

ARC OF FIRE

Chapter 11: "Military Prodigy"

Prosen Empire military side.

Lieutenant General Von Dietrich, Commander of the 25th Prussian Infantry Army Group and a Lord, watched the smoke rising from the city with suspicion.

His headquarters were on a small hill outside the city, which afforded an excellent view, even allowing visibility of the battleship Emperor Friedrich on the distant sea.

For this reason, he could clearly see the smoke now spreading through the city streets.

After a brief moment of thought, the Lord sought his Chief of Staff's opinion, "Is there white poison gas?"

The Chief of Staff shook his head, "I haven't heard about that, phosgene... isn't this white."

Lord Von Dietrich pinched the binoculars in his hands, his fingers nervously twiddled the knobs on the binoculars, a habitual action when he was thinking.

The Chief of Staff said, "Could it simply be smoke?"

"Smoke from the defenders?" Lord Von Dietrich clicked his tongue, "Then they wouldn't be able to utilize the firepower of the machine guns or exploit the range advantage of the Divine Arrows! In the Carolingian Campaign, we used smoke bombs to cover our tanks as they charged through Divine Arrow's

effective range, smoke is the attacker's good friend, the defender's nightmare!"

The Chief of Staff shook his head, "Maybe the enemy commander is a layman?"

Lord Von Dietrich shook his head, "The enemy commander is the experienced Duke Vladimir; he has received comprehensive military education and would not make such a basic mistake..."

While speaking, a staff officer rushed in, "This is bad!"

Lord Von Dietrich said, "Start with 'report'!"

The staff officer immediately stood up straight, heels clicking resoundingly as he saluted, "Report!"

Lord Von Dietrich was still not satisfied and scolded, "As an officer, no matter how urgent, one must act in an orderly manner, the subordinates are watching. Do you understand, Captain Hoffman!"

"Understood!"

Lord Von Dietrich then nodded contentedly, "Good. Now, what's the matter?"

"Division 54 reports via wireless that the Ante Empire has launched a counterattack, they've already lost contact with the 353rd Regiment under their command. Fugitives have appeared near the division headquarters!"

Lord Von Dietrich was stunned, "A counterattack? The war has only been going on for two days, and we're already at the foot of Ronied? Everywhere we've gone, Ante Empire's troops have collapsed like a house of cards, do they still have the morale to mount a counterattack?"

The Chief of Staff reminded, "You just said the enemy commander Duke Vladimir is quite capable."

"Right, I did say that!"

The Lord turned towards the map.

"But if the enemy has the morale and organization to launch a counterattack, why not retreat instead? I mean, breakout to the rear?"

"Even if they face our attack and manage to breach the defensive line, they can't escape. From here to the border is a march-in of a million-strong army!"

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While speaking, he forcefully tapped the area between Ronied city and the border line on the map with his cane, repeating, "A million-strong army, do you understand? Even if His Grace's forces were to break out entirely, only doom awaits them!"

After speaking, he stared at the map for a few seconds, then shook his head, "No, it can't be an offensive. It's just a counterattack, an attempt to shake our formation and create a chance for them to withdraw.

"General Hohte's Armored Troops will soon complete the encirclement of Ronied. This is a futile move."

As he spoke, the Lord looked at the anxious staff officer: "Order Division 54, immediately dispatch someone to steady the scattered regiment, find the dispersed regimental headquarters... no, I will speak with Division 54 myself. Is the telephone line connected yet?"

"Not yet, Your Excellency, we've only just learned the location of the 54th Division's headquarters, and the communication vehicle has just been dispatched." The communications officer immediately replied.

Radio communication requires decryption, which leads to transmission delays, and there's a high probability that wireless could be intercepted by the enemy. Telephone is much safer and communication quality is incomparable to wireless, but landlines must be laid, which can only begin when both ends have stopped moving.

Lord Von Dietrich waved his hand, "Alright, use the radio then, I want to speak with Division 54."

After speaking, Lord Von Dietrich took the lead toward the door.

The staff officer at the door hurried to open it, then stood up straight, his chest puffed out proudly as he watched the Lord leave.

In the adjacent communications room, the communications officer bellowed into the radio handset, "Rhein Rhein, respond if you hear me!"

"Rhein" was the call sign of the 54th Division.

After several calls, the officer handed the handset and headset to the Lord, "It's connected, Brigadier General Haussen of the 54th Division."

Lord Von Dietrich grabbed the items and cleared his throat, "This is Von Dietrich, what's the situation on your end?"

"I don't know, the situation is chaotic, lots of fugitives." General Haussen's voice was intermittent and filled with static, "The fugitives say that Antonov's Guards have launched an attack; some say that the Eastern Holy Church has dispatched its paladins."

Lord Von Dietrich frowned, "Get to the bottom of it as fast as you can! I believe it's a limited counterattack by the enemy!"

"But Your Excellency, the enemy used heavy artillery to launch smoke bombs. There's no wind now, and the ground is enveloped in smoke; nothing can be seen. Using so many smoke bombs for merely a probing attack doesn't make sense."

Dietrich looked outside the window; even from the communications room, he could see the thick smoke rising from the city.

