

# Over the Hill

## Jim C. Hines

Florence bundled her blankets and cloak tighter around her shoulders as she trudged through the snow. "Back when I was younger, I could march half a day without a break. Now I can't go half an hour without stopping to piss."

Millicent Redhand smirked. "Some of us expand with age," she said, patting her own thick trunk. "You shrank, so now you're stuck with a bladder the size of a chipmunk's."

Beside her, Grace the Bloody flashed a toothless scowl. "Less talking, more walking."

Florence rested her weight on her staff. "Don't worry, Grace. We'll get Jacob back."

"I know, Mother," she said. Florence sighed. Grace, two years Florence's senior, had taken to calling her "mother" almost a decade ago. Florence wasn't even sure Grace understood it was her grandson who had been kidnapped.

"Why didn't we hitch a ride with that wine merchant's caravan?" Florence asked. "Wait, I remember. Because *somebody* tried to seduce the driver."

"How was I supposed to know his wife was one of the guards?" asked Millie. "Besides, I was only trying to warm my hands."

Grace glanced back. "Do you need to borrow my mittens?"

Hoofbeats cut off Florence's retort. Millie looked at Florence, who listened for a moment, then said, "Sounds like a single rider."

Both women took up protective positions in front of Grace. Florence relaxed slightly when she saw the rider. The gold and green armor on the Appaloosa mare and her rider marked them as belonging to the Viscount's Guard.

The rider's armor was skimpier than that of her horse. Aside from a few bits of steel and bronze to protect her chest and nether regions, she wore only a long, green cape. Not the most practical uniform, but tradition was tradition. Millie gave a whistle of sympathy. "Folks say Guardswomen don't feel pain. Ha! You try donning cold breast-cups on a crisp midwinter morning and see if you feel anything else for the rest of the day. I used to stuff wool into mine to keep warm."

"You stuffed to keep warm," Florence repeated. "Right."

The rider drew to a halt. Florence could see the goosebumps from here. "Out of the way. I've no time for beggars and grandmothers today."

"Name and rank," Florence barked, loud enough to make Grace jump.

"Lissa, Scout Second Class." She drew her cape around herself. "Who are you, and what are you doing on the road on a morning like this?"

"We *were* heading toward Blind Snake River," Florence snapped. "Now we're arguing with a girl who can't bother to show her elders a bit of respect."

Lissa flushed. "The river is unsafe. Bandits have assailed travelers far better protected than yourselves. There have been robberies, kidnappings. . . ."

"We know. We'll take our chances," said Florence.

Lissa nudged her mount, and the horse trotted past to block the road. "Part of my duty is to protect the people of Adenkar. I'll take you back to town, where it's safe."

"Only if that wine merchant and his caravan have left," Millie muttered.

"We don't have time for this nonsense, girl. Who's your commanding officer?" Florence said.

"Baird Redbeard. And he'd be far less tolerant of your backtalk if he were here."

"Baird . . ." Florence glanced at Millie, who nodded.

"Stout fellow? Likes morning stars?"

"You know Baird?" she asked skeptically.

Millie leered. "Who do you think got him into chains, girl? You run along home and tell Baird that if he can't teach his Scouts manners, Millicent Redhand is going to give him the tongue-lashing of his life." She winked. "I may do it anyway, for old times' sake."

Lissa slid smoothly from the saddle, landing on the balls of her feet. "I can't let you pass. For all I know you could be spies for the bandits. I'd prefer not to fight, but I'll truss you up like hogs if that's what it takes."

"I don't think so," Millie said. "I've got nothing against bondage, but you're a bit scrawny for my taste."

Grace crossed her arms. "Want me to take care of her, Mother?" she asked in a voice that might have been threatening if it hadn't been so dry and hoarse.

Lissa patted her sword. "I don't want to use force."

Florence stepped forward, but her boot caught on a rock hidden in the snow. She stumbled, and Lissa reached out to catch her.

Florence's staff jabbed Lissa's sternum. Lissa dropped, gasping. Florence pressed the staff against Lissa's throat while Millie snatched her sword.

