

# WARRIOR OF THE HIGHLANDS by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

## Chapter 2

Argyll, Scotland, 1646

The branches of the old rowan barely bore his weight as he scaled them, and yet the wind in the leaves made more of a rustle than MacColla. It was a moonless night and he felt his way, clinging closer to the trunk as the branches grew thinner and more fibrous with his ascent. Just as the treetop began to stoop with the burden, he saw the roof materialize from the darkness.

It was a ruinous old structure nestled among the trees, a stout, near-windowless tower house, despite its grand title of Inveraray Castle. During the day, wooden steps bypassed the ground floor to lead to the entrance via the great hall on the second story. As such, invited guests wouldn't have to endure the unsightly cellars and vaulted kitchen, and the uninvited would be denied entry when the staircase was retracted at night.

MacColla's laugh was low and quiet. He would, most assuredly, be considered among the uninvited, and yet the fools must've thought some removable steps to be adequate security, for there were no guardsmen to be seen.

There were no suitable windows to climb to from the ground, leaving the roof as the second best access point. He studied it from his perch. A dormer bearing a single door was the only thing that interrupted the silhouette of the sharp peak. A low stone parapet flanked a thin walkway along the roof's edge, presumably to prevent guardsmen from falling the five stories to their death. Faint starlight shimmered in small patches all around, captured by the night's dew.

*Ah, and wet too,* MacColla thought with a smirk. *'T- weren't simple enough to begin with.*

It was no matter. He'd risk life and limb without a thought to get to his Jean.

He heaved his weight. Perhaps it was a good thing after all that Campbell's lair was in want of windows. As it was, he'd be lucky if none heard the tremendous creak the old tree's bones moaned into the night.

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MacColla leapt, hurtling his massive body through the air, crashing along the side of the roof and sliding down to land with an ungraceful thump on the narrow walkway.

He stood and drew his dirk from his belt. Speed and agility had been paramount, and he'd left his claymore behind. Brushing the leaves from his tartan, MacColla curled his toes and adjusted to the feel of the slate tiles, cold and damp under his bare feet.

He trained his eyes into the darkness, making sense of the terrain in the distance. The castle was nestled in Glen Aray, and the landscape was an almost impermeable black, punctuated only by the faint glimmer of Loch Fyne, a ghostly shade of dark silver in the far distance. He knew that squalid little huts clung to its banks in what constituted the village of Inveraray.

Certain now that nobody had heard his landing, MacColla made his way to the low entry cut into the dormer. "Och," he muttered, jiggling the locked door, "'twouldn't be that easy."

MacColla leaned on the stone railing and looked over the edge of the parapet. "I'll not be going down, I see." The nearest windows were a row of thin arrow slits over one story below.

He walked along the side of the ledge to where it ended, and looked around to the front of the tower. A small balcony was nestled in its triangular upper story. MacColla looked at the slick roof behind him, then again to the front of the building. Stones stepped inelegantly up to shape its peak.

"Nothing for it, then," he grumbled and, biting his dirk between his teeth, scaled the stacked and tapering blocks of granite until he was level with the small opening. Gripping the protruding stones between his thighs, he strained to reach the balcony. He grasped a crude stone banister in his hand and dropped, quickly grabbing on with his other hand as his body swung out. Heaving himself up and through such a tight space was awkward, and MacColla had to shimmy on his belly until he landed in a pitch-black upper chamber.

He forced himself to pause, despite his eagerness to rampage Campbell's so-called castle. She was close now.

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He could feel her presence, enduring God-knows-what at the hands of his enemy.

Just as his father had. His father who'd been held captive by this same man for so many years, in just such a tower, trussed like a savage. Campbell, who dared take another from Clan MacDonald prisoner.

MacColla hissed low in his throat at the thought of Jean. Frail, without guile, and lovely as the dawn, with shining black hair and a shy cast to her eye.

Lovely Jean. His sister.

