Classroom of the Elite Volume 15 Chapter 5 Introduction

Chapter 5: Conflicting, Intertwining Agendas

Let’s rewind the timeline just a bit, all the way back to the ninth day of the exam, the day just after the rainstorm, when Nanase first left Ayanokōji’s side.

Hōsen, despite technically being part of a group of three, had been acting on his own since day one. It was already 7:00 AM, but Hōsen was simply relaxing in his tent despite the fact that his first designated area had been announced.

This continued until just after 8:00 AM, when a lone individual approached Hōsen’s tent and called out to him.

“Good morning, Hōsen-kun.”

“Haaa?”

“It’s me, Nanase.”

“I can tell that by your voice, dipshit. Why are you here?”

“Why am I here? We’re in the same group, it’s only natural that we’d stay in contact.”

Nanase’s response was serious, but Hōsen let out a scornful laugh upon hearing it.

“You really gonna say that? Seems like you had one hell of a time together with Ayanokōji… got any results to show for it?”

“…No I don’t. In the end, I was no match for him.”

“Ha! A chick like you really went and challenged him head-on? Without even using those feminine ‘assets’ of yours?”

“Assets…? What assets?”

Hōsen continued, exasperated by Nanase’s inability to follow along with his logic.

“For fuck’s sake… Your tits are huge and yet you’re fuckin’ dumb in the head.”

“Uhm, I don’t quite understand the correlation you’re implying between the breasts and the brain.”

“Whatever, nevermind. Anyways, you came all the way here just to tell me you failed?”

Hōsen took out his tablet and immediately ran a GPS Search.

Since he didn’t know if somebody had followed Nanase all the way out here, he felt it necessary to run a quick check on the surrounding area. However, there didn’t seem to be anyone worth worrying about nearby.

“My plan to force Ayanokōji-senpai’s expulsion on my own ended in failure. That’s why I decided to come here and ask you to lend me your strength, Hōsen-kun. If you have a plan, please let me in on it.”

Nanase had taken action all on her own and was only now trying to come back and buddy up again, so Hōsen didn’t exactly trust her here. Well, to be precise, Hōsen wasn’t exactly the type to trust anybody in the first place.

“Leave. I’ll handle it myself.”

“…I will gladly wait here with you until you change your mind.”

“How ‘bout you just get your ass to the designated area instead? Make yourself useful and prevent us from getting a penalty.”

Despite his best attempt to drive her away, Nanase had no intention of leaving.

So, he decided instead to simply ignore her as he shut his eyes and continued to lounge around inside his tent.

After about ten minutes, Nanase spoke up once again.

“Hōsen-kun.”

“The hell are you still here for? You’re wastin’ your time.”

“It seems you have a visitor.”

Hōsen opened his eyes just a crack, only to see that a second silhouette was now standing beside Nanase outside his tent.

“U-uhm… Hōsen-kun… It’s me.”

“‘Me’? Who the fuck is ‘me’? Am I supposed ta’ know you by voice, shitbag?”

The visitor had introduced themself without giving their name, and Hōsen’s response was merciless.

“I-I’m K-Katagiri… from Class C…”

“Never heard of ya.”

“I’ll hear you out in Hōsen-kun’s place. How can I help you?”

“That’s, uhh… Well I brought something that I was instructed to give to Hōsen-kun.”

“Something you have to give to him? What is it?”

“I-I was told not to tell anybody other than Hōsen-kun…”

Despite his dismissive attitude from earlier, Hōsen suddenly began to crawl out of his tent, having apparently reconsidered.

And then, he rose to his feet. He stood tall, towering over the small-statured Katagiri.

“If this is something stupid, I’mma send you flying, got that?”

“T-this! I brought this!”

With his eyes clenched shut and his hands trembling, Katagiri fearfully held out a walkie-talkie before him.

“A walkie-talkie, it seems.”

“W-with this, you’ll be able to talk with Utomiya-kun.”

Despite his fears, Katagiri managed to get out the words he needed to say.

“Ha! So he wanted to talk to me so bad that he sent some fuckin’ small fry all the way here to give this to me, eh?”

Saying that, Hōsen reached down and snatched up the walkie-talkie from Katagiri’s hands.

