

## Abigail Meets With Gavin, and Almost Gets Fired

### Scene 71, Book 3

“So, young lady, have you adjusted some yet?” Gavin sat with Abigail in the library; the others were in the office working.

Abigail nodded. “Yes, sir, some. I no longer lay awake at night. I think the running has helped with that.”

“Good. I’m glad you decided to participate in everything. I said it wasn’t necessary, but actually, it is. To young people in many places, you will be the personal face for what we are doing, and you need to stay in shape. Now, I am sure you have thought about this business and how to organize it?”

“Yes, sir. I discovered that I could not get very far without knowing more about what you see as the purpose. I realized after that first call that you had some things in mind that were much more far-reaching than I had originally considered. However, my initial thoughts are these. Somewhat as the Greek sororities and fraternities are organized as chapters, we do the same here. We can have the central organization, us, to lay the foundations, but the chapters would be independently run. They should try to replicate, as much as possible given their individual circumstances, what you have done with Athena and Minerva. We found we were able to follow along fairly well, although we could not hope to match the pace, we still had to attend to our normal studies. We were not able to replicate the knife fighting, nor the pistol, of course. The reading and discussions are the main things anyway.”

“Yes, and I am glad you have realized that,” said Gavin. “It is easy to focus on the rest, given the events in Rome, but that was not the main reason they came here. Continue.”

“I know you see the purpose as being a way for young people to learn, but what I do not know is *why* you want that. The other girls in my group at Harvard are not your children, nor your ‘retainers.’ You are not their liege, and by the way, I am still trying to grasp all that implies. Why did you jump on this idea with both feet?”

Gavin stroked his chin. “I must say, Abigail, you impress me already. Not many people would realize there is a ‘why’ behind my thoughts. My plans are very much pie-in-the-sky at this point. I do not know that they are achievable, mostly because, as you have pointed out, I cannot hope to control the actions of people I will never meet nor even talk to personally. My plans may not be even partly achievable in my lifetime. My ultimate purpose is to destroy the system of higher education in the United States, and elsewhere, completely and utterly.”

Abigail jerked back in surprise. Her mouth flapped as she tried to respond. Gavin sat smiling. “What?!” she finally managed to get out. “Destroy it? I don’t understand!”

“Of course not,” replied Gavin, nodding. “I said it that way partly to shock you, however, I meant it. Tell me, what did you learn in your four years at Harvard?”

“Umm, after reading only a few of the books on the list and reading the recaps of the discussions Athena and Minerva posted, I realize not much.”

“Nonsense. You learned, just the wrong things. Notice I did not ask what you learned that was useful or meaningful. You learned mostly how to take in material and regurgitate it in a form that earned you a good grade. And mind, you were at one of the premier institutions in the Western world; think about what the vast majority of students get. There are about 6800 undergrads at Harvard; plus Yale, Princeton, and others like that, maybe you get two or three hundred thousand total? The other 14 million or so are in places ranging from West Bumfuck A&M to Huge-Ass State.” He had to stop and wait for Abigail to stop laughing. “The percentage of people with a degree has grown from about 5% in 1970 to about 30% now. Politicians and college administrators all tell young people to go to college so they can get a good job. Would you tell me that the percentage of people whose jobs *require* that level of education at the start has increased that much? For example, and this is perhaps a bit extreme, does a first-grade teacher *really* need a B.A. to teach a 6-year-old to read or count? A better example, does someone starting out a major corporation *need* a business degree? I contend that most people do not *need* to go to college, hell, as it is only about 60% graduate within 6 years. Think of all the wasted money, to say nothing of the time. Let us be generous and posit that the sheer amount of knowledge increase demands more school than the traditional 12 years. So let us add a year or two to high school. But if more school is what is required, why do kids already graduate from high school knowing so little? I guarantee a high school graduate in 1920 could easily point to the location of the Suez Canal, would you say the same today?”

Abigail held up her hands to stop the flood of statistics and questions from Gavin. “Stop! Stop! I cannot absorb all of that so quickly. Frack! Hey, what does that mean anyway?”

Gavin laughed. “Oh, no, you figure it out yourself. Okay, I’ll stop with the numbers, for now.”

“Good. I’ll do some research on my own. But if you want me to set up a system of societies at colleges all over the place, why do it if you want to get rid of the colleges?”

