

LORD OF THE HIGHLANDS by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

Chapter 2

London, 1658

Not again, Will Rollo thought sourly. He'd saved his friend Ormonde from many a scrape, but the Tower of London? Frowning, he pulled his cowl further over his head. An escape from the Tower far exceeded the obligations of friendship.

He nodded to his companion, and they pulled the oars up to skim near the surface of the water, dragging the small boat to a stop. Traitor's Gate loomed just ahead, connecting the Thames to the moat that encircled the Tower complex.

"Who goes there?" The guard shouted, jangling his keys as if to stress the gravity of his position.

It was early evening, and though there were hours yet before the gate would be locked for the night, traffic that time of day was uncommon.

His hired man shifted nervously at his side, and Rollo put his hand out, gesturing for calm. Coin bought men, but it didn't always buy composure.

Truly, he thought. This is the last time.

Rollo cleared his throat, trying his best to shed the Scots from his voice. "I've come wi' ale, gov'ner."

He frowned at the answering silence. He had one shot to get Ormonde out and needed to think quickly.

"It's for his lordship," Rollo added. He'd grown up on the other side of the servant-lord relationship, and knew invoking the wrath of an angry nobleman—even an anonymous one—was good for getting results. "He says I deliver it before the gates is locked for the night, or it's all our hides."

Rollo let out a quick, sharp cough. Keeping up the false accent was a struggle and an annoyance. Ormonde may thrive on these sorts of intrigues, but Rollo much preferred fighting his battles in the light of day. Preferably on horseback.

There was a pause, then a strained, "Be on your way then."

Rollo's shoulders eased. Without question, the last, he thought, giving the guard a nod as they rowed past.

He noted the man's greedy eyes pause on the cask, and fought the urge to heave a visible sigh of relief. The thing was empty, but for a stretch of rope, over twenty fathoms long. It was his ticket in and Ormonde's ride out.

Rollo spared a quick, satisfied smile. The barrel and its promise of drink had been just the thing.

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Only a painted French whore would've bought him swifter passage.

They cut a sharp right, rowing into the moat toward Cradle Tower, which jutted out along the southeastern side. Long ago, Edward III had built it as his own private water entrance. The days of such niceties were long gone, and Cradle Tower was now filled instead with prisoners from the civil wars. Cromwell's enemies all.

The fortress rose high above them, its beige and brown stone an ominous gray in the night's growing dark. As they glided in and toward the Galleyman Stairs, he contemplated the thin arrow slits along the façade. The small openings offered no help—he'd have to get Ormonde out from above.

Even though it was his crippled legs that were stiff, Rollo rubbed his shoulder, remembering his long-ago wound. He'd been shot on the field at Philiphaugh, and left for dead. But it was Ormonde who'd found him. Ormonde's boyish persistence that had pulled him from the field to safety.

He rolled his shoulders, eyeing a second guard coming into view. The last time, Ormonde.

"What have you there?" The guard was a beefy man, and it was at times like this that Rollo was glad of his cane.

"Ale." He stood, his cramped legs trying to find balance in the wobbling boat. His hired man pulled them close to the stone landing, and Rollo used the cane to make his way from the craft. "For you guards, mayhap?"

Rollo tried to wrench his face into a smile, but his thoughts were only for the blood that flowed too slowly back into his limbs. Damned boats. He despised them.

"What's this then?" The guard laughed. "You're lame!" He shook his head in wonder. "Can't be an easy job of it, hauling ale on feeble pins."

Rollo found his footing. He tossed his cane up, catching at its midpoint, and swung. He caught the guard behind his ear, and the man fell in a solid heap. "Not feeble," he gritted out.

Taking the man by the heel, Rollo dragged him under the wooden staircase. He patted down the guard's coat, plucking a ring of keys from his inside pocket.

"He'll wake," he said, returning to his companion. "But we have time."

Rollo noted the heavy length of rope that his hired man had hauled onto the landing. "Good work. You're earning your coin, and a bit besides." He looked back out to the moat, almost completely shrouded in darkness. "Be gone now," he told him. "Wait on the far side. You'll see us."

The sound of Rollo's shuffling step echoed off the dank stone as he made his ascent. The thick loops of rope cut heavily into his shoulder, but he dare not risk the noise of dragging it.

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He headed straight for the end of the hall, knowing exactly where he'd find his friend. The Sealed Knot was a clandestine bunch, working anonymously to topple Cromwell and reinstate the true king. But they weren't so secretive as to watch in silence as one of their own was imprisoned. When alerted that Rollo planned on freeing his friend, an agent had sought him out, pointed him to trustworthy hired help, detailed Ormonde's position, and all but escorted Rollo to the Tower.

