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The DRAGON'S
SOULMATE is a
MUSHROOM
PRINCESS!

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The Dragon’s Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 1

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The Dragon’s Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 1

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Prologue

“**AGNES.** I’ve met the one I’m meant to be with. I’m going to have to break off our engagement.”

Agnes Lefort felt her heart sink as she stared at the young man who’d just declared this in a booming voice.

They were at a glamorous ball held by the royal family.

Why was he bringing up such delicate, personal matters and causing a scene on an occasion like this? With so many royals and aristocracy in attendance?

Philip wasn’t in the direct line of succession to the throne, true. But, as the king’s nephew, he was *still* a fine catch. But Agnes hadn’t realized until now just how stupid he really was.

She knew he was naïve and foolish, sure. But she’d credited him with *some* brains, at least. That’d been her mistake.

Her hitherto-betrothed himself, Philip Visage, stood resplendent in front of her. He was dressed in a distinguished red frock coat that seemed to have been specially chosen to highlight his importance and consequent arrogance.

A girl was clinging to one of his arms, eyes sparkling wetly with devotion.

Oh, so that’s Philip’s type, is it? Cutesy-cute girls?

Agnes’s bright-pink, peach blossom-colored hair was tied up in a pristine coil, with nary a stray hair to be seen. She wore no hair accessories.

Her dress was amber-hued, with barely any embellishments or adornments. It was, all told, quite plain.

The girl clinging to Philip, however, had golden-brown hair in loose curls and wore a blue, lace-covered hair ribbon that shook whenever she moved her head. She wore a dress in a matching shade of blue, adorned with more bows and lace. Her hairstyle was much simpler and less intricate than Agnes’s but,

with its adornments, was eye-catching.

The two couldn't have been less alike. A chasm of difference lay between them. And, apparently, Philip's tastes clearly lay on the side Agnes wasn't on.

She stared at the girl's golden-brown curls. Noticing her gaze, the girl took a step back, huddling behind Philip.

How ludicrous!

The girl was acting like Agnes was some sort of evil witch, intent on keeping her and Philip apart.

"The person you're meant to be with, eh?"

"Yes. I've found my other half. My Dragonmate. The one."

Philip puffed out his chest and spoke these words with pride. It seemed he hadn't noticed the look of distaste on Agnes's face.

It was said that the royal family had dragon's blood. Of all the tales concerning the dragon's blood, the most well-known spoke of "Dragonmates."

It was said that when one encountered one's "Dragonmate," both would instantly know that they were destined for one another. None could divide them.

It's unclear how much truth there was to this, if any, but that was what the people believed.

He's pulling the "Dragonmate" card right now?

All right: so she and Philip hadn't been in mad, passionate love. But their union would still have been a favorable one. She'd *trusted* him. He was the only one, outside of her family, that seemed immune to the sprouting of the mushrooms.

She could feel her heart growing cold and hard against him now. The transformation was instant.

At the same time, anger began bubbling inside her.

How could he *do* this? After all the studying she'd done to learn how to act ladylike for him? All the hardships she'd been through. All the stress she'd

endured. *It was all for naught...*

Even worse, she could feel the mushrooms getting ready to sprout.

He can't be freaking serious!

A screw came undone somewhere in Agnes's mind. She snapped.

"I wasn't born yesterday, you know! It's obvious you're just doing this to try to legitimize your infidelity!"

Agnes finally let her smiling mask fully slip, heaving a disgusted sigh.

Philip blinked, processing Agnes's remark.

Yes, he must be shocked. Agnes had always been so obedient and docile. But in reality, Agnes had also always been the type of girl to speak her mind when she *really* had something to say.

Yes, she was a count's daughter. But she had her own goals in life. And so, she'd held her tongue all this time.

But there was no reason to hold back any longer.

"Mind your tongue! Is that how you speak to a member of the royal family, within whose veins runs the blood of the dragon?"

"All right, why didn't you break off our engagement before things got to this point, then?"

"Because I knew you'd never agree, obviously."

"You could've done me the courtesy of discussing it with me first! Given me some sort of warning!"

"You can hardly blame me. The mushrooms—"

"Don't use the mushroom thing as an excuse! Just be honest. 'We're engaged, yes, but I've been screwing another woman. So now, I'd like to switch to her, please.' That's all you had to say. But go ahead! I'd be *delighted* to cut off an engagement to a snake of a man like you!"

"Your rudeness is entirely inappropriate. I've found my Dragonmate, damn it! You were just...just a fake. A fake mushroom—"

“Like I said, the mushrooms have *nothing* to do with this!”

Unable to disguise his annoyance any longer, Philip raised an eyebrow, casting his gaze over Agnes’s head.

“Guards. Throw this woman in the dungeons! She has insulted the king’s nephew. She clearly needs some time to cool off and think things through.”

The guards hesitated, exchanging nervous glances. They seemed unsure as to whether or not they should follow Philip’s orders.

Still, one could hardly blame them.

They were only present at the ball on security duty and thus understandably hesitant to get involved in something as serious as the breaking off of an official royal engagement.

Besides, the order was coming from Philip. He *was* a royal, yes. But not a very important one.

Ultimately, though, they couldn’t just ignore his order. Not when he kept playing the royal card in such a loud, obnoxious way.

What a shameful example of class privilege...

The guards reached out reluctantly to grab Agnes’s arms, but she evaded their grip, feeling quietly sorry for them.

“Get your meat hooks off me! If I’m to be sent to the dungeons, I’ll walk there myself. As for our engagement, I couldn’t care less! Call it off! But just let me ask one thing.”

“What? I won’t change my mind for anything, I’ll have you know! Our engagement is dead.”

“I don’t give a tiny rat’s arse about that! Make it official, in fact! As soon as humanly possible!”

“Then, what? What is it you want to ask me?”

Agnes scowled, staring right into Philip’s frowning gray eyes.

“If you care so *much* about Dragonmates, why’d you bother getting engaged to a ‘fake’ like me to begin with? And are you sure that girl standing there is the

genuine article? I have to say, I don't trust your shoddy judgment at all!"

Philip's expression hardened instantly. He reached out and yanked one of the guard's swords from its scabbard.

The sword glittered in the light. *Beautiful.*

Fine, go ahead. Cut me down.

That way, Agnes could go from being an adulterer's jilted ex-fiancée to an adulterer's ex-fiancée who he'd then *threatened with murder*.

Either way, everyone would end up taking her side. After all, she'd clearly been treated poorly for a member of the nobility.

Not only had Philip callously chosen to end their engagement at a royal ball, of all places, but on top of that, he'd drawn a sword on his poor betrothed, herself a daughter of the aristocracy.

Philip may have been royalty, yes (only just). But even *he* wouldn't be able to exhibit this behavior without facing punishment. As long as Agnes didn't do anything to damage the Lefort reputation, then it was all fine by her.

Yes, cut me down. But make it quick. Before the mushrooms sprout...

Agnes pressed her lips together tightly and glared right at Philip, trying to face fear head-on.

"What's all the commotion about?"

A booming voice interrupted them.

It belonged to a handsome young man with Prussian-blue hair, who came shouldering his way through the crowd of interested onlookers.

He had the same dark gray eyes as Philip and wore a fine black frock coat embellished with gold embroidery. Both these features identified him as another member of the royal family.

Unlike feeble Philip, however, this young man emanated an aura of kingly chivalry and dignified manliness.

All of the royals boasted extreme good looks. But none more so than this young man. *He's kind of a knockout...*

“Whatever *are* you thinking, Philip? Disturbing the peace of His Majesty’s ball? And pointing a sword at a *lady*?”

“Claude. This is none of your business.”



Upon hearing the name, Agnes knew immediately who the young man was.

Claude Visage...the fourth-born prince.

He was second in line to the throne after the current crown prince, ahead of his two other elder brothers. Agnes had heard that Prince Claude was employed as a knight.

Philip had barely ever swung a sword, which only became all the more apparent when he stood in proximity to the prince, who carried himself in a way only a trained soldier did. Rumors of the prince's swordplay "hobby" went far and wide, but one look at him showed it was clearly more than a hobby.

"The king personally tasked me with sorting out this disturbance. If you won't listen to me, then we will head to my father directly and you can answer to *him...*"

Philip gulped audibly.

Perhaps it's starting to sink in just how much of a colossal man-child he's being...

"...I was merely putting this woman in her place. She took the news of the dissolution of our engagement with poor grace and insulted my honor in the process."

As Agnes stared incredulously at the pompous Philip, who somehow seemed convinced of his own righteousness, she started *wanting* to sprout a mushroom on him.

No. Not just *one* mushroom. She wanted to sprout them *all over* him.

Maybe Agnes really *would* live up to her hated nickname after all. Perhaps *this* was her time to really shine? *But no. Reason must prevail.*

Frowning slightly, Claude turned to face Agnes.

"Please, tell me what happened. In your own words."

He was asking her. Asking Agnes. Rather than just taking Philip, with all his royal status, at his word.

How unlike Philip Claude was. He seemed...fair.

“Lord Philip informed me that our engagement was off. When I told him he should’ve been honest about having found someone else, he told me that she was his Dragonmate and that I’d only been a fake. He didn’t like my reaction to that, so he announced I was to be sent to the dungeons. I asked him *why* he bothered getting engaged to a fake in the first place and questioned his judgment regarding his new paramour. This angered him and he drew that sword on me.”

There was a pregnant pause. Then Claude sighed audibly.

His handsome features were colored with distress as the women in the nearby crowd began to whisper and exclaim in shrill voices.

“...Clarify a few things. This woman *is* your fiancée, isn’t she?”

“Like I said, I just broke it off with her! I’ve found my Dragonmate and—”

“...Are you *seriously* a member of the royal family?”

Claude knit his brows in disgust and cut Philip off.

“An engagement is more than a verbal agreement between two parties. It is a binding contract between houses. You can moan about it being over all you like, but the fact remains that you two are still officially engaged. This fuss achieves nothing and only damages your credibility.”

“Nonsense. I’ve found my soul spirit—”

“When? *When* did you find her?”

“...Huh?”

Claude plucked the sword from Philip’s hands, glancing at the girl with the golden-brown hair.

“When did you meet this Dragonmate of yours?”

“It was...it was about a month ago.”

Aha.

So Philip had been cheating on me for an entire month?

Philip’s infidelity was obvious. But he was truly a fool to admit to it in a public forum.

“And why did you not dissolve your engagement at that time?”

“Well... Well, I just...”

“According to the writ of dragon’s blood, once one locates their Dragonmate, they can love no other. By your own admission, you’ve loved this woman a full month already. And yet, you did not dissolve your engagement. Why? Whether that woman is your true Dragonmate or not, it remains a fact that you’ve behaved unjustly. You’ve disrespected not only your fiancée but the woman you *claim* to be your Dragonmate as well.”

As Claude handed the sword back to the guard, Philip’s expression clouded over.

“Yes, but...”

Faced with the truth that he’d been secretly unfaithful for a full month, Philip found himself at a loss for words. And, faced with his clear superior, he was visibly cowed.

While Agnes’s angry words hadn’t affected Philip at all, he was unable to deny Claude’s admonishments.

Philip was a simple man. But he knew when to bend rather than break.

Agnes knew he was a bad guy, but she couldn’t help feeling a pang of pity for him. He *had* been her fiancé, after all.

“...Still, since things *have* come to this point, perhaps we should resolve them once and for all. Do you acquiesce to the dissolution of your engagement?”

Claude’s dark gray eyes found Agnes’s.

She’d only one thing to say:

“Gladly!”

She couldn’t bear to remain engaged to pathetic Philip for even another second.

Claude nodded. “Then I shall inform the king directly so that the engagement’s dissolution can be made official. I shall see you home myself, my lady.”

“Thank you, Your Royal Highness, but I’m fine.”

Agnes had already drawn far too much attention to herself.

The *last* thing she wanted to do was be seen with eye-catching Claude.

Besides, her mushroom alarm bells were ringing.

But Claude leaned in, lowering his voice.

“...Don’t want to get caught up in the gossip mill, now, do we?”

He was right. They *were* at a royal ball, with many fellow aristocrats in attendance. And her altercation with Philip had drawn quite a crowd.

No doubt the crowd would swoop in on her as soon as Claude left. Agnes was a mere count’s daughter with no influence of her own. Escape would prove difficult.

“...Okay, then. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Claude grinned as she accepted his offer.

The crowd was getting even louder now, but Claude didn’t seem to be concerned. He was probably used to being surrounded by screaming women. He *was* a prince, after all. *And a devastatingly handsome one, at that...*

“Incidentally, Philip...has there been any kind of sign?”

The abrupt change of subject took everyone—not just Philip—by surprise.

“They say that when one whose veins flow with the blood of the dragon finds his or her Dragonmate, there’ll come a sign.”

“I’ve never heard that! I’m sure you’re making it up.”

Philip seemed agitated and disturbed. But Claude simply stared at him, a hint of amusement on his features.

“Of course *you* haven’t heard of it. It’s a tale passed down among the blood of the dragon only. And you have *no* such blood.”

“Don’t be absurd! I’m a *royal*! Dragon’s blood flows through my veins.”

“If you truly *did* have dragon’s blood, but there was no sign, that’d indicate

that you had not, in fact, met your Dragonmate.”

No one was quite sure what *kind* of sign was being discussed here, but if Prince Claude, second in line to the throne, brought it up, then it must be true. Accordingly, if Philip was claiming that there had indeed been no “sign” when he’d met his “soul spirit,” then this would surely cast doubt on his claim to possess dragon’s blood.

Conversely, if Philip insisted on his dragon blood lineage, then this would cast doubt on his claim that the woman who’d taken his fancy was truly his Dragonmate.

Either way, the haughty and prideful Philip would lose face. He might’ve been able to throw his weight about and bully Agnes into submission, but he’d no such chance with Claude.

At an impasse, Philip merely stood there, cheeks bright red, as if he was in a pot of hot water that’d slowly been brought to a boil.

“Either way, what we *do* know is that your engagement is off and you’ve decided to pursue this other woman instead. In the future, I implore you to comport yourself with greater dignity as a fringe member of the royal family.”

Having said this, Claude reached for Agnes’s hand. Startled, she pulled away.

“N-No thank you, my prince. I can walk unassisted.”

It was gallant of him to reach for her hand, but she had to decline. Mushrooms could sprout at any moment, after all.

Frowning slightly, Claude nonetheless nodded, and headed off in front of Agnes.

Feeling hundreds of eyes on her as she went, Agnes beat a hasty retreat from the ballroom.

“You’re a feisty one, aren’t you? Surely, there was no need to provoke him that way. Yes, he was in the wrong for turning a sword on you. But you *really* put yourself at risk back there.”

Claude was speaking to Agnes over his shoulder as he walked in front of her.

Agnes nodded. Claude sounded mildly impressed, but he was undeniably

warning her here.

“I know. Our engagement was off either way. There was no need for me to put my neck on the chopping block.”

She could’ve just taken Philip’s rejection on the chin and left the ballroom quietly, under her own steam.

But she was too mad for that. After all her efforts had ended up being for absolutely nothing, she’d seen red.

“So then, why’d you do it?”

As Claude turned to look back at her, Agnes thought she could hear him gasp a little.

No doubt this was because he’d realized that her eyes were glistening with tears.

“If you asked me if I loved him, the answer would’ve been no. But we’ve been engaged for ages. I always found him high-maintenance and rather annoying, yes. But I still saw him like a younger brother, even though he’s older than me. And then there’s the thing with the mushrooms— Ah, never mind. Anyway, I tried my hardest to be a refined young lady so as not to cause any embarrassment for the royal family. But it was all a waste of time, apparently.”

During the confrontation, Agnes had been fueled by a mixture of rage and indignation. But now that she was removed from the scene and had calmed down, she was struck with a feeling of intense emptiness.

“He found his Dragonmate, I guess. I was just...a fake. Expendable. Everything I’ve been through...there was no *meaning* to any of it. I was just going further and further down a dead end the whole time. I gave him everything I had, but...”

“So...you really *did* like him, after all?”

Claude’s question was softly put. Agnes shook her head.

“No. But it hurts to be told you’re not needed by someone you’d planned your whole life out with.”

Agnes felt wretched. A tear slid down her cheek.

“And even worse, this quarrel is going to cause big problems for my family. I feel the worst about that.”

It all came back to family.

After all, she'd only gotten engaged to Philip in the first place for the good of her household. Not only was that all gone now, but she'd also managed to besmirch her family name as well. Agnes felt paralyzed with sudden regret.

If only she'd been able to punch Philip just once! Right on the nose! She would've felt so much better about everything. But no, that would've only made things worse.

She couldn't risk her family for one golden moment of sweet, sweet satisfaction.

A white handkerchief suddenly appeared under Agnes's nose as she stood there hanging her head.

She looked up to see those dark gray eyes, fixed sadly on her.

“Thank you. I'm okay, though. I'd better not wipe my eyes. They'll just get all red and puffy, and I don't want my family to suspect that something's wrong. I want them to think I'm okay with my engagement ending.”

“Why?”

“I don't want to worry them. They're...good people. Really good people.”

“It sounds like you've put up walls between yourself and them.”

It was true. Agnes wasn't her parents' true child.

She didn't feel like it'd be appropriate to explain her family dynamics to Claude.

Indeed, their entire conversation so far had been inappropriate. This wasn't the sort of thing one discussed with a prince.

Agnes took a deep breath to center herself.

“Your Highness, I apologize for all the trouble I've caused. Thank you for saving me from being thrown into the dungeons, or worse.”

“It's fine. He doesn't have the authority to order that anyway.”

That may've been true, but there was always the risk that Philip might've really lost his temper with her.

And, after all, he'd been holding a sword at the time.

"...What do you plan to do now?"

"After all this fuss, I doubt I'll get any other marriage offers. Even if I did, I have to consider the mushrooms— I mean, the circumstances. A lot of young men in the aristocracy feel like they've the right to have affairs, so girls like me who speak up about it aren't popular at all. I know that much."

Indeed, Philip had looked at Agnes with pure hatred in his eyes once he'd realized she was shaming him for his romantic indiscretion. Of course, she wouldn't have had to say anything if he'd just kept it in his breeches to begin with. But that thought had never occurred to Philip.

Still, perhaps Philip's very idiocy was what'd been keeping the mushrooms at bay...

"I should probably tell you, Your Highness, that I'm originally a commoner. I should probably go back and make a living among the common folk."

"I wouldn't go that far..."

How kind Prince Claude was, to listen to her woes. All because his father the king had ordered him to intervene with his nephew's troubles. It was no doubt just an act of royal family image preservation. But without it, Agnes would've been in a rough situation indeed.

Still, she didn't want to bother this prince with her affairs any further. Blinking back tears, she smiled brightly.

"I can't let my family know about this. But thank you for listening to me. I hope your own Dragonmate comes to you in due time."

Agnes bowed politely and boarded the carriage.

Claude reached out to help her board, but, as she was not a true-born lady, there was no need.

Common-born Agnes could leap up into a horse carriage with the best of them.

“Wait. Even if your eyes don’t puff up, the tear tracks alone will give you away. Take this.”

Once again, Claude offered her the pure white handkerchief.

“But I’ve no way of returning it to you.”

Besides, when she looked closer, she could see the royal emblem, embroidered in one corner.

This wasn’t an item to be lent so lightly.

“Just take it.”

Gazing deeply into Agnes’s eyes, Claude pushed the handkerchief into her hand.

How kind he was.

Philip never showed me such consideration. In fact— Oh, but to blazes with Philip.

“...All right. Well, thank you for the handkerchief too, on top of everything else. I doubt we’ll ever meet again, but I wish you good health.”

Her fingers brushed Claude’s palm as she took the handkerchief.

Blinking in alarm, Agnes could only watch as a bright red mushroom sprouted from the surface of Claude’s white-gloved hand.

She identified it immediately. *Amanita Muscaria*.

Its vivid red umbrella-shaped cap was spotted with little white bumps. As she recalled, it was highly poisonous.

Claude was gazing at it too. He looked shocked. Of course he was. Agnes had no idea how to talk herself out of this situation.

“...What an absolutely stunning mushroom.”

While Agnes was agonizing over what to say next, Claude reached out and plucked the mushroom off of his glove with his other hand, holding it up and admiring it.

“I’ve never seen such a perfectly *perfect* specimen. The bright, blood red of

the cap, the snow-white dots...”

“...Er, what?”

For some reason, the stunning prince was still standing there holding the mushroom, muttering insane things.

The coachman was standing by, waiting to close the door for her. Agnes shot him a look and they both nodded.

Closing the door quietly on the prince, the coachman then spurred the horses into action and they sped off.

Agnes had no idea what all *that* was about, but she decided it'd be better not to think about it.

A lot had happened and she was tired. Agnes sat back in her seat, putting all thoughts of the day's events out of mind as she sped off toward home.

Once she got home, she had let the servants know she was back before retreating to her own room.

Her father, Count Lefort, had been in attendance at the ball, as well.

He hadn't been anywhere near the unpleasant scene with Philip. But news of the disturbance would no doubt reach him before the evening was through. Along with the news that she was no longer engaged.

Agnes had taken an early carriage home, though, so she had arrived long before her father did. She didn't have the energy to wait up for him. Instead, she'd left word that she wished to speak to him tomorrow.

She didn't even have the energy to *bathe*. After changing, she fell straight into bed.

...Gosh, what a horrid evening...

She didn't know if she was sad, angry, or regretful. Or even all three.

She supposed she should probably be crying, now that she was officially unengaged. But she didn't really feel like it.

Philip wasn't really worth the tears.

While talking with Claude, she'd been struck by a wave of emotion and hadn't

been able to keep from crying. But those weren't tears of heartbreak. They were tears of anguish over time wasted, tears of rage over being stabbed in the back by someone she'd seen as a partner.

Thinking back on the events now, she felt her eyes prickle with tears again. But then she was struck with the sudden mental image of Claude gazing at the *Amanita Muscaria* mushroom and immediately, those tears dried back up.

"...What the heck was that all about?"

It was a splendid *Amanita Muscaria* that had sprouted on Claude's hand, to be sure. Beautiful, even.

But that wasn't the part she was hung up on.

"...Eh, I doubt I'll ever see him again, anyway. Whatever."

Right.

She was better off forgetting about everything that had happened.

She was going to be very busy, starting tomorrow.

Clutching the blanket, Agnes curled into a ball and fell into a deep sleep.



Mushroom of the Day

Amanita Muscaria

With its blood-red umbrella cap and white dots, this iconic toadstool is the first thing many people think of when it comes to poisonous mushrooms.

Fairly lethal, this toadstool was once used for catching flies. I wonder how it works?

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!

Chapter 1: The Peach Blossom-Colored Mushroom Princess

WHEN Agnes opened her eyes, the room was already bright.

She sat up and stretched her arms as high as they would go.

“...Okay. Time to figure out what I’m going to do now...”

After that little scene she’d caused, no one would want to marry her now. She was damaged goods. But to be honest, she didn’t really want to get married anyway.

Still, she couldn’t just stay home like this, cluttering up the place and being a burden.

In actuality, Agnes was the daughter of Count Lefort’s younger sister. In other words, she was his niece. Her mother had married a commoner. So, until she was eleven years old, Agnes had been raised as one, too. After losing both her parents in a carriage accident, she’d been taken in by her uncle, Count Lefort.

Count Lefort’s wife had also been riding in that carriage, so he’d lost both his wife and younger sister in the same accident. Agnes was the sole survivor of that accident, and she was forever grateful to her uncle for taking her in when she had no other family to turn to.

Agnes was eighteen now and, over the past seven years, her uncle had showered her with love and affection, raising her to want for nothing. So, naturally, she simply couldn’t bear to do anything to inconvenience him.

Agnes’s birth father had been a foreigner from a neighboring country.

The Visage Kingdom was ruled over by the Visage royal family, who had dragon blood. But her father’s country was different. It was rife with divine spirits who protected the land.

Agnes’s peach-blossom-colored hair could be attributed to that part of her heritage. Her eyes were also a vivid green: the color of verdigris, another

feature considered very unusual in the Visage Kingdom.

Agnes's unusual appearance was considered unsightly in Visage, where the people were unfamiliar with the spirits. As a result, she drew unwanted attention toward herself and her family.

Women of the aristocracy wore their hair long as a rule, so Agnes couldn't simply cut off her peach blossom locks. She'd tried dyeing it several times, but something always went wrong and the color didn't take. Perhaps it was because of her hair texture.

Her younger brother, Kevin, would carry the family name, so Agnes was spared that burden. Still, she'd hate to do anything to jeopardize his recent, official entry into society. It was a very delicate time.

"...So, the best thing for me to do is return to common life."

Having grown up a commoner, Agnes could do most things, like housework, herself. Even while living as a count's daughter, she continued to help maintain the household. She was glad she did, too, when she'd caught her first glimpse of Philip's foul temper.

Agnes had decided then and there to make sure she could always take care of herself, so that if, one day, Philip sprang a divorce on her in a sudden fit of rage, she wouldn't be totally ruined.

"Still, I never expected *this* to happen during the engagement stage... I guess he spared me from experiencing it later..."

Philip had proven himself to be more of a fool than Agnes had ever expected. But then again, this was practically bound to have happened sooner or later. She might as well return to common life while she still had her health and youth.

Most aristocrats would faint in horror at the prospect of having to live as a commoner. In fact, they could imagine no greater punishment. But Agnes didn't really mind at all.

And this way, she wouldn't have to watch that cheater, Philip, live out his days. Yes, she'd be spared that particular eyesore.

This is actually the best possible outcome, if you think about it.



“...**SO**, I think I’ll just go back to living as a commoner.”

Benoit Lefort gazed at his niece seated before him, his brows knitted in consternation.

“You *think*? But Agnes...what’s made you think this way?”

“I was dumped in front of the ton at a high-society party. I’m obviously damaged goods now. No one will come to seek my hand in marriage again. So, to avoid being a burden on the household, I feel it’s better to return to common society.”

Agnes spoke cheerfully, but Benoit sighed.

“I heard about last night’s...incident. It *does* sound awful, but Philip was obviously in the wrong. Besides, the man himself admitted that he’s been carrying on an affair for the past month in front of everyone.”

Yes, he did admit that, didn’t he? Gosh, what a brainless thing to do. Philip really is a royal idiot. Even if that idiocy of his does lend him immunity to the mushrooms...

“I’m certain most people will be on your side,” Benoit continued. “I’m not saying we’ll have suitors knocking down our door, but there’s no need to throw it all away and go back to being a commoner. Even if you never marry, you’ll always be a child of this household, Agnes.”

Agnes had always loved her uncle Benoit’s golden hair and red-brown eyes.

If only I’d been born with normal-colored hair, perhaps all this could have been avoided...

“I’m so grateful to you for taking me in, Father. Even though I am your niece. And I love Kevin, too. I love you both. So, you see, I don’t want to be a burden to either of you.”

“And I’m telling you, you could never *be* a burden to us. You were hurt the most by yesterday’s...unpleasantness. You should take some time to heal. You can always plan out what to do next later. There’s no rush.”

Philip was only really a fringe member of the royal family, yes, but their engagement had been warmly welcomed.

Her uncle had every right to scold Agnes for losing this key opportunity, which would've only led to prosperity for the Lefort household. The fact that he was being so kind, despite this, made Agnes's heart swell with love for him.

"Please...don't be nice to me right now. I don't want to start sprouting mushrooms on you."

"As long as they're edible, I say sprout away."

"For you, Father, I'd sprout the finest edible mushrooms around."

"You mean...*Matsutake*? I could go for a couple right now. But listen, Agnes. I want you to take some more time. Think things over."

"All right..."

Agnes had been so sure that a return to commoner life would solve all her problems, but it was clear she wasn't going to get the permission she needed from her uncle.

Without Benoit's approval and support, it'd be hard to get started as a commoner on her own. After all, it was very difficult for a young, single woman to rent a place to stay on her own. Not that she'd any money to *pay* rent or other living expenses. You needed *some* money upfront.

...Which means I need to get some funds together.

Up until now, Agnes had always asked her uncle for money, but...that wasn't an option anymore.

I could always sell some things I don't need and make money that way.

Agnes returned to her room and pulled out all of her dresses.

They were all simple and sort of drab, at Philip's request.

Philip had also wanted to tie up and hide her stunning hair so it wouldn't be so noticeable. After all, the people of Visage tended to turn their noses up at it. He also wanted her to keep her clothing and makeup as plain and understated as possible.

She'd gone along with his demands. She knew her hair stood out in a bad way, and she preferred to fly under the radar to reduce the number of strangers who approached her. She regretted it now, though. Dresses in this sort of boring color palette would be difficult to sell.

Hmm, well...maybe dresses like this would appeal more to older women? I should give it a try, at least...

"Lady Agnes? Have you finished your meeting with His Lordship? The bath is all prepared for you."

Agnes turned to see her maid, Therese, a plump woman who worked nimbly and speedily despite her stature.

"Thank you. I'll be heading out once I've had my bath. Therese, could you put these dresses together in a bundle for me?"

"Whatever do you plan to do with all of these dresses, my lady?"

Agnes flashed a brilliant smile at Therese.

"I'm going to sell them... The whole lot of them!"

They may've been drab, but Agnes's dresses were finely made and of considerable quality. She *was* a count's daughter, after all. She would have no use for them as a commoner. She could start afresh if she got rid of them all at once. She'd sell her jewelry and accessories as well, apart from a few sentimental pieces.

All she needed was a few simple pinafore dresses for everyday wear.

Agnes wasn't sure *what* she was going to do with Claude's handkerchief. She made up her mind to ask Uncle Benoit to dispose of it for her, when she left home for good.

After ruminating in the bath and solidifying her plans, Agnes dried off and slipped her arms through the sleeves of one of her simple dresses.

"Lady Agnes, are you *sure* you want to do this?"

"Yes, yes, it's fine."

"But... But these are all the dresses you own..."

“Eh, they were all Philip’s taste anyway, not mine. Besides, I’ll have no occasion to wear them in the future. I can at least benefit from them if I sell them.”

“But what do you intend to do with the money?”

“...It’ll be put to good use.”

Frowning, Therese fell silent as she carried the bundle of dresses for Agnes.



BY carriage, Agnes made her way to a most convenient little shop. It sold a variety of things and bought secondhand items, too.

As Agnes was busily creating a mountain of dresses atop the shop counter, a man in his early thirties emerged from the back.

“Good day to you, Lady Lefort. Mushrooms again today, is it?”

“No. Not this time. Today, I was hoping to sell these dresses.”

The man nodded sagely, casting his eye across the dress mountain.

“I see, I see. All right, let’s take a look-see.”

The man began combing through the pile of dresses, examining each one and making notes on a notepad with his appraisal.

He was the owner of this little shop and Agnes was a regular customer.

She made herself comfortable on a nearby sofa and waited for the shopkeeper to finish.

“Well, they’re all of fine quality...but these colors. They’re so...*drab*.”

“Yes, I know they might not sell among women my age, but I was thinking that elderly ladies might like them.”

“*Hmm*...with a few simple ornamentations added, they might. I’ll have to make some adjustments, so let’s factor that into the price. And the jewelry is very nice as well. That should sell no problem. All right. How about...this much?”

The shopkeeper finished his appraisals swiftly and handed Agnes a piece of

paper. Depending on how much money he was offering, making arrangements to leave home was either about to get a good deal easier, or...not.

Nervously, Agnes reached for the piece of paper and accidentally bumped hands with the shopkeeper. At that exact instant, five brown mushrooms sprouted up the length of his arm. Each one appeared in sequence, with a series of cute popping sounds.

Agnes slowly lifted her eyes to meet the shopkeeper's.

"Oh, please forgive me, my lady. I did not mean to touch your hand."

"N-No, it was my fault."

Seemingly used to this kind of thing, the shopkeeper plucked the mushrooms off his arm and examined them in a bunch.

"Ah, *Lyophyllum Decastes*, the "chicken of the gravel." Quite edible. But not particularly rare. I can't give you much for them, but if you'd like to sell...?"

"...Please accept them as a token of my esteem instead."

"If you insist, then, gladly. A tasty little mushroom, this one. Very firm. Very toothsome."

Agnes sighed as she watched the shopkeeper hurry into the back of the shop, smiling and clutching the handful of mushrooms.

The reason why Agnes had become a regular patron of this shop? It all came down to the mushrooms.

She had developed a fear of men ever since her commoner days, when they would flock to her in droves and make all kinds of passes at her because of her peach-blossom-colored hair. As a result, the protective spirits that dwelled within her reacted to this fear by—for some inexplicable reason—causing mushrooms to sprout on any man who approached her.

Men Agnes found particularly intimidating would be blighted with the biggest, most poisonous of mushrooms in great numbers.

The neighborhood boys who teased her took to calling Agnes "The Peach Blossom Mushroom Princess" as they fled from her, their bodies covered in clusters of mushrooms.

It'd hardly been the best of childhoods.

But Agnes felt safe with the men of her family. Mushrooms hardly ever sprouted on her adoptive father Benoit or her brother Kevin. When they did, they were of the harmless, tasty and edible varieties.

In the early days of their engagement, Philip had been the hapless recipient of spontaneous mushroom sprouting as well. But bit by bit, as Agnes got to know him and realized how daft he truly was, he almost seemed to become immune. Hardly any mushrooms sprouted on Philip by the end.

Once Agnes began seeing Philip as an incompetent younger brother, the mushroom magic all but stopped working on him.

Yes, Philip's fungal immunity had been a major point in his favor. But that hardly mattered anymore. After all, he'd broken off their engagement for good.

Unable to accept the prospect of a marriage smothered in mushrooms, Agnes had given up on the idea altogether.

Benoit could use his connections to find her someone understanding and trustworthy, no doubt. But until he dropped his bombshell, she thought she'd already found that in Philip.

She couldn't risk trusting another man again.

Besides, she could somehow sense that the mushroom reflex had only grown stronger now. She'd missed her one chance.



ALL right. I've sold my most valuable possessions. It's time to think about what else I can do to make money.

Back in her bedroom, Agnes was gazing down at her remaining dresses with her arms crossed. These were among the ones she'd taken to the store, but the shopkeeper had rejected them for being too drab to sell.

She'd no further use for them either, but they were still made of good quality material, drab or not. She couldn't just throw them away.

Agnes got out her sewing kit and brandished a pair of fabric shears.

“...What are you doing, Sis?”

While Agnes was engrossed in her sewing, a figure spoke to her from the nearby chair.

It was her younger brother, Kevin, with his golden hair and reddish-brown eyes. He was her cousin by blood and brother through adoption. He'd lost his mother the same day she'd lost hers.

“What does it look like? I'm making a skirt. And a hair ribbon.”

“What for?”

“Taking apart some old dresses. Hate to just throw them away.”

“But why? Why are you taking your dresses apart?”

“Hmm? Oh, Kevin. You haven't heard?”

Agnes explained about her engagement being off, which was why she no longer needed these drab dresses and was why she was taking them apart. Kevin sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Gosh, Sis, why are you always so melodramatic? And anyway, ALL your dresses are drab. You'll have nothing left to wear!”

“Well, these are the ones that were far too drab to even sell. I'm going to cut them up and make them into a skirt and a hair ribbon.”

“You shouldn't be doing that. It's not appropriate behavior for a count's daughter. That's seamstress work. What are you trying to do, Sis?”

“I was about to get married to a royal, you know. Well, royal-adjacent. I was going to be a countess. But now, I've got a new plan. I'm going to become a commoner instead!”

“But...why?”

Kevin shot a glance at Therese, who'd just walked in holding a tray of tea. They shared a nod and a conspiratorial sigh together.

“All right, all right. I'm fine with you giving up the dresses. After all, you only bought those ugly things to appease Lord Philip and his odd fixation. But there's no need to try to sell them. Or cut them up.”

“...Fixation?”

“Ah, forget that part. It hardly matters anymore. All I’m saying is...now you can wear nice, colorful dresses again. I’m sure you’ll look lovely in them.”

Indeed, ever since getting engaged to Philip, Agnes had slowly replaced her entire wardrobe of colorful dresses with bland, boring ones.

“No, no, no. I’m aiming for a commoner life. I won’t need fancy gowns anymore.”

“Why, though? Why do you have to go to such lengths? You haven’t done anything wrong, Sis. Really, it’s fine! Philip’s the one who went off and had an affair and called off your engagement and made a scene, not you.”

“Even so, no one’s going to want Philip’s reject now. And if I stay at home, I’ll end up putting off your future bridal prospects too, Kevin. No one wants to deal with a jilted, spinster sister-in-law who was rejected by a royal suitor, now, do they? I’d never put that burden on your shoulders.”

No, Agnes would rather die than become a burden to her beloved family.

“So...you’re going to become a commoner?”

“Yep. I’m pretty confident that I can handle it. I’m sturdy, you know? I could be a seamstress or even work in the fields. After all, I was raised as a commoner. It should be easy to slip right back into it.”

Kevin shook his head as Agnes grinned at him, her fists balled up in a display of bravado.

“But you’re missing the point. I don’t want you to go back to being a commoner. Neither does Father.”

“Thank you, Kevin. It’s sweet of you to say that.”

Agnes had been blessed with a loving family and counted herself lucky for it.

That was why she was doing this. It was all for them.

Agnes smiled as her dress shears sliced through fabric.



Mushrooms of the Day

Matsutake

A high-grade mushroom known by most.

What better reason to check out the roots of a pine tree than to locate one of these mushrooms?

But am I the only one whose mind jumps straight to Matsutake soup, before the actual mushroom itself...?

Lyophyllum Decastes (Chicken of the Gravel)

An edible mushroom with an ashy gray umbrella-shaped cap.

It looks rather like a shapeless, unenthusiastic Shiitake mushroom.

Firm-textured with a rich flavor, it cooks up well. I could go for one right now...!

Chapter 2: Mushroom Sensitivity Intensifies

AGNES sewed late into the night and ended up making five new skirts. She'd managed to make the skirts so much cuter by sewing white lace onto the drab material. Or at least, *she* was pretty satisfied with them. Lace had caught on as a fad with commoner women lately, as lace-adorned clothing was seen as somewhat luxurious.

Agnes visited town regularly to see what the common folk were up to. She figured that'd help her blend in more easily if she ended up having to return there someday.

The new skirts were good quality and should fetch a decent price despite their admittedly bland colors. At any rate, it'd be better than just throwing them out.

Filled with a sense of accomplishment that blew away the last dregs of her exhaustion, Agnes decided to head to the shop right away.

She washed her face, changed into a simple dress, and opened the front door to make her way to the carriage. But the door opened instead onto...a world of bright pink flowers.

"...Are you Count Lefort's daughter?"

Agnes froze as someone spoke to her from beyond the flowers.

She looked up and realized the large bouquet was being clutched by a man with black hair and russet-brown eyes. With the way he was dressed, he was clearly a member of the aristocracy.

She'd never seen this man before, though. *Perhaps he's one of Philip's squires?*

Agnes had no idea why Philip would've dispatched his squire to her residence. But he was surely up to no good. The best thing to do would be to avoid engaging with his nonsense altogether.

“What do you want? I’m in a hurry. Let me by.”

As Agnes tried to brush past him, the man forced the bouquet into her hands.

“...From His Royal Highness.”

Upon hearing those words, Agnes snapped.

Flowers? He thought flowers were a good idea? After he publicly dumped and humiliated me?

“Tell him to give them to his new woman! I’m just a fake, don’t you know?!”

Agnes threw the flowers back at the squire and dashed past, leaping into the safety of her carriage. It seemed she’d accidentally made contact with the young man, however. A cluster of white mushrooms had just sprouted from the toe of his boot.

They looked like a clump of *Coprinellus disseminatus*. Agnes pretended she hadn’t noticed them.

The man was Philip’s squire, so either he already knew about Agnes’ strange fungal effect, or he’d be able to find out from Philip when he returned. Either way, it wasn’t her problem.

Agnes sighed as the horses set off at a fast trot.

What was Philip thinking? And why now?

Was he trying to apologize with flowers? Perhaps he’d been scolded for causing so much trouble, and this was a pathetic attempt to save face?

The pink flowers were very lovely, but even the prettiest bouquet lacks appeal when it’s a gift from someone you don’t care about.

The squire would no doubt invoke Philip’s wrath when he returned, flowers still in hand. But that wasn’t Agnes’s fault. She wasn’t obligated to accept Philip’s gift just to cover for a squire she didn’t know.

...I’m going to forget all about this unpleasantness. I have to get these skirts sold!

Agnes was still slightly irritated but did her best to put it out of her mind.

The skirts ended up selling for more than she’d expected, which was enough

to put her in a much better mood.



“HELLO.”

“...Hello.”

It was the squire with the black hair and russet-brown eyes again. He’d come back to her residence.

Or perhaps he’d never left. This time, however, he’d announced himself officially and been granted an audience with the head of the household.

Unfortunately, since both her father and Kevin were out, this meant that Agnes was obligated to receive him.

Philip may’ve been a philandering idiot, but he *was* still technically a royal. So Agnes couldn’t decline to receive an official royal squire, much less turn him away at the door.

What a disgusting example of class privilege.

Agnes sighed under her breath.

The man was seated across from her in the drawing room, but there was no sign of any mushrooms on the toes of his boots.

He must’ve plucked them off at some point. Either that or they fell off without him noticing.

If Philip hadn’t briefed him on Agnes’s mushroom issue, then the young man would’ve no doubt been most perplexed by the incident.

While Agnes was still idly wondering what had happened to the mushrooms, the young man placed a white envelope on the table between them.

“This is an official invitation to a ball. I was told to hand it directly to Count Lefort’s daughter.”

If Agnes accepted the invitation letter, it’d be unfeasible for her to decline attending the actual event later. Not after meeting with the messenger in person and actually taking possession of the envelope. No, it’d be the height of bad manners.

“...Our engagement’s over. There’s no reason for me to be invited to balls anymore.”

Agnes figured the best thing to do was decline straight away, without even picking up the envelope. But her words seemed to startle the young man. He shook his head earnestly.

“No, no, milady! This is not an invitation from Lord Philip but one from Prince Claude.”

“...Say what?”

Agnes brought her hand to her mouth quickly. *Goodness, I used commoner’s speech!*

It made no sense. And yet, why would a royal squire have been sent to tease and trick her?

This had to mean that she really *was* invited to a ball...and by Prince Claude himself. But that made even less sense.

“Either way, there’s no reason for me to be invited to royal balls anymore, so I respectfully decline.” Agnes shook her head firmly, but the young man began to look most panicked.

“Your attendance is strongly desired.”

“I shall decline.”

“Please...all you have to do is make a brief appearance.”

“Easier said than done. I’ve no ballgown to wear, anyway. So, you see, my hands are tied.”

Agnes went for stark honesty in the hopes of bringing this endless conversation to a swift conclusion. But the squire was relentless.

“You can just wear a regular dress.”

The young man was mistaken. He seemed to think Agnes was being precocious about not having anything fancy enough to wear. He was wrong.

“No, I mean I haven’t a single ballgown, party dress, or fancy frock to my name.”

“...I’m...sorry?” The young man’s jaw dropped. “Wh-Why not?”

“I intend to return to commoner life. I’ve already disposed of everything I’ll no longer need.”

The young man’s jaw dropped even lower. The goofy look on his face clashed with his refined features.

“I can’t possibly show up to a royal ball, attended by the royal family, wearing a shabby day dress, now, can I? So, you see, I must decline.”

“But...it’s still three days away. That’s still time for you to—”

“I’m going back to commoner life, so I can’t get a new dress tailored now. It’s completely out of the question.”

Agnes knew she wasn’t being proper, but this young squire was giving her no choice. Besides, she had her own life to live.

“Anyway, why am I being sent an invitation? My father is going to deal with everything involving the engagement dissolving, so I’ve got nothing to do with the royal family anymore.”

“Ah, no, it’s not about that. The prince wishes to speak with you.”

“Speak about what?”

“I...I think you should ask him directly.”

The squire was being vague. *Too* vague. Agnes got to her feet, struck with suspicion.

“Take this, please.”

The young man frowned as Agnes held out the white handkerchief she’d retrieved from her room.

“See? It’s fine. I haven’t done anything to it. Return it for me, would you? And tell the prince thank you very much for his assistance.”

Claude was another royal, just like Philip. But he *had* made her feel a bit better. She was grateful for that.

The royal family was probably worried she would try to use Claude’s handkerchief as a pretext to get close to the prince. The prince was unmarried

and always being swarmed by eager women. An errant handkerchief could cause a lot of problems.

So, that's the sort of woman they think I am, is it? Things with Philip didn't work out, so now I'm just moving on to the next royal prospect?

Agnes felt her hands ball into fists in irritation but decided to shake it off. The royal family was none of her business anymore.

She thrust the handkerchief into the squire's hand. Looking lost, the young man kept glancing back and forth between the handkerchief and her face.

Ah...I must've accidentally touched him! An Akamomitake mushroom just sprouted from his shoulder.

Actually, it was two caps that'd sprouted. They were a muted yellowish-orange color. *That's kind of strange. But luckily, he doesn't seem to notice them, so it's not my problem.*

The two mushroom caps seemed to have sprouted into each other and become damaged. Yellowish juice was seeping onto the young man's clothes. *But luckily, he hasn't noticed it yet, so that's not my problem either.*

"Please, take the handkerchief and leave at once."

Agnes stood up again and quickly left the room.

She'd no idea why Claude would want to invite her to a ball. But, since he'd gone so far as to have his squire officially call on her, he was probably serious. No doubt she hadn't heard the end of this.

Still, wake not a sleeping spirit and ye shall come to no harm, as the saying goes. More like tangle not with a royal and ye shall encounter no strife...

The best thing to do, she reckoned, was to leave the royal capital at once, before she brought any further trouble upon her household.

Agnes hurried off to her room. She could use the remaining fabric to make another skirt.



"AGNES. Apparently, a squire from the palace came to call on you...?"

As soon as Benoit returned home, he came right to see Agnes, who nodded.

Over tea, she explained what'd happened. As she spoke, the frown line between Benoit's eyebrows grew deeper and deeper.

"...But wouldn't it be very disrespectful to just decline?"

"It's the royal family whose reputation should be besmirched by these events! Philip was the one who paraded his mistress in a public forum, who broke off a royal engagement in a spurious manner, *and* the one who called his fiancée a 'fake' to her face at a royal ball, of all places. Philip behaved shamelessly. There's no reason I should have to go, and I would hope the royal family would understand that."

Agnes may have been a count's daughter, but she'd been born and raised a commoner. And Philip was a royal, albeit one on the outer fringes.

It was kind of a miracle that they'd ever be engaged in the first place.

However, both Philip and his mother had significant baggage.

First off, he'd be obligated to formally leave the royal family upon marriage. That was the key factor that made noblemen hesitant to push their daughters Philip's way.

Still, Philip would go on to inherit the rank of count. And he'd always be considered a treasured relative by the royal family. So, it wasn't *all* bad. But Philip's reputation also preceded him. He was spoiled and childish, and very few young women were willing to deal with *that* the rest of their lives.

Philip's mother was the king's younger sister, and she'd forfeited her title as a royal princess to marry a commoner. After the wedding, though, she'd backtracked, much to the people's ire. As a result, she too had a reputation for being difficult.

So naturally, no one had wanted to deal with Philip. With few options available to him, he'd eventually landed on Agnes.

"They probably only want me to go so they can use me as a scapegoat and make a public spectacle out of me. I need to disappear from the public's mind before any of this begins to negatively affect Kevin."

“But the invitation came from Prince Claude, not Philip. If he really wishes to speak with you, I think you’d better go and see what he wants.”

“I’ve nothing to discuss with Prince Claude or any other royal. Besides, all my dresses are gone now.”

“...Why do you always have to rush headlong into things, Agnes?”

“The early bird gets the worm! Anyway, all of my dresses were frightfully boring, thanks to Philip. I wouldn’t have wanted to keep wearing them, anyway.”

Benoit nodded sagely. He’d heard all about how Philip had ordered Agnes to dress down and tie back her extraordinary hair.

“I turned a blind eye to Philip’s controlling tendencies and the way he forced you to dress down...but now that he’s out of your hair for good, why not have some nice new things tailored? I’m happy to get you whatever catches your fancy.”

“Like I keep saying, I won’t *need* them. Can’t you just tell them I’m ill, Father? Tell them I’ve taken to my sickbed. Tell them anything you like.”

“You’ve been seen dashing about all over town. The lie will never stick. Not unless you really do stay in bed from now on. You know how you tend to stand out, wherever you go.”

It was true that Agnes’s bright pink hair drew curious stares wherever she went. And it was also true that she’d been out in town a lot lately, gathering funds for her return to commoner life.

“All right, I’ll stay at home for a few days and lay low.”

Maybe it’d be better for her family if she just agreed to go to the ball. Let the royal family satisfy themselves mocking her in public. Maybe then, they’d drop it.

