

48 Hours 881

Chapter 881: Herto

In the second meeting with Hyacinth, Zhang Heng learned what the Balance Blade thought of him. Even if he took the initiative to warn Hyacinth that Altrus, who would be appearing next to Commodus tomorrow, was a fake, Hyacinth would be still unwilling to disclose more information about their next plan. She had made it clear that she did not fully trust Zhang Heng.

And there was nothing Zhang Heng could do about it. This was probably the negative impact of his disbelief in Kreis. It had caused the Balance Blade to doubt which side he was on in the upcoming war. Considering that he mingled with Commodus now, whether he was willing to abandon everything to join the Balance Blade to help them to maintain the balance was also a question worth discussing. And the Balance Blade clearly wasn't willing to bet on Zhang Heng's loyalty at this critical time.

There was nothing wrong with that. If Zhang Heng were in their shoes, he too wouldn't have trusted a newcomer who did not have much sense of belonging to the organization. That would mean Zhang Heng had now become an outsider.

After that, Zhang Heng came to the palace to report on time the next morning. Unlike before, Clint seemed to have missed his arrival this time. He was still talking to his colleagues around him. When the others saw how their leader, Clint, had treated Zhang Heng, they started to do the same.

Zhang Heng knew that this was Clint expressing his dissatisfaction over his refusal to persuade Commodus with him. However, he had all his attention diverted to the war between the Balance Blade and Altrus and the Hounds. Since Zhang Heng had no intention to work as an advisor for the rest of his life, he was not bothered by how he was being treated. Thus, he looked for a corner and stood there alone.

After a while, the generals of the imperial army responsible for the emperor's safety showed up. The emperor's departure from Rome was a major event. The security detail had to be perfected no matter what. Fortunately, Commodus was heading was only twenty miles outside the city, and there was also a military camp there.

Therefore, it was not necessary for him to bring too many guards with him. Sixty elite guards were more than enough to deal with all kinds of emergencies. However, to be safe, the general assigned nine teams of soldiers to protect Commodus, exceeding one hundred people in total.

Other than protecting the emperor, Commodus, they were tasked to protect Altrus as well. After all, the latter's identity was very sensitive. There had always been rumors that he was on the target list of assassins. Besides, this was the first time he showed up in public. This time, the imperial army had to pay extra attention to their surroundings.

The leader of the imperial army was the civic officer, Sebutul. Fully covered in armor, he wielded a sword as well. With a red cloak behind his back, he gave off a majestic look. And he had even brought two centurions as deputies.

When Zhang Heng saw one of the centurions, he was a little surprised. He realized that the man looked very similar to the portrait given to him by the one-eyed Samaritan. Zhang Heng had been a target for

assassination while he worked in the southeast city. He pursued the assassin, and the assassin led him to the middleman. He learned that the person who hired the assassin was probably someone from the imperial guards. But at that time, he did not get the opportunity to get close to the imperial guard. Hence, he was forced to pause the investigation.

After Zhang Heng became an advisor, he did come in touch with the imperial guards. However, their base camp wasn't was not in Rome. These guards were tasked to protect the palace, and the emperor adopted a shift system, where a new batch would come into the palace to replace the old guards from time to time. It meant Zhang Heng was only looking at the most recent batch of imperial guards. And he did not find his target among them.

This time, the guards were said to be directly transferred from the base camp. As for the guards in the palace, they still stayed there to protect the queen and others who lived there.

Zhang Heng didn't know the name of the centurion behind Sebutul. As of now, he had been boycotted by Clint and the other advisors. It would be impossible to extract any information from them for the time being. That being said, it was not that hard to solve the questions that he had in mind. He simply had to walk toward Sebutul.

The civic officer had just arrived at the palace, and he still did not know the bitter relationship between Zhang Heng and Clint. Seeing Zhang Heng walking towards him, he seemed quite excited. He knew that the Oriental man in front of him was a new rising star. However, he was puzzled to see that Zhang Heng standing alone in the corner. Before Sebutul figured out the reason, he saw Zhang Heng walked towards him.

Thus, Sebutul also took the initiative to reach out and shake hands with Zhang Heng, before the two exchanged a few words. Strictly speaking, Sebutul and Zhang Heng belonged to different systems. However, that did not mean that he did not need political allies, especially those always by Commodus's side and knew what the young emperor had in mind.

And after Sebutul chatted with Zhang Heng, he did not forget to introduce his two important subordinates. And he found out that Zhang Heng seemed to be interested in one of his centurions, namely Herto.

Zhang Heng looked into Herto's eyes while shaking hands. "Are you from Thracian?"

"Yes." Herto did not seem to want to look at Zhang Heng. After a short moment of eye contact between the two, Herto looked away.

"Have we met before? I think you look kind of familiar."

Herto was taken aback, "Have I? I don't think so. I usually stay in the barracks and don't go into the city very often."

Sebutul was the kind of person that took good care of his subordinates. Seeing that Zhang Heng was interested in Herto, and how Herto did not seem to be very good at talking, Sebutul tried to help Herto out. "Herto is an honest man. He doesn't talk much, but he fought valiantly in the battle. He once participated in the Roman Parthian War with General Pompeanus and achieved outstanding feats. Later,

he followed General Pompeanus back to Rome, and he was asked to join the imperial guard. Actually, it is a waste of his talent serving as a centurion. Sooner or later, my position will belong to him.”

Herto was not particularly excited after hearing what Sebutul said. Instead, his expression changed slightly. He took a quick peek at Zhang Heng saw that his expressions remained the same. It relieved Herto a little.

Then Zhang Heng said, “I didn’t expect centurion Herto to be so brave.” He then started to talk about another centurion. And the four chatted for a while afterward. They then saw Commodus and a man with secutor’s helm walking down the stairs together.

The crowd, too, had also calmed down. This time, Commodus was no longer the protagonist in the house. Most of the people had their attention focused on the mysterious man beside him.

The secutor’s helmet was designed to protect his head. Therefore, the materials used to craft it was extremely tough, leaving only two observation holes.

Chapter 882: Assassination

Commodus did not even have to make an introduction—everyone already knew that the man under the helmet was Altrus.

Even with his face hidden, there was no doubt that this was the closest the people had ever been to Commodus’ most mysterious advisor.

Right now, Zhang Heng was probably the one among the crowd who knew that that person was Altrus.

It wasn’t that anyone was unaware that Altrus could’ve probably used a substitute, but that no one believed that he would actually use one.

This was the day that he would step out of the shadows and into the limelight, something that would earn him unparalleled authority.

In life, there were always moments, such as the crowning ceremony of a prince or on a newlyweds’ wedding night, where there was just no way anyone would let someone else take their place. Clint knew this very well. If he were Altrus, he would be there in person no matter what.

What more, Altrus was but a name. Whoever showed up and stood next to Commodus would naturally become Altrus—the Altrus everyone recognized. Even if he was a fake, it was true that he would become the second most powerful person next to Commodus from now on.

Clint looked at the figure with an inexplicable expression on his face, fists clenched. He knew that if Altrus revealed his face, it would basically mean that he had already lost this battle.

Even though the majority was on his side, Clint knew it was only because Altrus never showed his face. So, the closer they were to Clint, the closer they would be to the center of power. In a sense, Clint was a representation of Commodus’ will.

But starting from today, it would no longer be that way since there was someone who better embodied Commodus’ will, where all power and authority would forever have a center. Soon, all these people behind him would become Altrus’ followers.