“Good question, but you are assuming some things that are not accurate. One, I do not want to get rid of all the colleges, I said I wanted to destroy the *system* of higher education; the two are not the same thing. Two, who said I wanted you to set up a system of societies at *colleges*? One thing you need to learn, Miss Abigail, I say what I mean; words and their meaning matter a great deal; the reason words have distinct meanings, and the reason dictionaries were created, was to ensure clear communication among people who did not know each other. Words do sometimes gradually change in meaning over long periods of time, but at this moment, each one should mean the same to you as it does to me. You cannot take the phrase ‘system of higher education,’ to equal the phrase ‘all colleges.’ To continue, although you will begin with the societies at colleges, your Harvard being the first of course, you will not stop there. I see three levels of chapters: Level 1, age 12 to 18 years; Level 2, the college ones; Level 3, the senior chapters for those later in life. Also, the college ones can be organized around the nucleus of people actually attending a college; they should, however, contain members who move out of the junior chapter but who do not actually enroll in college. Learning is a life-long task, it should not be confined to certain ages or institutions. Now, while you think about all of that, I need a fresh cup of joe.”

Abigail took everything in and mulled it over while she waited for Gavin to return. This was much bigger than she had ever thought it might be. Twelve-year-olds? People in the chapters who weren't in college? It was going to be hard enough to organize a chapter at Harvard where she already had a foundation; the idea of having one at every high school in the US was mind-boggling. Gavin came back in and waited for her to speak. "Before I go on, I need to have our relationship defined more. For one, what do you want me to call you?"

Gavin chuckled. "Yes, let's settle important matters first, by all means. Our relationship will be different from the one I have with Athena and Minerva; the way one of your professors has a different relationship with you than they do with their own child who may be your age, so I cannot be Grandpère to you. What would you think of '*sensei*,' the Japanese for teacher? Sir is always appropriate, of course." He smiled.

Abigail chuckled at the "sir" comment. "Hmm. *Sensei*. Teacher. I like it! It describes almost perfectly what you will be to the chapter members."

"No. To them, I will be *Dai-Sensei*, grandmaster. To you, I will be *Sensei*. You should strive to become *sensei* to others in your own right someday."

"Do you conjure all of this up on the spur of the moment?" asked Abigail in exasperation. "How many languages and cultures have you studied?"

"If I use a few words from a language does not mean I have studied it. When a word conveys a particular meaning, why should I not use it? Although *sensei* translates loosely to, it implies much more than the English word 'teacher,' therefore it is useful. But to answer your question, no, I do not conjure all of this up on the spur of the moment. I have usually thought about it, done some reading and some research. Maybe not recently, it might have been years ago. You must keep in mind I have 40 years more life than you, thus 40 years more experience. To get back to the original question, you will find the girls refer to me in different ways in different circumstances; you must learn to do the same. In private they call me Grandpère, to the staff they refer to me as His Grace, same as when they were on the BBC. To that crowd at Harvard, I was General Ross. Even Miranda will not refer to me as 'Gavin' when she talks to her maid Anna, and Anna practically lives in our quarters."

Abigail nodded. "I understand, sort of. Now, back to the societies. Do you envision open membership? Do you want them in countries other than the US? Do you want separate ones for men and women, like fraternities and sororities? And what am I going to be?"

"Whoa, young lady, my turn to say slow down! I will answer your questions, short and to the point, no discussion. Then you go mull things over while I go relax on the pistol range. Membership by invitation; all countries, ultimately; separate ones for men and women, although perhaps we should consider a combined one for older people, maybe a 4th level, a master chapter after age 40; and finally, you will be CEO of a non-profit foundation dedicated to the establishment and care of all the chapters. Enough food for thought?"

"Yes, sir, plenty. Wait, CEO?"

Gavin chuckled. "Ah, that finally seeped in, did it? One question, where do you want to live? Boston? New York? Washington D.C.? Nah, never mind, you think about it. We'll get it incorporated, I'll put some money in so you can get up and running wherever you decide. You'll

need office space, equipment, one secretary to start, maybe an IT guru to help with the website and social media, an attorney on retainer, so on and so forth. I'll put in 50 million to start, we can adjust as needed. Would a salary of a hundred thousand be satisfactory the first year? We'll adjust from there. Travel expenses would be covered by the foundation, of course, including a car. I see you traveling a lot."

Abigail blew out a deep breath she had not taken, she felt dizzy. "Oh, I am woozy again." She felt sick and jumped up and ran to the restroom, returning in about five minutes.

"Fracking hell, girl, you're eating into my range time. What's the matter with you?"

Abigail tried some semblance of the position of attention she had observed the staff use. "Sir. Forgive my weakness, but I am unacquainted with numbers like those."

Gavin laughed. "Ha! Well put!" He stood. "Okay, I'm off. You think over what we talked about; we'll sit down again in a couple of days." He turned and strode off, leaving a bewildered young woman behind him.