The only thing was, Agnes didn’t think she could stomach any further humiliation.

Benoit sighed and finally nodded.

“All right, then. I have to say, I’m not a big fan of the royals at the moment

either, after how scandalously my precious daughter has been treated. But you'll have to stay out of sight at least until the day of the ball."



THREE days had passed since the royal squire's visit.

Agnes had spent all her time at home, diligently sewing in her room. She didn't have any more fabric pieces large enough for skirts, so instead, she'd made hair ribbons and other small accessories to use up the remaining material.

"...You really *have* become like a seamstress, haven't you?"

Kevin was sitting in Agnes's room with her again today, sipping tea as he watched her sew away. He was clearly keeping an eye on her, but she didn't mind. She was grateful to have someone to chat with as she worked.

"Thank you. But I've run out of dress material. I'm going to have to think of the next thing."

"What do you mean, the next thing?"

Agnes remained silent. She didn't want to have to deal with Kevin's reaction if she mentioned raising funds for commoner life again.

Just then, Therese came running into Agnes's room, all aflutter.

"Lady Agnes!"

Therese was always so calm, but now she looked frantic. Agnes was getting a bad feeling. She could almost feel the mushroom spores gathering.

"It's the royal squire..."

"*Ugh*, he's back again?"

"Yes, and more! He's here to take you away, Lady Agnes!"

"What?"

Agnes and Kevin exchanged confused looks.

But they had to go and greet the man. He *was* a royal squire, after all. And so, Agnes and Kevin left the room together and headed to the drawing room,

where they found the man with the russet-brown eyes talking to Benoit.

“Father? What’s going on here?”

“Agnes. This knight is to escort you to the ball.”

“What?”

Agnes had been sure the man was a palace squire. But apparently, he was actually a knight.

Why would a knight be running errands like a squire, though? Oh! But I’d heard that Claude was a knight. Perhaps this young man is one of his subordinates.

Agnes looked back and forth between the knight and her father. It was clear what’d happened here.

The palace had used its influence on her father.

Benoit knew that Agnes didn’t want to go. He would never have sold her out.

Therefore...he must’ve been threatened.

Agnes felt rage swell within her. As she glared at the young man, a large, yellowish-brown mushroom suddenly popped out of the top of his head.

Ah, Rugiboletus Extremiorientalis.

The mushroom had a distinctive large cap, about twice as wide as that of a human palm. The cap was covered all over with cracks and looked like a glazed loaf of bread.

The royal knight-squire looked ridiculous, as if he was just sitting there with a loaf of bread atop his head.

From the corner of her eye, Agnes could sense Kevin desperately trying to hold back a laugh.

Benoit remained poker-faced but shot Agnes a warning look and shook his head ever so slightly.

It would never do for her to cover the royal knight in mushrooms.

Agnes clenched her fists, trying to hold back her anger and suppress the

shrooms.

Actually, what she really wanted to do was give the young man a piece of her mind. But he *was* here on business for the royal family. And based on how persistent he'd been so far, it didn't seem like he was going to let up.

If Agnes lost it now, it'd only cause trouble for Benoit. And if she kept holding out, it'd only lead to further mushroom sproutings. The young knight would end up with half a bakery's worth of buns coming out of his head.

So...I should probably cave. Just this once.

If the royal family had threatened Benoit, the only reason Agnes could think of as to why he would've given in was if what they had threatened...was Agnes herself.

She couldn't trust this young man. Nor could she trust Prince Claude, the one who'd sent him. But she had to obey. For Benoit.

"...Very well, then." As Agnes growled these words in reluctant submission, the young man's eyes lit up with relief. "But as I told you last time, I have no ballgown. I'm going to have to go wearing this old day dress."

"That's fine. We will take care of matters on our end."

Take care of what on their end? Maybe the knight has permission from the royal family to bring me in my ordinary clothes...?

That wouldn't be much fun for Agnes, appearing amongst fancily dressed noblewomen in her shabby day dress.

Or perhaps he meant they'd give her a dress to wear at the palace.

Either way, Agnes was not pleased.

"My name is Maurice, Maurice Gounod. I shall escort you to the palace."

"...Agnes Lefort. I'd like to be returned home before it gets too late, if possible."

"Certainly."

Maurice bowed and Agnes took that opportunity to quickly snatch the mushroom off his head and chuck it to Kevin.

Maurice lifted his head, looking confused as he caught sight of the count's daughter flinging something large and round (that looked very much like a mushroom) across the room. Still, he brushed it off and escorted his charge to the royal carriage.

They were sitting on opposite sides of the carriage, but Agnes still felt extremely uncomfortable being alone with Maurice.

She'd flung herself inside as quickly as possible to avoid Maurice offering her a hand. Her unladylike behavior had drawn a raised eyebrow from the young knight, but that was preferable to any further impromptu fungal appearances.

Oh, but how uncomfortable it was being trapped in such close quarters with a man!

She never felt nervous around Benoit or Kevin, and as far as men she wasn't related to were concerned, only Philip had felt safe, too.

But she'd only met Maurice a few times. And she didn't like him very much.

Agnes sighed as two small orange mushrooms suddenly sprouted from Maurice's shoulder.

Hygrocybe conica. The Witch's Hat. They were slimy mushrooms, glistening in the dim light of the carriage.

She'd tried to hold the larger mushrooms at bay, hoping that if she let some small ones through, they'd be less noticeable. But this was still no good.

...In fact, this is bad. Very, very bad.

They were on their way to the palace. What would happen if the young man emerged covered in mushrooms when they got there?

And he wasn't a mere squire, but a royal knight. That was so much worse.

Most people knew about the existence of the protective spirits, but few had ever seen them in action.

If Agnes tried to explain the knight's shroomy appearance by blaming it on her protective spirits, that'd only serve to make her birth father's native country look bad. It could even cause a diplomatic issue.

That'd be very bad indeed...

And what was she to say if they asked her how exactly making mushrooms sprout on people was supposed to protect her from harm?

After all, the mushroom sprouting hardly fell under the definition of a curse.

Many of the mushrooms that sprouted were edible delicacies or had medicinal properties. They weren't *all* poisonous and slimy.

Agnes clenched her fists. She would do her best to let no more mushrooms sprout on the young man. *No more!*

"...Are you nervous?"

"No."

Agnes shook her head in a fluster, taken aback at being spoken to.

She *was* nervous, actually. But not the kind of nervous Maurice was expecting.

She was nervous about losing the tightly pitched battle of wills she was currently having against all manner of mushrooms, fungi, spores, and fungal filaments. *Can't he just shut up?*

Agnes clamped her lips tightly together and went back to concentrating. Maurice watched her with curiosity in his eyes but did not say another word until they reached the palace.



Mushrooms of the Day

Coprinellus Disseminatus

White-gray caps that are only about 1 centimeter in size. They grow in clusters.

They look like a white chocolate version of the Apollo chocolates you can buy in Japan. They're kinda cute!

They're not poisonous, but they don't seem to be edible, either. Maybe they just don't taste very nice...

Akamomitake

Bright orange caps. It sort of looks like a cross between a Shiitake and an oyster mushroom. It's got that "I could definitely eat that" look to it.

Apparently, it tastes good but is a little dry. I want to put it in a soup.

If you scratch it, a reddish-orange juice seeps out. I want to see that for myself.

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 loaf 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...

Hygrocybe Conica (The Witch's Hat)

Red, orange, or yellow caps around 1.5 to 5 centimeters. Shaped like a round umbrella.

It kind of looks like "Kinoko no Yama" chocolate cookies.

It can be poisonous, though, depending on the specimen. Let's just categorize it as poisonous.

Chapter 3: I Can't Hold Out Mush Longer!

UPON arriving at the palace, Agnes found herself surrounded by ladies-in-waiting. They hustled her into the bath, scrubbed her down, and then began dressing her.

She was too fatigued by her mushroom-repressing efforts in the carriage to make much protest. Besides, she didn't have to worry too much about women touching her. The mushroom effect seemed mostly confined to men.

Women didn't make Agnes nervous. And when Agnes was calm, she barely sprouted even the tiniest of toadstools.

The polishing, buffing, and dressing process *was* exhausting, though. Agnes wished she could just go home.

The dress that'd been prepared for her was lovely, a bright jade green color with white accents. The jade green was a close match for the color of Agnes's striking eyes, and it offset her peach-blossom-pink hair perfectly.

Luckily, the ballgown lacked any fussy embellishments like bows or frills but was instead covered in fine white floral embroidery, which was extremely charming.

It was obviously a very expensive gown indeed, made from the finest materials.

Agnes did some quick mental calculations to figure out how much the dress had cost. No doubt she was wearing something borrowed from a royal lady.

The thought terrified her. What if she got it dirty?

Agnes sighed. Then one of the ladies-in-waiting asked her how she wanted her hair styled.

Thanks to Philip's insistence, Agnes had been wearing her hair in prim buns and braids for so long that she hadn't even worn any hairpins or combs. She never thought of it as "styling" her hair, so much as doing her best to "conceal"

it.

But there was no need to be bound by old rules anymore. So Agnes decided to wear her hair down, loose and flowing.

It was bright pink, the color of peach blossom, a token of her father's blood. Her father, who'd come from another land.

It wasn't considered an attractive color at all in *this* land, though. Philip had always nagged her to do what she could to downplay it. No doubt Claude wouldn't like it, either.

But so what? What is Claude going to do? Tell me to leave at once? Gladly!

The lady-in-waiting doing Agnes's hair added a small braid on one side and fastened it with a jade hair comb. The rest of it was left to cascade freely over her shoulders.

No doubt the lady-in-waiting herself was disgusted by Agnes's pink hair. Agnes felt herself cringe, just a little.

She was then led into a room and left alone to wait. Before long, the door opened, and Maurice entered.

The mushrooms were gone from his shoulder now.

Agnes didn't know if he'd plucked them himself or if someone else had done it for him. Either way, she was glad they were gone. She couldn't stomach seeing mushrooms right now.

"You look very nice, Lady Agnes."

"Uh-huh. Thanks."

But why was Maurice attending to her like this? It wasn't an appropriate duty for a royal knight. He probably didn't want to be doing it either.

But Agnes wasn't sure why he was. Was it royal pressure? A direct order from above? A favor for a comrade in arms? All she knew was that Maurice would stop at nothing to bring her, as long as that was what Claude wanted.

Again...what a disgusting example of class privilege.

Agnes couldn't help feeling bad for Maurice just a little. She also felt bad

about the mushroom thing.

“Anyway, whose dress is this I’m borrowing?”

“Borrowing? His Royal Highness had that dress custom-made just for you, Lady Agnes.”

Agnes stiffened with shock. *Goodness!*

That’d mean the dress had been ordered, cut, sewn, and adjusted in the three days that’d passed since Maurice had first shown up at the Lefort estate. A skilled and fast-working seamstress could theoretically fill a rush order in that time for the right price, but a brand-new dress in three days was almost unheard of!

The dress was tied with a ribbon in the back, its only adjustable point. The rest of it seemed to have almost been tailored with the exact contours of Agnes’s body in mind.

Filled with a sudden sinking feeling, Agnes realized that a white mushroom was about to sprout from Maurice’s shoulder again. No, not just one...a whole cluster of them, with dangling finger-like pieces that hung down like weeping willows. From a distance, it looked like Maurice’s shoulder was completely covered in shaggy white fur.

Ah, Hericium Erinaceus. The Lion’s Mane.

Actually, it looked more like...a mop head. A very distinctive fungus indeed.

“...Why, though?”

“...Why? But you said it yourself, Lady Agnes. You said you’d no dress to wear to the ball and that was why you could not attend.”

“I don’t mean *that*. I mean...why do I have to attend at *all*, anyway? My engagement with Philip is ancient history. I no longer have any connections to the royal family at all. You haven’t brought me here to be publicly shamed as a scapegoat just because I was once engaged to a royal, have you?”

“Is that...*really* why you think you were invited?”

Maurice was gazing at Agnes with a look of shock on his face, eyelashes fluttering rapidly.

“Well, what else?”

“You do realize that it was Prince Claude who invited you?”

“Yes, but maybe he’s in on it. Maybe it’s all part of a plot to help restore the royal reputation.”

Maurice shook his head rapidly.

“No, no, no. Goodness, what an idea. Events may have...transpired, events that involve you. But the royal family would never treat a young woman so callously.”

“Uh...but you dragged me here without even listening when I said no.”

“Yes, and I *do* apologize for that. But it really is simply to talk. Nothing untoward will happen to you, Lady Agnes.”

“Well, can’t you at least tell me what he wants to talk to me *about*?”

Another clump of *Hericium Erinaceus* mushrooms sprouted on Maurice’s shoulder, making the mop head quite large indeed by now. By some miracle, he didn’t seem to notice it.

Hmm, he could do with a clump on the other side just for some symmetry, thought Agnes. And then, as if on cue, another bunch of the white stringy shrooms sprung up on Maurice’s other shoulder.

Now Maurice was standing there with big shaggy puffs on both shoulders, looking like *whatsits...epaulets. Like the ones you see on a military uniform.*

This was *not* good.

At this rate, Maurice would be more mushroom than man.

Well, at least he would look stylish.

Agnes’s mushroom sprouting powers were sparked by her fear of men, yes, but also when she felt strong emotions. She took a deep breath, imploring herself to calm down.

“So I’m guessing the reason you made me put on this dress is because you want me to attend the ball, *hmm*?”

“Your attendance would be most welcome.” Maurice smiled and nodded, his

mushroom-mop-epaulets swaying merrily.

Indeed, they looked nicely symmetrical and framed his face. No doubt the mushrooms had responded to Agnes's feelings of sympathy for the young knight.

Evidently, the mushroom effect was growing stronger.

Agnes had no idea why but, if she carried on at this rate, Claude would end up as one giant mushroom cluster.

Ah, but maybe I should just go ahead. Turn him into the Prince of Mushrooms and drive him away from me for good...

"Oh, but that might lead to repercussions for my family..." she murmured.

"Repercussions? What's all this about?"

The door opened and a man with Prussian-blue hair entered the room. He wore a navy-blue uniform that seemed to have been chosen to complement his hair. He looked very commanding and manly in it.

Agnes got up to bow, but Claude waved a dismissive hand. Maurice went over to him and handed him something, which seemed to make him smile.

The prince really *was* handsome. Even Agnes (who was *SO* not interested) found that she couldn't keep her eyes off his noble-looking face. Then she clocked the bouquet of flowers he was holding, and immediately her spirits sunk with a negative premonition.

A mushroom-clustered premonition.

The flowers were a slightly deep shade of pink. The color was very close to that of Agnes's hair. She couldn't help noticing that, but desperately hoped no one else would pick up on her noticing it.

"Um, those flowers are a very...*striking* color..."

"I chose them to match the color of your hair. I was torn between these and ones an even deeper shade of pink, but it looks like my hunch was correct. Great!"

"There's nothing great about it!"

Agnes gasped. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. But Claude only chuckled wryly.

"I'm terribly sorry for dragging you here like this. But I was desperate to speak with you. By the way, you certainly look different today. That dress looks like it was made for you."

Claude narrowed his eyes with evident visual pleasure, which made Agnes blink in astonishment. *Ah, but of course.* The last time they met, she'd been dressed according to Philip's personal taste. Hair scraped back in a tight bun to hide it as much as possible. A drab, amber-brown dress. And only the smallest, plainest, dullest jewelry.

No doubt Claude was only commenting on the difference between...*that* and this new colorful look.

"Why did you have a dress prepared for me?" she asked.

"I heard you wouldn't have time to procure a new dress for yourself. So I had one tailored for you. Don't you like it?"

"Never mind that. The point is that I don't need a dress at all. I'm about to return to life as a commoner woman, so I'd prefer it if you hadn't wasted the money."

If the dress was funded from the royal coffers, that'd be bad enough. But what if Claude had paid for it out of his own pocket?

As Agnes delivered this mini-lecture on the subject of misspent funds, Claude's eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown.

"A commoner woman? Whatever are you talking about?"

Agnes sighed. Clearly, he hadn't the slightest clue about her situation and its gritty reality.

"You were there, Your Highness. You saw it all go down. Now I'm considered damaged goods. I cannot expect a fortuitous union to come my way any longer. I must return to commoner life before I bring disgrace upon my brother. I must do whatever I can to bolster my family name, even in the smallest of ways."

"You haven't done anything wrong. It's *Philip* who can't keep it in his pants

and decided to concoct that whole lie about you not being the one for him.”

“If you feel even the slightest bit of sympathy for me, then please, send me back home! I don’t wish to bring any more shame upon my family!”

Agnes was beginning to feel almost hopeful. At the very least, it looked like Claude wasn’t the type to defend a man like Philip, family ties or not.

She gazed at Claude with pleading eyes.

After a protracted silence, Claude heaved a deep sigh.

“...I’m afraid you seem to be under a hugely mistaken impression. At any rate, the ball is due to begin any moment. We can save the discussion for later.”

Claude offered Agnes his hand.

Was he for real? Popular prince though he might be, surely even *he* wouldn’t be so brazen as to flirt with her? She was his cousin’s ex-fiancée!

“Please attend the ball as my partner.”

“...Why?”

“Because I *want* you to be my partner. I’ll explain everything afterward.”

His sharp, unblinking gaze was focused squarely on Agnes.

“...Then this isn’t about sending me in there alone to be the laughingstock of the evening?” she asked.

“Heavens no.”

“Then promise me that you won’t lie to me...that you won’t betray me.”

Agnes knew that she really shouldn’t be speaking to a royal prince this way. But without his promise, she couldn’t bear to accompany him. She was too afraid.

“Of course.”

Agnes was expecting him to be offended, but he simply nodded with a solemn expression on his face. It looked like she’d no way out of this. She’d no choice but to trust him.

There was another major issue, though.

“And also...could you promise not to touch me?”

“Of course. I’ll try to avoid any extraneous physical contact.”

Claude nodded understandingly. It looked like Agnes hadn’t explained herself well enough.

“No, I don’t mean like *that*. I mean...don’t touch me at all. Not even my hand.”

Claude’s face fell slightly.

Agnes had been expecting indignance or anger. Not this hangdog expression.

“But how else will I escort you?”

Ah, he has a point there.

It’d be very difficult to escort Agnes to the ballroom, never mind dance with her, without holding her hand.

“...Fine. I guess it’d be quicker just to show you.”

Agnes held out her hand and Claude took hold of it without hesitation.

A mushroom sprouted on his arm with an audible pop. Its orange-yellow cap was studded with little flakes. And it glistened in a somewhat slimy way.

“...What’s this?”

As Claude watched, wide-eyed, Agnes reached out and plucked off the mushroom.

“A single stalk of *Pholiota Flammans*. The Flame Scalecap. *Hmm...* I think I could live with that.”

Agnes could gauge how frightening a man truly was to her, based purely on the number and variety of the mushrooms she produced on him. She could also predict what future mushroom effects the man in question could expect to be afflicted with.

This particular mushroom...there was much debate as to whether or not it was edible or poisonous. She didn’t like Claude very much. That was clear. But she also didn’t seem to find him particularly frightening.

After everyone had a good look at it, Maurice stepped forward to take the mushroom.

She couldn't possibly show up to the ball clutching one, after all.

"It's a pretty color, but it's probably not edible. Could be highly poisonous. Please don't try to eat it. Incidentally, though, that Lion's Mane is edible."

Agnes pointed to Maurice's mushroom-mop epaulets. Startled, Maurice quickly plucked them off his shoulders.

Claude stared at the cluster of mushrooms overflowing from Maurice's hands for a second. Then he returned his gaze to Agnes.

"You...*made* these?"

"I don't do it on purpose... I know, it's gross. So I really think you should let me go home! Otherwise, the ballroom might end up covered in mushrooms..."

"So, if someone touches you...at any time...mushrooms like this will sprout on them?"

Agnes knew how gross and creepy it was to become human mushroom mulch just from the simple touch of her hand. She didn't relish this opportunity to be the cause of disgust on the face of a handsome young man. But she figured it was better for Claude to know what her deal was. This was faster than trying to explain it, anyway.

"But it doesn't happen every single time I touch someone. And it won't happen at all, as long as you keep your distance. I mean, I can suppress it sometimes, to an extent, but..."

"All right, we can work around it. If any mushrooms happen to sprout in the ballroom, well, that'd be just fanta—that'd be fine. I'll run damage control. I promise it won't reflect badly on you in any way. So...will you come, then?"

Now Agnes was the one too shocked to speak.

She was so sure Claude would be disgusted and send her home at once. Also, she thought she heard him say something...weird.

But Agnes had no more compelling counterarguments left. Claude just kept steamrolling her. So, she had no choice.

Eventually, she gave the prince a grudging nod. His face lit up, as if both pleased and relieved.



THE moment they stepped into the ballroom, Agnes felt all eyes on her.

She felt immediately self-conscious. But she wasn't imagining it.

Who wouldn't stare, taking in the combo of a jilted royal ex-fiancée and the handsome prince without a single bad rumor to his name?

Custom dictated that Claude needed to escort her, so Agnes allowed him to lead her. It was exhausting, though, since she needed to concentrate all her energy on mushroom suppression.

It was also embarrassing, being escorted like she was a lady. But she'd no real grounds for fighting against it, so she just endured it.

Or at least, she *planned* to.

But she was so nervous and uncomfortable.

She was terrified that a large volume of mushrooms might suddenly start sprouting up all over the place.

"Lady Agnes, may I ask you to dance?"

"...Do I have a choice?"

Claude laughed awkwardly.

"If you'd like, I can get down on one knee and ask you..."

"D-Don't even joke about that, please!"

Agnes could only imagine the kind of rumors that'd go around if this prince got down on one knee in front of her. Especially after she'd already been jilted publicly by a different royal.

"Then you'll dance with me. Right?"

"...Fine."

He was manipulating her with mild threats.

Did he forget about my mushroom powers already?

Claude beamed at Agnes as she silently danced with him, the corners of her mouth downturned.

Was his plan to annoy me all along? Maybe he's actually some kind of fungus fetishist or something. Well, too bad!

Even if he *was* a mushroom enthusiast, there was no way Agnes was going to let them sprout in a formal public setting like this. She was already known as a jilted woman. She refused to be known as a jilted, *mushroom* woman.

Agnes pressed her lips so tightly together in concentration as she danced that they turned white.

"You look strained."

"I'm concentrating. Don't talk to me."

Before she could finish growling out the words, though, a white mushroom sprouted on the back of Claude's white-gloved hand. Still dancing, Claude plucked it off and quickly stashed it in his pocket.

Agnes only caught a glimpse of it, but it looked like *Amanita Cokeri*. She recognized the distinctive splinters in the stalk and the warty bits on the cap. It looked like an all-white version of the *Amanita Muscaria*. An unusual and stunning specimen, to be sure. But Claude didn't miss a beat.

Despite herself, Agnes was impressed with his quick handling of the mushroom. At this rate, though, Claude's pockets would soon be overflowing with them.

Agnes pressed her lips together even more tightly.

Just as she was about to snap, unable to suppress the shrooms for even a second more, the music suddenly ended.

Agnes flung herself away from Claude and took several gasping breaths. Claude, meanwhile, was looking at her with an unreadable expression on his face.

Agnes regretted her rudeness, but she wished he'd give her a break. *I'm doing my best here, after all!*

A squire came up just then, no doubt having timed his intrusion to coincide

with the dance's end. The man whispered something in Claude's ear. Whatever it was, it caused one of Claude's eyebrows to shoot up independent of the other.

"...All right, I understand."

Claude nodded, casually plucking another errant stalk of *Amanita Cokeri* that'd sprouted from his thigh and stashing it in his pocket.

The squire blinked in surprise to see the prince with a mushroom in his hand, but he nonetheless backed off and politely left.

"I've been summoned to see my father. I won't be long."

"Oh, I see."

"Would you accompany me, Lady Agnes?"

"No way— I mean, no, thank you, Your Highness."

Agnes gulped. *Nice save.*

But still, what was he *thinking*? After being cheated on and jilted by one of the royal nephews, why in the blazes would she want to see the king?

"I would hate anything to happen to you in my absence. I'll summon Maurice."

"Er, no thanks. I'll be fine."

She'd already made enough of a spectacle of herself. She didn't need to be seen in the company of yet *another* man.

"In that case, please remain in the ballroom. If you need anything, ask one of my squires. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Agnes watched him go, silently grinning to herself.

This was her chance! She had to get changed as quickly as possible and hotfoot it home!

"...But where's the dang changing room?"

She could always go door to door searching for it. But it'd never do to be spotted roaming around the palace. She might even be mistaken for a party-

crasher.

And, if she skipped out on Claude and went home without saying anything, no doubt there'd be some sort of negative repercussions...

"But I can't stay here like this..."

"Agnes! What are you doing here?!"

That horribly familiar voice was the last thing she felt like hearing right now.

Agnes looked over to see Philip, her ex-fiancé, standing there with his yellowish-brown hair and dark gray eyes. Naturally, the simpering woman from last time was once again clinging to his arm. Her golden-brown hair looked very curly and pretty again today. And her crimson dress offset her verdure-green eyes well.

Agnes had been pressured to tie up her hair and wear drab dresses, but *this* woman had clearly been given free rein to dress in vibrant colors.

Was it because Philip hated Agnes's hair that much? Or was it because this woman was the one he believed was his soulmate?

Either way, it was infuriating.

Even Philip's technically handsome, royal-adjacent features looked ugly and annoying to Agnes now.

Ooh, I'd love to cover him from head to toe with the slimiest, wartiest, ugliest mushrooms I could come up with.

"Why are you here? I was very clear about our engagement being over."

"Yeah, you were."

They were still engaged on paper, but the arrangements to dissolve their engagement had been filed already. A few more days and it'd all be officially over.

"You and I have zero connection," he stressed.

"Precisely. So do me a favor and don't come up and talk to me, okay?"

Agnes jerked her head as if to say: *Go on then, get lost!* ...To which Philip heaved a sigh.

“You don’t have to act so tough.”

“Huh?”

“You’re still in love with Lord Philip, aren’t you?” The girl clung even more tightly to Philip’s arm as she delivered this “sympathetic” remark.

Ew. Get a room. There has to be plenty available here. Anyway, what’s she talking about? Still in...love?

She’d *never* been in love with Philip.

Philip had only ever ascended to the level of “like an annoying younger brother, but still technically royalty” in Agnes’s eyes. This grudging acceptance of him as a person had been cultivated through years of getting to know him but been smashed into smithereens the moment he jilted her.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she stated bluntly.

“Well then, why *else* are you here? You don’t even have a dance partner,” the woman said, barely suppressing the mockery in her voice.

This dope seemed to truly think that Agnes had forced her way into the ball as some sort of ploy to get back with Philip.

Ridiculous! Philip cheated on me! Which this little strumpet ought to know better than anyone else, being the other party involved!

“I was forced to attend against my will. But I am now leaving. As I said...don’t talk to me, please.”

Agnes’s emotions usually only made mushrooms sprout on men. But when she was *really* angry, they sometimes sprouted on women as well.

Covering Philip with mushrooms *would* be a hoot. But there might be unforeseen repercussions if she did it to his new fiancée.

“Not only have you been rejected by me, but you’ve got the manners of a vicious shrew. No one will want you like that. You may be pretty, but don’t think *that’s* going to be enough to save you. After all, what’s with that hair of yours? I keep telling you to tie it back. And that makeup—”

“You’re not my fiancée anymore. You have no right to nitpick my

appearance.”

“Whether I’m your fiancé or not, you *still* ought to do as I say,” Philip said with all seriousness.

“Excuse me?”

Agnes stared at Philip with disbelief.

Talking with him...was nothing but a waste of breath. She knew he was foolish and fickle, but to think he was this delusional as well...

Goodness, I really dodged a bullet, didn't I?

“Oh, Lord Philip. I *do* feel sorry for poor Lady Agnes, though. I’m sure she doesn’t even realize how *vile* her hair color is. Nor does she appreciate the way you’ve always looked out for her.”

“How sweet you are, Sabina...”

Sweet? She’s not being sweet. She’s being a snarky witch. In fact, she could hardly be any more obvious.

So...the woman’s name is Sabina. She must be Sabina Barthet, then.

Philip was only a fringe royal, but he’d break with the royal family and become a count upon marriage.

The Marquis Barthet’s eldest son and heir had passed away a year ago, so it followed that the daughter, Sabina, would have to marry and have a son to pass the title on to.

Ah, it all made sense. Rather than becoming a mere count and marrying Agnes, Philip would do much better for himself if he were to marry into the family of a marquis. That would prove so much more beneficial to Philip than it would for him to simply find his one true love or “Dragonmate.”

“Wait, Agnes!”

Agnes was about to leave, disgusted, when Philip called her back.

“What? What do you *want*?”

“What did you *really* come here for? I swear, I’ll never take you back.”

“Good. I don’t want *you* back, either. Anyway, I didn’t come here because I wanted to. Oh...and Philip? Could you do me a favor and ask that lady-in-waiting over there to help me get changed and send me back home?”

Being sent home by royal summons! Yes, no one could argue with that. I am a genius!

Philip may’ve been a philandering fool, but she could still put him to some use.

“...What?” Philip frowned, as if she’d said something completely insane.

“In all honesty, I need to go home immediately before it’s too late, but I can’t find the room where I was dressed earlier. Please! Send me out of this palace! Use your fringe-royal connections!”

Philip *was* the kind of man to dump his fiancée and raise a stink in public. Kicking her out of the ball would be right in his wheelhouse.

If Agnes left of her own accord, she could end up in trouble. But if she was *forced* to leave upon the order of a royal, then she’d have the perfect excuse.

“Fringe-royal? How *dare* you! And what are you even talking about? What do you mean, the room where you were dressed?”

“I was dragged to the palace against my will. This dress isn’t even mine!”

“You were dragged here and *given* a dress?”

The crease between Philip’s brows was growing deeper and deeper. Sabina also frowned, seeing the perplexed look on her beau’s face.

“Anyway, just do me a favor and start screaming, would you? Get really hysterical. ‘Guards! Send this wench home at once!’ You know, just be your *usual* charming self. Go on then!”

Philip took a step back in shock, but Sabina quickly stepped forward, a confrontational expression on her face.

“Stay away from Lord Philip! How dare you show such disrespect?!”

Sabina shot Agnes a menacing glare, then grabbed and yanked on her arm.

Agnes stumbled, surprised by the sudden strength of Sabina’s grip. That was

when someone reached out and steadied her by the shoulders.

“What *are* you doing?”

The voice sounded extremely angry. Agnes looked up just in time to see Claude knock Sabina’s hand away from her.

“Prince Claude... I’m...I’m afraid Lady Agnes has been *very* rude to poor Lord Philip! I, personally, am frightened for my safety...!”

Sabina simpered at Claude in a sickly-sweet voice, the snarl of a few seconds ago now replaced by an angelic smile. Agnes was almost impressed.

Sabina continued to gaze at Claude, cheeks pinkening. She seemed to have somewhat forgotten about Philip, her so-called “soulmate.”

“Even if that *were* true, you’ve no right to tug on Lady Agnes’s arm in such a manner. Are you all right, Lady Agnes?”

Agnes nodded absently as Claude gazed into her face with concern.

“Thank you, I’m perfectly fine. But I wish you hadn’t interrupted. Lord Philip was just about to have me thrown out.”

“What?”

“But now you’re here, that’s even better. Please drive me from this ballroom, Your Highness!”

Claude, Philip, and Sabina were all looking at her as if she had two heads.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I want to go home. Really, really badly. I can’t take mush— I can’t take much more of this. The *mushrooms*...”

“Lady Agnes, you’re being extremely rude to Prince Claude as well. And whatever are you talking about? What mushrooms?”

Sabina clamped her hand down on Agnes’s arm again, but this time Agnes was the one to violently shake her off.

Under the circumstances, even Sabina’s gender wouldn’t save her. Agnes was so disgusted and annoyed by her theatrics, in fact, that it wouldn’t surprise her if Sabina ended up a walking mushroom head.

The only one with the status and power to fix this situation was Claude.

“Please summon the guards and have me handed over to them. Tell them to escort me off the premises! Oh, but make sure to let them know not to touch me. I can walk on my own two feet, after all.”

“Whatever is this strange girl talking about...?” Sabina’s lips were curling in disgust.

Philip looked sickened, too. Agnes wanted to scream: *You know the deal, Philip! You know better than anyone else here!*

Claude looked around at everyone, finally sighing a little.

“I... I want to talk to you for a moment first. Come with me.”

“If I say no, are you gonna force me?”

Agnes had forgotten all of her manners and her polite speech. But she didn’t care. She was exhausted from trying to suppress the mushrooms.

Still, Claude didn’t seem bothered by this at all.

“I promised, didn’t I?”

In fact, Claude was speaking in soothing tones designed to placate Agnes. Yes, he promised never to lie to or deceive her.

“So please, trust me. And hear what I have to say.”

As he gazed at her with those dark gray eyes, Agnes felt her irritation and anxiety begin to quiet down somewhat.

“...Fine.”



Mushrooms of the Day

Amanita Cokeri

A white mushroom with big warty bits on it. The stalk is flaky.

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!

Amanita Muscaria

Red caps with white polka dots. Like the poisonous mushrooms you find drawn in storybooks.

It's cute...but I wouldn't want to eat it.

Chapter 4: The Worst Proposal in History

AGNES left the still-grumbling, gruesome twosome behind and followed Claude out of the ballroom into a different room down the hall.

The room was ostentatiously large and sumptuously decorated, even though there was nothing in there but a table and sofas. A typical show of wealth and power within the royal palace.

Claude gestured for Agnes to sit, which she did. Claude sat down on the sofa on the opposite side of the table.

Maurice had popped up out of nowhere the second they left the ballroom and was now standing on guard near the door.

A maid came in and served them tea before swiftly exiting.

“...So...what do you want to talk to me about?” Agnes asked.

“Before that...why were you arguing with Philip and the Barthet girl?”

“They’re the ones who started it. The ‘Barthet girl,’ as you call her, accused me of coming to the ball alone to get Philip back.”

Just thinking about it made her blood boil all over again.

What could’ve ever given Philip’s silly side-piece that crazy impression...?

“So...do you? Want Philip back, I mean.”

“Not even in a million years. I don’t even want to be around him, much less be forced into a conversation with him again.”

Agnes scoffed at the prospect of her pining over Philip. For some reason, she thought Claude looked...*relieved*.

“Your Highness, why *did* you bring me here? You being seen with me doesn’t reflect well on the royal family. And it’s risky too, what with the mushroom effect and everything...”

“You hate being escorted to a ball by me *that* much?”

“No, no, it’s not about you personally. It’s just that I’ve made up my mind not to involve myself in high society events anymore. It’s the *ball* that’s the issue, not you.”

Claude narrowed his eyes a little as he let her words sink in.

“I... I see. Incidentally, you keep talking about ‘commoner life,’ but...are you really serious about that?”

“Yes. I’m damaged goods, so I’ve decided this is the best option to avoid bringing further strife to my family.”

“Your family... So Count Lefort is on board with this plan?”

Oh, goodness! He found my Achilles’ heel.

“My family is very kind. So, of course, they’ve tried to stop me. My father asked me to reconsider, but...”

“Then there’s no need to go through with it.”

“No, that’s only made me more determined than ever to leave home. I can’t keep letting them indulge me! And I refuse to scupper my younger brother’s future prospects.”

“Why do you think you’re damaged goods?”

“I was engaged to a royal then got cheated on and dumped by him in front of the ton. And I earned myself a reputation as a complaining, shrewish woman for talking back to him. No good marriage offers will come for me after all that.”

Of course, it was philandering Philip and simpering Sabina who were the ones at fault here. But not only was Philip a lousy man with male privilege, but he was also a fringe royal. There was a huge chance people would pin the blame on her even if she was completely faultless.

Her peach-blossom hair was a huge negative against her in this country. She could *totally* see people siding with Philip just because of her hair.

“Anyway, what concerns me most is my younger brother’s image. He’s only just made his official debut into society this season. No one will want to marry him if they know he’s got a sister like me. I’ll be considered a black stain on the family name.”

“So, arguing with Philip today... Was that supposed to make any of this better?”

Agnes cringed. *Wow, Claude knows just what sore spots to poke.*

“Well...no... But I told him to leave me alone. I told him multiple times! ...I messed up. I should’ve just ignored him. Ignored them both. Walked off.”

“That may have only drawn even more attention to you.”

True. With her peach-blossom hair flowing loose today, Agnes had no hope of trying to do anything under the radar.

“I wasn’t going to appear at high society events anymore. I even disposed of all my dresses... You just dragged me here for fun, didn’t you? What other reason would you have to put me in this fancy dress...? Or...was it your plan all along to make me a public scapegoat for restoring Philip’s reputation?”

If that was Claude’s plan, then I played right into it by arguing with Philip. How pitiful...

But Claude shook his head, looking alarmed.

“No. I would never do that. I certainly wouldn’t have had a ballgown made for you or escorted you as a dance partner if that *was* my plan.”

True, Agnes thought. *That would’ve just been a waste of money.*

“Then were you trying to smooth over the scandal by making it seem like everyone was fine with this situation? That it was all just water under the bridge? Sorry, but you should have told me beforehand if that was your plan. I can’t muster up even a fake smile for the likes of Philip, you know.”

“No, Philip has nothing to do with it. *I* wanted to see you again. *I* wanted to talk to you.”

Agnes blinked blankly at Claude. She hadn’t been expecting *that*.

“...What for? I already returned the handkerchief the other day. Don’t worry, I’m not going to try to cause any issues for you.”

“Issues?”

“I mean, I wasn’t planning to use it as a pretext to get close to you or

anything. I know you're a highly eligible bachelor, sought after by all the young single ladies. But I'm not like that."

"A highly *eligible* bachelor?"

As Claude muttered her words under his breath, Agnes suddenly realized what she was doing. She was talking about Prince Claude—second in line to the throne—like he was a piece of juicy meat.

"I...I do apologize for my brazen word choice."

"No, no, it's fine. But you're a young, single lady too, aren't you? Do you also think I'm an eligible bachelor?"

As he gazed at her with those dark-gray eyes, she realized she could hear her pulse pounding in her ears.

Handsome young men are so dangerous...

An ochre-colored mushroom sprouted on Claude's chest just then, as if reacting to Agnes's rapid heartbeat.

It looked, she thought, like *Marasmius Maximus*.

Thin stalks with ruffled, floppy caps like little umbrellas.

"...Well, yes. You're handsome and royal-bred, with incredible prospects. Any woman would be blessed to secure a position as your wife."

"I see."

Claude was grinning as he plucked off the mushroom. Agnes had spoken matter-of-factly, but he seemed extremely tickled by her assessment.

"You're not...mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"I was pretty rude just then. And then...the mushroom..."

"Well, you didn't *mean* it to be offensive, did you? And it's not like you sprouted this on purpose, right?"

Claude was twirling the *Marasmius Maximus* playfully between his fingers, gazing at it.

Maybe the mushroom is enjoying Claude's attention...

"No, I didn't do it on purpose. I might look the part, but I'm not actually a young noblewoman. I don't think you've heard, but I was raised as a commoner. I didn't want to cause a fuss, so I went along with the marriage talks concerning Philip and me. And I did my best to try to please him. But now I don't need to do that anymore. I think I let my tongue get too loose now that the pressure is off. I apologize."

Agnes bowed her head low, peeking up at Claude from beneath her lashes.

"So...are we done? If so, I'd like to leave at once..."

"We've only just begun."

"Ugh!"

Agnes couldn't help letting out a groan of frustration that made Claude chuckle.

"I've been fixated on you since we first met. I just *had* to see you again."

"...There you go again, using all kinds of misleading words...words that only lead to misunderstandings."

Agnes frowned, unimpressed by Claude's decidedly non-royal-appropriate behavior.

"What *kind* of misunderstandings?"

"The way you phrased that, it sounds like you want me to think you might *like* me or something. I have to say, I don't much appreciate it. I advise you to rethink how you talk in the future, or you could end up in unpleasant situations."

Agnes knew plenty of young women who'd lose their minds and betray their own flesh and blood over just a few words like that from Claude.

But Claude simply sat and gazed at Agnes, as if completely unconcerned.

"If that's what you think, well...you're right. I'm interested in you. If I wasn't, I never would've invited you here, had a dress made for you, or danced with you at the ball."

“...Wait, what?” Agnes stiffened, trying to process what he was saying.

“I want to invite you back again. And be your dance partner again. I’ll have another dress prepared for you. Would you wear it for me?”

“Wh-Why would you—”

“You threw away all your dresses, didn’t you? I can’t have you using that as an excuse not to come.”

“That’s not it... Why would you...want *me*?”

Claude sighed deeply. The distrust on Agnes’s face was blatantly obvious.

“...All right, I’ll be frank. It was love at first sight.”

Agnes stared at the handsome man with the dark-gray eyes. None of this was registering with her at all.

Then, Claude put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a handful of mushrooms. She recognized the ones he must’ve plucked off during the dance. But there were others there too, looking slightly shriveled.

Agnes leaned in, curious. Claude held the mushrooms out for her to see.

“I *love* mushrooms. I fell for these mushrooms at first sight.”

“You...*what*?”

Now Agnes was *really* lost. She gazed at Claude, her jaw hanging uselessly.

Claude beamed, still reverently clutching the mushrooms. Agnes’s shock didn’t seem to have bothered him at all.

“The colors, the shine...the little warty bits...the little ruffles! The size of them, the way they feel to the touch...it’s all sheer perfection! I’ve never encountered such magnificent mushrooms as these in all my life!”

Claude’s voice was growing louder and louder with excitement. Agnes had no idea what to do.

“Um, sorry, but...what are you *on* about?”

“I keep telling you! I’m crazy for these mushrooms!”



As Claude gazed adoringly at the clump of shrooms in his hand, Agnes suddenly realized what was going on.

Oh no! He's a pervert with a major mushroom fetish!

Now she recognized the shriveled ones. Those were the mushrooms she'd sprouted on Claude as she was leaving the last ball, the one where Philip dumped her.

The red caps with the white dots...Amanita Muscaria.

It was weird enough that he'd been carrying mushrooms around in his pockets for days like this, but to talk about being in...love with them...

Here she was thinking he was some amazing catch, but no. He was an amazing...creep!

"...I see. Well, I wish you and those mushrooms every happiness together. I have to be leaving now."

Touch not a royal and ye shall awaken no mushroom fetishist.

Agnes hurriedly got up off the sofa, figuring it was better to make a quick exit. But Claude looked up at her in shock, still clutching the mushrooms.

"Wait! Where are you going? I'm not finished talking with you yet."

"No, no, I wouldn't dream of intruding on you and your mushrooms! I'm going home."

"No, you can't!"

Claude placed the mushroom clump on the table, leaped to his feet, and strode up to Agnes. Grasping her hands in his, he watched intently as two little grayish-colored mushrooms popped up on the backs of his white gloves.

The stalks looked like skewers of wood, with horse saddles on top. It was undoubtedly, Agnes realized, *Helvella Crispa*. Also known as Elfin Saddles.

Claude showed no shock or disgust at the sight of the sprouting mushrooms. Instead, his features were alit with delight.

"I've never *heard* of a woman with the power to grow such incredible mushrooms!"

Well, of course he hasn't!

There *were* no other women who could make mushrooms grow on other people. Agnes was the only one.

Agnes found herself cringing away from him in distaste, even as he held on tighter.

“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?”

His dark-gray eyes were terrifyingly serious as they gazed at Agnes.

This has to be the worst proposal in the history of proposals! How can such deranged thoughts lurk in the mind of someone with such a refined face?

The Mushroom Prince had sunk like a stone in Agnes’s estimation. Now she’d slapped the mental label of “deranged and quite possibly dangerous” on him.

“Look, if it means *that* much to you, why don’t you marry your little mushroom harvest? Congratulations on the happy union! Bye-bye now!”

I have to get away. Far away. And fast! He’s perverted! Really, dangerously, grossly perverted!

Agnes tried to shake free of his grasp. But he *was* a knight and she was just a mushroom girl, so he was far stronger. He clamped down and actually drew her closer. As Agnes gasped, she got a whiff of a sweet, fruity scent.

“Don’t be silly. It’s *you* I need, Agnes Lefort.”

Agnes glanced down in panic at her hands, which were clasped in Claude’s white-gloved ones. At the same moment, a small mound of brownish mushrooms popped up on the backs of his hands, surrounding the two little grayish *Helvella Crispa*.

Agnes thought they might’ve been *Gymnopilus Junonius*, not that it mattered right now.

Claude’s dark-gray eyes lit up with delight, sparkling like a galaxy full of stars.

“I can’t let you get away! A woman who sprouts such incredible mushrooms...

let's get married! At once!"

The mushroom fetishist's gibbering continued making zero sense.

"Whoa, slow down! Skipping the engagement altogether?"

"So, you'll agree to get engaged?"

"No! I will *not*!" Agnes yelled without thinking, and Claude slowly let go of her hands.

"...It's not such a bad idea, though, is it?"

"Huh?"

He may be a fungal fetishist, but he is still a prince.

Agnes was worried that she might've spoken too rudely to him. But he didn't seem to mind. He was admiring the *Helvella Crispa* and *Gymnopilus Junonius* on the backs of his gloved hands with clear delight.

Claude looked very handsome, lashes downturned as he smiled down at his hands. Perversion aside, he *was* attractive. If you ignored the fact he was pining over mushrooms right now, he really *did* look every inch the regal prince.

He looked harmless. But that only made him even more dangerous.

"It could work in your favor, you know. For example...it'd help smooth things over for your younger brother's standing."

"...What are you talking about?"

Anything to do with her brother had to be addressed.

Claude grinned, seeing that Agnes had stopped trying to get away and was now fully invested in the conversation again.

"Well, after the original incident, you followed up by yelling at Philip today, didn't you? You certainly made a show of yourself. Even if you disappear from high society life, it's not like everyone will just forget. However, if you're seen with me going forward, it will show that there's nothing between you and Philip anymore, because you've healed your wounded heart by finding true love with your real soulmate...the prince. By which I mean me."

"Okay, perhaps...but it's just the mushrooms you've found 'true love' with.

I've got nothing to do with it."

"Don't be silly. These are *your* mushrooms. *You* sprouted them. I've fallen for the mushrooms. So by extension, I've fallen for you."

...This is hopeless. His perverted thoughts are too hard to follow. Goodness! The entire royal family is turning out to be total idiots!

First, she got dumped by a philandering fuzz-brain, now she was being proposed to by a mad fungal fetishist of a prince, hell-bent on getting his hands on her shrooms.

She had the *worst* luck with men. Specifically, royal men.

There can be no reasoning with a deranged pervert like this...

Agnes cast a desperate, pleading glance over at Maurice standing guard by the door. But Maurice cast his russet-brown eyes down and stared at his boots.

"Please give it up. His Highness's love for mushrooms is pure and true."

"Can't you lie even a *little* bit and say it's actually me he likes?"

"Putting aside his...*proclivity* for mushrooms, the prince is cultured, sophisticated, and has a glittering future ahead of him. Please stop protesting and give him the mushrooms he desires."

So, the prince is a freak, but it looks like his knight is a weirdo, too.

Agnes shook her head stubbornly. She was not about to give in.

"No. Not happening. I am not a mushroom-producing factory!"

"There's no need to phrase it so...indelicately. Let's call you a...garden. A garden where mushrooms of love can be planted and grown..."

"Be quiet, you mycologist freak!"

Agnes glared at Claude, who'd butted into the conversation with a big smile on his face. She was in a highly agitated state, which was perhaps why a clump of olive-colored mushrooms suddenly sprouted on both men's arms.

From the distinctive caps that looked like they'd been dusted with cocoa powder, they were obviously *Cortinarius Cinnamomeus*, also known as the Cinnamon Webcap.

Now Claude was standing there with three different varieties of mushroom sprouting from his hands and arms. He looked like a tree. They were all poisonous varieties. It looked like Claude had been placed under a dramatic kind of curse.

Claude sighed a little as he gently and reverently stroked each mushroom.

“...All right, then. There appears to be nothing that can be done. My love shall have to just go unrequited.”

Nothing that can be done about what? Agnes had no idea.

As if reading her mind, Claude looked up and smiled at her.

Ah, he's so handsome! For a freak...

If she didn't watch out around him, he'd end up harvesting all of her mushrooms.

“Still, you don't want your father and brother to suffer as a result of your scandals, do you? Cheated on, dumped publicly, deemed damaged goods, all that. If the people knew that you'd captured my heart at first sight, it'd really restore your image and raise your profile. After all, I *am* the fourth-born prince and second in line to inherit the throne, you know. *And* I have a promising knightly career.”

The Pervert Mushroom Prince started listing his own accolades.

Agnes stared at him, dumbfounded. Meanwhile, Claude began plucking the mushrooms off his arm.

