

THE ACADEMY

Making of a Ruler

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Black Chair Publishing



STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

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Black Chair Publishing
Pilotgatan 42
Stockholm, Sweden

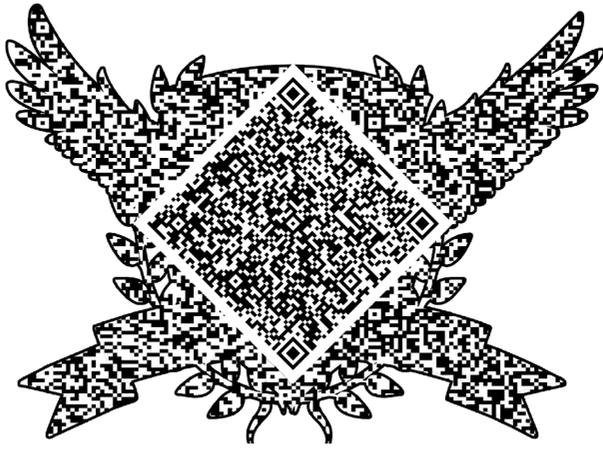
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THE ACADEMY/ C.C. Monö. -- 1st ed.
ISBN 978-91-983963-2-4

To Cindy, Zoey, and Emmy, who, despite all my hours at the computer, still seem to remember who I am.

“Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that
I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and
important person in existence.”

David Foster Wallace –
2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address



PROLOGUE

FOURTEEN MONTHS EARLIER

The young man sat in the dark, staring out the window across the room into the starless night. He'd been sitting there for hours, listening to the old grandfather clock as it ticked depressingly behind him. Outside, dense fog had swept in over the garden, and it swirled above the ground. He watched its graceful movements, using it as a distraction from the dark thoughts gnawing at the back of his mind.

At last, the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"It's been decided," a tired voice affirmed.

"And?"

"Listen, son, the others agree; it's an enormous risk."

"I know the risks, Father," the man said, wiping his clammy hands on his trousers. "We *all* know the risks, but what choice do we have?"

"It's the timing I'm worried about. We need to get a little stronger. Maybe we should wait another three years. Perhaps then..."

"Three years is a long time," the young man interrupted, his voice soft and respectful so as not to increase tension. "And while we may grow a little stronger, our enemy's strength will increase tenfold. We need to do this now before it's too late."

"Well, the decision has been made," the old man muttered. "I don't like it, mind you. No one does, but we'll go ahead as planned."

In the dark, the young man exhaled. He did it as much out of fear as out of relief. He was no fool, the task ahead wouldn't be easy, but it had to be done.

Standing up, he walked over to the window. "And the plan?"

"There's a plan. A brilliant, but complicated, one. I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

"All right, and when do we begin?"

"Begin? Son, it has already begun."

CHAPTER 1

Axel sat up in drowsy confusion. He threw a glance at the clock on his bedside table. 5a.m., on the dot! He sat without moving for a few seconds, straining to catch a sound in the darkness. At first, there was nothing. Then the doorbell let out an aggressive ringing that shredded the serenity.

“Mother of...!”

Axel threw the covers aside. It was Friday morning, a week in on the new year, and spring term wasn’t starting for another two weeks. Most of his friends were still out of town on holiday, and those still in the capital were no early risers.

This can’t be good, he thought, snatching a pair of sweatpants from a nearby chair. While wrestling them on, he impressed himself with feats of extraordinary imagination, coming up with various reasons for this early visit. Most of them weren’t good. Maybe someone was ill or had died. Perhaps the house was on fire.

He kept fretting until he reached the door and peered through the peephole. Baffled, he furrowed his brow and grabbed his jacket from the coat stand to pull on before opening the door.

There was a brief moment of silence as he and the visitor regarded one another.

“Uh...” Axel blinked and glanced down the empty corridor behind the stranger. What the hell was going on here? “Yes?”

The woman gave him a wide, dimpled smile and took a step forward, her green eyes locked on his. “Good morning, Mr Hallman. It is a great pleasure to finally meet you, sir.” She had a tantalizing voice with a typical highborn-British accent. “I apologise for this rude intrusion, but we have a long day ahead of us.”

