Classroom of the Elite Volume 14 Chapter 6 Part 2

After around two more hours of travel, we finally arrived back at the harbor in the starting area.

Nanase had started lagging behind during the final stretch of the journey, so she arrived about a minute after me, completely out of breath.

“Haaaa… I finally managed to catch up.”

She wiped her sweat with a hand towel as she tried to stabilize her breathing.

“It’s hard to believe you’re a first-year high school girl. I didn’t expect you to have so much stamina.”

Throughout our time together so far, there had been several instances where her physical prowess had piqued my interest, but this had been the most intriguing by a long shot.

“No no, compared to me, you’re not even short of breath, Ayanokōji-senpai… You’re just as outstanding as I thought.”

“I’m just putting on a stoic front. Well, that aside, take a look over there.”

“Wow─! So many people!”

Nanase, who had more or less caught her breath at this point, expressed her surprise about the sheer number of people bustling throughout the harbor.

Not only could you buy additional supplies here with your leftover provision points, but you could also receive free medical treatment, take a refreshing shower, or even make use of one of the clean, well-kept restrooms.

It was, so to speak, an oasis for the students. The one and only location on the island where you could let your guard down and relax a bit.

Whether it be those who were just stopping by due to the harbor’s proximity to their last designated area or those who had made the choice to give up on the next few areas and take a break, students with all sorts of goals and motivations had gathered here.

Furthermore, there were a fair number of school officials scrambling to and fro to handle the various needs and services of the harbor.

“So… Why did we come all the way here to the starting area, Senpai?”

“Before that, let’s check out the Task.”

“Ah, yes, I had forgotten about that.”

Just around the time when we stepped foot in area C8 on our way south from the Tug of War Task in C5, another Task had popped up in the starting area.

The Task in question was called ‘Open Water Swimming’.

It entailed a race where the participants would have to swim approximately 2km from start to finish.

While there had been plenty of physically demanding Tasks so far in the exam, the bar had been set drastically higher than usual for this one. Perhaps for that very reason, the Task also boasted the largest reward to date with 20 points.

Since the starting area was such an easy location to access, the Task should fill up fairly quickly. However, the number of students who would actually choose to register would inevitably be limited, given its demanding nature.

It was also worth mentioning that the sea didn’t exactly seem calm today.

Swimming in the open ocean was completely different from swimming in a pool and because of the inherent danger involved, it would probably be safe to assume that they were restricted to holding the Task in the vicinity of the starting area.

Lifeguards would surely be on standby, ready to jump into action in the event of an emergency.

The Task registration desk seemed to be located at the far edge of the harbor, so we made our way over.

From what I could see at a distance, there seemed to be a suitably large gathering there, but I couldn’t help but wonder if the size of the crowd was truly proportional to the number of registrations.

Before long, the two of us arrived at the registration desk and declared our interest in entering the competition.

“I must apologize. The last spot for the boy’s category filled up just a few minutes ago.”

The girl’s category, on the other hand, had just one spot remaining, making the situation highly reminiscent of the Beach Flags Task from a few days ago.

While the Task didn’t have a particularly large capacity or anything, I didn’t think so many students would actually choose to register.

What surprised me the most, however, was…

“Senpai… Is… Is that Kōenji-senpai?”

A young man could be seen standing with his back turned to the registration desk from just up ahead. And, sure enough, it was none other than Kōenji.

Seeing him here right after the Task was announced was… shocking to say the least.

“Erm… Senpai…”

“If you want to compete in the Task, you’d better hurry up and register. That said, are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

The journey here had by no means been an easy one.

It wouldn’t even be surprising if she had already exhausted every last drop of energy.

She would need to recover her stamina in the brief period of time she had to change clothes before the Task commenced.

“Although I’m reluctant to say I’m in perfect condition… it’s a rare opportunity, so I’d like to give it my best shot.”

Despite the circumstances, she seemed to be fairly enthusiastic and motivated.

“I’ll be waiting over there then. Come find me when it’s over.”

“Will do!”

After seeing Nanase off, I decided to leave the Task registration area in the harbor for a bit.

In the meantime, I wanted to make contact with a certain someone. In fact, meeting with this certain someone had been the main purpose behind my coming all the way back to the starting area.

Not too long after I started searching, I found the person I was looking for seated elegantly on a folding chair beneath a parasol that had been set up on the sandy beach.

“Good day to you, Ayanokōji-kun. It seems the weather is going to be awfully hot today, don’t you think?”

