

The Misbegotten Mycelium

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Abstract

Below is a creative writing assignment which was my final for one of my courses in Creative Writing. My name is Cameron Bolen and I've been going to Embry Riddle Aeronautical University for closing on 6 or 7 years now, on the last few classes before I finish my bachelor's degree in Homeland Security. I've always been a big fan of different fantasy stories like Lord of the rings by J.R.R Tolkien, The Wheel of Time by Robert Jordan, and roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons. So, without further Ado, my fantasy tale of The Misbegotten Mycelium, a simple Ode to Fantasy as a genre.

The Misbegotten Mycelium

A fist fight erupted the far end of the tavern like two men arguing in a library, grunts and thumping of flesh on flesh to the shouting and cheering of onlookers. A barrel breasted barkeep by the name of Hector eyed the duo appraisingly from behind a heavy oak tabletop, fingers drumming in tune with the slightly off key singing of a local musician who took center stage of the Tavern, struggling to bellow over the ruckus. Pipe smoke left the room in partial obscurity, leaving a haze of privacy amongst the patrons of The Goat & Moon.

However, there was blood in the air. The musician ceased, finally, in his attempt to perform while being interrupted by the shouting of obscenities and the two wrestling men. The bard gave a pleading look to the Tavernkeeper, which prompted him to tap the countertop with two sausage shaped fingers in front of a patron who seemed to be resting his eyes on the countertop.

Claude's eyes fluttered open and stung with the ever-present smog of the drinking room, two hazel eyes peered up to the intrusive pounding of Hector. The well-aged barkeep set an overfilled mug on the table before him and nodded off to the edge of the room where the fight had become a disturbance. Claude's tired eyes appraised the drink for a moment as if to place it on a scale, then reluctantly nodded and ended the wordless contract for his services by standing unsteadily from his perch.

His heavy boots were a disturbance of their own as he made his way through the crowded tavern, chairs scraped and patrons hold their breath at his passing. Many knew Claude by reputation, but those who frequented The Goat & Moon knew him by his nightly performance as

a bouncer for the quaint tavern as well. Busy nights like this, he could drink his fill for nothing but a pair of bruised knuckles.

The two disgruntled guests untangled themselves on his approach, trading suspicious looks at each other before changing their focus towards the hulking figure approaching them. Claude gave them little time to call a truce as one of his heavy fists collided with the closest of the duo, sending him sprawling with his limbs limply coiled about him like the corpse of a spider.

Before Claude could turn, he heard scraping of steel against leather beneath the hollers of the crowd, a blade clearing its sheath. Reaching for the nearest chair, he swung the furniture in a brutal arc. With a satisfying crack, the second man crumpled with the remains of the chair and a naked knife beside the rubble.

There was a satisfied grunt from Hector as Claude took his perch once more, reaching for his prize only to find a hand over the top of his mug. “You’re not done yet lad, ‘Your’ trouble just stepped in.” The gravel tone held a hair of amusement as he motioned with his balding head towards the door, where a short figure swept inside the Tavern behind another patron. Claude’s heavy-lidded eyes were still sharper than most, catching the subtle movements of the strangers’ hands darting between the belts and vests of patrons otherwise distracted with their festivities.

“Not a very good hand, is it?” came a feminine voice from behind the drawn hood of the stranger as they leaned over the shoulder of a patron playing cards at one of the larger tables. The dealer flipped another card in the center of the table and a coo came from the cowled figure. “But that changes things doesn’t it?” they asked and yelped as what felt like a steel manacle closed around their wrist, causing them to drop a half-drawn coin back into the card player’s purse.

“Serene... What did I tell you about working the room?” Claude asked in a low tone, hoisting the woman away from the card table as her hood fell from the motion. She was fair haired, clean faced, and altogether too pleasing about her rounded face to be found in the sort of tavern the two walked across. “That long as I don’t get caught it’s not a crime?” she pleaded with a grin, trying to weasel her arm from his grip as she was led towards the bar.