And it was because of this that Clint feared that Altrus would come forward.

But it would appear that there was nothing he could do to prevent this from happening.

Zhang Heng, on the other hand, conjectured that Altrus would most likely use a stand-in. But when Altrus' stand-in really did show up, Zhang Heng had a strange feeling that there was some part of Altrus' plans that he had yet discerned.

Due to his condition, Altrus could not appear before the people. It was simply not a question if the person standing next to Commodus would be him. Moreover, if Zhang Heng was right, if Altrus were to die, he could not be brought back to life again.

But using a substitute would also complicate things. Just like everyone present thought, once Altrus' stand-in came forward, in addition to Commodus' endorsement, he would become the real Altrus. Even if Altrus were to reclaim his identity right now, no one would believe him. Of course, with Commodus present, it would not turn out too bad.

Since all of Altrus' power came from Commodus, Commodus could also take it all back, which would greatly limit the substitute. However, the problem lay in the fact that if the substitute were to reveal his face to the public, Altrus couldn't wield his authority as freely as he could before. He would have to go through the stand-in and give orders on his behalf.

This extra little coupling in the middle was not insignificant since it would make it seem that Altrus' cane had suddenly doubled in length. Altrus would undoubtedly find a cane of such length unbearable.

Zhang Heng did not know how Altrus planned to finish this show. There was also something else that caught his attention. The person who assassinated him was none other than Lucilla's husband Pompenus, which surprised Zhang Heng since Pompenus had always kept to himself.

He had fought alongside Aurelius and gradually climbed the army's ranks to become a general under Aurelius. And after his marriage to Lucilla (she was said to be a bad wife and rumors were rampant about her in Rome), Pompenus became one of Aurelius' people.

As a result, he was often handed important duties.

When Aurelius passed away, Pompenus became the top horse in the military. But even at such a propitious position, he remained the same. He was still as conscientious, humble, and gentle as before, still respectful towards his wife, Lucilla. He allowed her to go around and do as she pleased, turning a blind eye to her misconduct—it was the one thing he had in common with Ole.

Zhang Heng could not wrap his head around why this military bigshot would want Altrus killed for no reason. Altrus had practically no association with Pompenus at all, and he had never done anything to harm Pompenus in any way...

As Zhang Heng was trying to piece the puzzle together, Commodus finally introduced "Altrus" to everyone present, but he allowed nobody to get to know him. Instead, he immediately set out for the barracks outside the city.

Sebutul quickly gathered the troops to guard Commodus' carriage.

As for “Altrus,” he did not share Commodus’ carriage, electing to ride behind instead. However, considering his special status, the Praetorian Guard had also assigned a small troop to escort him; and the rest accompanied by two small squadrons.

This was during the early days of Commodus’ reign. The war had just ended and coupled with the gifts the young emperor had distributed to solicit the hearts of the people when he ascended to the throne, the civilians in the city generally led a decent life. Public order had also improved, so naturally, no one wanted to cause trouble to the emperor.

Having heard that the emperor was traveling, a large group of civilians had gathered on both sides of the street, cheering for him. Commodus waved back at the people from the carriage, maintaining the image of an emperor in touch with his people. However, it resulted in the troops having to move slowly. They only left town at noon.

Fortunately, once they left the city, they could pick up speed.

Sebutul, the military tribune, breathed a sigh of relief. The civilians were too enthusiastic, and it was a little too chaotic for his liking, but Commodus did not allow him to use harsher means to disperse the civilians, so he was distraught. Fortunately, there were no major mishaps in the end. They would be much safer once they were outside the city. There were several military camps nearby, and the whole area was secure.

Just as the military tribune thought so, the troops suddenly stopped. He rode to the front and found that a donkey cart carrying smoked fish had overturned and blocked a section of the road in front of the small bridge. Other than the military, there were also a few travelers, including a group of Jews.

The military tribune, knowing that the young emperor enjoyed showing his compassion, ordered a few of the soldiers to help the owner of the donkey cart. However, as they were doing so, his gaze fell upon the group of Jewish people, and he could sense that something was wrong.

The Jews were covered from head to toes, and their waists bulged. Sebutul had some military experience and was about to warn the soldiers around him, but the Jews were too quick. They had already removed their overcoats, revealing the armor underneath.

Then, one after another, they drew out their weapons.

Chapter 883: Unexpected Event

“Protect His Majesty the Emperor!”

The civic officer was shocked and furious. Yelling, he rushed to Commodus’ side with his horse. He wasn’t expecting someone bold enough to attack Commodus less than ten miles away from the barracks.

Fortunately, the number of assassins disguised as Jews was only less than twenty. The imperial guards had an absolute advantage in number. However, they were more scattered, and they were at a disadvantage in some areas. This was also a very skilled group of assassins. They attacked together, managing to eliminate the group of imperial guards tasked to protect the emperor at the front line. After that, they started to approach Commodus’ carriage.

They killed the imperial guards who came midway before they could line up and organize themselves. When Sebutul saw such a scene, his back was drenched in a cold sweat. He suddenly realized that his horse seemed to be running a little too fast. Although he was a civic officer with some combat experience, he could only obtain his position thanks to his family. As a general, he did not need to fight very often. Sebutul now regretted not practicing his swordsmanship a little more.

Fortunately, the imperial guards he brought with him this time were well-trained. The two centurions were extremely powerful, especially Herto. Being the nearest to Commodus, he swiftly led his team and rushed to the emperor's carriage. Although they could not completely block those assassins, they managed to delay them, allowing the subsequent squads to get there in time. However, the factor that changed the course of the battle was not the imperial guards.

Zhang Heng discovered the abnormalities among the Jews earlier than the imperial guard, but he did nothing about it. It wasn't until the group of assassins was about to attack Commodus, that Zhang Heng jumped off the horse and pulled out both his Persian swords.

One of the assassins had also noticed Zhang Heng's quick reactions. He did not pay much attention to him, however, since he wasn't dressed like one of those imperial guards. The attacker waved his short sword casually and attempted to drive Zhang Heng away.

However, he did not expect that such a simple move would cost him his life. Zhang Heng leaned back slightly to avoid the assassin's attack. Taking advantage of the moment when his enemy waved his arms, he thrust his Persian sword and planted it into the assassin's heart.

One hit, one kill!

The assassin did not even realize that Zhang Heng had stabbed him. After that, Zhang Heng pulled out the sword as the corpse fell backward. He then walked toward the second assassin.

After learning the lesson from his companions, the second assassin was clearly more cautious. He also noticed that Zhang Heng was about to attack him. Just when he was thinking about performing a more effective charge, Zhang Heng had moved against him first.

Zhang Heng slashed at the neck of the second assassin with his sword, but the latter reacted quickly, immediately raising his sword to block Zhang Heng's sword. The attacker was elated when he realized that he was strong enough to block the gladiatorial champion's attack, feeling that Zhang Heng was no stronger than an ordinary fighter. His joy, however, lasted only half a second. The next moment, all the assassin could see was a cold light flashing before him—Zhang Heng had already cut his throat with another sword.

Zhang Heng killed the other two assassins in just a few breaths, rushing toward the front line and completing the feat easily. By the time he stopped the third assassin, the two teams of imperial guards had finished organizing themselves and quickly rushed to Commodus's side.

At this point, Commodus's imperial guards had gained the upper hand. The remaining assassins had been either stuck with Herto, or attacked by the imperial guards that had just organized themselves. Spears stabbed the flesh of the enemies from all directions.