Axel considered the woman. She was dressed in a black, tailored, business suit that did nothing to hide her well-shaped figure. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a French twist and when she extended her hand to shake his, a pair of diamond earrings glimmered in the cold, fluorescent light from the stairwell.

“My name is Nicole Swan. May I come in?”

Two conflicting thoughts collided in Axel's head as he shook her firm grip. The reasonable one argued that he couldn't let a stranger into his apartment. The less reasonable one, which was just as sensible from a twenty-two-year-old man's perspective, concluded that Nicole was drop dead beautiful and didn't look like a mass murderer.

"So, may I?" she probed, nodding towards his apartment.

Axel stepped aside as if commanded. Nicole strode into his apartment; a sweet, sensual scent wafting in behind her. The whiff of her perfume tickled his hormones, and Axel became terribly aware of his own appearance.

"Eh..." he began and ran a hand through his messy hair.

Nicole stepped into his small living room and gave him a charming smile. "So, would you prefer to get dressed *before* we talk, or vice versa? Either way is fine with me, sir."

Axel looked down at his open jacket.

"Oh...eh...before?"

"Splendid."

After pulling on a T-shirt and a sweater, Axel dashed into the bathroom. Seeing himself in the mirror, he let out a quiet moan. His grey eyes were red and puffy, and his hair a wild mess. It took half a bottle of gel to get it in to some kind of presentable state. After rinsing his face in cold water and dabbing his cheeks with too much aftershave, he hurried back into the living room.

Nicole had moved in to the kitchen and was leaning over the counter, pouring boiling water into a cup. She laughed when he entered. "That was fast, Mr Hallman. I hope you don't mind, but I've made us some tea. It'll be good for you, considering the weather." Returning the kettle to its base, she pointed at the second drawer by the door. "Could you please hand me a spoon?"

Axel frowned and considered the narrow drawer. Had that just been a lucky guess or did she know his cutlery was in the second drawer?

"Thank you." She accepted the teaspoon with a warm twinkle in her eye and fished out the teabags. Then, without hesitation, she opened the left cabinet under the sink and threw them in the dustbin.

Axel swallowed. This was beyond creepy. How did she know which side of the cabinet he kept the garbage can?

"There you go," she said a second later, handing him one of the steaming cups. "Black and strong with a little bit of milk and no sugar." Axel

peered down at his cup with growing unease. Another lucky guess or did she know his tea habits? “It’s Kericho Gold,” Nicole continued, inhaling the sweet aroma rising from her cups. “Your favourite brand.”

Axel frowned. Okay, no one could be *that* good at guessing. He took a tentative step forward, unable to decide whether he should be impressed or frightened by this strange woman’s knowledge of him.

His confusion must have been evident, for Nicole let out a soft laugh. “Oh, I know a great deal about you, Mr Hallman. I know you study economics at Stockholm University, although I’m not sure you actually enjoy it. You go to the gym five days a week. You don’t drink alcohol because you hate the taste of it and because it contains too many calories. Your father worked as a diplomat for many years, so you grew up abroad. You co-started the successful Talk Thirteen organisation in South Africa nine years ago. Six and a half years have passed since you returned to Sweden. You find turtlenecks itchy, and your favourite colour is blue. When it comes to literature, you prefer fiction, especially suspense novels and thrillers. You listen to most kinds of music, but prefer rap and hip-hop.”

An overwhelming sense of dread gripped Axel by the throat and in the back of his mind, a tiny thought began clamouring for attention. What if this woman was a psychopath? A beautiful, British psychopath.

“I could go on,” Nicole continued, glancing at her watch, “but we better get started. Our flight leaves at nine-thirty.”

“Hold on.” Axel felt his frustration bubble up to the surface. “I’m sorry, but what’s going on here? Who *are* you and what do you want?”

Nicole laughed and gave him a polite bow without spilling a drop of tea from her cup. “Mr Hallman, I’m happy to inform you that you’ve been accepted to the Eagle King’s Academy. It is my great pleasure to be the first to congratulate you.”

Axel gaped at the woman. “B-b-but...” he stammered, shaking his head in disbelief, “that’s not possible!”

