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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 3

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The Dragon’s Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 3

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Prologue

“A Dragonmate’s love seems to be an intense thing...”

“*Hm?* Where did that come from?”

Claude tilted his head curiously in response to Agnes’s murmured words. The way his Prussian blue hair swayed with the movement was captivating. As Agnes took another look at him, she found herself deeply moved by his refined features, and reflected on how it still seemed so unreal that she’d somehow become the fiancée of this man: the fourth crown prince and second-in-line to the throne, Claude Visage.

Agnes *was* Count Lefort’s daughter. But she was adopted—she was really the count’s niece and a commoner before he adopted her. Moreover, as if her engagement being callously canceled by her ex-fiancé (Philip, a fringe member of the royal family) wasn’t bad enough, she also had truly despised pink hair. Worse than that, she made mushrooms sprout on people wherever she went!

Yet, despite her having nothing but negatives to speak of, Claude still cherished Agnes. *Perhaps, she often reflected, this is because, to Claude, a royal with dragon’s blood, I’m his “Dragonmate.” His one true love.*

Or perhaps it was because Claude was also a colossal mushroom fetishist so, in his opinion, Agnes and her mushrooms were just perfect! *That’s probably the main reason...* she thought.

“Just something Princess Zenaide mentioned at the tea party the other day,” Agnes replied.

Zenaide was the crown princess and Claude’s sister-in-law. Agnes, Zenaide, and the queen were the only Royal Dragonmates at the moment, creating a unique bond between the women. Agnes felt blessed by their kindness and acceptance.

Zenaide had invited Agnes to a tea party at the royal palace today as well. But

when Claude had arrived earlier that day to pick Agnes up, his carriage seemed to be having issues. Now they were sitting around, waiting for it to be repaired.

While they were waiting, Claude had asked her, “Do you have any worries about your status as a Dragonmate?” And that was when Agnes mentioned what Zenaide had told her.

“Well,” Claude replied, “she’s not exactly wrong. What do *you* think, Agnes?”

“Well...you’re so *kind*, Claude. And I know that you care for me. So I suppose I don’t really mind whether it’s intense or not.”

In fact, she didn’t know what intense love really even *meant*. But she trusted Claude, so she wasn’t particularly worried.

“Well,” the beautiful blue-haired prince replied, smiling, “I know that you’re not the kind of person who tries to curry favor by lying, Agnes, so...your response really hits home.”

Claude brought his hand to his mouth and Agnes paused. *Is it just my imagination*, she wondered, *or is he...blushing?*

As she stared curiously at him, Claude noticed her gaze and suddenly cleared his throat. “I love you, Agnes,” he replied quickly, “and you’re very precious to me. I don’t want to burden you. So, if anything comes up, I want you to tell me right away. But as a woman and a fellow Dragonmate, it may be good for you to have Zenaide as a confidante.”

Having finished, Claude raised his teacup to his lips. A simple gesture yet one imbued with a royal’s elegance.

“Until now,” Claude continued, “the only Dragonmate besides Zenaide was Her Majesty the Queen. But with my mother’s status, they couldn’t exactly meet up for a light-hearted chat over tea. I know Zenaide is very pleased to have someone to share this experience with as well. So feel free to interact with her like a friend and sister. Anyway, I’m sure she has plenty of things she would like to confide in you too.”

“But...are you *sure* I’m good enough?” Agnes worried.

Zenaide was born into the nobility, after all. Surely, she’d many other, more

suitable ladies to consult with. Being a Dragonmate was a point in Agnes's personal favor, yes, but that was about all she had going for her. Surely someone else would be more appropriate.

Sighing, Claude put down his teacup. "It's improved," he said, not unkindly, "but you still have *terribly* low self-esteem." His gray eyes pierced Agnes as he went on, "Agnes, you are very lovely and admirable. Your hair is gorgeous, as if it'd been spun from a field of spring flowers. Its luster is so great, I could stare at it for hours. Your eyes sparkle like green jewels and looking at them gives me peace. Even your voice is as clear as the faint tinkling of bells. And your hardworking, self-sufficient attitude towards life is also splendid. Furthermore..."

"P-Please stop..." Agnes stammered, blushing.

At this rate, he'd simply go on and on praising her. So she begged him with a mix of embarrassment and dismay to stop.

He smiled right back at her as he said, "I keep telling you, *you're* the one Zenaide wants to talk to. It's not an issue of being good enough or not. Do you understand?"

"I... I understand..." Agnes said bashfully.

"Really?"

Flustered, she nodded. If she carried on denying it, his praise would just start up again. It embarrassed her more than it pleased her, and she found it so hard to endure.

"Well then," Claude said brightly, "try saying it out loud."

"Out...out loud?!?" Confused, Agnes gazed at his gray eyes, shining brightly.

"'I'm cute. I'm capable...' Okay, say it."

"W-What's that got to do with anything?" Agnes stammered.

"You still lack self-confidence. But you trust me, don't you? Then you can say it," he replied brightly.

"Er... But..."

I want to say these two things aren't mutually exclusive. But looking at his kind gaze, I can't bring myself to keep arguing...

"Do you trust me?" he asked again.

How could she deny him, when he spoke with such a sweet smile?

"I'm...cute. I'm...capable," she said softly.

Suddenly, explosive sounds resounded, as if to drown out Agnes's little mouse squeaks. Two mushrooms with purple caps and stalks: *Laccaria amethystina*. Even as he happily plucked the poisonous-colored mushrooms, Claude's gaze remained trained on Agnes.

"I could barely hear you," he admonished her sweetly. "One more time."

"My goodness..." she murmured.

What a demon. Such a terrifying combination: a demon and a mushroom fetishist... she thought.

Claude placed the *Laccaria amethystina* on the table and gently grabbed Agnes's hand. "Come on...speak up," he said sweetly.

Encouraged by his gentle voice and kind eyes, she once more spoke those terrifying words. Desperate to impress, Agnes sucked in air with all her might.

"I'm cute!" she cried. "I'm capable!"

As she shrieked the words, the door suddenly opened and Kevin stood there, wide-eyed.

She'd been seen! Well, *heard*... Had anything so embarrassing ever happened before?

No! No, no, no, no... she thought in a panic.

Another explosive sound echoed, as if agreeing with her. A *Helvella crispa* appeared on Kevin's shoulder.

"We've finished inspecting the carriage..." he said calmly. "Or..." he went on, grinning devilishly, "do you want us to extend it?"

"E-Extend what?!" Agnes sputtered.

Kevin calmly plucked the mushroom off and put it on the table... *A gift for Claude, perhaps?*

"Um..." she said hesitantly, "a-about what you j-just heard. Listen—"

"It's okay," Kevin smiled, utterly carefree. "You *are* cute, Sis."

This didn't sit well with Agnes at all.

"Th-That's what Claude made me say!" she cried. "I-It wasn't really *me* saying it!"

"Like I said," Kevin grinned, "it's okay. I understand. It's all part of Prince Claude's special training, right?"

Special training... she mused. *That may be so...but to overhear one's sister shouting "I'm cute" to the heavens... Well, Kevin's clearly reaching in his attempts to be understanding...*

"You *are* cute and capable, Sis," Kevin said softly. "Now go and board the carriage."

"B-But... I mean..." Agnes stammered.

First Claude, now Kevin...their praise was embarrassing. Too hard to simply accept. Not knowing what to do, Agnes froze, and Kevin let out a small sigh.

"Then I'll say it too," he said confidently.

"Say what?"

"You're *cute*, Sis! You're capable! There, now we're even!" he beamed.

Even?! Agnes cried in her mind. HOW?!

First, she'd had to endure the embarrassment of her brother overhearing her making such shameful pronouncements. Now she had to listen to him repeat them... It was all just too much.

Before she could open her mouth in protest, Claude, now holding the *Helvella crispa*, began stroking her hair with his other hand.

"I see..." he said softly. "I'm sorry, Agnes. It's tough going it alone. But I'll be with you, so don't worry."

Agnes turned to him, confused, as Claude put the mushroom in his pocket and looked her dead in the eyes, beaming.

“You’re cute, Agnes. You’re capable.”

He gazed adoringly at her, gently caressing her cheek. Agnes felt her face burn. She was so embarrassed in so many ways, she didn’t even know what to say.

“My precious mushroom princess...” Claude said adoringly, “I shall wait for you and the mushrooms. But one day...I hope to express the full force of my love to you. Please...be prepared.”

As he brought his face closer and whispered all this in her ear, Agnes’s face grew even hotter. All she could do was tremble.

If *this* was what Zenaide meant by a Dragonmate’s love being intense...Agnes wasn’t confident she could endure it.





“**AGNES**, what’s wrong?” Claude asked.

She was seated beside him, yet had kept her face firmly turned toward the window since they’d boarded the carriage. If one were to judge the situation based only on this current moment, her behavior would be considered most rude.

Still, she had her reasons.

“What do you *think*?” she hissed in embarrassment. “Why did you have to *carry* me from the house to the carriage?”

Claude had done just that. He’d carried her in his arms from the room they’d been waiting in all the way out to the carriage.

Of course, she’d resisted and argued.

Claude smiled, Kevin grinned, and the servants had looked on warmly. But no one had actually *stopped* him. Embarrassed and still so distrustful of people, Agnes had immediately squirreled out of Claude’s arms when they arrived, clambered into the carriage and had immediately clung to the window, trying to calm herself down.

“Well,” Claude said firmly, “you seemed frozen to the spot. And we had to hurry.”

“Well, whose fault is *that*?!” she huffed. “You could’ve just *asked* me to hurry up.”

Since he’d stroked Agnes’s cheek and whispered into her ear, it was only natural for her to be so startled she couldn’t move. Besides, she wasn’t some delicate, sequestered young woman. If you told her to hurry, she could run at a fair pace.

At any rate, she thought angrily, *he didn’t have to carry me*.

“Besides,” Claude grinned, “I just wanted to touch you, Agnes.”

Against that winning smile, she was powerless. Instead of a rebuttal, another pop resounded inside the carriage. The thing now growing like a clam-shaped

hump on Claude's shoulder was a *Cryptoporus volvatus*. In addition, many small milky white cap mushrooms—*Cuphophyllus virgineus*—were now growing on his other shoulder.

Seeing the mushroom fetishist adorned that way made her feel a little less embarrassed. "I feel like my mushroom sensitivity just keeps increasing..." she sighed.

"That makes me happy," Claude replied as he happily plucked the mushrooms and started arranging them neatly on the plush seat.

He's arranging them not just by type, Agnes reflected, but size as well. A meticulous fetishist.

"By the way..." he asked offhandedly as he went about his business, "why *do* these mushrooms grow for you?"

What a thing to ask!!! He'd apparently never even thought to ask about this before. *Too preoccupied with indulging his mushroom fetish...* she thought wryly.

"It's the spirits' divine protection, it seems," she said.

Actually, she felt it was more like a curse. Either way, that was the given explanation.

"I've heard that," Claude replied, "but are the spirits meant to be those of mushrooms?"

Caught off-guard by this unexpected question, Agnes mulled it over for a while. "Well..." she finally answered, "they look like balls of light and grow medicinal herbs. I don't think they specialize in mushrooms."

"How do you know that these mushrooms are the spirits' protection in the first place?" he asked.

"Because my father said so." Here, she didn't mean her father Count Benoit Lefort, but her birth father, Josse.

"Your biological father was Oreillian, wasn't he?" Claude asked. "Do mushrooms grow in abundance in Oreille?"

He wore a gentle smile on his face, but in Agnes's eyes, he was probably just

fantasizing about mushroom country. If such a paradise nation really existed for mushroom fetishists like him, then Claude's joy would be immeasurable.

"You're not saying you want to *live* in Oreille, are you?" she asked warily.

"That'd be out of the question," Claude replied. "So no worries there."

Was it because he was a member of the royal family that he denied this with such unexpected smoothness? Certainly, he'd never be allowed to relocate to a neighboring country just for mushrooms.

"Did your father sprout mushrooms, too?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "But balls of light always flew around as he grew his medicinal herbs, and it seems he could see the spirits too."

Agnes had never really *asked* him to grow any mushrooms, so she'd no idea whether he could or not.

"You told me before that green eyes indicate 'A Blessing of Nobility,'" Claude mused. "Did your father have them too?"

"Yes, the same color as mine," she said.

"Then your mushroom blessing must be something you inherited from him too."

The spirits' divine protection and her mushroom curse seemed to have mingled and intensified, but she wouldn't call the latter a blessing. Although she certainly *did* appreciate it whenever she got to eat a lot of edible mushrooms.

"My mother couldn't see the spirits," she reflected, "so I think you must be right."

"Agnes. My treasure. You have blessed eyes and hair the color of peach blossoms, my sweet Mushroom Princess... Please, be happy, always."

Once again, she heard her father's voice in her mind. He'd known she'd hated being referred to as the Pink Mushroom Princess. That day had been the one and only time he'd ever called her that.

...Or perhaps that was all just Agnes's dream, an invention of her own mind. Her memories of just before and after the accident were vague, so she wasn't

clear on the truth.

A white shirt with an embroidered collar, a ring with a green stone, her mother's gaze, her father's words. Before she knew it, she'd been all alone in the carriage... Then it'd been nothing but a sea of red...

Claude immediately hugged Agnes, who suddenly realized she was trembling.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did you remember something painful?"

Slowly, Agnes shook her head. Claude looked stricken, as if he himself had just experienced her pain.

He really is so kind.

His thoughtfulness warmed Agnes's heart a little.

"No, it's okay... If it's something I *can* remember, I'd like to remember it."

Agnes remembered her parents a little. But she'd almost no memory of her aunt, who'd also been in the carriage. She wished she could at least say something to Benoit, who had lost his wife. But every time she tried to remember, she felt scared for some reason.

Getting afraid when I don't even know why... How childish. Pathetic.

A large hand gently caressed her head. Agnes realized she'd been biting her lip.

"Don't force yourself," Claude said kindly. "Your family, the mushrooms, me... we all just want you to smile." As if responding to his words, another popping sound resounded and a yellow-brown umbrella-cap mushroom sprouted on Claude's arm. "It's a *Gymnopilus junonius*," he said fondly. "The name means Big Smile Mushroom. Well, big smile or not...as long as you're happy, that's fine with me."

Agnes appreciated his kind words. But it was hard to express that feeling while Claude was distracted plucking the mushroom.

"It's almost time I got you an exclusive bodyguard, Agnes," Claude said. "I worry, though, with you being so charming."

Come to think of it, His Majesty also mentioned bodyguards, so this is

probably inevitable.

“Are you worried I might cause you trouble?” she asked.

“Ah, no, of course not!” Claude said at once. “It’s just...no matter who I assign as your bodyguard, with you being so charming, they’re bound to fall for you, right?”

Claude spoke as if it was a foregone conclusion. But Agnes found the thought ridiculous.

“That’s nonsense,” she replied.

“True,” Claude mused, “no one would be stupid enough to lay hands on you with me around, but I still hate the thought of it. I understand how they’d feel, with you being so charming, of course. But I don’t want anyone around you who’ll look at you that way.”

The mental gymnastics that led to his jealousy were truly stunning to Agnes. Claude seemed to keep forgetting this, but to begin with, her pink hair was universally loathed in this country. On top of *that*, she was a former commoner whose engagement had been publicly annulled by Philip, himself a royal. Just her own personal history was enough to prove that she definitely ranked low among desirable noblewomen.

“Maurice might work,” Claude contemplated, “but as he’s *my* bodyguard, he might resist, saying he doesn’t want to invoke my wrath.”

“Invoke your wrath?” Agnes inquired.

Maurice *was* Claude’s main bodyguard and, since she’d already met him many times, even Agnes found no reason to fear him. But it sounded like he would hate the thought of being Agnes’s bodyguard. It also made sense he wouldn’t want to leave his original post as Claude’s bodyguard, but it also saddened her to think he wouldn’t want to be hers.

“Agnes,” Claude asked suddenly. “Do you like animals?”

“Animals...? I mean...as much as anyone, I guess,” she replied, surprised by the sudden change of topic.

But Claude’s eyes were deadly serious as he went on. “What kind of animals

do you like?”

“Um... Cats, I suppose. They’re soft and fluffy and their meows are so cute. I used to pet the neighborhood cats a lot back in the day.”

She had bittersweet memories, from when she was younger and a commoner, of growing mushrooms to please a cat, only for it to flee from her.

A brown mushroom suddenly popped on Claude’s arm just then. It had needle-like filaments clustered on its underside: clearly a *Steccherinum ochraceum*. This mushroom looked rather fluffy too.

“I see,” Claude replied softly. “...Yes. I understand, now.”

As he skillfully plucked the *Steccherinum ochraceum* and lined it up with the others, he kept nodding.

“Um...Claude?” Agnes asked warily.

“I’ll do my best to protect you, Agnes, no matter what,” he replied firmly, smiling yet gazing at her intensely. A bursting sound resounded, as if lending support to this announcement, and another mushroom sprouted on Claude’s head.

Amanita muscaria with its red cap dotted with white warts.

Yes, her mushroom sensitivity had risen far too much recently, Agnes reflected. At this rate, Claude might end up covered in mushrooms.

Still, she returned his smile, even as a hint of anxiety took hold of her.



Mushrooms of the Day *Laccaria amethystina* A mushroom with a purple cap and stalk, also known as Amethyst Deeper. The color varies from deep purple to pale purple, and it fades when dried, but the pleats’ color remains. Contrary to its poisonous colors, it’s edible, and its flavor and firmness are both good.

It grew hearing Agnes say, “I’m capable.”

It’s training its muscles... I mean, filaments, in order to become a mushroom that shines as brightly as an amethyst, all so Agnes can compliment it.

Helvella crista Gray-brown in color, with a stalk that looks like a bundle of

wooden skewers. It's topped with something that looks like a horse's saddle. If you see it in the mountains, you might wonder what exactly it is. While it is edible, it seems to have a poisonous effect if it's not cooked all the way through. It looks so odd, though, I'm not sure I'd want to eat it at all.

There's nothing more embarrassing than this, Agnes had thought, so this mushroom had come to tell her its embarrassing story of being surrounded by mushrooms. Seeing Agnes and Claude flirting at close range made it feel happy, but also a little awkward.

Cryptoporus volvatus A clam-shaped mushroom that grows on the sides of trees, it's cream-colored below and brown and shiny above. Like a chestnut stuck in a tree. It has a delicious name and looks delicious, but it doesn't seem to *be* delicious. A shrewd mushroom that wants to be stroked whenever there is a chance.

Claude said, "I just wanted to touch you, Agnes," so it came along bellowing its own passion, saying, "I want to be touched by Agnes, too!" Sadly though, it's just a mushroom, so no one understood it.

Cuphophyllus virgineus A cute little mushroom with a milky white cap. It's used in vinegared or traditional Japanese dishes and it has a mild flavor that makes it very easy to eat. A mushroom that adores romance, it grows without fail when sensing love in the air.

"I want to be held, carried, and most of all, stroked!" it bellowed as it sprouted, then it shook its cap in delight.

Steccherinum ochraceum It clings to trees, its back is velvety with pale orange-brown to dark brown stripes, and its belly is densely covered with fluffy needles. It has a cinnamon-like scent that remains even after drying.

Agnes recalled how much she loved cats for being fluffy, so it sprouted to show her that "Mushrooms can be fluffy too," as it said (though no one understood it). But the inside of the carriage was suddenly enveloped in a haze of cinnamon.

Amanita muscaria It looks like the poisonous mushroom from storybooks, with white warts on a red cap resembling polka dots. It may resemble the 1ups from a certain video game franchise you may've heard of, but you wouldn't

want to try eating a real one! A mushroom that grows when it perceives the red filament of fate, it's also the mushroom that Claude fell in love with at first sight.

When he said, "I will protect Agnes no matter what," the mushroom said, "Well said! I'll protect Agnes too!"

Chapter 1: Unwitting Love Talk and the Spring of Romance

“LADY AGNES!!!”

The moment Agnes was guided to the correct room in the royal palace, the door flew open, and a raven-haired girl charged her. By the time she'd realized it was Simone, collision was unavoidable, so all she could do was brace for impact to avoid getting hurt.

But the next moment, arms stretched out from behind and wrapped around Agnes. A popping sound reached her ears and she realized what had happened.

“Lady Simone,” she heard Claude say, not unkindly, “that’s dangerous, isn’t it? I don’t want Agnes to get hurt. It’s a good thing that this *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis* acted as a cushion.”

On Claude’s waist, there now grew a tan, cracked umbrella-cap mushroom. Its large cap, which stretched from Simone’s head to her waist, appeared to have acted as a cushion.

“Oh, excuse me!” Simone said breathlessly. “I was so excited to see Lady Agnes again, I couldn’t control myself... Thank you, Mr. Mushroom.” She paused to catch her breath. “By the way, Your Highness, you have official business today, right? Don’t stand here on ceremony! Off you go!”

With Agnes in his arms, Claude let out a sigh and relaxed his tensed muscles.

“Agnes,” he said. “I can’t escort you home. So, if you need anything, contact me via the servants. I think you should be fine since Zenaide is here. But if you feel uncomfortable in any way, please speak up.”

Agnes wasn’t sure *what* kind of scenarios he was imagining, but she was certain nothing would happen during the tea party that’d warrant her interrupting Claude’s official duties.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, “so please go. Also, you don’t need to take me home if you have official business. Or rather, I don’t think you need to escort me every

time.”

Maybe he was being overprotective because of the time she’d been kidnapped from Duke Wattau’s mansion. But *this* was the royal palace. And anyway, Claude would be in the palace still. *There’s no need to worry so much*, she fretted to herself.

“Well...” Claude said coyly. “I like to spend as much time with you as I possibly can.”

He looped a lock of her hair around his finger and smiled. His beauty and sensuality took Agnes’s breath away. Even with a giant mushroom growing from his hip, he was as dashing as ever.

“Th-That’s, um... Thank you...?”

Claude looked at Agnes, now so flustered she was flubbing her words. He narrowed his eyes, then dropped his lips to her pink hair.

“Well then, Zenaide,” he said. “Excuse me.”

Agnes watched him, pink staining her cheeks, as he executed a perfect bow and then turned to go. Dashingly, he plucked the mushroom from his waist and slung it over his shoulder, like a brave soldier heading to battle.

Still...really! Agnes huffed to herself. *He didn’t have to go and do a thing like that in front of Princess Zenaide and Lady Simone. Why can’t he just be normal? The servants were watching, too...*

As Agnes sat there, too embarrassed to know what to do, she felt Simone gently squeeze her hand.

“What’s with *him*?” she huffed. “All I did was seize the opportunity to give you a big hug and have myself a bit of fun, Lady Agnes.”

“It was more like a collision than a hug,” Zenaide reprimanded. “If Claude and the mushroom hadn’t protected her, Agnes might’ve been injured. Please apologize properly, Simone.”

What exactly does she mean by “fun...?” Agnes wondered.

“I’m sorry, Lady Agnes...” Simone’s shoulders slumped. Sometimes she said strange things, but Agnes was happy to have Simone around. She treated Agnes

so warmly, without discrimination.

“It’s okay,” Agnes replied, smiling warmly. “I hope you weren’t harmed, Lady Simone?”

Simone should’ve taken some damage because of that collision, even with Claude acting as a shock absorber. That was what Agnes thought anyway, hence her question. But Simone’s eyes began to sparkle like stars.

“Oh, Lady Agnes! Concerned about me?! *Ahh*, so precious! Your beautiful hair and eyes! Your kind consideration! Are you a fairy? A *goddess*? Oh! If only I’d been born a man...!”

Agnes withdrew a little as Simone clutched her head and began wailing. Zenaide sighed heavily.

“I’m sorry, Lady Agnes,” she said, a bit embarrassed. “It’s been a while, so she appears to be having Agnes withdrawal symptoms.”

“W-Withdrawal symptoms?”

Why?! We’ve barely spent any time together to begin with...

Agnes was glad she wasn’t being bullied for once. But Simone’s behavior was a little bit beyond her comprehension.

After Zenaide calmed down the excited Simone and Agnes finally took her seat, tea was prepared. The teacups in the royal palace were so delicately carved, just looking at them was fun. When Agnes took a sip, the scent of sweet fruit tickled her nose and made her smile.

Simone, who’d been watching her without even drinking a sip of her own tea, let out a deep sigh of contentment. “*Ahhh*,” she swooned. “Just her drinking tea is like something out of a magical painting. Her pink hair sways with her movement, shining where it catches the light...”

“Simone, could you please be quiet?”

Chastised by Zenaide, Simone reluctantly brought the teacup to her mouth.

“I hope it’s all right that I invited you to the royal palace today?” Zenaide asked.

At first she'd been worried that inviting Agnes to the royal palace would make her anxious, so she'd invited her to her father's residence. Unfortunately, then the kidnapping incident had happened, so they couldn't exactly use the duke's residence again.

"I won't say I'm not nervous," Agnes admitted, "but I was definitely looking forward to seeing you both."

That wasn't a lie. To Agnes, who'd been ignored and ridiculed in social circles all her life, these two women of her generation, who treated her normally, were worth their weight in gold.

Agnes was very pleased. She'd been worried they might not invite her again after the kidnapping incident. It was possible that Claude had pushed for this. But even so, she thought the two ladies were very kind, since they hadn't refused and were willing to see her anyway.

A teacup landed on a saucer with a loud clang.

Agnes looked up in surprise to find Simone trembling and looking at her.

Did I say something wrong? she wondered.

However, before Agnes could try to apologize, Simone let out a high-pitched shriek. "Oh my GOODNESS! Did you hear, Zenaide? Did you hear that? Did you?!"

Simone banged on the table, got up and started jumping up and down on the spot.

"Lady Agnes wanted to meet *me*! She said she's been looking forward to it...! Oh, Zenaide! I'm going to dedicate myself to somehow becoming Simone Lefort from today!"

What Simone was saying was outrageous, but Zenaide remained quite calm.

"Calm *down*, Simone. And anyway, Agnes is to become a Visage. You'll end up in different families after all, if you do that."

"*Oh!* I hadn't thought of that! Buuuuuuuuuut it might not be bad to wait around at home for Lady Agnes, either! Are the Leforts in search of a maid, do you know?!"

“Er, um...”

Agnes had no idea why Simone wanted to become a Lefort, but there was no way a duke’s daughter could become a maid at a count’s household, anyway. However, not knowing where to start explaining this, Agnes found herself at a loss. Then, with a popping sound, a mushroom grew on Simone’s arm.

The yellow-brown umbrella was a *Panellus serotinus*. Agnes wished it hadn’t sprouted just then, as it was making the conversation even more complicated.

“Oh!” Simone cried happily. “Another mushroom! This is a greeting mushroom from Lady Agnes, isn’t it? I’ll cherish it always!”

“Oh, um...” Agnes explained awkwardly. “Even if you cherish it, it will just wither away.”

“Then I shall eat it with great enjoyment!”

Yes, but... You’re missing the point...

Just as Agnes had completely lost the thread, Zenaide stuffed Simone’s mouth with cookies.

“Glorb!”

Zenaide simply smiled elegantly, ignoring Simone, who was complaining loudly even though her mouth was full.

“More importantly,” Zenaide spoke over her sister, “it seems that the royal family of Oreille will be visiting us soon for His Majesty’s birthday celebrations.”

Zenaide’s smile never faltered as she gracefully forced her sister back into her chair. She continued the conversation over Simone’s loud chewing that was most unbecoming of a duke’s daughter.

“This time the prince and princess of Oreille are joining the king as well,” she said.

“Glorp... *Gwaah!*” Simone, having now washed down the cookies with black tea, calmly joined the conversation. “That’s unusual. Even though the previous generation never once visited Visage.”

Agnes had always thought a noble’s daughter was supposed to be the picture

of grace and manners. But there seemed to be all sorts of ladies out there and Agnes decided not to judge them solely by their social standing.

“A king does not leave his kingdom that often,” Zenaide said coolly. “I’m sure the previous king had his own reasons.”

“Doesn’t that make this visit even more unusual? Why—” Simone suddenly froze, her eyes widening. “No *wayyyy!* Is he coming to see Lady Agnes’s beautiful hair?! This must mean the appearance of my new formidable rival...!”

“I really don’t think the king of a foreign kingdom could or *should* know about my hair,” Agnes protested. “Anyway... I *really* don’t think that’s the reason.”

“And *speaking* of rivals,” Zenaide chimed in, smiling slyly, “*Claude* would already be your strongest enemy, little sister. But regardless, those two are engaged. *You* are the extraneous party here.”

Simone pouted in dissatisfaction. But Agnes was pleased she wasn’t tip-toeing around the subject of her hair. While she found this conversation most confusing and a little intimidating, it was still very fun to chat with people who were on her side, for a change.

“Lady Agnes,” Zenaide said, “you will also be participating in His Majesty’s birthday ball as Claude’s fiancée.”

Since Claude *was* the second prince in the line of succession, it was only natural he’d take part in a ball to which Oreille’s king and royal family had been invited. And it was only natural that Agnes would participate, since she was to join the royal family as his eventual wife.

“I’m nervous,” she confessed, “but I’ll do my best not to cause any trouble for Prince Claude.”

“Me too! I’ll do my best to protect you, Lady Agnes!”

At the same time Simone raised her hand, there was a pop and another yellow-brown umbrella-cap mushroom grew on the back of her hand. After looking at the new *Panellus serotinus* for a moment, Simone plucked it vigorously and held her hand high.

“Mr. Mushroom...” she grinned, “let’s protect Lady Agnes together!”

All Agnes could think to do in response to this was smile wryly.

“What’ll happen if Lady Simone *also* develops an extreme mushroom fetish...” Agnes worried.

“She already has an Agnes fetish,” Zenaide smiled, “so it’s fine.”

Nothing being said was fine as far as Agnes was concerned, but Zenaide’s impregnable smile didn’t waver.

“If the king doesn’t usually leave his country...” Agnes wondered suddenly, “then does that mean Prince Claude has to go abroad in his stead?”

Usually, the crown prince would act on behalf of the king. But, of course, he had his own official duties to see to. If a trip required being away from the country for a long period of time, it’d make more sense for another royal to be sent as a figurehead.

“No, no,” Zenaide replied. “It would be Gerome, if anyone.”

It was certainly true that the second-born prince, Gerome, was the next most likely candidate to go in order of siblings. *But why not Claude?*

“Um—” Agnes began to say.

“Lady Agnes,” Simone butted in, “is this the same mushroom as the one that grew on me before? That one was *very* fluffy and delicious.”

“Huh? Ah, yes, one of those *did* sprout on you once before, Lady Simone,” Agnes recalled. Then the full import of what Simone had just said struck. “Are you saying,” she asked in alarm, “that you...you *ate* it?”

“Lady Agnes’s mushroom?” Simone said, beaming. “But of course! I wouldn’t give it to anyone else! I’m going to eat it all by myself again tonight!”

While this particular mushroom *was* edible, the concept of eating a mysterious mushroom that sprouted on you ought to have been quite nerve-wracking.

“Simone,” Zenaide admonished, “you might want to relearn your manners.”

“That’s right!” Simone cried suddenly. “I have to do at least *that* much to be worthy of joining Lady Agnes’s family!”

Her motivations certainly sound strange, Agnes thought. Just what does she mean by “become family,” anyway...?

Zenaide was Claude’s sister-in-law, so it was accurate to say they’d already be part of the same family.

At any rate, Agnes resolved to try to move forward without causing any upset. Zenaide gave her a gentle smile to support Agnes and her sense of resolve.



“FIRST OFF, I’m very relieved you are officially engaged to Prince Claude.”

Placing his teacup down, Count Benoit Lefort took a deep breath.

Once Agnes returned to the Lefort mansion, she began drinking tea with her family. Certainly, her engagement with Claude was established, but did this matter *need* to be discussed so seriously?

“It seems that good-for-nothing has also withdrawn into the Barthet territory. Good, good.”

Benoit ate some cake with satisfaction. The reason why Agnes’s ex-fiancé, Philip, had withdrawn into the Marquis de Barthet’s estate wasn’t due to being some sort of shut-in. He’d been forced to get married as punishment for attempting to harm Prince Claude’s Dragonmate. Dragonmates weren’t public knowledge, so they couldn’t make a big issue of the incident officially for fear of tarnishing Agnes’s name instead. That was why they made it look like Philip willingly withdrew into his territory.

“And it sounds like your mushrooms caused him some major hair loss, Sis,” Kevin chimed in cheerily, drinking his tea with a sunny expression. “Excellent stuff. Let’s hope he *never* shows his face in public again.”

Philip had been badly balded by Agnes’s mushrooms more than once. Again, though, this wasn’t public knowledge, so all Agnes could do was nod and smile vaguely.

“Never mind about that good-for-nothing diseased hair follicle. As long as Agnes is happy, that’s all that matters. Let him be as bald as a plucked chicken!”

Diseased...hair follicle? That’s a funny way to refer to Philip. And why did that

last part sound like a curse?

Since Philip had been ejected from the royal family, it made sense that Benoit hadn't called him "that good-for-nothing prince," but...why "diseased hair follicle?" She'd been wondering for quite a while now why Benoit's obsession with the state of Philip's hair seemed to run so deep.

"His Majesty's birthday celebration will be your first official ball as Prince Claude's fiancée," Benoit said. "I heard other royal families will also be in attendance?"

"It seems the royal family of Oreille will be visiting," Agnes said.

Benoit's fork paused midair, and then he immediately stabbed the strawberry on top of his cake. "...Unusual, that, isn't it?" he mused.

"Yes. I heard it's quite rare for another king to actually visit," Agnes responded.

"No *doubt* it will be a glamorous affair. Are you going to be able to handle it, Sis?"

As Philip's fiancé, Agnes had rarely participated in such events, and when she did, she was made to leave as early as possible. So she wasn't accustomed to such events. Besides, she spent those events trying to hide her peach-blossom-colored hair and not stand out, so she didn't really remember having any fun. Furthermore, quite a few people had followed Philip's lead and ignored Agnes or made fun of her. If she was to attend the king's birthday festival, then she supposed she'd be running into these people, whether she liked it or not. No wonder Kevin was worried.

"I can't say I'm *completely* fine with it," she admitted. "But it's something I *have* to do, so I have to get used to it. Besides, Claude will be there, so even if mushrooms do end up sprouting, I think he'll be able to handle things. After all, his mushroom-handling skills are outstanding, so it should be no issue for him to casually harvest and stash the evidence. Even *if* he is spotted with mushrooms, he won't get any backlash since he's a prince."

Agnes explained all that wanting them to be reassured, but for some reason Kevin grinned.

“It’s a good thing that you’re being so positive about this,” he said. “You really trust the prince, don’t you?”

“I...trust in his mushroom fetish,” Agnes replied blushing.

When it comes to mushrooms, she reflected, there aren’t a lot of mushroom fetishists out there who can stand in line with him, after all.

You might say that Claude was the ideal companion, mushroom-wise.

“That’s part of it, yeah,” Kevin said. “But if Prince Claude’s by your side, you’ll feel at ease too, right? It’s great to have a partner you can trust.”

Agnes was about to nod, then something occurred to her. *As long as Claude’s there, I can feel at ease, can be myself... In other words, isn’t this what people call...gushing about a loved one?*

“Eh, um... I didn’t mean it like that.”

As she got flustered and rushed to deny it, Kevin laughed.

“Yes, you did,” he argued. “And it’s fine! Go ahead and gush away. I’ll tell you when it gets to be too much.”

“Noooooooo, I don’t want to!”

She *liked* Claude and trusted him. But there was no need for her to gush like a girl in love, surely.

Kevin grinned at Agnes, who blushed in embarrassment. He seemed to be in a good mood. “In *that* case,” he grinned, “then you two must finally be embarking on your romance. ...Ah! But we’d better not talk about that. A certain diseased hair follicle may pop back up again.”

“Then what about *you*, Father?” Agnes asked, desperate to change the subject. “Can you regale us with how your romance with Auntie began?”

Benoit, who’d now finished eating his cake, rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Ours was a normal marriage, arranged by our parents,” he finally said. “There’s nothing very interesting to tell about the start of our romance.”

“Then what about Uncle Josse and Auntie Elise?” Kevin asked.

Kevin’s uncle and aunt were Benoit’s sister and her husband. Agnes’s birth

parents. *Come to think of it*, Agnes realized with a jolt, *I've never heard about how they had gotten acquainted.*

Agnes looked at Benoit with great interest, and he took a sip of tea before releasing a small sigh.

"Elise and Josse met at the Prayer Spring."

"The Prayer Spring?" she asked. She'd never heard that name before. Where was it?

"It's in the Barthet territory," Benoit explained. "Although it's small, it's very beautiful. It's said that if a couple prays there together, their wish will come true."

There was a popping sound and a mushroom grew on Kevin's arm. The gray-brown cap with blackish-brown warts was probably an *Amanita spissacea*.

"Huh, how romantic..." Kevin muttered. "But the Barthet territory, eh? When I think of that good-for-nothing diseased hair follicle being there, it's so off-putting." Kevin sipped his tea as if to soothe his dissatisfaction, then plucked the mushroom and put it on the table.

"I'd like to go someday..." Agnes said.

The place where a commoner from Oreille and a count's daughter first met. The place that led to my birth. I wonder if the reason I feel drawn to that fountain...is because I want to see them again.

Benoit looked at Agnes and narrowed his eyes, nodding slightly. "But first," he said swiftly, "the birthday party. What will you do about a dress?"

"Claude said the royal palace will make me one," Agnes replied, clearly embarrassed.

The clothing atelier in the royal palace—known as Commode—was originally reserved for *just* the royal family. Even though Agnes had already had several dresses made for her there, she still felt a little intimidated.

"You're really being taken care of, huh, Sis?" Kevin remarked, impressed.

"Yes," Agnes replied. "I appreciate it very much."

“We all wish you happiness, Agnes,” Benoit said warmly.

The moment the two men smiled, a yellow-brown umbrella-cap mushroom grew on Benoit’s shoulder with a popping sound. Benoit plucked the *Boletus reticulatus* and placed it next to the *Amanita spissacea*.

“It seems...” Benoit said in bemusement, “that the mushrooms are also wishing you much happiness. Please, mushrooms, do take care of Agnes.”

As if in response to Benoit’s unusually serious gaze, Matsutake covered with brown fibrous scales and white skin, began popping up, one after another.

Recently, Agnes’s mushroom sensitivity had increased in spades, and it was starting to feel as if the people around her were subconsciously talking to her mushrooms. The Matsutake kept sprouting, as if to provide support to Agnes as she grappled with feelings she found hard to describe.



Mushrooms of the Day *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis* Yellowish-brown or orange-brown caps, around 30cm 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 Japanese melon bread. It’s not poisonous. But apparently, it draws a lot of flies.

It hastily grew to protect Agnes from a collision and acted as a buffer.

Accepting Simone’s apology, it still admonished her by saying, “Be careful from now on.” But Simone didn’t hear this since it’s a mushroom.

Panellus serotinus An edible mushroom with a light brown semicircular cap. Under the cap, it has gelatinous scales that can fall off. When cooked, it turns soft and gelatinous, which it’s proud of. It grew claiming that it, like Simone, would become a maid of the Lefort household, saying, “A mushroom is a must in that house.”

“Let’s protect Agnes together,” it said, wobbling its gelatin with determination.

Amanita spissacea A mushroom with a dark gray cap with dark brown warts, resembling leopard print. Its flesh is white and mostly tasteless. But it’s

poisonous, so don't eat it! The mushroom braves *have* been challenging themselves again, haven't they?

It wears leopard print like old ladies who love gossip, and has a personality to match. *Cuphophyllus virgineus* is its gossip pal. Hearing about the romantic Prayer Spring, it sprouted, telling the younger mushrooms, "How nice. You have to enjoy this kind of thing while you're still young."

Boletus reticulatus A mushroom with a yellow-brown cap that gets a slimy surface when it's damp. It resembles Porcini mushrooms and is just as tasty. It's confident in its taste and scent and pairs really well with pasta.

Hearing Benoit say, "We all wish you happiness, Agnes," it sprouted to insist, "All us mushrooms love Agnes!"

Matsutake

A high-grade mushroom known to most, covered in fibrous scales with white flesh showing underneath. What better reason to check out the roots of a pine tree than to locate one of them? A VIP in the world of edible mushrooms. Very Important Mushroom...er...VIM?

A member of the *Mycorrhiza* Club, and good friends with the Shimeji.

It was happy that Benoit had entrusted Agnes to them, so it did its best to grow as a representative of edible mushrooms. Tonight, the Lefort Residence will be enveloped in the scent of Matsutake mushrooms.

Chapter 2: Get Accustomed to It Bit by Bit, Okay?

“THERE. How’s that?”

Agnes set down the watering can, put her hands on her hips, and looked out over the field. For a long time, she’d gone to the shops in town to sell her medicinal herbs. But recently, she’d been refraining from doing so.

Ordinary medicinal herbs don’t bring much income, she’d reasoned, and selling too many special medicinal herbs will make me stand out.

Now that the epidemic had subsided, the medicinal herbs blessed with the spirits’ divine protection were no longer needed. She grew them mainly for the king’s sickly younger brother, Duke Granier.

Agnes used the spirits’ power to make them sprout, but she had tried collecting the seeds herself so she didn’t have to summon them each and every time. However, that hadn’t ended up working very well. So, she’d had to borrow the spirits’ power each time and raise the plants from scratch.

There were only a few medicinal herbs and vegetables still growing in the field, since she’d just done a big harvest the other day.

...Ah! she realized. But there’s another type of plant life here...

A brown-capped mushroom was sitting on the ridge she was gazing at. For some reason, these *Lyophyllum decastes* growing in the field liked that little ridge, and always grew back as soon as they were plucked. Agnes had the feeling that mushrooms didn’t usually grow from the soil like that. But she figured there was no point in worrying about that at this point.

For the time being, she thought, I want to grow a few more medicinal herbs.

It seemed that Duke Granier was improving with her processed-herb tablets, and Agnes was happy to be of help. That was why she needed to grow her herbs systematically, so she didn’t run out of ingredients.

Resolved, Agnes took a deep breath.

“...Spirits! Hello!”

Once again, as she raised her voice in a perky, upbeat way, a fluffy ball of light appeared in response. Agnes had no idea *why* the spirits liked being addressed like children. But she had no alternative when that was the only voice they responded to. She couldn't overthink it. If she started getting embarrassed, she wouldn't sound convincing. Already a losing battle, perhaps, but Agnes wanted to at least come away with the goods.

“Ummmm, so...” she said cutely, “I want you to grow those medicinal herbs again today. You know, the usual ones. Would you mind, sweeties...?”

Agnes put her hand to her ear theatrically and tilted her head. The ball of light flashed and flew around the ridge, and soon, many buds had sprouted.