When everyone felt that they had regained their control over the situation and almost killed all the assassins that came out of nowhere, nobody would have thought that the donkey cart owner, trembling in fear earlier, would pull out a bow from the side of the overturned cart.

When the imperial guards saw that, they hurriedly gathered up and shielded Commodus with their bodies. The donkey cart, however, was not aiming for Commodus. Instead, he fired an arrow at the "Altrus" on the other side. The civic officer realized that they had just made a mistake. These assassins disguised as Jews were a decoy to attract their attention. Their real target was Altrus, who was following Commodus from behind.

It was already too late by the time he realized it.

Altrus was hit by the arrow.

His body started to sway before falling off the horse. On the other hand, the donkey cart owner immediately put down the bow and arrow in his hand and jumped into the river beside him.

"Get out of the way!" An angry voice came from the crowd.

The civic officer advised in a hurry, "Your Majesty, we don't know if there are more of them. You should..."

He was, however, interrupted by Commodus before he could finish. "I have to know whether my best adviser is still alive or dead."

"...I'm sorry, Your Majesty. Advisor Altrus has stopped breathing," said the other centurion, who was right beside Altrus. When the arrow hit Altrus, he was the first person who checked on him. The arrow had pierced squarely into Altrus's chest. Although he wore a helmet, he had no armor on his body. His heart had already stopped beating before he even fell off the horse.

As soon as the centurion finished, an uproar erupted.

This ambush came as completely unexpected. Today was supposed the day Altrus emerged from the shadows. His presence was enough to change the political structure of Rome's upper-class. Everyone was left in a massive shock and disbelief after seeing how Altrus was assassinated so quickly after he stepped out of the castle.

It happened so fast that even Clint, who had always wanted Altrus to die, was stunned. He could not believe what he saw.

After the ambush, Commodus wanted to inspect the barracks no further. With the last two assassins captured, he hurriedly returned to Rome. The young emperor vowed to make the murderer who killed Altrus pay for the crime. The first thing he did upon returning to the palace was to order Clint and Zhang Heng to interrogate their caught assassins. They needed to extract the mastermind's name from these captured assassins.

After leaving the palace, Clint took a deep breath and looked at the moon above him. He could no longer hide the joy in his eyes. He then said, "Fate is really an interesting thing, isn't it?"

It was also Clint's first time taking the initiative to speak to Zhang Heng today. However, Zhang Heng did not answer Clint.

Clint seemed unbothered. He then continued, "I have looked down on you. You are more mature than I thought. I have to admit that you are smart enough to choose the right team. You chose the side that is impossible to lose. I almost lost, but the world is unpredictable, isn't it?"

After that, Clint patted Zhang Heng on the shoulder again. "Let's go. We are going to get busy tonight," he said with a laugh.

Chapter 884: Reminiscence And Interrogation

The two assassins they had caught were tougher than they imagined. The guards at the dungeon used various methods to get them to speak, but it yielded no result. However, that did not affect Clint's good mood. He and Zhang Heng were now sitting in the guard room, munching on a freshly baked suckling pig, listening to the screams from the torture room at the end of the corridor.

"Interesting!" Clint put down his knife and fork. "I don't think Altrus would have thought that after he was assassinated, I'd be the one to help him track down the killer."

Clint thought that Zhang Heng would not speak to him. The latter had not said anything since he came down to the dungeon, sitting there alone with his eyes closed. No one knew what was going on in his mind.

After Altrus's death, Clint assumed that Zhang Heng would go into full panic mode. After all, Zhang Heng did not persuade the emperor with him earlier. It was only logical for Clint to think that Zhang Heng had chosen to side with Altrus. And Zhang Heng's new support was now dead in less than half a day after he showed up.

Clint felt that he could understand the grief in Zhang Heng's heart. However, he did not expect him to open his eyes, asking, "When did you and Altrus meet?"

"Well, about four years ago." Clint was in a good mood, so he did not mind answering Zhang Heng's questions. In fact, he also needed someone to help him remember the toughest opponent he had encountered in his entire life.

He then gladly elaborated, "At that time, I just started to work for His Majesty. We were fighting against those d*mned Germanic tribes by the Rhine. His Majesty mentioned a man named Altrus and said that he was brilliant and loyal. I have never seen him before, though."

"Was Altrus by His Majesty's side when you were fighting the Germanic?"

"No. To be precise, Altrus would not be in the barracks like the rest of us. Instead, he stays in Rome to take care of His Majesty's affairs. We have a clear division of labor. From time to time, he would question and express his opinion about the battle on the frontlines. It seems he understands the people's hearts very well, especially the thoughts of the Roman civilians. It was him who had told His Majesty that the people were tired of the long war that had lasted years. And that strengthened His Majesty's will to put an end to the war."

Clint paused and continued, "It seemed like it was Altrus's forte to collect valuable information. I'm not surprised that he knew what the civilians thought about the war. He could have spent some money to ask someone to gather opinions. What surprised me the most was that he knew what the nobles thought about the war as well. It is something I still can't figure out. He even knew about some of the

darkest secrets no one else would know. He made it look like he had mastered some witchcraft that allowed him to get inside someone's head. This, too, is among the reasons why I don't like him."

Seeing that Zhang Heng was listening to him attentively and that there was nothing else to be done right now other than to eat the roasted pork and chat with Zhang Heng, Clint then continued, "However, His Majesty believed in him completely. To be honest, I have never seen His Majesty put so much faith in a man. His Majesty and I have been getting along well, but I know that he would never trust me like he trusts Altrus. I admit that I am a little jealous of that man. However, even the smart Altrus made some mistakes before.

"About three years ago, His Majesty returned to Rome for a short time to marry Queen Christina. So, Altrus arranged a boat trip for them at the Tiber River. Mainly, he wanted to give them some space since they were newlyweds. Hence, His Majesty did not bring a single guard with him. And both of them were traveled in casual clothes. However, they did not expect to encounter a group of boatmen at the pier asking for payment. They blocked the river and caused a massive ruckus. Fortunately, in the end, both His Majesty and the queen were fine. When they returned to the palace, His Majesty was a little unhappy with Altrus. It was because Altrus hadn't informed him in advance about such big news.

"That was one of the few times Altrus made a mistake. After so many years of fighting with him, I have never managed to take advantage of him. And this time, I knew that he was about to defeat me again. However, I did not expect to die at the hands of a group of assassins. This is really ironic. Altrus, the man who knew almost everything, suddenly died, pierced by a sharp arrow that landed on him."

Clint then picked up a piece of meat with his fork.

"To our old friend! Although I have always regarded him as my adversary, I still think that perhaps we could sit down and have a meal together one day. However, I don't think it will ever come true."

Right after Clint finished talking, a prison guard bathed in blood walked up toward them and said respectfully to Clint and Zhang Heng, "Masters, one of the prisoners has decided to speak, but he insists that he wants to tell you in person."

Clint curled his lips. He then saw the sunlight falling on the stairs. "Is it already dawn? When you start talking about the past, time flies. Okay. Let's go and hear what he has to tell us."

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It was the younger assassin, a female actually, who had decided to speak. However, after numerous rounds of brutal torture, her body was in such a bad state that no one could tell that she was a woman.

Clint took a quick look at her and looked away immediately. He did not want to spit out the roasted pork that he had just eaten. After that, he said softly, "We actually don't want to torture you too much. After all, you are just a tool. Tell me who the mastermind is, and I will look for a doctor to check on your wounds."

