

## From The Ashes

Some people live lives that are grandiose and inspiring, while others fade into the background and are only remembered by their descendants.

Me? I'm not sure which I am, but I prefer to live it with a splash of colour.

I walk through the smog-coated city, past the ancient buildings that we were once known for. They are old limestone buildings, making us known as the Limestone City. Now it's fallen into disrepair, with many of the wealthy fleeing the city and everyone else hopelessly working in order to keep it up.

I walk past the limestone buildings, and onto the causeway that is slowly falling apart. Across the bridge is where my closest friend lives with her family, and I make it a habit to visit them often. Normally I would ride across the bridge on a bike, but today I had forgotten it.

Across the bridge is a wide road, one that use to be used for cars. I had seen old pictures of cars, but they no longer existed. Cars polluted the earth, and we kept driving them until they killed the environment. Our earth was precious. Why didn't we see that as the lakes were poisoned? Why did we turn our noses in ignorance as the forests burned? Why didn't we care as our wildlife died out? Why were we so ignorant? Why didn't we care?

Those who could afford it went to space, went to Mars and started a new life. The rest of us were left behind, left without anything. They expected us to die, but somehow, we still live. I like to call it the unkillable human spirit. My friend calls it the sheer determination of our species.

I arrive at her door, and I am immediately greeted by her parents. Her mother offers up an encouraging smile as I enter the door.

“Señora, ¿cómo está?” I greet her. *Ma'am, how are you?*

“Muy bien, gracias,” she replies. “Clara está en su cuarto. ¿Cómo te fué en el trabajo?”

*Very good, thank you. Clara is in her room. How was work?*

I worked in a small community with others, helping to rebuild our city from the ashes. Our city used to be named Kingston, but we had nicknamed the city Phoenix, like the mythical bird that rose from ashes to be glorious. Clara loved the metaphor.

“Mi trabajo es agotador, pero sé que valdrá la pena,” I answered. *My job is exhausting, but I know it will be worth it.*

With that, I head upstairs to Clara’s room. Her parents always made delicious food, which I could smell from the kitchen. One of the benefits of being friends with Clara was because of her parents’ delicious cooking!

“Hey Clara,” I greeted her, opening her door and sitting on her bed. “Been busy today?”

Clara looked over at me, dusting her dark hair out of her face. “You have no idea. Sedna says she has plans to renovate the old city hall into a greenhouse, but I’m trying to work through the logistics of engineering it.”

Sedna was another one of our friends, and my girlfriend. Sedna and I worked together, building new plans for the city. Sedna was the one who dreamed big, and the biggest activist of all of our group. We had a fourth friend, Hana, who was more on the artsy side. While Clara never was officially part of our rebellion group, we still went over plans with her.

Sedna advocated for Indigenous people within our city. She was the one making sure everyone had clean water, and she would tell stories to the children, passed down from her ancestors. The children of the city didn’t like stories of my ancestors. They were frightened by them. Hana worked on painting the buildings and creating messages of a hopeful and brighter

future. Clara ran through the logistics of our new infrastructure, and I did all the calculations and math work.

“We’d have to replace the roof,” I said. “It’s certainly doable, provided that the building doesn’t cave in on us.”

“You give it a shot, Frida,” Clara replied. “I wish my parents would let me join you in all the fun out there.”

“It's tougher than it looks," I twist my hand through my long hair. "No one thinks that we're worth saving. We're going to prove them wrong. Tomorrow, I'll show you. I'll show everyone."

Later, I headed home from Clara's house after a delicious dinner. I went across the bridge, and trudged my way into an apartment building that was collapsing in on itself. It was very dangerous, but I was the only resident. It allowed me to work on my inventions in peace.

I started by changing into a pair of overalls, and braiding my hair out of my face. Sedna was the one who taught me how to do a French braid. Next was putting on my gloves and mask, before I could enter my workshop.

This was my biggest project yet. It was a special kind of solar panel, hooked to a generator. The solar panel absorbed the photons, converting 99% of it into usable energy. Not only that, but the energy could be stored for up to a year. By hooking it up on the tallest building, it would be enough to power the entire city. Then, we would have unlimited electricity. With unlimited, clean electricity, we became free and no longer isolated from the world.

My other inventions had just been small tinkering, but I was confident that this solar panel would work. Everything I made, was an act of rebellion to everyone who left us here. From this land that they ruined, we turned it into a home, we were prosperous. When they planned for

us to fade away, we were a blaze that persisted. In a century, we built a sense of community when they left us in ruins.

