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Palace Council

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

The Council

The lawyer was nervous, and that was odd. His hands trembled on the steering wheel, and that was odder still. He had learned in the war that there was no sin in being afraid as long as the others never knew. He understood that courage was a discipline. As was confidence. In the marble caverns of Wall Street, the lawyer intimidated all around him with his breadth of knowledge and speed of mind. In the boardrooms of his clients, he had no equal. On his rare forays into the courtroom, he charmed the judges with his wit and persuaded them with his force. He had commanded a company of Rangers in North Africa and Europe. He provided his adoring wife and children with a house in the suburbs, equipped with every modern convenience. It was the summer of 1952, the era of such men as himself. The United States was about to elect a military man its President. The nation's steelmakers had just crushed a nationwide strike. The Congress was about to add the words "Under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. American science had invented a way to phone from California to New York without using an operator. Some people insisted on calling attention to the nation's imperfections. But the lawyer believed in quiet progress. Quiet, gradual progress. The nation would move forward in its good time. So calm down, he commanded himself, annoyed to discover that he was drumming his fingers on the dash.

He tightened his grip on the wheel.

The driveway was full of cars. The house was long and low. Golden light spilled invitingly from the windows. Still the lawyer hesitated. August air, loamy and rich, drifted into the car. Clouds hid the moon, but the forecasted rain had yet to arrive. The lawyer glanced at the glowering sky and endured a shivering premonition of death. Fighting

his growing unease, the lawyer focused his mind on the image of his wife's glowing face. He shut his eyes and listened to her teasing South Carolina drawl. Calmer now, he reminded himself why he was here.

Dinner and conversation, his host had said, smiling, over coffee in Manhattan. *And stag only. No wives.*

Why no wives? the lawyer had asked, not unreasonably.

Trust me.

The lawyer had been too savvy to press. His host knew people, and the kind of people he knew, knew other people. Then, too, his host had raised the return of favors to an art form. Everyone wanted to be in his good graces. As successful as the lawyer's career might have been so far, there were always higher rungs on the ladder. Courtesy and curiosity pushed him forward. When his host mentioned the name of some of the others who were expected to attend, the lawyer was hooked.

He climbed out of the car.

Laughter wafted from the house, and, beneath it, music, scratchy and low. The lawyer practiced his courtroom smile. The music was classical but fluffy. The lawyer fortified himself with the knowledge that his host was no Renaissance man. The disciplined confidence he had learned in the war was returning. He mounted the steps jauntily, ready to be the star of the evening.

About to ring the bell, he noticed a much younger man standing at ease on the grass, his face in shadow, his smooth hair pale and bright in the light from within. Odd. No aides, tonight's host had insisted. No drivers. No bodyguards. And this in a crowd whose members tended to possess several of each.

The lawyer rang, then turned to the stranger to say hello. But the blond man had vanished so thoroughly into the inky darkness that the lawyer began to doubt whether he had seen him at all.

Never mind. Focus. Scintillate. Intimidate.

The door swung open. The lawyer stepped inside.

When he emerged, it was well past four in the morning. He was dizzy from lack of sleep, and too much good food and excellent claret. He was among the last to leave. Their host had worked out a departure schedule, according to some scheme none of them understood. And yet they did as he proposed, accepting without a murmur of complaint his insistence on security against threats he refused to disclose. He had a hypnotic aspect, the lawyer decided. Mesmerizing. He would have been fantastic in the courtroom. He planned everything with

care. Even the number of guests turned out to be a symbol of their undertaking.

The lawyer stood beside his car, fingers touching the door without quite opening it. The dew made the surface shine. He was shivering harder now than he had been on arrival. And not from cold. The host had unveiled his plan, and it turned out to be, like the man himself, brilliant, complex, efficient. The lawyer had sat there with the others, the whole room entranced as their host strode up and down in front of the fire, eyes bright and alive, filling in some details, leaving others for later discovery. One by one, the men at dinner had nodded. Some of the most powerful men in the country, and they had all nodded. Yes. Yes. And yes again. They were on board. The lawyer had nodded along with the rest, but his nod had been a lie.

The lawyer thought the plan, for all its brilliance, was evil.

There was no other word.

The plan might even accomplish its ends. Many evil plans did. The lawyer had seen enough of life to know that the triumph of good was anything but inevitable. The triumph of good in the last war had cost the world millions of souls.

The lawyer slipped behind the wheel. What was it about him that had made their host think he would join willingly so wicked a plan? Did the man really think so little of him? Maybe so. Maybe with reason. He thought about the men in the room, smoking their cigars, drinking their wine, nodding their heads. His career would likely skyrocket if he went along with them. The future stretched ahead of him, an endless golden band.

With brimstone waiting at the far end.

He knew what his wife would say. She was a wonderful woman, but she had been pampered and sheltered all her life. She did not understand how, in the world of men, sometimes you had to sup with the devil at least for a while, in order to—

"Did you need anything, sir?"

The lawyer turned, startled. The blond man was leaning close, smiling politely through the open window. He had crept up on the car without giving the smallest hint of his approach. Even in the Rangers the lawyer had known no one as stealthy. The lawyer started to answer, then hesitated. The cobalt eyes said that the blond man knew his every thought. The gaze was at once pitying and spiritless, the gaze of an executioner.

"I'm fine," the lawyer said, after his stomach finished twisting and turning. "Fine, thank you!"

"Good meeting?"

"Oh, yes. Absolutely."

"Travel safely, sir."

"I will. Thanks again."

Driving off, the lawyer felt a flooding relief, as if he had escaped from Hell. His murder was still thirty months away.