The assassin, however, merely put on a sad smile. "I know it's impossible for me to survive my injuries, right?" she croaked in a barely audible voice.

"Well, at least I can make your death more comfortable," Clint shrugged.

The female assassin nodded. "Come closer, and I will tell you who the mastermind is."

Clint then looked at the prison guard who tortured the female assassin and nodded, indicating that she was incapable of hurting him.

Hence, Clint moved his head closer to the dying girl. "Well, I have done what you ask me to do."

Instead of the answer, however, he was greeted by a blob of the assassin's bloody spit. "Stop dreaming, you can destroy my body, but Kreis will take away my soul! There is balance... hidden among all things... everywhere!"

"D*mn you, woman!!!"

Clint was furious. However, there was nothing he could do. He had lost his chance to get his revenge. The assassin had mustered her last straw of strength to talk to Clint, and she died shortly after that.

"Didn't I tell you not to kill her?!"

Clint vented his frustration on the prison guard in charge of torture. "Do you know how angry His Majesty was when Advisor Altrush was assassinated? If we can't find the mastermind, you will not get to stay here anymore. I will make sure that you will be sent to the Rhine's border to spend time with those smelly Germanics!"

While he spoke, Clint pulled out a handkerchief and wiped off the drool and blood on his face. He then asked Zhang Heng, "What did she say last? Kreis and something about balance. , there are ghost things like balance hiding among all things. Do you know what that is?"

Clint had asked casually, not expecting an answer out of it. To his surprise, Zhang Heng answered him.

"Well. I know a little about it."

Chapter 885: Arrow And Scimitar

When Zhang Heng stayed in the southeast city, Cornu tested him with the Balance Blade's doctrine once. After that, Zhang Heng told Altrus about this matter, which was why he could not lie to Clint in the dungeon.

At the same time, Zhang Heng also realized why Commodus ordered him and Clint to interrogate the assassins. It seemed the ambush wasn't some random event. They wanted Zhang Heng to expose the existence of the Balance Blade.

In other words, the assassination that took place on the bridge that afternoon hadn't been led by the Balance Blade. It was a plan that Commodus and Altrus had come up with together. Altrus had no intention to use a representative on the front stage. The person who pretended to be him was supposed to sacrifice himself and put the blame for the assassination on the Balance Blade. With that, they would have a reason to use the empire's resources to get rid of Balance Blade once and for all.

The whole thing far more dramatic than Zhang Heng imagined.

When Clint and Zhang Heng reported the information obtained from the female assassin to Commodus, he immediately issued an arrest warrant to all the Balance Blade's members. In order to avenge his most trusted adviser, Commodus even withdrew one hundred thousand gold coins from his vault as a reward.

The Senate also expressed their concern about this matter. A group of nobles led by Dior expressed their condolences for the assassination of Altrus immediately. Since it was inappropriate to use the funds from the treasury as a motivation to capture the murderer, the nobles donated a total of two hundred thousand gold coins to the reward pool.

With all that aside, many were actually happy that Altrus was dead.

Altrus had worked by Commodus's side for a long time and was regarded as the emperor's right-hand man alongside Clint. With the death of Altrus, Commodus had lost one of his most trusted advisers, which meant he would have to rely on the Senate more often in the future.

Such a situation was undoubtedly what the group of nobles led by Dior would like to see. However, their happiness only lasted for less than half a day, soon to be taken aback by what they would discover. They realized that they had underestimated the young emperor. With the death of Altrus, Commodus began to purge the high-ranking generals.

Except for civic officers like Sebutul, who had escaped the fate of losing his job because he protected Commodus during the ambush, all the other noble officers were either transferred to other places or retrenched. They were replaced by a group of soldiers who had fought alongside Commodus against the Germanic tribes. Regardless of their different background, they all had one thing in common—their absolute loyalty to Commodus.

In the end, except for the highest commander of the imperial guard, every middle and high-level general was replaced. In other words, Commodus now had complete control over the military forces in the city of Rome. It was already too late when the Senate realized that Commodus had made the changes. Dior and others could only stare at each other.

However, Zhang Heng did not have much time to care about this political turmoil for the time being. Five days had passed since Altrus' assassination, and the Balance Blade still hadn't contacted him. For the past five days, nothing happened on his side. This morning, however, Commodus summoned him.

Apparently, he had done well to protect Commodus during the ambush at the bridge, killing three assassins in total. Commodus decided to reward him with a piece of land again. Thus, the landmass Zhang Heng owned now surpassed many noble families who had lived there for a few generations.

The only downside was that the land he owned was quite a distance from Rome. In the event of a future war, his land might turn into a battlefield. Still, his good fortune had made many jealous of him. After all, every advisor had different achievements.

Everyone now knew that Clint would replace Altrus as chief advisor, and Zhang Heng would become the next Clint. Before that, Zhang Heng would need to find a way to fix his conflict with Clint. Clint was now waiting for Zhang Heng to bow at him. Although he still felt that Zhang Heng was a threat, it did not stop him from enjoying the victory that he achieved currently. However, the thing that embarrassed him the most was that Zhang Heng did not look for him for the next few days. He had no idea what Zhang Heng was up to since the latter was away from home most of the time.

But that night, Zhang Heng finally returned to his domus. He stretched out his hand to open the door, then walked toward the front hall when he suddenly halted in his steps. He had sent the slave-girl away almost a month ago. Now, only he and the other two servants who came bundled with the domus as gifts were supposed to be here. The two new servants hadn't been living with Zhang Heng for a long time, and they had nothing worthy of his attention as well. However, they did do a good job at taking care of the domus.

In the past, when Zhang Heng came home, one of the servants would come out to greet him. Now, he realized how the house was eerily quiet. As he stood in the front hall, he saw moving ripples in a rain puddle shimmering on the wall, reflected by the moonlight.

He even heard the shrill sounds made by the clashing of some kind of sharp weapon. Zhang Heng moved his foot forward and in microseconds, an arrow landed at the spot where he stood just a moment ago. Zhang Heng did not need to raise his head to know that the archer was hiding on the second floor. It was probably the same assassin that assassinated Altrus.

Zhang Heng could never forget his archery skills. He dashed to the marble pillar beside him. Just when he was about to approach the pillar, he stopped abruptly. A scimitar came from behind the cylinder, aiming squarely for his face. If he had not stopped moving just now, he would have been sliced in two.

The threat was not over yet. Although he managed to escape the premeditated ambush by relying on his inhuman hearing and reaction, he did not forget that there was a masterful archer on the second floor. Clearly, he would not miss a golden opportunity like this to land a critical shot on Zhang Heng. As expected, when Zhang Heng started to make a move, the archer took advantage of the split-second he had and released his bowstring.

Hence, Zhang Heng wasn't only facing the scimitar in front of him, but he also had to deal with the second arrow flying towards him. Without any hesitation, he made a critical decision. Since the scimitar was approaching his chest, he had to deal with it first. He swung his Persian short sword, and at the same time, placed his other hand on the hilt of the second.

The moment Zhang Heng blocked the scimitar, the deadly arrow was about to pierce through his body. The Battōjutsu was performed with lightning speed once he drew the second Persian sword at the last moment. After that, he used the same method he used to deal with the archer gladiator at the Amphitheatrum Flavium. In the end, he managed to deflect the feather arrow aiming at him.

