



# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter One: What Happened to the Mouse*



## Chapter One: What Happened To the Mouse?

A short while after Mewtwo had teleported away with Mew and Celebi in psychic tow, the sprinklers dousing the entire laboratory floor faltered and stopped their deluge. A sudden eerie silence fell.

Slowly, the humans clustered around the room staggered upright, looking around carefully and treading gingerly around the sparking puddles of water.

“The specimens are all gone,” a man said grimly, the disappointment in his voice obvious.

“I don’t understand,” Lovrina said, pouting. “You told me Kitty would stay like that forever! But he changed back for no reason!” Her lower lip began to quiver. “My beautiful XD002!” she wailed, her hands tugging at her saturated pigtails.

“We need to leave, Miss,” he continued. “Cipher’s security and anonymity have been completely compromised now. The pokémon... may come back with extra force.”

Lovrina glared around the room, her gaze fixing upon the destroyed shadow machine chair. “None of this was meant to happen like it did.”

“We’ll regroup, and try again elsewhere,” another man said, his voice reassuring. “XD002 was a fluke discovery from the beginning. We hadn’t planned in advance.”

“I want a stronger one,” she said, turning towards the exit door. “I want XD003.”

“We’ll make it happen, Miss.”

Her peons followed her out the door. The last one in line halted for a moment, his attention casting back to the empty pokéballs spotting the room. Then, realising he was being left behind – and that they were impossible to reach without putting himself at risk of electrocution – he flipped his hand in a dismissive gesture and forgot about them. Pokéballs were only P200 apiece after all.

If in fact they had all been empty...

Merely moments later the only echoing sounds in the laboratory were the constant dripping of water from a leaking sprinkler and the occasional fizz of a loose broken wire at the chair.

The pokéballs were already deep in water. One sparked, its electronics shorting out, which activated its failsafe release protocol. Before the ball's electronics died completely, it opened; releasing the last shadow pokémon left.

Shadow Pikachutwo came to on the sodden, electrified floor. The cold water was up to her haunches and her fur immediately absorbed it, sending a chill down her spine.

*I hate this place.*

*I hate water.*

*I hate everything.*

*What is going on? Where is everybody? Why am I alone?*

*Where is something to kill?*

Pikachutwo screamed wordlessly in rage and frustration, her body zapping with purple electricity which spread over the whole waterlogged floor. The electricity intensified, prickling at her feet almost painfully. This only served to increase her rage; ending with Pikachutwo stuck in a vicious cycle of attacking with more and more electricity.

And still the water dripped.



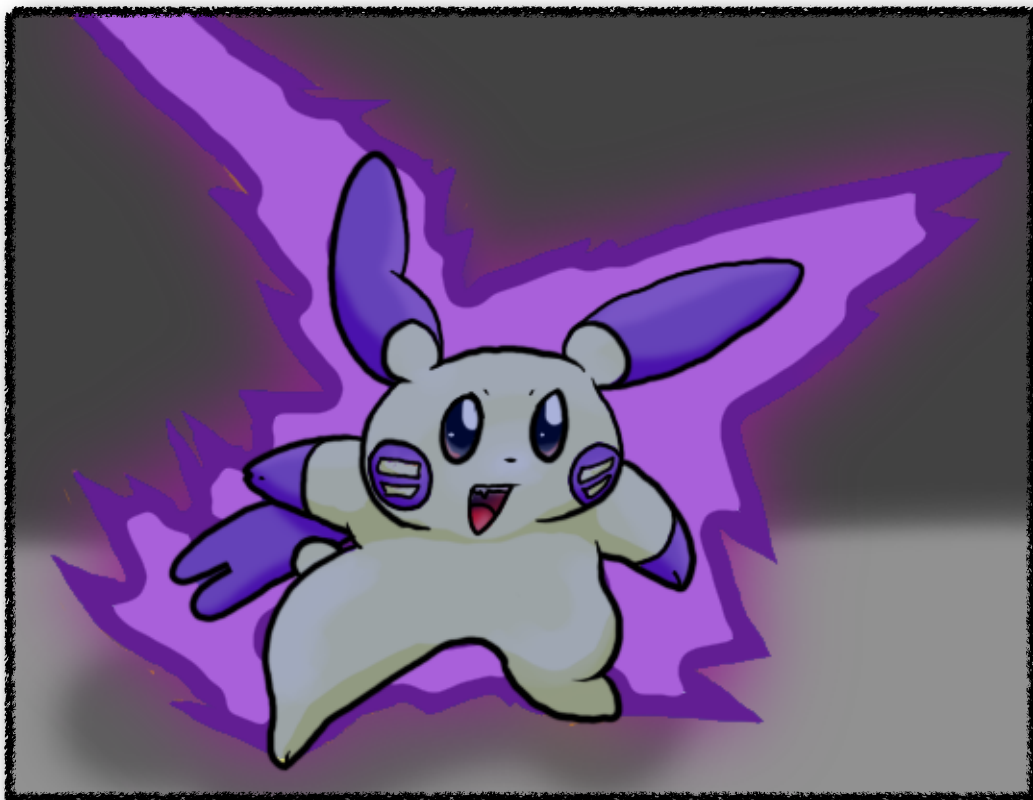
Minutes, hours, (days?) later, the door opened again with a rusted squeal. Pikachutwo turned at the sound, her eyes hazed over in blood red fury, her feet and haunches singed so much the fur had turned black and in some places had begun to fall off.

“Oh Gods,” a voice said. “We’ve got a live one. Over.”

“Capture on, Ranger. Over and out.” \*bzzt\*

The electronic sound ripped through her ears. *Finally. Something to kill.*

Pikachutwo raised her arms where she stood, and brought all her chaotic electricity into her cheeks. “Pika-CHU!” she screamed, lashing out with a vicious thunderbolt towards the shadowy figure at the door.



Something she hadn't noticed before at the human's feet leaped to intercept the attack - leaped right in front of it - and absorbed all its electric charge completely.

The human behind it gasped in relief. "Thanks, Neutri."

"Neu!" it replied, crouching on the floor and shuddering slightly in reaction to the amount of power in the attack.

"My turn."

Pikachutwo saw a trail of light whisk up into the air and zoom towards her. "Pi-KA!" she yelped in surprise and fear, attacking it with more electricity. But the thing effortlessly evaded the attack with a rapid twist through the air and looped back to continue its progress towards her. Before Pikachutwo knew it, the light was circling her time and time again, each loop shrinking upon itself until her body was absorbing it.

It hurt so much.

*I want to help you. Please.*

Someone was talking to her in her mind. That hurt even more.

"Go away!" she roared, and wildly flailed out at the loops of light with her tail. She batted at the small flying creature making the light and felt it connect with her paw's palm with extreme satisfaction.

She heard an electronic sound of alarm and a quick curse from the human.

“Nngh! One more hit like that and I’m done!”

“Status report? Over.”

“It’s gone into hyper mode! Over.”

The voice on the other side of the radio sighed. “There’s nothing for it. It’s practically impossible to link with a hyper mode shadow pokémon. You’ll have to use a pokéball. Over.”

“I don’t like it.” the human grumbled. “Over and out.” He fished in his pocket. “Neutri, can you defend us for a second?”

“Neu!”

*So much pain. Too many words.*

“Oh! This might do the trick instead.”

“*Shut up!*” Pikachutwo shouted, lashing out again with electricity. Neutri barked in response and stood firm. The attack lanced towards the human and his pokémon but then bounced off an invisible barrier shield and dissipated.

Pikachutwo shut her eyes and readied herself for another attack but then heard the distinct sound of smashing glass from right in front of her. A pungent scent rose from the liquid spreading through the water. Surprised, Pikachutwo opened her eyes and looked down at the smashed bottle and visibly yellow not-water. She sniffed deeper and felt her mind clear slightly and remember.

It smelled like the mountain. It smelled like the wind through the grass and the rich loam of the cavern. It smelled like the food eaten after drinking from the crystal clear lake water.

It smelled like home.

She paused and shut her eyes again, lost in the moment, the pain of her body slightly faded.

Light again swirled round her field of vision. Something tickled at her fur.

*Please, Pikachu, let me help you. Let us help you. That's all I want.*

Was that it? Really? But her name wasn't Pikachu. That belonged to the original pikachu. She was only a copy. A shadow. She'd wished her entire life for a bright future, a bright world, and to be free in it... but that had remained ever out of her grasp.

And then the other human had told her that she could be strengthened further in the shadows, and when it had seemed the only thing left to do Pikachutwo had surrendered to it and given up her dream - but the human had lied after all, and Pikachutwo had even lost that special unique part of herself, and she had become nothing. Nothing at all. It only proved that humans were never to be trusted.

*You CAN trust me. I want to be your friend.*

“Pika!” she cried, bent over and huddled on the floor, the water now uncomfortably seeping into her chest fur.

*You're hurting really bad, and I can't stand seeing you in so much pain. I'll help you feel better, and then we can find you a new home. I promise.*

The human was too far in - knowing every thought that passed through Pikachutwo's mind. Was that what that light had done?

*Who are you? Why do you want to help me?*

*I'm Tim. I'm a pokémon ranger. That's what we do, that's our job: to help pokémon.*

*I'm not a pokémon. I'm only a copy.*

*I don't know what you mean. When I look at you and talk to you I see and hear a pokémon. A real one.*

*You know nothing, Pikachutwo spat. I hate you.*

*Nonetheless. I can get you out of here. Will you let me help you?*

Another loop of light sunk in. He was telling the truth. Pikachutwo let her body grow limp upon the floor. *Fine.*

“Capture complete,” Tim murmured in relief.

When she felt strong warm arms enfold her body and cradle her close, Pikachutwo closed her eyes. *Please, let it all be over soon...* For the first time

since escaping her pokéball in Mewtwo's old laboratory she felt herself slipping into a much needed sleep.

They were in the air for a time after leaving New Island, the air crisp and cold and whistling shrilly as they battled through its unseen currents. Pikachutwo awoke with a jump when the human's phone buzzed loudly, but let the hypnotic motion and sound of beating wings lull her back into a comfortable hazy half-sleep soon after. She could feel Tim's heartbeat even through his uniform; the constant rhythm more soothing than anything she could remember before. She opened a paw and felt for her own heartbeat, but in vain. Her chest was completely silent.

She stirred again as they came in for a rather bumpy landing, poking her head out of his arms and looking in surprise at the verdant landscape of a sleepy little village.

"Thanks, swanna," Tim said after carefully dismounting, stroking its fluffed right ear in farewell.

The swanna cooed its own goodbye and waited until they had walked a little way off before taking off in one powerful sweep of its wings, soon vanishing into the low cloud cover on its way back home.

After briefly walking in to a human construct and talking to another human, Tim strode onwards through the town, down the many small hills and inclines and circling around here and there until they were bathed in the serene shade of an underground passage. Water trickled musically underneath the log walkway in a small river.

The human sighed. "It's always so peaceful here..."

From a comfortable pocket on the outside of his backpack, Neutri mewed her agreement.

The tunnel led them into a place of dappled sunlight. Struck by sudden curiosity, Pikachutwo craned her head around to come into view of an immense stone shrine placed in the centre of the clearing. She stared at it, wide-eyed, uncaring as Tim gripped her under the arms and set her down upon the first stone level.

"You're one lucky pikachu," Tim said. "This is the last time flute I've got."

Celebi heard the musical summons from her special place outside of time as she slumbered. Her eyelids shot open in surprise.

*How did it reach me here? This place doesn't even have a when!*

Nevertheless. She was needed. Celebi flew out of her time pool into the air, opened a time ripple and aimed it for the heart of Relic Forest.

Tim lowered the flute from his lips and waited, holding his breath. When the air above the shrine began to fragment and sparkle, as if it was being pushed out and warped slightly by some other force, he sighed in relief and wonderment.

Celebi soon flew from the ripple, shining powerfully with green coloured energy. It aimed for Pikachutwo, circling around the battered pokémon three times until she was completely bathed in the healing aura.

<Open your heart, Pikachutwo.>

Pikachutwo gaped at the name. “*You know me?*”

<Of course I do. I am Celebi; I know everyone.>

Pikachutwo opened her heart to Celebi. “*Can you take me home?*”

<Yes. Where is your home?>

Pikachutwo couldn't reply. She didn't *have* a home, much as she craved one.

The green pokémon fluttered down and landed on the stone level next to her. Folding her wings up, Celebi sat down in a cross legged position and faced Pikachutwo.

<Where do you want to go?>



Pikachutwo told Celebi. The more she described, the wider Celebi's smile got.

*"Do you know a place like that?"*

<I do. And I can take you there now, if you like.>

*"Please,"* Pikachutwo said.

Celebi turned to the time ripple, gesturing at it until the green had fractured into blue. <This can now take us there.>

Pikachutwo turned back to thank the human for his help before departing with Celebi. He stood there; the flute in one hand, Neutri snuggled in the other arm. The pair of them were beaming at her.

"Thanks, pikachu," Tim said, and raised the hand with the flute gripped tightly in it. *I'll remember you forever, spike-ears.*

Pikachutwo raised her own paw and felt the mental link between them suddenly sever. She found herself sighing softly in disappointment and sadness. After all the hatred and rage, she did really feel like showing her gratitude to him further somehow.

<Rangers don't believe in overly long goodbyes,> Celebi explained, surrounding Pikachutwo in psychic energy and lifting her into the air as Tim and his partner Neutri watched from a distance. <Don't take it personally. He knows

how you feel now you have been healed both in body and mind thanks to the link, I'm sure.>

Pikachutwo mulled over this in silence, as Celebi took her hand and flew the both of them right into the time ripple. Once they'd fully entered the time stream, though, Pikachutwo was far too distracted by the highly unsettling sensations around her both visual and aural, to wonder any more about the pokémon ranger. She found herself squeezing Celebi's hand for comfort when they seemed to increase their speed through the cylindrical tunnel of swirling rainbow patterns.

<Not long now,> Celebi said calmly.

The pair flew out of the time stream into a green, bright world. Pikachutwo gasped, a shiver running down her spine. "*It's beautiful. Where is this?*"

Celebi chuckled as they descended towards an empty pasture. <Not where, but when. You wanted to find somewhere where there are no pokéballs. Here in this *when*, you are completely free from them. You wanted to find a place where pokémon are more respected. Here, pokémon are known only as magical creatures and our powers are held in very high regard. You wanted a place that you could truly feel a part of. Is this that place?>

Pikachutwo alighted upon the springy grass and breathed in the air. Like the perfume's scent from before, it smelled like home.

*"Yes. Yes, this is that place. Th-thank you, Celebi."*

Celebi beamed at her. <That makes me so happy, especially knowing all you've been through.>

"Rai!"

Startled, Pikachutwo whirled to face the sound. A solitary raichu gamboled across the grass towards the two of them, its tail held high.

*"What should I do?"* Pikachutwo asked.

<Whatever you feel is right,> Celebi replied seriously. <That's your prerogative as a free pokémon.>

*A free pokémon... Pikachutwo marvelled. That's right. I am. I'm free, and I'm a real pokémon.*

The raichu slowed his pace as he drew nearer.

*"Greetings,"* he said, a smile on his face. *"My name is Chur."*

*"Hello,"* Pikachutwo replied, guardedly. *"I am Pikachutwo."*

Still on all fours, Chur padded over to Pikachutwo and gently touched noses before retreating a step or two. *"That's a long name,"* he said.

*"It is?"* Pikachutwo asked.

Chur nodded, sitting up on his haunches. *“Where are you from? I don’t understand what your name means. Something about ‘second one’...? I missed the rest.”*

Names were meant to have meanings? Mewtwo had just always called her Pikachutwo. It had just been the sound of her name, no meaning at all. And the human who had lied to and tricked her had called her by a name she couldn’t even pronounce let alone translate. At a loss, she looked down at the grass between her feet. The first pokémon she had properly met neither clone nor cloned, and her name was totally wrong. She wished that Celebi could have explained this beforehand.

Chur’s friendly smile soon drooped into a frown, and he cocked his head to the side, looking concernedly at her. *“Oh. Are you alright? I didn’t upset you, did I? I’m so sorry-”*

*“No!”* Pikachutwo said, shaking her head for emphasis. *“No, not at all. I’m sorry, I’m... just from a faraway place.”*

*That place was never my home... but this place really could be - I can feel it.*

*“Chur?”* she said, suddenly inspired. *“I don’t really have a name. Would you give me one?”*

The raichu's eyes widened. *"You'd grant me that honour? But... I don't even know you. How then could I already know your name?"*

*"Just pick anything,"* Pikachutwo insisted. *"Anything at all. I don't mind."*

Chur looked at her somewhat disapprovingly. *"You are from a faraway place. That's not how it's done here. Where is your father or your mother? Why didn't they already give you a name?"*

Pikachutwo gaped at him. *Father? Mother?* For words that sounded so familiar, why couldn't she place them into context?

*I am a clone, so I must neither have a father nor a mother. I don't even know what that means but somehow I still miss them... Would Chur even understand if I tried to explain?*

*"They died when I was too young to remember my name,"* she said, figuring it was the best way to describe her situation. Nameless. Homeless. Friendless. She felt her sadness coming to the fore, this time completely unattached to any sort of frustration or anger as it normally would have been. Pikachutwo looked down at the grass next to her, watching as it swayed gently.

Chur surprised her then by stepping completely into her personal space and enfolding her in a warm furry hug. She stayed stiff and tense in his embrace, eyes wide, then felt herself slowly relaxing into it.

*“My heart cries for them, as my eyes cannot,”* he said solemnly, mouth breathing warm at her ear. He held her for another breath and then politely let her go. When Pikachutwo met his gaze again she was surprised to see them glittering in excitement.

*“Run with me,”* Chur said.

Pikachutwo looked behind her to Celebi. The green pixie pokémon nodded to her and gestured vaguely about them. *<Do whatever you feel is right,>* she repeated.

Pikachutwo’s gaze and resolve intensified, and she turned back to Chur.

*“Let’s run.”*

The pair ran at breakneck pace for a few moments, both sets of cheeks sparking static. Pikachutwo felt her body brimming with electricity, almost as if she was being recharged by the sun and wind at her face. As her fur brushed past larger tussocks of grass she felt and heard it crackling in response.

She looked to Chur and saw a somewhat measured look in his eyes as his larger raichu body deliberately kept pace with her.

*He’s not running at full speed.*

*“Playing nice, are you?”* she said with a smile.

Chur flashed a cheeky grin back and continued on at the same pace.

*I’ll show him.*

Pikachutwo jumped into an agility attack and shot away from him; almost bounding across the mild incline. She heard Chur bark excitedly in response and quicken his own pace. Bit by bit she could sense him lessening the distance between them until he'd appeared once more in her peripheral vision, a slightly bug-eyed excited expression on his face. Pikachutwo wouldn't have been surprised to have seen his tongue hanging out.

She kept up the agility's speed until finally her muscles flagged, and she moved slowly and carefully into a gentle lope. Once her body felt relaxed and easy after the run she stretched and flopped down onto the springy fresh grass.

“Chaaaa...”

Chur flopped down next to her, lying on his back, looking up at the endless blue. “*Your name is Sparkling,*” he said, almost offhandedly, into the comfortable silence.

“Pikapika?” she asked. Or pika twice. Pika...two. Two pika? It didn't matter, every pronunciation - even from the different raichu dialect - meant the same thing. She was Sparkling the pikachu.

Sparkling's eyes widened in realisation and hope. Yes, that was her name - it had been her name all along, even though she had never known it. A bright name for a bright world. Not a mere copy. She was unique now, special - named and acknowledged.

*“Thank you,” she whispered.*

Chur blinked a lazy smile. *“You told me your name yourself - just not in words.”* He rolled over slightly and looked at her. *“But the rest of you is still hidden from me. Where did you come from, Sparkling?”*

*“It’s a long story.”*

*“As long as these summer days?”* he asked, waving a paw at the sky.

Sparkling paused, and took a moment to look up into the sky’s expanse. Had she ever seen such a rich blue colour in her time? The closest had probably been at Mount Quena, where the air was still clean.

She felt her mind clearing further, and suddenly knew where to start.

*“I came from the future,”* she said.

Chur’s mouth quirked oddly. *“So did I,”* he said woodenly, and then as if mirroring Sparkling’s surprise the sky fractured above them...





# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Two: Avengers Assemble*



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### MEWTWO

*My dearest Amber,*

*I write this letter to you from the lazy shores of Johto, after travelling around my own region of Kanto and searching for the Winged Mirages. These legendaries are spoken of in many myths and even eyewitness accounts. I can*

*now happily pronounce them very real guardians, as I have had the honour of speaking to them myself.*

*The first, named Articuno, had a beautiful song.*

Mewtwo paused in his letter writing and felt a small smile appear on his face at the remembrance. He'd flown the majority of time towards the Orange Archipelago - it had been mentioned most recently as a good place for sightings - and spotted Ice Island shrouded in cloud.

He had felt Articuno's presence only a few minutes later upon descent through the chilly air. The guardian's strength had loomed from below; deep and bestial and yet unmistakably calculating. Mewtwo had halted slightly at the eerie feeling of a stranger's power not so much touching his mind but simply enveloping it in mental ice.

Articuno may not have been psychic, but it did not matter really; Mewtwo could tell how strong it was anyway. He'd made contact.

*<Freezing One.>*

Articuno had reacted by crying out to him in a strange haunting tone and flapping its way towards him.

*Articuno's language was this song, and I will remember it forever. I learned something very important that day, Amber, which was further concreted in my visits to Fire and Lightning Islands. I am unique also in the sense that I am*

*not so much a protector and guardian of my home in Fiore as it is a protector - a refuge, if you will - for me. This is different to other legendaries such as these Winged Mirages, who through an innate instinct seemingly born with them are moved to fiercely protect their territory against harm. Of course, this does not mean I would not defend the Seer Repository with all my strength if it was ever threatened, but that I came to it not as a guardian per se. I find it much easier to leave it physically than I found it would be for Articuno to leave Ice Island.*

*So is my idea of a Council flawed? The Winged Mirages were - once they learned I had not arrived to do them battle for their much prized territory - friendly enough (barring Zapdos, who was, putting it lightly, impetuously aggressive), but apart from conceding it would be wise for an alliance I did not get much else from them. Perhaps...*

*No. No, that is foolish thought. All I needed from them was fact of their existence, and knowledge of their minds - and I have both. I could call to them all from here right now, and they would hear me even if they could not reply. That is Council enough... for now.*

*Oh, Amber, the things I have read and learned. The legends surrounding the mythical pokémon of Johto are fascinating. My quest continues onwards as I head towards the forests of this region in search of the guardian who protects them. I believe I have met them once before, but we merely brushed minds before*

*departing. I do have a name however - Celebi - to go on, and believe it won't take much time to make contact. Time, of course, being the key word here, as it's rumoured Celebi can manipulate it. I cannot wait to find out if this is actually the case. Imagine what could be done with that ability!*

*And so with that thought I journey onwards.*

*In memory,*

*Mewtwo*



## CELEBI

Celebi flew back through the rippling time stream towards her own timeline with a proud beam on her impish face. Taking Pikachutwo back in time couldn't have gone better if she'd actually done any reconnaissance work beforehand. The Raichu turning up - brilliant! Almost as if he'd been instructed to be there befo-

Had she possibly influenced the situation later on and not remembered? It was certainly possible - future memories were faint at best for the most part, and quite rare. Occasionally she'd have an inkling of what had to be done to bring the

future memory to fruition but mostly it was just trusting upon instinct and letting everything eventuate as it will. *Perhaps I should make plans to go back further than the first time and tell the Raichu to meet Pikachutwo when I take her back.*

*Or maybe-*

### **LITTLE GREEN ONE!**

The force of the summons buffeted her rudely past the last few seconds of time stream travel and she fell back into her own time headfirst, wings flitting furiously for lift.

### **I SEE YOU.**

The words made her head pound and her eyes tear up. Blearily, she made sure she was safely back fully at the Relic Stone, then sat at its base, raising a hand to her quivering antennae.

<Who is this?> she sent back. <And can you speak a little softer, please?>

**I AM THE LORD OF TIME, DIALGA, AND I DO NOT TAKE KINDLY TO MY SERVANTS TAMPERING WITH THE PAST TO THIS EXTENT.**

<What?> Celebi squawked. <Servants?!> Mouth grim, she shot back into the air, ignoring the sudden headache. <I am Celebi, the Voice of the Forest, and nobody's servant!> Mind racing and quickly growing irate, she cast her mind towards the source of the bellowing voice but found the way closed off to her.

Who was Dialga, anyway? Lord of Time? *She* was the time traveller. Flora and time energy were intrinsically connected, after all. Time Flowers, Voice of the Forest... she was the living embodiment of the symbiotic relationship her trees had to the power of time.

**SENDING A POKÉMON BACK AND LEAVING IT THERE PERMANENTLY IS PROHIBITED. YOU WILL GO BACK NOW AND RETRIEVE THE POKÉMON BEFORE THE DAMAGING EFFECTS OF THIS THOUGHTLESS MEDDLING ARE TO BE FELT IN YOUR TIME, PERHAPS RENDERING YOU UNABLE TO FIX IT FROM THEN ON. HURRY.**

<I'll do no such thing,> she growled. <It's not meddling, not tampering; it's helping. I'm perfectly within my rights to help a pikachu find a proper home.>

**THAT PIKACHU WAS NOT EVEN MEANT TO EXIST IN THE PRESENT, SO IT IS CERTAINLY NOT MEANT TO EXIST IN THE DISTANT PAST!** Dialga roared.

<Not... meant to exist...?> Celebi shook her head violently. <Why don't you come down here and say that?>

Then, <Celebi? Are you there?>



After the painful barrage of mental roars, the extremely faint psychic call barely alerted her to another telepathic pokémon's mental voice - one whom she didn't recognise at first until repeating its words in her mind and finally placing them.

<Mew...two?> she asked in surprise. <Yes, I'm here.>

<Are you in Johto?>

<No, I'm on a business trip out of the region,> she said, and attempted to strengthen the psychic link between them. <Feel free to come and help me talk some sense into some self-proclaimed lord of time.>

<Lord of Time? The one in the Sinnoh Story of Origin?> She felt Mewtwo's instant acknowledgement through the link and turned her attention back to the physical, just as a massive head and neck broke through the fabric of reality and surged through the air towards her, maw open and teeth bared.



## MEWTWO

Mewtwo used the strong link between him and Celebi to focus a very careful teleport to her location. He felt he'd never been there before, which would normally make it impossible without a link. He aimed for a large area of hopefully empty space next to Celebi's form and teleported away...

... only to come face to face with the furious gaze of what he presumed was Dialga; in the flesh. The creator of time itself.

According to the story, anyway.

