

Drama Diffusion

Three friendships down the crapper over the course of one afternoon.

This had cost Penny her reputation, and all over what she thought was a favor she'd done for one of her best friends in the critter community. Glee and Riddle had it completely public on their bluefly account that they were dating. How was she supposed to know that picture they took together was supposed to be a secret?

Well, she'd drawn a couple's portrait of them, and posted it. It got a few likes. But the moment Glee and Riddle saw it, they ordered her to take it down, then threatened to kick her out of the friend group if she ever "pulled a stunt like that again."

What stunt? She'd tried to remain calm. She admitted she may have been a little hasty, but she was sure to let them know that threatening to cut ties was no way to talk to a friend. They lamented the way she felt, but doubled down on the "seriousness" and "consequences" of drawing someone's picture without asking, none of which they could describe in practical terms.

At first, all she did was ask for space. And then Charisma got involved. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can hang out with someone who treats my friends the way you did. I wish you the best, and please try not to bring this up at future meet-ups."

Damn her. Charisma my ass. Just how far were those two bitching about her? She'd done what they'd asked her to and taken down the picture. She admitted that she'd made a mistake in posting it. This was no longer about her transgression, but their right to reprimand her however they wished.

She lashed back at Charisma. "Fine. Do whatever you want, but the way I 'treated' them is something I apologized for and agreed not to do again. The way they are treating me is making it hard for me to make friends." Then she went after Glee and Riddle. "This is the last I'll ever talk to you. Next time someone upsets you, maybe don't threaten to kick them out of your social circles, and think about what that says about your ridiculous standards for friendship. Goodbye."

Damn, that felt good.

For about thirty minutes.

And then the concept of consequences sat in.

"Don't feed the trolls," as the adage went. Over the course of her life, Penny began to learn that trolls were easy things to starve. Random colon blossoms who showed up on social media did such a poor job at hiding their true intentions that it was genuinely laughable. "Looks like someone forgot to flush the toilet," she recalled one person commenting on a picture she posted. Delete comment, block user, easy as pie. "Hasn't anyone called the cops on this [slur] yet?" Pretty sure that guy got his account suspended for that.

But these were not trolls. These were her friends. At least, she thought they were. Penny was a pure-bred human, and that already made her an outsider - an overweight, hunchbacked, bespeckled-ridden outsider. She'd looked all her life to find just the place where nobody cared what you looked like. And Glee the lamb was her friend, for more than a year. She'd helped her through the worst break-up of her life. The community wasn't perfect, but it was where she belonged. And then, over this one misstep, she might not even belong there anymore.

Damn it. Damn it all. She'd thrown away a wonderful friendship over it. But it was going to end anyway. No friendship where people threatened cutting ties over the first mistake you made was ever going to last. That's what she told herself. But did they truly intend that, or were they just blowing off steam? What if what she did really was something that could cause them harm? What if she really was an outcast among the critters now?

Her alarm went off. It was time to go to Celcias's party. Only... no. No it wasn't anymore. She didn't know who would be there. Celcias was a shared friend of all three of them. No doubt Glee and Riddle had got to her first. No doubt they'd won the race to see how many allies they could conscript to their side of the argument. No... friends didn't resolve conflicts like this. Good people didn't resolve conflicts by complaining about the people they were angry with to be sure that the recipients of their complaints were just as angry as they were.

A swarm of thoughts and anxieties followed after this one. The things that Riddle the hedgehog, Charisma the salamander, and Glee would be saying to justify themselves. They had a greater following. They had leverage against her. She was done for. Nobody would care that Penny had

apologized and said she'd never do it again. They wanted someone who knew exactly not to do it in the first place. Penny heaved herself onto her bed and lay face down.

Then there was the doorbell. She needed time, she needed room to recover. She needed permission to be angry and resentful for a while. But she couldn't ignore the doorbell. She needed comfort, too. She needed assurance that her intentions mattered to someone. She would take the risk.

There, standing on the other side of her closet door, was Celcias. Her closet door led to Seabottom, populated largely by sea dragons not too different from sea horses. Celcias, a whale of a sea horse, hovered there, balancing a tray of muffins across the landscape of her globular belly. She wore an apron - nothing short of a miracle they made any her size - and a lacy bonnet. Her waffle-pattern scales were bright orange, and her tale curled out like the tip of a treble clef. She had bright floral spikes running down her scalp and all throughout her spine until they tapered off at the end of her tail.

"We missed you at the party," she chirped. "I'd called you several times until Randall told me you might be taking a nap. Hope I didn't wake you, but now that you're up, you've got to try - "

She trailed off. There must have been something in Penny's face that let her know her appetite was practically in a coma.

Celcias's eyes widened in astonishment. "Why, my darling, have you been crying?"

If one more person turned on her, Penny would be in hell. She knew it. Divulging wasn't safe anymore. She stumbled back and sat on her bed, shaking, very close to vomiting with all the resentment she was holding back.

Celcias propelled forward, only to get stuck in the doorframe. Sucking her gut, rather than making her more compact, crushed the surrounding wood. Still, it was at least wide enough for her to get through.