Lord Von Dietrich raised his voice, “No, no, attacking at this time doesn’t make sense! It’s just a defensive counterattack! Where could he be attacking to? Behind us are countless Prosen troops!”

"But Lord... the enemy... the fugitives... what’s going on?"

Von Dietrich’s brow was tightly furrowed, “Brigadier General Haussen! Brigadier General Haussen! There’s gunfire on your end, what’s happening?”

However, all he got in response was static noise.

Dietrich handed the headset and microphone back to the communications officer, “Eliminate the malfunction as soon as possible!”

The communications officer immediately checked the radio’s own status, and then the hand-cranked generator before reporting, “Lord, there are no mechanical failures.”

Lord, “Then keep calling!”

The communications officer did not dare to delay and immediately shouted into the microphone, “Rhein Rhein, please answer if you hear this!”

The Lord began to pace in the communications room, tapping his palm with his cane as he walked.

After a while, the Lord took out his pocket watch and glanced at it, “It’s been five minutes, what’s going on?”

"It might be that Rhein—I mean Division Fifty-Four—has experienced a mechanical failure. But..."

The communications officer hesitated.

Lord, “But what?”

"But the division headquarters has several high-powered radios, it’s hard to imagine them all failing at the same time."

The Lord pursed his lips, his face gradually darkening as he ordered, "Division Fifty-Four may have run into trouble, our estimate of the enemy situation may have been too optimistic. Where is the Army Group reserve now?"

"They have already reached Shulsherfka."

Lord, "Isn't that still over ten kilometers away from us? Why is it moving so slowly?"

The Chief of Staff replied helplessly, "Traffic jam. The road conditions within the Ante Empire are worse than we imagined. The operation plan took 'highways' to be modern roads with asphalt surfaces, but they're just compacted dirt roads in reality.

"The road capacity is very low, and it's also hard on the vehicles.

"So the motorized troops are all stuck on the road."

The Lord made a face as if he had eaten something disgusting, "There's always a problem on the battlefield, if not here, then there, but it's always somewhere. Is there any way to contact Division Fifty-Four now? Keep calling!"

The last sentence was addressed to the communications officer, who quickly picked up the microphone and continued the mechanical labor.

The Lord looked at the other staff.

The Chief of Staff spoke up, "The Army Group's reconnaissance battalion has cavalry, we could consider sending them."

The Lord pointed his cane out the window, "Even though we're outside the city, Division Fifty-Four has already entered it."

Just then, the communications officer who was still trying to make contact suddenly stopped calling and said, "I have an idea. We can call the Armored Troops assigned to support our attack. There are radios in the tanks."

Lord, "Next time remember to say 'report' first."

"Report!"

"Don't make up for it now! I've already heard your suggestion. Let's do it that way. Do you know the frequency for the Armored Troops?"

The communications officer nodded, "Of course, we have heard the Armored Troops' communications before."

"Then call them."

The communications officer leaned in close to the microphone again, "This is Eagle's Nest, this is Eagle's Nest, calling the commander of the Armored Troops."

The Lord continued his pacing, his cane tapping against the palm of his left hand.

"Your Excellency, we're connected!" The communications officer, pleasantly surprised, passed over the headset and microphone.

The Lord took the items for the second time, "I am Lord Dietrich, who am I speaking with?"

A voice with poor Prosen came from the other end, "It's your Antean grandpa!"

What followed was all in the Antean language.

The Lord, being a member of a distinguished family, spoke not only Prosen but also Carolingian and Antean. In fact, before the outbreak of the war, there had been considerable contact between the courts of Prosen and Ante, which is why a non-aggression treaty had been signed.

Thus the Lord understood completely the other's cursing, and then asked in Antean, with virtually no accent, "So, are you an Ante soldier? You wouldn't be speaking from the headquarters of Division Fifty-Four, would you?"

The person at the other end was clearly unprepared for this situation and fell silent.

After a moment, the voice responded, "I don't know which division this headquarters belongs to, I can't read your Prosen characters! Anyway, there are plenty of maps and documents here, all captured; naturally, there will be staff members who understand your language to study them closely!"

The Lord furrowed his brows in frustration and decided to extract more information, asking, "Brave Antean commander, may I know your esteemed name?"

"You think I would disclose that information to you? Go to hell! Clean your neck and wait for it; I don't understand your writing, but I can read maps! I know where your headquarters is located! Just you wait!"

Lord, "Wait! Antean officer!"

He called out several more times, but the only response was the hiss of static.

The Lord turned to the Chief of Staff, "Have the Guard Battalion, the Reconnaissance Battalion, and the Special Battalion ready for combat. Bring the tanks from the headquarters to the hilltop to prepare for the enemy's attack!"

The Chief of Staff nodded, "Understood!"

The Lord looked towards the thick smoke that now shrouded a quarter of the city area and clicked his tongue, "Duke Vladimir commands like this? But as I recall, during the joint military exercises between our two countries, the Duke was quite a stickler for rules..."

"To take down one of our division headquarters and initiate this counterattack, the person behind it is a military genius!"