



Night of the tangled *jilapi*

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"It's the night of the sunken moon."

"Yeah, I know."

"Yet you waltzed all the way up here with a goodbye?"

She didn't face her once-lover to talk. Tyisha had more urgent matters to take care of, from her vantage on the rooftop corner. The flickering lights, purposeful and coordinated, scattered amongst the crew's homes in the alleys before her, deserved her full attention tonight.

The urgency, however, she felt wavering.

"Now is precisely the time for good-byes," said Aurok from behind, a smile etched in his tone. "For both me and you."

Tyisha ignored him. A muted green light flickered from the fifth building down Modhumakhon road. Gopla's run was successful. She waited now for at least four more. She scanned the sky for drones. It was empty, so far, barring the half moon. If the heavy fog didn't cover it, she would've seen the cosmic bowl, upside down. But the fog never left. For all the sunken moons, in all the years she'd lived, the screen of grey mounted on the city's highest roofs.

"I thought maybe we could have some *jilapi*?" Aurok lounged against the railing and swung a small bag, spotted with oil. Trails of smoke escaped through his grip. Recently fried, and to Tyisha's disdain, immediately mouthwatering.

There was a faint sound of static in the air, and a purple light flickered at the end of Kolpokothon street. Vjoyo failed his run. Anticipated, but not welcome. She went for her own torch beside her and grasped at mist.

It was in Aurok's hand. "I swear I'm not here to sweet talk you," he took a bite from his *jilapi*. A few drops of molten

sugar, golden in the grey night, dropped on the railing. It sizzled on the concrete, echoing a few more bouts of distant static. "I just thought the *jilapi* would be an apt gesture."

Purples from the alleys, flickering fast, reflected on his glasses.

Tyisha needed to snatch back her torch. She knew she could. Even with the wisps of gold oozing past his teeth, even with the moon sunken, Aurok was not a guardian of the city. Not like her. And yet he tests me.

"This is my night, Aurok. Months of pain and loss. The fate of our neighbourhood lies in what my torch beckons. Don't ruin this." She reached out, but Aurok skidded away with sudden speed, leaving golden traces in the mist.

"You know what this *jilapi* reminds me of?" He took another bite. "A blur of city lights."

Tyisha scanned the alleys, noticing a flicker of green – Dinina's – amidst the purples. She kept her count, and some hope, and lunged at Aurok. This time he jumped over her, landing on the railing behind.

"The blur when we rushed through the crowd to get a fresh batch."

The open bag with a single golden *jilapi* remained on the railing. Tyisha shook her head. She preferred silver.

"The blur when we feasted on them in a runaway rickshaw."

Tyisha brought out a candy from her pocket. Its silver aura blended with the fog.

"The blur when we fell through the spaces between the high towers." He smiled as Tyisha popped the candy. He leapt from the railing to the next rooftop, leaving an arc of gold. "And when we kissed midair."

With mana rushing within her, Tyisha controlled her emotions. With her hands

she flicked a command to the fog. With her feet she glided with the mist, glowing silver.

"So many lights," Aurok continued. "Shop lamps, lanterns beneath rickshaws, fluorescent in their homes, tungsten in our streets..."

Aurok had the audacity of never getting to the point.

"...Searchlights from the drones, the silver in your eyes, reflecting the golden from mine."

Tyisha ascended with the mists, far above than what was needed. She let the sharp breeze take away her tears. She looked down at the blur of golden, pulsing in the middle of her view. From it, her neighbourhood snaked along the webbed alleyways, guided by dots of hopeless purples. She didn't feel the stress of it all failing. Aurok held the torch and he'd never failed her. But she was enraged nonetheless, for he was delaying the inevitable.

She descended towards him in a flash.

Aurok tried leaping away to evade her, but was held by the mist that surrounded him. He smiled at her, "Two more successes: Pousho and Nibil. Keep your count, my sweet guardian."

That made Tyisha pause and look for the two green torchlights. Just need one more!

In the distraction, Aurok surged golden might into his arms, aimed at an impossibly straight line and threw the torch up in the sky. Tyisha let it pierce the fog and disappear.

"A little time for us, before it rains," said Aurok.

"I still have love for you," said Tyisha, placing her palm on his cheeks. "and I know you do too."

Aurok nodded.

"Then why?"

"My time in this city is up. And your fight for it will begin tonight."

"And you expect me to withstand it without you?"

"You are the guardian, silver mist of the night. I'm just a traveler."

"And I won't impede your travels, with my absence? How can you forget us, and all those blurring lights, all those kisses midair?"

He smirked. "I'll trust the maze that is my mind. It let you enter despite my many travels. It can safely tuck you away in the tangled mess, secured until I yearn. Look out."

The torch plummeted down, slowed by the silver mists around them.

"Can you give me one last kiss?" Aurok climbed up on the railing, ready to disappear.

"In return for one last advice?" Tyisha grabbed the torch, ready to illuminate. She was too afraid to look back, to know whether the alleys adorned a fifth green light.

Aurok sighed. "It will rain regardless, so choose as you believe."

A moment later, the rooftop was ablaze with torchlight, hiding those who kissed goodbye.

Alone, Tyisha heard murmurs cascading through the alleyways. She dreaded what lied in the days ahead – for her and her crew. She anticipated the struggles, the doubts and the triumphs. But she did not expect the fog above her lighting up.

Drones, in the dozens, hidden behind the grey curtain, now rained down on her, at the beacon she held. An ambush.

She remembered the one last gift, waiting for her in a bag drenched in oil. She leaped for the *jilapi*, and the powers it held, to make her escape or her stand. Whichever she, alone, decides.