

Guyuggwa

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The pulse of drums and dancing feet echoed across the night's air. Calls and laughter grasped the wind, dancing through the Maunga, already heavily laden with summer's gifts. The return of fresh air, after weeks of smoke, ash and rubble, nurtured a sigh of relief into Guyuggwa's hardened brow. Pressed between bodies, the glow of the bonfire swelled as more debris was added, casting shadows across tired faces, streaked with the dreaming tears of relief.

Ahi caught their eye and reached for their hand, stroking the flesh of their calloused palm, gesturing for them to leave. They'd both been working in Resources for the past couple of years after being reallocated from the front line. Once farm land had been seized the re-distribution of goods and medicine became the primary goal. With the collapse of the Common Wealth and the successful coup d'état, the constant violence had simmered and their work on the front line had been less pressing. Māori had been slowly shifting attention

from seizing back their Ancestral Wealth to coordinating the coming change. In some rare moments, while pressed between bodies and swaying in the back of a truck during drop offs, sometimes, Ahi even felt at peace.

The remains of a crumbling city smiled down at them as they slid through the crowds. A cluster of teens held each other, hugging waists, sweat dripping down their necks as they sang, jumping higher and higher. Ahi quickly calculated a short cut and took a sharp right after the group, gripping Guyuggwa's hand and pulling them towards the Maunga. That night the Elders had announced that the time of war was finally over. Tomorrow we would begin anew. Aotearoa had erupted with celebrations across both islands as The People marked the end of tyranny and control. A spark, centuries in the making, touched the final strong holds of white supremacy and imperial rule covering the evenings celebrations in a beautiful warm flame. Shadows danced across the faces of a people, born between earth and war.

Slipping into quieter streets, Ahi and Guyuggwa walked hand in hand. The glow and heat of bodies cooled into a soft summer slumber as they stalled in front of a mound of rubble and dirt, lingering.

'Remember when this was a supermarket Ahi? They sold kūmara at triple its value.'

‘Yeah ... they also sold the best chocolate. Fuck, I miss chocolate.’

Guyuggwa chuckled. ‘I don’t miss our birthright to food being withheld from us. Like we didn’t deserve to eat.’

Ahi swallowed a laugh and dramatically threw their arms in the air. ‘Yeah ... But fuck! That hazelnut chocolate! Remember when we stole a block and ate it down at the beach? We had to take three blankets, it was that fucking cold.’

Guyuggwa nodded slowly with a smile, looking beyond the pile of dust and dirt.

‘That was right before we seized control of the highways. Remember that mission out to the west coast?’

Ahi turned away from the boulders of cement and rotting wood. ‘We lost Daniel that day.’

‘And Mornah.’

‘Yeah ... and Mornah.’

The air had stilled as they walked down the residential streets. Guyuggwa side stepped a young Kawakawa plant, pushing through the concrete, cracking cement, unfurled

and bouyant in the softness of the evening. Some of these streets hadn’t seen a car in years. The Commonwealth had cut Aotearoa off from international trade but with the urban farms taking off and local infrastructure meeting most of the needs of people within the area, fuel had been saved for the most urgent transport and for now, that was enough.

Guyuggwa took a moment to peer into the houses whose doors were swung open, fires blazing in the backyards, children running through the streets, laughing and singing in their sovereign tongue. A newborn slept in the lap of a nanna sitting on a nearby porch. She smiled and nodded as they slowly walked past, returning the smile.

‘Can you believe it, Guyuggwa. That baby will never know life living in the colony, will always know their language, will always practise culture. Imagine what that generation will be capable of, imagine what they’ll create and who they’ll be.’

‘I can’t even begin to,’ Guyuggwa whispered. ‘It’s taken us so long to get here. I don’t even know who I am outside of struggle.’ Guyuggwa’s voice caught in their throat as they tilted their chin to the night’s sky, thick with smoke and ash. They hadn’t seen the stars in months. ‘I’ve spent my whole life fighting and resisting. How am I supposed to raise up children when I’ve spent so long pushing back the colony?’

Thick tears rolled down their cheeks. ‘I don’t know softness, I don’t know healing. I know building myself up after they tore me down. I know building muscle and growing scars to soften the next blow. I’ve forgotten who I am before all of this.’

