Classroom of the Elite Volume 15 Chapter 1 Introduction

Chapter 1: Secret Maneuvers

The pouring rain had gotten stronger and the fog, thicker.

It was hard to hear or see anything due to the weather, but I could feel an ominous presence approaching us from behind.

There was a deliberate, almost exaggerated sound of mud being trampled underfoot and strewn into the air.

It seemed that Nanase had immediately noticed it as well.

Looking over my shoulder, I caught sight of a student who had come to an abrupt stop behind me, her red hair swaying in the wind.

“Seems it’s gonna really start coming down, huh Sen~pai?”

It was none other than Class 1-A’s Amasawa Ichika, standing there in the rain.

While it had long-since been established that she had the same table as Nanase and I, this was by no means a mere coincidence.

There weren’t any other students nearby, and she didn’t have a backpack or tablet either.

This begged the question: How exactly did she make it all the way up here?

One possibility was that she had simply hidden her things somewhere nearby before approaching us.

Alternatively, she could’ve been tailing us for an extended period of time, empty-handed from the start.

I suppose it was also possible that someone had been tracking us with the GPS and relaying our position to her via walkie-talkie.

Nonetheless, it was probably fine to rule this out as simple coincidence.

No matter the method, her arrival was not a welcome one as far as I was concerned.

Besides, it wasn’t like Amasawa was completely empty-handed either. Clasped in her left hand was a thick wooden stick: one that was more than capable of being used as a weapon to bludgeon someone.

Was she trying to take us by surprise, only for Nanase and I to unexpectedly notice before she could do so?

But, in such bad weather, she could’ve been far quieter with her approach if she truly planned on attacking us.

“Please get behind me, Senpai.”

As I thought about the reason behind Amasawa’s sudden appearance, Nanase, despite still being exhausted from earlier, inserted herself in front of me.

From the brief look I had of her profile, her gaze was firm with a blatant sense of distrust written all over her face.

“Oh? Nanase-chan, shouldn’t you be happy to see me? How aw~fully cold you are to a dear companion from your very own group. Wait, are you perhaps nervous about this little stick friend of mine~?”

She casually tossed the wooden stick down to the ground between us in what seemed to be a show of good faith.

Even so, Nanase didn’t relax her guard whatsoever.

“You─ cannot be trusted.”

“How me~an. How could you say something like that? I’m super-duper cute~!”

I didn’t think that being cute had anything to do with whether or not you were trustworthy, but that didn’t really matter at the moment.

“Why do you say that she can’t be trusted, Nanase?”

There was certainly something about Amasawa that made it hard to tell what she was truly thinking.

It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that she had extraordinary acting skills and the uncanny ability to put plans into action.

So while it was natural to be cautious of her, it’s not like I wasn’t already doing that at this point.

But that was no explanation for the excessive distrust and caution Nanase was showing her.

Of course, Amasawa clearly had a reason for showing up here.

One could assume that Nanase was just overreacting now that she had become my ally, but…

“Jeez. I’m not some bad guy, right Ayanokōji-senpai~? I just wanna chat for a bit, kay?”

“Please don’t listen to her, she’s dangerous.”

Though Amasawa wasn’t showing any hostility, Nanase remained merciless and firm, refusing to budge an inch.

Despite voicing complaints only moments earlier, Amasawa didn’t appear to be bothered by Nanase’s seemingly unwarranted accusation.

“Senpai… There’s something I’ve been silent about for a while now… Back when Shinohara-senpai’s group was attacked and Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai retired from the exam, do you remember how you left to climb the slope with Ike-senpai?”

She was referring to the fourth day of the exam, when Ike heard a sound coming from the top of the slope and took off in a panic, thinking that Shinohara might be there.

Having decided that it was too dangerous for him to go alone, I had followed after him.

“While you were gone, I noticed that someone had been watching us from nearby, so I tried chasing after them.”

“Is that why you weren’t with Sudō and the others when we were making our way back after finding Shinohara?”

She gave a slight nod.

“So what happened?”

“They ran from me. And while I wasn’t able to catch up with them… I did manage to get a good look at their hair.”

