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The DRAGON'S
SOULMATE is a
MUSHROOM
PRINCESS!

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Various Facets of Growth](#)

[Chapter 2: Mushrooms Will Come When Called](#)

[Chapter 3: Love Is Stronger than Mycelium](#)

[Chapter 4: See? It's All Right](#)

[Chapter 5: A Mushroom House for a Mushroom Freak](#)

[Chapter 6: Let Me Go with You Too](#)

[Chapter 7: A Quick Infusion of Agnes](#)

[Chapter 8: The Walled City](#)

[Chapter 9: Agnes's Desired Punishment](#)

[Chapter 10: I Am the Pink Mushroom Princess](#)

[Chapter 11: A Latticework of Spirits and Mushrooms](#)

[Chapter 12: Trembling with Embarrassment](#)

[Chapter 13: A Mushroomy Wedding](#)

[Chapter 14: Crest Bearers with Dragonmates Are a Pain](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Short Story: The Dragon's Sweet Dream](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series](#)

The Dragon’s Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 4

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The Dragon’s Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 4

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Prologue

“**WE’RE** finally returning to Visage, aren’t we?” Lady Agnes Lefort muttered as she watched the royal palace of Oreille receding from the carriage window.

“Right.”

The beautiful young man with Prussian blue hair sitting next to her was Prince Claude Visage.

Agnes’s fiancé.

Though the two now rode in an elegant horse-drawn carriage, it wasn’t a pleasant vacation that had brought Agnes to the neighboring country of Oreille. Her visit was not of her own volition. She’d been brought to be sold, a form of recompense for the debts incurred by her ex-fiancé... *All right, let’s just call it what it was—a kidnapping.*

Agnes took a deep breath as she thought back over everything that had happened. Her biological father Josse Murre was in truth Josselin Oreille, the half-brother of the previous king of Oreille. It was shocking enough that her father, whom Agnes had always thought was a commoner, had turned out to belong to the royal family of a neighboring country. But that wasn’t all, either.

Josselin had been blessed by powerful spirits to be the King of Mushrooms, and he’d possessed a special ring that proved it. The current king of Oreille had wanted the ring. Out of jealousy and desire, he had Josselin killed and stole the ring at the same time.

But, as he was not the true owner of the ring, he was unable to possess its original power. So, he set his sights on targeting Josselin’s daughter Agnes, who was also blessed with the divine protection of the very same spirits.

Agnes was kidnapped and brought to Oreille. However, when she learned the truth about the death of her parents and aunt, her mushroom powers had gone out of control.

Claude was the one who had stopped the cathedral from being completely destroyed. He'd sacrificed his own blood and magical energy to summon a sacred beast to reach Oreille, even though just entering the country was enough to render him weak and sick. Agnes was grateful for his help, yet at the same time, felt guilty for all he had done for her.

Although matters had been settled for the time being, there was still a lot of work to do, from clean-ups to negotiations. Prince Gerome Visage, Claude's half-brother, remained in Oreille to take care of all that.

Prince Nathan of Oreille seemed like a decent person who would be willing to talk things through, but after such a big commotion that seemed likely to spark a war between the two nations, it was nerve-wracking to just leave Prince Gerome alone to settle things.

Gerome, however, was more concerned with another matter entirely.

"Listen," he'd said, exuding an aura like he wouldn't take no for an answer. "The first priority is to get Claude back to Visage with Agnes, pronto! Otherwise, there's no point to any of this!"

Without room to make any arguments, Agnes and Claude were rushed into a carriage and sent on their way. Now, they were watching the royal capital streets receding from view through the carriage window. Soon, they would be out of the capital entirely.

Agnes had recently spent several days riding in horse-drawn carriages, but she'd been blindfolded and gagged the whole time with the window blacked out. Compared to that, this was quite pleasant.

She tore her eyes away from the window and her gaze fell on the white creature curled up beside her, Ciel. She stroked its soft fur fondly. Ciel resembled a large white cat with dark blue stripes in its fur, but it was actually a sacred beast that Claude had summoned using his own dragon blood.

When she first saw Ciel, the tiger had been as tall as Agnes with beautiful sky-blue eyes, as his name suggested. The blessings of the spirits had transpired to make Ciel kitten-sized now. And to be honest, Agnes wasn't exactly sure how that worked.

To Agnes's understanding, sacred beasts continually drew from the magical energy of their summoners—in this case, Claude—and tended to consume less when they were smaller. And honestly, Agnes was delighted to have a very fluffy and adorable Ciel kitten around.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Agnes voiced after a while. "Prince Gerome only urged us to hurry off because he was worried about your health, right, Claude?"

"I'm fine. My original arrangement with Ciel has been fulfilled, and his current form is not draining much of my magical energy at all." Claude gave Agnes a soft smile, but she wasn't about to just let it drop so easily.

"I get that, but until you found me, the arrangement you made was a temporary, extremely taxing one, right? You used up a huge amount of your magical energy just getting here. It must have been very draining just to cross the border into Oreille..." she fretted.

There seemed to be a power conflict between those with dragon blood and the spirits. In Oreille, where the spirits' influence was strong, Claude's own power was muted and his physical condition adversely affected. On top of that, his magical energy was being guzzled by a sacred beast. He must have been in terrible condition, all things considered.

But Claude was so kind. No doubt he was trying his hardest to keep Agnes from worrying. His brows furrowed as he realized she wouldn't just let him wave the issue away.

"Well, I can't say I'm exactly in top condition right now, but we're heading home. I'll be fine," he reassured. "And you're here, Agnes. As you can see, I'm perfectly content."

Those with particularly high concentrations of dragon blood in their veins are born with something called a Dragon Crest. These Crest Bearers all have soulmates, known as Dragonmates. Agnes was Claude's, and her presence seemed to lend him strength in many areas. It was hard for her to notice any differences, so Agnes wasn't quite sure how much she helped.

Claude reached out and poked her cheek. The escaping puff of air made her realize she'd been pouting with her cheeks puffed out.

“Besides, there’s much to do once we get back,” he said.

“Yes, report to our families...and to His Majesty...”

“That goes without saying. Also, I have to deal with that walking trash heap who tried to sell *MY* Dragonmate to the king of another country,” Claude said in a dangerously dark voice.

“W-Walking trash heap...!” Agnes repeated.

It had been no ordinary kidnapping.

Agnes was the adopted daughter of a count, yes, but she was also the fiancée of Claude, second in line to the throne. The Dragonmate of a Crest Bearer.

Her ex-fiancé Philip and his wife Sabina had committed what was arguably treason. Even if they had only been acting at the behest of Oreille’s king, that didn’t help their case.

“What kind of punishment will Philip and Sabina receive?” Agnes asked.

“The specifics will be decided after my brother and father have discussed it,” Claude replied, a dark twinkle in his eyes. “If you ask me, it wouldn’t be going too far to have him executed on the spot... But Philip *does* have royal blood. He can’t be squelched so easily.”

Does that mean that if Philip wasn’t a member of the royal family, he could have been immediately executed? The thought was a little scary... But after everything Philip had done, Agnes couldn’t muster up much sympathy.

“And Marquis de Barthet is a loyal subject,” Claude continued. “When this all came to light, he handed over authority of the Barthet region to me. He’ll probably offer to rescind his title and may avoid execution, considering what he still has to offer the kingdom.”

“I see...”

Philip and Sabina had committed unforgivable crimes. Yet, the thought of people being executed because of something that involved Agnes was upsetting to say the least. All in all, she was somewhat relieved to learn what would happen.

“But there’s something more important than all of that,” Claude stated.

“What could that be?” Agnes asked, tilting her head.

“Preparing for our wedding. Things are already underway, but I’ll need your cooperation and input for many of the elements, such as your dress, accessories...” As Claude ticked things off on his fingers, Agnes found herself blinking.

“Our w-w-wedding?!”

They had already expressed their mutual desire to get married and were engaged, so all this was simply a natural progression of events. Still, Agnes had thought the actual marriage might be a ways off.

“And we need to get our new residence prepared, too,” Claude added.

“Our n-n-new residence?!”

“The building has already been renovated. We’ll be able to live in it soon.”

“Whaaat?!”

This is all going so fast! Agnes’s mouth was hanging wide open.

Seeing her shock, Claude peered at her face with concern. He seemed to have misinterpreted her reaction. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Perhaps you wanted to live in the royal palace instead?”

What? No way would I want that. Agnes shook her head hard, and Claude smiled.

“Good. I’d also rather spend time with you, just us, than in the royal palace with all those people around,” he said, sounding pleased.

That wasn’t what she meant by her instant rejection of the idea. The mere thought of living in the royal palace was already unbearable enough to her. But Claude’s smile was so dazzling, Agnes felt she couldn’t clarify.

Though she’d gotten somewhat used to him by now, the fact remained that Claude was an undeniably beautiful young man. His Prussian blue hair was as dark as the night sky, and his brilliant gray eyes brought out his dignified features. He wasn’t just good-looking, either. Claude was as skilled in swordplay as any knight, he could wield magic as a result of his Dragon Crest, and he had a gentle, kind personality to boot.

Okay, so he *was* a mushroom-loving fanatic, but even with that flaw, Agnes still felt he was far too good for her.

“If there’s anything you desire, just let me know,” he said sweetly. “Why don’t we go check it out together next time? Maybe you’ll think of some things you want once you see the place for yourself.”

“R-Right. So, uh, since when have you been planning a home for us?” Agnes asked.

“Since right after I proposed to you, Agnes.”

“That’s way too soon!”

Claude’s proposal... When exactly was he referring to?

Agnes considered his first proposal to be when he’d said: “This is fate! I promise you, it’s no spore-of the moment decision! My morels are not questionable! You and I would make the mushiest couple imaginable! Would you marry me?”

These days, she could be a little more open-minded about it, but at the time, his mushroom fetishism had completely taken her aback. It was just about the worst proposal ever, and Agnes had been almost too shocked to turn him down.

To think that he’d started looking for a house right after witnessing Agnes’s horrified reaction... Goodness, he really must be some sort of freak. Even now, Agnes found her head spinning over the entire concept.

“I was certain you were the only one I would ever want to marry, Agnes. So I figured if I have to wait anyway, why not have some fun and get some preparations in order at the same time? But then you came around quicker than I was expecting, so I’ve had to hustle a little with all the prep work.”

“...You weren’t expecting me to assent to the marriage?” Agnes asked.

To tell the truth, all Agnes could think of was running away very fast at the time. Surely Claude had noticed? Despite that, he still went ahead and started preparing a house for them? Yeah, that was weird no matter how she looked at it.

“You’ve been through a lot, and I didn’t want to force you, so I was planning on waiting for years if that’s what it took. Of course, I wanted to live with you as soon as possible. But your feelings are what matter most to me, Agnes.”

Claude was a twisted mushroom fancier, yes, but he was also so incredibly kind and considerate at the same time. Agnes was still a little stunned by the contrast, but she actually didn’t mind it so much—much to her surprise.

“You’re always far too good to me, Claude. I wish I could do something for you in return,” she said.

No doubt an offering of mushrooms would make him happy, but Agnes wished there was another way she could show her appreciation.

“As I’ve said many times, your presence is a gift enough to me, Agnes,” Claude reassured her as he stroked her cheek. “Just touching you, like this, seems to soothe my soul.”

The gentle touch of his hand conveyed love and warmed her heart.

Just then, the carriage was filled with the sound of a loud pop.

A *Helvella crispa*. Claude glanced at the grayish-white mushroom with a wooden stick-like stalk and a bumpy top resembling a horse’s saddle before plucking it off in an instant and propping it between Ciel’s curled-up legs.

“Well, I suppose you won’t mind if I ask for a little more soothing from you then, Agnes? The truth is I’m a little tired. Would you mind if I lay down?” Claude requested.

“Oh, of course not!”

Agnes had a hunch that Claude really was more tired than he’d let on. She wanted him to rest and not push himself too much.

“Okay, thanks.”

Claude proceeded to lay down with his head on Agnes’s knees, still smiling, as he nestled into her lap.

“Erm, uh...”

“If I am to lie down, I need a pillow, don’t I?”

Then, as if to punctuate Claude's rhetorical question, there came another pop.

A *Calvatia nipponica* had appeared on the opposite chair.

The fluffy white globe appeared to sway, as if it was saying, "Here you go."

"Oh look, a pillow just grew." Agnes spoke without thinking, but just then, as if to interrupt her, there came an even more explosive pop.

Growing next to the white sphere was a mushroom with a red cap and white warts resembling polka dots. The *Amanita muscaria*'s umbrella cap unfurled wide, as if to make a statement.

"One in a different pattern."

Claude didn't move from Agnes's lap, even as he gazed at the white and red mushrooms.

"Very tempting, but right now I'd prefer your lap, Agnes. I hope that's okay?"

Agnes was surprised that the mushroom fiend would decline mushrooms. She looked down at him, unguarded for a moment, and her eyes met his shining gray ones. Her heart skipped a beat at the intense, close-range eye contact.



“It... It’s fine...” she managed to say.

Looking away in an attempt to calm the clamor in her chest, Agnes spotted Ciel batting the *Calvatia nipponica* mushroom’s cap around.

Oh, how adorable! Such fluffiness! It brought pure joy to her. The cat reached for the *Amanita muscaria*, toe beans outstretched, and it was so cute Agnes wanted to squeal. *A kitten at play. Tiger at play? Sacred beast at play?*

Now Agnes’s heart was thumping in her chest for another reason. Distracted, she carelessly looked down and met Claude’s gray eyes again. They seemed to have never left her face.

“I...I’ll do my best to be a pillow, but please don’t gaze at me like that!” she insisted.

“But you’re so adorable.”

Claude reached out to touch Agnes’s hair, but the softness of his voice and the implied intimacy of his touch was too much for her.

“No touching either!”

Unable to stand it any longer, Agnes reached down and covered Claude’s intense eyes with her hand.

“Ahhh. An Agnes eye pillow is pretty nice, too.”

She was only trying to mitigate the intensity of the situation. Claude was insane!

When she instinctively tried to pull her hand away, Claude grabbed her wrist. Ignoring her utter shock, Claude made eye contact as he deliberately kissed her palm.

He may have been a mushroom freak, but he had an intense sensuality all his own.

“If... If you’re not going to sleep, then please at least sit up!” she demanded.

“Aw, that makes me sad. Well, how about this?”

Claude sat up and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. It was easier on the heart than being stared at while Claude had his head in her lap, but it still felt

embarrassingly intense.

“You can rest like this?” Agnes asked.

“Very much so.”

Agnes was skeptical, but if Claude insisted...

She thought for a moment, then plucked the *Amanita muscaria* and handed it to Claude.

“Wow, look at the cap on this. The stalk is exactly the right length and thickness. And the dispersal of the warts is exquisite. Not to mention that red hue!”

Agnes breathed a sigh of relief as Claude began to rhapsodize about the mushroom. Yep, he was as much a mushroom pervert as ever.

Agnes felt the tension drain from her face. Claude was right. Just being together like this was peaceful and joyful.

As Claude went on to discuss the even spacing of the mushroom’s gills, Agnes closed her eyes and smiled.



Mushrooms of the Day

Helvella crispa

Grayish-white with a stalk like a bamboo stick. It has a nodule on it that looks like a little horse saddle. If you spotted it on a mountain hike and didn't know what it was, you might go, "Hmm?"

It's edible, but if not thoroughly cooked, it can be poisonous. It doesn't really look edible from the shape though. It sprouted hopefully, but the atmosphere was kind of awkward.

Calvatia nipponica

It's also known as the Giant Puffball. The name makes me imagine something really giant, but it's just a fluffy, white, ball-shaped mushroom. Its dreamy white sphere is about 15 centimeters across and sprouts in one night. When it turns brown, its skin peels off and releases an ammonia-like scent. It's edible while still white, but rather tasteless than delicious. Why do we eat it, then?

It wanted to be a pillow, but Ciel was playing with it more like it was a trampoline. Still, it didn't really mind.

Amanita muscaria

Red caps with white polka dots. A poisonous mushroom. It may resemble the 1-Ups from a certain video game franchise you might have heard of, but you wouldn't want to try eating a real one! It felt the red filament of fate and sprouted. The mushroom Claude fell in love with.

"How about a pillow with a polka dot pattern?" it suggested.

Chapter 1: Various Facets of Growth

“SIS, Prince Charles is here.”

“Okay.”

When Agnes opened the door, her brother Kevin went wide-eyed for a second, then nodded in an approving manner.

“Yep, yep. You’re looking cute again today too. Therese, you’ve done good.”

Thanks to Philip’s constant negging, Agnes used to have a terrible self-esteem problem. But since the broken engagement and meeting Claude, she’d been gradually changing up her style of dress.

Today’s outfit was, in simple terms, a cute little dress with a light blue fabric, white lace, and a yellow bow tied around her waist with a matching choker. Therese, Agnes’s maid, had braided a yellow ribbon through her loosely curled hair. Fluffy and airy, to match her aura.

Before, you wouldn’t have been able to pick Agnes out if she’d been lying in a pile of hay in the fields. So, this was a major difference.

“Recently, Lady Agnes has stopped resisting me so much and is much more open to trying out new colors and different hairstyles.”

Therese looked puffed up with pride. Thinking about how difficult and unrewarding her job of dressing Agnes had been before, it made Agnes feel quite sorry for her.

“Well, please keep it up, even after Sis gets married. If you ease up on her even a little, Agnes will allow herself to slip back into drab-ville,” Kevin quipped.

“You can count on me,” Therese nodded.

“What? I get to bring Therese with me?”

After marriage, Agnes would leave the Lefort household. Therese was Agnes’s maid, but she was employed by Agnes’s father, Count Benoit Lefort. Agnes

wasn't sure if she was allowed to bring her own maid after marrying into the royal family.

"As long as Therese wants to go. It's already been arranged with Prince Claude through Father. No need to worry," Kevin said.

"I've raised Lady Agnes with great care all these years. I can't entrust her to anyone else now. All those years as a mental recluse, and now she's finally blossomed! What kind of maid would I be if I wasn't enjoying the heck out of this?!" Therese said proudly.

"Exactly right!" Kevin agreed emphatically.

"I mean, I'm not sure I agree with that sentiment, but it will be very reassuring to have Therese with me," Agnes replied.

Therese had looked after Agnes since before joining the Lefort family. She was like a sister to her—no, almost a mother. Agnes felt happy and grateful to know that Therese cared about her too and wanted to come along with her on her new life. She broke into a small smile of mixed thankfulness and relief.

Then, for some reason, Kevin and Therese let out dual gasps of wonder.

"Whoa. What a knockout. No wonder Prince Claude's lost his head," Kevin remarked.

"She's really come along, hasn't she?" Therese spoke sentimentally.

"...So, may I ask what you're doing in here?"

Spotting the beautiful boy standing in the hallway and gazing at her with curiosity, Agnes stood up straight.

The fifth-in-line prince, Charles Visage, Claude's half-brother, stood there looking somewhat quizzical. Like his older brothers, he had the perfect features of a porcelain doll.

"Prince Charles! I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting!" Agnes said.

"Ah, don't worry about that."

"Lady Agnes, don't forget this."

Agnes grabbed the basket Therese handed her and quickly trotted over to

Charles with Ciel pattering quietly behind.

Today Charles was here to escort Agnes. Keeping him waiting would be out of the question. But for some reason, Charles remained standing there, staring intently at Agnes.

“Is something the matter...?”

“Hmm, this is definitely concerning. I can certainly understand how Claude feels.”

“Prince Charles?” Agnes quavered awkwardly. Had she done something to cause concern? Or was there an issue with the outfit she was wearing today? She looked down at her clothes anxiously, but Charles simply smiled.

“Don’t worry. You look adorable, Lady Agnes. Now, why don’t we head out?”



AFTER following the still-smiling Charles into the carriage, Agnes felt herself stiffen up as the doors closed, but she soon began to relax.

Since her parents’ tragic death, Agnes had been slightly fearful about horse-drawn carriages, but these days she seemed to have gotten more used to them. All that practice with Claude seemed to be paying off. The fact that she could ride in a carriage with a man like Charles and not worry about mushrooms sprouting was a marked improvement.

“You are truly loved, Lady Agnes,” Charles murmured as he stroked Ciel, sitting beside him.

“I am?”

“I could see it on the faces of your brother and your maid, how much they love you. I heard all about how roughly that rogue Philip treated you. I’m reassured to see that you have such a loving family.”

“That rogue Philip...”

“Hmm? What about him?”

Agnes shook her head quickly, embarrassed at even having spoken Philip’s loathsome name aloud. “Oh, it’s just...you speak of him so casually,” she said.

Charles nodded agreeably. It was written on his face how much he clearly disliked Philip, and that was instantly endearing to Agnes. “I’m younger than him, but I’m still a prince. Philip expected me to defer to him, but I wasn’t so enthused. Anyway, things between us got more and more tense over the years, and now we barely speak.”

“Ah, I can imagine it.”

Philip was still a royal and craved respect, but obviously a prince outranked him. No doubt Philip grew annoyed with what he would have seen as Charles’s disrespect toward him, though it was only socially appropriate. Philip really was a petty-minded little man.

“Well anyway, both Claude and I will see that you’re cherished, Lady Agnes! You can feel free to rely fully upon us both!”

“Oh, thank you, Prince Charles. You are so kind.”

Charles chuckled, and with his cherubic good looks, he resembled something like an angel. This handsome, still-single prince was friendly and kind, so of course he was hugely popular with women.

“You’re the kind one, Lady Agnes. You’ve only just returned from Oreille, and here you are desperate to make a delivery to Uncle Cesar in person.”

Right. The purpose of today’s excursion was to visit Duke Cesar Granier, the king’s younger brother.

Cesar was a Crest Bearer but had no Dragonmate.

People say that Crest Bearers who don’t meet their Dragonmate by the time they reach adulthood will deteriorate in health. Cesar was one of those unfortunate few.

Agnes didn’t know how Cesar was before his health plummeted, but the fact that a man known for his brave deeds was no longer able to attend to his official duties showed her how frightening this condition was.

After accidentally discovering that the spirits could help with vitality recovery, Agnes had been delivering processed medicinal herbs in tablet form to Cesar. But with her kidnapping and everything, she hadn’t been able to make a visit for

a while.

“Well, it’s been a long time since my last delivery,” she said. “And speaking of the fact that we haven’t been back long...how is Claude doing today?”

Agnes had sent a message to Claude asking to visit Duke Granier’s residence that day, but Charles was the one who had come to accompany her. Perhaps this meant Claude was too ill to go out.

“He’s all right. He had a few things to take care of today, so I came in his place.”

So, Claude is simply busy? Agnes breathed a sigh of relief. Charles smiled at her.

“You’re bringing homemade snacks again this time too, right?” he asked.

“Oh, I didn’t have much time today, so it was actually my maid who made them.”

“Lefort treats are unusual and delicious. I love them. Actually, that’s kind of why I volunteered to come today.” Charles gave Agnes a playful grin, and she chuckled. In no time at all, they arrived at Duke Granier’s residence.



“NICE to see you both. Come, sit down.”

They sat down on the sofa as prompted, and tea was quickly prepared for them.

Cesar had more color in his cheeks than the last time Agnes had seen him. Good, that meant Agnes’s kidnapping hadn’t affected his condition too much.

“How are you feeling?” Agnes asked. “I was so worried because I couldn’t give you the last supply.”

“You gave me quite a lot of pills before you left for the Barthet territory, Agnes, so it’s all right. Anyway, it sounds like you had quite a tough time over there.”

Agnes’s kidnapping was a big deal. Trying to sell a royal fiancée to a foreign country was no small matter. Notwithstanding, from the viewpoint of the royal

family, someone had kidnapped an actual Dragonmate.

No wonder Cesar had heard about it. But Agnes felt bad for causing him concern.

“I apologize for all the fuss—”

“You don’t have to, Lady Agnes! You’re the one who was wronged here!” interrupted Charles. He was all puffed up with anger on her behalf, and it was sort of adorable. Agnes and Cesar exchanged glances and laughed.

“Oh, come on, you two. I’m just stating the facts, here,” Charles pouted.

“Oh, no, I only laughed because what you said made me happy,” Agnes assured him.

No doubt Charles had thought he was being mocked. He glanced at Agnes with a slightly sullen look on his face.

“You remind me of my younger brother Kevin when he gets mad,” she said. “It’s a sign that he’s worried about me. It makes me happy to know someone cares about me like that.”

“Man, that’s a killer smile. I don’t want Claude to kill me, so I’m going to just pretend I didn’t see it.” Charles’s cheeks reddened as he looked away. In this, too, he resembled Kevin. But Agnes decided not to mention that.

She felt a little sorry for Ciel, as Charles tugged on the cat’s tail a little. But for a few minutes at least, she’d have the kitty provide a distraction for her.

“Actually, I wanted to give you some more pills today, but I still haven’t had time to make them,” Agnes said. “I did get some more blessings from the spirits though, so I thought I’d use them to make tea!”

Agnes made the pills by harvesting, drying, and turning medicinal herbs into powder. Luckily, the herbs in her garden had been fine since Kevin and Therese had kept watering them in her absence, but Agnes hadn’t had enough time to make the supplements before her visit.

Still, she didn’t want Cesar’s condition to deteriorate. So, she’d brought something special along. Agnes removed some herbs from her basket with a good deal of enthusiasm.

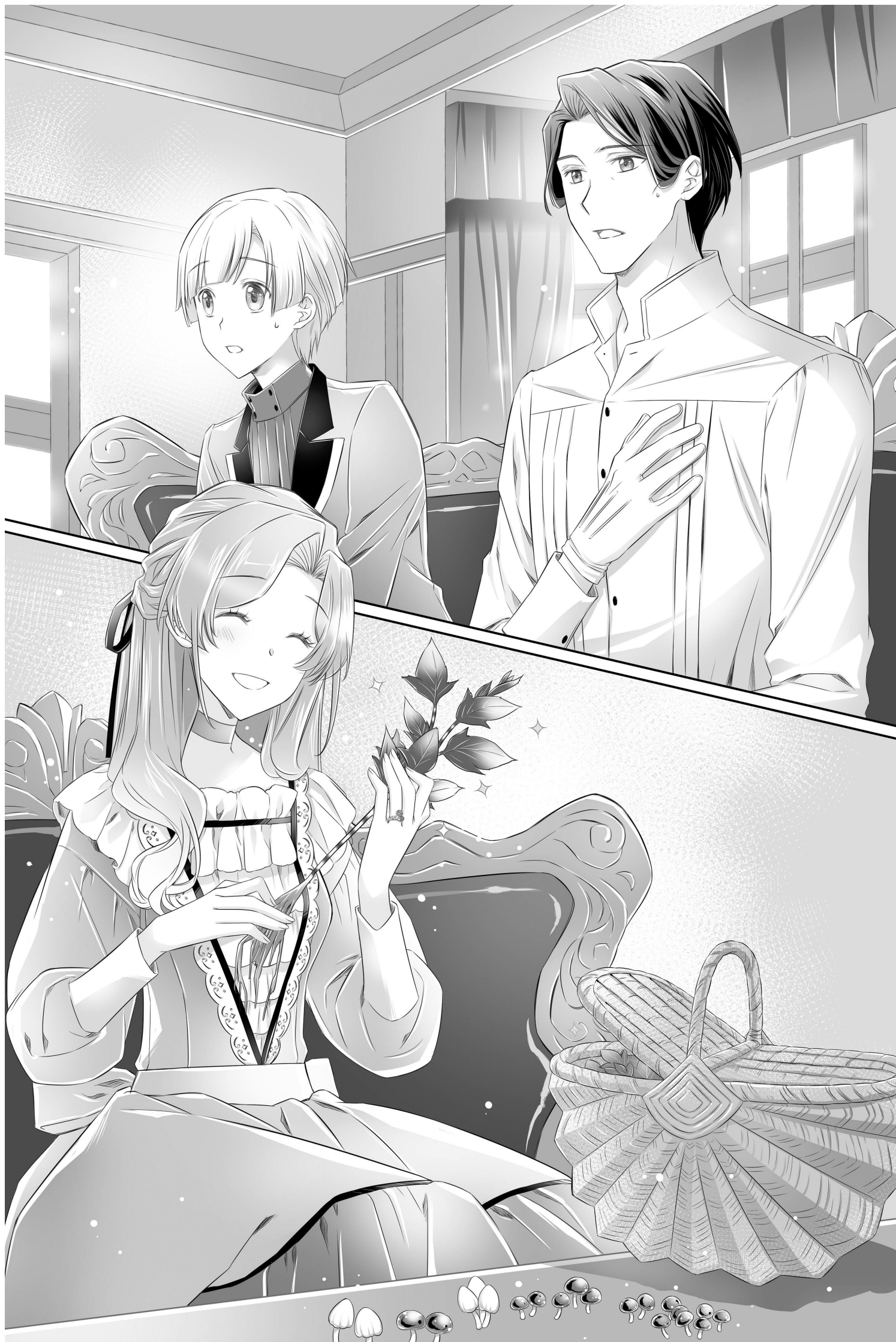
At first glance, the color of the herbs seemed unusual. The stems went from white to green, the leaves were vivid colors that went from green to a yellow hue, and oddly the roots were pink. Anyone could see that these were no normal plants. Both Cesar and Charles paused to study them.

“Th-They’re not poisonous, are they?” Cesar pressed a hand to his chest, anxiety making him sound blunt.

“The colors look deadly...but they’re sort of sparkling. They should be fine. Maybe.”

The room was filled with the sound of a pop, as if to punctuate Charles’s attempt to reassure Cesar.

A glistening blue cap that looked like the delicate glasswork of a Pixie’s Parasol appeared alongside a *Coprinellus micaceus*, which sported a yellowish-brownish cap with small, glittering scales. The mushrooms’ glistening caps undulated atop the table. Perhaps they were reacting to Charles’s use of the word sparkling.



“...So, they should be all right?” Cesar murmured as Charles smiled sheepishly.

“I’ll prepare some tea, but first, please have these.” Agnes took a small paper bag out of the basket.

Charles emptied the contents onto a plate provided by a servant, and his gray eyes sparkled when he saw what it was. “Cookies today! Score!”

“Some have dried fruits, and some have chocolate,” Agnes explained as she prepared the teapot with the medicinal herbs. But before she could finish speaking, Charles was already on his second cookie. Charles seemed to have a real sweet tooth—maybe because he was still young.

“Mmm, these are luscious! So crumbly, and they melt in your mouth!” he exclaimed.

“Delicious, for sure,” Cesar agreed. “Now these are sure to perk me up.”

Seeing Cesar chomp on a cookie with childish enthusiasm tickled Agnes, but for some reason, Charles looked quizzical.

“These cookies don’t really sparkle, though. Maybe they only sparkle when Lady Agnes makes them?” he wondered.

Charles did not have a Dragon Crest but claimed to have a special ability to “see” magic. He had been the one to feed Cesar the cake Agnes had made, after noting that it was sparkling. After that, Cesar’s condition had improved.

No doubt Charles’s sight was true. Possibly there were still positive effects, even without any sparkling?

“Today I didn’t make the cookies, but I did wrap them and bring them here. I wonder if that will work,” Agnes mused.

She tipped the pot and poured a greenish-brown liquid out—a sight that usually wouldn’t please most people. Even after being brewed, the poisonous-looking hue of the medicinal herbs was apparent. However, it smelled all right; something drunk with eyes closed.

“Wow, despite the awful color, this tea seriously sparkles! No doubt it’ll work wonders.” Charles studied the tea with interest, providing an evaluation that was both complimentary and sort of a slight at the same time. Not really a

normal way to describe a drink.

“Yes, I can feel it working! Not only is she a Dragonmate, but now she has a sacred beast as a companion! No wonder Agnes’s power has grown stronger!” Cesar slurped his tea with gusto, like a freezing man being handed a hot drink, and Charles watched with interest.

He tilted his own teacup, his expression determined. “...It smells and tastes all right. As long as I don’t focus on the color, it should be drinkable.”

Charles kept his eyes fixed on a spot on the ceiling as he drank. No doubt he was just being polite, but there was no need to force himself to drink it.

Cesar finished the poisonous-looking herbal tea in one final gulp, took a deep satisfied breath, then lowered his teacup. “Now, then. Why don’t you tell me more about the incident in Oreille?”



ONCE Agnes was done explaining all about the trip to the Barthet territory, the kidnapping, and the destruction of the cathedral, Cesar nodded thoughtfully.

“I had no idea you were the Queen of Mushrooms, Agnes. No wonder you can do such wonderful things just by transporting food on your person.”

The room was filled with a pop, as if to punctuate Cesar’s sentence.

A mushroom with a brownish cap and white stalk was now growing atop the table. The *Termitomyces*’s cap spread with confidence.

“Is being the Queen of Mushrooms such a big deal then?” Agnes asked.

Charles was looking satisfied after working his way through half of the cookies Agnes had brought. Oddly enough, he had also drunk quite a deal of Agnes’s special but poisonous-looking tea. It seemed he’d grown to like it despite the off-putting appearance.

The tea was imbued with the blessing of the spirits and should be good for health. So, there was no real concern even if Charles had finished off the entire teapot.

But, wasn’t it rather odd how casual everyone was about mushrooms popping

up all the time now? It was a little frightening how adaptable people were.

“It’s hard to draw comparisons, but to put it in Visage terms, a Queen or King of Mushrooms is up there amongst the noblest Dragon Crest Bearers,” Cesar explained.

“Wow, Lady Agnes, you’re actually really cool!” Charles exclaimed.

“But I make mushrooms sprout wherever I go,” Agnes replied dryly.

Having an official title sounded impressive, but the reality of her condition was just abominable.

“You really are a huge asset to Claude!” Charles cheered.

“Yes, I do feel that if I keep him supplied with mushrooms, he will grow stronger,” Agnes commented hesitantly.

Even in Oreille, which was a country where the blessings of the spirits were strong, very few people were blessed with the power to sprout mushrooms. In a sense, you could say that Agnes was Claude’s only shot at a mushroom-sprouting partner.

“I hear the monsters have been growing stronger lately, so Claude getting stronger can only be a good thing.”

“Monsters, you say?” Agnes had heard that monsters existed, but to her they sounded rather like something out of a fairytale.

“People in the capital don’t have much experience with monsters,” Cesar said.

“I’ve never seen one, either,” Charles added.

Cesar shot a worried look at Charles, who was helping himself to another cup of the poisonous-looking tea. “We work hard to keep it that way,” he said. “Though having said that, it has been some time since I left the frontline of battle. Claude has also been spending most of his time in the capital of late, but Armand is now posted there. It should be all right.”

Armand, the third-born prince but fourth in line to the throne, was in disgrace after trying to assassinate Agnes and weaken Claude. Agnes guessed that Cesar was referring to monster subjugation, but what did Cesar mean exactly by the frontline of battle?

“Monster invasions and Dragon Crest Bearers are deeply linked. You should ask His Majesty or Claude if you’d like to know more. Now, to change the subject.” Cesar turned his attention to Ciel, who was reclining comfortably on the sofa.

The creature’s glossy fur shone in the light, his ears twitched every now and then, and he had his plush tail wrapped around his body. His fluffy snoozing presence seemed to epitomize pure happiness. Just looking at him was enough to bring a smile to Agnes’s face. But it wasn’t only Agnes that Ciel seemed to be having an effect on. Charles and Cesar were smiling too as they watched the cat’s furry belly rise and fall with the rhythm of his breathing.

“I was aware that various bodyguards were being considered for you, Agnes, but to actually summon a sacred beast...” To hear this from Cesar, himself a Crest Bearer, made Agnes realize that summoning Ciel must have been a wild choice indeed. “I mean, to start with, it’s difficult for a Crest Bearer to even enter Oreille. Not impossible mind you, but uncomfortable, even painful. And under a temporary contract to a sacred beast, you’d be burning through twice as much magical energy.”

“Claude said he was fine... But was he, really?” Agnes reached out to pet Ciel, and the cat purred happily. Despite its cuteness, the white tiger fed off of Claude’s magical power.

“I suppose he must be all right, since it was his choice to summon the cat. Dragon Crest Bearers are strong. And they become even stronger once they meet their Dragonmate. There’s no need to fret too much,” Cesar said.

“I hope so... I feel terrible to think that his burdens have increased all because of me,” Agnes confessed.

Claude had only summoned the sacred beast in the first place to protect Agnes. Since it was due to her kidnapping, Claude had to expend double the usual amount of magical energy necessary—and she felt awful about it.

“A Crest Bearer’s Dragonmate is never a burden to them. For better or for worse, Claude would do anything for you, Agnes,” Cesar said.

“Princess Zenaide said the same thing,” Agnes remembered.

Cesar nodded firmly. “She knows it firsthand.”

“Xavier’s completely lovey-dovey with Zenaide,” Charles chimed in. “You know, I don’t think I’ve seen too many normal couples.”

The thought of the prince being lovey-dovey with his wife made Agnes smile, but the thought of her and Claude being like that... It was terrifying! If Claude got any more loving toward Agnes, she’d drown in a sea of syrup.

“Well, it’s good that a couple has a strong bond. Agnes and Claude’s wedding is right around the corner. Everyone is looking forward to the day they have children,” Cesar said.