“Thank you, Spirits! I love you!”

After Agnes waved her arms so much that they almost popped off, the ball of light disappeared as if it was satisfied. She'd somehow managed to motivate them again today. But Agnes was worried that she'd be mentally and physically exhausted if she had to keep this up for the rest of her life.

No, no! We need these herbs to help people, so just...do your best here! She admonished herself. Clenching her fists and reaching for her watering can with renewed determination, she noticed two figures at the entrance to the field.

It was Claude and Kevin, frozen with their mouths open.



Shame swallowed Agnes all at once. As if in response, green umbrella-capped mushrooms grew on Claude and Kevin's arms. A few yellow caps joined in the mix, but they all looked like *Hygrocybe psittacina*.

"I was..." Kevin said haltingly, "going to say that His Highness was here to pick you up, but... *Er*, I'm sorry."

"Ohhh..." Agnes moaned.

She'd been seen talking to the spirits a few times already. But that didn't make it any less embarrassing. Actually, she would prefer to have been prepared and shown it off herself. But it was just too embarrassing to know she'd been witnessed making a fool of herself. Her cheeks felt like they were boiling.

She wanted to run away. But the two young men, now unwitting witnesses, were also, in a way, victims. And anyway, Claude would never make fun of, criticize, or think badly of her. So as embarrassed as she was, Agnes had no choice but to silently endure it.

That's the price of losing the battle, she thought grimly. *Perseverance is required of losers*.

Claude slowly approached Agnes, who bit her lip and tried not to tremble in embarrassment. Usually, she'd be pleased to see him. But right now, she didn't want him to look at her.

Gently reaching out his hand and stroking Agnes's hair, Claude smiled. There was no ridicule in his expression; Agnes could only feel care and affection.

Having calmed down a little, she exhaled slowly.

"I came at a bad time," Claude said suddenly. "I'm sorry..."

"No," Agnes said, her jaw set. "It's my fault."

"Listen, Agnes, you didn't do anything wrong. *I'm* the one who visited without letting you know in advance, and Kevin was just doing his duty to show me the way. If anyone's to blame, it's *me*, not you, Agnes. So you don't have to apologize. "

She nodded reluctantly as his brilliant gray eyes gazed into hers.

“But, Prince Claude...you did nothing wrong.”

Unable to drop it, Agnes tried to insist. Claude smiled wryly and just stroked her hair again.

“By the way...” he said with an unmistakable hint of excitement. “I see there’re mushrooms sprouting in the field. Are you cultivating these?”

Seeing the *Lyophyllum decastes* enshrined on the ridge like that, even a mushroom fetishist would find the scene odd. They didn’t grow in soil, so it was only natural to be intrigued by their presence there.

“Those just started growing on their own,” she said.

“Is that so? ...Those *Lyophyllum decastes*, all standing on the ridge like that... so beautiful.” As he muttered those words, half-enchanted, a popping sound resounded and the number of mushrooms lined up on the ridge doubled.

“Don’t stimulate the mushrooms,” Agnes admonished. They’re already more sensitive than ever!”

“But that’s so wonderful!” Claude said, his eyes sparkling.

He really *was* nothing more than a mushroom fetishist to the core. It was foolish to try to stop him.

“It’s for my uncle that you’re growing these herbs anyway, Agnes,” Claude said brightly. “Thanks to you, he’s been able to show his face in public again. I really *am* grateful.”

The expression on his face was serene as he tightly squeezed her hand.

A Dragon Crest Bearer who doesn’t have a Dragonmate weakens bit by bit, Agnes reflected, from the time they reach adulthood. No wonder Claude’s so happy. Not only has his beloved uncle been saved, but the future he might’ve faced himself has been averted.

“So don’t be shy,” Claude said. “I like each and every side of you, Agnes.”

“But...it’s so embarrassing.”

They had had a good mood going, but his comment reminded her of what she’d wanted to forget. Anyway you cut it, acting the perky older sister type...

made her all sorts of embarrassed.

“I understand,” Claude continued, “how the spirits feel when they see you being so cheerful and cute. And I also understand how those mushrooms lined up on the ridge feel.”

What is this mushroom fetishist empathizing about now? Agnes thought, trying not to roll her eyes. She was slightly taken aback at this, but her embarrassment suddenly became irrelevant. *Could it be that Claude intentionally distracted me?*

“A *Lyophyllum decastes* that grows in a field... Just amazing!” Claude gushed.

This man...gleefully cooing over these mushrooms...is nothing more than an unrepentant mushroom fetishist!

But Claude never once criticized her. He accepted her unconditionally. Nothing could make Agnes happier. His acceptance helped her to accept herself.

“Yes, yes, that’s enough mushroom love,” Kevin sighed, exasperated. “It’s almost time to go. Please flirt to your heart’s content in the carriage.”

Agnes was about to splutter a protest in response to his shocking choice of words, but he simply nudged her sharply in the back.

“Sis, go change first. *Then* we’ll talk. Be quick about it!”

Agnes found herself being pushed back into the house by Kevin’s momentum.

Is it just my imagination...or is Kevin more of a mother than a younger brother these days?

She still felt dissatisfied. But she certainly couldn’t keep Claude and the carriage waiting, so she went to her room and quickly changed clothes.



“**MUSHROOMS** that grow on trees are lovely, but so are the ones that grow in fields, aren’t they? I saw something really splendid today.”

Claude kept talking, even after they’d got into the carriage, unable to suppress his excitement over mushrooms.

“You really *do* love mushrooms,” Agnes sighed.

Claude blinked in surprise, then smiled. “Yes, I do love them. But I love *you* more.”

“That’s *not* what I was trying to say...”

“May I sit next to you?”

“C-Certainly...”

Even if they were already sitting next to each other, Claude always made sure to check he had her consent. It was out of concern for Agnes as, traumatized by the carriage accident that’d taken her parents, she could usually only ride comfortably with family members.

“Recently,” Claude commented, “you’ve become comfortable sitting next to me in the carriage. All that practice has paid off.”

It *was* true that Agnes had gone out in a carriage several times with him for practice, so indeed, she must’ve gotten somewhat used to it.

“You seem to be having a good time,” she remarked.

“Well, as much as I love getting to see you from the front, I enjoy sitting beside you even more.” With a big smile, Claude reached out and stroked her hair.

Everything from his voice to his gestures were incredibly gentle, and Agnes felt her heart skip a beat. With a popping sound, a pair of red and black funnel-shaped mushrooms grew on Claude’s arm. The *Gomphus fluccosus* and the *Craterellus cornucopioides* made fricative sounds that matched Claude’s movement.

“Claude...” Agnes said, trying not to blush. “You always say the most blush-inducing things without any lead-up. Have you *always* been this way?”

She only said this as a pretext for changing the subject. But Claude thought her question over carefully for a few moments.

“I don’t know... I’ve never loved anyone before you, so I’m just saying what I think.”

Never...loved anyone before me...

Agnes was relieved to hear him say that. Yet, at the same time, she felt a little embarrassed. It was so arrogant of her to care about the past when Claude treasured her so well in the present.

How shallow of me...

As Agnes felt sadness sink into her, she hung her head. Claude's hand suddenly came down gently on top of hers. It seemed he'd been harvesting the mushrooms before Agnes even noticed. The two red and black mushrooms were neatly lined up on the seat opposite him.

"I think it's better," he said sincerely, "to openly tell you of my affection. Because of Philip, your self-esteem took a huge hit. I don't think you even *know* how much I care about you."

"...I'm sorry..." Agnes said sadly. "I know you care about me. I haven't repaid you in kind enough."

Claude often told Agnes of his feelings and always treated her with care. She knew that. In truth, she knew she should be more proactive in returning his feelings. But she often didn't know how to. She was afraid to do anything different than usual, thinking she'd come off as annoying. But she'd made up her mind to believe Claude. So she resolved she'd simply have to work harder.

"Agnes, look at me."

Prompted by Claude's gentle voice, Agnes lifted her face and stared into those kind, gray eyes.

"There's no need to worry about giving back," Claude said, almost like he'd read her mind. "I just want to thank you for being alive. I'm sure you don't know how happy I am...to have you by my side." With a troubled smile, he stretched out his hand and stroked Agnes's cheek. "Even so, I *still* have a lot of feelings I want to convey," he said, his voice dropping slightly.

"Oh, uh..." Agnes stammered.

With a popping sound, a small mushroom with a milky white cap and a flat scarlet mushroom grew on Claude's shoulder. Shockingly, he paid no attention

to the *Cuphophyllus virgineus* or the *Pycnoporus coccineus* and simply kept gazing at her, a soft look in his eyes.

He was so close, his breath tickled Agnes's cheeks. But the moment she finally opened her mouth to say something, the carriage stopped.

"Oh, it looks like we've arrived. Too bad." With a smile on his face, Claude took his hand off Agnes's cheek.

She felt relieved, but, at the same time, it felt somewhat lonely. Her heart was pounding so hard, it was almost painful.

Claude was always so *kind*. Always saying such sweet words.

But Agnes could feel something was changing, little by little. She didn't know if it was a change in her or Claude.

"A Dragonmate's love is intense," Claude said huskily. "Just get accustomed to it bit by bit, okay?"

Before Agnes could reply, he scooped up her hand and kissed it. His voice, and the soft feel of his lips on her hand, were fluster-inducing, and Agnes could only nod.



WHEN the green doors to the royal palace swung open, a collection of waiting servants bowed their heads.

"Your Highness, Lady Agnes. Thank you for gracing us with your presence. Please, right this way," said Delalande, head of the clothing atelier.

After she'd escorted Agnes inside and offered her a seat on the sofa, the other servants returned to their posts.

Agnes felt bad that they'd had to interrupt their duties just to greet her. But she supposed it couldn't be avoided since she'd arrived with Claude, a prince.

"Um..." she said awkwardly. "Please...allow me to apologize for the other day. I'm afraid I caused you all a lot of trouble by crying all of a sudden."

When Agnes last visited the royal tailor shop, she'd recalled her late father's words during a conversation with Delalande. She'd been so overcome with

emotion, she'd shed tears, which had made it look as if Delalande had said something to upset her. Moreover, she'd been so upset they'd had to cancel the day's fitting so she could return home. It must've been extremely rude of her.

Claude knew the reasons for her emotional breakdown, so Agnes was certain the tailor had avoided any kind of punishment for her actions. But she still wanted to apologize.

Delalande blinked in surprise, smiled, and immediately prepared a pot of tea in front of Agnes. "Not at all," she said brightly. "Lady Agnes, there's no need for you to worry... I'm the one who should apologize for not comforting you better. Now, what would you like today?"

"I was thinking of having a dress made for His Majesty's birthday party," Claude said.

Delalande nodded vigorously. "A dress for a grand feast, to which the royal family of Oreille are invited. This will *really* be a test of our skills!"

No sooner had she spoken than Delalande started arranging several design proposals on the table.

"Her Highness the Crown Princess," she went on, "always wears an elegant dress, but I think Lady Agnes should wear something with a gorgeous feel to it that accentuates her cuteness."

"Oh, that sounds good," Claude enthused. "Agnes is cute no matter what she wears, though."

"Since the 'King of Flowers' will be here," Delalande said, "it'd be nice to have a dress with a flower motif."

"The King of Flowers...?" Agnes asked in confusion, tilting her head over the unfamiliar title.

Delalande slowly nodded. "The Oreillian royal family," she explained, "have several names for the powers and characteristics of the spirits' divine protection. Right now, it's the 'King of Flowers.' The previous king was called, if I remember right, the 'King of Roots.'"

Different countries have their different cultures and customs, of course, Agnes thought, *but what a fascinating naming convention.* Even so, she wondered if the roots and the flowers in those names were meant to represent plants.

“But...” Agnes said suddenly as the thought occurred to her, “if the king’s name has a flower attached to it, wouldn’t it be rude to wear a dress with a flower motif?”

“It’s perfectly fine,” Delalande said. “There are many people who have the divine protection of flowers. It’d be a bit of a problem if you decorated your whole body with flowers. But wearing flowers is, in itself, a sign of respect.”

Ah...so it’s meant as a sign of respect, Agnes thought as she nodded in understanding. She certainly didn’t want to turn her whole body into a flower display. But she was grateful to be able to learn things she didn’t know. As long as she was to attend with Claude as his fiancée, she wanted to avoid causing trouble with her ignorance.

“Agnes looks stunning adorned with flowers,” her prince said brightly, “so it sounds perfect to me.”

“Well then,” Delalande said, “let’s get started. A fabric that arrived the other day has a nice color and a nice texture and perfectly fits Lady Agnes’s vibe. It will accentuate her flowery and eye-catching beauty!” As she said this, she stood up and quickly disappeared into the back room. She’d probably just gone to get the fabric. But still, Agnes was a little alarmed by her excitement.

“Somehow...” she said to Claude worriedly, “I’m afraid it’s going to be an overly extravagant dress. I don’t want anything *too* gorgeous.”

“I know,” he said kindly. “It’s still too soon for you to wear all pink from head to toe.”

Agnes breathed a sigh of relief that there’d be no pink. But she couldn’t let her guard down yet.

“Well, that’s not the *only* issue...” she said.

“I know you’re intimidated by bright and flashy dresses,” Claude replied, “but you *must* get used to this kind of thing. You need to practice.”

With a popping sound, a dark brown mushroom suddenly appeared on his arm. With the concentric folds on the cap's underside, it was probably a *Coltricia montagnei*.

"That's right," Claude said as he plucked it. "It's nice to have lots of frills, like this *Coltricia montagnei* does. It's okay, Agnes. You look cute no matter what you wear."

Come to think of it, Agnes realized, *the concentric folds do look like a dress full of frills*. However, if frills were included, Agnes would end up wearing a dress with a mushroom motif instead of flowers.

...Nope. If she mentioned this to Claude, he'd only get excited. She'd better not. *Mushrooms... Anything but mushrooms*.



THANKS to Agnes's lack of requests, the meeting went smoothly and she was able to leave the royal palace earlier than she'd expected. Agnes was grateful for that. But Claude, who escorted her to the carriage, seemed a little troubled for some reason.

"I'm sorry, Agnes," he finally said. "That ended much earlier than I expected, so it looks like I'll be in time for my official duties after all. I must at least stick my head in the door. But I'm afraid this means I can't escort you home."

Agnes didn't know why he seemed so reluctant to attend to his official duties. But she had no intention of interfering with his work, so she simply nodded.

"It's odd," she remarked, "that you, a prince, pick me up and escort me every time in the first place. Anyway, I'll have Maurice, so there's no issue at all."

She curtsied and boarded the carriage. However, even though Maurice sat across from her, the door didn't close. As Agnes was wondering what was going on, Claude got into the carriage, close enough to touch her face.

"Huh? Wh-What is it?" she blushed.

"I want to be by your side, even if only for a moment longer. What about you, Agnes?" He placed his hand on her cheek and whispered, his face close to hers, and a small squeak escaped Agnes's lips. "Don't you *want* to be by my side?" he

said huskily.

“I-I do...!”

Claude’s gray eyes narrowed in satisfaction as Agnes succumbed to his winning, sensual appeal. “There...that’s good. When I said I couldn’t escort you, you didn’t seem to mind. That made me sad.” Claude scooped up Agnes’s hand and gently pressed it to his lips.

At the same time, a popping sound echoed in the carriage. A reddish-orange mushroom with star-shaped holes on top of an ocher sphere suddenly sprouted on the back of Claude’s hand. Agnes knew it was a *Calostoma japonica*. But it was kind of embarrassing to look at a mushroom resembling lips at that moment.

“See you soon, Agnes.”

Claude left after flashing another beautiful smile. Then the carriage immediately started moving.



Mushrooms of the Day *Lyophyllum decastes* An edible mushroom with an ashy gray umbrella-shaped cap. It looks rather like a shapeless, unenthusiastic Shiitake mushroom. Firm-textured with a rich flavor, it cooks well. I could go for one right now...

“I want to grow in the field!” it announced. After sprouting, it remains enshrined on the ridge in Agnes’s field. A literal field mushroom that proudly opened its cap after Claude praised it.

Hygrocybe psittacina A mushroom covered in a thick layer of green slime that turns yellow as it grows. It shines like a green jewel when it gets wet with rain and dew. However, its green color isn’t chlorophyll, so it can’t photosynthesize. It’s thought to be poisonous, so it’s not suitable for eating. I wonder what happened to the people who tried it?

The green stuff is actually mucus. Its body underneath is a different color altogether. But when you ask it why that is, it screams, “Get your mind out of the gutter!” and produces even more slime. So no one really knows.

“She’s embarrassed! I’ll cover for her with more slime!” it said, trying its best to protect Agnes.

Gomphus fluccosus A poisonous red mushroom that resembles a trumpet. It causes gastrointestinal poisoning, yet has no taste... Someone must’ve tried eating this one, too. When it realized it makes no sound despite being trumpet-shaped, due to it being a mushroom, it still couldn’t give up. It tried to trumpet anyway. It’s still training.

Together with the *Craterellus cornucopioides*, it has reached a new level of fricative sound, and it really feels the potential for trumpet-shaped mushrooms.

It agreed with Claude when he told Agnes, “I want to be by your side instead,” and intended to play a fanfare. But, as expected, it was unable to make any sound by itself.

Craterellus cornucopioides A black, funnel-shaped mushroom, resembling a trumpet. Also known as the “Trumpet of Death,” it’s apparently eaten often in Europe. Goes well in soup.

...So why the scary name, then?

It grew with the *Gomphus fluccosus* and tried to show off its fricative sound for Claude and Agnes. Its goal is to someday make sounds on its own. But for now, it’s a hard-working mushroom trying to master fricative sounds with its partner, the *Gomphus fluccosus*.

Cuphophyllus virgineus Adorned with milk-white caps, this is a small, cute mushroom. It’s easy to eat, and goes well in vinegared dishes or in a sauce. It blooms when sensing an innocent young woman and loves peeking at romantic scenes.

“Tell me! Tell me everything!” it squeals as it shakes its cap.

Pycnoporus coccineus A red, flat, semicircular mushroom. It looks like a rusted *Polyporaceae*. Member of the Wood Deterioration Club. It usually comes along to rein in the *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, but it doesn’t always work. While keeping the *Cuphophyllus virgineus* in check, it whispered, “I know how you feel, though.” Its true intentions and its appearance are at odds.

Coltricia montagnei A round mushroom with concentric folds on the back of

its cap. It's dark brown and plain in color. But if you think of it as a frilly dress' petticoat, it's very elegant. Being frilly is a struggle, and many look more mesh-like. It sometimes grows bristles on the surface of its cap. But it's a fancy fungus and dislikes its Chinese name, which translates to Cinnamon-Colored Hair-Collecting Fungus.

Hearing the word "glamorous dress," it confidently swung its frills, believing its time had come.

Calostoma japonica The cap part is a yellowish sphere with a red star-shaped growth on top. It looks like a *takoyaki* with a hole in the top, stuffed with red beni-shoga pickled ginger. The Japanese name includes the word "lipstick," and that's what it looks like!

The previous simulated double *Calostoma japonica* kiss was very popular with the other mushrooms. "Another kiss on the hand today, eh?" it said, with a touch of regret. But, seeing Agnes blush, it got more and more bashful.

Chapter 3: Memories of the Accident and a Strange Feeling

AN embarrassing mushroom sprouting. During an *already* embarrassing situation. Now Agnes felt even worse than ever.

Because Maurice was there, sharing the carriage with her.

In other words, their close-combat romantic back-and-forth had played out right in front of his eyes. Unable to pretend like nothing had just happened, Agnes decided to say something, her cheeks redder than cherries.

“*Erm...about what just happened...*”

“It’s okay. I’ve been training daily. So don’t worry.”

...What kind of training could he mean?

Maurice smiled gently at her. She was unsure whether he knew what she was thinking or not.

“Just pretend I’m not here,” he suggested, “and flirt to your heart’s content.”

Agnes vigorously shook her head at this outrageous offer. “No, I-I don’t want to! I can’t! It’s so embarrassing!”

With her cry came an echoing pop. A dark brown warty mushroom with a gray-brown cap grew on Maurice’s arm. For some reason, he was still smiling as he plucked the *Amanita spissacea*.

“His Highness would be pleased by such a reaction. No doubt, the mushrooms would be too. To be by your side is His Highness’s greatest pleasure, after all. Please consider the other guards and I as mere roadside mushrooms and pay us no mind.”

“P-Pay you no mind?” Agnes repeated. “That’s easier said than done...”

Suddenly, the carriage came to a halt. It was still much too soon for them to have arrived back at the Lefort residence. Agnes wondered if something had happened.

“What’s wrong?” Maurice asked, sticking his head out of the carriage.

The coachman answered him, a slightly tense expression on his face. Agnes couldn’t quite make out what he said, but she noticed Maurice’s brows knitted in a frown.

“Did something happen?” she asked as Maurice sat back down.

“No,” he replied. “The road is a little difficult to pass here, so we’re going to take a detour. Don’t worry.”

That can’t be... Agnes had traversed this road many times by carriage, and she’d walked it much more than that. *The road’s very wide. There should be no need to take any kind of detour. Unless...*

“...An accident?” she asked softly.

Maurice quietly nodded, apparently not wanting to lie.

Agnes hesitated a moment. But unable to deny her curiosity, she finally looked out the window. She saw a wagon with its wheels off, the road strewn with wooden boxes that had apparently fallen. The road was littered with oranges.

Suddenly, Agnes recalled the day of her parents’ deaths. A chill ran down her spine.

“It looks like it’s just a simple malfunction,” Maurice said quickly, smiling again. “Neither the luggage nor the driver seem to have been greatly harmed, so please don’t worry.”

He’d most likely heard about her parents’ death from Claude. At first he’d said it was a detour while avoiding using the word “accident.” Even now, he felt the need to emphasize to her that no one had been hurt and that it was a simple malfunction.

Agnes was grateful for that kindness...but something still bothered her.

Looking out the carriage window again, she saw people fixing the wooden box lids and other people picking up the oranges. When Agnes had been in *that* accident, wooden boxes and luggage had been thrown around, too.

Yes, thrown around...and *left* there.

Agnes stared out the window and tried to figure out what felt so strange when she recalled the memory of that day. She'd heard later that bandits had probably caused the accident. Yet most of the luggage remained on the roadside.

Could it be that her family's luggage was not worth much and thus not worth stealing? Their bags had been untouched. Agnes didn't think the bandits had even looked at their contents.

It wasn't out of the question that they'd checked the contents and, finding them lacking, put them back in the bags and closed them up. But Agnes didn't think thieves would do something so...*polite*.

Around her blood-spattered aunt's neck had been a necklace seemingly made of jewels. Being a child, Agnes hadn't known its value. But it looked expensive—too expensive for a bandit to ignore.

But she had the feeling, then and now, that Josse's ring was missing. The ring with the bright green jewel: the same color as his eyes. *And mine*.

Agnes still couldn't fathom the bandits' criteria for stealing. But she couldn't help wondering about it. A thief would ordinarily take anything that would sell. But they hadn't touched *any* luggage or expensive accessories aside from her father's ring?

Her memory was vague, but she thought their horse had been killed.

If stealing wasn't their goal, then...was it murder? she wondered, a chill scraping down her spine. *No...it wouldn't have made sense to let me live then.*

Anyway, she couldn't imagine anyone would've hated her parents and aunt *that* much.



UNABLE to calm down even after returning home, Agnes took down a book from the bookshelf in her room. Her memory of the day was vague, but it'd been Benoit who'd saved her from the scene, where the luggage had been scattered and there'd been a sea of blood.

Most of the luggage was covered in blood, so there'd been no choice but to

throw it away. However, this one book had been left untouched, so he gave it to her. It was a book on medicinal herbs that Agnes had often looked at with her parents. Yet she'd been afraid to touch it since the accident, so she kept it on her bookshelf.

As she sat on the sofa and flipped through its pages now, she came across some slightly faded illustrations.

...Gosh, this takes me back... she thought, smiling sadly.

She loved these pictures when she was little. When she'd gotten a little older, she'd wanted to read the explanations, so she'd worked hard to learn her letters. She always took it with her whenever she went to the Lefort residence, looking forward to reading it with Kevin.

"Hmm?"

Agnes turned over the last page, but suddenly saw something stuck under the back cover.

Is something there...?

Agnes had read this one book hundreds of times. If there'd been something stuck in it, she would've noticed it ages ago. It must've been placed there after the last time she'd read it... Without her knowing.

By the time I boarded the carriage that day, something had been slipped into the book...

She couldn't imagine anyone other than her parents doing such a thing. She pulled the paper and saw, unmistakably, the handwriting of her birth father, Josse.

"I've been found. I'll try talking it out. If I don't come back, then take care of them both."

"...Found?"

On that day, Agnes and her family were going to visit the Lefort residence. They had done that a lot throughout her childhood. It *was*, she suddenly remembered, rare for her aunt to come and pick them up. But it wasn't like that day was the first time.

Let's say Dad had something to do and was planning to entrust my mother and I to the Lefort household. But then, why would he write that on a piece of paper and hide it in a book...? So, by "found," does he means he was found by someone he didn't want to find him...?

The only thing Agnes could think of was a debt collector. But she didn't remember any debt collectors. If he'd had to, her father could've just asked Benoit to lend him money. She couldn't imagine her father having debts, let alone letting them slide to the point where he might be in a situation he might not get out of.

I wonder...if I ask Father, will he know?

This letter, she reckoned, had probably been intended for Benoit, so it seemed highly likely that he'd know something. But Josse had been traveling to the Lefort residence in person. And her aunt, the countess, had *also* been there. He could've just relayed the message directly.

But he didn't do that. Because he didn't want me to hear it... Or perhaps it was something he couldn't even tell Auntie? If the reason we'd had to leave home that day was because Dad's enemies had "found" him... Then the reason why Uncle Benoit lost his beloved wife...was because of us.

That truth sent a chill down Agnes's spine. She clenched her fist tightly.

Does...Uncle Benoit know? If he doesn't, how will he feel about it?

Me...the sole survivor.

What if I wind up being blamed? Hated?

"...No, that'd never happen," the words slipped quietly from her lips. "Father would never think that way..."

He's a good-hearted person, who's been nothing but supportive, even right after the accident. He treats me like his real daughter...!

Agnes knew all this, of course. She didn't doubt his love. Yet, she couldn't stop trembling.

Okay, I should just...try to calm down...

With a deep sigh, Agnes returned the book to its place and left the room.

Shutting herself up in her room would only lead to bad thoughts. At times like this, a change of scenery would do best.



GAZING at the ridge while sprinkling a watering can around her garden, Agnes could tell the number of *Lyophyllum decastes* mushrooms was increasing.

“At this rate, it seems that ridge will soon be full of mushrooms.” As Agnes muttered to herself, smiling wryly, a brown umbrella-cap mushroom popped into existence.

Her recent rise in mushroom sensitivity apparently knew no bounds. If this kept up, it wouldn’t be long until this small plantation became a vast field of mushrooms.

Kevin had once said, “Those mushrooms seem to understand what you say, Sis.”

Now somewhat curious about that possibility, Agnes set her watering can on the ground and squatted down by the mushrooms.

“...Do...do *you* think I should say something?” she asked, feeling only slightly silly.

Even if the mushrooms understood her perfectly, how could they answer such a question? It wasn’t exactly as if she *wanted* an answer. She just wanted someone to *listen*. She felt rather ridiculous talking to a mushroom. But she couldn’t exactly talk to Kevin about this. So...what other choice did she have?

“If I say something,” she asked again, “will I regret it?”

A dark blue capped mushroom grew with another pop. An *Entoloma cyanonigrum* now nestled beside the *Lyophyllum decastes*. When you really looked at it, its dark blue color resembled Claude’s Prussian-blue hair.

Just as she was about to reach out her hand to poke it, a beautiful voice reached her ears.

“...Agnes!”

Agnes stood up and turned around, already enveloped in a sweet scent. There was only one person in the whole world who used *Cantharellus cibarius*

mushroom perfume. She was being hugged too tightly to move. But when she managed to lift her face and look up, she saw a pair of gray eyes she knew all too well.

“Um... Did something happen?” she asked Claude. He had told her he had to attend to some official business. *So why is he here?*

“I heard you saw a carriage accident,” Claude said empathetically.

“*That’s* why you came?”

“I thought you might be feeling upset.”

“Just for *that*...?”

“No ‘just’ about it. This is very serious.” Claude looked a little angry as he spoke. He held Agnes even tighter.

“What about your royal duties?”

“I finished those up quickly.”

“Just to come and see me?”

Then again, she recalled Claude saying he hadn’t even planned to attend to them initially. So perhaps this royal matter wasn’t a huge priority to begin with. Still, it was highly irregular of him to cut short his official duties, just to come and see how she was.

“No. To come and *hold* you, Agnes.”

Not sure what he meant, Agnes tipped her head in confusion. Claude flashed her a troubled smile and slowly stroked her hair.

“I can’t change the past,” he said softly. “There are things you have to just overcome. But when times are hard, they’re *hard*. At the very least, I want to help you through them.”

...What strange logic.

Yes, the carriage accident had come flooding back to her and she *had* been a little frightened. Yet, her fright aside, both Maurice—who’d clearly given a full report on the incident—and Claude, who’d cut short his official duties, were blowing it all out of proportion.

Still, to have Claude show such care and concern for her... It made her feel guilty, yet also deeply happy. It was like her traumatized heart had been wrapped in something soft, fluffy, and warm.

"Please," she said, "don't go out of your way for *me*..."

"It's okay. I made sure to wrap up my official duties properly, so you wouldn't have to worry about it."

He smiled warmly at her. Agnes felt like crying. She knew now that, no matter what happened, Claude would always be by her side. If she cried now, he'd be worried.

Agnes buried her face in Claude's chest to hide her eyes, brimming with tears and happiness.

"...I'm like a child, aren't I?" she whispered into his chest.

"At times like this, it's fine."

His hand soothed her as it ran gently down her hair. Agnes felt herself going limp against him.

"Lean on me all you like. You have this...tendency to shut yourself off and suffer alone."

Agnes recalled how Zenaide had said that Claude would "do anything" for Agnes. *Perhaps...this was what she meant?*

"A Dragonmate's love may be an intense thing, but... I'm happy to have it," Agnes muttered to herself, closing her eyes a moment as she leaned even more against Claude's chest. She breathed in his sweet fruity smell, then felt a little embarrassed for doing so.

Realizing Claude had fallen silent, Agnes looked up to see that his cheeks were bright red.

"Good grief!" he said, slightly aback. "A surprise attack... Now, that's not fair."

"Oh!" Agnes replied. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to trouble you..."

Perhaps, in her joy, she'd gotten a little too carried away.

Agnes quickly drew away, yet Claude just as quickly pulled her back against

him by her waist, his hand caressing her cheek.

“You *never* trouble me, Agnes. I love you.”

Her heart skipped a beat as Claude gazed at her with those lovely gray eyes.

“I I-love you too...”

Agnes did her best to respond. A soft smile appeared on Claude’s lips as he leaned in to kiss her forehead.

Just then, a fan-shaped mushroom grew on his shoulder with a loud popping sound. Claude, whose face was as red as the reddish-brown *Fistulina hepatica*, still didn’t look embarrassed.

“I treasure you,” his face seemed to say. Agnes felt her heart being filled with his love. She wanted to reciprocate. She’d said she loved him, but that alone wasn’t enough to match the amount of love he poured into her.

Her mind whirling, she buried her face in his chest again. Repeating this affectionate gesture again was embarrassing, but right now, it was the best way she had to show how she felt. To *show* and not just tell him.

Agnes’s heart was pounding so hard, she felt it might burst out of her chest. Yet, at the same time, she felt a sense of calm, of being soothed. It was odd.

Claude stiffened a moment, then he reached out and stroked her hair over and over again. She suddenly recalled how there’d been a friendly cat that’d pestered her to stroke it a long time ago. Now she could understand how the cat felt.

It felt so...*good* to be gently stroked by someone you love.

“So...” Claude said, slightly awkwardly. “Is there...something else on your mind?”

“Huh?”

Surprised, Agnes looked up, meeting his gray eyes.

“It wasn’t just seeing the carriage accident that upset you, was it?”

“Why do you...?”

Before she could finish her sentence, Claude smiled.

“I’ve been observing you a long time now, Agnes. Besides...the mushrooms seem like they want to say something.”

Is...is the mushroom fetishist finally having full-fledged conversations with them now?

“We shouldn’t just stand around talking,” he said. “Let’s talk over tea.”

Her mind reeling, Agnes allowed Claude to lead her back inside the manor and they sat on the sofa in the drawing room.

Even as Agnes was sipping tea to calm herself, Claude was busy arranging mushrooms on the table in the corner of her vision, and she couldn’t help but be distracted by him.

Once the mushrooms had been sorted by type and size, Claude surveyed them, nodding with satisfaction.

Ah yes, he’s in fine fetishist form again today.

She ought to be used to this by now. Yet every time, it startled her. Probably since Claude was so handsome and didn’t *look* like a mushroom freak on the outside.

Not only was he handsome, but Claude was also a genuine royal with impeccable lineage. He was second-in-line to the throne, a swordsman who could fulfill all his knightly duties and, to top it off, he was incredibly kind.

In other words, an excellent suitor...

Agnes didn’t feel worthy of being with such a person, but when she saw the mushrooms on the table, her anxiety disappeared at once. Actually...now she was worried about the mushrooms. At any rate, there were too many of them to fit in Claude’s pockets anymore. It’d be better to have a basket readied for him to take them home in.

Thinking of Claude made her heart race. Yet, in the end, it all kept coming back to mushrooms. Agnes wasn’t sure how much of a catch she was. Yet, since her fiancé was a huge mushroom fetishist, maybe things were the way they ought to be, after all.

“So, what are you worried about? I’ll hear you out, if you wish,” said Claude,

who'd finally finished arranging the mushrooms. He reached for his teacup now that his hands were free.

"...Claude," Agnes began, "you never shut me down, do you? No matter what it is I might have to say."

"That's right..."

Even the way he sips his tea is elegant, she thought. *It's hard to believe he's the kind of person who sits there, fiddling with mushrooms.*

"So perhaps," she continued, "I could use that."

"Use away. I *want* you to. So it's no problem."

Seeing Claude smiling as he put down his teacup, Agnes let out a small sigh.

"You really *are* much too kind, Claude."

It's pretty much always the case that whatever a person says has another side to it. But Claude was accepting, no matter *what* she said. Agnes wasn't used to being indulged like that. She felt a bit guilty about leaning on him too much.

"Do you remember," Claude said kindly, "how I said that Philip was your standard for 'normal,' so you'd have to learn from scratch?"

Come to think of it, she recalled Claude saying he'd teach her. Sitting on the opposite sofa, the prince suddenly got up and sat down next to her.

"You're *adorable*, Agnes."

"Where did that come from?"

In contrast to her confusion, Claude's expression seemed sort of clouded.

"Philip destroyed your self-esteem by degrading it over the years," he said curtly. "I want to get it back."

He spoke with a grimace, like he'd just swallowed a bitter pill, and took a small breath.

"You really *are* adorable, Agnes. Your peach-blossom-colored hair has a luster no silk thread can match. Just looking at it makes me happy. Your eyes are like emeralds and sparkle brighter than the stars. Your voice is beautiful and pleasant, like a bird's chirping Also—"

“I... I get it already! Please stop!”

Agnes, blushing furiously, flapped her hands in a panic. Claude tilted his head curiously.

“Why?”

“Why? B-Because it’s *embarrassing*...”

Having said that, she recalled what Maurice had implied: that her embarrassment brought Claude joy.

“...Were you teasing me on purpose?” she asked huffily.

“I only said what I truly think,” he replied coolly.

Well, who was she to say?

Agnes accepted but didn’t quite understand Claude’s compliments and nodded vaguely.

“Agnes...” Claude said suddenly, “if I was worried about something and acted upset, would you just turn a blind eye towards me? Or would you be concerned?”

“I...I’d be concerned, of course.”

“It’s the same thing,” he replied earnestly. “Agnes, you’re important to me, so I want you to smile,” Claude spoke slowly, as if gently admonishing her, and his words sank in.

That’s right. It’s only proper to worry if someone you care about seems despondent.

In Claude’s case, his royal affairs should be prioritized, of course. But, as long as Agnes didn’t impede him, she should be able to confide in him.

Confiding in someone...is a good thing.

As Agnes took a deep breath to summon her courage, a yellow stick-shaped mushroom grew on Claude’s arm with a popping sound. Bolstered by the *Clavulinopsis helvola*’s beautiful color, Agnes prepared to speak.

“...Will you listen, then?”

In response to her question, Claude gave her a gentle smile full of affection. So she told him how, when she'd seen the luggage scattered after the carriage breakdown, she'd gotten the sense of something being out of place. And she told him about the letter she'd found in the book when she got home.

Claude listened to her seriously as she told him of these things troubling her, even with no solid proof. Even though nothing was resolved, just talking to him made her feel so much better.

"The accident," he said, referring to the one in the past, "was investigated, right?"

"Yes. But I was a child, so I don't know the details. I heard it was a robbery."

Claude put his hand on his chin and mulled it over. Then he immediately turned his gaze to Agnes.

"I see. Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for listening. I feel a bit calmer now."

"I'll listen to you anytime, Agnes, no matter how trivial the matter. I believe in you. So you can feel free to rely on me more."

He placed his hand on hers and her heart soared. It didn't matter how many times Claude touched her. It was thrilling every time. Was it because he was so handsome? Or was it because she loved him?

...Probably both.

"I've... I've already imposed on you more than enough."

"By *your* standards, perhaps. But I'd rather be closer."

His hand on hers, he whispered this gently to her. She should've swooned, but she couldn't concentrate because she was worried about the yellow stick-shaped mushroom bobbing around on his shoulder.

Its bobbing motion was probably because of the slight movements of Claude's body, but it looked like it was jiggling around voluntarily, and was most unsettling.

"Whether or not to talk to Count Lefort, that's up to you, Agnes," Claude

continued obliviously. “Whichever you choose, I’ll back you up. There’s no need to rush. Think it over.”

“Okay...”

Claude always respected Agnes’s opinion and never forced matters. Everything was the exact opposite of what Philip had done. It was refreshing... and comfortable.

“May I hug you again?” he asked.

“What for?”

Perhaps he’s still worried about me, after the carriage accident I saw today.

“Because I want to hug you.”

He spoke plainly, with a smile, and Agnes blinked. She didn’t mind, but it was embarrassing to have him say it aloud again. But she couldn’t say no and would’ve felt guilty doing so.

As she hesitated, unable to find the right response, Claude smiled wryly and reached for her.

“Do you like this?”

His touch was so light, she wasn’t sure if he was even holding her. At the same time, his low voice reverberated huskily, just above her head.

“I... I *do*.”

“I see...”

As Agnes nodded her consent, Claude’s arms tightened around her slowly. Wrapped in his arms, a sweet scent tickled her nose. Even without words, she could feel his affection.

“I’d be very happy if you hugged me someday, Agnes.”

“Um...”

Just imagining it made her feel embarrassed and her heart skipped a beat. He’d hugged her many times now, yet she still couldn’t get used to it. Initiating a hug of her own was a hurdle too high to surmount.

Claude relaxed his arms and happily peered into her face, as she blushed and struggled for words.

If only she could make it happen... She knew Claude would be delighted. Knowing that, her face was growing hotter and hotter.

With a popping sound, a bright red cap mushroom sprouted on the table. With a series of pops, several other *Russula emetica* also grew, creating a circle that enclosed the other mushrooms.

Claude looked at the fungal ring and smiled while scooping up her hand and slowly kissing it.



Mushrooms of the Day *Amanita spissacea*

A mushroom with a dark gray cap with dark brown warts, resembling leopard print. Its flesh is white and mostly tasteless. But it's poisonous, so don't eat it! The mushroom braves *have* been challenging themselves again, haven't they? It wears leopard print like old ladies who love gossip, and has a personality to match. *Cuphophyllus virgineus* is its gossip pal.

"Embarrassment is part of youth!" it cried as it sprouted to watch over Agnes. At the same time, it tutted over the fact that someone was embarrassing Agnes. A mushroom unconcerned with contrasts.

Entoloma cyanonigrum A deep blue mushroom. It doesn't *seem* poisonous, yet it doesn't look very edible because of the color. During an earlier mushroom discussion, it was decided its color most closely resembled Claude's hair color, so *it* got designated the blue mushroom representative. It trusts Claude, because, after all, "He's also blue."

"Please talk to Claude. He's blue, so you can trust him," it said, showing its loyalty to all things blue.

Cantharellus cibarius A mushroom with an orange-yellow cap. It's eaten in Europe, but poisonous in Japan... So what does *that* mean? Its flesh smells strongly of apricots. It's more shocked than anyone to find it's used in Claude's favorite perfume.

“I am the source of the fragrance that envelops Agnes! In other words, I am the one who envelops Agnes!” it bragged to rapturous applause.

***Fistulina hepatica* (Beefsteak Fungus)** Ranging from spatula-shaped to fan-shaped, its color is reddish when young and turns bright red to reddish brown like liver when mature. The flesh is reddish brown with whitish streaks, looks like premium marbled beef, and seems delicious. It’s also called “poor man’s beefsteak” or “cow’s tongue” because a sour red liquid seeps out when it’s cut.

“Even us mushrooms love Agnes! Look at my marbled body!” A beefy mushroom, going up against Claude.

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. Yet, 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 sprouted to support Agnes’s bravery.

Today too, it watched the two flirting from its special seat (shoulder).

“I’m used to this flirting by now,” it said, swaying to show its support for their progressing relationship.

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?

"Hang in there, Agnes! I'll show you my mycelium!" it said as it sprouted, doing its best. It was enchanted both by itself and the splendid fairy ring it made again today.

Chapter 4: The Oreillian Royal Family and a Mushroom Greeting

AS soon as her carriage door opened, Agnes was stunned to see the dazzlingly handsome young man dressed in formal attire.

“...I keep *telling you*, Claude, that you don’t have to personally come and greet me every time...” she said, embarrassed.

“Actually,” the prince said warmly, “I wanted to bring the carriage and pick you up at your residence, but I refrained. Greeting you at your carriage is only natural, isn’t it?”

Agnes sighed and took his proffered hand as he flashed her a perfect smile.

“Agnes, you are as radiant as ever. Your beauty is even more apparent in that gown.”

“Thank you.”

Benoit and Kevin had also praised her effusively. But coming from Claude, it hit a little different. She was happy, yet embarrassed and nervous.

Today’s dress was a Delalande original. Light blue fabric was used for the entire piece, giving it a fresh look. The dress’ skirt was elaborate. Its asymmetrical drape, going from the left waist to the right hem, was very beautiful. The drape’s interior was constructed with layers of pale purple fabric and the color gradually changed to a darker blue at the hem.

