



A COURT  
OF  
SILVER  
FLAMES

SARAH J. MAAS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLOOMSBURY

A COURT  
OF  
SILVER  
FLAMES

*For every Nesta out there—  
climb the mountain*

*And for Josh, Taran, and Annie,  
who are the reason I keep climbing my own*

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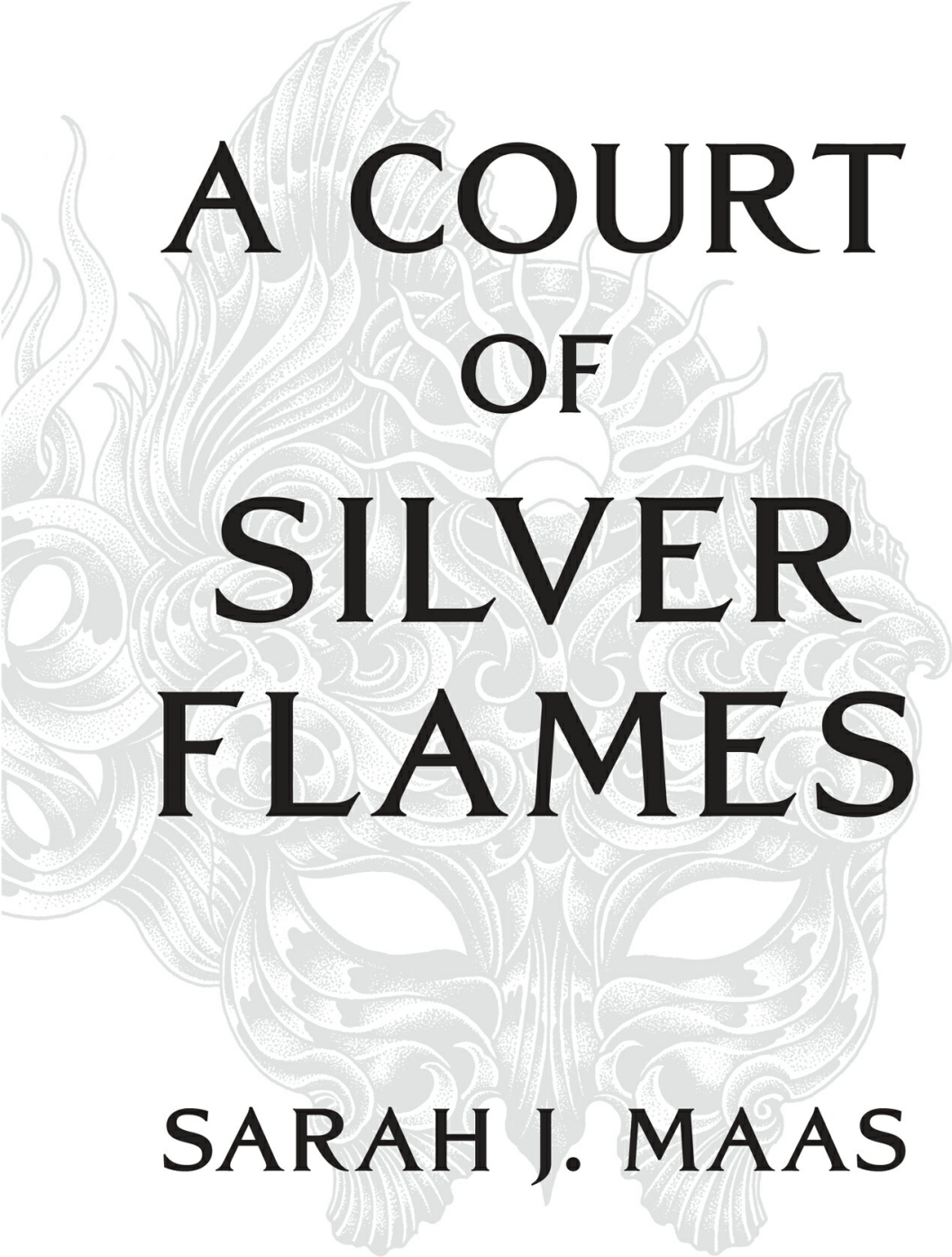


