

Steel eyes scanned the empty darkness surrounding them. His eyes strained to see his hands in front of him. The longer he looked the more he could make out the trembling of his hand.

The air felt cold. The lack of ground under him was worrying but confirmed his suspicion. He was dreaming again. It was the same dream as last time. The air around him felt like it was closing in on him. A deep chill rose up his spine.

He closed his eyes. He would find her. This time.

He focused.

His heart ached, searching.

"Where are you?" he uttered. His throat felt dry. Was that a clue?

For a minute he sensed nothing. The void around him stayed persistently cold but never dipped in temperature.

Another minute passed.

And then another.

And another.

And another.

However, even though the temperature of the air around him stayed the same, his heart was warmer.

A flicker of heat entered into his heart, and he felt it erupt like a blazing inferno as his soul greedily grasped onto it. The freeze of the inner world around him fell away, as his breathing finally returned to normal and his body began to warm up.

He felt his feet finally land on something sturdy.

He didn't dare open his eyes, focusing intensely on the connection. At any moment it could vanish. At any second he could lose her. If he lets go now there might not ever be another chance.

He grabbed the feeling with his mind. Searching for the hidden thread that connected them, summoning the icy grip of fear he held inside of himself using the ever-building, suffocating feeling of guilt he's been carrying with him and forcing himself to search.

He wouldn't fail.

Not again.

He could feel her phantom breath. Dry and airy, heavy with pressure. For a second he felt like he was with her again.

Focus.

He felt her near. He could feel her searching for him. She felt so far away.

Was she scared? Was she safe? Was she looking for him too?

Focus Hayden.

His eyes scrunched together. Brows tightening as his soul followed the thread. The thread was so weak. It looked dainty, like a spider-web, but as soon as he felt it he could feel the strength within.

Heat resonated through him again. A familiar comfort, not blazing and all-consuming like a fire, nor suffocating like his mind had been for the last few days. No. This warmth was simple, like stepping back inside your home after a long walk on a rainy day.

He traveled through the thread. The longer he followed the more of that comforting warmth he could feel. The closer he got the better he could see the small bits of energy that bounced within the thread.

Suddenly, or maybe it was happening slowly, he could begin to hear whispering. Was it her? Was the whispering coming from his partner?

As he grew closer the words became more audible but the voice was wrong. Distorted. Hollow. Robotic?

He felt some type of pressure from the thread. The heat was beginning to dissipate.

No.

No.

NO.

He could feel the thread shift. Changing. What was once a strong albeit weak-looking thread was slowly beginning to fade.

His emotions spiked. The ones he held back, the ones he refused to share. His burning shame, his freezing fear, his unbending guilt. All pushed to the surface as a bubble within his chest threatened to burst. Hot red tears streamed down his face.

"Please," he unknowingly said. "Don't leave me. I can't lose you again!"

The surface beneath his feet shifted.

He didn't dare open his eyes.

A gust of sandy air hit his face.

If he opened his eyes she'd disappear.

He was weak. If he holds on just a little longer, he could find her.

If he could find her then-

"Hayden."

He opened his eyes and he woke up in his bed. His sheets were covered in sweat, his nose was clogged and his throat felt hoarse. As he sat up he thought back to the dream. A deep bubbling anger filled his chest as his pale hand gripped at his heart.

He was so close.

He was so *close*.

If he'd focused just a little longer. Ignored her voice - then maybe?

He needed a glass of water.

His alarm rang, filling the room with the loud, obnoxious voice of his longtime friend shouting the lyrics of some song he was too afraid to look up.

He pulled himself out of bed, setting his bare feet on the floor as he searched for suitable attire. As far as he remembers, he doesn't have anything besides his tutoring, student council duties, and extra classes.

A simple white dress shirt and vest would do then.

He grabbed his necessary supplies as his eyes lingered on the third closest drawer to his bed. His hand reached for the drawer, gently pulling it open. Nothing. It was the same as before. Inactive Ability and Gate cards lay waiting for the return of the Bakugan they belong to.

