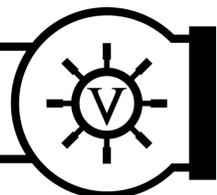


Silverware

Butterscotch Cream

PONY FICTION VAULT



With a name like Ironclad, you generally expect a big, brutish, slate-gray pony with a stern gaze about as hard as his namesake metal. That's about what you get most of the time—while I'm in armor anyway. I'm a stallion's stallion, a pony of the earth and proud of it. You can point me to a boulder and tell me to drag it from here to there and I'll do it. Feats of strength and endurance are an every-day thing, and when the changelings attacked I was bucking them three and four at a time. Generally speaking though, I like to think of myself as a *nice* pony. Having a job as a guardian and servant to the public has taught me many things: humility, chivalry, courtesy, integrity, self-discipline... Well, I could rattle off the whole set of Guard Statutes if I wanted. You get the idea.

But one thing my experiences did *not* endow me was finesse in the sacred art of social dining. I've never really been a high-society pony. Even in guard-duty I was always assigned the lower-class areas of town, and only rarely was I stationed within the palace grounds. I mean, sure, I *lived* there technically, but one look at the bustling beehive of the barracks kitchen with servants, guards and cooks narrowly dodging around each other and you know it's *nothing* like the posh and prettied dining halls that the non-servile ponies use. The gymnastics required to conquest a table spot notwithstanding, you usually sit, eat and get back to your post in short order, sometimes skipping the first step. Aside from respecting your superiors and common chivalry, manners in the mess-hall aren't the first priority.

On the other end of the spectrum, ninety percent of the aristocracy's socialization revolves around eating, or at least the pretense of it. The higher-status ponies stand around like shop mannequins in grand posture, strategically positioned where they're just close enough to hear each other and just far enough to be singled for admiration by everyone else. Whatever food or drink they may negligently hold is mostly a prop to complete their appearance. Oh, they'll take the occasional sip or nibble, but it's so slight and so brief I'd debate they managed to get anything more than a molecule past their teeth.

More to the point, the upper class follow a long list of esoteric and sometimes downright *arcane* mores and dietary laws regardless of whether or not anything is actually consumed. Breaking one of them within visual range automatically shoves you a few rungs down the social ladder, and makes you the unfortunate centerpiece in next week's gossip. Appearance and poise are *everything*.

And that, my friends, is how I lost my colt friend.

Now, before you go judging me on manners and etiquette, I'll have you know I'm both educated and a gentlecolt. I've known the basics from foalhood: Put your napkin in your

lap, swallow before you talk, chew with your mouth closed, wipe your hooves off before you eat—all that stuff. As for the “extras,” I worked my tail off trying to get all the obscure rules and regulations I thought would be necessary down pat before our date and I wanted to do my absolute *best*. I’m getting a little ahead of myself, though.

Cottonball was a candy blue unicorn from a reasonably well-off family and my first up-close-and-personal exposure to the higher castes of pony society. Given his lineage, he had a proclivity for expensive taste that my paycheck and I had difficulty adjusting to early in the relationship. Nevertheless, even if a little stiff from his upbringing, he was generally a sweet pony, delicate and proper in almost every social circumstance as gentility demanded—whether or not the circumstance did.

His parents weren’t all that bad either, though when he brought me home from a chance meeting during my patrol they seemed initially uncertain of their son taking a liking to a guard, and an earth pony at that. Not that they had anything *against* earth ponies, but as I myself discovered... earth pony guards and high society standards don’t always mix. Nicely.

I had already been going steady with Cottonball for around a year by the time of the fateful date. His parents had gotten over their first misgivings and generally treated me like one of the family, though I couldn’t help but notice I was never invited to any of their more austere occasions. That didn’t really bother me since those occasions were usually spent with Cottonball at the malt shop, as he (much to my pride) usually opted for my company rather than that of his family’s snootier friends.