He vowed he'd die at the hands of one hundred Campbells before allowing her to remain another day captive to the brutish bastard. Word was, the Campbell wasn't even in residence, and if the blackguard was fool enough to abandon his precious prisoner, MacColla would avail himself of the opportunity.

He stooped, walking the perimeter of the cramped attic room, tracing his hand along the damp stone as he went, shuffling a foot tentatively forward with each step to see with his body what his eyes couldn't make out in the dark.

The building would be in the old style—one-room floors connected by a spiral staircase—and it would do no good to announce his arrival by tumbling down the attic steps. Campbell's room would be on an upper floor, and would likely be empty. But he'd need to tread with care as he approached the lower floors. It was late, and MacColla hoped either sleep or drink—or perhaps both—would make easy work of dispatching his enemy's men.

MacColla wagered he'd find his sister in the cellars on the ground floor. Rather, it was where he hoped he'd find her. The guards wouldn't want to spend much time in the vaults beneath the castle, likely thick with rats, urine, and damp. If they used Jean even now, it was above ground that MacColla would find her, and he'd prefer finding his sister bound and untouched than being used for sport in the castle hall.

He sensed the opening in front of him, even before his toes slid over the lip of the first step. MacColla took his dirk in his left hand and felt his way down the tight spiral

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stairs that had been hacked crudely into the stone. He came to a landing and, shifting his dirk back to his right hand, gave himself a moment to let his eyes adjust to the fall of light and shadow in what was a much larger space.

*Every floor will look this way*, he thought, easily imagining the castle in his mind's eye. One of the lower stories would house whatever family Campbell chose to keep close, below that would be a great hall, and the kitchen and cellars would be on the ground level.

He scanned the room. A wardrobe, some chests, and a desk emerged from the shadows. It was well appointed, considering. This one would be the chief's then. MacColla spat in the direction of Campbell's bed, a gray hulk faintly illuminated by what was less a window than a rectangular hole to the outside.

MacColla continued down, opening his senses wide. Men were close, and he'd rather keep the benefit of surprise. Eyes wide in the dark and nostrils flared, he was like a wild hunting thing, taking the measure of the floor below through pure instinct.

Distant snores. The quiet rumble of two men's voices speaking in a hush. Firelight licking at the bottom steps, too weak to cut through the black shadows of the stairwell. The charred bite of wood smoke in his sinuses, overlaid with the sour tang of ale gone foul.

A voice jarred the relative calm. Much closer than the others. A third man, then, sitting just out of view of the staircase. MacColla crept down and into the orange firelight of the landing. Two sat at their ease in chairs in front of the fire, nursing their cups. The third sat on a small stool, his back to MacColla.

MacColla slid behind him and, for one strange moment, felt the rumble of the man's low laugh reverberate through his own chest as he slipped his hand around the Campbell's forehead, pulling him close to slit his throat.

The man's death was silent, but the scrape of his stool was not, and he soon had the attention of the other two Campbell clansmen. The taller one raised a call of alarm, but MacColla was unfazed.

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He dropped their dead kin to the ground and stepped over him to assume a ready posture. He'd let the first move be theirs, as that was often when men made their fatal mistakes. Legs apart and knees bent, his arms held just up and out from his sides, MacColla was a stalking animal poised to pounce.

And the first to move was indeed the first to fall. The taller of the two Campbell men leapt forward, slashing his broadsword as he lunged toward MacColla. But MacColla caught him easily, seizing the man's sword arm with his left hand, and impaling the Campbell with his dirk.

The hush in the room was palpable, with a few grunts, heavy breathing, and the scrape of chairs the only things to echo off the stark stone walls.

He could see that the second man would pose more of a challenge, despite his much smaller size. The other Campbell man was fast, faster than MacColla, whose six foot six inches of brawn made him powerful but somewhat stiff when it came to combat in close quarters.

The Campbell kinsman didn't have a sword to hand so he jabbed at MacColla with a small dagger pulled from his boot. MacColla pulled back, but not fast enough to avoid the bite of the blade at his chest. The pain focused him, and he peeled his lips back into a snarl.

