

Head In The Clouds

The rainbow-maned Pegasus plummeted through the air, her wings failing to move from her sides. She screamed for help, and Hoops' coat stood up on the back of his neck. He rocketed towards her as she neared the earth below. He was going to catch her. He only had to reach his hoof out to her. He looked into her rosy eyes and then at the earth below, only a hundred feet away. There wasn't enough time. He was going to hit the ground at top speed, any second now. He couldn't even say anything, his lips wouldn't move. She'd never know how he felt.

Hoops' eyes shot open as he was pulled back to reality from his dream. His heart was pounding, and he quickly noticed that he was sweating profusely in his cloud bed. He sighed as he played through the sleeping vision in his head again. When he was younger, Hoops didn't have any dreams that he actually remembered. Now that he'd grown up a bit, he only had one. The same dream had plagued Hoops' subconscious for almost a year now. Knowing that he didn't have a chance at getting back to sleep, Hoops rolled his stocky orange body out of bed and onto his hooves.

He brushed his brown mane away from his eyes as he tried to check the time on his alarm clock. It was nine o' clock on a Friday, which normally would have made Hoops late for work at the cloud-making factory, except that he had been given the day off. He meandered into the kitchen to try to fix something for breakfast, but he didn't feel like eating. His brain kept drifting back to his dream.

Hoops had never put that much stock in dreams, but this recurring one tormented his mind. What was it supposed to mean? He was sure that there was symbolism in there somewhere, but what was it? Hoops slammed his head down onto his breakfast table and tried to stop thinking. He managed to shut off his brain for a second, and his mind was filled with silence for that short moment.

The first thing he thought of as his head fired back up was the day he had planned, or better, the lack thereof. He tried to think of what he wanted to do, but it was too early for his mind to be functioning at peak performance, which wasn't exactly that great to begin with. All he could imagine doing was hanging out with Dumb-Bell, his best friend from flight school. Dumb-Bell wasn't exactly the brightest colt in Cloudsdale, but he was an honest pony and a true friend if there ever was one. After a minute of internal debate, Hoops came to the conclusion that Dumb-Bell would be more than pleased to see him.

Hoops' assumption had been right, and after explaining that he had nothing better to do, Dumb-Bell had quickly agreed to invite Hoops inside to hang out. The colt had the next three days off from work, so he didn't have to worry about getting up the following morning. He and Hoops were seated around his coffee table, the mid-morning light coming in from the open window on the east side of the room.

“So, what’s happening bro?” Dumb-Bell asked, his blue eyes drifting towards the window. Hoops was nervous about sharing his feelings with his friend, but he really wanted to talk to somepony.

“Well, I’ve been having this dream man, and, well, it’s really been bugging me,” Hoops started, not sure how to introduce the next part. “And, like, you remember Rainbow Dash, right?” Dumb-Bell started to grin.

“Heck yeah I remember Rainbow *Crash*,” the dark brown pony commented, snickering a little bit. “What, are you dreaming that she keeps beating you in a race or something man? I wouldn’t worry about it; you know you could kick her flank any day of the week.” Hoops sighed.

“It’s not like that at all, Dumb-Bell. I think I have a crush on her,” Hoops mumbled towards the ground.

“You’re gonna’ have to be louder man, I can’t understand you.”

“I think I have a crush on Rainbow Dash,” Hoops spoke up this time. He was blushing deeply on both cheeks, which was a first as far as he knew. Dumb-Bell’s eyes grew wide.

“You WHAT?” He yelled, before breaking down into laughter. There was no way that he could have a crush on a filly like that. The only thing that he’d ever seen Hoops show any interest in was hoofball. He’d never even had a marefriend! There’s no way that he liked Rainbow Dash!

“Come on man! Be serious for like five minutes, ok?” Hoops asked angrily. Dumb-Bell nodded, putting a hoof over his mouth to stifle his guffawing. “I keep having this dream where she’s falling, and I’m trying to rescue her, but I’m never able to! And then I wake up and I freak out because I think that I’m never going to see her again! It’s awful man, I’m a wreck...” Hoops put his head in his hooves and looked down. Actually, Dumb-Bell just guessed that he looked down. Hoops’ bangs were so far over his eyes that nopony could tell where he was staring.

