Volume 14 Chapter 2 Introduction

8:40 AM. The cruise ship slowly pulled up to the dock.

That is, the uninhabited island special exam was finally about to begin.

There would be a grand total of 157 different groups participating, with sizes ranging anywhere from one to four members.

As a breakdown, there were 36 first-year exclusive four-person groups, 81 three-person groups, 32 two-person groups, and 8 solo groups. And in the end, five of them would be gone.

Tensions began to rise as my classmates gathered together, and once everyone was present, we all headed off to the ship’s gangway. Since we weren’t instructed to form an orderly line or anything, the school seemed to be tacitly allowing us to chat amongst ourselves as we awaited further instruction. That is, as long as we stayed together as a class.

The starting area for all groups was area D9. Since there wouldn’t be any randomly designated areas on the first and last day, the next area would be within two cells laterally or one cell diagonally from here for a total of 12 potential options.

However, the area two cells to the south, theoretical D11, didn’t exist, so truth be told, there were really only 11 options.

This first day could be thought of as an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with a new environment when we didn’t even know our left from right yet.

After a brief announcement, we waited for our turn to disembark the ship, bags and backpacks in hand after receiving them not too long ago.

For my provisions, I ended up choosing a tent, two liters of water, three 500ml water bottles, 12 portable meals, a flashlight, a portable battery charger, a pot, a lighter, and a set of paper cups, for a cumulative total of 4960 points. Altogether, there was still plenty of free space left in my backpack, even after adding in all of the free essentials. So, even if I won additional provisions later on by clearing Tasks, I wouldn’t have to worry about not having the space to carry them around.

According to the announcement, we would be disembarking in the same order as yesterday’s briefing sessions, with the first-year students getting off before the rest of us.

It seemed like the first-years would finish getting off the ship by around 9:00 AM, the time when the first designated area was to be announced.

It made sense to think that this had been arranged to give the first-years a slight advantage.

On the other hand, it put the second and third-year students at a disadvantage, albeit only once.

Furthermore, since Class A was also the first to disembark, Class D would be put at an even greater disadvantage.

The total difference would only be an initial 15 to 30 minutes or so, but factoring in our limited travel time, it would still be a fairly sizable setback.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well yesterday?”

As I waited, I was approached from behind by Horikita, who was carrying a backpack of her own.

“Well, more or less. How about you? Are you feeling sick at all?”

“I see you’re still patronizing me about what happened last year.”

“I’m not patronizing you. Just messing with you is all.”

She looked at me with an expression of annoyance, wordlessly telling me that there wasn’t any difference.

“You’re awfully chipper even though such a serious special exam is about to start.”

“There’s no use getting worked up at this point. It’d just be a waste of energy. For that matter, have you heard about the third-year boy who got sick?”

“Yes, I have. I’m just glad that it didn’t happen to one of our classmates.”

If you fell sick before the start of the exam, you’d be forced to retire without even getting to step foot on the island. In this case, the retired third-year would have to stay in the doctor’s office or sickbay until his health improved. And even after recovery, he would be stuck on the ship, unable to do anything but pray for his group to pull through. Fortunately, he had been part of a group of three, so the fact that he had avoided getting kicked out of the school altogether on the very first day was a silver lining to an otherwise terrible mess. Although, for the students of the other school years, having one of the bottom slots get filled sooner rather than later was probably exactly what they’d want.

By now, the first-years were almost finished and it would soon be the second-years’ turn to get off the ship. The clock struck 9:00 AM and with it, my watch sounded off the first alert of the exam.

As if in unison, practically every student pulled out their tablet and began to check the details, myself included. After all, if we did so once we were off the ship, we’d lose out on time.

The first area I would be heading to was… D7. Just two cells north of the starting area.

I inclined my tablet’s screen in Horikita’s direction, prompting her to tell me her own designated area.

“Mine is F9. Looks like the two of us have different Tables.”

“Seems like it.”

Since we all started from the same place, it was possible that both our areas might overlap somewhat even if we didn’t have the same Table, but it looked like Horikita and I would be going in two completely different directions.