“Utomiya. What’re you tryin’ to get at by making contact with me? Want me to play around with you, is that it?”

Hōsen spoke into the walkie-talkie, only to be met with silence.

As he waited, he brought out his tablet and ran another search to pinpoint Utomiya’s current position on the map.

“I dunno if you’re not there or you’re just ignorin’ me, but this is your first and only chance, got that?”

Perhaps instigated by Hōsen’s supposed final warning, a voice suddenly spoke from the other side of the call.

『…I didn’t want to make contact with you either, but I wasn’t left with any other choice in order to carry out the plan.』

“Plan? What the hell are you on about?”

『Have you forgotten about the sixth day already?』

“Ah, I guess you did say something about holdin’ a secret meetup on the sixth day. Sorry, I forgot.”

Nanase’s expression stiffened ever so slightly as she heard this. After all, she hadn’t heard anything about this since she had been traveling together with Ayanokōji.

Hōsen cast a glance in her direction, but instead of stepping away to continue the conversation, he simply waited for Utomiya to continue.

『We expected that you might choose to ignore the meeting.』

“Did you? Get to the point.”

『Soon, we’ll be carrying out a plan to save the first-years.』

“Save the first-years?”

Upon saying that, Hōsen temporarily powered off the walkie-talkie, cutting off communication with Utomiya.

At the same time, Nanase hurriedly took her tablet out of her backpack and checked the standings for the bottom ten groups.

And from what she found, a total of four first-year groups were in danger of being expelled.

“Of the four first-year groups currently in the bottom ten, two are from our class, Class 1-D.”

“Pfft, I don’t give two shits if our trash gets taken out. Don’t tell me he thinks I’d take action just to save a couple of worthless classmates?”

“Please don’t be careless. I think they might be up to something.”

“Oh shut the fuck up Nanase. I don’t need you to tell me that.”

Hōsen once again powered on the walkie-talkie.

“I dunno what you’re talkin’ about. What’s any of that gotta do with me?”

From all this, Nanase felt keenly aware that some sort of strategy was already in motion.

She listened in with bated breath, eager to find out what was going on. However, at the same time, she knew that her presence would be obvious after a single GPS search.

Utomiya and the rest of the first-years had probably already investigated who Hōsen was with by this point.

For what it was worth, it seemed like the first-years were deliberately avoiding the topic as well.

『It’s… because you’re absolutely vital in our plan to save them.』

Utomiya’s expression as he said this wasn’t visible since he was talking over the walkie-talkie.

However, his words gave off a vague impression that he personally didn’t agree with what he was saying, and Hōsen was by no means stupid enough to not be able to see through that.

“Did someone tell you that? Ain’t that a joke.”

『If you want to refuse, refuse. I’m just reaching out to try and extend you the opportunity. I for one have always felt like we could do this without you anyway.』

“Then in that case, we’re done here. I refuse.”

Hōsen responded with a plain and simple rejection and left it at that.

He gripped the walkie-talkie in hand as if he was about to throw it off into the forest, but rather than actually do so, he simply stood and waited for Utomiya’s response.

『…Hōsen.』

Frustrated, Utomiya called out Hōsen’s name, but this time, Hōsen was the one who responded with silence.

『I suppose this means we won’t be getting any help from you, then?』

Utomiya’s disposition was such that he would’ve usually ended the conversation the moment Hōsen first refused to lend a hand.

But, since he didn’t do that, it seemed pretty clear to Hōsen that someone else was involved.

“Slow down. Nobody said I’m never gonna cooperate.”

『…What?』

Utomiya’s voice contained a vague hint of confusion as he spoke.

And in a way, his confusion made it seem like he had never expected Hōsen to cooperate in the first place.

“If you come on over here, kneel down before me, and beg, then I guess I can lend ya a hand. How’s that?”

『Don’t be stupid. Who in their right mind would ever bow their head to scum like you?』

“Then there’s nothin’ more to say. I hope you’re fine with endin’ it here, eh Tsubaki?”

Hōsen spoke directly to Tsubaki, who he assumed to have been listening in on their conversation from over Utomiya’s shoulder.

