

Continuum

Chapter 2

by Lady Moondancer

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The ponies staggered, disoriented from the unintended teleportation. All except the two pegasus ponies; they were enjoying an aerial view of their new destination. Also unintentionally.

It had been an eventful day for all the ponies, particularly Rainbow Dash. She had fought pterodactyls, *almost* visited a crazy volcano, tried an (awesome!) new flying trick, and teleported through a magic portal that made her feel like she was being turned inside out. The day promised further interest as the magic released her from her orbital path, but did nothing to lessen her momentum or speed.

"AHHHHHHHHHHH!!!" The other ponies gaped as the blue pegasus bulleted across the sky in an uncontrolled spiral. With a deathgrip on Rainbow Dash's tail and a resigned expression on her face, Fluttershy fishtailed wildly behind her. It might have been her added weight that allowed Rainbow Dash to fight into an upright position and snap her wings out in a sudden stop.

A yellow and pink blur streaked past as Fluttershy was slingshotted over her head. Rainbow Dash heard, from an increasingly distant voice, "oh deeeeeeeeeaaaaar—"

"Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash clapped her hooves to her mouth in horror as she watched Fluttershy arc right across the valley, her crash landing on a distant hill marked by a poof of snow. Rainbow Dash was about to shoot after her, but pulled up to avoid crashing into the pterodactyl that had appeared out of absolutely nowhere, lazily winging through the sky.

"Don't worry, Rainbow Dash, I'll get her," offered Pinkie Pie, who had recovered more quickly than her friends. Rainbow Dash reluctantly left the task to her, only because her wings ached so much after being magically propelled through the loops of the Atomic Aerial Rainbow at super-equine speeds.

As Pinkie bounced off across the snow, Twilight Sparkle stared around her with her hooves still over her head. "W-where are we?"

"You mean you don't know?" Rarity asked with concern in her voice. She was lying on her back with her hair in a tangle over her eyes, her hindquarters elevated by something she strongly suspected was Applejack's rump. It was not an appropriate or dignified pose for a lady, but Rarity had decided to put her poise on hold until her head stopped spinning.

"Wherever we are, it's freezing. And SNOWING! Why is it SNOWING?" Rainbow Dash added, wrinkling her nose as a single, stray snowflake landed on it.

Applejack groaned. "Would ya mind keepin' your voice down just now, Rainbow? My head feels like a freshly bucked apple tree." She stood up, causing Rarity to squeak as her hindlegs thumped onto the ground. "Oops—sorry 'bout that, Rare."

"Qu. Quite all right, Applejack," Rarity said with a quick smile. "I'm just . . . glad we're all together. Still without casualties, ah ha ha ha."

"Uh . . . aren't you gonna get up too?" Applejack asked cautiously.

"All in good time, my dear. All in good time."

"Oh no!" Twilight gasped suddenly, pushing herself into a sitting position. "Spike! Where's Spike?"

"Mmmph! Mmmph!"

"Spike?? Oh, thank goodness." The purple unicorn's head swiveled around. "Where are you?"

Applejack gazed at a small purple hand waving from the snow. That was under Twilight. "Uh, Twi . . . I think you're sittin' on him."

Twilight froze, then leapt up with a sheepish grin. "Sorry about that, number one assistant."

"Geez, Twilight, you need to lose some weight," complained the baby dragon, shaking snow off his green and purple scales. "What happened? Did one of your spells mess up again?"

"This was NOT one of my spells messing up aga—it was not one of my spells messing up." Twilight stomped her hoof so hard she sank into the snow up to her elbow. "Somehow Rainbow Dash's trick—"

"The Atomic Aerial Rainbow."

"—combined with raw magical energy to send us . . . somewhere," the unicorn finished lamely.

"Your magical energy?" Spike raised an eyebrow.

Twilight gave him a look that was a good imitation of Fluttershy's Stare. "That isn't. the point. The point is we need to get back. Spike, take down a letter to Princess Celestia—"

"With what?"

Twilight paused. All her quills and parchment were back in Ponyville and the remains of the much-abused library books (rest in peace, sweet tomes, and flights of choir books sing thee to thy rest) seemed to have been incinerated by the spell. "—okay, we'll wait on the letter. Our first priority is to find out where we—" A frigid wind whipped across the snowy plain, straight through her bones, and Twilight reordered her priorities. "—to find some shelter."

"What about Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie?" Applejack looked worried.

"I can teleport them back here." Twilight Sparkle tried to sound confident. Sure, she had only ever tried

teleporting one extra pony at a time, and only until her test subject, Fluttershy, had said that if it wouldn't be too much trouble she would like to opt out of any further experiments, please, because she was tired of her tail catching fire. Twilight tried to ignore the skepticism plainly written on Spike's face. "You girls—" "Ahem." "—and Spike go on ahead, get out of the cold."