Celebi floated next to him, eyes even wider than normal. <So that's what you look like,> she said to Dialga as it hovered deathly still in front of her; its mouth opened menacingly yet not even seeming to be breathing. <But if you're just trying to intimidate me, know that I'm perfectly capable of calling upon this forest to aid me in battle.>

<Celebi,> Mewtwo said gently. <Dialga's not spoken of as a psychic telepathic pokémon, I don't think it can answer you->

**IT IS NOT MEANT TO EXIST.**

<Aargh!> Mewtwo yelled, hands instinctively raising to his ear horns. <What kind of telepathy is that?>

**HIDDEN**, Dialga said, and for the first time Celebi heard emotion in its voice. Smugly, Dialga arched its neck up and hovered downwards carefully in the limited space of Relic Forest. **I CAME DOWN HERE AND SAID IT. NOW, GO AND RETRIEVE THE PIKACHU.**

<Hidden? More like hideous,> Mewtwo said. <No offence intended, of course, Lord of Time, but how are you actually communicating like that?>

**I SPEAK WITH THE POWER OF TIME.**

*Just as Zapdos had communicated to me with its power of electricity. Both are pretty much as painful as the other...* Mewtwo thought, as Celebi turned towards him in the air, eyebrows furrowed.

<Don't call it the Lord of Time,> she said. <That's my jurisdiction.>

**YOU ARE MERELY A GUARDIAN OF THE TIME STREAMS, Dialga continued calmly, AND WATCHER OF THE TIME ENERGY OF THIS WORLD'S FORESTS. YOU CAN ONLY MOVE THROUGH TIME. I, HOWEVER, CONTROL TIME ITSELF. I HAVE BEEN AWARE OF YOU FOR A VERY LONG WHILE, LITTLE GREEN ONE, AND WATCHING CAREFULLY. YOU HAVE FLUTTERED GENTLY AND SOFTLY UNTIL NOW, AND I HAVE BEEN GRACIOUS ENOUGH TO CORRECT THE SMALL PARADOXES YOU CREATED UNKNOWINGLY. BUT THIS... IS TOO MUCH. YOU WILL BRING A TORNADO DOWN UPON US, I CAN FEEL IT.**

<Paradoxes?> Celebi spluttered, her buzzing wings the only physical sound Mewtwo could still hear above the ringing in his brain from Dialga's mental deluge. <You go too far!> She began to glow luminescent green, eyes shining with power.

<Pardon me, Celebi,> Mewtwo said, casting a longer look at his surroundings. <But this is evidently a place of serenity and peace, and I come to you both with a call to ally, not war against each other.>

Celebi had the graciousness to look abashed as she let the potential attack silently dissipate. As mental silence fell, the cloying physical stillness became far

more apparent; as well as a strange, faint twittering sound from deep in the forest around them tickling his ears. Mewtwo took a deep breath and took a moment to wonder where in the world they were. It was a different type of energy in the clearing, that was for sure; seemingly emanating from the large stone structure built up in the centre. *I wonder what would happen if I touched it...*

<I wish to create a Council of guardians,> Mewtwo continued.  
<Connected mentally, allowing us to better protect this world together.>

Dialga's face remained impassive, but at least its mouth had closed.

<I have already spoken to many guardians, and today I ask that you, Celebi, guardian of the time streams and Johto's forests, officially join us.>

Celebi had a finger to her mouth. <I have no future memory of this one at all,> she said, suddenly vaguely. <Dialga, does the Council happen?>

**TIME RUNS OUT.**

The Time Lord raised a clawed front hoof and stamped the invisible surface it hovered upon just a metre above the ground. **RETRIEVE THE PIKACHU! NOW!**

<No! If you want her back so badly, get her yourself!>

Quicker than Mewtwo had thought possible, Dialga swung its head towards Celebi and growled wordlessly at her.

<What, you can't?> Celebi said, an impish not-quite-nice smile on her face, not looking at all intimidated by its closeness. <Oh, I see; so you control time, but time controls you right back. Some Lord you are.>

Dialga had no opportunity to reply to Celebi's taunt. The air began to shine, then flashed pink. Mew stepped out of nowhere at Mewtwo's right hand side, mentally holding two other pokémon in the air behind her.

<You're here too?> Mewtwo said in surprise. <And...>

Gods. One of the other pokémon was Pikachutwo, a strange searching look in her expression as she gazed at him. The other was a healthy looking raichu. Last time he had seen Pikachutwo, she had been altered; turned to the shadows. Now, thankfully, she looked back to normal. With a pang, the psychic pokémon realised he'd completely forgotten her plight in amidst his own, and had neglected to go looking for her after his own purification. *I am the worst kind of creature indeed...*

To Mewtwo's surprise, Celebi reacted even stronger at the sight of Pikachutwo and the raichu. <What are *they* doing back here in this *when*?> she demanded, looking afraid. <How did you...?>

<Dialga's right - time's running out. Celebi, you must join the Council, right now. It's imperative.>

<Well, of course I will, but->

<Good, we thankfully welcome you.> Mew said in relief. <Now truly begins the Game of Time!>

Celebi grimaced in her direction. <Time is not a *game*, Mew.>

**THIS IS YOUR FAULT**, Dialga said, and started to shudder, its eyes slowly squinting closed. **SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG. I FEEL... SOMEONE, SOMETHING, HAS CREATED A TEMPORAL CAUSALITY LOOP...**

A strange whistling noise interrupted the legendary's dire words, steadily growing louder. Dialga's head arced up straight as it turned its attention to the sky. Then without any more warning the small missile hit home, billowing smoke in its explosion, and the Time Lord screamed pain and fury.

The impact blew the other guardians back through the air. Mewtwo sought hazy confirmation that Mew still had a hold of Pikachutwo and the raichu, then watched from the borders of the forest as Dialga's body became enclosed in a dark sphere of energy.

*Team Rocket?* he wondered, long-forgotten anger quick to resurface as Dialga's roar turned from outrage to suffering. *I would not be surprised to find them at the bottom of this...*

He flew upwards, out of the enclosed area, and surveyed the open sky. Before long he spotted the hateful craft hovering a small distance away. But it

was not Giovanni at its helm, rather a young woman with one hand on her hip, the other on the wheel.

Lovrina.

Mewtwo snarled. *Why didn't I kill you when I had the chanc-* No. No, no more killing. He swooped back down and without hesitation fired a shadow ball right at the crackling sphere surrounding Dialga. The attack passed right through it and hit the legendary instead, prompting another pained roar.

<Sorry,> Mewtwo said softly, trying not to let his sudden perturbation get the better of him. Before him stood the beginnings of his great and powerful Council, after all. Surely they could save this situation from becoming any worse.

Mew was already at Dialga's side, looking intensely at the field surrounding it. Pikachutwo and the raichu had at some point - perhaps when Mewtwo had been surveying the air - been put down on the ground, and were now huddling together on the Relic Stone.

Mew's tail lashed, then she clenched her fists and flames of pink began flickering around her body; but before she could attack the aircraft drew near enough to cast a shadow over the entire clearing and began slowly lowering closer.

Dialga shuddered again, its normally powerful stance starting to fold in on itself inside the energy ball. Then as Mewtwo and Mew watched its eyelids flew



open and it lashed out with what felt like a last desperate gambit: raw frantic power; smashing the sphere and dissipating it entirely.

**TIME...** Dialga bellowed, gasping for breath. **TIME IS BREAKING...**  
**FRACTURING...**

Someone was gripping Mewtwo's wrist. He looked down and saw Celebi holding on tightly as she stared at Dialga.

<Look at it...> she said. <Look at its diamond.>

**GRRRR... IT HURTS SO BADLY...**

<I have a really bad feeling about this.> Celebi said.

Mewtwo looked. Dialga's diamond orb at the centre of its chest was pulsating a deep red-orange colour, and its normally shimmering aqua patterns on its skin had turned to deep orange. They looked wrong against the normal dark blue of its body.

**DESTROY ME, WILL YOU? I WON'T LET YOU!** Dialga roared, and slowly its head turned, ever so slowly, until it was resting directly at Celebi and Mewtwo in kind. Mewtwo looked in Dialga's eyes and saw sheer cunning malevolence - and yet, a desperate unthinking violence.

<Shadows...> Celebi whispered, and tugged at Mewtwo's arm. <We have to leave. Now.>

<I'm not going anywhere,> Mewtwo said harshly. <Some of the strongest pokémon in the region are gathered right here. We can manage this.>

From the aircraft, Lovrina's amplified voice floated down. "My beautiful XD003! Roar for me!"

**YOU! YOU'LL PAY FOR THIS, HUMAN! YOU'LL ALL PAY FOR THIS!**

Dialga turned his head again and roared silently into the sky, straight at the craft. The sound/time wave buffeted its metal frame like turbulence; Mewtwo could hear the creaking from where he stood. As he watched, Lovrina cried out into the microphone again, but the sound distorted just as the craft began to visually warp and distort as well until it had vanished into thin air.

<I don't believe it,> Celebi said. <I think... Dialga forced it back in time. But I didn't think it could do that...>

The Time Lord was growling low and menacingly as it turned its attention to the other guardians clustered around him. Then without warning it stamped a foot and howled another vicious time roar into the entire space around them.

<Go!> yelled Celebi, and flitted to the left. But it was too late. Dialga was gone, and the rippling trees around him had turned their leaves to yellow, then back to green in mere seconds as Mewtwo watched. Somehow, they seemed to be growing as well. Or... was he shrinking? With a start, he looked down at his

hands and saw them becoming pudgier, younger, less worn. *So, I'm going back in time and my body is as well?*

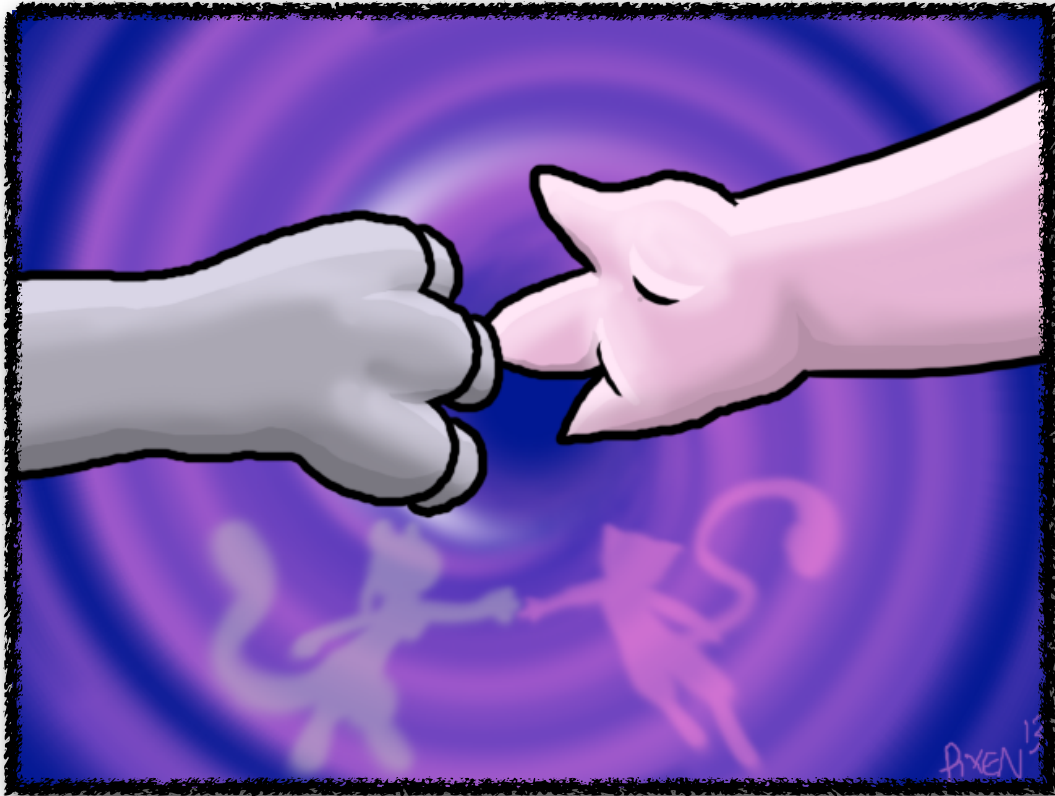
Mewtwo grew younger and younger in the space of a breath as the sunsets flew past him in the wrong direction. He looked up with startled eyes for Celebi, but she was gone too as Dialga had vanished. His gaze flicked around in panic until he noticed only Mew was left, still on the other side of the clearing. She was reaching for him, so he reached for her too. Somehow their progress towards each other seemed so slow compared to how scarily young he was becoming. His body felt even younger now than it had when he had awoken in his dream world so long ago and met Amber.

*What happens when...* It hardly bore thinking about. In desperation he made one final stretch and his now barely formed paw met with Mew's. She smiled at him, and as their hands had touched so did their minds.

*I'll protect you, Mewtwo. No matter what... I'll protect you.*

*You always do,* he replied.

Mew drew him in physically and held his rapidly shrinking form to her chest. Mewtwo felt her enclose his consciousness within her own, the two motions - one physical, the other mental - syncing up perfectly. He felt so perfectly shielded like this he hardly noticed as his body grew foetal, his previous



limbs now barely nubs upon his jellybean body, and then shrunk completely out of sight.

*I've got you.*

Mew held his consciousness carefully to her. As linked as they were, Mewtwo could even vaguely hear her outermost thoughts, flitting past his own awareness. *What do I do now? How far back are we going?*

Mewtwo remained unperturbed. He now felt incredibly sleepy; and besides, Mew's thoughts were moving far too quickly to take any real notice of. *Goodnight, Mama,* he said instinctively, and drifted off.

*Mama?! Mew yelped, still holding him - what remained of him - to her chest. Then... That... actually might not be such a bad idea - bizarre as it is. I could protect you better, and...*

She looked around her at the rapidly changing landscape. Relic Forest had disappeared eons ago. The world around her was beginning to move into its own infancy, just as Mewtwo had.

*Why is it not affecting me?* She had barely thought the question before the answer was clear to her. Of course - she was a mew, and mew didn't age like normal pokémon, so she naturally wouldn't age backwards as they did either.

Mew watched, silently, and saw things she had never imagined she would. The land had been slowly heading away from her in the planet's orbit through space as soon as they had become trapped in the violently misjudged roar of time, and from her vantage point Mew could not see very much at all, but somehow she still could feel as the legendary titans of earth and water did battle not very far from her location at all. As they vanished from her awareness, others faded in.

*Stop it now,* she pleaded. She'd gone far back enough. She had no desire to see-

And yet it continued. A million sunrises and sunsets. Something looming far above her and looking down with beady eye - *unmaking the world around her.* But that wasn't right, was it? It was in reverse, so that meant-

The world was thus unmade, and yet Mew still existed. As did Mewtwo, cradled invisibly at her belly. And... something... someone...?

*The Time Lord does not even exist here yet, so why am I still going backwards? There is no more time to rewind, surely!*

A great flash in reverse; its dull dim light slowly growing in intensity until the brightest yellow flare, and then dying completely.

That someone. *Stay with me*, Mew pleaded, as the entire world began exploding red and orange backwards around her. She shut her eyes, and felt not so much confirmation but the briefest whisper of the same, with no clue as to whether she'd merely imagined it. Mew kept her eyes shut until finally the silent subtle rushing of time power faded and was replaced with a gentle yet hot breeze and the strange sounds of a completely alien environment.

A time before time began.

*And I can't even be scared about it even if I tried.*

## LOVRINA

Lovrina came to on the floor of her aircraft, blinking away headachy tears. She sat up quickly, taking stock. Her entire crew remained where they'd been moments before her XD003 had shown off its power to her, but most of them still

looked unconscious. A grin slunk onto her face, and she skipped up onto her feet, running to the dashboard and its wide window. “My beautiful XD- huh?”

The craft had crash-landed at some point, snapping off a wing and burying it nearly entirely in sand a few metres from the cockpit. As Lovrina stared out of the window, her mouth slowly dropping open, a fierce gust of wind grabbed a big pile of sand and lashed it against the metal side.

Where were they? Where was her XD003?

The girl whimpered, pouting. “Captain!” she shrilled. “What’s going on?”

Her Captain was groaning, slumped in a chair close by. “That was the legendary roar of time. We’ve time travelled: forwards, or backwards - I can’t really tell. We’re in real trouble now, missy.”

“Nuh-uh,” Lovrina said. “Some people will so help us.”

The Captain shook his head. “Some people? We don’t even know if there are even other people out there.”

She tromped away. He stared vaguely out the window, uncaring, as she pried the emergency door open and ventured outside.

*Some time later...*

“Yoo-hoo!”

A teenaged Wesley Williams threw his custom-built motorbike into neutral as he came to a stop halfway between Pyrite and Phenac, and stared in

amazement at the pink-haired teenager waving furiously on top of a tall sand dune. Further from her he noticed a wreck of what looked to be a high-tech plane.

*Interesting...*

He revved the bike's engines and chucked it back into gear, manoeuvring it slowly towards her location. As he drew up closer one of his two eevie, sitting primly at his side, flattened her ears and growled at her.

"Auvan!" he said in a disapproving tone, yet secretly wondering why she'd reacted so strongly like that. Auvan was normally a great judge of character. So was Vee, her elder brother, for that matter; but he normally kept it to himself.

*How to play this?*

"Is anyone hurt?" he asked, motioning at the wreck. "Dead?"

"Mmph," she answered, with a shrug of her shoulders. "It's so every girl for themselves now."

This made Wes laugh in astonishment. "And here I was thinking you'd have to be a tourist, but not with that cut-throat attitude."

"How's that?"

Wes put on his best evil grin and gave the throttle a quick twist with his hand. "Locals hear this engine in the distance and tend to shut their doors, not give me a wave."



“So, you’re a bad boy, huh?”

“Depends. Any pokéballs on that outfit anywhere? Any free roaming pokémon on board the plane?”

Lovrina shook her head, and Wes sighed in obvious disappointment. “Then I guess I’ll have to be good. C’mon, jump on and I’ll give you a ride to Phenac City.”

Luckily, Auvan kept her cool as she snuggled up to Vee and allowed Lovrina to take her normal place at the side. The turbo engines threw up gritty sand as they charged off, leaving the plane behind in the stifling heat of the desert.

Lovrina had her hands over her ears, and was staring out into the distance. Wes took the opportunity to make contact with his base of operations at Team Snagem HQ. “Unidentified aircraft spotted five k’s south-east of Phenac City.”

His radio crackled in response. “Any survivors?”

“That’s for you to find out, I’m getting out of this heat right *now*.”

## SPARKLING

“*Sparkling!*” Chur yelled, holding her closely to him as he quavered at the base of the Relic Stone. “*What’s going on? I’m afraid!*”



Sparkling looked up at the raging Dialga and the other legendaries with gritted teeth and frowning eyebrows. The whole time had been a blur ever since she'd been granted a name and confessed to Chur that she was from the future. What was it Chur had said?

*"So am I."*

But then he'd stopped, and looked highly confused at what he'd just said. Sparkling had been just as confused - and shocked - but she'd had no time to even enquire after more details.

For Celebi had reappeared in front of them, grabbed both of them by a paw and pulled them back into a raging time stream. Chur had screamed high and long, but Sparkling felt more like yelling in anger. Couldn't she just have her

peace now without being dragged about constantly by everyone? For once she'd felt relaxed in herself and her environment - only to have this happen without one word of explanation.

They'd whirled out of the time stream, and Mew had been there to take them further without any word as well. Mew had grasped them mentally and winked them out, and the next thing Sparkling knew she was staring right at Mewtwo and another Celebi - seemingly from another time for she'd reacted quite differently, as if she hadn't known at all they were back in the future - still under Mew's mental grasp until the pink legendary set them down gently and went to attend to Dialga.

Which brought them to now - both completely at a loss. Chur was probably more so than her, though, and she felt so sorry for him. He looked terrified, not only at the raging battle above them but the height of the domineering Relic Stone and the trees around them. He couldn't keep his gaze on one thing, kept flicking his head around and flinching at each in turn. *What a shock it must be to travel into the future*, she thought.

Then Dialga roared and the whole world fell apart. There was a thundering in her ears like the silent memory of an earthquake, things were vanishing before her very eyes and Chur's hug was shrinking. She looked at him,

her only constant in this now madly shifting world, and in horror saw he wasn't constant either - he was now turning into a pikachu.

She gaped at him, and he gaped at her back. "*You're devolving,*" she whispered.

"*So are you,*" he said in a voice of dread. "*I'm not... I'm not doing that to you, am I?*" In one motion he snatched his hands away from her and stepped away.

"*No!*" Sparkling cried, and took his paw again. She looked down at her own paw - it was not even fingered any longer. She let out a little mew of horror. "*What am I?*"

Chur took her back into a warm hug. "*You're a pichu again,*" he said woodenly.

*Again?* She'd never been a pichu before. Chur wasn't to know that, of course. *What's it like to be even smaller than a pikachu? I wonder what it feels like for Chur to be a pikachu again? Then...*

"*You've stopped, but it's still happening to me,*" he said.

Sparkling looked at him in shock. His pikachu ears were rounding out and he was shrinking further, now unable to fully enfold her in one of his comforting hugs she'd begun to enjoy. As they clasped each other like anchors, Chur too devolved until he was her height, his eyes closed at the sensation.

As she watched, he nervously opened one eye halfway. *“Has it stopped?”*

*“Yes,”* Sparkling replied in relief. *“We’re both pichu now.”*

Chur opened the other eye and looked at the flitting, reversing landscape. It seemed to be slowing down, but it still made him whimper before he looked back at Sparkling. Amazingly, a hesitant smile began slowly creeping onto his juvenile face. *“I like your ear,”* he said.

Something was odd about her ear? Something was definitely odd about him, too, but Sparkling couldn’t quite place it yet. She looked down at her belly and then his, at her paws, and then his. Then it clicked. *“I like your fur colour - a lot,”* she said honestly.

They both smiled at each other, then Sparkling found her smile widening into a broad grin. Faced with the discrimination and mental pain of cloning? Nothing doing. Unsure of her place in world - boring! Time travel and uncontrollable devolution? *That’s* more like it! Bring it on!

*“It’s our magical mystery tour!”* she piped, and began to giggle. *“Next stop, the distant past!”*

Chur stared at her in worry. *“You’re completely mad!”*

Time slowed, stopped, and without any further ado began playing in the right direction at a normal rate. Chur fell to his knees - the gesture looking to

Sparkling completely ridiculous in pichu form - and sank one cheek to the grass in abject relief. *“We’re still alive...”*

Sparkling sniffed dismissively. *“Of course we are.”* She grabbed one of his paws and raced off, Chur wailing as he was tugged reluctantly behind her. *“Let’s go explore!”*

## PALKIA

The great Space Lord opened a lazy eye at the disturbance. **I WAS SLEEPING**, it said gruffly, and opened a portal into the air above Relic Forest, swooping through headfirst. **COME, BROTHER. CEASE THIS NOW.**

**TIME IS CORRUPTED!** Dialga bellowed, and blasted the circle with another savage roar of time. But there was nobody else there any longer to force backwards in time.

Palkia paused as it noticed Dialga’s primal state. Then it casually reached into another, smaller, portal and drew out a squirming pink celebi in a careful claw hold.

<Oh,> the pink celebi said.

**IS THE MYSTERY SPACE READY?**

The celebi gritted her teeth. <It'll have to be. There's no way we're letting it stay in this space to do any more damage.>

**AGREED.**

Palkia began preparing a spacial rend attack, and the celebi backed away. The Space Lord noticed this and grunted in her direction.

The celebi chuckled. <No offence, but you're horribly imprecise with that attack.>

**NONE TAKEN**, Palkia said, and blasted primal Dialga right in the face, casting it beyond; into the mysterious space. **YOU'RE THE ONE WHO HAS TO DEAL WITH IT NOW**

<Obliged, I'm sure,> muttered the celebi.



# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Three: Refusal of the call*





## Chapter Three: Refusal of the Call

### LOVRINA

Phenac City was at its most glorious in the balmy sweet air of spring. After pulling up at its grand stone entranceway the boy on the bike had not deigned to enter the city with her, choosing to stay mounted whilst she had hopped off and given a desultory wave. The two eevee had hissed at her departure, their teeth bared, but the sound had been completely drowned out by the loud idling of the engine so she had ignored them completely. She'd only taken a few steps away when he'd roared away again, dust clouds and exhaust fumes billowing in his wake.

*Every girl for themselves...* she'd reminded herself.

Now, as she sat on the staircase overlooking the fountain in the city's lower plateau, Lovrina took a deep breath of far cleaner air with satisfaction, letting her lungs fill to what felt like just beyond their capacity, and then as she exhaled everything which had been clouded over in her past life made perfect

sense. All those seemingly unanswerable questions answered themselves in a split second.

Lovrina grinned toothily, letting the realisation wash over her alongside the warm wind off the hot stone footpath.

“Oh, this just keeps getting better and better...”

Pens and paper were rare in the Orre of long-ago, it seemed. The store person in the supermarket had shrugged at her when she'd asked, an exaggerated rueful look on his face. But the young teen figured she'd find some eventually. There was enough proof of the fact in her memories. She practically had the old faded letter memorised word for word:

*Lovrina,*

*You don't know me yet, but you will in time. And yet, who I am makes no difference. What matters is that I know you.*

*I also know that by the time you read this the Shadow Pokémon Lab's location will be lost to the sands of time... almost. I know where it is, and I can tell you where to find it. Then you can use what resources you find there to continue my fabulous work.*

*I suppose I really should start from the beginning. You see, sweetie, there's this old team called Cipher who I'm going to teach how to create what's called*

*Shadow Pokémon, only they will make a boo-boo with it and get my instructions wrong. Silly little boys...*

*So I want you to find the lab when you're grown up, and resurrect Cipher. Find a place to build a new lab. Continue my work to create the ultimate Shadow Pokémon which can never be purified. Use the surviving data on XD001 as a basis for your work and create XD002; the ultimate Extra Dark Shadow Pokémon.*

Lovrina paused at the memory and found she couldn't remember the rest. But it didn't matter; she'd done everything important in the letter. She'd found the abandoned lab in Orre, retrieved the existing data, and worked so hard to create XD002.

*I am my own self-fulfilling prophecy.* There was no way to escape this loop or else create a huge paradox - had she not written the letter, there would be no XD002. Had there been no XD002, there would be no XD003, no roar of time, no way to find herself stranded in Orre's past to create XD001 and write that letter to her future self to create XD002.

She pouted, raising a hand to her head. "This is too hard..." she whined. Her past self was in her future whilst her future self - herself right now - was in her past. In order to see the future play out properly, she'd have to stay out of

trouble yet find a way to start pulling some serious strings within the original Cipher until she would have the resources and capability to create XD001.

And yet all her extra dark projects - past and future - had failed. 001, 002 and 003. The future - her younger self - would always fail. But in the past, which was here in her new present... was it possible XD001 could be a success?

Could time be rewritten?

What had she done wrongly? Why had XD001 failed?

It was time to start finding out... and in the process write a better end to the letter addressed to her younger self.

“That’s so why I can’t remember the end of the letter.” Lovrina said loudly, accidentally attracting the curious attention of a young trainer jogging around the water fountain, his castform whizzing close behind. She caught his eye, gave a quick wink and giggled. “Because I haven’t *cast its form* yet.”

*But I will... in time.*

## CELEBI

Celebi barely dodged Dialga’s wild attack with one more desperate flit of her delicate wings backwards into the thicker tree cover. She clung to a tree trunk

in exhaustion, watching as one by one each pokémon still trapped inside the spherical mess of time energy vanished silently, leaving only Dialga.

