

Smitty tapped his foot impatiently, sparing a quick glance at his Pokétech. He'd been sitting here for about five minutes now, no company save for the constantly whirring, buzzing, and beeping machinery. Seeing as he had nothing better to do, he took his time to take his environment more fully.

He'd been to this room many, *many*, times in the past, but he never had the opportunity to really look at it. Every time he entered it before, it would be all of five seconds before his opponent would enter, spout some non sequitur, and the battle would begin. Now, with the extra time afforded to him he could see this place for what it really was, and if he was a more conspiracy-minded individual what he was seeing would put him on the edge.

The building was nothing more than one big computer. What must be terabytes, perhaps even petabytes of data was streaming through thousands of fiber optics cables, pushed back and forth between the monolithic hard drives embedded in the walls around him. It was all protected by a thick glass shield (Which, he found, was cool to the touch. Perhaps they circulated water or something between the panes to help keep the computers from overheating?), but the great white towers had such a presence he felt that they were moving in on him, pressing in from all sides. Strange, he'd never felt claustrophobia before now.

This wasn't all that was embedded within the walls though. Conveyor belts and pneumatic tubes overstuffed with pokéballs sneaked their way in any gaps they could, hundreds of thousands of pokémon streaming through the walls of this very room every minute. Pokémon from all over the world, from all walks of life, were the weapons of this futuristic arena. A fire belching Charizard was a lot different than an ancient polearm, and no one was about to start making comparisons between a Shedinja and a spiked club, but the idea between then and now was the same. Using the intelligence and ability you have to defeat your opponent, no matter what tools are at your disposal. As delusions of ancient gladiatorial grandeur flashed across Smitty's mind, he looked at the three pokémon in his belt: Steelix, Porygon-Z, and Frosslass. He only hoped he chose his weapons wisely.

He was taking one last look around the room when suddenly, an odd noise that sounded like electricity came from behind him. He started to turn around, but there was a great bang, and green smoke filled the room. As the smoke cleared, two figures could be seen in the room through the various cameras embedded in the walls. There was Smitty, leaning against the wall, one hand on his pants near his belt, the other clutching his chest. His glasses were askew, one still attached to his ear and the other held up only by his puffed out, panting cheek. His blue hoodie and cargo pants were straining against his skin with the force that he clutched at them, and his backpack lay off to the side, somehow rocketed off of his person during the explosion.

Directly across from him stood what was quite possibly, somehow, one of the most normal looking people he had ever seen. He had a pair of green and black boots, green shorts, a black vest (he couldn't see buttons or a zipper, so he assumed pullover), a white button up long sleeve shirt, and a green tie with an odd silver clasp in front, it looked like a faux jewel. Oh, also he was wearing a fanny pack backwards, his hair was green and looked like the blades of a salad shooter, and he just arrived in a puff of green smoke, but besides the odd hairdo, explosive entrance, and obvious attraction to green this person looked almost disappointingly normal compared to most leaders of organizations in Sinnoh. He didn't look like he was prepared for a spelunking adventure, he wasn't androgynous, hell, he was even *less* green than one of the gym leaders he met before. And as much as this ridiculous amount of normalcy should have set his mind at ease, it didn't. And it didn't help that beyond the man in green's apathetic facade, Smitty saw eyes that reminded him of the cold and calculating machinery all around him.

After a minute of the both of them studying each other, the man in green's hand struck into his pouch behind him. He took out a device that looked very similar to Smitty's pokédex, and aimed it

right at the trainer. He stared for a good long while at the device before he finally began to speak, his voice a bored drawl.

"Sorry, don't mind me," the man in green said, "what I'm using is an invention of mine. It's my data analyzing machine." Smitty still didn't know his name, but considering this fanfare (and his own current winning streak) he had an idea who this person might be, at least in title.

"Andrew Smith, often called 'Smitty.' You have all eight Sinnoh badges in your possession and are the current pokémon league champion." Smitty sure didn't like the way he said "current," but the Frontier Brain continued, "Your team currently consists of an Infernape named Savana, a Staraptor named Rappy, a Weavile named Shadara, a Vaporeon named Swish, a Gardevoir named Swirve, and a Frosslass named Lady Fross. Interesting."

Smitty was dumbfounded. Not just by the way he seemed to know such incredible detail about his life, but through it all, that apathetic tone never left him, as if his accomplishments meant nothing to the man. Yet, the veridian villain did not cease. He now pointed his device at the pokéballs on Smitty's belt, and the device gave off a foreboding *ding!*

"It also tells me what you've rented for the match," he said as an afterthought. "I see! Steelix, Porygon-Z, and Frosslass. You seem to like Frosslass, don't you?" Smitty couldn't be sure if he was saying this in a complimentary or insulting tone, all that he could tell about said tone is that it was as emotionless as he would expect a computer's to be. It was unbearable. He wanted to speak up, but every time he was about to, the man cut him off again.