The familiar ache returned.

He didn't have time.

He had two hours to get to school. The bus took almost an hour to arrive at his school and breakfast took thirty-seven minutes to make and then eat. The bus would be here in almost

fifty-two minutes. The walk there would take fifteen minutes, twelve and a half if he ran. Him remembering all this took roughly three seconds.

He closed the drawer, turned off his alarm, and mentally prepared himself for school. He grabbed his bag, walked to the station, and waited in the rain for his bus to appear.

He was cold and soaked when he sat in his usual seat. He simply pulled out his homework and tutoring notes to distract himself.

Hayden slumped over the table, his back jutting out awkwardly as his glasses smushed against the bridge of his nose, clouding over due to his lengthy sigh.

The question would come. In three. Two. One.

"Hayde, do you trust me?" As suspected. Hayden raised his head enough for his chin to prop him up against the table as he glared up at the teen he's called his friend for the past three years.

"No." The teen, Carter, rolled his eyes. Leaning against the table and lowering his head to meet Hayden's eyes. For a moment the two boys were locked in a stalemate. Hayden forced his eyes to stay open, and Carter made multiple strange faces in an attempt to get Hayden to laugh.

"Just hear me out," Hayden's stomach felt cold. Knowing Carter this had something to do with Bakugan.

"No."

"So there's this tournament-" Not this again.

"I said n-" Carter merely put a finger to Hayden's lips as he made a shushing sound.

"Let me finish." Gray eyes narrowed up at the sweatshirt-wearing teen. "There's a tournament, a *random team* tournament coming up soon." This better not be going where Hayden thought it was. "So I signed up, but since it's a *team* tournament, I got paired with this girl named Wrenn. The problem? She doesn't know *anything* 'bout Bakugan."

"*About.*"

"Grammar nerd."

Hayden gave a heavy sigh. It felt like he's been doing that a lot lately. With little difficulty, the seventeen-year-old boy pulled himself up. "So how does this involve me?" Carter dared to grin.

"Knew you would see it my way." Hayden narrowed his eyes. Why couldn't Carter use proper grammar?

"/ knew you would see it my way." Carter rolled his eyes as he scoffed at the correction.

"The point is," he began, spitting out the word 'point' like it was going to add some level of grammatical strength and effectiveness to his most likely soon-to-be speech. "Wrenn doesn't know *how* to play the game, and I *suck* at explaining. *However* -" he eyed Hayden with a knowing look. "- I know you're good at explaining it, and I *know* you want back in. We just gotta find you a new partner."

Hayden clenched his jaw.

Carter didn't know as much as he thought he did. Still, for a brief second, Hayden felt a familiar flicker of bubbling, hot, anger build up. Only for a second. Carter must have noticed.

"Or maybe not," the smirk fell off his face. His brows dropped and his body leaned back in his chair, hands held up as his partner Bakugan, Rhycore popped up from his bag. Hayden's eyes glanced down at Rhycore before returning to the familiar pair of oak-colored eyes of his friend.

Closing his eyes, Hayden took in a deep breath.

In.

Out.

He imagined the feeling of the heat rising in his chest - stalling for a moment, as the air of the room suffocated the flames inside - and he blew out his frustration. His body hummed with the remaining feeling but he could subdue it, for now at least. He'd reason with himself in a minute, right now Carter needed to answer his questions.

"One: why would I help you?" The second question didn't need to be said.

Carter stayed silent for a moment. His eyes met Hayden's. Oak met steel, and the adventurous soul of Carter met the unmoving mind of Hayden. This was who they were, who they are, and who they will always be.

"Do you trust me?" Carter asked. His voice was low, soft, almost a whisper. His hands were on the table, his eyes leveled with Hayden. Rhycore stood beside him and a small part of Hayden's stomach fell a fraction. His clenched jaw loosened and his eyes softened as they met Carter.

