

Love Among the Talus

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You cannot really keep a princess in a tower. Not if she has no brothers and must learn statecraft and dancing and riding and poisons and potions and the passage of arms, so that she may eventually rule.

But you can do the next best thing.

In the land of the shining empire, in a small province north of the city of Messaline and beyond the great salt desert, a princess with a tip-tilted nose lived with her mother, Hoelun Khatun, the Dowager Queen. The princess—whose name, it happens, was Nilufer—stood tall and straight as an ivory pole, and if her shoulders were broad out of fashion from the pull of her long oak-white bow, her dowry would no doubt compensate for any perceived lack of beauty. Her hair was straight and black, as smooth and cool as water, and even when she did not ride with her men-at-arms, she wore split, padded skirts and quilted, paneled robes of silk satin, all emerald and jade and black and crimson embroidered with gold and white chrysanthemums.

She needed no tower, for she was like unto a tower in her person, a fastness as sure as the mountains she bloomed beside, her cool reserve and mocking half-lidded glances the battlements of a glacial virginity.

Her province compassed foothills, and also those mountains (which were called the Steles of the Sky). And while its farmlands were not naturally verdant, its mineral wealth was abundant. At the moderate elevations, ancient terraced slopes had been engineered into low-walled, boggy paddies dotted with unhappy oxen. Women toiled there, bent under straw hats, the fermenting vegetation and glossy leeches which adhered to their sinewy calves unheeded. Farther up, the fields gave way to slopes of scree. And at the bottoms of the sheer, rising faces of the mountains opened the nurturing mouths of the mines.

The mines were not worked by men; the miners were talus, living boulders with great stone-grinding mouths. The talus consumed ore and plutonic and metamorphic rocks alike (the sandstones, slates, schists, and shales, they found to be generally bereft of flavor and nutrition, but they would gnaw through them to obtain better) and excreted sand and irregular nuggets of refined metal.

The living rocks were gentle, stolid, unconcerned with human life, although casualties occurred sometimes among the human talus-herders when their vast insensate charges wholly or partially scoured over them. They were peaceful, though, as they grazed through stone, and their wardens would often lean against their rough sides, enjoying the soothing vibrations caused by the grinding of their gizzards, which were packed with the hardest of stones. Which is to say corundum—rubies and sapphires—and sometimes diamonds, polished by ceaseless wear until they attained the sheen of tumbled jewels or river rock.

Of course, the talus had to be sacrificed to retrieve those, so it was done only in husbandry. Or times of economic hardship or unforeseen expense. Or to pay the tithe to the Khagan, the Khan of Khans might-he-live-forever, who had conquered Nilufer's province and slain her father and brother when Nilufer was but a child in the womb.

There had been no peace before the Khagan. Now the warring provinces could war no longer, and the bandits were not free to root among the spoils like battle ravens. Under the peace of the Khanate and protection of the Khagan's armies, the bandit lords were almost kept under control.

So they were desperate, and they had never been fastidious. When *they* caught one of the talus, they slaughtered it and butchered the remains for jewels, and gold, and steel.

As has been mentioned, the princess of the land had no brothers, and the Khatun, finding it inexpedient to confine her only daughter until marriage (as is the custom of overzealous guardians in any age) preferred

