

Prologue

Praça do Rossio, Lisbon, 1720 AD

Outside the small window of his dormitory cell the frost stuck to the masonry and signage of the various storefronts in the market yet again.

Being told to bundle up at dawn in order to pick up some highly sought-after supplies was not an ideal start to the morning. Unfortunately, by the time Lisbon's bells started to ring out in calls for Terce it would become difficult to track down some of the more exotic goods.

He had served the hospital faithfully for over three years without any major complaint, but this recent expectation that his patient receive specific wares from the market was becoming an issue. It would normally not have caused the monk any real concern—indeed, he tended to rise early without any encouragement from the abbot—but the daily task also happened to coincide with the coldest winter anyone could remember in living memory.

November was always a time of persistent rain in the Portuguese capital and to be expected. Bitter cold draughts of wind though, along with the veil of ice draped across the city's stonework which caused one to slip, were more difficult to endure.

Baltasar das Chagas, lay-brother of *Santa Casa da Misericórdia* and former shepherd of many years, resigned himself to the unfortunate circumstances and ducked out of the archway into the open plaza.

Within seconds the howling wind purged any remaining sleep from his eyes and he awoke in full to

the day ahead.

Immediately, he began to weigh the coin purse at his side and to consider the list of items the Englishman had given him the night before. Normally any beggars or urchins being cared for in the various quarters of the hospital would receive whatever daily fare was provided for them, and that was the end of it. Baltasar was not used to fetching expensive produce, spices nor any number of other special requests for a guest of the *Hospital Real de Todos-os-Santos*, let alone when prices tended to be more than double the usual rate given the current weather and time of year.

Eggs, coarse bread and honey were some of the usual staples and easy enough to come by. Saffron from the fields around Basel in the lands of the Swiss, or oil paints made from lapis lazuli imported directly from Venice were another matter entirely. There was a reason why Affonso Carneiro, the brother responsible for the wing Baltasar helped with since joining the brotherhood, had readily agreed to permit such unusual requests from the newly arrived guest: The *Ingles* was without question a man of significant wealth.

Despite being utterly mad, or perhaps merely rattled from his life-threatening experience, there could be no denying the man's status. So numbed by the cold and lost in thought was Baltasar that he didn't even realise he had crossed the *Praça do Rossio*, and was being hastened over to the shop's entryway by its owner. The glowing light promised warmth, and Baltasar quickened his step to cover the remaining distance of the large, snow-covered plaza.

'Irmão, come along quickly,' ushered the shopkeep with a degree of urgency in his voice. 'You will catch your

death outdoors in such weather, and wearing such modest attire. We really must get you to try on one of the newly arrived velvet basques, my friend. A nice pair of leather boots from *Toscana* would serve you better in such cold as well.'

'Good morning to you, Symao,' quipped a shivering Baltasar in response. 'I can tell you've started early with your usual attempts to dispose of these trinkets on some gullible soul.'

'Oh you wound me Baltasar,' chuckled the rotund middle-aged man, adorned in his usual outfit consisting of embroidered fabrics in at least three to four different colours. Today Symao was adorned in no less than five, and looked even more like a gaudy merchant than usual.

'You know all too well I sell only the finest provisions and articles to both the hospital and the *Palácio dos Estaus*. What have you brought me this morning then, hmm?'.

Symao rubbed his hands together in anticipation of seeing which foreign bauble or bit of cloth would be offered for barter this time.

'Well, that all depends on how many of the items you can manage from this list,' replied Baltasar as he handed over the piece of bandaging which the patient had used to quickly scribble down his desired goods.

Symao's eyes quickly scanned the list at first but then gradually slowed. Baltasar knew he was trying to decipher the last few requests, which had come out as little more than chicken scratches upon the linen wrap, before Louis had once again fallen into a deep slumber.

That was the Englishman's name insofar as the hospital could tell, although he said it with a strange drawl and had not revealed a surname of any kind. The man spoke Portuguese quite well, and as a result

Baltasar was able to communicate with him.

However, Louis' manner of speaking was peculiar. It was almost as if the man had learned the language second-hand through an uneducated tutor, and one from *Brasil* rather than Portugal for that matter. Still, it allowed for them to discuss basic needs and to converse with one another.

Baltasar was not one to judge folk for their coarse language or lack of refinement either, having spent the majority of his life in the countryside. He remembered quite clearly the looks of derision and occasional barb thrown in his direction when he first moved to the capital.

‘The only thing I don’t have here currently is the gooseberry medicine from Macao, but I remember my friend Camillo from Génova saying he expected a shipment in sometime over the next few months,’ said Symao as he gestured with the bandage to the copper bin next to his desk.