“Why do you keep pushing her away then? I mean, why did you make fun of her before that young flyer’s competition?” Dumb-Bell scratched his chin with a hoof absentmindedly.

“I didn’t want you or Score to think I liked her. I was really embarrassed and, look it’s confusing alright? And why did you think I made *you* apologize to her after the contest instead of me?” The dark brown Pegasus shrugged at the question.

“It’s hard to figure you out sometimes,” he explained, “and I wasn’t going to just say no or anything like that.” Seeing that Hoops wasn’t listening, he added another statement. “Why don’t you just try being nice to Rainbow Dash if we run in to her? Cloudsdale’s a

small city, you know.”

“She never did hang out with us.” Dumb-Bell groaned at the orange pony’s pessimistic statement. He hated downers, and this conversation was just going to make Hoops more depressed. He guessed that the best course of action would be to change the topic.

“You know what you need to do?” Hoops didn’t give a response to indicate that he heard the question. “You need to come and play a game of hoofball with me down at the court. A couple of guys from the weather team are off today and they’ll play a pick-up game for sure.” Dumb-Bell knew that Hoops would never turn down a game of hoofball.

“I guess that’s fine, but I still want to talk afterwards, alright?” Dumb-Bell nodded in response as he got up on his hooves.

“Whatever you want, man.”

By the time the two colts arrived at the court it was almost noon. Hoops immediately recognized Cappuccino and Brolly from the weather team along with five or six other assorted ponies warming up. Cappuccino immediately flew over to greet the two newcomers.

“Hey guys! Pretty sweet you could make it to the game today. Is it just the two of you?” Dumb-Bell responded with a nod before the wavy-haired Cappuccino continued. “That’s a bummer, we’ll be one pony short of a full match. You two don’t mind playing on a team that’s a pair of wings down, do you?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem, Hoops here’s one of the best hoofball players in the city! Your side’s going down.” Dumb-Bell turned and smiled at Hoops, who managed to force a half-smile back.

“That’s cool, that’s cool. The game’s to 20 baskets. If anypony else shows up, I’ll put ‘em on your side, alright?” Cappuccino asked. It was Hoops’ turn to nod this time, and with that squared away, the weather-pony showed the two to their team. They would be playing with a mare and a colt that were new to the weather team, but apparently decent hoofballers. The team set up with Hoops and the mare playing forward and Dumb-Bell and the colt playing defense.

The game started off well for the four-pony squad. Hoops and the mare worked great together, weaving passes between the other side’s defenders and sinking two baskets early. When Cappuccino made a break for their own basket, however, Dumb-Bell just couldn’t match his speed, and ended up watching Cappuccino sink a shot. Discouraged, but also reinvigorated, Hoops gave some quick instructions to his fellow forward before they started their next attack.

“We’re going to fly a give and go now, alright?” Hoops questioned. The pink mare nodded vigorously, her yellow mane bouncing up and down on her head. Hoops smiled and rocketed forward. He gained speed as he dodged one of the other team’s gray defenders, and then looked to see where his teammate was. The mare had gotten open, and Hoops quickly dumped the ball off to her before getting into a position to score. The pink mare passed the ball back to him as soon as he was set, and Hoops shot the ball the same way he had a thousand times before. He watched the beautiful arc of the shot as it neared the basket. Hoops heard cheering as he saw the ball pass untouched through the net. He turned and saw about a dozen Pegasi watching the game. He smiled widely and turned to give his pink teammate a high hoof.

“That’s some pretty smooth flying there, Hoops,” a voice called from the opposite sideline. Hoops heart dropped as he turned around to see which pony had called to him. The mare’s rainbow mane was impossible to miss. Rainbow Dash flew out to center court and began to talk with the players.

“I see you’re a Pegasus short, so does anypony mind if I join in?” Hoops couldn’t think of any words to say, and he quickly realized that his mouth was simply hanging open in disbelief.

“No, go right ahead, Rainbow, we just started,” Cappuccino called, nervously eyeing the opponent’s newest addition. Rainbow clopped her hooves together and spun to face her team.

