

Prologue

Snow-capped mountains narrowed the sky like a defensive wall for Valdolla, the northernmost city of Amestris. Nestled at the foot of the formidable Briggs Mountains, this city offered a view of the white peaks from anywhere, in any season.

Depending on atmospheric conditions and cloud cover, the mountains were said to resemble a woman trailing the hem of a white dress. Thus, many of the youth in Valdolla mistakenly believe the ‘Legend of the Witch Velza’ originated from this and that the “White Witch” is nothing more than an old fairy tale.

But the old-timers know the truth. The witch clad in white robes truly existed. Long ago, she was sealed deep within the earth's core because of her immense magical power.

“She must never be awakened,” the girl murmured softly, gazing up at the statue of Velza erected in Valdolla's center.

The statue bore a face so gentle and full of compassion that it was hard to believe it belonged to a dreaded witch. Though the girl didn't know when it was made, she thought it must have been crafted by those who believed the story of Velza was only a fairy tale.

“Hers is a great power capable of destroying everything.”

A saying passed down among the older inhabitants. Those who knew this truth would never have created a statue of Velza bearing such a serene smile.

“Velza's power is beyond human control. Even for her own kin.” Her father's words echoed in her ears.

“Father...” The girl lowered her gaze. A year had passed since her father's death. She had vowed not to cry anymore, yet a sharp ache stung the back of her throat. Was it because she had returned to Valdolla after so long? No, she had left this town as a baby. She had no memories here at all—there was no reason to feel sentimental.

She looked up at the Velza statue once more. It must have been the statue's fault she was feeling so unusually tearful. She hadn't expected it to have such a gentle face.

“Almost...almost like Mother... Oh, what am I thinking? I don't even remember Mother's face.” She'd heard that her mother, Ilse, who had always been frail, died soon after giving birth. It was a painful memory for her father, so he never talked much about her. Still, she felt like she understood her mother from what little he had said.

The name Ilse, she learned, meant “My God is an oath” in the language of the northern lands. True to that name, her father said she was a woman of deep faith.

“You are a precious treasure to both your mother and I.” It was a bitterly cold evening when he had said that. That became the last day they spent together.

“Sophie, you are...the light of hope.” He smiled as he said this, then pushed Sophie into a hidden passageway as pursuers were closing in. They had been living on the run ever since she could remember and Sophie understood exactly what her father was about to do.

Fighting the urge to cry out, Sophie held her breath deep within the hidden passage. She heard heavy footsteps and voices arguing, followed by a loud crash. Still, she remained perfectly still. If she was caught, her father's death would have been for nothing.

She vowed to survive, no matter what. To fulfill her father's wish.

"I will definitely..." She whispered silently to herself "I will stop it. I will never let Velza awaken."

The clock tower's bells struck noon. The fountain in the square shot water higher than usual, sparkling in the sunlight. Children cheered around it.

She thought that perhaps she had come to Valdolla too soon. Watching this peaceful scene, Sophie felt uneasy. Perhaps she should have hidden from her pursuers a little longer, biding her time. Coming to this city meant plunging straight into the heart of the enemy.

Sophie shook her head slightly. Her mother had called to her in a dream. The words weren't clear, but that voice had definitely been calling to her. It was her mother's voice, Sophie felt certain of it. She didn't remember her face, let alone her voice, but she knew it was true.

Her mother, buried in the northern lands, told her that the time had come. Trusting that premonition, Sophie had decided to go to Valdolla.

Still, seeing this scene of utter peace made doubt creep in. What if her premonition was wrong? What if her feeling that something would happen was just in her head?

That was when it happened. Suddenly, the ground began to tremble in small, rapid movements.

"An earthquake?"

No. The Velza statue was shaking differently from the ground. Much longer, irregular intervals than the tremors felt at her feet. As if the statue itself were about to move. Soon, a sound like the rumbling of the earth reached her ears. Three times in quick succession, each from a different direction.

The premonition—her mother's voice—was right. It had begun.

Sophie turned her back on the Velza statue and began to run. She already knew where she was headed.

