

The Quays of Lac-Carge

Chapter One

“If I do this tonight,” Alexander said, “my penance is over.”

Gresley laughed and shook his head. “I doubt Her Majesty would see it like that, Wellstone.”

The alleyway was cold and dank. Alexander shivered as Gresley’s icy fingers encircled his throat. Alexander felt his entire body stiffen. He closed his eyes to block the close view of Gresley’s smug face and braced himself for the pain. To his surprise, he only felt a faint popping, as one does when descending a mountainous pass, or getting over a cold. He opened his eyes, confused.

Gresley gave him a knowing glance from beneath his bushy white eyebrows. “I’m feeling charitable tonight.”

So Gresley *was* able to control the level of pain he caused when he employed his beast talent. What a—

“Pass me the mole,” Gresley called over his shoulder.

Gresley had the rare combination talent of beast-talking and beast-healing. Somehow, he’d figured out how to combine both talents to join another person’s consciousness to an animal’s. He used this sinister talent on Alexander to keep him under surveillance during Alexander’s enforced nighttime escapades. As Gresley had explained the first time he’d used it on Alexander, *A mole will repeat whatever you hear. A horse will talk to you. And a dog... well, a dog will make you act like a dog.*

A group of black and gold clad constables stood behind them. One constable moved forward, dredging a pudgy mole out of a wicker basket. Gresley groped for the animal's back with one hand, the other still around Alexander's throat. When his hand found the mole, his fingers tightened around Alexander's neck. Gresley grunted with effort as he joined Alexander's consciousness with the mole's. Alexander felt a second faint pop, the mole squealed in pain, then it was over.

Alexander's sense of smell immediately heightened; he could smell the mole's comfortable animal scent, and that Gresley had eaten beef stew for dinner. He'd also be nearsighted for the duration. Now it was joined with him, the mole recreated every sound he heard, including his own speech. Gresley would be able to know exactly what he was doing.

"Don't mess up, Wellstone," Gresley said as the constable returned the stunned mole to the basket. The sound of Gresley's voice came, with a few-second delay, through the mole's mouth. It caused a strange, disorienting echo.

Alexander muttered an epithet, and the mole echoed it in its high, tinny voice.

* * *

A short time later, Alexander and his sole remaining retainer, Ulster, stood at the entrance to the Aria, the city's most exclusive brothel. Here went any vestige of a reputation he'd managed to hang onto.

Although it sat in the middle of the Nethers, a low-rent strip of ground between roguish Ploughman's Street and Mossy's Corner where the actors and poets lived, the Aria boasted an upper class clientele. This was due in part to the lure of the Aria's coach entrance, a narrow brick archway leading to a secluded courtyard, which allowed the

brothel's clients to maintain a semblance of privacy. A constant stream of coaches, black cloth muffling any revealing coats-of-arms on their doors, passed through the archway with the onset of nightfall.

“Well, let's go inside,” Alexander said.

Ulster, an imposing figure in his dark blue overcoat, grunted and shook his head. He didn't approve of the constables, or the work they required of his boss.

Alexander peered up at the five-story building as he ascended the front steps. He pulled the bell and waited, feeling exposed, for a full fifteen seconds before a maid opened the door, wide-eyed with surprise. “Don't want nothing,” she said, obviously assuming they were peddlers.

Alexander brushed by her. “I'm a client.” He should have insisted Gresley spring for a coach, for no client entered by the Aria's front door.

The maid shut the door behind Ulster, dropped a curtsey, then led them through an empty foyer and down a hallway to the back of the house. They entered a room small enough to feel cozy, well-furnished enough not to be tacky. A few men, one wearing a black velvet domino, sat at café tables with beautiful women, sipping drinks. The room smelled of several different perfumes. Four or five empty chaise longues sat scattered among potted ferns. A buxom woman sat behind a tasteful inlaid desk, watching them. The maid went to her, whispered something in her ear, dropped another curtsey, and left.

The woman studied Alexander for a moment, then made her way over. She wore, as if bowing to convention, a red velvet dress. Still, it suited her.

“Mr. Wellstone,” she said. “You haven't graced us with your presence before.”

“No, I haven’t.” Alexander wondered how she’d recognized him so quickly. His story must still be remembered, or perhaps he was more notorious than he’d thought.

