Classroom of the Elite Volume 14 Chapter 6 Part 4

“Phew~! Somehow we finally managed to make it to our last area.”

With a heavy breath, Nanase collapsed to the ground, succumbing to the fatigue plaguing her entire body.

The fourth designated area of the day had been area B5, right above the previous area B6.

For Nanase, even a short distance like that must’ve been considerably burdensome.

“It seems like you’ve been pushing yourself quite a lot.”

She had been fine when we left the starting area, but after a while, her pace gradually began to slow down. Given the circumstances, I had been eyeing the possibility of leaving her behind and making my way to the designated area on my own, but she ultimately managed to persevere through sheer willpower alone.

“To be honest, participating in that swimming Task was far too much for me.”

That Task had probably drained away just about every last drop of spare energy she had.

“Fortunately for you, we’re done for today. We can take it slow from here and look for a good place to set up camp.”

We rested for a bit while we waited for her to feel ready to walk again, and then we set out in search of a suitable campsite.

Before long, we came across a large opening in the forest where another group had already set up camp. It seemed as though they were getting ready for dinner, as there was an assortment of different cooking utensils lined up in front of their tents.

It was a great location with plenty of space for us to set up for the night, but it felt like it would be awkward to do so when we weren’t particularly close to the other group. Just as we tried to pass them by and look elsewhere, one of the students called out to us.

“Yo!”

The student in question was Hamaguchi Tetsuya, a boy from Class 2-C. I lightly raised my hand in response, prompting Nanase to follow suit with a bow.

“You guys in a hurry to get somewhere?”

“No. We’ve already reached our designated area for the day. We were just thinking of finding somewhere a bit closer to the ocean.”

“Then how about you take it easy and stick around for a bit?”

I hadn’t spoken with Hamaguchi since last year’s island exam and the exam on the cruise ship that was held on the way back.

We had only spent a brief period of time together back then, and we had never interacted with one another outside of that.

Our relationship was in no way close enough to warrant calling each other friends…

So then, why in the world was he looking to strike up a conversation with me?

“Though, you don’t have to force yourself if you don’t want to.”

After a lengthy silence, he added in a couple of slightly apologetic words.

Nanase had been following along without voicing even a single complaint, but her fatigue was probably reaching its peak, so I figured we might as well take him up on his offer.

“Well, I suppose we’ll take a short break.”

“Come on over then, make yourself at home.”

Hamaguchi ushered us over to his campsite as if he were inviting a couple of close friends into his room.

The way he managed to create such a welcoming atmosphere was just what you would expect of one of Ichinose’s classmates.

That being said, what truly piqued my interest here was not Hamaguchi, but the other two members of his group.

They had come out from within their tent not too long after Hamaguchi called out to us, having overheard the sound of our ensuing chatter.

The entire time, they had been casting glances in my direction as they unabashedly whispered to each other about something.

“If you two aren’t on board with Hamaguchi’s invitation, we’ll leave immediately.”

As students from different classes, if our presence made them uncomfortable, it would probably be better for us to leave.

At least, that’s what I thought, but Andō hurriedly put a stop to that.

“No, no, nothin’ like that. We were whisperin’ ‘bout somethin’ else. It just so happens we wanted to talk with you, Ayanokōji-kun, so it’s totally fine by us if you guys camp here tonight. Right Kozue?”

With that, she looked to Minamikata, who nodded along several times in agreement.

“If we’re all on the same page, then let’s take the opportunity to hold ourselves a welcome party!”

Saying that, Hamaguchi brought out a backpack from inside one of the tents.

He then unfastened the zipper and opened it up, revealing a considerably large amount of canned food contained within.

“That’s quite a lot.”

With just the amount I could currently see, a group could easily survive for a week.

“As luck would have it, all three of us had the card that gave 50% more provision points when the exam started. That’s why we’ve got so much more food than other groups.”

Although I had already figured that out myself, I decided to make it seem like I was genuinely impressed by this. A usual group of three would’ve had 15000 provision points to work with, but Hamaguchi’s group had 22500. Even if they chose to buy a barbeque grill and a rich selection of meat, they’d still have plenty of points left to spare. Of course, purchases like that would be ill-fit for travel and transportation, given the weight.

One of the primary strengths of Class 2-C was that its students practically never acted selfishly. In spite of that, one might be led to think that Hamaguchi’s group was being wasteful with their purchases, given the abundance of food and cooking supplies they had purchased, but that probably wasn’t the case here at all.

Chances are that this was all Ichinose’s idea. It would be extremely difficult to move about the map with such a large amount of food. This was particularly true for cooking utensils and tools like gas stoves and such, which would just end up getting in the way. However, it’s a different story when someone is explicitly tasked with holding onto these things. Ichinose probably wanted to have some sort of system put in place for students to share useful cooking tools with each other.

As far as the rules of the special exam were concerned, the school had already officially stated that students were allowed to share food with other groups. So, in that sense, it felt fairly accurate to think of these three as the kitchen keepers of Class 2-C.

Hamaguchi pulled out a bundle of skewers from the backpack.

“What an exceedingly interesting strategy.”

Nanase mumbled from off to the side, having seemingly gone through the same thought process that I had.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“We first-years are rather lacking in terms of solidarity. I would imagine that those of us willing to take action for the sake of another are few and far between.”

However, a strategy like this undoubtedly came with problems of its own.

Staying back and guarding the food and supplies was certainly important, but in the process, you would run into issues scoring points for the exam.