CHAPTER 2

EIGHT MONTHS EARLIER

Axel was standing on the depressing underground platform at Stockholm University. It was a dreadful place to be on a day like this. Above ground the sky was a vast blue. The trees seemed to glow in the sun, their spring-green coats rustling in the wind.

It was one of the first sunny days of summer, and those who could were quick to embrace it. In the city, the streets and downtown docks were bustling with life. Around campus, pale students emerged with their computers and books, squinting at the bright light as they made their way to the nearby fields. There, where the bumblebees hummed, and the smell of freshly cut grass lingered, they gathered in small groups to study, converse, and flirt with one another.

Yes, summer had arrived, but down here, deep underground, the air was still cold, damp, and raw. As was Axel's mood at the moment. He stared at his best friend in disbelief. Had the man lost his mind?

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I'm serious," Mikael replied. "Why would I make that up?" He glanced at his phone before pocketing it. "Anyway, it's just an application."

A group of students ambled by, engaged in a loud debate. They were so engrossed in their own conversation that they seemed oblivious to the world around them. One of them bumped into Axel, knocking his backpack off his shoulder.

"Hey, watch it," the woman growled and marched off before Alex had a chance to reply.

He gritted his teeth. The world was full of them; egocentric idiots who thought they were the centre of the universe. "It's not *just* an application," he said, readjusting his backpack. "You know that. If you're accepted, then you can't back out. They'll own you!"

Mikael pulled at his thin moustache and made a face. “Geez, Axell! Why’d I want to back out? It’s the freaking Academy we’re talking about!”

“My point exactly! People don’t apply to the Academy unless they dream of becoming a tyrant. It’s revolting.” Axel paused, knowing he sounded angry beyond reason. “You don’t want to become another Napoleon-wannabe, do you?” he asked, nodding towards the student who had bumped into him a few seconds earlier. “Aren’t there enough tyrants in the world already?”

Mikael grinned while his eyes followed the departing woman. “Compared to many others, I think I’d be a rather good tyrant, don’t you?”

“That’s not funny. The people who study at the E.K.A. are power-hungry narcissists trained to dominate others. Shit, we’re supposed to fight that kind of behaviour, not encourage it.”

“Oh, come on!” Mikael laughed. “Don’t you ever get tired of being such a righteous do-gooder? You started Talk Thirteen and made it successful. How many hours have you not spent on fundraising and securing donors? You’re a hero, my friend. Isn’t that enough?”

“Are you deliberately trying to piss me off?”

Mikael held out his hands in a sign of peace. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to piss you off. All I’m saying is that by being an Academy leader I will be able to make a real difference. And yes, I know there are tyrants in the world, but that’s just bad leadership. Good leadership is what saves mankind from these tyrants.”

Axel rolled his eyes in frustration and began drumming his fingers against the strap of his backpack. “God, you sound like one of their bloody commercials.”

He regarded the large underground billboard that had started their discussion a few minutes earlier. “The Eagle King’s Academy”, it announced, in large, gold letters on a dark background. Below was the Academy Logo: an eagle with its wings spread wide, a golden crown on its head. “Apply before the 30th of June,” it read at the bottom.

There was no need for any additional information. Everyone knew what the Eagle King’s Academy was.

The E.K.A., or the Academy as most people called it, had been established fifteen years ago. Its objective was to turn ordinary students, between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five, into powerful, global leaders.

Axel glared at the eagle on the poster, who glared back. Everyone seemed to agree that the Academy was the world’s number one leadership-

training institution. Experts said it had revolutionised the entire industry, and *no one* disagreed. Axel might just be the only person on the planet who *didn't* like the Academy. In fact, it represented everything he hated: dominance; superiority; control; and power. Why would Mikael be attracted to such things? He was a kind, warm-hearted, intelligent guy. Sure, he could be a little unconventional at times, no doubt about it, but he wasn't stupid. This made no sense at all.

Axel peered at his friend. They were an odd pair, the two of them. Axel was tall and lean, with wide shoulders and a large chest. He had golden-brown hair, a square jaw, and striking, grey eyes that he knew many women found attractive.

