

Londoner 28

Chapter 28. Slave Price and Bounty Hunters

Kivamus couldn't help but notice a shift in Madam Nerida's demeanor. The gentle, nurturing aura she had exuded earlier seemed to give way to the pragmatist in charge of managing the household staff.

"Leah," Madam Nerida began, her voice laced with a hint of disapproval, "there is a reason all the servants and maids reside within the manor grounds. This ensures they are readily available to attend to their duties whenever needed."

Leah, however, was undeterred. Her newfound freedom had ignited a spark of independence within her. "But Madam," she countered, her voice now tinged with a quiet resolve, "most of my duties involve sewing and mending clothes. Tasks that are best done in daylight. Working at night on that would be difficult, if not impossible."

She pressed her case with a fervent plea. "I promise, Madam," she vowed earnestly, "I will complete all my assigned tasks during the daylight hours. Please allow me to live outside the manor when I'm not working."

A hint of unease crossed Madam Nerida's features. Caught off guard by Leah's unexpected request, she instinctively turned to Kivamus for guidance, with the sudden deviation from tradition presenting a challenge to her well-ordered world.

Something as simple as reliable lighting would have eliminated the argument about nighttime work altogether, Kivamus thought. Electricity, a luxury he could only dream of in their current state, would allow for extended work hours regardless of daylight. It was a different fact that the servants and maids here probably worked very long hours anyway.

"Madam Nerida," he began, his voice thoughtful, "as you rightly pointed out, most of the maids' duties extend beyond daylight hours. However, if Leah's primary task is indeed sewing and mending, then working at night wouldn't be feasible anyway."

He turned to Leah, a hint of a smile gracing his lips. "Very well, Leah," he declared. "If you wish to live outside the manor walls, that is your choice."

A wave of relief washed over Leah's features. "Thank you so much, my Lord!" she exclaimed, her voice thick with emotion.

"But tell me, Leah," Kivamus inquired, "do you have a place to stay in the village?"

The young woman's face brightened as she nodded. "I do, my Lord," Leah replied with confidence. "I have a good friend, who's the village blacksmith now. I can stay in his house until I can save enough coin to secure a place of my own."

Seeing the uncertainty on others' faces, Duvas added, "Cedoron is a decent fellow, my Lord. I've known him since he was a child. His father, who worked as the blacksmith since the village was founded, died of fever some time ago. Cedoron took over the smithy after that and knows the trade well."

Kivamus considered her request for a moment. The potential benefits of a contented worker outweighed the slight deviation from tradition. "In that case," he agreed, "you may live outside the manor. However," he added, "you will still have to fulfill all your duties diligently during the day, as directed by Madam Nerida."

Leah, overwhelmed with joy, curtsied deeply. "Thank you, my Lord!" she cried, tears welling up in her eyes once more. "Thank you so much for your kindness and understanding! You have given me more than just freedom, you've given me hope for a future I never dared to dream of. I will work hard, I promise!"

"My Lord," Madam Nerida interjected, "Although nobody in the manor is getting paid these days, everyone living here currently receives a portion of their wages in the form of food and lodging within the manor. If Leah lives outside, she won't be receiving the same compensation as the others. That seems rather unfair."

A frown creased Kivamus's brow. "Indeed, that wouldn't be fair," he conceded.

"However," he continued, "as we are currently unable to spare additional coin, we were already planning to pay the new guards we are recruiting with a weekly grain and coal allowance. Perhaps we can extend the same offer to Leah. What do you think, Leah?"

Leah's face broke into a wide, grateful smile. "Oh, my Lord, absolutely!" she exclaimed, her voice overflowing with joy, "Even grain is more than I had hoped for, after gaining my freedom. I am truly indebted to your kindness."

With a final, heartfelt curtsy directed at Kivamus, Leah turned to leave, her steps lighter and her spirits buoyed by this unexpected turn of events. Madam Nerida departed along with her.

Leah, once a slave, now walked with the tentative steps of a free woman, while Madam Nerida, the embodiment of tradition, grappled with the unforeseen changes sweeping through the manor.

Kivamus, his brow furrowed in contemplation, turned to Duvas. "Hypothetically," he began, his voice laced with curiosity, "let's say that Leah decided to travel to Cinran after all. How likely is it that someone there would even discover her past as a slave?"

Duvas cleared his throat and launched into an explanation. "Well, my Lord," he began, "every slave carries the burden of a slave price. This price, which is usually the same as the money that the owner paid to buy them, represents the sum they can theoretically pay their owner over many years, often decades, to earn their freedom. As you know, my Lord, the slaves aren't paid any wages. That's because the amount that would have been paid to them as a wage, after deducting the cost of food and lodging, of course, is said to be deducted from their slave price. So, it's possible that every slave can eventually become free, once they have worked for long enough to earn their freedom from their owner."

He elaborated on the system in place. "However, in most cases, if not all of them, the slave owner would continuously find ways to keep adding to the slave price, once it became low enough. It would supposedly be a punishment for the slave not performing his duties well enough, or the price of something that the servant broke or misplaced. But the result would be the same, that the slave would have to work just a few more years to pay the slave price, again and again. The previous baron did the same many times, my Lord."

Kivamus looked at him carefully. "And you never said anything?"

