

The Yale Boys Visit

Scene 35, Book 3

David Fredrichs walked into the executive jet terminal feeling confused, exhilarated, and apprehensive, all at the same time. He was still in shock; go to Scotland for a week with Athena, Minerva, and General Ross? Are you kidding me? Athena told him five classmates would be coming as well, although she didn't say who.

David stopped as he entered the terminal, trying to figure out where he should go, when he heard a shout. "David!" He looked around and walking toward him was Josh Dirks, a lacrosse teammate. "Josh! You scruffy dog! You too?" The two young men shook hands by grasping forearms, the way the Romans supposedly had done it. No one was sure about it, but it was kind of cool to be different.

Josh laughed. "Holy crap! Can you believe this? The other guys are over here, come on."

"Wait, don't I need to check in somewhere?" asked David.

"Ha! This doesn't work that way, apparently," replied Josh. He led the way to a lounge area, and four other boys stood. Josh introduced him to the others; David sort of knew one of them from class. "Hey, want something to eat or drink? They've got everything. Right over there."

"Nah, I'm good," said David. "What about the check-in business?"

"Oh, well, this stewardess or whatever met us when we got here and said to park over here. She said she would come get us when it was time to board. Her name is Millie. She's a max babe, too. Seriously."

David chuckled. Josh was a real ladies' man, or thought he was anyway. He looked around. "Man, this place is upscale. The trip already beats a regular airline, and we aren't on the plane yet!"

"I know, right? We've all been sitting here in a daze. Don't know about you, but none of us can quite believe this. A week at Craignish with General Ross and the two most awesome women on the planet!"

"Oh, don't worry, I'm as shocked as you are. I felt like such a fool after I worked up enough courage to talk to them. So many things I wished I had thought of to say at the time. And then, out of the blue, Athena calls."

"Gentlemen," came a rich contralto voice. The boys all looked up. "It is time to board." Millie turned and walked away; the boys scrambled to follow. She led them outside where a luggage cart and two burly ramp workers waited. "Set your luggage here and it will be loaded." She paused as the boys followed her instructions. "Now, follow me, please." She headed across the tarmac toward a waiting Learjet Global.

The boys all followed, and in unspoken agreement, they spread out so they could all have an unobstructed view of Millie as she walked; they were typical 20-year-old men, after all. They followed her up the stairs into the small plane. "Sit anywhere," said Millie, smiling. "We will be

rolling in a few minutes, so please buckle up.” David and the others hurried to seats; he and Josh sat together.

They had barely gotten settled in when the plane’s engines whined to life and they were on their way. Not long after take-off, Millie brought out champagne. “Man, I hope I don’t get used to this,” said Josh as he sipped his champagne. “Going back to being a peasant is going to be tough.”

David laughed. “I know. The only champagne I’ve ever had is that crappy grocery store stuff at New Year’s.”

The boys drank champagne, flirted with Millie, talked about what the week ahead might be like, and ate dinner. Then, as young men do when their bellies are full, they all fell asleep.

The helicopter with the boys from Yale arrived a little after 0800. Athena and Minerva stood on the front veranda of Castle Craignish watching it fight the wind as it landed on the front lawn. It was about 40°F, overcast with a light drizzle, in other words—an average April morning. Ranged to either side of the women stood Gray, Singh, Captain MacDougal, and Corporal Scott. On the wings of the veranda, Stewart and Anderson were posted, armed with their HKs. James, Paul, and Adam waited below.

Once the helicopter was settled, the three waiting men ran to help unload the luggage. The six boys climbed down from the chopper and got their luggage, then everyone trooped up to the house. All six stopped at the bottom of the stairs and goggled at the house. “Holy shit!” one muttered.

Athena clapped her hands. “No dilly-dallying, gentlemen! Get up here and let’s get inside. The drizzle may be minor, but we don’t need to be getting sopping wet and track all over; Mrs. Gray would have a fit!”

The boys ran up the steps; they didn’t know who Mrs. Gray was, but if Athena did not want to annoy her, they *damn sure* didn’t. They all crowded through the main doors, following Athena, Minerva, and the rest of the householders. Once they were safely out of the rain and gathered in the foyer, their reaction was as predictable as the rain in Scotland—they stood in open-mouthed astonishment.

