

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

**The Foods and Festivals of
Old Asia**

By Kimberley Chiu



It was a cold day on Gongen and Tsetseg was late for school again.

It wasn't her fault. She'd done her best, really she had: had gone to bed a whole fifteen minutes early and woken up before her alarm, had brushed her teeth and washed her face and put her uniform on in absolute record time. She'd even packed her bag the night before, double- and triple-checking it before she went to bed so she wouldn't have a reason to do it in the morning, and she'd spent the time she usually gave to that sacred task trailing her father around the house, staring at him with pleading eyes.

They had left a whole two and a half minutes earlier than usual, but it hadn't mattered.

It would've been better if it hadn't been a Monday. If it had been a Tuesday, or a Thursday, or even a Friday, Tsetseg could've just kept her head down and slunk into class and taken the late slip without any fuss. But it was a Monday, which meant Morning Assembly, and Morning Assembly was a sacred time. You didn't whisper, you didn't fidget, and you didn't walk in late. You got in before the bell rang, or you were Tsetseg, and you sat outside.

At least they'd provided a bench. Tsetseg sighed and settled down in her usual spot, her legs jittery, feet swinging. She clamped her hands around the edge of the seat and tried to focus on the feel of it, the texture of the wood familiar and almost comforting. They'd spent a lot of time together, her and this bench. In moments like this, when Tsetseg needed one most, it almost felt like a friend.

The bench was parked just outside the parade square, along the edge; Tsetseg could see her classmates, and they could almost definitely see her. She tried not to think about it. She'd had a lot of practice, doing that; she really should've been better at it than she was.

She shut her eyes. That helped a little.

Tsetseg took a deep breath. It felt quiet, there in the dark behind her eyelids. Quiet and calm, like everything had stopped, like the world had gone still –

The bench creaked. The seat dipped. Tsetseg's eyes snapped open.

There was someone on the bench beside her. *There was someone on the bench!* Tsetseg stared; blinked. She could hardly believe it, but yes, there she was: another student, a *classmate*. Late like her.

"Hey," said – Lizah, Tsetseg thought. Norlizah Phuong: they had homeroom together, and extra maths. Lizah was okay, as far as Tsetseg knew. She'd had never said a mean word in Tsetseg's hearing, and she smiled at her sometimes when they passed each other in the halls. They sat a row apart in homeroom. They had never talked.

Lizah wasn't usually late. Tsetseg would've noticed. Still, here she was, looking perfectly calm and happy about it. She was smiling, actually: just this side of grinning, her eyes bright. She had something round cupped in her palms.

"Wow, so this is what Assembly looks like from here," said Lizah, craning her neck, blinking out at the parade square. Her smile widened. "It's a lot less boring from this angle."

“Oh,” said Tsetseg. “Really?”

“Yeah!” said Lizah. “Man, this is *much* better. I’m going to do this every week now.”

“Oh, no,” said Tsetseg. “You really shouldn’t.”

Lizah laughed, and Tsetseg could feel her cheeks heat. And then Lizah opened her hands, like a flower blooming, and showed Tsetseg what she had in them.

It was an ice ball, shining and almost perfectly round, starting to melt a little at the bottom. Cradled in a shallow plastic dish, two spoons tucked in neatly round the edge. It was crowned with a little spray of green syrup, showing off the flavour: matcha, Tsetseg’s favourite.

“I was a little early, actually,” said Lizah, “but then I saw the ice ball man outside, and I had to stop.”

Tsetseg nodded, blinking.

“You want some?” said Lizah, and held out a spoon. She was still smiling, bright as the sky through the dome.

Tsetseg stared, for a long moment.

“Okay,” said Tsetseg, finally, and took it.

* * *

Tsetseg’s hands were still sticky by the time she got to homeroom. She folded them in her lap and tried not to notice.

Mrs. Ichinose stood at the front, waiting for the students to settle. She did this every lesson, and sometimes she really did just *wait*: smiling calmly out at the class, standing in silence for whole minutes, till something shifted in the air and everyone turned to her at last like flowers to the sun. But today the wait lasted only a minute and a half, and then she rapped her knuckles against the teacher’s desk, a sharp *pap-pap*, and everybody snapped to attention. That knock meant *serious business*.

“Good morning, class,” said Mrs. Ichinose, still smiling that soft and even smile. “Today we’ll begin our discussion of Gongen’s culture and history, but before we start, I’d like to talk to you about your next assignment.”

A groan rose up: a loud, collective cry of *noo* and *why* that Mrs. Ichinose flatly ignored. Tsetseg said nothing herself, just breathed in deep, waited.