With that, Nanase slowly lifted her right arm into the air and pointed at Amasawa.

“Back then, the one watching us from the shadows was you, wasn’t it Amasawa-san?”

“Ahaha, so I was seen after all.”

Rather than try to deny it, Amasawa laughed, admitting to it immediately.

She didn’t seem remotely surprised about having been caught red-handed, her attitude the same as ever.

As such, it was probably safe to conclude that the presence I had sensed back then really had been Amasawa.

“You also hurt Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai, didn’t you?”

“Eh? Aren’t you just, like, jumping to conclusions? Maybe I just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

“Then you didn’t need to run away from me, did you?”

“If a girl came running at you with a scary look on her face, who wouldn’t run away? Plus, I didn’t wanna be suspected.”

“I don’t believe you. Not at all.”

“So in other words, Nanase-chan, you’ve just up and decided that I pushed those two senpais down the slope, is that right?”

“I’m sure of it. It’s almost impossible that I’m wrong.”

“You’re soooo sure, and yet you felt the need to throw in an ‘almost’, huh? Wouldn’t it, like, make more sense to say you’ve actually got no idea?”

The two girls, fellow group members, exchanged words back and forth, keeping one another in check.

“Then, can you swear to me that you weren’t the one who hurt them?”

“I can swear it, sure, but it doesn’t really matter whether I keep my word or not, right?”

Amasawa was basically saying that, at the end of the day, a verbal promise didn’t mean anything.

“Lemme just ask: If it really was me, what would you do? What then?”

Rather than try to escape from Nanase’s incessant questioning, Amasawa instead dove in head-first of her own accord.

Nanase was probably feeling a little overwhelmed at this point, but she pressed on nonetheless, determined to find out the truth.

“I’d want you to tell me why you did something like that. To give me a reason. No, before any of that, why didn’t your name come up back when the teachers investigated the surrounding GPS signals in the first place?”

This didn’t seem like something that Amasawa needed to explain, so I spoke up instead.

“It’s not that hard to get rid of a GPS signal. You just need to break your watch, that’s all.”

“Ding ding ding~ Correct~! Whether intentionally done or not, a broken watch is a broken watch. And you can get it replaced for free too!”

With a delighted expression, Amasawa showed us the watch attached to her right wrist.

“But even if you broke your GPS before the attack, wouldn’t the school have taken notice?”

“Yeah prolly. But in this case at least, I think it wouldda been pretty tricky to notice with how much of a rush they were in at the time.”

There were well over 400 GPS signals on the island. Even if one or two had been missing from the map, there’s no way they would’ve noticed it back then, and it’s not like they had the time to check everything either. The teachers rightfully needed to prioritize the safety and well-being of the students.

“The school would still conduct a thorough investigation later on though, right? It’d only be a matter of time before they found out.”

Since Shinohara herself had testified that they had been attacked by someone, the school would definitely investigate the case in detail.

And, in the process, it was highly likely that they’d find out that Amasawa’s GPS signal was the only one that had disappeared.

However, therein lies the problem.

“If Amasawa’s GPS signal was the only one missing back when Komiya and Kinoshita were attacked, the school would definitely be suspicious. But that’s it. Due to a lack of evidence they wouldn’t be able to conclude that she’s the culprit.”

“That─”

Having personally witnessed Amasawa’s presence at the site of the attack, Nanase wanted to identify her as the culprit.

However, proving a crime was much harder than she was making it out to be. No matter what, the school had to avoid forcing someone’s retirement due to a false accusation.

Originally, the wristwatch had been meant as a way for the school to safeguard the rules of the exam and maintain order, and yet students could effectively circumvent that to their heart’s content.

In order to prevent students from abusing the system, the school would have to implement strong penalties for breaking the watches, such as limiting the number of times they can be replaced, charging points, or even mandating retirement.

However, the stronger the penalties, the more susceptible to abuse the system becomes as a whole. For example, it would open up the possibility of tampering with or breaking a competitor’s watch to make them face the penalties. Furthermore, if students were forced to retire due to a genuine accident or software malfunction, it would probably make for a fairly unsatisfactory special exam.