『You noticed? Or did you just do a GPS Search?』

“Is it even worth spendin’ a point on somethin’ so obvious? I’ve known she was a shady bitch since the first time I laid eyes on her.”

Hōsen was lying. He had noticed that Utomiya and Tsubaki were right next to each other when he ran a GPS Search not too long ago, but instead acted as though he had found out by instinct.

『Seems I can’t let Utomiya-kun handle this on his own after all.』

A slight smile crept up on Hōsen’s face as he listened to Tsubaki and Utomiya’s exchange.

“You sayin’ you don’t trust Utomiya?”

『Only when it has to do with you, Hōsen-kun. Everyone knows you two get along like water and oil, and I’m not gonna let negotiations break down due to his inability to set aside his emotions.』

“Well then, what’re you gettin’ at with this ‘savin’ the first-years’ shit?”

『I’m sure you already know the answer to that. Four groups in the bottom ten are first-years, with two of them from Class 1-D. If nothing changes before the exam ends, then the damage done to the first year, and your class in particular, will be enormous.』

Hōsen was the sole person in charge of Class 1-D right now, and for someone in his position, this should be quite a pressing situation.

In fact, it would be strange if the person in his position wasn’t at least somewhat anxious to do something about it.

However, not only was Hōsen unwilling to take action, but he didn’t even seem fazed by the prospect of his classmates being expelled.

“So fuckin’ what? You’re not seriously thinkin’ of askin’ me to help you save ‘em all?”

『I have one quick question before I answer that. Nanase-san is on your side here, correct?』

For the first time since the walkie-talkie made it into Hōsen’s hands, Nanase’s presence was acknowledged.

This was Tsubaki’s attempt to probe for additional information, be it as simple as an extended silence or a careless slip of the tongue.

“More or less. She’s at least got some use compared to all the rest of the worthless trash in Class D.”

『I see. Then I won’t worry about her and get on with it. Essentially, you’re correct. I plan on saving all four groups, as well as any other first-years who drop into the bottom five moving forward.』

“Yer spouting some awfully big words for someone who’s had to come crawlin’ to me for help. You ain’t done jack shit to make a name for yourself since enrollment, so are you even capable of backin’ ‘em up? You’re not gonna like it if I find out you’re just wasting my precious time for no reason.”

『For someone whose time’s so precious, you seem to have quite a lot to spare lazing around.』

Tsubaki’s words seemed to indicate that she had been monitoring Hōsen’s physical location for longer than expected.

“You know what? Just for fun, how ‘bout I send your little errand boy Katagiri back to ya half-dead?”

Hōsen’s expression grew cold as he looked over at Katagiri, who promptly shrank back in fear.

Though, to be fair, with the way the mood had changed, the vast majority of students would probably find themselves doing the same.

『Don’t get so cocky, Hōsen. If you lay a single finger on Katagiri, I’ll make sure you end up regretting it.』

『Stop Utomiya-kun. Don’t interfere.』

『But─』

A disagreement seemed to break out between Utomiya and Tsubaki, but the transmission was cut off before anything more could be heard.

“‘Ey Katagiri, what happened with them?”

“Eeeek!”

Hōsen’s smirk was so ominous that Katagiri began to unconsciously distance himself as he cried out in fear, almost as if he was trying to run away.

“Tsk, fuckin’ wimp. Hurry up and get lost.”

“B-but the walkie-talkie…”

“The walkie-talkie? I’ll take real good care of it for you.”

“But…”

“Katagiri-kun, don’t say anything more. It’s probably for the best that you just leave it with Hōsen-kun.”

Nanase took it upon herself to step between them in an attempt to persuade Katagiri to stand down.

The look in her eye seemed to convey that even she didn’t know what might happen if he continued to dig in his heels.

And just over Nanase’s shoulder, Katagiri could see Hōsen staring him down with a piercing glare. It was so intimidating that he was practically scared senseless, causing him to turn tail and run away into the forest, nearly stumbling over his own feet in the process.

“What a retard.”

“You were immensely overbearing there.”

“That’s just my way of doin’ things. But you already knew that.”

After Nanase and Hōsen exchanged a few choice words with each other, Tsubaki finally responded.

『Thanks for waiting, shall we pick up where we left off?』

“Fine with me. Oh, but just to let you know, that Katagiri guy left his walkie-talkie with me and ran off somewhere.”