"Sorry about that, dear. But those bandits have my friend's grandson. We're going to get him back." She smiled. "And you're going to help."

\* \* \*

They put Grace on Lissa's horse, with Millie riding behind. Florence was a better rider, but her hands weren't strong enough to catch Grace if she fell. Florence and Lissa walked alongside. A loop of rope bound Lissa's hands and secured her to the horse's saddle.

"Kidnapping a Guardswoman is a capital crime," Lissa muttered.

"What should I do, send you running back to tell Baird?" Florence said. "He's been trying to catch this band for months. He'd send an entire squad blundering to the river, and we'd never get Jacob back."

"If you were a Guardswoman, you swore an oath to the Viscount. You have a duty to obey Baird's orders."

"I have a duty to save Jacob."

"The Viscount has forbidden anyone to pay ransom to the bandits."

"So you can execute me twice. Besides, I don't plan to pay any ransom."

"You plan to take him by force?" Lissa started to laugh.

Grace scowled and punched a withered fist into her other hand. This caused her to list sideways, and Millie barely managed to keep her from tumbling out of the saddle.

Once Grace was stable, Millie leaned down and whispered, "Careful, girl. Florence whooped *your* pretty behind without breaking a sweat."

"Trickery and deceit." Lissa spat.

Florence shrugged. "And threatening old women is honorable?"

"Who are you calling old?" Grace snapped.

Lissa didn't say another word until they stopped for lunch. Millie gleefully raided the saddlebags, seizing a skin of watered-down wine and a paper-wrapped package of trail rations. She tore off the paper, then grimaced.

"Food hasn't changed since we were in the Guard." She rapped a biscuit against the saddle, then tossed it to Lissa. "I'm not risking the teeth I've got left on *that*."

Grace snatched a bit of jerky and began gumming the corner.

Millie grabbed a small copper pot from Lissa's saddlebags. "Come on, Grace." She snatched the jerky from Grace's hands. "Let's go boil that and get it softened up before you starve."

"You're going to be slaughtered," Lissa said after they had gone. "Give up, and I won't report what

you did. The Guard can rescue your friend's grandson."

Florence just smiled as she sliced an apple into small enough pieces to chew. "The Guard couldn't find its arse with a map these days. Don't you worry about us, dear. If all goes well, we'll rescue Jacob and be gone before they know what happened."

"And if things go wrong?"

Florence's smile grew. "Then those bandits had better hope Grace goes easy on them." She took another bite of apple and chewed slowly. "So are you going to help us, or do I have to retie that knot? Don't think I haven't noticed you working it loose."

"If you're lucky, they'll just rob you and leave you to die."

"All the more reason for you to protect us, dear. The way I see it, you can help us, and maybe you'll learn a thing or two in the process. Or you can go home and explain how a couple of grannies waylaid you on the road." She reached into her cloak and pulled out a knife, which she used to cut Lissa's bonds.

"You're letting me go?"

"It would be a bit suspicious if we showed up dragging a bound Guardswoman, don't you think? Now don't tell me that beneath that bland, duty-bound exterior there's not a young girl dying for a bit of excitement and adventure."

Lissa stared at her wrists. "I did take an oath to protect the people," she said slowly.

"Good girl. Now go see what's keeping Millie and Grace, and let me have some privacy. If I don't pee soon, I'll burst."

\* \* \*

They peered over the hilltop at the river beyond. "What do you think?" asked Florence.

Millie pointed toward the trees on the far side. "If they're smart, they'll have men there and there. Archers, if they've got 'em. And at least one runner in case it's a trap."

Florence nodded in agreement. Thanks to Lissa's horse, they had made it to the rendezvous only a few hours past sunrise. The bandits' message said to meet a man in a blue cap by Farmer's Bridge.

"Does that cap look blue to you?" Florence asked.

"Maybe, if you washed off the grime." She flexed her shoulders. "How do you want to take him? If he's alone, I can do him with a sword. If he's got backup . . . It's a shame these old arms can't manage a bow anymore."

Florence leaned toward Lissa. "When we were in the Guard, we used to call Millie the queen of the bow-job."

Millie stuck out her tongue. Grace giggled.

