

A Shinobi of Paradis Chapter 32 (Kyuubi Awakens)

The makeshift medical station near Trost's inner gate buzzed with frantic activity. White sheets stained crimson hung as dividers between rows of wounded soldiers lying on improvised cots. The air hung heavy with the metallic scent of blood and the antiseptic tang of medical supplies.

Naruto felt his legs wobble beneath him as Squad 34 entered the converted warehouse. Using his abilities always drained him, but never before had he needed to grow roots that massive. His vision swam momentarily, and he placed a hand against the stone wall to steady himself.

I pushed too hard back there, he thought, wiping sweat from his brow. *But what choice did I have?*

Annie appeared at his side so quickly it was as if she'd materialized from thin air. Her expression remained impassive, but her eyes tracked his movements with hawk-like intensity.

"You look like hell," she said quietly.

Naruto attempted a smile. "Thanks. Always the charmer."

"You overextended yourself." It wasn't a question.

"I'll be fine," he insisted, pushing himself away from the wall. The effort cost him more than he'd admit. "Just need a minute."

She didn't argue, but remained close as they navigated through the crowded space. Beyond the walls, they could hear the continuing chaos—the distant rumble of Titan footsteps mixing with the screams of both soldiers and civilians.

Marco guided their wounded comrade toward an overworked medic, who barely glanced up before pointing to an empty spot on the floor. "Put him there. I'll get to him when I can."

"But he's losing blood," Marco protested.

The medic—a woman with dark circles under her eyes and blood-spattered hands—finally looked up. "Everyone's losing blood, soldier. I've got three men dying and two more who might live if I get to them in the next ten minutes."

Naruto surveyed the grim scene, his mind made up before he fully realized it. He knelt beside the wounded soldier, whose pale face glistened with sweat.

"What're you doing?" the man asked weakly.

"Something stupid, probably," Naruto muttered, placing his hands over the deep gash in the soldier's side. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the energy flow within himself.

Annie stepped closer. "Naruto, think about this—"

"Too late," he replied, already feeling the familiar warmth spreading through his palms. Unlike the explosive power he'd used against the Titans, this was gentler—a soft, green glow emanating from his hands.

The soldier gasped, more in surprise than pain. "What the—"

"Don't move," Naruto instructed, his brow furrowed in concentration. *Focus on the damaged tissue. Connect it. Guide it. Just like Dad taught me.*

Across the room, Reiner nudged Bertholdt and nodded toward Naruto. The tall, sweating cadet's eyes widened as they both observed the green glow.

"Is he doing what I think he's doing?" Bertholdt whispered.

Reiner's expression darkened. "Yes, he did the same thing with Krista."

The wounded soldier stared in disbelief as the wound on his body was slowly healing itself. Within minutes, the bleeding stopped completely, and healthy pink tissue replaced the angry red gash.

"That's... that's impossible," the soldier muttered, reaching down to touch his newly healed side.

Naruto slumped back, even more exhausted than before. "Yeah, well, apparently I do a lot of impossible things."

Marco crouched beside him, his freckled face a mixture of awe and concern. "Naruto, what else can you do that you haven't told us?"

"Make a decent omelet?" Naruto offered weakly, drawing a reluctant smile from Marco.

Annie extended her hand, helping Naruto to his feet. "You need to rest."

"No time," he replied, glancing toward the exit where soldiers continued to rush back and forth. Outside the window, he could see hundreds of civilians still crowded against the inner gate, desperate to pass through to safety.

They're moving too slowly, he thought, watching as panicked people pushed and shoved.

In the corner, Reiner and Bertholdt had their heads together, speaking in hushed tones. Occasionally, one would glance toward Naruto, their expressions unreadable.

"Your squadmates are talking about you," Annie observed, following his gaze.

"Let them talk," Naruto replied. "I've got bigger problems than explaining my abilities right now."

A nearby medic handed him a canteen of water, which he gratefully accepted. As he drank, he considered his options. The secret he'd kept for years—known only to his family and closest

friends—was now exposed to his entire squad. There would be questions, suspicions, maybe even fear.

Should I tell them everything?

