

The Loser Must Fall - Springle, Year 7, NSW

Ezra breathed in the scent of bloodlust. The sticky warm crimson was an uncomfortable feeling dripping down his forehead, sticking to his golden locks like glue. Not that he was new to this.

What he was new to was the anguish of losing. The pain of being crushed under fallen vined walls while Cyrus glared at him with eyes like the deepest pits of the underworld, orbs burning like the scarlet blaze of fire.

“This is a sight I've always wished to see,” he mocked. He was like a leech you could not get off, a leech who had successfully managed to demolish you. Sucked all your blood and left you wounded.

“Don't be so joyous, as soon as I get out I'll—” Ezra paused, his voice straining with soreness in the middle of the sentence.

“Oh? You don't look like you'll be getting out soon.” Cyrus walked towards him like he was the center of the world. An aura of arrogance emerged from him.

His fingers curled around the hero's chin, slowly lifting his gaze. Ezra's jade eyes scowled at him; usually they were a warm colour, now they were darker than an emerald, an intense hue.

Without warning, Cyrus pushed the rubble off. For a moment, Ezra almost thought he'd... help him. Which was unfortunately just his wishful thinking, because the next thing Cyrus did was drag him up and aggressively shove him down again, straddling his hips with his weight.

The aftermath of the fight left destruction all around them. This was what it meant to be a hero, right? All the wreckage from buildings, homes, shops, it was all for good cause. It was for catching the villain, catching Cyrus and saving the city. But now that it came down to this, Ezra wasn't so sure anymore.

Suddenly, Ezra felt a blow to his chin, then another, and another. Cyrus was punching him, hard. Ezra didn't even need to look down to tell purplish bruises were growing.

“You think you can escape? You think you're better? Who do you think you a-”

Ezra interrupted Cyrus by swinging his legs around his waist, catching him off guard. He sat up, shoving Cyrus off. His limbs staggered, his mind feeling fuzzy as it took him a few minutes to find balance.

It wasn't over. Despite the overwhelming feeling to vomit, faint and flee, it wasn't over yet. It's what he told himself and hoped it was what Cyrus was thinking as well. Ezra knew he

should've never underestimated Cyrus's cruelty, never given him a clear entrance to strike, never this... never that. His clothing was torn, showing his pale stomach, vulnerable to attack. The thing was, it was already scarred. The slimy liquid ran down his stomach, no vital organs hit, it should be just fine.

Ezra pressed his gloved hands against the wound, gasping at the pain. Cyrus rose from getting flung away, studying Ezra carefully, almost like he was contemplating something. The brunette muttered something under his breath. He was likely cursing himself out for being outsmarted, Ezra thought.

Cyrus stepped closer and closer to Ezra, while Ezra took a step back each time, he was too weak to do anything now, too weak to run, too weak to hide.

"Come with me," Cyrus demanded, an almost desperate command.

"No!" Ezra retorted, almost immediately. It was a foolish thing to do, considering his voice was already hoarse.

Cyrus shook his head. "A pity, a clear choice you had, and you go on and fumble it. I was trying to be fair, trying to convince you, but I suppose you must like the challenge. Don't you?"

Cyrus did not let him argue back before he made a quick stride towards him. Until something else grabbed Ezra first. *Someone*.

It was Mirth, a naive young girl who had been hypnotised into the world of heroes. Even though Ezra tried convincing her many times to reconsider. She had been wanting to prove her loyalty and durability for ages, constantly seeking approval. If she actually got him out, this might be the first time he'd even give her a nod.

"Ezra! Are you alright?" she exclaimed, looking back and forth, her eyes settling on Cyrus. Her dark brown skin felt warm, like a wave of rare heat in a bone chilling winter. It was a shame for her to join dangerous authorities like these. How old even was she? About nineteen, he'd assume. Just a few years younger than him.

"Whatever you do, don't let Cyrus catch up," Ezra said, even though that part was quite obvious. He still needed some time to catch his breath.

"You think I'd let him catch up?" Mirth laughed breathlessly, sprinting faster. Her bundle of pink hair braided into knots waved around her.

Her laughing stopped short when a hand grabbed for her shin, making her lose balance and tip over, sending Ezra flying as well. His long hair splayed out on the concrete, and his limbs felt like falling apart.

“Hell-” Ezra’s voice tried to draw, but he couldn’t speak anymore. All he could do was try to stand up while pressing down on his throbbing stomach. Now he could see citizens gathering up to look at the drama, but from a safe distance away too, fortunately. None of them would ever do anything, even as they watched Ezra risk his life away. No one would try to interfere, after all, this was for the heroes to manage, was it not?

From the corner of his eye, he could see Cyrus throwing away Mirth like a piece of trash. Her body looked haggard, shakily trying to get up just to fall back down again. *This is exactly why I told you to stay away...*

Cyrus’s gaze turned back to him again, the corner of his mouth twitched up, giving him a dangerous smirk. He grabbed Ezra by the back of his head, and Ezra could do nothing to stop it.

“You’ve had your fun, *hero*, now it’s time for mine.”

He kicked Ezra down, making Ezra cough the red substance again, the warm stench of blood and the metallic taste in his mouth.

“No fighting back? You’ve given up already?” Cyrus scoffed, a hint of boredom in his eyes.

Ezra frowned up at the man. Unlike him, Cyrus wasn’t on the brink of passing out, not even close. His face had a few bruises, for sure, but nothing like Ezra, who was covered in them. Cyrus gave him a few more kicks before scooping him up in his arms, a hint of something in his stare. Ezra’s eyes went blurry, he could taste a few salty tears, or sweat, whichever it may be, on his tongue. *Food?* Yes, he wanted food, he wanted many things at that moment. But the only thing he had was the unexpected soft embrace of the villain who had been the one to put him in this state in the first place.

“Are you awake?” Cyrus asked.

No, Ezra did not think he was awake, in fact he felt quite drowsy now. He could feel his eyes shutting and the world turning to darkness.

A hand patting his face, a high voice calling to him.

People whose voices Ezra did not recognise shouting or gasping.

And as Ezra’s mind hung on to a brink of a hole which led to nothing, he could feel his hand slipping, the cracks on the brink prodding his hand and he knew he was starting to let go, more and more.

“Not all heroes win.”

Was the last thing he heard before he succumbed to the dizzy feeling and let go completely.

Everything was dark now, how peaceful it was.

No, *not all heroes get a happy ending after all.*