



SUJI KIM

Under
the
Oak Tree

the novel
VOLUME ONE

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A NOTE FROM SUJI KIM

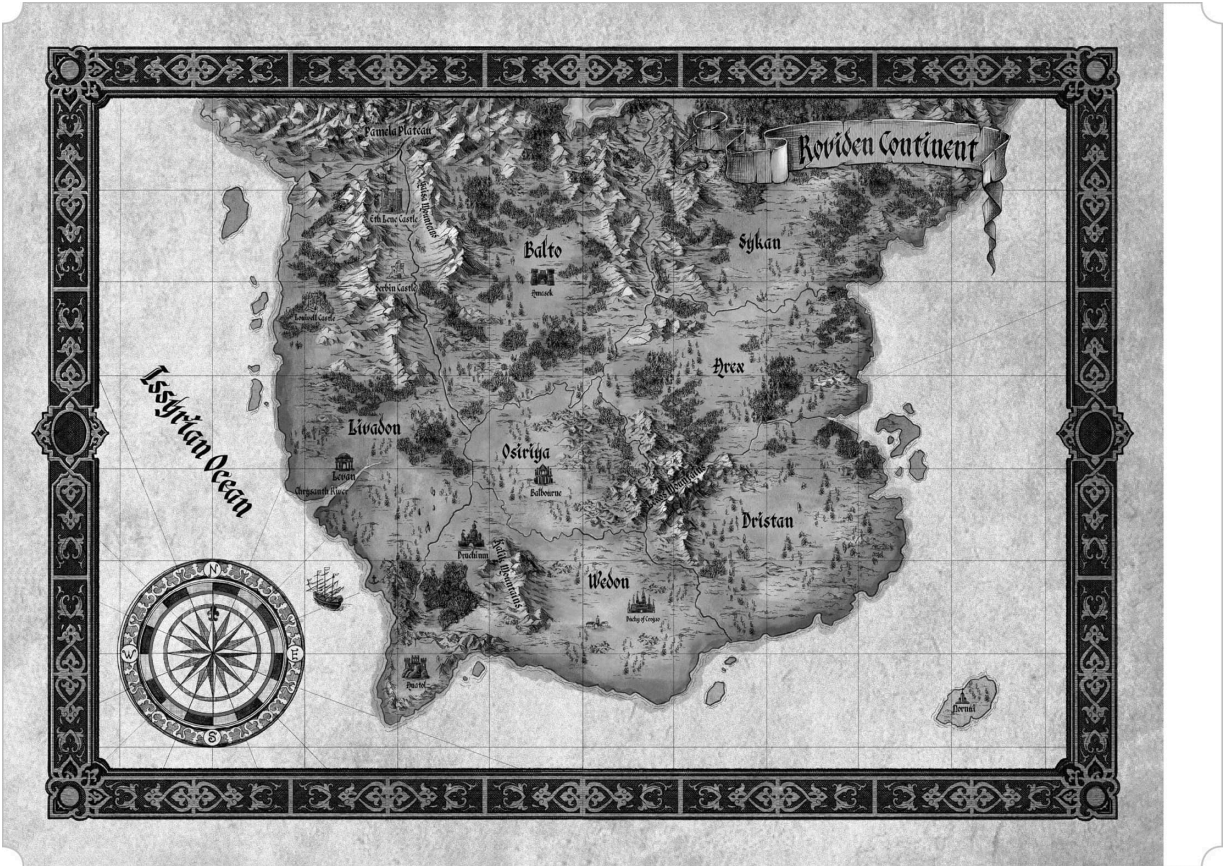


To my readers,

This story grapples with many difficult and complex themes. The content includes depictions of physical and mental abuse as well as themes of trauma and emotional distress experienced by the characters. Certain scenes may be disturbing and triggering for some readers; reader discretion is advised. The story also contains explicit sexual content that may not be suitable for all audiences.

