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A COURT OF SPLINTERED HARMONY

THE VALKYRIE CYCLE: MOVEMENT I

SARAH J. MAAS

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PRELUDE

There was a room, little more than a cell, far beneath his father's mist-shrouded keep.

It was his room—his *pen*, his older half brothers liked to sneer—and only once a day was he allowed out into the chill damp to breathe in the song of the craggy, wind-battered mountains and feel, if he was lucky, a kiss of sunlight on his cheeks.

His mother was not allowed inside the pen. Visits with her were limited to once a week, when they would eat a small breakfast together in her own cramped chamber many levels above. One hour—that was all they had. He'd carry the trays up himself so her too-thin, overworked hands didn't have to ache any more than necessary.

Not that his hands were much better. Not after what his half brothers had done three years ago. He assumed it was three years ago—time was meaningless down here, marked only by how large his wings were getting, how they could now brush either side of the cell walls if he stretched them fully.

There were nights when he'd bolt awake screaming, certain his hands were still burning, skin melting—and find that thick, gnarled scars remained.

He'd been young enough when it happened that his wings had spanned barely half the space.

He only remembered flashes. The laughter as they slathered his small hands in oil. Then the piercing terror at the sight of the burning braziers, their sizzling coals audible even from across the room. The deep dread in his bones as he realized that there was nothing he could do to stop his half brothers from shoving his oil-soaked hands into the flames. The heat of that fire reaching his straining fingers before they went in, then the instant shock of not feeling anything. That was the last glimmer—how he felt *nothing* for a moment.

And then pain so complete that everything went black.

He'd awoken to his mother's sobbing; he lay cradled in her lap with such pain in his hands, in his fingers, that the merest twitch had cast him into oblivion once more. That was how it was for a time: pulses of consciousness, a wave of agony, and then nothing.

Maybe the shadows kept him under, locked in their dark embrace. Maybe it was a kindness. But when he'd finally awoken for good, he found his hands changed. They were the same shape, but new flesh had crept over the burns. Where once his hands had been smooth, now the skin was shiny and rough and tight.

They'd thrown him back in the pen soon after that. And as before, his mother was not allowed to tend to him. To comfort him.

He knew why his mother was kept elsewhere most of the time. Why there was a small, discreet stairwell at the end of her hall that wound to the upper levels, where his father dwelled.

His half brothers made sure he knew.

Son of a whore—we'll fuck your mother one day, too.

Their own mother had personally locked him down here the first time he'd retaliated for the insult. The second time, they'd burned his hands beyond recognition.

So he was left with shadows for company, left to listen to the faint song of the wind that sometimes wandered into the depths of the mountain keep. He flexed his wings as often as he could, going through exercises he'd marked his father's warriors repeating in the courtyard.

He'd learned them all, noting the details during that one hour he

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was allowed out. How the warriors moved, how they handled their blades, how they stood, how they took off without a running start.

He had never flown. Not once.

His half brothers mocked him for that, too. But he practiced as best he could in the pen. His hands, once healed, had proved able to function as they had before the burns—albeit stiffly for the first few months, sometimes aching, but soon returning to their full range of use. So he trained. And trained.

He was an Illyrian; he could do nothing less.

His mother often reminded him of that, whispering so the other keen-eared chambermaids didn't hear, didn't report the words to their impetuous mistress.

You are an Illyrian, Azriel—the wind sings through your very blood. You cannot be caged. You cannot be broken. They lock you away because they fear you.

He sometimes forgot his name until he heard his mother say it. *Why?* he'd ask her, over and over. *Why do they fear me? Why do they hate me?*

She would kiss his brow once, twice. *Because you are different. They could all feel it, from the moment you were born. And one day, you will show them why that is a wondrous thing.*

When he'd been younger, the words had never made sense. But as the years passed, Azriel knew she was right.

The shadows in his pen—his *cell*—had become his friends. They had their own stories, their own accounts of events in the keep above.

