Volume 14 Chapter 3 Part 2

“We should be able to see it any time now.”

“Right!”

We crossed over into area F8 with our sights set on reaching the Task, tablets in hand to confirm our location as we pushed forward.

“By the way Senpai, this Task we’re looking to take on seems rather challenging, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well, it’s a quiz, so it’s true that there can be a lot to cover.”

The ‘Quiz’ Task took on a format where the genre of its questions would be chosen from several different options.

While it would be an easy Task to participate in because it was entirely multiple-choice, it would probably be difficult to win if you didn’t have a solid grounding in both liberal arts and sciences. Participation would be done as a group, and up to 12 groups could participate. Put simply, the larger the size of your group, the more minds you’d have to work with and the greater your advantage would be.

“That said, I should have a decent enough chance depending on the genre they choose.”

“That may be so, but… you actually wanted to go after the Task in area E5, didn’t you Senpai?”

I had deliberately changed my route to try and accommodate her, but it sounded like she had seen through me.

“I’ll admit that I considered it, but it was honestly fifty-fifty. It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“I’m glad to hear that. However, I’m simply here to accompany you, so please don’t make any concessions for my sake, okay?”

“You don’t need to remind me. Besides, the quiz is better when it comes to rewards anyway.”

The ‘Quiz’ Task gave 8 points for first place, 4 points for second, and 2 for third. Furthermore, you’d receive a bonus based on the number of people in your group who took part, allowing you to choose from a list of provisions to receive food or water.

It was an ideal way to replenish what you had consumed over the past two days.

Before long, the Task site came into view, and from the look of it, a decent number of people had already gathered there.

“Yo! Ayanokōji! There’s only three spots left! Get in before it’s too late!”

Having noticed my arrival, my classmate Sudō shouted out as he beckoned me over.

“Seems he’s right. Let’s hurry.”

Nanase nodded in response, and together, we ran over to the Task and completed the registration process.

We weren’t given any more information about the genre of the quiz, leaving us to wonder what kind of questions would show up.

At this point, we were effectively on standby until a twelfth group showed up or the registration deadline passed in around 30 minutes.

Ike was sitting down a bit away from the registration desk, waiting for the quiz to begin, but overall he seemed a little out of it.

He was clearly somewhat bored and disinterested, and Hondō seemed to be having a hard time striking up a conversation with him, so he was just off killing time by himself. You could say that the greatest strength of Sudō’s group was the enhanced teamwork that came from their close friendship, but it wasn’t clear how well that was really working out for them.

“Is everything going well on your end?”

I tried pitching a question to Sudō, the only one who really seemed willing to talk right now.

“I’m doin’ aight’ on points. Took third in one of our designated areas today, and first in two Tasks so far as well.”

“I wasn’t able to participate myself, but I watched you place first in that Grip Strength Measurement Task yesterday. By a large margin too.”

“Hell, you were gonna join in too!? If that happened you wouldda prolly given me a run for my money, so lucky me eh?”

Sudō made a show of wiping imaginary sweat from his brow in a slightly exaggerated manner.

“What about your group? Any problems there?”

“Well, I guess we’re runnin’ outta water faster than expected… Kinda feels like I mighta been runnin’ around too much.”

Apparently, the side effects of going all-out these first two days had finally caught up to him.

“But ya know, we can get that stuff back from doin’ Tasks, so I’d say we’re doin’ okay.”

With that said, however, Sudō’s expression took on a more difficult undertone.

“Though, well, Ike’s been kinda out of it.”

“Why?”

“Dunno… He was acting kinda strange before the exam, but he’s just glossed over it all by sayin’ nothing’s wrong.”

What happened with Shinohara had apparently left a lasting impact on Ike’s mental state.

The uninhabited island exam was already well underway, with the second day more than half-finished.

And meanwhile, the girl Ike was smitten for, Shinohara, was spending her time together with his rival, Komiya.

So in that light, it made sense that he couldn’t stop himself from worrying about it.

“I get that you’re worried, but a Task is a Task. If the three of you come together and give it your best, it shouldn’t be hard to come out on top.”

“Oh yeah, speakin’ of which Ayanokōji, you’re on your own right? Will you be alright on the quiz?”

“Well, it depends on whether or not they choose a genre I’m good at.”

Without responding, Sudō noticed Nanase standing beside me and turned his attention over to her.

“Hey come to think of it… You’re a first-year, yeah? What’s your name again…?”

Sudō had taken part in the fight with Hōsen a few months back, so it was only natural that Nanase would look familiar to him.

“It’s Nanase, Sudō-senpai.”

Instead of ogling the pretty girl in front of him, Sudō took on an extremely serious expression.

