

## **ARMOR**

## SYNOPSIS:

A small-time drug dealer named Ronnie thinks of committing suicide after a string of bad luck. He postpones the act after he sees an announcement for a Miss Gay beauty pageant in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, one of his neighbors warns Ronnie that a vigilante group called the Death Squad might be after him. He dismisses the counsel and prepares for the pageant. A week before the competition, a young man seeks refuge in his house. Later, he helps Ronnie create a costume inspired by medieval suit of armor. On the night of the pageant, a hit man arrives and alters the course of Ronnie's best-laid plans.

The week Ronnie was planning to die, one of his neighbors paid him a visit. Ronnie had just come back from the seamstress, bringing home a newly mended sheath dress he would wear for the pageant, when Oliver showed up.

“The Death Squad,” Oliver said. “They’re after you.”

Ronnie considered what reactions were possible. He would back away from the Mylar-covered table where Oliver was nursing his coffee. He would warn him that he didn’t appreciate this kind of joke, not after bodies had been found in empty, grassy lots around Mintal. Instead, Ronnie soaked up his neighbor’s silence, leaned on the refrigerator and lit a cigarette.

Where was the Death Squad when he regularly handed out *shabu* to the crew of wiry boys who had hung out at his beauty salon? They were hired guns, the Death Squad, who used to go after drug pushers, but lately they’d been taking down street gang members, crystal meth users, petty thieves.

Oliver was talking to him about a list they had at the community hall, a list of targets. Someone had tipped him off about Ronnie's name being in it. Oliver was telling him now so he could leave town before they found him.

"I don't even push," said Ronnie.

"You bought from Tiago before he was shot," Oliver said.

Ronnie had forgotten how nosy the neighbors could be. He thought of his stash in the pillowcase. Tiago, his go-to guy for crystal meth, was one of those who'd been killed. They said a man on a motorcycle stopped in front of Tiago who was chatting with regulars outside his karaoke pub. The man shot him through the lungs four times. He hadn't really known anyone who got killed by these gunmen until that time. A day before the shooting, Ronnie had seen Tiago in the same spot and they'd waved at each other.

"I only got them for the pageant," Ronnie said. "To prepare. You know, lose some weight?"

"You're joking, right?" said Oliver, eyeing him as though he were a stranger. In college, Oliver never fit in with Ronnie's clique: sharp-tongued *bayots* who thrived on banter. There was always something open and raw about Oliver, as if he didn't have time to assume a pose, to make pretend.

"Don't you have any confidence in me?" Ronnie said. "Maybe this year is my year."

After seeing Oliver out of the house, Ronnie resolved to stick to the plan. Before the Death Squad entered the picture, he had already made his decision. If the Death Squad were truly after him, they would have to race him down to that stage.

The pageant, known to many as Miss Gay, was a competition among cross-dressing gay men, a backwoods copy of international beauty contests for women. Like the Miss Universe

pageant, Miss Gay involved a sequence of elimination rounds: national costume, swimsuit, evening gown, and the Q&A. The pageant was held every year in Mintal on the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the town's patron saint.

As he was leaving this house to offer beauty treatments in the neighborhood, Ronnie found a young man squatting outside the gate.

"Hi, *gwapa!*" The boy got up, revealing a set of small yellow teeth. "We're looking so pretty today."

Ronnie knew him as Biboy, one of Tiago's former drug runners. Biboy wore a lime-green basketball jersey and camouflage shorts, ringlets of dirt around his neck. With his hard, nimble body and long wingspan, he resembled a field bird with a handsome face.

"Not buying today. I still have a few more left," Ronnie said.

"Who said I was selling?" said Biboy, pressing his body closer to Ronnie. "They took down Bossing Tiago. Haven't you heard?"

"You should be careful then," Ronnie told the boy and moved on.

THREE WEEKS EARLIER, Ronnie's assistant had emptied the cash register and split, taking boxes of expensive hair coloring products on the way out. The betrayal came on the heels of a huge blow. Ronnie's straight male lover, whom he'd supported through college, had left to marry a girl he'd gotten pregnant.

Ronnie had to close down the salon and move to a boarding house in a compound used mainly as an automobile workshop. To pay rent, he started going door-to-door, offering makeup, hair styling, even manicures and pedicures. Occasionally he would choreograph dance numbers for local government employees who needed "intermission numbers" for their parties.