“Poking holes in the rules is standard practice. If the school can’t even find any evidence, you’re free to do whatever you want.”

Although her phrasing was a bit awkward, what Amasawa was saying was correct.

“If they can’t find any evidence, then I’ll just have to testify that I saw you there, Amasawa-san.”

“Same difference. Be it my broken GPS or my presence at the scene of the crime, it would only end with suspicion at best.”

If it had been one of the more problematic students like Sudō or Ryūen, who had a history of highly violent behavior, the school might have been more suspicious. Amasawa, however, was a first-year high school girl with a spotless record. Given her character evidence, the probability of the school finding her guilty wasn’t very high.

What’s more, Komiya and Kinoshita didn’t even testify that they had been attacked in the first place, and Shinohara herself had only been able to make a vague statement, unable to say who it was she saw.

Nanase’s testimony of seeing Amasawa in the area would be treated no differently.

Without conclusive evidence, it would be impossible to get the school to punish Amasawa.

“That’s how it is, Nanase-chan.”

At the end of the day, we still didn’t know the reason why Amasawa had come here.

The continuous back and forth between Nanase’s questions and Amasawa’s evasive wordplay didn’t seem to be getting us anywhere.

As such, it was getting harder and harder to believe that she’d suddenly spring a trap on us at this point.

For the time being, we might as well set aside the matter of whether or not she was the one behind what had happened to Komiya and Kinoshita.

I figured that I should ask something to get past the current stalemate and steer the conversation back on track.

“What are you doing here Amasawa? No, how did you find us?”

Considering that there was still more than a week left in the special exam, it would be best for all of us to avoid standing out in the pouring rain like this.

We needed to pitch our tents and escape from the downpour as soon as possible.

“No need to be in such a hurry, Ayanokōji-senpai. Let’s just appreciate that we could meet each other like this~!”

“Sorry, but the rain has been far more taxing on my stamina than I anticipated. Let’s get this over with. Please.”

“Well~, how about I help you pitch a tent and we spend the night together, just the two of us? How’s that?”

Boys and girls were expressly prohibited from spending the night together in the same tent, something that she too, should’ve been fully aware of.

She was probably trying to stall for time by engaging me in a meaningless conversation.

“Ah, are you worried about breaking the rules? It’s fine, it’s fine. Even the school can’t monitor everything, you know?”

As soon as Amasawa took a step forward, Nanase immediately closed in and grabbed her by the arm.

“What’s with this, Nanase-chan?”

“You were about to lay your hands on Ayanokōji-senpai, weren’t you?”

“Since when were you his knight in shining armor? Weren’t you like, plotting to get him expelled together with Hōsen-kun?”

“That… That has nothing to do with you. Why did you come here?”

“I just happened to get lost, so I came to try and ask you guys for help.”

Amasawa told a bald-faced lie, seemingly without any intention of keeping up appearances anymore.

Had she perhaps come all the way out here to see the outcome of my fight with Nanase and survey the aftermath?

She’d probably be able to tell that Nanase had changed sides as well, given the way she was acting.

But that didn’t add up. After all, there’d be little reason for her to stick around and take part in such a meaningless conversation if that were the case.

“I’d like to chat with Ayanokōji-senpai, so could you let go and step aside?”

“Why don’t you just talk from where you are?”

“Well there’s no way I could do that. It has to do with the White Room, after all~”

Amasawa confessed, having apparently come to the conclusion that there was no point in hiding her true identity any longer.

Surprised, Nanase turned around and looked at me.

Throughout this first semester, the existence of the White Room student had always been on my radar, yet I hadn’t been able to pinpoint their identity.

That being said, I had never imagined that I’d find out due to an outright confession.

“Do you get it now? Little miss outsider~”

If Amasawa really was the White Room student, then it would certainly make sense that she would call Nanase an outsider.

“Let go of her arm Nanase.”

Although clearly somewhat dissatisfied, Nanase obediently let go of Amasawa’s arm just as I instructed.

“Wow, you’re such a good girl Nanase-chan~! It’s like you’re his loyal dog; it’s a better look for you than I thought.”

At that, Amasawa slowly began to draw closer to me, little by little.