“I want you all to do your own research into the old Earth cultures that Gongen was first built upon,” said Mrs. Ichinose. “You may choose to research any topic you like, but you should focus on at least two aspects of one or more pre-Gongen cultures – say, the food and festivals of old Japan. That’s just an example, by the way; please don’t all pick that topic, you won’t get extra points.”

Another groan, but this time it sounded softer to Tsetseg, made distant by the surprise she felt ballooning in her chest. This almost sounded *interesting*. Pre-Gongen cultures – why, her dad talked about that all the time, that and nothing else. Maybe, with this assignment, they’d actually have something to talk about at dinner.

“This is a pairs assignment,” said Mrs. Ichinose, and the good feeling inside Tsetseg evaporated. “You and your partner will have two weeks to prepare a presentation –”

Tsetseg sighed and looked down at her desk, letting the rest of Mrs. Ichinose’s speech wash over her like a wave. It just wasn’t fair! Finally an assignment that she actually almost *wanted* to do, and she had to work with a partner? Where was she going to get one? She’d just have to wait till everyone else was partnered off and find whoever was left, and they’d have to *work together* knowing they were both last choice, and –

“Psst,” hissed someone, from behind her. “Tsetseg!”

Tsetseg turned. Lizah was waving at her, one row back and two desks to the left. She was smiling again, the same smile she’d had when Tsetseg had dug into her ice ball, spoon clutched in her shaky hand.

“Be my partner?” said Lizah, and Tsetseg felt something lift from her chest.

For the second time today, Tsetseg said yes.

* * *

“So, you were saying,” said Lizah, “the lantern festival?”

They were in the library, sitting together at one of the desks, a pile of books growing around them as they raided the history shelves. Well, Lizah raided the shelves; Tsetseg stayed in her seat and read and took notes in her neatest handwriting. It was a good system, Tsetseg thought. It seemed to be working.

Lizah was perched on the desk itself, now, swinging her legs idly over the side. Tsetseg had been really worried that the table would tip over, but she’d gotten used to it. All those books should be enough to balance out her weight, probably.

“The lantern festival,” said Tsetseg, shuffling her papers. “The, uh, the last day of the new year? You know how we have all these lanterns hanging in some of the streets?”

“Sure,” said Lizah. “Like in the shopping district.”

“Yeah,” said Tsetseg, “well, I guess we’ve been making them forever. For thousands of years. It says here they used to just be for special occasions, but I guess we just kind of got used to them.”

“Neat,” said Lizah. “Lanterns are cool.”

“I like them too,” said Tsetseg. “I always thought that they were pretty, and now – well, is it weird that I like that they’re old?”

Lizah tilted her head, looking at her. Like she was looking for the weird in her, like she could see it with her eyes. After a moment she shrugged, and Tsetseg felt herself relax.

“Nah,” said Lizah. “Why, though?”

“I don’t know,” said Tsetseg. “I guess it just feels – realer, you know? Like they belong more, because they’ve always been here. Like that means they were meant to be.”

“Hmm,” said Lizah. “I guess.”

Tsetseg turned back to her book. Lizah kicked her feet back and forth, and back and forth; Tsetseg wasn’t staring or anything, but she could feel the table move.

“Hey, look,” said Tsetseg, a couple of pages later. “There were *two* lantern festivals – they called the second one the *mid-autumn* festival, apparently, and they ate – something called mooncakes?”

“Oh,” said Lizah. “I’ve heard about mooncakes. They were like bean paste buns, I think? But with a harder crust.”

“I wonder why they stopped making them,” said Tsetseg. “I want to try one.”

“I mean, maybe they sucked,” said Lizah. “I heard they put whole egg yolks in. That’s weird.”

“I bet it made sense,” said Tsetseg. “I bet they tasted cool. My dad always says the old things are the best.”

“Maybe,” said Lizah, waving magnanimously with one hand.

They slipped into silence for a while, after that: Tsetseg reading, Lizah watching her. She was still looking at her when Tsetseg looked up, and she didn’t even blink when their eyes met, only smiled.

“You’re really into this stuff, huh?” said Lizah.

Tsetseg felt her cheeks heat. She shrugged.

“I guess,” said Tsetseg. “I mean, it’s our heritage, right? It’s important.”

“Not *my* heritage,” said Lizah. “*I’m* Vietnamese. My great-great-granddad was, anyway. And one of my great-great-grandmothers, the one I was named after, she was from Singapore, and *she* wasn’t Chinese either.”

“Really?” said Tsetseg. “I thought they were all Chinese in Singapore.”

“Nope,” said Lizah. “My grandma says that’s not true, like, maybe the historians just got lazy and forgot everyone else. Or they did it on purpose to make everything seem neat when it wasn’t. She says it’s, uh, he-gem-omic?” – sounding the syllables out.