The shopkeep tossed it away then he continued, ‘the foodstuffs, paints and luxuries he is after won’t be cheap. The blue pigment itself is worth...’

Baltasar placed the finely stitched silk shirt down upon the desk. It was of the softest cream hue with what appeared to be gold lace at the cuffs and collars, and the neckline also sported numerous expensive-looking decorations hewn from what looked to be large, cut gems. He was no expert on fashion nor the latest trends at court, but even Baltasar could tell the shirt was the type of thing only royalty or the wealthiest lords might wear, and even then only when ceremony demanded it.

The trader’s eyes practically bulged out of his head, and this was a man who was accustomed to trading in

the finer luxuries of Lisbon. For all of his affected wealth and tendency to the extravagant, the shopkeep had not been idly boasting.

Symao de Briho was indeed one of the most reputable merchants in the entire city and member of the *Conselho da Fazenda*, or royal finance council, and could be trusted to find any manner of wares. If it was for sale in Portugal, this man knew where to find it along with the item's exact price.

'I forgot to mention, he also wants a ship of some kind constructed and to be seaworthy by the spring,' mused Baltasar with a wry smile on his face.

'I can certainly contact my colleagues in Belém and see what they think about the latest ship designs,' replied Symao.

'The vessel need not be overly-expensive, but I think a galleon would be reasonable considering the value of trade,' said the lay-brother while preparing to leave the shop.

It was unlike his friend to forgo a quibble over the authenticity of fine metals or fabrics. Baltasar had known him to often bite into gold coins or examine needlework closely prior to shaking on a trade.

Nonetheless, this time Symao simply nodded as if in a daze.

'I'll have young Martim gather the items and bring them along to your chamber this afternoon,' said the beaming shop owner.

'That would be a great help. My thanks, as always. Hopefully this will keep Louis satisfied for at least a few days,' replied Baltasar as he shook the man's hand and turned to leave.

The former shepherd couldn't help but laugh and shake his head, as he pulled up his hood to venture

across the wide square yet again. Just before closing the door behind him, a voice shouted from behind the entrance to the shop:

‘Tell that invalid he will be paying for any rigging or cannon out of his own purse.’



As Baltasar emerged into the area of Lisbon commonly referred to as the *Rossio* he took a moment to adjust his hood and look out over the various storefronts. The detailed stonework and intricate carving which constituted the entry into the *Palácio dos Estaus* never failed to make him pause for a moment. Despite being home to the Inquisition for almost two centuries, the architecture was somehow both elegant, delicate and powerful at the same time. The buildings of Lisbon radiated majesty and prosperity, and the winter storms blanketed them in a calming layer of frost.

Baltasar was no longer a young man as his sixtieth year approached, but he still had enough vigour to withstand a few strong gusts of wind. Thoughts of his youth spent in the hillside made the man smile in fond remembrance. His superior Affonso had been quite sure Baltasar must have been raised in the middle of nowhere due to his gawking upon first arriving into the city.

To be fair, that wasn’t far from the truth.

It wasn’t that he had never been to towns before, as the former-shepherd had often taken wool for sale to a number of larger settlements throughout Estremadura, but nothing quite compared to the scale of the capital.

Suddenly, a faint light became visible from across the plaza, flickering from a window above the colonnades

and main gate leading into the *Hospital Real de Todos-os-Santos*.

He finished preparing for the quick jaunt across the square, now that it was likely Louis had stirred from his fitful sleep. Either that, or one of the brothers was checking the dormitory and the comfort of its current residents due to the unusually cold weather. With a sigh, Baltasar das Chagas, brother and attendant to the unfortunate of Lisbon, began a brisk walk while keeping his head tucked into his chest.

‘Where’s my damned shirt, you useless little shit?’

Baltasar heard the cup smash against the wall to the cell before he even managed to finish climbing the small spiral staircase. He quickened his step in order to try and diffuse whatever nonsense was taking place in the small dorm.

‘Queen Maria Francisca gave me that shirt nigh on sixty years ago when I was still a young man,’ growled Louis towards a clearly uncomfortable young attendant by the name of Gaspar.

‘That truly is an incredible honour and achievement, to have been granted such an exquisite gift by *Dona Maria*,’ Baltasar piped up as he strode into the room.

‘It was reward for my having safely escorted her majesty from the family home in Paris all the way here in order to be wed. I remember at one point having to shield her with my own body, as I fought off no less than twenty Basque bandits with my own bare hands,’ Louis practically yelled, while shaking both hands out in front of him. ‘Your fellow brother here has some quick and nimble fingers, I think. Now where is that shirt?’