Athena and Minerva just waited, a smile on their faces; they knew what seeing this house for the first time was like. After a few minutes, Athena spoke. “Welcome to Craignish, gentlemen. You have all met Minerva and me. This is Gray, butler and house manager; this is Singh, under butler. Captain MacDougal here, and Corporal Scott are in charge of security, as well as physical and firearms training. Singh is also our knife combat instructor. Stewart and Anderson are the other security men. I will be overall in charge of your week. Looks like the weather will be perfect all week like it is this morning—just gorgeous.” The boys all looked at each other; they wondered what awful weather was like. “Now, first we get you settled in your rooms, two of you in each, and then breakfast, which is at 0830 sharp each day, so no sightseeing just now. Gray and Singh will show you up and then escort you back down. Now, hop to it.”

“Right this way, young gentlemen,” said Gray as he headed for the stairs. The boys all followed, and Singh brought up the rear. The boys were barely able to avoid bumping into each other as they marveled at the house.

“Wow,” said Josh. “This beats anything I ever imagined.”

“I know,” replied David. “Did you see that gigantic sword in the lobby, I mean foyer?”

As Gray led them past the top of the stairs, he pointed out Gavin’s room. “Those are His Grace’s quarters. You will meet him at breakfast. Your rooms are this way, down this hall.” As he led them down a wide hall, the boys saw three women standing next to three doors. “Here are Anna, Sarah, and Amy. They are the maids of the house and will assist you. Normally, a gentleman would have a valet, but we are not yet organized for that. Singh here or I will fill that role for all of you, in the matters where it would not be appropriate for a woman. Now, please pair off and go with them.”

David and Josh were in front of the group and headed for Anna. The others paired off and went to Sarah and Amy. “Right in here, gentlemen,” said Anna. “I am Anna Clark, first maid of the house. We don’t have much time for a tour now, but here is your sitting room, here is the bedroom, there is the loo, and right in here is the dressing room. Just put down your luggage, and I will unpack it while you are at breakfast.” David and Josh stumbled around, trying to follow Anna while looking at everything.

“Umm, Anna?” David was trying very hard not to seem the unsophisticated country bumpkin he felt like. “Umm, will my GPS work in the house? Because I am already lost.”

Anna laughed. “Oh, sir, it will be all right. We will give you a tour and explain everything. `Tis a big house, true. Don’t feel bad though, His Grace got lost three times his first week here.” David and Josh set down their luggage as Anna directed. “Now run along out to the hall, young gentlemen, Mr. Gray and Singh will take you down to breakfast. Right through there.”

David and Josh stumbled out into the hall and saw the other four boys doing the same. They heard feminine laughter coming from the other rooms, clearly, they weren’t the only ones bewildered by all of this. Gray and Singh waited patiently as they all grouped up again. “Now, gentlemen, we will give you a tour of the house after breakfast, to lessen the chances of you getting lost, though it will still occur, I’m sure. Come along now, mustn’t keep His Grace waiting.” With that, he turned and marched off down the hall.

“Mr. Gray,” said Josh. “Who is this ‘Grace’ everyone keeps talking about?”

Gray laughed, as did Singh. “Oh, sir, His Grace is the duke, the general. We refer to him in the third person that way when we speak about him. When you speak to him directly, you say, ‘Your Grace’ the first time you see him and then ‘sir’ the remainder of the day. He won’t be angry should you stumble a bit at first; he is still an American after all. Now, here we are in the foyer again. That way is the library and the office. His Grace normally eats breakfast in the small kitchen off the office, but with so many of you here, meals will be in the dining room this week. And it is right down here.”

Gray led the boys to the dining room, which was empty when they entered. “If you gentlemen will look for your names on the cards. His Grace always sits here at the end. If he is not present

when you arrive, stand behind your chair. Breakfast is a relaxed meal, you serve yourselves over here. The other meals we, Singh and I, will serve.”

The boys found their places quickly. They heard voices outside; one baritone boomed with laughter. “So, Mrs. MacGillicuddy said she started raising chickens as a hobby and to supplement her pension; she wasn’t planning to have an egg factory!” They all looked toward the door.

