

## **Chapter 12**

### **The time is now...**

#### **From Motoko's eyes**

It has arrived, the dreaded day of the exams. Keitaro has been buried in his studies, as has Narusegawa for the last few days. The residents of Hinata-sou knew to keep quiet at a time like this, even Mitsune stopped having spontaneous parties. Suu-chan and I decided to check up on Keitaro every day to make sure that he didn't go insane from the pressure. He seemed to be relatively content, smiling nervously at me, until he started panicking on the 22nd, thankfully I managed to bring some sense into him, striking him lightly to get his mind back on track. We left him to it, only to find him passed out and drooling in his room the next day. Mitsune and Shinobu-chan were taking care of Narusegawa, and were happy to report that she was doing fine, her nerves not yet at breaking point.

The day before the exam, Keitaro has returned to his usual self, although still a little tense. He wasn't able to finish his dinner, his stomach unable to digest any more through nerves. Narusegawa gave him some pills to calm himself afterwards, which I felt was a nice touch. He had taken a few pills and decided to walk up to the Shinkan to watch over the town at night. I decided to follow him.

#### **Shinkan**

##### **Late evening**

Keitaro was sitting there, on the edge of the roof, looking over the town below, the lamps illuminating the streets and homes with lights on inside making it look serene. Motoko walked up the stairs and then along the roof towards him.

"You know... I wonder if I will do well in these exams..." He spoke up suddenly, as if sensing her. He turned his head slightly, but still not facing her. "Please sit Motoko-chan."

Walking up to him, she did so, sitting beside him. "Do you not feel confident about tomorrow?"

Keitaro took his time in replying. "I'm not sure really... I've been revising for a while now, and this will be the third time in taking the exam..."

"But surely," she interrupted, "you must understand a little bit about how the exams work, considering you've done the same ones in the past."

"That's true is suppose..." He still sounded down.

"How does Naru feel about tomorrow?" Motoko had the feeling that she could predict his reply.

"I'm guessing that she will have no problems with it, she did get the National First a short while back. The only sign that I saw of her being worried about this exam is the amount of pills she ate earlier." Keitaro remembered how he face-faulted, collapsing onto the ground as he saw her polish off the entire container in a few gulps.

Motoko was silent, she didn't know what else to say. She had no inkling of what they had gone through in the last few months, let alone what Keitaro went through in the two years previous to this. All her life she was devoted to practising her kendo skills, and some more advanced techniques from the Shinmeiryu. She didn't spend a lot of time studying; she did what was required for her school and nothing more.

"The exams last for two days from what you told me, but you have not told me when do you find out the final results."

"We have to go to Toudai on March the tenth." He remembered the procedure exactly, seeing as he'd done the same thing for two years running, "There they will post up the Student ID's of those students who have passed."

"I see," she concluded, "so if your ID is not on the lists, then you won't have been accepted into Toudai."

Keitaro nodded and sighed. "The same as the last two years..."

He began to look at the city, but instead his eyes were focussing on the pain in the past. Motoko saw this, and began to feel a strange unfamiliar burning sensation in her heart. *His sadness... it's so overwhelming, it hurts me to see him like this...* Reaching out she enclosed one of his hands in both of hers. This action made him look towards her face, now displaying a compassionate smile. Before they realised it they were moving closer together, the distance between their lips rapidly decreasing. They looked into each other's eyes, a blush spreading across both of their cheeks. Keitaro half-closed his eyes and continued forwards. *She's so beautiful, Kami forgive me for what I'm about to do.* Motoko stopped where she was and shut her eyes. *I can't help myself, he's so gentle to me, and it makes me feel happy...* They were about to touch lips before...

"Motokooo!"

The energetic voice of Suu-chan echoed over the sounds of feet running up the steps to the Shinkan. Pulling away sharply, the two managed to avoid an embarrassing moment in front of the little girl. Turning their faces away from each other, they tried to act nonchalant, despite their reddening faces saying the opposite. As Suu-chan emerged over the boundary, Motoko stood up and walked over to her.

"What is it Suu-chan?" She enquired.

"Nothing," came the innocent reply, "just wondering where you got to."

Seeing Suu-chan's eyes droop a little bit she understood. "You're sleepy aren't you?"

The younger girl nodded, making Motoko play with her hair. "Then I'll be down in a second so you can stay with me overnight."

"Okay!" She bounded off, down the stairs to change.

Motoko turned around to look at Keitaro, who watched all this in silence. "Keitaro, I have to go now, Suu-chan awaits."

He stood up and walked down the slanted roof to her. "I know Motoko-chan." He smiled at her and held her hand. "Arigatou for being with me tonight, it was special."