“So,” Rainbow Dash turned to face the pink mare, “do you mind if I take over as forward, Honeysuckle?” The mare shook her head no, and retreated to center court. Dash then turned around to face Hoops. “Try to keep up, alright?” Hoops’ heart was in his throat. His pulse was pounding so loud in his ears that he couldn’t hear anything. Why couldn’t he think of anything cool to say? Hadn’t he practiced lines for situations just like this? The only thing that the orange colt could manage was a stupid grin and a nod. Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow at him before returning to her position.

Cappuccino’s team pulled off a very fancy passing play they no doubt put together during the long break between the action, and the result was another basket in their favor. The score was 3-2 at this point, but the game was far from over. During their next attempt, all Hoops could think about was what Dumb-Bell had said earlier; ‘Why don’t you just try being nice to Rainbow Dash if we run in to her?’ Hoops snapped back into consciousness and realized that he had brought the ball down court and had an open shot. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Rainbow Dash was open too. He made a snap decision and passed the ball off to her. Dash hadn’t expected the pass, and nearly dropped it from her hooves. She managed to get the shot off right as a defender tried to steal the ball away. It arced easily into the basket to the cheers of the ponies on the sidelines. Hoops flew to give Rainbow a high hoof, but the mare had already turned to get into position. ‘Next time,’ he thought.

The match went back and forth for quite awhile, with neither team able to pull ahead by more than two points. Hoops passed the ball off to Rainbow whenever she was open, and she was set to be the player of the game with ten baskets. The score was currently tied at eighteen points for each team, and Cappuccino had the ball. In a brilliant move, Dumb-Bell wrestled the ball out of the forward's hands and passed it up to Honeysuckle. The pink mare took a brave half-court shot that sailed into the net, much to the amazement of everypony watching.

'This is it,' Hoops thought to himself, 'one more basket and I'll have won a game with Rainbow Dash!' His heart skipped a beat as he realized that the other team had zoomed past him and into his own half of the court. More cheers broke out as a blue colt on Cappuccino's team sunk a short range basket. That meant that the next shot to go in would win the game, no matter which side took it.

It was Hoops' turn to go on the offensive. With a blinding burst of speed, he deftly dodged every pony on the opponent's defense and got into position to take a shot. Rainbow Dash zoomed up next to him and cheered. He looked at her and awkwardly smiled again. Her eyes grew wide, and Hoops was nervous that he might have something in his teeth. He realized what she had seen as he felt the ball being yanked out of his hands by a gray pony to the right of him. He tried to reach and retrieve it, but the opponent was already yards ahead of him. Hoops watched in horror as the pony skirted around their defense and took an easy shot. The crowd went wild as the colt pumped his hoof into the air victoriously. The game was over. Hoops had lost. Dumb-Bell flew up to try to say something to his friend, but Rainbow Dash spoke first.

"I can't believe it! What the hay were you thinking?" She narrowed her eyes at Hoops, who's stomach dropped at her expression. "You made us look like complete foals out there! It seemed like all did was pass it off to me when you had a perfect shot!" Hoops tried to say something to calm her down.

"Dash, I'm sorry, I was just trying t-"

"What you were trying to do was lose the game! Unbelievable! I thought you were supposed to be good at hoofball by that cutie mark, but that can't be right," Rainbow Dash spat, turning around to fly off court. Hoops attempted to catch up with her by speeding to her side, but Dash put a hoof out behind her and the colt collided with it as he got close. Hoops felt his teeth sink into the skin right below his lower lip. Rainbow hadn't meant to cause him any harm, but she had accomplished her goal of keeping him away long enough to make an exit. Dumb-Bell flew up to his shaggy-maned friend, who had his hoof over his mouth.

"Dude, let me see the cut," Dumb-Bell asked, and Hoops pulled his mouth open. "Awwww, sick. Your lip's all bucked up. You're gonna' need like, stitches or something." Hoops eyes grew large as his friend finished his statement. How was he going to afford

stitches? He spit out a trickle of blood to which Dumb-Bell replied by rearing back. “You’re mouth’s a horror show, dude!”

“Thanks, Dumb-Bell, you’re making me feel a *lot* better,” Hoops said, dripping with sarcasm. His friend’s expression lit up at the statement.

“Hey I know what *will* cheer you up man,” he exclaimed, grabbing Hoops’ left forehoof. “Come on, let’s get going.” Dumb-Bell pulled his friend off of the court and led him through the crowd of on-lookers to the sidewalk adjacent to it.