Chapter 1

The Divine Soldiers Attack

1

“Whoa, he’s huge!”

“What weird armor!”

The children pointed and laughed at him without restraint. The armor, easily two heads taller than the average adult, lowered itself slightly. Even though he was trying his hardest to shrink down, he couldn't hunch his back any further or tuck his neck in any more.

“Al, I'm sorry. It's been nothing but crowds.”

“It's fine, Winry. I'm used to it.”

If he had a body capable of sighing, he would undoubtedly have let out the deepest sigh imaginable. But he, Alphonse Elric, had no physical form. The sight of a soul anchored within an empty suit of armor startled ninety-nine point nine percent of those who saw it for the first time, eliciting screams that sounded otherworldly.

“If I knew any back alleys, we’d take those instead.” The girl named Winry looked around apologetically. The cobblestone sidewalk was packed with people, shoulder-to-shoulder.

Valdolla was a well populated city in northern Amestris. an ancient fortress city with wide roads radiating out from its center toward the suburbs. Connecting these main thoroughfares were narrow back alleys, but these were not planned roads. Consequently, they twisted oddly, were filled with dead ends, and were practically mazes for those unfamiliar with the area. People inevitably concentrated on the main streets.

“Mr. Garfiel said to stick to the main streets because Valdolla's roads are so complicated—” Winry's words were abruptly cut off by an irritated voice.

“Ugh, this is so annoying. This is exactly why I hate crowds.” The small boy grimaced and stretched up on tiptoes.

“Don't complain just because you're too little to see.”

His golden eyes took on a menacing glint. He'd been avoiding saying specifically what he found “annoying,” and being called out directly had set him off.

“Unlike Al, Ed's just being a sourpuss.”

“Winry, you little—” Just as he started to protest, something struck the back of Edward Elric's head. A dull thud echoed as stars filled his vision.

“Ah, my apologies.”

Rubbing his sore head, Edward looked up to see a kindly-looking man peering down at him with concern. He wasn't from this town—likely a traveler—as he had a camera slung around his neck. That camera had just delivered a blow rivaling even Winry's wrench. Because the man was infuriatingly tall, the camera, which should have been much lower, ended up almost at the height of Edward's head.

But everyone makes careless mistakes. And this was a gentlemanly, middle-aged man. Anyone could see there was no malice. This called for a mature response. Edward raised his right hand, adopting a magnanimous posture.

“No, it's fine—”

“I'm sorry, little boy.”

With his mouth half-open, Edward froze in place. The man ruffled Edward's hair, smiled warmly, and walked away.

“Little...boy?”

Winry covered her mouth with both hands and spun around. Her shoulders were shaking slightly. Alphonse lined up beside her. Even without turning to face them, it was obvious both were stifling laughter.

Edward could only gasp like a fish out of water, but he immediately raised both arms and shouted. Any trace of an adult response vanished completely.

"Come back here! You wanna' pick a fight with me? Bring it on!"

“Brother, calm down!”

“WHO DO YA THINK YER CALLIN' A PRESCHOOL-SIZED MINI-BEAN!?”

“He didn't say that... I mean, he literally didn't say any of that.” Looking more resigned than exasperated, Alphonse restrained the thrashing Edward. It was a practiced motion.

Winry just shrugged and said “Who's really the older brother here?”

“I'M the older brother!” Edward exclaimed. Many people, fooled by his large armor, mistakenly thought Alphonse was the older brother. But in reality, Alphonse was fourteen, and the smaller Edward was fifteen.

“That damn colonel! If nothing comes out of this, he's not getting off scot-free.”

“I don't think it'll be nothing. He went out of his way to send a letter.”

A few days ago Edward had received a letter from Colonel Roy Mustang while in Rush Valley. He'd visited his childhood friend and automail mechanic, Winry, to have his prosthetic arm and leg repaired there.

“Come to think of it, you got a letter.” After her usual lecture about how carelessly he handled his automail and why he couldn't be more careful, Winry stood up as if remembering something and handed him the letter.

