

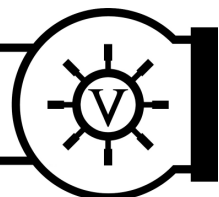
# **Ships & Notes**

**Ebon Mane**

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**PONY FICTION VAULT**



Twilight Sparkle watched the last orange rays of dusk fade. When night had well and truly fallen, she turned with a sigh and began preparations to close the library for the night. When she'd first taken on her role as librarian to Ponyville, she had only kept the library open until mid-afternoon. Those hours had generally been sufficient; the library was never busy, catering mostly to young ponies studying and adult ponies that wanted a new piece of fiction every few weeks. In the past few months, however, Twilight had kept the doors open late, all for one special customer.

He came once every few days, like clockwork, to return the book he'd checked out on his last trip. Inevitably, he would spend a few minutes wandering around the library, perusing the shelves, deciding on what book to check out; he always checked out at least one, every trip. Usually, they would exchange a few words; greetings, pleasantries, the occasional jest. Twilight spent most of the time he was in the library trying not to watch him. It was difficult. He would end up leaving well after dark. Twilight did not blame him for that; she knew that work on the farm didn't end until near sunset, the trip from Sweet Apple Acres was a long one, and Twilight never regretted working a few extra hours to wait for Big Macintosh.

Seeing the red stallion walk into the library was the high point of Twilight's days. She didn't know what about him attracted her so much. Perhaps it was how safe he made her feel. Intellectually, she knew that her magic was a more powerful response to a threat than anything the earth pony could have done. Still, there was something about his towering presence and the timbre of his voice that made Twilight feel like when Big Mac was in the room, nothing bad could ever happen, and nothing could possibly harm her. Perhaps it was the words they shared; his greetings swelled Twilight's heart and his jokes never failed to make her laugh. Perhaps the attraction was more physical than she would have cared to admit; long days on the farm had given Big Mac an impressive musculature. Whatever it was, Twilight could not deny its effect on her; butterflies had invaded her stomach in anticipation of seeing him.

Eventually, as she had hoped, he arrived. He said his greetings. He returned his book. He asked her about her day, and made a few jokes. The conversation was a blur in Twilight's mind. He lingered in the library, checking in each of the sections, before finally selecting a tome to take home. He brought it to her so that she could check it out, and she took it from him with her magic, made a few marks in the logbook with a quill, and surreptitiously slipped a note into the book before levitating it into his saddlebag. Then, as quickly as he had come, he was gone. That was always the worst part of Twilight's days.

As she locked the door, she thought of the note. All her feelings for him, spilled out on paper. This was her third note to him. Twilight Sparkle suspected that he had ignored her first two notes, but desperately hoped that it wasn't so. She thought that ignoring the notes might be his way of letting her down easy; she knew that she would have been devastated if he'd simply told her outright that the feelings were not mutual. With a heavy heart, she'd decided that this would be her last note to him. If he didn't respond to this one, she'd accept that they weren't meant to be, and try to get on with her life without him.

However hard she expected that to be.

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Big Macintosh berated himself for his cowardice.

It was the same as just about every other time he'd gone to the library. He had entered ready to declare his feelings for Twilight Sparkle, but his courage had fled as soon as he saw her. He'd forced himself to make small talk, feeling like the most awkward pony ever to walk on the face of Equestria. He'd managed to return the library book he'd checked out on his last unsuccessful attempt at asking out the unicorn of his dreams. All that accomplished, he'd failed to gather the determination necessary to attempt a confession, and pattered about the library for a few minutes, trying not to stare at Twilight, before finally grabbing a book at random and checking it out.

The comedy of errors had been the highlight of his day, as it always was, but it left him practically kicking himself for his failure. He took one last look at the library, barely lit by the newly risen moon, before turning to walk toward Sweet Apple Acres. The walk home was inevitably the worst part of Big Mac's day; the stallion was alone with his failure and his regrets.

