

The Frost Fight

Zoya Hasan

Finish the job, is all I can think of as I roll to the side, just as the sword pummels down onto the thick ice. Splinters of ice spray toward me, forcing me to pause to shield my eyes. I try to stand, but I get pulled back down by my coat, its flap wedged under my attacker's foot. On my knees, I grunt, heaving my sword up over my head just in time to shield another massive blow.

The impact leaves my arms shaking, my heart thudding in my chest, begging for surrender. But stubbornness, and the fact that the cold and stinging wind have likely frozen my palm stuck to the metal hilt, make me grip my sword tighter. Sensing this, my attacker snarls and rears back for momentum in their next swing.

I lean heavily to the right, extending as far as my coat allows me. I dodge another deadly blow towards my head, but barely, the blade cutting open the flesh on my cheek.

"Izna, stop!" I cry as I fire a few frantic, but forceful kicks to her shin.

She yelps, mostly in surprise, the impact not being nearly enough to incapacitate her. Still, wearing myself out as I hold a sword over my head is not an option either. Survive.

She staggers back for a moment, giving me enough time to yank my coat free.

"Don't talk." She says as the initial shock wears off.

I charge towards her, sword pointed forward, then feint left, just before the moment our swords would have clashed. I lean forward, drop, and slide on my knees, my sword outstretched, scoring a slash on her thigh. Izna releases a surprised hiss, her free hand pressing against her gash, blood dripping through her fingers.

I pull myself up into a fighting position, locking my gaze with hers: Izna's murderous, mine conflicted. Now that I am standing, I can even out the odds, and she knows it, her left foot inching back, but only slightly. I wonder who will make the next move - but first, I have to know for sure.

"Talk to me," I say, half pleading, the rest of me expecting nothing from her but a sword in my gut.

The two of us circle each other like vultures, a silent game of who reveals their weakness first — or even who slips on the ice before the other.

She surprises me by replying. "Can you do it?" she chitters, fake concern masking her voice.

I glare, lowering my chin to my neck, but do not reply.

She continues, a smirk widening on her lips, "Mhm, I did not think so."

Sweat gleams on her brown skin, despite the cold. Stray strands of obsidian hair are plastered onto her forehead; they are at least past her shoulders now. I smile faintly at that. The rest of her hair is knotted tightly onto her head so that the veins in her temples bulge. The thought of tying my hair so tightly makes my head hurt, but these days, it is always more than my head that hurts. My heart.

“Can you?” I retort, my voice thick with emotions.

“What do you think will happen when I return home?” She ponders, ignoring my question and answering it at the same time. She watches me with a strange expression on her face.

There will be celebrations. Mama and Papa will be proud. She will be admitted to the finest academy of Oloon. She will be like my father, decorated with medals of honour. Like my mother, a prominent general. Izna will be a breathtaking monster. Murderous. But just. Proud. But thoughtful... Powerful. Hateful. Empty.

I cannot let that happen.

“You won’t,” I say, not voicing my fears and stumbling on the words.

Izna tilts her head back and laughs a soft, graceful sound, releasing the tension from her body. But her eyes are still oddly trained on me. “When they told you, how did you react?” She presses.

“I never cared,” I say, forcing the words out.

She frowns, reading past my lie, “I can tell when you lie.” Then in an uncertain voice, “Do you feel cornered?”

An old memory flashes in my eyes. “*Do you ever feel cornered?*” My stomach folds in half. “*Like there is never an escape?*”

I search her eyes for any familiarity, she only blinks. “No, not cornered,” I say, my voice hoarse. I watch carefully as unnamed emotions briefly flicker across her face, my voice catches, and I try again, “I can run,” I gesture towards the icy lands littered with groups of boulders every few feet.

“*I can always run.*”

While I have been maneuvering over these tall boulders my whole life, we both know that I cannot outrun her, especially not when she can corner me between the boulders.

“*How can you run if there is no escape?*”

Her lips twist, and she opens her mouth but closes it. She tries again, “No,” her voice is barely louder than a whisper. Then louder, “You know that, Ila.” Her words have so many meanings, and I can feel them echo in my mind.

