**Prologue**
I stopped outside the city of Petalburg. In recent years, pokemon battling had taken a backseat. Pokemon Contests had become much more popular, and now every city had a contest hall. The traditional Hoenn starters of Torchic, Mudkip, and Treeko were no longer handed out to ten-year-olds; instead, trainers of fifteen or older went to the nearest Pokemon Center.

So I had gone to the Petalburg Pokemon Center. They handed me a pokeball, and I left. I didn't know what pokemon I had received, nor did I ask. I only hoped it wasn't anything overly wimpy, because the battle portion of the contests could be brutal.

It would be suicide to just walk in and sign up; I hadn't taught my unknown companion anything. So instead of walking into the building, I walked east, away from the dying sun, into the forest.

I headed to a small pond with grass next to it, where I hoped to find some fairly weak pokemon. I couldn't expect anything strong for a beginning pokemon.

Without a word, I tossed the pokeball into the air. The red light formed a small, four-legged silhouette. Then it solidified.
Brown fur with a fluffy, cream-colored ruff. Big, bushy tail. Dainty paws. Long, slim ears.

"Vee," the tiny thing squeaked.

**Chapter 1**
I stood once more outside the Petalburg Contest Hall. Now that I had trained my Eevee a little, I felt more confident about walking inside. I knew it would be very basic to start with: they would give me a Ribbon Case, a Pokeblock Case, and a Berry Bag. I would polish up my Eevee, feed it pokeblocks and berries, and send it into the arena, hoping it would remember what I had taught it.
With my head held high, I strutted up to the counter. Eevee followed, fur recently brushed free of tangles, shining like a star. It looked just as proud as I attempted to look.

"I need to register," I said smoothly.

The girl gave me a once over and a dirty look. "You need a Contest Pass, Ribbon Case, Pokeblock Case, and--"

"--and a Berry Bag," I finished flatly. "I know. And I also know you are the one who should be giving them to me. Now."

She sniffed haughtily. I glanced at her name tag: Cherise. The tag had a trophy in the background. So she was a former trainer, and a finalist of the last official League competition. It must be quite a change, from battling to sitting behind a desk. She probably couldn't adapt to the softer battle style and stronger competition. Let's face it, when you're aiming for raw power, it's easier to win than when you need to think of beauty as well.

She gave me everything I needed and signed me up for tomorrow's competition; today was all booked. So I thanked her coolly and went back to the wild grass to review Eevee's lessons.

"Vee," it barked.

"Eevee, Growl!"

It bared its teeth at me playfully. "Rrrrrrr."

Cute, and not too long. I pointed to a tree. "Return!"

It stared blankly.

I groaned. This could be problamatic; my entire routine was hinged on Return, but it was a difficult move to master. There were rumors that it could only be powerful if the pokemon completely trusted and loved its trainer, but I was skeptical of a move being so complex. Maybe I could substitute with Tackle? But that weakened the entire thing. Maybe I could start working on Swift; if I threw some balloons full of glitter for it to aim at, it would be a pretty sight for the judges. But if it didn't work, what would I do?

"Eevee," I called. "Focus, really hard, okay?"

"Vee!" She crouched down, tail up, staring at the tree.

"Use Swift!"

Nothing happened.

**Chapter 2**
I walked onto the stage, my stomach jumping nervously. I had fed my Eevee several pokeblocks today and the night before, and groomed its fur this morning until it shone. But when we had reviewed our routine this morning, it just sat there.

"Eevee, let's go!" I shouted, voice higher than usual.

Eevee jumped forward eagerly, but instead of landing gracefully, it tripped over its own paws and somersaulted into a heap in the middle of the stage. The crowd laughed. It jumped up. "Eee?"

My face heated up. "Eevee, focus!" It turned to me, eyes intense.

I gripped a plastic ball in each hand tightly. I had planned on using water balloons, but another coordinator had let me borrow hers. She had already won several times, I could tell: she had a fancy dress on, trimmed in silk, and two pokemon wearing Master Rank Ribbons on their collars. I had filled the balls with gold glitter, which I thought would compliment Eevee's fur better than the cheaper silver stuff.
I tossed them up. "Eevee, Tail Whip!"

"Vee!" Eevee leaped up, tail fluffed out. It twisted and broke the balls open, the tailwind spreading the glitter around. It continued forward into the gold. It skidded to a halt, its fur glittering."Eeeevee!" The crowd applauded. The judges recorded their notes.
"Eevee, Growl!" I shouted, a little more confident.

"Rrrrrr." It crouched down, ears flattened out.

"Now, Bite!" I tossed a small toy high in the air.

Eevee leapt straight from its crouched position and, still growling, bit into the doll with a ferocity that belied its sweet appearance. The timer hit zero just as it landed, head ducked, shaking the toy feircly.

"Eevee, return!" It returned to its pokeball. The judges' scores were displayed.

6.5, 5, 7

I didn't even make it to the battles.

**Chapter 3**
Eevee walked out of the hall next to me, tail and head held high. All fun and games for it, but I walked out looking like a whipped cur. So many blunders...the clumsy entrance, the vicious Bite and Growl...I shuddered at the thought of the judges' sympathetic looks. Nurse Joy had given me the seven, true to her generous nature.

I dragged Eevee into the grass east of Petalburg. We would train until sundown, which admittedly wasn't far off, but I was determined that Eevee learn something tonight. The Bite had been too vicious for the judges to consider it beautiful, so we needed to change that, but the Tail Whip/glitter combo seemed to be successful. Maybe I could work in some more balls of glitter, and maybe some frisbee work for that Bite. That would tone things down a little.

And I was determined to work on Return, as well.

We reached the pond. "Eevee, Tail Whip!" I commanded, pointing to a tree. "Eee," Eevee agreed, trotting forward. It leapt forward and slammed its tail into the tree trunk.

"Again!"

"Vee!"

"Again!"

"Ee!"

We continued for a few hours. Then we camped out by the pond.

The next morning, I washed Eevee in the pond and brushed it free of tangles. It seemed to enjoy the attention. Then we got back to training. We reviewed Tail Whip until I was satisfied that it was as powerful and graceful as it had been at the end of last night. Then I picked up a stick from the ground.

I tossed it into the air. "Bite!" It jumped and bit into the wood, snapping the stick easily. It splintered in its mouth.

I tapped my foot for a moment, then grabbed another stick. I spent the morning teaching Eevee to bite the stick gently, to look more graceful and beautiful when it used its attack. Finally, after many tries and almost three hours' work, I threw another stick high into the air. "Eevee, Bite!"

It jumped forward, catching it on the way down, but gently, not even leaving teeth marks. I smiled slightly, more confident. "Let's go, Eevee." We walked back to town.