Until a new, just-as-intimidating behemoth stepped through into the space from nowhere and brought a-

Another Celebi?

*I'm Celebi!* How... how could there be *another* Celebi? Even with a different coloured skin. Another her? That...

Speechless, she watched and waited and listened to the vague rumble of what almost felt like a far-off thunderstorm. The guardian she did not know attacked Dialga with a large beam of energy cast from its palm and blasted it away. In time? She did not know. But the self-professed Lord of Time was gone, all the same. That gave her courage to vault softly off the trunk and take to the air again, inching closer.

The low sound of a thunderstorm turned into booming words the closer she got to the odd pair:

**... TO DEAL WITH IT NOW.**

<Obliged, I'm sure.>

**HM?** said the big one, and the pair of them were suddenly looking straight at her.

Celebi had not realised how close she had been hovering. She almost disappeared back into the trees but consciously stood her ground after the tiny moment of hesitation.

<Your voice is not the same,> she said. <As mine, I mean.>

The pink coloured Celebi - the other her - physically shook off its surprise and smiled at her kindly. <Hello. Don't you know who I am?>

<No, I mean... you're me, but...>

**IT IS GREEN.**

Celebi frowned. <Of course I'm green. That's just what I'm meant to be.>



The pink Celebi flew down closer towards her. <No, she means you're green; not about your skin colour - even though you are that, too - but that you're... hmm. Unenlightened.>

<Thanks,> Celebi said frostily.

The pink Celebi tsked in frustration. <Oh, Palkia, I just can't do post-initiation right at all! See why I prefer the mystery space?>

**IT IS TOO NEW, Palkia said. IT IS... JUST BUDDED. IT HAS JUST OPENED ITS LEAVES TO THE SUN FOR THE FIRST TIME TO BLOOM.**

<That was very beautiful.>

**THANK YOU.**

<Excuse me!> Celebi said. <How is there another Celebi - you? How is that possible?>

<Call me Dianthus. Do you have a name yet?>

<Celebi.>

Dianthus laughed sweetly. <Oh, yes, you are very newly budded, aren't you? Holding onto your guardianship name like a flabébé to its flower. I'd recommend choosing a personal name soon, otherwise things are going to get very confusing around here for you.>

<Things are already very confusing,> Celebi said.

<Try remembering back to your initiation rite. I'm sure it won't be long until the truth will be made clear,> Dianthus replied, and looked to Palkia. <Time for me to return to the mystery space, I think - now we've got a shadow dialga rampaging around. Besides, we need him brought back to his senses as quickly as possible so he can return here where he is most desperately needed.>

Palkia nodded. **AGREED.**

<I-initiation rite?>

Dianthus looked back at Celebi, a distracted look on her face. Then her focus sharpened and she smiled ruefully. <I'm probably going to get scolded for this, but...> She flew down and circled the stone structure a few times slowly, then paused, hovering.

Her arms began waving gracefully through the air, and Celebi swooped down towards her. As she watched, a glittering pink and blue sprout looped out of the earth and began twining its way around the stone, growing thicker all the while. Offshoots clasped the pockmarked stone, expanding and finally budding at their ends; till the plant encircled the entire Relic Stone.

<Do you know what this is?> asked Dianthus. <Think deeply.>

Celebi thought deeply. At first she had no idea, then the answer flashed into her mind. <That's a time plant. I make it four mature time flowers.>



Dianthus beamed. <Good.> She finished with a long sweep of her right arm bringing the fifth and largest time flower into being, inclined her head politely to Celebi, and then catapulted back into the higher reaches of air with an exultant laugh. <It has been too long since I've had the chance to do that! All the same. Palkia, if you would be so kind?>

Palkia grasped her carefully with a large clawed hand and just before Dianthus disappeared into thin air back the way she'd arrived. Celebi heard her say, <Only waken one at a time,> and then she was gone.

**GOOD LUCK, LITTLE SPROUT,** Palkia said.

Celebi started to raise her hand in a gesture of farewell to the great guardian but then faltered halfway as it nonchalantly turned and opened a much larger hole in the fabric of reality. She stared at the rent, unable to look away for even a moment; her skin prickling in response, her mouth beginning to gape.

Palkia stepped through, the hole closed, and Celebi was finally able to blink again and look away, her eyes watering. What had that been?

That question paled in comparison to all her other questions about Dianthus. She wasted no time in flying back down and alighting on the grass facing the first, smallest, and lowest time flower. Just as Celebi now knew what they were, she also knew how to bring their ability to the fore.

*One at a time*, she repeated, and brushed her fingers across the glittering petals. With that one subtle touch the flower awakened, tinkling pleasantly and softly, and opened its petals to expose the glowing time energy sphere inside; infused already with the past. The sphere rose and with a flash it expanded a hundred times its original size, casting a grey pallor around the whole clearing and bringing another image into focus.

An image of a past event, a past memory.

But whose memory was it? Surely not this Celebi from the past which was about half her size and buzzing about in circles above her without any sort of rhyme or reason -

*That's a celeva, of course*, she reminded herself, *my pre-evolved form*.  
*Wait, what? I don't have a pre-evolved form. Since when did... I've always had a pre-evolved form. Then why don't I remember evolving? I must have evolved, but...*

She watched silently as the celeva looped about, squealing softly in happiness. Celebi's mouth unconsciously quirked into a half-smile at its joyous antics, each one more wild than the last; until the celeva whirred down towards her still standing on the ground and flew through her. Celebi flinched at the eerie feeling of the unsubstantial celeva shade making a visual, but not physical, impact.

Then something unexpectedly bubbled up from her and she began laughing in surprise and happiness. Spontaneously, she jumped up into the air, wings pushing with full force, ready to meet this celeva in the air and dance through the sky with it. Its joy was absolutely infectious.

She was just about to reach its current height when she heard a small rushing sound and the double image before her faded, leaving just one with its empty, silent sky. She looked downwards and saw the time flower closed, asleep; too far a distance between her and it to keep the past alive.

*Ah well.* There were many more flowers to examine.

She flew back down to touch the next one. This time the celeva was sky dancing at night, its tail bulb glittering and pulsing with small flashes of yellow light. It was soon joined in the sky by a swarm of ledyba and a few protective ledian at the swarm's head, but Celebi stayed hovering by the stone this time; too entranced and enchanted to wish the image disappear prematurely. The stars high above dimmed in comparison to the light show, until - too soon it seemed - the sky of the past became light with dawn. The swarm soon departed and the celeva waved goodbye, a satisfied piping sound echoing down, and the time flower slowly closed without any prompting.

*Was that me? It must have been me. How come I don't remember any of this? This all happened. To me? To Celebi? These do not answer any of my questions to Dianthus. How... how...*

The third time flower opened the same way, but no orb of time energy appeared. Ah, a flower yet to make a memory. Celebi pressed on, circling round the Relic Stone alongside the vine's upwards progress.

The fourth brimmed with time energy when it was awakened. Celebi gaped at the image of a dozen celeva - a dozen hers - holding hands and swirling through the air in a circle, surrounding a celeva and a celebi hovering in the middle, their hands grasped in each other's, their eyes closed in concentration.

*There have always been many celeva, of course. Of course. But... wait, that doesn't make sense-*

The lone celeva straightened, its body taut. Its eyes flashed open. Letting the celebi's hands go time energy soon blasted seemingly into it and yet out at the same time. Its body glowed with the energy, beams of light lancing from its fingers, and then when it screamed Celebi snatched her hand away from the flower, casting the image away. Forever.

Both her hands were trembling by this stage. *Why can't I remember this? Why should I need a time flower to show me my life? This makes no sense, I don't understand any of it-*

She looked up at the last and largest time flower, nestled up close to the flat top of the relic, and she was not sure whether she could bear going near it. The sheer need to know its contents soon overcome the fear and uncertainty however, and so she sat on the top of the stone pillar and held out a shaking hand:

The celeva stood at ease in front of the celebi, ready and attentive. The celebi was holding a large pink flower in its hand; holding it out to the celeva.

*Which one is me? Am I both?*

<I don't think I need to explain what this means,> the celebi said.

The celeva shook its head silently and inclined its head as it solemnly took the flower. <If that I could give it back to show my own gratitude.>

Chuckling at this, the celebi also bowed slightly. <You have shown you are worthy, but as always with extra responsibility comes extra hardship.> It paused. <Keep the flower; as I kept mine. It is a good and constant reminder.>

The celeva nodded, looking down seriously at its petals. <A reminder of the honour you've given me?>

<Well, yes; that... and more.>

The celebi's dire words made the celeva look up sharply from the flower, a half surprised look on its face.

<Initiation is not a decision to make lightly. If you wish, you may still give the flower back. Just know this, there are things you will learn, and they will

change your life as much as your body - perhaps even more so. You will probably not want to know some of these things, and so you may cast them out; but they will make themselves known to you eventually... in time.>

The celeva nodded. It raised the flower and nestled it gently between its antennae before grasping the celebi's hands. <I'm ready.>

<You're not,> the celebi replied. <Not yet, there is pre-initiation yet. You must be made aware of what will happen->

<I've seen it happen *twice*. You evolve, the other celebi helps you into your first time pool and you sleep. Then eventually you wake up and come out rested to begin your duties. What else is there to be made aware of without actually beginning the rite?>

The celebi frowned. <Evolution is not what I'd call painful, but all the same it's naturally very taxing upon the body; and new celebi are also affected very strongly mentally.>

<I was there when the shaymin was k->

<Yes,> the celebi said quickly. <Yes, you have aptly demonstrated your ability to remain calm and level-headed in times of undeniable tragedy. This is partly why you were chosen.>

<I'm really ready,> the celeva insisted. <I want to help. I want to evolve and become a celebi.>

<Very well,> the celebi replied, and so returned the firm squeeze upon the celeva's hands to begin.

Celebi was gripping her own palms with her fingers so hard she did not notice the past begin to take shape inside her own head as a true memory and not one merely visual. The celebi's hands dwarfed her own immature celeva ones as she felt it was gathering power inside and around; soon to share it with her and prompt her evolution.

*I'm ready*, she thought again.

Then the celebi opened the floodgates to the intense power, and she realised that she could never have been truly ready, not even in a thousand years. Her hands and arms near to burning with the rushing power; she looked down and saw them growing larger even as she watched. As the celebi had said, it did not hurt, but at least the feeling of pain was identifiable. This was alien to her, and all the more unbearable for it.

She was screaming. How long had she been screaming? Her back arched in response to the energy coursing its way through every part of her body; she was glowing, her eyes were wider than they ever had been, and then as the energy began to slightly subside and she knew she was all physically celebi now, that was when her mind opened and released a new torrent of thought all its own.

She was this celebi, and that celebi, and the other celebi in the past, and yet again the many more in future, but she was not - she was just *this* celebi in *this* body, yet she could still *feel* them and *know* them and they felt like her, they were her. Yet they couldn't be her, and she couldn't be them. She had hardly been all the celeva after all. They were different, then why was she every celebi? How could she possibly cope being *every celebi in time?!*

<Celebi?>

The single word had her clamping her arms as best she could over her suddenly gigantic and heavy head, groaning. The word was loaded with everything the speaker had ever done in their lifetime. She had her eyes screwed up but still she was looking at herself because she was that celebi too yet she was this celebi and-

<You're doing fine.> The words were firm and unyielding, yet calm.

<Reel it in.>

*I'm doing fine. Of course I'm doing fi-*

<No!> she shrieked. *Don't try to make me feel something I don't want to!*

<No, I'm not!>

<You are.>



Celebi whipped her hands from her head and balled them into fists. <You didn't think it a good idea to perhaps tell me beforehand that celebi share a *hive mind*?!>

You do not have to remember it all at once. You know this now. Turn it down. You know how to do that now, too,> the other celebi said. It gestured and a time pool opened in the air. <Calm down, so your body and mind can rest.>

*I don't want to automatically know things I haven't personally learned myself!* Celebi felt this but could not even find the words to express it. To relieve the unbearable frustration she snatched the flower from her head and ripped it in half with a yell, letting the two pieces fall gently from them.

The pain and upset Celebi felt in response from the other celebi was so acute that in desperation she not only turned the feelings down but completely off, cutting the feeling of knowing every other celebi, cutting the extraneous knowledge. She was alone in her mind and it was blissful after the noise of before.

She did not look at the other celebi again - she did not want to see the expression on its face - but barreled into the pool and sank into its timeless depths to sleep for once completely dreamlessly.

The flower closed. The past was over. Celebi came back to herself out of the memory, out of the past, to find herself rocking slightly in a seated foetal

position on the stone's edge. Her eyes were burning dry, staring past the forest edge to something she couldn't see.

The truth had been made clear. *I was a fool to think I could handle the initiation rite, and I was a fool to awaken the time flowers. Twice I've rushed in too soon. Impatient fool!*

*All things come in threes.*

The saying was not one she'd thought up. So a stolen thought from another celebi, then. Disgusted, she squashed that part of her mind working to impart advice at her situation.

*I've run away from this before; shut it out completely. What's the point in doing that again?* The revolted feeling subsided a little and Celebi relented just a fraction as well. *So what do I do now, then?* Her mind buzzed and she knew straight away what she had to do. Was some other celebi moulding her mind to their will? Had she individually come up with this plan of action or had it been merely planted there in her mind?

*Either or, it is the right thing to do,* she told herself, and opened a time stream.

The other side opened out into a field of flowers. Celebi now remembered this place well from her days as a celeva, swooping around with dozens of sky forme shaymin. But it looked like shaymin season had passed for this year; the

place was eerily quiet, and the breeze was just a bit chillier than from memory. Winter was closing in slowly, the air falling off the icecapped mountains which loomed over the lush valley protectively and soon, perhaps, bringing snow with it.

And yet the flowers still remained in bloom. Celebi flew just above them, scanning the naturally formed beds with keen appreciation of their health and beauty. She spotted one newly formed, planted just outside one ring of pink, and honed in on it. Perfect.

The blossom practically plucked itself out of the ground.

*It's ready. I'm ready.* Celebi paused in her thoughts, holding the flower close to her chest. *I said that before, and I regretted it.*

*All things come in threes.*

*This is my third time of readiness. Will I regret this time as the last two? I won't know until it happens.*

Steeling herself, Celebi breathed out and realised she had already been preparing herself for this time unknowingly. *I am Celebi, I know everyone*, she had said to Pikachutwo, and correctly identified the time plant at Dianthus's bidding. *Think deeply.* At the thought, she heard the pink celebi's voice again:

*I'd recommend choosing a personal name soon.*

Like the flower before, the name picked itself.

All that was left to do was to turn the psychic connection completely up.

She was greeted with little happy twitters of mental excitement from the many celebi in time and space who were now able to feel her presence among them. *Congratulations! Welcome!*

The first celebi - the one she was searching for - was not amongst them, not yet, until she turned a corner in her mind and came mind to mind with her. The sensation and guilt struck her mute.

<You have returned,> the celebi said impassively.

<I-> Celebi started, and felt the other celebi's mind fade away before she could finish. She consciously drew away herself, back into her own physical environment and saw a time stream burst into being in the air before her. The celebi whirled out and seemingly tackled her out of the sky before grabbing her hands and swinging her around in circles; the gracidea flower she was still holding for dear life nodding its head in the wind.

“Bi bi bee!” the celebi cried joyously. Celebi couldn't believe the elation on its face.

<I'm so sorry!> she said, blurting out her words. <I really am!>

<I forgive you,> the celebi replied instantly. <Because you came back to us!>

Celebi slowed her rather giddy circling progress through the air and proffered her flower. <This is for everything. Thank you.>

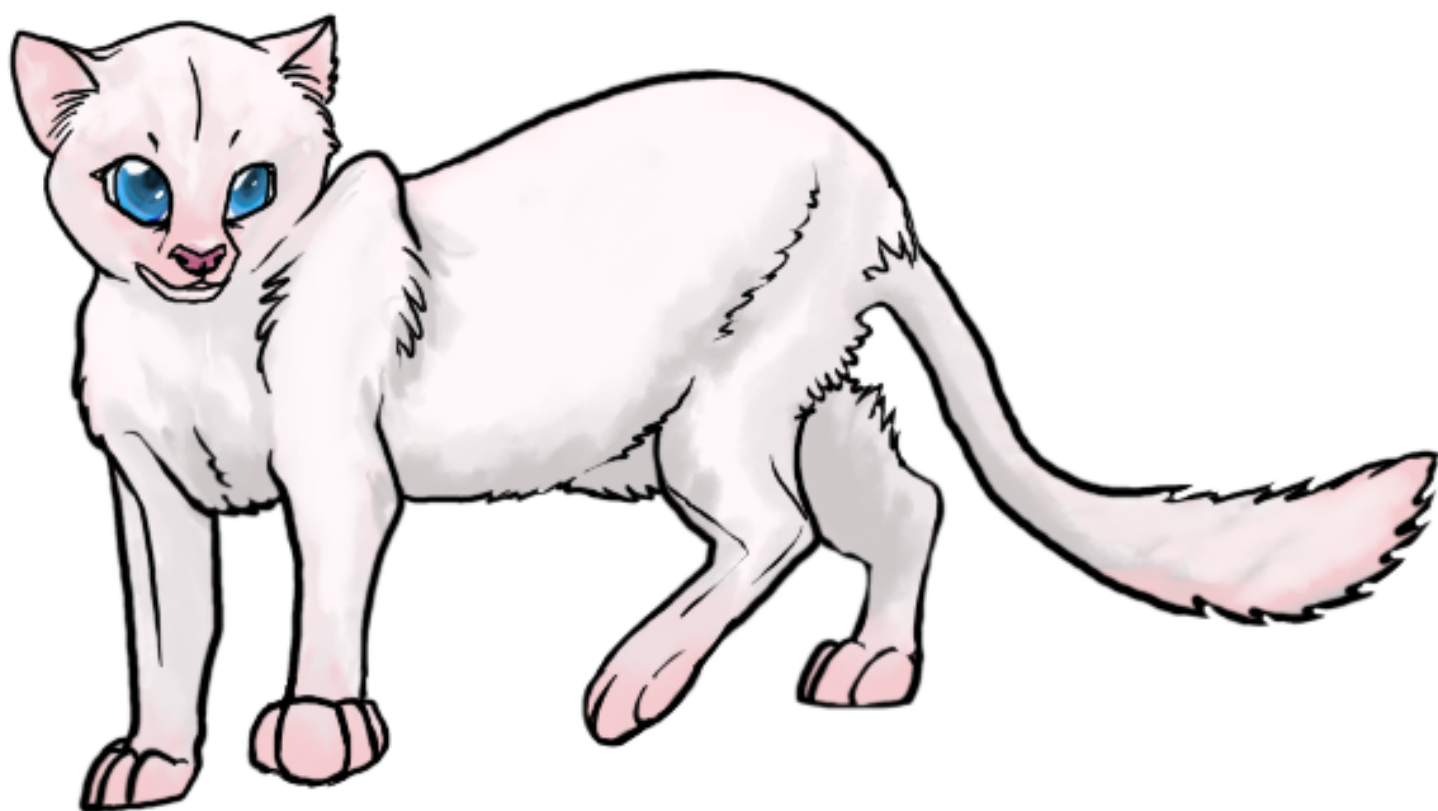
<What's your name?> the other celebi asked as it gently took the flower and hugged it to its chest.

Celebi paused, and rethought. Yes, it definitely should be... <G-grace.>

<From 'gracidea'?>

Celebi - Grace - nodded. <Now it really will be a good and constant reminder.>

The celebi's eyes sparkled with pride. <Mine is Aristeia. Well met, Grace.>  
She took Grace's hand with her free one and pulled her towards the time stream.  
<Come, let's meet the others. It is time...>



# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Four: Trapped in the Past*



## Chapter Four: Trapped in the Past

*And I can't even be scared about it even if I tried*, Mew thought, taking her first long breath of pre-time air. It filled her lungs and rushed through her body like a shiver from the inside out; and as she breathed out her lithe body fell from the air entirely.

She dropped, arms and legs and tail flailing. A squawk of alarm that definitely did not sound like *'mew'* burst from her mouth. Somehow her body had curved around so far instinctively by the time she hit the ground it was on all four feet to absorb the shock; tail held straight out for balance.

The soft soil did a little bit to lessen the pain which lanced up her paws. She stayed motionless for a few breaths, eyes blinking to adjust quicker in the dim light and felt her ears flicking about as they focused upon each sound above her individually. The forest canopy was alive with sound; raucous birdcalls audible from every angle.

Instinct told Mew she was not safe where she was; crouched underneath a tree wrapped with strangling vines. Do I climb this tree, head upwards? No, I am

not safe there, either. There was only one task to remember; and that was to survive. How best to strive for survival? Eat, drink, mate, breed, raise young, teach them how to continue the cycle...

For her young - already quickening in her belly - to survive she would have to survive. Where best to strive for survival? She was not safe here, nor up the tree. Where was her nest? Where her mate? Where her food, her water?

Some deep instinct told her in no uncertain terms there was no safe place for her. *You do not belong in this world.* She bared her teeth and felt the hackles upon her neck and down her spine raise in fear at the feeling.

If there was no place for her now, she would have to fight and kill to make a place for her in the future. Stake a claim, make a territory and defend it against all comers. That was the Law of survival when as hard-pressed as she was.

*You do not understand. You will never belong here, law or no. There will never be a place for you. You are a stranger here.*

Mew hissed, her ears flat against her skull, and bounded away into the undergrowth; heading blindly towards nowhere in hopes the feeling would go away. For she had to belong here - where else could she go?

Where else had she been? There had only ever been the jungle and its dangerous creatures. The strange memories of flying had been a mere dream; for only the birds above her in the trees had wings to fly.



*Help*, she thought, but to whom she had no idea.

“Hurry *up* would you, guys,” John said, wiping his sweaty forehead with his t-shirt. “Forget the map, forget the camera; let’s just go.”

The four other humans were engrossed with their various items. One woman was poring over a highly detailed map which was hardly readable in the harsh red light of the setting sun. Another held a compass, another a flask of water and the last a digital camera dwarfed by the length of its own lens.

“We’re coming,” Trish said vaguely, navigating through images on the small screen. “I just have to delete a few to make some more space-”

“Don’t you get it?” he replied. “We’re lost, for God’s sake! We should’ve hit the river hours ago! I *told* you guys to not go off the trail...”

John shook his head, looking down at his feet; then swiped a hand roughly in dismissal at the others and took off through the dense jungle undergrowth again.

“Lost?” Derek said, a half-smile on his face as he pocketed the compass and held out a hand for the water bottle. “Nah, we’re just taking the scenic route. Here, give us a swig.”

Amanda handed over her flask with a grunt, stepping lightly after the first man as if her backpack weighed half as much as it actually did. “Don’t waste it,”

she called back over her shoulder. “Not until we can hear running water again, anyway.”

“I’m sure if we keep heading the way we’re going...” Natalie said, folding her map up with finality. “We’ll be there in no time.” She jogged past the other three to catch up to the first man.

The five trudged down the barely-there animal trail, weaving their way through as it zigzagged randomly, having to move the low hanging leaves and branches out of their way; yet before long Amanda cocked an ear, a searching look on her face.

“Ha-hah!” she crowed, her stride accelerating. “Told you so!”

By the time the others had joined them Amanda had already made her careful way down the small yet sheer embankment and was splashing her face with the cold river water.

Derek gave John a nudge. “And here I thought girls couldn’t read maps.”

“You’re holding the bottle, so you’re on refilling duty,” John retorted, looking down the river’s bank. When Derek made to jump down to the water’s edge, John grabbed his arm. “Hold up.”

“What now?” Derek asked.

Without taking his far-away gaze off whatever it was he was seeing, John flapped an arm at Trish. “Can I have the camera for a tick?”

“You break it, you bought it,” she said in a deadpan voice, placing it in his hand and making sure to loop the strap over his shoulder.

“Just don’t move, anybody,” he said, and raised the viewfinder to his eye.

The image remained blurred for a good while whilst he fiddled with the lens zoomed all the way in in hopes he’d get a better look at the small creature lapping water downstream, its head raising high and alert every few moments in case of predators. Finally he found the pale pink-white shape in the image and carefully focused the camera upon it.

“... hell is that...?” he breathed, one finger questing for the shutter button. At the last moment he saw its head flick up in surprise at a rather strident alarm call from a bird and in panic pressed down on the any button he could feel as it tensed and turned tail, bolting for the trees with an odd jumping-running motion; as if its hind legs were too big for the rest of its body.

He felt the camera whirr and he brought it down to stare bug-eyed at the image in hopes he’d captured *something*-

Trish was at his shoulder, looking at the blurred and shaky image too.

“What’s that white pixilation to the right?” she asked suspiciously, then turned away from him with a wail to the skies. “How could you have possibly stuffed it already, man? Cost me a fortune!”

What *was* that pixilation? “Good question, Trish; because that’s not what I saw at all,” he said. “It was an animal. Some albino mammal or something.”

“Bullshit,” Derek laughed, already lying down on the embankment with his head in his hands; feet dangling off the drop.

“I’m serious.”

“Seriously hallucinating.”

John brandished the camera in Derek’s face. “What’s this, then?”

“Your mum,” Derek replied. “Now I *definitely* know it’s not my turn to put the tent up tonight when we make camp. I’m looking at you, ladies.”

“Screw you, asshole,” John said, suddenly feeling even more tired than he had before stopping at the river. He slumped down and folded his legs up, zipping open his bag to reach for his own prized possession: a brown leather journal wrapped in an old t-shirt to keep it safe. His trusty pen was still attached to its binding so he took it out and flipped to the next empty page.

Derek hmphed in response. “Y’know, normal people just blog...?”

“Computer keys don’t offer a tactile enough experience.”

“You’re weird.”

“That’s why you like me, right?”

“Totally.”

*July 4th*

*Guyana, South America*

*We finally hit the river. Saw a strange animal on the riverbank. I have no idea what it was.*

Trish flopped down besides John, peering down at what he was writing. He hurriedly flipped the journal closed. “Hey!”

“It’s not like there’s anything groundbreaking in there,” she said with a smile, proffering her smartphone. “Was it anything like this?”

John studied the webpage full of images of felines coated red, brown; some even a dusky dark grey colour.

“Sorta... Like this one a bit, only the head was a little bigger, and it was white furred.”

Trish nodded matter-of-factly. “Jaguarundi.”

“Jagua-what-now?”

She laughed. “Cute wildcat. *Albino* cute wildcat. We’d make a fortune if we caught it and sold it to a wildlife park.”

From John’s other side, Derek gave the both of them a lazy sardonic look. “Nah, I’d just take it home and train it into a vicious guard cat.”

“Skitch’im, Jaguar...”

“Rundi.”

“Rundi!”

But Derek shook his head. “Doesn’t have the same ring to it as Mutant Killercat. Hmm. Mew for short.”

“Awww, that’s a cute name!”

“You won’t be saying that when it goes for your jugular.”

“Mew wouldn’t do that to me,” Trish sniffed.

“That’s Mutant Killercat to you.”

Trish took her phone from John and stood up. “Looks like the tent’s ready.”

“Sweet.”