The wind was his most trusted adviser, bringing him tales of the world beyond. Of wide-open fields where sunshine gilded wildflowers; of rushing rivers that cascaded down mountains; of a violet-eyed boy around his age toward whom the entire world seemed to gravitate, a winged boy—another Illyrian—clawing out an existence in the mud and snow far from here, and . . . her. A golden-haired girl, lovely and bright, encased in darkness akin to his own, trapped within a city beneath a mountain, dreaming of the open sky above.

But they were far from him, as unreachable as the moon.

So the shadows and wind kept him company. Shadows and wind and

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stone. Azriel came to understand the quiet, rumbling language of the rock, how it caught the voices and words of those who dwelled in the keep.

That was how he discovered that his half brothers had come of age. How he heard their plans for his mother. It had nothing to do with her and everything to do with him. But they would hurt her and get away with it, and then gloat to him.

The stone warned Azriel when they left their rooms in the dead of night.

His self-imposed training told him how to shatter his cell door.

The shadows guided him, keeping him unseen as he raced through the halls.

And the wind instructed him on how to minimize his half brothers' screams as he intercepted them before they touched her door, as he slammed his fists and his power and his teeth into them, as he unleashed himself, more beast than male.

Those keen-eared chambermaids heard; they instantly alerted the household.

It took three full-grown Illyrian warriors to pull Azriel off his eldest half brother. The other was already unconscious. And Azriel was still snarling, thrashing in their grip, when his father appeared, his wife beside him, and took in the scene—the door they stood in front of, and Azriel's mother, wide-eyed and shaking, her wings folded away painfully tight in utter submission.

Alcohol clings to your father, the shadows murmured, drawing Azriel from his daze. *And heavy sleep. Fear and anger envelop his wife. Your mother knows only terror—and desperation.*

The shadows didn't speak, exactly, but he'd learned to interpret the shards of images they showed him as words, sentences. Just as he'd learned to read and write during the precious hours with his mother, who hid books in her room, along with what scraps of paper and cinders she could find.

His father's spoiled, ice-hearted wife shrieked as she rushed to her own sons, then cooed their names, stroking their hateful faces. The one still conscious sniveled and whimpered.

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Their broad-shouldered sire towered above Azriel, his wings so large they seemed to blot out all light. Wings as dark as his hair, currently pulled back from the harsh planes of his face. He surveyed his son with slightly clouded hazel eyes, while his Second in command gripped the boy by the back of the neck hard enough to bruise.

"Don't lame him, don't clip him, don't cut him," Azriel's mother begged, dropping to her knees, crawling toward his father. Her broken wings dragged on the ground.

His father ignored her, gaze fixed wholly on Azriel. "How did you get out?" His voice was harsh as granite. As unyielding.

Azriel sniffed back the blood clogging his nose. "The shadows and wind and stone told me how."

The warriors snickered, the breath of his sire's Second a warm push against his neck. His father kept staring, unmoved.

"Simpleton," his father's eldest son jeered at Azriel from the haven of his mother's arms.

Embarrassment flooded through him. For a heartbeat, Azriel wished he could fade into the rock and darkness. Wished he could step back so the shadows could wrap around him and hide him, and he'd never have to see these people again—

So he did.

One moment, he was held in place by his father's commander.

The next, a dark haze had settled over his vision. He could still see, but as if through a thin, black veil. A step, and he was out of the male's grip. A glance at his own hands showed—

Nothing. They were gone. Only shadow remained.

The commander yelped, leaping back. "The bastard was right here."

Azriel's father scanned the space, something like fear blasting away the cobwebs of alcohol and sleep from his eyes. And in that moment, Azriel knew he was truly gone, hidden in a sliver of shadow so deep no one could find him.

"Where is he?" his father's wife screamed.

Her shrillness shocked Azriel into movement. The shadowy veil shivered and fell away. Blaring light poured in, and he squinted against it.

Whatever had happened, he had reappeared—or removed that cloak of shadows.

We are here, the shadows whispered in his ear. *We are always here.*

Hide me again, he whispered back. His mother had raised a hand to her heart. The shadows encircled him, the world dimming. His body vanished. He could still feel it, use it—but he knew no one could see him.