“A letter for me?” They must have figured this was the fastest and most reliable way to deliver mail to Edward and his companions, who were constantly traveling around Amestris. The sender's name seemed correct.

"It just arrived the day before yesterday. I never thought it would get to you this fast."

“A letter? Who on earth... Gah!”

The moment he saw the sender's name, Edward recoiled.

"Your reaction tells me it's from the colonel. Did something happen?"

"I'd like to ask you that."

Edward scowled and handed the opened letter to Alphonse.

"Huh? That's all?"

On the military-embossed stationery, written in familiar handwriting, was a single line: "You might find what you're looking for in Valdolla."

"No clue what it means, huh?"

"Yeah... Wish he'd at least been a bit more specific."

Alphonse scrutinized the letter, searching for a postscript on the back or perhaps a watermark.

"Maybe he can't write specifics because it's dangerous."

Considering what they sought, it wasn't impossible. The Philosopher's Stone—a magical amplification device many alchemists had hunted in the past. It was also said to bring misfortune to those who touched it. In fact, they knew people who had lost their lives because of the Philosopher's Stone.

"Let's go check it out." Edward said this as he took a step toward the door.

"Oh? You two are going to Valdolla?"

Garfiel, Winry's mentor and the workshop's owner, appeared from the back. Though outwardly a burly man, Garfiel's speech and mannerisms were distinctly feminine. This embodied his skill as an automail mechanic—both delicate and bold.

"This is perfect timing. Would you do me a favor? An old acquaintance of mine is in Valdolla, and there's something I need delivered."

"We could do that, I suppose."

Roy's short letter offered no clues beyond the name of the city, so Garfiel's request was actually a godsend. Having a local contact would be invaluable for gathering information.

"That'd be a huge help. Well..."

Garfiel glanced back at Winry.

"Winry dear, wouldn't you like to go too? You could get a lot of shopping done with a piggy like him."

"Hold on, you expect me to foot the bill!?"

Ignoring Edward's protest, Garfiel smiled brightly.

"While you're at it, why not tour his workshop? His skills are incredible. I'm sure you two would hit it off." Hearing he'd get along with Winry, Edward pictured prosthetic arms with machine guns or prosthetic legs with caterpillar tracks, but he kept it to himself. A bad feeling washed over him. Garfiel might just agree to it without a second thought...

Thus, with Winry accompanying them, the journey to Valdolla became a trip for three. From the southern town of Rush Valley to the northern city of Valdolla, it took several days of changing trains. Unfazed by the fatigue of travel, Winry declared she wanted to go out as soon as she dropped her luggage at the hotel. She seemed unable to sit still, eager to see whatever 'amazing technology' Garfiel had mentioned.

Getting a city map at the front desk and cheerfully leaving the hotel went well enough, but Edward and Alphonse were soon disheartened before they'd even gone far down the main street. They were both extremely uncomfortable in crowds to begin with.

“What the hell is with all these people?”

“It's not like it's a festival or anything...”

Sure, balloon sellers and stalls dotted the area here and there, but people's reactions to them were lukewarm. Probably just shops cashing in on the main street's crowds, not any actual festival or celebration.

“All right, all right, all right! Stop complaining! Let's just walk!” Only Winry was full of energy.

“Well, what can ya do? Let's just push through.”

“Yeah.”

Just as they gathered their resolve and charged back into the crowd, a tremor hit their feet.

“Huh? An earthquake?”

The small tremors suddenly turned into a jolting shock. Screams erupted everywhere. A delayed sound like an explosion followed. It was very close. “What the hell was that?” someone yelled. What were they talking about?

“Brother, look at that!” Alphonse pointed, and Ed followed his gaze. Beyond the buildings stacked like blocks, a strangely shaped tower came into view. Or was it a stone statue? Or something else entirely? It wasn't clear. He only thought it might be a tower because it seemed taller than the highest building and because of its shape.

It hadn't been there before. At that height, it would have been impossible not to notice while walking down the main street. Could the recent tremors be caused by it breaking through the ground? But he didn't have any more time to think.

