If asked whether Zhuang Luoyan could claw her way back up, a sizeable majority of the imperial harem would shake their heads. Beautiful as she might be, she lacked brains. As such, how long could she keep the emperor’s affection?

Yet who knew the emperor would in fact bestow her gifts? Those women who learned of this felt their moods plummet.

“His Majesty has actually bestowed that pair of crystal hairpins to Wanyi Zhuang,” said the empress, stroking her prayer beads, her expression calm like the still surface of a lake. “Looks like that Wanyi Zhuang still has some tricks up her sleeve. This palace has underestimated her. Forget it. He Yu, send one of this palace’s bolts of satin to Taoyu Pavilion.”

“Yes,” said He Yu, taking care in leaving. As she turned around, she still did not see the empress’ expression change at the slightest.
The Taoyu Pavilion of today was more festive than previous. In one lump sum, Shang Palace Bureau¹ returned Zhuang Luoyan everything they had skimped on her in the past. As if they had forgotten how they treated her a few days ago. Zhuang Luoyan also pretended to forget. She did not act arrogantly in front of those eunuchs, merely instructing them where to place the items. But such a nonchalant attitude inspired more fear within the eunuchs’ hearts.

Returning what’s stolen should right all the wrongs, making bygones be bygones. Of course, a bit of unwillingness was to be expected. However, this Zhuang Luoyan, a woman who had once again snatched the emperor’s favor, did not react poorly to them at all. Her mentality had changed, it seemed. In the imperial palace, a master like this could not be offended. For the more gentle a woman seemed, the more malicious her heart.

“Master, it seems Her Majesty, the empress heard that your health has recovered, and is sending a few bolts of satin as celebration,” said Yunxi. “Noble Consort Shu, Consort Ning, Zhaorong Xu, and Noble Imperial Concubine Yan have also sent gifts.”

“Receive those as well. You all should know how to thank them.” Zhuang Luoyan did not believe those women were here to forge a relationship with her, to pull her to their side. At most, she feared they were acting out a play. They were warning her that she had received an insignificant amount of favor from the emperor. In their eyes, she was just a small Wanyi that could be crushed at any moment. On the other hand, they were the superiors merely sending small trinkets to a subordinate.

“Yes,” said Yunxi. She turned around and gave Fubao a look. The two did not speak and directly went on their way to the storeroom, making sure not to place the items in plain sight.
Ganzheng Palace.

After lunchtime, Feng Jin continued to read his memorials. A while later, an eunuch entered the room with a tray of name tags. There were those made of silver, copper, and wood. Three materials for different group ranks of imperial concubines.

Originally, he hadn’t been in the mood to choose a woman for the night. Before he could dismiss the eunuch, however, he recalled the noon events at a certain peach forest. The pitiful appearance of Wanyi Zhuang. If Feng Jin were to be honest, he had found her slightly genuine and adorable. A single glance, and he knew this: her pitiful appearance stirred happiness in his heart, more than those other beauties who would glance back with a smile.

He slowly picked up a wooden name tag. “Tonight let’s go to Taoyu Pavilion.”

“Understood,” said the eunuch, glancing at the nametag. The words “Taoyu Pavillion’s Wanyi Zhuang” glanced back at him. Looks like Taoyu Pavillion will have a lot of attention these next couple days.

Once Zhuang Luoyan received the notice from the eunuch, she was shocked. However, she did not turn away from it. Sweeping her gaze among her servants, she saw that they were nearly jumping from joy, and they scrambled to prepare. She sighed. Just from their reaction, it was quite apparent that imperial concubines who lost favor were in a frightening position.

After she took a bath, changed her clothes, and had her whole room lit up with incense, Tingzhu and Yunxi started to apply her makeup. Zhuang Luoyan finally opened her mouth to speak. “You can put these down. I’ll do it myself.”
When a man was aroused, suddenly tasting heavy rouge would put out whatever flame had been lit. Although the lead powder in ancient Chinese makeup added a nice pale touch, letting it sit in her face for a whole night was a woman’s greatest enemy. The skin of her current body was flawless. Just one layer of light powder would be enough.

Willow eyebrows under the candlelight gave her a more gentle appearance. Easier to arouse pity from the hearts of men. She painted a pink peach blossom on the center of her forehead. It drew upon the memory of the noon’s events, to inspire the emperor’s delight upon recollection.

