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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 2

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The Dragon’s Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 2

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Prologue

“AN outing by carriage, you say?”

Agnes Lefort, daughter of a count, was drinking tea in the garden. She placed her teacup on the table and tipped her head to one side, questioningly.

Across the table from her smiled a young man with Prussian-blue hair and dark gray eyes. Claude Visage, the second-in-line prince, nodded. He was holding a baked treat that had been prepared for them.

“Yes. Of course, if you don’t want to, I won’t push the issue. And it wouldn’t be far, so you could consider it practice. More than anything, I really would love to be able to pick you up and drop you off by carriage.”

Claude blushed as he spoke, and even to a woman’s eye, he seemed beautiful.

She realized that Claude knew she disliked traveling by carriage and was doing his best to be gentle with her about it. It made something deep in her heart feel all warm and fuzzy.

Originally, Agnes had been engaged to Philip Visage, a fringe member of the royal family. Philip had cheated on her and then broken off their engagement publicly. It was then that Claude came to her rescue.

Claude had been enraptured by the mushrooms she’d unwillingly sprouted. After that, the two had gotten to know one another, later realizing their mutual feelings...but to Agnes, it still didn’t seem real somehow.

“Oh, Sis. So, this is where you were. Your Highness, it’s been too long since I’ve had the pleasure. Well, do excuse me.” Kevin had just popped into the garden when he spotted Claude. He gave him a polite greeting before turning to go, quick as a wink.

“Wait, Kevin. Is Father home?” Agnes asked.

“Father? He’s out right now, and I believe he said he’d be home late tonight. Is something up?” Kevin whirled around and came to sit beside Agnes.

Agnes then explained the proposed carriage trip to her brother.

“That sounds fine to me,” Kevin nodded. “Father will be on board as well. If he’s not, well, I’ll convince him. You’d like to go, wouldn’t you, Sis?”

“Well...”

Being asked so many times...made her cheeks start to feel flushed. She snuck a sideways glance at Claude, who was smiling as if pleased, and that only made her blush all the more.

“In that case, you should accompany her,” Claude suggested. “With you by her side, Agnes will feel quite at ease, won’t she?”

“Huh? Me? I’d just be in the way.”

True, she would feel at ease with Kevin there. No need to worry about nerves making her nauseous. It might be a good idea, actually. It would be a very effective way to prevent something terrible from happening, like her throwing up on Claude’s lap in the carriage.

“Please do come, Kevin.” Agnes shot him a hopeful glance.

Kevin frowned, before sighing deeply. “All right. But please try to get used to it as soon as you can. It’ll be a pain if you guys need me to accompany you for the rest of your lives.”

“I do hope she will be able to feel more comfortable soon, as well. But on this occasion, I’d love to talk to you too, Kevin. So really, this works out nicely.” Claude’s smooth response was met with a solemn expression and a nod from Kevin.

“Good point. I have to tell you all sorts of things about how best to handle my sister.”

“What nonsense is this, now?” Agnes raised an eyebrow at her brother.

“Well, Sis, you’re a lot to handle.”

“Kevin!”

Agnes was slightly shocked at her brother's strong words, but Kevin simply grinned wryly as he took in her funny expression.

"But for all your foibles, both Father and I adore you. And you've finally started to come out from under Philip's spell. Now we've got to get you acting like a strong-willed young lady for a change."

"What? That's the objective, here?" she asked, incredulous.

"I think that would be just right, Sis. You deserve to get to speak your mind for a change."

Agnes wasn't sure what it would look like to be a strong-willed young lady, but at any rate, she felt that it certainly wasn't anything to aspire to.

And yet, for some reason, Claude was nodding along, his hand thoughtfully on his chin.

"I see. He does have a point there."

"You're taking his side, Prince Claude?!" Agnes raised her voice slightly, and just at that moment, something black appeared on Claude's arm with a pop.

The pitch-black, digit-like projections looked like *Xylaria polymorpha*.

The arrival of the black mushroom on the scene drew the attention of all three.

"...Is it me, or does it seem like the mushrooms are sprouting more readily these days?" Kevin asked. "They've never appeared this much before, have they?"

"It seems my mushroom sensitivity has increased," Agnes sighed.

The mushrooms had been growing more than ever since Philip tried to get her back. Before that, they were mostly caused by strong emotions like fear or the touch of a man. But recently, they seemed to appear whenever they got a chance to. It was like he had set off something in her.

"And what a wonderful thing it is." Smiling, Claude plucked the black mushroom. "*Xylaria polymorpha* is black on the outside, with a white interior."

After dropping some mushroom knowledge that nobody had asked for,

Claude gazed at the *Xylaria polymorpha* in his hand.

As ever, he was a mushroom fanatic.

“You might like them, Prince Claude, but they’re nothing but trouble for me,” Agnes sighed. “Although, it doesn’t matter as much while we’re at home.”

“Worry not. In public places, just stick by my side. It’s quite well known that I appreciate mushrooms. We can just tell people that you’re putting up with my hobbies,” Claude said gallantly.

“I feel like that is just as bad in more ways than one...” Agnes looked away.

Even if it was public knowledge that the beautiful prince liked mushrooms, she wasn’t sure it was the best thing for him to be thought of as someone who pushed his interests on his companions.

“People can think what they want,” he said dismissively. “Just let me handle talking to anyone who’s got a problem with it. Tell me if they ever say anything to you, and I’ll take care of them.”

“Goodness. All this over mushrooms that were sprouted by me in the first place? I won’t allow any trouble to come to you over it.” Agnes shook her head.

“It’s no trouble at all; that’s what I’m saying here.”

Kevin looked back and forth between them, clutching his cake, shoulders shaking. “See? That’s why I keep saying you should learn to be a strong-willed lady, Sis. *‘Hey mister, you gotta problem with my mushrooms? You oughta thank me for giving you the privilege of being their fertilizer!’* You should say something like that.”

“Goodness, no! Why do I have to become like some terrible Queen of the Mushrooms?”

“Agnes, you’re no Queen of the Mushrooms.”

“Oh, Prince Claude...!” Agnes looked at Claude, touched by the way he came to her defense. His gray eyes narrowed slowly.

“No, the queen of all mushrooms is the *Phallus luteus*. You’re the lovely mushroom princess, Agnes.”

...All right, scratch that.

He had come to her defense, but not in the way she'd initially thought.

Agnes looked at the mushroom maniac's radiant smile and sighed a little.

"Here I was thinking Sis was a lot to handle...but you're pretty out there too, aren't you, Your Highness?"

"Don't flatter me, I'll blush," Claude said, all bashful.

"He's not actually flattering you," Agnes interjected.

But even as the Lefort siblings exchanged exasperated looks, Claude remained supremely unbothered.

"Folks like what they like," Claude said. "As long as it harms no one else, it's all fair game. I happen to love mushrooms, but if I don't force it down other people's throats, then it's all good, isn't it?"

Come to think of it, he had a point.

Claude never forced his love of mushrooms onto others.

...Although he was always on the hunt for Agnes's mushrooms.

"And Agnes, it's not like you're purposefully making mushrooms sprout on people you dislike, cackling all the while. So, there's nothing for you to be concerned about."

"That's true."

No doubt, Claude was choosing his words carefully out of the utmost respect for Agnes.

"So, if you're going to sprout mushrooms anyway, make sure they all sprout on me. You're welcome to cackle while you do it, too!"

...Ah, misjudged again. He really is nothing but a hardcore mushroom fanatic at heart.

With Agnes's mild frustration came a curiously shaped mushroom, which sprouted on Claude's right shoulder. It had a white stalk with a bell-shaped yellow cap that was webbed, like netting. The aforementioned *Phallus luteus*.

“...A new one’s sprouted,” Agnes pointed out.

“It has, it has, indeed!” Claude’s gray eyes lit up brighter than she’d ever seen them. “That’s a *Phallus luteus*, that is! Ah, what a splendid dress she wears. Look, Agnes!”

“Uh-huh. That web-like bit, you mean?”

“Not a web! It’s a dress made of the finest lace! See how splendid she looks? You would expect nothing less from the Mushroom Queen herself!”

Claude was spellbound, but something stank. The smell was probably coming from the queen herself. But with Claude looking so happy to have her on his shoulder, Agnes felt she couldn’t comment.

“The queen is yellow, isn’t she?” she remarked.

“There’s also the *Phallus indusiatus*, who wears a white dress,” Claude happily informed her.

“Ack, stop it. If you keep mentioning them, I’ll keep sprouting them.”

Her mushroom sensitivity had never been more heightened, and now it felt risky even for someone to mention the name of certain mushrooms. And yet, the mushroom fetishist was not to be deterred.

“That would be fine with me,” he said. “You know, these mushrooms grow incredibly fast. In just a few hours, they sprout from the ground and unfurl their dresses, and then over the course of a mere half a day, they change color and topple from the root.”

“The queen lives fast and dies young, then,” Agnes said.

Which meant that the mushroom holding out her dress skirts on Claude’s shoulder would change color within half a day.

“They say the beautiful people die young, don’t they?” Claude responded with a grin.

“Yes, but that’s a mushroom, remember?”

“I see. The beautiful mushrooms die young, then.” Claude nodded, absolutely solemn, and another mushroom sprouted on his left shoulder.

It looked just like the *Phallus luteus* on his left shoulder, only this one had a white dress. No doubt, it was a *Phallus indusiatus*.

“...Another beautiful mushroom has joined us,” Agnes sighed.

“Two mushroom dresses! Two queens in our presence!” As he looked back and forth between each shoulder, rapt with excitement, nothing about Claude seemed dashing in that moment. He looked like nothing more than a mushroom maniac. “Wonderful. Thank you, Agnes. I am delighted.”

“Uh-huh. Good for you.”

With two queens in attendance now, the air had become quite foul and stinky. Kevin wrinkled up his brow and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“...Your Highness, you really do love mushrooms, don’t you?”

“I do indeed,” Claude nodded serenely. “I was fourteen years of age when I awoke to the magic of mushrooms. For all the seven years that have passed since, I have been a slave to their very filaments.”

His passion for mushrooms went back further than Agnes knew. Rather than being impressed, she felt that sense of mild frustration again. Why would a fourteen-year-old boy be enslaved by mushroom filaments? She really didn’t want to know. She had no doubt that the truth was something scary.

“So, I suppose it’s true after all... You consider mushrooms more precious than you do me,” she said dryly.

“Nonsense.”

Agnes had simply spoken her feelings aloud. But Claude seemed taken aback by them, his expression clouding over.

“Well, I mean, you did propose to that *Amanita muscaria*,” she pointed out.

“That was because that mushroom was simply so beautiful...”

Then there came another pop, as if to cut Claude off mid-sentence. A new mushroom sprouted on the back of his right hand. A red cap with white dots. Its distinctive look showed it to be a specimen of the aforementioned *Amanita muscaria*.

“...Your soulmate has sprouted,” Agnes told him.

Claude gasped with delight over the unexpected arrival of this mushroom. “The gentle sloping angle of the umbrella-shaped cap! The alignment of the pleated gills! The lustrous color! These little warty bits! Oh, the mushrooms you sprout are simply amazing, Agnes!”

“You really do think of me as a walking mushroom generator, don’t you?”

She knew he was a mushroom fetishist and all, but with him raving over the mushrooms this way, Agnes began to feel like a third wheel.

Claude’s gray eyes fluttered, and he smiled wryly. “Not at all. I love the mushrooms, of course...but I love you far more, Agnes.”

Agnes was taken aback, her shoulders jerking, and just then, a white mushroom sprouted beside the *Amanita muscaria*. Its small, milk-white umbrella cap proved it to be a *Cuphophyllus virgineus*.

Goodness, my mushroom sensibilities really have ramped up, haven’t they? At this rate, we’ll need to bring a basket along at all times to hold all of them.

She distracted herself by thinking about mushroom transportation methods, but she couldn’t hide the blush rising on her cheeks.

“You’re still blushing? You’re so adorable.”

Agnes’s face reddened even deeper as she found herself on the receiving end of a bright smile.

“...Uh, I seem to be a third wheel here,” Kevin interjected. “I think I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Oh no! Wait, please, Kevin! Don’t leave me behind!”

She rushed to stop him, but Kevin shook his head.

“No, it’s better this way. You two can canoodle all you like. My sis needs that.”

“Why do I need that? Wait! Please, don’t go!”

Kevin got out of his chair and made to leave, but Agnes grabbed his arm. Then she heard a sigh from above.



“C’mon, Sis, isn’t this a bit odd? If you’re going to be grabbing onto someone, it should be your lover, not your brother,” Kevin told her flatly.

“L-Lover?” she sputtered. That word made her eyes widen more than ever.

As if in response to Agnes’s voice, a gray-colored mushroom with an umbrella cap popped up on Kevin’s arm. The little blackish dots on it made it look leopard-printed. It was an *Amanita spissacea*.

“Wow, so rare. A mushroom sprouting on *me*,” Kevin said, surprise coloring his voice. “The mushrooms really are popping up easier these days, aren’t they?”

“Wh-What do you mean by lover?!” she pressed.

But Kevin paid no mind to Agnes’s fluster. He was more interested in the *Amanita spissacea* on his arm.

“Huh? Am I wrong?” he asked, poking the shroom. “I mean, you’re still a ways off from being engaged, right?”

“En... Engaged!” she choked.

The word “lover” had gotten her heart beating fast, but this new word had it pounding even harder.

“I’m not about to... What in the fairy realm are you saying, Kevin?!” Agnes yelped, wishing her burning cheeks would cool down, but Kevin seemed completely unconcerned.

“Huh? I just meant you’ve made a clean break with Philip and broken off that engagement, and you *are* Prince Claude’s Dragonmate, aren’t you? Soulmates, wasn’t it? And you’re not yet engaged, which makes you lovers by default, doesn’t it?”

“But that’s... I mean, we still haven’t discussed...” she trailed off.

Yes, we had expressed our mutual feelings, and Claude did say we’re Dragonmates. But we haven’t spoken of being lovers yet!

Kevin shrugged, seeing how flustered Agnes had gotten. “I presumed His Royal Highness would’ve been a pushier individual, but it seems not...” His gaze

flickered to Claude, and the gray-eyed, handsome young man smiled.

“Hmm? Yes, it’s true that we’re Dragonmates and soulmates. But Agnes has her own pace for these things. I was thinking we could start as intimate friends and go from there.”

What a wonderful man.

Agnes was so grateful to Claude, from the depths of her heart. He may have been a freak with mushrooms on both shoulders and on the back of his hand, but in that moment, he shone with virtue.

“You’re playing the long game then, surprisingly,” Kevin summarized.

“Y-Yes, we are. We’re starting as close friends!” Agnes repeatedly nodded, happy with that path.

Claude plucked the mushrooms from his shoulders and arms as he gazed at the Lefort siblings, who were operating on very different ends of the emotional spectrum.

“Right. It all depends on how Agnes feels about me, though.”

“Huh?”

Claude arranged the mushrooms on the table and then started plucking off the one on the back of his hand.

“But once you feel that you love me, I believe it is right for us to call ourselves lovers.”

“Huh? Is... Is it?”

Claude’s gray eyes narrowed as he gazed at Agnes, who nodded under the pressure.

“So? Agnes, do you love me?”

“Excuse me?”

The sudden question made Agnes’s voice go high and squeaky.

“Because I love you.”

Kevin whistled, and just then, another crop of mushrooms sprouted on

Claude's newly bare arm. It was a small, milky white mushroom—a *Cuphophyllus virgineus*—and a flat, semicircular red fungus, the *Pycnoporus coccineus*.

But Agnes had no time for mushrooms. Her cheeks, which had just begun to cool, were suddenly aflame again.

"Agnes?"

"Urf?"

A grunt escaped her mouth, and Claude smiled, his eyes still fixed on her.

"Do you dislike me?"

"N-No, I do not...dislike you."

"Then, do you like me?"

Fixed by his gray gaze, Agnes felt like her cheeks were about to melt off.

"Ack. Y-Yes..."

Agnes clung to Kevin's arm, her chest constricting painfully as she answered.

Claude nodded with satisfaction and plucked the mushrooms from his arm.

"Good. Then we're lovers."

Agnes balked and wanted to deny this. But in the face of Claude's broad smile, the words escaped her.

Because, even though his hands might be overflowing with mushrooms, the smile of the man you love can be very powerful indeed.

"All... All right, then," she conceded.

"Sis, you're going to tear my shirt. Could you let go?"

"Can't do it. Kevin, please don't go..." she pleaded. Agnes clung to Kevin. He was her last resort, and she couldn't let him get away.

"What a troublesome sister you are... Still, I'm glad to learn you're not leaving the prince hanging. After everything that's gone on, you've got such low self-esteem that it would make a cat laugh." Kevin shifted his gaze from Agnes to address Claude. "She may be an incessant burden, but please try to spoil and

indulge her when you can. Philip's evil spell has finally dissipated, and she's just recently started listening to reason, you see."

"What do you mean?"

Agnes was slightly shocked at being considered an incessant burden. Although she did think of herself as troublesome, in truth.

"It means, both Father and I want you to be happy, Sis," Kevin told her.

"I understand. I'll do my very best," Claude said, accepting the task.

"You don't need to put in any effort, Claude. I'm scared to see what will happen if you do."

Agnes's chest was filling up with a painful sensation, and her cheeks were practically on fire. She certainly couldn't take much more of this attention.

But Claude simply smiled with amusement at the sight of Agnes in her flustered state. "There is nothing to be afraid of at all, so please be at ease. Well then, let us all go on an outing, with Kevin too. Please wait until I come to collect you."

"Er, okay."

Agnes nodded but didn't let go of Kevin's arm. Claude smiled wryly and reached out to stroke Agnes's hair. His gentle touch helped her unclench her death grip somewhat, and that was when Claude took her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it.

"Yeeek!!!"

As Agnes shrieked, a pale-yellow mushroom sprouted on Claude's chest. It consisted of a cluster of frilly caps. *Polyporus umbellatus*. Agnes didn't even know what was happening anymore, but it felt like her chest might burst at any moment.

"See you soon." After stashing all of the mushrooms in his pockets, Claude left the garden after flashing another smile.

"...How long do you intend to cling to me, Sis?" Kevin asked.

Agnes let go of Kevin's arm, revealing a shirtsleeve that was quite crumpled.

“Kevin. I don’t know what I should do.”

“About what?”

“About everything.”

Agnes answered honestly, but Kevin exhaled with frustration.

“Listen, Sis, after all of Philip’s pressuring, you’re not used to doing what your heart desires. Start by telling me what’s on your mind. No one will fault you for having opinions. If you don’t want to go out by carriage, then simply say so. His Highness won’t be angry with you. Do you not want to go?”

“It’s not that.” Agnes shook her head, and Kevin shook his right back.

“No, no, phrase it more strongly. Say, ‘Yes, I would like to go.’ You’ve improved a lot, but you’re still deeply influenced by that silly royal’s hold on you. Honestly, if we had only realized it sooner...” Kevin mumbled to himself for a moment, then shook his head as if trying to shake away unwanted thoughts. “Anyway, you’re finally free. From now on, you must do much more of what you want to do. Stress your own opinions much more. Stand up for yourself!”

“Be a headstrong young lady, in other words?”

“Precisely. If you go too far, I’ll be sure to stop you. So, for now, that’s what you should be aiming for. As I keep repeating, we all love you, Sis. We want you to be happy.”

Agnes blinked in surprise. She then tightened her lips and nodded. The word “love” in this context didn’t make her heart seize up like it did with Claude. Instead, it seemed to fill with warmth—a very pleasant sensation indeed.

“All right. Thank you.”

“Anytime, Sis. Gosh, it’s great that I can finally get through to you.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

Kevin smiled warmly, trying to tug the wrinkles out of his shirtsleeve. “I’m just happy that you’ve started acting like your old self again. See?” He gently stroked the *Amanita spissacea* that was still situated on his arm.

Agnes wasn’t sure if it was just her imagination, but the mushroom seemed to

be bobbing about, just a little.



Mushrooms of the Day

Xylaria polymorpha

A black mushroom that grows in dirt. The Japanese name for it, Mamezayatake, includes the word “bean” but it’s not suitable for consumption.

It is black on the outside but white inside, and hollow.

The flesh is quite firm but crumbles surprisingly easily.

It’s tough but fragile, and it sprouted to demonstrate to Agnes what a strong-willed young mushroom should be. (It misheard “strong-willed young lady.”) Now it’s embarrassed and has decided to crumple up quickly.

Phallus luteus

It has a white body, a bell-shaped umbrella cap, and a yellow lace cloak-like thing dangling from it. A very elegant mushroom.

Its distinguished appearance means it can be compared to a queen.

Despite being a delicious mushroom used in fancy cooking, its head is slimy and quite stinky.

It takes only an hour for its dress to unfurl, and it wilts after only three hours of glory. An ill-fated mushroom, but they do say only the beautiful die young.

It sprouted full of vigor, delighted about being called the Queen of Mushrooms.

Phallus indusiatus

It has a white body, a bell-shaped umbrella cap, and a white lace cloak-like thing dangling from it. A very elegant mushroom.

Its distinguished appearance means it can be compared to a queen.

Despite being a delicious mushroom used in fancy cooking, its head is slimy and quite stinky.

Its lace cloak unfurls quickly. The fastest-growing mushroom in the natural world.

It sprouted along with the *Phallus luteus* to represent fast-growing mushrooms.

Naturally, it's impatient.

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's not satisfied with being called beautiful by Claude. It wants to warn him that it only sprouted because it felt the red filament of fate regarding Agnes.

Cuphophyllus virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom.

It's easy to eat and goes well in vinegared dishes or in a sauce.

It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

It trembled with excitement when Claude confessed his feelings.

It, too, loves Agnes, so it agrees with Claude there.

It sprouted once more, squealing, "I love her!" But it's a mushroom, so alas, Agnes couldn't hear it.

If Agnes could hear it, her eardrums would be in trouble.

Amanita spissacea

A mushroom with a dark gray cap and dark brown warts, resembling leopard print.

The flesh is white and mostly tasteless, but it's poisonous, so 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.

"The young mushrooms these days have lost their way," is her favorite catchphrase, and she's obsessed with Agnes's love life.

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...

Claude's proposal sent the *Cuphophyllus virgineus* rushing in, and it couldn't stop her.

Polyporus umbellatus

A mushroom with multiple small spatula-shaped caps in a light-yellow-brown color.

It has a subterranean sclerotia, and it can make an herbal medicine called Choreito.

The mushroom part is edible and is supposed to be quite tasty.

Agnes complained that her chest hurt, so it came rushing in to help.

It only works as a diuretic and an antipyretic, though, so it can't do anything for love pains.

Chapter 1: Mental Tempering, Like a Perky Young Lady

“I have to strengthen myself. Strengthen myself mentally.”

Agnes stood alone in front of the herb patch she’d created in the garden, taking deep breaths. She loved Claude, and he had said that he loved her. It also appeared that she was his Dragonmate. And yet, putting the label “lovers” on their relationship made her chest constrict painfully.

This just won’t do.

In just a few short days’ time, they would go on an outing by carriage. For Agnes, this was a big event coming up on the horizon. With her mental fortitude still so weak and fuzzy, she could see herself growing nauseous very quickly. She desperately wanted to avoid being sick in front of Claude—her “lover,” for all intents and purposes.

“To temper and strengthen the mind, I think this is what I need most of all.” Agnes gazed at the rows of medicinal herbs she’d planted and took another deep breath. “Hiya, Spirits! How have you all been, cuties?” she called out in a loud voice. Several glowing balls of light began to float in front of her out of thin air.

It had been a while since she had last called on the spirits. She was reminded again how exhausting it could be to act perky in this way, as though she were speaking to a young child. But thinking about it from another angle, there was no better way to strengthen herself mentally than this.

She felt just a little bit shy and embarrassed. She must think of herself as a caring young woman playing with a small child. She needed to act excited, speak in a loud voice, and exaggerate all her motions. She must, in other words, be a perky young lady.

“Hey, Spirits! Can I ask you something?”

She put her hand behind her ear in pantomime fashion and waited for the response. The five glowing balls of light all flickered at the same time.

“I’m to go out riding in the carriage soon! Oh, but not by myself, of course! Anyway, I’m feeling terribly nervous and sick about it! I might actually *be* sick!”

The balls of light began wobbling all over the place as if to say, “Goodness, how terrible!”

The spirits really were so kind, so quick to empathize. Perhaps it was proof of how much they loved their perky young lady.

“I don’t wish to be sick, so I need some motion sickness prevention! Spirits, would you be able to help me out just a little here?”

The balls of light bobbed up and down like little kids raising their hands. Agnes plucked an herb from the garden, placed it on her open palm, and held it out.

“Motion sickness prevention, please! An antiemetic, if you can swing it!”

The balls of light swirled around the herb as if to say, “Leave it to us!”

The next moment, the green leaf on Agnes’s palm turned purple. The color was quite striking, but the spirits seemed confident. No doubt she could expect it to be very effective.

“Thank you so much! Thanks to you, I can ride the carriage without getting sick! I love you all!”

The balls of light flashed brightly, and then a moment later, they all vanished.

Agnes watched until the imprint of their lights on her retinas faded, and then she sat down on the spot, clutching her purple herb.

“...It’s always so exhausting doing that,” she said to herself.

It was a necessary evil when it came to interacting with the spirits, but having to act all perky and upbeat, in the way they favored...really tended to take a lot of energy out of Agnes, mentally.

“The spirits really seem to love the perky young lady persona. Hmm, since the mushrooms come from the spirits as well, I wonder if that means the mushrooms would also like it if I acted like that...?” she mumbled aloud.

Recently, her mushroom sensitivity seemed to have heightened, and the mushrooms were sprouting thick and fast. Perhaps they would also be pleased

if she called on them in the same sort of way. She thought she should probably leave well enough alone. But the seed of curiosity had been planted, and she just couldn't ignore it.

"Just a little. I'll just give it a try." Mumbling excuses to herself, Agnes got to her feet and drew in a breath. "Cute little mushrooms! Hello there!"

She put her hand behind her ear and tilted her head to one side, as she had done when she had called on the spirits earlier. Then she heard a popping sound. She looked down to see a mushroom that had sprouted on a patch of bare earth.

It was a gray, umbrella-capped mushroom, a *Lyophyllum decastes*. And it was as big around as a person's head.

"So, you showed yourself. Not quite so little, are you?"

Seeing a mushroom sprout neatly amongst her rows of medicinal herbs gave her an odd feeling she couldn't identify.

"So, all I have to do is call, and you come out, hmm? Or was it just a coincidence?"

Agnes wasn't sure, but at any rate, her mushroom sensitivity seemed to be in fine form. Still, calling on the mushrooms could prove dangerous.

"Sis, you've started growing mushrooms in your garden now?"

"Yeek!"

A sudden voice behind her made her shriek.

"You don't have to jump out of your skin that way. But never mind that. You can cultivate mushrooms at will now?"

"Don't startle me, Kevin. And this is just... This was just me sort of saying hello...?"

Kevin had appeared by her side at some point, and now he was prodding at the mushroom that was protruding from the earth. "Saying hello? To the mushroom? Who are you, Prince Claude? Honestly, you're so easily influenced, aren't you, Sis?"

“It’s...it’s not like that!”

Now it looked like Claude’s mushroom mania had rubbed off on her. Agnes could sprout mushrooms, yes, but she was no mushroom fanatic.

Goodness, the very implication!

“Well, it doesn’t really matter. Is this one edible? Shame to waste it. We could serve it up for dinner.” Kevin reached down and plucked the *Lyophyllum decastes* from the soil. The next moment, a new one sprouted nearby. It was a velvety-coated, dark brown cap-type mushroom, a *Boletus edulis*.

“...There’s another one,” he said.

“...Yes. Another one,” Agnes said, mirroring his dry tone.

Kevin gazed at the mushroom for a moment, then shrugged and plucked that one too.

“Based on the timing of when it sprouted, we can eat this one too, right?” he guessed. “I’ll take them to the kitchens.”

“G-Go ahead.”

“At this rate, your newlywed life with His Highness will be well-stocked with mushrooms, eh?” Smoothing the earth back down, Kevin grinned at her.

“I-I hope not...”

As if to cut Agnes off mid-sentence, another mushroom appeared on Kevin’s arm, a small, milky-white one. Was it her imagination, or were there a lot of *Cuphophyllum virgineus* sprouting these days?

“There’s another one, eh?” Kevin laughed. “Still, His Highness will be thrilled if lots of mushrooms sprout. You’ll have a very happy life together.”

“Kevin!”

Kevin hurried out of the garden as if trying to escape Agnes’s chiding.

She also got the impression that another *Cuphophyllum virgineus* had sprouted on his arm, but she shook her head and forced herself to look away.



“SIS, are you ready? Your prince is here.”

“Yes. I’m ready.”

Kevin, who had come to see how Agnes was getting along, immediately spotted the glass on top of the table the moment he entered the room.

“What’s this? That’s an unusual sort of color,” he remarked.

The glass contained a kind of juice made from the herbs that would prevent motion sickness. Agnes had already drunk most of it, but the thick purple juice residue had clung to the walls of the glass. She had been expecting it to taste rather foul, but it was surprisingly drinkable. She was filled with gratitude for the spirits’ kind consideration.

“It’s a medicine to prevent nausea,” she explained. “Since it’s mainly an issue of how I feel, I thought it would be better to take something than not.”

“Hmm, well, yeah, I guess. How you feel is the biggest issue here. If there’s something you want to try, I think it’s better to try it. But what *are* you wearing, Sis? This is your big date, right? Don’t you think that looks a bit...drab?”

Agnes was wearing a completely ordinary sort of dress. It had a white skirt, with a dark green vest and apron skirt over it. The vest was laced up with a red cord, and it was a brighter shade of green. She hadn’t thought it drab at all.

“Not at all,” she denied. “Besides, I have no other clothes.”

Kevin’s brows drew together. “Right... You threw away all your Philip dresses. You haven’t made or bought anything new to wear on a normal basis since?”

“I didn’t throw them away,” she corrected. “I upcycled them and sold them. And I do have dresses.”

Claude had presented her with new dresses to wear when he summoned her to all those balls and banquets. Her closet was quite stuffed with beautiful gowns.

“Not those. I’m talking about clothing you’ve selected yourself, Sis.”

“But I have plenty. I feel no lack.”

Simple day dresses were fine for staying at home. She had a few choices, and

she considered the one she was wearing today to be one of the brighter ones.

But Kevin seemed dissatisfied. He sighed loudly. "Sis, you're a count's daughter and a young lady at an age where you should be dressing up. What's more, you're Prince Claude's significant other! You should wear fancier things and enjoy dressing up more. Buying you a few new outfits would hardly bankrupt us. There's no need to hold back so much, you know."

"But I'm fine, really."

She wouldn't lie and claim that she wasn't holding back, but that wasn't the reason she hadn't ordered any new clothes. She simply hadn't felt as though she wanted anything. So, what was the problem?

"At least try to pick brighter colors."

Before Kevin was even done speaking, a mushroom popped up on his arm with a loud noise. It was a blueish-green-capped mushroom with lots of cracks in it. *Russula virescens*.

"...Ah, yeah. See, this is the kind of bright green I'm talking about," he said, seeing the mushrooms were in agreement with him. "At least the mushrooms know!"

Compared to Agnes's dark green dress, the hue of the *Russula virescens* was more of a light, bright mint green. It looked, for a moment, as though the mushroom was jiggling around, showing off the color of its cap... No, it must be her imagination.

"At least you've started wearing your hair down like you used to," Kevin continued. "That's a step forward. But let's change your clothes. We should purge every last trace of that disgusting Philip's influence."

"Disgusting..."

Philip was really getting raked over the coals here, even though he was a fringe member of the royal family. But he had cheated on Agnes and announced that he was ending their engagement, then attempted to make her his side mistress. So perhaps it couldn't be helped that her brother hated him.

Agnes didn't really care how Philip was treated, but hearing his name spoken

aloud definitely didn't bring back good memories.

"...If that's the case, I'll cooperate."

The sound of a third voice made them both look over toward the door, where a handsome young man with Prussian-blue hair stood.

"Oh, hello, Claude," Agnes greeted him, surprise lacing her voice.

"But that outfit is very cute. And it suits you well. You're beautiful no matter what you wear," Claude said with a dashing smile. "Still, Kevin is right. Bright colors would suit you very nicely indeed. I will prepare several new outfits for you."

"Oh... Oh, you don't need to go to all the trouble..." She had already received several dresses from Claude and felt guilty accepting any more.

"I don't mind choosing them for you, but perhaps it would be better if you choose your own." Claude's gaze slid over to Kevin, who nodded emphatically.

"That would be best. Wear your favorite colors and accessories in front of His Highness," Kevin said.

"But, like I keep saying...I don't really need anything new," she protested.

"If you won't choose, I'll choose for you, you know? I'll choose bright colors, fine fabric, adorable cuts, and the most expensive things I can find," Claude said.

Bright colors were bad enough. But fine fabrics, adorable cuts...and *expensive*?

And Claude was a prince.

Agnes's idea of expensive was no doubt far below what was standard for royalty. Just the thought of it made her muscles stiffen.

"N-No, you can't."

"Then, let us go and pick something out together."

Agnes faltered as Claude responded quick as a wink.

This was a calculated move to make it so that Agnes would come along to have the clothes made. In that case, she must decline—no, she couldn't decline

here. Because if she did, no doubt a delivery would soon follow...of clothes that had the brightest colors, the finest fabrics, the most adorable cuts, and the highest price tags. It was better for her to go along, so she could mitigate the choices somewhat.

“...All right, then.” Agnes nodded regretfully, and Kevin grinned with amusement.

“That’s the way to play it, Your Highness.”

“You’re both terrible,” she groaned.

They knew Agnes wasn’t excited about this, but they had banded together against her for the oddest of reasons, and she was in a real bind because of it.

As she puffed out her cheeks at them, Claude smiled.

“Don’t make that face. Kevin just wants you to have the kind of clothes you deserve. And to make up for everything you’ve been going without, too.”

“Are these clothes really so terrible?” she asked, looking down at her attire. She could understand if they had holes in them, or if the colors were faded, but to say they were no good based on the drabness of the color...

“Not at all,” Claude answered. “I like the understated color theme, and anything looks beautiful on you. However, you’re not wearing that color because it’s a color you like, are you? I think you should enjoy wearing different colors sometimes. You don’t dislike bright colors at all, do you?”

Agnes was, of course, a regular young woman. She liked all colors—bright ones and understated ones too, and it wasn’t as though she had zero desire to experiment.

“Well, no, I do like other colors, but my hair will just stand out more,” she explained. Her hair, in its peach-blossom pink hue, was bright and definitely stood out. If she wore bright clothes as well, she’d be liable to startle people.

“There’s nothing wrong with standing out,” Claude told her. “Nothing wrong with it at all! You’re absolutely gorgeous, so of course you’ll stand out!”

A seashell-shaped mushroom popped up on Claude’s arm. The cap was a deep peach color. *Pleurotus djamor*.

“Ah, look at this, Agnes,” Claude said in a velvety voice. “See the wonderful pink hue of this *Pleurotus djamor*? Your hair is so beautiful that it could hold its own against this mushroom. You must be more confident.”

“...Hahhh,” she sighed.

From his wide smile, she knew Claude was giving her a genuine compliment here. But being compared to a mushroom like that... She had to say, it was hard to feel genuinely pleased.

“...I think I should remain at home after all,” Kevin interjected. “I’m not sure if I can stomach watching you two canoodle over the mushrooms.”

“N-No, please! Don’t go!” Agnes grabbed Kevin’s arm in a panic, and his reddish-brown eyes met hers. If Kevin left, so too would her safe haven. Agnes was panicked.

“All right, all right. Since I promised, I’ll go with you this time. But you’re on your own next time, so get over your nerves today, okay?”

“Shall we go, then? Agnes.” Claude took her hand, and with Kevin’s warm gaze on her back, Agnes left the room.



Mushrooms of the Day

***Lyophyllum decastes* (Chicken of the Gravel)**

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

It looks rather like a shapeless, unenthusiastic Shiitake mushroom.

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

“I’m a Chicken of the Gravel, but I’m here to bloom in your mushroom patch!”
it says while appearing in the medicinal herb garden.

It seems to enjoy the cool earth and the slight ridges of the patch.

Boletus edulis

It's an edible mushroom with a velvety, dark brown cap.

The cap can be over 6 inches wide! It tastes great in a stir-fry or broiled. The bigger, the better, then! It's a brave mushroom, offering itself up for dinner.

"I feel like being grilled today!" it offered in the kitchen, but it ended up being broiled instead.

Cuphophyllus virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom.

It's easy to eat and goes well in vinegared dishes or in a sauce.

It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

"Here's to a newlywed life with plenty of mushrooms!" it sprouted gleefully.

Kevin's talk of matrimonial harmony excited it, and it started multiplying.

Russula virescens

A bluish-green cap with cracks all over it.

It's not very toothsome but tastes pretty good, so it's best to avoid eating it raw or eating too much of it.

...Why? I wonder what happens?

It heard the phrase "bright colors" and sprouted to show Agnes the color of its cap.

It wobbled its cap to show off the color, but no one noticed.

Pleurotus djamor

A deep pink cap that gradually fades to ashy white.

It's edible, but it gets tougher as it grows, so it's best to eat it while it's young.

Its beautiful pink color fades with heat, so it's good for slicing raw in a salad.

It sprouted to show Agnes, "Look, I'm pink like your hair! Look how pretty we are!" in an attempt to bolster her self-confidence.

It's proud of its pink caps, which match the color of Agnes's hair, and it fears getting near heat.

Chapter 2: Mushrooms and Self-Esteem

“**SERIOUSLY?** Me, sitting beside you? When it’s a date and everything?”

Upon entering the carriage and becoming aware of the seating arrangement, Kevin looked at Agnes with mild exasperation.

“It’s practice. All for practice.”

It would be far too difficult to try it with just her and Claude right from the start. This occasion was meant to be about practicing and getting her used to these sorts of situations, so having Kevin sit next to her was a concession she needed at this stage.

“It’s perfectly fine with me,” Claude said with a smile. “We don’t want you to get so nervous that you become nauseous. As you say, Agnes, today is simply about practicing. And it is better this way, because I can see your face more clearly.”

With Claude’s statement came a popping sound that filled the carriage. The mushroom’s wide gray cap resembled tree rings. It was a *Ganoderma applanatum*. It had appeared on Claude’s knee and looked like a small piece of defensive armor.

“The mushrooms really are sprouting with ease, aren’t they?” he laughed.

“I’m so sorry.”

Agnes hung her head in contrition, but Claude merely grinned wryly and plucked the mushroom.

“Don’t apologize. I should actually be thanking you. The mushrooms you sprout are all splendid, the caps so well-formed. Take this *Ganoderma applanatum*; its rings are so defined, and it is so sturdy—”

“Um, excuse me? Can we have no more mushy mushroom talk?” Agnes pleaded. If she didn’t cut him off now, Claude would no doubt go on talking

about mushrooms for hours. And the more talk there was of mushrooms, the more likely they were to sprout. Agnes didn't want them to drown in a carriage of mushrooms.

"Ah, forgive me. It's just such a gorgeous mushroom, you see," Claude gushed.

Agnes watched Claude fawn over the mushroom, doubt swirling up within her. "You love mushrooms, don't you, Claude? And you love the look of them too, right?"

"Ah, yes, indeed I do," he nodded emphatically.

"So, in other words, does that mean that I resemble a mushroom?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"What?" Stashing the mushroom in his pocket, Claude blinked in confusion.

"My clothing is all in understated colors like mushrooms, and I sprout mushrooms. That's perfect for a mushroom, isn't it?" Agnes was absolutely serious when she asked this, but Kevin sighed.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. As you can see, her self-confidence is absolutely nonexistent after Philip. It's so low, it's practically buried underground. She's finally just managed to claw her way back to the surface, you see."

Before he was done speaking, a truffle popped up on the back of Kevin's hand. It was a large round mass with a marbled exterior and multiple small projections, which Kevin quickly plucked.

"You will have to work hard to get through to her, but I hope you'll continue to care about my sister... By the way, what kind of mushroom is this?"

"It's all right," Claude assured him. "I told you, remember? Agnes is the only one for me, and I'll wait as long as she needs. Oh, and that's a tuber. It smells good and is used in gourmet cooking."

Kevin gazed at the mushroom he'd plucked, then handed it over to Claude. "Thank you for the kind, loving words about Agnes and for the mushroom facts. You can have this. I think I'd really better stay home after all."

"No, you can't!" Agnes grabbed hold of Kevin, absolutely refusing to allow

him to get out of the carriage.

The two men exchanged wry grins.

“By the way, has Philip been by the Lefort residence?” Claude asked Kevin.

“No, not recently. I wish he’d go six feet below and stay there, though,” Kevin said dryly.

Agnes wasn’t sure why Philip would go six feet below, but if that was where he belonged, perhaps he really should go there.

Philip had been the recipient of a furious mushroom attack at the Crown Prince’s engagement party. It was unknown exactly what effects the mushrooms had. Assuming all of them had fulfilled their intended purposes, then it was quite likely that he had still not recovered.

“You think he’ll come for her again?” Claude asked, his voice darkening a bit.

“I wouldn’t put it past him. I will never understand why he treated her the way he did, but at any rate, he clearly thinks of my sister as someone special to him in his own sick way. That’s why neither I nor Father were aware of the situation for a while.”

“Special? Me?” Agnes cocked her head.

Philip and Agnes had become engaged out of mutual goals and convenience. During their engagement, they had become like family—or so Agnes had thought. Philip had never truly cared about Agnes or the Leforts at all.

“...As you can see, the one saving grace is that the person involved still isn’t aware of it,” Kevin said, gesturing to Agnes.

She felt for a moment as if she was being looked upon as an object of pity. Perhaps it was her imagination.

“At any rate, what Philip has done is unforgivable on every single level. He distorted the very foundation of Agnes’s self-esteem.” Claude’s gray eyes flashed, but then his expression immediately softened. “...But at the same time, that at least prevented her from being taken by some other man. I guess I can at least permit him to greet us.”

“You are a kinder man than I, Your Highness. I never want to see that man’s

face again. Although, I certainly would like to see his reaction when he spots you and my sister canoodling.” Kevin spat the words out, and even though his expression didn’t change, it was obvious how angry he really was.

“You really love Agnes, don’t you, Kevin?” Claude asked.

“I do. She’s my precious sister.”

“Is that all?”

“...Well, actually, to be honest, she was my first love.”

“What?” Agnes yelped, surprised by what Kevin had just admitted.

At the same moment, a mushroom sprouted on Kevin’s shoulder. It had a dark gray cap with dark brown warts resembling leopard print, probably an *Amanita spiccacea*.

“To be honest, it was my cousin, Agnes Murre, who was my first love. She would come by to visit now and then, a sweet girl with hair the color you only see in dreams. Who could blame a young boy for burning with the flames of fleeting love?” Kevin addressed that last part to Claude, who nodded. Kevin plucked the mushroom and handed it to him, which was met by an even bigger nod from Claude.

“What are you saying, Kevin? I’ve never heard that before,” Agnes said.

“Well, that’s because I never mentioned it before. When you were little, Sis, you were so adorable. It was like you were a fairy in human form. You smiled often, wore flouncy, bright-colored dresses, and showed me all your mushrooms like you were really excited by them.”

Kevin smiled mistily, reminiscing about the past, but then his expression stiffened.

“But after the carriage accident, you became reclusive and stopped leaving the house. Seeing you that way, I decided to take care of you and treat you as close family. Father and I were the only people you would ever really look in the eyes. I wanted to live up to the level of trust you placed in us. That’s why we are now brother and sister. And you feel the same way, don’t you, Sis?”

“You’re my precious little brother, Kevin,” she said without hesitation.

Gazing at Agnes, Kevin smiled broadly and nodded emphatically. “And so, what I spoke of moments before is simply a story from when we were mere cousins. You really were like a fairy back then... Who could have guessed you would turn out to be such a handful.”

It sounded like he was complimenting her, but was he really?

Agnes smiled a little awkwardly, which was met by an amused grin from Kevin.

“In the past, you used to show me your mushrooms with a sunny smile. Dinner was always a mushroom buffet whenever you came to visit.”

“That sounds like something out of a dream to me,” Claude said dreamily. Of course, the mushroom fetishist latched onto the part about the mushrooms.

In the past, when the mushrooms sprouted, Agnes hadn’t minded so much. *When was it exactly that the mushrooms started to feel like a curse*, she wondered.

“Once, the boys in the neighborhood were picking on me, so I covered them with mushrooms,” she said, looking back through her memories. “They called me the Peach Blossom Mushroom Princess... I think that was when I started to dread the sprouting of the mushrooms.”

“Hmm. I don’t think they were actually picking on you, though,” Kevin said. “Boys that age are just like that. I should know, since I was one myself. They get this urge to bully the girls that they like, to get their attention.”

Bullying? To get their attention? No one likes being bullied. How is that supposed to get someone’s attention? Surely it would only serve to make them dislike the bully and avoid them?

...Well, at any rate, those mushroomified bullying boys gave Agnes a wide berth after that.

“You never bully me, Kevin,” Agnes said.