He watched as civilians continued to struggle at the gate, soldiers trying desperately to maintain order. A child's cry pierced the general din, reminding him of more immediate concerns.

"We can't stay here," he decided, handing the canteen back. "Those people need help, and there are still Titans in the district."

Before Naruto could rally his squad to move out, Reiner appeared at his side, one hand firmly gripping his shoulder.

"We need to talk," Reiner said, his voice low but insistent. "Now."

Naruto glanced at the exit where Marco was helping direct civilians. "Can it wait? We've got a crisis happening."

"No, it can't." Reiner steered him toward a quiet corner of the medical station, behind a stack of supply crates that offered some privacy from the chaos. Bertholdt hovered nearby, his tall frame bent slightly as if trying to make himself less conspicuous.

Naruto shrugged off Reiner's hand. "Make it quick."

Reiner crossed his arms, his normally friendly demeanor replaced by something harder, more calculating. "Those abilities of yours. Growing trees from nothing. Healing wounds. What else can you do?"

"Is this really the time for—"

"Yes," Reiner cut him off. "It is. We're fighting for our lives out there. If you've been holding back abilities that could help us survive, we deserve to know."

Naruto ran a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. *He's got a point.*

"I can manipulate plants," Naruto admitted reluctantly. "Grow them, shape them, I can heal people. That's it."

"That's it?" Reiner's eyebrows shot up. "That's like saying 'I can only fly a little.' No human can do what you just did."

"Well, this human can," Naruto replied, irritation creeping into his voice. "I've been able to do it since I was a child."

Reiner leaned closer. "And your parents? Could they do the same?"

"My parents?" Naruto's eyes narrowed. "What do they have to do with this?"

"Everything, potentially," Reiner pressed. "These abilities had to come from somewhere. Were they inherited? Acquired? Is your whole family like this?"

Naruto felt a flash of protective anger. "My father was Grisha Yeager, one of the best doctors within the Walls. My mother is Carla Yeager, who teaches children in Trost now. And in case you've forgotten, Eren is my brother." His voice hardened. "You know my family, Reiner. We've trained together for three years."

"That doesn't answer my question," Reiner insisted. "Did Grisha have these abilities? Did he experiment on—"

"Enough." Naruto stepped forward, his exhaustion momentarily forgotten. "My father was a healer who saved countless lives. I won't stand here and let you imply he was something else while Titans are breaking down our walls."

Bertholdt shifted uncomfortably. "Reiner, maybe we should—"

"Stay out of this, Bertholdt," Reiner snapped without looking away from Naruto. "There's more going on here than you're telling us. Those roots appeared from nowhere. That's not natural."

"Nothing about this day is natural," Annie's cool voice interrupted as she slipped between the supply crates. "Titans breaking through a gate we've defended for five years isn't natural either."

Her presence created an immediate shift in the atmosphere. Reiner straightened.

"This isn't your conversation, Annie," he said.

"It is when you're interrogating our squad leader during an active crisis." She moved to stand beside Naruto, her small frame somehow making Reiner's bulk seem less imposing. "Whatever secrets Naruto has can wait. The mission can't."

Reiner's gaze shifted between them, calculation evident in his eyes. "You knew about his abilities already," he observed. "For how long?"

"That's not relevant."

"I think it is."

The tension between them crackled like static electricity. Naruto had never seen Annie and Reiner at odds like this before.

"Hey, is everything okay back here?" Marco appeared around the corner, his open face showing concern. "We should be heading out soon. The Garrison is requesting support along the western flank."

The interruption broke the standoff. Reiner stepped back, his expression shifting into something more neutral.

"We're fine," he said. "Just discussing strategy."

Marco's eyes lit up as he looked at Naruto. "I wanted to say—that thing you did with the healing? That was incredible! How many lives could you save with something like that?" Unlike Reiner's suspicious interrogation, Marco's interest seemed born of genuine admiration.

"It's not as simple as it looks," Naruto replied, grateful for Marco's straightforward enthusiasm. "It drains me pretty quickly."

"Still," Marco insisted, "it's amazing. Like something out of the old stories my grandmother used to tell."

Naruto felt a small smile forming despite himself. "Next time you're injured, come find me instead of waiting for the medics."