On the way, I tossed a few random sticks to it, and every time, it left not even one tooth mark. Then, Eevee did something unexpected: it caught the stick and twisted around, using the spin's momentum to toss it back to me. I caught it, surprised, but an idea already forming for a new routine. A graceful entrance, Tail Whip/glitter combo, and a quick dance with a frisbee, if I had the time.

When we entered the town, I led Eevee straight past the contest hall. I didn't think competitive battling was worth anything, but it was clear to me that Eevee would require much more training before we would be ready for something that complicated.

**Chapter 4**
I decided to pass Petalburg for the time being. I couldn't go to the Festival without collecting all the ribbons, but I wasn't going to the next town. I just wanted to train in the woods.

But first, I stopped by the PokeMart. I didn't know what pokemon I would encounter in the woods, but I knew I might see something I wanted. So I stocked up on pokeballs, and also bought a switchblade, which I thought would be useful to have around.

I had seen plenty of Poochyena, Zigzagoon, Ralts, and even Surskit while I practiced by the pond, but while any of those would make excellent additions to my Contest Team, what I really wanted was a flying pokemon. I knew their were Wingull, Tailow, and plenty of Wurmple in the grass on the other side of Petalburg, and thought I'd start there and make my way back. It might even be worth it to raise a Wurmple, though I desperately hoped it wouldn't become a Silcoon if I did; you saw so many Beautifly on the stage these days, it was becoming a joke. I'd even heard there were some judges who docked the trainer's points autimatically if they sent one out, just because they were so sick of seeing them. And while their day-geared moves were pretty to look at, I thought the psychic moves of a Dustox would give me more of an edge.

That made me think of my Eevee. I wondered what it would evolve into. I liked the idea of it evolving, but now that I thought of it, I hadn't paused to think of what type of moves it would learn. That could really affect the outcome of a contest.

I looked at the four-legged cutey walking next to me. I tried to picture it in each of its discovered evolved forms. I couldn't really see myself traveling with a Flareon or Umbreon, or a Glaceon or Vaporeon. An Umbreon or Vaporeon would be powerful and beautiful, but the ones I had met had all been stubborn and difficult to work with. Flareon and Glaceon tended to be clumsy on the stage, and didn't do well with a time limit; Flareon had short legs and a long, puffy ruff, and while Glaceon had longer legs and was more graceful, its long ears tended to get in the way.

That left Leafeon, Espeon, and Jolteon. I bit my lip. Espeon would be lovely, with its big eyes, long ears, long forked tail, and lithe body. It was a psychic type, and its lavender fur would be stunning on stage. Leafeon would be green and brown, but would look every bit as beautiful as Eevee's other evolutions, with its smaller ears and eyes. Its tail would be long, leaf-shaped, and it would look like a living plant. Jolteon would be wonderful too, with its silky, sun-yellow coat and spikey white ruff. Its tail would be short and spikey, a downside to most judges, but it could learn powerful electrical attacks.

It would be a hard decision, I knew, and I also feared I wouldn't be in control of it: the Espeon and Umbreon evolutions were spontaneous, depending on the time of day, and how much the Eevee loved its trainer. And Glaceon and Leafeon evolutions were only possible with special, almost-impossible-to-obtain stones. The original three evolutions could be done with stones as well, but the stones were common and easy to get to, so I wasn't concerned.

Just then, Eevee interrupted my thoughts, growling at a wiggling tuft of tall grass. It sprang forward, tackling whatever was there. I heard a short squwak, and then a Tailow came flying out at me. I was so startled, it got away, flying high above the reach of Eevee's Bite and my pokeballs. I cursed silently at it, glaring as it winged away, and went to free Eevee from where it had tangled itself in the grass. It bit fiercely at the smooth, slick, strong blades, struggling.

"Stop," I said, putting my hands around its body. It didn't listen at first, but then it yanked its head back and the blades slipped between its teeth. It howled as they sliced into its gums.

"See?" I scolded. "You should have listened." I took out my new switchblade, cutting the grass away. "Isn't this faster?"

"Vee," it agreed, looking up at me with wide, adoring eyes. I scratched its head and we continued on towards Petalburg Woods. I was careful to stick to the path, and kept Eevee from wandering into the grass again. Once the traditional starters had stopped being handed out, other things had begun happening as well, like the path to and through Petalburg Woods being allowed to become overgrown. The region's flora in general had become odd as well: funny colors, quicker than normal growth, and sometimes people swore it attacked them. I thought the last rumor was untrue, because with tall grass so common now, people and their bicycle wheels would become tangled all the time.

Then there were the rumors that Team Plasma, from the distant Unova region, had been revived and had resettled in Hoenn, but I wasn't sure if I believed it. After all, with so few pokemon battles these days, it would be really noticeable, and I hadn't seen or heard of any criminal activity.

**Chapter 5**
Eevee and I stood waist deep in grass. I was trying to direct my poor Eevee in battle against Shroomish, but I couldn't see the little...bugger. I was having a hard time seeing Eevee, too, for that matter.

"Eevee?" I called hesitantly.

"Vee!" It sounded distant. I swung to the right, hoping to spot its brown-and-cream fur. I cursed the dense trees and brush that confused sounds and directions.

All of a sudden, I heard "Shroo!" I ducked as a Shroomish--the Shroomish--came flying at me from behind. Eevee was right behind it.

"Bite!" I yelled. I heard the pained "Mish!" and knew Eevee had connected. When I came back up, they were standing on a boulder, facing each other menacingly. I took out a pokeball. "Pokeball, go!" I shouted. The Shroomish was beamed into the ball. It rocked violently once...twice...three times, and it was mine. I stumbled my way over to Eevee and picked up the pokeball, shouting my victory. Then I picked up Eevee and swung it around, hugging it tightly. It squeaked and licked my face, its tongue warm and damp. I laughed.

I fought my way happily through the plant matter that tangled my legs, wanting to get Shroomish to a Pokemon Center. I decided to go back to Petalburg. Now that I thought of it, I hadn't tried to catch any pokemon on Route 101. I had seen few pokemon here, and a passing coordinator had said they were hard to find lately.

I felt a little frustrated about going back to the "kiddie pool," but what could I do? I wanted a Wurmple to raise into a Dustox, and I couldn't find any Wurmple right now. And maybe it would be worth it to raise a Poochyena to a Mightyena. Ralts to Gaurdevoir or Gallade would be nice, too.

We made it to Petalburg a few hours later without incident, but I was pretty scratched up. Some of those plants had inch-long thorns.
At the Pokemon Center, Nurse Joy greeted me. "How is your starter?" she asked cheerfully.

I offered Eevee up, then grabbed Shroomish's pokeball. "I just caught this one," I said. "Fought the grass tooth and nail for it. Is my Shroomish okay? Eevee's Bite can be vicious."

