

Thea Hong
PRINCESS OF THE THOUSAND THIEVES
– BETRAYED (Vol.1)

Sample Translation by Catherine Venner



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Chapter 2

*Rule No. 82 from the Book of Thieves:
Violence is never a solution. It is the solution.*

I'd dreamt of this moment my whole life. Even as a child, I would imagine my triumphant return: the long-lost daughter, welcomed with open arms by her father to live happily ever after in the bosom of her family. A happy ending of the kind found in children's books.

What bullshit!

All I felt on returning to Busan was a wave of rejection, followed by confusion and helpless anger.

An anger that sat in my stomach like a block of ice and froze my blood as we travelled up the long drive towards the main building.

My family's ancestral home, situated close to the Ahopsan Forest, was a match for the historic royal palaces in Seoul. Nine hundred and ninety-nine — that's the number of rooms in the Hong Clan's building complex, and the only reason it wasn't one thousand was because that number belonged to the kings.

I've made a mistake I thought, gazing through the limousine's tinted windows and watching the elegant pine trees roll past. In my memory, this had been a warm place, my home, my refuge. But nothing was left of that. What I saw today was a repulsive display of wanton wealth and power. The limousine glided silently past the perfectly manicured flower meadow, whose upkeep probably cost more than our café's annual income. And was that actually literal gold, up on the roof tops?

My fingernails dug into my palms, leaving small half-moons in my skin. A little more pressure and I'd bleed.

I've been scraping together every penny and been thankful for every piece of cake left over in the cafe, while there was enough money on these roofs to secure my mother a bed in Korea's best hospital for the next decade. If it were up to me, the whole clan could be buried under their wealth, but naturally only after I'd secured my share.

What had my father actually been thinking with this farce? Why, since the moment I boarded the plane, was my every wish anticipated and why was I being treated like a member of the royal family? Or even worse, treated as if they were afraid of me? It was like being in a strange parallel world. Of course, I'd expected a certain luxury, after all my father had a reputation to uphold. A bedraggled daughter coming to visit in economy class and on the bus just didn't fit the image of Patriarch Hong. However, I really hadn't reckoned with him chartering a whole plane and deploying a personal stylist, who'd given me a full make-over complete with a chic suitcase full of clothes. Naturally without the price tags, but seeing the sewn-in labels made me feel giddy.

"Agassi, young lady, you have the perfect figure," the stylist had gushed, and I knew she was trying to be nice. But eating stress instead of food keeps you thin. I calculated how much I'd earn back in Jeju if I sold the suitcase full of designer clothes.

Four months, I thought. Yes, it would pain me to part with these clothes but we could easily live for four months off the profit. It was almost obscene how much money was held in this tiny case.

I forced myself to relax and closed my eyes for a moment. The soft seat of the perfectly air-conditioned limousine and the engine's quiet purr were making me drowsy. Even though the flight from Jeju to Busan was barely an hour, I could feel my tension gradually giving way to tiredness. I picked up the cool bottle of water in front of me; holding it to my cheek to keep me awake. Under no circumstances could I be negligent. My mother had been naive enough to believe the invitation was a peace offering, but I was under no illusion. I was heading into enemy territory and needed to reckon with the worst at all times.

The car stopped and someone opened the door for me.

"Welcome, Sora Agassi."

The clan's servants, all dressed in hanboks, stood in a row with bowed heads and folded hands. My legs wobbly, I got out of the car and shaded my eyes with my hand to stop the bright sunlight from blinding me. Framed by bamboo-covered hills, my family's large estate sat in the midst of untouched nature like a relict from bygone days. As if time had stood still for centuries, no city roar could be heard. Just peaceful silence, punctuated by birds chirping and the rustling of the wind.

Amazing what money and magic can buy, I thought and lowered my hand as I grew accustomed to the light.

"I hope you've had a good journey, Sora Agassi." A gaunt man with a friendly smile and silver-grey hair bowed. "Here, a refreshment."

Automatically I took the small towel soaked in cold, perfumed water and wiped my hands.

"Oh." As he took the used towel from me, I recognised him.

Muyeol, the right-hand man of my father and manager of the estate. A former contract killer and relative of my father, eight times removed. I remembered the candy he used to slip me. The bloodthirsty bedtime stories he told me, supplemented with the advice that as the clan heiress I bore the responsibility to lead the clan just as wisely as my father. I trusted him. And like so many others here, he'd bitterly disappointed me.

"Please follow me, Sora Agassi. The Patriarch has requested a meeting and evening dinner with you." Muyeol was treating me as if I really were the long-awaited daughter of the house, and I was too dazed to respond.