The main light blue fabric was layered over with a piece of transparent white fabric, the edges of which were embroidered with delicate white flowers. All over, between the two layers of fabric, were dotted flowers made of cloth. It made it seem as though Agnes was emerging from a floral bouquet. Even so, the light blue, white, and pale purple colors were subdued, so nothing about it was overstated.

Her hair was decorated with the same cloth flowers as the dress, and she

wore a dainty hairbow with white flowers embroidered on it. She sported an embroidered necklace with jewels and flowers woven into it. The necklace could only be described as splendid.

It was a wonderful outfit that met all the requirements of a high society event, while not causing Agnes any mental distress.

As if reacting to their conversation, a mushroom grew on the back of Claude's hand with a pop. This lightly colored red-capped fungus was a *Russula bioleipes*.

He happily plucked it and stashed it in his pocket. But at this rate, Claude's pockets would soon overflow with mushrooms. It wasn't very seemly for a prince to be spotted with his pockets bulging full of multicolored mushrooms. Agnes wished he'd put them someplace more appropriate.

Only she couldn't imagine what an appropriate place for mushroom storage could be during a ball.

"You've finally mastered saying 'Thank you' to compliments," Kevin beamed. "That's growth, Sis. That's growth."

Kevin and Benoit smiled at Agnes with satisfaction from within their family carriage.

"From here," Benoit said, "we'll be going our separate ways. But you must not leave His Highness's side. And when you wish to come home, please let us know at once. In fact, if you're uncomfortable, we can take you home right now?"

"Excuse me?" Agnes asked.

It was a pretty extreme proposal. But no doubt, it was only offered out of thoughtfulness and concern that Agnes might panic over attending a royal ball where a foreign kingdom's royal family was present.

It's not just Claude. Uncle Benoit and Kevin are so very kind to me as well... Agnes mused. But she was used to receiving negative comments. And, since she had the support of those who cared about her, she felt she had to do her best, so she politely declined the offer to take her right back home.

"Your Highness," Benoit implored, "please take care of our Agnes."

"Don't sound so formal, Father." Agnes laughed despite herself.

Benoit gave her a troubled smile in return.

“You’re precious to them,” Claude said. “What a loving family you have.”

“Yes, I’m very proud of my father and brother.”

As Agnes puffed out her chest, the corners of Claude’s eyes crinkled with happiness.

“Oh... Then, what about me?”

“Hmm? Oh. Yes... You’re my precious...f-fiancé.”

Why is it so hard to say out loud, even though I’m just stating the facts?

Kevin’s grinning made it even more embarrassing.

“Yes, very good,” Claude grinned. “Then let’s go, shall we? ...My beloved fiancée.”



WHEN they entered the ballroom, Agnes was literally dazzled by the spectacle. Sparkling chandeliers, sumptuous food, and elegant music permeated every corner of the magnificent hall. Noble ladies in fashionable gowns danced and their dress hems swayed beautifully with their movements.

Even though Agnes had been to several balls, she still felt uncomfortable during such events. Until now, she had attended all balls with Philip, and thanks to the drab clothes he’d forced her into, she’d hardly ever been spoken to.

But tonight, she was with Claude.

His Prussian blue hair was as beautiful as the night sky and his penetrating gray eyes shone as powerfully as obsidian. His handsome features only further complemented the splendor of his hair and eyes. Even though Claude was slender, he still had a knight’s toned figure. Yet his bearing was full of royal dignity.

Furthermore, he *was* second-in-line to the throne and had a good relationship with the crown prince. In fact, the only true mark against him was his mushroom fetish. *But not very many people know about that...*

That was why, even with his fiancée Agnes by his side, Claude still drew the

eyes of every woman in the room. Perhaps they were calculating their chances of stealing her place or actively plotting her downfall if the opportunity arose.

Agnes quickly realized what they must think of her: a commoner's daughter with a strange hair color and lovely yet still understated clothes. It should be the opinion of most social circles that there was nothing particularly special about her.

"I knew it!" Claude exclaimed. "You're so adorable, Agnes, you stand right out."

Zeroing in on the words "stand out," Agnes unconsciously reached to cover her hair.

But Claude gently grasped her wrist, stopping her.

"There's nothing wrong with your hair. You should stand proud, Agnes."

Agnes didn't care what people thought of her. But the thought of someone saying something rude about Claude for being with her was agonizing.

"It's probably Philip's fault that you care about your hair," Claude mused bitterly, "but did the other nobles say things to you as well?"

"...In this country, people don't like pink hair," Agnes replied softly.

Philip had always taken things too far. But he'd been right about that. Since her commoner days, Agnes had been mocked for her hair color, so it was only natural it'd stand out among nobles, who cared so much about appearances.

Sighing wistfully, Claude lifted a lock of her pink hair. "It's so beautiful," he said softly. "Some people are just so very stupid." Then, without pause, he leaned down and kissed that lock.

Seeing this dashing scene, the assembled nobles gasped and then let forth a wall of cheering like a strangled scream.

Agnes's heart skipped and a bursting sound echoed in the midst of the cheering. A dark pink umbrella-capped mushroom had just sprouted on Claude's chest. In a flash—with Agnes only having just enough time to recognize it as a *Pleurotus djamor*—Claude plucked it and stuffed it in his pocket.

The mushroom fetishist's mushroom-handling skills have also leveled up... she

thought.

Even the young ladies fascinated by Claude hadn't noticed.

...Well, even if they had, Agnes thought wryly, judging from their manic gaze, they might not even care.

"Personal tastes may vary," Claude said a little too loudly, "but I'm head over heels for you, Agnes."

Apparently overhearing this, the noisy nobles averted their gazes awkwardly. The young ladies, however, narrowed their eyes sharply at Agnes. But Claude stepped protectively between her and them.

"Those words..." Agnes recalled. "They're the same ones you said back when we made our initial contract."

"Ever since then, I've been obsessed with you, Agnes," Claude said dreamily.

Behind his beaming face, she could hear the nobles muttering.

"Such an awful hair color...!"

"How did a *commoner* infiltrate the royal family?"

"His Highness will be bored of her soon..."

These remarks were familiar to Agnes, mirroring the past criticism she'd received. Naturally, those voices seemed to reach Claude's ear. He frowned and turned to say something. But Agnes pulled at his sleeve to stop him.

"I'm used to it. I don't mind," she said. "Anyway...I have *you*, Claude. I believe in *your* words. For I know you treasure me. So I'm...I'm quite all right."

She'd always done her best to not care, to not get involved, to close her ears and her heart and just let it wash over her. She'd truly believed her purpose in life was to be reviled and hated. So she'd tried to be quiet and unobtrusive and make herself small so as not to cause trouble.

But...things are different now...

She knew her hair color was despised by many. But there were people who loved her all the same. Agnes knew that in her heart now. As if she were wearing a thick suit of armor, it'd now become difficult for malicious words to

reach her.

“...I’m glad we’re in public right now,” Claude said suddenly.

“...Excuse me?”

“You say such thrilling things, I find it impossible to imagine letting go of you.”

“Pardon?”

Let go? We’re not even holding hands...

Claude gently brought his face closer to Agnes as she looked up at him in confusion.

“...I want us to marry as soon as possible,” he said dreamily.

“Yeek?!?”

His hot breath tickled her ear and Agnes’s shoulders jerked involuntarily.

Just as the young ladies who’d overheard this began to scream, the arrival of the Oreillian royal family was announced, and they were drowned out.

Three of them had arrived. A middle-aged man—the king—and a younger man and woman who could only be the prince and princess.

Agnes was curious about their outfits, which had a slightly different vibe to the ones currently in vogue in Visage. But, above all, it was the prince’s hair color that caught her eye. It was the purest red she’d ever seen. As bright and impactful as a flower in full bloom in midsummer.

She’d heard that Oreille had more vibrant hair colors than Visage. But she never thought she’d see such a conspicuous one.

The king and princess both had hair of varying brown shades, so Agnes guessed that not all members of the royal family had such distinctive hair colors. For the first time in her life, Agnes had finally seen someone besides herself with such a striking hair color.

“Claude, do we need to go greet the Oreillian royals?” she asked.

“His Majesty and my brothers are engaging them. A casual greeting will do. Or...if you’re tired, we can retire now?”

She only asked because she wondered if Claude should be over there representing the Visage family. But he seemed to have misinterpreted her words to mean she was exhausted.

She appreciated his concern, but it was a bit overbearing.

“To be honest,” she said softly, “I’d rather go home if I could. But this is important. I have to get used to these kinds of things, for the sake of the future.”

Claude’s eyes widened a moment. Then he beamed at her.

“I’m so happy you’re thinking about our future!”

“Huh? N-No, I didn’t mean... Oh, well, I suppose... I mean...”

It was a given that Agnes and Claude would be together for a long time. But to speak of it so openly...

Replaying what she’d said in her mind, Agnes cringed in embarrassment. At this moment, she couldn’t exactly say, “We’ll be together from now on, right?” while looking into Claude’s loving eyes.

But if she’d said something like, “Even if we must part someday, I’ll fulfill my obligations until then,” she had the feeling it would be very much akin to opening a can of worms at the worst possible moment.

As a result, she was at a loss for words. All she could do was turn her face away and blush. She’d have to work on her mental fortitude more, she realized. She didn’t want to give Claude the wrong impression or cause him any trouble.

Mental fortitude. Yes... She’d need to summon the spirits with her perky older sister persona in front of Claude to bring her mental fortitude to the next level. She had the feeling that she could actually change if she did that.

...Change for the better... Or not...? Well, let’s sidestep that for now...

“But I don’t want you to go pushing yourself, Agnes,” she suddenly heard Claude say.

Well, if he insisted, she’d keep the mushroom show under wraps for a while.

Taking a short breath and relaxing a bit, she stared up into those gorgeous

gray eyes.

“I’m fine,” she said brightly. “You’ll be by my side, right, Claude?”

“Of course. ...All right, then, I suppose we should go over and say hello.”

“Yes.”

A bursting sound resounded as if to drown out Agnes’s answer. Another mushroom appeared on Claude’s arm. This red-capped mushroom was a *Hygrocybe coccinea*. But just as Agnes clocked that, it immediately disappeared into Claude’s pocket as he used his lightning-fast plucking technique.

If a mushroom-picking contest was ever held, Claude would definitely win...

After that, she joined him in greeting the visiting royals. Upon her introduction, the King of Oreille’s eyebrow quirked upwards.

“Agnes, you say?”

As he appeared to mull over her name, she felt his gaze on her hair.

Agnes had assumed Oreillians weren’t as prejudiced as Visage’s citizens, since they had a huge variety of hair colors in their kingdom. But perhaps her peach-blossom hair was offensive, all the same.

As she sank into herself a little, the King of Oreille quickly smiled. “Ah, excuse me!” he said brightly. “Your hair and eyes are so beautiful that I just got lost staring at them. Such bright green eye color is considered a blessing in Oreille and is often seen in our family. But...that is rare in Visage, is it not?”

Upon closer inspection, Agnes realized the king and the prince had the same green eyes as her.

“I...” she trailed off.

Even as a social nicety, Agnes hadn’t expected her hair to be excused, much less complimented like this. Quietly pleased, she tried to explain her birth father was Oreillian. But Claude’s hand shot out, intervening.

At that exact moment, a mushroom grew on the back of Claude’s hand with a popping sound. Even he was a moment late to the appearance of the *Russula virescens* with its bluish-green cap.

Agnes frantically snatched the mushroom away. But it was obvious that everyone had seen it and noticed how odd it was. It'd be extremely rude to bring mushrooms to greet a visiting king. But it'd look weird if she tried to stash it away now, and she couldn't exactly offer it to the king.

At a loss as to what to do, Agnes froze. But when she risked a glance at the king, she realized that he was smiling with a satisfied expression.

"It's just as I'd heard," he said kindly. "You seem to be much loved by the spirits. You *must* have some sort of Oreillian kinship."

The king was surprised, yet he showed neither fear nor disgust.

Well, Agnes reasoned, he is the king of a country blessed by the spirits. Still... how broad-minded he is!

There was no disgust on the face of the prince and princess either.

It was refreshing for Agnes, who'd been bullied so much for her mushrooms and hair color. And she suddenly felt deeply moved.

When you think about it, there's one more person who's overjoyed by my quirks. But...he's a mushroom freak! So he's...kind of in a separate category all his own.

"If you'd like to," the king said warmly, "I'd be delighted if you'd visit Oreille."

"You honor me," Agnes said as she curtsied in gratitude.

The king nodded at this, then turned his gaze to Claude.

"And you, as well... Oh! But...if it's not possible...? Well, the young lady alone will be made most welcome."

At this, Claude suddenly grabbed Agnes's hand, mushroom and all.

*There's no need to panic, she thought. She planned to hand him the *Russula virescens* once things had calmed down. Perhaps he can't wait?*

"...Please excuse us," Claude said suddenly.

"Certainly!" the king smiled. "Perhaps later, then."

They turned their backs on him and moved to a back corner of the ballroom.

Offering Agnes a chair, Claude slipped the mushroom into his pocket.

“I’ve never seen anyone else with such bright hair!” Agnes said excitedly. “And they were so nice, even with the mushroom sprouting and everything.”

She was babbling with excitement, but Claude was silent by contrast. He wasn’t a big talker, except when it came to mushrooms. But Agnes suddenly realized his expression seemed dark.

“Um, is something wrong? Oh! Was it the mushroom? Or...did I do something rude without realizing it?”

“You did *fine*, Agnes. The mushroom was splendid, as well.”

Claude smiled gently. But Agnes still felt that he was acting oddly.

“The color of this *Russula virescens* mushroom is particularly beautiful, and the cap’s cracks are such a wonderful aesthetic.”

Hmm...maybe I was just imagining things, what with him being his usual mushroom freak self now...

Relieved, Agnes exhaled. Then she saw someone walking towards them.

Even from a distance, it stood out...that bright red hair color.

Nathan, the Prince of Oreille, stood in front of them, wearing a friendly smile.



Mushrooms of the Day

Russula violeipes

A white or cream-colored mushroom with a bright red splash on the cap, resembling a peach. Its Japanese name, *Keshouhatsu*, means “made-up mushroom,” because of its lightly colored cap. When it matures, it’s shaped like a cup, but when young, it really looks like a peach... Although it smells like a beetle, it’s edible. A mushroom of contrasts.

It’s a member of the “Makeup Club,” but the other members are older sisters who mainly use matte base makeup, so it’s rumored the battle for mushroom prominence will be a one-on-one battle between it and the *Calostoma japonica*.

Pleurotus djamor

A mushroom with a deep pink cap that gradually fades to ashy white. It's edible but gets tougher as it grows, so it's best to eat it while it's young. Its beautiful pink color fades with heat, so it's good for slicing raw into a salad. It's proud of its pink caps that match Agnes's hair color and fears getting near heat.

"Yeah! Pink hair is beautiful! Pink is the best!" it yelled as it sprouted. But then Claude grabbed it and quickly pocketed it, so it had to stay quiet.

Hygrocybe coccinea

A mushroom with a bright red cap, good at growing in clusters. It's edible, with a nice texture and unique color. It'd like Agnes and Claude to eat *Hygrocybe coccinea* skewers someday. But it's worried that being skewered might hurt. According to a senior acquaintance who'd once been stabbed by a skewer, it feels like "a little sting."

When it heard talk of royalty, it wondered if a crown of *Hygrocybe coccinea* might look dashing, too.

Russula virescens

A mushroom with a cracked bluish-green cap. It's not very toothsome, but it still tastes pretty good. Still, it's best to avoid eating it raw or eating too much of it.

...Why, I wonder what happens?

It sprouted to show off its cap, saying, "See the similarity?" Having been plucked by Agnes, then grasped by Claude, its complex mushroom heart experienced both pleasure and pain.

Chapter 5: The King and the Mushroom Complex

“I’D heard that different countries have different hair colors. But I didn’t expect I’d stand out *this* much!” Nathan, speaking to Agnes in a friendly manner, touched his own hair with a wry smile.

Agnes thought the prince himself stood out far more than his hair. But in his country, bright hair colors probably didn’t draw as much attention, so she could understand why he’d be surprised.

However, Agnes was surprised that the Oreillian royals didn’t seem bothered by her hair.

“In this country,” she replied, “bright hair colors are rare.”

To be blunt, they’re openly disliked. But I can’t exactly say that...

She couldn’t imagine anyone showing any blatant disgust towards a foreign prince but, even so, he was probably able to pick up on the subtext that his hair wasn’t exactly celebrated here. Luckily, though, she didn’t appear to have offended him.

“In Oreille,” he was saying, “one’s change in hair color is welcomed as proof of the spirits’ divine protection, and it’s also seen as very appealing. From my own point of view, peach-blossom hair is very attractive. Of course, even without your captivating tresses, you *are* very beautiful, Lady Agnes.”

Agnes, who’d never been directly praised by a nobleman in public, felt like she’d just been hit with a club. She skipped any feelings of pleasure or embarrassment and went straight to stunned surprise.

Even if it was 90 percent flattery, it was still a huge deal.

She knew she should thank Prince Nathan, but she was simply too shocked to speak.

Then, as if to protect Agnes, Claude stepped forward, his arm circling around her lower back.

“My fiancée *is* a wonderful woman, isn’t she?” he said. “I accept your compliment on her behalf.”



Agnes was once again shocked, this time by Claude's response.

When she'd been with Philip, the occasional gentleman did offer her a few words of flattery. However, Philip had always responded by saying things like "There's no need to praise her" or "Yes, I consider myself very generous for accepting her, unsightly hair and all."

Back then, Agnes hadn't really noticed how Philip would deflect the compliments meant for her or how he'd turn them around to praise himself. But now that she thought about it, that'd been quite...odd.

Even if you don't think someone deserves praise, it's odd to go out of your way to negate any compliments they might get.

And Philip had always *hated* her hair. From the moment they'd met, he'd always criticized it. Realizing this far too late, Agnes felt somewhat confused. But she was yanked back to the present by Prince Nathan chuckling wryly.

"That mushroom was yours, was it not, Lady Agnes?" he asked. "Growing mushrooms is quite rare, even in Oreille."

"Is...is that so?"

Her father, Josse, had said that mushrooms grew as part of the spirits' divine protection, so she'd assumed it was normal in Oreille, where their protection was more common.

"Lady Agnes," Prince Nathan said, "do you know *why* those mushrooms grow around you?"

Before she could reply, another voice suddenly cried out, "Nathan!"

Princess Marielle clung to Nathan's arm as soon as she appeared from the crowd of nobles keeping their distance from the royals. Her brown hair was more subdued than her older brother's fiery red hue, but from her expression, it was clear to Agnes that her personality was just as cheerful and energetic.

"Don't leave me," the princess pouted. "I was lonely."

"You're acting like a *child*, Marielle."

Judging by the princess's exaggeratedly puffed-out cheeks and their smiling

conversation, Agnes realized these siblings must be on good terms. Then, as soon as Marielle turned to look at them, she quickly let go of Nathan's arm and gracefully curtsied.

"I am honored to meet you, Prince Claude," she said elegantly. "If you don't mind, would you show me around your wonderful garden?"

Agnes had accompanied Claude to greet the royal family, so Marielle must have known she was his fiancée.

But...on what grounds could she possibly think it's okay to ask Claude to tour the gardens alone with her? Well...she is a neighboring princess. So maybe this is a form of diplomacy...

Having to wait here alone would be rather stressful, Agnes thought, but it might prove good training for her.

"If you're interested in the gardens," Claude said coolly, "I will have one of our professional gardeners guide you. The roses are at their peak."

"Huh? Wait, no, I..." Marielle flinched. Then she smiled. "A dance, then."

"Unfortunately, I have a fiancée."

"All right, well..." she said, undaunted. "If we could just chat alone..."

"Unfortunately, I have a fiancée."

Agnes could see Prince Nathan holding back his laughter as Claude cut off Princess Marielle's every attempt.

But all this aside, isn't Claude being quite rude? She is a visiting princess, after all. It'd be just terrible if there was some sort of confrontation involving Claude, even if it didn't lead to a major diplomatic incident.

"Prince Claude," she butted in. "Please don't concern yourself about me."

"I'm concerned about nothing *but* you, Agnes," he replied lovingly.

Her heart leaped as he fixed her with his dazzling smile. But, at the same time, she could feel Marielle's sharp gaze upon her. While Agnes was at a loss as to what to do, a gorgeous dress entered her peripheral vision.

"Lady Agnes!"

Simone came over with her black hair swaying. She gracefully bowed and greeted the royal siblings. She often acted very strangely and said odd things, but seeing her like this reminded Agnes that she was still a duke's daughter. Her demeanor had such elegant beauty that was far beyond Agnes.

"It *is* such a delight to meet His Royal Highness," Simone said, "the Flower of Oreille."

Princess Marielle didn't blink, clearly taking the compliment for granted. Then, she suddenly smiled.

"Yes, I'm relieved to see the Kingdom of Visage has at least *one* noble lady who knows how to be polite. A man caring for his fiancée *is* sweet and all, but a woman who gets in the way of socializing is just... I mean, don't you agree?"

In other words, Marielle was blaming *Agnes* for Claude rejecting her invitations. *Now* she was implying that Agnes ought to insist Claude go with her to "socialize."

Frantically, Agnes racked her brain for something to say.

"Oh, you're quite right."

Marielle nodded smugly in response to Simone's agreement. "Right?!"

"Yes, that's right," Simone said rapturously. "Lady Agnes's skin is as smooth as porcelain, and her brilliant green eyes steal my heart every time. Her peach-blossom hair is so dreamy, just *looking* at it fills me with bliss! On top of that, her *dress!!!* While the color is somewhat subdued, the white lace with scattered flowers is so pretty! Her beauty is like a fairy that appeared in a meadow. No, in fact, Lady Agnes *is* that fairy. Nay, she's a *goddess!!!*"

As she came to the end of this rhapsody, Simone let out a rueful sigh.

"Thus, I *completely* understand why Prince Claude is so particular about Lady Agnes. Indeed, I do! Personally, I'd *love* to have her all to myself...!"

As Simone's voice rose to a shriek and she clenched her fists, Marielle's shoulders jerked in surprise.

"It's so heartening to see *you* feel the same as I, princess!" Simone continued, clasping the princess's hands in joy. "Come, let us talk at length all about Lady

Agnes's many charms."

As Simone's eyes bored into hers, Marielle took a step back, looking frightened.

"I...I have other business to attend to... Excuse me..." Smiling tautly, Marielle turned and hurried off.

Simone sighed heavily as she watched her go. "How presumptuous of her!" she sniffed. "To approach the Lady Agnes with *that* level of adoration...!"

Simone's phrasing was utterly beyond Agnes's comprehension, as well as its implications.

"My sister said the Princess of Oreille seemed to be taking quite an interest in Lady Agnes," Simone explained, turning back to the others, "and that I should come over and introduce myself."

"I am grateful to Lady Zenaide for her thoughtfulness," Claude said, bowing politely.

Returning the bow with one of her own, Simone squeezed Agnes's hands. "Lady Agnes...let us talk again soon."

As she shot Agnes a carefree smile, Agnes *finally* realized that Simone had come over here especially to help her out. After all, Marielle *was* a princess. No matter *what* Agnes said, it'd probably have gone unpleasantly. Whether or not the conflict had been resolved amicably was still hard to say. But, thanks to Simone, it at least ended peaceably enough.

"Yes," she sighed in relief. "Thank you so much."

A pop came as Agnes spoke and a purple-capped mushroom appeared on Simone's arm. When Simone saw the *Laccaria amethystina*, her eyes sparkled as she roughly plucked it. Agnes swore she could feel Claude wince.

"A mushroom the same color as Lady Agnes's dress!" she cried. "I'll treasure it always!" Practically jumping on the spot with excitement, Simone happily walked off.

Treasure it? Is...is she planning to display it in her room?

"To be so excited over a mushroom like that... Is *she* a closet mushroom freak

as well...?” Agnes mumbled those words without thinking, but Prince Nathan burst into raucous laughter.

It’d make sense if he’d been angered by the situation with his sister. But he didn’t seem to be bothered by it at all.

“By the way...” Nathan commented as if nothing had happened, “I noticed the mushrooms seem to grow without you even having to summon them.”

His voice held pure admiration. No surprise or disgust. Hearing that, Agnes felt herself relax a great deal.

“You said it’s rare even in Oreille for people to grow mushrooms?” she asked.

“I only know of *one* person who can, and I’ve never heard of any non-Oreillian being able to do it.”

“Is it really *that* rare?”

As if reacting to Agnes’s surprise, a popping sound resounded, and a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s arm. It opened up in a star shape...probably a *Chorioactis geaster*. Its outside was blackish, but its inside was orange. It stood out quite a bit.

“Another one,” said Prince Nathan in astonishment. “Amazing...”

“*Chorioactis geaster!*” Claude cooed in delight. “It’s an endangered species! It turns from a sphere to a spindle and opens into a star. I *never* thought I’d see it in a place like this...!”

The two princes stood captivated by the mushroom, their eyes shining.

Perhaps mushroom fetishism is a royal trait that transcends borders, Agnes thought wryly. She was a little bit dismayed, but it was better than being insulted.

“Lady Agnes...” Prince Nathan said, turning to her. “My father...the king might say something strange to you. I apologize in advance.”

“Something...strange?”

Agnes was used to hearing strange things by now, mostly from a certain mushroom fetishist. But she’d also fielded so many criticisms and comments

about her hair color over the years, she was used to it. Besides, even if a visiting king said something a little strange, there was no need for the prince to apologize to Agnes. She was just a count's daughter, after all.

"My father has..." the prince hesitated before continuing, "a...complex about mushrooms."

"A...complex? About *mushrooms*?" Baffled by the very phrase, Agnes couldn't help but repeat it out loud.

From mushroom fetishes to mushroom complexes... The royal reaction to mushrooms is wider than I ever imagined...

"I can't say too much about it," Prince Nathan said apologetically. "Personally, while I'd like to see you again, Lady Agnes, I...think it's best if you don't come to Oreille."

"What do you mean?"

What he was saying didn't mesh with what Agnes had seen of the king so far. Seeing her puzzlement, Prince Nathan smiled at her.

"I have to go now. Please excuse me," he said.

As Nathan bowed to leave, Agnes felt a flood of anxiety.

"Prince Claude..." she said, turning to her fiancé. "Did I do something rude? I knew it! The mushrooms..."

"No, Agnes," Claude said reassuringly. "You didn't do anything. He *was* rather accepting of the mushrooms, after all."

But why should Prince Nathan warn her against visiting his country, then? That was unusual. Not that she *had* any plans to go to Oreille, even so, it was still painful to be spurned like that.

"I think," Claude said finally, "he said what he did for *your* benefit, Agnes."

"How so?"

In other words, he was warning her that if she expected a warm welcome in Oreille, the reality would be much different?

Seeing that she'd wrinkled her forehead, racking her brains over the situation,

Claude gently touched it with his finger.

“You will stay here, Agnes,” he said firmly, “in our country. By my side. Oreille is irrelevant.”

“That’s true...but...”

Claude scooped up Agnes’s hand and quickly kissed it. “Come, my precious mushroom princess,” he said soft and low. “Shall we dance?”

“Oh! Certainly...” Agnes nodded, her heartbeat quickening in response to that dazzling smile.

As they danced, she could feel the young noblewomen’s piercing gazes on her back. It made things awkward. On top of *that*, mushrooms kept popping up everywhere! But before she could get *too* worried, Claude smiled and swiftly harvested them. As she observed his fast-paced mushroom picking, it even became somewhat amusing.

It’d be so nice if we could stay like this forever, Agnes thought to herself.



Mushrooms of the Day *Laccaria amethystina* A mushroom with a purple cap and stalk, also known as Amethyst Deeper. Its color varies from deep purple to pale purple and fades when dried. Yet, the pleats’ color remains. Contrary to its poisonous color, it *is* edible and its flavor and firmness are both good.

It grew in response to Agnes’s grateful heart... At least, that was its pretext. In fact, it was happy to have the same color as her dress and sprouted out of pride.

Chorioactis geaster A mushroom that changes from a sphere to a spindle and opens into a notched star. Its outside is black and its inside orange. An endangered super rare mushroom, it’s also called “The Devil’s Cigar” since spores shoot out like white smoke from its cracks.

It’s rare, so it sprouted in joy and courage when it thought it was being referred to. However, it was too nervous under the two princes’ keen gazes to release its spores.

Chapter 6: I'm Sorry

"I found this letter in a book..."

Agnes, who'd told Benoit she had something to talk to him about, handed him the letter from Josse she'd found the other day. She could've left it be, written it off as something best left in the past. But she couldn't. It weighed too heavily on her.

If everyone really *had* died because of Agnes, then this might be the point where she should apologize. Yet she was still afraid of being cast out. However, she had Claude now. That knowledge gave her strength, so she resolved to be brave.

She sat down on the opposite sofa and waited while Benoit read the letter. Tea and sweets sat on the table in front of her, but her throat was too dry to even attempt swallowing anything.

Benoit put the letter on the table and sighed deeply after he finished.

"When he says 'found,' does he mean he was being chased by debt collectors or something? Did you know anything about this, Father?" Agnes asked.

"...That day, Josse had entrusted you and Elise to my household as he was planning to go to the Prayer Spring in Marquis de Barthet's territory." As he spoke, Benoit reached for his teacup. "I don't even know who he was going to meet; Josse didn't tell me. But I didn't expect...*that* to happen."

Sipping his tea, Benoit sighed again.

"After the accident, I did a lot of research. I was told it was thieves, but my wife's jewelry was fully recovered, and the carriage seemed more smashed up than ransacked."

Agnes was surprised Benoit seemed to feel the same sense of incongruity that she did. Now she felt even more confused.

"But, if theft wasn't the motive, then why...?" she asked.

"Josse *was* Oreillian," Benoit said, "but it seems he was actually an aristocrat,

not a commoner. He left home, entered Visage, and met Elise at the Prayer Spring in the Barthet territory, near the border.”

“...I always thought Dad was a commoner,” Agnes said quietly, letting the news sink in.

“So did I,” Benoit nodded. “But he had received permission to marry Elise from our father. Knowing the type of man our father was, I have the feeling Josse explained his circumstances to him first.”

Even if Josse *had* been an Oreillian noble, he’d still left his home and country, rendering him as little influence as a commoner. At any rate, he’d clearly received permission to wed her mother.

“Nothing valuable was stolen from the wreckage,” Benoit went on, “including my wife’s jewelry. The horse didn’t die in the accident, but was killed. And afterwards, we realized one thing *was* missing.”

“...Dad’s ring, right?” Agnes asked.

Benoit’s eyes widened. “You...*know* about that?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes, I do. The other day, I recalled Dad was wearing that ring in the carriage. Was it stolen?”

Benoit nodded and gently put the teacup down on the saucer with a soft cling. “That ring could be said to be Josse’s only asset. I’ve heard it symbolized a promise.”

A promise...? With whom...? Could it be the person he’d been planning to meet at the spring?

“I don’t think they would leave all that jewelry there if their goal was money,” Benoit said, “but given that they killed the horse, I’ve always suspected some sort of grudge. But Josse had no debts and wasn’t the sort to have enemies. Of course, neither were Elise or my wife.”

Agnes nodded; of that, she had no doubt.

All three of them were very kind and good people. It’s impossible to imagine anyone begrudging them for no reason.

“The only real clue,” Benoit continued, “is the stolen ring. I did what research

I could... And I think I finally found something.”

“What did you find?!” Agnes leaned forward, her pink tresses cascading over her shoulders as she locked onto her uncle’s surprising remark.

But Benoit frowned and shook his head. “This is just my speculation. There’s no solid evidence. And I promised Josse I wouldn’t pry. That I would simply protect you and Elise. So I’ve never spoken of this before now, nor have I sought to make it public. But I believe...the culprit is an Oreillian. Josse’s ring holds significance there. So perhaps, that’s why it was all the culprit took.”

If the only objective was the ring, then it certainly made sense why the thief didn’t touch anything else. *The luggage being scattered about might’ve been because the thief was looking for the ring...or it was done to make it look like it was a bandit raid.*

“But...” Agnes said hesitantly, “if they wanted the ring, why didn’t they just stop us, rob us of it, and go? Was the ring *that* important to my father? Was it important enough to kill for?”

“Josse wasn’t the kind of man who’d put a ring before his own life or the life of his family,” Benoit said definitively. “He likely planned to go to the spring in order to hand it over. And maybe he knew that wouldn’t be enough for the person who wanted it. That’s why he tried to entrust you and Elise to me in advance.”

So...the culprit meant to kill Dad all along? Yet...it makes sense when you consider that the horse was killed to prevent him from escaping. Agnes couldn’t understand why anyone would go to such lengths for a ring. Her confusion won out over her fear, yet she felt her fingers trembling as she clasped her hands together on her lap.

“At the time of the accident,” Benoit said, his voice carrying a heavy edge, “Josse used all his power to hide you, Agnes.”

“How?”

“Josse also had the spirits’ divine protection. But he only grew medicinal herbs, didn’t he? A rare gift as far as that goes. But he wasn’t blessed with great magical power. He always said that growing herbs was the extent of what he

could do.”

Agnes just nodded and listened. She’d never heard about this before.

“Josse left a magical message inside the carriage,” Benoit continued. “My wife and the coachman were killed, and it was impossible for Josse’s power to hide you and Elise. Escape was impossible. The carriage was surrounded. He knew all three of you couldn’t have escaped. So...he did his best to protect you, Agnes. Knowing that the assailant would check the bodies, he’d cast a spell to make it look like my wife was *you*.”

Having said all this in a rush, Benoit let out a small sigh.

“‘I sincerely apologize for involving your wife,’” he said slowly, as if from memory. “‘Please don’t try to track down the culprit. If they believe everyone is dead, then they won’t be looking for us. If we manage to escape, I’ll explain everything. If I don’t return, then please take care of Agnes. Please...protect my daughter.’ That was what the message written in light said. As soon as I’d read it, it disappeared.”

Agnes suddenly recalled that, when she’d awoken and opened the carriage door, there’d been a light bursting into nothingness.

So...that was Dad’s magic?

“So *that’s* why,” she said softly, “when you heard the Oreillian royal family would be visiting, your expression darkened.”

Just the word Oreille must’ve reminded him of that day... she thought sadly.

“I wouldn’t have minded throwing my life away to avenge my wife, Elise, and Josse,” Benoit said stiffly. “But I had you and Kevin to think about, Agnes. So I chose to spend my life protecting you both. Our precious children.”

“...I’m so, so sorry,” Agnes squeezed out, her voice hoarse with emotion.

Benoit frowned. “What are you apologizing for?”

“Dad and Mom might have escaped if it wasn’t for me. Auntie wouldn’t have been involved. And yet I survived. Because of that, you couldn’t take the actions you wanted to...”

Agnes took a deep breath to conceal her trembling voice.

“I can’t socialize like a normal noblewoman. That horrible joke of a royal dumped me. And I sprout mushrooms everywhere! I’m completely useless... Nothing but a burden. ...I’m sorry.”

Benoit had had to shoulder so much grief and loss. And all Agnes had done was shackle him in place, stopping him from getting his revenge. She felt miserable. Her vision was growing increasingly blurred. Soon, she couldn’t hold them back, and tears started rolling down her cheeks.

“Agnes...” Benoit said softly. Before she knew it, she was being hugged tightly, her hair being stroked over and over again. “No need to apologize,” her uncle said. “You did nothing wrong. It’s the culprit’s fault.”

Those words, meant to comfort her, were no doubt words Benoit had long been telling himself.

“I’ll curse the people responsible until the day I die,” he said, venom tinging his voice before it softened again. “But keeping you and Kevin safe is *far* more important. Josse and Elise loved you so much, Agnes. My wife was in the carriage since she was concerned about you all. She was there for the family she loved and adored. *None* of it was your fault, Agnes. I promise you that.”

Having loosened his hold on Agnes now, Benoit smiled very kindly as more tears streamed down her cheeks onto her hands.

“You have suffered so much,” he said, “all because of that good-for-nothing diseased ingrown hair. But I’m sure Prince Claude will take good care of you. Nothing would make those three happier than to know you are happy and fulfilled, Agnes.”

Wiping her tears away with a handkerchief, Benoit exhaled.

“Josse was from a prominent Oreillian family,” he continued, “and he died due to that connection. You’re supposed to be dead as far as they are concerned, Agnes. So, I think you should be fine. Even so, you should be *very* careful about getting involved with Oreille.”

“Yes, Father...”

Benoit smiled ruefully as he watched Agnes squeak out a response again.

“You’ll be fine, Agnes. ‘I am cute. I am capable,’ right?” he repeated with a teasing grin.

“H-How do you know about that?!”

Such unexpected quoting dried Agnes’s tears right up.

“I heard it from Kevin. Nice mantra.”

“K-Kevin...!”

Benoit stroked Agnes’s hair again, ignoring her trembling over Kevin’s unexpected betrayal.

“I’d like to hear you say it...” he said.

“Whyyyy?” she whined.

It was all so embarrassing, Agnes couldn’t stand it. That was what she *wanted* to say. But Benoit’s eyes were so full of expectation.

“I...I am cute. I am...capable.” She managed to squeeze the words out. Yet Benoit’s eyes told her that he still wasn’t satisfied.

“I...I am cute!” she said louder. “I am...capable!”

After she’d cried those words out in desperation, Benoit nodded in satisfaction.

“Right. You *are* capable, Agnes.”

Agnes was mentally exhausted and out of breath. *What powerful words these are...*

“Be happy, Agnes.”

Benoit squeezed Agnes’s hand as her shoulders rose and fell with her erratic breathing after her mantra. Then, with a popping sound, a mushroom appeared. One with white warts on a red cap. Benoit stared at the *Amanita muscaria* gently swaying on the back of his hand and gently stroked its cap.

“Please protect my precious daughter...the Mushroom Princess,” he told it.

Never mind my fiancé, Agnes thought, *now he’s entrusting me to the mushrooms!*

She thought that a bit kooky, but Benoit looked so serious, she didn't have the heart to snark about it. As if responding to his sentiment, more *Amanita muscarias* began popping all over him.

Agnes couldn't help but laugh as she looked at Benoit, covered in polka-dotted mushrooms.



“**YEP!** You look as adorable as ever today.”

“Thank...you.”

When Claude arrived at the Lefort residence to pick Agnes up, that was the first thing he said. Agnes realized he would always compliment her, no matter what she wore. But she still felt bashful and happy.

Today's dress, as usual, was a gift from Claude. It had a simple design—a light blue color with a navy-blue sash—and it didn't stress her out too much. The fabric felt nice on her skin and the buttons and lace's delicate workmanship was beautiful.

Perhaps the glass mushroom necklace around her neck and the mushroom brooch pinned to her chest brought its tone down somewhat. But since those were gifts from Claude, they meant more than any luxury accessory.

Her face now stiffening for a different reason, Agnes heard two popping sounds. *Mycena interrupta*, a blue-capped mushroom that shone like glasswork. And the mushroom that looked like a translucent white Canelé cake on a deep azure stalk was a *Mycena lazulina*.

“They go with your necklace,” Claude observed brightly, “and they complement the color of your dress. What obliging mushrooms!”

“They're *not* accessories,” she warned him. “I'm not taking this with me.”

Claude seemed quietly moved as he plucked the mushrooms that had sprouted on him. But when Agnes thought about it, she already *had* two mushroom accessories on anyway.

And, of course, Claude was wearing matching ones.

“Somehow,” she went on. “I feel more embarrassed about the mushroom

accessories than the dress.”

“Well,” Claude replied simply, “it’s a refreshing change from you worrying about your hair. But mushrooms are wonderful, living things. There’s nothing wrong with them at all.”

Mushrooms aren’t the problem! It’s being the kind of person who’d wear mushroom accessories... Yet, seeing those sparkling eyes, she couldn’t complain.

“I can’t win against a mushroom freak’s love of fungi,” Agnes said out loud accidentally. Claude laughed happily.

“I *do* love mushrooms. But I love you *more*, Agnes.”

“Wh-What *are* you talking about!”

They were standing in the entrance hall of the Lefort residence, with Kevin and the servants, who’d come to see her off, standing nearby. As Agnes realized they were all smiling warmly at her, she felt embarrassment wash over her.

“L-Let’s go!”

She grabbed Claude’s hand and rushed out of the house. They hadn’t even gotten off the premises, and she was out of breath already. She was grateful for Claude’s kindness. But she wished he’d choose his timing and location more delicately.

She looked at Claude—the root of all evil—but he was smiling happily, for some reason.

“Why are you smiling?”

“You grabbed my hand and didn’t let go,” he beamed. “I’m thrilled!”

Grasping the situation, Agnes let go of his hand in a hurry. But that big hand soon grabbed hers back.

“Why not?” he asked cheerfully. “Let’s hold hands as we go to town.”

But that’d be embarrassing! And even worse, if someone sees us...

Still, she *liked* holding his hand and didn’t want to disappoint Claude by refusing. When Agnes gave up and nodded, Claude laced his fingers with hers. She looked up in surprise, but she couldn’t say anything when she saw those

happy gray eyes. Her heart was pounding, and she felt a small sense of happiness which, more than anything, made her unable to let go.

As they walked together, Agnes realized that Claude's guards, including Maurice, were watching over them. Acting overly skittish would be more embarrassing than anything else, so she decided to hold her head high.

This is all just to prevent us from getting separated, she thought. Seeing it akin to leading a horse by the reins, Agnes felt a little better.

"Holding hands with you makes me feel closer to you," Claude said abruptly. "And that makes me happy."

What an outrageous thing to say! With that sexy voice and handsome face! Just when I'd finally managed to regain my composure...

Claude treasured Agnes. Yet, as a result, he was the one who pushed her out of her comfort zone the most.

"I-If you're going to say things like *that*," she huffed, "I won't hold your hand at all."

Almost at her limit, Agnes shook Claude's hand loose. But he lowered his eyebrows sadly.

"Why...? Do you hate holding hands with me?"

How is it fair for such a handsome young man to tilt his head at me like a puppy? He's making me the bad guy here, isn't he?

"I... I don't *hate* it," Agnes admitted.

"Then why...?"

"It's...it's embarrassing!"

And having to state the obvious out loud is even worse!

Claude blinked upon seeing the strawberry-red blush staining Agnes's cheeks. Then his lips pulled into a smile that would melt any maiden into a puddle on the spot.

"Yes. That makes me happy."

"HOW?!"

She was trying to say she was embarrassed and inconvenienced by it. But she had no idea why that'd make him happy.

“Because,” he said sweetly, “it’s like you’re saying that you love me. Besides... you’re so cute when you’re all bashful, Agnes.”

As he spoke, he took Agnes’s hand again. Without lacing their fingers together this time, he held her hand tightly and grinned.