Big Macintosh's only comfort was the weight of the book in his saddlebag. The book gave him a good reason to come back and test his courage again in a few days, though that's the only good he'd get out of it. Big Mac never read the books he checked out from the library; between his trips, they sat in his saddlebags unopened, gathering dust. He'd never so much as cracked a single one.

Apple Bloom looked down at the most imposing tome that she had ever seen. It sat on the impromptu table formed by the desks of Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and herself, dominating the surface entirely. "*Changes In Equestrian Society In The First Hundred Years After Nightmare Moon's Banishment*," Apple Bloom quoted the title to nopony in particular. Her voice didn't carry far in the din of the class; the room was filled with the sound of students familiarizing themselves with the books they'd have to do their senior reports on, as well as the more sizable noise of students ignoring their assignments entirely. Apple Bloom glanced around the room, and noted that the other groups appeared to be having a lot more fun than hers.

Sweetie Belle still seemed shell-shocked at the sheer size of their book. Her eyes wide with disbelief, she complained, "I really wish that we had been able to choose our assignments. I think we got the worst Equestrian History assignment in the history of Equestrian History. Look at this thing! It's huge!" Her forelegs gesticulated wildly in the direction of the tome, which did not deign to respond.

Scootaloo replied with a dismissive grunt. "I really wish we'd been able to choose our groups," she said, looking over at a nearby group of pegasi. "This is our last project of our last year of school. I want to be able to do it with my friends."

"Then I guess we'll just have to finish it quickly," Apple Bloom said, using a hoof to flip the heavy cover to reveal the first page of many.

"Hey, what's that?" Sweetie Belle asked as her horn started to glow. She used her magic to grab a small, folded piece of paper that Apple Bloom hadn't noticed was tucked into the cover when she had opened the book. Sweetie Belle unfolded it and started to read, first gasping, then giggling at the words.

Apple Bloom looked on with impatience. "Well, what's it say?"

"It's a loooooove letter," Sweetie Belle responded, an amused smile on her face. "Here, read it." She floated the letter to Apple Bloom, who looked it over. The note was addressed to a 'special customer', and the neat text and perfect grammar gave contrast to the writer's apparent ignorance in the area of romance. It was almost as though the writer didn't even know that they were writing a love letter. Apple Bloom couldn't help but smile in sympathy; she'd been ignorant of the birds and the bees at one time as well.

"This is just too funny. That poor writer. I wonder how long this has been in that book. Scootaloo, want a look?"

The pegasus glanced at the paper with distaste. "Not really. Seems kinda lame to me, some old love letter in a dusty library book." She returned her gaze to the classroom's clock, noticeably impatient.

Apple Bloom turned her attention back to the letter, "I wonder if they ever ended up together. Whether the customer even got this note. How'd it end up in this old book?" She was suddenly overcome by a wave of nostalgia. "D'y'all remember when we would have seen this and done somethin' like yell 'Cutie Mark Crusader Matchmakers, go!' and tried to figure out this note and get the two people together. For all of about five minutes, of course."

That brought a bark of laughter from Scootaloo. "Ha! Yeah, we were so lame back then." She smiled just a bit, her eyes distant.

Apple Bloom managed an uneasy grin and a weak laugh. "Heh, yeah, lame." In truth, she missed the days of the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Sometimes it seemed like just yesterday that the two ponies in front of her had been her best friends, but for the last few years, they'd rarely spoken. After they all had discovered their cutie marks, they just sort of... grew apart. Now Sweetie Belle spent all her free time with her choir friends, Scootaloo was always at track and sky practice, and Apple Bloom was usually busy helping her siblings out on the farm. The young earth pony doubted that they'd ever reconnect, especially with Scootaloo headed off to flight school in Cloudsdale next year and Sweetie Belle applying to colleges in Canterlot and Fillydelphia.

Sweetie Belle used her magic to fold the letter up and slip it back into the book. She looked a bit sad as she said quietly, "We should leave it in there. Maybe someday, it'll find that special customer."