Mikael, on the other hand, was blond, skinny, and short. A straw with arms, Axel thought. He concluded that, even with that dead earthworm glued to his lip, his friend looked fifteen rather than twenty-two. No moustache in the world could change that.

Yet, despite their physical differences, the two of them usually had the same perspective on things. That was why Mikael's behaviour was so disturbing. It was out of character.

Axel peered into the tunnel. Where was that damn train?

* * *

With all the technology in the world, nothing could beat the traditional form of eavesdropping; being there, watching, listening, and observing. It was an art form and some were better at it than others.

The inconspicuous man pulled his cap down a little lower, hiding the tiny scar above his right eye. It'd been years since he'd done this kind of work, but he felt confident, excited even. He knew he could melt into a crowd like a drop of water in a pond. It came natural to him, which was why they'd asked him to do this. The Box needed him. This was a delicate assignment, and they needed someone who spoke the language.

The observer took a casual step towards Axel and his friend. The platform was filling up with loud students and he was struggling to hear what the two men were saying.

"Aren't you the least bit tempted to apply?" came Mikael's voice. "We have one shot. By the next application period, we'll be too old."

While fidgeting with the strap of his backpack, Axel shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again.

He's genuinely not interested in the Academy, the observer thought in amazement, moving a little to the side so the camera in his shirt button

could catch the young Swede's facial expression. Maybe the others are right. Maybe he's our best choice.

"I'm so bloody tired of constant talk about leadership," Axel muttered, showing his hands in his jeans pockets with force. "Everyone wants to be a leader, an E.K.A. leader in particular. It's just selfish. All they want is power."

Mikael continued with his ridiculous habit of pulling at his moustache. "I disagree. If I am accepted, I'll have the chance to make this world a better place. Anything I'd say would be valued. Anything I'd do would get attention. I would be able to influence the entire world. How can that be bad?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"Because no one should have that kind of power," Axel barked. Then, as if someone had just pierced his bubble of fury, his shoulders slumped a little and his eyes fell upon his feet. "It's just plain wrong."

Mikael shook his head.

"People need someone to lead them. It's human nature."

"Christ," Axel moaned. "You've lost it, haven't you?"

"On the contrary, but I'm beginning to question *your* sanity. E.K.A. graduates are already running key global organisations. They've built the most successful companies in the world. They'll solve our environmental problems, end wars, and improve living standards for millions of people. They're our future and people love them. They're good leaders."

"They're powerful, that's what they are! What happens if the Academy trains the wrong kind of person?"

The observer smiled. Good question, he thought to himself, but Mikael showed no appreciation for the question. He just laughed.

"The wrong person? Are you aware that more than a hundred thousand people entered the application process last time? This year they expect twice as many. Out of all these people they choose twelve students. So, no, Axel, the Academy won't accept anyone who can't handle power." For the first time since they began their discussion, Mikael let his frustration show. "Why are you so upset, anyway? I'm the one applying, not you."

Axel shuffled his feet in silence for a while. His demeanour began to change. For a moment, all he did was stare at the ground, poking at a dark spot with his shoe. Then he began to mumble something.

Damn it. The observer hesitated, then took a small step towards the men. Any closer and they would notice him.

“...and for the past three months, my dad has been pressuring me to apply,” he heard Axel whisper. “It’s driving me crazy. We can’t have a single conversation without him bringing it up. His argument is always the same; I can’t make any difference in the world without power, and the only way to get any real power is by becoming an E.K.A. leader.”

“Maybe he’s right, Axel?”

“Or maybe he’s a bloody moron.”

CHAPTER 3

PRESENT MOMENT

Axel felt empty inside, as if someone had sucked his brain out of his head. It was an awful feeling. At one point, he almost expected to hear an echo between his ears every time he took a breath.

I need to think, not panic, he reminded himself, although there were parts of him that found this strategy difficult to accept. If there was ever a moment to panic, it was now.

“You look pale, Mr Hallman,” Nicole said, sounding more amused than concerned.

Why me, Axel pondered with despair. There must be thousands of people who are better qualified than I am; people who *want* to become leaders.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked with a whisper.

“Most definitely, sir.” Nicole said, laughing, before tilting her head. “Do you want a glass of water?”

