

Read after Throne of Glass, but before Crown of Midnight

THE ASSASSIN & THE PRINCESS

{Celaena and Nehemia go shopping and get to know one another a bit better}

Celaena

The midwinter day was warm enough that Celaena Sardothien didn't bother with gloves when she set out into Rifthold.

Princess Nehemia however, was thoroughly miserable. Still, she declined Celaena's repeated offers to take a carriage to the most fashionable avenue of the capital city. Traveling by carriage would only make the day go faster, the princess said. And since they'd claimed the day solely for enjoying each other's company, neither young woman was in much of a hurry to see it quickly end.

So they walked through Rifthold, dressed as finely as they could while still being warm—and remaining relatively unnoticed. They took their time crossing the city, though they had an unspoken agreement not to venture near the docks, warehouses, or anywhere they might run into any living proof of Adarlan's empire—and brutal conquest of the continent.

Having spent a year as a slave herself, and not particularly inclined to discuss the topics of slavery, war, and the general hellishness of the world, Celaena was more than happy to stick to the broad, clean streets where they could pretend to be two young women on their way to spend obscene amounts of money.

Nehemia had already toured much of the city and disliked almost all of what she'd seen, but still indulged Celaena in a detour to walk past the Royal Theater, in going into her favorite bakeries and sweet-shops, and popping into a few bookstores. Unsurprisingly, by the time they reached Kavill's, the finest clothier in Rifthold, Celaena had spent a good chunk of her monthly salary as King's Champion.

That was another topic they'd agreed to ignore for the day.

The two young women paused outside the front of the shop, and Celaena ran an eye over the gilded woodwork wreathing the glass window. Two dresses were displayed—one a somewhat traditional blue ball gown, edged with gold and splashes of turquoise; the other a daring work of red velvet, long-sleeved and accented with midnight lace.

“Kavill’s,” Nehemia read on the ornate shop sign swinging in the breeze off the Avery River. The princess frowned at Celaena. “It’s very... fancy,” she said in Eyllwe.

Indeed, beyond the glass and the display, Celaena could see a cluster of well-dressed women offering advice to a companion showing off a potential purchase.

Celaena hid her own frown. They were supposed to have a private appointment. Not just for the safety of the princess, whose personal guards trailed behind them, but also to put Nehemia—who hated shopping and playing dress-up and anything ‘useless’—at some degree of ease.

“We’re a few minutes early, I think,” Celaena said. Nehemia was still frowning at the storefront. “We could pop into a tea shop if you want and—”

“No, no. My hands are frozen through,” Nehemia said, her gloved fingers curling into fists. “Let’s just go in and wait.”

It had been a month since Celaena had been appointed King’s Champion—a month during which she’d had to face all the hardships the position presented—but somehow the thought of walking into Kavill’s’s with an already ill-tempered Nehemia made even Celaena’s nerves fray. She already pitied Lee Kavill himself...and the other customers inside.

“Just remember,” Celaena said in Eyllwe as Nehemia walked to the green-painted door, “I’m Lillian Gordaina and I am just some—”

“Heiress in Rifthold, I know,” Nehemia finished without looking back at her, and walked inside.

Celaena followed after the princess, giving Nehemia's two personal guards a nod as they moved into position: one by the storefront, the other going around the block to take up a spot by the back door. Once the appointment began, no one went in or out.

The lavender-and-mint smell inside Kavill's was altogether familiar and foreign.

Familiar, for in the years Celaena had lived in Rifthold, this had been her preferred clothier. Foreign, for the year she'd spent in Endovier and the months that she'd been in the glass castle had made everything from that past life into something strange and unknown.

Lee Kavill, whom Celaena had already visited twice since becoming the King's Champion, was standing by the gaggle of women before the dressing room curtains, his signature plain leather notebook in his arms and a glass pen in hand.

In his forties, Kavill was a decent-looking man, his clothes simple and elegant, despite some of the extravagant offerings in his shop. He was also quiet. Not shy, but calm. Balanced. He didn't fuss, and didn't push, and had an artist's eye for colors and cuts and changing trends.

But those very eyes went a little wide at the sight of them, darting between the gathered women and his one o'clock appointment.

Nehemia stopped just inside the door, but Celaena went a few steps further into the red-carpeted shop. Kavill was already before them by the time Celaena smiled and held out her hands.

"We're a little early," she said by way of greeting, "but we're more than happy to wait." She inclined her head to the green-and-gold circular divan in the front of the room—a place usually reserved for ladies-in-waiting, patient husbands, and bored children.

Kavill took her hands with a smile. His fingers were just as calloused as hers, though his calluses and scars came from years with needles and pins, not blades. "Marta said my one o'clock was an important guest, but I had no idea I'd receive such an honor." As he finished, he looked to Nehemia and bowed. "You are most welcome."

Of course he'd recognize the princess. While it was fairly easy for Celaena to blend in, there was no hiding who Nehemia was. Not because of her creamy dark skin, but because Nehemia carried herself like a princess.

No matter where they went or how they were dressed, Nehemia always had that angle to her head and a glint in her eye, as if she'd come out of the womb knowing royal blood flowed in her veins. As if she always wore an invisible crown. Celaena still wasn't sure if she envied or pitied the princess for it.

Nehemia gave a shallow nod of the head—as much respect as Kavill deserved, if not more, given that he'd come from peasant stock and worked his way up.