“If you're not personally taken with the idea of being the one true love of the fourth-born prince, I can always use royal influence to force your hand. I'm still free, with no other engagements to complicate things. I think my father would approve.”

“Uh...you *do* realize I'm Philip's old cast-off, don't you?”

Agnes hated having to describe herself like that, but she needed to get through to this mushroom fetishist somehow. She was expecting disgust once Claude remembered. But instead, he simply gave her a wry, exasperated smile.

“What does *that* matter, in the face of all these exquisite mushrooms?”

His insane love for mushrooms was clearly far deeper than she had imagined.

So Agnes decided to try a different tactic.

“All right, but what about my hair color? Everyone hates it. You do too, of course?”

“No...why?”

“...*Why?* Because this entire country hates peach-blossom-colored hair!”

He had to know that, even if all he cared about was mushrooms.

Agnes had suffered discrimination over her hair her whole life, during her commoner days and those as a count's daughter, too. And who cared more about appearances than the royal family? That was why Philip was always nagging her to try to conceal her hair.

“I think it's splendid. Beautiful, even.”

“What?”

“Like a spring meadow. It's a gorgeous color. Like I said, beautiful.”

Agnes stared at Claude, speechless for a moment.

“...Not as beautiful as a mushroom, though.”

...Phew, okay. He really is just a mad fetishist, after all.

Agnes sighed, struck by an odd sense of relief.

“Besides, since you were engaged to Philip, that means you've already been vetted by the royal family. I don't think we'll run into any problems.”

“...Lady Agnes. The minute you showed that mushroom power of yours, it was all over for you. I really think you'd better give in and accept your fate.”

Maurice smiled softly at her as he spoke.

It certainly seemed like nothing she had to say was going to get through to this Pervert Mushroom Prince. Agnes was going to have to use her smarts to do whatever she could to tip the balance in her favor. She couldn't let this mushroom-loving pervert have his way with her.

Nor could she allow him to use his royal privileges to force her into marriage.

Ugh, how awful! A freak with influence.

“Let me... Let me think it over for a while.”

Claude seemed...mostly sane. Perhaps if she gave him a little time, he'd awaken to his own foolishness.

Please, please let that happen! Before it's too late.

Claude gazed into Agnes's pleading eyes a moment before slowly nodding.

“All right. Yes, take some time and think it over. I want you and I to make beautiful mushroom babies together.”

Ugh! On second thought, maybe no amount of time will be enough for crazy Prince Claude to get with the program.

“Lady Agnes, my one true love... Let us be good to one another and *for* one another, always.”

Claude caught hold of Agnes's hand and pecked the back of it.

Agnes jerked her hand back in surprise, just as Claude's glove suddenly sprouted half a dozen *Gymnopilus Junonius* mushrooms.

Claude gasped with delight and began plucking them immediately, his features bright with excitement. *He's so handsome! And so deranged...*

Agnes had never been more disgusted or terrified by her own mushroom powers than she was on this day.



Mushrooms of the Day

Marasmius Maximus

It has a slender stalk and a yellowish cap. Upon maturity, the edges wrap backward just like a blown-out umbrella.

It's not edible, but it looks a lot like a fully opened Enoki mushroom, so it sure looks edible.

Helvella Crispa (Elfin Saddles)

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 be like, "Hmm?"

It's edible, but it can be poisonous if not thoroughly cooked.

It doesn't really look edible from the shape, though.

Sitting quietly on Claude's glove.

*Surrounded by *Gymnopilus Junonius*. It looks kind of creepy.*

Gymnopilus Junonius

Yellowish-brown. Looks kind of like the Japanese Shimeji.

It contains a poison that attacks the nervous system and can cause mental overstimulation and hallucinations. The Japanese name translates to “Big Laugh Mushroom,” but I’m not sure what’s so funny about that.

*In the above chapter, it appeared surrounding the *Helvella Crispa*. Aw, buddies!*

Maybe they could collaborate and launch a mounted attack. Get it?

Cortinarius Cinnamomeus (Cinnamon Webcap)

A mushroom with an olive-colored cap.

It looks like a Shiitake dusted in cocoa powder. Mmm, looks delicious! But no, it’s poisonous. Apparently, it causes gastrointestinal distress.

Chapter 5: Until Sanity Returns

AFTER returning home, Agnes immediately explained the situation to her father, Benoit, finishing up with a huge sigh.

“...So, it seems to me that a royal plot is afoot.”

“What do you mean?”

“Philip’s technically a royal. They’re trying to make it look like there’s no hard feelings between us to save Marquis Barthet’s reputation, since his daughter will end up with Philip now.”

Benoit placed his teacup down on the table as he raised an eyebrow. His daughter seemed so...serious about all of this.

“It’s a bit late for that. You already *had* that big bust-up with Philip when he publicly broke things off with you. There’s nothing left to hide. Besides, how does Prince Claude factor into all this?”

“He probably drew the short straw when they were looking for someone to use as a pawn in their favor. The crown prince is already engaged, so he was no good. And Claude’s the handsome one, after all. All the girls love him. No doubt they thought he’d be the biggest draw for someone like me. Like I would obviously fall for him.”

“Oh, my! Agnes...*have* you fallen for Prince Claude?”

“Please, no. If anything, it’s pity I feel for him. But he *does* seem to appreciate mushrooms, at least.”

“Oh dear, so I’m assuming you sprouted a few on the prince?”

“I tried not to. But yes, I ended up sprouting quite a few on him. Even worse, he proposed to them!”

Agnes felt like she’d done a pretty good job suppressing the mushroom effect, all things considered. *What with the horse carriage and ballroom dancing and*

everything...

Benoit nodded solemnly. He knew all about the situation, of course. But just then, as if slightly delayed, Agnes's last comment finally seemed to register.

"...P-P-Proposed?!"

"To the mushrooms, not to me."

"I'm not following, Agnes."

Agnes wasn't really clear on the situation either. But Benoit hadn't even *been* there. So, no doubt, she wasn't making a lick of sense.

"It seems that the prince...is some sort of...mushroom fetishist. He said all this stuff about falling in love with the mushrooms I sprout. And now he wants to get engaged..."

"...So, what did you say?"

"Well, eventually, he agreed to let me think it over while he, uh, attempts to win me over."

A range of emotions crossed Benoit's face. Then finally, his shoulders slumped.

"If it's a direct order from the king himself, then there's no way you can turn it down and return to commoner life. You're going to *have* to play along, at least for now. Besides, maybe this'll be good for you. It'll take care of the bad reputation you've been saddled with."

"All it's going to do is take me from the king's nephew's jilted ex-fiancée to the weird, hypergamous mushroom girl who's now sunk her claws into his cousin, the fourth-born prince."

Yes, Claude and Philip were cousins. Both royals. And of the two of them, Claude had much higher status and prospects. It would look like Agnes was trying to climb the bachelor ladder, using Philip as a mere rung on her way to the top.

Agnes didn't really care about her own reputation at this point. It was protecting the good Lefort name and her younger brother Kevin's future that concerned her.

“Everyone knows Claude isn’t the type to let himself get tricked into marriage by any woman. Don’t worry.”

Despite his popularity with the ladies, it was true that Claude had a spotless record when it came to relationships. In fact, he’d been involved in exactly zero love scandals. So much so that people had often wondered aloud if Claude was actually something of a woman-hater.

So, if he and Agnes did get involved, no one could blame her for ensnaring him. It’d be obvious that he himself was fully on board. After all, Claude had always had his pick of the prettiest, most eligible young ladies. They swarmed around him like moths to a flame.

But Claude had never gotten involved with any of them.

No doubt because he much prefers mushrooms to women, Agnes thought. If only one of these eligible young ladies had known about Claude’s fetish and plied him with mushrooms, perhaps she would’ve been successful.

“At any rate, it looks like royal men are drawn to you, Agnes. *Er...idiosyncratic* young men though they may be. At least you won’t have to return to commoner society now. That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

Idiosyncratic young men? More like idiotic young men!

Agnes nodded reluctantly. Still, she wasn’t happy about this.



“WELCOME home, Sis. How was the ball?”

After talking with Benoit, Agnes was about to return to her bedroom when Kevin walked in.

“...*Hmm*, it’s complicated.”

Agnes couldn’t hide her worries from her tone and expression. Kevin quickly sat down on the sofa, where Benoit had been earlier.

“But the prince...he’s pretty cool, isn’t he?”

“*Hmph*, I guess so. At least appearance-wise.”

Shame he’s a fungal fetish freak inside...

“Huh. So you prefer Philip?”

“Uh, *no!* Philip’s just a cheater. You should have heard him again today, pompous jerk. I wanted to smother him in mushrooms. I have no idea how I ever tolerated him so long.”

Kevin chuckled as Agnes huffed and puffed indignantly.

“Well, all you have to do is rub his face in it. You know, show him how close you and Claude are. You always complained about how Philip made you tie your hair back and forced you to wear only plain makeup. Now you can really show off your pretty, peach-blossom hair and your stunning features for once.”

“You talk as if I *had* any beautiful features to show off.”

Kevin frowned deeply.

“It looks like years of having to endure Philip’s negging has done a number on your self-esteem. Curse him! Feckless fool.”

“...Kevin?”

Agnes looked quizzically at her younger brother as he came to sit next to her on the sofa and took her hands in his.

“I know that your hair color is unusual and lots of people act weird about it. But I think it’s objectively very pretty! And you’re pretty too, Sis! I just wish Philip could see what he gave up.”

Agnes was taken aback by Kevin’s impassioned speech. He was being so kind.

“Kevin, where did you learn to say such sweet things?”

“It’s just what Father always says. He was furious with the way you’ve been disrespected. He just didn’t want you to know he agreed with you. He was worried you really *would* return to commoner life. ‘*Curse that Philip! May he go as bald as a plucked chicken!*’ That’s what Father always says.”

Goodness! With the many years Father has on Philip, surely it’s Father who’ll go bald first...

“I’m sorry you’ve had to worry about all of this too, Kevin.”

“It’s fine. I know you’ve been quietly enduring a lot of stuff, Sis. But Father

and I love you! We don't want you to leave us and become a commoner again."

"Thank you. I love you both too."

Agnes stroked Kevin's hair. He looked a little embarrassed but let her do it.

"In that case, go and be with Claude."

"But I can't... What was it you said earlier? Oh yes, 'Show off how close I am' with Claude. He's a royal prince. *Every* woman wants him. If I get too close to him, it could end up being dangerous for me. Besides...there's a...complicating factor."

"A complicating factor? Oh, was he freaked out by your mushroom thing?"

"Quite the opposite. He proposed...to the mushrooms."

"...He what?"

Agnes could understand Kevin's confusion. But it was all true. *Weird but true.*

"He's a *total* mushroom fetishist. And apparently, he's taken a *special* liking to my mushrooms."

"S-So, what are you going to do?"

Kevin was unable to hide his shock. Clearly, he'd never heard the words "mushroom fetishist" anywhere before.

"I'm going to string him along until he chills out and snaps out of it. If I say no and he uses his influence to *force* me into marriage straight off the bat, there won't be anything I can do about it. So I'm pretending to think it over. I'm just hoping he regains his sanity in the meantime."

Kevin frowned and groaned. Then he thought it over for a few moments.

"...Even so, if you're seen out with Claude laughing and having fun, that will really get Philip's goat."

"*Hmm*, will it?"

Not that Agnes cared what Philip thought. *He'd called me a fake and tossed me aside like garbage.*

"Yes, for sure. Philip's nothing but a big baby."

No doubt Philip would blow his top over being called a baby by someone younger than him like Kevin.

Still, Agnes didn't feel like sticking up for Philip. Why should she?

"...All right, then. I'll date the prince awhile. Just until he regains his senses."

Kevin smiled and nodded, satisfied with his sister's decision.



A new bouquet of flowers was delivered to Agnes every morning after the Mushroom Proposal.

He may be a pervert prince, but he still has princely manners...

As Agnes admired the flowers, she noticed the attached card.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you again," it read.

"Wow. Even his handwriting is regal."

No one would guess that it was the handwriting of a mushroom fetishist...

"Excuse me?"

Maurice blinked at her. It was Maurice who delivered the flowers, of course. Agnes waved dismissively.

It wasn't even clear who Claude was looking forward to seeing again. Was it Agnes herself? Or was it her mushrooms?

...It's the mushrooms, isn't it?

Yup, it's definitely the mushrooms...

Agnes sighed, taking hold of the large bouquet and accidentally brushing Maurice's hand as she did.

A brown, scaly-capped mushroom popped up on his arm.

Pholiota Terrestris, if Agnes wasn't mistaken.

And she rarely *was*. Agnes found it funny how good she'd become at identifying mushroom varieties, even considering how many opportunities she had for practicing such a thing.

Her mushroom powers were definitely intensifying. That had to be down to her protective spirits acting up.

It really *was* almost like a mushroom curse.

“Sorry... You’ve got a mushroom on you.”

“Ah, that’s quite all right. His Highness will be pleased.”

Maurice plucked the mushroom off his arm and carefully wrapped it in a handkerchief.

He’s planning to take it back to Claude as a souvenir, isn’t he?

She had mixed feelings about that, but she couldn’t exactly demand he return the mushroom to her, could she? All she could do was watch.

“Sir Gounod...you’re a knight, aren’t you? Why are *you* running around doing errand work like a squire?” she asked.

“Please, just call me Maurice. I am Claude’s subordinate and also his personal bodyguard. As such, I am often entrusted with a...variety of tasks.”

So, he’s not just any knight but a part of the Royal Guard. Wow, he’s actually kind of an elite.

“All right then, Maurice. But what *other* kinds of tasks does he...entrust you with?”

Delivering bouquets to young women jilted by the royals? Delivering mushrooms that sprout on his body to the mushroom pervert prince?

But Agnes didn’t really care who Maurice was or what he did.

“We cannot have any uninformed parties involved. They might end up causing trouble over your mushroom powers. The prince also thought that perhaps you might feel more comfortable with me since we’ve already met on several occasions.”

“Hmm, you’re right. You already know about my powers. And I don’t find you *that* scary anymore. But wait. The first time the prince sent you, you didn’t know about my powers then...did you?”

“That... That was...well... I didn’t. But I was just pleased to be entrusted with a

task by His Highness. It's always an honor, you know."

"Hmph."

Agnes still wasn't satisfied, but it looked like Maurice wasn't about to say anything further. At the very least, his hesitance to divulge what orders Claude gave him was proof that the prince trusted him highly.

"Moving on... Could you let me know a suitable date for the dress fitting?"

"Oh. I'll arrange a dress myself. Don't worry about it."

The last thing Agnes wanted was another custom-made dress. It felt too awkward. But Maurice visibly blanched.

"But...I was given orders to make sure we had that handled on our end. To prevent you canceling at the last minute, using lack of a dress as an excuse."

"...Fine."

Maurice was thorough. And he didn't seem to trust her one bit. Or rather, he trusted her completely to try and find an excuse to get out of this arrangement.

How desperate was Claude to see her mushrooms again, anyway?

With no other choice available, Agnes decided to submit to Maurice on the dress issue.

"...Incidentally, Maurice, when should I return the ballgown I was given to wear the other day?"

"Oh, that was custom-tailored for you, so there's no need to return it. Please do whatever you like with it."

Agnes suddenly lit up in delight.

With material that expensive, I could make an amazing skirt! Now, at last, I finally have the chance to make enough money to get my commoner life off to a good start!

"Really? All right. I'll go ahead and cut it up, then!"

Maurice blinked several times.

"Cut it... Cut it up?"

“Yes, if I cut up the dress, I can make a skirt and various other accessories out of it to sell.”

“N-No! You *mustn't* do that! That would be...blasphemy!”

Maurice took a step forward in agitation. Agnes frowned. She didn't know what the big deal was, but she had her own situation to think about here.

“But I don't have any plans to ever wear it again, so what's the big deal?”

“You might wear it on another occasion?”

“Once the prince snaps out of his madness, I plan to resume my commoner life. So I'll have no use for such a fancy ballgown. And I can't exactly *give* a royally gifted dress away, can I?”

“No, no. Think about it. Isn't it worse to chop up and sell off His Highness's gift to you?”

Hmm, maybe Maurice is right. Maybe it is a bit crass.

That was why Agnes hadn't cut the dress up yet. She wanted to run it by Maurice first. But it was clear she wasn't going to get his blessing.

“Well, can I gift it to someone else then?”

“No! It was a gift for you and you alone, Lady Agnes.”

“Fine, I'll wear it the next time I'm summoned then. You don't need to call in a seamstress.”

“Summoned...? ...Never mind. But you *can't* wear the same dress again. And this new dress will be another present from His Highness. You can't turn it down...”

“Fine. I'll wear the new dress. But that'll mean I won't have any further use for the old one. It'll go to waste. I'm not allowed to give it away or sell it, right? Then I'll have to burn it when I become a commoner again. What a terrible waste.”

If I'm just going to burn it, why can't I turn it into a nice skirt and get some more wear out of it? Surely the dress itself would prefer a fate like that to being torched.

Agnes gave Maurice an annoyed look. Just then, a little mushroom popped up on his arm.

Pale-red and unmistakably *Marasmius Pulcherripes*.

Maurice just sighed, though, plucking the mushroom off.

“...Lady Agnes, why do you think His Highness has invited you to another ball?”

“For my mushrooms, mainly,” she said flatly. “No, *absolutely* for my mushrooms. And to help fix the royal family’s image. Philip’s on the fringes, yes, but he’s still *technically* royal. And he’s caused a big scandal. Also, Claude *is* kind. I like to think he’s doing this to help my image a little bit, too.”

“I can’t deny the part about the mushrooms. But...” Maurice muttered, frowning as he carefully tucked the little *Marasmius Pulcherripes* into the handkerchief alongside the *Pholiota Terrestris*.

Well, he’s putting together a nice little bundle to take back to his master, isn’t he? I feel like I’m gifting Claude against my wishes...

“Look, may I speak frankly?” Maurice started. “Prince Claude is the fourth-born royal prince, but he’s also the second in the line of succession for certain reasons. Philip’s due to marry out of the royal family soon, after which he will cease to be their problem. So why would Prince Claude be running around trying to smooth things over for Philip?”

“Prince Claude’s currently the most eligible bachelor in the land. He has looks, money, status, and prospects. Everything a young woman could wish for! And yet, he’s refrained from frivolous affairs and scandals. He takes things seriously. He’s not the type to publicly court a woman he has no interest in. Much less have dresses designed for her or bouquets delivered to her.”

Agnes mulled over all this for a few moments.

Claude isn’t concerned about Philip at all? And he’s never behaved improperly with a girl, despite his popularity?

“...Oh, I get it. He wants to use me to keep the other women away, is that it?”

“...Excuse me?”

“I noticed lots of ladies watching him like predators stalking prey at the ball. That constant attention must get quite tiring. And he could easily pass this whole affair off later as him just trying to smooth the feathers Philip ruffled. Still, odd choice to use someone as plain as *me* as a deterrent. But he gets mushrooms out of it, I guess. And with my detestable hair, I stand out. So, I guess it works out in his favor after all.”

Agnes wore her hair down at the ball out of a sense of rebellious freedom after being constrained so long by Philip. It worked out quite well, though. Her hair would draw any crowd’s disgust.

Philip always told her to hide her hair to avoid standing out. *Maybe he was right all along.*

“No, you’re wrong! His Highness would *never* try to use you in that way. Although he’d gladly take your mushrooms if they were up for grabs. You know, most young women would go crazy over the briefest eye contact from His Highness and immediately believe it meant they were destined to be together. Why doesn’t he seem to have that sort of effect on you?”

“So you don’t deny that he’d use me for my mushrooms?” Agnes said dryly. “Yes, yes, the prince is handsome. But *I’m* not the type to jump to conclusions and lose my head over a man. Don’t worry.”

Having been initially raised as a commoner before becoming a count’s daughter, and with her striking hair *and weird mushroom* problem, Agnes was no ordinary young lady, that was for sure. Her family was kind and always complimented her appearance. But Agnes wasn’t stupid enough to believe them.

She’d absolutely nothing to offer Claude. She’d be nothing but a burden.

You have to be completely full of yourself to look at a situation like this and call it fate.

Besides, even though she’d nothing against Claude personally, she found his mushroom fetish disconcerting and alarming. She couldn’t *be* any less swept off her feet.

Getting all swoony over a guy who proposed, not to me, but to my

mushrooms? Uhhhh, no!

So why was Maurice looking so irritated and impatient with her? She'd no idea. Maybe he was hoping to see her in high spirits, actually *excited* over the prospect of a fling with Claude?

"...At any rate, please sit down with Prince Claude after the next ball and have him clarify the situation a little more."

"If you say so..."

Agnes didn't really feel like talking with Claude. But how could she say no?

Sulking, she gazed down at the bouquet of flowers she was clutching and sighed.

If what Maurice was saying *was* true, then this whole thing actually wasn't a plan to help bolster Philip. Nor was Claude planning to use Agnes as a shield to keep away thirsty, marriage-minded women.

So, that left only one explanation. It was her mushrooms the prince was after.

Either way, though, Agnes stood to gain nothing from this arrangement. *Absolutely nothing at all...*



Mushrooms of the Day

Pholiota Terrestris

Light brown with dark brown scales. It looks like a pale, toasted Shiitake.

The flesh is soft and seems easy to eat, but it causes vomiting and digestive system problems.

The first person to eat it was probably like "Wow, what a great texture!" until they started puking. Or maybe they knew it would make them puke, but they still ate it anyway and were like "Wow, what a great texture!" ...It's hard to know...

Nestled in Maurice's handkerchief, are they lording their powers over the Marasmius Pulcherripes?

Marasmius Pulcherripes

Red caps around 1-2 centimeters. The stalks are wire-thin.

I've seen lamps in the shape of this mushroom being sold before.

It's uncertain if it's poisonous, but it's not really said to be eaten.

The world doesn't seem to appreciate this mushroom as a foodstuff.

Chapter 6: Blessed by the Spirits

“...**DOESN’T** that make it sound like he really *is* romantically interested in you, Sis?”

Agnes’s eyes widened. What a question! And coming from Kevin!

“Perish the thought! He’s a mushroom fetishist, you know? *Please*, spare me the tasteless jokes.”

Agnes shot down Kevin’s suggestion as they sat together sipping tea. A mushroom popped up on the back of his hand, as if reflecting Agnes’s feelings of indignation.

The mushroom had a brownish-gray cap with a fat stem. *Entoloma Sarcopum*. It was an edible mushroom, so Agnes planned to send it down to the kitchens later.

“Yeah,” Kevin continued, “but we’ve ruled out him doing this to smooth things over for Philip or to keep clingy women away from him, right? Our family’s friendly with the royals, but there’s nothing for them to gain from this. Despite all that, we’ve got the prince that everyone says is the serious sort, sending bouquets here every day and begging you to be his dance partner at the royal balls. If *those* aren’t romantic overtures, then I don’t know what are!”

Kevin plucked off the mushroom and looked at it—it’d been a long time since Agnes had last sprouted one on him. Shrugging, he propped it up against the teapot.

It looked nice there, Agnes reflected. Kind of artistic. She sighed and slowly put her teacup down on the table.

Kevin acts wise beyond his years, but he’s definitely still a child.

“Listen, Kevin. Think about this from the prince’s point of view. I’m his cousin’s jilted cast-off. I’m neither beautiful nor special. Plus, I have this *awful* pink hair! And I make mushrooms sprout everywhere I go, which is objectively

weird. But I could still be useful to him as a shield against other women. And he can harvest my mushrooms at the same time. Two birds with one stone, right? I'm just...a convenient tool to him. Romance doesn't factor in at all."

As Kevin's big sister, Agnes wanted to explain things gently. But he frowned.

"Gah! I knew it! Philip's really hammered your self-confidence. What a waste of space he is. Bainless royal brat! And Prince Claude's motivations are highly suspicious too!"

"Kevin, stop bad-mouthing Philip. I understand the sentiment, but you can't say things like that in public. He's technically royalty, you know."

"I *know* that, Sis. I'm not stupid. I just hate the way Philip's tainted your mind! He's made you ashamed of your gifts! Your hair! The divine protection offered by the spirits! Your looks..."

Agnes hated the way Kevin was looking at her, eyes full of pity.

"Let me ask you this, Sis. Do you feel any lingering grief over Philip dumping you?"

"Not even a little!"

Agnes was delighted to be free of the cheating little twerp.

Her indignant response made Kevin chuckle wryly.

"Well, I'm glad Philip's brainwashing doesn't extend *that* far then. But listen, Sis. The world's full of all types of people, all with different ways of seeing things. The mushrooms...actually, forget about the mushrooms a second. Your pink hair and the spirits' *divine protection* you receive? There are people out there who'll completely understand about that stuff."

"And you're saying the Mushroom Pervert's one of those people?" Agnes asked dryly.

"Er...well, at any rate, he doesn't seem to *dislike* that stuff! That's good, right?"

Hmm. Kevin has a point.

Agnes was so taken aback and grossed out over Claude's mushroom fetish

that she hadn't noticed. But it was true. Claude didn't seem to mind her hair at all.

Maybe it was because he was too fixated on the mushrooms to even notice anything else about her. But unlike most people, he didn't seem to judge her based on her hair color. He was actually a pretty decent, unprejudiced kind of prince.

"*Hmm*. You're right. Even if His Highness doesn't see me as a beauty, he at least doesn't seem to mind my hair. All he really cares about is the mushrooms."

Agnes nodded thoughtfully as she mulled it all over. Meanwhile, Kevin's smile clouded over with a frown.

"I see...at this rate, Philip's lingering, malicious influence could actually be lifted. Almost like...desensitization therapy of sorts. Slowly replacing the negative thoughts over your appearance, the divine protection you see as a curse, your social standing... Curse that Philip! He really *is* a stain on humanity. Still, it's a blessing the brainwash wasn't absolute..."

Kevin was mumbling something to himself, but Agnes couldn't make out what.

"Er...Kevin? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just feeling a bit sorry for Prince Claude, is all."

Kevin reached out and flicked the *Entoloma Sarcopum* with his forefinger. It toppled onto its side next to the teapot.



RECENTLY, Agnes had started wearing her hair down and choosing colorful day dresses.

Not having her hair scraped back made her head feel so much lighter. It was sort of fun, too. She'd never really *minded* wearing her hair up. But part of her had resented having to do so, just to evade Philip's whining.

Having the freedom to choose her own hairstyle was actually a real mood-lifter.

Agnes was outside strolling in the gardens in the best mood she'd been in in ages. The sky above was so blue that she just couldn't stay inside a moment longer.

Along with her peach-blossom hair, Agnes had another gift that resulted from her foreign blood.

The divine protection of the spirits that lived in nature all around her.

She could sense the spirits. And she could even tell how they were feeling sometimes. They appeared to her in the form of balls of light. Agnes thought she could sense happiness emanating from the light source.

But people with this power were rare in the Kingdom of Visage.

By talking to the spirits, though, Agnes could receive their blessings.

The mushrooms were one example of this. They seemed to respond to Agnes's emotions. Although they often felt more like a curse than a blessing. And Agnes still had no idea why *mushrooms* of all things, much less what purpose they were supposed to serve in her life.

Agnes used to go out in the gardens and spend time chatting to the flowers—she thought she sensed the flower spirits listening—but Philip had overheard her one day and said it was creepy and gross. So, she stopped doing that.

She wasn't afraid of inciting Philip's anger; she'd just been sick of his complaining.

At the time, she was also desperate to behave like a real aristocratic lady did, so she obeyed his demands.

And so, the days and months had passed.

Agnes had stopped trying to sense the spirits or trying to communicate with them. A part of her hoped that the protective effects would begin to wane if she ceased contact. But the mushrooms kept on sprouting.

In fact, she'd noticed that the mushroom effect had only grown more intense.

She paused, gazing down at the flowerbeds by her feet.

"Hello. Nice weather we're having today."

At the sound of Agnes's voice, the flowers swayed, though there was no breeze. Then, new buds began to burst open all around her.

The flowers nearby were white, but, for some reason, these bloomed deep pink.

"Oh, is that in honor of my hair?"

The flower heads bobbed as if nodding.

"Thank you so much! Can I display them in my room?"

As if responding, another flowerbed suddenly burst into bloom. Agnes giggled as she picked the flowers, thanking the spirits again.

She *knew* it was them. She couldn't sense them like she used to. But she just *knew* they were listening to her. Communicating with her.

If she kept this up every day, perhaps she'd be able to align her soul with theirs again.



BACK in her room, Agnes asked Therese to put the flowers in a vase.

As she took the flowers, Therese exclaimed, "How unusual! I've never *seen* flowers this shade of pink before."

The spirits must've changed the color of the flowers just for her, Agnes realized. She couldn't firmly sense their presence, but she knew they bore no ill will from the way they'd responded to her.

It was like reuniting with old friends and it made Agnes's heart glad. She smiled and the flowers swayed in the vase.

"...Which means...I might be able to do a little test." Agnes smiled, stroking the bobbing petals.

During her commoner days, Agnes used to sell spirit-blessed medicinal herbs to make a little spending money. She'd needed to sell her wares via a specialist shop. But it'd been plain to see that her medicinal herbs were of a far superior quality than the standard.

Selling too many herbs would draw suspicion, cautioned her parents, so

Agnes had made sure to only sell a few at a time.

The mushrooms she could sell too. Except Agnes could never control what kind of mushrooms she'd sprout or how many. So they weren't much of a moneymaker.

But maybe I can try making medicinal herbs again?

It'd be faster to try to increase the potency of already-existing herbs. But, she realized it was too difficult to head into the forest for foraging while she was still the daughter of a count. She'd hate the kind of rumors and scandal that might bring her family.

I could try growing them in the garden, though!

As a kid, Agnes had tended a vegetable plot and flower garden. No doubt she could use a garden hoe better than any other young noblewoman could.

So, Agnes borrowed a corner of the garden and began planting fast-growing herbs. She was excited about the opportunity to make enough money for her new life. It also felt great to move her body and dig around in the dirt.

It was really sinking in now just how much of a boring and dull life she'd been living in an attempt to please Philip.

Now that she was free again, she actually felt *relieved* that he'd cheated on her and dumped her. It was almost kind of funny.



THEN the day of the next ball came.

Agnes's room was practically a flower shop by now, since Claude had been sending a fresh bouquet every single day since the last ball.

She could see the spirits again by this point. The balls of light flittered around the room, going from flower to flower. They seemed...happy.

But what concerned Agnes was how all this was being paid for. Surely it wasn't being funded by the royal coffers? If it was, she *really* wished Claude would stop.

But according to Maurice, the flowers were being paid for out of Claude's own

pocket.

Agnes didn't think much of that. But Maurice had started pretending to be deaf whenever she tried to argue the point with him. She was going to have to bring it up with Claude himself.

As if it wasn't bad enough that she had to get in a carriage and *go* to the royal ball, now she had to negotiate with the pervert as well.

Agnes sighed, looking down at the ballgown she was wearing. It was a simple, pale-yellow dress, covered with lighter material which was embroidered with silver thread—floral embroidery. Every time she moved, the beads sewn into the embroidery work sparkled.

It was a beautiful dress, indeed.

In her hair, she wore a cloth hair ribbon covered in matching silver thread, which was woven into her curls. The rest of her hair was left to flow loosely.

Where her ears poked through her hair, yellow-quartz earrings could be seen dangling. She also wore a yellow-quartz hair comb in her peach-blossom-colored hair.

"It's cute, but...I just don't feel comfortable."

Six years of being engaged to Philip. All that time spent trying to hide my hair and look as plain and ordinary as possible.

It was a shock to the system, suddenly appearing in public dressed up so fine and colorful.

The seamstress had left right after the fitting, so Agnes had no chance to give her own input on what she wanted the dress to be like.

She was shocked by how little time passed before the completed dress was delivered. It seemed to happen in the blink of an eye. And all of the decisions had *clearly* been made by someone who wasn't her.

Naturally, Agnes had no intention of following Philip's usual suggestions and ordering a drab dress. But she would've pushed for something a bit more modest and understated, in both design and color, if only they'd bothered to actually consult her.

“...It’s clear that nobody cares about my opinion at all, huh?”

It looked like Claude wanted her as flashy and showy as possible. And it was also clear that he placed a lot of trust in the royal seamstress to deliver the kind of dress that’d fit his request.

Agnes heaved a sigh as the carriage swayed and clattered along the road.

“...Huh?”

Agnes muttered in surprise as they drew up to the palace and the carriage door opened. This was the palace entrance, all right. Agnes was supposed to alight the carriage here.

But why was Claude standing right outside the carriage door?

“Good evening, Lady Agnes.”

The fourth-born royal prince smiled at her, those dark-gray eyes glittering.

“Uh...good evening. But what are you doing here, Your Highness?”

Did he have some special business here? Or perhaps he was on a stroll and happened to spot her carriage?

“I came to greet you, of course. You promised to let me be your escort to the ball.”

“Oh. Oh, right...”

Yes, that was our arrangement. But somehow Agnes had never expected the fourth-born royal prince to greet her carriage personally.

Half-sick with nerves and unsure what to do, Agnes could only watch as a cluster of yellow mushrooms sprouted from Claude’s shoulder.

They were long and thin and looked like tiny worms stretching to the sky.

Clavulinopsis Helvola, they were called.

Most ordinary people would probably scream if they found a cluster of yellow, wormlike fungi sprouting from their shoulder. But the Mushroom Fetishist himself *wasn’t* ordinary. Instead, his eyes sparkled with fresh delight.

“Wow! You didn’t even have to *touch* me to sprout them this time.”

Claude turned his handsome smile on Agnes. It was almost as if he was pleased with *her* and not just her mushrooms.

“Uh, yes... Sometimes they sprout sans direct contact. Usually, contact produces a stronger mushroom effect, though.”

Claude causally plucked the yellow, wormy mushrooms off and placed them onto a tray held out by a waiting servant.

Why was there a servant waiting there with a tray? Agnes wondered. But she decided not to dwell on that. There wasn't *mushroom* for pondering just at that moment, anyway.

Anyway, the answer probably wouldn't do her much good mentally.

“That dress looks great on you. Look, these mushrooms are the same color.”

Claude held his hand out to her as he paid her—no, *her dress*, a compliment.

Why was he smiling in such a twinkling manner? Was he pleased over his newly acquired *Clavulinopsis Helvola*?

She was so hoping he'd awaken from this madness and let both Agnes and her mushrooms go free. But that seemed to be less likely with every passing second. The prince's fetish ran too deep.

And yes, she *knew* he only wanted her for her mushrooms. *But must he be quite so blatant about it?* she thought.

He's a prince, after all, isn't he? At least in public, couldn't he try to cover up his fetish with even a thin veneer of respectability? Paper-thin, like the rice starch sheets used to wrap candy. Yeah, that's all I ask...

“Shall we go then?”

Agnes took hold of his proffered, white-gloved hand. Immediately, a small mushroom popped up on the back of it.

It looked like *Rickenella Fibula*. She recognized it by the orangey-yellow cap.

Claude quickly plucked it off and stuck it in his jacket pocket. He did it with a smooth, practiced air. *Yeah, he's getting far too good at that.*

The prince was clearly the type to do things properly.

“Your Highness...thank you for the dress. Oh, and the accessories.”

Agnes had been expecting the custom-tailored dress, of course. But she'd been taken aback when it was delivered with the yellow-quartz hair comb, earrings, the hair ribbon embroidered with silver thread, the shoes, and the gloves.

And everything was *extremely* high quality.

It was all too much. Claude had really gone overboard. But whether it was a sign of his mushroom mania or simply a point of royal pride, Agnes couldn't tell.

“You're welcome. I *knew* I was right. Bright colors really *do* suit you best, Lady Agnes. You look beautiful!”

Claude twinkled. Just then, three more *Rickenella Fibulas* sprouted up the length of his arm.

Must he twinkle so indiscriminately? Agnes thought. He might be a freak, and his romantic intentions up for debate, but he was still a very handsome young man. *Anyone* would tense up, being smiled at by someone like him.

“Th-Thank you. I heard that you paid for this dress out of your own pocket instead of the royal coffers...”

“Yep.”

“Please don't. It's too much fuss over a nobody like me. The last dress you gave me was already going too far. I would've happily worn it again, even. There was no need for you to prepare me a whole new outfit...”

“The last one was a rush job. Wasn't even properly tailored to you. Anyway, I bought you the outfit because I wanted to see you in it. You don't need to worry about a thing.”

Even so, Agnes *was* worried. How could she *not* be? She was still deliberating over how to answer him when they arrived at the ballroom.

Here was the fourth-born prince, escorting the jilted woman again.

Naturally, every eye in the room turned to them.

By Claude's side, Agnes couldn't *hear* any snide remarks. But she could guess

what everyone would be saying if they could. The thought made her stomach knot. And her mushroom early-warning sensors began tingling.

Most of the harshest looks came from other young women. Agnes knew they saw her as a bothersome fly, one that'd gotten a foothold on the tempting honeypot that was Prince Claude.

Agnes knew that focusing on the dirty looks too much would only result in a fresh crop of mushrooms, so she tried to turn to thoughts of the carefree commoner's life that surely awaited her once this was all over.

"Shall we dance?"

"Okay..."

It looked like he was going to force her either way. So Agnes had no choice but to accept.

Claude took Agnes by the hand and led her to the center of the ballroom, where they began dancing to the music performed by the royal orchestra.

As a mere commoner, Agnes had never even *seen* dancing until she was adopted. She'd had to suffer through years of lessons to learn how.

Now she was a competent dancer. But she had nothing on Claude's practiced ease or his dynamic flare. The chasm between his royal status and her own lowly standing had never been more evident to her than this moment.

He led competently; all she had to do was follow. But mentally, this dance was a battle of wills for her.

Every now and then as they danced, yellow wormlike mushrooms would sprout from the backs of Claude's hands. But without missing a step, he simply plucked them off and stashed them in his pockets.

They were probably the same *Clavulinopsis Helvola* as before. But Claude moved so fast that Agnes didn't have time to make sure.

It was unmistakable. Claude's reflexes regarding the mushrooms had really sped up.

However does he manage to perform his royal duties when his mind is this focused on mushrooms all the time? Never mind his royal duties. What does he

do out of the palace on knight business? Surely he encounters all kinds of mushrooms in the wild.

Maybe the other knights know about his fungus fetish. Maybe they even have a nickname for him. The Knight of Shrooms or something.

Knight of Shrooms? I'm losing it!

A mental image popped into Agnes's mind of Claude wearing a giant mushroom cap on his head.

An *Amanita Muscaria* cap, of course. Bright red, like the red thread of fate that terribly bound the two of them together. *Oh dear, the mushroom toxins have clearly invaded my brain.*

It was all too much. The angry eyes on her, the strain it took to hold the mushrooms at bay. Agnes sighed, which drew a glance from Claude.

"...Are you growing tired?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry."

How rude, sighing like that while dancing with His Highness! Even ruder than imagining him with a giant mushroom cap on his head... I should picture him as the Mushroom King, instead. That seems more proper.

Now she could see Claude in her mind's eye, wearing a mushroom-shaped crown.

Agnes's eyes widened in alarm as she found herself choking back laughter. Claude narrowed his eyes, looking regretful.

"I'm so sorry. I can see I've been pushing you too far. Shall we take a little break?"



Mushrooms of the Day

Entoloma Sarcopum

Gray-brown caps with thick stems. It's edible.

It's bitter raw, so it needs to be thoroughly boiled or grilled.

It also looks a lot like the poisonous Entoloma Rhodopolium and the Entoloma Sinuatum, so please exercise caution.

It showed up to put Kevin in his place. A busybody mushroom.

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'd be edible. But it's not considered a worthy foodstuff.

Apparently, you need a lot of courage to eat it.

It's a proud mushroom, a symbol of bravery!

It has its empathetic side and lends a sympathetic ear to the Rickenella Fibula.

Rickenella Fibula

Light orange and yellow caps, about 1 centimeter. A little mushroom.

It doesn't seem to be poisonous. But no one's really sure.

It's too small to be worth eating. A sad, untasted mushroom.

Like the Marasmius Pulcherripes, it's just waiting for someone brave enough to come and try eating it. Don't be that person...

Amanita Muscaria

Red cap, white spots. The go-to poison mushroom for cartoons!

Claude's soulmate?!

Chapter 7: Too Hasty, Perhaps

THEY left the ballroom and quickly headed for a room with an ornate red door. The room was a little larger than the one from last time. They sat across from each other on the rose-patterned sofas.

“Your Highness...you invited me here for the mushrooms, didn’t you?” Agnes asked. “In that case, there’s no need for me to attend balls and the like. I can just have mushrooms delivered to you. Or did you have some other reason for needing my presence? Maurice said that it had nothing to do with the whole Philip situation. So...I wondered if perhaps you need me to keep away other women?”

“No.”

From his seat on the opposite sofa, Claude pulled the mushrooms from his pocket and arranged them on the table. There they were, the *Rickenella Fibula* and the *Clavulinopsis Helvola* that’d sprouted while they danced.

Despite being quickly shoved into his pockets, the mushrooms still looked fine.

This Mushroom Pervert really is good at handling them, Agnes thought.

“I told you. This is all because I want to see you.”

Agnes slumped. Claude really sounded too casual about the whole thing.

“I think you should be more careful about how you word things. To avoid *misunderstandings*.”

“What misunderstandings? I don’t mind if *you* ‘misunderstand’ me...”

What is this Mushroom Fetishist even saying?

“Do you talk to *all* the girls like this?”

“Not at all. In fact, I do my best to avoid them.”

True. He has zero romantic scandals to his name...

But this whole thing kept making less and less sense to her.

Claude gazed at a now visibly confused Agnes. Then he smiled, eyes twinkling again.

“You’ve let your hair down again today.”

“What? Oh... Yes. You don’t like it, after all?”

She was free of Philip’s tyranny. But there was no changing the fact that her natural peach-blossom hair color was as unpopular as they came.

Since Claude had made no complaint last time, she wore it down again today.
But perhaps he’s sick of the sight of it now?

“Not at all. I’ve never *seen* a girl with such beautiful hair and eyes.”

“Thank you for trying to make me feel better. I’ve always tried to hide my hair and downplay it as much as possible. And I tried to keep my makeup and dresses bland, so I don’t stand out as much.”

“Why would you do that?”

“...Philip wanted me to.”

Philip was a dimwitted adulterer, but he had a point when it came to appearances. Even when she’d attended evening events with him, she was able to avoid having people approach her by dressing down as much as possible.

Meanwhile, Claude was frowning and looking unimpressed by her confession.

“Well, don’t hide that beautiful hair of yours anymore. I’ll have another dress made for you too. I want you to wear it and dance with me at the next ball.”

“For my mushrooms, right?”

“...I can’t say you’re wrong there.”

Fetishists are always so accepting of their own feelings! He probably wants his mushrooms as fresh as possible... He has weird interests, sure, but it’s me who’ll shoulder the risk that comes with him indulging them.

“I don’t need a dress. Once you’re satisfied, I plan to be a commoner again, so it’ll only add to my burdens if you keep giving me extravagant dresses.”

“You’re *still* considering commoner life? And what do you mean, ‘once I’m satisfied...?’”

“I figured, if you’re not just using me to prop up the royal image or keep bothersome women away from you, then you must be using me as a walking mushroom farm. Keeping me around as an amusement.”

Claude’s mouth dropped open and he froze.

“Why do you think that?”

“Well, you said all that stuff about falling for the mushrooms. What other reason could you have for keeping me around?”

“...But I want to see *you*. I find you interesting! More than any of those other girls, anyway. Doesn’t that mean I have feelings for you...?”

“It’s just mushroom mania. It’s the *mushrooms* you’re into! Not me as a person.”

Okay, so he has no scandals to his name, but he’s still a handsome prince. He says grandiose things and has a huge amount of power and influence.

Claude sighed while Agnes was still thinking about his impressive status.

Just then, a small mushroom popped up on the back of his glove.

Psilocybe Subcaerulipes, judging by the little brown cap.

Claude plucked it off and added it to the table with the rest of his collection.

“I see, I see. So that’s how it is. That’s what I am to you...”

“Er, Your Highness?”

Claude lifted his dark gray eyes from the mushrooms on the table and fixed them on Agnes.

“All right, then. I want to use you to keep other women away. As you know, I’m the fourth-born prince, second in line for the throne, and single. And indeed, I wish to keep away all the hypergamous females who see me as a tempting catch. If you could pretend to be...*involved* with me, it’d help a great deal. So, would you mind doing me that favor?”

“But you just said it wasn’t about keeping other women away.”

"I just changed my mind. Now it is."

What? He's going back on his own words now?

Here she'd been thinking he was a decent, though perverted, sort. But it turned out that he was cut from the same cloth as Philip after all.

Agnes was shocked. But she'd no time to dwell on it.

"All right, what do you want me to do? And for how long?"

"My brother... I mean, the Crown Prince is getting married in six months. I want your help until then."

"Six months?"

Was that a long time or not? She couldn't tell.

"Yes. That should be enough time to finish up the business at hand."

"...What business?"

He's not planning to clone me with magic, is he? So he can have a lifetime supply of mushrooms? There's no telling what this pervert might be thinking!

"Don't worry about it."

Claude grinned at her, but Agnes wasn't reassured.

"As for your duties...be seen with me as much as possible. Be my partner for evening parties and events. And I also want you to meet with me privately, too."

"But...surely you could find someone better than me?"

"Who?"

His abrupt question gave her pause.

"Who...? I don't know. Some other, well-bred young lady. Someone prettier, more refined."

"I'm *tired* of girls like that. I prefer you. I like your hair, your eyes, *and* your mushrooms. You're perfect for me! That's what I think."

Oh, you do, do you? Mushroom freak...

“Anyway, there’s no reason why I should accept your request.”

“If I tell everyone I fell for you at first sight that night you got publicly dumped, it’ll completely overwrite your scandal with Philip. Your bad reputation will vanish instantly, and your little brother and family will have their image restored, too.”

“No, it’ll just make me seem like a fickle woman who hops from one royal husband candidate to another.”

“If we were just dating for fun, then yes. But I’ll tell everyone I’m head over heels for you. That you’re my soulmate. I’ll really lay it on thick. I’ll say I proposed to you right away, but you turned me down. That way, it’ll look like I’m the one who’s pursuing you, while *you’ll* be the innocent, desired party.”

“So, you want to make this like some kind of a contract?”

“*Hmm*, something like that. I’ll pretend to be crazy about you and that will keep the annoying girls off my back. At the same time, *you* can fix your scorned woman reputation and safeguard your younger brother’s future. You scratch my back, I scratch yours.”

“Yes, but...at the end of our time together, it’s going to look like I’ve been rejected by two royals.”

What’s the point of dragging myself out of the mud, only to leap back in at the end of it all?

“Listen, the story is going to be that I’m crazy for you. Head over heels. You’re the one who’s going to dump *me* in the end, not the other way around. Your reputation won’t be affected at all. Nor will the Lefort family be negatively impacted in any way. I give you my word.”

“You’re going to destroy your own reputation if you do that.”

He’s a mushroom freak, yes, but he’s still the fourth prince. What does he stand to gain, pretending to have lost his head over a woman who was damaged goods, only to end up dumped by her in the end?

“You’re concerned about my wellbeing, are you? In that case, agree to the plan. I assure you I’m very serious about this.”

Claude's eyes certainly did seem serious as they gazed at Agnes.

He was a fetishistic freak, yes. But he was quite a nice prince. And he *had* stepped in to help when she and Philip had had their public screaming match. He didn't seem like the type to lie to try to trick her.

"You're having that tough of a time with the ladies? Then I suppose this is worth it to you if you can keep them away and get mushrooms in the process?"

Claude blinked for a second. Then he smiled wryly.

"Yes, the mushrooms are...*tempting*. All right. How about if I purchase them from you?"

"You want to *buy* my mushrooms?"

That wasn't such a bad deal for Agnes, all things considered.

Asking a mushroom fetishist to give up the mushrooms was an exercise in futility. And if Agnes explained things to her family properly, it might be okay. They wouldn't get the wrong idea about her and Claude. Yes, maybe she *could* get through this unscathed.

And if she could spin her weird mushroom-sprouting effect into actual, big money, well, that'd be just fine.

"...All right, then."

"Thank you, Lady Agnes. I mean...Agnes."

Claude gave her a brilliant smile that made her heart skip a beat. *Dang it!*

"Say my name, too."

"What? I can't..."

Fetishistic freak though he may be, he *was* still a prince. A mere count's daughter like her couldn't possibly address him using only his given name.

"We *have* to get friendly with each other, or no one's ever going to buy our ruse, now, are they? It's okay. I give you permission."

When he put it like that, she almost believed him. *This is why good-looking men are deadly!*

“All right, Prince Claude, then.”

“Try again, drop the prince.”

“Okay. C-Claude...”

Embarrassed, Agnes snuck a look at the prince. He was beaming at her. He wielded his princely smile like a weapon.