“Of course, you can’t hope to win someone’s full trust like that... But that might be where your issues started. Then after that, the carriage accident happened, and you were just starting to get back on your feet from that when

Philip happened..." Kevin trailed off, his frown intensifying.

"Even recalling it now gets my blood boiling... Sis, go ahead and canoodle and flirt with Prince Claude all you like. If possible, do it at a ball where Philip is a guest. Radiate an aura of happiness so intense it makes everyone witnessing it blush."

"You can't be serious, Kevin?" She blinked at him.

"It would make for the finest revenge." Kevin grinned wickedly, and Agnes felt a tremble of worry for the future ahead.

Agnes was grateful that she was so treasured by both Kevin and her father, Benoit, of course. But their mutual lust for revenge against Philip really needed to be nipped in the bud.

"Incidentally, I haven't seen Philip at any royal functions of late. Although, he was never all that sociable. Perhaps he's still in shock from losing Agnes."

That one comment from Claude made a cold shiver go down Agnes's spine.

Could it be? Had her all-out mushroom attack really wreaked havoc on Philip?

"Philip, for all his faults, is a fringe royal, isn't he? Up to this point, had you and my sister really never met face-to-face, Your Highness?" Kevin asked.

"We hadn't. I first met Agnes right after Philip publicly called off their engagement. If only we had met earlier, I wonder if I would have noticed right away that she was my Dragonmate."

"So, it was pure coincidence that you never met, after all. Oh, if only she had met you earlier, Your Highness..." Kevin groaned.

There was no point dwelling on the what-ifs now, but perhaps things would have been different, indeed. At any rate, had she not met Claude before getting married to Philip, no doubt she would have completely become his slave. The fact that she herself hadn't even noticed what was happening... That was proof that Philip's influence over her had been no trifling matter.

"...No, I don't think it was a coincidence that we never met." A small cough drew their eyes his way, and Claude rubbed his mouth for a moment, seemingly deep in thought. "For all his faults, Philip is a royal. In the course of six years

with her as his fiancée, neither I nor any one of the other princes ever met Agnes. There's a limit to coincidences, you know."

"What do you mean?" Agnes asked.

Indeed, thinking back on it now, she had only been to greet the king at the palace once after getting engaged. Other than that, she had never met any of the other royals. Perhaps they were busy. Perhaps there was no reason for her to meet them, since Philip would break with the royal family upon marriage. It had never seemed particularly strange to her.

"He never took you anywhere that royals would be expected to be in attendance, right? Now that I think about it, he also never took you anywhere that any eminent aristocrats might be. I can only assume he was doing that on purpose," Claude said.

Agnes wasn't sure who he meant by "eminent aristocrats." But she had never really chatted or danced with anyone else but Philip, so she surely hadn't met anyone of note.

"He made you wear drab clothes. I can well imagine he did that to keep you from catching the eyes of young men of a certain age. Agnes, did he never say anything to you?"

Finding herself suddenly faced with a question, Agnes sifted through her memories.

"...At a ball held right after we became engaged, once we finished greeting His Majesty, I did ask him if we were going to greet any of the other royals next. That put Philip into a sudden black mood, and we ended up just going straight home. 'Your hair will only offend the royal family,' he said. So I just assumed that none of the other royals wanted to meet me."

As soon as she was finished speaking, Kevin slapped his hand hard against his chair.

"That dirty, rotten royal! He was brainwashing you ever since the start, wasn't he?"

As Kevin's shout rang out, a mushroom popped up on his arm. It was an orange, flat-capped mushroom with a depression in the center. A *Lactarius*

torminosus. It was unusual for mushrooms to sprout on Kevin, but no doubt this one had responded to his emotional outburst.

But whereas Kevin was steaming mad enough to make mushrooms appear, Claude remained stony-faced.

“I believe everyone was aware that Philip had himself a fiancée. But as the lady herself never came out in society, no one paid much attention. And then, not long after his engagement, Philip’s negative reputation started to smooth out to some extent. There was talk that it was all down to his fiancée’s positive influence.”

Kevin plucked the *Lactarius torminosus* with a sulky scowl.

Claude sighed before continuing, “But it just seemed that he was drawing support from you, Agnes, not that he himself had really changed. After he wrecked your engagement, his reputation quickly deteriorated again. Well, at any rate, he’s barely shown his face in society for the past month, it seems.”

“No doubt seeing my sister with you, Prince Claude, has decimated the man. At last. Serves him right, if you ask me.”

Kevin’s tone seemed to have lightened up a little, but Agnes was so worried about Philip...or, to put it more accurately, about what havoc the mushrooms might have wreaked, that she could barely stand it.



Mushrooms of the Day

Ganoderma applanatum

Gray or whitish brown cap with age rings like a tree.

It grows year by year, and large ones can reach 12 inches.

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 the 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.

It's not edible, but I wouldn't want you to try eating a mushroom the size of a chair anyway.

It overheard the talk about seating positions and sprouted to say, "You can sit here if you like?"

Tuberaceae (Tuber)

A lumpy, marbled mushroom with multiple small projections.

The so-called truffle is considered one of the three major edible delicacies.

The price difference varies between white and black varieties, so it's become an issue of late.

When it heard talk of being buried in the ground, it thought it was being summoned and sprouted joyfully.

But it was handed over to Claude this time. Just once, it thinks, it would like to adorn Agnes's dinner table instead.

Amanita spissacea

A mushroom with a dark gray cap and dark brown warts, resembling leopard print.

It loves gossip, and the *Cuphophyllus virgineus* is its gossip pal.

"The young mushrooms these days have lost their way," is its favorite catchphrase.

Kevin's talk of romance set its mushroom gossip radar off, and it just had to sprout.

It tapped...er, sprouted on Kevin's shoulder, saying: "Ah, to be young!"

***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. In fact, it's always

better not to put mushrooms in your mouth if you're not sure what they are.

It sprouted in solidarity with Kevin's anger.

"Even if you spit me out before the poison starts to work, I'll still burn your tongue!" it shouts as its sales pitch.

Chapter 3: Enduring and Acclimating

“**WHAT’S** wrong, Agnes?”

Agnes had clearly been deep in silent thought for some time, her gaze trained on her hands. This prompted Claude to check in on her. To keep him from having the mistaken impression that she was feeling sick, she quickly raised her head.

“I’m fine. It’s just...has Philip really not been seen in high society this past month?”

“I don’t know all the details myself, but I haven’t seen him nor hair of him myself, nor heard anything. Are you worried?” Claude asked, concerned.

“No, not about Philip, especially. It’s more about...the *mushrooms*,” Agnes said in a scandalous whisper.

“The mushrooms?”

Apparently her response was unexpected, as Kevin fixed her with a surprised look at the same time Claude did.

“When I spoke with Philip at that ball, he said that he had me tie my hair back and wear drab colors for my own benefit,” she explained. “...Ah, no, I believe he said it was for the good of the Lefort family. Once I realized he was wrong, I’m afraid a great deal of mushrooms sprouted on him.”

The two men looked surprised to hear about her mushroom onslaught. Kevin knew that Philip had been basically immune to the shrooms for many years, so the concept of mushrooms sprouting on him at all came as a surprise.

“I see. So hearing it from the horse’s mouth, so to speak, was enough to lift the curse. It sounds like he was trying to get you to become him again, but his actions ended up backfiring. Serves him right.” Kevin grinned wickedly. He seemed to be enjoying this.

But Claude's face registered clear envy. "S-So, then, what kind of mushrooms sprouted?" Gray eyes flashing, Claude leaned forward with great interest.

When she spoke the words "a great deal of mushrooms," it had sparked the attention of their resident mushroom fetishist.

"...You want me to list them all?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," he said eagerly.

"All of them?"

"Oh, yes."

"...Very well."

It was difficult to decline, with Claude's shining, boyish gaze on her. She could see the excitement writ large on his face. She was quite sure it wasn't just her imagination.

"Well, first, an *Astraeus hygrometricus* sprouted on his arm."

"Ah. I adore the shape."

Only a mushroom fetishist would have the characteristics of different mushrooms committed to heart.

Feeling oddly impressed, Agnes thought back to the mushrooms that had sprouted that day. "For some reason, though, it was orange."

"What? I've never seen that color variation. A new strain?" The mushroom fetishist leaped on that tidbit of information greedily, and Agnes felt herself recoil just a little.

"Er, no. I think it was probably just because of me. I had the same thing happen once before."

"I see. An orange *Astraeus hygrometricus*...goodness, it must have looked just like a half-peeled orange."

"Yes, exactly," Agnes nodded.

"I see, I see. Orange, eh? I would have loved to have seen it." Claude's eyes misted over, and he gazed off into the distance romantically. He might have looked quite dashing if it wasn't a mushroom he was dreaming of.

The mushrooms put a stop to any swooning feelings she might have felt.

Agnes felt like she was deepening her understanding of mushrooms a little.

“Then the *Astraeus hygrometricus* began to multiply, until Philip had two on each arm, four altogether,” she recalled. “Then I’m afraid they blew spores at him.”

“Excellent!” Claude’s responses to what she was saying were totally wrong in tone, but she had to look past them. Otherwise, they would be at this all day.

“Then, a *Podostroma cornudamae* sprouted on his head.”

“Aha! That poisonous mushroom, eh? That must have made for a stunning headpiece,” Claude said enthusiastically.

“Then on both shoulders...a pair of Bleeding Teeth.”

“Ahhh!!!” Claude’s voice was growing louder and louder with excitement.

“Then on his back, I’m afraid I sprouted a *Clathrus archeri*.”

“What a spectacle that must have been!”

“And a *Clitocybe acromelalga* sprouted inside his mouth.”

“Goodness me!” Claude exclaimed.

As Agnes sighed with mixed feelings, Claude flung himself back in his chair, his expression rapturous.

“That’s amazing. Each specimen was perfectly suited for the attack. Gosh, am I envious! That’s a display of shrooms such as I could only ever dream of!”

Agnes cringed a little as she observed Claude, smiling daftly as he mulled over the list of mushrooms she’d just divulged.

“Hey, I don’t know the names of any of those mushrooms. What do they do?” Kevin asked.

She was grateful for his contribution to the conversation. Laymen often didn’t know the names of mushrooms or the particulars of their effects or appearances...unlike a certain fetishist.

“Erm...the ones on both his arms that looked like a half-peeled orange, they

released spores right into Philip's face," Agnes recounted. "The red, projectile-like one on top of his head made him look like he was wearing antlers. The white ones on either shoulder leaked a red sap that stained his jacket. And the one on his back looked like an octopus's tentacles and released a nasty stink."

"...Wow, that sounds horrible." Kevin grimaced.

"Yes. To put it mildly, it was a catastrophe," Agnes agreed.

"Indeed. Take that, Philip!" Claude cheered. "Compliments of Agnes."

Before Agnes could say they were hardly *compliments*, a mushroom sprouted on Claude's arm. Based on the golden cap, it was probably a Koganetake. It was a sort of jaunty color. Perhaps it was influenced by what Claude was saying somehow.

"Also, it was a *Clitocybe acromelalga* that sprouted in his mouth. It looked normal, but..." she trailed off.

"What? Does it have a bad taste?" Kevin asked.

"No, it's not about the taste," she shook her head. "It's, uh, poisonous."

Kevin's eyes went round with surprise. "A poisonous mushroom? You sprouted a good one, eh, Sis? Is Philip on the verge of death right now?"

"No. He only swallowed a little. I don't think his life is in any danger. It's just, it causes some rather unique symptoms..."

Kevin nodded, encouraging her to continue, but she couldn't get the words out.

It also felt difficult, in Claude's presence, for her to describe how the toxins caused pain in the extremities, such as the fingers, toes, and *penis*. Fortunately, Claude took that pause as a chance to answer for her.

"Once *Clitocybe acromelalga* infiltrates the system, it begins attacking the extremities such as the fingers, toes, and penis...after an incubation period of four to five days," he explained. "The agonizing pain can continue for up to a month. In the worst-case scenario, it can cause necrosis, but Philip is a fringe royal, after all, and he only ate a little bit, so no doubt he'll experience nothing worse than pain."

“E-Exactly.” Agnes breathed a sigh of relief to have the difficult parts explained for her so that she didn’t have to do it. Seeing just how relieved she was, though, made Claude grin. No doubt he had seen how uncomfortable Agnes looked and taken it upon himself to provide the explanation for Kevin. She felt pleased but also a little embarrassed. She allowed her gaze to casually slide away.

“Then, there is the *Podostroma cornudamae*, which is another type of poisonous mushroom that can cause harm just from touching it,” Claude continued. “If it sprouted on Philip’s head, I’d be surprised if his scalp gets through unscathed.”

Kevin was now visibly smirking. “Well, that’s just dandy as far as I’m concerned. And nothing at all in the scheme of things, not compared to the six years of suffering he put my sister through. Hey, if his scalp comes off, doesn’t that mean his hair will come off, too? If so, Father would be so delighted.”

Indeed, Benoit had said something about wishing baldness upon Philip before. You could say that his heart’s deepest desire had been granted, then.

“But will he be all right?” Agnes asked, concern lacing her quiet voice.

“He won’t die. Nor will he suffer necrosis. Just pain,” Claude said, shrugging. “Even if he blames it all on you, the other aristocrats won’t understand what he’s saying.”

True, none of the aristocracy was aware of Agnes’s mushroom curse.

“If he starts ranting about mushrooms, certain people might think I’m involved somehow. But I would never give any of my beloved mushrooms to Philip. They’ll believe me if I explain that. And the ones who don’t know about my mushroom proclivities will simply think that Philip has gone mad.”

“Besides, we don’t know for sure that it’s the mushrooms’ fault that Philip hasn’t been seen in public lately,” Kevin said. “Don’t worry about it too much either way, Sis.”

“I... I’ll try.”

Right. It’s a fact that Philip had suffered a mushroom attack, yes, but there’s no way to know how effective the attack itself had been. With Kevin and Claude

encouraging Agnes to let it go, perhaps she should stop worrying about it.

“Ah, it looks like we’ve arrived.” Just as Claude had said, the carriage’s swaying and shaking had stopped.

Claude then escorted Agnes to a flower meadow. Spread before her was a sea of yellow, pink, white, and red as far as the eye could see. The colorful flowers swayed tightly together. Their sweet scent rose on the breeze to tickle her nose, and Agnes found herself deeply inhaling the fragrance.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“This is where they grow the flowers for selling,” Claude explained. “They’re in full bloom right now, just waiting to be picked. I asked the gardeners to wait to harvest them until after today.”

“Oh no. I feel bad putting them out like that just to see it,” Agnes said.

Selling... So, someone makes their living from these flowers. The price of flowers varied based on the condition of their budding, and flowers that started to wilt tended to fetch lower prices, making them a burden to get rid of. She didn’t want to be the cause of hurting someone’s livelihood.

“It’s all right,” Claude assured her. “This meadow is located close to the center of the kingdom, so they’ll be picked right at the peak of their blooming.”

“Oh, I see.” Agnes breathed a sigh of relief, and by her side, Claude reached out for the flowers. He picked a pink one and tucked it into Agnes’s hair.

Appraising her for a moment, his gray eyes softened, and he smiled at Agnes.

“Yes, that suits you very well. Very pretty.”

“...Gack!”

Agnes could only produce a choking sound as she flapped her lips, and just then a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s shoulder. It was a white, frilly mass, probably a *Sparassis crispa*. But Agnes didn’t have the wherewithal to think about mushrooms.



“...I really think it would be better if I wasn’t here.” Kevin spoke those terrifying words from behind her, and as soon as they registered with Agnes, she spun around and streaked over to him, clamping onto his arm.

“N-No! Stay here!” Agnes was trembling as she begged him, and Kevin sighed with a put-upon air.

“Listen, Sis. Today was supposed to be about practicing riding the carriage, wasn’t it? For you to practice riding the carriage with Claude...for you to practice being alone together. So just pretend like I’m not here. Now, let’s start over.” Kevin gave Agnes a little push, but she froze up in front of Claude.

Claude gave her a gentle, patient smile. “You don’t have to be so nervous. Agnes, which flower do you like?” After he asked her that question, Agnes felt her muscles untense a little.

“Erm...the white ones. The buttercups.”

The rainbow mix of colors was very pretty, but Agnes wasn’t used to too much color, and the white ones seemed to put her at ease.

“This one?” Claude pointed to a flower, and Agnes nodded. He picked it for her and tucked it into her hair. “...I knew it. The flower looks all the more beautiful adorning you.”

He smiled sweetly at Agnes, and she slowly rotated on the spot, like a jointed doll whose hinges had rusted over. “...Kevin. Kevin, I can’t do this...” She clamped onto his arm again, and then she felt a gust ruffle her hair as he sighed again.

“Yes, yes. Now tell me, what is it exactly that you can’t do?”

“I... I mean. The flowers. And...b-beautiful! Suits me! He said!”

“That sounds normal.”

“It is not normal!” Agnes was feeling tearful now, and she gazed entreatingly at Kevin as he tucked a white Baby’s Breath flower from the meadow into her hair.

“That looks great on you, Sis. You look very beautiful.”

“Th-Thank you.”

Kevin shrugged his shoulders, seeming mildly exasperated as Agnes blushed. “There, see, you were fine with that! Now give some of that to Claude, and magnify it by three!”

“Well, *you’re* okay, Kevin.” Agnes blinked at Kevin but got only a sigh in return.

“Ah, I give up. Here we see Philip’s curse at work again. Is it really so difficult for you to accept a compliment from someone other than a family member?”

“Yes, it is; it is very difficult.”

“There, see? Philip always told you to hide, to conceal, to be drab, to not stand out. He imprinted it onto your subconscious that your hair color was universally hated. Thanks to that, you’re not used to being complimented.”

Agnes wasn’t sure what “imprinted onto your subconscious” meant, but he was right. She wasn’t used to being complimented. She always assumed there was nothing about her worth complimenting.

A white-capped mushroom suddenly sprouted on Kevin’s arm. It was hard to be sure, but she thought it was probably a *Mycena chlorophos*. It glowed brightly at night, but in the daylight, it looked like a regular white mushroom.

“...I see. In that case, I’ll be sure to compliment Agnes in abundance,” Claude said.

“Please do, Your Highness. We must shower her with compliments befitting a strong-willed young lady.” Kevin plucked the mushroom off his arm as he spoke and handed it to Claude.

...In fact, he had been handing all of his mushrooms to Claude. *When was this little mushroom transaction agreement set up?* she wondered.

“Well, Agnes is gorgeous through and through,” Claude said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “We don’t have to put any effort into it; praise for you will just come naturally.”

“K-Kevin!” Agnes cried pleadingly to her brother. This latest soundbite from Claude had her stretched to her limit.

“Endure it, Sis. Acclimate, Sis. And His Highness is right. You *are* gorgeous. It’s what Father and I have told you all along, right?”

“I know, but...”

Benoit and Kevin were family. It was only natural for them to be kind to her.

But Claude was different.

“Hmph. Next time, you two can ride the carriage by yourselves. I’m even more exhausted watching this than I would be watching canoodling,” he sighed.

“Kevin...”

This was tough enough with Kevin in attendance, but if he left, Agnes might actually die from embarrassment.

“Look. It’s almost time to go, Sis. I’m sure His Highness has other plans after this.”

“R-Right,” she said.

Either way, it was probably better to get away from this beautiful, dangerous flower meadow. If she stayed any longer, Claude would only continue his flower onslaught.

Agnes immediately leaped into the relative safety of the carriage, sensing the two men laughing behind her. But she couldn’t worry about that now. The carriage started off, and inside, Agnes couldn’t bear Claude’s warm smile. She looked up at Kevin beside her instead.

“Um, could you stay with me a little longer?” she asked her brother.

“No,” he said flatly. “I understand you have issues because of Philip, but even Father is worried that you might drive Prince Claude away with all of this.”

If Benoit had to worry about someone, she wished he would worry about her rather than Claude. It was starting to look as though Benoit and Kevin were of the same mind about all this.

“That’s all right,” Claude assured the siblings. “I’m very patient, Agnes. I understand you’re nervous around me. That just goes to show you see me as a man. Also, if you’re nervous, that means mushrooms might sprout, which is

good news for me.”

“...That’s what you’re really after, isn’t it?” Agnes asked dryly.

“I won’t deny it,” he laughed.

Go figure. Agnes getting all nervous and sprouting mushrooms was just fine with Claude, wasn’t it? Perhaps that romantic scene at the flower meadow had been engineered to get him extra mushrooms?

“But you weren’t as skittish back when you and His Highness had that contract relationship, right?” Kevin asked.

“I mean, that was a contract. I thought we were acting,” Agnes argued.

Sure, Claude had been pretty passionate with his performance, and it did make her heart throb, but if she thought it was all an act not meant for her, then she could get through it.

“All we can really do is wait for her to acclimatize to things, I suppose,” Kevin said.

“Seems like it,” Claude agreed, then turned to Agnes. “Agnes, please hold out your hand.”

Agnes held out her hand, confused, and Claude took it before planting a kiss on her fingers.

“Yeek!!!” She shrieked with alarm, and Claude grinned.

A milky-white mushroom sprouted on his shoulder—the old familiar, *Cuphophyllus virgineus*. Then another mushroom sprouted, one that had an ochre-colored cap with a red star shape in the center. That had to be a *Calostoma japonica*. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but seeing the *Calostoma japonica* right after being kissed made her blush.

“Thank you for today. Would you go on an outing with me again?”

“Y-Yesh...” She managed to stammer out a response somehow, and beside her, Kevin gave her an ironic clap.

“Yes, yes, that’s the spirit, Sis.”

That’s the spirit? Is it really, though?

If she carried on like this, she'd end up keeling over, no doubt. Was this really all right after all?

"Let's see... Next time, let us attend a ball together," Claude suggested. "It will be a royal ball, so I want to introduce you to absolutely everyone in the family."

"That sounds like another headache-inducing event..." she groaned. "I'm worried, you know, about the mushrooms..."

It was easy to forget these days, since her mushroom sensitivities had strengthened, but the mushrooms originally tended to react when Agnes was experiencing extreme emotions. Something as nerve-wracking as being introduced to the royal family would come with a high risk of mushrooms.

"It's all right. I'll be there, so we can blame the mushrooms on me," Claude said proudly. "So, feel free to sprout them, or not, whatever the case may be. Just enjoy yourself, Agnes. Ah, and I'll have a dress prepared for you."

"What? No thank you."

She already had plenty of dresses. She could repeat an outfit easily enough. At any rate, no one would be interested in her anyway. No one would even notice her dress.

"Nonsense. It's already been ordered. You must wear it."

"All right..."

Under pressure, all Agnes could do was nod. Kevin grinned in amusement.

"You're getting the hang of things, Your Highness. Keep that up, and we'll be golden."

"You've got it."

The two exchanged grins, and Agnes felt her heart sink.

Since when did the two of them get so chummy?

She was glad they were getting along, but being under fire from both sides...it was too much.

Agnes let a small sigh escape her lips.



Mushrooms of the Day

The Let’s Attack Philip Squad (Operation Avenge Agnes)

Astraeus hygrometricus

Podostroma cornudamae

Bleeding Tooth

Clathrus archeri

Clitocybe acromelalga

When Philip's mushroom immunity wore off, the mushrooms launched an all-out attack. It's a long story, so please refer to *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess! Volume 1*. In particular, I don't think I can discuss *Clitocybe acromelalga's* attack features without crying...maybe one or two tears. *Clitocybe acromelalga*, *Podostroma cornudamae*... Their attacks are really top-notch.

Koganetake

A mushroom with a cap covered in golden powder, also known as kinako take in Japanese. It's covered in plenty of powder, like kinako powder.

It's edible, but eating it raw will cause food poisoning, so please boil it first.

How do the mushroom braves know to do that?

It heard the word "compliment" and sprouted, shaking its cap as if to say, "You wanna see something worth complimenting? Check out this gold!" Apparently, it misjudged the mood.

It ended up shaking powder all over.

Sparassis crispa

A mushroom with a white cap and 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'm the only one who should decorate Agnes!" it sprouted boldly, but it didn't end up getting to decorate her hair.

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. It makes you wonder why the mushroom braves are always trying things that smell bad.

When Agnes was feeling like there was nothing good about her, it sprouted to say, "You're wrong. You glow bright just like I do, Agnes." But it sprouted during the day, so there was no glow.

Cuphophyllus virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom.

It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

“He kissed her hand!” It squeaked, sprouting with the *Calostoma japonica*.

Recently those two seem quite cuddly, so it couldn’t be more delighted.

Calostoma japonica

The cap part is a yellowish sphere with a red star-shaped growth on top.

It looks like a Takoyaki deep-fried octopus ball with a hole in the top, stuffed with red beni-shoga pickled ginger.

The Japanese name includes the word “lipstick,” and it does look like lipstick!

It was brought along by the scream of, “He’s kissing her!” but alas, it was only a kiss on the back of the hand.

One day they will kiss for real, and the *Calostoma japonica* is thinking of sprouting two of itself to recreate it in mushroom form.

Chapter 4: Happy Miscalculations and Mushroom Sins

“**AGNES**, that dress suits you beautifully.”

“Thank you.”

On the day of the ball, Claude was in high spirits when he arrived at the Lefort residence to pick Agnes up. Was he in high spirits over attending a ball with Agnes? Getting to pick her up in the carriage? Or was it about how she looked in the dress he gifted her?

“Tell me if it’s just my imagination, but this dress...it’s a mushroom, isn’t it?” Agnes guessed. “*Amanita muscaria*, to be precise?”

The dress she had received from Claude was red with cute white dots. The puffy sleeves were finished with white lace and rustled pleasantly as she moved. There was a red bow on the bodice, and the ribbon was studded with pearls. Around her waist was a red corset with white frills. The skirt was comprised of white material with red thread overlaid, and the entire thing was studded with large pearls. The shoes and gloves were red, and there was a pearl bracelet and necklace, plus a white lace and pearl hairpin.

At first glance, the dress appeared to be expensive and beautiful. But Agnes stood in front of the mirror with a dazed look as the final adjustments were made.

Wait a minute. This is just a big Amanita muscaria masquerading as a dress, she realized. She knew Claude was mushroom-obsessed, but for him to actually gift his beloved with...a dress designed after a specific mushroom...

Agnes was filled with a feeling she couldn’t define, and she debated changing outfits. However, she had promised to wear the dress Claude had given her, so she couldn’t do that to him.

“Ah, you noticed then?” he asked, delighted. “I just knew you would, my mushroom princess.”

If he had denied it, she intended to cross-examine him, but Claude showed no sign of trying to hide his intentions at all. She felt deflated, like a poisonous mushroom that had lost all its spores. Instead of trying to skirt around the topic, Claude was beaming happily. A mushroom sprouted on his chest with a jaunty pop.

Red cap, white spots...*Amanita muscaria*. The very mushroom this dress had been designed to mimic.

“Look. Even the mushrooms are happy to see how well that dress suits you!”

The mushroom fetishist had finally begun a sort of imagined dialogue with the mushrooms, where he guessed at their reasoning for showing up. It was more likely the mushroom had popped up to say, “Hey you, don’t copy my design,” but it was easier to let Claude think what he liked.

“I’m not so sure about that, but...a dress is a dress, I suppose,” she conceded. “I still think a mushroom dress is taking things a bit far, though...”

“But it’s splendid.” Claude beamed, and another two mushrooms appeared on his chest.

“The mushrooms are going wild already, and we haven’t even gone out yet. I’m a ball of nerves. Can we call the whole thing off?” she asked, hopeful.

“No can do. Besides, I told you, there’s no need to worry about the mushrooms, remember?” Claude plucked the two new *Amanita muscaria*, clearly in a great mood.

Perhaps he was enjoying the mushroom harvest. But for Agnes, this was an ominous, fungal-filled start to the evening.



“**YOUR** Highness. Thank you for taking the trouble to come all this way to pick my daughter up. Thank you very much, indeed.” Benoit appeared in the entrance hall, greeting Claude with a smile.

“For this beautiful lady who holds my heart in her hand, the pleasure is all mine,” Claude said suavely.

“Lucky you, eh, Agnes?”

Benoit's daughter was romantically involved with a prince, who had come all the way out to their manor to pick her up himself. He had even called her beautiful, to boot.

All splendid on paper, indeed, but the truth is marred by mushrooms, Agnes thought wryly.

"Oh, Father, don't tease me. I mean, look! My dress is a *mushroom*," Agnes gestured to her outfit. "And several have sprouted already. It doesn't feel like a good night, fungus-wise. I think I had better stay home instead..."

"Worry not. You are very pretty, even as a mushroom, my dear," Benoit assured her in a not-so-reassuring way. "And any mushrooms that sprout can be swiftly harvested and tossed to your special someone here. I'm sure he will be quite delighted by the prospect."

"Delighted how?"

Would the good name of Lefort remain unblemished if its noble daughter was seen sprouting mushrooms all over the place? Benoit would be dubbed the Mushroom Count. Had he no sense of impending danger?

"At any rate, I will be delighted," Claude announced. "I only wish I could harvest them myself."

"Please don't say such scandalous things with such a nice smile and suave voice. You are quite the mushroom fetishist, aren't you, Claude?" she accused wryly.

"Agnes." Benoit's tone had a sharp, warning edge to it, and Agnes quickly remembered her position and lowered her head.

Right. No matter how mushroom-mad he was, Claude was still a prince. And he was second in line to the throne. It would not do for her to be calling him a fetishist and a freak.

"I'm terribly sor—"

"...Listen well, Agnes. If I'm a mushroom freak, that also means I'm a freak for you, as well. Is that not a splendid thing?" Claude suggested with a big smile.

"...Er, come again?" Agnes gaped at him, unable to follow his logic.

“I heard good news from Kevin,” Benoit said. “Philip’s hair has fallen out at the roots. Today is a perfect day for a banquet!”

“Uh, no, it’s a ball... Are you going too, Father? In that case, we should go together.” Agnes immediately thought of having the whole family go together in the carriage, but Benoit shook his head.

“Agnes. You must not stand in the way of a man who is only happy to accept not only you but your mushrooms as well. He is prepared to take full responsibility for the mushrooms, so please go. And have a hearty chuckle over Philip’s balding head.” He sounded so serious up until that last point, and then it got a bit weird.

“Why are you so obsessed with Philip’s hair and whether or not it’s attached to his head?” Agnes asked, eyebrows raised.

“This may not be something we should be discussing in front of His Highness, but I believe Philip isn’t over you yet, Agnes,” Benoit said.

“But how do you know? Have you seen him in person?” Agnes asked.

Kevin had said that Philip hadn’t come by the Lefort residence lately. So there was little chance Benoit would have encountered him.

“No, I have not seen him myself,” he said. “But I’ve seen him plenty over the past six years. He is not the type to give up so easily, especially when he knows he should.”

“He was very rude to our family the last time we met,” Agnes agreed.

“He wasn’t like that at all when he came around proposing a union between our families,” Benoit said, sadly shaking his head. “Well, anyway, Philip is reaping what he has sown. It serves him right. So, let his hair follicles die and wither from the roots.”

“But why his hair?” Agnes asked again, incredulous.

She had never been able to make much sense of Benoit’s animosity toward Philip’s hair. It wasn’t as if Benoit was in any way balding himself, so it was a mystery why he seemed so fixated on Philip’s follicles.

“He may only be a fringe royal, but a royal he still is. I could not squash the

marriage talks from my end,” Benoit explained. “But what’s the harm in cursing the man’s follicles? Pay him back for the hairy harassment in kind, I say!”

Claude, who had been watching their conversation in silence, suddenly snorted as if he couldn’t contain himself a moment longer. “No one will believe that his hair has fallen out as a result of a mushroom attack. If they did believe it, they would attribute it to me somehow. And if I tell them it was payback for laying his hands on my beloved, they would be sure to voice no complaint.”

“Your Highness! Simply wonderful! How glad I am to hear those words!”

For some reason, the two grasped each other’s hands and gazed at one another.

First Kevin, now Benoit. Her family members were getting entirely too chummy with Claude.

“Your Highness. I’m sure that Agnes...well, Agnes will prove a handful to you. And yet, she is my precious and irreplaceable daughter. Please, offer her your protection.” Benoit gazed at Claude with earnest, solemn eyes, and Claude nodded, his gaze equally earnest and solemn.

“Of course. Agnes is one in a billion in my eyes. I swear to protect her.”

Benoit exhaled, clearly greatly relieved, and turned his kind gaze on Agnes.

“Then, off you go, Agnes.”



IT was the first time just the two of them rode in the carriage together.

Agnes felt a little nervous, but Claude sat down opposite her without saying anything. She knew he was giving her a bit of space, and it helped her to relax somewhat. She was finally comfortable enough to look out of the window now. She was starting to think that perhaps it wasn’t such a scary thing, after all, going out in the carriage with Claude.

“Today is a royally sponsored ball, so naturally, most of the royal family will be in attendance. I intend to introduce you to them, but...is that all right with you?” Claude asked, checking with her.

“What exactly does that entail?” she asked.

No doubt he was warning her to brace herself for harsh comments about her hair.

“I am a royal, and I carry the mark of the dragon. When I introduce you as my Dragonmate, it’s tantamount to announcing that I’ve decided to spend my future with you. There won’t be any turning back. Is that...all right with you?”

Agnes’s mouth fell open. She hadn’t been expecting a reason like that.

“Future...”

“Of course, we won’t marry until you’re absolutely certain about how you feel regarding it, Agnes. But you can expect them to begin treating you like my fiancée. To you, I may be just a man, but to me, you are a once-in-a-lifetime woman. I could not bear to lose you to another.” His gray eyes flashed with that final sentence.

“Marriage...” she mumbled.

“An engagement, to start with. Does that...displease you?”

Claude gazed at Agnes with concern, and she blinked for a moment before slowly shaking her head.

“I adore you, Claude. But please, wait a while longer for marriage. I’m afraid I can’t quite keep up, emotionally speaking,” she told him truthfully.

“You’d be fine with...an engagement?” he asked cautiously.

“...Yes.”

As soon as he had her answer, a soft smile appeared on Claude’s face.

“I am delighted. Thank you, Agnes.” He took hold of Agnes’s hand, passionately, and pressed the back of it against his lips.

“Eeek!”

She unleashed a pathetic scream and yanked her hand back, but Claude simply grinned at her. Her heart was hammering against her ribcage. What was she to do?

With a pop, a white, flat mass appeared on the back of Claude’s glove. It was obviously a mushroom, but what an unusual shape! It seemed to have small

open holes all over it... Probably a *Wolfiporia extensa* Ginns.

Since he couldn't very well attend a ball with a mysterious mass stuck to the back of his glove, Claude plucked the mushroom off and put it in his pocket.

"Um...I'm not used to things like that. I do wish you would refrain," she said quietly.

"You're not? But you were engaged to Philip, were you not?" Claude looked at her curiously as he stashed the rest of the mushrooms in his pocket.

"Philip? Doing something like kissing my hand?" she scoffed.

"...He never did?"

Agnes shook her head, and Claude's expression darkened a tad.

"The forehead, then."

"No."

"Cheek?"

"No."

"The lips."

"P-Perish the thought."

Agnes blushed, overwhelmed by what she was being asked, pressing her hands against her burning cheeks.

Claude was silent for a moment, but then...

"That is...a happy miscalculation, then."

"You're...happy?"

How could he find happiness in discussing such an embarrassing topic? What was he thinking?

"But of course. I hated the mere thought of someone else touching my beloved. But I see. So Philip never even kissed you. What a fool! Still, his loss is my gain." Claude stood up, a grin on his lips, and then sat himself down right next to Agnes. "You rode the carriage with him, though? And felt fine during the ride?"

“Yes, I did. Philip was...he was like a relative, almost.”

“I see.”

She had ridden in carriages with Philip, but they had never sat side by side like this. She was just starting to calm down, so having Claude suddenly sit beside her like this was making her heart pound harder than ever.

“Did you ever hold hands?” Claude placed his hand on Agnes’s as he spoke.

Shocked, she tried to pull her hand out from under his, but he held on and squeezed.

“Only when he was escorting me,” she said.

“You danced together, right?”

“A few times.”

She hadn’t been to too many balls, and she’d had even fewer opportunities to dance. Philip said it would be better for Agnes not to draw attention, and at first, she believed him. But after dancing together a few times, it became clear that Philip was not very good at dancing, and she started to guess that his reticence was simply because he himself did not want to dance.

It wasn’t as if Agnes particularly wanted to dance herself, and she certainly didn’t want to draw attention. So she generally left early, without ever venturing onto the dance floor.

“...So he held you this close as you danced, then?” As he spoke, Claude’s arm reached out and pulled Agnes closer by the waist. Before she even knew what was happening, he had pulled her upper body against his, and she could hear his breathing.

“Um...”

Unsure what to do, she lifted her face, looking for help, and then those gray eyes were right in front of her.

“...And still, he *didn’t* kiss you?”

“No.”

She wished he would stop asking such embarrassing questions. She felt her

cheeks burn again, and she looked down, unable to hold his gaze.

“I see. Wow, he’s something else. What man could be this close to you and not want to touch you?”

“Er... Um...”

She wasn’t sure what he was so impressed about, but this closeness was choking her. This angle was awkward, but the worst thing was that her heart was pounding so hard that it hurt.

“What?” he asked.

“Y-Your arm...”

She was about to reach her breaking point, and she wanted that arm out from around her waist pronto. She couldn’t put it into words very well, but Claude seemed to know what she meant, and he released his grip on her.

But he remained sitting beside her and made no effort to move away.

“Aren’t you going to go back to your seat?” she ventured.

“You want me to?”

“That’s not what I said.”

If she admitted to wanting him to go back to his seat, that would be the same as saying she didn’t want him sitting beside her. It would be terribly rude to say something like that to Claude, and she was afraid of hurting his feelings.

“You don’t mind me being here?” he inquired.

“I don’t...mind. As long as you don’t, um, touch,” she said quietly.

“I see.”

Agnes’s request took all her strength to make, but for some reason, Claude was chuckling.

“Hey, Agnes.”

“What is it?”

“...I love you.”

With his sudden confession of love came a mushroom, sprouting on his

shoulder. It had light orange-yellow caps, a *Rickenella fibula*. But Agnes didn't give a jot about mushrooms at the moment.

"Wh-What? Where did that come from?" she squeaked.

"I just felt like saying it."

"Goodness..."

How was her heart supposed to hold up with him throwing these bombs at her, just because he felt like it?

"Agnes. You mustn't hold back when there's something that you don't like. Talk to me about it. All right?"

"But you're so busy, Claude."

"It's generally accepted in royal life that a man with the mark of the dragon on him must prioritize his Dragonmate above all else. So please, don't worry about it. Besides, you're supposed to be trying to become a strong-willed young woman, right? This is the bare minimum, surely." He grinned impishly at her, as if he had no concept of the stricken expression that was no doubt on her face.

If this was all being done on a whim by him, she wished he would lay off a little.

"I'm not trying to become that! Besides, wouldn't that be a tremendous burden?"

"I don't mind being burdened by you, Agnes."

"Well, I mind."

Grinning, Claude plucked the mushroom and placed it into his pocket.

Could he be teasing Agnes simply in an attempt to get mushrooms from her?

She snuck a glance up at him beside her, and his gray eyes softened as they looked upon her. She felt embarrassed, but she didn't mind. It was an odd feeling, and Agnes placed a hand on her chest to steady herself.



THEY arrived at the palace, the venue for the ball, and Claude escorted her inside. Agnes found herself the recipient of sharp gazes, walking in on the arm

of the fourth-born prince.

In high society, Agnes was a nobody really, just a count's daughter. No doubt the sight of her had stirred up all of the young women who had been gunning for the fourth-born prince themselves. She couldn't imagine that would all just go away if they became engaged. Far from it. She would be receiving sharp looks of an entirely different kind then.

She realized again what a monumental thing it really was to get engaged to a handsome prince.

"Agnes, are you all right?"

She was not all right. And it was clearly about to get worse.

The former fiancée of the king's nephew was about to be introduced as the Dragonmate of a prince who bore the crest of the dragon. When the king heard that, how would he feel, as a father? It was hardly the ideal way for his son to meet his mate. No doubt he wouldn't be happy about it.

"I'm... I'm fi..."

But before Agnes could finish her sentence, a mushroom popped up on Claude's arm. It had a velvety cap...clearly a *Lactifluus volemus*. It released a milky sap when scratched. It would not do for it to stain Claude's clothing.

She reached out to pluck it off in a hurry, but Claude laid his own hand over Agnes's.

"You'll dirty your gloves, my dear. My gloves are white, so it matters not. Let me."

Of course, the mushroom fetishist had seen through to the source of Agnes's anxiety.

Claude neatly plucked the mushroom and then handed it to a nearby servant. Surely he wasn't about to have it disposed of? She looked at him in shock, but Claude smiled back.

"I will have it delivered to my room at the palace, so worry not."

It wasn't the fate of the mushroom that she was particularly concerned about, but all she could do was nod as Claude kept his carefree smile trained on

her.

“You didn’t bring me to meet your relatives just to get mushrooms to sprout, did you?” she asked, suspicious.

“Goodness, no. I’m pleased about the mushrooms, of course, but I would never do anything to cause you undue anxiety.”

Oh, right.

Claude was a mushroom freak, yes, but he wasn’t a malicious one. Nor would he use his father, the king, just to get mushrooms. He could get mushrooms just being in her presence normally, anyway.

“I’m sorry. I’m so nervous I can’t think straight,” she confessed.

“You have met the king before, though, haven’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, six years ago, when I was newly engaged to Philip. I didn’t really know much back then, but I remember understanding that he was a very important old man.”

It had been only one year since she was brought into the Lefort household, and she had spent most of that time shut up in the house. As a result, although she knew what the word “king” meant, she wasn’t too sure exactly what kind of figurehead he was, so she had been able to get by without shrinking from nerves.

“An important...old man...” Claude snorted with laughter for a second, then quickly coughed to cover it up. “Well, you could be right. But even a king can’t intervene when it comes to Dragonmates. We really are just going to introduce you. There’s no need to worry so much.”

Claude’s warm smile somehow made her feel a little less nervous. Claude’s smile, his words...they really had this mysterious power over her.

He led her by hand, and they ended up in a room located beyond the ballroom.

“We cannot discuss the matter of Dragonmates with anyone but the royal family, you see.”

Claude seemed to speak the truth. There were armed knights on guard

outside of the room, and servants stood waiting, too.

Only those present knew about Dragonmates.

The knights opened the doors for them, and inside was a round table, ringed by chairs.

Around the table sat the king and queen, the crown prince and his new wife, and presumably three of the other princes. They all turned as one to look at her, and Agnes felt her anxiety levels rise even higher.

“We have no need of stiff pleasantries in this room. Please, be seated.”

It would be rude of her to attempt to introduce herself now, after the king had said that.

Agnes noticed that Claude was pulling out a chair for her. With a polite bow to the king, she sat down quietly.

“It appears you have something to discuss with us, Claude,” the king said.

“Yes, Your Majesty. This is Agnes Lefort, daughter of Count Lefort. She is my Dragonmate,” Claude announced.

The word “Dragonmate” sent a ripple of excitement through the room. Agnes made eye contact with the crown prince’s new wife, who smiled at her, and that helped steady her a little.

“I received the report already from Xavier,” the king responded. “Who would have thought it—Philip’s ex-fiancée. What good luck that this did not come to light after they had already wed.”

The crown prince, Xavier, nodded deeply. “Indeed. I’m glad there will be no complications. Philip behaved like an ass, but we should be glad he did on this occasion.”

What did he mean? The dissolution of a publicly announced marriage was something to be happy about?

The amber-haired prince who sat beside the crown prince was smiling wryly at his remark. “Even if she had married Philip, the result would be the same.”

“Gerome, that would be unscrupulous. It’s better not to enter into disputes

unnecessarily.” The prince with hair the color of lead admonished Gerome, who shrugged.

“Armand, it is as you say. We should all get along.” The gold-haired young man at the opposite end of the table was the one who said that, and he turned to Agnes then, smiling.

“Charles, quiet for a moment. Agnes Lefort.”

“Y-Yes?” Terrified at being spoken to by the king, Agnes’s voice came out high and squeaky.

“I met you when you came with Philip to announce your engagement, yes? An odd pairing, that. Please, take good care of my son, Claude.”

“Certain...”

But before she could finish responding, there was a loud pop in the room. Agnes trembled, a terrible premonition taking her over, as from the corner of her eye she spotted a mushroom that had sprouted on the king’s arm.

Red cap, white warts. The *Amanita muscaria*, embellishing a splendid costume. The mushroom that had just sprouted on the king was vividly colored, impossible not to notice.

...She couldn’t handle this.

She could feel all the blood start to drain from her face. She got up in a hurry and, with no other recourse, bowed her head down as low as it would go.

“...I’m terribly sorry...”

“Agnes.” Claude stood up beside her and touched her back.

She lifted her head to face him, pathetically on the verge of tears.

“Goodbye, Claude. It’s all over. My mushroom sins will no doubt be severely punished.”



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.

Agnes was wearing a dress based on it, so it was feeling very flattered.

It's giggling, planning to show off about it among its friend circle.

When the king asked Agnes to take care of Claude, it sprouted to say, "Leave it to me!"

Things look menacing, though, so it's getting ready to spread spores at a moment's notice.