“How are you doing, Sakayanagi?”

“Reasonably well, I suppose. Ichinose-san and Shibata-kun are putting forth their best efforts for my sake, so I truly can’t ask for much more than that.”

Ichinose and Shibata were Sakayanagi’s fellow group members. She was participating in the exam in a pseudo-retired state because of her bad leg. Since she couldn’t move together with her group, they could only earn a maximum Arrival Bonus of two points per designated area.

“I’ve been curious about whether or not your group is eligible for Early Bird Bonuses.”

If a group had someone retire, they would lose the ability to earn Early Bird Bonuses.

Sakayanagi, however, was a special case.

“The school has graciously decided to make an exception for my group. After all, it’s not my fault that I’m forced to stay sedentary.”

Even though her group wasn’t part of the top ten right now, it was probably safe to assume that they had achieved fairly decent results so far.

“I must ask, what brings you to the starting area today?”

“There were a few reasons, but the first didn’t play out according to plan.”

I shifted my gaze toward the Open Water Swimming Task that would probably begin any second now.

“Unfortunately, the final spot was taken by Kōenji.”

“He was in fourth place just this morning, and yet now he’s already in second? As a classmate of yours, he’s quite the prodigy, isn’t he?”

“I hold the same opinion.”

Most of the top groups were competing against one another with a fairly slim margin of points separating their scores. If Kōenji were to take first in this swimming Task, he would temporarily shoot up to the first place spot.

“It should be about half an hour until the Task is over and Nanase-san comes back, so you’re welcome to come join me if you’d like. The shade here is wonderfully refreshing, I must say.”

“How do you know about Nanase?”

“Because I receive regular updates about the various going-ons of the island.”

I had crossed paths with students from Class 2-A several times so far, so I suppose it wouldn’t be surprising if one of them had reported back to Sakayanagi here at the starting point. After all, traveling alone with an underclassman — and a girl at that — definitely tended to stand out in a bad way.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to join you? I’m an enemy after all.”

The heat from the sun’s rays was so intense that it would be difficult to justify half an hour of direct exposure.

By standing still under direct sunlight, you would just end up needlessly exhausting your stamina.

“Fufu, by all means. Don’t be shy.”

She seemed to be saying that I, as someone who wasn’t part of the top ten, didn’t even amount to a perceivable threat.

As I pondered over whether or not to take her up on her offer, the various students participating in the Task arrived on the beachfront and entered the water in preparation for the start of the competition.

Shortly thereafter, the boys began with their race.

“How overwhelmingly one-sided.”

Kōenji set out at top speed from the very start and proceeded to swim straight to the finish line, completely outpacing the rest of the competition. In other words, despite all the strength and stamina he had used while quickly traveling from area to area, he still had plenty left to spare.

“It seems to me that Kōenji-kun has been surprisingly motivated during this exam. Other groups must see him as quite the threat.”

As far as this particular special exam was concerned, one might even go so far as to say that he was a reliable member of Class 2-D.

“Actually, there’s a favor I’d like to ask of you, Sakayanagi.”

“Ayanokōji-kun himself is asking me? Well now isn’t that intriguing? Please, do go on.”

Most people wouldn’t even want to entertain a request from an enemy, but Sakayanagi’s eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

“Five days have passed since the exam started, and yet only two people have retired.”

“Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san, right? It seems you’re fairly well informed yourself.”

“Incidentally, I just happened to be there when they retired.”

Hearing this, the seemingly fascinated Sakayanagi nodded.

“From what I’ve gathered by looking at the rankings, the remaining Shinohara-san still seems to be putting forth the effort to stay afloat… As such, I would reckon that she’s working with someone else now in order to get through the rest of the exam, is that right?”

“Correct.”

“Though, given her abilities, it would be considerably difficult for her to navigate the second half of the battle on her own. Ideally, she should look to get absorbed by some other group sooner rather than later… Ah, I see what you’re after.”

Even though I hadn’t said all that much yet, she had successfully managed to deduce what I wanted to ask of her. Just like that, she continued:

“So you want to get me to cooperate? Have you already met with Ryūen-kun?”

“He’s on board with my plan. It seems he thinks quite highly of Komiya and Kinoshita.”

“Is that so?”

Sakayanagi let show an amused smile as she looked at me with discerning eyes.

