

SWORD OF THE HIGHLANDS by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

She met a famous hero...

“Oh!” A man’s voice rasped beneath her.

The hard thud of her landing jarred Magda’s senses back to her. She was kneeling astride a man in bed. His chest was warm beneath her flattened palms, his breathing deep and even in the languorous rhythm of sleep. A light dusting of hair bristled softly through the thin flannel of his nightshirt.

“A good evening to you...” His voice was a slow, rolling Scots burr. Shadows flickered in the dim candlelight, exaggerating the intensity of his black-eyed gaze. She felt the heat of his hands through her thin dress, as they came to rest lightly on her thighs. “You wee jade.”

It was the man from the painting. She was dreaming of James Graham.

“You?” Shock choked her voice into a squeak. Jerking her hands to her chest, Magda stilled, even as her heart exploded into high gear. *A nightmare.*

“Aye.” His voice was groggy with sleep, but the rest of his body seemed to be rousing to wakefulness beneath the covers. “Me indeed.”

She tried to master the pounding at her sternum, assuring her body it was just a dream and dreams always pass. She forced air in, driving the reluctant rise and fall of her rib cage. She’d had nightmares before. Had them often, in fact, since her brother’s death. Her conscious mind knew the drill: convince the body to get a hold of itself while she watched and weathered the nightmare through, riding it like rapids that would sweep her along till its course had run.

Her eyes darted around the large square bedroom. It was unnervingly realistic for a dream. The furnishings were simple but lush. A maroon and gold duvet was draped over the mattress. A gold-tasseled tablecloth and ceramic pitcher topped a wooden nightstand. A desk and darkly upholstered chair sat in the corner. Heavy draperies embroidered with a fleur-de-lis pattern hung on the far wall, and by the sound of distant waves, Magda imagined that, if her dreaming mind could will them open, they’d reveal a generous view of the sea.

She didn’t remember going to sleep. *Where was I? The museum. At work. What happened?*

James shook the bed-mussed hair out of his face and broke into a devilish smile as his eyes devoured the length of her. “But do tell, love, who are *you*?” His hands glided up Magda’s legs, disappearing easily under the folds of her dress, thumbs roving out to stroke the insides of her thighs.

Her muscles tightened. His thick duvet gave with the pressure, and Magda could feel the solid warmth of his torso gripped between her legs. *An erotic dream?* Could she relax into it, let it pass...maybe even enjoy it? She tried to give her conscious mind sway, let it take over, steer the dream either to action or to an ending.

She studied his face. That same loosely tousled hair. Black eyes that caught and held hers. The mouth, slightly full, fighting not to curve into a smile. Just like the portrait. It had obsessed her,

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hadn't it? No wonder her unconscious mind would summon a vision of this very man.

She'd been dizzy, violently so, like there was a chainsaw buzzing through her brain. Some people had bad visual side effects from working with ultraviolet light. Photic seizures were not unheard of. *A seizure then. From the UV light.*

"Still here, love?" James prompted, giving her thighs a quick squeeze. He studied her, his eyes bright in the darkness. The slight tremble of his lips betrayed his puzzled amusement. The look in those eyes alone identified him, unmistakably, as the man from the portrait. Magda fought the urge to smooth the rest of his hair from his face.

Though it made sense that she'd dream of this man, Magda couldn't recall ever having had such a vivid one. *Postconvulsive hallucination.* She felt herself relax a little. *Wake up now.*

He cocked his brow as if to ask a question then appeared to think better of it. Despite continuing to stroke her legs with his thumbs, he seemed to be waiting for Magda to make the next move.

Wake up.

She couldn't bear the silence. "I know who you are," she blurted out.

His smile flared to life like a newly lit candle in the darkness. "But of course, love." He winked. "All the lasses do, don't they?"

"You're James Graham. This is a dream."

"Well"—he caressed her thighs in renewed earnest—"I'm glad you find it so agreeable."

Whose battles raged through the pages of history...

His men were all screaming now, howls and screeches like Berserkers of old. James sprang from behind the boulder and ran to join them, a wall of Royalists cascading down upon the Covenanter camp.

Many of Campbell's men had a startled, wild-eyed look to them as they struggled in vain to load muskets with cold and sleepy fingers. The whoosh and slash of Royalist blades came too quickly, and the first wave cut through a swath of Covenanters before they could finish loading their weapons.

The sun rose bright that day, and light cut over the edge of the mountains to cast long shadows below. Chaos ruled as the mobs of men drove into each other, the sounds of men fighting for their lives and the noise of swords finding shield and flesh thundered through the valley.

James quickly lost sight of Ewen, his attention focused only on whatever man was unlucky enough to stand in his path. He didn't carry a shield like many of the others, relying instead on his agility as its own weapon, and he carved his way forward, ducking and diving away from any sword that sought him.

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They were decimating Campbell's troops from the front and side now, and what was once a solid block of men shattered like glass into a thousand skittering pieces.