

EMMA's partner Pokémon was an Eevee: it was a family tradition. Eevee had been with her as long as she remembered, and was certainly more loyal than any human friend. Unlike most Pokémon, though, she didn't really do anything *useful*. Others had important roles in the city, fighting crime, selling bus tickets; Eevee wasn't like that.

"There's a reason," said Nora, home from university for a long weekend, sitting filing her nails, feet propped up on her Vaporeon, who looked like he seemed to be enjoying it. "She needs to evolve before she'll be of any real use. You'll get it when you're older."

Nora – Emma's sister – attended university outside Ryme City, in a part of the country where Pokémon and humans lived the segregated lives that tradition dictated. She hired Vaporeon out to a trainer while they were out there, some kid who was always getting into scrapes and had a lot to prove. He was apparently incredibly rich, and paid Nora twice the going rate for the rental; over the course of a semester, she made a packet, which she always managed to spend within days. Emma didn't know how, only that their mother was not in favour of the arrangement.

"Kids are gonna tease you," said Nora bluntly, finishing off her nails and catching Emma's eye for the first time. "You need to evolve her soon or you won't hear the end of it. Do you have the cash for a stone?"

"Mum set up a savings account for it," Emma explained.

Evolutionary stones were expensive. Mum knew that better than most: her own partner Pokémon was an Espeon. She'd saved like crazy for an evolutionary stone when *she* was a kid, and then blown the lot trying to impress a guy she met at the Moomoo Milk Bar, a doomed summer romance that had ended as soon as the weather turned. Mum had had to go down the affection route after that, pampering her Eevee relentlessly until he eventually changed. According to what she had told Emma, she'd spent a whole three years after she finished school doing little else – not even working, just paying attention to her Eevee until he finally deigned to evolve one morning.

Espeon and Umbreon looked cool, but as Mum and Nora never ceased to warn Emma, they didn't *do* much. Pokémon had to have a purpose. They were, apparently, an important constituent part of Ryme City's economy. Eevee's other forms were supposedly more useful in that regard: Emma should pick whichever of them would be the best at helping her get established in her chosen career. Mum and Nora weren't usually this mercenary, but this was a topic where they insisted, the result of being accustomed to getting strung along by men and having to make their own way in the world. Emma was no more interested in men than in picking a form for Eevee to evolve into. "Early days," Nora used to cackle, whenever she brought it up. "You'll get there, sweetie."

To stop them endlessly hassling her about it, Emma agreed to do some research of her own, and found herself wandering

the city keeping a lookout for Eevee's different evolutions and the uses they were being put to. Ryme City had been meticulously planned, with positions for Pokémon in every part of its infrastructure. Most of the menial jobs were held by Pokémon – not that that meant they were exploited. In fact, where possible, they and their partner humans were given preferential treatment. Humans who took the rarer and less easily handled Pokémon as partners were rewarded with tax cuts and various other incentives from the municipality, in order to fill some of the more esoteric roles and encourage species diversity.

Emma was familiar enough with Vaporeon because of Nora's, which she had evolved about ten years ago: Nora had always been precocious. Nonetheless, she went out looking for another, trying to understand them from a more professional perspective. She found one, soon enough, at the swimming pool: no surprises there. It sat underneath the lifeguard's chair, keeping an eye on the Pokémon swimming in the pool as attentively as its partner watched over the humans. At one point, a tiny Joltik began squeaking in alarm, having drifted into water it must have believed too deep to handle, and the Vaporeon elegantly dived into the pool and scooped the little thing delicately into its mouth, carrying it to safety at the poolside.

Emma couldn't see herself or Eevee doing a thing like that: the smell of chlorine was far too overpowering, for one thing.

Not long afterwards, she came across a Flareon and a Glaceon in a bar – it was sheer luck that she was looking and happened to catch sight of them through the window. She couldn't actually go inside the bar until she had gone home and found an expired ID of Nora's that bore a close enough resemblance. Nonetheless, after rooting around in a few drawers, she went straight back, ordered an orange juice, tried to ignore the odd looks from the staff (the humans, of course – Pokémon would never be so judgemental) and settled down to watch the two creatures she had identified.

The bar served food, although Emma didn't have the cash for it. It was one of those places that prided itself on the integration of Pokémon into its working environment: some places just shoved a Quagsire or two into the kitchen to take care of the washing up and benefit from the associated tax cuts, but this was the kind of establishment where the Pokémon really were part of the process. The Flareon was in charge of grilling the food and putting the final fiery touches on some of the more ludicrous cocktails. It could take two at a time: one with its breath, the other with its tail. The punters watched and cheered every time a drink was lit. In between orders, the Flareon would wind its way around the bar, making sure the place was warm enough for the customers, climbing briefly into the laps of any who encouraged it to do so.

The Glaceon, of course, was in charge of ice. In the trendier establishments such as this one, standard ice cubes were seen

as tremendously passé, and of course needlessly harmful to the environment. Instead, the done thing was to have one's tame Glaceon breathe its icy breath over the drink, causing crystals to settle over the top of it in a pretty pattern that was very effective in keeping the liquid chilled. This Glaceon had a bit more work to do than its opposite number – ice was required in a lot of drinks, after all – but it didn't do the rounds like Flareon did. Presumably nobody wanted to get too cold. Or maybe, Emma decided, it might do that on warm summer evenings. It was winter when she visited, and she was wearing a thick duffel coat, which perhaps explained why the Flareon wasn't going near her – not much room on her lap with the thick layers of material. She'd left Eevee at home, too, so that nobody sussed her out as underage.

