

Mightier Than the Sword

John G. Henry

Suzanne entered the temple hesitantly, her footsteps sounding small in the great structure whose marble pillars reached toward a ceiling emblazoned with pictures dark and bright. Before her, torches flared around the great statue of Inspiration, Goddess of Writers. To either side of the goddess, lesser idols in Inspiration's pantheon were ranked behind their altars. There stood proud Contract next to faceless Writer's Block, while Slush was almost invisible behind the pile of offerings on his altar. Not far away, several petitioners were down on their knees before the grim visage of Deadline, praying for the extra time only she could grant.

Suzanne rendered honors to Inspiration, then turned toward the cubicles lining the sides of the temple and approached the tiny cells where the Editors worked. One glanced up as Suzanne reached her desk. "Do you have an offering?"

"Yes." Suzanne knelt and proffered her manuscript, carefully settling it into the Editor's offering tray. "May I beg an audience?"

"An audience?" The Editor frowned, then shrugged. "You may speak."

"Oh, Editor, why have my previous offerings been rejected?"

"I'm afraid the Mysteries of Editing are not for the uninitiated."

"But, please, grant me at least a hint!"

The Editor sighed heavily. "Very well. You can scarcely go wrong if you follow your Muse."

"My Muse?"

"Yes. You do have a Muse, don't you?"

"Ummm." Suzanne looked around. "Would I know if I did?"

"Most assuredly. I'm afraid if you lack a Muse—"

The Editor was interrupted by a sweet voice coming from above and just to the right of Suzanne. "She lacks one no longer."

"You?" The Editor held up her hands, palms out. "Oh, no. Not Calliope."

"What?" Suzanne looked toward the voice and saw floating there the almost transparent figure of a woman perhaps two feet high. "A Muse? I have a Muse?"

"Wait!" the Editor cautioned. "That's Calliope!"

"Is that bad?"

Calliope answered. "The Editor cannot say, can you? For Editors cannot reject a writer's Muse. You see, dear writer, I have already revealed one of the Mysteries of Editing to you."

The Editor glared at Calliope. "You might mention to her that Editors can't reject the Muse but we can always reject the manuscripts that Muse helps create!"

"Oh, posh." The diminutive figure began drifting toward the exit from the temple. "Come along, my writer."

Suzanne followed hastily, catching up just as the Muse floated out of the temple. In daylight, her figure remained faint but clearly visible. "I didn't know Muses could be seen."

"Only by our writers, and Editors of course. Now, let's have a look at your latest offering." Somehow, Calliope had retrieved Suzanne's manuscript from the offering tray. She quickly flipped through it, then frowned down at Suzanne. "Oh, dear."

"I was trying to—"

"My dear . . . what's your name?"

"Suzanne. Suzanne of—"

"Suzanne's fine." Calliope drifted down to eye level with Suzanne. "If you have to explain to the reader what you're trying to do, you haven't done it. That's lesson one. Lesson two is that it really helps to write something interesting."

Suzanne rubbed her forehead. "Well, I try to write about what I know, you see."

"Haven't you ever done anything interesting?" Calliope paused in anticipation of Suzanne's answer, then hung her head theatrically. "You have to seek Inspiration in your experiences."

"But, if I imagine—"

"Who's the Muse here?"

"You are." Suzanne bit her lip and looked around. "I don't see anything interesting."

"You have to seek it! Come along." Calliope floated off down the street, passing through obstacles without hindrance, while Suzanne struggled through the crowd to catch up. When she finally did, Suzanne saw Calliope admiring an armorer's shop display. "This is just the place."

Suzanne peered at the armor and weapons. "For what?"

"If you're going to go adventuring, you need to be outfitted properly." Calliope's shape drifted inside the shop.

"Adventuring? What? Wait!" Suzanne rushed through the door, finding herself the object of the attention of several rough-looking men. "Excuse me." She slid sideways until she reached some shelves near Calliope. "What are you looking at?"

"Armor. Look at this one!" Calliope pointed to a gleaming mail shirt with mesh so fine it flowed like water.

Suzanne checked the price and yelped, drawing more glances from the men in the store. "I can't afford that."

"What *can* you afford?"

Suzanne scanned the shelves. "That." She lifted a stout leather shirt, stained and scored with damage, a sheet of scarred metal tacked to the upper chest. "I wonder why it's so cheap." In the center of the largest stain, her fingers found a thin hole about two inches in height in the armor. "Oh."

