



Sample file

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LIEGE, LORD AND LACKEY



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# Introduction: The Greatest Reward

## Nones, Thursday:

Brother Pietro stood silhouetted at the window of the townhouse. The red afternoon light shone on his face and illuminated the polished wooden floor behind him. The sound of steel on steel welled up from street below along with the cries of the enraged and the dying. The rioters had come to this quarter of the city, fighting up and down the filth-encrusted streets, dying in archways. The change of power had long been delayed. In the morning, if there was any city left, the grandi would no longer have seats at the council.

More worrisome were the columns of smoke in the afternoon sky. Fires had sprung up all over the city - carefully set fires, which did not spread once they began and were not extinguished. Someone was deliberately burning houses to the ground.

Another line of smoke trickled into the sky. Soon the smoke would billow. Pietro estimated the fire's location — the Via Franciosa. That would be the house of Henricus, the Tremere.

Down in the courtyard, the cellar door swung in the breeze. Neither Rolando nor Tommaso had returned from their errand. A simple syllogism: The courtyard and labyrinth beneath were both unsafe.

Pietro crossed to the stone arch at the room's far side. He hefted the brass lamp he found there and checked the shutter to see that it was lit, then strode into the darkness of the corridor. Six feet along, the hall bent abruptly. Sunlight could reach the corner, but no farther.

Pietro opened the door and entered the windowless room. He approached the crypt cautiously, setting the lamp down on the flagstones. Darkness surrounded the little circle of light. The stone lid turned slowly, grating as it always did. Inside, his master lay pale and dead. Pietro shook him.

The corpse opened its eyelids.

"It is morning?" it asked.

Pietro shook his head. "The rabble are rioting. I think the council is about to fall."

The Cainite furrowed its brow. "You wake me for this?"

"Domine, the city is afire. The houses of the children of Caine are burning. I suspect the Brujah, Stilicho.... There's more: Rolando and Tommaso have not yet returned from the Labyrinth."

The corpse sniffed the air, then it was out of its crypt faster than the eye could follow. "Fire, fire, I smell fire. Oh! I am undone!" The blur went from corner to corner to corner, wailing as it scrambled to escape. The Cainite's nails splintered as it tore at the paneling.

Pietro ran to it. He pulled at the frenzied hands till they stilled. Slowly, he stroked the corpse's hair. "Shh," he said. "Shh. We'll get you away, but you'll have to be calm. Remember the other house." Large drops of black-red blood leaked slowly from the master's dead eyes and splattered on the floor.

Just then, Matteo and Alessandro entered, bearing a chest between them. Pietro nodded at them.

Quickly, they wrapped the gibbering corpse in sackcloth and straw, and bundled it into the chest. They snapped the lid closed on the bundle, and Pietro shoved a cloth deep into the mechanism of the lock.

Pietro chanted swiftly in Latin. "I say a warding over this chest. Let no unfriendly hands break it. Let no light enter into it." He crossed himself.

By the time they got the chest out of the elbowed corridor, the house was already aflame. The breeze through the open window wafted burning ash into the wooden room. Red flakes snagged on the thick-woven tapestries, and flames began to lick the cloth. Pietro coughed into his priestly robe, while Matteo and Alessandro struggled to pull the chest along.

Smoke choked the long stair, and from the bottom came the sounds of fighting, screaming and dying. The three men hurried with their burden to meet the noise, the chest banging against the wall as it went. Pietro prayed to God that its occupant would not panic.

When they reached the threshold, they found Guidoriccio the knight standing amid a field of shattered corpses, his great blade in hand. Ash covered his hair, and he was burned, his clothes ruined.

The young man grinned when he saw Pietro. "Good work, no? He is in the box?"

Pietro nodded. This day Guidoriccio had well repaid the money lavished on his aristocratic whims.

Then the ceiling collapsed. Pietro staggered as a rain of smoldering plaster crashed onto his shoulder. Sparks and smoke filled his eyes, and he could not see his master. He crawled until he felt the box. It had fallen on its side, pinned down by rubble and wood. The bodies of Matteo and Alessandro lay alongside, their blood wet and black around them. Pietro pulled on the chest, hoping it had not split, that no sunlight had entered.

The house gave another ominous rumble, like the belly of a great hungry beast.

"Guidoriccio!" he called.

The young noble staggered forward, and together they pulled the chest free, hefting it as best they could. The smell of Guidoriccio's scented oils and Pietro's burnt flesh mingled incongruously in the air.

Outside, the street was chaos, rioters everywhere, and as Pietro and Guidoriccio struggled on with their burden, Pietro saw a face in the crowd — Reynaldo, Stilicho's servant.

## TERCE, FRIDAY:

Sunlight streamed into the basilica. Soot and straw covered the white marble floor. Refugees lay huddled in the columned spaces of the aisles, many too burned to walk. Mumbled prayers rose from the chapels to compete with the wailing of women and children. Near the choir, a priest recited mass. Mercifully, the shadows were long, the faces nearly invisible.

Pietro paced slowly through the crowd, his arm in a sling. He tried not to look, not to weep, not to think about his complicity in this. It had been a bloody night of reprisal, but in fifty years of life, Pietro had seen it all before.

"Brother Pietro, Brother Pietro." A thin man's arm reached up and clawed at the rough hem of his robe.

Guidoriccio stepped forward instantly, the knight's arm raised for a slap. His eyes were feverish with pain, his colorful and foppish clothing charred and stained. Pietro restrained him with a hand.

"No," he said. "It is all right. I know him." He smiled kindly (or so he hoped) and knelt.