

ROYAL ALCHEMY



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Introduction to the Alchemy Universe

England 1913, but an alternative earth where things are achingly familiar but also very different.

King Rudolph, a Tudor, is on the English throne, the American War of Independence did not occur and neither did Bismarck's Prussia.

The sprawling British Empire includes Canada which stretches from the Arctic to the Mexican border, India (which includes Pakistan and Sri Lanka), Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and many parts of Africa.

England is a superpower and only The Austrian-Hungarian Empire with its spread over much of Europe, Africa and parts of Asia rivals its strength and military forces.

In this parallel world, alchemy – the power to transmute metals and flesh - is a skill used by the alchemists who occupy privileged positions in the royal courts.

Alchemy is a science that is practically restricted to the ruling class. The Royal Alchemist is a potent weapon in diplomacy and politics and Lord Oscar Hawthorne discovers Royal Alchemy changes his life forever.



Part One: The New Lord.

1.

Godwin, my manservant fastened my bow tie before helping me with my jacket.

‘Simpson has the car ready, my lord, as you instructed.’

‘Thank you, Godwin,’ I said, inspecting myself in the mirror as the servant brushed my jacket, removing pieces of lint and the occasional dog hair.

‘Renaldo has been inside your suite again, sir,’ Godwin said disapprovingly, showing me a piece of red dog hair he had removed from the jacket.

‘He’s just a dog, Godwin,’ I said, shooting my cuffs as I liked the cufflinks to show, ‘I like having him around.’

He was, I felt like saying, the only one I could really count as a friend.

‘Your late father forbade animals in the house...I’m sorry, sir,’ Godwin immediately added when he realised what he had said.

‘It’s all right, Godwin,’ I said, trying hard to smile, ‘my father is dead; it’s a fact that we all have to absorb. We can’t go on pretending it hasn’t happened.’

The truth was, although my father had been dead for three months, I still found it difficult to come to terms with the loss. My father and I had been very close, as my mother died when I was three, and his sudden death had been a terrible blow. His death also meant that I had to emerge from my self-imposed obscurity and step into the spotlight.

King Rudolph had amended the Royal Inheritance and Aristocracy Act a few years previously so I had immediately after the death of my father, I became the twelfth Earl of Maidenshire, much to the chagrin of my half-brothers Julian and Nigel.

The alterations to the Act gave clarity, so it was said, to the line of succession to the throne as well as allowing some choice in titles. For example, I could be known as Lord Maidenshire or Lord Hawthorne. It was terribly confusing and most people brushed it off as the as a poor attempt at modernisation by King Rudolph. Of

course, no one said that loudly in case their comments reached the ears of the King.

My father had married my stepmother three years after my mother's death and Lady Barbara had produced two heirs in rapid succession. Although only three when my mother died, I had been close to her as most young children are to their mothers and, subsequently, my relationship with Barbara had always been uneasy.

My half-brothers, Julian and Nigel were tall, broad, strapping young men who enjoyed polo, cricket and, occasionally, golf. Julian, the older of the two, had just commenced his first year in Oxford and I could tell he would enjoy the undergraduate life tremendously.

My father had been proud when I had graduated with First Class Honours and had made the point I had done better than Prince Albert who had been in the same year as I.

Although not friends, Albert and I were very well acquainted and enjoyed each other's company when the need arose. He was King Rudolph's only child and heir to the throne. The gossips said that Queen Antoinette had difficulties and could only provide one child.

Of course, some wags said, if the only child had been a girl, King Rudolph would have probably changed the Royal Inheritance and Aristocracy Act again so females could inherit! Most people laughed at that as everyone knew the King had some outlandish ideas in his

quest for modernisation but surely, King Rudolph would not be *that* insane!

Still, the succession line to the throne was elaborate and confusing, although I did know that, thanks to my fathers' family, I was sixth or seventh on the succession list, perhaps even higher.

Accordingly, it was now expected that I would appear at countless functions, be patron to the occasional charity and mainly hang around in the wings in case something happened to the others who were ahead of me.

It was, I felt, vaguely ridiculous.

'You look very smart, my lord,' Godwin said.