“I can offer you my office to wait, if you'd prefer,” Kavill said quietly, especially as some of the women by the dressing room curtains turned to examine the newcomers. “We shouldn't be more than a few minutes.”

It was his step to the side that ultimately gave him away—gave away what he was trying to shield from them. And Celaena might have played along had Nehemia not noticed it, too.

The girl could have been from Fenharrow or Eyllwe with her tan skin, but it was the twin gold bracelets—manacles—around her wrists that marked her as a slave. Gold, chainless manacles that had been welded on—and would never come off.

“We can go somewhere else,” Celaena said softly.

Nehemia just stared at the slave-girl, her face blank. The girl was dressed well, and looked well-fed, but the manacles, so horrifyingly beautiful, gleaming in the warm light...

The women were staring at them now, but the slave-girl kept her eyes down. Didn't even turn toward them. Celaena rotated her own wrists, a tinge of phantom pain going through the scars that marked where her own shackles—iron and scratched—had once been.

Celaena put a hand on Nehemia's elbow. “We can—”

“No,” Nehemia said, looking away from the girl and giving Kavill and bland smile. “We shall wait. Please—return to your work,” she said to him, and took a seat on the divan. Celaena slowly sat down beside her, and Nehemia flashed her a brighter smile.

Today, they had agreed when setting out, would just be about enjoying themselves—about letting Celaena dress Nehemia up. Today, they were just two ordinary, perfectly happy girls, out to do some shopping.

Celaena gave her best smile in return.

So Kavill went back to his customers, the soft-spoken Marta came to take their cloaks and gloves and replaced them with jasmine tea, delicate cookies, and a selection of the day’s papers.

“Such service,” Nehemia said when Marta had slipped away to assist Kavill in taking down his measurements and seeing to the needs of their customers. The princess ran an eye around the gilded walls, the racks of sample gowns, the displays of jewelry, shoes, hats, and parasols. “Such wealth, too.”

Celaena, who had been watching one of the women debate whether a quarter of an inch would make her neckline too daring, glanced at the princess. “If it makes you feel better, he’s turned down positions as the royal tailor several times.”

Nehemia raised a well-groomed brow, the gold jewelry she wore glinting in the light of the lily-shaped glass sconces. “I don’t mean to be...difficult,” Nehemia said in the common tongue, any trace of her fake, thick accent gone.

The accent, Celaena had learned, was just to deceive the royal court—to get them to think she was dimwitted, and make them speak more freely when they thought she couldn’t understand. But Nehemia spoke better than the most refined of them. And she had been using the knowledge she’d gleaned to uncover any tidbits of maneuverings that might help the plight of her enslaved people.

It was why they had gone shopping in the first place: to find gowns that Queen Georgina would approve of—gowns to enable Nehemia to cozy up to the queen and her inner circle, to see if she might help Eyllwe by winning over the King of Adarlan’s wife.

“Let’s just enjoy ourselves,” Celaena said, taking a long sip of her jasmine tea, almost groaning at the sheer perfection of it, then adjusting the folds of her forest-green gown. A piece that had been made in this very shop—a fact that she was certain Kavill had already noted.

The five other customers cast only a few curious glances their way before they finally left the shop in a flurry of fur cloaks, kidskin gloves, and moans about the endless winter. The slave girl never once looked up, and Celaena could have sworn that Nehemia’s hand twitched when she walked by—as if the princess had contemplated reaching for the girl, and then thought better of it.

When they were at last gone, Marta shut the curtains on the front window, lit a few more sconces, and escorted them to the silk couches before the dressing room curtains. Kavill himself bought them another ornate pot of jasmine tea, and then refilled both their cups.

After Celaena explained that Nehemia needed at least four dresses, two of them to be ball gowns, and all fit for Adarlanian royalty, Kavill crossed his arms behind his back and paced as he inquired after the colors and fabrics that Nehemia preferred or hated, about her feelings toward low or high necklines, how much mobility she desired, and on and on until Celaena started wondering if Nehemia would snap.

But the princess just smiled at the slender man, answering him with the thick, hesitant accent she used for everyone but Celaena. And then she patiently sat through Kavill and Marta’s presentation of color, cloth, beading, and stitching. It wasn’t until Kavill and Marta went into the back—to get a sample of the blue ball gown in the window—that the princess sagged slightly.

“I think I prefer just having the royal dressmaker bring me something,” she said quietly. “This is truly what you—you enjoy doing?”

Celaena winced, but smiled. “When the mood strikes me, yes.” And now that she had the king’s gold burning a hole in her purse, she was more than happy to spend most of it. “I’ve always liked pretty things—dresses, jewelry, shoes... I suppose it’s easy to dismiss it as frivolous, but a gown like the ones Kavill makes is art. It’s art, and mathematics, and economics.”

Nehemia's brows lifted and Celaena shrugged, but turned to point to the red velvet sheath dress in the window display.

“That gown in the window—think about how Kavill had to first come up with the design, then get the measurements just right to match the image in his head, then find the right vendor to supply the perfect red velvet and black lace. Think about where that velvet and lace came from—the velvet from the port in Meah, the lace from Melisande, the thread that holds the whole thing together from a spinner in Fenharrow. Think about where the dyes for the red and the black came from, too—think about all the people and places that had a hand in that dress coming together. It's like a map of the continent, and every part of it tells a story, and—” Celaena trailed off and snorted. “Well, map and story aside, it's also pretty as hell.”