reached into its pocket and touched something real.

Bertholdt.

Bertholdt, who sweated through a cool morning. Bertholdt, from Annie's village. Bertholdt, who kicked him away from her two years ago and called him a devil. The same word the monster carried. The same word Annie whispered in her cell.

He had loved Annie. He had seen the truth flicker in her a hundred times and looked away, and forty-nine soldiers went into the ground for it.

Not again.

Captain Mike's blood soaked warm through his collar. Jaime fixed his eyes on the light ahead and flew, and the resolve filled his heart.

This time, he would not hesitate.