The Madame introduced herself as Mrs. Barker. “Have a seat.” She gestured to an empty table. “Can I offer you and your man a drink?”

Alexander requested a glass of whiskey for himself, and an ale for Ulster. He considered leading Ulster to a chaise. He stifled a laugh at the thought of his retainer attempting to lounge in his overcoat and heavy boots, but decided being inside the Aria was already enough stress.

The curious gazes of the other patrons followed him as he and Ulster sat at the table. Forcing himself not to duck his chin, he directed a stony gaze back at them. Though he hadn’t seen himself in a looking glass larger than his two-inch square shaving mirror for at least a year, he knew if he did it would be like looking into a stranger’s face. Underneath his black hair his face was much thinner than it had been. His lips now pressed together into a mistrustful line. His nose, as fine as his mother’s had been, was the only thing that hadn’t changed. The other patrons’ avid gazes lingered on his face, and then they bent to whisper their shocked observations to their companions. Memories for scandal were long in the city of Lac-Carge. Alexander shrugged. It was just as it should be: a changed visage for his changed life.

Mrs. Barker brought them drinks and handed Alexander a menu printed on fine cardstock. He glanced over it, and blushed until he thought his cheeks would burst into flame. He set it face down on the table.

Ulster, meanwhile, glanced to the right and left, then held his hands around his glass mug and closed his eyes in concentration. A rime of frost edged up from his fingers. He took a long draught from his now-icy mug, sighed in contentment.

“Don’t get too cozy,” whispered Alexander. “I just want you to know which floor I’m on, then you can wait outside.”

Ulster nodded once, then took another draught.

After a few minutes, during which Alexander imagined Gresley standing in the nearby alley and listening in through the mole growing more and more anxious, Mrs. Barker returned. “Do you see anything you’d like?”

Alexander shrugged, trying for nonchalance. He needed to act like he did things like this all the time. “I prefer to see how things go,” he said. “I prefer to order off the menu.”

Mrs. Barker raised an eyebrow.

“My preferred companion,” Alexander continued, as if making conversation, “is malleable. Who is, shall we say, impressionable.”

“I quite agree,” she answered. “I know exactly what you mean.” She opened up a small purse, drew out a handful of embossed chips, and selected one. She let the rest fall back into the bag, and they sounded like rainfall. She placed the chip on the table, used one forefinger to slide it in front of Alexander, smiled at him, and went back to her desk.

Alexander glanced at the chip, then slid it into his waistcoat pocket. “Room 413,” he whispered. “Fourth floor.”

Ulster drained his mug before leaving. Alexander glanced at the Madame. She was watching him from heavy-lidded eyes. Damn. He’d taken a chance by bringing

Ulster in. It was not done to bring servants in, not done to arrive on foot instead of by coach, not done to order off the menu. He only hoped his reputation would explain any odd behavior.

He stood up, fighting the urge to jerk the bottom of his waistcoat, both because it would make him look nervous and because he wasn't certain its threadbare seams would withstand it. He headed for the winding wrought-iron staircase in the corner of the room, hoping it was the correct one. *Stop worrying*, he told himself. *They're expecting a man like you to act however he damn well pleases.*

He paused on the second floor to look along the hallway. Three burly men, each sporting a cudgel, watched over the closed doorways. Here was the muscle he'd been expecting. Alexander suppressed the urge to smile, and proceeded up the stairs. Two crisp hundred notes with the legend *Drawn from H. M. Bank* on the front sat in his pocket. Gresley had threatened him with various gruesome deaths if he didn't return the notes. "Show them if you need to," Gresley had said, "but don't hand them over. Remember, I'll be listening."

How could he forget?

He reached the fourth floor and walked down the narrow hallway, ignoring the guards, and found the door with the brass number 413. After taking a deep breath, he turned the knob and stepped inside.

A fire blazed on the small hearth and it was quite warm, he assumed it was to encourage the shedding of clothes and to discourage lingering. The room held little else than a large bed dressed in blue satin and a slip of a girl dressed in a white corset splayed atop it.

“How’re you?” the girl slurred, trying to sit up.