Women were made up of three parts hairstyle, three parts outfit, and four parts makeup. If they wore clothes that were too bright, they would seem like vixens. Too sexy, then they would seem vulgar. It would not fare well if the emperor thought her a person fueled by ambition, hungry to climb up his bed. For this reason, it was better to wear something the same pale hue of the moon. Something with a tight waist and flowing wide sleeves. Indeed, a blouse and a wrap-around skirt under the night would weave the impression of a fairy.

Judging by the emperor’s desires, the closer a woman gave off this impression, the more he would chase after her. This fetish existed in most powerful men.

Zhuang Luoyan stopped Tingzhu and Yunxi from putting adornments in her hair. From affixing jewelry and ornaments on her person. She stroked her hair, enjoying the silky sensation. Then she instructed Tingzhu to style it into a flying immortal bun, pairing it with the crystal dangling hair ornaments the emperor had bestowed. A truly splendid match.

As Tingzhu and Yunxi observed their master, once more did they believe she had changed. They were surprised that she had a plan on capturing the emperor. That she had these tricks up her sleeve. Gazing at the sky that was growing dark, the two of them waited eagerly and anxiously for the night to arrive.
In the ancient palace of the fallen, the flowers were beautiful yet lonely⁴. The emperor’s procession passed by, holding the hopes of many women. How many had waited for him every night, their love dying before they aged?

Which woman didn’t care about flourishing in the palace? They all hoped to be smiling in the end, unaware that their fate was akin to duckweed floating above the lake’s surface. Rootless.

Emperor Chengxuan was considered a great ruler. For this reason, even though he had been stunned by a girl as beautiful as Zhuang Luoyan, he would not ignore his work to be with her. So when he set for Taoyu Pavilion, the sky was already dark.

The eunuchs that carried the emperor’s palanquin over the green tiled road dared not make a peep. Once he smelled the fresh scent of peaches, Feng Jin knew he was near Taoyu Pavilion. He pulled back the curtain before him. Saw lanterns hanging high from the main entrance. In the night, a girl held a six-sided lantern, dressed in a blouse and a wrap-around skirt the color of the moon. Her crystal dangling hair ornaments reflected the candlelight, shimmering with different hues. A single glance, and one would fear she would catch a cold in the night air. One could not help but desire to pull her close, wrap one’s arms around her.

Feng Jin bit his lip. His palanquin stopped. He watched as the girl saluted, and once he disembarked, he reached out to grab her hand. “Beloved concubine need not stand on ceremony,” he said, before draping a cloak around her.

Feng Jin had attractive and smooth hands. Perhaps because he had learned archery and how to ride, there was a thin layer of calluses on his hands. Zhuang Luoyan lowered her gaze, allowing Feng Jin to hug her as they went inside. The lantern in her hands swayed back and forth. Her shadow bobbed as she walked.

She hung the lantern on a hook on a carved pearwood frame. Within the main room, Feng Jin caught sight of a painting of an adorable and small white pig, one Zhuang Luoyan had drawn in the morning due to boredom. She presented a cup

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of tea to him, fragrant as flowers. “Your Majesty, the night is cold. Drink some hot tea to warm yourself.”

“Beloved concubine’s painting is…” Emperor Chengxuan wondered why she had drawn such a thing. It could not hold a candle to the professional works of Consort Ning. However, once he laid eyes on her skinny waist again, he broke into a smile. “Quite interesting.”

“Is Your Majesty telling the truth? I’ve already practiced drawing this for many days. Today, everyone has said that this concubine has improved.” Her face was bright with smiles.

Feng Jin received the tea cup and soaked in Zhuang Luoyan’s joyful appearance. In his heart, he thought she was certainly a girl who had just entered the palace. Her smile still had remnants of girlish temperament. But there was nothing girlish about her body. Making love would definitely be amazing.

Setting the cup back on the table, he reached out to hold her slightly chilled hands. “It’s late now. Better to retire early.” As he looked down, the blushing face of a maiden came into view. Such a beautiful face would kindle a flame in anyone’s nethers.

Lying bare and warm under the bed curtains; a couple embracing found the night too short⁵. For men, if a gorgeous woman in his bed acted like a dead fish, stiff and unmoving, he would lose all interest.

Zhuang Luoyan, in line with her philosophy of taking pleasure in life, did not hold back in enjoying Feng Jin. Both were extremely satisfied at the end.

Feng Jin spooned her, hands caressing her smooth body. He could not help but touch her. The taste of Zhuang Luoyan was delicious. During their fun, he had

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almost finished prematurely. It brought him chills. He craved for another round.