Tsetseg didn’t know what *hedgymonic* meant, but it sounded bad.

“Oh,” she said, again.

“Yeah,” said Lizah. “Anyway, so I don’t really care about this stuff. It’s all just stories to me. It’s cool that you do, though.”

“Yeah,” said Tsetseg, and turned back to her book.

* * *

Her father had never heard of the lantern festival.

Well, that wasn’t necessarily true. He probably *had* heard of it; he’d had the same classes she did, after all, when he was her age. Someone must’ve done a presentation on it, or something. Maybe he’d forgotten.

Whatever it was, he didn’t react when she mentioned it, or the mid-autumn festival either. When she asked him about mooncakes, he just grunted, and muttered something that sounded like “too sticky”, and slid back under the hoverbike.

Tsetseg sat on the floor and waited for him to come out. It wasn’t like she had anything better to do. She’d done nothing but homework all afternoon in the library, and her dad usually liked to at least be around whenever dinner was made in their house.

He slid back out again about five minutes later, wearing a new streak of grime across his left cheek. He glanced over at Tsetseg; fixed her with a look, long and considering.

“Dinner,” he said, eventually. “You want dumplings?”

“I want to talk about my school project,” said Tsetseg.

Her father raised an eyebrow. He stood up, brushing off his coveralls, and then leaned down to offer Tsetseg a hand up.

“Okay,” he said, “talk then.”

Tsetseg blinked. Her whole face felt tight in a way she couldn’t explain.

“I don’t want to *now*,” she said. “I just – I thought you’d be interested. You like the past, and everything. *You* know.”

“Not my past,” said her father. “We’re Mongolian. No lanterns.”

“I *like* lanterns,” said Tsetseg.

“Okay,” her father said.

They stared at each other for a moment, then her father shrugged.

“Dumplings,” he said, nodding, and headed off towards the kitchen.

Tsetseg watched him go. She couldn’t understand why she felt so much like crying.

* * *

The next day was a Thursday, and Tsetseg was late for school, *again*.

It didn't matter why, not really. It never mattered; her teachers didn't care. They might have been concerned at first, but as soon as it became clear that Tsetseg's lateness wasn't a temporary crisis so much as a chronic condition, they had largely stopped worrying about them. Now when she was late they approached her not with questions but with flat disapproval, or barely-veiled disdain, or – best of all – no reaction whatsoever. Tsetseg was deeply, profoundly grateful for that last one, though of course she never said this out loud. The other two she could live without, but at least they were quieter.

Mrs. Ichinose did that last thing, kindly and gloriously: ignored Tsetseg completely whenever she slipped guiltily into class, always called on her later like nothing had happened. It was for this reason that Tsetseg liked her better than any of her other teachers and felt a rush of relief whenever she was late on a day when she had Homeroom for first period.

Thursday was one of those days. So it should've been fine, really: embarrassing, but fine.

Except that, for some reason, Mr. Mori had been roaming the halls. He caught her right before she reached her classroom, which Tsetseg thought was really pretty unfair.

“Sansar, isn't it?” said Mr. Mori. “What are you doing out of class?”

“I was just going in,” said Tsetseg, and then, belatedly: “sir.”

“But the bell rang five minutes ago,” said Mr. Mori, which was not exactly *new* information, but Tsetseg couldn't exactly point that out.

And then it was a whole speech about punctuality, again, and about respect, again, and about how Tsetseg clearly had neither – Mr. Mori had remembered her previous late-coming incidents, apparently, what kind of luck was *that?* – and it was all very bad, but Tsetseg had heard a lecture like this before, so she let it wash over her and didn't react. And that worked out alright, until:

“You know, Miss Sansar,” said Mr. Mori, “this is a good school. We take only the best students here – clever, disciplined, well-mannered. Poised to succeed. When we accepted you, it was because we believed that you were that kind of student. The right kind. Were we wrong about that?”

And Tsetseg swallowed hard, and said “no sir, sorry sir,” and then he let her go to class.

But the words stayed with her, stuck in her throat like the bad kind of peanut butter, the cheap brand her dad always liked to buy unless Tsetseg kicked up a fuss. And Tsetseg tried not to think about it, to forget about it and pay attention to the lesson, but it was hard. It was really hard.

She thought hard about lanterns instead, but that didn't help at all, for some reason.

* * *

Her father picked her up that day. *Figures*, thought Tsetseg, and got on the hoverbike.

The ride home was quiet, and so was the walk into the house, and the silence lasted through Tsetseg putting her bag down on the sofa, changing out of her uniform, pulling out her homework and putting the relevant papers on her desk. But then she wandered into the kitchen for a snack, or a cup of juice, something, and her father was waiting for her.