The Campbell pestered him with much hopping and a few quick feints and stabs of his small blade.

"Enough." MacColla slashed his dirk down and, standing so much taller, he easily caught the flesh at the man's collarbone.

The Campbell glanced at his bloodied shoulder and panic replaced what had been arrogance just a moment before. Frantic now in what he knew was a fight for his life, the man dashed to MacColla's unguarded left side, but before he could strike, MacColla flexed his arm.

*Sometimes, he thought, a man simply prefers his fists.* MacColla's bicep was a thick mass of muscle, straining like a rock against his linen shirt. He pulled back and swung, clubbing away his enemy's blade and striking him

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squarely on the jaw.

The sharp, clipped sound of pain shattered the focused quiet of the chamber, and MacColla's grimace turned into a smile. Flipping the dirk in his hand, he tucked the blade close against his forearm and punched the side of the man's head, his broad fist landing with devastating force across the Campbell's temple and ear. Dead weight fell with a crash that belied the man's small stature.

MacColla was primed now. He descended the stairs and came to the great hall. The snores he'd heard two stories up echoed off the cold stone. A low fire flickered, mostly a few angry embers casting amber light across the men strewn on blankets in front of the hearth. The acrid smell of piss and ale filled the room, and MacColla could tell he'd likely have no need to blood his blade further while these half-wits slept off their drink. In fact, he thought, looking toward the main door with a smile, he fancied that once Jean was safe in his charge, the two of them could even take the civilized way out.

The steps connecting the great hall to the floor below were wooden, rotted and bowed with age. MacColla tread along the very outer edge, but it wasn't enough to avoid the complaining creak of old timber underfoot.

He paused and held his breath, then moved down in a swift, final burst. If someone had heard him, he'd face them head-on. Otherwise, he'd not tarry, wanting to get to his sister as quickly as possible.

The kitchen had a low, vaulted ceiling and brick walls covered in a decades-old veneer of oil and soot. An elderly woman slept curled close to the hearth. A few coals remained, smoldering amidst the thick blanket of black ash that had been the cook fire.

Some sort of lumpy, beige stew congealed in a cast-iron pot above it. *Potatoes*. MacColla scowled. His days in Ireland had cured him of the taste of potatoes forever. His grandmother had railed against the foreign, dirty little things. Swore up and down that a food not found in the Bible wasn't fit to be found on a good Christian table. She'd relented only after they'd sprinkled the ugly lumps with some holy water, and they'd been a staple with the

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MacDonald clan in Ireland ever since.

MacColla worked his way through two narrow pantries and a buttery before discovering the padlocked door. The lock was a rusted old thing, and he wasted a few minutes jiggling his dirk through the keyhole in an effort to spring it. Growing impatient, he finally just drew his arm back and sheared the hasp from the door with the butt of his weapon.

Jean cried out at the intrusion, and the sound near broke his heart. His sister stood in the pitch-black of a dank vaulted cellar, squinting and blinking her eyes rapidly to adjust to what was merely the faint ambient light of the kitchen.

Fury boiled in him.

“It’s me, lass. Alasdair.” He ran to her, lifting her easily into his arms, and the sight of the filth that soaked the hem of her dress made something in him snap. “Och, Jeannie... bonny wee Jeannie.” Anguish tightened his voice as he scanned her body for signs of misuse.

She broke then, and her tears came in a shuddering rush. Jean tucked her face as tightly to him as possible, nuzzling into the crook of his neck as if she could close some fundamental breach between her life as she’d known it and what she’d just endured. Despite her shuddering body and staccato breaths, Jean’s sobs were nearly silent.

The sight of his sister, broken in his arms and hiding her brave tears, hardened MacColla’s resolve to a white-hot fury. The Campbell had disgraced his father, exiled his family to Ireland, and besieged his Highlands in a wolfish grab for power.

He’d once vowed to destroy the man. But now MacColla found he’d a taste for the blood of all Campbells, and it choked him like bile he needed to cleanse from his throat.