The two assassins had never seen Zhang Heng's previous gladiatorial performance. When they witnessed this miraculous scene, they were left in bewilderment. This was not something an ordinary human could achieve.

Chapter 886: Surrounded

The moment the assassin with the scimitar got distracted, Zhang Heng's retrieved the Persian short sword he used to deflect the arrow, then performing a quick slash in the air. When the assassin with the scimitar snapped back to reality, he saw the blood on Zhang Heng's weapon. When he was not paying attention, Zhang Heng had slashed his neck and chin.

"It's not a good habit to get distracted during a battle." At that time, Zhang Heng had retreated to the marble pillar. After that, the assassin with scimitar collapsed on the ground slowly. Zhang Heng fought

two enemies at the same time, and he succeeded in killing one of them. Not to mention that the ambush was premeditated. Since these assassins decided to get rid of him tonight, it meant that his identity was finally exposed. To make matters worse, it could also mean that the Balance Blade was completely defeated in the war with the Hounds and Altrus.

And unlike the cannon fodder assassins he dealt at the bridge earlier, the assassins who ambushed him at his domus tonight were highly skilled, probably the Hounds' core members. In terms of strength, the Hounds' assassins were slightly worse off than the Balance Blade's assassins. However, they were still be considered top-tier assassins around the world. Zhang Heng still could not keep up with these experienced killing machines when it came to assassination skills. That said, he still had his Lv4 swordsmanship with him. Once his opponent missed the first hit, there was a high probability that they would defeat him in a head-on battle.

The bad news was that his opponent had the intention of facing him one-on-one tonight. After Zhang Heng killed the scimitar assassin, two more assassins came out from the other two marble pillars. They looked at each other and moved slowly to where Zhang Heng was hiding.

Since there was an archer on the second floor, Zhang Heng could not stick his head out to observe the situation. In other words, he would not be able to see the two assassins that were approaching him quietly. When the two assassins arrived at the pillar where Zhang Heng was standing, they swung their daggers and tried to deliver a fatal blow to Zhang Heng. However, Zhang Heng was no longer standing at that pillar.

Fortunately, the two of them reacted quickly. They immediately raised their heads and looked above them, seeing a shadow under the eaves. The space was wide enough for a person to climb over without being noticed by others.

One of the assassins immediately reminded the archer, "Be careful, God's Eye! The target has left his original position. He may be heading towards you."

The heart of the archer on the second floor named God's Eye tightened when he heard what his allies said. He had witnessed how Zhang Heng fought at the bridge, killing three assassins with a clean hit. He did not even perform a second move on them. Earlier, the scimitar assassin had also been killed by him in a split second. It could only be said that the gladiatorial champion of the Amphitheatrum Flavium had lived up to his reputation. As an assassin that was excellent in using the bow, the last thing he wanted was to be close to Zhang Heng unless he had a death wish.

Therefore, he did not hesitate after hearing the reminder from his companions. Immediately, he began to pay extra attention to his surroundings while maintaining a squatting posture. He then began to move quietly.

He knew that the previous two arrows he fired earlier had exposed his position, and staying here any further would prove extremely dangerous. His decision had saved his life. Zhang Heng moved quietly to the second floor like a ghost. The latter's companion did not discover him until his shadow fell on the spot where the archer assassin squatted earlier.

It was then that the archer assassin had moved away, and he immediately turned around and aimed at Zhang Heng. He then completed his next action in one go with not a single second wasted.

Unfortunately, Zhang Heng was only quicker. The moment he released the bowstring, Zhang Heng had already sliced the wooden bow with a single slash. Without the supporting force, the arrow fell straight to the ground.

However, Zhang Heng couldn't do anything to the archer assassin after that because another assassin dashed out from the next room to stop him. The latter had been waiting quietly for him over there. Since Zhang Heng was wearing the Heart of Kreis, the assassins had failed to detect his movements. Hence, the assassin missed the opportunity to attack Zhang Heng with the archer assassin.

And Zhang Heng did not expect that the Hounds would regard him as a powerful opponent. To make sure that they could kill him, they dispatched at least five top-tier assassins to deal with him. Zhang Heng also wasn't sure if other assassins were waiting to ambush him in his domus. Though he failed to kill the archer assassin, he got to at least destroy the latter's weapon.

The next moment, Zhang Heng dashed to the two assassins downstairs before climbing up to the second floor. With the Persian swords in his hand, Zhang Heng managed to push back the opponent in front of him. After that, he ran and rolled into the room where the slave girl lived before. Fortunately, there were no other assassins in the room.

Zhang Heng pried open a piece of the wooden floor as fast as possible and took out the Pestilence Bone Bow and Paris Arrow that he had hidden in the floor. When the assassins dashed into the room and saw Zhang Heng holding a bow and arrow, they ran out immediately.

Under normal circumstances, the assassin would think that he was now safe, but the arrow that flew out of the room took a quick turn and flew toward him. And it landed on his forehead.

After that, Zhang Heng approached him and retrieved the Paris Arrow from the corpse. Right after that, he kept walking and jumped directly onto the roof. As expected, it seemed the Hounds were determined to kill him, having placed their men on the roof to ambush Zhang Heng. They blocked off all the possible exits.

However, Zhang Heng didn't panic when he saw the enemies, simply looking at them approaching from all directions. He then jumped directly into the air and spread out the huge pair of wings behind him. They were expecting him to be affected by the gravity, but Zhang Heng flew past the dumbfounded assassins and plunged into the distant darkness.

It wasn't long before the Hounds' assassins came back to reality and realized that they had failed the mission. They were not thinking about explaining the failure but were thinking about the magical scene they just witnessed.

Some of them heard some rumors about Zhang Heng, but none took it seriously until they witnessed it with their eyes.

The leader assassin then said, "The Balance Blade is gone. It's not a big deal to let him, a core member, escape. Whether he is human or something else... it doesn't matter anymore. When the sun rises tomorrow, his wanted portraits will be all over the streets and alleys. If he is smart, he should leave Rome tonight. He will have no place to stay in Rome anymore."

The harsh words made the magical scene less impactful now. However, the assassins could still see the doubt and anxiety in each other's eyes. Since they had the victory in hand, they decided to suppress their doubts, for now, trying their best to forget what just happened.

Chapter 887: Night Visitation

That night, Lucilla's residence.

Lucilla had been living in the palace since her father became the Roman emperor. Later, she married her first husband, Lucius, whose father ruled the Roman empire with another emperor at the same time. Hence, Lucilla could naturally continue living in the palace.

However, when Lucius died, Lucilla was asked to marry her second husband, Pompeanus, by her father. That would mean she had to move out of the palace. Fortunately, her father asked the Senate to compensate her. Hence she was awarded the title Augusta. Although Pompeanus was not as powerful as her previous husband, he had an impeccable attitude toward her. After they were married to each other, they were not as affectionate as other newlyweds, but they got along harmoniously.

Pompeanus would usually stay at the barracks and not interfere with Lucilla's private life.

Therefore, in the eyes of others, Lucilla had a married life that most women envied.

She constantly held banquets at her domus and usually provided an endless flow of wine, accompanied by many hunks. But tonight, neither of these things could make her happy. In fact, Lucilla's mind seemed to be absent from the beginning of the banquet. It was as if she had been traumatized before. The laziness and pride she had in the past were now gone. When her maid asked if she would cancel the banquet tonight, Lucilla told her that everything was business as usual.