I hesitated as I saw the broad steps leading up to the imposing main building, and only in passing did I notice Muyeol ordering another servant to carry my luggage.

Being here hurt more than it should.

"Please, Sora Agassi."

I tried to shake off the unwelcome thoughts and follow Muyeol — in vain. I remembered every step. Every creak of the wood planks. Every corner. The sound of the sliding doors opening in front of me and closing behind me as if by magic.

Every memory stabbed me like a needle to my heart. A single needle may not have been so bad, but hundreds? Thousands?

How could I have thought I'd ever be able to patch-up these holes in me again? I felt like an old, well-used pin cushion, only held together with great effort. In my memory, I heard myself laughing and saw myself running through the corridors squealing with joy. Back then, I hadn't known how replaceable I was. Nor how much memories could hurt.

"Hello, sister."

It was a soft voice, infused with pure evil. A voice I hadn't heard in years but hadn't forgotten.

My half-sister was waiting outside my father's office, and I counted myself lucky to be accompanied by my father's loyal servant. Who knows what humiliation I would otherwise have suffered? Ultimately, she was the same girl, no, already a woman now, who as a child had hidden poisonous snakes in my bed and watched with delighted amusement as I fought with them for my life. Jia was everything that I am not: she had so much Mana it took effort to contain it. Even I, who possessed no Mana, could feel this unbelievable power.

She's become even more powerful I thought and allowed my jealousy to crash over me like a wave. There was no point denying how much I wanted to have what Jia possessed in abundance: Mana.

If I'd only possessed a fraction of her power, my mother and I would never have had to leave Busan. But right now, I could do without these emotions, which were threatening to overwhelm me.

Jia sounded as if she was going to be sick at the word "sister". And for a change I agreed with her. But that would have to wait. I had more important things to do, for example, extorting money from my father. I had priorities, and a full bank account was more important than the brief satisfaction of sending Jia into a fit of rage.

She pursed her full lips and approached me with small cautious steps. She had the milky-white complexion and glossy hair of someone who'd bought their natural beauty as well as a perfectly cut fringe I'd have loved to rip out of her head.

But her doll-like appearance didn't fool me. I knew she had the power to kill me on the spot. Fortunately, there were witnesses, who would stop her.

“Why is she here?” Jia stood in Muyeol’s way but he didn’t slow his steps causing her to awkwardly step aside with an indignant tut.

“The Patriarch has requested to see Sora Agassi in his office.” Muyeol bowed slightly in my direction and put his hand on the heavy brass handle of the door that separated me from my father.

So near, I thought and my heart began racing. I wiped my clammy hands on my trousers. After all these years.

“Why’s she allowed in the office, and I’ve never been there?” Jia’s voice, enraged and simultaneously tearful, stopped my growing panic. I rolled my eyes at her pitifulness. Where had her dignity gone? Behaving in this manner in front of someone who was a servant to the family and, as pretentious as it sounds, was beneath her.

“It does not befit my place to answer that,” Muyeol responded in a tone that was almost impolite, and I saw barely concealed anger flash across Jia’s face. Something cold and calculating hung in her eyes and I forced myself not to flinch.

We all knew the unspoken dispute smouldering between us: with his answer Muyeol had shown I was more important than Jia and that he as a servant held more power than her. For ultimately, the knowledge he kept from her was power.

Interesting.

But I had no time for that now, the schadenfreude would have to wait until I was back in Jeju - with a full bank account as consolation for any humiliation suffered. Considering everything I’d so far seen, my so-called father wouldn’t really miss a few billion won.

“Could we go in already. I don’t have all day.” I tried to sound as bored as possible, and Muyeol suddenly became attentive.

“Of course, Sora Agassi.” No way, Jia didn’t pick up on his respectful tone towards me. While she watched with clenched fists, Muyeol knocked loudly on the heavy wooden door and announced me in a loud voice. The door swung open and a familiar voice received us.

“Come in.”

The sound of his voice almost turned my legs to jelly, but I gritted my teeth. Without granting Muyeol or my half-sister a further look, I entered.

My ancestors would have surely been proud of me, I thought cynically as I closed the door behind me and found myself in a light-flooded room.

A solid desk made of dark wood stood in the centre of the room, tall embroidered screens leaned against the walls and to the side, floor-to-ceiling windows revealed a view of the carefully tended enclosed garden in whose centre an ancient oak grew.

It was also my first time in the office since the Patriarch would normally only receive guests of honour or the next clan leader here.

He'd grown so old.