Please approach this content with care and seek support if needed. For any readers who see themselves in this tale, my hope is that it provides you with comfort, courage, and the knowledge that you are not alone.

SUJI KIM



CHAPTER 1



MAXIMILIAN CALYPSE PACED AROUND the drawing room.

She was so nervous that she did not realize she was biting her fingernails—not until the Duke of Croyso entered the room. The clack of his heavy cane shattered the silence, and she rushed to hide her hands behind her back.

“Have I not told you time and again to cease that *revolting* habit of yours?”

The duke’s words were like a biting chill, and Maxi fixed her eyes on her feet.

“F-Forgive me, Father...”

The duke clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “You’d best not embarrass me, girl. You have been far more fortunate than you deserve. Should your repulsive behavior besmirch our family name, know that I will not forgive you.”

A cold sweat formed on Maxi’s back, and an icy bead trickled down her skin. She opened her mouth to try to form a smooth reply, but her spine stiffened with fear, choking her words.

“I-I w-w-w—I shall...I shall d-d-do as you c-command, F-Father. W-When he c-c-c-comes, I w-w-w...”

Maxi did not have to raise her head to know that her father was grimacing at her. Disgust shadowed his face whenever he heard her speak. She tried to remain calm, even as she scrambled for words.

“I-I...I w-will p-persuade him t-t-t...t-to stay i-in this m-m-marriage...”

“Enough!” The duke rapped his cane on the floor. “Is it too much to ask that you speak normally for a day? For even just an hour? Can you think of any man who would want a stuttering wife?!”

“I...I...”

“As you are well aware, Riftan Calypse is no longer just a lowborn knight! He is now revered as one of the best swordmasters on the entire continent, as the hero who defeated the Red Dragon, Sektor! He need only ask, and the church would rush to annul this marriage!”

The duke paused to catch his breath. He pressed a palm to his temple, as if the mere thought of divorce scandalized him.

“I will *not* allow the eldest Croyso daughter to be divorced by a lowborn knight! I will *not* stand idly by while my half-wit daughter ruins the reputation of this house!”

Maxi bit her lip, unspoken words burning her throat like bile. *It’s not my fault*, she wanted to say. Neither she nor Riftan had ever expressed a desire to be wed. It was her father and her father alone who had willed the marriage to happen.

The duke continued his tirade, lips snarled in rebuke. “If only you were half as beautiful as Rosetta...No, if only you were *normal*! Then I would not have to grovel at that lowborn’s feet, to humor his every whim!”

Maxi’s half-sister, Rosetta, was like a rose in full bloom. At the mention of her, what little defiance Maxi had mustered slipped from her grasp like water through her fingers. She had turned deathly pale, but her father was relentless.

“King Reuben may wish to make Riftan Calypse his son-in-law, but there is nothing he can do if Calypse refuses! If only you had managed to win your husband’s affection, you would not be facing a divorce! You have no one to blame but yourself!”

“B-But he...he left for the c-campaign the day after...after the wedding...”

Maxi had hardly had a chance to talk to Riftan, let alone win his affection! But just as she was about to give voice to that protest, her vision

flashed white as her father slammed his cane into her side. The pain was so severe that she curled over, gasping for breath and unable to scream.

“How dare you talk back to me?!” the duke demanded. “Just thinking about your wretched impediment is enough to infuriate me!”

Maxi nodded in desperate submission, lest he strike her again. The duke’s lips twitched, as if he was readying himself to spew forth another stream of vitriol.

A knock at the door saved Maxi. The duke spun to face the sound, and he was addressed by the meek voice of a maidservant.

“Your Grace,” she said. “The Remdragon Knights have arrived.”

“Show them in!”

Maxi’s face flushed with terror, and she finally raised her gaze to meet her father’s. The duke hissed through gritted teeth.

“Make it very, very clear to Calypse that the marriage will not be annulled. And a reminder, should you have forgotten—if you bring shame upon our house, you will have a price to pay.”