“Yes, please.” Axel watched with unease while Nicole picked the right cupboard without hesitation, taking a glass from the lower shelf. She knows everything about me, he thought with dread. They must have studied me for months, even broken into my home, so how in the world did they miss my true feelings about leadership? “I don’t understand,” he croaked. “I thought I just did the first four steps of the application process.”

“No, sir,” Nicole replied and walked over to the sink. “You did them all.”

“I thought I’d failed.”

“Well, you didn’t,” Nicole affirmed with a merry voice, handing him a glass of cold water. “You’re one of the twelve, and we’re all waiting for you at the Academy.”

Axel emptied his glass in one go. The cold liquid washed through his system, and his mind began to clear. There was but one person in the world who could help him right now. “I need to call someone,” he said, bolting out of the chair, still holding his glass.

With surprising speed and strength, Nicole's hand shot out and grabbed him by the wrist. Her smile had vanished.

"Mr Hallman, your parents and sister are being informed as we speak. You can call them later."

"I'm not calling my parents."

"Should I remind you, sir, that you've signed form AG14, stating that, if accepted, you'll refrain from contacting or communicating with any form of media until after graduation?"

Axel shook his head to the point where he began to resemble an aspen leaf in a storm. "No, no, no. I'm not calling the media! I'm calling Mikael!"

Nicole released her grip. "Ah, your friend," she said, taking his empty glass from his hand. "Well, you can rest assured that anyone who needs to know about this change of yours will be informed, and this includes your friend. He's busy filling out the relevant forms at the moment, so you can call him from the airport."

"He's filling out forms?"

"Yes, regarding confidentiality. He's your closest friend, is he not?"

"Yes, but..."

"And you don't have any other friends, do you?"

"What do you mean? Of course I have other friends!"

"Hmm, let me rephrase, sir. Other than Mr Mikael Andersson, do you have any *close* friends?"

"Not as close as Mikael, but I *do* have other friends," Axel said, feeling a strange need to defend himself.

"Then you have nothing to fear, Mr Hallman. With the exception of your immediate family and Mr Andersson, no one will know the truth until you graduate. In a few hours, we'll spread the news that you have taken on a job abroad as a volunteer for a small NGO. You can trust us, Mr Hallman. We've done this for years and have never failed." Nicole took a sip of her tea, watching him over the rim of her cup. "Providing you follow our rules, you and your family will be protected."

Axel stood by the kitchen door, his arms hanging loosely by his side. The tiny boost of energy he'd felt a minute ago escaped him, leaving nothing but a sense of resignation. And so it begins, he thought. My life is over.

From a pocket inside her suit jacket, Nicole pulled out a few papers. "Speaking of rules, I need a signature here." She held out the bottom page along with a pen.

"What is it?"

“Oh, this is just a formality. We need a signed consent stating that, from now on, you’ll tell no one, not even your friends and family, about what you see or do at the Eagle King’s Academy.” Nicole pointed at a dotted line. “You just sign there.”

“Shouldn’t I read it first?”

Nicole laughed. “You should, sir, but I’m afraid we don’t have the time. We’ve wasted it on small talk.”

“But I think I should read the document first.”

“Why? You read all the security documents when you applied, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

Okay, so that wasn’t true. Axel had just read a couple of documents in the beginning of the application process. There had been so many, and since he couldn’t imagine the Academy accepting him, it had seemed like such a waste of time to read them all.

“Then you must know we demand a signed contract,” Nicole continued, her face now grave. “Really sir, we don’t have time for this.”

Frustrated, Axel grabbed the document. What choice do I have, he thought, signing the damn thing. He handed it all back to her, and she accepted it with a nod.

“Thank you, Mr Hallman. Now I should inform you that if you break this contract, whether by intention or not, you *will* be kicked out of the Academy and taken to court.”

“What?”

“There, we will do our very best to ensure that you are jailed as well as economically ruined for the rest of your life.”

Axel began to sweat. Was she serious? Could they even do that?

“The Academy does not take lightly on breached agreements,” Nicole continued, putting her cup in the sink. “Perhaps next time, you’ll be a little more persistent when someone hands you a contract.”