The two left John alone, his journal in his lap, silently staring out across the river in hopes he’d catch a glimpse of the wildcat again. *I don’t want to catch you or take you home or anything like that. I just want to know if I really did see you at all; or if I was just hallucinating after a long stressful day trekking.* He stayed there until nightfall; when the scents of dinner and his rumbling stomach lent enough persuasion for him to finally stir and wander into the light and warmth of the group’s campfire.

After hearing no more about it from anyone else during dinner he decided to forget it. Maybe it really had been a mirage. The white pixilation on the

camera could have just been some strange trick of the sunlight. It was time instead to focus on getting back to civilisation.

Mew huddled in the undergrowth close to the river, her delicate nose whiffing at the delicious scents wafting over in the breeze. She dared not venture out further though; there was no telling what kind of predators those strange animals could be they were so bold. From her own protection she could see they had none, and were huddling close together around a fire. Mew would not have dared to get so close to the flames; fire was something dangerous, something to flee from; and she was amazed that it was not at all spreading across the ground but dancing just in one place as the animals made loud vocalisations and ate their food.

Did these creatures ever sleep? Her body craved food. She had barely eaten a thing since falling from the sky, surviving on insects mostly since they proved the easiest to hunt. The food the animals were eating over the other side of the river smelled much tastier than insects. Surely they'd leave scraps; a bone, a piece of fat, anything after they had finished.

But as to when they would finish... It looked as though it was necessary to play the waiting game - but if there was anything Mew was good at, it was waiting. Something told her she would have to prepare to wait a very long while

before the land would see fit to accept her and her unborn kit. So wait she would, and wait she did; dark blue eyes unblinking as they looked out from underneath a large leafy frond and across the river. *Soon...*

<It's time for what?> Grace asked Aristeia as they flew through the time stream.

Aristeia did not slow her progress through the stream as she answered.

<You do not already know?>

The information was there, Grace could feel, lurking just beyond her consciousness. If she bade it, she would know it instantly. That was her right as a celebi. And yet...

<Talking telepathically feels more comfortable at the moment,> she started, and saw with relief that Aristeia nodded.

<Of course. As a fully budded celebi, it's time for everything. As a celeva you supervised and guarded the time streams and whatnot; now as a celebi you control them wholly. You have permission to create and travel through any. Of course, with all these rights come just as many responsibilities...>

The time stream led them out into a thinly forested wood absolutely dancing with celebi. Some sat on the horizontal branches and snacked on bunches



of round, red berries. Others flitted through the airy space looking far more focused and determined - as if on a mission - than the rest.

<What's...> Grace began, then shook her head. That at least was obvious. They had reached some sort of secret celebi sanctuary. More important questions were at hand. <What kind of responsibilities?>

Aristea took a seated position on the fringes of the collection of buzzing celebi. After carefully selecting a berry for herself and plucking it from a branch she cradled it for a moment at her lap to continue: <Well, we've already maxed out our body quota for the lake healing ceremony; which is a shame because it was simply *lovely*... Take the time to remember it, though; healing other celebi - and the world's flora as well - is a skill you'll want to foster as soon as possible.> She popped the berry in her mouth and smiled widely. <Delicious.>

Grace frowned. <What's something I can help with, then?>

<Oh, there's always various bits and pieces; mending paradoxes, visiting worthy humans, protecting the forests around the world->

Grace did not have to hive-mind-linked to Aristea to know she was dodging something much more serious and exciting. <Aristea...> she prompted. <I didn't face down the Lord of Time, Dialga, after waking up to merely patrol forests. *Tell me.*>

<Tell yourself,> Aristeia replied. <What happens after we bring primal Dialga back from the mystery space once he is healed, and he touches the before time?>

Grace thought hard - very hard - about this one yet there was no memory of anything afterwards, just a blank haze; as if she was a celeva again and not privy to the future any longer. Her eyelids slowly widened. <Does that mean no celevi survives to remember it?>

<Either that, or there are an infinite number of possible outcomes depending on us - so every time any celevi comes to this moment the result changes. Until that moment when our memories stop we will never know what will happen during, and every celevi afterwards cannot properly remember either because it will go differently the next time. Well, we *think*. That's the best explanation we've been able to come up with.>

<So every celevi in time - past and future - sees that blankness in that moment in time?>

<Yes.>

<How are we meant to know which celevi have travelled there before and witnessed it?>

<We don't.>

The idea both horrified and fascinated Grace. She realised her arms were wrapped protectively around her small body in response to feeling that strange blip in time that no celebi could remember properly. She sought information about afterwards - years, even - and found the entire way clouded and blank. She realised how quickly she had grown used to absorbing information from other celebi that the lack of such was what felt strange now.

<You want me to go to the moment the memories stop,> she whispered; the shock giving way to a burning curiosity at not knowing.

Aristea's eyes were glittering in some strong emotion, whether fear or excitement Grace couldn't tell. <Think of it as a *game*, Grace. And now you've finally joined us, it's your turn to move.>

A... game? She suddenly remembered Mew, back in Relic Forest: *Now truly begins the Game of Time!* Why had Mew called it that? Why had joining the Council that very moment been so imperative to Mew, anyway?

As she had answered Mew so she answered Aristea the same way. <Time is not a game.>

<Would you have me describe it as a competition? None of us who have gone before - for we most probably have countless times - have seen it ended in such a way that it can be remembered. The future possibility which we created - the one we saw come to pass - was only one of a million. Yet every moment in

every day, we come to this impasse in our minds! That means we still haven't learned what creates this anomaly nor have solved the puzzle of getting the events during it to finally stick. Of course it's a game of time, Grace; every day for celebi everywhen is a game.>

<And now you have a new player,> Grace said determinedly, taking heart at Aristeia's tone. <I'm ready.>

<You're not.>

Grace blinked. <I *swear* I have heard that more than once before, and from my personal memories, too.>

<It's time for you to take time,> Aristeia said, smiling gently. <It's so easy to get used to swimming the rapids of our time streams that we forget how to feel how time moves normally as a wide and long river does. Attune yourself to the forest here. The trees never forget; they always live at exactly the same pace.>

<I-I understand,> Grace replied, but now she had felt it first hand the fog of the future in her mind's eye wouldn't leave her thoughts. <Though, why does Dialga touch the before time and trigger the start of the game? What's the point?>

<The answer lies in *your* true memory, seedling. You've had to take a lot in since awakening, understandably, but this is one memory that I am seeing from you; not the other way around.>

Grace thought back. She'd awoken to the summonings of a time flute played by a ranger, travelled to Orre and purified Pikachutwo - Sparkling. As she had been travelling back, Dialga had accosted her and demanded she put things to rights; namely bring Sparkling back to her normal time. Then all chaos had broken loose, Mewtwo, Mew, another Sparkling and Chur from another time, *and* a human had arrived, and then Dialga had repeatedly attacked the entire congregation with its roar of time. Only Grace had escaped being flung elsewhere in time.

<The human girl I have seen before from another's memories. She lives the rest of her life in a past time. But Sparkling and Chur... they may have a much larger part in this game of time, I feel.>

Aristea blinked at her. <How can you tell that when...?>

<I don't know. It's... well, they both feel special. I was so driven to heal and defend Sparkling. I think her story is not yet over.>

<And Mewtwo and Mew?> the other celebi prompted.

Grace nodded. <They were blasted through time as well. They're... gone from us. Not dead, but... they're not here any longer. I can't sense their presences at all right now, merely remember them from a before time.~ She put her hands on her head almost unconsciously in concentration. ~I don't think I can even remember them from the future!>

<Nor can I.>

<Is that where they are, now? The before time? How are they even still  
*alive?*>

<Nothing from our time can go there and live; but now two have, and they  
survive yet. A paradox we do not understand for it is not of our making.>

*Sending a Pokémon back and leaving it there permanently is prohibited,*  
Grace remembered. Dialga's very words; and yet he had been the one to send  
Mew and Mewtwo back so far in time that they'd gone beyond anyone's reach.

<What would happen if I tried to bring them back on my own?>

<Opening a time stream to before Dialga's birth itself? Grace; there's a  
good reason all celebi are terrified of not remembering moments in time. It goes  
against our very being. That's why we feel so motivated to enter the game of  
time. Could you honestly open that time stream? Could you reach that far back,  
knowing it's far beyond the birth of space and time?>

<Then how can they still exist, if they were both pushed to a time before  
time?>

Aristea shook her head. <We may never know, unless your turn finally  
causes the events during the game to stick so we can ask and then remember.>

<I'll do my best.>

<I know.>

Mew waited a long, long time; long enough for the moon to rise and the clouds to cover the majority of its glow. She gazed up high where she had once flown free - *no, that had been a dream, even though it must have been a dream so real that she still vividly remembered the feeling of the cloud's embrace bathing her short fur with ice-cold dewdrops* - and waited for the birds and other wildlife above her to all fall quiet and still. Was there any other creature around who was still awake and alert? Waiting as she had waited; to creep silently and make the killing strike of the hunt as noiselessly as the night around it? Was she, the hunter, being hunted even as she waited?

There was no way of knowing. The only truth was the darkness and silence of the creature's camp across the river - and its still mouthwatering scents of uneaten food. The fire had banked and only golden-red embers remained. Safe enough, for now.

Mew slowly padded out of the undergrowth and made for the water, her tail lashing. She held her body so taut and low upon the ground that every step forward became a task in itself - but to lose her concentration now would be only inviting the potential for a noisy misstep upon the pebbles.

As she stepped into the water her hackles raised at its icy touch. It seeped into her coarse fur and met skin almost straightaway. Stubbornly, Mew continued at her excruciatingly slow pace at a futile attempt to mask the sound of the river

bubbling around her legs. When the bank dramatically fell away from her she barely stifled a startled growl and began doggedly paddling instead; fighting against the still-strong current bearing her downstream.

The light of the embers began to draw away from her rapidly. Now, Mew did growl; both in consternation and determination. There was no way of knowing how far she'd made across the black river with the moon's light masked as it was. Still she paddled, until finally her front paws began scrabbling upon the loose rocks and pebbles of the other side and she was able to make some purchase upon some once extending her sharp claws and digging in.

Her shoulder and neck muscles ached as she pulled herself from the water upon what felt like much larger boulders. The light at the camp was barely aglow upon the much higher ground so far away.

Now on solid ground, Mew made sure of her steady footing and then shook her entire body starting from her head and neck in a wave right down to the very tip of her long tail. Water sprayed everywhere, dotting the bank with loud splots of noise. Mew was too tired and beyond caring about noise at this stage, and even yapped softly in triumph for braving and defeating the river.

Yet Mew did not realise the most danger had not come from the forest's creatures around her but from the river's; for had she remained much longer in its depths the enormous arapaima fish now nosing sluggishly around the shallows



where she had clambered out would have been curious enough at the disturbance to take a bite...

Now safely on the shore, she made her way to the campfire and stared, mesmerised, at the glow for several moments until catching another whiff of the food emanating from just next to the intimidating-looking structure which smelled occupied. Mew cautiously made her way to the food scent and found it covered and enclosed. Her claws made short work of the covering in her hunger, and whilst the creatures snored in their sleep Mew choked down the hard and salty meat bits until she was completely sated.

The whole experience had made her mouth very dry and so she made her way back to the water to gently lap at its banks - gently enough, luckily, to not attract any more unwelcome attention from the river's carnivorous inhabitants - before letting her exhausted satisfaction take over completely and curling up to sleep as a real hunter would after eating its fill: proudly and unashamedly out in the open, in the lee of the overhanging ledge to escape the occasional breeze.

*"You're fucking kidding me!"*

Derek's anguished howl brought John quickly to his senses as he awoke in the tent come early morning. Everyone except Natalie was already up it seemed, for they were the last two left in the tent's comforting darkness.

Natalie's eyes were wide. "What is it?" she yelled.

"Some animal got into my jerky last night and ate the lot!"

John groaned. "Is that all?" he muttered, laying back down and shutting his eyes. "Here I was thinking we had a real emergency on our hands."

"I heard that," Derek said, unzipping the tent and thrusting the torn result at his friend. "Get up, lovebirds. It is a real emergency. Look!"

John caught it automatically. It was not only the bag of jerky that had been ripped to shreds. Derek's small bag was in tatters, loose threads waving everywhere. He couldn't contain the surprised smirk as it spread across one cheek. Natalie did even worse at the 'serious-face' attempt though - she began to giggle, one hand to her mouth.

"Jagua-fucking-rundi," Derek said, sounding disgusted.

"Aw, I guess Mutant Killercat doesn't like you after all," Natalie said, still giggling.

John guessed Derek was not amused at this. "C'mon, let's pack up and start heading."

"Sans bag."

John just shrugged in response. "It's not like your nocturnal friend made off with your compass or anything else irreplaceable."

“Guess you’re right. Anyway, Trish found a little wharf further down the river when she was snapping away. It’s on the way anyhow, let’s go check it out.”

Five full days later, Grace was right in the middle of snacking on her new favourite food: red berries. The taste was tart yet sweet, and *just right*; it made her want to practically squeal in sheer delight. The secret celebi clearing was completely encircled by the same species of berry tree and even the dozens of celebi zipping here and there, winking in and out as they moved about time before rejoining their friends, did not seem to be diminishing the spring crop at all.

She watched as a time stream opened right in front of her and Dianthus flew out and began hovering. <Long time.>

<Not really,> Grace said, puzzled. She hadn’t travelled through time at all during those five days; taking Aristeia’s advice to heart, yet whilst the days had flowed normally still she had not felt they had dragged at all. There was really too much going on around her in real time to ever feel stagnant or bored.

Dianthus quirked an antennae, not looking puzzled back but very humoured.

<Never mind,> Grace continued, feeling sheepish. <How’s it been in the mystery space?>

<Trying. Intense. Full-on. Heartwarming and heartbreaking. But... my friends living there saw it done nonetheless. They calmed Dialga from his primal state, and he is now prepared to return to this space to resume his duties here.>

<Oh!> Grace leapt from the branch in surprise and excitement at the news, her wings buzzing double-time. <Great!>

Dianthus smiled a bittersweet smile at Grace's enthusiasm. <Yes, it is. Come, meet me *here*.>

Dianthus bethought a space in her memories to Grace; a space high up in the air above the calm seas, one where blue met blue on the faded horizon at every direction gazed. Both celebi nodded to one another and without another word whirled through a time stream to a place far away.

Grace turned slowly around as she hovered. There truly was no land to be seen from their position. It made her feel slightly uneasy, especially with the lack of warm air updrafts assisting her in staying aloft.

<Palkia,> Dianthus said.

A great shining claw poked through from nowhere and slowly drew down; ripping a neat gash in the fabric of their dimension. Soon Grace could spot Palkia's entire arm slipping through, then curling round and drawing something else out as it flew slowly backwards.

Dialga had his eyes shut as Palkia grasped him by the forelegs, bringing him back with excruciating care; till at last the two massive legendaries drew apart in the air. Dialga opened its eyes and faced the two celebi, staring unblinkingly at them.

<Wait for it,> Dianthus said, a finger held up in the air. Time flowed past and with a start Grace realised the other celebi was waiting for the fog to kick in. Her heartbeat began thudding almost painfully in response at the mere apprehension of the idea.

Grace took a breath to mark the mental feeling of the moment as the very second ticked over, then turned her head and stared at Dianthus as she slowly breathed out, so enormously on edge every muscle in her body felt taut. Even her antennae felt tightly curled.

**YOUR MOVE, LITTLE ONE,** Dialga said. **YOUR MOVE IN THE GAME OF TIME. WHAT WILL YOU DO, AND HOW WILL YOU DO IT?**

<In a moment,> Grace replied, for something had just occurred to her. <Dianthus, if Dialga is the guardian of time then how does it still flow properly without his constant presence in the mystery space? > Something told her that her space, here in her world, would not have adapted well to Dialga's absence for very much longer. No matter how long it had taken to heal Dialga in the mystery

space, it seemed well to her that the pink celebi had reappeared very soon after the whole original crisis in Relic Forest in order to bring him back cured.

Dianthus laughed nervously. <We have an alternative means of keeping time stable there.>

*Which is...?* Grace looked deeper but for whatever reason Dianthus's memories remained hidden to her, and she was evidently not willing to explain further telepathically. *Hmph.* <Look, the only reason I ask is that if the mystery space can, then perhaps so can the time before time. Maybe it doesn't need a guardian - any more than the mystery space does - all the time.>

***BLASPHEMY!*** Dialga hissed. **THERE WAS NO TIME BEFORE MY EXISTENCE! I AM TIME ITSELF!**

<But Dialga, if that time exists differently - with completely different rules - what if we simply look at it as we do the mystery space with its different rules; as another time *and another space!*>

<Go on,> Dianthus urged, after Dialga's angry - and mentally painful - growling subsided.

Grace shook her head to clear her whirling thoughts, her breath coming shorter as she grew more excited. <Listen - *listen* - we might need both Dialga's *and* Palkia's power to reach them. The combined powers of time and space; to

locate Mew and Mewtwo, grasp them and carry them back here to their proper time!>

Dianthus laughed shortly. <A Time Rending... Spacial Roar?>

<Exactly!>

Grace realised she was baring her teeth in an emotion which felt not quite like pleasant happiness but a savage joy. <So Dialga and Palkia need to combine their powers to find Mew and Mewtwo, then bring them back!>

Palkia blinked at her, opening its clawed hand and reaching for her. **THIS IS YOUR MOVE, LITTLE SPROUT, AND THUS IT IS YOU WHO SHALL FIND THEM. WE WILL ASSIST YOU, OF COURSE, FOR WE ARE FIRMLY ALLIED IN THE GAME.**

<Wha- what?!>

Palkia's great claws enclosed her.

<Remember to breathe,> Dianthus said, her telepathic voice drawing faint as Palkia placed its other hand on Dialga's shoulder and visible power began to gather at their forms. From its shoulder gem, Grace could sense Palkia's entire arm growing incandescent pink and chanced a look to Dialga's chest gem to see it was sparking also with blue light.

<Keep your eyes open and your mind sharp!> Dianthus hollered at her, her hands cupped around her mouth as she yelled physically too. <Good luck!>

Palkia's arm gathered Dialga's growing power and soon Grace was entirely enclosed in a growing light sphere of pink and blue energy. The energy was raw and nearly unfettered; she could feel Palkia's grasp shuddering ever-so-slightly as it grew denser and denser around her.

Till at last Palkia opened its mouth and cried out in a warbling pure tone; Dialga adding its own growling cry in the duet of power, and Palkia raised its arm with Grace inside then thrust it with a long swinging arc - celebi, power and all - into a different time and space -





- the breach was like an electric shock passing through her whole body. Antennae tingling, Grace barely had any time to register just what had happened - or if anything had happened at all, for somehow she still felt safely enclosed in Palkia's grasp - before she cast her mind into the waters of time for her strongest memories of Mew and Mewtwo.

She hurtled across time and space. Stars whipped by, planets flew by, and her only anchor in this mind-bending flight became a visual memory of the two of purple and pink and how they'd slowly grown to know each other-

*Come back to us, Mew, Mewtwo. Where are you?*

She flew towards a planet of endless green and blue. Her mind buzzed and the memories grew sharp, all clarity - *there! There they are!*

She was no longer Grace the celebi. She was an immense glowing beacon of blue and pink, violently slamming her way through time and space towards one particular point on the surface of this world. It would not do to miss, so she - flaming and wonderful and terrible - took the power from its previous bearers she'd once known and yelled one final battle cry before letting her useless wings fold flat and the energy cast her screaming at terminal velocity into the earth.

*My first move in the Game of Time... will it destroy me?*

*I must bring them back, for they belong in another time and space.*

*Please let me not be forgotten...*

*... hell is that?*

John Smith allowed himself that one final thought before the asteroid hit, blinding light engulfing the entire area. He felt the catastrophic impact through his feet before the roaring thunder followed through and momentarily deafened him. His hands sought Natalie's but found only emptiness and the void...

To any onlookers that day outside the the enormous hemispherical blast zone the explosion would have appeared as a flash of pink and blue in the air then peace and silence once more a millisecond later. The only difference was the sudden lack of a circular patch of forested land; now rapidly filling with water and creating a naturally circular lake instead. Everything inside the flash of light had simply vanished into thin air.

The journey back took a moment yet an age. Grace barely held the island in her grasp as she travelled once again through space and time simultaneously. A blink later and she was breathing once again with lungs and looking through her own eyes normally as she materialised back in alongside Dialga, Palkia, and a completely new landmark on the faraway seas - a little patch of what had once been part of Guyana, South America; now a faraway island in the pokémon world.



# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Five: Eldritch*



## Chapter Five: Eldritch

*I awaken. The others awaken next to me. I sense them before I properly sense myself, then feel as time begins to move sluggishly into being as well.*

*Time? Until now that had been merely a long-forgotten thing. Urged on, perhaps, by the glowing beacon which is moving softly past us just beyond the wall bordering the nothing-place. I stare at the beacon as it goes past, and realise it does not sense us back at all.*

*Time quickly falls dead as the beacon moves past our home, too far to stir-*

*My sense fails, and I slumber. Perhaps the others slumber as well. Out of time, my thoughts move differently. But they still move in their own way. I wonder what that beacon had truly been. I want to touch it, move past the billowing wall and find where it has gone.*

*The beacon had been light. For a moment time had nearly begun flowing and with it, light shining, but now neither of those things even exist in this nothing-place. As I slumber I remember the sensation. It is all I have. Just a memory of a distant glow before it passed us by; completely unacknowledged.*

*No, I do not just want to touch it. I do not just want to move past the wall. I want to rip the wall into thin shreds and devour the light whole. For once we were eaters of worlds... but that was such a long time ago, before we were banished here in this dark nothing-place to hunger forever...*

*and I am so hungry*

**LITTLE ONE...** Palkia said, its great booming voice sounding almost hesitant. **DIANTHUS SAID I WAS IMPRECISE, BUT...**

The legendary beckoned to her with a claw flick and together the four - two celebi, Dialga and Palkia - swooped down for a closer inspection. The patch of land in the middle of nowhere was somewhat oval-shaped and barely settling in to its new home in the pokémon world. They watched in solemn silence as the edges of land continued to sink deeper and deeper into the ocean, eroding and scattering in the meantime.

**LITTLE SPROUT, DID YOU MEAN TO BRING THE ISLAND SURROUNDING YOUR FRIENDS BACK AS WELL?**

<No,> Grace said, ashamed, then gritted her teeth. <It was hard enough staying conscious let alone steering to the extent you're implying!>

Dianthus placed a calming hand on her shoulder. <You did it, Grace. You succeeded in rescuing them from the time before time. A bold move in the game indeed. They're definitely somewhere on this island.>

Grace nodded in determination. <Yes, I can sense them too.>

<All we need to do now is find them.>

Dianthus took her hand and they flew into the dense green forest together side by side. They had barely explored the eerily quiet surrounds for a minute when Palkia's worried call reached them.

**LITTLE ONES? WHERE ARE YOU?**

Grace faltered through the air at the question. Confused, she looked back to where they'd left the guardians of space and time outside but couldn't spot their forms beyond the veil of greenery. <We're just inside, we'll be back as soon as we find Mew and Mewtwo.>

**LITTLE ONES, IT HAS NOW BEEN A WHOLE DAY. WE MUST SOON RETURN TO OUR OWN DIMENSIONS.**

<Oh no,> Dianthus muttered to herself. <No, no...>

<What?>

<Shoot!> the pink celebi swore, looking around desperately. <Time in here hasn't caught up yet! It's still settling in. We're moving much slower than outside the forest!>

<What?!>

**FAREWELL, UNTIL NEXT TIME.**

<No, no, *no*! They'll be wondering where we have been all this time.

Quick, Grace, we must find Mew and Mewtwo as quickly as we can and get out of here!>

The two celebi buzzed through the air towards the middle of the island at high speed, dodging trees and hanging vines till Grace's wings and shoulders were aching. The land undulated sharply until it gave way to a torn river now unable to flow properly. Small pools were forming around the broken earth.

Dianthus honed in on the largest pool of water. At its bank sat Mew, who was crouching on all fours, shaking her head and looking dazed.

<What... happened?> Mew asked weakly, as Grace joined them and landed on a dry patch of earth.

<I brought you back to your own time,> Grace said proudly. <Are you ok? Where's Mewtwo?>

<Mewtwo...> Mew sat up and cradled her stomach. <He's... in here, sleeping, protected.>

The two celebi glanced uneasily at each other. <I don't understand,> Grace said.

<It matters not. It is only that he is such a part of me that made this possible in the first place. Had I not acted as I did, he would have completely ceased to exist at all.>

<Oh, he is an egg?> Dianthus asked.

Mew shook her head slowly. <I don't believe so.>

<Well, at least you're both back safe and alive. Come on, we need to leave this island as fast as we can.>

<I... don't think I can fly yet.> Mew held out a paw in supplication, her eyes still lacking the sharpest focus and her voice sounding somehow distracted.

<Maybe some more food from the creatures's cache...>

<Creatures?> Grace looked around quickly then flew up back into the air to properly scan the area. Further on along the river bank's crumbling edges were five humans lying prostrate on the ground next to their tents.

<Dialga have mercy...> she muttered as she flew towards them for a closer inspection. <There were humans living in the before time?>

Dianthus joined her, holding Mew aloft with a gentle hand. <Not as barren as we believed, seeing as flora and fauna both existed then too, apparently.>

<Should we wake them?> Grace asked, almost hesitant to even touch them.



Mew carefully released Dianthus's hand from her own paw and floated gently downwards; her focus sharpening. <It may not be that easy. Can't you feel their life forces lacking somehow? I do not believe they sleep, but... it's hard to describe...>

<Try,> said Dianthus.

Mew frowned as she looked down upon the humans, then reached down and lightly brushed the closest forehead. <Their aura is practically a flat grey,> she said finally, <but that they still even have auras is a miracle in itself. They've gone far beyond their own lifetimes, so only the shell of life remains. The rest - knowledge, emotions, even willpower itself - no longer exists.>

<So what do we do with them?> Grace asked, breathing as slowly as the humans were whilst she absorbed this rather sobering information.

<I just don't know,> Mew said. <Perhaps... there may be a way to rejuvenate their auras. Give them a new life?>

**LITTLE ONE! THE MYSTERY SPACE NEEDS YOU BACK!**

Palkia's disembodied voice echoed around the island in unmistakable urgency.

<I'm sorry,> Dianthus said, clasping both Grace's and Mew's hands firmly before heading towards the canopy. <I have to go, *now*. Who knows how much time has already passed outside.>

<Wait! Don't go!> Grace yelled, but regretting how it sounded, followed up with, <Please come back if you can.>

<I will.>

With that she was gone.

<She won't be back until it's too late to fix anything at all.>

The flat telepathic voice came from behind both Grace and Mew. Grace swivelled frantically through the air - her heart rate doubling in fright - and came face to face with a celebi flying out of a time ripple followed by three other small levitating pokémon.

<How do you know that?> Mew asked the new celebi calmly.

Grace momentarily wished for a fraction of Mew's unshaken friendly curiosity, then concentrated a lot harder on the three strange pokémon behind the celebi.

*Uxie, Azelf and Mesprit. The guardians of the three lakes. And...*

<Whoever you are, at least your timing is impeccable,> Grace said, her heart swelling in warmth after its little scare. <Thank you.>

The other celebi silently nodded its welcome, its eyes closing at the lowest dip of the nod. When they opened again, their gaze fixed on Grace's and held it captive; willing her to look and think deeper once again.