Gavin walked into the dining room, Miranda on his left arm. Behind him were Athena and Minerva; then MacGilravie, MacDougal, and Scott. Gavin went to his chair and looked at the boys around the table; they looked back or tried to. It was difficult for them to decide whether to stare at Gavin or Miranda. “Welcome to Craignish, gentlemen!” exclaimed Gavin. “We have a busy week planned for you, but first, introductions. This, as I’m sure you know if you pay any attention to the news, is my fiancé, Miss Miranda Graham. Miss Graham and I are to be married May 17th.” Miranda smiled at the boys, and they said “hello,” trying not to mumble. “This is Miss MacGilravie, my personal secretary, and basically my brain. Athena and Minerva you’ve met, and I believe Athena introduced Captain MacDougal and Corporal Scott earlier. We will discuss plans later, but now let’s eat. Ladies, after you. Gentlemen, jump in after the ladies, I shall come last.”

Miranda led the way to where the breakfast was laid out, Athena and Minerva beside her. Gray brought Gavin a cup of coffee. The boys lined up behind the ladies, trying not to trip over their own feet. So far, the pace of events had them completely disoriented. They were active young men, however, so the food quickly occupied their attention, and they piled their plates high. They saw that the ladies began eating as they sat down, so they followed suit; Gavin grinned at the obvious relish with which they dug in. Gavin went last; he had wanted the boys to get some food eaten before he started explaining things.

After Gavin tucked away some eggs and bacon, he addressed the gathering. “Now, everyone continue eating, but I’m going to talk a little about plans for the week. After breakfast, Gray and Singh will take you on a tour of the house and grounds; can’t have you getting lost after all. Not like I did!” He laughed. “Anyway, a tour. Then we will all meet in the library and cover specifics. You’ll be split up in pairs, you won’t always be doing the same things at the same time. Physical training begins tomorrow, 0615 sharp, out front. Scott will lead you in calisthenics, then a run, then in unarmed combat. Then breakfast at 0830. After that, each day will vary a bit. You will go to the pistol range, we have a visit to Mrs. MacGillicuddy and the chickens, a time with a sheep farmer, some time with the villagers, especially Mr. Kerr, and some other things. Lunch will be a little haphazard what with all you’ll be doing. Dinner here, all together. Tonight, being it’s Sunday, we dress and have a formal meal. After dinner, we will be in the library for drinks and discussion time. You’ve gotten your assigned readings?” The boys all nodded. “Good. You’ve all read the same thing, but each of you has been assigned a separate chapter. Each night, one of you will expound on your assignment, explain what you think it says, and everyone will gleefully poke holes in your argument. You’ll draw lots to see who will be on deck each night. Should be great fun!”

The boys exchanged glances; they weren’t sure how much “fun” it would be to have Gavin, Athena, and Minerva poke holes in their arguments.

“Although we have a great deal of work for you to do, I also want you to have fun; we have a fair bit of unstructured time; you can choose what to do then, or do nothing. We will all join you

on your activities at random times; hard to get to know you in a big group like this. Eat as much as you like; after you've finished go to the foyer where Gray will start the tour. Once again, welcome aboard!"

The boys finished quickly, although they all went for seconds. As they finished, the boys all hurried to the foyer; they were eagerly anticipating the tour. Gray and Singh waited patiently as the boys gathered. "Now, gentlemen, I will lead and Singh will follow, the better to gather you up. Craignish Castle was built in 1800, although it has been renovated several times since; in fact, we are in the midst of one now." Gray talked some more about the history of the house and then led the boys on a complete tour.

"Geez, can you believe the size of this place?" Josh said to David.

"I know, and all the people! I've lost count of everyone we've met; what an army!"

The tour took two hours and then Gray took them to the library, where Gavin and the others waited. "Now that you've seen everything, imagine if you will, *my* first impressions when I entered this house only 15 months ago. They were not much different than yours, I assure you. There are more people about now; I've added staff at a prodigious rate which will likely increase after Miss Miranda moves in permanently as my wife. Now let's go over specifics, and for that, I turn you over to Athena." He stood, Athena and the others did as well, so the boys followed suit. "I will be in the office. Athena, they're all yours." With that, Gavin and Miranda left the room.

Athena spent an hour detailing the activities for the week, then she took questions. Each boy was given an itinerary. Time passed quickly for the boys, and they were astounded to find it was time for lunch.

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The boys followed Athena and Minerva into the dining room for lunch. They found their name cards had been moved a little, apparently, they would each be sitting next to Gavin or Miranda at some point. Gray and Singh waited off to the side, and when the boys entered, they went to a large tureen and began ladling stew into bowls. As they did, they took the bowls and set them on the table. At 1300 sharp, Gavin and Miranda entered and went to their places. Gray assisted Miranda and Gavin sat as well, followed by Athena, Minerva, and then the boys.

