Classroom of the Elite Volume 15 Chapter 4 Introduction

Chapter 4: Surrounded on All Sides – Kōenji Vs. The Free Group

It was just after 5:00 PM on the tenth day of the exam, right around the time when the students were freed from their obligations for the day. The leader of Class 3-B, Kiriyama, quietly shut his eyes after having finished up with a conversation on his walkie-talkie.

Even though the second half of the exam was now in full swing, Kōenji still showed no sign of slowing down any time soon. Throughout the past several days, he had been racking up enough points to stay neck-and-neck with Nagumo’s group. When the top ten groups were first revealed on the fourth day of the exam, it had been somewhat surprising to see Kōenji’s name included on the list. At the time, however, neither Kiriyama, Nagumo, or just about anyone else had given it much thought.

After all, anyone could tell that a one-man group like Kōenji would be reaching his limit soon enough.

“Kiriyama, don’t you feel like Nagumo’s response to this has been too, y’know, passive? Wasn’t he supposed to run away with the lead once the second half of the exam started? He’s put off dealing with this Kōenji guy for so long now that it’s already day ten and their scores are still pretty much the same.”

Mikitani, also a Class 3-B student, spoke while looking at the current state of the leaderboards on his tablet. Nagumo’s group had an overall score of 236 whereas Kōenji’s was 230, a difference of only 6 points. Kōenji was in a prime position to turn things around; it would just take a single first-place Early Bird Bonus.

Nagumo’s group had dramatically increased in size thanks to the special ‘More People’ card, and as such, they could reliably earn 7 points per Arrival Bonus just by having everyone make it to a designated area before the time limit.

Kōenji, on the other hand, would only be able to earn 1 point per Arrival Bonus, but at the same time, it would be easier for him to earn Early Bird Bonuses. This was even more impactful given that he alone boasted the highest number of first-place Early Bird Bonuses out of every group in the exam.

“Even if Nagumo manages to lock down first-place, with the way things are going, you’re just gonna end up in third. Man, if you end up losing to a lowly second-year, then your reputation with all your supporters’ll go right down the drain.”

Kiriyama’s group currently had a total of 188 points. The difference between their score and Kōenji’s had only been growing larger and larger as the days passed.

“Come to think of it, there was a rumor going around not too long after Kōenji enrolled last year, wasn’t there? That whole thing with how he was going up to various second and third-years and dropping hints about buying their private points with cash? What did you think about that back then?”

“I thought he was getting ahead of himself just cuz he’s rich, somethin’ like that.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s how everyone thought of it. Just a strange kid from a rich family. One who seemed pretty capable physically and had decent scores on tests, but never really did anything to make a name for himself.”

Hearing Kiriyama’s answer, Mikitani nodded.

“The main reason why Kōenji managed to fly under the radar for so long is that he’s never really seemed all that serious about anything. He goes against the grain, refusing to behave how a student of this school ought to be. Even during past exams, he’s always been completely defiant about taking part.”

This knowledge had spread out amongst not only the second-years, but the third-years as well.

If Kōenji had always been a serious, diligent student, then Nagumo would’ve recognized him as a formidable enemy much, much earlier. Therefore, he would’ve probably taken action against him sooner as well. The nail that sticks out gets hammered down, after all.

“I don’t know what happened, but it’s clear that Kōenji’s going all-out this time around. And as a result, he’s made himself out to be the most formidable opponent out there right now. His seemingly unlimited energy makes him especially frightening. It’s entirely possible that he might not run out of steam before the exam is over.”

He was not only making the best use of the few advantages that came with operating alone, but also executing every move with a nearly inexhaustible supply of stamina.

Since he had accomplished so much, the third-years had been left with no choice but to come up with a plan to try and deal with him.

If left unchecked, Kōenji would undoubtedly finish in the top three.

And depending on the situation, he might even end up overtaking Nagumo.

While losing to an underclassmen would be a problem in and of itself, losing to a one-man group would be downright shameful.

He was an opponent they had to defeat to matter what, an opponent they needed to dispose of sooner rather than later.

Of course, violence should be avoided if at all possible.

If the third-years were to assault Kōenji, injuring him and forcing his retirement, it would definitely lead to problems.

After all, squashing his progress with violence would inevitably bring about harsh judgment from the school.

In the end, they’d have to subdue Kōenji as peacefully as possible.

“Kiriyama, have you decided on a plan?”

“Yeah. We’ll use the Free Group.”

The Free Group: an informal group composed of several three-man groups that Nagumo had personally chosen to act as his arms and legs during the exam. There were five groups each from Class 3-B, 3-C, and 3-D, for a total of fifteen. Two members of each group were given the task of following instructions given to them by a figurehead, whereas the last was told to travel between designated areas so as to avoid incurring any penalties.

In other words, within each of these so-called ‘Free Groups’, there were two students free to move about the island.

“Well, I suppose that’s fine. So, how many do you plan on using?”

“All six groups I have at my disposal, all of them.”

“All six? Are you for real dude? He’s only one guy. Four should be more than enough if you have my group take charge. The other two can stick with your group and─”

Kiriyama cut in, interrupting Mikitani mid-sentence.