Rainbow Dash flicked her tail. Deep in her being she felt that SHE should be the one to rescue Fluttershy since she had kinda accidentally catapulted her to begin with. But Twilight's teleport spell thingie *would* be faster and Dash's wings still felt like noodles. "Okay," she reluctantly conceded. "Fluttershy landed over that-a-way. We'll wait for you, uh—"

"By that big rock at the base of that ridge," Rarity said, her mane somehow arranged in a perfect, delicate curl once more.

Twilight looked at the large rock capped with snow at the far side of the valley and nodded. "Good choice. See you girls—" "Ahem." "—and Spike soon. I was GOING to say 'and Spike', honestly." She rolled her eyes as she teleported away.

"Race you guys to the rock!" Rainbow Dash said, trying to raise her spirits, but she did not complain when Applejack told her there was a time and place for racing and this weren't it. They trudged across the snow, three ponies longing to get out of the cold and one baby dragon longing for a romantic date with Rarity. A starry night, the flicker of a single candle, maybe some rubies with a magma glaze for dinner . . .

The skies had opened so quietly and gently that none of them were sure when it had started to snow. The flakes started out small, but by the time they reached the rock they had graduated to large, wet snowflakes that caught together in feathery masses as they spun to the ground.

"We're here, what a relief. And look, there's a little outcropping over here. A . . . *very* little outcropping, but I dare say we can all fit in there if we squeeze."

"Ugh, it's full of snow and stuff," Rainbow Dash said, eyeing the small cave-like crevice with distaste.

"Musta blown in there. With a little horsepower we can scrape it out an'—"

Spike interrupted her with a gesture, holding up his hand. "Excuse me, ladies, but I've got this one." He sucked in a breath that made his cheeks bulge and expelled it as a blast of green flames. The snow melted before their eyes, evaporating in a gust of steam.

"Oh, that was *most* helpful, Spike, thank you." Rarity patted the little dragon's head as he gazed rapturously up at her.

"Heck yeah, you even warmed up the rocks!" Rainbow Dash laid down in the newly cleared space, stretching her limbs (all six of them) luxuriously.

"It ain't JUST for you, Rainbow," Applejack reminded her. "Now shove on over and let the rest of us in."

Grumbling a little, Rainbow Dash did so. "It's not my fault I need more space, I have WINGS." She opened them, batting the other two ponies in the face.

"Rainbow Dash," Rarity's voice was slightly muffled. "*Please* be so kind as to remove these *lovely* feathers before I use them for my next hat."

Rainbow Dash snapped her wings shut with an indignant gasp. "You wouldn't!"

Rarity gave her a steely gaze. "Oh *wouldn't I?*"

"I'll help you make it, Rarity!" Spike eagerly put in.

"Uh, good job findin' this here cave, Rarity!" Applejack said, reaching out a foreleg to pull Spike to her other side, away from Rainbow Dash and, for that matter, Rarity. "I reckon we'll have to find something a mite bigger when Twilight gets here with t'other two, though."

Rarity nodded. "I saw another small shelf on the other side of the rock—*not* as comfortable as this one, mind you, because it faces the wind, but better than nothing. Perhaps I should go over and examine it more thoroughly—"

Applejack shook her head. "Best wait for the others to come back. No sense in freezing your patootie off before ya need to."

"My . . . oh yes, that. Well," the white unicorn sighed, "I supposed you're right."

Spike sat down and picked a little pebble off the ground, tasting it and making a face. "Hey guys . . . where do you think we are?"

The ponies looked at one another. It was the obvious question. The annual Winter Wrap Up had begun that morning. All across Equestria ponies should be welcoming spring. So how could it be snowing outside?

"I reckon we're be far enough outta some town or 'nother that they ain't got round to cleaning up the snow and all yet."

"Indeed—for *years* it took Ponyville more than a single day to wrap up winter, I'm sure such is the case in many other areas as well," Rarity said.

"I'll bet we're near Seaddle, I've heard they're really lax about cleaning up clouds on time," Rainbow Dash added, selectively ignoring the fact that Cloudsdale sent Seaddle nothing but rain clouds.

"Wherever we are, we're safe an' dry an' we got a dragon fireline straight to the princess soon as we find some paper," Applejack said, smiling at Spike. "So don't you worry none."

"And you'll have something to rib Twilight about, right?" Rainbow Dash grinned, elbowing Spike.

"Oh, you'd better believe it! I'm never gonna let her live this one down!" Spike smiled and took advantage of a rare opportunity to snuggle close to Rarity. And if the smile she gave him was more maternal than he would've liked . . . oh well.

