

## A Lushan Goes to War

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 4999 words

*In the eleventh month of the fourteenth year of the Tianbao era, General An Lushan rebelled against the reign of Tang Emperor Xuanzong and founded a parallel kingdom, the Yan dynasty. He died two years later, and the Yan five years after that. Though General An's revolt was short-lived, its impact on Tang dynasty politics and culture was immeasurable.*

*General An was Sogdian, by adoption if not by birth; his surname, An, came from his stepfather. His mother was a Göktürk sorceress. He was born on the first day of the first month of the year after she prayed to the stars for a son. Lushan was likely a transcription of Roxshan, meaning bright; its female form is Roxana.*

*Yan, his dynasty's name, means swallow; the bird.*

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As a child in the desert, Roxana learned to fly. He was fat even then, and while other boys and girls' fathers would raise their bodies high in the air and spin them round and round just to hear them giggle, Roxana's stepfather never did. In the hours before rain, birds would soar low in the sky where the breeze was warmer, and Roxana would watch the shadows of their wings glide across the sand. He would study his own arms, so be-ringed with fat that they looked like bunched-up sleeves of flesh, and he would flap them against his sides, straining his stubby thighs as he jumped up and down, sometimes emitting an involuntary squawk. His stepbrother would glare at him, but would not beat him — had not beat him since Roxana had gotten this heavy.

Roxana imagined himself flying up to the clouds and taking a nap in them, where the sun would not be so unforgiving, where the coolness of the rain that the clouds carried in their belly would sprinkle itself across his skin like the sparks of a fire. And he imagined that after his nap he would come back down onto earth and make the desert quake and quiver with his weight. The world would rumble beneath his feet.

*Roxana, Roxana, his mother would whisper in the evenings while she bathed him, you are my star.*

Roxana did not want to be a star, distant, petite, decorative. He wanted to burrow so deep into the dirt that he could wear the world like a shirt. Each breath he took would send the hot sand of his torso rippling; dunes would shift, camels and tents swallowed with the softest of hissing sounds. His arms would be the green sea of the steppes. His legs would be the packed yellow clay of the central plains. His feet would be made of lake water, and instead of walking his hobbling little limp he would simply make the flow carry him where he needed to go. And of course, his head would be made of the sky. When he was angry, his huffs would be the gale and his curses would be brutal sandstorms; when he cried — which, in his short life, had only ever been once, and absolutely not because of his stepbrother's bullying — when he cried, his tears would be the rain that his mother so loved to catch in her hands.

His mother told him about snow, once. She had never been in it either, but she had heard his father describe it. She never talked about Roxana's father; only the things she'd seen through his eyes, like snow, like steppes, like the central plains.

Roxana got to see all those things, in due time. The month that Roxana bled for the first time, his home was attacked, and his stepfather took him and his stepbrother east. They snuck away in the night and Roxana fell into feverish sleep. When he woke up, days or weeks later, he looked around him and saw yellow — not the parched yellow he'd always known so well, but yellow of the wet kind that built itself up from river sediment. The red between his legs was gone; it would come back soon, though. His stepfather said that they were in the land of Tang, and it sounded like the sound you made when the soup you were drinking was too hot and you were trying to expel the hot air from your mouth. Lips puckering open, panting, *Tang!*

After he learned the language of the Tang, Roxana realised that *Tang* really did sound like the word for *scalding!* and also the word for *soup!* and for *pond!* and *sweet!* Sweet like the oats coated with honey that he fed to the horses he purchased at market and led back to the stables, patting their snouts and whispering to them all the while. He would say to them, *Is this scalding hot soup not so sweet? Sweet like the water of the oasis, which is like a pond, except in the desert, not the forest, nor the garden. Sweet like lying down after a long day.* Lying down also sounded like *Tang*, Roxana noted.

Roxana would show the horses to his employer at the stables and the employer would tell his stepfather, "Roxana will make a good wife."