"I'll hold you to that," Marco grinned. "Now come on. We've got civilians to protect."

As they moved to leave, Reiner caught Naruto's arm one last time. "This conversation isn't over," he murmured.

"Yes, it is," Annie stated flatly. Her blue eyes met Reiner's with unmistakable warning. "For now, we're soldiers with a mission. Nothing else matters."

Outside the medical station, chaos had only intensified. Black smoke signals punctuated the sky like grim exclamation points, indicating Titan breaches throughout the district. The clamor of bells mixed with distant screams created a hellish symphony that set Naruto's teeth on edge.

A Garrison officer intercepted Squad 34 as they emerged, her uniform spattered with blood that wasn't her own. "Cadets! What's your current assignment?"

"Eastern quadrant evacuation support," Naruto replied. "Just completed."

She nodded briskly, consulting a hand-drawn map marked with hastily scrawled notations. "New orders. Middle guard needs reinforcement near the supply depot." She pointed to a section of the map. "Head to these coordinates. Report to Captain Kitz."

Middle guard. Where Eren is stationed. A flicker of relief passed through Naruto. Maybe he could check on his brother while fulfilling their orders.

"Understood," he said, turning to his squad. "Let's move!"

They took to the rooftops, using their ODM gear to traverse the city. From this height, the scale of the disaster became apparent. Columns of smoke rose from multiple locations. Buildings lay in ruins. And throughout the district, the hulking forms of Titans moved.

"There must be at least thirty of them inside the walls now," Marco observed, his voice tight.

Bertholdt's face had gone pale. "How did so many get through so quickly?"

"Does it matter?" Reiner replied grimly. "They're here. We deal with them."

Annie, as usual, said nothing, but her eyes constantly scanned their surroundings, alert for threats. She stayed slightly behind Naruto, covering his flank without being asked.

As they approached the middle sector, a blood-curdling scream drew their attention to a side street. A female soldier dangled helplessly from a broken ODM cable as a 7-meter Titan reached for her.

"I've got her!" Marco shouted, already adjusting his trajectory.

"Cover him!" Naruto ordered, changing direction to support. *Every second counts now.*

Marco swooped down, catching the soldier around the waist just as the Titan's fingers closed on empty air. The extra weight threw off his balance, and he struggled to regain height.

"Reiner! Bertholdt! Distract it!" Naruto called, spotting three more Titans converging on the area. *This just got complicated.*

Reiner needed no further instruction. He launched himself directly at the Titan's face, slicing across its eyew. Blinded, the creature stumbled backward, its arms flailing wildly.

"Annie, with me! We'll take the two on the left," Naruto decided, conserving his botanical abilities for when they might be truly needed. His body still hadn't fully recovered from the earlier exertion.

Annie nodded once and broke right, her small frame a blur of precise movement. She spiraled around a 10-meter Titan, using its own momentum against it as it lunged for her. When it overextended, she struck, her blades finding the nape.

Naruto faced his own opponent—a grotesque 6-meter with disproportionately long arms. He fired his hooks into adjacent buildings, creating a triangulated approach that the Titan couldn't track. As he neared, he released his left hook, dropping suddenly beneath the creature's grasping hands, then fired again into its shoulder. The sudden change in direction gave him the perfect angle to strike, and his blades bit deep into the nape.

"Clear!" he called as the Titan collapsed.

But their small victory was short-lived. A piercing shout from behind made Naruto spin mid-air. Bertholdt had misjudged his attack on the fourth Titan, and now hung precariously from a single hook, his gear apparently malfunctioning. The Titan, an unnaturally skinny 12-meter, turned toward him.

"Bertholdt! Get out of there!" Reiner yelled, too far away to help.

Naruto prepared to intervene, gathering what remained of his strength, ready to call forth roots to ensnare the Titan. Before he could act, Marco appeared.

"Not today!" he shouted. His blades carved a clean, deep cut across the Titan's nape, and the creature crumpled instantly.

Marco landed beside Bertholdt, helping the taller boy regain his footing on the rooftop. "You okay?"

