Classroom of the Elite Volume 14 Chapter 5 Introduction

Chapter 5: The Invisible Enemy

It was just before 5:00 AM, around the time when the morning sun began to rise into the sky.

While most students would probably still be asleep, I woke up to a strange sound coming from outside my tent.

It was a sound so subtle, so indistinct that, for a moment, I thought I might just be hearing things.

I poked my head out of my tent to investigate further. And, although it was faint, I could definitely still hear it.

A few seconds later, Nanase peeked her head out of her tent as well, having apparently been woken up by the sound, just as I had.

“Can you hear something?”

“Yes… it’s faint, but I can hear an electronic noise of some sort.”

Perhaps due to its low proximity, the sound was so soft to the point that it almost blended in with the surroundings.

It was possible for it to be an alarm coming from a tablet, but this particular sound had been going on for far too long for that to be the case.

“Do you think it might be an Emergency Alert?”

“It’s definitely possible.”

I emerged from my tent before once again straining my ears to analyze the sound.

It sounded similar to what Mashima-sensei had played for us during his explanation back on the cruise ship.

But from what I could hear, there was a slight echo to it, perhaps because it was coming from so deep within the forest.

“It doesn’t sound like it’s going to stop any time soon, does it?”

It had already been over a minute since I first noticed the sound. Warning Alerts were set up to go off twice, but both times they would be cut off after only five seconds. The only alert set to go off continuously like this was the Emergency Alert.

“If I’m not mistaken, after five minutes─”

“The school will locate you through the GPS in your watch and send help to your position?”

If they were in a situation where they couldn’t afford to turn off the alert, then they could be in quite a precarious position.

“Couldn’t we go find them before the school arrives?”

“Why would we do that? Although it’s not pitch black outside anymore, the visibility is still poor. And if we’re careless, we might run into danger ourselves.”

“Do you need a reason to go help someone?”

She pierced me with eyes that were far too sincere to be described as angry.

I could tell that, no matter what I chose to do, she wouldn’t back down, even if it meant going off to help on her own.

“If we’re going to take action, it’d be better to have more people on board. Let’s wake up Sudō and the others.”

“Right.”

We decided to wake up Sudō, Ike, and Hondō, who were still asleep in their tents.

After coercing the three of them, all still half-asleep, out of their tents, we explained the situation and began to form a plan.

Our field of vision would be fairly limited inside the dim forest ahead of us, and without a light of some sort, it would be tricky to find a proper foothold on the rough terrain. As such, we would have to carefully light the path ahead of us as we pushed forward.

Between the five of us, we had a total of three flashlights. Nanase and I both had one, and so did Sudō’s group.

It wasn’t enough, but we’d have to make do with what we had.

Other than that, we also decided to take a tablet with us to ensure that we didn’t get lost.

“Well, I guess I’ll lead the way.”

Spurred on by the circumstances at play, Ike volunteered to take the lead. Although, he didn’t exactly seem very enthusiastic about it.

“I’m sorry, but could you please refrain?”

“Eh? W-why?”

“Given that it’s still fairly dark out, I cannot allow a technically unreliable person to take the lead. The job should be left to someone with good crisis management skills and the discernment to select an optimal route.”

“Well, but ya know… Outta all of us, I think I’m prolly the best one to─”

“Ayanokōji-senpai, could I ask you to lead us? I’d be willing to follow your judgment without hesitation.”

Nanase cut Ike off, asking me to pave the way without even bothering to hear out his justification. After all, given the circumstances, every second counted.

Coming up with some sort of excuse to try and convince him would be nothing but a waste of time.

“Nanase, Ike, and I will each take a flashlight. Nanase will be behind me, followed by Sudō and Hondō. Ike, I’ll have you take up the rear.”

With our formation decided upon, I immediately began walking toward the source of the alert.

“No…? Ah, I mean, that’s not a problem, but… Are you sure you’ll be alright, Ayanokōji?”

Just like that, Ike had been left in the dust, unable to fully come to grips with what was happening.

“Don’t worry ‘bout that. Just hurry up and follow along Kanji. Ayanokōji’ll prolly be fine.”

Sudō responded in my stead, forcefully grabbing Ike by the arm to get him to start walking.

Like that, the five of us set off together.

“There’s a real possibility of getting injured moving around like this, isn’t there?”