One afternoon, as he woke up to the sound of melting steel, Ronnie decided he'd had enough. He walked to the highway, the sunlight knifing his eyes. He was about to fling himself before a truck hauling timber from Lorega when he noticed a banner fluttering at the entrance of the gymnasium, its carefully painted words heralding a coronation.

The whole town would watch him compete again, hundreds of his neighbors—who'd already written him off as a cautionary tale—would see him at his glamorous best, see him in a long gown, on that stage, spotlights beamed on him. Ronnie knew that he still had one thing left to do before killing himself.

AFTER SERVING HIS CLIENTS, Ronnie skipped lunch to sign up for the pageant at the community hall. The deadline for registration had produced chaos: people argued over who would get to be Miss Venezuela, Miss Puerto Rico, and Miss Colombia, powerhouses in international pageants. The organizers, who didn't anticipate the complication, resolved the matter by making contestants draw lots, to which most of the *bayots* grudgingly agreed. Flaunting a call center-accented English, the most *mestiza* of the bunch grumbled when he didn't pick Miss USA. One *bayot*, who clamored nakedly for attention, literally sang with joy when he plucked out Miss Philippines from the glass filled with nations' names.

Ronnie had joined pageants in college. It was a thrill some *bayots* chased, from tarpaulin-bordered basketball courts at small-town fiestas to huge convention halls in cities. Together with friends, he entered every contest in Davao and in towns as far as Lanao. He was slimmer then, naturally smooth, his drowsy eyes framed by a small hard-boned face.

Since he'd come in late, he found himself at the end of the queue. He took a strip of paper from the glass, read what he got, and quickly thumbed it into his shorts pocket. He had fished out

Great Britain, a nation still winless in the Miss Universe contest, but he could live with it. Maybe it's time, Ronnie was thinking, they bow down to The Queen.

“What you have there?” a *bayot* asked him. He had long, ironed hair touching his bare shoulders.

“Secret,” Ronnie said. “You’ll have to see for yourself.”

“Chos!” sneered another one, frail and much younger, with unusually pale skin that was almost gray. “When was the last time you joined? The 1960s?”

Ronnie was going to say something lighthearted when he noticed the way the youngsters were looking at him. The one with flattened hair asked him, “So how does it feel to be a thank-you-girl?”

The phrase summoned the humiliating image of a contestant packing up his things after losing. You did not simply lose: you didn’t stand a chance.

Ronnie bristled. “You carry yourselves not with poise but with vulgarity. Neither of you deserve any kind of crown!”

When they didn’t respond, he took it as the perfect moment to leave with a final barb: “You are still on your way, but I am already coming back.”

THE FOLLOWING DAY he still couldn’t figure out his national costume. Desperate for ideas, he scoured old magazines, looking for icons, but he couldn’t find anything that inspired. Then, after lunching on a cup of rice and one salted fish, he saw something on TV.

He was mindlessly flipping channels—his landlord was thoughtful to share cable TV—when a vision seized him: a model marching from the stage wing in a flowing couture dress, her body glimmering so brightly, she looked as though she were swaddled in flames. The most

remarkable part of the ensemble was her right arm. Cased in a gold armored sleeve, the arm looked like it belonged to a knight. The warrior queen stepped out of the tube and crossed into Ronnie's living room, blinding him with light.

He took out a pencil and a pad of yellow paper, moved closer to the TV set, and began sketching. There it was, the gown that would send him back to the Miss Gay pageant one last time. King Arthur, after all, was British.

Afraid inspiration would wane, Ronnie rushed to the hardware store. He picked up aluminum sheets, wires, metal shears, tiny screws and nuts, and a can of gold aerosol paint.

At the tricycle cab terminal, he saw Biboy again. The way the boy beamed at him, it was as if he'd been waiting for Ronnie to appear.

"After you, *gwaps*." Biboy hopped in and sat beside Ronnie.

When they reached the compound, the boy got off and followed him to the gate.

"Let me carry that," he offered, grasping at the cellophane bags in Ronnie's hands.

The boy was wearing the same green basketball jersey and shorts.

"I don't have time. Shoo, before my landlord sees you."

The boy skipped in front of him, blocking his way. He was so tall that the top of his head almost cleared the iron spikes bent over the hollow block wall. The grooves of his ribs showed through the jersey's large armholes.

"Promise you I'll be good," said Biboy. "*Sige na, gwaps*. If you want we can arrange something. I'm a very talented singer." Then he smirked, so Ronnie would know exactly what kind of "singing" he had in mind.