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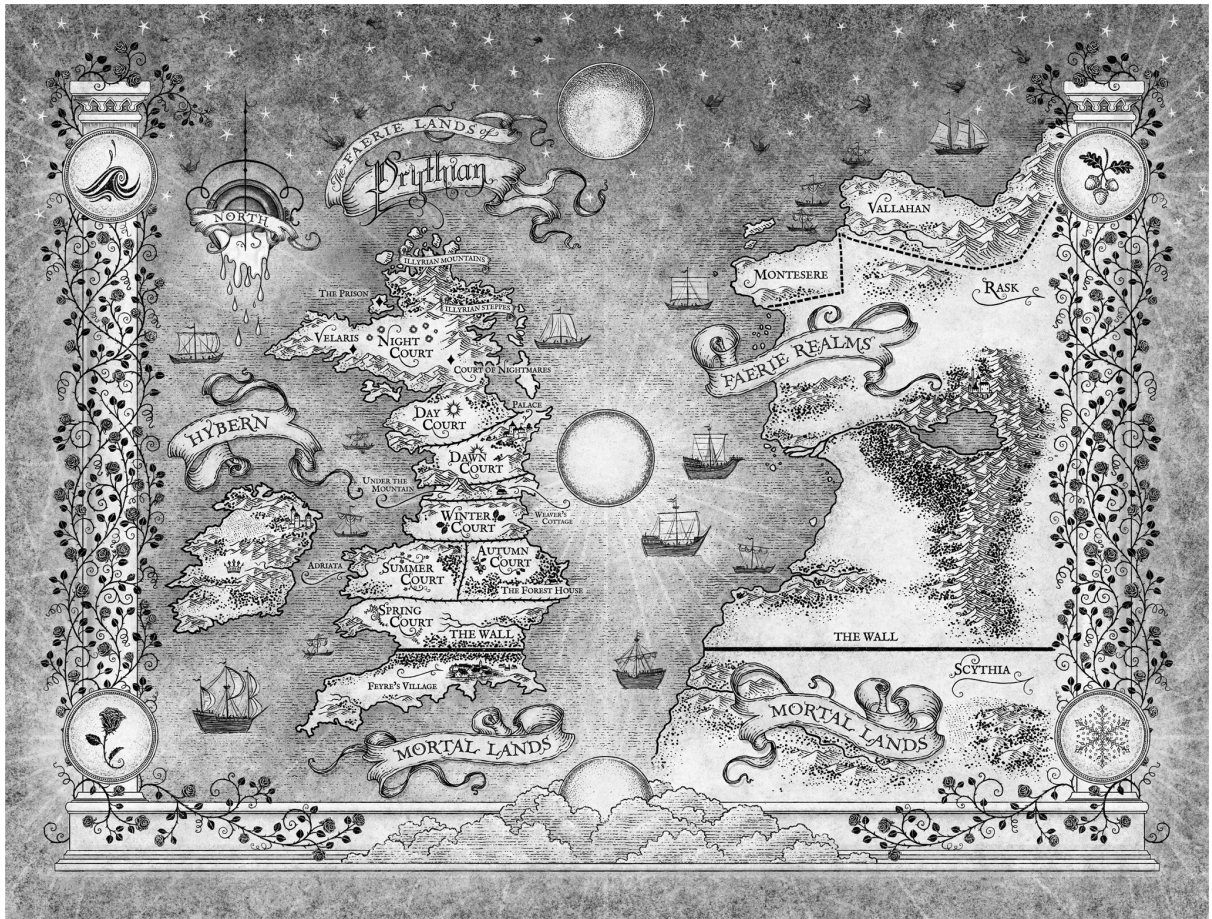
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### Acknowledgments





The black water nipping at her thrashing heels was freezing.

Not the bite of winter chill, or even the burn of solid ice, but something colder. Deeper.

The cold of the gaps between stars, the cold of a world before light.

The cold of hell—true hell, she realized as she bucked against the strong hands trying to shove her into that Cauldron.

