

Of Duty and Devotion

an *Eldest Princess Above* fanfic

by Rodo

for *Melody_Jade*

“YOU ASKED FOR me, Princess?”

She had, Gu Xuanqing knew as much, but he didn't get an answer, not right away. Instead, Princess Yunzhen gracefully craned her neck, pinning his gaze to hers. He did his best not to let it stray to her loose white undergarments and their pearlescent glow. It was indecent and shameless, to have a man see her so, and yet it wasn't his place to point it out. A large part of him didn't want to be here, in her private quarters. It was the other parts of him that had grown increasingly weak in her presence, leaving him floundering between duty and devotion.

A servant rushed in, then another. They carried robes over their arms, one as exquisite as the other. Distracted, Xuanqing let his eyes fall to the floor, fixed firmly on the bare feet that peeked out from her clothes. Indecent. He couldn't look away. She was a snake, he reminded himself, salacious and selfish.

A dainty step, then a finger lifted his chin and his eyes met hers again. “Do your job, Guard Gu. You are here to protect me, are you not? The last time a stranger entered my manor he tried to kill me. If one of the tailor's servants tries anything, should you not stay close by? Protect me?”

He nodded, repulsed at her satisfied smirk and the way it made his heart beat faster. She knew exactly what she was doing. He was but a toy in her manicured hand. There was nothing to do but watch in agony as she tried on hanfu after hanfu, baring far too much for the likes of him to see. And he couldn't help but see, even though he was supposed to watch the mousy servants. There she was, in the corner of his eye, radiant as the moon. Lurking at the centre of his world, as she had in his thoughts ever since he had first entered her mansion.

Tormenting him was simply irresistible. Li Yunzhen knew she should leave him alone. He was her brother's man, hand-picked to appeal to her predilections so that he could get close enough to gather information. It had been obvious from that single look her brother had sent his way when he had come to berate her. But maybe he had been chosen too well. She couldn't help it – she wanted him close. She could never get enough of the way he looked at her, like she was the scariest thing in the world as well as the most desirable. That he obeyed her commands without fawning was a bonus too.

“Guard Gu, follow me,” she told him at the entrance to the bath. He'd already taken his post at the door while her servants hurried along with towels, scented oils and soaps. Gu Xuanqing stiffened.

“As you command,” he finally said.

“You may not look, of course,” she said, then strode past him as if he was air. She was sure he averted his gaze when she slipped out of her clothes and passed the gauzy curtains into the bath. There was no doubt in her mind that others couldn't have resisted a peek. Guard Shen, no doubt, would have devoured her with hungry eyes. But he obeyed, always, whether it was her or her brother's orders.

The bath was heaven. The warm water relaxed her muscles, and the scent of peach blossoms reminded her of simpler times. All the while, she was aware of Gu Xuanqing standing guard beyond the curtain, impossibly unmoving but unable to keep himself from casting his eyes over to catch a glimpse of her through the thin fabric. She knew he could barely see more than her silhouette and yet he was drawn to it. The perfect bait for the perfect catch. Slowly, she reeled him in like a prize carp. It was the most exhilarating game she had played in years.

“I must say, Princess, your home is lovely. I wondered how you could stand being away from the palace and its many luxuries, but now I wonder no more.”

The insult wrapped in a compliment had been delivered by Lady Yang, the second wife of the Minister of Rites. She covered the lower half of her face with a fan as she did so, but didn't bother to hide the fox-like glint in her eyes as well. Gu Xuanqing watched her carefully. This was a woman who might be a match for the Princess.

In her place of honour on the dais, Princess Yunzhen smiled. Xuanqing knew that smile of hers – it was the smile of a tigress facing her prey.

“Thank you, Lady Yang. I find that sometimes, simplicity gives one clarity of mind. And I do so love having more control over my household. In the palace, the eunuchs take care of everything.”

Lady Yang let her eyes roam over the attendants and guards. Xuanqing wished he were free to sigh when her gaze settled on him. It didn't feel nearly as uncomfortable when the Princess did it, and he was hers, as much as he was anyone's but the Emperor's.

“Yes, I can see that,” Lady Yang said.

In response, Princess Yunzhen merely raised an eyebrow, then turned her head to watch her guards dispassionately. It was an exaggerated gesture, a piece of theatre, and they all knew it.

“If all you're doing is standing there, then help the servants with the wine and the dishes. Lady Yang poses no threat to me. Now go!” The Princess shooed them away, sleeves flowing with the movement.

Gu Xuanqing obeyed, even though he ached to know what the Princess was plotting with a minister's wife. But unlike Guard Shen, he was too obedient to eavesdrop in sight of everyone. Such behaviour wouldn't endear him to his mistress at all.