"It's a decent set up. Like, say, 18% percent?" Smitty's gaping mouth seemed to have finally attracted the man in green's attention, though that didn't mean he gave the shocked trainer more than a glance, and a raised eyebrow. "My name is Thorton, by the way. Let's begin--"

"Wait!" Smitty shouted, the word echoing through the chamber. His outburst seemed to break himself from his trance, and conversely dive Thorton into one. Newfound courage and even indignation coursed through the trainer's veins, while Thorton looked like he was struck across the face. Perhaps this was the first time anyone had ever questioned the man? Inconceivable, but not impossible, it would seem.

"I'm not supposed to beat you," Smitty said through gritted teeth, "I thought all of this was a little too suspicious. For a simple test of a trainer's pokémon knowledge, this place seemed to care a little bit too much about the trainer themselves. How we think, how we act. If all you care about is how well I know pokémon, then why did you go to so much trouble to find out about me?"

Thorton's jaw was set, the Frontier Brain trying to retain his apathetic facade, and failing miserably. An odd emotion was shining through now, though Smitty could not place it. Annoyance? Disgust? Fear? He wasn't sure, but seeing anything on the other's face clued him in that he was on to something, and he wasn't about to stop now. He had won many battles here, lost quite a few more, and knew too much because of this to let such strong suspicions fade away. There was a secret behind this entire place, and Thorton was at the head of it all.

"When you come in, this place is supposed to be all about random chance. You could get crappy pokémon, but there's an equal chance your opponents can too. That's what you tell us that is," Thorton's body twitched as if a punch was about to be thrown his way, but Smitty was unrelenting, "It's weird though, the way this place is set up, I mean. If it's so equal, why is it the more battles I won, the worse selection of pokémon I got to pick through? I looked at the numbers, I've been here enough. My pokémon have been poorly trained and poorly chosen a little too often to be coincidence."

"I was still willing to give this place the benefit of the doubt up until a second ago. After all, I haven't been here an infinite number of times, maybe I just got really really unlucky...But you proved

my point for me, I think.” Smitty took a step forward, readjusted his glasses, and picked up his backpack. The two trainers’ positions seemed to have done a complete 180, with Thorton now looking quite nervous, and Smitty, while not as apathetic as the man in green once was, definitely had the advantage now.

“I’ve heard of unfair, but this is ridiculous. Knowing my pokémon, what moves and stats they have, my usual strategies? It’s no wonder I haven’t seen a single winner on the plaque near the entrance here, we’re not supposed to win!” Smitty, despite his usually calm disposition, was yelling and shaking a fist at Thorton, who was pale as a sheet.

“So all I want to know Thorton, is why. Why create a challenge that’s impossible for us? Why make it so that we cannot win? Why go through all this trouble-“

“Because trainers need to lose!”

Besides the constant whirring and buzzing of the machinery that surrounded them, silence sat thick in the arena. Smitty tried to retain his righteous indignation, but he had faltered before this outburst. Thorton was shaking, sweat pouring down his brow. Smitty wanted to speak, but he knew not what to say to this. He was about to open his mouth, hoping the words would just come, but Thorton spoke once more, in a tone that did not welcome interruption.

“People come here, to the battle frontier, to my battle factory, thinking they’re the best. That no one is better than they are. That they’re going to be on top forever. They’re being arrogant, and it makes me sick. Someone has to put them in their place.”

Thorton looked like he was about to spit with disgust. Smitty wasn’t sure if he should be shocked or insulted, or both.

“Look at you Andrew Smith. You’re the Pokémon League Champion. You’re regarded as one of the best trainers there ever was and probably one of the best there ever will be. I bet you’ve never tasted bitter defeat, have you? You never had to know what it was like to fall to your knees and pay out to your opponent, through no fault of your Pokémon, but your own.” It seemed as if Thorton would continue his diatribe against Smitty and his “ilk”, but it was the green man’s turn finally to be interrupted, by Smitty’s sarcastic laughter.

“You’re kidding, right? Hahahah,” the blue-clad trainer looked as if he was going to slap his knee for a moment, just for effect.

“Me, never lose? How the hell do you think this works? Of course I’ve lost, dozens of times. Everyone does. What, you think you were the only one who-You actually thought that didn’t you?” Smitty stepped forward, realization dawning upon his face.