I worked on the finishing touches, carving in my nickname. Valkyrie. They were the mythical warriors of Norse mythology, the strong women who fought on battlefields and brought warriors into Valhalla. I was disconnected from my own culture, as apart from my last name and a few words, I was no part of them. Frida Bjornstad was quite an unusual name, but it was the last fragments I had of my culture.

Throughout the night, I worked on my solar panel, running trial after trial, concentrating photons to hit the solar panel. It would never be quite 100% efficient, but 99% was enough. This would give us electricity, and with access to the outside world, we could encourage other cities to follow our lead. Perhaps we could unite the world.

My finishing touch was adding swirls of bright paint, a traditional art form from my culture, called rosemaling. It was my own personal touches, the art that I lived by. Hana was far more talented than I could ever dream of being, but I did like the splashes of colour that adorned my inventions.

The paint itself was biodegradable. It was one of the first things that Hana had insisted upon. If she was going to paint, she only wanted biodegradable paint. It took Clara and I a long time to patent it, but it paid off. Once we figured out the formula for biodegradable materials, we applied them to everyday uses. If it wasn't biodegradable, we would recycle it over and over again until it was depleted.

I sat back to admire my solar panel. I hope people will be proud of me, that they'll admire how much I have worked. Maybe then they would understand why I spent all my time in this

building. I was susceptible to rumours, especially when I was an orphan girl whose family abandoned her to live on Mars, and you were forgotten. People don't let go of grudges easily.

Not only had we rebuilt ourselves, we had done so with a rebellious spirit and never with a leader. We were like a beast with no head, difficult to slay. We are invincible as a community together.

I wandered around my apartment building, wasting time until morning. Many rooms hadn't been kept up, and were reclaimed by plant life that had choked through the drywall and the broken windows. There was an odd beauty to all of it. Where there once was human life and love, they have been replaced by Mother Nature. The families that lived there came from the dirt of the earth, and to the dirt of the earth they returned.

Once the first rays of sunlight hit my eyes, I began transporting my solar panel and generator outside. I had promised a big surprise was to be coming, and I hoped this will be worth the wait. Sedna and Hana were already standing there at city hall.

Sedna's black hair had streaks of purple and red, tied into a messy bun. Her jacket was torn and repaired in many places, but I didn't notice because of her dazzling smile.

Hana shaved all her hair off, and I could only see the dark stubble growing back on her head, about a few centimeters long. She had a prosthetic arm, which she had ivy plants painted climbing up her arm. Clara and I had a fun time designing her arm for her.

I patted my solar panel, leaning onto the generator. "Pretty cool, eh?"

The solar panel itself was roughly the size of a table, and the generator was smaller, more the size of a suitcase. The generator would convert it to usable energy, and transfer it to a much larger, stationary generator. That second generator would then transfer the energy to every home within the city.

The greenhouse we were building inside the old city hall would also provide better access to food for everyone, whereas before we relied on gardens built on land that was barely fertile. For transportation across the city, we had to fix up the old bridges, but we didn't have to calculate the potential weight of the cars. We all rode bikes or walked places. Until we had the infrastructure to build something more complex, bikes were convenient.

Sedna inspected my solar panel, running her fingers over where I had carved my name, then painted over top of it. A smile dances on her lips, her hand touching mine. She too could sense how this would impact our future, the sparks we made of our future.

"The sun rays should reach through the smog, right?" Sedna questions.

"Yes, and it's designed to absorb ultraviolet rays. They'll be our main source of energy because of the holes in the ozone layer," I explain. "How has your family been doing?"

"We're working on things," Sedna brushes her hair out of her face. "We're trying to form this new cultural identity for ourselves. We were robbed of our language, our dances, given the title of Canadians. Canada doesn't exist anymore. What does that make us, really?"

"I think that it doesn't make us anything," I lean back. "We are just human. We paint with the hues of our ancestors, sing their songs, even if we've forgotten the words. We can just exist without trying to fit into an identity."

"Maybe. We're only human, after all," Sedna touches my hand. "Hey, you have a crowd waiting for you. Give it all you've got."

I nod, and stand in front of the old city hall. My heart is overwhelmed with all of the people, old and young, from all different walks of life. Every hour of work I've done was for them. For the elderly, that grew up in despair and collapse. For the youth, whose lives will be so

much better. For everyone gathered here, they were worth every sleepless night and the tears shed.

It was time to reclaim our lives after being abandoned by those who fled to the stars.