There were a total of 12 Tables. If the resulting 12 designated areas were all guaranteed to be different during every interval, you would essentially be competing against the same 13 or so groups the entire exam. In reality, however, it would be safe to expect designated areas to overlap between Tables fairly often.

In any case, even if you weren’t setting your sights on the top three groups, it would still be important to begin piling up points, one point at a time.

Furthermore, it’d be best to try and avoid getting caught off guard by any randomly designated areas that might pop up all of a sudden.

“I won’t worry about you anymore, then. At least try to manage a decently high ranking.”

“As much as I’d love to do that, it’d be pretty funny if I were the only one in the class to get expelled from all this.”

I responded as I put my tablet back into my backpack.

“That… would be troublesome.”

For her to say that she would be troubled without me was a bit shocking.

“I lent you some points just the other day. I’d be mad if I didn’t get any back.”

“…That’s what you’re worried about?”

She made a show out of tilting her head to the side in confusion, as if to ask what other reason there possibly could have been for her to worry.

“I know you have that contract with Kushida-san, so I can’t blame you for being troubled for money, but man up and do something about it.”

“That almost hurts to hear.”

If I ran into a sudden, urgent expense, I might not be able to come up with the money in time. I hadn’t even been able to raise the funds to protect Kei from expulsion without help.

“You better not push yourself too hard, Horikita. A solitary girl like you has a tough fight ahead of her. You should look to join up with another group or find yourself an opportunity to bring someone into yours as soon as possible.”

“Thanks for your most exceptional advice then.”

She sounded a bit suspicious, but it didn’t seem like she was that worried.

Horikita was leagues ahead of where she was a year ago; As she was now, she should be more than capable of identifying her own limitations.

“Speaking of which, the conditions for merging groups certainly seem strict, so we’ll need to pay attention to that.”

“The point averaging, huh.”

The longer it took to merge with another group, the more problematic it would become to average the points together.

However, if you managed to max out your group size early on, you’d reap the benefits all the way until the very end of the exam. Earning six points just for reaching a single designated area would be huge, and you could even get seven if your group had the ‘More People’ card. Compare this to a solo group who would have to toil over every single point, and the difference was clear as day.

From the moment they were off the ship, the first-year students quickly set off without the slightest hesitation. And since there weren’t any Tasks yet, the second and third-year students would most likely do the same, choosing to head toward their first designated area once they were finally off the ship.

When I finally stepped foot in the harbor, I decided to stand back and take a look at the general flow of things instead of rushing off to my destination.

I needed to make sure to set aside about an hour to an hour and a half for traveling, but there shouldn’t be any problem with waiting around for about 30 minutes as long as I kept track of time. If you didn’t have your sights set on getting the Early Bird Bonus, there was no difference in how many points you’d earn for arriving after an hour or so.

“There don’t seem to be any second-year groups in a hurry or anything. Well, it’s not a very good idea to compete for this first designated area anyway. Even if they rushed to try and catch up, they’d still be over 10 minutes behind the first-years in the lead. Closing a gap like that would use up a lot of stamina, don’t you think?”

Having come off the ship herself, Horikita approached me yet again.

“Given the disadvantage, it’s only natural that people would want to take it slow at first.”

As they disembarked right after Class 1-D, students from Class 2-A might have a slight chance of catching up in time, but it didn’t seem like they were going out of their way to do that.

“Anyway, it’s really hot, isn’t it…? I’m glad I thought ahead to get a hat. Are you fine without one?”

“I don’t have enough points left to buy one. I’ll figure something out.”

While Horikita and I were chatting, a young man gallantly strode past us. From the brief look I managed to get of his smiling face, he gave off the impression that he would be enjoying these two grueling weeks to the utmost extent possible.

“Kōenji… Do you really think that guy will take this special exam seriously?”

“Who knows… While he’s agreed to my bet, there’s no telling what he’ll do.”

“It’s a coin flip. That is, whether he’ll really take action or not.”