“Mongolians did not have the lantern festival,” he said, with absolutely no preamble. Tsetseg swallowed hard.

“I know, dad,” said Tsetseg.

She gripped her mug tight, in both hands. Tried to squeeze past him and back into the hallway.

“We had Tsagaan Sar,” said her father, and Tsetseg froze. “New year festival.”

“Oh,” said Tsetseg.

“No lanterns,” her dad said, shrugging. “No mooncakes. Lots of milk, lots of meat. Lots of dumplings.”

“Dumplings?” said Tsetseg.

“Yes,” said her father. “Hundreds. Whole mountain for every family, your grandmother said. She only made us five each. Lot of work.”

“Grandma made dumplings?” said Tsetseg. “She made special new year dumplings?”

Her father shrugged again. He was frowning a little, but it was the thinking kind of frown, not the angry kind, so Tsetseg wasn't worried.

“Grandmother made a lot of things,” he said. “Lots of old recipes. Some she wrote down. In the house somewhere.”

Tsetseg put her mug down on the nearest counter. Her heart was beating faster than it had in a while; even faster than it had when she was on the hoverbike. Then again, hoverbikes were normal. Tsetseg sat on a hoverbike every day. This, though. This was special; this was something new.

“I didn't know about that,” said Tsetseg. “You never mentioned it before.”

“No,” said her father. “Guess not.”

“You never cooked any of that stuff for me,” said Tsetseg.

“No,” said her father, again, and: “forgot. Till conversation yesterday. You reminded me.”

“Oh,” said Tsetseg. “Okay.”

“Sorry,” said her dad, and Tsetseg blinked twice to make sure she wasn't hallucinating.

She hadn't, though. He really had apologized. And he was looking at her now, with the sort of long considering look he usually reserved for the underside of the hoverbike, and Tsetseg held her breath for a full fifteen seconds.

Then her father blinked, and shook his head, and turned to the fridge, and: *well*, thought Tsetseg, *that's that*. Except –

“Lunch now,” said her father. “Later, tell you about Naadam. Horse festival. Wrestling too.”

Tsetseg nodded so hard she thought her head might snap off.

“You want sandwiches?” said her father.

He yanked the fridge door open, pulling out mayonnaise. Eggs, too. Egg salad was Tsetseg's top favourite filling.

“Yes,” said Tsetseg. “Yes, I want sandwiches.”

* * *

So Thursday turned out to be alright, after all. Friday was much better. On Friday, Tsetseg went to the library.

Well, Tsetseg and Lizah went to the library, technically. But Tsetseg did all the reading. Lizah, again, spent most of her time running for new books whenever Tsetseg wanted them, and sitting on the study desks with her legs dangling over the edge, and ceremoniously sticking brightly-coloured divider tags on all of Tsetseg's notes in a pattern that Tsetseg herself could never hope to understand. At one point she peeled an entire orange. The librarian had almost thrown them out for that one, but Lizah offered her a piece, holding the orange very pointedly *away* from any and all paper products. Apparently that made it okay.

Lizah had not been very excited to go to the library, but she had gone anyway. Tsetseg wasn't sure why. That had been Lizah's question, actually, *why*: specifically, *why go to the library now when you've already done way too much research?*

Tsetseg had taken exception to the idea of “too much” research. Lizah had said that she was entitled to her opinion.

But she had come, picked out what she claimed was every book in the library on Mongolia, and stacked them all in an unwieldy pile on the desk beside her.

The books were *amazing*. There was so much in them: recipes for biscuits and meat roasts and more kinds of dairy products than Tsetseg had ever considered the possibility of, rules for wrestling and ceremonial horse races, photos of traditional costumes, which, well. Tsetseg wasn't sure she could pull off those big hats, but they sure looked nice on other people.

They were also really colourful, all those reds and yellows and greens. Tsetseg had never worn a lot of colour; the thought of it scared her a little. Even the red-and-gold trim on her uniform had

always felt like too much. Still though, she thought, tracing a finger over a picture of a woman dressed in pink and lilac and a rich deep turquoise, maybe she could give it a try.

She lost herself in reading for a long time, and then she looked up, reaching for another book – and found that the pile was gone.

Tsetseg frowned. Lizah glanced up from – well, another book actually, and hang on, was that a *romance novel*? – and looked at her, blinking.

“What’s up?” said Lizah. Tsetseg frowned deeper.

She looked at the pile of books again, now relocated to the other side of the desk to show that she was done with them. On second glance it was smaller than she’d thought – a *lot* smaller. And kind of dusty, actually, the edges of some of the covers fraying.

“Are you sure that’s all of them?” said Tsetseg. “All the books.”

