Classroom of the Elite Volume 15 Chapter 3 Introduction

Chapter 3: A Fight Against Solitude

After brushing away the cobwebs that had tangled around my clothes, I slowly took off my backpack and set it down on the ground.

The Uninhabited Island Exam had entered into its ninth day, and it was as hot and humid out as ever.

By the time I had safely arrived at the fourth designated area, I was already breathing heavily.

One way or another, I had managed to reach my intended destination, just as scheduled.

The sweat on my brow slowly began to trickle down the bridge of my nose, so I wiped it away with the sleeve of my jersey.

Area D5, the designated area revealed at 3:00 PM, had been a considerable distance away from the previous area H9. It had taken quite a lot of effort to make it within the allotted time period.

In fact, I had even run into a decent Task along the way, but chose to give up on it so as to minimize the risk of accruing a penalty.

Although the journey had taken me almost two full hours, it didn’t seem that very many other groups had arrived yet, as I had successfully earned the third-place Early Bird Bonus.

I wasn’t dissatisfied with my progress for the most part, but I still hadn’t been able to make it back to the starting area and meet up with Sakayanagi.

It’d just be a waste of stamina if I forced myself to go there now, and I didn’t want to overwork myself. I had crossed paths with several Class 2-A students throughout the day today, but unfortunately, none of them had walkie-talkies. I thought about whether or not I should just bite the bullet and go there tomorrow morning, but… well, that would make things fairly complicated.

After deciding to put aside the whole situation with Sakayanagi for the time being, I went ahead and took a look at everything that had happened today.

“So with all the points I earned today, I’ve upped my total score to 112, huh?”

The Kuronaga group, who had maintained their 10th place spot, had a comprehensive score of 123 points, a mere 11 points ahead of me, who had risen up to 13th. Given that it would soon be 5:00 PM, this 11 point gap was most likely where things would end for the day.

My goal was actually to reach 11th place, but an 11 point difference seemed well within my tolerance range. Although it happened slightly behind schedule due to what happened with Nanase and the rough patch of weather, I had finally secured the strategic position that I’d been aiming for since the very beginning.

That’s right, I had been aiming for 11th place since before the uninhabited island special exam even started. I was currently in 13th place, which was a bit lower, but that wasn’t the important thing here. Rather, I just needed to make certain of one thing: that I didn’t rise up to tenth.

In order to stand on the winner’s podium, you’d have to put in the work to pile up points. However, regardless of whether you were all on your own or in a seven-man group through the use of the ‘More People’ card, by being part of the publicly-visible top ten, you’d inevitably end garnering attention, even if you didn’t want to.

And by garnering attention, your rivals would become wary of you, and you’d have to face the risk of being sabotaged before the end of the exam.

In order to avoid that and yet still have your sights set on a top spot, 11th place was the most ideal position to be in. That being said, there were still a few drawbacks to this strategy. Given the exam’s nature, staying in control of your score can be fairly difficult. Therefore, if you didn’t keep a close eye on your score, it’s possible that you might find your group’s name inadvertently showing up on the leaderboards, even if only for a moment. And if that were to happen, the entire strategy would be for naught.

Furthermore, an even greater drawback was the fact that it was heavily dependent on the score of the 10th place group. The smaller the gap between 10th place and 1st place, the easier it’d be to mount a comeback. However, if the gap was on the larger side, it’d be increasingly difficult to turn things around since you’d need to earn a larger number of points to catch up.

For that exact reason, it was important that the top groups strove to actively impede each other’s progress.

But… that had been happening less than anticipated. So much so, in fact, that certain groups had been allowed to run away with the lead.

Fortunately, the absence of pressure from the first and third-years meant that the second-years were at a relative advantage, although that didn’t exactly mean very much given all the other drawbacks. In order for groups to interfere with each other, they’d need to sacrifice their own ability to earn points, so it’d be difficult to put anything into motion unless you already had a substantial number of points on hand.