Roxana spoke six languages, which meant that there were six times as many husbands waiting in the dark corners of town alleys, waiting for him. Roxana was fatter than a cow, with breasts that could suckle six children in a row without going dry. Just those breasts could be a dowry on their own. His stepfather was pleased with him, and allowed him his freedoms.

On summer evenings, Roxana would climb to the roof and look at his city and think about ways to make himself a bad wife. He thought about it like this: from the roof, there were two ways to get down; flying, or falling. Falling meant cracking his head open on the ground below and letting the bird and vermin slurp his brains away. Flying meant making his body his own, sticking his head so far up into the sky that his every word would rumble as thunder, just as he'd imagined when he'd been a child.

Of course, there were also the stairs; he could leave the roof via the stairs, which was how he'd come up in the first place. But his knees hurt, on account of all the weight they had to bear. Often he would just fall asleep up here, under the North Star, after which his mother had named him. She had wanted a son very much. She had had him. He was here, now.

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He was condemned to death on two occasions.

The first time was for stealing sheep. Roxana lived alone in You Prefecture by then, across the world from where he'd been born. He was taken to the local governor, who constantly looked exhausted from spending his whole life battling the Khitan and the Qay — their horses, fed strong on the grass of the steppes, trampled the governor's horses easily. Emperor Xuanzong was impatient for progress, and hounded the governor in weekly letters. That day, the governor had received yet another letter. He was in a foul mood. The governor began to beat Roxana with a cane and Roxana was silent for the first few hundred strokes, but as the blood began to pour out of his ass and trickle down his legs to puddle beneath the gaps of his toes, he wailed, "My lord, do you not wish to destroy the Khitan and the Qay? If you wish for victory, you would not wish to cane this Roxana to death." He said *wish* three times, just as his mother had *wished* three times beneath the stars for a son like him.

The governor stopped the cane and measured Roxana's body with his eyes. Unlike the horse merchant, what the governor saw was not the fullness of Roxana's breasts and hips, but his mud arms and clay legs and the clear bell of his voice. The governor said, "What did you say your name was, boy?"

And the boy stood up straight and said, "Roxshan."

Roxshan became a soldier, fighting nomads whose war cries sounded like his own. The governor said he was worth five men and praised him for not being scared of blood; how could he be?

The second time that Roxshan was condemned to death was three years later, for disobeying the governor's orders and leading an ambush, slaughtering thousands. This would have been forgiven, had the battle not ended in defeat. The governor sent him to Chang'an, where Emperor Xuanzong saw him for who he was and pardoned him. Roxshan bowed in gratitude, his belly swinging between his legs.

"What does this barbarian belly contain?" Emperor Xuanzong asked with a smile.

"Nothing other than a faithful heart," Roxshan replied.

Later, the Emperor gifted Roxshan a tile forged from iron. "This tile promises that you can never be killed," Xuanzong said warmly, placing the tile into Roxshan's cupped palms. "Except for treason."

Roxshan leant on the cane that he now used to ease the pressure on his knees and said, "Thank you."

All the other men of the court hated Roxshan, because he did not act like a gentleman. They called him a barbarian, and he agreed. One day, he thought, they would all kneel before him and wash his feet in their own porcelain food bowls. They would be forced to nibble their grains of rice from his nailbeds.

The Emperor liked Roxshan precisely because of the way he sang and broke tables when drunk. Roxshan had seen the way his mother swayed, entranced, when she performed her rituals; he adapted these using a length of white silk ribbon, which he sent in arcs through the air while the Emperor's favorite consort, Yang Yuhuan,

played the pipa. The ribbon moved like fast-paced clouds over the desert in the springtime, and Roxshan chased them as he'd done when he'd been a child learning to fly. Xuanzong enjoyed watching him do this because of how brutish he looked; Xuanzong had an artist paint Roxshan atop a mighty tiger, eyes bulging, hair wild, the Emperor's favorite war dog.