Nanase provided casual commentary as we advanced through the forest.

“Gosh, why the heck are we movin’ around so early in the mornin’?”

Hondō voiced his complaints as he rubbed his sleepy eyes.

“It ain’t all that strange. If the next designated area were super far away or somethin’, we’d have to start moving early like this in order to try’n get closer.”

For the most part, the school had chosen designated areas with some level of consideration in place for how long it would take most groups to get there. With the existence of randomly designated areas, however, there were plenty of scenarios that could force groups to take action early in the morning or late at night.

Little by little, we approached the source of the alert. Even now, it was still blaring throughout the forest.

The Emergency Alert was gradually growing louder and louder.

No, there was something more to it than that…

“If someone’s there, respond to us-!”

Sudō shouted out in the direction the sound was coming from, but nobody responded. There didn’t seem to be any movement in the area either.

“Why aren’t they sayin’ anything…? D-do you think this might be the work of a g-ghost?”

The sound had a certain ominous vibe to it due to the location we were in, and perhaps because of that, Hondō began to tremble.

“I think it just means that they’re in a situation where they can’t even call out for help.”

“If that’s the case, then they might be in a real bad spot.”

Either way, the only way to find out for sure was to keep pushing toward the source of the sound.

We held back the urge to speed up our pace, choosing instead to err on the side of caution and carefully light the path forward as we continued to advance further into the depths of the forest.

“Everyone, don’t you think the sound is a little… peculiar?”

Nanase, who was trailing behind me, pointed out the unusual, out-of-place nature of the sound.

“Peculiar? Well, it certainly sounds eerie. That’s prolly just cuz we’ve been sloggin’ through this dark-ass forest though…”

“No, that’s not what I─”

“You’re talking about the frequency, right Nanase?”

I looked over my shoulder and replied to her, to which she responded with a decisive nod of the head.

“At first, I thought that the noise was simply echoing because it was coming from deep within the forest. But now that we’re closer, I realized that that’s not the case. Rather, I’m fairly certain that it’s actually two different sounds.”

An Emergency Alert would only go off when someone was in an exceptionally severe condition.

So, the notion that two were going off at the same time wasn’t something any of us had been expecting.

However, now that we were so close, it was clear.

The definite rhythmic sound of two Emergency Alerts was blaring out from what seemed to be the same location at about the same time.

It had only seemed like there was an echo due to the fact that they were ever so slightly out of sync with each other.

“Scary… Are you guys… Are you guys sure it’s safe to keep going…?”

As the terrain ahead gradually began to incline upward, Hondō began to voice even more concerns.

Though, given that we were approaching a location where two people had been incapacitated in quick succession, his fear wasn’t unreasonable.

Soon, the sound became so incredibly loud that it seemed like we had finally arrived at our destination.

We temporarily came to a stop and began to comb the area with our flashlights in search of the source.

Not long thereafter, we found the figure of a certain boy collapsed on the ground.

“Is that… Komiya!?”

The first one to recognize the boy’s identity was Sudō.

He wasn’t wrong. It was indeed Class 2-B’s Komiya.

“O-oi! The hell is this? P-pull yourself together man! Komiya!”

Sudō, seemingly spurred on by the bonds he had forged as a fellow member of the basketball club, rushed over to the fallen Komiya in a panic.

“Senpai…”

“Yeah.”

Just as we had predicted, it wasn’t just one alert, but two.

A second alert was sounding off from someone lying several meters away from where Komiya had collapsed. The person in question was Kinoshita Minori, a fellow classmate from Class 2-B. Although Nanase seemed momentarily baffled by the peculiar situation we had stumbled upon, she quickly rushed over to Kinoshita’s side.

In order to try and piece together what had happened, I left Komiya and Kinoshita to the others as I went to survey the rest of the surrounding area. It weighed on my mind that I couldn’t find any trace of their third group member, Shinohara, nor any of their backpacks or other equipment.

“Oi Komiya! What happened to Shinohara!?”

“There’s no use, he’s not waking up at all…”

I listened in as Sudō and Ike spoke to each other about Komiya’s condition.

They then manually turned off the Emergency Alerts, returning the forest to a state of tranquil silence.