The duke stormed out of the room. When she was sure he was gone, Maxi slumped against a window. She tried to slow her breathing as she waited for the throbbing pain to subside.

The light of the autumn sun streamed in through the window, and Maxi blinked back her tears. Crying would only serve to drag her deeper into the abyss, where her sorrows would consume her.

Maxi clasped her shaking hands together. She had to collect herself. For a noblewoman, divorce was akin to death. Not only would she be ridiculed, but she would also disgrace her entire family. It was an unspeakable dishonor, and a duel was the only path to redemption. But a duel, against Riftan Calypse?

The Duke of Croyso had no sons, and none of his relatives or sworn knights would stand the slightest chance against Riftan. He was a swordmaster who had felled a dragon! Who could possibly match him in combat, let alone best him?

It seemed inevitable that she would tarnish her family name. The duke would never forgive her—it was possible he would even kill her with a timely “accident” before the annulment was complete. Such machinations were not beneath her father.

I must do all I can to prevent something like that....

But would Riftan Calypse listen to her?

Maxi bit her lip. She was trapped at the edge of a sheer cliff, with no way to safely descend. After all, her marriage had been arranged solely for the convenience of the duke and his knights.

Three years prior, when news spread across the continent that Sektor the Red Dragon had awoken from its slumber, King Elnuima Reuben III called his vassals to arms, to embark on a campaign to subdue the beast. Duke Croyso and his forces were bound by law to participate, but he had found a way to shift his duty to Riftan Calypse by marrying off his daughter.

Maxi shuddered, recalling her wedding day. The air had been thick with thinly veiled insults, whispered among the guests. As a lowborn knight, Riftan had no choice but to obey the duke and appear at the wedding hall. Just how much resentment had he felt? How humiliated must he have been?

That day, Maxi had been terrified of Riftan’s expression. He had looked as if he was holding something back.

If I were half as beautiful as Rose, could I have won his heart?

Such thoughts deepened Maxi’s torment. Riftan Calypse was a stunning man. Even Rosetta, who often mocked his humble origins, could not help but blush when she saw him dressed in his order’s ceremonial attire.

Riftan could have courted any woman he wanted. How could he possibly be attracted to a plain, stuttering woman like her? Especially now that his accomplishments had elevated him from his lowborn status?

Now that he’s likely to marry a princess, pleading won’t be enough to change his mind.

The night after the wedding was their only night together. Riftan had left for the campaign the following morning, without saying a word, and he

never wrote to her once while he was gone. Maxi was not sure if he even saw her as his wife.

She buried her face in her hands, dark thoughts clouding her mind.

“What a sight you are,” said a familiar, sullen voice.

Startled, Maxi looked up. A giant of a man glowered at her from the door. She hadn’t heard him enter.

“A wife trembling in fear while awaiting her husband’s return from mortal peril.” Riftan’s voice dripped with sarcasm, and he approached her with slow, silent footsteps.

Dressed in silver armor and a navy-blue tunic reminiscent of a monk’s robes, Riftan was far more powerfully built—far more intimidating—than Maxi remembered. She held her breath as he drew closer.

“I didn’t expect a warm welcome, but do you have to tremble as if I’m carrying the plague?”

His frigid tone snapped Maxi out of her trance. As she realized that she had managed to displease him within mere minutes of their reunion, the blood drained from her face.

“I...I am relieved t-to see you un-unharmed....”

Maxi’s voice trailed off. What else could she say? She was not even sure how to address him. Riftan? Too intimate. Sir Riftan? He would surely mock her. Unsettled by his piercing gaze, she took a step back.

Why was he looking at her like that?

Riftan’s face hardened further as she retreated from him, until he grabbed her arm and yanked her back. His words came in a threatening whisper. “At least pretend you’re happy to see me.”