Kōenji had promised Horikita that, if he didn’t take first place in this special exam, he would cooperate during the next. But, this promise wasn’t really held up by anything. There was no compelling force, no binding agreement put in place, so if he didn’t want to keep his word, that would be it.

However, Horikita was gradually becoming more and more recognized as the leader of our class, so if Kōenji chose to betray her trust, he could rest assured that none of our classmates would lift a finger to help him when faced with a difficult exam in the future.

An outcome like that wouldn’t be very desirable, even for somebody like Kōenji…

I was personally looking forward to witnessing Kōenji’s performance during this special exam.

“Let’s friggin’ goooo! I’ve got my sights set on numbah one, baby!”

Not too far from us, a lone male student broke into a full-on sprint straight toward the sandy beach: Class 2-B’s Ishizaki. He was shouting loudly, but Nishino, his group member, was just trailing behind him, not really making any effort to run and chase after him like he wanted. And then there was Tsube, who was watching the two of them from the rear with an awkward smile on her face.

“Oi, hurry up Nishino! You too Tsube!”

“It’s super hot so don’t go askin’ for the impossible! I mean, like, we can’t even catch up to the first-years anymore. Sheesh.”

“Well, uhm, at least it’s good that Ishizaki-kun is motivated, yeah?”

Tsube looked at Nishino with a somewhat exasperated expression as she tried to smooth things out between the two of them.

I had heard that Nishino was fairly isolated from the rest of her class, but it seemed like Tsube was making an active effort to try and get close to her.

“If we give up, then it’s all over! The first-years might get careless and slip up, you never know!”

“You seriously wanna go after ‘em? Forget that. It’s like, such a total waste of energy.”

“Woah woah, c’mon, don’t be like that!”

Both Nishino and Tsube stood in stark contrast to Ishizaki, who was practically bursting with energy.

“How ‘bout you just go ahead without us then?”

“We won’t get the Early Bird Bonus if we do that though! Besides… it’d suck if we got split up or somethin’.”

Right now, the only thing you could check on your tablet was your own current location. Even amongst members of the same group, it would only be possible to find out where somebody else was once the GPS searching feature unlocked on the sixth day.

If you got separated from your group before then, you’d have a hard time meeting up with them again.

Seemingly unaware that I had been watching the whole exchange, Ishizaki reluctantly gave in and went back to Nishino and Tsube to match their pace.

I could understand his impatience, but there was no need to be in such a hurry straight from the get-go.

“Found you!”

All of a sudden, a firm, almost angry, voice called out to us.

The owner of said voice approached us, fiercely glaring at Horikita.

“What do you want?”

“Want? I don’t ‘want’ anything. Just makin’ sure you know I’m never gonna lose to you…!”

Having apparently approached Horikita just to say that, Ibuki turned on her heel and set off to the north all by herself.

“Good grief… I wonder if she properly understands just how difficult this exam is?”

“She seemed quite motivated. It must be nice to have a rival.”

At my light teasing, Horikita forced out a deep sigh.

“I don’t see myself as her rival at all though? Well whatever, she’s going north and I’ll be going east, so it seems we’ve got different Tables too. There’s that at least.”

After all, if they had the same Table, they might bump into each other every now and again.

One of the few benefits of being alone had to do with the designated area’s Early Bird Bonus. Since you didn’t have to rely on anyone else, the only thing limiting your potential was your own two feet.

“Well, it’s about time for me to get going.”

With that, Horikita made sure her hat was snug on her head and set off to the east. Though, not long after she started walking, she stopped and looked back in my direction for some reason. Just as I thought there might be something she had forgotten to mention, she looked away and set off once again.

After watching a fair number of students head out, I realized that I hadn’t seen any third-year students pass by yet even though they should’ve started getting off the ship already. As such, I decided to turn around and check on what was happening.

As I did so, I saw a fair number of third-year students walking in my direction. Even from a distance, I could tell that every single one of them was calm and composed, significantly more so than the first and second-years had been.