...I never should have looked.

She sighed in peak embarrassment and discomfort.

Claude got up from the sofa and came over to her. He kneeled before her and took her hand.

“Let’s be good together, okay, Agnes?”



Still smiling, he kissed the back of her hand. Just then, a couple of red mushrooms popped out of the front of his shirt.

Being met with this sight—the sight of the handsome prince smiling up at her with two *Amanita Muscaria* sprouting from his chest—felt so bizarre, even for her.

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

She yanked her hand free from his grip, flustered by the sudden kiss and the resultant mushroom sprouting. She’d meant to chastise him, but the prince looked utterly unconcerned.

“I told you, I plan to really throw myself into this. I’m going to be wooing you all over town. A kiss like this is only the logical first step.”

She knew he was only talking about their ruse. But still...those words had a mesmerizing effect, coming from such a handsome face...

Another cluster of mushrooms sprouted up on the back of Claude’s glove, as if responding to Agnes’s feelings.

Agnes narrowed her eyes, appraising them. *Gymnopilus Junonius*. She sighed.

“You’re going to wind up covered in mushrooms if you carry on like this.”

“I can think of nothing better.”

His dazzling smile was blinding her.

Once again, she realized how futile it was to use logic against a mushroom maniac.

...Perhaps I was too hasty, agreeing to this plan at all.

As Claude continued to beam at her, Agnes felt a wave of regret wash over her.



CLAUDE said he planned to throw himself into this.

He said he planned to woo her all over town.

But Agnes had no idea that he meant...*THIS*.

Maurice and the servants of the Lefort residence were on friendly speaking terms by now. After all, he came every day with the regular bouquet delivery. He was *supposed* to be a knight, but lately, he'd become a one-man flower-delivery service.

Now Agnes's room was crammed wall to wall with colorful flowers. The balls of light inhabited by the spirits floated happily around the room, going from vase to vase.

The flowers looked beautiful and smelled lovely, too. But the sight of them weighed heavily on Agnes's mind.

If it was just the flowers, that'd be one thing. She could accept them graciously. But Claude started sending handwritten letters along with the flowers ever since the day after their agreement was made.

Not message cards. Actual letters. He was going *far* beyond the terms of their agreement.

Yes, all right. He did say he was going to go all out. But handwritten letters from a prince? On the daily?

"Anyway, how are letters supposed to help our mutual causes? Unless he or his servants tell other people about them, no one's even going to *know* he's sending them but me and him," she said to Kevin later as they sipped tea together.

"Well, he probably *IS* telling people about them. Or his servants and friends are spreading the rumors." Kevin pointed out that horrifying possibility after biting into a tea cookie.

After the ball, Agnes had gone straight to her father and Kevin and explained what'd happened. She let them know that Claude would be acting very friendly toward her, but they weren't to worry. Still, she'd never expected the prince would go *this* far.

"No...he wouldn't...would he?" she replied to Kevin, concerned.

"Well, you said that he said he was going to go all out, right?" her brother asked. "Pretend to be head over heels in love? No doubt it'd be easier to broadcast it than just send personal letters."

“Then he should just *say* it! Why does he need to write it down every day?!” Agnes grabbed a nearby envelope and thrust it at Kevin.

“Well, he *has* to express how head over heels he is...”

“No one’s ever going to *read* these letters! He’s just...making extra work for himself!”

If he wanted people to know he was sending Agnes love letters, all he had to do was leak that to the servants. No need to actually write them. He didn’t even *need* to use real envelopes. Or waste stationery. Let alone waste the ink!

“But you *are* reading them, aren’t you, Sis?”

“Yes, well, I thought they might have instructions in them regarding our arrangement. Instead, he just writes page after page of...absolute nonsense! Each and every day!”

Agnes dropped the envelope onto the table and took a fortifying sip of tea, trying to relax. But her agitated state was evident by the row of *Boletus Edulis* that sprouted along Kevin’s arm.

With deep brown, velvety caps, the mushroom didn’t look particularly tasty. But it was, in fact, highly edible. Also known as Porcini, it was delicious stir-fried or baked. She’d send those down to the kitchens after she finished chatting.

Kevin carefully plucked the mushrooms and arranged them on the table. Then he picked up the envelope.

“Can I read this?”

“Go ahead.”

It’s not like it was written out of real love for Agnes, anyway. She didn’t care who read it. But for some reason, Kevin’s face clouded over. *Weird*. He’s *the one who asked to read it...*

“I think the prince would be shocked to know you let your little brother read his heartfelt letter.”

“*I’m* the one who’s in shock here. Just read it if you want.”

“Hello, Agnes.

How many days have passed since the ball where we first met?

My heart is filled with sadness, knowing I must wait until the next public event to see you again. But I soothe myself by gazing at the splendid mushrooms you grew.

The yellow hue of the Clavulinopsis Helvola reminds me of your dress..."

"...What the heck?"

"It's a love letter. To...mushrooms..."

It was addressed to Agnes, sure. But the content was unmistakably written with mushrooms in mind.

Comparing my dress to Clavulinopsis Helvola? Seriously?

"Wait, let me read the next part."

"The contrast between your peach-blossom hair and the yellow dress was exquisite. And you drew all eyes when you entered the ballroom.

Naturally, I, too, was charmed.

How blessed I am to be able to stand by your side.

And don't worry. I intend to take full responsibility for, and ownership of, any and all mushrooms. So just relax and let them sprout.

I cannot wait to see you again.

-Claude Visage"

"Oh, that's nice. He spends the second half of the letter complimenting you."

"He keeps mentioning mushrooms! Who bangs on about mushrooms in a letter to someone that they supposedly love? It's like: am I even needed in this equation anymore? Would he and the mushrooms like to go and get a room?!"

Kevin scanned the letter again, shoulders slumping.

"But he seems sincere. Everyone says he's got a spotless romantic record. It's practically a blank slate."

True, this didn't seem like the kind of letter some philanderer would send to a girl he was scamming.

Not that Agnes had ever *gotten* any letters like that to compare...

The only “letters” Philip had ever sent during their engagement were terse notes reminding her to dress modestly. Compared to *those*, Claude’s were practically awash with romance.

“Who rambles on about mushrooms in a letter that’s only being sent for show, anyway? And have *you* ever sent anyone a letter all about mushrooms, Kevin?”

“*Hmm...* It does seem abnormal.”

Agnes felt a flood of relief. Finally, someone agreed with her.

Also, she was glad that Kevin wasn’t another oddity who thought writing letters about fungi was acceptable behavior.

“Right?! Kevin, this can only mean one thing, right?”

Kevin placed the letter back down on the table and nodded.

“You’re right. The prince is actually very awkward at—”

“—Actually a big mushroom pervert!!!”

Agnes interrupted her brother breathlessly in a highly agitated state. Kevin grimaced.

“What...makes you say that?”

“Well, the letter goes on about mushrooms from start to finish. And when we met, he wasn’t freaked out by my mushrooms. He took them in stride! And then he himself told me he’d ‘fallen for’ them! He’s an *obvious* mushroom perv! That’s why he forced me into this weird arrangement!”

Right, right. If all he wanted was a shield to keep thirsty females away, he had his pick of pretty ones to choose for the job. And choosing a really pretty one would dash the others’ hopes.

But he chose me. Which meant he had another motive.

“I’m probably the only girl in the world with mushroom-sprouting powers, and I’ve no other prospects because of my vile hair color. The prince probably sees me as a golden goose that lays mushroom spores! No *wonder* he’s

interested!”

“You’re right that you’re the only one who can sprout mushrooms,” Kevin replied. “And I also agree that the prince *does* seem to have taken an interest in you. But I don’t believe that the mushrooms are all he cares about here.”

“Right, my hair color plays into it as well. My vile hair color will creep other women out and keep them well away. The stigma, you know? But it’ll also keep men away. That’s kind of an unwelcome side effect for a prince, I would’ve thought.”

Still, when the time came, Claude could easily distance himself from Agnes, couldn’t he?

Kevin sighed, shoulders slumping.

“Damn it! That Philip really did a number on you, Sis. I’d like to give him a piece of my mind.”

“What’s this about Philip now?”

“Listen to me, Sis. As I’ve said many, many times, your hair is beautiful. Your eyes, too. And you’re as pretty as any other nobleman’s daughter. No matter what Philip says.”

“I know. I know that Philip is a silly fool with a wandering eye and loose morals.”

“Yes, yes, he is. That’s what I’m saying.”

“But, even so, at least Philip let me know how the outside world *really* sees me. I owe him my gratitude for that.”

It was Philip, after all, who’d cared enough to help her temper her clothes and general appearance. Even if she often felt that he was taking things too far...

But it worked, didn’t it? In the end, Philip had been proven right.

“You don’t seem to understand at all! *Why* do you still put so much faith in what Philip told you?”

“Because you and Father are both way too kind. You’d never look at me with disgust, would you?”

“No, of course not. There’s no reason to, anyway.”

Agnes smiled. Kevin was so sweet.

“So *that’s* why I’ll always remember what Philip said. He told me the absolute truth.”

Kevin looked like he was about to say something but eventually just sighed instead.

“This conversation always just ends up going around in circles. I can see I’m not going to get through to you until the spell of Philip’s wicked influence is broken.”

Kevin picked up all the letters, stacked them, and then handed them to Agnes. Then he picked up the *Boletus Edulis*.

“This agreement you’ve made with Claude doesn’t sound like such a bad deal to me. After all, he’ll probably free you from the spell...”



Mushrooms of the Day

Psilocybe Subcaerulipes

Dark brown caps. A little mushroom that looks a bit like Shimeji.

It's one of the poisonous mushrooms referred to as magic mushrooms. It can induce vomiting, paralysis, and derangement.

It popped up when Agnes said "Mushroom Mania," clearly thinking it was its time to shine. Alas, it was too hasty.

Clavulinopsis Helvola

A yellow mushroom that grows from the ground like French fries.

Nicely arranged on the table, it offers words of consolation to the hasty
Psilocybe Subcaerulipes.

Amanita Muscaria

Red caps, white dots. THE poisonous mushroom.

It sprouted up when Claude attempted a kiss, but neither that nor the mushroom was received warmly.

Gymnopilus Junonius

A poisonous mushroom that looks like a yellow Shimeji.

A staple of the mushroom world. It sprouts up to give the Amanita Muscaria a boost.

Boletus Edulis

It's an edible mushroom with a velvety dark brown cap.

The cap can be over 15 centimeters wide! It tastes great in a stir fry or broiled. The bigger, the better!

Kevin will take it down to the kitchens soon...

The mushroom tried to tell Agnes, "See you at the dinner table!" But unfortunately, she didn't seem to understand it.

Chapter 8: Head over Heels and Crazy For You

“**LONG** time no see, Agnes.”

Upon her arrival at Duke Watteau’s residence, the carriage door opened to reveal a handsome man with dark-gray eyes, who smiled as he greeted Agnes.

After last time, she should’ve been expecting this. Yet, she couldn’t hide her discomfort.

“In what kind of world does an actual prince of the realm come to greet a middling noblewoman at her carriage?”

“In *this* one. I was desperate to see you and couldn’t wait.”

Agnes took Claude’s proffered hand and alighted from the carriage. She was so flustered by what he’d just said to her that a series of umber-colored mushrooms sprouted on the back of his glove.

Pleurocybella Porrigens. Its warty cap was unmistakable. And there were three of them, lined up merrily along the back of Claude’s gloved hand.

“Ah, a sort of yellowish-brown color today. So...you don’t always accessorize the mushrooms you sprout with the same color as your dress.”

Claude examined the mushrooms with a smile before plucking them and handing them to Maurice.

Is it for safekeeping? Or is he going to have them appraised for purchase?

Agnes thought over what Claude had just said. Perhaps the mushrooms aligning to her dress in terms of color *was* a key sprouting feature.

...Key sprouting feature? Goodness!

Claude’s mushroom mania was rubbing off on her like poisonous spores.

As she sighed, another light purple fungus sprouted from the back of Claude’s other hand.

Alloclavaria Purpurea. Also known as Purple Coral. The long, thin stems

resembled worms. Agnes wasn't sure if this was a reaction to Claude pointing out the synergy of her dress color and the mushrooms' color or to her own thoughts.

"That dress looks splendid on you, Agnes. It really offsets your peach-blossom hair."

"...Thank you."

The dress that'd been tailored for Agnes was the exact same shade of purple as the *Alloclavaria Purpurea*.

Philip had once had a purple dress made for her, but it was a completely different shade of purple than this one. That one resembled a bruise's dark purple, whereas this one looked like a flower meadow in full bloom. Made of multiple thin layers, the dress was flowy and quite adorable.

She also wore a matching purple flower hair comb set and earrings.

She couldn't help noticing that Claude also wore a purple flower in his buttonhole.

No doubt he did that on purpose to match me, Agnes thought.

"Um... Your Highness?"

"We agreed on Claude, didn't we?"

Claude grinned over his shoulder at Agnes as he escorted her, and she felt a sense of deep exhaustion wash over her.

"Claude... You really didn't *have* to make me another dress, you know. Much less go to all this fuss over color coordinating."

"But I *wanted* to buy a dress. And I wanted to wear the same color as you! After all, I'm head over heels *and* crazy for you."

"Yes, that *is* our arrangement. But..."

But there was no need for him to take things quite so seriously.

Claude was a prince. It was ridiculous for him to come and greet her at her carriage.

Catching sight of Agnes's frown, Claude burst into hearty laughter.

“Everyone’s already gossiping about how I’ve fallen head over heels for the girl with the peach-blossom hair. I’ve spread the rumor myself, you see. Once we get there, try to act a little bit more friendly toward me, will you?”

“Why spread rumors? Surely it’s enough for us to just be seen together?”

“Well, I’m crazy about you. I don’t want any other man thinking he has a chance and trying to snatch you before you’re officially mine!”

Grinning, Claude walked through the opened front doors with a flourish.

The ballroom was filled with glamorously dressed aristocrats, as one might expect from a duke’s ball.

As soon as Claude and Agnes entered, the room went dead silent. The atmosphere was stifling, but Claude paid no mind. Instead, he escorted Agnes inside.

After spending the past few years trying to blend into the wallpaper, Agnes felt panicked over being scrutinized this way.

Agnes was too frazzled to pay attention to anything that was going on, but she was pretty sure she properly greeted Duke Watteau when he came over to them.

“How surprising, Your Highness, to see you with a woman at last! The Crown Prince must be pleased?”

“My brother has already found his soulmate and was desperate to see me happy, too. Well, now I am. For I, too, am blessed by fate!”

Claude was even running their scam on a duke. *He’s got guts.*

True, leaking it to the most influential members of society was the fastest way to get the rumor permeating. But once their arrangement ended, they’d each go their separate ways. Agnes didn’t want Claude laying it on quite this thick.

And she wished he’d stop using the words “fate” and “soulmate.”

Those words reminded her too much of her painful, public jilting.

Irritated and embarrassed, Agnes stared at her feet. She *was* exhausted, especially with all these eyes on her...

Claude seemed to notice and quickly cut short the pleasantries. Taking Agnes by the hand, he led her out to the garden.

“...Tired?”

They sat on a stone bench as Claude looked at Agnes with concern. All they’d done was show up to the ball and greet the host. Agnes felt guilty for her lack of stamina.

“I’ve never had so many people looking at me before. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it’s all right. I think I got ahead of myself. I’ll bring us some drinks; just sit here and rest a minute.”

“Thank you.”

Agnes sighed, watching the moonlight shine on Claude’s Prussian-blue hair as he walked off.

In her role as Claude’s woman-shield, she’d probably have to attend many balls like this. It was going to take a lot of effort to get used to this arrangement. Living such a mousy life for so long had done nothing to prepare her.

“...Congratulations on wrapping His Highness around your sly little finger.”

Agnes looked up to find five women surrounding her bench.

They wore brightly colored ballgowns, glittering jewelry, and perfect makeup. They were the kind of girls Agnes usually tried her best to avoid. *The ones who care about nothing else but appearances.*

“...You’re talking about Prince Claude, I take it?”

The women’s faces clouded over.

“After that *disgraceful* scandal you caused, it’s shocking you’d even show your face in society. You commoner girls really are something else,” one of them said.

Hmm, true. Most people would choose to hide away after being publicly dumped.

Not that this had anything to do with being commoner-born. It was probably

just another button that these women wanted to push to make Agnes feel bad.

“Don’t mistake His Highness’s kindness for anything more,” another girl said.

Agnes wouldn’t. Besides, it wasn’t kindness. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Like a mushroom farmer and their customer.

“He only noticed you because of your *hair*, anyway,” another girl piped in.

True, Agnes’s hair did stand out. But during the Philip era, when she kept it hidden, it’d never really been an issue.

Yet again, Agnes had to admit foolish Philip had been wise about that.

“You’re just Claude’s little plaything,” another girl sniffed.

Nope. Untrue. With my standing and looks, who’d even want to play with me? Well, it might be a different story when it comes to my mushrooms, though...

“Right. Just because your face is somewhat pretty, don’t go thinking you’re all that!”

Oh, that’s quite nice. That one called me pretty...

Agnes would’ve expected something like, “*Don’t go thinking you’re all that, ugly!*”

Still, maybe it was just that girl’s good breeding that prevented her from slinging insults outright. But then again, if she was *really* well-brought-up, she wouldn’t be menacing another woman sitting defenselessly by herself. None of them would be.

“Hey! Say something! You...commoner! You and your cursed hair can get lost!”

“...*Who* are you talking about?”

A low voice rumbled and the women all froze.

At the sight of Prince Claude, now standing there holding two glasses, the women immediately began to simper and smile.

Ignoring them, Claude held a glass out to Agnes.

“Here, Agnes. Some water. I made them add lemon. Hopefully, it’ll reenergize you.”

“Thank you for going to the trouble.”

Agnes took a sip. The lemon was indeed fresh, sharp, and invigorating.

“It’s delicious.”

Agnes smiled and Claude’s expression softened. Then a moment later, he scowled again.

“...So? What’re you girls doing here? And just *who* were you talking about just now?”

“It’s...it’s all a misunderstanding, Your Highness.”

“Right. We were just, *uh*, warning her. About her hair color.”

“We were telling her she should tie it back like she used to, so it doesn’t stand out as much.”

Agnes blinked in surprise as the women all exchanged anxious glances. She was convinced that nobody had even noticed her hair during the drab Philip days. But apparently, they *had*. And they’d noticed she was trying to hide it, too.

She’d never heard a single complaint, though. *Perhaps that’s the correct, aristocratic way...*

“I asked her to wear it down. Don’t attack her.”

“Huh? But Prince Claude, why?”

“Because I want to see her beautiful hair in all its glory, that’s why,” Claude said matter-of-factly, his smile a little scary. Unable to argue back against the prince, the women began looking uncomfortable.

It looked like Claude was leaning on the “*It’s fate! I’m head over heels!*” narrative here, too.

“Incidentally, I don’t remember giving you permission to address me by name.”

“Oh, but Lady Lefort just did...”

As Claude said, it was considered extremely impolite to refer to a royal using their name instead of “Your Highness.”

Agnes only did it because Claude told her to. But these girls didn’t know that. They just thought she was being impudent. Them doing the same thing was meant to highlight how supposedly in the wrong Agnes was.

“Agnes is faultless. She is my special someone.”

“What?” Agnes and the five women all spoke in unison.

Quickly covering her mouth in horror, Agnes glanced at Claude. But his eyes were crinkled with a smile.

“Wh-What do you mean, special someone?”

“Surely, you’ve heard already? I’ve fallen head over heels for Agnes. I’m crazy about her.”

The five women’s jaws dropped. So did Agnes’s.

The fourth-born prince, second in line to the throne, had fallen for a common-born, jilted count’s daughter with ominously pink hair?

It sounded ridiculous.

“So if you’ve got something you want to say to her, you can say it to me. I refuse to let anyone approach her with ill will. If there’s nothing further, though, I suggest you girls head back to the party and get out of my sight.”

Claude’s smile was charming, but his words had a cold, steely edge to them.

The women exchanged glances before hurrying off as fast as they could.

“...Agnes. Are you all right?”

Once the women were gone, Claude sat down beside Agnes.

“I’m fine. Sorry for the trouble.”

“Would you tell me what they were saying to you?”

“It’s nothing worth hearing.”

“I want to know. If it concerns you, I must know.”

They were alone now. He could drop the devoted suitor act. This prince took

things way too seriously.

Still, perhaps she *should* meet him halfway and take things seriously too. *Under the circumstances.*

“Um... They talked about my hair. My commoner roots. My scandal. They said I mistook your intentions. They said I’m just your plaything. They told me not to get carried away. Stuff like that.”

As Agnes ticked off each thing on her fingers, Claude’s expression grew darker and darker.

“How *dare* they? And what did you say?”

“I mean, it’s all pretty much true. I just haven’t heard it to my face in a while. It gave me a good idea of what people are saying about me these days.”

The public dumping incident really *had* stained her name considerably.

Now Agnes wasn’t so sure that being seen with Claude would be enough to restore her reputation. Still, she’d already started this, so she had to see it through.

Still, even if the negative gossip never stopped, then at the very least, she could use this opportunity to make enough mushroom money to start a whole new life.

“Anyway, this is what happens when I go against Philip’s advice and start dressing up. The drab outfits really did serve a good purpose.”

Also, now Agnes had really seen firsthand just how sought-after Claude was.

“...Agnes?”

Claude cupped his hands around hers, even as she continued to clutch her water glass. Two mushrooms popped up on the back of his gloves. From the milk-white caps, Agnes thought they might’ve been *Cuphophyllus Virgineus*. But she was too distracted right now to be sure.

“From now on, tell me anything that happens. I hate to think of you being treated poorly because of me. I won’t have it. I must stop this at once. Women like them need to be held in check.”

“Stop it?”

Claude nodded, plucked the mushrooms off, and then reached out for Agnes’s hand once more.

“Agnes Lefort. Would you dance with me?”

“Huh? What? Wh-Why?”

The sudden change of subject and the intense look in Claude’s eyes panicked Agnes and caused three more mushrooms to sprout up Claude’s arm. It looked like more of the *Cuphophyllus Virgineus*. But again, Agnes didn’t have the mental capacity needed to identify them right now.

“I’ve made sure that rumors are swirling about me sending you love letters and flowers every day, but a painting speaks a thousand words. Let’s go and show them in person.”

“H-Hold on! You ‘made sure’ that rumors are swirling?”

“Yes, of course. I just made sure the truth is out. Now let’s go.”

Claude took Agnes’s hand and led her back to the ballroom.

Agnes was still highly agitated. Maybe that was why a red, egg-shaped mushroom was lying in the bottom of the glass Claude left on the table.

Amanita Caedareoides. It lay there so round. So still. Almost as if it was sentient, watching Claude and Agnes as they disappeared into the center of the ballroom, where they immediately began to dance.

He was as good a leader as last time, which helped Agnes calm down.

Dancing like this, it was hard to believe that the handsome man twirling her around on the dancefloor was a closeted mushroom pervert.

Claude’s fancy steps drew the eyes of the nearby ladies and their dance partners.

Royal status aside, Claude definitely had a magnetism that tended to attract others.

Agnes felt out of place, dancing with him.

Her role was nothing more than a woman-repeller and mushroom sprouter.

She didn't feel worthy of being a dance partner to someone as splendid as Prince Claude.

"Um...can we wrap it up now?"

"What? Wrap what up?"

Claude leaned in close to hear her.

Uh-oh. Bad move. It looks like we're...canoodling!

As Claude brought his face down to hers, the onlookers gasped.

Agnes could hear the indignant shrieks of the women and the low, surprised murmurs of the men. It was almost as if Claude's handsome face had entranced the men as well, and they too resented Agnes for being his partner.

"Agnes?"

Claude's face was right up against hers. She could see his dark-gray eyes so clearly. His Prussian-blue hair brushed her forehead. Agnes jerked back in alarm.

A deep orange mushroom popped up on Claude's arm. Not missing a beat of the dance, Claude casually picked it.

Based on the rounded shape and vivid orange hue, Agnes thought it might've been *Pycnoporus Coccineus*. But Claude moved so fast, she couldn't really be sure.

Agnes was paralyzed by Claude's closeness and by the sweet scent she remembered smelling on him once before.

Even though Philip was her fiancé, he'd rarely looked at her when they danced. Agnes had never had a man bring his face so close to hers before.

Of course she was nervous. This was all new to her.

Now a white mushroom sprouted from Claude's midsection. But again, he quickly plucked it off and stashed it away. It looked like another *Cuphophyllus Virgineus*. But again, Claude moved so fast, Agnes could never be sure.

He really was a mushroom fetishist with the reflexes to match!

Agnes found herself mildly exasperated with Claude. Did he *have* to be so

extra in everything he did?

“Um...your face is too close. And can we stop dancing now? I’m sure that’s more than enough.”

“No, no, no. We’re just getting to the best part!”

The best part of what?

Claude grinned upon seeing the look on Agnes’s face.



The grin from Claude was enough to make the surrounding women gasp with jealousy.

Claude's motivations were twofold: keep away annoying women and acquire mushrooms. Dancing with Agnes like this, he was getting everything he wanted.

Surely, Claude's intentions with this dance were to show the other women that he was taken with Agnes? They weren't to embarrass her into sprouting an endless supply of mushrooms, were they?

"Agnes, focus on the dance. Look into my eyes."

Look into his...eyes? To...to keep the other women away, right? Not so I'll sprout extra mushrooms...right?

They were already practically dancing cheek to cheek. Agnes was desperate to hold the mushrooms back any way she could.

Hmm, perhaps I should distract him with another topic?

"Um, Your Highness...what is that fruity cologne you're wearing? It smells so... nice and sweet."

"What? Oh, this? It's made from the *Cantharellus Cibarius* mushroom."

"Oh, I...I see."

Mushroom cologne? Seriously? Just how deep does this crazy prince's fungal fetish go?

Agnes was willing to bet that none of the onlookers would ever, in their wildest dreams, imagine that the prince they so admired was the type to wear *mushroom cologne*.

This unwelcome piece of information only served to heighten her discomfiture.

Here she was, dancing with the Mushroom Freak Prince, who twirled her around the dance floor, merrily harvesting mushrooms and wafting the scent of mushroom cologne wherever he went.

He wasn't a man.

He was...a walking, talking mushroom.

Agnes got a vivid mental image just then of Claude, wearing a giant mushroom cap on his head and waving about a mushroom-shaped bottle of fragrant cologne.

She couldn't put anything past him anymore.

Trying to hold it together, Agnes was relieved when the dance came to a close.

The nerves, plus all the water she'd drunk, were both beginning to wreak havoc on her physiology.

She separated from Claude and visited the washroom just in time. On her way back to the ballroom, she bumped into the quintet of mean girls again.

After being warned off by Claude, they couldn't surround and antagonize her again. But they couldn't resist shooting off a few snarky remarks as they passed by.

"His Highness seems to be spending a *lot* of time with Duke Watteau's daughter these days."

"Indeed. But why shouldn't he? After all, a certain someone is only a mere *plaything* of his."

"Lady Watteau is very pretty, with such beautiful *black* hair. What a stunning couple they make."

Then, sniggering nastily, the women trotted off.

"Not a plaything. A mushroom factory." Agnes couldn't resist correcting them under her breath.

Duke Watteau was the host of this ball.

If Claude and the Watteau girl really *were* close, then it was very rude of him to dance with Agnes in front of her under her own roof.

Or maybe this was all a ploy by those mean girls. *They're after Claude themselves, so I wouldn't put it past them to make it all up and name-drop the host's daughter just to stick it to me.*

"I can understand why he wants me to act as a repellent to keep them away,"

she murmured.

The mean girls—Claude's fangirls—and their jealousy were nothing but a colossal annoyance to Agnes.

She sighed.

On her way back into the ballroom, she was accosted near the door by a man she'd never seen before.

"You're Count Lefort's daughter, aren't you?"

"Er...yes. I am. Can I help you with something?"

Agnes didn't know many noblemen. And she was sure she'd never seen this one before. She looked at him suspiciously. He seemed very restless.

"Y-You've got your hair down tonight."

...*Oh, right.*

He wanted to say something nasty about her hair, did he?

"Yes. If the sight of it offends you, well, I'm sorry about that."

Agnes tried to walk past the man, but he reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. A white mushroom immediately popped up on his shoulder. Luckily though, he didn't seem to notice.

Agnes gazed at the mushroom. It looked like *Lyophyllum Connatum*, also known as a White Domehead. The man was staring at Agnes.

"No, you've got it wrong. It's not like that. It's just that your hair is so... I mean, I find you very..."

"What are you doing?"

A cold, low voice interrupted the stammering young man from directly behind Agnes's shoulder.

"Oh, Claude..."

The man stiffened when Agnes addressed Claude.

"Agnes, I came to look for you since you were taking ages. Who *is* this man?"

Claude narrowed his eyes at the man, who'd gone pale as milk.

“Y-Your Highness! P-Please forgive me!”

Then the young man ran off in a huge fluster.

Claude watched him go, brows drawn.

“I can’t let my guard down for one second, can I? Still, seeing the way you look tonight, Agnes, I can hardly blame the man.”

“It’s not my fault. I told you I shouldn’t wear my hair down. Still, I’m used to nasty remarks about my hair. He must’ve been *really* offended, though, to stop me as I was walking by to lecture me on it.”

If wearing her hair up had been what prevented Agnes from having to deal with harassment like this until now, then it’d been a wise choice indeed. Perhaps she owed Philip a debt of thanks after all.

Goodness, how the people of this country lost their minds with hatred over something as silly as pink hair.

“Wait, what? What do you mean, Agnes?”

“...I mean exactly what I said? What’s confusing about that?”

Agnes blinked at Claude, who frowned and then sighed.

“I see, I see. I understand how you have been treated up until now. That’s reassuring...although also somewhat dangerous... At any rate, I can see that some discouragement is called for.” Muttering to himself, Claude took hold of Agnes’s hand.

A mushroom sprouted, almost as if on cue.

It was a trumpet-shaped mushroom, *Gomphus Fluccosus*.

Claude stroked its little gills, then carefully plucked it off his glove. All he was doing was harvesting a mushroom, but he did it sort of...*sensually*.

“Let’s call it a night. I only wish I could see you home myself. Will you agree to accompany me on a day out in the city next time?”

“Huh? Oh. Sure.”

The terms of their agreement stipulated that Agnes would be seen with Claude as much as possible. That must be what he meant by “a day out.”

Agnes answered automatically, but Claude still lit up with a big, beaming grin of happiness. *Stop that!*

Two mushrooms popped up merrily on the back of his gloves. One *Cuphophyllus Virgineus* and one *Pycnoporus Coccineus*.



Mushrooms of the Day

Pleurocybella Porrigens

A mushroom with a brownish cap, covered in flaky scales.

Depending on the specimen, it can be poisonous. If you eat it with an alcoholic drink, you'll get sick-drunk.

It tried to bring a message to Agnes. "Don't get drunk tonight!" ...What a busybody mushroom.

Alloclavaria Purpurea (Purple Coral) *A purple mushroom with thin stalks.*

It has no flavor or scent and doesn't taste good, so it's not used as food.

It came a-sprouting because someone asked for a mushroom "the same color as her dress."

Cuphophyllus Virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom.

It's easy to eat and goes well in vinegared dishes or a sauce.

It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

This time it brought a Pycnoporus Coccineus along with it.

Amanita Caedareoides

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 just pick and eat it without being sure of what it is. Apparently, it's delicious, though.

Its relative is the Amanita Muscaria. So, when that one shows itself, this one comes along as if to say, "Are we talking soulmates now?"

Pycnoporus Coccineus

A red, flat, semicircular mushroom.

It looks like a rusted Polyporaceae.

It was invited by the Cuphophyllus Virgineus, which sprouted in response to Agnes's racing heart.

It came along to rein in the Cuphophyllus Virgineus, which never knows when to stop.

Cantharellus Cibarius

A mushroom with an orange-yellow cap.

It's eaten in Europe but poisonous in Japan...what does that mean?

The flesh smells strongly of apricots.

It's more shocked than anyone to find it's used in perfumes.

Lyophyllum Connatum (White Domehead) *A white mushroom with a cap that looks like it's been dusted with white powder.*

It contains a poison that affects the gastrointestinal system and has no particular taste.

It certainly looks very tasty, tasty enough to tempt a brave person to try it.

It sprouted in response to the cosmetics worn by the women surrounding Agnes. Not quite the right timing.

Gomphus Fluccosus

A poisonous mushroom with a red, trumpetlike cap.

It causes gastrointestinal poisoning and is said to have no distinct taste. So someone must have tried eating this one, too.

It tried to play a trumpet note to cheer up Agnes, but despite its shape, it realized that mushrooms can't make music.

Chapter 9: The Mushroom Fetish Prince and the Mushroom Brooch

“GOOD morning, Agnes. Shall we go?”

When Agnes opened the door, she found a handsome young man standing there, the light shining on his Prussian-blue hair. He was dazzling enough without the sunlight.

He was wearing a simple long-sleeve shirt, a look she'd not seen him in before. Still, he couldn't hide his royal aura or natural good looks. *It's still so hard to process the fact that he's a closeted mushroom fetishist...*

“Good morning, Claude.”

“Did you pick out that light and movable dress for our outing today?”

Claude cast his eye over Agnes, looking pleased.

Today she wore a simple deep-green dress that was belted at her waist. While pretty white lace adorned the neckline and the cuffs, it was certainly lighter and easier to move in than a ballgown.

“No...I don't *have* any fancy dresses anymore. This is just what I wear these days. Sorry...I wasn't expecting you to come today.”

After all, she'd only just attended the ball where he'd asked her to go out on the town with him the prior night. So she wasn't expecting to find the prince on her doorstep first thing the following morning. She'd thought she was still dreaming at first.

“It is, is it?” Claude said, taking in her outfit again. “Maurice mentioned you claimed to have disposed of all your fine dresses. I guess it was true after all.”

“I didn't dispose of them. I *sold* them. Then whatever was left over, I cut up into skirts and sold those.”

“I thought it was just an excuse you were giving me... You're seriously

planning to become a commoner again...?”

Claude’s smile faltered. Almost as if he was deeply disappointed with Agnes’s behavior.

Mushroom-lover though he was, he *was* really handsome. Agnes felt a tinge of guilt.

“Don’t worry. I’ll uphold the terms of our agreement. Anyway, where was it you wanted to go today?”

“I want everyone to see us walking around town together. I have to get back this afternoon, though, so I don’t have much time.”

“If you’re *that* busy, why don’t we postpone this?”

“No, no. I’ve got a lot of official work to do. If I miss this chance today, I’ll have to wait another three days.”

If you’re that busy, then rest, Agnes wanted to say. Three days wouldn’t make *that* much difference.

“We could go somewhere a little further if we went by carriage...” Claude muttered.

“Not if we need to be back by this afternoon. All right, then. I’ll just go and get ready. Please give me a few minutes.”



AFTER slinging a small crossbody purse across her chest, Agnes hurried back to find Claude and Kevin standing in the entryway.

“Kevin? Is something wrong?”

“I heard the prince was here, so I came to greet him. Your Highness....I know my sister is a handful, but I hope you’ll be good to her.” Kevin bowed, then grinned and flapped his hand at Agnes. “Off you go, Sis.”

“What? Oh! Okay... Bye...”

Agnes followed Claude outside, and they walked to the front gates together. There was no carriage awaiting them. Nor any guards or footmen.

“Uh, Claude? Did you come out here all by yourself? Don’t you have any

guards with you?”

They were in the royal capital, yes, and Claude was a knight. But the second man in line to the throne couldn't just walk around unguarded.

“I'm a knight, remember? I can handle most things by myself.”

“Wait, you're *really* unguarded? In that case, let's cancel today! If anything were to happen...”

Agnes ground to a halt just a few feet away from the gate. Claude went a few more steps before he realized she'd stopped.

“But we're finally on a date, Agnes. I didn't want to ruin the mood by bringing guards!”

“I'd rather have the 'mood' ruined by guards than by ruffians or bandits. And anyway, this is *not* a date,” she stressed.

“Agnes, you hate stepping out with me *that* much?”

“It's not *about* how I feel. It's about your safety! You're royalty, so you should really take your wellbeing more seriously. If anything happens, you'll be sorry.”

Claude's shoulders slumped. Then he threw up his hands.

“All right, all right. I'll come clean. Maurice will be following us at a distance with two other Royal Guards. Is that safe enough for you?”

Agnes nodded, then another suspicion struck her.

“Why don't they just walk *with* us then?”

“Because I want to be alone with you! Not surrounded by burly men. Anyway...I don't *want* them getting too close to you, Agnes.”

Claude was sulking. In that moment, he looked more like a bratty neighborhood boy than a prince. It was sort of...adorable.

He doesn't want them getting too close to me...? Oh! He's just looking out for me after that young man accosted me at the last ball....

Unlike Philip, Claude was capable of such consideration.

“I'm used to people saying mean things about my hair,” Agnes said, “so you

don't need to worry about that."

"No, that's not what concerns me. Goodness...it's as bad as I was told."

"What?"

"We don't have much time. Let's go!"

Claude grabbed Agnes's hand and they began walking briskly.

A mushroom popped up on Claude's arm. He promptly plucked and pocketed it.

It was a scarlet-capped *Russula Aurea*.

Or so Agnes thought. But who could tell for sure? Claude was too fast.

The Mushroom Fetishist is at it again... He doesn't miss a beat.

Slightly impressed, Agnes obediently walked alongside Claude for a while.

By the time they reached the town square, Agnes had gotten used to him holding her hand, so there were no further mushrooms.

"So, what is it you wanted to see, Claude?" she asked.

"Anything. I just want to walk through town with you, Agnes."

"You want to...walk?"

"Yes. We're on a date."

"Oh, I see... This is part of your 'I'm head over heels' act then..."

The Mushroom Fetish Prince was going all-out for their ruse again today, it seemed. Although she doubted they'd encounter that many aristocrats walking through town together.

But Agnes's peach-blossom hair stood out like a sore thumb.

With all the merchants and servants around, no doubt the gossip would soon spread far and wide. Spreading the rumor amongst the poor as well as the rich would ensure maximum permeation. Every woman in the kingdom would know that Prince Claude was unavailable.

"Hello, Lady Lefort! With a male companion today? Is that your boyfriend?"

When Agnes stopped to buy a fruit skewer, the friendly shopkeeper turned an interested eye on Claude. Even dressed down like he was, there was no hiding Claude's royal facial features. He stood out like a sore thumb.

"No, this is a...business transaction. Exchanging goods for sale."

Agnes had to be careful what she said. Claude's reputation was on the line. She couldn't let their arrangement slip.

"Business?"

The shopkeeper frowned as he prepared two strawberry skewers. Agnes just smiled and shrugged. She couldn't explain that she was supplying Claude with mushrooms.

"Well, anyway...good for you! You were always *far* too good for that silly royal brat you were engaged to. Here, have an extra strawberry!"

"Ooh! Thank you very much!"

Philip certainly *was* a silly brat. So much so, in fact, that even the commonfolk knew of his idiocy. Agnes didn't really know what the merchant had meant by "Good for you," but if it meant free strawberries, she wouldn't question it.

Agnes paid then handed one of the skewers to Claude.

"Thank you. I feel terrible having you pay, though."

"It barely cost anything. It wouldn't even pay for a single bead on that first dress you gave me. At least let me buy you a fruit skewer as thanks."

Claude had brought gold coins with him, of course, but those were worth too much to be used to buy anything in this part of town. Using even one would require too much change back, which would inconvenience the shopkeeper and draw too much attention.

Really, he should've prepared some copper coins for this outing, Agnes thought.

"Is this the first time you've ever been shopping in this part of town?" she asked.

"No, I've bought from street merchants during military operations before."

No doubt Maurice or another of Claude's subordinates did the actual paying. Still, it made sense. Who'd picture the king's son standing in line at a shop, clinking a pocketful of copper coins?

"You seem very used to all this, though, Agnes."

"Well, I'm commoner-born...and I go shopping in town all the time."

"And you're friendly with all the shopkeepers?"

"Yes, I am. We've never exchanged names, but they all remember me on account of this hair of mine. See what a liability it is?" Holding up a lock of her hair, Agnes sighed and grimaced. "Let's sit down on that bench over there to eat," she suggested to change the topic.

Once they sat down, Agnes bit into the first strawberry at the top of the skewer.

An aristocrat's daughter would never do something like that in public, but Agnes knew the best way to eat a fruit skewer was to just stick it in her mouth. Eating it that way made it taste even more delicious, in her opinion.

Anyway, if Claude was repulsed by such unladylike behavior, then maybe he'd be willing to let her out of her obligation all the sooner. But no, Claude seemed quite unconcerned as he bit into his own strawberry.

Maybe Claude was familiar with the custom from his time as a knight. Either way, he seemed to think nothing of Agnes chowing down on the fruit skewer.

Agnes felt relieved. No, wait. Disappointed. No...she wasn't sure *what* she felt, really.

Having finished her first strawberry, Agnes looked up. Claude had red strawberry juice glistening on his lower lip.

The strawberries were extra juicy, so it was no surprise. But it was definitely odd seeing a prince with a strawberry mouth.

"Prince Claude, you've got strawberry juice dripping down your chin."

Agnes whipped out her handkerchief and reached out to dab the red juice off Claude's chin. Meanwhile, Claude stiffened, mouth slightly open.

Agnes frowned at him. *What? What's wrong?* Then she realized what she was doing.

“Oh! Sorry! It’s just that this is what I do for my little brother...”

Kevin often mashed food around his mouth, and Agnes thought nothing of wiping it off for him. It was just a reflex.

But what am I thinking?! Muscle memory is a scary thing!

Agnes cringed, staring at Claude and steeling herself for the scolding that was sure to come. But Claude stayed silent, touching his lower lip.

Oh dear, his face is very red. He must be furious with me...

“Uh...it’s...it’s fine. You...you wipe your brother’s face often, Agnes?”

Claude lifted his head to look at her. Yes, his cheeks were very red, but he didn’t look angry. Agnes could relax, for now at least.

“Yes, almost every day when he was little. Even now, sometimes. But more recently, it’s been Philip who I—”

“Philip?”

Claude’s voice was low and gravelly. Agnes wondered if she’d said too much again. But it was too late now. It was true, though. Philip had always had food on his chin that Agnes would wipe off.

She didn’t want to think about that foolish boy now. But she couldn’t deny that they’d spent many years together. After that long of a relationship, things just stuck with you.

“Uh...don’t worry about it.”

Claude took Agnes’s handkerchief from her and smiled.

Agnes looked at him in confusion for a second before he pressed it to her lips.

“...You’ve got some on you as well.”

Agnes felt her cheeks burn in embarrassment as Claude leaned into her personal space.

Just then, several mushrooms sprouted on Claude’s arm.



“S-Sorry!”

Agnes snatched her handkerchief from Claude and clutched it. He merely chuckled in response.

The white mushroom jiggled jollily as Claude laughed. *Hygrophoraceae*.

Beside that one, there was another with an ochre-colored, globular head. On top of the head, there was a deep red star-shaped clump.

It looked like *Calostoma Japonica*, and the bright red hue reminded Agnes of lips. *Not that I want to think about lips right now...!*

She couldn't stand the sight of Claude delightedly fondling the mushrooms either, so she stood up in a hurry.

She wanted to get away. Anywhere would do. So she headed to a nearby shop, realizing it was a jewelers.

A jewelers for commoners, though. None of the pieces on display were that expensive. Even the ones with real gemstones were somewhat affordable.

Still, Agnes had no need for jewelry. Not when she was returning to her humble roots.

She was about to head on to the next shop, but Claude—who, of course, followed her—remained standing there, looking at the window display.

“...What's up?”

Agnes looked back into the window, trying to see what Claude was so focused on. Without thinking, she gasped.

There it was, nestled amongst the rings and hair combs.

“Is that a...*mushroom*?”

Claude was gazing at a navy-blue mushroom brooch. Its navy-blue umbrella cap was studded with little gemstones. They were like little polka dots. *So adorable*, Agnes thought. The mushroom shape was cartoonish and cute, too.

Still, it was weird for a handsome young prince to be standing there with his nose pressed up to the glass, gazing raptly at a brooch.

The shopkeeper seemed to be having the same thought. He inched warily toward Claude but then seemed to relax when he spotted Agnes next to him.

“Hello, young sir. Want a present for your lady friend? You two look like quite the pair of sweethearts!”

“That’s a great piece. Especially the cap’s fine lines and the detail on the frills of the gills...”

Claude was clearly appraising the brooch on its resemblance to real mushrooms instead of on its merits as a jewelry piece.

The shopkeeper turned his baffled gaze to Agnes, looking for help.

So, Claude’s mushroom fetish is freaking out the local merchants now... she sighed internally.

“Er, Claude? Do you...like that brooch?”

“What do *you* think, Agnes?”

“I think the little polka dots are cute...”

The shopkeeper was the first to react to her appraisal.

“What do you say, young lady? We’ve another of the same brooch, in pink. Adorable, isn’t it?”

The shopkeeper whipped out the identical brooch he’d been describing.

“Oh! That’s *really* pretty.” Agnes spoke without thinking. It was too late to take it back.

Claude’s eyes flashed with excitement.

“Shopkeeper! We’ll take it! And this navy-blue one, as well.”

“You’ve got a fine eye, young sir. That brooch is the finest thing we stock. And those little fleck pieces are all real gemstones!”

Agnes quickly checked the price. It *was* quite pricey for commoner jewelry.

“You’re going to *wear* them, Claude?”

If the refined, dignified fourth prince was seen walking around with a couple of gaudy mushroom brooches like those on his lapel, it’d be...*really* weird.

“Don’t be silly. One of them is for you, Agnes. A present!”

So that means you’re going to wear the other one? thought Agnes, shaking her head in a panic.

“Oh, I don’t need one. And besides, it’s pretty pricey.”

Agnes didn’t want Claude spending any more money on her. But the shopkeeper interjected just then.

“All right! Tell you what! I’ll give you a discount because you are such a *pretty* young lady!”

The shopkeeper scribbled a new number down. Agnes looked and thought, *Wow, that is a hefty discount!*

“Then we’ll take the pair.”

Claude, not missing a beat, quickly paid.

While they were standing there, a curious crowd had formed behind them. As Claude handed over his money, they all gasped appreciatively, as if entertained. Some of them even clapped as Agnes and Claude walked off.

“What was all *that* about?”

Agnes had to speak up. She hated to walk back home in awkward silence. She’d no idea where that crowd of people had come from, but she was terribly embarrassed.

With a spectacle like that, the members of the aristocracy would hear of it before long.

Everyone would instantly know it was them. Agnes’s peach-blossom hair would identify her right away, and Claude had made barely any effort to dress down. He hadn’t even used a code name. Everyone would know that the fourth prince had been jewelry shopping in town.

It was all another ruse. A ploy. Part of Claude’s “I’m head over heels for her” play.

He said he didn’t have much time? Well, he certainly squeezed in time enough to spread rumors about us on a date together!

“The crowd gathered because of your beauty, Agnes.”

“Huh?”

Agnes covered her mouth. She kept forgetting to speak in a ladylike manner. *Oops.*

But what is this mushroom freak going on about?

“I think it was your face that drew the crowd, actually!” she burst out.

“My face? How’d it do that?”

“How? Come on! Who wouldn’t notice a man with a face as handsome and regal as yours?”

Agnes was just telling the truth, but Claude seemed to be loving it.

“Oh, *really*? You think my face is handsome, eh, Agnes?”

“I didn’t say I— *Grrrrr!* You tricked me into saying that!”

Agnes’s cheeks burned with shame and indignation. *He played me like a fiddle!*

A small mushroom popped up on the back of Claude’s right glove. It looked like *Entoloma Virescens*, but Agnes didn’t have time for that right now.

“Ah, it’s so nice to get a compliment from someone you’ve fallen head over heels for.”

“B-But... I mean, it’s you who...!”

It was simply a fact that Claude was a handsome young man. What was so remarkable about her saying it? And why was she *this* embarrassed?

In response to her flustered feelings, another mushroom popped up on the back of Claude’s left glove. An indigo-blue one this time.

It looked like *Entoloma Cyanonigrum*.

...What is with all the blue mushrooms today?

Maybe Claude’s brooch had sparked something in her.

“I mean, what’s the point of pretending to be head over heels for me if no one’s around to see it? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of your plan?”

“Defeat the purpose of my plan, eh? I guess it does on one front. But my real plan is best acted upon in private, I’d say...”

“What?”

Agnes didn’t understand what he was talking about, but they arrived back at the Lefort estate before she could question him further.

“Here, Agnes. For you.” Claude placed the pink mushroom brooch in her palm. “I wanted that one, actually. A mushroom the same pink as your hair...”

“You’d look weird walking around wearing a pink mushroom.”

