

ARC OF FIRE

Chapter 12: Through the Times of Yesterday

Colonel Yegorov smashed the radio with the butt of his gun, and then told the soldiers around him, "Stop looking. Gather all the papers and send them to the back."

"Wait a minute!" Staff Officer Pavlov stopped the soldiers who were about to throw various documents into the basket, pulling out one of the papers, "This document contains the unit number. This is the 54th Infantry Division of the Prosen Twenty-fifth Army Group, which participated in the Carolingian Campaign; the division's crest has an iris, which is a mark of participating in the Carolingian Campaign."

Yegorov: "But we still crushed them! The idea of Duke Aleksei turned out to be quite reliable; we really made it to the enemy's division headquarters without any obstructions!"

Pavlov corrected him: "It's a count, and you shouldn't preface a title with a name, you should at least use a patronymic, call him Count Konstantinovich."

Yegorov waved his hand dismissively: "I'm just a rough man, I don't understand all your twists and turns! The count's order was to attack and advance, let's continue."

Pavlov exclaimed in shock: "Continue the attack? We have already emerged from the smoke; stumbling upon a division headquarters was unexpected for the enemy! Now they are prepared! And you've just..."

Yegorov: "I was just bluffing them! Come look!"

Yegorov pointed at the enemy's map and said: "The enemy's headquarters is here, on top of the hill, overlooking the entire city of Ronied. It also controls the highway into the city and can hit the railway that passes through the city. The enemy must think we're going to attack here!

"But the order we received is to break out, that is, to move to the back—eastward. We have to take this side road out of the city. I know this little path; it'll lead us through a large thicket. By the time we rush out, it'll be nightfall, and we can retreat via the small path under the cover of darkness!"

Pavlov: "Are you sure that's what the count meant? Maybe he wanted to break out and fight to the death."

Yegorov: "How could that be! We wouldn't have brought the field hospital then. Trust me, the count definitely wants to break out and survive; it's just that he happened to discover the breach at the front."

"But..."

Yegorov placed his hands firmly on Pavlov's shoulders: "Listen! I really don't know the count's intentions, but I do know mine! I'm not planning to die here! The Prussians are indeed hateful, and I want to thrash them too!

"But how can I beat them if I'm dead?"

Pavlov: "You're just afraid to die, you have no sense of honor!"

"What?"

Pavlov: "I tell you, if the chaplain with the army hadn't died, he would have sent you to the tribunal by now! The charge would be cowardice and surrender!

"But I remind you, according to the regulations, if the military commander shows any signs of cowardice or surrender, I as the staff officer have the right to strip him of command!"

Yegorov, in a burst of anger, grabbed the staff officer by the collar: “What did you say? Where were you when I was smashing Prussian heads with a grenade just now? And you dare say I’m showing cowardice and surrender?”

Pavlov: “You chose the escape route!”

As the two were at daggers drawn, the sound of a car engine came from outside the door.

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Let’s rewind the time a little bit.

Wang Zhong led the remnant troops of the headquarters and the field hospital unit on their departure.

Before leaving, he had Captain Sergey dispatch messengers to convey the message to the other troops under the duke to prepare for a breakout from the front—eastward. 然而

Whether the message could be delivered was beyond Wang Zhong’s control.

In any case, Wang Zhong led the group on their departure, and he was at the forefront.

Soon the troops entered the smoke created by the rear artillery. By this time, the smoke had dispersed quite a bit, and the obscuring effect had decreased, which increased visibility within the fog.

However, the scope of the fog had also spread. Wang Zhong walked along the main street for quite a while and was still within the fog.

The white expanse looked very much like the game “Silent Hill,” half of the horror atmosphere of which owes to the thick fog that envelops the setting of the story.

Fortunately, Wang Zhong had a top-down perspective, but sadly, he couldn't keep it on while walking—the disconnect between cognition and vision would instantly make Wang Zhong violently sick.

He could only walk a few steps before stopping to change his viewing angle.

This behavior greatly astonished Captain Sergey, who he felt might start getting suspicious if it continued.

But without looking from an overhead view, there was no way to remain on guard against the enemy. With the naked eye, one could only see a few meters around, and if one were to run into the enemy unexpectedly, a burst from a submachine gun could end his journey right there.

Wang Zhong could only reduce the frequency of his stops and endure the dizziness that came with using the overhead view while moving as much as possible.

As he was struggling with this issue, the group finally emerged from the smoke, and immediately a Prussian-abandoned jeep at the roadside caught Wang Zhong's eye – it was the same model that Ludmila had blown up with a grenade.

Wang Zhong made a snap decision and said to Sergey, "Let's go, get in the car. Take two guards with us, we'll drive straight ahead!"

Sergey, "Are we just driving away? Who's going to command these troops? We don't have any walkie-talkies!"

Wang Zhong, "We just need to keep following the road, there won't be any problems. Besides, in case of an emergency, we can always send someone back with orders."

After a moment's consideration, Captain Sergey nodded.

Wang Zhong then asked, "You can drive, right?"

Wang Zhong didn't know how to drive himself, mainly because he didn't see the need to learn in the current situation – if there was no rush, he could take the subway, and if he was in a hurry, he could just hail a cab through DiDi.

Captain Sergey, “I often drive for the Duchess. Leave it to me.”

Wang Zhong remembered something that the sergeant who had been shot had said – wasn't this Captain Sergey the Duchess's gigolo?

— Forget it, why do I care about that!

Wang Zhong got straight into the car, “Drive!”

The two guards were agile and jumped into the back of the jeep in an instant, without even opening the rear doors.

Sergey got into the driver's seat, started the car and barely drove a few paces when he exclaimed, “The feel of driving this is so smooth, much more comfortable than our domestically produced ‘Lada’ cars!”

Lada cars, indeed, that classic Soviet automobile brand whose poor performance had become a part of Soviet jokes.

As Captain Sergey drove through the devastated city, he commented with a hint of sadness, “Such a beautiful city. I quite liked that coffee shop, often accompanied the Duchess there.”

Wang Zhong followed Sergey's gaze and noticed that only the iron sign hanging toward the street from the coffee shop remained intact; the shop seemed to have suffered a hit from artillery fire of 152 millimeters or larger.

Passing by the front of the coffee shop, one could see that the inside was almost completely destroyed, with coffee pots and the like in shambles.

Sergey gritted his teeth, “Damn Prussians!”

Wang Zhong pursed his lips; truth be told, he still didn't harbor much hatred for Prussians – after all, it wasn't his country or his homeland that was invaded.

Up to now, his goal was still to survive the war.

At that moment, soldiers in khaki uniforms began to appear alongside the road, looking as if they had just been through a fierce battle.

There were quite a few corpses in black uniforms lying among the buildings lining the streets and roads.

It seemed Wang Zhong had caught up with the attacking vanguard of the Third Amur Group.

Just then, a roar came from a building ahead:

"What did you say? Where were you when I was smashing a Prussian's head in with a hand grenade just now? You dare accuse me of cowardice and surrender?"

"But you chose the route of escape!"

Wang Zhong patted Sergey on the shoulder, "Stop in front of that building! The one where people are arguing!"