“…Ey Ayanokōji, c’mere a sec.”

He suddenly wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled me aside, taking some distance away from Nanase.

“Looks to me like you came here with her, but you know she’s an enemy right? The hell are you doing?”

“She just asked if she could tag along with me since there’s a good chance that we have the same Table.”

“Wha? Even if you got the same Table what’s the point in doin’ that? That chick is workin’ together with Hōsen to get you kicked outta here right? This shit ain’t safe man.”

It seemed like, in his own unique way, Sudō was genuinely worried about me.

“You might be right.”

However, I wasn’t naive enough to think she was accompanying me for no reason.

“You’ve got no sense of danger do you… Well, I get you’re all calm like this cuz you know you’ll get through it, but… If you run into trouble make sure you let me know aight?”

I nodded in response to Sudō’s sentiment, and while he wasn’t entirely satisfied, he seemed willing enough to back down.

“If she was givin’ you a hard time, I was gonna have her buzz off, but if yer sayin’ it’s fine, then I guess I’ll leave it be.”

Just as he said that, the last group finished registering and preparations for the beginning of the quiz went underway.

“We can talk more afterward. A Task is a Task, just like you said, so let’s do our best.”

At that, Sudō went back over to Ike and Hondō. Each of the 12 participating groups then took out their registered tablet and readied themselves for the upcoming questions. And when the time finally came, the quiz genre was displayed on our screens.

『Quiz Genre・Anime』

Huh? Anime?

Before my mind had a chance to fully comprehend the words that showed up on my tablet, the first question began.

『Question 1: Which of the following is the correct title of the Thirteenth episode of TV Anime Mobile Samurai Bombdam?』

1)『Farewell Bombdam』 2)『Burn! Bombdam』 3)『Shouting Bombdam』 4)『A Bombdam’s Tears』

I spoke involuntarily, the words practically escaping from my mouth.

It obviously had something to do with anime given the genre and question, but beyond that, I hadn’t the slightest clue as to what the correct answer was.

“Forreal!? This is uber-mega-easy!”

From nearby, Hondō shouted out in excitement, clasping his tablet tightly as he selected the answer.

Easy? This question was easy?

Bombdam… Bombdam… What in the world did that even mean?

The genre definitely fell way outside of my area of expertise, but even so, I was the one who had gotten myself into this, so I was going to put forth every effort to see it through.

I just needed to stay calm. Since there were four possible options, there was a 25% chance that I’d answer correctly even if I chose at random.

If I were to attempt to make a guess, unlike titles 1 through 3, title 4 was the only one that had the word ‘Bombdam’ come at the beginning. Perhaps that was some sort of hint? I decided to take a stab at it and go with the fourth option. Not long after I did, the time limit was reached and the correct answer was displayed.

I focused my attention on the second question, feeling a faint sense of dizziness as I stood under the scorching summer sun.

I was once again confronted with the fact I knew nothing of the chosen genre.

Naturally, the second question was completely beyond me as well. And this time, each of the four options looked effectively identical.

And at that, I came to realize that participating any further would be nothing more than a waste of time.

I proceeded to select answers at random, hoping that by some kind of miracle I’d manage to select the correct ones.

After spending the next ten minutes answering the rest of the questions, I silently closed my tablet.

Of the 20 questions on the quiz, the number I had gotten right was 4, for a correct answer rate of 20% overall. In other words, I had done worse than average. Unsurprisingly, the group that took first place was Sudō’s group, with an astonishing 95% correct. After all, Ike and Hondō seemed fairly reliable when it came to these kinds of questions. It wasn’t just straightforward academic and physical prowess that could prove useful, but miscellaneous knowledge as well. This all helped support what Chabashira had told us back before the exam had even started.

“Those questions were all pretty challenging, huh?”

With 5 correct answers, Nanase’s accuracy rate was just about the same as mine.

Essentially, it seemed safe to say that she knew nearly nothing about anime. And from a look at everyone else’s scores, it seemed like most of the other groups had the same experience with the quiz as we did.

“We freakin’ did it Kanji!”

As a member of the winning group, Sudō put his hand up, looking to celebrate by sharing a high-five with his teammates.

“Yay…”

Ike gave a dispirited response and just barely touched hands with his teammates. Seeing this firsthand, I felt somewhat concerned, unsure if I should talk to Sudō about what Ike was going through.

While this was my second time running into him, there was no guarantee that we would meet again after this. If Ike were to find out that Shinohara and Komiya had begun dating or had otherwise gotten close to each other during the exam, he probably wouldn’t take it very well.

