I almost ignored him. I was so close. But in the end, I did the research, cursing Wilder all the way for the seeds of doubt he had sown.

So, my brown hair flopping into my face as I leaned toward the computer screen, green eyes skimming through, I started with my hero and role model, Abigail. She had won almost every contest with her Absol. She had died two years ago. She was born twenty-eight years ago. When she had won all possible ribbons, she had bred her Absol and competed with the babies—and won, of course. She didn’t use any other Pokémon other than Absols. The writer of the article thought it very mysterious that she didn’t use any other Pokémon.

But I knew all of that, so I decided to research the Absols she used. She used the same routines over and over, until someone started to copy it, and then she made a new one. She had named her Absol line Lucky Disaster. She hadn’t actually named her Absols except with numbers, a common practice these days, but rare in hers; it was thought that Abigail was the one who started it. The Absol wasn’t her starter Pokémon; it had been a Wurmple that she had traded for the famous founder of Lucky Disaster.

I perked up at that; it was new information. The original owner of the Absol was an unknown young man. The Wurmple hadn’t even lasted two weeks.

I was floored by that. I couldn’t imagine giving away any of my babies. But it was interesting to know that Abigail could. I decided to research some of the other more famous winners to get my mind off that depressing bit of information.

But it was similar stories across the board: a new coordinator would show potential, and a mysterious youth would trade their starter for one of his higher-quality Pokémon. The new Pokémon would know moves usually obtained through breeding and TMs, and would be instant success. Sometime after, when they had won a few ribbons, they would end up with the gold bracelet with an engraved SC. After all the ribbons were claimed, they helped judge contests, earned money through unknown means, and made several public appearances. In fact, most of them bred starter Pokémon for new trainers and coordinators. Those owners usually won, but they usually never ended up with the gold bracelets. There were no Eevee breeders.

Wilder had said I hadn’t met all the right conditions to win; did that mean someone with a lineated Pokémon would be favored over me? I thought back to the previous winners; the last had been an Absol, before that was a Skitty, a Wingull, and a Poochyena. The first contest I entered had been won by a different Absol. Were those Pokémon descendants of the famous ones?

So Wilder was doing what? Telling me to give up? I snorted. All the judges had to see was that just one of my Pokémon was better. I stood up, stretched, and went outside; Espeon needed to review our routine before tomorrow’s contest.

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I was about to step into the contest hall when Wilder sauntered up to me. “Find out anything interesting, Erin?” he asked casually, watching the contestants walk in.

I knew immediately what he was talking about and told him my findings. “But so what?” I asked. “People trade their starters all the time, and breeding them isn’t so weird.”

“And all their new Pokémon were from the same person. Doesn’t that seem odd?”

“Yeah, I mean, why would they want a bunch of worthless Pokémon? But it doesn’t matter, does it? I can handle opponents with better moves; I just have to make a better routine.” I shrugged.

“It’s not that simple.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “It’s not just better moves; they’re flat out favored over the others. It’s outrageous, and more people are beginning to see it.” He looked at me, measuring me. “Don’t you want to know why?”

I flicked a piece of lint off my shirt, getting impatient. The contest would start soon, and I hadn’t even checked in. “How about you tell me if I lose again?” I asked offhandedly, hoping he would insist on now or not at all. That way, I could turn him down without being at fault.

“Okay,” he agreed, much to my surprise. “And I can almost guarantee you’ll lose to that Skitty that just walked in. Its owner recently traded her starter for it.” He turned and walked away.

I stalked inside, ruffled, checked in, and went to the waiting area. When my number was called, I led Espeon out onto the stage. With a flourish, I began our routine.

When I walked out, I had lost. Second place, by three points, yet again. And yes, it was to the owner of the Skitty. I blinked rapidly as my vision blurred, and went to find Wilder.

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Protagonist—Erin, a girl who only wants to compete in Contests. She keeps losing, frustrating her and drawing Wilder’s attention.

Antagonist—Wilder, a boy who begins to destroy Erin’s world view to further his own agenda.