"You might be able to take him by surprise," Lissa said. "But if he has friends, you're dead."

Florence looked at Millie, then cocked her head toward Lissa. Millie smiled.

"What?" asked Lissa.

"She's young," said Florence. "I imagine that fellow hasn't seen a pretty girl in quite some time."

"She'll need a bit of work," said Millie. "We need to do something with that hair . . . and she could use help in the chest region."

Lissa pulled her cape closed. "I'm *not* going down there to seduce that grimy bandit." She glanced at Millie. "I'm not some tramp."

"Excuse me?" Millie said softly.

"But you *are* a tramp," Grace said with a shrug. Millie rolled her eyes.

"And there's nothing wrong with my hair!"

"Nothing at all," Millie agreed. "Except you've got it braided so tight I'm amazed your eyes don't pop out. And try smiling once in a while. You look like a statue from the Temple of Stuck-up Bitches."

Lissa's hand slapped her hip where her sword would have been.

"Enough," Florence snapped. "Lissa's a Guardswoman. A soldier." She turned to Lissa. "And a soldier uses every weapon she's got." She untied Lissa's braid and ran her fingers through the dark hair,

fluffing it around her shoulders. "Besides, you're quite pretty. At least you could be, if you'd relax a little."

"Enjoy it now," Millie added. "Before you know it, you'll look like us, all wrinkled and spotted like spoiled fruit."

Lissa glanced at the ground. "You really think I'm pretty?"

Florence shifted Lissa's cape out of the way and tightened her armor.

Lissa squawked. "What are you doing?"

Millie whistled. "Adding bulges, girl. If he's not panting like a dog in two minutes, I'll eat my sword."

"It's all in the attitude," Florence said. "You're more than a soldier. You're a beautiful young woman. Flaunt it. Enjoy it!"

Lissa flushed again. "I'm not sure I can."

"Career soldier?" asked Millie. "Spent your whole life learning to swing a sword, no time for fun, and all that?"

She nodded.

"Ha! You're as bad as Florence was when she signed up. She was as uptight as you. Florence, you remember the first time we dragged you to the Mighty Stallions tavern to see the Sword Swallowers?"

"Hush," scolded Florence. "It's okay, dear. If you're not up for it, we'll just have Millicent here try to seduce him."

\* \* \*

"You're late," said the scout.

"These legs aren't as quick as they used to be," snapped Florence. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Who's that?"

She glanced at Lissa. "Jacob's sister. She insisted on coming along."

"I miss him *so* much," Lissa said, simpering ever so slightly—just as Millie had suggested. "I'd do *anything* to get my big brother back."

"Do you have the money?"

"Let me check." Lissa flipped her cape back and began patting herself down.

The bandit folded his arms. "Hurry it up, girl."

Florence stared. Lissa was practically throwing herself at the fellow, but he might as well have had snow running through his veins.

Lissa smiled. "I know it was here somewhere."

"Today, if you don't mind." More than anything, the bandit sounded bored. What was wrong with the boy?

Lissa shot her a worried look. "My poor brother. What have you men done to him?"

"Nothing, yet. Boss wouldn't let us touch him. He put up a good fight, though. Strong fellow, your brother."

Florence's stomach tightened. "He is, isn't he? Good-looking, too."

The bandit sighed. "Ain't that the truth?"

Florence knew that sigh. So much for seducing this one. Lissa didn't have the proper equipment for it.

Lissa caught on a moment later. Turning so her mane of hair hid her face from the bandit, she mouthed, "What now?"

Florence didn't know. She had insisted Lissa leave her weapons behind, so as to appear more helpless and enticing. "We buried the money along the road," she said quickly. "For safekeeping. If you'll come back with us—"

"You don't have it, do you?" asked the bandit. "I'm going to have to take you in."

He reached for Lissa's wrist.

"Lissa, don't—" That was as far as Florence got. A moment later, the bandit was on the ground.

Lissa pressed his fingers backward until they almost touched his forearm. Her other hand pressed against his elbow.

An arrow sprouted from the snow between Lissa's feet.