She looked at me skeptically, but took my Shroomish with a nod. "We'll make sure they're okay." I nodded gratefully and went to sit down in the waiting room.

After a few minutes, a trainer sauntered over, smirking at me. I looked at him cooly and focused my attention back on the front desk. I hoped he would leave soon, because he gave me a slimy, jumpy feeling, but instead he sat down next to me and kicked his feet up onto the little table in front of us, flopping out casually. He stared at me expectantly. Did he think I would yell at him? Well I wouldn't, if that's what he wanted. I stared straight ahead, my eyes stony.

"What are you here for?" he asked innocently. I glanced over at him, seeing his sneer still in place.

"My pokemon, what else?"

"Do you battle?"

I glanced at him. "Every coordinator does."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Would you battle me? I don't expect a pansy coordinator like you to win, but it just *might* be fun."

I turned and glared at him. "What do you mean, 'pansy coordinator'?"

He smirked. "Coordinators don't live for a battle. They choreograph everything based on beauty, and as a result, their pokemon are weak." He looked at me. "How many pokemon do you have?" He pulled out four pokeballs. "I'll let you choose which ones you battle, up to all four." He sounded like this should be tempting me greatly.

The truth was, it *did*. I wanted to show this trainer just how strong I was. I almost said, "Then let's go!" but then I remembered that my pokemon were healing still, and I had just started a few weeks ago. I lifted my head proudly.

"No, thank you."

He looked a little shocked...and angry, for some reason. My stomach twisted uncomfortably. "What?" he asked angrily.

"I said, 'No,'" I answered calmly. "I can see you've been at this longer than me. Even I, who has had my starter for only a few weeks, know when a fight will be unfair." I looked at him. "And I think you already know I'm new at this. Even if I'd been training longer, I only have two pokemon."

He looked completely dumbfounded. Then he shook himself. "If it's a matter of a beginning pokemon, fine," he said angrily. He picked out one pokeball and put the others away. "I just caught this one. No reason to say no," he snarled.

I gritted my teeth. I was *not* going to back down now. Just then, Nurse Joy walked out, spotted me, and beckoned me over. "Tomorrow, noon," I snapped, and then I stood and went to talk to Nurse Joy.

**Chapter 6**
I stood in the noon sunshine, arms crossed, the sun's warmth not reaching past my skin. Eevee sat next to me. She (according to Nurse Joy) was as tense as I was. Across from me stood the dark haired jerk from yesterday. He was grinning darkly, a pokeball in his hand. I looked closely at it; it was a Dusk ball. He said he had just caught this one, and I wondered what pokemon I was battling. Was it a Ghost type? Or was using that type of pokeball all for show, to throw his opponents off?

"Go, Murkrow!" he yelled, tossing it into the air. The Murkrow took flight, cawing rauciously. I gritted my teeth. A Flying type would have the advantage, but at least it wasn't a Ghost type.

"Eevee," I said, my voice cool but contolled. I knew I shouldn't battle in this state of mind; it had become very personal, from the moment that stupid little boy, who couldn't be more than thirteen and must therefore be a foreigner from Unova, had insulted me. I thought for a moment that Eevee would stay put, refusing to battle, which she had every right to do, but she stepped forward, staring at the Murkrow balefully.

Another trainer stepped in to referee. "Are both parties ready?" he asked. I nodded, and so did the dark haired trainer. "Begin!"

"Eevee, Tackle!" I barked. She dashed forward and jumped, but the Murkrow dodged. I raised my head proudly. "Again, and this time, don't miss!"

"Counter with Wing Attack!" Dark Hair called.

"Dodge and Tackle!" I yelled. Eevee did, and this time she connected when Murkrow passed by. She pinned it down, paws on its wings. "Now, Bite!"

She bit viciously into its back. The Murkrow cried out. "Don't let go," I called. "Toss him, now!" She swung around and let go, sending it flying into a tree. The Murkrow didn't get back up, knocked unconscious.

"Murkrow is unable to battle," the referee said. "The battle goes to Eevee!"

I snorted. The battle had been pathetically short. The way Dark Hair had been going on, his pokemon were superior in skill and strength. He said his newly-caught pokemon was strong enough to take down a wild Absol, which are powerful, and I had expected to have to fight for my win. I picked up my Eevee and walked away, noting proudly that she didn't have a scratch on her. "Good job," I murmured. She shoved her head into my chin. I scratched under her chin.

"You haven't heard the last from me!" yelled Dark Hair wildly. I looked at him; his face was bright red from embarassment. "You haven't heard the last of Jacob Wilder!"

I smirked. "I think I have," I said. "You're all washed up, Jacob Wilder. You bragged about your pokemon, you got yourself into a battle, and you lost. Get over it." I walked back to the Pokemon Center. I would stay the night and train tomorrow. But now, I wanted to make sure my Eevee really was unhurt. As the doors slid shut, I saw Jacob Wilder pick up his Murkrow and run over to a man in a brown suit. They spoke for a moment, and Jacob looked furious, but after a while, he backed off. I walked away, wondering, *What in the world was that about?*

**Chapter 7**
I walked out of the Pokemon Center the next day, a little annoyed. After that battle with Jacob Wilder, I had stayed at the Center because Nurse Joy was overrun with pokemon in need of care, and I wanted Eevee to be checked out. It had been hours before we could be seen, which meant I had wasted another day. I walked quickly to the Petalburg Woods, keeping Eevee in her pokeball for now.

I had decided to train in the Petalburg Woods with my Shroomish today. I couldn't enter a contest in Rustboro City without winning the Petalburg Ribbon, so I was reluctant to stray very far. But I was determined to get my Shroomish some battle experience, which would bring it one step closer to evolving.

Once in the Woods, I called my Shroomish out. I felt a little guilty about breaking my promise to myself about catching pokemon by Oldale Town, but what could I do? People said training a pokemon in the area you caught it in made it happier, which in turn made it evolve faster. And it looked like Wilder had friends; they might come after me again. Breloom were powerful, so if Wilder used any of his truly strong pokemon, I wouldn't be defenseless.

"Tailow!"

I ducked, surprised out of my daydreaming. I looked up; there was a Tailow, wheeling around to strike again.

*What an annoying creature*, I thought. *But it* is *a flying type*. "Shroomish," I barked. "Stun Spore!" "Mish," it answered, already shooting orange dust into the air.

The Tailow pulled up short, the spores not quite reaching it. "Tailow," it crowed happily. I hated arrogance.

"Tackle," I yelled. Shroomish leapt into the air. The Tailow dodged, but that was okay. Shroomish was still going up. "Now, hit it with another Stun Spore!" More orange dust.

This time, Tailow couldn't get high enough, fast enough. It was caught in the paralyzing cloud. "Tackle, again!" Shroomish was dead on, as Tailow was caught in its paralysis. It rolled away into a tree. I got a pokeball ready, determined not to let this one go. I clicked it to full size. "Pokeball, go!"