Suddenly, the crowd began to move. Instantly accelerating and threatening to swallow Edward and the others whole. Panic quickly ensued.

“Al! Winry! Don't get separated!” He instinctively grabbed Winry's arm, which was closest to him. If they got separated by the flow of people, they might not be able to secure each other's safety. This was unfamiliar territory.

Gunshots rang out. Close again. This only fueled the crowd's anxiety further. Shouts and screams flew about, the force pushing them along growing stronger.

His foot caught on the cobblestones. His body lurched forward. Trying to regain his balance was a futile effort—the flow of people was simply too fast. What would happen if they all fell into this chaotic crowd? Edward lost his composure—badly—he had to let go so Winry wouldn't get dragged in...

“Brother!”

He was grabbed by the collar. A metal arm yanked Edward and Winry out of the crowd.

“Quick! This way!”

Using Alphonse's body as a shield, they broke free from the flow and darted into a back alley. Both Garfiel and the hotel front desk had warned them not to venture carelessly into back alleys, but compared to that panic, getting lost was preferable.

“Al saved us.” Edward exhaled deeply. If it had been a moment later, they might have been trampled by that raging torrent of people.

“What the heck just happened?” Winry looked anxiously toward the main street.

“No idea, but...” Edward fell silent at a sound, like a short crack of thunder.

“Brother, was that...a cannonball?” It was definitely a cannonball. No doubt about it.

“Whoa, no way. Are they starting a war in the middle of town?” The words ‘civil war’ flashed through his mind. In this country, it wasn't an outlandish thought. Rapidly militarized Amestris could hardly be called a stable nation. In remote regions far from the capital—the border areas—the military's reach is weak, leaving smoldering embers of civil unrest. Just a few years ago, the Ishvalan minority had revolted.

“Let's get back to the hotel, in any case.” Even if civil war had broken out, returning to the hotel wouldn't guarantee safety. But at least they could figure out what was happening.

A thought suddenly crossed Ed's mind: wouldn't it be easier to get information by going to the military headquarters? Even though he wasn't a regular soldier, a state alchemist held a rank equivalent to a major. He wouldn't be turned away at the gate, and if he asked, they'd likely provide some useful information. But he immediately dismissed the idea. If this was indeed an uprising, military-related facilities would be the first targets. Since he was traveling with Winry this time, it was best to stay away.

With that thought, he started walking using the map, but soon lost his bearings. The back alleys offered no landmarks whatsoever. The buildings were all identical apartment blocks, with no signs or markers of any kind. To make matters worse, rain clouds suddenly began spreading, obscuring the sun. This made it impossible to tell any direction at all.

“Hey, maybe...”

“Are we...lost?”

Alphonse and Winry exchanged glances. Just as Edward was about to confirm they were indeed lost, men in strange attire blocked their path. They wore masks with bizarre patterns and were armed with guns. Neither the guns nor their pale clothing were military. Even without inspecting their gear, their allegiance was obvious. They all pointed their barrels at them simultaneously.

“No questions asked, huh?” Edward pressed his palms together, glancing sideways at Alphonse. Alphonse nodded, doing the same.

“Winry, get back!” Simultaneously, both men slammed their palms against the ground. The lighting-like lights of an alchemical reaction flared, and dozens of spikes erupted from the stone pavement. The men—guns still raised—were sent flying. Yet, they rose back up without hesitation.

“Doesn't seem to be doing much.”

“Then...”

Once more, the two pressed both hands against the cobblestones. Thinking it would just be spikes again, the men leapt back in unison. But it wasn't spikes—rising up from beneath their feet was a thick stone wall, rapidly growing taller, until completely separating Edward and the others from their pursuers.

The three of them spun around and ran. This way, they could escape while the men scrambled to climb or break through the wall.

“Good thing it's a narrow street.” Alphonse muttered as they ran at full speed. The speed of transmutation is greatly affected by the mass of the transmuted object. A wall matching the narrow street width could be conjured in an instant, but this wouldn't have been possible on a broad avenue.