Motoko blushed again and smiled back at him, "I felt the same," She paused for a moment, "but now we must leave, I need to be with Suu-chan and you require rest to survive tomorrow."

"Yeah... I guess so..." He put his spare hand behind his head, taking one last look at the town below. "Well, it wouldn't hurt us to walk in together now would it?"

"No it wouldn't," She appreciated this innovation by him, "I for one would like that."

Walking down the steps together they continued to hold hands. However once they entered Hinata-sou, Keitaro released his grip, they both agreed that if the residents saw them holding hands together it would result in disaster for everyone. They waved goodbye to each other as Keitaro walked along the corridor to his room and Motoko returned upstairs to her room.

## **Day 1 of Final Stage Toudai exams**

**Thursday, February 25th**

### **Early morning**

Dawn broke, the sun casting a red-orange glow over the town. One of the first places in the town to receive it was Hinata-sou. Curtains drawn in most rooms meant the sun didn't disturb the sleeping residents there. It wasn't just two people in Hinata-sou who were particularly worried about the coming day; there were many possible candidates who also had the same worry, the coming exams. Almost all of them would have to go to Toudai to take the tests, others who cannot attend being allowed to take their exams in their home towns under strict supervision. The next two days would decide the way their lives panned out for the rest of their lives. The birds began to chirp on the grounds of Hinata-sou, singing a song to welcome in the new day as the sun rose. The residents soon began to wake up one after another...

### **Room 201**

Keitaro continued to kiss the neck of his love, his lips making their way up to plant a kiss on her mouth.

"S... Sempai..." Shinobu-chan was still shocked by his boldness, the way he walked into her room and woke her this way. She couldn't help but moan with pleasure.

"Shinobu-chan..." He pulled back to look into her eyes, "You do know that you are the only one for me." She gasped as he continued, "From the moment I first saw you, I knew then, I fell in love with you." He winked at her, "Why else do you think I made you that cake for Valentine's Day?"

Her face turned bright red, "I... I had no idea sempai..."

"No," he interrupted, "call me Keitaro."

"Okay... Keitaro." She beamed at him, the first time she smiled fully in a long while.

*I can't believe this has finally happened, Keitaro-sempai has said that he loves me. I'm so happy right now... It's almost as if this were a dream...*

"Mmm sempai..." She hugged her teddy bear closely, making its head bulge out from her hug, dangerously near to tearing it off the body. She woke up groggily, and peered through her eyelids to see not Keitaro but her stuffed toy there. She sighed; it was all too fantastic to be real. Wiping the sleep out of her eyes she promptly got dressed out of her flowery pyjamas into her school uniform. Her dream began to vanish in her mind as they do to all people, but she remained warm the whole day, it giving a sense of comfort to her that, some day, anything is possible. She cleaned her teeth, brushed her hair and then walked downstairs to cook some breakfast for everyone else.

### **Room 205**

Mitsune got up, stretching her arms lazily; looking around for any clothes around her room. Rummaging through the random piles she had on her sofa, chair and even by the window. Smelling a few of them, she smiled to herself and picked those that weren't too far-gone. Changing quickly she then walked to the window. Looking left she could see the town, but the sun began to blind her.

Drawing back she rubbed her eyes to get rid of the spots that were in her vision and opened her eyes to see they had disappeared. Keeping her eyes open she began to think. *This is it; all their time studying will have to be put to the test. They have to pass... I can't imagine what will happen if they fail. Naru would be upset, but Keitaro? All he has known is failure; there's no telling what he might do if the test goes awry.*

Looking in her mirror she absent-mindedly glided the brush through her hair, still thinking. She left soon after for breakfast.

### **Room 304**

The alarm went off, resulting in a hand hitting it over the top almost immediately from under the futon. Another alarm went off a few seconds later, this time at the other end of the room. The hand fumbled around, picked up the now inactive alarm and threw it in the general direction of the sound, striking lucky when it went quiet. A mobile phone went off on the furnace table, playing the soothing tune known as Komm Suesser Tod. Sighing, Naru got out of the futon and picked up her phone, looking at it for a few moments before turning off the alarm.

She looked in the mirror. *Kami, I look terrible...* Her hair was all tangled and frayed at the edges; she looked like she hadn't got any sleep. Nevertheless, after a few minutes of changing and washing up her face she looked bright as ever. Picking up her prescription glasses she breathed on the lenses and wiped them clean with her jumper. As they glistened in the sunlight that reflected into her room, she put them on, closing her eyes for a second before reopening to adjust her sight quicker. Picking up her bag that she packed last night, satisfied that everything was done, she left her room.