"Of course," he said. He meant it. This was his friend, this was *Carter*, he could trust him.

Carter reached over the table, laying a tanned hand on Hayden's shoulder as a casual grin spread across his face.

"I know you want back in the game," their eyes stayed connected. "I know Bakugan means a lot to you, why I don't know, but I know it does. And I know it hurts to hear it, but I think finding another Bakugan would help you, you wouldn't have to be partners, but you'd have a better chance of finding her if you had help."

He was right.

It did hurt to hear.

Hayden's throat felt tight, his mouth dry, and his chest felt pain. His mind flickered to the image of the string, of the warmth of his old partner before he focused back to the moment at hand.

"Makes sense." he choked out. Carter's eyes relaxed as the hand on his shoulder tightened.

"This tournament has a few prizes."(- Oh. So this is about prizes. -)"One is a cash prize, another is a battle with a top ranker, and a third is a special Bakugan." That's odd. Most tournaments, especially public ones, don't give away Bakugan.

"That doesn't make sense." At that point, Rhycore finally spoke. The Ventus beetle approached Hayden, jumping off the shoulder of Carter and landing heroically on the table. The Bakugan looked to Hayden with indifference.

"Which is one of the reasons we want to investigate." The flat tone of Rhycore did not surprise Hayden. But the amount of effort hidden in the voice did. What was he hiding? "This Bakugan is unique. It's inactive, almost like it's waiting on someone or maybe - something?"

"So, I talked to Wrenn about it. She said she would help us check it out, so long as she gets the cash and we show her how to brawl. Which is why I need you to help us out. You're better at the strategy thing than I am, and she rocks with Pyrus while I'm more of Ventus airy boyo."

Despite himself, Hayden snorted.

"You did not just say 'boyo'." Carter removed his hand as he scratched at his neck. Grinning as he did so.

"That's beside the point. My question gets repeated -" Hayden mentally recoiled at the broken English "- Will you help us? The teaching and whatnot. You won't even have to brawl unless we lose a match. And given you taught me - and I haven't lost in a while - I think you would be the best teacher and the best for moral support."

Hayden thought for exactly fourteen point twenty-two silent seconds. His brows scrunched as his eyes shut. His mind quickly ran through the factors he knew: using his general experience with Pyrus brawlers, their style, their methods, their strategies as well as their general compatibility with Ventus brawlers. The conclusion he came to was simple in theory.

"I'd like to meet her." It wasn't a yes, but it also wasn't a no.

"Knew I could count on you." Hayden's brain felt too fried to correct Carter this time. As he laid his head against the cool surface of the table, he felt the unpleasant feeling of cold paper.

"We forgot about the tutoring lesson - didn't we?" he mumbled. He felt the table shift as Carter stumbled over his chair. The sound of a leather bag slapping against school-issued table wood and the sound of a startled Rhycore being yanked entered his ears.

Hayden felt a laugh build up in his throat. A puff of air escaped his nose as he smiled.

Yes, that was Carter.

Mr. (self-proclaimed) King of Ventus, the Endless Wind, the Tyrant Storm.

Too many titles if you asked Hayden.

As his eyes drifted shut, a cold chill entered his body as he was once again, surrounded by darkness.

Wrenn was lost. Sort of. Not physically - she'd had more than enough time to adjust to this abnormally hot city - but she was mentally. Between the two "Brawlers" in front of her she could only focus on measuring the differences between them.

Between the two of them, the larger brunette was very ... what's the word, *animated*? Both in terms of words and body language.

His hands were constantly swinging about, never taking a second to stop as they were either grasping the air, gesturing vibrantly, or, holding onto the smaller boy next to him. His feet were continuously pivoting between her direction and others. His brown eyes bounced from Wrenn; to the long-sleeve wearing boy; to wandering children and teens and adults. A bright, welcoming grin spread across his face and his tone was almost that of absolute glee.