"Really, I have a lot to finish." He brushed the boy aside and opened the smaller entrance.

“Maybe I can clean your house,” the boy prodded. “Pick up your groceries. I only need a place to stay. Please, *gwaps*?”

Ronnie was about to shut the gate when it occurred to him. He could really use some help after all.

“Quick. Before I change my mind.”

Taking the bags from Ronnie’s hands, the boy followed him to the house.

After peeping into the only bedroom, Biboy reclined on the rattan sofa and shook his flip-flops off, propping his feet comfortably on a beanbag. “Small, but cozy...” he said. He found the sketches Ronnie had made for the armored sleeve.

“What’s this? Excalibur!” Biboy chuckled.

“Suit of armor,” said Ronnie. “Don’t tell anyone. That’s my national costume for the Miss Gay pageant.”

“What? This? You have a fever, *gwaps*?”

“Just the arm,” Ronnie said. “I’ll wear it with a long gown covered in sequins.”

“The *bayot* with the golden arm! Tripping!”

“Maybe you want to sleep at the market tonight.”

“Uh, yes, boss,” said Biboy. “As long as you’re happy, I’m happy.”

Ronnie spread the materials he’d bought out on the floor. He considered making three detachable parts to form the whole sleeve, following his initial sketches. Perhaps he would get some mesh cloth, or something rubbery. Or he could stitch the arm plates with wire, make an inner sleeve that would look like chain mail.

“You know, *gwaps*, I can help you with that,” said Biboy.

“That’s what you’re here for.”

Biboy tossed the sketches. “I got a high mark in industrial arts. For my project, I made an iron garden set. Compared to that, your arm plate is peanuts.”

“Okay, Mister Industrial Design,” said Ronnie. “There’s chicken *siopao* and orange juice in the fridge.”

FOR THE FIRST TIME since he’d moved in at the compound, Ronnie got out of bed early. The dusty shafts of light cutting through the windows made it seem like he was in a different world. The dress for the Q&A segment was ready, along with a one-piece red, white, and blue swimsuit patterned after the Union Jack. He’d borrowed it from a woman friend who, in her younger years, had worked as a choreographer in Brunei.

There was one competition left. He needed to build an armored sleeve and pair it with an evening gown, which he had yet to secure. Biboy had asked him to download pictures of medieval armors that they could copy.

The living room was empty, pillows and sheets heaped on the floor. The boy had already left to shoot hoops. On the table Ronnie found a fist-size chunk of bread smeared with margarine. He swallowed it.

Hunger sharpened his focus. After conceiving of his costume, he’d begun a breakfast regimen of *pan de sal*, two Fortune cigarettes, and black, sugarless coffee. He would not have lunch until the afternoon when he would buy Coke and a pack of crackers from the grocery chain across the street. For supper, he would have a glass of water and a last cigarette. At best, it saved him some money, which allowed him to splurge on wardrobe and accessories for the pageant.

Holding a sturdy nylon umbrella, Ronnie ducked out of the gate and walked over to Mintal’s newest Internet café. The café had opened behind the gymnasium where the pageant

would be staged.

On that hot windless day the paved roads seemed to wriggle under the heat. The streets of Mintal were fringed with brightly colored trimmings. In a vacant lot not far from the church, a shabby carnival had shown up, erecting a neon-lit Ferris wheel that loomed taller than any structure in town.

The café was full of high school boys playing online war games. An attendant, who was playing along with them, pointed Ronnie to a vacant PC near the bathroom.

He studied a photo of a knight in a suit of armor. The warrior's torso was encased in plates of polished metal, his helmet like a silver birdcage perched on his steel-padded shoulders. The intricacy alarmed him; he was relieved he only needed the arm. But that alone had eight components, with sinister-sounding labels like Spaulder and Pauldron. He made a mental note to build three attachable parts, covering the shoulder, elbow, forearm and hand. He could fix the aluminum plates over a thick material—fake leather maybe, or rubber—which he would then spray-paint in gold.

After surfing the Web, he moved on to the stalls of used-clothing at the public market. New items had arrived at the *ukay* stands just in time for the crowd to go shopping during the weeklong festivity. He surveyed the line of tents but couldn't find anything that pleased him. After nearly an hour, Ronnie found himself sorting through a bin full of old drapes.

“How much for these curtains?” He lifted a beige sheet printed with what looked like cascading spirals of purple dahlias.