"What's happened? Has someone... did somebody make you not want to come to the party?"

Penny kept her eyes on the floor. Opening up could be deadly. If Celcias had the wrong response, Penny could become, in the sea dragon's eyes, little more than a traitor. She couldn't keep it in forever though. More than anything else, she wanted relief. She didn't want to carry the burden of uncertainty and misery around with her. She needed emotional closeness.

"I did something... I made a mistake." She managed to cough up those words. "And some people... I thought they were my friends... they said they'd cut ties if I did it again. And though I apologized, I asked them not to tell me off like that, but they went and complained to more people. And I... I hate myself. I can't feel safe around them..."

She was shaking now. She didn't look up at Celcias's face. The worst thing that she could see was disapproval. That would have been utter damnation. She needed her, above all else, to show that Penny's intentions mattered.

Slowly, and softly, Penny felt herself rising off the bed, into Celcias's arms, and onto the cool, breezy surface of her torso. She felt her chin come to rest on her scalp. Please, thought Penny. Please don't let this turn into another blame game.

"Oh, sweetheart... I want to say the right things. If ever you start feeling triggered, by all means, interrupt me. But threatening to cut ties after one mistake is no way to talk to a friend. Can you tell me what the mistake was? I promise, I won't blame you."

Penny disclosed it. The use of a picture they'd posted for gift art.

"Hmm... it is a little odd to get upset over something like that, but still not a reason to cut ties. It sounds like this is a person who isn't good at expressing discomfort. Was there anything, well... revealing about the picture?"

"No... I don't think so... but... I have to be honest. I don't understand why what I did was so bad. I can't feel safe talking to them again. And I know they'll just tell me off again if I try to work it out."

"That's their responsibility. We all owe it to one another to be kind when setting boundaries with first time offenders. Is there a specific way you can handle confrontation? There must be some time when it made sense to stop doing something."

"I just... I wish they didn't give me orders and threaten to kick me out of a group. That was just so... harsh."

"It sounds like whoever this was confronted you during a panic attack."

"Yes... I... that wasn't the only mistake. I blocked them too... I freaked out. I was scared... I know they told at least one person about it, and I can only imagine how many more, so I blocked them... I'm

sorry! Please, please understand, it's just so awful when you try to stay calm and the only consolation you get is, 'I'm allowed to do this because I wasn't even harsher.' "

"Did they say that? Heavens to high water! Well... it does sound like more than a few hasty decisions were made... may I say that?" Penny nodded. She knew better than to claim she was in the right on all fronts. Celcias sighed. It was a sigh of relief. "Yes, the art of constructive confrontation is so lost... it's been that way for... well, since a certain farmer brained another one in the head with a cinderblock. It seems as though the goal all around was just to not feel awful, which is an understandable thing to shoot for, although attaining not-awful-feelingness ought to come from somewhere apart from... well... you know."

Penny held tight to Celcias's body. "Thank you for not judging me. I feel like I might be able to trust again."

"Well... I'm not sure who got up in arms about the gift art, but I am sure that a true friend wouldn't kill off a friendship on the first sign of conflict."

Penny gulped. That was what she had done. Glee, Riddle, and Charisma, she'd completely blacklisted over this. It wasn't just one sign of conflict, though. They'd taken extreme measures to show how bad they thought that one specific transgression was. And not once did they give a practical reason. It was all emotionally charged demands.

"I... I blocked them. I lashed out. That's... I hate that about myself. I know you might think I'm a hypocrite. That's... I was so desperate to get my point across that all that mattered was not feeling like the bad guy."

Celcias raised Penny up to her shoulder. The tears had yet to subside.

"Dear, listen. You're not a hypocrite. You're not the bad guy. You're a sensitive individual who encountered a situation you didn't know how to deal with, because it was unfamiliar to you. You may be encountering situations in your own mind that you don't know how to deal with either, and... if I could venture to say... this is something that you and the... uh, picture-posters have in common."

It was clear there to Penny that she would eventually have to forgive them. She would have to forgive herself. Maybe not reopen contact, at least not for a while. But that did make sense.

"And if they're telling other people... well, everyone needs to confide in another person from time to time. But a reasonable person never takes everything at face value. A reasonable person listens to both sides of the conflict. If you agreed not to do the thing that upset them, then you've done your job. If they won't agree not to do the thing that upset you, well... they might not have been your friends in the first place. Conflict reconciliation is the core of relationship building, after all."

It was like an angelic glow soaring through Penny's body then. She didn't feel like she had to hate herself or settle a score to have a healthy mind again. Things seemed much different.

"I love you," she said, and she could feel a surge of warmth coarsing across the outtermost layer of Celcias's skin.

"Aww... can I ask you one question? And... don't feel like you have to answer right away, but... do you think you could find a way to forgive them, even if they don't apologize? And... I don't mean put yourself in danger, since they've chosen to complain about you in addition to confronting you, I mean, accept if they choose to limit you to your mistakes?"

Penny didn't know if she would do that all throughout the future, but for the moment, she felt as though she could, so she nodded.

"Ah, wonderful. Now, you simply must try these muffins!"