After running for a while, Edward and the others stopped. They simply couldn't keep running—they were out of breath. Leaning against a building with its shutters down, Edward and Winry panted heavily.

In place of the two who couldn't move, Alphonse went around checking the surroundings for any suspicious lurkers. After all Alphonse, lacking a physical body, felt no fatigue no matter how much he ran.

Still, it seemed Valdolla had fallen into the worst possible situation. Civil war had indeed broken out. Those men earlier weren't mere civilians, their disciplined movements were the kind only achieved through training on par with military soldiers.

“Hey, Ed... What do we do now?”

“Get to the main street first.”

With those kinds of people roaming around, the back alleys were too dangerous to walk through. They had no choice but to walk along the main street while figuring out a way to escape from the city. With a civil war raging, the trains were surely not running. Could they leave the city without relying on public transportation? But if they dawdled, the city might be sealed off...

“Those people from earlier!” Alphonse's sharp cry snapped Ed back to reality. Those dangerous-looking people were apparently still around.

“Hey, yelling like that will get us spotted—”

“No! We have to help!”

Alphonse took off running. It seemed someone was being attacked. Edward hurried after him. He couldn't risk losing Alphonse here.

“They turned the corner over there! I'll go ahead, Big Brother!”

Confirming Winry was following, he pressed on after Alphonse. Fortunately, the chase was short.

“There!” Alphonse pointed. In a dead-end alley, someone was being cornered by men dressed in the outfits he'd seen earlier. No, there was one more. Mixed in with the white clothed group, there was a man wearing a gray coat. His hair color, somewhere between dark navy and blue-purple, stood out clearly even from a distance.

The man was walking with a gait and bearing that were distinctly feminine. Getting closer, Ed could see his coat trimmed with fur at the collar and sleeves also looked more like women's wear than men's. The man swept his purple hair back with an exceedingly graceful gesture.

“Well now...what shall I do with you? If you keep wasting my time...” The man spoke with an unexpected falsetto.

Pressed against the wall was a girl about the same age as Winry. The man inched closer to the girl. Edward saw the glow emanating from his palm. It resembled the light of an alchemical reaction, but at such a distance, he couldn't be certain.

“Stop it!” Alphonse's shout made the man turn, revealing his face covered in makeup.

“Oh? Can I help you?” The man said teasingly. Yet his gray eyes showed no trace of amusement. By now, Edward was certain that this man intended to harm the girl.

A mocking smile formed on the man's lips, but it vanished instantly, replaced by a bored expression. With an air of annoyance, he raised his hand that was glowing with light and hurled something at them.

Light. A pure white orb of light, as if the sun itself had been brought down to earth. It flew toward Edward and Alphonse. Then in a flash it transformed into a bunch of arrows. They instinctively leapt backward and the cobblestones shattered beneath them.

Arrows plunged into the spot where they had stood. The arrows were transparent like glass, but their strength seemed to be on an entirely different level.

“You bastard!”

Edward leapt toward the man. He had already transformed his prosthetic right arm into a blade. Any fellow alchemist would recognize that forging speed was anything but ordinary, yet the man's mocking expression remained unchanged.

Edward thrust the blade toward the man's dominant arm. Just when it seemed he might dodge, the man stepped straight forward. Edward's blade collided with the man's hand.

A dull thud sounded as the sword stopped. A flesh-and-blood hand had halted a blade forged from steel automail.

“Wha!?”

The next instant, his body was soaring. Not only had the man stopped his blade, he'd simultaneously kicked Edward away. He instinctively took a breakfall, but couldn't fully absorb the impact, grimacing at the pain shooting through his back. He managed to sit up, but couldn't stand immediately.

“Stop it! They're not involved!”

The men in white tried to restrain the screaming girl.

“Just watch quietly. We'll be done in a moment.” The purple-haired man said with a hint of amusement, then flicked his palm again. The same orb of light flew toward Edward.

He couldn't dodge it, the orb transformed into arrows again. Edward closed his eyes involuntarily.