Claude grunted with effort as he forced her wrist onto the countertop before Hector, who waited with a glowering stare and a hand outstretched palm up beside hers. Claude couldn’t help but smile as he reached down with his free hand, trying to hide the effort he was using to keep her squirming arm in place on the table. “Shame you were caught then, isn’t it?” he mused before bringing the mug to his lip.

The much shorter rogue eyed Claude for a moment with disdain before reaching into one of her many pockets to place a few coins in Hector’s waiting palm. After an approving nod, the Barkeep cleared his throat, and her arm was set free. “You know Serene, you won’t be getting much work if folk see Claude catchin’ you like a babe stealing mother’s sweet rolls.” His voice was both scolding and a teasing jab at once as she rose rubbing her wrist to the provocation. “He didn’t see me take anything! You just told him to grab me and got lucky!”

The two eyed each other for a moment before looking to Claude for an answer. The tall man let out a groan as he felt their gaze and ran a hand thoughtfully through his salt and pepper hair. “Eight coins... The man in the red, green vest, feather cap... And three of mine,” he mused after his other hand searched his own pocket to find it light. It was the two men’s turn to eye down at the girl before reluctantly three coins were placed before Claude. “Almost had you that time... easiest mark in here.” Claude reached to take the coin, however Hector had beat him to it and already had begun tucking the coin into his apron. “For future expenses,” Hector said

simply, and Claude held his protests as the door to the tavern opened to cheers and shouts. Claude and Serene both seemed to deflate slightly as a flamboyant man stepped inside, the draw of both their ire for wholly separate reasons.

The newcomer wore bright violet and crimson motley with large shoulders and a codpiece the size of a fist. Serene was the first to whisper his name - "Richard..." - with a distaste that sounded as though even the word was sour tasting. A rival thief who rather than steal behind your back is more likely to rob you face to face with a smile. Richard's searching eyes found Serene, and a contempt filled smile stretched across his face. "Serene! If it isn't the little footpad who could! Fetch a few coppers from the peasants, have you? Wonder you could afford such an extravagant cloak such as that!" She reflectively pulled her cloak back behind her as if to shield it from his view. Claude knew it was much more practical in its dark dyed rugged knit than the finer Richard was sporting, but it drew a room of laughter all the while. It wasn't hard to appease the drunkards this late into the evening.

Serene could feel blood pumping to her face as she attempted to keep her cool, leaning back against the tavern to shout back, "Better in black than dressed like a Jester's whore!" She grinned as a chorus of amusement filled the room at the two's battle of wits. Her grin however was short lived as Richard drew closer, "Whoring will be the only work left to you now that I'm in town, who would want to hire second best?"

Claude resisted his urge to come to her aid, but he knew she would resent him for fighting her battle for her. Serene was red faced now, a mixture of rage and embarrassment as the crowd howled with laughter. She reached towards her belt where a set of dagger hilts laid in wait to settle her dispute, however a clearing of Hectors throat let her know that wouldn't be the best idea.

Richard noticed the gesture and took a seat beside her at the bar, facing the crowd with a wide white grin flashed out to the masses waiting for their next moves. “How about a wager? You’ll need the money anyway so it’s a win win for you, I bet....” He reached to his belt and set down a coin purse so filled that the seams revealed a mixture of gold and silver from within. “That I am the better thief. To prove it, I’ll write a mark on a slip of paper. Only you and our lovely proprietor can see the mark, and if you get me what is on that slip, I’ll give you this purse and admit that you my dear Serene are the better Thief.”

Normally the title of thief would be one of disdain and distrust, but to those who resided in this establishment it was a title of honor. They had nothing to steal, but the lord and ladies that enjoyed the fruits of their labor and toil it meant heroes who struck back. Folk heroes who could fight against injustice within their eyes and hearts. Serene waited a moment, eyeing the bag which could keep her in luxury for months at least. However, the boost to her reputation alone would have been worth it. She looked up to Claude to read his expression and found it squarely focused on Richard with a look of pure disgust.

“Deal!” She shouted and placed a bag of her own beside his, albeit much smaller and only half filled. “If I lose, I’ll leave you all I’ve got and leave town with my tail between my legs.” The crowd cheered and genuine excitement filled the room as patrons pushed to try and reach over Richard’s shoulder as he wrote on a small slip of paper, he tore from a ledger tied to his hip. He shielded the paper adequately enough she was sure no one had seen and slipped the paper over to Hector.