“What?” Agnes yelped, but Charles ignored it, closing his eyes as if amused.

“A child born from a Dragon Crest Bearer who summoned a sacred beast and a Mushroom Queen beloved by the spirits. That’s got to be one powerful kid!”

Charles’s choice of words gave Agnes a mental image of a white tiger riding on a dragon’s back, batting at a giant mushroom. Goodness, what was wrong with her?

“I must recover my strength as soon as possible and prepare for the wedding, too,” Cesar said. “Then I must speak to Claude about military concerns.”

“But Claude won’t be up for it for a while— Oops!”

From the way Charles clapped his hands over his mouth, Agnes sensed that something was up.

“What do you mean, he ‘won’t be up for it?’” she asked.

“Oh, uh, I just mean he’ll be busy with this and, er, that?”

Charles’s innocent expression was cute, but Agnes couldn’t fail to notice how his gaze was wavering.

“...Is Claude unwell?” she pressed.

“It’s not like he’s had a breakdown or anything! But Xavier has asked him to take a break for a while, just in case.”

Not only was Charles avoiding Agnes’s intense gaze, but his voice had also grown raspy. It was clear that he wasn’t telling the whole truth.

“He’s bad enough that the crown prince, a Dragon Crest Bearer, has asked him to take a rest?” Agnes asked.

“Ah, well yes, but also, not as such.”

She couldn’t get a straight answer out of Charles. Agnes let out a sigh, stood up from the sofa, and turned to Charles.

“Prince Charles?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“I want to go and visit Claude. Would you kindly escort me?” Agnes demanded.

With a faltering grin still plastered on his face, Charles nodded weakly.



Mushrooms of the Day

Mycena interrupta (Pixie's Parasol)

A mushroom with an umbrella cap that sparkles like glasswork. It's about 2 centimeters long and .2 centimeters thick, making it small and fragile. It's poisonous, so you can't eat it...but who would try, when it's so tiny? It grew when it heard the word sparkle to add a little glitter.

Coprinellus micaceus

Covered with tiny, mica-like cells that glitter. A light yellow-colored mushroom. When someone eats it with alcohol, they can get very sick. It sprouted to reassure Cesar, saying, “Don’t worry! Behold the sparkle!” But nobody noticed.

Termitomyces

A mushroom that lives symbiotically with termites. With its brown cap and white stalk, it is as delicious as it looks and is called the king of mushrooms.

A fungal garden grown by self-sufficient termites accidentally grew on the ground. "I'm the King of Mushrooms. Did you call me?" it asked as it sprouted, but of course, no one understood.

Chapter 2: Mushrooms Will Come When Called

“**CLAUDE**, I’m sorry. Don’t get mad,” Charles spoke apologetically through the palace door he’d cracked open. He felt extremely guilty because Agnes was involved, but he couldn’t exactly back down.

“What are you on about?” Agnes heard Claude reply before she stepped past Charles and entered the room.

On the bed lay a young man with dazzling blue hair. At the sight of Agnes, he opened his silvery-gray eyes so wide, it seemed like they might pop out of his head.

“Agnes?!”

“W-Well then, I’ll be off!” Charles closed the door behind him as he fled.

This was a private room in the royal palace; in other words, Claude’s bedchamber. Even though Claude was her fiancé, this was Agnes’s first time here. Though she knew she wouldn’t get any prizes for effort, considering the circumstances.

Still, she had to see him. She tightly clenched her fists as she approached Claude, who lay frozen with shock.

Claude wouldn’t ever order her to leave—Agnes knew that—but she still felt awkward as she understood she was an uninvited guest.

As Agnes took a seat on the bedside chair, Claude sat up, looking confused.

“Claude,” Agnes began slowly, “are you unwell?”

“I was just taking a rest. Don’t fret.”

Feeling a sense of relief at Claude’s smile, Agnes still wasn’t sure how much she could trust his assurances.

“I heard the crown prince himself has ordered you to rest... Duke Granier also said that entering Oreille must have been hard on you... All because of me...”

Dragon Crest Bearers are strong, all those knowledgeable on the subject agree. Seeing Claude lying in bed, it must also be true they weaken when leaving the country of Visage.

And his current plight was all due to Agnes getting kidnapped by the Oreillians.

“No, no, Agnes, you did nothing wrong,” Claude rushed to assure her. “This is why I told Charles not to speak of this to you, that tattletale.”

“Please don’t blame Prince Charles. I forced him to tell me.”

Claude took a deep breath and held his hand out to Agnes. Confused, Agnes placed her hand in his. In one fluid movement, Claude tugged her forward to sit beside him on the bed and moved his arm around her, making her heart race.

“I’m sorry for making you worry,” he whispered right by her ear. “I’m fine though, really. I was ordered to rest just to be on the safe side, and I only asked it be kept secret because I didn’t want you to worry.”

“But I don’t want secrets between us,” she insisted. “I hate being the only one not knowing.”

Agnes didn’t know how she could help, but she hated the idea of being protected, kept oblivious.

That wasn’t how one treated their wife—more a pet.

Claude’s eyes narrowed slowly as Agnes gazed pleadingly at him. “All right. I’m sorry; I won’t do it again,” he apologized as he stroked her hair, and she could tell from his voice that he truly was sorry.

It wasn’t that Agnes was particularly angry. But faced with that angel face and sweet voice, how could she not forgive?

“It’s okay. I’m sorry too for barging in on you while you were recuperating,” she said.

“Don’t worry. I was in the wrong, anyway. Besides, I’m delighted to see you.”

It was always like this. Claude prioritized Agnes above all else, doing everything with her foremost in his mind. That pleased Agnes, but it also scared her a little.

“You’re too kind, Claude. You could be a little more selfish, you know,” she said.

“It’s you who needs to learn to be a little more selfish.”

“I’d rather be a useful person than a selfish person.” Agnes frowned at Claude, aware that he had managed to get her off the subject.

“I see,” Claude laughed happily. “Well then, let’s go on a date in town soon.”

“Don’t try to put me off.”

What was the point of such silly fancifulness? A date seemed like nothing but a distraction. She wasn’t just going to say yes under the circumstances.

“I’m completely serious,” he asserted. “Well, in that case, I’d like to ask you for something more immediate.”

“Anything!”

It was rare for Claude to ask her for something other than mushrooms. Agnes was ready to do anything she could to repay his constant kindness.

“Would you please hold my hand?” he requested.

“Sure!”

Agnes straightened up and quickly took hold of his hand.

“Look into my eyes.”

“Okay!”

Still gripping his hand, Agnes lifted her eyes to Claude’s shining ones. As requested, she gazed into his eyes, marveling over their silvery-gray hue.

“Tell me you love me.”

“Okay! I love you— Erk!” Agnes shrieked a little, realizing what she’d said.

Of course she loved Claude—she’d already told him as much—but this seemed wholly different. Sitting on the bed together, telling each other how much they loved one another. Agnes was so embarrassed, she felt like her face was about to explode.

Instinctively she covered her face with her hands. As if in response, a loud

popping noise filled the room.

Peeking through the gaps in her fingers, Agnes could see that Claude was also covering his bright red face with his hand, upon which several mushrooms shook slightly. The small, milky-white capped *Cuphophyllus virgineus* jostled next to the white-capped *Coprinellus disseminatus*.

Thanks to the white mushrooms growing on the back of his hands, the redness of Claude's cheeks stood out even more, but Agnes wondered why he was blushing in the first place. He was the one who told her to say such embarrassing things.

"Ah! It works! It works all too well!" Claude exclaimed.

"Are... Are you toying with me?!" she asked.

"No! As long as you're close to me, Agnes, I'll be fine. I apologize for worrying you."

Beaming, Claude tried to get out of bed, but Agnes put her hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him back down. Usually, Agnes wouldn't have been able to make Claude do a thing, but this time he sat back down obediently and nestled his head against the pillows.

"Please, sleep well today," she insisted. "Your body needs to be well rested."

Agnes tucked the covers up under his chin, and Claude placed his hands over hers.

"How can I sleep while you're here? Unless...you'd like to sleep beside me?"

His words, his expression... They were so seductive, Agnes felt her heart thump and words escaped her.

"Claude..."

She didn't know what to say...but she just wanted him to rest. Worried, Agnes squeezed his hands and he pulled them back under the covers with a sigh.

"All right. I'm no match for you, Agnes. I'll rest in bed today."

"Good. Thank you."

Seeing Agnes let out a sigh of relief, Claude narrowed his eyes mischievously.

“So, how about a kiss goodnight?”

“What?!”

So? So? Surely a kiss isn't needed!

But Claude looked at her with such hope in his eyes, it was hard for Agnes to say no. Would it be better to grant Claude's request in order for him to rest?

Agnes's thoughts started to become confused at what was the right answer, so she chose to let her momentum lead her into leaning for Claude's hair. She brought her face closer to his, and after a moment's hesitation, kissed his forehead very lightly.



“Y-You better keep your promise! Get plenty of rest, okay?”

Agnes didn't need to check the looking glass to know that she was bright red. Her heart was thundering away in her chest. A loud popping sound erupted, but Agnes was too distracted to look and see what kind of mushroom had grown as she ran out of the room, letting the door slam behind her.

Claude, who was left alone in the bedroom, turned his attention to the mushroom jiggling away on the back of his hand with a deep sigh.

“But how can I sleep now?”

The white mushroom cap bobbed around as if agreeing before Claude plucked it, his cheeks still red.



AGNES stood in front of the vegetable patch she had cultivated in the Lefort manor gardens. Arms folded, she gazed down at the ridges in the earth.

Her brow was furrowed, her expression not exactly serene. Finally, Agnes unfolded her arms and sighed loudly.

“The spirits responded when I called them normally,” she muttered. “There was no need for that...*performance*, ever. So, now, what I'm curious about are the mushrooms.”

There were a few rows of brown-capped mushrooms growing among the medicinal herbs Agnes was cultivating for Cesar. Agnes had grown used to seeing the *Lyophyllum decastes*, but at this rate, she'd end up with an entire field of them—that wouldn't be good.

“If I can summon the mushrooms at will, then I suppose I really must be a Mushroom Princess. Oh, I mean, Mushroom Queen,” she concluded.

Honestly, Agnes didn't want to attempt it. If only she could continue pretending to be blissfully ignorant. That would be so nice. All the same, Agnes was engaged to a mushroom fetishist with dragon's blood; mushrooms might come in handy. At the very least, she should check to see what she could do.

Yes. She needed to be brave and try it out.

Agnes held her breath and stared at the empty ridge in the dirt.

“M-Mushrooms... Come, mushrooms, come...”

No sooner had Agnes fearfully mumbled those words, a cacophony of pops resounded.

The familiar red-capped *Amanita muscaria* with its white warts appeared alongside the white-capped mushrooms with large warts indicative of the *Amanita cokeri*.

“Yeek! They sprouted instantly!”

Agnes found herself yelping in shock. The red and white warty mushrooms bobbed their caps as if excited. Unlike Agnes, they seemed to be enjoying themselves—or maybe that was just her imagination.

In the end, the mushrooms came when called. Having confirmed that simple but terrible fact—and considering these particular types were poisonous—Agnes decided to remove them.

It was all in the interests of food safety. Not in an attempt to destroy evidence, of course. Er, maybe.

With a sigh, Agnes reached for the mushrooms when she suddenly felt someone’s eyes on her.

“C-Claude?!” she exclaimed as she spun around.

“Yes, hello, Agnes. Those mushrooms look very pretty in your vegetable patch.”

Agnes faked a smile, inwardly sighing over Claude’s mushroom fixation.

As he stared at the mushrooms in the patch, however, Claude nodded as if he’d just confirmed something.

“Red and white mushrooms, both warty—excellent specimens. Just look at the colors, did you instruct them to grow that way, Agnes?”

“Yeek!”

The mushroom freak’s intuition was so sharp that Agnes yelped in alarm before quickly clapping a hand over her mouth.

Claude gave her an odd look, but Agnes tried to look nonchalant. Any further sprouting in this moment would not be good.

“N-No, of course not,” she said, her voice cracking a little. “The mushrooms simply sprout of their own accord. Perhaps I’m in a red-and-white mood today?”

“Hmm, I see.”

Phew. The mushrooms had always sprouted randomly until now, which lent credence to Agnes’s little white lie. If the truth were to be revealed, Agnes might end up obligated to sprout all kinds of mushrooms from morning until night for her future husband. The thought was terrifying, so she tried to change the subject.

“Are you feeling okay now?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ve come to escort you today. Let’s go and make our report to the king together.”

Agnes was glad to get away from the vegetable patch, but the concept of a palace excursion brought up fresh concerns.

Claude stroked her hair softly, perhaps sensing her worry, as they made their way to the capital.



WHEN Agnes, Claude, and Ciel arrived at the royal palace, they were immediately shown to one of the royal family’s private rooms.

Chairs were arranged around a large table, and several people were already there. Agnes sat down in one as she clutched Ciel in her arms, feeling a little nervous.

The king was seated in the seat farthest from the door with Crown Prince Xavier to his right; both Prince Gerome and Charles were sitting on either side of them, and Agnes and Claude were a little further away.

“Gerome, so you’re back, are you?” Claude spoke to the second-born prince with golden brown hair. They’d been together in the Kingdom of Oreille until recently, and it seemed Gerome had already made his return home.

“Yes, how’ve things been with you?” Gerome asked.

“All good now. No problems.”

“Glad to hear it. And your cute little sacred beast seems to be doing well, too.”

Ciel sat up in Agnes’s lap and mewed, apparently sensing Gerome talking about him.

Everyone in the room seemed to know exactly what the white kitten-like creature really was, but it was still hard to resist its allure as everyone cooed in response to his mewling, making Agnes wonder how nice a life it would be for Ciel to be a true lap cat.

“Now then. The reason why we’re all gathered here today is to learn more about Gerome’s negotiations with Oreille,” the king declared, making the atmosphere suddenly tense.

“In summation, we have reached a compromise regarding the crowning of the new king of Oreille and the continued secrecy of Agnes’s true identity,” Gerome began.

“Just to confirm,” Crown Prince Xavier nodded along, “it was definitely the king of Oreille’s order to kidnap Agnes, correct?”

“Yes. After talking with Philip, he set his sights on Agnes. It seems that Philip, who had lost badly at cards, offered to kidnap her to offset his debt. The disgraced king himself admitted this,” Gerome confirmed.

“Philip, honestly...” the king murmured under his breath. He sounded disgusted with his sister’s son and the way his name always accompanied some sort of scandal.

But seeing as he was still a member of the royal family, to borrow Claude’s phrasing, Philip couldn’t be squelched so easily.

“Agnes’s late father, Josse Murre, was the king of Oreille’s half-brother,” continued Gerome. “In addition, he was the King of Mushrooms, the highest of the four levels of the spirits’ divinity. He was believed dead and lost his status. His daughter Agnes is an Oreille royal, and, similar to her father, she is now the

Queen of Mushrooms.”

“Just like the Dragon Crest decides the order of succession to the throne in Visage, the strength and type of spirit protection determines the same in Oreille,” the king said. “I’m astonished Josse was willing to step down.”

This was exactly why Claude, as the fourth-born prince, was second in line to the throne. It wasn’t strange then for the king of Visage to be surprised by Josse stepping away from his rightful claim to the throne as the King of Mushrooms.

“The behavior of the disgraced king could very well have sparked a war,” Gerome said. “However, the existence of Agnes remains a secret, and she herself does not desire the throne. Prince Nathan also wants to avoid war and make amends with Agnes.”

The king nodded at Gerome’s explanation, but now Xavier frowned.

“Is the new king trustworthy?” he asked.

“He immediately apologized for his father’s actions and had him arrested. No doubt, he will be able to quickly restore the stability of the throne,” Gerome explained. “Prince Nathan will now be the King of Leaves, replacing the previous King of Flowers. No doubt the defenses of the country will be much stronger as Leaves outrank Flowers.”

“I see. With that settled, are we fine with leaving things at that with Oreille, Claude?” the king directed his attention his way.

Claude, who’d been listening intently, seemed to be mulling something over. “Are you asking me for my personal opinion? Or my opinion as the fourth-born prince?” Claude stated, his face expressionless.

Agnes sensed trouble.

The king seemed to have had the same inkling. He exhaled a little, looking concerned. “...As the fourth-born prince, let’s say.”

“From a defense standpoint, it’s not a bad idea to offer benevolence to the new king of Oreille,” Claude stated matter-of-factly. “Furthermore, I think it is a good idea to keep Agnes’s identity a secret and for the Queen of Mushrooms to stay here, in Visage.”

“And your personal opinion?” the king prompted.

“I want to punch the previous king in the face and roast him alive with lightning bolts.”

The king and the princes exchanged exasperated looks and shook their heads when Claude spat out these words.

“I thought you did that already,” proffered Gerome.

“I lacked power. Just charring him around the edges isn’t enough,” Claude responded in a deadpan voice to Gerome’s teasing. He was deadly serious.

Agnes didn’t want to believe that Claude would actually do it. But if Claude really did manage to get his father’s permission, no doubt he’d head straight to Oreille and enact his revenge.

“Cl-Claude...”

He looked her way as she stammered his name. Agnes wanted to stop him from taking further action.

“But to do such a thing would break Agnes’s gentle heart,” Claude rationalized after sliding his eyes shut to make peace with his feelings. “So, I will refrain.”

“Good. So then, things with Oreille are thus settled. I’ll leave the various negotiations and cleanup to Gerome.” With that declaration, the king indicated the matter was settled.

Agnes breathed a sigh of relief the matter wasn’t going to drag on any longer.

“Hmm, I’m wondering when I’ll ever get a day off, but you can rely on me,” Gerome muttered, looking as if he really didn’t want to put any more effort in, when a mushroom appeared with a pop on the back of his hand. He waved the yellow-capped *Pleurotus citrinopileatus* languidly in the air in amusement. Maybe it was Agnes’s imagination, but this kind of mushroom seemed to appear often on Gerome.

Claude, who’d been scowling, suddenly perked up when he spotted the mushroom. Gerome perhaps sensed the silent pressure Claude was imparting and dutifully plucked the mushroom and handed it over.

The mushroom trade between brothers was still going strong, it seemed.

“Well, let’s talk about something more cheerful,” the king interjected. “Preparations for Claude and Agnes’s wedding seem to be going well. Are there any issues with the new house?”

“All is progressing well. It’ll be ready in time for the wedding,” Claude replied just as a popping sound resounded throughout the room.

Growing on Claude’s shoulder was a white, fan-shaped mushroom in mottled gray and purple. He narrowed his eyes fondly at the *Schizophyllum commune* mushroom before pocketing it carefully.

Agnes found herself wondering where all the harvested mushrooms were going. The other day, when Agnes was in Claude’s bedchamber, she hadn’t spotted any conspicuous mushrooms. Perhaps he kept his stash in a separate room?

A mushroom playroom for a mushroom fetishist. The thought reeked of danger—Agnes never, ever wanted to see such a place.

“Then, as planned, Claude will leave the royal palace and become Duke of Aznavour upon his marriage,” continued the king. “The order of succession to the throne will not change. And since he has a Dragon Crest, he will not be removed from the royal family.”

“Duke of Aznavour...” Hearing the title for the first time, Agnes couldn’t help repeating it in a whisper. Gerome grinned at her.

“You’ll be a duchess, Agnes,” he stated cheerfully.

“D-Duchess!”

Since she was marrying Prince Claude, she knew from the beginning that she would join the royal family. Agnes assumed her status would be higher than presently as a count’s daughter, but the reality of it was a bit nerve-wracking.

Wow... I’m really getting married.

The realization hit her all over again, making her heart thump.

“But it’s not all happy news. There are reports that the hole in the wall is widening,” Xavier imparted, sparking an increased feeling of tension in the

room.



Mushrooms of the Day

Cuphophyllus virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom. It's easy to eat and goes well in vinegared dishes or in a sauce. It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

It came out screaming, "He loves you! I knew it!"

Coprinellus disseminatus

White-gray caps that are only about 1 centimeter. They grow in clusters. They look like a white chocolate version of the Apollo chocolates you can buy in Japan. They're kind of cute! They're not poisonous, but they don't seem to be edible, either. Maybe they just don't taste very nice.

"These arena seats are great!" it yelled, overexcited.

Lyophyllum decastes

An edible mushroom with an ashy gray umbrella-shaped cap. It looks rather like a shapeless, unenthusiastic Shiitake mushroom. Also known as Chicken of the Gravel. Firm-textured with a rich flavor, it cooks up well. It likes Kevin, who's good at raking neat rows.

"I want to grow in a garden like this!" it cried, and indeed it seems to enjoy its spot on the dirt row.

Amanita muscaria

Red caps with white polka dots. Like the poisonous mushrooms you find drawn in storybooks. It may resemble the 1-Ups from a certain video game franchise you might have heard of, but you wouldn't want to try eating a real one! It felt the red filament of fate and sprouted. The mushroom Claude fell in love with.

Being summoned by Agnes was the greatest mycelium blessing. "I'm so happy I wouldn't even mind if all my warts fell off!" it cried.

Amanita cokeri

A white mushroom with big warty bits and a flaky stalk. It looks kind of like an all-white *Amanita muscaria*. Nobody knows if it's poisonous or edible, but I wouldn't want to take a bite and find out! An alert mushroom who's always worried about Agnes's situation and mental state.

"Listen up, 'shrooms!" it announced, drawing attention to the fact that Agnes was speaking.

Pleurotus citrinopileatus

An edible mushroom with bright yellow caps. It grows in clusters and is very tasty. Fetches a good price, too. A member of the Wood Deterioration Club. It's grown on Gerome several times and has started to get attached. Gerome seems so busy, and it wants to help.

Schizophyllum commune

Semicircular or fan-shaped brown caps, covered with coarse gray hairs. It is a mushroom that spreads throughout the world, distributed on all continents except treeless Antarctica, and boasts a strong vitality that allows it to adapt to dry conditions. Its spores can get into people's lungs and cause strange ailments, but it can also be used in cancer treatment. It's unclear whether it wants to hurt humans or help them.

A mushroom with a name that reflects its contrast. It sprouted to bless Agnes and the others.

Chapter 3: Love Is Stronger than Mycelium

“IT’S not all good news. We’ve been getting reports that the hole in the wall is getting bigger.”

The atmosphere grew tense at Xavier’s words, but what was this about a hole in the wall? Even if there was a hole in the royal palace, they’d just call on the servants and craftsmen to fix it? No need to worry, surely.

But the king’s face darkened as he spoke, “I have Armand stationed there, and I’ve prepared backup, but... Recently, with our Dragon Crest Bearer away...”

“I think it would be good to stop by there at least once, before the wedding,” Claude said.

“Agreed,” the king replied.

Claude was looking serious too, but Agnes still didn’t understand what was being discussed. Then, as if sensing her silent questions, Claude smiled at her.

“Father, is it all right if I discuss this with Agnes now?” he asked.

“Yes,” the king nodded. “The wedding hasn’t taken place yet, but she is your Dragonmate, Claude, which means she is already royalty; she should learn what that means.”

“Agnes, have you ever seen a monster?” Claude began, shifting his gaze back to Agnes.

“No. But I’ve heard of people encountering them outside of the city, and of the damage they can cause.” Agnes had thought they were discussing a hole in a wall somewhere, but the topic seemed to have shifted again.

“That’s right. The capital is also protected by knights, so monster victims are rare. Well then, do you know where those monsters come from?” Claude asked.

“Huh? Where? Aren’t they just wild animals?” she assumed. Agnes had never given it much thought, but certainly humans weren’t raising these monsters as livestock. Ergo, they must live naturally in the wild.

“It’s a little different. They are...separate, from our world’s ecosystem,” Claude explained.

“What do you mean?”

“It may be similar to when you summon a spirit, or when I summon a sacred beast,” Claude replied. “Entities that don’t exist in this world suddenly appear. As for the monsters, we don’t summon them, but there are spots where they tend to appear.”

Agnes had never seen a monster, so this didn’t sound quite real to her, but it was true that the spirits didn’t naturally exist in this world. Agnes needed to summon them for them to appear.

It wouldn’t be so strange if something else, something similar, also existed.

...In which case.

“So, the place where the monsters appear, it’s this hole in the wall?” she ventured.

“Correct. There is a border between different worlds, right at the border with Oreille, and we call it the hole in the wall. Monsters come from there.”

So then, it wasn’t a hole in the palace wall after all? Agnes nodded as she digested the new information, and Gerome laughed wryly.

“The hole in the wall itself is always monitored by knights, so we can deal with a certain amount of monster appearances,” Gerome chimed in. “However, the monsters’ spawning—or should I say, the width of the hole in the wall—is variable. Still, I’m not a Crest Bearer, so I’ve only seen it myself once. But Armand is stationed there. Do you understand the significance of this?”

“Prince Armand is not a knight like Claude,” Agnes followed. “He’s not stationed there simply to provide a reinforcement of military power, right?”

“Precisely,” Gerome affirmed. “He’s a thinker, not a soldier. He’s not of great use to us in the physical sense.”

Agnes felt confident in her understanding of the weight of the situation. If Gerome was right, then that meant Armand provided some other benefit, something besides brute force.

“So then... Him being a royal, that’s a significant factor?” she guessed.

“Right. By using Visage dragon blood and the blessings of the Oreillian spirits, we have created something like a set of bars to block off the hole,” Claude answered. “Monster prevention is made possible thanks to royal dragon blood.”

Agnes tried to visualize this based on his explanation, but all she could think of was a crumbling rock wall barred with cut-off tree branches. Such a barrier didn’t seem strong enough to deter even a lone thief, let alone a ferocious monster.

“Crest Bearers, who have inherited strong dragon blood, protect the hole in the wall and thus, by extension, the nation. This is why Crest Bearers are given priority in succession to the throne,” Claude continued explaining. “They protect the land with their great power, and we believe only such a great man has the right to become king.”

Agnes knew Crest Bearers had priority, but she had just assumed it was because of their superior vitality and special magical powers. It wasn’t just about inherent gifts, but about an actual role they played.

“If a Crest Bearer is harmed, it could lead to the destruction of our nation. This is why we keep their existence a secret from the general public,” Claude clarified.

At his words, an *Auricularia auricula-judae* popped its black-brown, fluttering cap as if in agreement.

“Oh! Look how wonderfully gelatinous it is!” Claude proclaimed as he plucked the mushroom growing on his upper arm with shining eyes.

“...Does mushroom obsession come with dragon’s blood, too?” Agnes couldn’t help blurting this out, and Gerome snorted with laughter.

“If so, then His Majesty and Xavier would be mushroom fanciers too, right?” Gerome chuckled.

“Oh, please excuse me! I never meant to infer...”

The king had invited Agnes not to stand on ceremony around the royal family now that she was engaged to Claude, but to insinuate that any royal was into

anything weird like mushroom fetishism seemed incredibly rude of her.

Despite all this mushroom fuss, the real fungus freak in question was distracted, happily stroking the frills of the *Auricularia auricula-judae* as he stood beside Agnes.

Though she apologized immediately, Xavier looked a little disgruntled. Oh dear, would Agnes be scolded now for her disrespect?

“When did...His Highness Josselin, die?” Xavier asked hesitantly.

“Huh? It’d be about seven years ago.”

Agnes was worried Xavier would scold her, but instead, his question took her by surprise. She hoped he was going to let things slide, but it didn’t seem to be the case.

“Claude wasn’t always into mushrooms. As I recall, one day he just suddenly started talking about them out of the blue.”

“Now that I think about it, that’s right. If I remember correctly, he said something odd, like, ‘The mycelium of fate has descended,’” the king recalled nostalgically, but Agnes didn’t think a prince’s insane ramblings really warranted looking back on with a wistful sigh.

Just then, Claude stopped stroking the mushroom and looked up, almost startled, with shining eyes as if he’d had a divine revelation. “So, you’re saying the mushrooms are...for me? As her Dragonmate...so that I will protect her always and assure her happiness?”

“Er, no, I don’t think the mushrooms work like that,” Gerome let out as he rolled his eyes.

“No, but...my father did wish me happiness,” Agnes began weakly as she tried to re-steer the course of conversation, “and the spirits followed his words to protect me.”

“Agnes suffered from the mushroom sprouting, but I was made to love mushrooms as her destined Dragonmate,” Claude concluded. “Guided by the mycelium of fate, sent to me by the King of Mushrooms, I was destined to meet Agnes...”

“Does that mean you were remotely brainwashed by the mushrooms?” Xavier joked as he rolled his eyes as well, inciting Claude to smile in a dreamy manner.

“My love transcends mycelium. The mushroom didn’t trick me into loving Agnes. I chose mushrooms for myself. I am the one who imbued the force of mycelium into Agnes!” Claude raised his fist triumphantly, and everyone present shifted around awkwardly, unsure of how to react.

“I don’t get how mycelium factors into any of this,” Xavier spoke after a pause, and Agnes was inclined to agree. She wasn’t convinced by Claude’s guesses, anyhow.

“It sounds like it’s supposed to be romantic, but I’m not really getting it? Is it just me?” Gerome chimed in with a confused look, and Agnes shook her head in agreement, smiling wryly.

“It’s okay. It’s hard to understand the rationalizations of a mushroom enthusiast... Only...” Agnes noted weakly.

Just then, Josse’s final words from that day when they were parted forever, rang through Agnes’s mind: *“Agnes. My treasure. You have blessed eyes and hair the color of peach blossoms, my sweet Mushroom Princess... Please, be happy, always.”*

It also served as a request to the spirits from the King of Mushrooms.

“I’ve always had the protection of my father’s love,” Agnes thought aloud. “Perhaps the mycelium fates really did spread.”

“Rawr!”

Ciel, who had been quiet until then, mewed loudly as if to agree.

With a popping sound, the red and white warty-capped *Amanita muscaria* appeared on Ciel’s head, swaying as if in affirmation as well. The red mushroom looked dashing against the tiger’s white fur.

No, no. Agnes wasn’t going full mushroom fangirl. This was simple...color theory.

Absolutely.

Agnes sighed, trying not to think fungal thoughts anymore. Then Claude

smiled a mysterious smile.

“Going forward, both I and the mushrooms will be protecting you, Agnes.”

A handsome prince, smiling and telling her he would protect her. Who could blame Agnes for a swoon or two? Although...

“Prince Gerome, I’m not quite convinced by this theory either, though,” she said.

“Hmm, yes. Well, the love of a Crest Bearer is a serious thing. Though he may get a little overexcited about mushrooms, Claude’s love is a more playful sort.”

“Er... I see.”

Agnes didn’t even know what a normal Crest Bearer’s love was supposed to be like, but she got the impression everyone was saying that Claude’s was special.

Come to think of it, Crown Princess Zenaide once said, “The love of a Dragon Crest Bearer is an intense thing.”

Zenaide’s husband, Xavier, was a calm and rational sort of man, not a mushroom fetishist like Claude.

Claude’s love was playful? The same Claude who had summoned a sacred beast, entered Oreille under a magical contract, and flame-roasted a king for her?

Agnes gulped, wondering again what the future had in store for her.



“IT’S been too long, Lady Agnes! Ah, your green-blue eyes are as bright as ever—no, even brighter! And that peach-blossom colored hair!”

At the private palace of the crown prince, Agnes was greeted by a girl with black hair: Simone Watteau, daughter of a duke and Princess Zenaide’s younger sister.

As soon as the door opened, she came rushing at Agnes at an alarming speed. But Zenaide grabbed the overexcited Simone by the back of her dress, preventing her from barreling into Agnes. Even though Simone was meant to be

one of the kingdom's most eligible young ladies, she was always charging forward.

And Zenaide, holding her in check with one hand, was also a fearsome individual with that calm smile of hers.

"Simone, if you insist on trying to scare Agnes, I'll have to send you home," she threatened.

"If I miss the chance to have tea with Lady Agnes, I'll never recover from the shock! You'll have to strike me down first! But I'll try to compose myself!" Simone looked to be as full of beans as ever.

"It's been much too long," Agnes managed to say right before Simone clasped her hands together, her eyes sparkling and her expression rapt.

"Ah, even your voice is like sweet birdsong in my ears!"

"Simone."

"Okay, I'll be quiet now!"

Simone clamped her lips together at Zenaide's admonishment.

No doubt Zenaide knew all about Agnes being kidnapped, but it wasn't something she would ever bring up. In fact, she was keeping far from the subject. No matter the circumstances, kidnapping isn't a popular topic of conversation.

Agnes didn't want everyone tiptoeing around her, but she was pleased that she wouldn't have to discuss the incident either.

"Thank you, Zenaide," Agnes said.

"It's fine. Is that the...*you know?*" Zenaide looked pointedly at the white tiger cub sitting at Agnes's feet. Small and fluffy, rather like a cuddly toy, but there was a brilliance to its sky-blue eyes that showed a clear intelligence.

"Yes, this is Ciel."

"Rawr!" he mewed in what sounded like "hello!" and Simone gasped.

"Oh, it's so cute! That white fur; those bluish-black stripes; those clear, sky-blue eyes! Ah, how lovely with the contrast of Agnes's gorgeous pink hair!"

Agnes was nodding along until Simone's last strange statement. Now Simone was gazing only at Agnes. Maybe it was Agnes's imagination, but she thought she caught a glimpse of drool on Simone's lips.

"Simone."

"Okay, I'll be quiet now!"

"You don't have to be quiet, just rein it in. And stop drooling."

"Shertainry!" Simone yelped as she quickly wiped the glisten from her mouth at Zenaide's rebuke.

Why would she be drooling, though? Agnes could understand it if they were at a banquet and meat was being roasted at the table. But why would Simone be drooling right now?

Agnes was curious, but she had a feeling that asking for an explanation would be something she'd regret, so she decided to erase the scene from her memory.

She sat down in a chair, running her hand along the elaborately carved armrest, and Ciel jumped up onto the chair beside hers. Agnes smiled. It was as if Ciel was making sure he wouldn't be left out of the tea party. Watching them, Simone covered her mouth and squeaked.

It seemed like every little thing Agnes did, Simone had some reaction. Agnes hoped Simone wouldn't tire herself out.

When everyone, including Ciel, was seated and tea was poured, Zenaide sighed. "I'm sorry about this, Agnes. But Simone insisted on seeing you."

"Everyone's got something that sustains them! For me, that's Agnes!" Simone's voice was cheerful, but what she was saying was just...odd.

"...You know, Simone, you remind me of someone," Agnes remarked.

"I won't ask who, but I think I can guess. Maybe the one who gave you Ciel? He's beyond help too, it seems."

Zenaide no doubt knew that Ciel was a sacred beast and what it would have meant for him to have been summoned. Who knows, maybe she even knew about Claude's reckless infiltration of Oreille.

A Crest Bearer's love is an intense and heavy thing. Yes, it did indeed seem so.

"Your wedding's not so far off now," Zenaide said. "Agnes, you'll be the Duchess of Aznavour, right? I was rather hoping you'd live here at the palace, though."

"Claude and His Majesty said the same, but I don't think I'm suited for life in the palace," Agnes said.

Zenaide looked a bit put-out. But even frowning, she was extremely beautiful. Maybe Simone's loud excitement over the mundane things Agnes did was something like Agnes's appreciation of Zenaide's beauty?

No... Even if Simone did really like Agnes's pink hair, drooling over it was taking things too far—there was something fundamentally different about Simone.

"But now we are official sisters-in-law. Please feel free to come visit anytime," Zenaide said.

"Oh, thank you."

Currently, there were only three Crest Bearer Dragonmates: Agnes, Zenaide, and the queen. But Agnes couldn't exactly drop in on the queen for tea.

Zenaide was clearly taking the newcomer Agnes under her wing, providing her a confidante. She was not only beautiful and elegant, but also very considerate. Agnes hoped that one day she could become a wonderful woman like Zenaide. Though it would be a tall order. She must do her best to try to live up to her example.

Determined to do whatever she could in that regard, Agnes reached for her teacup. Then she noticed that Simone seemed to be trembling.

For a moment, Agnes wondered if she was cold, but something seemed off.

"Agnes will be a duchess. She won't live in the royal palace. She'll be just like me! So doesn't this mean that I can visit her whenever I want?!"

Agnes jerked in her seat as Simone let out an ear-piercing squeal.

"Claude is second in line to the throne. His title will be the same as a duke, but his position will be quite different. And if you meddle in their affairs as

newlyweds, Claude will no doubt ban you from coming anywhere near their new residence,” Zenaide chided her sister calmly.

“Gah! Prince Claude is a tyrant! How can he monopolize Lady Agnes like this?! I want to gaze upon those dazzling green-blue eyes, too!”

As Simone gnashed her teeth in frustration, the room was filled with a series of loud pops. An *Amanita griseoturcosa* sprouted with its muted, bluish-gray cap alongside a duller *Amanita viridissima* and the cracked cap of a *Russula virescens*.

“All green-blue mushrooms...” Agnes noted with wide eyes.

No doubt the mushrooms had reacted to what Simone had been saying about green-blue eyes. Agnes felt a little sorry for the mushrooms, which were clearly trying to participate in the conversation. She thought she’d better apologize since they’d just sprouted on Simone’s arm, but it seemed she wasn’t upset or alarmed by the mushrooms. Instead, she was gazing at them all along her arm, her eyes sparkling.