This particular date was different, though, both in setting and significance. This was a proving grounds for me, and the anticipation of tying the knot had been floating around in my head for some time. In fact the whole thing was *my* idea. I figured if I can crawl through mud under barbed wire, blast through brick walls with nothing more than my iron-shod hooves and wrestle a grown stallion to the ground, I could handle eating off a plate at Cottonball’s favorite restaurant. I wanted to prove I could stand up to high society and make Cottonball look good, or at least not embarrass him. Cottonball had tried convincing me to start with a private affair at his home as a sort of “test run,” but I in my... *boundless wisdom* was determined to get it right the first time on the playing field.

Well...

Things didn’t go quite how I planned.

While the higher social climes aren't my *customary* habitat, I'd been around Cottonball's parents and the major palace shebangs enough to know that the first step to fitting into higher society was looking "nice." For a guard, that's actually rather easy: wear your dress uniform, give deference to everyone and treat everything you do as solemnly as military duty. Everyone you encounter will assume you're well-mannered and attired appropriately, even if you wear the same thing every time and have no idea what kind of social minefield you're meandering through.

So, I spruced myself up and even splurged on the cleaning, taking a five-minute shower instead of the usual 60-second wash-down you learn in boot-camp. A few of my friends in the guard helped me finish with the rest: getting my hair combed properly, making sure I was brushed and even ironing my dress uniform. Of course this was accompanied with the typical fraternal detail-doting while offering bits of romance advice with varying degrees of wisdom. Things were going pretty well when one of the pegasi assaulted me with a cologne bottle in the hallway.

The sudden wall of fragrance hit me so hard I thought he'd splashed the whole thing on my face. Then I spotted the tiny container clenched between his hooves, belching out an almost constant stream of "Acqua di Cavallo." A brief contest of keep-away ensued as I floundered helplessly through the miniature atmosphere, trying to smash his toxic weapon or him as he darted about like a dragonfly, still squirting the thing at every opportunity with infuriating agility. It's hard to tell someone you can't breathe when he's yelling at you to hold still and spraying a cloud of perfume up your nose whenever you inhale.

I was on the verge of asphyxiation when one of the more present-minded guards tackled him against the wall and shouted, "Beat it!" As I staggered to my escape out the barracks door, spritz-a-lot continued fumigating the air in my general direction with the spray-bottle, desperately babbling something about knowing what he was doing. I don't think I'll ever trust another stallion with a beautician for a marefriend.

To avoid becoming a public safety hazard, I stumbled to the nearest fountain and dunked as much of my head as I dared, trying not to *totally* ruin my painstakingly crafted date-look as I burbled and hacked into the pool. Even then, I couldn't stop coughing for ten of the fifteen minutes it took me to walk from the barracks to the restaurant where I was meeting Cottonball, drip-drying my face almost the entire way. Nevertheless, a quick glance at my reflection in the building window told me I hadn't arrived *too* badly off by my standards, and—the sudden case of asthma aside—I felt I was putting on a pretty good show. I mean, I hear "wet manes" are in fashion these days anyway. The drips of

residual water conveniently ignored, I thought it looked rather slick. Optimistically speaking, of course.

That was right about the time things began to... go unplanned. Well, more so. When the host had inquired whether I wanted a large or small table, I looked at the seating prices (apparently that's a thing in these high-collar places) and immediately chose the small one. The meal itself was going to cost me a heavy bit, and I wanted it to be as nice as possible for my colt. I figured he wouldn't mind if we got to sit a little closer together during the evening. The host smiled and nodded, I paid, he walked and we followed.

I was so enthused by how well my first five minutes were going that I wasn't really paying attention to my surroundings. I just helped Cottonball into his seat and sat into mine. That was when I noticed: the table was... *tiny*. By *tiny* I mean there was barely enough room for me to have played a comfortable game of solitaire. It was more like a glorified stool with a giant napkin draped over it.

This normally wouldn't have been a problem. I mean, while I like my elbow-space, I can deal easily enough with cramped quarters. But... a guard's dress uniform does have its inconveniences. In this case, the *helmet*. The helmet, while constantly worn on duty, takes an entirely different role in social garb. It's no longer an item of protection but one of decoration and symbolism. Of course this means that the helmet is removed and carried when inside a building, and in proper circles it's very bad form to place the helmet on the floor or anywhere else that might disrespect the uniform.

