Classroom of the Elite Volume 14 Chapter 4 Part 2

We entered area J6 and approached the Beach Flags Task site.

It looked like there were already more than eight boys participating, but there was no way to say for sure just yet.

Since only one person per group was allowed to participate, I probably still had a chance.

A male third-year student noticed us as we drew closer.

His name was Kiriyama, the vice president of the student council. Up until a few seconds ago, he seemed to be enjoying himself as he chatted with his friends. However, his demeanor changed entirely the moment he caught sight of us, as he immediately rushed over to the staff member in charge of the Task and began to talk to them about something.

While I was put off by his strange show of behavior, I simply approached the staff member myself and let them know I was looking to participate.

Unfortunately, I was told that the student just ahead of me had apparently filled up the last spot in the boys’ category, making it impossible for me to participate. I watched as Kiriyama and the other boys who had registered left to go change their clothes in the makeshift changing rooms that the staff members had set up.

The girls, on the other hand, only had seven entries, so there was still one more spot available.

“If Senpai can’t participate then I’ll sit this one out as well. I wouldn’t want to keep you waiting.”

“It’s okay, I wanted to take a break anyway. You should participate.”

“But…”

“Since you’re surrendering all of the Early Bird Bonuses to me, the gap between our points is only going to get wider. I’m not saying anything about whether you’ll win or not, but you should just go for it if you think you stand a chance.”

There were still about ten minutes left until the registration deadline, but if Nanase entered, the Task would reach maximum capacity.

In other words, she could immediately compete in the Task without wasting any time.

“Thank you very much. Well… I suppose I’ll go sign up then.”

If she had a decent chance of stealing away points from students of other school years, then she should take full advantage of it. Given that she was the one who had asked to accompany me, she wasn’t really in a position to make willful decisions here. But even so, this was still a Task that she should be firm about participating in.

A tent had been set up a bit off to the side for people to take refuge from the direct sunlight, so I moved over to it once Nanase left to change clothes.

There were a variety of different swimsuits available for the Task for both boys and girls. One might go so far as to say that the competition truly began from the moment you decided on which one you would wear. Although, since there wasn’t going to be any swimming, it probably wouldn’t make that much of a difference no matter which one you went with.

One by one, the boys began to emerge from the makeshift changing rooms, donned in their chosen swimwear. For the most part, they were all wearing standard loose-fitting swim trunks, with the only real difference between them being the pattern print of the fabric. The various students on standby began to cheer and hollar as their friends came out into the open.

I decided to take a closer look at the strange lineup of students who had assembled here. Each of the eight boys were third-year students. Similarly, on the girls’ side of things, there were seven third-years. Nanase, the sole first-year student, had only just barely managed to slip her way in.

As a rule, only one person could participate per group, which meant that there were at least fifteen different groups of third-years gathered here right now. Regardless of whether they were here because of a nearby designated area or because of this Task alone, the fact that there weren’t any students from other school years present was undeniably abnormal.

Given that, Vice President Kiriyama was certainly worth paying attention to. If a large number of people were all moving together just to ensure that he would take the win, then…

I stood back and thought this over, and before long, everything was ready for the boys to begin their matches. The format of the competition was the average bracketed tournament, where students would compete against each other in one-on-one matches in order to decide who would advance to the next round. Winning three straight matches would net you the first place spot. Therefore, I should be able to see if the competition had been fixed for Kiriyama by watching the intensity of the other third-years.

After all, the intensity of the matches would help dictate whether they were serious about winning or not.

From the very first match, however, the competition was unexpectedly fierce, with Kiriyama pitted against one of his very own classmates. The two boys arose from face down on the ground and broke into a sprint at practically the same time. It was so neck-and-neck that they were both in the air as they dove for the flag. You could even say that it all came down to the length of their arms. In the end, Kiriyama seized the flag, and with it, the win.

It wasn’t just that first match either. Time and time again, the third-years faced off, burning with determination to come out on top. It really didn’t seem like they were deliberately throwing for Kiriyama’s sake, or anyone else’s for that matter.

They could be taking it seriously because I was watching, but that probably wasn’t the case here.

Kiriyama wasn’t ‘that’ wary of me, and even if he was, it was immensely unlikely that he’d be able to convince everyone else to follow along.

In which case, what was the explanation for the crowd of third-year students currently spread out before me?

It was possible that something beyond my expectations was happening here.

Just as the boys’ matches were getting into full swing, the girls began to show up in their new change of clothes.

Five of them had chosen the usual school regulation swimsuit. Nanase, meanwhile, had chosen an option that was far more bold and daring.

It seemed like they were on standby, free to do as they wanted until the boys finished.

Given that, I approached Nanase and called out to her.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

She looked over at me curiously, in the midst of doing warm-up exercises in a blue-green bikini.

“I see that you chose a rather cute swimsuit. Is there a reason for that?”