The door opened and Lady Barbara, my stepmother swept in, followed by her maid who was vainly trying to fix a cameo to Lady Barbara's chest.

My stepmother waved her away.

'No, Eliza, I don't want the broach!'

Eliza half curtsied and I wondered if she had the temerity to roll her eyes.

'Very good, mum, I'll put it back in the jewellery box.'

'And make sure it's locked.'

Eliza opened her mouth and then shut it when she caught my glance. She hurried from the room.

Lady Barbara was always dressed well and followed the rules of fashion religiously. For example, she never bared her arms during daylight hours – that was for the evening only – and always ensured head-to-ankle

coverage during daylight but I noticed, she was featuring the newer lowered neckline.

‘That girl is useless,’ Lady Barbra sighed. ‘I just knew that awful red hair indicated a complete lack of discipline. So much for your recommendation, Godwin!’

Godwin said nothing but his eyes narrowed slightly.

‘Oscar,’ my stepmother said, placing a fast kiss on my cheek, ‘you look simply marvellous. A well chosen suit for your first appearance as Lord Hawthorne. I suppose Godwin chose it for you?’

It was a veiled insult but I let it fly by; there was no point in taking anything my stepmother said to heart. She was constantly rebuking or politely insulting people. I pitied the servants, as I was sure she was constantly at them as well. Of course, I had no interest in the domestic arrangements of the houses and really had no idea how Barbara treated the servants.

Godwin was expressionless and simply said, ‘the car is waiting, Lord Hawthorne.’

I almost smiled at his pointed use of my title, as it was a reminder to Barbara that I now controlled the estates, houses and incomes associated with the Earl of Maidenshire.

‘Thank you, Godwin.’

Barbara brushed something from my shoulder. I suspected there had been nothing there and it was a gesture to simply that point out that Godwin had failed in dressing me properly.

‘When you’ve finished at the Palace, Oscar,’ Barbara said, ‘make sure you go straight to the Hanover residence.’

‘I will.’

‘Don’t forget.’

‘How could I when you remind me all the time,’ I said with a forced smile. ‘I’ll be there.’

Just as I walked towards the doors, Julian and Nigel stepped in.

‘Good luck, Oscar,’ Nigel said, his round face wide with a smile. ‘It’s not often the King hosts a reception in your honour.’

‘Thank you, Nigel.’

‘Yes,’ Julian grunted, ‘good luck.’

‘No luck required,’ I said, ‘I just have to stand around and sip champers while the King talks. Nothing special.’

‘Yes, quite,’ Julian said dryly.

2.

The Rolls Royce was waiting outside the London townhouse. It was a Silver Ghost and had been my father’s pride and joy. He loved that car and had immediately paid the thousand pounds for it in 1909.

I remembered how excited he had been.

‘Oscar, it’s smooth as silk and can go up to sixty five miles per hour!’

‘Why on earth would you want to travel that fast?’

‘Because you can, old boy, because you bloody can!’

I had shared his enthusiasm somewhat and when the Rolls Royce team had swept the board at the Austrian Alpine Trials, I had immediately ordered the Alpine Eagle, which was to be delivered next year.

‘Good morning, Lord Hawthorne,’ Simpson said as he opened the door.

‘Good morning, Simpson,’ I acknowledged and slipped into the back of the motor.

It was a short journey to Buckingham Palace and I nervously watched the world go about its business as the Rolls slid past. A few people on the street stopped to look at the car as we passed and I wondered what the common folk thought of the state of the world as they hurried home from their daily toil.

Although I didn’t have much interest in politics, I did know that relations with Austrian Hungarian Empire had diminished. There had been a skirmish on the border of New Guinea and Australia with Austrian troops and Imperial Australian Forces. Luckily, it had been resolved but tensions were still high.

There were unsubstantiated rumours that the Austrian Emperor, Napoleon VII had ordered the Royal Alchemist to transmute the wine of our ambassador at an Embassy function in Vienna. The wine had turned into poison but, luckily, an Alchemy Sensor accompanied the ambassador who sensed the vibrations of the transmutation and warned the ambassador.

Nothing could be proven, of course, and the ambassador just declined the wine, claiming an irritated stomach.

