Classroom of the Elite Volume 14 Chapter 6 Part 3

The Open Water Swimming Task came and went, and even though Nanase ended up missing out on first place, she managed to just narrowly slip into third and earn some points for her efforts.

She had covered a long, harsh distance in a drastically short period of time, so all things considered, she had performed admirably.

I was going to praise her for her efforts when she came back, but she looked discontent so I took a different approach.

“That girl who took first place is my classmate Onodera. She’s a highly formidable opponent when it comes to swimming, so you shouldn’t let the loss get to you.”

With a top member of the swimming club like Onodera as her opponent, Nanase had managed quite well for herself.

“Yes. Onodera-senpai was certainly amazing. However, the one I’m truly concerned about is…”

Nanase trailed off as she looked over her shoulder and fixed her gaze on a certain someone.

That someone was none other than Kōenji, the young man who had snatched away the first place spot in the boy’s category in an overwhelming display of superiority.

“On top of making his way to the starting area faster than us, he won his match in record time.”

He stood refined as he looked out over the sea, and from what I could tell, his breathing wasn’t labored in the slightest.

“He’s as much a freak as he is a superhuman. Thinking about him any more than necessary isn’t worth the time.”

Although I may say this, even I, as his fellow classmate, have had to personally change my evaluation of him two or three times so far during this special exam. The Tug of War Task from earlier was only one such example of this.

He held utterly unfathomable potential.

If this was a glimpse of what he was truly capable of, then it would certainly be fair to call him a prodigy of some sort.

Having been awarded a lump sum of 20 points from his win, Kōenji had temporarily moved up to first place overall.

However, it would be incorrect to say that this put Nagumo at a disadvantage.

Rather, the fact remained unchanged that Nagumo was in an overwhelmingly advantageous position compared to Kōenji.

Moving forward, Nagumo would undoubtedly max out the size of his group through Tasks.

Once his group hits six members, they would start earning points at an accelerated rate and probably run away with the lead.

No matter how extraordinary Kōenji may be, in the end, he was acting alone. He lacked the human resources necessary to come out on top.

Therefore, when push came to shove, I wondered how exactly Kōenji planned on overcoming this setback?

At this point, we decided to rest until our next designated area was announced.

We rehydrated ourselves with the free drinking water they had on site, laid back, and enjoyed a well-earned break.

Then, at 1:00 PM, the third designated area of the day was revealed.

It was the random designation for the day, jumping straight from area H9 to area B6 — from one side of the map to the other.

I had missed a total of five areas in a row so far, costing me a sizable number of points due to the ramping penalty.

As such, I wanted to reach this new designated area by any means necessary.

“Senpai. In terms of distance it’s certainly manageable, but…”

Having seen the area that had been designated on her own tablet, Nanase looked to me with shining eyes.

“It’ll be hard if we try to go straight through the forest. However, we can take the beach in D8 and C8 and cut through a shorter patch of forest to the beach in B8 instead. Then, if we just head north from there, we can get to B6 without too much trouble.”

I finished her sentence for her and added a few thoughts of my own, prompting her to nod and stand up. Apparently, she had pictured this very same route.

“Thankfully, I’ve been able to recover my strength and rehydrate a bit. I should be fine to push forward without issue.”

Although we were reluctant to part ways with the starting area, we once again set off toward the forests of the uninhabited island.

We could see plenty of other groups of students at first, but just as soon as we stepped foot into the forest, we found ourselves reunited with the familiar feeling of solitude.

Unlike the sandy beaches where you were subject to the intense rays of direct sunlight, the muggy heat and humidity of the forest gnawed away your body.

“We’ve only just started and I’m already thirsty.”

“I’m grateful that we could stay hydrated back at the starting area, but I’m going to miss the easy access to water as well.”

Going from drinking as much water as we wanted to being forced to conserve water again felt worse than expected. That’s why, even though earning points came at a high priority, it’s only natural that there would be groups that try to stay somewhat nearby the starting area.

“There are more groups huddled around the starting area than I expected. I wonder if that’s due to the stress and difficulty that comes with living on the island for four or five days in a row? What do you think, Senpai?”

“I think that’s part of it, but that’s not the only reason. I’d say the largest factor is the revelation of the bottom ten groups.”

“…Is that so? Well, the expulsion penalty only applies to the bottom five groups, and since they were given the ability to find out their current situation through their tablets on the fourth day, I suppose it makes sense that they’ve grown complacent…”

By the end of the third day, nearly every student had been putting forward their full effort to secure a position on the leaderboards. We had been set to meander around an unfamiliar uninhabited island, told to pile up as many points as possible while being tossed around by Tasks and designated areas. All of this, just for the sake of escaping from the underlying threat known as ‘expulsion’.

On the fourth day, however, that all changed. Students began to compare the points they had earned with those down at the bottom ranks. Using their first three days of island life as a baseline of sorts, they’d make rough, arbitrary approximations of how many points they could earn in a day and use that to help decide whether or not they were at an advantage.

“But, even if you have a 10 to 20 point lead on the bottom five, there’s no absolute guarantee that you’ll be safe, right? If it were me, I’d try my best to establish a 30 to 40 point lead and work to maintain it.”

“Of course, at some level, everyone knows that they should be doing it that way. After all, everyone wants to face the special exam with the resolve to give it their all from start to finish. But reality is not that kind. Just like how you and I are eager to get a drink of water right now, once you get a taste of something sweet, whatever resolve you might have is bound to falter.”