“Kōenji is the only threat; there’ll be plenty of time to deal with everyone else after we crush him. We have until the end of the twelfth day to check the leaderboards, so we’ve only got the next two days to knock the guy down a peg once and for all. Once he starts to lose momentum, he won’t be able to bounce back again.”

Even if Kōenji were to join up with some other group, the outcome would still be the same.

“That’s true and all, but didn’t Nagumo say there was some other group he was worried about? If we send everyone we’ve got available to deal with Kōenji, we won’t have the manpower for anyone else.”

Mikitani hadn’t been told which group exactly Nagumo had been referring to, but he felt like it was probably safe to assume they were part of the top ten, meaning that it was most likely either the second-year Ryūen group, Sakayanagi’s group, or the first-year Utomiya group.

“Don’t bother worrying about that anymore. Nagumo was just getting worked up over nothing.”

Kiriyama, on the other hand, knew exactly which group Nagumo had been so concerned about.

However, that particular group hadn’t shown up on the leaderboard even a single time in the past ten days.

Even if they were to pick up the pace at this point, it’d be impossible for them to make it to one of the top spots.

“So it was just Nagumo’s mistake then, huh?”

“…Seems weird, doesn’t it? For Nagumo to misjudge something like that.”

“I guess it’s not unreasonable, the dude’s been haunted by a ghost of the past after all.”

A ghost of the past: a remnant left behind by Horikita Manabu, the only man that Nagumo had ever recognized.

In that light, it was understandable that Nagumo, who was usually more than capable of overseeing the battlefield, had now been rendered blind.

“So anyway like, you’re just gonna let the six Free Groups handle Kōenji while you go on with collecting points like usual?”

“No. I’ll take command and see it through myself.”

“You? Wouldn’t that be way too inefficient? Let me take care of it.”

If the currently third-place Kiriyama group were to get involved with obstructing Kōenji’s progress, it would only serve to inhibit their own progress moving forward.

“You’re asking me to leave you in charge?”

“It’s do-or-die for me this time around. You’ve already found your path, but I’ve got no choice but to try and get Nagumo to acknowledge me somehow, so please man, just let me take care of it.”

Mikitani put forth his best plea, but Kiriyama didn’t seem to be having any of it.

“That’s not happening. If you use the six Free Groups and screw things up, the results will be disastrous.”

“But you need to take second place, right? Don’t waste your time when you don’t have to dude!”

Desperate to take credit, Mikitani refused to back down.

“Aside from myself or Nagumo, nobody will be able to stop Kōenji. End of story.”

Upon hearing this, Mikitani’s brow furrowed ever so slightly. However, Kiriyama didn’t even bother to spare him a glance, so he didn’t notice his disgruntled expression.

That evening, the six Free Groups hurriedly set out with Kiriyama at the command, all for the sake of stopping one lone student.

While an ordinary opponent would be one thing, even Kiriyama had no idea what Kōenji was truly capable of.

The only problem now was where the first designated area would appear at 7:00 AM tomorrow morning, the eleventh day.

The plan of action would differ depending on which direction Kōenji ended up moving in.

As such, it would be ideal to take care of all of this some time after he had settled down for the night, but before the exam started up again in the morning.

Fortunately, Kōenji’s current location, area B3, and Kiriyama’s current location, area E3, weren’t very far from each other.

Since the scores of the top groups could only be monitored until the end of the twelfth day, Kiriyama only had two more days to verify whether or not his efforts would bear fruit. At the very least, he wanted to establish a thirty-point lead for Nagumo before the leaderboards went away.

“How far you gonna have us march tonight?”

Not long after embarking on the long journey, Mikitani posed Kiriyama a question in an attempt to kill time.

“As far as we can. I’m aware it’s risky to travel in the dark like this, but I think I’d at least like to make it within one area of him before stopping for the night. We have to catch up with him by 7:00 AM tomorrow morning, after all.”

Once Kōenji started moving again, catching up would become significantly more difficult.

“Well, we’ve got two days, so I’d reckon it’ll be a walk in the park. With all six of your group coming along, we’ve got eighteen whole people across seven whole groups working on this.”

Mikitani turned and looked over his shoulder, as if to motion toward the sixteen third-year students following behind them.

“Don’t get careless. There’s a good chance he might give us the slip with how vast the forest is.”

“I get he’s like, fuckin’ strong for a second-year, but that still doesn’t change the fact that he’s younger than us.”

Kiriyama and Mikitani had never seen Kōenji’s outstanding physical prowess firsthand, so it was difficult for them to make a completely accurate assessment of who they were dealing with. But even so, they had been aggregating data on the true extent of his capabilities from various third-year students who had previously competed against him in Tasks.

“Stay cautious and keep your wits about you. Treat this as though we’re going against our greatest adversary yet.”

“Greatest adversary? Suuure dude. Whatever you say.”

Presented with such a dismissive, derisive response, Kiriyama felt reassured that turning down Mikitani’s plea had been the right decision after all.

When faced with an enemy you have to defeat no matter the cost, you must take them on with the unwavering intention to kill, to choke the life out of them.

However, should you lack the resolve to do so and approach with negligence, well, that’s when you might end up as the one being snuffed out instead.