“Agnes-colored mushrooms, just for me? Such divine thoughtfulness!” she gushed.

“Er, no, it’s not that...” Agnes demurred.

Agnes’s mushrooms tended to spring up when she was feeling harassed by someone, and some of those mushrooms were poisonous. One could view it as a sort of attack on Simone.

“Can I keep these mushrooms?” Simone asked.

“Huh? Er, if you like.”

“I shall save them as keepsakes! Ah, even these warts are so precious!” Simone quickly plucked the mushrooms and looked at them happily.

Come to think of it, she’d taken some mushrooms with her last time, too.

“...Has one more mushroom freak emerged?” Agnes didn’t mean to say that out loud, but Zenaide sighed and shook her head.

“She’s just an *actual* freak, Agnes. Don’t pay her too much attention. Anyway, are the wedding preparations going well? What about the new residence?”

“I heard that the new house is ready, but...it still doesn’t feel quite real.” Agnes felt a little bad being so hands-off, but she had no idea what a royal wedding entailed. She was painfully aware of how uneducated she was.

“If you have any concerns, please talk to Claude. He’d lay down his life to protect you, Agnes,” Zenaide said.

“It’s...a lot to take.”

Especially when Agnes remembered how he’d spilled his own magic blood to summon a sacred beast and entered Oreille under a temporary draining contract, all to save her.

Ciel seemed to notice Agnes’s gaze and jumped onto her lap. Stroking the cat’s soft fur, Agnes felt soothed. She realized this would be a good opportunity to ask a burning question.

“Um, Prince Gerome said that the love of a Crest Bearer is very serious. But because Claude has my mushrooms to distract him, he’s able to stay playful about things... What does that mean, exactly?”

Ciel looked up at Agnes as her hand paused midstroke, prompting her to resume. This strange creature, feeding off of Claude’s magic to live, seemed to really love being petted.

“The way Gerome phrased it is a bit odd, but it’s mostly correct. You’ll understand more once you’re married, Lady Agnes,” Zenaide said.

“Is... Is it going to get tougher going forward?” Agnes asked, a little shocked.

“Tougher... It’s more like certain prior restrictions are going to be lifted.”

Agnes was kind of hoping for Zenaide to say Gerome was just exaggerating, but this was sounding even more daunting.

Zenaide had her eyes half-closed, and though she was gazing at the chandelier, it was like she was looking at something very far away. Her smile, tinted with a hint of resignation, frightened Agnes a little.

“There are restrictions right now? What, am I going to be expected to eat mushrooms for all three meals?!” Agnes cried.

A loud pop punctuated the room.

As Simone spotted the deep pink frilly *Pleurotus djamor* among the blue-green mushrooms on the table, her eyes lit up like a wild beast spotting its favorite prey, all while muttering something about “Lady Agnes’s colors!”

Agnes was glad Simone seemed pleased, but she wished she’d stop fixating on the mushrooms. Zenaide watched with a smile as Simone began her harvest. Agnes couldn’t exactly snatch them away, so she sat back and watched.

At this rate, everyone in the palace would be eating mushrooms for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Now that she and Claude were to be married, she needed to have a serious talk with him about the mushroom situation. No doubt a total mushroom ban would be impossible, but surely Claude would listen and try to make a few concessions for her.

She didn’t want to put restrictions on him, though. What was the right balance? She wasn’t sure.

Agnes stroked Ciel, who was happily curled up on her lap, and let out a small sigh.



Mushrooms of the Day

Auricularia auricula-judae

An edible mushroom, black and frilly. You can eat it raw or dried. It's got a rubbery crunch. "If there's a hole, why not cover it with a frilly cloth?" it suggested, but it's a mushroom, so no one knew what it was saying.

Amanita muscaria

Red caps with white polka dots. Like the poisonous mushrooms you find drawn in storybooks. It may resemble the 1-Ups from a certain video game franchise you might have heard of, but you wouldn't want to try eating a real one! It felt the red filament of fate and sprouted. The mushroom Claude fell in love with.

"I shall continue to protect Agnes!" it declared, trying to endure the ticklish sensation beneath its feet...er, stalk.

Amanita griseoturcosa

An elegant mushroom, its cap a muted blue-gray color with a white stalk and gills. It is unknown if they are poisonous or not, but since it's part of the *Amanita* family, it'd be safer not to eat one. Good friends with *Amanita viridissima*, another greenish-looking mushroom.

"I had to sprout when someone mentioned green!" it declared, on a mission.

Amanita viridissima

An *Amanita* whose name means green. It's a dull blue-green, or rather, a pale green that reminds me of zombie skin. It's beautiful, but the warts on the cap and the handle look a bit gross. Still, the gills are pale yellow and fluffy, making me think, hmm, maybe just a little nibble...?

It was happy to find itself among fellow greenish mushrooms.

Russula virescens

A bluish-green cap with cracks all over it. It's not very toothsome, but tastes pretty good, so it's best to avoid eating it raw or eating too much of it. ...Why, I wonder what happens?

"You have good taste, complimenting Agnes's eye color!" it sprouted, immediately liking Lady Simone.

Pleurotus djamor

A deep pink cap that gradually fades to ashy white. It's edible but gets tougher as it grows, so it's best to eat it while it's young. Its beautiful pink color fades with heat, so it's good for slicing raw in a salad.

"Never mind eye color! I'm here to represent hair color!" it said, although it was worried that it would lose its chance to participate if it happened to be cooked...

Chapter 4: See? It's All Right

"IT'S nice weather today," Agnes muttered.

Looking out the window at the Lefort garden—or rather, the field—Agnes lifted her teacup to her lips. Originally what had been a garden of blooming flowers was now a field of strangely colored medicinal herbs and mushrooms. Of course, Agnes could only see part of the garden from here, but it was so striking she couldn't help staring out at it.

"Well, we need those medicinal herbs," Agnes reasoned. "They're for Duke Granier. And the mushrooms are...well, you know."

Forcing herself to accept the importance of the mushrooms as well, Agnes placed her teacup on the table, and Ciel jumped onto her lap from where he'd been sitting at her feet, almost as if he'd been waiting.

Ciel stretched out his body and put his paws on Agnes's shoulders. He gently moved his face closer to hers and licked her cheek.

"Whoa! That tickles, Ciel," she giggled.

"Rawr."

Fluffy cats are cute and their behaviors are irresistible, but feline tongues are rough and can be quite painful.

Since Ciel was a sacred beast, Agnes wasn't sure if he exactly qualified as a feline. But no doubt, her skin would be raw if he kept licking her like that. As adorable as it was, Agnes could do without the pain.

Just as she lifted Ciel up into her arms, she heard a gasp from behind her.

"Agnes!"

She turned to see Claude, who had just opened the door, with Maurice, his personal knight, behind him. Apparently, Agnes had been so preoccupied with Ciel that she hadn't heard Claude knock.

“Huh? Oh, Claude, Maurice, hello.”

But before Agnes could even really finish saying hello, Claude rushed in and quickly snatched Ciel from her hands. Agnes was surprised by his behavior and the speed at which he moved, but she was most distracted by his expression—a mask of sadness and anger—quite unlike Claude.

“Um...?” Agnes looked uncomprehendingly at Maurice, who for some reason shook his head apologetically and indicated that Agnes should look at Claude, not him.

Claude was holding Ciel by the scruff, dangling him in front of his face at kissing distance. “Your role is to protect Agnes, not to be *caressed* by her,” he said in a threatening tone. “You already get to be with her all the time, and now I find you *snuggling* up to her and *licking* her. I’m so jealous!”

“Er, do you even hear yourself?!” Agnes interjected. Now she felt like a fool for worrying that something might have been really wrong.

“Unfortunately, His Highness is saying exactly how he really feels,” Maurice whispered to her before leaving to close and stand guard by the door, as if to say he washed his hands of the whole thing.

“Isn’t it the role of a personal knight to keep their master’s rampages in check?” Agnes asked.

“When it comes to Dragonmates, no,” Maurice said flatly. “I am prepared to risk my life for His Highness, but I have no intention of incurring his displeasure and dying.”

“Oh, please!” Agnes sighed, incredulous.

Agnes wanted to brush it off and tell him not to be so silly, but a part of her knew that there was something special about the Dragonmate bond. She could hardly blame Maurice.

Agnes rescued Ciel from Claude’s grasp, expecting some resistance, but Claude readily handed the cat over. Only, he wouldn’t let go of Agnes’s hand now. Ciel jumped out of Agnes’s arms and ran to hide behind Maurice.

“Don’t get me involved in your mess, cat!” Maurice shouted.

“Rawr.”

Now Maurice and the sacred beast were arguing. It didn't seem serious, so Agnes decided it wasn't her problem.

“Claude,” Agnes said softly. “I was simply petting Ciel because he's so soft and fluffy. Don't make it sound so disturbing and wrong, please.”

As if to punctuate Agnes's words, a *Steccherinum ochraceum* mushroom covered in soft needles appeared with a big pop. A roundish *Hericium erinaceus* with numerous soft, white hanging fronds completed the party atop both of Claude's shoulders—but for some reason, the mushroom freak didn't react.

“In that case,” Claude said weakly, pulling Agnes's hand and placing it on top of his head, “come, pet me too.”

“What?!” Agnes gazed at Claude with shock, gasping.

“Lady Agnes. His Highness will not be deterred. It would be quicker to simply pet him,” Maurice advised. It seemed like he was trying to help her out, though it didn't feel very helpful.

Agnes was taken aback to think that Claude would be jealous of the sacred beast he himself had summoned for her. Then again, wasn't such insane jealousy proof of his love for Agnes? She had no other choice but to stroke Claude's soft hair.

“Is... Is this okay?” she asked, unsure.

“Ah. It's nice to be touched, but...I want to touch you too, Agnes,” Claude replied, gently stroking her hair in turn.

“Again, His Highness is very forward with his feelings,” came Maurice from behind.

Honestly, Agnes wouldn't mind if Claude kept a few more of his feelings to himself though.

A clam-shaped *Cryptoporus volvatus* grew with a pop on the back of Claude's glove. The bump was cream-colored with a brown top and a glossy finish, making it look like it had been dipped in delicious caramel sauce. However, once again, Claude continued to caress Agnes without making the slightest

move to pluck the mushroom.

“Uh, um...” she muttered.

“Yes?”

Claude did not stop even when Agnes cleared her throat. Instead, he dropped a kiss on her forehead. Such a natural move, and his expression was filled with love. Agnes felt her heartbeat catapult.

“D-Didn’t you come here to discuss something?!” she asked, her voice rising with her panic.

“That’s right. Agnes, let’s go to town and see a play.”

“A play?”

Agnes was thankful that the stroking and kissing seemed to be over, but what was all this about a play?

Claude narrowed his eyes and grinned as he responded, “Yes. It’s a story all about defeating monsters with the power of dragons.”



BY horse-drawn carriage, they arrived at a large theater in the center of the royal capital. After entering the building through a luxurious private entrance, they were guided directly to a private box located right in front of the stage with the best view. The seats were plush and incredibly spacious.

Maurice stood guard by the door, but there were also theater staff waiting just outside to wait on them. Agnes had been thinking of Claude as a mushroom fiend for so long, she’d almost forgotten he was a prince—of course, he would get the VIP treatment.

Agnes, raised as a commoner and then a count’s daughter, then becoming something of a recluse during her engagement years, found herself uncomfortable around all the glitz and glam. In an attempt to calm herself down, Agnes repeatedly stroked Ciel sitting on her lap.

“Agnes, don’t forget about me too...” Claude entreated.

“You said this play was about slaying monsters or something?” Sensing

danger, Agnes quickly changed the subject to avoid public spectacle.

“Yes. It’s what they call a hero story. Look, it’s starting.”

The curtains rose, and the orchestra kicked in. The play turned out to be a simple story about good and evil. Innocent people besieged by monsters. A hero comes to their rescue, with the help of a dragon. In the end, the hero rescues the princess from the monsters and the two swear their love.

A tale as old as time, yet one that retains the power to move people emotionally.

During the curtain call, Agnes gasped a little as she clapped loudly.

“I thought it was just a story, but it’s a true one, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Naturally, the play has been heavily dramatized, but it is certainly a retelling of an event that happened a long time ago,” Claude replied.

After several curtain calls from the performers, Agnes rubbed her palms, sore from so much clapping.

“So, the ancestors of the Visage royal family borrowed the power of dragons to save people, right?”

“Yes, through dragon’s blood, to be precise.”

Claude reached out and stroked Agnes’s palms. Apparently, he’d noticed how red they were and was concerned.

“This happened a long time ago, right?” she asked.

“It’s a fairy tale based on the royal family from around the time of the founding of this country, so yes, I think it happened a very long time ago.”

Agnes patted Claude’s hand to indicate that her palms were fine now, and Claude reluctantly let go. He instead reached out and slowly stroked Agnes’s pink hair. It was embarrassing but sort of soothing at the same time.

“The Visage royal family has been protecting this land for so long, hasn’t it?” she mused.

The Crest Bearers of the royal family, those with dragon’s blood, protected the masses from monsters. That was the duty of the royal family.

In that case, what role did Agnes, Queen of Mushrooms, have to play? She pondered vaguely on this topic as she listened to the applause raining down on the stage.



“AGNES, what’s wrong? You seem out of sorts.”

After they left the theater and climbed into the carriage, Claude turned to her in concern as they sat side by side.

Agnes had been conversing normally and hadn’t expected her true feelings to show on her face. Claude cared so much for Agnes; he was attuned to every little quirk of her expression.

“I’m sorry, I’m fine...”

She was about to deny everything, but then trailed off as she remembered what Zenaide had said: *“If you have any concerns, please talk to Claude. He’d lay down his life to protect you, Agnes.”*

Ah, that’s right, she realized.

Being with Agnes was all he needed—Claude told her as much more than a few times. Here he was, concerned for her, though she’d tried to hide her feelings. Fobbing him off would be too easy. Up until now, Agnes would have gone this route and faked a smile. She didn’t want to worry Claude—these were *her* personal concerns.

Yes, she was concerned, and Claude had picked up on it. Why not look to him for advice, for once?

For a moment, she thought of her ex-fiancé, Philip, yelling at her. Worthless Agnes. Disgraceful, detestable Agnes. Just do what you’re told; don’t attract attention.

She had heard those words over and over until, before she knew it, she’d internalized them. Her brother Kevin had referred to this as Philip’s curse. Claude was the one who’d rescued Agnes from a situation that even the kindness of her own family couldn’t solve.

So, it was all right. She could open up to Claude. Agnes knew this, but it still

took courage to speak. It took courage to break free of an internalized habit. She took a deep breath and looked into those silvery-gray eyes.

“Actually, something is bothering me,” she started. “Can I talk to you about it?”

“Of course. You can talk to me about anything, no matter how small.”

See? It's all right. Agnes felt a flood of relief. The feel of Claude holding her hand was enough to make tears spring to her eyes.

“The royal family of Visage protects the country and citizens with the power of dragon blood, right? That’s the role of the royal family. Then, what’s my role?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“My father was a member of the royal family of Oreille, a King of Mushrooms blessed by the spirits. Now I find out that I myself am a Queen of Mushrooms. If I inherited a royal power, then maybe I inherited a specific role too. Maybe I should fulfill it... Though I don’t know exactly what it is I could do?”

Claude stared at Agnes, and then slowly narrowed his eyes.

“...Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Thank you” was an odd answer to a question about what she should be doing—although her question had been a bit muddled.

“Your self-esteem has been decimated all because of Philip. You’ve been recovering a little, but now see, you’ve gained the courage to express your own worries to others. To me. I can’t tell you how happy this makes me.” Claude smiled and patted Agnes’s head as he spoke.

His smile, his gentle touch—Agnes could feel the depth of his care for her. She was so moved by this unconditional care and trust in her, she felt like she was about to burst into tears.

“Claude, why are you so kind?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t call this kindness. I’m not unconditionally kind to everyone. It’s

just that I adore you. I always want to see you smile.”

“That IS kindness, I think.”

“You don’t want me to be kind to you?”

Agnes wasn’t saying that; she loved his kindness toward her. She lowered her head and took a breath, fighting the feelings welling up inside her.

“I...don’t mean that. I find your kindness so soothing,” she tried to explain. “But I feel at the same time that I shouldn’t be too reliant upon it.”

“I think your self-control is admirable, Agnes, but in fact I WANT you to rely on me,” he stressed.

“You do?” Agnes lifted her head, surprised, and saw Claude smiling softly at her as he always did.

“Your poor heart, so wounded by Philip, is slowly recovering. Even so, the wounds may open back up again at some point. Don’t be afraid of that. No matter how long it takes, I will...be by your side and support you, Agnes.”

“Oh Claude, you really are too kind.”

The tears threatened to overflow again. Claude hugged Agnes’s shoulder, and as they swayed in the carriage, droplets fell onto his jacket.

“So, to return to the topic,” he said, knowing that talking would help her through this moment. “You weren’t born and raised to be a member of the Oreillian royal family. You’re under no obligation to fulfill any role. You renounced your rights to being a member of that family, too, and are no longer one of them. Anyway, this is Visage. Not Oreille.”

“But...”

Agnes knew all that. King Nathan wasn’t the type of person to impose any responsibilities on her. She wasn’t an official member of the royal family of that country. So, she had no rights, and thus no obligations there.

“If you want to be useful as a member of *OUR* royal family, then you can lend me some of your power and help me defend the hole in the wall with my dragon power,” Claude suggested.

“My power?”

Agnes looked up at Claude, wondering what he meant, when his lips suddenly touched hers. He moved so swiftly, so naturally, that it took Agnes a second to realize what had just happened.

“If you care so much about it, Agnes, then I’ll gladly accept all the power you have to give,” he said suavely.

By power, did he mean...that kiss?

Claude really was impossible. She shook her head quickly, embarrassed and frustrated.

“I-I think that’s enough for now!”

Agnes held her hand over Claude’s mouth to block him from further kisses, and he smiled a little sadly.

“I just want you to stay where it’s safe, Agnes...please.”

“...Okay.”

Claude cared for Agnes and wanted to protect her. She was happy about that, truly. Still, was it really okay for her to be so indulged?

A line of brown-capped Shiitake popped up on Claude’s arm, their entrance reverberating within the carriage. Claude looked out the window while plucking the new arrivals, and the carriage stopped at almost the same time.

“Ah, it looks like we’ve arrived.”

Agnes took Claude’s hand and stepped down from the carriage to find herself in a flower meadow. He’d brought her to a flower meadow before, but those ones were grown for sale. The flowers here were wildflowers. So many colors and types, all swaying happily in the green grass. No doubt, the flowers meant for sale were beautiful, with larger petals and more vivid colors. The beauty of these wildflowers, however, growing free, was beyond compare.

There were so many different types of flowers blooming, the scent changed every time the wind did; all the smells were so enjoyable to Agnes’s nose.

Ciel leapt down from the carriage after Agnes, stretching and narrowing his

blue eyes in pleasure.

“This is amazing... It’s so beautiful,” Agnes gasped in admiration, and then there came a loud pop.

On Maurice’s arm sprouted a mushroom that had pale reddish-brown petal-like fronds, and a mushroom with a pale gray cap and indigo frills. At the same time, matching mushrooms were also growing on Claude’s arms.

“A *Sparassis crispa* and a *Lactarius indigo*! They are as beautiful as any flower garden!” Claude effused.

Maurice bowed to Claude, whose eyes were sparkling at the sight of the colorful mushrooms. “Please rest assured that the mushrooms will be stored in the...designated location.”

“Right. Well then, Agnes, shall we go?” Claude held out his hand to her.

“Um, uh, yes...”

Where is the designated location? Agnes wondered. What if Claude is bringing them to our new house? What if there’s an entire mushroom room there? The thought crept her out.

Would her new married life begin surrounded by mushrooms?

Agnes tried to put aside those nebulous doubts, and they made their way through the meadow. It wasn’t maintained, so it was a little difficult underfoot, but Claude held her hand so she wouldn’t trip.

Seriously, he would be the perfect prince if he wasn’t so obsessive about mushrooms. But seeing as Agnes was a Mushroom Queen, she supposed it had all worked out to everyone’s benefit...

“When you’ve got a lot on your mind, it’s best to go somewhere out in nature and look at the beauty all around. Do you feel a little better?” he asked.

“...You brought me here for my mental health?”

“For me, too. Because I want to see you smile. Come on, Ciel. Stretch those legs of yours for once.”

As Claude stroked the cat, it suddenly grew from kitten size to the same

height as Agnes. At the same time, a popping sound rang out, and a mushroom with a gray-brown cap and blackish-brown warts grew on Ciel's head. Ciel, now in the form of a white tiger, ran off across the meadow, *Amanita spissacea* bobbing on his head, as if he was yelling, "Wahoo!" Ciel now ran faster than any beast, and the slipstream sent Agnes's pink hair flapping.

"Claude, if Ciel is in his large form, won't it consume more of your magic?" she worried.

"It's not a big deal. We're in Visage, after all. I can support him being bigger for a bit."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I wouldn't lie to you, Agnes."

Agnes wasn't quite sure it was as minor a thing as Claude was making out. But she felt confident that at least it wouldn't drain Claude too much. He might hide the truth from Agnes sometimes, but he would never outright lie to her.

Agnes felt a little relieved, but by then, Ciel had already disappeared from view.

"I hope Ciel doesn't run into anyone..." she said worriedly. It would be quite a shock to find a huge white tiger barreling toward one at lightning speed in a meadow.

"Agnes."

She turned to Claude, who placed something on her head. Looking up, she caught a glimpse of petals. *A flower crown?*

"Yes, that really suits you. Adorable," Claude smiled.

Curious, Agnes lifted the object off her head. It *was* a flower crown.

"You made this, Claude? It's so well done... Are these...mushrooms in it?"

Woven in between the colorful flowers were the *Sparassis crispa* and *Lactarius indigo* mushrooms. Agnes had never seen a flower crown with mushrooms in it before. Though the colors did look very nice.

"I got really into drying mushrooms and making decorative strings of them for

a while.” Claude’s fungus flag was flying again.

“A prince who weaves flower crowns is romantic, but a prince who dries strings of mushrooms is, hmmm...” Agnes wasn’t sure how to feel about that one.

“Can you make flower crowns too, Agnes?” he asked.

“Yes, I grew up a commoner, so we often made these as part of our games.”

Agnes placed the mushroom flower crown back on her head before bending down to pick flowers. She hadn’t done it in a while and was surprised how easily flower crown making came back to her. Quickly, she wove one and placed it on his head.

She’d added a lot of white and yellow flowers to provide a strong contrast with Claude’s Prussian blue hair, and it turned out great. He looked in every respect the dashing prince, not like a mushroom freak at all.

“You look lovely too, Claude.”

“Thank you.”

Claude stopped smiling gently then and his expression grew suddenly severe. Before Agnes could blink, Claude pulled her against his chest, one arm reaching out, as lightning struck the meadow.

“Eeek?!”

The flash of light and the shaking of the ground startled Agnes, and then there was the smell of something burning.

“C-Claude?!”

Claude loosened his grip on her, and Agnes turned to see that part of the meadow was black and smoking. A curl of black mist rose from the ground and dissipated into the sky. Claude had used magic of some sort, clearly, but all Agnes could see was burnt flowers. She had no idea what had just happened.

“Your Highness!” Maurice came running over from the carriage.

They had traveled some way from the carriage, but she could see the driver was standing on guard now too. *What happened?*

“Was it a monster?”

“Yes. Wouldn’t have expected one to show up at a place like this,” Claude said.

The ground rumbled, and a muffled roar ripped through the air. Ciel returned at top speed with something odd in his mouth. It looked like a jet-black bird, but there was a sort of black mist coming off it in waves, which was a bit creepy.

Could this be a monster? Agnes took a step back out of fear, and Claude put his arm gently around her.

“Well done, Ciel, you can eat it,” Claude approved.

“Rawr!” As if he’d been waiting for this cue, Ciel started chomping on the bird.

Agnes was glad there was no splashing blood, but all that black mist... And there was this odd sound, like air through a broken flute, which crept her out. Was that the monster crying out?

“Are... Are you sure it’s safe?” she wondered.

“Sacred Beasts like Ciel live off my magic power. Monsters are more like snacks to them.”

Some snack!

“So, the monsters... They look like birds?” she asked.

“No. They come in various shapes and sizes. They often resemble animals, but they don’t have what you would call flesh and blood exactly,” Claude explained. “Look at it.”

With every chomp of Ciel’s jaws, the monster began to lose its shape and eventually disappeared into a black mist. Ciel swallowed with relish and licked his chops with satisfaction.

“When you defeat one, it turns into mist and disappears,” Claude continued. “It’s essentially like a mass of magical power.”

So, the magic Claude had cast just before was an attack against a monster. It had turned into black mist before Agnes could even see its true form.

“Won’t Ciel get a stomachache?” she worried.

“He’s a sacred beast, so he’s probably fine. But humans are in great danger from these monsters. They attack any living thing on sight. It’s not unusual for some of them to slip through the hole in the wall and escape, but... I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” Claude sighed a little and patted Ciel, who was still licking his chops. Oh, but he wasn’t patting Ciel... He was plucking the *Amanita spissacea* off his head. “The monsters tend to break through the wall in waves. I’ve got a feeling a major wave is coming.”

Maurice furrowed his brows at his words. Judging from their grim expressions, this was bad.

“There are knights stationed near the hole in the wall, so if anything happens, they’ll contact us,” Claude said. “Armand is also stationed there, so the worst probably won’t happen.”

If Claude says so, it’s probably fine. Agnes hoped. But there was still a part of her that remained uneasy.



Mushrooms of the Day

Steccherinum ochraceum

It clings to trees, its free side velvety with pale orange to brown stripes, and its ventral surface is densely covered with fluffy-looking needles. It has a cinnamon-like scent, which remains even after it's been dried.

"I heard that if I'm fluffy, I can get petted?" it said, excitedly waiting for a soft touch.

Hericium erinaceus

A mushroom with strands hanging down everywhere. It looks like a fluffy ball of fur. It is pure white when young but gradually turns brown, which is fun to see. It's edible and used in supplements.

"I'm bushy! I'd make a great epaulette," it claimed, shaking its thorns with all its might.

Cryptoporus volvatus

It grows on tree trunks and looks like a clam. The bottom part is cream-colored and the top part is a glossy brown. It looks like a chestnut stuck in the tree bark. The name makes it sound yummy, and it definitely looks yummy, but apparently it doesn't taste good.

A shrewd mushroom that wants to be stroked every chance it gets. "How about this smoothness?" it said, hoping to be stroked.

Shiitake

Brown caps, a beloved table staple. Tasty either fried, boiled, or dried, a member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

“Honestly, even mushrooms want to grow in a safe place,” it said as it made its appearance.

Sparassis crispa

A mushroom with a white cap and a frilly film on it. It's edible and has a nice texture. As a member of the Wood Deterioration Club, it's a hard worker who infiltrates rotting wood to return it to the soil. When it heard about the flower garden, it knew it had to take part. It's in rivalry with the flowers.

Lactarius indigo

A mushroom with bright indigo folds on a light indigo cap. Its milky sap is a beautiful blue that turns green when exposed to air. It's edible, but loses its color when heated, so it's best to eat it raw.

It wanted to join the flower garden and sprouted right in the midst of the action.

Chapter 5: A Mushroom House for a Mushroom Freak

“HELLO, Your Grace. I brought you your refill today.”

Agnes made her usual visit to the duke’s house with Ciel and handed a small bottle to Cesar.

“Thank you for going to all the trouble,” he replied.

“No trouble at all. I’m just sorry it took a while.

She took a seat on the sofa as indicated. Ciel jumped up beside her, curled into a ball, and immediately fell asleep. Sacred beasts didn’t seem to require sleep, so this probably indicated that Ciel saw Cesar as a safe person and didn’t need to guard Agnes. Or perhaps he just fancied a nap? His carefree attitude was similar to that of a domestic housecat, and it charmed Agnes.

“Thanks to you, Agnes, I’ve been feeling so much better lately,” Cesar said. “I appreciate it.”

“It’s all thanks to the spirits. I haven’t really done much.”

“The spirits only lend their power because it’s you asking, Agnes. You’re quite something.”

“Th-Thank you...”

Cesar’s habit of giving very straightforward compliments was a lot like Claude’s. Maybe it was because they were blood relatives. Only, on second thought... That scoundrel Philip was a blood relative too. Perhaps it came down to the personality of the individual after all then.

“Your sacred beast seems to be performing its duties well,” Cesar observed.

Ciel, seeming to realize he was being discussed, responded by lazily waving his stripy tail. His eyes opened, and he let out a little “rawr,” looking like an adorable stuffed toy.

It was so cute that Agnes felt herself melting.

The servant who'd just brought the cake to the table also smiled upon witnessing Ciel.

"Oh, you made this cake, Agnes?" Cesar asked.

"Actually, my maid made it. The lemons are in season right now and really tasty, so I figured, why not."

"Those cookies you brought last time were excellent. I'm certainly looking forward to trying this cake." Cesar took a bite, then his eyes lit up like a little boy's. "Mmm. Sweet, sour, and refreshing. And I actually feel a little lighter. Agnes, you and your spirits truly are amazing."

Agnes was glad to see Cesar enjoying the cake, but something was odd about his reaction. "I mean, I brought it here, but the spirits weren't involved," she said. "Are you saying this cake has been enhanced?"

"Perhaps... Maybe the spirits decided to act of their own accord this time," he guessed.

"The spirits, acting of their own accord..." Agnes mulled it over. "Yes, that could be true. The mushrooms have always sprouted of their own will, after all."

It seemed the spirits and the mushrooms worked in tandem to uphold the wishes of her late father, the King of Mushrooms. Agnes wasn't sure about how they'd gone about it, but anything that helped Cesar's health was a good thing in her book.

"Ah, I feel quite rejuvenated," Cesar said. "At this rate, Claude might not have to shoulder the expedition all by himself, after all."

This casual comment made Agnes blink, causing Cesar to smile softly in turn, picking up on this tell.

"You heard about the hole in the wall and the role of the royal family, right?" he asked.

"Yes, well, in a nutshell."

Cesar nodded and picked up his teacup before he began speaking again. "There are currently four Dragon Crest Bearers. However, it is difficult for His

Majesty the King and Crown Prince Xavier to leave the capital. Up until now, Claude and I have been the ones to go on expeditions, but recently, I've been unable to participate."

"Are the expeditions...really so very dangerous?"

Cesar took a sip of tea, then slowly shook his head. "No. Basically, we just keep an eye on things and hunt down any excess monsters. It's just that traveling is too much of a burden on me these days."

"You're... You're really that sick?" Agnes worried. She had heard that Cesar wasn't able to attend official events, but if he was too sick to even bear riding in a carriage...

"As you probably know by now, Dragon Crest Bearers without a Dragonmate begin to weaken from the time they reach adulthood," Cesar explained. "I've done what I can to slow the progression, but it's taken its toll on me slowly all the same."

Thanks to the spirit herbs Agnes brought, Cesar's condition had definitely improved, but it wasn't like they were a cure.

Dragon Crest Bearers needed a Dragonmate.

Not just mentally, but physically, they needed one—that was the cruel reality.

"Is it too late? I mean, to keep looking for your Dragonmate?" Agnes inquired.

"According to past records, most meet theirs in their teens. Anyway, I don't have time to go about searching," Cesar waved off the idea. "I don't have time to walk around looking for someone, who could be anyone, anywhere. I'm a royal Crest Bearer first and foremost. I have to fulfill my role."

The brilliance of those silvery-gray eyes staring straight at Agnes was exactly like Claude's.

"I heard that Claude was anticipating growing weaker, too. You and he are both really strong, Your Grace," she said.

Despite knowing that they would only weaken in the future, they had both nonetheless focused on their important roles. Something easier said than done.

Even more so because Cesar's brother King Visage and Crown Prince Xavier

already had their Dragonmates.

Agnes wondered how it felt to see another person meet their great love and gain great strength and long life in the bargain.

“Maybe it was my destiny to be born without a Dragonmate,” Cesar remarked. “But I don’t have any regrets.”

Oh, Duke Granier is so strong. Claude, too. Though he’d already begun to weaken, he never tried to force a marriage with Agnes to prevent it. She wished desperately to be a better person, to live up to these fine men that she knew. Although she knew they would accept her as she was, Agnes couldn’t remain complacent.

“I heard reports of the hole in the wall widening,” she said.

“It seems that way. It’s not really so shocking. But if a big wave of monsters occurs, it could cause some issues,” Cesar replied.

“I think Claude will be heading to the hole in the wall before our wedding.”

“That makes sense. To send whoever of the Crest Bearers is available to help out where Armand cannot.”

Agnes was about to comment but found herself hesitating.

Then, with a popping sound, a yellow rod-shaped mushroom grew in the center of the table. The *Clavulinopsis helvola* swayed back and forth, as if cheering for Agnes. She relaxed a little and looked straight at Cesar.

“Claude wants me to stay where it’s safe,” she said. “I appreciate his kindness, but I’m not sure if that’s what I should really be doing...”

“Because you are a Queen of Mushrooms?” Cesar prompted.

“Right, but it’s more... If there’s anything I can do, then I don’t think I should just sit around.”

Agnes felt adrift. No one had asked her to help out. Perhaps she was being selfish, agonizing over this kind of thing, but she couldn’t just shrug it off.

Cesar nodded a few times, then put down his teacup. “Crest Bearers are usually very indulgent of their Dragonmates.”

“Right...”

“Incredibly indulgent, even.”

“Y-Yes...”

Agnes could certainly appreciate that, but was there more to what Cesar was saying?

“They prioritize protecting their Dragonmate, even more so than their own lives. But that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s what’s best for their partner,” he explained.

“What’s best for me,” Agnes repeated, tipping her head to one side as she mulled over what Cesar was getting at.

“Think for yourself about what you’d like to do, Agnes. You can be a little unreasonable; Claude will be open to it.”

Then there was an echoing pop, as if to punctuate what Cesar just said. The white *Tricholoma japonicum* grew beside the *Clavulinopsis helvola*.

“What I’d like to do.”

Looking at the swaying mushrooms, Agnes thought hard.



“RAWR.”

“Yes, yes. Please wait a moment.”

Agnes kept her eyes on the picture book even as she stroked Ciel, nestling at the foot of the sofa. Pictures of people being attacked by monsters. The hero who defeated the monsters with the help of dragons. In the end, the princess is rescued, and it’s a happy ever after.

Agnes continued flipping through the pages. She could hardly believe that the fairy tales she’d heard since childhood were actually true. But now that she knew of Crest Bearers and their magic and strength, not to mention the fact that they could summon sacred beasts, she could no longer write the stories off as mere fantasy.

The last page of the picture book concluded with a happy marriage between

the hero and the princess. She'd read this tale many times and enjoyed it, but now she felt oddly unsatisfied.

The fairy tale princess was loved and protected by the hero and lived happily ever after, but was that okay?

Agnes gazed at the pages and smiling characters before closing the book with a heavy sigh.

"Oh, Agnes. There you are."

"Claude."

At the sight of the beautiful young man with stunning blue hair, Agnes put her book down on the table and stood up.

"Were you reading?" he asked.

"Yes, but how come you're here?"

"I don't need a reason to want to see you, Agnes. But actually, I do have something I want to do with you today. Let's go and see the new house!"

"...Pardon?"

Claude took a confused Agnes by the hand and led her out of the Lefort residence.



"I could have shown it to you after it was completed, but I wanted to get your opinions as well."

Even in the carriage, Claude's excitement was palpable. But Agnes was more reserved.

A mansion renovated by a mushroom fetishist. Agnes was imagining nothing other than a complete mushroom mansion. *Having to live in a place like that... Egh.*

Claude said he wanted Agnes's input, but if the place was already covered with mushrooms, she'd have to ask him to remove them. Anyway, she at least hoped Claude would try to get her opinion before decorating with toadstools.

"It's close to the royal palace and the Lefort residence, so it'll be very easy to

get around, especially for you,” he said.

“Thank you, Claude.”

Agnes appreciated Claude’s attention to detail. However, she had a feeling he wouldn’t be so flexible when it came to fungi.

“Well, here we are.”

The carriage came to a halt. Agnes trembled a little, expecting to encounter a hellish nightmare—she should have spoken up against mushroom decorating when Claude first started talking about renovating a house for her.

Ah, but the renovations were already underway from the moment she and Claude had met. No doubt it would have been too late, anyway.

And if she took mushrooms away from Claude, he might just die. She’d have to draw a firm line in the mycelium all while accommodating Claude’s mushy proclivities to a certain point.

Feeling like she was headed to the guillotine, Agnes nervously let Claude help her down from the carriage.

Would the mansion be mushroom-shaped? Could she at least ask for caps with muted colors? Beige at the very least! She lifted her eyes with trepidation, her heart sinking, to see an ordinary building with white walls and a dark blue roof.

“Oh, it’s shaped like an actual building...”

Maurice, standing guard by the door, crumpled with laughter over Agnes’s gasped remark.