Maxi froze. Their bodies were close. Too close. The potent undertones of leather, horses, and sweat filled her nostrils, and the overwhelming *maleness* of his scent unearthed memories that she had kept buried for the past three years.

A curious heat radiated from his muscular body, and his eyes seemed to pierce straight through to her mind. On *that* day, he had looked at her the same way, like he was a hound ready to gorge on fresh meat.

Maxi ducked her head, ripping her gaze away. Her face was burning. There was no stopping the torrent of memories that now flooded her mind. Memories of that night washed over her, engulfing her, the sensations as vivid as yesterday.

—

“TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES.”

Maxi regarded her new husband with apprehension. She was perplexed. When the wedding feast came to its end, her nursemaid had led her by the hand to the bridal chamber. After her maidservants bathed her, they left her alone, and she was sitting on the bed when he entered the room.

Unable to gauge his intentions, Maxi just stared at him, wide-eyed. She could not comprehend why the man who had ignored her during the ceremony would make such a sudden demand. She was vaguely aware that unspoken things happened between wedded couples in the privacy of their bedrooms, but no one had ever told her the details.

Her nursemaid had impressed upon her that she must follow her husband's commands. She was to remain still, no matter what he did. But removing her clothes was *not* one of the commands she'd expected. And she was to obey without question?

Riftan Calypse pulled his tunic over his head, shooting her an impatient look as he stepped closer. “Must I remove them myself?”

Maxi gasped at the sight of him. The muscles in Riftan's body were like cords of steel, and his shoulders were twice as broad as hers. His neck was long and thick, and his chest tapered into a taut, slim waist.

Maxi had heard that Riftan was a giant, even among the knights, but to see him standing before her eyes was overwhelming. Her mouth went dry. A few blows from her father were enough to cause her unbearable pain. Would she survive at all if a man like Riftan decided to strike her?

“You look like you've just seen a monster,” said Riftan.

Maxi flinched. His tone was frosty, and he crossed the distance to the bed with a single stride, fixing her with an interrogating stare. Bathed in the warm glow of the fireplace, his body gleamed bronze. It completely filled her vision.

“Do you find me undesirable?”

“I...I, um...”

He leaned over her. Two black eyes, embedded in a nearly flawless face, glinted frighteningly. His mouth, clenched shut, twisted into a cynical smile. “How could I, a lowly knight, ever please the proud daughter of a duke?”

The contempt in his voice sent a shiver down Maxi’s spine. She was at his mercy. If he wanted to, he had the right to flog her and subject her to the cruelest of punishments. Realizing that she had earned his scorn, she broke into a cold sweat.

“Come. Fulfill your marital duties.”

Maxi wanted to ask what those duties were, but the question never left her lips. She fixed her gaze on his feet as his body cast a dark shadow over her. A long, calloused finger reached down to lift her chin. There was something subtle in Riftan’s gaze, something she could not read.

“A marriage is annulled if it isn’t consummated,” he said. “Do you wish to leave me?”

She trembled uncontrollably. At any moment, she might drown in the dark depths of his eyes, but he only sneered.

“Speak now, if you want me to leave.”

“...”

“I won’t stop once we begin.”

Maxi’s tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. Her father would never forgive her if she let him leave. She had never had any choice in this matter. She squeezed her eyes shut and began to unclasp her belt with shaking fingers.

She feared her father’s retribution far more than what shame she would suffer at the hands of this strange man. Should Maxi fail him here, her father would not stop at a mere beating. He would punish her brutally, and in a

matter of days, she would find herself back in this very room, facing a different knight. To her father, she was nothing more than a tool.

Maxi removed her jewelry, piece by piece, and set them next to the bed. A suffocating silence hung between them, punctuated only by the crackle of wood burning in the fireplace. Riftan's gaze bore into her as she pulled down the straps of her linen dress and removed her arms from the frilly sleeves.