Baltasar caught Gaspar glancing over at him with shoulders shrugged and a puzzled expression.

‘Oh, you misunderstand me, *Launcelot*,’ quipped Baltasar with an amused twist at the edges of his mouth. ‘I meant to say that there is no chance you are a day over forty, so for the queen to have bestowed such a gift on you two decades prior to your birth seems rather, how shall I put this... odd?’

‘I told him I have no idea what he’s on about,’ Gaspar said in his usual painful-sounding voice.

The lad was on the cusp of manhood, and already his voice was beginning to break. Between his thin hair, unimpressive build and deep scars resulting from a childhood bout of red plague, Gaspar had enough to occupy his thoughts without this madness. Baltasar ushered him out of the room and began to wet a linen cloth to place over the Englishman’s forehead.

‘Did I tell you about the time old Sam Bellamy and myself fought off an entire Barbary squadron near Tripoli? The two of us, drunk on *Moselman* blood, kept the wolves at bay for days while the fleet regrouped,’ Louis yawned as he stretched out his back in the small cot. ‘Well, on that and the rum of our good Queen Anne as well. They say the leader of the corsairs was a relative of that Murat Reis who raided Ireland when my Da’ was still on the seas.’

‘I see you’re more in the mood for tall tales than hearing about your list,’ Baltasar replied while gently placing the cloth to the man’s head and settling him back to rest. ‘Louis, you were the one who sent me over to Symao at the crack of dawn with that shirt, in case you have forgotten. You were quite clear on the point and told me it was of no consequence. The look on the merchant’s face told a different story though, he seemed to think it an item of very great value.’

‘I’ve told you before, I’m not some bloody

Frenchman prancing about in a powder top and painted up like a harlot,' Louis muttered as he ceased to resist the gentle compress.

'Yes, I know, but I can never seem to wrap my tongue around it properly,' Baltasar said gently as he finished folding the fabric and lowered himself into a stool at the side of the bed. '*Lyu-wees* is about as close as I seem to get.'

'That was a better one,' the wiry foreigner chuckled.

'Well, I know how it feels to constantly hear one's name spoken incorrectly,' retorted Baltasar.

'One of Symao's staff from Sicily called me *Bartolomeo* for about the first year after I moved here. Thankfully, he is away trading in Constantinople until next summer, so I am at peace for the time being.'

'It's spelled L-e-w-i-s back home, if that's any help,' said the thin and leathery-faced sailor, for there could be no doubt this was a man who had spent many a year at sea.

From the weather-beaten and cracked fingers, to the countless scars across the man's back, *Lewis* had the telltale look of someone who had lived through difficult times aboard ship. Baltasar had not known much of sailors before moving into the capital after his land and flocks were seized, but enough trips for provisions down to the docks had quickly opened his eyes.

Lewis had an easy smile, but there was a fire behind his eyes that promised danger as well.

If the Englishman had been slightly shorter and not quite so light of feature he would easily have been taken for a crew member returning from *Brasil*. This was what perplexed Baltasar since the man's arrival: Lewis showed all the typical manners of a lower crew member

aboard a trade cog or galleon, but his expensive clothing and overall confidence suggested something altogether different and more menacing.

More sure of his own status and power, that was how Baltasar thought of it. The Englishman was quick to rage, but equally quick to laugh, and he had yet to show Baltasar any real hostility, other than an obvious bit of light-hearted mockery on occasion.

‘Actually, that may help indeed. My letters are not exactly worthy of His Holiness, but brother Diogo was assigned as my tutor when I first entered service to the hospital. I will try to bear it in mind, now do you want to hear about your list or not?’

‘Yes, yes of course,’ cackled Lewis as he folded his hands across his stomach. ‘Just be thankful I refuse to go by my mother’s preferred way of saying my name. I thought that a fine enough trade in return for your tender care since those two louts dragged me up from the shore. Did you manage to procure everything as I requested? Your superior assured me there would be no problems considering my display of generosity yesterday.’

Baltasar recounted his discussion with Symao de Briho and said, ‘the other matter you mentioned is also being looked into. He seemed to think an older galleon might serve, although he was adamant that you pay for any lines or sailcloth yourself.’

Lewis waved away the latter point as if it was no reason for concern. Suddenly, a cold and piercing look came over his face. He sat up slightly and turned to look Baltasar directly in the eye.

‘Do I look like a fool to you?’

‘I... no, you look like a man who has been through a very rough spell, and someone who could use God’s

mercy until you are recovered.'

'No, no, not that...' said Lewis tersely, 'I mean, do you think me mad, my friend? You of all people should be able to tell, having spent the most time with me since I washed up here.'