“Where are we going dude?” Hoop’s asked as they rounded a corner. Dumb-Bell turned around to answer.

“Same place we always go when we’re feeling down,” he replied, a deviant’s grin crossing his face.

It took the pair six minutes to make the flight to their local pub, *The Irish Draft*. It was too early for the regular crowd to be present, but a few scattered Pegasi sat in booths drinking. Near the back of the bar, something that was obviously *not* a Pegasus was drinking as well. Hoops and Dumb-Bell had a hard enough time dealing with regular ponies, and the idea of mingling with some other species didn’t sound very enticing. Nevertheless, the pair took their seats in an open booth adjacent to the creature.

“Well, it’s nice to see you two back in this pub,” the bartender Golden Rye said. “I’m guessing you’ll both have the usual?” Hoops grinned in response at Golden Rye, who returned a grimace at the sight of his bloody teeth. “Let me get you those drinks and uh, a towel.” Hoops turned back and shrugged at Dumb-Bell.

The whiskey burned the gash in Hoop’s mouth as he drained his third glass. Dumb-Bell stared dully across the room. It had been a few weeks since the two had patronized the pub, but the establishment never really changed. The wallpaper had been peeling for as long as either of the Pegasi could remember, and the smell had only gotten worse with time. That being said, *The Irish Draft* was cheap and it served good liquor, as Golden Rye was always a little heavy-hoofed with his pours.

“So I guess that’s it then,” Hoops began, causing Dumb-Bell to snap out of his daydream.

“What’re you talking about, dude?” Dumb-Bell replied, his words running together as if they were connected.

“She hates me, that’s the only thing she thinks about me,” Hoops complained while trying to get the last drop of whiskey into his mouth. After ten seconds with the glass held over his head, he gave up.

“Oh, how could you know that, are you inside her head or something? If she’s honestly going to judge you based on today alone, then you deserve better than her,” Dumb-Bell explained, gesturing widely with his hooves throughout the statement.

“I’m just aggravated with myself, dude. I get my first chance to actually hang out with her, and then I ruin it... I don’t even know what I did wrong!” Hoops yelled, loud enough to elicit stares from some of the drinkers standing by the bar. Dumb-Bell tried to figure something out, anything to lift his friend’s spirits a little bit. He spied a pair of attractive mares giggling at a table near the pub’s door, and gears began turning in his head.

“Wait here for a minute, I see a possibility.” Hoops looked up inquisitively as his friend stepped out of the booth and stumbled towards the front of the pub. Dumb-Bell turned his head around right before he approached the mare’s table and winked at Hoops before clearing his throat to attract the fillies’ attention.

“Let me just say that if I had a bit for every time I saw a pair of mares as beautiful as you two, I’d have one bit,” Dumb-Bell crooned, trying to lather on the charm. The two Pegasi, one blue and the other a pale green, were unamused.

“Yeah, and if we had a bit for every guy that’s about to get a drink thrown at him, we’d have one bit,” the green one supplied, before propelling the contents of a near-empty glass into Dumb-Bell’s face. The colt smiled and thanked the two girls jokingly before turning back around and wobbling back to his seat. Hoops rolled his eyes at his pal, before realizing that Dumb-Bell couldn’t see through his bangs.

“I’m rolling my eyes, dude.” Dumb-Bell laughed a little at the fact that he had to explain himself. He then began to wipe the excess alcohol off of his head with the slightly blood-stained towel Hoops had been using.

“Rye! Another whiskey over here!” Hoops called across the pub. Golden Rye nodded and hurriedly poured the drink.

“It’s cool, dude, I was just tryin’ to lighten the mood a little is all,” Dumb-Bell spoke as Golden Rye placed another glass in front of Hoops, who immediately took a large sip out of it. He looked up and realized that the creature from the booth adjacent to theirs was peaking her head over the seat. Hoops wasn’t actually sure what gender was looking at him, but he recognized that it was a griffon and extrapolated that it was a girl from the amount of eye shadow it wore.

“Can I help you,” Hoops decided to try his luck, “Miss?” The griffon blushed at having been called out, but responded quickly.