True hell, because that was Elain lying on the stone floor with the red-haired, one-eyed Fae male hovering over her. Because those were pointed ears poking through her sister's sodden gold-brown hair, and an immortal glow radiating from Elain's fair skin.

True hell—worse than the inky depths mere inches from her toes.

*Put her under*, the hard-faced Fae king ordered.

And the sound of that voice, the voice of the male who had done this to Elain ...

She knew she was going into the Cauldron. Knew she would lose this fight.

Knew no one was coming to save her: not sobbing Feyre, not Feyre's gagged former lover, not her devastated new mate.

Not Cassian, broken and bleeding on the floor. The warrior was still trying to rise on trembling arms. To reach her.

The King of Hybern—he had done this. To Elain. To Cassian.

And to her.

The icy water bit into the soles of her feet.

It was a kiss of venom, a death so permanent that every inch of her roared in defiance.

She was going in—but she would not go gently.

The water gripped her ankles with phantom talons, tugging her down. She twisted, wrenching her arm free from the guard who held it.

And Nesta Archeron pointed. One finger—at the King of Hybern.

A death-promise. A target marked.

Hands shoved her into the water's waiting claws.

Nesta laughed at the fear that crept into the king's eyes just before the water devoured her whole.

*In the beginning*

*And in the end*

*There was Darkness*

*And nothing more*

She did not feel the cold as she sank into a sea that had no bottom, no horizon, no surface. But she felt the burning.

Immortality was not a serene youth.

It was fire.

It was molten ore poured into her veins, boiling her human blood until it was nothing but steam, forging her brittle bones until they were fresh steel.

And when she opened her mouth to scream, when the pain ripped her very self in two, there was no sound. There was nothing in this place but darkness and agony and power—

They would pay. All of them.

Starting with this Cauldron.

Starting *now*.

She tore into the darkness with talons and teeth. Rent and cleaved and shredded.

And the dark eternity around her shuddered. Bucked. Thrashed.

She laughed as it recoiled. Laughed around the mouthful of raw power she ripped out and swallowed whole; laughed at the fistfuls of eternity she shoved into her heart, her veins.

The Cauldron struggled like a bird under a cat's paw. She refused to relent.

Everything it had stolen from her, from Elain, she would take from it.

Wrapped in black eternity, Nesta and the Cauldron twined, burning through the darkness like a newborn star.

PART ONE  
NOVICE

## CHAPTER

# 1

Cassian raised his fist to the green door in the dim hallway—and hesitated.

He'd cut down more enemies than he cared to tally, had stood knee-deep in gore on countless battlefields and kept swinging, had made choices that cost him the lives of skilled warriors, had been a general and a grunt and an assassin, and yet ... here he was, lowering his fist.

Balking.

The building on the north side of the Sidra River was in need of new paint. And new floors, if the creaking boards beneath his boots as he'd climbed the two flights had been any indication. But at least it was clean. Definitely grim by Velaris's standards, but when the city itself had no slums, that wasn't saying much. He'd seen and stayed in far worse.

He'd never understood, though, why Nesta insisted on dwelling here. He got why she wouldn't take up rooms in the House of Wind—it was too far from the city, and she couldn't fly or winnow in. Which meant dealing with the ten thousand steps up and down. But why live in this dump, when the town house was sitting empty? Since construction had finished on Feyre and Rhys's sprawling home on the river, the town house had been left open to any of their friends who needed or wanted it. He knew for a fact that Feyre had offered Nesta a room there—and had been rejected.

He frowned at the door's peeling paint. No sounds trickled through the sizable gap between the door and the floor, wide enough for even the fattest of rats to meander through; no fresh scents lingered in the cramped hallway.

Maybe he'd get lucky and she'd be out—perhaps sleeping under the

bar of whatever seedy tavern she'd frequented last night. Though that might be worse, since he'd need to track her down there instead.

Cassian lifted his fist again, the red of his Siphon flickering in the ancient faelights tucked into the ceiling.

*Coward. Grow some damned balls.*

Cassian knocked once. Twice.

Silence.

Cassian almost sighed his relief aloud. Thank the fucking Mother—

Clipped, precise footsteps sounded from the other side of the door. Each more pissed off than the last.

