

## Londoner 21

### Chapter 21. Freedom

It was the first time others had heard Kivamus take such a strong stand about something and give them a direct order. But despite any hesitation they may have had, their habit of immediately following the orders of their liege kicked in. Duvas rushed away along with a few other servants who were nearby and started to give them orders to find specific people around the manor and to bring them to the courtyard in front of the manor house.

While Duvas was away to fulfill his command, Kivamus found himself lost in a sea of contemplation. Here, in this world, a seemingly insurmountable chasm separated the privileged few from the desperate many. The common folk toiled endlessly, barely scraping by to fill their bellies, while nobles like himself reveled in a life of relative luxury. It was a stark imbalance, a system that reeked of injustice. By now, he knew very well that this world was a harsh and unforgiving place. Poverty gnawed at the very fabric of society, forcing people to the brink of starvation. It was a constant companion, a suffocating weight that stole the joy from life and left people barely clinging to existence. But as if that wasn't enough, he thought bitterly, the barbaric practice of slavery was stripping people of their freedom and dignity.

The injustice of it all burned within him. The very notion of slavery, so deeply ingrained in this society, filled him with a cold fury. These people, no different from him in their desire for a decent life, were denied basic freedoms, and treated as mere possessions. The fear he had witnessed occasionally in the eyes of some of the servants, their uncertainty about his intentions, was a stark reminder of the cruelty inherent in such a system.

The casual acceptance of human ownership, the complete disregard for the basic rights of another human being - it all left a bitter taste in his mouth. How could an entire society function under such a system? How could these enslaved people have any hope for a better life living like this?

Looking at the servants running around the manor now, some oblivious to what was happening, others betraying worry in their eyes, solidified his turmoil. He couldn't help but wonder which of them were slaves, and what their lives were like, constantly at the beck and call of their masters, their freedom a mere illusion.

He closed his eyes for a moment, willing himself to focus on the task at hand. He yearned for answers, for a solution to the crisis at hand, and perhaps, a way to rectify the injustices he now witnessed firsthand.

He glanced around the courtyard, his eyes landing on the slowly gathering throng of servants and maids around him. Their expressions were a mixture of confusion and unease. Some, unaware of the recent commotion, had gathered out of curiosity, drawn by the flurry of activity. Others, who had overheard his earlier outburst, seemed to shrink back, their expressions laced with a subtle fear.

He let out a heavy sigh, the sound lost in the murmurs of the gathering crowd. He longed for the bustle to subside, for Duvass to return with the slaves, so he could finally address this issue head-on. He had a big decision to make, a choice that would set the tone for his leadership in the future. It would lay the foundation for the kind of ruler he would become in Tiranat and would influence the lives of its people for years to come.

Duvass returned to the courtyard soon after, with five figures trailing behind him. Three were male servants, one of whom Kivamus recognized as a stablehand from earlier. The other two were young women, their eyes downcast and their faces betraying a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. News of the gathering had spread quickly, and by now, a small crowd of servants - cooks, maids, and even a couple of guards, had gathered at the edges of the courtyard, murmuring amongst themselves, their daily tasks forgotten for the moment.

Duvass cleared his throat, his voice carrying across the hushed crowd. "My Lord," he announced, "as requested, these are five of the six slaves currently residing within the manor. There is one other maid, but she has gone on an errand in the village. I will bring her to you once she returns later."

Kivamus observed the group, his gaze lingering on each individual. While they were undeniably thin, their features etched with the same worry lines he'd seen on many others lately, it seemed a consequence of the recent food shortages rather than any deliberate cruelty. Unlike the gaunt, hollow-eyed slaves he'd glimpsed being transported near Cinran, these individuals, while nervous, held a spark of life in their eyes. They huddled together, seeking silent comfort from their shared circumstance.

They were slaves, and his property, according to the law of the kingdom, yet he couldn't reconcile himself to the concept of owning another human being for even a moment, nor would he allow it to happen under his watch. Not anymore. Taking a deep breath to steady his churning emotions, he addressed the group.