“You two dudes don’t look lame or anything, do you want to join me over here?” the griffon asked. The colts were puzzled at the sudden invitation, but Hoops noticed a hint of loneliness in the girl’s voice. He looked at Dumb-Bell, who shrugged as if to say, ‘You

make the decision.'

Hoops stood up, grabbed his glass in his teeth, and moved over to slide into the griffon's booth. She smiled as a greeting as Dumb-Bell slinked in next to the orange colt. An awkward silence hung over the group, until Dumb-Bell finally spoke up.

"So," he started while stirring his liquor with the tip of his hoof, "What's your story?" The question sounded blunt, but the griffon didn't seem to care.

"Well, I'm in town from St.Griffonsburg to meet up with an old friend. I'm Gilda by the way," the griffon added. She shook both of the hooves that the colts put out for her to take before continuing. "You see, I'm trying to work up the courage to go and see her, but I've just been too nervous tonight." The scent of alcohol was heavy on her breath, and Hoops guessed that she'd been "working up courage" for quite a while.

"If you're just meeting a friend then why do you have to be so tense?" Dumb-Bell asked as he roughed up his mane with a spare hoof. "Is she not expecting you or something?" The colt gestured with his drink for unnecessary emphasis, sloshing a little over himself.

"It's sort of like that, yeah," Gilda replied before putting a talon under her chin pensively. "You guys aren't gonna' squeal all of my secrets to the next pony you see, are ya'?" The griffon looked the nodding colts over before continuing. "Well, let's just say that an old love interest of mine lives in town, and we haven't exactly been on speaking terms for a while."

"Well, you made the flight from St. Griffonsburg, right?" Hoops asked, gaining an affirmative head gesture from Gilda. "Well that's a feat in and of itself!" He was starting to lose the ability to control his volume, but the rest of the party didn't seem to mind. "I think that any girl who's willing to journey over the Dragonheart Ridge for love deserves to be commended! Your mare's lucky to have you." Pub patrons started eyeing the odd group of two thoroughly plastered Pegasi and a tanked griffon with suspicion as they began to get louder and louder.

"You might not think that if you knew the whole story, dude. I was a real jerk to her a while back and I don't know if she's ever really forgiven me," Gilda explained.

"But don't you think she's over that by now? I mean seriously, how long can anypony hold a grudge?" Dumb-Bell asked neither of his table mates in particular.

"I don't know, you've never met *this* Pegasus," Gilda emphasized, "she's something else when it comes to that kind of stuff." Hoops cocked his head, now interested.

"Heh, I've been having problems with a Pegasus like that too," he commented idly.

"The mare near knocked his teeth out earlier! Show her the cut, Hoops," Dumb-Bell

demanded, to which Hoops said he wouldn't. After assuring the two that she really had no interest in seeing the gash, Gilda moved the conversation forward.

"I don't know dudes, I'm just worried that she's gonna' flip out and then I'll have come all this way for nothing," Gilda spoke with a downcast expression.

"Let me ask you this," Dumb-Bell began, "Are you happy right now?" The griffon was a bit taken aback by the question.

"I... I guess not."

"And do you think that sitting here and drinking is going to make you feel any better?"

"No."

"And what will make you feel better?"

"Talking to her, I guess."

"You're dang right! You need to get up, march out of here and tell that filly how you feel!"

"Yeah!" Gilda yelled, this time attracting the gaze of everypony seated in the pub, "You know what, I'm gonna' go tell her right now! I don't care what happens, dudes, but I'm not leaving Cloudsdale tonight without having shared my feelings with that mare!" The two colts cheered and patted Gilda on her back as she hastened out of the booth. "Thanks for the encouragement, you two, and if you're ever in St. Griffonsburg, make sure you ask for me, all right?" The two colts applauded as Gilda turned and pushed her way through the pub's front doors.

"We did a good thing," Dumb-Bell announced. "We just helped spread love in this world, and there's nothing better than that, dude." Hoops nodded.

"And you know what; Gilda's given me some confidence too! I'm gonna' have another drink, and then I'm flying over to Dash's to set the record straight," Hoops began, before raising his voice for the whole pub to hear, "you all hear me? After this drink, I'm gonna' confront the mare of *my* dreams!" Someone in a booth clapped their hooves together, before realizing that everyone else had ignored the outburst. Golden Rye came by to put a final whiskey on the table.