So it wasn’t a surprise for Feng Jin’s hands to slowly descend, reaching for that special place.

“Your Majesty, this concubine... can no longer move.” Such a frail and sweet voice naturally would not stop his actions. In fact, it spurred him on even more. Once more did they enjoy each other’s company.

Zhuang Luoyan wrapped her arms around Feng Jin’s neck, taking much pleasure from his service. Feeling comfortable, she closed her eyes. *As expected, men like it when women praise them. This emperor’s technique is incredible.*

The eunuchs and maidservants standing right outside the room lowered their heads and kept silent. As if they could not hear what was happening within the main room. The head eunuch Gao Dezhong instructed the lower-ranked eunuchs to prepare their masters’ bath. He lifted his head and gazed at the more quiet areas of Taoyu Pavilion. If nothing bad occured, this Taoyu Pavilion would be bustling in the future.

Feng Jin absorbed the sight of the girl who was currently knocked out. In a great mood, he carried her outside to the bathtub. As he lowered her into the water, he saw the red marks left behind on snow-white skin. The corners of his lips tilted upward.

“Your Majesty, my waist is sore.” The person in the tub jerked slightly. She grabbed his large hand and brought it to her waist. Dazed, she did not realize she had lost her manners.

Feng Jin was surprised. His smile grew. Then he obeyed the woman’s orders, and massaged her waist. He found it a new perspective.
The technique of Feng Jin’s massage was barely satisfactory. However, Zhuang Luoyan still felt happy. Having the emperor service her with a massage really made a woman proud.

The temperature of the water was just right. Once more did they partake in some fun. In the end, Zhuang Luoyan yawned and fell asleep.

Later that night, Gao Dezhong carefully helped Feng Jin change into nightwear. Originally, it should have been the chosen imperial concubine’s duty. However, Zhuang Luoyan seemed to be sleeping soundly, and Gao Dezhong did not think she would be waking up anytime soon. Furthermore, Feng Jin had been holding her delicately, trying his best not to rouse her.

After leaving the main room, Feng Jin noticed there were only two maidservants and one eunuch standing by outside the doors. He furrowed his brow. “Are you the only ones serving Wanyi Zhuang? Where are the other servants?”

“Responding to Your Majesty, Wanyi Zhuang only has us three servants,” Fubao carefully said as he kneeled.

Feng Jin furrowed his brow even further. He turned around to face Gao Dezhong. “Inform the household department to send some capable servants to Taoyu Pavilion. How can a master only have three people serving them?”

“Understood, Your Majesty,” said Gao Dezhong, bowing. He kept his eyes on the fortune character embroidered on his shoes, used to Feng Jin’s actions. Whichever concubine he favored, he would make sure she was living well.

Once Feng Jin departed, the Zhuang Luoyan who was supposed to be deep in slumber opened her eyes. A slight smile graced her lips.

All men were like this. No matter how powerful they were.
1. Shang Palace Bureau: (尚宫局) Shàng gōng jú. One of the six palaces/departments that takes care of the imperial palace’s food, clothing, accessories, etc.

2. blouse and a wrap-around skirt: (襦裙) Rú qún. From Wikipedia-- An item of traditional Chinese attire primarily for women but also for men. It consists of a blouse and a wrap-around skirt.

3. flying immortal bun: (飞仙发) Fēi xiān fà. Picture is provided in the chapter supplement.

4. In the ancient palace of the fallen, the flowers are beautiful yet lonely: (寥落古行宫，宫花寂寞红) Líáoluò gǔ xínggōng, gōng huā jìmò hóng. From a longer poem that translates to “The ancient palace that has long been empty and cold; the flower of the palace is still bright red; there are several palace ladies with white hair; sitting idle and talking about Emperor Xuanzong of Tang.” Basically means maidservants that had worked since they were children until their hair turned grey feel hate and unhappiness wasting their lives in the palace.

5. Lying bare and warm under the bed curtains; a couple embracing found the night too short: (脱钗去衣香帐暖，鸳鸯相抱恨夜短) Tuō chāi qù yī xiānɡ zhànɡ nuǎn, yuānyānɡ xiānɡ bào hèn yè duǎn. Literally “removing the hairpins, clothes, and perfume, it’s warm inside the mosquito nets (of a bed); a couple embracing would feel that the night is too short.” I’m struggling to put this in actual poem form in English, so please bear with me.

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