

Chapter 2

The day had finally arrived. Koichi now stood in front of the vast Driftveil Stadium, where the PWT took place. While not the tallest building he had ever seen, it was the certainly the largest. Imposing in its design as well, the exterior was painted a deep blue wherever steel plates and scaffolding weren't visible. Even the tiled walkway, cold beneath his feet, added to the sense of importance the complex represented.

Numerous people milled about in the warm breeze. Some were merely taking in the sights, while others took advantage of the various specialty Pokémon shops, from berry stands to move tutors, set up in booths near the entrance.

While he had certainly learned the value of patience, Koichi nevertheless knew it would be best if he made his way into the building early, as he was to be competing. So, he stepped under the archway and through one of the many doors which led inside.

The lobby of the arena was tiled in a similar manner as the sidewalks. Directly ahead of him was a set of reception desks spaced between two wide staircases that led to the spectator seats. To his left was a row of concession stands selling Pokémon themed snacks to said spectators, and to his right, more people waited in line to buy tickets. In the middle, a few prominent trainers he vaguely recognized were surrounded by fans. The only one he knew was Misty of the Cerulean Gym.

Ignoring them, he made his way forward to the desks. A receptionist wearing a bright green suit-dress was standing at attention. When she noticed him approaching, her expression soured.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm here to assist the competitors. Tickets are available over there," she said, pointing. Koichi could tell that she probably would have added something about his appearance, but was trained to be polite.

He sighed. "Actually, ma'am, I am a competitor." He punctuated his statement by placing the invitation on the desk.

The woman blinked in disbelief. After a few seconds, her eyes lit up. "Oh! I'm sorry, you must be Koichi, then! Blue called ahead to let us know you'd be taking his place today."

"That's right."

"Great! If you're ready, I'll lead you to the waiting room. The tournament doesn't start for another hour, but plenty of the other leaders, elites, and champions are already present."

"Sure."

She opened the waist-high door set between the desk and the wall and gestured behind her. "All right. Follow me, please."

Koichi silently did as she instructed, and was ushered down a maze of hallways, passing various maintenance workers along the way. Eventually, they arrived at a comparatively small

lounge, complete with plush sofas and coffee tables. A buffet table was set up against the wall, and multiple large TV screens provided entertainment.

He noticed the receptionist vanish back to her post out of the corner of his eye as he looked over the other trainers in the room. Koichi had only bothered to check in advance if the person he sought desperately to surpass after all this time was attending. Well, apart from Blue, of course. Not seeing them present yet, he began making his way over to one of the couches to wait.

However, it seemed that someone noticed his arrival. "Hey!"

Koichi stopped and turned around. A girl wearing blue jeans and a midriff bearing tube top was walking up to him. Her bright red hair was tied up in a ponytail, and somehow splayed out in all directions.

"I haven't seen you around before." She extended her hand. "Name's Flannery."

He took her hand in his and shook. "Koichi."

She beamed at him. "Nice to meet you. So, you think you got what it takes to win? Are you the strongest trainer in the world?"

"Well, I-"

Suddenly, she cut him off. "TOO BAD, cuz I'm taking home the trophy this time! I can feel it!" Flannery then burst out laughing.

Koichi sighed internally. She was a lively one, that's for sure.

Flannery stepped back, placing her hands on her hips. She narrowed her eyes and hummed to herself, tracking her gaze up and down his body. "Let me guess: you're a Fighting type specialist?"

His brow furrowed. "How did you know?"

She grinned. "Oh, my friend Maylene up in Sinnoh runs a Fighting gym, and she doesn't wear shoes either. I think it's a martial arts thing."

"Ah."

Standing up straight again, Flannery shook her head. "Hmm. I'm getting the feeling that you don't really want to talk right now. We'll have more to discuss after we see each other in action anyway. See ya." With that, she waved goodbye and walked back over to the others.

Koichi watched her go. He didn't much care for people lacking in manners, but knew that powerful trainers tended to have battling on the brain more so than anything else, with etiquette taking a backseat. If he was being honest with himself, he would likely be called a hypocrite for voicing such. So he didn't hold it against her.

Now that he was once again undisturbed, Koichi took a seat and closed his eyes. He focused on clearing his mind of worry and fatigue in preparation for the battles ahead. The time zone here was very far apart from Kanto, and he would normally be asleep right now. Usually when he skipped sleep, it was because he was training.