『You threatened him, right?』

Tsubaki spoke bluntly, as if his actions had already been accounted for.

“That puny weakling wouldda had it rough as shit against me. The fight between us wouldda been over before it even started. Same thing goes for you too, Tsubaki.”

『Indeed, no matter how hard I tried, I doubt I could ever beat you in a fist fight. But, this alone would be another story.』

“This?”

『I’m pointing at my head. A battle of the mind.』

Hōsen couldn’t help but let out a laugh at Tsubaki’s seemingly serious response.

“Ha… You’re a piece of fuckin’ work if ya really think you’re sharper than I am.”

『There’s a way to forcefully save a group that’s fallen into a rut, but in order to do that, we’ll need all the help we can get. The upperclassmen already seem to be using a roughly similar strategy, so I’d like to borrow the power of Class 1-D as well.』

This was the reason why Tsubaki was reaching out to Hōsen, who had been off doing whatever he wanted since the exam first began.

“As much as I’d love to help you guys, I’ve got shit to do right now. I’m real fuckin’ busy.”

Tsubaki knew full well that Hōsen had plenty of time on his hands, given that his GPS signal hadn’t moved an inch even after his first designated area was announced. However, she deliberately chose not to mention that, just to see how he would react.

『‘Real fuckin’ busy’, huh…? You mean with trying to get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled, yes?』

“Pretty much. I don’t have the time to give a fuck about how many of my trash classmates get kicked outta here.”

『But how exactly do you plan on expelling him? It’s already the morning of the eighth day and Ayanokōji-senpai is still operating all on his own, but his name hasn’t shown up in the bottom ten yet. In this special exam, there are only two ways to get expelled. Either your entire group retires, or you finish as one of the bottom five in terms of overall score.』

And having him finish as a part of the bottom five was obviously less practical than its alternative.

『While a handful of students have retired this past week, the number of groups that have been eliminated so far is still at zero. We have a week left and it’s only going to get harder from here, so a couple of groups might very well get eliminated at some point.』

『That’s certainly true. I know some are already pretty close to running out of food.』

Utomiya chimed in from over Tsubaki’s shoulder. He, alongside many of his companions, had already provided aid to first-year groups who were struggling for food several times by now.

『If five other groups are eliminated first, it’ll become effectively impossible to get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled, right? So in a sense, you can think of bailing out the failing first-years as means to help ensure Ayanokōji-senpai’s expulsion.』

Upon hearing Tsubaki’s point, for the first time, Hōsen’s cocky smile began to fade, instead taking on an air of serious consideration.

“Bailing out the first-years, huh? Well, it doesn’t sound like a terrible idea… Aight, cut past all the bullshit and tell me your plan then.”

『As I said earlier, we’ll bring together our entire school year, just like the upperclassmen have been doing. We’ll have the groups that are lagging behind merge together with groups doing well enough to pick up the slack. If it comes down to it, I’d like to try and snipe Tasks away from the struggling second and third-year groups as well.』

“If the plan’s that simple, then how come you’ve come crawlin’ to me for help? I can’t imagine Class A and B would be willin’ to help our classes neither.”

『You don’t need to worry about that. They already decided to cooperate with me a long time ago. At this point, we’re all just waiting for you to get on board too.』

Essentially, they were ready to take action as soon as Class 1-D promised to cooperate.

“It ain’t a bad idea at all, but you haven’t said jack shit that proves you’ll be able to get anywhere with it. At the end of the day, you’d just be using the same ol’ strategy as everyone else. And I’ll tell you what: the first-years’ll be first to fuck things up what with how much less experienced we are.”

While on the surface it seemed as though Hōsen had been listening half-mindedly, he had actually been slowly pouring over every facet of Tsubaki’s strategy inside his head.

And after a period of deliberation, he had concluded that, although their odds of saving the struggling first-years would go up, there’d be no getting around the disadvantageous position it would otherwise put them in.

『You’re not wrong. With the plan as it is now, we might not be able to protect every first-year out there.』

“Oh? Maybe I was just imaginin’ shit earlier, but I thought you said you were gonna save every single one of ‘em?”

