

# The Oxford Lads Visit

## Scene 43, Book 3

Vishann Patel stood outside the gate of his College at Oxford, his roommate Harry Stiles beside him. Behind him were most of his classmates; they were all there to see him off. It was late, the instructions said the bus would come by between 2300 and 2315. The drive was over 7 hours, so they would sleep on the bus and arrive before breakfast.

“Vishann, are you quite all right? You look a little green,” said Harry.

“Harry, old bean, wouldn’t you be a little green right now? I feel like throwing up, but I can’t do that with most of the class and even some of the professors watching.”

Harry chuckled. “True, true. And don’t look, but the Warden herself is over in the shadows of one of the doorways.”

“*Wonderful*. Thanks for making me feel less nervous.” Vishann inhaled slowly and let it out twice as slowly. “When I saw Athena and Minerva sitting there in the Commons and went to talk to them, I had no inkling this might happen.”

“Yes, but *you* had enough guts to do that, most of us didn’t. Now, you must take lots of photos and videos, everyone is going to expect a full briefing on what it is like, you know.”

Vishann laughed a little. “Well, I’ll see what I can do, but the duke does not strike me as the type to want us wandering about with our phones out like tourists. Nor Athena or Minerva, for that matter. You didn’t talk to them; they are *not* like ordinary college girls. They are, well, *intense*, like I could see a fire burning behind their eyes. A little scary, if you must know.”

Harry grinned. “Maybe so, but you still had the courage to talk to them. Look, I think I see a bus.”

Indeed, there was a bus just rounding the curve. It wasn’t a large bus, but for only the six who were to travel in it, it was more than enough. It coasted to a stop, the door opened, and the driver climbed out. “Here you go lad, just toss yer bags in here.” The driver opened a compartment, and Vishann put in his luggage.

He turned to face his classmates. “I very much appreciate you all coming out to see me off, it does mean a lot.”

“You show `em, Vish!” said someone in the back. Vishann blushed.

“Yes, you show `em,” said Harry. “Must uphold the honor of the College, you know.” He grinned. “Seriously, have a grand time. Can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“All right, lad,” said the driver. “Climb aboard now, we’ve one more stop to make.”

Vishann shook hands with Harry, and the crowd of classmates called words of encouragement. He waved to them and boarded the bus.

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“Right, lads, might want to wake up now,” came the driver’s voice through the bus’s speakers. “There’s the sign for the village, so won’t be long now.” Indeed, the boys could see signs on the side of the narrow road, “CRAIGNISH.” They all marveled at the change in the terrain; when they had gone to sleep, they had been on a wide motorway with plenty of traffic in spite of the hour. Now they were on a road that was barely wide enough for the bus. It was about 7 in the morning.

The village they passed was not even as large as the grounds of their Colleges at Oxford. Then another mile and they turned onto a wide gravel drive that led through stately trees to a closed iron gate. The boys were shocked to see two men, both in dark commando clothing, holding rifles, one on each side of the gate. One boarded the bus; he checked the driver’s ID, then walked down the aisle, looking carefully at each boy and referring to an electronic tablet in his hand. He nodded and returned to the front of the bus. “Right. Follow us up to the house. Do not stop along the way.” The driver gulped and nodded.

The gate opened, and both men climbed into a waiting Land Rover and started off, the bus following. The boys all clustered at the front of the bus to look out the windshield; the driver did not admonish them. They came over a rise, left the trees, and suddenly there it was, Craignish Castle. From a quarter-mile away, they could tell it was huge; even the driver sucked in his breath. As they got closer, they could see several people standing near the main doors.

The Rover swung wide and came to a stop, the bus following and stopping parallel to the castle. The driver opened the door, and one of the armed men from the Rover motioned. “Right, gentlemen, everyone off.” The boys gathered up their belongings and climbed down onto the gravel drive into a blustery morning with a light drizzle. They were still only barely awake and were slightly disoriented; certainly, none of them had ever before been greeted by armed men. “Now, gentlemen,” said the man with the rifle. “Please gather your luggage and up the steps. Miss Minerva and Miss Athena are waiting.” The boys grabbed their bags as the driver unloaded them and started up the stone steps.