As I stared down at the dinky thing in front of me, the host's question about a large table or small instantly replayed through my head like some taunting phantom, and I wistfully imagined myself confidently and happily saying "large." Money wasn't quite so big of an object now, seeing as how the table was such a small one. This restaurant obviously didn't serve military personnel frequently, or... maybe going in full uniform wasn't as good an idea as I'd thought. I was *already* doubting how the place would serve us decently-sized meals on anything larger than tea saucers, so placing my helmet on the table (as would customarily have been done) was entirely out. I began to feel the first inklings of just how much I'd trapped myself.

Ordinarily, I'd have pulled over a chair or another table and set my helmet on it, but not only were all of the tables around us occupied, I instinctively knew that the gods of aristocracy peeping from the unseen would frown on such a sinful act. To make matters worse, the table we had was not only small but *short*, and being a bigger pony as I am it was a struggle not to bump it—especially when one or both of us were trying to aim a sip

from our water glasses. Thus setting the helmet in my lap would have appeared... *extremely awkward.*

Cottonball noticed something was wrong, though I insisted otherwise and decided to bite the bit. I plucked my helmet off and situated it as non-provocatively as possible in my lap, pretending it was perfectly normal and hoping that onlookers familiar with military tradition would at least view me with pity. I did my best to keep my thighs from moving to avoid any attention-drawing bobs, which I figured couldn't be any harder than holding a station-pose for six hours. If a little embarrassment was the biggest price I had to pay to pop Cottonball "the question" that night, I could live with that. I'd just *omit* that particular detail from my account to the boys at the barracks.

If only.

The helmet *did* garner some raised eyebrows and confused glances, but overall the other ponies were too oblivious, self-absorbed or polite to notice anything awry. Our waiter was the most pronounced, as he stopped and stared a good five seconds before I pointedly cleared my throat and asked for the menu. Cottonball and I placed our orders, and for the most part things seemed to be settling down. By the time our dinners arrived, chatting was going normally and I was feeling good enough to pat myself on the back again. I was in the middle of a laugh when I looked down and noticed two things:

First, as I had originally suspected, our plates and thus our serving sizes were atrociously small. So small that despite the cost of the meal I was seriously contemplating ordering a second, perhaps even third plate of the same thing. I could've eaten four or five of those little plates and still have been perfectly comfortable, but I figured for one night I could go light for the sake of Cottonball's appearance. Besides, it would have to wait anyway. They could only fit two of the darned things on our "table" at once, so I resigned myself to hoping the taste of the food was enough to warrant such a purchase.

The second thing I noticed was the strange, long cylindrical *cloth* thing the waiter had placed next to my tea saucer. Now, most of you who've been to places like this will immediately say, "Oh, well that was a napkin!" It took me a bit longer to recognize. In fact, it wasn't until Cottonball unwrapped his own silverware that I *did* realize what it was, and mimicked him as dutifully as possible.

The utensils clattered into a pile on the table, but otherwise I succeeded just fine, leaving me to tackle the question of whether I should place the napkin over or under my helmet. Eventually, I decided that draping the napkin over the helmet would have made it appear very much like something it wasn't, and figured that the rules of etiquette wouldn't be

horribly offended for the sake of decency in this matter if I made the wrong choice. I tucked the napkin under my helmet and looked back up at the table preparing to deal with the next dilemma: the silverware.

Now, I am *not* unfamiliar with silverware. I've seen it on many occasions and it's as common a word to me as any other. I just never used it. Each time I think I've learned all there is, I find out there's a sub-group of a dozen or so I've missed. I think somepony is *inventing* them on the side. Silverware is a quirk of the upper class, and if I'm honest, I've become vaguely convinced that it's a secret measure by which a household or restaurant demonstrates their level of refinement. The more shiny trinkets you can pile onto a table with the assumption the pony sitting there knows what they are, the fancier you've become.