Still, he couldn't help but overhear the world news broadcast playing on the nearby television. "In other news, seismologists are still baffled as to the cause of the localized

earthquake which leveled half of Mt. Mortar three weeks ago," a male voice stated. "According to top Pokémon researchers, none of the Pokémon living on or in the mountain would be able to cause a tremor of the magnitude observed. Tune in tonight at seven for our exclusive interview with Professor Elm on the subject." Then, it cut to a commercial.

A wide grin briefly crept its way onto Koichi's face.

After that, he returned to a state of meditation. In what felt like no time at all, a chime sounded, rousing him and causing the other people in the room to fall silent. They began to move over to the center of the room, gazing intently at the largest screen on the wall. Though, all the screens had changed, showing two men seated in an announcer's booth.

As Koichi stood up to join them, one of the pair, a man in a pristine white suit, began to speak. "Hello, ladies and gentlemen! It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the Driftveil Stadium and this event, the seventh annual Pokémon World Tournament!"

A chorus of cheers could be heard in the background.

"It is here that the most skilled Pokémon trainers from regions all around the world gather to prove themselves," the man continued. "Only the greatest among them will earn the title of Pokémon World Champion! My name is Jim Masterson, and I will be your guide to all the stupendous action we have the privilege of witnessing today!" Jim turned to the man on his right, a portly fellow with curly brown hair sporting an Alolan shirt. "This year, joining me in the commentator's booth is none other than Scott, owner of the Hoenn Battle Frontier!"

Scott beamed. "It's great to be here, Jim. I'm super excited to see everyone give it their all. There's nothing else quite like the thrill of a Pokémon battle between talented trainers."

"Indeed! I'm sure the audience feels the same way, so let's get started!" Jim cleared his throat. "First, a brief summary of what you can expect. Sixteen renowned competitors have elected to take time out of their busy schedules to appear this year, so today will be the first round of the tournament, with eight 3v3 single battles to take place. Normal rules for competitive league matches apply, so no potions or other non-held items will be permitted."

Jim flung his arms out to his sides dramatically. "And now, let's see who will take to the ring first!" The image suddenly cut to a tiled set of portraits, Koichi's among them. He watched as the caricatures of two mole-like Pokémon he didn't recognize appeared on the screen, arms over their heads forming a point. They whirled and spun around for a bit until they settled next to two of the images, causing the others to vanish.

"It seems our first battle of the day will be between Clemont of Kalos' Lumiose City Gym and Koga of the Indigo League Elite Four!" Jim exclaimed.

Muttered conversations broke out between many of the trainers in the room. Koichi watched as a boy with a metallic backpack - Clemont - and his old acquaintance Koga made their way over to separate sliding doorways on the other side of the room, both painted with Pokéball symbols.

Turning away, Koichi moved back to the seat he previously occupied and started to resume his meditation.

However, a tap on his shoulder delayed him. He reluctantly twisted his head to look. The offending finger belonged to a young man with green hair and tacky orange pants. "You aren't gonna watch?" he asked.

"I do not watch battles that are not my own," he replied, simply.

The man shrugged. "Suit yourself." With that, he walked off.

Putting the brief conversation out of his mind, Koichi took a deep, slow breath and drowned out all else. He heard the sounds of battle, the cheers of victory, and the cries of defeat, but they did not register in his mind, for he was calm in mind and body.

Eventually, he felt another tap on his shoulder, once more bringing him back to full alertness. "Get up, Koichi, we're up next! Like, what are the odds?"

He stood, his eyes meeting those of the voice's owner: Flannery. She practically buzzed with excitement and bravado. Grinning, she dashed off towards the righthand exit, the door sliding open to admit her.

More than ready to begin, Koichi walked on after her. He noticed many of the other trainers eying him with apprehension, as if they had only just noticed he was here, and wondered why he was present to begin with.

He would show them why.

Proceeding past the other exit, Koichi wove his way down the narrow corridor. Another woman in uniform was waiting for him near the end, and handed him an earpiece, instructing him to wear it. Reaching under his hood, he slipped the device onto his ear. It felt foreign to use such a thing, but he was nothing if not tolerant.

He did not break stride as he entered the stadium proper and was assaulted by light and sound. The huge overhead lights were supplemented by waving, multicolored beams and launched confetti on both sides. Voice booming from loudspeakers, Jim proclaimed "And her opponent, the enigmatic Koichi!"

As he continued forward, the cheers of the crowd morphed into a combination of polite applause and confused murmurs. That was to be expected. None of them knew who he was. Not yet.

Jim continued his introduction. Koichi could see the actual box where he sat now. "Apparently, he's taking Blue's place. We couldn't confirm why, though, he seems to be keeping the matter under wraps. But the man must be tough if he has Blue's approval, so we should be in for a treat! Are you familiar with Koichi, Scott?"