“Right this way, gentlemen,” called Minerva. “Let’s get in out of the drizzle, and we’ll talk.” Two men opened the doors, and she entered, Athena beside her, and the boys followed, through the main doors and into an entryway and then another set of doors into a foyer. Here Minerva and Athena stopped and turned back to face the expectant boys, who were suddenly aware of their surroundings. Almost as one, they dropped the luggage they were carrying. Above them was a massive crystal chandelier, the foyer was at least 50 feet on a side and filled with statues, weapons, and paintings. They goggled. Minerva and Athena waited with amused expressions until the boys stopped looking around and looked at them.

“Right,” said Minerva. “Got it out of your systems? Come now, Oxford is larger and older than this castle.”

“Yes,” said one of the boys. “But it’s a college. This is a house, for one family.”

Minerva chuckled. “Good point. You will find more people live here than you might think, and although most of the residents are not related in the usual sense, you will find they consider themselves more of a family than if they were related by blood, in the usual sense that is. Now, introductions. The two men with rifles are Stewart and Anderson, security. This is Corporal Scott, security and our physical training and unarmed combat instructor. This is Captain MacDougal,

head of security and our pistol instructor.” Each man raised a hand as they were introduced. “Over here is Singh.” She indicated a tall man with a scarlet turban and a beard. “He is under butler as well as our knife fighting instructor.” She indicated the last man. “And this is Gray; he is butler and essentially manager of the house. You may have noticed we are in sweats; we have just finished our five-mile run for today. Normally we would be at our unarmed combat training, but your arrival forced us to cancel that. I’m sure you would like a shower and a change of clothes; a long bus ride is sure to make you feel grungy. Gray and Singh will take you up to your rooms and get you settled. You will meet His Grace at breakfast.”

Gray stepped forward. “Gentlemen, if you will gather your belongings and follow me.” He turned and started for the stairs; the boys all hurried to follow. Gray led them up the stairs and down a wide hall. Three women waited for them, each stationed by a door to a room. “These are Anna, Sarah, and Amy. They are maids of the house and will help you get settled. If you need anything done where it would be inappropriate for a woman to assist, Singh or I will be around. Please pair off and go with them. Shower and change; we will be here in the hall at 0815 to escort you to breakfast. Any questions for now?” The boys looked at each other and shook their heads. “Good. Remember, 0815, here.” He and Singh turned to go. The boys, with a little hesitation, paired up and went to one of the waiting women.

A little over an hour later, they all met in the hall; Gray and Singh were just arriving. “All here?” asked Gray. “Good, this way, gentlemen. Please remember, the first time each day you encounter His Grace, you will address him as ‘Your Grace,’ the remainder of the day, use ‘sir.’ His fiancé we address as Miss Miranda, until the wedding, of course. Two weeks ago, we had six young men from Yale, in America. As you might imagine, they had a little trouble with the life in an old-fashioned Scottish household, the etiquette in particular. I don’t think I will need to explain nearly as much to you gentlemen.”

The boys all glanced at each other; they weren’t sure if they should admit they had no idea either. One of the boys spoke up, “Umm, Mr. Gray? I’m going to go out on a limb and say we don’t have any idea about this business either.”

Gray stopped dead in his tracks, and Vishann almost ran into him. “What? What do you mean?”

The boy who had spoken up looked embarrassed; Vishann jumped in. “Well, sir, we talked some, on the bus. Robbie there is pretty well-off; his father is a banker. The rest of us are all working-class chaps, and even Robbie says he doesn’t have servants, just a cleaning lady. So, other than what we have seen on the television, we wouldn’t know a ‘Your Grace’ from ‘Your Backside,’ I’m afraid.” The other boys laughed; Gray glowered.