“Right. I knew it... It’s boring, isn’t it? Perhaps some eye-catching mushroom statues... Or perhaps the roof itself should be shaped like a mushroom cap.” The mushroom freak, mistaking Agnes’s surprise for disappointment, started rambling things that were a terrible affront to tasteful design.

“No, no! Keep it like this, please!” she pleaded. “It’s a perfectly acceptable mansion, one that doesn’t offend public decency at all! I love it!”

“Oh... Well, all right. If you would rather it stay like this, Agnes.”

Even though they hadn't even stepped inside yet, Agnes was already breathless with anxiety. *Yikes*. If she wasn't careful, the entire mansion would be transformed into a mushroom before she could blink.

"Well then, shall we go inside?"

"Lady Agnes, have courage!" Maurice's whispered words of support made Agnes's heart sink.

A dark pre-mush-nition?

...Oh, she wanted to go home.

Weak, Agnes stumbled through the front doorway, Claude tugging her by the hand and Ciel headbutting her heels.

"I particularly like the high ceilings in the entrance hall," Claude said.

"Wow, it's beautiful with the sunlight coming in."

The entrance hall was spacious with a beautifully polished white marble floor. High ceilings opened up to the second floor, its walls beautifully decorated with stained glass windows and elaborate molding.

"Isn't it? I slightly changed the window placement so that the sunlight would have even greater impact," Claude boasted.

"Never mind the placement, is that stained glass in a mushroom motif?" Agnes asked in disbelief.

"It seemed a waste of such lovely sunlight not to use it to express the beauty of mushrooms through the medium of stained glass!"

Yes, the stained glass filled the room with beautiful rainbow rays. The way the colored light poured down was spectacular, but the shapes cast on the walls were of mushrooms.

Red cap, white cap, polka dot cap... Agnes could only see fungus.

In this hall of shining mushrooms, the place didn't really feel like a person's home.

"It was a little difficult to place the windows just so that the mushrooms would always be reflected on the floor of the entrance hall," Claude said,

sounding very serious.

“Ack! Yes, there are images all over the floor too! The first thing you see when you open the door is mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms!” Agnes cried.

That was why the floor was white marble—to better display the mushrooms.

A white-capped *Mycena chlorophos* popped up on the elaborately colored floor with a loud pop, only it wasn't glowing since it was daylight. And anyway, weren't there already enough glowing mushrooms here?!



Claude quickly plucked the mushroom that Ciel was attempting to bat and handed it to a servant.

Agnes wondered where all the specimens were going, although that was hardly the pertinent issue at the moment. She needed to be careful, or she'd end up living inside an actual mushroom.

"I'm glad you like it. Now, let me show you around," Claude said gallantly.

"Why do those words fill me with fear?!"

Agnes did not exactly "like" the front hall! Even so, Claude seemed blissfully unaware of that fact and continued down the hallway with a light step.

"The wallpaper throughout has a white vine theme. You can see it where the sunlight hits."

"Um... Does the light reveal hidden mushrooms, or something? Like, in all kinds of shapes and sizes?"

"Actually, I wanted mushroom-themed wallpaper everywhere, but Gerome stopped by to see it and said I really shouldn't. I went with this simple vine pattern instead."

Agnes had a guardian angel. Next time she saw Gerome, she would have to thank him.

"He told me I'd better keep the walls neutral as I had all this mushroom furniture ordered. He's right; a proper balance is needed to highlight their beauty."

Nope, not a guardian angel. Simply someone who had bargained for a slightly less terrible deal on Agnes's behalf.

"If you're talking about balance, I think there are already too many mushrooms in the entrance hall," Agnes quipped.

As if on cue, a line of mushrooms sprouted along the wall. The brown-capped *Ganoderma applanatum* showcased ring grooves resembling tree rings alongside the semicircular rose-colored *Fomitopsis rosea*.

"Ah yes, a mushroom chair would be good too," Claude nodded.

“MORE mushroom furniture?!”

Then, with another explosive sound, a pure white spherical *Calvatia nipponica* blocked the hallway. Agnes wasn't sure why it chose to sprout just then, but it ended up blocking the corridor to the rest of the house, which was something of a relief.

“I-I've already seen the interior, now I want to see the garden!” she cried.

The inside was a complete mushroom fest.

Agnes wanted to get some fresh air—and away from mushrooms for a minute.

“Really? Well then, let's go out into the garden.”

When Claude led her out of the building, Agnes took a look at the garden and breathed a sigh of relief.

Phew. It's a completely normal garden.

For a moment, she'd been terrified to find herself in a garden where only mushrooms grew, but that wasn't the case. Some of the flowers were planted in beds that were a bit mushroom-shaped, which was tolerable. Compared to the inside, as long as it wasn't a mushroom garden, she had no complaints.

“What do you think?” Claude asked.

“It's fine, except for the shape of the flowerbeds. The flowers are pretty, though. It's actually a lovely garden.”

“Good. I actually wanted everything mushroom-shaped, but Xavier said it wouldn't be a garden so much as a mushroom patch.” Claude sounded a little bit despondent. Still, Agnes didn't have it in her to console him.

Agnes was going to have to live here, too. Too much compromise Claude's way would lead her down the path of doom.

Anyway, Xavier had come to her aid too, it seemed. He was a prince, a Crest Bearer, but also a very sensible sort of person. She'd have to thank him, too. She was grateful to her future in-laws.

“So, I also had them put in a special tilled patch especially for growing

mushrooms!”

Noooooooooooo!

Claude beamed at Agnes, who could only scream internally.



Mushrooms of the Day

Clavulinopsis helvola

A yellow mushroom that grows from the ground like French fries. The Japanese name has the character for “noodles” in it, so you’d think it would be edible, but it’s not considered a worthy foodstuff. Apparently, you need a lot of courage to eat it.

It waved its French fries proudly, announcing that it was a symbol of bravery. It intended to encourage Agnes to be brave, but it undulated a little too much and started to get lightheaded.

Tricholoma japonicum

White cap and stem, but as the cap grows, the center becomes brownish. It changes color when touched or scratched, but only slightly. The flesh has a mild bitter taste but is edible.

“What I wanna do is change color!” it cried, trying to rub itself against things and turn brown.

Mycena chlorophos

A mysterious mushroom with a white cap that glows green at night. Its glow is said to be the strongest known in the world. It grows after rain or in the rainy season and lives about 3 days. It's not poisonous, so you can eat it, but it's watery and smells of rot. Why are the mushroom braves trying things that smell bad, you may wonder.

"I'm glowing my best to cheer up Agnes!" it cried, but it's daytime so no one could really tell.

Ganoderma applanatum

Gray or whitish brown cap with age rings like a tree. It grows year by year, and large ones can reach about 30 centimeters. It's durable enough not to fall apart even if you sit on it, so it's more suitable as a piece of furniture than as a mushroom. A member of the Wood Deterioration Club. If you scratch a message into the back of the cap while it's growing, it won't disappear, and it will shine like an ornament if you polish it. Maybe it really is furniture...

"I want to offer myself as furniture and be sat upon by Agnes!" it cried, expressing a long-cherished desire.

Fomitopsis rosea

The cap is semicircular to horseshoe-shaped. It's rose-colored when young, turning from brown to black as it ages with cracks and wrinkles becoming noticeable. Not to be confused with the *Fomitopsis cajanderi*. It has seven similar species siblings, so it's often misidentified, but it doesn't mind and loves being part of a big family.

It admired the *Ganoderma applanatum* and sprouted excitedly crying: "I want to sit beside Gano!"

Calvatia nipponica

It's also known as the Giant Puffball. The name makes me imagine something really giant, but it's just a fluffy white ball-shaped mushroom. Its dreamy white sphere is about 15 centimeters across and sprouts in one night. When it turns brown, its skin peels off and releases an ammonia-like scent. It's edible while still white, but rather tasteless than delicious. Why do we eat it, then?

It sprouted to show Agnes it's a strong contender for a mushroom chair, but it sprouted the wrong size and ended up blocking the hallway.

Chapter 6: Let Me Go with You Too

“I had it designed to resemble the growing patch you have at your family house, but feel free to make changes so it’s easy for you to use,” Claude said.

“I’m grateful for the gesture since I’m growing herbs for Duke Granier, but I feel like this growing patch is really huge,” Agnes noted.

True, Agnes had her own section at the Lefort residence, but that was part of their existing garden, more of an add-on. Here, though, the entire garden seemed oriented around this huge growing patch.

“We need space for growing lots of mushrooms, right?” Claude asked as if it was a no-brainer.

“I’m not planning to grow them though...”

Immediately, there was a popping sound followed by newly sprouted mushrooms. The brown-capped addition was a *Lyophyllum decastes*, and the species that looked like a cluster of upside-down bottle caps was a *Cyathus stercoreus*. Due to the force of the sprouting, something like a black stone came flying out of the ground. Seeing this, Claude gasped with delight.

“Ah, good! The mushrooms are growing well. What a delight to be able to gaze upon this every day.”

“I knew it, this is a total mushroom mansion,” Agnes sighed with despair.

Both inside and out, was there no escape?

“We’ll save the mushroom plans for another day. Today, we have other business,” Claude said.

“We do?”

Claude grabbed Agnes’s hand as she stood in a state of fatigue, led her out of the mansion, and back into the carriage. The pair and Ciel rode to the palace and found themselves in front of Commode, the royal clothing atelier.

"I am honored to have been entrusted with designing your wedding dress, Lady Agnes!" Delalande, the proprietress, regarded Agnes with shining eyes.

"Er... Ah, yes... Is that so?"

"Often, the bride's family arranges for the dress, but this time we're having Commode do it," explained Claude.

Agnes almost found herself nodding along as Claude beamed at her, but she'd better not let herself get carried away. First off, Agnes wouldn't have known where to start with preparing a royal wedding dress—she was grateful to leave it to the professionals. But after the mushroom mansion, Agnes was filled with trepidation.

"I just want to check, it's going to be a plain, white dress, right?" she hoped. "No mushroom motif, okay?"

"Come now, Lady Agnes. It's a royal wedding! Surely there would be nothing so silly," comforted Delalande.

"R-Right!"

Phew, someone around here has some common sense. No matter how mushroom-deranged Claude was, Agnes could breathe easy knowing her dress was being made by someone competent.

"Right, Agnes. Only the lace overlay will be in a mushroom motif," Claude interjected.

"What?!"

"And the accessories, too, of course. But don't worry, the dress will be pure white!" Claude effused.

Agnes couldn't relax for a second. She narrowed her eyes at Claude, who beamed away innocently as usual—a sudden urge to sprout a mushroom right on top of his head bubbled within her. *No, wait, he'd love that.*

"When I first heard about the mushroom details, I was a tad concerned," Delalande said. "At any rate, Prince Claude has given his input, and I think we've come up with something spectacular. I'm sure you'll be delighted, Lady Agnes!"

Please, just the dress! No mushrooms!

Ciel let out a roar, batting at Agnes's feet as if he could hear her silent screams.

"Oh, only Ciel understands me..." she sighed.

His soft fluffiness was Agnes's only salvation. She blinked at him, suddenly moved, while Claude for some reason nodded.

"Right. We need a great outfit for Ciel too," he said. "A bow around his neck with a mushroom pin?"

"Rawr!" Ciel let out with satisfaction, his tail swaying happily around.

Agnes felt her shoulders slump. *Mushroom traitor!*

"Oh, yes. Is *that* finished yet?" Claude inquired.

In response to his question, Delalande pulled out a small box.

"Okay, what kind of mushroom thing is it this time?" Agnes asked.

"That's amazing, Agnes; you already knew what it was!" Claude exclaimed.

Agnes wasn't hoping to be right. Regardless, at this point, anything other than mushrooms would have been a big shock.

When Claude opened the small box, Agnes saw a silver ring with a lattice carving in those familiar shapes.

"Oh, that's so pretty," she said. "But what's it for?"

"It's your wedding ring."

"Oh, instead of this one?"

The engagement ring currently on Agnes's left hand ring finger featured two three-dimensional mushrooms on it with pink and blue gemstones for warts. If that was her wedding ring, she'd probably be wearing it permanently after the ceremony. It was still fungal-themed, but there were no protruding figures or colored stones on it.

Good, the mushroom adornment on her hand would be a bit more understated going forward.

"I thought you might be sad not wearing the old one anymore, so I had it

made so they're stackable, see?" Claude said.

Then that meant there would be even more mushrooms on her hand—a short-lived dream. It was Agnes's fate to never escape from them.

"Can I try it on now?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh yes, here you go."

Since they were stackable, she should probably check that they both fit properly. Delalande took the empty box from Claude and made a silent exit.

Before Agnes could process what was happening, Claude had taken her hand and knelt down on the spot.

"C-Claude?"

Agnes, mentally exhausted from it all, felt her heartbeat speed up as she gazed down at Claude, every inch the picture-book prince.

"I'm so glad I met you, Agnes. I'm so lucky."

As he spoke, he slid the ring onto her finger, where it nestled perfectly against the other one. Then he kissed the back of Agnes's hand with reverence before looking right up at her.

"Agnes Lefort. Will you marry me?"

Along with those words, a loud popping sound announced the arrival of a red funnel-shaped *Gomphus fluccosus* and a black funnel-shaped *Craterellus cornucopioides* on Claude's shoulder. The two stalks grew so close together, they made squeaking noises where their caps rubbed.

"We... We're already getting married, you know?"

Maybe he was worried Agnes would call the whole thing off after the fungus onslaught today? Really though, Agnes wasn't about to break off the engagement over that at this point. Or at least, she was pretty sure. Though she wished he'd dial it back a little.

"Yes, but I want to hear you say yes, again and again. I love you, Agnes. I want us to be together forever."

Claude, still kneeling, reached up to cup Agnes's cheek. Having him gaze like

that made her cheeks burn. She'd always known that Claude was handsome, but now he looked thirty percent more seductive than usual. It made her heart flutter and ache.

"Y-Yes..."

"Say more."

His other hand reached up to cup her other cheek. There was no running away now.

"I...love you too, Claude."

Claude smiled with satisfaction. That was evidently what he'd wanted to hear. Unlike his usual calm, gentle expression, she could see the passion burning behind his eyes.

"Yes, I know."

But as he stood and brought his lips to hers, Agnes quickly slid her hand into the gap between them to block him.

"Claude. I want to talk to you about something."

"You do?"

Agnes nodded, and Claude sat down beside her, with Ciel jumping up beside them.

"I'm having trouble getting my feelings in order..." she began.

"It's okay. Just take your time and say what you feel."

Claude was always so kind. Earlier, his seductive manner had frazzled her, but now she felt she could talk.

"I don't feel that I belong to the Oreille royal family, but I can't say I have no connection to them. I don't want to be a burden to you, but I want to help. In any way I can." She'd spoken her feelings, and she was sure it was confusing. Still, she was encouraged by the way Claude stayed quiet and listened to her. "I know I've caused trouble. My kidnapping caused a lot of bother, to lots of people..."

Claude shook his head, but it was an undeniable fact. Of course, the

kidnappers were responsible. However, Agnes was still at the center of it all.

“It would be different if I could at least use a sword, but all I can use is a garden hoe,” she continued. “I’m grateful for Ciel’s protection, but even that ultimately means I’m relying on you so heavily.”

Agnes felt her reality was pathetic—regardless, she had to face it.

“I can’t be the princess in the fairy tale who just lets herself be protected by the prince. That’s not me. I know I don’t have power of my own, I know this might seem selfish of me...” Agnes exhaled slowly before she looked right into Claude’s eyes. “Let me go with you, too.”

A loud pop like a handclap preceded the appearance of a mushroom with a red cap and white warts on Claude’s arm. Balls of light started floating around the *Amanita muscaria*.

“Rawr!”

“Call on us, they’re saying apparently,” Claude nodded to himself as Ciel made entreating eyes behind him.

“Call on them... Erm... Okay... Er, come out?”

A *Panellus serotinus*, a pale yellowish-brown mushroom with a semicircular cap, grew on Claude’s shoulder after a series of loud pops. Looking around, a wide variety of mushrooms seemed to have grown on the surfaces of the tables and sofas.

Ciel growled and tugged at Claude’s clothes, who was entranced by the spectacle. The beast seemed to be some sort of mushroom or spirit translator, but it looked like an innocent pampered kitten.

“They want to help you, it seems,” Claude interpreted.

“The mushroom powers...”

Agnes had wondered about her ability. They must be very strong, seeing as how they’d all but destroyed that church in the Kingdom of Oreille.

“The spirits and the mushrooms want to help you. And I, too, want to make your desires come true, Agnes. Before that, I want you to promise me.” Claude held Agnes’s hand, his gaze intense, telling her that he’d prefer if she didn’t

come with him to the wall, but he would respect her wishes—despite his mixed feelings. “Don’t push yourself too hard. Prioritize your own safety. Don’t leave Ciel’s side, even for a moment. And make use of your mushroom powers. Are you okay with all that?”

“Yes.”

Let me be useful. She couldn’t say that. Her first priority was to avoid getting in the way, then she’d figure out what she could do to help—even if in the end all she could really do was lift Claude’s spirit with mushrooms.

Agnes nodded with determination, and Claude gave her another worried smile.

“Honestly, I’d be grateful for the assistance of the Oreillian spirits in this matter. With things as they are there, Prince Nathan—oh, I mean King Nathan—he can’t possibly come to assist us at the wall. I’ve heard none of the other Oreillian royals have even half his power.”

In Oreille, the blessings of the spirits came in four tiered ranks, which affected the order of succession to the throne: mushrooms, roots, leaves, and flowers.

As Nathan was the King of Oreille, that meant there was no King of Roots.

Nathan was a King of Leaves, so anyone else with the blessing of leaves would no doubt be less powerful than him. Theoretically, as a Queen of Mushrooms, Agnes had the strongest spirit blessing among all the Oreillian royals.

Still, Agnes’s father, the previous King of Mushrooms, was actually not blessed with a vast amount of magical power and was unable to use much magic. It seemed like divine spirit protection wasn’t everything.

“Thinking only of the hole in the wall, then yes, having you along will help,” Claude said. “But I’ll be fine going alone. I hate to think of burdening you with this. Plus, it’s going to be dangerous no matter what.”

“I just want to help in any way I can,” Agnes told him. “You’ve always helped me so much, Claude. I want to do something for you in return.”

Claude let go of Agnes’s hand and stroked her hair. The gesture was soothing and made her feel safe.

“Just having you around strengthens me, Agnes. Though your safety is my top priority. I do understand it would be selfish of me to try to keep you away; I don’t want to be the one who prevents you from doing what it is you desire.”

Like Ceasar had said, “They prioritize protecting their Dragonmate, even more so than their own lives. But that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s what’s best for their partner.”

Claude always tried to prioritize Agnes’s safety above all else. More than that, he was also trying to respect Agnes’s free will. Perhaps this was what it truly meant to prioritize one’s Dragonmate.

“Thank you. The expedition to the hole in the wall will be quite a long one, won’t it?” she asked.

“Right. Based on past expeditions, we will probably be away for a month, including the travel time.”

Goodness. It will take that long?

Agnes had expected about that much. Still, actually hearing it, the reality seemed to hit harder. Or maybe it hit harder for a different reason.

“Maybe I just don’t want to be away from you, Claude...” she whispered.

Wanting to be helpful, wanting to give back, and wanting to fulfill her role, Agnes was earnest about all these things. At the same time, she couldn’t deny that the thought of being away from Claude for so long was awful.

Agnes tried to smile wryly to herself. *It’s not like I’m a child*, she told herself, but then she froze.

Claude covered his mouth with his hand, his eyes burning once more with a red-hot flame of passion.

“Now, now, that’s underhanded of you, Agnes...”

His sweet words, his hot breath—Agnes couldn’t have moved if she’d wanted to. He pulled her into his arms without any further hesitation, their lips meeting as if pulled by some irresistible magnetic force.



Mushrooms of the Day

Lyophyllum decastes

An edible mushroom with an ashy gray umbrella-shaped cap. It looks rather like a shapeless, unenthusiastic Shiitake mushroom. Also known as Chicken of the Gravel. Firm-textured with a rich flavor, it cooks up well. I could go for one right now.

When it heard the new home had a garden with a growing patch, it came to check it out. “It’s not bad, but I prefer Kevin’s patch,” it sighed, already homesick.

Cyathus stercoreus

It looks like a cluster of several metal bottle caps turned upside down. Is it a mushroom? Or some form of moss? If you suffer from trypophobia, it might freak you out. Some people really hate the way it looks. It's also a strategist, who catches rainwater in its upturned bottle caps. It seems to be used as a medicine for stomach pain in China, but what part of it is eaten? The caps, or...? It needs a high growing location to catch and scatter rainwater.

Gomphus fluccosus

A poisonous red mushroom that resembles a trumpet. It causes gastrointestinal poisoning, but doesn't have any taste...someone must have tried eating this one. When it realized that it makes no sound despite being trumpet-shaped, due to it being a mushroom, it still couldn't give up. It tried to trumpet anyway. It's still training.

It was so excited about the proposal that it started celebrating and making fricative sounds with the *Craterellus cornucopioides*.

Craterellus cornucopioides

A black, funnel-shaped mushroom resembling a trumpet. Also known as the “Trumpet of Death,” it’s apparently eaten often in Europe. Goes well in a soup. ...So why the scary name, then?

While playing a chorus with the *Gomphus fluccosus*, it decided to practice hard for the upcoming wedding.

Amanita muscaria

Red caps with white polka dots. Like the poisonous mushrooms you find drawn in storybooks. It may resemble the 1-Ups from a certain video game franchise you might have heard of, but you wouldn't want to try eating a real one! It felt the red filament of fate and sprouted. The mushroom Claude fell in love with. It sent out a request for mushroom cooperation on behalf of Agnes.

The mushroom world received the summons: "Urgent Recruitment! Happy Mushroom Tour to Aid Our Agnes!"

Panellus serotinus

An edible mushroom with a light brown semicircular cap. Under the cap, it has gelatinous scales that can fall off. In cooking, it turns soft and gelatinous, which it's proud of.

It jiggled gelatinously for Agnes, but then got distracted a little by its own jellification.

Rescue Agnes Squad Members

The mushrooms who participated in the *Amanita muscaria*'s valiant drive to help Agnes. They're making the most of being summoned by their queen, Agnes herself.

Chapter 7: A Quick Infusion of Agnes

“**IT’S** been a while since the three of us had tea like this. Would the kitty like a drink? Milk, perhaps?” Benoit was gazing at Ciel sitting at Agnes’s feet. Sitting still like that, he looked like a stuffed animal.

“No, Ciel is—”

“Rawr,” Ciel mewed excitedly, licking his chops.

Ciel lived off of Claude’s magical energy and had monsters for a snack. What did he need with milk? Maybe he could eat anything, after all.

“Yes, he’d like some,” Agnes said.

“Certainly.” Therese immediately prepared a saucer of milk, which Ciel began happily lapping up.

“I was expecting some dangerous beast since Claude conjured it for your protection, but he’s actually very cute, isn’t he?” Kevin’s comment was laced with a touch of sarcasm, but Agnes had to concede a smile.

Yes, Ciel did look like a sweet fuzzy pet. Still, the fact was he *was* a sacred beast. When roused, he became a ferocious tiger, but she wasn’t about to tell them *that*!

“So, you had something to discuss?” Benoit prompted.

“Um... So, Claude is going out on an...inspection soon,” Agnes began.

“An inspection? Touring his dukedom, I suppose?” Benoit guessed.

“Er, not that. He’s going to inspect the national defenses.”

Only those involved knew about the hole in the wall, and the role of the royal family and the Crest Bearers wasn’t public knowledge, either. Anyway, how could Agnes possibly explain it?

“Ah, yes. Prince Claude also serves as a knight. Is it something to do with that?” Benoit asked.

“Y-Yes! That, exactly!” Agnes jumped on that explanation.

“What’s that got to do with you, Sis? Are you so worried you can’t sleep at night? Something like that?”

“No, it’s not that... I was thinking of going with him. On the inspection.”

Kevin was teasing Agnes while nibbling on cookies, even though he was off the mark, Agnes found herself blushing.

“What for? I know Claude’s always going on about never wanting to be separated from you, but I can’t see him putting you in danger like that.”

Honestly, for a teasing younger brother, Kevin really was sharp.

“What does Prince Claude say about this?” Benoit brought up.

“I consulted him about it,” Agnes said. “He said okay, but he’s going to prioritize my safety above all else.”

“Okay, but why are you going in the first place?” Kevin kept circling back to the glaring question even though Agnes had felt the conversation’s course was corrected.

If she brushed it off, she’d end up worrying everyone. It would probably be faster all around if she just explained honestly.

“Because... Because I myself want to accompany him,” she confessed.

Though her family knew about Agnes being descended from Oreillian royalty, she couldn’t talk to them about the rupture, or the divine blessing of the spirits. Agnes wanting to go would be a convincing reason enough. It was still embarrassing to openly voice what she wanted, though.

“I... I see,” Benoit let out slowly.

“Tch. Here I was thinking congratulations were in order. But it’s just you being sappy, isn’t it, Sis?” Kevin sighed and began scoffing down cookies again. “Boring!”

“I, too, completely jumped to that conclusion,” sighed Benoit.

“WHAT conclusion? What are you both getting at?!” Agnes trembled with shock, but Kevin shrugged, unbothered.

“I mean, you’re already officially engaged to a royal, your new house is all ready, and we’re all just waiting for the wedding ceremony. What’s the big deal about jumping the gun a little?”

“It is a BIG deal!” Agnes spluttered in protest, but Kevin just sipped his tea and nodded placatingly.

“If you want to go on a little pre-wedding trip together, then what’s the issue? We know Claude would never put you in any danger. And if anything did happen, he’s man enough to protect you. Unlike a certain slimeball I could, but won’t, mention.”

“Right. And Agnes, even if you decide to have kids early, we’ll be here to support you.”

“What are you talking about?!” She glared at Benoit, who for some reason had started to blush and clear his throat.

“No, but anyway...Kevin’s right. If the two of you have decided together to take this trip, we have no right to comment. Besides, all we want is for you to find your own agency, Agnes. Knowing that you’re beginning to express your wishes makes me very happy.”

After all the trouble and worry she’d caused her family, how could she complain now when they were both saying such kind things?

“Kevin and I will support whatever decision you make. As Prince Claude said, remember to prioritize your safety first.”

“Right. Well, please water my plants while I’m gone, will you?” Agnes requested. Fungi aside, she was growing those medicinal herbs for Cesar; it would be terrible if they withered up.

“You don’t need to fuss so much. They’re plants, not kids,” Kevin remarked.

“Well, I worry about them. Those plants are family to me. Ah, I know.” Agnes’s green eyes sparkled as a great idea suddenly struck her.

“What?” Kevin replied with a quizzical look.

“Claude asked me to draw on the power of mushrooms more often. Maybe I’ll ask them to look after you in my absence, Kevin!” Agnes exclaimed.

“What for? I’m in no danger. Claude told you to prioritize yourself, right? What do you mean by asking mushrooms to look after me?”

Kevin was saying this and that, but Agnes wasn’t to be stopped.

“Mushrooms! Guard the family while I’m gone, please!” As she finished this impassioned request, there was a series of pops like loud applause.

Dark pink *Pleurotus djamor* grew all over Kevin’s arm while yellow-brown *Hypholoma fasciculare* with olive-colored folds were found on the windowsill. White *Amanita cokeri* with big warts took up residence on the table alongside an ochre-brown *Amanita viros*, which sported a depression in its cap.

Ciel let out an excited growl, no doubt explaining for everyone’s benefit that the mushrooms were, indeed, very motivated.

“...The Mushroom Unit has sprouted for duty,” Kevin spoke with a stunned expression, poking at the new sentries that had sprouted on his arm.

“They seem to be poisonous, but sort of reliable in a crisis situation at the same time, no doubt,” commented Agnes.

“...Sis, that prince has certainly rubbed off on you,” Kevin said dryly.

Agnes would like to deny it, but how could she after such a fungal-sprouting display? It was she who’d called on the mushrooms—Agnes had to own it, didn’t she?

“They are a part of her personality, a part she’s suppressed for a long time as a result of external pressure. But she should be proud of them, as she was before he-who-must-not-be-named. You must do you, Agnes,” assured Benoit with smiling eyes.

“...I will!” Agnes beamed back, and even Kevin had to break into a wry smile.



“**PLEASE** take care of Agnes.” Benoit bowed to Claude, who had come to the Lefort residence to pick up Agnes on the day of the expedition departure.

Ciel was growling at Benoit’s feet, no doubt trying to reassure him. Although no one could understand his language, the talkative sacred beast had everyone charmed.

“I will. Please, take care of your health too, sir.”

“We have mushroom protection. No worries.” Kevin’s offhand remark made Claude’s eyes light up.

“Mushroom protection? Tell me more.”

“Gah! It’s time to leave now, isn’t it?!” Agnes piped up.

If the mushroom fetishist got started, they’d never get away. Anyway, the new security detail was intended to keep an eye on Kevin, not for Claude to start harvesting.

In a fluster, Agnes pushed Claude by the shoulders out of the entry hall to the waiting carriage. Surely there was no need for a prolonged farewell. What was with all the drama?

“Have a good time, Agnes.”

Agnes smiled and waved back to Benoit and Kevin.

“I will!”

Claude usually selected fancy carriages suitable for royalty, but today’s selection was different. It was fancier than an ordinary horse-drawn carriage, sure, but it seemed like this one had been selected for functionality over luxury. The wheels and siding looked very sturdy—it seemed to be intended for long-haul travel.

The coachman and a man who appeared to be an official escort bowed to her and reached for the doors. Agnes looked at Claude quizzically.

“Isn’t Maurice coming?”

Normally Maurice would be the one opening the doors, however he was nowhere in sight.

“He would, usually, but I asked him to stay behind and take care of a few things this time,” Claude said.

“But he’s your bodyguard, isn’t he?” Agnes asked.

Claude was so eminent a person, he naturally had a bodyguard whenever he went out to town. Could it be that he really wouldn’t have his bodyguard on a

month-long expedition?

“Well, yes. This time, however, I have another reliable companion with me,” Claude spoke as the carriage door swung open, revealing a familiar face.

“Duke Granier?!” Agnes yelped in surprise as Claude escorted her into the carriage. She sat down beside Claude and across from Cesar. Ciel prowled around their feet. The sacred beast seemed to have aimed for Agnes’s lap at first, but one glance from Claude had him settling down beside Cesar.

As soon as the door closed, they started moving. It seemed that several guards would be following them on horseback. Considering royalty was involved, this seemed a very small entourage.

“My uncle is a Crest Bearer famed for his bravery. He’s much more powerful than most of the knights,” Claude explained.

“I-I know, but...”

“Hello, Agnes,” Cesar greeted. “Thank you for the pills you brought the other day.”

“You’re very welcome... Duke Granier, are you joining us for the whole expedition?” she asked in response. No matter how much better Agnes’s medicine had made the duke feel, she felt it wouldn’t be wise to overdo it. After all, it wasn’t as if he’d been cured.

“I’m sorry to intrude on the two of you, but an extra carriage seemed a needless extravagance,” Cesar said. “I hope you won’t mind riding with me.”

“In-Intrude... Not at all, I...”

“It’s not a pleasure trip. One carriage is fine,” Claude nodded reluctantly, as if he would have preferred it to be just him and Agnes in the carriage, after all.

“More importantly, are you feeling okay?” questioned Agnes.

“Thanks to you, I’m doing fine. Of course, I’ve brought the pills with me. I have permission from the king himself to be here too, and nobody forced my hand. Please, don’t worry about me.”

It certainly sounded like he was here of his own will. Still, Agnes knew he had difficulty attending official events until recently; she didn’t want him to exert

himself.

“Please don’t push yourself too hard,” she said. “Oh, would you hold out your hand?”

“Hmm? Certainly.”

Agnes enfolded his hand in her own.

“Spirits, please lend your strength to Duke Granier,” she requested.

A ball of light formed in the cabin and seemed to circle the duke a few times before zooming over to Agnes and dissipating. Was this them signaling they were finished? Agnes still didn’t know where the spirits came from, but they always answered when summoned and gave their obedience.

“That’s odd, I suddenly feel much lighter,” Cesar said, sounding awed. “Thank you, Agnes.”

“It’s not me, it’s the spirits,” she replied. “Still, I think the effects are only temporary. You must make sure to keep taking the pills regularly.”

“Right. I know that, only...”

His reaction struck Agnes as strange, and she looked at him with curiosity.

“Is there a problem? Do you need a stronger boost?” she asked. “I’ll summon the spirits again.”

“No, I’m fine. Doing great, in fact. Don’t worry, Agnes. It’s just...”

The duke gestured toward her side, prompting Agnes to see Claude...making an odd face. It was the face of someone struggling and failing to repress a mixture of anger, suffering, and self-restraint. In any case, it was a complex expression, one she hadn’t seen before.

“Claude, what’s wrong? Are you feeling sick?” she asked.

“Are you done? Quite finished?” Claude’s voice was tight with tension, but Agnes had no idea why.

“What?” Agnes blinked at him.

“She’s finished. See?” Cesar replied quickly. He passed Agnes’s hand over to Claude, who grabbed it and clung on.

“Claude?”

Was he not feeling well after all? She could make Cesar feel better with the power of the spirits, but she wasn't sure if it would work on Claude as well.

Anyway, what was wrong with him?

“I know you're thinking of my uncle. You're so kind, Agnes. Only...” Claude gripped her hand even tighter. “It's painful for me to see you touch someone else, gaze at them, speak kind words to them,” trailed Claude.

“Gazing?! I wasn't gazing!” Agnes denied.

“I know. You did nothing wrong, my uncle too. It's just...it's painful. It's hard for me.”

“What?! Claude!”

Claude hung his head, gripping her hand. What had gotten into him?

“Dragonmates can't help themselves. Agnes, give the poor boy a hug,” Cesar advised.

“Wh-What?!”

“It'll replenish him fastest. He needs a quick infusion of Agnes.”

“Replenish?!”

When did Agnes become a consumable resource? She herself had felt depleted walking around that mushroom mansion of horrors. That had nothing to do with this, though.

The duke was talking about topping up Claude's...Agnes levels? But what exactly did that mean?

“Do it for Claude. Go on.”

The duke gave her an encouraging smile. Hug Claude here? In front of company?

“Agnes...” Claude gazed at her, his eyes colored with weakness. He was clearly suffering—over her. The cure was Agnes herself.

Highly embarrassing as this was, she'd do anything for Claude. Certainly, he'd

earned it.

No doubt Cesar was right. Agnes made up her mind and spread her arms out wide. However, just as she was about to hug Claude, there was a loud, close, popping sound.

Agnes felt a soft sensation on her cheek and saw something yellow-brown and cracked in front of her. Her arms were around Claude's shoulders—technically an embrace. With the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis* that seemed to have sprouted on Claude's chest between them though, it was more like they were hugging around a mushroom.

What was going on?

Still, she'd better wait and see what Claude did in response. Then, a deep sigh came from the other side of the mushroom.

"Agnes and a mushroom... Double the happiness," he sighed dreamily.

...Apparently, this was a good thing. Mushroom fetishists were so hard to predict.

"I hope you feel better now?" she asked.

"Yes. Thank you, Agnes. Lovely mushrooms. Only..." With that, Claude quickly plucked the mushroom and then fully clasped Agnes.

Agnes, knocked off-guard by the surprise sprouting, found herself in his arms before she could resist.

"But you, Agnes, are more effective than any mushroom."

Mere minutes before, Claude had sounded on the edge of tears. Now, he was whispering seductively in her ear. How was that fair?

"H-His Grace is right there!" Agnes protested.

"Indeed."

But so what? Claude seemed to be thinking as he dropped a kiss on the top of Agnes's head.

"Whaaat?!"

Claude's moods were far too volatile! Just one mushroom could perk him

right up.

“Agnes, you may as well give in,” Cesar said. “Crest Bearers get this way about their Dragonmates. Claude actually reins himself in quite well; the mushrooms help with that. It’s actually refreshing to see. You know, His Majesty, my brother, almost killed me once.” Cesar smiled, like he was reveling in a fond memory, but was that really the kind of thing you looked back on with a smile?

Almost killed. Well, what happened? No, wait, she didn’t want to know!

“Love’s a heavy burden, you’re saying?” Agnes guessed.

“Precisely. Anyway, I’m used to His Majesty’s antics with my sister-in-law. Don’t worry about me. You two go ahead and snuggle to your heart’s content,” Cesar said, giving them his blessing.

“No thanks!”

Such support. But no way was Agnes going to take the duke up on that!

There came a popping sound overhead as if to punctuate Agnes’s shriek. No doubt, some form of mushroom had just emerged, causing Claude’s grip to loosen slightly.

Agnes made out a flat, semicircular, bright red mushroom growing on the top front of Claude’s head like a flat-brim cap. While Claude was distracted by the *Pycnopus coccineus*, she seized the opportunity to slither out—his fungus obsession came in handy at times like this. Perhaps Agnes should be more grateful for her powers.