Baltasar looked at the man and carefully weighed his response.

'Well, you did tell me last night about how you once stole a sea nymph from Neptune and have her stored away in a cave outside of...where was it?'

'Up in St. Kilda,' Lewis replied, 'and so what?'

'Well, wouldn't you say that's a bit of a peculiar tale? Some would likely call it mad.'

Lewis visibly relaxed and grinned practically from ear-to-ear.

'Good. If it has been enough to convince you of my madness, then I am sure the likes of Gaspar have no doubt. I can assure you Baltasar, I am in my right mind. You have been a good friend to me these last few weeks, and it will not be forgotten.'

'Well, as much as running your errands every morning has become tedious, I do enjoy listening to your ramblings,' Baltasar replied, as he quickly poked his head out into the corridor to make sure no one was eavesdropping.

There had been a young lad by the name of Bruno being cared for in the cell across from the Englishman's; the boy had been skin and bones resulting from severe malnourishment, but Baltasar had not seen him since *Vespers* the night before last.

Lewis fidgeted on the bed so that his leg hung free off its side. The man could never seem to stay still for very long, and he would often scratch at the cot's frame or on the window sill.

‘At any rate, I’d wager we have a bit of time before your friends get in touch concerning our arrangement,’ he sighed. ‘Have I ever told you about the time I single-handedly defeated a French ship of the line? My fists were raw to the bone by the time I was finished.’

Baltasar rolled his eyes and poured himself a cup of wine from the flagon which was sitting on the bedside table.

‘No, I can’t say I’ve heard this one.’

‘Well, maybe it didn’t happen exactly like that, but we’ve got some time to pass so let me tell you. If any of the other brothers happen by you can just tell them you are attending to my needs,’ Lewis grinned.

‘Fair enough, it beats being out in that miserable weather,’ replied Baltasar with a nod to the frost-covered window pane.

‘Alright, but before I begin you really should be thanking me,’ Lewis said.

‘For the blessing of your esteemed company on such a cold evening?’

‘No, for not demanding that you use the name my mother gave me,’ Lewis chuckled.

The Portuguese brother of the Holy House of Misery raised an eyebrow.

‘It’s *Llewellyn*.’

Baltasar opened his mouth as if to speak, but after a moment’s hesitation he decided to close it.

Even attempting to sound out the name would have felt embarrassing. Instead, he bowed deeply in a gesture of gratitude. Lewis, caught off guard by his friend’s overly-dramatic gesture, slapped a hand against his knee and laughed.

‘You’re welcome. English father and a Welsh mother, you see. I imagine we have a few days before a half-decent crew can be assembled as well, even if your Symao comes through with the ship. That gives us plenty of time to drink and exchange tales of our youth.’

‘Most likely only a few hours, as you forget one important thing,’ Baltasar said with a grin. ‘This is *Lisboa*, my friend. If I threw this cup out of the window I would probably hit a sailor on the head.’

He made as if to toss the cup out of the small dormitory window for added effect.

‘Between Symao’s connections and your generous offer of coin, you will likely have your crew turned out before the call to *Nones*.’

‘Fair enough,’ Lewis replied. ‘Where shall I begin then?’

Baltasar gave the Englishman an exasperated sigh, then stood up and walked over to the cell’s small entrance.

‘Hold that thought, I’ll be back in a moment.’

After about a minute passed Baltasar returned with an expensive-looking glass bottle.

‘I’d been saving this, but now’s as good a time as any,’ he said. ‘A friend gifted me this last year after I helped treat his burns from a fire at his tannery. It’s Venetian glass, but what’s inside is far more valuable.’

Following a slight struggle to open the bottle without breaking it, the Portuguese elder poured a dark liquid into their goblets.

‘I hope you like good *vinho do Porto*.’

Lewis smiled and offered his cup.

After both men had sampled the sweet drink they

returned to their relaxed positions. Baltasar leaned forward, and in a quiet, almost conspiratorial tone, he began to speak:

‘I’ve heard all your tales of dragons or fleets of Berbers. How about we start at the beginning?’

Chapter 1

Southwark, London, 1678 AD

My arse was on fire.

This was by far the worst thrashing I had received since being deposited at the workhouse several years earlier. I will admit the beating had been well-deserved, although at the time all I could do was run all the way to the Thames to avoid the other orphans seeing the tears well up in my eyes.

That would have ended with even more problems, particularly if that brute Will was involved.

It turns out refusing a chance to interview for an apprenticeship does not sit well with the men responsible for your care. Telling the alderman in charge of governing our employment ‘I don’t want to be a fucking apothecary’s boy’ to his face definitely didn’t do me any favours.