A second bandit saluted from the trees. "You two play nice, you hear? Otherwise somebody's likely to get hurt."

\* \* \*

Three men escorted them through the woods. The one with the bow kept smiling at Lissa, who did her best to ignore him.

"Why couldn't *you* have been the one at the rendezvous?" Florence asked him.

"What's that?"

"Never mind." She trudged along as slowly as she could without arousing suspicion. How long would it take the others to follow? Probably ten minutes or so, assuming Millie could convince Grace it was important. Better make it fifteen to be safe.

The bandits had done a good job of camouflage. The tents were white canvas that blended into the snow. She counted eighteen men and a few women sitting around a small campfire. There was probably another handful in the tents. She leaned to Lissa.

"How many do you think you can handle, and be honest?"

Lissa glanced around. "In a fair fight? Maybe four or five."

"A fair fight." Florence patted Lissa's cheek. "That's cute." Raising her voice, she asked, "Who's in charge of this rabble?"

Nobody answered. A good number were staring appreciatively at Lissa. The rest looked to a thin blonde fellow who was eating a plateful of dried fish.

"You there, Blondie!" Florence stomped over and planted the end of her staff between his feet. "Where's Jacob?"

"Where's my money?" He glanced at Lissa. "Or did you bring this pretty young thing as payment?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Florence snapped.

"Or what?" He gave Florence a gentle shove. She twisted back, catching her balance with her staff. And then Lissa was there.

Flinging off her cape, Lissa stepped between Florence and Blondie. "I am Lissa Bloodsong of the Guard, and if you lay a finger on this woman again, I'll rip it from your body and feed it to you."

Florence pushed Lissa aside. "If you're so eager to die, why not throw yourself on his sword and get it over with?"

"I was trying to protect you, you stubborn old—"

"I'm fine. He wasn't going to hurt me."

"At your age, a stiff breeze can hurt you!"

Blondie laughed. "Keep an eye on them while I grab the ropes. Looks like we've got some new hostages. Somebody should pay a good sum for the pretty one, at least."

Florence glanced around, searching the woods. Where were Millie and Grace? Both women were more mobile than Florence, and they had Lissa's horse. It wasn't like they had Florence's need for a privy break every half-hour. Except when Millicent . . . oh no.

"Lissa, when you went to get Millie and Grace after lunch, what were they eating?"

"I don't remember."

"Did Millie have a purple pouch with her?"

Lissa's forehead wrinkled. "I think so. . . ."

"Damn the woman. She said she left them behind."

"What was in the pouch?"

"Dried figs. Millie loves them. Always has." But it wasn't until a few years ago that they had begun

wreaking havoc on her digestive system. "It could be another hour before they get here."

She stopped talking as Blondie returned. He handed the ropes to two of his men. "So you're a Guardswoman," he said to Lissa. "At least you're easy on the eyes."

The bandit who had escorted them to camp gave Florence an apologetic shrug as he looped the rope over her wrists. The one tying up Lissa just looked smug. It was, Florence realized, the same man who had been eyeing Lissa back on the trail.

"I say we keep this one in my tent, boss," he said.

Lissa used a different throw this time, hooking his leg with her ankle and pushing him to the ground by the throat. Before anyone could move, she grabbed his knife and shouted, "I challenge for leadership of this band!"

Blondie started to laugh. "You plan to use that pigsticker on me?"

"I'll beat you with any weapon you care to name."

"Fine." He snapped his fingers, and one of his men passed a loaded crossbow into his hands. "Use the knife. I'll stick with this baby."

Florence pulled away from her captor. "Oh, for crying out loud." A lifetime ago, she would have kicked the nearest bandit in the groin, grabbed his weapon, and fought back-to-back with Lissa until they were both free or dead.

Instead, she hobbled over to Lissa and tugged the knife from her hand. "If you want to get yourself killed, that's your business, but if you keep on like this, Jacob and I will likely end up dead as well."

Lissa puffed up, causing several of the bandits to goggle appreciatively. "I was—"

"I know," she said softly. "And I appreciate it. But do it again and I'll brain you myself." She turned to Blondie. "You'll have to forgive Lissa. She's headstrong. But she does *not* want to challenge you."

