Anger Management

by Helthehatter

Summary

Gideon Grey has reluctantly joined an anger management class and forced to spend time with his old victim Sharla. The young sheep is also less than thrilled.
But time spent together may show these two are more similar than they know.
Sharla had nearly had a heart attack when she walked into her house and found a fox in the kitchen. And it wasn't just any fox but the old schoolyard bully Gideon Grey. Sharla hadn't been this close to him since middle school, she having temporarily left Bunnyburrow to study for ZASA during highschool.

She had been back for only three days and now the boy who had plagued her childhood with insults and pushes was in her house.

The fox jolted when he heard her bleat of surprise and had whirled around with bristled fur, Sharla saw his right arm was in a sling.

"Sharla, you're home!" her mother, calmly standing beside the fox, smiled at her. "Perfect timing. Gideon and I were just about to get some fresh baked cookies out of the oven."

Sharla could only blink.

Gideon had seriously considered running away when his parents informed him he would be taking anger management classes. He didn't need anger management classes, especially not from some sheep.

Mrs. Clover was a far too optimistic sheep who insisted on one on one classes, that way they could form a "bond" and "connect". It made Gideon want to vomit.

This was completely unfair and all because he had fought with a pack of bulls. He had already gotten his arm broken during that scuffle. Hadn't he suffered enough?

It was his third day with Mrs. Clover (class was on every Friday), and she was blabbing how the cookies she was baking was a metaphor for change. A sudden bleat had had him turning around to see a vaguely familiar sheep his age.

"Sharla, you're home!" Mrs. Clover cooed happily.

Oh, she blinked. Now he remembered she was one of his old victims, she had disappeared during high school, he hadn't realized she came back.

Mrs. Clover walked over to her daughter and quickly explained why the fox was here. Bored of the two sheep he turned back to looking at the cookies through the oven. Being raised by bakers cooking had always calmed him.

He did not need anger management.

"Come eat cookies with us," Mrs. Clover whispered to Sharla. "You'd be a good influence on him."

The quiet sheep moved her eyes to the hooves that were interlocked with her mother's. The Clovers were a flock of snowy white wool. Sharla was the only black sheep. And she doubted she'd be any kind of influence on Gideon, the stocky fox looked like he had forgotten the two sheep were there.
"I'm not..." Sharla began but in the end she couldn't say no to her mother's hopeful expression, "Sure, Mom."

Her mother ushered her to stand by Gideon while Mrs. Clover pulled the finished cookies out of the oven. Sharla had instantly tensed up when she was placed next to her old bully, so close she could feel his body heat. She swallowed and forced herself not to step away.

Gideon wasn't surprised to see Sharla tense up once she was placed beside him. And he wasn't bothered by it either. In fact maybe he could go home early if Mrs. Clover saw how uncomfortable he made her daughter.

"Try one, both of you," Mrs. Clover encouraged once the cookies were on a plate.

Both teenagers picked up an oatmeal cookie, Sharla softly blowing on it before taking a tentative bite. Gideon however, took a moment to examine his cookie, noticing the burnt edges and how crumbs fell though he barely moved it.

He took a small bite and wasn't surprised to find that the cookie tasted terrible. And he had no qualms with telling Mrs. Clover that.

The sheep didn't so much as blink at the bluntly rude comment, but Sharla turned to him with a scowl. "No it isn't! They taste good to me!"

Gideon turned his head to meet her eyes and the smaller sheep flinched but stood her ground.

"That just means yer taste is as bad as these cookies," he replied dryly.

If sheep could bristle Sharla would be doing just that.

But her mother's sudden gasp brought their attention back to her. She was staring at them with a strange grin, "You have the same eyes!"

Gideon fought the urge to look back at Sharla to confirm him as he had never paid attention to her, or anyone's, eye color.

"They're exactly the same," Mrs. Clover was still gushing. "You know what that means, it means your kindred spirits!"

She took Gideon's paw and Sharla's hoof and for a horrifying moment the fox thought she was going to make them hold hands.

"Just because we both have blue eyes doesn't make us kindred spirits, Mom," Sharla said, expression awkward.

"Oh yes you are," Mrs. Clover would not be proven wrong. "I can see it, you're both so alike."

Gideon could've gagged, but then the grip on his paw tightened.

He looked at the older sheep who eyes were just a trace harder, "However, Gideon you need to work on thinking before speaking. Hurting someone's feelings doesn't benefit anyone."

Gideon opened his jaws to tell her what he thought of that, but in a blur of movement Mrs. Clover shoved another cookie in his mouth, silencing him.
"There you see," she smiled sweetly while the fox coughed, "You'll find it's not so hard to keep that handsome muzzle shut."
"Gideon Grey!?!"