I was curious about what Nagumo was going to do moving forward. It seemed like it’d be a good idea for him to take on countermeasures of some sort to deal with Kōenji, his foremost competitor for the top spot. However, from what I saw during my previous GPS Searches, there was no indication that he had any plan to run interference at the moment. It was conceivable that he was simply pouring his energy into scoring points right now instead, but…

“With the way things are going, even if I don’t win, I won’t have any complaints as long as Kōenji takes first or second.”

By staying at or around 11th place, I wouldn’t attract very much attention. And even if I were to have my progress stunted via sabotage by Amasawa or one of the other first-years, I wouldn’t have to worry about dropping all the way down to the bottom of the leaderboards.

All I needed to do at this point was maintain a high rank until the end of the twelfth day of the exam.

I took a well-earned rest in the shade of a nearby tree, and once the sweat had faded from my brow, I put my backpack back on and set off, headed toward the neighboring area.

Rather than set up camp right on the border, I wanted to find a nice, open spot located a bit further out.

Just around the time when the sun began to set and I needed to make a decision as to where I’d be camping for the night, I caught sight of an isolated, one-man tent pitched in a clearing not too far ahead of me. The entrance was zipped shut despite the sweltering heat, so it didn’t seem like its owner was resting inside. Perhaps they were out scouting the surrounding area, or possibly even going to the restroom.

“What a nice spot.”

It was hard to find such a flat, open spot in this neck of the woods.

It’d make things a lot easier for me personally if I could just set up my tent somewhere around here.

However, compared to when I had Nanase accompanying me, I was currently a boy traveling on his own.

As such, if this tent’s owner was a girl, my presence could lead to inadvertent trouble if they didn’t trust me to be here.

What’s more, whoever it was, I wasn’t sure what to make of the fact that it was a one-man tent.

Were they acting separately from the rest of their group, or had they been on their own since the beginning?

If it were the latter, then it was almost certainly someone I was acquainted with.

At this point, I at least wanted to find out their identity, regardless of whether I ended up pitching my own tent here or not.

I decided to stick around for a little while to see if the owner would turn up.

If they were out for a walk, then they should be back before sundown. And, if there were noises coming from inside the tent, then I could just call out to them.

I was fully aware that it’d be more efficient to try calling out to them now, but… well… you get the idea.

I waited for about ten minutes after that, but there was no sign nor sound of anyone.

The longer I waited, the more possible it began to seem that they had simply gone to bed early.

And since I had no reason to believe that anyone else would show up looking to use the campsite, I finally made up my mind and called out from beside the tent.

“Is anyone there?”

I held my breath for a few seconds and listened carefully for a reaction of some sort, but it was perfectly silent.

“Sorry, but I’d like to set up my tent nearby. Please let me know if you have a problem with that.”

I went through the formality of asking for permission, and, having reached the conclusion that there was truly nobody inside, lowered my backpack down to the ground.

That is, after having appropriately distanced myself from their tent, of course.

Although I was still somewhat curious about who it was I was sharing a campsite with, I quickly finished pitching my own tent.

Time and time again, I’d been thoroughly impressed with how much easier this tent was to set up than the one used during last year’s uninhabited island exam.

And that wasn’t the only thing. It was also nice to have a tent all to myself without having to fuss over sharing the space with somebody else.

Though, this introverted way of thinking may just be the reason why my friends were so few and far between.

A sunny, cheerful person would probably say that sleeping in a tent without other people would be boring.

I couldn’t help but wonder if there would ever come a day where I’d think so as well.

“…I really can’t imagine it.”

It was a future that would probably never come.

“I thought I heard some weirdo show up, but to think it was you of all people.”

Just as I was sorting out my change of clothes for tomorrow, a voice called out to me from behind.

Apparently, the owner of the lone tent just across the way was none other than Ibuki.

“Did I make too much noise?”

“Not really.”

Her response was brief, and she immediately followed it up with a piercing glare.

I thought that she’d say something else, but she instantly went back inside her tent instead.

Feeling like something was out of sorts, I decided to go and see what she was up to.

“You got a minute?”