With an echoing pop, a white, mop-like mushroom grew on his shoulder.

Agnes had no choice but to walk alongside him, her face burning. Yet Claude held her hand tight, even as he plucked the *Hericium erinaceus* with his free hand.



Mushrooms of the Day *Mycena interrupta* (Pixie’s Parasol) A mushroom with an umbrella cap that sparkles like glasswork. It’s about 2cm long and 2mm thick, so it’s small and fragile. It’s poisonous, so you can’t eat it... But who would try when it’s so tiny?

It secretly wished it could be a pendant and hang around Agnes’s neck. “I’ve strengthened my body a bit, so I want to hang from a necklace!” It exclaimed before being softly plucked by Claude.

Mycena lazulina A mushroom with a deep azure root and a translucent white canelé on top. Looking from the bottom, the canelé part looks like cute round pasta, and it glows yellowish green in the dark. The cap is as small as 1-2mm, and it has no special taste or smell... Still, someone must have tasted it.

With its good looks, I can imagine a range of promotional goods... It’s like the pop idol of the mushroom world.

“If you’re going to hang from a necklace, I’ll join in!” it said to the Pixie’s Parasol as it dangled. But it was a bit shocked to find itself getting plucked right alongside the Pixie’s Parasol.

Hericium erinaceus A white stringy mushroom that looks like a mop. Very edible. It looks like a fluffy ball of hair. It’s pure white when it’s young, but becomes browner as it ages, so it’s fun to watch it change color.

It's edible, and very healthy.

The *Cuphophyllus Virgineus* nudged it to sprout, and it did so, squealing, "I'm included! I'm included!" It totally thought its fluffiness was being referred to, but it was wrong. What a relief.

As long as it can go out and about with Agnes, it's happy.

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

A highly motivated mushroom that sprouted to say, "We will protect Agnes, too."

Benoit was buried in polka dots, but I think it suits him.

Chapter 7: I'm By Your Side

“OH!” Claude said sadly. “There aren’t any strawberries.”

After arriving in town, hand in hand, they headed to the fruit skewer stand that had apparently become a staple destination in Claude’s mind.

“I guess strawberry season is over,” Agnes remarked. “It looks like it’s grapes now.”

The stand sold seasonal fruits in an easy-to-eat form at a low price, so it made sense that the fruits would change with the season. This seemed like a sign indicating how much time she’d spent in Claude’s company. It probably wasn’t a *big* deal, but it made Agnes happy.

With a popping sound, a *Tylopilus vinosobrunneus* suddenly sprouted on Claude’s arm. He nodded as he looked at the reddish-brown cap, which, as its name suggested, looked like a grape.

“I see. It appears the mushroom also recommends the grapes, so let’s try them.”

While it appeared that the mushroom *was* making a recommendation, Agnes’s throat was dry with nerves after all this time spent holding hands with Claude. Still, she wanted to eat the grapes, so she took the *Tylopilus vinosobrunneus* up on its suggestion. They headed over to the stand.

After they made their purchase, Agnes promptly sat on the nearby bench and stuffed her mouth. She was delighted they were the kind of grapes you could eat with the skin on. Sweet scents and fruit juice burst over her tongue, moistening her parched mouth.

Fruit juice is nice, she thought, but nothing beats the juice from fresh fruit.

So absorbed was Agnes in eating, it took her a moment to notice Claude was watching her. Perhaps he was appalled by the sight of her eating so voraciously? She wasn’t exactly dripping fruit juice down her chin, but you could hardly call this ladylike eating.

Agnes didn't *think* Claude would criticize her as Philip had, but she'd still feel bad if she ended up disillusioning him. Nervously, she turned to face him. There he sat: the handsome prince with a big smile.

Agnes was relieved he didn't seem to be offended. *So then, why's he just staring at me, not eating?*

"You can eat these grapes without peeling them," she informed him.

"Yes, I know," he replied happily.

"Then why aren't you eating?"

"Because you're just...so adorable when you eat, Agnes."

He spoke as if it was the most natural thing in the world to say. Agnes was about to nod affirmatively, then realized how weird his statement was.

"I... I'm just eating normally!" she sputtered. Now she felt too embarrassed to finish the rest of the grapes. She had one grape left. *What's he trying to do to me?!?*

"Are you going to eat that?"

"No, I'm not!"

She *really* wanted that last grape. But after what he'd just said, she couldn't bring herself to plop it into her mouth.

Claude's hand reached out and covered Agnes's hand holding the grape skewer. Before Agnes even had time to wonder what he was doing, Claude reached out and bit the grape right off the skewer.

The mere act of biting it off the skewer...the way he chewed and licked the juice off his lips with his tongue... It was all very...sensual. All Agnes could do was watch in a daze.

"*Hmm?* Oh, you wanted to eat it, after all? Well, here," Claude said, proffering her his own skewer.

One was missing, which indicated Claude had already eaten one. If Agnes ate from this skewer, it...it'd almost be like an indirect kiss.

Actually, Claude already ate from my skewer, so I suppose we already...

ummm....

“I... I don’t want it!” she blurted out.

She had actually already kissed him once before. But that was different. The whole situation made her blush. But Claude just smiled in delight.

Is this what Maurice meant about Claude being happy to see me embarrassed?

If he was doing this on purpose, Agnes wasn’t sure she appreciated that. But Claude seemed to pick up on her mood as she turned away, so he didn’t push it any further.

After quickly consuming the grapes, Claude took Agnes’s empty skewer and disposed of their garbage.

Agnes knew Claude was kind and really did treasure her. *But this is still too much for me...! What’s the correct etiquette when he offers me a skewer of grapes? Perhaps I should ask Princess Zenaide sometime. No, no! I couldn’t ask the crown princess a question like that!*

Seeing Claude’s lips were slightly purple when he returned, Agnes took out a handkerchief. Reaching out as he sat back down next to her, she finally remembered there were escorts watching them. She’d almost repeated the Strawberry Skewer Incident, and that indirect kiss from a few moments ago had surely been witnessed.

Unable to handle any further embarrassment, a bright red Agnes held out her handkerchief. Claude looked at her sadly.

“You’re not going to do it this time?”

“People are watching.”

“So you would have if there wasn’t anyone else around?” he grinned.

“Th-That’s not what I...”

Seeing Claude laughing happily, and realizing she was being teased again, Agnes blushed until her cheeks felt like they were on fire.

At times like this, Claude seemed almost monstrous.

“The shopkeeper complimented your dress again today,” he said, changing the topic for her.

“He did,” she said.

That stall owner was always kind to Agnes; he’d even praised her when she had shown up all in pink. Today, he commented on how pretty her dress was. Even if it was just flattery, it’d made Agnes’s heart soar.

“Have you gotten used to wearing nice dresses now?” Claude asked.

“I suppose? Actually, I...kind of like cute clothes.”

Until now, she had worn nothing but the plainest of clothes because of Philip’s influence. She’d never had a particular desire for cute clothes. But now that she knew she wouldn’t be shunned, her feelings towards fashion were starting to change.

Hearing Agnes speak so casually, Claude smiled like a flower coming into bloom. With a smile like that, he could charm anyone. Agnes was frankly impressed by the mushroom fetishist’s non-mushroom-related skills.

“That’s good,” he beamed. “Let’s get you even more clothes. You’re so pretty, you’ll look amazing in anything.”

Agnes was pleased to be complimented. But this was heading in a rather odd direction.

“Uh... Um...” she fumbled for words.

“Don’t worry about money,” Claude said nonchalantly. “I’d be happy if you could wear pink eventually. But one step at a time. Oh, I’m looking forward to it!”

“O-Okay...”

He seemed so happy, Agnes had no choice but to agree.

They started walking, Claude leading Agnes by the hand. He soon adjusted his pace to match hers.

Claude could be pushy at times, but he never forced his will upon Agnes. That was part of why she trusted him so much. Anything that made him happy made

her happy, too.

“Hey there! You two mushroomers!”

Grinding to a halt, they realized the owner of an accessory shop had just called out to them.

“Ah, you two are as much a beautiful, mushroomy pair, as ever! ...Oooh?” The owner of the shop, who seemed to have noticed something, approached them and stared at Agnes’s hand. “That ring... It’s a mushroom.”

Indeed, on Agnes’s left ring finger, the mushroom ring Claude had given her was shining. It was proof of their engagement. Yet today, Agnes was a total mushroom girl, with a mushroom brooch and even a mushroom necklace to match.

Don’t write me off as just a mushroom fan. It’s all a misunderstanding... I swear!

“Ummmm, this is...” she began.

“You don’t have to say anything; I understand,” interrupted the merchant. “But...is that an engagement ring? A wedding ring? Either way, it’s something worth celebrating. Thanks to the two of you, mushroom-related products are selling like hotcakes. I have to thank you and do something to celebrate you!”

It didn’t seem like Agnes was getting through to the shopkeeper. But her greater concern now was Claude, who was staring at something in the mushroom shop’s open display case.

“Is that a mushroom hair ornament?” he asked, pointing at what had caught his eye.

“Oh! You’ve got a keen eye! Yes, and it’s made of genuine silver.”

Claude picked up the silver hair ornament. It was shaped like a large mushroom with several smaller ones nestled next to it.

“If you put this in your hair, wouldn’t it look like there were silver mushrooms growing out of it, Agnes?” he asked breathlessly. His eyes shone as he tried to appeal to her. But what he was saying was deranged.

Who’d want to walk around town with their fiancée looking like they had

mushrooms growing out of their head? Mushroom fetishism is truly beyond comprehension...

But she couldn't bring herself to pour cold water on a smile that looked *that* happy. In the end, at both the men's recommendation, Agnes left the shop with silver mushrooms poking out of her pink hair.

"This is *worse* than head-to-toe pink...! Are you *sure* it's okay for a human being to dress this way...?" Agnes muttered as they slowly walked towards the Lefort residence.

Necklaces and brooches may be mere accessories. But too many mushroom pieces are like I'm making a statement. Any way you slice it, I look like a mushroom fetishist. She just couldn't get on board with it.

"It's all right," Claude reassured her. "The pink and silver colors complement each other. You're as beautiful as a mushroom goddess."

"No, it's *not* okay... As a human woman, I'm done for...!"

"Don't worry, Agnes, you'll look cute no matter *what* kind of mushroom you grow."

Why does he have to meet all my anxieties with that winning smile? She wished he'd stop. Between Claude's good looks and the mushrooms, her emotions were a mess.

Then there came a pop, with timing that seemed to agree with her sentiments. The mushroom that grew on Claude's arm had a thin, wavy white cap that looked like a mass of frills. As Claude plucked this *Sparassis crispa* and put it in his pocket, he tilted his head quizzically.

"*Hmm?* Come to think of it...mushrooms don't grow on you, do they, Agnes?"

Now that she thought about it, Agnes realized that it was true: no mushroom had ever sprouted on her. It *was* odd. She was cursed by mushrooms, yet they didn't grow on her cursed body.

"Well..." she said finally, "it's not like I *want* them sprouting on me."

"That's right. I'm sure you'd look *wonderful* with mushrooms sprouting on you, Agnes, but...it'd pain me to pluck them."

While it struck Agnes as unusual for her fungi-loving fiancé to be so passive about mushrooms, she couldn't let that last bit slide.

"Does it...hurt you when you pluck them?"

All her life, Agnes had grown and plucked countless mushrooms. But she'd never imagined it might be painful. Shocked, she grabbed Claude's arm as, just then, a clam-shaped cluster sprouted.

Claude plucked the *Cryptoporus volvatus* and smiled at it. "Not a bit," he said. "So don't worry. I don't know *how* the mushrooms grow, but it really does seem like they just appear. They don't hurt at all... It's more like they appear just to see *you*, Agnes."

Hearing this, Agnes breathed a sigh of relief that he wasn't some kind of masochistic mushroom pervert who got off on the pain of each pluck.

After she released his arm, Claude stashed the mushroom he was holding in his pocket.

"Originally," Claude mused, "they grew in response to negative emotions, didn't they? Perhaps they might sprout painfully in response to how you're feeling..."

Come to think of it, Philip *had* been seriously menaced by her mushrooms. Agnes wasn't sure if they had hurt Philip when plucked. But it was obvious that they secreted poison that could easily permeate the skin. Either way, harm had been done.

"It's a little scary, isn't it...?" she pondered out loud.

As long as the mushroom fetishist enjoyed her mushrooms, all was well. But knowing that she could use them to cause others pain...Agnes didn't like that at all.

"It's okay," Claude said. "The mushrooms love you, Agnes. They wouldn't hurt those around you unnecessarily."

"How do *you* know?"

"Because mushrooms are wonderful creatures!"

As if agreeing with his words, a white-capped mushroom grew with a bursting

sound. Agnes shrugged, watching Claude happily examining the *Mycena chlorophos* as he plucked it.

It looks like he's trying to...talk to it! But surely, even a mushroom fetishist wouldn't go that far?

She felt both a little relieved and a little afraid of this mushroom freak who put such deep, unconditional trust in fungi. Claude often said things Agnes found funny, but she didn't mind too much. *Oh no, what if his mushroom fetishist ways have rubbed off on me?!*

"Oh!" Claude said suddenly. "I forgot to mention. Since the Oreillian royal family visited and it's quite rare for a king to make a foreign visit, *our* royal family will also pay a visit to their kingdom."

"Then who'll go?" Agnes asked. "His Majesty? Or the crown prince?"

"No, Gerome will go."

Since Oreille had sent their king, prince, and princess, Agnes thought Claude's father or oldest brother would go to even the score.

I guess not...

"Dragon Crest Bearers basically don't leave the country," Claude explained briefly.

Oh yes...this must be what Zenaide was talking about.

Certainly, if Dragon Crest Bearers couldn't leave the country, then that'd leave Gerome as the best option as the second-born prince with no crest.

"Agnes...do you want to go to Oreille?"

When Claude asked her that, she recalled how Prince Nathan had told her she shouldn't. She thought about what Benoit had told her too. No doubt she ought to think twice before ever going to Oreille.

"I *am* interested in the country where my father was born. But I don't *know* anyone there. I have no particular desire to go. Everyone precious to me is right here in Visage."

"Am I...part of that?" Claude asked shyly.

“Of course,” she answered without thinking. Then Agnes realized she’d just said something quite embarrassing and came to a halt.

“Er... Ummm...”

“Agnes...you’re precious to me too.”

With a gentle smile, Claude closed the gap between them. A reddish-brown capped mushroom, having appeared on his shoulder at some point, was jiggling around. The Nameko mushroom was slimy and shiny...and *certainly* couldn’t pass for an accessory. It lent the handsome prince an air of derangement.

“Of course...mushrooms are also precious.” Claude grinned as he wrapped the plucked *Nameko* in his handkerchief and put it in his pocket. Ever the mushroom fetishist, he swiftly handled the slimy fungi. When he started walking again, Claude cleared his throat, as if it was hard to find the words. “Actually...” he finally said, “I’m thinking of going to Marquis de Barthet’s territory with Gerome on his way to Oreille.”

“Why?”

Marquis de Barthet’s territory... That’s on the border between Visage and Oreille...where my father was headed... Agnes wondered why Claude would accompany Gerome, even though he wouldn’t be leaving the country.

“It bothers me,” Claude explained, “that the King of Oreille heard about you and your mushrooms before he came here, Agnes. Your name aside, few individuals could gossip about your mushrooms as far as a foreign country. It must be Philip’s doing, and he’s currently in the Barthet territory.”

It was only natural for the Oreille royal party to have stopped by the Marquis de Barthet’s border mansion. They must’ve—Agnes realized this suddenly based on what Claude was thinking—stayed the night there.

“I’m curious about what Prince Nathan said,” he continued, “and I want to confirm it for myself. A letter would be too easy to ignore. It’d be more effective to do it in person.”

Claude grinned at her as a mushroom appeared on his arm with a bursting sound. The vivid vermillion rod-shaped mushroom was a *Clavulinopsis miyabeana*. Claude quickly plucked the mushroom and smiled a little sadly

while putting it in his pocket.

“I won’t be able to see you for a while,” he continued. “But I’ve no intention of bringing you anywhere near Philip.”

“Can’t I go with you?” Agnes asked.

“...Do you *want* to see Philip?” His voice dropped an octave, chilling Agnes. But his suggestion was so insane, she had to shake her head.

“No. Not even a little. Not one bit! I don’t care a jot about Philip.”

At that outright statement, Claude’s tense expression softened.

“Then why...?”

“I’ve heard my parents met at a prayer spring in the Barthet territory. I want to see it at least once.”

Dad had planned to meet someone at a spring in the Barthet territory. Presumably, it’s the same one...

“Then I might be able to get some kind of clue,” she mused.

“What do you mean?”

Agnes told Claude what Benoit had said. He listened, his head cocked at an angle. It wasn’t a pleasant story. But she couldn’t bring herself to sugarcoat that her continued existence was a sin against nature and that she herself was possibly a harbinger of future dangers.

“If something like that ever happens again, Prince Claude,” she continued, “please put yourself first. I’m not a child anymore, anyway. I can take care of myself...”

Claude cut her off by pulling her into his arms.

It was a remote street, but someone might still come along. No doubt, their escorts were watching. Panicked, she tried to pull away, but Claude held her so tightly she couldn’t move.

“Count Lefort is strong. If I were him, I would never forgive someone who took someone important to me. But he endured, for you, Agnes, and for Kevin.” Claude slowly loosened his grip and gently stroked her hair. “No matter *what*

you do, the dead will not return. For Count Lefort's sake, you must be happy, Agnes."

A smile returned to his lips as he saw Agnes nod slightly.

"You're cute, Agnes. You're capable."

"Um...what's this, all of a sudden?" she blushed.

Alongside a loud popping sound, a small pale red-capped mushroom now appeared on Claude's shoulder. However, since he was still hugging Agnes, the *Marasmius pulcherripes* kept bobbing around up there.

"I'm not telling you to force a smile," he explained warmly. "Don't worry, I'll be by your side. The mushrooms too."

Agnes wasn't sure how or *why* he was including the mushrooms in this otherwise touching declaration. But she *was* grateful for the slight distraction.

"Ummm..."

"Yes? What is it?"

When Agnes looked up, those gray eyes were unexpectedly close. While he'd loosened his grip, she was still in his arms. She was still embarrassed, but she wanted to tell him this one thing.

"Thank you. For everything."

"Good...you've started saying 'Thank you' more than 'Sorry' lately. That's a very good thing..."

"It's all thanks to you, Claude."

Agnes hadn't really noticed, but Philip had eroded her self-worth and self-esteem. Claude had been the one who'd figured this out and brought them back. Benoit and Kevin were very kind, of course. But since they were family, and since Agnes felt indebted to them, she'd never been able to *really* confide in them.

Then...this mushroom fetishist had appeared by her side and supported her. It must've been quite troublesome for him to put up with. But all Agnes could do was thank him for his patience with her.

“I see...” Claude grinned. “Well, in *that* case, I’ll redouble my efforts.”

He scooped up her hand and kissed it, a bit too lingering for a mere aristocratic nicety. When he looked at her again, his eyes were deeply...*sensual*.

Agnes, unable to endure any more, hurriedly withdrew her hand.

“I’d be happy if you could get used to this kind of thing,” he said plainly.

“I’ll... I’ll do my best,” Agnes blushed.

Since they were engaged, they had to make public appearances together. If Agnes kept reacting with such skittishness, it’d be most rude to Claude.

“Well, I love seeing you all bashful as well, Agnes. So I’m happy either way.”

“Goodness...”

“May I have another, then?”

Still holding her hands, Claude gave her a challenging grin. But Agnes shook her head vigorously.

Can’t he do something about this...sensuousness of his? It practically oozes off him. Even though he is a mushroom freak...

Agnes turned her face away from Claude. But, still holding hands, they headed back to the Lefort residence.



Mushrooms of the Day *Tylopilus vinosobrunneus* It has a reddish-purple cap and, as its name suggests, it’s grape-colored and bitter. It’s not edible, of course. But it doesn’t *seem* to be poisonous. Its color is beautiful, but it fades easily in the rain.

“Grapes are good! Look at *this* grape body!” it cried as it sprouted, shaking its cap brazenly. After that, though, it got shy and even redder seeing Agnes and Claude flirt over grape skewers.

Sparassis crispa A mushroom with a white cap with a frilly film on it. It’s edible and has a nice texture. A member of the Wood Deterioration Club. A hard worker who infiltrates rotting wood to return it to the soil.

“I’ll be the one to decorate Agnes’s pink hair!” it declared, sprouting with

motivation. Yet Claude plucked it right away. “All right then, I’ll be a cool mushroom peeking out of your pocket,” it said, instantly changing tactics. A realist mushroom.

Cryptoporus volvatus It grows on tree trunks and looks like a snail. Its bottom part is cream colored and its top a glossy brown. It looks like a chestnut stuck in tree bark. The name makes it sound yummy and it definitely looks the part! But apparently, it doesn’t taste too good.

A shrewd mushroom that wants to be stroked whenever there is a chance. “A chance to be plucked by Agnes!” it said as it sprouted. Yet Claude was the one who plucked it. In the end, Agnes didn’t touch it. It was still satisfied because she gave it a good look.

Mycena chlorophos A mysterious mushroom with a white cap that glows green at night. Its glow is said to be the strongest in the world. It grows after rain, or in the rainy season, and it lives about three days. It’s not poisonous, so you can eat it. But it’s watery and smells of rot. *Why are the mushroom braves trying things that smell bad?* you may wonder.

In response to Claude’s claim that mushrooms are wonderful, it proudly said, “Well! Mushrooms can also glow in the dark, you know!” Even though it sprouted during the day... “Perhaps I still haven’t trained enough,” it thought as it did some more muscle training... Mycelium training?

Nameko

A slimy mushroom with a reddish cap. It often grows in clusters. It's an affordable grocery item, loved by the whole family. When Agnes was having a crisis, it sprouted to use its slimy secretions and render a pair of shoes unwearable.

A member of the Wood Destruction Club.

"Agnes is precious to us mushrooms too! I'll slime my best slime just for her!" it said, unable to stop secreting goop as Claude spoke of how precious Agnes was.

Clavulinopsis miyabeana A brightly colored stick-shaped mushroom that resembles the highly poisonous *Podostroma cornudamae*. So it *looks* poisonous, but it isn't. It isn't tasty, though. They're sometimes used to add color to dishes.

When it heard Philip was in for a whole heap of trouble, it offered its cooperation, saying, "If it comes down to it, I'll call on my bigger mushroom friends for help!" Of course, no one heard it...

Marasmius pulcherripes It has red caps around 1-2 cm thick and its stalk is quite thin, like wire. 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. This mushroom doesn't seem to be appreciated as a foodstuff by the world.

"You *are* capable, Agnes!" it declared, sprouting to show support. Thinking it'd immediately be picked, the mushroom then watched over the two as they flirted from its special seat, its mushroom heart beating very fast.

Chapter 8: The Source of The Power that Supports a Nation

“**AGNES**, how are you feeling?”

“I’m fine... How many times a day are you going to ask me the same thing?”

“As much as I wish. You tend to suffer in silence, so I want to make sure.”

Claude, sitting opposite her, smiled.

Agnes *was* happy to be accompanying Gerome to Oreille. But inevitably, they’d have to travel by carriage. Moreover, they were going a distance that couldn’t be reached in just a day or two. Benoit and Kevin were quite worried. But she’d managed to persuade them to let her go, since Claude would be there too.

But now he’s behaving like...this, she frowned.

Usually when they went out, he’d quickly sit beside her. But during this trip, they were sitting opposite each other. Apparently, this was so he could observe Agnes’s physical condition and, yes, he did ask her about it on a regular basis.

True, Agnes had been panicked about carriages due to her accident. But that was long ago now. Since she and Claude had ridden together so often, there were almost no problems now. The biggest problem so far was that her backside hurt from so much sitting, but... *I can’t possibly say that!*

“Excuse me, I’m coming in.”

After a rough knock, the carriage door opened without waiting for them to respond, and another man entered. The beautiful young man with bright golden hair was Claude’s older brother, Gerome. Since they were already seated, Agnes bowed her head without getting up. Gerome waved this aside, saying that formal greetings were unnecessary.

“Is something wrong, Gerome?” Claude asked.

“I wanted to talk to you while we still had the time.” Gerome sat next to Claude.

Seeing two beautiful royals in front of her, Agnes sat up straight.

“Lady Agnes...just what are you going to *do* in Barthet?” Gerome asked.

“There’s a prayer spring where my parents met there, so I thought I’d like to see it just once.”

“Aside from that?”

“...I would like to find out what Philip said to the King of Oreille.”

This is starting to sound like an interrogation, Agnes thought as Gerome sighed gratefully.

“You have a reasonable understanding of the situation, more or less. I’m relieved.”

Apparently, Agnes had passed Gerome’s test, as his expression softened.

“Do you know the reason why Visage did not send His Majesty, let alone the crown prince, in response to the visit of *their* king, prince, and princess?” Gerome asked gravely.

“I’ve heard that Dragon Crest bearers don’t leave the country.”

Something about what Agnes said seemed to make Gerome frown. He glared at Claude.

“I understand you cherish her,” he told his younger brother harshly, “but you’d do well from now on to tell her more of what she *needs* to know.”

“I was *going* to explain along the way,” Claude stressed.

The problem seemed to be that she wasn’t comprehending something.

“Um, it’s because I’m not strong enough,” she said apologetically. “Could you please not blame Prince Claude?”

A while back, Claude hadn’t told Agnes that Dragon Crest Bearers would weaken from adulthood if they didn’t meet their Dragonmate. Even though it could affect her own life, Claude had been worried that Agnes would feel the weight of that responsibility and that it’d color her choices.

Claude’s very kind...he always tries not to burden me... If there was something they hadn’t discussed, it wasn’t because of Claude’s negligence but due to

Agnes herself.

“Oh, no,” Gerome said suddenly. “I’m not blaming him. If I misled you, I apologize.”

He scratched his head awkwardly, as if his harsh words just now hadn’t been said. Agnes had thought he was angry about her lack of something. But perhaps she was wrong.

“Agnes...” Claude explained softly. “My brother is worried about me. And he’s worried about you, too.”

“I see. I didn’t know the circumstances, but I’m sorry,” she said with a bow of her head.

“No, it’s fine,” Gerome said apologetically. “I’m not known for being very personable. Please let me know if I frighten you. I’ll adjust myself. You’re Claude’s precious Dragonmate, after all.”

Far from being angry, Agnes realized, he seemed to...*value* her. When she realized that, she felt the distance between them evaporate at once.

“Okay!”

As she responded with joy, there came a popping sound. A bright yellow-capped mushroom grew on Gerome’s arm.

“Oh! Please excuse me, Your Highness.”

“I don’t mind.”

Plucking the *Pleurotus cetrinopileatus* off his shoulder, he handed it straight to Claude. It seemed to Agnes that this mushroom trade arrangement had been established in advance.

“Simply put,” Gerome said, “the power of Dragon Crest Bearers declines once they leave our country. That’s why they don’t typically cross the border.”

Power... Agnes thought of Claude’s lightning magic. *So...that will weaken once he leaves Visage?*

“There were *three* Oreillian royals in attendance at His Majesty’s ball,” she mused. “Is it a case of ‘different country, different customs?’”

“There’s likely little effect on those three when they leave Oreille,” Gerome said.

“Does that mean...there are Dragon Crest Bearers in other countries?” Agnes looked at Claude as she asked this. She was surprised when he nodded back.

“Not Dragon Crests, *per se*,” he clarified, “but they have something similar, no doubt. At least, the previous King of Oreille never once left his country. Hence his nickname, the ‘King of Roots.’”

“It’s the ‘King of Flowers’ now, isn’t it?” Gerome chimed in. “Oreille is a country protected by spirits and their power seems to be categorized by strength or type, but I don’t know the full details. They seem to be only vaguely aware of our Dragon Crest Bearers, so...neither of us seems to know too much about the other.”

“I see...” Agnes said softly.

In other words, she thought, the King of Flowers is something like a royal without a Dragon Crest. Perhaps the old King of Roots was more like a Dragon Crest Bearer.

“Claude,” Gerome implored, “*please* tell her more about Dragon Crests. You can’t always be by her side to protect her.”

Claude nodded and turned his gray eyes towards Agnes. “Every country’s royal family supports their nation,” he began. “But their power comes from an outside source.”

He gently slipped the mushroom he was holding into his breast pocket as he spoke.

“In Visage,” he continued, “this is the dragon. In Oreille, it’s the spirits. Both provide different powers, which decrease whenever the empowered royals leave their nations. It’s odd that the King of Flowers seems so...*unaffected*. It’s also unorthodox for the prince and princess to visit a foreign nation as well. I want to find out *why* they came.”

Apparently, it was unusual for the royal family members to leave in general, even if they weren’t as powerful or connected to the land as the King of Roots.

“In the unlikely event that Philip has revealed our nation’s secrets,” Claude said grimly, “he won’t be able to escape a heavy punishment this time. Besides, I’m concerned that the Oreillians had already heard about Agnes before the ball. So what did Philip say? What did he tell them that made them interested enough to visit Visage?”

“When you mention Philip,” Agnes said, trying to maintain her composure, “you’re referring to my hair, aren’t you? Isn’t it possible they only mentioned it because it’s so rare in Visage?”

“It’s possible,” Claude mused, “but we also have to consider that Prince Nathan said it was better if you didn’t come to Oreille.”

It *was* certainly a strange thing to say to a foreign prince’s fiancée at a royal ball.

“He told you mushroom growing is rare even in Oreille, right?” Gerome asked. “I sure hope things don’t take a troublesome turn.”

“You should take care too, brother,” Claude said to Gerome.

Claude had told Agnes that his relationship with his brothers was more professional than anything. But it was clear to her that they were on good terms personally, too. Gerome’s expression certainly showed his trust in Claude, and Agnes felt heartened seeing it.

“More importantly, Lady Agnes,” Gerome implored her, “please take care of Claude. He—or rather, all Dragon Crest Bearers—tend to lose all reason when it comes to their Dragonmates...”

“I’ll do my best!”

The topic shifted so suddenly that Agnes sat up straight and yelled in response.

“Meanwhile, you seem to be keeping your desires too in check, Lady Agnes,” Gerome mused, “So...perhaps it’s a match made in heaven.”

Claude simply said, “All right, we’ll be arriving at Marquis de Barthet’s residence soon. We must make sure to greet them properly.”

As if responding to his words, a bright yellow-capped mushroom grew on his

arm. Actually, Agnes realized that one had grown on Gerome's arm as well. The two princes, adorned with matching mushrooms, looked very funny.

"Er, sorry about the m-mushrooms," Agnes apologized while holding back her laughter.

Smiling, Claude plucked the mushroom that'd grown on Gerome in his practiced manner. "Since the mushrooms are also supporting us," he said, "let us go and quickly cut off the source of any trouble."

His smile was dazzling as always. Yet, at this rate, Agnes feared Philip might end up a shining star in the heavens above.

Agnes was feeling a little anxious as the carriage entered the grounds of the Barthet residence.



WHEN the carriage door opened, the servants were all in a line to greet them.

Agnes was a little surprised. *Then again, there are two princes here before going ahead to Oreille on an official visit.* It was only natural that they'd be welcomed as honored guests.

When Agnes followed Gerome and Claude out of the carriage, she spotted Philip and Sabina. The couple had officially married and were living together.

"It's just a brief visit," Gerome said to Sabina as they walked over, "but thank you for your hospitality. Will we be seeing Marquis de Barthet?"

"I'm sorry," Sabina said apologetically. "My father is sick in bed."

If the lord of the territory wasn't available, then the family's next head—Philip, in this case—should have been the one to answer here. Not that there was anything *wrong* with Sabina, Lord Barthet's daughter, answering. But for some reason, Philip was looking Agnes's way and snickering. It was clear he hadn't been paying attention. Agnes wondered what in the world was going through that head of his.

"Please tell him to take care of himself," Gerome said diplomatically. "There's no need for him to strain himself."

"Thank you for your consideration."

Perhaps Philip didn't notice Sabina bowing her head as he was still grinning like an idiot.

"Well...it's been a while. How about a hello, Agnes?" Philip said, ignoring all decorum. That high-handed tone was certainly nostalgic.

How does he not realize how inappropriate it is to say something like that in this situation? Agnes wondered. *They're supposed to be welcoming two princes, with one traveling abroad as our country's representative. Not only has Philip ignored his duty of greeting Gerome in the marquis's place, but now he's even criticizing me.*

Agnes wasn't afraid of Philip, but this reminded her of old times and irritated her. She was amazed by Philip's complete and utter lack of competence.

"Lady Agnes," Gerome said icily, his eyes narrowing, "is the fiancée of Prince Claude, second in line to the throne. His Majesty has already recognized her as a member of the royal family. Do you understand what this *means*, Philip?"

"*You* are no longer a member of the royal family," Claude stressed. "*You* are Earl Dolan, the husband of Marquis de Barthet's daughter. Agnes is of a higher rank than you. Treat her as such, or else."

"I...suppose..." Philip looked and sounded dissatisfied as the two princes glared at him. But the good-for-nothing didn't have the guts to argue back. In the first place, the princes were in the right. There was nothing Philip could've said in his own defense, anyway.

Agnes understood that he couldn't exactly glower at the princes. *But why is he glaring at me?!* She was concerned for Philip's bare scalp, hidden under his hat. *Has it recovered? Please, Philip, for your own sake, stop scowling...!*

Then, as if her wish had reached the heavens, a yellow-brown mushroom grew on Philip's arm with a popping sound. Noticing the *Lactarius torminosus* on him, Philip hurriedly plucked it and chucked it on the ground with disdain. But Sabina shot him a dubious look. From her point of view, Philip suddenly took out a mushroom and threw it at the princes after they rebuked him. She probably didn't understand what he was doing.

Sabina's brow wrinkled even more as Claude quickly scooped up the fallen

mushroom. “W-We shall dine together tonight,” she said suddenly, tripping over her words.

The two princes shrugged and nodded at Sabina’s proposal.



“**LOOKS** like he’s still hung up on Lady Agnes. You should watch out for him, Claude.”

“You don’t need to tell me.”

After being shown into the parlor and taking a breather over a cup of tea, the two princes nodded in agreement.

“Lady Agnes,” Gerome turned to her, “you have a higher status than Philip now, so don’t hold back.”

“I-I’ll try...”

“And you don’t have to be so nervous around me, either.”

“I-I understand.”

Still unaccustomed to Gerome, Agnes responded breathlessly, causing Claude and Gerome to exchange glances.

“Listen...” Gerome said, “I know I’m not the friendliest sort, but we’re all *boys* in our family, right? I’m not used to being around girls.”

“You’re good at evading young ladies with clear ulterior motives in mind, though,” Claude smirked.

Agnes was sure it must be tough to be a royal with so many lady suitors. But surely, Claude didn’t need to bring that up *now*.

“But you, Lady Agnes... You’ll be my sister!”

Gerome spoke as if it was a set phrase, but Agnes wasn’t sure what he meant. Confused, she looked at Claude, who seemed to be enjoying himself.

“In other words,” he said slyly, “my brother wants to get along with you, Agnes.”

“...Could you have phrased that differently, perhaps?” Gerome quipped.

“Am I wrong?”

Gerome scratched his head, looking awkwardly at Claude, who grinned back.
Could it be that Prince Gerome is embarrassed?

“Well, what I mean is...” Gerome said. “You don’t have to be afraid. I’m to be your older brother too, Lady Agnes.”

If Agnes married Claude, Gerome, his older brother, would obviously become her brother-in-law. But he wasn’t just saying it as a formality. It was like he really *did* see her as a sister.

He...accepts me. He sees me as one of the family. Hearing those words made Agnes so happy, she could feel her face relax into a natural smile.

“I would like that very much!” she exclaimed.

As she sat there, happy to her core, Claude came and sat beside her. Agnes wondered why now. They’d been sitting opposite each other in the carriage for days.

As she stared at him in wonder, Claude smiled.

“I’m happy you’re on good terms with my older brother. But it’s no good if I lavish others with your cute smile too much.”

I’m not lavishing him with my smile! Or being cute! That kind of thing would only inconvenience Gerome, Agnes thought huffily. There were many things she wanted to say. But seeing Claude’s gentle, beautiful smile up close, they all fell away.

Goodness...this mushroom fetishist really is just so incredibly handsome...!

Put bluntly, he was far too dazzling to argue against.

“I... I’m...”

“Yes, Agnes? You’re what?”

It’d take so much effort to let him down now. Besides, it’d make Claude sad.

“C-Cute...” Casting about for the right words, she landed on the mantra she’d been repeating of late.

From Gerome’s point of view, who didn’t know the circumstances, this must

be confusing. You couldn't blame him for being alarmed, if not repulsed.

But Claude nodded in satisfaction. "You are...?"

Is...is he urging me to continue? This is already embarrassing enough. Is he trying to torture me?! For a mushroom fetishist, he's certainly a demon...

"...Capable."

Still unable to resist the pressure of his smile, Agnes gave in. Claude was delighted.

"Yes. Well said. Great."

Saying that, he scooped up a lock of Agnes's hair and gently kissed it. This only compounded her shame, and Agnes felt herself tremble.

"You guys flirt very oddly..." she suddenly heard. Agnes could sense Gerome shrugging in exasperation. But she was too embarrassed to meet his eyes.

"It's an expression of affection," Claude said smoothly. "And...training."

"Well, that's...fine," Gerome said. "As long as you two are on good terms, then I'm happy. If possible, you should go show off in front of Philip."

Startled at this suggestion, Agnes looked at Gerome. He smiled back, his gray eyes shining.

"You don't have to tell me twice," Claude smirked.

He's agreeing?! He plans for us to repeat this...in front of Philip?

Staying at the Barthet residence was becoming more and more of an ordeal.

Agnes sighed as the two handsome princes kept smiling the devil's smile.



Mushrooms of the Day *Pleurotus citrinopileatus* An edible mushroom with a bright yellow cap. It grows in clusters and is very tasty. Fetches a good price, too. It's a member of the Wood Deterioration Club. In the past, it's been offered as an apology mushroom to Claude. It sprouted on Gerome to say hello.

It sprouted on Claude, too, to say, "Long time no see!"

With Philip approaching, it adopted a warning stance and sprouted on the

princes to egg them on.

***Lactarius torminosus* (Bearded Milkcap)** An orange mushroom with a cap that can transform into a flat, funnel, or bun-like shape. It causes gastrointestinal poisoning. It has a strong, hot taste, so if you taste heat, don't eat it! In fact, it's always better not to put mushrooms in your mouth if you're unsure what they are.

"Don't look at Agnes! You have no right! I'll grow in your mouth and burn off your tongue!" it threatened Philip.

Chapter 9: On Edge for a Different Reason

“YOU sit here, Agnes.”

When they all gathered for dinner, this was the first thing Philip said as he pointed to the seat next to him. As the *de facto* lord of the residence, Philip was seated at the head of the table, with Sabina across from him. Gerome and Claude, who were supposed to be the guests of honor, would ordinarily have sat next to Sabina, with their wives on either side of Philip. But Gerome was single, meaning only Agnes was obliged to sit beside Philip.

She knew she had little choice in the matter, but Agnes was still reluctant. But then Claude reached out and pulled her to him by the shoulder.

“Sorry. Lady Dolan, please sit next to Philip. Agnes will take your seat,” he said firmly.

“But...”

Philip was about to say something. But Claude’s glare made him clam up.

“I understand this goes against custom,” the Prussian blue-haired prince said icily. “However, I cannot allow my fiancée to be seated next to a person who lacks even the most basic morals.”

No doubt Claude was referring to the incident where Philip had facilitated Agnes’s abduction and held her against her will afterwards. Because of this, Philip had been forced to marry early and was placed on house arrest for three years. So he couldn’t exactly say anything in his own defense.

“Understood. Please come this way,” Sabina said as she showed Gerome to his seat with a slightly strained smile. Since it contrasted so greatly with her previous character, it struck Agnes as sad.

For his part, Philip looked unsatisfied. But when Gerome sighed, he turned his face away in a fluster.

Agnes knew that Philip was a good-for-nothing coward. She wished he knew it too and that he wouldn’t make such a fuss to begin with. In the end, she sat

between Gerome and Claude, while Philip kept shooting her looks she found most annoying.

This continued even after the meal started. Although Sabina scolded him several times, he showed no signs of changing his rude behavior.

Agnes didn't care about Philip. But she *was* distracted by him wearing a hat at the dinner table, and she wondered what was under it.

Did his hair grow back, or is it still as bald as a burnt field? Distracted by such useless thoughts, Agnes could barely taste the food. *Honestly, why can't Philip behave?*

"By the way...what did you talk about when the King of Oreille stayed?"

Philip frowned when Claude spoke to him. But after Sabina poked his arm, he reluctantly opened his mouth.

"Just small talk..." he demurred.

"Did you tell him about Agnes?"

"Yeah... I was asked if I knew the one who grows mushrooms, so I told him about her."

"...So it wasn't from *you* that the king learned of her existence, then? Well then, what exactly did you tell him?"

Claude's expression stiffened, and Sabina was glaring at Philip, but for some reason, the idiot was smugly puffing out his chest.

"I said Agnes *is* my *ex-fiancée*, and she has the most detestable pink hair. Since it's so awful, I advised her to hide it. The mushroom sprouting, too, is unfathomable and ugly to behold. I told her to stop it, since it's simply too disgusting. And I also said..."

Philip was gleefully speaking ill of Agnes. Yet, at the same time, it felt like the temperature around Claude was dropping. But Claude was still smiling, which was twice as scary.

"So? What did the king say?" he pressed, keeping his voice even.

"He...said he really wanted to meet Agnes. Mushrooms are rare, even in

Oreille. See how you're a freak, no matter the country?" Philip sniffed at Agnes. "Just a *complete eyeso*—"

Philip stopped as the smile finally disappeared from Claude's face, and the brat shivered a little at the dangerous glint in those gray eyes.

No, no, no! Agnes thought. *Even if you heap pressure on Philip, a good-for-nothing coward, that won't make him change his tune.*

Claude had said he wanted information, which was why he'd been quietly listening to Philip's diatribe up until now.

If he frightens him now, he might lose the moment...

"What...um, what else did you talk about?" When Agnes tried her best to give him a warm smile, Philip blushed happily for some reason.

So...he's happy to have me speak to him, even after he just trashed me so crudely? What is wrong with him?

Agnes just couldn't understand this good-for-nothing's mind.

Then Philip started blabbering about all sorts of things, without even having to be asked. Agnes only nodded from time to time, a smile on her face. She was good at listening like this. In the end, Philip didn't say anything of interest. He peppered his speech with more remembrances of Agnes, yet more slander.

How can he spew such pointless, rude talk in front of a visiting member of a foreign royal family?

