**Chapter 224: It's Been a While (4)**

Right after Bunny finished speaking, when I stared at the sparrow intently, its eyes met mine, and after a brief stiffness, it showed signs of bewilderment and spread its wings.

-Flutter!

I was certain the moment it tried to take flight.

The reaction seemed to be a mixture of confusion and bewilderment from being caught by the surveillance target making eye contact, followed by an escape attempt.

It wasn't a reaction typical of an ordinary sparrow.

Immediately reaching the conclusion that it was something like a familiar, I swung my axe at the sparrow trying to fly away.

"Where do you think you're going!"

With mana manipulation made more natural thanks to the Dragon Heart's blessing, I drew up the cold mana residing in my heart.

-Crack!

When the aura overlaid on Bunny with cold mana hit the window, the glass immediately shattered, and a huge chunk of ice formed at the point of impact.

Balkan instinctively felt he could manipulate that ice chunk.

The tip of the ice chunk created from mana was sharpened.

-Stab!

"Screech!"

The ice formed on the window extended like an icicle and pierced the familiar sparrow's left wing.

The sparrow screamed and struggled to pull its wing free from the icicle. But it was meaningless.

-Swoosh. Swoosh.

I manipulated the ice while imagining the feeling of grasping the sparrow with my hand.

I had to be careful.

If I caused enough damage to kill the sparrow, the fatally wounded familiar would be forcibly recalled to its master.

Soon the sparrow was gripped in an ice fist about the size of a hand.

Perhaps because I accomplished it purely on instinct without knowing the principles of magic, it consumed much more mana than when creating blade aura.

Enduring the dizziness from the sudden mana consumption, I retrieved the sparrow.

"Chirp! Chirp chirp!"

The struggling creature, seeming to realize escape was impossible, quietly chirped and gave up resistance.

Balkan brought Bunny's sharp axe blade to the sparrow's neck.

Though it wouldn't mean much since it was a familiar, it seemed better than doing nothing.

"Were you sent by the succubi?"

With Bunny's words about detecting the magical energy of lust and recalling the succubi I had lost track of in the lawless zone's brothel district when Noir had become simpleminded.

Those who had addressed me with unusually honorific speech said they would visit again soon, so I suspected this sparrow might be a familiar sent by those succubi.

Sure enough, the sparrow's attitude completely changed upon hearing those words.

"Chirp chirp."

It chirped softly while looking at the ice. Its eyes seemed to say it would tell him if he let it go.

Though he had brought it inside and the broken window was blocked by ice, making escape nearly impossible, he couldn't let his guard down.

There was also the possibility it could force a recall by stabbing itself with its beak.

Still, he needed to make some concessions to hear what the sparrow had to say.

Once again manipulating mana, he only loosened the ring and little fingers of the ice fist holding the sparrow. Its neck and wings were still restrained.

Like a penis being jerked off, when the sparrow held in the ice fist gained freedom of its lower body, it scratched small letters on the floor with its claws.

-That's right.

A short, affirmative answer.

As expected, this familiar sparrow was sent by the succubus side.

"Is your master... no, you who are watching through this familiar, are you that succubus I saw last time?"

-Shake shake.

The sparrow shook its head and wrote letters again.

-Their master.

The master of the succubi.

Through the words the sparrow wrote, he could instantly grasp who the being beyond the familiar was.

The being who tried to find and bring him even by releasing succubi into the Labyrinth City, the Worshiper of Lust.

"How did you find my location?"

The sparrow remained silent without moving its feet.

'Is this a secret then?'

Though I wasn't sure, it was clearly someone who commanded not just middle-ranked but even high-ranked succubi. They must have had some means.

The succubus who had attacked in the labyrinth seemed able to track through something called yang energy, so they might have found out through that.

"Have you been watching me all this time?"

After returning from the labyrinth, I had occasionally seen that sparrow resting on the window over the past few days.

I had thought it might be trying to build a nest nearby, but who would have thought it was a demon worshiper familiar.

[How about it? If you hadn't given this soul stone to me, it would have live-streamed your mating routine to an incredibly lewd succubus, don't I deserve some reward?]

Seizing that gap, Bunny subtly demanded compensation.

[...Later.]

[Tch. Cheapskate!]

[I'll give you plenty of semen.]

[You blessed bastard. Now you're finally talking sense. Make sure to give me lots!]

I answered through telepathy instead of opening my mouth.

If they had been watching since earlier, they would have noticed Bunny wasn't an ordinary axe, but probably wouldn't have reached the conclusion that the Demon of Gluttony resided within.

While thinking that, the sparrow wrote more letters.

-Sometimes.

"Why were you watching me? Last time you even tried to find me and take me away using familiars."

-Because you have value.