Walking home after her third orange juice, she pondered. Ice and fire seemed useful elements to have at one's command, but choosing between them would be difficult. Being followed around everywhere by a Flareon would be as uncomfortable in summer as by a Glaceon in winter; it would hardly be a very balanced way to live.

It took a while to find a Jolteon. There was a day when, unusually, the power went out in the apartment building, and a vanload of men and Pokémon from the city council turned up to fix it: it seemed to be due to a fault in an overhead cable. Emma went out for a walk – no point sitting at home when the wifi was off – and made herself comfortable on a bench across

the street to watch the men and their Pokémon at work. There was a Jolteon among them, giving the occasional zap to the power line. Each time it did this, it flashed white and its fur stood on end, which looked pretty cool, Emma had to admit. Dangerous, though, to keep a Pokémon with electric power: that was probably why most of them belonged to the council instead of being in the care of private citizens. Emma's mum had once told her about how she used to go out with a guy with a Boltund, and how one day it got so excited playing fetch that it discharged all its electricity and scorched all the leaves off one of the trees in the park, and Mum's boyfriend had had to pay a fine on account of his Pokémon's "despoilment of the urban landscape's aesthetic qualities".

"All right there, miss?" said one of the men from the council, wiping his hands on a rag after fiddling around with the cables in the electricity box, his Plusle peering down at Emma curiously from his shoulder.

"Yes, thank you," she said politely.

"Good," he said. "We'll have your power back on directly. Don't worry, you'll be online again soon."

It turned out to be more complicated than that, though, because they were still working on it half an hour later, and there was only so much watching Emma could do before it started to look weird. She headed out to the metro station instead, hoping to take a trip out to the suburbs. The subterranean must have exceeded the permitted pollution threshold for the day,

because there was a Leafeon in position by the ticket office, calmly purifying the air as the busy passengers made their way towards the concourse without sparing it a glance. Leafeon looked cool, Emma had always thought, but by all accounts it was an incredibly passive Pokémon, just lying there serenely instead of doing anything of particular note. Great for the environment, of course, and the city council swore by them, but quite frankly a boring Pokémon to have as one's personal companion.

With Espeon and Umbreon written off, that just left Sylveon, the one she knew least about. In fact, when Emma reflected, she didn't think she'd ever even come across a Sylveon before.

"I'm not surprised," said Nora, back for another long weekend with the trainer who rented Vaporeon in tow: apparently they were an item now, and he wasn't a kid at all, but actually a couple of years older than Nora, with a degree in hydrology. "It's the rarest out of all of them," she explained. "Not worth the effort."

Nora's boyfriend was trying to make it as a professional trainer, which was apparently a risky endeavour. Over dinner he told them with great enthusiasm about how he'd broken three bones in the arena over the past year: one of his arms was still in a sling as a result of the most recent of these incidents, not that he seemed to mind. Emma wasn't particularly interested in the story: there were no trainers in Ryme City

anyway. Moreover, she was still resolutely unmoved by boys of any kind, despite Nora's increasing reluctance to believe her on that point.

Sylveon remained an enigma for some time, until Emma spied one at work. She'd taken a weekend job as a runner at the small community hospital in her neighbourhood, transporting paperwork from one department to another in what must have been the least efficient system ever to have been invented. For a start, it was ludicrous not to be able to use scanned electronic copies in this day and age, and even if they weren't able to do that, there seemed to be no reason why it couldn't be a job for a Pokémon: there must have been at least one species that was the right kind of size and wouldn't leave bite or burn or water marks in the documentation. But if Pokémon did all the low-level jobs like this, she supposed, all the young and as yet unqualified people like her would have no source of income, so best not to complain.

The Sylveon, it turned out, was in the business of relationship counselling, this being one of the various services the hospital offered to the community. Emma had been tasked with bringing some documents to one of the counsellors; there was an appointment in progress, so she knew not to go in. She tried not to eavesdrop, either, but a peek through the little window in the door gave her a sight of the Sylveon, standing between the couple, a feeler stretched towards each of them. She remembered what she'd been taught at school about Sylveon,



then (it hadn't come to her before, but who could blame her when there were over eight hundred Pokémon and they'd had to study every single one) – the species was known specifically for its calming aura. By using its feelers to make contact with an aggravated party, it had the ever-useful ability of diffusing tension and inspiring calmness.

Emma waited until the couple had left appointment, then headed into the room to pass the paperwork to her colleague, who took it without sparing her a glance. On her way out, she extended an experimental hand to the Sylveon, and immediately felt tranquility wash over her. She was so relaxed that it was immediately very tempting to lie down and go to sleep. The intensity of the sensation was, somewhat counter-intuitively, almost frightening. This was probably what being on drugs felt like, she reckoned. Some drugs, at least.

Extracting herself from the Sylveon's touch, she escaped into the corridor. A partner Pokémon like that would be too much; enough contact with one of those would surely alter the mind. Now that she thought about it, the counsellor had come across as a bit spaced out – probably from having to spend so much time with it.

She took stock on her way home from work: she'd seen all of Eevee's potential evolutions by now – all those that seemed achievable, at least. And yet none of them had really seemed especially appealing: their specialisations meant that while they were very good at what they did, there would always be a lot

of disadvantages to choosing one of them. Eevee had no special talent or skill, sure, but she could fit into any situation that Emma might want to put her in, and that was a benefit of its own.

Evening drew on; the shadows lengthened. As Emma walked, Eevee hopped up into her arms, settling into a familiar position. The tip of her tail tickled Emma's chin. Evolving could wait, and so could growing up; and never mind what anyone thought about it.