

# Armor

By Jen Anderson

This morning, I put on my suit of armor.

It is not fashioned from metals found deep under mountains, but it is heavy. It carries the weight of your expectations.

It is not forged in fire, it is not molded on a blacksmith's anvil. But it is tailored to fit my frame. Too tight, or too big, and I would look sloppy, unkempt, and you won't take me seriously. Those would be your thoughts.

My fingers fasten buttons on a jacket that shouts my professionalism into your face, jarring like iron on iron. My fingers smooth wrinkles out of a skirt... not pants... to show you I can analyze data sets, create policy recommendations, and provide advice to mayors of cities, but still be nonthreatening. My feet slip into sensible shoes, with heels that are neither too tall, nor too thin, so you see I can be feminine but not inappropriate. Those would be your words.

I check my helmet in the mirror; I smooth flyaways down and push pins deeper into my scalp, securing the stays of a sensible chignon. I make up my face into a visor, paint my skin so you don't see behind it; my true, unadorned, vulnerable self.

I won't slap the reins and charge a frothy-mouthed steed across the grounds of a jousting arena; my arm won't feel the strain of a heavy lance. Instead, I will sit in the arena of this office, deflecting my self-doubt as I deflect your verbal lances, smile against your subtle parries: "Why do you think you are qualified for this position? How old are you? Do you have a family, children?" I will dutifully charge through my rehearsed answers under the weight of your microaggressions.

I will smooth my armor over my thighs as I feel the weight of your eyes on my legs.

This afternoon, I took off my suit of armor. The heft of it left marks on my body. The sheer relief of its absence lifted the fought-back tears to the surface. Beneath the bruises of your lance strikes, the chain-mailed memory imprints of our joust, I massaged muscles trembling from sitting so straight, so still, tensed and waiting for the blow of lance against shield. A blow that would only come later, in an email: "Thank you for your interest in the position, but...."

As a knight in this contest, I am not impervious. I am not infallible. But I am valiant.

My suit of armor hangs in my closet, at the ready, for the next test of honor. And the next.