『Just as you’ve hypothesized, if everyone were to use the same strategy, the first-years would indeed lose out in the end. Therefore, why not just force a couple retirements before the exam comes to a close?』

With this, Tsubaki’s true target finally began to take shape.

『There are still a handful of upperclassmen taking on the exam alone, you know? Let’s just flatten them.』

“I see. If five solo groups drop out, I guess it’s possible to save ‘em all.”

『Originally I thought it’d be best to try and claim the upper hand once everybody started to exhaust themselves. I’d planned on it being in the second half of the exam, ideally some time between day eight and day ten, but, well… there were a few unexpected setbacks.』

Firstly, there was the fact that Hōsen hadn’t shown up for the secret meeting on the sixth day.

But at the same time, there was the fact that just about everybody had been given the chance to recover their stamina after the bad spell of weather ruined the seventh day.

Both of these ‘setbacks’ instantly crossed Hōsen’s mind as well.

“So? Tell me exactly what you’re lookin’ to get me to do for you.”

『The acting director mentioned something when he was going over this exam, remember? That it’s not a problem if you solve things with a bit of violence? You yourself have been planning to use brute force to beat Ayanokōji-senpai to a pulp, haven’t you Hōsen-kun?』

“Well sorta, it’s not like I’ve got any other option.”

Hōsen responded as such, but his true intentions were slightly different.

He actually had several other strategies in mind, but regardless of which one he ended up going for, the fact remained that he wanted to crush Ayanokōji with his own two hands.

『But it’s been difficult to stop Ayanokōji-senpai all by yourself, given how he’s constantly on the move, right? That’s the reason why you haven’t found the opportunity to do anything yet. However, it’d be a different story if you were to cast a wider net.』

Tsubaki was implying that she would be willing to take on that role for him.

『For your information, I’ve looked into how many first-year students are both confident in their fighting abilities and willing to make use of them, such as yourself and Utomiya-kun. If you can surround Ayanokōji-senpai with enough people, he won’t be able to escape unscathed.』

“So you’re tellin’ me to help put this little stunt of yours into action?”

『Yep.』

“What kinda slack-jawed idiots would just go along with somethin’ so dangerous? Utomiya aside, I don’t reckon anyone else’d be willing to put in the work free of charge.”

『Naturally. I’ve agreed to pay a contingency fee of 500,000 points to those who cooperate. Unfortunately this does mean that your own overall share of the profits will be smaller, but just think of it as a necessary expense for the assistance provided.』

Essentially, she was proposing to share a portion of the private points they’d earn for getting Ayanokōji expelled.

『Wait Tsubaki. At the fundamental level, violent behavior is prohibited by the school. How many people could possibly be willing to risk it all just for half a million private points?』

From the sound of Utomiya’s voice coming through in the background, it seemed like this was his first time hearing the specific details of Tsubaki’s strategy as well.

And upon hearing the sound of the transmission cut off moments later, Hōsen realized that Tsubaki had intentionally allowed him to overhear it.

When using a walkie-talkie, one’s voice would normally only be transmitted if they were deliberately holding down the talk button.

Therefore, if it seemed like Utomiya was about to say something confidential, she could’ve simply let go of the button.

However, she hadn’t done that. This had been her way of indirectly conveying to Hōsen that she still had unseen cards up her sleeve.

『You’re right, it would’ve been impractical to ask them to risk it all on day one. However, the second half of this exam will be both physically and mentally exhausting, so the sheer amount of stress they’ll be dealing with can’t be underestimated. Their desire to relax and have fun will be at odds with their desire to bring about results. Of course, it’s only natural that some might feel reluctant to take on the risk of dealing the first blow, but that’s precisely why I’d like to have Hōsen-kun take the lead in that regard.』

Tsubaki calmly stated her analysis, saying in a roundabout way that Utomiya’s concerns had already been accounted for.

『It’s not uncommon for people to feel the desire to jaywalk when there aren’t many cars around, but they’re often unwilling to take that first step when there’s a chance that others are watching. However, the moment one person makes a move, things change.』

And Tsubaki was saying that she wanted Hōsen to be that one person.

“Well, I don’t hate takin’ this approach of yours, but the school ain’t stupid.”