I was exasperated, but at least the conversation might finally get somewhere now.

“Sorry but given a prior misunderstanding with Nanase, I won’t be jumping to any conclusions just because you brought up the White Room.”

“That’s fine, I’ll prove to you that I’m the real deal. However… letting Nanase-chan hear it is a bit…”

She trailed off, mouthing the words ‘You get it, right?’ with that usual devilish grin of hers plastered onto her face.

I lightly motioned to Nanase, instructing her to distance herself. Although she was reluctant to leave me alone with Amasawa, she eventually gave in and followed suit. The pouring rain had grown stronger, to the point where she wouldn’t be able to hear us if we talked quietly from a few meters away.

Treading the muddy ground below, Amasawa finally came within arm’s reach.

“Now then, where oh where should I start~?”

She put her hand on her chin, a grandiose motion meant to signify that she was thinking over how exactly to go about explaining herself.

In any case, the fact that she came here in the first place really didn’t make any sense to me.

For the past several months, the White Room student had been lurking in the shadows, waiting for their chance to get me expelled.

And yet, Amasawa had appeared in front of me and revealed her true identity without so much as a single trick up her sleeve.

Furthermore, the fact that she was of two minds over what to say at this point was strange to begin with.

It seemed fairly obvious that she was intentionally drawing this out and stalling for time.

Just as I began to contemplate whether or not to press her about that, Amasawa opened her mouth.

“Senpai, the curriculum you took back when you were 10 years old included Systems’ Theory based on Project 5. And at the age of 11 it was the Theory of Relativity based on Project 7. I took part in both myself, so I remember them well.”

She began mentioning specific pieces of information about the White Room to prove that we had come from the same place.

“The classrooms, the corridors, our assigned living chambers… everything was a world of pure white.”

At the very least, it seemed Amasawa knew a lot more about the White Room than Nanase did.

And it was too hard for me to imagine that she had heard about it from Tsukishiro.

He would never talk about the inner workings of the White Room with someone unrelated – an outsider.

As such, it was probably safe to conclude Amasawa’s guilt.

From the things she knew to the way she conducted herself, she fit the image of a White Room student to a T.

“Why would you go through the trouble of making yourself seem like a normal person only to reveal your identity to me like this?”

“Sure sure, I figured you’d be curious about that. It’s cuz I wanted to tell you that I’m not your enemy, Senpai.”

“That doesn’t add up. The White Room student was sent here in order to force my expulsion. To say that you’re not my enemy in light of that doesn’t make much sense.”

Completely unconcerned with the fact that our clothes were being drenched by the rain, Amasawa continued to speak.

“You wouldn’t know this as part of the fourth generation, Ayanokōji-senpai, but the later generations harbor immense feelings of jealousy when it comes to you. The higher-ups probably thought that they could select someone promising and manipulate this jealousy to force your expulsion. However, they chose the wrong person. They didn’t predict that I was but a young maiden who secretly idolized you.”

“So, that’s why you revealed yourself?”

She nodded with a quiet ‘Mhm’.

“Then, wouldn’t it have been better for you to do this back when you first enrolled here? You even managed to step foot in my dorm room on more than one occasion, so you should’ve had plenty of chances to tell me.”

“Well, no matter how much you might idolize someone, that’s just like, all in your head, you know? You’ve gotta talk with them and meet face-to-face before your admiration starts to feel justified. That takes time.”

In other words, if I hadn’t turned out to be someone Amasawa deemed worthy of idolizing, then it’s possible that she would’ve moved to eliminate me. And based on the flow of our conversation thus far, that seemed fairly reasonable.

“Do you understand?”

“I guess. Only someone who’s been at the White Room would be able to say so much about it.”

“There we go~. It feels kinda strange, doesn’t it? To pass the days at school as an ordinary high schooler.”

Before, I had been the only one to experience the strange, peculiar sensation she was talking about. But knowing that another White Room student was now going through the same thing had filled me with genuine curiosity.

“If you feel the same as I do, then surely you’ve also noticed how interesting this school is, right?”