The cold night air lashed at her bare back and shoulders. Not daring to expose herself further, she stopped and clutched the dress to her bosom. But before she could hesitate further, Riftan knelt on the bed and pulled her dress down.

"W-Wait...Wait!"

The dress slipped off her body before she could stop it. She clutched desperately at her skirt, even as Riftan's impatience grew more palpable.

"Keep your hands away."

"W-Why are you...p-pulling..."

She gazed up at him, her eyes wide with confusion. His face was concealed in shadow, silhouetted against the light, and she couldn't make out his expression. It intensified her fear.

"Do you want me to leave?" Riftan asked. "Make up your mind."

Maxi stifled a sob. She reluctantly lowered her hands and the dress slid to her waist. Riftan pulled it down further and flung it to the floor.

"There's no turning back now." His deep voice chilled Maxi's heart.

As his rough, warm hands caressed her tense body, she pushed him away instinctively—only to end up more firmly in his embrace when he locked his arm around her waist. Skin pressed against skin, and his body exuded an unfamiliar heat. For reasons Maxi could not explain, the heat made her shudder.

"N-Not so c-close..."

He carried on as if he had not heard her stammering plea, and leaned forward to press his lips to her breast. Maxi's eyes widened in shock.

Warm lips, sweeping across soft skin. A shiver coursed through her body at this unfamiliar sensation. As he buried his face in her bosom like a

newborn babe, her mind went blank.

“Relax.” With his calloused palm, he stroked her back, now paralyzed with fear. His damp breath left goosebumps in its wake.

Rubbing his chin on her soft skin, he slid a hand under the garment that covered her waist. His touch here startled Maxi, and her lips quivered. She had never imagined that a man would one day intrude on *this* region of her body.

“W-What are y-you—”

“Stay still. It will hurt if you don’t warm up.”

Maxi’s legs were caught in a helpless struggle. She had only ever exchanged a few greetings with this man, and now—now, here he was, casually touching her most intimate parts.

“P-P-Please! D-don’t...”

She grasped his thick shoulders, pleading with him. It was now his turn to quake and quiver. Her hands burned when she touched his firm, smooth skin, like she had wrapped them around a red-hot iron.

Riftan’s lips twitched. But instead of words, Maxi received a rough kiss. He tasted of something savage and untamable. She was still trying to make sense of what was happening when he removed the last piece of clothing from her body. She cried out in protest—but even that was quickly swallowed up in a kiss.

“Damn it...” Riftan let out a series of curses and moans while Maxi gasped for air like a fish out of water. He was encroaching on parts of her that she had never even known she had.

She thrashed her legs, but they were soon weighed down by the bulk of his unyielding body. She was trapped like a helpless animal, caught between the jaws of a wolf.

“Damn it. I can’t hold back any longer...” He muttered to himself impatiently, and his fingers entered her deeper and deeper still. Maxi’s breath was lodged in her throat. She had long forgotten her maid’s instructions about dutifully submitting to her husband’s will. Under his

touch, her body twitched and jerked, and she gasped helplessly, overcome by unthinkable sensations.

“N-No! D-Don’t...*Oh!*” Her struggles and protests were useless. There was no chance of escaping his searing mouth and rough caress. She clutched at the pillow under her head.

She could not believe that something so grotesque was happening to her. Her eyes burned, and her mind twisted and turned, tossed in an impossible storm.

What’s happening to me?

After what seemed like a lifetime, Riftan’s hand stopped. “This will hurt a little.”

Maxi sank into the bed, her limbs hanging limply as she tried to catch her breath. Her body had been so tense that it was now drained of strength. She was no longer capable of struggling.

Riftan undressed completely and wrapped an arm around Maxi’s waist, lifting her up. Their warm bodies touched. Only then did Maxi realize that they were both slick with sweat.

His back shone reddish gold in the dim firelight. It reminded her of the time she snuck into a goldsmith’s workshop and watched as they cast statues out of molten gold. Was this how it might feel to have bubbling metal poured over her? Her entire body was melting away, as if submerged in a crucible of liquid gold.

