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SUJI KIM

Under the Oak Tree

the novel
volume two

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VOLUME 2

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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 TWELVE



THE END OF THE cold snap marked the start of Aquarias. Maxi kept herself busy by practicing defensive magic and persisting in her efforts to fix her speech impediment. Progress was slow in the beginning. However, through repeated practice of remaining calm while speaking, Maxi could now read a line of poetry without stuttering. Of course, these were not the archaic poems her father used to make her read but simple verses of the bards.

Even so, when Maxi first managed to utter a full sentence without stumbling, it had brought tears to her eyes. Ruth had been right; staying calm and speaking slowly had shown steady results. Long sentences or words that were difficult to pronounce were still a struggle, but Maxi made a conscious effort to converse as much as possible, and it was paying off. Her stutter was improving day by day.

Recently, Ruth had started writing sentences for her to read aloud to loosen her tongue and improve her enunciation. The exercises would make her tongue feel stiff and sore afterward, as though she had eaten a mouthful of needles. Perhaps staying quiet for so long had made her muscles weak. Still, Maxi practiced every morning without fail. She would gladly have bitten a knife if it helped her speak her mind.

“I would like...there to be...a flower garden beneath...the second-floor balcony.... How long do you think...it would t-take?”

If there was one downside to her recent improvement, it was that she spoke terribly slowly while trying to articulate her words. Ruth had assured her that this would improve in time, but Maxi still fretted that those listening might find it frustrating.

Maxi lifted her gaze from the landscape plans she had been inspecting to study Aderon's face. The merchant, being the shrewd man that he was, answered with utmost deference.

"It would be difficult to acquire such large quantities of seedlings right away, my lady. Might I suggest starting with shrubs? I believe my guild would be able to acquire azalea saplings. They look quite impressive when their red flowers are in full bloom."

"But...I also wish to fill the flower beds."

Rodrigo, who was in the middle of serving tea, spoke up. "If daffodils please you, my lady, I can procure bulbs without delay. I shall let the gardeners know."

Maxi tried to picture it in her head. Grasses and shrubs planted in rich soil. Colorful flowers and ornaments transforming Castle Calypse's bleak gardens. She was certain it would look magnificent.

At the same time, she could not help but worry about the expense. Not only would she need to hire more gardeners, but the trees and flowers themselves would cost a fortune. She should have had Ruth there to review the order before she signed it. Sighing, Maxi lowered the parchment onto the table.

"I think...I shall require more time...to think about it."

"I understand, my lady," said Aderon. "In the meantime, I shall try to procure as many seedlings as I can."

"Thank...you." Maxi smiled at Aderon and rose from her seat.

The market had reopened now that the weather grew warmer, and merchants once again came into Anatol for trade. The knights spoke of how mercenaries would be next, flocking to Anatol for work. The drakes that dwelled beyond the northern end of the Anatolium Mountains usually emerged around this time of year. Though monsters of the dragon race were

extremely dangerous, their scales, magic stones, and bones commanded high prices as power sources for magical devices.

Just as the knights had predicted, when spring came, fortune-seeking mercenaries and merchants began arriving in Anatol, with even more expected once Aquarias was in full swing.

I would like to finish the garden before then....

With spring came duties for the Lady of Calypse Castle. Maxi would have to hold banquets, invite traveling bards, and host theater troupes to perform. She could not allow people to gossip that the continent's most renowned knight lived in a dreary castle run by an unsociable wife.

Maxi walked down the stairs, still mulling over the greenery to plant in the garden, when she heard a maidservant calling to her.

"Oh, there you are, my lady."

When Maxi gave her an inquiring look, the aged maidservant politely added, "His lordship has requested your presence in the council room."

"Has...something happened?"

"I'm afraid I do not know the details, my lady."

It was rare for Riftan to be in the council room so early in the day, but it was rarer still for him to request Maxi's presence. Perplexed, she quickly made her way back up the stairs. The council room was located directly across from the stairwell, one floor above the library. Maxi strode over the deep brown carpet and came to a stop in front of the large mahogany door. The maidservant, still trailing behind her, stepped forward to knock and announce Maxi's arrival.

"Come in." Riftan's deep voice rumbled through the wood.