To Wrenn, everything about him seemed to just *scream* 'Look at me! I can make you smile!' As she observed the boys, she found something almost comforting about the larger of the boys' presence.

It was cute in a way.

As for the smaller - and most likely younger - of the two.

Well...

"- which then concludes the major significant distinctions of the Prime Era of the Bakugan game, the Second Era, and the current Generation."

She was lost. Her brain tried, and frankly failed, at trying to summon up the words for a proper response before ultimately falling onto something lame.

"Alright," Wrenn didn't feel like focusing too hard on what he was saying.

This boy was a decent contrast compared to his friend.

Unlike Carton - or maybe it was Carlos? - this other boy was of a shorter stature by a good head or so. His body was a little on the skinny side if you asked her, skin pale but still healthy with a mop of cleanly combed dark brown hair that was swept to the left. In all truth, he looked just slightly above average in terms of looks.

Not that Wrenn would care.

His eyes were fixed. Staring almost unblinkingly at her - perhaps even through her. His voice was very consistent. Neither slow nor fast, not loud or quiet. It was a rather steadying voice. The kind that didn't demand your attention but you still gave it because you *wanted* to.

It was the kind of voice a leader possessed.

It was the same kind of voice Ethan possessed.

This boy was *strangely similar* to Ethan.

Both having slow, almost hidden movements and disturbingly observant eyes. The boy in front of her also held the same cold, indifferent aura that Ethan possessed.

To say the least, it was odd - but not impossible.

Admittedly, however, she would prefer to avoid seeing any more similarities; she was already friends with one dork, she didn't need another.

Actually, now that she thought about it, what was he saying? And what was his name again? Something, something.

Tayvon? Jordan? No, no. Maybe-?

"So," Carron drawled on slowly, lazily raising up two tanned fingers. Held between these two fingers was a singular orb decorated with shades of emerald green, and dark purple, and bold

lines of orange. "We gunna brawl or...?" Before Wrenn could answer an irritated voice sounded beside her.

"Are we *going to brawl*." Wrenn briefly glanced at the owner of the voice. *Grammar aficionado, noted.*

"I suppose so," she said, grateful to be saved from the mental distraction. The casual boy grinned and Wrenn felt a small piece of her wanted to take a picture at that moment. Carrot held up a card and pulled his friend up and over his shoulder.

"Carter!" - Oh, so that was his name - "Let me down!" the glasses-wearing boy shouted. Wrenn slipped a card between her fingers and held it up. *Something tells me this is going to be embarrassing.*

"Get ready, Wrenn!" Carter said, tossing and catching the Bakugan held in his free hand. "We ain't gonna go easy on ya!"

Wrenn almost grinned.

Almost.

She raised the glowing crimson card - balanced delicately in between her tanned fingers - as she closed her eyes. Her voice rose a pitch as she called out the command to enter the battlefield, and the world began to slow to a stop.

The various birds flying overhead slowed until their wings no longer moved, their bright feathered bodies became fixed points in the - now multicolored - sky, and reflective trees. All this, Wrenn noted, while the rushing patter of feet and rampant voices of parents, and their children, drew silent.

All that was left for Wrenn to hear were the whispers of the mysterious voice that beckoned her each time she entered this new world. An abnormally familiar feeling of its burning gazing and predatory attention lingered on her form.

She felt a part of this being grow closer and closer the more she entered this domain. Its presence in the back of her mind permanently perched far and out of reach, eyeing her from above as if daring her to do *something*.

What that something was, she didn't know.

A familiar unease settled into the pit of her stomach.

"Gate Card," Carter's voice was loud and booming, reaching her from across the field and echoing despite the lack of landscape surrounding them all. "Set!" The card flew to the center of the field, as though the action was practiced to perfection.

From her standing point, she could see the large boy place down his friend as he gave a reassuring thumbs up. Why he was reassuring the glasses-wearing boy, she did not know.