Her thin brows concentrate, forming a nearly connected line as she surveys me. A moment’s worth of hesitation, then, she crouches down, holding her blade across her body. Defensive posture. Finish the job.

I am making the move, then, I think, fingering the dagger in my vest.

I shake my head, tossing aside any distractions in my head. Finish the job. I study Izna's stance, searching for a weak spot. She is still faster than me, but I am stronger and sore, but otherwise unharmed. I can tell by the way she leans favourably on her right leg, that my cut did some damage. My heart twinges a bit at the thought. Finish the job.

Her eyes follow mine wearily, but she realizes it too late. Everyone has a weakness, find it.

I am on Izna like a hound on fresh meat. I take a running leap towards her, whipping out my dagger and letting it whirl in the air towards her. She stumbles to the ground, missing the missile by inches, raising her sword groggily as I slam into her with mine. Her weapon flies out of her hand, but she expertly replaces it with two dangerous-looking curved daggers in each hand.

She strikes her blades repeatedly at my arms, legs, and stomach, dancing away from the reach of my sword. We move in sync, her anticipating my every move, and I hers. I swiftly block each attack, though my arms grow weary after each save.

She continues her assault, pushing me back. My heart leaps to my throat as my boot hits an uneven plot of ice, making me stumble. My forearm exposed, she makes a precise gash, twisting the blade in deep. I let out a strangled cry, my vision blurring as her foot connects with my stomach, pushing me onto the ground.

She is on me in a beat, raising her dagger over my head. Still gripping my sword, I slam the hilt on her hand. She roars, dropping one of her daggers. Izna focuses on her other dagger, thrusting it down dangerously close to my temple. I drop my sword and manage to slip my fingers into her grip, forcing her to release it into my other hand. I push her off me, the two of us now wrestling for her dagger. One moment I have it, the other, her.

We scramble on the snow, protecting our injuries from each other. The battle is slow now, each of us tired and weak from our wounds. Izna closes into my right, aiming a punch at my swelling arm. I let her have the bait, snarling as her fist clamps down on my arm. I grab her sides, too weak to triumph over the way her surprised eyes widen. Know your enemy.

I fall to my back, push her up with my legs and clumsily shove her over my head. She lands painfully on her side, the wind knocked out of her.

I scramble up to my feet, grabbing my sword lying a few feet away, and kick Izna's dagger away with my foot as she struggles towards it. My fist connects with her jaw, causing a sickening crack. Izna falls heavily onto her elbows, and for one glorious and terrifying moment, I think that she is gone. That my job is completed.

"Izna?" I ask unsurely.

After a moment, she rolls to her side, groaning, holding her broken fingers to her chest. No hesitation.

I point my sword at her throat, she spits, blood dripping down her chin. She pauses, eying the sword, then with fierce conviction she whispers, "Do it."

I've been told that a loser expects to win far before the battle is over, but a winner stays alert until the very last moment. So when I realize I am standing over Izna's body, my sword perched over her throat, my world falls backwards.

The fog in my mind clears. I am so close to winning the trials, but this is the hardest part. The part I feared the most since that fateful day years ago.

Every dangerous thought enters my mind. I could. Every lesson and every second of my life that was spent preparing for this moment screams at me: Finish. The. Job.

And yet, I hesitate, my blade frozen on her throat. My thoughts race. You've seen how to do it. You can make it quick. I can. You want to. And that is why I am afraid.

"I'll always take care of you." I feel the ground slipping from beneath my feet.

"Do you want to?" Do I want to?

"Yes." No. Yes...

"Promise?" Don't ask me that.

"Promise." I can't.

For seventeen years, my entire life has revolved around this moment. When I stand over my duelist's body, where I finish them. I always knew this is how it would play out. I was the better fighter. More strong, more skilled. So how can I possibly hesitate when everyone would be so proud? My ancestors faced victory after victory, over and over again, and I can join them.