“Kinoshita-senpai won’t regain consciousness either. But, judging from all the dirt and scratches on her jersey, I’m afraid that…”

As Nanase’s words trailed off, she turned and looked at the steep slope of the nearby cliff several meters in height.

After assessing Komiya’s condition, Sudō nodded along in agreement. They seemed to think that one of them had lost their footing and fell down the slope somehow, while the other had probably been dragged down as well after trying to save them.

I drew closer to the slope to investigate, only to find that there were clear signs that somebody had recently come tumbling down it.

In other words, it was safe to assume that the somebody in question (or somebodies) were Komiya and Kinoshita.

The visibility in this area was so poor that it was entirely possible that they could’ve lost their sense of direction. Moreover, the humidity was high and the ground was somewhat damp, making slipping a very likely possibility.

I pointed my light down toward my feet. The ground was a bit muddy in some places, so depending on where I stepped, my footprints would be left behind.

By shining my light on the pathway, I could make out two distinct sets of footprints from when Sudō and Nanase had rushed over to where Komiya and Kinoshita had ended up after their fall. Alongside those, however, were faint traces of what appeared to be a third, faded set of footprints.

The footprints drew close to where Komiya and Kinoshita were laying, but abruptly turned back.

While it wasn’t exactly clear if they were related, this meant there was a possibility that someone else had been here recently.

The thought that the footprints could’ve belonged to Shinohara crossed my mind, but it was hard to imagine that she would leave without trying to help them.

Plus, even if she had gone to find help, she still would’ve rushed over to them to try and confirm their wellbeing first.

Given that, I compared the size of the footprints to my own shoes and found that they were on the smaller side. My shoe size was 26cm, but the mystery footprints, on the other hand, appeared to be 1.5 to 2cm smaller than that. Although I couldn’t completely rule out the possibility that they had been left by a boy, it seemed much more likely that they had been made by a girl.

Suddenly sensing an unknown presence off to the northwest, I kept my light trained on the ground and discreetly looked in its direction.

However, the world around me was covered in a layer of darkness and lain thick with trees, so I wasn’t able to see anyone there.

I wondered if there was some reason for them, whoever it was, to feel guilty about not approaching us.

Ultimately, I chose to disregard the presence for the time being and went to check the area around Kinoshita’s feet instead.

I figured that there was a small chance that Kinoshita might’ve walked around the area before she lost consciousness.

However, I found no evidence to suggest that she had been walking in the nearby vicinity.

In any case, it was probably safe to assume that the footprints I had found belonged to an unidentified third party.

Kinoshita’s face and clothes were dirty and covered in various scrapes and scratches just like Komiya, but there didn’t seem to be any major external injuries that I could see.

“Everything else aside, the problem here is what’s going to happen after the teachers show up…?”

The full extent of their injuries was unknown, but there was clearly no way for them to avoid being checked out by a medical team. If they had really lost consciousness after falling off the slope, a thorough medical examination would be necessary, and retirement would be all but guaranteed. They probably wouldn’t have enough time to wake up and try to gloss over what had happened with a lie of some sort.

If Shinohara was in a similar situation someplace else, then Komiya’s group would have all three people retire from the exam at the same time.

And then, given that none of them had an ‘Insurance Card’, expulsion would naturally be right around the corner.

“Shinohara-!!”

Ike shouted Shinohara’s name into the depths of the dimly-lit forest.

If she was in the area, then she should’ve been able to respond to him, or at least send some kind of signal.

The fact that she hadn’t meant that it was possible that she had gotten caught up in some kind of accident, much like Komiya and Kinoshita.

Ike was about to run off to try and find her, but I hurriedly grabbed him before he could.

“If you go charging into the forest without a tablet then you’ll just get yourself lost.”

“T-that’s, I know that but still!”

“I understand that you’re anxious. After all, it is strange that she’s not responding despite your shouting.”

“Y-yeah. That’s why we gotta hurry up and find her!”

“However, if she were seriously injured, her Emergency Alert would most likely be going off like Komiya and Kinoshita. Right?”

Apart from the two Emergency Alerts from earlier, the forest was dead silent.

“That’s… that’s… Well, you’re not wrong…”

“And since Shinohara doesn’t seem to be anywhere nearby, we can assume that there’s a low chance that she’s sustained a major injury.”

“So, you’re sayin’ she might be lost…?”