Honestly, Agnes found his mushroom obsession slightly squirm-inducing. Still, she’d made an agreement with him, and providing him mushrooms was part of it.

“You’re right. Then I’ll just have to be satisfied with this one.”

“I’m not sure if that’s much better...”

Claude pinned the blue mushroom to his lapel. With that, an *Entoloma Virescens* on his right hand and an *Entoloma Cyanonigrum* on his left, he was all decked out.

“You’re fine with the pink?”

Agnes looked at Claude, confused. He was gazing at her as if worried. She could tell what he wanted to say and smiled wryly.

“Despite what my hair’s put me through, I actually don’t hate the color pink. And you know, there are some people who compliment my peach-blossom hair.”

Like my father and mother. Uncle Benoit and Kevin. Actually, even Claude said some nice things about my hair. Didn’t he say it was beautiful, once?

Since she’d become a count’s daughter, not one nobleman had ever complimented her hair. Until Claude that is.

Even Philip, her fiancé, had never had a kind word to say about it.

Still, Philip was trash. He’d dumped her for his “Dragonmate,” after all.

“I see. Then I’m glad.”

Claude smiled with relief. Agnes looked at him closely.

“Aren’t you going to harvest those mushrooms? They must be getting in your way.”

Agnes gestured toward the blue mushrooms bobbing about on the backs of Claude’s hands. But he merely smiled in a soft manner.

“*Entoloma Virescens* is a delicate shroom. Once harvested, it dries out and turns yellow. I’ll carry it home on my glove. Anyway, don’t I look dapper with an *Entoloma Virescens* on my right hand and an *Entoloma Cyanonigrum* on my left?”

“If you say so...”

He really *was* an extreme mushroom freak.

But she was impressed. Through years of living with her mushroom curse, Agnes had learned to identify them and even knew their scholarly names. But she was surprised to find that Claude knew those and their characteristics, too.

She was impressed, yes...but also a bit grossed out.

Still, it’s good for a fetishist to be informed, isn’t it?

“Now that I think about it, you’re not going to search for your own Dragonmate, Claude...?”

Philip didn’t possess dragon’s blood, so his little girlfriend wasn’t *really* his true Dragonmate, anyway. But Claude was second in line to the throne, so *his* dragon blood status was irrefutable.

Agnes had figured that he must have his own Dragonmate waiting somewhere out there for him. That’s why she asked. But her question made Claude’s smile cloud over, and his eyes went flinty and hard.

“It’s not something you *search* for.”

“It isn’t? Sorry, I didn’t know.”

True, Philip didn’t seek out Sabina personally. He just found someone who offered him a better future than Agnes.

“It’s a convenient phrase, though, isn’t it, Claude?”

“...What is?”

“Dragonmate. Once *that* gets uttered, there’s no getting out of it anymore. It’s the best excuse out there.”

If there was something wrong with her, then she could live with that. But if it wasn’t the fault of either party...if it was something undeniable...

“You can just discard anyone you were already involved with by saying they were a fake. Well, I guess to the person who found their Dragonmate, the prior relationship really was nothing more than a fake placeholder.”

Agnes would have had an easier time accepting the situation if Philip had apologized to her for falling for someone else or just came straight out and told her he hated her guts and never wanted to be with her in the first place. But to be told she was a fake? It was as if her very existence was denied. Whatever trust was cultivated between them was brushed under the rug, and she wasn’t even allowed to fault him for it.

“...I see.”

Claude was still frowning. Agnes realized that she’d been running her mouth and quickly bowed in regret.

“I’m so sorry. This is my problem. I shouldn’t be ranting to you about it. And after you saved me from that ugly scene with Philip too... It’s all just Philip and his cruel words messing with my mind.”

How rude it was of her to rant about her failed relationship to a prince.

Anyway, unlike Philip, Claude really *did* have dragon’s blood. He really *did* have a genuine Dragonmate. It wasn’t just an excuse he could use. *Probably...*

Everyone said that once a true Dragon’s Blood met their Dragonmate, they’d be unable to love any other. You couldn’t blame them or call them a traitor. The power of Dragonmates was too strong and transcended such petty things.

Agnes had gotten too familiar with Claude and forgotten her place.

They had to act close per the terms of their agreement. But she had to remember—this was a *prince* she was dealing with.

Commoner-born Agnes was from an entirely different world. She really

needed to be more careful.

“No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Um, well...if you *do* find your Dragonmate, Claude, please let me know. I don’t want to get wrapped up in any more love triangles. I actually kind of hate the phrase ‘Dragonmate’ now. I guess I’m traumatized. So anyway, just let me know and we can dissolve our contract on the spot. And I’ll disappear from your life entirely. I won’t make any trouble. Don’t worry.”

“...Mm-hm.”

Agnes only wanted to let Claude know that she wouldn’t interfere, but his response was lackluster.

“Claude?”

Peering at his face in concern, Agnes blinked as Claude grabbed her hand and suddenly kissed the back of it.

As mushrooms sprouted up along the length of his arm, Claude’s eyes narrowed in pleasure. The little white caps were *Cuphophyllus Virgineus*, and the little bright-red ones were *Marasmius Pulcherripes*.

Hmm, there seems to be a lot of Cuphophyllus Virgineus sprouting lately. That’s odd.

“...Can I come to see you again?”

“Huh? Oh. Sure.”

It looked like their contract and Claude’s “I’m Head Over Heels!” ploy would be continuing.

As Agnes nodded in agreement, Claude smiled at her. But there was something...sad about it.



Mushrooms of the Day

Russula Aurea

A mushroom with a scarlet cap. It has a pleasant but indistinct taste.

It gets easily infested with insects, so it's not really suitable for eating. Poor mushroom.

It's desperate to be eaten before the bugs get to it. It sprouts as if to say, "Come on, let's get going!"

Cuphophyllus Virgineus

A small, milk-white mushroom. It loves anything to do with romance.

It sensed a kiss and got excited, bringing a new companion along with it...

Calostoma Japonica

The cap part is a yellowish sphere with a red star-shaped growth on top.

It looks like takoyaki but with a hole in the top, stuffed with red beni-shoga pickled ginger.

The Japanese name includes the word “lipstick.” And it does look like lipstick!

It was hurried along by the Cuphophyllus Virgineus, which was screaming: “A kiss! A kiss!”

Entoloma Virescens

A mushroom with little, sky-blue caps. It's unknown if it's poisonous.

When damaged, it turns yellow. A fragile mushroom.

Claude purchased a blue mushroom brooch, and this one likes to think it was the inspiration for that.

It's relieved to see how careful Claude is when handling mushrooms. It doesn't want to turn yellow.

Entoloma Cyanonigrum

A deep blue mushroom.

It doesn't seem to be poisonous but doesn't look very edible because of the color.

It thinks that it was the inspiration for Claude's blue brooch, not the Entoloma Virescens that turns yellow so easily.

Being called "dapper" by Claude made it happy beyond words.

Marasmius Pulcherripes

A small mushroom with a light red cap.

*The Cuphophyllus Virgineus invited it along because it's sort of a pinkish color.
No polka dots, though.*

Chapter 10: Some Kind of Communication

AGNES was spending the entire day out in the garden tending her medicinal herbs.

She'd pulled her hair back in a ponytail and wore a wide-brimmed sunhat. To keep her dress from getting dirty, she also put on an apron and rolled back her sleeves. Normal attire for a commoner working the fields but unthinkable for a count's daughter.

Still, it posed no problem in her private gardens. It wasn't like she was off to a royal event dressed like this. So then...*what* was that young man with Prussian-blue hair and dark-gray eyes doing here?

"Hello, Agnes!"

Claude grinned down at her as she stiffened, dirty trowel in hand.

Agnes had been working in her little medicinal herb garden located in the far back corner of the Lefort property. Claude may have been a prince, but even *he* couldn't just barge into a private residence unannounced.

So, clearly, someone must've shown him in, Agnes thought. The servants all knew that Agnes was working in the garden. *Why didn't they show him into the drawing room to wait?*

"H-Hello..." Stammering, Agnes looked down at her shabby, disheveled self.

Should she run and change? *No*. If Claude found her disgusting, then good. He'd dissolve their arrangement and then she'd be free. She'd miss the mushroom money, but it'd be worth it to have such a huge weight off her shoulders.

"I was told you were out gardening. You really *are*, aren't you? Are all these herbs that you've planted yourself? Can I come closer?"

"N-No. You'll get all dirty." Agnes dropped the trowel and hurried over to

Claude instead. "Is there something I can help you with...?"

"Oh, no. I just wanted to see you, Agnes. Do you always...show those off?"

What is he talking about?

Agnes followed Claude's gaze down to her...feet. Her white legs were bare, since she'd hiked her dress skirts up above her knees.

"Oh! I'm sorry. This is terribly unladylike of me..."

She must've looked like a grubby farmworker to Claude's royal eyes.

Still, he didn't seem to mind. *The contract's still on then.* Sighing, Agnes untucked her skirt to cover her pale legs and patted the dust off her clothes.

Perhaps she should take off her hat too, she thought suddenly. It was rude not to, but she just knew her hair was a terrible mess underneath.

"Well, that *was* a treat...but never mind. Are you only growing medicinal herbs? Why do it yourself?"

"To sell them."

"What? This many?"

Claude was baffled and Agnes understood why. Medicinal herbs were the kind of thing you bought in adequate supply when needed, not something you grew yourself, especially if you were nobility. At any rate, the number of medicinal herbs a person could grow in their back garden wouldn't fetch very much money at all.

"What do you want to sell them for?"

"To make money, of course. To fund my new life."

"Your...new life?"

"Commoner life."

Agnes's answer made the Mushroom Prince's shoulders slump.

"You're still going on about that then."

Agnes didn't like his dismissive tone. But regardless, she needed capital before embarking on her new life. That was a fact.

“Can you get all the money you need *just* selling these?”

“Not at all. No, I’ll have to engineer them so that...”

“Engineer?”

Claude looked interested, but Agnes bit her tongue.

“Um... Listen, it’s kind of confidential. So would you...”

“Agnes.”

Claude took hold of her hand, cutting her off as she was about to ask him to leave.

A black, funnel-shaped mushroom popped up on the back of his black-gloved left hand. She thought it must’ve been *Craterellus Cornucopioides*, but it was the same black as Claude’s glove and looked more like some strange sewn-on embellishment.

Agnes noticed what he was wearing. The same kind of simple shirt and trousers as yesterday, only with gloves on. It looked weird. But maybe it was some sort of royal or knight policy to wear gloves all the time?

“We’re close, though, aren’t we? Can’t you tell me?”

“Our little arrangement has nothing to do with my current business venture. Anyway, it’s not that interesting anyway.”

Agnes shook her head, and Claude responded by taking hold of her other hand.

As if on cue, white mushrooms came popping up. She thought they were more *Cuphophyllus Virgineus* at first. But, on closer inspection, the caps had radiating lines running down them.

It was actually *Coprinellus Disseminatus*, and there were a lot of them.

The little white mushrooms grew in thick clusters, leaving Claude’s right arm looking like a big white mound and completely obscuring the black of his glove beneath.

“I want to know everything there is to know about you. I won’t let you go unless you tell me, you know.”

Claude fixed her with his gray eyes and smiled.

It was a nice smile, Agnes thought, but this was still coercion.

Three small brown mushrooms sprang up on his arm with audible popping sounds. Agnes sensed Claude turn his head ever so slightly, his eyes focusing for a moment on these new points of interest.

Agnes knew that they were *Russula Compacta*, a very fragile kind of mushroom with easily crumbling flesh. Claude's eyes kept flicking back and forth between the mushrooms and her face.

Hmm. Agnes suddenly started to wonder if Claude was acting this way to get as many mushrooms out of her as possible. Milking her for mushrooms made far more sense than him *actually* being interested in her. As odd of a consolation as it was, that (very mistaken) thought relieved Agnes, and she nodded.

Claude clearly took this as her giving him permission to harvest the mushrooms, because he instantly let go of her and started gently plucking them off and putting them into his pockets.

He treated the *Russula Compacta* with extra care.

Ha. So his goal really was to sprout as many mushrooms as he could, after all...

Agnes gazed at the blue mushroom brooch Claude wore pinned to his shirt. She was beginning to get extremely tired of both him and his whole shtick.

"What *kind* of engineering, then?"

After finishing harvesting every last little shroom, Claude pressed her again. Agnes sighed.

"I'm receiving blessings from the spirits."

"...Blessings?"

"My late father was a native of the neighboring kingdom, and it's through his bloodline that I inherited my peach-blossom hair...and the blessings granted by the spirits who live throughout the land."

Just as the Kingdom of Visage had its royal family with their dragon's blood, the country of her heritage had close ties with spirits.

"My plan," she went on, "is to commune with the spirits in this area to receive their blessing, which will hopefully make the medicinal herbs even more potent so I can sell them at increased prices. Then I can make a greater profit. It's a little sneaky, but it works..."

"I see."

A lot of people refused to even believe in the existence of spirits, but Claude, luckily, didn't seem to be one of them.

"...You're not...freaked out?"

Agnes steeled herself for his response. She was fully expecting him to tear her idea to shreds. But he merely tilted his head curiously.

"No, that sounds marvelous, actually. I'd love to see it."

Uh-oh. Did I just dig a big hole for myself?

As Claude continued to gaze at her with rapt fascination, Agnes felt her spirits sink. Getting him to leave quietly was *not* looking likely anymore.

"But... Okay... But promise you won't laugh?"

"Of course not."

Ah, the power of a handsome young man's smile.

She couldn't back down now. Reluctantly, Agnes turned to a nearby herb, plucked it, and held it aloft. Then she took a deep breath.

"Spirits! How're you doing?"

Agnes's voice was sing-songy and light, like she was speaking to a child. Three balls of light—some of the spirits in the garden—began to materialize.

The light balls floated in front of Agnes, as if to say "Hello." Then they seemed to notice the herb she was holding.

"Hello, spirits! I've got a request for you today! Could you bless this herb just a little?"

Agnes put her hand to her ear, awaiting a response. The light balls began to flicker. She couldn't hear them, but she knew they were asking: "Why?"



“I need money if I’m going to live as a commoner. I plan to work too, of course, but I need money upfront to rent a room, you know? So what I want is to sell these plants if you can bless them for me! I can charge high prices if you do that! They’ll sell like hotcakes! Oh wait...do you know what hotcakes are? Anyway! What I mean is, people will love them!”

The light balls flickered rapidly as if to say: “We understand.”

The phrase “people will love them” seemed to have made them happy, Agnes realized.

She went on, “I wanted to harvest wild plants from the forest, but I can’t do that right now. So I’ve been growing my own. I only managed to grow a few, but...would you please bless them?”

The light balls swooped and swirled in the air before zooming over to the herb. The green leaves began to change color, turning orange.

“Wow! Thank you, little ones! See you again soon!”

Agnes waved, and the spirits twirled in the air as if in response before zooming off to places unknown. She breathed a sigh of relief. *It worked!* She’d received the spirits’ blessing. Now she turned back to face Claude.

He was standing there, jaw agape. A second later, he imitated Agnes’s sigh of relief.

“...That was...*not* what I was expecting.”

Agnes knew what Claude meant. And she was embarrassed. But she hadn’t wanted to show him in the first place. He’d made her.

Communing with the spirits sounds like it should be a beautiful, ethereal thing. But no, it was...like that.

It wasn’t as if she could have a back and forth, in-depth verbal discussion with them, so she was forced to rely on pantomime and child speak. It’d worked well to begin with, and now she was afraid to let up in case she ruined a good thing. So now she was stuck doing this.

After all, sometimes the spirits ignored her requests. It wasn’t like reasoning with a human being. It required a lot more effort on her part.

“Well, sorry to burst your bubble. I’m sure it *does* look like I’m just talking to myself like a crazy person. Philip said as much. He always hated it. That’s why I went so long without calling on the spirits.”

But now she needed money to start her commoner life. She needed the spirits’ help.

Claude’s frown was growing deeper and deeper.

Agnes felt her heart sink. *He was really that put off by me?* The thought made her feel sad somehow.

“You...showed Philip this?”

“Yes. Well, it’s more like he...walked in on me doing it sometimes.”

“Did you...sprout mushrooms on Philip often?”

Claude was still frowning. And he was going off-subject.

Agnes wasn’t sure why he was asking. Still, she thought back on her time with Philip to answer him.

“*Hmm...* At first, yes. But at some point, they stopped sprouting on him almost entirely.”

“Was that because you grew to...*trust* Philip?”

“I don’t think it was that. It’s more like...I didn’t feel so on edge around him anymore.”

The mushrooms had stopped around the same time that Agnes had begun to see Philip as a troublesome little brother. At some point, he’d stopped being “a man” in her eyes and more of a burden she’d been made to bear.

“...I see.”

Claude fell silent.

He’s acting weird...but he doesn’t seem annoyed with me. It’s more like something else has upset him. Agnes wasn’t sure what was wrong with him.

“I don’t think it’s creepy, your spirit thing. Just sort of...surprising.” Claude stepped closer to Agnes and peered at the medicinal herb she was still clutching. “You were surrounded by this warm-looking light while you were

talking. Was that the spirits?”

“You...you could see them?”

Up until now, the only other person Agnes knew who could actually see the spirits was her late father. A few others seemed able to sense them, though.

If Claude saw the light balls too, that meant he could see the same thing Agnes saw.

“Not clearly. It just looked...brighter around you for some reason.”

Even *that* was enough. Agnes felt less alone now. The thought made her heart glad.

“Not many people *can* see them, you know. Maybe this is because of your dragon’s blood?”

She’d always secretly thought the whole “Visage Royals have dragon blood” thing was some kind of fairy tale.

But perhaps it *was* real...and stronger than she’d ever thought.

“It might be. Either that or the spirits decided to show themselves to me because they can see how deeply I care for you.”

Claude gave her a dazzling smile and Agnes smiled wryly back.

How far was Claude willing to take their ruse, anyhow? Was there any limit to how serious he was going to take this?

“We’re not in public now; you don’t have to pretend you’re really in love with me.”

“But I mean it! At any rate...you looked beautiful talking to those spirits.”

“Yes, yes, you can drop the act...”

“I’m *serious*.”

His dark-gray eyes were fixed upon her.

Agnes knew it was all part of the contract—part of the plan—but being stared at so closely by such a handsome man...she couldn’t help being shaken.

With a satisfying *whump* noise, a snail-shaped mushroom sprouted out of the

toe of Claude's boot. It was cream-colored with a glossy brown part on top that made it look like it was covered in caramel sauce.

It was a *Cryptoporus Volvatus*, clearly.

Claude's eyes slid irresistibly down to look at the mushroom. His face lit up as he drank in its tempting sight. Agnes wondered why he even bothered to try to hide his excitement.

"I understand you want as many mushrooms to sprout as possible, but you don't need to use trickery to get what you want."

"No, you've got it wrong. I really *am* serious."

"You're saying...you don't want the mushrooms?"

"No. I want them."

Claude bent over and plucked the mushroom from his boot, carefully pocketing it. His pockets were overflowing with mushrooms today already.

Agnes worried about what the palace staff thought of Claude, returning from his outings with pockets stuffed full of mushrooms.

"Well, I want to get these herbs sold while they're still fresh! So, if you'll excuse me..."

"Wait, Agnes! I'll go with you."

It looked like Claude hadn't had his fill of mushrooms yet. It was hard to say no to him. He was like a mushroom addict dying for a fix.

And there was no time to spend arguing with him.

Agnes headed back to her room to change out of her dusty dress.



"**THESE** are amazing, Miss! Wherever did you get them?"

The shopkeeper was unable to hide his excitement, eyes sparkling as he gazed hungrily at the little yellow herbs.

Usually, the obvious answer to his question would be "The forest." But a noble young lady like Agnes surely hadn't been out foraging in the woods?

Agnes was going to hide the facts a little, but that was only because the shopkeeper wouldn't believe the truth anyway.

"Oh, I started growing some in the garden for fun, but they turned a funny color."

"You grew these in...a *garden*? But how? What kind of soil? How much sun exposure? How much water? Fertilizer? You must tell me how you did it!"

"I didn't do anything special really. It was a coincidence. I think our garden just has good growing conditions."

Agnes shrugged, not wanting to get into it. The shopkeeper heaved a huge sigh.

"A coincidence, huh? I see. Well, if you keep growing herbs of this quality, you'll put all the wholesalers out of business."

"They're that good?" Agnes posed the question tentatively, and the shopkeeper nodded with a look of marvel on his face.

"These are more potent than usual herbs, many times over, in fact. They're worth a lot. And you can't get this kind easily, you know! It's a rare species, especially nowadays."

"Did something happen?"

"Oh, there's this sickness going around affecting young kids. The usual herbs don't do much for it. Everyone's doubling up on doses. That's why supplies have dwindled. Well...thank you, Miss. This will be a big help."

The shopkeeper offered Agnes a sum of money much higher than she'd been expecting. She was shocked. And felt guilty at the same time...

Maybe she shouldn't have brought spirit-blessed herbs.

Still, it sounded like they'd be put to good use treating the illness that was going around. Maybe that made it okay for Agnes to do what she did?

Reaching for the money, Agnes was distracted by her thoughts and ended up bumping hands with the shopkeeper. A large purple mushroom that looked like a clump of flower petals sprouted on his arm.

All the color drained from the shopkeeper's face as he stared at it.

"Is that... Is that a fungal mutation of *Polyporus Umbellatus*? The mushroom with medicinal, fever-reducing properties...?" The shopkeeper quickly plucked the mushroom and began examining it from all angles. "Unmistakable! It's the new strain, *Feveratus Disappearatus*! Please let me purchase this mushroom! With one of these, I can make a large amount of antipyretic medicine!"

"Oh... Yes, of course."

The shopkeeper began rummaging in his lockbox while shooting looks of awe at the mushroom. Meanwhile, a certain Mushroom Fetishist was also gazing with longing at the purple mushroom. Luckily, he'd the good sense to keep his mouth shut about it.

"This mushroom can only be found in a limited number of areas where conditions are favorable! Even a small amount goes for a high price. And they're out of season right now. I can't get even a tiny stalk. They don't last long, either. Once the petal parts crumble off, the medicinal properties are all but lost. To find such a fresh specimen! It's like some kind of miracle! I must make haste and turn it into medicine at once!"

Perhaps spotting the desire in Claude's eyes was what had made the shopkeeper hurry even more. He pushed the payment into Agnes's hands before disappearing into the back of the shop with an air of uncontained glee, mushroom cradled carefully in his cupped palms.

"Agnes, um..."

"No, I will NOT sprout you one of your own."

"Oh...okay."

Claude nodded sadly. *He already has pockets full of mushrooms and he wants even more?*

The Mushroom Fetishist's fungal lust was even greater than Agnes thought.

"You seem very skilled at bartering," Claude commented as they left the shop.

"Well, I'm an ex-commoner, remember? I sell mushrooms at that shop a lot. That's where I sold my dresses and the skirts I made, too. I'm a regular there."

“Oh yes...you talked about selling your dresses. So, you sold all of them?”

Claude looked incredulous, but Agnes nodded.

“I only wore drab and boring dresses to appease Philip, but I’ve managed to sell most of them. The ones nobody could ever want, I cut up and made into slightly cuter skirts.”

“What do you mean, ‘to appease’ Philip?”

Oh, right. At home, Agnes and her family often talked about Philip this way, but it must have sounded odd to an outsider. She couldn’t expect Claude to know what she was talking about, either.

“Philip was always going on about how I shouldn’t wear bright colors or eye-catching jewelry. He said I stood out enough on account of my hair and I should try to mitigate the effects by dressing down.”

“He *said* that to you? And you listened to him?”

“Yes. If I went against him, he wouldn’t shut up about it. It was such a headache. Anyway, he *was* right. People hate my hair. I wouldn’t mind so much if it only affected me, but I didn’t want people looking down on my family just because of my appearance.”

Claude rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Because of who Philip and his mother are, most of the nobility didn’t deign him worth the time of day. But over the past few years, his image really improved. I thought maybe he had finally matured and started to act more like a real royal, until I witnessed that *awful* behavior he exhibited the other day. Did you have something to do with his improved image when you were engaged, Agnes?”

“Well, not very much. I would remember the names of influential people and remind Philip of them at parties. He never *could* remember anyone’s name. And I would prop him up during discussions when it was clear he wasn’t listening properly. Oh, and I made sure to school him on manners and etiquette, as well. He never bothered much about that kind of thing before me.”

“Oh, yes, that’ll be what did it, then. So it *was* all down to you.

Fundamentally, Philip hasn't really changed at all."

So...Philip's reputation benefited from our engagement, did it? Which means my efforts hadn't been in vain.

Not that Philip was any of her business anymore...

As they strolled through the streets, they heard raised voices. Probably some sort of quarrel.

Disagreements are commonplace where people gather. The same rang true for commoners and aristocrats alike. *The aristocrats are just better at hiding it behind a veil of decency...*

Agnes had never wanted to get involved in the gossip and backstabbing. That was another reason why she dressed down.

Everything she did, she did to protect her family from any kind of trouble. But despite her best efforts, she'd brought scandal to her name and theirs. The thought made Agnes feel so despondent.

As she sighed, Claude frowned down at her.

"Agnes...you liked Philip *that* much?"

Agnes's eyes widened. *What?*

"No. I didn't... I *don't* feel anything for him. He was older than me but acted like a bratty younger brother. But...he was like family. Or...he was going to *be* family. That's what I told myself."

Philip was just her ex-fiancé. Her annoying, ridiculous fiancé.

She felt no lingering sense of connection to Philip or their engagement. But she was still shocked. Shocked to have been betrayed so abruptly by someone she considered family.

She fell silent. Claude took her hand, as if trying to comfort her.

A white mushroom suddenly sprouted on his shirt.

Agnes recognized the white, fingerlike strings hanging down like weeping willow fronds...the mop mushroom, *Hericium Erinaceus*.

He grinned and snatched it up with a practiced air.

Claude was dressed down today again, but he couldn't hide his handsome face or regal air. Passersby kept looking at him. His face was so dazzling that no one seemed to notice the white mushroom blooming on his shirt. Perhaps they just mistook it for a ruffle.

The stares bothered her, though.

She was embarrassed. Of course, she was. She was walking through town, holding hands with a man. It may've been part of the ruse, but Agnes thought being seen in town together would've been enough. The hand-holding, though, was overkill.

She looked up at Claude, meaning to complain. But instead, he looked down at her with the sweetest smile.

"...Claude?"

"Philip *is* a fool...but I owe him one. Without him, I never would've met you, Agnes..."

Claude gazed into her eyes. Agnes felt her heart skip a beat.

She was at a total loss for words. Just then, a red mushroom and a white one bloomed on Claude's shirt.

The little white mushroom was *Cuphophyllus Virgineus* and the red-capped mushroom with the white dots was *Amanita Muscaria*.

Needless to say, the sight of them made a certain pair of dark-gray eyes sparkle.

Agnes knew it'd be churlish of her to complain about this onslaught of mushrooms. Part of their contract involved her keeping Claude well-supplied, after all.

She wished he'd be more aware of his good looks. Then again, he *was* a prince.

Born into privilege and good looks, he was clearly oblivious as to how he came across to others.

Anyway, she thought, he's not happy to have met me. He's happy to have met my mushrooms...

She needed to stay cool and just respond normally. But as she watched Claude happily pick the mushrooms off his chest, a series of yellow-brown capped mushrooms began popping up.

They were clearly *Gymnopilus Junonius*. So many of them sprouted that it looked like Claude's white shirt was covered in elaborate embroidery.

"Thank you for the compliment. Everyone hates my hair except my family. I know you only said it to get mushrooms out of me, but still...thank you."

Agnes bowed stiffly and Claude came to a sudden halt.

They were still holding hands, so she was forced to stop as well. They stood there, beside a horse-drawn cart.

The mushrooms clinging to Claude's chest stopped waving in the breeze, too.

Agnes looked up at him in confusion. His dark-gray eyes were clouded over with...anger?

"You're *wrong*, Agnes. I..." But Claude trailed off, biting his lip and huffing with frustration. "The next time you go selling stuff, bring me along. Medicinal herbs and mushrooms are in high demand, right? I don't want you catching the attention of bandits."

Agnes's parents used to say the same thing. That was why she only made infrequent trips to town.

Anyway, she knew the shopkeeper. She'd be fine as long as word didn't get out about her being the supplier.

"Thank you, but you're a very busy man and—"

"If you don't want me to go with you, then I'll send Maurice instead. Just let me know, please."

Claude fixed her with his dark-gray eyes until she finally relented and nodded her assent.



Mushrooms of the Day

Craterellus Cornucopioides

A black, funnel-shaped mushroom resembling a trumpet.

Also known as the “Trumpet of the Dead,” it’s apparently eaten often in Europe. Goes well with soup.

...So why the scary name, then?

It was called forth by Agnes and tried to play a warning note to distract Claude. But mushrooms can’t make music.

Cuphophyllus Virgineus

Small, milky-white caps. A mushroom that loves romance!

It couldn't fail to show itself today.

"He's holding her hand!" it tried to squeal. But alas, mushrooms can't talk. It just can't help sprouting when anything romantic starts to happen.

You never know if it's going to be this one or the Amanita Muscaria, though.

Coprinellus Disseminatus

A whitish, grayish cap, it looks like a white chocolate Apollo candy.

It's good at growing in clusters. The Cuphophyllus Virgineus brought it along to increase the romantic atmosphere.

Russula Compacta

It has a red cap and goes powdery when dry. When humid, it's quite slimy.

No one knows if it's poisonous or not. The flesh is brittle, though, so it's not really something you'd want to eat.

It also gives off a stench like a rhinoceros beetle. No, I wouldn't want to try it myself...

The Cuphophyllus Virgineus brought it along for a pop of color. It was just going with the flow.

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 tree bark.

The name makes it sound yummy and it definitely looks yummy! But apparently, it doesn't taste good.

Amanita Muscaria and Cuphophyllus Virgineus were fighting over whose turn it was, so this one stepped in. An opportunistic mushroom.

Polyporus Umbellatus

This mushroom grows like a parasite on tree roots. It's small with yellowish caps.

Its mold can be made into the well-known herbal medicine, choreito.

It doesn't appear in person in this story, only in reference.

Feveratus Disappearatus (Not a Real Mushroom)

A fungal mutation of Polyporus Umbellatus with fever-reducing properties. It is purple in color.

The mold of the Polyporus Umbellatus can be made into medicine, but this mushroom's entire form can too. It's also cute with petallike frills.

It becomes floppy and its medicinal properties decline over time, so it's a very rare and delicate mushroom.

It can apparently take away the fever that's been going around. It sprouted up to lend Agnes a hand.

Hericium Erinaceus

A white stringy mushroom that looks like a mop. Very edible.

It's difficult to harvest and often gets dirt and leaves stuck in it. Just like a broom, really.

There was a fight between the mushrooms over who got to sprout on Claude's shirt, and this mushroom was the victor.

Amanita Muscaria

Red with white spots, like a storybook poison mushroom.

It tries to sprout whenever it senses destiny but often clashes with the romance-loving Cuphophyllus Virgineus.

Over time, though, they forge a bond and try to sprout together.

Gymnopilus Junonius

It looks like a yellowish Shimeji, only poisonous. It's in charge of brightening things up.

Whenever Agnes's heart beats fast, it tries to sprout up to keep the peace between the Amanita Muscaria and the Cuphophyllus Virgineus.

Chapter 11: The Male Mind and the Mushroom Mind

“WHAT’S all the commotion?”

One day, while harvesting herbs in the garden, Agnes realized she could hear raised voices coming from the house. She shouldn’t have been able to hear any voices from the house while outside, which meant that whoever it was...was really shouting.

Kevin was home. Maybe he was letting off steam with some friends? In that case, she didn’t want to interrupt. No one would be glad to see the older sister with the weird pink hair.

Agnes was worried she might bump into them still in the garden, so she brushed the dirt off her skirts and decided to return to her room. But once inside the house, she realized she recognized the yelling voice.

Ah, the annoying voice that totally fails to tug at my heartstrings. Don’t tell me it’s...

Inching closer to the front hall, she could see Kevin in a heated conversation with a man with yellowish-brown hair.

Aww darn...I knew it was Philip...

Agnes didn’t know what they were arguing about. Kevin and Philip certainly weren’t friends, though; she knew that much. But for Philip to have come all the way to their house...it had to mean that he’d some business with her.

She heard her name somewhere among the yelling, too, so she figured she was right. But their engagement was long over. What could Philip have come to their house for?

Eh, he’s still a royal, more or less. So I’d better go and greet him at the very least.

Agnes let down her hair—she’d tied it back for gardening—and slowly walked toward the entrance hall.

“I was wondering who our visitor was! Hello there, Philip.”

Agnes walked into the entrance hall speaking in a bright tone. Philip turned and spotted her, his face lighting up for some reason. In contrast, Kevin was standing there with a face like thunder.

“Agnes! There you are! I need a word with you.”

“Go back to your room, Sis. You don’t need to talk to filth like this.”

Kevin reached out and grabbed hold of Philip’s sleeve, yanking him back as he tried to head over to Agnes.

Philip was undeterred and kept pulling. He looked like a dog straining at its leash.

What is Kevin thinking, manhandling a royal this way?

Her brother was clearly furious with Philip for dumping his older sister.

“I heard your voices all the way out in the gardens,” Agnes said. “And so early in the morning, too. You’re going to annoy the neighbors. Can you please leave?”

“I came... I came here to see you!”

“I didn’t ask you to. You’re making a nuisance of yourself. So please, go away.”

Not only had Philip publicly dumped her, but he’d also tried to throw her in the dungeons too. So how dare he show up at her home now and demand an audience with her?

“You’ve always had a nasty mouth on you! But you used to be a good, obedient girl. What happened to you?”

Nasty and obedient at the same time? Does he realize the contradiction there? She realized he was referring to her prior deference toward him during their engagement. Well, that was a thing of the past.

It’s just like him to twist the facts to suit his own selfish narrative. He hasn’t changed.

“None of your business. You’ve no right to see me anymore.”

“E-Excuse me?! And what’s with your hair? I keep telling you to wear it up!”

“Instead of wasting your time here, shouldn’t you be visiting your ‘Dragonmate?’ I really don’t think you should concern yourself with the hair of a woman who’s functionally a stranger to you now.”

Go home, you cheating pig, Agnes wanted to add as she glared at Philip...who was smiling and nodding, for some reason.

“Oh...I get it,” he smirked. “You’re jealous of Sabina?”

“Wow...just wow...” Agnes and Kevin said at the same time

“I thought that you were just a philandering fool, but now it’s all clear. You’re not just a cheater but a completely oblivious and misguided one...” Agnes muttered.

Kevin seemed to hear her because he nodded along, shooting Philip a look of disgust as he did.

“You’re hopeless, Agnes,” Philip chuckled. “You really are.”

Now both Lefort siblings were glaring at him as if to say, “The only hopeless one here is you!” But the oblivious royal remained oblivious.

Philip was so dense, he wielded his stupidity like a weapon. He could twist anything around and use an accuser’s own words against them. It was quite the talent.

“But I’m willing to take pity on you, Agnes,” he said smugly. “I’ll take you as my second wife!”

“You’ll take who?”

“I’ll take you, Agnes.”

“...As whose second wife?”

“Mine, of course!”

“...That’s what you came here to discuss?”

Philip nodded, smugly self-confident. Agnes stared at him incredulously. Oh, she was so sick of him! She knew he was dense, oblivious, self-serving, and unfaithful. But he was so much worse than she remembered!

She heaved a huge sigh.

“Get off my property.”

“What? Why?!”

Philip was clearly shocked to the core.

But how? How can he be so shocked? That, itself, is shocking! Agnes thought.

“Why do you assume I’d ever accept such a proposition?” she fumed at him. “You dumped me in public, ordered me thrown into the dungeon, and drew a sword on me! You’re a philandering fool, and I don’t feel one scrap of affection toward you! Now you think I’ll agree to be your mistress while you marry the woman you cheated on me with? Are you insane? Get a grip, Philip!!!”

Philip’s eyes widened.

Just how little does he think of me, anyway? Agnes raged internally.

She debated throwing a punch but refrained. After all, he was technically royalty.

And besides, who knows how he’d punish her if she did...

“...You’ve been friendly with Claude lately.”

“Oh. Yeah. Kinda...”

It looked like news of their fake romance had reached even Philip’s ears. The bratty prince frowned, continuing in a menacing tone, “Were you cheating with him behind my back?”

“...What? I think you’ll find you were the only cheater here!”

“It was never my intention.”

“You got with someone else while engaged to me! Your soulmate, no? Do you even hear yourself? Are you deranged?”

“Like I said, it wasn’t intentional. Why did you leave me, anyway?”

“You’re the one who broke our engagement! Hello? Anybody home?! Is your head just for show?”

“Even so, you had no right to leave me.”

“How dare you talk to me this way?! I was publicly dumped, threatened with the dungeons, and menaced with a sword! Meanwhile, you cast me off for someone else! And you think I should’ve stuck around after that?!”

“...Exactly.”

Philip was looking at Agnes with disgust, as if she was being cruel and unreasonable. *This is insane!*

“...What are you doing?”

As Agnes was spluttering in indignation, someone else interjected in a cold voice.

She turned to see that young, handsome man with Prussian-blue hair and dark-gray eyes.

Claude smiled at Agnes before stepping between her and Philip.

Ah, perfect timing! She couldn’t help but feel relieved.

“How dare you show up at the house of a woman you rejected and cause this kind of commotion? Are you trying to heap further shame upon yourself?”

“Claude, this is none of your business.”

Philip was actually standing up to the higher-status Claude. Still, his voice sounded weak.

“It’s every bit my business.”

“How?” Philip asked.

Claude walked over to Agnes and put his arm around her.

“I’m in love with Agnes. I’ve fallen for her.”

“...What?!” Agnes and Philip both yelled in surprise.

Then there was a popping sound as a pair of mushrooms suddenly sprouted. They jiggled cheerfully from their position on the tips of Claude’s boots as they all watched.

The one on his right boot was dark and brown. It looked like *Ompholotus Japonicus*. It was fairly poisonous. Probably reflecting Agnes’s venom and anger

toward Philip.

But the mushrooms had sprouted on Claude, not him. Perhaps she still saw Philip as something akin to family.

On Claude's right boot, there was a mushroom with a bright yellow cap. That one was probably *Pleurotus Citrinopileatus*. It was edible and would actually sell for a pretty good price.

It was an odd, mismatched crop this time. Probably reflecting how mentally distressed Agnes was right now.

"See? See those mushrooms? She did that."

Philip grinned with wicked delight at the sight of the mushrooms growing on Claude. He seemed to assume that mushrooms sprouting on his cousin meant Agnes was rejecting him.

"Yes, I know. Marvelous, isn't it?"

Claude peeked down at the mushrooms on his boots and smiled with satisfaction. His delight over them was plain to see.

Clearly, these two royals saw the mushrooms in completely different ways, but neither was aware of the other's opinion. Agnes didn't have the heart to say anything.

Claude chuckled heartily, ruffling her hair. "You must've heard the rumors? Everyone's talking about us."

"...I heard. *Yesterday*," Philip spat.

"You've been shirking your public duties lately, so it's no wonder you were late to hear about it," Claude went on. "I hear you can't even manage to remember the names of influential persons, so it's no wonder no one bothers telling you anything."

Huh. So Philip's ignoring his royal duties, is he?

"Really, Philip?" Agnes interjected. "You still can't remember anyone's name? That's terribly rude of you. You should really put in more effort. Why don't you at least have your precious soulmate back you up?"

“Y-You shut your mouth! Anyway, remembering that stuff for me is your job!” Philip shrieked, pointing at Agnes.

“Why is it my job to prop up a socially inept man who’s absolutely none of my responsibility?” she bristled.

Agnes couldn’t hide her anger. Philip was so entitled!

“I am your responsibility!”

“Wrong. We are no longer engaged. That makes us strangers. We’ve zero connection to each other.”

“You can’t just be okay with that?!”

Agnes heaved a disgusted sigh.

“I just really don’t care anymore, Philip. You’re the one who chose this outcome, remember?”

Philip was the one who’d moved on to Sabina and ended their engagement. If he’d never done that, Agnes would probably be married to the silly fool by now. No, this was a reality entirely of Philip’s own making.

“That’s enough!” Claude said. “How dare you come here and make selfish demands, Philip. You make it sound like you’re still attached to Agnes.”

“Attached to her...?”

Claude’s harsh tone made Philip pout like an angry little boy.

“Not that it matters, either way,” Claude continued. “Like I said, I’ve fallen for Agnes. I’m in the process of wooing her right now. I’ll do everything in my power to get rid of you if you persist in menacing my beloved now that you no longer have any claim to her.”

Claude was smiling...but not with his eyes.

Philip opened his mouth as if to say something. But then he clucked his tongue loudly in annoyance, opened the door, and left instead.

Agnes and Kevin sighed with relief. The storm had passed.

“Thank you, Your Highness. Thank you for driving that pest from our house.” Kevin bowed to Claude.

It wasn't the most gracious way to deal with Philip. But at least he was gone.

"No, no. Thank you for sending for me."

"He sent for you?"

Agnes looked at Claude in surprise. Meanwhile, Kevin cast his gaze toward the door that Philip had just left through.

"I knew when Philip showed up that he was here to cause trouble for you, Sis," he said. "So I sent for Prince Claude right away."

Goodness!

Agnes had assumed it was just lucky timing. But Kevin had actually summoned Claude to help.

"Is this the first time Philip has come here?" Claude asked.

"It's the first time since he ended the engagement with Agnes. I guess he's finally started to realize what he's lost. Too bad for him, though." Kevin scowled with disgust, before turning back to Claude and bowing politely again.

"Philip is a royal, more or less," he went on, "so I probably shouldn't say this, but...he's a brat. He's got this sick attachment to my sister. Father and I turned a blind eye while they were engaged because we believed he really cared for her. But he's gone too far. Please...free my sister from his grasp...physically and mentally..."

"Kevin, what are you doing?" Agnes cried. "I explained to you that the relationship between Claude and I is just a ruse. What were you thinking, summoning him here? That was very rude of you!"

She didn't mind Kevin going against Philip, but she couldn't let him inconvenience Claude this way.

But Kevin simply sighed and shook his head.

"It's going to be difficult. As you can see, she's still heavily brainwashed by Philip."

Agnes scowled at Kevin. What was he talking about now? But Claude merely nodded, an unreadable expression on his face.

“I don’t mind how long it takes. As I’ve said...I’m head over heels for her.”



AFTER that, Philip didn’t come by again, but Claude started visiting on a regular basis. As a result, he ended up tagging along whenever Agnes went to the shop to sell and even got on friendly terms with the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper seemed to think that Claude was her fiancé. He always had a twinkle in his eye when he saw the two of them together. It was very vexing.

“Your little herb garden seems to be doing very nicely, Miss! I’ve never had such regular deliveries before! You must have magic soil!”

No magic soil. Just the blessing of the spirits.

Not that Agnes could say that, though. “Oh, it’s just luck,” she giggled instead.

“I’ve heard these herbs are working wonders for that sickness that’s going around. Those mushrooms you brought the other day; the medicine made from them is basically a wonder drug! Everyone’s so grateful to you, Miss.”

The shopkeeper was chatting away as he carefully took ownership of the yellow herbs that Agnes had brought today.

She’d prefer not to make this many selling trips. But she had to.

Once she found out about the sickness going around, she knew she had to help. The sickness caused a high fever that sapped the energy of its victims. And apparently, her herbs were the only treatments powerful enough to lower the fever.

The regular, non-blessed herbs apparently had little effect. So Agnes came by as often as possible, bringing the powerful herbs that she’d asked the nearby spirits to bless.

“Well, at any rate,” she went on, “I’m just glad to be able to help out. And I get money for them, so it’s nice for me. By the way, you haven’t told anyone it’s me who’s bringing the herbs...right?”

“I haven’t told a soul. I’d hate for some lawless bandits to target you, sweet miss.”

The shopkeeper handed over her payment, which Agnes accepted. But then he stared at her hands.

“I don’t suppose...another of those mushrooms will grow...?”

“What, you mean...the purple ones?”

“Yes, *Feveratus Disappearatus*. The mutation of *Polyporus Umbellatus*.”

The mushroom that was said to have fever-reducing properties. The name was pretty much self-explanatory.

“Um, I’m not sure it’ll work. But we can try?” she said.

Agnes held out her hand, and the shopkeeper placed his atop hers, excitement in his eyes.

With a tiny pop, a little brown mushroom appeared. The shopkeeper looked visibly disappointed.

“It’s just a *Shiitake*, I’m afraid,” Agnes said.

“It’s the luck of the draw, it seems,” the shopkeeper responded. “Well, thank you for this, anyway.”

He bowed politely, plucking the little rounded Shiitake mushroom.

“We can try one more time, if you like?”

Agnes grabbed the shopkeeper’s hand again, but only three more *Shiitake* mushrooms sprang up.

Just then, a third hand reached out and scooped up Agnes’s hand. Another *Shiitake* popped up on that hand, too.

“That’s enough for today, Agnes.”

Claude gently lowered her hand until it was by her side, his new Shiitake mushroom bobbling about on the back of his glove.

“But we might get the right one if we keep trying,” she protested. “I never know what kind of mushroom will sprout, but there’s as much chance of the next one being *Feveratus Disappearatus* as anything else. Besides, there’s no need for me to hide my power. The shopkeeper knows all about it. And the more medicine we can make, the better. The sick children need it!”

“In that case,” Claude mused, “it’d be better if it was me, wouldn’t it?”

“Pardon?”

Agnes looked up at Claude, confused. He smiled back down at her.

“You should touch me to make mushrooms. The effect is strong on me, isn’t it?”

Hmm, he’s right. But the shopkeeper would be fine, too... Agnes thought.

“The *Feveratus Disapparatus* grew on the shopkeeper,” she replied, “so I think it’s more likely to sprout again if I touch him.”

She shook her head, but the shopkeeper laughed and interjected. “Miss, Miss... your beau doesn’t want me touching your fair hands. Please...try to understand the male mind.”

“The male...mind?”

No, no, Claude is just hungry for the mushrooms... This is his Mushroom Mind at work here!

The last time he saw her sprout the *Feveratus Disapparatus*, Claude’s eyes had lit up with desire. He was obviously just desperate to get his hands on one of the pretty purple mushrooms.

Still, she couldn’t out a prince as a mushroom fetishist. So she had to keep her response vague.

The shopkeeper chuckled.

“The two of you are wearing matching mushroom brooches, aren’t you? Ah, how nice it is to be young!”

“Both of us...?”

Agnes was wearing the pink mushroom brooch Claude gave her, pinned to her chest.

On her way out that day, Claude had asked to see her wearing it, so she put it on before leaving.

But why was Claude wearing his mushroom brooch too? He hadn’t been wearing it when he came to her house. Agnes hadn’t even noticed him affixing

it.

“Wh-When did you put that on?”

The two of us have been strolling through town wearing matching pink and blue mushroom brooches? Like some sort of lovestruck couple? How embarrassing!

Agnes reached up to at least remove her own brooch, but Claude covered her hands with his.

“My...male mind wants us to be wearing matching mushroom brooches. Please wear it...just for today.”

Before Claude even finished talking, a string of pale, reddish-brown mushrooms popped up on his black glove. Now Claude had *Shiitake* mushrooms on his right hand, and on his left, a neat row of *Tremella Folicea*: a frilly, gelatinous fungus.

Claude’s left hand looked like it was covered in pinkish, ruffly petals.

At a brief glance, it looked like he was wearing a fancy, decorated gauntlet.

Until you realized they were actually mushrooms, that is.

Man mind? More like mushroom mind.

Agnes sighed, watching Claude as he gazed at his own arm in wonder.



AFTER that day, Agnes tried several times to grow mushrooms by herself. She’d tried roping Kevin in as her guinea pig at first, but she couldn’t get much of anything to sprout on him.

Several days passed, with Agnes praying for mushrooms the whole time. But it was no use. Apparently, she couldn’t consciously sprout mushrooms. She was about ready to give up.

Hmm, she thought to herself, if the spirits are what cause the mushrooms... maybe if I speak to them directly, I could get them to sprout what I need...?

She closed her bedroom door and went to stand in front of her collection of filled vases. The bouquets from Claude just kept on coming, so Agnes’s room

was like a permanent flower show.

The spirits seemed to like it. And now that Agnes had regained much of her communicative powers, she was able to contact them pretty much anytime. She didn't even need to call forth the balls of light anymore as they seemed to stay materialized around her anyway these days.

"Okay, let's try this."

Agnes took a deep breath and focused on the glowing balls of light.

"Hello, spirits!"

The balls of light flickered, as if responding to her.

Agnes definitely felt a little awkward standing in her room and talking to herself in a super cheery baby voice. She used to like chatting with them. It made her feel like she had a secret friend. But these days, she was much less prone to whimsy.