"Take your time with this one," he instructed, before disappearing behind the bar. Hoops looked down at the liquid beneath him and realized that he probably didn't need another drink. Then again, no one ever died from one last whiskey or anything. He decided that he would take his time in drinking, if only because he doubted his stomach could handle another sudden rush of alcohol.

“What am I going to say to her?” Hoops asked after sipping his drink. “I mean, I can’t just be like ‘hey Dash, I love you’ or something stupid like that, I need to have something prepared!” Dumb-Bell nodded, deep in thought.

“When did you start liking her anyway, dude?” he finally asked. Hoops didn’t take a minute to think before speaking.

“You remember that race we had with her at flight camp all those years ago, the one where she did a sonic rainboom?” Dumb-Bell thought for a minute before responding.

“No, I blacked out after I hit that column early in the race. I never even saw the rainboom,” he explained, looking a little downcast.

“Oh, that’s right, man. Well, you never saw what she looked like when she was doing it either, dude. Back then I was too young to figure out what I was feeling, but I guess you could say that it was admiration. I wanted to talk to her; to simply be in her presence. She casts this air of raw feminine energy, and I only started to pick up on it as I aged.” Hoops paused to sip his drink. “I started to try to spend time with her, but the only opportunities I ever had were with you and Score, and I was stupid and cared more about maintaining appearances than acting on what I felt. Don’t you think it attractive how she always has that ‘never say die’ attitude?” Dumb-Bell shook his head.

“No, and frankly I’m surprised that you do.” Hoops put a hoof up to his face in exasperation and slurped his whiskey.

“I mean, you think she’s cute, don’t you?” Dumb-Bell scratched the back of his mane, embarrassed.

“Not really, dude. The entire ‘rainbow’ vibe is kind of a turn-off for me,” he replied, yawning and trying to keep his eyelids open.

“Look, I’ll just say this, and I hope this is simple enough for you. I find her beautiful both physically and emotionally.”

Dumb-Bell smiled.

“I guess I get what you mean. Just tell her that,” he said, before looking at the table. “Your drink’s empty,” he mentioned. Hoops looked down and saw that his friend was right. He didn’t really remember drinking it, but he had made a promise and was going to keep it. Standing up, he looked at Dumb-Bell, who was nearly passed out on the surface in front of him. Hoops threw down an abundance of bits indiscriminately, not wanting to cause a problem with Golden Rye. He stumbled to the front doors of the pub and fell through them and onto the cool sidewalk outside. It was now dark out, but Hoops knew the city well enough to find Dash’s house.

The inebriated Pegasus found Rainbow Dash's cloud castle without much trouble. He had flown nervously, his wings pushing different strengths on each side of his body, but he had managed to land on her front walkway without injuring himself. Hoops noticed that there were lights on inside, which was a good sign that Dash was still awake. He mentally prepared what was about to happen in his head, and what he was going to say, before finally knocking twice on the front door.

It swung inward to reveal a disheveled looking Rainbow Dash. If Hoops hadn't been so intoxicated, he might have noticed the redness of her eyes, or the dried streaks on the side of her face, but he was a colt on a mission, and he was single-minded in his efforts. Dash narrowed her eyes again as she realized who was standing on her doorstep.

"There's nothing I want to say to you," she informed the colt before attempting to slam the door. Hoops had anticipated that this might happen, and he quickly shoved a hoof between the door and its frame. The pain normally would have caused Hoops to withdraw, but the alcohol had numbed it down to just an inconvenient pressure. "I said I don't want to talk to you!" Rainbow Dash yelled with an air of finality, trying to push the door closed.

"That's fine; I just need you to listen. Ok Dash?" Hoops was trying his hardest to think everything over before he said it. Rainbow responded quickly.

"You have five seconds, and then I'm going to *make* you leave."

"Dash, I think I'm in love with you!" Hoops blurted out, forgetting everything he had practiced saying to her. The statement caught her off guard, and she stopped putting pressure on the door. The silence was only momentary, though.

"Ugh, what the hay are the odds of both of you showing up tonight!? I'm not interested, alright? Get out of my life!" Rainbow pushed his hoof out of the door, slammed it, and clicked the deadbolt.

