

GARY MILLS

Up-Armored

MY KNOCK KNEES TORQUED TWO MILLIMETERS CLOSER under 41lbs of individual body armor—marked “IBA” on the hand receipt. The torn meniscus in my left knee clicked under the additional weight, marking time for the march from mirror to nightstand. I asked my wife for help. She sat up and slid to the edge of the bed. I pointed to the side straps of my ballistic vest.

She tugged all four straps. I asked her to attach the M4 and M9 magazine pouches to the front of the vest, bottom-left. “Why here?”—she rested her palm on the forest of polyester loops. I didn’t want to explain rapid reloads. “That’s how I was told.” She weaved and staggered the modular magazine pouches within easy grasp of my left hand—the armor system complete and close to flesh. Off-balance, I thanked her with a kiss. “Even support personnel wear this equipment—everything is going to be all right.” Light curved down her creased cheek and ran along her jaw. On the nightstand, red lights clawed at the face of one of the baby monitors. My four-month-old daughter cried—my wife responded.

I shuffled back to the mirror; the full weight of the helmet, armor, holster, new CamelBak hydration system with tag still attached (“Hydrate or Die”), and gas mask settled into my knee and hip. I was desperate to make a connection—anything. Mythology. What would Hephaestus say? The crippled master twisted sparks, choreographed arsenic’s firefly dance over glowing copper, and molded earth. Once craftsman of war—once god of fire—he forged Heracles’ breastplate, cast Achilles’ armor, and sculpted Pandora from clay. He combined the ignition

of chemistry, physics, and magic with the crush of muscle, sweat, and rage. How would *he* respond?

I focused on the mirror. The two composite ceramic inserts fused with high-density polyethylene tucked inside the Kevlar sheath—two ballistic shields to protect the chest and back. Plates arched, facing supersonic or hand-thrust projectiles. I expect this tryst with technology lacked the passion of the original, desperate theft from his forge. The fluid balance between bone, sinew, and bronze ignored. It lacked art. I fumbled—but it was too late to stop the invocation.

I heard Hephaestus sigh. He sighed at the turtle with 21 lbs of neglect pressing around the edge of its artificial shell. He sighed at the *Monitor*, complete with turret, deck plating, and provisions. “More ponderous than nimble,” Melville quickly added, twisting his poetic observation on the real vessel into a joke—a weapon. I waited for dead relatives—the combat veterans—to fill in the rest, sounding off in order of conflict and campaign. They remained silent.

Hephaestus’ sigh gained depth and edge. Then he roared: “As if *you* could wear Achilles’ armor and strike fear in any Hector, or Hajji—take it off!” I wanted to obey. I stared at myself. My left foot tingled as the carpet’s soft curls turned to needles. It started at my knee, then leg, now foot—system failure complete. I hopped to the bed, sat, and rubbed the torn flesh. The voices stopped, save the sound of my wife comforting my child over the baby monitor.

I knew I would buckle again: under the weight this equipment; under an IED-scarred HUMVEE; or under a mortar-torn roof. Apollo waited to knock off *my* helmet, force down *my* shoulders, and wrench off *my* breastplate—priming *my* death for the hand of another. There was my connection.

I stripped the tackle and forced it into the water-resistant bag. My wife returned to bed, touched my hand, and turned away from the gear. Six weeks later the deployment was cancelled, the casualty of a restructured manpower requirement. The equipment sits in the far corner of my garage. I avoid the armor in the dark green bag—and the voices inside.

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