What Xuanzong didn't know was that Roxshan could be gentle, too, when he wanted. Like between Yang Yuhuan's legs. Consort Yang had been wed to Xuanzong's son, and when her first husband had died, her father-in-law had made her his; he'd entered her into a Daoist nunnery, first, to avoid suspicion. After lunchtimes, when the palace fell into midday slumber, Roxshan fucked her with his fingers until he could coax squawks out of her bruised lychee mouth, and she would sometimes slip into prayer, reciting nonsensical passages from the Zhuangzi she'd had to memorise as a nun. *"The minnows are darting about free and easy!"* she would ramble as she came. *"This is how fish are happy."* Indeed, Roxshan thought, Yang Yuhuan was a minnow wife. She needed a river to carry her over the threshold of her home.

One summer afternoon, the Emperor came into his consort's room bearing a basket of lychees he'd had rushed to Chang'an from the very south of the Tang, and he saw Roxshan and Yang Yuhuan dozing together on the divan, two enormous bodies adorned with jewellery and with mouths pulled into lazy smiles, looking like the very Maitreya Buddha that they wore on jade pendants on their ankles. The Emperor's favorite woman and favorite man awoke and, seeing the quizzical look on his face, Roxshan said, "Consort Yang has adopted me as her son, since I love the Emperor as a father." The Emperor believed him, and was happy.

They peeled lychees together, Xuanzong pitting them to feed to his consort, Roxshan putting the whole thing in his mouth instead and feeling the slippery seed at the core of the fruit elude his tongue. He held the shorn purple shells of the lychees between his fingertips and chased the seeds until he could spit them out, and listened to the Emperor and Yang Yuhuan's murmurs, and thought about his future. He thought about wearing the world like a shirt. Each of the buttons was a city.

When Roxshan had made a living stealing sheep in You Prefecture, he'd used wool to spin thread using a loom that he'd also stolen. He had recalled the wrinkled women he'd seen on the Silk Road, with the calluses on their fingertips, and it had only taken him a few months of practice to make a passable spool, which he'd sold right back to the seamstress whose loom he'd stolen. He'd made her dependent on him, for the threads. In exchange she'd let him watch her turn that thread into coarse cloth.

He told Yang Yuhuan about this and she asked the Emperor to give him You Prefecture, as reward for having defeated the Khitan and the Qay. The Emperor said, "Why don't you just have the whole region? You can be commander." Roxshan became the governor of the governor of You Prefecture, and could cane him right back, if he wanted. Then the Emperor gave Roxshan even more land, so that Roxshan now controlled the entire northeast of the Tang Empire — almost two hundred thousand taxpayers — and so Roxshan was in a good mood, and did not cane the governor.

Yang Yuhuan had a loom brought in, and wove a large white cloth for Roxshan. Each day that he visited her over the course of a year she was at the loom, and by the first day of the next year, his birthday, the cloth was so large that she and her ladies-in-waiting each took a small corner of it and walked round and round Roxshan's body, wrapping him in layers of her love. In that moment the Emperor and his attendants arrived. The ladies-in-waiting said, "Consort Yang gave birth to her son Roxshan just three days ago, and she is washing him!" The Emperor laughed and laughed, but his chancellor Yang Guozhong, Yang Yuhuan's cousin, looked at Roxshan with suspicion on his brow.

After the eunuchs unwrapped Roxshan, he bowed to the Emperor. The Emperor gestured at a man standing beside him and said to Roxshan, "This is Li Heng, my son who has recently come of age." When Roxshan did not bow to the crown prince, the Emperor added, "You must bow."

"Why must I bow?" Roxshan asked, reaching into his pocket to palm the iron tile that he always kept there. He ran his thumb over the worn surface. He could not always see well with his eyes, and he preferred to feel.

Xuanzong replied, "Because he is my son, and after I die, he shall be your Emperor."

Roxshan bowed.

Xuanzong also gave Roxshan a birthday gift: Lady Duan. It had been difficult to find a noblewoman willing to marry a barbarian, but Lady Duan smiled to Roxshan when he lifted the red veil and thumbed her porcelain chin. Roxshan was pleased with his new wife because she had a belly almost as rotund as his own, but some months later she gave birth to a boy and then her belly was not as round anymore. Roxshan did not mind, though, because he now had a son, which — as he'd learned from all of his mothers and fathers — was an important thing to have.