Scott tilted his head in thought, perplexed. "I can't say I am. Which is slightly upsetting. I mean, scouting out strong trainers is what I do, for Pete's sake!"

Koichi returned his gaze to the front, and ascended the short staircase in front of him. As he crested the edge, he saw Flannery already waiting at the other end of the traditional sandstone battlefield, rotating her arm at the elbow.

"Finally here, eh?" she said, leaning forward. Her voice was projected over the speakers, so everyone could hear her easily. Must've been the earpieces. "It's rude to keep a girl waiting: I've been super stoked for a hot battle all day!"

"Me too," he replied, declining to comment on her fire puns.

She smiled almost savagely. "Ok then, let's see what you've got, Koichi! Just don't get too upset when your Pokémon wind up scorched!"

Koichi snorted. Flannery narrowed her eyes a bit.

"Are you ready to begin?" the stripe-clad referee asked them both.

"You bet I am!" confirmed Flannery.

Koichi nodded.

"Then let the battle begin!" the referee slashed his arm through the air.

Flannery pulled out a Pokéball, throwing it with an overextended arm. "Let's light 'em up! Go, Torkoal!"

The flash of blue light from the ball quickly faded, revealing a Pokémon Koichi had never seen in person before. It was a medium-sized orange tortoise with a grey shell, and smoke billowed out of a hole in its back.

Koichi took a long look at the Torkoal, observing how it held itself. In nary a moment, he knew for certain: Flannery would be no threat to him at all.

Koichi tossed out his Pokéball. Hitmonk emerged, bowing before his opponent. However, he did not ready himself for battle immediately, instead turning to face Koichi while stroking his beard. He grunted in confusion.

Koichi nodded and sat down cross-legged on the ground. "I agree, Hitmonk. You can handle this yourself."

Across from the pair, Flannery raised her brows. "Hitmonk, eh? And you're planning something?" She shrugged. "Oh well. Doesn't matter to me, though. We'll strike first either way! Torkoal, Gyro Ball!"

Koichi made no commands in response. He would merely watch, and observe the techniques Hitmonk would choose to fight with against an unfamiliar opponent.

Torkoal withdrew its limbs and head, launching into a spin. As it did, Jim began commentating. "And Flannery leads off with Gyro Ball! But will it work? I've never seen a trainer use a Hitmonk before. Have you, Scott?"

Scott shook his head. "No, never. But I'm excited to see what it - he, probably - does."

"Indeed!"

Now with its move fully charged, Torkoal was already speeding off towards Hitmonk like a silver-cloaked top. It leapt upwards, aiming right for Hitmonk's chest. But Hitmonk was ready, and brought up both forearms to block. The Gyro Ball ground against him for a moment, sending up sparks, before Hitmonk brought up his knee, which collided with Torkoal's underbelly and knocked it away. Torkoal landed on its feet, mostly unharmed.

"So that's how you wanna play, huh? Torkoal, Flamethrower!" Flannery ordered.

Torkoal reared its head back, smoke billowing from its nostrils. With a mighty bellow, a gout of flames shot forth from its mouth, heading for Hitmonk.

The Flamethrower, however, was too slow, and Hitmonk jumped to avoid it. Descending towards the stunned Torkoal, he collided foot-first with its shell, stomping down with crushing force as he sprung off into a flip, landing elegantly near Flannery.

She suddenly wore a look of extreme apprehension, and it was directed at Koichi. "Ok, yeah, what gives? Your Pokémon isn't even listening to you! You haven't given any commands; it's just attacking on its own like a wild Pokémon!"

Koichi did not reply, merely crossing his arms. Surely she couldn't be *that* stupid, right?

Jim piped in. "Actually, that's true. Koichi hasn't even issued any move commands yet! Why would a trainer intentionally use a poorly trained Pokémon?"

Scott put a hand on his shoulder. "That's not it. Watch carefully."

While Flannery was distracted, Hitmonk charged, coming in low with a series of jabs against Torkoal's side. Torkoal slid back to avoid further damage.

Flannery huffed. "Fine, then! Use Flame Wheel!"

Her Pokémon nodded, then jumped, twisting in midair. Tucking itself in again, Torkoal hit the ground rolling, wreathed in flames. It was surprisingly quick, reaching Hitmonk in seconds. But just before it made contact, Hitmonk unleashed a roundhouse kick into Torkoal's side, knocking it off course.