I waited tensely. The ball rocked once, twice, three times. The light stayed on for another few breaths, and then went out. I cheered. I finally had my flying type.

I grabbed Shroomish and whirled it around a couple of times, stopping under a tree. I let Eevee out to celebrate with us. "Vee," it squeaked, running around us. I put Shroomish down. They ran around happily together. Then, Shroomish and Eevee disappeared into a knot of plant matter.

Concerned, I rushed over. There was a little hole from where they had ripped out vines on their way through. It was dark, but I pushed my way in anyway, and slid, headfirst, down a dirt-and-leaf lined tunnel. I couldn't see anything ahead of me, and hit a rock at the bottom, blacking out.

**Chapter 8**
I woke up, not sure how long I'd been out of it. I sat up, feeling above me to make sure I didn't hit my head again. My hands brushed the top of the space, feeling twigs and leaves.

"Eevee?" I called softly. There was no telling what was down here. "Shroomish?"

"Mish!" came the soft reply.

So there was one of them...but where was Eevee? I crawled forward, feeling ahead of me, in the direction I hoped Shroomish was in. My hands brushed the rock. I scowled at it; stupid rock. Why did it have to be here, of all places? I moved around it. On the other side, I felt Shroomish's rubbery, thick skin. I felt around my belt, finding its pokeball.

"Just until we get out of here," I promised, returning it to its pokeball.

I leaned back against the rock. Then, wondering how big it was, I reached up. When I felt it curving, I felt sure I reached the top. I felt something furry. At first I thought it was Eevee, but the fur was too short. But I might be wrong...

"Eevee?" I whispered. "That you?" A nose bumped my hand. I took that for a yes, and got Eevee's pokeball out. "Okay, then, return!" A brief flash of red, and the fur under my hand disappeared.

"All right, time to get out of here," I whispered to myself grimly. I felt my way around to the other side of the rock and found the tunnel.

After awhile, I crawled out of the tunnel, the sun just beginning to set. It had taken a few tries. I had a few scratches, but nothing else. I decided to check my pokemon and decide whether or not to keep training. First, Shroomish; it looked okay, not even any scratches. Then, I looked at Eevee. I brought her out.

But it wasn't Eevee that came out of the pokeball. It was an Espeon.

But there was something strange about this Espeon; it had a mark on its chest, created by darker-than-normal fur. In the darkening frorest, it was hard to make out, but it looked like a simple starburst, four points.

I kneeled down by the Espeon. My Espeon. Had Eevee evolved? I grinned, scratching her under her chin, unable to believe it. I picked her up.

Then I wondered something: I thought Eevee who evolved into Espeon didn't need just the daytime, but daylight. What had happened? I looked back at the tunnel entrance, then at the surrounding area, memorizing the features. I would come back with a flashlight and some rope, I decided. I would get a good look at that rock. I had the feeling it held the answer.

When I came back from town, carrying a coil of rope and a flashlight, the tunnel had vanished.

**Chapter 9**
Several days had passed since my escapades in the forest. My oddly marked Espeon now knew Psychic, Swift, Morning Sun, and Shadow Ball. My Shroomish had long since become a Breloom, and learned Force Palm, Sky Uppercut, Stun Spore, and Solarbeam. Tailow should have evolved too, but had refused. It knew Quick Attack, Wing Attack, Aerial Ace, and Agility.

Several times, we had come in second place. We lost our ribbons by only a few points. I didn't know what we were doing wrong. But I had resolved to try harder, to come up with new tricks. And somewhere along the way, I stopped thinking of my pokemon as animals and tools, and started thinking of them as friends and companions. I decided to catch no others until all of my pokemon had earned their first ribbons.

Today, after spending so long training, I was going to win a ribbon. I could feel it. I entered the competition.

"Tay?" my little bird chirped inquisitively. I stroked its feathers, then fitted on its little clear harness. Colorful streamers were tied on near the tail, each streamer about a foot long. Today was Tailow's day; we would be relying heavily on Agility. Espeon was laying under our prep table, head on its paws, watching everyone get ready with half closed eyes. Our tag lay next to Tailow's tiny nails. It read **#38**. I pinned it on, picked up Tailow, and waited for the announcer's voice.

It took so long, but then...

"Entry 38, come to the main stage."

I walked to the stage, passing Entry 37, a boy and his Poochyena. He looked like he had little confidence in his performance. I nodded to him as I passed, but he stared fixedly forward, and walked by as if he hadn't seen me. I walked onto the stage, the lights blindingly bright, and tossed Tailow into the air at the sound of the bell, streamers fluttering.

Later, after the competition was over and done with, and the sun sinking below the trees, I sat hunched over in the Pokemon Center, fighting to keep emotions under control. I had lost again. Someone stood in front of me. Eventually, I looked up. It was Wilder.

"My, oh, my," he said idly. "Did we lose again?" My jaw clenched.

"What does it matter to you?" I asked coldly.

"It doesn't," he said gleefully. "But I know something that could help you win." He tilted his head, begging to be asked. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"I don't care." I stared defiantly. "I can win on my own."

"But you haven't met all the right conditions." He laughed softly. "You might figure it out if you do a little in-depth research about the past winners." He walked away, his laughter floating back to me.

What did he mean, I hadn't met the right conditions?

**Chapter 10**
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.

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 pokemon other than Absols. The writer of the article thought it very mysterious that she didn’t use any other pokemon.

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 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 pokemon; 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 pokemon. The new pokemon would know moves usually obtained through breeding and TMs, and would be instant successes. Sometime after, when they had won a few ribbons, they would end up with a 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 pokemon 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 pokemon 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, the winner was a different Absol. I hadn’t made the connection before, but those pokemon were bred from gold bracelet winners.

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

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

“They all traded their starters for a new pokemon,” I said with a shrug. “So what? People do it all the time.” I glanced at him casually, then away again. He grinned at me.

“Absolutely right,” he agreed. “And they got them from the same person.”

“Along with a bracelet.”

He glanced at me. “And a bracelet. Do you know what they did after they won all the ribbons?”

“Earned money, judged contests, and bred their prize-winners.” I shrugged. “Again, I say so what? They breed starters with good moves, and they win more often. I can deal with that; I just have to make a better routine.”

“Not that simple, and you know it.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “They don’t just win more often, they are favored. It is completely outrageous, and more people are beginning to see the pattern.” 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. I blinked rapidly as my vision blurred, and went to find Wilder.

**Chapter 11**
Wilder was waiting for me in front of the pokemon center. He wore a sober expression, his mouth set in a grim line, his eyes no longer mischievous, but narrowed and serious. When I walked up to him, carrying my Espeon, he nodded a greeting.