She couldn't let them know how awkward she felt. She had a purpose, after all. She wanted to be able to sprout mushrooms of her own volition, somehow.

It's just like playing with cute little kids...in glowy ball form, Agnes told herself as she smiled at the spirits.

"I have another request today, spirits. Would you grant me what I seek?"

The floating light balls glowed brighter.

"The thing is...I want to be able to sprout a specific mushroom. There's this special mushroom I need called *Feveratus Disapparatus*. It's purple and it takes away fever. Do you guys know it?"

The balls of light swayed in the air, before giving off a flickering glow.

Aha! They seem to understand me.

"All right, then... Can any of you cuties sprout a *Feveratus Disapparatus* for me?"

A small mushroom appeared beside one of the vases with a pop.

It was purple and looked like flower petals. No doubt about it! It was a *Feveratus Disapparatus*!

Agnes was delighted. She could make medicine with this! And the spirits had granted her wish and allowed her to sprout a mushroom of her own choosing!

“Thank you, cuties!” she cried. “I love you all!”

The glowing balls flashed in pleasure. Agnes quickly plucked the mushroom off her dresser and zoomed out of her bedroom.

She wanted to head directly to the shop, but she’d been told to alert either Claude or Maurice when she went there and to never go alone.

She sent a messenger, but neither man could drop what he was doing and come just then. In fact, neither could guarantee that they could make time today at all.

One was a prince and a knight. The other, a knight and a royal bodyguard. They were busy men with busy lives.

But the *Feveratus Disapparatus* was beginning to wilt and crumble in Agnes’s hands.

The shopkeeper had told her that this particular mushroom was delicate and would soon break down, which would reduce its medicinal powers. She needed to deliver it while it was still fresh.

And the shopkeeper mentioned that he’d be closing up shop before noon today!

When Agnes had gone there to sell her herbs the other day, the shopkeeper had mentioned he was going to a nearby town on business. The shop was going to close in a few hours!

The shopkeeper told her his business trip would take several days. So, if she waited for Claude, she wouldn’t be able to sell the mushroom for another few days at the earliest. *That’ll be far too late!*

I can’t waste this mushroom! Not when it has the power to help sick children...

Agnes hesitated just a moment. Then she quickly left a message with one of the servants, pulled her hat down low to cover her face, and quickly left the house.



Mushrooms of the Day

Shiitake

A mushroom with brown caps. It's delicious boiled or fried. A well-loved, edible mushroom.

"Look, to be frank, as a mushroom, I'd rather sprout on a hot prince than some middle-aged guy, you know?" What an outspoken mushroom.

It heard its distant relative, the Omphalotus Japonicus, was launching a desperate, life-or-death mission and tried to join in the party.

But it chose the wrong moment to sprout and will no doubt be eaten and enjoyed.

Tremella Folicea

Light reddish mushroom resembling a flower. It's edible.

It looks like finely sliced sushi ginger, but it tastes rubbery, like Auricularia Auricula-Judae.

It's like a flower bouquet that accompanies the Cuphophyllus Virgineus whenever there's a romantic moment with Claude.

***Feveratus Disapparatus* (Not a Real Mushroom)**

A fungal mutation of the Polyporus Umbellatus, it's a purple mushroom that reduces fever.

It doesn't really exist, though.

It's proving an effective medicine for the children who are currently sick. "My time has finally come!" it thinks to itself.

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 sprouted up along with a few friends in response to Agnes's feelings of anger toward Philip in an all-out kamikaze attack. "Let's trick him into thinking he's eating a Shiitake!"

Pleurotus Citrinopileatus

An edible mushroom with bright yellow caps. It grows in clusters, and it's very tasty. Fetches a good price, too.

It's a mushroom that got swept up in the "Take down Philip via Omphalotus Japonicus attack" plan and is very sorry for sprouting on Claude by accident instead.

It was also trying to say, "I'm tasty! Don't mind me! Just make sure Philip gets that Omphalotus Japonicus in his mouth!"

Polyporus Umbellatus

Yellowish caps, a famous mushroom whose mold can make an herbal medicine known as choreito.

It's only an example and doesn't directly appear in the story.

Chapter 12: Pretty is a Hollow Word

“I can’t believe it! Another *Feveratus Disapparatus*! Thank you! Thank you, Miss!”

The shopkeeper gulped with excitement as he gazed at the purple mushroom.

Agnes breathed a huge sigh of relief. She’d made it to the shop just as he was about to close.

“But Miss, you’re here alone today? Where’s your usual companion?”

“I sent a message, but I didn’t have time to wait for him. The mushroom came all of a sudden, you see, and I knew the shop would be closing soon. I ran all the way here!”

It wasn’t *that* far from the Lefort estate, so Agnes decided to forego trying to find Kevin or asking for the carriage. Running was the quickest option.

She must’ve made for a funny sight: a count’s daughter running through town with her dress hiked up to her knees. Still, she’d hid her hair with her hat, so no one should be able to identify her.

And so *what* if they could? She was returning to commoner life soon. What did she care?

“But do you plan to walk back alone as well? I could see you safely home if you wish?”

“Oh, no thanks. I told our servants to let everyone know where I went. Someone will probably come looking for me, and I’ll meet them on the way back. It’s not so far, after all. And anyway, I know you’re off on your trip after this. I’d hate to keep you.”

“All right. But please be careful. Your young man is concerned for your safety too, I can tell. He clearly adores you, pretty thing that you are.”

Pretty thing that you are? The sentence didn’t make any sense to Agnes.

Pretty *thing*?

That *you* are?

...*You're pretty, in other words?*

Oh, oh, of course!

The shopkeeper was trying to butter Agnes up, so she wouldn't be tempted to sell her wares to any other store!

It's just like when those street stalls call out to you, saying, "You there! Pretty girl!" just to try to get you to buy something. Agnes smiled dryly.

"You don't need to go *that* far. I promise I'll bring any additional mushrooms to you. Well, I'm headed home now."

Agnes left the shop and headed back the way she'd come. There was no need to run on the way back, of course, so she could stroll at her own pace.

"Pretty thing," eh?

Even Agnes, with her peach-blossom hair, had been on the receiving end of a compliment or two in her life. And plenty of fake flattery when she'd show up at evening parties on Philip's arm. He was a royal, after all. There were all sorts of insincere interactions: *"Would you honor me with a dance?" "You look very pretty tonight"* and so on and so forth.

She knew they were compliments meant more for Philip than her. He told her as much. It was customary to praise a man on his choice of partner, no matter what you actually thought of her. He made sure she knew how they felt about her.

And then there was Kevin and Benoit. They saw Agnes through a filter of familial love, so perhaps they really did believe her vile hair color was beautiful.

But Agnes knew how the world really worked and what people *really* thought. She'd learned that at a young age. Aristocrats tended to be two-faced. Sure, they'd compliment Agnes while she was an accessory to Philip. But in their minds, they no doubt felt disgusted whenever they glanced at her pink hair.

Their engagement had lasted six years, and Agnes had attended so many balls, banquets, and tea parties during that time. It hadn't taken long to see the

truth behind the façade, especially with Philip pointing it out to her every chance he got. She learned to ignore their snooty looks of disgust as well as the insincere compliments. Over time, she saw how Philip was right and began to play down her hair and appearance by dressing drably. People stopped commenting and complimenting her then.

She hadn't realized how much power Philip had had, even as a fringe royal.

Once their engagement was off, Agnes started wearing her hair down again, figuring that she'd soon be done with high society. But then Claude had come along and thrust her right back into the party scene. Life was strange like that.

However, the Crown Prince was due to be married in less than a month now, which would mark the end of their contract. Agnes was worried for her family at first. But luckily, all the talk about her being damaged goods since her public dumping had mostly tailed off. Everyone was distracted by Claude going around telling everyone he was "head over heels" for her.

Kevin hadn't suffered from the rumors. In fact, he often had people approaching him now, asking him if he was personal friends with Prince Claude

And, thanks to her medicinal herbs and mushrooms, Agnes was creating a nice little nest egg for herself so that she could start her new life off on the right foot.

Let's just hope things keep going smoothly, right up until the end of the contract.

Agnes passed through the center of town and had just reached a quiet street when a ball of light appeared in front of her. She came to a halt, wondering what this was all about. Two men were standing at the end of the street, watching her.

There was also a horse cart laden with boxes stopped by the side of the road. Were they transporting something?

The sharp looks they were shooting Agnes, though...they weren't the kind of looks you gave a stranger simply passing you by.

Agnes pulled her hat down further and stepped back, which was when the men started walking toward her, as if to detain her.

“You!” one of them called. “You’re the girl who’s been bringing all those rare medicinal herbs lately, aren’t you?”

Agnes frowned below her hat brim.

“...What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. We’ve heard the rumors. A girl with bright pink hair has been seen going in and out of that shop right before they get a new delivery of potent herbs.”

Agnes quietly clicked her tongue. She knew it. She’d been making too many trips to that store. She didn’t think the shopkeeper would ever leak her info. No, he’d never have done that.

But she’d been coming in and out of the shop a lot, and every time, there was a fresh stock of herbs afterward. Someone else must’ve noticed. And Agnes’s peach-blossom hair stood out. Whoever it was, they’d be sure to remember her.

Agnes knew she needed to get away from here as fast as possible.

She took another step back, her back hitting something solid behind her. Before she even had time to turn around, her hat was whipped away, and her peach-blossom-colored hair tumbled free.

“Hair the color of peach blossoms. No doubt about it,” a voice said.

The man standing behind her raised her hat out of reach, grinning.

So, there’d been a third man approaching her from the rear all along.

There was no doubt that Agnes was who they wanted if they’d gone to the trouble of double-checking her hair color.

They must be bandits looking to steal the herbs to make a buck off them, she thought. If she just told them she didn’t have any on her, presumably, that’d be the end of it.

“Return my hat at once,” she demanded. “What do you want with me?”

Agnes made a grab for her hat, but the bandit only held it up higher.

She scowled up at the man, irritated at his clear enjoyment. A white

mushroom sprouted on her hat, but the man didn't seem to notice.

The white, needle-like projections all over it looked like a fluffy mop. Another *Heridium Erinaceus*? It probably sprouted in response to how frightened the men made her. But still, it looked quite cute, like a little woolly pom-pom on her hat.

"Huh!" the man snickered. "All we heard was that it was a girl with weird-colored hair. Had no idea she'd be such a pretty one!"

There's that word again. Pretty.

It wasn't meant as a compliment this time. They were mocking her, which really made her mad. They were looking down on her.

She needed to find an opportunity—an opening—and run away as fast as she could.

"So," the thief said gruffly. "You got any herbs?"

"If you want any," Agnes replied curtly, "you should go to a shop."

"All right..." he said, smiling. "If *that's* how you want to play this. You're gonna tell us all how you came by those herbs. In *great* detail."

While Agnes was talking to the hat-snatcher, the two men at the end of the street were inching closer. If the three of them surrounded her, she wouldn't be able to get away.

Just as Agnes was trying to sidle her way past the hat-snatcher, a hand reached out and grabbed her arm.

Agnes spun around, trying to get away before the man could pull her to the ground. Twisting her own arm, she managed to knock his grip off of her.

It was a technique she'd honed since childhood but to no avail. The path was still blocked even with her hand now free.

Now Agnes had her back against the horse cart, with the three men closing in, only a few feet from her.

Just then, a mountain of reddish mushrooms sprouted on the men's feet.

They glistened in the light, obviously slimy. They were clearly *Pholiota*

Microscopa, also known as *Nameko* mushrooms.

None of the men seemed to notice them at all. *What good are these supposed to be in helping me escape?*

They were certainly very slimy—much slimier specimens, in fact, than the ones she'd seen in recent years. The men's boots were dripping with slime. But Agnes didn't see how that was supposed to help her. Unless they slipped and fell...

"Let's take her with us."

The hat-snatcher put on Agnes's hat and reached out to grab her. Another white mushroom sprouted atop the hat, almost on top of the *Hericium Erinaceus*.

It had a white cap with white warty bits...*Amanita Cokeri*.

It was poisonous, yes. But it wasn't going to help her get out of this situation any more than the slimy *Nameko* mushrooms would.

Agnes was powerless as the men kept advancing on her. She glared at them with all her might, when all of a sudden, someone spoke in a deep, gravelly voice.

"Hold it right there."

The man's hand froze in midair. That voice was so commanding.

There he was, standing in the middle of the cobbled street. The handsome young man with the Prussian-blue hair.

Claude had come for her.

Agnes was filled with a strange feeling, which she couldn't quite call either relief or joy.

"Don't you touch her," Claude snarled.

"The heck do you want?" The other man's voice was shrill, as if he knew he was already beaten.

The fronds of the *Hericium Erinaceus* seemed to be obscuring his vision, so he reached up to adjust the hat. Seeing this, Claude frowned.

“Don’t lay a finger on that hat.”

“What?”

The man froze, taken aback.

The other two lifted their eyes to the hat on the third man’s head, where the *Hericium Erinaceus* and *Amanita Cokeri* had sprouted.

It was like a mini, white mushroom garden up there...

“...Did this hat always look like that?” one of them asked.

“Weird bit of decoration. I never understood women’s fashion...” remarked the other.

“What? What’s on the hat?” said its wearer as he reached up for it.

“I said, don’t touch that hat!” Claude yelled again, and the man’s hand paused in midair once more.

Clearly annoyed at Claude giving them orders, the man got a mulish look on his face as he reached up and deliberately grabbed the hat brim, glaring at Claude all the while.

“You must be the young lady’s companion that we were told about,” he snorted.

“Don’t touch that hat,” Claude said insistingly. “You’ll get it all dirty.”

“This isn’t really the time to be concerned about the lady’s personal effects, now, is it?”

The man laughed mockingly, not realizing that it wasn’t Agnes’s hat Claude was concerned about. Clearly, he didn’t want to see the pure-white mushrooms get dirty. Perhaps instead of coming to save Agnes, he was *really* only here for another mushroom foraging session.

At any rate, Agnes thought, here’s my chance!

While everyone was standing around focusing on the mushrooms, she made a break for it. But the man holding her hat reached out and grabbed her by the hair, hauling her back.

Now my hair is literally holding me back!!! How vexing!

“Don’t struggle,” the man ordered. “You’ll rip out that hair. We don’t want your price to go down, now, do we?”

The man was holding Agnes’s head back, so all she could see were his boots. They were covered with those *Nameko* mushrooms, which glistened with slime. She’d never seen such slimy ones before. It was far beyond the normal characteristics of this particular variety.

Agnes had no idea *why* they were so slimy. Perhaps the mushrooms themselves were doing their best for her.

Still, she couldn’t just give up, either.

“The price isn’t moving because my hair is *not* for sale!” She twisted around and punched the man square in the crotch.

It was a move she’d perfected after being teased and harassed by men over her hair since early childhood. It was a killer move, although it always led to sore knuckles later.

She hadn’t used this move in a while, but it proved effective as ever. The man crumpled to the ground motionless and the other two blanched at the sight.

Agnes took the opportunity to get some distance from them as they stood frozen in shock. That was when Claude came dashing to her side.

“Agnes, are you all right?”

“Yeah, just bruised my knuckles. Thank you for coming to my assistance.”

Agnes lifted her right fist to show him. Claude’s lips tightened. *But why does this mushroom fetishist care, anyway?*

“I’m just glad you’re all right. Shall we get out of here?”

Claude gently touched Agnes’s raised fist, and a blackish mushroom popped up on the back of his black glove.

From the velvety black cap, Agnes was sure it was a specimen of *Tylopilus Alboater*. It didn’t stand out that much since it was the same color as his glove. Agnes wished more of the mushrooms would color-coordinate with the clothing in the future so it’d be less mentally tiring on her.

“Hold it! Give the girl to us!”

The man she’d punched was getting shakily to his feet with the other two’s help.

He must’ve been quite strong indeed to be getting to his feet so soon after a crotch-punch like that. Either that or her punch had lost its power after a long period of nonuse.

“I told you that I don’t have any medicinal herbs,” she insisted. “And give me back my hat!”

It looked a bit weird with the mushroom fronds hanging from it, but it was still one of her favorite hats. She’d planned to wear it during her new life, so she really wanted it back.

“Who *cares* about the hat!” the man yelled. “You’re what we want!”

“I care! It’s *my* hat!”

“Right, and it’s got that magnificent mushroom on it as well!”

Agnes winced, deciding to pretend the Mushroom Fetishist hadn’t actually spoken just then.

“Don’t mess with us, or you’ll regret it!” the other man snarled at Claude. “We’re going to sell that pink hair for a high price. We *were* just gonna cut it off, but she’s much prettier than we anticipated. So we’re going to sell her with her hair still attached!”

Agnes’s green eyes widened with shock as she digested what the mushroom-headed bandit was saying.

“Sell it? You’re planning to sell *my* hair? ...For how much?”

“Of *course* we want to sell it!” the brigand snorted. “It’s rare and beautiful. Of course, it’s not appreciated in this country, but hair that color goes for a pretty penny elsewhere! You can get up to ten times what ordinary black hair goes for!”

“Seriously?!” Agnes gawped.

Long hair was all the rage in this kingdom. The aristocracy, in particular, never

purposely cut their hair. As a result, women were desperate to hide any accidental hair loss that resulted in shorter hair. Many others were fond of adding wigs, hairpieces, and extensions to change up their look.

Yes, long hair was prized by women. But there was scant supply for extra hair, and it tended to go for high prices.

Even basic black hair fetched a good price, so Agnes could only imagine how much coin she could get if pink hair did, in fact, go as high as this thief was saying.

She'd no idea her loathed hair had so much monetary value. That kind of money could be a huge boon and set her up for a comfortable commoner's life. And although she knew this already, it was fascinating how her hair color was actually appreciated outside the Kingdom of Visage.

"...So what I'm hearing," she finally said, "is that if I leave the country and sell my hair, I'll be rolling in dough?"

"S-Stop, Agnes! You mustn't do that!"

Claude grabbed both her hands in a panic, and another black velvety *Tylopilus Alboater* popped up on the back of his glove.

It was so nice how it blended in with his gloves and barely stood out at all.

"Don't worry," she said. "I know there's still a month of our contract left. I'll honor the duration we agreed on."

"That's not the problem," Claude protested.

"Oh, right, the mushrooms! All right, on the day before your brother's wedding, we'll have a mushroom fest. I'll give you all the fungi I can muster. You can consider them a shrooms gift for the groom's special day and a conclusion to our partnership."

"R-Really?! ...I mean, no! You can't go to a foreign country. And you absolutely can't cut your hair."

The Mushroom Fetishist shook his head hard as if to distract himself from the temptation of mushrooms.

"Don't worry," Agnes said, "lots of commoner girls cut their hair short. And

short peach-blossom hair will attract a lot less attention than if it's long..."

"No, you're not understanding me—"

"Hey! How dare you ignore us?!"

The man with the mushroom hat was yelling at them. Then he suddenly flung what looked like a fireball directly at them.

He had used magic. She rarely ever saw it used in everyday life, so Agnes was transfixed by it.

A split second later, she realized a fireball to the face would probably really hurt, but it was too late to dodge.

However, just as the fireball was about to strike her, Claude's hand shot out and knocked it away...

"...Huh?"

"Damn you!" the thief cried.

Agnes had no idea what had just happened. But then the mushroom-hatted man conjured a succession of fireballs which he pelted them with. But each one was deflected by Claude's hand. One of them shot off and collided with the side of the horse cart. Immediately, the wooden boxes burst into flame and the air filled with a burning stench.

"It's dangerous to play with fire!" Claude admonished the thief. "And fire magic is clearly wasted on you, since you seem to have little control over it!"

"How dare you!" the thief cried.

"*This* is how you do it," Claude said slyly.

He stretched both arms out and the air around them seemed to almost shimmer.

The next moment, the men's clothes began to rip and hang off them... It was as if a sharp blade had cut their clothes to ribbons, exposing their skin. A second later, blood began oozing forth. Then the swords the men wore at their waists clattered to the cobblestones.

Agnes thought it had to have been done by wind magic, but it was so sudden

and shocking that she and the three men were completely lost for words.

Then Agnes spotted the familiar balls of light, which gave off quick flashes as if trying to alert her to something.

There was a bursting sound and her vision went dark.

It all seemed to happen in slow-motion...the burning wooden boxes loaded on the cart started to fall.

Boxes that heavy could really crush a person, Agnes thought in an odd, detached manner. Just then, something pushed her hard and she went flying backward.

She went rolling across the cobblestones with no idea what was happening until she came to a stop. Her entire body hurt from falling and rolling across the hard stones, and all she could do was lay there for a second, motionless.

“Lord Claude! Lady Agnes!”

She knew that voice. It was Maurice.

Oh yes...the first time Claude came to the house, he’d mentioned Maurice was one of his personal bodyguards. Claude must’ve come with his guards today...

Why hadn’t they stepped forward until now? Was it because they assumed Claude had it under control? Or were they just a bit slow?

Usually, Maurice referred to Claude as “Your Highness” or “Prince Claude.” Maybe he wasn’t now because they were in town?

Agnes’s mind was racing a mile a minute, trying to distract her from the pain. Someone helped her sit up while she was still processing the situation.

“Lady Agnes, are you all right?” Maurice’s russet-brown eyes were filled with concern. Agnes looked down at herself.

Her dress was streaked with mud and her arms and legs were covered in cuts and bruises. Luckily, though, she didn’t seem to have any serious injuries.

“...I’m all right.”

“Clear away those boxes if you don’t want to be cut down where you stand! Move!!!”

Agnes turned to look at the men who were shouting. There was dust everywhere, and the boxes that'd fallen off the cart were now a heap of broken wood and debris. They were able to put out the fire right away, but moving the wreckage wasn't going as quick.

The two men, who seemed to be Royal Guards, were barking orders at Mushroom Hat and his men, who were trying to move the boxes out of the way. They seemed far too heavy, though.

Then a chill went down Agnes's spine.

"...Where's Claude?" Her voice quivered.

"He's fine. More importantly, Lady Agnes, your injuries...!"

"...No!"

The wreckage everywhere. The dust clouds. The broken carriage. The dripping blood. The rapidly cooling body.

Agnes trembled as these images flashed in her mind.

She knew what happened to people who lay trapped underneath a wrecked carriage.

...She knew.

"We have to...save him..."

Agnes shook her head, hugging herself to try to stop the shaking.

The horse cart itself hadn't fallen. If they could just move the boxes, maybe they could pull him out and save him...

But it took everything Agnes had to stand. Maurice took hold of her shoulders, steadying her.

She felt numb, not from pain so much as fear. She couldn't move.

Mushroom-Hat, his men, and the Royal Guards were all trying to clear away the boxes, but there were just too many of them. The boxes also appeared to be jam-packed with apples, which made them fairly heavy. The clearing work didn't seem to be making any progress.

Just then, a red mushroom popped up on one of the boxes.

A bright, burning red-colored mushroom with thick, finger-like parts growing upward. *Podostroma Cornudamae*, also known as the Poison Fire Coral.

It was even redder than the fireball Claude had deflected, the kind of red that caught the eye. But just as Agnes identified it, more mushrooms began sprouting up all over the boxes.

Shiitake. Pycnoporus Coccineus. Pleurotus Citrinopileatus. Slimy Nameko.

And the ones with the yellowish-brownish caps were *Neolentinus Lepideus*.

They just kept sprouting. Within seconds, the boxes were covered with mushrooms.

The mountain of boxes soon became a mountain of mushrooms. The rapid growth suddenly stopped. Then they all began to topple like a pile of sand.

As Agnes watched, she realized the boxes were disintegrating along with their apple contents. Now the mountain was less than half its original height.

It was all happening so suddenly, Agnes couldn't make sense of it.

"Lord Claude!"

As his bodyguard cried out, the last of the debris was flung aside, and a handsome young man with Prussian-blue hair emerged.

He was covered in muck and sand, but that did nothing to take away from his beauty.

But the most important thing was that, even despite being crushed under a pile of boxes, he was able to stand and walk unaided and seemed to have escaped major injury.

Claude said something to his guards, flashed a quick look of appreciation at the mushroom mountain, and then came straight over to Agnes.

She was still slumped against Maurice's chest. As she took in the sight of Claude striding over to her, her knees buckled, and she sank slowly to the ground.

"Agnes. Are you all right?"

"Th-That was supposed to be my line," she answered weakly.

Claude gazed down at Agnes before kneeling and taking hold of her hand.

“You’ve had a terrible fright. And you’re injured! I’m so sorry.”

“It’s just a scratch or two. Ya saved me from being crushed. Are ya really alright, Claude?”

“I’m fine. But...why are you speaking like that?”

Agnes hadn’t realized it until he pointed it out. She felt her cheeks burning.

“S-Sorry!” She quickly lowered her head in contrition.

She’d studied etiquette so that she could blend in as a proper young lady. But under the circumstances, she’d been so flustered she reverted to commoner speak. *And in front of a royal, too!*

She felt ashamed. Not only was she speaking improperly in front of a prince, but she also wasn’t behaving as a proper young lady should.

“Agnes.”

She felt him stroking her hair and looked up. Those dark-gray eyes were filled with tenderness.

“That’s your original accent, isn’t it?”

“Yes...”

“I see. In that case...I’m glad.”

“...Uh...what?”

Claude grinned, but Agnes didn’t follow. She tipped her head to one side in confusion, which shot pain right through her.

“Pure, unadulterated Agnes. The genuine version. I got to see it. That makes me happy.”

Really, there’s no need to bring out the old “I’m head over heels for her!” act at a time like this. Or...is that really how he feels?

With his dazzling smile focused on her, she couldn’t quite decide.

“...Um...”

“What is it?”

“What about the mushrooms? You don’t want them?”

“Oh, of course I do!”

Claude stiffened, head snapping up as he looked over at the mushroom mountain, a glint in his eyes.

Oh, phew! He’s still the same old Mushroom Fetishist.

As she sighed with relief, she relaxed, which made her start trembling again. Pain wracked her body.

“Lord Claude has the blood of a dragon and has been blessed with its powers. His body is strong, so there’s no real need to worry about him.”

Maurice leaned in to explain while Claude was distracted, *ooh*-ing and *aah*-ing over the mushrooms.

“Dragon’s...blood...” Agnes murmured.

It sounded unbelievable. But Claude was somehow fine even after being crushed under all those boxes, and he could see the same spirits she did, so that proved he wasn’t ordinary.

Even dragon’s blood—which had always seemed like a fairytale—sounded plausible to her now.

“He’s...from a different world.”

As a royal, Claude was already far out of her league. Even without factoring in her mushroom curse.

“Not at all. I’m as much of this world as you are,” Claude said as he directed his attention back to her from the mushroom mountain.

Even so...there was no comparison between handsome, royal-born Claude and his dragon’s blood and commoner-born fake Lady Agnes, who made mushrooms sprout wherever she went.

If the blood of the dragon was real—and what’d just happened seemed to prove it was—then perhaps Dragonmates were real too.

“You look very pale,” Claude said. “Are you quite sure you’re all right?”

“It just...it just made me think of my parents’ accident again...” Just talking

about it made her hands shake.

The sight of the broken horse cart had, perhaps, made it all come roaring back. Agnes had thought she was over it by now, but the slightest trigger could apparently cause an avalanche of trauma to wash back over her.

She put one of her hands on top of the other and squeezed tight, trying to stop the shaking. Claude then placed one of his hands on top of hers.

His black glove was badly burned, revealing his bare skin in places.

He must've been burned when he deflected the bandit's fireballs.

"Just rest for now."

Agnes nodded and tried to stand, but her legs were too weak.

Claude let go of her hand, and the next thing she knew, he'd picked her up in his arms.

"What? Wh-What are you doing?" she protested.

"Maurice, monitor the cleanup. Once those bandits have finished sweeping up every last cinder, arrest them."



Claude glanced over at the mushroom mountain. The bandits were picking up the box wreckage, sweeping up the sand, and separating out the mushrooms while the guards instructed them.

Agnes looked over, too. Mushroom Hat had a *Podostroma Cornudamae* sprouting from his arm. The other two men were also sporting fresh-sprouted specimens of the same mushroom.

Agnes was pretty sure they wouldn't try to eat them, so they probably wouldn't die or anything. But they would end up with nasty sores on their skin, the rate they were going.

"Um, listen—"

"Don't forget to retrieve the hat," Claude continued, ignoring her. "Also, tell those men not to even touch those red mushrooms that are sprouting on them."

"Certainly." Maurice bowed smartly before walking over to the mushroom mountain.

"Claude, the *Podostroma Cornudamae*..."

"They won't die from just having one or two sprout on them. Anyway, they *deserve* a little pain for what they've done."

"But..."

Ignoring Agnes's worries, Claude started walking off, still carrying her.

He's carrying me princess style, isn't he?

Claude *was* a prince, so Agnes supposed she should enjoy this chance to play princess. But in reality, she was wounded, traumatized, and also deeply embarrassed.

Claude didn't seem to notice...or *did* he?

Still cradling her close to his chest, Claude kept walking, putting distance between them and the mountain of mushrooms that still remained.



Mushrooms of the Day

Hericium Erinaceus

An edible mushroom that looks like a round mop with white strands hanging down everywhere.

It sprouted on the hat in an attempt to come to Agnes's aid and disguise her peach-blossom hair.

But the hat brim thwarted that plan. All it managed to do was turn into a very big pom-pom.

Still, it continued to sprout, its fronds draping down from the hat brim.

Pholiota Microscopa (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 sprouted to try to save Agnes and stop the bandits. It produced more slime than it ever had in its life in an attempt to destroy their boots. And it succeeded!

Now that the men's boots have rotted, the delicious Nameko will have a chance to sprout from them next year. But who'd want to eat those ones?

They're members of the Wood Deterioration Club: after they were done devouring the men's boots, they set their sights on the wooden boxes and apples.

Amanita Cokeri

White caps with white dots. A poisonous mushroom with a flaky stem.

It looks like an all-white Amanita Muscaria.

“If you don’t stop picking on Agnes, I’ll summon backup!” It sprouted to keep guard and alert the others.

It was a little relieved when Claude showed up. But this is a mushroom that’s always on alert.

Tylopilus Alboater

Black velvet cap. Flesh turns red when bruised.

It's in the Boletaceae family. It's a relative of the bitter Tylopilus Felleus, but it's not bitter itself. It's edible.

"Thanks for saving our Agnes," it wanted to say to Claude and company. But it also wanted to say: "Sorry for all the trouble our Agnes caused. You really could have shown up sooner, though."

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.

In response to the emergency signal sent out by the Amanita Cokeri, it responded to Agnes's feelings of anger.

It sprouted to teach a lesson to the men who brought out Agnes's trauma.

"I won't kill you," it says. But it will definitely cause skin irritation.

Shiitake

Brown mushroom caps, tasty fried, boiled, or dried; it's a beloved table staple.

It answered Podostroma Cornudamae's summons and is another member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

Pycnoporus Coccineus

A half-circle, Polyporaceae-like mushroom.

Member of the Wood Deterioration Club. It usually comes along to rein in the Cuphophyllus Virgineus, but not today.

Pleurotus Citrinopileatus

Bright yellow caps, grows in clumps, edible.

Member of the Wood Deterioration Club. It grew in clumps to devour the wood and apples, creating a colorful mushroom mountain.

Neolentinus Lepideus

Yellow capped, flaky, edible mushroom.

Depending on the specimen, it can be poisonous and should never be eaten raw. And why would anyone eat a raw mushroom? Well, ask your local mushroom maniac.

Member of the Wood Deterioration Club. It came along to devour the wooden boxes and apples on orders from the Podostroma Cornudamae.

Chapter 13: Dragon's Blood and the Mushroom Fetishist

“CLAUDE, I can walk,” Agnes protested. “Please put me down.”

“Nope. Not with how pale you look right now.” Brushing aside her request, Claude kept walking.

Agnes wanted him to put her down, since she thought she was too heavy for him to carry when he was injured. But even though Claude had a trim frame, he was definitely a knight. His strong arms cradled her and, no matter how heavy she might be, he never flinched.

If she insisted on him putting her down, perhaps he would take it as an insult. Still, she really shouldn't be letting a prince carry her like a princess.

Agnes was still going back and forth with herself over what she should say when they entered another street, and Claude set her down on a bench near a fountain.

As he started to move away, she grabbed his hand, which made his eyes widen.

“What's wrong?”

“Your glove. It's in tatters. Were you burned?”

His skin was showing through the burned glove. Agnes was sure she could see some redness.

They must be burns, she thought. *He deflected the fireballs with his hands, after all.*

He needed immediate treatment, but Claude pulled his hand away in alarm and quickly hid it behind his back.

“I'm fine. You saw, right? I'm incredibly strong. You don't need to worry.”

“...All right.” All Agnes could do was nod.

Claude sat down beside her and fondly stroked her hair.

“Those men were targeting you, weren’t they?” he asked.

“They kept mentioning the herbs. And they took the time to check my hair color. I think I made too many trips to the shop. I’m sorry for putting you through all this because of me...”

“I told you to call for me whenever you went to the shop. Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“Well, I managed to sprout one of those purple mushrooms that reduces fever... *Feveratus Disapparatus*...”

“What? Wh-Where?”

“I already sold it.”

“...I see.”

The childlike excitement faded from Claude’s eyes as his shoulders slumped.

“You wanted one *that* badly?”

“Of course! That beautiful, flower-shaped cap and its deep purple color! I’ve never *seen* such a ‘shroom! And what’s rarest of all is the balance of color between its flesh and the outside...”

The Mushroom Fetishist is letting his freak flag fly again today. Agnes looked at him as if observing some rare animal. Claude seemed to notice and trailed off.

“I mean, the mushroom *is* splendid,” he muttered, “but...you really should’ve waited for me. Why didn’t you?”

Hmm...with him along, there’s a good chance that mushroom never would’ve made it to the shop. She was actually glad he hadn’t made it in time but decided not to say that out loud.

“The shop was only open this morning,” she explained. “The shopkeeper was going on a multi-day business trip this afternoon. And it was drying out rapidly, so I had to hurry.”

“Bad timing, huh?” Claude murmured. “But...I’m glad I made it there just in

time. Those men were going to *kidnap* you, Agnes.”

“Apparently, my hair’s pretty valuable. I wish I found that out sooner.”

“...Why, what’re you planning to do?”

Claude’s tone grew harsh all of a sudden. Agnes looked at him in surprise.

“I’m going to sell it, of course.”

She could earn money to start off her commoner life and get rid of most of her attention-grabbing hair at the same time. It was a win-win.

But Claude sighed deeply and grabbed her hand.

She couldn’t see his skin through the tattered glove anymore, since a bunch of mushrooms had just sprung up on the back of it.

A velvety Tylopilus Alboater and a frilly blackish-brown Auricularia Auricula-Judae...

They were both black and blended with the glove. *A response to my earlier wish for less eye-catching mushrooms to sprout?*

Her mushroom sensitivity seemed to be on the rise. It was a weird feeling to think that the mushrooms may be starting to respond to her will.

“Do *not* do that. If you...if you insist on doing it, I’ll buy it all.”

Agnes stared at him. His gaze seemed so...serious.

“So you’ve branched out from mushrooms and you’re collecting hair now?” she asked in a dubious tone.

She thought he was just a mushroom freak. Who knew he was an all-purpose weirdo?

Anyway, she wasn’t moved at all.

“No. I’m a mushroom specialist through and through.”

The way he swiftly rejected her statement with a handsome young man’s confidence made him look kind of cool. But what he was saying was...so cringeworthy.

A red *Amanita Muscaria* sprouted on Claude’s hand. A poisonous mushroom

to match Agnes' inner turmoil.

Claude's eyes sparkled as he looked at it. But he refrained from launching into another poetic speech about the mushroom's beauty.

Hmm. The Mushroom Fetishist has gained a level of social awareness.

"...You've got some color back in your cheeks," Claude observed.

Now that he mentioned it, Agnes *did* feel a little better. The clenching sensation in her chest and gut had eased up, and the trembling had nearly stopped. Maybe it was just the passage of time. Or maybe it was listening to this Mushroom Maniac ramble on; it proved a very good distraction.

"Did you lose your parents in a carriage accident?"

"Yes. I was riding with them. My aunt, too."

"Your aunt?"

"Yes, Countess Lefort. My mother was Benoit Lefort's younger sister..."

That day, when Agnes was eleven, she and her parents had boarded the carriage her aunt had arrived at their house in.

Agnes couldn't remember where they were supposed to be going. But it wasn't unusual for her aunt to come spend time with them or for them to be invited over to her house.

She'd assumed they were going to the Lefort's country estate that day. She'd been excited because she and Kevin could play when they got there. She remembered staring out of the window as the carriage departed her home.

The next thing she remembered was everything inside the carriage becoming dark. She'd hurt all over and couldn't stand up. Somehow, she'd pushed herself up and looked around. Things inside the carriage were...odd.

The whole thing seemed to have tipped on its side. Agnes had been terrified because she couldn't see her parents or aunt anywhere.

Pulling herself on the sideways seat, she'd somehow managed to open the door, which was now on the ceiling. The handle had come away in her hand as a beam of bright light burst through.

Agnes had pushed the door open and crawled out. What she saw on the outside was a hellscape.

Two carriages lay on their sides and broken boxes—the other carriage’s cargo, no doubt—lay scattered all over the road.

Then she saw a familiar dress. A limply dangling arm. A puddle of blood seeping across the street.

Her parents and her aunt, who only moments before had been riding and laughing with her in the carriage, were now sprawled all over the stones like broken marionettes.

“After that, Uncle Ben... I mean, Count Lefort...came to save me. He took me in and adopted me.”

“...I see. That is terrible.”

Claude’s voice was husky with empathy. Agnes forced a shaky grin.

“I don’t remember what happened just before or right after, really...but whenever I see carriages or broken wooden boxes, I flash back to it. I wish I never had to ride in a carriage again, to be honest...”

“...Ah. That’s why.”

Claude nodded as if making a heavy realization. Then he took hold of Agnes’s left hand.

A bright red, umbrella-capped mushroom popped up on Claude’s arm, but Agnes looked away. Its crimson color reminded her of blood. Agnes was frustrated with herself for still being so affected by what happened, and Claude could tell.

“You experienced something traumatic,” he said firmly but softly. “You’ve done so well to move forward from it.”

“I didn’t do anything. It was Kevin and my father. They did so much for me. Without them, I never would’ve been able to set foot in a carriage again. I really *am* so grateful to them...”

At first, she hadn’t been able to look at a carriage without shaking and crying, but the two of them comforted her with endless patience. Now she could ride

in a carriage anytime. And the sight of wooden boxes no longer made her panic.

The two of them weren't just Agnes's family. They were her saviors.

"I was his niece," she continued, "but I was still a commoner-born child. He could've sent me to a convent, but he took me in and gave me kindness. That's why I've been doing everything I can to behave like a proper, aristocratic lady, so I don't cause him any embarrassment. But try as I might, I can't be the perfect young lady. I make mushrooms sprout wherever I go. And my *hair*! I've caused nothing but trouble and strife."

"Your mushrooms and your hair are the most charming things about you."

Claude's compliment rang hollow. She'd heard it all before from her family. It was kind and she appreciated it. But she *knew* her special features caused nothing but trouble. It was so hard to believe people who said otherwise.

"Anyway, I have to do all I can to repay their kindness. That's why I accepted Philip's proposal. I thought that if I became a royal's wife, that'd go a long way toward mitigating the damage I do to my family's good name simply by being myself."

But Agnes had lost all that. By public dumping. That had to be one of the worst ways to lose an engagement.

"Even with Philip's poor reputation? Even though you weren't approached by someone of higher status?"

"Well, Philip's still *technically* royalty. He's the king's nephew."

"So you just went along with what he wanted? Hiding your beautiful hair? Wearing boring dresses? And other despicable things like that?"

Claude was frowning at her. It all sounded so silly now that Agnes had to wryly grin.

"Okay, a lot of his requests were unreasonable, but he ended up being right about a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like about my hair being unusual and unpleasant to the eye. He said that people would be angered by it. He said that a lady should wear mature dresses

and stand meekly by her fiancé's side."

As Agnes spoke, the furrow between Claude's brows was growing deeper and deeper.

"What part was he right about? Your hair is *beautiful*. It's like...like a meadow in springtime."

"You're a mushroom freak, Claude, but you're a very kind man. Still, it's just a fact. The people of this kingdom *hate* peach-blossom-colored hair. Even when I was a commoner, all kinds of things happened..."

"Like what?"

Claude was looking at her, his eyes sharp. Agnes could sense waves of concern radiating off him.

"Just...things. It's all in the past."

"...You've suffered, haven't you?"

Agnes wished he'd just drop it, but Claude had a face like thunder. He looked so...*sorry* for her. Agnes felt guilty and flustered.

"Uh, but...I mean...stuff happened, but it's nothing to feel sorry for me over. Really, you don't need to worry about me at all."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, adults hate my hair color. But kids don't care so much about things like that. I was even able to sell it for a nice price because everyone was saying that it was like a good luck charm. A love charm."

"You...sold your hair?"

"Yeah, just by the strand, though. To one or two people. But then quite a few people started to want one, so I had to sell it by auction."

"Auction...?"

Little Agnes had been quite excited by this new money-making venture, but then her parents got wind of it. They were *not* happy. In the end, there was only ever one auction held for the peach-blossom hair.

"All the girls *really* wanted a strand. Because they heard the spirits had

blessed my hair with the power to help their love lives.”

When she thought about it, even if her hair color was despised, it still had monetary value. She wished she’d made more of a business of selling her hair earlier. She might’ve earned a great deal of money.

“...I see.”

“Anyway, some of the kids were really persistent and got on my nerves, so I taught them a lesson or two with the move I pulled on the bandit earlier.”

Claude blinked at her in confusion. He looked even more handsome when puzzled. *So cute.*

If he only kept his mouth shut, no one would think that this angelic-looking man was a secret mushroom freak. Ah, what a waste of good looks. Or maybe... just maybe...the contrast between his stunning face and creepy interests is actually kind of...appealing?

No, no, Agnes did *not* want to go there. It’d be simpler if he just stayed a mushroom freak in her eyes.

“But what about you? You have dragon’s blood, right?”

Since they were already having this cozy chat, Agnes decided to ask Claude a little bit about himself. Would he answer, though?

“What about it?”

He wasn’t angry, exactly. But she could tell this was a delicate question. Still, if she backed down now, she might never get another chance to ask. She was going all in.

“I mean...can you breathe fire?”

“I cannot.”

“Can you turn into a dragon?”

“No.”

“Oh...”

“Even *with* dragon’s blood, I’m just a regular human being.”

Agnes's mental image of dragons was the storybook version of them. She pictured them to be like the illustrations of huge, scaly dragons breathing fire. But apparently, those were just that—illustrations.

Everyone had heard how the royal family had dragon's blood flowing through their veins, and Agnes had even heard joking rumors that they could breathe fire. She knew they were just silly rumors. But she'd be lying if she said she hadn't hoped they were a little bit true.

"Are you disappointed?"

It must've shown on her face. Claude was grinning at her, clearly amused.

"Nope. I just heard something like that on the street. I guess rumors are just rumors, after all. You know...they used to say I'm like a witch, just because there's a rumor that says '*People with divine spirit protection can cast magic as easy as breathing.*'"

Witches are just another "evil" character from the storybooks. Being called one is not meant as a compliment.

On top of the hair color thing, those rumors were what made people look at Agnes with hardness in their eyes.

"...I guess there's also the fact I caused the boys that picked on me to go home covered from head to toe in mushrooms."

"What?! Lucky kids!"

Agnes pretended not to hear. *Mushroom Fetishist.*

Claude coughed awkwardly as he noted Agnes's cold stare.

"Being strong physically and being able to use and deflect various types of magic," he continued, "doesn't mean I can turn into a fire-breathing dragon. As far as I know..."

"I've got foreign spirit blood in me too," Agnes replied, "but I can't cast magic as easy as breathing. I can get mushrooms to sprout in response to my will, though. Well...kind of."

"That sounds wonderful to me."

Claude smiled at her. It may've sounded wonderful to a Mushroom Fetishist, but she didn't really find that reassuring.

If only Claude had the mushroom curse, everything would be so much simpler.

The world is an illogical place, she thought.

"As I showed you before, I learned to communicate with the spirits a little. So if someone treated me poorly, I'd just have a little word with the spirits and get them to sort it out. A little mischief, you know."

"Mischief, you say?"

"They'd make it so the kid's home garden got choked with overgrown, human-sized weeds. And sometimes, the little balls of light would float around their bedrooms at night."

"Oh, those sound like cute little pranks."

"Well, they were pretty effective."

Agnes knew her spirits well, so those kinds of things wouldn't have scared her. But if you didn't know much about them, and couldn't even see them properly, then they'd appear like an apparition...a mischievous ghost.

One by one, the boys who'd chased Agnes and teased her began to quieten down. Oh yes, the hauntings had been *very* effective.

Agnes giggled as she thought back to those days.

Claude's eyes widened as he watched her. Then he broke into a soft smile.

"Do you still do this?"

"Ah, nah...after Philip and I got engaged, I explained my relationship with the spirits to him. But Philip told me it was creepy and not a good look. He told me to knock it off."

"...Philip strikes again." Claude sighed, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

"Well, I figured I should stop soon, anyway. I already cause enough trouble for my family. But after that...I sort of got out of sync with the spirits."

"Philip certainly kept you on a tight leash, didn't he?"

“Maybe. But it’s not like I was completely obedient to him. I’d scold him for skipping his studies, correct him when he was ill-mannered... I was pretty outspoken! I guess that’s why he started to dislike me...”

All that nagging and weirdness on top of her hair and background. She wasn’t particularly pretty, either. No wonder Philip had an affair.

Looking back on it, Agnes felt pathetic. Her shoulders slumped.

“Let’s not talk about Philip anymore.”

“Huh?”

She lifted her head to see that Claude was frowning, a deep line between his brows.

“Oh, sorry,” she said hurriedly. “It’s a boring topic, I guess.”

Claude was only with her for the contract’s sake. Surely he wasn’t obligated to listen to her complain about her ex.

“No, you don’t need to apologize,” he said. “But I think your hair is beautiful. And it’s amazing that you can communicate with spirits. And you being common-born doesn’t change anything. It’s amazing how hard you tried to fit in with high society.”

Agnes stared at him. Wait, he was actually complimenting her. *A lot.*

“So, what I’m saying is...you don’t need to hold back anymore. You don’t have to worry about your family or what society says. I want you to just be yourself. Just be Agnes.”

“Th-Thank you.”

No one outside her family had ever said anything like that to her before.

A mushroom popped up on Claude’s shoulder in response to her feelings.

It was a *Cantharellus Cibarius* with bright yellow caps.

Agnes expected Claude to grab it straight away. But he didn’t move.

“And I would be very happy if you were yourself...by my side.”

His dark-gray eyes were fixed unblinkingly on hers. Agnes felt her heart leap.

A small white mushroom and a semicircular orange mushroom sprouted up.

Now a *Cuphophyllus Virgineus* and a *Pycnoporus Coccineus* had sprung up to join the *Cantharellus Cibarius*.

Agnes struggled to process what Claude was saying for a few moments before the signal got through.

“You’re back on that again, are you? You’re taking this whole contract thing far too seriously. You don’t need to use those kinds of tricks. You’ll get your mushrooms fair and square. So just relax.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Claude picked the *Cantharellus Cibarius* off his shoulder and brought the cap to his lips. It looked like he was kissing it. *Definitely weird.* But he was so handsome. Someone should’ve painted him like that. *Goodness, how fearsome good looks really are.*

Oh, but perhaps he’s just smelling it. Apparently, Claude’s cologne contained extract of *Cantharellus Cibarius*. *Perhaps he’s just checking the scent.*

“I only ever speak my mind, you know. Let’s go on another date soon, Agnes.”



AFTER that, Claude made frequent visits to the Lefort residence.

Agnes continued to sell her blessed herbs. She heard that they were proving highly effective. She was glad to be of help. Of course, she always went accompanied by either Claude or Maurice. And there hadn’t been any further problems since that day.

She was also able to make quite a bit of money from selling the mushrooms that grew on Claude.

She’d done a lot of careful calculations to determine how much money she’d need to start a new life on her own.

Yes, things were going well. And personally, she found this current state of affairs very comfortable.

But I can't go getting the wrong idea...

It was the mushrooms Claude loved. He was only kind to her because of their contract. Which would end before long.

The Crown Prince's wedding. It'd been six months away at first, but now, it was getting closer and closer. It was almost upon them.



Mushrooms of the Day

Feveratus Disapparatus (Not a Real Mushroom)

A purple mushroom with fever-reducing properties. A fungal mutation.

It doesn't really exist. It's a fake mushroom.

It's reducing someone's fever again today.

Tylopilus Alboater

A black velvety mushroom that can turn blacker or redder. Strange.