I stopped to catch my breath by the rubble of the old Globe Theatre and looked out across the river lost in thought, trying to take my mind off the pulsing pain in my backside. These days there was not much rubble left, as lofts and new structures had gradually been built over its charred remains in the decades following its closure. I’d never been to any of the shows since it was torn down before I was born, not that Cripplegate and its staff would ever have taken us anyway.

Prayer, daily coarse bread and shelter for the nights were about as far as charity extended. The rest of London may have been in a festive mood, with the

recent war against the Dutch concluded in England's favour and King Charles gaining lands in the New World, but the men I answered to were of old puritan stock who had managed to avoid the purges a decade ago following the collapse of the Commonwealth.

Charles the Second, by the Grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith and so on, was by most accounts a fun-loving ruler with a sense of humour, even if my stone-faced carers felt differently. As far as they were concerned, the king was emptying England's coffers and more concerned with the latest fashions than the good of the people.

Still, as I gingerly sat down on the bank of the Thames I couldn't help but feel melancholy about my lot in life. The country was recovering from the plague which had carried off my father almost ten years ago, and London was in the process of being rebuilt following the Great Fire which swept the city shortly thereafter.

It was during the fire that I was rendered an orphan; my mother was caught underneath a collapsed roof whilst out visiting her friend Marjorie who worked in the Royal Exchange. So, while the rest of the city reveled along with its 'Merry Monarch' as Charles was affectionately titled, I just felt a profound sense of grief over the loss of my past life.

Here I was, a boy of fourteen without a farthing to his name and belt-lashes across his back from years of strict discipline. I picked up a shard of what must have been pottery at some point and tossed it into the rushing water.

Don't worry lad, someday we'll travel to see my suppliers in

Venice or Genoa, and after that we can visit the West Indies to see where your grandfather defeated the Papists.

I grimaced as the words from my father's letter echoed in my mind. His name had been Richard Frobisher, a fairly well-to-do trader of textiles and imports from the Italian cities, but his claims of descent from the great explorer Martin Frobisher of Good Queen Bess' court had always been mocked behind his back. My father held no written evidence of his connection to Sir Martin, and most of his initial wealth had come through marriage to my mother Gwen whose family owned extensive farmsteads in service to the March lords on the Welsh border.

Most in the community simply dismissed his claims as an attempt to puff himself up as an exotic merchant rather than a simple, everyday trader of linens and wool. I'd been too young to recall his words for myself —both my parents were killed in the blazing inferno when I was two years old—but reading over his various pieces of correspondence always conjured images of my parents in my mind.

One of my most valuable possessions was a small portrait of them painted years before I was born, but to my eyes they looked like any other man and woman portrayed in countless frames throughout the city. I tried not to grind my teeth as my head swam with a mixture of pain, anger at my father's empty promises, and at the fact no one on my mother's side of the family had accepted to take me in following their deaths.

It was a vicious cycle, as after every pang of loathing I felt towards my parents the guilt quickly followed.

That I had never really known them was not the point; it didn't change the fact my life had been stripped

away from me before I had even learned to walk. But, such thoughts were always eventually replaced by ones of remorse. I would chide myself for blaming them, as if they somehow chose to die of the sickness or in the blaze a year later.

I stood up to take some of the pressure off my bruises and tried to ignore the hazy memories of my younger childhood which seemed especially relentless this afternoon. Tom and Michael would be expecting me in about an hour and I needed to make my way down to the docklands. Tom and his father had just finished building a small punt boat and we were desperately wanting him to take us out fishing.

My knowledge of boats was limited to having tagged along with my friends on the occasional day's work, but Tom and Michael had both grown up on the banks of the Thames. Well, Tom's family had moved up from Dorset when he was about three years old, due to his father's line of work. They both came from a long line of coastal fishermen and I would often sit wide-eyed at stories of close encounters with pirates out of Barbary.

Michael's father in particular often told his story of being taken prisoner by a corsair but later being freed in exchange for fresh water when the Moorish ship ran low on supplies and happened upon a French cog. His captors had underestimated the amount of water needed for their raid due to a series of storms delaying their return, and after a few days of thirst were unsure about attacking the vessel directly.

Instead, they pulled up alongside the much slower flat-bottomed cog and demanded water in exchange for Stephen, for that was his name, along with two other prisoners.

At first the French sailors were hesitant, but, between Stephen's promises of catching them a healthy supply of mullet or cod and the cutlasses of the corsairs, the Frenchmen finally agreed to terms. They were en route to the estuary of the Thames laden with fabrics and wines out of Burgundy, so Stephen was able to eventually make his way home to London.