***Wolfiporia extensa* Ginns**

A mushroom that grows like a parasite on the roots of pine trees, used to make a medicine called Poria cocus.

Its fruiting bodies, aka the mushroom part, are rarely seen.

Agnes was feeling pain in her heart, so it sprouted to help.

Its effects are as a diuretic and as a sedative, so it might have helped, but Agnes didn't eat it, of course.

Rickenella fibula

Light orange and yellow caps, less than half an inch. A little mushroom.

It doesn't seem to be poisonous, but no one's really sure.

It's too small to be worth eating. A sad, untasted mushroom.

It was reading its favorite novel, "The Mushroom Brave and the Seven Mushrooms," when the *Cuphophyllus virgineus* gave it a shove, saying, "You've got a mushroom cap! Sprout!"

It had no idea what was going on, but when it saw Agnes blushing, it felt somehow happy.

Lactifluus volemus

A mushroom with a brown, velvety cap that releases milky sap when scratched. A truly milky mushroom.

Apparently, its juice is very tasty and can go for a higher price than Matsutake, depending on the region.

As a mushroom that specializes in special attacks, it resembles the *Clitocybe acromelalga*, but that one doesn't produce milk.

Agnes was thinking about fathers at the time, so perhaps it sprouted to remind her of mother's milk, too.

Alas, its milk wasn't required today.

Chapter 5: Five Princes

“**WHAT** are you talking about? There are no sins involved with mushrooms,” Claude said with all the confidence in the world.

“It’s not the mushrooms, it’s the way they sprout!” Agnes argued.

“The way they...sprout?”

Agnes’s strangled tone was met with a low murmur from the king. There was no covering this up.

Agnes turned to face the king, whose eyes were fixed on her. “That mushroom. It’s my fault. I’m terribly sorry. I’ll accept the punishment without protest. But please, don’t blame the House of Lefort. I, alone, am to blame.”

Sprouting a mushroom on the king. It was an act of near-blasphemy. Even worse, it was a poisonous mushroom that she’d sprouted. It looked bad, as if she had murderous intent. Thinking about how her actions would cause so much trouble for Benoit and Kevin made Agnes’s clenched fists begin to tremble.

“You sprouted this mushroom?” the king asked.

“Yes. It wasn’t on purpose, but... I’m so terribly sorry.” Agnes bowed her head low again, but Claude placed a hand on her back and coaxed her to look up.

“It’s all right, Agnes. Look how wonderfully that *Amanita muscaria*’s cap has opened! Isn’t it just splendid?”

“You would say that, Claude! You’re a mushroom freak!” she yelped without thinking, and now she froze in alarm. Not only had she sprouted a poisonous mushroom on the king, but now she had called his son, the fourth prince, a freak. She hung her head again, and Claude stroked her hair reassuringly.

“It’s all right. My whole family knows about my penchant for mushrooms.”

Agnes lifted her head to say that it was beside the point, but just then, the

king began laughing in a throaty chuckle.

“Claude is right. Don’t worry about it at all, Agnes. We all know how my son feels about mushrooms. You just stated a fact, is all. Feel free to call him a freak all you like behind closed doors. Now, please, be seated once more.”

A mushroom freak with his father’s full approval? Agnes shuddered.

Apparently, she was to be given free rein to call out Claude’s freakish obsession with fungus without the risk of punishment. Agnes breathed a sigh of relief and sat down with a polite bow.

“More importantly, this mushroom sprouting... Is it a sort of power of yours?” The king’s eyes sharpened suddenly, and Agnes felt her back stiffen.

“Yes. My father said that it is the divine blessing of the spirits.”

“Count Lefort said that?”

“No. My late father. He was the husband of Count Lefort’s sister.”

“And what was his name?”

Agnes had been introduced to the king as Benoit’s niece on the occasion of her engagement to Philip. But he clearly didn’t recall that her biological father was a commoner.

“Josse. Josse Murre.”

“Murre... I have heard the name before. I believe there are aristocrats in the neighboring land of Oreille that share that name,” the king said thoughtfully.

“I heard that my father came from a neighboring country, but he was just a commoner. I think it’s probably just a coincidence,” Agnes said, dismissing the possibility of her father being an aristocrat.

Her father was a peddler of medicinal herbs, which he cultivated himself. He certainly couldn’t have been an aristocrat. Actually, one of the biggest hurdles when he married Agnes’s mother was their different social statuses.

Benoit’s father, the previous Count Lefort, had taken a great deal of convincing, apparently. If her father had any aristocratic ties, they surely would have come to light during that time.

“I see. At any rate, individuals who possess the divine protection of spirits are very rare in our land. Some of our people are slow to understand or accept such gifts. Philip should have been responsible for protecting you from such people, but...well, we shan't bring up the foolish boy's failures here. Claude, I entrust her safety to you now.”

“Of course, Father. I will protect her.”

Agnes looked at Claude, who was nodding, and that was when the king and queen stood up.

“We have business to attend to, so please excuse us. Agnes, please enjoy the ball.”

“...Th-Thank you.”

Agnes stood up too and bowed, and then the king and queen retired. Just seeing them go was enough to make a large weight seem to lift off her shoulders. And yet, the king had departed with the mushroom still on him. Surely he would not forget to pluck it before he returned to the ballroom...?

Agnes let out a breath, and Claude smiled wryly beside her.

“Very well done, Agnes. Now, take a seat. We have announced our plans to my father, the king, and now we are as good as engaged. All that's left is to ask Count Lefort to take care of the formalities on his side. The day will soon come when we can publicly announce that you are my Dragonmate. I am thrilled.”

Seeing Claude's carefree smile, Crown Prince Xavier grinned.

“I understand how you feel, but tighten up that slack expression.”

“Do you not typically announce your Dragonmate until after you are officially engaged?” Agnes's question was simple, perhaps, but Xavier nodded.

“Externally, no. Hardly anyone knows that what we royals call a “Dragonmate” is not merely an official title. It's easier to let everyone believe that it is simply another word we have for fiancée.”

Oh, right.

Everyone, even the common folk, knew that the royals had the blood of the dragon. And, although they didn't know quite how serious it was, they were

also familiar with the existence of Dragonmates. Apparently, the people were being allowed to believe that “Dragonmate” was simply another word for a royal fiancée, rather than its own special thing. If you want to hide a leaf, hide it in the forest, they say, and perhaps that was what was going on here.

“However, Philip spoke of his Dragonmate when he made that public scene,” Agnes pointed out.

Claude had dismissed the possibility of Philip having a true Dragonmate, but did Philip’s claim mean that it was all right to speak of someone being your Dragonmate without being engaged to them?

“Philip has no dragon crest, and he is but a fringe royal. That said, he should have known the correct timing for announcing that one has found their Dragonmate. Perhaps he wasn’t listening when it was first explained to him, or else he forgot about it.”

Agnes nodded, digesting Xavier’s words.

Philip was always forgetting the names and faces of aristocrats who he really ought to know. He had to rely on others to remind him. No doubt he had been careless about remembering important family discussions as well.

Even though Philip was due to break with the royal family, social interaction was a vital part of aristocratic life. Philip would need to get a grip, or else rely heavily on Sabina Barthet’s lead, if he didn’t want to encounter real trouble.

“Incidentally, we haven’t properly introduced ourselves yet, have we? I’m the first prince in line to the throne, Xavier. Beside me is my wife, Zenaide.”

The black-haired prince and princess consort smiled, and Agnes quickly bowed her head.

“Then on my other side, we have Gerome, the second born, and then on his other side is Armand, the third born. And finally, our little brother Charles, who is the fifth.”

“Hello. I am Agnes Lefort. It is a privilege to meet you all.”

“Mm-hmm. You’re our brother Claude’s Dragonmate, huh? You’re a pretty one.” Charles grinned, his golden hair shining, and Agnes found herself

stiffening up.

“P-Pretty?”

At the exact same moment, a mushroom popped up on Charles’s arm. It had a cute pink cap, no doubt a *Mycena pura*. After sprouting one on the king, she had now gone on to sprout one on the fifth-in-line prince.

And what’s more, it was another poisonous one.

The king had been very forgiving, but at the rate Agnes was going, the entire royal family would end up smothered with mushrooms.

“Whoa, a pink mushroom! D’you want it, Claude?” Charles was gazing at the mushroom with interest, carefully plucking it as he spoke.

“Stop, Charles. Don’t pluck it too roughly. Mushrooms are delicate, beautiful creatures.” Claude gently accepted the *Mycena pura* from Charles, who had gotten up to walk over and hand it to him. Then Claude carefully placed it in his pocket.

“You’re even prettier up close,” Charles said to Agnes. “That’s your natural hair color, right? It’s gorgeous. May I touch it?”

Up close, Charles was a strikingly beautiful young man. He was most definitely Claude’s brother. Agnes felt terribly flustered being called pretty by such a handsome young man. He was even asking to touch her hair, to boot.

“You can look, but no touching.” Claude reached out and grabbed Charles’s wrist, pushing his hand away.

“You stingy...well, whatever. I’m Charles. Let’s be friends, okay, Big Sister Agnes?”

“Sis... Sister...”

“Charles. Don’t jump the gun here.”

“But she’s your Dragonmate, isn’t she? Claude, you’re not about to go falling for anyone else now, so what’s wrong with me calling her sister already? Right, Big Sister Agnes? You don’t mind, do you?”

The young man’s innocent smile was terribly convincing.

How could she say no?

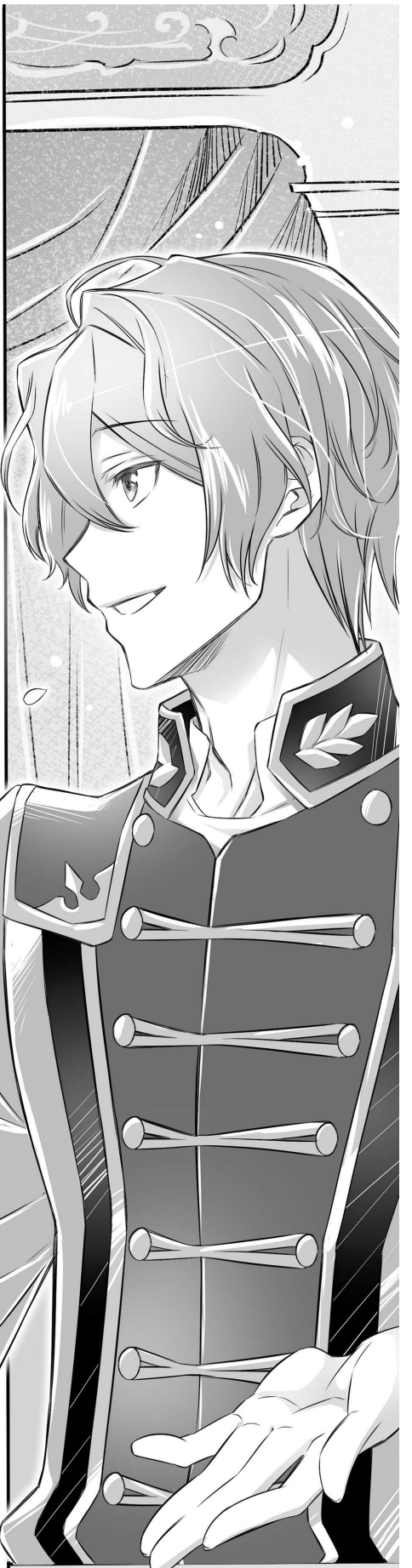
“...Sure.”

“See? The lady herself says it’s fine.”

“Charles, watch yourself.” Gerome, who had amber-colored hair, sighed with a put-upon air.

Then Armand, the prince with hair the color of lead, nodded. “Until they are officially engaged, the fact of her being his Dragonmate will not be publicly revealed. So you must treat her as any other aristocrat.”

“All right, all right. You should all hurry up and get engaged as well, brothers.”



Gerome sighed once more in reaction to Charles's sass. "We're not exactly all free to choose. We don't even have dragon crests. At least let us enjoy the period of freedom we do have."

"Gerome, I don't appreciate that talk. Even those with dragon crests are bound by duty." When Armand pointed this out, Gerome shrugged in an exaggerated manner.

"Don't be so stiff, Armand. At any rate, you're in the same situation yourself, aren't you, Charles?"

"I'm still a child, or didn't you notice?" Charles shot back.

"You're fifteen years old already. You won't be able to run from this forever."

Charles shrank under Gerome's sharp glare and quickly huddled behind Claude. "Claude. Gerome is being mean to me."

"Either way, talk of your engagement will come your way at some point, Charles." Armand pointed this out, and Charles pursed his lips with displeasure.

"...By the way, what happened to Philip, anyway?" Xavier's question drew shrugs and shaken heads from the others.

"He hasn't been seen in high society for almost a month now."

"Goodness. He may only be a fringe royal, but doesn't he have any awareness of his own status?"

"Speaking of absent people, no one's seen Uncle Caesar either."

"But he's always in bad health." Charles looked at Agnes with a slightly sad-looking smile on his face. "I'm so glad you found your Dragonmate, Claude. I wonder if Uncle ever will."

"Most meet their Dragonmate before they reach adulthood, they say...but well, it's enough just to meet them at some point, I suppose."

Charles nodded in response to Armand's comment, gazing back and forth between Claude and Agnes.

"I guess Big Sister Agnes really is a special girl, isn't she?"

"Well, shall we head back to the dance floor? Zenaide and I have some people

to greet.” With that, the prince and princess consort got up to leave, followed by Gerome and Armand.

“I have some business as well, so I’ll go off first.” Gerome opened the doors and immediately began conversing with one of the waiting servants. “...Charles. His Majesty wishes to speak with you.”

“What? What for?”

“Maybe engagement talks?” Gerome grinned as he left, and Charles began to get visibly flustered.

“Seriously? Help me... Xavier, come with me, would you?”

“I told you, I have people to greet with Zenaide.”

“...All right. I’ll accompany you then.”

“Oh! Oh, thank you, Armand!”

Agnes watched the royal family members depart the room, chattering noisily amongst themselves, and felt a huge sigh escape her.



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 saw Agnes apologizing and dropped a few warts out of a feeling of guilt.

But it relaxed when the king said that everything was fine. Then it realized it was making its ball debut and got so excited that it dropped spores everywhere.

Mycena pura

It has a light pink cap, and when it becomes damp, long streaks become visible.

It's pink and looks cute, but if you crush it in your fingers, it releases a rooty smell. It's quite the contrast.

It has no taste, but it has poison, which can cause stomach poisoning and nervous system poisoning. I thought it might be edible, since it smells rooty, but nope.

When Agnes was praised for her looks, it sprouted with delight.

It wanted to show off the fact that its cap is the same pink color as Agnes's hair.

Chapter 6: Pleading and Rewards

“**I**M sorry for all the commotion, Agnes. Why don’t we rest for a bit?” Claude suggested. He then brought Agnes to the private royal garden they had visited once before.

“No one will interrupt us here.”

They sat down on a bench in the flower-strewn gazebo, and a sweet scent came to them on the wind.

“But don’t you have to go and greet other guests, Claude? I’ll stay here; you go,” Agnes told him.

The royal family always had to greet masses of aristocrats at balls. It was a part of the job. Even though the other princes were in attendance today, it would not do for Claude to be seen lounging around and shirking his royal duties.

Usually, Agnes would have gone with him, but she felt so drained after all that had happened. Also, she wasn’t Claude’s official fiancée yet, so it might have caused issues if she was seen accompanying him like that.

“Do you really think I would just leave you here alone, Agnes? Besides, introducing you to my family tonight was more than enough.”

“...Okay.”

Agnes didn’t think that was correct, but he had probably noticed how tired she was, and that was why he was saying that.

“I believe you met Xavier once before. But tonight was the first time you met the other princes, right?”

“Yes, it was.”

“I knew it. Philip was doing his best to keep you out of our sight.”

Agnes looked at Claude in confusion, and he narrowed his gray eyes.

“Remember what we discussed? It’s inconceivable for him not to have brought his fiancée around where the royal family gets together. But nobody has any interest in Philip, so no one really cared as long as the king had met and approved of her. All part of Philip’s plan, I suppose.”

“But why? I suppose that it must have been my hair,” she said, answering her own question. “I have no doubt it would offend the royal family.” Agnes grabbed a lock of her hair, but Claude reached out and softly enveloped her hand with his own.

“How many times do I have to tell you? Your hair is beautiful, Agnes. Some might react to your hair with jealousy and spite, but most would agree it is beautiful. Do you not believe the things I say to you?”

Then he kissed her fingers, and Agnes felt her shoulders jerk.

“Th-That’s not what I...”

She tried to yank her hand away, and Claude sighed a little. There was a mushroom sprouting on his arm. It had a yellowish-brown cap. Probably *Boletus reticulatus*. But Agnes, panicked by a simple kiss to the fingers, had no mind for mushrooms just then.

“Kevin was right. You really should aim to be a headstrong young lady, Agnes.” Claude harvested the mushroom and stroked its gills for a second before putting it into his pocket. “...Do you know why Philip is only a fringe member of the royal family?”

“Philip’s mother is the king’s younger sister, isn’t she? She married out of the royal family when she wed a marquis. Then, when her husband passed away, she returned to the royal family, I heard.”

She wasn’t quite sure of all the details, but then again, Agnes knew next to nothing about the royals or aristocratic society before her engagement. Therefore, she accepted the story she was told at face value.

“Is that what Philip told you?” Claude asked, eyebrow cocked. “Didn’t you hear anything from Count Lefort?”

“I heard that the reason Philip would break with the royal family upon marriage was because of reasons having to do with his mother, not him. That it

was a real shame for Philip.”

She didn’t know much more than that, and at any rate, Benoit had never told her anything more. She had felt a sense of kinship with Philip, thinking that he must have a lot to deal with as well.

“That’s all that’s been made public, yes, but even if Count Lefort knew more than that, I suppose he wouldn’t have felt it appropriate to tell you... Philip’s mother is the king’s younger sister. In other words, my aunt.”

That made sense, since Philip was the king’s nephew, but hearing Claude say it out loud made her realize that Philip and Claude really were quite closely related by blood.

“First off, my aunt married Marquis Descartes,” Claude continued. “She fell for him at first sight, and even though he was already engaged, she pressed him for marriage. Then Philip was born, and the Marquis died tragically young.”

Philip’s mother’s behavior must have come as a surprise, but then again, she was the king’s younger sister. Marquis though he may have been, since he technically wasn’t married yet, perhaps he simply had to fall in line or risk the royal family’s wrath.

“She should have remained the Marchioness Descartes and waited for Philip to come of age, as is the custom,” Claude explained. “But she abandoned all of that and said she wanted to return to the royal family. It was madness, and it usually never would have been allowed. But she shut herself up in the palace, doing nothing.”

Wracked with grief over her husband’s death she may have been, but how irresponsible of her to abandon her household and flee back to her original family! After the Marquis died, she should have taken over as marchioness and focused on raising Philip to be the next marquis.

“Then, the Marquis’s younger brother, who never thought much of the forced marriage to begin with, announced he would take over the family estate himself. Fool though she was, Father could not abandon his younger sister, and so he agreed that she could return as a royal. In exchange, she would have no more ties with the Descartes. Nor would Philip have any right to take over the family lineage. Upon marriage, Philip would break with the royal family, and my

aunt would, at that time, decamp to the royal villa. So it was decided.”

After explaining all this in a rush, Claude paused for a breath.

“Philip lost his right to be a marquis. Right now, he is a royal, but he will one day lose that too. The aristocracy hates and loves a good scandal, and so he has been treated rather as an eyesore ever since.”

“I see...”

All Agnes had known was that Philip would have to leave the royal family. But from the sound of it, Philip was blameless in all that had happened. She had met Philip’s mother only once. The woman had shown not one smidgen of interest in Agnes.

Agnes had thought that perhaps Philip’s mother disliked her because of her hair. But now, it sounded more like she was simply a selfish woman, utterly uninterested in anything except herself.

“At the very least, Philip was blameless at that point in time, and despite the scandal involved in the situation, he had many sympathizers. However, once he started appearing in society, he acted like...well, you know. And until he got engaged to you, Agnes, I heard he dismissed many other suggestions of marriage.”

“I suppose he got the short end of the stick with me, then. Although, I got a pretty short stick with him as well. Maybe he and I were a good match after all,” she said with a dry laugh.

Despite attending balls with Philip, hardly anyone had come to speak with them. She’d thought it was her fault, but it appeared most people were trying to avoid Philip.

But Claude’s gray eyes flashed as he heard her say that. “I can’t let that slide. It was not your fault, Agnes. If anyone ignored you, it was out of jealousy and misunderstanding. Meanwhile, Philip had sympathizers and a chance to turn things around for himself, but he drove people away with his behavior. Don’t compare yourself to him.”

Agnes could only nod, cowed by the pressure of his firm gaze.

“Over the past few years, his reputation has improved somewhat, but that was all just because he was following your advice,” Claude sighed.

“...Um, so what does that have to do with Philip keeping me from meeting the royal family?”

Claude blinked several times, as if her question had come as a surprise. Then he smiled wryly and stroked Agnes’s hair. “Because to Philip, you were the only thing he ever wanted and got for himself.”

“Wanted? Me?” she asked, disbelief coloring her voice.

“When I first met you, I went right to my father to ask about Philip. Six years ago, he fell in love with you at first sight and begged for my father’s permission to marry you. He had turned down countless offers before then, all arranged by the royal family. You were the first person that Philip said he actually wanted to wed. You were the first thing he had ever asked my father for.”

Agnes blinked several times in surprise at this. “But Philip never said a word about that.”

“Hmm, well, that’s Philip for you. He can never be sincere about anything. He told the truth to Count Lefort, just once, when he asked for your hand in marriage. After that, the truth was apparent from how he acted, or so your father told me.”

“You spoke to my father about that?”

Just when could such a conversation have taken place? she wondered.

“I went straight to your father to ask for your hand right after we met,” Claude said. “I believe I told you that, right? Well, that was when.”

Yes, she had heard something like that. But to think they would discuss such things on their first meeting.

“Now that you mention it... I don’t remember him being quite so cold and cruel to me in the beginning,” Agnes recalled.

“However, if Philip had introduced you to the family, and any of us had fallen for you at first sight, then it is unlikely you would ever have been engaged to Philip at all. After all, his own mother used her royal connections to steal away a

man who was already engaged to another. No doubt, he would be worried, would he not?"

That made sense. In Philip's mind, the royal family was clearly able and willing to use their connections to steal other people's betrothed.

"I was single, of course, and at that time Xavier had not yet met his wife, Zenaide, either. Even if Philip didn't know about the crest of the dragon, he must have realized that if any of the five unmarried princes happened to fall for you, then your hypothetical marriage to Philip would have been swiftly rendered null and void. That's what he must have been afraid of, I think," Claude said.

"So that's why he kept me from meeting any of you...?"

But if that were true, that would mean that Philip actually treasured Agnes quite a bit.

"Hide yourself. Make yourself drab. No one will like you."

That was all Agnes ever heard from his lips. She never really knew what was going on.

Claude put his hand gently over hers, picking up on the fact that she was clearly shaken. "However, he went too far. It's unforgivable how he tormented you over your hair and over the spirits and their divine protection." His eyes flashed and narrowed as he bit out the words. "He had plenty of chances to show how much he cared for you, but he could do nothing but wound you. I couldn't let a man like that have you, Agnes."

Claude squeezed Agnes's hand, and she felt his conviction.

"But why is this coming up now? My engagement with Philip is already over, and he has the Barthet girl, so it really has nothing to do with me anymore."

"You're right. But I suspect that Philip has not completely given up on you."

"That's nonsense. He's the one who *chose* another woman," Agnes stated matter-of-factly.

As a result, their engagement ended amicably, but that end was caused by Philip's infidelity. What possible grounds did Philip have for "giving up" Agnes,

or not, as the case may be?

“Xavier and I warned him, but he’s a stubborn fellow,” Claude said ominously. “...So just watch out for Philip, all right?”

“Y-Yes, of course.”

Watch out for Philip?

She doubted their paths would ever cross again. But Claude seemed so insistent. All Agnes could do was nod. At that moment, a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s shoulder. It had reddish-brown, slimy caps... Clearly Nameko.

Agnes reached out to pluck it, worried that it would dirty Claude’s clothing, but before she could grab it, Claude had already plucked it off himself. He couldn’t exactly put such a slimy mushroom in his pocket, so instead he placed it on the chair beside him.

“Well then, let us have no more talk of Philip. Not when you and I are finally alone together. Let us speak of more enjoyable things.” Claude beamed and lifted Agnes’s hand to his lips... But before he could kiss her fingers, she yanked her hand away.

Yikes. That was close.

He had already kissed her so many times today.

“Aw, I was so close too.” Claude grinned impishly, and he looked so beautiful. It was honestly such a sight for sore eyes. Mushroom freak though he was, he could be incredibly sexy at times. “I know my brothers said all kinds of things, but you don’t have to pay attention to them. Were you nervous?”

“Well, yes, of course. I mean, they’re your brothers, Claude, and they’re royals. ...Um, there was talk of having dragon crests or not. Does that mean that not all of you have one?” she asked, curious.

Philip was a royal, but only a fringe one, with no crest. He wasn’t even aware of their existence. But the princes had spoken as if they all knew about the crests.

“Exactly. Of my brothers, only Xavier and I have the crest. That’s why I’m actually second in the true line of succession, even though I was the fourth

born. Our father has the crest too, of course. Basically, priority goes to the sons who have the crest. Then it's based on blood lineage, birth order, and so on." Claude counted on his fingers as he explained, glancing at Agnes.

While Claude was speaking, he kept checking Agnes's expression to make sure she was following all this. Philip would never have shown her such courtesy, and it made her heart quicken.

"The current line of succession goes: Crown Prince Xavier, Fourth-Born Claude, then the royal nephew, Duke Granier. We are the only ones with dragon crests. After that comes third-born Armand, then second-born Gerome, then fifth-born Charles. Gerome and Charles are the sons of a concubine, so they rank lower."

Oh, right.

The king had both his queen and a concubine. In other words, Xavier, Armand, and Claude were the queen's children. While Gerome and Charles were the children of a concubine. And, with his dragon crest, Claude, while born fourth overall, skipped ahead to second in the line of succession. It was very complicated.

"...Will you take a concubine as well, Claude?" Agnes asked, a bit despondent.

Claude was not only a royal, but he possessed the rare dragon crest. Passing on his bloodline was an important duty that would benefit future generations. That was all she was thinking as she asked, but Claude's eyes suddenly grew wide.

On his shoulder was a reddish-brown-capped mushroom—a *Collybia butyracea*. The mushroom freak noticed it right away and quickly plucked it before stashing it in his pocket.

"...Goodness me, no," he promptly denied. "I have you, Agnes. In my father's case, he wasn't able to find his Dragonmate for a long time, you see. His fiancée was chosen for him, for the good of the next generation of royals. He was due to be married soon when he met my mother, his Dragonmate, but the other lady had already waited a long time. She still wanted to marry him, so she ended up becoming his concubine."

Agnes couldn't fathom the thought process of a woman who knowingly wanted to marry a man who had a Dragonmate. But she was no doubt a high-society lady, and she had been waiting a long time to wed the future king. Perhaps she had already passed her most marriageable age. Or perhaps she really loved the king. And she simply wanted to become the king's wife in any way she could.

Either way, it was the kind of relationship Agnes couldn't even begin to understand.

"I have already met you, Agnes, so there will be no other," he said firmly.

"I... I see."

This was much better than Claude announcing that he planned to take many lovers in the future. But it made her blush like crazy to have him say such a thing so openly to her.

"And with that, you have successfully finished greeting and learning about my primary family members," Claude announced. "You did very well today, Agnes. Is there anything you might like?"

"Like? What do you mean?" She blinked at him.

"You sat through a very stressful meeting, and you deserve a reward. What would you like? Simply state your wish."

State her wish? But Agnes could think of nothing.

"I don't... I don't really..."

"Hmm. That won't do. Now I'm in a fix."

He didn't look like he was in a fix, but Agnes did want to please Claude. She thought hard, and then it came to her.

"Um. Can it really be anything?" she asked.

"Yes. What is it?" Claude leaned in excitedly, and Agnes angled herself away from his approaching face.

"Um. I'll bake a cake, so if you'd agree to eat it..." she mumbled, and Claude's mouth fell open as he stiffened up.

“...That’s your request?”

“If... If it’s too much, I understand. I know you’re busy, and it may not be to your taste anyway... I mean, I don’t want you to get sick to your stomach. So actually, never mind. Just forget it.”

Claude was a prince in line for the throne. He had to be very careful about everything he ate. Agnes certainly wasn’t about to serve him anything unsanitary, or anything like that, but still...you could never be too careful. If there was even the slightest chance that Claude could get sick, it would reflect terribly on the Lefort household.

Goodness, what a ridiculous thing I’ve asked of him. Agnes hung her head, feeling ashamed of herself. She heard a sigh, and then a hand stroked her hair gently.

Slowly, she lifted her head to meet Claude’s gray eyes.

“Of course I’ll eat it! I can’t wait.”

“Are...are you sure?”

“Of course.”

She felt her chest grow warm, and her lips spread into a natural smile.

“...I’m not sure who’s the one who’s getting the reward, though.” Claude grinned, lifted up a lock of Agnes’s hair, and kissed it.

“Yeek!”

As Agnes squealed, a mushroom popped up on Claude’s shoulder. It was round and had soft white projectiles hanging down. *Hericium erinaceus*. It was a very fluffy one, looking like a white epaulette on Claude’s right shoulder.

“If... If mushrooms are what you want, I wish you’d just ask!” she said, blaming him. She wasn’t sure if they would sprout on demand, but these unexpected kiss attacks weren’t good for her blood pressure.

“That’s not why I kiss you. *Ah*, I have my adorable Agnes and my beautiful mushrooms... Oh, how fortunate am I!”

Claude stroked his mushroom epaulettes, grinning as if he were having the

time of his life.



Mushrooms of the Day

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.

There was a rather intense discussion going on, so it sprouted to say, "How about a little snack to perk you up?"

It's confident in its taste and scent and goes really well in pasta.

Having its cap stroked by Claude just wasn't enough.

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 it senses danger for Agnes, it's capable of sliming shoes into oblivion.

It's a member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

When Claude was warning Agnes of danger, it sprouted to say, "If anything happens to Agnes, I'll bring my slime to help her!"

Collybia butyracea

An edible mushroom with a reddish-brown cap.

It's good friends with *Armillaria mellea*, also a member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

However, it itself is a member of the Bacteria Decomposition Club.

It sprouted to warn: "Laying your hands on another woman when you have Agnes? The Club members won't stand for this!"

Hericium erinaceus

A white, stringy mushroom that looks like a mop. Very edible.

It's difficult to harvest and often gets dirt and leaves stuck in it. Just like a mop, really.

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.

When the *Cuphophyllus virgineus* saw Claude kiss Agnes's hair, it nudged it, saying, "You look a bit like hair. You sprout, too."

It ended up being an epaulette on Claude's shoulder, which made it jiggle with delight.

Chapter 7: When Aiming to Become a Strong-Willed Young Woman...

“**THAT** smells nice, Sis.” Kevin poked his head around the kitchen door and sniffed appreciatively.

Agnes had been in the kitchen since morning, baking a cake with her maid, Therese. Usually, an aristocratic young lady would never enter the kitchen, much less be seen baking a cake. However, Benoit had taught Agnes how to bake cakes in order to cheer her up when she had just lost her parents and was deep in grief. It was her mother’s recipe that they used, and baking and eating the cake seemed to lift her spirits a little. The cake held sentimental value for Agnes.

Her mother, who was born into the aristocracy but lived as a commoner, baked cakes that weren’t much to look at. They were not adorned with cream and fresh fruits. Instead, they were long-lasting cakes filled with mixed dried fruits. Agnes had already baked two of them, but as they cooled, she began to feel more and more uneasy.

“Kevin. This cake looks far too drab, doesn’t it? Can I really present this to royalty?”

“Of course you can. His Highness will be delighted.”

“But will it suit his palate?”

Taste was an issue, but more importantly, Claude had grown up eating the food prepared in the palace. Could he really be satisfied by such a boring sort of everyday cake as this? She had been absorbed in the process while baking, and quite enjoyed herself, but now she felt nothing but anxiety.

With a pop, a mushroom sprouted beside the cake. It was a Matsutake, with exposed white skin and brown fibrous scales. The kitchen, which was filled with the sweet smell of baking, was now filled with another pleasant scent.

“...Hmm, well, if a mushroom sprouts, you can be sure His Highness will be happy.” Kevin plucked the Matsutake and put it in the basket.

“But I made a cake. The scent of Matsutake is...something else entirely.”

Then, as if it had been waiting for Agnes to say that, a new mushroom appeared beside the cake. A *Coprinellus micaceus*, a light yellowish-brown capped mushroom sparkling with tiny, mica-like cells.

“No. You’re very shiny and pretty, but you’re poisonous,” she told the mushroom. “You’ll make Claude quite sick.”

“Then, I’ll put this one in here.” Kevin plucked the *Coprinellus micaceus* and placed it in a different basket than the one the Matsutake was in. “But man, your mushroom output is really ramping up. It’s almost like they’re joining in on our conversations now.”

“Indeed. For whatever reason, my mushroom sensibilities are only increasing.”

Kevin was right. They weren’t just sprouting when she was upset. It was as if they were now responding to her conversations, to Agnes’s innermost feelings.

“...At this rate, I really am going to end up becoming the Mushroom Princess,” Agnes muttered in a solemn tone.

Kevin clutched his stomach and belly-laughed. “Become? You already are the Mushroom Princess!”

“No, I’m not!” Agnes couldn’t hide her shock. Her brother’s words deeply wounded her.

“It’s all right, it’s all right. Even if you are the Mushroom Princess, you’re still my sister. And anyway, His Highness will be delighted.”

True, the more mushrooms she sprouted, the greater Claude’s joy would be. But it wouldn’t be because she was his lover; it would be because she was his mushroom *supplier*.

Agnes hesitated as Kevin patted her on the shoulder.

“I don’t know what His Highness’s tastes are when it comes to food. But since it’s a cake you made just for him, I know he’ll love it. And he’ll love you too,

even though you are the Mushroom Princess. So there's no problem at all."

"You're right. Claude is so kind, after all."

Even if the cake wasn't to his taste, he would surely never say anything negative about it to hurt her feelings. Leaving the Mushroom Princess thing aside for a moment, she really did feel quite a lot better about the cake now.

"That's not what I meant, you know?"

"Lady Agnes, His Highness has arrived."

Agnes panicked when Therese said that, and she began looking around for a knife. "I'll cut this to serve. Kevin, could you go and greet him?"

"Sure, if you like. But don't you want to get changed?"

"What?"

Holding the knife, Agnes stared blankly at her brother as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

She was wearing a deep red dress. After her big post-Philip wardrobe purge, she was left with only a few dresses and the gowns that Claude had given her. She couldn't wear ball gowns around the house, and she had worn the same green dress when they went out the other day, so she had decided to wear a different color this time.

"I thought I told you to get some new dresses made up. Aren't you worried about running out of things to wear in front of Prince Claude?"

"No, I'm not worried about it at all?"

"Agh, give me strength! That dirty, rotten royal! His awful influence still remains! What proper young lady out there, realistically, wears only drab-colored dresses?!" Kevin clucked his tongue angrily, turning and stomping over to the door. "Anyway, I'm going to go and greet the prince. Just...do something with yourself, would you?"

And with that, Kevin closed the door angrily, almost slamming it.

"D-Do something? But...what?"

"Please leave it to me, my lady."

Agnes had turned to Therese, looking for backup, but she was met by the maid's bright grin.

This must be what they mean when they speak of terrifying smiles.

Agnes clutched the knife tighter.



AGNES loaded the freshly sliced cake and the tea set onto a wagon and pushed it right up to the parlor. She stood outside it for a few moments, hesitating, not quite brave enough to knock.

"Lady Agnes, shall we go in now? His Highness is waiting." Therese nudged her, not for the first time.

But Agnes was frozen.

"W-Wait a moment. I think I should leave and come back later, when..."

"No, no. You're fine just like this."

"But..."

"...Hey. How long do you plan to stand out there?" On the other side of the slightly ajar door, Kevin's face appeared. "What are you doing? Come in here..." Kevin made eye contact with Agnes and nodded in understanding. "I see. So that's the cause of it, eh?"

"Is... Is it no good, after all? I'll go and come back!" Agnes turned to go, but Therese grabbed hold of her arm and refused to let go.

"No, no, that's perfect," Kevin said. "Good job, Therese."

"Thank you, Master Kevin." Therese curtsied neatly and then firmly placed Agnes's hand in Kevin's.

"Let's go now, Sis."

"Oh, but... Wait. Wait, please..."

"It's fine."

Kevin tugged her into the room, where she spotted Claude lounging on the sofa.

“Ah, Agnes. Hello...”

The moment they made eye contact, she could tell that Claude was looking at her face—or, more accurately, her hair. Earlier, she had it tied back for baking in the kitchen, but Therese had taken over and redid it for her. There were also white flowers tucked into her hair.

The braided hairstyle was one thing, but to have flowers in her hair when she wasn't even going to a ball or anything...it made her feel embarrassed. She liked flowers, but she knew they didn't suit her, and it felt extraneous.

Just when she couldn't stand his silent gaze anymore, Claude finally spoke.

“Your hair—”

“...I'll go and fix it right away!”

Agnes wasn't brave enough to hear the rest. She broke for the door, flinging Kevin away. However, Claude was by her side in an instant, grasping her hand.

“Fix it? Why?”

“I mean...”

Unable to flee, she turned reluctantly to Claude, whose gentle smile was so close.

“It looks wonderful. Just like that. Very pretty.”

His compliments thrilled her. But at the same time, her chest felt painful. She somehow felt that it might have been easier if he had spoken ill of her appearance.

“See? What did I tell you, Sis? It's perfectly fine.”

“But...”

Fine? What was fine, exactly?

Agnes's heart was hammering against her ribcage. It certainly could not be described as fine. Then Claude took a yellow flower from a vase near the doorway and tucked it into Agnes's hair.

“See? Now you're even prettier.”

“That’s not true...”

With a pop, a yellow, tubular mushroom appeared on Claude’s shoulder. She didn’t have time for *Clavulinopsis helvola* right now, though.

“Yes, it is. Ah, I know. Let’s adorn you with flower accessories for the next ball. Your dress shall have a floral motif as well, and you will look quite fresh and splendid.”

“Ah, that’s a great idea,” Kevin added his opinion with clear enjoyment, shooting Agnes a look. “Sis. If you want to become a strong-willed young lady, you must begin by seeking jewels. Otherwise, you’ll never get anywhere.”

“But I’m not trying to become one!”

“We had an agreement that new dresses would be procured for you. I do apologize; it’s taking more time than I thought. Now, you don’t mind brightly colored dresses, do you?”

“It’s neither here nor there.”

She didn’t have anything against bright colors or dresses that came in bright colors. She just didn’t think there was any need for them in her case.

“All right. Let’s get the clothes made up as soon as possible,” Claude said. “I’ll follow up.”

“No, you can’t. It will cost so much money. It would be so wasteful.”

“I want to adorn my beloved. There is nothing wasteful there.”

Ah, yes, Claude was a prince. Last time he had spoken of clothing in bright colors with a high price tag. His concept of money was no doubt vastly different from Agnes’s.

“Well, at least let me pay for the dresses,” she insisted.

“No. I’m gifting, so I get to pay,” he refused.

“Sis. It’s terribly rude to insist on paying when a gentleman wants to give a lady a gift.”

Even Kevin was her enemy now. Agnes felt swamped by the pressure. Though, it was partially her fault for getting rid of all her clothes.

“But I can’t allow you to spend royal funds on me...” she protested.

“It’s all right. I’ve paid personally for all the dresses so far,” Claude informed her. “I’m a prince, but at the same time, I’m involved in mushroom research and trading. I’m actually pretty flush as far as cash goes. I have trouble making a dent in my finances, to be honest with you. So please, let me buy you pretty things, Agnes.”

Mushroom research? And trading?

This mushroom fetishist was quite the businessman. Now all she could think about was mushrooms. What were they talking about again?

“But, still...”

“Please, Agnes.” Claude grasped Agnes’s hand and gazed at her, his face very close.

This was all just too much. Agnes felt as though her head was a balloon whose air had slowly leaked out. She couldn’t think straight.

“Okay, but only a little.”

The moment she acquiesced, Claude, and Kevin too, broke into big smiles.

Honestly. Why are all the men in my life like this?

“Good. Then I’ll make the arrangements as soon as possible, and we’ll go together to view everything, starting with choosing the fabric,” Claude said.

Kevin nodded in agreement. “That sounds good. Make them very bright and very eye-catching, please. Well then, I think I’ll excuse myself now.”

“Huh? You’re leaving?” Agnes gazed desperately at Kevin, who shrugged pointedly.

“I have no interest in watching two lovebirds coo and twitter together.” Kevin left the room without glancing back.

Soon, tea and cake were laid on the table, and Therese, too, vanished.

It was just Agnes and Claude, alone together now.



Mushrooms of the Day

Matsutake

A high-grade mushroom known to most.

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

Agnes was worried about the taste of the cake, so it sprouted to offer itself as an alternative option.

Benoit is always pleased to see it, so the Matsutake hoped Agnes would be pleased, too.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't really go with sweets, so it was forced to leave the battlefield.

Coprinellus micaceus

Covered with tiny, mica-like cells that glitter. A light-yellow-colored mushroom.

When someone eats it along with alcohol, they can get very sick.

Every time it sprouted, it got plucked, so it started to feel a rivalry with Claude... Man vs. Mushroom.

When it heard that Claude was coming, it claimed, "This time I won't lose!" But since it was poisonous, it got avoided in the end.

Clavulinopsis helvola

It's a yellow, thin-stemmed mushroom that looks like soggy French fries.

The Japanese name has the character for "noodles" in it, so you'd think it would be edible, but it's not considered a worthy foodstuff.

Apparently, you need a lot of courage to eat it.

It's a proud mushroom, a symbol of bravery!

Agnes didn't have enough bravery to knock on the door, so it sprouted to lend her some.

But it messed up the timing and ended up watching the two flirt from a special seat (aka shoulder.)

Chapter 8: The Responsibilities of a Dragonmate

“THERE’S no need for us to stay standing while we chat. Let’s sit, Agnes.”

She had no need to say no, so Agnes nodded meekly and sat down on the sofa. She watched Claude sit down on the opposite sofa and felt herself finally relax a little.

“This cake...you made it, right?” he asked.

“I’m sorry it’s so drab-looking.”

“Why do you apologize? You made it for me, so of course I’m delighted.” Claude was so delicate as he scooped up a bite of cake on his fork, and Agnes realized she was staring at him. “What’s inside? Apricot?”

“Yes. Dried fruits, including apricots.”

“It’s sweet, a little sour, and very fragrant. Most delicious.”

With a pop that echoed around the walls, a mushroom appeared on the back of Claude’s hand. It had an orange-yellow cap...a *Cantharellus cibarius*.

She knew it. They were listening to her conversations and sprouting accordingly. Kevin was right. Agnes really was already the Mushroom Princess.

Claude didn’t seem to notice Agnes’s slight horror. Instead, he quickly plucked the mushroom and started sniffing its fragrance. “That’s a *Cantharellus cibarius*, all right. It must have thought you summoned it, Agnes.”

“Goodness...” She wished he wouldn’t say such inflammatory things.

“The cake is most delicious. Thank you for making it.”

“Is it really? I’m so glad.” Agnes relaxed and felt herself smile. Claude saw this, and a smile came to his own features.

Agnes felt embarrassed but also quite happy. Ever since she met Claude, her emotions had been swinging all over the place. It was tiring, but she didn’t really mind. The fact that she *didn’t* mind was hard for her to process.

“Where did you learn to bake cakes?”

“My mother taught me. I was very depressed after the accident, and Father Benoit wanted to cheer me up by baking her recipes together. This cake...its flavor is very sentimental and makes me think of my parents, and Father, and Kevin.”

“You made a truly important cake for me, then. I’m so pleased.” Claude put his fork down and stood up, coming over to sit down again beside her. “You have some too, Agnes.”

Then Claude scooped up a forkful of cake from Agnes’s plate and held it out to her.

“Er. I can eat it by myself,” she said.

“Now, now. Open wide.”

The forkful of cake hovered in front of her face. Beyond it, Claude grinned.

Agnes was stumped. She opened her mouth and ate the cake. But in her nervous state, she couldn’t quite manage chewing, and it got stuck in her throat. Choking it down somehow, she turned to Claude and shook her head.

“No more, please. I’m quite full.”

“Are you? Ah, you’ve got cake on your face.”

“Huh?”

Agnes looked up, not sure what he was talking about, and that was when Claude’s finger grazed her lip. Then...he licked the cake off his finger.

“Ack! What... What are you doing?!” Agnes leaped away from him on the sofa, and Claude looked at her quizzically.

“I didn’t want to waste it. That’s your special cake, you know?”

His grin, the way he licked his finger—it was oddly sexy, and it made her heart pound. Claude gazed at Agnes, who was blushing deeply, and then he lowered his brows.