"I didn't think so." Blondie smiled and set the crossbow on the ground.

Florence smiled right back. "*I* do."

"What?" A half-dozen people said it at once. Florence ignored them as she fumbled out of her blankets and cloaks. The wind bit like cold steel, but she ignored it. Bandits stared in amazement as she shed layer after layer of old wool and faded cotton. When she finished, Florence was clad almost identically to Lissa.

Her tarnished breast-cups were loose against her chest, and her emerald loincloth would have slipped right over her bony hips if she hadn't had the belt taken in last month. Frayed yellow tassels tickled her thighs. Her skin was the color of parchment, and age spots spattered her body like ink. Dark veins and pale scars crisscrossed her arms and legs.

"You can't be serious," said Lissa. "I can't let you do this."

"I was fighting bandits when your daddy was still squealing for your grandma's tit."

"He'll kill you."

Florence sighed. "I'll be seventy years old this summer. You're what, sixteen?"

"Eighteen," Lissa said defiantly.

"Eighteen. Gods protect you, girl. If this jester kills you, he's taking your whole life away. If he kills me . . ." She shrugged. "That's a few less years of eating mushy food and hunting privies."

"That's crazy."

"You said it yourself. I was more likely to get myself killed than to save Jacob. But none of us can afford Blondie's ransom, and it's not like I have much to lose." She smiled. "The most dangerous foe is the one with nothing to lose."

Florence poked her staff toward Blondie. "So let's get this over with before I die of old age."

"You've made your point, old woman. I respect your courage, but—"

"Fine." She hobbled toward the tents. "I'm going to free Jacob. If you want to stop me, you'd better do it now."

He gestured at his men. "Troy, tie her up and put her with the other hostage."

Troy turned out to be the blue-capped bandit they had met at the river. Florence jabbed a thin finger into his chest. "Don't you dare. I challenged *him*. Shame on you, doing his dirty work. You sit down and wait until he settles things like a man. Then you can tie me up."

She shook her head sadly. "What's a boy like you doing with this ragtag band, anyway? You're young, healthy, handsome . . . I'm sure it sounded romantic, to live out here surrounded by rugged, outdoorsy men." Troy blushed. "But they're not for you. Find yourself a nice boy and an honest job. There are safer ways to earn a living than following garbage like this." She cocked a thumb at Blondie, who was no longer smiling.

"That's enough," he said.

Florence ignored him. "And *you*," she said, turning toward a bandit with a bald head and a blotchy birthmark on his cheek. "You look like you haven't bathed in a week, and I can smell your breath from here. Nobody's going to respect you if you don't respect yourself, least of all a pretty girl like Lissa here. And if you can't mend the rips in that cloak, just fold it up and leave it. I'll take it when I leave. And I expect to be paid a fair sum for fixing it, understand?"

He nodded dumbly. Some of the others laughed, but Florence had already moved on to a young boy. Blondie barked an order, and the boy drew his sword.

"Give me that." Florence snatched the sword by the blade and plucked it from his hands. "Did he give you this bit of scrap?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She ran a thumb down the blade. "The handle's loose, the balance is horrendous, and it hasn't been properly sharpened since before you were born. A sword like this is a greater danger to you than to your opponent, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now, you demand a real sword from this cheapskate, and if he doesn't give you one, you march right back home to your mama. Otherwise you'll be dead before you're old enough to shave."

Before she could start in on the next bandit, Blondie grabbed her shoulder and pushed her to the ground. The cold earth was hard as brick.

"What's wrong with you?" snapped Florence, once she caught her breath. "Sneaking up on an old woman. Didn't your parents teach you any manners?" Grumbles of agreement spread around the circle.

"Quiet," yelled Blondie. "I'm not going to fight you, but I won't have you talking to my men like that."

"I'm taking Jacob," Florence said, her voice firm. She heard Lissa shifting nervously.

Blondie started to laugh, great gut-wrenching guffaws that echoed through the woods. "I like you. You've got more spunk than any woman I've met, and if you were a century younger . . ." He shook his head.