“Yeah,” said Lizah. “I checked twice.”

“Oh,” said Tsetseg.

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Tsetseg jumped: Lizah had poked her in the shoulder.

“Are you okay?” said Lizah.

“What?” said Tsetseg, then: “oh. Yeah. I just – I thought maybe there would be more.”

Lizah nodded. She looked sort of – thoughtful. It was a new look for her, but it seemed to suit her pretty well.

“They don’t have much on mine, either,” she said. “Well, there’s some about Singapore, but mostly the Chinese half, which isn’t worth much to me. A bit more about Vietnam, but nothing I haven’t heard at home.”

“You looked it up?” said Tsetseg. “I thought you weren’t interested in this stuff.”

“Well, I’m not interested in China,” said Lizah, shrugging. “Which is what you were looking at before. And I’m not really interested in this assignment – sorry for making you do all the work, though. I’ll make the slides if you want.”

“It’s fine,” said Tsetseg. “But – okay.”

“Cool,” said Lizah. “But yeah, no, of course I care. Like you said, it’s our heritage, right? And my parents care, and my grandparents, and if I have kids I’ll pass my stuff on to them, too. But that’s private stuff. Home stuff. It doesn’t have to be in school with me, if it’s not welcome.”

“It – could be welcome,” said Tsetseg. “You could put it in the presentation. If you wanted.”

Lizah blinked. For a moment it looked like Tsetseg had actually thrown her. Then she grinned, warm and open, right at Tsetseg. Bright as anything.

“Nah,” said Lizah. “We wouldn’t have space for all that, and I want to hear about yours.”

“Yeah?” said Tsetseg.

“*Yeah,*” said Lizah. “It’s so cool – I’m glad you’re my partner, you know, you’ve got all this interesting stuff. So: come on. Tell me about Mongolia.”

* * *

Tsetseg walked home, after; it took a while, but that was fine. It was pretty hot, too, and normally Tsetseg would be sweating and irritated and almost tempted – almost! – to say a swear word, but today she didn’t even feel it over the sound of all her Thoughts.

Her head felt weirdly full – of facts, probably, and Tsetseg could almost feel them buzzing around in there, jostling with each other, dancing on the tables. Were there tables in your brain? Probably not.

She was going to have to get it together.

It was hard, though, after reading all those books and writing down all those Facts and getting to tell Lizah about it, in a long rambling stream that poured out of her for what must have been a solid twenty minutes. Her mind was full of visions of steppes and horses and weird round houses made of felt, and amazing colourful outfits, and cookies shaped like feet, and this strange milk thing that people had to stir whenever they passed through a doorway or something – ?

She would have to ask her dad about that. Probably he would know. He was always thinking about this sort of stuff, and talking about it, even if he had never given Tsetseg *details* before the other day, and what if his brain was like this all the time? No wonder he could never seem to get her to school before final bell.

She would ask him, she decided, as soon as she got home – and she tried, going straight to the garage instead of through the front door like usual, but he wasn’t there. Tsetseg even checked under the hoverbike, just to be sure.

That was weird. Not, like, *weird* weird, but weird. Tsetseg went inside the house, full of vague suspicion, and she put down her bag, and she wandered into the kitchen.

She wasn’t sure what had led her there. Maybe it had just been a guess; her father was in the kitchen a lot, he liked to cook, so that would’ve been reasonable. Maybe her subconscious had been hungry. Or maybe it had been the smell, which she must’ve noticed as soon as she walked through the door, strong as it was, and which she was really paying attention to now: the thick, pungent scent of hot milk, fatty and salty and sour.

“Oh, Tsetseg,” said her father, “you’re home.”

He was standing by the oven, gloves on, pulling out a tray of something that looked thick and hard, cut into small white cubes. He put the tray down on the counter, waved Tsetseg over. The smell got stronger as she drew closer, made her want to wrinkle her nose.

Her father took off the oven gloves. He picked up a cube between thumb and forefinger, and held it out to her.

“Aarul,” said her dad. “Mongolian dried curd. Leave milk to curdle, bake in the sun. Your grandmother wrote down a cheat’s way – boil the milk, bake the curds. Not the same. But close enough.”

Tsetseg took the cube, held it in her fingers. It felt smooth, solid, almost like a stone. She stared at it, transfixed. Not the same, but close enough.

It was a Mongolian snack – a *real Mongolian snack*. Her dad had made it, he’d made it *for her*. Her heritage in a little chalky square, put together *all for her*. All for *Tsetseg*.

Her heart was beating very hard. She cupped the piece of aarul in her palm. It was light, just a little thing, but it felt heavy to her. Heavy like something special, heavy like gold.

“Grandma used to make this?” said Tsetseg. “She used to make this for you?”