“You lost before when you thought you were the best, and you thought it was up to you to treat other people as unfairly as you thought you were treated.” Thorton was silent once more, but his expression was louder than words ever could be, “Well that’s the difference between you and me. I’ve learned from every one of my mistakes, rather than throw a tantrum about them. I plan on walking away from here a winner, 18% or not.”

“You’ll get knocked down like all the rest you arrogant trainer,” Thorton spat, pulling out his pokéball.

“We’ll see. Go, Steelix!” The Champion yelled, tossing his pokéball forward, his weapon crying out with similar tenacity.

“Cresselia!” Thorton screamed, his pokémon readying itself as well.

Blades of the crescent moon bit the air, while the earth itself seemed to scream in pain. The might of a thousand landslides closed their gaping jaws over the spirit of the moon, and the night sky became dark once more, the strength of the earth weathering the lunar assault. But the Frontier Brain was not yet defeated. Soon a four-limbed titan rose to his aid, Metagross’s very arrival staggering the

steel leviathan and its trainer with mental energy. The Champion steel serpent fought valiantly, but barely put a dent in the titan's great defenses.

But just as the Frontier Brain was not defeated so easily, the Champion would not be denied either. The walls buzzed and stopped their cooling processes immediately, for the specter that appeared at the Champion's side brought with it the chill of winter. The Frontier Brain grew pale, and not from the icy grip of the heralded frost. His titan was powerful, but this Froslass may just topple it. His fear turned quickly to confidence as he remembered its weakness; he would simply overpower the specter. Its speed and skill was enormous, but it could not fell the titan so quickly, and while the great metal behemoth could take a number of blows, the wispy spirit could not even take one. The Frontier Brain and his titan braced themselves, for the Champion whispered to his guardian, and as the ghost moved forward, it would surely strike a great blow...But that blow never came, despite the spectral hand thrown towards the metallic, towering body.

The Frontier Brain shrugged, and called out to his pokemon; there was no time for hesitation, now was the time to strike. The titan of mind and metal rose high into the air with dexterity its great body belied, and suddenly changed trajectory, a single great column of steel crashing upon the unmoving ghost. The Frontier Brain cried out in victory, thinking the advantage was his, but alas; as the ghost fell unconscious to the ground, so too the metallic titan. A red string, previously unseen, connected their fate.

With a furious cry, the Frontier Brain unleashed his final weapon, a great phoenix, whose very presence caused the coolant systems that had shut down to start again immediately, and at maximum capacity. The Moltres seemed to be made of the very flame it wielded, ash swirling through the air with every flap of its mighty wings. From the Champion's hand flew a weapon of dramatically different quality. It did not fly with majesty, or exude the very essence of fire. Instead, the tiny, oddly shaped thing darted about to and fro, as if its very existence was an unnatural, planned kind of chaos. The two bird-looking beasts stared each other down, and the Frontier Brain cried out. The Champion himself had to dive out of the way because of the ferocity of his enemy's assault, but the actual target was not so lucky. Though not defeated, the sputtering and flitting Porygon-Z looking creature seemed gravely injured, only barely hanging on. The Frontier Brain smiled. Victory was his, nothing the Champion's beast could do could possibly defeat his own in the seconds it had before a second assault destroyed it. Or so he thought.

His hardened heart quaked with fear for the first time he could recall, as the Champion cried out, and the pixilated beast began to crackle with electric energy. The man in green knew this attack, knew of its inaccuracy, but if it struck, victory was assured. The electric strike was let loose without warning, and the ball of great electric current began to bounce about the room haphazardly. The phoenix had seemed to outwit its opponent soaring and dodging with great grace, when the ball suddenly appeared behind, and a scream like a roaring flame echoed throughout the arena. As the phoenix sank to the ground, body paralyzed with the energy that just struck out, the Champion said only two more words, which might as well have been "I won." The pixilated guardian flitted before the fallen beast of fire, and glowed with a different energy now, pure white. Soon the force was too much to contain, and a beam of concentrated power erupted from the futuristic guardian engulfed the phoenix. As the stream of energy tapered off, it moved no more, and would not move for a long while.

Thorton sunk to his knees, tears in his eyes. He could not remember the last time he had lost. He could not lose, he was not supposed to lose. Everything was supposed to be perfect! And yet the Champion stood before him now, having bested him with more honor than Thorton could ever muster. The green man expected a blow to fall upon him (he deserved far worse, after all), but instead a voice, calm and soft, fell upon his quivering head.

“Every loss is one step closer to victory,” the Champion said, and walked out, knowing his opponent was now one step closer to victory himself.