Sharla cringed at the shocked yell that blared from her phone. "He was at your house? Why?"

"He's a student for my mother's anger management classes," Sharla explained.

She sat cross-legged on her old childhood bed, her laptop opened before her. She had been looking for any part-time jobs when a friend called.

Berry had been bullied by Gideon as well and Sharla hadn't been surprised by the bunny's reaction. "But didn't you tell her how awful he was to us?" Berry asked.

"Even if I did schoolyard bullies are her bread and butter," Sharla pointed out, ending her words with a sigh. "She'll just be more inspired to reform him."

Berry let out a noise of disbelief, "Like that would ever happen. You poor thing, you're gonna be stuck with that jerk forever."

"Thanks for the comforting words, Berry," Sharla said dryly.

"Hey," she could hear the bunny shrug, "We can't all be Judy Hopps."

Sharla's shoulders drooped, Judy Hopps was exactly what she needed. The bunny, like Sharla, had left Bunnyburrow but unlike her Judy was flourishing at the ZPD Academy. She was going to make her dreams come true. And Sharla bet if she was here she would put Gideon in his place.

Well, Judy wasn't here so Sharla would have to do it herself. It wasn't like she was good at anything else.

Gideon sat across from Mrs. Clover in the sheep's spick and span living room.

Today his lesson was about using his words.

"It's the most effective form of conversation," she explained the obvious. "It is more effective and far more awarding than answering with anger."

Gideon gave her a droll look, "Is that a fact?"

The hard glint in her brown eyes returned and Gideon locked his lips immediately. He then mentally growled at himself for letting a sheep scare him.

"Look Missus Clover," he began using his 'words'. "It don't matter how I act. Im'a fox." His voice grew into a growl, "I could spend all day pickin' flowers and kissin' babies, ain't no one who's gonna see more than a fox."

Mrs. Clover nodded knowingly (as if she knew anything) and wrote something down in her notebook. "So you suffer from self-doubt."

Gideon blinked, where did she get that?!
"And you're letting it manifest into unchecked rage and aggression."

The stocky fox narrowed his eyes. Was she making this up as she went along?

"That's something we can work with," she nodded again, wearing a proud smile as she basically stole his parents' money.

Footsteps on the stairs announced the arrival of Sharla, wrapped up in a purple coat and blue knee high skirt. Her frown deepened when she saw Gideon on the couch and he almost bared his teeth at her.

"Sharla! Splendid news! I found the root of Gideon's problem!" She jumped to her feet, "And we'll discuss it over tea, be back in a moment!"

Mrs. Clover scurried to the kitchen, leaving Gideon with her daughter. And the fox didn't waste time giving his opinion to Sharla. "Your ma might as well be burning my parents' money."

She glared at him, "She said she figured out your problem. Found out you're a total jerk?"

He let out an amused snort, "That supposed to hurt my feelings?"

Sharla made a noise similar to a growl and straightened her spine. "Look Gideon Grey, I came down here to lay down some ground rules."

Gideon's thick brows rose, he was still darkly amused that this sheep was trying to stand up to him with her knees knocking. She cleared her throat and kept on, "You might be bigger but you can't boss me around like when we were kids. Judy Hopps might not be here but I'm willing to be a substitute."

His brows lowered at the mention of that pesky dumb bunny who had nearly broken his snout all those years ago. Gideon's claws dug into his pant leg.

As if reading his mind Sharla added: "I won't hesitate to hit you, I don't care how my mom reacts."

Gideon let out a rude chuckle then stood up. Sharla flinched when he suddenly stood nose to nose with her. "Then hit me."

"Wh-What?" she stammered, shaking under his gaze but not running away.

"Go ahead and hit me," he breathed. "Cause I plan on using yer ma's advice and use my words. And I'm sure I can make you a sobbing mess with just a few words."

Sharla silently glared at him, still shaking and Gideon noticed she was wearing some kind of rosy perfume. It was a nice scent but it, like everything else in life, didn't distract from the fact that he was a fox. And this sheep hated him for it.

"Oh goodness!"

Mrs. Clover had returned with iced tea and was looking at the two with a wide smile. "Are you two about to kiss?"

Gideon jumped back so quickly he nearly tripped over the coffee table. "No!"

Mrs. Clover only giggled, placing the tea down, "Whatever you say love birds. Sharla, darling, want some tea?"

Her daughter was already shaking her head, "N-no, Mom." Her voice was wobbling, "I-I'm going
upstairs.” She quickly turned on her heel, not knowing Gideon watched her go.
Mrs. Clover was giggling at the ‘hilarity’ that the Greentree Trail was currently full of yellows and red thanks to autumn.

