

# Mourners

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*Since FictionPress is down...I'll put this up here. ;) It's a story I wrote today because I was reading a biography of Rommel (one of many on my shelves) and started feeling depressed...Rommel is so cool.*

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# 1 - Mourners

The black river of mourners plunged down the narrow streets in a growing tide of grief. Faces downcast, some tearful, some expressionless, all of them gaunt from the harrows of war, the people who had come from far and wide followed the procession in silence, their footsteps echoing off the old stone buildings on either side.

They were all here for different reasons, yet all were here to mourn the fallen, some to martyr him, some to remember, some to say a last good-bye. There were many soldiers in the crowd, men who had stared death on the face on numerous occasions, as was apparent by the flash of bandages and the irregular step of the limping here and there, and came out alive because of the one who they mourned, someone they had respected and spoken fondly of and loved. The dead man had been special to them, a symbol of sorts that made them proud to boast that they had fought under him in a rite reserved only for those who could truthfully make such a claim. Some were weeping, but their tears were silent. Soldiers didn't cry.

There were civilians here too, thousands of them all wearing their mourner's black in contrast to the subdued tan and grey of the soldiers. They walked a bit apart from their mourning warriors, respecting their rights to their grief and at the same time fearing them a little because of the unseen great divide between them. Still, they came and they paid their respects. The dead man had been a hero, a revered legend of those who had never known his name until it had been burned into their brains by deeds lavishly praised in type and fawning words. The few who saw the truth behind the lies came because of these deeds, because those had been real and those had been what had made him a hero. So very, very real.

The river poured into the church, gathering in waves and crowding for a look, an inspiration, anything that would help them remember. Some hung back, preferring to remember the deceased as what he had been rather than a coffin draped in a flag. There was no shoving and pushing that characterized large crowds, though there was quiet reverence, a moment of reflection and a last look at what had been a soldier, and then the front row turned away to join those who waited and the next ripple of people moved without a word to their places.

One of the soldiers stood and spoke for a time, his words making little sense to him while thousands hung on to every syllable, believing what their writer thought was lies with every fibre of their being in some cases and in others desperately striving to. The speaker watched through tired eyes as some of the people fell to their knees in prayer or bent their heads in anguish, wishing he could believe his own hollow words as they did so he would have some consolation that his comrade rested in peace.

Madness. All of it.

The old man finally sat, and another man took the people's attention as he intoned the words intended for the ears of a higher being. They were not the sacred words spoken at real funerals they were changed, cruelly twisted to suit this insane fancy. He had not deserved this, the soldiers, the ones who knew, thought privately yet bitterly.

There were prayers in the church that day. Real ones, not the ones spoken aloud, but simple, insistent ones hoping against hope that there would be some comfort for the one who had passed. Countless pairs of lips moved silently in desperate pleas, some for healing, some for aid, some for reality. If any god heard them, it gave no sign, but this did not deter those who believed and did not occur to those who did not. There was always hope for something.

When the prayers had ended at long last, the mourners stirred themselves once more and resumed their procession, one last march behind the man who had always led them. Tears fell onto the cold, dirty cobbles below the endless muffled tramp of shoes on stone, droplets of rain on the street that made no impression yet did not seem to dry.

The burial was swift. The grave, simple yet meaningful, had been prepared, an insignificant hole in the earth waiting to swallow up the dead. It was difficult for some to watch, but all accepted it without question, and when the last words had been said over the freshly turned earth sprinkled with raindrops the people began to leave, murmuring quietly.

Their hero, the voices said. A great man. Fearless, courageous, he gave them victory. Their dead lion.

Not a dead lion, the old soldier thought bitterly as he left the woman and the young man standing alone by the grave, sincere words of regret fresh on his lips. His last few days had been a desperate chase, a fleeing fox before the sea of mad hounds who had only the chance to bare his teeth in defiance before the hunt came to a final conclusion. This was madness, a disgrace, a sham. It would have to end, the soldier knew in his heart, although he could not find the strength in his heart to do such a thing himself. That bit of courage had died with a failed explosion and a brave little fox.

*This story is sincerely and respectfully dedicated to the Desert Fox, Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel, an extraordinary person, on the sixty-second anniversary of his death. I can only hope he rests in peace.*