“Ah. You’re so adorable,” he murmured, stroking Agnes’s cheek with his hand.

Agnes wasn’t used to such heated looks, or being touched this way, and she struggled to breathe all of a sudden. In the corner of her vision, she could see

that a yellowish-brown, fibrous-capped mushroom had sprouted on his shoulder. She thought it was probably an *Inocybe rimosa*, but just then, Claude's finger touched Agnes's lip.

"Excuse me! Hate to walk in on anything..."

There was a sudden knock, and a reluctant voice rang out into the room.

"Come in."

Following Claude's response, Kevin appeared from beyond the door. In a flurry, Agnes leaped and grabbed her brother's arm.

"K-Kevin!"

Kevin looked at Agnes, who was blushing and shaking, and for some reason, he nodded a few times at the sight.

"It looks like you two have been canoodling. Great stuff."

"Excuse me?! You shouldn't have left me, Kevin!" she huffed.

"Yes, yes. More importantly, you have a guest. It's Prince Charles Visage."

"Eh?" Agnes grunted in confusion, and just then, a golden-haired boy popped his head around the doorframe.

"Hey, Claude. Haven't seen you since the ball, big brother."

Claude stared at Charles, who was waving at him. A slight furrow formed between the older prince's eyes.

"Charles, what are you doing here?" Claude queried. "This is the Lefort residence. You are aware of that, right?"

"I know that. This is the household of your precious Dragonmate, Claude. I didn't get to really talk to her at the ball. Anyway, it's fine as long as you're here too, right, Claude? Right, Big Sis Agnes?"

Charles seemed aware that he was being scolded, but his response and his attitude were quite bold... Agnes could never hope to imitate Charles, but she envied his brashness.

"Y-Yes, Your Highness," she replied.

“Oh, don’t be so formal. Just Charles is fine.”

“Then...Prince Charles.”

“Hmm, you don’t need to add ‘Prince,’ but eh. I can see Claude is already giving me murderous looks, so I’ll let it slide.” Charles grinned in a friendly way at her as he spoke, and she felt herself being swept along with the force of his personality.

Maybe the final stage of becoming a strong-willed young lady was to cast aside social decorum and force other people to play to your tune instead.

“Well, take a seat.”

Plucking the *Inocybe rimosa* that had grown on his shoulder, Claude was unable to hide his annoyance even as he invited Charles to sit. But where was he to sit? There were a pair of two-seater sofas facing one another. Usually, only two could sit on either sofa.

You could fit three on one if you really squeezed, but surely no one would do something that silly when the company included two royal princes. Agnes would end up sitting on one sofa and the two royals on the other. Even that seemed a bit odd.

That was when Agnes noticed Kevin, and a clear bell rang in her mind.

If Kevin stayed, it would make perfect sense for the royals to be on one side and the Leforts to be on the other. Nicely separated and completely relaxed.

She needed to secure Kevin. She couldn’t let him escape. But before Agnes could reach for Kevin’s hand, Claude reached out and tugged her away.

“Agnes, sit beside me,” he insisted.

Suddenly sitting beside Claude, close enough for their bodies to touch, Agnes inched away in panic.

“B-But... Prince Charles, and Kevin...” she squeaked.

“Oh, I’ll be excusing myself now. Enjoy yourselves,” Kevin said swiftly.

“Oh, Kevin, you beast! You...traitor!”

“Give it your all, Sis!” Smiling dashingly while waving, Kevin was gone in a

flash.

Now she was sitting beside Claude, facing Charles.

What manner of torture was this?

Charles took one look at Agnes's stiff expression and chuckled wryly. "Don't be so nervous. I promise I don't bite."

Therese, who had appeared all of a sudden, laid out Charles's serving of tea and a different, small dessert on the table.

"Hmm? What's that you two are having, then?" he asked.

"It's a dried fruit cake," Agnes said.

Charles sat still, raptly staring at the cake on the plate. "Huh. Don't see that every day."

Well, no, you wouldn't.

This cake was baked to be long-lasting, quite different from the elegant confectioneries served at the palace. It wasn't strange at all that Charles wasn't familiar with it.

"So there's none for me?" he pouted.

"Do you like dried fruit cake, Prince Charles?" Agnes asked.

"Yeah. I love sweet things. If you've still got some, I'd love to have a slice. It looks so...sparkly."

"...Sparkly?"

Perhaps some of a Coprinellus micaceus's glitter had come off? She snatched up the plate in a panic, but there was nothing unusual about it.

"This is *MY* slice, so you can't have that," Claude stressed. "And you certainly can't have Agnes's partially eaten one."

Goodness, what was the mushroom fetishist saying now? But Charles didn't seem too bothered.

"Aha, so it's an Agnes thing. Did you two go halvesies?"

"No. I baked it," she corrected.

“You baked a cake? Huh. So that’s why. ...Isn’t there any left?” Charles wheedled.

“No. But if you’d like, I can get you a slice from another one.”

She’d baked two cakes, meaning that there was still one remaining. It would be no trouble to prepare a slice for Charles.

“Yeah. I’d like to have some.”

Agnes thought she should at least offer, and Charles smiled, looking pleased. He reminded her of a younger Kevin. He’d been an earnest, nice kind of boy like this. Lately he’d really grown up, though, and tended to involve himself too much in Agnes’s affairs.

Therese brought another cake, and Charles picked up his plate and began scrutinizing it closely. “Ah-ha. I knew it. It *IS* sparkling.”



After that unusual little comment, Charles tried a big bite of cake.

“Hmm, it’s very dense. Quite filling. But definitely delicious. ...And beautiful,” he said.

“The cake is...beautiful?” Agnes repeated, baffled.

It was just a fruit cake, Agnes thought—nothing so impressive to look at.

Charles blinked at Agnes, who had looked at him with curiosity, as if her reaction were odd.

“What? Claude, you haven’t explained?” Charles asked his brother.

“Not yet. I was going to soon,” Claude said.

“Hmm. How prudent of you. But you can tell her, can’t you?”

“Hmm, well, yes.” Claude glanced over at Therese, who picked up on the look right away and exited after a polite bow.

It must be something important if he is dismissing the help, Agnes realized.

“Big Sis Agnes, how much do you know about the dragon crests?” After a slightly nervous wait, Charles questioned Agnes as he ate more cake.

“It’s proof that the blood of the dragon is especially strong in the bearer. It appears on the back of the hand. At birth, it’s black, but it turns red once the bearer has met their Dragonmate,” Agnes said, listing off what she knew.

Charles polished off the cake, took a sip of tea, and nodded. “Yup. Presently, only four people bear the crest of the dragon. I don’t have one, but I’m still a royal, you know. And I’m good at *Seeing*.”

“What is Seeing?” Agnes asked.

“It lets you see the flow of magic, or something like it. Take that cake you baked, Big Sis Agnes. I could See it shining.”

“Really?” Agnes looked over at the cake, which looked no different from an ordinary cake to her. It certainly didn’t look like it was shining at all.

“Big Sis Agnes, the magic you use is on a level you yourself aren’t aware of. That’s why you can’t notice it. ...A shame, really. You’ve got quite the talent, it

seems.”

“Talent?”

What talent?

Was he talking about how she was cursed by mushrooms?

“You don’t encounter many people who can bring about magic that sparkles like this,” Charles said, gesturing to whatever sparkles he saw on the cake. “And the Lefort family isn’t particularly connected to the royals in terms of blood or anything like that. Still, every now and then you do find the odd aristocrat who’s got strong magical powers. ...Hmm? Ah, but you were a commoner, were you not?”

“My mother was born a Lefort, but my father was a commoner from a neighboring country,” Agnes said.

“Hmm. Then perhaps it’s your father’s family line that’s blessed with magic,” Charles speculated.

Her father sold medicinal herbs with divine protection, so he probably did have magic, but Agnes wasn’t sure what form it would have taken. Perhaps it wasn’t a talent. Perhaps it was more of a rarity, something you just didn’t see much of in this country.

“And then... It’s also...very soothing. It feels regenerative, almost. You could cultivate it if you put in some effort,” Charles told her.

“Charles, back off. I won’t have Agnes being pressured.”

Charles shrugged dramatically as Claude lightly rebuked him.

“All right, all right. You must be greatly relieved, Claude, if only... Hey, Big Sis Agnes. Do you have any more of that cake? Could I have some?”

“Oh, yes. I baked a whole other cake, so please have some if you’d like.”

It was a basic sort of cake, but Charles seemed to like it. If so, she was delighted.

“What’s your game?” Claude asked, his tone low.

“It’s a magical cake, made by a girl chosen as a Dragonmate. It might prove

effective.”

Claude gasped and looked at Charles, then the two of them nodded.

“It may be hard for you to part with it, Claude, being that it’s a cake made by your beloved Dragonmate. But I’d love to test it out if we can,” Charles said, sounding hopeful.

“Ah, if that’s the case, then I’m willing to part with it,” Claude agreed. “There’s definitely a chance it could prove effective.”

“Um... What are you talking about?” Agnes asked the brothers.

The conversation had grown serious all of a sudden, which seemed odd when they were meant to be talking about her cake. She gathered her bravery to ask what was going on, and when Claude realized that Agnes was totally in the dark, he grinned.

“I told you that only four members of our family possess the crest of the dragon, right? The king, Crown Prince Xavier, me, plus, the king’s brother, Duke Cesar Granier. Only, our uncle does not have a Dragonmate.”

“Okay.” Agnes still didn’t know what they were talking about, but she nodded anyway.

“The crest is proof that its bearer has strong dragon’s blood. It comes with great power, but our bodies are not those of full dragons, and so the power is rather too great in human form,” Claude explained. “It is the duty of the Dragonmate to support such a mate. Without a Dragonmate, we tend to weaken and lose our powers once we become adults. Those with Dragonmates, conversely, live extended lifespans.”

“Lifespan?”

This was a lot to grasp at once, and Agnes couldn’t figure out that last part in particular. Charles grinned, seeing Agnes struggling to comprehend it all.

“Right. Which means that you will live longer than the average person, Big Sis Agnes.”

“Those with dragon crests have sturdy bodies, are blessed with immense magical power, and can use distinctive magic,” Claude continued.

“Dragonmates are their destined soulmates. They support the crest-bearer, prop them up, and strengthen them.”

“What? But I’m... I’m just...” Agnes sputtered. This role was far more vital than she could have dreamed of, and it was hard to believe they were really talking about her.

“You don’t need to do anything special. Just stay beside your mate. A crest-bearer cannot be without his Dragonmate. That’s what it means to be life partners.” Claude placed his hand over Agnes’s as he spoke. “But Uncle Cesar, he doesn’t have a Dragonmate. Not long after he came of age, his health began to fail him. Now, he cannot even go out in public anymore. It is said that he doesn’t have long left to live.”

“Goodness, how awful!”

It seemed terrible that a healthy man could weaken because he did not have a Dragonmate. It was even worse than if he had just been sickly to begin with.

So earlier, when Charles spoke of Claude being greatly relieved, this must be what he meant, Agnes thought. Claude has found his Dragonmate, and now he won’t get sick or grow weak.

She had never thought too much about what it meant to be someone’s mate, but knowing that the lack of a Dragonmate could sicken and weaken a man...it sent a shiver down her spine.

“So I’d like to feed our uncle some of this cake,” Charles said. “Her Majesty the Queen and Princess Consort Zenaide are both Dragonmates, of course, but they have very little magical power. You, Big Sis Agnes, are a Dragonmate, and you’re positively brimming with magic, so perhaps you may have a positive effect on our uncle.”

It was clear that Charles was deeply concerned about his uncle, the Duke of Grenier. Agnes understood what it felt like to worry for your family. She understood so much that it hurt.

“Of course, this is all just my conjecture,” Charles admitted. “I’ll make sure your name is kept out of it, Big Sis Agnes, so whatever happens, you won’t be held responsible. So please...may I have some cake?”

The gray eyes gazing at her were the same color as Claude's. The sincerity in them could not fail to stir her heart.

"Of course. I'll get it prepared right away." Agnes rose as she answered, and just then, a mushroom sprouted on Charles's arm. It had grayish-brown spatula-shaped caps, a Maitake.

"Ah, another mushroom. This is your influence too, Big Sis Agnes?"

"Ah... Yes. I'm so sorry."

Charles silently plucked the Maitake and held it up to examine it. "So those mushrooms the other day, they weren't just a fluke, huh? This must be why Claude is so mad about you."

"No. The mushrooms are splendid, of course, but you know that it's not just about the mushrooms, Agnes." Claude hurried to clarify this point, which made Agnes smile.

"I know. I know you're a big mushroom freak, Claude."

Her smart response had Charles chuckling as he handed the mushroom over to Claude.

"I see, I see. You two truly are destined soulmates. ...Big Sis Agnes, please take care of my big brother, Claude."



Mushrooms of the Day

Cantharellus cibarius

A mushroom with an orange-yellow cap.

It's eaten in Europe, but poisonous in Japan... What does that mean?

The flesh smells strongly of apricots.

It's an ingredient in Claude's favorite cologne, but it's more shocked than anyone to find itself used in perfume.

It has nothing to do with fruit, but it was pleased to find that her cake included apricots.

It would like to try Agnes's cake someday and would love to be part of it, but then again...it's poisonous.

Inocybe rimosa

A mushroom with a yellowish-brown fibrous cap.

Accidental ingestion can cause excessive sweating, hypothermia, and breathing difficulties, so it's dangerous.

It thought Agnes might stop breathing, and it sprouted in a panic to make sure that it hadn't been accidentally eaten.

It was relieved Agnes hadn't been poisoned by mushrooms, but when it saw the canoodling going on, it felt like it was the one that would stop breathing. It shared Kevin's sentiments.

In its mushroom heart, it was relieved to find that all was well but felt awkward watching the display.

Coprinellus micaceus

Covered with tiny, mica-like cells that glitter. A light yellow-colored mushroom.

When someone eats it along with alcohol, they can get very sick.

It wanted a rematch with Claude, but it's on standby in the kitchen.

It was half-suspected of getting its glitter on the cake, but the mushroom was innocent, chatting with the Matsutake in the basket about where it would like to grow.

Maitake

A mushroom with multiple grayish-brown spatula-shaped caps clustered together.

Its name in Japanese means “dance,” as in “you’ll dance with happiness when you find one.”

It tends to sprout in the same place, so if you revisit the same spot every year, you’ll probably find it.

It sprouted, hoping to be eaten by the duke, who was unwell, but Claude ended up with it instead.

“I taste very tender when cooked with meat!” it boasted, but as it’s a mushroom, no one heard it.

Chapter 9: A Request to the Spirits

“...**THE** Dragonmate of one who possesses dragon’s blood, eh?” Agnes muttered to herself as she watered the plants in her little garden patch, as was her custom.

She had thought it simply meant that you were really loved or that you were someone’s life partner. But from all that Claude and Charles had said, it was something much more. It meant supporting one who bore the crest of the dragon, a very powerful individual.

And it would extend her life.

It seemed impossible to believe, but Agnes had seen Claude buried under a mound of heavy wooden crates and emerge unscathed. As she suspected, there was something that made him different from ordinary people. This also meant that the malady afflicting Duke Grenier was very real indeed, and a very grave issue.

Agnes wasn’t sure how a Dragonmate was supposed to help, but based on what Claude and Charles had been saying, the cake she baked was supposed to have some sort of effect.

In this case, she guessed it would somehow improve his ill health.

“Prince Charles said he could see magical energy, so perhaps the cake is imbued with magical energy, then,” she pondered.

If Agnes had any ability at all to make the duke feel even the slightest bit better, then she definitely wanted to try it. But she wasn’t sure what she should do. The so-called sparkling cake was just a normal cake she’d baked in the usual way. How was it that she had supposedly imbued it with magical energy? She had no idea.

“...I wonder what would happen if I asked the spirits for help?” she mused.

The spirits had done a great job of making her medicinal herbs more potent

and effective. Perhaps they could assist her with this.

Agnes put her watering can down and took a slow, steadying breath.

“Spirits! Hello, hello!”

Putting her hands around her mouth, she unleashed a greeting far perkier than any attempt she had made with the spirits so far.

Then, as if summoned, the balls of light began to materialize, floating in the air. There were three balls of light, but today she wasn't simply asking for them to strengthen herbs for her. Just in case, she wanted to gather even more spirit balls.

“I have a really, really important favor to ask! Spirits, could you all come out?” Clasp ing her hands together, Agnes tipped her head to one side expectantly.

Then, more balls of light began to materialize at once, until she found herself surrounded by more than a dozen spirit balls. There were more than she expected, which was a surprise. Clearing her throat, she tried to recenter herself.

“Spirits...do you know about Dragonmates?”

She thought that it was a stretch, herself, as far as questions go, but the balls of light actually started to flash brightly.

“There's this person who's very sick because he doesn't have a Dragonmate. I want to help him get better somehow, but I don't know how. Any ideas?”

She wasn't really expecting them to be able to help her, but the balls of light began to bob slowly up and down in the air. They shook and shivered as if they were having a conversation amongst themselves. Then, they all flashed in unison, as if they had come to a consensus of some sort.

“If there's a way, please lend me your strength! Please!”

In response to her plea, the balls of light began to swirl around her feet. As they gathered together, their glow grew stronger. After she closed her eyes against the glare, they all suddenly went out. She opened her eyes and looked at the ground by her feet. A strange mound had appeared.

“...What's this?”

She reached down and tentatively touched the ground. With a pop, a tiny bud sprouted from it.

“I should cultivate this... Is that what you mean?”

In response to her low murmur, the bud suddenly grew two sizes bigger with a pop. She was going to take that as a yes.

Pleased, Agnes wanted to respond with the same sort of energy, so she waved her arms overhead. “Thank you, spirits! I love you all so much!”

As she yelled in a loud voice, a voice she didn’t normally use, she suddenly became aware of the man standing by the entrance to her small herb patch...a man with Prussian-blue hair.

...He saw her.

More than that, he *heard* her.

It wasn’t the first time he had seen her commune with the spirits, but being watched was still embarrassing when she herself hadn’t been aware of him. And right now, she was gesticulating and talking in a very loud, perky voice, acting with wild abandon.

Agnes froze, arms still high in the air. She could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks, reddening them. She let her arms fall weakly, her entire body as hot as if she’d sunk into boiling water.

“Uh, um... I was just...” Agnes took a shrinking step backward, her head hanging.

She was thinking of fleeing, but Claude was upon her in a moment, grasping her arm.

“I’m so sorry, Agnes. I didn’t mean to spy on you.”

Agnes was flustered, even though she’d been seen doing this before, and wasn’t sure what to do. She was thinking of making her escape, but Claude’s voice rang heavy with guilt. He did not laugh at her. He did not get angry with her. He did not resent her.

Claude was...not Philip.

It seemed so obvious, but the realization brought her instant calm.

“It... It’s fine. I wasn’t aware of my surroundings. It’s my fault, really.”

“Agnes, it was not your fault at all.” Claude released her, clearly having decided she was no longer a flight risk. Then he gently stroked her hair.

Hmm, but exactly how long has he been standing there? She felt like a total fool for not realizing.

“Say, Agnes. That, just now...it didn’t look like it did the last time, when you got the spirits to strengthen those medicinal herbs.”

“Ah, um, er...”

Agnes wasn’t sure how to respond to Claude’s sharp observation.

Last time, Claude watched her as she was getting the medicinal herbs transformed.

This time, the spirits had sprouted an actual herb.

Based on how the spirits were acting, she could guess that this herb would be stronger than any of the previous ones. And yet, Agnes had acted alone, and even if Claude was all right with it, there was no guarantee that Duke Granier would be all right with the spirits’ involvement.

That thought made it hard for her to say any more.

Claude kept watching her and then sighed a little, enfolding Agnes’s hands in his.

“I will neither respond with anger nor admonish you. If you don’t wish to speak about it, then I understand. But please, don’t make that face.” Claude spoke so kindly, bringing Agnes’s fingers to his lips.

Her shoulders stiffened, and at the same instant, a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s shoulder. It had a green cap covered in a thick layer of slime—probably a *Hygrocybe psittacina*. It wasn’t wet from the rain, but it glistened like it was.

She should have been embarrassed, having her fingers kissed, but right now, for some reason, she didn’t mind it.

“I apologize,” she said quietly.

“You don’t have to... I understand that Philip’s influence runs deep. He objected to the spirits and their divine protection as well, didn’t he?” Claude gently let go of Agnes’s hands, his expression clouding over.

“Yes. He said they were...creepy.”

“...You have no lingering attachment to Philip, right?”

“None whatsoever.”

Claude grinned wryly in response to her emphatic denial. Then he stroked Agnes’s hair again. “Then you should forget all that Philip said. Little by little is fine. You should trust the words of those who support you, not those who oppose you. Right?”

His gray eyes gazed right into hers, and Agnes felt rather strange.

“Prince Charles said that my cake would prove effective on Duke Granier. I don’t really understand much about magic, but I’m sure that the divine protection of the spirits will be even more effective.” The words she had been too nervous to say just before now flowed out without impediment, surprising even Agnes.

“You called forth the spirits to help my uncle?”

Agnes nodded, and before she knew what was happening, Claude had embraced her.

Enveloped in his arms, she could smell a sweet and fruity scent. Although she immediately felt embarrassed, she also found his embrace reassuring. Standing very still, unsure how to react, she could hear the smile in his voice as he spoke just above her head. “Thank you, Agnes.”

“But the bud only just sprouted,” she told him. “It won’t be ready right away.”

“I can wait as long as it takes,” he said.

“And I have no idea what kind of effect it will really have.”

“I’m just so happy that you took it upon yourself to try, all for my uncle. Whatever effect it has will only be a bonus.”

Held in his arms, she couldn’t help but voice her doubts, but Claude smoothed

away each one. He continued stroking her hair over and over, and when she lifted her head to look at him, their eyes met. He gazed at her kindly.

Suddenly embarrassed again, Agnes pushed on Claude's chest, getting a bit of space between them.

"Claude...aren't you being too kind to me?"

"In comparison to Philip, right? Compared to him, I'm sure I do seem overly kind. But to be honest, I'm still holding back."

"R-Really?" Agnes's eyes widened. This was unexpected.

"If I had my way, I would be spoiling you so much more."

"G-Goodness! You mustn't do that!"

Her heart began hammering, even in her already flustered state. Any more of this, and it felt like her life would be in danger.

"I thought you'd say that, which is why I've been holding back," he said with a chuckle.

"Holding back. Goodness, what is it you'd rather do?" she asked.

Embracing her all of a sudden, calling her pretty...already, the things he had done had challenged Agnes beyond her comfort zone.

"Hmm? Is it all right for me to say?"

He looked adorable, grinning impishly like that, but at the same time, he was also devastatingly sexy.

"N-No! Actually, don't say it! Please keep on holding back instead!"

Agnes had no idea what he was about to say, but no matter what it was, she was sure it would lead to her ruin.

Safety first. Health first.

She didn't want to die right here.

Claude grinned, twinklingly, as Agnes responded in a panic. "...You seem like you're enjoying yourself."

She meant it as a slight complaint, but that part didn't seem to get across.

“Yep. I’m having a lot of fun. They say the whole world changes when you find your Dragonmate, and that’s quite true. You and your mushrooms...to me, you both sparkle.”

“Mushrooms have always sparkled in your eyes, right?” she couldn’t help but point out.

“Their sparkle has intensified.”

When they first met, Claude had already been a serious mushroom fetishist. She couldn’t imagine how mushrooms had managed to become even more appealing to him over time. It appeared that there was no limit when it came to a mushroom fetishist’s love for mushrooms.

“Those who bear the crest of the dragon receive a lot of help from their Dragonmates. As a result, we grow very attached and quite possessive. But a Dragonmate has more options than just their crest-bearer. I think my heart doesn’t want you to leave me.”

“The power of the dragon crest, you mean?”

“More than that, I mean a change of heart. I adore mushrooms, but for your sake, I can try to rein myself in a little.”

“Just a little, huh?”

Holding back just a little. That must be quite a concession for a mushroom fetishist to make.

“Before now, it would have been unthinkable. But I don’t think it’s the dragon crest that has facilitated this change. It’s for you that I have made some adjustments, Agnes.”

“...Doesn’t that scare you? Won’t it be tough on you?”

Whether it was because of a dragon crest or not, changing one’s self sounded quite frightening to Agnes.

But Claude shook his head slowly. “Not at all. This is pure happiness. And, because of that, I cannot permit anyone to lay their hands on you.” His gray eyes flashed for a second, or was it just her imagination?

“But there is no risk of that,” she said flatly.

Lay their hand on her...he must be referring to a rival man trying to get fresh with her. Looking back on her life until now, that was something she had never had to worry about.

“Why do you think that way?”

“Well, because of my hair. And I’m commoner-born.”

Also, she had been publicly dumped by Philip. And, even though it wasn’t public knowledge, she was utterly cursed with mushrooms.

Except for mushroom freaks like Claude, no man would come near her.

Agnes responded earnestly enough, but Claude’s shoulders visibly slumped.

“...All right, I see. I think I am going to have to spoil you rotten after all, Agnes.”

“Huh? But just before, you said you would refrain.”

“I’ve tried. But that’s enough of that. You keep putting yourself down. Probably Philip’s influence. First, we need to foster a sense of self-confidence in you. You need to start by fully understanding yourself... Otherwise, it’s going to be dangerous in all kinds of ways.” Claude stroked Agnes’s hair and lifted up a lock of its pink length. “This hair is beautiful. You are adorable, Agnes. You can sprout mushrooms. You are utterly charming.”

“...But half of my appeal is my mushrooms, right?”

“It is part of your appeal, but not all of it.”

Just then, two mushrooms appeared on Claude’s arm with a loud pop. A white mushroom that looked like it was wearing a yellow lace cloak, and a similar one with white lace.

Phallus luteus and *Phallus indusiatus*.

The two of them sprouted at once, giving off a strong smell.

But Claude’s eyes sparkled as he beheld them.

“Agnes, are you free today?”

“Huh? Yes. I don’t have any specific plans.”

“All right. Then, let us go out.” As he spoke, Claude took Agnes’s hand and started to lead her out of the garden.

“Huh? But where to?”

“It’s a secret.” He grinned at her, and Agnes had no idea how she should respond.

“Maurice!” As they exited the garden, Claude raised his voice, and a young man with black hair and russet-colored eyes appeared from the corridor.

“We’re going to Commode. Ready my servants.”

“Certainly, Your Highness.”

Maurice bowed low and then hurried off. They watched him go, and then Claude turned to look at Agnes.

“Let us inform Count Lefort, then be off at once. ...Are you all right to ride alone in the carriage with me now?”

His royal smile was so dazzling, Agnes couldn’t imagine how she could ever say no.



Mushrooms of the Day

Hygrocybe psittacina

A mushroom covered in a thick layer of green slime that turns yellow as it grows.

When it gets wet with rain and dew, it shines like a green jewel.

Its green color isn't chlorophyll color, so it can't photosynthesize.

It's theorized to be poisonous, so it's not suitable for eating. I wonder what happened to the people who tried it?

The sprouts grown by the power of the spirits were the same color, and it was so happy about it that it sprouted to show Agnes.

But when it sprouted, the atmosphere was rather serious, so for the moment it just cheered Agnes on by making its mucus glossy.

Phallus luteus

It has a white body with a bell-shaped umbrella cap, as well as a yellow lace cloak-like thing dangling from it. A very elegant mushroom.

Its distinguished appearance means it can be compared to a queen.

Despite being a delicious mushroom used in fancy cooking, its head is slimy and quite stinky.

It takes only an hour for its dress to unfurl, and it wilts after only three hours of glory. An ill-fated mushroom.

“If you want Agnes to know about charm, show her this dress!” it sprouted, showing its dress off to Claude.

Phallus indusiatus

It has a white body, a bell-shaped umbrella cap, and a white lace cloak-like thing dangling from it. A very elegant mushroom.

Its distinguished appearance means it can be compared to a queen.

Despite being a delicious mushroom used in fancy cooking, its head is slimy and quite stinky.

Its lace cloak unfurls quickly. The fastest-growing mushroom in the natural world.

It's famous, alongside the *Phallus luteus*, as a mushroom that lives fast.

It couldn't wait for the opportunity to have the dresses made and sprouted along with the *Phallus luteus* to urge Agnes along.

Chapter 10: Celebratory Eyes and Mushroom Worries

“...**CLAUDE**, this is the palace, isn't it?”

The carriage ride had been filled with nerves, and now they had arrived. Claude led Agnes by the hand until they stopped in front of the green doors.

“It's a tailor's shop,” he said. “We have our own, located in the palace itself. It's called Commode. It means ‘Chest of Drawers.’ Come on, come in.”

Claude opened the door, and a surprisingly wide space waited within.

Everywhere she looked was crammed with gorgeous fabrics all stacked up, the bright colors hurting her eyes. She was encouraged to go inside and then sit down on a sofa. A cup of tea was brought to her and placed on the table. She couldn't quite process what was going on. But she was thirsty, probably from being so nervous in the carriage, so she was grateful for the tea.

“So, Claude, what did we come here for?” she asked him once her thirst was quenched.

“Why, to get some clothes made up,” he said.

“Clothes for you?”

“No, for you, Agnes.”

It wasn't often that you got to see where royal clothes were made. Agnes had been feeling quite interested in it all until Claude said that. Then the tea she was drinking went down the wrong way. Coughing, she looked at Claude.

“M-Me?!”

Just then, a mushroom sprouted on his arm. It had a light brown, bumpy head resting on a stalk...*Morchella esculenta*. Yes, her mushroom sensitivities were in fine fettle as always.

“We discussed it with Kevin, did we not? You need some bright and gorgeous dresses,” Claude said with a smile.

“But that’s... I mean, the palace... I’d be fine with off-the-rack. Or, I mean, second-hand...”

“...Agnes.”

“...Oh, all right...”

His tone was soft but carried a hard edge to it, making Agnes nod meekly. He was a true-born prince, after all. His tone was so different from that of a certain frivolous royal she could mention, who had to resort to using volume to subdue those he spoke to.

“I wish to spoil my beloved Dragonmate. I wish to have a beautiful dress made that will complement your stunning hair and lovely features. There is to be no argument. Are we clear?”

“Y-Yes.”

Noticing her shrinking back a little, Claude smiled wryly and stroked her hair. “Let us begin with the measurements. Run along, then.”

Agnes followed the seamstress as she was told, and soon she was having her measurements taken. Even her drab dresses from Philip had been made to measure.

As such, Agnes was familiar with the procedure. This time, though, the measurements taken were so minute and detailed that she was exhausted by the time they were finally done.



“**WELCOME** back, Agnes.”

“...Good to be back...”

She sank onto the sofa where Claude was waiting, feeling as if she could fall asleep right on the spot.

“Finally, we get to meet! Your hair is as beautiful as the rumors say, and you yourself are quite lovely!” A very enthusiastic woman had appeared all of a sudden, and Agnes scrambled to sit up straight. “I am Delalande, a representative of the royal tailor shop. I go simply mad for beautiful things.”

The lady, called Delalande, bowed, then quickly kneeled before Agnes.

“Mon Dieu, I have never seen such a lustrous peach color. Not a single split end, as if every strand was woven from silk thread. And your face is quite perfect, your skin translucent, and those eyes...”

Agnes was taken aback by the woman’s breathless speech and the closeness of her face. Then Delalande paused.

“Sacre bleu! Never have I seen such green eyes. A color such as that is rare in this kingdom.”

“Is it?” Agnes asked, speaking for the first time since the woman appeared.

Now that she thought of it, Agnes had never seen anyone with similar colored eyes before, except for her father. They weren’t as unusual a sight as her peach blossom hair, of course, so Agnes had never given them much thought.

“Many have green eyes, and blue too, but rarely do you see a color somewhere in the middle,” Delalande said. “Although I have heard tales that you can encounter it on occasion in the neighboring land.”

“My father was from the neighboring kingdom.” Agnes was delighted to have her eyes praised, since she shared them with her father, and she found herself leaning forward eagerly.

“I see. Then you have inherited your father’s beautiful eyes. I believe that in the neighboring land, they refer to that greenish-blue as ‘A Blessing of Nobility.’”

“Do they?” Claude didn’t seem to have heard this before, either. He interjected just then, with considerable interest.

“My grandmother was from the neighboring land of Orielle.”

Just as Delalande spoke those words, Agnes heard a familiar voice in the back of her mind.

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

It was her father’s voice. It was a memory from inside the carriage...at the time of that terrible accident.

She pictured her mother, blonde-haired and with eyes of reddish-brown. Benoit and Kevin had the same color eyes, and she remembered consoling herself by looking deeply into them after the accident.

Her father had light-crimson-colored hair and greenish-blue eyes, and he always wore a ring with a stone the same shade of greenish-blue. But come to think of it, her kind father never once would have called her “Mushroom Princess.” That was a cruel nickname thought up by those taunting boys. So then why did she have this recollection of him calling her “my sweet Mushroom Princess...?”

It can't be a memory. It must be a fragment of a dream, she told herself.

“...Agnes?”

Claude's voice snapped her back to reality. For some reason, her cheeks were wet. She put her hand to her face, realizing that she must have been crying.

“Have I said something to upset you? I am so terribly sorry.”

Seeing Delalande hang her head, Agnes quickly shook hers. The movement of her head sent her tears spattering.

“N-No, not at all. I'm sorry. I was...”

Claude cupped her head with his hand and drew her close as she struggled to explain. “It's all right. Take a breath.” Enveloped by his sweet scent, his gentle voice soothed her.

Once she was calmer, Agnes let out a long, slow breath.

Sensing that she needed some time to gather herself, Claude addressed Delalande. “Delalande, would you pour some more tea? Let's take a break.”

Delalande departed quickly by way of answer, but Claude didn't let go of Agnes.

“...I'm so sorry, Claude,” Agnes choked out.

She surprised herself with the weak sound of her voice. Claude loosened his grip on her, looking her in the face with concern. Then he put his hands over hers, and that was when Agnes finally realized her hands were shaking.

A fresh cup of tea was delivered, and then the servants left the room.

It was a sitting space for waiting customers, of course, but still, this was supposed to be a place of work.

Sending everyone away like this would surely interfere with their work, Agnes fretted, and yet she could not move.

“Have this. It’s hot.” Claude handed her a teacup, and she slowly brought it to her lips. Her hand was still shaking, so Claude had to help her a little. It was almost as if he was acting as her nurse.

The fragrance hit her nose as she swallowed, the hot liquid warming her belly. That was enough to make her begin to calm down.

“...What happened? Did I push you too far with all this?” Claude asked gently as he took the teacup from her and put it down on the table. He must have been worried that the measurement-taking had upset her or that she had been brought to tears over something Delalande had said.

The tailors and seamstresses had done nothing wrong. Agnes urgently felt the need to explain this.

“No, it’s not that. Um...”

“It’s okay, take your time.” He covered her hands with his again, and she could feel how warm they were.

“...Just before, when I heard that greenish-bluish eyes are a blessing of the nobility, I seemed to hear my father’s voice in my head. I think... I think it was during the carriage accident.”

Claude’s brows drew together, and he nodded. “What did he say?”

“‘Agnes. My treasure. You have blessed eyes and hair the color of peach blossoms, my sweet Mushroom Princess... Please, be happy, always.’ I must have forgotten those words until now.” She paused, exhaling. “I remember those clothes and his ring. The ones my father was wearing at the time of the accident.”

A pure white shirt with an embroidered collar, and the ring with the greenish-blue stone. Her father had been wearing both of those things that day when

they got into the carriage.

“My... My memories of the accident are fuzzy. Before I even knew what was going on, I found myself all alone in the carriage...”

...But she remembered that voice. And she remembered the looks on her parents’ faces. So did that mean that Agnes had spoken to...to them both before they died?

What exactly happened that day...?

She awoke, opened the carriage door, and then she saw...a river of red.

“...Agnes! Agnes!”

She felt a hand on her shoulder and a sharp voice speaking to her. She came back to herself, gazing into a pair of gray eyes.

...Oh yes, she was in the palace.

The overturned horse carriage and the river of red, that was all in the past. She put her hand over her chest and took a deep breath, realizing that her hand was trembling once more.

“I’m...sor...”

But before she could finish speaking, Claude pulled her into his arms.

He’s so warm, she thought. And then that made her realize how chilled she was.

“No more now. Don’t force your memories. ...The mushrooms are concerned, too.”

“The mushrooms?”

Agnes blinked, his words not quite making sense; she looked around her. Claude’s arms, his shoulders, the table, and the sofa were all covered in mushrooms.

The mushrooms that sprouted on Claude’s shoulders and arms were shaped like black and red trumpets, a *Craterellus cornucopioides* and a *Gomphus fluccosus*. The white mushroom resembling a mop that sprouted on Claude’s chest was a *Hericium erinaceus*. On the table was a mushroom that looked like

a horse saddle on a grayish-white stalk. A *Helvella crispa*. All around it, in a ring, was a bright red mushroom with mycelium, a *Russula emetica*. Then, around that, was a cluster of yellow mushrooms, *Gymnopilus junonius*.

The mushrooms had always seemed to respond to Agnes's feelings, but now her mushroom sensitivity seemed to have hit the roof.

Still, she never expected such a wild mushroom party as this one. She was so shocked, so completely taken aback by the paradise of fungal filaments the room was now filled with, that her shaking ceased all of a sudden.

"Um... I'm very sorry..." Agnes wasn't sure exactly what she was apologizing for, but she still lowered her head anyway.

"Let's call it a day for now. There's no need to force things. I'll have the dress made up here and have it delivered to you another day."

"Okay."

Claude stroked Agnes's hair as she continued to hang her head.

She felt terrible. Claude had been so thoughtful, and he hadn't been allowed to see it through. She felt terribly sad but also distracted, since when Claude moved his arm, the mushrooms all over him began to jiggle and shake, making a gelatinous rustling sound.

The longer it continued, the funnier it seemed, until she allowed herself a small smile.

Then Claude's hand reached out and lifted her face by the cheek.

"...Finally, you smiled."

"Huh?"

Agnes was stunned for a second by Claude's smile, like a flower in bloom. Then she realized how close he was, and her heart started to hammer in her chest.

"Um... Um! I want to apologize to the staff from before. It was all my fault. I really caused a huge fuss." She pushed on Claude's chest in a fluster, getting some space between them, feeling the cool surface of the *Hericium erinaceus* beneath her fingers.

“You did nothing wrong, Agnes. In fact, are you all right? You were forced to relive a painful memory, weren’t you?”

His every movement sent the mushrooms jiggling, but Claude didn’t seem to mind. To a mushroom fetishist, even the sound of mushrooms must have been appealing.

“No, it’s all right. I just got a little frightened, since it seemed to be a memory from the time of the accident. But still, all I heard and saw were my parents. I’m happy to know that they cared so much for me.”

It was so many years ago now, and while she’d tried to hold onto her memories, they had begun to fade bit by bit.

But that memory from just before...it was so clear. So vivid.

She had felt afraid, yes, but more than that, she felt happy. Because it was like seeing her parents again, if only for a moment.

Claude smiled, seeing Agnes blush, and then he began busily plucking the mushrooms off his body. “Did your birth parents have peach blossom hair, too?”

“No. My mother had blonde hair and reddish-brown eyes, and my father had light-crimson hair and greenish-blue eyes. I have this hair color, but my parents, especially my father, always complimented me on it. *‘The Spirits’ divine protection is strong with you. No doubt, you will always be protected by them, and you will find great happiness.’* That’s what he always said.”

She paused, noticing a sensation on her cheek. She hadn’t intended to, but it seemed that she had begun crying again without realizing it.

“I’m... I’m so sorr...”

But before she could fully apologize, Claude took her in his arms again, and then all she could see was the *Hericium erinaceus*.

“...It’s all right. I’ll protect you, Agnes. And I swear to make you happy.”

He stroked her hair so softly, over and over again, and Agnes nodded a little as the tears flowed.





Mushrooms of the Day *Morchella esculenta* A mushroom with a light brown, bumpy head that rests on a stalk.

It can be boiled or made into a soup, but it's poisonous when raw and must be heated through. Why do people spare no effort to risk their lives eating mushrooms, I wonder?

When it heard that Agnes was making clothes, it thought its unique head could be used for decoration and sprouted to offer itself up.

"I could be an accessory, or if you dried me out, you could use me as a button," it said, dreaming of taking a walk with Agnes.

Craterellus cornucopioides A black funnel-shaped mushroom that resembles a trumpet.

Also known by the name "Trumpet of Death," it is eaten on a daily basis in Europe and adds flavor to soups.

...I think the name is a bit odd for an edible mushroom.

It tried to comfort Agnes by playing a song, but as it's a mushroom, it made no sound.

However, the unexpected collaboration with the *Gomphus fluccosus* made Agnes smile, so it was well satisfied.

Gomphus fluccosus A poisonous red mushroom that resembles a trumpet.

It causes gastrointestinal poisoning but doesn't have any taste...someone must have tried eating this one, too.

When it realized that it makes no sound despite being trumpet-shaped, due to it being a mushroom, it still couldn't give up. It tried to trumpet anyway. It's still training.

It made no sound this time, but it still managed to vibrate a little, so there's a possibility that trumpet-shaped mushrooms might make a breakthrough yet.

Hericium erinaceus An edible mushroom that looks like pure white coral.

It's hard to pluck and easily gets dirty. The dirt probably gets trapped in the

thorny parts.

It easily won the category of “Who sprouts on Claude’s white shirt?” A winning mushroom.

It clung to Claude again today and ended up sandwiched between Agnes and Claude, so it was kind of happy.

Russula emetica Bright red caps, known to sprout in circles called “Fairy Rings.” A fairytale mushroom.

It causes gastrointestinal poisoning. Scentless but apparently spicy.

These mushroom fanatics really will taste anything, won’t they?

Agnes pictured blood, so a red mushroom bloomed.

“Don’t cry. I’ll show you my mycelium!” it sprouted, doing its best.

Helvella crispa Grayish-white, with a stalk like a bamboo stick. It has a nodule on it that looks like a little horse saddle.

If you spotted it on a mountain hike and didn’t know what it was, you might be like, “Hmm?”

It’s edible, but if not thoroughly cooked, it can be poisonous.

It doesn’t really look edible from the shape, though.

It sprouted in response to Agnes’s emotional state, but it was surrounded by *Russula emetica*, then by *Gymnopilus junonius*, so it couldn’t really move.

It felt a little bit embarrassed.

Gymnopilus Junonius Yellowish-brown. Looks kind of like the Japanese *Shimeji*.

You may or may not be able to guess from the name, but it’s poisonous.

It contains a poison that acts on the nervous system and can cause mental overstimulation and hallucinations. The Japanese name translates to “Big Laugh Mushroom,” but I’m not sure what’s so funny about that.

It sensed Agnes’s anxiety and sprouted, wanting her to smile.

If it gets too many followers, there’s a rumor it will become a King *Gymnopilus*

junonius, but this time it remained a Normal *Gymnopilus junonius*.

Chapter 11: A Small Gentleman and a Charming Flower

“YOU’VE grown much bigger.”

As she watered her herb patch, Agnes took note of how much the herbs had grown.

Until just recently, she had been selling herbs blessed by the divine protection of the spirits for use in combating the epidemic. But then she had heard that the epidemic was coming to an end. This meant that it was probably about time to finish up selling the rest of her blessed herbs.

In the past, her birth father had always warned her not to sell recklessly, so she should probably tell the shop owner that the next shipment would be the last one.

She finished watering the herbs and looked them over, noticing one oddly bluish-green-leaved herb amidst the rest of them. The leaves really did look quite blue, but they also had greenish parts, and the roots were completely purple. The shoot the spirits had sprouted for her when she called them forth the other day was like a normal herb in form, but the colors were bright and very different.

“I wonder if...if this will be all right.”

She called on the spirits for help with Duke Granier’s condition, and they sprouted these as a result. Surely, they would be imbued with powerful effects. But the colors looked like those of a poisonous plant, so she couldn’t help feeling a bit nervous about it.

“No. It’s not right to judge a book by its cover,” she said.

Agnes herself had suffered due to the color of her hair. Even if they looked like poisonous plants, she had to trust in the spirits.

“I just hope they prove effective...”

She couldn’t fathom what it meant for a Dragonmate’s presence to

strengthen someone, nor could she understand why the lack of a Dragonmate would weaken them. But since the duke was never seen in public, he must be very frail and sick indeed.

These herbs, given to her by the spirits...she could only pray that they would help a little.

“Sis, are you still in the garden?” Kevin peeked out into the garden from the back door, then came over, his frown deepening as he approached. “...What’s with those herbs? Those colors look poisonous. Quite dodgy, don’t you think?”

“Dodgy? Really?” Agnes tilted her head, giving the herbs another look.

The colors weren’t great, truthfully, but it wasn’t right to judge based on appearances. Agnes was shocked by his appraisal, but Kevin continued to frown as he gazed at the blessed herbs.

“I’m not sure how to phrase it... They have this oppressive feeling to them.”

“Usually, the spirits bless the herbs I’ve already grown. But this time, the spirits sprouted these herbs specifically in response to my request.” As she explained the difference between these and her usual crop, Kevin’s frown grew even deeper.

“That sounds pretty dangerous, don’t ya think? I mean, the spirits put some of their divine power into those, right? ...I really don’t think you should sell them.”