So that was it. So much preparation, all for that. Rainbow Dash didn't want to see him. Hoops sighed. He wanted to throw open the door and yell everything about how he felt. He wanted to beg her to consider him. He wanted to take Rainbow in his hooves and kiss her, but that likely wouldn't have happened even if he had said something more charming. She wasn't usually the kind of girl for romance. He decided against doing anything at all, and flew off, dejected, in what he hoped was the direction of his house.

He didn't remember any of the flight, and he didn't remember touching down or opening his front door. The only thing that he remembered was lying face down on his kitchen table, trying to block out his memories of the day previous.

When Hoops finally woke up, the sun was out. He shielded his eyes from the light and tried to remember what had happened. Flashes of recollection filled his head, but it wasn't chronological and it was nothing more than a second or two.

knock knock knock

Waves of memory and bits of dialogue flooded Hoops like a dam had opened. He remembered drinking with a griffon in the pub, and flying to Dash's house. His heart sunk as he remembered what she said when he had opened up.

Get out of my life!

Knock Knock Knock

The pounding was getting louder and more aggravating. It felt like somepony was driving a nail into his temple. Hoops knew he had to get to the door or else his head was going to explode. He took a step and immediately regretted putting his hoof down. He quickly investigated the source of the pain and realized that the entire area above his left forehoof was badly bruised. He limped out of his kitchen and tried to open his front door. After finally getting the lock undone, he threw the door open. The light outside was obtrusive, and he couldn't make out who was standing there for a second.

"Hey, about last night," a voice called from the light. Rainbow Dash slowly came into focus. Her voice was abrasive to his ears, but Hoops' heart was pounding in his chest. Somehow Celestia had made a mistake and had gifted him a second chance! He quickly spoke his mind.

"Look, Dash, I'm sorry about last night, I shouldn't have just showed up an-" Rainbow Dash held up a hoof to silence the colt.

"I'll be doing the apologizing, ok?" Hoops nodded to let her continue. "You really caught me off guard last night, and I'll admit, I didn't want to see you. I had just finished dealing with an old friend who I've been trying to erase from my life, and I wasn't in a good emotional frame of mind. I didn't mean what I said though. I directed that anger at her that I was feeling back to you." Hoops could barely understand what was going on. Rainbow Dash was apologizing to him? He decided to press his luck.

"I meant what I said though, Dash. I may have been drunk, but I wasn't lying." This statement sent a blush quickly over Rainbow Dash's face.

"And I want to talk to you about that too. It's really tough for me to find a colt that isn't immediately turned off by how I act, and you're the last pony that I thought would be saying 'I love you.' I didn't believe it. I was sure that you were just trying to mess with me. I guess it was later that I started looking at the signs over the years, and I realized

that you were telling the truth. I'm not a romantic filly. I didn't really know what to do last night, and I figured that it'd be easier to slam the door on you than to deal with how I felt too." Hoops was a little confused.

"What exactly are you saying, Dash?" Rainbow Dash nervously crossed her front hooves and looked down.

"I'm saying that I'm really sorry about yesterday, and I want to make it up to you over lunch at *The Italian Trotter*." She smiled tentatively, and Hoops almost laughed at this very uncharacteristic side of Rainbow Dash. This girl could kick a dragon in the teeth without flinching, and yet she was nervous about setting up anything that could even possibly be construed as a date. The orange colt spoke softly back to her.

"Thank you, Dash. I'd like that." Hoops was able to manage an actual smile, and Rainbow Dash smiled back. The moment didn't last long, as Dash's stock competitive expression spread over her face again. She turned and got her chest down to the clouds in a flyer's starting position, before throwing a look behind her shoulder.

"Race you there!"

The rainbow-maned Pegasus plummeted through the air, her wings failing to move from her sides. She screamed for help, and Hoops' coat stood up on the back of his neck. He rocketed towards her as she neared the earth below. He was going to catch her this time. He only had to reach his hoof out to her. He was surprised to find Rainbow Dash reaching for him instead. He grabbed her hoof and pulled out of the nose-dive only a hundred feet away from certain death. Rainbow Dash clung to the orange colt, barely able to speak.

"I'm sorry," she said, which puzzled Hoops.

"For what?" he asked.

"For falling," she replied.

"No," Hoops began, "I'm sorry for pushing you."