The vendor squinted up at Ronnie. He was sitting on a plastic chair made for little children. “Twelve pesos per bunch,” he barked. He was hefty and sunburned in a perforated shirt and denim pants cut off at the knees. He offered Ronnie a crinkly, mildewed lavender drape that

probably had been hung in a hospital. “From U.S. and Japan. First class.”

Ronnie wrapped the cloth around his torso and, with his other hand, pulled another curtain from the heap. He wore it over his neck like a scarf. In a desperate moment, he entertained the possibility of sewing a gown out of these curtains. He decided to try another tent.

Inside, he found a teenage girl munching on corn chips.

Finally his luck turned. Dangling from the ceiling was a heavily beaded serpentina dress, its bodice wrapped delicately in sequins and tulle. The gown was displayed between a life-size orca stuffed toy and velvet halter dresses that only the most unimaginative amateurs would be drawn to.

Using a long stick with a hooked end, the shopgirl took the dress down and showed it to Ronnie.

He was close to tears. The silhouette was similar to what he’d seen on TV, the fabric in good condition, with only a few small tears, detailed with swirling translucent beads, clearly made by hand, and the color—saffron, he decided—flattered his skin tone. Paired with an armored sleeve, the dress on him would look stunning.

Elated, he didn’t even haggle.

He stepped out of the tent, triumphant. Before going home, he dropped by his trusted seamstress a few blocks from the compound.

HE TOTTERED THROUGH the gate, left the printouts in the *sala*, then shut himself up in his room. He was about to doze off when the sound of an engine made him jump.

He flew out of his room and peered through the glass window slats. Bougainvillea grew in tangled profusion beyond the dismantled corpses of trucks and cars in the yard. Neighbors had

been talking about how the vigilantes were closing in on Mintal after a rash of muggings and rapes in the village. Witnesses had sworn that Tiago's hit man rode a motorcycle. All these assassins, they said, rode motorcycles.

The engine roared. He wondered if the gate was locked. He wished someone from the landlord's house would come out and check.

"What are you looking at?" Biboy said, stepping out of the bathroom.

"That noise."

Ronnie walked over to the kitchen and took a jug of ice-cold water from the fridge. He drank it all in one swig.

"See, *gwaps*." Biboy was holding out a scrap of aluminum. "I copied your printouts and made one for the shoulder."

The boy had cut and bent the aluminum precisely into an oval shape that resembled a gold plate on a knight's shoulder.

"Show me how you did it," Ronnie said.

"I didn't use a hammer. Just this." Biboy picked up a set of pliers from the floor. "The hammer would've dented it bad. Told you it was easy."

"Yes, you did," said Ronnie.

HE WENT BACK for his gown the next afternoon. The flaws had been mended, the size altered. The seamstress charged two hundred pesos, but Ronnie pleaded with her. He'd come to her shop hoping for a price cut since she'd been a loyal customer at his salon. The seamstress agreed on condition that Ronnie would offer hairstyling and makeup at her granddaughter's *début* party, for half his standard fee.

But when Ronnie tried the dress on, the bodice squeezed his ribs; the side zipper wouldn't close. The seamstress offered to give it another go but he refused.

"It's only a half inch," he told the seamstress. "I drank a lot of water today."

As he was leaving the dress shop, Ronnie saw a man from across the road. A bald man was smoking at an open-air canteen, observing him. He wore jeans and a military jacket, and he had one of those unfortunate underbites that sealed the face into a scowl.

Ronnie carried his gown across the highway. From the corner of his eye, he saw the bald man leaving the canteen. Ronnie hurried into the crowded street fair, making his way through the snarl of carnival goers around the booths. Surely they wouldn't take him down here, not with all these people around. His breath quickened. He'd heard about targets shot openly in daytime, on streets filled with motorists and bystanders, at house parties before stupefied guests. He would be dead by the end of the week, but only on his terms. He pulled away from the crowd, the dress still in his hands.

It was dark when he reached home. The boy was slurping instant noodles at his dinner table.

"*Gwaps*, I finished it," Biboy said.

Indeed there it was, a copy of the object he'd seen on television, fully realized. They had been working on the sleeve for the better part of the day. Ronnie had cut and shaped the aluminum, while the boy assembled the pieces. Biboy had done an excellent job of painting the whole thing in gold.

Gently, Ronnie scooped the delicate thing from the couch. Made from spray-painted aluminum and rubber pads, the armored sleeve was better than he'd imagined, three cylindrical parts perfectly fastened as a whole piece.