He tucked his wings in tight, squaring his shoulders as he braced his feet apart. A traditional fighting stance, beaten into him during his training years, now mere muscle memory. He didn't dare consider why the sound of those footsteps sent his body falling into it.

The snap as she unlatched each of her four locks might as well have been the beating of a war-drum.

Cassian ran through the list of things he was to say, how Feyre had suggested he say them.

The door was yanked open, the knob twisting so hard Cassian wondered if she was imagining it as his neck.

Nesta Archeron already wore a scowl. But there she was.

She looked like hell.

"What do you want?" She didn't open the door wider than a hand's breadth.

When had he last seen her? The end-of-summer party on that barge in the Sidra last month? She hadn't looked this bad. Though he supposed a night trying to drown oneself in wine and liquor never left anyone looking particularly good the next morning. Especially at—

"It's seven in the morning," she went on, raking him over with that gray-blue stare that always kindled his temper.

She wore a male's shirt. Worse, she wore *only* a male's shirt.

Cassian propped a hand on the doorjamb and gave her a half grin he knew brought out her claws. "Rough night?"

Rough year, really. Her beautiful face was pale, far thinner than it had been before the war with Hybern, her lips bloodless, and those eyes ... Cold and sharp, like a winter morning in the mountains.

No joy, no laughter, in any plane of it. Of her.

She made to shut the door on his hand.

He shoved a booted foot into the gap before she could break his fingers. Her nostrils flared slightly.

“Feyre wants you at the house.”

“Which one?” Nesta said, frowning at the foot he’d wedged in the door. “She has five.”

He bit back his retort. This wasn’t the battlefield—and he wasn’t her opponent. His job was to transport her to the assigned spot. And then pray that the lovely home Feyre and Rhys had just moved into wouldn’t be reduced to rubble.

“The new one.”

“Why didn’t my sister fetch me herself?” He knew that suspicious gleam in her eye, the slight stiffening of her back. His own instincts surged to meet her defiance, to push and push and discover what might happen.

Since Winter Solstice, they’d exchanged only a handful of words. Most had been at the barge party last month. They’d consisted of:

*Move.*

*Hello, Nes.*

*Move.*

*Gladly.*

After months and months of nothing, of barely seeing her at all, that had been it.

He hadn’t even understood why she’d shown up to the party, especially when she knew she’d be stuck on the water with them for hours. Amren likely deserved the credit for the rare appearance, due to whatever bit of sway the female held over Nesta. But by the end of that night, Nesta had been at the front of the line to get off the boat, arms tight around herself, and Amren had been brooding at the other end of it, nearly shaking with rage and disgust.

No one had asked what had happened between them, not even Feyre. The boat had docked, and Nesta had practically run off, and no one had spoken to her since. Until today. Until this conversation, which felt like the longest they’d had since the battles against Hybern.

Cassian said at last, “Feyre is High Lady. She’s busy running the Night Court.”

Nesta cocked her head, gold-brown hair sliding over a bony shoulder. On anyone else, the movement would have been contemplative. On her, it

was the warning of a predator, sizing up prey.

“And my sister,” she said in that flat voice that refused to yield any sign of emotion, “deemed my *immediate presence* necessary?”

“She knew you’d likely need to clean yourself up, and wanted to give you a head start. You’re expected at nine.”

He waited for the explosion as she did the math.

Her eyes flared. “Do I look like I need *two hours* to become presentable?”

He took the invitation to survey her: long bare legs, an elegant sweep of hips, tapered waist—too damn thin—and full, inviting breasts that were at odds with the new, sharp angles of her body.

On any other female, those magnificent breasts might have been enough cause for him to begin courting her the moment he met her. But from the instant he’d met Nesta, the cold fire in her eyes had been a temptation of a different sort.

And now that she was High Fae, all inherent dominance and aggression—and piss-poor attitude—he avoided her as much as possible. Especially with what had happened during and after the war against Hybern. She’d made her feelings about him more than clear.

Cassian said at last, “You look like you could use a few big meals, a bath, and some real clothes.”

Nesta rolled her eyes, but fingered the hem of her shirt.