The three ponies also settled themselves as best as they could on the uneven, rocky floor. If they felt an

underlying unease about their location or predicament, none of them voiced it. They merely stared out at the snow as they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

"They shoulda been back here ages ago. Where in tarnation are they?" Applejack kept her voice low to keep from waking a gently snoring Spike.

"Oh dear, what if they're lost?" Rarity worried. Unfortunately this seemed like the most likely possibility. The snow was falling thick and fast, hiding the landscape behind a drifting white veil.

The conversation seemed to break whatever spell or miracle of nature had kept Rainbow Dash motionless. "I'll find them!" The rainbow-haired pegasus leaped to her feet, so fired up she barely noticed her head bonking against the stone ceiling. "I should've been out there to begin with!"

"Rainbow *Dash*, sit down this instant! We need to stay together!" Rarity was on Rainbow's trail (and *she* remembered to duck) as the pegasus darted out of the cave.

Applejack followed too, frowning fiercely at the sky blue pony. "Going out in a storm like this is just plain foolishness! I know you got better sense than that, Rainbow!"

"Well . . . yeah. I guess it's not such a smart plan." For a moment Rainbow Dash seemed to deflate, lowering her head. Just as the other two ponies relaxed, she raised her head to reveal eyes glinting with determination. "But I still gotta try." She spread her wings and leapt forward and up.

Applejack lunged, snapping at her tail and missing by a fraction of an inch. Rarity helped the earth pony to her hooves and they stood side by side, helplessly watching the blizzard hide their friend far, far too quickly.

"And then there were two," Applejack said nervously, pawing at the ground.

"Guys? Where'd everyone go?" Spike's voice floated out of the cave.

"Uh. Make that three."

Earlier (not by much), elsewhere (not so far).

It would be nice to think that some sense of destiny or fate propelled Moonstone through the forest, but in fact he chose it simply because the amount of snow underhoof was so much less under the trees. The evergreen branches overhead crisscrossed, dimming the sun, but nevertheless it was warmer here out of the wind. *Mwush, mwush* went his hooves in the soft snow as he walked between dark, bristling spruces and tall, spindling alpine firs.

The fact that he continued on after the trees thinned and retreated can mostly be attributed to

stubbornness.

It wasn't easy. Suddenly he was struggling through snow above his knees. Crystalline powder shimmered on the surface, but underneath it lay old snow, snow that remembered the beginning of winter and had lain all this time, crushed and compacted by every new snowfall, until it was now more like layered ice.

Moonstone found that if he walked very quickly and carefully, placing each hoof with exact precision, the hardened crust of snow would support him just long enough to give him false hope before buckling under his weight exactly as it would have if he'd used a less tiring and time-intensive approach. After twenty feet Moonstone gave up on precision and the rainbow-haired pony moved forward through a combination of high-stepping and forward lunges.

He had just triumphantly fought his way to the top of the ridge and was enjoying the reward of a wind that numbed his ears and horn and snow that whipped straight off the drifts into his eyes when he heard a shout. He thought he did, at least—he couldn't be sure, with the wind threatening to blow off his ears. He screwed up his eyes against the too-white, too-bright landscape stretched in front of him and thought he saw a distant pteradactyl flapping across the sky.

He devoted more time to clearing snow out of his eyes.

When he looked up again, the clouds that had stealthily drifted in all day to blockade the blue sky had just begun releasing their first barrage of snow. The rainbow-haired unicorn decided it was time to return to Snowvale . . . as soon as he quickly scouted out the valley below. If he squinted, he thought he could make out movement at the far end of it. Probably just his imagination, but . . .

He readjusted his scarf and picked his way slowly down the slope. The snow was falling thicker now, but so what? He had plenty of time until dark.

Rainstorms may open with a crack of thunder, but snowstorms open with a peal of silence. A few more flakes, bigger flakes, wetter flakes, more flakes, and still more . . . The snow and silence began to weigh down on Moonstone. All around him the hypnotic snow tumbled down and flurried skyward and tumbled down again. The wind whistled and calmed, whistled and calmed.

The blue unicorn frowned, suffering a sudden, unpleasant epiphany. Looking right, he could no longer see the opposite side of the valley. There was only a constant whirl of snow. Glancing left, he could barely see the steep slope he'd come down. Snow was piling higher and faster. He cursed his inattention. The trench behind him was drifting up with new snow, although he was not seriously worried about it being filled any time soon, deep as it was. But the more new snow, the more inches of cold he'd have to walk through.

He turned to go back. And that's when he heard the voice. So faint he almost missed it.

"G-giggle at the g-gho . . . sties, g-g-guffaw at the g-grossly . . ."

~*~

Again, earlier.