His father's wife shrieked, "*Demon!*"

The word threw him into the light again, shadows slipping. Torchlight and the freezing hall pressed in.

"Shadowsinger," a warrior down the hall breathed.

Azriel did not know what that meant, had not heard that word in the courtyard or on the wind. He peered at his scarred hands. A wisp of shadow wended around his fingers. *Why now?*

To seize this moment, the shadows answered.

He realized he'd been listening to them with a cocked head, as if having a conversation—realized it only because his father's cruel face shifted from fear to calculation.

His father's wife apparently read the same shift in expression and hissed, cradling her son's head to her breast, "Don't you *dare*, Maxtus. Don't you *dare*."

Azriel's sire ignored her. His Second in command, now keeping a healthy distance from Azriel, countered, "Milord, having a shadowsinger in our forces is an asset—"

"The beast is an affront," his father's wife seethed, fear forgotten as she shot to her feet and tucked her eldest son behind her. At seventeen, the boy was too old to be hiding. But there he was, shock and horror blatant on his bloodied face. It melted into something close to victory as his mother spat at her husband, "If your by-blow stays, Maxtus, I'll put him down myself."

His father's craggy features again became as immovable as the mountains around them. The female trembled at that expression. And though Azriel hated her, he did not enjoy the sight and scent of her terror before that merciless countenance.

His father's voice was like gravel as he said to her, "For too long I've let you dictate what to do with the boy."

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"You shamed me with his birth, when he was born of that *whore*," his wife snapped, unable to help herself, fear be damned. She flung a thin finger toward Azriel's mother, still kneeling on the floor. "And here is the monstrous result. That boy is a devil; look what he did to our sons—"

A backward swing of a broad hand, so fast that his father's wife hit the stone wall behind her before the sound of the blow had finished echoing. His father had barely moved. His face remained impassive as he growled, "I have had enough of your interference. Get out of my sight."

She clutched her cheek, righting herself. Her son didn't try to help steady her. Not one of the warriors reached out a hand to assist her. But she bowed her head, her light brown hair—a rarity amongst their people—tumbling over her shoulder. And she said with no true remorse, "Apologies, milord."

Then she rushed away, eldest son in tow, motioning to one of the warriors to lift her other son from where he lay unconscious on the floor. She turned back only once, venom in her gaze as it landed on Azriel. Then she was gone.

The lord once again assessed Azriel—slowly, coldly.

Down the hallway, water dripped against stone. A torch crackled. Far above, someone screamed. With pain or laughter, it was hard to tell.

Azriel's mother remained trembling at his father's feet. The looming male examined her. As if he had never seen her before.

But Azriel wouldn't have her kneeling—not for this male. Not for anyone. And no one, not even Azriel's father, stopped him from walking to his mother, helping her rise. His scarred knuckles were bloody and raw—arcs of dirt and blood lay beneath his nails.

His father ordered his mother, "Go into your room. The boy stays here."

Azriel lunged for his mother, but she only gave him a terrified, pleading glance before she vanished. Begging him to behave.

"Leave us," his father directed his warriors.

"Milord," his commander started, face pale as porridge. "I'm not certain leaving you alone—"

"Leave us," his father repeated, the green stone atop his hand flaring with a sickly light. In silence still heavily laced with fear, the soldiers departed. And then Azriel was alone, perhaps for the first time ever, with his father.

His sire stared at him. Azriel stared right back.

"How long have you heard them, boy?"

Azriel knew what the male meant, and kept his face blank as he answered, "A while." His voice was hoarse, but icy as the winter beyond the keep.

Interest honed itself into something deadly sharp in his sire's eyes. "And what do the shadows tell you now?"

Azriel considered his words carefully. Knew it for the test it was, though he could only guess at what the end result might be. The shadows yielded a solitary kernel of information: "They tell me that your wife is not going to her chamber. She has dropped your sons at the infirmary and is now walking alone to the guards' station. They tell me that the male who is leading the patrol tonight likes to lift her skirts when they are alone. They tell me that she thinks you do not know, but you do. And one day she will pay for it."