Suddenly, a shock hit his eardrums. A sound like gravel being violently scattered over iron plates. Edward's eyes snapped open. Alphonse had stepped in front, shielding him. That deafening sound had been the arrows raining down on the armor.

But the arrows were now embedded in the stone pavement. Their force seemed immense, and Alphonse began to be pushed back, inch by inch.

Finally, unable to withstand it any longer, Alphonse flipped backward onto his back.

“Whoa!” Two screams echoed through the air. Where Alphonse had fallen, Edward lay beneath.

“Alphonse! Get off me! You're too heavy!” Edward, pinned beneath the armor, flailed his exposed legs and yelled. Perhaps because he'd flipped over in an awkward position, Alphonse couldn't get up immediately either, kicking his legs just as wildly.

“Well, well, you're surprisingly resilient.” The purple-haired man laughed aloud. The rain of arrows had finally stopped.

“I underestimated you, thinking you were just regular children. Next time, I'll be more...”

“Stop it!” The girl screamed, her voice almost a shriek.

“Please...stop...stop...it...!” Something was off about the girl's voice. What was wrong? But Edward—pinned beneath the armor—had no way to see.

“NOOOOOOOOO!”

The impact came suddenly. Whether it was a gust, an explosion, or something else entirely, Edward felt a violent surge of force. He and Alphonse were both thrown back, smashing into the stone pavement. Winry's screams echoed in the distance.

He couldn't make heads or tails of what was happening. Everything was just white. Yet the unknown force kept surging forward, showing no sign of weakening.

He forced his eyelids open, which threatened to snap shut. He saw the girl. Her body was glowing. He realized the white vision was caused by that blinding light.

"Well, well, a terrifying power indeed."

Within the light, Ed saw the strange man writhing in agony.

"Until we meet again..."

The man vanished. Ed couldn't tell if he truly disappeared or merely fled somewhere and he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

Just as he thought his optic nerves were reaching their limit, darkness engulfed him. Suddenly, his limbs regained their freedom. It was quiet. So quiet, he wondered if something was wrong with his ears.

Somehow, the light had vanished from the girl's body. A thud broke the silence. She had collapsed where she stood.

"Hey! Are you okay!?" He jumped up and shouted. No reply. Edward rushed over in a panic. Alphonse lifted the girl up.

"Stay with me!" But she lay limp and unresponsive. The back of her hand glowed faintly.

"Brother, this light..." It was far too faint and feeble to be the same dazzling light from before. Soon, like the last embers dying out, the light vanished.

"A mark?" On the back of the girl's hand was a purplish-red mark. No, not a mark—it was drawn by human hands. It was too perfectly formed to be natural. The shape resembled a flower. A tattoo, perhaps?

"What the heck is going on? Seriously." Winry approached, coughing. But the moment she saw the unconscious girl, she practically lunged forward and grabbed her wrist. Checking for a pulse first was typical of Winry, born into a family of doctors.

"Thank goodness...her pulse is normal."

"But she won't wake up. What should we do?"

"We need to find somewhere for her to lie down." Indeed, those white-clad men might attack again if they stayed there.

"But a place to lie down? In a back alley like this?"

"If only there was a hospital nearby... Oh!" Winry, who had been scanning the area, suddenly froze, her gaze fixed.

"What is it?"

"Over there. There's a church." A church might be able to provide basic first-aid. At the very least, it should be able to offer a place for the girl to rest. They nodded to each other in confirmation. Alphonse stood up, cradling the girl in his arms.

Up close, the church looked abandoned. Opening the door and peering inside, there was no sign of anyone.

“Maybe it's not used anymore. Or maybe they're just out?”

“They wouldn't go out without locking up, would they?”

The inside wasn't particularly dusty, and there were no cobwebs. Even if it had fallen into disuse, it must have been recent. Either way, this was a lucky break.

Passing through the chapel and climbing to the second floor, they found a small guest room. Though it was somewhat dusty, the curtains and bed were fine. Perhaps it was slated for reuse as some kind of facility soon.