Ahi nodded, more to themselves, feeling inside their chest for something of their own, not thrust upon them by the colony. Following Guyuggwa’s gaze into the night sky they rolled their shoulders back for the first time in nearly 400 years.

‘I just—’ Guyuggwa bit their lower lip and swallowed slowly, allowing the tears to fall where they landed, closing their eyes to the sting and itch of smoke. ‘I’m just so broken.’

There was nothing to see in the sky, no distinct shapes or lights, just the clotted blanket of the colony burning.

Ahi reached for Guyuggwa’s hand, blinking into the darkness, tears pricking at the corners of their eyes and swallowed hard. Taking a deep breathe, they promised the night’s sky and every heart that had beat since The Beginning:

‘We’re not broken.’

Resting their forehead on Guyuggwa’s shoulder they watched their own tears fall into their woven fingers.

‘We’re not broken. We deserved better than this. We deserved safety, we deserved Language, we deserved a home on our homelands. We were denied that and we did the best that we could with what we had. Things are different now, we have control over our futures and can make better choices than the people before us.’

Guyuggwa had arrived nearly a decade earlier from a posting in the Eora Nations. Warriors and strategists had been sent over to support the Māori Resistance when the Common Wealth had doubled down, re-seizing Pasifika lands and closing off the Ancestral trade routes. It had been nearly twenty years since leaving their Sovereign Lands in the north. Two decades since the Larrakia salt water had tasted the sweat and melanin of their skin. It wasn’t the sounds of one hundred people sleeping in a dorm that kept them up, but the stone sitting in their stomach that churned, telling them their lands had forgotten them. Five years into their posting the crown broke through the north west, claiming Yawuru land. Cross ocean travel had been difficult while so many resources were pushed to where they were needed the most. Since the empire had fallen, Elders everywhere were calling people home. Ceremony was required, loved ones needed to Tjalak and Country needed to be healed.

Tomorrow they would be announcing the boats that would be taking people to the Eora Nations, from there it would be

weeks of travel inland and north before they finally returned.

A returning to their Sovereign Lands but this time, not as an unwilling subject of the British Empire, not as a pawn to white supremacy, but with the heavy feet of the Larrakia people. Not heavy with the weight and burden of settler colonialism but with the abundance of their Sovereign Inheritance. Laden with the songs of their ancestors and the dancing of their descendants. The first time in four centuries they would arrive a free people.

Guyuggwa's Nardang had been leading the rehousing program when they left all those years ago, but since their Nardla's passing during a raid, they weren't so sure where their family was. The Nimeybirra that were knee high when they left would be adults now. Everything was different.

Boots hit concrete as they scaled the stairs. Perilously close to the edge of the sloping hill, its rotten railing had given way long before people had been relocated after the bombings. Guyuggwa kicked their shoes off at the door, dropped their socks on the floor and collapsed on the mattress. It had been nearly three days since they'd slept more than two hours, the anticipation of freedom too powerful to sleep through. Ahi gently closed the door behind them as they entered the room. They were certain that the other Warriors were still out enjoying the

celebration, but something about the slowly blooming morning light called for the gentleness.

Sliding in next to Guyuggwa, they tucked their brown curls behind their ears and kissed the top of their forehead, pulling them in closer. Depending on what the Elders were going to prioritise, the boats would probably leave for The Eora anywhere from a couple of weeks to a few months and Guyuggwa would be on the first round of boats. There hadn't been a conversation about what would happen between them once the colony was overthrown. They both knew what would happen.

'What's the first thing you're gonna do when you get home?'

Guyuggwa tossed the sheets over them and rested further into the arch of Ahi's body, gazing through the window, watching the first light kiss the tree tops and ocean.

'After seeing my Alap, obviously.'

'Obviously!' chimed Ahi, leaning their head into the curve of Guyuggwa's neck and watching the sky blush soft pink.

'I'm gonna go to the beach and jump straight into that water. It's gonna be hot, it's gonna be humid and I'll finally be home.'

The ocean wind exhaled over the Maunga, gently pushing the thicker layers of smoke aside. Guyuggwa and Ahi held each other and watched the last of the colony burn to the ground, ash rising to the skies.