“Second,” I told him stiffly, leaving the again unsaid. He nodded again. “So what did you want to say?”

He launched immediately into his explanation.

“The bracelet comes from an organization called Sophia Corbin Breeding Association, but all that’s put on the bracelet is SC, to honor the founder, Sophia Corbin. But they don’t just give away memberships; they go to the descendants of Team Magma and Team Aqua. It is thought by some that they are trying to reform as allies instead of enemies.”

My blood ran cold. Team Magma and Team Aqua had been defeated and disbanded decades ago. They had stolen pokemon, tried to awaken Groudon and Kyouger, and had even done the little-known deed of euthanizing pokemon that wouldn’t work for them or were deemed useless. It was a horrifying thought, that they might be making a comeback. I shuddered, hugging Espeon closer to me.

Wilder nodded. “My thoughts exactly. But while more people are noticing the favoring of the SC bred pokemon is being noticed, nothing else is. But I saw it, when I started to look into why certain trainers were being chosen. And I want to stop it.”

“So why me? Why ask me, why tell me, why talk to me at all?” I snapped. It didn’t make sense; I was a nobody from my home town, and apparently second-best in the contest ring.

“Because you care,” he snapped. “Look at them.” He gestured to the others hanging around the square. “They lost, but they don’t care. All they know is a coordinator is supposed to enter contests, and it is better to be a coordinator because trainers are so condemned. Trainers are violent; their presence is undesirable. But they want pokemon, and the only other way to have one is by being a coordinator. It doesn’t really matter to them. If I told any of them that SC bred pokemon were favored, they would shrug and walk away. If I told them who was getting the bracelets, they would say, ‘So what? It has nothing to do with us. We’ll deal with it when we get there.’ Then they will walk away.” He glared.

“So why is it so important to you?” I spat. “Why not let someone else deal with it, like an actual trainer?”

“Do you want it to get that far? I know ancestors of mine had to deal with them; I don’t think there’s a coordinator or trainer alive today who can’t say the same.” He snorted. “If you don’t want to find out if that’s what SC is doing, then fine. I’ll find someone else.” He turned to walk away.

“It’s not that,” I said sharply. “If Team Magma and Team Aqua are making a comeback, then yeah, they should be stopped. But what if you’re wrong? Their descendants are worse off than those who decide to become trainers; they’re given second-best on starter choices, they have to work harder and longer for what they want, and they are treated as outcasts. What if the Sophia Corbin Breeding Association is trying to give them a second chance, an edge that they couldn’t have had otherwise?”

“That’s what I want to find out!” He stared at the winner, who was chattering with the others directly across from us, not a care in the world. If I had won, I would have gone straight to the next town, for the next ribbon. I would have modified my routine as needed, made it tighter and smoother, cut out anything unnecessary, made the discipline and beauty and control obvious. I would have worked for perfection. “What if I am wrong? There are no consequences if we find that, as long as we don’t spread it around what we’re doing. But if we find something, we need to do something.” He gave me a hard stare. “Will you help me?”

I deliberated quietly. I didn’t want to go sticking my nose into something that looked so completely innocent, but what would happen if Wilder was right? I couldn’t stand by.

Yet I didn’t think there was anything suspicious about the SC. I did think we would find something, but I didn’t think it would have to do with the SC.

I took a deep breath. “Yes,” I said. “If only to keep you out of trouble.” I watched him warily; he seemed the type to jump into something without thinking, if it was something he felt strongly enough about.

He nodded, giving a winning smile. I felt my stomach clench.

**Chapter 12**
Months of investigation later, and Wilder hadn't found any evidence pointing to the return of Team Aqua or Team Magma. Neither had I. We met today in Petalburg City's newly-built cafe to discuss our plan, and I was going to insist we do something else, find something else to occupy our time. I wasn't going to pursue this charade any longer.

Wilder fidgeted nervously under my hard stare. I would have given it up weeks ago, if he hadn't insisted we were close to finding something. "I know I've said this before," he began, "but we're so close!" He was almost whining. I gritted my teeth. Focus, I reminded myself. He's done this before. Be strong.

"Yes," I said with a sigh, "you have said that before. But we've found nothing. It's time to move on." I almost flinched at his hurt look, but didn't. In the time we had been investigating, I had grown to like Wilder. He had a sharp wit and a wicked sense of humor. But he insisted on chasing ghosts of the past. I wasn't entirely sure he *wasn't* persecuting Teams Aqua and Magma's descendents *because* they were descendents. I told him that. He flinched.

"I'm not persecuting them!" he cried. "Why should they have special treatment, though? They're the only ones winning." He stared at the ground mutinously.

"Maybe it's the only way they can," I said patiently. "We've been over this; they're persecuted all over the place, they need something to help them win. SC's reputation is all they have going for them." I stood, stretching. "I don't think you're wrong, about them getting special treatment," I admitted. "But enough's enough." Espeon stretched and yawned lazily, preparing to follow me off to Petalburg Woods. We had traveled all over, but we always trained there.

"What if I'm right?" he asked loudly, drawing the attention of the cafe patrons. I walked back over, knowing this was what he wanted, but playing into it to avoid a scene.

"Then I will freely admit my mistake and help however I can," I said honestly. "But until then, I'm going to live my life as the best coordinator I can be."

"You still believe in that?" he asked incredulously.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked sharply. "I've been waiting for you to get over this insanity, so I could get back to *my* path. I've yet to win a ribbon, because of you." I looked at Espeon, now a beautiful creature and a strong fighter. "There aren't any SC members today; we'll win," I crooned at it. My Espeon, who had never really said anything, pawed the air silently. I left the cafe.

A stranger watched me, then finally crossed the square to me. I noticed the silver bracelet he wore, the nice clothes, and the attitude...so much like Wilder's had been before this obsession with SC had set in. He was older than me, though.

"May I walk with you?" he asked stiffly. He seemed alright, so I said yes, inviting Espeon into my arms to warn him about getting to close. We headed off to Petalburg Woods in silence.

"Anything you need?" I asked once we were outside of town, sick of the silence.

"I see you've met Jacob." He stared off towards the ocean.

"Yes, we've known each other for a few months now."

"Be careful of him. I know him well, and he's told me about his hunt. If you've left it, I doubt he'll let you go easily."

I shivered. "He's strong," I admitted. "But so am I. In recent battles, I've managed to end it in a draw."

"That's good." We stopped at the entrance to the Wood. "But he is right about one thing."

I stiffened, thinking he would be going on about Wilder's madness as well, but said, "Oh?"

"As long as SC stands, normal coordinators won't have a chance of winning." He looked at me. "Unless, of course, there was a different place to hold contests, where your status as a member of SC didn't matter."

A thrill passed through my body. "Is there such a place?"