Bertholdt nodded shakily. "Y-yeah. Thanks. I thought I was—"

"Don't mention it," Marco smiled, clapping him on the shoulder. "That's what squadmates do."

Naruto felt a surge of pride watching Marco. *He's going to make an incredible leader someday.* "Nice work! Everyone still functional?"

They regrouped on a church steeple, taking a moment to assess equipment and injuries. The soldier Marco had rescued thanked them profusely before departing to find her own squad.

"We're still a kilometer from the supply depot," Naruto noted, consulting his mental map of Trost. "And it sounds like things are getting worse, not better." Indeed, the frequency of screams and the thunderous crashes of Titans destroying buildings had only increased.

As they continued toward their objective, Naruto found his thoughts straying to Eren. The middle guard assignment had placed his brother directly in the path of advancing Titans. While Eren was skilled and determined, he also had a reckless streak that worried Naruto.

Please be careful, brother. Don't do anything stupid.

A flash of movement caught his eye—a Titan lunging for a group of soldiers trapped on a rooftop ahead. Without hesitation, Squad 34 adjusted course to intercept.

"Here we go again," Naruto muttered, unsheathing fresh blades. "Form up! Triangle formation!"

They moved as one unit now, their earlier tensions temporarily set aside in the face of immediate danger. Whatever questions loomed about Naruto's abilities—whatever strange undercurrents existed between Annie and Reiner—all of it faded behind the singular focus of survival.

As they engaged yet another Titan, Naruto caught a glimpse of black smoke rising from the vicinity of the supply depot. His stomach tightened with foreboding.

Something's wrong. Very wrong. But there was no time to dwell on his fears. Only time to fight. To survive. To protect.

And to pray that those he loved were doing the same.

□

□

The sudden clanging of bells echoed across Trost, their urgent peals signaling that the civilian evacuation was complete. A cheer went up from several exhausted soldiers nearby, but Naruto knew their ordeal was far from over.

"Finally," Marco exhaled, leaning against a chimney. Their squad had fought through three more Titan encounters in the last hour, each one draining their resources and resolve. "Now we can fall back, right?"

Naruto checked his ODM gear's gas canisters, frowning at the near-empty reading. "We've got a problem. I'm almost out of gas." He glanced at his squadmates. "Anyone else?"

A series of grim nods confirmed his fears. None of them had enough fuel to scale the inner wall to safety.

"We can't be the only ones," Reiner observed, scanning the rooftops where other scattered squads perched like wary birds. "The entire vanguard must be running on fumes by now."

Annie examined her gear with clinical detachment. "Ten percent capacity, at most. Not enough for the wall."

Marco's freckled face brightened as an idea struck. "The supply depot! We just need to reach HQ and refuel." His optimism faded as he registered the others' expressions. "What?"

Naruto pointed toward the central administrative building that served as both headquarters and supply depot. Even from their position several blocks away, they could see the problem. At least fifteen Titans surrounded the structure, pawing at its walls and windows.

"They're concentrated there," he said quietly. "Almost as if they know that's where we'd need to go."

Bertholdt swallowed audibly. "H-how would they know that?"

"It doesn't matter," Reiner interrupted. "If we can't reach the supply room, we're all dead anyway."

A flash of movement caught Naruto's eye as Reiner pointed toward a large building about three hundred meters away. "Look there—other cadets are gathering."

Indeed, dozens of soldiers had congregated on a roof tall enough to be temporarily safe from Titan reach. And among them—a flash of red scarf and dark hair, moving with unmistakable grace.

"Mikasa!" Naruto's heart leapt. If Mikasa was there, Eren and Armin might be too. Without hesitation, he fired his hooks toward the gathering. "Come on!"

He launched himself across the gap, conserving what little gas remained. From the corner of his eye, he saw Mikasa spot him mid-air and adjust her own trajectory to intercept. They landed on adjacent rooftops, then used a final burst to meet on the same tiled surface.

"Naruto!" Relief flooded her normally stoic features. "You're alive."

"Takes more than a few Titans to stop me," he attempted a smile as the two hugged, but it faltered as he noticed the tension in her shoulders. "What's wrong? Where are Eren and Armin?"