The stocky fox glanced at Sharla on Mrs. Clover’s other side; she didn’t find her mother’s joke anymore endearing.

Gideon’s eyes moved from Sharla’s face to south, examining the track suit she currently wore. White with purple stripes it showed off her arms and legs. Gideon’s eyes pulled away when he felt like he was starting to stare. He was wearing an old pair of jeans and a short sleeved ivory shirt that matched the sling that held his arm to his chest.

Speaking of his sling… “Are ya sure hiking with a broken arm is a good idea?”

“Yes but I rather you spend time with me than alone in your stuffy room,” Mrs. Clover answered.

Gideon rolled his eyes, ignoring the young ewe’s glare. Mrs. Clover started the jog into Greentree, Sharla fast walking after while Gideon just walked.

“You won’t get a view like this in the big city!” Mrs. Clover said from up front, enjoying the picturesque scenes of foliage.

Gideon resisted the urge to point out Zootopia has parks and instead tuned her cheerful banter out, his blue eyes turning back to Sharla.

Why his eyes moved to her he had no idea. But be supposed he could admit—to himself—that Sharla was nice to look at. He almost could call her pretty when she wasn’t glaring at him and waiting for him to take a bite out of her.

Stay away!

Sharla must have felt his eyes on her, she turned and scowled at him before his eyes moved away, his vision going unfocused.

We don’t want to play with you!

Gideon shook his head, feeling his brain buzz with red. Why was he bringing that awful day up now? It was hotter than usual today, maybe the heat was getting to him.

Mrs. Clover’s sudden elated gasp distracted him, dragging his eyes back to her just in time to see her heading to a short, almost invisible trail on the side of the main path. “I know this old trail! It leads to an old pond I used to go to!”
“Mother, wait!” Sharla called out but the older sheep had vanished.

Gideon stopped next to the black ewe, staring where Mrs. Clover had disappeared. “I’m not followin’ her.”

“How?” Sharla moaned in exasperation and sat on the path, chin resting in her hooves. “Why did she have to drag me into this?”

“Why did she have to drag me into this?” Gideon’s voice came out as a growl.

She looked up at him, “Because you have anger issues.”

“I do not!” he snapped and Sharla flinched. “…I do not,” he repeated in a quieter but still angry tone.

“And I’m sure you got your arm hurt because you were happy,” she mocked.

Gideon pulled his lip back to show off his teeth, “Funny, can’t remember this being any of your business.”

Sharla shot up to her feet and faced him with a full on glare, “And I can’t remember deserving any of this! My mom is trying to help you be a better mammal but all you do is treat her with disrespect! You don’t even care how awful you’ve been to literally every mammal you’ve met! It’s a wonder you ever had any friends!”

_No one wants to be your friend!

“I don’t either!” Gideon yelled back. “I mean why would they? I’m a fox after all!”

Sharla blinked, taken aback by his words. “What?”

“You heard me!”

“You think I give a damn that you’re a fox? I hate you because you were dead set on making mine and my friends’ life a living hell!”

“Then why did you come back?” Gideon demanded. “I thought you wanted to go off and be an astronaut.” He said the last word like it was as ridiculous as her suddenly sprouting wings and flying away.

Sharla took a full step back, her expression a mixture of astonishment and heartbreak.

Gideon felt a twinge that he would realize was guilt if he didn’t still see red. Awful words rolling in his head: _Mangy, untrustworthy, fox, fox, fox._

Sharla’s eyes turned glassy and Gideon waited for her to cry. But instead she smacked his shoulder. And thought it didn’t hurt him it made them both stare at each other with wide eyes, shocked.

“Well, well, well.”

Mrs. Clover returned to the main path, giving them both a disapproving look. Her sudden appearance made the two wound up teens jump. “I’m gone for less than a minute, I counted, and you two are at each other’s throats. I now have two patients.” Her smile sent cold water down Gideon’s spine. “And I know just what method to use.”
Good news Mrs. Clover's next method will actually work.
When they returned to the Clover household Sharla's mother pointed to the couch and they young ewe immediately sat down. Even though she had an incredibly ominous feeling, last time her mother had that smile on her face Sharla's parents had gotten piercings.

Mrs. Clover's arm was still indicating to the couch but her eyes had turned to Gideon who stood grumpily in the middle of the living room.

"Sit." she ordered.

Gideon bared his teeth, "No."

"Your parents told me to call them if you're being too difficult and I believe in involving the family as much as possible."

Gideon's fangs were still on display as he reluctantly sat down next to Sharla, their elbows brushing and making them both flinch.