"There is, but it isn't licensed." He looked at me, as if to ask, *Do you want to see it?*

"So if won't count towards the final contests held every five years?" I asked coolly.

"No," he admitted, "but we're trying to become more recognized. With recognition, we have a better chance at obtaining a license. But to be recognized, we need participants, members of our own."

"And you want me to join?"

"Yes."

I stared at the entrance. "What's it called?"

"It doesn't have a name, just like the normal contest circle."

"Any requirements?" I told myself it was just curiosity, but I wasn't fooling myself; I remembered my own tears at the last contest I had entered.

"We have a small participant base, so until it grows, we're staying quiet. It is very recent, within the last year." Something flashed in his eyes, but I couldn't tell what.

"How am I supposed to earn a living, then?"

He shrugged. "We can set you up with jobs, and while the Trainer School is no longer open, we can also set you up with breeders. You will help them, and in return, you will get part of the profits of what is sold." He looked at me, our eyes meeting squarely. "Will you join?"

I looked off towards the contest hall. I knew I would never get a ribbon there, but also had a gut feeling that this "shadow contest," as I had decided to call it, would never be recognized. It was my dream to become a famous coordinator, to have my name be known. I mentioned this to him, not entirely aware of what I was saying.

He laughed, the sound startling me. "We may not be recognized in Hoenn, but we are in Unova. If you want, you can travel out there to participate. The first time they've had actual contests; I believe they had something more like a theatre competition."

I pulled a face; I had heard about that, and while it didn't sound entirely like a bad idea, I still liked the contests I was familiar with best. "All right, I'll join," I said finally. "But what do I call you?"

"Out in the open, my normal name. It is Cody." He smiled, his teeth bright white. "But in our contest rings, we don't use our real names. We wear a mask also. This is because someone may invite a better-known coordinator, and this will help keep there from being favoritism. Even if I told you my ring name, you wouldn't recognize me."

"So, just where are you based?" I asked casually.

"We are literally an underground society. There is actually an entrance in Petalburg Woods, if you would care to watch a contest now." He walked into the woods, and I hurried to follow. He led me through a strangely familiar path.

When we passed the clearing where I had found my Breloom, then a Shroomish, I realized why; the tunnel where I had been unconscious, and where Eevee had evolved into Espeon, had been here. It had disappeared mysteriously...

I thought that's where we were going, but Cody passed it by. He led me to a different clearing, to a different hidden tunnel. It was larger, with a gentler slope, I noticed as we slipped inside. He tugged at a vine, and the entrance was hidden with a clever little covering. He turned on a flashlight and I followed him onward.

The tunnel continued on downward, until the dirt-covered floor evened out and became smooth, swept stone. The tunnel began to look less rough and tunnel-ly, and more smooth and cut-looking. Eventually, we came out into a wide cavern.

Someone had obviously used Secret Power to make a Base, because the cavern had been sculpted, painted, and decorated as a lobby. A receptionist sat behind a desk, waiting to greet us. There was another tunnel behind the desk, behind a door. Cody led me up to her. "Let's get you registered," he said with a smile.

**Chapter 13**
The receptionist gave me a simple black mask that covered my eyes and nose, a plastic card, and a case. I picked it up, noticing it was a little heavy. The receptionist started to explain what I would find.

“I’m sure Cody has told you why we use masks?” I nodded. “Good. The card is for collecting points. In the Sinnoh region, they use special capsules that enclose the pokeball, and put special seals on the capsule so you can plan your entrance. The ideas came over when all the regions started trading together, but the normal contest circle doesn’t use it. We, however, do. It is your choice, of course, but in case you want to, you can buy seals and capsules with your earned points, as well as other items.

“The case holds supplies for your mask, so you can personalize it any way you like. There’s also fabric so you can make your own contest costume. It’s something we encourage, as you can’t use your real name. When you walk onto the stage, the costume and mask you wear become the persona others see, and only on the stage.” She smiled brightly. “Any questions?”

“If we can’t use our real names, what names do we use?” I wondered.

“Whichever one you like. Just be aware that you can’t change it,” she warned.

I thought for a moment. How would I like to be known? Espeon, whom I hadn’t let down yet, squirmed in my arms. My silent Espeon, who never seemed to speak the way the others did…

“Whisper,” I said, almost so quiet that they couldn’t hear me.

The receptionist nodded and entered the name. “If I can have your card for a moment, I’ll activate it,” she said. I handed it over; she tapped at the touch screen, swiped the plastic through a slot, and handed it back. “There you go, all ready now,” she said cheerfully. “You won’t be able to use it for twenty-four hours, but I suspect that you want to watch a contest now anyway.”

I nodded once, and Cody led me through a door, a different one than the one behind the receptionist. It was blue with a yellow star; Cody told me it was the spectators’ door. We walked through a winding corridor, with another downward slope, until we came to another door. When we walked through, we found ourselves in the stands of a contest ring.

We found seats near the back, and I realized that from the hush the first round was about to begin. I would see how these “shadow contests” were conducted from the start.

The first to walk on the stage was a young woman in a simple black outfit. She had saved all the color and brightness for her mask, the simple black obscured with red-and-gold glitter and big red feathers. The announcer called her name—“Solara”—and the pokemon she was using—a flareon. Their performance was truly amazing, and I could tell from the relatively small crowd that she was a favorite.

Only a few people were performing today. Cody said it was because of their small participant base. They were growing, but slowly. There was barely enough for everyone to have an opponent for the second round battles.

Those battles were better than anything I had seen in the normal contests. There were no novice mistakes, no panicking. I had heard elders saying that contests these days just weren’t the same; the coordinators had no heart anymore, no passion, no *reason*. But I could see here that they did. And I could suddenly understand why this circle existed.

I watched Solara win her battle with effortless grace. She won the contest, and I realized that the others hadn’t stood a chance, not really; but I would.

**Chapter 14**
The next day, Cody took me to meet some friend of his, a breeder who helped out the new coordinators. I would be helping two others take care of the breeder’s pair of surprisingly mild-natured Tyranitar and a pair of rather finicky Seviper, along with the duties of tending the berry garden and helping make pokeblocks. It would be more difficult than I would think, he warned me, but it would pay well enough. Larvitar and Seviper were rare, and the adoption fee was high.

The breeder—a woman named Justine—gave me a tour of the place; it was absolutely huge. I could tell I would be getting lost for a while until I memorized the lay of the place. When she asked my name, I almost gave her my stage name; I had never truly felt my real one—Erin—really represented me. But I gave it to her, and was introduced to Madeline and Trevor as that.

Then I was introduced to the Pokémon I would be caring for. They were friendly enough, but I watched Trevor try to give the Seviper pair a new type of pokeblock, and they turned their noses up. The Tyranitar pair were amazingly gentle, but the female actually took out a clump of Wiki bushes when she went searching for Madeline, the one who usually fed her and her mate.