Duvas shook his head slowly. "It's not my place to question the baron, my Lord. My task is the proper administration of the manor, as well as the coal mines. And I try to do my best to manage and supervise everything here, to see that everything keeps running smoothly, within the bounds of the orders given to me. My personal opinion simply does not matter, my Lord."

It made Kivamus remember that thinking outside the prevalent norms was not commonplace in this era, even on Earth. It was only during and after the Renaissance, from what he remembered, that common people started to question everything around them, giving rise to the scientific method, which eventually led to, well, nearly everything in the modern world. However, in the Middle Ages, it was probably typical for the common people to obey the orders and whims of their superiors, particularly the nobles, without questioning anything.

Duvas continued, "Well, in the rare case that the slave price was indeed paid in full, a slave would typically receive a formal document - a piece of paper, no less - proclaiming their newfound freedom, and bearing the seal of the noble who owned the slave, or in whose domain the slave owner resided."

"However," he added, "such instances of slaves buying their freedom are exceedingly rare, my Lord. Most remain bound to their owners for their entire lives. And as you might know, my Lord, the children of slaves are also the property of the slave owner."

"That explains why they would rarely leave the confines of the manor or the farmlands they live in," Kivamus murmured.

Duvas nodded in agreement. "Indeed, my Lord," he confirmed. "Most slaves remain bound to their owner's manor for their entire lives. And leaving the manor or the farm that confines them is a rare occurrence," he said. "The only exception might be when they are given an errand by their owner, whether it is to a nearby market or to some other place to deliver their produce. And in those cases, the owner knows precisely when to expect their return."

"However," he continued in a grim voice, "any delays are met with harsh consequences, either by severely beating the slaves or in some cases, even branding them. And if a slave fails to return for many days, it results in a bounty being placed on their heads, which would carry their description."

He elaborated on the bleak fate that awaited such runaways. "This bounty essentially brands them as fugitives," he explained. "Becoming an outlaw or joining the ranks of bandits becomes the only option for the desperate slaves seeking escape. But even then, the bounty hunters would relentlessly pursue them, making their lives a constant struggle for survival."

Duvas's voice softened slightly. "There is another option for them, my Lord, albeit a risky one. A slave could try to flee to a distant land, perhaps to another kingdom, or they may leave Cilaria entirely by enduring a long voyage on a merchant ship. But such a journey requires a lot of coin, a luxury most

slaves simply don't possess. And even if they somehow manage to reach a distant land, there is always the risk of their past being discovered."

He added, "And if they do get recaptured by the bounty hunters after running away, their enslavers' punishment would be swift and merciless. Often, it involves a brutal physical punishment like cutting off a limb, to serve as a grim reminder of the consequences of disobedience, and to set an example for the other slaves."

Kivamus grimaced hearing about the dreadful condition of slaves, while Gorsazo was silent, likely already knowing the details.

"So, to answer your question directly, my Lord," Duvas continued, his voice returning to a more neutral tone, "if Leah were to travel to a big place like Cinran or any other city, it's unlikely anyone would suspect her past, as long as no one recognizes her there from her time as a slave. Particularly since the previous baron hadn't needed to resort to branding the slaves which would make them easily recognizable, since none of them ever tried to run away from here, knowing they would likely die in the dangerous forests surrounding Tiranat far before they could reach another place."

Taking a deep breath, he concluded, "The reason that no one would suspect her is simply that any other noble or slave owner would never free a slave out of goodwill, and if a slave were to flee, a bounty would undoubtedly be placed upon them by the enslaver. That would alert the authorities and bounty hunters alike, leading to a recapture of the slave, whether in Cinran or elsewhere. Of course, you seem to be an exception, my Lord."

Kivamus, seemingly lost in thought, spoke after a while. "You said that slaves are not permitted to leave the manor, but Madam Nerida did allow her to go to the village," he pointed out.

Duvas chuckled softly. "Indeed, my Lord," he conceded. "Madam Nerida has been a part of this village since its very foundation. The previous baron purchased Leah as a slave when she was a child, so Madam Nerida has known and trusted her for years. And as Leah herself mentioned, being an orphan, she has nowhere else to go even if she desired to escape."

He continued, "When the previous baron ruled here, the slaves were escorted by a guard if they were ever sent to the village for an errand. However, as you know, my Lord, since that disastrous trip of the previous baron, we have been very short on trained guards. We barely had enough guards to man the gates till now, so we just couldn't afford to send a guard to escort a slave as well. So Madam Nerida has had to trust the slaves that they would return if she ever sent them outside the manor."

Kivamus nodded thoughtfully, the weight of Leah's situation and the complexities of slavery settling in. He had only begun to scratch the surface of this deeply ingrained system, and the human cost associated with it. The path forward, towards a more just and humane future, was far from clear, but the decision to grant freedom to Leah and the other slaves was not something he was going to regret.

He looked at Gorsazo and Duvas. "Perhaps it was indeed impulsive..." he conceded, a hint of doubt lingering in his voice. "Freeing the slaves so abruptly... it might not have been the most well-considered course of action."

He glanced at Leah and Madam Nerida, who seemed to be in an animated discussion near the servants' hall, with a smile playing on his lips.

"But seeing the joy on their faces," he continued, his gaze sweeping across the courtyard where the former slaves bustled about with newfound vigor, their faces etched with genuine happiness, "it's hard to believe I made the wrong decision. I stand by my decision."

"However, the one thing that troubles me," he confessed, "is how Count Cinran will react to this news. This barony does fall under his domain..."