“Not often,” said her father, shrugging. “Once or twice, maybe. Common in Mongolia, though. Everyone ate it, long ago.”

Everyone ate it. And now Tsetseg was about to eat it. Tsetseg was about to be part of *everyone*.

She lifted the aarul to her lips, slowly, slowly. Took it in her mouth, bit down.

It was –

Well, it was *hard*, that was the first thing. Tsetseg bit into it and it only made her teeth ache. She’d have to suck on it instead, like a piece of hard candy – only it *wasn’t* candy, it was really only a little bit sweet. Mostly it was sour: like strong yoghurt with lemon in it, and milky, not *creamy* but really *milky*, that cooked-milk smell hitting her all over again. Goat’s milk, specifically. Tsetseg didn’t know where her father had gotten hold of it, but it had to be. She could practically smell the goat.

Tsetseg held it there in her mouth, sucking on it, tasting it. Thinking about the flavours, all the tastes of a home she’d never known at all. Thinking about home, and belonging, and heritage, sucking on that little white rock with the smell of milk and goat and cheese –

Tsetseg spat it out.

She hadn’t meant to. Hadn’t even realised she was doing it until she caught it in her palm, soft around the edges and wet with her spit. She hadn’t meant to do it at all.

But she had.

She stared down at her hand for a long moment. She could feel her father watching her, quietly. She could feel the tears start to prick in her eyes. She could feel the panic building, something in her starting to scream.

Tsetseg did the only thing she could: she ran.

* * *

Her father found her in her room, crying on her bed like a stereotype.

He came in without knocking and sat down on her bed in silence. Tsetseg buried her head further into her pillow. The sobbing had mostly passed, by then; she was just sort of *leaking*, quietly and unintentionally, which was extremely gross and fully unfair.

Tsetseg snuffled. Her pillowcase was beyond description and would probably have to be burned. She shut her eyes and tried not to think about it.

Her father shifted, a little, rocking the mattress with his weight.

“Don’t like it either,” he said, finally. “Aarul. Too sour.”

Tsetseg almost laughed. It came out as a moist sort of cough, which made her feel hysterical.

“Maybe you made it wrong,” she said.

“No,” said her father. “Followed the recipe.”

“Ugh,” said Tsetseg.

They were both quiet for a long moment. Then Tsetseg sat up, slowly, painfully, her head still buzzing with thoughts – different ones, now. Her stomach flipped, once and then again. Perhaps it had been good that she hadn’t managed to swallow; the aarul would probably have come back up.

Her father was watching her, his gaze intent but calm, even. No anger or judgment, just a little worry. Tsetseg looked away.

“Don’t have to like it,” said her father, and Tsetseg shook her head.

“I do,” she said. “I did. I wanted – I’m not right, don’t you know that? I don’t fit in here. I have like one friend and he’s annoying, and I’m late for school all the time, and I’m scared to talk to people, and – and I’m not right.”

“Tsetseg,” said her father.

“No,” said Tsetseg, “no, you don’t get it. I thought – you know, the past, maybe if I could find something about it that was mine, maybe I would feel like that meant I was meant to be here, you know? Like me and this world grew out of the same places, so we had to fit together.”

Her hands were folded in her lap; she twisted them together, tight. Her left palm was still sticky with spit.

“But we didn’t,” said Tsetseg. “I mean, I’m not Chinese or Japanese or anything. And I thought – I thought, maybe I could just be Mongolian, like you. But I can’t.”

Her father frowned.

“Don’t have to like it,” he said. “Doesn’t matter.”

He was looking at her like – he was looking at her, so *hard*, and Tsetseg thought he *must* see her, he must get it, the way he was looking. But he didn’t, he couldn’t; it was so obvious, to say a thing like that. He didn’t understand at all.

Tsetseg lay back down. She felt very tired.

“I want to be alone now,” she said.

Her father said nothing, just looked at her some more. And then, after the longest moment, he nodded, and stood up; and he left, just like she’d asked, closing the door behind him.

* * *

The weekend was quiet. On Monday, Tsetseg went to school on time.

It was the day of the presentation, and Tsetseg was ready: she’d done her research and planned out her speech, and Lizah had made a set of really quite good slides, stuffed with pictures, and she’d sent them to Tsetseg on Sunday night so they could both have a copy.

Something had stirred in Tsetseg, looking at those slides, though she still couldn’t tell if it was a good something or what.

It didn’t matter; she was prepared, was the point. Prepped and perfect and ready to go. And she felt that way as she walked to class and sat at her desk and felt Lizah’s gaze on the back of her neck, and watched Mrs. Ichinose wait for the class to settle down, and waited.