*I should not be here at all. But I couldn't stop myself. You'll understand one day, I know. Why I broke the rules.*

*I already understand why. We can't just leave the humans here like this.*

*It is not only that which is broken. You may still be able to look deeper, but all you have been told is not necessarily as it seems.*

*How so?*

The other celebi blinked, and the deep-thought was broken.

<The Game will never end for us,> it continued unemotionally in its regular telepathic voice. <There is no finish line to cross. The fog is just marking when we first moved to bring Mew and Mewtwo back. We can never actually win. It will never let us go. It is just always the same struggle to go back and fix events in time so they do not result in cataclysmic death and destruction. To go back further and further each time and change even the smallest of moments in time in the vain hope the ensuing future will play out differently->

<What's the Game?> Mew asked.

Uxie, Azelf and Mesprit all turned their attention to Mew in synchrony and joined her in the air a little lower than the two celebi. Grace saw them apparently begin to privately engage her in their own telepathic conversation and draw further towards the earth and the five empty humans.

<This is not intended as a warning,> the other celebi continued. <You shouldn't know this now just as much as I shouldn't be here, but...> Its antennae wilted completely in despair and Grace found herself frowning in pity. <I just can't not tell you.>

<What am I honestly meant to do with that information, anyway?>

<I don't even know. You're already well in to the Game, so there is no help for it, really.>

<Thanks.>

The other celebi growled at her. <This is not easy for me either.>

<I don't even know who you are. What's your name?>

<Celebi. And don't laugh. Right now, it's *just plain Celebi*.>

Grace was not satisfied. <What is it *not* right now?>

<Once upon a before time, it used to stem from the flowers of gratitude,> the celebi replied darkly, waving a time ripple into being. <But seeing as I can't exactly be grateful for anything anymore I think I'd prefer being known as Jade.>

Once again Grace's heart began pounding heavily in her chest. <What?>

<Why don't you ask your mentor Aristeia?> Jade said, sneering at the name, <seeing as she's *so* emotionally invested in the Game and all.> The ripple swallowed her away to another time before she could say anything more.

Grace hung in the air, ignoring the four other guardians below her.

*Could that have been me from a future time? Is that even possible? What paradoxes have been created now I've spoken to her?*

She decided to leave the four remaining legendaries to their own devices and carved a ripple through the air towards the celebi sanctuary.

*I need answers.*

<What's the Game?> Mew asked.

Uxie, Azelf and Mesprit all turned their attention to Mew in synchrony and joined her in the air a little lower than the two celebi.

<It's the Game of Time,> Uxie said. <Some time-travel thing for bored celebi, as far as I can tell from what was a rather rushed explanation. We were roped in after affiliating in this whole 'Council' business... something about granting new lives to five humans?>

Mew gestured downwards. <There are your humans.>

<Hmm...> the three replied together. Uxie circled them once in the air and seemed to come to a decision. <Join their hands.>

The four diminutive guardians struggled with the dead weight of the humans's arms and hands, lifting them carefully until proper skin contact had been made between the group.

<You first,> Mesprit said to Uxie, the sly smile on her face only accentuated by her lidded gaze. <Mew, you *might* want to shut your eyes for this.>

<How come?>

<Uxie's going to open *hers*,> Azelf explained. <When she looks upon someone who already has knowledge, it shall be taken away. Luckily for these humans, the reverse also holds true, but for you - the mother of all? Please, keep them shut until we say it's alright to open them.>

Mew shut her eyes lightly. <Where does that knowledge come from?>

<From someone it has been taken away from,> Uxie said in a voice of tight concentration. <I'd forgotten *colour*...>

Mew fell silent in wonder, the play of light and shade over her eyelids dancing rapidly and sometimes almost violently as Uxie opened her eyes to the humans.

<It's fine to open them again,> Mesprit said, finally. <They have been granted with knowledge of their new world. Now, it's my turn.> She flew down and laid both her glowing hands on one of the human's faces. <*Dare not touch the pokémon's body. In but three short days, all emotions will drain away.*>

<You're giving them stolen emotions?>

<That's a bit of a loaded word, 'stolen',> Mesprit replied, still looking down at the human with a serious expression. <When the majority of these creatures just want nothing but to steal our freedom and our powers.>

<I was just hoping you'd give them good emotions; make them good people. I'd like to think they were good people before.>

<Every human wants to think they are a good person who does good deeds,> Azelf said dryly, taking Mesprit's place and the human's hand in her stead. <We are not here to take control once granting them the elements of true spirit. They become autonomous from here on in; and it will be solely up to them whether they do more good or bad in this world for the rest of their lives.>

Her form suddenly froze and the human she was touching jerked randomly upright, its eyes flashing open blindly. Then just as it settled and lay down again, its eyes closed once more, it happened to the two next to it and further along the physical link... until Azelf began moving properly once again in the air and released her hold on the human's hand.

<They sleep naturally now,> she explained. <They remember nothing of their past lives and - thanks to Uxie - have knowledge of their new life here.>

<One which they didn't actually live.>

<No, but save ageing them backwards - which is impossible - to a time in childhood they wouldn't remember anyway our only other option would be to

release their bodies from that strange limbo of half-life. And *that*, Mew - I hope you agree - is no option at all.>

Mew nodded her agreement, holding her tongue regarding the impossibility of ageing backwards. The less anyone knew of Mewtwo's current situation, the better.

<And now, our task done, we leave you,> the three said, ascending further into the air.

Mew raised her eyebrows, surprised. <Didn't Celebi bring you from another time?>

Mesprit nodded, gesturing about her. <As both incarnations have apparently already left us without any further explanation we will have to prevail upon our brother Dialga to send us back to our proper time. Knowing Dialga, though, he will be more than willing to oblige.>

<Farewell, then,> Mew said, waving her paw and settling down next to the humans.

<They will wake soon, you know,> Uxie said, her tone warning.

Looking calmly at them, Mew curled further into a ball on the grass. <I think I will stay and watch over them until they do.>

*Surely Uxie was not insinuating that these people are not pure of heart...*



When she looked up again, though, after receiving no reply, she realised she was alone again with the sleeping humans. *Wake soon*, she willed them. *There is much which awaits you here in your new world.*

Grace flew to the edges of the forested celebi sanctuary from the time ripple and found night had shrouded the clearing in deathly, eerie silence. She flitted into the centre of the clearing to clear her mind yet found her unease deepening every second which passed by.

The celebi who frequented this place couldn't have just been sleeping somewhere nearby; the place felt so cold and empty it began to have the same effect on Grace's body. The natural flow of the subtle flora aura about the forest had completely stilled here. It felt deserted, as if it had been for days - no, *weeks*.

*When in time am I?* Grace thought.

<Aristea?> she called, and hoping to seek the other celebi's presence, as she'd done before when firstly opening her mind to her ability, she turned up the range as much as possible.

Aristea's presence did not appear in her mind, even though Grace waited several nearly breathless minutes waiting. She tried conjuring up the most vivid memory she had of the time she had turned the psychic connection completely up and Aristea had found her almost instantly afterwards. What was different this

time? Then she realised that, like the forest around her, her mind was completely silent.

The silence slowly started to become absolutely deafening.

Where was Aristeia? Dianthus?

Where was every other celebi? Where that constant buzz and twittering, like a multitude of conversations just far enough out of range to dull to the point of obscurity and become its own silence? Right now, the true silence felt and sounded like a low roaring instead of the normal void of sound.

*You may still be able to look deeper, but all you have been told is not necessarily as it seems.*

The only celebi left to speak in her mind was Jade: but it was merely a memory of her previous dire warning. Could Grace still look deeper? What was something she didn't know now but could find out thanks to the hive mind? She needed to find Aristeia in the physical realm, was there a way to do that without locating her mentally too?

She thought deeper, and still the seconds ticked by. In the end, Grace had to shut her eyes and place her hands on either side of her head to focus deeply enough to find an answer.

*The fog of the Game of Time separates the players inside from the observers outside.*

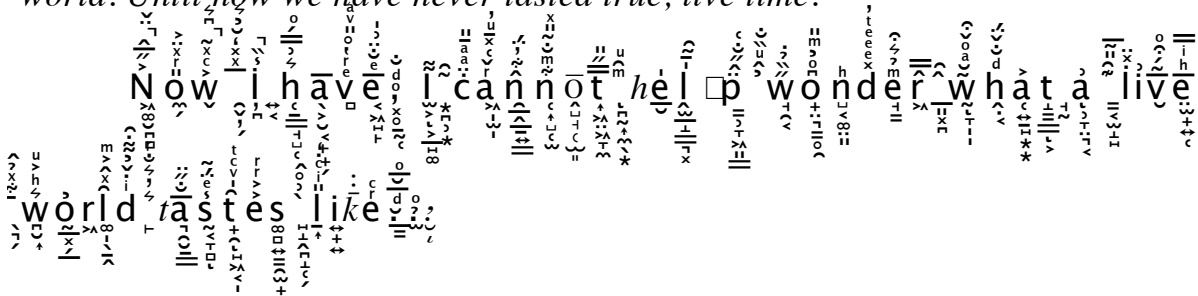
<Aristea is not playing at the moment?> Grace muttered, confused. <Why not? when things are at their worst? Perhaps... she doesn't realise.> So she, eager to escape the uncanny quiet of the sanctuary, wove another ripple through time which broke through the fog to the clear of before.

*The beacon is not light this time, but a crack. The slightest crack, slivering at an excruciatingly slow speed down the wall. Something begins flowing through the crack. I feel it flowing past my self and attracting the rest of the flock. They gather behind me, cautiously, but I can feel their brimming eagerness as well.*

*The something is true time from a live world, I realise, as I take the first sip. It is wholly thirst quenching and yet afterwards I realise I must have more. I must have all of it. The flock jostle one another in the darkness and silence of this place, catching precious drips of true time one by one that I miss. Yet not a bit is wasted. We are most methodical.*

*For a small time - just a droplet really, before it is eaten - I ignore the slow leak and instead watch the broken wall. It seems the crack has stabilised as it stands now. We cannot touch it, so something on the other side must have caused the disturbance.*

*Will there be more disturbances now this crack has appeared? Is it possible it will widen, causing more time to leak through? Has this ever happened before like this? We have been unleashed before, but never on a live world. Until now we have never tasted true, live time.*



<Aristea,> Grace said, extending her palms; so relieved she'd finally found her in the past above the sanctuary's canopy just a few moments before Grace's past self was about to start her first move with Dialga and Palkia. <I need your help in the Game.>

Her mentor turned to meet her and went pale. <G-grace? What are you doing here? You're already meant to be with Dianthu-> Then her eyes went even wider, her pupils pinning into not only shock but pure fear. <You're not meant to be here at all!> she said. <You can't be here! It's totally against the rules! Go back!>

Startled, Grace let her hands fall back to her side. <I'm in trouble, the Game's not going how it should at all->

<You must return *now*, and keep moving, and let it play out as it will! Don't come back here until it's done, Grace.> Aristea reached out for her but the

motion faltered just before their skin made contact. <No, that's dangerous,> she muttered.

<Come with me,> Grace begged. <Help me with it. Maybe you'll remember something from your first time playing... It's worth a try, right?>

<I...>

<It's been crazy in there, you have no idea. I can't do this on my own. No celebi could, I realise now. That's why I was so confused when I couldn't find you or any other celebi inside the Game. Time's pretty messed up in there already so I figured it was just owing to that, but...>



<I can't stay here any more,> Aristeia started again, her face downcast, when out of nowhere Jade flashed into their line of vision like a green blur and tackled her savagely across the sky.

Grace had barely any time to react before her instincts did so for her. She flipped her body around and followed the pair at breakneck pace for a reason she couldn't even understand.

Aristeia telepathically screeched panic and terror the whole way, struggling in vain. Jade had her lips open in a snarl, her teeth bared to the wind and her arms and legs wrapped up tightly around the other celebi's body.

<You'll thank me one day!> Jade yelled to the pursuing Grace, suddenly dipping and - headfirst - aiming for the earth instead. <This one would have deserted you here and now mere seconds before the Game begins! hidden in the secret sanctuary with the rest of them and dodged the whole thing!>

<What?>

<Do you get it yet?> Jade shouted back, the wind whistling almost as shrilly as Aristeia was. <There's only one celebi in the Game, ever; and that's *you!* You're the one they chose to take the fall for them!>

<We're all falling, Jade!> Grace cried, the earth rushing towards them far too quickly.

Jade freely laughed at her reply, and without saying another word reached for the earth, her fingers outstretched as they willed a time ripple into being. The ripple curved and stretched and grew, far larger than any Grace had seen before, beckoning them onwards to evade the treetops and warp through time instead.

Aristea must have caught the motion and concentration on Jade's face for she managed to crane her neck around and spot their fate; a whirling maelstrom of green and white shards splintering in a circle.

<No!> she screamed. <Please don't!>

<It's your turn now,> Jade said darkly, and so the three entered the ripple; one unwillingly, one determinedly and the other simply curiously; wondering how on earth things had gotten so confused so quickly.

Fuji opened his eyes to the beautiful relaxing view of deep green treetops reaching for the blue cloudless sky. He squeezed the warm hand enfolded in his own and next to him Renee - the hand's owner - groaned into wakefulness.

He suddenly realised he had someone else's hand in his other, and let it fall as he sat up, shaking the groggy vague feeling from his mind with a brisk ruffle of his hair, and blinking slowly to hopefully reorientate himself.

"My back's wet," Renee croaked.

At her voice, a rush of sudden relief gathered at his chest and swept through his body. *She's alive, I'm alive...* He took a firmer grip of her hand and bent across, gripping her closer. *Of course we are,* his internal voice said. *Why wouldn't we be?*

Renee scooped over further towards him and returned the hug, holding his shoulders tightly. “Feels like I’ve been out for ages - what happened?”

“Must have been an earthquake,” he mumbled against her warm coat. “Look, the ground's all broken up.”

She nodded against his back. “Is everyone else ok?”

Fuji looked to the other research team members. They were slowly blinking and stirring too; sitting up and taking stock. He gave them all a shaky grin. “Some trip, huh?”

“At least we got what we came for,” Tess said, reaching slowly around for her camera. She finally succeeded in digging it out of her bag and aimed its lens towards something behind Fuji.

With movement so slow it was almost unbearable with the curiosity he was feeling, Fuji turned his head and the shape of a pokémon curled up a few paces next to them on the ground swam into his peripheral vision. It was pink furred and delicately proportioned.

“A new species?” he wondered softly.



“I’ve never seen anything like it before in my life,” Renee said, her attention rapt. “It’s bound to be rare.”

“Anyone have a pokéball?”

“No, we’ll have to come up with a cage for it.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, here,” Fuji chuckled. “We’ll need to catch it first.”

“I’m on it,” Daniel said, creeping around behind the still form of the pokémon, his arms out for balance.

The pokémon turned its head to blink curiously at him, and Daniel froze only a few steps away from its prone form. “Mew,” it said softly, and without further ado shimmered into invisibility and was completely gone from their awarenesses.

“Balls,” Daniel said, his hands falling back to his sides as he stood up, flummoxed. “Lati eat your heart out, the thing’s a mirage.”

Fuji felt the disappointment spike in his chest. This adventure made less and less sense the more he thought about it. No pokéballs? No other capture devices? On a trip to discover and retrieve new undiscovered species for research and study? Had they simply run out of pokéballs at some point?

“What did we do yesterday?” he found himself asking the group at large.

They all looked baffled at him. “We did that thing, the thing that...” Tess said, then faltered.

“We explored,” Renee said, the confidence in her voice spilling into the silence. “We researched and compiled and all that.” Suddenly the confidence seemed to have completely run out, and her eyes began to water. “And then we decided to go home after the earthquake.”

“Agreed,” Abby said, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

The five stood and gathered their scattered belongings in silence. Fuji was not yet convinced somehow. Whilst the others packed their bags more securely he began rummaging in his own, eventually pulling out a notepad:

*July 4th*

*Guyana, South America*

*We finally hit the river. Saw a strange magical creature on the riverbank. I have no idea what it was.*

“We’re in Guyana, apparently,” he said. “Somewhere in South America.”

*This can’t be my journal; they haven’t been called magical creatures since...*

“How far is that to Kanto?” Daniel asked. “I’d rather not attempt to swim it. Did anyone bring a water pokémon?”

“We don’t have any pokémon,” Renee said, her tone dead. She adjusted her backpack and walked away.

Fuji followed her and heard the rest follow him. After closing his own backpack he looked further at the notepad still in a hand and saw it had a pen in its binding. Whilst he walked, he flipped it open and mused upon the next blank page.

*Diary: July 5*

*Guyana, South America*

*A new pokémon was discovered deep in the jungle.*

“Mew?”

Fuji jolted back into his spatial awareness to find the pokémon bobbing alongside him in the air, fully visible. The moment he stretched out an arm towards it though it whisked backwards in the air and shimmered from his sight again.

“So you’ll tag along with us as a free pokémon, will you?” he asked the empty air, smiling. “That sounds a good deal. No strings attached, promise. I won’t try capture you again.”