He strode forward and sat on the bed beside her, took her in his arms. He didn’t smell any liquor on her, but he did smell an acrid, unpleasant odor. With a forefinger and thumb, he pried one of her eyelids wide. Her pupils were dilated so much he couldn’t tell her eye color. She was drugged. Luck was with him.

The girl giggled. “Fresh, ain’t you,” she said, as if she thought this were part of his foreplay.

He lowered her onto the mattress.

“You’re farther along than I am,” he said. “I need a little something to catch up.” He didn’t know if he was being too obtuse for her in her present state, but she nodded as if well familiar with the request.

“Sam!” she bawled; a shockingly loud call to come from such a small body.

The door burst open, and one of the muscular guards entered with cudgel raised. He stopped when he saw no apparent problem. “What’s the problem, lamb chop?” he asked.

“John wants a pinch,” she said.

Sam looked Alexander over. “Got money?”

In answer, Alexander slipped the notes out of his pocket. Sam stepped forward and reached for them.

“That’s not good enough, I’m afraid.” Alexander put the money back in his pocket. “I’ll have to see it before I buy.”

The guard shrugged, took another look at the girl who was now snoring, and left. It would take quite a few minutes, as Sam would check with Mrs. Barker before he sold

him anything. She would sell it to him, though, he had no doubt. Sometimes the disreputable reputation the Queen and Gresley had given him actually worked in his favor.

Alexander walked to the single window, twitched the curtains aside and looked out. No sign of Ulster. He inspected the window, opened it and stuck his head out, then left it cracked open and sat on the edge of the mattress.

Sam came back in about five minutes with a small sack and threw it on the mattress. "Best we have."

Alexander teased the ties open and rubbed a pinch of the red powder between his thumb and forefinger. A bitter smell enveloped him. He brought his finger to his mouth, touched the tip of his tongue to it.

"Redleaf," he confirmed, his eyes watering from the acrid taste, "very pure."

Because he couldn't see any other way, Alexander handed over one of the notes. Sam touched his forelock.

The girl awoke, as if a bell had rung. She snatched the bag of redleaf from him, shook some onto a small bureau, and snatched some paraphernalia out of the top drawer. With a few flicks of a straight-edge razor she fashioned the powder into three small lines. She set a glass tube to one nostril and inhaled one line, then passed the tube to Alexander.

He had no choice. He took the tube from her, set it to his left nostril, and inhaled. The redleaf felt like sandpaper on his brain. With shaking fingers he held out the tube toward Sam.

He barely felt Sam's fingers pluck the glass tube out of his hand. Knees trembling, Alexander sat on the bed. His eyes felt wide open as if they were going to pop

out of his head and take flight and he was having a difficult time keeping from laughing out loud. By the time Sam had inhaled the third line the girl collapsed back on the bed and was snoring again. Sam muttered his thanks and left.

As soon as the door shut behind the man, Alexander leapt to his feet. He figured he had about two minutes before the constables raided the place. Shoving the sack of redleaf in his coat pocket he ran to the window, then turned and pulled the coverlet over the girl, half laughing at himself for his concern over her modesty. Still, he didn't want the constables to find her like this, poor little chit. He flung the window wide, sat on the ledge and swung his legs over.

The night air had grown colder. He shut the window behind him and hiked himself up on the steep dormer roof. There was no sign of Ulster so he'd have to make it out on his own. He sidled over to the nearest window. He could only hope the next room was unoccupied.

He eased open the window. A puff of overheated, lavender scented air escaped.

"...really think The Rose will be left so unguarded?" a man was saying. His voice, big and gruff and confident, barreled out into the night air.

Alexander started to sidle away when a second voice answered.

"Yes." The woman's voice was silky. It had a mesmerizing effect on Alexander. He found he couldn't move. "The Banian ambassador's ship will be met by seven companies as an honor guard. This will certainly leave the barracks depleted. And The Rose will be arriving back from school the same day. She'll be travelling under very light guard. They have a false sense of security," and here the woman gave a gloating laugh. "They think all roads in Ethium are safe."

“She’s definitely taking the land route?” the first voice demanded.

“Of course! The *Telma*’s not been sent out from the quays. You can still see the stacks from the High Bridge. She’d have to have been launched two days ago to make the voyage in time, for she’s too big to go up the Ruina, and must go out to sea. The princess, I am told, suffers from motion sickness.” The woman’s voice exuded a miasma of life-force, a cloud of intention, meant to influence anyone within hearing.