It sprouted on the hole in Claude's glove to say, "Thanks for saving Agnes." It has a strong sense of duty.

Auricularia Auricula-Judae

An edible mushroom, black and frilly.

You can eat it raw or dried. It's got a rubbery crunch.

It was invited along by the Tylopilus Alboater to brighten up Claude's glove. It tried its best to sprout with lots of gelatin in it.

Amanita Muscaria

Red mushroom with white dots, like a storybook poison mushroom.

It sprouted as a representative of all mushrooms when Claude said that he was a “mushroom specialist.”

Russula Emetica

Bright red caps, known to sprout in circles called Fairy Rings. A fairytale mushroom.

It causes gastrointestinal poisoning. Scentless but apparently spicy.

These mushroom fanatics really will taste anything, won't they?

Agnes pictured blood, so a red mushroom bloomed. It didn't manage to distract her from her traumatic thoughts, though.

Cantharellus Cibarius

Bright yellow caps and a fleshy body that smells strongly of apricots.

The source of Claude's favorite cologne.

It sprouted as an offering to Claude after he complimented Agnes.

Cuphophyllus Virgineus

Milk-white little caps. A lover of all things romantic.

It always shows itself when love is in the air.

“He’s close!” “...He’s going to kiss you!” it can be heard to squeal. But as it’s a mushroom, Agnes can’t understand what it’s saying.

Pycnopus Coccineus

A semicircular mushroom resembling Polyporaceae.

It sprouts to put the brakes on the excitable Cuphophyllus Virgineus.

It can't do much, though, so sometimes it just comes along to observe.

Chapter 14: The Father, Cursing a Man's Hair, and the Brother, Swinging a Hoe About

"AFTER my contract with Prince Claude is over, I want to head to the countryside."

Agnes went to Benoit's room as soon as he came home. Once he heard what she had to say, he sighed.

"...Just take a seat, Agnes."

Benoit took off his coat and handed it to a servant before taking a seat on the sofa himself. Agnes sat on the sofa facing him.

"You seem to be accruing a lot of money lately. Is it for travel expenses?"

It looked like her medicinal herb racket was busted. Before that, she'd sold all her dresses, which Therese knew about. She wasn't surprised the information had been leaked to her uncle.

"Not traveling expenses. Living expenses."

"You want to go out to the countryside? Why not stay in the capital?" he asked.

"If I stayed in a house in the capital, I'd only get in the way of Kevin getting married. With this hair, I wouldn't be able to blend in with the servants. In the countryside, they're a bit more understanding. So I should be able to live out my life alone without having to worry too much."

Agnes was only being frank. But Benoit grabbed his head as if pained.

"First, you don't want to ride to the countryside with some stranger, right? And you just mentioned living alone...so you wouldn't be going to our country estate? How are you planning to make a living?"

"I've already gathered enough money for the first few months. And I've drawn up a financial plan. I'll start as someone's apprentice and learn a trade.

I've got a few places in mind already. And I also learned that I can sell my hair. Until I get settled, I also plan to do my best selling medicinal herbs."

Benoit's head sank lower and lower into his hands as Agnes spoke.

"Why are you always so...*quick* to act?"

"Thank you."

"It's not a compliment. And what *are* you talking about? Selling your *hair*?"

Oh. If Father has to ask that, he must not know.

Agnes smiled pridefully.

"I heard from some passing kidnappers in town. Apparently, peach-blossom-colored hair goes for a high price in other countries! Isn't that amazing?!"

"Wait, wait...what passing kidnappers?!"

"Well, I sprouted an exceptional mushroom. So I went to sell it and they ambushed me. I guess it's really important to stay alert when you're selling expensive goods."

"That's not what I was asking, Agnes. When did this happen? And are you all right?!"

Agnes clammed up. She couldn't exactly tell him when.

"It happened...the other day. The bandits stole my hat. Then it became a mushroom hat. Prince Claude showed up and took all the mushrooms. The hat's okay, though."

Claude had looked so ecstatic as he'd plucked the white mushrooms off that hat.

Any passing young women would've dissolved into squeals of excitement at the sight of him just then. *Until they'd seen what he was actually doing, that is.*

"I don't care about hats or mushrooms, Agnes! All right. As long as you managed to get out of that situation unscathed, I won't pry."

Benoit coughed, looking tired.

"We all know how hard you've tried to fit into high society. And we see how

hard you try to be respectable for the sake of the family name. You agreed to marry Philip for the good of the family too, didn't you? But never mind all that. You're my daughter and Kevin's big sister. You have to let us take care of you."

Benoit stood up, then sat back down next to Agnes. He stroked her hair fondly.

"After everything you've been through, I wouldn't mind if you decided to terrorize Philip with your mushroom powers a little. Infect his scalp with spores, and then I'll tear out all the little shrooms that sprout."

Kevin told her their father had once remarked, "*Curse Philip! May he go as bald as a plucked chicken!*" She was so sure Kevin was just exaggerating, but apparently not.

No, Benoit really *did* have it out for Philip. And his hair.

Agnes wasn't sure why Benoit was targeting the hair. Maybe he really was just so mad on Agnes's behalf.

"I wouldn't want you to get in trouble over that loser, Father."

Agnes smiled, which made Benoit smile, too. He stroked her hair again.

"At any rate, I want you to know that...you're my cherished daughter. You're not going anywhere."

Benoit spoke in subdued tones, but Agnes could feel the strength of conviction behind his words. He certainly wasn't about to give her his blessing to leave their home.

She was expecting something like this. Her uncle really was so kind to her.

"Then I guess all that's left is to be an unwanted spinster, cluttering up the place."

"If that's what you want, you're welcome in this house until the end of time. Until you meet someone who really does accept, appreciate, and honor you just the way you are, that is."

"There's no such person, Father."

It'd be one thing if she was a high-born, beautiful maiden, but Agnes had little

more than the label “damaged goods” to her name now.

Born and raised a commoner. Peach blossom hair hated by all. A mushroom curse that came from spirits no one else could see. A woman who’d already been publicly dumped by *royalty* and was rumored to be a *witch*.

“You never know. It’s a big world out there. Who knows, you may’ve already met him...”



ONCE her talk with Benoit was over, Agnes went out into the garden. She’d gotten much more skilled at growing herbs now. She was able to plant and harvest twice as many as before.

If she *was* going to be staying at home, she could earn her keep by continuing to grow and sell the medicinal herbs.

Oh! But if I get targeted by thieves again, that could cause trouble... I should really make sure to only sell a sensible amount. I’ll need to be careful, though. After the contract period is up, I won’t have Claude or Maurice to escort me...

“I thought I’d find you out here, Sis.”

She was just watering the plants when Kevin emerged from the house.

His golden hair shone in the bright sun. How many times had she wished for beautiful blonde hair like that? Her loathing for her own pink hair aside, Agnes had always loved Kevin and Benoit’s golden locks.

“...What’s with that look?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking about how beautiful your hair is.”

Agnes finished up watering the plants and went over to Kevin, untucking her folded-up skirts as she went.

“Listen, Sis. You wouldn’t...I don’t think...but just to check...you don’t hike up your skirts around the prince like that, do you?”

“Only once. He was shocked, that’s for sure. I *know* it looks uncouth. I started being more careful after that.”

“I don’t think he was *shocked* so much as...uh...”

No, it certainly wasn't appropriate for a young lady to hike up her skirts in public. You wouldn't find many proper young ladies working in the fields either. Anyway, Claude hadn't seemed offended by it.

"So, how've things been going with His Highness lately?" Kevin asked brightly.

Hmm, that's a tough question, Agnes mused.

"The same as ever," she said after a moment. "He's still a mushroom fetishist."

"I see. And have you had any more, uh, *encounters* with Philip?"

Agnes wondered why he emphasized the word "encounters." Or maybe he hadn't, and she just imagined it.

"Not since his altercation with Prince Claude."

"That's good. So...my efforts have paid off."

Kevin grinned. But Agnes wasn't following.

"Wait...what're you talking about?"

Kevin picked up the garden hoe and put it over his shoulder.

"Philip's been by quite a few times since then. But I've been chasing him off every time."

Kevin grinned, swinging the garden hoe as he spoke.

Hmm, very suspicious... Is he saying he chased Philip off with a garden hoe? Yikes...



“Really? Well, what did he want?” she asked.

Kevin swung the hoe a few more times before putting it back down, apparently satisfied.

It's not a sword, you know, Agnes wanted to say.

Maybe Kevin was suffering from pent-up stress.

“Philip’s still hung up on you, Sis.”

“Er...what’s that supposed to mean?”

Agnes looked sharply at Kevin, surprised by what he’d just said. Her reaction seemed to surprise her younger brother.

“He spent all that time hiding you, keeping you all to himself. He was so desperate for no one to figure out what he was doing. But it was obvious.”

“Huh? But Philip’s supposed to be engaged to the Barthet girl. She’s meant to be his soulmate.”

“He was expecting you to cry over him and cling on, refusing to let go.”

“Ha! He’s *insane*. How weak does he think I am, anyway?”

“Well, you did play the part of the demure, obedient fiancée in front of him. Philip’s a child. He only sees what he wants to see.”

That may’ve been true, but Agnes would never have dreamed that Kevin would be saying something like that. Her jaw fell open in shock.

“If only we’d realized earlier how much Philip was brainwashing you, you never would’ve gotten as bad as you are.”

“What do you *mean*, ‘as bad as I am?’”

Kevin looked solemn, so she didn’t think he was messing with her. He sounded...sad, actually.

“You’ve been doing everything to play the part of a perfect lady. And it’s done a number on you. You swallowed all of Philip’s nonsense just because he was a royal. Now your mind’s been completely corrupted by him. I’m sorry to have to say this, Sis.”

He was right, though. While engaged to Philip, Agnes had stopped knowing her own mind. Everything just got so confusing.

There was a time when she thought that everything her fiancé said about aristocratic society had to be true. He'd know more than her, after all.

By the time she realized that Philip was an idiot, it was too late. She'd already started dressing down and diminishing herself by then.

"It's okay, Kevin. You've always had my back; I know that. You've really grown up."

Philip was a fool and a cheat, yes. But she was the one who'd chosen to trust his every word. It wasn't Kevin's fault at all.

But it *was* sweet of him to blame it on Philip and not on her. She appreciated his kindness.

Kevin narrowed his russet-brown eyes in response to her words.

"That's why I want to come of age as quickly as possible! So you can stop worrying about taking care of my reputation. I'm going to become a real man and take care of everything in this house. Then you can do whatever you like. If you want to stay at home, that's fine with me. And if you meet a nice guy, you can marry him! No matter who he is."

Kevin grabbed Agnes's hands and held them in both of his.

"That accident was bittersweet. I'm so glad you were spared, Sis. I know you feel guilty because my mom died that day. You feel like you owe us. So you tried to do your best not to stand out or be yourself. But...in the process, you've started to hate your hair and the spirits' protection—the very things that make *you you*."

Kevin's mom...Countess Lefort.

If only she hadn't been riding in the carriage with Agnes and her family that day.

If only she hadn't come to pick them up, she'd never have died.

Agnes shook her head. She knew it was no good to think that way.

But it *was* her fault. She was part of it! Part of why Kevin lost his mom and Benoit his wife.

The trauma had taken root deep inside her, leading to fear and regret that constantly spurted forth.

Benoit and Kevin were so kind. They'd never blamed Agnes. Not once.

She *knew* that. She really did. But the horror of that day was permanently stuck in the back of her brain. She couldn't keep the thoughts from taking over her.

Maybe one day, the two of them would leave her as well, just like her parents had.

Maybe they'd abandon Agnes.

In that case, Agnes would remove herself first.

She'd leave before she could be discarded.

She knew such thoughts did them a disservice. It wasn't fair to think this way. But she was terrified at the thought of having to endure any more loss in her life. She just wanted to get away.

No matter how badly she didn't want to leave them...

"You didn't even *love* Philip," Kevin continued. "You got engaged to him because he offered. He didn't have any other prospects. And you got stuck having to suck up to a bunch of people who looked down on you because of your hair color. You did it all for us. For our family."

"That was..."

"Sis, do you love me?"

"Of *course* I do! I love you and Father both. I love you so much."

"Then would you listen to what I'm saying and believe it?"

Agnes squeezed Kevin's hands, nodding. He smiled at her, his eyes narrowing gently.

"I don't really understand royalty or mushroom fetishes. Nor do I know much about knights or Dragonmates. But what I do know...is that Prince Claude has

feelings for you.”

Agnes knew something was up. But she certainly wasn’t expecting Kevin to say something like *that*.

She let go of his hands and sighed.

“No...you’re just imagining it. All Prince Claude cares about is mushrooms. He and I just have a contract going. He’s just *pretending* to be in love with me.”

If Kevin really thought this way, then that proved that Claude had managed to really sell their lie.

Agnes smiled. Yes, the two of them had pulled off their little ruse perfectly.

But Kevin wasn’t smiling. He was frowning, his brows drawn together.

“Even so...he likes you. It’s so obvious.”

Agnes smiled wryly. Kevin was being uncharacteristically insistent today.

“Even if he *did* like me,” she said firmly, “it’d all go down the same way once he found his Dragonmate. I’m just a decoy. A dead end. Anyway, our contract is ending soon. After that, we won’t meet again. Thank you, though, Kevin. I love that you’re concerned for my wellbeing.”

Agnes put her arms around Kevin and hugged him tight.

Kevin had grown so much lately. She could barely fit both arms around him. But no matter.

Claude *liked* Agnes as a person, at the very least.

She was able to tell that much herself. Which was why it was best to get far away from him as soon as their contract was over.

Before she started getting any stupid, false hopes...



Mushrooms of the Day

Agnes was chatting with her family, so no “Mushrooms of the Day” for this chapter.

It’s a day of rest for all shrooms everywhere.

For those who may be saying, “Hey! Where’s the mushrooms?”

...You might be suffering from Mushroom Addiction.

Chapter 15: Dragon's Blood and Dragonmates

“GOOD evening, Agnes. Tonight's dress looks splendid on you.”

“...Thank you.”

When she got down from the carriage, the dashing prince was there to greet her as always. It was his usual practice, but she wished he'd stop.

In fact, she thought, Claude should really think a bit more about his own position...being second in line to the throne and all.

Agnes didn't want to hold up the other carriages, so she always made sure to arrive at the very last moment. But tonight, she couldn't do that.

Tonight's party was being held to celebrate the Crown Prince's wedding. Being late would be terribly bad manners.

So she'd *had* to arrive in a throng with the other guests. She could already feel all the others' painful stares, their eyes fixed on her.

“Should someone like Agnes even be allowed to attend the wedding ball for the crown prince? She's only a countess's daughter,” she could feel them thinking.

They had their contract, yes, but today was the final day. Agnes just wanted to be done with it all.

She sighed a little as a yellowish-brown mushroom popped up on the back of Claude's white glove.

“Pleurocybella Porrigens,” he sighed happily. “I love the little dots studded all over the cap! They're so beautiful. And see how the cap and stem are different colors? It's so fascinating.”

Agnes remained silent and let him ramble on a moment. What harm could it do? But there was one thing she needed to bring up with him.

“Claude, why are the embellishments on my dress the same on your suit?”

The dress Agnes wore tonight was another gift from him. It was a light blue, off the shoulder dress, with layers of tulle fabric gathered at the back of her waist. The fabric's fluffy drapes were adorable, with pleasant, tidy symmetry.

The issue was with the embellishments at the hips and chest.

The deep-blue flowers were made to resemble cornflowers. And they *were* very pretty. But Claude's black suit had the same cornflowers attached to the chest part.

"I'm head over heels for you, remember? This kind of thing's totally natural. You should *really* try to adjust," he said.

"Okay, but matching floral details is taking it too far!" Agnes protested. "And the color of them...it's way too close to your hair color."

"Well, I should hope so! That was what I put in my request to the seamstress." Claude nodded briskly as he answered her, and another mushroom shot up on his arm.

The deep-blue mushroom was an *Entoloma Cyanonigrum*. *But why did a dark-blue mushroom have to sprout just now?* Agnes agonized. It was as if it was responding to their conversation.

Agnes's mushroom senses had gotten entirely too sharp. *It's like the mushrooms are butting in on my conversations.*

"Claude," she said emphatically, "you should really wake up and take a good look at your own position. Strolling in there with a partner dressed up in accessories that match your hair...people will start to think all kinds of unnecessary things."

"It's all right," he replied smoothly. "*You* didn't choose the dress. I did."

"That's even worse!" As she further made her grief known, Agnes spotted something horrifying nestled among the flowers on Claude's chest. "...Claude, it's probably just my imagination, but...those flowers on your chest... Is that a mushroom I see amongst them?"

A blue mushroom *was* poking out amidst the blue cornflowers.

Unlike the *Entoloma Cyanonigrum* that had sprouted on his arm, this one was

small and...sparkled. If Agnes wasn't mistaken, that looked like the mushroom brooch Claude had purchased in town.

"Isn't it great? See how well the color goes?" Claude gave Agnes a dazzling grin. Somewhere nearby, she could hear young women squealing.

This mushroom fetishist *really* needed to remember that he was meant to be a prince.

"Blue and blue. Yes, yes, very nice. And *I* see now why you asked me to bring my own mushroom brooch. Well, here you go."

Agnes pulled out the pink mushroom brooch.

When the evening's dress was delivered, there'd also been a message saying that she should wear her mushroom brooch to the ball.

He probably wanted to add it to his suit's decoration.

"Here you go?" Claude replied dumbfoundedly. "Here *you* go. That one is yours, Agnes."

"...You want me to decorate myself with mushrooms too?"

I'm already cursed with them, so there's no point, she wanted to say.

Claude shook his head as Agnes frowned at him.

"Do you want to swap mushrooms with me?"

"Why do we have to wear mushrooms at all?"

"Why? Because mushrooms are fantastic. And I want to match with you, Agnes. There are only good reasons!"

His smile was dazzling, but Agnes just frowned even more.

It looked like they were wearing the mushroom brooches, then. The pink mushroom stood out a lot against the blue cornflowers. She preferred the blue one, after all.

But then, when she thought about it, pink *was* the color of her hair.

They were wearing matching brooches that also matched their hair. At least they weren't wearing ones matching the *other's* hair. She was better off with

her pink one then.

...That's probably the better option...I think...

"Then I'll wear this one."

Agnes had planned to shove the brooch deep into the cornflowers so it would be mostly hidden. But Claude gently took it from her.

"Hold on a second. I want it in the same position as mine."

"No, no, I can't let you do that. I can pin it on myself."

"You're going to try to *hide* the mushroom, aren't you? You mustn't do that, Agnes."

He read my mind. Then again, this was the man who gave me a dress so I couldn't turn down his invitation.

He seemed like he was able to read her very well from day one.

Agnes gave up and stood silently as Claude pinned the shiny pink mushroom brooch next to the cornflowers on her dress.

It couldn't look more conspicuous! Agnes felt exhaustion wash over her.



AGNES had attended many palace balls by now, but *this* was on a totally different scale.

The giant crystal chandelier in the center of the ballroom sent glittering flecks of light in every direction. It was present at every ball but seemed somehow shinier tonight.

The guests, all people in the echelons of society, were decked out in all their finery. Agnes and Claude walked further into the ballroom, and Agnes steeled herself for what would happen next. What always happened whenever this handsome prince entered a room full of people.

Sure enough, all eyes turned to look at them with piercing stares. A mushroom popped up on Claude's hand, which he plucked with excitement.

It was clearly a *Coprinellus Micaceus* with its little light-brown cap. It was covered with tiny, glittering mica-like cells, which helped her identify it.

Glittering mushrooms for a glittering ballroom...my mushroom senses really are getting sharp.

Another popped up. Then another. Claude harvested them all quickly, but... why were they sprouting so fast?

She wished it'd stop. If too many sprouted at once, someone was bound to notice.

Then, as if in response to her wish, they stopped.

Claude was looking greedily at his glove, as if wishing they'd continue. He looked so handsome tonight—like a prince right out of a picture book. Why did such an attractive man have to be such a mushroom freak?

Maybe her mushroom senses *weren't* getting sharper, she thought suddenly. Maybe it was the curse getting *worse*.

This was a terrible thought. Agnes felt exhaustion dragging her down.



“IT’S the last day...and it’s the worst yet...”

Agnes returned from the ladies’ room sighing and muttering to herself.

Final day or not, Claude was still doing the whole *“I’m crazy about her!”* thing, and it was exhausting trying to keep up the act.

Most people just smiled and nodded politely. But recently, a lot of them had started approaching Agnes and talking to her. It was mostly small talk, but she hated the questions about how she and Claude had met and what their relationship was like.

Claude mostly answered for her. But some of the things he said were so syrupy-sweet and sappy, it almost sickened her.

This has been a long battle, to be sure. But this has to be the final stand, right?

“Oh, hello, Lady Agnes. We haven’t seen you in a while.”

Agnes turned to see Sabina Barthet standing there smiling.

Her yellowish-brown hair and bright green eyes looked very pretty, and she wore a dandelion-colored dress with lots of bows on it.

Yes, she was dressed like a cute doll again tonight. As Agnes stood still, Sabina walked up to her with a smile.

“Are you here with Prince Claude again tonight?”

“Mm-hmm.”

If Sabina was here, that meant Philip was too.

Agnes would prefer not to run into him. She’d have to stay aware of her surroundings at all times.

Sabina came to a stop in front of Agnes and narrowed her bright green eyes.

“Good for you. I was worried after Philip discarded you and you lost your reputation. But on Prince Claude’s arm, you have nothing to worry about.”

Sabina nodded, a huge grin on her face.

“It’s amazing, though,” she continued. “You’ve got your hair down, despite Philip advising you to always wear it up. It’s such an unusual color! It really draws the eye, doesn’t it? Yes...you’ve done very well for yourself. You common-born girls really *are* cut from a different cloth than the rest of us nobility, aren’t you?”

She smiled, eyes twinkling. It sounded like she was complimenting Agnes, but each word was laced with malice.

She stole Philip, Agnes thought. If anyone has the right to be nasty here, surely it’s me.

But she wasn’t interested. She’d heard all these insults before and was over it.

“Oh, thank you very much.”

Agnes gave Sabina a tight smile and a flat response, which made the other girl instantly scowl.

“Hmm... Well, if he *likes* unusual things, then maybe he’s open to new options. Maybe I’ll go and say hello to Prince Claude myself.”

If Sabina really wants to win over Claude, Agnes thought wryly, she should bring a mushroom with her. No doubt Claude would be swayed. He might even propose to Sabina on the spot. Or to her mushroom.

Still, Agnes had no reason to go giving Sabina hints. Instead, she just nodded and said, “Mm-hmm...”

“...But your time on his arm is limited, you know?”

“...Excuse me?”

Sabina’s voice dropped an octave and her smile completely vanished. Her lips were still curled upwards but now in a sneer of derision.

“Prince Claude *is* a royal, and he has the blood of the dragon. There’s still a chance that his *real* Dragonmate could show up at any time. If that happens, Lady Agnes, well...you know the drill, yes? It must be painful to have to go through the same exact experience twice... You poor thing.”

Agnes smiled. Sabina’s words were dripping with fake concern, but she wasn’t fooled. She wasn’t sure why...but Sabina seemed to see her as an enemy. If she got upset or disheartened, that’d be just what Sabina wanted.

So instead, Agnes gave her best smile, the one she’d cultivated over years of trying to become a sophisticated young lady.

“Thank you so much for your concern.”

Her eyes flicked up to the top of Sabina’s head, where a *Mutinus Bambusinus* had just sprouted.

It was easily identifiable by its egg-shaped root and its red-pink finger-like projection that shot straight up. The slime that oozed from its tip was fairly stinky. But why should Agnes bother to warn Sabina? *Let Philip handle it.*

Having decided this, Agnes got away from the scene as fast as possible...and away from the stench.



“**EXCUSE** me. Are you Count Lefort’s daughter?”

Back in the ballroom, Agnes was just searching for Claude when an unfamiliar gentleman came up and spoke to her. He was with a female companion, and Agnes recalled seeing him from a distance before.

Quickly realizing who this was, she curtsied.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Duke Raugel. I am Agnes Lefort.”

“Likewise. I’ve been hoping to meet you.”

The duke exchanged a smile and a nod with his companion, presumably his wife. Then, they both smiled at Agnes.

“You...wanted to meet *me*?” she said with disbelief.

“Thanks to those marvelous mushrooms you managed by some miracle to grow,” the duchess explained gratefully, “our children’s fevers have *finally* gone down. We tried all sorts of medicines. None worked and we feared the worst until... Well, thank you.”

She took hold of Agnes’s hand and gently squeezed it.

How could this be? A woman of such high standing couldn’t possibly be thanking someone like me... Agnes thought.

Much less gazing at her with overwhelming gratitude in her eyes.

“H-How did you know it was me?” she asked worryingly.

She’d asked the shopkeeper to promise not to mention her name. Besides, he wouldn’t even if she hadn’t asked. He wasn’t a gossip like that.

Agnes was flustered and worried, but the duke simply put his arm around his tearful wife.

“Thanks to those wonderful *Feveratus Disapparatus* mushrooms,” he exclaimed, “our son’s life was saved. We wanted to make sure that there’d be a steady supply of the wonder drug made from those mushrooms and medicinal herbs. So we investigated. I *do* apologize for prying. But how surprised we were to find out that Count Lefort’s daughter grew them in her own garden!”

Yes, it made sense to secure the drug’s supply chain in case of further illnesses. It was even more important when the illness was one that afflicted children.

Even if the shopkeeper kept the details hidden, it wouldn’t have been too difficult to find out it was her. *If those bandits had managed to figure it out, Agnes reflected, a duke would’ve had no trouble.*

“It’s very embarrassing...” she demurred. “I just happened to find one of the mushrooms sprouting in my little herb garden by chance. It was just a stroke of luck. But I’m so happy I was able to help.”

“Please, don’t be so humble,” Duke Raugel said gratefully. “You’re our son and daughter’s savior. Please allow us to give you a proper thank-you sometime soon.”

Then with a smile, he and the duchess walked off.

Agnes didn’t want the truth about her lineage to come out. She’d need to be more careful while still supplying as much as possible.

Still, this was the first time that anyone had ever thanked her for something that was in relation to her protective spirits. *Even if Duke Raugel doesn’t know about them...*

All her life, she’d put up with people disparaging her hair and acting like the spirits were creepy. But actually being able to help people by being herself...and having them thank her for it...it felt strange. Almost embarrassing.

But at the same time, she was really pleased. She felt...soothed, somehow.

Overcome with emotion, she felt the need for fresh air, so she headed to the balcony.



THE manicured gardens below looked beautiful, illuminated by the moonlight.

The cool night breeze felt good. But just then, Agnes realized she could hear people talking. She didn’t want to intrude on someone’s private tryst, so she was about to go back into the ballroom when she heard someone else answer the first voice. And *this* voice was familiar.

“...Claude?” she murmured.

That was definitely his voice I just heard.

She looked down and realized that she could see him and a woman standing and talking amongst the flower trees. The woman’s black hair and Claude’s Prussian-blue hair both shone in the moonlight.

If only I had hair like that, Agnes reflected, life would've gone so differently.

She couldn't see the woman's face but could tell she was smiling and seemed to be enjoying herself. Claude had a shy smile on his face. It was clear that the two were very close.

Agnes found herself unable to look away. The wind was strong, and she could only catch fragments of their conversation.

"Really wanted to meet... So..."

"But that's..."

"After all... Dragonmate..."

Claude fell silent after the girl said this. Then he moved farther back into the shadowy garden.

The wind changed direction and Agnes could hear no more.

"Dragonmate..."

She knew she'd heard that part right.

Is that woman Claude's...Dragonmate?

Agnes had heard rumors that Claude was close with a duke's daughter. *That must have been her.*

"Prince Claude is a royal, and he has the blood of the dragon..." She heard Sabina's words again... *"His Dragonmate could show up at any time."*

Agnes could be cast aside at any time.

She was only around to provide Claude with mushrooms and keep excitable females away. They'd made a contract. But if Claude had found his *real* partner, then she'd be dismissed.

...Although I have a feeling he'd still want me as a steady mushroom supplier.

Agnes understood the situation perfectly. So...why did her chest hurt right now?

The night breeze she'd been enjoying seemed to chill her to the bone now.

Then a black clump appeared with a pop at Agnes's feet.

The clump consisted of several marbled tubers...truffles.

Why did they choose to sprout now? she wondered. They were not only edible but very rare and expensive. Agnes carefully picked the clump up in her hand. Then she tucked it away in her bodice between the blue cornflowers and the brooch.

...I guess I should head back inside.

Her legs felt heavy as she turned back toward the ballroom.

“Finally! I’ve found you, Agnes.”

Oh, great! One of the top three people she most wanted *not* to see right now.

It was Philip, standing there with his yellowish-brown hair, blocking her from reentering the ballroom.

“I can’t think of any reason for you to be looking for me,” she said dryly.

“What’s going *on* with your hair? And that makeup! I keep *telling* you to tie it up and only wear neutral tones.”

“It’s none of your business,” she snapped. She didn’t feel like sparring with him just now.

Not that she ever did, come to think of it. But she didn’t feel like it now *in particular*.

“...Agnes, I’ve heard you’ve been cultivating these *amazing* medicinal herbs. Have you been using those creepy spirits of yours on them somehow?”

Philip changed tack suddenly. *He must’ve guessed I’m in no mood for pleasantries...*

If even Philip knew about her medicinal herbs, that had to mean that news of Agnes’s little cultivation operation had really been spread wide.

If she didn’t dial it back, she’d end up with a reputation as a small-scale herb farmer...which wouldn’t be so bad, actually. It was just a weird thing for a count’s daughter to be doing.

“That’s none of your business either, Philip,” she said firmly.

“Duke Raugel has been singing your praises,” Philip sneered. “Telling

everyone his kids' fever wouldn't break and how they were all out of ideas when your medicine worked. I'd no idea you could do something like that. Why *didn't* you start doing it earlier?"

He was looming over her, looking down on her like he always did.

"You told me to cut it out," she said calmly. "You said it was creepy. Anyway, you and I are strangers now, Philip. Stop talking to me."

"Nonsense."

Nonsense? I'm making perfect sense. It was impossible trying to get through to him.

She turned to go, not wanting to waste any more time on this silly, philandering royal. But Philip sighed theatrically.

"Now I know why there was no sign. No sign to show that I'd found my Dragonmate."

"...Excuse me?"

"They say that once you find your Dragonmate, you stop being able to love any other. That's why I didn't get a sign. It's all because of *you*, Agnes."

"...Say what?"

Agnes stared at him, having no idea what he was talking about. But Philip nodded emphatically.

"Sabina is my soulmate. But so are *you*, Agnes. *That's* why I got no sign!"

"What kind of sick statement is that? You want me to be your mistress again? While earning my own keep from growing medicinal herbs? Is that what you are trying to say with your nonsense?"

"*This* is why I urged you to hide your unpopular hair color and dress down! So people wouldn't look at you like that. I did everything for you!"

"I'm not going to just stand here and take this, you know!"

She couldn't believe that Philip wanted to take her as an income-earning mistress.

Besides, she couldn't see Sabina agreeing to that. *If Philip even discussed it*

with her, that is. ...No, there's no way he did.

Philip was a fool, a cheat, and completely oblivious. And he only ever thought about himself.

"This discussion is over," Agnes said finally. "Excuse me."

"Those flowers," Philip burst out. "They're the same color as Claude's hair, aren't they? And I hear that Claude's been wearing a mushroom on his chest. That's like the one *you're* wearing, isn't it?"

Agnes froze at the call out. Philip was dumb but could be horribly perceptive about some things.

"He's the second in line to the throne, you know," he went on, sneering. "You can't *possibly* think he's going to keep you around with that hair that everyone hates. Don't get the wrong idea just because of some matching mushroom accessories."

"I haven't gotten any ideas!" Agnes fumed back. "I'm not wearing this by choice, you know."

In Claude's eyes, all she was good for was mushroom farming. Just someone he had a mutually beneficial contract with. He was only with her for that. And it was ending tonight. Soon she wouldn't even be seeing him in passing anymore.

"So you're saying Claude is making you wear it?" Philip was frowning, for some reason. "...He's already supposed to have found his Dragonmate, though."

Agnes's shoulders slumped as she digested the brat's words.

She looked up into Philip's face. The eyes that stared back at her were the same dark-gray color as Claude's.

"His soulmate. It's not you, now...is it?" Philip sounded so solemn.

Agnes shook her head.

"No. I haven't heard anything about it. But I know it's not me."

He'd met his little mushroom soulmates, maybe. But that'd nothing to do with Agnes herself.

As she denied it, Philip's expression softened a little.

“Right... You only met Claude six months ago, after all. To borrow his expression, you’d know if someone was your Dragonmate long before that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Like he said. When you meet your Dragonmate, there’s some kind of sign.”

Yes, she did recall Claude saying that. It’d been when Philip publicly called off their engagement, and Claude had come to rescue her from the ensuing argument.

“They say that when one whose veins flow with the blood of the dragon finds his or her Dragonmate, there will come a sign.” That was what Claude had said.

But what does that mean? What sign?

Claude also said that because Philip had noticed no such sign, that indicated that he didn’t really have dragon’s blood. But it made sense that when Claude, (who undoubtedly did possess it) found his Dragonmate, there’d be a sign of some sort.

“One year ago,” Philip reflected softly, “when I was sword-fighting with Claude, I saw him change gloves. The back of his hand had this odd, blackish bruise on it. Well...I thought it was just a bruise at first, but I asked the Crown Prince about it the other day. The *sign*...it’s supposed to show itself on the back of the hand.”

The back of the hand... Agnes suddenly recalled the sight of Claude’s hand, the skin showing through the burned tatters of his glove...

She’d thought it a burn mark then. *But what if that’d been it? The sign?*

When she’d suggested treating his hands for burns, Claude had brushed it off and said he was fine.

She thought he’d meant he didn’t need treatment, since his dragon’s blood lent him so much extra strength. But was it possible that it wasn’t a burn mark or a bruise after all...?

“The Crown Prince hasn’t definitively confirmed it, but he hasn’t denied it either. He’s probably keeping me out of the loop since I’m not part of the line of succession.” Philip chewed on his lip in annoyance.

He was prideful and probably hated to admit that he didn't have dragon's blood.

"It was a year ago that I saw this bruise, as I said," he continued. "So, the sign was already showing on Claude then. In other words, he'd already met his soulmate long before he ever met you. *That's* the one he's going to be with."

If Philip was right...then it'd play out like that, for sure.

Claude had the blood of the dragon and was second in line to the throne. If he had already found his soulmate, his Dragonmate...then the dragon's blood would prevent him from ever loving another.

"The reason he's spending all this time with you? It's just for fun." Philip smirked slightly. "You're the *fake*. The *decoy*. He's going to use you up and throw you away, Agnes."

Agnes knew that. She knew that she'd only ever been a mushroom producer, someone to use as a shield to keep other women at bay. It was all part of their contract. Just an act. She knew that.

But why did Philip's words cut so deep? Why did her heart feel so heavy?

"...So, what I'm saying is," Philip said softly, "...come back to me."

"...HUH?"

If that's a joke, it's in poor taste, Agnes thought.

"Don't jerk my chain, please," she said. "You dumped me because you found the one you really wanted to be with. Mess with her, not me."

Agnes glared at Philip, whose eyes flicked away guiltily for just a second.

"Y-You used to be a far more proper lady, much more...demure," he said firmly. "I'll put you back the way you used to be."

"Cut it out, Philip! You never even knew the real me."

"You used to trust what I said and dress down. You should go back to that. Otherwise... you'll keep getting all kinds of bad attention from men."

He seemed agitated now. Agnes gazed at him, frowning. She was getting the weirdest feeling right now.

“...*What?* You told me to dress down to downplay my hair.”

“Right. I made you dress modest so that your hair and face wouldn’t catch people’s eyes.”

...Philip seemed different from how he usually did, somehow. Something wasn’t clicking.

“Right...” she said slowly. “You made me downplay it to hide the color, since everyone hates it.”

“Right. That’s what I said. To *make* you hide it.”

“...So that wasn’t the reason?”

Philip looked away awkwardly. Then reluctantly, he began to speak.

“It’s true, there’s always a few people out there who hate pink hair. But most people just don’t particularly like it because they’ve never really seen it for themselves. Why should *they* get to see it? I’m the only one who deserves to see your hair. So that’s why I tried to get you to hide from people.”

Agnes knew something was different.

Everything she’d believed in until now...it wasn’t quite true.

She couldn’t shake the doubts. Nervously, she cleared her throat to speak.

“So you didn’t do it for me...for the good of the Lefort family...?”

“It *was* for you. It was necessary to keep your attention focused where it should be. On me.”

“...Are you for real?”

All she’d ever heard was how she should keep her hair hidden due to the vitriol it inspired in people. She did it to prevent people from saying bad things about her. About her family.

That was why she’d trusted Philip’s words. She’d actually *trusted* this foolish, cheating, oblivious royal!

And that’s all he was in the end. A fool, a cheat, and an oblivious liar.

How could she have *ever* trusted him? She felt so stupid.

As she lifted her chin to look right up at him, she thought she could see a white-capped *Amanita Cokeri* on the ground.

Wish I could have sprouted that right on his dumb head, thought Agnes, glaring at him as if he was the root of all evil.

“Goodbye, Philip. Don’t ever speak to me again.”



Mushrooms of the Day

Pleurocybella Porrigens

A yellow mushroom. Some specimens are poisonous. If you eat it along with alcohol, you'll get very sick.

It sprouted to try to warn Agnes against drinking alcohol at the ball.

But Claude pointed out all its features and it got embarrassed.

Entoloma Cyanonigrum

A dark blue mushroom.

It talked things over with the Entoloma Virescens, and they both decided this one was closer to the color of Claude's hair.

As the representative blue mushroom, it sprouted with wide mushroom caps.

Coprinellus Micaceus

Covered with tiny, mica-like cells that glitter. A light-yellow-colored mushroom.

When someone eats it along with alcohol, they can get very sick. It sprouted to take over for the Pleurocybella Porrigens that Claude harassed (indecent exposure!) to transmit the “Don’t drink too much” message.

It did its best, but Claude plucked it right away. It tried to keep sprouting on the ground, but Agnes forced it to stop.

“But I haven’t fulfilled my purpose yet,” the mushroom said, planning its revenge against Claude.

Mutinus Bambusinus

An egg-shaped base with deep, red finger-like projections rising from it. The tips secrete a smelly juice.

It's not poisonous, but it stinks. Only a mushroom maniac would eat it.

"A fitting stink for a woman who bullies our Agnes!" it was heard to remark, sprouting from the top of Sabina's head and letting out three smelly projections.

Feveratus Disapparatus (Not a Real Mushroom)

A purple, fungal hybrid that reduces fevers.

It doesn't exist. It's a fake mushroom.

It goes for a high price, and now it's even being used by dukes and other aristocrats.

Truffle

A cluster of little marbled bumps, truffles are one of life's major delicacies. A very high-grade food.

Worried about the turmoil inside Agnes, they sprouted to say, "You can eat or sell us if you like." They were just trying to make her feel better. A very kind mushroom with excellent morels.

Amanita Cokeri

White caps with white dots and a flaky stem. It looks like an all-white Amanita Muscaria.

It's on the alert for Philip. Agnes's safety barrier on Philip has departed. It's a mushroom free-for-all.

Chapter 16: Before Getting Any Silly Ideas...

AGNES turned to get away as fast as possible, but Philip grabbed her by the arm.

A bright orange mushroom popped up on his forearm in response. It looked like a half-peeled orange. In the center was an orange ball, and all around it were star-shaped sections, like peeled orange skin.

Agnes believed it was the mushroom known as *Astraeus Hygrometricus*. But it wasn't supposed to be that color. The turmoil inside Agnes seemed to be represented in its color.

And more startling than the color was that it'd been *years* since she'd last sprouted a mushroom on Philip.

The two of them gazed wordlessly at it. Philip spoke first, smiling wryly as he did so.

"...You still love me, Agnes."

"No. Nope. Nuh-uh. Look at the mushroom. See it? See the reality? I never loved you. Not for a single second."

Apart from a few rare exceptions, Agnes only ever sprouted mushrooms as a result of strong fear or feelings of wariness. She'd known Philip for years. For a mushroom to sprout on him now...that meant that he was no longer a comfortable, familiar presence to her.

He *had* to know that too, of course. But for some reason, he was grinning, and his dark-gray eyes narrowed on the mushroom with evident delight.

"It's all right," he said. "It's a beautiful orange. The color of love and affection."

Where did this boundless confidence come from? He was so arrogant, so convinced that he was right when he clearly wasn't. Taking it to lengths like this, though...it was worrying.

As if responding to Agnes's innermost thoughts, another *Astraeus Hygrometricus* popped up on Philip's other arm.

But that wasn't all. Another bright, flaming red mushroom popped up on top of Philip's head. It was a *Podostroma Cornudamae*. Then two more popped up on either shoulder. They looked like white clusters with red blood oozing out of them. They were known as *Hydnellum Peckii*, aka the Bleeding Tooth Fungus.

They didn't just *sprout* there, though. Red, blood-like sap was oozing out of them, dripping onto Philip's suit and staining it.

"Ignore the color!" Agnes protested. "*Wake up!* Mushrooms are sprouting on *you*."



“So? You sprout mushrooms on Count Lefort sometimes.”

“Only very rarely! And they’re always edible, high-grade mushrooms. I never sprout...unnaturally colored *bright orange* mushrooms on Father, nor ones that weep red sap.”

“I’m not concerned about small details like that.”

“You’re *never* concerned about the things that’re actually important! Let *go* of me!”

Agnes tried to shake Philip off her. But her strength was no match for a man’s, even a weak one like him.

Then, out of nowhere, Philip began to cough violently. It looked like he was choking on something. He put his fingers in his mouth and pulled out what looked like half-chewed fragments of mushroom.

The mushroom was yellowish with an indentation in the middle. It was probably a *Clitocybe Acromelalga*.

“Philip...did you *eat* that?”

“J-Just a little. You made a mushroom sprout in my *mouth*? Your powers really *have* increased, Agnes.”

Philip was still coughing a little as he gave Agnes this odd compliment. He didn’t seem to be aware that he was in terrible, terrible danger.

Upon ingestion, *Clitocybe Acromelalga* would infiltrate the body and lie dormant for four to five days. After that, it’d relentlessly and specifically attack the victim’s fingertips, toes, and penis, causing intense pain that could last over a month. But he wouldn’t die from it. *Probably...*

Anyway, Agnes had never managed to make a mushroom sprout inside a person’s mouth before. *Kind of a kamikaze attack on its part...*

It’d probably happened because she was so angry at Philip and felt powerless with him holding her there. The mushrooms were overreacting to her inner feelings.

She felt...honored and grateful but also a bit terrified.

What was even worse was that, despite the mushroom attack, Philip was still holding onto her arm and wouldn't let go.

She wished he'd let go. He was so strong...or at least tenacious.

He left her with no other choice now. She would need to start yelling and draw attention.

Philip was so prideful. He'd surely let her go if she embarrassed him publicly.

As she sucked in a deep breath to scream, someone spoke up from behind her.

"It's bad manners to manhandle a lady, Philip."

The owner of the stern voice was the Crown Prince himself! The man of the hour—the groom whose wedding was being celebrated tonight.

The dark-gray-eyed prince grabbed Philip's arm and tugged him away. At the same time, a beautiful woman came to stand next to Agnes. She had the same black hair as the Crown Prince, and she put her arm protectively around Agnes.

"She may be your ex-fiancée," the Crown Prince said harshly, "but this is *not* how a gentleman treats a lady. You're a royal, Philip; can't you try to *act* like it? And what *is* that?"

His stern gaze was fixed on the orange mushroom that'd sprouted on Philip's arm.

The shape and color were both very unusual. It probably didn't even look like a mushroom, but more like an orange someone was in the process of eating.

Only Philip would be weird enough to carry a half-eaten orange on his arm as he went around the Crown Prince's wedding ball.

And then there were the strange red horn-like things growing out of the top of his head. And the white clumps on his shoulders oozing red, blood-like sap and dripping all over his suit.

"I was simply trying to save Agnes."

Philip looked flustered as he pulled the *Astraeus Hygrometricus* off his arm and thrust it in front of the Crown Prince's nose.

“Look! It’s the sign of her *love*.”

Philip must’ve squeezed it. A puff of spores burst out of the mushroom, enveloping his face.

The orange-shaped *Astraeus Hygrometricus* had a body full of spores, which it’d release when stimulated.

Philip got a full face of them now, and he choked, eyes watering. The spores stuck to him since his shoulders were wet from the sap oozing out of the Bleeding Tooth Fungus.

The air was filled with a bad stench, too. *Probably from the spores*, Agnes realized.

The Crown Prince and Princess exchanged looks and sighed.

“Philip,” the Crown Prince reprimanded. “You’ve already caused a public disturbance, dumped this poor girl, and insulted her in front of everyone. The engagement is off per your own actions and insistence. I believe Claude’s spoken to you about this as well. But if you don’t straighten up and act right by her, I’m going to have to exercise my royal authority.”

He was glaring at Philip, and Agnes could see that Philip was visibly trembling.

Philip always took a great deal of pride in being a royal. So he certainly couldn’t argue back against the Crown Prince, who was as royal as it could get.

“Just remember, you can come to me anytime, Agnes.” Even backing down, with a face full of spores, Philip was still talking nonsense.

“Like I *would!*” she huffed. “Are you stupid or something? I’d rather die than be your mistress.”

Philip opened his mouth to snap back, but one look from the Crown Prince silenced him, and he scuttled off.

He had something stuck to his back. It looked like octopus tentacles. That must’ve been *Clathrus Archeri*, aka Octopus Stinkhorn. It was a species that released secretions that smelled like rotting flesh. No wonder the air around Philip stunk.

After Agnes watched him walk away, covered in mushrooms, she turned and

curtsied deeply before the Crown Prince.

“Thank you so much, Your Highness.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. I don’t believe we’ve met before, Lady Agnes. I do apologize for all the grief Philip has caused you.”

The prince smiled and nodded warmly to Agnes.

Philip may’ve been his cousin, but she felt that the Crown Prince, of all people, had no need to apologize to her.

What a wonderful person the prince must be, based just on how he’d handled Philip and the kindness he was showing to Agnes.

If all the royals were like Philip, then the country would be doomed. As a subject, she was relieved and grateful.

“How is your arm? It’s not hurt, is it?”

Her beautiful black hair swayed as the Crown Princess examined Agnes’s arm with concern on her face.

The Crown Prince was a just man. And the Crown Princess was sweet as well.

Even if it was just a public act, they were still so different from Philip, who couldn’t behave in public to save his life.

“I’m all right,” Agnes said. “Please forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. I’m Agnes Lefort. Crown Prince, Crown Princess, congratulations on your marriage.”

The Crown Princess looked relieved and gave Agnes a twinkling smile.

“Thank you!” she said brightly. “When he told me I was his Dragonmate, I was shocked out of my mind! But now I’m very, very happy.”

Agnes froze. There was that phrase again.

“You’re the Crown Prince’s...Dragonmate?”

“Oh, yes. He’s first in line for the throne, you know. The dragon’s blood is strong in him!”

The Crown Princess looked so pretty, blushing a soft pink color. It was clear

that their union was a happy one.

If the Crown Prince, who was first in line to the throne, had strong dragon's blood and a Dragonmate, then it stood to reason that Claude, who was second in line, would too. It seemed the line of succession was determined by how much dragon's blood the king's children inherited.

The things Sabina and Philip said earlier that evening were coming back to Agnes all of a sudden.

"I heard that...Prince Claude also found his Dragonmate," she said.

Agnes wasn't lying. She'd heard it directly from Philip just moments before. All she was doing was voicing the rumor. And she wanted to make sure. After all, the Crown Prince was Claude's brother and would know better than anyone.

Philip didn't know for sure, so perhaps it wasn't something a count's daughter should know about, either. She didn't want to try to trick the Crown Prince into revealing anything. But she couldn't go on not knowing the truth.

Agnes steeled herself. Would the Crown Prince deny it or get angry? He did look surprised for a moment. Then he smiled softly and warmly.

"Ah, so he's finally said it out loud, has he? I kept telling him to hurry up and get on with it, that waiting so long was terribly rude and would only lead to arguments."

The Crown Prince's voice was filled with joy. But Agnes felt her soul sink.

So, it was true then. Claude really had found his "one."

And, just like Philip said...there was no way that it was her.

Arguments...those would probably be about how Claude had been treating Agnes like a girlfriend all this time.

The Crown Prince probably knew about Claude and Agnes's contract. And he'd been telling Claude to hurry up and reveal the truth to her.

"It's okay. There won't be any arguing about it. Please don't worry," she said softly.

