

## Ashes

The sparse cloud cover gave us light drizzles as we were forced out of our cell; we were rounded up and flanked by guards, to march towards the city square. An eerie silence falls wherever we go, as the market-goers stop and look, with sorrowful or wrathful eyes, at us, a doomed group flanked by guards. The sound of overhead birds seem out of place in a world of dead silence, while the smell of rotting produce and burning joss paper stings my nose. As we are marched up one by one to the platform, a hooded figure with a glaive sombrelly look at us with no empathy in his eyes.

As my journey nears a close I realize I have no riches to leave: no splendid manors, no priceless treasures, no unspent fortunes; I have no memoirs, no progeny and no piety. I only have my loyalty to an emperor who is no more and a sense of duty to a non-existent kingdom. Where has this brought me today? All this has brought me to be branded a traitor by the new rulers who took over the country in the last war. Practically being fugitives for the last few months, we have been captured and been sentenced to be executed.

I recall, as we line up in front of the gallows, on that fine spring morning when I was appointed to be an ambassador to the northern states; the flowers were blooming, the woodland creatures were frolicking and the sun was shining on the day I left. My family was there, bidding farewells to me; the atmosphere was calm and festive, for it was a joyous occasion, devoid of fear. If I could now return to that time to refuse the position, perhaps I wouldn't be in this mess, but alas, that is not the case.

As the first name is called to the stand I recall how in our daring escape we had hid in a castle ruin in the middle of the dense forest. That day also had similar weather, but with the thick canopy it was difficult to tell. Vines crawl entwined up the stone walls of the abandoned castle and the inside empty and bare; signs of past civilization stand weathered all about – an empty pedestal, a lonely desk, a ceramic shard – but whatever was is now no more. All we were glad is that on that night we had a place to stay where enemy patrols cannot possibly find us so they can execute us. Alas, our efforts are in vain.

Inwardly I also recall how when we later learnt that the dilapidated castle was the one of a rich a prosperous king in the ages past, a lot of people were surprised. It seemed inconceivable that this famous king who was renown for his riches and splendid gardens has now returned to nature.

The blade severs the head of the first man and I, unable to look with my own eyes, instead picture his grandchildren will never understand the vivid life which the man has gone through.

The second name is called, and now I recall that foggy evening when we passed though a recent battlefield. Splayed across the whole landscape, there were fields of spears, arrows and bones of nameless thousands solders who shed blood here. In a grotesque way, these bones was an art: their existence here was a tragedy, and the worse tragedy will be that in a hundred years nobody will be able to recall the names of those who died there. As we went across this vast expanse we came across a woman, who confided to us that her husband died here. Her grandchildren will never know of their grandfather's crazy antics, only that he died heroically for his country, and that is what everybody will remember him by, if he has the fortune to be remembered.

The second doomed head flies, blood spluttering all over the stone ground. The sun is coming out now, giving a reflective sheen to the glaive's blade. The birds overhead are looking at the bloodshed with beady eyes, as if anticipating the inevitable. I hear my name called.

I stand steadfast in place; another hooded man comes up and pushes me forward. I stumble, and the hooded man drags me to the executioner. A daring idea pops into my head in the moments before my demise.

“Harken all those who have assembled here,  
Ashes we are and to ashes we be;  
In books our legacy shall persevere.”

The watching crowd murmured and gave bewildered looks, the action contagious as wildfire in the brush. I look upon the remaining shreds of the old empire's government with melancholy eyes as the executioner yoked my hands. The sun gleams at the glaive's sharpened blade, and I close my eyes.