『When the time comes, both sides will be at fault. The school’s got a zero tolerance policy, so we’ll both have to face expulsion. Therefore, I’ll take full responsibility and drop out of my own volition as the one behind the scenes issuing instructions to everyone.』

“Oh?”

『I don’t have any like, real attachment to this school. That’s why I’d be chill with leaving whenever. I already gave all my private points and my ‘Half Off’ card to the kids who grouped up with me.』

Not only had Tsubaki come up with such a detailed plan, but she had also ensured that her accomplices would be fine even if they were to get caught up in the aftermath.

“To think you’re willin’ to sacrifice yourself, how fuckin’ extreme. Color me impressed.”

Hōsen spoke true words of admiration, praising Tsubaki for coming to the negotiation table with such a powerful weapon in hand.

『Utomiya-kun, I know I didn’t tell you about any of this, but are you opposed to it?』

『…No. In fact, I think it’d be a waste of time to try and rely on cheap, petty tricks at this point. From what I’ve seen from observing Ayanokōji on my own, it’s not just a coincidence that a 20 million point bounty has been placed on his head. He’s clearly been targeted because he’s such an abnormality. If we stay within the rules, there’s no doubt in my mind that he’ll just outmaneuver anything we throw at him. If you’re truly prepared to do this, then I’ve got no right to stop you.』

Utomiya wasn’t opposed to using violence, he was just apprehensive when it came to the consequences of doing something so utterly transparent.

But if Tsubaki really were to take full responsibility, it was different.

The narrative would change entirely if it came out that Hōsen, Utomiya, and everyone else who agreed to take part in this had just been being used by somebody else.

It’s possible that they might get penalized in one way or another, but it was difficult to imagine that the school would choose to expel dozens of students who had simply been following orders.

『It’d prolly be hard to get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled with normal methods. That’s why I think the school put together this special exam for us, a well-crafted stage free from the eyes of surveillance.』

『I see. So this exam wasn’t a coincidence either.』

Hōsen closed the map on his tablet and switched over to recording mode.

“Ey Tsubaki, this plan make Ayanokōji retire by usin’ violence, you come up with it all on your own?”

『More or less.』

“And if I play along with it, no first-years’ll be expelled, right? Can you go ahead an’ guarantee that for me?”

『I promise. And if something does happen, I’ll take full responsibility.』

With this, Hōsen felt satisfied and turned off the recording.

『Is that all the evidence you want? It’d be safer if you had my complete testimony, yeah?』

Upon hearing that she had seen through his attempt to gather evidence, a content smile took shape on Hōsen’s face.

“So? When’s the big day?”

『I can’t tell you that yet. After all, I can’t afford to let such critical information leak out so easily.』

“So ya don’t trust me, huh? Maintainin’ secrecy is great an’ all, but I might not be able to help ya at the drop of a hat.”

『That’s exactly why I’m giving you that walkie-talkie.』

Apparently, she had intended to give Katagiri’s walkie-talkie to Hōsen from the very beginning.

In other words, the result would’ve been the same whether Hōsen had stolen it or not.

“So that’s how it is, eh?”

『I’ll contact you again when the time’s right. Take care.』

Saying that, Tsubaki one-sidedly ended the call.

“What a crafty little bitch.”

With a sneer, Hōsen slid the walkie-talkie into his pocket.

“What are you going to do now?”

“I could do whatever, but there probably ain’t no harm in just ridin’ along with Tsubaki’s little strat. In any case, I was still plannin’ on crushin’ Ayanokōji, even if I had to do it all myself.”

To do that, he would have to repeatedly spend points on GPS Searches.

But since it sounded like Tsubaki was willing to take care of that, Hōsen had decided that he might as well just hitch a free ride.

“We get to do whatever we want and Tsubaki’ll take all the blame. It’s way too sweet a deal.”

“I get a suspicious feeling from it personally… Are you sure you’re not just being used?”

“She’s welcome to try. Well, I don’t really give a fuck either way.”

“…I’ll help too.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I want to do what I can to protect our classmates. Please, let me stick with you until we hear more from Tsubaki-san.”

Presented with Nanase’s earnest plea, Hōsen responded with a few simple words.

“Do whatever you want.”