Despite that, her relief was short-lived. Claude plucked the new passenger, clutching it as he put his free arm around her shoulders.

“I have Agnes with me and a mushroom in my hand; I couldn’t be happier. See Agnes, this mushroom is a *Pycnopus coccineus*, and...”

Claude started happily rabbiting on about the specimen. Cesar stroked Ciel with a wry smile on his face. Surprisingly enough, Agnes didn’t really mind. Maybe Kevin was right—Claude had started to rub off on her after all.



Mushrooms of the Day

Pleurotus djamor

A deep pink cap, that gradually fades to ashy white. It's edible but gets tougher as it grows, so it's best to eat it while it's young. Its beautiful pink color fades with heat, so it's good for slicing raw in a salad.

"I'll demonstrate Agnes's colors and make you feel at ease!" it cried. In charge of mental health care away from home.

Hypholoma fasciculare

A mushroom with a yellowish-brown cap and olive-green folds. As the name suggests, the flesh is extremely bitter. Three hours after eating, it can cause severe abdominal pain, severe vomiting, and diarrhea. In severe cases, death can occur. Did I mention it's extremely bitter?

It might set a fire in the mushroom soul, but if you eat it, it'll definitely burn you inside out. A guard dog mushroom that threatens with its poison.

Amanita cokeri

A white mushroom with big warty bits and a flaky stalk. It looks kind of like an all-white *Amanita muscaria*. Nobody knows if it's poisonous or edible, but I wouldn't want to take a bite and find out!

A surveillance mushroom that is worried about Agnes's personal and psychological state. "Leave the emergency summons to me!" it cried, opening its cap with full enthusiasm.

Amanita viros

A pure white, beautiful mushroom, with white flakes, depressions, and warts. It's highly poisonous, and just one has enough toxin to kill a human. One of the strongest of the Destroying Angels. The ultimate weapon, it's ready for a special attack in case of an emergency.

Rugiboletus extremiorientalis

Yellowish-brown or orange-brown caps, around 30 centimeters in size—a big mushroom. As it matures, cracks appear in the cap, and it resembles a load of baked bread. It's kind of like a big French boule loaf or a Japanese melon bread. It's not poisonous, but apparently it draws a lot of flies.

Pycnoporus coccineus

A red, flat, semicircular mushroom. It looks like a rusted *Polyporaceae*. Member of the Wood Deterioration Club. It usually comes along to rein in the *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, but it doesn't always work.

Sensing that Agnes was upset, it hurriedly said, "We have to put the brakes on Claude!" But it felt a little embarrassed because Claude kept talking about his happiness and so on.

Chapter 8: The Walled City

CLAUDE continued to touch Agnes at every opportunity, claiming he needed to replenish his “Agnes levels.” Just holding hands in front of Cesar was embarrassing enough, but Claude’s attempts to hug her were more than she could take. Even though she managed to persuade him to just put his arm around her shoulder, it was still embarrassing.

Agnes was starting to feel mentally exhausted.

However, as Claude wasn’t the type of man to persist after noticing Agnes was extremely uncomfortable, he tried to restrain himself—sometimes even choking back tears.

A few days into the journey, Agnes finally began to relax and even enjoy herself.

“By the way, you said that there are knights permanently stationed by the hole in the wall. Does that mean there’s a settlement there and not a temporary camp?” Agnes asked.

“Right, we just call it the Walled City. No need for an official name, really,” Claude answered while clutching an *Entoloma cyanonigrum*, which was quite similar in color to Claude’s dark blue hair. It was a little comical, though, to see the dashing prince talking about important military matters while grasping a shroom.

“A Dragonmate who keeps her Crest Bearer in check with mushrooms. I can’t wait to see what Agnes does with her future,” Cesar beamed as he stroked Ciel, curled up beside him. Ciel seemed to be enjoying the petting as he started snuggling up against Cesar, looking every inch the affectionate pussycat.

“The mushrooms are a concession. I can’t cope with being hugged all day,” Agnes sighed.

“Once you’re married, you won’t be able to hold him off with just

mushrooms, though..." Cesar warned.

"...Come again?"

Agnes felt like she'd heard a hint of something alarming there, but Cesar just kept grinning.

"No, never mind." Cesar shrugged. "Anyway, the Walled City is a royal territory, off-limits to the general public. The only residents are knights, and the only proprietors are innkeepers or weapon-sellers."

So it isn't really like a proper city, is it?

Claude nodded along to what Cesar was saying, the mushroom bobbing in his hand. "Uncle has been the acting lord there. As he hasn't been well, inspections of the city haven't been conducted in some time. There's been talk of me taking over."

"So, the acting lord needs to be a Crest Bearer?" Agnes asked.

"In principle, yes. But when there's no suitable Crest Bearer, any member of the royal family could serve as the overseeing lord," Claude explained.

"Ah, we're just about to enter the Walled City," Cesar alerted, directing Agnes to look out the window. The mountain road scenery from earlier had faded away, and they seemed to be entering what looked like a village. It wasn't a very big place, but each building seemed to be more steadily reinforced than any in the royal capital. There were a few shops selling wares. On the surface, it looked like a normal town. However, something odd stood out to Agnes.

"There are no children or elderly people," Agnes observed, noticing the streets seemingly populated with mostly men. She saw a few women who wore swords, but they didn't look like ordinary citizens.

"In the event of an emergency, this city is the frontline of our defenses. Only those who can fight live here," explained Cesar.

That made sense. This was a city, but its main purpose was as a breakwater to keep the flood of monsters at bay.

"I had no idea a town like this even existed," Agnes mused.

Even the people who lived there probably didn't think about it too much.

Monster appearances were so rare, they were almost mythical.

“That’s how it should be. It’s better if the citizens of our land are able to live peacefully, not knowing anything,” commented the duke.

Cesar and Claude gazed out of the carriage windows, their eyes warm and protective.

The royals came to the Walled City to fulfill their duty—as they had done for centuries. Even if the people knew nothing of it.

“...Thank you,” Agnes murmured, to which Claude responded with a quizzical look, mushroom still in hand, and Cesar stopped stroking Ciel. “I think, in the future too, many people will be able to live their lives in blissful peace. Please, at least let me offer thanks on their behalf, as a citizen. For all you do for them... for us... Your efforts to protect your people.”

Agnes lowered her head to show respect, and Ciel let out a guttural roar. The cat began rubbing his head on Cesar’s arm, no doubt also expressing gratitude. Or just asking for more pets.

“You’re welcome,” Cesar smiled, continuing to stroke Ciel’s back. The creature began loudly purring—apparently, he wanted more pets after all. Seeing how cute Ciel was, Agnes couldn’t suppress a smile.

“This time, we shall protect the people together, Agnes. Will you lend us your strength?”

“I will!”

Agnes still didn’t know what exactly she would be able to do. Still, she wanted to be useful. She nodded hard, completely determined.

After passing through the center of the Walled City and reaching the top of a small hill, the carriage stopped outside of a dwelling. It was larger than the ones in the city and seemed durable. The windows were small and had solid bars across them, likely to protect against attacks.

Though it wasn’t glamorous, the building wasn’t as plain as some of the other buildings. The bars were laid in a sort of geometric pattern that indicated some design thought had gone into them.

“What’s this place...?” Agnes asked.

“The household for the resident lord. It’s a bit dusty inside, though,” Claude muttered apologetically, but he was right—it wasn’t exactly very fancy.

Inside, the ceilings were coated with cobwebs and the floor thick with dust, to which Ciel started shaking his paws in disgust. It wasn’t exactly what you’d call homey.

All of a sudden, a popping sound sent dust flying explosively off the walls as a series of mushrooms bloomed. An *Amanita griseofarinosa* greeted the party with its gray cap and stem that appeared to be covered in its own whitish dust. Beside it was a yellowish-brown capped *Gymnopilus junonius*.

Despite frantically shaking his paws, Ciel couldn’t get them clean. In the end, he resorted to seeking Claude’s legs to help wipe them off.

Claude scooped up Ciel and helped brush the dust off his paws, though no doubt the same thing would happen again the moment he set him down. At this rate, Ciel might as well consider a change of vocation and become a silver tiger instead.

“When I was living here, the place was a little bit more taken care of. But there aren’t any permanent staff, see,” Cesar grunted, looking a little frustrated as he brushed the dust from his shoulders. “I used this place only for sleeping, so my bedroom was the only room I touched. Judging from the state of it, Armand must be staying at an inn in town instead.”

“Well, we’re just here to do a job and then go home. We don’t even really need a residence here,” Claude noted.

Right... Certainly, considering the role of the city, this residence wasn’t really meant for elegant relaxation. No doubt they wouldn’t be inviting any guests over for tea. As long as they had the bare minimum, clean beds, and washing facilities, then they could easily get by.

Even so, Cesar had only just regained some of his health; he absolutely needed a hygienic environment. And how were they supposed to get any good rest sleeping in a dust heap like this?

“This...THIS is where I come in!” Agnes’s emerald-green eyes sparkled.



AGNES immediately rolled up her sleeves and opened the windows. Finger marks were left in the dust on the windowsill, but she didn't have time to worry about little things like that. There weren't any dust-free spots anywhere. There was so much to do!

"Agnes, here's a broom, and a bucket."

"Thank you, Claude."

Ciel was dashing about the room, batting mushrooms across the floor and kicking up dust clouds like powder snow. The mushrooms rolling about looked like little snowballs. But maybe these dust-covered *Amanitas* started off looking like that.

"With the windows open, it should be a little more breathable in here," Agnes noted. "Anyway, I want to sweep out all the dust then wipe up the residue with a cloth. I'd like to wash the curtains, too. Oh, and we have to air out the duvets."

"Oh, Agnes, you don't have to do all that..." Claude reassured her, looking worried as Agnes listed off all the work to be done.

"If we're going to be staying here a while, we need to be comfortable," she insisted. "The residents of the city are here to guard the wall, and there aren't any spare servants around. So, it only makes sense for me, without any fighting ability of my own, to pitch in and do what I can."

"It's not like there's no one to clean and cook. When I was staying here, I had a few people on staff," chimed in Cesar.

Time was marching on, so Agnes started knocking down the ceiling cobwebs with the broom. Cesar frowned, looking as unconvinced as Claude.



“Those staff members have their own duties to do, right? We can’t go piling a major cleaning job on top of them as well. Claude, would you hang the duvets out to air? And Duke Granier, can you...” Agnes propped her broom against the wall and picked up Ciel, who was still running around chasing mushrooms, “take a seat, relax, and try to keep Ciel under control?”

“Agnes, I’m perfectly fine,” Cesar said.

“Well, then, could you bring in some water?”

The two Crest Bearers caved under Agnes’s tenacity, nodded, and muttered, “Yes, Agnes.”

“Here I was thinking she was a meek young lady... She’s surprisingly headstrong,” Cesar remarked to Claude.

“Right. She’s the Mushroom Princess who thwarted the bad, bully guy by covering him with mushrooms,” Claude responded.

“In your case, that would have been heaven, not a punishment,” Cesar laughed. “Well, anyway, I suppose we’d better get to work as well.”

“Ciel, keep an eye on Agnes,” Claude called out.

The beast let out a loud roar and dashed over to Agnes. Excitedly, he jumped up at Agnes, leaving dirty paw prints on her skirt.

“Yeek! Ciel, your paws are black as soot! I must wipe them.”

Ciel, now in Agnes’s arms, shot Claude a look and let out a cry.

“Well, Ciel, you seem to be enjoying yourself...” sighed Cesar.

“He’s saying to leave Agnes to him,” Claude interpreted. “Shall we get on with our work then?”

The two Crest Bearers got to their respective tasks, both smiling wryly.

After the sweeping, mopping, laundry, and wood chopping were finally done, the sky had gone completely dark. Atop the table of the now-sparklingly clean room, all kinds of dishes were laid out.

Claude and Cesar let out gasps of admiration as they cast their eyes over the slightly hard bread purchased in town, the wine from the cellar, and the stew

filled with hearty ingredients.

“Wow! Everything looks delicious,” exclaimed the duke.

“Agnes made everything. Isn’t she amazing?” Claude boasted. “Is that mushroom stew?”

“I just used mostly what was in the pantry, but as for mushrooms...”

Loud, echoing pops as if to punctuate Agnes’s sentence preceded a fungus frenzy. Appearing on the table between the gaps of the plates were a brown-capped Porcini mushroom with a thick white stalk, a slimy reddish-brown Nameko, a yellow-brown *Hypholoma lateritium*, a whitish Bailing Oyster Mushroom with folds that extended all the way to the stalk, and a dark brown *Boletus edulis*.

Most notably, Claude’s eyes were sparkling. “...Freshly sprouted.”

The dinner’s star ingredients sprouted in the kitchen while Agnes was making stew, and now by coincidence. In other words, these morsels seemed to have grown as a demonstration, as if to say, “Here we are!” as they bobbed around happily. Were they really that happy about being cooked and eaten?

“Ah, what a festival of edible mushrooms. Beautiful to look at and delicious to eat. Truly amazing,” Claude breathed as he brought a spoonful of stew to his mouth without taking his eyes off the table, nodding with a smile of great satisfaction. “Mmm, it’s delicious.”

Claude’s flattery and mushroom enthusiasm aside, the stew actually did seem to be delicious, at least to him.

Agnes grew up cooking and cleaning before joining the Lefort household. Even after she joined Benoit and Kevin, she tried to please them by baking treats and other domestic responsibilities. Seeing people appreciate her efforts made her happy.

“Glad to hear it,” she said. “There’ll be freshly baked bread tomorrow morning.”

“We’re grateful, but you’re not here to be a servant, Agnes. Please, don’t push yourself too hard,” Cesar said kindly.

“I’m not. This is fun, and doing it makes me happy. I want to help.”

Actually, Agnes was excited and highly motivated.

Claude smiled too as he watched Agnes excitedly ponder the following day’s menu. “Well, now that I’ve finished with the wood chopping and prepping the bedrooms, let me help you wash up after dinner,” he offered.

“I can handle it, though?” Agnes replied.

There weren’t all that many dishes. It wouldn’t take Agnes long.

“I want to help,” Claude countered, smiling at her with those twinkling eyes of his.

“O-Okay,” Agnes stammered as her heart skipped a beat.

Yikes.

She could handle Claude easily when he was doing weird things like gathering mushrooms into a basket he’d produced out of goodness-knows-where. But when he started giving her those seductive smiles, she started getting chest pains. She was glad Cesar was there. And that the mushrooms were around as a distraction.

After dinner, Agnes convinced Cesar to go straight to bed. He insisted he was fine, but Agnes didn’t want him overdoing things. Tomorrow would have work of its own, and Cesar needed to get plenty of rest.

Agnes and Claude carried the dishes past Ciel, who was rolling around on the carpet, and started the washing and drying process. With the work split between them, it would only take a few minutes.

“Dinner really was delicious. Thank you, Agnes.”

“Oh, you’ve already said thanks so many times. Anyway, it’s not like it was anything fancy.”

Before eating, after the meal, now while washing dishes. Claude had heaped praise on Agnes’s cooking multiple times. She knew that he was naturally kind, but he was really making too much of this.

Or was it that the dinners served in this residence were usually really

disappointing?

“You cleaned and cooked after a long carriage journey. It’s only natural for me to want to thank you,” he said. “And it *really* was delicious.”

“Right, but you also chopped wood and helped clean after your own long carriage journey.”

In terms of physical exertion, Claude probably had the tougher time of it.

“I’m used to it,” Claude said. “Anyway, I’m not tired at all.”

“But you still worked hard. Thank you.”

“Oh, enough already.”

Agnes heard Claude sigh behind her as if to indicate she was being unreasonable. At that moment, he enveloped her in a hug from behind.

Agnes, enveloped in Claude’s arms, stopped wiping the dish she was holding.

“Um, it’s hard to wipe.”

Partly because she couldn’t move her arms. But mostly because her heart was pounding so hard.

“Yeah. But I need to top up my Agnes levels,” he whispered.

“Haven’t your Agnes levels been topped up quite a lot recently?” she countered.

“I can’t help it. You’re so adorable. This is actually me holding back.”

Agnes wanted to know what part of this exactly was Claude holding back. It’s not like she wasn’t enjoying the hug a little. She was a little worried that if she admitted it, though, she’d be opening a floodgate of Claude’s affections. He had been hugging her so much, surely his Agnes levels were fully replenished. She’d prefer to move more slowly going forward.

“Once we get married, we can be together like this every day,” he said.

“Yes, you’re right.”

Claude had his official duties. No doubt there’d be days when they’d be apart. But what would be the point of pointing that out now?

“I can’t wait. I want to gaze at you all day long.”

“That makes me a little nervous, so please don’t,” she said.

Agnes hoped Claude was just exaggerating. But knowing him, he wasn’t. And if he did insist on gazing at Agnes all day, no doubt he’d do it up close and personal. She rather he didn’t; it would make daily life quite difficult.

Just then, a hand snaked around her from behind, taking away her plate. She then felt a gentle touch on her palm. Hearing a surprising smooching sound, Agnes looked up to see Claude kissing her palm and smiling.

“Claude, we still need to do the dishes,” she tutted.

“It’s okay. The plates aren’t going anywhere.”

Claude returned the plate to Agnes’s hand, kissing the back of her hand this time. This came with another loud smooching sound, then a soulful gaze. Agnes started to think he was doing this on purpose.

Though she knew that, she couldn’t stop herself from blushing, her heart from pounding.

“I’m not going anywhere either, you know?” she pointed out.

“Even if you tried, I wouldn’t let you go.”

Claude whispered into Agnes’s ear, making her shiver. The sultry tone of his voice, his clear devotion—it made her chest constrict.

“...Claude, you’re so naughty.”

He knew Agnes would never leave. She couldn’t see his face, but she knew he was smiling. Frustrated, Agnes tried to break free, but Claude held her even more tightly.

“I love you, Agnes.”

His sweet voice in her ear almost finished her off. Agnes gasped a little.

Uh-oh. It looked like the dishes were going to take a while longer.

Agnes closed her eyes, giving in to the warm, almost painful sensation spreading through her chest.



“**FINALLY** finished,” Claude exclaimed, placing the last dish back on the shelf.

“Because you distracted us, Claude.”

“I can’t help it when you’re so lovely, Agnes.”

“It’s embarrassing when you keep saying that.”

Agnes was happy Claude was so devoted to her, but she wasn’t used to being praised and loved so much, and it made her nervous and antsy. It was certainly better than when she used to get put down and mocked all the time. But adapting to such different treatment wasn’t all that easy for Agnes.

“But it’s true. Yes, your peach-blossom pink hair, your emerald-green eyes, are beautiful. You also have a lovely face, a kind heart, and just a generally adorable aura. I’m just so grateful you exist. I could look at you forever.”

“L-Like I keep saying...!”

Her words were falling on deaf ears. And Claude was totally serious, which was even more embarrassing.

“Does it upset you?” he asked.

“It’s not that I don’t like it, it’s just that I’m embarrassed!”

“It’s okay to be shy. That’s cute, too.”

No matter what Agnes said, it didn’t seem to have any effect on Claude. Well, not unless she insisted that she disliked something—then he would always respect her wishes. But because that wasn’t the case, she sighed, and Claude gave her a strained grin.

“Agnes, you were beaten down and repressed by Philip. I want to heal those wounds, if even a little. I want to tell you how beautiful your hair is, I want to tell you how your mushrooms are a thing to be proud of.”

As always, Claude was trying to build Agnes up. But there was something that nagged at her.

“Claude... Does it look like I still care so much about what Philip used to say?”

“Ah, no, I wouldn’t say that.”

It sounded like it did seem that way to him... A little. Or maybe Claude was just worried. It seemed that anything Agnes had to say in this situation wouldn't have that much of an effect.

"My engagement with Philip... It was something I did for my family's benefit. I obeyed Philip...for my family. Emotionally, I never had any respect or love for Philip," Agnes slowly let out, drawing close to Claude and taking his hand. "Yes, Philip beat me down and repressed me. I can't deny that, or the effect it's had on me. But I don't want you to feel hung up on it, Claude."

Clasping his hands tightly, Agnes looked into those gleaming gray eyes. She hoped her own would convey more than her words could.

"Claude, you noticed me, and showered me with love. That saved me. So please, don't worry too much." Agnes took a breath, then put her hand on Claude's cheek. "I'm so happy I met you, Claude."

She smiled at him with all the gratitude she felt... And then Claude suddenly collapsed to his knees.

"What?! Claude?!"

"There's a limit to my self-restraint, you know...?"

"Er...?"

Claude, on his knees, suddenly got to his feet and pulled Agnes into a tight embrace. He kissed first one cheek, then the other, then the first cheek again.

"Eep! Hold on?!"

"Just a minute. Until I'm calm again."

Agnes had no idea what he was doing... And she certainly wasn't calm!

But Claude seemed at the edge of rationality and kept kissing Agnes's cheeks, over and over, before finally landing a smooch on the top of her head.

"...Are... Are you calm now?" she asked.

Now Claude was holding her so tightly she couldn't move, but it was better than being showered with kisses at least.

"Tomorrow, I'm leaving first thing to go and assess the hole in the wall. Please

stay here with Uncle,” he said. “Once I’ve determined the situation, we can decide what to do in response.”

“All right.”

Claude finally loosened his grip on Agnes. Smiling crookedly, he patted her head, looking somewhat regretful.

“Honestly, I’d rather keep you far from any danger. I’d like to lock you up somewhere safe, where no one else can lay eyes on you. I want to be the only man you see,” Claude said in a rush, then suddenly fell silent. After a moment of hesitation, he sighed, his breath ruffling her hair. “...But if I did that, I’d be no better than Philip.”

Agnes tried to lift her head, but Claude’s arms tightened around her.

“Philip controlled you, discounted your abilities, suppressed your spirit, used his status to put you down in front of others, kept you sequestered from other men, and tried to make you feel like you were only worth what he said you were worth.”

Agnes was surprised to hear the vitriol in Claude’s lowered, husky voice. But then, he let go of her.

She looked up at him in concern, and he gave her a sheepish smile.

“I don’t want to control you. I want to live life by your side.”

Ah, so that’s what this is about. Claude was scared. The love of a Crest Bearer for his Dragonmate was a heavy and intense thing. It represented an extraordinary obsession.

Since Claude hated how Philip treated Agnes, his greatest fear was to become like him. That was why, though it meant going against his natural obsessive tendencies, he sought to hold himself in check and not control Agnes. Whether he was actually effective at that or not, there was no doubt that Claude was doing his best.

And he was doing it out of love.

His motivations were completely different from Philip’s, and Agnes wasn’t concerned. Claude might have been a Crest Bearing royal with the blood of the

dragon, but he had odd weaknesses.

“I know that you respect me, Claude,” Agnes said softly. “I want to become a woman worthy of being by your side. Thank you for indulging my selfish whim and bringing me here.”

Sometimes, even Claude needed reassurance, for Agnes to say it’s okay and not to worry. And right now, Claude needed those words more than ever.

That was what Agnes wanted to get across.

“I...I love you, Claude.”

She smiled, and Claude reached for her, kissing her forehead.

“...I love you, too.”

Claude’s voice was soft and husky, almost tremulous. Then he pulled her into his arms as if he could no longer control himself, and let out a deep sigh.

“Oh, I want us to be married as soon as possible.”

There came an echoing pop when Claude groaned those words.

When Agnes looked up, she saw a red, egg-shaped mushroom sitting on Claude’s Prussian blue hair. The color contrast was striking.

“Claude, there’s a mushroom...”

“No mushrooms right now. Only Agnes.”

He stroked her cheek, muttering words that were very out of character considering his extreme mushroom fetish. Then, drawing Agnes closer, his lips met hers.



Mushrooms of the Day

Entoloma cyanonigrum

A deep blue mushroom. It doesn't seem to be poisonous, but it doesn't look very edible because of the color. During an earlier mushroom discussion, it was decided that its color most closely resembled Claude's hair color, so it got designated the blue mushroom representative.

It accomplished the great task of calming down Claude and was praised by the other mushrooms.

Amanita griseofarinosa

A mushroom with a gray body covered in some kind of white powder. It could be baby powder, or...room dust. It's not known if it's poisonous, but considering the species company it keeps, I wouldn't try eating it.

When it heard talk of dust, it sprouted in solidarity, only to find itself in a room dustier than any it could have imagined. It was batted around by Ciel's big paw, and rolled around collecting extra dust while screaming "Aaargh!"

Gymnopilus junonius

Yellowish-brown, looks kind of like the Japanese *Shimeji*. You may or may not be able to guess from the name, but it's poisonous. It contains a poison that acts on the nervous system, causing mental overstimulation and hallucinations. The Japanese name translates to "Big Laugh Mushroom," but I'm not sure what's so funny about that.

A lively member of the mushroom world, it uses its special skill to grow all over the place.

Porcini (*Boletus edulis*)

A mushroom with a brown cap and a thick white stalk. In rare cases, it can grow to about 30 centimeters in size. It follows in the wake of the *Boletus reticulatus*, the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis*. It's a delicious mushroom that lives up to its name as a member of the *Boletus* family and is also very valued due to its large size.

As leader of the "Mushrooms to be Eaten by Agnes" squad, it sprouted with several edible friends.

Nameko

A slimy mushroom with a reddish cap that often grows in clusters. It's an affordable grocery item, loved by the whole family. It's a member of the Wood Deterioration Club and a member of the "Mushrooms to be Eaten by Agnes" squad; it sprouted to add some thickness to the stew.

Hypholoma lateritium

A chestnut-colored mushroom, reddish to yellowish brown. It is edible, has a crunchy texture, and makes a good soup stock. However, caution is needed as it resembles the poisonous *Hypholoma fasciculare*. A shy mushroom that gets excited and starts leaking spores at the thought of being eaten by Agnes.

Bailing Oyster Mushroom (*Pleurotus nebrodensis*)

Also known in Japan as the *Hakureitake*, or White Spirit mushroom. It is white to cream in color and the folds on the back of the umbrella continue to the base of the handle. It is said to be a variant of *eryngii*, with a strong aroma and crunchy texture reminiscent of abalone. It wanted to show off its chewy texture, but it was cut into smaller pieces than it expected and ended up a little disappointed.

Boletus edulis

It's an edible mushroom with a velvety dark brown cap. The cap can be over 12 centimeters wide! It tastes great in a stir fry or broiled. The bigger the better, then!

"I want to be fried!" it cried, but it ended up boiled in a pot instead. It made its peace with it, though. And a tasty stew.

Amanita caesareoides

An egg-shaped, red mushroom that changes into a flat shape. There are a lot of poisonous mushrooms that resemble it, so it's not safe to try to eat it. Apparently, it's delicious though. It wanted to be boiled to see if the phrase "Skin like a boiled egg" had any merit. Instead, it ended up being eaten with gusto. Because it accidentally grew on Claude's head at an opportune moment, it was later scolded by the *Cuphophyllus virgineus* for being "sneaky."

Chapter 9: Agnes's Desired Punishment

CIEL was up early in high spirits.

Today, he was chasing pine cones around the garden after clearly enjoying batting those mushrooms about yesterday. He might have a kitten-like body, but his chubby legs darting about were very cute.

Still, as you might expect from a sacred beast, he was very good at batting those pine cones hard and long. Ciel was zooming around the garden after them at unbelievable speeds.

Agnes was trying to sweep up the leaves, but Ciel kept dashing through the leaf piles and scattering them, meaning that the work was starting to seem endless. She'd mostly cleaned up the garden though, so perhaps she should leave it and move on to some other tasks.

"So, it seems Claude has headed off to the hole in the wall, eh?" Cesar approached Agnes, waving, and Agnes nodded back.

Claude left the house right after eating breakfast. Apparently, he was off to interview the knights stationed at the wall and get an update on the current situation.

"This is your first time in the Walled City, right? Come this way," Cesar invited.

Agnes followed as they exited the garden, with Ciel dashing quickly after her. It was admirable that Ciel seemed determined to fulfill his role as Agnes's bodyguard, but with that pine cone in his mouth, it seemed like he wasn't quite done playing yet.

Cesar led Agnes around to the back of the house. The dwelling itself was built on a small hill, so they had a panoramic view of the surrounding area. At the foot of a large mountain stood a cliff with an exposed rock surface, and a mist-like substance clung to the base.

Odd that there should be fog on such a clear day. Perhaps it was smoke, then,

or steam? It was blackish in color, so it seemed to be something else entirely.

“Do you see the cliff at the bottom of that mountain?” Cesar pointed at that very location.

“Yes. But there’s that weird area. It’s a bit unsettling.”

“Yes. That’s the hole in the wall.”

“Wall... You mean that cliff?”

“No. The hole isn’t in the cliff. The cliff just happens to be there.”

But what Cesar was pointing at was a large rock on that same cliff. Agnes couldn’t see anything that looked like a wall. Maybe she needed to be closer to see it.

“We call it a wall, but it’s not a wall in the physical sense. It’s a boundary, between two worlds. In essence, it’s a mass of black mist floating in the air. Ah, but it’d be quicker to just show you.”

So then that cliff face had nothing to do with it physically? It was all quite confusing.

“So that black mist we can see from here... That’s the hole?” Agnes asked.

“Yes. When the number of monsters increases, the amount of mist that leaks out also increases. Usually, you can’t see the mist from here. I’d guess a big wave is coming.”

Then that must mean the “hole” was filled with monsters right now. Claude was there... Would he be all right?

Cesar seemed to notice the concern on Agnes’s face and gently touched her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Claude will be fine. And the resident knights are skilled enough to fight most monsters without any problem.”

“...Right.”

Right. The knights are there, too.

Claude was strong, and monsters must have appeared before. Worrying too much about him seemed almost rude.

Agnes took a deep breath to calm herself and looked around at the scenery

again. On the other side of the mountain was the cliff. Shifting her gaze a little, Agnes saw the Walled City. From what she could see, it was within walking distance.

“It’s closer to the town than I thought,” she observed.

“The town exists so we can monitor the hole in the wall and exterminate the monsters. In the present era, there are four Crest Bearers. In times past, sometimes there weren’t any at all. So, the city needs to have a strong military presence.”

“Wow...”

Agnes had no concept of the sheer number of monsters, but judging from the city and its defenses, no doubt they were formidable foes. The city was the frontline in case of attack. It wasn’t a place for people to live, but a fortress where people would fight.

After that conversation, they headed back to the garden.

“Oh...” Cesar muttered in surprise ahead of Agnes.

Agnes peered over his shoulder and saw that a man had appeared in the garden.

“Armand, eh? It’s been a while,” Cesar said.

The third-in-line prince Armand Visage, a young man with hair the color of lead, bowed to Cesar and came right over to them.

Armand had once plotted to weaken Claude by killing Agnes so that he could become the king, without himself having a Dragon Crest. Agnes knew that after his plan failed, he was sent to the monster suppression force as a knight in training. So, he was sent... Here?

Ah, but come to think of it, there was mention of Armand being stationed here at the hole when Agnes first learned of its existence. Perhaps he’d been here for a while, only no one was able to mention it before.

“Uncle, it’s been a while. You seem to be doing well.”

“Yes. Thanks to Agnes, I’m feeling much better. Have you seen Claude yet?” Cesar asked.

"I have. I heard that you and Lady Agnes would be coming, so I thought I should come around to greet you and apologize properly... Lady Agnes?"

"...Y-Yes?!" Agnes squeaked in response.

Armand's wickedness had already been exposed and punished, and besides, Cesar was with her. She doubted he would harm her. Nonetheless, it was only natural for her to be guarded against someone who'd exhibited a murderous intent toward her in the past.

But Armand came in front of Agnes and bowed low. "I've caused you a lot of trouble. I'm deeply sorry."

Agnes was stunned by his unexpected sincerity, but Cesar patted Armand on the shoulder, and that's when he finally raised his head. The apology was not a superficial one; it seemed to come from genuine remorse.

Agnes could see that. But at the same time, he was so different from the Armand Agnes knew that she couldn't hide her surprise.

"Do you finally understand the gravity of the situation after seeing the wall?" Cesar asked.

"Yes. I'm ashamed of my past foolishness. If I had succeeded in my designs on Lady Agnes, I would not have deserved to live. Gerome and Xavier both told me how stupid I've been, and...they're right." Armand lowered his gaze and sighed. "There was a time in the past when there were no Dragon Crest Bearers. The intended role of the royal family cannot be carried out without at least one. My thinking was that royal blood would be enough, but..."

"Well, you're not completely wrong. I take it you've tested that theory?" Cesar asked.

Armand's shoulders shook a little.

Agnes wasn't sure what was going on, but clearly something unpleasant had happened.

"Yes. Blood does count, but not fundamentally. The importance of Crest Bearers and their Dragonmates cannot be overstated. This city has been basically propped up by them." Armand clenched his fists, and Cesar patted his

shoulder with a smile.

“You seem to understand now, so I’ll say no more about it. You’ve grown, Armand.”

“Thank you. And, Lady Agnes...”

“Y-Yes?”

Armand and Cesar were acting like mentor and mentee now. Agnes was starting to relax, but now Armand was talking directly to her.

“Considering what I did to you, I cannot ask you to forgive me. The king has punished me already, but perhaps you could offer an additional punishment that would please you?”

“A... A punishment...?” Agnes hadn’t been expecting this.

“I’m still a royal, so I cannot offer my death as penance. But anything else would be fair game. If you want to never lay eyes on me again, I can assure you that you won’t.”

Personally, Agnes didn’t want anything from Armand. The king had already punished him for his crimes, and Agnes could see that he was remorseful for his actions. But it seemed that Armand needed more.

“...Well, then, perhaps you could swear to protect the Walled City.”

“Protect the...city?” Armand blinked, perhaps surprised by Agnes’s proposal.

As Claude’s blood brother, his expression reminded Agnes a little of him.

“I heard that this place is the frontline of danger, where the hole in the wall is monitored and monsters swiftly dealt with. But there aren’t always Crest Bearers posted here. So, it would be great if you could swear to protect the city at all times.”

“Is... Is that all...?” Armand asked.

“Also, please clean this mansion from time to time. There’s just too much dust.”

There was a pop at the end of Agnes’s speech, and a gray mushroom sprouted on Armand’s arm along with another cap with a stalk that appeared to

be covered in white dust.

The *Amanita griseofarinos*a looked dusty again today, or was that baby powder?

Armand stiffened for a moment as he stared at the mushroom. Then he broke into an amused grin. "All right. I swear to do my best."

There was another pop, and this time a white mushroom with a rough-looking stalk sprouted on Armand's shoulder.

"The mushrooms are growing as well as ever. Claude will be very happy." As Armand said this, he plucked the *Coprinopsis lagopus* mushroom and stashed it in his pocket. Agnes wondered if he intended to give it to Claude.

Just like with Gerome. It was a little scary to think that arrangements had been put in place for the transfer of mushrooms. If the mushrooms weren't for Claude, though, then that might indicate mushroom fetishism in Armand as well. Agnes hoped not. She decided to believe that it was simply a brotherly favor he was doing.

"Prince Armand, why aren't you staying at this house?" Agnes asked.

"Well, like you said, it's full of dust. And since I'm here as punishment, I've been staying in the knights' quarters. ...Incidentally, Uncle..."

"What?"

Agnes realized that Cesar was crouched down, stroking Ciel. The two of them had become quite friendly over such a short period of time.

"I understand that my status means something here, but it's not enough. I want to know how to fight monsters, and I'd appreciate it if you'd teach me," Armand requested.

"Once your punishment is over, you won't be posted here anymore. I doubt there's much benefit for you to truly learn to swing a sword." Cesar sounded dismissive, but no doubt he was right.

Gerome, too, had been to the wall only once. Expeditions were important, but there probably wasn't much need for a non-Crest Bearing royal to be at the wall while other Crest Bearers existed.

But Armand shook his head.

“Because of my shallow thinking, I committed an unforgivable offense as a member of the royal family. I have to do my duty and fulfill my role as a royal.”

Cesar regarded Armand with his gray eyes and stopped stroking Ciel. “...I understand. There are models of the surrounding area and previous battles in an outbuilding of the mansion. Let’s look at them as I explain.” Cesar patted Ciel’s head as the cat snuggled against his legs. “Ciel, I’ll be leaving for a while, so please take care of Agnes.”

“Rawr!” Ciel responded politely and came over to sit by Agnes’s feet.

“...Is that a cat?” Armand asked.

“It’s a sacred beast,” Cesar replied.

“A sacred beast... You mean like a *SACRED* beast?”

Judging from the surprise in Armand’s tone, it seemed he was aware of their existence.

“I’ll explain about that, too.”

Agnes watched Cesar and Armand enter the residence together and sighed a little.

People make mistakes.

Even so, Armand was able to admit and own up to his mistakes and move forward. Despite almost being the victim of a murder plot, even Agnes felt somewhat uplifted by the sight of Armand trying to turn things around.

Agnes stretched and took a deep breath. “Well then, I suppose I should get on with the cleaning.”

“... Agnes?”

It was a low-pitched voice... But it made Agnes stiffen all the same.

Slowly turning her head toward the garden gate, she saw a young man with golden hair standing there. He wore a simple shirt and trousers and a hat that didn’t suit him at all. Her ex-fiancé, that bumbling rogue, Philip.