The tavern keeper went decidedly pale and looked to Claude. He gave no signal, but his eyes told the mercenary the danger that the paper held. Reluctantly Hector handed the slip over to a grasping Serene who after reading it for a moment scoffed and gave Richard a look before

playing off her disapproval. “Perfect! By this time next week, drinks are on me!” she shouted and made for the door. Claude spared one last look to Hector who nodded silently to him, and bulky man followed swiftly after the departing rogue, catching her arm as they crossed into the street.

“Hey! Oh Claude, I didn’t take anything I just need to-“ Before she could finish, Claude thrust out a small ring to her. The ring was one she knew all too well from the times she had hired Claude as a bodyguard or as hired muscle. It was part of a pair, each of which reflected the heartbeat of the others owner. Claude used the magic trinkets to tell if his ward was in trouble when they were out of his sight. She slid the ring onto her pinky before asking why he had given it to her. The pale stone that served as its centerpiece flashed a dim red before it began faintly thumping in rhythm with a heartbeat that wasn’t hers. Claude raised his hand to reveal he had fitted an identical ring onto his own pinky that was thumping slightly faster, matching Serene’s adrenaline racing.

“This ones on the house,” Claude said simply and crossed his arms over his broad chest, his eyes scanning the nearby streets rather than meeting the questioning, Serene’s. “What do you mean on the house? You’re coming with me? Why? Did Hector put you up to this?” Her rapid fire of questions was silenced as he looked down at her with a disappointing gaze. She narrowed her eyes at him but before she could question him further. He interrupted, “Don’t you think it’s a little stupid you just accepted a job from your, no, our enemy? You don’t think you did exactly what he thought you would do? What in the seven hells did he write? The King’s Crown?”

Serene passed him the slip and began to walk down the muddy road, expecting Claude to follow behind her. Which he did as he scoffed at the slip. “Baron Drache? The Father to the bloody Sheriff? You can’t possibly be serious! Even if its just a-“ She interrupted him by turning

around and looking up at him, a stubborn rebellion in her eyes. “Would you rather I let him win? Can we do it or not?”

The Heist

Distorted shapes fell across the lawn of Baron Drache’s estate, torches in elaborate sconces set a show of shadows dancing across the walls which did little to tell the pair of intruders where the watchers were or how many patrolled the grounds. Crouched in underbrush, Claude nearly had to flatten himself on his steel plated chest to stay hidden behind the foliage. Meanwhile Serene managed to hide herself comfortably beneath her rough cut and deeply dyed cloak, which hid her already small silhouette amongst the other darkness which obscured the forest outskirts they hid within.

Claude adjusted the sword scabbard attached to his hip to get comfortable and motioned to the right side of the estate. “I figure, if we can cross quickly enough, we can reach that little garden there. It seems set in enough that the torchlight won’t reach us while we get a better look at the guardsmen.” He heard a rustling of leaves and saw a streak of fabric as Serene sprinted low across the lawn towards the garden he pointed. The aging sellsword grit his teeth as he pushed his body forward and broke into a sprint behind her. The breastplate that protected his torso dug into his waist as he held onto his scabbard to keep it from making any noise. Dark leather had been studded around the breastplate to keep it matte and unreflective in the night without removing the immense protection it offered him.

Claude struggled to breathe quietly as he fell into a rose bed beside Serene who likewise was attempting to catch her breath beneath the folds of her heavy cloak, with nothing but a grin visible to Claude’s well-adjusted eyes. “Would have... Appreciated a warning...” he seethed

quietly to her. Before she could retort they heard footsteps heading their way around the bend. Claude looked from the bend to Serene to see her hands already reaching up the rockery of the Manor behind him. While she could easily scale the rough-cut stones of the manor, Claude needed to find his own way to keep up.