Pulling back the bedspread, the pillows and sheets were clean enough to be usable. Alphonse gently laid the girl down.

“It's okay, right, to just use this place?”

“Of course it is. No complaints allowed in an emergency like this.”

“Saying ‘of course’ is a bit much, though...” Ignoring Alphonse, who seemed to want to say something, Edward leaned in to examine the back of the girl's hand again.

“Does this pattern have anything to do with that light earlier?” It was a light that seemed to amplify the alchemical reaction dozens of times over. If what was drawn on the back of her hand was an alchemical array, then the power the girl used would be a form of alchemy. But this simple pattern looked nothing like an alchemical array, no matter how he looked at it.

The girl grimaced like she was having a bad dream. Silver hair clung to her sweaty forehead. Winry took out a handkerchief and gently wiped the girl's brow. Then, her eyelids fluttered.

“Fa...Father...” The girl's eyes snapped open as if startled. Confusion flickered in her pupils.

“You're awake?”

“Where am I...?” Winry held the girl back as she tried to jump up.

“You have to stay in bed. This is a church.” The girl's gaze shifted from Winry to Edward, then to Alphonse.

“You don't have to worry anymore. Those guys are gone. It should be safe here.”

Even hearing the word ‘safe,’ the girl's expression remained rigid. She was on guard. Her eyes scanned the room as if assessing her surroundings. Slowly, she sat up. This time, Winry didn't stop her.

“I'm Edward Elric.”

“I'm his younger brother, Alphonse Elric.”

The girl remained silent, comparing Edward and Alphonse.

“I'm Winry Rockbell. Nice to meet you.”

Winry thought she might ease the girl's wariness, but her expression remained unchanged.

“So...what's your name?”

She'd used some strange power, but she didn't look like an alchemist. What was she? But the girl didn't answer Edward's question. Did she have some reason she couldn't give her name? Edward decided to change the subject.

“Who were those guys in white earlier? You know something about this, don't you? Can you tell us?” That purple-haired man had clearly targeted the girl. He didn't seem to be attacking anyone nearby.

indiscriminately. Above all, her own words confirmed it. When that man tried to attack Edward and the others, she said, "They're not involved." Turning that around meant she herself was involved and knew why she was being targeted.

"Hey, why aren't you answering?" Edward grew impatient with the girl who showed no sign of replying.

"...I'm grateful you helped me." Still looking down, the girl finally spoke.

"But please...don't get involved in this any further." The girl lifted her face. Her eyes now held a starkly different, intense light.

"Forget what happened, leave here quickly. Leave Valdolla while you still have time."

"Hold on! We want to know what's going on. What's happening in this city right now?"

She definitely knew something.

"You could at least tell us that much."

"Even if you knew the situation...there's nothing you could do about it."

Her words were terribly irritating. Edward couldn't help but snap back sharply.

"We're not sayin' we're gonna do anything about it. We're just asking you to tell us what's going on."

The girl fell silent and looked away, her pale lips pressed tightly together.

"Hey, won't you at least try talking about it?" Winry placed a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Sometimes just talking about it makes you feel better, right?"

The girl's gaze wavered uncertainly. Winry seized the moment to press her advantage.

"This guy looks small, but he's surprisingly reliable."

"That's right. Small but surprisingly rel—Hey! What's that about looking small!?"

Winry brushed off Edward's protest with ease.

"What? I'm complimenting you, so stop picking fights with me all the time. Really, you get obsessed about such small things..."

"There it is, you said 'small' again!!"

"You actually are small, so what's the problem with calling you 'small'!?"

"AAAAAAARGH!! You said it twice!"

"Jeez. I guess if your body's small, your heart's small too... As you'd expect from the smallest state alchemist in history.

"THE—YOUNGEST—IN—HISTORY!!" Edward's scream echoed through the room. The old windowpanes rattled and creaked.

"Hey, Ed! Could you keep your voice down a little?"

"So stop saying I'm small!"