"So, what has Mrs. Shaw got for us today? Ah, mutton stew, perfect for a rainy April day. So, tour all finished and Athena has covered your agendas? Good. As you probably know, we carry on as much conversation as possible at lunch in Latin. I've only been studying it for two years now, so I am hardly expert, still bring my book to the table."

Miranda said, "And he has me to think of now, I don't speak a word of it. I have my book now, and I shall do my best."

Gavin smiled and patted Miranda's hand. "Yes, I now have Miranda to think of, and thank heaven for it! You boys may think I'm a crusty old bastard now, you should have met me before! Ha!"

"Yes, gentlemen," said Athena. "His Grace has turned into quite a Winnie-the-Pooh. Why, he might even say 'sorry' after he breaks your nose."

The boys all glanced at each other; they were not entirely sure which part of that was the joke.

Gavin wagged his finger. "Now, Athena, none of that. I never say 'sorry,' as you know perfectly well." He grinned and then turned to the boy at his left. "So, Javier, tell me a bit about yourself."

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After lunch, Athena turned the boys loose. "Nothing on the agenda for this afternoon. We will gather in the drawing room before dinner at 1800. And don't forget that one of you will be on deck tonight to discuss your reading."

David and Josh stood in the foyer a minute. "So, what are you planning?" asked Josh. "I know what I need to do, work on my assigned reading. I didn't know we would have to do a presentation and then defend it!"

"I sort of guessed we would," said David. "Seemed like the kind of thing the general would do, so I'm pretty much ready for that. I think I'll poke around in the library."

"Okay," said Josh. "See you later." He turned and went up the stairs.

David stood in the foyer after Josh left. They had just finished lunch; it was only their first day at Craignish, and he felt like he had been run over by a truck. A little over 12 hours ago, he had arrived at the airport in Boston; now his head was spinning with all that had occurred. He headed for the library.

David entered the library and stood in the center of the room, letting it wash over him. It was amazing. The library at Yale was much larger, and older as well, but there was something about this one. It felt—alive. He wandered around, pulling books at random. Some of the shelves were high, and there was a sort of stepladder nearby. He decided to see if he could find the shelf with the oldest books and grabbed the ladder.

Three hours later, he was sure he had found it; it took three hours because he kept getting distracted by books he came across. The shelf was the highest of the bookcase nearest the entry, on the left. Natural, now that he looked at it. He climbed the ladder and pulled out a book at random. Latin, but he could read the date—1425. Whoa, no way was he going to touch that one any more than he already had; he replaced it and selected another. This one, also in Latin, said 1650. Again, he replaced it; not only could he not read Latin very well, he felt funny touching a book that should be in a museum. He gave up and climbed down.

"Ahem. Excuse me, sir." David looked up to see Gray standing near the front of the room. "Pardon me for interrupting, but it is now 1700, and I thought you might want to go dress for dinner," said Gray.

"Thank you, Mr. Gray, I lost track of time. I need to be in the drawing room at 1800, right?"

"Quite correct, sir. Cocktails at 1800. And I am just 'Gray' to you, sir. The staff refers to me as 'Mister,' not family or guests, such as yourself."

"Ah, okay. I see, I think. Very well, I'll run along. I do so love this library; it almost seems like it is talking to me. Of course, it's in Latin, like those old books on that top shelf there. Thank you." With that, David hurried from the room.

Gray watched the boy leave with a slight smile on his face. He thought he would wait 30 minutes and then go up; he was quite sure someone would need assistance with their tie. He chuckled to himself and walked out of the library.

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“Damn it. I just cannot get this tie to cooperate!” David and Josh stood in front of mirrors, each fumbling with their ties. They were college boys; rarely did they wear a tie. Fortunately for David, his father had instructed him at a young age; he stepped over to help Josh.

“Here, the first thing is to get the length right, and that depends on how thick and how wide the tie is.” David helped Josh fiddle until he got it right.

“Thanks a million, pal. I can’t even remember the last time I wore one of these.”

A knock came at the door of the dressing room, and Gray entered. “Do you require any assistance, gentlemen? With your ties, perhaps?”

“No, Gray, we’ve got it, believe it or not,” replied David.

“Hmm.” Gray came over and inspected them, tweaking the knot on their ties, and using a brush he carried on their jackets. “Quite satisfactory, sir. When you are ready, please wait in the foyer for the others. I will go see how they are progressing.” With that, he gave a slight bow and left the room.

