

Chapter 164: The Runaway Duramente

Makoto had previously considered the possibility of forming a trainer contract with Almond Eye when she mentioned wanting his guidance.

Breaking through the limitation of short-to-mild distances and stepping into longer races—he felt quite confident about that.

From what he remembered, Almond Eye was extremely strong from mile to mid-distance races, with incredible results.

Even without relying on those memories, her performance in the last event race—and all the attention afterward—made that clear enough.

An Umamusume who hasn't entered Honkakuka stage yet doesn't undergo very intense training. Their usual distances are around 1,000 or 1,200 meters.

Almond Eye's performance at these distances wasn't bad—she ranked near the top of her class—but she wasn't among the absolute strongest of her age group.

This kind of situation meant one of two things:

Either she hadn't undergone specialized training yet and her talent hadn't bloomed, or the race distances were too short for her—her body couldn't fully activate, and her late-race push, breakout power, especially her closing kick, simply couldn't manifest.

Considering the final stretch of the event race, the latter seemed far more likely for Almond Eye.

Adding his memories to the evaluation, he could almost conclude that she was built for distances far beyond 1,200 meters—possibly *much* farther.

Since she had now entered the Honkakuka stage, perhaps it was time to get in touch with her family.

After assessing Almond Eye's condition, that was what Makoto thought.

While Makoto was quietly thinking, Almond Eye suddenly remembered something—her parents had mentioned taking her to the hospital for a check-up sometime soon.

She hadn't felt sick or uncomfortable at the time, so she didn't think much of it.

Only now did she realize that the so-called check-up was probably related to the start of her Honkakuka stage.

Realizing this, she answered Kitan Black and the others while sneaking occasional glances at Makoto.

Noticing her gaze, Makoto was about to ask for confirmation when he caught sight of someone approaching from the side.

Judging from the figure, it was a girl—but her outfit was odd.

It was the peak of August's blazing heat, and even though it was just past nine in the morning, the sun was already scorching.

Yet this girl wore a baseball cap, sunglasses, a mask, and a thin long-sleeved jacket.

Her lower half was just as tightly covered—long, light blue jeans wrapped around her long legs.

The only part that matched the weather was her footwear: low-heeled sandals.

Kitakan Black and the others noticed the strangely dressed girl too.

Seeing her heading straight toward them, Kitasan Black blinked in confusion.

It looked like the girl was coming *specifically* for her.

Her build and aura seemed vaguely familiar as well.

“...Um, hello, may I ask who—”

“...It’s me.”

A muffled voice came from behind the mask.

The girl tugged her sunglasses down slightly, revealing a pair of gradient purple-blue eyes.

“Ah! Dura—mmph mmmph—!”

Before Kitasan Black could finish calling her name, the “girl”—actually Duramente—quickly clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Shhh! Shh...”

With her finger pressed over her mask, her eyes—peeking out above her sunglasses—were full of embarrassment.

Wrapped up from head to toe, Duramente nervously glanced at Makoto and the others, then scanned the surroundings.

“Keep your voice down. I... Kitanasan, can we—can we talk somewhere else...?”

.....

A short while later, at a corner of the highest row of the spectator stands—

Kitasan Black stared at the now-unmasked Duramente, her mouth twitching uncontrollably.

“...So, you picked a fight with your family because you want to run in the Kikuka Sho... and then you secretly ran away from home to watch the Dream Trophy today...?”

“Yeah. That’s exactly right.”

Duramente nodded with perfect seriousness.

“I promised you, so I *will* run in the Kikuka Sho.”

“But... but...”

Kitasan Black’s emotions grew complicated.

Of course she remembered the promise she and Duramente had made—to race against each other again someday.

But she also remembered clearly that on the day they first met, Duramente had said she wanted to become the strongest racer, and that her family hoped she would become an Arc de Triomphe champion.

After that, she had looked up the Arc and asked her Trainer about it, learning that it was one of the most prestigious G1 races in the entire world.

From long ago to the present, many of her senpai had challenged that race.

Yet so far, the best result a senpai had achieved was second place.

Her Trainer had once said that Japan's Umamusume were no different from those anywhere else in the world—that their talent didn't vary by region.

Kitasan Black believed that.

And precisely because of that, the fact that no Japanese Umamusume had ever won the Arc might actually mean that whoever won it could indeed call herself “the strongest.”

She had never imagined Duramente would give up on that dream—and even less that she would change it because of her.

If Dura-chan really gives up on the Arc... and even fights with her family over it... what am I supposed to do...?

She bit her lip anxiously.

Meeting Duramente's earnest gaze for a moment, she couldn't help but glance over at Makoto, then at the confused-looking Almond Eye.

The viewing box wasn't large; other than the two of them, only Makoto and Almond Eye were inside.

Silence Suzuka and Rice Shower seemed to have anticipated this situation—or maybe not—but on their way here, both senpai had politely excused themselves, saying they wanted to go cheer for some friends.

Seeing the plea for help in Kitasan Black's eyes, Makoto felt a headache forming.

He had heard Duramente's explanation as well, and unlike Kitasan Black, he knew more of the background.

In casual conversations, Air Groove had told him before that both her family and Duramente's family placed enormous importance on the Arc de Triomphe.

Or rather, *all of Japan* placed great importance on that European G1—it was practically a national obsession.

Every powerful racer and their trainer had considered challenging it, and many had indeed tried.

And not just in the last few decades.

Even in the years—and even a decade—after this, no Japanese Umamusume would win the Arc.

That failure didn't discourage fans at all.

Instead, it made them *even more* fanatical.

Whenever news broke that someone was heading for the Arc, the whole industry and fanbase would go into a frenzy.

Calling them obsessed wouldn't even be an exaggeration.

In this context, Makoto could easily guess what Kitasan Black was thinking.

And he also knew he wasn't in a position to say anything definitive.

He couldn't exactly say:

“Give it up, Duramente. The Arc is impossible. You’ll go there just to get crushed.”

Moreover, judging by her appearance, Duramente was clearly on the run from home.

For many reasons, he had a responsibility to inform Air Groove.

In fact, Air Groove already knew.

“Yasui-san, Duramente should be with you, right? She used my credit card to reserve seats at the racecourse.”

“I asked the staff and heard she went to you and Kitasan. Please keep an eye on her—don't let her run off. And don't let her know that I know.”

“Please, I beg you.”

That was the message Air Groove had sent just moments earlier.

Even through the screen, Makoto could practically feel her massaging her temples, completely exasperated.

Thinking of the message, Makoto mulled things over—then suddenly had an idea.

“...It’s great to keep one’s promises,” he began.

“But future race plans should still be made carefully.”

He added a subtle nudge:

“Besides, Duramente has probably been undergoing some pretty intense training at camp these days. Think of today as a rest day. If you push too hard, all sorts of problems can pop up.”

Dropping the hint intentionally, he turned his gaze toward the racecourse and shifted the subject.

“Let’s relax for now. Let’s enjoy the race first.”