“I see… I suppose I can somewhat understand what you’re saying. For instance, even if you’ve resolved yourself to stay up all night to study on the day before a big test, once you start thinking about how much you want to take a quick nap, you’ll find yourself getting under the covers of your futon and end up accidentally sleeping until morning…”

She looked embarrassed as she spoke, as though this was a retelling of something she had experienced firsthand.

“Since the start of the fourth day, most groups should’ve started to run out of both food and water, and general fatigue has begun to set in as well. I think you can see that dropping in for a short visit at the starting area is the root cause here. If you see another group taking it easy in such a comfortable environment, it’s only natural that you would think to do so yourself, at least for a bit.”

In a world where nobody was taking a break in and around the starting area, most of the groups that stopped by would never be tempted to join in and instead choose to resume their journey.

“I would imagine that the decision to stay and rest at the starting area would come after a discussion between group members. They’d say something like: ‘We have a lead for the time being, so let’s stay here for a bit and pick up some easy Tasks while we enjoy the free water and safety. Then, once we’ve secured a suitable amount of food and water, we’ll set out again.’ Well, that would probably be the gist of it, anyway.”

Nanase nodded along as I spoke, seemingly convinced. However, she sent a question my way only moments afterward.

“Then, the correct choice is to give up on taking the easy way out and be stricter with yourself… that’s what you’re getting at, right?”

“Nanase, you said that you’d want to establish a sizable lead and maintain it, but fatigue has started to catch up with you, hasn’t it? You’ve taken part in more physically demanding Tasks than I have too.”

“Y-yes. I know I said earlier that I’d work hard, but I must admit that my pace has actually slowed down by a fair bit since day one. I suspect that by tomorrow or the day after I’ll probably be even slower.”

Though she didn’t say it explicitly, the wear and tear on her body was probably more severe than I imagined.

Energy spent participating in Tasks aside, just how many dozens of kilometers had she and I traveled in these last five days?

“Rest is important. There are times where you’ll have no choice but to overwork yourself to earn points, but the key to that is knowing when to push yourself and when to take a step back and take a break. You ultimately just have to avoid doing the same things as the majority of other students.”

Move when others have chosen to rest and rest when others have chosen to move.

“I’ve been thinking that you’ve been taking on the exam fairly negligently these past few days, Ayanokōji-senpai. But, you’ve just been conducting yourself that way because you don’t want to stand out too much during the first half, haven’t you?”

“That’s about right. Of course, I’ll bite if an adequate opportunity presents itself, but even if I made it into a highly contested Task, the number of points I can earn would be limited.”

There had been many Tasks so far where I could’ve won if I had been given the chance to participate, but was never given that chance because someone else had already taken up the last spot.

“Uhm, if I may ask… why are you telling me about your plan? Up until now, it has always seemed that you’ve been looking to placate or deceive me whenever the topic comes up, Senpai.”

She wanted to know why, and rightfully so as well. After all, I didn’t normally let other people hear me talk like this.

So then, why did I choose to share a select portion of my overall strategy with her instead of trying to cover it up like I usually did?

Having spent the last several days traveling the island together with her, I had naturally come to understand her better.

The student named Nanase Tsubasa… What kind of personality did she have? What kind of mentality? She was a diligent honor student whose physical and academic capabilities were well above average. She was someone who followed instructions without voicing a single complaint, but wouldn’t hesitate to speak her mind when she felt like something needed to be said. Above all, she had the confidence and resolve necessary to not break down easily.

Altogether, this was just as much a strength as it was a weakness, as well as a fairly awkward way for someone to live their life. It was precisely because she was such a person that I couldn’t help but feel a sense of incongruity about the fact that she had chosen to join forces with someone like Hōsen.

Was it because she was trying to get me expelled as the White Room student?

Or perhaps there was some other motive for it?

Back when she first proposed the idea of traveling together with me, I thought that she was looking for an opportunity to strike when I showed a moment of weakness.

For that very reason, I had tried to make myself seem relaxed or careless on multiple occasions during our time together.

If she chose to strike while we were deep in the dark forest, her actions would be hidden from any prying eyes.

But, in the end, Nanase never even tried to take advantage of the opportunities I gave her.

Rather, between lending an ear to Ike’s troubles and helping Shinohara and the others when they were in danger, she always put forward a genuine effort to try and help those in need.

“Put simply, there’s no questioning the fact you’re my enemy, Nanase. Not only because this exam requires us to compete against each other as students from different school years, but also because there’s 20 million private points in it for you for getting me expelled.”

“…That’s right. After all, I tried to plot against you before, Senpai.”

“That being said, your actions so far have made it impossible for me to see you as an enemy.”

“Even though I’ve acted with blatant hostility before…?”

“Strange, isn’t it? Well, that aside, I’m also fairly certain that even if I didn’t say anything you’d still understand my strategy to some extent.”

She acted as though she was surprised when I said this, but deep down she should’ve already picked up on my true intentions.

And despite the fact that she was already vaguely aware of my plans, she looked to feign ignorance so as to potentially find out something more.

“But with all that being said, this is just my intuition.”

At this point, Nanase sank into silence.

I had no intention of pressing her any further on the matter, perfectly content with quietly continuing our journey through the forest.

For the time being, my top priority was reaching the next designated area.