She wouldn't cause trouble or get the wrong idea. Nor would she argue

against Claude's decision. Agnes tried to keep her voice steady as she responded. The Crown Prince smiled, seeming pleased.

"I see. Well, that's good, then."

There's no need to worry about outcomes, Agnes thought ruefully. *Your younger brother will be with his Dragonmate. The spare will disappear meekly on her own.*

Agnes smiled back, hoping the Crown Prince understood her intentions.

"Agnes. I've been looking for you."

Claude came hurrying over, but Agnes didn't really want to look at him just then, so she averted her eyes.

"Claude, Philip was menacing the poor girl. You *need* to keep a closer eye on him."

"Oh, dear. Thanks for handling that."

"Don't mention it. Well, we're off."

"Let's meet again soon, Lady Agnes!"

Agnes curtsied as the Crown Prince and Princess walked off. Claude moved closer, gazing at Agnes in concern.

"Are you all right, Agnes?"

"Yes. Your brother saved me."

"Good. I'm sorry. I never should've left you alone."

Agnes knew that he'd left her to go off and have a private talk with the black-haired beauty.

Now she remembered the gaggle of mean girls who'd mentioned that Duke Watteau's daughter and Claude were "close." And they'd also mentioned her beautiful *black* hair.

So...was that the duke's daughter? And was *she* Claude's Dragonmate?

It didn't matter, really. All that mattered was that Claude's Dragonmate was someone who wasn't Agnes.

“No, it’s fine. You can leave me. Go off and be free, Your Highness.” Agnes looked up at him and smiled brightly. Claude frowned...but whatever. “I’m tired, so I’ll be excusing myself now.”

She curtsied, then turned and began walking across the hall as fast as she could.

The contract ended tonight. She’d greeted the bride and groom. There was nothing left for her here...

Now she could go home and think about what to do from now on.

Agnes hated to give up on her dream of a commoner life in the country, but how was she supposed to convince Benoit?

As she headed out of the hall, Claude came hurrying after her.

“Agnes, what’s wrong?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Claude caught up to her, but Agnes refused to stop.

The two of them exited the hall and continued down the corridor.

“Why did you call me Your Highness? I asked you to call me by my name...”

“It’s been six months.”

“What?”

“Our contract was set for six months. Until the Crown Prince’s wedding.”

“But...” Claude trailed off.

“Over the past six months,” Agnes continued as she kept walking at a brisk pace, “you’ve kept me close, and I’m grateful for that. Thanks to you, I’ve been able to protect my brother’s good name, and I’ve even been able to make some decent funds on the mushrooms.”

“Funds? Agnes, what are you trying to say?”

“Tonight’s the end. Thank you for everything up till now.”

“Agnes, wait. We need to *talk*...”

Claude grabbed her arm just as a clump of light-brown mushrooms sprouted

from his white glove. He was distracted by the *Armillaria Mellea* and let go of her for a second. Agnes was about to make a break for it when he grabbed her arm again.

She couldn't just keep walking and dragging him along, so she turned back to face him. The Mushroom Prince was still able to look handsomely bewildered even with a mountain of mushrooms sprouting from his arm.

"Do you remember what I asked you to promise me in the beginning?" Agnes asked. "Never to lie to me, and never to betray me."

"Of course," Claude said.

"I asked you to tell me right away the moment you found your Dragonmate."

Claude's expression stiffened.

"How do you...*know* about that?"

"So it's true?"

She was hearing the truth straight from the horse's mouth. Claude had a Dragonmate...he'd met his soulmate.

"The Crown Prince told me."

Claude had lied to her. He'd found his Dragonmate but hid it from her.

He'd used Agnes as a fake and a decoy, while he had a special someone all along. But at least she *knew* she was a fake from the start this time.

"Not only has our six-month contract expired," she continued, "but you broke your promise to me. So we will not meet again. Again, thank you for everything till now. Your Highness, I wish you every happiness. This is a farewell gift."

Agnes pulled the truffle from her bodice where it lay wedged into the blue cornflower embellishments and placed it gently in Claude's hand. Then, finally, she gave him the most ladylike smile she could muster.

Claude opened his mouth to say something. But just then, a bluish-gray mushroom sprouted on his nose. The mushroom had an odd shape. It was like a bluish-gray stick with a crumbling end. It was probably the *Pseudotulostoma Japonicum*.

A rather rare specimen. Perhaps this, too, was a fitting parting gift.

Shaking his hand off her arm, she turned and hurried down the corridor, heading for her carriage.

...It's for the best, really.

It was only ever meant to be a six-month contract. Agnes had restored her reputation and reduced the impact on Kevin's. And Claude had found his Dragonmate. It seemed like a good point to call it a day. She'd earned quite a bit of money from the mushrooms too.

Those were the kind of thoughts running through her mind. So then why was she crying?

Another Dragonmate that wasn't her. Once again, Agnes was just the fake.

Claude's soulmate was someone else. Agnes was nothing but a placeholder, a complication.

"I...I loved him, though..."

Agnes whispered the words out loud, finally admitting it to herself for the first time.

He was the perfect prince.

He wasn't freaked out by her mushroom... He actually loved them!

He told her that her hair was beautiful, not ugly.

It was all part of their contract. But even so, being with him had been so much fun.

But she'd...gone and gotten the wrong idea...about everything.

Claude, meanwhile, had merely made a contract with her. And all he'd done was meet his soulmate. He shouldn't have to worry about her or her one-sided misunderstandings.

...I managed to say I wish him happiness.

The words she hadn't been able to say to Philip. Perhaps she'd grown. The thought made her heart feel a little lighter. She wiped her tears and tried to control her breathing.

It's okay, she thought. I'm used to this. I'll get over it in no time. Probably.

That was why she needed distance. Before she caught any extraneous feelings.

The contract was up. There was no reason for her to stay in the capital. She didn't want to stick around and have to hear the gossip about Claude.

At any rate, she had money. She could leave for the countryside immediately.

No doubt Benoit would be very upset if she suddenly announced she was moving to the countryside to live alone. But it'd be good for her to have some peace and quiet and enjoy the country air as a medicinal herb farmer.

When things calmed down, the gossip about Claude's wedding would infiltrate the countryside too. But by then, she hoped, she'd be able to wish him well with a smile.

Thinking about the future...was a little bit depressing. But she'd be able to find things to smile about, she was sure.

Just then, a ball of light appeared in front of her, hovering in the air. Agnes came to a sudden stop.

"Wh-What's wrong?" she said out loud.

The ball of light was familiar. *It must be one of the spirits.*

She rarely ever saw them outside of her own garden or bedroom before. This was most unusual.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

The ball flashed as if trying to tell her something, bobbing about in the air.

Agnes hesitated. She couldn't just leave it here. Then down the corridor, she saw Claude. He was hurrying after her.

Agnes didn't know what he wanted, but she didn't want to see him.

"Can we do this later? I'm in rather a hurry right now."

Agnes took a step forward, intending to move past it, but the ball of light came zooming at her face.

“Yeek!”

“Agnes!”

Agnes stumbled backward and almost fell. But something held her up.

She got a whiff of sweet, fruity cologne. She was glad she hadn't fallen, but... this was too much. She turned slowly around to see that handsome young man with the Prussian-blue hair.

“Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes...”

Agnes was embarrassed. Falling and having to be caught by him, *right* after she'd said she never wanted to see him again and flounced off. And now that she'd realized she loved him, she couldn't look at those dark-gray eyes. It felt far too dangerous. So she averted her eyes.

“Thank you, Your Highness. Please excuse me.”

Eyes down, she tried to get away. But she could see Claude's arm, covered with a trembling mound of mushrooms.

The *Pseudotulostoma Japonicum* that was on his nose wasn't there, of course. But the *Armillaria Mellea* were right where she'd left them.

Usually, Claude would be delighted by such a crop and instantly start picking them. Why hadn't he?

Perhaps they weren't to his taste.

“Wait! I need to talk to you.”

Claude grabbed Agnes's arm, and a succession of mushrooms sprouted up on his own.

The brownish ones that looked like rabbit ears were *Wynnea Americana*. But Claude not only didn't pluck them...he didn't even take his eyes off her face.

Agnes was a little bit afraid. The Mushroom Fetishist was acting very out of character. She stepped back.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Well, I do. If you don’t want to talk inside, we can go to the garden. Please... just hear me out.”

He refused to let go of her arm. His eyes were so serious. Agnes knew he wasn’t going to let up. But the most dangerous thing of all was how much she wanted to spend more time with Claude.

Now that she knew she loved him, though, she didn’t want to talk with him inside. It was...too much for her to bear.

“...In the garden, then.”

“Thank you. It’s this way.”

Claude looked relieved as he took her hand and they walked off together.

A succession of *Wynnea Americana* popped up along his arm as they walked, but Claude paid it no mind. He just kept walking.

He’s a Mushroom Fetishist, but he’s not drooling over the mushrooms for once. Is he sick or something?

Concerned, Agnes looked up at Claude’s face as they walked. She was paying so much attention to him, they arrived at the deserted garden before she realized it.



Mushrooms of the Day

Astraeus Hygrometricus

It looks like a starfish with a globe in the middle. Or a peeled orange.

It's usually dark indigo but sprouted orange to express Agnes's anger toward Philip. It really does look like a peeled orange now!

"I'm not the color of romance! I'm the color of fury!" it roared.

Philip's no longer on Agnes's safe list, so the mushrooms won't give him any leeway at all.

Podostroma Cornudamae

A poisonous, flaming red mushroom.

Only a few grams are enough to kill a person. Even touching them can cause a rash. A very dangerous specimen.

It sprouted on Philip's head just for Benoit, who really wanted to see Philip go bald.

It has the power to cause skin irritation, so what might it do to hair follicles...?

Hydnellum Peckii (Bleeding Tooth)

A white fleshy body with blood-like juice oozing out. Like a bleeding tooth!

It's supposed to be edible but bitter. Those mushroom maniacs have been at it again!

It soaked Philip's suit to get revenge on him for tormenting Agnes. The juice it releases is actually antibacterial, though. So it's really quite a kind mushroom.

Clitocybe Acromelalga

A poisonous mushroom. Yellow with an indented cap. It's vicious. Once it enters the body, it lays dormant for 4-5 days. After that, it attacks the victim's fingers, toes, and penis and causes excruciating pain for a month or more.

Why does it target the penis? No one knows.

The Podostroma Cornudamae gave it permission to go all-out on Philip. "That's what you get for gaslighting our Agnes all these years!" A very brave mushroom to launch a kamikaze attack in a man's mouth.

Clathrus Archeri (Octopus Stinkhorn)

Like a broken eggshell with a tentacle coming out. It releases a black sap.

It looks like an octopus leg sprouting upside-down. The sap gives off a stink.

"I'm here to torment your nose!" it cried as it clung to Philip's back, tentacles outstretched.

It planned to increase its own stink fivefold once Agnes was a safe distance away.

Armillaria Mellea

Light brown caps with clusters of stalks.

A representative of the Wood Deterioration Club. It's able to latch onto wood as a parasite and devour it. It sprouted to thank Claude for saving Agnes from the ruffians, but its timing wasn't quite right.

It sent out an SOS to the spirits to stop Agnes.

Truffle

A prized foodstuff. A delicacy.

It sprouted as a gift to cheer up Agnes, either by being eaten or sold. It was surprised to find itself being gifted to Claude.

Pseudotulostoma Japonicum

It looks like small, stunted gray sticks. A very rare mushroom. The stalks are sturdy. You can use them to write on paper.

It sprouted as a farewell gift to Claude. But it never expected to be handed over with the Armillaria Mellea in such serious circumstances.

Claude quickly plucked it since it was in the way on his nose. It was safe enough in his pocket.

Wynnea Americana

A reddish mushroom that resembles rabbit ears. Quite unusual.

It's not suitable for eating. Perhaps it doesn't taste good.

It sprouted to urge Agnes to listen to what Claude had to say. A busybody mushroom.

Epilogue

THE garden she was led to was smaller than the garden the ballroom's balcony was connected to, but it was beautifully tended with gorgeous flowers, the air sweet with their scent.

"This is the private garden for royals only," Claude said. "No one will interrupt us."

He led Agnes down a narrow path and sat down on a bench under a little gazebo. He let go of her hand, but Agnes felt awkward being the only one standing, so she sat down too, keeping as much bench between them as possible.

She couldn't relax while he was staring at her with those dark-gray eyes. She cleared her throat to try to break the tension.

"So...what did you want to speak to me about, Your Highness?"

"I asked you to call me by my *name*, Agnes."

Claude was frowning sadly, and Agnes felt a little bit guilty for her attitude.

"Our contract is over. I want to draw a firm line in the sand. You're a royal and I'm just a count's adopted daughter. I couldn't possibly use your name."

"Even if I want you to?"

She knew he was blinking earnestly at her. If she looked at him right now, she'd lose. So, Agnes kept her eyes averted.

"If it's an order...then I'll comply," she said.

They were royal and subject, after all. She had to obey a direct order. That was how their relationship would be from this day forth.

But Claude just narrowed his eyes and sighed.

"...I don't *want* to give orders. Not to you, Agnes."

His voice was soft as he began plucking the mushrooms from his hands and arms.

Once he was done plucking all of them and piling them up neatly on the bench, he turned to face her again.

“You were talking about me having found my Dragonmate, weren’t you? Can you tell me *exactly* what it was you heard from my brother?”

“It was Philip who first told me you’ve found your Dragonmate.”

That answer made Claude frown deeply.

“Then the Crown Prince said, ‘*Ah*, so he’s finally said it out loud, has he? I kept telling him to hurry up and get on with it, that waiting so long was terribly rude and would only lead to arguments.’ That’s how I knew it was true.”

“So then...*why* were you trying to leave?” Claude asked.

Agnes blinked. The situation was pretty clear, she would have thought. It wasn’t much fun to have to spell it out. She’d rather not have to say it aloud. But it looked like she had no choice.

“Our contract is *over*,” she said firmly. “You’ve found your Dragonmate. I’m just a complication. There’s no reason for us to spend any more time together.”

She was only describing the situation as it stood. But saying it all out loud made her heart feel heavy. This was all too much. She felt heartsick. She wanted to go straight home and crawl into bed.

As she sat there, head hanging, Claude moved the mushroom pile aside and slid closer to her.

“About my Dragonmate...who do you think it is?”

“I don’t know...”

Asking me to guess who his Dragonmate might be...that’s cruel...

She could feel the tears welling up. All she wanted was to bring this conversation to a close as soon as possible.

“You’ve never thought it might be you?”

Agnes’s eyes widened. If he was saying this to her, then *that* had to mean...

“Your Highness...your Dragonmate is...a *mushroom*?”

He did propose to that red *Amanita Muscaria* back when they originally met. What if his soulmate was...a mushroom?

Talk about the “mushiest” couple imaginable.

So she was the lovestruck woman, jilted for mushrooms.

How pathetic...

If she *had* to lose to someone, she’d rather lose out to a stunning young woman rather than...mushrooms.

“Don’t be silly, Agnes. It’s *you*. Just you...”

“Oh, *haha*.”

Agnes smiled ironically, rolling her eyes at Claude’s mumbled joke.

“Why’s that so funny?”

“You said it yourself when you came to my rescue the night Philip dumped me—you said that those with dragon’s blood should be able to tell who their Dragonmate is in less than a month. We’ve known each other for six months now. I *know* there’s no way it could be me. Besides, I saw you talking to her. That girl with black hair. You seemed very close. It’s *her*, isn’t it? Your Dragonmate.”

There was no point trying to hide it anymore. She didn’t care anymore as long as she didn’t go down in history as the girl who lost out to mushrooms...

“...I think it’d be quicker for me to just show you,” Claude said with a sigh. Then he took off his white glove and showed Agnes a reddish mark on the back of his left hand.

Agnes leaned in to look closer. It looked like some kind of pattern.

“This is called a *Dragon Crest*,” Claude said.

So there really was a sign. This crest’s appearance was proof that Claude’s Dragonmate really existed.

Faced with tangible proof like this, Agnes couldn’t hide her shock. As if in response to her inner anguish, a white mushroom sprouted beside the mound

of *Wynnea Americana*.

The little white cap with the white bumpy bits...*Amanita Cokeri*.

Yes, she remembered seeing one of those just before she mushroom-bombed Philip that night. *Weird coincidence*.

But what if it wasn't? What if Claude, too, was about to be attacked by the mushrooms? Agnes started to panic and desperately tried to mentally speak to the mushrooms.

"Claude hasn't done anything wrong. Please don't attack him..."

Agnes wasn't sure if it'd do any good, but the thought of a *Clitocybe Acromelalga* sprouting in Claude's mouth terrified her. She didn't want to have to visit Claude, the man she loved, at his sickbed while he writhed in pain for a month.

She let out a tiny sigh and tried to get her mind off mushrooms.

"That crest appears once you've met your Dragonmate, right?" she asked. "Philip said he saw the mark on your hand a year ago. Doesn't that mean you already met your Dragonmate around that time?"

She was overtaken by a self-destructive urge to force Claude to pour salt in her emotional wounds. But he was shaking his head.

"About that... I think you've gotten the wrong impression, Agnes. It's Philip's fault, really. Not that I was really able to correct him..."

"What do you mean?"

"You said that the crest appears when one's Dragonmate has been found, right? That's half true and half wrong. The crest is present from birth."

"It is?"

Agnes didn't understand. She just stared at Claude, mouth slightly open.

"The crest is black from birth but turns red when one finds their Dragonmate."

"It changes color?"

That's right...Philip talked about a black bruise. But Claude's crest is red. It's

completely different from what Philip said!

“In the olden days,” Claude went on, “when the dragon’s blood was stronger, the people used to say that the crest would turn red the very instant one met their Dragonmate. That’s how you’d know that they were the one. But in these modern times, the reddening process is more gradual. It’s not immediate.”

So the crest really does change color?

It sounded like something from a fairytale. But then again, she’d witnessed Claude emerge mostly unscathed from under a huge pile of heavy wooden boxes. So she supposed him having a magic, color-changing crest wasn’t out of the question.

“It took about twenty days for my brother’s Dragon Crest to go red,” he continued. “He told me I should expect it to take around a month or so.”

Interesting. So he was basing the time frame on how long the Crown Prince’s Dragon Crest took to change.

“My Dragon Crest started changing color the night I met you at the ball. It only changed a little at first...but it was definitely turning red. The only girls I’d met for the first time that night were you and Marquis Barthet’s daughter.”

Yes, that was true. Agnes had never met him before that night. Even though she’d been engaged to his stupid cousin. It was a bit odd. But presumably, Claude had been busy.

Or perhaps Philip had something to do with it. Not that it mattered anymore.

“I wanted to see you again after that,” Claude went on. “I was entranced. The way you stood up to Philip, even as he was trying to shame and diminish you. The way those angry tears glistened in your eyes. And those mushrooms! Mushrooms more beautiful than any I’d ever seen! I was captivated by all of it. But you said no when I invited you to balls or even just tea parties, remember?”

Agnes was still focusing on the “beautiful mushrooms” part of his speech.

Is he sure it’s not the mushrooms he’s meant to be with?

She looked at the handsome man sitting beside her with his little mound of mushrooms. Still, she nodded.

“When you sent back the handkerchief I lent you,” Claude kept on, “it only made me want to see you even more. When I finally got you to come to one of the balls, I was beside myself with excitement. That night, the Dragon Crest turned fully red.”

He fell silent a moment, his dark-gray eyes focused on hers.

“Agnes...you’re my Dragonmate.”

“...What?”

Exasperation, Agnes thought. *That’s what you call this feeling.*

She’d no idea what he was talking about. But she was lost in his gray eyes.

“You’re my Dragonmate, Agnes.”

“...You mean...the red mushroom is, right?”

She remembered Claude exclaiming how perfect of a specimen it was, the *Amanita Muscaria* with its blood-red hue.

“Please listen to me, Agnes! Not the mushrooms. *You*. Agnes Lefort.”

Agnes gulped, still lost in his eyes.

“But...the black-haired girl. In the garden...”

“Black hair? The garden...? Oh, that was Duke Watteau’s daughter. She’s the Crown Princess’ little sister. She was surrounded by persistent young men, so I came to her rescue. Actually...she started pestering me to introduce her to you. She *really* likes your hair color, apparently. She was squawking loudly, asking if you were my Dragonmate. I needed to move her to a more private place before rumors spread. That’s when you must’ve seen us.”

Agnes nodded, ruminating over what Claude had just told her. She probably only wanted to meet Agnes so she could warn her to back off. Maybe it wasn’t Claude who was interested. Maybe it was the *girl* who was pursuing him.

“I’m really sorry if you got the wrong impression,” Claude continued. “But she’s not my Dragonmate. I met her for the first time over two years ago now. My Dragon Crest didn’t react at all.”

Claude’s eyes were fixed so solemnly on her. He didn’t seem to be lying.

So that meant the black-haired girl *wasn't* his Dragonmate.

"The day after that ball I invited you to," Claude exclaimed, "I went straight to Count Lefort and asked for your hand in marriage."

"You what?!" Agnes yelped, then quickly covered her mouth with her hands.

Claude chuckled wryly. "But he said no. Because your engagement to Philip hadn't been officially dissolved yet. It would have only taken a few days more, but he said you were still too wounded from being rejected. And I'm another royal. He said you'd had enough of royal suitors now and I should leave you alone."

That meant he'd come to ask Benoit for her hand the very day after he made that bizarre proposal to the mushrooms. Agnes was truly shocked at how fast Claude had acted.

Usually, Benoit would never be able to turn down a royal request. But for Agnes, he did...she was filled with warm love for her adoptive father.

"Usually," Claude went on, undeterred, "the concept of Dragonmates is something known only to royals with the Dragon's Crest and their Dragonmates. The word 'Dragonmates' has come into popular use, but people don't really know the specifics of how a Dragonmate is chosen. I can't blame your father for thinking I was a shady character. But he saw something real in me and decided to give me a chance. He also wanted to do whatever he could to stop you from returning to commoner life."

That sounded like something Benoit would do. Both her father and little brother had seemed desperate to stop Agnes from leaving for a new life in the country.

"Count Lefort told me that if I fulfilled certain criteria, bade my time, and made you fall in love with me for real...then he'd give me his blessing to marry you."

"*What* criteria?"

"Ah, right. Well, he told me not to talk about the Dragonmate thing. And I was not to pick you up or drop you off by carriage. Nor try to make you spend time with me against your wishes."

Claude had never come to pick her up himself. And whenever she was sent home, he'd escorted her to the carriage and said goodnight there.

Agnes had mostly gotten over it, but she still got a little nervous whenever she had to ride in a carriage. If she had to ride in one with Claude, she might've made herself sick with anxiety.

Benoit was clearly trying to spare her that.

"I wasn't able to talk to you about you being my Dragonmate," Claude went on, "but I was able to tell you how I felt about you. But after Philip, you didn't trust a word I was saying. You didn't seem to take me seriously at all. You never let me in. As proof, the mushrooms kept coming, didn't they?"

Agnes had thought that Claude was goading her into producing as many mushrooms as possible for his own gratification. *But no...he actually really understood what the sprouting of the mushrooms meant...*

He knew that once she began to relax and feel at ease around someone, the mushroom sprouting would taper off.

"I knew that you weren't interested in me that way, and I know that you were only going along with everything because of my royal influence. So I decided to make it into a contract. I knew we had to spend time together for you to get to know me. And for me to woo you."

Woo her...

Yes, she remembered him saying something like that before.

"I thought that was part of the act...part of the contract."

"Nope. It was real. You just didn't know about it."

Agnes thought it was all about the contract from the start. And that everything that'd followed was for its sake.

"Then...what about your love for mushrooms? Was that a pretext too?"

"No. That first mushroom of yours I saw, it slayed me. Such a beautiful red."

Claude's eyes glazed over, and a blissful expression came over his features. Agnes found this to be something of a relief.

At the very least, she hadn't been wrong about one thing. His mushroom fetish.

It was weird being relieved to find out he really was as much of a mushroom freak as she suspected. But her image of him as a fungal fetishist was so strong by now, if *that* had turned out to be fake, she'd probably faint from shock.

Whether she'd fully accepted the fungal fetish as a part of him, though, was a different story.

Claude smiled gently, watching as Agnes sat there frowning and thinking hard.

"You went along with pretending to be my girlfriend for the sake of your brother and family. But I was so happy. I got all the mushrooms I wanted, and whenever I was with you, I felt like I was on cloud nine."

"I think the mushrooms played the largest part in your joy..." she muttered

It wasn't being with me that felt good. It was having an all-access mushroom buffet.

"If the mushrooms were all it was about, I would've just asked you to send them to me. Still, I can't deny that being able to harvest them off my own body was also really fun..."

Oh. Harvesting them was part of the fun, was it? Just how obsessed with mushrooms is this prince, anyway?!

Claude plucked the white *Amanita Cokeri* from beside the mushroom mound and held it by the stem as he twirled it around and around.

"Once the Dragon Crest turned bright red, I went to my brother. He told me there was no doubt that you were my Dragonmate and that we needed to get engaged immediately, without any further hesitation. But I made that promise to your father already. I wasn't allowed to discuss the topic with you. I was afraid that if I did, I would lose you forever. I was planning to tell you after the six months passed...on the last day of our contract."

Claude stopped twirling the *Amanita Cokeri* and placed it back down on the mound of mushrooms.

"But you tried to leave the party early. You were about to leave me forever,

just because the contract was up. I was...shocked. These past six months have been heaven for me, but for you...they were just part of a contract. You thought that all I cared about was the mushrooms..."

"Uh, I still don't think I was entirely wrong about that..." Agnes said.

She knew Claude couldn't have been faking the look of delight on his face at the appearance of each new mushroom. Actually, all she *saw* was his love for the mushrooms.

"I *do* adore mushrooms, it's true," he admitted. "But my feelings for you are something else. I know I may have misled you to avoid you knowing about the Dragonmate thing. But after being betrayed and jilted by Philip, I thought the *last* thing you wanted to think about was Dragonmates. When I saw that last, extremely rare mushroom...the *Pseudotulostoma Japonicum*...I was fascinated. But then you said you didn't want to see me anymore, and I was devastated."

He was talking about the gray stick-like mushroom she'd sprouted on his nose. Apparently, *that* was the kind of specimen that'd make a mushroom enthusiast weak in the knees.

When he came chasing after her, the other mushrooms were still all stuck to his arms. It was only the mushroom on his nose he'd plucked.

She'd figured it was getting in the way of his vision, but apparently, it wasn't that. It was just that rare and valuable a specimen.

While she was spacing out, avoiding this conversation by thinking about mushrooms, Claude was still speaking.

"You said you wished me every happiness. I realized that you thought I'd found my Dragonmate in someone else and that you really didn't care for me that way. But at the very least, I wanted you to know the truth...before you left me forever."

Agnes was still half-thinking about how valuable the *Pseudotulostoma Japonicum* might really be, when Claude took both her hands in his.

His touch pulled her out of mushroomland and back into reality. His dark-gray eyes found hers and held them.

“My Dragonmate—my soulmate—is *you*, Agnes. I’m in love with you. And I need you by my side.”

“What...?”

Agnes simply stared at Claude. The way he phrased that...there was no more room for doubt.

“That’s what I wanted to tell you. Thank you for indulging me.”

Agnes was thinking hard about what Claude had just said, her mouth still open.

What was it he wanted to tell her?

That she was his Dragonmate?

That she was his soulmate?

But that couldn’t be.

Because Agnes...was only ever the fake.

“You liar.”

The word just fell out.

“I know. I’m sorry for lying to you.”

“It’s only the mushrooms you want, isn’t it?”

She needed to reject what he was saying. Otherwise, she would be crushed under the weight of his emotional blackmail.

Even though she was so happy. She *should* be happy.

But it couldn’t be true. Something inside Agnes wouldn’t let her believe it.

“No, you’re wrong. I *like* mushrooms, but I *want* yours. No. Not even your mushrooms. I just want you.”

“You’re lying! I’m just a fake! A complication! You never *needed* me, I...”

But no...

Those were *Philip’s* words, she remembered. Not Claude’s.

And anyway, Philip’s new girlfriend was *not* a real Dragonmate.

So...nothing that went down with Philip had anything to do with Claude.

She didn't know *what* to think anymore. She was starting to tear up again for some reason.

"Agnes."

Claude pulled Agnes gently into his arms, which was accompanied by the popping sound of multiple mushrooms sprouting.

Her face pressed against his shoulder, the scent of his sweet, fruity cologne in her nose...somehow, she felt instantly soothed.

"Do you see how emotionally wounded you are by Philip's lies? And all I did was pour salt in the wounds. I'm so sorry."

Claude let go of her a second so he could mop her tears with a handkerchief. White mushrooms began to sprout on his arm. *Cuphophyllus Virgineus*.

Agnes realized they were surrounded by *Gymnopilus Junonius* and *Pycnoporus Coccineus*, which had sprouted in great number. It was a regular mushroom festival.

"Listen, Agnes. I love you!" Claude declared. "If you don't want people calling you my Dragonmate, it's okay. My brother can shut everyone up. And I can keep my Dragon Crest hidden. I can hold off on the mushrooms, too. *Anything* you need. So, if you feel any affection for me at all...would you please consider being mine?"

Claude plucked the mushrooms off his arm and placed them onto the bench one by one. Then he returned his dark-gray gaze to Agnes.

Even at a serious moment like this, Claude couldn't keep his mind entirely off mushrooms. Agnes snorted through her tears.

"I don't have the best impression of the whole Dragonmate thing," she said.

"I know."

"But...hearing you say you love me...makes me very happy."

"What?"

Claude blinked, dropping the mushrooms he was holding.

“If you really think I’m your Dragonmate,” Agnes continued, “can you promise never to say I’m a fake? That I’m a complication? That you don’t need me? Can you promise you’ll never go off and leave me alone?”

“Yes, of course I won’t say that. I’d never say *anything* like that. You mean more to me than anyone, Agnes...and I need you.”

Claude got to his feet excitedly, almost gasping the words. He looked so silly. Agnes smiled, enjoying the moment a little.

“You don’t think I’m a burden? I mean...I sprout mushrooms all over the place.”

“Are you *seriously* asking me that question now? I don’t care! I love the mushrooms! Sprout away!”

“What if I said I was cutting you off? No more mushrooms?”

Claude’s face fell for a second. She could see that he was shaken up by this.

“Th-That’d be very hard to take...but if that’s what it takes to have you, I don’t need the mushrooms.”

But even as he spoke those words, Claude’s face crumpled a little as if he was about to cry. He was so easy to read. Agnes couldn’t suppress a giggle.

“You really *are* a liar. I know you’re a Mushroom Fetishist; you can’t fool me.”

Claude watched Agnes giggle a second before smiling wryly himself.

“Your Highness...” she said.

“...Please call me by my name.”

He looked so cute, begging like that. Agnes stopped giggling and nodded.

“Claude.”

All she did was say his name, but Claude broke into a wide grin.

“Our contract is over,” she said happily, “but would you continue to take me out on dates?”

“I’d love to!”

Claude’s answer and smile made Agnes feel like glitter was exploding inside of

her.

Just then, a peach-blossom-colored mushroom bloomed on Claude's chest.

It looked like an *Amanita Muscaria*, but the color of the cap and the little dots exactly matched the mushroom brooch Claude had gifted her with.

Both of them stared at the mushroom, knowing this was no coincidence. Then they looked into each other's eyes and smiled. A ball of light came out of nowhere just then and swooped and swirled around the mushrooms.

It was the ball of light that stopped Agnes as she was attempting to flee from the palace.

"You wanted me to stay and talk with Claude, didn't you?" she said, addressing it directly. It glowed on and off rapidly before settling itself on top of the mushroom. "I think the spirits are getting tired of putting up with me," she said.

"But without them, I might've lost you for good. Thank you, spirits," said Claude gratefully.

The ball of light glowed on and off a few times in response to him. Then it vanished.

"...Can I have this mushroom?" Claude asked.

"I guess so," Agnes replied. Since you're the man I love...and a Mushroom Fetishist and all."

Claude picked up the peach-blossom-colored mushroom and stroked its little cap lovingly.

"I love you, Agnes. My Mushroom Princess."

Agnes giggled. Claude smiled at her. And then he leaned in and softly kissed her forehead.





Mushrooms of the Day

Wynnea Americana

A reddish mushroom that looks like rabbit ears. Very unusual.

It sprouted to urge Agnes to listen to what Claude had to say. A busybody mushroom.

Many sprouted, and after they were picked, they sat on the bench in a pile with the others, watching over Agnes.

Amanita Cokeri

White caps with white dots and a flaky stem.

Looks like an all-white Amanita Muscaria.

It sprouted when Claude made Agnes cry.

It was ready to send out a Mushroom Alert at any time, but it understood Agnes's request and remained silent and watchful instead.

After that, Claude picked it and rolled it between his fingers. Never having been rotated this way before, the mushroom was surprised by how much it enjoyed it.

Clitocybe Acromelalga

Yellowish brown cap with an indentation in it. Very, very poisonous and nasty.

It sprouted in Philip's mouth in an all-out kamikaze attack.

All Agnes has to do is call and it will sprout normally.

Pseudotulostoma Japonicum

A mushroom with a gray, thick stalk. Quite unusual.

Its body is quite sturdy, and it can even be used to write on paper.

Claude quickly plucked it, and it was transferred to his pocket, where it lay quietly.

When Agnes finally started to smile, it felt glad.

Cuphophyllus Virgineus

Small, milky-white caps. Loves romance.

It always appears whenever there's love in the air.

It was very excited, squealing things like: "Your Dragonmate is here!" "He's hugging you!" "Forehead kiss!" and so on.

Excited by the events, it called its friends Gymnopilus Junonius and Pycnoporus Coccineus to the party, too.

Gymnopilus Junonius

A poisonous mushroom that looks like a yellow Shimeji. Here to brighten the mood.

It was invited by the Cuphophyllus Virgineus and sprouted in a clump, wishing for Agnes's happiness.

Pycnopus Coccineus

Semicircular, with cracks all over. Resembles a Polyporaceae.

It sprouted to rein in the Cuphophyllus Virgineus somewhat.

But today was a day for celebration, so it found itself getting overexcited as well.

Amanita Muscaria

Red caps, white dots. The textbook fairytale poison mushroom.

It sprouted with a peach-blossom color in honor of Claude and Agnes's special brooches.

It loves Agnes, and seeing her smile means everything to this little mushroom.

Side Story: When a Dragon's World Changes

"I just hope you can find your own Dragonmate soon, Claude."

That was what the king had murmured during the ball while talking with his son. It wasn't just tonight that he'd thought that.

He could relax a little now that the Crown Prince had finally, after many long years, found his Dragonmate. But Claude still weighed heavily on his mind.

Claude was grateful his father cared so much, but nothing could be done about the situation.

"It's all just a question of fate, anyway," he said. "I'll be fine no matter what happens, even if I can't find my Dragonmate. So please, don't worry."

Claude responded with a smile, but the king's expression was filled with silent concern.

Just then, a servant came over and whispered something in the king's ear.

Claude watched as his father's frown lines grew deeper and deeper. It was clear this wasn't a happy conversation.

"Philip's causing some kind of ruckus," his father grumbled finally. "Good grief, the trouble that boy causes. Claude, go and take care of it, would you?"

"All right."

Claude was relieved it was nothing serious. He bowed politely to his father and headed off.

Philip was Claude's cousin.

He was a member of the royal family on *paper*, but he lacked class and was always causing some sort of disturbance.

The king could've sent a servant or one of the knights to investigate, but Philip was unlikely to listen to them. He had no sense of royal duty and was extremely prideful at the same time. He was the type to ignore people he considered

beneath him.

But Claude was the fourth-born prince, second in the line of succession.

There was no way Philip could ever consider Claude beneath him. So, he'd probably do what he said.

If the king went himself, it'd be settled within seconds. But the king didn't need to get his hands dirty with things like this.

"Dragonmate, huh..." Claude muttered as he headed over.

His father had used that term, but it had no real meaning to him.

His older brother said finding your Dragonmate was a "life-changer." But Claude was pretty happy with his world as it was. He didn't really care if it changed or not.

Of course, he understood the significance of Dragonmates. He *was* a royal, after all. It just didn't seem to have much of anything to do with him.

As Claude made his way through the ballroom, he noticed people gathering in a far corner of the room.

That was probably where Philip was causing a scene.

Why is Philip always causing so much trouble for everyone?

"What's all the commotion about?"

Claude approached, raising his voice. The rubberneckers parted obediently to let him through.

Ah, there was Philip, as he suspected. With two women.

One of them was half-hidden behind Philip but had golden-brown hair and a bright blue dress. The other wore a very plain, muted, amber-colored dress and had her hair tied back. Its color, though, was quite eye-catching.

It was the color of peach blossoms, of springtime flowers. Claude had never seen anything like it. She also had green eyes that sparkled like jewels. And her face was *very* pretty.

Claude was curious about the mismatch between her natural beauty and how she presented herself. But there were more pressing matters to consider just

now. Philip was actually brandishing a sword at the pink-haired girl. Whatever for?

“Whatever *are* you thinking, Philip? Disturbing the peace of His Majesty’s ball? And pointing a sword at a *lady*?”

“Claude. This is none of your business.”

Claude just wanted Philip to put the sword down. But of course, Philip *had* to be stubborn. He couldn’t let his wayward cousin get away with brandishing a sword at a young lady, at a royal ball, of all places.

“...I was merely putting this woman in her place. She took the news of the dissolution of our engagement with poor grace and insulted my honor in the process.”

Claude merely frowned in response to that. Then he turned to the girl with the peach-blossom hair.

“Please tell me what happened. In your own words.”

Claude didn’t know *what* was going on here. But he’d bet good money it was all Philip’s fault. The poor girl had just been dumped in a very public setting by Philip. And then he’d turned a sword on her.

There was a good chance she’d be too terrified to speak. But her green eyes were unwavering as she looked at Claude.

“Lord Philip informed me that our engagement was off. When I told him he should’ve been honest about having found someone else, he told me that she was his Dragonmate and that I’d only been a fake. He didn’t like my reaction to that, so he announced I was to be sent to the dungeons. I asked him *why* he bothered getting engaged to a fake in the first place and questioned his judgment regarding his new paramour. This angered him and he drew that sword on me.”

She wasn’t afraid at all. She was outspoken. Claude was a little taken aback. But at the same time, he couldn’t suppress a sigh of disgust over Philip’s stupid behavior.

His cousin was even more of a walking disaster than he had previously

thought.

Philip couldn't just erase an official engagement blessed by the king with a few selfish words. Nor could he formally dissolve the engagement just by telling the poor girl and her family that he was calling it off.

If Philip seriously wanted to end the engagement, he'd need to make an official report to the king and to the girl's family. This wasn't the kind of thing you discussed in public, let alone in front of high society.

And he seemed to have brought his mistress along. Oh, and the worst part of all...he was brandishing a sword at his ex!

Apparently, Philip's excuse was that he had "found his Dragonmate." But that was ridiculous. Philip was *technically* a royal. But he'd no dragon's blood. Accordingly, he would never find a Dragonmate. Not now, not ever.

He was trying to use a sacred royal birthright to legitimize his affair, and Claude wasn't about to stand for that.

Philip was an idiot and there was no changing that. But Claude felt bad for his poor ex-fiancée. Even though he'd heard she and Philip had been engaged for many years, he'd never met her himself.

Her appearance was *very* drab, but that peach-blossom hair of hers really drew the eye.

It looks quite nice tied back, but it'd look really beautiful if she wore it loose.

Claude had no idea why she was dressed down like that.

The young ladies usually loved to dress to the nines for royal balls. And the new girl—the one peeking out from behind Philip—was dressed quite flashy. Her dress and makeup were both brightly colored.

Claude had thought all young women liked to dress up like that. *Apparently, I was wrong.*

If she let her hair down and wore a more colorful dress, she'd be a knockout. It seems like such a waste of natural beauty.

But Claude realized his personal tastes were completely beside the point here.

“...Still, since things *have* come to this point, perhaps we should resolve them once and for all. Do you acquiesce to the dissolution of your engagement?”

“Gladly!”

The girl didn’t skip a beat. Claude nodded.

He offered to see her home without really knowing *why* he had. He just felt bad, he reckoned, about leaving her alone under the circumstances. Still, he could’ve always gotten a servant to see her home. Or one of the knights.

For a prince like him to see her off...that wasn’t good. People would notice.

He knew that. But he couldn’t make himself leave the scene.

He felt for her. Philip’s behavior had been so ridiculous.

At any rate, Claude was thinking of retiring from the ball himself. So perhaps it was good timing.

But the girl, who’d been so feisty against Philip, seemed to be rapidly sinking into despondency.

“He found his Dragonmate, I guess. I was just...a fake one. Expendable. Everything I’ve been through...there was no *meaning* to any of it. I was just going further and further down a dead-end the whole time. I gave him everything I had, but...”

“So...you really *did* like him, after all?”

It was just a question, but for some reason, Claude found himself holding his breath. The girl shook her head, though.

“No. But it hurts to be told you’re not needed by someone you’d planned your whole life out with.”

Then the girl’s green eyes filled with tears. They sparkled like jewels. Claude was transfixed. He felt like someone had just punched him in the gut.

So she *really* must’ve loved Philip. Enough to cry about him in front of a strange man she’d just met. She said otherwise. But she must’ve been terribly shocked over being jilted in public like that.

She shouldn’t have to experience pain over the actions of a loser like Philip.

Claude felt a sense of annoyance growing inside him.

Like the girl said, it'd be difficult for her to expect any good marriage prospects to come her way after she'd been publicly ditched by a royal.

Claude wasn't sure how serious she really was about her plan to return to commoner life, but it was clear she had no intention of showing her face in society again. He realized this meant he'd probably never have the chance to see her again. The realization made his throat go tight.

He wanted to wipe away the tears of this girl—a girl whose name he still didn't know. Why did he feel so much empathy for her? He'd no idea what was going on in his own mind.

"Wait. Even if your eyes don't puff up, the tear tracks alone will give you away. Take this."

Claude handed her a white handkerchief. He couldn't wipe her tears, but at least he could help her to do it herself.

"But I've no way of returning it to you."

Well, obviously not, Claude thought.

That was why he wanted her to take it.

He could maybe use that handkerchief as a pretext to see her again. He knew that what he was trying to do was *very* weird. But he couldn't fight these sudden urges.

"Just take it."

He gazed into her eyes as he thrust the handkerchief out to her. He squeezed the soft fabric extra tight to stop himself from just reaching out to dab the tears from those stunning green eyes.

"...All right. Well, thank you for the handkerchief too, on top of everything else. I doubt we'll ever meet again, but I wish you good health."

As she reached out to take the handkerchief from him, her fingers brushed Claude's.

It felt like being struck by lightning.

Claude looked down in shock to see that there was a red mushroom sprouting from the back of his white glove.

“...What an absolutely stunning mushroom.”

It had a bright red cap with little white dots all over it. An *Amanita Muscaria*.

His eyes were fixed on it. Even though a mushroom had just sprouted on him out of nowhere, he rolled with it.

Carefully, he plucked it and examined it closely.

“I’ve never seen such a perfectly *perfect* specimen. The bright, blood-red of the cap, the snow-white dots...”

Amanita Muscaria caps tend to flatten out as they mature. This one is an adorable round shape, though. It’s so beautiful!

The white dots were fragile and easily rubbed off. But this one’s dots were all intact and spaced so perfectly apart! It was like a work of art.

The red color, too, was brighter than any other specimen Claude had ever seen. The white dots seemed to glow against the cap’s redness. The little dangling frilly bit on the stem looked like the skirts of a noblewoman’s dress. It was an absolutely impeccable specimen.

Claude gasped as he gazed in rapture at the stunning mushroom.

When he came to his senses again, he realized that the girl was gone. But his heart felt like it was about to burst with emotion.



“I have to see her again.”

Later on, back in his room, Claude muttered these words aloud.

Where had these feelings come from?

He gazed at the *Amanita Muscaria*, feeling as though he was in a dream. That was when he noticed that the Dragon Crest on his left hand looked a bit red.

It was said that those in possession of dragon’s blood and a Dragon’s Crest would see the crest turn red once they’d met their Dragonmate.

Claude had observed the changing color of the Crown Prince's Dragon Crest, so he was fairly certain this was true.

But the only new girls Claude had met that night were Philip's ex-fiancée and his floozy mistress. It couldn't be one of them, could it?

Nothing was for certain, of course. But an unwavering belief was beginning to take hold inside Claude.

The belief that it was her...the girl with the peach-blossom hair.

Just thinking about her made his heart feel light with joy. He felt that he could do anything if he had her by his side.

"Finding your Dragonmate can change your world, huh?" he murmured.

Claude smiled at the mushroom in his hand, wondering what the girl with the peach-blossom hair was doing right now...

Afterword

HELLO everyone, I'm Hanami Nishine.

I'm so happy to be able to bring you this copy of *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 1*. It's a real honor to be able to release this story that I wrote in Japanese to a worldwide audience in the form of an English version. I think the mushrooms are probably releasing all kinds of happy spores, too.

I've wanted to write a story on the theme of "Dragonmates" for quite some time now.

I thought it would be boring to just write a story about Dragonmates meeting, so I focused it on an engagement breakup instead. But that still wasn't quite right.

So, I made it so that the heroine has the odd power of sprouting mushrooms. She still doesn't know exactly why she has this power, but one day, she meets the story's hero, who has a big mushroom fetish.

For the sake of her family, the main character Agnes has suffered years of gaslighting from her fiancé, Philip, the king's nephew. Now it's gotten so bad that she's developed a complex about her appearance, including her peach-blossom-pink hair *and* the spirits that protect her. She's totally lost all self-confidence.

Despite doing everything she could to please Philip, she finds herself jilted when he breaks off the engagement. That's when Prince Claude comes to her rescue.

This is the part of the story where a dashing and handsome hero rescues her, right? But Claude is kind of...*different*.

Agnes has an odd power that causes her all kinds of trouble. She makes mushrooms sprout on people. But Claude is a mushroom enthusiast to an insane degree. He loves to gaze at mushrooms, harvest mushrooms...he even

wears mushroom cologne.

Instead of being grossed out by Agnes's mushrooms...he's head over heels for them.

Agnes agrees to play the part of Claude's love interest for a set period of time, but the truth is that it's not only the mushrooms that have captured Claude's heart...

And so, Agnes continues producing mushroom after mushroom. But as the story progressed, I started to worry. *"With all these mushrooms being introduced, what if people lose track of which ones are which?"*

I asked the readers if they'd like to be able to read short introductions of the mushrooms that appear and that led to the birth of the "Mushrooms of the Day" segments.

At first, I started off introducing the mushrooms seriously, but over time, it became a place for me to celebrate the "star player" mushrooms that appeared most often and got me the most excited.

I also heard that my readers enjoy looking up and researching different mushrooms as they read "Mushroom Princess." Even now, they let me know when there are TV shows and things like that featuring mushrooms. I'm really grateful for that.

I hope you enjoy seeing the efforts of all the mushrooms in this story as you read about Agnes and Claude.

One last thing:

To the publisher, who gave me this opportunity to publish an English version.

To the readers, who have read everything to this point and supported me.

To everyone involved in the book publication, including the translator, editor, designer, and illustrator.

To my family and cats, who supported my writing.

It's thanks to you all that *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess!* was able to be released this way.

I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Well then, I hope to see you all again sometime!

-Hanami Nishine



cross infinite world



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SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

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AFTER REINCARNATING, I WILL
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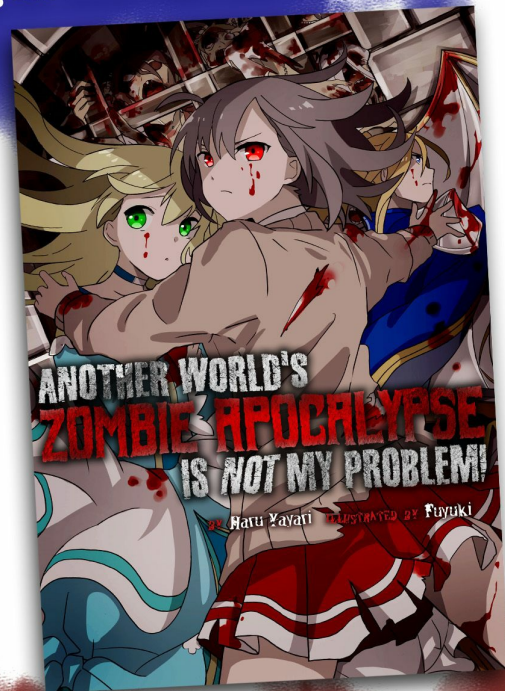
"I don't care if you are a man, let me court you."

Rock's whole life is shaken when a werewolf shows up at her shop in the middle of the night...asking for more than just clothes!

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