If she wanted to keep things simple, then a standard school swimsuit would’ve probably been more than enough.

“A reason? From what I’ve seen of Beach Flags on TV, girls usually compete wearing swimsuits like this, right? I thought it’d be strange if I took part in a school swimsuit. Have I misunderstood something?”

After all, Beach Flags is one of the most popular recreational activities for people that come to the beach.

At that, Nanase turned her attention to the ongoing matches as she continued with her warm-up exercises.

The final match ultimately drew to a close with a splendid victory for Kiriyama. This was only to be expected from someone who was trying to take down Nagumo. His skills seemed to be an accurate representation of his B+ Physical Ability rating in the OAA app as well.

The girls’ category was up next, meaning that Nanase would be participating soon. In fact, her name was called for the very first match, so she immediately went and took her position prone on the field. Her opponent was a third-year girl named Tomioka, who had a decent C+ Physical Ability rating. Nanase, on the other hand, was one step above that with a B+. That being said, a higher Physical Ability rating wouldn’t necessarily guarantee victory.

Overall Ability would certainly have a part to play here, and furthermore, everybody comes with their own unique strengths and weaknesses.

Whether or not a student had prior experience with Beach Flags would also be important, but I felt pretty confident in thinking that it mostly came down to running speed and reflexes. This begged the question: Who was truly better between them? At the sound of the pistol, Nanase nimbly arose from the ground, kicked off from the sand, and burst toward the flag in one swift motion.

Tomioka lost before she even had the chance to put up a fight, left only to stare at the open sky with a dumbfounded expression.

The timing of the blank was usually unpredictable, but in Nanase’s case, she had responded in perfect sync with the sound of the gun.

That alone served as definitive proof that her reflexes were several magnitudes faster than Tomioka’s.

The six remaining competitors who had been watching from the sidelines had probably gotten a sense of just how formidable Nanase was as well. After the next three matches, the four semi-finalists were chosen, and Nanase’s speed and reflexes seemed to be a head above the rest.

However, that was by no means reason for her to be careless. Between negligence, pride, and an assortment of other factors, there were plenty of things that may dull her reflexes, no matter how amazing they may be. And, no matter how much confidence she may place in her running ability, if she were to get her foot caught in the sand and tripped, it would all be over.

But at the end of the day, results rarely betray the favored outcome.

Nanase won her second match by another large margin, and was now one step away from snatching up the competition.

“She’s a tough one.”

Kiriyama voiced his candid impression of Nanase as he spectated the matches.

Of course, these words were not meant for me, but for his fellow group members.

The other semifinal match went by and before long, the final matchup was decided. Nanase would be going up against a girl named Tokunaga, and this time, her opponent was someone with an identical B+ Physical Ability rating. Tokunaga had won her last two matches decisively, much in the same way that Nanase had. The final match had become a proper showdown between two worthy competitors.

Up until this point, the onlooking crowd had been fairly rowdy, but everyone quieted down as the two girls took their positions and waited for the signal.

The staff member fired off the pistol for the last time, the sound echoing out across the beach. And with it, the two girls burst into action, arising from the sand simultaneously. The opening movement was truly evenly matched, but the similarity between them only went that far.

Not only did Nanase take the first step after getting up, but she propelled herself forward with a strength far superior to that of Tokunaga. And then, after a short sprint, she dove, cleanly wrenching the flag out of the sand as she did.

Tokunaga had been skilled enough to make it all the way to the final match, and given that she also had a flawless opening, she must’ve realized the difference between herself and Nanase. A difference so apparent that she couldn’t even feel resentful about it, left only to smile bitterly with traces of astonishment in her expression. In the end, she asked Nanase for a handshake, paying due respect to the victor two years her junior.

After leaving to wash off all the sand from her body and swimsuit, Nanase returned with her participatory bottle of water in hand.

After fighting three fierce battles in this sweltering heat, a cold drink of water was probably just what her body needed.

“That was a landslide victory.”

With the competition finished, I went to Nanase’s side and spoke up to her as she rested.

“Thank you very much. I managed to get through it somehow.”

Her shoulders were moving up and down to some extent and she was definitely at least somewhat short on breath, but overall, I got the impression that she hadn’t really put forth that much effort. In fact, it seemed to me that she had won with strength and energy to spare. In a contest between a first-year student and a third-year student, it may seem at first glance that the first-year is at a disadvantage. Generally speaking, however, girls reach the full potential of their physical capabilities at a relatively earlier age. As a result, there was probably no real difference in the athletic capabilities of a girl at 15 or 16 and a girl at 18. The primary factor influencing the outcome would have to be prior experience in the sport at hand, but in the case of Beach Flags, that wasn’t something that many teenage girls would have.