"Now," Mrs. Clover rested her hooves on her hips, "It's clear you two have some unspoken baggage between yourselves."

"You could say that," Sharla and Gideon said in unison before glaring at each other.

Mrs. Clover nodded, "Indeed, so today instead of hiking I'm leaving you two here to talk, just you two, no phones, just each other."

The fox and ewe stared at her with open horror but Mrs. Clover was already turning on her heel to walk out.

"You can't do that!" Gideon insisted, moving to stand up.

Mrs. Clover smirked over her shoulder, "I can, actually, Sharla's my daughter and I already told your parents the plan. They wholeheartedly agree." She turned and closed the door behind her and Gideon slumped back down.

The awkward silence that they were left in made Sharla hide in her wool, wrapping her arms around herself and keeping her eyes on the carpet. Gideon was bristling next to her before remembering he didn't have to sit on the couch and quickly stood up, the tip of his tail accidentally flicking across her leg.

Every time he touched her her skin jumped and it made Sharla want to curl up into a ball and
disappear. The fox was staring at the door with narrowed eyes.

"How long is she going to make us stay in here?" Sharla shrugged, her mother was unpredictable and had odd methods.

Gideon gave her a thoughtful look, "You could just say we made up, she's your mom, she'll listen to you."

"No, she wouldn't," said Sharla, pulling her legs up onto the couch to rest her chin on her knees. "She won't be satisfied until we're friends."

"That's stupid," his voice was a low rumble.

Sharla agreed but she wouldn't admit it out loud. And Gideon didn't add any more, he stood in the middle of the cozy living room, tail flicking back and forth and blue eyes staring at one spot of the carpeted floor, apparently deep in thought.

As the terrible silence felt like it would never end Sharla finally cleared her throat, genuinely curious of something and wanting to make a point. "I really don't care that you're a fox."

His eyes turned to her so quickly it felt like a jolt. "I don't," she continued. "You might try to make the excuse that no one likes you because you're a fox but that's not true. No one liked you because you're a jerk."

His eyes were sapphire slits, "I'm a jerk because mammals didn't like me, and they didn't like me because I'm a fox."

Sharla opened her mouth to retort but Gideon waved his paw, cutting her off, "Remember when we minded each other's business, I wanna go back to that."

"Well I don't!" Gideon wasn't the only one surprised by her bold tone. But Sharla forced herself off the couch to lock eyes, "You told me you're a jerk because you're a fox. If that's the reason you tormented me and my friends I want to know more."

Gideon's ears pulled back and he looked ready to step back, actually...he looked nervous. But that couldn't be right...

She took a step forward, "Answer me."

Gideon Grey, her childhood bully, stepped away from her, pressing his back against the wall. She was making him uncomfortable, which was fantastic because all he had done these past few days made her uncomfortable.

"Tell me-"

"Mammals don't like foxes," he broke in, baring his teeth in a desperate attempt to appear menacing. But the way his ears were folded back made him look so small. "You're a harmless sheep, no one's scared of you. Me, I'm a fox, you know what that means? I steal and I bite-that's it. That's all I am to the world, that's all I was to those bulls, that's all I am to our old classmates, and that's all I am to you and yer mom!"

"That's not true," Sharla's voice was a choked whisper.

Gideon didn't believe her, "I could've spent my whole school life picking flowers and you, and everyone, would still hate me."
"I would not!" she insisted, her hoof reaching out and grabbing his uninjured arm. Gideon's fur bristled underneath her grip. "I wouldn't."

Suddenly the door opened up and Mrs. Clover popped her head in, "Are you guys hungry? Bonding can be very-oh, did I interrupt something? Fantastic!"
The Visitor

Chapter Summary

Commissioned by hajimekarakuristudios

Identify Possible Solutions

Gideon tried to ignore the itching sensation under his cast. He couldn't wait until his arm healed and he could finally scratch that itch.

He sat on his bed, the only unmade thing in his room. His books and films were stacked neatly on their respected shelves, the dirty clothes in a hamper and the floor devoid of any sort of debris. His mother had been thrilled when he had finally started to pick up after himself when he turned thirteen.

"You were the messiest pup," she had chastised, her voice exasperated but fond as she ran her paw over his head.

Gideon hadn't told her what had happened earlier that day, getting into a fight with some rabbits and sheep that had outnumbered him and pushed him into a large pile of mud. It took way too long for them to leave him alone and finally allowed him to crawl out of the itchy, murky substance. His fur had felt disgusting and his stomach roiled with fury. Not wanting his parents to ask questions he had washed himself off at a nearby pond and walked home. He wouldn't tell anyone what had happened; just a few days ago he had bullied those kids as well, stealing the smallest rabbit's lunch money. If he tried to tattle on them they would tattle right back and the entire town knew what Gideon Grey was like. But upon entering his messy room he had felt a strange empathy toward it and decided not to let it get filthy ever again—he finally got what that felt like.