Something flickered in her expression—something that sent ice through Naruto's veins.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I was with the rear guard. I've been looking for them since the evacuation completed."

Together, they crossed to the main rooftop where the cadet gathering had grown larger. Sasha spotted them first.

"Naruto! Mikasa!" She clasped Mikasa's hands in hers. "Thank goodness."

"Sasha," Naruto acknowledged, his eyes already scanning the crowd. "Have you seen Eren? Or Armin?"

Her expression crumpled slightly, and she simply pointed toward the far edge of the roof where a small figure sat alone, knees drawn to his chest.

Naruto felt his stomach drop. Armin was alive—but he was alone, his back against a chimney, staring at nothing. His uniform was splattered with blood, his face ashen beneath dirt and tears.

"What happened?" Naruto demanded of no one in particular. Several cadets looked away, unwilling to meet his gaze.

Jean stepped forward. "Armin's squad was on the front lines. We found him here and he is not moving. Hasn't said a word." He lowered his voice. "The rest of his squad... we don't know where they are."

No. No, that's not possible. Naruto refused to process the implication. Eren is too stubborn to die.

Mikasa had already started moving toward Armin, her steps mechanical, as if her body was functioning on instinct while her mind refused to accept what she was seeing. Naruto followed close behind, each step heavier than the last.

"Armin?" Mikasa's voice was unnaturally gentle as she knelt beside him. "Are you hurt?"

Armin didn't respond, didn't even seem to register their presence. His blue eyes remained fixed on some middle distance, witnessing horrors only he could see.

Naruto crouched in front of him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Armin, it's us. Are you injured?" A quick visual check confirmed no obvious wounds, though that did little to ease Naruto's growing dread. "Where's the rest of your squad? Where's Eren?"

At the mention of Eren's name, Armin's breath hitched. His eyes finally focused, meeting Naruto's gaze for a brief moment before dropping to the rooftop in shame.

"I..." His voice was barely audible, cracked and hollow. "I'm sorry."

Mikasa went very still. "Armin. Where is Eren?"

Armin's fingers dug into his knees, knuckles turning white. "Our squad..." He shuddered, struggling to form words. "Thomas Wagner... was eaten first."

The growing crowd of cadets had fallen silent, listening as Armin continued, each word seemingly torn from his throat.

"Then Nack Tierce... Millius Zermusky... Mina Carolina..." He looked up, tears streaming down his face. "They all died bravely. For humanity."

Naruto felt numb, the names washing over him like icy water. *But he hasn't mentioned...*

"Armin," he pressed, unable to stop himself, "what about Eren?"

A sob escaped Armin's throat. "We were surrounded... nowhere to go." His words tumbled out faster now, as if he needed to expel them before they poisoned him from within. "It was my fault—I froze. A Titan had me in its hand. I was going to die."

Naruto's pulse thundered in his ears, each beat a desperate prayer. *Please, no. Not him. Not my brother.*

"E-Eren saved me," Armin continued, his voice breaking. "He pulled me from its mouth, but he—" A strangled sound escaped him. "He sacrificed himself. The Titan... it bit down. His arm... I saw his arm..."

The world seemed to tilt beneath Naruto's feet. This isn't real. It can't be real.

"The rest of him..." Armin couldn't meet their eyes. "Gone. Swallowed. I watched it happen. I couldn't do anything."

Mikasa's face had transformed into something terrible—a mask of perfect calm that didn't reach her eyes. Those eyes had gone hollow, as if her very soul had vacated her body, leaving only an empty shell.

"Armin," she said with eerie softness, "calm down. You cannot stay here. We need to leave."

Naruto remained frozen, unable to rise from his crouch. The words echoed in his mind on an endless loop. *Eren is dead. My brother is dead.*

Images flashed through his consciousness—Eren as a child, declaring he'd kill all the Titans. Eren training alongside him, refusing to give up no matter how many times he failed. Eren just yesterday, toasting their graduation, eyes bright with dreams of joining the Survey Corps.

"No," Naruto finally managed, his voice unfamiliar even to himself. "He can't be..."