"If I was that young, I'd take your head to the Viscount as a trophy."

Blondie was still chuckling. "A shame you're no longer young." He raised his voice. "Kill her."

A few of the bandits actually rose. Florence crossed her arms, and they stopped with their weapons half-drawn. "For shame. Next thing you know, you'll be robbing babies. Sit down, all of you."

Nobody spoke. A hawk shrieked in the distance, sounding like laughter. Slowly, the bandits sat.

Florence turned back to Blondie. "You should find another career. You're too dumb to lead bandits. You should have killed me the second I challenged you. Now it's too late."

"Is that so?" he sneered. His hand went to his sword, and then he jumped in surprise. He touched his neck, where a slender black dart protruded from the skin.

"It's so," Florence said.

His lips pulled back, and he drew his sword. The first blow shattered her staff and spun her to the ground. His second swing never connected.

Lissa leapt over Florence's body, and her foot crunched into Blondie's chest. He flew backward, dropping his sword. Lissa grabbed the sword and brought it into a guard position.

Behind her, Blondie staggered to his feet and drew a curved knife. He took one step, then stopped as the jagged end of Florence's staff poked his stomach.

He sneered and snatched the staff. Florence smashed the other half of the broken weapon against his knuckles, and he fell back, howling. His yells faded as the toxins in the dart took effect, and he collapsed into the snow.

Florence rolled over and looked at the trees, where Grace was putting another dart into a slender black tube.

"About time you got here!" Florence yelled.

Millie looked sheepish. Grace simply glared and said, "The next one who threatens my mother gets a dart in the eye."

\* \* \*

Jacob was unharmed, if embarrassed. Florence spent ten minutes chewing him out for being so careless as to let a pair of bandits get the jump on him. Then she gave him a hug and a quick kiss and sent him to round up the bandits' horses.

As for the bandits themselves . . . Florence glanced around. More than half had chosen to accompany them back to town. Some clearly didn't want to be around when Blondie woke up. Others were afraid of what would happen when the Guard arrived.

"What will you do from here?" Lissa asked.

"You mean what will *Jacob* do?" Millie piped up.

Lissa flushed and brushed her hair back from her eyes. Florence only smiled. Anyone could see the way those two had been eying each other. She already had a bet with Millie as to how long it would take Lissa to drag the boy into bed. She leaned toward Lissa. "It turns out Jacob's been talking about joining the Guard. The daft boy has never touched a sword in his life."

"If he's never touched a sword, why would he want to—"

Florence gave her a pointed look, and her blush darkened.

"Oh. Well, I could . . . um. I can keep an eye on him. If it would make Grace feel better, I mean."

Millie chuckled. "I'm sure she'd feel much better, knowing you were there to help him master his sword."

"Don't worry, dear," said Florence. "Grace plans to keep an eye on Jacob herself. She's been going on about it all day, how she's going to sign up for another ten-year stint."

"But she's—"

"Too old?" finished Florence. "Grace Shadowsoul can hit a fly at fifty paces with that blowgun. Do you really want to finish that sentence?"

She shook her head. "I just worry what would happen to her."

"Nothing, so long as she's got the right commanding officer." Florence smiled and waited for that to sink in.

Lissa's eyes widened. "You mean *you*? But—"

"Don't finish that sentence either, girl. Besides, it beats sitting by a fireplace crocheting socks and waiting to die. Between Millie, Grace, and myself, we'll get the Guard back into shape."

Lissa's face tightened. "That sounds . . . nice."

Before she could say anything more, Grace and Jacob came thundering up the road on their horse. Grace's gray hair was slick with sweat, and a wide smile wrinkled her face. "Come on, Mother! We'll race you to that hilltop!" She took off again without waiting for an answer.

Florence turned to Lissa and Millie. "Let's catch her before she hurts herself." She stretched her knotted fingers and flicked the reins. Her horse leapt forward, jolting her bones and leaving the others to chase after her. Her joints would ache something fierce tomorrow morning, but that wasn't the worst of it.

As she rode, she muttered to herself, "First thing I do once I'm back in the Guard is requisition a saddle that won't jostle the bladder so badly."



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