She was ready, and she felt ready. And then Mrs. Ichinose called her name, and Tsetseg froze.

She didn’t even notice she was doing it, at first. In her mind she was getting up, walking to the front, facing the class. She could see Lizah plugging in her drive so their slides appeared, hologram-sharp, all around them. She could hear herself speaking, though she couldn’t understand the words.

But none of that was real, and neither was the taste flooding through her mouth suddenly: the taste of boiled milk, and spit, and disappointment.

“Tsetseg?” said Mrs. Ichinose, one more time. “Norlizah? Are you ready?”

Tsetseg blinked at her. She didn’t say anything; she didn’t know what to say.

And then, behind her, Lizah stood up.

Tsetseg whirled round to look at her. Lizah looked calm, composed, contrite. Her eyes wide, her chin tipped up. She glanced over at Tsetseg, just the quickest of looks, then turned back to Mrs. Ichinose. Her hands gripping the edges of her desk.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Ichinose,” said Lizah. “We can’t present today. I forgot to bring our slides – they’re on my drive at home.”

Mrs. Ichinose frowned. She looked from Lizah to Tsetseg, back again.

“The presentations are due today,” she said. “You knew that. If you’re not prepared, I’ll have to mark you both down.”

“Not Tsetseg,” said Lizah. “Please, Mrs. Ichinose, that’s not fair. It was my fault; I was in charge of the slides. I promised her I’d bring them. She didn’t even know I’d forgotten till just now.”

Mrs. Ichinose sighed. Tsetseg felt something loosen, deep in her chest.

“Alright,” said Mrs. Ichinose. “We don’t have time for all the presentations today, anyway. But you’ll go first tomorrow, and you’d better have everything with you.”

“We will,” said Lizah. “Promise.”

Mrs. Ichinose sighed again, waving for Lizah to sit down. She called the next pair – Li Xiu and Jae Hyun, and wow, *that* was going to be interesting – and that was that was that. Tsetseg clenched her fists and tried to calm down. Her brain was buzzing, like it had on Friday: full of thoughts.

Lizah caught her eye. She winked. Tsetseg turned back to the front of the class.

* * *

“Why did you do it?” said Tsetseg, after.

Lizah blinked at her. Shrugged.

“Well,” said Lizah, “you’re my friend.”

She looked so casual about it, too. Smiling, posture loose, like it couldn’t possibly matter. Like she hadn’t just taken a scolding for Tsetseg, because Tsetseg had frozen and screwed up in front of everyone, and she hadn’t even bothered to ask why. Like that was okay.

“But you got in *trouble*,” said Tsetseg. “But you – ”

“If we present tomorrow she won’t dock us,” said Lizah. “You heard her. It’ll be fine.”

“You said it was your fault,” said Tsetseg. “Why would you say that? Why would you tell her that?”

Lizah tilted her head, just a little. She was looking at Tsetseg again, that long quiet look she’d had so many times in the library. Like she was figuring Tsetseg out, peeling her skin back just a little. Layer by layer, but not to hurt her. Just because.

“You know,” said Lizah, “when I first came here, I was really scared. All the time. Scared I wouldn’t fit in, scared I wouldn’t be right. Scared no one would like me – teachers, classmates, whatever – because I didn’t belong here. Because maybe one day I’d just break some sort of rule and not even know it, and then they’d all see.”

Tsetseg said nothing to this. She swallowed; her throat suddenly dry.

“But then I saw you,” said Lizah, “and you were late for school, right, and they made you sit outside so you’d be embarrassed, and you just sat and like – you were late again, and again, and you just kept sitting. Like you were who you were and you weren’t ashamed of it, like you didn’t need to change for anyone. Like you didn’t even care.”

She leaned in, just a little. Close enough to touch.

“And I thought,” said Lizah, “well, if she can do it, maybe it’s not so scary after all.”

Tsetseg was quiet for what felt like a long time.

“I care,” she said, finally. “I care a lot.”

“Oh,” said Lizah. “Well. You sit there anyway, though. That’s not nothing, you know?”

Tsetseg breathed in; breathed out. Her heart was beating very fast. Lizah was still smiling: smiling at her.

“Anyway,” said Lizah, “I figured, after all that, I probably owed you one. Don’t worry about it, okay?”

Tsetseg didn’t know what to say to that either. She settled, eventually, on “okay”.

* * *

Tsetseg walked home again after school, and when she got there, she found her father in the kitchen.

She almost didn’t want to go in there. No, actually, she really didn’t want to go in there. Bad things seemed to happen lately whenever her dad went anywhere near a stove, and Tsetseg was seriously considering banning that whole situation entirely, never mind that her dad had cooked her dinner nearly every day for her entire life – and lunch too, on weekends.