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ON PAGEANT DAY, Ronnie woke up to the sensation of little knives piercing his stomach. The walls were shifting. Two cups of coffee later, the pain didn't go away, and his body wracked with chills. He shook what was left of his stash out of the pillowcase.

He held the resealable packet closer as if to smell it, then spilled the content into his palm. The tooth-shaped shard of crystal was slightly smaller than the nail on his pinkie.

Before lighting up, he installed a mosquito net in the living room. He preferred to trap the smoke inside the net, ever so careful not to waste a wisp of the stuff. Squatting under the net, he turned the TV volume up to drown out the mechanics outside welding steel. He tuned in to CNN, anticipating a current events entry during the pageant's Q&A portion; a paraphrased quote or two from a global headline would suffice. He poured what was left of his stash on a neatly folded sheet of tinfoil, held the foil gingerly over the flame, and with a tin pipe, began sucking the lush white vapor of melting crystal. Smoke billowed to the edge of the foil. Within seconds, he was vibrantly awake. He was again the most attractive, vivacious, irresistible creature he knew.

At 4:30 p.m., he prepared for battle. He strapped the first layer of tape over his stomach, rolling it tight around his waist, folds of excess flesh inching up his torso. He donned two feminine panties, deftly inserting pads over his behind. Carefully, he cupped his soft penis and testicles, folding deep to reach the hollow between his buttocks.

To keep it flat, he wrapped tape around his crotch, then he threw on one last pair of underwear, a silky charcoal black swatch of nylon. He would try to fit into the Union Jack one-piece later for the swimsuit competition. Ronnie then slipped on ten pairs of pantyhose; the thicker the layers, the more the illusion of curved, shapely legs was achieved.

For breasts, he placed beneath a strapless bra two latex condoms filled with water, which

he'd tied in such a way that the rubber bloated into small globes. The tips of the condoms produced a somewhat realistic effect of nipples.

He used a palette he'd always relied on. Violet pigment on the lower lids, copper line over the lashes, indigo eye shadow, slick scarlet mouth. He applied false lashes using the milky paste from a star apple leaf, for a lasting hold. The rest of his body he coated with liquid foundation. Under the glare of lights, the tone shimmered on flesh like porcelain.

He topped it all off with a wig, chestnut brown styled into petals, a gift from a friend who had been to Dubai.

WHEN HE AND BIBOY arrived backstage, a few assistants were still strapping tape on their half-naked candidates, clipping extensions and spraying products on hard tiers of hair. The narrow space smelled of armpits, the floor littered with tissue paper and torn fabric.

There they were: *bayots* jiggling their hands to make manly veins disappear, while others, once their makeup was on, became stoic. There were long-limbed girly boys with taut dancer's bodies toned after working in pubs in Japan as "entertainers" or male Japayukis, *bayots* with large breasts, *bayots* whose skin glowed from taking a cocktail of hormone pills. A few of them gazed at Ronnie coldly like they were in a trance.

He wobbled as the boy helped him into his dress. The gown was still snug; he sucked in his stomach until they could zip him up. Stale, rancid air blew out of his throat. He'd had two boiled bananas and coffee for breakfast and nothing since, but he steeled himself.

The boy took out the armored sleeve from a carton tied up in twine. The *bayots* stared.

"Don't mind them, *gwaps*," Biboy said. "Next to you, they look like clowns."

Ronnie slid his right arm carefully into the sleeve, Biboy securing the last strap over his

shoulder. After the metal clamped onto his skin, the length of his arm sheathed, Ronnie felt large and supremely complete. Lifting the sleeve close to his face, he felt like he could leap over the gymnasium and land on his feet. With a soft, victorious smile, he strutted regally in full view of the competition.

“What a costume!” said one candidate, whom Ronnie immediately recognized as the flat-haired *bayot* who ridiculed him at the community hall. He was in a catsuit speckled with tiny mirrors. “Did you make that yourself?” he asked Ronnie. “How much did you pay for it?”

“Is that real, *te*?” another contestant asked. “Ava-ava-avant garde!”

Their fascinated exclamations floated up and enveloped him.

Ronnie was practicing his angles before a full-sized mirror when a contestant, looking petrified in a bright lavender kimono, startled him. The *bayot* stood unsteadily on six-inch clogs, his round face a shock of white makeup. He had on a wig of jet-black hair parted in three slick buns, adorned with a cluster of pink orchids. A sash was pinned on one of the kimono’s giant sleeves, signifying the nation he represented: Japan, lettered in blue glitter.