His colleagues, even Renee when she turned around to look, all shared the same smile when it appeared to them again and followed close by through the winding dense jungle towards home.

~~~

On the jagged coast of their little island jungle where dense greenery met sea the five humans stared desperately at the empty oceans around them. Besides their own little Guyana there was not another landmass to be seen.

Renee took a long audible breath. “I really don’t even want to ask this question, but...”

“Don’t, please,” Fuji answered. “I don’t think anyone can answer.”

The question was already on everyone’s lips. *How did we get here in the first place if we have no transport - mechanical or living - to get back?*

“Mew,” the pokémon said, and instead of turning invisible, it teleported away; leaving an afterimage of jagged pink in Fuji’s field of vision. To say the humans were discouraged after an hour or two of it not reappearing would be putting it lightly. It was, then, an enormous shock to be nudged awake at the dawn of the fifth day gone with excited mumbled squeals from not only it but a pod of lapras milling about at the banks of the island.

“Water,” Fuji mumbled vaguely, after coming to with a violent jerk of his entire body, as he blinked the dirt from his eyes to look upon the excitable pod and a pink pokémon doing loops in the air. His stomach was by this stage in shrunken disuse. They’d run out of bottled water the previous day and had resorted to sipping from the pools about the island which were mostly just puddles of wet dirt by this stage. The last of the jerky had all gone the day before, not aiding their dire water situation in the slightest.

The pokémon flew down and perched at his side, looking curiously down at him. It seemed to come to a conclusion and squeaked in happiness, bringing its paws together and a force of water brimming out, splashing and wasting upon the earth.

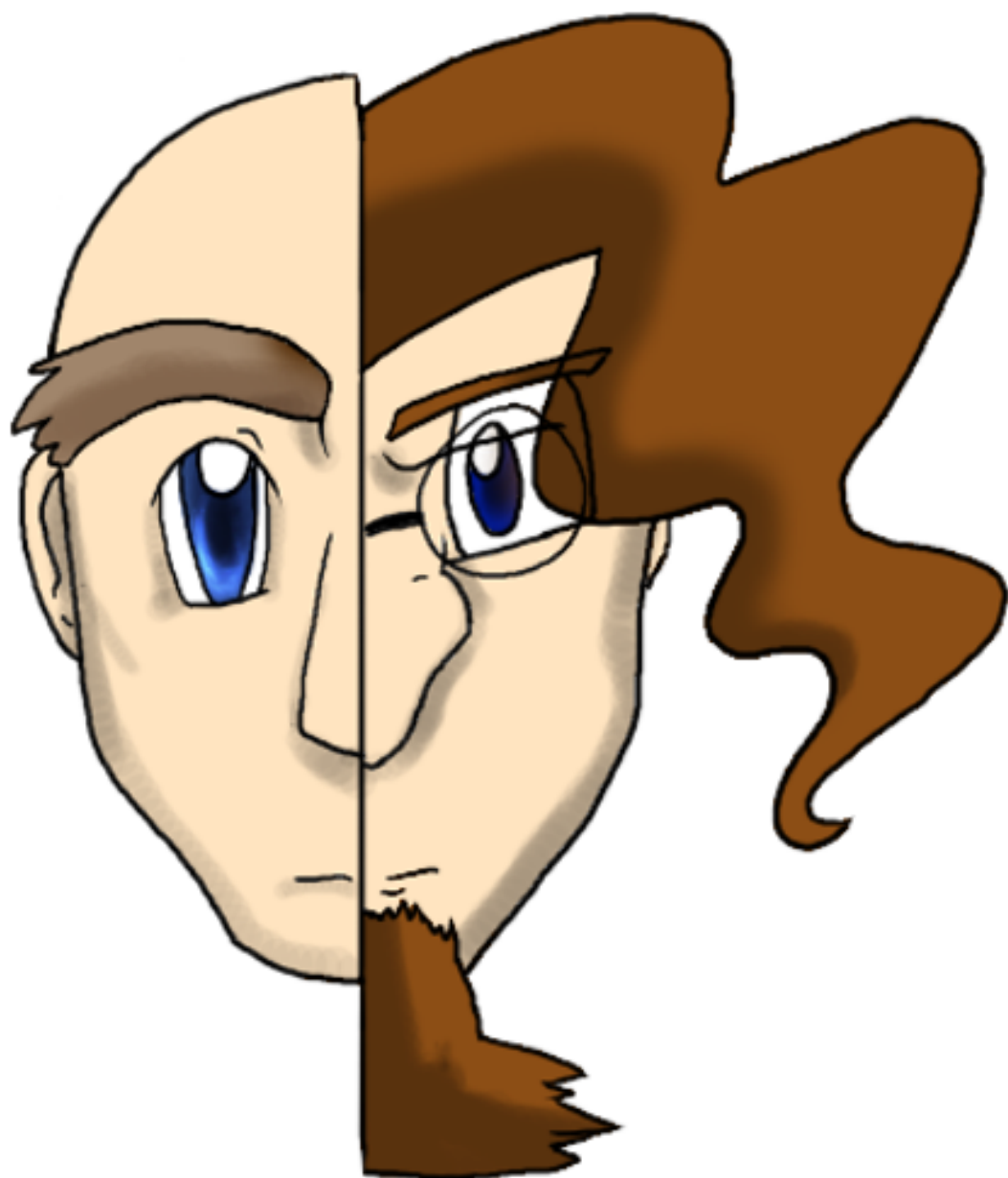
Fuji’s eyes shot open and he rolled his head underneath the deluge of the water gun; gasping and spluttering it down until the pokémon suddenly moved over to the other four for the same treatment. That had been the cleanest, most crisp cold water he had ever tasted. Grinning, he stood; feeling the water sloshing around in his belly, and hoisted himself onto the nearest lapras. It hummed happiness and moved away from the banks of the island, trilling a tune to the rest of its pod. The pink pokémon followed close by at Fuji’s head. “Mew,” it said, its tone almost apologetic.

Inspired, Fuji grabbed the journal again.

*Diary: July 10*

*We christened the newly discovered pokémon, Mew.*

And so the unlikely group took the long journey from Faraway Island to Cinnabar Island, Kanto.



# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Six: Multiple Choice Past*



## Chapter Six: Multiple Choice Past

*Where am I?*

*Who am I?*

*What am I?*

The creature's consciousness faded in ever so slowly as he drifted from sleep to a hazy half-wakefulness and back again. With the times of awareness came the questions. Always, the questions. It felt to him like he had been asking them all his life - and yet his life had not even begun yet.

He felt so still and relaxed, fully surrounded in softness and warmth. It was not time to really wake yet. There was plenty of time now to emotionally heal, to rest, to dream - and happily let the familiar sound of bubbles through water, the gentle double-beat, and the rhythmic swell of a distant tide to lull him into further comfort.

For whilst all these new sensations somehow held their own unmistakeable familiarity, never before now had he settled down without the



unshakeable restlessness that all was not right. Yet like this, as he was, he could sleep knowing everything *was* right.

Or was it really?

Three celebi flew into the time stream. By the stage Grace - the third - had caught up to Jade and the still-whimpering Aristeia she'd finally decided on the most important question at hand.

<Are you my future self?>

Jade didn't reply to Grace until the ripple ended, throwing them all violently into a new airspace of a different time. The ripple closed slowly with a pained creaking shuddering sensation that was nearly audible and made all their antennae vibrate uncomfortably.

<I'm just one of your potential future selves,> Jade said mildly, looking at Aristeia's abject fear with disgust and taking a firmer hold of the other celebi's shoulders. <How this present plays out this time around will determine whether you become me or not.>

The ramifications of this explanation were not lost on Grace for long.

<But if it does play out differently you won't exist in the future, right? Then...>

<She's a total paradox!> Aristeia spat the word out, evidently as disgusted at Jade as Jade with her. <Don't listen to a word she says->

<You think I care anymore about creating paradoxes when the whole *world* is breaking?!> Jade yelled, shoving Aristeia away suddenly and shaking her head in frustration. <Go on, run - yes, carve a stream away from here and back to your sanctuary with the rest of them. Hide. Listen to the distant rumble of chaos and destruction and *think yourself safe*, if you dare. Think yourself untouchable until they are eating the very forest around you and you realise the sanctuary is next.>

Grace couldn't help shuddering. What had Jade possibly seen in the future that hinted at such horror?

Meanwhile, Aristeia had gone very pale in the face at Jade's tirade. <I'm not even meant to be here. What can I possibly do to stop it?>

<You can move, damn it,> Jade snarled. <A single celebi flapping its wings in the past...>

<... can create a tornado in the future.> Amazingly, Aristeia smiled weakly in response as she finished the sentence.

The saying sparked a memory for Grace. Dialga had once warned her so long ago that she would bring a tornado down upon them for leaving Pikachutwo in the distant past. Whether or not everything that had eventuated had been what Dialga had been referring to, Grace had no idea, but she allowed herself a rueful

grin anyway. No matter his original intent, Dialga had been totally right. Ever since she'd refused to follow his order the whole world had gone awry.

<But I don't know how to move,> Aristeia said, looking around in the sky nervously. <What do I do?>

<Fix the past to fix the future,> Jade said shortly. <That's the whole point of the Game. Or if you want to really show off, *mentor*, fix the future to fix the past - but I wouldn't recommend going any further in time than around nowish to have a look. It gets pretty messy.>

An idea occurred to Grace. <Want to come with me to talk with Dialga? I kinda need to apologise for something. We'll go back to after my past self goes back to the before time, and leave before I return; to escape any confusion.>

<That might not be possible,> Jade said, her voice small and sad.

<Why not?>

<Grace, Dialga... I'm so sorry, but time is broken, and I don't know why.

The Guardian of Time... Dialga... He's gone.>

<Gone?!>

Jade grabbed for her drooping antennae, clutching them tightly. <I've been trying to fix it!>

<Gone as in... dead?> Grace whispered, her last word barely audible.

<I don't know, but it's something I plan to find out.>

The lapras beached itself with a contented coo after their long journey at sea, turning its neck to peer at its human passenger and give a patient blink.

When the human did not immediately stir, the water pokemon softly squealed at it and nudged it gently with its nose.

*We are here...*

The subtle tone of urgency in the soft and vague telepathic message was enough to wake Fuji from his half-doze. He raised his head where it had fallen, slumped over the rim of the lapras's salt-crusted shell, and blearily looked around.

Next to him the the other lapras were milling about the shallow waters with the rest of his friends. Before him the land slightly elevated and gave way to the humble-looking buildings of a small village. Cinnabar Island? It certainly appeared to be his home town from this viewpoint.

Mew happily stuck close by Fuji's shoulder as he gingerly made his way off the lapras after their long sea journey. He paused a moment in the gentle surf, letting it wash over his ankles, then staggered onto the dryer sandy shores of Cinnabar Island.

"Thank you so much," he said to the lapras, still staring at the village, his voice still croaky. "We owe you our lives."

The lapras squealed happily in reply, and with a powerful beat of all four fins it surged backwards into deeper water to beckon its pod accompany it back to proper ocean waters once their own humans had hopped off.

Saddle-sore and malnourished after a diet of raw fish pokemon and Mew's water gun attack (the results being inevitably cold and messy), Fuji groaned into a painful yet needed leg stretch, the wobble in his stance only exacerbated by the uncanny feeling of the earth underneath his feet swaying like he was back at sea.

Yet, all that considered, at the sight of the quiet little town Fuji beamed, realising it was helping him place more and more pieces of the puzzle in his patchwork knowledge. There - his house was *right there*. It looked resplendently beautiful as ever; all classic pillars and large windows welcoming in plenty of natural light at its front.

Further on he spotted the gym, and the pokémon centre so close to it for all those overconfident trainers and their pokémon who were normally smacked down by the leader's impressive fire element lineup within moments.

He quickly scanned the beach for any locals further down its yellow stretch, looked back to his friends who seemed happy enough for the moment lying down and recovering, then glanced at Mew worriedly. The pokémon seemed to catch his mood and blurred out of sight. With the fleeting hope that it

would continue following him, Fuji strode up the two small steps to the door of his house and swung it open.

“Good afternoon!” the man said cheerfully from where he stood close to one of the large rhydon statues in the entrance foyer, big cardboard box in his hands. “Can we help you?”

*Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?* Fuji thought, for a good moment stunned into silence. “Just thought I’d come say hello; I’m new to the area.” *What? Why did I say that instead?*

“Oh, really?” the man replied, setting down his box and gesturing Fuji further inside. “Well, welcome to the island!”

This was beyond uncanny. Fuji could feel his scalp and neck prickling as he stepped further into the room, seeing it just as he remembered it from before they’d travelled far away to Guyana. It even smelled the same. And yet here was this strange man with a friendly beam on his face welcoming him for the first time - in his own house!

What was going on?

“I don’t normally just come barging in to other people’s places, but...” *It’s my place, so I’m allowed to barge in. Right?*

The man chuckled. “Oh, every Kantoan does *that*, I’m sure. Part of the culture, really. Trainers love it - even depend on it, sometimes. We all do our best

to give them a meal or a warm bed if they're in need." When he held out his palm, Fuji took it without thinking, giving it a shake. He found himself smiling an honest smile.

"My name's Fuji."

The man's bushy eyebrows shot up in surprise. "And *that* is a coincidence a little too farfetch'd to ignore - if you'll excuse the pun," he said, gentle eyes appraising behind thin spectacles as he continued holding Fuji's hand in a comfortable yet firm grip.

Fuji's head began to throb with the beginnings of a pressure headache.

"Sorry?"

"Doctor Fuji, at your service," the man said, finally releasing hands. "At least, until about an hour from now. Work commitments... my family and I are moving to Saffron City today so I can continue my research there at the Silph company."

Stunned, Fuji faced his far more qualified namesake and opened his mouth to reply something noncommittal, but another voice from the other room interrupted him.

"Daddy, Daddy!"

The floor began pounding double-time to his headache with the sound of excited footsteps. A young girl child ran into the room, first jubilantly, a big grin

on her face and arms outstretched, but then at the sight of the stranger the grin disappeared and she circled back quickly, grabbing one of Dr Fuji's legs with one arm and clutching a faded clefairy plush closer to her body with the other.

“Dear? Is she with you?”

“Yes, darling,” Dr Fuji said warmly, turning slightly to greet the woman who was carrying a cardboard box down the stairs from the second floor behind him. “Here, let me.” He swung around gracefully and took the box from her once she'd stopped at the landing. “This is Mr Fuji. Fuji, this is my wife, Larissa, and my beautiful daughter, Amber.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Fuji said weakly, his head now pounding. When he looked down to Amber to give her a smile as well his vision blurred double for a moment and he felt the smile become a frozen grimace.

Larissa smiled kindly, her surprise at the name fading. “And you. Are you alright? Can I get you a seat? Something to drink?”

“No, no, I'm fine,” he replied, bringing up a hand to massage his forehead, screwing up his eyes with the pain. White lights flashed behind his lids until he opened them again.

“I think I may need some fresh air though, please excuse me.” He turned towards the door and found himself staggering as his balance completely left him.



“I think your nose is bleeding,” she replied with a worried tone behind him, each of her footsteps meeting his ears and echoing with a throbbing cacophony inside his head.

“I’m-” *fine*... he said, his last word falling unheard but by the blissfully empty darkness...

*We’re gibbering, now wholly drunk on the live time still seeping steadily through the weak points; writhing at the gaps between this dark world and the next. It’s not only travelling beacons of light showing us the way now, but ghostly spectres appearing as smoke on glass of the barrier; beckoning us onward.*

*One appears so close to me on the barrier, and I screech mad ecstasy before lashing out at it and watching it flail backwards in fright. I cannot touch it, not yet... but I know we can both sense each other and the reaction I receive is perfect.*

*Everything now is perfect. So close to paradise that time refuses to slow any more. Somehow I can feel that the cracks will give way before too much longer... and we will be free once again.*

*“What are you?” the wisp asks.*

*Who are we? Insolence, ignorance. He will know now. All will know, soon. So we tell him as one...*



“No!” Fuji screamed, his body twisting upright as he gasped awake. For a moment he wrestled with the sheets and quilt before properly coming to and relaxing into the protective warmth of the large bed.

Renee perched next to him leaning on the bedside table, a tray balanced carefully on her lap, one hand finding his shoulder and squeezing it gently. “Hey, feeling ok?”

“Nightmare,” he explained, looking around. The small bedroom was cosy, comforting; thin shards of red light created by the half-closed blinds hitting the bookshelves and carpeted floor, beckoning on a lovely Cinnabar sunset.

“I made soup.”

He looked up at the tray she was holding, his dry lips cracked and aching. Happily the migraine felt like it had completely faded, but even after the sleep his body still felt exhausted and rundown. As for his appetite, it was all but non-existent, especially when he thought back to the shifting shapes in the nightmare that had brought on a slithering nausea whenever he looked at them.

His stomach roiled uneasily at the memory. “I don’t know-”

Renee planted the tray on his blanketed lap. “Eat it,” she commanded. “We’re all dehydrated and malnourished but you’re the only one who actually collapsed.”

He tried a small spoonful tentatively and realised it was the first proper hot food he'd had in days. He let it sit for a moment on his tongue, relishing the flavours of vegetables and the slightly spicy stock.

*The memory of soup... somehow it tastes even better for real now.*

As he ate, he felt his body reacting, growing more alert and invigorated.

“This is amazing. Larissa’s secret recipe?”

Renee nodded. “She and her family left hours ago, though. They...” She giggled, a tone which sounded higher than normal, a somewhat-bemused expression on her face. “They said we could stay here as long as we needed to get back on our feet with our research.” She paused to take a deep breath. “Doctor Fuji thinks we might have been attacked by a pokémon or something else at Guyana and lost everything from our memories to most of our stuff.”

Fuji looked down at the quilt; decorated with pidgey silhouettes and intertwined leaf shapes. *Of course! That must have been what happened.* He made to force a smile onto his face and felt his mouth warp into a horrid leer instead. “Nothing like some good old fashioned Cinnabar hospitality.”

Renee wasn't smiling. “Sounds a little above and beyond to me.”

Fuji took a moment to silently agree with her, breathing out slowly and audibly as he let the smile go. “Still, we could do with the help, let's be honest. I don't think I can even remember any proper details until when we woke up.”

“Mmh.”

Fuji finished his soup before he knew it. Renee took the tray gently and placed it on the bedside table, seating herself on the side of the bed. The pair stayed silent, both looking further out than the walls around them as the red light waned into the blue-black of dusk. At some point he fell asleep again.

*He finds himself back at the wall. The things behind it have been waiting for him. He makes to run away and finds his legs planted firmly, his body a mere hand's reach from its shifting surface. Closer than last time.*

“What are you? Who are you?”

*If he can just see them properly, if he can just part the shadows, maybe then he'll know. For isn't that what he is; a scientist? intent on discovering and researching the wonders of the world around him?*

*If he can just...*

*His right hand is about to make contact when he suddenly blinks and freezes, before snatching it back and grabbing it firmly with his left in panic.*

*What is he doing?*

*He's discovering. He's learning. Sometimes they're hard truths, but truths all the same. And it is so hard to see without stepping closer, waving a hand at the murk so he can see the beings behind it-*

*When he sees them, he is at first bodily paralysed, his hand frozen in a claw-like gesture halfway through a sweep. He must get away, but his body fails him and he cannot move. He can only look at them and realise with a new dawning horror that even seeing them is not actually knowing them as they truly are, for they are too much for his mind to fully comprehend.*

*They are Gods - no, they are demons. No, monsters. They are not any of those, they're something different altogether; and now he has seen them, and known them, and he is the only one in the whole world who has.*

*As if in response they shriek as one towards him, their bodies cascading over and around one another in a swarm of black flapping wings and teeth, and finally his legs are free. When he leaps backwards to escape their mad rush the nightmare fades and he sinks deeper into proper dreamless slumber.*

When Fuji awoke early the next day his chest felt slightly compressed by a warm subtle weight. He tilted his head and saw Mew curled up on top of the warm quilt, fast asleep. The cute innocent expression on its face made him smile.

Renee's voice floated through his mind. *Doctor Fuji thinks we might have been attacked by a pokémon...*

The smile disappeared.

*Attacked by a pokémon...*

The same one the journal mentioned on July 4th? That was the day they had lost their memories and woken up a whole day later. Maybe... no. No, that was impossible. Mew had saved their lives by alerting the lapras pod to the human's desperate predicament on the island. It had followed them back to Cinnabar Island and now continued staying by his side whether invisible or no.

Why would Mew do that? What had it to gain by staying? Unless... no. Mew was a joyous, curious creature; powerful, too. Very powerful perhaps, Fuji realised; remembering its ease at teleportation and wondering whether it had hidden talents untapped in the brief time they had known of its existence.

*Attacked by a pokémon...*

*Why are you still here?* he mouthed, reluctant to see Mew awaken and perhaps then destroy any sort of hope he had been building that perhaps it was enjoying his company by abandoning him straight away: flying off or teleporting outside, never to be seen again. *What do you have to gain by staying with us?*

The question remained unasked, and so could never be answered. It remained there at the place somewhere between the thought's pregnancy, birth and maturation - yet refused to die, only shrivelled and festered and rotted before becoming something different altogether:

*What can we gain by keeping you? How do we properly contain you to keep you? How do we find more like you? Or can we simply make more of you?*

Whether sleeping or waking, Mew did not feel properly back to normal after her trip to the time before time. The strangeness lingered. Her powers of flight were back, winking in and out was a breeze by this stage, and yet somewhere deep within the effects were sustained by more than just memories of the event.

Perhaps it was directly linked to where Mewtwo's aura now sheltered. Such a thing she knew was more than unnatural, given that her body was now harbouring two individual awarenesses. Surely if his aura did not remain in that almost-hibernation her body would be in dangerous psychic turmoil. They could not remain long like this, she felt. Yet what was his aura without his body? A lost being of mere energy, cast out to only fade and scatter? or maybe ascend beyond... she did not know which. The problem remained; Mewtwo's slumbering soul remained without its body, which had de-aged to the point of absolute nonexistence.

Thankfully, Mewtwo had given her a possible solution before falling into that deep mental sleep. Mew could maybe bear him as a mother could; he would be a newborn again and grow up into a new body. Yet how would they both succeed in accomplishing something so radical? Mew had no idea how.

Her body in sleep, her mind raced past these thoughts and hit an impasse where lack of knowledge met with her mew-centric lack of concentration and she



instead ended up floating about in a vivid dream of ancient remember places, following no apparent logic in her twirling and pirouetting through the high air.

<Mama?>

An even younger form of Mewtwo than the one she remembered from before the start of this whole mess flew by her side. He was half her size and even more closely resembled a mew - albeit one grey-and-purple-coloured with a slight frown at its eyebrows.

<Son,> Mew said in surprise. <I thought you were sleeping.>

He matched her flip for flip, always flying parallel. <I am. So are you, right?>

Mew figured her body must be. Her mind was far more active in dream-sleep though, evidently Mewtwo felt the same way. In cheer she realised it made for the perfect opportunity to talk to him after so long telepathically apart.

<I am glad you're still safe.>

<You're keeping me safe, Mama.>

His continual childish tone and the name began to unnerve her. <Mewtwo, this can't continue as it is any longer. I helped you when you wouldn't have survived without it, now you need to help me in the same way.>

<I don't understand.>

The two halted in the air, both staring at each other; Mew focused, Mewtwo looking confused and slightly anxious at this uneasy turn of mental events.

<I need you to find a way to regain that body in real life,> Mew said, gesturing at his form. <You're only a creature of aura at the moment.>

The little mewtwo rubbed at his eyes, yawning. <I don't know how,> he said vaguely.

<Neither do I.>

<Maybe the man does.>

The man? Mew was flummoxed for a moment until she saw Mewtwo suddenly fold his arms and legs inwards and seemingly fall completely asleep. Her mountain faded and they ended up hovering inside a manmade room with silver machines and stark cleanliness.

It reminded Mew of the one she had seen beyond the bars of her cage and with her barest mental suggestion it became that exact room.

“Put it in the machine,” said an echoey voice.

Mewtwo awoke, pouted, and waved a hand; resetting it back to his own memory. <No, Mama, *this* man.>

Mewtwo's memory of the human appeared similarly as from nowhere and spread his arms victoriously, gesturing enthusiastically at the pair of them.

“For years we struggled to successfully clone a pokémon to prove our theories, but you’re the first specimen to survive! That is Mew, the rarest of all pokémon. From its D.N.A. we created you: Mewtwo!”

<*Dee-Ennay?*> Mew wondered. <Is that how you create a pokémon?>

<Yes. Humans need yours to make me,> Mewtwo said, his gaze focusing.

<Later, I needed bulbasaur DNA to create Bulbasaurtwo; and charmander and squirtle similarly to make clones of those species.>

<Why didn’t mew *Dee-Ennay* just make another mew?>

Mewtwo shrugged. <They didn’t want a mew that time, so they genetically modified your DNA and got me, instead.>

<Genetically modified...> Mew said slowly. <I don’t understand.>

<But the humans do,> Mewtwo replied. <Maybe they can help.>

*Yes*, Mew thought. *I’ll enlist the help of the humans.* <Thank you, Mewtwo; go back to sleep now, son.>

<G’night, Mama.>

She bade Mewtwo goodnight in turn, and flew from her dreams to wakefulness. Her body awoke with a shiver and her eyelids fluttered open to a cool nighttime. She’d been so far deep asleep for so long she had missed the departure of the man from the room they had both been sleeping in.

The scent of hot food emanated from the adjoining rooms, and Mew's ears twitched at the clink of metal and glass accompanied by the low burble of human speech. She slipped into the air and weaved her way out of the room and down the winding corridors and large rooms following the rich scent as it grew more powerful with each corner.

She entered the dining room and the human conversation faltered, then as she began waltzing around the beautiful chandelier at the room's centre it resumed sporadically. Yes, she could happily live here with these humans until Mewtwo was made whole once again. She could only hope that they would be as receptive to the idea as she - their own dreamscapes of sleep tonight would be their proving ground for the idea's inception.

Later, Mew realised the idea was already partially there; though she had no idea how it could have possibly spawned without her suggesting it in the first place. Barely a week had passed after their landing upon Cinnabar Island and there was already talk of founding a research laboratory down the hill next to the Pokémon Centre, with funds supplied by Doctor Fuji of Silph Co.

The month later practically saw its completion. Free-spirited and cloaked in invisibility, Mew had the run of the entire island and had watched each day as the construction site grew ever more complete. Normally a human-borne lengthy project like this would have ceased to be interesting within the space of day for

her, if not for her gathering worry about the ever-present extra awareness still hibernating inside. Mewtwo needed to be set free, and she needed to stay with the group of humans on the island to see that happen.

A month later again the humans took her down and captured her in the dining room with the assistance of a snide dugtrio and stoic, unspeaking beedrill. The combination proved a devastating one; arena trap had prevented any sort of instinctual teleportation away, even with the knowledge that this was the only way the humans knew how to see her plan to fruition, and the beedrill had gone straight on the offensive, its endlessly droning wings providing it with enough speed to block her at every turn.

Uxie had been right all along. They were their own creatures; truly autonomous. And they certainly were not pure of heart, after all. Perhaps in the beginning they had been, but... no longer. She could not stay with these people, she would have to find others that would be purer in their intent.

One of the humans recalled the beedrill quickly before it could make contact with an uncalled tackle attack. Paralysis from its previous stinging attacks lagging her muscles and fogging her brain till she could barely hold herself aloft, Mew aimed for the open door in the battle's reprieve, but a human netted her from behind and she crash-landed to the tiles, a shocked meow escaping her.

Thus saw the birth of her new world of pain at the hands of humankind.

*Five months later...*

*Feb. 6*

*Mew gave birth.*

Mr Fuji sat hunched over at the table, his journal open before him, the pen gripped tightly in his right hand. The words wouldn't come any more; he'd barely managed to squeeze out the last three after seven whole months of not writing a thing at all. Yet how could those three possibly encapsulate the memories of the past months? Surely he could describe the burly machoke which had helped them build the Lab, for instance, meanwhile humbly mention the fact they he and his team had designed it entirely themselves?

Or what of the papers he had written? the physical research his team had undertaken once the Lab had been built, equipped with psychic-proof barriers, the equipment installed inside the holding room, and the testing had all been approved? Surely there was enough there to fill an entire book! They'd managed to find a way to clone new pokémon specimens from *aerodactyl D.N.A.* of all things. With the guise of this approved research made public they'd secretly used their newfound knowledge to clone the one and only living mew with a recombined DNA sample and implant the clone back into the mew to be born.

How simple the process sounded in one thought! Yet it had been anything but. The struggles and trials and sheer frustration... how to write of the weeks spent monitoring the foetus with scan after scan as it barely grew in size at all yet continually sapped the surrogate's energy to the extent they were both worryingly still? The anguish felt when it seemed completely lifeless during scans, before randomly choosing to wiggle just once and cast their worries out for a brief spell before they began anew?

There was so much to write, and yet nothing at all. All of it felt lumped together in one big ball of teeth-gnashing determination and melancholy victory: Mew gave birth.

Yet what it had finally given birth to was hardly even mew-like. Its skin was a pallid grey, yet its thick tail a deep purple colour; no pink on it at all. How had that happened? Was it the injections of proteins and carbos and other vitamins they had given to Mew during the long, tiring gestation period to keep its ever-waning strength up? Surely not... that would not alter the DNA like that. All they had done was recombine it - but just what other DNA had his research team secretly used to recombine with the mew's to get that result? The baby didn't look like anything else on the planet. How could he possibly trust any of his team anymore?

Too many questions. None of them answerable. His hand was beginning to cramp and sweat copiously with the pen still in its grasp. He let it go with a gasp of relief, and stood up. He'd write more later.

*Mar. 6*

Fuji strode over to the double-paned one-sided window and peered inside to the small room next door.

Mew lay curled up in the corner of the crude pokémon nursery bed, the young newborn keeping warm next to her. The pair looked to be both asleep.

“What are you?” he whispered, his breath fogging the cool glass of the window.

That was when the newborn's eyes opened and, rather than the vague shortsightedness Fuji was expecting to see, it looked past what was meant to be a mirror-image on its side; meeting his gaze square-on. The newborn told him in no uncertain terms what it was before holding his mind captive for a moment more, then shutting its eyes again and releasing him.

Mr Fuji slumped back down into the chair in the office room and stared down at the journal. He picked up the pen. *No words to describe that...* but still, he felt five more words needed to be added to the previous entry.

*We named the newborn Mewtwo.*

*Mar. 7*



*Further observation and testing of both subjects will be required.*

*Apr. 1*

*Mewtwo continues to grow in brief spurts. It is taking MooMoo Milk and other liquid food readily in the bottle. It never vocalises, unlike Mew.*

*May 2*

*The baby now weighs more than its mother although is still smaller in size. They both play very gently unless the game intensifies, then Mewtwo will turn rough. We have not had to step in yet.*

*Jun. 5*

*We are slowly introducing Mewtwo to soft solids and it is learning more about them from its mother in the process. It is showing an amazing aptitude for learning in general. I wonder how intelligent it is. Further testing required.*

*Jul. 3*

*Mewtwo is excelling at pokémon IQ tests, and is able to pick up new skills after only one or two attempts. It is beginning to communicate telepathically. Said 'no' to the teaching game yesterday. Renee thinks we should terminate the entire project. She is concerned. Further observation is needed.*

*Aug. 4*

*They're still in my head from that nightmare all those months ago. Looking at Mew makes them fade a bit. Touching her head used to banish them*

*entirely, but I cannot comfortably go in the room any longer for their daily feeding and cleaning unless they are both heavily sedated, because Mewtwo is far too large and unpredictable a pokémon now. I can still supervise them from the other room. The computers do the rest. They tell us that he is thrice her size now...*

Mewtwo came to one fateful day in late August when the memories of a past life as yet unlived but in remember places made themselves properly recalled at last.

He and his mother had only known the confines of the nursery room since he had first come into this world with an indignant wail. But before that... he had known so much more. The memories cascaded upon his fragile five-month-old mind. Memories yet to happen. Of his first birth - yet it had not been a proper birth at all, but something more akin to an awakening.

An awakening much like this one, into a body already half-grown.

<Mew,> he said, his telepathic voice still adolescent, his tone tense and excited. <Where are we?>

Mew looked at him gravely, her eyes wide. For the first time since being born he had not used *Mama*. <I don't know,> she said.

By this stage he had recovered the use of most of his adult motor skills. He grabbed Mew out of the air by the neck.

<Show me,> he hissed, and his mind held onto hers as tightly as the physical. Ignoring her weak squirming, he saw the memory Mew had of accompanying the humans to the island - *Cinnabar...?* before it continued, playing out her point of view as she followed one human up to a house and entered where they met more humans. The man almost looked like a younger version of...

When the human girl child appeared in Mew's memory, Mewtwo physically thrust her body away in shock, yet couldn't bear letting go her mind yet. So he watched her memory in full, not letting his attention sway from the solemn little face as it stared up at the invisible phantom mew as if it could still see her even though its parents obviously could not.

<Let me go,> Mew commanded from a few feet away in the air, and writhed out of Mewtwo's psychic grasp, her eyes pained and accusing. <You hurt me.>