After finishing his pointless yapping, Philip drained his glass of wine, clearly in high spirits. "Right!" he said brightly. "Why don't we play a card game? I learned to play since I can't leave the territory and have all this free time."

"If you have free time, you should study." Agnes quickly covered her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. Sabina nodded vigorously, which heartened her.

Is he really unaware of the reason he's been confined to the Barthet territory for three years? It's not a vacation. At the very least, he should reflect and try to learn something about the land he'll be ruling over.

Sabina had once said that Philip still couldn't match the other nobles' names

to their faces. No doubt, he still had plenty of studying to do.

“I’ve never played a card game, nor am I interested,” Agnes flatly turned him down.

Thus having been refused, Philip turned his gaze to the two princes.

“I hate gambling,” Claude said just as flatly as Agnes.

Rejected again, Philip looked displeased but then quickly grinned. “What? No confidence?”

Never mind him, Claude. Where is your confidence coming from, Philip?

“I don’t mind playing,” Gerome chimed in, “but I must warn you, I’m *very* good. Claude is pretty sharp, too. You might end up having to gift us the Barthet mansion.”

Agnes didn’t really understand the difference between “good” and “sharp” when it came to playing card games, but judging by Gerome’s confidence, he’d at least beat Philip.

After all, she—a total novice—felt she could easily do so.

“Well...haha, right... Gambling is...no good. Nope!” the worm said suddenly.



Agnes was almost impressed by the way Philip shrank back in his chair like a frog before a snake.

“...You didn’t suggest a card game against the royal family of Oreille, did you?” she asked, fairly certain he had from the way he was behaving.

“C-Certainly not!” But Philip’s panicking told all.

He definitely did. Just how stupid is this good-for-nothing?!

There came a popping sound and a mushroom covered in gold-colored dust appeared on Philip’s shoulder.

“Yaargh!”

Bellowing, Philip tore the *Phaeolepiota aurea* off and threw it at the floor near his feet. Sabina glared at him like he was a madman, and Claude’s eyes lit up as though he had just spotted treasure.

“Philip!” Gerome admonished. “Are you *trying* to ruin Barthet before you’ve even inherited its title?”

“It’s...it’s okay. We agreed we wouldn’t take any money!”

Philip may have intended to defend himself, but he’d really ended up confessing. In addition to asking for a card game against the royal family of Oreille, he’d lost.

Judging from the way Sabina’s glaring at him, it must’ve been quite the defeat.

Had the Oreille royals taken it as a mere game, since money wasn’t involved? Or had Philip *really* gambled the Barthet territory and almost caused an international incident?

“So...wh-what are you doing tomorrow?” Philip abruptly changed the subject. *Another common trait of his.*

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” Gerome said. “Heading to Oreille via the border town.”

The Oreille delegation led by Gerome would set off in earnest from here. Thus Barthet was nothing more than a transit point. A lodge.

“And what about Agnes?” Philip asked, his gaze homing in on her.

“We are going to the Prayer Spring,” Claude answered.

Philip’s expression suddenly brightened. “I see. It’s close enough that I can walk there, but I prefer the carriage.”

“It doesn’t matter what *you* prefer, Philip. Agnes and I will go together.”

“Huh? But—” Philip shot Agnes a betrayed look.

Why did he just assume he’d be coming along in the first place?

“That...that spring is said to grant certain wishes,” he said, “when two people pray there together.”

“Then we won’t need you, *will* we, Lord Philip?”

She certainly couldn’t have Philip join them, so Agnes spoke brusquely. Now Philip stiffened, his eyes opening wide like he’d been slapped across the face.

Philip had mentioned the wish was only granted when two people prayed together. But if he went along, there would be three of them.

...Goodness, surely Philip didn’t expect that...that he and I would visit the spring together?

The mere thought was truly beyond comprehension.

Agnes and the two princes all sighed in unison.



AFTER bathing, Agnes let out a deep sigh as she sat down on the sofa in the room she’d been guided to. She had rested at inns along the way, of course. But this was the first time she had truly been able to relax.

A bath really does work wonders. She even felt refreshed from the exhaustion of enduring Philip.

A knocking sound came at the door, and when Agnes opened it, she found Claude standing there.

“I’m sorry...were you about to retire?”

The reason why Claude averted his gaze a little awkwardly was probably due

to Agnes wearing just a nightgown.

“No. You must have something urgent to discuss if you’re here. If my attire is unsightly, I can throw something on...”

Agnes *was* a little embarrassed. But, if Claude was coming to visit her this late at night, she was sure it must be important. If she threw on a shawl, or at least a blanket, then Claude shouldn’t be too uncomfortable.

“Then...take my jacket,” he said as if he’d read her mind.

“But Claude, then *you’ll* be cold.”

“I’m fine.”

Smiling, Claude shrugged out of his jacket and gently draped it over her shoulders. In the resultant breeze, the scent of soap gently tickled Agnes’s nose, and a loud popping noise echoed through the drafty room.

As soon as Agnes had realized Claude had *also* bathed, she suddenly got even more embarrassed. Even though he removed his jacket, it wasn’t like Claude was wearing *his* nightwear. *Anyway, I’ve seen him in just a shirt before...*

Don’t fixate. Don’t fixate. Don’t be weird about this...

Agnes sat down on the sofa, silently lecturing herself.

Claude sat down next to her, along with the yellow-brown capped mushroom that had sprouted on his arm. “Thank you for earlier,” he said. “I knew it’d be better to let him talk. But the things Philip was saying were rage-inducing.”

Claude sounded frustrated, but he was gentle as he plucked the *Hygrophorus hypothejus*.

“Were you able to gather some useful information?” Agnes asked.

“Yes. Thanks to you, I was able to sit through even the most pointless of Philip’s ranting.”

“Well, that’s good.”

Claude had come with Gerome to hear what Philip had to say. If Agnes had helped, then it was worth putting up with Philip.

“It’s *not*.”

“Excuse me?”

Claude’s face was clouded over when he placed the mushroom on the table.

“He’s *completely* obsessed with you, Agnes! How *dare* he speak of you that way... In front of your fian— In front of me. He shouldn’t speak that way about you at all!” Claude’s voice was harsh. He was clearly upset.

“Oh, *that*... That’s just Philip,” Agnes said dismissively. “It was like that every day. There’s no need to give it any deeper thought.”

“Is *that* how you endured?”

Even though Claude’s gaze and voice were gentle, his eyes seemed somewhat sad.

“I don’t know if you’re aware, Agnes, but Philip completely distorted the foundation of your very personality. Even though Count Lefort and Kevin were there, you were still forced to endure him all the same. It’s all right for you to get angry. It’s all right to hit back.” Claude gently placed his hand over hers. “Your very existence is precious, Agnes. You should never have had to be befouled by that man’s words.”

“Are...you angry, Claude?”

“Of *course* I am! I should’ve rained lightning down on his thick, fat head...” Seeing Claude gritting his teeth in disgust, Agnes blinked and began smiling. “What’s so funny?” he asked. “You think it’s not too late for me to go and electrocute Philip?”

“Please don’t! You shouldn’t dirty your hands on a good-for-nothing like him.”

Of course, Agnes was pretty sure Claude was joking. But she also thought he might actually go and do it if *she* asked. And that was a little scary.

“Then...why do you smile?”

“Because...because you’re getting so angry on *my* behalf.”

Claude kept looking at her in confusion. In his mind, he was only doing the obvious. But that, too, made Agnes happy.

“I never cared for Philip at all,” she said softly, “but I *did* see him as part of the

family.”

Maybe that was why barely any mushrooms had sprouted on Philip back then...

“I hated it,” she went on, “when he said my hair was ugly or that I was useless. The only ones who backed me up were my family. Father and Kevin really were special. I thought that everyone else in the world hated me. Only Philip spent any time with me, conversed with me. So I...I thought he was kind.”

Claude’s hand tightened over hers as his brow furrowed. Seeing this made Agnes smile again.

“I *knew* something wasn’t right, but...I was afraid of everyone else. So I always did what Philip said.”

She hadn’t loved Philip, but then again...she *had* trusted him.

She didn’t like him, but...at least he hadn’t actively hated her.

That relationship was unbalanced. Distorted. No doubt it would’ve collapsed on its own at some point.

“But Claude,” she said gratefully, “you don’t care about my hair... And you... rather enjoy my mushrooms. You bring me out into the world. It’s scary, but it’s so much fun! It makes me happy. And to have someone not in my family get angry on my behalf... Well, I can think of no greater happiness.”

“Oh, that’s enough! Come here...” Claude grunted, wrapping Agnes suddenly in his arms. “I came here to console you after Philip’s cruelties. But you’ve ended up consoling me many times over. You’re always one step ahead of me, Agnes.”

“Claude...are you all right now?” she asked. “I *know* Philip’s a lot. But you shouldn’t get angry over him. It’s a waste of energy.”

The things Philip said were horrible but baseless. He had no firm convictions. He was just throwing things at the wall, seeing what stuck, and throwing tantrums when things didn’t work in his favor.

“Yes, I’m calm now,” Claude sighed. “With you touching me like this. *Ahh...* actually, now I’m on edge for a different reason.”

Confused, Agnes looked up...just as Claude's lips landed on her forehead. Their soft touch, the light smooching sound... It all made Agnes blush.

"I love you so much, Agnes."

"Umm..."

Alone together in my room at night... Me in my nightgown, with Claude kissing my forehead and whispering he loves me... Goodness, this is all quite spicy, isn't it?! No. No! We're engaged. No problem! No problem, right...

But should we really be doing this at Philip's mansion?!

Confused by the reality of the situation, Agnes's cheeks burned hotter and hotter.

A loud knock at the door shattered the moment.



Mushrooms of the Day *Phaeolepiota aurea* (Koganetake) A mushroom with a cap covered in golden powder, also known as *kinako take* in Japanese. It's covered in plenty of powder, like kinako powder. It's edible, but eating it raw will poison you. So please boil it first! How did the mushroom braves know to do that?

Confusing the word gold for money, it sprouted. Yet Philip ripped it off and threw it. "Both money *and* gold are important!" it huffed, scattering powder on Philip's shoes.

Hygrophorus hypothejus It has a yellow-brown cap that becomes slimy in damp environments. As its name suggests, it's an off-season mushroom that can be seen when light snow falls. No need to worry if it's sprouted out of season. It's edible and very good in soup.

"I'm strong against the cold!" it yelped, sprouting. Seeing that Agnes looked chilly, it hopped into the pot, yelling, "I'll become a tasty soup and warm Agnes up from the inside!"

Chapter 10: I Want to Get Married Soon, Okay?

CLAUDE sighed in response to the rough knock on the door.

"Sounds like *someone* can't read the room," he muttered.

"Who could that be at this hour?" Agnes wondered. "Perhaps Maurice is looking for you, Prince Claude?"

"No, definitely not him."

Claude got up and stood in front of the door, opening it slightly.

"What are *you* doing here?!"

Agnes couldn't see the person from her perch on the sofa, but that grating voice was unmistakably Philip's. She stood and rushed to Claude's side, wondering what was happening now. But she couldn't see anything; Claude had cracked the door just enough to push his face through the opening.

"That's *my* line," he hissed. "What's wrong with me being in my fiancée's room?"

"Agnes, are you there?" Philip cried.

He called my name...should I respond?

As she hesitated, she noticed Claude was waving his finger towards her.

Oh, he probably doesn't want me to...

"So," Claude asked coolly, "what do you want?"

"I want to talk to Agnes."

"At night? Just you two? *Together*...in her room?" Claude's voice dropped an octave.

She could hear Philip gasp. Claude's expression likely shifted to match the menacing tone of his voice.

A gentleman visiting an unmarried woman's room late at night was the height

of immorality. Moreover, since Philip was married and Agnes was engaged to another royal, they could be accused of violating morals and manners. Agnes wondered if Philip understood that. She doubted he did. Yet, she was a little curious about what he felt warranted this situation.

“Wh-What’s the problem? I *am* her ex-fiancé,” Philip insisted.

“Exactly. *Ex*. You’re a stranger now. And Agnes is to be a royal. You are *way* out of line, Philip!”

Just as Agnes heard Philip breathe in to reply, a bursting sound reverberated around her to drown it out.

“Gagh!!!”

Judging from his miserable scream, Philip must’ve grown a mushroom. *Or two...*

“S-See you tomorrow, Agnes!”

“Don’t come back!” Claude snapped. “But leave the mushrooms behind!”

Philip’s voice faded away with his footsteps. Apparently, the mushrooms frightened him off...

Claude had accidentally let his mushroom fetishism show. But Philip had clearly been too distracted to notice.

“I thought he might come, but I didn’t think he would REALLY come. What a *hopeless* loser he is.” With that, Claude closed the door and turned toward her. “Agnes, are you okay?”

“Yes, I couldn’t see a thing. But I think this is the first time I’ve sprouted mushrooms on someone outside my field of vision. My mushroom sensitivity really is skyrocketing.”

“Now *that’s* wonderful.”

Agnes’s increased mushroom powers seemed to please the mushroom fetishist to no end. She appreciated his acceptance. *But it’d be nice if he could refrain from his mushroom obsessing a little.*

“Philip had mushrooms growing on him, didn’t he?”

“Yes! Several. *Leucocoprinus fragilissimus*, *Clavulinopsis miyabeana*, and *Clitocybe acromelalga*,” he sighed. “All wonderfully colored and *wonderfully* damaging. A splendid array...!”

Ever the mushroom fetishist, he had all of them clutched in his hands and stars in his eyes.

Clitocybe acromelalga was the mushroom that had once sprouted in Philip’s mouth, causing quite a bit of damage. Agnes didn’t think Philip could distinguish between mushrooms, so he probably had a blanket fear. *Either way, it’s good he didn’t accidentally chew one this time.*

“You expected Philip to show up,” she said thoughtfully, “so you came in advance, didn’t you, Claude? Thank you.”

“That’s part of it, yes. But I also wanted to comfort you, Agnes. Not to mention, I just wanted to see you.”

“Is...is that so?”

He wanted to see me? But we spent all day in the carriage together, and we were just at dinner earlier. It struck Agnes as odd. But she was far too happy now to point this out.

“He’s an idiot with no boundaries,” Claude said bitterly. “For your safety, I shall sleep here tonight.”

“...Wha—wha—whaaaaaaat?! ”

Claude smiled wryly and stroked Agnes’s hair as she yelped over his unexpected suggestion.

“I’ll sleep on the sofa in this adjoining room,” he grinned. “So don’t worry, Agnes. Sleep well in your bedroom.”

Right. In the unlikely event Philip returns, Claude intends to deal with him.

Agnes appreciated the thought. But she couldn’t accept his proposal.

“You can’t do that,” she said. “Based on our size differences, it would be better for *me* to use the sofa.”

“I’m sure you’re tired from the carriage trip,” he insisted. “So *you* should take

the bed. I'm quite resilient, so it's no problem."

"But..."

True, she'd heard how tough and resilient Claude was as a Dragon Crest Bearer. She had seen it firsthand when he survived being buried under wooden crates. But this was something else entirely. It was unacceptable to exile Claude to the sofa and luxuriate on the bed alone.

"Then..." he said, narrowing his gray eyes and whispering sultrily, "do you want to sleep together?"

Agnes's whole body suddenly grew hot. As she stood there frozen and unable to speak, Claude flashed her a wry smile.

"I'm kidding. Don't mind me, Agnes, just take the bed and—"

"L-Let's do it, then!" As she cut Claude off, his eyes grew very wide and round. "The bed is very wide!" she continued breathlessly. "And I'm good at sleeping on the edge. It's all right. Please don't worry!"

"Huh? What? No, Agnes, you—"

"J-Just come on!" Blushing and trembling, Agnes opened the bedroom door.

Claude, whose jaw had dropped, recovered and gave her a sheepish grin.

"Well then...shall we go?" he asked.

"Let's!"

After hopping into bed as instructed, Agnes lay so straight, it was like she had a rod in her spine. She was perched on the very edge of the bed. Suddenly, she realized one foot was about to fall off the side. Now that she thought about it, she realized it was almost like she'd...*forced* Claude to get in bed with her. Even though neither of them had any ulterior intentions...it still felt—wrong.

And with Claude behind her, Agnes was too nervous to sleep.

Shouldn't I move to the sofa, after all? she fretted.

One leg had already fallen off the bed. She would be up all night at this rate. Then she heard a sigh behind her as an outstretched arm pulled her into the bed's center.

Surprised, she turned to see those gray eyes staring right at her.

“You can’t sleep if you lie so stiffly,” Claude said sweetly. “You need to rest. Anyway, you’re about to fall off. I’ll take the sofa, after all.”

“N-No, I will!”

Agnes grabbed his sleeve to stop him from getting up, and Claude let out a small sigh.

“I’m almost on the edge myself...” he sighed.

“It’s a bit of a conundrum...” she concurred.

When Agnes hurriedly let go of his sleeve, Claude gently stroked her hair.

“Don’t worry, I won’t touch you, Agnes. I swear on the mushrooms... Does that ease your worry? If not, I’ll use the sofa.”

Really? He swears on the mushrooms?!

This mushroom fetishist’s mind was so skewed, the sheer hilarity of it made Agnes laugh, unintentionally.

Claude’s eyes softened. “It’s really true, Agnes... You have *such* a cute smile.”

Whispering in a voice overflowing with emotion, Claude’s hand slid over her cheek.

Shocked at his unexpected sensuousness, Agnes twitched, and Claude immediately withdrew.

“I’m sorry,” he said seriously. “I won’t touch you anymore.”

Agnes shook her head so fast, it hurt.

“Um, don’t apologize... I don’t mind *your* touch, Claude.”

Agnes *adored* Claude. She even liked holding hands with him. She was just embarrassed. But she didn’t want him to think she despised his touch. She certainly didn’t want him to apologize.

Even though she’d just spoken her mind, Claude’s face was turning a deeper shade of crimson by the second.

“...Agnes. You can’t say *that* kind of thing...in this situation. Do you want me

to betray the mushrooms?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Betray the...mushrooms?" she asked confusedly.

Claude's promise on the mushrooms...is that he won't touch me. Betraying the mushrooms would mean laying his hands on me. Does he mean...?

When it finally clicked into place, Agnes blushed all the way up to her ears. Her entire body felt as hot as if she'd been out in the summer sun. The embarrassment was making it hard to breathe.

"I... I just..."

I simply wanted Claude to sleep well. I didn't want him to apologize. How did that end up...like this?

"I know," Claude said suddenly. "It's okay. ...But...let me do *this*, at least."

"Huh?"

Claude slowly reached out to Agnes and kissed her forehead. He'd done that plenty of times.



But never this long before...

His breath tickled her skin. It was a sensuous kiss that left her shuddering.

Claude smiled happily at Agnes, who'd stiffened with her eyes wide open.

"...I want to get married soon, okay?" As soon as he said that, a large bursting sound rang out.

On Claude's arm, red and black trumpet-shaped mushrooms and small milky-white-capped mushrooms sprouted all at once. A *Gomphus fluccosus* and a *Craterellus cornucopioides* were making mysterious sounds on one arm and a *Cuphophyllus virgineus* on the other.

Claude beamed at the sight and began harvesting them with glee.

"Ermmmm... Ummmm..." Agnes stammered, unsure what to say.

Claude put the mushrooms aside and gently stroked her hair.

"Goodnight, Agnes."

Seeing Claude picking mushrooms again with a smile, Agnes gave up on thinking.

Putting her blanket back over her, she turned her back to Claude. Behind her, she could hear him crooning softly, and her heart kept pounding. Agnes was so flustered, she thought maybe Claude was cooing over the mushrooms. Or were the mushrooms cooing?

At this rate, when we really do get married, I'll have a heart attack...!

Shutting her eyes tightly, Agnes rode out the wave of embarrassment and anxiety.



Mushrooms of the Day *Leucocoprinus fragilissimus* This semi-transparent white umbrella mushroom with lemon-colored stripes radiating from it looks exactly like a Japanese umbrella. Its elongated handle is hollow and its cap is incredibly thin. It's known as one of the most fragile mushrooms. An untouchable mushroom that breaks even if you poke it with your finger or if the wind blows on it. It's good friends with *Entoloma virescens* and the Pixie

Parasol, which also quickly disintegrate.

“Don’t you touch Agnes!” it said as it sprouted to warn Philip.

Clavulinopsis miyabeana A brightly colored, stick-shaped mushroom that resembles the highly poisonous *Podostroma cornudamae*. So, it looks poisonous but isn’t. It’s not tasty, though. They’re sometimes used to add color to dishes.

“Don’t get too close to Agnes! I’ll call all my bigger friends!” it yelled as it sprouted, getting all angry and three times as red as usual.

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, causing excruciating pain for a month or more. *Why* does it target the penis? No one knows.

A brave mushroom with a history of martyrdom after launching a special attack in Philip’s mouth. “Did you forget that penile pain, hmm?” it threatened as it sprouted, shaking its cap.

Gomphus fluccosus A poisonous mushroom with a red, trumpetlike cap. It causes gastrointestinal poisoning and is said to have an indistinct taste. So, someone must’ve tried eating this one, too. It tried to play a trumpet note to cheer up Agnes. Yet despite its shape, it realized mushrooms can’t make music.

Together with the *Craterellus cornucopioides*, it’s reached a new level of fricative sound and feels the potential of trumpet-shaped mushrooms.

“At their wedding, we’ll play a fanfare!” it said, all excited, as it made a din alongside the *Craterellus cornucopioides*.

Craterellus cornucopioides A black, funnel-shaped mushroom, resembling a trumpet. Also known as the “Trumpet of Death,” it’s apparently eaten often in Europe. Goes well in soup.

...So why the scary name, then?

Hearing the word “marriage,” it sprouted. Then, when it realized it was in a bedroom, it couldn’t hide its shock and made loads of noise.

Cuphophyllus virgineus A small and cute mushroom with a milk-white cap. It’s easy to eat and goes well in vinegared dishes or a sauce. It sprouts when it

senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

“Marriage! Marr— Wait a second! They’re canoodling on a bed!” it squawked as it sprouted in quite a flap. But since it’s a mushroom, no one noticed. A peek-a-boo mushroom that looked through the cracks in its mycelia while squealing.

Chapter 11: Wishing at the Prayer Spring

WHEN Agnes woke up, the sun was already shining brightly into the room. After staring in a daze at the ceiling for a while, she slowly sat up.

“A dream...?”

She thought she’d spent the night with Claude, but Agnes was alone in bed. As she looked around to see if it had all just been a dream, she saw the mushrooms neatly arranged in order of size on a small table.

“It wasn’t a dream. There’s the mushrooms...” she mumbled sleepily.

Perhaps I tossed and turned too much and ended up driving Claude away...?

She quickly got ready and left the bedroom only to run into Claude, who’d just entered the adjoining room.

“Good morning, Agnes,” he said brightly.

“Good morning. I’m sorry about last night.”

Claude blinked and laughed out loud at her contrition. “You don’t have to apologize. I was just getting some exercise in the garden. I was planning to return to my own room early this morning. I doubt Philip’s an early riser.”

Well, no. He’s not.

Philip’s mental dictionary didn’t contain words like “early riser” or even “diligence.”

“Besides...” Claude said, “it was a good distraction after a night of self-control.”

Agnes wondered *what* he’d been controlling exactly. But something told her not to ask, so she didn’t.

“So,” she said bashfully, “it wasn’t my tossing and turning that drove you away.”

“Not at all. You’re adorable when you sleep, Agnes.”

“A-Adorable?! ” she squeaked.

Agnes had simply wanted to confirm that she hadn't tossed and turned all night to avoid a more awkward discussion. *But in the end, this got awkward anyway...*

"But you're *far* too tempting," Claude said. "And since I cannot betray the mushrooms, we will leave Barthet tomorrow."

Does that mean he'll stay with me again tonight, as a Philip countermeasure? Does...does that mean he wants to touch me, but won't?

Agnes tried to stop her thoughts from going down *that* rabbit hole, but it was no use. The sheer thought of it made her cheeks grow hotter and hotter. No doubt her face was now *extremely* red.

She couldn't help but look down a little. Then she heard Claude sigh.

"Oh, you're making that face again... I don't want Philip or my brother to see that."

"Is my face really so strange?" she pouted.

"Not at all. You're adorable. And mushrooms look fabulous on you." Claude slid the silver mushroom hair ornament back into her as he spoke.

Agnes had brought it along, figuring she might wear it. But she'd left it on her bedside table. *How does he have it?* She was a little stunned by this fresh display of mushroom fetishism. But as Claude gently stroked her hair, she calmed down. She was coming to terms with the fact that before she'd even realized it, Claude's presence was now a safe space for her.

"Come on, let's see my brother off," he said with a smile.

"Okay."

They held hands and left the room together as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Being seen by the passing servants was embarrassing. But Agnes didn't mind holding Claude's hand. *It's so warm...*

She lifted her face, hoping to catch a passing breeze and possibly cool her fevered cheeks. She met Claude's gray eyes. She smiled, this one simple moment filling her with so much happiness.



“BE careful, Gerome.”

“I will. All right, I’m off. Take care, Lady Agnes.”

“Have a safe journey, Your Highness.”

Their brief goodbyes over, Gerome left the Barthet residence, leading the delegation to Oreille. It would take them several days from there to the border town, then several days beyond until they would finally enter the Oreillian royal capital.

Gerome’s long journey was really only just beginning.

“Now then...” Philip said suddenly, proffering his hand to Agnes like nothing had changed between them. “Shall we prepare to visit the Prayer Spring?”

“What do *you* want?” Claude frowned as Philip glared at him.

“Claude...did you spend the night in Agnes’s room?” he asked testily.

“That’s none of your business. Agnes and I *are* engaged,” Claude asserted.

Philip had no right to ask questions about their relationship, and Agnes didn’t think this was an appropriate conversation to have in front of a large group of servants.

Sabina should have intervened and stopped him. But her father was not feeling well, so she had left immediately to tend to him after seeing Gerome and the delegation off.

This unchecked good-for-nothing is nothing but a nuisance.

“What’s going on, Agnes? Did Claude stay in your room?!” Philip asked her accusingly.

Please...stop talking so loudly. Even though nothing had happened between her and Claude, this conversation was too embarrassing. *Why can’t he shut up?* Agnes knew it wasn’t Philip’s nature to be considerate. But this was just too much!

She blushed and looked down at her feet as Philip, who seemed to have figured it out all on his own, angrily shook.

“All right,” he said suddenly. “I’m going to the spring, too.”

“Is that so?” Claude said uncaringly. “Well, have a nice time.”

“*With Agnes!*” Philip said, smiling.

“No, I’m going with Prince Claude,” she replied firmly.

Philip seemed very flustered now, yet still undeterred.

Claude let out a big sigh. “Philip. I’ve told you over and over again!” he said, exasperated. “You are her *ex*—fiancé and now you are Earl Dolan, a total stranger. Agnes is *my* fiancée and belongs to the *true* royal family. Just accept reality.”

“I... I...” Philip was about to say something, but a bursting sound interrupted him.

A sphere on top of a brown starfish that looked like a peeled orange...an *Astraeus hygrometricus*. For some reason, a large cluster of them had grown on one side of Philip’s hat. The hat, adorned with a delightful peeled-orange garnish, slid off his head and onto the ground under the mushrooms’ combined weight.

Agnes gasped upon seeing Philip’s suddenly exposed scalp in such a shocking state. His baldness had progressed one step further than when she’d seen it last. It now formed a striped pattern. There was a large circular burnt field-like area on top of his head. The hair that had survived the mushroom assault was growing around it in orderly streaks.

Philip turned crimson, hastily picking up his hat and shoving it back on. But it was too late. The surrounding servants appeared to be biting their lips to keep from laughing at the spectacle.

“This is all *your* fault, Agnes!” he hissed. “Don’t just stand there wearing that mushroom hair ornament! Take some responsibility!”

Finally, the good-for-nothing speaks, and his words sound more like a scorned woman trying to con a man. Agnes might have been responsible for the mushrooms sprouting. But she couldn’t take credit for those delightful stripes.

“If you want hair, shall I give you a wig?” she suggested.

“No need!” Just as Philip shouted, another popping sound rang out.

Dark purplish-brown capped mushrooms now grew on the mess atop his head, pushing the hat up. From these, a bunch of mysterious hairlike strands were swaying. They were probably *Marasmiellus crassitunicatus* with bundles of extra mycelium as bonuses. *But it looks for all the world like a wig.*

“You— You!” Philip sputtered impotently. “At least make it a *real* wig!”

“You don’t want it?” Agnes ventured.

“Read the room! No, I *don’t!*”

Agnes felt a little impressed. Never would she have imagined Philip saying such words. Even though he’d never read even a corner of a room, he apparently knew the saying. Then again, they weren’t even in a room right now...

“If we’re talking about taking responsibility,” Claude chimed in coolly, “then *you* should be executed for the crime of abducting Agnes and holding her hostage, not to mention all the years you spent tormenting her.”

“*Yipe!*”

Frightened by Claude’s low voice, Philip jerked, then desperately repositioned his hat. Agnes couldn’t help but worry about the swaying and protruding mycelium bundles.

“After you return from the spring, we need to talk. *Properly.*” Claude flashed Philip a dazzling, evil smile as he said this. Philip screamed in a reedy voice and immediately fled.

“Damn...I should’ve collected those mushrooms. *Ahh* well... Shall we depart, Agnes?”

Agnes took his proffered hand with a smile, pretending not to listen as the mushroom fetishist lamented the loss of the mushrooms.



THE Prayer Spring was a short carriage ride from the Marquis de Barthet’s residence. It was located in an open glade in the woods. An admittedly small area. Yet, the water that sprung up from the ground was so clear, it was almost invisible. Agnes could see right through to the swirling sand at the bottom. It

was so beautiful to see the water glistening in the sunlight.

This was where my parents met. Where Dad was headed seven years ago. If Dad had come here alone, would he have been safe? Would he have been safe if he'd never met my mother? Even though Agnes knew such thoughts were pointless, they crossed her mind anyway.

"Agnes...what shall we wish for?"

"Hmm?"

"If we pray together, our wish will come true, right?"

"Oh yes, that's right..." she replied, thinking.

If two lovers pray together, they will be happy together their whole lives...or something like that, right? But you never know what life will bring...

Agnes didn't want to tie Claude down with such strong words, so lightly spoken.

"Ummm...I wish Claude and I will always be friendly...?" she finally said.

She'd tried her best to come up with something sensible. Yet, judging by Claude's troubled smile, it apparently wasn't the right thing to say.

"How typical of you, Agnes," he said.

"What do you wish for, Claude?"

If praying together means making the same wish, then we should try to come up with something together...

"I will stay by your side *for* the rest of my life. I swear to cherish you always, Agnes."

That's not a wish; it's a vow!

Agnes wanted to point that out. But she was hypnotized once again by Claude's gray eyes as they gazed into her own.

He took her left hand and gently kissed her ring.

Agnes heard a small disturbance in the water. Looking for the source of that sound to escape this embarrassing moment, she spotted a white umbrella

mushroom floating in the spring water.

“Ahh!!! Psathyrella aquatica! The only underwater fruiting mushroom in the world, Agnes!” Claude’s eyes shone like stars as he gazed down at it. “Look! Its bubbles are as beautiful as pearls. I never expected to find this *here!*”

A minute ago, he was every inch the dashing, handsome prince. Yet now, he’s a complete mushroom lover once again.

Sometimes Agnes couldn’t keep up with this sudden swing in personalities, but she supposed she didn’t really mind. She laughed, charmed by Claude’s childlike enthusiasm. He smiled back, finally seeming to have calmed down.

“My wish is your happiness, Agnes. And to stay by your side, always.”

“Thank you...”

Agnes knew how much Claude cared for her. Yet it warmed her heart to hear him put it into words.

“I know you won’t say ‘always’ or ‘forever,’ but...I want to know,” he said softly. “Will you be my best friend for the rest of my life?”

“Yes. Yes, I will...!”

...I wish Prince Claude and I will always stay friendly for the rest of our lives.

The two of them silently prayed to the spring.

Agnes prayed silently in her heart, but these words warmed her, even so.

...Oh, how I love him...!

She knew she did. But this moment only reified that.

Really, if we could stay close the rest of our lives...how happy that’d be...!



WHEN they left the spring and reboarded the carriage, Claude sat opposite Agnes and let out a big sigh. He looked tired. But it’d only been a short journey, so it couldn’t have been the travel.

Only one thing came to Agnes’s mind.

“Did you not get enough sleep?” she asked. “I should’ve taken the sofa, after

all...”

“No, no, I’m fine,” he said reassuringly. “Actually...I relished watching *you* sleep.”

Agnes blanched. *Goodness! I hope I wasn’t drooling...*

“Barthet is border territory. Oreille is close by. As a result, my Dragon Crest’s power is weakening,” Claude told her. “It’s almost like...the air’s getting thinner.”

The power of the Dragon Crest... Agnes thought of the lightning magic she’d seen Claude use. *Is that not its only effect...?* If Claude felt this way, she reasoned it must be true that he couldn’t leave the country easily.

As she gazed at him in concern, another mushroom—this one with an ochre-colored cap—appeared with a popping sound.

“It’s a *Lactarius aspideus*,” Claude said admiringly as he plucked it and wrapped it in his handkerchief. “Even though it’s thin, the liquid that comes out of this fungus turns purple when exposed to air. Don’t be fooled by its milky appearance.”

Agnes was sure she’d never even mentioned the color of the mushroom’s liquid.

The handkerchief was rapidly growing saturated. Yet Agnes felt there was too much moisture to be attributed solely to a mushroom’s juices. Yet a mushroom that oozed purple liquid probably didn’t belong in one’s pocket. Hence why Claude placed the wrapped mushroom on the carriage seat instead.

My mushroom powers have increased, indeed.

Before Philip had broken off their engagement, her mushrooms had often grown in response to negative emotions. But since then, she’d begun sprouting more and more. Now they seemed to pop up with ease.

It was nice Claude was pleased, but she had to be careful not to end up growing an impromptu mushroom forest in public.



“WELL...time to go and give that scoundrel a piece of my mind.”

Back at the Marquis de Barthet's residence, Claude grabbed the mushroom wrapped in the soaked handkerchief.

"Maurice, please!" Agnes pleaded to their head knight. "Please stop Prince Claude."

"That's impossible," Maurice replied. "Lord Philip ought to be grateful that Prince Claude is letting him off with merely a stern talking-to."

Agnes understood what Maurice was saying. But she knew Philip wouldn't. To be honest, she didn't care about the man-child. But there would be big trouble if the relationship between the future Marquis de Barthet and Prince Claude went sour.

Agnes wanted Maurice to be prepared just in case.

"I just want you to be there to make sure his talking-to doesn't turn into a bloodbath..."

"...I understand," Maurice nodded slowly. "In which case, I'll have these two accompany you while I join His Highness."

Agnes thought Maurice was being a little overprotective, assigning her guards when she was just going to be in a different part of the mansion from them. But since this was the condition for him to join Claude, she had to accept it.

It was up to Philip not to get himself hurt, and Agnes wasn't obligated to save him, anyway.



AS Agnes, accompanied by a male and female servant, proceeded through the mansion, Sabina suddenly appeared.

"Oh my! Are you alone?" she asked. "Didn't you go to the spring with His Highness?"

"We just got back. Prince Claude has something to discuss with Lord Philip."

"Oh."

Nodding in understanding, Sabina let out a small sigh. With her father in poor health and her husband...being who he was, Sabina must also have been having

a hard time.

“Would you join me for a spot of tea?” Sabina asked her.

Sabina had been so rude to her several times over. Yet Agnes couldn’t refuse a genuine invitation like this. She didn’t expect to *enjoy* it. But, as Claude’s fiancée, she realized she should accept every opportunity to work on her socializing skills.

“All right,” Agnes said, accepting her invitation.

Sabina met her response with an elegant smile where Agnes had expected a snarky remark. *Apparently, I miscalculated...*

Sabina showed Agnes to a room with a large window facing the garden. Thanks to the servant opening the window, the scent of the garden’s flowers filled the room with a fragrant breeze. It was wonderful.

The tea and cookies brought forth were also delicious. Surely, Agnes wouldn’t be treated so nicely if Sabina disliked her.

Yet more than that, she was struck dumb by what Sabina talked about over tea. She spoke only of her dissatisfaction with Philip.

Considering the social disadvantages three years of territorial confinement wrought, it was important to socialize and exchange letters in the territory. But Philip—as Agnes would’ve expected—wouldn’t do this duty properly, it seemed. Nor would he put *any* work into governing the territory.

On top of that, Philip was still his arrogant self. Agnes understood *why* Sabina would need to vent. But she never *dreamed* she’d hear all this from someone who had wanted Philip so badly she’d wreck his engagement.

Even after marriage, Philip’s still Philip... Actually, the current state of affairs only seemed to have made him *worse*.

“I’ve no one else to talk to about this,” Sabina finally said apologetically. “So... thanks for hearing me out. I’ve been quite rude to you, haven’t I? Ever since you arrived here... I’m sorry.”

She’s apologizing? To me? Agnes was too stunned to even respond.

“I made such a stupid mistake,” Sabina lamented. “Although it’s a bit too late

to realize it now. Hey, you! Could you fetch the wooden box over there?”

When the woman attending Agnes lifted the small wooden box and tried to hand it to Sabina, its bottom suddenly fell out. The bottle that’d been inside fell and rolled around on the floor as its contents spilled out.

There seemed to have been some kind of liquid inside, as the servant’s skirt was splattered with some kind of deep blue dye.

“Oh! It looks like the box is broken. You there,” Sabina said, gesturing to another female servant, “please help her wash up.”

The first servant apologized, insisting she could change herself. But Sabina shook her head.

“Once that gets on your skin,” she explained, “the color doesn’t come off easily. I had a hard time getting it off my fingers at first. You had better go and launder those clothes right now, or it will be much more work later.”

“It’s all right,” Agnes said. “You can go. I’m just drinking tea. I don’t need any help right now.”

Urged on, the two servants left the room, leaving her and Sabina alone... alongside the male servant that Maurice had assigned to Agnes.

“I got some *beautiful* ink,” Sabina explained, “so I thought I’d gift it to you. I have another bottle, so I’ll have it delivered to your room later.”

“Thank you,” Agnes said.

She realized that this was the first time she would receive a gift from another woman her age as a noblewoman. It was probably an olive branch of sorts. But it felt unique, and it made Agnes very happy.

“I thought you hated me...” she said awkwardly.

“I do...sort of?” Sabina said hesitantly. “But it wasn’t *your* fault Philip is...how he is. In a way...we’re both his victims. We’re the only two who can complain to each other and be understood.”

Certainly, when it came to Philip-caused suffering, nobody knew better than them. Agnes smiled wryly, amused by this strange commonality.

Sabina let out a frustrated laugh.

“Oh, yes,” she said suddenly. “I had something else I wanted to confide in you about. Will you hear me out?”

“Yes...if you don’t mind telling me.”

“*Um...* It’s something just between us women, okay?”

Sabina glanced awkwardly at the male servant, standing there silently.

I agreed to hear her out...so I can’t pull out now, I suppose.

“Also...” Sabina went on hesitantly, “it’s something concerning the royal family.”

Claude *had* been worried about Philip revealing royal secrets, Agnes recalled. Perhaps she was about to find out something useful.

“Would you please wait outside the room?” she turned and said to the servant. “I’ll call if you’re needed.”

At first, the man was reluctant to follow Agnes’s instructions. But eventually, he nodded and left.

“Thank you,” Sabina said gratefully. “The tea has gotten cold, too. Recently, I’ve been trying to practice brewing it myself.” As she spoke, Sabina shakily picked up the teacup and refilled it after brewing another cup.

The tea she offered Agnes *was* a little more bitter than the one the servant had brewed. *It’s probably an issue of the time taken to steam the tea leaves,* Agnes reasoned. Telling herself she had to try hard to be a genuine noblewoman, she tried to endure the bitterness.

“So...” Agnes said, “what did you want to confide in me about?”

“Well...as you know, the Oreillian royal family recently stayed here,” Sabina, who looked worn out just from brewing the tea, sighed and popped a cookie into her mouth. “Philip lost at cards...badly,” she confessed.

“But,” Agnes replied, “he said they weren’t playing for money.”

“Correct...not for *money*.”

Sipping her tea again, Sabina stood up and looked out the window. Her

expression was dark, her face colored by fatigue.

How horrible Philip is, to make his new wife look this way...

"It wasn't quite as bad as His Highness Prince Gerome said," Sabina finally continued. "But...he really *could* have almost lost our mansion. Instead, the king asked us for a...troublesome favor."

"Troublesome?"

"He wanted someone...*brought* to Oreille."

Well, Agnes didn't see any problem with that.

"You mean, the king wanted to invite someone?" she asked.

"No...it was to be done secretly."

Secretly... That's...a disturbing way to put it.

"What did Philip say?" Agnes asked warily.

Who could refuse an invitation from a royal family? Surely all they have to do is ask the person to come? There must be a reason why they didn't, Agnes reflected. Why Sabina is using the word "secretly." Perhaps, it might mean kidnapping... No matter how weak Philip is, surely he wouldn't commit an actual crime...again...

"He didn't ask Philip," Sabina said warily. "Only me. After seeing how Philip behaved during the card game, they apparently decided it'd be foolish to negotiate with him or entrust this to him."

Goodness, Philip really is pathetic! Agnes thought angrily. *Even though he lost so badly, he couldn't even clean up his own mess, forcing it on his wife instead.*

If things had been even slightly different, it'd be her in Sabina's place right now. Sabina's plight seemed to be partly her own.

"You said you wanted to confide in me..." Agnes said. "Does that mean you want me to help you with this? Have you spoken with your father yet?"

"My father's doctor told him he doesn't have much time left," Sabina said sadly. "I don't want to trouble him with this."

Agnes had heard repeatedly that the marquis was in poor health. But she had

no idea it was that bad. She could understand not wanting to worry the marquis. *Yet, it must be hard to carry that burden alone...*

“If I don’t follow their instructions,” Sabina said, “they’ll collect on our debt. If we just pay them this way, this goes away.”

Well, that makes sense...

The debt was bad enough that it would cost them their mansion. But the marquis had plenty of money. He ought to be able to pay almost any price. Yet, Philip, the future marquis, had gambled against the Oreillian royal family and racked up a huge debt. On top of his being banished from high society for three years, this would only worsen his reputation.

Really, I don’t know where or when Philip’s troubles will stop!

“That’s why I thought I’d ask for your help,” Sabina finally finished.

“I don’t have that kind of money, I’m afraid,” Agnes said.

Something isn’t right, she thought as she cleared her itchy throat. Sabina just brushed her breeze-swept hair aside and smiled.