However─ Was Sudō really the right person to try and support Ike right now? To that end, I had my reservations. In an academic, physical, and even mental sense, Sudō had no doubt matured from the person he used to be. But, whether or not he was capable of providing someone with delicate emotional support was a different story entirely.

“Is something the matter?”

Nanase asked me curiously.

After all, with the Task finished, there was no reason to stick around any longer.

“Is something wrong with Sudō-senpai’s group?”

As she had been watching closely for a while now, Nanase got right to the heart of the matter.

“As an uninvolved third-party, what does their group look like to you, Nanase? Well, I ask that, but I guess it’d be hard for you to conclude anything since you’ve never met any of them other than Sudō before.”

“Indeed. Then could you perhaps fill me in and tell me a bit about them?”

“Off on Sudō’s left is Ike Kanji, and to his right is Hondō Ryōtarō. They’re the type of people who do stupid things and end up standing out in a bad way… or, well, I guess it might be better to say that they’re the type of people who easily get carried away. But, at the same time, they both really add a lot to the class atmosphere.”

This definitely felt like an oversimplification.

Though, I probably wasn’t mistaken either, but I’d keep that to myself.

“They aren’t a studious bunch by any means so their group leaves a lot to be desired, but Sudō has plenty of physical strength and Ike has the right skills and experience to camp out on an uninhabited island. And Hondō… Well, Hondō’s a lively guy.”

It wasn’t a bad group of people to be with if the goal was just to get through the exam and enjoy yourself along the way.

“Ike-senpai and Hondō-senpai, is it? They add a lot to the atmosphere…? From what I can tell, that doesn’t really seem to be the case for Ike-senpai; Could he be sick perhaps?”

Despite having never met face-to-face, Nanase was still able to perceive that something was wrong.

Based on the vibe he gave off right now, she was certainly correct in that he didn’t look like someone who added to the atmosphere at all.

“It’s true that he’s usually livening things up in class. While he seems to be in a bit of a funk right now, he should at least be fine physically.”

“So that’s what Ayanokōji-senpai is worried about…”

After everything that had been said so far, Nanase had probably gotten a sense for it as well.

“Well, it is what it is. It’s troublesome, but I can’t always worry about the affairs of others. In the quiz, instead of placing in the top three, I placed all the way down at the bottom. They on the other hand took first. Composition aside, the group that racks up more points is the better one.”

Put simply, I was getting a bit ahead of myself by worrying about Sudō’s group when they were currently ahead of me in terms of overall score.

“That’s just the nature of this special exam, isn’t it? As long as you play to your strengths, you’ll still stand a fighting chance. In that respect, it really puts into perspective just how much effort the school has put into all of this. After all, not only did they rent out this entire island, they also crafted such a large-scale competition that highlights the different strengths and weaknesses of the students.”

This may sound rude, but there simply weren’t many opportunities for students like Ike and Hondō to play an active role back in the classroom.

A student’s duty primarily consisted of studying and sports, so it followed that those who struggled with both would eventually find themselves left in the dust.

In this exam, however, other aspects had a chance to take center stage as well. I had previously been concerned about the lack of balance in Sudō’s group, but they seemed like they were going to be just fine.

And because of that, Ike’s mental health was the only thing left standing in their way, which was a really tricky problem to solve…

If he were in prime condition, this exam could’ve been his chance to become a dark horse and overturn his negative reputation.

Be that as it may─ I cast a sidelong glance at the adults in the process of dismantling the Task site. While this school was clearly different from an ordinary high school, the sheer cost of such a large cruise ship, all the various equipment, labor, and everything else that had gone into a single special exam was unimaginable. Last year’s island had been impressive, but this time the school had gone above and beyond.

Not only was the budget on a completely different level, but the content was as well. Last year, we were told to work together as a class, but this time around, we had been told to split up into a bunch of small groups and scurry to and fro throughout this vast, no-man’s island. As such, minor, petty disputes between fellow students had the potential to blow up into something major and unprecedented.

Additionally, matters of injury and illness were now incredibly pivotal. While a couple of scratches or a low fever probably wouldn’t pose too much of a problem, there was a dire need to keep in mind the possibility of a bone fracture, or potentially something even worse than that.

Until the two-week exam has safely reached its conclusion, the school faculty members probably won’t have the luxury of relaxing either.

“Let’s get going.”

Rather than stand around here, we’d be better off heading toward the next designated area or looking for another Task to take part in.

“Senpai, may I say something before we depart?”

Just as I began to start walking, Nanase inserted herself in front of me and looked up to meet my eyes.