“So, where do we do it?”

“There’s only one possibility. The Overoad gap –”

The voice stopped. The miasma withdrew, as if the woman inside the room had shifted her attention somewhere else. Alexander shook himself, able to move again. A banging sounded from below. Gresley’s constables had arrived.

A large, dark shape loomed up over him. Ulster, who’d learned his balance on the decks of wartime frigates, stood on the steep dormer as if it were level ground.

“Raid!” someone screamed from deep in the bowels of the Aria. There was a moment of complete silence, then chaos ensued.

“The window!” the silky voice hissed. Alexander inched away from it even as the occupants tore the curtains aside.

Ulster, however, never panicked in these situations. He knew his boss would outlive his usefulness to the constables if he was identified as a mole, and that might mean a return to Whiting Prison, or worse. The best defense, as Ulster always said, was a quick escape.

Quick as a heron diving, Ulster snatched Alexander’s arm and almost tore it out of its socket pulling him to his feet. Alexander followed him in a skulking run over the

roof to the edge of the building where a grappling hook trailing a thick rope clung to the corner. Ulster threw a pair of gloves to Alexander, who, due to his mole-induced shortsightedness fumbled and almost dropped them, then swung himself over the edge.

Alexander tried to control his jittery shaking from the redleaf. Gresley had made him try the drug yesterday in Constable House so he'd know what it tasted like, and he had detested the experience. The drug caused hyper-alertness, an effect he didn't particularly need while standing on a steep, high roof. Tonight, the drug was coursing like swift fire through his veins. This batch must be very pure indeed.

Ulster disappeared over the edge of the roof, the rope hissing through his gloved hands. As Alexander turned to follow he saw two forms skulking over the roof, following them. They'd left some blood in the water, and sharks were trailing them.

He wrapped a coil around his arm and played the rope through his gloved hands to descend, forcing himself not to look down until the ground jolted his feet. Ulster had chosen the spot well, an out of the way, misshapen corner of the building, right near the eight-foot garden wall. "Got company," Ulster said, looking up.

Alexander saw two hazy figures huddled over the rope, preparing to come down. Since he was linked to the mole he was too nearsighted to be sure who they were. "Are they who I think they are?" he asked, squinting up.

Ulster nodded.

There had been something unclean about the miasma surrounding the woman's voice. Someone wicked had been in the Aria tonight, and he didn't relish meeting her face-to-face in this out of the way corner. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Ulster grabbed Alexander by the waist and hoisted him up until Alexander was able to grasp the top of the garden wall. As he straddled the wall he glimpsed the two figures, now halfway down the rope. To his chagrin, a pack of black and gold clad constables, two carrying lanterns, appeared on the corner of the roof. They shouted for everyone to halt, a few lifting long slender shapes. The constables carried the new repeating rifles, and in a few moments they stood a good chance of being hit by a bullet.

Alexander grasped the top of the wall, swung his legs over, and let himself down to his full extension, then let go. He landed hard and pressed against the outside wall, swearing. He'd ripped his trousers and scraped himself all along his calf. As soon as Ulster landed heavily beside him they crept along the alleyway toward Ploughman's Street that ran along the back of the Aria. When they reached the street Ulster noticed Alexander limping, and wouldn't go another step until he'd inspected the cut in the flickering light of the streetlamps. He declared the wound messy, but not bad, which Alexander found difficult to believe as it had started to burn like fire, the sensation heightened by the redleaf. Ulster put his hand over Alexander's skin and the next moment a soothing cold dampened the pain. It was very convenient to have a cold-drake as a retainer, especially in the rough-and-tumble business he'd been forced into the past four years.

"The missus'll take care of it when you get home," Ulster said.

They crossed Ploughman's Street, trotted down a diagonal alley, and emerged in the midst of Gresley's men. Alexander felt sudden anger. He shouldered through them and strode up to Gresley, who was inspecting the mole.

“You cut it too close,” he said, hearing the redleaf talking through him. “Your constables almost caught me.”

In a nearby basket the mole repeated what he’d said, causing the strange high-pitched humming of feedback.