\*\*\*

Abigail lay on the couch in her sitting room, again with a damp cloth on her face. She had begged off from lunch, she was afraid she would only throw it up anyway. Amy had tsk-ed over her a few minutes but then left her alone. The discussion with Gavin, no, *Sensei*, had gone well at first. Actually, it was fine right up to the end. Chapters all over the world, ages 12 and up, CEO, 50 million, office space, secretary, attorney on retainer, IT guru, a hundred thousand. *Holy shit, what have I gotten myself into? No, I cannot do this, I do not have enough experience for this; hell, I just graduated! What do I know about money, hiring people, office space, and all of that? Four years of college and all I know how to do is footnote a research paper. Maybe if Sensei told me what to do, I could handle it, but it sounds like he is expecting me to do it. No, I will tell him tonight this is too much. Bloody hell, as Corporal Scott says, is this what the Dark Side is like?*

\*\*\*

Dinner was lively, except for Abigail, she was pale and withdrawn. Athena, Minerva, and Miranda noticed right away, and even Gavin picked up on the edges of it. After dinner, everyone moved to the library for drinks and talk. "Miranda, when is your mother coming up for good?" asked Gavin. "Surely she doesn't have that many loose ends to tie up."

"Oh, shush, not everyone moves as rapidly as you do. It's not been a month since the wedding. She is packing what she wants to bring and arranging to sell the rest. I'll need to go assist her sometime soon, probably after the trip to London."

"Oh, okay. We'll have Stewart and Anderson, or maybe Samuel go with you. Yes, I'll have them drive a couple of Rovers and the truck down to London, then you all can leave from there." Everyone had taken seats by then; Abigail was off in a corner by herself.

Miranda noticed; she was concerned. "Abigail, dear, what ever is the matter? Come here, sit over here with the rest of us."

Abigail shook her head. "No," she whispered. "It's all too much for me. I can't do it."

Athena and Minerva shared a glance, uh oh. They went to sit beside Abigail. “What do you mean?” asked Minerva. “What is too much? Come on, tell us.”

Miranda glanced at Gavin and started to say something, he held up a hand and put a finger to his lips.

“Yes, Abigail,” said Athena. “We can’t help if we don’t know.” Abigail shook her head. “Here, come on, let’s go into the office.” She stood and held out her hand; Abigail took it and meekly followed.

Miranda watched them go with concern. “Gavin, what is wrong with that girl, do you think? Surely no one’s been mean to her?”

Gavin shook his head. “No, not that. The staff like her, I think Stewart is a bit smitten in fact. I have an idea I may have contributed; we’ll see shortly.”

In about 10 minutes, Minerva stormed in, followed more slowly by Athena and Abigail. “Grandpère! How could you? You frightened the poor thing half to death!”

Gavin grimaced. “Yep, that’s torn it.”

“Gavin, what did you do?” asked Miranda.

“Come sit down, you three, come on. Goddamnit, Minerva, calm down. Now sit!”

Gavin rarely raised his voice; Minerva sat, followed by Athena and Abigail. Minerva was angry, Athena was sad, Abigail looked lost. “Now look, I did not do anything intentionally, I simply miscalculated. There are so many things going on I gave her an info dump like I would one of you two. Abigail, is that what’s bothering you?” Abigail nodded. “Say something intelligible, you are not a meek little mouse, you could not have organized that thing at Harvard if you were. So come on, out with it.”

Abigail sighed. Gavin waited. Finally, she spoke, “It wasn’t all the information, I mean, it was a lot, but I can handle that. It was the things you said at the end, all run together. It’s the CEO thing, all the responsibility you want me to have; I can’t handle that, I don’t have enough experience.”

Gavin nodded. “Ah, I see. You think I want you to take all of it on, all at once, alone with no direction.” Abigail nodded. “Abigail, look at me. Do you take me for a fool? I answered your questions; we did not get into the *how* of all of them. Did you believe I would expect you to suddenly be able to be an effective manager without some guidance? Even with Athena and Minerva, I put them to work with MacGilravie on the business side of things. The rest was a lot of work, but it was mostly individual—running, fight drills, reading, arguing. Chesty Puller’s Ghost, even in the Marine Corps they put us through six months of intense training before they gave us a platoon of 40 men, and they still expected they would have to keep teaching us; that’s why they assign an experienced platoon sergeant to new lieutenants; they know we are going to fuck up.” Miranda turned a little pink, Athena and Minerva smirked. “Young lady, I told you the end game; I flatly stated I did not know if it was achievable even in my lifetime. I told you that because you asked. I certainly don’t expect you to be able to have everything up and running by yourself in a year, much less a month. You have to look at it in small pieces, you do it like a jigsaw puzzle, one piece attaches to another, and slowly the picture takes shape. What I told you was like looking at the box lid of the puzzle, that tells you what the end result is supposed to be. Understand so far?”