Now in present day Gideon learned his head back against the bed frame, running his claws lightly over the cast. He was glad he didn't have to go visit Mrs. Clover today, free from that smug smile and knowing eyes. Free of her daughter who suddenly started to act like she was a saint.

"Gideon!" his mother's voice suddenly came from downstairs. "Come down here for a second please."

He obediently slid off his bed and made his way down to the living room, wondering what his mother needed. Did he not hang up his coat? But the moment he reached the living room he jolted to a stop, eyes wide and ready to turn tail and run.

Sharla was sitting on his couch, in his house; across from her was his mother who looked delighted by the ewe's presence.

"What are you doing here?" Gideon snapped.

His mother sent him a glare, "Put those teeth away. Miss Clover is making an order. She'd like some muffins for her family's upcoming picnic."
"I hope it wasn't too much a bother to come over," Sharla smiled. "I just wanted to talk to you in person."

"Nonsense, dear of course you're welcome," Mrs. Grey was quick to return the smile.

*She's already won my mother over to her side,* Gideon realized with horror. *That sneaky minx!*  

"Also," Sharla pulled a slip of paper from her pocket and offered it to Gideon. "This is from my mother."

Ignoring the dread Gideon took the note and read over it: *Find the solutions to your problems.*

He growled lowly at the strange and brief message, "What does that mean?"

He looked to Sharla who shrugged, "My mother is cryptic." She then stood up, hooves behind her back, "Can I have a tour?"

Gideon was about to deny her when his mother broke in, also standing up, "Of course, Mrs. Clover's daughter is always welcome. Gideon, give the dear a tour. You can stay for lunch, Miss Clover, if you like."

"You're so kind, it'd be my pleasure," she smiled, "And please, call me Sharla."

After Mrs. Grey walked off into the kitchen, leaving Gideon and Sharla in the living room, he turned to her and was surprised to see the friendly expression on the sheep's face. "After you," she replied. "I never realized how big this house was. Hasn't it been in Bunnyburrow since the town was first built?"

"I know that," he said, suspicious as he turned around and headed to the dinning room, "My family has owned this house for years."

"That must make you proud," she commented, walking close by his side, muscles relaxed.

Gideon kept his eyes forward, "Not really. My I don't know how many greats great grandfather won it in a drunken game of poker."

Sharla didn't respond, the two reaching the dinning room. "Oh, wow." She stopped before a cabinet, antique vases sat on it. Her head looked up to see a small chandelier, "I can feel the history in this place."

Gideon lifted his chin, "My family used to invite mammals from the city for dinner, aristocrats." He released he had just bragged and wondered why he felt the need to do that. Still Sharla's impressed expression made the angry twisting in his gut ease.

"Is there an attic?" Sharla walked over and stopped far too close for Gideon's liking but he didn't step back. He didn't want the ewe to know he was bothered.

"Attic?" he echoed, confused.

"Yeah, an attic full of old antiques and heirlooms," she giggled quietly and it reminded him of bells. "Maybe even a ghost?"

"We have an attic," he answered. "There aren't any ghosts in there."

"But there's *something*?" Sharla persisted.
The fox shrugged, looking away from her, "I don't know. I don't go up there."

"Why not?"

He wouldn't tell her that, back when he was a pup, the attic had absolutely petrified him.

"There's stuff in there, isn't there?" Sharla grinned, "Can we go look at it?" When Gideon didn't reply her face twisted into a sneaky expression that reminded him of a fox. "Or can I see your room?"

"To the attic then," Gideon turned on his heel and marched up the stairs, not watching to see if Sharla followed.

But the ewe was right behind him, nearly stepping on his tail when he came to a stop on the second floor, his head lifted skyward to the rectangle door on the ceiling. Sharla made an excited humming in the back of her throat and Gideon gave her a sideways glance. "You really like antiques and stuff like that?"

"I do," she nodded. "See, back before I was born our old family home got burned down by a kitchen fire and my mother told me we lost so many photos and heirlooms. So, I like seeing others family history and imagine what mine had been like."

That wasn't an answer Gideon had expected. "So you like history and space then?"

She grinned, "Yep. And one day my great grandchildren are going to talk about me, going up to space, they'll look at pictures and watch videos, even have silly old space souvenirs."

Gideon grabbed the cord of the attic door and pulled, a set of stairs appearing and leading into the dark attic above. Sharla hurried up the steps before Gideon could move a muscle. "What about you?" she asked from the darkness.