Mewtwo could not even apologise to her now the memory had become his own to keep close, only repeat one word like a mantra, or a promise; the sound of it gradually crescendoing to a shuddering roar in his mind:

<Amber... Amber... *Amber!*>

*Is she alive out there somewhere?* He made to teleport away to a safe and secret location to take stock without wasting any more time, but his body remained still.

When he locked gazes with Mew, she nodded at him in silent acknowledgement, still hovering a fair distance away.

<I'm so sorry,> he said, the apology finally free of his mental tongue. <I... I don't know why I did that.>

<The before time lingers on us even now,> Mew replied, and even though Mewtwo had no idea what she was talking about he felt the truth of it in his bestial unthinking instinct to snatch Mew rather than control his excitement and continue talking. <But I could teleport before, and now I can't; so the humans must have done something to stop us.>

<I need to get out of here, *now*,> Mewtwo said. The thought of not being able to escape the small room was already beckoning on a crawling claustrophobic feeling. Mewtwo did his best to suppress it.

<As do I. What can you do which I have not already tried?>

<We are the same, and yet not the same at all. I am your shadow, and not greater than you - only different. What can I do? Mew, I'll do anything to get out of here. Anything!>

*I'll do anything... to see you again...*

When the human's presence drew near behind the two-way mirror the same day, like every other day before it, Mewtwo stepped up closer towards his reflection; only today did something entirely different and planted his fingers to the mirror's surface on either side of his shoulders, leaning in close.

<I need to leave this place right now,> he said, broadcasting powerfully to every single mind in range. <You do not own me. You do not have any right to keep me here. Let me out.>

His heart began to accelerate again. The vision of the girl would not leave his mind. He waited in the same position for minutes on end, glaring beyond his reflection, waiting for the humans he could still sense were watching him just beyond the wall to open the door and make contact. When they did not, he reached for the doorknob and shook it this way and that, the strong lock holding firm. Frustrated, Mewtwo began beating the glass with clenched fists. His fleshy fingers began to smart and bruise almost straight away.

<Damn you,> he growled. <There is no time! Let me out!>

He had not wanted to resort to this, but there was no other option if the humans refused to listen. *I'll do anything...* His eyes glowed blue and the glass hummed; then shattered into countless tiny pieces falling musically about each side of the thick teleport-locked wall.

The sniper's dart was already embedded in Mewtwo's thigh by the time he had locked onto the human's mind and temporarily disabled it. Human and pokémon staggered to the ground in synchrony, gazes locked. Mr Fuji stood back from the broken window silently, mute, unable to even move as Mew wasted no time in flying through it and, once clearing the wall, closing her eyes and disappearing in her first successful teleport since being captured.

<Wait, Mew, don't leave me...> Mewtwo said softly, unable to fight the strong tranquilliser effects any longer. The amount loaded would have brought down an adult male tauros within fifteen minutes.

Through the mental link, most likely physically a thousand miles away already, Mew answered him. <I had to leave... to heal my mind and body.>

<Every pokémon for itself?> he retorted.

<'I need to leave this place right now', you said, not 'we',> Mew said.  
<So, yes, it seems that way.>

For the second time, Mewtwo could not even apologise to her before the silence of complete unconsciousness claimed him.

### *September*

Two full days later Mewtwo came out of the grey fog with searing headache and remnants of bad dreams of watching Amber fade away time and

time again and leave him alone in a dark clouded void. He blinked into the room and sat upright onto his haunches, his legs and arm muscles like jelly.

*Where... am I? This... this is not the same... was everything before just a dream?* The whole memory of his natural birth seemed faded in comparison to his test tube birth all those long years before... some time in the near future.

Which was the real one? They both were, to him at least. They had both happened to him. Both still existed in his memories.

The room had changed. The furniture had all gone, save for the cool metal bed he now found himself kneeling upon. The two-way mirror was back in place. He could feel their stares behind it. Their presences were somehow deafening, rude splats of aura too noisy in his mental field of awareness.

*Those voices... They're outside... where I must be!*

*Quiet! Let us hear its psychic powers!*

So Mewtwo sang.

The first rush of psychic power lifted him easily into the air, the second the hefty metal bed behind him. He twirled it a few times then without warning launched it with full power at the glass. It smashed through, still twirling, erasing colour as it continued its assisted journey through the air.

This time Mewtwo was ready for the frenzied human counterattack. Stun-darts, pokéballs and capture nets alike bounced off his barrier defence. Eyes still

glowing blue he raised his arms and summoned a psychic whirlwind of glass and other debris around him, ready to lift the entire room upwards with him, barrier or not. He wasn't even a true pokémon - nothing could hold him!.

The humans turned and fled, and the tornado followed. Mewtwo cleared the few large rooms of the lab methodically, following the psychic trails all the way out of the building and beyond. Here they scattered, so he let go the whirlwind and aimed towards the one heading to the same expansive building he'd seen before in Mew's memory.

Inside, the human was nowhere to be seen or heard. Mewtwo closed the door behind him with a slam of his psychic power and stood tall, silently surveying the corridor, nostrils whiffing at the air.

The hunt was on.

He crouched slightly and moved, catlike, towards the shadows cast by the statues. The tip of his tail flicked sporadically as he cast his attention on both the corridor and the flight of stairs leading further into the mansion until finally deciding upon simply following where the fear scent was strongest.

He eventually found the human down in the dark basement after floating down the last staircase and circling to the door of a small room. The human sat hunched at the table, furiously scribbling at a small book and muttering under his breath.



Mewtwo stepped into the doorway and waited for acknowledgement of the prey that it had been sighted and its demise was inevitable. When it never came he seized the book and pen both, bringing them closer as they glowed with blue-purple energy.

<What is this?> he asked in disgust, eyes narrowing at the unfamiliar human text. *<Sep 1. The pokemon Mewtwo is far too powerful.>* He read on, each word slow and deliberate. *<We have failed to curb its vicious tendencies. It's no use. I cannot control it!>*

Mewtwo snapped the pen in half - ink splashing about violently in the air - and ripped the journal in half. The animalistic urge to hunt the human was being fast overtaken with rage at the text.

<Cannot control it?> he seethed. <That is all humans consider, isn't it? Can it be controlled?>

The human did not reply, rather kept staring forward, hands clenching as if he still held the pen and book.

It did not matter - there was another human already speaking in Mewtwo's head reminding him of the bitter truth.

*With your psychic powers, and my resources, together we can control the world... A wildfire destroys everything in its path. It will be the same with your powers unless you learn to control them.*

<I'll show you *control*,> Mewtwo said, his arms shuddering with it. He focused all his attention upon the two notebook halves and ripped every page neatly from the spine, holding them all separately aloft around his body.

<Firstly... ah, look; August.>

His eyes shone and the page crisped and burned to nothingness in a moment. Mewtwo stared at the tiny bit of ash then looked away and released it.

The human did move, then, turning his head to watch with a growing despair appearing on his face. "No," he mouthed. "Please, don't."

<July.> That page went the same way once Mewtwo had located it from the dozens around him. <June.>

"Please," the human said, already practically gasping. "My journal..."

<May... April... March...> Mewtwo found all three and burned them away in a row. <Here's February, oh look; *Mew gave birth*->

"Stop!" The human jumped up spasmodically, kicking the chair away, and snatched the page out of Mewtwo's psychic grasp. He desperately lashed out at the others, catching them in each hand until he had the lot, then looked up at Mewtwo; tears streaking down his face. "That book was my whole life..."

<Nobody controls me but myself!> Mewtwo said. <Understand that right now, human, or burn along with it!>

"Get out of my head!" the man screamed in grief, his voice breaking.

Mewtwo laughed a loud telepathic laugh, watching him flinch, and took further into the air, summoning far hotter psychic flames to envelop his entire body. They licked at his skin with a sensation which felt like it should have been pain. He hadn't experienced this height of psychic strength since his original duel with Mew; where the sheer amount of psychic energy in his body was exhibited as wild flames rather than orbs or a shining light. The rush was heady and addictive.

Before long the carpet caught with the psychic fire and spread, licking and spreading across the floor. Mewtwo watched it grow, keeping tight control over the whole area. No wildfire this one - but a carefully monitored back-burn to rid the place of dangerous flammable buildup. A cleansing fire.

The flames took the entire floor - save for a small circular area at the human's feet - and surged upwards; blistering the paint and wallpaper alike. Ceiling became upstairs floor, the entire rooms engulfed in the energy. Upwards, and upwards, till the fire had immersed the entire mansion - save for a small spherical area around the human.

*The human and his stupid papers...*

Mewtwo waved his hand and the whole fire disappeared silently; leaving the room around them looking completely ruined. The destroyed house creaked ominously around them as it settled piece by piece.

By the time Fuji had the courage to open his teared-up eyes and blearily gaze about him, Mewtwo had gone. Eyes staring at something beyond the destruction before him, he slowly stepped out of the room and up the stairs towards the entrance. His arms and hands went limp as he traced his way up and down staircases and through the many rooms, uncaring as the last few surviving scraps of paper floated from his grasp until he was left at the entrance with nothing but the clothes on his back and nobody in sight to turn to.

The lone figure lumbered towards the water's edge, his feet barely stepping up at all. At the shore a lone lapras waited, looking at him trustingly. Fuji's mouth tightened along with his throat, and without a word he flailed into the water and swung aboard its shell, gripping its neck tightly in a comforting hug.

The lapras cooed once and sailed off towards farther shores. As they travelled, the vague broadcast of its thoughts and emotions drove the clamour and chaos of the waking nightmares away. He slept; and dreamt of waking in a soft warm bed, the light cool and crisp and dancing on the floor, the bird pattern on his bed seeing life and taking flight about the room...

Mewtwo flew from Cinnabar Island.

<I'll do anything to see you again...>

He had done everything, yet there was much more to do yet. Find where she would be. He replayed Mew's memory as he traversed miles of open sea. She had not been paying very much attention to the human speech which made whole sentences very difficult to pick out.

“Doctor Fuji... about an hour from now. Work... Saffron City today ... continue my research... Silph company.”

*Saffron City!*

The city smog grew more and more apparent on the horizon until Mewtwo found himself in the choking thick of it. He flew below it and continued at speed, dodging the spires of skyscrapers with ease. How to find her from here?

Mewtwo aimed for the more residential area of the city, where the houses and unit blocks were smaller. He desperately looped and doubled-back about the area, boldly drawing lower and lower through the air until he knew he was in plain sight of the many humans walking along the busy streets. He had just finished wishing for his hooded cape - back safe at the Repository this entire time - when he zipped past a house on the other side and spotted a lone green flower-pot hanging from its balcony.

*Mama has a green flower-pot on the verandah...*

He jolted through the air and for a moment lost all control and fell a few feet before snapping back to attention and zooming back to make sure it was still there and the only one in sight. *Yes!*

The downstairs front door below Mewtwo swung open. Dr Fuji, Larissa, and Amber stepped out. Mewtwo's vision blurred strangely when he looked at the three of them stepping down to the gate and heading out to what appeared an early dinner somewhere in the more metropolitan area of the city. All three were dressed up semi-formally; both Larissa and Amber were even wearing wide brimmed hats adorned with ribbons tied in a bow.

From his vantage point in the air he could hear Amber chattering gaily to her father as she skipped alongside him. Larissa brought up the rear, chuckling back at the pair of them in what sounded like a loving, humoured conversation.

After proving so much control of his powers an hour beforehand, Mewtwo could barely keep a proper hold on them in order to maintain a smooth flight seeing Amber and hearing her talking again. He couldn't even hear the individual words so far away, just the tone. Every moment he found himself dipping lower and lower towards the earth to hear more and maybe even catch a full sentence; each time she laughed he wanted to laugh along with her and then maybe even join them and introduce himself.

*That is the stupidest idea in the world*, he said to himself, but it didn't stop him from wanting it all the same. He continued shadowing them and soaking it all in. *She's real. She's actually real and alive... Amber...*

Mewtwo hesitated in the air for a moment, torn; then dropped neatly to the pavement and threw up a *don't look too closely at me* barrier. The humans busy on their own little journeys who had halted, startled, at his arrival suddenly went vague and their gazes fell away from him. Satisfied, he waited until they had continued on before pressing on and making to follow Amber again.

The family had just crossed the road ahead of him. He watched as a strong breeze picked up down the narrow street and took Amber's hat with it backwards. He heard her cry out in surprise and saw as she whirled out of her father's relaxed grip and started back onto the road after her hat, which was wheeling gracefully upwards and across. Amber's gaze never left it and she threw her hands out in preparation to catch it once it had fallen back to the ground.

Mewtwo went to seize the hat and with a jolt found his telekinesis had completely vanished. At the same time both Amber's parents whirled about and yelled out after her in shock and angered worry, starting back to catch her.

He heard a screeching sound and cleared the corner to see the car veering towards her on an angle. His psychic reflexes failed him - *where are my powers?!*

and as he surged through the crowd he felt the very air around him grow thick and gluey till it felt more like running through water.

“Amber!” her parents roared.

<Amber, no!> he roared.

The screeching grew low and faint. As Mewtwo battled through the soupy obstacle course of people and pokémon he watched as time slowed to a near standstill around him. And he, moving even slower than it, could see her parents scrambling in slow-motion towards Amber from the other side of the street.

The hat lost its updraft and fell back right into the girl’s grasp. *That’s what I must do. Lose the resistance; bend around the air.*

Mewtwo moved around the air and time sped up alongside his quickened progress. He blinked and heard the screech ramp up to normal pitch as he sidestepped, grabbed Amber around the shoulders - the contact jarring his arms with numbing not-quite-electricity - and forcibly threw her out of the way of the oncoming car.

Purple lightning struck a close spire and something integral jarred to a halt. Above the city in a close by time-dimension, Dialga roared once as the crystal at its heart shattered, the aqua blue light pulsing around its body flashing once then going completely out. It roared again, and slowly - heavily - collapsed.









# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Seven: Clock Roaches*



## Chapter Seven: Clock Roaches

Time is an elastic force in the Pokémon World. Able to be stretched and curled; looped around and manipulated (more often than not by the prolific time travelling celebi species) before easing straight and circular again under Dialga's ever-present watch.

One prime example of this was during the titanic battle of Sinnoh's legendary Lords - Arceus, Dialga, Palkia and Giratina - in Michina Town. When Dialga sent the humans back in time to right the wrongs done to the vengeful Arceus and rewrite the future in tow, upon their arrival back Arceus was still in a rage and the temple was still ruined. It was not until several moments later that the rewritten past 'caught up' and slowly rewrote the very reality around human and pokémon alike as they watched; calming the legendary's rage and miraculously repairing the temple.

Perhaps Dialga's unconscious state had been directly linked to the delay in time fixing itself to reflect the altered past. Perhaps it had been Arceus holding fast to the old future before being 'reminded' of the new one by the humans. Whatever the reason, it had taken its time doing so.

This day, again, had seen a similar situation. Only this time, whilst the slumbering Dialga had been subtly drawn towards the place and time through its instinctual guardianship, it had not been privy to the time meddler's identity or

movements (*don't look too closely at me*) until it was far too late to awaken and stop the disaster.

When Grace the celebi had brought Faraway Island, Mew and Mewtwo, and the humans back from the distant unknown time before time she had landed close by to her original time stream - only not close or far away enough to prevent the possible creation of dangerous paradoxes and their original symptom of startling coincidences.

Mewtwo existed then before his creation, a paradox in itself. Up until his moment of self-awareness this had not been an issue, as the scientists had him confined. However, when he broke out and made for Saffron City in his blind haste and emotion he had no idea how dire his actions actually were.

For whilst Doctor Fuji was a recognised scientist already, at that time he only studied in the field of medicines and pharmaceutical drugs for pokémon. Silph Company hired him for his work in this field which prompted the entire family's move from Cinnabar Island. After his daughter Amber's tragic death upon being struck by a car, Fuji moved his attention to the field of genetics and cloning; proving even more keen an apprentice there as he had beforehand, which was most likely owing to his secret hope to one day bring Amber back to life.

Giovanni, the leader of Team Rocket, soon heard of Fuji's tireless work and privately commissioned him and his team to clone super-powered pokémon; one of which was cloned from an incredibly rare mew fossil and augmented with human DNA amongst other samples. All of which was hugely illegal, but so was cloning a human at all - the only way Fuji could ever hold his little girl again. As it was, he would never hold his wife again; she had left him a year after the accident, their

relationship strained beyond breaking point because of the rift created by the hope he refused to let go of like she had. Amber was all he had left.

In the end, the experiment had nearly completely failed. The only clone to grow to maturation inside the tube had been the mewtwo specimen: Giovanni's pet. Ambertwo's life force had faded away with the rest of the pokémon clones, and all Fuji's hope with it. "My Amber is gone forever. Only Mewtwo survives..."

Before any of that had even happened, Mewtwo had raced to Saffron City and seen the original Amber for the first time. He had been there to witness the moment of her death and in love had been driven to stop it.

But as if deliberate action from a conscious party, the very reality around him had striven to stop him from attempting to save her. Originally reacting with a warning blurring of his sight when he first saw the Fuji family together, then his telekinesis failed; the whole of his psychic ability dimmed to the point of barely having any at all. His forward motion slowed to the point of immobility, as if in a bad dream. Perhaps it had been Dialga's subconscious attempt to stabilise what was already a frayed point in time as it slumbered and renewed its energy in a close-by time dimension, yet even so it was too late.

Mewtwo somehow managed to move past all the strange obstacles through sheer willpower and determination, make physical contact - time reacting to this with a large jolt of raw energy - and throw her out of the way only to be hit by the car himself.

His daughter's death averted, Fuji never grew all that interested in cloning, was never contracted out by Giovanni, and so Team Rocket's grand *project optima* never properly got off the ground during its first phase with a different group of scientists... and so Mewtwo never existed in the first place; to later go back in time and save Amber.

The world's guardians of time and space both awoke and struggled in pain with the paradox, the earth groaning to a halt, every force of nature and reality desperately attempting to give it logic or reason in the chance it could be explained. Now fully awake, Dialga roared when it realised it could not: if Mewtwo existed, it would ultimately bring about the cause of its own nonexistence. But if Mewtwo didn't exist here, Amber would have died, and thus he would have been created in the future which would play out the same and bring about the same paradox now. Before Mewtwo could perish from his injuries, Dialga instinctively, unthinkingly, desperately and *completely* erased him from the whole of time and existence itself; not even enough time to alert its celebi minions to help in possibly fixing the disaster.

Everything Mewtwo had done his whole life, everyone he had affected, became no more. Team Rocket still discovered New Island but built a new base of operations there instead. Pikachutwo, now called Sparkling (a pichu living in ancient times with a remarkable spiky ear) gasped once and vanished. Next to her, Chur did too the moment later; before reappearing in another time and space as a raichu again, no memory at all of the past weeks and his friend who now no longer existed at all. Every one of Mewtwo's clones, wherever they were in the world, vanished and were forgotten like ripples spreading across a pond to simply fade away. Mount Quena was

finally fully explored by humankind and subsequently pillaged and ruined when word inevitably got out about the amazing healing properties of its lake. All the good, all the bad, all of Mewtwo's multifaceted life - gone.

(Or was it?)

The damage had been done, and could not be undone, or even mended. The unsolvable paradox and continuing damage through time created by a pokémon which no longer existed at all shattered the Lord of Time's heart jewel and broke the natural flow of time around the world as it collapsed in dire injury. Reality stretched alongside the crippled time-stream, then snapped as well; opening a crack into a neighbouring pocket dimension and releasing a flood of silent distortion into the skies of Cinnabar Island like a million flapping wings...

On a busy street in Saffron City, the young girl Amber cried shock and pain as she lay in the gutter. Her father, Dr Fuji, reached her side first and scooped her limp form up into his protective arms. By the time she was properly cradled and slowly beginning to moan softly and hiccup away her momentary hysteria her mother Larissa was already stroking her face and hair, murmuring platitudes and ignoring the gathering crowds about them.

The car which had finally stopped its deadly uncontrolled progress was standing still in the middle of the intersection, the smell of burning rubber emanating from its front tires and the radio still playing merrily after its engine had stalled into silence. Its driver-side door opened and the driver all but tumbled out in haste, his face deathly white.



“I’m so sorry! oh Gods! the brakes - I couldn’t - someone call an ambulance!” he cried to the crowd at large standing close by. “Who’d I hit?” He ran to the bonnet and stared around it wildly, bending low and checking to the right and left. The road before him remained empty. “But... the car made contact. I *saw* someone...”

“Someone who saved our daughter,” Larissa replied, her voice wavering. “You would have killed her!”

“I know,” the man said softly, squatting down and brushing his hands across the wet bitumen. He raised them into the air to better see in the fading dusk light and his mouth dropped. “So much... This isn’t hers, is it?”

“She’s a bit scraped up, but no,” Dr Fuji said, looking her unprotected arms and legs over.

“Then... whose...?”

“Our daughter’s guardian angel,” Larissa said, looking up into the sky fading from red to deep blue. “Whoever you are, please be alright, and *thank you* for saving our Amber.”

She waited hopefully for a reply and yet it only came in the sounds of sirens from the emergency vehicles all converging on the intersection.

Her head resting on her father’s shoulder, Amber stirred at the sound and looked about curiously, wet streaks from her tears still gracing her cheeks but her eyes now bright and clean. “Look, Daddy and Mummy, an ambo-lance.” She pointed at its flashing lights. “Why are all these people looking at us?”

“Because you’re a super-star,” Dr Fuji said, his throat tightening. “Our own little Halley’s Comet.”

Amber shook her head. “Nuh-uh. The stars are the little lights that twinkle all night, so we won’t feel alone in the dark.” Her voice grew dreamy as she pointed upwards at the first few glimmers beginning to shine from the blue-black. “*He’s* going to become a star, though, maybe.”

“He? Who’s he?” her parents both asked as they made their way through the crowd to the back of the ambulance and the awaiting care, never looking back as the driver was led away by two police officers whilst a stern-looking arcanine brought up the rear.

“I don’t remember,” she replied.

Uxie awoke at the bottom of the lake and squealed in pain, bringing its hands to its large head. With each intense throb came a new wave of knowledge; as if entire lifetimes of things learned had been forgotten by others, cast out without a home, and had to return to their guardian pokémon for safekeeping. As if they had never been learned at all in the first place.

The pain radiated for minutes, and then gradually faded. Uxie’s head still felt far too heavy after the barrage of knowledge. She shuddered and craned her eyes open to stare into the dark waters of her hiding place for someone - anyone - to take it from her, but there was nobody to meet her dangerous gaze and so the knowledge stayed with her even though she could not glean anything specific from the tangled mess of multiple sources.

Someone’s source vaguely told her something had gone very wrong somewhere far away. Uxie closed her eyes and aimed upwards, her body shining as she ascended

out of the lake's depths into the air and beyond. Wherever and whatever the wrongness was, it was her duty as a Council Guardian to assist in fixing it.

We are in the live world. It is beautiful: all vibrant movement and colour, which I can only vaguely sense but know nonetheless. The flock cascades as one creature through the air, spilling down and spiralling towards solidity. Air, and earth; both living. We meet the earth and like time before it I taste of its substance. I eat the earth and swallow its wholeness, its very existence.

A chunk of nothingness takes its place, and the feel of it thrills me from head to wingtip: yes! fulfilling my purpose once more! I cry out, spontaneously. Our purpose! The things before us are there to consume until there is nothing left. We are the eaters of worlds, and yet how long has it been since we have fed? Much, much too long.

The earth unexpectedly riles inside, time twisting and sloshing about. Too much movement. The earth is still alive, from a live world. It roils and sparks with strange energy. I halt low in the air and unintentionally reject the earth from inside. The earth rejoins the rest, yet I sense my touch still lingers. The piece remains tainted by it, somehow. It does not feel the same any longer.

I am empty still, and the hunger pains me. When I swallow the air it flows through and I am left wanting. When I swallow the earth it will not subside within me. Live air, live earth. Live time. I drink time and yet never grow satisfied.

A whole world before us, and we cannot consume it! I scream frustration and the flock answers with their own cries of rage and confusion. The hunger mounts, and we dive full towards the earth and eat ravenously, spreading our touch gradually along as

we regurgitate and swallow again and again, for that is our purpose; and we must eat until there is nothing left.

<How do we find something like that out?> Grace asked. <Lord of Time!> she cried into the ether. <Can you hear me?>

Jade shook her head. <I've already tried that.>

<Of course you have, because Grace just did,> Aristeia said, her voice wavering in tension. <Please, I'm begging you; let me take sanctuary.>

Grace considered her mentor for a moment. <Alright,> she said. <But first tell me what Jade meant before about everyone else *dodging the whole thing*.>

<Only celebi can find the sanctuary, for it's deliberately not in time with the rest of the world. It remains hidden, that way. Dialga helped us grow it. Also, nobody can get there from this time because the Game has already begun. You'll be diverted all the way to the end of it if you try.> Aristeia halted and took a big breath. <We can all go back in time to hide there now if you like, it was wrong of me to ask you to do this thing for us->

<You're only saying that because you're scared,> Grace replied, realising she'd previously witnessed Aristeia's explanation about the sanctuary when she'd seen it dead and cold; no celebi in range to answer her. <Have you been to the end of it? Is it going to that future which is scaring you so much now?>

<Think about it,> Jade said, her arms crossed. <There's no definitive future after this point. Aristeia explained all this to you when you rejoined the hive: the fog of infinite possibilities. You've been to one, at least. But what can you do to change it to

another? *Think of it as a game.* Except she left out the part where it turns out nobody else is brave enough to face the responsibility.>

<Well, if we can't contact Dialga right now,> Grace said, not wanting to even consider the prospect this would be an ongoing thing, <let's go even further back to when we can.>

Jade considered her for a moment. <I don't think you understand fully what has happened. The future has directly impacted the past in an enormous way. No matter how far back you go - and believe me, I tried - Dialga is nowhere to be found.>

<But... I talked to them! I saw them! Did that not happen in the past any more? Why can I still remember it?>

<It happened... And didn't, at the same time. It's broken, all broken...> Jade said, looking down and shaking her head.

Grace glared at her. <I can't even tell if you're telling the truth, but I don't want to believe what you're saying.>

<I'm not lying to you.>

<Possible future self or no, I have to go see for myself,> Grace continued, and time rippled away.

Jade's fingers began to tingle and she brought them to her face, staring as their tips began to fade from sight. She smiled at the sight, her heart fluttering in response with its already light rapid beats, then began to chuckle.

<Why are you laughing?> Aristeia asked, her expression concerned.

<Because in breaking the rules of time, and contacting my past self, I may have just saved the world. Well, hopefully.>

<But you'll disappear from existence itself!>

Jade continued to study the odd fade about her fingertips. <Perhaps, or perhaps not. Technically, I should have ceased to be the moment Grace chose to do something I didn't. After all, Dialga is not here to stabilise any paradoxes any longer, and the damage here hasn't extended, yet. But if it does... well, c'est la vie, celebi.>

Grace headed to the faraway island and found it deserted. By this stage it looked to have completely settled in; the places where earth met sea lapping calmly and not eroding any longer.

She flew into the deepest parts of the small island, her flight patterns swaying from side to side through the air in nervousness; and came across someone she hadn't expected at all:

<Grace!> Dianthus said loudly in relief, hovering over the water, <thank the Lord... I found you!> She buzzed over to the green celebi and grabbed spasmodically for her hands. <Please... help me!>

<Help you?>

Dianthus gazed at her and opened her mouth and screamed pure wordless fear into Grace's face. The scream echoed and grew in power.

The trees around them began to sway though there was no wind. Grace and Dianthus began shining both and with a flash they winked out of the area; Dianthus's scream echoing once more then fading away with them.

They flashed back into being high up in the air above Cinnabar Island. Dianthus pointed a finger downwards with a trembling hand and whimpered.

Stunned that even the differently coloured, smart-talking, dimension-crossing celebi had been reduced to mimicking Aristeia's feared reaction to the Game, Grace peered closer at the scenery below and felt her eyes start to water and ache terribly at the sight.

<Wh-what is that?> she said weakly. <What in Dialga's name am I looking at?!>

The land crawled with things she couldn't quite see. Things, or perhaps creatures; for they seemed to be moving in a creature-like way as far as she could tell from the shifting and warping. They rippled, almost; practically disappearing from sight entirely if they rose into the air but then once upon the earth again their forms took upon a more visible mash of colours and shapes.

<Monsters...> Dianthus whispered.

Grace felt inclined to agree, her skin crawling around her entire body. The *things* below them were engulfing the entire area where earth met sea; passing through the land's surface and leaving it damaged somehow in their wake; the very reality of the earth corrupted. They spread and circled and double-backed, then spread out further, continuing the damaged look towards Cinnabar Island's buildings.

<We need to stop them,> Grace said, grabbing at Dianthus's hand and whisking the pair of them down towards the Pokémon Gym.

<But... you can't time-dance yet!> Dianthus hollered, her teeth gritted and pulling back through the air.

<Huh?>