“Hmmpf. Disgraceful,” said Gray grumpily. “Very well, I shall assume you know nothing and proceed accordingly, and I shall inform His Grace, though thankfully, he does not expect much of people along those lines. And I am just ‘Gray’ to you gentlemen, not ‘mister,’ and certainly not ‘sir.’ Now, this way, please.” The boys followed him, goggling at all the rooms they passed until they entered the large, ornate dining room. Gray spoke again, “There are cards with your names; we will move them around each meal. His Grace always sits here at the end. If he is not seated when you arrive, stand behind your chair. His Grace will explain things, but the first item on the

agenda is a tour of the house, immediately following breakfast. For this meal, you serve yourselves, at all other meals Singh and I will serve, assisted by others.”

The boys heard voices approaching. Gavin entered the room, Miranda by his side, Athena and Minerva following. “Ahoy maties! And what a scurvy lot of landlubbers!”

The boys looked at each other; Gavin was nothing like what they expected, he sounded more like a movie pirate.

“Oh, my word, dear,” said Miranda. “Stop that. Boys, don’t pay any mind to His Grace’s antics. He read *Treasure Island* again last night and has gone off on one of his tangents.”

“Arr. Shiver me timbers. Blow me down. Hoist the mains’l!” Athena and Minerva snickered, they were used to this sort of thing; however, the boys weren’t and stood in various states of confusion. Gavin noted their expressions; he laughed. “Oh my! That was fun! You should see your faces; I could tell you suddenly thought the bus made a wrong turn and dropped you off at an asylum by mistake. Heh heh. Ahem. Okay, fun’s over, for now at least.” He indicated Miranda. “This lovely young lady is my fiancée, Miss Miranda Graham. Now, ladies, please precede us to the chow line. Gentlemen, you jump in after them, and I shall go last.”

Miranda led the way, followed by Athena and Minerva. The boys hesitantly lined up behind them, they still were a little confused, but when it came their turn did not shy away from filling their plates.

Gray brought Gavin his coffee and motioned him to the side. “A word, sir?” Gavin moved off with Gray and raised an eyebrow. “Sir, it’s the lads, the young gentlemen here. It’s just disgraceful.”

Gavin could tell Gray was highly agitated; he put his hand on Gray’s arm. “Now, Gray. Relax. Deep breath, now let it out slowly. Now, calmly, tell me. It can’t be too bad; they’ve only been here an hour.”

Gray followed instructions. As calmly as he could, he explained. “Well, sir, I thought with them being British, they would have a better understanding about etiquette than the lads from America had. But when I said something about it, they admitted they hadn’t any notion either! One even made a rude jest about not knowing a ‘Your Grace’ from a ‘Your Backside.’ Disgraceful.”

Gavin almost choked on his coffee. “Ack. Ack. Hoo-whee! Ahem. Which one was that?”

“Umm, Mr. Patel, sir, the slightly built Indian-looking fellow.”

“Ah, very good. Now, does it surprise you they have no idea? After all, these days the only interaction they have with members of the peerage is likely through the TV, and we know how inaccurate that is. Cut them some slack, look at me after all. I’m a duke and still have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Hmmpf. As you say, sir. I’ll do my best.”

Gavin clapped Gray on the shoulder and made his way to the food. As he sat, Miranda glanced at Gray and raised an eyebrow at Gavin. Gavin just grinned and dug into his eggs. After a few minutes he spoke, “Now, gents, you carry on eating while I talk a bit. First, we are very pleased you’re all here. Should be a fun week. You may have been told we had a group in from Yale two weeks ago; they all seemed to enjoy themselves. Next, Gray tells me you may have some concerns about etiquette. As I am ‘His Backside,’ I think I can help.” It was Vishann’s turn to choke on his

coffee. “Yes, Mr. Patel, Gray let it slip. You may be relieved to know I found it highly amusing” Vishann let out a *whoosh* of relief. “Yes, quite funny, although Gray did not find it so. However, he is likely the most proper person around here; I have to depend on him to keep me sorted, as I still don’t have a handle on all of this myself. And if you slip up, it’s quite likely I won’t even notice, I am still American after all. After breakfast, Gray will lead you on a tour. After that, we’ll meet in the library to cover the week’s agenda. Please eat your fill and have fun this week. Arr, me hearties!” Miranda giggled.