"It'll do," Calliope announced. "A writer's real armor is her imagination."

"Does that stop swords?"

"Now that you mention it, you also need a sword."

"Wait!" Suzanne once more followed Calliope, to where the Muse hovered near a barrel of rusty weapons. "These don't look all that good."

"The price is right. Try that one with the nicks in the guard."

Suzanne hefted the blade doubtfully, then smiled as it seemed to fit herself to her hand. "It is nice! I think its name is Guardian."

"Guardian? Good. You'll need one of those."

"I thought you—"

"I'm a Muse, not a Guardian." Calliope waited with every sign of impatience while Suzanne paid for her purchases, then drifted back out onto the street as Suzanne awkwardly carried her new armament in the Muse's wake. "Now, you've a pen?"

"I always—"

"Good. Write something on your armor."

Suzanne frowned down at the battered leather and metal. "It's not the best writing surface."

"You must armor yourself with your imagination! Write something upon your armor that will strike fear into the heart of evil!"

Suzanne paused, her pen poised above the leather. "Isn't my Muse supposed to help me write?"

"I'm an agent of Inspiration, not a secretary."

"But what should I write?"

"Try a spell to protect you and smite your foes."

"I don't know any spells."

"Make. One. Up!"

"All right." Suzanne's pen paused again. "Should it be in a foreign language?"

"That's usually a good idea. Do you know any foreign languages?"

"No. Can I make up a foreign language?"

Calliope applauded. "Wonderful. Of course you can. That's thinking like a writer."

Suzanne patiently inscribed a series of nonsensical but impressive looking words upon her armor just beneath the metal plate. "Now what?"

"Put it *on*."

"In public?" Calliope's glare answered Suzanne's question, so she hastily struggled into the stiff leather. "Oh, it smells."

"That's called atmosphere. Comfortable?"

"No."

"Good. Let's go."

"Go where?"

Calliope glanced back as she began floating away again. "In search of Inspiration and adventure! You won't find that in a safe little town. To the countryside!"

"But there's bandits out there."

"Excellent! Follow me."

Suzanne tried to stand her ground, but found her feet moving briskly of their own accord. By the time they reached the gate to the city, she was sweating in the heavy leather and wondering if she should've listened to the Editor.

The guards at the gate frowned as Suzanne approached. "We're gettin' ready to shut the gate for the night. Come back in the mornin'," their leader announced.

Suzanne, momentarily managing to stop her feet with the greatest of effort, watched Calliope drift unheeding through the gate. "I have to leave now."

"Why? Got a fella out there?" The guards broke into laughter.

"No! I'm a writer and I have to follow my Muse!"

A guard with a brass ornament on his shoulder which apparently identified him as the leader gave Suzanne a skeptical look. "A writer? You look more like one of them barbarian sword maidens. Ain't that right, guys?" His fellow guards chorused in agreement. "How come a writer's wearing armor?"

"I . . . I'm going to a writer's workshop. They're going to criticize my writing."

The head guard eyed Suzanne suspiciously. "Not a barbarian? What's that on your armor, then? It looks like barbarian writin'."

Suzanne looked down at her armor. "It's a, uh, spell. I wrote it."

The guards exchanged glances. One of them came close, leaning to peer into Suzanne's face. "She ain't got on much makeup." He looked downward. "And she's wearing sensible shoes. Maybe she *is* a writer."

"I dunno." The head guard scratched his scalp with a spade-like fingernail. "Barbarian sword maidens wear sensible shoes, don't they?"

"Sometimes. But they always fight half-nekked. This one's got too much clothes on."

"That's true. There's not even a hint of cleavage visible on her. Hey, I know. Check 'er hands."

"Okay." The closest guard grabbed Suzanne's hands and turned them palms up. "She's got ink on 'em."

"Hmmm. Now ask her to spell somethin' hard. Like, uh, arachnid."

The guards looked from their leader to Suzanne. "Go ahead," one urged. "If you're a writer, spell that."

"Uh . . . a, r, a, c, uh, h, i, no!, n, i, d."

The guards looked to their leader. "Is that right?"

"I dunno. Sounds right. Okay, you can pass. Hey, can I be in your next book? Somethin', you know, heroic? No comic relief, mind you!"

