

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

# WARSONG —Academy 27—

**Uphill Both Ways**

**By Leo Irons**



Tsetseg Sansar had never seen the steppes of Mongolia, and she never would. But her father assured her that Mars' cold, sharp beauty could never compare.

She knew her father was a sentimental man, despite appearances. Everyone on Gongen knew all about Earth, and the nuclear catastrophe, and the events that had placed them on their new celestial home. But few people actually talked about it. Certainly, the parents of her classmates didn't.

Still, she was unashamed of her father. She knew that he was just passionate, and that passion ran deeply through his tall frame, behind his inexpressive face. Sometimes, it felt like her father had been carved from stone. He was craggy, impassive, and impossible to budge.

These were all sterling qualities in a guardian, but Tsetseg was late for school, and kind of just needed a dad.

She took after him when it came to height, if nothing else. Not really in terms of temperament. For a nervous teenage girl, being tall wasn't necessarily an advantage. There was less of her that could unobtrusively fade into the background, and more of her to trip over her own feet.

She fidgeted with her bag, pointlessly. She knew she had everything, because she had already checked it three times. She had checked it three times because there was little else to do while she waited. Her uniform was in order, and she already had her goggles on. All she could do now was watch as her father lay beneath his hoverbike. He glared at its underbelly with what she knew to be intense concentration, but it was hard not to take it at face value. Idleness.

"Are you sure it'll...?"

He ignored her question, or chose not to answer. Finally, he reached up and wrapped his fingers around something. He twisted.

The bike roared, like the tired old beast it was. But it was still alive.

"Actuator." Her father always used the fewest words possible. "Got loose. Fixed."

"That's great, dad," said Tsetseg, in a tone that indicated it perhaps was not. "Now, can we please...?"

He moved, slowly, out from under the bike. He unclipped the rusty chains that had been suspending it from the ceiling. Part of her couldn't understand how he could use something so archaic; to let that be the only thing stopping a tonne of metal from crushing his head.

But while the chains were rusty, they weren't fragile. Just as their garage was dark, but not dour, and their house was small, but not cramped.

With the surgery a success, the bike was floating again. It remained in position without the chains, which her father returned to the exact spot he had taken them. Every motion was slow and calm and did nothing to soothe Tsetseg's anxiety.

Finally, he swung a leg over the bike. She was sitting behind him before he even had his goggles on. "Okay! Can we please go?"

The garage door opened automatically as he eased the bike out. The limitless Martian sky greeted them, refracted through the dome above. The only sky either of them had known.

Her father watched over his shoulder (and her head) as the garage door closed itself again. Satisfied, he angled for the school.

"Time?"

"My first class starts in fourteen minutes," she said, miserably.

He nodded. Then he drove upwards.

Many had wanted Gongen's cities to adhere closely to Earth-like architecture. Humanity's ancient and eternal refrain, *But We've Always Done It Like This*, had successfully survived in space.

The elder Sansar was a man of tradition too. But only for those traditions he considered his own. Two-dimensional traffic was about as sacred to him as dying from a broken leg.

Tsetseg wrapped her arms around his torso as the ground shot away. She remembered being terrified as a young, young child. Some of her classmates, even now, refused to go too high in an

unenclosed vehicle. But this was how her father had always traveled, and now it was routine to her as well.

Their street sank into the distance. This was a poor area, even by the standards of Cheonsa, which fell somewhere between 'a vibrant, off-beat area of Takumi' or 'that slum dome,' depending on who you asked.

If you asked Mister Sansar, he would be quick to remind you that Mongolia had never had a high GDP, and more to the point, never needed one.

Buildings sped past below them, and streets full of people. Tsetseg knew that there would be at least a few glares leveled their way, from people who didn't trust rickety old hoverbikes not to plummet out of the sky. She wasn't worried, though, because she knew her father was a steady hand. If anything, this was the calmest she had felt all morning.

Things were going to be fine. She would arrive before the first bell, and take her usual seat, and she wouldn't get any 'joking' comments from classmates or deadly serious reprimands from her teachers. The strict regimentation of school life was something she had never gotten used to - something her father, with his unbending slow pace, wasn't much help with - and as a result she was often anxious.

When the siren started shrieking, she did too.

On an immediate, childlike level, she was glad she was already essentially hugging her parent. But that only provided a certain amount of comfort. Academically, she knew that her parent was the problem.

For a mortifying moment, she feared he would just ignore it and keep stoically driving. But a police vehicle trailing three meters behind them, its sirens and lights making themselves clear, was enough to stop him. Just about. With his usual deliberation, he decelerated. The bike hung in the terraformed air, about ten storeys above a tiny artificial park.

Denied the opportunity to exit his cruiser and saunter up slowly, the cop was forced to pull up alongside them. His engines were much quieter.

He glared at Mister Sansar behind a pair of thick sunglasses. "Do you know why I pulled you over?" An ancient greeting from the olden days.

Her father watched him, and shook his head.