Thankfully, our own Royal Alchemist, Lord Bizet was powerful and had trained many Minor Alchemists and Alchemy Sensors.

Alchemy Sensors were extraordinary young men selected from the finest universities, who had been trained by the Royal Alchemist to sense the first waves of transmutation. They were unable to transmute themselves but they were gifted in sensing and in this day and age of political turmoil and intrigue, that was a very handy gift indeed.

Barbara had been on at me recently, saying that I needed to hire a Sensor as I was at risk because I was now directly linked to the throne. I had waved the suggestion away because of expense plus Alchemy Sensors were devilishly rare and hard to get hold of.

The Rolls turned into the gates and the guards peered through the window at me, saluted and waved us through. The newspapers had been full of drawings and even photographs of me so I supposed the guards knew who I was.

Simpson opened the door and I walked up the steps and through the entrance to where the reception was being held. I couldn't help but wonder how I would be accepted as I was now the youngest member of the House of Lords, the most powerful house of parliament. King Rudolph consulted the House of Lords regularly

before making a decision and even, I had heard, discussed some lesser items with the Lower House of parliament.

The footman nodded to me and I adjusted my tie as he opened the double doors.

‘Lord Hawthorne,’ he announced to the waiting men and I walked through to applause.

Lord Bentley, my father’s trusted friend and adviser must have been waiting near the doors as he immediately greeted me, shook my hand and took me around to introduce me to the Lords.

‘Lord Windermere, Leader of the House,’ Lord Bentley introduced me to an elderly man with grey mutton-chop whiskers and moustache.

‘Oscar,’ Lord Windermere said, ‘I was a great admirer of your late father, my deepest commiserations.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said politely and so it went as I moved around the room, glass of champagne in my hand as Bentley introduced me to the Lords.

Of course, no women were present at the reception as this was no place for them. I had heard there were a few women advocating the vote for females but that, of course, was just a lunatic fringe element. No right thinking woman would want to be involved in politics; they would want to concentrate on children and their husbands!

I responded politely to all the greetings and smiled politely. I was wondering when I could have a minute to myself when the noise of the footman’s ornate

bejewelled staff pounding on the floor immediately silenced us.

‘His Royal Majesty,’ he called, ‘King Rudolph the second - accompanied by the Prince of Ireland, Prince Albert!’

We all bowed and then applauded as King Rudolph, dressed in a smart black suit, shook hands and greeted the lords who were close to the door. He looked pale and a little drawn but still carried himself regally as he formally greeted the Lords of the land. Albert stood shyly by, nodding and smiling but, by his eyes, wished he were a million miles away.

‘Go ahead, my boy,’ Bentley murmured, ‘he’s here to welcome you, you know.’

His hand propelled me forward, the crowd parted and King Rudolph spied me immediately. His pallid face broke into a broad smile and walked towards me.

‘Lord Hawthorne!’

‘Your Majesty,’ I said, bowing as I had been taught by Bentley, Godwin and my father.

‘Oscar,’ King Rudolph said immediately, taking my hand, ‘I’m so sorry about George, it was a surprise.’

His hand was soft and clammy and I immediately wondered if the rumours about the King’s illness were true.

‘Thank you, your Majesty, your words are appreciated.’

The King then said some nice words and warmly welcomed me to the House of Lords, his trusted advisory council and legislators.

Protocol precluded me from replying, something I was rather grateful for, so I just smiled and accepted the applause and warm wishes.

King Rudolph circulated, talking immediately to Lord Windermere and I saw a younger man in black join them.

‘That’s Prime Minister Feldberg,’ Bentley supplied before I could even ask. ‘He’s a special guest of the House. Not a bad chap, a bit of one of those new fangled socialists but well brought up, knows his place.’

‘And who is that?’ I asked, nodding to a small man dressed in a black three-quarter length coat and suit. His hair was steely grey and his eyes seemed to be everywhere and yet relaxed.

‘That’s Lord Bizet, the Royal Alchemist,’ Bentley said and I detected some awe in his voice.

Bizet had two young men in black with him and I assumed they were Alchemy Sensors. After the King, there was no doubt that the Royal Alchemist was the most powerful person in the land.

