

In The Middle

"Hey, Snails."

"Huh?"

Snail's voice was accustomed to forming around simple questions.

"Snails!"

"What?"

Snips stared enthusiastically at his friend, grinning as though he had stumbled upon a fantastic secret plot that needed to be shared. Snails only stared back blank-faced, ever the picture of cluelessness. It wasn't that he didn't try to pay attention – the world just seemed to move a little faster than he could keep up with.

"Snails... who do you like?"

Snips' voice was more like an unexpected emery board – grating and disarming, and in this case, a makeshift wedge to pry open a lockbox of clandestine information. Snails looked even more clueless than usual.

"What do you mean?" His thick lazy drawl elongated every syllable a little past its normally comfortable duration.

"You know. Who do you... *like*?"

Snips nudged Snails in the side with a bent leg, a largely unnecessary gesture to communicate the sultry nature of the questioning.

"Yeah man, come on. Everyone has someone they like."

A third voice chipped in – more composed than the other two, but jagged at the edges; young, and full of enthusiasm. On the weekends, after school was out, or sometimes during their lunch breaks, Spike liked to hang out with the only other young males or in town – or at least the ones he found most bearable. After the 'Trixie' incident, the two well-meaning but slow-witted colts had grown on him.

The voice like a grating rock in a tractor blade chimed in again before Snails had a chance to respond, though its contribution to the conversation was suspect.

"Yeah! Tell us who you like, Snails. C'mon." Spike cringed slightly at the obnoxious voiced mimicry, but returned to wide-eyed curiosity shortly.

The tiny dragon and stubby green colt stared at the receiver of their inquiry expectantly, leaning forward towards him as they waited for an answer.

"Well... I don't know. I don't really like anyone."

The questioners deflated.

"Come on, it's like we said. Everyone has someone they like. Are you just embarrassed?" Spike smirked.

"Snails, don't be nervous. We're your friends, you can tell us."

Snails shifted his eyes, not in secrecy but apparent embarrassment, as well as shuffling his lanky legs to drag his hooves through the dirt absentmindedly.

"Aw, I dunno. I can't think of anyone."

"Man!" Snips' exclamation prompted another ear-covering from Spike. Snails simply looked into the distance bashfully.

"It is cause you're embarrassed, isn't it? If we tell you who we like, will you tell us yours?"

"Well-"

Snips cut Snails off before the first word had fully formed in the confines of his languid voice, hinting at a suspicious connection to his namesake and cutie mark.

"You know who I like?"

Spike leaned in close in anticipation, and despite his lack of involvement in the conversation thus far, Snails found himself doing the same.

The prickly unpleasant bark lowered in volume, though whispering was an alien concept to Snips. Instead, his usual borderline yelling cacophony was reduced to a more listenable decibel setting.

"I like... Diamond Tiara."

Snails blinked in evident astonishment; even his often tardy thinking process could interpret the absurdity in such a ridiculously incompatible infatuation. Spike was more direct, though not scornful.

"...Really? Diamond Tiara? She doesn't seem like your type."

Snips' voice was laced with enthusiasm in the heat of his response.

"No way dude, I see the looks she gives me. I can tell she likes me back... she's probably just too scared to tell me about it."

Snails and Spike shared a sideways glance over Snips's head, the stubby unicorn still caught up in his fantasy romance. A mutual agreement passed between them, unspoken.

"Huh," was Spike's summary. Snails chewed on a bite of grass idly as a moment's silence passed.

"What about you Spike, who do you like?"

Spike rolled his eyes though he had been expecting the question inevitably, but still gave a conspiratorial glance in either direction to ensure the privacy of the group's conversation.

"Alright... but you guys have to promise to keep this a secret."

Snips nodded enthusiastically, along with a lazy head bob from Snails.

"Yeah yeah yeah, we promise, we won't tell anyone, right Snails?"

"Yeah, we won't tell anyone." The day-glo orange colt spoke up in assent for the first time in the conversation. In the past Snails wouldn't have hesitated to mimic his close friend's boisterous vocal nature – but as of late, he had found more enjoyment in simply staying quiet most of the time. A tinge of enthusiasm had evidently prompted him into imitation, if only for a moment.

Spike gave another look around before leaning forward conspiratorially. He gestured with both claws for the other two members of the cabal to lean in closer, which they did without hesitation. His voice hushed down to a barely audible hiss as he began to whisper.

"I like..."

Snips and Snails stared wide-eyed with expectation as the pause hung in the air.

"I like... Rarity."