I called out to her from outside her tent, but she ignored me. The only thing I could hear was a faint, indistinct noise coming from inside.

“I’d like to ask you something.”

I tried calling out to her again, but she still refused to respond.

At first I thought that she was merely ignoring me, but upon further inspection, it seemed like she was actually up to something in there.

“I’m gonna unzip the flap, okay?”

Just to be safe, I waited for thirty seconds or so before unzipping the entrance to her tent.

“…What do you want?”

Upon looking inside, I was met with the sight of a seated Ibuki who seemed to be chewing on something.

“Jerky.”

“Jerky…? That wasn’t included in the Uninhabited Island Manuel they handed out to us before the exam, though?”

In other words, she had secured fresh meat somehow, perhaps by purchasing it, and dried it into jerky all by herself.

However, it’d take quite a lot of time and effort for her to go through the jerky-making process on her own.

Back when the exam first began, she had started out by provoking Horikita before immediately setting off for the first designated area. If she had been carrying raw meat back then, it went without saying that it would’ve spoiled within a few hours of this scorching heat.

With that in mind, it made more sense to think that this was a part of a strategy that the entirety of Class 2-B was in on.

I could imagine that some Class 2-B group out there had taken on the job of making a large quantity of jerky for the rest of the class.

It would only be possible because it was cost-effective and cheap on the wallet. No matter how portable it might be, straight-up buying premade food that has a long shelf-life, such as dried meats, wouldn’t be very practical from a cost-performance standpoint due to the high prices the school would charge for it. So, rather than buy the processed result, you could get more bang for your buck by going through the effort to make your own jerky out of raw beef instead.

I hadn’t seen what Ryūen’s food situation was like back when I crossed paths with him, but it was probably safe to assume that he was carrying emergency rations as well, jerky in particular. Even though it couldn’t hurt, the students of Class 2-B could look past the highly competitive Tasks that supplied participants with food.

“What’s it matter to you? It’s none of your business.”

I could stand here thinking about this all I wanted, but it didn’t sound like I’d be hearing the truth from her any time soon.

At any rate─ as far as I knew, Ibuki’s name hadn’t shown up in the bottom ten groups so far, even though she was taking part in the exam all on her own. It seemed that she had managed to maintain a somewhat decent score.

For Ibuki, taking a top spot in a Task centered around academic ability would be a lost cause.

With that being the case, her main source of income had to be the Arrival Bonuses and Early Bird Bonuses that came from traveling to designated areas, and outside of that, she’d be limited to the Tasks that tested our athletic skills.

As a result, she’d inevitably wear herself out at a faster rate than other students.

Anyone with eyes could see just how much physical and mental stress she had been put under.

In fact, it was entirely possible that she had already gone well past her limit.

“How many people have you spoken with since the exam started?”

“Wha…?”

It didn’t seem like she had been sleeping very well, as I could see faint, dark circles taking shape under her eyes.

“…Just Horikita. You heard me say I wouldn’t lose to her, right? You were there.”

“In other words, you’re saying you haven’t had a proper conversation with someone since day one?”

At best, she had probably only opened her mouth to answer yes-no questions during the Task registration process.

“You should try and find someone to talk to, even if only a little bit.”

“Ain’t no way I’m gonna talk with my enemies.”

“Then talk with a classmate. If you wander around long enough, you’re sure to come across someone.”

“I don’t think of my classmates as ‘friends’.”

Her current state was the result of her closing herself off from the outside world, hiding away in her shell. And to think she had been like this for nine days now, and yet still had five more to go before the end of the exam.

If the fraying thread that was holding Ibuki together were to snap, everything would most likely come crumbling down around her.

And, as a lone student, if she were made to retire from the exam, her expulsion would be all but set in stone.

However, this special exam was such that, if at all possible, you didn’t want to let groups from your own school year get expelled. To that end, it would be ideal if Ibuki could dedicate a day to rest and recovery. If she could spend a full day taking it easy, that would probably be enough for her to regain most of her energy. Given the type of person she was, it wouldn’t be impossible for her to make it through the remaining four days of the exam at that point.