Cassian added, “Kick out the sorry bastard, get washed, and I’ll bring you some tea.”

Her brows rose a fraction of an inch.

He gave her a crooked smile. “You think I can’t hear that male in your bedroom, trying to quietly put on his clothes and sneak out the window?”

As if in answer, a muffled thud came from the bedroom. Nesta hissed.

“I’ll be back in an hour to see how things are proceeding.” Cassian put enough bite behind the words that his soldiers would know not to push him—they’d remember that he required seven Siphons to keep his magic under control for good reason. But Nesta did not fly in his legions, did not fight under his command, and certainly did not seem to recall that he was over five hundred years old and—

“Don’t bother. I’ll be there on time.”

He pushed off the doorjamb, wings flaring slightly as he backed away a few steps. “That’s not what I was asked to do. I’m to see you from door



to door.”

Her face tightened. “Go perch on a chimney.”

He sketched a bow, not daring to take his eyes off her. She’d emerged from the Cauldron with ... gifts. Considerable gifts—dark ones. But no one had seen nor felt any sign of them since that last battle with Hybern, since Amren had shattered the Cauldron and Feyre and Rhys had managed to heal it. Elain, too, had revealed no indication of her seer’s abilities since then.

But if Nesta’s power remained, still capable of leveling battlefields ... Cassian knew better than to make himself vulnerable to another predator. “Do you want your tea with milk or lemon?”

She slammed the door in his face.

Then locked each of those four locks.

Whistling to himself and wondering if that poor bastard inside the apartment would indeed flee out the window—mostly to escape *her*—Cassian strode down the dim hallway and went to find some food.

He’d need the sustenance today. Especially once Nesta learned precisely why her sister had summoned her.



Nesta Archeron didn’t know the name of the male in her apartment.

She ransacked her wine-soaked memory as she returned to the bedroom, dodging piles of books and lumps of clothing, recalling heated glances at the tavern, the wet, hot meeting of their mouths, the sweat coating her as she rode him until pleasure and drink sent her into blessed oblivion, but not his name.

The male had already leaned out the window, with Cassian no doubt lurking on the street below to witness his spectacularly pathetic exit, when Nesta reached the dim, cramped bedroom. The brass-poster bed was rumpled, the sheets half-spilled on the creaky, uneven wood floor, and the cracked window banged against the wall on its loose hinges. The male twisted toward her.

He was handsome, in the way most High Fae males were handsome. A bit thinner than she liked them—practically a boy compared to the towering mass of muscle that had just filled her doorway. He winced as she padded in, his expression turning pained as he noted what she wore. “I ... That’s ...”

Nesta tugged off his shirt, leaving nothing but bare skin in its wake. His eyes widened, but the scent of his fear remained—not fear of her, but of the male he’d heard at the front door. As he remembered who her sister was. Who her sister’s mate was. Who her sister’s friends were. As if any of that meant something.

What would his fear smell like if he learned she’d used him, slept with him, to keep herself at bay? To settle that writhing darkness that had simmered inside her from the moment she’d emerged from the Cauldron? Sex, music, and drink, she’d learned this past year—all of it helped. Not entirely, but it kept the power from boiling over. Even if she could still feel it streaming through her blood, coiled tight around her bones.

She chucked the white shirt at him. “You can use the front door now.”

He slung the shirt over his head. “I— Is he still—” His gaze kept snagging on her breasts, peaked against the chill morning; her bare skin. The apex of her thighs.

“Good-bye.” Nesta entered the rusty, leaky bathroom attached to her bedroom. At least the place had hot running water.

Sometimes.

Feyre and Elain had tried to convince her to move. She’d always ignored their advice. Just as she’d ignore whatever was said today. She knew Feyre planned a scolding. Perhaps something to do with the fact that Nesta had signed last night’s outrageous tab at the tavern to her sister’s bank account.

Nesta snorted, twisting the handle in the bath. It groaned, the metal icy to the touch, and water sputtered, then sprayed into the cracked, stained tub.

This was her residence. No servants, no eyes monitoring and judging every move, no company unless she invited them. Or unless prying, swaggering warriors made it their business to stop by.

