The Seed of Yggdrasil

Book One

TILL MYTH DO US PART



DARIUS EBRAHIMI

MYTHICAL BANDIT BOOKS

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For Riley,
who showed me the power of imagination

Special thanks to my mom,
Who always believed in me,
Love you to infinity and beyond

ONE



DIVIDED

KAI DREAMT OF MORE than heaven. He was already there. Elysium's glorious spires glinted in drought-light, rusting orange as morning dust roused, and the only darkness in the day was the wrought iron fence below that divided Kai from the one he loved.

From atop an under-construction temple spire, Kai felt he could've flown over the small barrier. Yet, rickety bamboo scaffolding and his task kept him grounded.

Maybe the cat had disintegrated the spire's golden dragon head decoration and left for a nap. The one time Kai wanted a myth to be real, it was nowhere to be seen. Leaning on a smooth bamboo railing, the slight sway sent shivers down his spine as he tried to steady himself, and looking out was more comforting than looking down.

With Elysium behind, Kai peered over the fence to the city of Asphodel. A tumult of people and buildings and businesses.

Wheels rolled over sidewalks and into streets and back again. A river of rooftops tumbled up and down in cascading size. Disparity. Chaos. Struggle. That was life there. Copper-green spires were hollow shells of the past, and no new ones sprouted. The city was too cramped to waste space.

Yet, Asphodel retreated from an unused quarter of the city. There, the streets were wide and vacant. There, pale shingles fell into undisturbed dust. There, it was better to let things lie.

Kai didn't dare think of the myths lurking there.

However, one did think of him.

A creature of snow and ice padded behind him—a stalking snow leopard. Unperturbed by heat, it walked cool. Fur ruffled, bending under a gust like stalks of white-blue wheat. Eyes glared, oceans of terror, not because of violence within, but by the depth. Still staring at Kai, the leopard arched its back into a stretch, and drifting on the breeze behind, scarlet phoenix feathers shivered excitedly on the tail-tip, each bristle brandished like sunbeams. The leopard's whiskers bent forward, inspecting the intruder on its roost.

Kai glanced over his shoulder. "You're what I expected."

He wiped heat-soaked hair off his forehead along with the thought of the black fence below. Despite nonchalance, Kai listened for movement. Even such a silent hunter must make noise.

The leopard unfurled dry lips with a subdued rasping, displaying fangs. It took a breath. Quiet. Calm. Then, the air built and escaped in what should've been a growl, but it was not a growl that Kai heard.

"I'd expect more respect, then," the leopard said.

"My expectations were high." Kai smiled. "Are you surprised to find someone that understands you?"

"Should I be?" The cat yawned; no matter the size, cats seemed to expect all meows, mews, and tail flicks to be understood.

"Most myths are used to swords instead of words."

The cat hissed. "If you call me a myth again, I'll devour you."

"Go ahead, myth." Kai faced the cat and opened his arms as if expecting an embrace. "I'm bitter and stringy as they come, and you'd be saving me from a lot of trouble."

Dark lips tilted, glistening with a tinge of saliva. "With this heat, you're already cooked."

"And what would you know about heat?" Kai crossed unheroic arms. If he was to survive this encounter, strength would do him no good—he would need calm in the face of fear.

"I've seen more droughts than you've seen sunrises," the leopard said.

"Were you created with a backstory, or are you making it up as you go?"

The creature growled. Even Kai heard it; it had no translation. "I am not one of those new creations."

Kai frowned. If he was wrong, the goading would end up with a goring. "Look, I made a deal to rid Elysium of new myths. In this case, one born by those who want snow instead of drought. I've seen snow and wasn't impressed, but if I had to choose between this drought and a blizzard, I'd choose the cold until I was freezing in it. But you say you're not a new myth, so I guess I have no business with you."

"I still have business with you." The leopard tensed the hairs above its icy blue eyes like a raised brow.

The nerves made him laugh. "And what could that possibly be? In need of a translator?"

"Exactly. You know what I am, and I know what you are."

"What's that?" Kai asked.

"My maker."

Triumphant, Kai began to think of how a small success might reverse a smothering tide of failures. "See, you are what I expected—a new myth—one I made. But what could I possibly translate from something I created?"

"You didn't create me. You only remade me. And as you brought me back, I'm here to bring the world back—to fix what's broken. It's time people had something to believe in."

Although Kai did not look behind to the divide between cities, he fell upon a recent feeling, a constant feeling, which inhabited the uncleaned corners of his mind, infecting all other thoughts. "Like love?"

"A different love than you intended."

With that, the leopard grinned. *Pop*. The big cat burst into a flash of golden ash. Dust floated on a slow wind, landing in a neat pile on the sun-bleached wood planks. A sunset-red feather floated down on the pile, stuck upright, waiting to be plucked.

Kai obliged, taking the feather as proof that he had dealt with the myth.

"What a waste of words. But I suppose *you* are not a waste." He twirled the feather between forefinger and thumb, a tightening grip keeping it from slipping to the city below.

Kai headed around the spire to the ladder down. Yet, he waited on the platform, not wanting to descend towards paperwork, family, and his so-called wife, all of which were less routine than dealing with miscreant myths.

Here at the highest point of what others called heaven, Kai could've felt like a god. Elysium's rooftops, shingles, and streets splotched themselves under him on the city's canvas, a tapestry of civility. Spires dominated. Some ornate. Some tall. Some still under construction like this one. Each tower called attention to itself, trying to outdo and outshine the last with precious metals, artwork, and height. But each taller and taller tower seemed smaller and smaller.