In this case, at least, the setting was fairly generic: two forks, a knife and two spoons, most of which I counted as entirely useless. If I hadn't noticed that everyone there had the same setting I would have thought it was someone's idea of a joke at my expense. It seemed silly to have so many utensils assigned to such tiny plates of food. I didn't need to cut my salad with the knife—if I tried there might not've been anything *left*. Eating salad with a spoon was obviously ridiculous, and why anyone would need two of them was a mystery. At least the second *fork* made sense if you somehow managed to lose the first one. Since this experience, I've come to the grim conclusion that at least a part of their purpose is forcing you to eat so slowly that you *think* you're eating your money's worth. However, intentionally or not, I discovered they also serve as excellent tools for vetting out the socially inexperienced.

Two minutes had passed, and I was still staring at my silverware. Cottonball became concerned again and asked why I hadn't touched my food. "Oh! *Haha!* I'm just letting my food cool!" I was just letting my... *salad* cool. Cottonball just shook his head with a grin and kept eating his own, likely thinking I was trying to be funny. Well, I *wasn't*; sometimes being an idiot just comes naturally.

For once I was jealous of Cottonball's magic as he gracefully conducted his utensils, and my eyes began to rove around the room as my first true pangs of panic set in, hoping that I'd spot another earth pony and learn how to handle my silver by covert observation. There were plenty of unicorns, and a few pegasi who at least had the benefit of wings, but no earth ponies. Either I had just scheduled our date on a particularly non-earthly time, or earth ponies *avoided* this place for reasons I was just finding out.

My mind began to backpedal on my goals, and I started to think of ways to actually *avoid* eating. At those serving sizes it wouldn't have made much difference whether I ended up

eating or *not*. Maybe I could talk my way through dinner? As expected, most of the ponies seemed more interested in yammering than eating anyway, so I'd hardly seem out of place in that regard. Or, maybe I could *start* the evening by asking the big question, and Cottonball would be so blown away he'd never think of eating! But no. I'd come here to *prove* myself under pressure, not wiggle my way around it. I *had* to do this for Cottonball.

So, I took the combat approach of "Know thy enemy" and made my first fumbling attempts to grasp one of the forks. I say "attempts" because as soon as I reached for them, my silverware *came alive*. It was like chasing pieces of melting ice over a glass pane, and sounded less like handling silverware and more like a game of smash-the-beetle in a china cabinet. After a few humiliating seconds of frenetic grappling I was minus a spoon and my extra fork, which had leapt to their escape and tumbled into the protective shadows of other patrons' tables, leaving me helplessly glaring after them with my sternest guard-face. Fortunately, the *rest* of my tablesetting had remained in my custody, though the knife had snuck over to Cottonball's side of the table a few times.

Once I had managed to corral my remaining utensils into a pile again, Cottonball offered to help, but I insisted I was fine and I was "just getting the hang of it, that's all!" Of course, that was an outright *lie*. By some twisted serendipity I now regret, I accidentally managed to flip the rebellious fork into the crook of my foreleg at that moment, giving the temporary appearance of victory. Nonetheless, that was when I realized my true problem: My foreleg is far too beefy to securely grip something as tiny and wigglesome as the stems of my delinquent silverware. No matter how hard I tried, I *could not* squeeze my leg around it, which by then I noted the more adept ponies were doing, if they weren't using magic or wingfeathers. How they achieved such an unnatural dexterity I'll never know; perhaps they had their legs broken at birth.

I was not going to let this stop me, however, and decided to use the stroke of fortune to my favor. With a bit of struggling, I managed to wedge the fork under a prong of my armored shoe, and if I flexed my foreleg *just right* it was... somewhat less wobbly. With this improvised fork-holder, I began stabbing at my salad. My fork, however, had not yet been tamed. Every time I tried to pierce my salad, the fork would swerve off to clink uselessly against the side of my plate in any direction it was inclined. The more firmly I pierced, the more violently it swerved, reinforcing its independence by shoving what little contents of my plate there was onto the table around it and making a general mess of what was certainly intended as a "work of art."