"From this moment forward," he declared in a booming voice ringing with authority, "slavery is abolished and forbidden in all the lands falling under my domain. Defying this rule is outlawed from now on, and will have criminal consequences." He looked at the people around him and their varied expressions for a moment. He continued in a loud voice, "We are all human beings, and no one deserves to be owned by another person. Slavery is an abhorrent thing, and it should never have been allowed.

But even if it is not in my power to put an end to slavery everywhere, I will never allow it where my word is the law."

Duvas interrupted, "But... but my lord, you can't just do that!"

Kivamus glared at the majordomo. "Why?"

"Because... That is how it is my lord! It has always been like this!"

"Do you think human beings deserve to be owned and traded like animals, then?"

Duvas was indignant. "It does not matter what I think, my lord! His majesty, the King of Reslinor, has allowed it. I don't make the rules here!"

"No, you don't, Duvas. I do. I make the rules in Tiranat, and this is my final decision." He looked at the majordomo for a moment, trying to determine his seriousness about opposing him. "This is not negotiable, Duvas. If you can't accept this and are unable to continue working alongside me to support me in my decisions, you are free to resign from your position. Even though I'm new here, this is far from the last thing that I will do, which may go against the customs of this place. It is entirely up to you to decide whether you are with me in this or not."

The majordomo seemed to be considering his options and it took a minute for him to make his decision. In the end, Duvas sighed and gave a deep bow to Kivamus. "Forgive me, my Lord, if I was overstepping my boundaries. I will accept your decision and would be glad to continue serving you."

"Good," Kivamus replied. "I do value your suggestions, and you can always offer your advice wherever you think it is necessary, but the final decision will be mine."

Duvas nodded in reply, while Gorsazo seemed to have a thoughtful frown on his face.

Kivamus looked at the slaves standing in front of him, who were thoroughly surprised by now. "As of this moment, you all are free from your servitude and are no longer the slaves of anyone. All of you are free to leave this manor and forge your own paths in the world."

A stunned silence descended upon the courtyard. The former slaves stood frozen, the meaning of his words slowly sinking in. Slowly, tentative smiles began to bloom on some faces of the onlookers. Just as Kivamus expected a surge of relief and perhaps even joy, tears welled up in the eyes of some of the newly freed slaves. For a fleeting moment, Kivamus thought his words had brought tears of happiness. However, there was a deeper emotion beneath the surface, a chilling mix of fear and despair. Confusion clouded his features. Weren't they happy?

One of the maids, a young woman, could not contain her emotions and erupted into sobs. "No, my lord! Please!" she cried, her voice thick with desperation. "Don't send us away! Please, I beg you, let us remain as your slaves!"

Kivamus was taken aback by her outburst. This wasn't the reaction he'd anticipated... Freedom, a concept he so deeply believed in, was met with this kind of fear?

"Why?" he asked, his voice full of confusion. "Why wouldn't you want your freedom? I thought this is what you all desired!"

The woman wiped at her tears with her sleeve, her voice trembling. "My lord," she stammered, "what will become of us if we leave the manor? We have no coin, no land, no family to take us in... We would starve on the streets... Here, at least we have food and shelter. Even a single meal a day that we get here is much better than starving outside the manor as free people. Please, my lord, I beg of you, don't cast us out!" she pleaded, dissolving once more into tears.

Her words hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder of the harsh reality these people faced. Freedom, while a noble ideal, couldn't fill empty stomachs or provide shelter from the coming winter.

The fear in the maid's eyes wasn't defiance, but raw terror of an unknown future. Kivamus recalled his earlier conversation with Gorsazo, and the chilling truth he had told about some slaves clinging to their servitude in the face of freedom. Now, witnessing their raw fear firsthand, he understood.

Taking a deep breath, Kivamus addressed the hesitant group. "Please, understand," he began, his voice gentle, "I am not forcing you to leave the manor. This is your home, and you are welcome to stay and work here as long as you wish. However," he continued, "you all are now free people. You have a choice. You can continue with your current duties, or you can choose to leave and pursue another path. It is up

to you now." He paused, letting his words sink in. The weight of this decision, the power to shape their own destinies, must have felt overwhelming after years of servitude.

The maid, her eyes red-rimmed from tears, looked up at him. "Are you... are you truly not sending us away, my lord?" she stammered, her voice barely a whisper. "We can... we can stay?"