The maidservant creaked open the door, and Maxi tentatively stepped in. The spacious room was overlaid in soft carpet. A fluttering of wings came from somewhere in the room.

Eyes full of curiosity, Maxi gazed around the brightly lit space. Next to the large window opposite the entrance stood a birdcage taller than Maxi full of cooing messenger pigeons. A massive sword and shield hung on the left

wall. To Maxi's eyes, they looked far too heavy for any knight to actually wield.

As Maxi lingered by the door, taking it all in, Riftan looked up from behind his desk, where he'd been writing on a piece of parchment.

"Well? Come in. Take a seat."

Maxi approached. Riftan's expression was grave, his black hair disheveled as if he had been running his hand through it. The muscles of his forearms, visible with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, contracted as he went back to writing.

Worry clouded Maxi's face. "I-Is something...wrong?"

"I've received a message from Drachium Palace. I thought it best to let you know."

"A m-message?"

Riftan hesitated, which was uncharacteristic. He let out a sigh. "Guests will be arriving in a few weeks. There will be twenty, maybe thirty people. I'd like to have the best rooms ready, as well as a small welcome feast."

Maxi's eyes widened. She had been expecting guests, yes, but not this early in the season. "May I ask...who...we are expecting?"

"A royal inspectorate, a dispatch of the king's knights..." Riftan trailed off, throwing Maxi a furtive glance. His sensual lips twisted into a troubled expression, but in the next moment, all emotion faded as he continued casually, "...and Princess Agnes."

Maxi's breath hitched. She stared dumbly at Riftan.

The princess.

The princess everyone assumed Riftan would marry once the campaign was over.

That princess was coming to Calypse Castle.

Maxi had no idea how to react. When she remained silent, Riftan's tone took on a hint of agitation. "She is only coming to inspect the land at the king's behest. He likely appointed her as she is the only member of the royal family I am acquainted with, not to mention she is already on friendly terms with the Remdragon Knights."

“I-I see.” Maxi swallowed hard. He had used such a distant word. Acquainted. Yet it still struck a nerve. The two were comrades who had fought alongside each other during the Dragon Campaign. How could they be mere acquaintances? And if Ruth was to be believed, Riftan and the princess’s relationship had seemed close enough to fuel gossip.

Not wanting to be seen as the jealous wife, Maxi swallowed past the lump in her throat and willed herself to smile. “I-I will...h-have the servants prepare...the best rooms. I-Is there anything else...I should do?”

Riftan’s gaze bored into her. “You need only to instruct the maidservants to make thorough preparations for the welcome. Don’t trouble yourself beyond that.” As brusque as ever, he turned his attention back to his desk.

Maxi was too caught up in her own emotions to worry about his strangely chilly attitude. She hastily rose from her seat before he could notice her distress.

“Then...I-I shall go inf-form them r-right now.”

“I’ll leave it to you,” Riftan said without looking up.

Maxi hurried from the room to seek out Rodrigo and inform him of their impending guests, her mind a muddle of inner turmoil as she tried to process the news herself.

Was it normal for a woman of royal birth to call on the estate of a man who had refused to marry her? What reason would the princess have for visiting Riftan? It was possible that King Reuben had not yet given up on making Riftan his son-in-law. The inspection could simply be an excuse to send his daughter to try and win Riftan’s heart for good.

The thought filled Maxi with dread. Riftan had ordered her to put any thoughts of divorce out of her mind, but there was no guarantee that his feelings would not change. What could she do if the princess decided to use every one of her charms to beguile him?

“You look quite pale, my lady. Are you feeling unwell?” Rodrigo asked worriedly when Maxi found him in the castle.

She shook her head. “I-I am...just...a bit tired.”

This was not the time for her mind to be elsewhere, so she did her best to banish the negative thoughts to the back of her mind so she could concentrate on the task at hand. She had to make sure the royal guests did not think the castle had fallen into a state of neglect. She no longer had the leisure of time, which meant forgoing Ruth's consult on expenditures as she had hoped.

"I think...we will have to ask A-Aderon...to come to the castle again. Could you tell him...that I wish to start...working on the garden...without delay? A-Ask him to s-s-st...to prioritize the courtyard in front of the great hall if...if it proves difficult to gather...supplies for the full project...on such short n-n-notice. And I would like...new trees planted as well."