His father smiled, teeth flashing. "Anyone could figure that out. She's a harlot, through and through, but a good enough breeder to keep around for the time being. Tell me something no one else knows."

Azriel's entire life had boiled down to this moment, these next words. But the shadows offered nothing. Only silence. If this was a test, it was his to pass on his own.

His father was a brute, yes. But also clad in velvet finery at odds with what most warriors wore. The talons atop his wings were shining, as if polished, in contrast with the roughness of this place.

He was a vain male. And beneath the vanity lay fear—of being lesser, of being found wanting. The vanity was a shield. His sire's most valuable weapon and defense. And his greatest weakness.

So Azriel said, keenly aware of his mother's frantic terror leaking through the nearby door, "The shadows tell me that you have weapons in your arsenal that you have yet to wield, weapons that will take you to new heights of influence and prestige."

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A blink—all the shock the male would show. But Azriel knew he had him, even before the male asked, "What sort of prestige?"

Azriel did not break his father's gaze. "While you now rule only this mountain and its range, you might command far more."

"How far? How much?"

The shadows whispered at last, and Azriel answered with the reply they supplied, "To the Steppes in the north, perhaps to Windhaven itself, if you use your arsenal wisely. Deploy it shrewdly."

Another blink. The boy had never seen a map, never heard of either place—and his father knew it.

Azriel lifted his chin, daring the male to doubt him.

His sire swept his gaze over him once more. To his scarred hands, bunched into fists. A grimace crossed his face. But it faded as he noted the wings Azriel managed to keep from dragging on the stones, as a true Illyrian warrior always did. His father gave him another smile, again full of teeth. "Look at the size of you. More my son than those whelps. And yet still a boy—a boy who sent his brothers sprawling." He chuckled. "An unknown weapon in my arsenal, indeed."

The words meant nothing. This male was nothing.

His sire looked to the cracked door. To where Azriel's mother was listening in pure panic. "Pack your things," he commanded. "You leave at dawn with the boy."

Azriel started. Had the shadows orchestrated this?

His father pivoted on his heel and strode for the stairwell. Azriel didn't fail to note that his father hadn't told him to pack *his* things. Azriel had nothing in his cell beyond two buckets, some hay, and a blanket. The threadbare clothes he wore were the only ones he owned.

His father said without turning back, "You will go to Lord Devlon's camp, and there you will stay. He is one of the few with resources to properly train you—and one of the few I trust to do it right. In the meantime, you are banished from this keep and my territory until I see fit to summon you. Then you will report to me what you have learned, what you have seen. And if your shadows have spoken true this night . . ." His father paused, peering over his shoulder at Azriel at last. Only undiluted greed and cruelty filled his features. "Perhaps you

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will be able to prove to me just how valuable you are. And then we shall see which of my sons is given the honor to fight at my right hand as my true heir."

With that, the male strutted away, content in his own dominion and lordship. Azriel had never hated a person more. Even his father's wife. Even his half brothers.

Azriel stayed with his mother as she swiftly packed, one of the chambermaids bringing a rough-stitched sack for her to carry whatever she could.

And then they waited.

Those two remaining hours in the night were the longest of their lives, he thought. Waiting for the darkness to ebb, waiting for the silvery light to illumine the mists. Waiting for his father to change his mind and order him back to the pen. To keep his precious asset here.

Azriel and his mother clung tightly to each other as the minutes dripped by. She didn't ask him about the shadows. She just held him, stroking his hair.

But then dawn broke, and the bulk of two warriors filled her door. Two—because they would both have to be carried.

Shame heated Azriel's cheeks, worsened by the many who silently gathered to watch as they were hauled up into the sky, his mother shaking so hard he could hear her teeth clacking. Around them, the mist and wind howled. A beckoning and a warning.

And as the keep was swallowed by the mist, as his mother sobbed through her prayers of gratitude, Azriel bade the shadows and stone of the keep to await his return.

Not when his father called for him. He would never again be summoned on his father's word. The male was a fool for thinking that dangling his title would keep Azriel in line.

He would sooner die than be named his father's heir. But he would return—and so Azriel instructed the shadows to be ready.

For the day he'd come back to kill them all.