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As the years passed, Consort Yang became obsessed with Roxshan, and Roxshan became obsessed with the idea of Emperor Xuanzong dying. Roxshan left Chang'an, and never saw either of them again.

In his domains, Roxshan fought battles with the nomads and played cards with his lieutenants — all barbarians from various tribes. Roxshan was meant to find comfort in them, be reminded of the horse market of his youth, but their presence only reminded Roxshan that he was not a barbarian, or rather that he was more of a barbarian than all of them put together. They were weak. Just like the Chang'an courtiers, they abhorred his unmanly behavior — true gentlemen, they said, should be refined, and retreat daily to the gardens to admire calligraphy with his friends. The difference between the Chang'an courtiers and the barbarian lieutenants was that Roxshan could cane the lieutenants.

Roxshan thought about Xuanzong's painting of Roxshan on the tiger. Xuanzong had called it *balance*; Roxshan saw it as the moment before victory, before he reached his hands into the tiger's jaw and pulled it apart with a crack. In the painting, he could

tame the tiger because he and the beast were the same size, so the tiger could not shake him off its back. As Xuanzong aged and the courtiers' resentment of Roxshan began to show more, Roxshan dreamt one night of Roxana, in the bath with mother. *My Roxana is getting so big*, his mother cooed. *Not small at all!* When Roxshan woke up, he understood the chasm between those two sentence cliffs; that he had fallen in; that he needed an out.

At fifteen, Roxshan's son came of age. Roxshan felt that his son was a better son than the Emperor's son, and so Roxshan, with his son in tow, left his domains and captured Luoyang, the eastern capital of the Tang Empire. He ordered lychees from the south to be sent to the Emperor and attached a letter, in which he announced that he had founded a new dynasty. "It is the order of nature," Roxshan told the messenger to tell Xuanzong.

His domains expanded until they encompassed the northeast corner of the Tang. The people who lived in the mountains not far from Luoyang carved their homes into the faces of the earth-packed cliff. Their world was yellow and hot, but inside their homes, it was cool. This was something Roxshan's family in the desert had never been able to do, because sand was not silt. It occurred to Roxshan, as he surveyed his new dynasty's capital, that he now owned the silt that, as a child, he'd imagined formed his legs. In Luoyang, instead of his legs, Roxshan preferred to imagine that he held the yellow earth in his mouth, like a cupful of wine. Could spit or swallow; could do whatever he wanted.

He chose swallow.

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Early on in his career, Roxshan had been given the honorary title of Chief Deputy Imperial Censor. Historians say that his rebellion killed 36 million people, a sixth of the world's population at the time; but that was mainly because the war disrupted the imperial bureaucracy. Less people signed up for census in those years. It's as simple as that.

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After Luoyang, there were two ways for Roxshan to go: west, to the Emperor in Chang'an; south, to the rest of the empire beyond the Yangtze. He went south first, to persuade more generals to surrender to him, but was blocked only a day's ride out of Luoyang's walls. A humiliation. But that was fine; Roxshan decided to try again in the future. He looked at the map of the empire and decided that the next time he marched south, he would fight at a town called Suiyang.

Suiyang, because the name sounded like *Sui-Tang*, the two dynasties that preceded Roxshan's, yet also nested *Yan* within it. His mother had always told him to look for patterns, not because they revealed some innate creator's intentions, but because they invented new truths. You could nestle truths within truths alongside truths; you could pile deserts of truths out of grains of sands of truth, and weave cloths of truth out of threads of truth. Like how *yan* (swallow) could mean both *yan* (the bird) and *yan* (the

act of clenching one's throat) around *tang!* (hot) *tang!* (soup). Like how Roxshan had made himself his mother's son, and then he had made his wife's son his son.