“It’s not money I need,” she explained. “I’ve acquired some *seriously* damaged goods because of you. You’ll take responsibility...won’t you?”

As Agnes was about to ask what that meant, she felt the room begin to spin. It felt like vertigo...but Agnes was seated comfortably.

Sabina laughed with amusement as Agnes felt a sudden chill rake down her spine.

“They promised me they wouldn’t kill you, so you’ll be fine! ...Probably.”

Yes...she drugged the tea.

Agnes needed to let Claude know right away. Even though this was probably a personal grudge against her, the King of Oreille was still involved.

If she cried out, the servants outside would hear her. Agnes tried, but...she couldn’t speak. Instead, her eyelids drooped, and her body stopped responding.

“Apparently,” Sabina mused, sounding far away yet still in good humor, “it’s a kind of drug that prevents the spirits from interfering. You use such

troublesome magic, don't you...? Well, forget that now. Just be still... Tragically, a burglar entered as we were taking tea. I was hurt too. Sad, really...you and I are both just unfortunate victims."

Even her condescendingly cheerful voice was getting harder to hear.

Someone... Anyone... Even a mushroom...

"Ew! Gross! What's this mushroom doing here?"

A pop. The sound of plucking. Sabina muttering angrily. It all sounded like it was coming down a pipe now.

As she slumped against the sofa, Agnes felt something hard against her head.

I've got to leave Claude something. Some kind of clue...

Desperately, she reached up and grabbed her silver mushroom hair ornament. Then she dropped it under the sofa.

...Please. Claude...please find it.

Then her hand went limp, and everything went black.



Mushrooms of the Day *Astraeus hygrometricus* It looks like a starfish with a globe in the middle. Or a peeled orange. When it ripens, a hole opens up in the middle of its ball and spores are released. It's *technically* edible. But no one really eats it.

In order to give Philip, still obsessed with Agnes, a reality check, it grew itself and several others of its kind on his hat. With their combined weight, Philip's last defense crumbled. "If you carry on, I'll throw out my spores again," it threatened. But Philip didn't hear it since it's a mushroom.

Marasmiellus crassitunicatus A dark reddish-brown to dark purple-brown capped mushroom. It's known as the "Mountain Witch" due to its frequently developing tufted hairlike bundles of mycelia.

It hoped to gather in a clump and hide Agnes's pink hair. But, with Claude arriving, it lost its chance.

"Dream broken. Mycelium bundle, swaying in the wind."

This elegant mushroom likes haiku.

Psathyrella aquatica It was certified as a new species in 2010 and is currently the only underwater fruiting mushroom known. Its whitish cap and handle look plain on the surface, but underwater, it's covered in air bubbles that shine like pearls.

It's a member of the *Psathyrellaceae* family, which live by spreading mycelium on the bottom of rivers. But it's also a very mysterious mushroom that happily consumes submerged trees and even grows near water. Its cap protects its spores from water. But the reason it takes this shape underwater is unknown.

"Agnes is here!" it cried in joy, letting its air bubbles pop as it rose. Receiving praise from Claude wasn't its original aim.

Lactarius aspideus It has a pale ochre-colored cap that turns slimy in damp environments. A metamorphic mushroom that oozes a rice-water-like liquid when scratched that turns pale purple when exposed to air. It has a bitter taste and is unfit to eat... It seems the mushroom braves have been taste-testing again...

Claude complimented it on its milk when it grew in response to the word "thin." That made it happy, so it decided to make even more milk.

Nameless Mushrooms (The Save Agnes Troops) The mushrooms that grew when Agnes was in a pinch. They did their best for her, making full use of their conspicuous colors, slime, and flying spores. They distracted Sabina as planned. But Agnes lost consciousness and they were unable to hide their woe.

Chapter 12: I Am Cute. I Am Capable.

WHEN Agnes opened her heavy eyelids, she was somewhere that rattled and shook. Her ankles and wrists hurt, and she found it hard to breathe. She realized it was because her hands and feet were bound, and she'd been gagged. Clearly, she hadn't been treated well. But at least they had laid her on a carriage seat instead of letting her roll around on the floor.

While she was still trying to get a grip on things, a man and a woman sitting opposite her noticed she was awake.

"If you don't make noise or try to run away, I'll loosen the rope," the man said.

When Agnes nodded in agreement, the woman immediately removed the gag.

Drinking from an offered cup of water, Agnes looked around. *Yes, I'm definitely inside a moving carriage.* The interior was plain and could hardly compare to the royal carriage she had traveled to Barthet in. But from a commoner's point of view, it was on the higher end.

The man and woman were dressed like commoners, yet, they had splendid swords hanging off their waists. They also maintained excellent posture.

They don't seem like bandits. Maybe they're part of Barthet's private forces...? Agnes guessed.

The windows were blocked, so Agnes couldn't see outside. It was impossible to tell how long she'd been unconscious. Her head still felt all woolly and she couldn't concentrate. The spirit-blocking drugs were clearly still in her system. This meant no mushrooms would sprout. And she certainly couldn't expect any help from the spirits.

Even if she *could* jump out of the carriage, she couldn't get far in this state. She had no choice but to wait and see how this situation played out.

The carriage was rattling hard. No doubt the horses were running at a fast clip.

Just like that day...seven years ago...

Agnes shivered while recalling the day of the accident.

The woman noticed Agnes's distress as she watched her with what seemed to be slight concern coloring her features. No doubt that, to her, Agnes appeared terrified by the situation. Agnes saw no reason to disabuse her of that notion.

She couldn't see outside. She had no strength with which to escape. If she overstrained herself now, she'd only use what limited energy she had when it would do her no good.

Sabina *had* said she wouldn't be killed. Indeed, Agnes didn't feel any murderous intent coming from her captors.

There's only one thing I can really do...sleep.

Agnes leaned back into her seat and closed her eyes. As she focused inward, away from the carriage, she pictured those lovely gray eyes.

Has...Claude noticed I'm missing yet?

As she wondered this, at some point, Agnes fell asleep.



WHEN Agnes woke up, her head was a little clearer, and the woman even said her complexion had improved.

She was taken off the carriage blindfolded, then bundled into another one after a few moments. Changing horses made sense. But it was highly unusual and unnecessary to change the whole carriage.

Perhaps it's a special carriage—maybe one that's hard to spot if people are looking for it. Either way, switching took time, effort, and money. *This isn't something you do on a whim.*

Agnes couldn't figure out *why* these people were going to such lengths to kidnap her.

When the blindfold was removed once more, Agnes saw the same sword-

wielding woman sitting in front of her, plus another woman who seemed to be a servant.

Agnes's hands were still bound, but they had untied her feet, and she was being treated much better in this carriage.

The windows were still blocked, but Agnes could tell from the vibrations that they were going just as fast. She started feeling carriage-sick again. In the end, she passed the time mostly by sleeping and keeping to herself.



A few days later, they stayed at an inn. But due to her fatigue, Agnes fell into a sleep as deep as quicksand. Before she knew it, it was morning again. This pattern persisted for days.

She tried repeatedly to call the spirits. But one of the two women were always near her, so she never could. In addition, her woolly-headedness hadn't completely faded. So not only could Agnes not concentrate, but she also felt dizzy when walking.

Agnes ate well and slept as much as possible, determined to rest her body for when the time came to use her powers.

As she slowly recovered, she noticed the furnishings of the inns they stayed in were different from those in Visage. From how the carriage shook, she could tell the roads were becoming more cobbled, and they were clearly heading towards a city, not deep into the countryside. If this was being done on the King of Oreille's orders, then it was highly likely they were heading to Oreille's royal capital.

Since he had gone to all this trouble, time, and risk to bring Agnes to Oreille, she probably wouldn't be killed *en route*.

But there must be some reason he didn't just invite me through official channels. ...Or maybe there's some significance to killing me on Oreillian soil...

"...I *will* make it back to Visage," Agnes muttered to herself in her room at the latest inn on this forced trip.

She had spent the last few days there, completely alone except for meals. Of

course, her hands were still tied. But luckily, she was no longer so closely monitored.

Do they think I'm too meek to run away? Or did they take me so far away that there would be nowhere safe to go even if I ran?

If it was the latter, then Agnes didn't have much time left.

Finally, her head had cleared, and her physical strength had mostly returned.

If she was going to escape, now was the time.

It would mean traveling a long way from Oreille to Visage, then back to Visage's royal capital on foot.

But Agnes had been a commoner once. Even if it took ages, she could walk. However, even *if* she could return safely, she realized that a kidnapped young noblewoman would probably be treated as damaged goods and cause trouble for Claude.

There was also the possibility that she would be discarded, deemed an unsuitable royal fiancée.

No...Prince Claude would never do that...

Besides, even if she *was* discarded, Agnes still had a loving family who went through thick and thin for her. If her return caused trouble for them, well...then all she had to do was resume her commoner life. *I can do that.*

But first, she had to get home. At all costs.

"It's okay. I am cute! I am capable!"

Muttering her mantra, Agnes clenched her bound hands into fists.

In order to escape, she needed to do something about this rope. She tried biting into it and weakening it by rubbing it against the bed rail's beams.

But all *that* did was hurt her teeth and hands.

"Hmm...how can I cut this?"

The moment Agnes whispered that, she heard a familiar popping sound.

Surprised, she looked around and saw a purple-capped mushroom growing

atop the rope. More and more *Clitocybe nuda* sprouted until the ropes that bound her hands loosened and she could easily tear them away.

Curious, Agnes picked the mushroom-studded rope off the floor and it crumbled between her fingers.

“It’s rotted,” she whispered.

Agnes wasn’t sure *how*. But this was probably the mushrooms’ doing.

A long time had passed since she’d been drugged by Sabina, and she was overjoyed to see the mushrooms again.

“Thank you, sweet mushrooms,” she said softly.

Agnes put the rope’s remains on the table and dashed over to the window. Even though she was no longer monitored, she’d be spotted instantly if she went out through the door.

I’m on the second floor...so I should be able to get down safely if I can just get out of the window.

But because of the shutter, she couldn’t see outside. She couldn’t open it because it was locked. It was designed so the shutters could be opened by breaking the glass. But someone would notice the noise and come to see what was going on.

“How can I open this...?” she pondered.

As if it’d been waiting for those words, a popping sound echoed, and another mushroom with distinctive tree-ring-shaped grooves on its cap grew densely and quickly on the window frame.

Recognizing it as a *Ganoderma applanatum*, Agnes waited until the window frame had rotted away. Then she was able to remove the window glass quickly and quietly. The mushroom also seemed to have grown on the shutters, which meant she could open them easily.

“Thank you once again, mushrooms,” she said gratefully.

Beyond the open window spanned the early morning sky, still dark. Luckily, it seemed the window didn’t face the main street.

Agnes couldn't see anything that would make for a good foothold. But from this height, she judged that she should be able to manage by hanging from the window frame, then jumping down.

Her mind made up, she placed her foot on the frame. Then she heard another popping sound from below. Looking down, Agnes saw that a mysterious white sphere had suddenly appeared on the ground.

"Calvatia nipponica...?" As if responding to Agnes's voice, the white sphere swelled up in size. "...You're saying I can jump on you?"

The mushroom swelled again, as if saying, "Just leave it to me, Agnes!" This helped Agnes make up her mind. She jumped down and was enveloped by white sponginess, like she had landed on a giant marshmallow.



She easily slid the rest of the way to the ground from its soft embrace.

“You have my thanks!” Agnes stroked the white sphere gratefully. Then it disappeared instantly with another faint pop.

Agnes thought it was awfully strange for a mushroom to magically disappear without a trace. Then again, it was just as strange that they appeared out of thin air, too. She decided to put it out of her mind for now.

“It’s a relief not to have to destroy evidence—or mushrooms—at any rate,” Agnes said quietly.

If someone came into her room, looked out of the window and saw a giant white mushroom, it’d be like leaving a confession note that said, “This is how Agnes escaped!”

And anyway...if a mushroom as tall as me was left growing in an alleyway, it would cause an uproar for an entirely different reason.

Suddenly, she heard more faint popping sounds overhead. No doubt the remaining mushrooms in the room had also just disappeared.

All incriminating fungus had taken care of themselves, forcing Agnes to wonder once again just how much of what she said was *consciously* understood by the mushrooms.

“It’s still early morning... I’ve got no choice but to hide somewhere...” she said aloud again, curious if they would respond to her plight.

Hearing yet another popping sound, she spotted the new mushroom growing on the inn’s outer wall. The *Peziza ammophila*, with an orange-brown sphere and a hole in its center, seemed to decorate the wall a moment. Then it disappeared with another popping sound.

Agnes wasn’t sure what *that* meant. But she knew she had to leave. *Now.*

Agnes hurried out of the alleyway and ran quickly through the empty streets. She glimpsed a splendid building with a white outer wall in the distance. *Is that the royal palace? But if it is, why didn’t they take me there right away?*

It had been dark when they arrived at this inn. It must’ve been later than she thought. *Perhaps that was why we couldn’t enter the palace right away. Or*

were they going to take me somewhere else, with no intention of entering the palace?

That option *would* be more convenient if their plan was to kill Agnes in the end.

Either way, I still don't know why I've been brought here. But there's no way I can just sit tight and let myself stay captive...

Due to the drugs and long travel tied up and under constant watch, Agnes's mind and body were still a little out of sync, making it hard to move. Still, she was grateful she had managed to escape without incident.

Now all I've got to do is get back to Visage from here... But there were a number of issues she had to overcome first.

Looking down at her clothes, Agnes let out a small sigh.

When she had been kidnapped, she'd been wearing a gorgeous dress. The kidnappers had only prepared a very ordinary blouse and skirt for her to change into. After washing herself at this inn last night, Agnes had been given new clothes and instructed to sleep.

Perhaps, she thought absently, it was to reduce the trouble of me changing into night clothes. And to be able to leave immediately if something happened.

As a result, Agnes didn't have to look conspicuous walking around in a nightgown. But this outfit wasn't great, either. The design was simple, but the fabric was high quality. Too high quality for a commoner. If they were looking for her, this outfit would make her easier to locate.

If only she could've done something about her hair. But her peach-blossom locks had rejected everything from homemade hair dye to magical spells in the past. Wrapping it in cloth would be the easiest solution. For now, she'd have to make do with what she had.

"It's okay," she whispered. "I am cute. I am capable..."

Spotting the kind of store she was looking for, Agnes hid down another alley, taking the sparkling ring off her left hand and dropping it into her pocket.

Then she patiently waited for the coming dawn.



Mushrooms of the Day *Clitocybe nuda* A metamorphic mushroom that has a light purple to dark purple cap that warps and turns brown when mature. It's edible, but if you eat it raw, it'll poison you... Apparently, the Mushroom braves couldn't wait.

A member of the "Decomposing Bacteria Club."

"How *dare* you bind Agnes!" it said to the ropes as it rotted them. Agnes thanked it and the other mushrooms praised it too. A truly heroic mushroom!

Ganoderma applanatum A mushroom with a gray or whitish-brown cap with age rings underneath, like a tree. It grows year after year, and large ones can reach up to 50cm! It's durable enough not to fall apart even if you sit on it. So, it's more suitable as a piece of furniture than as a mushroom. If you scratch a message into the back of its cap while it's growing, it won't disappear. If you polish it, it will shine like an ornament. Maybe it really *is* furniture...

A member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

"I won't let them get away with locking up Agnes!" it sprouted, rotting away the window frame. After finishing its job, it started considering a new vocation as a furniture mushroom, saying, "It might be *nice* to have a window with mushrooms."

Calvatia nipponica It's also known as the Giant Puffball... The name makes me imagine something really large. But it's just a fluffy white ball-shaped mushroom. Its dreamy white sphere is about 50cm across and sprouts overnight. When it browns, its skin peels off, and it releases an ammonia-like scent. It's edible while still white. But rather than tasting delicious, it's rather tasteless. So why do we eat it, then?

A rescue mushroom that waited with its fluffy mycelia to catch Agnes jumping out of the window. "Agnes stroked me!" it said with joy as it returned to its friends.

Peziza ammophila An orange-brown sphere with a hole in the center, this rare mushroom only grows on sandy beaches. It's usually buried in sand and only the hole atop it is visible. It appears when strong winds blow the sand

away. There also seems to be a stalk below the ball shape. But of course, it's covered with sand.

“I’m confident in my hide-and-seek skills!” it shouted as it hid itself. But it secretly hoped Agnes would find it.

Chapter 13: Even So, I Want to Be with You

“AHH! I can’t *take* it anymore!”

Agnes pulled open the shop door forcefully as she huffed in a loud voice. The woman inside, who looked to be the owner, stared at her in surprise. Agnes stomped up to the counter and pointed at her outfit.

“Would you please buy these clothes off me? And then can you give me something that’s loose and easy to move around in?”

The shopkeeper blinked several times, clearly taken aback by this sudden customer, who had appeared a split second after she opened for the day.

“Wh-What’s wrong, young lady? What brings you here at this hour...?”

“Will you please just hear me out? I used to work at a nobleman’s residence, and the young lady of the house was so selfish!”

Agnes shrugged in disgust and the shopkeeper nodded empathetically.

Yes, she’s buying it!

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Agnes continued her story with a look of dissatisfaction on her face.

It was risky to sell these clothes, since they were high quality and quite suspicious for a commoner to be wearing. Coming across as suspicious wasn’t her greatest concern, though. Worst-case scenario, it could be reported as a possible theft.

Agnes would probably be questioned, and the shopkeeper might even call the authorities. She would be caught again. Escaping a second time would be much more difficult. So she came up with a cover story so she could sell these clothes without raising suspicion.

Agnes let out an exaggerated sigh, playing the part of a servant who had served a noblewoman like Sabina.

“She fired me for spillin’ some ink. But *she’s* the one who spilled it! And she wouldn’t even give me any severance! Can you believe it?! The nerve!”

Am I doing this right...?

Agnes based her speech on her commoner days and the commoner women she always overheard in town. But she worried she might be overdoing it.

The shopkeeper just smiled at her. “Oh dear! What a disaster. So those clothes were all you got as compensation?”

“Uh-huh. I’ll sell these and return to the countryside. I’ve had enough of nobility and this stinking city!”

Naturally, the clothes aristocrats provided their servants with would have decent fabric.

Judging by the shopkeeper’s nods, it seemed she’d bought it. *That’s a relief...*

“Well, all rich folk are like that. *Some* are kind, but they’re few and faaar between.”

“Yes, you can say that again... I got the worst of the lot, I tell ya.”

As the shopkeeper directed her to do, Agnes entered a small room partitioned by a cloth and changed into the outfit she was handed. The clothes were a little stiff, but easy to move in, without any unnecessary embellishments. The colors were on the drab side, but Agnes had spent so many years in such outfits, she didn’t mind. It was even oddly reassuring.

After she changed, Agnes took out her engagement ring and put it in the pocket of her new clothes. *A dismissed servant wearing a jeweled mushroom ring would be so out of place...*

In order to fly under the radar and avoid thieves, she reasoned it’d be better to keep it out of sight until she returned to Visage.

“Oh, lovely! It suits you.”

After Agnes emerged, the shopkeeper immediately began sizing her up.

“With this fabric, even if you take it apart later on,” she explained, “I’m sure you can find many uses for it. How about this much for your old outfit?”

What she offered was a slightly better price than Agnes had expected. Lacking any kind of currency, she nodded gratefully.

“My hair’s in the way,” Agnes said, “and I want to tie it up for the journey home. Is there a suitable cloth?”

“If that’s the case, I’ll throw this in for free.”

The shopkeeper brought out a short cloak with a hood.

“Oh! May I?” Agnes asked.

“It’s quite old and has some holes,” the shopkeeper said. “The time it’d take to repair it wouldn’t even justify the selling price, so it’s just been lying around. You’re a *very* cute young lady, so I’ll throw it in with the hope that you don’t get caught up with any riffraff on your way home.”

“Thank you!”

With the hood, Agnes’s hair and face were almost hidden.

The shopkeeper smiled back at her as she beamed over her unexpected bounty.

“Incidentally,” Agnes said, “could you tell me how to get to the border quickly?”

“The border? Where are you going?”

“I have relatives on the Visage border. I thought I might pay them a visit and see if I can get any work there first.”

Of course, Agnes couldn’t tell her the truth. She had to choose her words carefully and try to sound natural.

“Well, if you go west on this main street, you’ll come to a highway. After that, it’s a straight road.”

“Is there a carriage?”

“There is. If you take several and travel between the towns on the way, you should be able to get to the border easily.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Agnes really wanted to know more details like the cost. But such a display of ignorance might expose her. After all, Agnes was now a former servant who'd been dismissed from a nobleman's mansion. Anyone in that situation should be familiar with this land's customs.

"I wanted to take a peek at the royal palace as a conversation starter..." Agnes mentioned with a sigh.

"I can understand why. Even though you can see the building from here, commoners can't get close to it."

That meant the splendid building with white outer walls was indeed the royal palace and this really was the Oreillian royal capital.

"The world's different for the sort of folks who get fired over a simple bottle of ink," Agnes lamented, keeping the act up.

"It certainly is. Well, take care."

After waving goodbye and leaving the store, Agnes let out a deep sigh of relief. Ducking into a still-quiet alleyway, she sat down on a wooden box.

"Well...I was able to do some shopping, at least." This would reduce her chances of being found straight away. "But both an inn and carriage will cost money."

As Agnes counted her coins, she heard yet more popping sounds. When she turned her head to the side, yellow-brown capped mushrooms and clustered mushrooms were growing on the wooden box.

Agnes felt a passionate gaze coming from the *Flammulina filiformis* and truffle mushrooms neatly lined up beside her.

"Umm...are you saying I can sell you?"

Agnes wasn't sure if she really needed their permission. But their timing had been so convenient. And these were edible, high-class mushrooms. Perfect for selling at high prices. There came more pops, as if in confirmation, and a thick pile of mushrooms soon built up beside her.

Presumably, they were happy to be sold.

"...Thank you so much! I really appreciate you guys!"

My mushroom powers have definitely increased lately...but this much?

At this rate, it almost seemed like she could request a certain mushroom and have it sprout... But she was too afraid to test that theory.

Deftly plucking the mushrooms, Agnes left the alley to find a shop that would buy them.



“ISN’T this a little too cheap?”

At a shop that bought mushrooms in bulk, Agnes frowned over the proffered price. Honestly, she’d just wanted to sell and get her money with no fuss. But this was too egregious to just let slide.

Agnes knew the mushroom market better than any mushroom farmer out there. Even though she was now in a different country, the prices here were still extortionate. Clearly, she was only being offered half of what the mushrooms were worth. Agnes glared at the shopkeeper, making her dissatisfaction plain.

Does he think I’m an amateur, or is he just trying to swindle me?

Either way, she couldn’t back down. Not in front of the mushrooms that had grown so generously for her.

“J-Just kiddin’!” the merchant said nervously. “I thought you were a naïve young lady. But you, uh, clearly know a lot about mushrooms.”

He gave Agnes an amount equivalent to the market price, an embarrassed look on his face.

Agnes knew she couldn’t let herself get swindled. Yet, at the same time, she didn’t want to make too big a fuss and stand out. Still, she’d gotten a decent price in the end. *That’s good, at least.*

“Sorry about that.”

As a token of apology, he placed an apple on her palm. It was a hush fee, perhaps. But she *was* hungry, so it was appreciated. Her hood was in the way, so she pushed it aside a little and bit into the apple, only to realize the owner was staring at her.

“Is...something wrong?”

“O-Oh! I was just noticing your beautiful peach-blossom-colored hair. You must be blessed by the spirits. How lucky you are...”

The owner’s expression was calm. Agnes couldn’t see even the slightest hint of disgust in his eyes as he gazed at her pink hair. She realized that he really meant what he said. With a lifetime of abuse taken for her hair, she felt flustered.

“Your hair’s beautiful,” he continued to compliment her. “But your eyes are green, too, aren’t they? Green eyes mean you’re blessed. That color’s a common royal trait. No doubt a happy future awaits you.”

“...Thank you.”

Delalande had said something similar. *Maybe this is just polite conversation...* But at the same time, Agnes felt her heart swell and tears sting her eyes. She smiled to cover it up.

She was in a country where neither her hair nor eyes were despised. In Oreille...it might even be possible for her to live a normal life.

Still, what Agnes wanted more than anything...was to be with Claude and her family.

That’s why...I have to go back to Visage!

“Oh, by the way... If you know the going carriage price, could you tell me?” she asked.

“Which direction?”

“West.”

The shopkeeper, now sorting the mushrooms, stopped and shook his head.

“Oh! Then you should wait a few days. Thanks to the Visage royal family coming, the border checks on the surrounding towns have been tightened. You don’t want to get caught up in that.”

“The Visage...royal family?” Agnes clenched her fists tightly in front of her chest to hide her quickening heartbeat.

“Yeah... You know how our royal family visited Visage recently? This is in return for that. It’s good our countries are on friendly terms.”

“Yes. Well...I certainly don’t want to get caught up. I think I’ll leave in a few days.”

“You should. It’s a bit of a festive occasion, and it’s pretty rare to see foreign royal carriages. Why not go and take a look while you wait? You’re a very cute young lady, y’know. So who knows? Maybe some prince will fall in love with you at first sight.”

Of course, Agnes knew that the owner wasn’t serious about what he was saying. So she indulged him with a fake smile and left the shop.

Indeed, she noticed there were more people about than there had been in the morning. *Are they all here to greet the royal carriage?*

What worried Agnes the most was learning that there were checkpoints in the border towns. She wanted to leave during the festivities. But even if she went now, there was a high possibility she would be stopped at a checkpoint.

It’d be better to stay here and kill some time.

How in the world did I get here before even Prince Gerome? she wondered.

Getting in touch with him would be the swiftest way to get home, but she couldn’t see how she could safely. If a random woman started claiming she knew a foreign prince, there was no way anyone would believe it.

And since she’d passed through the checkpoints on the way in without any issue, that made it highly likely that the King of Oreille or someone else in the royal family was involved in Agnes’s kidnapping. In *that* case, if she went to the royal palace with Gerome, then they would know her whereabouts at once and that would make things even worse.

I can’t cause any trouble. It’s all right...I just need to retrace my steps...

Luckily, thanks to the mushrooms, she could afford travel expenses. She decided to start by looking for an inn for the night. But after going down several alleys, Agnes came to a main street, and she couldn’t move because of the throngs of people.

As she looked around to see where she should go, she heard cheers in the distance.

“I see the Visage carriage!” someone cried. Everyone turned their heads in unison, as if following it.

Behind several people who seemed to be knights on horseback, there was a familiar carriage.

That’s definitely Prince Gerome’s carriage!

Agnes wondered how long it’d been since she’d seen that carriage off from Barthet. Reality suddenly hit her, and she felt overwhelmed with anxiety over being all alone in Oreille.

“...Claude...” she murmured sadly.

She wondered what he was doing. She hadn’t seen him in days. *Maybe weeks... He must’ve noticed I’m not there by now. No doubt he’s looking for me.*

To think that Claude might be worried about her made her chest hurt and filled her with crushing loneliness. She had been trying not to think about it too much. But, when she saw the Visage carriage, it suddenly flooded her mind.

Agnes clutched the ring in her pocket tightly.

It’s better not to think about him right now.

She couldn’t let anxiety take over.

Agnes released a small sigh, trying to sort out her feelings.

At that moment, another bright yellow-capped mushroom...a *Pleurotus citrinopileatus*...grew on the carriage roof with a *pop!*



Mushrooms of the Day

***Flammulina filiformis* (Enoki)**

A mushroom with a yellow-brown to dark-brown cap that expands from a globular shape and eventually curls. Cultivated and wild varieties have different appearances and tastes, and wild ones have a strong viscosity. An edible mushroom, popular for its crunchy texture.

“I want to be sold to help Agnes!” it said as it sprouted. But what it *really* wanted was for *her* to eat it.

Truffle

A cluster of little marbled bumps, truffles are one of the world's major delicacies. A very high-grade food. The problem at the moment is the price difference between white and black. Hearing that Agnes needed money, they grew more frequent than usual.

"We will help fatten your pocketbook, Agnes!" it claimed, sprouting next to the *Flammulina filiformis*.

It was also shocked by the unexpectedly low price that was offered.

"*Of course* Agnes knows a lot about mushrooms! She's the Mushroom Princess!" the truffles proclaimed. But, since they were mushrooms, no one noticed.

Pleurotus citrinopileatus

An edible mushroom with bright yellow caps. It grows in clusters and is very tasty. Fetches a good price, too.

A member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

It grew for both Claude and Gerome as an apology mushroom, a souvenir mushroom, and a greeting mushroom.

A notification mushroom that told Agnes, “Gerome is right here!”

Chapter 14: Mushroom Signposts

AGNES was surprised at the unexpected mushroom appearance, but no one seemed to have noticed it on the carriage roof. Only cheers filled the area. She was relieved the mushroom hadn't caused a commotion. Then the door of the slowly rolling carriage burst open.

A handsome man with yellow-gold hair leaned out—Prince Gerome.

Before the crowd could cheer, there was a cacophony of bursting noises, and a sudden line of red-capped mushrooms popped up in a straight row right from the carriage to Agnes.

Gerome's eyes followed the line of *Amanita caedareoides* until he found Agnes wearing her hood. Her peach-blossom hair wasn't visible. Yet, with such blatant mushroom signposting, he couldn't fail to spot her.

Knights came dashing over and escorted her right into the carriage.

"Is that truly you, Lady Agnes?" Gerome asked.

"Y-Yes," she said.

Not only were her face and hair obscured by the hood, but she was also wearing the plainest clothing. She felt far too shabby to be sitting in such a splendid carriage. But right now, answering Gerome's questions needed to be her top priority.

When she lowered her hood and showed her face, Gerome looked relieved.

"Contact Prince Claude immediately," he said to the nearest knight.

The knight nodded, and the carriage started moving again after the door was closed.

"First off," Gerome said quickly, "are you okay?"

"Y-Yes. My wrists were tied, but I wasn't harmed."

“Tied wrists is the same thing as being harmed. We’ll have someone examine you later. Did...did anything else happen to you?” Gerome brushed aside her assessment. But now he seemed to have difficulty choosing his words. “I mean, when a woman gets kidnapped...” he said awkwardly. “I...I know it might be difficult to talk to *me* about...”

“You mean to ask after my chastity? Are you saying a kidnapped woman is no longer suited to be a royal’s fiancée? Should we dissolve the engagement?”

“Did they do something to you?!” he cried in a panic.

Agnes shook her head as Gerome leaned forward, his expression grim.

“No,” she said. “Nothing of the sort happened to me. Don’t worry...”

“I see. Good.”

From the way he leaned back in his seat with a deep sigh, Agnes could tell that he’d been deeply worried about her, which filled her with warmth.

“If they had harmed you,” Gerome said seriously, “then that would affect our response. But your engagement will *never* be canceled. At any rate, if we don’t prevent the slaughter, it will mean war.”

Slaughter was an odd thing to bring up in the context of her engagement, but Agnes didn’t have time to process the underlying meaning there.

“So, what happened?” Gerome asked.

Agnes explained what had happened to her from the time she had sat down for tea with Sabina. Gerome clicked his tongue in disgust.

“I received the news while staying in the border town,” he explained when she’d finished. “It was reported that a thief broke into the parlor where you were taking tea with Lady Sabina. They said Lady Sabina was injured and that you were kidnapped. You were taken from the Barthet mansion. Yet, there was no trail to follow. I thought that was odd, but now I see... Those *scoundrels*.”

In other words, Claude must’ve commenced his search for Agnes based on Sabina’s story. Agnes got the impression that Sabina’s injuries were self-inflicted. But clearly, the ruse had worked.

“Naturally,” Gerome said, “I want to return you to Claude as soon as possible.

But if I try to send you home alone now, you'll surely be attacked again."

That was probably true. It had taken the kidnappers so much time and effort to bring her here. She doubted they would give up just because she had given them the slip.

Since she'd been seen entering the carriage in front of a crowd, the Oreillians should've already figured out her whereabouts by now.

"It's far safer to keep you with me at all times. Surely they're not stupid enough to try to kidnap you again while you are with a prince on his royal visit. For a while, you and I shall travel together."

"I'm terribly sorry to be such an inconvenience." Agnes bowed her head.

"Don't worry about it." Gerome shook his head. Seeing those familiar gray eyes that were so like Claude's, Agnes felt herself calming down just a little. "It's better than having Claude go on a rampage. I ordered that he be informed as soon as possible. He's probably already put the pieces of the puzzle together, so he might already be on his way. Having him enter Oreille poses its own set of problems, yet...I can't imagine him staying away."

The Dragon Crest's power weakens when they leave Visage's borders...

Claude had spoken of how thin the air seemed even at the Barthet spring. Agnes wondered how hard it'd been for him to actually leave Visage.

Agnes was worried, and wished he wouldn't come. But a messenger had already been sent. And no doubt, Claude would be unable to stay away.

"I hope it's not painful for him..." she muttered.

Gerome nodded wordlessly.



AFTER a while, they seemed to have arrived at the royal palace, as the carriage came to a stop.

Gerome picked up the cloak that was lying beside him and pulled it over Agnes's head. "Lady Agnes, you will accompany me as the fiancée of Visage's fourth prince. Your outfit is undeniably out of place, so we must conceal it for now."

The way Agnes looked right now, even a commoner would raise an eyebrow at her shabby attire. She looked more suspicious than anything.

“But wouldn’t it be strange for me to be here with the second prince and without my fiancé?” she asked. “And weren’t you originally supposed to be making a solo visit?”

“I’ll say Claude is coming too, but was delayed. Mistakes are bound to happen in communication. Even *if* the Oreillians haven’t made the right preparations in time, I’m willing to be open-minded and forgive them for their indiscretion.”

Gerome certainly *was* a royal, especially in the way he expected special treatment. He flashed her a wicked grin as she let his words sink in.

After they had alighted the carriage, Gerome acted as planned, leading Agnes, still wearing his cloak, to a room in the palace.

He explained the situation by saying there seemed to have been some mistake on their side, because the fourth-born prince and his fiancée would also be visiting with him. He then said they were far too tired to greet the king, and would prefer the meeting to be postponed. They had also asked to be excused from the evening’s welcome banquet. After relaying all that to the pale-faced minister, Gerome breathed a huge sigh as he sat down on the sofa.

“Are you certain this is the right way to handle things?” Agnes asked as she worriedly sat down on the opposite side of the sofa, still clutching the cloak.

“Of course,” Gerome said. “This is all *their* fault, anyway.”

“But what if the royal family wasn’t involved?”

From what Sabina said, it really *did* seem like they were involved. Yet...Agnes worried about the one in a million chance they weren’t responsible for this mess.

Gerome was here on an official reciprocal visit. Without context, his behavior could only be taken as rude.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Gerome said. “Right now, your safety and getting you back to Claude as quickly as possible are my highest priorities. I’m glad I have female knights in my employ. I can’t entrust you to

their people in any way or form.”

Gerome nodded his head towards the two women standing at attention in the room with them.

“I’ve arranged that you be given the room next to mine. You may not like it, but it’s a necessary precaution. And of course, my female knights shall guard you at all times.”

“But...”

The knights were supposed to be *Gerome’s* escorts. It surely wouldn’t do to place so much focus on Agnes.

“Listen,” Gerome said, noticing her worry. “If something happens to you... I mean, you’ve already *been* kidnapped. If it comes down to it, Claude can and *will* destroy this palace to save you. This is a necessary measure to avoid war. I must ask you to comply with my guidance.”

“Y-Yes, of course...”

Gerome was saying some scary things. Agnes didn’t think she should be making demands in her position.

“Well,” he said. “With no plans to attend the banquet, we’re both free now. Come and have some tea with me later.”

“Y-Yes, of course. *Um...*”

Agnes got to her feet as Gerome did and his brow furrowed a little in annoyance.

“Is there something else...?”

“Thank you very much for saving me.”

Agnes had intended to return to Visage alone. But even if things had gone well, it would have been a long, dangerous journey before she made it back. During that entire time, Claude would’ve been worried for her. But not only was Gerome keeping him updated, he was also going the extra mile for Agnes.

She felt guilty for causing so much trouble. But more than anything, she was just filled with gratitude.

Agnes bowed low, and when she'd straightened up, Gerome smiled softly at her.

"Don't worry about it, *Agnes*. You're to be my little sister after all!"

For some reason, he seemed to be in a good mood as he left the room.

"...What was that about?"

Gerome has always called me Lady Agnes. Why did he suddenly drop the "Lady"? Of course, she didn't mind one bit, but it still piqued her curiosity.

"If I may speak, my lady," said one of the female knights. "As His Highness said, he clearly cherishes you as a little sister, Lady Agnes." She smiled and bowed to Agnes. "We shall be tending to you as your guards and de facto maids, Lady Agnes. I am called Teignier and this is Johnna."

Teignier had raven-colored hair, and Johnna kept her chocolate brown hair in braids. Both women looked awfully young to be knights, but since they were accompanying the second prince to another country, they obviously had the skills necessary.

"Now, let's get you into a bath before we do something about those clothes." Teignier quickly rolled up her sleeves and pulled Agnes's cloak off.

"*Erm... Excuse me?*"

Agnes understood she couldn't stay in the royal palace in this outfit. She also realized that she'd need to take a bath.

But why are the two of them looking at me like I'm their...prey?

"As part of our position," Johnna explained, "us female knights have many opportunities to escort noblewomen and tend to their personal needs. Now, I am not as good at arranging hair as I am with a sword, but my skills are still adequate, if I do say so myself. Please leave this to me." Johnna smiled at Agnes.

Agnes couldn't imagine how hair arranging fell under knightly duties.

"But I have nothing to change into," Agnes protested. "And surely there's no rush?"

“Everything has already been arranged for. Don’t worry, my lady,” Teignier said. She was smiling, too. Agnes thought she heard her murmuring something like, “This will be a test of my skills.”

In the end, Agnes bathed without further complaint, then let the two knights groom her. They changed her into a pretty, light blue dress. It wasn’t too flashy, but the delicate lace and ribbons were adorable.

Yes...it’s very cute... Agnes thought.

“Is something wrong?” Teignier smiled at Agnes as Johnna continued combing her hair. Agnes decided to take the plunge and say what was on her mind.

“It’s cute.”

“Yes. Very cute.”

“I mean, it’s...it’s *very* cute,” Agnes stressed.

“Yes,” Johnna chimed in. “It suits you *very* well.”

Agnes had no response to their matching, winning smiles.

She wasn’t getting through to them. It wasn’t that she *hated* the dress. She just didn’t have the confidence to ask for something a bit more...modest. All Agnes could do was convince herself that this, too, was part of her noble training.

Giving up, she slid on her mushroom ring. The gems sparkled in the light. Seeing them, Agnes was reminded that Claude really understood her and her feelings.

It must be boring to be with someone always panicking over having to wear lovely clothes. But even so, Claude always did his best to match her pace. He was infinitely kind. But he didn’t just pamper Agnes. He was also working hard to help Agnes regain her self-esteem.

Someone who accepted her, mushrooms and all, and had claimed her as his soulmate.

...I want to see him so badly...

Thinking about Claude this way... It was probably because she was relieved to

have encountered Gerome and no longer be all alone.

She would have to watch her behavior and be careful not to cause too much trouble. This *was* the royal palace of Oreille.

Agnes's kidnappers' ultimate purpose was still unknown.

Once Johnna was done with her braiding, Agnes headed to the room where Gerome was waiting, the two knights keeping close behind her.

"By the way...how did you know I was in the crowd?"

Sitting opposite Gerome, Agnes took a sip of tea and voiced what had been weighing on her mind.

After opening the door of the carriage, Gerome had followed the signposting of the red mushrooms straight to her. But it was still a mystery as to why Gerome had opened the door while the carriage was in motion in the first place.

Gerome pulled a bright yellow-capped mushroom out of his pocket. The *Pleurotus ctrinopileatus* that he placed on the table looked as fresh as if it'd just been plucked.

"This suddenly grew on my leg," he said. "It's a color I've only seen once before, and when it comes to mushrooms growing, only you spring to mind. After that, I just followed the red mushrooms."

"Erm... I'm sorry about that."

"Mushrooms *are* oddly useful, aren't they? Did you purposefully have it grow on me, Agnes?"

"No... That wasn't my intention..."

Until now, her mushrooms had never grown out of her sight or on someone she wasn't with. But then again, it had happened once with Philip in the Barthet territory. It seemed her mushroom powers were continuing to grow.

Claude *would* be pleased. But at this rate, Agnes *was* a little worried about where it'd lead.

Would this all end with Agnes leaving a trail of mushrooms behind her

footprints? That'd be terrifying. If that happened, she would have to live the shut-in life of a mushroom farmer. Would Claude still accept her?

He was a mushroom fetishist, so he would most likely accept anything involving growing mushrooms.

"Well, thanks to them," Gerome said, "I was able to save you, Agnes. I'll have to give this mushroom to Claude."

Agnes wasn't sure when Claude would arrive. *But surely it won't be tomorrow. The mushroom will probably shrivel by then. Is Gerome planning to give it to him anyway?*

Claude was a mushroom freak. But Gerome was also oddly conscientious about the mushrooms.

"Has Claude always had a mushroom fet—" she cleared her throat. "Er... Has Claude always liked mushrooms?"

"No...? Not when we were little, anyway. About seven years ago, he began talking about mushrooms all the time. Since then, he's been collecting and growing mushrooms... Eventually," Gerome beamed, "he even found a mushroom Dragonmate."

Indeed, Agnes seemed to be Claude's ideal partner. But from the way Gerome was speaking, it sounded almost like Claude had been placed under some kind of mushroom curse.

"Excuse me," said a knight coming in from the other room. "His Highness, the First Prince of Oreille, is here. Do you wish to see him?"

Agnes froze, teacup halfway to her lips.

The firstborn prince—that must be Nathan. But why would he come to this room?

"Shall we refuse?" Gerome asked softly.

Agnes shook her head a little.

Considering diplomatic matters, she reasoned they couldn't reject an audience with the prince. Also, Agnes had questions for him.

“When I met him in Visage, Prince Nathan told me I would be better off not coming to Oreille. I can’t imagine he’d had a hand in my kidnapping.”

If Nathan had planned to kidnap Agnes, there was no need to warn her against coming to Oreille in the first place. Even now, it still sounded like it had been a warning.

“It’s certainly hard to believe the entire royal family was behind your kidnapping,” Gerome said. “Shall we hear what he has to say?”



Mushrooms of the Day *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 try to eat it. Apparently, it’s delicious, though.

Once, it sprouted by mistake when it misheard someone say “excellent” as “eggcellent” and had ended up getting eaten. A hasty mushroom.

A signpost mushroom that shook its proud red cap and announced, “Agnes is here!” It was planning to ride in the carriage with Agnes. But it was carelessly left behind by the guards, so it felt a bit sad.