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The kisses she trailed along his throat were tender and deliberate, like they had been the first time. One hand of hers was gripped by his, while his other arm had wrapped itself around her waist, anchoring her to him. He moaned. It was a slight one, and not a hint of pain, as he had promised. His healing wounds would not be a problem. If she wanted, she could just lay with him as she pleased, order him to take her to heaven and beyond. And yet... She lifted her head and untangled herself from him.

“I promise, it's fine,” Gu Xuanqing assured her yet again.

Li Yunzhen let her lips curl into a devious smile. “I know, but this was supposed to be a punishment, wasn't it? Do you feel very punished?”

He frowned, not comprehending her intentions.

“Lie back, and don't move a finger.”

He still didn't understand but did as she said. When he lay there, still as a stone, she climbed on top of him, straddling his hips and smiling at him. Then she leaned forward and whispered into his ear: “A punishment should be a little uncomfortable, shouldn't it?”

Gu Xuanqing nodded.

“What did I say about moving?”

His eyes widened, but that was the only movement he allowed himself, and she wasn't about to berate him for something so trivial. Instead, she let her finger trace a line from his scalp, down his nose, then his lips, his chin, and further. With deliberate slowness, she undid the knots keeping his clothes together and brushed them to the side, revealing his bandaged chest. Yunzhen sighed at the sight, but didn't stop. She continued in her ministrations, adding kisses trailing down the unbandaged parts of his torso, while undoing her own hanfu. A hitch in his breathing was accompanied by a twitch of a finger against her left calf. At her back, she could feel him rise to the occasion.

“No moving,” she reminded him.

This was going to be glorious fun and she intended to enjoy every last moment of it.

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Gu Xuanqing was tense. He had no reason to be, officially. Now that the Emperor sat on his throne and no longer needed a regency, Princess Yunzhen had decided to use her quasi-retirement to tour the country, to see the sights. The Western Provinces were quite a sight, full of lush mountains, meandering rivers and tidy pagodas. The Princess enjoyed taking in the scenery and tasting the local delicacies. If only that was all there was to this tour. Xuanqing knew her well enough to know better.

The visit to the governor was courtesy, of course, but probably much, much more. Xuanqing followed behind the princess as she walked up to the man at his residency. He stood surrounded by his men in their military uniforms, and one lone speck of colour, his wife in her pale lilac silks. Yunzhen, of course, was undaunted.

“Welcome to our province,” the governor barked with a booming voice.

Xuanqing saw Yunzhen smile graciously as she looked around them. “It is always good to see so many men eager to devote their talents to the service of our nation.”

Even Xuanqing could tell that the show of force had little to do with devotion to the empire.

The general had the audacity to snort. Then his eyes went to Xuanqing. “We have heard of your tastes, Princess. Even out here, we have heard that you like a strong man to follow. Do you kneel at your guard's feet often?”

“Have you now..” Yunzhen shot Xuanqing one of her dangerous looks, then focussed her whole attention on the governor. She still didn’t look at him when she voiced her order: “Guard Gu, on your hands and knees.”

He did as he was told. The foot that collided with his ribs didn’t come as a surprise. He didn’t even make a sound.

“Does this look like I serve a lesser man, Governor? Now, I believe we have something to talk about..”

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“Get down!”

As soon as Gu Xuanqing shouted, Li Yunzhen let herself drop to the hard ground. An arrow pierced the air where her head had just been. Around her, the sound of clanging swords and stomping boots disrupted the quiet of the forest.

Yunzhen wasn’t surprised it had come to this. What better way to sell the need for more troops to subdue the bandits roaming the hills than a dead princess? She was surprised the ambush had come so soon, though. If she had planned it, she would have waited another day or two to put more distance between her and the governor. This close, there was a danger he would no longer look in control of his domain. That kind of loss of face could result in an unintentional loss of power.

A hand gripped her elbow. For a moment, she tried to shake it off, before she realized who it was.

“We must get to the trees,” Xuanqing said. “There’s too many of them.”

Yunzhen nodded and struggled to her feet, but as soon as she was ready, another arrow missed her by a hair’s breadth.

“Run!”

Yunzhen didn’t. Instead, she looked at him, his wide eyes and his sword coated with blood. She wanted to say something, wanted to hug him, wanted to order him to come back to her. And more than anything, she wanted him to run with her.

“I’ll be right behind you,” he assured her with a smile, but she knew it for a lie. Behind him, the governor’s men circled in on them.

And so she ran. It was the only thing she could do. Up the slope, undergrowth tearing at her silks and thorns pricking her arms. The sounds of fighting slowly faded, replaced by birdsong and rustling leaves. For an eternity, she waited. There was no use in going farther

– Yunzhen was a woman of the palace and didn't know how to find her way in the wilds. She was lost.

In the end, he found her, bruised and battered, but whole. And when she spotted him, the smile on Xuanqing's face lit up her world.

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