I couldn't ignore the longing, which sprung up in me, although I'd promised myself never to feel anything for this stranger.

How had he grown so old?

Here sat the man who'd cause my mother and I so much pain. Who was so weak he'd put his reputation above love. Who'd believed his duty to his clan was more important than his duty to his wife and daughter.

Yes, Jihoon was still a good-looking man, but in my memory he was proud and full of life. So young. However, the face of the man in front of me was etched with wrinkles and his hair already slightly greying. He looked at me as if I were his most prized possession.

"Sora," he stood up. His voice quivered slightly. "I wasn't sure whether you'd accept my invitation."

What power do parents have over their children, making us forgive them everything? Making us long for them, love them? Even if they'd once rejected us? And how did he dare talk with love and longing in his voice? How did he dare evoke feelings in me?

And yet, I too could barely hold myself back and nearly threw myself into his open arms as if I weren't an adult but nine years old again.

I deliberately scratched my left forearm with my right hand to make the pain bring me to my senses. No, I wouldn't play into his hands, I wouldn't go along with his charade here.

He looked hurt when I didn't go to him, instead giving him a cool nod. "Please take a seat."

I obeyed, but didn't relax. I would let him do the talking and carefully consider how best to approach the matter of money.

But suddenly everything changed.

“I realise you probably didn’t want to see me as all my letters were returned unopened,” he said and my eyes widened.

What did he just say?

“That’s why I sent my last letter straight to your mother. I...” he paused, looked grim and then continued, “I’m not actually permitted to, but I had to break this rule.”

“Wait a second. What letters?” I almost jumped back up off the chair. “I never got anything from you.”

“What?” he looked more confused than I was, and I almost laughed since I was certain that nobody had ever seen the Patriarch so speechless.

“I never got anything from you. Neither letters nor any kind of support.” I noticed his iron grip on the armrests of his chair. “I even wrote to you when mother got sick and we needed money for her treatment, but you never answered.”

“Heesun is sick?”

He looked as if someone had stabbed him, straight to the heart that he doesn’t have. How can that be possible I wondered, confused, while unpleasant thoughts rushed through my head. He obviously really didn’t know, otherwise he wouldn’t have called my mother by her first name.

His hands shook and his eyes were full of pain. “How is she? What has she got?”

My throat felt tight and my thoughts raced.

He rubbed his hands over his face and I tried to suppress the thought popping into my head that despite everything he wasn’t indifferent to my mother. No, I thought defiantly, I’m not going to let myself be lulled into a false sense of security by him.

“Muyeol.” My father’s voice was almost too quiet to hear, but his loyal servant still appeared right next to him. I jolted in shock, but neither of the men seemed to notice.

“Search the West Wing. Take only your trustworthy shadows with you and act as my voice and hand. Don’t come back until you’ve found evidence.”

“Yes, Master,” Muyeol disappeared into thin air and I felt dizzy. Search the West Wing? What did that mean?

Was the West Wing not ...

“I never wanted to send you and your mother away, but I had to do it.” Jihoon came round the desk and stepped towards me while I attempted to process what I’d just discovered. “It was the only way to protect you, but now I see that ... that none of the help that I sent to you over the years ever reached you.”

A dreadful suspicion crept into my brain. Something I’d never considered but made perfect sense after Jihoon’s orders to Muyeol.

Could it be true? I began to sense that a lot of things weren’t quite as simple as I’d imagined.

“I will make this up to you, I swear.” He kneeled down before me, his warm hands clasping mine. Despair in his voice and so much love and regret in his eyes. “To you and your mother.”

The tips of my fingers grew numb and I resisted the temptation to break loose.

For me, this shock, this slowly dawning realisation was worse than all the years of waiting for a sign from my father. I hadn’t been abandoned at all and my mother was still loved. All these lost years. The tears, the humiliation, the hope and the hopelessness. For what?

Impotent hot anger filled me and boiled over like water in a pan. I staggered to my feet, the chair falling behind me. He was the literal Chief of the Hong Clan, a master of Mana. With so much power and resources at his disposal.

He should have been capable of seeing through the superficial manipulation, he should have done more, he should have cared. He should have saved us.

He should have come to me.

In desperation, I tried holding back my tears while the small lonely child inside me finally wanted to scream out her anger.

If he’d really wanted to know more about us, if he’d wanted to help us, then he could have done so.

“I didn’t contact you directly to protect you both. Please believe me,” he said emphatically, and to me his words sounded like chalk grating over a black board.

“To protect me?” I saw red. “Believe you?”