Gideon climbed up the stairs, glad to see his childhood fear didn't resurface as he was surrounded by the dim shapes of the attic. "What about what?"

Sharla was feeling her way around the attic, practically disappearing in the shadows, "Years from now, when your great grandchildren ask what you did with your life, what will they hear?"

"I don't know," Gideon replied honestly, leaning against what he hoped was a dresser. "I don't have plans like you, Sharla. I'm a fox."

The sound of footsteps came to a stop and even though he couldn't see her he felt the ewe's eyes on him, "That's a lousy excuse and you know it."

He didn't reply and a moment later he felt Sharla grunt, before he could ask what on earth she was doing a glare of light hit his eye. Sharla had found the small, boarded up window and ripped the old wood off, allowing afternoon light to come in and light up the attic.

"There!" she cheered, "Now we can see-Oh my God, is that a lava lamp? I haven't seen one of these since I was three!"

While Sharla entertained herself Gideon stood up and looked at the dresser he had been leaning against and was surprised at what lay on its surface: dusty old photographs. He picked one up at random and blew the dust off, the mites dancing in the air. He couldn't help a small smile when he saw who the picture was of.
"What did you find?" Sharla was suddenly there, leaning her hooves against his arm and looking over his shoulder. Gideon didn't reply but inside he was screaming.

"It's my great grandma," he answered bluntly, "Back when she was our age." From the photo a plucky vixen in an aviator outfit smiled up at them.

"She's beautiful," Sharla complimented. "She was a pilot?"

"A pilot in the war," he explained.

Sharla sucked in a breath, "That's amazing, and at our age too? Did-did you want to grow up to be like her?"

Gideon shook his head, "No, I can't stand heights."

"Then what do you want to do?"

Gideon pushed away from her, his ears pulled back and his expression suspicious, "What's with you today?"

Sharla knew what he meant, "My mother told me something this morning, that you and I should solve our...problems. And I agree, and I think that problem could be solved if we were friends."

His brow furrowed, "You want to be friends with me?"

"Yes, I'd be a good influence on you."

"Well..." Gideon felt his tongue twist, "I don't want to be your friend."

Sharla chuckled, her laugh once again like bells, "You won't say that for long, just wait. I'm very likable."

Gideon had never been more terrified in his life.
The Clover Family Picnic

Stick with ‘I’ Statements

Gideon couldn’t be more nervous if he was about to bungee jump off a cliff without the bungee cord.

The day Sharla had lunch at his home (easily charming his father as well as his mother), she had invited Gideon to her family picnic. How clever of her to ask right in front of his parents who wouldn’t allow him to say no. She was really taking this ‘I’m going to make you like me and be my friend’ mission seriously.

So now Gideon walked alongside Mrs. Clover as they made their way to the park where the rest of the family waited, Sharla and her father walking ahead of them and talking animatedly about some show the two were watching.

“Today your focus is to stick with ‘I’ statements,” Mrs. Clover told the fox.

Gideon glanced at her, his free arm carrying a basket for the sheep.

Mrs. Clover smiled at him, “I figure you’d be more comfortable if you thought this was another session instead of a social outing. You seem the introvert.”

Gideon huffed through his nose; disliking Mrs. Clover would’ve been easier if she wasn’t nice.

They arrived at the three picnic tables that was already had a flock of sheep, though this family size was nothing compared to a rabbit’s.

Sharla and her father called out to their relatives who happily waved to them, but several smiles dropped when they spotted Gideon behind them. The fox swallowed nervously.

“You’re bringing your work with you to family gatherings now, May?” one of the sheep asked of Mrs. Clover, eyeing Gideon with obvious distrust.

“Yes, I am,” Mrs. Clover said with a lovely smile. “Changing mammals’ lives is a full time job, Jerry.”

“And he’s my friend,” Sharla added out of nowhere, standing next to the fox. Gideon felt flushed under his fur and wish everyone would look anywhere else.

When the crowd, minus the lambs who were running around playing, kept a moody silence Sharla grabbed the basket Gideon was carrying, startlling him. “The benches are full, we can use a blanket.”

Embarrassed Gideon followed her to a shady spot a few feet away from the others and pulled a red and white checkered blanket out of the basket, placing it on the grass and making herself comfortable.

“I’m fine,” Gideon assured her quietly, still standing. “You don’t have to do this.”

Sharla looked up at him, “My mom shouldn’t have invited you.” The words hurt more than the fox cared to admit but Sharla continued. “I knew our family would act like this around you. But it can’t be helped now; you can just sit with me and ignore them.”
Gideon sighed and sat down on the blanket, helping her lay out some food. As they did some of the lambs were drawn toward the two, big eyes wide with curiosity as they zeroed in on the fox.