“I know exactly what you mean, Senpai. I too have thought about how nice it’d be if I could just enjoy being a student like this up until graduation. I’ve thought about it several times, actually. I suck at making friends though, so I just don’t have very many people to talk to.”

In a way, she was quite similar to me.

Although I could talk to people like Horikita and Ike, it had always felt like there was some sort of distance between us.

Thinking back on it, for quite a while, it felt as though I couldn’t honestly call anyone a friend.

“That doesn’t mean that I lack communication skills like you do Senpai.”

As if fully aware of what I was thinking, Amasawa spoke up to clarify.

“I was taught essentially the same stuff you were, Senpai. But at the same time, there are certain things that only the fifth generation of students that came after you could learn.”

She paused for a moment to see if I wanted to say something before continuing.

“It’s said that, before the fifth generation, children were often crushed one after another due to their excessive individualism. Of course, those with poor scores notwithstanding, those with excellent scores were still allowed to come in contact with each other. In my generation, on the other hand, all children were required to maintain a minimum level of interpersonal communication.”

If she was telling the truth, then I could understand why it seemed so easy for her to make such a rich assortment of different facial expressions. Even though I could pretend to be someone else in the short-term thanks to my acting skills, it was hard to break the habit that had formed from living most of my life devoid of emotion.

“Still don’t believe me?”

“I believe you’re from the White Room, but I’m not convinced with the reason you gave me for why you revealed your identity.”

“You’re awfully calm and composed for someone who believes that I’m a White Room student. Perhaps you don’t think I’ll be a threat to you?”

I said nothing in response to this, prompting a smile to creep onto her face.

“Well then~ I’ve said everything I wanted to say to you, so I guess it’s about time I excuse myself.”

Saying that, she turned her back to me, content with simply being recognized as the White Room student.

“What are you thinking, Amasawa?”

“Jeez~ Didn’t I tell you already~? I admire you, Ayanokōji-senpai. That’s all.”

Looking back, she reached out and brushed the tips of her fingers, wet and cold from the rain, up against my cheek.

“So please, don’t go and get yourself crushed without my permission, okay?”

And with that, she pulled back her hand and walked away, headed off to who knows where.

She said ‘don’t go and get yourself crushed’… but by whom? Tsukishiro? The first-years who had their sights set on the twenty million private point bounty? Or, perhaps…

“Ayanokōji-senpai, are you alright? She didn’t do anything to you right?”

Having noticed Amasawa’s departure, Nanase rushed back over to me, worried. I nodded along to try and ease her concerns before looking over toward my backpack.

“The rain. We’d better hurry.”

I wanted to take some time to process everything, but there were other things that took priority at the moment.

“Yes! We should set up the tents, right?”

“Yeah.”

I responded affirmatively, but there was still one thing I couldn’t afford to forget about.

Namely, checking the footprints that Amasawa left behind.

“Senpai…?”

“The rain will wash away her footprints soon.”

Amasawa had only just left, and yet her footprints were already starting to lose their shape.

“Amasawa-san’s… footprints? Is there something wrong with her footprints?”

“Back when Komiya and Kinoshita were attacked, I found some footprints nearby the scene of the crime. From what I can tell, I’m fairly confident that they’re the same size as Amasawa’s.”

In other words, Amasawa had definitely been there, just like Nanase claimed she was.

“So rather than just happening to be in the area, you’re saying that she’s the one who pushed them down the slope?”

“I don’t know about that. It’s probably safe to conclude that she’s the one who was watching us back then, but there’s still no conclusive evidence pointing to her as the one who pushed them.”

For a moment, it didn’t seem like Nanase understood what I was talking about.

“There may not be any solid evidence. However, shouldn’t it be fine to assume that it was her?”

“Based on the information we have on hand right now, Amasawa is certainly the most likely culprit.”

“Exactly, I think so too. I know I’m repeating myself at this point, but she’s definitely the one I saw back then.”

And she clearly wasn’t wrong about that either.

“However, it’s not like you actually saw her push them.”

“That… well… she just confessed not too long ago though.”

“It’s hard to call that a confession. She just asked what you’d do if she was the one who pushed them. That’s a far cry from explicitly admitting that she’s the culprit.”