“Philip? What are you doing here?” Agnes asked, her voice low.

“Rawr!”

Ciel leapt to his paws and bared his teeth at Philip, who’d begun ambling across the garden toward Agnes. Despite Ciel being kitten-sized, he was still a ferocious beast, and Philip was a bumbling coward.

Philip, looking extremely disconcerted, came to a stop some distance from Agnes and shook in his boots. “It’s been a while. I heard that you were kidnapped by the King of Oreille... Are you all right?”

It was ridiculous how Philip could stand there and try to chit-chat when Agnes couldn’t make it any clearer how NOT welcome he was. Anyway, what was there to discuss?

“I’m fine. But I heard that YOU tried to sell me off to cover your own debts,” she snipped.

Philip was the one who’d facilitated her kidnapping. How dare he say things like, “it’s been a while,” and “are you all right?”

“I didn’t know! The King of Oreille and Sabina planned it all between them. It wasn’t my fault!” Philip whined.

“Not your fault...?”

Unbelievable. Agnes’s jaw was hanging open. Was Philip deranged?

“Ah, right. Have a word with the king, would you?” Philip asked as casually as he might a servant. “It’s cruel and unusual punishment to bundle me off to a dangerous excuse for a town like this one.”

“How dare you ask me for favors?”

Philip was lucky Agnes hadn’t whipped out a sword and swung for him on sight. Was this really how little he thought of Agnes? Or was it just that Philip was really that much of an idiot?

“Well, if you’re here, you must have come to see me, right?” he assumed.

“What could possibly give you that impression?” Agnes snapped.

Philip did look a little bit pink in the face, perhaps. But Agnes was so mad and disgusted, she didn’t want to think about that. She put a mental block on this

whole interaction.

“Because I know that, no matter what, you can’t forget about me, Agnes. You can’t just give up on me,” he droned on.

“Like I said, what could possibly give you that sort of deranged impression? It’s Claude that I love. I don’t care for you at all, Philip. How many times do I have to repeat myself?”

“There’s no need to try to seem tough.”

Philip’s dogged insistence was starting to shatter her mental block, her much sought-after calm. Agnes felt her forehead contort in anger. She gasped for breath and let it out in a huge, shuddering sigh of annoyance.

“Is there no limit to your utter stupidity, Philip?”

“...Say what?”

A popping sound covered up Philip’s words, and a reddish mushroom resembling a *Matsutake* appeared on his arm. Philip, alarmed by the sight of the *Tricholoma bakamatsutake*, let out a girlish scream, which made Agnes’s head pound.

“Not your fault? You didn’t know? You seriously think excuses like that are going to work, here?” Agnes glared at him with hatred, and Philip paused in the act of plucking the mushroom. “The only reason why Sabina went along with the King of Oreille’s instructions was because of YOUR debts, Philip. You wouldn’t pay, so she had to! Getting your wife involved in dirty dealings because of your own poor finances... You think feigning ignorance here is going to work out in your favor?!” Agnes exploded. And Philip’s eyes darted about as he clutched the mushroom.

“Y-You’re making it sound like it actually was my fault!”

“It WAS,” Agnes snarled.

Philip squeezed the mushroom in his hand, his throat contorting.

“I’ve been put in the same quarters as the knights, and every day is all about those horrible monsters. What I mean is, I’m being treated badly. I shall stay in this house instead. And have a word with the king, would you, so that I can be

brought home soon.”

Agnes heaved a huge, lung-emptying sigh, as Philip blinked at her, utterly incapable of comprehending his own culpability. She wanted to scream and rant at Philip. Her entire body was shaking with exasperation and irritation.

“Shifting responsibility, acting the victim, don’t you have any other way of operating?!” she shouted.

“What?!”

“Prince Armand is also here as punishment, but he has owned up to his sins, repented, and is moving forward to make amends. He’s a far cry from you, Philip. All you do is blame others and try to weasel out of things.” She shook her head.

“What did you just say?!” Philip’s face darkened and he took a deep breath.

But before he could say more, Ciel’s low roar shook the vicinity. It wasn’t a light, threatening roar like the one he gave to Philip earlier.

Agnes looked at Ciel, surprised by the change in him, and that’s when she saw something shrouded in black mist slink into the garden. In terms of appearance, it resembled a dog.

But Agnes could tell at one glance that its empty yet malicious eyes, its overly sharp fangs, and the strange way it walked like it had broken bones, meant that this was no ordinary dog.

“M-Monster!”

As Philip unleashed a pathetic scream, Ciel suddenly transformed. The white kitten morphed instantly into a huge white tiger, causing Philip to scream again.

“Aaagh! Another monster!”

Looking annoyed by Philip’s remark, Ciel swiped Philip aside with his mighty paw. It was a simple bat of a paw, but currently Ciel stood shoulder height to Agnes. As a result, Philip was knocked forward, right into the path of the monster. Immediately, the monster opened its jaws and clamped down on Philip’s arm.

“Aaargh!”

“Philip?!”

Did monsters EAT humans? Or was this an attack pattern? Either way, if Philip didn't get help, he'd die. But Ciel moved between Agnes and Philip, blocking her from coming closer.

Then, for some reason, the monster that was biting Philip stopped moving.

Before Agnes could process what she was looking at, the monster opened its jaws wider and spat out Philip's arm.

“...Huh?”

“It huuurts!”

Philip was rolling around on the spot and screaming like a child, but there was something odd. His hat came off when he fell, and the strips of balding hair on his head were visible... Though plenty of time had passed, Philip was still half-bald. A testament to the power of that mushroom punishment he'd previously received.

“I'm sure it does hurt, but what the heck was that just now?” Agnes asked.

Why would a monster—if it did indeed eat humans—spit one out? Even if the monster simply meant to maul Philip, what made it release its grip?

The monster in question was currently shaking its head vigorously back and forth. It kept spitting and spluttering, like it had eaten something very bitter... Or very spicy.

“Monsters hate royal blood!” Philip whined. “I've been used as bait SO many times! But never mind that! I need first aid!”

Philip finally stopped rolling on the ground, got up, and put his hat on, but he was still bleating away annoyingly.

Was this what Armand was hinting at when he said that royal blood helped to a point?

Anyway, from the monster's perspective, Philip clearly tasted extremely gross. There wasn't even any blood on Philip's arm. The taste of his skin alone must have been enough to repel the monster.

Actually... Monster-repellent flesh was quite the super-skill.

The monster finally stopped shaking its head, as if the worst of the Philip taste had passed, and turned its gaze toward Agnes. Yucky Philip aside, Agnes and Ciel were both also present at this scene. Agnes was obviously the easier choice of prey compared to a giant tiger. It was only natural that the monster would go for her next.

At that moment, a cluster of mushrooms appeared in the center of Philip's chest with a loud popping sound. The white mushroom that looked like squid legs was a *Lysurus arachnoideus*, and the mushroom that looked like an octopus's legs with bright red tentacles and black slimy spots was a *Clathrus archeri*.

Their foul smell wafted in the air and made Philip scream even louder, but Agnes didn't have time for that right now.

The monster lunged for her only to be intercepted by a mighty swat from Ciel's huge paw. That swat Ciel had given Philip earlier had been a mere tap compared to this. Knocked off the ground, the monster flew through the air and landed a considerable distance away.

"We have to get Duke Granier!" Agnes said.

Ciel was strong, but Agnes wasn't sure of the protocol for actually dealing with monsters. Claude had used magic to attack one before. Cesar, also a Crest Bearer and a brave man in his own right, would know just what to do.

But as Agnes was turning to head for the house, another creature resembling a boar shrouded in black mist appeared and lunged at her.

Agnes threw her hands up to protect herself. Suddenly, Ciel appeared and knocked Agnes out of the way. Before she could hit the ground, she heard a loud pop and felt something soft beneath her. She was saved by the yellow-brown cracked cap of the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis* that had served as a cushion. However, the number of monsters had increased, and now she was surrounded.

"Whoa!"

As if triggered by Agnes's voice, all the monsters pounced at once.

Roaring, Ciel batted several away, but he was outnumbered. Now a monster's fangs were at Agnes's throat, and she didn't even have time to scream. All of a sudden, something fluffy appeared between Agnes and the beast, and she fell back... Landing on another soft sprouting *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis*.

Ciel held a monster between his jaws. As he bit down, it turned into black mist and dissipated.

Agnes gasped in relief, but the next instant, one of the other monsters clamped down on Ciel's white forepaw...



Mushrooms of the Day

Amanita griseofarinosa

A mushroom with a gray body covered in some kind of white powder. It could be baby powder, or...room dust. It's not known if it's poisonous, but considering the species company it keeps, I wouldn't try eating it. When it heard talk of dust, it sprouted in excitement, only to find no dust at all...

Coprinopsis lagopus

A whitish mushroom with a rough fuzzy cap. When young, it's shaped like an acorn. As it grows, it opens up and eventually curves into a concave shape. It may look like a delicate, translucent, lace parasol, but it ends up turning black and melting and doesn't last long.

Seeing that Armand had changed his tune, it sprouted to say, "It's all right. We can melt away together and start anew."

Tricholoma bakamatsutake

Unlike the standard Matsutake, this mushroom grows early in clumps. Its scientific name includes the Japanese word “baka,” or “stupid.” Seeing that the name includes the word “baka” outside of Japan as well is a little demoralizing...

It looks almost like a Matsutake mushroom, has a stronger aroma than the original, and is edible, making it highly sought-after. The mushroom's been successfully cultivated, and one day may cover the world in stupid clumps. It sprouted in response to the word “stupidity,” but it doesn't really want to be lumped in with Philip.

Lysurus arachnoideus

When this young white spherical mushroom matures and splits open, 6 to 16 fronds appear from the white stalk. It literally looks like an upside-down squid. Not only is it disgusting because it has so many legs, but the black-brown, foul-smelling mucus it oozes looks just like squid ink. An unforgiving mushroom that is disgusting, smelly, and grows in clusters.

It sprouted with the *Clathrus archeri* to stink out Philip and get him to pipe down.

Clathrus archeri

Like a broken eggshell with a tentacle coming out, it looks like an octopus leg sprouting upside-down. The black sap seeping from the suckers gives off a stink. The *Lysurus arachnoideus* invited it along for a stink party, but it said, “Don’t red and white colors indicate a party?”

Rugiboletus extremiorientalis

Yellowish-brown or orange-brown caps, around 30 centimeters in size—a big mushroom. As it matures, cracks appear in the cap, and it resembles a load of baked bread. It's kind of like a big French boule loaf or a Japanese melon pan. It's not poisonous, but apparently it draws a lot of flies.

A cushion mushroom that grew in a hurry to prevent Agnes from falling.

Chapter 10: I Am the Pink Mushroom Princess

“CIEL!” Agnes yelled, grabbing the neck of the monster that was biting into Ciel’s leg and swinging it into the face of another monster.

The monster was thrown with such force that it seemed like its body would be torn apart, but when it collided with the other monster it immediately turned into black mist and disappeared.

“Ciel, are you all right?!”

Agnes rushed over and examined the bitten paw, but there was no blood coming out. Instead, a black mist clung to it. No doubt the same type of mist that shrouded the monsters.

Ciel looked weakened—that wasn’t good. She needed to get rid of that black mist.

Agnes tried to wipe away the mist with her hand, but Ciel stopped her, rubbing his head against her hand. His sky-blue eyes gazed intently at Agnes, as if trying to convey something to her.

“I shouldn’t touch it...?” she guessed.

Ciel let out a small roar then faced off against the rest of the monsters, moving in front of Agnes.

“What kind of monster is THAT?” Philip cried.

“Ciel’s not a monster. He’s my bodyguard, appointed by Claude.” Agnes scowled at Philip, who’d come up behind her, and that was when he said something totally unbelievable.

“Then let’s use it as a decoy while we escape!”

“...Excuse me?”

“You said it’s a bodyguard? Appointed by Claude? Then its job is to provide us cover so we can get away,” Philip reasoned.

Agnes was so shocked, she ended up yelling hoarsely, “Are you telling me to abandon Ciel?!”

True, Ciel was Agnes’s bodyguard. If Agnes ordered Ciel to distract the monsters while she fled to the house, no doubt Ciel would obey.

Even at the cost of his own life...

“Our lives are more valuable than that of some mangy beast. Obviously.” Philip reached out to grab Agnes’s arm, but she shook him off and glared right into those hopeless eyes.

“...I *was* your fiancée.”

“What?”

“It was an arranged marriage, one with no love, but I was still officially your fiancée. Then you insulted my appearance, acted like my mushrooms were disgusting, cheated on me, and then ultimately dumped me in public. THEN you came back around, asking me to be your mistress, acting like you actually liked me all along after all...only to have me kidnapped by a foreign country to pay off YOUR debts!”

Ugh, just going over it all again made her blood boil.

“But none of it compares to how angry I feel with myself for letting you do all of that!”

Philip took a step back, paling as he took in Agnes’s clenched, trembling fists.

“A-Agnes?”

“Between you and Ciel, I don’t even need to waste my breath clarifying whose life has more worth in this situation!”

“What? Huh?”

Agnes had never yelled at anyone like this in her life. Philip simply stood there, making stupid noises in shock.

“Get out of my sight, you utter waste of space! Disappear!”

Then Agnes turned from Philip, stepping protectively in front of Ciel and facing off against the monster. Ciel tugged on her skirt as if to say, “Don’t,

Mistress,” but Agnes stroked his head reassuringly.

“You’ve saved me many times, Ciel. Now it’s my turn.”

She’d promised Claude she would not leave Ciel’s side. Agnes knew she had to do something.

“Mushrooms! Please, get in touch with Duke Granier! Can you do it?”

There came a popping sound in response to Agnes’s cry, and a white mushroom with large warts appeared on Ciel’s head.

An *Amanita cokeri*... Previously, it had come to Agnes’s rescue and stopped Gerome when he was passing by in a carriage. She would trust in it again now.

It would need to hold until Cesar came along.

“Okay, mushrooms! Let’s go!” Agnes yelled again, and an *Amanita muscaria* popped up on Ciel’s head. With its red cap and white warts, it looked very pretty beside the *Amanita cokeri*, but Agnes didn’t care about aesthetics now. She was just happy it had come to help.

Don’t worry, Agnes. We’re your friends. You’re the Pink Mushroom Princess, after all.

“I need mushrooms to slow down the enemy!”

With another popping sound, a reddish-brown Nameko grew just before the monster. Wielding its slimy cap, it doubled its slime output until the ground was slick, trapping the monster’s legs in the several-centimeter-thick trap and causing it to slide and fall. The monster struggled for purchase, like it was trying to stand on slippery ice, as it floundered in a sea of slime.

“And I need attack mushrooms!”



There was a loud pop, almost as if Agnes's words had been a signal. A creamy *Macrocybe gigantean* suddenly sprouted on the boar-like monster's back. It quickly surged to more than twice the monster's size, crushing and pinning it beneath its weight.

A pale yellow-capped *Galerina fasciculata* growing in the dog-like monster's mouth was quickly gnashed between its teeth, but a few seconds later, the beast began to thrash and writhe on the ground. The attacking mushroom was powerfully toxic, but the effects kicked in so quickly—no doubt it contained a super-charged dose.

Stretching protectively in front of the monsters was a red, lattice-like cage. The stench of the *Clathrus ruber* seemed to repel the monsters away, but in their hurry to flee the stink, they crashed into the monsters in the rear.

"The sprouting..." Agnes was the one who'd summoned this fungal onslaught, but...she would never have expected it to be this dramatic.

A loud shriek of "Ohhhh! Mushrooms!" from behind snapped Agnes out of her state of semi-shock.

The multitude of monsters turned into black mist and dissipated. In other words, the mushrooms had defeated them.

"Mushrooms! You were amazing!" Agnes breathed excitedly.

It was unbelievable that mushrooms alone could have done all this! Just as the monsters abhorred dragon blood, they must be weak against the power of the spirits as well.

Just as things were looking up, a huge monster suddenly appeared, crushing the garden gate. The bear-like monster was so huge, it made Ciel look like a tiny kitten again. A bear alone would be bad enough, but a monster bear wrapped in black mist...

"Arrgh!"

"Be quiet, you excuse for a man!"

It was SO annoying the way Philip was just standing around screaming.

The monster locked on to Agnes and began lumbering over to her. Still, she

did not flee. She planted her feet and stared it down.

As the beast was about to attack by swiping at her with a paw as thick as a tree trunk, Agnes heard a sharp voice cut through the air.

“Lightning!”

The huge monster was instantly charred by a bolt of lightning from the sky. Before it could hit the ground, the body crumpled and dissipated in a black mist.

“Claude...”

Appearing beyond the disintegrating monster was a beautiful young man with that familiar blue hair.

...Ah. He’d come for her.

Just before Agnes could collapse on the spot, Claude ran over and enveloped her in his arms.

“Agnes, are you all right?!”

She wanted to respond, but no words came out. It was only just now realization dawned on her, how terrified she’d been.

Before Claude could say anything, the few remaining monsters began to move all at once. The more threatening monsters had all been defeated, but there were still enough smaller stragglers to pose a threat.

Claude, supporting Agnes in one arm, thrust out his hand only to pause at the sight before him.

“Goodness! It’s a mushroom paradise!” Eyes wide, he took in the sight of the field that was once covered in grass but now was the scene of mushrooms rolling this way and that, bobbing around on the bodies of the monsters.

Despite his shock and awe, he couldn’t forget the attacking monsters—much as he’d clearly rather focus on the shrooms.

Lightning bolts rained from the sky, charring the monsters. Black mist trailed from bodies, and the charred remains of the mushrooms wafted away on the breeze.

“Brave mushrooms... I’ll never forget your sacrifice,” Claude whispered as he

gazed wistfully at the sky, his eyes glistening with emotion. A little annoying, but also slightly moving at the same time.

And, on this one occasion, Agnes could share his sentiments a little. She took a moment to silently thank the mushrooms for responding to her call and for fighting so hard.

“Agnes, are you hurt?” he asked.

“I’m okay. Ciel and the mushrooms protected me.”

Claude touched Agnes’s cheeks and arms, making sure she was okay. He glanced at Ciel and gasped.

“What an amazing *Amanita muscaria* and *Amanita cokeri*!” Claude’s expression softened as he gently stroked the red and white caps. “Ciel, you did well.”

Was he praising Ciel? Or just crooning over the red and white mushrooms?

But the moment he stroked Ciel’s head, the black mist that had been wafting out of the wound on Ciel’s paw instantly dissipated. Ciel roared proudly, instantly looking healthier than ever. Claude, his contracted master, had clearly just healed him.

“Thank you, mushrooms.”

Claude smiled at the mushrooms on Ciel, which bobbed around as if to say, “Right, don’t forget about us!” The sight of red and white mushrooms bobbling around on the head of a large white tiger was unusual to say the least, but still rather adorable.

Suddenly, Claude stopped beaming at the mushrooms, and his face instantly darkened.

Philip, dirty from rolling around on the ground, let out a small scream when his eyes met Claude’s.

“So. What are you doing here, Philip?” Claude asked, his voice lowering an octave.

“Oh, I...”

Agnes wasn't sure what Philip's official role here was, but it was clear he wasn't taking it seriously. Though she didn't really care about Philip at all right then.

"Claude, never mind him. Please, take me to the hole in the wall. I feel like I understand something now. About my mushroom powers."

Now, Agnes felt she could help, so she didn't have time to worry about the miscreant that was her ex.

"Agnes! Some mushrooms sprouted suddenly, and... Claude?!"

Cesar and Armand emerged and came running over from the house. Apparently, the mushrooms had properly informed Cesar.

"Uncle, monsters have broken through. Caution is advised," Claude warned.

"I see... The mushrooms were a signal, then?"

"It's not just one band of monsters. Apparently, the wave we expected has arrived," Claude informed the pair.

Cesar and Armand's eyebrows furrowed as they looked at the charred ground. Looking at the surroundings, even if monsters had appeared, the amount of evidence must have seemed a little odd.

"By the way, there are red and white mushrooms growing on the sacred beast's head... Are those..."

"Isn't it poetic?!"

Armand's question was perfectly valid, but the mushroom fetishist's response was...unhinged.

However, the sight of the small *Amanita cokeri* bobbling around on Ciel's head really was rather adorable.

Agnes wished she could explain better, but even she didn't know exactly why mushrooms grew on top of Ciel's head. Why choose to sit on top of the fluffy and soft head of Ciel... Why there, of all places? The great view, perhaps? Maybe it was a bit...poetic.

Agnes felt a little disappointed with herself for so easily reaching the same

conclusion as a confirmed fungi fan.

“Agnes and I will head to the hole in the wall now,” Claude said. “Please deal with our intruder and any remaining monsters.”

“Wah?!” Agnes shrieked as Claude picked her up and placed her on Ciel’s back before jumping on behind her.

“Leave things here to us,” Cesar said. “Go ahead; we’ll follow soon. Be careful, Agnes.”

“I will!”

“Wait, Agnes!” Philip cried out to her, and Agnes felt a wave of irritation. As she sighed, a multitude of mushrooms erupted all over Philip.

The pale ocher *Lactarius aspideus* and *Hydnellum peckii*, a sort of white mass oozing red bloodlike sap, instantly dyed Philip’s clothes with their juices.

The *Astraeus hygrometricus*, which looked like a peeled orange, scattered a cloud of spores, making the mottled pinkish-stained clothes look even dirtier.

To top it off, Philip suddenly coughed and spat out something that looked like the yellowish-brown cap of a *Lactarius torminosus*.

“Gack! Mushrooms! So spicy!”

Cesar and Armand both stepped back as Philip convulsed, but Claude watched with rapt fascination.

“What a combination. And such wonderful colors...”

Uh-oh. At this rate, Claude would be consumed with the mushroom show.

“L-Let’s go!” Agnes insisted.

Did Ciel sense the tension in Agnes’s voice? Or did he just want to get away from Philip and the racket he was making? Either way, he started running. Agnes was caught off guard by the motion and started to tip backward, but Claude supported her from behind, steadying her in his arms.

Agnes almost fell off the horse...er, tiger. They were in a hurry, yes, but she couldn’t afford to go getting hurt right now.

“Thank you, Claude.” She looked over her shoulder to thank him only to find

him beaming. “What? Why are you smiling?”

“I was just thinking... The Agnes you were when we first met would have apologized for the trouble, not thanked me. It’s a welcome change.”

“Maybe. But if I’ve changed, it’s all thanks to you, Claude. And I’m certain I’ll continue to change in the future, too.”

Agnes wanted to change. With Claude, the one who’d inspired her.

“I look forward to it. Ah, look ahead. It’s in sight.”

The cliff Agnes had spotted from the house was looming ahead. A huge monster, shrouded in black mist, was crouched at the base.

“There it is... The hole in the wall,” Agnes said in awe.



Mushrooms of the Day

Amanita cokeri

A white mushroom with big warty bits and a flaky stalk. It looks kind of like an all-white *Amanita muscaria*. Nobody knows if it's poisonous or edible, but I wouldn't want to take a bite and find out! A surveillance mushroom that is worried about Agnes's personal and psychological state.

"Leave the reporting to me!" it cried, sprouting on Cesar in response to Agnes's request and putting out the summons to the other mushrooms. "Come to think of it, I should have sprouted on Claude as well and summoned him," it reflected. An excellent summoning mushroom always trying to optimize its work.

Amanita muscaria

Red caps with white polka dots. Like the poisonous mushrooms you find drawn in storybooks. It may resemble the 1-Ups from a certain video game franchise you may have heard of, but you wouldn't want to try eating a real one! It felt the red filament of fate and sprouted. The mushroom Claude fell in love with.

It left the summoning work to the *Amanita cokeri*, instead focusing on mushroom troop selection and field observation. On top of Ciel's head, it spread its cap a little wider as Claude stroked it, his eyes fixed on Agnes.

Nameko

A slimy mushroom with a reddish cap. It often grows in clusters. It's an affordable grocery item, loved by the whole family.

It rushed to Agnes's aid in a crisis and produced more slime than ever—of the shoe-ruining kind. It's a member of the Wood Deterioration Club. "I'll stop you in your tracks!" it said, releasing a huge amount of goo, so much goo that it almost gooped itself to death.

Macrocybe gigantea

A giant mushroom that can grow from 10 to 30 centimeters wide with a chrome-colored cap. They're all gigantic, but some are really huge. There are records of them weighing from 10 to 100 kg. Although they are edible, they must be cooked. As they grow larger, they start to smell and become less tasty.

Using its huge body to help with the attack on Agnes's behalf, one wonders just how big they can really become.

Galerina fasciculata

The Japanese name includes the word “Cholera” to indicate its poisonous nature. Of course, as the name comes from the infectious disease cholera, the effects it causes upon ingestion are similar to those of cholera.

Upon consumption, consumers suffer diarrhea but soon recover. However, a few days later they go on to develop fulminant hepatitis and kidney failure, leading to death. The poison is so potent, it can't be removed through heat cooking. Although it resembles popular edible mushrooms such as Nameko and Enokitake, it is deadly poisonous, so be careful.

“Today, I’m going to spread my poison at double speed!” claimed the elite mushroom with an in-mouth kamikaze attack.

Clathrus Ruber

This mushroom has a red lattice-like appearance and resembles a baby's rattle. Despite its terrible smell, it was apparently eaten as a medicine in southern Europe. I'm curious about what effects it has... But I'm not willing to try it out.

Cornering the monster with its trademark stench, it cried, "How do you like this stink?!" before being knocked over by the monster's paws.

Char-Grilled Mushrooms

The heroes who completed the mission proudly and scattered in the wind, leaving behind a whiff of cooked and burning mushroom scents.

Lactarius aspideus

It has a pale ocher cap that becomes slimy in damp environments. A metamorphic mushroom that oozes a liquid like rice water when scratched and turns pale purple when exposed to air. It has a bitter taste and is not suitable for eating... It seems that the mushroom braves have been taste-testing again.

“Don’t get in Agnes’s way. I’ll stain your clothes!” it yelled in excitement. Actually, it had always wanted to try dyeing clothes.

Hydnellum peckii

A white fleshy body with bloodlike juice oozing out. Like a bleeding tooth! It's supposed to be edible, but bitter. Those mushroom maniacs have been at it again!

It dyed Philip's clothes red, but its liquid has antibacterial properties, so it's actually rather a kind mushroom.

Astraeus hygrometricus

It looks like a starfish with a globe in the middle or a peeled orange. When it ripens, a hole opens up in the middle of the ball and spores are released. It's technically edible, but not really eaten.

While scattering the spores on Philip's clothes, made wet by the juices of other mushrooms, it also secretly sprinkled spores on his hair to make it look gray.

Lactarius torminosus

An orange-tinged mushroom with a cap that can transform into a flat, funnel, or bun-like shape. It has a strong, hot taste. So, if you taste heat, don't eat it as it causes gastrointestinal poisoning. In fact, it's always better not to go putting mushrooms in your mouth if you're not sure what they are.

A brave mushroom that attacks Philip's mouth and stops him in his tracks with its spiciness.

Chapter 11: A Latticework of Spirits and Mushrooms

“**BLACK** mist, floating in the air... It’s just like Duke Granier said,” Agnes whispered more to herself than out loud.

Ciel wove through the knights, who were busy fighting several monsters, to arrive right in front of the mist. The cliff’s rocky surface was so vast, it hurt Agnes’s neck when she looked up at it. It was...imposing.

At first glance, the black mist looked like a hole in the rock, but it was not touching the cliff at all; rather, it floated in the air without any support. It was a mist, so it didn’t have a clear outline, but it was vaguely circular and the size of three grown adults with arms outstretched.

In front of the circular black mist was something like a floating grid or lattice that looked like some sort of suppression apparatus, but Agnes had no idea how it was managing to suspend in the air like that.

“Your Highness!”

One of the knights finished cutting down a monster in his path, barked a few orders at his fellow knights, then ran up to Agnes, Claude, and Ciel. He helped Claude down from Ciel before bowing reverently.

“The wave is here, it seems,” Claude remarked to the knight.

“Yes. We let a few slip through. My apologies.”

The monsters that “slipped through” must have been the ones that attacked Agnes. Then, how many monsters had there been originally?

Agnes had heard the term “frontline” several times... And that was no exaggeration. Now that the remaining monsters seemed to have been defeated, the knights were all rushing about to treat the injured and prepare for the next battle.

“I took out the ones that came toward my residence,” Claude said. “My uncle will handle the cleanup there, so no issues.”

“Duke Granier? In that case, there’s no need to worry,” the knight said, looking relieved. Cesar clearly had a reputation for his strength.

However, the fact that these knights were able to suppress the monsters even without Dragon Crest magic showed how excellent they really were. Agnes watched them with admiration as they gathered around.

“Is this...?”

“Yeah,” Claude nodded in response to the knights, who were all looking at Agnes.

Immediately, every knight present straightened up before they bowed.

“Mushroom Princess, blessed by spirits. We extend our heartiest welcome to you. We are the knights who guard the hole in the wall.”

Agnes was taken aback by the vigor of their welcome, and the phrase “Mushroom Princess” stood out to her. Did they know the truth about her and the Kingdom of Oreille?

“This is my precious princess, daughter of a man of Oreille, blessed by the spirits and beloved by mushrooms. Right, Agnes?” Claude turned to her.

Right... It was well-known that Agnes didn’t grow up as a royal and that her father was from Oreille. Claude had only stated the facts, albeit in an embarrassing way.

“We certainly weren’t expecting to see a white tiger with mushrooms on its head today,” the lead knight remarked. “The spiritual protection of Oreille must be a thing beyond our comprehension.”

Ciel now received the knights’ admiration, as did the red and white mushrooms bobbing about on his head. They were wiggling an awful lot, almost like they were vibrating with pride or something.

“The tiger’s not my doing...” Agnes demurred. “The mushrooms are mine, though...”

“Uh-oh... It’s leaking through, again,” Claude muttered.

Following his gaze, the knights’ faces grew grim and serious as they all reached for their sword hilts.

The lattice grid floating in front of the black mist was made of some brown material. Every now and then, it seemed to crackle with something like static electricity. Though the gaps in the lattice were quite wide, they still seemed to be holding back the mist. Whatever protection it gave, it wasn't purely physical.

On closer inspection, Agnes could see that the black mist was not still; it was undulating slightly like a wave. When the waves grew large, black mist seeped through the gaps in the lattice. Whenever this happened to a certain extent, it manifested as a monster.

In front of Agnes's eyes, a mass of mist took on the shape of a large mouse. With a blow from the knight, it returned to the mist and disappeared.

"Is this what you meant by the monsters being made of mist... Not flesh and blood?" Agnes asked. She had seen the monsters destroyed and turned to mist, but to learn that they came from mist to begin with, it was impossible to tell when a wave big enough to form a monster would come. No wonder someone always needed to be watching.

And no wonder a monster-subjugation force of knights was needed.

Humans need rest, so the people on guard would have to be rotated out at regular intervals. Agnes could now fully understand the significance of having knights stationed at the hole in the wall and why the Walled City was so necessary. As Agnes stood there overwhelmed, Ciel took a bite out of a wisp of mist.

"Uh, Ciel?" Agnes was about to ask if Ciel was all right when she remembered that Ciel liked to snack on the monsters. She doubted the mist monsters were very filling. But Ciel seemed to enjoy the taste nonetheless.

"The mist isn't just a floating mass," Claude said. "We believe it's a border to another world. That grid isn't physical, either. It's a seal, created by the power of dragons and spirits."

A border to another world. That didn't sound quite real. And yet, looking at it...

"Why not seal off the hole completely?" Agnes asked.

If the mist leaking through the lattice turned into monsters, then why leave

those gaps to begin with?

Claude and the knights nodded.

“There is record of this being done in the past,” replied Claude as he looked up at the hole in the wall thoughtfully. “Not only was it a huge undertaking to seal the hole completely, but there was a breach after a few days, and a huge mist wave came through. We think that this is something like a vent for the other world. If we don’t let a little seep through, there might be a massive explosion.”

Even the few monsters who leaked through were formidable. It was scary to think of a huge influx coming through at once.

“That’s why it’s shaped like a grid, then,” Agnes noted.

“Yes. It vents the mist while preventing too much from coming through at once. That’s how we have guarded the hole in the wall for a long time,” Claude said.

These knights continued to protect the way of life of the ignorant masses.

Agnes was filled with gratitude and respect for the royal family and the knights who supported this land and all its subjects. Her heart ached with emotion.

The hole in the wall could not be eliminated, nor could it be sealed completely. With that being the case, Agnes wanted to help in any way she could. She wanted to help protect those who protected the country.

Agnes clenched her fists and slowly approached the black mist and the floating grid. What had first looked like a collection of brown sticks was actually a complex latticework.

“This lattice is made out of vine... Or maybe roots. Either way, it looks like a plant,” she observed.

“The current grid was created by a King of Roots several generations ago. Strong spiritual blessing leads to an affinity with plants,” explained Claude.

Right, that made sense. Come to think of it, King Nathan also controlled vines. On the surface, the vine lattice looked like any normal plant, but it was probably

very special—a blessing of the spirits.

“But what’s this static electricity crackling through it?” Agnes wondered.

“We use the Visage power of the dragon to strengthen the Oreillian lattice,” Claude said. “Currently, it’s mainly my power...but since the lattice has weathered and its power is weakening, I’ve had to reduce my output a little. I’m concerned about the lattice being destroyed.”

The electricity crackling was Claude’s lightning magic at work. On closer look, Agnes could see that the roots were discolored in some places, and some were withered and broken.

“That’s why the mist leaks out,” she said.

“Some leaking is expected. But if the lattice fails when a big wave comes...”

Even as Claude spoke, a large amount of black mist spilled through the barrier, but Ciel sprang into action and devoured it, licking his chops. They couldn’t expect Ciel to chomp up all the black mist that leaked through, though. And if the lattice itself were to break, there would be no hope.

Did this situation not call on Agnes to create a new lattice using the divine protection of the spirits, her birthright as an Oreillian royal?

But what if she failed? Sorry, I tried? The situation was too serious for that. She suddenly felt such a sense of pressure that she struggled to breathe.

“It’s all right,” came a kind voice as Agnes felt a warm arm around her shoulders.

Looking up to see those familiar eyes narrowed warmly at her, Agnes felt the weight in her chest lighten.

“Agnes, all you need to focus on is fixing the cracks in the lattice. I’ll be right by your side,” Claude reassured. “Right, Ciel?”

“Rawr!” Ciel roared in agreement.

Though nothing about the situation had changed, Agnes’s entire mood had lifted.

“Thank you.”

It was Agnes herself who decided to come here. Agnes who had decided to use her Oreillian birthright for good. So, she would need to do everything in her power.

“Spirits!” she called.

Multiple balls of light began to swirl around, responding to Agnes’s call. The mellow glow they gave off was beautiful, like fallen shooting stars. The nearby knights let out gasps of admiration.

“I want to fix this grid. Can you lend me your help?”

Though she tried asking them outright, the spirits didn’t act. Instead, the balls of light began to sway back and forth, as if they were trying to tell her something.

“Rawr,” Ciel growled, staring intently at the light balls and rubbing his cheek against Agnes’s arm.

“It seems...they’re saying it is better to break down what’s already there, and completely rebuild it,” translated Claude, which shocked Agnes.

“Huh? But if the grid is removed, even for a second, the mist will overflow...”

The balls of light swayed more in response to Agnes’s doubts, and Ciel rumbled again.

“Fixing it will keep it weak. Starting from scratch will make it strong. I see, yes, that’s certainly so.”

“Claude?!”

Agnes didn’t understand. If the grid was broken down to nothing, there would be zero protection at all. And if Agnes had to create the new grid... Well, there was no guarantee that she’d be able to do a good job.

“Existing records state the grid has indeed been destroyed several times in the past, but that the seal was sustained through dragon power alone for several days,” Claude said. “I’m sure things will work out. After all, we have a Queen of— I mean, a Mushroom Princess on our side.”

Agnes was glad Claude had corrected himself, but at the same time, she felt embarrassed. Would this plan really work? In theory, a Queen of Mushrooms

would have a stronger spirit blessing than a King of Roots.

A yellow, rod-shaped *Clavulinopsis helvola* grew on Claude's shoulder, appearing with a loud pop as if in response to Agnes's turmoil. The balls of light also began to swirl playfully around Agnes, appearing to cheer her on.

"Rawr!"

"They want you to call on them." The strength in Claude's voice made Agnes feel silly for worrying.

First off, give it a try. Agnes was supported by so many wonderful people who'd changed her entire philosophy on life. And she was proud of who she was becoming—someone capable of believing in herself.

"Right. I trust the spirits. I trust the mushrooms."

The red and white mushrooms on Ciel's head released a puff of spores, as if to say, "That's the spirit!"

"We will break down the current grid and install a new one," Claude announced to the knights. "Be prepared for an onslaught of mist and monsters. Be prepared for battle. Notify the entire city, just in case."

"Yes, sir!" the knights responded with enthusiasm to Claude's instructions.

They dispersed to tackle their tasks, preparing weapons, making reports, and getting into battle formation. Agnes felt reassured that all these good soldiers were here, working together to handle the situation.

