

Chapter Three: The Question

Kefilwe set the plates down without ceremony — a paper plate of chips for each of them, Oteng's hotdog in a split roll, Thato's burger wrapped in a square of paper that she unfolded with the focused attention of someone who takes food seriously. The chips were golden and had been salted properly and they smelled exactly right. The hotdog was sitting in a straight line in its roll with a line of tomato sauce and a line of mustard, and it looked, Oteng thought, like a thing that was going to be good.

He did not immediately reach for it.

Something had been sitting at the back of his mind since the walk — since Thato had mentioned, in the easy flow of first-date conversation, that she had bumped into Tumo the previous week at the kgotla area and that he had said hello. She had said it without emphasis, the way you mention a thing that has no particular weight, the way you mention the weather. But Oteng had heard it with the particular frequency of a person who is already carrying a question and suddenly has new material to add to it.

The food was in front of him now. The afternoon was good. The conversation had been good. He should pick up the hotdog and eat it and talk about something else.

He picked up the hotdog.

He put it back down.

"So you and Tumo," he said.

The air changed. It did not drop in temperature or shift in any way that was physically measurable. But it changed.

Thato looked at him over the top of her burger, which she had picked up and had been about to bite into. She lowered it.

"What about us," she said.

"I am just asking. You said you broke up. But you still talk."

"I said I ran into him at the kgotla area and he said hello," she said, her voice very level. "That is not talking. That is greeting. That is what you do when you know someone and you see them in a public place."

"I know. I am not saying it is something. I am just trying to understand the situation."

"What situation?" she said. "There is no situation. We broke up. That is the situation. The situation is over."

"But you live near his family."

"His relatives live in this ward, yes. I did not choose that. They were there before I was aware that he existed."

"I know."

"So what are you asking exactly?"

Oteng opened his mouth and then closed it, because what he was asking, exactly, did not have a clean shape. It was more of a feeling than a question: the feeling of walking into a room and not being sure of the furniture arrangement, of not wanting to sit down before he knew what he was sitting on.

"I am asking," he said finally, "whether it is really done. Whether you are genuinely past it. Because sometimes people say they are past something and they are not."

Thato set the burger down fully now. She folded her hands on the table in front of her. She looked at him for a moment that was longer than comfortable.

"Oteng," she said. "I'm here with you today. Not him. I am sitting at this table with you. Not him. He says hello when he sees me because we were together for two years and it would be stranger not to. That is all there is. I am not going to justify myself further than that."

"I am not asking you to justify yourself."

"You are asking me to justify myself."

"I am asking a reasonable question."

"On a first date," she said.

The chips sat between them, still warm, still smelling exactly right, utterly indifferent to the conversation.

"You know what," Thato said, picking the burger back up with a deliberateness that communicated clearly that she was choosing to move past this, "let's eat."

"Fine," Oteng said.

He picked up the hotdog. He reached into his back pocket for his wallet so it would be ready when Kefilwe came back for payment.

His back pocket was empty.

He reached into the other back pocket. Also empty. He tried the front pockets. Keys. Phone. A receipt from somewhere. No wallet.

He sat very still for a moment.

Then, slowly, he put the hotdog down.

© 2026 Gaolatlhe Reuben Mogorosi | ultranovels.com