But, reality was not so merciful. As easy as it may seem, taking a day off from the exam would be incredibly difficult.

And, even if she were to force herself to take a break, there was no saying whether or not her mental state would improve.

While you rested, your rivals would be racking up points, placing you at risk of not only being overtaken, but possibly even causing you to sink down to the very bottom.

It’d be impossible for an ordinary person to sit back and empty their mind while the rest of the world moved on with the exam without them.

Besides, missing out on all four of a day’s designated areas would lead to a penalty, of which the ramping effects would only make the following days that much more strenuous.

“Get out already.”

“…Alright.”

Even though it was Ibuki, she was still a girl.

With the sun sinking further and further under the horizon, it wouldn’t exactly be appropriate for a boy to be looking inside a lone girl’s tent like this.

Even if Ryūen was here right now, I had my doubts that even he would be able to solve her problem.

After leaving Ibuki’s tent, I went back to sorting out my clothes.

It had been a fairly windy day today, so I hoped that it’d be a relatively cool night tonight.

“Hey.”

Just when I had reached a decent stopping point with what I was doing, Ibuki emerged from her tent.

She staggered a bit as she got to her feet, wobbling around somewhat haphazardly, but she regained her bearings soon enough.

And then, with her hands in her pockets, she proceeded to walk straight over to me.

“How many points you got right now?”

She had finally come out of her tent, only to follow it up by asking me something surprisingly bold.

“We’re mutual enemies, you do know that right?”

“So you won’t tell me.”

In a low voice, she mumbled something that sounded like the word ‘cheapskate’, but I still had no intention of divulging that information.

I could tell her that I was currently in 13th place, but there wasn’t a single person on this deserted island who’d stand to benefit from it.

“That’s just how it is.”

“Then, at least tell me if you’re higher or lower than me. I’ve currently got─”

Just as Ibuki was about to willingly disclose her own score, I held out my hand to stop her.

“Sorry, but I won’t be answering your question, no matter what form you put it in.”

Merely telling her if my score was higher or lower would be no different from giving her a hint, and the same thing went for lying to her about it.

It may seem risk-free for me to say that my score was lower than hers, but if people were to learn that I was struggling to secure points, then there’s a chance that someone may try to force me into a desperate situation in order to expel me. No matter what, I had to prevent any intel about me from taking on a life of its own.

Ibuki clicked her tongue, her hands still in her pockets.

“…Whatever. It was a waste of time to bother with askin’ you anyway.”

“Fair enough. Besides, your true target here is Horikita, right?”

As soon as Horikita’s name crossed my lips, Ibuki’s tired, listless demeanor changed drastically.

She pulled her hand out of her pocket and presented me with her middle finger and a scowl on her face.

“When you next see that bitch, do me a solid and tell her that I’ll absolutely never lose to her.”

“That’s fine and all, but I’m probably not the one you should be giving the middle finger to.”

“You, her, same difference. After all, you two are on real good terms with each other.”

No, we weren’t.

She was completely off the mark, but from her perspective, it probably looked like Horikita and I treated each other that way.

Apparently, she didn’t have anything else she wanted to say to me, as she began to walk back to her own tent without another word.

“Hold on a moment.”

I called out as I went after her, only for her to look back just as I was reaching out to grab hold of her arm.

She was already more than wary of me, but upon seeing what I was doing, that wariness was cranked up to the maximum as she instantly moved to avoid my hand.

“Haaa? You tryna pull somethin’?”

She clenched her fists as she spoke. It seemed she had interpreted my actions as me trying to pick a fight with her.

“That wasn’t my intention here at all, but─”

Leaving my sentence unfinished, I extended my arm for a second time and, without giving her an opportunity to escape, swiftly grabbed hold of her wrist.

“The hell are you doing!?”

She sent a kick flying at me in a panic, prompting me to block her foot with my free hand. I expected her to try it again, but she instead let out a sigh of resignation and averted her gaze.

“I’ll admit I can’t beat you, sure, but one of these days, I swear I’m gonna get the satisfaction of kickin’ your teeth in.”