“Maybe she only put it that way because she was afraid that we were recording her or something?”

“With how loud this rain is and the circumstances we’re in, I don’t think she needed to be on guard about that.”

At a glance, this didn’t seem like the type of environment suitable for recording anything.

“You still can’t be absolutely certain. She’s well aware that you’re an opponent she ought to be wary of, so it’s reasonable to assume that she took any and all precautions necessary.”

To eliminate all potential risks, that would indeed be a wise choice.

“If she deliberately inflicted potentially life-threatening injuries on two upperclassmen, then she should’ve hightailed it out of there immediately after she did the deed. Why would she stick around and let you see her as she ran away?”

Nanase pondered how to respond for a moment as she retrieved her backpack.

“That’s… I imagine that’s because she was interested in what happened to Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai. It’s the same mentality as how an arsonist always returns to the scene of the crime.”

It’s true that there was a saying that arsonists, or criminals in general, always return to the scene of their crime.

Although there were plenty of theories about this phenomenon, it was risky to try and relate it to this particular situation. If we were to speculate based on the assumption that Amasawa was the culprit, then we wouldn’t be able to see past the superficial.

“Pushing two people down a slope is a heartless act in and of itself, so it doesn’t make sense that she’d risk returning to the scene of the crime just because she was interested in what happened to them. There’s also the fact that you were able to identify her as she ran away. Honestly, I find it hard to believe that someone sent here by Tsukishiro would make a mistake like that.”

I began to trace back the rapidly fading footprints so as to make sure I wasn’t missing out on anything.

“That being said, I wonder why she revealed her identity to us like this?”

“I figure she did it because she knew I saw her back then and that she wouldn’t be able to hide it anymore. Even though it wouldn’t prove her guilt if I were to report it to the school, it would still lead to problems for her, right? After all, the mission Acting Director Tsukishiro entrusted her with would be put in jeopardy.”

“In the end, that contradicts the fact that she returned to the scene of the crime.”

“Can’t we just chalk that up as a careless mistake on her part?”

“That’s impossible.”

Perhaps Amasawa intentionally let Nanase find her for some reason?

Just as I began to mull over that very possibility, I came across a new hint.

“As I thought, there’s something about each and every one of Amasawa’s actions that can’t be overlooked.”

“Something that can’t be overlooked?”

I pointed at Amasawa’s trail of footprints, which were now on the verge of being washed away by the rain.

“Her footprints seem clean and steady as she was making her approach from behind, but… the ones before that─”

“Eh!? These…”

Nanase finally noticed the strange discrepancy as well.

“These are someone else’s footprints, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.”

There were another set of footprints that seemed slightly larger than Amasawa’s, but it wasn’t possible to determine their actual size because they had already lost their shape.

“Whoever it was, it looks like they were closing in on us until right around here, where they met with Amasawa’s footprints. Something happened at that point since the tracks get messy, but you can see here how the mystery footprints end up turning back around.”

“So, you’re saying that… someone else was here only moments before Amasawa-san called out to us…?”

Whether they were a student or a member of the school’s faculty, there seemed to be no way to tell for sure.

“Can you fetch me that stick Amasawa was holding earlier?”

“O-okay!”

She went off to fetch the stick and handed it over to me.

Once I saw it close-up, all of my speculation thus far finally arrived at one singular answer.

“What do you think, Nanase? Do you notice anything?”

“Do I notice anything…? Well I think it’d be dangerous to hit someone with it. Wait, actually…”

Nanase took back the stick and after holding onto it for a second, it dawned on her.

“This… This doesn’t seem like something you’d find lying around the forest.”

“Yeah. It’s been whittled down in certain places so it can be better used as a weapon. Looking at other branches in the area, its shape is just too unnatural.”

“Do you think she was going to use this to try and attack you, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“If Amasawa really planned on attacking me, then she should’ve tried to catch me off-guard instead of calling out like she did. That being said, even though she had a dangerous weapon in hand, it didn’t seem like she had any ill intentions. If anything, I think she just wanted us to notice her presence.”

And, there was yet another thing that could be gleaned from this.