Tom's father, Johnathan Coram, had been employed as a pilot for several years due to his knowledge as a mariner, but his stories tended to lack the flair and sense of detail. However, Stephen Bollard could always be relied upon to tell a good tale from his days at sea. Thoughts of their fathers' stories replaced my earlier melancholy mood with one of impatience as I rushed down to the Pool of London and its swaying mass of ships. Part of me always felt a mixture of nervousness and excitement when I thought about the Barbary corsairs, but the town criers had assured us there had been no major reports of raids against English towns nor vessels for years.

Even so, we would stick to fishing up and down the river rather than tempt fate. Well, that and punts were not exactly meant for coastal waters, let alone the high seas. The heat from my caning was starting to ease off and I remembered around this time my friends' shacks usually had a supply of fresh fish and whelks brought in. As hunger quickly took over my senses I raced towards the docks with a head filled with stories of far-off lands.



'Look at the state of you, Lewis,' tutted Bethany Coram, as I tried to hide my awkward gait upon arriving

at Tom's home on the river.

It was small and ramshackle with his father's fishing boat moored at the end of their small pier, but I loved the place. Tom and Michael were both fortunate in their families getting along well for the most part. There was always a warm and welcoming atmosphere as their mothers both doted on me. Michael, who was actually a French boy I met at Cripplegate named Michel, had been given a job assisting with mundane tasks for the fishermen three years ago.

He had connected with Tom's family through his service and they took a liking to the hard-working young Frenchman. Eventually, they proposed that one of the neighbouring families which had been unable to conceive a child take him in through adoption. Ever since the two families had become inseparable.

I stopped in the battered doorway and gave an extravagant bow one of the clerks had taught us back at the workhouse. Apparently it was expected in his work around Westminster when dealing with certain clients, but I always did it as a bit of a jest with Tom's family. It usually had the effect of making them roll their eyes or chuckle, although once it did end with me getting a playful boot up the backside from Tom's father when I was slightly too 'mature' in my manners.

That was the last time I took Bethany's hand and kissed it, even though I had just meant it as a joke to lift their spirits on a particularly wet and dreary afternoon.

'Good afternoon, Mother Coram,' I said.

'Welcome, *Sirrah* Lewis of the Golden Fleece,' Bethany returned with a mock courtesy of her own.

'I am here to obtain some pottage, preferably with some cod and onion.'

Bethany laughed at my formal language and the

sound lifted my spirits even further. Alderman Samuel had never neglected my education, for all of his other faults. My earlier sadness was almost forgotten in the hope of a hot meal and a day spent on the river. I tried never to take advantage of their hospitality, but a couple of meals per week never seemed to bother the Corams.

In fact, more often than not they seemed eager to have me join them for supper. Tom's stepmother, she had married John shortly following the death of his first wife in 1671, was always unhappy with my weight and would ask about the meals at Cripplegate regularly.

His father might pipe up and mumble about another mouth to feed, but he never once begrimed me a place at their table and I got on well with the man. He could be stern and irritable, but John Coram also had a quick wit and often made us laugh with jokes which left his wife and daughters looking scandalised.

‘Well, if you’ve brought some chocolate, coffee or fresh banana then I’m sure we can arrange something,’ she replied with an amused twist at the corner of her mouth.

At that we both burst out laughing and I sat on one of the stools by the counter where she was busy peeling onions and boiling water on a hob.

‘I’m afraid I’m fresh out, my Lady, prices at Leicester Fields’ markets are still high from the war.’

Bethany chopped down on the end of an onion with a grin. She knew I had never set foot in that newly-built and wealthy neighbourhood in my life.

‘How did the interview with the apothecary go?’

I shifted on my stool and looked down at the counter trying to look ashamed.

‘That bad, was it?’

I rubbed my backside and grumbled, ‘I never even had the bloody interview. Alderman Samuel gave me a walloping when I refused the chance at an apprenticeship.’

‘For a lad who knows his letters and has a mind far beyond his years, you can be a fool Lewis Frobisher.’

‘Well, you’re probably right Mum. Still, I wasn’t about to spend the rest of my days mixing *Venice treacle* and *oil of vitriol* for one of those dorbels who left my Da’ to God’s mercy.’

Bethany turned to me, her expression a mixture of sadness and reproach.

‘That’s unjust Lewis, and you know as much. There’s no cure for the pestilence, no matter what the charlatans selling bottles of cold tea would have you think. Look, I’m not saying it was punishment for your father as I never knew the man, but sickness is just part of the world we live in. I miss Sarah every day, as does my John, but we have made our peace with God.’