Personally, I’d rather she didn’t set such an unsettling goal for herself.

“So? Did Horikita put you up to this? Tryna get in my way?”

Not only did she fail to understand my true intentions behind grabbing her wrist, but her strange suspicions had led her to an even stranger conclusion all of her own.

As one of Horikita’s classmates, it didn’t seem like there was any way my words would make it through to her.

Thinking about it logically, the odds of getting Ibuki to willingly take a break had been minuscule from the very beginning.

“Your pulse is racing.”

“Hah!?”

“The inside of your mouth looks dry too, not to mention how cracked your lips are. You’re obviously dehydrated.”

With the way things were going, it wouldn’t be very surprising if her first Warning Alert was to go off soon.

Actually, it was entirely possible that it had already gone off by now.

The reason why she had been passively sitting within her tent was probably not just that she was tired, but that she had been trying to prevent an alert from going off due to her abnormal heart rate.

“I’m not all that thirsty… anymore.”

“Anymore? So then, you’re saying you were thirsty at one point?”

I let go of Ibuki’s wrist and she immediately distanced herself from me with an openly hostile look on her face.

“Mind your own business. There ain’t anything wrong with me.”

With that, she turned her back on me once again, but I immediately gave chase and made it to her tent a step ahead of her.

“Wait, wha─? What are you doing!?”

She wasn’t going to listen to me no matter how clearly I spelled it out to her, so I went inside her tent and dragged out her backpack.

“Show me what’s inside.”

“Haaa!? No way in hell I’mma show a guy. No, I wouldn’t even do it for a girl either.”

“Fair enough.”

Since she wasn’t going to grant me permission, I simply opened it up without permission instead.

“Hey! I said no!”

Inside her backpack, there were clothes, amenities, and a bit of food like jerky.

Aside from that, there was a plastic 500ml water bottle, but it was already empty.

Since the school had set up trash receptacles at certain locations such as Task sites, she should’ve already thrown away anything she didn’t need by this point. However, there wasn’t so much as a single drop of water inside the plastic bottle, indicating that it had been empty of its contents for quite some time now.

In addition, she didn’t seem to have a walkie-talkie or any other form of communication device.

“How long have you been out of water?”

“I don’t have to tell you anythi─”

“I said, how long have you been out of water?”

I asked my question again, this time with a stronger tone and a rigid, unsparing gaze.

“…A full day… and then some.”

“So you’ve just been walking around without water like this?”

“Nope. I’ve been resting here all day today.”

“What an obvious lie. There were no GPS signals anywhere near here this morning.”

“You did a GPS Search?”

Of course I hadn’t. I was bluffing. However, I didn’t think Ibuki would call me on it.

After all, with how desperate she was to beat Horikita, I couldn’t imagine that she’d willingly choose to take a break.

“Has your first Warning Alert gone off yet?”

“…It did about an hour ago. That’s why I reluctantly decided to turn in early for the night.”

Warning Alerts worked on a system where they would only stop going off once the detected abnormality stopped happening.

And then, if the same abnormality were to resurface later on, you’d be met with a new Warning Alert rather than having it escalate to an Emergency Alert.

“If you don’t rehydrate at some point, it’ll keep ringing even if you rest.”

If she couldn’t get her rapid heart rate under control, an Emergency Alert would be soon to follow.

By the time it came to that, she would likely be even more dehydrated, to the extent that if she were to receive a medical checkup, she wouldn’t be able to prevent herself from being sentenced to retirement.

“I’ll handle it tomorrow, and if push comes to shove I’ll even go back to the starting area, so drop it and leave me alone.”

“It’s more than two kilometers from here to the starting area. If you were to collapse along the way, it’d be all over.”

“Then I’ll just do a nearby Task or some shit.”

“You can’t do that though, can you? Otherwise you wouldn’t be in the state you’re in now.”

The only way to appease Ibuki’s irrationality was to present sound logic of my own.