"I shall send word immediately, my lady."

"A-Also...I would like for the guest rooms to be decorated with c-colorful tapestries...and have the f-finest linens...p-prepared for the beds. Please tell the rest of the staff...that they are to a-attend to our guests...with utmost care...and to be e-extra...diligent while cleaning."

"As you wish, my lady."

Maxi's lips parted and closed several times as she tried to think through any other instructions. Drawing a blank, she finally muttered, "Please inform me if any...p-problems arise."

After dismissing the steward, Maxi returned to her chambers where she mechanically opened a book outlining magical techniques, but she could not register any of the words. She skimmed the same page again and again, chewing her lip.

With no sign of an heir, her marriage was as fragile as wet parchment. The slightest tremor could rip it apart if Riftan so wished. Her anxiety swelled even more when she thought about how distant Riftan had been acting lately. He had assured her that he had no intention of breaking his marriage vows, but there was always the possibility that he could change his mind. He could have second thoughts were a breathtaking beauty to come along and try to seduce him.

She truly could be coming just to inspect the lands, as Riftan said.

Maxi desperately tried to stamp out the gray clouds of anxiety gathering within her. As obstinate as he was, Riftan was a man of integrity, not a reed tossed about by the wind. After all, Riftan had sworn allegiance to the crown; it was inevitable that he would have to interact with the royal family. Drowning herself in self-sabotaging thoughts every time it happened would not do. It took all of Maxi's strength to tame the maelstrom of doubt roiling inside her mind.

Enough of these dark thoughts tonight.

—

ONE GOOD THING ABOUT being so preoccupied with preparations was that Maxi had no time to brood. Putting even her studies on hold, she summoned merchants to the castle in order to select decor for the guest rooms and landscaping for the gardens. There was not enough time for the vision she'd had for the grounds, so Maxi had them filled with shrubs and statues. The work went quicker than she'd feared, the frozen ground thawing early in one act of grace.

The merchant guild sent laborers to dig holes at fixed intervals for the new trees, and the castle servants scattered seeds in the flower beds between the newly planted saplings. It was still early to be sowing seeds, but Maxi hoped that the leaf mold mixed in the soil would help them take root as the weather grew warmer. She wanted the once-barren space to be presentable by the time the guests arrived.

"The royal kn-knights...shall stay in the annex...while Her Highness, her retinue...and her ladies-in-waiting...shall stay...in the great hall. Do m-make sure...they have...everything they need."

"Yes, my lady."

"And do not...be light with the spices.... Spare no expense for the f-feast preparations.... Only use g-gold or silver utensils...and see that we have several kegs of our finest wine in the storerooms."

“Yes, my lady.”

Maxi gave meticulous instructions to the servants and inspected the castle several times a day to make sure the preparations were going smoothly. Maidservants opened the thick shutters and polished the clouded windows until the glass was near invisible. Servants cleaned out the ash-laden fireplaces until their faces were covered in soot, even scrubbing the braziers free of scorch marks.

The preparations did not stop there. The servants spent an entire day drawing water from the well in order to scrub the stains out of each and every carpet, rug, and curtain. Maxi had her hands full overseeing their progress alongside making orders and reviewing invoices from the guild. With Ruth busy working on his latest magical invention, everything came down to Maxi.

Still, she knew the others had even more on their plates than she did, so she did not think to complain. Ruth toiled away without sleep, while Riftan and the knights were up from the break of dawn until the dead of night planning the massive road construction project set to commence in the spring. Building a wide road to connect Anatol to the port was an enormous endeavor. Riftan spent his days poring over maps and discussing the fastest and safest routes with the knights, not to mention the considerable effort put into securing the manpower and materials necessary.

All of this activity meant that the frequency of their coupling dwindled. Riftan only returned to their bedchamber near midnight while Maxi, exhausted from her early-morning rounds, fell asleep as soon as it was dusk. Since Riftan came back so late and left well before dawn, there were times when Maxi would not even catch a glimpse of him all day.

As they spent less and less time together, Maxi grew increasingly frustrated. She wanted her husband to take her in his arms and kiss her with his warm, soft lips. She wanted to curl up like a kitten on his sturdy chest, her face buried against his skin, his hand stroking her hair.