Left by the nimble rogue once again, Claude stood slowly and carefully and made his way towards the edge of the garden. He waited, watching torchlight slowly creep around the bend to be followed by two local militia men, lightly armed with clubs and even lighter in protection. He waited until one of their heads began to turn towards his position in the alcove and leap from the shadows to fall upon the duo.

Serene finally felt smooth stone as she hefted her burning muscles through an open window on the second story. She heard a clattering outside but had little time to investigate Claude's wellbeing as she heard the unmistakable sound of a deep snore from the dark room she now crouched inside. The room was elaborate and filled to the brim with artifacts and expensive looking baubles that made the space look more like a dragon's hoard than a room. However she spied a very familiar suit of arms on a tunic hung on a mannequin in the corner of the room beside a sword. She then followed the snoring to see the sleeping face of the Baron's son, the Sheriff himself.

She crept towards the door, forsaking the many items strung about the room that could likely earn her plenty on their own in fear of waking the sleeping bear. None of his collection was her quarry. A quick peer through the keyhole of the door revealed an empty hall which she swiftly entered, being especially careful to close the door behind her. She could kiss her oiled moleskin boots for spiring her through the room with little more than a whisper of movement.

Claude heaved the second inexperienced guardsmen into the rose bed, still breathing but very much unable to pursue them. Dashing their torch into the dirt to put out its flame before emerging around the bend they had come from. Their position now empty, left a literal door of opportunity before him in the back of the manor. He quickly pushed himself inside, closing the door behind him to ward off the eyes of any of the guardsmen still patrolling the yard. Turning face his eyes met that of a man sitting at the far end of the kitchen they found themselves in. The man staring at Claude had dropped a pastry to the floor at his feet and placed a flour covered hand on a sword handle that had been resting on the table beside him.

Claude rushed forward around the preparation tables and fell upon the man, not fast enough to prevent the sword from being raised from the table but fast enough he hadn't had time to stand or swing rightly. Claude's vice like hands gripped the blade of the sword tightly enough his opponent could not pull the blade free as Claude wrestled to pull it from his grasp.

The rival sellsword was too well fed around the gut for a proper fitted breastplate and instead stood in a loud rustling of chainmail. Despite being well fed he was far from being easy meat even for a skilled fighter like Claude as he was quickly gaining the upper hand. Claude could feel the steel beginning to bite into his gloves and part flesh beneath, to prevent this he released the blade and rammed his shoulder into the portly sellsword driving him backwards through a door into the main hall.

The well-fed knave could have shout for aid, but it was clear by his movements towards Claude he was hungry for the renown and possible bonus for dispatching the intruder himself. Claude was more than happy to give him the chance if it meant delaying the militia who patrolled the yard from learning of his intrusion early. The two circled each other in the roomy entryway of the manor, like wolves waiting for hesitation by their prey to make their strike. A

shifting of weight, a step too hurried, even an intake of breath could betray the motive of either man. Claude made the first mistake, his heavy boot catching the edge of a rug causing him to stumble.

Serene heard the rattling of chains and what sounded like a body hitting the floor from the end of the hallway and scurried to peer over a banister at the disturbance. Below she saw Claude, sword half out of its scabbard, pinned to the ground beneath a fat man who was attempting with one hand on the blade and the other on the handle to shove the edge of the blade through Claude's neck. Claude held him at bay with both hands pushing against his aggressor, but the knave could put his weight against Claude which was slowly and painfully winning the struggle.

Serene fumbled within her cloak to retrieve a small wooden handle and what looked like a bow sized for a fairy and carefully fit them together with a satisfying click. She drew a small metal dart and grunted at the effort to pull back the string on the tiny crossbow before taking aim from her position on the banister. There was a snap followed by a yelp from Claude as the bolt missed its target and cut his cheek before embedding into the wood floor beside his head.

Claude looked up towards the stairway, along with his aggressor, to see what had shot him as a second bolt struck true. The man who had been pinning him went tense, then eerily stiff as Claude shoved him off. Sitting up to catch his breath he caught the eye of the Knave, now one short as a bolt protruded from his right socket. The aging sellsword felt his cheek before looking back up the stairs to find it empty.