“Once again, just to reiterate, please disregard my presence and choose what you truly believe to be the most ideal route. Okay, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

This uninhabited island exam was such that, even if you took first every once in a while, that wouldn’t be enough to secure yourself the win. Coming out on top overall would be difficult if you didn’t steadily rack up victories throughout the entirety of the long, two-week battle. And, this said nothing of the fact that larger groups had an inherent advantage. If you were on your own, that just meant you had to work harder to score more points than others.

“I’ll say this one more time as well. I’m not letting your presence influence my decisions, so stop worrying about it.”

By this point, I had already come to a decision about my approach to this.

An approach that looked to unravel the rules of the exam and the thought processes of those around me.

If letting her accompany me was going to get in the way of that, I wouldn’t have allowed it in the first place.

“I’m relieved to hear you say that. Please take care of me moving forward.”

After checking my watch, I took out my tablet.

It was just about time for the fourth Basic Movement designation. It would be the last of the day, as well as the first randomly designated area of the exam. When the time came, I checked the map and found that I had gotten area I7.

If we wanted to take the shortest path, we would have to cross over a mountain range.

Having said that, if I chose to prioritize safety and take a detour, it would take quite a while to get there.

However, this was where it got tricky, because this wasn’t an area we needed to get to.

“Shall we depart?”

“Before that, Nanase, I want to see your tablet.”

“Ah, that’s right. We still haven’t confirmed whether or not we have the same Table.”

While I was expecting her to at least be somewhat reluctant, Nanase pulled her tablet out of her backpack and showed me the map without hiding anything. And sure enough, her next destination was marked as I7, just the same as me.

“It seems I have the same Table as Senpai after all.”

“I guess so.”

I couldn’t discount the possibility that our areas might have coincidentally overlapped across different Tables, but given everything else that had happened so far, it seemed reasonable enough to conclude that our Tables were the same.

“With that out the way, let’s move on. Will we be going over the mountain range?”

“No, I’m not going to go out of my way for the Arrival Bonus this time. Tasks appeared in both G8 and G9, so I’m thinking of finishing off the day by heading to those instead.”

Both Tasks were centered around academic concepts, with the first being called ‘Math Problems’ and the second ‘English Problems’.

I felt pretty confident that I’d do well in them. That is, as long as I managed to make it there in time to register.

“Then, which will we be pitching camp at today?”

“Well… The first area tomorrow will be centered around area I7. If we get too close, we might accidentally start out in the next designated area. I’d like to avoid that if possible.”

Just to be sure, it felt like it would probably be safest to stick to area H9.

“Once we’re done with the Tasks, I think we’ll head to H9 to set up camp.”

After hearing out my explanation, Nanase nodded along in agreement without a single complaint.

“Oi Ayanokōji! Didja just say you’re gonna set up camp in H9?”

Sudō was just about to set out after wrapping up with the Task when he called out to me.

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, it’s just that our next designated area happens to be H9. Where you goin’ after this?”

“For now we’re going to G8 and G9 for the Math and English Tasks.”

“Ugh, yeah, we’re gonna be avoidin’ those for sure.”

Sudō muttered while scratching his head, as if he was saying something obvious.

While it was a little further away, Sudō’s group would most likely be headed to the Task that appeared over in area E9 instead.

“If ya want, how ‘bout we all meet up after an’ camp together? Should be more fun with friends. I’d also like to hear whatcha think ‘bout our strategies so far and see if you’ve got any suggestions.”

This was an unexpected proposal, but not a bad one. Moreover, I should probably praise him for his progressive attitude. Not to mention, the problem with Ike had been bothering me for a while as well.

With a coincidental get-together like this, Ike probably wouldn’t feel like I had any ulterior motives in reaching out to him.

“It’ll prolly be hard to find each other in the forest, so how ‘bout we meet up on the beach in G9 instead?”

Since it’d be easier to find each other on the beach, that was probably the better choice.

“That sounds good. When should we look to meet?”

“Since we’ll all be close by, how ‘bout 5:30?”

In which case, we’d probably be able to meet up without running into any problems after we all finished up with our Tasks.

“Alright. See you on the beach in G9 at 5:30.”

With that, Sudō and his friends set off in the other direction, looking to take on a different Task than us.

Well, it’d be unreasonable to ask them to participate in an English or Math Task.

It was only natural that they would look to challenge Tasks that suited them.

“Turns out that we’ll be spending the night with them today. Do you have any problems with that, Nanase?”

She’d be spending the night with four older guys, so it would make sense for her to be at least a little bit hesitant.

Although, I guess it was probably better than having to spend the night camping alone with me.

“It’s fine. I actually think it’ll be a good chance to get to know everyone.”

I was glad to see that she seemed open to the idea.