Armin looked up at him, tears flowing freely now. "I'm sorry, Naruto. I'm so sorry. If I had been stronger—if I hadn't frozen—"

Something broke inside Naruto then, a dam containing emotions too powerful to name. Grief crashed through him first, threatening to drown him completely. But close behind it came something else—something hotter, more volatile.

Rage.

His vision began to blur, the edges tinged with crimson. In the deepest recesses of his mind, he felt something ancient and terrible stir in response to his pain.

"Naruto?" Marco's voice seemed to come from very far away. "Are you okay?"

Naruto did not answer. He wasn't there. He could not hear anything. He could hear only one voice.

"So the brother is dead,"

The voice reverberated through Naruto's skull, and tinged with cruel amusement. It wasn't the first time he'd heard it, but never before had it sounded so clear, so present.

"What will you do now, boy? Stand and weep? Or take what is yours? REVENGE."

A growl—not human, not his own—escaped his throat.

Jean took a step back, eyes widening. "What the hell?"

"Everyone get back," Reiner warned, recognition flashing across his face. "Now!"

Mikasa, still locked in her own grief-induced trance, turned toward Naruto. "Naruto, what's—" She reached for his shoulder but yanked her hand away with a sharp gasp. "You're burning up!"

Steam began to rise from Naruto's skin, wisps at first, then thicker clouds that twisted around him like living tendrils. His blue eyes flooded with crimson, pupils narrowing to vertical slits that focused on nothing and everything.

"What's happening to him?" Connie shouted, backing away.

"It's happening again," Berholdt whispered, momentarily shaken from his shock. "Like that time with the bandits, when Mikasa was threatened..."

But this was different. Where before there had been flashes of red in Naruto's eyes, now his entire body seemed to radiate a malevolent energy. The whisker-like marks on his cheeks—birthmarks he'd had for as long as anyone could remember—deepened and widened, giving his face a feral appearance.

Annie pushed through the retreating crowd, her usual composure faltering as she took in the transformation. "Naruto. Can you hear-"

His head snapped toward her, but his eyes didn't seem to recognize her—or anyone. Within his mind, reality fractured. He was no longer on a rooftop in Trost but trapped in a storm of fragmented images: blood-red eyes identical to his own, watching him from the darkness; massive gates held shut by a paper seal; the sound of a woman's scream; and through it all, the roaring inferno of his grief.

Eren is dead. My brother is dead.

The nails on Naruto's fingers lengthened into claws, curving wickedly as he dug them into the rooftop tiles, cracking them with impossible strength. The air around him shimmered with heat, creating visible waves that distorted the very light around his form.

"Naruto!" Krista called out, taking a step toward him before Ymir roughly pulled her back.

"Are you insane?" Ymir hissed, interposing herself between Krista and the transformation unfolding before them. "Whatever that is, it's not Naruto right now."

Reiner's expression hardened as he assessed the situation. "Everyone move to adjacent rooftops. Now!"

Marco hesitated, torn between following orders and trying to help his friend. "We can't just leave him like this!"

A sound emerged from Naruto's throat—a keening wail that started low and built in intensity, like nothing human vocal cords should produce. The red energy surrounding him pulsed in sync with his heartbeat, each throb sending another wave of crimson light expanding outward.

"That's it," the voice in his head encouraged. **"Let it out. Show them your true power. Show the world what happens when they take what's yours."**

The tiles beneath Naruto's feet began to crack, hairline fractures spreading outward like a spiderweb. The entire structure groaned under the pressure of the energy he was emitting.

"The building's coming apart!" Jean shouted, already firing his ODM hooks toward a nearby roof. "Move!"

Cadets scattered in all directions, using what little gas remained in their gear to reach safety. Mikasa and Annie was the last to leave, her eyes never leaving Naruto's transformed figure even as she retreated.

The red energy intensified, no longer just an aura but a swirling vortex that surrounded Naruto completely. It shot upward in a pillar of crimson light, visible across the entire district—a beacon of rage and grief that momentarily outshone even the afternoon sun.

Inside that tempest, Naruto's consciousness fractured further. He was no longer Naruto Yeager, second-ranked graduate of the 104th Training Corps. He was no longer the son of Grisha and Carla, brother to Eren and Mikasa. He was someone else.

