

Chapter 212: The Final Challenge That Decides the Strongest of the Generation

When her footsteps felt the upward slope for the second time, Kitasan Black instantly sensed something was wrong.

The last time she stepped onto the uphill stretch on the opposite straight, she had just left the gate.

Back then, her stamina had felt like a surging tide ready to burst forth—full and overflowing.

With that kind of strength, every step carried endless momentum, as if she could smash through any obstacle ahead.

But now, she has already run more than 2,000 meters.

In the races she usually ran, just a few seconds—ten seconds or so—after passing 2,000 meters, the finish line would already be within reach.

She might even have crossed it already, basking in the glory of victory.

Yet in this Kikuka Sho, nearly 1,000 meters still stretched out before her.

Even as she gradually increased her speed, the remaining distance would probably take a full minute to cover.

It wasn't as if she hadn't known this beforehand, or hadn't mentally prepared.

But now that she had truly reached this point and experienced it firsthand, it felt as though a heavy hammer suddenly smashed into her chest, making her heart jolt violently.

At the same time, she realized in shock that the stamina she had always been proud of—rarely ever feeling tired—was now leaking away like air from a punctured balloon, hissing out bit by bit.

Uphill. Entering the third turn for the second time. She was still fine then.

Her breathing kept its familiar rhythm. Her arm swings and strides did too.

Entering the curve, cutting forward along the inside lane—her tempo hadn't changed much.

The changes began when she entered the fourth turn for the second time.

Her breathing became labored.

The steady, powerful rhythm that had continuously supplied energy to her body was gradually falling apart.

When she inhaled, it felt as if thin membranes were wrapping around her lungs layer by layer. Her alveoli seemed to groan, protesting their inability to draw in enough oxygen.

When she exhaled, wind resistance—or some other invisible force—blocked her. The stale air couldn't fully escape, lingering in her chest and slowly building into a suffocating pressure.

Her arm swings also stopped being as coordinated and forceful as before.

The range unconsciously shrank. The frequency gradually slowed.

They had once helped propel her forward, but now they felt like a burden.

It wasn't like she hadn't tried adjusting her rhythm, trying to reclaim her original cadence.

But every attempt felt like fighting the hardest boss in a game the first time you ever played—barely effective.

Her leg muscles, too, began to feel as heavy as if filled with lead, sore and sluggish.

Distances she could once cross easily now demanded far more effort.

With every step she landed, she could clearly feel the roughness of the track beneath her feet.

That friction was no longer helping her move forward—it had become resistance, holding her back.

Then came her brain. Her vision.

It felt as though everything was shrouded in thick fog, her thoughts turning slow and muddled.

Her vision blurred. Everything around her seemed distorted. The track wavered and warped before her eyes.

She struggled to focus, barely managing to make out the vague outline of the end of the fourth turn.

At that moment, faintly, she heard the commentator's voice drifting from far away, as if through a heavy barrier:

"The downhill section is about to end, 600 meters remaining!"

"The runners are starting to struggle, but! The final challenge to decide the strongest of this generation—It's here!!"

The commentator's voice was filled with excitement, every word like a spark bursting into flame, leaping and burning:

"Kitasan Black still leads, but she's clearly fatigued, yet she still has a three-length advantage!"

"Ribbon Victory is holding on desperately, but the gap between her and Kitanasan Black is widening."

"Tagano Café is charging up! She replaces Ribbon Victory for second place!"

"Number 15, Angel Wing, makes her move! The late runners are starting to attack! The third favorite, Satono Rasen, finally begins her move!"

"Satono Rasen is closing in from behind! The second favorite, REAL STEEL, is moving forward as well— No—!"

"REAL STEEL has moved to the far outside. She's preparing to sprint!"

"After that is Number 10! And on the outside is... Number 7!"

"Strengthen Will is finally making her move! She's finally charging up! She's chasing along the outside of Proof of Glory!"

“Right now, the one leading the pack is No. 12, Wonderful Warrior! And in last place is No. 1, Important Heart! She’s already losing speed!”

“Heading into the straight!”

“Final 400 meters!”

The commentator was practically screaming, delivering every key update to the crowd.

The grandstands had long since erupted into a feverish frenzy.

People who had already stood up waved flags and glow sticks, shouting themselves hoarse. Cheers, screams, and cries of encouragement intertwined into a deafening roar, as if it might flip the entire stadium upside down.

The racing Umamusume like Oguri Cap leaned forward excitedly, eyes locked on the track without blinking for even a second, afraid of missing a single moment. Their hands were clenched tight, palms soaked with sweat, muttering constant words of encouragement for the runners.

Saburo Kitajima stared fixedly at Kitasan Black, his lips trembling as he shouted incoherently to cheer on his granddaughter:

“Kita-chan, go! Hang in there! You can do it! Sprint!”

His voice had turned hoarse from excitement, his eyes full of worry and hope.

Makoto was just as focused on the track. Infected by Kitajima’s excitement, he shouted at the top of his lungs too:

“Kita-chan, keep your pace! Show your strength! Push through the finish!”

His binoculars had long since slipped down and hung uselessly from his chest, but he didn’t even notice. Sweat covered his forehead as he stared wide-eyed at the black-haired girl at the very front.

Then, the commentator’s voice suddenly rose sharply:

“Final straight!”

“On the outside, Albert moves up into third! On the inside, Crowned Stone steps forward again!”

“But Real Will is slowing down—Crowned Stone is blocked!”

“Aiming for the innermost line—REAL STEEL is coming up!”

“Albert! In an instant it’s Tagano Café! REAL STEEL— she’s up to second!”

“Satono Rasen right behind her!”

“But second place is REAL STEEL!”

“A sharp closing kick! She’s crushing Kitasan Black’s lead!”

“On the inside, Kitasan Black! But on the outside, REAL STEEL!”

“Only two lengths left... one length... half a length!”

“Could it be...?”

The commentator’s voice trembled with excitement:

“Is Kitasan Black going to be overtaken just like that?!”

In the stands, the atmosphere froze for an instant, as though time itself had stopped in a suffocating silence.

But that silence lasted only a moment. In the blink of an eye, the entire stadium erupted like a volcano.

Countless spectators completely lost control of their emotions. Many were so tense they stopped breathing, eyes wide, staring at the track. Others screamed uncontrollably, their voices rising and falling like waves, as if they might tear open the sky above the stadium.

Among the Umamusume watching the race, even the usually calm and composed Oguri Cap was trembling with shock and excitement. Her eyes were locked tightly on the track, her hands clenched unconsciously, her nails nearly digging into her palms.