There was so much fury within me that it opened the floodgates to the words I'd kept so long inside me. "There were days when my mother starved just so I could eat! She sold everything she had to put a roof over our heads. And you have the nerve to tell me that you didn't contact us because you wanted to protect us?"

Jihoon wanted to give me his hand but I shook my head.

"You would have known all that if you hadn't been so cowardly and hidden yourself behind family traditions, allowing yourself to be manipulated by others."

As he closed his eyes in torment, I felt grief and satisfaction at the same time. Right now, I didn't care if he too had been a victim, I just wanted to hurt him, just as I myself had been hurt.

To hell with the formalities. To hell with everything. To hell with the money.

My mother had protected me her whole life, and now it was my turn to protect her. I wanted to show him that we didn't need him. I wanted to hurt him as much as I could because I was too hurt. I couldn't stay here any longer and let myself be crushed by this dreadful family. And most of all I didn't want to feel any sympathy for Jihoon.

"I should never have come here." I wanted to smash his heavy desk, rip down all the intricate artworks screens and leave chaos and destruction in my wake, before I went. But I controlled myself, for no matter how much I wanted to, I was powerless without Mana. I had no magic, only words to use as weapons.

"I don't know why you have decided that you are interested in me *now*, but I don't need it. Not any longer. I don't need you or anything at all that you could offer me. I'd rather beg than take anything from you."

I'd been an idiot to believe I could demand money from him, he wasn't even worth that. Even if it appeared he hadn't known his messages to us had been blocked and his support had been redirected, it didn't change anything in regard to the thought raging in me: *He should have known.*

"You have the clan you want. The heiress you want. Let's leave it at that. You've had a quick glance at your magicless failure of a daughter, who you used to have, and now we'll go our separate ways. Forever."

“You are not a failure, Sora!” His voice was like thunder and I felt the ground under my feet shake. “You are the best and most pure thing that ever happened between your mother and I.”

For a moment, the anger turned everything black and I forgot the shaking.

His words, which were so much like those of my mother, sounded like mockery in my ears.

The best?

Don’t make me laugh.

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that. You’ve no right to speak like that to me or my mother, especially since you have lived this whole time with your perfect family.” I wanted to set the world alight and burn everything to ashes. Me included. “Your second wife, your perfect daughter, you had everything. And we were desperate. Don’t you dare play the father now. The only thing that connects us is our surname. Why did you contact me now? I still don’t have any magic, so I’m useless to you.” Breathing heavily and gasping for air, a blast wave unexpectedly hit me and sent me stumbling backwards.

“You’re not useless,” Jihoon’s raw voice yelled and the magic in his anger shook the building. A flash of lightening and a moderate earthquake under me made me lose my balance and fall over.

The fear that flooded through me was sobering.

With a thudding heart, I saw that the tree in front of the window had split into two halves and smoke was rising from the trunk. I broke into a cold sweat and tried to control my shivering.

How could I have forgotten for just one second that I was surrounded by a murderous power? That ultimately, every person in this house was a monster?

Jihoon balled his hands into fists, and I was sure it was him who’d split the tree.

Great.

I’d provoked someone with anger issues and enough Mana to make me pay for letting out my frustration on him.

“Listen, I made a mistake. I don’t need anything from you.” I picked myself up and staggered to the door.

Once and for all, I gave up my plan to demand money from him, for it was more important to stay alive. “I’m going back to Jeju.”

I would survive, just like I always had, and I would find some other way to provide for my mother. And then, perhaps, one day I would finally start living. Far away from this crazy family and their criminal doings.

“You’re afraid of me?” He sounded shocked. “Why?”

Did he really just ask that?

Had he not just split a hundred-year-old tree in front of my very eyes. How could I forget just for a minute that I’d entered the monsters’ den and was surrounded by creatures, who despite being disguised in human skins were murderous beasts on the inside?

“Please stay,” he implored, “just a few days. I swear by your mother that I will make it up to you.”

“No. I’m not going to let myself be drowned by hope, never again.” The mantra in my head repeated tirelessly. “A few days will change nothing, you had years. It’s over.” I turned my back to him. “I’m going now.”

I tried to open the door, but it didn’t move. “Open the bloody door,” I hissed, once again more angry than afraid.

“Will you stay,” he asked, almost pleadingly. “Nobody will harm you. I’ve ordered for you to be treated as a guest of honour. I swear I’ll make it up to you. Please stay.”

“Open the bloody door and you’ll find out whether I’m staying or not.” When the door finally opened and I stormed out, I was on the verge of going mad. I needed peace to think through everything properly and to process what had just happened. That all these years, someone had been denying my mother the necessary support and intercepting the letters from my father.