The closest guard leaned even closer. "I got this great idea for a story. I can tell it to you, and you could write it up and split the money with me. Whattaya say?"

Suzanne smiled with what she hoped appeared to be sincerity. "What a wonderful deal. Let's talk about it later." Her feet were already moving again, pulling her along the path Calliope had taken.

Calliope slowed enough for Suzanne to catch up. Her form had taken on a golden glow as the sun began to set. "You've passed your first obstacle. Isn't it glorious?"

Suzanne glared at Calliope from under lowered brows. "I don't feel glorious. I certainly don't smell glorious in this armor. Did you hear those offers I got from those guards?"

"You have to expect to be propositioned when you're a writer."

"I'm not *that* kind of writer!"

Calliope sighed. "Ah, you're the artistic type. There's nothing wrong with selling your talents occasionally, you know."

"I really don't like the way you're describing this. Where are we going?" The sun kept sinking toward the horizon, and Calliope kept drifting down the road.

"To an adventure."

"It's getting dark."

"Mysterious night! What wonders and terrors does it hide?"

"My feet hurt."

Calliope gave Suzanne a disappointed look. "I thought you were an artist."

"I work best after a good night's sleep. And something to eat."

"You didn't bring anything?"

Suzanne opened her mouth but nothing came out.

Calliope peered ahead and smiled. "Here comes a rider! What adventurous prospects!"

"A rider?" Suzanne glanced around frantically. "I have to hide."

"Nonsense. You have a sword."

"A sword?" Suzanne glanced down at Guardian, swinging forgotten at her side.

"And your armor," Calliope added. "I'd try to avoid getting hit, nonetheless."

"Thank you." Suzanne drew Guardian and stood in what she hoped was a confident posture as the rider drew closer. It soon became apparent that the rider was male and, from his expression, in a foul mood.

Instead of veering his horse slightly to the side to avoid Suzanne, he aimed a kick at her. "Get out of the way!" As she dodged the kick, he took another look. "Hey. A babe. Out here all alone?"

Suzanne gritted her teeth. "And planning to stay that way."

The man grinned unpleasantly. "What's with the armor, babe? It just gets in the way."

Suzanne's eyes narrowed. "It helps protect me from jerks."

"Ah, that's no way to be. I bet you're hungry, huh?"

"Not that hungry." Suzanne tried to ignore the growling in her stomach, but it was obvious the rider heard it.

He rummaged in his pack and surfaced with an oblong object. "What say we make a trade? I give you this, and you give me something in return."

"Is that chocolate?" Suzanne stared at the bar. "Trade? What do you want?"

The grin grew into a leer. "Like I said, that armor gets in the way. Take it off."

"That's all? Take off my armor?"

"Then take off everything else. You'll get the chocolate when I'm done."

Suzanne's temper boiled over. "I'm tired and hungry and out in the middle of nowhere and you dare treat me like some kind of slut who'd sell herself for a single bar of chocolate?"

The rider frowned. "I've got two bars if that's—"

"Ahhhh!" Losing all control, Suzanne leaped at the rider, her sword swinging. The flat of the blade caught the surprised man on the side of his head, tumbling him from the saddle. "Not for two bars! Not even for three! I'm not a slut!" She stood over him where he lay in the road, her sword poised, her face glowing with rage.

The man stared up at her, fear filling his face. "What . . . what are you?"

"I'm a writer!"

The man scuttled away, still on the ground. "Take the chocolate. Take the horse." He scrambled to his feet and fled, vanishing into the growing darkness.

Suzanne blinked, looking around in surprise. "Well . . . that was nice of him. Why do you suppose he gave me the horse? He didn't seem all that nice a person."

Calliope had reappeared by her side. "He's not. I believe you frightened him."

"It serves him right for using chocolate to taunt an armed woman." Suzanne ate slowly, savoring the bar, then dug in the abandoned horse's saddle bags and found another. "Now what, Calliope?"

"You have a horse. Ride it."

Suzanne mounted the horse, who seemed unimpressed by his change in owners. "I'm sure that man didn't treat you very well, either, did he?" The second chocolate bar and the last traces of daylight vanished at about the same time. Suzanne shivered in the cool night breeze. Her sword scabbard kept slapping her leg in an annoying way, so she removed the scabbard from her belt and fastened it to her saddle, rather enjoying the sensation of being armed and mounted. She even rubbed her armor with some feeling of satisfaction.