Nevertheless, I pinned the reprobate down with my other forehoof and eventually managed to harpoon a slice of tomato. I should say *the* slice of tomato—it was the only

one. My triumph, however, was short-lived: as soon as I tried to lift it up to my mouth, I discovered that my legs don't bend that way. What's more, when I removed my forehoof to try again the tomato flopped back onto the plate with an almost insulting **smack**. The fork, which for *once* remained obediently still, couldn't be faulted.

I'd lost track of what Cottonball was doing at this point, though in all likelihood he was watching the unfolding scene open-mouthed, unsure of whether to offer me further assistance that he knew I was prone to reject again. Meanwhile, having been defeated, I had already formulated a new plan of attack: the tried and true method of grabbing the fork in my mouth. I snatched it up by the stem, turned my head and jabbed at my plate a few times. Success! I'd lost a few more pieces of salad in the process, but hanging tantalizingly within eyesight, my fork was finally stacked with several of the elusive vegetables.

Which, incidentally, I couldn't stick into my mouth. No wonder the fork hadn't struggled.

I dropped it back onto the plate and stared down the offending utensil with all the anger I could muster toward an inanimate object. I couldn't pick up the fork to eat with, I couldn't use my mouth and eating normally would leave me a reprehensibly smeared mess. The mess my silverware had *already* caused was quickly making that a moot point. For a moment, I even considered trying to wrap my (less than long) *tail* around the darn thing, until the mental image of the position necessary popped into my head. I wasn't even entirely sure I could *bend* that way, and I had no desire to give the appearance of attempting to lick my rump in public.

Ingenuity and persistence are the keys to success, though, and inspired by my first failure I decided that even if I couldn't grab the fork with one leg, I could likely tackle it with two. Here I would like to state that I believe my principle was entirely sound: I'd grasp the fork stem between my hooves, and eat from it like a popsicle stick. Unconventional? Yes, but workable, and when I'd dropped the fork on my plate, it had landed in such a way that the stem was sticking out over the edge. A little low, perhaps, but high enough that I could lift it.

As an earth pony, you're usually fairly adept at grabbing things—it's a necessary part of life—so it wasn't too *terribly* difficult to pinch the stem between my hooves and rotate them till the fork was in an upright position like I'd planned. Once again the fork was mostly compliant, and I'd achieved my second success and managed to get my first *real* bite of food for the evening. It was a milestone, and I found myself wearing a self-satisfied, giddy grin that couldn't have seemed anything if not maniacal.

By that point I had absolutely no idea how long I'd actually spent trying to get that first bite, but a look at Cottonball's plate told me he was only halfway through his meal. At first I thought this meant I'd made good time because, as I said, the servings were barely a few mouthfuls, but then I glanced up and noticed that most of the ponies I'd seen when we first arrived were gone and replaced by others. To make matters worse, my battles with the silver had already acquired their frequent, inquisitive and not-so-discreet glances, much to my humiliation. Perhaps they were rotating out the audience.

I realized that Cottonball, being the sweetheart he was, had simply slowed down to try and keep pace with me, or possibly I was making him lose his appetite. Either way, conversation had dropped to a dead stop since dinner had arrived, and I saw with a sinking sensation that rather than looking at me with adoring eyes as I wanted to imagine, he was glancing anxiously from one side to the other as if scoping escape routes. A wave of good-old army determination shot through me, and I knew it was time to prove my worth as a stallion and finish the meal properly. Underneath that mental pep-talk, I *really* just wanted to end it and suggest going to the malt-shop for dessert.

Unfortunately, whoever fashioned the keys to success decided to skimp on costs and make them fit the locks on disaster, too, and they didn't label the doors. Armed with my discovery of how to finagle the fork into submission, I again used my mouth to grab and load it with salad, topping it off with the ornery tomato that mocked my first attempt. Vengeance is juicy. And once again, I set the fork on my plate in such a way that I could lever it between my hooves, but this time I decided to be more efficient and put too much trust in the hooves unaccustomed to handling such delicately treacherous objects. Instead of grabbing the fork in its resting position and rotating my hooves like last time, I tried to use one hoof as a brace while edging my other hoof underneath the stem to lift it up, and the fork made its move.

sproinnnnng

I never found out what happened to most of those vegetables. I only know that my gape-jawed, bug-eyed expression was mirrored almost perfectly in my then-coltfriend's face, staring with abject horror at the miraculously empty fork held perfectly upright between my hooves. However, the chain reaction that followed was enough to make the location of the lost vegetables largely insignificant.