### **Room 302**

Motoko woke up earlier than usual. Looking around she saw Suu-chan nuzzling at her arm affectionately, still asleep. Petting her cheek, Motoko managed to wake up the princess without startling her, looking at her face more clearly she saw that Suu-chan hadn't cried the whole night, which odd as it may seem was a good thing. Suu-chan yawned like a cat, her mouth growing immensely wide for a few moments before she stretched her limbs out.

"Suu-chan..." Motoko began.

"Yeah Motoko?"

"Remember what we did the last time there was an important exam?"

"Oh..." She recalled the time when the initial exams were taken two weeks before Christmas. "Yeah, I do."

"Well, we must pray again for their luck."

She nodded, and once again they changed into their usual clothes, Suu-chan in her school uniform, Motoko in her gi and hakama. They sat opposite each other, a table bearing burning incense in between them. They sat like that for a few minutes, Motoko saying some words followed by Suu-chan, then a period of complete silence. After a time that Motoko chose, they got up and left the room for breakfast.

## **Room 204**

### **Kanrinrin's Room**

Still snoozing away was Keitaro, the typical bubble out of one nostril expanding and shrinking with his breaths. His alarm went off, making his bubble burst. Sitting up he switched the alarm off and yawned loudly, scratching his head afterwards. Putting on his glasses he went to his mirror. Tufts of hair were sticking out at random point on his head, and now matter how much he pat them they wouldn't go down. He had some small bags under his eyes and the dreaded morning breath as well when he yawned again. Cleaning himself up he looked much better. Then he looked at his bag.

"AAAGH!"

He started running around the room looking for his stationary and other things he thought would be important in an exam. After finally stuffing it all into his bag he combed his hair down again, after it had stood up with fear. Having one more look around his room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, he left, walking downstairs to the dining area.

### **Dining area**

Everyone was there, ready to eat, Shinobu-chan made some healthy brain food for Naru and Keitaro so that it may help them out in their forthcoming exams. The others were there to see how the two examinees were handling it all. Naru appeared to be outwardly calm whereas Keitaro looked a little jittery; it seemed his nerves would shatter soon. After eating Keitaro glanced at his watch and looked to Naru, who nodded.

"Okay, it's time for us to go now..." He hefted the satchel onto his shoulder and both he and Naru stood up.

"Wish us luck please." Naru smiled nervously.

"Well," Mitsune stood up proudly, "Try your best, and Keitaro..." She winked at him, "Don't kill yourself if you fail."

He sweatdropped. *I guess I can always try not to fail...* "O... Okay Kitsune."

Shinobu-chan piped up, "G... Good luck on your exams Naru-sempai, Keitaro-sempai. I hope you pass." She bowed slightly to finish it off, eliciting a smile from both of the examinees.

"Hey!" Suu-chan jumped up in front of them, "Hope you two have a long life together."

"Wh... WHAT?" They both yelled at the same time, their faces turning red.

"Suu!" Shinobu-chan waved her arms about frantically, "They're going to an exam, not getting married!"

"Aah... Is that all?" She put a finger to her mouth in mock fascination; she then turned to them and giggled to herself. "Good luck, go for it!" She then kicked Keitaro in the face, whereupon she clarified in a wink, "For luck Keitaro!"

Motoko walked up to them, Keitaro straightened up a little and stared at her eyes. "Naru, Keitaro, I wish you luck in this test, not just for Toudai, but for yourselves. Success is not forever, and failure is not fatal. Remember this, we will cheer for you either way."

"A... Arigatou Motoko-chan." Naru managed to thank her despite her numbness at the wisdom in the words spoken. "We will remember it."

Keitaro just looked at her and smiled, looking at her eyes he saw her smile back with them even though it didn't translate to the rest of her face. He knew that she still didn't like to show any form of happiness in public, except to Suu-chan. Turning around he faced them all one more time before waving once, then he set off down the steps with Naru.

*Fare well Keitaro. Do your best, that is all one can do.* Motoko turned around to go back inside, Suu-chan jumping on her back. Shinobu-chan went to do the washing up, and surprisingly Mitsune, who rarely did any housework of any description, helped her. Motoko dropped off Suu-chan at the door to her room, who jumped in enthusiastically, turning to face Motoko with her hands behind her back she waited.

"I will see you at lunch Suu-chan, behave until then little one." She smiled at her.

"Roger!" she said whilst putting her right hand to her head in a military style salute, "See you then Motoko!" She beamed at her, closing her eyes, as the door closed automatically. Quirking an eyebrow at the door's behaviour Motoko returned to her room.