Fully drawing his blade, Claude crept up the stairs to find Serene at the top, a small crossbow sitting on the floor beside her with another little metal bolt prepared. She was crouched

beside an ornate door with a pair of small metal tools in her fingers, which were trembling. Claude placed a hand on her shoulder as he looked about the empty hallway, “Take your time, I think that earned us a few extra moments.” She didn’t look up to him as she spoke but paused in her movements with tools still halfway into the lock of the door. “Sorry I missed...” She said quietly before returning to her picking. Claude eyed down at the small crossbow and shook his head, despite her eyes being elsewhere. “Sorry you had to fire that. Glad the practice paid off,” he mentioned offhand as he removed his grip on her shoulder to peer into the entryway.

Serene felt a click, which took her mind off taking her first life. This lock felt like an impossibility with how many pins she had felt, the lock itself must extend past the door itself for a few inches. The first click gave her some level of confidence, but the task ahead was daunting to say the least. Just as she felt a second click, Claude tapped her shoulder. “Don’t stop...” Before she could ask, she felt the floor tremble as heavy boots departed her side followed by a roar of challenge. She looked up long enough to see Claude meeting steel with the risen and armored Sheriff that must have been roused by the commotion downstairs.

Serene kept her eyes frantically on the lock in front of her, the faster she finished the job, the faster they could make their getaway. She heard a yelp of pain from Claude that made her wince as if she had been struck herself, a third click, a fourth click. There was a crash behind her as the final click sounded and the tumbler of the lock turned. She turned to see the banister was splintered and the Sheriff was slowly getting to his feet at the bottom of the stairs. Claude nodded to her, panting as he caught his breath, a gash across his right sleeve revealing a relatively shallow wound beneath. As he descended the stairs, Serene kept her mind on the job and snatched up her crossbow pushing into the unlocked door.

She closed the door behind her and found herself looking over an expansive study lined with artwork, large tomes which looked old enough to be worth their weight in gold, and several glass cabinets the sort that jewels would be kept behind. However instead they housed odd objects that she inspected as she passed. A gem encrusted dagger with a large ruby on its hilt, a seemingly insignificant rock with some carvings over its length, and finally her prize. Within a small glass case in the center of the room was... a toadstool. A small red capped mushroom with a wide stalk that seemed too red to be natural and too perfectly shaped not to be some sort of sculpture. There was a red sash attached to bollards around it to keep inquisitive guests from the glass, the only artifact in the room to get that sort of treatment.

She ignored the sash, pulling free one of her small sturdy daggers to cut it out of her way as she approached it. Putting the crossbow on the ground and sheathing the knife, she lifted the glass enclosure off its stand. The mushroom was resting in a small pot that seemed well saturated and even a slightly reddish in its complexion. She hesitated as she reached for the redcap as Claude's warning of the job echoed in her head. She instead drew one of her daggers to experimentally prod the mushroom's stalk to see what it was made of.

Upon touching the stalk with the barest of tip of the blade it uncurled, hundreds of reaching tendrils of white mushroom flesh whipped out with fat whiskers to feel the blade, which left a dark stain across the blade where it had touched. She recoiled from the mushroom with a squeak and after a few seconds of watching the mushroom frozen, she watched as the creature's tendrils withdrew and resumed the shape of an otherwise unassuming mushroom stalk.

She felt something was off, it had gotten too quiet. In the stillness of the room, she couldn't hear the clattering of steel and reflectively looked towards the blood red stone on her pinky ring to see it was a dull grey. She watched it, willing it to pulse, willing the heart it was

attached to beat. She felt her eyes begin to burn as a tear slid down her face realizing she would likely have company. The door burst open as if on cue, and a bloodied and panting Sheriff entered the study, blood streaked down the edge of his blade.

Serene scrambled for the crossbow but knew she didn't have time. She let out a howl of rage and threw the dagger towards the approaching knight only to graze his forearm. The Sheriff grinned as he kicked away her crossbow and raised his sword. He paused then, blade hanging in the air, as a puzzled look crossed his otherwise hardened features. The Sheriff looked down towards his arm and screamed as he saw small deep red tendrils begin ripping themselves from the flesh around his graze. His sword clattered to the ground, and he bat at the rebelling red tendrils growing out of his arm as they snapped and bit the surrounding flesh. He took another step back and stumbled, crashing through the other displays. Serene tore her eyes from the terror she now saw on the Sheriff's face and went back to the terrifying fungus.