Skidding to a stop, Torkoal's emotions were beginning to surpass mere resolve, clearly angry at its own inability to connect an attack. The amount of smoke billowing from its back increased. This sentiment was shared by its trainer, Koichi noticed.

"Get in close, then use Overheat!" she exclaimed.

Torkoal charged, its stout legs producing loud stomps. Koichi could make out the ripples in the air surrounding it as its shell began to heat up. Hitmonk made no moves to evade, merely adopting a light-footed stance.

Only when Torkoal was less than a body length away did it shoot forth an enormous columnar beam of white-hot flames at Hitmonk's face. But he had dived out of the way the instant its mouth had opened, and the move just grazed him. Bringing his legs back under him, Hitmonk crouched to shift his momentum diagonally, springing forwards with a hook that met squarely with Torkoal's face.

"Now do you see it? Or, rather, what *isn't*?" Scott asked, awe in his tone. Koichi was unsure if he was addressing the crowd, or just Jim. "Those aren't *moves* at all. Just regular punches and kicks. If anything, that Pokémon Koichi has with him is *expertly* trained."

Jim had no reply, ironically too engrossed was he in the battle.

Flannery was the same. She turned to her Torkoal, which was now showing signs of exhaustion. "Let's see them dodge this! Smokescreen!"

Torkoal obeyed. The smoke coming from its body suddenly turned black and increased in volume exponentially. Soon, the entire battlefield, Hitmonk included, was shrouded in vast a hemisphere of the stuff.

"Fire Spin!"

Ah, so that was her plan, Koichi thought. It wasn't half bad, honestly. Most Pokémon rely on sight or smell to navigate, and a Smokescreen obscures both. Their other senses were limited on their own. But he had trained Hitmonk to surpass his limits.

Koichi closed his eyes, recalling sparring matches held in pitch dark caves. He could feel the heat of the flames now spiraling outwards from Torkoal, and he could hear the crackling they made as they burned through the air.

He could also hear Hitmonk's footsteps as they receded, without a hint of hesitation in his stride. Then, they vanished, only to be replaced by a sharp crack.

Koichi opened his eyes. The smoke, now fading, slowly revealed Hitmonk, standing triumphantly over Torkoal's fainted form.

"Torkoal is unable to battle!" declared the referee.

Flannery consoled her Pokémon as the crowd began to applaud. Without further ceremony, she returned it and retrieved her second. "Go, Blaziken!"

Accompanied by the usual flash of light, Hitmonk now stood opposed by the wingless bird that was Blaziken. It stood a good foot taller than him, feathers practically humming with anticipation.

Flannery kicked out at the air in front of her. "Kick things off with Blaze Kick!"

Blaziken replied with a shouted "Blaze!" and flames engulfed both of its legs up to the knee. Koichi continued to watch silently as Blaziken ran up to Hitmonk, planted its foot, and loosed a front snap kick at Hitmonk's face. Hitmonk deftly bobbed to the side and avoided the blow.

When Blaziken withdrew its leg, it quickly lashed out with the other, aiming for Hitmonk's knee. But he hopped backwards, out of range. Once more closing the distance, Blaziken continued its assault, determined to land its move. It let loose more and more Blaze Kicks, unpredictably and in rapid succession. Hitmonk kept on the defensive, waiting for an opening as he continued to block and evade. Eventually, Blaziken overextended itself with one of its side step kicks, and Hitmonk slammed his arm down against its leg, sending his adversary tumbling forwards into him. He followed up with a couple of narrow-range jabs to Blaziken's chest, and then finished with an open-palm strike to its face.

That last blow really hit hard, slamming Blaziken back and onto the ground. As it groaned in pain, so too did Flannery, but in frustration. "Get up!" she said. "Use Brave Bird!"

Blaziken propped itself up with one clawed hand as it rose onto one knee, then two. Standing tall again, it clenched its fists, elbows locked to its sides. There was a flash of light, and a sharp blue aura was suddenly surrounding Blaziken. It charged headfirst at Hitmonk, with a level of speed previously unseen.

Hitmonk, unable to get out of the way in time, barely managed to brace itself for the impact. When Blaziken did strike, there was an explosion of energy. Rather than break off, it continued to push forward, trying to bowl over Hitmonk. He managed to maintain his stance though, even as he was pushed back by the force, feet scraping the ground.

That was when Hitmonk grabbed its torso and twisted. Turning its own momentum against it, he spun, and threw Blaziken over his shoulder, where it hit the stone floor face up, mostly behind him. The resulting thud echoed throughout the stadium.

Blaziken lay there for a moment, twitching, before its eyes glazed over.