“I’m not selling these,” she said, shaking her. “I, uh...the king’s brother is sick. I thought these might help...”

She probably shouldn’t explain about the Dragonmates, but at this rate, it sounded like she was just trying to push her herbs onto the king’s brother. It was very weird for an aristocratic young lady to be delivering herbs to the king’s brother out of the blue like this.

Agnes looked at Kevin, expecting him to be angry, but Kevin just breathed a huge sigh.

“You’re so kind to others, Sis. You’ll see that they go via Claude, won’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, I think that’s what will happen.”

“That should be all right then. But listen here, okay? Your spirit blessing is a

rare thing. You don't want the wrong people to find out about it. Just be careful."

"O-Okay!"

It was like a teacher imparting warnings to a student.

How strange. When did he get so grown-up?

Up until not too long ago, Kevin had been a little boy running around everywhere after Agnes. She felt a complicated mix of happiness and sadness, along with a motherly pride and a sense of "That's our boy!" about it.

"Hmm, still, I'm glad to see you taking an interest in different things and taking independent steps, Sis," he said. "Thanks to a certain idiot royal, you've barely had a chance to leave the house and experience things. Huh, come to think of it, he hasn't been by recently at all. Perhaps he's finally given up."

"Philip hasn't been by at all, has he?"

"Nor do I wish to see him. In fact, if he comes by, I will refuse to let him see you. And...wait. That mushroom story you told the other day. What if they really had a bad effect on him?" Kevin guessed, sounding hopeful.

"...I saw all of the royals at the most recent ball, and Philip wasn't in attendance. Apparently, he really hasn't been seen in society in a month."

Kevin listened to Agnes's explanation, then rubbed his chin as he began thinking hard.

"Philip's royal connections are all he has. If he hasn't been to royal family gatherings, there must be a reason for it. Perhaps your mushroom onslaught really did a number on him after all. That means right now, Philip may be bald as a plucked chicken, suffering all manner of painful ailments..."

His reddish-brown eyes sparkled at the prospect, the corners of his mouth getting progressively higher and higher.

"...I don't think I've ever been so grateful to mushrooms in all my life! Good job, little mushies!"

As if to respond to this rousing praise, a mushroom popped up on Kevin's arm. It was covered with fibrous scales and had white flesh...a Matsutake.

“Ooh! Are you a little Matsutake? Not that it matters. You’ve done a very good job responding to Agnes’s long-held feelings of bitterness! We shall have mushroom soup tonight!” Kevin plucked the mushroom from his arm and then cradled it like a baby, announcing the night’s dinner menu.

“...What? You’re going to eat it? When you’re so grateful to it?”

Agnes reacted with shock, which made Kevin pause and look at her, then back at the Matsutake.

“Am I not supposed to eat it? What, then...should I display it?” As Kevin spoke, another pair of mushrooms popped up on his arm and shoulder. One had a white-brown cap and a white stalk, a *Hypsizygus marmoreus*, and the other had a brown cap and a thick stalk, a *Lyophyllum shimeji*.

“...All edible.”

Once Agnes confirmed it, Kevin, who was now a walking mushroom farm, grinned hugely.

“The mushrooms approve! Looks like mushroom soup is back on the menu. Now, to harvest you. I must be careful not to squish you, precious mushies, born of Agnes’s raw feelings!”

In a great mood, Kevin began harvesting the mushrooms and putting them in a basket, but no sooner had he plucked them than new ones sprouted.

“Whoa, an endless mushroom buffet. I can’t eat all of you.” Muttering under his breath, Kevin continued frantically harvesting mushrooms.

When it looked like the basket was in danger of overflowing from mushrooms, he finally looked at Agnes. “About the mushrooms,” he said. “You said you never know why they sprout, but I think there’s a reason behind it, real intent, there.”

“Er... Intent?”

Kevin stopped plucking and grabbed another, empty basket.

“Until now, they sprouted when you were feeling strong negative feelings, right? But recently, they pop up when your feelings are positive. It’s like you’re gradually beginning to understand one another.”

“The mushrooms and me? Understanding one another...”

“You really are the Mushroom Princess, eh?” Kevin grinned wryly, and Agnes didn’t know what to say in return.

She knew that Kevin meant absolutely no offense, but that nickname wasn’t something Agnes enjoyed hearing spoken aloud.

“It’s all right. You’re free of Philip now. And you have me, and father, and Claude. One day you’ll happily respond to the title of Mushroom Princess and sprout mushrooms at will.” Kevin smiled as he started putting mushrooms into the second basket.

“...Is that really all right, though?” she asked, doubtful.

“I want you to aim to become a headstrong young lady, but I don’t mind if you become a headstrong Mushroom Princess instead.”

Agnes looked at Kevin, who was grinning, and finally realized that he was teasing her.

“Don’t tease me! Hmph!”

Agnes let out a vexed sigh, and Kevin grinned even more. The mushrooms on his arms and shoulders jiggled about merrily.



“**YOU** look beautiful today as you always do, Agnes. That dress really suits you. A floral motif always makes you look so vibrant.”

Claude was smiling, bright enough to beat any flower.

They had been invited to a ball at the residence of Duke Raugel, and Agnes was in attendance with Claude.

When Duke Raugel’s son had been very sick, Agnes had been the one to share a special medicinal mushroom with the duke, so they were acquainted. That said, all she really did was sell said mushrooms to the shop, and it had been a shock for her when the duke personally thanked her at a previous ball. She was even more shocked when he personally invited her to this one, saying he wanted to thank her once more.

Agnes felt pleased, but also embarrassed and not sure if she was deserving of this. Still, the invitation wasn't unwelcome.

The issue was the dress she was wearing.

It was the dress Claude had made up for her, and it had a floral motif, as he had just mentioned. The skirt looked like it was made of layers of large flower petals, and the bodice and sleeves blended from white to crimson. On the front of the bodice was a big white flower, and the skirt was covered with pink and red flowers, blooming brightly.

In her hair, she wore white flowers, and she also wore white gloves. Translucent beads shimmered. A string of pure white pearls was around her neck, with just one of the pearls being blue. The dress and accessories were very lovely, but it was the single blue pearl that was causing Agnes trouble.

She glanced over at her prince, who was sharply dressed in mostly white with crimson accents. On his chest, he wore a white flower with a blue pearl sparkling in its center.

"I just don't think there's any need for us to wear matching accessories, you know?" Agnes told him. "And my dress and your suit are in the exact same color scheme."

They were matching from head to toe, and Agnes couldn't stop blushing.

She loved Claude, and she knew they were heading toward an engagement. And yet, this was too much for a novice like her to cope with.

A mushroom appeared on Claude's chest, no doubt in response to Agnes's feelings of worry and insecurity. It had layers of a thin white membrane, a *Tremella fuciformis*. It sprouted beside the floral decoration on his chest, quivering but not really standing out.

"You are my Dragonmate, Agnes. We are not officially engaged yet, but I want to keep away any bothersome flies. This is all necessary. And anyway, you're adorable." Claude grinned at her, stroking the *Tremella fuciformis* on his chest. Even with his mushroom freak flag flying at full mast, he was still a terribly dashing prince.

"You mean me and the mushrooms are adorable, don't you?" Muttering in a

small voice, Agnes was still pleased to be called adorable by the person she herself adored.

But she was just...so...embarrassed.

Claude seemed to have picked up on that, and he flashed his grin at her.

She was embarrassed, and delighted, and completely flustered.

Agnes had never felt like this before in her life.



“AH, Lady Lefort. So glad you could come. Thank you again for all you did. Thanks to you, my son is back to his usual happy self.” Duke Raugel spoke to Agnes in a jovial tone, gesturing to his son, who was currently trying to hide behind Duchess Raugel’s skirts.

He must have been only about four years old. His cherubic face peeked out shyly from behind his mother’s skirts. This tiny, adorable child had been racked with fever until recently.

And Agnes and her herbs and mushrooms had helped.

Agnes felt a warm feeling spread through her chest, and she thought about how glad she was that she had asked the spirits for their help.

Agnes crouched down in front of the boy and smiled.

“Hello, young sir. I’m so happy to meet you today.”

The little boy froze up, his jaw dropping, and then his little eyes began to sparkle. “...Flower princess.”

“Oh, my. You’re very polite and nice to the ladies, aren’t you, little sir?” she said, speaking in a sweet voice.

He was certainly the son of a duke. Despite his tiny size, he could greet a lady properly. No doubt he was receiving the finest education.

Deeply moved, Agnes smiled and curtsied, and then the duke and his family moved on.

“...Claude. That little boy just called me a princess, didn’t he?”

“He certainly did.”

“I assumed it was just politeness, but...the ‘Mushroom Princess’ nickname hasn’t leaked out into high society, has it? Oh goodness, what will I do if so?” she asked, worry lacing her tone.

Because of Philip, Agnes had only ever exchanged the bare minimum of pleasantries with the aristocracy until now. None of them ought to know about her mushroom curse. And yet, Duke Raugel knew her as a supplier of medicinal herbs that worked well during the epidemic.

Perhaps he had looked into her and found out about the mushrooms.

Claude saw that Agnes was panicking and responded with a wry grin. “I don’t think so. I think... I think you managed to charm even a four-year-old boy, my love. I worry about the future with you as my Dragonmate.”

“Why?”

“No real reason. I’m just thinking that it was a good idea for me to have us wear matching outfits today. ...Well then, shall we take a rest? I’ll go and fetch us drinks. Stay in this vicinity, won’t you?”

“Okay.”

This was a duke’s ball, so there were many guests. Agnes wasn’t used to crowds, so she moved over to the wall and released a little sigh.

“You’ve done well for yourself, haven’t you?”

Agnes lifted her head, surprised by the prickly tone of the voice, and she saw a woman standing there in a bright green dress—Sabina Barthet, daughter of a marquis.

“...It’s been a while,” Agnes greeted her.

The last time they met, it had been at the ball to celebrate the crown prince’s wedding. Her amber-colored hair was beautifully set, and her green dress made her green-leaf-colored eyes sparkle.

If Sabina is here, does that mean that Philip’s here too? Agnes looked around, and Sabina picked up on it, frowning.

“Look all you like, but Philip isn’t here. I came with my father tonight.”

“Oh, I see.”

Agnes would be lying if she said she wasn’t curious about how Philip was, but she didn’t want to see him. Honestly? She was glad he wasn’t here.

Agnes breathed a sigh of relief, but Sabina’s expression remained overcast.

“I haven’t seen Philip in a month, actually,” Sabina said. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“No. I haven’t seen him either.”

“...Hmph, I guess you wouldn’t.” Sabina looked bored and finally let her frown fall.

“Um, did you want something?” Agnes asked, wanting to be free of her.

“...Is it true that you whispered the names of important people and other information into Philip’s ear for him?”

Agnes was taken aback by the sudden change of subject, but there seemed no point in lying.

“Yes, I did. Philip never could remember anything.”

When Agnes responded honestly, Sabina scowled again.

“Are you serious? Give me a break. Thanks to you, now I have to do the same thing, apparently. I mean, is this some kind of joke? Doesn’t he have any concept of how important it is for a royal to know his subjects, to know their names and circumstances? You spoiled him, that’s what you did! And thanks to you, he never even tried to remember them, right?” she snapped, taking her frustration out on Agnes.

“No, you’re wrong. I warned him many times that he needed to memorize those things himself. But Philip—”

“...Quit blaming your failures on others!”

Before Agnes could finish explaining, Sabina exploded.

“...It’s your fault! All of it is your fault! Okay, he has to break with the royal family, but he’s got good bloodlines, and he’s handsome, even though his

reputation isn't that great. But this talk of you...propping him up! It's unbelievable. I never caught wind of it before getting involved with him! Now I'm stuck picking up your mess! I'm disgusted."

Then, with a final glare at Agnes, Sabina turned and stormed off.

Agnes was so stunned by what had just happened that she couldn't process it. She just watched Sabina walk off and let out a long, slow breath.

It was Philip's fault that he hadn't bothered learning any of the things he was supposed to know. He was content to coast along, but Agnes knew it wouldn't do to have Philip embarrass himself and upset others, so she'd taken to feeding him the necessary information.

Of course, she had told him countless times to study these things himself. She had even tried to make him do so on numerous occasions. But Philip had no motivation, and nothing seemed to stick. In the end, nothing had changed.

Was Agnes really to blame for that?

If only Agnes had worked harder, maybe Philip would have gotten motivated and studied. Maybe he would have learned how to act politely in society. Part of her didn't believe that was true, but another part of her felt racked with guilt, and she could feel her head growing heavy.

"...Am I really just a big burden to all kinds of people, after all...?"

Claude said that Agnes was his Dragonmate, and he seemed to care for her. Agnes adored Claude, as well, and that was why the thought of being a burden to him was so hard for her to bear.

"...Maybe we shouldn't be together after all."

Claude would never say it or even think it. She knew that, but something inside her still felt terrible.

Just as she was sinking deep into despair, someone appeared in front of her.

"Thanks for waiting. Look at the cocktail stick in this juice. It's shaped like a mushroom! There were so many colors, I had trouble choosing, but— What's wrong? Has something happened?"

Agnes shook her head and took the glass from Claude's hand. There was some

sort of fruity juice with pulp in it and a pink cocktail stick shaped like a mushroom. She took a sip and felt herself start to calm down a little.

She allowed herself a small, surreptitious sigh and then tried her best to smile.

“I ran into Lady Barthet.”

“...Is Philip here?” Claude’s expression clouded over as he began looking around.

“No. Philip isn’t here.”

“Oh, right. ...Well then, what did she say to you?”

“Nothing important.”

A mushroom sprouted on Claude’s arm with a pop as Agnes answered. It had a brown cap and stalk, a *Melanoleuca melaleuca*. As she gazed at the quivering mushroom, she could hear Claude sigh.

“It doesn’t look like nothing important. Not when you’re making that face. And a mushroom just sprouted.”

“Huh. What about the mushroom?”

Claude plucked it with a grin as Agnes spoke without really thinking about it.

“Mushrooms are beautiful, delicious, splendid creatures!”

...*Oh, help.*

The mushroom fetishist was waxing lyrical about fungus again. Agnes wasn’t sure how to respond, but then Claude pocketed the mushroom and took Agnes’s hand.

“...So?” With him grinning at her up close like that, it was hard not to go along with him. And a part of her really wanted to talk to him, to have him understand her.

She knew that Claude would never thoughtlessly rage against her.

Surely, it would be all right.

Agnes gathered her strength and started to explain the situation.

“...She had no grounds to say any of that.” Once Claude was done listening, he drained the contents of the glass he was holding in one gulp. “You are not to blame, Agnes. Philip didn’t do what he should have done. Now the Barthet girl is unable to accept that and unwilling to prop him up. No doubt she is displeased by Philip’s treatment of her and is lashing out at you.”

Claude picked up Agnes’s empty glass and placed it on a nearby table along with his own.

“After he caused such a scene, ending his engagement publicly, those two absolutely have to get married now. There’s no escape for either of them. If they break up, it’ll reflect badly on them both. It’s what they deserve. And so, Agnes, you shouldn’t feel badly about anything.”

“...Okay.” Agnes nodded, and Claude gently stroked her hair. That was all, so why did it make her feel so reassured?

“...All right. Let us go on an outing in town sometime soon,” Claude said, changing the mood.

“In town, you say?”

“Yes. On a date.”

That one word made Agnes’s cheeks go red.

She’d been out with Claude before, but hearing it described as a date made her feel several times more embarrassed.

“I’ll have a dress sent to you, so be sure to wear it, okay?”

“Ah... Okay.”

She was embarrassed, but happy, and looking forward to it.

The horrible feeling from a few minutes ago had vanished, and now she felt clear-minded. She looked up at Claude, not sure what this feeling was meant to be called. He narrowed his gray eyes at her, ever so kindly.



Mushrooms of the Day

Matsutake

A high-grade mushroom known to most, covered in fibrous scales with white flesh showing underneath.

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.

Last time, it sprouted to offer a balance to the sweets, but this time it sprouted to get a second shot at success.

As a token of gratitude for the all-out mushroom attack, the Matsutake decided to offer itself as an example of a high-class mushroom.

Hypsizygus marmoreus

An edible mushroom with a white stem and a white-brown cap.

A familiar, easily acquired mushroom that can be used in a variety of dishes. Very popular.

Sometimes it's sold as Shimeji, but this has led to some filament-al problems.

When it heard the phrase "mushroom soup," it happily sprouted, hoping there would be a mushroom banquet to celebrate Philip being attacked.

Lyophyllum shimeji

An edible mushroom with a brown cap and a thick stalk.

“I smell like a Matsutake and taste like a Shimeji,” so of course it tastes and looks perfect.

A member of the Mycorrhiza Club, good friends with the Matsutake.

It shares the name Shimeji, so it's got a complicated past with the actual Shimeji, but a settlement was reached with Matsutake serving as an arbitrator.

Now it's happy to share the spotlight as a beloved edible mushroom.

With the Matsutake and regular Shimeji, it hopes to decorate the Lefort dinner table.

Tremella fuciformis

An edible mushroom with layers of thin white membrane.

It looks like it's made of gelatin, but when you dry it out, it turns yellowish-white and hard. You can reconstitute it with water, though.

It's odorless and tasteless but quite toothsome, so it fetches a good price.

It sprouted hoping to join the white flowers on Claude's chest.

"I won't give up the white frilly seat that decorates Agnes and Claude!" it said, quivering gelatinously.

Melanoleuca melaleuca

An edible mushroom with brown caps and stalks, and its flesh smells like flour.

It has many dark, warty spots covering it.

“Don’t trifle with Agnes’s heart, or I’ll cover you with warts,” it warned Claude.

Chapter 12: I'll Show You

“**Sis**, Prince Claude will be here soon. Please just come out already.”

“But...”

She could hear Kevin sighing from beyond the door, but Agnes was in a bind. She looked down at herself, and the source of her panic came into view.

The pale pink dress was adorned with cute frills in the same color. The hem and sleeves were trimmed in white, and tiny beads glittered all over. The collar and waist, as well as the upper arms, were finished off with black ribbon, giving it a cutesy appearance, like something a little girl would wear.

There was also a neck ribbon included with the order, so she put it on, and she finished it off with the mushroom brooch intended to fix it in place. But this was all too much!

There was also a hair accessory made of pink and black ribbon, so she asked Therese to help her with that. Therese braided her hair to one side and tied it with the ribbon, leaving the rest to flow free.

In fact, the majority of her hair was left free and flowing.

Agnes's hair was peach-blossom pink, the dress was pink, and the mushroom brooch was pink. She was all in pink from head to toe.

“I... I think I'll change after all.”

Taking in her own appearance once more, Agnes had reached her limit. Then she heard Kevin sighing on the other side of the door.

“You promised to wear the dress you were given, didn't you? Even Therese said it looked good. Besides, His Highness will be here soon. Just come on out here.”

“But...at the very least, my hair. I have to put my hair up.”

It was barely a drop in the bucket, but if she could reduce the pinkness a little,

that might mitigate the damage. She reached up to untie the hair ribbon, but then she heard Kevin rustling about.

“...Agnes.”

“Yeek!”

She squealed. That was not Kevin’s voice.

“Claude? It’s not time for you to arrive yet...” she managed to say.

“I couldn’t wait. I’m just too excited!” he exclaimed on the other side of the door. “So? Are you changed yet?”

“Yes, no, um. Please wait a minute.”

His early arrival took her by surprise, but she could still do something about this. He wasn’t the kind of person to open the door on her before she was ready, so she could quickly tie up her hair first and then go out there.

“She’s already finished getting ready. She was rambling on about colors and her hair. Can you just take her already?”

“...Aargh! Kevin! You traitor!” Agnes shrieked as Kevin leaked the truth of the situation.

“Come, Agnes.”

Claude’s gentle voice tugged at her resolve.

“But, um...”

“...Please come.”

“Urgh...”

If he had gotten pushy like Philip, she’d have been able to dig in her heels. But Claude did not raise his voice and he asked politely, and so Agnes could not continue to protest.

She could not ignore him. She could not oppose him with defiance... Backed into a corner, she slowly reached for the door.

“You look beautiful,” Claude said as soon as he saw her. “The whole outfit suits you so well, Agnes.”

“Whoa. It IS bright. Yes, yes, that’s the way to go, Sis!”

The two men both grinned at her, and Agnes felt her heart being tugged again.

“But, look at my hair. And the dress is pink. And the mushroom is pink.”

“Yeah. It’s beautiful.”

Claude’s compliment came without even a pause. Agnes felt she didn’t have a leg to stand on. She struggled for words, and instead, a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s arm.

It had a deep pink cap...a *Pleurotus djamor*.

Claude grabbed hold of the still-blushing Agnes’s hand and tugged her along, the mushroom bobbing.

Kevin waved them off as they both got into the carriage.



“**A** carriage, I see.”

If they were going to town, they could have walked just as well. It was a perfectly walkable distance, but apparently they were going by carriage today.

“Yes. Some extra practice.”

Claude plucked the mushroom off his arm. He was wearing a basic shirt and slacks, but that wasn’t enough to stop him from looking like a nobleman.

His royal blood really shines through, Agnes thought. Then she noticed the blue mushroom brooch sparkling on his chest.

They were completely matching, weren’t they?

All of a sudden, she felt even more embarrassed, her gaze moving to the carriage window.

“May I sit there?”

“What? Y-Yes...”

Did she want him to sit beside her? No, she did not. But being asked outright like that... She felt it would be too cruel of her to say no. Besides, it wouldn’t be

so bad.

Why did everything have to be such a mental burden for her?

But this wasn't like the troubles she'd been through in the past. This one felt... rather nice. And she wasn't sure how to handle that.

"That dress really suits you. You may be self-conscious, but your hair really is very pretty. You shouldn't hide it or put yourself down. I was actually thinking of having a ballgown made in the same color, but I thought that might be a bit premature."

A ballgown? So he wanted her to look like a giant mass of pink in front of the general public?

"...No. Absolutely not."

Just the thought of it made her spine stiffen in horror.

"Yeah. So first, I thought we'd start with a simple dress, and a simple outing, to get you used to it. You know, people don't notice each other as much as you'd think. If they did look at you, it would be because they were noticing how pretty you are. Now, this is the first time out, so I thought we'd go by carriage to keep you from getting too tired out, and I plan for us to go home early as well."

"Claude. Am I... Am I not a huge burden to you?" She gathered her courage to ask him that, and Claude responded by giving her a quizzical look. "Um, since I won't just graciously accept your gifts, and you do have to walk on eggshells rather a lot. That is to say, I..."

...Oh dear. Is he getting sick of being around me?

She couldn't form the words she most wanted to ask him. She had been worried about this all along, but what if he agreed with her? She was suddenly too scared to ask.

"Agnes, do you dislike me paying all this attention to you?"

"...N-No!"

She lifted her head quickly, to be met by Claude's kind, soft gaze.

“It can’t be helped that you need careful handling sometimes. That is entirely Philip’s fault. As long as you get used to this bit by bit, that’s fine with me. I pay attention to you because I adore you, Agnes. You can rely on me as much as you need. I would be perfectly happy if you did.”

“...I don’t think I like it like that, though.”

She adored Claude, but she didn’t want to be a burden to him. Nor did she want to rely on him utterly.

“That’s a shame. ...Ah, we’re here. Shall we go?”

She took Claude’s hand, and they alighted the carriage together. The familiar sounds of the town instantly enveloped Agnes.

She usually never thought anything of it, but today she was in head-to-toe pink.

Claude smiled behind her, seeing Agnes walking along so nervously.

“Now then, where shall we go? I’m a little hungry, so I’d like to start by eating some strawberry skewers like we did last time,” Claude said.

“In that case, they’re over there.” Agnes pointed to a nearby street cart, and Claude took her hand and started off.

“Let’s go and buy some together.”

“Huh? But...”

That street cart owner knew her. What would he say, seeing Agnes all in pink? The thought made her want to dig in her heels.

“Then, can you wait by yourself?”

Right now, she had Claude by her side, and his emotional support. And, the benefit of his stunning good looks to draw attention away from her. Standing alone in the town’s streets, dressed all in pink...it would require considerable bravery.

Agnes dithered, unable to say yes or no, and that was when Claude’s big hand stroked her hair.

“...Just kidding. I would never leave you standing alone to get stolen away.

Not when you look this cute.”

Who would steal her away? Claude was clearly just saying that to be sweet.

Agnes had all sorts of thoughts just then, but as he gazed at her with his beautiful gray eyes, the words vanished.

...This must be what they mean when they say love makes you weak.

Just as she came to that conclusion, a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s arm. It had bright indigo folds on a light indigo cap. A *Lactarius indigo*. The deep blue reminded her of Claude’s hair, and she felt herself blushing a little. Over a mushroom!

Claude plucked the mushroom and pocketed it before taking Agnes’s hand. Then he tugged her over to the street cart and ordered. The cart owner gazed at Agnes.

She knew it. The pink look was an eyesore and made her stand out. She steeled herself for what he was about to say, but after blinking a few times, the cart owner gave her a broad smile.

“Ah, if it isn’t Lady Lefort! You look different from usual, so I wasn’t sure it was you at first. Ah, you always were very beautiful, but that outfit really shows you off.”

Agnes thought he was about to scoff and scowl at her pink ensemble, so this made her jaw fall open in shock.

“Are you all dressed up for your boyfriend? How nice, how nice. ...All right. In exchange for the beautiful view, here’s a little something extra!”

With a cheerful manner, the cart owner skewered an extra, errant strawberry and handed it over.

They sat down on a nearby bench, and Claude held his skewer aloft. “See? It was fine, wasn’t it?”

“Was it... Was it really fine?”

Even though it was just pleasantries, she was still embarrassed over being called beautiful by someone she knew, and even more so by Claude being referred to as her boyfriend.

“He didn’t say anything negative about your hair or your pink outfit, now, did he?”

“Well, he...no, he didn’t.”

The shopkeeper knew her, so surely he wouldn’t have made a really rude face or anything. But oddly enough, the sight of an all-pink Agnes didn’t seem to offend him at all.

“Many people will voice an opinion on your hair, no doubt. But the majority will find it beautiful. I believe this. So please, don’t worry about it so much. Now, let us eat.”

“Okay.”

The skewered strawberries were juicy, sweet, and sour, and just eating them was enough to lift her mood. She recalled, suddenly, how the last time they had sat here eating strawberry skewers, she had wiped some strawberry juice from Claude’s chin with her handkerchief.

She peeked, and his gray eyes met hers.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Uh, nothing.”

Claude’s hand reached out right in front of Agnes as she shook her head. She gazed at it, wondering what was going on, and then his long finger touched her lip.

“Agnes. You have strawberry juice on you.”

A white mushroom sprouted on his shoulder...it was a *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, but she didn’t have time for that right now.



“Oh, I’m sorr...” She rushed to apologize, but Claude...licked his finger.

Agnes stiffened up. It felt so...intimate.

For a moment, she gazed at the young man with the Prussian-blue hair, unable to process what was happening right in front of her. She looked at Claude’s finger, at his mouth, at his gray eyes...and finally, she realized what he was doing.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” she blurted.

“What? I forgot my handkerchief.”

She felt the answer didn’t quite match the question, but her heart was pounding so fast she couldn’t think.

“Then say so! Here!”

Claude took the handkerchief Agnes thrust at him and...dabbed at her mouth with it.

“Why are you wiping me?!”

“I mean, I can hardly get you clean just using my finger, can I?”

They weren’t on the same page at all. But Claude was grinning with amusement.

“Just...give it back!”

She snatched the handkerchief out of Claude’s hand. She knew he was only wiping some fruit juice from her mouth, but his method was so weird. And the handkerchief...she’d handed it to him to wipe his hands with. She hadn’t wanted him to wipe her mouth for her.

Her heart was still hammering, showing no signs of calming.

“Hey, Agnes.”

“What?”

“Am I okay?”

She lifted her head, wondering what he was talking about, and that was when she noticed some strawberry juice around his mouth now. That would be fine

alone, but he was still grinning and now also tapping his mouth.

Was he indicating for her to wipe it?

The realization came to her, unwelcome, and now her cheeks were so hot she was sure she could fry an egg on them.

“You have a little, so please just lick your lips!” she told him.

“Really?”

Claude obediently licked his lips, looking terribly sexy. He even looked hot as he plucked the mushroom and stuffed it in his pocket.

...She shouldn't have witnessed that.

Now she couldn't stop thinking about how he had brushed her lip earlier and then licked his finger. Mushroom fetishist he may be...but why did he still have to be so sexy?

She knew she was lashing out, but she found herself glaring at Claude.

He noticed and narrowed his eyes at her.

“What? You wanted to lick it off for me, Agnes?”

“...As if!!!”

Her cheeks were about to ignite. Her heart was about to burst. She clutched the handkerchief and trembled, and then she felt him stroking her hair softly.

“I was kidding. I'm sorry.”

It was impossible to stay angry now that he'd apologized to her. Besides, Agnes was more embarrassed than angry anyway...and she felt like Claude had the upper hand.

She wondered if the day would come when she'd stop feeling so embarrassed and awkward and flustered.

She sighed a little and then ate the rest of her strawberry.

Leaving the house, riding by carriage, eating strawberry skewers. That was all she had done. So then, why did she feel so tired?

The pink dress was exhausting to start with, but Claude was the most

exhausting part of all. And yet...

As tired as she was...she also felt excited.

"Come on, Agnes."

When she took the hand he held out, Claude smiled back at her. That made her heart pound even harder.

She had been engaged to Philip for a long time, but nothing like this had ever happened with him. Did that mean Philip and Agnes had been an odd couple? Or did it mean that Claude, himself, was the odd one? What was it that was so different about those two?

...It was a huge difference, whatever it was.

"...What are you thinking?"

"You're so different."

"From Philip?"

"How did you know?" Agnes looked over at him in surprise, and Claude chuckled ruefully.

"Well, you know. Philip's the only guy who's been close to you, right? So that makes your baseline for everything...Philip. Before, you said that I'm kind. But that's in comparison to Philip, isn't it?"

Now that he pointed it out, he could be right.

Agnes had been raised a commoner, and the only aristocratic male she'd gotten to know outside of her family was Philip. After that, she hadn't really met any others. So perhaps Philip really had become her baseline.

"It does...seem that way," she admitted. "I'm sorry. From now on, I'll try to meet all kinds of men and reconsider my baseline a little."

Agnes knew there was something odd about Philip. But she could never put her finger on what it was or figure out what to do about it. There was so much she didn't know, come to think of it.

She would need to live in society going forward, so it was important for her to understand what was normal in this world and what wasn't. She was

considering the future seriously, but for some reason, Claude clutched his temples.

“I’m in favor of you reconsidering your baseline. But there is no need for you to meet all kinds of men,” he said.

“But I don’t know anyone but Philip, so it will be difficult to reconsider my baseline otherwise.”

“It’s more important for you to see yourself objectively than it is to learn about what’s normal for men,” he told her.

“Objectively, you say?”

The way Agnes saw it, she was a girl with peach blossom hair cursed by mushrooms. In other words...she was not fine just as she was. However, she felt she should get to know others and learn from them. Her own opinion alone wasn’t enough.

Claude stopped walking and brought Agnes’s hand close to his chest. “It’s all right. I’ll teach you the important things. ...Okay?”

“Yeek!”

She wasn’t sure what was “all right” or what he was planning to “teach” her. There was a lot she wanted to ask, but his sexy gaze up close to hers made her heart pound.

She was afraid of denying him. And she was also afraid of agreeing.

Agnes wasn’t sure what to say, and then a voice rang out suddenly behind them.

“Ooh! It’s the twosome with the mushroom brooches!”

There was no ignoring a voice like that. Agnes turned to see a man smiling broadly at them.

“...Ah yes, the gentleman from the brooch shop.” Claude’s words sparked her memory, and yes, she recalled the face of the shop owner.

Based on what he had just said, it was clear that the shop owner remembered them too, although the reason why he remembered them seemed a little odd.

“Ah, young man, you’re as handsome as you were, but you, young lady, have had quite a change of image!”

Agnes’s shoulders jerked a little as the shopkeeper said that. She stiffened, wondering what he was saying, and then felt Claude squeeze her hand.

“What a lovely outfit. You looked nice in subtle colors too, of course, but a pretty young lady deserves pretty outfits. I bet that brooch is pleased to be part of your outfit as well!”

Agnes blinked, not expecting this. Claude chuckled, watching her, and reached out to stroke her hair.

“Ever since you bought that brooch, they’ve seen a boost in popularity. Apparently, a royal prince wears a mushroom brooch as well, or so the rumors say. It seems to be quite in fashion these days!” As he spoke, the shopkeeper showed them a variety of brooches among his other wares. “The brooch you bought, young man, had gems in it. It was a little expensive, as I recall. But the ones without stones sell very well.”

“I see...” Claude responded politely, but who else but him could be the prince with the mushroom brooch?

No doubt, the reason for the brooch’s popularity had a lot to do with the fourth prince’s good looks and royal influence.

“Claude...?”

Looking at him from the side, Agnes noticed that Claude looked as though he was thinking something over quite deeply. He was staring at...she knew it. A mushroom.

A small mushroom pendant of translucent glass, sparkling beautifully. Claude’s gray eyes sparkled too as he looked at it.

“Another mushroom?” she sighed.

“It’s so small, and yet the cap of the mushroom is intricately crafted. Shopkeeper, this mushroom is a fine work of craftsmanship!” Claude effused.

“Th-Thank you...” The shopkeeper seemed taken aback by the compliment paid to his wares.

“Look, Agnes!”

When Claude turned those excited little-boy eyes on her, she couldn't deny him. She looked closer and saw the sparkling mushroom crafted of glass. As Claude said, it had been made with great attention to detail. There were little red gems studded on the top, and they really stood out against the translucent glass.

“...It's cute.”

All of a sudden, she realized she may have been damning it with faint praise and covered her mouth, but Claude and the shopkeeper both smiled at the same time.

“Uh, um... By that, I mean...” She scrambled to fix things, but it was too late.

Claude and the shopkeeper seemed to have come to an agreement, and Claude swiftly selected a pair of pendants, one with pink stones and another with blue ones.

“Consider this a present from me to say thanks,” the shopkeeper said with a grin. “All I ask in exchange is that you be seen wearing this as you stroll through town. That would help me out a lot.”

“Free publicity, eh?” Claude deduced. “That's shrewd of you. Still, I'll take you up on your kind offer.”

“Huh? But those are...”

The shopkeeper had the pendants packaged up in a jiffy. He was grinning as he handed the package to Claude.

Claude tugged her away from the smiling shopkeeper, and they set off strolling through town.

There was a lot weighing on her mind, but the biggest issue of all was the mushroom that had sprouted on Claude's shoulder. It had a tiny blue umbrella cap that sparkled like glasswork...a *Mycena interrupta*. She felt that it somewhat resembled the pendants, and perhaps it had sprouted by design.

Her mushroom sensitivity had heightened so much that it was almost scary. At this rate, she'd end up surrounded by mushrooms, and no one would be able

to get near her.

Still, Claude wouldn't mind if it came to that.

...In fact, he'd probably be in mushroom heaven.

She could just picture it, and the thought made her smile a little.

Agnes would hate to have that many mushrooms sprouting, but when she looked at Claude, she got the feeling he would love it. She felt a little alarmed at the change in her mindset but also happy at the same time.

Smiling a little, Agnes and Claude continued to make their way through town.



"...**YOU** seem to be enjoying yourself," Agnes noted.

Back in the carriage, Claude kept beaming. He had harvested the *Mycena interrupta* on his shoulder, and he had the mushroom pendants in his hand, so he was highly satisfied.

"Yes. After all, I'm with you, Agnes. ...May I sit beside you?"

"Yes. Please do." Agnes nodded, and Claude quickly moved over. She was used to sitting side by side with him now, and being inside the carriage no longer made her feel nauseous.

The practice was starting to pay off. She felt glad to know that her efforts were working.

"Agnes, which do you prefer?" Claude opened the package from the shopkeeper and brought the pendants out.

"What do you mean?"

The translucent mushrooms had pink gems and blue gems. She wasn't sure there was much of a choice to be made here.

"It would be odd for you to wear pink, Claude. I'll have the pink, I think."

"...I actually wanted you to wear my color. But no matter."

"Then you shouldn't have chosen pink, should you?"

If he had chosen two blue ones, then he could have had his wish.

...It would have made Agnes's heart pound to wear it, though.

But Claude shook his head, his Prussian blue hair shaking.

"I had to buy your color, Agnes."

Agnes smiled with vexation, not sure what he was talking about, as Claude unfastened the clasp of the pink-gem mushroom.

"I'll put it on for you. Would you lift your hair up, please?" he requested.

Yes, the clasp would get caught in her hair if she left it down like it was. Obediently, Agnes gathered her hair in her hand behind her, and Claude fastened the pendant around her neck.

She looked down at the dangling little mushroom, and it certainly was very cute. It wasn't too big, and it was hard to tell that it was a mushroom at a glance. Agnes thought it was quite a nice piece of jewelry.

But as she dropped her hair back down, she realized Claude was deep in thought, a frown on his face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Ah. I was just thinking how sexy you looked with your hair pulled back."

"...Pardon?"

She couldn't process what he had just said to her with such a serious expression on his face.

"Would you do it again?"

Was he saying that...that she looked sexy with her hair up? Now the simple act of pulling her hair back, which she had never thought twice about, seemed suddenly lascivious.

"N-No!"

"Oh, I see. That's too bad."

Agnes was glad he relented so easily, but at the same time, she thought her heart might burst. Claude was the sexy one, so she wished he wouldn't say such bizarre things.

“Then, can you put mine on for me?” he asked.

“Sure.”

It would only take a second to close the clasp, so she agreed without thinking about it, but when he handed her the pendant, she realized. If she reached out and put her arms around his neck, then, based on her height and the length of her arms, it would look like she was embracing him.

That would not do. That would be...dangerous.

“Turn around.”

“Huh? Okay.” Claude turned around obediently, and Agnes released a sigh of relief. “Now you and I have one more matching thing, don’t we?” With the pendant now secured, Claude turned with a smile, and Agnes’s heart skipped a beat.

Today was pretty tough on her heart, beating-wise, and she wondered if it would be okay. Back home, she would drink some tea and try to relax a little.

“Your pink dress. No one was bothered by it at all, were they?” Claude said.

“Huh... Oh. No, they weren’t.”

Her dress had been alluded to, but nothing negative was said. In fact, she had only heard compliments.

“You can wear any color and any hairstyle, Agnes. Let’s try to get you used to it bit by bit, okay?”

“...Okay.” Agnes nodded. Claude’s voice was so kind.

“Today was your first outing in pink. You must be tired, so let’s get you home so you can rest.”

“You knew I’d be tired. That’s why we came by carriage, isn’t it?”

She recalled him saying something about it when their date began.

“No, it was because I wanted to spend time with you alone like this.” Claude chuckled and took Agnes’s hand, kissing the back of it.

“Yeek!”

She yanked her hand away in a panic, and a mushroom sprouted on Claude's arm. It had a dark gray cap with brown warts, an *Amanita spissacea*. Claude must have noticed the mushroom, but he kept his gaze trained on Agnes.

As his gray eyes stared at her, he kissed her hand again. She was shocked, but also, for some reason...she didn't dislike it.

Preparing outfits in colors Agnes would never choose, taking her out for a short date so as not to exhaust her...it was all him telling her that she was okay as she was. All of Claude's little actions were for Agnes. That much was clear. It made her chest fill with such warmth, it almost hurt.

...She loved Claude.

Her cheeks pinkened as she let the feelings fill her, and she could see the happiness in Claude's eyes as he gazed steadily at her.



Mushrooms of the Day

Pleurotus djamor

A deep pink cap that gradually fades to ashy white.

It's edible, but it gets tougher as it grows, so it's best to eat it while it's young.

Its beautiful pink color fades with heat, so it's good for slicing raw in a salad.

It sprouted, happy about the pink color of the dress, but when it saw that Agnes's cheeks were pink too, it felt even happier.

Lactarius indigo

A mushroom with bright indigo folds on a light indigo cap.

Its milky sap is a beautiful indigo color that turns green when exposed to air.

It's edible, but loses its indigo color when heated, so it's best to eat it raw.

It's afraid of heat, just like the *Pleurotus djamor*.

It wanted someone to notice that it's the same color as Claude's hair, but when it saw Agnes blushing, it started to get embarrassed, too.

Cuphophyllus virgineus

Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom.

It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

It sprouted while squealing, “An indirect kiss!” but as it’s a mushroom, no one heard it.

It encountered the *Lactarius indigo* in the pocket and started gossiping immediately about the indirect kiss.

***Mycena interrupta* (Pixie’s Parasol)** A mushroom with an umbrella cap that sparkles like glasswork.

It’s about 0.8 inches long and 0.08 inches 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 sprouted, hoping to be complimented when everyone was looking at the glass mushroom.

It secretly wishes it could be a pendant and hang around Agnes’s neck, but it would need to be less fragile for that to work.

Claude plucked it, and it was impressed by the gentle way he handled and stored it.

“In order to repay this kindness, I’ll do my best to become a robust mushroom so I can be a pendant!” it decides.

Amanita spissacea

A mushroom with a dark gray cap and dark brown warts, resembling leopard print.

It wears leopard print like old ladies who love gossip and has a personality to match.

Cuphophyllus virgineus is its gossip pal.

“The young mushrooms these days have lost their way,” is her favorite catchphrase, and she’s obsessed with Agnes’s love life.

In place of the *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, who was busy with a heavy spore schedule, it sprouted in response to the kiss on the back of the hand.

“You’re young! You should have passion!” it sprouted, encouraging Claude, but at the same time, it was warning him, “If you want to kiss our Agnes, you’d better make sure you’re man enough!”

Chapter 13: When You Smile...

“Claude Visage, the fourth-born prince, has formally begun the process of engagement negotiations between himself and you, Agnes.”

Benoit called Agnes to his chamber, and when she arrived, that was the first thing he said.

Claude had said as much to her himself. He had also said that having introduced Agnes to his family was practically the same thing as them getting engaged. However, hearing it out loud again made her feel funny.

“Okay.”

Benoit put down his teacup and sat up, facing her. Agnes straightened her posture. “What do you want to do, Agnes?”

“I told him that getting married right away was out of the question.”

Thinking about it, she supposed she was being quite rude. Agnes was nothing but a count’s adopted commoner daughter, and Claude was second in line for the throne. Based on her status, she had no reason to reject him.

“Yes. I heard as much. Prince Claude said he would wait until you were ready. But you don’t mind if we go ahead with marriage talks, do you?”

Agnes shook her head to signal she didn’t mind. Benoit slowly smiled.

“...I see.”

Benoit was grinning now, as if amused by something, but he quickly took a sip of tea and then exhaled.

“Agnes. I am sorry to have let you go through such a tough time with Philip. But let us forget about that balding royal. You go and find happiness with Claude. I know that Elize and Josse are both wishing for your happiness as well.”

“...Thank you.”

Benoit almost never spoke the names of Agnes’s parents aloud. When Agnes

was still in her grief period, the mention of those names would make her sob, and so she had very little opportunity to hear them these days.

Hearing the names of her parents again after so long didn't make her feel as despondent as it once did. She did feel a little bit sad, of course, but more than that, she was filled with warm memories of their love.

Perhaps this was an example of time healing all wounds, or perhaps it was a result of the memory she'd had of her parents the other day.

"Oh, right. Father, I heard that having greenish-blue eyes means you're blessed in the neighboring country."

"Why do you bring that up?"

Based on his response, it seemed he already knew that fact.

"I heard about it from the head royal tailor. She said her grandmother came from the same country. And...I remembered that my dad also mentioned it to me before."

"When did he mention that?"

"Probably directly before the carriage crash, I think," she said, tugging on that distant memory. "Dad's clothing and his ring were the same on the day of the accident as when he mentioned it to me."

Benoit frowned a little, indicating that she continue.

"*'...Agnes. My treasure. You have blessed eyes and hair the color of peach blossoms, my sweet Mushroom Princess. Please, be happy, always.'* ...That's what he said," she said, recounting her dad's words.

Knowing it happened during the carriage accident was a little scary, but she was happy to have been able to remember her father's words. She only mentioned it because she was eager to share, but for some reason Benoit's expression had clouded over.

...No. It wasn't clouded over. It was filled with sadness.

"...I see. He said that, did he?"

"...Father?"

Had she said something she shouldn't have?

Benoit's wife, Countess Lefort, had also died in that accident. Perhaps this all brought back memories of his late wife. If only she could have remembered her aunt's final words, as well...but she couldn't, and there was nothing she could do about that.

Benoit covered his mouth with his hand and sighed heavily. Then a mushroom sprouted on the table with a pop. Red cap, white spots. An *Amanita muscaria*. It was odd timing, but Benoit gazed at it without much surprise, and for some reason, he then reached out and stroked its little cap.

"...Agnes, please listen to me."

"...Yes, Father."

She sat up straighter. Benoit's tone was very serious.

"Elize and Josse loved you with all their hearts and treasured you. You must never forget that. Seeing you smiling and happy would make them both very happy, too."

"I won't forget."

"And of course, it will make Kevin and me happy as well."

"...Yes. Thank you."