I rushed through the corridors, but didn’t even know where I was going myself. Only one thing was clear: one of my best virtues was that I was able to adapt. I could sometimes be resentful and occasionally explode, but just like my dear ancestor, I also knew how to cleverly turn a situation to my advantage. I would be able to make the best of my father’s desperation regarding the revelation and maybe...

“Opps,” my feet slipped and I would have fallen, had somebody not caught me.

“Hey, you shouldn’t be running. The floor’s slippery here.” A strong arm around my waist kept me from toppling over.

I blinked. A friendly face looked at me with a smile. It definitely looked familiar. Snow-white, unruly hair, grey eyes and an athletic stature. And this crooked, boyish smile.

Hong Min. My cousin or rather one of my distant relatives. How many times were we removed? I’d seen him in the newspapers where he’d been praised as the new star of the Korean Olympic swimming team. What would the world say if they knew he ruled the water spirits, who were certainly giving him an advantage in the pool?

“Min.”

He smiled at me, happy as a small child, and I almost smiled back.

“You remember who I am!” He looked so pleased and excited, and reminded me of an overgrown golden retriever puppy.

“Oh...” I only knew him from the papers, but then a long forgotten memory surfaced. Of a small boy following me around and always trying to catch up with me. Who cried when I was too fast, snot and tears all over his face until I came back.

“You were really cute back then,” I blurted out without thinking. He turned red and scratched his head.

“Haha, yes and you ...”

I interrupted Min with a movement of my hand as I sensed the tingling of Mana on my skin and knew that it could only be my half-sister. It was strange I could feel her Mana, but it was likely down to the mutual dislike, which connected us. She must have been waiting close by to catch me.

“What did you do?” Without any further formalities, Jia blocked our way.

Didn’t she have anything better to do than to chase after me? There was a time in which I would have soaked up any attention from my family like a sponge, but now I longed to go back to Jeju where people just left me in peace.

I played dumb. “I’ve no idea what you mean.”

“I asked you what did you do?” Her movements were fluid, too coordinated to be described as human.

Min tried to inconspicuously push me behind him, but I slapped his hand away. I guessed why Jia was so outraged, and the feeling that I had as a result could be described as delicious. Like biting into gateau with oodles of quark and strawberries. I smiled and I didn’t even need to fake it. “What exactly do you mean?”

Jia was angry, and the schadenfreude was literally dancing in me. “You must have said something to Father, otherwise he wouldn’t have sent his lackeys to search our wing.”

Oh.

“Why don’t you ask father yourself?” I answered her cockily, and although I knew for sure that I was in the process of doing something stupid, I could no longer stop myself. I opened my eyes wide and formed an exaggerated mute “Oh” with my mouth. “Oh dear. If you want to ask him, you’ll have to go into his office, and you’re not allowed in there, are you? What a shame.”

“You’re going to regret that!” With a scream and a movement of her hand, the air around Jia turned black. A wave of lethal knives of steel and smoke formed in front of me. The attack was so abrupt I hadn’t seen it coming — I didn’t even have time to be afraid.

Was Jia spoilt or dumb? Or both?

She must have it from her mother, a Hong would never be stupid enough to defy the orders of the Patriarch. I may nurture a grudge against my father, but I never for one moment doubted his assurance that I was a guest of honour. And as guest of honour, I was safe from attacks. Nobody was above his orders and rules. You only needed to look at what happened to me and my mother.

“You may not use your powers.” Min had stepped in front of me and a blurry shield of water protected us from the knives of smoke.

“Shut up, Min” Jia hissed and pushed his chest so hard that he smashed against the wall and the stone behind him cracked.

He coughed and wiped blood from his mouth. “Stop it, Jia. The Patriarch said she should be treated as a guest of honour!”

“You’re already trying to curry favour with her?” Jia mocked. “Yeah well, good luck. The useless creature won’t last long here.”

Now I was afraid. But I’d also had enough of her arrogance. “Maybe I should do it,” I said and looked steadfastly at Jia, “maybe I should reconsider and become the successor to our father.”

She screamed angrily, “What did you just say?”

“That’s why I’m here of course, to belatedly celebrate my coming of age with my beloved family.” I smiled and brushed a strand of hair from my face with my middle finger.

“Just imagine how much fun you and your whore of a mother will have in prison, where you belong, when I finally accept the succession. At the end of the day, I never abdicated.”

As a black spear pierced my chest, my final thought was, I really ought to know when to keep my mouth shut.

[END OF SAMPLE]