Abigail had listened carefully, she nodded. “I think so. So, you will be there to tell me what to do?”

Gavin sat stone-faced a minute. “Miranda, no, all of you, please excuse us. Abigail, follow me please.” He stood and waited until Abigail did. He strode out of the room with her in his wake.

\*\*\*

Much later, Athena and Minerva were in their sitting room; they had left the door open. They heard someone coming down the hall and looked up as Abigail passed. “Abigail!” said Minerva sharply. “Come in here!”

Abigail turned around and came into the room. “Now don’t you start on me. I’ve had my ass chewed up one side and down the other, and I’m not ready for it again.”

“Oh, come sit down. Here, have a drink. We’re not going to bitch at you, I was just trying to get your attention.” Abigail sat in a chair and took the whisky Minerva handed her. After she sipped some, Minerva continued. “Okay, so what did he chew your ass about?”

Abigail wrinkled her brow. “Shit. Everything. First, he reminded me of the threat he made about throwing me out on my ear. Then he ranted and raved about me making assumptions and jumping to conclusions. He was *really* pissed about that, but then he sort of apologized.”

“Wait,” interjected Athena. “He apologized? As in saying he was sorry?”

“Well, no, actually, yes. He did say, ‘I’m sorry.’ Then he said he was angry because I had learned to do those at Harvard, said this was all a perfect example of how college fails people and why he was determined to burn the entire fucking worthless edifice to the ground.”

“Wow. Grandpère apologized. That is a rare event,” said Athena. “Go on.”

“Yeah, but then he chewed my ass some more, and this time he did not say sorry. He let me have it over two things. One, that I got all mopey instead of coming to him with questions and concerns. He did make a joke about that, said he had taken his daughter at 12 to buy her first box of tampons and explained all the how and why, so he doubted I could ask something that would throw him for a loop.” All three girls laughed until they cried. The thought of Gavin explaining menstrual flow to a 12-year-old girl was almost too much.

“Yes,” Athena was finally able to say. “That is one thing he is very good at, making a joke about a serious subject which puts the whole thing in perspective.”

“Yeah, I almost forgot he was chewing my ass for a minute, but then he let me have it, and I mean but good. He said it was the last thing I said in the library, when I asked if he would be there to tell me what to do. He almost wasn’t able to talk, he was so pissed. He said, and I hope I quote him fully, ‘You are a fucking 22-year-old college fucking graduate from Harvard fucking College, and if you sit around on your fat ass waiting for someone to tell you what the fuck you are supposed to do, then you will end up a fucking worthless excuse for a fucking human fucking being!’ Then he threw his hands in the air, said, ‘I need a drink!’ and stormed into the house. I had no idea you could use ‘fucking’ that many times in one sentence. Wait, I don’t have a fat ass, do I?”

Athena and Minerva both chuckled. “No, Abigail,” said Minerva. “Your ass is fine. Just don’t get too attached to Mrs. Shaw’s cooking unless you keep running.”

“Yeah, I can see him being pissed about that,” said Athena. “When you said it, I knew there would be hell to pay, I just didn’t know he would do it right then. Don’t forget, he yelled and cursed at us our second day here after our run, after we whined about it and told him to cut us some slack. He does not care who you are, where you are from, or what circumstances you are in; he expects you to make a plan, make rational choices, and not whine about the random events the universe throws at you. The universe doesn’t care about you, he says, one way or the other; it just is. You don’t get any slack.”

“Is he like this all the time? I know you said he was intense, but hearing it and being smashed in the face with it are two different things. But you guys seem to handle it fine; how do you do that?”

“Hmm,” mused Athena. “Yes, he is like this all the time; well, not the angry part, he rarely loses his temper, but when he does it isn’t pretty. As far as us handling it, remember we have been here a year; we’ve had a lot of practice. Look, it’s late, and we all need to get some sleep; Corporal Scott certainly will cut us no slack. You sleep, then we’ll run, then breakfast. Then you go think. Go for a walk in the forest; that always clears my head. Think about the jigsaw puzzle; find the first two pieces to attach.”

Abigail stood. “Okay, thanks for listening, guys. Good night.” She left the room.

After she had gone Minerva said, “Man, I hope she gets over this mopey business fast. Grandpère will only put up with that for so long.”

“Agreed. Well, we can’t make her, she has to do it. Now, bedtime for Bonzo.”