No─ was there even any point in trying to analyze it like this? The fact of the matter was that Nanase Tsubasa’s true Physical Ability rating was higher than what the OAA reflected. We had been told that the incoming first-year students would have their ratings evaluated based on their performances during their third year of middle school, but we were already well into the start of summer.

It had already been so long since the start of the year, and yet Nanase was still maintaining a B+ rating.

To me it seemed like she was more than capable of getting an A- rating or even an A, but…

“U-uhm, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“Hm?”

“Seeing you stare at me so closely like that, it’s… well, it’s a little unsettling, you know…?”

She looked away from me, a somewhat uncomfortable expression on her face.

“Ah… Yeah. Sorry.”

It’d probably be fine to continue thinking about this once Nanase changed her clothes.

With the Task finished, Kiriyama and the other third-year students immediately began preparing to pull out. It was probably safe to assume that they would be headed off to their next designated area or another Task site.

At that, Kiriyama approached me for the first time since we showed up here.

“Ayanokōji, don’t say anything unnecessary.”

He said nothing further, simply turning his gaze toward the distant shoreline behind me.

I looked over my shoulder, curious about what he meant, only to catch sight of several figures moving together along the sandbar.

I immediately understood what Kiriyama meant.

At some point, Nagumo, the student council president, had started messing about with some other third-year students in the ocean not too far away from the Task site.

He must’ve realized that I was looking at him too as he proceeded to call out to me, subtly beckoning for me to come over.

“I’ll say it again just to be sure: Don’t get in my way, got it?”

“I understand.”

Together with the rest of his friends, Kiriyama headed off toward the forest, leaving the beach behind.

“Nanase, I’m going to go talk with a senpai for a bit, so take your time getting dressed.”

“I will, thank you.”

I couldn’t exactly ignore Nagumo, so I figured that I might as well go talk with him, at least for a bit.

Besides, there was something I was curious about myself.

“From what I saw, it didn’t look like you were able to participate in that Task.”

“Aren’t we the same in that regard? Or did you just come here because of a nearby designated area?”

“Hmm, who knows?”

Nagumo smirked dismissively, evading the question.

“How about you come take a swim with us?”

“As much as I’d love to take you up on that offer, I didn’t have enough points left over to rent a swimsuit like you did, President Nagumo.”

It wasn’t just Nagumo either. Asahina and several other third-year students had also rented swimsuits.

They had even gone so far as to rent a beach ball to play with at the same time, so it seemed like they had quite a bit to spare.

“You seem awfully composed, playing on the beach like this. I thought you’d be fighting tooth and nail to rack up points like the rest of us.”

“Well it’s important to take breaks, right? Besides… the real event starts tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, that is, the fourth day of the exam.

The day when the top ten groups and bottom ten groups would be announced on our tablets.

“If it turns out that a first or second-year group has managed to sneak into the top three, I’ll take action accordingly. First and second-years have no right to stand on the winners’ podium. You’re no exception either, so keep that in mind.”

In short, this meant that Nagumo had a strategy of some sort to prevent himself from losing.

Provided, of course, that he wasn’t lying.

“Thank you very much for your considerate advice.”

At the end of the day, Nagumo was the leader of Class 3-A, the class that stood at the apex of the entire school.

Moreover, he was the current president of the student council. Given his position, his words were most likely not just mere lip service.

“However, I’m in a group alone. Rather than being at the top of the list, my name may very well show up at the bottom.”

“In that case, you’d better group up with someone as soon as possible. Horikita-senpai would probably be fairly disappointed if you self-destructed and got yourself expelled.”

“Nagumo. Come over here for a sec?”

From a bit behind me, a third-year student named Masuwaka called out to Nagumo.

Nagumo lightly raised his hand in response and proceeded to walk out of the ocean, headed over to where Masuwaka had motioned for them to talk.

They had already been plenty close enough to have a conversation, but I guess they didn’t want me to overhear anything.

At some point, Asahina stopped playing around in the ocean to take a look at what was happening, and after making sure that Nagumo was an adequate distance away, she approached me.

“Heyo. Word is that you’re working alone?”

“Well. You probably heard me earlier, but I’ve got a tough fight ahead of me.”

“That so…? Maybe that’s for the best though. If Miyabi were to start goin’ after you… things’d prolly get pretty dicey for ya, yeah? So here’s some advice. While you’ve got the chance, go meet up with as many groups as possible and───”

“Asahina, it’s time. Let’s get going.”

Just as she was about to whisper something into my ear, Nagumo came back, causing her to swallow her words.

“W-well, good luck.”

“Thanks.”

While she had stopped mid-sentence, I could more or less infer what she was going for.

Nagumo Miyabi had a strategy that only he himself would be able to implement.

A strategy that, if executed, would certainly make the fight ahead even more unsparing due to the peculiar nature of the exam.

That said, whether or not he would actually use that strategy against me was yet another question.

After all, as of right now, I was but a harmless existence that had no chance of taking up one of the top spots.