She had caused nothing but trouble for Benoit and Kevin. Despite that, the two of them had shown Agnes nothing but kindness. Although her memories of her parents were old and faded, she knew Kevin and Benoit cherished her just as much as they had. She felt so full of their love.

Benoit saw Agnes smile, and then he finally smiled back at her, nodding slowly. "Prince Claude will protect you. I'm certain he will protect you."

"Protect me? So dramatic."

She had heard that fathers could be difficult when it came to handing over their daughters as brides, so perhaps it was something like that? But they had only talked about an engagement so far. It was too soon for Benoit to start getting all emotional.

“...Right... Yes, you’re right. I hope.”

Agnes smiled at him in slight frustration, and finally, Benoit laughed.



“**YES**, yes. You look adorable again today.”

When they arrived at the palace, the venue for the night’s ball, Claude looked at Agnes once more and smiled.

Her ball gown for the evening had yellow material used for the skirt, and it was quite bright. The bustier was covered with blue lace, giving her a very mature look. There was a long ribbon in the same blue color wrapped around her waist, and the ribbon tie in the back hung long and flapped over the skirt. The skirt’s hem was done in the same lace as the bustier, and the overall effect, with the contrast between yellow and blue, was quite beautiful.

Her gloves were made with blue lace, and a necklace of citrine stones sparkled around her neck. In her hair, she wore a large accessory made of a flower and dark blue lace. It looked very bright and pretty against her peach blossom hair.

The overall effect was quite mature and gorgeous.

However, when she thought about the implications of the blue lace and the ribbon, she felt a flood of embarrassment, which she couldn’t hold back. She was wearing elements of blue from head to toe...Claude’s color.

In other words, she was wrapped head to toe in Claude.

“I can’t tell everyone that you’re my Dragonmate. This is about all I can do, you know?”

As if to punctuate what he was saying, a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s arm. It had a deep blue cap. An *Entoloma cyanonigrum*. Claude plucked the mushroom excitedly, but this was no laughing matter.

For a moment, she started to miss Philip’s drab, subdued dresses, but then she shook her head hard. That wasn’t done for the good of Agnes or the Lefort family. It was because of Philip’s unfathomable thought process.

Even if the dress was weighing heavily on her mentally, it was still a dress that

Claude had carefully prepared just for Agnes. There was no contest when it came to choosing which was better. So she was glad to be wearing this dress.

...Mostly.

While she was talking herself off the ledge, Claude took her hand and led her into the venue. The guests' eyes on her were as painful as ever today. Agnes was still mentally giving herself a pep talk, though, so she found they didn't bother her that much.

"...Uncle!"

Claude's raised voice snapped her out of her thoughts, and just then she noticed a man walking toward them. He looked a lot like the king but a bit younger, and when he noticed Claude, he smiled and held up a hand in greeting.

"Uncle, it's been so long since I've seen you!" Claude exclaimed.

"It has been a long time, Claude. That's a nice smile. ...And who is this young lady here?"

Claude couldn't describe her as his Dragonmate in public, but perhaps his uncle had already guessed. Agnes quickly curtsayed.

"My name is Agnes Lefort."

"Cesar Granier at your service, my dear. I hear you've been taking good care of my nephew."

"Oh, it's Claude who has done so much for me, actually."

Agnes had heard that Duke Granier was the king's younger brother and third in line to the throne. She had thought he would be intimidating, but he was surprisingly friendly, which surprised her. Still, the kindness in his eyes as he looked at her resembled Claude, and she felt herself relaxing.

"Nonsense. Doing stuff for you, Agnes, is just as fulfilling as doing it for myself," Claude said.

"You two seem to be well matched. I'm glad you found her, eh, Claude?"

"Yes. Thank you."

It was said that if one who bears the crest of the dragon didn't find his Dragonmate, he would weaken. So Agnes had no doubt there was a different meaning beyond simply being glad that Claude had found a fiancée.

Duke Granier smiled warmly at Claude, and Agnes felt a wave of sadness wash over her.

"Ah, that's right. The cake Charles brought by...didn't you bake it?" Duke Granier asked Agnes.

"I... I did."

Charles said he wouldn't mention Agnes's name, but it seemed like the truth had gotten out. Maybe the duke was annoyed it didn't taste good?

Agnes stiffened her back, steeling herself for whatever she was about to hear.

"Don't look so nervous," Duke Granier said reassuringly. "I'm the one who forced Charles to name the baker, so please don't blame the boy, will you?"

"Blame him? Goodness, no. But yes, I am the one who baked that cake. I take full responsibility. I'm so terribly sorry."

Agnes had agreed to let Charles take the cake, so she wasn't blameless here. But knowing that the cake had displeased the duke so much that he'd interrogated his nephew for the baker's name... That made her feel terrible.

"You have nothing to apologize for. It was most delicious. After eating that cake, I've started feeling quite a bit better. I was even able to attend tonight's ball. I wanted to meet you and thank you myself. So thank you."

He was thanking her. For something she'd made. She'd rarely ever heard gratitude from anyone but her family and Claude, and for some reason, it made her chest seem to swell.

She had always felt persecuted, always felt the need to hide herself. Being seen, acknowledged in this way, thanked even...it made her feel like maybe she had a right to be here. She was flooded with happiness and didn't know what to say.

"Uh, um. If you'd like, please take this..."

She had Claude bring out the small vial she'd asked him to keep in his pocket.

She had harvested the medicinal herbs the spirits had sprouted, dried them, and processed them into pills. They didn't look so good, being a mottled purple, but it was better to put them in pill form rather than walking around with a mass of leaves, and they would last longer this way, too.

Duke Granier looked confused for a moment, but he took the vial and stared at its contents.

"I heard that your health was not good, and I... I mean, those are medicinal herbs that I...that I grew."

She couldn't very well mention that the spirits had sprouted them for her, not in a place like this. It was all she could think of to explain, but it made her look like she was just trying to push her homegrown herbs on him on their first meeting.

He was also a duke, and the brother of the king, which made it even ruder.

She had messed up.

It would have been better for Claude to pass them on to the duke in secret.

Agnes felt filled with regret, but she could hardly take the vial back now. Duke Granier looked at her squirming, and then he smiled wryly.

"Thank you. These pills, they're very sparkly, aren't they?"

To Agnes, they looked like nothing so much as poison pills, but apparently when the duke looked at them, he "Saw" the same thing that Charles could "See."

"You are a well-loved person, aren't you? Thank you. I will take these." Duke Granier glanced at Claude, and they both nodded at one another. "Lady Agnes, please take good care of Claude."

"I... I will!"

Duke Granier's gray eyes softened into a smile, then he waved before departing.

"...What a nice man," Agnes said softly.

"Yes, he is. Recently, he often feels unwell, but he used to be a very brave

man and a noted knight.”

“Really? Is that so?”

Brave men often sounded harsh and stern to Agnes, but Duke Granier had been kind and sweet. It didn’t really fit with his image, but she could guess the reason why.

“...So, it’s all because he doesn’t have one?”

She didn’t need to be specific about what she was referring to. Claude nodded, seeming to understand anyway.

“Right. I thought I’d go down that path in the end as well, so I decided to work as a knight, at least while I still could. I hoped to dedicate myself to researching mushrooms eventually, if I did end up like that.”

Claude was also destined to gradually weaken like his uncle after he came of age. Had he not met Agnes, he would have shared his uncle’s fate. After meeting Duke Granier in person, the whole situation felt a whole lot more real to her now.

“Aren’t there a lot of downsides to this?” Agnes asked in a whisper. “If you have one, you get to have a longer life, but if you don’t, you grow weak... It seems very extreme.”

“Well, if you think of it in terms of lifespan and pure numbers, then life would probably be more stable for those who don’t have a crest,” Claude whispered back. “But there’s significance to having one. That’s why those who do are the highest in the line of succession.”

“Okay. ...I apologize, it was rude of me to assume.”

Those who bore the crest of the dragon did not get to choose their fate, nor did those who had no crest. Judging it as having a lot of downsides... That was quite rude.

Agnes, herself, suffered agonies over her hair, so what right did she have to say such thoughtless things? She felt terrible, and guilty, and despondent, but then Claude’s large hand landed gently on her head.

“It’s the obvious conclusion to come to when you don’t know the specifics,”

he said gently. "I thought the same thing myself, many times. Don't worry about it."

Both Claude and Duke Granier were so kind. Perhaps it was a strength that came with living a life where you could weaken at any moment.

Did Agnes really have the right to stand by the side of someone like that?

Claude was kind. And that was why she couldn't let him indulge her too much. Agnes would need to grow stronger so that she could prove useful to him if anything happened.

"Ah, I've finally found you. Claude!"

A young man with amber hair was approaching them, sighing.

It was the second-born prince, Gerome.

He nodded briefly at Agnes, who curtsied, then he clapped Claude on the shoulder.

"Claude, Father is calling for you. He said for you to come alone."

Alone? Then he must want to discuss something Agnes wasn't allowed to hear.

She had greeted the royals, but her status was still that of a count's daughter, so it made perfect sense. Claude seemed to have intuited that as well, and he glanced at Gerome and Agnes before nodding.

"All right. Wait here please, Agnes."

"Okay."

She didn't like being left alone, but she couldn't go with him.

Claude smiled, seeing Agnes nod, and then he hurried away.

She had thought that Gerome would go with him, but for some reason, he remained standing beside Agnes.

Had Claude asked him to? Or maybe he was just taking a rest.

Should she talk to him?

She hesitated, thinking about all of the angles, and then, with a pop, a

mushroom sprouted on Gerome's arm. It had a bright yellow cap...a *Pleurotus citrinopileatus*.

Did it really have to do that right now?

What was she supposed to do about this?

"I'm... I'm so sorry!"

She quickly went to pluck it, but Gerome blocked her with his hand.

"No, it's fine. I heard from Claude. So, I should just give this to him later, right?"

"Huh? ...Er, yes."

Just what and how exactly had Claude explained it? Either way, mushrooms certainly seemed to find their way into his pocket one way or another. The mushroom fetishist had done his work setting things up so that he didn't miss a single shroom.

Gerome plucked the mushroom and pushed it into his pocket, then sighed and looked back at Agnes. "...It looks like you're still not officially engaged, huh."

"Th-That's correct." Her voice grew a little higher. She hadn't expected Gerome to make conversation with her.

"You're Claude's Dragonmate, aren't you? What's wrong? You don't like him?"

"No. That's not it at all..."

Gerome looked at Agnes from the corner of his eye as she shook her head, and then he pushed his amber hair back.

"Then get on with it and get married. I don't know what Claude told you, but I hear that physical closeness with one's Dragonmate confers blessings. He's found you, so I guess the danger is over, but...we can't have you two meandering about, enjoying being boyfriend and girlfriend for much longer."

"...I understand."

Seeing that Agnes had nothing more to say than that, Gerome sighed and

moved away from her. “Be more aware of your situation.”

Agnes felt her spirits sink as she watched Gerome saunter away.

...Gerome was right.

Agnes had been making Claude indulge her.

This was the first she heard of close physical distance conferring blessings, but it sounded like the sooner they got married, the less of a burden she would be on Claude.

Agnes had been stalling for her own selfish reasons, and Claude had simply accepted it. But if she kept causing him trouble and being a burden, who knew if things would work out all right?

Claude said she could rely on him...but with things the way they were, Agnes was just troublesome baggage.

So then, they should just get engaged and then married as soon as possible, shouldn't they?

Even if Agnes didn't feel emotionally prepared, that would be best...since she was his Dragonmate...

“I can't.”

She had seen what happened when she forced herself into an engagement for her family despite not feeling it. Philip. She did love Claude, but to rush into marriage out of a sense of duty...that would be doing the same thing she did with Philip. She would grow resentful, no doubt.

“Seeing you smiling and happy would make them both very happy, too.”

“And of course, it will make Kevin and I happy as well.”

She took a deep breath, recalling Benoit's words.

The ballroom was so bright, and dressed in her vivid ballgown, Agnes found it hard to get her thoughts in order. But Agnes was Claude's partner here, and she didn't want to be seen acting strangely.

“...I think I need some air.”

It wouldn't be good for her to go out into the gardens alone, so for now, the

balcony would suffice. Some cold, fresh air would help soothe her and get her brain working once more.

She moved to the side of the bright ballroom and went out onto the balcony. The cool night air caressed her cheeks, and her peach blossom hair flowed in the breeze.

She took several deep breaths, gazing out at the night sky.

Putting Claude's health first, the best thing to do would be to get engaged at once and then married soon after. Unlike how it had been with Philip, she had feelings for Claude. There was no reason for them not to get engaged.

But then Agnes would be Claude's fiancée—a royal's fiancée—in the eyes of society.

Would she be able to act proudly as his Dragonmate?

Claude said that she was beautiful, but she could see her peach blossom hair as nothing but a burden.

Would Agnes's presence become an impediment, dragging at his heels?

Would he grow to resent and hate her someday?

Agnes smiled wryly to herself.

"Nope, nope. My way of thinking is so negative."

Claude had chosen Agnes for himself. It would all be fine.

All Agnes had to do was do her best, and things would work out.

Everything would be fine. Releasing a full breath, Agnes felt encouraged as she gazed up at the sky.

"...Agnes."

The voice that came from behind her was familiar...but it was also the very last voice she wanted to hear.



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.

When Benoit was worrying about Agnes, it sprouted to tell him: "Fear not! We'll protect Agnes."

It spoke in Mushrish, so Benoit didn't understand, of course, but it likes to think it got its message across.

Entoloma cyanonigrum

A deep blue mushroom.

It doesn't seem to be poisonous, but it doesn't look very edible because of the color.

During an earlier mushroom discussion, it was decided that its color most closely resembled Claude's hair color, so it got designated the blue mushroom representative.

It sprouted to represent Claude's color and decorate Agnes's dress.

It was confident, but since it was a mushroom, it just ended up being plucked.

Pleurotus citrinopileatus

An edible mushroom with bright yellow caps.

It grows in clusters, and it's very tasty. Fetches a good price, too.

A member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

In the past, it has been offered as an apology mushroom to Claude.

This time it sprouted on Gerome to say, "Take care of Agnes."

It was a bit perturbed to find itself shoved in a pocket, but it likes tight spaces, so it didn't mind in the end.

Chapter 14: Heart Melting Inside

AGNES shuddered as she heard his voice say her name.

It wasn't because she was startled. She had spent years listening to that condescending voice, and now she was surprised to find that there wasn't a shred of nostalgia or care for it left in her.

"...Philip."

She turned, and yes, it was the man himself, standing on the balcony behind her. He looked a bit haggard, yes, but the thing that drew her attention the most was the hat he was wearing—he never wore hats.

"Agnes. It's been a while." Philip moved closer as he spoke, his eyebrows drawing together in annoyance. "Wearing a colored ballgown again. Don't you have any shame?"

"...It's none of your business, Philip." Agnes responded feistily somehow, but her conversation with Gerome was still weighing heavily on her, and Philip's words stung. She knew she wasn't in the wrong, but she was conditioned by years of Philip's disapproving looks and snide comments.

"Claude gave that to you, didn't he?"

Agnes nodded, and Philip clucked his tongue with disgust.

"...Agnes. This is all because of your mushrooms."

"What is?"

Agnes wasn't sure what he was getting at, and then Philip removed his hat.

The top of his head was...completely bald.

Where his yellowish-brown hair should have been, there was now only reddish skin. It looked like he'd balanced a round plate on top of his head, and Agnes wasn't sure whether to be shocked or to laugh. All she could do was gasp and cover her mouth.



“Because of you smothering me with mushrooms at the crown prince’s ball, I ended up like this. All of my hair fell out, and my hands, my feet, and— Well, anyway, various places hurt. I’ve barely been able to get out of bed all month. This is all because of your mushrooms, isn’t it?”

Speaking with disgust, Philip jammed his hat back on. It appeared that the mushroom onslaught had worked admirably. But thanks to that, Agnes was now being held responsible.

“But I can’t make mushrooms sprout at will,” she told him flatly.

“It doesn’t matter if you can! Anything to do with mushrooms is your fault!” he shouted at her.

“Goodness, what a thing to say.”

Agnes wanted to dismiss it as Philip wanting to start a fight, but she had to admit that the mushrooms had sprouted on her behalf. It also meant that Philip’s current state of baldness could only be accurately described as, well, Agnes’s fault.

“...I’m...sorry?” She apologized, not sure what else she could do, and Philip flashed her a satisfied grin in return.

“Right. That’s right. You do what I tell you now. You’re not engaged to Claude, are you?”

“No...not yet.”

“Good.”

“How’s that good? I can’t see what it has to do with you,” she said, irate.

Philip was talking big, but just what did he plan to do?

Their engagement was over, and now she was simply an aristocrat, and he was a fringe royal. They were barely on speaking terms. He had no right to go pointing things out about her engagement status.

A mushroom sprouted on Philip’s shoulder in the usual fashion, perhaps in response to Agnes’s consternation. It looked like a starfish with a globe in the middle, or a peeled orange...*Astraeus hygrometricus*.

Agnes steeled herself, wondering if it would unleash its spores on Philip like it did last time, but Philip seemed oblivious.

"It has everything to do with me," he said arrogantly.

"No, it doesn't," she refuted.

"Sabina is lacking when it comes to providing social assistance. Agnes, you should step in," he ordered.

What is he on about? This ridiculous royal bonbon.

Agnes was stunned into silence by what Philip was suggesting and his entitled way of phrasing it.

"Are you serious? How dare you order me around?" she snapped back firmly.

"I dare. This is the way we've always done things. I order, you obey. What's the difference?"

"That was when we were engaged and I felt obligated. Now we are not, so I am under zero obligation. Besides, you have Lady Barthet now. Ask her, or maybe try studying up on a few things by yourself for once, hmm?"

This was a huge annoyance, but Agnes explained things patiently to Philip. Instead of understanding, though, Philip's expression warped with anger.

"It's quicker with you by my side."

"You're the one who ended our engagement, aren't you? I've washed my hands of you," Agnes declared.

"Well, unwash them!" he barked.

"Never!" she said loudly.

"...That's quite enough."

While she and Philip were exchanging angry verbal barbs, another, quiet voice cut in. Agnes and Philip looked around in unison to see a young man with lead-colored hair and gray eyes standing by the balcony door. Before Agnes could acknowledge the third-born prince, Armand, Philip clucked his tongue in annoyance.

"Lady Agnes has already been introduced to the royal family as Claude's

Dragonmate,” Armand said warningly. “How long do you intend to hound her, Philip?”

Philip looked annoyed but said nothing to Armand. Instead, he moved away from Agnes. Philip could not go up against such a strong opponent. How pathetic he was, as ever.

Agnes was feeling mildly impressed when Philip turned toward her once more, the mushroom still on his shoulder. “Agnes. We’ll discuss this another time.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” she said with finality.

“...Philip.”

As Armand spoke Philip’s name coldly, Philip fled the balcony at top speed.

“Thank you so much,” Agnes said to Armand.

If Armand hadn’t shown up, Agnes feared she and Philip would have gotten into a terrible quarrel.

“Claude is with our father, so I came to check on you, only...” Armand sighed, looking troubled. “You know better than anyone just what Philip’s like, don’t you? You need to be more guarded.”

“I... I apologize.”

It wasn’t as if she’d met up with Philip of her own volition. Still, she had no basis for objecting. If Agnes hadn’t gone out onto the balcony, Philip probably wouldn’t have approached her. Thinking of it that way, she supposed it was ultimately her fault.

Just when she’d made up her mind to do her best, she caused trouble for Armand right away. She felt pathetic.

“...I’ll escort you to Claude,” Armand said.

“All right. I’m sorry. Thank you.”

Perhaps Armand noticed how downhearted Agnes looked, for he said nothing more and instead took her by the arm.

Soon after they reentered the ballroom, she could see Claude hurrying

toward them.

“Agnes! ...Armand, what happened?”

Armand handed Agnes’s arm to Claude, shrugging.

“She was waylaid by Philip.”

“...Philip. So he’s here?” Claude said darkly.

Armand sighed when he saw Claude’s gray eyes flash dangerously. “If she’s that important to you, don’t take your eyes off her. Otherwise...you might lose her.”

“...I’ll be careful. Thank you.”

Armand walked off with a casually raised hand. Claude turned back to Agnes, who was hanging her head.

“Claude, I’m so sorry. I was imprudent, and I caused a lot of trouble for everyone.” She got that far, then she became so overwhelmed that it was all she could do to fight back the tears. “Um, I’ll leave early...”

Head low, Agnes tried to make her exit, but Claude grabbed her hand.

“Wait...what happened?”

His kind voice made her feel even worse right now. If she spoke, she was sure she would start crying. She heard that familiar pop, but she couldn’t even lift her head to see what kind of mushroom had sprouted.

“Nothing... It was all my fault. I’ll be more careful. Excuse me.”

Head still low, she attempted to shake Claude off, but then she heard a sigh from above her. The next thing she knew, Claude had...scooped her up into his arms!

“...Wh-What are you doing?”

Flustered and embarrassed though she was, Claude remained unmoved.

“Don’t try to force yourself. If you’re leaving, I will take you home.”

Then he cut his way through the ballroom and into the corridor with Agnes in his arms.

“Um, I can walk. I can go home by myself.” Agnes tried to convince him, but Claude kept on walking and made no attempt to put her down.

“...Tsk. Just when I thought the effects had been wearing off, he got into your head again. I can’t let this slide.”

His voice was lower than usual, and it was obvious he was angry. This frightened Agnes a little, and she began to tremble.

There was a mushroom on Claude’s shoulder, one with a gray cap and stalk. It must have been this *Melanoleuca melaleuca* that caused that pop just before. The mushroom fetishist had made no attempt to pluck it, nor had he even glanced at it. That was not normal.

Agnes remained silent, unable to even speak to him, as he bundled her into the carriage and onto her seat. But then Claude immediately sat down beside her and drew Agnes into his arms. He held her so tightly, she couldn’t even move.

What’s going on?

“Um... Er, Claude?”

“...Be silent a moment.”

She closed her mouth as she’d been told, but wondered how long he planned for them to sit like this. She didn’t even know the meaning of this embrace to begin with.

All Claude could have known was that Agnes had caused a scene and then announced she was going home. He could have pressed again and asked her what had happened, but he didn’t. And just before, he seemed angry. So why was he suddenly being like this now?

His arms tightened around her until it became a little difficult to breathe. For a moment, she thought he was doing it on purpose in anger against her, but she knew Claude would never do something like that.

Then he was simply embracing her, wasn’t he? ...But no, she could make no sense of it.

“...All right. I feel calmer now.”

“P-Pardon?”

His arms loosened around her as he came out with this cryptic remark. Now he was sitting beside her again, but he kept a tight hold of Agnes’s hand.

“So, what happened? Tell me.”

The light of anger in his eyes as they’d left the venue had disappeared now, and his voice was back to its usual kind timbre. She looked up at him, wondering what was up, and he narrowed his gray eyes slowly.

“...Finally, I get to see your eyes.” His smile was so dazzling that she found herself looking away, but then Claude’s hand reached out to touch her cheek. “No. Face this way.”

He cupped her cheeks in both hands and turned her face toward his. She was met with the sight of his beautiful gray eyes.

“What did Philip say to you?”

He was close enough for her to feel his breath on her face, and Agnes knew she was blushing.

“*Mumble, Mumble...*He said,” Agnes recounted the story under her breath.

“Sorry, come again?”

“His hair fell out. A bald patch... Perfectly smooth...”

“...Huh?”

As Agnes fumbled over her words, Claude, who had been perfectly solemn up until that point, suddenly let his jaw drop. Then, as if trying to add their part to the story, a mushroom popped up on the top of Claude’s head. It was a smooth, round, red mushroom...an *Amanita caedareoides*. It had sprouted in the exact same location as Philip’s smooth bald spot.

On purpose?

“Th-Then...he said his feet and hands, and, um, other places...*hurt*. For a whole month...”

When Agnes finally finished explaining, Claude immediately released a whoosh of air. He took his hands off her face, and she was free to try to cool her

hot cheeks down with her own hands.

Claude started to burst out laughing.

“I... I see! Well...serves him right...” Still chuckling, Claude plucked the mushroom off the top of his head. “You did good work, mushies, didn’t you?”

As Claude spoke to the *Melanoleuca melaleuca* and the *Amanita caedareoides*, the air filled with a pop. A snail-shaped mushroom had just sprouted on the back of his hand. A *Cryptoporus volvatus*. It was mostly cream-colored, but the upper part looked like it had caramel sauce dripped on it. From a distance, it might pass for a glove pom pom...or not.

“You have reliable knights working for you, don’t you?” Claude said to Agnes.

“Mushroom knights...?” she repeated.

At the moment, it seemed to her that her mushrooms were only good for decorating tables or covering other people with. Could you really call them knights?

Claude grinned as he saw that Agnes was mulling this over, and he plucked the mushrooms and put them in his pockets.

“What else did he say to you?”

“Um. He said that everything to do with mushrooms is all my fault. He wanted confirmation that you and I aren’t engaged. He demanded that I accompany him and be his social advisor. I told him I’d washed my hands of him, and he demanded that I unwash them.”

“I see. So, simply warning him alone wasn’t enough to make him go away, was it?” Claude patted his pocket of mushrooms lovingly, his muttering voice very low. Agnes looked up in surprise, and Claude’s gray eyes flashed. “So, then? There was more, right?”

“Er, um...” Agnes looked away, a little afraid, and Claude cupped her cheeks with his hands again.

“Look at me.”

“I... I am looking, so...”

“No, you’re not. What else did he say to you? If you’re hiding it, then...maybe my brothers said something?”

Agnes’s shoulder jerked as Claude hit the nail on the head, and he nodded as if he understood now, taking his hands away. At this point, she couldn’t keep hiding it. She gathered her wits and took a deep breath.

“Prince Gerome said... *‘Get on with it and get married. Stop gadding about being boyfriend and girlfriend. Be more aware of your situation.’* And Prince Armand also said, *‘You need to be more guarded’* ...And they’re right. I’ve caused nothing but trouble for you and everyone. I feel so terrible.”

Claude’s hand covered her clenched fists. “So that’s why, huh.” Claude sighed, and then the next moment, he pulled her into his arms again. “...It’s all right.”

She could smell his sweet, fruity scent, and he was stroking her hair. Before long, she felt her tense heart begin to melt. She knew she couldn’t cling to Claude like this forever, but she wanted this comfort for just a few moments more.

“My brothers are concerned. They saw what happened to our uncle, and they know how important the role of a Dragonmate is.”

Yes...since seeing up close what happened to those who didn’t have Dragonmates, Agnes did see the risk involved in delaying marriage. If the brothers cared about Claude at all, then obviously they would be coming down hard on Agnes right now.

“Also, there’s a lot involved with crest-bearers and non-crest-bearers. I’m afraid you’ve been caught in the crossfire, Agnes.”

“What do you mean...there’s a lot involved?”

“Legitimate children of the queen, illegitimate children of the concubine, crest-bearers and non-crest-bearers... It would be unrealistic to expect us all to get along. But it’s not like we’re at each other’s throats or anything. Hmm, I guess it’s part of the difficulties of being an adult.”

“I see.”

Claude was the fourth-born prince, and yet he was second in line to the

throne, right after the crown prince. Agnes had never given it much thought before, but it would make sense for things to be a bit thorny between the brothers.

Claude stroked her head once more and then finally let Agnes free of his embrace.

“As for Philip...he got what he deserves, so don’t worry about it,” he assured her. “...Did anything else happen?”

“That’s all.”

“I see.” Claude nodded, placing his hand over hers. “You must tell me everything, Agnes. Whenever anything bad happens, anything that upsets you. I may not be able to fix everything, but you’ll feel better just getting it off your chest.”

Claude stroked Agnes’s hand rhythmically, as if he were soothing a baby. She felt a bit pathetic, but it really did wonders to calm her down.

“It’s probably Philip’s fault, but I’ve noticed you bottle things up. Say something before you start getting really upset.”

“But...”

Speaking to Claude about every little concern...it sounded a little childish. It would only bother and concern him.

“It pains me to see you struggling alone, Agnes. If you can’t talk to me, then at least talk to Kevin. Learn to talk things through with others and rely on them more. You are not an inconvenience. You are not a burden. Allow others to indulge you. ...You’re supposed to be trying to become a headstrong young lady, right?”

He gave her an impish grin, and Agnes felt her heart leap.

“I’m... I’m not trying to become like that specifically!”

Claude laughed and then hugged Agnes again. “Come on, don’t make that face. Whenever you want to cry, come and lean on my chest. Just don’t suffer alone.”

“...Okay.”

There was a side of her that was soothed just by being held and stroked. It was reassurance that she had a right to be here.

Claude needed Agnes.

He would not dismiss her.

That's what his touch told her...and somewhere inside her wavering heart, she felt herself begin to melt.

With a pop, a mushroom sprouted on Claude's chest. It was a gray mushroom with a scaly cap, a *Coprinopsis atramentaria*. It seemed like odd timing for it to sprout, but the mushroom fetishist plucked it with delight and held it up with excitement.

"Ah, *Coprinopsis atramentaria*. This mushroom's cap melts down after just one night. Looks like I'll be staying up all night with this one, then."

She felt a little bit turned off by the mushroom fetishist's crazy plans, but oh well.

Does he really intend to watch it melt? All night long? She was a little curious about it, but felt she might regret it if she asked, so she let it go.

"...Oh, right. Zenaide has invited you to her tea party. Would you like to go?" Claude asked.

Zenaide... Prince Xavier's wife, and Dragonmate. She was a kind lady with black hair, and Agnes remembered thinking that she and Xavier looked very much in love.

"A tea party? Am I to attend alone?"

"Yes, indeed. At Duke Watteau's residence two days from now. I will have Maurice escort you. Would that be all right?"

An invitation from the future queen. She couldn't just turn it down. Also, they were both Dragonmates. Perhaps it would be fortuitous for Agnes to befriend her.

"Yes, that would be fine."

"Don't worry, it's for the inner circle only, I was told. Only a few ladies will be

in attendance, I think.”

That meant Agnes would have to sit face-to-face with those ladies and talk, which made her nervous, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Just then, Agnes realized there was a big problem here. She had absolutely nothing suitable to wear to an aristocratic tea party. She couldn’t exactly wear a ballgown to an afternoon soiree. But her drab day dresses were also completely out of the question.

That left only the dress she had worn for her outing with Claude the other day, but she wasn’t sure if it would be appropriate for her to turn up to the engagement dressed all in pink.

But two days...that still gave her time to make some alterations. She could perhaps remodel the pink dress somehow. For the first time in a while, Agnes’s creative juices were flowing.

“...Is something on your mind?”

“No, I was just thinking about what to wear...”

“Oh, the clothes will be sent to you soon.”

“Huh?”

Agnes’s head was still filled with thoughts of dress alterations when Claude grinned at her.

“You haven’t got a single afternoon party dress, have you? I’ve ordered one day dress, one afternoon party dress, and one evening gown for you. They should have finished being made up by now.”

“So... So many?”

She’d been measured at the palace, so he could feasibly have any number of dresses made up. But a dress with her measurements had already been delivered, and she had thought that was to be the only one.

“That number won’t be enough at all. Soon, you and I will have to go and pick out fabrics.”

“Oh... Okay.”

Claude's broad grin made it impossible for her to opt out of further dress-designing outings. At the very least, she might be able to choose more muted colors and less expensive fabrics. That would be possible...wouldn't it?

Filled with nerves, Agnes managed a smile.



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 the ball, and spores are released.

It's technically edible, but not really eaten.

It sprouted to defend Agnes from Philip's crazy talk.

"If you don't pipe down, I'll spore you!" it threatened, but as it's a mushroom, Philip didn't understand.

Melanoleuca melaleuca

An edible mushroom with brown caps and stalks, and its flesh smells like flour.

It has many dark, warty spots covering it.

“Don’t trifle with Agnes’s heart, or I’ll cover you with warts,” it warned Claude.

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.

It's a silly mushroom that has sprouted before when Agnes was talking about wanting to eat a boiled egg. It still got boiled and eaten up, though.

It sprouted on the back of Claude's head to make a joke about bald heads and boiled eggs.

Cryptoporus volvatus

It grows on tree trunks and looks like a snail. The bottom part is cream-colored, and the top part is a glossy brown.

It looks like a chestnut stuck in the tree bark.

The name makes it sound yummy, and it definitely looks yummy, but apparently it doesn't taste good.

It sprouted while hoping that this was its chance to get complimented by Claude, but it was disappointed.

There was talk about smoothness, so it also sprouted in the hope that Agnes would rub its smooth surface.

Coprinopsis atramentaria

A disintegrating, or melting, mushroom with a gray-scaled cap that starts to break down after just one night.

The name of the toxin that makes the mushroom poisonous is Coprine.

It interferes with the breakdown of alcohol, so it shouldn't be eaten when drinking. And it's also poisonous, so you shouldn't be eating it anyway!

Agnes said something about her heart melting, so it sprouted to say, "I'll show you some serious melting here!"

It plans to melt the night away with Claude.

Chapter 15: What Can I Do?

It was a sophisticated dress of ivory material with pink ribbon. In it, Agnes stared down at herself, frozen. In the center of the ribbon at her chest was a brooch with a blue stone, flashing in the light.

“...So this signifies...well, you know?” Agnes mumbled.

The dress and accessories she had received from Claude were in subdued tones, which eased Agnes’s nerves a bit. But the brooch on the front of the dress was blue, the color of Claude’s Prussian-blue hair.

“...It *does* signify...well, *you know*...doesn’t it?” she answered herself.

Based on the color scheme of the dress, there was no need to incorporate blue into it. This meant that its inclusion must be significant.

What color did blue signify? The only thing that came to mind was the color of Claude’s hair.

“I’m not allowed to...remove this, am I?” she asked the empty room.

Since he went to the trouble of getting this for her, he obviously wanted her to wear it. No doubt Delalande’s crew had made it up for her, and she didn’t want to waste their hard work either. She told herself that this was the price she had to pay for the dress. She sighed a little.

“Sis? Your escort is here.”

“Okay.”

She heard Kevin’s voice, and when she opened the door to him, he blinked and looked stunned for a moment.

“You came out right away today... Hmm, yes, you do look very pretty. Bright colors really do suit you best.”

“Thank you.”

She looked at Kevin’s smile and felt embarrassed but also happy. Seeing how

pleased Kevin looked, she realized that wearing brightly colored clothes might not be so bad after all.

“And it has Claude’s color represented, as well,” he nodded approvingly.

“...Well...”

“Yes, yes, well, it’s time, so off you go!”

Before she could speak, Kevin pushed her in the direction of the entrance hall, where a young man with black hair and russet-colored eyes stood.

“It has been a while, Lady Agnes.”

It was Claude’s personal guard, the royal knight Maurice Gounud. When Agnes greeted him, he smiled at her.

“That dress looks very nice on you,” he said. “The pink dress from the other day was also very lovely, but this color scheme looks very sophisticated.”

“Did Claude tell you to compliment me?” she questioned, suspicious.

“Goodness, no. It was my honest impression.”

Was it? she wondered. She wouldn’t put it past Claude to set up an arrangement like that. Then Agnes noticed something in what Maurice had just said.

“How do you know about the pink day dress?”

“Because I am Prince Claude’s personal knight.”

Maurice’s smooth response made Agnes stiffen. She had worn the pink day dress only once, when she went out with Claude on their strawberry date. So that meant Maurice was around to see it...

“...That day...were you watching?” she asked.

“Yes, I and two others. As you advised, the prince travels with a guard entourage now, without complaint. It has made things easier.”

Oh. Oh, right.

Claude was a prince and second in line to the throne after the crown prince. It made sense he would have guards along, and in fact, it was Agnes who told him

to make sure he had them.

In other words...Maurice had been watching it all. All their dates...

“Um... How much did you... How much did you see...?” Agnes’s voice trembled from fear and mild panic, and Maurice rubbed his chin as he thought about it.

“Hmm. The other two swooned during the eating of the strawberries on skewers...it was very touching, but perhaps a little less flirting in public next time, if you please.”

“...Sis, what exactly did you get up to?”

“...Aaagh!” Agnes covered her face with her hands and screamed, just as a loud pop could be heard.

Kevin had come to see what was going on, and Agnes grabbed his arm and latched on to it. Trembling, she slowly looked up.

“I can’t... I can’t go out with Claude anymore. I won’t. It’s totally beyond me!”

It was embarrassing enough that her pink ensemble had been witnessed, but to think that their almost-kiss while they ate the strawberry skewers was in public view too...

And it wasn’t just Maurice who saw it. He said there were two others.

Claude would always have a guard entourage with him, which meant that the only way to prevent further public shame was to refuse to go out with him. She would spend her life here, living in her residence and the gardens.

Human beings should live in close harmony with nature, after all.

While Agnes’s natural inclination toward being a shut-in started to kick in again, Maurice sighed as he plucked the mushrooms that had sprouted on both arms. The scarlet-capped one was a *Dermocybe sanguinea* and the bright red one was a *Hygrocybe coccinea*, but seeing their red colors reminded her of the strawberry skewers, which she didn’t need right now.

“Oh no, that won’t do. I’ll be killed if you say that,” Maurice said rather seriously. “Those other two still aren’t right mentally, I can’t deny. But don’t worry; I have a steel heart, and I’m prepared to witness any amount of public smooching without batting an eyelid. No concerns there.”

“I have nothing but concerns!”

What was this demented knight saying with such a straight face? At any rate, she thought a knight’s steel heart should be used for more important purposes.

“I can’t... It’s out of the question...” She clung to Kevin’s arm, her only lifeline, but she could hear him sighing over her.

“Good grief, what were you doing? ...Still, I suppose a little smooching is to be expected,” Kevin said acceptingly.

“No, it’s not!”

“Anyway, you have to get going. It’s time. See?”

Kevin bundled her into the carriage and shut the door on her.

Agnes was already exhausted, and all she could do was recline weakly on the seat and try to catch her breath as the carriage set off.

“I shall accompany you as far as Duke Watteau’s residence today,” Maurice said. “I will be standing by and waiting during the tea party as well, so do call on me should you require anything.”

Maurice bowed politely. He hadn’t batted an eyelid during her emotional outburst in front of him and Kevin.

“Sir Maurice...you’re a knight, right? Why are you being sent to accompany me?”

“You can feel free to just call me Maurice. As I said, I am Prince Claude’s personal knight. And as his precious Dragonmate, you, Lady Agnes, also fall under my umbrella of responsibility.”

“I see... Oh, how awful for you...”

She didn’t know much about the job responsibilities of a bodyguard knight, but it stood to reason that the workload would only increase if you had more people to guard. And having to guard additional persons on top of your main target, well, that had to be quite tough indeed.

“Not at all. Thanks to you, Prince Claude is in excellent condition, and it is an honor for a knight to take charge of his important targets. There is nothing

awful about it.”

Agnes sat up straighter when he mentioned Claude’s condition.

“...Was Claude sick?”

“Nothing so serious as that. But he wasn’t exactly what you could call ‘well.’ Ever since he met you, though, he’s really perked up, and I never see him looking unwell anymore.”

“I... I see.”

Agnes had been told that crest-bearers who didn’t find their Dragonmate by the time they reached adulthood would sicken. She didn’t know exactly when that was in terms of age, but Claude had to be around that age or getting close to it. That meant it wouldn’t be strange for there to have already been a big change in his physical condition.

Claude had said something about how he expected he would go down the same path as Duke Granier, and he had also said something about wanting to eventually study mushrooms down the line.

Was he already noticing himself weaken and was preparing for the inevitable?

Agnes felt terrible for never thinking about those possibilities until now. It made sense for Gerome to be telling her to get on with the marriage. If Claude had already begun to sicken, then a quick engagement and marriage would be the best thing for his health.

And yet, Claude was willing to wait.

He had said he would wait until Agnes was ready.

She looked down at the brooch pinned to her collar and found herself reaching up to grip it. Claude had said he cared for her, and she understood that. But apparently, his feelings for her went deeper than she thought. He truly treasured her.

She was filled with happiness, and yet her heart hurt and was filled with warmth at the same time.

“...What can I do?”

She would become engaged to Claude and, no doubt, marry him eventually. But that wasn't enough. She wanted to do more...something to rise to the level of consideration Claude had shown her. She badly wanted to do something.

There was a pop, and a mushroom sprouted on Maurice's shoulder.

Red cap, white spots, an *Amanita muscaria*.

Maurice looked taken aback by the mushroom for a second, then he slowly plucked it and wrapped it in a handkerchief. He was probably going to give it to Claude. She pictured the knight handing the prince the tidy handkerchief parcel, and it struck her as comical.

"I am his guardian knight, but I do not know much about Dragonmates. But through my work, I have seen the power of dragon's blood with my own eyes. Prince Claude is strong, but that power is a lot to bear alone. I am glad you are here, Lady Agnes. Just your presence is enough to make the prince happy and stabilize his powers. That alone does more than you realize. I do not think there is any need for you to overthink things." Maurice smiled at her, and Agnes allowed herself a small smile as well.

"Thank you. ...You're right. I should just do my best in my own way, shouldn't I? At any rate, I can sprout mushrooms. That will win Claude over."

There wasn't much she could do, but that couldn't be helped. She could always make up for the trouble she caused with copious amounts of mushrooms.

"Hmm? Well, the prince does love mushrooms... Did you say win him over?"

First, she had to attend today's tea party. It was hosted by the crown princess, Claude's sister-in-law, who was another Dragonmate like Agnes. Agnes didn't need to become her best friend, but for Claude's sake, she didn't want to make a bad impression.

"What is Lady Zenaide like?" Agnes asked. "I know she's Duke Watteau's eldest daughter and the crown princess, but that's about all I know."

If they had to talk, she could at least pump Maurice for information. Maurice pocketed the handkerchief-wrapped mushrooms and nodded.

“She was discovered to be Prince Xavier’s Dragonmate three years ago. They met at a ball and became engaged soon after, and the other day, she happily became the crown princess.”

“...By the way, why is the party being held at the Watteau residence today and not the palace?” Agnes asked, curious.

Zenaide was the crown princess and was already living at the palace. Why was she returning to her family home to host a tea party? It seemed a bit soon for her to be returning to her family home, but Agnes wasn’t sure what married life was really like. Perhaps she just frequented home surprisingly often.

“I don’t know the details, but I would guess that she decided to host her party away from the palace to prevent you from feeling too nervous, Lady Agnes,” Maurice said.

True, compared to attending a tea party with the crown princess at the palace, this would be a lot easier. But Agnes, who had only met her once or twice, was very grateful that the princess was taking such steps to accommodate her feelings.

“Princess Zenaide said she wants to become good friends with you, Lady Agnes, as you are a fellow Dragonmate. Please, just relax.”

Agnes nodded in response to Maurice’s smile as the carriage arrived at the Watteau residence. She got down from the carriage and followed a servant into a garden blooming with flowers. She parted from Maurice at the entrance to the garden and continued in. Soon, a girl spotted her and came rushing over to her with a big smile on her face.

“...Lady Agnes!” She had black hair and crimson eyes and was very pretty, her eyes sparkling as she curtsied. “Oh, I’m so happy. I finally got to meet you! I kept asking Prince Claude, but he’d never let me! Oh, what a great day today is. Oh, and there’s the peach blossom hair I saw in my dreams! Oh, it’s so beautiful! I could just kiss your cheeks...if you’d only let me, that is!”

The girl gazed dreamily at Agnes, but Agnes had no idea what was happening.

Who is this girl? Agnes looked around, flustered, and then a familiar black-haired woman started coming their way from deeper in the garden.

“Simone! I wondered where you’d gone! There you are. You’re intimidating Lady Agnes.”

Chastized by Zenaide, the girl called Simone immediately stiffened up.

“I’m terribly sorry, Sister. I was just so pleased... Shall we go, Lady Agnes?”

She had called Zenaide “Sister,” so Agnes assumed that Simone must have been her sister. Actually, she had heard about her from Claude before. He said that Zenaide had a sister who was eager to meet her. Based on her reaction just now, Simone must have been that sister.

Agnes let Simone pull her through the intricately constructed gardens. They came to a clearing surrounded by trees, where there was a white table and chairs set up. She sat down as she was instructed to. Simone sat on one side of her, Zenaide on the other.

“Thank you so much for inviting me today,” Agnes said with all the formality expected of a noblewoman.

“Please don’t be nervous. It’s just us three for this tea party. Please, call me Zenaide. And may I call you simply Agnes?”

“Yes. Thank you very much, Lady Zenaide.”

Zenaide smiled, looking elegant and beautiful as she regarded Agnes, who dipped her head. A true-blood aristocrat really was a cut above.

“We two are the only Dragonmates, except for the queen, so I was keen to talk to you,” Zenaide said. “I would have preferred it if it was just us today, but my little sister begged to be included. Simone is absolutely taken with your hair, you see.”

Agnes looked at Simone, wondering what exactly about her hair she was taken with, as Simone’s crimson eyes met hers.

“Well, just look at it, Sister! It’s silky, like gossamer thread, and that luster! Not to mention, it’s such a gorgeous pink, it could put the blossoms to shame. Oh, it’s so amazing, like something out of a fairytale! Her bluish-green eyes offset the hair so perfectly, and then there’s her pretty face as well!” Speaking breathlessly, Simone clutched her temples. “Aaah! Why was I born a woman? If

only I were born a man, I would propose to Lady Agnes at once!”