My old foe, the tomato, had found the perfect opportunity to poetically end my wretched struggles to consume it. Instead of flopping harmlessly on the floor or sticking to the ceiling like a few of the wilting pieces of lettuce, it had gracefully arced through the air and landed *precisely* on the crown of a neighboring mare's omelette. It didn't stay there.

A shrill scream shattered the otherwise stuffy atmosphere of the restaurant, and with one swipe of her foreleg that would put sports enthusiasts to shame, the mare had instinctively launched the entire plate of food like a discus back in my direction. I had, of course, reflexively turned toward the source of the scream. In a moment forever photographed in my memory, I saw in front of my face the omelette, perfectly centered on the plate with the tomato on top like the iris of some evil, angry eye leering malignantly at me, just before it slammed full force into my muzzle.

Now, I'm a big pony, as I've mentioned, and that tiny table Cottonball and I sat at didn't have much of a chance against a stallion that was flailing his way to the floor. Our meals and our silverware were launched into the air when my back hoof slammed into the bottom of the table, and I could see them hanging suspended in the air, flipping gracefully like little metal acrobats. Then, as though possessed by an angered spirit of etiquette, the "business ends" of knives, forks and spoons alike aligned themselves downward and began raining indiscriminate retribution on me and anyone unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity with an uncannily sentient vengeance. More food was spilled, more tables knocked and more screams were heard as the collateral damage played itself out. I have no idea where my helmet went, though I later found it in a corner, covered in ketchup with the blunt end of a knife embedded in the plume.

At the end of those few, agonizingly tumultuous seconds, I was lying on the carpet covered in salad, egg, wine and several other comestibles that had mysteriously added themselves to my uniform. The tomato surreptitiously managed to drape itself over the bridge of my nose. Patrons all around were yelling and calling for waiters, demanding explanations and generally staring with offended, superior gazes. Beyond all that, though, standing in front of me looking as though he were near tears, was Cottonball.

Everything I had planned and done had been a hopeful effort of making him happy. I'd been arrogant enough to believe I could have handled it all myself, that his world was nothing I couldn't conquer. And yet, here I could only watch as my chances of impressing him melted into the salad dressing now oozing into the carpet. Feeling humiliated and as though all the world were crumbling around me, I, a grown stallion in the royal guard, started to cry.

"Cotton... *Cottonball*—all I wanted to do was impress you! I wanted to show you... *Oh Cotton...*"

I'm not entirely sure *what* made me do it. I was scared, caked in food, and I knew beyond a doubt I had just brought unspeakable shame to Cottonball *and* his family. I had utterly

failed my own ground test, and in the maddened grappling of a pony desperate beyond hope, I croaked out:

“Cotton, *please* marry me... oh *please*...”

I’m not sure if everyone in the room stopped talking, or if my ears had been turned off for anyone but Cottonball. Either way, Cottonball is the only one I remember hearing. I saw a tear trickle down his cheek and my gut wrenched inside of me, my hope dying just a little more. His horn glowed and I felt him clean the egg and tomato off my face, being the kind colt he was. He stepped close and shook his head.

“*You, and no one else, Ironclad.*”

And, with a smile slightly smeared in splattered salad dressing, he kissed me.

If there needs to be a moral to this story—and I suppose there might as well be—it’s that while our weaknesses and mishaps can knock us down, they can also be the venues to the best things in our lives. But on a more pragmatic note, if someone offers you the chance to circumvent your weakness with a test run, for goodness sake *take it*.

Oh, I said I lost my colt friend, didn’t I. Well I did—and gained a mate. And in some rather ironic way, I suppose I have to thank the silverware.