Am I mad? Am I broken for being frozen?

I could do it.

But how can I murder my own sister?

Suddenly, reality settles in. I can feel a dull pain creeping up my stomach, a heavy throb in my arm, and a wave of nausea washes over me, threatening my knees to buckle. I sense the holographic camera hovering over my head, I can hear the beat of its wings. I can imagine the glare of my parents, scrutinizing every moment that I stall from my victory. They would not hesitate. How can I steal this victory from my parents, my family? But Izna is my family.

How many times was I told? Finish the job. How? Survive. How? No hesitation. But no one told me the answer to "How?" for that.

I feel the emptiness settle in, the pressure of the camera now burning the back of my neck. I lick my cracked lips, my throat dry. Stealing a glance at the camera that now zooms into my face, I can feel the colour rising into my cheeks. I'm so weak. My grip on my sword loosens a bit.

Izna buries her head into the ice, as though reading my thoughts, "Please."

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There were once twin sisters. The eldest, who liked to brag that she was a few minutes older, had thick wavy hair. The youngest had short-cropped hair, which she vowed to never grow out.

The sisters were inseparable. They fought, like most siblings do, fiercely. But at the end of the day, when one sat sniveling in her cot after being told off by her parents, the other would comfort her. They would put their heads together and promise to never fight again.

That was a lie.

But like most lies, there is always some truth to them.

So when the sisters found out they were to be separated, as the Oloon customs demand, and trained for the Frost Trials, they were petrified. The people of Oloon deeply mistrusted identical twins, considered to be dangerous and unnatural.

The Frost Trials entailed that whenever a noble family were to birth a pair of twins, the two, as the sun set on the day before they came of age, would battle until only one stood. That way, when the sun rose on the day of their coming of age, only one would claim her right to become a warrior of the state.

Early one morning, silent about what they had overhead, the girls sat in knee-high snow, pushing snow together into a large pile to make a fort.

The younger sighed frustratedly, "Do you ever feel cornered?" She paused thoughtfully, continuing, "Like there is never an escape?"

The eldest had disregarded her comment, filing it under her sister's usual list of daily complaints in her head. "I can always run." She said dismissively, knowing her sister would not stop pestering her without a reply.

Her sister scrunched her face, "How can you run if there is no escape?"

She looked up from her pile of snow, brushing her wavy hair into her hat, finally looking intrigued. She had a spark in her eyes that her younger sister had admired but also thought was foolishly naive, "We can always make a way out," she earnestly held her gloved hands out to her sister, "You and I, we can do anything together."

Her sister had smiled wearily, not believing it, but still feeling warm at the sentiment. They rested their foreheads together for a while, ignoring the chills the snow sent up their legs as it melted around their knees.

"I'll always take care of you." The eldest whispered when she finally had the courage to speak again without her voice cracking.

Her sister squeezed her gloved hand, "Do you want to?"

"Yes." She replied without hesitation.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

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I swing my sword in a wide arc, it connects. My stomach threatens to spill. My arms grow heavy, and stars fill my vision. There is no going back now. The seconds pass, and suddenly I can see again.

The camera shatters in a fiery haze, falling into a patch of snow where it remains motionless.

Izna's head bolts up, "What are you doing?"

I shake my head, "We're alone now." I whisper. I lower my sword.

Panic fills her eyes, and for just a second, I doubt my plan. But then I remember what this is all about.

Izna crawls onto her knees, disgust filling her beautiful features. "Ila." She continues crisply, "Do it."

No, not disgust, fear. Rage fills me. Not at her. But at everything else. Everyone else. At my parents, at my ancestors, and at all of Oloon. For forcing this on us. *There is never an escape.*

I let my sword slip from my fingers. It clangs on the ice.

A spark in my eyes, I whisper, "You and I, we can do anything together."

She hesitates. A small frown written over her face. Then, a smile, slight at first, but widening, appears on her lips, "Finally."

There is always an escape. There is always a way out.

I outstretch my arm to her.

A new future.

She grips it and stands.

We'll make sure of it.