It was enough to make her wish the harsh winter had never ended. She missed the days when the two of them were inseparable within the cold,

gloomy castle. Some nights, it made her wonder if he had finally grown tired of her. Did this distance mean that he no longer felt any passion for her?

Such thoughts simmered in her mind as she lay awake at night waiting for him, almost to the point where she felt as if she would go mad. It was easier during the day when she had a thousand things to do, but lying alone in their vast bed, running her hand over the cold and empty spot next to her, it possessed her mind. She wanted nothing more than to see her husband's smiling face. To go riding with him away from the castle grounds.

To be alone with him.

—

THE GUESTS ARRIVED AS Maxi's frustrations reached their peak on a sunny afternoon that announced the true arrival of spring. Word came while Maxi was in the gardens—a band of knights carrying the royal seal was seen entering Anatol. For a moment, she froze. Her mind sought something grounding and found it in the trees now planted in what had only weeks before been a wasteland. There was far more she wished to do with it, but Maxi felt proud of what they had accomplished. Calypse Castle would be able to hold its head high before the royal inspectorate.

With that thread of courage humming through her heart, she hurried to welcome the guests.

Gathering the servants, she made sure they were stationed in an orderly fashion at the entrance of the great hall before returning to her chambers. There, she inspected herself in the mirror; her dress was lavish indeed, but she could not shake the feeling that something was lacking.

She opened the small chest on her vanity that housed her rarely worn jewelry and adorned herself with a carefully chosen brooch, necklace, and ring. She then asked Ludis to rearrange her hair. It would not do for the lady of the house to pale in comparison to her husband's almost-fiancée, princess or not.

Thankfully, Ludis seemed to read her mistress's mind and put painstaking effort into braiding her curls and winding them with silk ribbons. She finished it off with a stunning jewel-encrusted coronet.

Not long after, Maxi heard the blast of a kopel boom from afar.

The guests had arrived.

—

DRAPING A LUXURIOUS SHAWL around her shoulders, Maxi made her way downstairs with her maidservants in tow. Her heart pounded heavily against her chest, and beads of cold sweat broke out on her back. She was about to welcome her first guest as Lady Calypse. The fact that this guest happened to be Princess Agnes only amplified her anxiety.

Maxi wondered what kind of person the princess would be. Would she be as haughty as Rosetta? Would she take one look at Maxi and turn her nose up at her inadequacy?

Maxi wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt as she looked out of the wide-open front doors.

For a while, it was only their voices that reached them, but soon enough, a company of people dressed in fine garments began ascending the castle steps. Maxi immediately identified Princess Agnes.

The princess was the epitome of dignity as she made her way to the great hall. Two young ladies-in-waiting, half a dozen male attendants, and knights in silver armor trailed in a long procession behind her. Their entire party was flanked by the Remdragon Knights, with Riftan personally escorting the princess.

Despite Princess Agnes's royal grace, Maxi was completely taken aback by her appearance, so much so that she forgot to curtsy. The princess was dressed in men's trousers, high boots, a knee-length purple tunic, and a cloak. Her golden tresses were unadorned, tumbling loosely over her shoulders. An easygoing smile stretched across her sun-kissed face as she

strode toward the castle. She seemed so uninhibited and vibrant, nothing at all the way Maxi had imagined. She wore no jewels, but her dazzling blue eyes put any sapphire to shame.

Maxi greeted her, feeling slightly disarmed.

“I am so glad to make your acquaintance, Lady Calypse,” said the princess. “I am Agnes Drachina Reuben.”

“It is...an honor, Your Highness.... I am Maximilian...Calypse.” Maxi’s greeting was slow, but free of stuttering thanks to the hours she had spent practicing in secret. “I hope that you will...enjoy your stay here i-in Anatol.”

Maxi spread her skirts in a curtsy, the maidservants following suit behind her with their heads bowed.

Princess Agnes remained the picture of refined grace, even as she gave Maxi a carefree smile. “Thank you for welcoming us so warmly at such short notice.”

Riftan stepped between the two women, his back to the princess and eyes on his wife. “I will show the knights to their quarters. I leave it to you to show Her Highness to her room.”