This made me ask Justine why she had needed another assistant; the other two certainly helped with the garden and pokeblock making, and each had their own pair to feed and exercise, so why was I here? She told me she was expanding; she had bought several more acres for the garden and another pair of Pokémon, for another location. She was leaving soon to claim a pair of Lucario that someone could no longer care for. They would be my responsibility.

In the meantime, I would mainly be helping in the garden. It was relatively light work, just picking berries and blending blocks. Once I completed that, the rest of the day was mine. On weekends, all we had to do was feed the Pokémon, and then we were free. Madeline said she and Trevor used the time to prepare for contests, and I was welcome to join them. I thanked her and said I would take her up on the offer soon, but I needed to make my costume and mask first.

That night I checked the case. Black, blue, purple, silver and gold; ribbons, lace, and lengths of fabric; there were even packets of sew-on jewels and buttons, and a few patterns. I planned my outfit.

But first, the mask. Since my outfit would be mostly dark colors, I decided to keep with the theme. But once again, I thought of my Espeon, and sketched around the eyes, smoothing them from oval-shaped into something resembling Espeon’s. I went and borrowed a purple glitter pen from Madeline—she had a whole collection—and outlined the eyes. The purple was dark, just a few shades off from black, really. Not too noticeable until the artificial light of the arena hit it.

Breakfast the next day was eventful. Madeline enlisted me to help feed her charges. Apparently, Justine’s Tyranitar are frisky in the morning. Trevor had it easy; the Seviper didn’t get up until well after sunrise, so he could sleep in.

Madeline explained the schedule. After breakfast, we worked in the garden first, when it was coolest and the sun wouldn’t kill us; in the afternoon, after lunch, we were indoors, making pokeblocks. After dinner, the time was ours. I worked with Trevor in the garden; Madeline said I would only slow her down.

And that was when Trevor told me Justine was taking three helpers for one reason: she, a former coordinator, was looking for someone who could take over her business. That was a shock; I didn’t see why she couldn’t continue. Trevor said it could take years to learn everything perfectly, without checking notes, and that was without being a coordinator on top of that.

“I’ve already started memorizing,” he said cheerfully. “All top breeders were coordinators, or at least trainers, and I’ve already won ribbons in my age group.”

“Age group?” I asked blankly. Something Cody hadn’t mentioned…?

“If you went to Petalburg right now, I bet you a few adults would be registering for the later shows,” Trevor said easily. “It’s common courtesy for them to not enter the same show as younger coordinators, because they have more experience. But in the bigger cities, a few of them enter anyway, to assure a few wins—and ribbons—for themselves. To avoid that altogether, the founders made a system of age groups.” He plucked an Oran berry from a bush. “After a while, the older ones retire, like in the cities. When you retire, your name and picture is revealed. It makes your decision final.”

It was a bit more complicated than the contests I was used to, but it seemed to be working just fine. I nodded, thinking about how much better contests would flow when all the coordinators in a given contest were on relatively equal footing.

“So what Pokémon do you use?” he asked casually.

“Not Beautifly,” I muttered, thinking of the so-common bug. Trevor laughed. We finished and went in to lunch.

Making the pokeblocks was interesting; I had never done it before, so I messed up a lot. Trevor was patient, but Madeline, who had been so sure that I would only get in her way, began to show her true colors.

“No wonder she has us using Orans today,” she sniffed. “They’re so easy to grow and replace, it would be a shame to use anything else on a newbie.” She walked off to a separate machine, where a basket of Pamtre waited. “Good thing she wants to keep us somewhat on schedule,” she sneered, dropping a berry in. “She asked me to blend some more advanced blocks today.”

Trevor seemed to take it all in stride, like her behavior was normal, but I had to literally bite my own tongue to keep from snapping a comment back. What made her think she was so much better, anyway?

“She’s just anxious,” Trevor said, starting up the machine. “With only us two, she had a fifty percent chance of Justine choosing her as an apprentice. Now it’s down to thirty-three percent.” He picked up a berry, gesturing for me to do the same. “Now, see that big red button?” I nodded. “Tap it when the lever spins by your part.” We each dropped one in.

After a while, Madeline came over to watch, snickering at how much I messed up. In the end, Trevor and I ended up with a pile of low-grade blocks that she shrieked would never be fit for anything other than the compost heap out back. When she was gone, Trevor confided that I had done much better my first time around then either of them had their first time.

“She’s just trying to make you lose your nerve,” he said.

Well, then. I helped Trevor feed his charges that night, grinning at the thought of Madeline’s failed tactics. If she thought her behavior would make me run away, she had another thing coming.

**Chapter 15**
The weekend came with no major problems during the week. On Saturday, Madeline and Trevor invited me to practice contest-battling, and since Justine had lent me her sewing machine and I had finished my costume earlier than I had expected, I accepted on the condition that I watch the first round. I wanted to see their battle styles, so I could recognize them in the arena.

The first thing I noticed was that Trevor’s battling was appallingly bad. He froze during key points, letting Madeline take advantage of his weaknesses and allowing what could have been a great strategy fall apart. And he had won ribbons in his age group? He had to be lying.

The next was that Madeline took shameless advantage of every opportunity. Her Pokémon were graceful and agile, and she used that to overwhelm Trevor. At first I thought she would be fast and efficient in her battle style, but she seemed to waste time and energy on trivial little flourishes. Yet I could see how it worked to her advantage; when she battled with her Wingull, she used its agility to distract Trevor from the actual battle, and then directed it to take out his poor Vigoroth before either could recover. It was a carefully thought out strategy.

And then it was my turn. I battled Trevor first, my Tailow versus his Vigoroth. I could tell he was expecting a similar strategy to Madeline’s.

But I surprised him, and that was even worse. Rather than using little flourishes, I stayed direct, keeping my attacks efficient. Tailow destroyed him before he even realized what was happening. Madeline used her Wingull again when we battled, and while the battle lasted longer, I managed to beat her, too; I didn’t let her stylized battling fool me.

But my wins came at a price. Madeline stalked away, nose so far up in the air I probably could have seen her tonsils. Trevor congratulated me on the wins, but he was subdued, and didn’t speak to me until after dinner. After that, he was overly cheerful, trying too hard to make me think he was alright with being beaten by someone who hadn’t managed to win a single ribbon before. I couldn’t really blame him, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel sorry for him, either; if he had really won ribbons, he shouldn’t have been able to be distracted so easily.

Sunday came, and with it, my first contest. I was the last coordinator in the routine rounds; there were fifty of us altogether. Only sixteen of us would be moving on. I would be using Espeon today.

