

When Muses Go Bad

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Rated: PG

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Summary: "Every writer gets ideas from some place. But some of those places are stranger than others."

She sauntered across the threshold of my mind like a sandworm chasing water, carrying a manila folder in one hand and a disassembled tricorder in the other. Her 1930's-style skirt hissed against her nylon-sheathed limbs as she moved.

The folder slapped down against the top of my desk. "Got something I think you'll like, sugar."

I adjusted my shade-of-grey tie and sighed. "You're exhibit 'A' in the campaign against open minds, Polly."

"You're such a tease, Sam."

"I'm busy."

"Read this first."

I reached for the intercom box but she shook her head. "Effie isn't there. I think she had to visit the ladies' room."

"And you had nothing to do with that, right?"

"Of course not. Trope might pull a stunt like that, but I wouldn't."

As she sat in my rose-print wingback chair, I gestured toward the mass of electronic components she was studying. "That got anything to do with this?"

She glanced up only long enough to see what I was pointing at. "Huh? Oh, no, baby, this is something else I'm working on. For another client."

I nodded and looked around her shoulder. "She ain't here, hon," Polly grated. "I'm flyin' solo on this one."

"You and Trope have another argument?"

Chewing gum suddenly appeared in her mouth, probably so she'd be more in character. "Well, yeah, but ya gotta –"

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you've gotten me into in the last year?"

"Oh, come on, babe, that story was great! Them readers don't know nothing from nothing. They're just stupid bums."

"I'm not talking about them, Polly! And they're not stupid! I don't write for stupid people!"

"Then how come they hated somethin' that brilliant?"

I tried to splutter something that can't be spelled. "Let's stay on task, okay? I'm talking about the idea you gave me without Trope knowing about it. When I had trouble with the ending, she came in and gave me something just totally – it was – " I tried to say something else unspellable.

"That's not a word, Sam."

I'd told them both my real name too often to care what they called me. "You knew that story idea you gave me wasn't very good. I never should have accepted it." I flipped my fingers at the folder on my desk. "And how do I know this is any better?" I leaned back and glared at her.

"Come on, baby," she crooned, "just take a look. If you don't like it, I got someplace else I can dump it."

Against my better judgment, I opened the folder as the implications of the phrase "dump it" registered, but I held on to my comment until I'd read the first page of the treatment.

Then I slapped it shut.

"Whassa matta?" she whined. "Itty bitty brain can't work with it?"

I shook my head. "Polly, if I actually posted something like

that, I'd get pilloried, maybe even drawn and quartered! And rightly so! Nobody wants to see Clark Kent as a super-pimp and Lois Lane as one of his string of hookers! And that includes me!"

She smiled. It reminded me of a barracuda. "I bet you could post it in the n-fic folder, huh?"

I dropped my head into my hands. "You know I don't post there. And this story idea is garbage! No way it's up to your usual high standards." I tossed it back into her lap and scattered the tricorder fragments. "You're lots better than this."

She looked almost hurt. "If you don't want it, I'll give it to your partner. I know Miles would run with it."

"Miles would run with a rewrite of 'The Odyssey' and make it a Mary Sue if you smiled at him when you handed it to him. Besides, he doesn't have the time. He's due to get shot by another client soon. Now please, let me get some work done. I've got that big third part of the trilogy to finish, there's the new super-hero crossover where you wanted me to use Batman, and on top of that my shoulder hurts." I pointed at the door. "Come back when you have something worth leaving."

She stood up and somehow the pieces of the tricorder fell into her tiny purse. She was so mad her gum popped out of her mouth and plopped on the floor. "Well! If that's the thanks I get, I'll just give it to someone else!" She paused in the doorway. "Someone with a really good sense of humor!"

The office wall shook as she slammed the door. I waited to see if she'd pop back in and yell some more, but the diminishing clip-clop of her high heels down the hall told me she had other fish to fry – or maybe other writers.

"She's gone," I said.

Trope opened the closet door and waved her hand in front of her face as if the air was foul. "Whew! Where did that idea come from, sixth grade?"

I ignored the question. "Tell me, did you two really have a falling out?"

Trope slid onto the desk with her legs crossed, making sure her Rosalind Russell skirt showed plenty of knee, and swung one foot back and forth. "You know Polyskitsodia. She always considered herself the tenth Muse."

"I know. I also know that you think the same thing about yourself. So what did you two fight about?"

"You really want to know, Sam?"

"Wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

She sighed. "It was you."

"Me?"

She nodded. "And, of course, first dibs on your services." She licked her lips and inhaled like Marilyn Monroe at a Playboy photo shoot. "I have to admit that Polly has excellent taste when it comes to writers."

I laughed. I hoped it was a sardonic laugh. "Very funny. I'm not your only boy and I know it. You two have a skyscraper's worth of clients to service."

She smiled. It showed a lot of very sharp teeth. Her smile was a little saner than Polly's smile, but I knew that Psychotropia could get nasty with little or no warning. "But you're one of the most fun," she answered. "Almost anyone else would have tossed her out without reading the whole first paragraph. Not you. You gave it a chance, even knowing it was trash." She leaned closer and licked her lips. "I really – respect you for that."

I didn't take the bait, not because I'm so very noble but because I know better than to mess around with mythic figures. I remember what happened to the city of Troy. "Thanks, Trope. But I was telling Polly the truth when I said I had a lot of work to do. So you just run along now. And let Effie out of the bathroom, would you?"

"Must I? I think I'm much more fun than she is."

"She actually takes the messages when she answers the phone. You just pretend to be a 1-900 number."

She sighed. “Okay, Sam, if you insist.” She slid off the desk and wriggled to the door, then turned. “Oh, you will read that little idea I left you, won’t you?”

“I read hers. I’ll read yours, sweetheart.”

“You’ll like it.”

“Is it funny?”

She cocked her head to one side and frowned with half her face. “You want funny, I’ll send Harley to see you. I do serious work.”

The prospect of Harley giving me story ideas made my navel pucker. I happen to like my ears where they are, thank you.

“That’s okay, Trope. I prefer the way your mind works.”

She gave me what the old detective stories used to call a sloe-eyed glance, along with a smile that promised more than any woman could deliver. “You say the sweetest things, Sam. Bye for now.”

She shut the door softly and walked down the hall in the opposite direction from her sister. I pushed my fedora back on my scalp and sighed, relieved that I’d escaped without any visible wounds this time.

Might as well read her suggestion, too. It couldn’t be any worse than Polly’s.

I hoped.

THE END