Apple Bloom agreed, but as the bell rang and they closed the tome, she couldn't help but pity the sender of the note. A message like that, she knew, was sent from the feelings of one pony to the feelings of another. She couldn't help but think that a letter lost for so long might as well be in an envelope marked with two addresses that no longer existed.

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The Mare sighed as she closed the front door to her house and slipped off her collar of office. She'd dreaded coming home, even more than she had dreaded her inevitable defeat. When she'd lost, she had been among her supporters, few as they were, and their kind words and sympathy had softened the blow. They'd all seen it coming; every

politician loses an election sometime, and her opponent had run an amazing campaign, to nopony's surprise.

Everypony had expected Twilight Sparkle to become the next mayor of Ponyville when she had announced her candidacy. The Mare was surprised that she had waited this many years to try to run; the leadership and administrative ability that the unicorn had shown over the years of winter wrap-ups and crises from giant bears to plagues to riots had convinced The Mare that Twilight would inevitably replace her at some point. She had just always hoped that the point would be one far in the future.

But as she lit the silent rooms of her home one by one, the realization hit The Mare that she wasn't going to be the mayor once Twilight took office. The house had always seemed empty, just one mare living in what was intended to be a family home, but The Mayor had always brought a sense of purpose back from her job, and that determination had seemed to fill the building and keep her company on the long, lonely nights. Now, The Mare could only bring the grim spectre of defeat, which seemed to speak from the dark corners of the rooms, filling her with doubts: 'where do you go from here?' and 'what will you do with yourself now?', but most dreadfully, 'was it all worth it?'. The night got colder when The Mare realized that she didn't know.

Twilight had told The Mayor that she could stay on as an advisor after she left office; she was, after all, more familiar with the position of mayor than anypony else in Ponyville. The Mare wondered how long that would last, and what she could do after, and how it would feel to train her replacement for a position that she'd held for almost two-thirds of her life. She shuddered at the depressing line of thought, and resolved to drown it in a stiff drink. She didn't bother mixing the clear alcohol with juice as she normally did; that night, The Mare just wasn't in the mood. She shuddered at the taste, but managed to down quite a bit in one long draw.

Presently, The Mare felt a bit better, or at least less aware of how bad she felt. She glanced idly around the room, thoughts unfocused. A campaign poster prototype hung on one wall. That would have to go. A banner had been hastily kicked under the sofa, and The Mare could still read 'CONG' as the first few letters. Probably a part of an aborted party to congratulate her on her victory. She wondered why her staffers had gone through the trouble of making the banner when they should have known that they'd never use it. She supposed that they might have kept the one from the previous election. Her eyes settled on a closed book set in a stand on the opposite side of the room.

She'd checked the biography out of the library before the election season, but hadn't had a chance to read or even touch it after bringing it home, being busy with the campaign. It

was written about one of the more famous mayors of Fillydelphia, a statespony that she'd always looked up to. It was sure to have details from after he retired; perhaps it would have some insight into what a politician could do when their public life came to an end. She made her way unsteadily across the room and stabilized herself against the stand before flipping open the book, struggling to focus her eyes on the page.

The Mare's vision settled on a note that had been slipped into the book, just small enough to fit between the cover and the first page without being noticed. The Mare was lucky that it was open and readable immediately; she doubted that she could have even flipped it over had it been placed with the writing facing the other direction, much less flatten it had it been bent along the creases of past folds. The Mare slowly read through it, and shock over the contents of the note sobered her a bit as she scanned the letter a second time to confirm what she'd read.

It was from Twilight to Big Macintosh, and it appeared to be a love letter. The Mare considered how public knowledge of this note would have been quite awkward for all involved; Big Mac and Fluttershy were expecting their third foal soon. If she'd known about this before the campaign, the scandal might have been enough to -

No. No, she wouldn't have wanted to win that way. Besides, the letter looked old, and like it had been folded and unfolded several times over the years. It had probably been written long before Big Mac and Fluttershy had married. The Mare felt a bit of sympathy for Twilight; the letter was incredibly well written, full of imagery comparable to some of the best romantic poets she'd read, and the feelings it expressed seemed so strong and pure that it struck The Mare as a shame that the letter obviously hadn't worked. Twilight had never dated Big Macintosh. Actually, thinking back, The Mare couldn't remember Twilight ever dating anypony.