“Ah.” Gresley glanced up at him. “Yes. Good job, Wellstone. Where are the notes I gave you?”

Alexander exhaled through his nose. “I had to give over one hundred to get the redleaf. You’ll either find it in the possession of Sam, one of their hired muscle, or Mrs. Barker.” He held out the remaining money and the bag. Gresley gestured to his newly-promoted second in command, Greene. Sporting an unfashionable haircut underneath his black hat, Greene grinned at Alexander as he took the bag and money. He wore street clothes, like Gresley, but unlike Gresley his new suit fitted him ill, as if his mother had made it instead of a tailor.

Gresley peered at Alexander. “You’re staying until I recover the money.”

His connection to the mole combined with the effects of the redleaf was beginning to overwhelm him. His heightened sense of smell grated on his nerves. Each second his olfactory nerves clamored for attention, bringing him needless information about everything around him. “At least break the connection,” he said.

With an impatient movement Gresley encircled Alexander’s throat with his hands. Pain seared across Alexander’s brain like a netting of fire, and from its basket the mole squealed again. Groaning, Alexander rubbed his forehead. His sight had gone blurry. Curse Gresley, the bastard *did* cause the pain on purpose. He shuffled through the crowd

of constables, finding Ulster more by his height than anything else, and leaned up against the wall of a building beside him.

A constable dashed down the alleyway and careened into his fellows.

“Yes?” Gresley snapped.

The constable puffed. “Sir,” he said after a moment, then “sir,” again, as if he couldn’t get anything else out.

Two more constables came down the alley bearing something large between them wrapped in a grey blanket. It looked like, of all things, a corpse. Alexander rubbed his eyes, trying to see, but all he succeeded in doing was to blur his vision more.

The constables put whatever it was down and one flipped open the blanket. There was an outcry, and swearing.

Ulster grunted.

“What is it?” Alexander asked Ulster.

“Body. A constable’s. Horrifying look on its face.”

Everyone was exclaiming and shouting at once and Gresley had to yell twice for quiet. He demanded to know what happened.

“Don’t know, sir,” a constable answered. “We found nine of them, down by the rope, where *they*,” the constable paused “escaped.”

“Are they all looking at us?” Alexander muttered to Ulster.

Ulster nodded.

“Didn’t your constables mention that two Aria patrons escaped right behind us?”

Alexander called out.

Gresley walked forward until Alexander could see him clearly in the lantern light. “No one mentioned it. Not even you, Wellstone.”

His recalcitrant brain skittering like an unbroken horse, Alexander thought back through their conversation. He shrugged. “I didn’t think I needed to. A whole group of constables was following them.”

“Nine, would you say?” Gresley’s voice held something Alexander didn’t like. “I’ll tell you one thing, Wellstone. I’ll find out who did this. And whoever it is, they’ll pay for it.” The Chief Constable’s attention was pulled away by renewed shouting.

“Chief!” Greene bawled from near the corpse.

Gresley rushed back over to the crowd of constables. Alexander moved forward a few steps until he could see. When he caught sight of the corpse, however, he wished he hadn’t. Its belly was roiling, as if its stomach had tidal patterns. Fascination overriding horror, Alexander fell to one knee, bending down to peer between the constables’ legs. When the corpse’s mouth opened, the constables leaned forward and blocked his view.

“What’s happening?” Ulster asked behind him.

“I don’t...” Alexander was interrupted by shouts of horror and revulsion. The constables scattered back from the body. Large, shiny beetles erupted from the corpse’s open mouth. The beetles ran in all directions, in regimental lines like a conquering army. One line moved straight toward Alexander and Ulster. Alexander scuttled backward on his hands and feet to let them pass. “Perhaps we should catch one?” he suggested.

In answer, Ulster stomped one with his boot. The beetle flattened with perfect symmetry. Its fellows rushed over it and disappeared into the cracks and crevices of the city.

“Thank you.” Alexander said. He glanced over at the constables, who looked too horrorstruck to be very observant at the moment. “I wonder if you would try to see where our two friends from the roof went after they did... whatever they did with the beetles.”

Ulster was away before Alexander could warn him not to get within hearing distance of the small one. Ulster would realize they were dangerous. Alexander picked up the squashed beetle with his handkerchief and tucked it into his pocket.