I felt genuinely shameful upon hearing this. In my own moment of bitterness I had forgotten about Sarah Coram. She had passed away from the blood cough slightly before I got to know Tom through my friendship with Michael. By all accounts she had been a cheerful lass with a quick smile, and the thought I would never get to meet her brought back my earlier sense of regret.

‘I... I’m sorry, Mum,’ I said. ‘Sometimes I get stuck in my own mind and forget other people suffered as well.’

Just as Mother Coram let out a sigh and was about to respond, a blur of colour and noise exploded into the doorway and leapt on to my pained back.

‘Oi, that hurts,’ I winced. ‘Who’s this imp?’

‘She’s a little changeling who’s about to be sent back to her goblin kin, that’s who she is,’ chuckled Bethany with a wry smile. ‘You should be out helping your sister with the braiding.’

‘Lucy, have you been sloth in your duties? Well, it’s off to the Tower with you,’ I roared at the girl as I swung her off my back and over my shoulder.

At five years of age, Lucy Coram was the spitting image of her elder sister Jane. However, while Lucy was quick to laugh and possessed a cheeky smile, Jane, who was twelve years old and closer to Tom, was often cold and aloof. I sometimes wondered to myself if she resented the rest of her kin after Sarah’s passing, in some way blaming them for the loss.

Tom had often told us how much Jane used to follow at the eldest Coram daughter’s heels and try to copy her in every manner. Neither Tom nor his elder sister were unkind to their stepmother though, it was more that the elder daughter refused to show warmth to anyone else.

‘Put me down!’ Lucy giggled as she squirmed and beat against my back. ‘Jane says we need more flax for the netting.’

I gently placed the grinning auburn-haired girl on the floor and she was swept up into a hug.

‘Well, I will leave you in peace to the business of the day,’ I quipped, as Bethany jokingly smacked at my hand with a wooden ladle. She was too slow, and I ran off to the doorway with the slice of cheese in hand.

‘The lads are already down at the dock?’

Lucy flicked a clump of onion skin in my direction as her mother called after me with a reminder for Tom to have us back for before *Complines* and supper.

As I made my way down to the end of the old pier and

passed by John Coram's trawler I briefly paused to take in the smells and view of the Thames. The pier itself was covered in lichen and barnacles with decades of salt markings covering the cracked wooden planks. Vessels of all shapes and sizes bobbed in the light breeze and at a first glance it looked like a complete mess.

After getting to know Tom and Michael I had begun to realise the fishing communities sprawled along the banks of the Thames had a very orderly and particular way of doing things. Ships' pilots knew how to avoid colliding into others for the most part, and some even used various flags to signal one another when it was too windy to communicate through the usual shouting.

While I looked up at the Coram fishing boat, which had belonged to Tom's grandfather and now his father John, I chuckled at the thought of their typical yells. The language was almost impossible to understand unless you were grew up with it, although I sometimes caught them asking about the weather or day's catch. Between the tang of salt and cooking fires in the air and the clear winds off the river it felt wonderful compared with the musty corridors back at Cripplegate.

I often wished I had been taken in by one of the families here the way Michael had, but my knowledge of the fishing trade was minimal. Once, I had read through a copy of 'The Compleat Angler' by Izaak Walton which had been collecting dust in the commons of the workhouse, but there is an enormous difference between reading about a man's love of fishing and actually knowing how to prepare a pole or haul in a catch.

Well, at least the governors of the orphanage and later the workhouse had never neglected my letters.

Tom in particular was often quick to crack jokes at my expense, calling me the ‘Bishop of London’ or ‘His Lordship’, but it was usually in good humour. He was also grateful when I was able to read for him after receiving a written request from the markets. His father could read well enough for plying his trade, but if he was out fishing it was often left to Tom to handle the household tasks.

John Coram was quite pleased with my attempts at teaching Tom to read for himself, and I had earned more than one bowl of millet with herring for my efforts. Sadly, Tom did not make for an enthusiastic student and I was by no means an experienced mentor at fourteen. These thoughts all raced in my mind as I inhaled a large breath and continued to amble along to the end of the pier.

The three hulking shapes were huddled around the brand new punt resting in the river. I could tell by their hollering of delight they had just lowered her into the water.

‘She actually floats, God be praised,’ I teased as I came up to stand next to Tom.

‘I was worried about the treads but they seem solid,’ he replied.

‘Aye, well the teak and spruce were well-seasoned,’ his father added. ‘I’d wager she will give you years of service if you treat her well.’