Carter raised his hand, holding, presumably, a Bakugan and a large one at that. Before he could throw that Bakugan however, his friend caught his hand effortlessly and lowered it. As they exchanged words Wrenn looked at her current options for Bakugan. Of her current cards and her limited knowledge of the game and her soon-to-be tournament partner she had brought the Bakugan she was most comfortable with.

A trusty and rambunctious Uniment who - despite not having the best capabilities of taking or giving damage - was an excellent dancer and prancer allowing him to dodge in perfect style while also utilizing his natural stamina. She found this Bakugan to be her favorite to use, he more often than not surprised his opponents due to his weak frame but joy did he make them

regret doing so. Her hand almost unconsciously went to grab Uniment from inside her bag, before she stalled and considered her options.

Uniment was fast, yes, but at the moment she needed someone who could take enough hits to allow her to see Carter's battling style. Not to mention someone who could use their weaknesses to their advantage, maybe someone with less fire?

She thought for a moment. *I can play this safe, or I can play this fast.* Her fingers traced the form of a second Bakugan, one that had won 100% of the battles it had encountered. Meanwhile, Uniment had only won about 68% of the battles it was in.

With a deep breath, she made her choice. She pulled out a simple Bakugan, a hulking beast made for taking hits. The heat radiating from the Bakugan was low, and it almost felt like she was holding a water bottle filled with room-temperature water. *Let's see if we can keep this win streak.*

Wrenn raised her right hand, curling it horizontally to her left shoulder with her closed palm facing outwards. In a matter of seconds, Wrenn whipped her arm toward the battlefield and watched as the Bakugan spun toward the center. As the ball form struck the center of the battlefield, a small sphere of fire sparked to life, surrounding the ball as a new form emerged.

A crouching beast, body covered in smoke and ashes, with a bold white mane trailing from the crown of its head to the beginning of its tail. Stacked vermillion muscle remained hidden beneath the ash, becoming visible only when the beast moved. Its physique was powerful, and its stature only flaunted it as it took to be the size of - roughly - a four-story building.

A robotic voice arose from her left wrist as the battle interface finally awoke.

"Antiomnis, standing at 4-1-0 Gs. No further data available." *Top that.* She thought, her eyes quickly spotting the powerful form of Antiomnis. *Only one thing can beat a beast.*

Her watch changed screens. The faces of both Carter and the other boy appeared before her. A carefree smirk sat ~~handsomely~~ **casually** on his face.

"That the best you can do?" Carter quipped as a loud yawn escaped him. A small part of Wrenn smiled. *Isn't he confident?*

"You got something that can beat that?" Carter's smirk turned to a grin.

"Bakugan!" *Oh?* "Brawl!" A loud whip of a sound exploded from across the field, as Wrenn's widened eyes managed to briefly catch sight of a green blur being thrown onto the field with a mighty force.

A large gust of wind spiraled behind the Bakugan as the ball form landed at the center of the field, summoning a large shockwave of power, sending Antiomnis sliding across the battlefield a good sixty feet as dust and air kicked up and created a powerful vortex to surround and conceal the mysterious Bakugan.

Wrenn dug her feet into the earth beneath. The invisible forcefield that protected all Brawlers from the power contained within the Bakugan shone and shook from the sheer force summoned by this creature. Her clothing shook, the large sweater she wore doing barely anything to protect her body from the cold this air summoned. From behind the hand that shielded her eyes, Wrenn could make out the silhouette of the mountainous Bakugan standing in the center of the field, unmoved and seemingly uncaring, almost impatient with the way its head pivoted.

If Wrenn had to guess, the Bakugan had to be at least 60 feet in height alone, most likely more. Its body was covered in a dark exoskeleton, spikes lining its sides with three imposing fingers at the end of its two arms, and two sizable wings rested on its back, protected by the

same exoskeleton. Three pairs of gleaming red eyes glared down at her impassively, arms - with the thickness of at least a semi-truck - laid over one another with an air of regal authority.