Gideon tried to offer a friendly smile but the sight of his teeth must’ve startled them, the small flock scurrying off to continue their game. Gideon leaned back and tried not to feel dejected; ignoring the sympathetic look Sharla passed him.

The two ate in silence, occasionally flicking their ears to the tables to catch one or two conversations; most of it was the theme of Bunnyburrow: family and farming. One grandfather’s was having some problems with his crops and a distant aunt in the city had just had a set of twins.

But then: “Why would you bring him?”

All Gideon had to hear was the way she said ‘him’, the loathing thick in the ewe’s voice as she looked at Mrs. Clover with a curled lip. Couldn’t these sheep at least pretend they were talking about someone who wasn’t five feet away from them?

“I’m gonna go for a walk,” Gideon told Sharla without looking toward her, pulling himself to his feet with a grunt. He kept his ears laid flat against his head, not wanting to hear Mrs. Clover’s reply to her relative (“He’s just a job.”).

“Gideon-” Sharla started but he was already walking away, the lambs that were running around gave him a wide berth.

The fox had just wanted to calm down, away from the detesting whispers. But the farther the walk the angrier he got. How dare they? They thought they had the right to judge him? They never met him! They knew nothing of him, but they didn’t have to, did they? Foxes were all the same, obviously. How dare Mrs. Clover even bring him, focus on ‘I’ statements she said. No, he wasn’t the problem, she was, they were, they all were.

Sharla had stayed put for a few minutes, thinking she should give Gideon his space. Guilt twisting inside, having heard her older cousin bring up the fox. Gideon had left before her cousin had started to insult him, and before her mother quickly put their relative in her place.

“Go find him, please,” Mrs. Clover had asked of her daughter, having to stay back to watch her husband.

Sharla didn’t have to go far, spotting Gideon after a few minutes of walking. He was standing by the park’s stream with…a small rabbit.

“Gideon?” she spoke up, walking toward them.

The fox looked surprised to see her. Beside him the rabbit was brown, with a pink dress, the bottom of her outfit wet as if she had waded through the stream. And when Sharla was closer she saw Gideon’s feet were damp and the bunny was holding his thumb in her tiny paw. “What happened?” the sheep asked.

“This rabbit thought she’d go learn to swim by herself,” Gideon replied, his voice chastising but low. Sharla looked for any sense of irritation in the fox but she saw none, perhaps helping the little
rabbit was just what the doctor had ordered.

“I saw a fish,” the bunny said to the two. “I was gonna catch it.”

“And then you got scared and wouldn’t move,” Gideon reminded her as he told Sharla. “So I had to fish you out.”

Her ears fell in shame, “Yeah…”

Sharla lowered herself to be at eye level with the child, “Where’s your mom? We can take you back to her.” The sheep didn’t say anything but the mother had better have a good reason for not being with her child if she wanted to escape Sharla’s judgment.

But before the child could answer a shriek split the air: “MARY-ANNE!”

An older rabbit, who had to be the kit’s mother, stomped over to the three. But despite yelling her daughter’s name, the mother’s eyes were on Gideon’s and they blazed with hatred. A defensive instinct came over Sharla and stood up as the rabbit snatched her daughter away from Gideon.

“Do not ever,” she seethed through blunt teeth. “Come near my child again, fox.” The disgust as she said the last word, Sharla was ready to punch her in her face.

Gideon didn’t reply, his ears lowered but he looked more depressed than angry. But not Sharla, Sharla was furious.

She stepped in front of the fox, “How dare you,” she snapped at the rabbit that looked like she had just noticed Sharla. “Your daughter was stuck in the stream and this fox saved her life. He was more a parent then you are! You weren’t even watching her!”

The rabbit looked like she wanted to say more, and Sharla would’ve been happy to add on. But a few wandering park-goers had been attracted to the noise and they were growing an audience, an audience that this rabbit clearly didn’t want and with one last venomous glare at Gideon and Sharla she dragged her daughter away, the tiny bunny giving them a farewell wave before she and her mother vanished from sight.

But Sharla was still hot under her wool.

“Unbelievable,” she hissed, fists shaking.

“It’s okay,” Gideon said, the words surprising Sharla who whirled around.

“No, it’s not! She was awful to you!”

“She-I’ll be fine,” Gideon replied, thought it was obvious it was hard to get the words past his tongue. But he kept on, “I…did a good thing. I didn’t start a fight…I…am a good fox.”

Sharla blinked, and then realized what he was doing. “You’re still following my mom’s advice.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” he asked, looking in pain to be doing so.