Josh chuckled. “Thanks for the help with the tie, David. For some odd reason, I would not want Gray to say I was ‘unsatisfactory.’ He’s a butler, a servant, and yet I find I crave his approval.”

David chuckled as well. “I know what you mean. However, his title may be ‘butler,’ but I would not call him a servant. I have watched how the others deal with him, even Athena and Minerva, and General Ross, for that matter. Somehow, I think he is far more than a servant.” David didn’t say it, but he got the feeling none of the people in this house were servants, although they might perform servant-like jobs.

The boys left the room, headed for the foyer. “Hmm,” said Josh. “Not sure I understand. But I will watch, now that you’ve pointed it out.” They were the first arrivals to the foyer, so they wandered about, looking at the art and the weapons on display.

One by one, the other boys came down, followed by Gray and Singh. “This way, gentlemen,” said Singh, and he led the way. As they entered the drawing room, he went to a bar in a corner. “Perhaps an Amontillado before dinner, gentlemen?”

“Wait,” said Richard, one of the boys. “Amontillado? As in ‘Cask of Amontillado,’ by Poe? That’s a real thing? Oh, yes, whatever it is, I’ll have some.” The others all said they would have the same, although most had never read the story. They asked Richard to explain, which he gladly did while Singh poured. They all picked up their glass and sipped tentatively; several wanted to inspect the bottle. David decided he liked it; Josh found it a little sweet, but not bad.

“Ha! Started already I see.” The boys turned to see Gavin enter the room with Miranda, Minerva, and Athena close behind. “What are they having, Singh? Amontillado? Most excellent! Same here, I believe. And you, my dear? Now, what did you think of the house?”

Javier spoke up. “General, I was, no *am* amazed. I’ve seen pictures of the White House, and this has it beat, hands down.”

Gavin chuckled. “You know, I’ve been in the White House, once, didn’t see much of it. Considering the British burned it during the War of 1812, this house is therefore older.”

David went next. "The library is what gets me, sir; I spent my afternoon there. It's almost as if it talks to you. I need to tell you, I touched one of the old books on the top shelf, on the left as you enter, 1425; I put it back, frightened me to touch it."

"1425? Good Lord, I had no idea. Latin, I suppose? Blast, I still need to get some sort of expert in here and catalog the whole thing. And you found it spoke to you, did you? Hmm, interesting. Ah, the others. Gentlemen, may I introduce my son, Conner; Melanie, my daughter; my son-in-law, Derek Connelly. They have come for the wedding next month. My grandson Stephen is doubtless upstairs. He's barely a year old, but you might see him about. My soon-to-be mother-in-law is in London, planning the wedding."

Conner, Melanie, and Derek got a drink from Singh and went to mingle with the boys. They had all read about the attack in Texas; Richard pointed out that of the people present, only the Yale bunch had not been in a gunfight, although he wasn't sure about Singh or Miranda.

"My word, you are almost correct," said Gavin. "In fact, Miss Miranda is the only one, other than you all, who has not. Extraordinary. A bunch of steely-eyed killers we are."

"Oh, my dear," said Miranda. "Don't sound so gruesome. Although..." she broke off and looked around the room. She suddenly realized Richard was right; she and the boys from Yale were the only ones who had not been in a combat-like situation and had their lives threatened directly. Fully half the people in the room had killed someone, mostly within the past two years. She shivered and felt herself begin to understand the attitude of Gavin, Athena, and Minerva.

The party chatted a while, then Gray appeared at the door. "Your Grace, ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served." He turned and walked away, followed by Singh. The others set their glasses on the bar, and led by Gavin and Miranda, walked to the dining room. As they entered the dining room, the boys all went to find their cards. Gavin and Miranda took their usual places. Gray and Singh stood to the side with their recently drafted assistants. Samuel had worked a short time in the officers' mess at Portsmouth while he was in the navy; Gray was very happy to discover that fact. He had broken with custom and brought in Anna, Sarah, and Amy to help serve. He had groused some to Gavin about using maids. "Now, Gray, needs must, you know. However, I see your point. With me bringing in a new lady of the house, things will change, likely to have more family and visitors. I suppose you'd best start trying to find a young person to train up. Used to be called a 'footman' I believe? Well, footman, footwoman, whatever, go ahead. We won't normally have six extra people on top of family, as we do this week, but still. And I suppose another maid and a kitchen person as well. Blast, this is getting out of hand. We'll soon outnumber the village at this rate!" Gray had gone away pleased but realized Gavin was right, the household was growing like Mrs. MacGillicuddy's flock! Mrs. Gray was taken aback; she started counting everyone up on her fingers and realized she could no longer do it on just two hands!