Of course, that was definitely a possibility here as well.

“Ugh… guh…!”

While everyone was baffled, unable to fully grasp the situation at hand, Komiya suddenly let out a weak, stifled groan.

“Komiya! Can you hear me Komiya!?”

Sudō immediately called out to him, and he seemed to respond to this, meekly grabbing hold of the arm of Sudō’s jacket.

Apparently, Komiya had managed to regain consciousness.

A feeling of relief began to wash over us, but when Komiya finally opened his mouth to speak, that relief was just as quickly washed away.

“M-my leg… it hurts…!”

From the look of it, Komiya’s right leg was just fine, but his left was another matter. Anguish and agony showed on his face whenever he tried to move it.

“Your fuckin’ leg man…!”

Judging from the way Sudō was shaking, I could deduce Komiya’s condition without needing to take a look for myself.

In order to properly assess the situation, Nanase took a closer look at Kinoshita’s condition as well.

“It isn’t just Komiya-senpai, Kinoshita-senpai’s left leg seems to be in terrible shape as well. Worst case scenario, it may even be broken.”

Not only had the two of them fallen off the same slope, but they had both seriously injured their left leg as well.

I could’ve personally confirmed the extent of their injuries by feeling around the affected area myself, but very little good would come out of doing so at this point.

“If they have any bone contusions or fractures they’ll be disqualified, no questions asked.”

The fourth day of the exam hadn’t even officially started yet, so it was only natural to assume that nobody had retired so far. By that same logic, it stood to reason that their disqualification, and ensuing expulsion, was practically set in stone. Even if Shinohara was safe and sound, it would be difficult for her to accumulate a meaningful number of points on her own. Moreover, she herself was currently nowhere to be found.

Be that as it may, there had to be more going on here than what meets the eye…

What’s more, there was still a strange presence watching over us from the northwest.

And yet, they didn’t make any moves, simply choosing to keep their distance instead. At first they kept their presence exceedingly faint, but as I continued to play dumb it gradually became more pronounced. It was as if they were daring me to pay attention to them already.

At this point, Nanase suddenly left Kinoshita’s side and came over to me before whispering into my ear:

“Something seems a bit off, don’t you think?”

Sudō and the others probably hadn’t caught onto it, but there was definitely something weird about this entire situation.

“You’re right. They might’ve gotten caught up in trouble of some sort.”

It wouldn’t be that strange if this had only happened to one person, but the fact that they were both in the exact same condition was definitely cause for concern.

“Komiya. Can you remember exactly what happened at the time of the accident?”

While I could continue to theorize on my own, doing that would only get me so far. Therefore, I figured it would be better to ask Komiya outright instead.

After all, I probably wouldn’t have the time to ask him once the school faculty members arrived.

“I-I don’t know… it just happened out of nowhere. I suddenly felt something strike my calf and the next thing I knew I was rolling down the slope… Agh…!”

His face twisted in pain as he once again tried to move his leg.

“Your calf was hit by something?”

“M-maybe? I don’t really remember very well… Sorry.”

His memory of the moment when the accident took place was vague and fuzzy, but you couldn’t really hold that against him.

“Kinoshita fell as well and ended up beside you. Do you know anything about what happened to her?”

“Eh…? N-no, I have no idea. Why is Kinoshita here…? If I remember correctly, when it happened we…”

Judging from Komiya’s reaction, it didn’t seem like Kinoshita had been the first one to fall down the slope.

So, at the very least, I could assume that Komiya had fallen first.

“That’s right…! Satsuki, where’s Satsuki!? Did she fall too!?”

Enduring the pain as his memories came flooding back to him, Komiya cried out Shinohara’s name through gritted teeth. Ike’s expression darkened when he heard Komiya call Shinohara by her given name, but he knew that this was no time to be upset over something so trivial.

“Shinohara is missing. Were you guys not moving together?”

“Satsuki was─ Agh…!!”

His left leg seemed to hurt so badly that it was difficult for him to keep talking properly.

“You don’t have to force yourself.”

“N-no, I’m worried about Satsuki… Sorry Sudō, but can you help me sit up…?”

“Y-yeah. But don’t overdo it.”

With Sudō’s support, Komiya slowly managed to prop himself up.

“Komiya, where’s Shinohara!?”