Once the referee had confirmed its inability to go on, the crowd cheered some more.

"Wow!" Jim exclaimed. "What an incredible display of skill and power! Koichi's Hitmonk has dispatched two of Flannery's Pokémon almost effortlessly!"

"And it looks like that super effective Brave Bird barely phased him," added Scott.

Jim nodded. "If anything, Flannery's the one feeling the sting of defeat."

He was right, Koichi thought. That is, if the fact she seemed to be clenching her teeth behind closed lips was any indication. The young gym leader was also fidgeting with her hair, pulling on one of the ends.

But with some rapid shakes of her head, Flannery snapped herself out of her fervor, and reached for her final Pokémon. "Turn up the heat, Magcargo!"

Flannery's final partner was one Koichi was familiar with. Having no legs, or even bones, to speak of, Magcargo were usually slow moving. But their strong special moves made up for it. Though, that wouldn't be the part which worried him a bit.

Flannery clenched her hand tightly. "Go all out from the start! Shell Smash!"

Magcargo replied with a sound like boiling water, and the shell on its back suddenly developed multiple cracks, each one radiating energy. As they lengthened and split, the energy grew, until the entire stone flew apart into fragments of light, which then reversed course and entered the Pokémon. Once they did, its body turned from orange to yellow, and the speed at which the lava bubbled formed and popped along its body increased tremendously.

Meanwhile, Hitmonk waited patiently. Only once the move had completed did he begin his rapid approach.

"Lava Plume!" ordered Flannery.

Immediately, blobs of searing magma large and small launched from Magcargo in all directions, akin to an erupting volcano. Hitmonk wove through the storm of molten rock like a needle through cloth, allowing nary a single drop to singe his robes.

Then he kicked it in the face.

"Oh my!" Jim exclaimed. "That can't have felt good. I certainly wouldn't kick a Pokémon as hot as that! Especially one with the Flame Body ability!"

Magcargo was pushed back a good distance, leaving a trail of char on the ground as it went. A similar burn had appeared on the sole of Hitmonk's foot.

Flannery now sported a confident smile. "Now you're mine! Magcargo, Earth Power!"

Its body angled low, Magcargo let out another bubbling cry as the ground beneath Hitmonk's feet charged with energy. He had only an instant to leap out of the way, but the resulting explosion of power from beneath his feet was much larger than he anticipated, and he was caught by the edge of the blast.

Koichi understood his partner's frustration as he watched Hitmonk pick himself up and brushed off the debris from his clothes. That Earth Power was indeed far more powerful than any he had seen in person before.

"Oh, that was a nice hit," said Scott. "Maybe we'll see a come-from-behind victory from Flannery here. If he continues to attack head-on like that, Hitmonk will end up doing just as much damage to itself as to Magcargo."

Hitmonk, however, was smarter than that. Noticing the cracks that now ran along the arena where the Earth Power went off, he ignored - or perhaps didn't even register - the flaring pain in his foot and stomped down with great force. Combined with the heat damage from earlier, he managed to knock a misshapen chunk of rock loose and upwards.

Flannery's eyes widened in shock as Hitmonk struck the falling stone with his open palms, sending it careening into Magcargo. Unprepared for the impromptu tactic, it was unable to dodge, and the rock bounced off of its head with a splat. After wobbling a bit, it collapsed, returning to normal as it fainted.

Raucous applause echoed into Koichi's ears as he stood, returning Hitmonk to his ball. Now that the battle was over, Jim and Scott began talking a mile a minute, mostly about the impressive skill Hitmonk displayed. However, one person was rendered speechless.

Flannery had collapsed to her knees, sniffing. He could tell she was trying desperately to hold back tears as she clamped her hands tightly on her thighs.

Koichi approached her slowly, and placed a hand on her shoulder, only for her to bat it away with a snarl.

"It's not fair! Why can't I ever beat my peers?" she said, stuttering. "I try so hard, but..."

Koichi sighed. He was never very good at consoling people, but he couldn't just leave her like this. He would try and help her get her spirit back.

"To try is not enough," he said. "Your Pokémon are mighty, and they obey. But they have not *learned*. For a Gym Leader, what you have is often enough. But if you want your Pokémon to gain true strength, you must *teach* them. Rediscover what it means to be a trainer. Only then will your dreams be within your grasp."

She stared up at him, tears drying up. She didn't look happy, and probably wouldn't until tomorrow, but her anger was fading. Soon, Flannery no longer gazed at him, but through him, lost in thought.

Neither of them said another word as Koichi retreated back into the stadium's depths.