Axel felt his cheeks begin to blush. He should have known better. His father always said that a smart man “checks his receipts and never signs a document he hasn’t read”.

“You said there was no time,” he protested.

“Never let anyone pressure you into making bad decisions, Mr Hallman. As a global leader, *you* decide if there’s time or not. There can be no excuses. You are the one who’ll face the consequences for your actions.” She paused, giving him a tiny smile before leaning forward and placing a hand

on his shoulder. “I want you to remember something, Mr Hallman,” she whispered. “At the Academy you’re *always* evaluated. Even when you least expect it.”

CHAPTER 4

Nicole wore an expression of sly amusement. “Any questions?”

“Yes,” Axel said, “I have about a million of them.” But where would he begin?

“Anything about confidentiality?”

Axel thought for a moment. “What about my family?”

“They’re being informed at this very moment. All you need to focus on right now is packing your bag. I’ve a packing list. You’ll be wise to follow it.”

Nicole retrieved a small envelope from her pocket and handed it to him. It was a black envelope with the well-known Academy logo on the front; a golden eagle with its wings spread and a crown on its head. It contained a handwritten gold card.

Dear Mr Axel Hallman.

Congratulations! We are delighted to have you join us as a student at the Eagle King’s Academy. You are advised to bring the following:

- Personal items such as photos or jewellery
- Passport

We look forward to meeting you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Henry Milton, Concierge Manager

Axel read the note twice.

“Is this a joke?”

“No, sir. Why would you think that?”

“Well... It says I should bring ‘personal items’.”

“That’s an option, sir. The passport, however, *is* a requirement.”

Axel glanced around the room. He couldn't think of anything to bring except the book he was reading and his favourite sneakers, if you could call them "personal". He read the note again.

"No toothbrush?"

"No need, sir."

"What about trousers? Shoes? Sweatshirts?"

"No."

He grinned. "Underwear?"

Nicole smiled and turned for the door.

"No, sir."

"Then where in the world are we going?"

"You'll know soon enough."

Axel shook his head. "It better be a warm place if we're going to be walking around butt naked," he mumbled.

Nicole laughed but chose not to answer.

"Wait, are we coming back here?" Axel asked, hurrying after her.

"No."

"So who's going to water my plants and feed my fish?"

"No need to worry about it, sir. We have it all organised. We'll take care of your apartment, including your plants, fish and any expenses until you decide what you want to do with it all. There's no rush. Your only focus should be on graduating from the Academy. As I'm sure you already know, failure is not an option."

* * *

Large snowflakes fell from the dark sky, heading aimlessly for the car park below. At the edge of the parking lot, hidden among shadows and shrubs, stood a weathered-face man in his late-thirties. His piercing blue eyes scanned the surroundings like an eagle searching for prey. The tiny scar above his right eye itched under the black knitted hat. He ignored it, just as he ignored the fact that his shoulder-length hair, light brown with streaks of grey in it, clung wet to his neck.

The man rubbed his frozen hands together while keeping a trained eye on the black Volvo parked outside the entrance of the building. He tried to relax, embracing the cold as if it was a friend rather than an enemy. Many years ago, during his training, he had a sergeant who would argue that the idea of being cold was a very human concept. "Animals just accept the world as it is," he had said, "cold or hot, comfortable or not, they accept it.

A true soldier must learn this skill; to embrace the environment he works in. You don't want two enemies, do you?"

For almost an hour the observer stood motionless, letting the heavy snowflakes settle on his head and shoulders. When Nicole finally exited the building, Axel was at her side, a backpack over his shoulder. She whispered something to him and he nodded. The observer knew what she was saying, "Don't mention the Academy or anything connected to it while we travel."

The driver of the black vehicle opened the rear door and Nicole slid in. Axel placed his backpack in the trunk and joined her.

A smile found its way to the observer's lips. He waited until the car began to move, then pulled out his phone and dialed a secret number.

It rang twice, then:

"Yes."

Thor stepped out onto the parking lot.

"We've got him, sir," he said with his calm, husky voice, forming a tiny cloud with his warm breath. "Everything went as planned. Phase one is now complete."