Like how the Tang historians recorded Roxshan's name as *Lushan* and how it sounded like *Lu Shan*, Mount Lu, which was south of the Yangtze, and which would soon belong to Roxshan, if he could just get there. Funny, Roxshan thought, how unfathomably big mountains like Lu Shan were. When you were nestled within one, you could only see the pebbles and dirt and trees around you, and not the shape of its body as a whole — and yet, even though you couldn't see the mountain, you had to be sure that it existed, because you were standing on it, because what you little you saw had to point towards the rest of itself, and because you knew others could see it from afar. That was a pattern of truth, too. The mountain inside was truth and the mountain outside was truth, and anything you chose would be correct.

And, Roxshan thought, when it came to seeing the inside of the mountain or seeing the outside of the mountain, it was like standing on the roof and picking whether to fly or to fall. It was like that because there was a third choice; here, Roxshan *was* the mountain. He was the monument; he was the unfathomable one; he was the truth; he was the world. He would make it so.

"Suiyang," he told his son, who nodded vigorously. "Remember that it will have to be Suiyang."

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In the meantime, the path was open to Chang'an. Xuanzong's generals were uncoordinated because they hated each other almost as much as they hated Roxshan, and it was easy, so easy, to capture them one by one, collecting them like the little wooden figurines at market stalls that Roxshan used to buy when he lived on the Silk Road. There had been the twelve animals of the zodiac, and humans of all tribes — the Sogdians wore pointed hats — but Roxshan had always liked the crooked ones that had been over-whittled by some clumsy apprentice and now looked like something between man and beast. That had been why he'd been able to afford them; the merchant sold defects at discount, and allowed him to use excess paints to decorate the figurines.

When Roxshan captured Geshu Han, a Turgesh general with whom Roxshan had never gotten along, Roxshan showed him one of the figurines he'd kept all this time, in his pocket, right next to Xuanzong's now-useless iron tile.

"Looks like you," Geshu Han said of the defect.

"Funny," Roxshan replied, "I was going to say it looks like you."

Roxshan kissed the figurine and placed it in Geshu Han's bound hands, and then had his lieutenants bring the subordinate of Geshu Han who had betrayed his general to the Yan troops. The subordinate had been tortured, and was about to die. Roxshan allowed Geshu Han to do the strangling; Roxshan leant on his cane and watched as the figurine, trapped between Geshu Han's hands and the subordinate's neck, dug into the dying man's Adam's apple and then snapped into two splintered halves.

Something like fear flashed across Geshu Han's face when he dropped the purple corpse to the ground and noticed the broken toy, but Roxshan only smiled and said, "You can keep it."

Geshu Han was given a suite in Luoyang and wrote letters to Xuanzong's other generals, urging them to surrender as he did; but they only mocked him, and sent him his letters back unread. Geshu Han turned out to be useless, so Roxshan had him executed. He took the figurine's halves back and had them sent to Yang Guozhong, who by now commanded Xuanzong's army.

In Roxshan's pocket, the figurine had been a shrivelled-up little heart from his past. He'd given it impulsively to Geshu Han out of some bizarre desire to make a friend. Now he sent it to the Tang army as a threat.

Another nestling of truths occurred to Roxshan as the messenger galloped away: halves could be halves of harmony, like fish swimming alongside the flow of a river, or Daoism's yin and yang, or matching hands clasped together in the throes of passion. Halves could also speak of violence, like if you scooped a minnow out of the water and took a cleaver to its belly and pulled out its guts in one long string. Ate it half by half straight out of the steamer. Traded one dead eye for the other when you and your wife gathered your chopsticks together from both sides of the table to flip the fish over in its plate. Its scales glittering in the candlelight.

Or maybe not. It was violent for the minnow's belly, yes, but it was pleasure for you and your wife, and your bellies. And that was what really mattered, Roxshan supposed.

The Yan army neared Chang'an and the Emperor fled south with his court. But Xuanzong's generals had witnessed Yang Guozhong receiving the figurine halves and had read their own truth. They killed Yang Guozhong and demanded the death of his cousin, Consort Yang. Xuanzong had no choice; he had Yang Yuhuan taken to a Buddhist temple and strangled. They said the sounds from her sphincters were loud as thunder, and that it rained afterwards. It rained so hard that the farmers lost their crops.