The Mare sighed. That was another thing that she had in common with her victorious opponent; she'd never been in a relationship with anypony either. Straight out of school, she'd become the administrative assistant of the previous mayor, and after taking on more and more of his responsibilities to make up for his incompetence, she'd soundly defeated him in the first mayoral election after she had graduated. After that, she'd just been consumed by her work; she lived and breathed Ponyville, and had never had time for hobbies and stallions. Now, the empty silence of her house reminded that she'd never found romance, never married, never had foals. Hadn't she wanted all that, way back in the distant past of her childhood?

The Mare stared at the love letter for a long time, thinking. She wasn't dead yet. She could still find love, find happiness as The Mare instead of The Mayor, even get a new

job in something other than politics. She had a lot of money saved up; she could move to Manehattan. She was sure that there would be plenty of single ponies her age in the largest city in Equestria.

The Mare closed the cover of the book. The dry biography had helped her, she thought, but not in the way she'd expected. She intended to return it to the library in the morning, and tell Twilight that she couldn't accept a position as an advisor; she intended to move out of Ponyville as soon as Twilight was sworn in to office. She left the note inside, in the hope that it would help other ponies as it had helped her.

The Mare smiled; her life wasn't over yet, and she intended to enjoy it to the best of her ability for as long as she could.

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Twilight Sparkle sat, legs folded under her, on a cushion in the center of the library as a classful of young fillies and colts wandered around her tree. Their teacher was trying but failing to keep them all at a respectful volume, and their enthusiasm made the unicorn smile. The population of Ponyville had grown over the decades, but the library was still at its busiest when a local school picked it as the destination for a field trip. Twilight didn't mind; she had become comfortable with being the center of attention.

Twilight generally proved to be a more interesting curiosity than the library itself to young ponies. Inevitably, there were questions about what it had been like to preside over Ponyville as mayor, and about what things had been like when she was young. She'd given up protesting that she wasn't that old when her mane had faded to gray, and now her coat, mane, and tail were all bleached pure white with age. Her horn had faded to white, and then gained the yellow-brown tarnish of old ivory. Only her cutie mark was unchanged, still brilliant purple after all these years. No pony else in Ponyville was near as old as she, so she could understand the curiosity the foals had about the effects age had on a unicorn as ancient as Twilight.

The teacher looked anxious about her class's behavior as she stood next to Twilight's resting place. "I'm sorry about the mess they're making, Twilight Sparkle. I'll get them to clean up before they leave."

Twilight reassured her in the croak that never stopped sounding strange to her own ears, "Don't worry too much about it. Let them have their fun. I'll have plenty of time to clean up when you're back at the school." Twilight had liked Schoolday Blues since she was just a filly, always interested in learning and teaching. She'd never have admitted it to the



others, but Schoolday was her favorite among Pinkie Pie's great-grandfoals. They chatted idly while the students investigated all the obscure corners of the library, read bits of interesting-looking books on magic, and asked Twilight the occasional question. They made her tell the story of defending the town from a full-grown ursa major twice. Eventually, it was time to go, and Schoolday Blues herded the students out the door and back toward the schoolhouse.

Humming to herself, Twilight began to call on her magic. The room filled with a purple glow as she levitated the books that had ended up on the floor to herself. The cataracts in her eyes made it hard to read at a distance, so she brought each book to her face in turn to read the title before whisking it off magically to where it needed to go; she knew the library by heart, and remembered the place for every book. Still, sometimes she missed having Spike around to help out; he'd gone to take his first draconic nap some years back, and with over ninety years left before he woke, Twilight didn't expect to see him ever again. He probably would have made some smart remark about expecting her to get up to help, anyway. It had been years since she'd gotten up to move a book the earth pony way; her muscles were so weak and her bones were so brittle that she relied on magic almost entirely when she needed to move around. Without her magic, mundane tasks like getting the library in order would have been impossible, but with it, she made good progress. Soon, the floor was clear, the books were arranged, and the work was done.