When those handsome men invited her to dance, she rejected every single one of them without exception. After that, Lucy got up and left her seat, telling the maid that she wanted to head back to her room for a change of clothes. However, after undressing, she did not go to the closet to get a new set.

Instead, she stood in front of the bronze mirror and stared at herself in the mirror motionlessly. She seemed to be obsessed with the person in the mirror. She started to stroke her skin with her palm, bit her lip, and reached into a drawer on the side. Among all the perfume bottles, she picked a small verdant jade bottle.

When she picked up the bottle, an indecisive and unwilling look flashed in her eyes. But in the end, she removed the cork. When she tried to bring the jade bottle to her lips, she heard a coughing sound from behind her.

Lucilla was startled, and the jade bottle in her hand also fell to the ground.

"They said that Cleopatra VII learned that her death was approaching after the Battle of Akshin. So she asked her maid to hide a poisonous snake named Aps in a basket of figs. After that, Cleopatra VII let a poisonous snake kiss her chest, and she ended her splendid and legendary life just like that. Her death also meant the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Eventually, Egypt was annexed by Rome and became a province under Rome..."

"When did you show up here?" Lucilla turned around and saw the person that talked to her.

“Sorry, I actually just arrived here not long ago.” Zhang Heng wiped the blood off his two Persian short swords with the silk bed sheet, “I faced some troubles just now. I came here to look for you right after I dealt with my problem. To be honest, I didn’t expect you to take off your clothes as soon as you came in. I wanted to wait for you to change before talking to you to avoid an embarrassing situation like this, but...”

“They got to you too, didn’t they?” Lucilla’s expression changed slightly.

“Uh-huh,” Zhang Heng nodded and inserted the cleaned Persian short swords back into their sheaths. “It looks like your toy is broken.”

Lucilla did not argue with Zhang Heng when she heard what he said, “We lost this war. In fact, we lost not only this war but everything else as well.”

“I can’t agree with the last statement. You still have me. You really shouldn’t have kept it from me from the beginning,” Zhang Heng said.

“...”

“It’s too late now.” Lucilla shook her head. She then asked, “How did you find this place?”

“Augusta of the Empire, the emperor’s sister, is the Priestess of the Balance Blade, the mysterious assassin organization. It must be admitted that people with no imagination would have never connected you and Balance Blade. When you played the Priestess of Kreis, you were so different from who you are right now...” Zhang Heng paused. “Uh... why don’t you find a dress to wear first, and we will continue talking.”

“I don’t think it is necessary.” After the initial panic, Lucilla quickly calmed herself down and stood in front of Zhang Heng, naked. “Are you not interested in me? I remember you rejected me more than once before.”

“Well, if you are not afraid of catching a cold, you can just be like this...” Zhang Heng rubbed his nose and continued what he was trying to say. “The time you met up with me as the Priestess, you were wearing a mask, and you sounded completely different from now. However, you overlooked one detail, which is the smell of the perfume on your body.”

“The smell of the perfume on my body?” Lucilla frowned. “I didn’t overlook this detail. Every time I played the Priestess of Kreis, I would bathe first and put on a different perfume.”

“Yes, but the two kinds of perfumes that you use are the perfumes from the palace. In the beginning, I didn’t suspect that you were with the Balance Blade. I thought that the Priestess was hiding in the palace as a court maid. The day I started to suspect you were when you visited me in my new domus. When you left, you said something inexplicable to me. I thought you were threatening me, but Altrus looked for me that night, and he asked some questions. It was at that time when I finally understood what you said to me.”

Lucilla nodded. “On that day, I was told that Altrus might meet you. It was too late for me to summon you as the Priestess of Kreis. Hence, I could only go and look for you personally. Fortunately, I have quite some rumors surrounded me. It is not uncommon for me to like a gladiator. However, I don’t think you identified me as the Priestess with just one sentence, right?”

“Yes. After that, I found the place where we met that night,” Zhang Heng said. “That house belongs to Sktus, a young man from the Kolasu family. A friend of mine told me that he rarely comes here for two years now. Out of curiosity, I investigated Sktus and found that two years ago, there were rumors that he was one of your secret lovers. That was where you had an affair, right?” Zhang Heng said as he stared at Lucillia in front of him.

“This is something I still can’t figure out. At that time, your eyes were covered, and you were put in the carriage. How did you manage to find that place?” Lucilla asked in surprise.

“This is a little trick taught to me by an old friend of mine from Baker Street. If he were the person who was loaded into the carriage that night, he would’ve figured out the route a lot sooner than me,” Zhang Heng said.

Chapter 888: Is Our Agreement Still In Effect?

“So now, you found me after everything has settled. It’s just you and me now, the two remaining remnants of the Balance Blade. Oh. And maybe your teacher is still alive. But considering his age, I don’t think he’ll be getting to the place I sent him,” Lucilla chuckled. “We are the only surviving members of the Balance Blade now. Admit it. We have already lost the fight. If I were you, I won’t waste my precious time on a dying person. You should leave Rome overnight before they catch you.”

“Maybe.” Zhang Heng was noncommittal. “What about you? Why don’t you leave this place?” he then asked.

“Because I am the daughter of Aurelius, the wife of Lucius, and Augusta of the Roman Empire. I will not run away. No matter where I escape to, someone is bound to recognize me,” Lucilla continued. “They won’t do anything to me for the time being because I’m the only blood relative of Commodus, and they must take this fact into consideration.”

“So, you plan to end your life here just up like this?” Zhang Heng pointed at the jade bottle on the ground.

“As I said, we lost this time. And I accept this result, but I will not put my fate in the hands of others. Now, I have to die with dignity.” Lucilla puffed her chest and continued, “Don’t underestimate a woman’s determination. Cleopatra has her viper, and I have mine as well.”

“It’s admirable, but I’d like to correct something. You lost the battle, not us,” Zhang Heng said. “I haven’t lost yet.”

“Have you lost your sanity after what happened tonight?” Lucilla frowned. “You are not even qualified to participate in this war. You have no right to talk about winning or losing!”

“Sometimes, a bystander sees more,” Zhang Heng replied. “Oh, and I’m not talking about your naked body. However, there’s something I want to confirm with you first.”

“What is it?” Lucilla asked.

“Is our previous agreement still valid?”

“Our agreement?” Lucilla was puzzled.

“I’ll help you get rid of Altrus, and you take me to the secret library of the Balance Blade,” Zhang Heng said. “As you said, we are the only three remaining members of the Balance Blade. Given that I have no idea where my teacher is, it seems you are the only person that can bring me to the Balance Blade’s secret library. I believe you know why I didn’t escape the city tonight and came to look for you instead.”

Zhang Heng looked at Lucilla, “I need you to be alive until I enter the library at least. Unfortunately, I’m afraid I will be making some losses here. Not only will I have to kill Altrus for you, but I’ll also have to help you deal with the Hounds.”

“You are alone now, without any companions and support. And you want to fight two powerful enemies at the same time? What are you planning to do?” Lucilla asked with a puzzled look. “Just you wait until the next morning. Even if the Hounds fail to hunt you down, a warrant for your head will be all over the streets and alleys of this city.”

“Well... Since we are an assassin organization, let us solve this problem the assassin’s way,” replied Zhang Heng said. “After all, the person who taught me these skills always emphasized the importance of keeping the tradition alive.”