It took her a while to realize Calliope had disappeared. With no Muse to follow down the empty road on a cold night, and with the last of the chocolate gone, Suzanne's brief pleasure in her adventure rapidly faded. Spotting a somewhat sheltered area among some rocks not far from the road, she guided the horse that way, dismounted a bit stiffly, then sat heavily onto the ground, thrown off balance by the weight of her armor. Muttering curses at Fate and Muses, Suzanne struggled briefly with getting out of the armor, then gave it up as too much trouble and simply leaned back against the nearest rock.

A sound woke her to bright day. Suzanne stared around, blinking against the light. "Calliope?"

"Right here," the Muse answered cheerily. "You really should wake up now. Your adventure is getting better by the moment!"

Beyond Calliope's shape, Suzanne saw a group of men approaching. Their generally scruffy appearance and ragtag assortment of arms and armor didn't inspire confidence in her. She struggled back to her feet, aware her hair probably looked frightful, and adjusted the leather armor, rapping the metal reinforcement on her chest for reassurance.

The group of men stopped when they saw her moving, then came on again, smiling with varying degrees of menace and anticipation. Suzanne counted their numbers and the scars on their faces with a sinking feeling. "Oh, Calliope."

"Yes?"

"I'd appreciate a little help."

"This isn't the best time to write."

"I don't mean with writing! How am I going to handle these men? They look like bandits."

"They are bandits."

The advancing bandit gang had halted as Suzanne talked with Calliope, looking around with puzzled

expressions in search of the companion she was speaking with.

"Calliope! What do I do?"

"You're wearing your armor."

"Which didn't do its last owner much good."

"Then draw your sword, for Inspiration's sake."

Suzanne made a desperate grasping motion toward her side, finding nothing there. She glanced around quickly, finally seeing her sword about twelve feet from her. In its scabbard. Tied to her new saddle. Cinched onto her new horse, who was looking back at Suzanne with an expression which clearly communicated "if you take one step toward me I'll run away as fast as possible." "I don't have my sword."

"Well, then, draw your knife!" Calliope advised with a trace of aspersions.

"I don't have a knife."

"You must have something."

Suzanne felt frantically around her waist. "I've got my pen."

"Draw it!"

Gripping the pen firmly, Suzanne raised it in what she hoped was a menacing fashion. "Come no further!" The bandits halted their progress again. "Calliope! Now what?"

The Muse's voice had grown fainter, as if she were moving away. "You're the writer. Find a solution to your plot dilemma."

"What? Plot dilemma? This isn't a plot dilemma! I'm in serious danger!"

Calliope's voice could barely be heard now. "Surely you didn't write your primary character into a dead end? Didn't you plot this out beforehand?"

"No!"

The bandits, staring around again, jerked in surprise at Suzanne's howl of anger.

"Then use your imagination and your tools, writer. Create a way out for your character." Calliope's voice faded out completely on the last word.

Suzanne stared at the bandits, who stared back, then began slowly advancing again. "Stand back!" Suzanne cried. "I'm wearing armor!"

The bandits exchanged glances, then one near the head of the gang addressed Suzanne. "So are we. And we've got weapons."

"So do I!" Suzanne waved her pen at them. "Besides, this armor is . . . is . . . magical. See? There's a spell written on it."

The bandits paused yet again, their eyes locked onto the area just beneath Suzanne's chest. "What kind of spell?" the bandit chief asked warily.

"Uh, a powerful spell. Yes. Very powerful. Anyone who attacks me will be stricken . . . uh . . . stricken. Yes. Like . . ." Suzanne waved her pen again. "That."

One of the bandits spat and shook his head. "She ain't providing much detail, is she?"

"No," the chief agreed. "I think you're lying, woman."

Suzanne glared at the bandits. "I can be very detailed. I may be weak on imagery, but I can detail every detail in detail. I'm very good at that."

"Pah! Let's get her."

Suzanne lowered her pen's tip toward the bandits, extending her arm and settling her body into a fighting stance. "Don't make me use this!"

The bandits halted so fast some of them stumbled, then stood looking from Suzanne to the pen. "It don't look too dangerous," one whispered.

"It *is* dangerous," Suzanne insisted. "With this I can . . . I can create monsters! And terrible armies! I can create entire worlds!"

The bandit chief's smile held menace. "Then how come you ain't created any decent armor for yerself? All you got is that there battered leather. With what you say is a spell on it."