That's when Twilight really started to feel alone. Her work kept her busy, which was why she had insisted on continuing to serve as Ponyville's librarian well past when most ponies would have retired. In decades past, she would have received visits from her friends, or gone to see them, even Rarity in Canterlot, but one by one they had passed away. Fluttershy, the last survivor among the friends that the unicorn had gained on the day of Nightmare Moon's return, had died almost a decade before. Twilight remembered it as clearly as if it had happened yesterday; Fluttershy had looked so serene when she passed on, like she never had to fear anything again. Twilight recalled the funeral, scores of Fluttershy's foals, grandfoals, great-grandfoals, and all their families had gathered in mourning. She wondered sometimes who would attend her funeral; all her close friends were long gone, and she had no foals of her own. She supposed that when the time came, she wouldn't be in a position to care.

The opening of the library door interrupted her morbid thoughts, and she saw by the sun that several hours had passed. A young unicorn entered the room hesitantly, and Twilight looked at her with a welcoming smile; Twilight recognized one of the fillies from the class that had visited her earlier. "Hello there. What brings you back so soon?"

"Um... Hi Auntie Twilight," the filly said hesitantly. It seemed these days that more than half the colts and fillies in Ponyville were descended from one of Twilight's friends or another, when they weren't related to two or more, and all of those young ponies called her Aunt or Auntie. Twilight couldn't help but swell with some pride whenever she heard them call her that; biologically, she had been an only foal, so she had no more blood nieces and nephews than she did sons and daughters. "I'm looking for a book."

"Well I think I have one or two around here somewhere," Twilight quipped. "You looking for just any book, or for one in particular?"

"I remember it from earlier. It had a note in it. I think I can find it." The filly went to the shelves and in a few moments, she levitated a quite a large book on introductory magic over to Twilight and set it down in front of her. "Can I check this one out? I remembered it because of the note I found in it today."

Twilight smiled at the little unicorn. She was too young to have a cutie mark, and already levitating large objects. "My, my. That's some impressive magic for such a little pony. And you're going to study more, I see."

Nodding, the filly struck a pose clearly intended to be heroic. "Yeah! I'm going to become the bestest magic pony ever, and protect Ponyville and be awesome just like you. You're my hero, Auntie Twilight! I'm going to read every day 'til I can lift an ursa."

"A good goal. Just remember the one thing more important than strong magic."

The little pony tilted her head as she looked at Twilight quizzically. "What's that?"

"Strong friendships. You can have the strongest magic in Equestria, but it won't make you happy when you're alone. Strong magic or not, if you have strong friendships, you'll go far. Just remember that. And what note did you find?" Twilight lectured as she filled out the paperwork for checking the book out.

The smaller unicorn's horn glowed as she opened the front cover of the book and levitated a small scrap of paper close enough to Twilight that she could read it.

"Just a little note, I don't really know why it was there, Auntie Twilight."

Seven words. There was no indication who the note was to or from, but Twilight knew. Seven words, and so simple, but Twilight remembered writing them, so very, very long ago. The third note she had written had been the shortest, but it was the essence of what she had felt. What had taken the first two letters paragraphs to express had been stripped

down to seven words that said it all. She managed not to break down in front of her customer as she slipped the note back into the book. "Why don't we keep that in there? I think it's a message that anypony would do well to read and take to heart. That's a good enough reason not to take it out." Twilight levitated the book into the small unicorn's saddlebag, and wished her luck in school as she left the library, weighed down slightly by the large tome.

And then Twilight was alone with her strong magic and thoughts of the note. Seven words, but she remembered the message to Big Macintosh perfectly after all these years:

*I love you. Please don't ignore me.*