From the numbers, it seemed like students from Class 3-B had just about finished disembarking, so I took a moment to try and catch a glimpse of Nagumo. However, I couldn’t find him anywhere.

As I continued to look for him, the third-year students who were walking toward me eventually caught up and began to pass by.

“You’re still here, Ayanokōji?”

Hearing someone address me, I gave up on my search and returned my attention to the third-years nearby.

“Good morning, Kiryūin-senpai. Is there anything strange about that? I’d imagine that many groups would choose to refine their strategies here at the starting area.”

“But you’re alone, right? You should be fine to think it over while you walk.”

She expressed her doubts about my decision to stay at the starting area.

While I already knew she wasn’t an ordinary person, she really had a keen eye for detail.

“If there’s something you wanna know, I can help explain it to you.”

“Thanks, but it’s fine. After all, you’re a third-year student, Kiryūin-senpai. A direct competitor to second-year students such as myself.”

Upon politely declining her offer, she didn’t say anything more on the matter, simply choosing to meet my gaze with her own instead.

“There’s something… enchanting about seeing the entire student body scatter throughout the uninhabited island. Though there are more than 400 of us, we’re nothing but insignificant specks of dust in comparison.”

Kiryūin spoke casually, watching as the various groups of students began to disperse throughout the island.

Despite being a third-year student, she was also among those who chose to tackle the exam alone.

While this exam wasn’t exactly going to be a walk in the park, she didn’t seem even the slightest bit anxious or restless about it.

In fact, she seemed to give off the faint impression that she was looking forward to it.

“By the way, what’s your first designated area?”

“D7.”

“Hoh? Sounds like we’ve got the same destination then. At least for this first one.”

Kiryūin looked at me happily, letting show a white, toothy smile.

“Please don’t be too hard on me, then.”

“Right back at you. Well, I’m gonna head out. You wanna come along?”

“No, but thanks for the offer. I doubt I’d be able to keep up with you, Senpai.”

“I guess we’ll find out if that’s true or not soon enough.”

Leaving me with that, Kiryūin walked off toward the sandy beach all by herself.

I continued to linger around the area for a little bit longer, but ultimately never caught sight of Nagumo.

And just like that, a few minutes after Kiryūin left, I set off as well.

For the time being, I’d leisurely make my way to my first designated area.

One of the most important parts of this exam was making sure not to miss out on the easy points that came with reaching the designated areas. You could earn 5 to 10 points all at once if you succeeded at Tasks or got your hands on an Early Bird Bonus, but that would require a good mix of physical ability, academic ability, and luck when facing competitors. Therefore, I felt pretty confident that the true core of all of this came down to stockpiling points, one point at a time.

So with that in mind, I once again pulled out my tablet and opened up the map.

As a whole, the map was divided up into 100 different areas, with each area running 500 meters vertically and 700 meters horizontally.

For my first move, I needed to go from area D9 to the edge of D7. Since I was already near the center of D9, I needed to walk about 750 meters in a straight line.

At a standard pace of about 80 meters per minute, it’d be very easy to cover. At that rate, without taking any external factors into account, I should be able to reach the designated area in around nine minutes. But, as one would imagine, there was a fair chance that the path ahead would neither be flat nor straight. Faced with such a thick forest, I could run into steep slopes or cliffs that make it impossible to proceed. And as a result, the journey as a whole would probably take several times longer than usual. The highest point of the island was about 300 meters above sea level, so a decent amount of uphill travel was to be expected. Furthermore, as time went on, the weight of your backpack and gradual wear and tear on your stamina would get in the way of your ability to keep moving forward.

So, even if everything went smoothly, it was probably better for me to expect this to take about three times as long, or around 30 minutes. And if the path ahead was particularly treacherous, it could easily take over an hour.

With the exception of the first and last day, there would be four designated area shifts per day. As such, there was a decent chance that I might end up taking the same path several times over the course of the exam. It’d probably serve me well to keep my past movements in mind, along with how long it had taken me to move from place to place.