Prince Albert walked over to me and shook my hand after I gave him a half-bow.

‘A big day for you, Oscar?’

‘It appears to be, your Majesty,’ I said formally and he grinned, taking my arm to lead me away from Bentley.

‘It’s all a bit stuffy, isn’t it? Look,’ he said seriously, ‘I terribly sorry about your father.’

‘Thanks Albert,’ I said, now we were out of earshot.

‘You’re going to that do at the Hanover house? Of course you are,’ Albert said ruefully, ‘you’re meeting your beloved there, aren’t you.’

‘This is only the second time I’ve met her, Albert,’ I said evenly, ‘Regina is *hardly* my beloved.’

‘Don’t say that too loud, old boy,’ Albert teased, ‘the court gossips would have a jolly field day.’

The last thing my father had done was to open negotiations with the Mounthaven family for me to marry their daughter Regina. Arranged marriages were the norm in upper society and the alliance between the English Maidenshire family and the Canadian Mounthaven family would be formidable.

‘What’s she like?’ Albert pressed.

‘Presentable,’ I replied dryly.

Truth was, she was a little cold and standoffish but she probably didn’t want to marry me anymore than I wanted to marry her.

‘Come with me to the Hanover house in my car, Oscar,’ Albert said and I thought I saw something in his eyes. I knew that he suffered from incredible shyness and was totally under the thumb of his mother and father but he suddenly seemed afraid.

‘What is it, Albert?’ I asked, taking him a little further away from the watching Lords.

‘I’m just tired of having everyone watching me,’ he said eyes darting around the room. ‘I never get a minutes peace.’

‘You’re the Crown Prince,’ I jollied, ‘it’ll be worse when you’re King.’

‘I know,’ he said morosely. ‘Look, come with me in my car. Your driver can go ahead, can’t he? I really hate walking in by myself.’

‘Of course,’ I said automatically, ‘that would be delightful.’

‘Wonderful,’ Albert said, seeing his father, the King gesturing to him, ‘I’ll be back here in twenty minutes.’

Bentley quickly appeared at my elbow. ‘It’s good you’re friends with the Prince,’ he said.

‘I’m not really a friend,’ I said, ‘Just...’

‘You should make him your friend, Oscar, he *will* be King someday.’

‘I can’t pretend...’

‘Quiet! Here comes Bizet! Good morning, Lord Bizet,’ Bentley said with a forced smile. ‘Do you know Lord Hawthorne?’

‘Not formally,’ Bizet said, offering his hand. ‘I knew your father, he was a great man.’

‘Thank you, Lord Bizet.’

He smiled, nodded and moved away to stand beside King Rudolph who was saying goodbye.

Immediately the King left, the Lords formed into small groups, cliques even, and I rather felt on the outer.

Bentley introduced me to a few more Lords and I managed to slip away after about fifteen minutes.

Standing next to the Lords entrance, I waited for Prince Albert's car to pull in as arranged.

'Waiting for the Prince?'

Startled, I turned to find Lord Bizet standing in the shadows.

'Yes, Lord Bizet,' I said, somewhat taken aback, 'he asked that I accompany him to...'

'The Hanover dinner party. Yes, I know,' Lord Bizet said, and showed me his lit cigar. 'The King can't abide smoke so I'm exiled when I wish to enjoy a cigar. Do you smoke, Oscar?'

'No, Lord Bizet.'

'That is wise, I suppose. Your father enjoyed his pipe, did he not?'

'He did.'

'The Prince is a shy young man, Oscar. It's good that he is friends with you...'

'I wouldn't say we were friends, Lord Bizet, we simply attended university together...'

'Albert doesn't have many friends – shyness can be a curse when you wonder if everyone is trying to take advantage of you.'

I said nothing as I had seen the hangers-on fluttering around Albert at University and at every gala occasion. It would be terrible.

We both turned as the royal car, followed by another that contained bodyguards and Alchemy Sensors.

‘I must go. Good evening, Lord Bizet.

‘And to you, Lord Hawthorne.’

He said it with a light smile and I walked down the steps.