After breakfast, the boys all gathered in the foyer for the tour. Gray gave them a history of the house as they walked. Vishann snuck a few photos and a short video. He and Robbie were both from London; when they got to the roof and saw how isolated the castle was and how quiet it was, they were astonished. “Gray,” said Robbie. “How far is the village from here? And are those the nearest houses?”

“Well, sir, the village is just over a mile, as the raven flies. There is one house a wee bit nearer: the Master Distiller and his family live near the distillery, just over there. And speaking of ravens, there they are. His Grace must have come out on the veranda below.” The boys watched as two huge jet-black birds hopped out of a box and took wing. They spiraled down silently. “His Grace will introduce you to them tomorrow. Now, shall we go back in and continue?”

“Did you hear what he said?” asked Robbie of Vishann. “Introduce us? To ravens?” Vishann shrugged. Made as much sense as talking like a pirate.

Two hours later, Gray led them to the library where Gavin, Minerva, and Athena waited. “Ah, excellent,” said Gavin. “All done with the tour of the ship. What about the view from the roof, eh? We will go up on a clear night, you must see the stars. Glorious!”

“Sir?” asked Gary, one of the boys. “We saw two ravens and Gray said you would introduce us?”

“Ha! Yes, my ravens. You shall meet them tomorrow after breakfast. Now, Minerva here is in charge of your week, she will explain everything. We have several activities planned for you, and some free time. I will join you at various times. Now do have fun, and for heaven’s sake, if you have a question, ask it. Anything at all, I assure you, as gruff as I may appear, I am bothered by very little; I am a Marine, after all.” He stood. “They’re all yours Minerva, and arr! Do yer best to whip this scurvy crew of lubbers into shape before we sights the lee shore of Tortuga! Arr!” With that he walked out, singing, “Fifteen men on a dead man’s chest...”

Vishann and the others looked at each other, then at Minerva. She was trying hard to look serious, but failed. Suddenly she was laughing, and everyone joined her in relief. She dried her eyes after a minute. “Ahem. Oh my. He’s not done this before. He already uses a lot of nautical lingo, Marines are a naval service after all, but not to this extent. Anyway, here are your agendas for the week.” Minerva spent an hour going over details and very soon the boys were surprised that it was lunchtime.

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The boys from Oxford recovered from their initial disorientation quickly; they were busy most of the time. The Sunday dinner wasn’t that much different from the occasional formal dinners they

had at Oxford. They met Huginn and Muninn and were as astounded as everyone else on the first encounter. Ravens speaking Latin? Vishann managed to get a photo with Huginn sitting on his arm.

As was expected, mucking out the chicken coops at Mrs. MacGillicuddy's caused a couple of them to lose their lunch, Vishann among them, though he went back to work as if nothing had happened.

None of them had ever seen a pistol up close before, let alone held or fired one. They soon got the hang of it, however, and all of them enjoyed it immensely.

As with the Yale group, none found the morning runs too difficult at first, except for the ever-present rain. After the first day, however, Scott steadily increased both the distance and the pace. The boys were all thrown off a bit by how Athena and Minerva ran almost half the way backward, encouraging them to keep up the pace.

Unarmed combat and knife fighting, they were totally unprepared for. They all participated in one sport or another and were no strangers to bumps and bruises, but this was an entirely different level of pain. As the Yale boys found, they spent a lot of time flat on their backs, trying to breathe. Vishann was voted a figurative trophy because one day he picked up the hard rubber knife and, with no preamble, charged Singh. He got inside Singh's long reach and, before he was sent flying head over heels, managed two quick jabs to Singh's torso. Singh was surprised but complimentary. Gavin hooted about it at breakfast. "Oh yes! That's it! Size up your opponent quickly and then attack! No quarter! If Singh wasn't an expert, you would have won that fight for certain!"

The evening discussion sessions were spirited. The boys were used to this sort of thing at Oxford; many professors used the same technique. However, the book they had been assigned was unfamiliar, and, therefore, they were still challenged.

All too soon, the week came to an end. They had one last breakfast, went around the house to say goodbye to the staff, and piled into the bus. They did not speak as they rode through the village; each was wrapped in his own thoughts. The village sign had barely disappeared from view, and they were all fast asleep.