Suzanne drew herself up to her full height, adopting a haughty expression. "It does have a spell on it! A spell I created out of nothing! This armor is reinforced by Imagination and . . . and Desperation. It is the Armor With No Name! It is Ineffable! Ineluctable! Undistinguished! Inexplicable! Inadequate!"

The bandits gaped at her, their mouths open with awe. "She's casting a spell," one cried.

The bandit chief lowered his sword, his expression now guarded. "That stick can make anything, huh?"

"Well, so far I haven't made any money with it. I'm still working on that." The bandits looked angry and puzzled again. "But it wrote this spell on my armor! Believe me, one of us will regret it if you attack me!"

"She's a sorceress," one of the bandits warned. "She could be real dangerous."

"Or maybe she's crazy," another one added.

"Crazy women're dangerous, too."

The bandits shifted back and forth where they stood, holding their weapons between themselves and Suzanne's threatening pen. The chief tried to focus on the pen's tip, squinting as his entire head followed the wavering instrument. "Here, now. I've had enough. Are you a sorceress or are you just crazy?"

Suzanne's anger at the bandits, at Calliope, and at the entire situation finally flared. She raised the pen over her head, her eyes wild, her unkempt hair flaring around her face. "I'm *not* crazy. I'm a *writer*!"

The bandits stared wide-eyed at her for a moment. "Run!" several shouted at once, and the entire pack took to its heels.

Perplexed, Suzanne watched them go, holding her fighting stance. As the figures of the bandits dwindled into the distance, she finally lowered the pen, then ran her free hand through her hair. "I don't look *that* bad in the morning," she muttered.

Calliope reappeared directly in front of her, smiling with approval. "Excellent! You've had experiences worthy of interest. I'm sure you're just filled with the spirit of Inspiration."

Suzanne glowered at her Muse. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I feel inspired to do something right now." Her hand balled into a fist as she swung right at Calliope, but the Muse vanished like a burst soap bubble and Suzanne's attack swished through empty air.

Grumbling and feeling muscles knot up from sleeping all night on rocks, Suzanne limped toward her horse, now standing with no sign of skittishness. Suzanne eyed the beast sourly. "I'm going to call you Inconstant. You really don't seem to care what happens to your owners, do you?" It was impossible to tell for sure on a horse's face, but Suzanne thought Inconstant smirked at her words.

Riding in full daylight, the journey back to the city was an easy one. Suzanne found a writing pad in one of the saddlebags and worked on a story as she rode. A new set of guards were at the city gate when Suzanne arrived. They waved her through, though not without some worried comments that her attire might represent the first indication of a trend toward modest dressing by barbarian sword maidens.

This time, Suzanne strode firmly into the Temple of Inspiration, ignoring the flinches of those she passed close enough to that they caught a whiff of her odorous armor. She came up to the same Editor she'd spoken with before, kneeling briefly as she presented her offering.

"Another manuscript already?" The Editor took it, glanced at the first page, kept reading, and twenty minutes later looked back up at Suzanne. "Your offering is accepted." Suzanne smiled as the Editor painstakingly counted out a small pile of coins. "That's the standard payment rate. It's set by the goddess, so don't complain to me."

"It's fine." Suzanne swept up the coins.

"Can I expect more offerings from you?"

Suzanne smiled again. "Perhaps. First, though, I have to kill my Muse."

The Editor shook her head sadly. "Writers can't kill their Muses. A Muse can leave of its own accord, but it can't be killed."

"I can try." Suzanne paused before the idol of Inspiration to toss some of her new coins onto the goddess' altar, then headed out of the temple.

Calliope appeared, floating about ten feet away from her. "Your first accepted offering! How wonderful. Are you ready for more experiences?"

Suzanne smiled merrily as she drew Guardian from its sheath. "Sure. Let's talk about it. Could you come a little closer, please?"

"I'd rather not."

Suzanne drew forth her pen with her other hand. "Have I shown this to you? It's really a nice pen. Come look."

"No, thank you." Calliope began floating backwards as Suzanne took a step toward her.

Suzanne took another step and Calliope flew away at a faster rate. Still grasping her sword Guardian in one hand and her pen in the other, Suzanne jumped onto the back of her horse Inconstant and urged him after the fleeing Muse.

It wasn't until they reached the gate that Suzanne realized Calliope was leading her out of the city again.

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