Pleurotus citrinopileatus An edible mushroom with bright yellow caps. It grows in clusters and is very tasty. Fetches a good price too.

Member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

It has grown on Claude and Gerome as an apology mushroom, a souvenir mushroom, and a greeting mushroom.

“I’m *sure* to be praised for letting them know that Agnes is here,” it thought, spreading its cap and waiting in anticipation.

Chapter 15: The King of the Four Divine Protections

IT didn't take long for a man with eye-catching crimson hair to join Agnes and Gerome. Judging from his formal attire, Prince Nathan had no doubt come from the welcome banquet. Agnes was curious about how it was going without her and Prince Gerome in attendance, and now with Prince Nathan himself slipping out. Not that she cared to comment on it.

"I'm sorry that we couldn't participate in the welcoming party you took the trouble to throw us," Gerome said politely. "I'm afraid the exhaustion from our long journey caught up with us."

"Oh please," smiled Nathan. "Don't worry about it."

Having exchanged greetings, they all sat down on the sofas.

Having Nathan in front of her and Gerome beside her filled Agnes with anxiety.

I'm fine when it comes to Claude... Never mind, his presence fills me with an entirely different type of nervousness.

In the end, being around royalty was an endless source of tension for Agnes.

"Incidentally, was it fine for you to withdraw from the banquet?" Gerome asked.

"The nobility have more fun when the royal family isn't there," Nathan said.

"I have to agree with you there," Gerome nodded.

Agnes didn't disagree with their assessment, but she was surprised that both royals would openly admit such a thing.

"By the way, Lady Agnes..." Prince Nathan turned to her. "After entering Oreille, has the spirits' protection... I mean, have your mushroom powers increased?"

"In what sense?" Agnes asked.

My mushroom powers are definitely getting stronger, but why does Prince Nathan know that?

“Oreille’s spirit protection increases within our borders and weakens outside them. If your spirit protection is indeed derived from Oreille, it’s only natural it’ll be more powerful here than within Visage,” he explained.

In other words, it’s like Visage’s Dragon Crest power.

It seemed that both powers were similar in that they weakened outside the country of origin and became stronger within it. In that case, her mushroom sensitivity increasing also made perfect sense.

Nathan made his attendants leave the room before speaking further about the topic. “Would you consider asking your own attendants to leave as well?” he asked calmly.

“...And if I say no?” Gerome replied coolly.

Nathan turned his gaze to the knight standing behind Gerome. “Please take your knight’s sword, then. I don’t mind if you keep that sword trained on me throughout the conversation. As you can see,” he said, smiling slightly, “I am unarmed.”

“I...I’ll leave too,” Agnes said quickly.

No doubt Nathan’s request meant he wanted to talk about something important. The decision over what to do with the knights was up to Gerome, but Agnes felt it wasn’t her place to stay for a private chat amongst royals.

“No,” Nathan insisted. “Please stay, Lady Agnes.”

Gerome’s eyebrow twitched. With a sigh, he ordered his knights to leave the room too. “...So,” he said, reaching for his teacup, “what is it you wanted to discuss?”

Prince Nathan nodded, as if he’d just made up his mind about something.

“His Majesty the King is who kidnapped Agnes,” he said contritely. “I am *truly* sorry.” He bowed deeply to them both.

Agnes and Gerome exchanged looks.

What he said was shocking. But even more curious was *why* he was telling them this in the first place.

Nathan smiled, looking troubled. “As I’ve told Lady Agnes before, His Majesty has a...severe mushroom complex.”

“Mushroom complex...?” Gerome sounded puzzled by this phrase, perhaps only hearing it for the first time. Agnes didn’t quite understand what he meant by it either.

“I went along with him to Visage since he was acting so strange,” Nathan sighed. “But I never thought he would do such a stupid thing.” He took a big sip of tea. “Oreille is a country protected by the spirits. But their protection is classified into four groups according to the power’s different elements.”

“Hold on,” Gerome said, alarmed. “Are you sure you should be telling us this?”

Nathan didn’t seem too concerned. “I probably shouldn’t,” he admitted. “But I see no reason to defend the secret to the death. Anyway, you already have some understanding of our powers, don’t you, Prince Gerome?”

“To a degree,” Gerome said. “It’s well-known among the royal families that Visage protects our country with the power of the dragon, and Oreille protects itself with the power of the spirits.”

“And there’s a difference in those power levels,” Nathan added. “Even the commoners roughly grasp it. As long as I don’t tell you every last secret, there’s no harm discussing it in general, is there?”

It was a fact generally recognized, even among Visage’s commoners, that their royal family had dragon’s blood. *Some people even know about Dragonmates. Maybe there’s something similar here...*

“Here in Oreille, we royals sometimes go by a special title,” Nathan continued. “The current king is the King of Flowers. You’ve already heard of this, haven’t you?”

“I’ve heard his predecessor was known as the King of Roots,” Gerome replied. “The fact that king never left the country probably means he was treated equal to someone with the power of the dragon in Visage.”

“Right. As I said earlier, our powers are classified into four categories. The most common are those with the protection of flowers. The highest of them all is the King of Flowers. The current king—my father—is one. Next, are those with the divine protection of leaves and flowers, also known as the King of Leaves. That’s where I fall. Finally, there is the King of Roots, who has the divine protection of roots, leaves, and flowers. That was my grandfather, the previous king.”

In other words, Agnes reflected, the Oreillian royal family is organized into groups based on the type of spirit protection they have. Each of these has a representative called the King.

“Basically,” Nathan concluded, “the King of Roots doesn’t leave the country for the same reason as Visage’s Dragon Crest Bearers: his power weakens outside our borders. Consider also that roughly more than half of our royal family has the divine protection of flowers. I believe the rest are split between leaves and roots.”

“But that’s only three,” Gerome interjected. “What about the fourth one?”

Oh yes, Agnes realized. He only explained three: flowers, leaves, and roots. But he mentioned four.

“That one,” Nathan explained gravely, “is so rare, most don’t know of its existence. It’s the divine protection of mushrooms.”

“Mushrooms...” Agnes and Gerome both said at once.

Nathan laughed at their perfect sync. “Yes, mushrooms,” he smiled wryly. “Even in my family, which is said to be particularly blessed with the spirits’ protection, a mushroom type rarely appears. As such, they tend to be kept close at hand. But my father, the current King of Flowers, has a terrible inferiority complex towards those stronger than him.”

As Nathan had explained, most of the blessings were of the flower type. Thus, in terms of rarity, the King of Flowers must be quite common.

“Remember when I said I only knew one person who grew mushrooms?” Nathan asked Agnes. “That was my uncle. He was a very kind man. He used to grow little mushrooms to amuse me.”

Nathan's expression and voice softened so much when he spoke of his uncle, Agnes could tell he had good memories of the man. As a mushroom-sprouter herself, she felt a twinge of jealousy for her fellow mushroom-sprouter, who was thought of fondly despite their curious ability.

"He died twenty years ago," Nathan said sadly.

"Is that so?" Agnes said, slightly crestfallen.

What a shame. I'd so dearly love to have met him...

"His Majesty and my uncle were half-brothers," Nathan explained. "But it seems that my uncle had the protection of mushrooms, which triggered his mushroom-sprouting powers. Back then, many were calling for the King of Mushrooms to be crowned the next king. I guess that was why..."

The King of Mushrooms... Another stunningly powerful phrase. Claude would be delighted to know of such a title. But now's not the time or place to bring that up.

"Why didn't he take the throne?" she asked.

"My father—His Majesty—was the child of the queen and my uncle the son of a concubine. Even so, when my grandfather passed away seven years ago, some said that, had my uncle lived, he would've been crowned the King of Mushrooms."

No doubt that had only fueled the current king's mushroom inferiority complex, Agnes reckoned.

"If a commoner showed up who could sprout mushrooms," Nathan said, "they'd no doubt be invited to the palace and given an appropriate position. But that concerns Oreille. For it to be a foreigner and a royal's fiancée, no less... Well, it's terribly rude for starters."

Since Nathan had gone out of his way to tell them all this, it seemed extremely likely that the King of Oreille had masterminded Agnes's kidnapping.

I don't know much about this so-called mushroom complex of his... But it's apparently been festering for years.

"You have an audience with His Majesty tomorrow, right?" Prince Nathan

asked.

“Yes. Originally,” Gerome explained, “I was supposed to greet him upon our arrival. But we postponed it.”

“I will accompany you tomorrow then,” Nathan said simply. “I asked that it be held in the chapel next door—not in the royal palace’s audience hall—so it’ll be less visible. I also plan to request that no harm come to Lady Agnes. Of course, if she wished to *serve* in the royal palace, that would be different...” He trailed off as he looked directly at Agnes.

“I do not want that,” Agnes said without pause. If that happened, she’d have to leave Visage. *Besides, I’ve no intention of serving a king who’d kidnap me!*

“I figured...” Nathan laughed.

It was clear to Agnes that he’d expected her to say as much before even suggesting it. His previous warning aside, Agnes was glad Prince Nathan was the type of man who held to his convictions, even if it meant opposing the king.

Or maybe he’s feeling nostalgic for his late uncle... she mused.

“Come to think of it,” she said aloud, “a member of the Visage royal family said that some of the things I made were glittering. Do you know what that means?”

If it was something visible to someone with dragon power, then Claude would’ve been able to see it. Agnes didn’t really get the needed criteria here.

“Presumably,” Nathan began, “something like a fragment of the spirits’ protection is visible. It can only be seen by those who have the aptitude. I’ve seen it myself, after my uncle used his power. You could say it’s proof that the maker is blessed with strong powers by the spirits.”

“I see...”

So it’s not a matter of strength, but simple aptitude? Charles had said he was good at Seeing. Perhaps there are various categories of dragon powers too.

“Now, then...Lady Agnes, I have one request,” Nathan said.

“What is it?”

Agnes couldn't imagine what it could be. Yet surely, he wouldn't ask anything terrible of her.

"Could...could you grow some mushrooms for me?" Nathan asked shyly. "I... just can't forget the ones my uncle grew for me as a child."

How odd for a handsome prince to make such a blushing request! Yet, Nathan seemed so solemn, Agnes couldn't even laugh about it.

"The mushrooms tend to sprout on their own," she said apologetically. "I'm not sure if I *can* right now."

"Why don't you call on the spirits?" he asked.

A death sentence! Spoken so calmly... Agnes twitched.

Certainly, if she called on the spirits, at least *one* mushroom would grow.

But! But I can't do my usual perky older sister routine in front of my fiancé's older brother and a foreign prince!

It'd be pure torture...

"Oh, *um...* Well, it...it's embarrassing."

"Why?" Nathan sounded surprised.

"Why?!" she shrieked. What Agnes *really* wanted to know was *why* he wouldn't find it embarrassing.

Or...perhaps calling on the spirits sounds different for each person?

"Your Highness," she asked nervously, "How do *you* summon a spirit?"

"The usual way," Nathan replied matter-of-factly. He looked around the room, then placed a vase of closed flower buds on the table. "Spirits, could you please make the flowers bloom?" he asked calmly.

A ball of light appeared, then the flower buds burst open in full bloom.

"Like that."

"Huh...it's the first time I've seen that. Interesting." Gerome was impressed.

But Agnes was so shocked that her voice almost warbled when she spoke. "Y-Y-You just talk to them...*normally*?"

“Yes, that’s right...”

“Y-You mean to say you don’t have to sound extra perky or anything?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh— Oh my goodness!”

Mortally wounded by his words, Agnes hid her face in her hands and groaned.



What in the blazes was I doing all these years?! I've been forcing myself to play a perky older sister character for no reason. And Kevin, Philip, and Claude all caught me in the act...

There was never any need for her to have endured such embarrassment.

"Lady Agnes...are you all right?"

Agnes looked up to see Nathan and Gerome watching her in concern...or suspicion. Still, she couldn't quite keep it together.

"Ah, yes, m-mushrooms," she said hurriedly. "Spirits, could you sprout some mushrooms, please?"

Casually...offhandedly...

As she whispered those words in a low voice, several balls of light began to appear. Soon, mushrooms had sprouted on the table with popping sounds.

Matsutakes covered in brown fibrous scales and showing white skin.

"This is amazing!" Nathan sighed in awe as he gazed at the dozen or so mushrooms that had sprouted.

"Oh!" Agnes said in surprise. "They came. And the mushrooms sprouted."

Even though she'd muttered her request so ineloquently, the spirits had still appeared, and the mushrooms had still grown.

These are high-grade mushrooms...and quite a few of them, at that...

All I had to do all this time...was ask normally...

As she groaned in embarrassment, Nathan exclaimed in astonishment, "I can't believe someone other than the royal family has such spirit protection. What kind of people are your parents, Lady Agnes?"

Agnes quietly smiled back at the excited prince. "Well, I'm actually adopted. My mother was a Visage aristocrat, and my father an Oreillian commoner. They both died seven years ago."

"That's...a terrible shame," Nathan said consolingly. "I knew from your hair and eye color that you had the spirits' protection. But I never imagined it would be anything like this. You really *are* most beloved by the spirits."

His smile seemed to indicate she was lucky. Yet, from her point of view, the mushrooms were a curse. But she couldn't just *say* that to someone so happy for her. Thus, she simply nodded vaguely.

Nathan stared at the mushrooms on the table and stroked their caps. "I caused trouble for your princess.," he said to them. "I'm very sorry."

While Agnes was surprised at this unexpected contrition, another Matsutake mushroom grew on Nathan's arm with a resounding pop.

Yes, it's an expensive mushroom. But it's no good to go sprouting on a prince...!

As she tried to quickly apologize, Nathan's eyes sparkled.

"May...may I have this one?" he asked sweetly.

"Huh? Y-Yes, of course."

"Thank you."

Nathan plucked the mushroom, bowed to them, and left the room, a smile on his face.

"Does mushroom fetishism transcend borders as a royal trait?" Agnes asked once he was safely out of earshot.

"Don't lump us all in like that," Gerome frowned in disgust. He shrugged his shoulders. "Well..." he finally said, "I'm glad it sounds like we will be able to work something out with the royal family. You're a count's daughter, Agnes, but you're also an officially recognized royal fiancée. They threatened the Barthets and kidnapped you straight off our soil, so I'll make them pay handsomely for their indiscretions against Visage..."

His face was like that of a devious loan shark collecting his payment. Agnes was afraid to even ask what his demands would be.

"Now..." Gerome said calmly, "we just wait for the king to make a move. Claude will also arrive in a few days. Until then, don't leave your knights' side for anything, all right?"



JUST as Prince Gerome had said, the two female knights never took their eyes off Agnes. Wherever Agnes went, they followed, even sleeping on the sofas in her guest quarters at night.

“How fortuitous that the dress will be ready in time for tomorrow’s royal audience,” Teignier said a couple of days later.

“Now all we have to do,” Johnna grinned, “is to design a look and hairstyle that’ll bring out Lady Agnes’s charms to the fullest... Oh yes! This’ll be the *ultimate* test of our skills.”

“Let’s show them who’s boss.”

“Indeed!”

Teignier and Johnna shook hands in grim determination. Agnes realized just how scary they could be.

Surely no one would care if I dressed up... And anyway, who’re they trying to show up?! Yet they seemed to be having so much fun, she had no room to object.

That night, Agnes crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling with a deep sigh.

...In a few more days, I’ll be able to see Claude.

Having planned to walk back to Visage herself, she’d expected it would take much longer to see him than this.

“Claude...”

Agnes called out his name so softly that even Teignier, lying on the sofa, couldn’t hear her. Agnes felt a comforting warmth inside her chest.

Then a red mushroom with white warts appeared on the ceiling. An *Amanita muscaria*, hanging with its cap pointing towards her.

Agnes gazed at the mushroom. It was the kind that had caused Claude to fall in love with her at first sight. *Maybe I’m imagining it...but is it shaking...?*

Agnes felt it was trying to comfort her. She felt the tension in her face and body relax.

“Thank you, Sir Mushroom. Good night...”

As she whispered goodnight to the mushroom, it shook again.

Is it reacting to what I said, Agnes wondered as she drifted off to sleep, or is it about to fall off due to gravity...?

Picturing a mushroom avalanche, she rolled to one side and closed her eyes. Exhausted from her ordeal, she fell asleep at once.



Mushrooms of the Day Matsutake A high-grade mushroom known to most. It's covered in fibrous scales with white flesh showing underneath. What better reason to check out a pine tree's roots than to locate one of these? A VIP in the world of edible mushrooms. A Very Important Mushroom... er... VIM?

A member of the *Mycorrhiza* Club and good friends with the Shimeji.

Summoned by Agnes, it shone with the honor of being seen by her and the princes. Accepting Nathan's apology, it became a sort of souvenir gift, saying, "Please take care of our mushroom princess, Your Highness."

Amanita muscaria Red caps with white polka dots. Like the poisonous mushrooms you find drawn in storybooks. It may resemble the 1ups from a certain video game franchise you may've heard of. But you wouldn't want to try eating a real one! It felt the red filament of fate and sprouted. The mushroom Claude fell in love with Agnes over.

"I will protect Agnes until Claude comes!" it announced, sprouting on the ceiling. A protective mushroom. But being upside down like this is making the blood rush to its head...well, making the spores accumulate in its cap...

Chapter 16: You'll Pay for This

WITH a pop, a mushroom with a dark brown cap grew on Agnes's mirror. With concentric folds on the underside of its cap, it had to be a *Coltricia montagnei*. Claude had said something once about how a very frilly dress, like a *Coltricia montagnei*, would look nice. Now Agnes was wearing just that.

The dress had dark and light blue fabric and a smooth design like flowing water. The skirt section was made of two-toned fabric, with flowers blooming all over the frills, and little white flowers around the waist. Agnes's bodice and hair were also decorated with similar smaller flowers. Transparent beads and pearls were scattered throughout, shining like water droplets.

"It's cute, but also beautiful and elegant," said Teignier. "I like it."

"It highlights your tidy charm, doesn't it?" agreed Johnna. "This will show them who's boss..."

Her two impromptu maids—who were really knights—seemed satisfied, so all Agnes could do was smile back at them.

I'm still unsure who I'm supposed to be showing who's boss...

But dressed like this, Agnes could understand the lengths Claude had gone to always be sensitive to her wishes.

Being cute is a form of justice, she thought, and going against it is a sin.

These two knight-maids had dressed Agnes in a manner befitting a count's daughter and royal fiancée.

This was for Agnes herself, for Claude, and all of Visage.

She couldn't—and shouldn't—resist.

It's not like I dislike cute things, so I should just roll with it.

I must...!



WHEN Agnes joined Gerome and Nathan, a fighting spirit burning away inside

her, she was guided to a splendid building right next to the palace. She entered the cathedral, with its impressive white walls and rounded roof, and the high ceilings and beautiful stained glass caught her eye.

As they proceeded across the mosaic-tiled floor bathed in colorful lights, the King of Oreille was already there waiting for them, standing in the center of the chapel.

They stopped in a line before him.

There are no knights, Agnes realized, or even servants. Was that at Prince Nathan's request...? Or maybe it was because what they were going to talk about wasn't to be made public.

As they greeted him, the king received them with a dignified attitude.

"First of all," he said contritely, "please let me apologize for the rough invitation. I am truly sorry."

So it seems the king was involved in abducting me, after all... Agnes wasn't expecting to receive an apology straight off the bat. She studied his face to see what emotion was hidden there. *Did Nathan already speak with him and convince him to apologize?*

Kidnapping and intimidation were grave crimes, of course. But Agnes had no clue how to go about denouncing the king of a foreign country. If he vowed to never go after her again, she would leave it at that.

"Why did you try to bring me to Oreille?" she asked.

That was what she wanted to know most of all. She wasn't going to tiptoe around the issue now that he brought it up himself. Even *if* her mushroom blessing was rare, he could've just invited her through official channels if he had business to discuss.

Yet, he went so far as to kidnap me from a Visage nobleman's manor... Why?

"In Oreille," His Majesty began, "the spirits' protection takes four separate forms. You've heard of this, I assume?"

"Yes, I have..."

Flowers, leaves, roots, and mushrooms. Nathan had given her a general

explanation of it.

“The king who stands as each divine protectorate’s representative wears a special ring, handed down throughout the generations. I am the King of Flowers and I wear the Petal Ring.”

He displayed his right hand and a ring with a red colored stone sparkled under the cathedral’s lights.

“I thought,” he said, “that if I acquired the mushroom ring, I would be able to receive the protection of the mushrooms.”

Mushroom ring... Well, he could only mean... Agnes looked down at the sparkling polka-dotted mushroom ring on her left hand’s ring finger.

“But...this is the engagement ring Prince Claude gave me,” she said. “I doubt it harbors such power.”

To think the mushroom fetishist’s obsession could bear such fruit...

The king certainly couldn’t just *ask* Agnes for her engagement ring, she realized. Had he kidnapped her to directly negotiate instead? She could neither understand nor sympathize, but at least now, she knew *why* she’d been kidnapped, and felt slightly unburdened.

“No. That’s just a regular mushroom-shaped ring...” He shook his head. “Speaking of which, it’s got quite the, uh, design there.”

“Not by any choice of my own,” she sighed.

The king appeared a little put-off by her ring’s unique design, but she wished he wouldn’t think it was made to suit *her* tastes. She hurried to deny the terrible accusation, but what *couldn’t* be denied was the ring’s mushroom design.

Seemingly unconvinced, the king cleared his throat and pushed onward with the conversation. “Each ring worn by a representative king is proof of a contract with the spirits. The ring itself is only symbolic. But it *is* still imbued with magical power.”

“So...Claude made a contract with the spirits,” Agnes said softly.

My mushroom freak’s mushroom love is beyond anything I’d ever imagined.

She couldn't fathom *when* this might've happened, but she knew Claude would do anything for mushrooms.

"Again, no..." the king huffed. "That's just an ordinary mushroom-shaped ring. I'm talking about a ring handed down through our royal family."

Agnes's suspicions about Claude forming a mushroom contract seemed to be mistaken. Still, what the king was saying didn't make sense.

"But... Prince Nathan said the royal line with the mushrooms' protection died out twenty years ago," Agnes said.

"Is that so? Well, behold..." As he spoke, the king raised his left hand.

A beautiful ring with greenish-blue stones. Somehow, it reminded Agnes of the one Josse had always worn.

"Agnes. What was your birth father's name?" the king asked.

"...Josse Murre."

As she said that, Nathan frowned.

"Murre..." Nathan muttered. "The Murre family is part of the Oreillian nobility. The last king had taken a concubine from that family..." Nathan gasped.

"Your father's real name," the king declared, "was Josselin Oreille. The last royal with the divine power of mushrooms."

Agnes, struggling to absorb his words, blinked slowly.

"If...if you are *indeed* Josselin's daughter, Lady Agnes," Nathan said, "then it makes perfect sense that you would have the rare protection of the mushrooms. But he *did* die twenty years ago..."

This prince had departed the world before Agnes was even born.

So it couldn't be Dad...

Agnes took a small, deep breath to calm her restless heart.

"My father *was* from Oreille. But he was a commoner. He died in a carriage accident seven years ago. So it couldn't be him," she explained.

At this, the king laughed in a troubled manner.

“That was my older brother’s...the last king’s fault. My older brother, the King of Roots—a son born of the rightful queen—should’ve been able to take the throne with no obstacle. However, many strong voices pushed for Josselin, our younger half brother, to be the next King of Mushrooms instead.”

“I had heard Prince Nathan’s uncle wasn’t blessed with all that much magical power, even though his mushroom affinity was rare,” Agnes commented.

That’s probably why the King of Roots became the king in the end. But since Josse’s name kept appearing even after the current king had taken the throne, Oreille probably couldn’t let go of the idea of the divine mushroom protection being born into this era so easily.

“Josselin was not endowed with much magic,” the king admitted. “He had almost no divine protection, and he himself did not *want* the throne. To avoid conflict, he talked with our father and older brother, and apparently left the country in secret, after pretending to have died. I only found out about it after our brother passed on. I learned from their letters that Josselin was still alive in Visage, that he’d married...and had a child.”

Then...that could’ve been Dad, after all...!

But whether that was true or not was another matter, Agnes reminded herself. Despite that, the shining ring on the king’s left hand bothered her, and she found she couldn’t interrupt him to ask more.

“Josselin had the ring of the King of Mushrooms that I’d been looking for ever since I ascended the throne...” the king said darkly. “Yes, the fabled Mycelium Ring. I sent word to him, saying that if he gave me the ring, he’d never be bothered again. He’d chosen the Prayer Spring at Barthet for the exchange...no doubt knowing his mushroom powers would be a bit stronger there. Such impudence...! And he’d tried to hide his wife and child. So...I had his family carriage attacked.”

His confession shook the room.

“...You... You what?” Agnes gasped, her jaw dropping wide open.

The king’s lips curled up in a cruel smile. “Agnes...your father was attacked while traveling in a carriage with this ring. He died, did he not?”

"Y-Yes...that's right," she managed to say.

"At the time," the king continued, sounding absolutely unrepentant, "it was reported that his, his wife's, and their child's bodies were found. So...he must've had *two* children..." He sighed.

"I...I don't *have* any siblings..." Agnes was now racked with anxiety. Her chest felt tight.

Just...just what is he trying to say?!?

"So then...he prepared a decoy corpse? *Hmm...that concubine's spawn always was a sly fox.*"

Such insanity...it couldn't be.

Agnes clenched her trembling fists, her eyes fixed on the king.

"That day," she said slowly, trying not to show her fear and rage, "the only people inside the carriage beside the driver were my parents, my aunt...and me."

Something doesn't fit here... He must be misunderstanding something...

"*Hmm...so...what I saw was an illusion? Very cunning indeed, little brother...*"

That word, "illusion," reminded Agnes of what Benoit had said.

"*At the time of the accident, Josse used all his power to hide you, Agnes.*"

He had said that Josse had cast a spell on the carriage...a spell that'd block recognition. Knowing their killers would check the corpses, he'd made her aunt resemble her instead.

No, this can't be a coincidence... There's too many moving parts...

But there were still some things Agnes didn't understand.

"But wait...if my father was giving you the ring anyway, why couldn't you just wait to receive it at the spring? Why did you need to have him killed?"

Josse had had an appointment to meet *someone* at the Prayer Spring, and he'd be on his way to entrust Agnes and her mother to Benoit before that.

He might've felt he was in danger...but surely, he would've handed over the

ring as he'd promised...

The king laughed mirthlessly, cruel mockery in his eyes.

"Don't be foolish, girl! Josselin was a complication."

He spoke as if Agnes's question was ridiculous. The two princes stiffened on either side of her.

"The reason *why* he was called the King of Mushrooms is because he was the *only* person who possessed the divine protection of mushrooms. Even though he *barely* had any magical power. Yet, he was still a threat, to me, the rightful king. I *had* to get rid of him...or I *knew* I'd regret it."

"How could a commoner from a neighboring country you thought dead pose *any* threat to you, Your Majesty?" Agnes's voice lowered an octave as she attempted to keep it from wavering.

The king scowled with disgust. "The very *existence* of someone with such a rare ability was simply too unpleasant to overlook. And here I thought the ring seemed awfully weak when I finally got my hands on it, but now I know why. That spawn of a concubine had used up all his magical power protecting his... child. Still, *now* I have someone in my possession who can endow this ring with *fantastic* power. From bad luck springs good!"

"...Do you even realize what you're saying?!" Nathan clenched his fists and glared at the king. "You have just confessed to a grave crime, Father. Have you lost your mind?"

"*This*, boy, is what the game of thrones involves!"

The king didn't seem to care about his son's denunciation of him, and he spoke as if scolding Nathan. His utter calmness terrified Agnes.

"But...but Uncle Josselin abandoned all claim to the throne! He cast aside his royal status and pretended to be *dead*, didn't he?!" Nathan cried.

"The ring is just a token," Gerome interjected. "Just a symbol of the contract between the person and the spirits. A third party cannot wield its powers. So why did you try to take it from Prince Josselin?"

Even when cross-examined like this, the king didn't seem to care.

“Even *with* the tiniest amount of magic left in the ring, the spirits *still* reacted,” he said. “If Agnes, who has the mushrooms’ protection, channels her magic into this ring, then I can *finally* become the true King of Mushrooms.”

“No, you can’t. Father, you should know that better than anyone. Please... stop this! I cannot stand by silently if you continue to harass the Fourth Prince of Visage’s fiancée, especially after every other foul sin you have committed.”

Although Nathan glowered at the king, His Majesty’s expression didn’t change. He didn’t seem to feel anything. He didn’t care about the death of Agnes’s parents and aunt.

Bit by bit, that truth had sunk into Agnes’s heart. Now her whole body trembled.

“...You...you killed my father?”

Perhaps unable to hear Agnes’s mumble, the king looked at her in puzzlement.

“You killed my family over a damned ring?” she said louder. “Even though my father *promised* to give it to you? Even though my mother and aunt had nothing to do with any of it?”

The king nodded, then snorted at her. “Even though Josselin’s magic power was meager, if he had escaped, he would’ve at least been able to save himself. He died in vain due to his...*baggage*. The power of the King of Mushrooms was *wasted* on him. But I shall use it properly!”

He held the Mycelium Ring aloft and sneered. Agnes heard Gerome click his tongue with disgust.

“...You’re insane!” he snapped. “Come, Agnes. We will not spend another second talking to this lowlife.”

“I agree,” Nathan said. “I will arrange your return to Visage immediately.”

“Wait...the girl stays here!” cried the king.

Agnes could hear all three talking. But they all sounded very far away.

Her heart beat so fast it hurt, yet at the same time, it also felt like it’d stopped completely.

“You...you killed my father...my family...”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she trembled. Something soft and hazy filled the air, lifting her hair to wave in the breeze.

“...You. Shall. Pay...”



As Agnes voiced the murky emotions welling up inside her, a pure white mushroom—an *Amanita cokeri*—appeared on the mosaic tile floor. There was a cacophony of popping sounds. The sound rang throughout the cathedral, as if a large audience was applauding.

Armillaria mellea and *Pycnoporus coccineus* covered the walls, *Ganoderma applanatum* growing between them. The stained glass was enveloped in the white frills of *Sparassis crispa*. The glass itself was now slimy with Nameko mushrooms.

Then, when all but the floor was covered in mushrooms, a huge one rose from the cathedral's center and burst through the ceiling with a dull, explosive sound like an earthquake. With the white warts on its red cap, it was probably an *Amanita muscaria*. Yet its stalk was so thick, several adults could've stood around it with linked hands. The roof, destroyed by this giant cap, crumbled into dust that rained down upon them.

Before it could land on Agnes, there was another pop and a human-sized mushroom appeared next to her. The *Rugiboletus Extremiorientalis'* yellow-brown cap caught the debris like a cushiony umbrella.

“Whoa!!!”

Mushrooms also grew next to Gerome and Nathan, repelling the falling chunks of debris away from them.

Agnes wasn't sure if their yells were because of the mushrooms suddenly sprouting, or because they'd realized how they were now protected.

Then, atop the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis'* cap, a *Clathrus ruber* and an *Ileodictyon gracile* appeared. The sight of the red and white cage mushrooms arranged on top of the caps looked like some kind of acrobatics show. They seemed to be having fun. Next to them was a pink umbrella mushroom with many overlapping caps along its stalk. Probably a *Podoserpula miranda*. The top of its cap was as lively as a festival: a whole different space from the cathedral that was currently being destroyed.

“Whoa! What—what *is* this?!”

A red mushroom, resembling a deer's horn, was now atop the king's head,

and his hair looked like it was standing on end. Yet he didn't seem to have noticed this *Podostroma cornudamae*. He was too busy staring at the several white-capped mushrooms in his hand.

It seemed these *Amanita viros* were growing as fast as he could pluck them. A mountain of white mushrooms was growing at his feet. The brown chunks he kept occasionally choking on and spitting out were probably pieces of a *Clitocybe acromelalga*.

Was it Agnes's imagination, or were these...different sorts of mushrooms that were sprouting on the king? The more dangerous kinds...

She hadn't meant to destroy anything. She didn't *want* to hurt anyone. But she couldn't make it stop.

Seeing the cathedral being eroded and destroyed by mushrooms, the king's eyes sparkled. "Yes! Yes! Th-This power! Give it to— *Gack! Augh...* I-Imbue this ring with that power!"

The king was still ranting insanely, even as he kept choking on mushroom pieces. Far from showing remorse over all the pointless murders, he didn't even seem to *care*.

The mushrooms kept growing as Agnes trembled in frustration, anger, and sadness.

If I hadn't been there...would my father and mother and aunt have lived...?

If she didn't stop this mushroom onslaught soon, the entire cathedral would collapse. If she asked the spirits and the mushrooms to do so right now, she could probably kill the king. She knew they would do it for her.

Since he killed them...doesn't he deserve to die just as miserably?

No. No, I can't...!

But Daddy, Mommy, and Auntie did no wrong. They were innocent...! He killed them for no reason! Doesn't he deserve the same agony?

N-No... I can't be the same as him...!

The mushrooms kept growing and disappearing in cycles, as if responding to Agnes's conflicting thoughts.

At the same time, the king kept choking and spitting up mushrooms.

The roof and the walls were starting to crumble around them.

“Agnes, please calm down!”

“Lady Agnes!”

She could hear Gerome and Nathan. But their voices didn’t reach her heart.

The two of them appeared unable to move from under the protection of the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis* umbrellas, due to the debris dislodged by the sprouting and evaporating mushrooms.

What...what do I do?

Agnes didn’t know what was right. She didn’t know what she really wanted.

No matter what she did, she couldn’t bring back the dead. Her heart was a hurricane of muddled emotions.

“I will stay by your side for the rest of my life. I swear to cherish you always, Agnes.”

Yet suddenly, she heard Claude’s words once more.

She wanted Claude. She *needed* him.

That gentle mushroom freak with the Prussian blue hair and gray eyes.

She longed for him. The one she loved most in the world.

“Claude...please help me...”

As she muttered those words through her tears, the cathedral’s doors blew off with a colossal explosion. Through the cloud of dust...no, the cloud of spores...came a young man with Prussian blue hair astride a huge white tiger.



Mushrooms of the Day *Coltricia montagnei* A round mushroom with concentric folds on the back of its cap. It’s dark brown and plain in color. But if you think of it as a frilly dress’ petticoat, it’s elegant. Being frilly is a struggle, so many of them look more mesh-like. It sometimes grows bristles on the surface of its cap. But it’s a fancy fungus and dislikes its Chinese name, which translates

as “Cinnamon-Colored Hair-Collecting Fungus.”

“I’m frilly! Just like Agnes!” it said with delight, planning to brag to the others later.

Amanita cokeri A white mushroom with big warty bits on it. Its 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!

A surveillance mushroom that takes care of Agnes’s personal and psychological safety. The king’s guilty verdict has been urgently sent to all mushrooms.

Wood Deterioration Club Representative *Armillaria mellea* is a strong founding member who parasitizes the roots of living trees and withers them. *Pycnoporus coccineus*, *Ganoderma applanatum*, Nameko and *Sparassis crispa* have also been dispatched.

The demolition group covered the cathedral’s insides and let them rot all at once, saying, “We’ll let the house of the man who bullies Agnes rot.”

In anger, they spread their mycelium on wood and stone. Yet, some of them got a little *too* obsessed with their own fluttering and sliminess.

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

“I can’t allow you to harm our king and interfere with the mushroom princess,” it said as it grew into a giant pillar and smashed through the cathedral roof.

Rugiboletus extremiorientalis It’s a big mushroom with either a Yellowish-brown or orange-brown cap, around 30cm in size. As it matures, cracks appear in its cap and it resembles a loaf of baked bread. It’s kind of like a big French *boule* loaf or a Japanese melon bread. It’s not poisonous, yet it apparently draws loads of flies.

“Do your worst! I’ll protect Agnes!” it said, supporting the Wood

Deterioration Club.

***Clathrus ruber* (Basket Stinkhorn)** Also known as a Lantern Mushroom, it looks like a red basket. Its English name is Basket Stinkhorn, which means stinky. The white cocci mature and open to reveal a bright red lattice, after which the basket splits in two and warps. It looks smelly but is apparently edible. I wonder how many mushroom braves exist in the world...

Its dream is to someday put candles in its basket and play lanterns with Agnes.

“When it gets dark, I’ll turn into a paper lantern,” it said to the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis*, as it waited for its turn.

Ileodictyon gracile A friend of the *Clathrus ruber*, its white coccus also matures and opens. But the lattice that emerges is also white. A pure white basket, it’s covered in dark green mucus, and...it stinks!

Yet, it’s still edible.

It loves tumbling like dandelions and wishes to tumble its way to Agnes one day.

“I’ll cover the king who made Agnes cry with mucus!” it exclaimed, sprouting atop the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis*.

Podoserpula miranda A pink mushroom with five caps growing in a link on its stalk. Or the non-tornado version of the tornado potatoes you see at festivals. These mushrooms are in danger of extinction due to fires and overeating by wild pigs. Yet they don’t care much.

It sprouted into an unexpected mushroom festival and shook its spores in joy.

Podostroma cornudamae A red fungi shaped like a burning flame or deer antlers. Only a few grams of it can be lethal. Even touching it is not advised. It’s very poisonous. A heavyweight in the world of poisonous mushrooms, it sprouted up in response to the *Amanita cokeri*’s emergency call and the cry of Agnes’s heart.

Just touching it causes skin irritation, so most of the king’s hair follicles it touches will probably fall out. In anger, it proclaimed the elimination of all his

hair roots, saying, “The sin of making our mushroom princess cry shall be paid in hair!”

Clitocybe acromelalga Another 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.

A brave mushroom that launches a special attack on the front line (inside the mouth) instead of attacking directly, as a result of Agnes’s will.

While provoking its enemy by saying, “Hey, bite me! Eat me up!” it kept releasing more and more of its toxins.

Amanita viros A pure white, beautiful mushroom, with white flakes, depressions, and warts. It’s highly poisonous. Just one has enough toxin to kill a human.

One of the strongest of the “Destroying Angels.”

“Are *you* the one who made Agnes cry?” it sprouted, overpowering the king. “My parts you swallow by mistake don’t count,” it said, occasionally stopping up its enemy’s mouth.

Chapter 17: Agnes's Wish

WHILE everyone stood stunned at his sudden appearance, Claude looked up at the *Amanita muscaria* that had become a grand pillar and sighed in admiration. The mushroom had destroyed the ceiling and its red cap stood vividly against the blue sky.

“Ah yes, the mushrooms blew it away...” he sighed wistfully. “And what huge mushrooms! *Ahh...I-I mean... Agnes!*”

Claude leaped off the tiger's back and rushed over to hold Agnes tight in his arms. His strong embrace and sweet fruity scent made her cry.

Why is he riding a tiger? She had to wonder despite the tense situation. *His dashing entrance was ruined by him being distracted by the mushrooms. He really is a mushroom-loving weirdo.*

Seeing Claude's eyes sparkling with the reflections of mushrooms, Agnes was struck by how funny it all was and grinned through her tears.

She had been on the verge of absolute despair. She actually considered giving in to her darker thoughts. But Claude had, once again, illuminated the darkness for her, like a light piercing the clouds. She realized the painful feelings that had threatened to consume her were slowly melting away. Her tears flowed again.

“I'm sorry I'm late, Agnes...” he whispered.

Hearing his gentle voice above her, Agnes shook her head, clinging tightly to his warm chest.

“Thank you...” she responded tremulously.

His large hand gently stroked her hair. Claude quickly took off his jacket, wrapped it around her shoulders, then hugged her again.

“You made it just in time! Is this tiger what I think it is...?”

The mushroom onslaught having ceased, Gerome called out to his brother as he approached them.

The white tiger had slinked up to them. It really *was* gigantic, Agnes realized.

Its beautiful sky-blue eyes were level with her head. The tiger gazed right at her.

But...where in the world did he get a tiger from?

"I knew a horse wouldn't make it in time," Claude said. "So...I summoned it."

"...A sacred beast," Gerome said in awe. "I knew the Dragon Crest's power could summon them, yet...I've never seen one before."

"It's the first time I've tried summoning one," Claude explained. "More importantly, what happened here? It's like a mushroom paradise— I mean, carnage," he added hastily as Agnes rolled her eyes.

Claude's expression gradually darkened as Nathan and Gerome summarized what had happened.

"I see...then the mushrooms' anger is justified."

His steely gaze was now trained on the king, still grappling with the mushrooms amid the dust clouds and debris.

If you didn't know better, Agnes thought, you would think he's some sort of red-wigged lunatic, clutching white mushrooms while dancing around and choking.

"What do you wish to do, Agnes?" Claude asked her darkly. "If it's revenge you want, I'll help you."

"Hey! If you do that, it means war!" Gerome rebuked sharply.

Claude didn't seem to care. "Maybe," he said calmly. "But if it comes to that, just say I went rogue and acted alone. With great power, there also comes great responsibility, of course..." Saying this, Claude now shifted his gaze to Nathan. "Prince Nathan...what will you do?"

"I knew about His Majesty's mushroom complex," the other prince said sadly, "but I never imagined he'd go *this* far. I am so terribly sorry. The only thing to do now is to force him to abdicate." Nathan spoke wearing a bitter expression.

The king turned to glare at them as he continued wrestling with the mushrooms. He seemed to be trying to shout something, but the mushrooms grew faster than he could spit them out. Soon, he was choking violently and vomiting up bits of mushroom.

The ochre-colored vomit chunks looked to be *Clitocybe acromelalga*. He'd been choking on them for some time now. *He must've swallowed a great deal of them...* Agnes thought coolly.

"I will usurp the throne from my father," Nathan said definitively. "I'll be taking the Petal and Mycelium Ring from him too. I'll do my best to compensate you and see that my father is harshly punished. I know this can't make up for what he's done. But please...for the sake of both our nations' civilians, don't do anything that would start a war." As he finished, he bowed deeply to them.

Seeing this, Agnes let out a sigh. "This is the first time I've ever wished death upon someone," she reflected. "I can't forgive what he did to my parents and aunt. But I *don't* want war. I don't want to involve more innocents in this..."

If I killed him now, I'd be just as bad as him. He murdered my aunt and our driver simply because they were there...

"Besides," she said, "the last thing my father said to me was 'Be happy.' I don't think taking the king's life and going to war will lead to anyone's happiness..."

In retrospect, she thought, perhaps Uncle Benoit always knew who the real culprit was... That was why he had reacted to the news of the Oreillian royals coming the way he did. Yet, he had suffered in silence to protect Kevin and me... and to keep his promise to Dad. If I've been protected like that, there's no way I can choose to go down a path of despair.

"I don't..." she said haltingly. "I don't want to destroy a world inhabited by people who care for me so much."

As she said that, the mushrooms suddenly stopped growing. Multiple balls of light appeared all around them.