Snips was not as courteous in his reaction as Spike had been. The young colt's gravelly croon erupted into raucous laughter, sending Spike tumbling backwards in surprise at the sudden increase in volume inches from his face.

"Haha! No way, man. Rarity? She's totally out of your league!"

Spike jumped to his feet in front of Snips, dusting himself off and glaring.

"Keep it down, will ya! I don't want this to become public information!"

Snips only continued laughing, throwing his head back as the cacophonous mirth bounced off the trees in the distance of the boys' gathering spot.

"Whatever you say man, but I think you're barking up the wrong tree."

"You don't say..." Spike grumbled, gritting his teeth as he squeezed the words out. He clenched his claw in an obvious attempt to repress the scathing comments he had withheld earlier at Snips' admission of romantic preference. The anger subsided in a moment as the young dragon remembered the original purpose of the communal information sharing.

"Right... so now that we've both said who we like... what about you, Snails?"

Snails turned his lanky neck away from the group, staring down towards the ground. He thought back to the afternoon two days ago.

Snails had been waiting outside the school for his parents to come pick him up. The trip home was not particularly dangerous nor difficult, but for some reason his parents always insisted on escorting him. Frankly, he found it embarrassing... but he was not the type to disobey his parents' directions. And so, he found himself waiting patiently just past the school-house door, staring absentmindedly into the distance. He was so absorbed in his attention to nothing in particular, he didn't even notice the tiny patter of a set of hooves approaching.

"Hey Thnailth!"

The peppy voice arriving in his ear unexpectedly made him jump awkwardly. On the way down to the ground, his lanky limbs became tangled in a now typical fashion, sending him tumbling into a waiting face-full of dirt. He let out a small 'oof' as the rest of his body flattened in accordance with the resultant gravity.

"Oh my goth, I'm thorry! Are you okay?"

Snails awkwardly spit out a mouthful of dirt turned mud with the addition of saliva while assessing the damage. His legs were inexplicably contorted, but the short fall hadn't even given him a scrape – just a helping of brown dust.

"...yeah." He mumbled, undoing the makeshift knots his legs had found their way into before standing upright, giving a quick shake of his head to rid his dark green hair of its new earthy highlights. He turned to face the voice that had startled him.

"Twist? What are you-"

The high-pitched lisp interrupted him at his last word.

"I'm thorry, really! I didn't mean to thcare you like that.. Are you thure you're okay?"

Snails blinked slowly and looked down at himself in a cursory assessment. As long as his appendages remained and were unbroken, he'd be fine. At the moment, however, any physical damage seemed ancillary – he was more concerned with the bespectacled white filly standing in front of him.

As a rule, Snails did not spend a lot of time talking with his class mates – the few that

approached him fled quickly, much quicker than he could manage to compose a sentence or dialogue to retain their attention. He heard the words people called him behind his back, often-times in ready earshot – slow, stupid, dopey... Speaking up was not in his nature, so he let the words pass by. He thought to himself sometimes that maybe he was so stupid his brain couldn't process the insults enough for them to bother him... but at least that meant he spent most of his time relatively content, if a tad lonely.

There was always Snips, after all. Since the day the two colts had met, they had been almost inseparable, spending more time together than any other friends their age. Though the two approached life with a slightly different outlook, they had a great deal in common – most notably, the distaste from their peers. And so they had reasoned – who needs them, when we have each other?

Twist was not a pony Snails was used to associating with. They shared a class, as did most other young ponies in town of their age, outside the home schooled or pegasi attending flight-school – but Snails couldn't recall a time they had spoken. Twist was not that popular, but she was intelligent and hard-working, and that at least was enough to endear her to their teacher Ms. Cheerilee. Meanwhile, Snails' frustratingly plodding approach to most of his school work left his teacher sighing with frustration, spending more of her time than was necessary after school to coach him on problematic homework – which was to say, all homework.

And so, the two had very little in common, and had spoken even less as a result. Yet here she was in front of him, a round-eyed red-haired young girl who had ventured the first word between them.

Snails blinked as the moment's contemplation coursed slowly through his brain. What had the question been, again?

“...yeah, I'm okay.”

Twist smiled at him. He was used to grins and smirks when he spoke, usually other ponies chuckling at his strange-sounding voice or lethargic way with words; Twist's smile felt different though – warmer. He could feel a weakness in his knees that usually came on when his body became acutely aware it was growing faster than his brain could keep up with.

So what had she come to talk to him about?

His brain translated the question inelegantly.

“So, uh...”

And before he could finish, Twist took over.

“Oh, right, I'm thorry! You're probably wondering why I came to talk to you.”