"Incidentally...how are we supposed to break down the grate?" she asked.

"I could break it down, but I don't want to open the floodgates," Claude said. "If the spirits did it in the past, then perhaps they can do it this time, too?"

"Can you?" Agnes asked the spirits. The balls of light glowed quickly in response to Agnes's question, as if saying it was possible. "Then, please destroy the grid."

Instantly, the balls of light began to gather around the grid. The roots gradually dried up, changed color, and eventually fell apart. In an instant, the grid lost its shape, and the electricity crackled and disappeared. Then, the undulating mist began to sway violently.

Though Agnes had been expecting...something...the oddness of its weird mix of colors and the creepy sounds it made caused a chill to run down her spine.

With a disturbingly wet noise, the mist oozed from the hole with surprising and increasing viscosity. It seemed sentient, realizing the blockade was now gone, and surged forth.

“It’s coming. Lightning bolt!” Claude chanted.

The mist that spilled onto the ground reformed itself into about a dozen bird-shaped monsters. Claude’s lightning bolts instantly rained down upon them, with a flash of light so blinding and a crack so loud, Agnes feared losing both her sight and hearing. Losing many of its monstrous shapes to the wind, the black mist fragmented and left only the smell of burnt earth behind.

“A-Amazing...”

“Incredible, Prince Claude. That many monsters in the space of an instant.”

The knights seemed taken aback and impressed, but Claude was still on high alert.

“Don’t let your guard down, the next wave will come soon! Agnes!” Claude shouted.

“O-On it!” Agnes took a deep breath and focused on the hole overflowing with dark mist. “Spirits, Mushrooms! Please, make a grid to close this hole!”

As soon as Agnes finished her request, the balls of light began to shine brighter. The glow became thin and snaky like a vine, zooming toward the hole, and forming a delicate lattice in an instant. The mist stopped glopping forth but was not held back completely. It continued to ripple and undulate violently. Then, something like a long, thin thread appeared from nowhere and intertwined with the lattice of light, which became thicker and more robust.

Mushrooms began to grow rapidly on the lattice.

A red lattice-shaped *Clathrus ruber* and a black-brown bumpy *Morchella esculenta* now wove through the lattice. Was that meant to happen?

Brown *Termitomyces* mushrooms were concentrated in the center of the lattice, making them look like one large mushroom at first glance. Bright red-

capped *Hygrocybe coccineas* and a stack of pink-capped *Podoserpula miranda* gave off vibrant pops of color as they scattered throughout the white lattice, giving off a lovely impression.



Then, mushrooms all puffed out spores in unison, like white smoke, and floated away with the wind. When it cleared, the black mist was safely contained beyond the lattice, undulating in only slight, gentle movements.

“It worked...! Spirits! Mushrooms! Thank you!” Agnes was filled with gratitude, and the balls of light glowed happily as the mushrooms released another puff of spores.

“Now, to charge it. Lightning bolt!” Claude cried out, and lightning shot down from the sky, striking the grid.



Mushrooms of the Day

Amanita muscaria

The knights called Agnes “Mushroom Princess,” which made the *Amanita muscaria* puff up its chest...er, cap, with pride. When Agnes said that she trusted the mushrooms, it was so happy, spores came out.

Amanita cokeri

It spread out its cap, trying to broadcast Agnes's big moment to the entire mushroom world.

Clavulinopsis helvola

It's a yellow, thin-stemmed mushroom that looks like soggy French fries. The Japanese name has the character for "noodles" in it, so you'd think it would be edible, but it's not considered a worthy foodstuff. Apparently, you need a lot of courage to eat it. It waved its French fries about, showing off how brave it is.

"Fear not, my dear! Mushrooms are here!" it said, encouraging Agnes.

Clathrus ruber

This mushroom has a red lattice-like appearance and resembles a baby's rattle. Despite its terrible smell, it was apparently eaten as a medicine in southern Europe. I'm curious about what effects it has... But I'm not willing to try it out.

It competed with the *Morchella esculenta* to see who'd look better on the lattice and ended up in a tangle.

Morchella esculenta

A mushroom with a light brown, bumpy, mesh-like head that rests on a stalk. The cap is light brown to black-brown and looks like the head of a horsetail. There are many similar species, so make sure to judge the wild ones accurately before eating them...What kind of quiz is this? Although it is poisonous if not cooked, it is popular as an edible food in Europe.

As it tangled with the *Clathrus ruber* mushroom in the lattice, it admired the view, saying, “You’re looking good, Agnes!”

Termitomyces

A mushroom that lives symbiotically with termites. With its brown cap and white stalk, it is as delicious as it looks and is called the king of mushrooms. A fungal garden grown by self-sufficient termites accidentally grew on the ground.

“I’m the King of Mushrooms. I should be in the front!” it cried as it sprouted, but of course no one understood.

Hygrocybe coccinea

A mushroom with a bright red cap, good at growing in clusters. It's edible, with a nice texture and unique color. This colorful mushroom grew excitedly on Agnes's lattice as a form of decoration.

Podoserpula miranda

A pink mushroom with five caps growing in a link on the stalk. Or the non-tornado version of the tornado potatoes you see at festivals. These mushrooms are in danger of extinction due to fires and feeding damage from wild pigs, but they don't care much.

It sprouted for the fun of it, not sure what was going on, but it found itself in the midst of a big lattice mushroom festival. It decided to join in and add a bit of dark pink color to the mix.

Chapter 12: Trembling with Embarrassment

“NOW, to charge it. Lightning bolt!” Claude cried out, and lightning shot down from the sky, striking the grid.

Electricity trembled violently across the grid, and where it touched the black mist, it burst and disappeared. Static electricity had run through the old grid too, but this looked very different. Such power. Almost...beautiful.

However, as Agnes watched, overtaken with emotion, she saw one of the mushrooms growing on the grid get charged by electricity, too.

“Oh! The mushroom! It’s being electrified.”

“I don’t think it’ll burn, but...”

But mushrooms hadn’t grown on the old lattice. This was a new situation for Claude.

“Even if it doesn’t burn, won’t it hurt? Though I don’t know if mushrooms have a sense of pain.”

Even the fanatic seemed to have no idea how a mushroom might feel being struck by lightning.

Agnes and Claude looked at Ciel, who was apparently interpreting for them.

“He said the mushrooms enjoy it... They say it tingles,” Claude interpreted.

“Then, it’s okay?”

Now she knew the mushrooms liked to be stimulated, but was it a good idea to stimulate them in the first place?

“They don’t seem angry or uncomfortable,” Claude said. “Look, the lightning seems to make them multiply. They seem to rather like it.”

“Seems kind of masochistic...” Agnes sighed.

“Mushrooms are very generous.”

Agnes didn't really get it, though fungal logic always seemed to elude her.

The knights sheathed their swords and gazed up at the hole in the wall with its new grid, sighing in admiration.

"It's amazing. Even when the mist undulates, the lattice doesn't budge in the slightest. Thank you, Mushroom Princess!"

"Er..." Agnes wished they wouldn't call her that, but she'd hate to rain on the knights' happy parade.

"You're the one who enlisted the help of the spirits and mushrooms to create this grid, Agnes. You should be proud," Claude said.

"Thank the spirits and mushrooms, not me," she replied wryly. "Thank you both for helping out."

The spirit balls glowed bright and then went out, and the mushrooms puffed out more spores. Where were all those spores coming from? Shouldn't they be running out soon?

"I like the name Mushroom Princess, but from now on, you can call her the Duchess of Aznavour," Claude said to the knights.

"Mushroom Duchess, then!" the knights beamed, causing Agnes to frown.

Why was the mushroom part being preserved? That was when Agnes noticed the mushrooms were gone from Ciel's head. When were they harvested?

"Claude! Agnes! Are you all right?"

Cesar and Armand appeared then, and the knights bowed and stepped back.

Agnes thought she heard mutterings about "the Mushroom Princess" and "Lady Mushroom." Maybe it was just her imagination.

"Thanks to Agnes, we were able to completely reform the grid," Claude reported.

Cesar nodded, looking up at the grid, his breath catching. "Spectacular. Now we'll be able to relax our guard a little. See that the city is informed."

"Yes, sir!" The knights nodded and dashed off, their eyes alight. They were saying things like, "The Mushroom Princess forged a mushroom grid," but

Agnes tried to ignore it.

In the midst of the excitement, Armand stared intently at the grid, nodding to himself. “The withering parts are gone...and the grid itself has become thicker. There seems to be much stronger lightning running through it as well. But what’s the purpose of the mushrooms?”

Agnes would like to know the answer to that one herself.

“Erm... I think it’s just for decoration...” she ventured.

Agnes felt bad admitting she had no idea when Armand’s eyes were shining with curiosity. So, she desperately tried to think of a plausible explanation. Even if they were edible, the mushrooms were too super-charged to be eaten; some of them were definitely poisonous too. What other reason could there be for except decoration? Either way, Armand, knowing nothing about mushrooms, didn’t seem to understand this concept. He raised a brow at Agnes.

“Decoration?”

“Beautiful guardian, er, mushrooms,” Agnes muttered.

Claude sighed, his silvery-gray eyes sparkling, and Armand rolled his eyes a little.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m guessing there has to be some significance to those mushrooms,” Armand concluded.

“Oh, doubtless,” Claude agreed.

Right...there probably was.

It was just that it was beyond human comprehension.

“In any case, Claude, Agnes, you did a great job. Thank you,” smiled Cesar as he patted Agnes on the shoulder.

There was a loud pop, and a clam-shaped mushroom appeared on Cesar’s arm. The *Cryptoporus volvatus* mushroom was quickly plucked and handed to Claude as a matter of course. Apparently, there was a mushroom trade agreement in place between Claude and his uncle as well. Cesar’s approval made Agnes smile, and the mushroom handover made her giggle.

Claude pocketed the mushroom and put his arm around Agnes. In front of the others, Agnes felt embarrassed. But seeing Claude's smile, she had to giggle again.

"Now then. Sorry to bring up business so soon after a dramatic scene, but there's something I'd like to confirm," Cesar began a little more seriously.

"What is it?" questioned Agnes.

Perhaps Cesar was wondering about the mushrooms as well. Agnes didn't really have any answers to give. Perhaps the resident fungi expert could explain.

But Cesar and Armand exchanged glances, as if they were having trouble proceeding with the conversation. What could they be having difficulty discussing relating to mushrooms? Maybe they were going to ask Claude to hand over some of his precious mushrooms? No, no way would they ask that.

"Philip was causing a ruckus, claiming that he is the one Agnes truly loves... So, we had to restrain him," Armand stated, albeit timidly.

"...You're not...not seriously asking Agnes to confirm whether or not it's Philip she loves, are you?" Claude asked incredulously, his voice dangerously low and his smile fixed.

This is what's known as a landmine. Armand seemed to sense this as well, and shook his head in a panic.

"N-No, even I can tell that's not true."

"Obviously."

Though Claude's voice was still cold, the menacing aura seemed to have lifted for the time being. Armand exhaled, looking exhausted, and Cesar patted him encouragingly on the shoulder.

"...See, that's why I warned you to choose your words carefully," Cesar admonished gently.

"I was just relaying what happened?!"

"A Crest Bearer's Dragonmate is his moon and stars. If he sees you as an enemy, he will not show mercy."

“What a hassle...” Armand grouched.

Seeing two Dragonmate-less royals nodding in solidarity with one another was kind of heartwarming. All the same, there were bigger concerns just then.

“That waste of human skin. Still saying things like that, without any remorse,” Agnes spat out, much to everyone’s surprise.

“I never expected words like that to come out of your mouth, Agnes.” Claude grinned, looking stunned.

True, Agnes had rarely voiced such strong opinions aloud before.

“Well, it’s impossible trying to reason with that reprobate. I love Claude, and don’t care a speck for Philip! ...Oh.” Agnes clammed up when she suddenly realized what she’d just done—she said “I love Claude” in front of his brother and uncle. How embarrassing! “Er, I mean— That’s not what I meant. Although it technically is, I—”

Agnes stumbled over her words trying to take back what she’d said without actually taking it back. Her cheeks felt like they were on fire.

Claude hugged Agnes as she turned away, as if to help shield her from view. Like this, no one could see how much she was blushing. But the hug somehow made things even more embarrassing.

“I love you too, Agnes,” Claude crooned above her head, and made a smoochy sound as he kissed the top of her head. In Claude’s arms, Agnes grew redder still.

“Claude! We’re in public!”

“Indeed, we are. Shall we show them all who you really belong to, Agnes?”

Oh, yikes. Agnes wasn’t sure what triggered it, but Claude had gone into full-on lover-boy mode. As she squirmed, trying to escape his embrace, she heard Cesar sigh.

“Surely, he’s seen this, too. I wonder what sort of possible thought process could have led Philip to any other conclusion.”

“Maybe he’s in denial,” Armand speculated. “He wasn’t executed for his crime on account of his ties to the family. Perhaps he misunderstood and

thought that Lady Agnes pleaded his case. Good grief, he's got a sunny outlook on things, doesn't he?"

Cesar and Armand were hypothesizing away. *Never mind that, rein Claude in*, Agnes wanted to say.

"He's got the obsessive nature of one with dragon blood, to be sure. But if he keeps this up, Claude is liable to explode," Cesar predicted.

As Agnes managed to get her head free from Claude's chest, she saw Armand nodding, an odd look on his face.

"That would be troublesome, indeed. ...Claude, Lady Agnes?"

"Yes?"

Armand gave them both a loaded grin, and stated, "I have a suggestion."



WHEN Agnes and the others returned to the house, they found Philip in the garden. To be more precise, he was sitting on the lawn with his arms bound, cursing at the knight who seemed to be guarding him.

"Like I said, untie me at once! I'm royalty!"

The knight's eyes were cold as he looked at Philip, who was bleating away pathetically, as he responded, "I heard you were stripped of your royal title. Now you're the Earl of Doran."

Philip, faced with this irrefutable fact, only grunted, clearly embarrassed.

"Furthermore, since you're here in the Walled City as part of your punishment, I have been informed that your position is the same as that of any regular knight."

Still, the knight was being quite polite, even if he and Philip were technically of the same status. It wasn't clear if this was registering with Philip, though.

"Rubbish! I am NOT a knight!" he continued to argue. "Agnes?!"

Spotting her, Philip stopped arguing, got to his feet, and started trying to run over to her. Agnes was grateful that the knight grabbed Philip's arm so that he didn't get any closer to her.

“Agnes! Tell them to unbind me at once! Listen—”

As if to interrupt Philip, a star-shaped *Chorioactis* appeared with a loud pop on his shoulder. It was black on the outside but orange on the inside, making it quite noticeable. Next to it, a *Leucocoprinus fragilissimus* also appeared, flourishing its translucent white cap covered in radiating lemon-colored striations. Philip, covered in mushrooms and facing Claude’s icy glare, let out a pitiful shriek.

“Claude and Lady Agnes have rebuilt the grid over the hole in the wall. Thanks to their efforts, the threat level has been lowered, and the observation system reevaluated,” Armand explained, with Philip glancing at Agnes all the while.

He’s not listening, Agnes thought. With a death glare from Cesar, Philip straightened up in an instant.

“Although I have recovered, I do have some lingering health issues. So, I believe I will install Armand here as acting lord,” Cesar said.

Agnes knew that the Walled City was a royal territory and that Cesar was its current acting lord, but the original plan was for Claude to take over on account of the duke’s health. It came as a surprise to Agnes that he would name the crestless Armand as his successor instead.

Cesar smiled at Agnes and the others before returning his attention to Philip, stating, “The workload of the knights will be lessened considerably. In fact, we’re thinking of giving them some time off. You being here is meaningless, since you’d be of no use anyway. It’d be a waste of manpower. I was thinking of ending your punishment early. In which case, what’s your next move?”

“What do you mean?” Philip responded. “I’ll go home, of course, Your Grace. I’m the Earl of Doran. Soon, I’ll be the new Marquis of Barthet.”

Your Grace... So, he could be polite to Cesar, it seemed. Philip seemed to have cheered up over the news his punishment was over. Agnes was so sick of Philip by now that she found herself nitpicking his style of speech.

“When the current marquis dies, the region of Barthet will revert to a royal jurisdiction,” Claude interjected.

“What?! That’s stupid!” Philip screamed in frustration over Claude’s calm

explanation.

“You, the son-in-law of the current marquis, were supposed to be his successor. But you committed an act of treason by attempting to sell a fiancée of the royal family to another country,” recounted Claude. “I feel bad for the marquis. His whole family could have been executed as traitors. Instead, their land will simply revert to us. It’s a testament to the marquis’s willingness to cooperate and make amends.”

“That wasn’t my fault...”

Was Philip seriously still sticking to that excuse? Agnes shot him a death glare, and Philip shut his mouth.

“Naturally, your title of Earl of Doran has also been revoked. You have served, essentially, as a knight here. But without territory of your own, you’ll have to work from now on if you want to support your wife,” Claude stated.

“A-A knight?!”

“Incidentally, your wife has submitted multiple requests for a divorce. The king has rejected them and said he will never see those papers signed,” continued Claude.

“No... She wouldn’t... Sabina...”

Agnes felt a twinge of pity for Philip, on the verge of being discarded by his wife, his supposed “soulmate”—even though she was the one he’d ditched Agnes for. Still, considering what Philip had done, this was only a natural progression of events. Anyway, it was all his own fault.

“You have two choices, Philip. The first is to go off and try to make a living on your own somehow. The other is to work here, as one of my knights,” interjected Armand.

“Your royal blood may come in handy, and if you reflect on your deeds and agree to work hard, you’ll be able to make a life for yourself in this city. If you work very hard, you might even work your way up to acting lord one day,” continued Claude.

Both proposals here were very kind. If Philip was willing to work, he wouldn’t

starve or go destitute. Basically, they were offering him a steady job and security.

Philip had been on the brink of being formally executed for his crime. This was actually an extremely kind gesture from the royal family. But Philip didn't seem to appreciate or acknowledge that. He turned pale, and began to tremble.

"Is that... Agnes, is that what you want?! You should help me!" Philip demanded.

Agnes heard everyone else suck in their breath in shock. Ciel, now in his kitten form, also growled protectively.

At that moment, a small, star-shaped *Sphaeroborus stellatus* grew on Philip's arm, echoing with a loud pop as if in agreement and sprayed black viscous spheres onto his pink-stained clothes, which were gradually taking on a black polka dot pattern. A familiar ocher-brown *Clitocybe acromelalga* had also appeared on the tip of Philip's nose, causing him to let out a loud scream.

Well, there was only one thing left for Agnes to do here. She shot Armand a look before she took a deep breath and not only grabbed hold of Claude's arm, but wrapped both of hers around it, snuggled, and looked adoringly up at him.

"Claude, darling. Let's leave this riff-raff and go and have some tea," she crooned in an adoring tone. Modeling this performance after Sabina's simpering, she reverted to her casual speech.

"I'd love to spend some alone time with you, too. But I have to clean up a few things here. Can you wait a little longer, love?" Claude beamed, stroking Agnes's cheek, even as she stood there with her heart pounding.

"Oh, but I want you all to myself, see," she insisted, gazing up at him with what she hoped were hearts in her eyes.

Was this flirting? Agnes felt like this was what flirting was. She wasn't sure if she was doing it right or not. Her embarrassment was so evident, she felt like her face was on fire.

"And I want you all to myself, darling Agnes. My heart's greatest treasure." Claude's honeyed words and melting gaze sent shivers down Agnes's spine, but she managed to keep her simpering smile intact.

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear you say that, dearest. Hold me?” She reached for Claude’s hand where it stroked her cheek, trembling with utter shame.

“Of course,” he responded, kissing her fingertips.

She swallowed back a scream, and was rather impressed with herself. At this rate, death from embarrassment seemed imminent.

A loud pop interrupted the two, as if announcing that Agnes had reached her limit. The white, potato-like Hungarian Sweet Truffle, had grown like a big earring on Claude’s earlobe, making it a little distracting.



“A-Agnes...?” Philip bleated, but Agnes only gave him a cold look of triumph.

“Don’t talk to me, you waste of air. I only want to hear the sweet sound of my beloved Claude’s voice.” She’d gone over that line many times in her head, but actually saying it out loud made her want to die of embarrassment.

“Oh, Agnes. I’m going to make sure you’re a satisfied woman,” Claude breathed, sounding delighted, and kissed Agnes on the forehead. She hadn’t been expecting that, so she had to roll with it somehow.

“B-But...” Philip, looking lost in despair, allowed himself to be led out of the garden by the guard knight.

The moment he disappeared from sight, Agnes squirmed free of Claude and let out a gasping breath.

“Th-That was so shameful...! Oh, I’m so embarrassed, I can’t stop shaking!”

She knew she was red in the face, and her hands were trembling. Obviously, it had been a fake performance. How could Philip not see through it? On the contrary, it seemed to have worked like a charm.

“Are you sure that was all necessary?” she asked.

Armand nodded, smiling with satisfaction at his idea. “He misinterpreted your shyness around Claude as a sign you weren’t truly in love with him. He needed to see your devotion to Claude in order to accept it.”

“Seriously?”

That made sense. Kinda. Maybe.

“Oh, you’re done? Maybe we should practice more. For the next time we encounter Philip?” Claude teased, grabbing Agnes’s trembling hand and placing his lips against the back of it.

“I-I think that’s enough!” she rejected.

“Oh, drat...”

“Well, you two can flirt as much as you like after this,” Armand said. “I won’t be able to make it to the wedding, but I’ll wish you both every happiness now.”

Armand was Claude’s older brother. He wasn’t coming to the wedding?

Cesar, however, had a different sentiment as he rolled his eyes and said, “Stop being so stubborn. The grid has been reinforced. We have good knights in place. You should come to the wedding, Armand.”

“Nah. Someone has to be around to keep an eye on Philip. Make sure he gets to work as he should.”

Everyone had to agree with that; Philip was not to be trusted.

The mushroom spirits, however, had other sentiments as well, as a chorus of loud pops announced the arrival of new mushrooms on the garden lawn.

With its characteristic big warts, the white *Amanita cokeri* grew alongside a *Podostroma cornudamae*—another poisonous red and white mushroom. The deer antler-shaped mushroom can poison a person just by touching them. Seeing as it sprouted on the ground, maybe this indicated they were being considerate.

However, their sudden appearance must signify...

“Um... It seems some surveillance mushrooms have sprouted,” Agnes said.

“Rawr!”

“They’re saying... Leave things here to us,” Claude interpreted.

Armand blinked a few times, looking at the “surveillance mushrooms,” and at Claude, interpreter of the sacred beast’s tiny roar. He grinned and threw up his hands.

“Then, I’ll come to the wedding, Mushroom Princess. To celebrate your union with my...mushroom-brained little brother.”



Mushrooms of the Day

Cryptoporus volvatus

It grows on tree trunks and looks like a snail. The bottom part is cream-colored and the top part is a glossy brown. It looks like a chestnut stuck in the tree bark. The name makes it sound yummy, and it definitely looks yummy, but apparently it doesn't taste good.

A shrewd mushroom that wants to be stroked every chance it gets. It sprouted thinking, "Now's my chance to be praised and stroked!" But when it found itself plucked by two Crest Bearers, it decided to show off to the general assembly instead.

Chorioactis

A mushroom that starts as a spherical shape and opens into a star shape, blackish brown on the outside and orange on the inside. A super rare mushroom that is an endangered species. It is also called the “Devil’s Cigar” because of the way spores spew out like white smoke from the cracks.

Philip was acting way too overly familiar with Agnes, so it sprouted to spurt angry spores.

Leucocoprinus fragilissimus

This semi-transparent white mushroom radiating with lemon-colored stripes looks exactly like a Japanese umbrella. The elongated handle is hollow, and the cap is incredibly thin. It's known as one of the most fragile of mushrooms. A non-touchable mushroom that breaks even if you poke it with your finger or if the wind blows on it. It's good friends with *Entoloma virescens* and *Podoserpula miranda*, which both also quickly disintegrate.

"Don't touch Agnes!" it sprouted to warn Philip.

Sphaeroborus stellatus

When ripe, this mushroom's outer skin splits into 6 to 10 pieces in a star shape, and it expels black sticky balls about 1 millimeter in size. Although it has a small body the size of about 1 centimeter, it has a range of a few meters and is quite aggressive. Its sticky balls can't be washed away easily with mere water.

It sprayed sticky spheres on Philip's clothes and succeeded in giving him a polka-dot makeover.

Clitocybe acromelalga

Yellow with an indented cap. A poisonous mushroom; it's vicious. Once it enters the body, it lays dormant for 4 to 5 days. After that, it attacks the fingers, toes, and penis of the victim and causes excruciating pain for a month or more. Why does it target the penis? No one knows.

"Do you want the penis pain punishment?" it threatened Philip. A brave mushroom. It's willing to sprout a kamikaze mouth attack if the situation calls for it.

Hungarian Sweet Truffle

It looks like a white potato, but it's a truffle that's as sweet as saccharin. It's often eaten as is as a dessert. Boasting a unique sweetness in the mushroom world, it is still sweet even when dried.

Agnes's unexpected sweetness took it by surprise, making it realize it was in danger of losing its status as the sweetest one.

Amanita cokeri

A white mushroom with big warty bits and a flaky stalk. It looks kind of like an all-white *Amanita muscaria*. Nobody knows if it's poisonous or edible, but I wouldn't want to take a bite and find out! A surveillance mushroom that is worried about Agnes's personal and psychological state.

"I'll call the troops! Leave it to me!" it called, filled with enthusiasm.

Podostroma cornudamae

It looks like bright, burning red fingers reaching from the ground. Only a few grams can be a lethal dose, and even touching it is not advised. It's a really poisonous mushroom. An important figure in the poisonous mushroom world who previously burned away the hair roots of both Philip and the King of Oseille.

"If the hair punishment wasn't enough, next time I'll take your eyebrows!" it cried, aiming to punish Philip.

Chapter 13: A Mushroomy Wedding

IT was finally time for the wedding.

Agnes was in the waiting room of the cathedral, dressed in pure white. She stroked Ciel beside her and sat dreamily in a chair, gazing out the window.

First, she was engaged to Philip, who called it off. Then she met a mushroom fanatic...so much had happened since then. Just thinking about it all was making her emotional.

A knock disrupted her reverie, and Benoit entered the room. He took one look at her and began to weep, stammering out, "Oh, Agnes. You look so beautiful. I wish Josse and Elise could see this..." between breaths.

Kevin followed close behind and rolled his eyes at the sight. Even Therese wore an amused smile. "Dad, it's too soon for the waterworks. The wedding hasn't even started yet."

As if agreeing with Kevin, several mushrooms popped into existence. The peach-colored *Russula violeipes* provided a hint of pale pink on Benoit's white suit as the yellow-brown spherical *Calostoma japonica* gave a splash of reddish-orange with its star-shaped hole on its cap.

Kevin plucked the new guests off Benoit's arm. Was he...planning to give those to Claude?

"B-But Agnes looks so beautiful."

"Oh, for crying out loud." Kevin reluctantly whipped out his handkerchief and started dabbing at Benoit's weeping face.

"Oh, Father, please calm down," Agnes said. "Look, look. The lacework is all mushroom-themed. It would be embarrassing to cry over me in a dress like this, right?"

Even her gown's more cringe-worthy details didn't stop his tears.

“With you looking this beautiful, Agnes, who cares if things are mushroom-themed?” Benoit wept.

“Goodness...”

Crying was all well and good, but Agnes was concerned about how Benoit would get through the ceremony at this rate.

“Woah, she wasn’t kidding. I didn’t notice at first since it’s all white, but there *are* mushrooms. Amazing,” acknowledged Kevin, fiddling with the lacework and looking impressed.

It was amazing, all right. No doubt the manpower and expense that went into making the dress was considerable. It was the design choice itself that was questionable.

“Wait, what?! All the accessories are mushroom-themed, too! I’ve never seen bridal mushrooms before. And you’re all mushed out too, Ciel,” continued Kevin.

Ciel had a blue ribbon tied around his neck, fastened with a pink mushroom brooch.

“Rawr,” he cried out proudly, but Agnes sighed.

“I wasn’t able to stop him with my powers. The mushroom influence is too strong...” she lamented.

“I doubt anything could stop the prince from loving mushrooms. At least he reined himself in with the all-white dress, though.”

Agnes had to agree with her brother. In her worst nightmares, she’d thought about the possibility of a red and white polka dot dress. As long as it was all-white, it was fine with her.

“You know, I can feel my own prejudices against mushrooms lowering,” she admitted.

“Well, it’s your mushrooms that make you part of the whole package. Why not embrace being Mrs. Mushroom?” Kevin teased.

Mrs. Mushroom. AKA the Mushroom Princess. AKA the Queen of Mushrooms. Maybe there was to be no escaping mushrooms in the life of Agnes.

“Oh, right. I can’t keep Ciel with me during the ceremony, so will you take care of him?” Agnes picked up Ciel and handed him to Therese when a sky-blue *Entoloma virescens* appeared next to the brooch with a popping sound.

“Oh, what a cute mushroom. It suits you, Ciel.”

“Rawr!” Ciel preened as Therese stroked his soft fur.

“I won’t be able to enter the cathedral, but I will happily be able to attend the post-wedding party with the rest of the guests. I’ll keep Ciel safe until then,” Therese said.

A normal wedding might have been different, but this was a royal occasion. Prince Claude was second in line to the throne. As expected, the church was to be filled with the country’s major aristocrats, and there would be no way to get a seat for Therese.

Agnes felt a little sad, but she was grateful that Claude had arranged it so Therese could attend the reception.

“Now then, Ciel. Be a good boy, okay?” she stressed.

“Rawr!”

Benoit seemed to have recovered from his tears, and Kevin handed him a fresh handkerchief with a grin.

“Wel then, it’s time. Come on, Sis.”



THE cathedral’s large white entrance door was covered in a delicate gold carving—beautiful but understated. Sophisticated. It made Agnes feel even more nervous, somehow. Beyond that door waited many guests of noble and royal backgrounds. The entire wedding ceremony was about to take place there.

The formalities weren’t too complex, and Claude promised he would lead her through it. Nonetheless, Agnes found she couldn’t control her nerves.

She sighed, as she’d been doing all morning, and Benoit gently patted her shoulder.

“I have faith in Prince Claude. But if anything happens, know that you can come home whenever you want to.”

“Can I come by anytime I like, just to visit?”

“Of course. Agnes, I’ve said it many times before, but I’m so glad you lived through that terrible accident and became my precious daughter. All I want is for you to be blissfully happy.”

Through her veil, Agnes could barely make out his eyes, so swollen were they from crying. She felt her heart constrict, and tears welled up in her own eyes.

Benoit had always protected Agnes and showered her with love. Sometimes, Agnes hadn’t been the best daughter. Just the same, he had never turned his back on her: he had always been her biggest support.

I love you, Father. Thank you, Father. Those words weren’t enough. Instead, Agnes smiled, showing Benoit that, yes, she was truly happy.

“...Okay.”

“Lady Agnes, it’s time,” the waiting priest said softly and opened the door.

As Agnes stepped forward, clutching her bouquet, she caught a glimpse of a high ceiling and sparkling stained glass. There stood Claude by the altar. Benoit would escort Agnes down the aisle. Most of the guests were nobles Agnes didn’t know, but she could spot Armand, Cesar, Gerome, the king and queen, Xavier and Zenaide, and Charles.

It wasn’t all that far to walk, but all those eyes on her made it seem like an eternity. She kept her eyes lowered, and that was when she noticed something odd about the bouquet she held. The pure white lilies were beautiful, but there was something stuck between them that clearly wasn’t a flower—what resembled thin, white membranes stacked on top of each other was a *Tremella fuciformis*.

That mushroom pervert just couldn’t resist sneaking them into the bouquet.

As long as it’s white, it’s all right. Those words came back to Agnes, and she almost chuckled out loud. When they finally arrived in front of the altar, Benoit gave Agnes’s hand to Claude.

“Your Highness. Please take care of my Agnes.”

“I will. I swear I will make her very happy.”

These were mere words of formality, Agnes knew that, but the thought of leaving Benoit’s protection and starting a whole new life with Claude was sort of...bittersweet.

Benoit stepped back, and Claude and Agnes turned to face the altar and the priest.

The colorful light from the stained-glass windows fell in sheets into the cathedral. It was so overwhelmingly beautiful, like something out of a dream.

“Claude Visage. Do you vow to follow the customs of the Dragon Royal Family and love Agnes Lefort as your lifelong partner?” spoke the priest, reciting the vows in a melodic voice.

“I do,” Claude responded in kind.

The whole thing felt sort of...holy.

Claude was dazzling, looking resplendently like a royal prince.

“Agnes Lefort. Do you swear to join the Dragon Royal Family and love Claude Visage as your lifelong partner?”

Yikes. Don’t freak out in the middle of the wedding, Agnes. This is no time for blushes.

“I...”

But before she could say “do,” there was a series of loud echoing pops throughout the cathedral. A black funnel-shaped *Craterellus cornucopioides* and a red funnel-shaped *Gomphus fluccosus* had sprouted on the holy book the priest clutched. The worst possible time and place for mushrooms to sprout!

Agnes screamed internally as Claude swiftly plucked the mushrooms and slotted them into her bouquet. The bouquet—now with white, black, and red mushrooms dispersed between the lilies—instantly transformed into a bright, attractive arrangement.

“My beloved. Do you vow yourself to me?” Claude gave her a soft, confident

smile.

He was so assured. Of course. He was a royal.

It was true that the only people in attendance who could even see the mushrooms were those in the front row. Just the royals and relatives. They either wouldn't balk at a mushroom or two, or—knowing about Claude's proclivities—would almost be expecting it.

So then...what was the problem?

Taking shallow breaths to calm herself down, Agnes nodded slowly.

"I do."

The priest, taken aback by having mushrooms sprout right in front of him, was distracted by the bouquet for a moment. He smiled as he regained composure once more.

"As the representative of the voice of the dragon, I have heard their vows. Now, as proof of their devotion, we move to the exchange of rings and the sacred kiss."



Claude slid the engagement and wedding rings onto Agnes's finger. The rings were mushroom-themed as well, but they were so small and delicate. Hard to see, really—Agnes decided they didn't fully count. In turn, Agnes slipped Claude's ring onto his gloved finger shakily. For a brief moment, she thought she saw a fungi motif on his ring as well.

Still thinking about mushrooms, Agnes blinked as her vision grew clearer. Claude had just lifted her veil. Seeing Claude clearly, in his fancy attire, was sort of exciting.

Normally Agnes was able to sort of work around his dashing handsomeness, since he was such a mushroom dork, but with him gazing deep into her eyes like this, she felt fixated.

"Agnes. I love you," he said as his eyes sparkled in the stained-glass light. His smile made Agnes smile too.

"Yes. I love you, too."

Claude smiled again and stroked her cheek as their lips met.



THE royal palace ballroom sparkled with chandeliers and was filled with guests in gorgeous attire. Right after the wedding ceremony, the party began. As one might expect from a royal wedding, no expense had been spared.

Just being there was exhausting, and tonight, Agnes was one of the main stars. She felt like she was going to collapse as she greeted guest after guest, but she had to do her best—for Claude.

"Finally, the wedding happened. Now we can relax a little. And Armand seems to have changed his tune completely. Wonderful, all just wonderful," Gerome exclaimed as he wandered up, beaming and clutching a glass of wine.

Cesar and Armand stood behind him, looking like they were trying to avoid mingling too much with the aristocrats at the venue.

Agnes was just glad she didn't need to worry about mushrooms around the royals. With that, a Koganetake appeared on the wine glass with a loud pop. Golden dust puffed out from the cap, falling into the wine. Wearing a bemused

smile, Gerome handed the glass off to a passing servant.

“I apologize for my misdeeds, Gerome,” Armand said.

“How was the Walled City? Tough going?” Gerome asked, looking intoxicated, poking the repentant Armand with his elbow. Maybe having too much wine was how Gerome expressed joy.

“It wasn’t the city; it was the hole and the things that emerged that were tough. But let’s not go there,” uttered Armand, looking pale.

Had he been bitten by a monster like Philip? Although he was clearly fine, that would have had to hurt. Being on the frontline of where the monsters spilled forth from the hole must have been like torture.

“Before I forget, Armand, about making you the acting lord of the Walled City...” Gerome said slowly as he glanced at Cesar, who nodded.

“The king has given his permission already. The acting lord had been appointed. He’s a smart boy. He’ll be better at administrative matters than I would be, anyway,” Cesar boasted as he snagged two wine glasses from a passing servant and handed one to Gerome.

“What about Philip?”

“We’ve appointed him as a knight with a view to becoming acting lord one day if he gets himself together. More accurately, he’s an apprentice knight right now. We have no use for him except as a monster decoy.”

Gerome sipped his wine as he listened to Cesar, then sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Well, it’s his own fault. If he’d behaved himself, then the position of Count Lefort would’ve... But never mind. Pretend I didn’t say anything,” he cut off. Red-faced, Gerome slurped down the rest of his wine, feigning nonchalance.