Ormonde was a nobleman, and his cell was actually quite an accommodating affair, with a settee, fireplace, and small desk. "How'd you know where to find me?" he asked the moment Rollo found the right key and slipped in.

Rollo chuckled at his friend's exuberance. Ormonde's bright red hair was in a tousle, and he could use a fair spot of barbering besides, but these things only heightened the man's boyishness. Though Ormonde was in his forties, Rollo expected he'd never lose his bright-eyed zeal.

"Your Sealed Knot friends seem to have much information at their disposal."

"But how...?"

"Later." Rollo eyed the windowless room. They'd have to continue up, making their escape from the roof. "Let's away from here before your guard wakes sore and angry."

"Give me that." Ormonde gestured to the rope.

"I can manage," Rollo said coldly.

"You never change, do you? I know better than most how well you can manage." He reached for the heavy mass. "But I've been cooped up here for weeks, and if I don't set this nervous energy to something, I swear—"

"Fine." Rollo shrugged the rope from his side. "Let's just be gone."

They made their way up a cramped spiral staircase to the rooftop. Rollo had read of a Jesuit priest who'd made this same escape not one hundred years prior, and he figured if a man of the cloth could do it, two battle-hardened soldiers could manage as well.

"What cause do you risk your head for this time?" Rollo placed his hands on the cold stone of the battlements and peered down. The moat—and he hoped his boat—waited for them in the blackness below. "Hand me that," he said, pointing to the rope.

"The same as ever. I'll see the true Stuart king reinstated before I die." Ormonde helped Rollo secure the end of the rope around one of the battlements. "Cromwell and his Parliament may have beheaded King Charles I, but they dare not behead the son. I vow, Charles II will be restored to the throne."

"They do call it a kingdom, after all," Rollo said dryly, tugging the rope tight, testing his knot.

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“There now. Who shall be first to give it a go?” He spared Ormonde a smile.

“I need to tell you something, Will.”

Rollo’s face grew stoic once more, waiting in silence for what his friend had to say.

“Your brother.” Ormonde looked into the distance, weighing his words. “It’s Jamie. Jamie’s the one who masterminded my capture.”

“I knew...” Rollo inhaled sharply. “I anticipated this day. I knew, when he traded wives. To go from Graham’s sister to Campbell’s. Aye, getting in league with Cromwell himself wasn’t far behind.”

“So you’re not...surprised?”

“There’s no ill my elder brother could conceive that would give me surprise.” He glanced quickly at his legs before he gave the rope one more tug. “Up and over, you.”

Ormonde smiled, shaking his head, and clapped his friend on the shoulder. “I thank you for this, Will.”

“Aye,” he muttered, watching Ormonde’s descent. “And it’s the last time, for certain.”

“Good evening, cripple.”

Rollo turned sharply, though he knew from the voice whom he’d find. “Jamie. So happy you could join me. `Tis a lovely wee fortress you have here. Though it does seem to have sprung a leak.”

“Did you think I’d not hear your clopping about?” Jamie eyed his brother with disdain. “The years pass, and still you trudge around like a one-legged fishwife.”

“Aye.” Rollo smiled broadly. “The years pass, and still you talk to me as if you’re the same twelve-year old in our father’s stable yard.”

The hiss of Jamie’s unsheathed broadsword cut through the night.

“Dear Jamie, you surprise me.” Rollo laughed softly, tapping his cane lightly on the toe of his boot. “You’re fighting your own battles now? Or is it that Cromwell doesn’t have a sister for you to bed?”

Jamie leapt for him, but Rollo was ready. Tossing his cane up, he grabbed the curve of the pistol-handled grip in one hand, pulling a tidy little sword free of its wooden sheath.

“Hiding a weapon in your walking stick.” Jamie slashed hard, and their swords crossed with a sharp clang. “Not fair, little brother.”

“You speak of fair?” Rollo cut his sword in the sharp diagonal slash he’d perfected in years of

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cavalry fighting, and his brother's blade caught it just before it bit into his shoulder. "What's not fair is destroying an innocent seven-year old simply because you don't like his pony."

Jamie unleashed then, thrashing with rapid but sloppy strokes. Rollo's legs prevented him from bobbing and weaving as another swordsman might, and he suffered the onslaught, meeting each thrust with his own block and parry.

He recognized his brother's style, though, and planned to let Jamie flail himself into exhaustion. He was younger than Jamie and, ironically, it was Rollo's injury that had kept him fitter than most men, regardless of age.