"That hoverbike has to be at least fifteen years old! It's irresponsible to keep it so high off the ground. Lower it, sir."

Tsetseg wanted to curl up, tighter and tighter, until she just disappeared. This was so much worse than a late slip! And worse, she knew her father would argue the point. He took pride in maintaining his bike - it was his livelihood - but if he tried to explain that to a cop, he'd be asked for documentation to prove it, and that would lead to very familiar arguments about how no-one had ever needed documentation to show a horse or old-timey petroleum motorcycle was in good shape, so why did the current government think it had the right to-

"Okay," he grunted.

Tsetseg blinked. She must have misheard that.

But there was no mistake. He jerked his head back to indicate her. "Daughter's late. Was just saving time."

The sun glinted off the cop's shades as they turned to Tsetseg. If she was the cunning type, she would have purposefully made herself look anxious and uncomfortable to garner sympathy. She very much wasn't, but 'luckily', she didn't have to pretend.

After an agonizing pause, the cop nodded. "Alright. But don't do it again, understood?"

Mister Sansar simply grunted.

There was a brief and silent standoff, and then the cop's vehicle began to lower to street level. Tsetseg was mildly relieved when her father actually chose to follow suit.

Their bike glided forward slightly, eventually ending up just above the ground and just behind the park. The cop watched them for a moment, then pulled away.

Mister Sansar drove toward the school. He stayed on the ground for about three of Tsetseg's remaining minutes, and then, on a quieter stretch of road, rose again.

He must have felt her sigh. She was still clinging to him, after all. "Dad..."

Normally, she didn't have the backbone to directly confront him, or anyone, ever. But it wasn't every day they were stopped by the police.

"What if he sees you again?"

"Told me to lower." The wind tried to whip his words away, but this close there was no missing them. "We're lower."

"But...!"

"Five minutes left. Late otherwise."

She sighed again, more quietly.

All her teachers stressed the beauty of Gongen's communality. Humanity had only carved a foothold on this planet through sharing resources, labor, and a common goal of survival.

As foundational myths went, it was pretty spectacular. So much more immediate and visceral and real than the vague, flowery histories Earth's old nationstates had to work with. But ultimately, it was still a myth, codified and rubber-stamped by a party official somewhere in Gongen's Ministry of Education.

It was useful to teach children to work together and respect authority. It was also very difficult, if their fathers routinely ignored cops.

"I just don't want to get in trouble," she murmured. She barely noticed that she said it out loud. It hadn't been an intentional request.

Her father surprised her yet again when, a moment later, he glided back down to the street.

As ever, there was a sense of fatherly pragmatism underpinning his actions. It was actually a straight shot from here to the school, and traffic was minimal. Still, Tsetseg held him a little tighter, turning her mundane grip into more of a hug.

In a few moments, he was pulling up just outside the school. Tsetseg was relieved to see her friend Bashrat loitering by the gate. Although he wasn't the most dedicated of students, it was a sign that she wouldn't be late - or at least, she wouldn't be alone in being late.

"Thanks, dad!" She hugged him a little tighter, then disentangled herself. "I can walk home, and I'll start making dinner if you're still out, I know we're running a little low on mutton but I was thinking a soup would be-"

"Tsetseg."

He turned to her. She knew that behind those goggles, his gaze was steady.

"Don't worry so much. You'll get through it."

It was hard to tell if he meant the day, or the school year, or life in general. Maybe all three. Whatever his intent, she took it to heart. "Thanks..."

He held her gaze for a moment. Part of her wanted to pull away, anxious that this silence could undo their rush to get here on time. But she waited, and her patience was rewarded.

With the natural grace of a glacier, he slowly smiled.

"Have a good day. Looking forward to that soup."

She returned it. A moment later, he was gone.

Bashrat ambled up to her as she watched him leave. "God," he said. "You and your stupid cool dad."

"What?"

“My dad’s a janitor. Well, he’s a ‘sanitation officer’, but that means janitor. Your dad gets on his bike and puts on a rebreather and rides around outside the dome all day. It’s metal, Tseg. Metal as hell.”

“Oh... Well, I-”

“Goggles, by the way.”

“What?”

“Goggles.”

She blinked, and then realized with a start. She struggled her goggles off and stuffed them into her bag.

She began to hobble toward the door before she had them fully inside, the heavy bag pulling awkwardly at her balance. Bashrat ambled after her.

The pause had, at least, given her the time to find her words. “He says our ancestors did the same thing.”

“Except on Earth.”

“Yes.”

“And presumably without the hoverbikes or the rebreathers.”

“No...”

“But the same idea? Mastering the rugged plains? Looking Mother Nature in the eye until she backs off?”

“S-something like that...”

Bashrat nodded, quite a lot, as though listening to a song she couldn’t hear. “Like I said. Metal.”

The bell went off before she reached the door.

Whatever her ancestors were doing, and whatever her father would find today out on the red deserts, Tsetseg was looking at another late slip.

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