Sighing, she picked up the incense from earlier and placed it in her shrine. It was still smouldering from earlier; the thin rivulets of smoke spreading the smell of roses combined with cinnamon throughout the room. Taking a deep breath she savoured the smell, it reminded her of home, back with her sister. Picking up her katana she went up to the Shinkan, assumed a stance, and began to train.

## The steps of Hinata-sou

Keitaro glanced at Naru. She was making him more nervous by the minute due to the way in which she looked through her flashcards. Thinking to herself that enough was enough, she closed them and put them back into her bag. Looking over she saw that Keitaro was staring at her.

"What are you looking at!" Her face looked angry.

"Oh... nothing sorry..." He turned away, looking down the steps in a downcast manner. Naru was a little surprised; she would've expected him to act in a more panicked way.

"What's wrong Keitaro?" She looked at him with good-natured eyes.

He looked over at her and chuckled slightly, "Nothing much, it's just that..." He paused, thinking for what to say, "... well you seem to have the passing grade already Naru. You're very confident."

"Me!" She put a hand to her chest and stopped walking, causing him to stop as well to look at her. "Keitaro, I have more nerves about this exam than you could imagine!"

Keitaro was taken aback at this. Naru walked down a few steps to be level with him. "I've never sat an exam this important in my life before, so I'm very worried about the end result." She continued to walk down the steps with Keitaro by her side. "So you see Keitaro, you have me at a disadvantage here because unlike you, I have no experience regarding such an exam like this one."

They both looked at each other, their eyes connecting for a split second. "Even though you weren't able to pass the first two times, you would probably stand a better chance of passing this year than me who is taking it for the first time." She smiled at him, "Don't be so hard on yourself, like Motoko-chan said, 'We will cheer for you either way', so if you pass or fail it won't matter, you'll always be Keitaro."

Tears were brimming at his eyes after she said those words. "A... Arigatou Naru, that was so kind!" He then hugged her, much to Naru's shock and embarrassment, as her face turned red.

"Hey... HEY!" She started to feel claustrophobic, "If you keep doing this then we're going to be late!"

"Aah, I see you're getting along with Naru now Keitaro." His eyes snapped open as he pulled back to see they were now outside Haruka's tea shop, with the owner standing outside smoking a cigarette.

Keitaro facefaulted onto the ground with a painful 'Thud', blood seeping out from a head wound, flowing down the steps, whilst Naru turned bright red. "Haruka-san! It's not like that!"

Keitaro got up of the floor, a hand behind his head, "Haruka-obasan, how are you?"

He received a punch to head, sending him to the floor again, "Who's an old lady? Call me Haruka-san."

"H... Haruka-san." He checked his watch, "We have to go now, we'll be late otherwise."

She put out her cigarette on the floor and smiled at both of them. "These are the exams aren't they?" They nodded to confirm it, "Well, good luck then." She watched them run off down the remaining steps as they made their way to the place where destinies change, Tokyo University.

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**Author's Notes**

Ahem, me again, hope this chapter is to your liking, I may have padded it out with the way in which everyone woke up on this momentous day (for them), but I felt it was necessary.

I need feedback now... I'm going to make a fairly huge decision regarding the fanfic, the storyline. Keitaro will fail these exams, there's no two ways about it (I have many plans for him and Motoko-chan ). However, I am toying with the idea of Naru passing these exams (as you know, she failed them in the manga) and getting into Toudai first time. It would work out pretty well I feel, I have many ideas about what she can get up to there, but I won't introduce any ACC's, SI's etc (maybe bring in Kentaro from the anime). It also leaves Keitaro to go on his trip alone, but meeting up with Mutsumi for the first time, which is also a rather important occasion. If Naru fails, then the manga will just repeat itself in my eyes when I'm writing this out. If Naru passes, then this will lead to many other prospects that have not been entertained via the manga, Keitaro visiting her there, her bringing friends home, and other things. She'd probably also meet up with Seta-san earlier than usual, thus introducing him and Sara-chan to the story before time. She would also still live in Hinata-sou, she wouldn't move away just because of this.

Anyways, I would like at least five of you lovely reviewers to say whether you think Naru passing is a good idea. It will be my decision in the end, and I do think it is the way to go, however I don't want to be accused of favouritism with Naru or Keitaro bashing. It would be interesting to hear what you say about this matter. I have one more chapter to go, this one dealing with the exam itself and the second day of exams, so there should be enough time for me to receive enough reviews. I hate asking for reviews, it makes me feel as if I'm vying for attention, but this time I don't know...

Yup, that's all I need to say, except Happy (belated) Easter!

- Jason