His personal life loomed larger.

Somewhere among the white-walled houses and black shadows, his family was out enjoying the day and trying to fit in. Possibly, they were home, and he looked out further towards the well-adorned homes on the hill, but he felt no draw for the smooth stucco and Mediterranean-orange rooftops.

However, as he lingered a little longer, no matter where he looked and what he thought, he kept returning to the iron fence below. In the cause of his misery, he might also find a brief window of happiness.

Kai sped down a ladder and the scaffolding built aside the temple, descending like an archeologist inspecting the architectural record of Elysium's patchwork past. Each level built on the last, reaching for the sky as if to see whether the gods were still there.

There were three main levels. The upper tower was decorative, desperate, and propped up by cracked bamboo

scaffolding that looked more likely to fall than the construction it held. Steady grey brick composed the middle layer, the times of which Kai could only imagine but would never dream of. Finally, at the base of the temple were Corinthian columns painted clay-red, which besides color, also matched the construction grounds around in the amount of cracks, dirt fissured by drought and foundation by burden.

Fighting anticipation, Kai stopped between the middle and lower floors. The foreman still might be waiting for him, and that would destroy his opportunity.

Kai waited, and as with every time he saw this temple, the artwork that separated these two sections depicting Hercules's twelve labors captivated him. The band of heroism ranged from lions and boars, triumphs and trickery, legend and godhood, but it lacked the misdeed that mirrored Kai's like the glint of the gold figures—why Hercules chose to undertake the tasks.

Guilt.

Without motive, myth was emotionless recounting. Without reason, without failure, without flaw, Hercules was only what he ended up as—a god, a perfect, shining figure to be worshiped, not the fallible hero worth striving for. And Kai, more than anything, felt less like the gold and more like the cracked bamboo holding him.

Unable to wait any longer, he brushed the gold art with a finger as he passed, smudging the fine film of dust. No one saw him do it, but he'd rather be caught touching the gold than the iron fence across the yard.

Down the final ramp and timing it to perfection, Kai stepped onto dry dirt as the foreman left the construction yard for lunch.

With no one in sight, the wrought iron awaited. Crossing the dusty, dead yard, he grasped black bars, and the metal's sear in sunlight was nothing to the pain of separation. Like most fences, it was only a barrier to overcome; yet, it was the consequences of crossing that made even the most determined hesitate.

His youthful face wrinkled, his eyes shining like broken brown diamonds, cracks in crystalline irises cooling and carved by another heartbreak, but despite pain, a stubborn glisten betrayed the hope that survived.

A rustle on the other side of the dead ivy blocking his view.

"Sophia?"

Her voice snuck through. "Is it safe?"

"The foreman got tired of waiting," Kai said. "Must've thought the leopard ate me, and he didn't want to be the only one still hungry."

"Did the foreman take a good look at you? A leopard would still be hungry."

"That explains why he didn't go up and check." Kai wished the buoyancy of his mood could lift him over the barrier. Failing this, the ballooning cheer met the pinprick of reality, and like that, he wanted more than a sample of true happiness. "I can't see you."

"Imagination is better than reality."

She might've been right. In his head, Sophia was perfect and vague, except for a memory of a single-dimpled smile and mocking eyes, blue as robin eggs. The image radiated the

glorious glow of distance. Although he knew breaking beyond the bushes would destroy the perfect picture dancing in his head, his memory of Sophia shifted like sand dunes, and he sought only to renew, rather than maintain, a perfectly false memory.

Yearning for a glimpse, he cracked the sun-bleached ivy, dust raining down like dew, but he only broke through thickets to brown bushes behind. "How is it only the wildest dreams become real, while the simplest remain out of reach?"

"I'm not your wildest dream?" A smile hummed through her words, but sarcasm settled serious. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Kai's knuckles whitened around black bars. "If they catch me here, they might sentence me to a better fate than Elysium."

"And what would Elysium do without their hero?"

He let go of the fence, happiness gone with the grip. "I'm no hero. I'm just a janitor putting a bucket under a leak rather than plugging the hole."

"Is it so hard to be satisfied with what you do and what you have?"

"It is until you're here."

A pause lingered, painful. "I know."

The gap between them seemed greater as the words dissipated in the distance between them.

"I've got to get back," Sophia said. "Say hi to your wife."

"Ex-wife." Kai suppressed the annoyance that came with a reality he didn't agree with.

"I'm your ex-wife."

"You're my wife."

"According to the gods, I'm neither." Truth ended the argument. "Going to the temple later?"

Kai nodded, even if she couldn't see him. "My mom insists. I might be an adult, and the gods might be gone, but she always had more power over us than any god. Can I see you at the garden?"

"I don't like that spot. Anyone could see us talking. Besides, the council said it would only be a few weeks."

"Until they make it a few more weeks."

Silence, then Sophia said, "Alright, I'll see you then. But I better go before my lunch is over and my stew goes to waste."

Kai's hands clenched as if it would hold onto the moment, too. "Eating stew in this heat?"

"It's cold stew now."

"I'd say that's an improvement."

"Just like this was an improvement on my day," Sophia said. "See you soon."

Her footsteps drifted away on loose dirt, and Kai was left lonely again, but this time, with a hopeful smile that would last him through the unpleasantness that awaited him in heaven.