"*Pfeh...* D-Don't go thinking you can subdue me with mere mushrooms! Such power is *wasted* on a foolish girl like *you*. I'll use it properly. So give it to me!!!"

Now that the mushrooms had stopped attacking, the king was done dancing and choking. He was slowly advancing towards Agnes, insanity gleaming in his green eyes. Only the heap of *Podostroma cornudamae* on his head was still there. Agnes wondered when he'd notice.

Claude released Agnes from his tight embrace and moved protectively in front of her. “I *was* going to let you off easy,” he said icily, “based on Agnes’s determination and these splendid mushrooms, but... No. I just can’t...”

Claude made no attempt to hide his contempt. The king scowled.

“A Visage prince, huh?” he smirked. “Your aura tells me that you have the power of the dragon. But your powers diminish here. This is near the royal palace, and there are *many* spirits around. So...what can you possibly do, *hmm?*”

Claude grinned and held out his left hand.

“Dragon Crest. Lightning Strike.”

At those words, a rumble of thunder rolled across the blue sky. A lightning bolt struck the ground in front of the king, as if to pierce him. Vibrations and the smell of the floor burning filled the room, and black smoke began slowly spiraling upward.

Claude shook his left hand, ignoring the king, who now stood dumbstruck, mouth agape. “It’s true. My power *is* quite limited.” Even as he spoke, Claude summoned more thunderbolts, raining them down all around the king.

Thus, the plucked *Amanita viros*’s pure white form turned golden brown. The king’s clothes and the *Podostroma cornudamae* also turned black.

“It seems somewhat wasteful...but I *do* enjoy grilled mushrooms...”

Claude smirked as he shot another lightning bolt that grazed the king’s cheek. A gash of red bloomed out of it.

“If you kill me, it means war!” the king snarled.

“That, I don’t mind,” Claude said dispassionately. “If it’s war anyway, it’s faster to take your head now... By the way, don’t move around so much. You’ll burn the mushrooms...”

“What the— *YAGHHH!*”

The king screamed as Claude called down more lightning bolts, leaving him no room to protest.

Agnes didn't think Claude would *really* kill him. But she *did* worry. *If this continues, the king and the mushrooms will end up a toasted golden brown.*

Then the balls of light that had been drifting around her began to rotate. As Agnes stared at them, she suddenly realized something.

"Oreille's protected by you spirits, isn't it?" she addressed them. "Then I'll leave this to you..."

As if they had been waiting for that, more spirit lights appeared, eventually shining so bright they blotted out the ruins of the cathedral and burnt mushrooms.

Everyone exclaimed in awe at this light that shone brighter than the night sky.

"I've...never *seen* so many spirits," Nathan said in surprise, his eyes widening.



It was Agnes's first time seeing so many at once too. But she knew she had to focus.

"What do you wish to do, O Spirits?" Having learned she could speak to them normally, she spoke in a subdued tone. The spirits began vibrating in response. They almost seemed to be waiting for her to give them permission, so she nodded. "Please...do as you wish."

The spirits then congregated around the king's two rings. In a dazzling flash of light, they both disappeared. They then swirled around the king, as if dancing. Then they, too, disappeared.

After such brightness, the cathedral's ruined interior felt so very dark. Agnes blinked quickly to adjust her eyes.

Then the king screamed.

"My— My Mycelium Ring! You little *bitch*!"

He charged Agnes, rage burning in his eyes. But, holding her tight with his right arm, Claude thrust out his left hand to summon yet another lightning bolt.

The king, suddenly hit at full force, was violently blown backwards. Plunging into a pile of burnt mushrooms, he let out a sound that was neither a scream nor a groan but somehow both.

"I've no intention of killing him, but this isn't my country, so I don't have the best control over my abilities. So, sorry if I used a little too much power on that one."

Claude was wearing a stunning smile that would send anyone to their knees begging for forgiveness.

Then Prince Nathan stepped forward and spoke to the spirits. Out of nowhere, vine-like appendages appeared and tied up the king, who'd just crawled out of the mushroom mountain.

"I-Impossible.," he sputtered at Claude. "Your power is supposed to decline when you enter my country... And you shouldn't be able to muster any power here in my royal capital."

"That depends on the person," Claude said coolly. "I can overcome *anything*

for the woman I love. And here, I've entered a mushroom paradise; I actually feel quite energized."

Does that mean the power of Claude's mushroom fetish outweighs the Dragon Crest's weaknesses? It doesn't seem like the kind of thing you should say out loud. But, well...Claude will be Claude, Agnes thought.

"Nathan!" the king cried. "Remove these vines at once!"

"If you respect the spirits' power, Father," his son replied coldly, "then you know you've already lost your crown... If you think otherwise, undo the vines with their power yourself."

The king stayed bound, which proved he didn't have the strength needed to free himself. In other words, the spirits took away his rings and his divine protection.

"If you hadn't been so greedy," Nathan said, "you would've stayed king. This is your own fault. From now on, please pray for the lives lost to your greed."

He turned to the soldiers who had just arrived to assess the commotion and ordered them to carry the bound king away.

Once they had all left the cathedral, he sighed deeply and bowed once again to Agnes.

"I...am truly sorry. Words are worthless. But I still apologize to you."

"But you didn't know, Prince Nathan," Agnes replied. "And you even helped me. That's enough. More importantly, I'd like to know more about my father."

If Josse was Nathan's beloved uncle, then that would mean Nathan had memories of him. Agnes wanted to know all about her father's newly revealed past.

"He was...very kind," Nathan said, his tone softening. "He would sprout all kinds of mushrooms and give them to me as gifts. They were delicious." He looked at the charred mushrooms all around them and smiled nostalgically.

When he asked for a mushroom before... Was that his way of remembering Dad? Agnes felt a little relieved. For a moment, she'd been terrified that mushroom fetishism really *was* an inherent royal trait.

Then, with a popping sound, a mushroom sprouted on Nathan's arm.

A scale-filled brown cap with a hollow center... A koutake...

Nathan's eyes sparkled with joy, and he looked at Agnes with silent pleading.

"Be my guest," she said.

"Thank you! *Ah*, this takes me back! And it's sparkling. The spirits' divine protection truly *is* strong with you."

Sparkling... Agnes looked at the mushrooms again. She didn't see it.

"It's true!" Claude chimed in eagerly. "It *is* sparkling... It's like a glow-in-the-dark *Mycena chlorophos*."

It was hard to agree with a renowned mushroom fetishist. But apparently, Claude could see the sparkles as well.

"I think I can see it too," Gerome muttered. "Does that mean it's extra delicious...?"

A couple of mushrooms grew on his arm as if shrewdly picking up on what he was saying.

"Go ahead. Try them," Agnes said.

"Th-Thanks," Gerome said awkwardly.

"Agnes, wh-what about me? Where are *my* mushrooms?"

Claude looked pleadingly at her. But it wasn't like Agnes had consciously sprouted them. Gerome seemed to pity his brother, so he plucked one of his and offered it to him. Claude smiled in delight.

Seeing this handsome young man blushing while holding a mushroom brought Agnes indescribable disquiet.

His mushroom fetish can't be helped, of course, but can't he show at least a little self-control?

"Visage's dragon power is closely related to animals," Nathan said suddenly. "Oreille's spirit protection is closely related to plants. But mushrooms are different: they're neither."

Surprised by his words, Agnes stared at the mushroom he was holding. “But they’re vegetables, right? Plants...?”

“Strictly speaking, no,” he answered. “They’re fungi: a class of their own.”

All this time...I thought they were just plants...

“Mushroom blessings are very rare,” Nathan continued, “and not much is known about them. What we *do* know is that the spirits love those with mushroom powers more than any other recipient of their protection. They possess all the blessings of flowers, leaves and roots...”

“Well, a lot of mushrooms sprout around me, but never *on* me. What does that mean?” Agnes asked.

Mushrooms had sprouted near her since she was a little girl. Yet they had never grown directly *on* her. Not even once. In truth, this never bothered her. But if there was a reason for it, she figured she should know why.

“*Hmmm...*” hummed Prince Nathan thoughtfully, “that, Lady Agnes, must be because they acknowledge you as their King. It’s the same as other blessings; they cannot grow on their lord or lady’s body without permission.”

“Me, the king?” Agnes asked.

“No one else is known to actively possess the mushroom’s blessing. And you not only have royal blood, but can also call on the spirits. You are, without doubt, the true King of Mushrooms.”

“The King of Mushrooms...!” Claude clutched his chest, his cheeks reddening as he repeated those words in a gasp.

Yes, he would like this, wouldn’t he...? Agnes thought. He looked as stunning as ever, but his mushroom fetish, oozing out of every gorgeous pore, totally ruined his appeal.

“Well...” Prince Nathan mused. “She *is* the daughter of Josselin, the last true King of Mushrooms. I suppose that really makes her the *Princess* of Mushrooms.”

“Agnes. My treasure. You have blessed eyes and hair the color of peach blossoms, my sweet Mushroom Princess... Please, be happy, always.”

Agnes suddenly remembered what Josse had said during the accident. He had known people were teasing her, calling her the “Pink Mushroom Princess,” so he never called her that.

Only that day had he called her the “Mushroom Princess.” Not referring to the nickname the kids had given to her, but to her true identity as the King of Mushroom’s daughter. Leaving her with those words inspired the spirits and mushrooms to protect Agnes.

“Be happy, Agnes.”

Benoit’s words from not that long ago replayed in her mind, causing her heart to constrict even more. Agnes was protected not only by her parents, Benoit, Kevin, and Claude but also by the mushrooms and the spirits. For everyone’s sake, she had to be happy. Because that was the only way she could repay their kindness.

“Lady Agnes,” Nathan said suddenly, “if you wish, as the King of Mushrooms’ daughter, you have a legitimate claim to the throne of Oreille.”

Certainly, having heard about Oreille’s customs, this would be possible. Yet Agnes shook her head slowly.

“I just want to live a normal life,” she said. “That’s all the happiness I want.” She stared right into Nathan’s green eyes.

We’re probably cousins, she thought. But officially, we’re a prince and a count’s daughter. Better to keep it that way.

With narrowed green-blue eyes, Nathan nodded slowly and plucked the mushroom that had grown on his arm. “I understand,” he said kindly. “I can’t force the fixing of my father’s mismanagement on you. You’re just a passing mushroom princess. But...please come and visit us once in a while. That’ll make the spirits happy.”

Shaking the mushroom in his hand with a smile, Nathan left the cathedral through the hole in the wall where Claude had blown the door right off.

“You really made it just in time, huh...?” Gerome turned and said to Claude.

Gerome had said it would take a few days for him to make it, so Claude’s

arrival *was* unexpectedly early, to say the least.

"I found Agnes's hair ornament under the sofa," Claude explained. "According to Lady Dolan, the robbers suddenly entered through the window and kidnapped Agnes. Yet the mushrooms were growing to hide the hair ornament."

Once again, it's the mushrooms with him... Yet, they led Claude to the clue I had left for him, so I suppose I should be happy that he puts such faith in them...

"I threatened Philip a little," he said. "That loosened the lady's lips."

Agnes doubted it was only a little. Gerome had a wry smile on his face; he seemed to be thinking the same thing.

Claude, however, didn't seem to care. He took out the silver mushroom hair ornament from inside his pant pocket and slipped it into her braid.

"Yes, indeed..." he sighed happily. "Mushrooms look great on you."

Not a great compliment for a lady...but it's the best a fungal freak can do... Agnes thought. She simply responded with a smile and squirmed under Gerome's pitying gaze.

"I knew the carriage wouldn't make it in time," Gerome said, "but for you to summon a sacred beast... Are you all right?"

"Umm...just what exactly *are* the sacred beasts?" Agnes asked.

I understand they're very rare. But Gerome's talking as if summoning one will cause problems for Claude.

"It requires a lot of preparation," Claude explained, "and the probability of success is low. It requires your blood, and once summoned, it'll consume your magical power for the rest of your life. Since it's a constant drain on your magic, it'll inevitably shorten your life... So the records say, anyway..."

"Blood? Are you hurt?" Agnes looked at Claude in alarm. But he stroked her hair and just smiled.

"It's okay," he said. "The bleeding has stopped, and it wasn't a serious wound to begin with."

“But doesn’t just being in Oreille weaken you? The king said you shouldn’t even be able to use your magic in his capital,” she pointed out.

Claude had once said the air in Barthet, near the border, was thin to him. Agnes was sure he was doing worse than he was making it sound.

“I can’t say I’m doing well...” Claude admitted as he saw her concern. “But it’s not *that* bad. Besides, just being by you feels great, Agnes. Is it your divine spirit protection or the power of love? Either way, I’m quite all right now.”

That’s quite the phrase to use, but I’ll overlook it for now, Agnes decided.

“If you’re *that* concerned...” Claude whispered to her softly. “Then stay...right by my side.”

As soon as he’d said that, Agnes found herself being enveloped in his sturdy arms once again.

“Yes, yes...” said Gerome with a smile, “you seem more than fine. All right, time for the third wheel to leave now. I have to go see Prince Nathan so we can think up some excuse for the cathedral’s collapse.”

Chuckling, Gerome walked through the hole in the collapsed wall, leaving Claude and Agnes standing inside the ruins, holding each other tightly.



Mushrooms of the Day

Amanita muscaria

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

It was relieved when Claude appeared. But it couldn't see him well since it was too big. So it asked the mushrooms around it, "Is that Claude? Has he finally come?"

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 its victim's fingers, toes, and penis and causes excruciating pain for a month or more.

Why does it target the penis? No one knows.

"You be quiet!" it yelled, growing in the king's mouth and shutting him up.

A brave special attack mushroom, ready to be bitten into at any moment.

Podostroma cornudamae

A red fungi shaped like a burning flame or deer antlers. Only a few grams can be lethal. Even touching it is inadvisable; it's really poisonous. A heavyweight in the world of poisonous mushrooms, it sprouted up in response to the *Amanita cokeri*'s emergency call and the call of Agnes's heart.

Just touching it causes skin irritation, so most of the king's grown out hair roots will probably come off. "Those other two had no choice but to withdraw. Yet I will fight against the follicles to the end!" it bragged, bobbing about atop the king's head.

Amanita viros

A pure white, beautiful mushroom, with white flakes, depressions, and warts. It's highly poisonous. Just one has enough toxin to kill a human.

One of the strongest of the Destroying Angels.

When Claude appeared, it stopped attacking and lay on the floor. Yet, the lightning strike turned it a golden brown. "It's a little hot, but this color is not bad," it thought, enjoying the makeover.

Koutake

An edible mushroom that looks like a monster with scales all over the brown cap, a hollow at its center. It smells and tastes good when dried out. It's common to dry and eat it. But be careful, as it causes poisoning symptoms if it's raw.

"It's been a long time. You've sure grown up...!" It was delighted to see Nathan again *and* to have brought him a gift—*itself*.

It seems the reason it grew on Gerome and not Claude was "Because his expectations are too high."

Mycena chlorophos

A mysterious mushroom with a white cap that glows green at night. Its glow is said to be the strongest known in the world. It grows after rain or in the rainy season and lives for about three days. It's not poisonous, so you can eat it. But it's watery and smells of rot. *Why* are the mushroom braves trying things that smell bad, you may wonder.

Claude mentioned it as an example of glowing and sparkling, and it sprouted as if to say, "To meet your expectations, I must glow in the afternoon too!" It tried to do some more muscle...*er...*, I mean Mycelium training.

Cathedral Mushrooms

The mushrooms that watched over Agnes as they were slimed, burned, and exposed to the sun's rays. They seemed to like the phrase "Passing mushroom princess." This started a trend among the mushrooms of wanting to be transient or "passing mushrooms."

Epilogue

“AGNES...”

As Claude called her name, he hugged her tightly, stroked and kissed her hair, and hugged her again.

After all that, he finally calmed down and sighed softly.

“Are you hurt?” he asked. “I should’ve asked you that right away.”

“I’m fine,” Agnes said. “It’s *you* I’m worried about.”

Since blood was used to summon the sacred beast, she reasoned Claude must be injured somewhere.

“I’m *fine*. You’re far more important.”

Once again, he stroked her hair, kissed it, and hugged her.

Agnes, who realized this could be repeated forever, hurriedly looked up at Claude.

“*Ummm...* please let me go soon...”

“Why?” he asked, a little hurt.

I really wish he didn’t do the puppy-dog eyes thing... Makes me feel guilty...

“Why...? B-Because, *um...* Th-The beast! I want to see it up close!”

“Oh, I see...”

It seemed Agnes’s desperate excuse was the correct one, as Claude willingly released her.

The white tiger, which had been quietly waiting for them, seemed to know it was wanted and slowly padded over. It was white with black stripes, and its blue eyes were as clear and beautiful as the sky.

Agnes reached out to it and it let her pet it with no resistance. While its fur

was firm to the touch, it was also soft and fluffy and felt good beneath her fingers.

How odd that this is a beast summoned from a dragon's blood...

"Oh!" she realized with a start. "If Oreille weakens the Dragon Crest's power, then it probably doesn't like me since I grow mushrooms..."

She hurriedly withdrew her hand. But the tiger rubbed its head against Agnes's arm, almost like it was trying to convince her to pet it. Unsure of what to do, Agnes hesitated. The tiger lifted its head and stared at her hard.

"It seems," Claude said, "like he wants you to *name* him, Agnes."

"What?! Claude, do you understand what the tiger is saying?!"

"Not fluently," he laughed. "But for all intents and purposes, I suppose I'm his master."

That made sense.

Agnes didn't really know what contracting with a sacred beast entailed, but it clearly meant *some* kind of bond.

"Since we're naming him, I think you should do the honors, Claude. Anyway, I'm surprised to see that this sacred beast is a tiger. If it was a lizard, that would've made more sense."

She would've expected a big, scaly creature not unlike a dragon, really. *But a tiger...?*

"A lizard would have worked, too," Claude said. "But you told me you like cats."

"...Cats... Well, he's a bit big to be called that. I mean...it's a tiger!"

In other words, if not for me, it would've been a giant lizard...?

In that case, she thought a cat really was for the best. A lizard that big would've been...shocking.

"Bigger's always better, right?" Claude asked, smiling.

Agnes wasn't sure she understood his reasoning. But perhaps Claude liked oversized things.

“Then what about those big mushrooms?” She pointed to the giant mushroom that had turned into a kind of cheerful pillar. Claude grinned widely.

“That’s the best of all! It’s a clump of pure...*romance!*”

“No...it’s a mass of mycelia.”

Agnes couldn’t resist a jibe. But Claude was too enthralled by the giant mushroom to notice. She was a little exasperated, but then she felt something touch her arm.

The white tiger was nudging her with his muzzle and gazing at her expectantly.

“I summoned this sacred beast with my blood and dragon power,” Claude said, “but naming it in this world will form a bond. That’s why I want *you* to name it, Agnes.”

“Because...I’m your Dragonmate?”

“Because you’re precious to me.”

Apparently, the tiger wanted a name, and Claude wanted her to be the one to grant it one. If both parties agreed, there was no reason to refuse.

“Well, he has beautiful, sky-blue eyes, so...I think I’ll call him Ciel.”

As Agnes spoke, there was a pop. A small, sky-blue cap mushroom appeared on Ciel’s head. With the *Entoloma virescens* swaying on his head, Ciel was enveloped in a faint light that seemed to fade into his body. Then the mushroom disappeared.

Ciel seemed to be in a good mood, since he kept rubbing his head against Agnes’s hand.

“Now the contract is officially concluded,” Claude said happily.

“Huh? Then what was in place before?” she asked.

“I came all this way on a provisional contract. So I’m very tired. Having to pay with double the amount of magic power for a provisional contract is really tough.”

Double magic power consumption to get from Barthet to Oreille. Claude’s

powers weaken abroad...and not only is it near-impossible for him to use his powers in the capital, but this contract costs double the magic?

Agnes felt the blood drain from her face.

“Are...are you sure you’re all right?” she asked worriedly.

“Hmmm....it is kind of painful, actually,” Claude admitted.

Just as I suspected... She thought something had to be wrong. But Claude had insisted he was fine, so she dropped it.

“If you kiss me, Agnes, I’m sure I’ll recover,” Claude smiled, pointing to his own cheek.

Agnes stiffened a moment, then averted her gaze as she realized what he was asking.

“Y-You seem fine enough... Can you summon Ciel anytime you want? Does he... go somewhere when he’s not needed?”

Claude said he’d summoned Ciel. Does that mean he needs to repeat the ritual each time...?

If it required Claude to sacrifice his blood every time, Agnes would simply have to do without stroking that luscious soft fur.

“No, that’s not possible,” Claude said. “Once summoned, he’ll continue to live off my magical power for the rest of my life.”

“Y-You made *that* kind of contract just to get here faster?!”

Since Gerome had never seen one, the other Dragon Crest Bearers likely hadn’t summoned a sacred beast in his lifetime.

To think he made a lifelong contract just for fast transportation...

“Yes, but...” Claude paused. “It was a small price to pay to protect you, Agnes.”

“How...?”

Having this soft, adorable tiger around would soothe her soul, yes. But the sacrifice involved was too much.

“Even if you *have* permanent guards,” he said, “they won’t always be able to be by your side. There are many cases, for example, where you can only be in the company of other women. And then there’s the fact that male guards could develop untoward feelings for you. All that considered, Ciel is a perfect deterrent, safety blanket, and protector. After all, he *is* a sacred beast.”

“Are you going to use this sacred beast as my personal bodyguard?!”

Now Agnes was more shocked than she’d been when she thought Claude had summoned him merely for transportation. She didn’t know all the rules. *But... shouldn’t a sacred beast be treated more as a sort of...sacred thing?*

“Ciel’s on board with it.”

“Rawrrrrr!”

That responding roar is very cute... But that’s not the point!

“Hearing your parents’ accident may *not* have been due to bandits, I also did some research,” Claude explained. “It seemed clear the Oreillian royalty was involved somehow. A human bodyguard may not have been enough to protect you. So I’ve been thinking and planning this whole time.”

“But...such a big tiger accompanying me everywhere... I mean, he’s *very* cute! But I couldn’t take him anywhere! Although he *is* cute...”

“He’s too big to be of use?” Claude, who seemed to like big things, tilted his head, and Ciel tugged at his sleeve. “Ciel is saying,” he interpreted, “‘I want to borrow the power of the spirits.’”

Those sky-blue eyes were so adorable, Agnes couldn’t say no.

“Spirits,” she said, “can you come out for a second?”

Several balls of light appeared at her call. Yet now, Claude was staring at her for some reason.

“What happened to your perky summoning method?”

Agnes blushed, realizing that he meant her old “perky older sister” routine.

“Uh...apparently, summoning them normally works just as well. I mean, / didn’t know... I wasn’t doing it like that for fun, you know!”

As she frantically tried making excuses, Claude smiled gently.

“Yeah. I know...but you were so cute.”

“Ugh...”

She'd rather he agreed that the big sister act was embarrassing. Even though that would've been a little upsetting. But this way was far worse.

The spirits that had encircled the groaning Agnes flashed and disappeared. Then Ciel's body suddenly became smaller and smaller, until he was the size of a housecat.

“So...*cute!!!*” Agnes squeed. “But how does it work?”

“Oreille weakens dragon power,” Claude answered. “In other words, it seems he used the spirits' protection to weaken himself enough to shrink. Don't worry, Ciel can grow bigger again in an emergency.”

No, no...we still haven't solved the issue of whether you should be making sacred beasts do this kind of work!

“And it seems that, in his small form, he consumes almost no magic power.”

“Really? Well, that's good news.”

If Ciel was going to consume Claude's magical power for the rest of his life, it could only be a good thing if that amount was reduced. Agnes would've preferred Claude's power not to be consumed at all. But he couldn't undo the summoning, so they just had to make the best of the situation in whatever way they could.

“Are you really all right, Agnes?”

Agnes felt embarrassed Claude would worry about her when he was in a bad way himself and was paying double magic power for the provisional contract. Was this what Zenaide had meant when she'd said that Claude would do anything for Agnes?

Agnes would have to be careful in the future, since there seemed no limit to the lengths Claude might go for her sake.

“I can't get past what happened to my dad...” she finally said softly. “It's a

blow that won't heal easily. But...I still have Uncle Benoit, Kevin, and you. So I'll get through it."

A hand reached out and gently stroked her cheek.

"I'll have to work harder so my name comes first in that list."

"I... I do really *care* for you, Claude!" Agnes cried.

There was no deep meaning behind the order she'd listed the names in. It pained her to think Claude felt her feelings for him weren't strong enough.

When she thought about it, she realized she'd just said something very embarrassing.

"I know that...I love you too, Agnes." Claude gave her a melting smile and gently kissed her forehead. "By the way, you must be tired after growing so many mushrooms."

"No...not really."

When she answered honestly, Claude's gray eyes shone brightly.

"You're fine even after summoning those giant, mega mushrooms and an army of their friends..."

Just then, a warning sign... No, warning *spores* appeared in her brain.

Letting him think that way is dangerous...

Agnes smiled, sensing the impending danger. "It must be because this is Oreille. Usually, it'd be *way* too much for me," she insisted.

"...That's true."

It was a shame to see Claude so visibly disappointed. But Agnes's instincts had steered her right.

"After we get married, I want a giant mushroom like this one as a pillar in the middle of our mansion... Oh! But I won't force you, Agnes."

Very dangerous. I almost ended up living in a huge mushroom mansion. My instincts were right... Thanks, instincts.

"Forget the pillars," Claude said. "But maybe one small mushroom

decoration. Let's make a mushroom space in the garden. Mushrooms lined up in the ridges in the field. That'd be just fine."

Claude's merciless words reached Agnes, distracted by thanking her quick wits.

"We'll end up living in a mushroom house!" she cried.

"Oh, perfect!"

Goodness! He really is an awful mushroom fetishist... At this rate, our married life will be a mushroom life!!!

Will that be okay? Well...will it?

Worried, Agnes peeked at Claude, grinning with excitement.

Well...if Claude's happy...then it should be fine...

A ball of light appeared out of nowhere just then, flickering in front of Agnes.

"Ciel says they want you to call on them."

Call on them...? How?

"Come... Come out, spirits...?" Agnes asked timidly.

A dull explosive sound resounded throughout the ruined cathedral. With the rumbling came another mushroom growing in the center of the cathedral, piercing the scant remains of the roof.

The sight of two giant fly agaric mushrooms with white warts lined up on a red umbrella was spectacular.

This...this is a mushroom temple...

Moments later, bits of debris started raining down. But a *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis* sprung up next to them, using its cap as an umbrella to deflect the falling chunks.

When the white mist—either dust from rubble or spores from mushrooms—finally cleared, only the giant mushrooms' caps and the blue sky spread overhead.

"They're saying...leave it to us," Claude interpreted through Ciel.

“...Are they?”

Contrary to Agnes, now confused, astonished, and unable to speak, Claude looked up at the giant mushrooms excitedly.

“What wonderful mushrooms. It’s like a dream...to see this every day. Those folds that line up neatly, the red caps that grow in the blue sky, the graceful pattern, those delicate lines...”

Really, what should I do? My mushroom powers are growing, the spirits have an interpreter, and Claude is such a mushroom freak...

The more she thought about it, the less sense it all made. She couldn’t help but laugh.

Seeing her laugh like that, Claude gave a soft smile.

She wanted to thank him for all he’d done. *But is there any way I can without involving mushrooms?*

She had a sudden idea. Yet at the same time, she felt a tad worried.

What if he ends up hating it...?

No, I decided to trust in Claude. So it’ll be fine.

I am cute. I am capable.

As Agnes repeated her mantra, she pulled Claude’s sleeve, distracting him from the mushrooms.

“Claude...” she said. “Can you bend down, and lift your arms?”

“Yeah? Like this?”

He did exactly as told, not doubting her orders for a moment.

Mind made up, Agnes hugged his open chest.

“Whoa, Agnes?!”

Ignoring his startled voice, Agnes loosened her grip, straightened up, and kissed Claude’s cheek.



Claude was blushing. No doubt her face was even redder. But at the same time, she was glowing with satisfaction.

I did it! I kissed him!

The loud popping sounds were probably due to the small milky white cap, gray-brown cap, warty dark brown, and white potato-like mushrooms now growing all over Claude's clothes.

Yet, he was so distracted he didn't even glance at the *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, *Amanita spissacea*, or Hungarian Sweet Truffles that were now neatly lined up on his arm.

"Well..." Agnes said. "You *said* you wanted me to initiate. You *said* a kiss on the cheek would help you recover. D-Did I go too far, after all?"

I only intended to fulfill Claude's wishes, but what if he said it as a joke?

As Agnes fretted, Claude pulled her into his arms.

"Not a bit. Thank you. I'm very happy."

She could tell from the strength of his tight hug and slightly trembling voice that he *was*. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"I *love* you, Agnes. My mushroom princess..." He loosened his arms and stroked her cheek. "I'll swear it any number of times. I'll be by your side the rest of my life, spending every day making you happy."

"Let us be happy together...my dragon prince."

Seeing Agnes smile, Claude narrowed his eyes in joy...then slowly kissed her lips.



Mushrooms of the Day *Entoloma virescens* A mushroom with little, sky-blue caps. It's unknown if it's poisonous. When damaged, it turns yellow. A fragile mushroom. When Agnes said that Ciel's sky-blue eyes were beautiful, it thought it was being summoned. After hurriedly sprouting, it found it was mistaken. A dejected mushroom.

"It's so fluffy!" it then squealed, delighted by Ciel's soft fur.

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

"Eeeeeek! Agnes hugged him and kissed his cheek! Did you see?!" It was very excited...

Amanita spissacea A mushroom with a dark gray cap and dark brown warts resembling leopard print. Its flesh is white and mostly tasteless. But it's poisonous! Don't eat it! The mushroom braves *have* been challenging themselves again today, haven't they?

It wears leopard print like old ladies who love gossip and has a personality to match. *Cuphophyllus virgineus* is its gossip pal.

"It's okay to take the lead sometimes, Agnes! It's okay to be young!"

Hungarian Sweet Truffle It looks like a white potato, but it's a truffle as sweet as saccharin. It's often eaten as is, as a dessert. Boasting a unique sweetness in the mushroom world, it's still sweet even when dried.

It heard the word "sweet," so when it tried to tell Agnes how sweet it really was, it was introduced to the true sweetness of love.

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

"Let me decorate your new house! I'll always protect you, Agnes!" it said, sprouting jumbo-sized, desperate to do anything for its beloved Agnes.

Short Story: A Dragon Cannot Lose His Dragonmate

“**WHAT** *are* you playing at, Claude? Sabina’s injured, you know!”

Claude had summoned Philip and Sabina to their garden, then had thrust a silver mushroom hair ornament under their noses.

“*This* was in the same room Agnes was kidnapped from. The thief must’ve invaded, hurt Lady Dolan, then quickly kidnapped Agnes. But why was this under the sofa?”

“It...it must’ve fallen when she was kidnap—”

Before Philip could finish speaking, a bolt of lightning hit the ground at his feet.

Claude had pulled his punch. But it was *still* a lightning bolt. There was now a hole in the soil in front of Philip’s feet, and a slight burning smell wafted into the air.

“Enough of this farce! Tell me where Agnes is. Now!”

“But I’m looking for her mys—”

Not bothering to wait for Philip to finish his sentence, Claude conjured another lightning bolt. A pitiful scream was heard. But Claude stared at Sabina, unconcerned.

“Someone broke into *your* residence and no one noticed? A guest was kidnapped...but there have been no clues for days? Barthet’s private army surely can’t be *this* incompetent?”

“Like I said, Sabina was... YIPE!”

Infuriated, Claude conjured another lightning bolt to shut Philip up.

“Lady Dolan was the only eyewitness to these so-called thieves, Agnes’s abduction, and her own injuries. The Marquis is currently unwell. Philip is of no use at all. Lady Dolan is handling this *entire* investigation... And we can’t find any trace of her? How can I not conclude this was an inside job?”

“Goodness!” Sabina cried. “I’ve been injured. And we’re doing our best to find her. You really *are* too cruel...”

Seeing Sabina with her head hanging, whatever gentlemanly feelings Philip had apparently stirred within him, and he moved protectively in front of her.

“Claude,” he said firmly. “I must ask you to please stop disparaging my *wife* with your wild guesses.”

At his words, Claude’s irritation skyrocketed.

After all these years of tormenting Agnes for his own amusement, Philip was the last person who had any right to say such a thing, scoundrel he was.

“Dragon Crest. Lightning.”

Another lightning bolt—the biggest one yet—struck the ground, nearly blasting Philip.

Having noticed the change in intensity, Philip let out a pathetic scream and trembled.

“I’ve confirmed the wounds with the servant who tended to Lady Dolan,” Claude said swiftly. “Judging by their orientation and depth, it’s likely she injured herself. The knife believed to have inflicted the wound was also recovered. And the ornament was hidden in a pile of mushrooms. Or...should I say the mushrooms hid it?”

Sabina’s eyebrows twitched at the word “mushrooms.” But she immediately smiled. Claude had hit the mark, but she wouldn’t fold as easily as Philip.

“I’m glad you stepped forward, Philip,” Claude smirked. “This is more convenient for me, too.”

Claude wasn’t in the habit of interrogating women, and he’d be happy to use Philip as leverage against her. No doubt, he’d squeal pitifully...

He didn’t mean to *kill* Philip, of course... But he could bring him to the brink easily enough.

Smiling evilly, Claude pointed his left hand at Philip again.

“Please enjoy...Dragon’s Thunder.”

As Claude spoke, dazzling flashes rained down from the sky with booming rolls of thunder.



“I’M headed for Oreille now.”

When Claude left the scorched garden, he called out to the waiting Maurice.

With every second counting, the two walked and talked.

“Is that where Lady Agnes is?” Maurice asked.

“Yes. This was done on the King of Oreille’s orders. It seems Lady Sabina was threatened with having to pay the huge debt that idiot Philip had racked up. Without even consulting the Marquis, they agreed to kidnap and *sell* a royal fiancée to a foreign country. They will be shown no mercy.”

Amidst many lightning bolts, Claude had finally gotten the whole story. But learning the truth was just the start.

Abducting a royal of one’s own nation on another country’s orders was an act of treason. On top of the *usual* punishment for treason... Agnes was Claude’s Dragonmate. Harming her was tantamount to harming Claude himself. They should consider themselves lucky they would face their judgment day with all five limbs intact.

“I’ve talked to Marquis de Barthet,” Maurice said. “It seems now all Barthet’s authority, including the private army, will be surrendered to you.”

A wise decision.

If the response was delayed here, it could affect the entire Barthet territory.

If the Marquis hadn’t been in bed sick, this foolish thing would never have happened. Claude cursed Philip’s existence, but he didn’t have the time to string the rat up.

“Have those two locked up,” he ordered. “Then lift the checkpoint and tell His Majesty what’s going on.”

“...You really made a big show of it, didn’t you?” Maurice said carefully. “You can smell the burnt smell from here. What if there’d been a fire?”

“The lightning blast blew out any small fires. No need to worry.”

Maurice nodded reluctantly and began instructing several nearby servants.

The power of their loyalty to the Marquis was evident as the servants calmly proceeded to lock up his daughter and her fiancé without question.

“So...you’ll let them live?” Maurice asked.

“Of course. I can’t just kill them. In general, it’s the king’s domain to judge crimes. Rescuing Agnes is *my* priority. So...I just surrounded that idiot with lightning and roasted him a little bit. I knew he wouldn’t die.”

Claude walked through the garden with Maurice and stopped in a deserted corner. Thanks to the tall trees, nothing could be seen from the surroundings.

“Maurice,” Claude said firmly. “I entrust you with full, temporary authority over Barthet. Please cooperate with the Marquis. I’m heading to Oreille alone.”

“Even on horseback, it’ll take days. And I cannot let you go alone, my prince. I’ve noticed you’ve been unwell these past few days. I can’t allow you to overstrain yourself.”

Maurice’s taut expression came out of worry for Claude. But they didn’t have time for worrying.

Claude began dragging his sword through the soil of the garden.

“This is a royal secret,” he muttered, “so I can’t explain in detail. Put simply, I can’t live without Agnes. My physical condition will worsen in Oreille. But...I’ll go anyway. I’ll summon something faster than a horse. I leave the rest to you.”

Maurice grew paler and paler as he listened to Claude. “You just gave me a whole lot of details! Don’t go leaking royal secrets!”

In a way, yes. And also, no...

Either way, Claude would be acting alone. He needed Maurice to understand the basics of the situation at least.

“This is necessary information for you if you continue to serve as my bodyguard knight,” Claude stated.

“After hearing this, I can’t exactly *quit*, can I?”

“No, you *can*. You’ll just be monitored for life and executed if anything leaks. I’m in a hurry. Move aside.”

Claude had drawn a circle in the soil large enough for a person to stand in, with complex geometric patterns layered on top of one another. After writing a few more letters, he sheathed his sword and removed a dusty, small book from his vest pocket.

“Okay...now I need blood. I’m not sure how much... Well, better err on the side of caution.”

Claude rolled up his sleeves and cut his left arm with a dagger from his pocket.

“...Y-Your Highness?!?”

Checking Maurice with a stern glance, Claude held his arm out over the circle and let the blood fall. It was then sucked into the drawn leylines, filling all the lines and letters, which now began to emit a faint light.

Claude had planned to summon the sacred beast all along, so he’d pilfered a dagger from the treasury that would let him skip a few steps.

He stabbed the dagger into the circle and muttered the words written in the book. Ancient words, once with true meaning, now reduced to mere sounds.

The light’s intensity increased at these words, and Claude could no longer keep his eyes open.

Finally, the glare subsided, the lines of light disappeared, and now a large tiger sat in the circle, black stripes on its pure white body. Its eyes were at the same height as Claude’s face and as beautiful as the clear blue sky.

It wasn’t *just* a large animal. It was an awe-inspiring magical beast. It had the presence required of something considered sacred.

“You called me, Dragon Child. To seal our contract, speak your name and mine.”

The tiger’s mouth didn’t move. But Claude could hear its voice inside his mind. Apparently, Maurice didn’t. Perhaps this proved the bond between the Dragon Crest Bearer and a sacred beast.

“My name is Claude Visage. I will not name you yet.”

It was written that by giving the summoned sacred beast its own name, a contract would be formed to permanently anchor it to this plane. Which was *why* Claude was reluctant to name it right now.

“Very well...” the beast said. *“A temporary contract. But it will cost double the magic.”*

Offering double the magic when he was already going to be strained by entering Oreille was risky, but Claude had his reasons.

“I am the one who summoned you and formed the contract. But the one *you* must stake your life to protect is the woman I love. That’s why I shall have *her* name you.”

A sacred beast was a creature a Dragon Crest Bearer called upon using their own blood and name, to do their lifelong bidding. Naturally, the beast obeyed its master and protected him.

But Claude had done this not for himself, but for Agnes.

Due to unforeseen events, he planned to use the beast as emergency transport. But his original aim was always to have the beast serve as Agnes’s bodyguard. He wanted to ensure a deep bond between Agnes and the beast.

“Your...mate?” The white tiger looked quizzically at Claude, who nodded. *“A Dragon Child’s mate is also precious to me.”*

“Good. Now come. Let’s get on with it.”

Sacred beast or no, time was of the essence.

However, the white tiger stared at Claude and licked his bloody left arm.

The pain and bleeding disappeared before the rough tongue could irritate the wound or cause any pain. Claude couldn’t say for sure, but he suspected this was the sacred beast’s power. His deep cut was almost entirely healed now.

“Your mate would be alarmed,” the tiger explained simply. *“Also, ’tis a shame to waste such...tasty blood.”*

The tiger seemed more concerned about its own appetite than Claude. But he

was grateful. He had no time to treat the wound himself, and now he wouldn't have to encounter Agnes with such a bloody wound.

"You can have my blood. But not Agnes's," he said firmly.

"If I have a Dragon Child's magic...I need no other sustenance."

Does...that mean my blood was like some sort of dessert...? He should probably do a little more research into these beasts. *Another time.*

"...Maurice, I'm leaving now. Please take care of the rest."

Maurice sighed as Claude rolled his sleeve back down. "I feel like I've just been shown an immense secret. But perhaps, it was just my imagination. Reasoning with you never works when it comes to Lady Agnes. So please...bring her home quickly, my prince."

Nodding as Maurice performed a knightly bow, Claude leaped on the tiger's back. Gently touching the silver mushroom hair ornament in his pocket, he felt a slight warmth in his chest.

"All right. Off we go." To Agnes, who meant more to Claude than anything. She was his world.

He would never part from her. Nor could he *ever* stand to lose her.

The white tiger dashed off in the blink of an eye, leaving only faint traces of light in its wake.

Afterword

HELLO, Hanami Nishine here.

I'm ecstatic to be able to deliver the third volume of *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess!* to everyone. I'd like to celebrate by shedding spores with all of the mushrooms around the world!

Our main character, Agnes, is a common-born count's daughter with pink hair and the spirits' divine protection, and she can also grow mushrooms. Prince Claude, a mushroom fetishist, uses the power of love to help her improve her self-esteem, which was at rock bottom due to her awful ex-fiancé. After Agnes accepted the special position of Dragonmate to a dragon-blooded royal, the two officially became engaged.

This volume is not only bursting with mushrooms, but it also concerns the mystery of how Agnes's parents died, a visit by a neighboring country's royals, her evil ex-fiancé's meddling, the source of Agnes's power, and a new power of Claude's.

Volume 3 also continues the Mushrooms of the Day segment at the end of each chapter. I was surprised by how popular the mushrooms are! You could say they're the *real* stars of this story. This volume features plenty of mushroom shenanigans as well! Enjoy their brave and sometimes misguided struggles, spurred on by their adoration of Agnes.

I've received comments from readers like, "I bought a picture book of mushrooms" and "My search history is full of mushrooms now." So, I recommend you read this series while looking up all the mushroom varieties you meet here too.

Finally...

To all the readers who've read the story so far and supported the mushrooms.

To poporucha-sensei, who draws such beautiful artwork of the characters and mushrooms.

To the publisher who gave me the opportunity to publish the sequel and all

the people involved in the publishing process.

To my family and cat, who support my writing.

It is thanks to you all that I was able to deliver the third volume of *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess!*

From the bottom of my heart, thank you all!

I hope to see you all again in the next volume.



The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

By Makino Maebaru Illustration by Hachi Uehara

What adventures await a priestess with the inconvenient power to rouse the baser instincts of others and the imperial prince who's unaffected by her?!



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration by Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Revolutionary Reprise of the Blue Rose Princess

By Roku Kaname Illustration by Hazuki Futaba

She was a queen who died during a revolution. Now she's gone back in time. Her first course of action? Changing her fate by winning over the revolutionary mastermind!



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