“...Er...” Agnes was used to drastic reactions to her hair, but never before had she been complimented on it like this. She was pleased, of course, but at the same time she had no idea what to say.

Simone’s praise was gushing, overshadowing even Claude’s...and what could she mean by “propose?”

“Claude would block your attempts,” Zenaide said.

“I wouldn’t give in! Or at least, I’d like to say that, but my enemy would be powerful indeed...” Simone seemed to mull over what Zenaide had just said for a second before she turned to Agnes. “Um, Lady Agnes. May I touch your hair?”

“Huh? ...Yes, go ahead.”

Simone leaped to her feet even as Agnes responded, and in a second, she had come around behind her.

“Wow! It’s so silky! It feels so good! The color changes a little when the sunlight falls on it! Oh, it’s amazing! SO beautiful. Oh, to die wrapped up in this hair...”

...What?

This girl had been saying some seriously odd things...or was it Agnes’s imagination?

Zenaide got to her feet and dragged her sister back to her seat just as it looked like the girl was about to start nuzzling Agnes’s hair. “I apologize for my sister...”

“Please, don’t. Um...the thing is, my hair has only ever gotten me a lot of hate,” Agnes admitted.

“What? But it’s so beautiful? It doesn’t make any sense. I’d go to the ends of the earth just for a chance to pet and fondle this hair!”

“Simone, can you quiet down a little?”

Chastised by Zenaide, Simone stopped talking and began eating cakes instead.

She definitely said some odd things, but Agnes felt it would be better not to

focus on the words too much and just enjoy the compliment instead.

“Agnes. Peach-blossom-colored hair is, indeed, rare in this country. Plenty of people will make comments, I imagine. However, that doesn’t ring true for everyone. I, too, think that your hair color is gorgeous,” Zenaide said sincerely.

“Th-Thank you.”

“No fair, Sister! What about me? I would DIE for that hair!”

Agnes closed her ears to that particular comment. She nodded blandly as Simone squawked and fell dramatically across the table.

Just then, with a pop, a mushroom sprouted on Simone’s arm.

It had a light brown semicircular cap, a *Panellus serotinus*.

...*What terrible timing.*

Sprouting a mushroom on the crown princess’s sister, a lady no less...how incredibly rude. Should she apologize first or pluck it first?

Agnes hesitated for a second, then Simone lifted her head and plucked the mushroom. “...Is this mushroom yours, Lady Agnes?”

Agnes wondered why Simone had immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was her doing. But when she thought about it more, she remembered that Zenaide had indeed been present when Agnes had sprouted one on the king during her official introduction to the royal family.

Most likely, she had mentioned that day’s events to her sister.

“I’m so sorry. It won’t hurt you at all. That mushroom is actually edible, so...”

Agnes’s reassurances weren’t convincing, even to herself, but Simone’s jaw started hanging lower and lower.

“...A mushroom from Lady Agnes! Why, I shall treasure it!” Simone grasped the mushroom, smiling, her eyes sparkling.

Her reaction was so odd that Agnes could only draw one conclusion from it.

“It can’t be that we have another mushroom fetishist here, can it...?”

“No, no, Agnes. Although I’m not denying she’s a fetishist of sorts, it’s better

to just leave it well alone.”

A fetishist of sorts? What does that mean? Agnes wondered. But then again, Simone had been saying so many odd things. No doubt it was better not to think too deeply about any of them.

“If there’s anything you need, mushroom-related or otherwise, don’t hesitate to say it,” Zenaide told her. “I am the crown princess, after all, and a rather good mediator. I have the connections to help you.”

“Goodness. I couldn’t impose like that.”

Zenaide was the crown princess, which meant she was the future queen. Agnes couldn’t inconvenience such an important person.

“In that case, please turn to Claude. As I’m sure you’re aware, he’d do absolutely anything for you, you know?”

“Anything...?”

Agnes looked quizzical, not quite following, then heard a squeak of “Because you’re exquisite!” from one side, which she chose to ignore.

“To us, they are just men, but to them, we are irreplaceable persons of extreme value. It took me a while to understand, as well...but the passionate love of a crest-bearer...is intense, you know?”

“I-Intense?”

Agnes trembled over the heavy implications of that word, then from the side she heard another squeak, saying, “I’d like to love you passionately and intensely, too,” which made Agnes shake her head hard in order to pretend she hadn’t heard it.

“If you have any problems in that area, please come and discuss it with me any time.”

Zenaide’s beautiful smile and cryptic words remained with Agnes as she excused herself from the tea party table.



A servant was waiting as she left the clearing.

Maurice would be waiting when she exited the garden, but the trees were as thick as a maze. She was grateful for the assistance in finding the way out.

Today's tea party had been held at the duke's residence for Agnes, and there were barely any guests, which meant that Agnes would be able to return home before too long, once again. She was grateful to Zenaide for her consideration and wished that she could become someone so kind and caring herself one day.

Lost in those thoughts, it wasn't long before she exited the gardens.

Only, it didn't look like the front entrance, where she had left Maurice. This appeared to be more of a back entrance.

What a perplexing tree maze, to befuddle even a servant of the residence.

She was just about to call out to the servant and point out their mistake when someone grabbed her from behind and pinned her down.

She heard a pop, but before she could make a sound herself, some kind of material was pulled over her mouth and nose. The next thing she knew, she was out cold.



Mushrooms of the Day

Dermocybe sanguinea

A mushroom with a scarlet cap that produces red juice when crushed.

It can be used for dyeing, and it's proud of its red juice.

When Agnes recalled the strawberry skewer indirect kiss incident, it sprouted, saying, "I'll produce some red sap, so grab a handkerchief!"

It was sad when Agnes looked away, but it knew Agnes was just shy. It's keeping the spore door open for her.

Hygrocybe coccinea

A mushroom with a bright red cap, good at growing in clusters.

It's edible, with a nice texture and unique color.

When Agnes recalled the strawberry skewer indirect kiss incident, it sprouted, saying, "I'm the same color as strawberry juice!"

One day it would like for Agnes and Claude to eat *Hygrocybe coccinea* skewers, but it's worried about whether or not being skewered would hurt.

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 sprouted to see if it could help Agnes, saying, "Agnes can sprout mushrooms!"

It has taken on the task of sprouting to appease Claude in case of emergency, its cap jiggling away.

Panellus serotinus

An edible mushroom with a light brown, semicircular cap.

Under the cap, it has gelatinous scales that can fall off.

In cooking, it turns soft and gelatinous, which it's proud of.

When Simone was professing her adoration for Agnes, it sprouted to say, "No one adores Agnes more, and no one is more gelatinous than me!"

Chapter 16: The One I Belong With

AGNES opened her eyes slowly to see an unfamiliar ceiling above. Sluggishly, she rolled her head to the side and made eye contact with a young man with yellowish-brown hair.

“...Finally awake?”

The room was dimly lit, but she could see herself reflected in a familiar pair of gray eyes.

Philip, wearing a hat indoors, got up from his chair and came to Agnes’s side.

Agnes finally realized that she was lying in bed. She sat up in a hurry.

“Where is this place?”

She was supposed to be on her way home from a tea party in the Watteau gardens. She remembered following the servant out of the gardens, but then her memory was blank.

She got out of bed in a hurry, but she couldn’t see her shoes. She had been wearing silk stockings, but for some reason, the feet that stood on the carpeted floor were completely bare. She didn’t know whether she had taken them off or someone had taken them off her, but at any rate, they were gone.

She looked around and saw that the sky outside the window was dark. She had been at the duke’s residence around noon, so quite a lot of time must have passed. She didn’t know where this room was, but based on the furnishings, it had to be an aristocrat’s residence of some sort.

She needed to get a handle on the situation as soon as possible.

For some reason, the chair where Philip had been sitting was surrounded by mushrooms—something else she couldn’t make sense of.

Maybe Philip had awoken to the charms of mushrooms as well, she started to wonder, but that would be terrible, so she pretended not to see.

“Where is this place?” She repeated her question, and the young man with the yellowish-brown hair sighed.

“My room.”

Philip’s room...? That meant she was in a building located away from the palace. She had come here only once, to meet Philip’s mother. She had never been anywhere near his residence since.

“...Huh? Then, this bed is...”

“My bed.”

She felt a cold chill run down her spine.

Even when they were engaged, Agnes never entered Philip’s private chambers. They were not yet married, so such a thing would have been unthinkable.

“Why am I in your room... In your bed?” she asked.

Even if Agnes had fainted or taken ill, there was no reason for her to be brought to Philip’s bedroom, far from the Watteau gardens no less. She didn’t know what was going on, but Philip’s actions frightened her.

“I said we were going to discuss things later, didn’t I?” he said darkly.

“...You actually brought me here for that? But I was at the Watteau residence. How did you...?”

“I had an accomplice. But more importantly, Agnes, do you intend to become engaged to Claude?”

“...Huh? Who cares about that right now? Did you seriously kidnap me? If you want to talk, you should go through the normal channels of inviting me to a proper place to converse, no?”

Agnes was highly confused, and Philip flinched a little, but then he scowled.

“We can’t talk if we keep getting interrupted,” he hissed.

“So, you just wanted to talk about my engagement with Claude? That’s what this is all about? I have already told you that it’s none of your business, and it still isn’t. ...I’m going home!”

This villa was technically on palace grounds, so she could surely find a servant to show her the way out. Being barefoot wasn't ideal, but she didn't want to stay in this room any longer, not even to search for her shoes.

"...Wait." Philip grabbed her arm as she made to leave.

Two mushrooms sprouted on Philip's shoulders at the same moment with a loud pop. The big one with the white warts was an *Amanita cokeri*, and the brightly colored stick-type one was a *Clavulinopsis miyabeana*.

Philip trembled at the sight of the mushrooms for a second, then he quickly plucked them and tossed them aside.

"D-Don't think your mushrooms can get you out of this! I'm not done talking yet. Don't marry Claude, that's an order," he commanded her. "You should be with me. You have always been with me and always will be. You belong by my side!"

Agnes looked at Philip, who was breathless from delivering this speech, and she felt herself recoil.

"...I understand."

"...You do?! You finally understand?!"

Philip's cheeks were colored pink, his gray eyes sparkling, but Agnes gave him a cold stare.

"...I understand that you're an *idiot*."

"...Huh?"

She shook off Philip's arm as he stood there with his jaw hanging. She scowled at his dopey face.

"You're the one who cheated and called off our engagement. How dare you demand I be by your side without an engagement? Quit messing around. I'm not here for your benefit, Philip. I have my own happiness to live for and people who are cheering me on! You are NOT the one I belong with!" As Agnes shouted, a red and black trumpet-shaped mushroom sprouted on each of Philip's arms.

For some reason, the *Craterellus cornucopioides* and the *Gomphus fluccosus*

shook, making percussive noises. The sound seemed to snap Philip out of his haze, and his gray eyes flooded with anger.

“...I won’t allow this, Agnes. You... You are *my* property.” His low voice was menacing, and Agnes tried to back away, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her close.

Just then, she heard a loud pop.

“...Whoa!”

With the short, sharp sound came the sensation of Philip’s arm trembling. She looked up to see that more mushrooms had sprouted on his shoulders. The red one on his right shoulder was a Nameko; its slime was smeared on half of his face.

Philip quickly plucked it off with his left hand, but then another mushroom sprouted on his left arm, resembling a half-peeled orange...an *Astraeus hygrometricus*, which belched spores from a hole in its center.

“Damn it! Not these ones again!” Philip clucked angrily, his face smeared with slime and spores. He yanked on Agnes’s arm.

Just as she was about to lose their tussle and fall against Philip’s chest, there was another popping sound, and Agnes’s face bumped into something soft.

It was a large yellowish mushroom covered in cracks, a *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis*. It appeared to have sprouted on Philip’s chest, covering him right up to the chin.

Feeling his grip on her loosen, Agnes pulled away to see Philip struggling.

His flapping hands had knocked off his hat, but he was so busy grabbing the mushrooms and gasping for air that he didn’t notice.

The way he’s pawing at his mouth as well makes me think that another Rugiboletus extremiorientalis sprouted on his tongue.

Thanks to that, she had evaded an embrace from Philip. She wished she could express her gratitude to the *Rugiboletus extremiorientalis*, which had served as a mushroom cushion. She just wanted to get out of this room, but Philip was standing in the way of the door.

“D-Don’t think you’ll get out of this with your horrid mushrooms! You are my property. I won’t let you leave this room!”

“You want to turn this kidnapping into unlawful captivity, huh? I always thought you were a fool, but you’ve grown...into a colossal idiot!” she exclaimed.

Philip may have been a fringe royal, but locking a count’s daughter in his room surely could not go unpunished, even for him. Even if it wasn’t public knowledge, Agnes had been introduced to the royal family as Claude’s Dragonmate, so Philip couldn’t get away with pretending he hadn’t known. Laying his hands on her could only be seen as an act of rebellion against the royal family.

Agnes wasn’t sure to what extent Philip understood his actions or was willing to stand by them, but all she could say was that he was being an idiot.

“You canceled the engagement with me because I was a burden, right? So what right do you have to lock me in here? I thought you wanted to be free of me!” she accused.

“You’re wrong. Why...? Why didn’t you come after me afterward?” He spoke with a hangdog expression, as if Agnes were the one who’d wronged *him*, and she couldn’t make sense of it.

“Come after *you*? What? You wanted me to hold a grudge and come flying at you with a weapon or something?” she asked, incredulous.

“No. You should have come after me, begging to be with me again. But you didn’t.”

“Well... I don’t want to be by your side. So why would I come after you?”

They had only gotten engaged out of mutual benefit, with no feelings really involved either way. Philip proved annoying, always banging on about what Agnes wasn’t allowed to do or be. Never had she looked at him with anything approaching feelings of love.

Then he went off, had an affair, and called off their engagement in a way that humiliated her publicly. If Philip thought she was going to come running after him after that, he had another thing coming.

But one comment from Agnes was enough to make Philip's gray eyes open wide and for him to freeze up. His eyes brimmed, almost as if he was about to cry, and she could see him ball up his fists.

"...Agnes. Do you... Do you love Claude more than you love me?"

His tremulous question was, again, hard to puzzle out. Why was he acting on the supposition that she loved him *at all*?

"Philip, you were just my fiancé. It wasn't an issue of us loving each other or not. It was an arranged marriage. And at any rate, the only one I love is..."

But then embarrassment made her clam up. Agnes put a hand on her chest to steady her heart, unable to speak, and then she saw Philip hang his head.

"...I see. So that's how it is. Very well. Then I have no choice but to make you mine by force."

"Huh?"

Philip raised his head, not tearful now. Instead, his gray eyes were burning with emotion. On his head sprouted a white mushroom with large warts...an *Amanita cokeri*.

He reached out to grab Agnes, and then there was a series of loud, reverberant pops.

A line of red and white mushrooms was standing on Philip's head. Next to the *Amanita cokeri*, another mushroom had sprouted, one with a bright, fiery red color...the poisonous *Podostroma cornudamae*.

While she was distracted from looking at the mushrooms, Philip closed the distance between them. But then there was a squelchy sound, and Philip slipped, slamming to the ground.

There was something slimy all over his boots, probably slime from the Nameko that had gotten onto the floor.

She could see his back now that he had fallen face down. It was in a sorry state.

He had a white mushroom oozing sap...a Bleeding Tooth. Its juice was staining his collarbone and shoulders red. Below it, there were several red, stick-shaped

mushrooms...*Mutinus caninus*.

Philip had crashed to the floor due to the slime, and his back was now stained red with mushrooms. He looked just like he had been jumped in an alley and stabbed in the back.

Even worse...he stank.

Philip pushed himself up slowly, but two more mushrooms sprouted on the backs of his hands. The poisonous mushroom, *Amanita virosa*.

All of a sudden, Philip began to cough violently, still crouched on all fours. He coughed something up and seemed to swallow it again, spitting out only a small, chewed-up fragment of mushroom.

It was yellow with an indented cap. Probably a *Clitocybe acromelalga*.

At any rate, while Philip was incapacitated and slimed by mushrooms, Agnes had to seize her chance and escape this room. Philip was between her and the door, but there was a window on the opposite side of the room, showing the twilit sky.

Agnes opened the window and looked out to see what she was dealing with, but it looked like they were on the second floor. There was no exterior staircase nor any footholds, but she could see a wide garden below, filled with shrubbery.

From this height, if she dropped feet-first, she probably wouldn't die.

"...Agnes... Wait..."



She ignored the voice behind her and jumped out of the window in her bare feet.

Mid-air, she looked down to see where she was landing and spotted a white patch in the greenery. The next moment, the white patch suddenly seemed to bulge. It enveloped Agnes as she hit it, its mushiness absorbing the impact of her landing and softening it.

“...This is a mushroom...isn’t it?”

Agnes was spread-eagled on top of a big white, marshmallow-like thing. Slowly, she sat up, looking down at the expanse of white beneath her. It was a big white sphere, which she thought was a *Calvatia nipponica*, only it was really huge.

This, too, was surely proof that her mushroom sensitivities had greatly heightened. She slid off the side onto the ground, turning around and stroking the mushroom.

“Thank you. You saved me.”

As soon as Agnes thanked it, the mushroom let out a puffing sound and deflated to half of its original size. It was still so large that she couldn’t get both arms around it. Its sheer size was shocking.

“Now, I need to find someone to show me the way out, and get far away from here...”

“...Where are you going?”

She heard a voice in the dark garden, and Agnes stiffened.

The sun had gone down, and the garden was beginning to be enveloped by darkness. A man with lead-colored hair emerged from the gloom.

“...Prince Armand?”

This was technically part of the palace grounds, so it wasn’t unusual for a royal to have happened along just then. But why was he wandering the dark gardens alone at this time of night?

“It looks like you escaped from Philip unscathed... You aren’t making this easy,

are you?" Armand said darkly.

"...What do you mean?"

They were standing beside the villa where Philip's chambers were, yes...but even so, how did he know what was happening?

And what did he mean by "You aren't making this easy, are you?"

"I went to all the trouble of delivering you to his room, but Philip wasn't able to rise to the occasion, I see. Hmm, well, never mind."

The things he said in that silky voice of his made no sense to Agnes. Fear flooded her anyway, and she took a step back.

"What are you... What are you saying right now?"

"I told you. You need to be more guarded. You shouldn't go letting your guard down just because you were at the duke's residence. How can you stay safe without guards by your side? ...If you did have one, though, I planned to remove him first." Grinning as he spoke, Armand reached for the sword he wore at his belt.

"You're talking like...like you were the one who kidnapped me."

"Precisely. Philip made the request, but it suited my goals as well. ...Rather than just killing you outright, forcing Claude to learn his beloved Dragonmate become another man's property before dying would hurt him all the more, don't you think?"

Armand sneered, and Agnes took another step back.

She couldn't believe it, but the words he'd just spoken were rattling around in her head. She felt dizzy and faint, but now wasn't the time to pass out.

"Killing...dying...you mean...me?" She felt a cold bead of sweat slide down the nape of her neck as Armand's gray eyes narrowed with amusement.

"That's right. I'm glad you catch on fast. Lady Agnes Lefort... I'm afraid you have to die now."

Agnes was in a panic. Armand's almost-pleasant smile seemed monstrous to her. Seeing that, Armand only smiled even wider.

“But...why?”

Agnes had been singled out for her hair before, but never had anyone wished death upon her. Armand had only met her a handful of times. He had no reason to hate her that she could think of.

“Because you’re in my way, that’s why.”

“I’m...in your way?”

In his way?

But Agnes hadn’t done anything.

Then, as if he were able to hear her thoughts, the young man with the lead-colored hair grinned wryly.

“My true elder brother Xavier is the crown prince, and my true younger brother Claude is second in line to the throne. And yet, I, the third-born, have been demoted to fourth place. This, I cannot accept.”

Those three princes were all the queen’s children, and only Armand was lacking the dragon crest. That was why the line of succession was set up the way it was... So what was he getting at with this?

“Even if I die, you will still be in the same position, I think,” Agnes said.

Armand raised an eyebrow for a second, then nodded knowingly. “Ah, right. You don’t know, do you? When a crest-bearer *loses* his Dragonmate, he sickens at a rapid pace.”

“...What?”

Agnes knew that they could sicken if they reached adulthood without meeting their Dragonmate, but this was different.

And what does he mean by “lose?”

Ignoring Agnes’s confusion, Armand smirked, still fingering his sword. “Claude’s a knight and hard to beat, but if he weakens, then it’ll be a piece of cake to take care of him. And I have an ace up my sleeve, anyway. Our uncle never had a Dragonmate, and has been weak from the start, so that takes care of that. And if Xavier loses his Dragonmate as well, then he’ll go the same way.”

“Loses... You mean if she dies?”

“Precisely.” Armand nodded with the kindest smile that would make a normal girl blush.

If a crest-bearer’s Dragonmate died, he would sicken rapidly. Agnes didn’t know if that was true or not, but it appeared to be the motivation driving Armand to do all of this. It wasn’t Agnes’s death he wanted as an end goal; it was to weaken Claude.

“But why? Why do you want to weaken him?” Agnes asked.

“They all act so superior, just because they have a dragon crest,” Armand scoffed. “All they have is a bruise that changes color, along with a little bit of physical strength and a pop of magic. However, if they don’t have a Dragonmate, they’ll weaken, and if they do find one and she dies, they’ll still weaken. ...Such an unstable existence, isn’t it? Wouldn’t it be better for the kingdom and the royal subjects if a non-crest-bearer took the throne instead?”

“But...”

Agnes had wondered the same thing herself. If a Dragonmate’s existence could swing things rapidly in either direction for a crest-bearer, wouldn’t it be better for the royal family and its subjects if someone without a crest ruled?

“But Claude said that being a crest-bearer carries great significance,” she said.

“Of course, he did. He *is* one, so naturally he’d think that way. Actually, ever since he found you, Agnes, Claude has stopped showing any signs of weakening. Even considering the *true role* of the royal family, not having a dragon crest shouldn’t be an impediment. In the past, during eras when there were no crest-bearers, we served our purpose just fine.”

“The true...role?”

Another phrase Agnes wasn’t familiar with.

Armand smiled with exasperation and pity. “You don’t know *that*, either? I get that you aren’t engaged yet, but still... I suppose he doesn’t trust you, Lady Agnes.”

Agnes’s shoulders jerked.

The concept of Claude not trusting her made her chest ache.

Just then, a mushroom sprouted on Armand's arm with a pop. It had deep blue caps—an *Entoloma cyanonigrum*.

Agnes gazed at it; it was the same color as Claude's Prussian-blue hair. She felt some of her calm return to her.

Claude had said she should ignore the words of those who criticize her and focus instead on those who lift her up. It didn't seem like Armand was trying to lift her up here, so it would be better for her to ask Claude whether he trusted her or not.

She'd be lying if she said she wasn't wounded and didn't think he was partially right. But she didn't want Armand to see that he'd rattled her.

"If you have a problem with the line of succession, you should make your issues known openly and see if the crown can't be convinced to change things. What you're trying to do here...it's a crime and nothing more," she said, challenging him.

"It'll all be water under the bridge once I'm king. This is what needs to be done to make that happen. Sometimes, you have to do what you have to do, you know?" Speaking in an almost bored tone, Armand plucked off the mushrooms and tossed them away.

Agnes thought his plan was the height of stupidity, but she had no doubt there was nothing she could say that would get through to him.

And so, all she could do was try to flee. She needed to run and also warn the crown princess, Zenaide.

She took several steps back, watching the man with the lead-colored hair.

Armand noticed that she was backing up, and he drew his sword from its scabbard. Its tip sparkled, and just then, there was a loud pop.

A yellow, slimy *Tricholoma ustale* had sprouted on the sword's blade, practically covering it. The sword, which had just been sparkling in the moonlight, now looked like a giant mushroom stick.

"A mushroom? ...Was that you, Lady Agnes?"

He shook the sword in disgust, but the mushroom showed no signs of budging. Clucking his tongue in annoyance, Armand put his hand on the scabbard. As he did, more mushrooms sprouted, covering the entire sword this time.

It looked like the *Tricholoma ustale*, but these were even slimier, glistening in the moonlight.

“...How disgusting. No wonder these things are abhorred.” Spitting out the words, he managed to sheathe the sword once again. It made a small, gross sound, and the mushrooms all scattered from the top.

His dark gray eyes flashed with anger, and Agnes took that opportunity to turn and flee. But he was after her in seconds, grabbing her arm.

Agnes shrieked a little, hearing Armand sigh behind her.

“Stop causing trouble. I don’t particularly enjoy tormenting women.”

What was he saying now? When he was apparently fine with killing women for ridiculous reasons?

She glared at Armand, unable to do anything else, and his gray eyes met hers. They were the same color as Claude’s, but the crazed light that shone in them was different.

Agnes glared so hard at him that, if looks could kill, he’d be a goner. The gray eyes blinked at her several times.

“...I see. I can see a little why Claude is so mad about you.”

“Huh?”

Armand let go of the arm he was holding and put his arms around her back instead, pulling her to him. It was like he was trying to dance with her, and even though she pushed against his chest and tried to get away, he didn’t release his grasp on her at all.

“...I must say, that hair color of yours is very unusual. Your face isn’t bad, either. And the color of your eyes is pretty. How about becoming my woman instead?”

“...Huh?”

Was he insane? Wasn't he just trying to kill her?

His choice of phrasing was so bizarre.

"It's tempting, the thought of forcing Claude to watch as his Dragonmate betrays him... He won't weaken unless his Dragonmate is killed, of course, but...I have that ace up my sleeve. It's not too late to have a little fun with you before I kill you."

He grinned down at her, and she felt a cold bead of sweat run down her back from fear. As Armand's hand touched her cheek, she saw something come flying past right in front of her eyes.

She realized it was pure air as Armand's cheek was suddenly cut open by an invisible force. Red blood began to pour from the wound.

"...That's far enough, Brother."



Mushrooms of the Day

Mushrooms Piled High (Protect Agnes Squad)

While Agnes was unconscious, these brave soldiers sprouted to keep Philip's wandering hands at bay.

Some slimy, some spiky, and all colorful, they continued to guard against Philip.

"If you want to touch Agnes, you'll have to get through us!" they cackled, but as they were mushrooms, he didn't understand.

Now they're having a serious discussion about how they'd most like to be cooked.

Amanita cokeri

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

It looks kind of like an all-white *Amanita muscaria*.

Nobody knows if it's poisonous or edible, but...I wouldn't want to take a bite and find out!

A surveillance mushroom, worried about Agnes's personal and psychological state.

"It's not too late to make things right. Return Agnes to her family!" it warned, but as it's a mushroom, Philip didn't hear it. He plucked it and tossed it aside instead.

Infuriated by Philip's actions, it sent out an APB to the other mushrooms and then watched as the onslaught came rolling in.

Clavulinopsis miyabeana

A brightly colored, stick-shaped mushroom that resembles the highly poisonous *Podostroma cornudamae*.

It looks poisonous but isn't. It isn't tasty, though.

They're sometimes used to add color to dishes.

Philip has been attacked by the *Podostroma cornudamae* before, so it sprouted to say, "Remind you of anyone? If you lay a hand on Agnes, I'll call my buddy, you know!"

Craterellus cornucopioides

A black, funnel-shaped mushroom, resembling a trumpet.

Also known as the “Trumpet of Death,” it’s apparently eaten often in Europe. Goes well in a soup.

...So why the scary name, then?

It sprouted when Agnes talked back to Philip, saying, “Way to go!” and tooting a fanfare. But as it was a mushroom, it didn’t make any sense.

Gomphus fluccosus

A poisonous red mushroom that resembles a trumpet.

It causes gastrointestinal poisoning but doesn't have any taste...someone must have tried eating this one, too.

It's in training to make trumpet sounds.

It sprouted to toot a fanfare along with the *Craterellus cornucopioides*, but neither of them was capable of making any sound.

With nothing to do, it sways and shakes, trying to make a percussive sound with the *Craterellus cornucopioides*.

Nameko

A slimy mushroom with a reddish cap. It often grows in clusters.

It's an affordable grocery item loved by the whole family.

A member of the Wood Destruction Club and representative of slimy mushrooms.

It sprouted with all its sliminess to say, "Agnes is not yours. She's our princess!"

It also made the floor as slippery as it could, and it succeeded in making Philip slip and fall.

"Slime isn't made in a day," it quips wittily as Philip goes down.

Astraeus hygrometricus

It looks like a starfish with a globe in the middle. Or a peeled orange.

When it's heated, a hole opens up, and spores come out.

It's edible but not really eaten.

It sprouted to throw spores at noisy, annoying Philip, which worked well with the Nameko's slime factor.

Rugiboletus extremiorientalis

Yellowish-brown or orange-brown caps, around 1 foot in size. A big mushroom.

As it matures, cracks appear in the cap, and it resembles a loaf of baked bread.

It's kind of like a big French boule loaf or a Japanese melon pan.

It's not poisonous, but apparently it draws a lot of flies.

Agnes looked like she was about to jump into Philip's arms, so it sprouted in a hurry.

It sprouted in Philip's mouth to shut him up, sacrificing itself for the cause.

Podostroma cornudamae

It looks like bright, burning red fingers reaching from the ground.

Only a few grams can be a lethal dose, and even touching it is not advised. It's a really poisonous mushroom.

It heard the call to arms from the *Amanita cokeri* and sprouted in response to Agnes's fear.

Just touching it can cause skin inflammation and make the hair roots come out.

"You're lucky I only attacked the very top of your head," it said, as, infuriated, it took another swipe at Philip's follicles.

Bleeding Tooth

A white, fleshy body with blood-like juice oozing out. Like a bleeding tooth!

It's supposed to be edible but bitter. Those mushroom maniacs have been at it again!

It soaked Philip's suit to get revenge on him for tormenting Agnes. The juice it releases is actually antibacterial, though, so it's really quite a kindly mushroom.

This time, it attacked together with the *Mutinus caninus*, and was shocked at the carnage they both caused together.

"This time, I want to stain Philip blue," it yelled, showing a bloody enthusiasm toward dyeing Philip.

***Mutinus caninus* (Dog Stinkhorn)**

A stick-shaped mushroom with a red, foul-smelling tip.

It doesn't seem poisonous, but it smells, so it's not really eaten.

"If you mess with our Agnes, I'll beat you with my stink!" it yelled, attacking Philip's back along with the Bleeding Tooth.

Amanita virosa

A pure white, beautiful mushroom with white flakes, depressions, and warts.

It's highly poisonous, and just one has enough toxins to kill a human.

One of the strongest of the Destroying Angels.

"If you try to hurt our Agnes, I'll show you no mercy!"

Clitocybe acromelalga

A poisonous mushroom. Yellow, with an indented cap. It's vicious. Once it enters the body, it lays dormant for 4 to 5 days. After that, it attacks the fingers, toes, and penis of the victim and causes excruciating pain for a month or more.

Why does it target the penis? No one knows.

"I can't leave it all up to the *Podostroma cornudamae* and the *Amanita virosa*!" it bellowed, determined to join the fray.

Two serious warriors this time around...if they went full-out, Philip would be sure to die. But they worried that this might upset Agnes, so they decided to just give Philip an updated blast of Penis Pain instead.

Calvatia nipponica

It's also known as the Giant Puffball...the name makes me imagine something really giant, but it's just a fluffy white ball-shaped mushroom.

Its dreamy white sphere is about 6 inches across and sprouts in one night.

When it turns brown, its skin peels off, releasing an ammonia-like scent.

It's edible while it's still white, but rather than tasting delicious, it's rather tasteless. Why do we eat it, then?

It sprouted as big as it could, fluffing up with all its might to save Agnes when she jumped out of the window.

It was pleased that Agnes was safe, and even more pleased to be stroked by her.

Entoloma cyanonigrum

A deep blue mushroom.

It doesn't seem to be poisonous, but it doesn't look very edible because of the color.

It talked things over with the other mushrooms, and they all decided this one was closer to the color of Claude's hair. It's the blue mushroom representative.

When it saw Agnes, looking shocked over being told she wasn't trusted, it sprouted to say, "That's not true. Look at my color!" It showed Agnes its blue color to convince her that Claude trusts her.

Tricholoma ustale

A poisonous mushroom with a yellow-brown cap that gets slimy when it's damp.

The flesh has a strong smell, and it is somewhat bitter...why did anyone ever eat it? Well, we can't count out accidental ingestion.

It sits in one corner of the Three Miseden Ones and often confuses mushroom braves with its delicious-looking appearance.

It slimed up the sword and its scabbard to protect Agnes.

It slimed up the sword so much that it ended up getting tossed aside, but it just kept on sliming—all for Agnes's sake.

Chapter 17: The Dragon's Dragonmate

HIS voice was sharp in the gloom, and Agnes was so delighted to hear it that she exclaimed, "Claude!"

She turned her face toward the voice, but she was still being restrained by Armand, so she could see nothing.

"Let go! Let go of me!" She struggled, but his arms were like a vice.

"What do you want?" Armand asked Claude, ignoring Agnes. "It's very rude to intrude on a lovers' tryst, you know."

Agnes could hardly believe her ears. He was making it sound like they had been having a romantic rendezvous.

Why? When he had just been about to kill her? Then it hit her. Just before, he had spoken about wanting to see Claude betrayed by his Dragonmate.

...This is a trap.

He was pretending that there was intimacy between them to upset Claude. He had spoken about seeing Claude, a knight, as a threat, but he had also said that he didn't "need" to kill Agnes right away, that he had an ace up his sleeve. Agnes didn't know what that was supposed to be, but at this rate, she knew Claude was in danger.

She wanted to announce that there was nothing between herself and Armand, but now didn't seem like the time. If Claude was going to suspect Agnes so easily, then so be it.

It was more important to protect Claude. Agnes balled up her fists and tried to think. If she couldn't use force, there was still one thing she could do. It was embarrassing, and she wasn't sure whether she could pull it off, but she had to try.

In Armand's grasp, Agnes sucked in a huge breath.

"Spirits! How are you doing, cuties?!"

Agnes raised her voice, making it loud and perky. She could sense Armand

turning to shoot her a disgusted look. She could see a fuzzy ball of light reflected in his gray eyes. Relief flooded over her as she realized the spirits had answered her call.

“Hey, I can’t move! I reeeeeeally need help! Can you help me, little ones?!” Agnes yelled wildly, and just then, everything grew so bright that it looked like daylight had come again.

“...Whoa!”

With Armand distracted, Agnes seized the opportunity to slide out of his grasp. She fell onto the lush grass and managed to scramble to her feet straight away, but then found herself grabbed and lifted by a pair of reaching arms.

“No! Let go of me!”

She struggled to escape in the bright light, but he held on tight.

She smelled a scent, something sweet and fruity, and Agnes stopped struggling.

“...Claude?”

He stroked her hair over and over again, in affirmation.

The light source finally decreased in intensity, and Agnes was able to see the young man with the Prussian-blue hair standing there. She had never seen him in the imposing black outfit he wore. Perhaps this was a knight’s uniform. There was none of the usual light of kindness in his gray eyes; his gaze focused squarely on Armand.

“Armand, you’re the one who kidnapped Agnes from the Watteau residence, aren’t you? Just what is it you’re trying to do?” Claude spoke politely enough, but each word was laced with anger.

Armand stared back for a moment, then, seeing that Agnes was safe in Claude’s arms, he shrugged theatrically. “I told you, it’s a lovers’ tryst. You don’t need me to spell it all out, do you?”

Apparently, he was still trying to make it seem like there was something going on between himself and Agnes.

Claude pressed a finger against Agnes’s lip as she was about to explain. “You

don't need to say it. It's all right."

She looked up at him in confusion. His gray eyes met hers, and he smiled. "It's true. I don't need him to spell it all out for me to understand that my brother is trying to do you harm, Agnes."

"What...?"

Armand narrowed his eyes as Claude turned and breathed a short, sharp sigh.

"The big white mushrooms are *Calvatia nipponica*. The ones covering your sword are *Tricholoma ustale*. The ones that have fallen on the ground are *Entoloma cyanonigrum*. ...You must have been doing something seriously bad to Agnes for mushrooms like these to sprout. At any rate, her being barefoot outdoors is suspicious enough. And if this is a lovers' tryst, then why did Agnes seek the spirits' help to get away from you?"

Agnes never imagined that mushrooms would prove her innocence. They held significance for no one other than Claude...or rather...to Claude, they were an important means of discerning the truth about a situation.

"Spirits? ...Hmph. There's no getting through to a mushroom idiot like you," Armand scoffed.

"You may be my true blood brother, but since you went after Agnes, I'll make you wish you were never born." As Claude spoke, a strong breeze got up and whirled toward Armand.

Armand threw up his arms to protect his face, but the wind attack cut his arms and legs instead. His scabbard fell from his belt, sending the mushroom-encrusted sword tumbling across the grass.

As Armand began bleeding from multiple cuts, he lowered his arms and spat. "Your magic is a serious impediment, as I thought." As he spoke, he grabbed a small bottle from his belt and shook its contents over the grass. The liquid turned to purple smoke and vanished.

Agnes gazed at it, not sure what it was, but the balls of spirit light that had been floating around suddenly vanished. Everything was in darkness once more.

"...So it seemed the spirits were real, after all," Armand said with a dry

chuckle. “This is a magic potion I found deep in the treasure vault. It nullifies the spirits in seconds.”

Armand tossed the empty bottle aside. He scooped up his sword and tried to unsheathe it, but he seemed to be struggling. Apparently, it was too slimy to handle properly. He finally gave up and tossed away the sword, scabbard and all.

“Magic works by borrowing the power of the spirits,” he said. “Now you can no longer use magic. How well can you fare against me alone, with only a sword, and with that woman as a hindrance, hmm?”

As if cued by Armand’s words, men came out of the shadows clutching swords.

Agnes was still held in Claude’s arms, so she couldn’t see very well, but there looked to be at least ten of them. If the spirits were nullified, that meant there was no hope of receiving help.

The balls of light had gone out. No doubt, Armand was telling the truth.

Compared to the assault on Philip, Agnes felt her mushrooms’ sprouting had been mild against Armand. Perhaps that, too, was due to the stuff in the bottle. The mushrooms sprouted through the divine protection of the spirits, after all. If the spirits were incapacitated, it made sense that the mushrooms had weakened as well.

This meant that she couldn’t rely on the mushrooms to help them either.

Agnes really was nothing but a hindrance.

“Claude, please leave me and flee,” she said. “Prince Armand is targeting Princess Zenaide. You must go to her and protect her.”

If the crown prince’s Dragonmate was killed, then Armand would get his way. That could not be allowed to happen.

Agnes looked up at Claude, held in his arms, desperate to be heard, but his gray eyes slid away from her.

“Be quiet, dear.”

He smiled sweetly, but his tone was as hard as iron. He held tightly to Agnes,

who was trembling from fear and confusion, and brought his lips to her peach-blossom hair.

“Armand is not like Philip. I thought he understood the significance of dragon crests and Dragonmates, but...it seems I overestimated him.” He held Agnes in his left arm, sighing.

“I understand completely,” Armand said. “A Dragonmate strengthens a man, but she is also his Achilles’ heel. The dragon crest is proof of that restricting bond.” As the men with swords drew closer around them, Armand drew a dagger from his waistband. “Being killed by common men...that is the highest shame a knight can endure. But don’t worry. It is my job as your older brother to put you out of your misery. After all, you have lost your Dragonmate, and with her, the will to live—or so the story will go.”

Claude looked at Armand, who grinned back evilly, and sighed, smiling himself.

“...You are no longer a brother of mine. You should try to understand the magnitude of your actions as a royal.” Claude let go of Agnes and removed his left glove. The crimson dragon crest was visible on the back of his hand.

“What do you hope to achieve by showing that off? You think it’ll strike fear in my heart?” Armand sneered.

“No? Even if you do back down in fear now...it’s too late. I won’t let you get away with this.” Claude pulled Agnes close with his right arm, holding his bare left hand out straight. “Dragon crest... *Lightning Bolt*.”

As Claude spoke those words, the dragon crest began to glow with light. At the same moment, a multitude of lightning bolts tore through the night sky and rained down on the ground around them.



Closing her eyes didn't help against the burning flashes, and as they made contact with the earth, the ground shook. The noise was cacophonous. Agnes thought her eardrums might burst.

The ground in front of Armand had opened up in a crevasse, and the smell of burned earth filled the air.

"...B-But how?!" Armand cried. "When you can't use magic?"

With cold disdain, Claude observed Armand, his eyes open wide, and the fear-frozen men, and scoffed a little.

"This is not the kind of magic that needs to borrow the power of the spirits. This is the power that comes with having the blood of the dragon, with being a crest-bearer. I am glad that the power of the spirits has been blocked. That leaves me as the only one with magical power here."

Claude looked around at the men, chuckling.

"If you do not wish to be burned by the bolts of the dragon, then flee. Put down your swords and go, unless death is what you seek. I will not repeat myself a second time."

He wasn't informing them so much as stating a fact. The men trembled and threw away their swords onto the grass.

"Then you leave me no choice..." Sweat beading his forehead, Armand reached into his waistband, but then an arm snaked out and grabbed him from the side.

"...Stop right there, Armand." So spoke the young man with amber hair, twisting Armand's arm up behind his back.

Claude grinned at the familiar face. "...Gerome. You took your time."

"No, you were too fast. Anyway, I couldn't get too close while those lightning bolts were flying, could I?" Gerome raised a hand, and several men, presumably knights, rushed forward. They grabbed the men who were cowering on the grass and dragged them away.

"Gerome! Brother! I'm glad you're here," Armand said. "Why not join forces with me? If it weren't for the dragon crests, the royal family would be so much

more stable. And you'd become second in line for the throne, you know?"

Gerome looked at Armand with disgust for a moment, then shrugged. "You really are an idiot. After what you've seen, don't you realize how foolish it is to make an enemy of a crest-bearer? If Claude wanted, he could sear you to a crisp where you stand."

Gerome pointed to the giant hole in the ground, which was big enough to fit them all. It was still smoking from Claude's lightning-bolt attack.

"Besides, even if all the crest-bearers disappeared...I would still outrank you, and I would be king. I have zero interest in being king, as it happens, but if someone like you, who doesn't understand the first thing about the importance of dragon crests, became king...it would lead to the degradation of the entire kingdom."

Gerome glared at Armand, who sucked in a breath.

"For the crime of breaking into the treasure vault and stealing a magical item, for the crime of targeting a crest-bearer's Dragonmate, for the crime of attempting to eradicate a crest-bearer, for the crime of interrupting *me* during my precious day off...for all this and more, I shall have you brought before Xavier and the king to confess."

As Gerome began dragging Armand away, Claude sighed and put the glove back on his left hand.

"...Waaaaaaah!"

There was a sudden scream, and they all looked up to see Philip jump from the second-floor window and plummet to the ground below.

He fell head-first, so perhaps he would die.

Agnes was just thinking how she didn't really want *that* when another large *Calvatia nipponica* sprouted. It didn't look as bouncy as the one from earlier, though, and it was also sort of brownish.

It still looks like it can serve to cushion Philip's fall, Agnes thought. Then, with a dull sound, it released a cloud of spores.

Philip crawled off the edge of the *Calvatia nipponica*, stinking from its

ammonia-laced fluids. His eyes lit up when he saw Agnes.

“Y-You sprouted a mushroom to save me!” he cried, delighted.

“No. It was just one left in the reserves. It was a complete coincidence.”

Ignoring her denial, Philip came dashing over to her.

Agnes shrank back, crept out by the things he had said and done only minutes before. Then Claude was there, pulling her protectively into his arms.

“...Philip,” Claude said, his voice dark. “You kidnapped Agnes and locked her up here, didn’t you?”

It was Armand who kidnapped Agnes, but it was true that this was Philip’s residence. Philip clearly knew he wouldn’t be able to feign innocence, but for some reason, he puffed out his chest.

“Th-That’s right. Agnes was in my room.”

“In your...room?”

Claude’s voice lowered an octave, but Philip, who didn’t notice, continued. “Right. She was sleeping...in *my* bed.”

“...I see.”

Claude’s voice was even lower this time, and even Philip noticed it now, his shoulders quivering. Agnes looked up, tentatively, and saw a shadow in Claude’s gray eyes that had never been there before.

“...Then it can’t be helped, can it?”

Now Agnes felt a chill go down *her* spine.

“W-Wait, please!”

At this rate, Claude would end up killing Philip. Agnes felt that for sure, and so she had to cry out.

“Agnes! Won’t you save me?!”

“Agnes. Will you save Philip?”

They said almost the same thing at the exact same moment, but the implications of their words were completely opposite. Agnes felt sick. She didn’t

care about Philip, but that murderous tone in Claude's voice...

"No, I won't save you. I don't give a damn about you, Philip!" Agnes bit out her denial, not sugarcoating it, and finally, Claude's murderous rage seemed to abate.

"...In that case, let us see that Philip is punished appropriately. His Majesty and Xavier won't stop me from killing him like they will Armand, so it's perfectly okay."

His criteria for what was okay...was very odd. He spoke as if he would have killed Armand, too, if his father and brother didn't intervene. Agnes felt cold sweat sliding down her back endlessly. She grabbed hold of Claude's arm as he smiled dashing and readied his sword.