Indeed, if there had been no uproar over the engagement, Philip would have married Agnes and become the heir apparent to Count Lefort. If he hadn’t sold Agnes to the Kingdom of Oreille to cover his own debts, he’d have been assured the position of Count Doran and, eventually, the Marquis of Barthet.

But Philip had destroyed both of those golden opportunities out of his own

stupid actions.

“It’s okay. Philip is a fool, and his treatment of Agnes is unforgivable,” grimaced Claude. “But I’m grateful to him. Without him, I might never have met Agnes. Let’s see if the Walled City can’t knock some sense into him.”

There was a popping sound, and a brownish *Ganoderma applanatum* with grooves like tree rings appeared on Claude’s arm. He smiled as he plucked it, but there was something scary about that smile.

“...You haven’t forgiven him at all,” Armand noticed. “Well, anyway, I agree that Philip needs to start over from zero. The way he is now, he’ll never be of any use to anyone.”

If Armand said so, then Philip really must be useless. It seemed doubtful that he would ever even be able to become a full-fledged knight, let alone an acting lord.

“Tsk, Crest Bearers with Dragonmates can’t be reasoned with. Sorry about him, Agnes,” said Cesar, a Crest Bearer who didn’t have a Dragonmate of his own. He was a sensible sort. As such, he seemed to want to apologize for the antics of Claude—a Crest Bearer who DID have a Dragonmate.

Agnes felt a little sorry for Cesar. She hoped Claude would rein it in a little.

“It’s okay. No actual harm has come to me. Right now, I— Oh!” Agnes gasped a little as several familiar figures approached.

It was Kevin, Benoit, and Therese holding Ciel in her arms. They greeted the royals with bows.

“Sorry to interrupt, Lady Agnes,” Therese said. “I just thought I should hand Ciel back over to you.”

From that night, Agnes would be living at the Aznavour residence and not the Lefort residence anymore. She had forgotten she needed to collect Ciel before leaving.

Agnes took Ciel back from Therese, noticing that the mushrooms that had grown on him before the ceremony were gone now. No doubt someone plucked them... Wait, did this mean Therese had delivered them to Claude?

Recruiting her maid for mushroom-harvesting duty... That would be a step too far. In that case, Agnes didn't want to know.

"Thank you, Therese. Ciel, have you been good?"

"Rawr," Ciel let out quietly in affirmation.

Suddenly, a sharp sound of breaking glass pierced the air and wine spattered across the floor. Agnes looked around in surprise to see that Cesar was crouched on the floor, head low, having apparently dropped his glass of wine.

"Uncle?!" the princes all reacted with alarm.

Cesar had been doing so well lately. Was he ill?

"Duke Granier, are you all right?!" Agnes asked.

Maybe the spirits could help, but as she tried to rush to Cesar's aid, Therese took hold of her.

"Don't, Lady Agnes. Your splendid dress will be stained. Allow me," Therese placated. She immediately knelt on the floor, held Cesar's trembling hand, and placed her hand on his forehead. "Color...not pale; more flushed. Tremors. Fever may be rising. He must be taken to bed, right away."

After assessing his condition, Therese tried to stand up, but Cesar clung to her hand.

"What's your name?" Cesar spoke to her in a trembling voice. Therese bowed her head politely.

"My apologies. My name is Therese, and I work for Lady Agnes in the Count Lefort household. Please forgive my rudeness, Your Grace. You should lie down and rest."

Therese tried to stand up again, but Cesar still clung to her hand. What was going on? There was no need to get angry over a servant touching him. After all, this was a clear health emergency. Was he angry?

Everyone stood watching, confused, as Cesar clung to her hand. He drew in a deep breath and gazed at Therese.

"I have found you."

“...Excuse me?”

Cesar’s voice was solemn, tremulous with unshed tears. Therese seemed... taken aback. He got to his feet, still holding her hand, and turned to Agnes.

“Agnes. You said before that the treats you brought to my mansion were made by a maid. Did you mean this maid, here?”

“Huh? Y-Yes?” Agnes replied.

“And those cakes that Charles brought too?”

“Therese and I always baked together...so yes, surely.” Agnes had no idea what Cesar was asking her. She then heard Claude suck in a breath.

“Uncle, you’re not saying...”

Cesar nodded, his eyes intense, and folded Therese’s hand in both of his before he proclaimed, “Therese... Marry me.”

“Whaaat?!”

As everyone gasped in shock, there was a loud pop, and multiple small *Cuphophyllus virgineus* with its milky white caps grew on Cesar’s shoulders. He paid them no mind—he had eyes only for Therese.

“Agnes’s pills were great of course, but those sweets were particularly effective,” he said. “It was all because of you.”

“Er...?” Therese was a veteran maid, but this situation seemed to be beyond her. She just looked confused. “Effective? You mean, the improvement in your condition? But...”

Agnes’s pills were made using spirit power. Other than that, there was only one thing that seemed to improve the physical condition of Dragon Crest Bearers!

“No way!” Agnes could scarcely believe it. She looked at Claude, who also looked shocked, but he nodded emphatically.

“Therese is Duke Granier’s...?”

The princes seemed to have reached the same conclusion as Agnes and Claude, and both muttered, “No way...”

Duke Granier had broken a glass, fallen to his knees, and proposed marriage to what seemed to be a servant woman. The nearby nobles were looking on with curiosity and whispered amongst themselves.

Claude quickly put his hand on Cesar's shoulder and said, "It's crowded here, Uncle. Let's go somewhere quieter."

Cesar gave Therese a reluctant glance, but allowed Claude to lead him away. He must have realized that he couldn't continue talking about this in front of the assembled aristocracy.

"Therese, please come too," Agnes whispered to Therese, realizing something important: Benoit and Kevin didn't know about Dragonmates.

A duke proposing to a maid didn't make any sense, but Agnes wasn't sure how to explain.

"This way, please, Count Lefort and Lord Kevin. I have something to tell you," Armand whispered lowly.

All right. Agnes would leave this in his capable hands. Silently grateful to her brother-in-law, Agnes took Therese and led her out of the ballroom.



Mushrooms of the Day

Russula violeipes

A white to cream-colored mushroom with a bright red splash on the cap, resembling a peach. The Japanese name, *Keshouhatsu*, means “made-up mushroom” because of the lightly colored cap. When it grows up, it’s shaped like a cup. When it’s young, it really looks like a peach. Although it smells like a beetle, it’s edible. A mushroom of contrasts.

It’s a member of the “Make-Up Club” and came to check out Agnes’s bridal look.

Calostoma japonica

The cap part is a yellowish sphere, with a red star-shaped growth on top. It looks like a takoyaki, a deep-fried octopus ball with a hole in the top, stuffed with red beni shōga pickled ginger. The Japanese name includes the word “lipstick,” and it does look like lipstick! It liked Agnes’s lip color, but wanted to suggest a different shade.

Entoloma virescens

A mushroom with little, sky-blue caps. It's unknown if it's poisonous. When damaged, it turns yellow. A fragile mushroom. It took a shine to Ciel's fur, and decided to join the cat and wait for Agnes together.

Tremella fuciformis

An edible mushroom with layers of thin white membrane. It looks like it's made of gelatin, but when you dry it out it turns yellowish-white and hard. You can reconstitute it with water though. It's odorless and tasteless, but quite toothsome, so it fetches a good price. It sprouted in the bouquet with extra gelatin for that special-occasion sheen.

Craterellus cornucopioides

A black, funnel-shaped mushroom, resembling a trumpet. Also known as the “Trumpet of Death,” it’s apparently eaten often in Europe. Goes well in a soup. ...So why the scary name, then? It sprouted in high spirits, planning on performing a congratulatory fanfare, but it seems it may have misjudged the timing.

Gomphus fluccosus

A poisonous red mushroom that resembles a trumpet. It causes gastrointestinal poisoning, but doesn't have any taste...someone must have tried eating this one. When it realized that it makes no sound despite being trumpet-shaped, due to it being a mushroom, it still couldn't give up. It tried to trumpet anyway. It's still training.

It felt nervous when it sprouted on the holy book to find all eyes on it, but it ended up in the bouquet and tried its best to make rustling sounds.

Koganetake

A mushroom with a cap covered in golden powder, also known as Kinako Take in Japanese. It's covered in plenty of powder, like kinako powder. It's edible, but eating it raw will cause poisoning, so please boil it first. How do the mushroom braves know to do that?

It sprouted on this auspicious occasion to sprinkle some gold dust.

Ganoderma applanatum

Gray or whitish brown cap with age rings like a tree. It grows year by year, and large ones can reach 50 centimeters. It's durable enough not to fall apart even if you sit on it, so it's more suitable as a piece of furniture than as a mushroom. A member of the Wood Deterioration Club. If you scratch a message into the back of the cap while it's growing, it won't disappear, and if you polish it, it will shine like an ornament. Maybe it really is furniture...

When it heard talk of knocking sense into Philip, it sprouted crying, "I'll get him right in the mycelium! I'll knock the spores right outta him!" But sadly, a mushroom can't do much, and Philip doesn't have any mycelium or spores anyway.

Cuphophyllus virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom. It's easy to eat and goes well in vinegared dishes or in a sauce. It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

"Oh, it's a surprise love event!" it cried, trembling with excitement at the hint of new love.

Chapter 14: Crest Bearers with Dragonmates Are a Pain

IN a room decorated with magnificent sofas and tables, a group of hurried royals, a servant, and a sacred beast filed in one by one. Sounds from the reception in the nearby palace ballroom ceased as the door closed.

Claude and Gerome sat on either side of Cesar on one sofa, and Agnes and Therese sat on the other, with Ciel nestled in between. Normally, servants would prepare and serve tea, but this was not the time—answers were needed.

“I-I’m sorry to surprise you so suddenly,” announced Cesar calmly as he bowed to Therese.

Usually, it would be unthinkable for a duke to propose marriage to a servant. Or even apologize to her reverently.

Therese was stunned, her eyes fixed on the man in front of her. “Um, it’s all right... But I think you’re perhaps in some sort of delirium. You had better lie down... Even if it’s just here, on the sofa.”

“My thinking is clear. In fact, I’ve never been more clear-headed in my life. Please, marry me!” The duke’s voice grew louder and more emphatic, and Therese blinked and trembled.

“It’s too sudden. You’re frightening the poor girl,” Gerome said, patting Cesar’s back soothingly, who was usually so calm. Agnes was taken aback by his sudden, frantic demeanor.

“I suppose it’s obvious by this point, but just to clarify... You’re saying that this woman is your Dragonmate, Uncle?” Claude questioned, to which Cesar nodded emphatically.

“Right. There can be no doubt. The cakes Agnes brought had a magical effect on me. I knew it wasn’t just the spirits; it had to be Dragonmate power.”

“Then...the crest has...?” Claude prompted.

“Oh right,” Cesar blinked, quickly stripping off his gloves. “I forgot to check.”

As the gloves came off his shaking hands, everyone could see the black birthmark on the back of his left hand, the same as Claude's, was tinged with red.

"Yes, I knew it... Ah, I had almost given up hope. To find you now, here, of all places..." Cesar's eyes filled with tears as he squeezed his gloves in his hands.

Currently, there were four Dragon Crest Bearers. Cesar, the only one who didn't have a Dragonmate, waited for so many years. After not being able to find her, he had given up, accepted his weakness, and prepared for death. Agnes felt her own eyes well. Finally, he had found her...

"Judging from my uncle's reaction and the look of the crest, there can be no doubt about it," exclaimed Claude, whose eyes were filled with joy as he looked at his uncle's crest changing color.

It was clear he was delighted for his uncle. As a Dragon Crest Bearer who had some experience of that same weakening, Claude probably knew better than anyone present what his uncle had been going through.

"Um...did I do something wrong?" Therese was the only one who didn't understand what was going on. No wonder she was frightened, being suddenly ushered into a room of royals like this.

"Therese, please listen to me as I explain," Agnes began, squeezing Therese's hands and holding her gaze. "The royal family has dragon blood, and the proof of that is this birthmark, the Dragon Crest. When they meet their Dragonmate, that birthmark turns red. You are Duke Granier's Dragonmate, his soulmate, in other words."

Agnes thought she'd summed it up succinctly. Therese, however, looked around anxiously at those present and sighed.

"Lady Agnes... I'm happy to see that you've become more playful, but you can't go roping members of royalty into your girlish pranks," Therese spoke kindly, like she was scolding a small child for naughty behavior.

Ah. Oh well.

"Oh, I understand completely how you feel," Agnes said. "You don't have a clue what's happening, right? It just all seems so out of left field, that it must be

a joke, right? I'm right there with you. I completely get it!"

"You get it...?" Claude paused, sucked in a breath, then hung his head in despair.

"Argh! That's not what I'm saying! I mean, I am, but—" Agnes stammered. She had found Claude's sudden proposal impossible to accept at first, too, but that was because she was still shocked from being dumped by Philip. And by Claude's obvious mushroom fetish. Still, he looked so frazzled that Agnes felt a bit sorry.

"Claude, don't confuse the matter even more..." Gerome interjected. "Um, Therese, was it?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Gerome! Don't speak to my beloved so casually!" Cesar shouted.

"Oh, be quiet, Dragonmater! Claude, rein him in."

Taking his cue from Gerome, Claude clapped his hand over Cesar's mouth. Cesar did not protest. Clearly, he understood how tense the situation was. Even so, to have his Dragonmate within his grasp who didn't understand or even agree to marry him—he was clearly frantic.

"What Agnes said is true," Gerome explained gently. "But it's not as romantic as just being someone's soulmate. Being a Dragonmate means being an object of complete devotion and obsession."

The bare truth had been revealed. Phrased simply like that, the reality of it was slightly sobering to Agnes.

"Are you saying that the duke wants me to be his wife? That he has romantic feelings for me?" Therese asked in disbelief. Gerome nodded, and she shook her head. "Goodness. That's impossible. I'm a commoner, a servant. Besides, I'm too old for marriage, AND I'm plump, AND I'm no beauty like Lady Agnes. I have nothing to offer a duke."

"You're wrong!" Cesar shouted as soon as he shook off Claude's hand. He got on his knees in front of Therese and looked beseechingly at her. His dukedom, his Dragon Crest, his status—they were all counting against him. "Just looking at

you is enough to rend my heart asunder! I don't care about your status or anything else! You're perfect to me, Therese."

The duke continued to gaze into her eyes, completely solemn. If this was a play or story, it would be very romantic. Yet, no matter how much the duke entreated her, a servant like Therese would not be able to suspend her disbelief.

Anyway, Therese wasn't a young, starry-eyed girl; she was a practical, grown woman. She wasn't one to be swept away. At the same time, could she ignore the words of a duke?

"Lady Agnes..." Therese began weakly, turning her sights to the girl whom she had known and served since before they joined the Lefort residence.

"It's all true, Therese," Agnes said. "You're not married, right? Do you have a gentleman friend?"

Even the mere mention of such a thing made Cesar go bright red and start spluttering. Agnes shivered too, seeing the mad look in his eyes.

"Aaah!"

"Uncle, you're frightening Therese."

"I told you! Don't bandy my beloved's name about so casually! But I...I shall control myself."

Agnes suggesting that Therese had a boyfriend, others referring to her by name—such small things, but they whipped the duke into a frenzy. What if Therese had been married? The duke might have gone on a bloody rampage.

What would Claude have done if Agnes had really married Philip? No...the thought was too frightening. Agnes wasn't going there.

"I have always cared for and served Lady Agnes and Lord Kevin as if they were my younger siblings, or even my own children. I have no time for gentleman friends," Therese said.

Oh phew, it looked like bloodshed would be avoided. Everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing as a collective exhale emerged from Claude, Gerome, and Agnes.

“In that case, would you please consider Duke Granier as an option for a moment? If you really aren’t interested, we’ll help you esca— We’ll help in any way we can,” entreated Gerome.

“It’s not that I dislike the duke. He is a fine person. It’s just...”

Cesar’s steely eyes lit up at the compliment. “What is it? If you’re worried about your social status, we’ll make you a noble. If you’re worried about high society, you don’t have to participate. I’ll accommodate any requirements you have.”

The love of a Dragonmate is an intense thing, indeed. Agnes sat there a little alarmed by it—although it wasn’t happening to her this time.

Suddenly, Therese cheered up and proclaimed, “Ah, indeed? My plan was to transfer to the Aznavour residence to continue to wait on Lady Agnes now that she’s married. So, then there’s no issue? I can continue to work as a maid, and perhaps we could get to know one another on a conservative basis?”

Seeing Therese smiling broadly, Cesar completely froze. Get to know one another on a casual basis? That was far removed from a “yes” to his marriage proposal.

Cesar turned slowly, like a rusty, creaking screw, to gaze at Claude before slowly smiling...

Uh-oh. Agnes was getting a bad feeling about this...

“Claude. From now on...you will call me Father.”

“What?!” Claude yelped, and a dark blue mushroom popped up suddenly on his arm. He shook his head hard, and the *Entoloma cyanonigrum*’s cap did as well.

“If I adopt you, Claude, then we can live as one household. Agnes will be there, with Therese! All issues solved,” Cesar determined.

“What? That’s insane! I’m the new Duke of Aznavour! That’s going to be *my* house!” Claude declared.

“How about installing a giant mushroom pillar? One that stretches all the way to the roof of the Granier mansion?” implored Cesar with a smile, unmoved by

Claude's loud protests. "And how about mushrooms on the gateposts? What variety of mushroom do you think would be best? We need something that conveys class, dignity."

Right... The duke *knew* Claude. He knew all about his fungal fanaticism—and he was using it!

"In that case, how about *Eryngii*? It has a rounded and chunky appearance," Claude quickly suggested.

"Claude, please! Don't let him bribe you with mushrooms!" Agnes yelled, erupting an *Eryngii* itself with another loud pop.

After plucking the mushroom with a thick white stalk and a flat brown cap, Claude showed it to Cesar with a happy expression on his face.

"See, something classy like this."

"Hmm, not bad."

It was no good—Cesar had egged Claude on. How terrifying!

"I don't want to live in a mushroom mansion! I shall return to live at the Lefort residence!" Agnes proclaimed exasperatedly.

"Uncle, you plan to force a situation where you and Therese live together? What about her wishes?" interjected Gerome.

"Like I said! Don't bandy about the name of my beloved!"

"Oh, for crying out loud... Dragonmatters are incorrigible!" Gerome ran his hands through his hair, clearly frustrated.

"Prince Gerome," Agnes implored, wishing he'd do more for the situation. This was his uncle, after all. "Please help."

"Sorry, but the only thing that can rein in an out-of-control Dragonmater is his own Dragonmate."

Right, so the only person who could stop Cesar was...

"M-Me?!" Therese blinked in surprise as Agnes and Gerome turned to her.

If Therese didn't do something, Agnes would return home—before she'd even left.

Therese sighed in resignation, turned, and addressed Cesar, “Duke Granier.”

“Oh, call me Cesar.”

Therese flinched a little as he responded with extreme eagerness.

“Then, Lord Cesar... I am Lady Agnes’s maid. This is non-negotiable. I will be working at Duke Aznavour’s residence.”

Cesar crumpled, realizing that cohabiting with Therese was off the table.

“However, no doubt you will come to visit, as you are now Lady Agnes’s relative. On those occasions, I will treat you to cake. Is that okay with you?”

“...I understand. I’m prepared to wait years for you, my beloved Dragonmate. Until then, I’ll do my best to make you understand the depths of my devotion.”

It looked like Cesar had more planned than merely getting to know one another on a casual basis, but Agnes was relieved the situation seemed to be somewhat resolved.

“So, starting tomorrow...” Cesar began sheepishly.

“It would be unreasonable for someone to visit a newlywed on the day after their wedding, right?” Therese reprimanded quickly.

“Y-Yes, of course.”

“The next time I see you will be over a week later, so please take care of yourself until then,” she continued, unperturbed.

“Y-Yes, all right...” uttered Cesar, beaten down and visibly deflated.

It was a little heartbreaking to see such a dignified adult look so small—and Therese also felt the same.

“You poor man,” she said, bending down to smile at Cesar. “...I look forward to seeing you again, Lord Cesar. In one week from now.”

“Right!” Cesar returned brightly with a sparkle in his eye. He was brimming with excitement, like a dog wagging his tail, causing everyone to grin.

“...Surprisingly, things look promising,” Claude observed quietly as he shifted to sit next to Agnes.

“Yes, they do,” Agnes returned.

This was a start in the right direction. Like this, Cesar could keep up his strength—and woo Therese at a sensible pace.

Agnes smiled, filled with joy, as Claude hugged her tightly.



Mushrooms of the Day

Entoloma Cyanonigrum

A deep blue mushroom. It doesn't seem to be poisonous, but it doesn't look very edible because of the color. During an earlier mushroom discussion, it was decided that its color most closely resembled Claude's hair color, so it got designated the blue mushroom representative.

It feels a brotherhood with Claude due to their shared color palette, and it felt excited at the prospect of having a new father. It sprouted to say, "If Cesar is Claude's father, then he is also my father!"

Pleurotus eryngii

A mushroom with a thick white stalk and a flat brown cap. Although it is only farm-grown in Japan, it's a standard edible mushroom overseas. Its unique texture has made it a popular ingredient in Japan as well.

When it was chosen to go on the gateposts of a nobleman's mansion, it decided quickly to consult the *Ganoderma applanatum*. But the advice it received was a bit too hard to understand. Something about "get them in the mycelium and kick the spores out of them." It realized being a furniture mushroom is hard work.

Epilogue

IT was already close to midnight when the carriage arrived at the residence of the new Duke of Aznavour.

After all the hullabaloo with the discovery of Cesar's Dragonmate, things ran behind schedule. Cesar had convinced Therese to have a private chat with him, promising to see her safely home, so Agnes and Claude left. The maid would be returning after her mistress, in a duke's carriage, no less.

It was kind of unbelievable when you thought about it, but Agnes was glad that everything seemed like it was going to work out well. She'd been on her feet all day, and now felt pleasantly tired.

The carriage door opened, and Claude got down, holding his hand out for Agnes.

But as soon as she took his hand, Claude pulled her into his arms and carried her!

"Claude!"

Claude began walking toward the mansion as Agnes protested in his arms.

"It's customary to carry the new bride over the threshold," he insisted.

"Really? Well, you don't have to carry me all the way across the pathway!"

Even after getting down from the carriage, there was the long driveway and the stairway. Couldn't he just have lifted her in front of the door?

"But I want to carry you. I want to hold my beloved wife in my arms." With a dopey smile that would make an onlooker blush, Claude kissed Agnes's forehead.

He was always kind, but since the wedding ceremony ended, he'd become even more affectionate. Agnes wasn't sure how she was going to handle living like this...

Claude carried her into the entry hall, and moonlight poured down from the skylight above. The sunlight shining in during the day had been beautiful, but at night, the stained-glass windows sparkled like stars in the night sky.

“Wow, it’s beautiful.”

Released from Claude’s arms, Agnes put her feet on the ground, where colorful mushrooms were projected wonderfully as well.

Ciel, at their heels, started darting about, batting at the sparkling fungi. He seemed to find the rays of light very stimulating and became more and more excited, showing no signs of calming down. His cat-like...tiger-like...batting was growing more and more frantic.

“I’ve already seen the stained glass, but these sculptures and artwork... They weren’t here last time, were they?” Maybe Agnes was imagining it, but she didn’t remember the paintings and statues being there before. She looked at Claude, who looked away guiltily.

“Er, there’s something I want to show you. This way.”

Trying to distract her from the issue at hand? Not that she’d be fooled, but Claude was so obvious, it was kind of cute.

“What is it you want to show me?”

“The garden.”

“But it’s already night, I won’t be able to see. Why don’t we see it tomorrow, in daylight?”

Agnes let Claude lead her through the house, but the moonlit hallway was dark, and she couldn’t see where she was stepping. She’d hardly be able to see the garden without daylight.

“No, no, now is the best time to see. ...Look.”

Claude opened the door leading to the garden, which was illuminated with brilliant lights. The moonlight picked out the dark shape of plants, and there were countless green lights dotted all around. It was like light particles had been dispersed throughout the greenery. How exactly did it work?

“Wow, it’s like a starry sky. Amazing.”

Claude led Agnes into the garden, and when she brought her face close to a speck of light, she finally realized what it was.

“These are...all mushrooms?!”

The small mushroom that glowed green all over was a *Mycena lux-coeli*. There were smaller ones too, emitting a bright green light. The *Mycena lazuline* shown with yellow-green glow, deep azure roots, and a translucent white canelé top.

There was also a *Geastrum britannicum*, which looked like a statue of a dwarf with a gray sphere and four white leglike things sprouting from it. It stood beside a *Mycena chlorophos* and an *Omphalotus japonicus*,

“I used luminescent mushrooms to express a starry sky,” Claude explained. “I’m so glad you like them. I’m going to add a whole variety of mushrooms in the future.”

“What?! You’re going to add more?!”

After going through all the trouble of placing rare translucent mushrooms throughout the garden, Claude planned to add more?

Agnes had been worried about mushrooms growing in the vegetable patch! She had finally come into her own a little after Philip’s abuse, but Claude, too, seemed to have advanced with his mushroom fetishism.

Bewildered, Agnes let him lead her through the starry sky of mushrooms to the center of the garden. There were more growing across the rose arch, making it look like it was twinkling with stardust.

In a mushroom garden, beneath a mushroom arch, Agnes was face to face with a mushroom fetishist. She felt a sense of resignation. There was no getting away from it—her life would be all mushrooms going forward.

But what was really odd was that she didn’t mind that thought at all.

“Agnes, thank you for being born,” Claude said as he took Agnes’s hands and gazed into her eyes. “Thank you for choosing to go through life with me. I promise to love only you, with all my heart and soul.”

There was a cacophony of pops, and milky-white *Cuphophyllus virgineuses* sprouted all at once like a carpet under their feet. And, on Claude’s shoulder,

there sprouted a red and white *Amanita muscaria*.

Claude gasped at the sight of the mushrooms, his smile growing wider.

“...And thank you for the mushrooms too, you were going to say?” Agnes quietly asked.

“Them too, of course.”

They giggled together, and Claude pulled Agnes close—close enough to feel his breath on her face, and Agnes could see herself in those silvery-gray eyes.

“Claude. Thank you for finding me. Thank you for accepting me as I am. From now on, I will be by your side forever, as your wife.”

Claude listened intently as Agnes spoke, filling her chest with a deep sense of warmth.

“...I love you,” she said the words clearly, gazing into his eyes, and Claude gave her a knee-weakening smile.”

“Oh, I know.” Claude’s hand slowly caressed Agnes’s cheek, and his face moved closer. “I love you, too... My Dragonmate, my Mushroom Princess.”

The green light of the mushrooms illuminated the two of them as their lips touched.

Their shadows joined as one, never to be parted.





Mushrooms of the Day

Mycena lux-coeli

A small mushroom with a cap of about 10 millimeters in circumference, emitting green light from its entire body. It prefers to grow on rotten trees and glows in the dark. The scientific name of Mycena (Mushroom) Lux (Light) Coeli (Heavenly), means “Heavenly Light Mushroom.”

Given the important role of making Agnes’s new home shine, it’s sparkling with excitement.

Resinomyцена fulgens

A small white mushroom, about 3 millimeters wide. Although it emits light, the light is weaker than that of the *Mycena lux-coeli*, so there's some rivalry there. So many small glowing mushrooms together make the garden look like a galaxy of stars.

It usually only clusters with members of its own family, so it's excited to be branching out and making new friends.

Mycena lazulina

A mushroom with a deep azure root and a translucent white canelé on top. Looking from the bottom, the canelé part looks like cute round pasta, and it glows yellowish green in the dark. The cap is as small as 1 to 2 millimeters, and it doesn't have a special taste or smell... So, someone must have tasted it. With good looks, I can imagine a range of promotional goods. Perhaps a pop star career?

It originally planned to serve as a hair ornament or necklace for Agnes, but then it decided it wouldn't be a bad idea to provide garden light for her as well, so it branched out into a new career.

Omphalotus japonicus

It has a dark brown cap and glows green in dim light. It causes significant gastrointestinal poisoning and has actually killed people.

It was so excited to show Agnes its light on a moonlit night that it started leaking spores everywhere.

Mycena chlorophos

A mysterious mushroom with a white cap that glows green at night. Its glow is said to be the strongest known in the world. It grows after rain or in the rainy season, and lives about 3 days. It's not poisonous, so you can eat it, but it's watery and smells of rot. Why are the mushroom braves trying things that smell bad, you may wonder.

It has a luminosity that sets it apart from others, so it's the right choice as Captain of the Luminosity League. But its tenure is short-lived, so it's actively searching for a successor.

Geastrum britannicum

It looks like a gray sphere with four white legs and can sometimes resemble a dwarf. At first, it seemed like a type of *Geastraceae*, but it actually seems like a new species.

“Glowing is nice, but how about a cute art object?” it suggested, and sprouted in the garden, but in the dim light, its dwarflike shape is hard to pick out. A total massacre.

Cuphophyllus virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom. It's easy to eat and goes well in vinegared dishes or in a sauce. It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman, and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

"It's so romantic! More flirting!" It was so excited, it couldn't stop itself from multiplying in joy.

Amanita muscaria

Red caps with white polka dots. Like the poisonous mushrooms you find drawn in storybooks. It may resemble the 1-Ups from a certain video game franchise you may have heard of, but you wouldn't want to try eating a real one! It felt the red filament of fate, and sprouted. The mushroom Claude fell in love with.

"I love Agnes! Now all the mushrooms can live together!" it cried, dreaming of a new life replete with mycelium.

Short Story: The Dragon's Sweet Dream

“NOW listen here. You need to get some solid rest today, at least,” Xavier sighed as he hauled Claude to his bed and forced him under the covers. “Summoning a sacred beast is all well and good. But you certainly picked an awkward time to do it.”

“But Agnes had been kidnapped,” Claude argued. “And a horse wouldn’t have gotten me there in time. I had to choose the fastest possible option.”

“Well, you should have forged a formal contract before you acted. Just entering the borders of Oreille is enough to drain a Crest Bearer of their power. And a temporary contract consumes twice as much magical energy. Your actions were insane,” Xavier chastised as he loomed over Claude, arms crossed. But Claude wasn’t about to fold.

“None of that mattered. I had to protect Agnes. I have zero regrets.”

The two stared at one another in silence.

It was Gerome, not Claude or Xavier, who finally broke the silence.

“There’s no point rehashing it all now. Crest Bearers don’t care about their own lives when their Dragonmates are in peril. Anyway, how are you feeling now?”

Xavier, unable to say Gerome was wrong, looked away in annoyance. If something were to happen to Zenaide, Xavier would probably go wild, yes... But he wasn’t about to admit it to his younger brothers.

“I’m back in Visage, and Agnes is unharmed,” Claude said. “Ciel... The sacred beast I summoned is small enough now that he doesn’t consume that much of my power. I’m totally fine.”

“Hmm, I see. So, you’re no longer being drained.”

“I guess all you need to do now is rest and recover the physical strength and magical energy you lost.”

Claude felt a little annoyed at being restricted to bed, but in truth, he really didn't feel too good.

"All right. ...Ah, how annoying," Claude grouched. "I was almost finished setting up the new residence too."

Now that Claude had agreed to rest, the brothers were able to relax a little too. He knew they were worried about him and appreciated their concern. In the past, their relationship had been a little more distant, but that seemed to have been something of an act to catch the court off guard. When it came down to it, the older brothers were quite protective of their younger brothers.

"Your new residence... It's not shaped like a mushroom or anything, is it?" Gerome asked.

"I'd be happy with that, but it's a preexisting house that we're renovating, so it looks normal," Claude sighed.

For Claude, a mushroom-shaped building would be ideal, but building a new one would take a considerable amount of time. Now that Agnes had agreed to marry him, he wanted to live with her as soon as possible—there was no time to delay.

"Hmm, are you sure it's normal? What about, for example, the wallpaper and so on?"

"I haven't decided yet," Claude replied. "I'm thinking of brightly-colored mushrooms and..."

"No doubt you'll have mushroom furniture anyway, so you should keep the walls neutral," Gerome said, quick to shut Claude down. Maybe he had a point.

"Right, if the furniture and décor clash, it could be a bit visually exhausting."

"Not visually exhausting. Mentally exhausting. Cut back on the mushrooms," pressed Gerome.

Either way, if the mansion was too gaudy inside, it might tire Agnes. That would not be good. This was her new home, and Claude wanted her to be comfortable. He wanted to see her smile.

"...Okay, now I'm concerned. If it's mushrooms inside, what about the

garden?” Xavier asked.

Claude nodded confidently and said, “Right. I plan to have everything planted in mushroom shapes.”

“That’s not a garden, that’s a mushroom patch,” Xavier sighed.

“Right!” Claude clapped his hands together. “Yes, we do need a patch for growing mushrooms, too.”

Ah yes, the crown prince had fine taste all right. Claude beamed, and his brothers frowned.

“To grow the medicinal herbs for uncle, right?” Gerome asked.

“Yes, that too. But, also space for mushrooms to grow, in neat rows! I’ll make the arrangements right away!” Unable to contain his excitement, Claude tried to sit up, but Xavier pressed a finger to his forehead and shoved him back down.

“Mushrooms are all well and good, but if you overdo things, you’ll turn Agnes right off,” Xavier warned.

“What if Agnes issued an ultimatum? ‘It’s the mushrooms or me!’ What would you do?” Gerome’s joke pierced Claude’s very soul.

Choosing between Agnes and mushrooms? He wanted both. He’d do anything to have both. But what if Agnes really DID issue such an ultimatum? Break up with Agnes? Or break up with mushrooms? Well, there was only one possible answer.

“For Agnes, I would forsake mushrooms.”

The two brothers’ eyes widened as Claude made this declaration. Then they both sighed.

“...So you say, with tears in your eyes,” Xavier remarked.

“Crest Bearers with Dragonmates really are such a pain in the...” Gerome muttered under his breath.

After patting Claude’s head, the two of them left his room. “Get some rest!” they called out behind them, and Claude nodded.

He wished he could go with Agnes to visit Cesar, but it couldn't be helped this time. She'd be all right with Charles.

Claude closed his eyes, picturing a vision of loveliness, with peach-blossom hair and emerald green eyes. Not much longer now. They would soon be married. Soon, he began dreaming of the sweet future that awaited.

Afterword

HELLO, this is Hanami Nishine.

I am very happy to be able to deliver the fourth volume of *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess!* to you all.

The main character, Agnes, is a commoner daughter of a count with pink hair and gifted with the blessings of spirits. She also has the often-embarrassing power of causing mushrooms to randomly sprout. Prince Claude, a mushroom aficionado, has been helping to restore Agnes's self-esteem following the abuse she suffered at the hands of her bullying ex-fiancé. They return from the Kingdom of Oreille following Agnes's kidnapping, having learned the truth about her father's death.

As they prepare for their upcoming wedding, they receive reports that the "hole in the wall" is getting wider. When Agnes learns that the duty of the royal family of Visage is to use their dragon blood to protect the kingdom, she wonders if her royal Oreillian bloodline means that she also has a role to play. Finding her voice and making her desires known, Agnes travels to the "hole in the wall" with Claude and uses her mushroom powers to aid the situation.

This fourth volume features Agnes accepting her powers, embracing mushroom life, and enjoying her wedding to Claude.

I hope you enjoy this mushiful mushroom love comedy.

Volume 4 also includes the Mushrooms of the Day section at the end of each chapter. The mushrooms, basically background characters in this story, are very active in this volume, as well! From familiar mushrooms to new varieties, I hope you enjoy the brave (but sometimes misguided) efforts of the mushrooms as they try their best to aid Agnes!

Each volume, I pay attention to which mushrooms are the favorites of my readers and make sure they feature prominently in the story. Who knows, your favorite mushroom might have a key role this time around!

Also...the audiobook version of *Mushroom Princess* is now available! Now you

can enjoy the world of mushrooms with Diana Richardson's beautiful voice. Furthermore, it has been decided that the Japanese version will be made into a manga! Please look forward to the manga version of *Mushroom Princess*.

And finally...

To all the readers who have read the story up to this point and supported *Mushroom Princess*. To poporucha, who draws the characters and mushrooms so beautifully. To the publisher who gave me the opportunity to continue publishing the series, and to everyone involved in the publication process. To my family and cat, who helped me write this book. Thank you all. It's because of you that I was able to deliver the fourth volume of *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess!*

Thank you truly, from the bottom of my heart.

Well, I hope to see you all again soon.



Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor

By Iota AIUE Illustration by Misa Sazanami

In all three of her lives, Princess That never received a name from the cruel emperor. But this loop, she has the support of dragons and tigers on her side!



A Young Lady Finds Her True Calling Living with the Enemy

By Syuu Illustration by Fujigasaki

A young lady with a hidden talent for business finds herself married off to a general known as The Battle-Crazed Savage. Misunderstandings and negotiations kick off their enemies-to-lovers romance!



The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy General!

By Miyako Tsukahara Illustration by Satsuki Sheena

A feisty alchemist gets a tsundere enemy general to help her collect resources! Will she be able to tame him and his dragon?!



Author: MASHIMESA EMOTO
Artist: TERA AKAI



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