Through dinner, Gray mostly directed traffic. There were a few bobbles, thankfully nothing serious, and no one at the table would have noticed except maybe Gavin. At least the Royals weren't here!

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The rest of the week passed quickly for the boys from Yale. As Gavin had promised, the nightly presentations were great fun, in spite of all the holes torn in their arguments. David got the sense very quickly that it happened often to Athena and Minerva. Some of his classmates were a little more sensitive, apparently, they were not used to spirited debate.

The morning runs were challenging, but not too much; everyone had already been working out a fair amount. The unarmed combat and knife fighting were different stories; Scott and Singh took great delight in seeing how many bruises they could inflict without actually breaking any bones—or killing them. Even Athena and Minerva got in on the act, and that was a humbling experience for the young men. David and Josh both found themselves flat on their backs, struggling to breathe, within seconds. They felt better when Stewart told them that the women had done the same to him.

The pistol range was pure joy, for some. David had fired a pistol before; none of the other boys had. David had to unlearn a few things, but once he did that he quickly found his groove. Two of the boys were simply unable to handle it—they were too frightened, especially after MacDougal gave a demonstration of the damage inflicted by a 9mm bullet.

All the boys were excited to meet Matilda; they had seen her videos. They were not thrilled with the mucking out of the coops. Chickens may be cute on screen, but they produce a lot of manure, and when it piles up it is odiferous. More than one boy “tossed their cookies.” Naturally, the same ones did not do well with the sheep.

Huginn and Muninn were a total surprise; neither Athena nor Minerva had posted anything about them. When asked, they both looked a little guilty. “Cheese and rice!” exclaimed Athena. “With all that’s gone on since Hogmanay, I’d completely forgotten!” The ravens had become accustomed to many people coming and going and were no longer shy. In fact, they were quite pushy and demanding – except to Gavin. To him, they were quite attached.

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The boys all gathered in David and Josh’s sitting room the night before they were to depart. They had all become close during the week together. All agreed it had been a memorable experience.

“I will tell you this,” said Richard. “I will not look at an egg or fried chicken the same way ever again.” Hoots of laughter greeted this solemn pronouncement.

“Besides that,” put in Javier. “The thing that most amazed me is that Athena and Minerva do all of this all the time. I thought they just ran and read a lot. There is way more to this than I had imagined.”

“You are right about that,” said David. “This year has obviously been a momentous one for them. I still cannot get over how self-assured they are—they positively reek of it. The staff all respect them too and are proud of them. They love them, actually. And yet, think about it guys, less than a year ago they were a couple of average college girls; now look at them.”

“No kidding,” said Josh. “Can you imagine being a guy at Harvard next year and trying to ask one of them out on a date?”

The impromptu meeting broke up at that point; the boys could no longer carry on a conversation—they had laughed themselves hoarse.

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Breakfast, the day of departure. The boys were no longer shy; they ate and talked with gusto. “So, young fellows,” said Gavin. “I hope you have enjoyed your time with us and learned some things as well.” The boys all nodded enthusiastically. “I do want you to consider a few things. One, less than a year ago, Athena and Minerva were like you, going to college because they had been told that was what you did, taking classes that did not seem important or to lead anywhere, floundering around a bit. Now look at them. I doubt you would find two more poised, self-assured young people in all the world. Don’t get a big head, you two; you’re still impertinent scamps.” The entire table roared with laughter, even Athena and Minerva. “Consider this as well. Although they have gotten stronger physically, that is the easy part. It is the mental toughness they have gained that is the most important. *Nothing*, and I mean *nothing*, will ever be too difficult or frightening to them again, ever. You can do the same, but you will have to work harder, to seek it more diligently, and it will take you longer. Do not take the easy road; as they said so eloquently, strength is a fire fed by trial and adversity. Feed your fire, gentlemen, do not let it die out in softness.”

“So say we all,” said Athena.

“So say we all,” echoed Minerva.

“So say we all,” Gavin finished.

The boys all sat silently, thinking, wondering. Could they be like this, ever?