“It’s only natural that Ryūen-kun would lend a hand given the circumstances, but I don’t see any merit in doing so myself. At some level, I suppose that it would be prudent to prevent second-year Class Points from falling into the hands of the other school years. But to be honest, if there’s no harm done to Class 2-A, I don’t think it warrants any kind of intervention on my part.”

Although she had patiently listened to my request, that was markedly different from an agreement.

“But, if you’re willing to stomach working with me under the same conditions, I wouldn’t be opposed to helping you out.”

Sakayanagi countered my request for a favor with an exceedingly fair proposal of her own. Thanks to her quick intuition, it seemed that negotiations would be finished quickly.

“I’d like to agree to your condition, but I lack the necessary manpower right now.”

“I’ll gladly wait for when you’re ready, of course. This strategy of yours will require both time and effort to execute, so if you want to take action, it’d be best to do so sooner rather than later.”

“Right.”

Moreover, I had reason to believe that Nagumo has been carrying out a similar strategy from relatively early on as well.

I had a suspicion that this type of strategy would come into play more frequently throughout the latter half of the exam.

“I’ll contact you later.”

“I’ll leave it to you to decide on a messenger then. Whether it be Horikita-san or Ryūen-kun, it’s of no concern to me.”

I nodded in response before promptly taking my leave, having decided that it would be for the best not to loiter for too long.

After all, if I were to be seen together with Sakayanagi I would end up drawing far too much negative attention.

After that, I once again returned to the center of the harbor.

As I drew closer, I caught sight of a group of first-year students in the middle of purchasing an assortment of different supplies from Mashima-sensei. It seemed that he was the one in charge of selling provisions.

Even though I was essentially out of provision points, I decided to stop by and take a look.

“Hello.”

“Ah, Ayanokōji. Perfect timing actually. I have something to tell you, so make it seem like you’re looking through the merchandise and listen up.”

I moved in line with his suggestion, casually dropping my gaze to the various goods on display as I discreetly drew closer to him.

“Acting Director Tsukishiro hasn’t done anything noteworthy so far, at least not since the exam started. I haven’t noticed him planning anything to interfere with you.”

“So you’re saying I don’t need to worry about him doing anything?”

“…That’s what I’d like to tell you, but there are still certain things that seem a bit strange.”

“What do you mean?”

I slowly moved through the merchandise on display, occasionally taking the products into my hands as I did.

“In this exam, there’s no telling when or where someone might run into danger. In the event that a student suffers a particularly time-critical injury, the school has prepared a small boat and a helicopter to help expedite the rescue process.”

“That seems reasonable to me.”

The helicopter and the boat each had their individual uses, so it wasn’t strange that the school would have both prepared. If, for instance, a student were to run into trouble on the opposite side of the island during a spell of bad weather, it would be better to make use of the boat, whereas the helicopter would win out in cases where every second mattered.

“We originally planned on bringing along one helicopter and one boat, but for some reason we ended up bringing two boats. When I looked into it, I found that the Acting Director had arranged it as a supposed safety precaution.”

It seemed that, even as the exam went on, Mashima-sensei had been dutifully keeping tabs on even the smallest of details as he collected information on Tsukishiro’s movements.

“So then, maybe it’s possible that he did so expecting the need for two boats to arise at once?”

“That’s certainly true. In the end, it’s just something peculiar that I thought would be worth mentioning. Take it for what you will.”

What was originally supposed to be a single small rescue boat had apparently turned into two.

However, though the boat may be small in size, it would inevitably be noticed once it started moving. It would probably be pretty difficult to send one out without an SOS signal from a student. Most importantly, even if they managed to mobilize the boat, the question still remained: What exactly did that have to do with me?

“Where does the Acting Director usually spend his time?”

“Generally, he stays in the tent where the monitoring equipment has been set up, making sure that nothing has gone wrong with any of the students’ watches. Of course, other staff members are in there monitoring the watches as well. Outside of that, he tends to go out and patrol the island once or twice a day, sometimes for several hours at a time.”

“The Acting Director goes out of his way to patrol the island, all on his own?”

“Yes.”

Although it was unknown what exactly it was that he was doing, there was still one concrete takeaway I could glean from this. Namely, that there were several hours each day where nobody was watching him.

“In any case, I have a bad feeling about all of this, so be sure to watch your back, Ayanokōji.”

“Thank you for going to the trouble of providing me with this warning.”

I fully intended to stay as vigilant as physically possible, but I still wouldn’t be able to forget about the exam. At the end of the day, no matter how wary I may be, I would continue to be bound by the Basic Movement rule.