I kept my routine basic, but I had practiced it until it was perfect. Psychic to lift balloons filled with air and glitter, Shadow Ball to pop them. A recently-learned Morning Sun to fill the stadium with bright light, setting the glitter off. All of it was done perfectly; the only flourishes to the entire thing were done during that routine. I received a score high enough to place me in the top five, along with Solara, who had appeared today as well.

My first battle was against someone who called himself Zeus. He used a Manectric, and battled fairly well, if it weren’t for him freezing up all the time…

Wait. Freezing up? He had to be Trevor! With a sad smile, I ordered Espeon to speed up the frequency of attacks; as I thought, it blew truck-sized holes through a strategy that was only just taking shape. This time, I did feel bad for him; I had watched his routine, and it had been every bit as beautiful as Solara’s, in its own way. But the minute he stumbled, he lost confidence, and Espeon ran rings around his Manectric. I won in less than two minutes.

Another round of battles, and I faced off against Illumination, a girl who used a Flareon. The poor beast was no match for Espeon’s speed, but Illumination battled well enough that it came down to a judge’s decision. I won, but only barely.

In the semi-finals, I fought against a girl called Weaver and her Ariados. It almost came down to another judge’s decision, but I managed to use a final Psychic and win. That left me against Solara, whose battle style had convinced me it was really Madeline. Haughty personality, needless stylization…it all fit.

And battling her myself convinced me of it. I sent my Espeon against her Beautifly—what a waste of time. She used its moves and natural beauty to try and intimidate me, but Espeon was just as agile and graceful, and we managed to win by half a point.

It was then that I noticed Cody and Justine in the stands, watching us closely. I grinned at them, and received my ribbon for a first-time win.

**Chapter 16**
When I got back, Justine was already home, waiting to speak to me. She handed me a notebook.

“I recognized your battle style,” she said before I could say a word. “I’ve watched Trevor and Madeline for the two months they’ve been here without seeing in them the potential I’ve seen in you.” She left.

The notebook was a five-subject one with pretty much everything a breeder would need to know. It was a replacement for the pokedex that was no longer handed out to trainers. I wished I had the compact digital reference instead, but I would have to use this, and preferably memorize it.

I sighed and got started; I would need to learn Lucario and Riolu’s moves first…

A few more weeks passed. Every Sunday I entered competitions, getting better and better; first I dropped Shadow Ball from the routine and began working on Return again, a move I hadn’t touched since Espeon had been an Eevee. Then I worked on perfecting the routine. Last I worked on our battling, since I felt we didn’t need to work too hard there.

The Lucario pair arrived at their separate ranch, and I moved there to take care of them. Trevor and Madeline hadn’t seen my exchange with Justine, but they both snubbed me now, hinting that they knew what had passed between us. I wasn’t surprised that Madeline was acting like that, but I was sad when Trevor did because I had begun to view him as a close friend.

And another change came. I began to enjoy the battling portion of the competitions more than the routine portion, a realization that appalled me because trainers were so condemned. But I made myself recognize it; there was no point in avoiding it, for all I agreed heartily with everyone else that the last thing I—and any other coordinator—enjoyed was battling. I felt guilty for lying.

In town, I learned that the League was open again, for those who wished to take the challenge.

**Chapter 17**
I almost took the League challenge. Almost.

It was abundantly clear that, while I loved the shadow contests with all my heart because of their challenge and fair chances, I wouldn’t be recognized by many people here. And I felt a strange panic at the thought of being tied to this breeder’s ranch.

Cody did say that they were recognized in Unova, though, right? I fingered the cover of the notebook thoughtfully.

Could I make a copy of it? It would help me memorize it, sure, but I would also have a reference in case I decided not to stick around. Trevor and Madeline were so angry with me, I admitted to myself that might be about half the reason I wanted to go, but I still felt the need for something more than this.

I didn’t want to hide behind a mask, and I might not have to in Unova…

The same contests with pokemon that were entirely new to me was appealing…

The thoughts whirled around inside my head for a long time; it was hard to make a decision. But in the end I decided that if I continued to feel like that at the end of…two months, I’d give myself two months…then I would head for Unova. In the meantime, I would copy the notebook’s contents and prepare myself for whichever path I ended up on.

I had to admit, the next week was fun. I learned about myth-items that were rumored to exist but hadn’t been proven, for one thing. One such item was the Victory Bell, a flower that you fed to the mother-pokemon to get shiny babies. I learned of the rumored existence of a Soul Dew, somehow kept intact outside of a pool of water, which was a shock to me—I had always been told that the two legendary pokemon it controlled had long since disappeared.

Actually, they disappeared when the traditional starters stopped getting handed out. It was funny, how many things had happened around the same time.

I memorized the starting moves of a newborn Riolu—Quick Attack, Foresight, and Endure.

And as I spent more and more time with Justine, learning what I needed to know, Trevor got further and further away. He spoke to me in almost the same way Madeline did, only a little more politely. I decided he was stuck up and over-sensitive, but still made an effort to be friends, which he ignored.

Finally, after almost a week of this treatment, I cornered him while we made pokeblocks—separately today, because I didn’t need anyone’s help anymore, so the quality wasn’t too bad.

“What is wrong with you?” I demanded quietly. Madeline, oblivious for all that she was about five feet away, continued with Pamtre blocks.

“I don’t know, what is wrong with me?” he asked sarcastically. “You show up, amazing at everything, and with less than two weeks with us you’re Justine’s apprentice! Whatever could be wrong?” He snorted and picked another basket of berries to blend: Charti and Payapa. I picked up a basket of Enigma and Custap.

“Oh please,” I snapped. “You think I cheated?” He looked away; my eyes widened with shock. “You do think I cheated! All I did was do my best, it’s not my fault you were so easy to beat!”

“No one’s beat me before!” he snapped back, voice rising steadily. “I’ve won ribbons in my age group. Only Madeline’s beat me, and that’s outside the ring, and because she’s in a different age group. She’s had more experience.”

I almost wanted to apologize when I heard the edge of desperation in his voice, but it wasn’t my fault I was chosen over him, so I didn’t. Instead I said, “How could you have been winning ribbons in your age group, the way you hesitate? There’s no way it could happen.” I started blending my blocks at the station next to his, determined to get my work done today; I had been studying so hard and long lately that I had begun to fall asleep in my chair.

“I don’t hesitate! I gave you a chance, that’s all, and it won’t happen again.” He glared at me.

“Good,” I replied frostily. “Maybe you’ll give me a challenge, then.” I turned pointedly away.

He growled—actually growled—and stomped away, depositing his basket at a different station.

If he wasn’t lying, I thought grimly, then he’ll do better than our first battle. If he wasn’t lying, if he didn’t hesitate, then perhaps I wouldn’t feel so guilty next time I trounced him.

Perhaps I wouldn’t feel so guilty about practically calling him a liar, right to his face.