And all he knew was loss. All he knew was rage.

As the last cadets cleared the building, Naruto threw his head back and released a sound that wasn't a scream so much as a roar—the battle cry of a predator awakening after a long slumber. The sound shattered windows for blocks around, sending birds fleeing from their perches.

The rooftop beneath him gave way completely, bricks and mortar disintegrating under the pressure of his power.

From nearby rooftops, the cadets watched in horrified fascination as their friend was engulfed in dust and debris, the red energy still visible through the chaos like a baleful star.

"What is he?" Bertholdt whispered, his face ashen.

No one had an answer. They could only watch as the dust slowly began to settle, revealing a scene that would forever change how they viewed their comrade.

In the epicenter of destruction, Naruto had dropped to all fours, his body completely encased in a shroud of red energy that clung to him like a second skin. The crimson aura outlined his form while somehow obscuring the details, giving him the appearance of a beast rather than a human. Most shocking of all, a thick tendril of the same energy had emerged from his lower back, swaying behind him like a tail.

"A tail?" Jean gasped, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. "What the hell is happening to him?"

Mikasa's hand went to her mouth, her grief for Eren momentarily overshadowed by concern for her younger brother. "Naruto..."

The transformed cadet raised his head, revealing eyes that glowed like hot coals in the dust-filled air. He opened his mouth—now filled with elongated canines—and released another roar that sent shivers down the spine of every soldier who heard it.

It wasn't a sound of pain, or even grief anymore.

It was a declaration of war.

The thunderous footfalls of an approaching Titan broke the moment. A 10-meter class lumbered toward the collapsed building, drawn by the commotion or perhaps by the concentrated human presence nearby.

"Titan!" Connie shouted the warning, though it was hardly necessary.

Mikasa's grief-numbed mind snapped back to survival mode. She readied her blades, preparing to defend what remained of her family. Before she could move, however, something impossible happened.

Naruto vanished from the rubble.

One moment he was crouched there, surrounded by his red aura, and the next—nothing.

A split second later, a blur of crimson appeared directly in front of the Titan's face, so fast that most eyes couldn't track the movement. The sound of impact reached them a heartbeat later—a sickening crunch as Naruto's clawed hand connected with the Titan's face.

Blood erupted in a violent spray as the creature's entire facial structure collapsed inward from the force of the blow. The Titan's body continued forward by momentum alone, crashing face-first into the ground with a thunderous impact that shook the surrounding buildings.

"Did he just...?" Marco couldn't finish the sentence, too stunned by what he was witnessing.

Steam began rising from the Titan's ruined face as its regenerative abilities activated. But Naruto wasn't finished. He landed on the fallen creature's back and immediately began tearing into it with inhuman savagery.

His clawed hands ripped through flesh and muscle with terrifying ease. The red aura surrounding him seemed to intensify with each blow, the tail behind him lashing violently as he pummeled the Titan with relentless fury. Blood sprayed with each impact, coating Naruto's transformed body until he himself appeared to be made of the crimson liquid.

"My God," Someone whispered, looking terrified.

The Titan tried to rise, one hand groping blindly behind it to dislodge its attacker. Naruto caught the massive hand and, with strength that defied his size, wrenched it from the creature's body entirely. The appendage flew through the air, crashing into a nearby building before beginning to dissolve.

Still the assault continued. Naruto tore into the Titan's nape, not with the precise cuts of ODM blades, but with animal ferocity—ripping, shredding, destroying until the creature stopped moving entirely. Even then, he didn't stop, his clawed hands continuing to pummel the dissolving corpse.

Naruto's head snapped up, blood-red eyes scanning the district. In the distance, more Titans were visible, drawn by the commotion or perhaps by the strange energy Naruto was emitting.

The transformed cadet crouched on the dissolving corpse, his tail swishing behind him. A low, anticipatory growl emanated from his throat. Then, with another burst of impossible speed, he vanished again—leaving behind only a red streak as he raced toward his next target.

The cadets stood in stunned silence, watching as their friend—or what had once been their friend—became something else entirely: a force of nature, unstoppable and terrible.

"What do we do now?" Jean finally asked, his voice uncharacteristically subdued.