Her gaze scrutinized the Mushroom's every sway as she carefully took off her cloak and as if she was catching a wild animal, she threw the cloak over the mushroom and watched as it thrashed for a moment before going still. She bundled up the fungus as she was sure it couldn't pierce her cloak and tucked it securely under her arm. With one last look at the Sheriff, she swiped her dagger from the floor and made for the same window she had entered the manor from. Carefully tying the mushroom up in a bundle with her hood free, she secured the cloak around her neck and began making her way out of the window, still shaking with adrenaline, fear, and horror at what this job had cost her.

Her foot caught a patch of dense moss, and she lost her grip, Her fingertips tied to support the sudden loss of balance but it was too late. She fell backwards, tensing up as she prepared for her rough landing on the fungus that was her prize.

A pair of hands shot out and caught her with a sharp intake of breath. She opened her eyes to see the tired eyes of a fairly pale Claude looking down at her. She threw her arms around him without hesitation, grappling him so tightly she couldn't process what he was whispering to her. "Get... off..." She finally heard as he set her on her feet with another sharp intake. She felt something warm and wet on her shoulder where he had been holding her and noticed a deep stain of blood. Following it to its source she saw Claude was clutching his left hand, where he was now short one digit. Claude smiled at her look of panicked concern, and he nodded to her back. "That it?" He asked as if they were just drinking calmly in The Goat & Moon.

The Goods

Even after a week, Claude still felt a ringing in his ears from the beating he had taken, his left hand had a mass of white bandages around the bottom half of his hand. His other hand reached out and clutched the familiar handle of his drinking mug, a small red stone pulsing on a ring now settled on his ring finger. Serene sat beside him in a green cloak a size or two too large for her with a bundle on the seat beside her.

Hector stood behind them, polishing a glass mug as the trio patiently waited for the arrival of Richard, who did not disappoint as he made his grand entrance into the haze filled tavern. A hush went across the crowd as Richard searched the room with a smug grin across his face, which died as his eyes locked with a grinning Serene. His smile remerged as a mask while he crossed the room, "Ah! Serene! You must be here to give your goodbyes!"

Serene plucked the squirming package on the seat next to her and strode confidently towards Richard. The two met at the center of the room as tables and chairs creaked to make way. "Hold out your hand Richard." She demanded simply, holding out the squirming bundle. A

small slowly pulsing red stone ring sat on her ring finger as she looked over it to the horror on Richards face. “What do you mean? There is no possible way you-“ Before the thief could refuse he felt a hand squeeze around his wrist, like a manacle made of steel. He turned to see Claude looming over him as he was forced into a chair with his hand slammed onto the tabletop.

Serene made to untie the bundle and Richard screamed as his eyes held recognition of what could be dropping into his hand. However, as he clenched his eyes shut, he felt nothing. There was then a thump on the table his hand resided upon. As he opened his eyes he saw the hellish Toadstool, albeit a bit bruised, sitting in a pot at the table’s center.

Richard stammered as he tried to pull against Claude to further himself from the table, sending the chair he was sat upon clattering to the ground. “How did... That’s impossible!” Claude pulled Richard’s hand a few more inches towards the Mushroom. “Are you sure you want to find out how real that thing really is?”

Serene collected the two coin purses from the countertop from Hector with a grin and strode back to the table Richard was squirming against. “Say it.” She ordered him and motioned for Claude to move his hand closer. He only got half an inch before Richard shouted “You win! You’re the best! Alright?! You’re number one!” He wailed as Claude paused waiting for Serene to give the okay.

Serene swept back her cloak to reveal a jewel encrusted dagger with a large red ruby at the top of its handle, with a broad grin she simply respond, “You’re god damn right.” And the usually quiet tavern erupted in cheers. Serene tossed the small slip of paper onto the table, which read in Richards eloquent script “The Misbegotten Mycelium.”