Pinkie Pie had tried, she'd tried really hard. Yes, here and there she'd skimmed a mouthful of clean, powdery snow off the landscape and had sometimes traversed across the valley by somersaulting, cartwheeling, or tumbling rather than merely walking. She quickly discovered that she was bouncing on top of a crust of snow which hid depths far greater than the few inches of loose powder she was walking through. So naturally she burrowed down through the crispier snow, tunneling through it like a mole OR, an even better example, like a Pinkie Pie.

But for all that she had reached the far end of the valley faster than any other pony could've, except maybe Rainbow Dash.

And Fluttershy hadn't been there.

"That's funny!" Pinkie said, bouncing in place as she gazed at the spot where Fluttershy had obviously impacted—a clear silhouette of a pegasus imprinted in the snow. But no actual pony!

Fluttershy wasn't in the sky either—and that was just really weird because Fluttershy was a slow flier, so she should've been really close if she had flown somewhere, close enough for Pinkie to see, but she wasn't, so where was she?

Pinkie wanted to find her friend so she'd looked and she'd looked and she'd looked and she'd LOOKED, and just when she was about to look some more, her Pinkie Sense went off, then it went off AGAIN!

"Double Pinkie Sense!" she squealed. Her tail was a-twitch, twitch, twitching and her knee was a-pinch, pinch, pinching—

"Pinchy knee!" Pinkie Pie gasped. "Oh no, something *scary* is about to happen!" She braced herself, constructing a snow fort (perhaps not in ten seconds flat, but close) and hunkered down in it.

It began to snow. Her tail, satisfied that something was falling from the sky as it had predicted, stopped twitching. But her knee kept pinching.

Pinkie Pie took her Pinkie Sense seriously—as seriously as she took anything, at least—but after thirty minutes of waiting for something scary, she was bored. Nothing had happened at all, except the snow, of course. And she had wasted all that time worrying when she could've been catching flakes on her tongue. But even more important, she needed to find Fluttershy, ESPECIALLY if something scary really WAS about to happen!

She bounced off across the snowy crust again, occasionally pausing to lift rocks or logs in her hunt for Fluttershy.

Eventually she reached a log and was surprised to find that she recognized its shape; both ends were kind of triangular and it reminded her of her alligator, Gummi. She spotted a set of hoofprints in snow, snowflakes gently settling in them. "Oh, I've already looked under this one! Silly Pinkie!" She giggled, ignored the pinch in her knee, and bounced off.

Later, she found the log again. Her original hoofprints were just dents in the snow. The second set was half buried. Her knee was still pinchy.

Later, she found the log again. There weren't any hoofprints around it. Just smooth, even snow. She massaged her knee.

Later, she didn't find the log again. She didn't find anything. She kept walking and walking and shivering and sometimes she would see her hoofprints in the snow and follow them for a while. She didn't think her knee felt pinchy anymore, but it was hard to tell 'cause mostly she just felt cold.

Later, she still didn't find the log again. There weren't any logs on the rock farm. It was so cold in the winter. The rocks sucked up the cold till they felt like ice, and sometimes ice got in them and they split. That was bad so she and her sisters had to go out and put rock warmers on them so they wouldn't. But there weren't any rocks here. Maybe if there were rocks she could put the warmers on them and go home. She staggered on, looking for rocks.

Later, something . . . something was floating through the sky. Looking up made her feel like she was falling into the snowflakes, into the sky, but she wanted to see it. "—shyyyyy! Pinkie Piiiiiiiie! Twiiiiiight! Fluttershyyyyyy! Pinkie Piiiiiiiie! Twiiiiiight!" It drifted away. But she had seen what it was. A rainbow! THE rainbow. She felt her hair. It was coated with snow but—yes, it was poofy and curly from the rainbow. She smiled, even though it made her feel like her face was cracking. She walked a little ways. She laid down.

It didn't seem so cold any more. Somehow, that was scary. She was scared. *Granny, there's a monster under my bed. Pinkie, ol' Granny Pie knows how to get rid of ghosts.*

Good ol' Granny Pie. Pinkie sang.

There was a shadow spreading over her. Pinkie vaguely remembered Granny Pie chasing them away, but right now that shadow was the best thing in the world because it wasn't falling and it wasn't white and it wasn't snow. It said something. She said something, she wasn't sure what. She just didn't want the shadow to leave. She didn't want to fall into the sky.

She squinched up her eyes to get a better look at it. It was blue, so maybe it was the sky. Especially since it had a rainbow. It was a rainbow? Wait! She was being a silly-filly! It had eyes. Rainbows didn't have eyes. Ponies had eyes. "R-r-rainbow Dash?"

The rainbow (only not) said something.

Pinkie Pie thought of something. Something vitally important. She told it, "I n-n-need to warm up the r-rocks."

Then she didn't think anything for a while.