Snails blinked, and nodded slowly.

“Yeah.” Somehow, he managed to make even a single word seem ponderously slow.

Twist's disposition shifted at that juncture – where she had been mostly exuberant and bouncy in her initial approach, the conversational turn seemed to jar her slightly. She tilted her head downwards, staring at the dirt beneath her feet as though it was the most interesting in the world. She was blushing slightly.

“I was jutht wondering...”

Snails tilted his head curiously.

“...if, uh...”

It wasn't like Twist to take so long to articulate a thought. Even Snails was beginning to

feel slightly impatient – but he continued to wait. While Twist was focused on the ground, Snails' eyes were on her. He hadn't noticed before, how red her hair was, or the way the sun at its height shimmered off her soft white coat. He wished she would look back up at him, so he could see her eyes again – when their gazes met a moment ago, he had seen for the first time how bright and wide they looked behind her purple glasses. That was when his knees had shaken.

Finally, Twist let the words out all at once, like a breaking dam.

“... I was jutht wondering if you'd go out with me.”

The sentence hung awkwardly in the air. Twist brushed a hoof against the dirt as she stared downward.

Snails took a moment to process the request. It had been a request, hadn't it?

He considered the possible responses.

Twist was... sweet. Much like her namesake of the peppermint twists she so loved making, she was sugary and day brightening. Snails had to admit, he didn't know her that well – just the cursory information provided at a glance. Then again, he didn't know anyone in school that well, aside from Snips, and he could recall moments in the past when the glow of bright orange-red hair had caught his eye and made him smile. Twist never had anything bad to say about him, unlike the rest of his classmates. She smiled at him when she walked by his desk, and sometimes he managed to smile back.

What did it mean to 'go out' with somepony? He understood the basic concept, vaguely, but the details were unclear. Ostensibly older ponies 'went out'... they had boyfriends and girlfriends and... dates? The words were there in his head, but as for the particulars... Would that make him and Twist boyfriend and girlfriend? What would something like that imply? It was a lot to consider. His face scrunched in mental concentration for a moment, apparently prompting Twist's notice out of the corner of her down turned eyes.

“I'll underthtand if you thay no... I just... um... think you're thweet.”

Snails felt his cheeks flush read. No one had called him that before.

“Um... I guess we could go out.”

In spite of her momentary embarrassment, Twist beamed.

“Really? That's thuper!”

Snails wasn't sure what to say next. Another uncomfortable silence took place, this time with twist smiling brightly and Snails casting furtive glances on either side of his periphery.

“So, uh... what happens now?”

“Well... I wath thinking we could hang out after thchool thometime? You could come over to my houth and I could thow you how to make peppermint thtickth!”

So his new girlfriend – if that was the right word – wanted to make candy with him?

Well, that didn't sound so bad.

“Sure, I love peppermint sticks.”

That wasn't quite what Snails had meant to articulate in his response... often-times the first thought that popped into his head was the first to make itself heard. Twist seemed happy with the answer though.

“Awethome! I'll meet you afther thchool on tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure.” Snails noticed that, alongside Twist's enthusiastic lisp, his own languid drawl seemed less out of place. Next to each other, the pair of voices circumvented

conventional speaking patterns, in a strange kind of compliment.

“Great. I’ll thee you then!”

The red-haired filly dashed off into the distance with as the same vigor she had used to blurt out her request, leaving a tiny trail of dust in the air as her hooves kicked it upward. Snails watched her as she vanished around the corner of a faraway house.

“Well?”

Snails kept his eyes down.

“I dunno.”

Snips groaned in over exaggerated disappointment, while Spike simply shrugged. The young dragon could understand the delicacy of divulging such private information, especially around someone like Snips, who had proven himself utterly tactless on so many occasions.

“Aw man, come on. We just told you. There really isn’t anyone you like, no one at all?”

The circle of field that Snips and Snails snuck off to on the occasional lunch to share ‘guy-time’ conversation with Spike was only a short distance from the schoolhouse – though often just far enough away that the bell to end the break went unheard, leading to frequent bouts of tardiness and resultant detentions. It was far enough away as well that no one ever bothered them – everypony else spent their time on the playground or inside talking with their friends.

There was one pony nearby that day though – Snails saw the glimmer of sun on bright-red out of the corner of his eye, his height letting him stare right over the heads of the other two participants in the conversation, both considerably smaller in stature.

As he turned to focus, a white hoof waved at him from the distance. Snails felt a smile creep across his face.

“Well... maybe there’s someone.”