"P-Please, wait! Don't dirty your sword with him, Claude! And there's no point in killing him anyway!"

"There is no point, and yet, he has sinned. He has no value."

Claude ignored Agnes's attempts to dissuade him and put his hand on his sword again. If he unsheathed that sword, it would all be over in a flash.

Agnes didn't know for sure how well each of them swung a sword, exactly. But in this world, there are things you just...felt.

"The... The *Clitocybe acromelalga*! It's already punishing him enough!"

She wasn't even sure what she was yelling, but those words were enough to stop Claude in his tracks.

"*Clitocybe acromelalga*? You made him eat some?"

"Er, no, I made it sprout in his mouth...and there was another *Podostroma cornudamae* on top of his head. And there were others, too..."

She glanced at Philip, who was covered in slime. His bald pate was covered with red pieces, probably remnants of the *Podostroma cornudamae*.

Claude looked too, and then took his hand off his sword.

"...Let me ask you one thing," he addressed Philip. "Did you put your hands on Agnes?"

It felt like the air was crackling with tension.

Philip began nodding initially. But the tension in the air seemed to suddenly register with him, and he slid his gaze away from Claude.

“...The mushrooms,” he choked out.

“Mushrooms?”

Claude and Agnes had both spoken at the same moment, until they were interrupted by Philip, desperately trying to defend himself.

“I... I tried to touch Agnes, yes, but the mushrooms started sprouting like crazy! In the end, I could touch nothing but her hair!”

When Agnes awoke, she noticed a veritable mountain of mushrooms beside Philip.

“...Ah! That mound of mushrooms! So that’s what they were doing there!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

Those were all mushrooms that had sprouted in order to protect her.

“I thought perhaps you’d awoken to the joys of mushrooms as well, Philip,” she said, dead serious.

“Me? The joys of mushrooms?! Listen here, I think mushrooms are absolute—er, absolutely not bad at all!”

Claude’s murderous glare made Philip back down meekly, mid-sentence.

Philip could never stand up to anyone stronger than him. His pathetic nature was no different today.

“...Hmm, well, I’m satisfied enough. I believe in the mushrooms.”

Claude’s first instinct had always been to judge situations based on what the mushrooms were up to. He really was a complete mushroom fetishist.

“The mushrooms have spoken, so I will let this slide. But don’t you ever come near Agnes again.”

Philip turned and dashed off in a cowardly manner. After watching him go, Claude took Agnes’s hand. Then he bowed low before her.

“...I’m so sorry.”

“Uh, er... For what?”

A lot had happened, but none of it could be considered Claude’s fault.

“I couldn’t protect you.”

“Huh? But you came to my rescue.”

“He kidnapped you even though I assigned you guards. That’s on me. Because of that, you almost became Philip’s... If it weren’t for the mushrooms, I don’t know what would have happened.”

Claude lifted his face slowly, and Agnes could see the deep frown etched there.

“What do you mean? Why would Philip lay a hand on me anyway? He always hated my hair. Oh goodness, do you think he might have tried to cut my hair off?”

It was Philip, after all, who had told her that she should hide her hair. Maybe he was escalating and had actually decided to cut it off? He had no right, since he wasn’t her fiancé or anything, but Agnes couldn’t think of anything else Philip might have wanted to do to her.

“...I thought I knew just how much he hadn’t gotten across to you, but I guess that remains true even after all this,” Claude said cryptically. “I would sympathize with him, but he doesn’t deserve sympathy...”

“What are you talking about?”

Claude smiled wryly as Agnes blinked at him in confusion, then he pulled her into his arms. “He wanted to make you his, by force if necessary. Thanks to the mushrooms, he didn’t get his chance. If he had harmed you at all... I would have torn him limb from limb.”

Agnes shivered. His tone told her he was serious.

...His.

Yes, Philip did say something like that.

His...property.

She thought that meant he wanted to make her act as his secretary, but perhaps he meant something else entirely.

“Um... He said he wanted to make me his property. What does that mean, I wonder?”

“Philip said that? Then I think he was talking in terms of making you his both mentally and physically. ...Did he say that?”

Mentally and physically...

Then Philip meant to attack her...*physically*.

She did feel a sense of danger, but thinking about it once more, Agnes couldn't believe that Philip saw her in such an...animalistic way.

“But I don't think that Philip...that he sees me in a carnal way at all. Just as a tool he can use to get ahead. In fact, what Armand said was much worse...”

“...What did Armand say to you?”

She'd dug a hole for herself now. She realized it right away, but it was too late to take it back. Fixed in his gray gaze, Agnes nervously cleared her throat.

“He... he asked if I'd be his. He said it wasn't too late to have fun with me before he killed me.”

“...That gets added to his list of crimes, then. Do you understand what he said to you?”

“Erm. Something like he wanted to...to have me as his lover and then kill me when he got bored of me.”

Claude slowly exhaled, then hugged Agnes again. “You understand that, but you weren't guarded enough around Philip. It's not trust, so what is it? ...Is he special to you in some way?”

“No, he is not.”

Philip was more like a family member. That didn't mean she had any love for him. He had always been an ally of the Leforts...until now.

“Hmm, I see. Either way, it's clear you don't see him as a virile man.”

“Uh...you might be right there.”

Philip was a frivolous royal, nothing more and nothing less. Agnes had never seen him as a real man.

“I’m adding it to his list of crimes and will see him severely punished. For now, we should get you home. Can you handle coming to the palace tomorrow? I’ll pick you up, of course.”

The royal family would surely not allow either Philip or Armand to go unpunished. Agnes would be needed as a witness.

“All right.” Agnes nodded, and Claude hugged her once more.

“...I’m so glad you are safe, my love.”

Hearing the husky, emotional tone in his voice, Agnes nuzzled her face against his chest.



Mushrooms of the Day

Calvatia nipponica

It's also known as the Giant Puffball. The name makes me imagine something really giant, but it's just a fluffy white ball-shaped mushroom.

Its dreamy white sphere is about six inches across and sprouts in one night.

When it turns brown, its skin peels off, and it releases an ammonia-like scent.

It's edible while it's still white, but rather than tasting delicious, it's rather tasteless. Why do we eat it, then?

After it cushioned Agnes's fall, it felt the disturbing atmosphere and began storing mycelium so that it could grow bigger at a moment's notice.

It didn't really care about Philip, but it knew Agnes would be upset if he got killed, so it puffed up to cushion his fall as well.

But as it was reluctant, it started to grow brown and hard, which meant it provided only the minimum amount of cushioning.

It was so reluctant, in fact, that it released a ton of ammonia and spores. A rescue retaliation mushroom.

Tricholoma ustale

A poisonous mushroom with a yellow-brown cap that gets slimy when it's damp.

The flesh has a strong smell, and it tastes somewhat bitter...why did anyone ever eat it? Well, we can't count out accidental ingestion.

It sits in one corner of the Three Miseden Ones and often confuses mushroom braves with its delicious-looking appearance.

It slimed up the sword and its scabbard to protect Agnes.

It just kept on sliming, which meant Armand couldn't unsheathe his sword, and ended up joining his slimy friends who were lying on the grass.

Entoloma cyanonigrum

A deep blue mushroom.

It doesn't seem to be poisonous, but it doesn't look very edible because of the color.

During an earlier mushroom discussion, it was decided that its color most closely resembled Claude's hair color, so it got designated the blue mushroom representative.

"Claude's here. No one is bad who wears blue!" it sprouted to shout to Agnes, but as it's a mushroom, she didn't understand.

Clitocybe acromelalga

A poisonous mushroom. Yellow, with an indented cap. It's vicious. Once it enters the body, it lays dormant for 4 to 5 days. After that, it attacks the fingers, toes, and penis of the victim and causes excruciating pain for a month or more.

Why does it target the penis? No one knows.

"I can't leave it all up to the *Podostroma cornudamae* and the *Amanita virosa*!" it bellowed, determined to join the fray.

Inside Philip's stomach, it's preparing for a month-long Penile Pain Punishment (upgraded version.) ***Podostroma cornudamae***

It looks like bright, burning red fingers reaching from the ground.

Only a few grams can be a lethal dose, and even touching it is not advised. It's a really poisonous mushroom.

It responded to the emergency signal sent out by the *Amanita cokeri* and Agnes's feelings of anger.

It planned to attack Philip's hair follicles again, but he plucked it off.

"You fool! You didn't pluck enough! Some of me still remains!" it taunted Philip, clinging to his head.

It's considering what kind of balding pattern to inflict on Philip this time around.

Mushrooms Piled High (Protect Agnes Squad) While Agnes was unconscious, these brave soldiers sprouted to keep Philip's wandering hands at bay.

Some slimy, some spiky, all colorful, they continued to guard against Philip.

"If you want to touch Agnes, you'll have to get through us!" They laughed, but as they were mushrooms, he didn't understand.

While they were having a serious discussion about how they'd most like to be cooked, Agnes and Philip disappeared.

Oh well. Now they've started debating where they're going to sprout next time.

Epilogue

THE next day, Agnes went to the palace with Claude. She was shown into the royal meeting room she'd come to last time. The table was cleared away, and now the room was empty, except for the two thrones where the king and queen sat.

The other princes and Duke Granier were also standing there, waiting for them.

Armand was there, too, being made to kneel in front of the king by Gerome, who was holding him down.

"Agnes, Claude. Come here."

Called forward by the king, they went to stand alongside Armand. Agnes felt afraid, but Claude swiftly stepped around her so that he was between her and the criminal.

"First, let us discuss Philip's foolish actions," the king began. "Even though he was manipulated by Armand, it is still a fact that he had Claude's Dragonmate brought to his chambers without her consent. I have long been toying with the idea of forcing him into knight training to knock some sense into him... Unfortunately, he is out of capacity for the moment as a result of the mushroom effects. Claude also said that the other knights would not like to have him become their problem. So, I have decided to have Philip stripped of his royal claim earlier than expected and confined to his home instead. ...Is that fine with you all?"

"I agree with your judgment, Your Majesty. But what do you mean, 'earlier than expected?'" Agnes asked.

Agnes was done with Philip and didn't care what would happen to him after this. She simply didn't know what stripping him of his royal title so early meant.

"I forced him to wed the Barthet girl, the one he caused all that fuss with and

ruined his first engagement over. He will be confined to the Barthet estate for three years. Now he is no longer a royal, which means that you, Agnes, as the fiancée of Claude, a crest-bearer, now outrank Philip in status. You no longer have to listen to a single thing that fool says.”

Marriage to Sabina was what Philip ostensibly wanted. But just when he had finally become a marquis by marriage, to be confined to quarters for three years...cast out of high society...that was quite a harsh punishment. Agnes was sure that Sabina would not enjoy that. But at any rate, that wasn't her concern anymore.

“Now then, Armand.” The king's voice made the young man with the lead-colored hair lift his head. “You don't seem to understand the significance of dragon crests. You will join the Anti-Magical Threat Force. We have been lax, since we are living in a blessed age of four crest-bearers, but it never pays to let our guard down. You will do your best, like your life depends on it, because it does.”

“But Father...!” Armand made a sudden movement, but Gerome had him by the neck and started to drag him out of the room.

“Enough from you,” Gerome said. “The knights will knock some sense into you. Incidentally, during your tenure there, you will not be considered a royal. You will be treated as a trainee knight. Give it your best effort.”

Armand was yelling something as he was dragged out, but this soon faded away. Gerome returned to the room alone.

“Now, Cesar.”

Duke Granier moved in front of Agnes, summoned forth by the king. His cheeks looked to have much more color than the last time she'd seen him. In fact, he seemed to be in robust health.

“About that medicine you gave me, Lady Agnes. What is that stuff? The very next day after I started taking it, I felt lighter than I have in years.”

Agnes was pleased that her herbs had worked, but she wasn't sure how to answer. She looked to Claude for help, and he smiled and nodded at her.

“Um...they were herbs that grew with the blessing of the divine spirits.”

At the mention of spirits, even the king looked quizzical.

“Agnes. You said your birth father was from Oreille, right?”

“Yes. Because of that, I’ve been able to call on the spirits ever since I was little. The herbs I made the pills from grew because I asked the spirits to sprout them.”

The king nodded, as if something were falling into place for him. He exchanged glances with the duke.

“A dragon crest-bearer who does not meet his Dragonmate by the time he reaches adulthood will gradually sicken and grow weak. Cesar, too, was in bad shape. So, I believe this miracle is due to the spirits, of which we Visages know very little. If you wouldn’t mind, would you be willing to continue to supply these blessed herbs?”

How could Agnes say no to a request from the king himself? But the way he had phrased it, as a request for a favor, meant he was taking into account the burden this might place on Agnes.

“Of course. I am delighted to be of assistance.” Agnes smiled, and just then a mushroom popped up on Duke Granier’s arm. It had multiple spatula-shaped caps in yellowish brown, a *Polyporus umbellatus*. “I’m... I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it. That looks most delicious.” Duke Granier chuckled and plucked the mushroom.

Claude was staring at the duke with an envious look in his eyes. Or was she imagining it? She hoped she was.

Claude gets plenty of mushrooms on a daily basis. How could he be hankering for even more?

Next, Prince Xavier turned to address Agnes. “I arranged the tea party at the Watteau residence on Zenaide’s request, but because of that, you were kidnapped. Please allow me to apologize for this on Zenaide’s behalf. Never could I have imagined one of my own brothers would be a snake in the grass. But I can make no excuses for my lack of foresight. Please accept my apology.”

The prince lowered his head before Agnes, who flapped her hand and shook

her head in a panic. She knew she was acting theatrically, but to have the crown prince himself lower his head before her was unthinkable!

“No, no. Lady Zenaide has been so very kind. I’m so grateful to her. Please, it was neither her fault nor yours, Your Highness.”

“You are so kind to say so, but I cannot just act like none of this happened. From now on, you should be accompanied by guards at all times.”

“I agree, Xavier,” Claude said. “That is my intention as well.”

Agnes looked at Claude in surprise. But Xavier and the other royals were all nodding. She felt this was being too dramatic, but then again, she had just been kidnapped.

The king smiled wryly as he saw how flustered Agnes was. “Agnes. You are not officially engaged yet, but we royals all see you as Claude’s fiancée. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“As we’ve discussed, a crest-bearer who does not find his Dragonmate by adulthood will gradually weaken. Again, he will weaken if he loses his Dragonmate. But in that scenario, the decline is rapid and drastic.”

She’d heard this from Armand, but hearing it from the king himself made it sound more frightening.

Really, having a Dragonmate seems like more of a liability than anything.

“Having knowledge of that, one fool among us tried to use it to his advantage. But the danger does not exist only on this occasion. Others may appear and attempt to harm Claude by harming you. Your life is not yours alone anymore. It’s important that you understand this fully.”

“...I understand, Your Majesty.”

If Agnes was killed, Claude would rapidly sicken. Claude’s personal safety was intrinsically intertwined with Agnes’s.

“Please take care of our Claude, Agnes.”

Fixed in the king’s gray gaze, Agnes slowly bowed.



ONCE they were done talking with the king, Claude brought Agnes out to the royal garden. This was the place where she first realized her true feelings for Claude.

They sat on the bench in the gazebo, and Agnes could recall it like it was yesterday.

“That dress is very pretty, isn’t it? I knew flowers would suit you, Agnes.” Claude smiled at her, and Agnes looked down at the dress she was wearing.

It was light green, with an adorable flouncy silhouette constructed from layers of gauzy, gossamer-thin fabric. The bodice and skirt were scattered with embroidered white flowers, calling to mind a flower meadow. However, the shoulders and back showed a little skin in a sophisticated cut. Agnes found this most embarrassing, of course, but it was an undeniably lovely dress.

Being summoned to the palace and surrounded by royals, she was too nervous to be embarrassed. But this dress was certainly designed to catch the eye. She also wore pink and white flower accessories throughout her hair, which she felt was a bit too much.

Claude, however, wore a deep gray suit with navy-blue pinstripes, looking as handsome as ever. Agnes was trying to ignore the sprig of whimsical pink and white flowers he wore in his chest pocket.

“Thank you. But, it’s a little bit...”

“Yes. I know. It could have done with being a bit brighter. But you’re so lovely, Agnes, you’d suit any dress.”

His full smile was dazzling, and she could make no protest. If she did, he would probably have something even cuter made up for her at the tailor’s.

Agnes felt a complex mix of happiness and consternation. She sighed a little, internally.

“So, are you feeling all right?” She nodded for the hundredth time that day, and Claude looked relieved. “Please allow me to apologize again for getting you caught up in my brotherly troubles. I’ve never known my brother that well, but I

had no idea he was dreaming up such evil schemes.”

Claude had said there had always been distance between them. He had never pushed the issue but had always thought of Armand fondly. Claude must have been shocked to find out that his older brother was planning to murder his Dragonmate and weaken him to the point of being able to easily murder him as well.

“Xavier and Gerome often had conflicting opinions, but it seems that was a calculated act. In the past, there have been aristocrats who have questioned the line of succession, not understanding dragon crests. To nip any dissension in the bud, Gerome, who is the child of a concubine and lower in the succession order, has been pretending to resent this, to see who might agree with him and keep tabs on them.”

Indeed, if you didn’t know about the dragon crests, the royal line of succession didn’t really make any sense. It wouldn’t be unusual for dissenters to arise in opposition to it.

“We knew a magical artifact had been stolen from the royal vault, and while investigating, we discovered that the culprit was Armand. That was how we were able to track him, and thus, you, when you were kidnapped.”

“Oh, by the way, what happened to Maurice? He was waiting for me by the entrance, but it was totally my fault. When I was leaving the garden, a servant showed me to another exit. It wasn’t Maurice’s fault at all.”

Claude shook his head at this. “Maurice was tasked with protecting you on my order. Even if you did order him to wait by the entrance, he never should have risked your safety. That was a grave mistake on his part.”

“But...”

Although it wasn’t public knowledge, Agnes was Claude’s Dragonmate. What punishment would be brought down on Maurice for failing to protect her?

“But I hold the blame as well,” Claude continued. “I cannot push it all on Maurice. I should have accompanied you to the tea party. I, too, am equally culpable. Maurice’s punishment is to have no days off for three months.”

“That’s... That’s a relief...”

Claude grinned impishly, and Agnes sighed.

Thinking about it, no days off for three months for a knight...that was pretty terrible. But at least Maurice wouldn't be facing an even worse punishment.

"Still, I never thought Armand would be so stupid as to act like that. Philip's a huge idiot as well, but he doesn't know about the dragon crests." Claude sighed a little, covering Agnes's hand with his. "You said you weren't harmed, but are you sure you're all right? They didn't do anything to you?"

"Anything like what?"

Agnes thought they were done with this discussion, but apparently Claude wasn't.

"Did he touch your hand?"

"Yes. More like he grabbed it." Agnes nodded, and Claude stroked her hand softly.

"Your hair?"

"Yes, he touched it apparently."

Agnes couldn't recall this, but Philip had admitted as much.

Now Claude was stroking her hair.

"Then...?"

"Erm, he pulled me close, by my cheek."

Claude, still seated, pulled Agnes close and cupped her cheek.

"Then? He didn't touch these, did he?"

Claude's thumb gently stroked Agnes's lower lip.

"N-No, he didn't!"

Agnes shook her head, flustered, and Claude grinned wryly.

"Anything else?"

"No...the mushrooms protected me."

"I see. The mushrooms saved you, then."

Just then, a mushroom sprouted on Claude's arm with a pop. It was shaped like a snail...a *Cryptoporus volvatus*. The bottom part was cream-colored, and the top part was a glossy brown, like caramel sauce. It looked particularly glossy today...or was it her imagination?

"Thank you. You're our saviors...our little mushroom knights. Thank you for saving Agnes." Claude let go of Agnes and plucked the mushroom, stroking it softly as he thanked it.

He must have looked like an absolute freak, should someone have been passing by. But Agnes knew he was just a mushroom aficionado.

"I am so sorry I couldn't protect you on this occasion." Putting the mushroom in his pocket, Claude bowed his head to her.

"You've apologized enough," Agnes told him again. "It wasn't your fault, Claude. Besides, you came to my rescue."

"I have the blood of the dragon, and you are my Dragonmate. But those are my circumstances to bear, not yours. I didn't want to rush you—I was afraid I would lose you if I did..."

Claude got to his feet, then knelt down in front of Agnes. He held out his hand to her. In it was a ring box.

"Agnes Lefort. You are my soulmate, my Dragonmate. Please, marry me."

Agnes froze, locked in his gray gaze. As if to speak for her, there came a loud popping of multiple mushrooms sprouting. One had a dark gray cap with brown warts, an *Amanita spissacea*. Another had milk white small caps, a *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, and yet another had half-circle-shaped scarlet caps, a *Pycnoporus coccineus*.

Agnes could only assume that they had sprouted in response to Claude's proposal. Her mushroom sensitivities had really gone into overdrive. And yet, they had sprouted on the bench and not on Claude, as if they were being respectful of the importance of the situation.

Can they really understand human conversation? Agnes allowed herself to be distracted by the mushrooms, but then Claude gripped her hands.

“As I said when we met... My feelings haven’t changed.”

“...Ah, for the *Amanita muscaria*, right?” Agnes retorted.

The mushroom Claude had fallen head over heels for. Ever since then, he had been an unwavering mushroom fetishist.

“Yes. That mushroom was splendid indeed...but even without mushrooms, I’d still want you, Agnes. If you don’t particularly dislike me, I’d be delighted if you’d consider my proposal.”

She had already been introduced to the royal family as his Dragonmate, and they all saw her as his fiancée already. This earnest proposal was clearly Claude trying to do things by the book. Filled with happiness, Agnes looked down at Claude’s hand. There was a mushroom on the engagement ring.

“...Claude. That ring looks like a mushroom.”

“It is a mushroom. I had it designed to look like an *Amanita muscaria*, the very one that foretold our fateful union.”

“...So, you’re proposing...to the *Amanita muscaria*?”

“Goodness, no. To you. The mushrooms are more like a dessert course.”

So...he intended to eat it?

Amanita muscaria is poisonous. Will he survive...?

“The thing about crest-bearers weakening if they don’t meet their Dragonmate by adulthood, and about them sickening if they lose their Dragonmate... I planned to tell you all that later,” he said. “I didn’t want you to feel pressured into feeling like you had to accept my proposal if you didn’t truly love me.”

Agnes tried to immediately protest, saying she did love him, but Claude shook his head.

“You think too little of yourself, Agnes. That is all Philip’s fault, but I do think you’re healing little by little. If you knew I would weaken, you might feel obligated into marriage. You would not be truly happy in that case. I wanted you to think this proposal over for yourself, to choose what you truly want. I understand it might be a little late for me to be saying all this, though...”

Claude smiled wryly and lifted Agnes's hand with his free hand, the one not holding the ring, so he could press a kiss to it.

"You don't have to respond right away. Think it over. You are the only one for me, Agnes, so I'll wait as long as it takes."

He smiled kindly, and Agnes felt emotion bubbling up inside her chest. She felt completely on edge but also supremely comfortable. Since she met Claude, this kind of thing has been happening all the time.

Agnes picked up the ring and looked closely at it. It was a silver ring that was shaped like a mushroom. The spots on the mushroom cap were glittering blue and pink gems.

"There are gems on the mushroom cap."

"Yes. I had it made to resemble those brooches we bought in town. In our colors."

A prince's engagement ring, made to look like the brooches they bought in town?

Made to look like mushroom brooches... She supposed it couldn't be helped. He was a mushroom fetishist, after all.

Thinking of it that way...it seemed kind of fun.

"You wear it on the third finger of the left hand, right?" Agnes asked.

"Huh? Oh, yes. Hold on. I'll put it on for you." Claude slid the ring onto her ring finger, where it sparkled.

"It really is a mushroom. I've never seen a mushroom ring before."

Claude blinked as Agnes giggled, then he chuckled as well.

"Claude, are you sure I'm the one you want?"

"Agnes. You are the only one I could ever want."

"I'm a lot to handle. I make mushrooms sprout absolutely everywhere."

"That's fine. That's *good*. You're perfect the way you are, Agnes." Claude's eyes were so wide and insistent, it was almost comical.

“I find it hard to be confident in myself. But even if I don’t believe in myself, I believe in you, Claude. If you say I’m perfect the way I am, then I’ll believe it.”

Claude had said she should only choose to believe the words of those who sought to lift her up.

She would begin with Claude. He would never call her a burden or say he didn’t want her. She could believe that.

“...Will you marry me?” He was still kneeling, still gazing at her with those gray eyes. Agnes smiled and nodded.

“Yes. Yes, please.”

“...Agnes!”

Claude leaped to his feet and threw his arms wide to embrace her.

But then the familiar “pop, pop, pop” of the mushrooms filled the air.

Suddenly, the space between them was filled with mushrooms. She moved slowly away from Claude, who had mushrooms sprouting from his chest.

One was a Koganetake covered with golden dust. Another was a yellowish-brown *Gymnopilus junonius*. Another was a black, brush-shaped *Xylaria polymorpha*, and there was also a *Calostoma japonica* with its yellow round body and red star shape on the top. They were all colors, and it was hard to identify them, but Agnes snorted with laughter.

“Are they sprouting because you’re happy? Or are they trying to stop me from touching you?”

The fact that mushrooms sprouted surely meant she was happy, but Claude looked doubtful as he tried to puzzle out their meaning.

“Who knows? But I love you, Claude. And I think the mushrooms love you, too.”

Then another mushroom popped up on Claude’s shoulder. Red cap, white spots. An *Amanita muscaria*.

Covered in mushrooms, Claude stroked the *Amanita muscaria*, smiling. “I see. That’s perfect. I love the mushrooms as well. And I love you most of all, Agnes.”

Ignoring the mushrooms, he pulled Agnes into his arms and softly stroked her hair. As he gazed into her eyes with his gray ones, she felt embarrassed. But at the same time, she was happier than she'd ever felt.

“I love you, Agnes. My Mushroom Princess.”

Then, with a smile, Claude gently pressed his lips against hers.





Mushrooms of the Day *Polyporus umbellatus* A mushroom with multiple small spatula-shaped caps in a light yellow-brown color.

It has a subterranean sclerotia, and it can make an herbal medicine called Choreito.

The mushroom part is edible and supposed to be quite tasty.

When it heard about Duke Granier's condition, it sprouted proudly to say, "I work as a diuretic and antipyretic!"

Apparently, those weren't the desired medicinal effects, so it was a touch disappointed, but it was cheered up over being called "delicious-looking" and shook its cap bashfully.

Cryptoporus volvatus It grows on tree trunks and looks like a snail. The bottom part is cream-colored, and the top part is a glossy brown.

It looks like a chestnut stuck in the tree bark.

The name makes it sound yummy, and it definitely looks yummy, but apparently it doesn't taste good.

It sprouted thinking this was its chance to get praised by Claude. A shrewd mushroom.

As a representative of the mushrooms that protected Agnes, it was happy to have its shiny part stroked by Claude.

Amanita spissacea A mushroom with a dark gray cap and dark brown warts, resembling leopard print.

It wears leopard print like old ladies who love gossip and has a personality to match.

"The young mushrooms these days have lost their way," is her favorite catchphrase, and she's obsessed with Agnes's love life.

"Our Agnes has just been proposed to!" She's as happy as if Agnes were her own daughter.

She was so happy, in fact, that she decided to start gathering bridal

mushrooms immediately.

Cuphophyllus virgineus Milk-white caps. A small and cute mushroom.

It blooms when it senses an innocent young woman and loves to peek at romantic scenes.

“The proposal has come!” it squealed, bringing the *Pycnoporus coccineus* with it.

It got so excited that it ended up sprouting too much of itself.

Pycnoporus coccineus Half-circle-shaped, *Polyporaceae*-like mushroom.

Member of the Wood Deterioration Club.

Its role is to put the brakes on the over-excitables *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, but it rarely has any effect.

Today it sprouted hoping to do its best against the *Cuphophyllus virgineus*.

With the *Cuphophyllus virgineus*, it shook its cap in joy.

Koganetake

A mushroom with a cap covered in golden powder, also known as kinako take in Japanese. It's covered in plenty of powder, like kinako powder.

It's edible, but eating it raw will cause poisoning, so please boil it first.

How do the mushroom braves know to do that?

When it saw the successful proposal, it shook its cap to say, "Gold is needed for celebratory occasions!" Squished against Claude, gold powder went everywhere.

Gymnopilus juunonius Yellowish-brown. Looks kind of like the Japanese *Shimeji*.

It contains a poison that acts on the nervous system and can cause mental overstimulation and hallucinations. The Japanese name translates to "Big Laugh Mushroom," but I'm not sure what's so funny about that.

A lively member of the mushroom world, it uses its special skill to grow all over the place.

"A proposal! A proposal!" it yelped in joy.

Sandwiched between Agnes and Claude, it just couldn't stop sprouting.

Xylaria polymorpha A black mushroom that grows in dirt. The Japanese name for it, Mamezayatake, includes the word "bean" but it's not suitable for consumption.

It is black outside but white inside, and hollow.

The flesh is quite firm but crumbles surprisingly easily.

Its body crumbled happily between Agnes and Claude.

What a nice way to go.

Calostoma japonica The cap part is a yellowish sphere with a red star-shaped growth on top.

It looks like a Takoyaki deep-fried octopus ball with a hole in the top, stuffed with red beni-shoga pickled ginger.

The Japanese name includes the word “lipstick,” and it does look like lipstick!

One day they would kiss for real, and the *Calostoma japonica* was thinking of sprouting two of itself to recreate it in mushroom form.

When that day finally came, it happily sprouted two of itself in the perfect recreation kiss.

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 sprouted, shouting, “We mushrooms love Claude as well. And we REALLY love you, Agnes!”

Short Story: My Heart, Colored by the Dragonmate

“**YES**, yes. You look adorable again today.”

When they arrived at the palace, where the ball was being held, Claude looked at Agnes again and smiled. Her dress had skirts done in yellow material, and the bustier had blue lace on it, giving it a very sophisticated look. There was a long ribbon in the same blue color wrapped around her waist, and the skirt and hem were covered in the same lace as the bustier.

Her gloves were made with blue lace, and a necklace of citrine stones sparkled around her neck. In her hair, she wore a large hair accessory made of a flower and dark blue lace. The overall effect, with the contrast between yellow and blue, was quite beautiful, and the blue flowers in her peach blossom hair looked like they were blooming.

She was accessorized in blue from head to toe—Claude’s color. To rephrase, she was wrapped in Claude from head to toe.

“I can’t tell everyone that you’re my Dragonmate. This is about all I can do, you know?”

As if to punctuate what he was saying, a mushroom sprouted on Claude’s arm. It was a *Calvatia nipponica*, with a dark blue cap. Claude plucked the mushroom, beaming at Agnes.



AGNES was...so lovely.

She had a beautiful face, eyes that sparkled like greenish-blue jewels, and her peach blossom hair made her look like a sprite that had jumped out of the pages of a storybook. Knowing she was his Dragonmate may have colored his opinion of her a little, but there was no denying she was a beauty.

When they arrived at the ballroom, all eyes turned to Agnes.

Claude felt conflicted. He wanted to show her off. But he also wanted to hide

her. But Agnes seemed oblivious to the looks all around.

Her opinion of herself was low, thanks to the gaslighting from her ex, Philip. She was even skittish around Claude, no doubt due to her public dumping, but recently, signs of positive change had been seen.

Philip's brainwashing was deep-seated, but Claude was pleased that her heart had recently begun to open up.

Seeing the buds of love blossoming in her eyes as she looked at him...that made his heart grow warm. It filled him with a feeling of deep happiness that he had never known.



"AGNES! ...Armand, what happened?"

When Claude returned from his business with the king, Agnes was being pulled along by Armand. Something must have happened. Agnes had a miserable look on her face, which made Claude's heart pound with anxiety.

"She was waylaid by Philip."

"...Philip. So he's here?"

Claude's gray eyes flashed when he heard this.

Philip was a danger. He seemed determined to hound Agnes even after he had been the one to publicly reject her.

"If she's that important to you, don't take your eyes off her. Otherwise...you might lose her."

"...I'll be careful. Thank you."

Claude thanked Armand, who walked off, hand casually raised. Then he quickly turned to Agnes.

Agnes hung her head, saying she would go home. Her usually sparkling greenish-blue eyes looked about to well with tears. Claude took her hand in alarm.

"Wait...what happened?"

"Nothing... It was all my fault. I'll be more careful. Excuse me."

Agnes, her head still hanging, tried to shake off Claude's hand.

He heard a pop and sensed mushrooms sprouting on his shoulders, but now wasn't the time. Claude sighed, then picked Agnes up in his arms.

"Don't try to force yourself. If you're leaving, I will take you home."

Ignoring the eyes all around, he left the ballroom and went out into the hallway with her in his arms. He was filled with rage and couldn't stop his feet from marching.

"...Tsk. Just when I thought the effects had been wearing off, he got into your head again. I can't let this slide."

He knew the anger was seeping into his voice from the way Agnes trembled in his arms. He felt sorry to have frightened her, but he was just so angry.

If he spoke indelicately to Agnes right now, he really would end up scaring her. He hurried to the carriage, not even checking out the mushrooms on his shoulders, and sat Agnes down on the seat.

...He was at his limit.

Claude pulled Agnes into his arms, knowing he had to calm his burning anger. Holding Agnes's delicate form always seemed to bring his heart a deep sense of happiness. But right now, it was all he could do to keep his bubbling emotions in check.

"Um... Er, Claude?"

"...Be silent a moment."

Regrettably, he could not speak at present.

Philip was Agnes's ex-fiancé. Claude knew he had never touched her, except to escort her to balls, but he was wracked with jealousy all the same.

Philip had wasted his years with Agnes complaining about her hair. He had poured his negative influence all over her. It was practically brainwashing. Because of him, Agnes didn't think highly of herself.

Doing the normal things young ladies like to do...Agnes considered this a radical act.

Claude couldn't let Philip get away with what he had done, and at the same time, he was frustrated that he himself had not met her sooner. But he could never put those feelings on Agnes. They were Claude's selfish emotions, and he would not worry his beloved with them.

He tightened his arms around Agnes.

She was his soulmate. The One.

As if to prove it, he could almost see some sort of force pass into him from Agnes where he touched her.

They said that his world would change once he found his Dragonmate, and that was true. After allowing enough of the warm force to flow into him, Claude slowly let out a big breath.

"...All right. I feel calmer now."

He loosened his arms around Agnes, then took her hands and held them tight. Just touching her soothed him so much; it was amazing.

"So, what happened? Tell me."

He spoke again, calmer now, and Agnes finally looked up and met his gaze. Her green-blue eyes sparkled, and Claude slowly narrowed his.

According to Agnes, Philip had lost part of his hair and was experiencing pain in his extremities. Apparently, he had approached her to find out if she was engaged to Claude and to order her to be his assistant once more.

Apparently, Gerome said to her, *"Get on with it and get married. Stop gadding about being boyfriend and girlfriend. Be more aware of your situation."* And Armand said, *"You need to be more guarded..."*

"I've caused nothing but trouble to you and everyone. I feel so terrible."

"So that's why, huh." Claude sighed, reaching out to hug Agnes.

His brothers were worried about Claude's health, no doubt. They had seen what had happened to Uncle Cesar and couldn't stand watching Claude remain unengaged even after he had met his Dragonmate.

The fact they spoke to Agnes, not Claude, showed they understood the

situation and wanted him to get engaged as soon as possible. They were taking it out on Agnes, Claude's Dragonmate.

...Philip, now, he didn't matter at all.

Claude nodded, understanding the situation now, and laid his hand over Agnes's.

"You must tell me everything, Agnes. Whenever anything bad happens, anything that upsets you. I may not be able to fix everything, but you'll feel better just getting it off your chest."

He stroked her hand as he spoke, wishing she would place all her burdens on him. He wanted her to come to him first. He wanted to be that kind of man for her.

But it didn't seem that Agnes wanted that. He felt a little sad, but at the same time, he loved how considerate she was of him.

"Come on, don't make that face. Whenever you want to cry, come and lean on my chest. Just don't suffer alone."

"...Okay."



AGNES relaxed in Claude's arms, letting him hold her.

That was proof that she trusted him.

Looking away, avoiding his gaze, saying she was in the wrong and would leave—all that was done, and now she was opening up to him.

To think that just a gaze and a few words could elicit such emotion.

He could never have imagined it before meeting her, but now, being with her felt so right. There was a pop, and a gray-capped mushroom popped up on his arm.

"Ah, *Coprinopsis atramentaria*. This mushroom's cap melts down after just one night. Looks like I'll be staying up all night with this one, then."

Claude plucked the mushroom and grinned. Agnes was still feeling a little flustered. Or was it his imagination? He wanted to melt Agnes's heart always,

like this *Coprinopsis atramentaria*.

You are not a burden. I need you. I understand you.

You can tell me anything. There is no need to hold back.

Zenaide, the crown prince's Dragonmate, said that the love of a Dragonmate is intense.

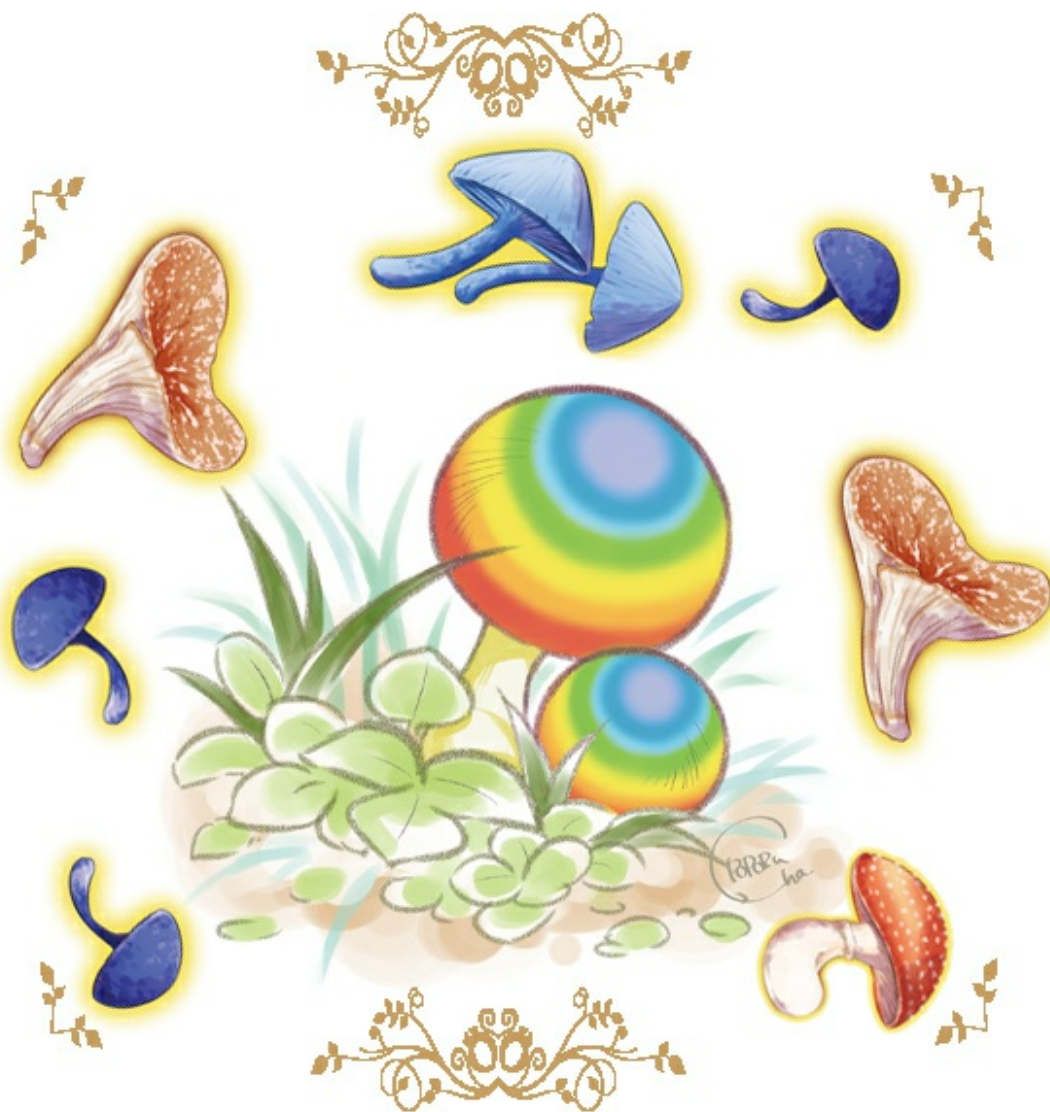
Well, that was reasonable enough.

The world changes once you meet your Dragonmate.

Those words...were so right.

Claude's world had already begun to change...to be colored brightly.

By Agnes.



OMAKE

SPECIAL MUSHROOM OF THE DAY

POPOTAKE

An adorable mushroom with a perfectly round cap. It's a colorful mushroom that allows you to enjoy rainbow-colored gradations from red to purple from the edge of the cap to the center. This mushroom also changes color depending on the season by reading the changes in the air. It's far too gorgeous to eat and eating it will cause stomachaches! Not even beauty will stop those brave mushroom connoisseurs it seems...

***Note: This mushroom was made in honor of the series' illustrator, poporucha!**

Afterword

HELLO, I'm Hanami Nishine.

I'm so happy to be able to bring you the second volume of *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess!* The mushrooms are sending a great deal of spores flying in the air from Japan, caps waving, I expect.

The protagonist, Agnes, endured a loveless marriage to the royal Philip for many years. Due to his disparagement of her peach blossom hair and the divine protection of the spirits she possesses, her self-esteem has tanked.

When Philip cruelly cuts off their engagement, it's Prince Claude who comes to her rescue. She may be the owner of an ability that can prove most troublesome—making mushrooms sprout willy-nilly—but her beau is actually an extreme mushroom fetishist whose eyes sparkle at the sight of his beloved shrooms. He loves harvesting them, and he even wears mushroom cologne!

And so, in his eyes, Agnes's mushroom ability is a real bonus. Now the two have realized their feelings for each other, but Agnes's low self-esteem is keeping their romance from progressing.

"...All right, then. I think I'll have to spoil you, after all, Agnes."

And so, Claude embarks on a rehabilitation program of sorts.

Battling years of brainwashing from Philip, Agnes slowly regains her sense of self. Little by little, she begins to close the distance between herself and Claude, but it's at this point that Agnes will come to know what it truly means to be the Dragonmate of a man like Claude, who has the blood of a dragon running through his veins...

In this second volume, each chapter ends again with the Mushrooms of the Day section. The mushrooms can't speak, but they truly adore Agnes, so as you can expect, they've been busy in this volume as well! They're determined to do their best to protect their precious Mushroom Princess.

I really enjoy learning about mushrooms, and I definitely recommend looking them up for yourself! If you find out about any interesting mushrooms, be sure to let me know!

Finally...

To Cross Infinite World, who provided the opportunity for me to publish the English version and the second volume as well.

To all of you readers who have read this far and given me your support.

To everyone involved in the publishing of this book, including the proofreader, designer, and illustrator.

To my family and cats, who support my writing.

It is thanks to you all that I have been able to release the second volume of *The Dragon's Soulmate is a Mushroom Princess!*

I am grateful to you all from the bottom of my heart.

Well then, I hope to meet you all again.

—Hanami Nishine



THE PRINCESS' SMILE

STORY BY: YUURI SEO
ILLUSTRATION BY: M/G
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Sara enters a political marriage with the reclusive prince of a neighboring country, but as the princess' body-double?! And this prince just so happens to have a wolfish secret, too!

**SINCE I WAS ABANDONED
AFTER REINCARNATING, I WILL
COOK WITH MY FLUFFY FRIENDS**

STORY BY: YU SAKURAI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KASUMI NAGI
SERIES / VOL 1 - 4 OUT NOW

After being dumped by her fiancé and expelled from the kingdom, Laetitia decides to live her life in leisure, cooking for cute and fluffy mythical creatures!



I'D RATHER HAVE A CAT THAN A HAREM! VOLUME 1

STORY BY: KOSUZU KOBATO
ILLUSTRATION BY: HINANO CHANO
SERIES / VOL 1 - 2 OUT NOW

Cats are better than harems! Amy has reincarnated into an otome game world as a villainess, but she's more interested in cats than boys!





cross infinite world



THE DRAB PRINCESS, THE BLACK CAT, AND THE SATISFYING BREAK-UP

STORY BY: RINO MAYUMI
ILLUSTRATION BY: MACHI
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Seren attempts to break off her royal engagement with the help of a black cat familiar—who might actually be a tsundere archmage?!

SURVIVING IN ANOTHER WORLD AS A VILLAINESS FOX GIRL!

STORY BY: RIIA AI
ILLUSTRATION BY: MUCHA
SERIES / AVAILABLE NOW!

Can two reincarnates set aside their differences to save the fox girl twin villainesses in this romantic comedy?!



THE STRONGEST KNIGHT IS ACTUALLY A CROSS- DRESSING NOBLEWOMAN?!

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: HAKUSEKI
STANDALONE / AVAILABLE NOW!

Bernstein slays monsters and hearts alike at her all-boys military academy, but what will her friends think when they discover that the strongest knight is actually a woman?!



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