I went and fetched my backpack from my own tent and took out two plastic 500ml water bottles that I had gotten from Tasks earlier today.

“Trade me.”

“What?”

“It just so happens that I’m running short on food. On the other hand, I have a bit of an oversupply of water. I’m asking you to negotiate with me since I think we can make a fair trade.”

Ibuki swallowed audibly as she looked at the pristine water held within the plastic bottle, however warm it may be.

“How about it? I’ll say it again just to be sure, but I’m looking to make a fair trade here. You’ll have to give me a suitable amount of food in exchange.”

“Who the hell do you think you are to─”

“Feel free to say no, but I won’t be giving you a chance to change your mind.”

I maintained a firm, unyielding attitude, and Ibuki drew silent.

“If you retire due to dehydration like this, you’ll definitely lose to Horikita. In fact, I met with Horikita a little while ago. Her complexion was perfectly fine, and she didn’t seem to be having any problems with water or food either.”

Rather than emphasize the impending threat of expulsion, I dropped Horikita’s name, the most effective buzzword to spurn Ibuki into taking action.

“I get it… I’ll trade with you. But, how much do you want from me?”

With what she had on hand now, Ibuki would run out of food in a little less than two days.

However, if I were to ask for just a few meager scraps, it wouldn’t exactly be a fair trade, now would it?

“Half of your remaining food. That should be enough.”

“Only that much?”

“It’s at least better than sustaining myself by eating random weeds.”

Just like that, we finalized the trade and exchanged the food for water.

As soon as Ibuki had one of the bottles in hand, she popped off the cap and downed about half of it all in one go. Normally, I would’ve told her to try and conserve it, but considering that she was already suffering from dehydration, I felt it better for her to be hydrating herself as soon as possible.

Apparently, she didn’t like me seeing this side of her, as her usual sharp, pointed look quickly returned.

Even if her physical condition were to improve somewhat, her state of mind clearly wasn’t normal right now. She had been subjected to a great deal of stress with no time to relax, left with no choice but to try and come to terms with her situation.

I couldn’t help but wonder how much longer she’d be able to hold out.

Would it be a few hours, or a few days? Hopefully, she’d be able to persevere until the very end.

Ibuki and I had different Tables, so once we parted ways, we probably wouldn’t meet again until after the exam was over.

As such, I felt like I should at least say something more here, for what it was worth.

“I’m not gonna thank you if that’s what you’re after. It’s supposed to be a fair trade, remember?”

“I don’t want you to thank me.”

“Then whatta you want?”

She was probably sensitive to human contact due to constantly having her guard raised for the past day or so. That mindset would be useful in the short term for sure, but in her current situation, it would only bring about her own destruction.

“If you’re not doing too badly with points, how about you spend most of the day tomorrow resting? That, or switch to a strategy where you only focus on acquiring food and water?”

“So you’re sayin’ for me to give up on scoring points? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

Upon hearing my suggestion, Ibuki flared up and lost her temper.

“I’m not puttin’ in all this work ‘cause I don’t wanna get expelled. My only goal here is beating Horikita.”

I was well aware of that.

And it was precisely because I understood what was motivating her that I was giving her the advice she needed to increase her odds of succeeding.

But… well… Ibuki has hated me ever since she found out that I was the ‘X’ Ryūen had been looking for.

Due to her warped, biased perspective of the type of person I was, my true intentions had no chance of getting through to her.

“I’ve got nothin’ more to say to you.”

Saying that, Ibuki went back inside her tent and zipped up the entrance.

My attempt at persuading her felt like it had been unsuccessful, but my words should’ve at least served as an effective warning.

At any rate, with this, Ibuki should be fine for the next day or two.

Beyond that, it’d be up to her. She’d just have to get back on her feet and secure food and water for herself.

Since she was alone, I was somewhat worried about her score, but having seen how adamant she was about her match with Horikita, she probably wasn’t doing that bad.

Although the night was still young, I had used up a lot of my energy today, so I decided to turn in early.

Despite the muggy summer heat, I spent the rest of the evening relaxing before drifting off to sleep.