With his back to the light, his shadowed face looked graver than usual. His dark blue tunic and silver breastplate only magnified his imposing brawn.

“I...will.” Maxi met his intense gaze with a soft nod. She was hoping for a peck on the forehead or cheek, but Riftan merely looked down at her from a respectful distance before turning to the knights.

“Allow me to show you to your rooms.” He strode away toward the annex, the royal knights and their attendants following behind him.

Hiding her disappointment, Maxi ordered the maidservants to show the rest of the royal retinue to their rooms. The maidservants promptly began to move the luggage.

“I’ve prepared a room...o-on the second floor of the great hall...for you, Your Highness. Your attendants...will be on the s-same floor.... I hope that is to your satisfaction?”

“Of course. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“Th-Then...allow me to show you the way.”

Maxi started up the carpeted staircase, the princess beside her. The princess's eyes took in the castle's halls, bright with interest.

“What a splendid home you have. I must say, I was surprised at how much bigger it is than I expected.”

Maxi glanced at her awkwardly, unsure how to respond to such affability. Despite the long journey, the princess did not look tired in the slightest. She ascended the stairs with a bounce in her step as she took in the sight of Calypse Castle: the lavishly decorated banquet hall, the high arched ceiling, the rustic pillars, and the sunlight streaming through its classically vaulted windows.

“I heard that Calypse Castle is older than Drachium Palace. It looks very well maintained.”

“Th-Thank you, Your Highness.” Maxi unconsciously adopted a servile tone. Even dressed like a young man, the princess commanded an overwhelming air of royal authority.

Falling two steps behind the princess, Maxi watched her, transfixed by the princess's confidence. She was a tall woman, at least five kevettes and two hences, her arms and legs long and lean, reminding Maxi of a deer. She was not at all the classic beauty Maxi had imagined. Instead, Princess Agnes radiated a provocative charm that was entirely different from Rosetta's delicate loveliness. Full lips too large for her face; a thin, sharp face with a straight nose; and almond-shaped eyes that were slightly upturned, giving the impression of the cat who ate the canary. She was more handsome than beautiful.

“It feels as if I've traveled back to the Roem Dynasty,” the princess continued in a placid voice. “Could I trouble you for a tour of the castle later? I would love to explore it further.” She turned to Maxi, her eyes crinkling at the corners. Although her expression was friendly, her blue eyes were penetrating.

Maxi reflexively hunched her shoulders and nodded. “O-Of course.”

“Thank you. But first, I’d like nothing more than a bath and a change of clothes. Which way was it to my room?”

Ludis, who had been trailing behind them, stepped forward with a bow. “This way, Your Highness. Please follow me.”

Princess Agnes nodded toward Ludis in acknowledgment, then smiled again at Maxi. “Well, I shall see you later.” With that, she pivoted gracefully to follow nimbly after Ludis.

Maxi could only watch them go, her own legs rooted to the spot. It was only their first encounter, and she already felt as if she had been swept off her feet. She blinked several times until clarity returned, and she gestured for another maidservant. “P-Prepare baths...for the guests...and be... especially attentive...w-when attending to Her Highness.”

“Yes, my lady.”

As the maids left to follow her instructions, Maxi went down to the kitchen. Preparations for the welcome feast were well under way, and the place was buzzing with activity. While Maxi oversaw the progress, her mind kept returning to the image of Riftan and the princess standing side by side. It was a magnificent sight fit for any fairytale ballad: a golden-haired sorceress who was radiant as the sun, and the dashing knight next to her.

No wonder people wanted to see them wed.

Maxi anxiously bit her lip. Was there truly nothing between the princess and Riftan? Although the princess seemed to be eccentric, there was no doubt that she was extremely charming. If even Maxi found her attractive, then how much more alluring must she be to men?

“My lady?” A servant’s voice pulled her from her thoughts. “We are about to slaughter a lamb for the feast. Will you be watching?”

Maxi had been blankly staring out of the doorway leading outside. As her eyes focused, she finally noticed the lamb tied to a post and the man with a bushy black beard sharpening a knife. Not having the heart to witness such a scene, Maxi gave the servant an awkward smile and spun on her heel to scurry out of the kitchen.