Beside Edward, who was panting heavily, a soft chuckle sounded. It wasn't Alphonse. Unnoticed, the girl had been laughing.

"My name is Sophie. Sophie Belkman." After laughing for a moment, the girl finally introduced herself.

"Alright. I'll explain the situation. I owe you for your help." Sophie's expression turned serious again.

"The ones who attacked us earlier... the ones attacking this town... are called the Velza Clan."

"Velza...?"

Edward and the others exchanged glances. The name sounded familiar somehow.

"I came to Valdolla to stop their plan."

"Plan?"

She didn't answer that. Sophie took a small breath.

"A long time ago, there was a witch clad in white." Closing her eyes, Sophie spoke slowly as if confirming each word.

"This witch used strange sorcery to deceive those in her midst.

These acts enraged the king, who attempted to slay her.

But the witch didn't die. She became furious and cursed her malefactors, swearing revenge.

Then she offered herself to a red devil, bringing great disasters to this land." At the words 'red devil,' Edward instinctively glanced at Alphonse. Alphonse, too, was looking at Edward. They must have thought of the exact same thing.

"When the witch clapped her hands once, all who had spoken ill of her fell dead.

When the witch clapped her hands twice, the castle turned into sand, and the king perished under its weight.

When the witch clapped her hands thrice, disfigured monsters appeared, and many were attacked and killed by them.

The people implored the witch for forgiveness.

Yet she grew even angrier still, killing many more, and sending the country to ruin.

Then, a brave few rose up and challenged the witch to battle.

They were unable to defeat her, but in exchange for most of their lives, they cast her into a deep slumber.

The few survivors sealed her away, such that she would never wake again.

And to guard that seal, they built a new castle in this land."

"Sophie, what exactly is that story?"

"This is the legend of the witch passed down in Valdolla. Her name was Velza."

"Ah, I remember!" Winry snapped her fingers.

"It was on the map, wasn't it? The Velza statue. I should have figured it out sooner. When I asked for directions at the hotel, the square with the Velza statue came up."

"Come to think of it, there were some ruins or something near there. So, does that mean a castle once stood on this land? Is that what it's about?"

"But it's just a legend, right? Not something that really happened."

Sophie shook her head. "It's not just a legend. The townspeople think it's a fairy tale, but it's based on fact."

"So the witch was real too?"

Sophie nodded emphatically. "The Velza Clan worships the witch Velza as their deity. They're trying to awaken Velza to destroy the world."

"Destroy...the world?" Edward and the others were stunned by this outlandish claim. This fairy tale had suddenly become a matter of the world's fate. But Sophie continued unperturbed.

"This legend has a continuation. A continuation passed down only within the Velza Clan."

Sophie continued in a solemn tone.

"Hers is a great power that will destroy everything."

It must never be awakened.”

Silence fell. It wasn't the kind of story you could just accept at face value, yet dismissing it as pure fantasy felt wrong too. Above all, Sophie herself was utterly serious as she spoke.

“To break the seal and revive Velza, countless sacrifices are needed—the life energy of human beings. That's what the Prayer Obelisks are for—gathering life energy. I came to this city to stop them.”

“So that's why you were being hunted?”

“Yes. Remember the man with purple hair? He's one of Velza's Four Priests. I think he's called Leonid of Diamond Dust. He was wields ice arrows.”

The great powers, the obelisks, the energy of human life. It was all so outlandish, yet impossible to simply dismiss. The details differed, but the core elements evoked something Edward and the others knew all too well.

“What do you think, Brother?”

“What can I say? This is suddenly about saving the world, right? But...”

Common sense would suggest taking all this with a grain of salt. Yet, the very reason Edward and the others had come to Valdolla was similarly legendary. The “Philosopher's Stone,” refined using living humans as material. Considering that, they couldn't simply dismiss Sophie's story.

“I can see why you find it hard to believe.” Edward's silence seemed to be mistaken for a negative reaction. Sophie stood up. “I'm leaving now. I've explained the situation.”

“Hey, wait a minute. That's not what I meant...”