“Let’s not talk about the fact that you haven’t passed the assessment to become a real assassin. How can you kill them without knowing who or where the target is?” Lucilla continued to ask.

Zhang Heng smiled and took out three copper coins from his pocket and placed them in the palm of his hand one by one. “Balance Blade, Altrus, and Hounds. If I can’t see what is on the back of any of these coins, I will follow your advice and escape Rome overnight. After that, you won’t get to see me anymore. I wonder if this answer satisfies you?”

“Do you know where Altrus is hiding? And do you also know who the Hounds’ leader is?” Lucilla’s eyes widened, “How is this possible? The Balance Blade has been investigating this matter for so long, but we haven’t heard of a single answer. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have failed so badly.”

“As I said, sometimes a bystander sees more than the insider. And I must admit that it took me a lot of time to investigate this matter. With a little luck, I managed to sort out all the problems. I’m glad that my luck is still working well.”

Zhang Heng stood up from his seat as he spoke. “If you don’t mind, I will start to work on it next.”

After that, he walked to the balcony, and he stopped in front of a pot of cosmos.

“By the way, I do have a question that I haven’t figured out quite yet. Who is the traitor in Balance Blade?”

Lucilla shook her head when she heard the words, “There are no traitors in the Balance Blade. After the tragedy two hundred years ago, we have strict requirements when it comes to selecting members. We need to make sure our members are loyal and faithful to us. People like you are unique. This is also the reason why we find it hard to accept you into our organization.”

“Oh, I understand now. The so-called traitor is something you people come up with to bait Altrus? In that case, the previous agreement you came up with me was just to confuse the enemy. The Balance Blade didn’t need to extract any information from Altrus. When you guys asked me to get close to

Commodus, the Balance Blade actually tried to use me to distract the enemy. None of you expected me to locate Altrus, right?" Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, that's right," Lucilla sighed. "That's because Altrus's whereabouts are too secretive. We wanted to plant someone that could gain Altrus's trust. However, but it turns Altrus will never trust anyone. In the end, our people were used by him to convey the wrong information to us, which eventually caused the Balance Blade to lose the war."

"If you hear about Altrus's childhood, maybe you won't get your hopes up," Zhang Heng said.

"What was his childhood like?"

"Altrus is the twin brother of Commodus. He contracted a strange disease when he was five years old. From what I know... Uh, I believe the disease is called "polio" in our country. The condition can cause its sufferer physical paralysis. However, the priest in the palace said that this child was cursed and would bring bad luck to the family. For the sake of this country and people, the priest told the emperor that he had to kill this child. I believe you know about the story better than I. After all, you were a teenager when it happened, and it took me a long time to find out the backstory."

"Yes, that's right, my father asked someone to kill the child, claiming that he died of disease," Lucilla said. "I still remember this tragedy. I can't forget the way the child looked at me when I said goodbye to him."

"Actually, your father didn't kill the child. Instead, he sent him away secretly and entrusted the child to someone he trusted. The person that cared for the child was someone that guarded the border. There is no one who knows about it."

"Is he my brother?" Lucilla asked in disbelief.

"Yes, you still have time to change your mind. You can show him mercy. After all, he is your brother."

"No. Kill him," Lucilla said firmly. "Between him and me, only one person can live. If he doesn't die, it will have to be me. As for his story, you can tell me more after you kill him."

"Now I like doing things for the royals. At least, none of you are indecisive."

Zhang Heng shrugged.

Chapter 889: Owl And Bad Luck

Zhang Heng jumped off the balcony and landed gently on the ground.

On his left, the guests in Lucilla's domus were still singing and dancing. When the musician plucked the lyre's string, its melodious tune coupled with the laughter of the guests broke through from the other side of the wall. It was as if the happiness would never end.

But in comparison, the street outside the domus was quieter.

It was past midnight. Hence, no pedestrians were walking around the street.

This was not good news for Zhang Heng since assassins usually preferred chaotic environments like crowded markets or an arena full of spectators or a tavern or brothel with a constant flow of customers. In places like these, Zhang Heng could make an assassin disappear easily.

Fortunately, the moon was not too bright tonight, and the darkness could provide Zhang Heng with some disguise. He didn't go looking for Altrus right away after leaving the domus, heading back to the southeast city instead to change into a set of black clothes, one more suitable for what he was about to do. He also heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor when he added some arrows to his quiver.

They were almost silent, and if it were not for the zero-maintenance floor of this apartment, Zhang Heng would find it hard to hear footsteps through a door even with his excellent hearing. These footsteps could only belong to an assassin.

Zhang Heng was not surprised to find an assassin following him. It was no secret that he had formed a new force in the southeast city. Besides, the Hounds had Beehive collecting all kinds of information for them in Rome. After Zhang Heng foresaw his identity might be exposed, he asked Marcus from the southeast city to arrange several safe houses for him. However, now it seemed the Hounds also controlled the location they were at.

In addition to the assassins that ambushed him at his domus, the Hounds had also arranged for some personnel to deal with Zhang Heng here.

The footsteps from the hallway finally stopped outside his house. Still counting the arrows in the quiver, Zhang Heng pretended that he did not hear him. He even packed two figs to snack on during his journey later.

The assassins in the hallway, on the other hand, were probably ready to attack Zhang Heng. He quietly unlocked the door. However, when they entered the room, they found out that there was no one inside. They could not help but glance at each other.

In the room opposite his, Zhang Heng put on his hood and looked back again to make sure that he left nothing behind. After that, he stuck his body out of the window and climbed the brick wall to the top of the building. Upon arrival, he jumped from the top of the building to the slightly lower apartments next door. When he landed on the ground, he walked into a dark alley and disappeared completely.

The safe house Zhang Heng had arranged with the help of Marcus was to bait the Hounds. Later, he asked Soap to find a few trusted locals to rent the opposite unit quietly. It would serve as Zhang Heng's real hideout in the event of a crisis.

After losing the assassin behind him, Zhang Heng set off to the first place that he wanted to go tonight.

That place was Rome Square.

Every city has its center, and Rome was no exception. Its center was located at Rome Square. More than a dozen centuries ago, it was but a desolate, mosquito-ridden swamp, with not a single soul inhabiting the place. There were even Romans who buried their dead relatives here. However, several centuries later, a large drain was built, draining away all the water from the valley, and turning the ground hard.

At that time, Rome was still in its Republican phase. The people who lived there paved the way and built the temples and Basilica, making it more and more prosperous as time went by. Gradually, it formed a

huge square. When the Empire era arrived, the continuous expansion of the territory caused an explosion in population. The original Rome Square could no longer meet the people's needs, so a total of five new squares were built around it, one after another.

But there was no doubt that the Roman Square was still the most central area of Rome. The former emperor Marc Aurelius once gave a speech about how he felt about Caesar here. The pillar coated in gold in front of the podium was the starting point for all roads leaving Rome. Hence the saying, "All roads lead to Rome."

However, Zhang Heng was not here tonight to visit Roman Square. He walked through the huge arch built by Augustus and passed through the center of the square, where a vine, an olive tree, and a fig tree were planted. They were known as the sacred trees of Rome. After that, Zhang Heng looked up and saw the temples on Capitoline Hill, where the gods of Rome were enshrined.

Among them, the two most majestic temples stood on the top of the mountain, one on the left and the other on the right. They were the temples of King Jupiter and Queen Juno. Knowing that Altrus had to be in one of the two temples, Zhang Heng wasted no time and ascended the wide stone steps.