Oliver shrank, bracing as though for a slap.

It struck Ronnie with equal amusement and anger, a gossip mongering *bayot* trying to scare him out of competition.

“So this is why you wanted me out of Mintal.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” said Oliver. Liquid talc had begun to dissolve around Oliver’s puffy jaw. His thin sideburns were perspiring.

A few contestants, who’d been eavesdropping, descended on the neighbors. “Round One—Fight!” one of them cheered.

Ronnie gamely aimed his golden forearm at Oliver’s face, but somebody tugged at his

elbow.

“*Gwaps*, calm down,” Biboy said.

The boy’s presence calmed him. Biboy was still there, the one who’d been with him from the start. He thought about where the boy would go after all this was done. Ronnie slipped his bare arm around the boy’s back and they turned away.

Contestants were forming a queue behind the stage wings. Before leaving him backstage, the boy told Ronnie he would wait for him outside.

To wild cheers and a thumping techno beat, the night’s twenty-six candidates breezed onto the ramp, and forming a half circle across the stage, performed an impromptu line dance. A makeshift runway, dotted with light bulbs on the rim, stretched toward the huge hall. Bamboo arches from which hung loops of colorful metallic paper jutted out from both ends of the platform. Four big spotlights radiated from the ceiling. Beyond the stage was a hot, impatient swarm of people.

One by one the candidates took turns at the center microphone.

—“Welcome ladies and gentlemen, this is a tale as old as time! I am Beauty—and the Beast will follow. My name is Desiree Verdadero, seventeen years of age, and I come from the beautiful island of ice and fire, Reykjavik, Iceland!”

—“Season’s greetings! The family that prays together stays together, but the family that eats together is probably a pride of lions. This dusky beauty standing in front of you is Armi Barbara Crespo, and I represent the smile of Africa, Namibia!”

—“*Buenas noches, amigos del universo!* All things bright and beautiful. All creatures great and small. All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all. This is Guadalupe Sanchez *viuda* de Aurelio, nineteen years old, and I come from Caracas, Venezuela!”

Then it was Ronnie's turn.

He drifted across the platform, the saffron gown rustling on his manicured feet. His eyes swept past the faces of judges. In one corner of the hall, he could see little children outside perched on the branches of a tree, peering through the open vents like hairless monkeys. His face lit up when he spotted, near the edge of the second row, Biboy raising both thumbs up. Ronnie posed before the microphone, and lifting his golden arm, addressed the audience.

“A pleasant evening to all of you! The Little Prince said, ‘What is essential is invisible to the naked eye.’ My name is Maria Rosario Silayan, from the land of King Arthur and Lady Diana—Great Britain!”

The crowd roared. Sweeping the hem of his gown, Ronnie waved his golden arm at them. This was what he had come here for, the chance to tower in heels, look down with unbending grace at a crowd filled with awe, to glide as though life was just as easy. After striking a last pose, he walked back to where the other candidates stood.

While the stadium listened to the next contestant, Ronnie discerned a figure rising from the middle rows, the thick body of a man getting up from his seat.

It was the bald man, the very man who'd been watching him the other day, a pale vibrating shape trying to reach the front rows, elbowing people on his way. Could he possibly expose himself to these witnesses? Ronnie squinted, but there was no mistaking that underbite, the smooth hairless skull. For the first time, he was nervous. This death, it turned out, would have an audience.

But the bald man, instead of taking aim at the stage, stopped behind where Biboy was sitting. He clutched the boy's arm, forcing him to stand, as if Biboy were a child he'd been searching for all night.

On stage Ronnie tried to move. He tugged and heard a rip—the armored sleeve had snagged on the hip of his dress. He fumbled to get the thing off but his large fingers couldn't seem to close. He looked up and saw the boy's long narrow body being pulled toward the end of the hall.

Clasping the aluminum, Ronnie peeled the armored sleeve from his arm and flung it angrily, a gold husk arcing out of the stage, smashing into parts on the concrete, missing his target. The audience gasped. He could still catch them, he thought, as he hitched the dress around his hips, kicked off his high heels, and leaped from the stage. He landed hard on his knees and palms.

But Ronnie got up, unfettered by his garments, his limbs springing back to life. Refusing to believe that the boy was gone, he thrust himself into the aisle. His body shimmering, he cleared the rows of bewildered observers, ran beyond the exit, and stumbled into a sudden, cool night.