It took five minutes for the water to actually heat enough to start filling the tub. There had been some days in the past year when she hadn’t even bothered to take the time. Some days when she’d climbed into the icy water, not feeling its bite but that of the Cauldron’s dark depths as it devoured her whole. As it ripped away her humanity, her mortality, and made her into *this*.

It had taken her months of battling it—the body-tensing panic that made her very bones tremble to be submerged. But she’d forced herself to

face it down. Had learned to sit in the icy water, nauseated and shaking, teeth gritted; had refused to move until her body recognized that she was in a tub and not the Cauldron, that she was in her apartment and not the stone castle across the sea, that she was alive, immortal. Even though her father was not.

No, her father was ashes in the wind, his existence marked only by a headstone on a hill outside this city. Or so her sisters had told her.

*I loved you from the first moment I held you in my arms*, her father had said to her in those last moments together.

*Don't you lay your filthy hands on my daughter*. Those had been his final words, spat at the King of Hybern. Her father had squandered those final words on that worm of a king.

Her father. The man who had never fought for his children, not until the end. When he had come to save them—to save the humans and the Fae, yes, but most of all, his daughters. Her.

A grand, stupid waste.

Unholy dark power flowed through her, and it had not been enough to stop the King of Hybern from snapping his neck.

She had hated her father, hated him deeply, and yet he had loved her, for some inexplicable reason. Not enough to try to spare them from poverty or keep them from starving. But somehow it had been enough for him to raise an army on the continent. To sail a ship named for her into battle.

She had still hated her father in those last moments. And then his neck had cracked, his eyes not full of fear as he died, but of that foolish love for her.

That was what had lingered—the look in his eyes. The resentment in her heart as he died for her. It had festered, gnawing at her like the power she buried deep, running rampant through her head until no icy baths could numb it away.

She could have saved him.

It was the King of Hybern's fault. She knew that. But it was hers, too. Just as it was her fault that Elain had been captured by the Cauldron after Nesta spied on it with that scrying, her fault that Hybern had done such terrible things to hunt her and her sister down like a deer.

Some days, the sheer dread and panic locked Nesta's body up so thoroughly that nothing could get her to breathe. Nothing could stop the

awful power from beginning to rise, rise, rise in her. Nothing beyond the music at those taverns, the card games with strangers, the endless bottles of wine, and the sex that made her feel nothing—but offered a moment of release amid the roaring inside her.

Nesta finished washing away the sweat and other remnants of last night. The sex hadn't been bad—she'd had better, but also much worse. Even immortality wasn't enough time for some males to master the art of the bedroom.

So she'd taught herself what she liked. She'd obtained a monthly contraceptive tea from her local apothecary, and then she'd brought that first male here. He had no idea that her maidenhead had been intact until he'd spied the smeared blood on the sheets. His face had tightened with distaste—then a glimmer of fear that she might report an unsatisfactory first bedding to her sister. To her sister's insufferable mate. Nesta hadn't bothered to tell him that she avoided both of them at all costs. Especially the latter. These days, Rhysand seemed content to do the same.

After the war with Hybern, Rhysand had offered her jobs. Positions in his court.

She didn't want them. They were pity offerings, thin attempts to get her to be a part of Feyre's life, to be gainfully employed. But the High Lord had never liked her. Their conversations were coldly civil at best.

She'd never told him that the reasons he hated her were the same reasons she lived here. Took cold baths some days. Forgot to eat on others. Couldn't stand the crack and snap of a fireplace. And drowned herself in wine and music and pleasure each night. Every damning thing Rhysand thought about her was true—and she'd known it long before he had ever shadowed her doorstep.

Any offering Rhysand threw her way was made solely out of love for Feyre. Better to spend her time the way she wished. They kept paying for it, after all.

The knock on the door rattled the entire apartment.

She glared toward the front room, debating whether to pretend she'd left, but Cassian could hear her, smell her. And if he broke down the door, which he was likely to do, she'd just have the headache of explaining it to her stingy landlord.

So Nesta donned the dress she'd left on the floor last night, and then again freed all four locks. She'd installed them the first day she'd arrived.