"...Value?"

Balkan suddenly recalled the words the succubi had muttered in ecstasy when they met him.

—There was a reason our master ordered us to find that man! He is a true male, a true incubus...!

—To us and our master, you have become a very desirable figure.

—We will awaken you as a true incubus and teach you how to use that power to techniques that will bring all females to their knees.

—Together with us, let's dye this city in lust and pleasure...

After gaining the Curse of the Nightmare, they showed considerable goodwill and respect toward me when they met.

That fanatical behavior was beyond mere expression of favor, it was something more.

-You should know best? You're special because you're fundamentally different from other inferior males.

And the words of the Worshiper of Lust that added certainty to those thoughts.

The vague fantasy-like thoughts he had from before began to take on more reality.

Could these ones...

'Are they trying to do something using my body, an incubus' sexual desire?'

Just as that thought occurred, footsteps of someone coming up from below could be heard.

When the window shattered, the sound was loud, so it must be Denshi and Diana.

The sparrow that noticed that presence wrote letters again.

-Beware of Pride and Sloth, the beastkin duke and the woman in white robes.

That sentence contained unexpected content.

"......You're telling me to beware of the Worshipers of Pride and Sloth?"

To that question, the sparrow nodded while answering by writing.

-16th floor. Laboratory. Found out. Not personal details yet.

The meaning contained in that short sentence could be understood right away.

The artifact warehouse that seemed to be the laboratory of the Worshiper of Sloth and that person found out about the mess caused there.

Would only the Worshiper of Sloth know? The possibility was low. The suddenly mentioned Worshiper of Pride was also concerning.

At least those two, or three including Lust, would know.

Looking at the words that personal details weren't known yet, it seems they haven't been able to identify who specifically.

"...Why are you telling me this?"

It didn't make sense. As fellow demon worshipers, she had no need to provide such information.

-Clang!

"Balkan! Are you alright?!"

"Master, are you okay?! We could hear glass breaking even in the next room!"

At that moment, Diana and Denshi opened the door and entered simultaneously.

-Swoosh.

In the brief moment his gaze turned that way, the sparrow held in the ice fist went limp.

[It's dead. Since familiars don't die from bleeding out just from having their wings pierced, they must have unilaterally severed the familiar contract from their side.]

While listening to Bunny's quiet explanation, I looked down at the floor.

-We're not exactly on the same side. And consider it a reward.

New words were written there.

-From now on too, just keep doing what you're doing.

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"What the...ugh. These succubi are all so creepy. Last time they even tried to take over your body in the labyrinth..."

"...Worshiper of Lust..."

When I briefly explained what had just happened, Denshi hugged herself and rubbed her arms as if getting goosebumps.

Diana muttered while looking at the familiar sparrow with a thoughtful expression.

"We should inform the Explorers' Union for now. And increase security in the area. You must have been surprised, so leave the rest to us and get some rest first. Recover your mana too."

Diana also showed an expression of not welcoming the stranger who had visited her residence.

I thought some defensive artifacts or relics would probably be brought into the inn within a few days.

Even if she opened a second inn branch in the labyrinth, this ground-level inn would be a home and sanctuary with many memories for Diana, so she was raising the security level.

"Since those kinds of beings might come again. I'll stay by master's side."

Denshi clung close while making jokes as if trying to calm her startled heart.

"...Balkan. Perhaps..."

"Yes?"

While gently patting Denshi’s head and smiling bitterly, Diana opened her mouth while carefully rubbing her lower abdomen.

The lower abdomen that had borne another pattern before the incubus' bondage mark was engraved.

After moving her lips for a moment while rubbing it, Diana swallowed her words again.

"...Mmm. Nothing. Since we have to leave for the royal castle tomorrow, get plenty of rest today."

After seeing off Diana who gestured goodbye saying she would isolate Denshi and see him tomorrow, Balkan was lost in thought.

'Not exactly on the same side...'

Perhaps there were things like factions even among demon worshipers. Their relationship might not be as tight as I had thought.

'Plus reward, and keep doing what I've been doing?'

The Worshiper of Lust had mainly seen scenes of me mating with Diana and Denshi.

Where in that was anything worth calling a reward for information?

"......Hmmmm..."

No way. They couldn't have given the reward for mating with Diana...

"No, seeing what these bastards do, that might unexpectedly be right..."

There was no disagreement that succubi were perplexing beings in many ways.

I sighed, cleared away idle thoughts, and lay down under the blanket.

There was still time until the Second Princess's birthday, but we had decided to leave early for the royal castle to match Diana's escort schedule.

'I wonder if Ellie is doing well too. I miss her.'

Sleep quickly came as I thought about meeting the elven girl who was a royal magician and handled magic incredibly well.