But his agonized expression eased Sharla’s own temper and she smiled, feeling a little lighter when he forced himself to return a wobbly smile of his own.

“Wanna find a place to sit?”

“…Sure.”
On Breaking Wood

Don’t hold a grudge

Sharla had taken Gideon to an old dock where the stream became a slow flowing river. Her grandpa used to take her down here to fish, they had never caught anything but Sharla had enjoyed the time she had spent with her grandfather as he talked about his adventures as a lamb.

While most of Bunnyburrow knew about this old dock, Sharla had never taken someone there until now. She had liked to see it as just her and her grandfather’s place. But here she was, bringing along her old tormentor. How things changed with the passage of time.

But as Sharla sat down on the edge of the dock, letting her feet dip into the cool water, it was then she saw Gideon hadn’t joined her. Instead the fox had stayed on the grass, giving the dock a dubious and paranoid look. Sharla did suppose the dock had looked better when she was a child, the wood less rotted.

“It’s sturdier than it looks,” she assured him. “Trust me.”

Gideon gave her a dubious look before slowly, and with light steps, made his way to Sharla’s side, sitting next to her-his tail bristled when the wood creaked.

“This dock has seen better days, I guess,” she admitted, kicking the water to let the splashes catch the sun light.

Gideon cut right to the chase, “Why did you bring me over here?”

Sharla tried to swallow her awkwardness, “I wanted to cheer you up.”

He smirked but it wasn’t mocking, “You were madder about that rabbit than me.”

“Why weren’t you mad?” She stopped herself from reminding him of the obvious. That he was Gideon Gray and being mad was the first thing mammals brought up when he was the topic of conversation.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t mad,” Gideon’s eyes trailed to the water and stayed put. “But I’m wasting my parents’ money if I don’t listen to your ma. And…I expected it to happen.”

“Expected it?”

Gideon sighed, looking like he wore the wrong skin, or maybe he was just talking to the wrong mammal. “I’m a fox,” he stated like that answered everything.

And the tragic thing was, it did. Sharla, while acutely aware of his sharp teeth and claws growing up, she liked to believe she feared him more for his temper than his species. Even if not, now she was trying to better herself for that. But she couldn’t say the same for other residents of Bunnyburrow or even her own family; they saw nothing wrong with the way they looked at Gideon.

Gideon jolted slightly when Sharla scooted next to him, pressing her arm against his own. His fur was well-groomed and pleasant to the touch.
“It was wrong of her,” she replied, her voice steady but her throat tight. Then she considered… “Is that what happened with the bulls that broke your arm?”

His ears twitched, “Your ma told you, huh?”

She shrugged, “I asked her.”

“Yeah,” the word came out in a sigh. “They just…said things. And after I punched one I ended up biting off more than I could chew.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

Sharla pulled her feet up to wrap her arms around her legs, “I can tell by your tone, you’re disappointed in yourself, right? I get that.”

Gideon’s head tilted to the side, “Why would you be disappointed in yourself?”

Sharla had given her mother the synopsis that she just didn’t cut it at the ZASA training. But for Gideon, somehow for Gideon, she explained everything. That she had been so scared, had hated the training, started to have anxiety attacks, thinking of going up into space, of being alone. The instructors suggested that perhaps this career wasn’t for her, and she agreed. She had dreamed of stars for so long, but couldn’t go up there. She wasn’t only disappointed in herself; there was a part of her that hated her.

Gideon sat quietly, but his eyes were wide with compassion and understanding and Sharla fought the urge to curl against his side and take comfort in his warmth.

“I’m sorry,” Gideon finally spoke. “But…don’t hold a grudge.”

The words made Sharla look at him oddly, “Don’t hold a grudge over myself? Can mammals do that?”

“I did,” Gideon replied, “Over myself and others, but I’m trying to fix it. If just because I’m pretty sure your mother can read my mind.”

Sharla chuckled and placed her hoof on Gideon’s thigh, “Thank you, for hearing me out.”

“I owed you,” Gideon smiled. And the sheep just then noticed his muzzle was awfully close.

“No, you don’t,” she breathed, and for a second wondered how her breath smelled. “You’re my friend, I want to help you.”

There was a solid minute where-something-went on between them though neither spoke or moved. Whatever it was it had Sharla’s chest feeling as light as a cloud, her hooves buzzing with energy and her heart picking up its pace…Was she-

But then the dock creaked loudly beneath them and they both let out yelps, but thankfully didn’t fall into the river below. Still Sharla looked at the wood with newfound doubt.

“Maybe we should get back on the grass?” she suggested.

“Please.” Gideon begged.
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