“Take a deep breath.” Riftan’s voice had become so husky that it was hard to decipher his whisper. His lips grazed her earlobe, sending chills down her spine.

Holding on to his sinewy arm, and without thinking, Maxi allowed her legs to open. Riftan promptly paired his hips with hers.

“Ah...!” Maxi cried out, startled.

Before Maxi could grasp what had happened, a dull pain radiated through her lower body. She struggled, terrified of the unfamiliar feeling. Riftan weighed her body down with his own to stop her from breaking free,

and he nibbled at her lips. Her breasts pressed flat against his rugged chest as he entered deeper. Close to tears, she scratched at his arms.

“It...It h-hurts...”

“Too tight...”

Droplets of sweat trickled down his neck and dripped onto her face. As she writhed in an attempt to flee, he quivered slightly and secured her waist with both of his hands. A deep line creased his forehead.

“Just...stay still...”

“H-hurts...It hurts...!”

“Don’t move, damn it—ugh!”

Riftan’s body trembled, and Maxi held her breath as he crushed her in an embrace. As if unable to hold back any longer, he began moving rhythmically. Each thrust produced a sharp pain that drew faint moans from her throat.

Maxi’s body rocked like a boat on stormy waters. Her mind sank into miry depths, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the sheets. What was he doing to her?

“Damn...” Riftan released a strangled moan and collapsed over her. His body radiated so much heat that his sweat threatened to turn to steam. Panting, Maxi allowed her gaze to drift to his shoulders. Like hers, they were rising and falling in rapid succession. A strange sense of emptiness enveloped her and, eyelids aflutter, she stared blankly at the ceiling. What had just happened to her?

“Why are you crying?” Riftan asked.

Maxi hadn’t realized it, but her cheeks were wet. She tried to cover her face, but a warm tongue slid across her skin, tracing away the tears. He cupped her cheeks so she could not turn away.

“Don’t look away from me.” Riftan spoke the words through clenched teeth. His dark eyes flickered with intense emotion and the hairs on her nape stood straight. He pelted her tear-streaked face with kiss after kiss.

“You’re my wife now,” he said between kisses. “There’s no turning back, whether you like it or not.”

A hand reached into her hair and pulled her lips to his. There was little she could do but allow it to happen. Again, and again...

When Maxi awoke the next day, it was well past noon, and Riftan had already left for the dragon campaign. She learned from her nursemaid that a cleric had come to inspect the blood on the sheets and declare the marriage valid, and that this consummation of marriage was a rite of passage for all newlywed couples.

And that was all that had transpired between her and Riftan back then. Nothing more, nothing less. She had lost her virginity, and he had left for the Lexos Mountains in the duke's stead. It was difficult to believe that they were man and wife—even now, at this moment, as he stood before her returned from war.

Lost for words, Maxi stared silently at Riftan's face, his expression like a storm. Her ears rang with the echoes of her father's voice, threatening her with myriad punishments should Riftan Calypse divorce her. Her lips, however, were sealed shut. What could she possibly say? He was a stranger—her husband in name only.

“For heaven's sake, stop shaking!” Riftan snapped, voice raised.

Maxi flinched and took a step back, but he tightened his grip on her arm and closed the distance between them once again.

“Do you find me that horrendous? Have I come back a monster?”

“I...I...”

He ran a hand through the thick, shaggy hair that covered his eyes and glared at her. Maxi's vision blurred. Far from achieving her goal—to persuade him not to divorce her—she had instead managed to offend him less than five minutes into their reunion. Her lips twitched.

I need to say something. Anything. Please...

“I-I w-was n-n-n-nervous and I-I...I d-d-didn't know w-what t-to say....”

Her cheeks burned red with shame. Tears welled in her eyes, but this wasn't the time to cry. Doing so would only enrage him. She searched desperately for the right words.