Kivamus couldn't help but smile, a genuine, heartfelt smile that warmed the chilly courtyard. "Yes," he confirmed, "this is not a trick. You all can stay and continue your duties as before, but now as free people."

The weight of his words seemed to settle on the group. The fear that had clouded their faces slowly began to dissipate, replaced by a hesitant curiosity.

Kivamus felt a surge of determination after witnessing firsthand the depth of their fear and the harsh realities of their world. He would never allow this system of slavery to stand under his watch, even if it was ingrained in the people. But simply freeing them wasn't enough. He needed to offer them a path forward, a future built on dignity and choice.

He turned towards Duvas, his brow furrowed in thought. "Duvas," he inquired, "were these people ever paid for their work?"

Duvas shook his head. "No, my lord. It has always been the custom everywhere that slaves only receive food and lodging in exchange for the duties they perform."

Kivamus frowned. "And the other servants?" he continued. "Do they get wages?"

"Indeed, my lord," Duvas responded. "Their wages are based on the duties they perform. Depending on their skills, most of them get between eight to twelve coppers a day. Of course, the cost of their food and lodging is deducted from it, which is around half of it."

He sighed. "However, as you know, my Lord, in the past few months we were unable to generate more money by selling coal. So I had to make a difficult decision to temporarily pause the payment of wages, for everyone in the manor. I had to save the money we had left to buy some grain, my Lord, in case we got an opportunity to trade."

Kivamus grimaced. Not paying wages while making people work for him left a bad taste in his mouth, but it was still true that their current situation didn't allow them to spend any money which was not vital for the survival of the village and its residents. He looked around at all the servants gathered near him. While there was nobody who could be called fat by any estimate, they still looked well-fed compared to the villagers living outside the manor. In this poor village, even having enough to eat was a luxury. And while nobody here would be happy that their wages had been stopped, none of them would want to switch places with any villager living outside the manor walls.

The village's current situation left him with no other choice than to ask them to continue working as unpaid laborers for now. It was something he hoped to remedy as soon as possible, but the least he could do right now was to offer them some hope for the future.

Taking a minute to think about it, he declared, "From now on, just like others who work in the manor, the freed slaves will also receive a wage based on their duties." Despite not liking what he was going to say even a little bit, he continued, "However, as you all know very well, the current situation has left our coffers nearly empty. So just like the other workers in the manor, their wages will also be paused temporarily, until we can ensure that our situation has stabilized. I cannot say how long that will take, but I will do everything in my power to bring this barony back on track."

Turning back to the former slaves, his voice carried a newfound warmth. "Speak with Duvas later," he instructed, "to discuss the specifics of your wages, and what each of you are entitled to. I promise you all that when the wages are finally paid to others, you will also get the wages for the duties that you perform. Of course, the food and lodging provided to the other servants and guards will also be provided to you, with appropriate deductions from your wages. You are no longer slaves, but valued members of this household."

The former slaves, overwhelmed with this unexpected turn of events, could barely contain their emotions. Perhaps it was less than what they could have gotten if the situation was normal, but it was much more than what they could have ever dreamt under the previous baron. Tears of gratitude welled in their eyes, tears that were not born of fear but genuine relief and hope. "Thank you, my lord!" they all added. Through sniffles and choked sobs, they managed a deep bow together, their voices thick with emotion as they expressed their heartfelt thanks.

A ripple of acceptance spread through the gathered crowd and soon the courtyard was booming with the sound of joyful clapping and chants of "All hail Lord Kivamus!"

Even Duvas, his initial reservations forgotten, wore a smile of approval. Slowly, the courtyard emptied as people returned to their duties. The former slaves, now free men and women, walked with a newfound lightness in their steps and a smile gracing their lips - the first genuine smiles they'd likely felt in a very long time.

This rare moment of joy, shared by all the residents of the manor even amidst the constant threat posed by bandits and the food shortage, spoke volumes of the immense change that had transpired within the walls of the manor.

Kivamus watched them go, a seed of hope blossoming in his chest. A new chapter had begun for them, a chapter filled with the promise of choice, dignity, and a future free from the shackles of slavery.