Ike shouted out a question of his own. Naturally, he was far more concerned about Komiya’s group than the rest of us.

In fact, his inability to contain himself was so obvious that Komiya probably took note of it as well.

“…I don’t know… We… We were trying to move quickly…”

Komiya continued with his explanation, glimpses of pain and anguish occasionally flashing across his face.

“Then, we were waiting… for Satsuki to come back…”

“You were waiting? What? I don’t understand what you’re sayin’ here!”

Komiya was struggling to provide proper context for what he was saying, so he shook his head a few times to try and focus his mind.

He then slowly sifted through his memories as he tried to set up a proper timeline for us.

“Let me start from the beginning. We were in a hurry because we missed the last two designated areas yesterday. After talking it out last night, we ultimately decided to try and close the distance early this morning… It was still fairly dark when we set out, so we were keeping tabs on each other as we traveled, but… at some point, Satsuki said she needed to go to the restroom, so she split off for a bit while Kinoshita and I waited for her to finish. Of course, we were using our flashlights to keep track of each other…”

He had calmed down quite a bit compared to back when he first woke up. Even though he was fraught with pain, it was obvious just how worried he was about Shinohara.

“While we waited for Satsuki to come back, the two of us were looking down the slope over there and talking about whether we could use it as a shortcut. Just as I was thinking that it’d be pretty difficult to make our way down─”

“That’s when something hit your calf, yes?”

Having anticipated where he was going with this, Nanase cut in, prompting Komiya to nod in response.

“I remember it hurt like hell… But the pain didn’t last long ‘cause the next thing I knew I was rolling down the slope… And then, when I came to, Sudō and the rest of you guys were here.”

Human limbs are by no means invincible. It’s not uncommon for them to unexpectedly sustain injuries at a moment’s notice.

If Komiya had been the only one involved in this incident, then it would be simple enough to conclude that the pain of the impact had knocked him off his feet and sent him falling down the slope he was looking at.

However, the fact that the same thing had happened to Kinoshita as well made it seem like I wasn’t quite seeing the full picture yet.

Did she suddenly freak out upon seeing Komiya start to collapse and end up falling with him when she tried to help…?

Whatever the reason may be, the mysterious set of eyes watching over us and the unidentified set of footprints were definitely cause for concern.

As I pondered about it, I suddenly heard movement come from the top of the slope.

We all simultaneously turned our flashlights in the direction it had come from, but there didn’t appear to be anyone there.

It could’ve just been a small animal or something given how faint of a sound it had been, but…

“Shinohara!?”

Ike had only just begun to regain his composure, but when he heard the sound, he immediately started running toward the slope.

“Oi Kanji! Hold on! It’s dangerous!”

The cries of his best friend fell on deaf ears, left only to echo throughout the dark forest.

“Senpai, it’s too dangerous to let Ike-senpai go off on his own!”

“I know. I’ll leave the tablet with you. Wait here until we get back.”

I was tempted to quickly go running after him, but Ike had his sights set on climbing what basically amounted to the face of a cliff.

A slight delay wouldn’t be that much of a problem.

“But won’t you be in trouble if you get lost without the tablet, Senpai?”

“It’ll just get in the way of climbing the slope.”

Besides, climbing the slope with the tablet wasn’t the only risk at play here. In the unlikely event that something happened, it would be riskier for me to drop the tablet and lose it altogether. By simply leaving it with Nanase, it wouldn’t be impossible for her to come find us if we got lost or something went wrong either.

Once Nanase took the tablet, I immediately went after Ike.

Ike was eagerly clawing his way up toward the source of the sound, but his movements were dangerous. By the time I finally caught up to him, I decided to show him a suitable path to navigate up the slope. It was clear as day that he would put up a fight if I tried to get him to come back with me.

“A-Ayanokōji!?”

At first he probably thought that I had come to stop him as he was surprised when I quickly climbed past him. As a result, this surprise caused him to panic and try what he could to catch up with me.

And in turn, panic gave rise to negligence. He stopped paying close attention to his footing and began to slip off of the slope.

“Oh, ah…!?”

I quickly reached down and grabbed Ike by the arm and helped to pull him back up.

“Are you going to calm down and follow me or not? If you can’t then I’ll take you back by force.”