Jamie bobbed forward for what he clearly thought would be a killing lunge, and Rollo saw his chance. Though he refused to kill his brother, he found he was quite eager to bruise the lout. Rollo stepped forward, meeting Jamie's lunge. Their swords crashed, blade sliding down blade, until the brothers' hands were mere inches apart.

"You always..." Jutting his foot forward, Rollo grabbed his brother's wrist and flung him over his extended leg. "Make this same blunder." As Jamie fell, his sword came loose and clattered across the timber roof.

Rollo put the tip of his blade to Jamie's neck. "Don't forget, brother. My injury makes me the stronger man. Or are you loath to admit that you are the cause of that strength?"

"Never." Jamie grabbed the blade in his palm, and a thin trickle of blood seeped from his fist.

"You will never be the stronger man."

He rolled from beneath the sword, shouting at once for a guard.

Rollo looked for a split-second from the sword in his hand, to its wooden sheath tossed halfway across the roof, then to the battlements. With a curse, he tossed his blade down. The cane had been a fine little treasure, but he had neither the time nor the hands to spare.

He heard his brother's shouts and the scrape of his broadsword as he retrieved it.

Rollo pulled himself up between the battlements, the stone scraping his back and arms as he wriggled through. Fumbling in the dark, his hands found the rope. The rock scored his knuckles as he climbed down into the blackness below.

"Will," Ormonde hissed. "Just here. Hurry now, I hear the guards rallying."

Rollo dropped the last foot, landing clumsily in the boat, and his hired man set at once to rowing them back toward Traitor's Gate.

"What are you doing?" Rollo sidled toward the empty cask, still waiting in the prow of the boat. "You were to hide."

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“Someone has beat me to it.” Ormonde’s voice had a peculiar edge.

Rollo swung his gaze to him. “You sound amused.”

“Have a look-see,” the hired man spoke, offering his dagger.

Rollo took the knife and pried the lid free, revealing a woman. She was curled up, fast asleep, her heavy breath echoing in the tiny chamber. “What the devil?”

He peered in. It was impossible to make out any details in the dark. “Help me,” he said to Ormonde. “I’ll get her”—he put his hands under her arms and pulled—“you steady the barrel.”

“Good Lord,” Ormonde said, turning his face away. “Is that her or the cask?”

Rollo grimaced at the smell of stale wine. “I think mayhap...it’s both?”

He laid her down gently, staring for a moment in dumbfounded silence. She was a small, fine-boned thing, with pert little features and hair that flowed long and loose down her back. The moon had risen and illuminated her face with an unearthly light, making her seem like some sort of wayward fairy princess.

Rollo spied something on her, and he carefully took her bare arm in his hand. Her skin was warm and smooth, and he couldn’t help but run his thumb over the delicate bones of her hand, her fingers longer and more graceful than he’d have expected.

He turned her arm to see what had stuck to her and peeled a strange card from the thin skin of her forearm. It pictured a man, walking blithely along, the sun at his back and a bloom in his hand. The man in the drawing gazed up at the sky, heedless of the cliff from which he was about to step. Beneath the image was written, *The Fool*.

Rollo quickly pocketed the peculiar thing, his skin prickling to gooseflesh.

The distant rumble of talk floated over the water from the direction of Traitor’s Gate, calling him back to himself. “Hurry,” he said to Ormonde. “In the cask. Now.”

“What of her?” Ormonde pointed to the girl with a mix of bemusement and panic.

“I’ll give her my cloak.” Rollo slipped his arms from the blanket of dark wool, eyeing her strange and colorful skirt. “Something to cover the clothes she wears.”

“But they’ll recognize you. You can’t risk so much for some drunken wench.”

“What would you have me do? Drop her in the moat?” He settled the strange woman on his lap, leaning her against his neck as if she nuzzled him. “The guard’s eyes will be on the lass, not me.”

Ormonde stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. Rollo glared a challenge, and his friend simply

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shrugged, climbing awkwardly into the barrel.

“Make it fast.” Rollo angled away from the guard’s side of the boat, draping the woman’s hair over his face. The smell of lavender filled his senses, and an unsettling feeling seized him, something visceral, both foreign yet somehow dimly remembered. He swallowed hard, reminding himself where he was. “We approach the gate.”

His hired man began whistling with affected boredom as they rowed closer, and Rollo thought he had well earned his keep.

Just as he’d predicted, the guard had eyes only for their drunken passenger. The man shot Rollo a rakish and congratulatory wink, nodding them through the Traitor’s Gate and out to the Thames.

But Rollo gazed sightlessly in the distance, breathing the scent of lavender and thinking he’d wager anything that this lass was more than a mere wench.