In the worst case, the penalty for missing out on designated areas could be mitigated by a single person. However, you’d still gradually get outpaced by the rest of the competition. In which case, you’d inevitably find yourself standing on the doorstep to expulsion.

“You guys alright with some yakiniku?”

“Eh, what do you mean?”

“We’ve at least gotta treat you guys to a solid dinner. Right you two?”

When Hamaguchi looked to check with his fellow group members, the two girls responded with an immediate nod of their heads, completely fine with the idea.

Seeing this, I spoke up.

“No, hold on a moment. I appreciate your sentiment, but there’s no way we can accept such a generous offer.”

“That’s right. Your food is far too valuable to be used on us.”

Although Nanase and I felt grateful for their show of goodwill, we both declined the offer. Despite this, however, Hamaguchi simply acted as if he hadn’t heard us and continued preparing the meal. He was really far too good-natured a person. Rather than waste the resources on us, students from other classes and school years, they should be using them to support their own classmates in need.

Without so much as a second thought, Hamaguchi proceeded to take out some packed meat from a cooler box stored inside the backpack.

“You guys really don’t gotta worry ‘bout it. We just so happened to get our hands on some nice beef as a reward from a Task today. It’s not gonna last for long in storage either way, so we might as well dig in while we can.”

He took the cuts of meat and began to pierce them with skewers. From the look of it, we were about to be served a full-blown meal.

They even brought out a can of mosquito repellant for us to use in order to make the atmosphere even more welcoming and comfortable.

“Is it… really, really okay for you to treat the likes of us to a meal like this?”

“Oh stop it with the formalities. Don’t hold back.”

Even though their class had a tendency to overly prioritize helping others, I still had to ask myself: why me?

There was surely no way that they would go to these lengths for every student that passed them by.

“Are you curious about why I called out to you?”

“Considering that you’re also treating me to a meal, it definitely raises questions.”

After pausing for a bit to come up with the right words, Hamaguchi came out with it.

“It’s cause we’ve been hearing a lot of talk about you lately, Ayanokōji-kun. We wanted to get a chance to talk to you ourselves. Ain’t that right guys?”

“Yep.”

Minamikata and Andō promptly agreed, fully on board with Hamaguchi’s reasoning.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, like… ya know…”

Andō shot me a questioning glance, the look in her eyes all but saying: ‘You DO get what I’m talkin’ about, right?’

Once they realized that I genuinely had no idea what they were getting at, their expressions became even more surprised than before.

“Eh? Wait, then has there really not been any progress yet? For real?”

“No way! I thought for sure that they’d at least be at that ‘more than friends, less than lovers’ stage by now!”

“I know right? Honami-chan’s been dropping his name pretty much all the time these days.”

“Is that so?”

“I know it’s not our place to say this an’ all, but… is there even any reason why they shouldn’t be going out at this point?”

While I had heard somewhere before that girls love talking about this kind of thing, was it really appropriate for them to do so right in front of the person himself?

Nanase seemed to have connected the dots for herself by this point, as she was looking at me with keen, undivided interest filling her gaze.

“…I’m not 100% certain I get what you two are going on about, but I don’t think we should go out with each other.”

“No no no no no no. What are you saying? I’ll say it again just to be sure, but you do know that this is THE Honami-chan we’re talkin’ about, right?”

“I can’t really speak for all the boys out there, but prolly like 80 to 90% of the second-years like Honami-chan, right?”

“That sounds like a safe bet to me.”

While there was certainly no denying the fact that Ichinose was popular with boys and girls alike, 90% was clearly an overstatement. Sudō liked Horikita, Ike liked Shinohara, and that was no doubt just the tip of the iceberg.

“You two are in different classes, sure, but you don’t have to let that get in the way of love! There’re tons of couples out there going steady with each other regardless of their class or grade.”

“Isn’t the bigger issue here the fact that Ichinose isn’t even interested in me?”

“Ooooo, is that modesty I see? You do know that you were quite the hit with the girls back when we first enrolled here, right Ayanokōji-kun?”

When I thought back on it, I could recall Kushida saying something relatively similar to that about a year ago.

I simply didn’t take what she said at face value at the time, or rather, I chose not to think all that much about it.

“It sounds like you’re quite a hit with the ladies, Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“No, I’m not. Nothing of the sort. No girls have ever said anything like that to me before.”

“Reeeally~? Ah, well I can think of one time when you came up in a conversation, but the topic changed real fast.”

“Well, ain’t no helpin’ that. There’s no way to tell if you’re gonna like a guy unless you up and talk with ‘em face-to-face, and Ayanokōji-kun wasn’t the type a’ guy to talk with people a year ago.”

“Doesn’t seem to me like he’s changed much since then either though~!”

The two girls shared a laugh as they cracked a joke at my expense.

“Ayanokōji-senpai has changed a little from how he used to be, then?”

Nanase observed as the two chattered away before raising a question of her own.

“Well, I guess in some ways he seems a lot… softer now?”

The one to respond this time was Hamaguchi, who had only just returned from a trip to the restroom moments before Nanase asked her question. While I had never spoken with Andō or Minamikata before, I had spent a bit of time together with Hamaguchi during the exam on the cruise ship.

He was pretty much the perfect person to give an objective comparison of how much I had changed this past year.

All of that aside… it didn’t seem to me like these three were afraid of the possibility of getting expelled. Of course, there was no way for me to tell exactly how many points they had, but there was no way that they were anywhere near the top of the leaderboards.

If that’s the case, then…

After we finished with dinner, we ended up deciding to accept their warm hospitality and chose to stay there for the night.