Tom beamed as he looked down at the small, narrow boat. Even though he was expected to contribute to the family trade with his catches, and to build the skills needed to someday take it over from his father, I could read Tom’s impatience clearly. Having grown up in a two room fishing shack with his parents and two sisters, the

opportunity the modest punt offered for privacy and his own space was almost too much for the boy to handle.

‘I will make sure to take care of her, Father,’ Tom said. ‘She’s beautiful.’

John simply nodded, but I could tell he was pleased with his son’s earnest appreciation. Michael was bent over sorting out provisions and supplies for our first jaunt out on the river into a neat pile by the boat. After standing back up and cracking his back, he turned to the three of us.

‘How did you get time to join us anyway, *Louis*? I thought you were interviewing for a job at the new medicinal gardens in Chelsea.’

‘Ugh, not you as well,’ I moaned. ‘I refused the interview because I don’t want to spend every waking hour covered in oils and mixing *Aqua regia* until my skin cracks. What’s more, I’ve told you not to call me that, *Michel*! ’

He put up his hands in a gesture of surrender, then turned to Tom and winked.

‘It’s not my fault you share a name with *le Roi Soleil* and are famous throughout the known world, not to mention—’

Tom jumped in to cut him off, ‘hush, you jackanape. I’ve told you afore about spoutin’ off in French. Have you forgotten the beatings already?’

Michael feigned a look of annoyance.

‘First of all, my name is Michael Bolland, and I am a true son of England. Second, our kings are the best of friends and are once more at peace. As for the beatings, well... they helped with my English, no?’

I rolled my eyes as my two closest friends bickered back and forth while Tom’s father busied himself loading the baskets of supplies aboard the punt. I’ve

never known two people in my entire life who were so alike one another yet uniquely different in character.

Both boys were of a similar age having been born shortly after the Great Fire and about four years younger than myself. Tom was slightly taller than Michael but otherwise their builds were comparable enough, and they both shared the same colour of sandy-brown hair. Michael had a few marks on his face from some pox he had recovered from as an infant, but otherwise the lads were much alike. However, this was pretty much where the similarities ended.

‘Are you two dolts going to help or not?’ Tom interrupted my thoughts as if reading my mind. He was always impatient and tended towards being serious in his manner, whereas Michael took the opportunity to crack a joke whenever the opportunity presented itself. It wasn’t that Tom lacked a sense of humour, he was as quick to guffaw at Michael’s nonsense as anyone, but he was a bit more... stiff, is the word that usually came to mind.

Tom Coram had a raucous laugh, so long as he wasn’t the target of the joke. Where Tom was rigid and easy to offend, Michael was perfectly content to roll his eyes and join in the merriment. My thoughts were interrupted as the small punt was finally ready to leave her small berth.

‘Right, that’s you then,’ John said as he dropped a final wicker basket into the tiny vessel.

We all looked down into the punt, now filled with three fishing poles, several baskets for any catches and a few small linen sacks. I could tell by the size and shape of the bags they likely contained our lunches as prepared earlier by Bethany, as I was pretty sure I could make out

the round bump of an apple in one of them.

‘I trust you lads won’t need me to come fetch you from the riverbank, you’ve been out with me a fair few times now and should know enough for a day’s fishing on your own.’

Tom was already lowering himself into his punt and beckoning at the two of us to hurry up.

‘Don’t worry, Master Coram,’ I replied while throwing my legs over the side of the small jetty.

‘No going past Putney upriver and stay inside of Lymehurst if we head down the way.’

‘Always say aloud when you’re about to shift your weight and do it slowly,’ piped up Michael, who had already taken a seat in front of where Tom stood ready with his long oar. Usually punts were not as deep as this and the pilot used a long, narrow pole better suited to the shallow rivers of the countryside. However, John had made some alterations in order for us to fish the Thames with less risk and with more space for storing our catches. The hull was about two hands deeper than usual for better balance, and a long paddle had been fitted to the stern.

‘Half our catches go to the Corams for market,’ I added, having finally dropped myself into the seat opposite Michael.

We were all beaming with excitement as Tom slowly pushed us free of the dock on to the river, as his father gave us a curt wave then turned back towards his shack.

At some point Tom’s stepmother must have put together some small hay-filled cushions for the benches, and my backside, still slightly throbbing from a sound Cripplegate lashing, reminded me to thank her directly when we got back ashore.

‘Freedom and liberty, lads,’ Tom began to rotate the

oar in a circular motion. ‘I hope our fine lady here can hold all the carp and bream in store for her.’

With one last glance back at the pier, the three of us broke out laughing in giddy excitement, as the warm afternoon Sun cast its light across the gently flowing waters of the River Thames.