Oh, joy.

"Like what you see Wrenny?" shouted the excited voice of the messy-haired boy. His arms gestured grandly towards the mountainous figure, a wild look of glee in his eyes. "If we're gunna be partners, you gotta be able to beat my ace. You hav'ta be able to take down a King."

"Titanus Rex: Rhycore, standing at 6-4-0 Gs. No further data available." Green eyes widened, as she looked down at the dual screen. *Six-hundred forty Gs? How?*

"How do you have a Bakugan with over 500 Gs?"

"That's for me to know," Carter began, his voice smoothly transitioning between his regular voice and "brawler" voice. "And you to find out. Rhycore! Show 'em what you c'n do!"

Wrenn was expecting an ability card. Or for the Gate Card to activate, her hands reflexively going to grab a dual-cancelation card. As her eyes met with Antiomnis she felt she had made a mistake.

The vortex roared, expanding and contracting as the sound of a sinister laughter drew from the center and was seemingly amplified with the wind.

"Gladly," Came its voice, dark and resonating. One of the titan sized arms moved and the air surrounding the Bakugan dispersed. *What?*

Antiomnis - who had still been stunned - finally regained mobility and narrowly escaped as it dug under the field to avoid the oncoming air pressure. Rhycore merely glanced at the hole made into the battlefield. It made no movement towards the hole. Waiting.

Wrenn's shaking fingers twitched, her eyes scanning the field for any indication the opposing Bakugan would make a move. The Bakugan's eyes met hers and she froze once more. A feeling of complete cold washed over her, as if its gaze alone was powerful enough to snuff out whatever flame in her heart she held. If she didn't know any better, she'd say the Bakugan was grinning.

It raised a singular hand, pulled it back and slammed it into the ground. Almost instantly a large crack was born, shattering and caving in the earth the Bakugan had struck as large chunks of the battlefield were thrown into the air, one of which held Antiomnis.

Wrenn's eyes widened as Antiomnis flew across the field directly towards her. Instinctually she braced herself, her arms forming an X shape. A dark shadow loomed on her as her Bakugan drew closer. Just as the Pyrus Bakugan was about to fall on the force field Antiomnis shrank back into its ball form.

"Antiomnis G-Power reduced by 4-1-0 Gs. Your Bakugan has been defeated. Your life points will be deducted by 410 points. This round has ended."

Defeat. In less than a minute.

The laughter and cheer of Carter sounded from her Bakupod. She glanced downwards, her question flying out before she could think about how to phrase it.

"How did you-?"

"While Ability Cards and Gate Cards can be vital tools in a brawl - " began the boy with glasses " - they are not the only thing that can decide a battle. Needless to say while your Antiomnis has fortitude it lacks experience and training. Meanwhile Rhycore has all three of these aspects and more." She watched as the encyclopedia in human form's face glared at what she assumed was Carter. "It's why I told you to choose someone who *wasn't* your partner."

"Ah, com' *on* Hayde," so that was *his* name. "What better way to show Wrenn what we're up against then to bring out the big guns!?"

"You're aware that the tournament has a ban rule against using your primary team *and* your partner Bakugan, yes?" At this Wrenn nodded. The tournament was for newbie and amateur brawlers. Anyone who looked at the sight would know.

"It does?" Apparently Carter didn't know.

"Yes, meaning, you can't use Rhycore."

"Wait! Then why am I even allowed to compete!?"

"Chances are they may think you're participating as a team captain or advisor." Wrenn chimed in. She thought for a moment, speaking once more before 'Hayde' had a chance to speak. "If that's the case, Hayde, will you be competing in Carter's place?"

The boy's face hardened. His voice dropped as he let out a sharp and irritated, "No."

Wrenn, as well as Carter, flinched at the sound. "Carter, this time use something *other* than Rhycore. We need to assess her skills and playstyle in order to actually prepare either of you for the tournament."