“That is to say, she had no intention of attacking us from the very beginning… Wouldn’t that mean that the one who originally brought this here was not Amasawa-san, but the mysterious person who vanished before she approached us?”

The mystery footprints seemed to take short strides as they approached us, but when they turned back after meeting with Amasawa, the strides they took grew further apart. They left as if they were trying to avoid being noticed, or rather, as if they were trying to run away.

“But why?”

“From what Amasawa told me, I’m apparently the subject of her admiration. So it doesn’t seem that far-fetched to think that she might’ve just wanted to protect me when I was about to be attacked.”

“It feels a little risky to assume she’s an ally based on that alone though…”

“Naturally. However, these footprints are clearly targeting me, and I can’t even hazard a guess as to who made them.”

“Do… you perhaps think it could’ve been a school faculty member?”

“That’s possible, but it’s also true that I have a bounty on my head.”

There was a high chance that these mystery footprints belonged to a student who had their sights set on cashing out my bounty.

It was completely conceivable that someone would be willing to stake their own future to try and force my expulsion.

“Oh! That’s it!”

Having apparently come to some sort of realization, Nanase suddenly raised her voice.

“Senpai, let’s do a GPS Search right now! It hasn’t been that long since Amasawa-san first approached us. Even if this mystery person ran away at full speed, they shouldn’t have been able to get very far with the weather like this, right?”

She wasn’t wrong. If we did a GPS Search right now and there were signals in the surrounding area, we could narrow down the list of suspects all in one go. It’d be as simple as going through the closest signals one by one to see who they were.

“Oh, but we wouldn’t be able to identify them if they broke their watch like Amasawa-san did, would we…”

“No, that’s not true. When you break your watch, your GPS signal disappears. Amasawa aside, if we did a search right now and there was only one student with a missing signal, what then?”

“…Then that’s our guy.”

“Yeah. Therefore, we can conclude that the person who tried to attack me definitely didn’t break their watch.”

“It’s worth our while to spend the point on a search then, right?”

It had only been about fifteen minutes since Amasawa first called out to me.

So, even if they ran at full speed, they would’ve only made it to the edge of area D3 by now at the very most.

With a bit of luck, there would only be one signal that fit these conditions, allowing us to pinpoint the owner of these mysterious footprints.

As such, it made sense that I should go along with Nanase’s idea and do a GPS Search right here, right now, but…

“I won’t be using the GPS Search.”

“Eh!? W-why not!?”

“At the end of the day, it wouldn’t be surprising if this was all part of a strategy to bait me into making a GPS Search so that someone completely unrelated who just happened to be nearby would come to the forefront.”

It was hard to say with any finality that this wasn’t an attempt to mislead us into suspecting an innocent person. One should always exercise caution in situations where an opponent was spoonfeeding you information, such as how Amasawa deliberately allowed Nanase to catch sight of her as she fled the crime scene, or even Amasawa’s presence here today in general.

“It still feels like a bit of a waste to not even check.”

“If it were me, I wouldn’t be foolish enough to get caught by something as trivial as this. If they can’t even take the GPS Search feature into account before taking action, then they’re certainly not anybody we need to be worried about.”

Although Nanase didn’t seem fully convinced, she eventually conceded and complied with my decision.

In any case, even though I still wanted to collect my thoughts, that wasn’t going to happen given the way the weather was headed.

After deciding to cut the conversation short, we hurriedly went about setting up our tents.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that heavy rain was really coming down at this point.

Our tents were pitched with the entrances put face-to-face, and once everything was in order, we promptly hid ourselves inside, taking refuge from the rain.

I peeled off my drenched gym uniform, jersey, and underwear before drying my hair and body with a towel.

And then, after changing into a spare set of clothes, I slightly unzipped the entrance and took a peek outside. It was still early afternoon, but the outside world was as dark as night.

We were probably going to be stuck here for the rest of the day, at the very least.

The raindrops were practically shoving their way in through the hole in the entrance, so I zipped it closed and laid down on my sleeping bag.

In this short time, I had found out about Nanase’s past and identified Amasawa as the White Room student.

However, that didn’t mean that all the fog had been lifted.