When Roxshan heard of this, he wept for Xuanzong, who was so weak a ruler that he had not been able to do the killing himself, and who had now abdicated for Li Heng to become Emperor Suzong. But it also made things better, because now Roxshan's mother and father were gone once more, and Roxshan could attack with no fear.

"You must kill Li Heng with your own hands," Roxshan told his son, who looked back at him, annoyed.

"Before or after Suiyang?" his son asked. His son had not asked a question of Roxshan in a long time, not since he'd been a child.

"Suiyang is the path to the south, whereas Li Heng has gone to the west," Roxshan replied, "to recruit nomad allies. Do you know what is in the west, my son?"

“The west is where father comes from,” his son said. “I hope to see the lake where father was born.”

Roxshan was seized with sudden fondness for this son that he had made his. “It is called Bu Gu,” he said. “Valley of Cloth.” He took out Xuanzong’s iron tile from his pocket and gave it to his son. “This tile promises that you can never be killed. Except for treason.”

His son said, “Thank you.”

Soon after that, Roxshan began to go blind, and stopped leading his army. He grew ulcers in his stomach that kept him up at night. His favorite eunuch, Piggy, needed to roll him to a different side each hour so that he did not develop bedsores; every hour Roxshan screamed and fought, for he suspected Piggy of having cursed him with these very ulcers. When he developed an angry red rash on his skin, dotted with swollen purple scabs like underripe lychees, Roxshan understood that Consort Yang was haunting him. He took baths in boiling water that only made the welts worse and chattered while making waves in the water with his hands; “*Shui*,” he rambled, “sounds like *water*, sounds like *sleep*, sounds like drawing out the syllable when you ask, *Who?*” Who falls asleep in the water and dreams of oases? Roxshan was who.

“Why do you cane me like you cane Piggy and the others?” Roxshan’s son used to ask through muffled sobs. “Do you wish to cane this son to death?” Such questions would only make Roxshan’s cane angrier. How else was his son supposed to learn to fly?

One night, as Piggy worked to roll Roxshan to his other side, Roxshan suddenly felt a sharp pain in his abdomen, and woke up with a gasp.

“That is the pain of your menses, my lord,” Piggy said beneath the glow of a single candle by the bed.

“And the blood on your hands?” Roxshan asked.

“The blood, my lord, is the blood of your menses,” Piggy replied, as he drove the sword into Roxshan’s belly a second time.

Roxshan roared for his son, who came, but stood by the doorway and did not step inside. And the sword that Roxshan normally kept beneath his bed was not there, because Piggy had taken it. Piggy stabbed and stabbed at Roxshan’s belly, and each cut blinked open like an eye and began to cry hot red tears.

“Stop that,” Roxshan said, but Piggy did not stop, even as Roxshan’s intestines fled from his stomach and landed like a heap of silk ribbon onto the soaked mattress. Roxshan reached out to stuff them back into him but was stunned by the slipperiness of it, the way they seemed to play hide-and-seek with him.

“It is the order of nature,” Roxshan’s son said from the doorway.

Roxshan wanted to ask his son if the Yan troops were still going to go to Suiyang after this, but his mouth was no longer moving, and so he stayed silent, emitting only the lightest of whimpers and groans in response to Piggy's stabs. Though Roxshan's vision was near-blind, he could see that his intestines had unravelled themselves now that they were free from the inside of him and were swimming about all around his body, like tributaries of the great river that he was. So different, Roxshan thought, from the shrunken umbilical cord that his mother had once shown him, calling it life. And Roxshan noted that his insides did not look much like his outsides.

This was fitting, Roxshan thought. A barbarian death that was not very barbarian, for a barbarian general who was not very barbarian. Or something. He was no longer lucid enough to spot the patterns his mother had taught him to spot. As Roxshan's body melted away from him, he only hoped that his son would break beyond the Yangtze and find Mount Lu, and scale it. Just as Roxshan saw the snow and steppes and central plains that his mother had never seen, Roxshan's son could see Mount Lu, all of it, at the same time.

不识庐山真面目，只缘身在此山中。—苏轼（宋）