She would learn to cook. She would save her allowance and buy her meals from a street stall. She was the hugest coward on Gongen and she had had a very tiring day, and so she snuck up to her room and hid there for as long as she could make her homework last.

It was about half an hour; Tsetseg was, unfortunately, very good at homework.

Her father was still in the kitchen when she went back downstairs. Of course he was; he was waiting for her, though he didn’t seem annoyed when she finally appeared, just nodded at her and bent to pull something out of the oven.

It didn’t smell like aarul, at least. It smelled warmer, more familiar: like butter and sugar and flour, like the cookies Tsetseg sometimes splashed out on when she wasn’t trying to save for a book or a game or something, sweet and steaming from the bakery, hot and fresh.

The whole room smelled like that, actually. Like that, and like, like –

Oh.

It wasn't just the oven. The whole kitchen smelled of sugar, because it was *full* of it: a big pot of white paste that was probably pudding and a plate of things that looked like pancakes and another of things that looked like doughnuts, and all of them laid out on the little dining table in the corner.

There was a little jug of something on the table, too: cream, maybe, or yoghurt, chilled with ice cubes that clinked when Tsetseg lifted it by the handle. She sniffed it; it smelled sweet and sour and a little funky, but not enough to be off-putting. It smelled like something she might actually like to drink.

Tsetseg pulled out a chair, made herself sit down. The plate of pancake-things was right in front of her. She stared at it and felt a little overwhelmed.

"Here," said her father, coming over, carrying the baking tray he'd been fussing with. "Last thing."

He held the tray out, and yes, Tsetseg had been right: it was covered in what was definitely some kind of cookie, shaped into long thin ovals with dips in the middle. She reached out for one, ignoring the flare of heat in her fingertips, and bit down.

It was delicious. She ate the whole thing in about five seconds.

When she looked back up her father was smiling. He'd put the tray on the table, next to the not-doughnuts; had taken the oven gloves off. He was holding a cookie of his own, though he hadn't bit into it yet. He held it up, as if in demonstration, as soon as he saw Tsetseg looking.

"Ul boov," he said, wiggling the cookie a little. "Shoe cookie. Made for Tsagaan Sar, dessert after the dumplings. Pile them up in a pyramid to celebrate the new year."

"Oh," said Tsetseg.

"Rice pudding," said her father, pointing at the pot, "made with milk and almonds. Winter dessert. Boortsog" – the doughnuts – "and gambir" – the pancakes – "both made with dough. Boortsog eaten with tea, gambir for breakfast."

Tsetseg nodded. Swallowed hard around the strange tightness in her throat.

"You didn't have to," she said.

Her father shrugged.

"Wanted to," he said. "Your grandmother's recipes, passed down from her grandmother – past time to share with you. Took too long."

Tsetseg nodded again.

"Here," her father said, "try."

He scooped some rice pudding into a bowl, put it in front of her. Handed her a spoon, and Tsetseg took it, and then didn't move; just looked at the pudding, frozen. That strange feeling she had in the classroom, back again, somehow.

Her father frowned. Narrowed his eyes, just a little.

"Tsetseg," he said.

Tsetseg looked up.

"You're scared," said her father.

"No," said Tsetseg.

"Yes," said her father. "You're scared you won't like it. Like the aarul. But you don't have to like it. Not the point."

"Dad," said Tsetseg.

"No," said her father, and he leaned forward then, placed a hand over her wrist. "Listen. It's not the point. These recipes, they're yours. Like or don't like – doesn't make a difference. Yours means you get to decide, think for yourself. Yours means you get to know. Means you get to try, no matter what."

Tsetseg blinked. Her vision was blurry, suddenly, for some reason. She looked at her father, and he looked back at her. Then she looked at the rice pudding, and picked up the spoon, and scooped. And swallowed.

"Good," said her dad. "Well?"

"Yes," said Tsetseg. "Yes, I – I like it."

"Good," said her father, again, and handed her one of the boortsog.

* * *

Lizah grabbed her before class the next day.

"Hey," she said. "Ready to go today?"

Tsetseg nodded. Lizah grinned.

"Wanna get ice balls at recess?" she said.

"Yes," said Tsetseg.

"Awesome," said Lizah.

She turned to go inside. Tsetseg stopped her, fingers light against Lizah's elbow. Lizah turned back, eyebrow raised.

“Wait,” said Tsetseg, “I have something for you.”

She reached into her bag. Pulled out a piece of ul boov, wrapped in brown paper; handed it over.

Lizah peered at it, peeling back the wrapper. Her eyes lit up, bright as anything.

“A cookie?” she said. “Sweet!”

“Yeah,” said Tsetseg. “They’re really good.”

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