During the daytime, the Roman Square was the busiest place in the entire city of Rome. Crowded with people, the devoted believers would line up in front of the large and small temples. At the same time, the beggars took the opportunity to ask for food or copper coins. Vendors, too, would sell their products in the stalls around the square. One could always hear the constant haggling among vendors here in Basilica.

But now, after entering the night, everything fell silent. Only the holy fire of the Temple of Vesta was still burning. Zhang Heng did not encounter any obstacles along the way and quickly made it up to the top of the mountain.

After a short bout of hesitation, he went up to the Jupiter Temple on the left. The flame on the altar had been extinguished, leaving only some charred bones and garlands around. Zhang Heng walked around the altar and came to the closed bronze gate. He then picked up a stone and threw it at the gate.

After Zhang Heng waited for a while, the bronze gate opened slowly. A young priest rubbed his eyes and stuck his head out of the temple. However, after scanning his surroundings, he saw no one. He strained to look a little further before eventually seeing an owl standing on the wall. He could not help but curse.

Owls had always been a symbol of bad luck in Rome. Hence, spotting one was not a good thing.

The young priest did not dare to look around anymore. He retreated and closed the gate again. While he looked at the bird, a person slipped into the temple silently. Recently, Zhang Heng had been practicing his stealth ability assiduously. Coupled with Kreis' Heart's blessing, it was difficult for an ordinary person to notice him unless he was spotted.

Zhang Heng was not in a hurry. He waited for a while on the ceiling. It was not before the young priest walked back to his residence that Zhang Heng returned to the ground, closing up on Jupiter's marble statue.

His attention was not focused on the lifelike idol, a magnificent work of art on its own right. Instead, he was looking at the stone seat under the idol. He knelt down and touched the hole with air coming out of it.

Chapter 890: Altrus's Ear

Located at the back of the statue, those vents were not that easy to spot. If one did not walk to the back of it, they would be impossible to find. Other than the vent holes, the stone slab under the idol was also movable. In other words, the space underneath the stone slab was not filled, built with an arched structure like the Amphitheatrum Flavium.

Zhang Heng removed the slate and saw only a tiny room beneath it, a space that could only fit a child under fourteen. He also found some bread crumbs and a bowl of unfinished water in it. And that was all he found. Hence, he walked around to the back of the temple, where the priests were living.

The young priest who opened the door to welcome him earlier had now gone to bed again and was asleep. Besides him, two older priests and six attendants were doing some chores. Zhang Heng completed a search of their residence without waking them. The search yielded little results, though, so he retreated to the hall where the statue was located, opened the bronze gate, and quietly left the temple.

A quarter of an hour later, Zhang Heng stood in front of the temple of Queen Juno, getting ready to use the same trick to get the gate opened. He threw the stone in his hand, and the next moment, the temple's gate suddenly opened by itself.

A woman dressed as a priest came out with a group of children. There wasn't time to climb onto the roof, so Zhang Heng could only roll to the side in a hurry, and that was when he got to the edge of the cliff. When the gate was fully opened, he hung his body on the cliff and climbed the rock wall with one hand.

He did move as fast as he could, but the whole thing happened so suddenly that the first child who stepped out of the temple saw Zhang Heng moving. The child stopped and looked at the cliff where Zhang Heng was hiding with some doubts.

"Priestess Vera, I believe I see something."

The priestess named Vera glanced in the direction shown by the child and found nothing unusual. She then said, "It's just wind, Mosmir, let's move quickly. You will need to get up early tomorrow."

Blinking, Mosmir did not think that he saw the wind. However, he still obeyed the priestess's order and continued to walk forward while the other children followed him.

When the children left, the bronze gate did not close immediately. Instead, a male priest walked out from inside the temple. Compared with the priestess, he paid little attention to etiquette. After watching the children leave, he walked to the edge of the cliff, unbuttoned his pants, and was about to urinate.

Unfortunately, the liquid that flowed out from his body was not urine but his blood. A shadowy figure that breathed death came from behind him, slit his neck, and hugged his falling body at the same time. With that, the priest could not scream when he died. He stretched out his hand and grabbed the killer's

sleeve as if he did not want the killer to escape. However, he lasted only a few seconds before he lost his strength completely.

Afterward, Zhang Heng placed the priest's corpse aside and grabbed his right hand to examine it. There were many calluses on the index finger and thumb. And there were also scars on the arm. Clearly, he had endured tough military training and might have participated in the war as well. Although he was dressed like a priest, he carried a demeanor that was more akin to a soldier.

And judging from his appearance and skin, he was not born in Rome. If Zhang Heng speculated correctly, he should be one of the elites that Altrus had brought from the frontier to Rome, and he also belonged to the group of guards that he trusted most.

It was at that time; Zhang Heng figured out that he was at the right place. Speaking of Zhang Heng's ability to find Altrus's hiding place, he had to thank Clint for the information he revealed while they had a long chat at the dungeon. Without him, Zhang Heng would've never found this place.

Clint described Altrus as someone that could read minds. Since Zhang Heng was drugged by Altrus before, he knew that Clint was talking about Altrus using a truth serum on others. However, using plant alkaloids like scopolamine to force the truth out of someone had a big problem. One of the problems was toxicity. Zhang Heng did not know the method Altrus had used to neutralize some of the toxicity in the truth serum. However, he was certain that Altrus did not make the toxin disappear completely. At Zhang Heng's current fitness level, he was not affected after he drank the poisoned wine. This might not apply to the average person.

In terms of efficiency, this was not a good way to gather intelligence. Altrus needed to convince the target to drink the poisoned wine and look for a place to bring the target there for questioning. In that case, he could only interrogate seven or eight people in one day at most. It was impossible for him to know the secrets of every civilian or noble, as Clint had said.

And Zhang Heng did not think that Altrus would waste his truth serum on the civilians. He should have other means to gather the information. The serum was more like his special move to respond to certain emergencies. Besides, Clint had also mentioned that Altrus made a huge mistake three years ago. The dockworkers on the Tiber River were asking for wages, and they paralyzed the traffic on the river. Zhang Heng was surprised that Altrus did not receive such big news in advance.

It did not make sense no matter how one tried to explain it. However, when Zhang Heng combined all the facts that he knew, he saw the answer.

Altrus was gathering intelligence through the temple.

Temples and public bathhouses were probably some of the few places open to the poor and nobles. And these were also the two places where people like to discuss secrets. When the believers prayed, they would not hesitate to say out their most secret wishes. Similarly, many would discuss business and personal matters in the public bathhouse as well.

What made Zhang Heng eliminate the public bathhouse was the embarrassment that Altrus received these three years. Altrus did not receive any news about the dockworkers in advance because most of the dockers were Jewish. They either believed in Judaism or Christianity, which meant they would not come to the temple to pray to the Roman gods.

There was another reason why Zhang Heng was more inclined to the temple. And that was, Altrus was sentenced to death by the priest in the palace. If it weren't for his father's final act of mercy by sending him away, he would've been dead when he was four years old. In the end, he lost his identity as a prince, and even though he survived the death penalty, and he would never be able to show his face to the public again.

After many years, he returned to Rome and regained power. Zhang Heng did not believe that he would not retaliate against the priests in the temples. Through this, he could control these temples and transform them into a place for him to gather intelligence.

The hiding place that Zhang Heng found under the stone seat of the Jupiter statue was the best proof for his theory. And the group of children who were taken away by the priestess should be the ears of Altrus.