“…G-got it. I’ll chill out and follow you so… please don’t take me back…”

Content with his response, I nodded and proceeded to lead the way up the slope.

Although visibility was still poor, little by little the sun was beginning to light the path ahead.

We took our time to climb safely, and once we reached the top, we came upon a narrow point that Komiya and Kinoshita had apparently fallen from.

Ike was on his hands and knees as he tried to catch his breath, but his eyes were frantically scanning the surrounding area in search of Shinohara.

I took a cursory look around the area myself, but there was nobody to be found.

“Shinohara-!!”

He called out Shinohara’s name with all the strength he could muster, desperately hoping that his voice would somehow reach her this time.

There didn’t seem to be very many solid pathways, so it wasn’t impossible to imagine that Shinohara had fallen at some other point along the slope when she tried to get down.

At this point, on the ground, I discovered three different backpacks that appeared to belong to Komiya, Kinoshita, and Shinohara.

As far as I could tell, there wasn’t any evidence to suggest that someone had gone through them without permission.

The three of them had probably decided to leave their bags here until Shinohara had gotten back from the bathroom.

I could picture the scene of Komiya and Kinoshita standing here talking with each other about whether or not they should try to head down the slope.

“Dammit, she’s not here either!”

Ike struck the ground in frustration, dismayed about the lack of a response. But then, at that very moment…

“…Ike? Is that you?”

Shinohara slowly stood up from within a thicket of bushes off in the distance.

“Shinohara? Shinohara!!!”

When she finally caught sight of the two of us, she immediately came running over, stumbling over her own feet as she did.

She then threw herself into Ike’s chest, her body shaking and tears streaming down her face.

“Y-you’ve been here this whole time?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Then why didn’t you call out sooner!? Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been!?”

“B-because…”

Having seemingly recalled something hard to swallow, Shinohara began to tremble even more than before.

With this, Ike must’ve understood that she wasn’t hiding due to ill-intentions.

“K-Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san, where are they!?”

“They’re both seriously injured at the bottom of the slope, what the hell happened to them?”

If her fellow group members had simply tripped and fallen down the slope, then Shinohara would’ve been frantic about trying to get down and help them.

However, given that she didn’t do that and chose to single-mindedly hide in the bushes instead, something was definitely amiss here.

She turned pale upon hearing that they were seriously injured, and after a moment, she opened her trembling lips.

“I-I couldn’t move… I was scared, so scared… a-and… I saw…”

“You saw? Saw what?”

“…Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san… Somebody… I saw somebody push them off…”

According to Shinohara, this wasn’t just an accident.

“Somebody? Who the hell was it!?”

“I-I don’t know! I really don’t! …But why, why would they do such a thing!?”

Ike clenched his teeth in frustration, watching as Shinohara collapsed to the ground and broke down in tears.

Essentially, she had been afraid that this ‘somebody’ would find her too, so she hid, putting forth her full effort to erase all traces of her presence and shut out the sound of her surroundings.

That being the case, it was no wonder that she didn’t immediately try to rush to her friends or respond to Ike’s calls. Although there was no conclusive evidence that what she was saying here was correct, I didn’t think Shinohara was the type of person who would conjure up a fabricated story like this.

However, it would be a huge undertaking for ‘someone’ to have snuck up behind them without being noticed.

Furthermore, since they’d give away their position if they used a flashlight, the perpetrator must’ve acted with a poor field of vision as well.

“Do you remember seeing anyone since last night? If there’s someone behind this, it would make any groups camping nearby into prime suspects.”

I decided to redirect the conversation a bit and asked Shinohara a question instead.

“I think after 8:30 last night… there were, um, first-years… Yeah… we came across a group of first-years camping out together… We passed them back that way.”

She pointed off to the north as she said this.

“Do you know the names of those first-years? Anything you might know would be helpful.”

“Sorry, I don’t really know most of the first-years yet. All I remember is that there were three girls and one boy.”

If this was all she knew, I couldn’t exactly say it was very useful information.

But if those first-years had attacked Komiya and Kinoshita as part of some sort of prank, it should be easy enough to catch the perpetrator.

“For now, let’s head back down and meet up with Sudō and the others. It won’t be long before the teachers arrive.”

“R-right.”

Going back down the way we came would be a bit risky for both Shinohara and Ike, so we opted to take a short detour instead.