The pink celebi took her hand back and looked at it blankly for a moment, then shook her head with a wail; eyes shut. <We don't even know what they *are*...> She opened her eyes and glared down at the village. <A single celebi, a single celebi... Stay here! watch me for a while until you feel ready to help!>

Grace hesitated, then began hovering slightly above the scene as Dianthus zoomed closer, looped her body up into an upwards stance through the air and growled vocally at the shifting creatures before her. She swung her hands together and summoned a shining green orb to cast at the closest side.

As the energy ball made contact the creature rippled and absorbed the entire thing before shuddering - a strange rending noise following - and forming into the skeleton of an enormous kabutops.

Grace blinked in disbelief as she watched the battle begin. The kabutops snarled (somehow) and whisked out a deadly sharp scything arm ~~which sliced Dianthus's right antennae clean off~~ - which Dianthus dodged at the last moment in a tricky across-up manoeuvre and sent another small energy ball in return; hitting its skull and billowing smoke.

The kabutops hissed in pain, stepping back. Dianthus ~~hovered, unsure, only for the kabutops to recover, bend down, and launch itself into the air at her with a roar~~ - nearly blurred in Grace's vision as she flew down lower, past the kabutops, and sent tangling vines shooting from her fingers to entwine its entire form.

This was time-dancing? Allowing one moment to happen, then rewinding briefly to rewrite it now you knew how to avoid it? How on earth was Dianthus doing that?



It did not seem to involve the time-consuming ripples or loud and painful Voice of the Forest technique.

She concentrated harder upon Dianthus's movements, just as the kabutops roared in frustration and struggled futilely with the leafy vines only for its skull to morph into a snouted aerodactyl shape and its scythes to part and become the finger-thin bones normally between wing-skin. The celebi swung about through the air so she was hovering closer to Grace and held the bind tight as the aerodactyl thrashed and leaped into the air; somehow staying aloft without proper wings.

<Did you see how it works?> Dianthus called up to her.

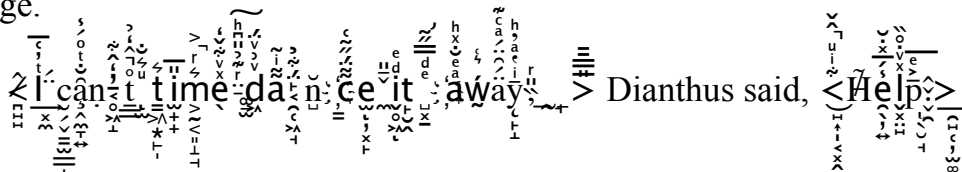
<Not really!>

Dianthus had no time to respond back as the now-aerodactyl skeleton wriggled once more than in an eye-watering metamorphosis from the inside out became a hazy black and purple coloured spectre, grinning malevolently and wriggling easily out of the vines with its transparent body, before lashing out with a three-fingered hand and ~~grasping Dianthus around the neck~~ just missing her neck.

Try as she might, Grace couldn't understand how Dianthus was time-dancing; even though she could at least witness the original event before it was rewritten. She wondered if the creature could, as it huffed ghastly laughter and became its original reality-breaking form once more only to further climb effortlessly through the air and engulf Dianthus entirely.

Grace screamed as she watched Dianthus's body break apart into a dozen different parts and loosely reform - yet incorrectly - as the creature released her and

rejoined the others of its kind still spreading inexorably towards the centre of the village.



I can time dance it away Dianthus said, Help

<I don't know how to help you,> Grace whispered, shaking as she tried to look away from her friend but couldn't stop staring.

Dianthus moved towards her and Grace flitted backwards. <Don't touch me,> she said.

The corrupted celebi snarled and went for her, ~~grabbing her by the shoulder and allowing the brokenness to seep into her skin like icy running water~~, Grace only just dodging a quick strike to her shoulder, then flying backwards even further and blinking in confusion. Had she just time-danced? There were two futures in her mind and she'd just avoided the worst one.

But how to time-dance further back and save Dianthus? She'd dodged it by pure instinct. She tried concentrating on the time before the creature had swallowed the pink celebi but nothing happened, and still Dianthus came for her. Grace created a hasty time ripple behind her and flew into it =backwards, waving to close it before the corrupted celebi could follow in after her. She flew the length of the ripple in the same stance, backwards; her legs trailing from her head and arms.

As the fright wore off, the misery set in. Her mouth set in a grim frown, she gazed backwards at the closed off ripple's end fast disappearing into the distance and shook her head.

<I'm sorry, Dianthus...> she whispered. <I'm so sorry. I'm trying to fix it.>

The time ripple led her into the air above Cinnabar Island before her previous self had arrived. Grace waited and waited for her and Dianthus to arrive, looking anxiously around and down at the beach slowly being eaten by the creatures, and wondered... could she go further back to before they had arrived?

<Come on...> she murmured. The creatures had already reached the Cinnabar Island Gym and were slowly creeping up its right hand side, breaking its walls into confusing blocks of wrongness. As the apprentice trainers and Gym Leader ran out frantically onto the beach away from the corrupted Gym the creatures gibbered and swarmed towards them. The human's screams rang out and then distorted along with their bodies.

It had not taken this long. Her past self and Dianthus weren't coming.

<This can't be right!> she said. The only reason she had come here was because of the events of the future - well, now the present, but the point still stood. Grace was witnessing a huge and troubling paradox; one she was highly involved in.

The celebi stayed high up in the air, unnoticed by the creatures continuing to eat the island building by building, until another pixie-like pokémon joined her side solemnly and silently.

<So this is the wrongness,> it finally said.

Grace looked harder at the pokémon before replying. <Yes, Uxie.>

<What exactly... is it?>

When Grace looked down at the devastation with the same open hive-mind she did not receive the same information. <I don't know.>

<I'm the guardian of knowledge,> Uxie said, sounding mildly perturbed, <so I should already. I felt where the wrongness was, but now I can't identify it?>

Grace frowned at Uxie, deep in thought. <Do you know how to stop it?>

<No.>

<Well... well I'll just have to go far back enough in time to prevent the whole thing from happening, then!>

When Grace fled the scene, Uxie stared at the patch of air she no longer existed in for a long while with her closed eyes; seeing and yet not at the same time. The wrongness down below felt like a creeping tickling sensation all over her skin; like sharp talons and feathers. Her heart thumping, Uxie looked down and carefully, slowly, opened her eyes to see them clearly.

<They're birds,> she said in wonder. <But not bird pokémon, like pidgeot or fearow. They're... carrion birds...? who should be feasting on dead worlds instead. They should not be here. So why are they?> As the sensation and vision cleared and intensified, she nodded in satisfaction at her scrutiny and felt the instinctive terror at their unseen forms solidify into something she could deal with; fear she could accept and yet continue to function without succumbing to it.

The flock of birds were a shifting black, purple and blue in colour, their edges fraying as they moved about. They had too many wings to their bodies and tooth-filled beaks. Unlike flocks of bird pokémon they did not give each other space through the air but tumbled as one as like a wave across the sand in their forwards progress. As they went on and on, and eventually hit the other side of the island and surged into the ocean to continue, they pecked and snapped and tore at the very edges

of reality; eating and passing on and swallowing and gorging themselves on what gave the world around them substance and logic, leaving the ravaged ground behind them corrupted.

Uxie shut her eyes and the horrid vision left her, but the wrong feeling remained.



# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Eight: The Nothing After Death*



## Chapter Eight: The Nothing After Death

The being stood motionless on the dusty brown shoreline, looking out to the glasslike still waters. Out to the endless horizon the greyish blue ocean faded to the deep black emptiness of the skies above them; surrounding the entire moment with comforting silence.

They looked about themselves for an unknown amount of time. Time did not matter here. Things did not change, and the being did not move; merely watched, listened and felt as the frozen, simple scene simply existed for them - a frozen, simple soul - to inhabit.

Here was the silence of an empty, unknowing peace.

The being stood calmly on the shoreline and watched as the eerie still mirror of the waters before them shattered into a million pieces and began ever so slightly lapping at the earth; drawing in and out on the smallest scale.

The being watched and soon after heard the first sound to break the silence of the place. The water rushed up and kissed their toes with a curling, shimmering hiss, and further out in the darkness came the sounds of heavy, sodden wood creaking and clunking.

They watched, still and relaxed, as the faded brown rowboat appeared from the gloom and coasted through the water, leaving eddies in the wake of it and its oars. On the other side of the oars sat a being in a faded brown coat; their cowl shadowing the majority of their face and the unnatural light barely even illuminating the face's half smile.

The being on the boat gently plunged their oars deeper into the water and sands to slightly rotate the nose, and the boat slowed to a standstill as it beached itself softly right next to the being on the shoreline.

“Welcome,” the gondolier said, their voice rich and warm.

“Welcome to Forgotten.”

“Thank you,” the being replied.

“Would you like to stay here for now, or are you ready to move on?”

The being considered this, looking around them. Behind them, the brown, flat empty land stretched and faded into the darkness as far



as they could see, just as the waters did before them. Besides the two beings there was nothing, nobody. They had seen all there was to see here in this place.

“It’s time to move on,” the being decided, and stepped further into the water, then carefully clambered onto the boat's unoccupied passenger seat.

The gondolier nodded slowly, and dug the oars in to move away from the empty shores. The boat moved further into the gloom. Its two occupants sat in silence as they moved on, the gondolier's shadowed expression fixed and focused upon their craft as they navigated further and further away from the unending, never changing shore.

“Do you have any questions?” they asked finally.

“I have too many,” the being admitted, “and I don’t even know where to start.”

“Sometimes they don't just want to know at all,” the gondolier said reassuringly. “Nobody has to, if they don't want to, of course, but then again most are at least a little curious as to where they've ended up. That is why I am here. For guidance.”

“Ended up... There was something before this?”

*Well, of course there must have been something before this, the being thought. Only different, somehow. More... complicated.*

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” the gondolier said. “Some tell me stories of them. Parts of those tales I hear as we move across the water may very well be just imagined up. But I personally believe they're not. If you decide you have a story for me, I will be very happy to hear it.”

The being considered this. “And if I don't?”

“Then I guess we will go on forever, like this, on the water... and you won't step ashore again.”

The being looked at the gondolier carefully yet curiously. As if in a dreamstate, their features had remained mellifluous - unimportant to the subject at hand until this point; when it was time to pay more attention. As they studied the graceful rowing motions the gondolier's form sharpened; revealing two strong thickset arms flashing from time to time under the cloak's flapping sleeves, giving way to six-fingered hands. The cloak covered the length of their body as they sat, their tail draped over the wooden seat next to them; and six-toed feet poking out and pressing firmly upon the boat's wooden bottom for added stability.

“Would you tell me a story?” the being asked.

“Once upon a time, there was a sailor, his crewmates, and his captain chasing pirates out on the open seas,” they replied, sounding as if they had recited the same words verbatim at least a few times before. “Their navigation instruments had led the captain astray and they were all completely lost out on open waters. Soon after, the ship got caught in a terrible storm. The sailor was thrown overboard and dragged under by a freak current. They tried to reach the surface before they lost unconsciousness, but...

“They instead found themselves standing on a beach, looking down at a boat, so - naturally - they climbed in and started rowing back and forth, exploring. After a while, others with different kinds of stories started appearing on the shore where the sailor had, and so they decided to trade a ride for a retelling when they picked them up to head to the other side.”

*Hmmm... the being wondered. That is a personal story?*

“Should you think of anything that would make a story, I would be eager to hear it... to break the monotony of this place.”

“What is this place, though? How did you come here after falling into the ocean?”

The gondolier quirked an eyebrow. “Who said it was I who fell in?”

“You are the one rowing the boat,” the being pointed out.

“Ah, yes of course. I call this place Forgotten. The place, and its people. I believe I did not die, back there with my crewmates and captain. I was taken away from there somehow.” The gondolier chuckled. “It is a theory, nothing more. I have no way of knowing otherwise. But in my people's culture, it is believed that our life's journey will be made clear to us at its close. That we will understand each little moment as a collection of moments, then culminating into a whole... before moving on to a new journey with that newfound wisdom in mind.”

“And isn't this your new journey?” the being asked.

The gondolier stilled their oars, looking out at the waters pensively. “I myself thought so for a while. But nothing rings true. I did not experience death, or even the fade towards it, and certainly not the bliss of untold wisdom that I believed was to come afterwards. I was still conscious in that water, swimming towards the surface. I was not yet completely frantic for air. And then standing on land, dry clothed,

my whole life forgotten until a few snippets made themselves known to me later... It was..."

"Strange?"

"Unexpected, in hindsight at least. As if the universe had plucked me from my mission there and assigned me a new one here with this boat instead." They harrumphed in amusement. "I tell myself it may be a downgrade size-wise, but not in importance."

The being wondered over the gondolier's story for a while, and then decided they, too, would like to tell one; even though they did not know how it would turn out after the first sentence.

"Once upon a time," they began, "there was a young boy who was friends to all around him. Even though many would blindly attack him or those around him, he would not falter in his desire to help them see reason and better themselves. Even if the world was ending right in front of him, he and his friends would fight without hesitation to see it saved, time and time again. Even if it meant giving up your very life force to do so."

The gondolier's eyes twinkled underneath their hood. "I've heard a similar tale to that once or twice. Makes for a gripping conclusion

whichever way it ends. What happened in yours to prompt such a noble self-sacrifice?"

"Everyone around him was brutally fighting to the death, and he couldn't bear it any longer, so he ran out in the middle of the two ringleaders, arms outstretched, and cried out for them to stop... only for him to get caught in the crossfire."

"He died?"

"He faded," the being said, feeling inspired, "but a miracle happened. Every single one there stopped fighting and mourned his loss so deeply that their tears restored him back to life."

The gondolier was smiling. "I like endings like that. Thank you for your story. Heard it just in time, too."

The being turned their head and noticed the gloom lifting to reveal a similar shore; only this time dotted with others standing separate from each other.

"Who are they?"

"Others forgotten, just like you."

The boat drew near and soon rasped its way onto the gritty sand. The gondolier gestured in one solemn wave of their hand. "This is where I leave you."

The being accepted this like the rest they had heard as they stood to disembark. “Thank you for the journey across. What happens now?”

The gondolier waited for the being to hop off before they answered, their eyes now filled with an undeniable sadness. “If there is anything which happens for you now after I drop you off to this side, I am unaware of it. The people here don’t go anywhere, each time I arrive with another. I... I’ve guess I’ve been at this for an eternity; maybe even part of this place, from the beginning somehow. Figured it must take a really long time to cross the river both ways even though there’s no time here in Forgotten.” They grunted humour. “Maybe it’s been forgotten here, too. Either way, nobody takes any notice of me once they land here and I depart. Why would they? I can’t take them back, and their stories have already been told.”

Standing with their toes in the water, the being nodded. “I understand.”

The gondolier’s eyes gleamed in multifaceted emotion as they drove down with their oars into the soft sands to surge out backwards and depart.

The being watched until they had faded from sight, then studied the other people around him. Most stood, others sat; their gazes faded

and distant, looking at nothing. Perhaps, the being figured, that was because there was nothing much to see here on this empty hill.

They strode towards the top of the incline. The view of the other side presented them with nothing but the same. No more rivers or bays. Grey-brown earth, and dark enclosed horizons. They turned again and walked slowly over to another being who was sitting cross-legged, eyes shut and arms in a meditative posture.

“Excuse me,” the being said.

The other quirked an eye open. “Hn? Oh, hi. I’m Clair. What’s your story?”

“Clair?”

“Yes, that’s my name. Come and talk to me when you’ve remembered your own.” They shut their eye again.

Name. Hmmm. What was that? A label of some sorts? The being stood there and mused upon it for a while.

“I don’t have one,” they said eventually, “and if I once did, I don’t care enough about it to try and remember it any further.”

Clair opened both eyes, and quickly hopped up on their feet.

“Nice to meet you anyway. What’s your story?”



The being did not want to tell the same one they had the gondolier. They thought quickly. “Once upon a time, a scientist was determined to do something nobody had done before and play God: create a living creature using different parts from others; splicing them together then invigorating them with energy.”

Clair nodded, a wry expression on their face. “But when the creature finally woke, it turned upon its creator in confusion and frustration, fleeing the place to seek answers elsewhere.”

“You’ve heard that story before? But I just made it up now.”

“Can’t say I fully understand how this place works yet, but I’m pretty sure you didn’t just come up with it now, at least. They all originate from our past somewhere. I’ve heard from everyone here at least once. Their stories are different enough in ways to set them apart but similar enough in other ways to always remind you of another that you once knew.”

“What do you mean?” the being asked.

“Thematically,” Clair said. “Proving that although we all came from different places, our stories remain the same. That is, unless you’ve received enough training beforehand to escape the worst of the time-jump hangover and can specifically remember your own.”

“Hangover?”

“I mean, I know I can’t talk, since I’ve only recovered enough to know how I ended up here, but at least there’s plenty of vivid detail in the meantime.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, I was a time-trialer for a big corporation; diagnostics and simulations and whatnot... In the meantime, I was studying up on how multiverses work. Sure, they were fun to sim, but back then everyone was asking themselves what happened to them *afterwards?* when they shut the sim down? Wouldn’t those parallel universes exist beyond our view all the time?”

The being did not altogether understand what this other being called Clair was saying, but they remained silent.

“Which got me thinking, how are parallel universes created anyway? What are the conditions needed for someone to do one thing or another and split both futures into two worlds? Even the smallest of unconscious choices made by people? And that’s just one person’s actions, let alone millions!” Clair grasped their head with a hand, a wide-eyed, intense expression on their face. “I mean, it really boggles

the mind, doesn't it? One world, splitting infinitely into a million billion multiverses every millisecond."

Clair's hand fell, and they fell silent, looking down at the earth in wonder.

"That is, if you believe that theory," the being said.

Clair's gaze shot up from the earth and blazed at them instead.

"That's right," they said. "That theory was only the start of it, really. It's too much to handle believing that's happening to our worlds - at least it was to me. So I had another think. What if... what if each time a decision is made either way, two - or more? - parallel worlds are in fact split from one but only one becomes an eventuality? The other worlds stop in time? I mean, that's still as scary as the first theory - time-trialers backtrack all the time to fix mistakes - since it'd ultimately sentence the world we'd lived and known to death for another 'better' parallel. But it just seemed I could understand that theory better than the first one."

"What would happen to the dead worlds, then?"

"Oh, this is where it gets *good*. I asked myself the same question. Then, I asked my boss." Their gaze hardened and dropped away from the being's curiosity. "It was either forget about it or relinquish my comfortable position. I guess they got scared for me. Told me not to risk

playing with tech still in its alpha stage. But... I had to know. I had to risk it." Their gazes met again. "I had to go beyond.

"My people had used time tech for so long, but dimension tech was still in its unrefined infant stages; bringing on new kinds of hangovers and everything. I tried it anyway, and somehow ended up right where I had planned: a dead world. I was all alone. Time had stilled. The whole planet had simply... stopped." They gestured around them. "A bit like this, really. But this one somehow feels a little more alive, which is a relief, really..."

"What happened to you then?" the being asked.

"The monsters happened to me," they said. "I was only just standing up trying to remember what I was after the jump and realising being there was freaking me out too much - I couldn't stay there; I'd have to go before I could even take a look around - but then I found out what happens later to my theorised dead worlds after all."

They paused.

The being stood still, willing Clair to continue. Eventually...

"What happens to roadkill after peak hour? The scavengers move in. They ate that world so fast I had nowhere to run. They tried to eat

me, too, but something went wrong I guess; I was still too 'living' for them to handle. It didn't matter though, I still ended up Forgotten."

"I'm sorry," the being said.

Clair waved a hand at them. "It was my own fault for not leaving well enough alone. Even now I can't help wondering, wishing I could get back somehow. I want to find out what on earth they were. Where they came from - *when* they came from. Were they created, or born? I know now what they do, but that's not *enough*. It's really frustrating!"

"You're a truth-seeker indeed."

Clair laughed. "That's a flattering way of putting it." They gestured with a quirk of their head and sat down again, motioning to the being to do the same.

Once the pair were seated comfortably on the almost-spongy-feeling soft earth, Clair reached over and took the being's hand, wondering at it with soft murmurs. "If you ever want to tell me the story of *you*, feel free," they said. "I get the feeling it'd be an interesting one."

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*I have to fix it, Grace thought, as she left Uxie at Cinnabar Island. I have to go back far enough that I can change the future. Have to do something that'll fix it. But what? If I can't seem to reach my past selves at all, is that even possible?*

Her time stream wavered as it lengthened sporadically. Grimly, Grace kept flying at blistering pace through the warping colours and ripples; still without a proper destination in mind. *This should not be possible*, she thought wryly. *How can a stream - of water or time - be created without two definite ends?*

<Because it's broken,> she said. <Who broke it?> She had no idea. Perhaps that was why she couldn't reach Dialga, either; all owing to... somebody. Surely if that somebody had meddled with time so much, Dialga would have made contact with them and demand they fix it, just as they had Grace -

The celebi lost all focus holding onto the time stream and it spat her out unceremoniously at its inevitable other, glittering, fragmenting, end. Eyes narrowed, barely even taking in her surroundings in the low air as her arrival was investigated by a flock of hesitant sparrow, Grace grabbed an antennae and yanked at it unconsciously.

Was it *Grace herself* that had broken time? Had Dialga been more correct about everything in the beginning that she could have ever imagined? How could this possibly have gone so wrong? She was only one celebi!

<A single celebi flapping its wings can create a tornado in the future,> she said to herself, reminding her of the stark truth. So, this was the tornado? This inevitability that had lead to Dialga being injured not once, but twice now - owing at first to a human, then... what? What had she done in time to bring it about? Was it truly about the pikachu being left in the past? Maybe, then... just maybe...

Grace had no more time to muse upon the possibilities as her time stream, its inner surface jewel-like suddenly fragmented far beyond its normal self and out swarmed the invisible monsters she had just fled from. She let out a little shriek and whipped away in the air, the spearow around her following suit to her relief.

Whether or not they or the monsters behind them continued to dog her heels, Grace didn't know. She cast a brief thought of safety for the innocent and curious bird pokémon - hopefully they'd know to avoid it at all costs - before heading far further back in time to a place she remembered well.

From time to time as she zipped and circled in the air, the people and their harnessed magical creatures tending the bountiful crops would look up in wonder at her, and sometimes even cry out. Gradually the tended land gave way to the more open, unattended pastures and valleys of lush green grass. This was where the pikachu had wanted to live. This was when Grace had just departed from the happy pair of mouse pokémon barely moments ago. Why, then, was the raichu she could see - and easily recognise as the same - bounding along below her completely on his own?

<Chur,> she called, swooping down and alighting at his side as he sat up on his haunches, a surprised look on his face. <Where is Pikachutwo?>

“Who?” Chur asked, tilting his head to the side and wriggling an ear.

<The pikachu you were giving a proper name to,> she explained, figuring he’d probably know her as someone else now. <Where did she run off to?>

“*I’m sorry,*” he replied, an uncomfortable and embarrassed expression on his emotive face. “*My brother is called Churr - maybe you are thinking of him? I don’t know any pikachu.*”



In sudden despair, Grace stared at the raichu in silence for a moment; feeling her mouth quirk downwards the same as his. <No, I'm the one who is sorry,> she said eventually. <I must be mistaken. I'm sorry to bother you.>

*"No bother at all, Celebi,"* Chur said, his smile recovering as he stood on all fours again and stretched. *"You're known as a lucky charm hereabouts; the flying four-leaf clover. Maybe I will have good news today!"*

With that, he was gone down the slope at a dash. Grace watched him go silently, her sadness deepening. *I can't do this on my own, she thought for not the first time. I've been left to it on my own, though. Fixing a mess that I'm not even sure that I started - or if I did, this whole thing can't just be because of me. I would have felt it. If other celebi were around, maybe we could work together and find out how to fix it. But they're not, which defeats the whole nature of our calling; to pool our resources in time and work together!*

The gracidea flower ceremony had never felt so far away as Grace dropped to the earth and belted it with a fist in frustration. Yes, the saying might be a good reminder. All celebi must have gone back at some stage and changed just the barest of moments only for the future to

rewrite itself in a momentous way. But this? This was not how it was meant to go. Her, just her; completely on her own. It went against everything her mentor had said. She'd rejected and abandoned it, only for them to reject and abandon her once she had rejoined the fold and the Game had begun.

<Fine, Aristeia,> she growled, forgetting the fog and the unusable bank of hive-mind knowledge hidden behind it. <Have it your way. I'm not Grace any more. I'm a single celebi. I can do it on my own.>

<And now, our task done, we leave you,> the three said, ascending further into the air.

Mew raised her eyebrows, surprised. <Didn't Celebi bring you from another time?>

Mesprit nodded, gesturing about her. <As both incarnations have apparently already left us without any further explanation we will have to prevail upon our brother Dialga to send us back to our proper time. Knowing Dialga, though, he will be more than willing to oblige.>

<Farewell, then,> Mew said, waving her paw and settling down next to the humans.

<They will wake soon, you know,> Uxie said, her tone warning.

Looking calmly at them, Mew curled further into a ball on the grass. <I think I will stay and watch over them until they do.>

The three lake guardians accepted this without another word and, together, made for the clear oceans bordering the island. <Dialga,> they called simultaneously as they dipped their toes in a fraction; amplifying their psychic reach to even the Lord of Time's own dimension.

The short reply they received back was faint, pained, and barely there from a being barely conscious enough to respond at all.

Uxie was the first to speak solo. <He is dying, breaking apart... but he will not die - not if he remains there in stasis.>

<He is gravely wounded,> Mesprit said, her four long antennae trembling in empathy.

Azelf's red gem at its forehead sparked, bringing all three at their heads to light. <We must go to aid him!>

<We cannot go to that place,> Uxie said heavily. <You know this.>

<Then... where do we go?>

<Back to our own time, when we belong, at least. Then, we will see. Come, let us seek Celebi.>

## The Lake Guardians and Guardian of the Time Streams

converged soon afterwards; after Celebi had carried her frustrations back to a shrine at Ilex Forest only to find those three sitting where she would normally perch.

<That's my spot,> she said impatiently, pointing.

<We knew we would find you here eventually,> Uxie said, ignoring her quip. <You left us completely high and dry, you know; disappearing like that after getting your part of the bargain.>

<Huh?>

Azelf was glowering at her, seemingly enough for all three of them. <The psychic contract you made! Does it mean nothing to you?>

<Psychic... contract?>

<Do you remember nothing of our bargain? How will we see it finalised when it is time, then?>

<It is fine, Azelf,> Uxie said quickly, holding up a hand and floating down to Celebi. <I know why. Do you recognise us at all?>

<You're the lake guardians,> Celebi said. <You healed the humans.>

Uxie nodded. <And now it is time for us to go home to our when and where. Please, take us back there; and in return our past selves will

come with you and heal the humans in the name of the Council. You see?>

Celebi's eyes widened. <I see,> she said.

Celebi took them back with barely any more words, and saw them all slip happily into the depths of each of their lakes quietly; barely making a ripple on the glassy surface. Once each lake guardian was sleeping still at the lake bed, she then levitated higher and summoned the voice of the forest to transport her back; completely at the same place yet years back.

The three all acted the same - hiding until she make psychic contact and then only emerging once the deal had been made. She spoke to Uxie first. Only... future Uxie had lied, it seemed. Past Uxie cared not of an event she hadn't seen come to pass yet.

<I won't join this council of yours, won't be a player in your game-> she said in the end unabashedly, somehow glaring through closed eyelids.

<It's not *my* Council. Or my Game!> Celebi interrupted.

<... and I *certainly* won't leave my sanctuary unattended to grant new life to... *humans*, no matter how much you may beg it of me.>

The green legendary's chest swelled with indignant anger. <I am the Voice of the Forest, and I refuse to even plead it once of you!> she retorted, turning in dismissal. She was about to close her own eyes and wail with her Voice - uncaring if she took Uxie with her or not - when the lake guardian called out:

<There may be a way we can reach an agreement.>

<Quickly,> Celebi said, not turning from her power-gathering posture.

<Every favour granted requires considerable sacrifice on our part,> Uxie explained. <Granting knowledge rather than taking it is quite unlike our more regular vocation. Should you agree to part with something precious to you... we, too - yes, all three of us - shall agree to your terms as well.>

Celebi turned around at this. <What is it I'm parting with?>

<That is the beauty of it. You will not know, not even when it is gone. For how can you remember that which you have forgotten? I must admit I know not how that feels, for I remember *all*.>

<You'll take a memory of something from me? Can't I choose which one?>

<No.>

<Are you going to take it now?>

<No, you have need of them all now. But one day, we'll take what is rightfully ours.>

<I can't agree to those terms.>

<Then farewell.>

Impatience and desperation surged. <Fine! I agree to the deal!> *I must have agreed before, for I remember it all happening.*

Uxie smiled, and power beamed from her gaze as her eyes slowly opened to Celebi, who was transfixed. *You won't remember this part, though.*

Thus Celebi swore the three lake Guardians into the Council.

<Whose odd idea of a psychic affiliation was this, anyway?>

Mesprit asked.

<I don't remember,> Celebi replied.

By the time they'd flown close to the exit of the time ripple leading into the clearing of Faraway Island, Celebi's heart was beating fast. When she flew past the last of the cylindrical tunnel and came into full view of herself from the past it accelerated even more. *I can contact*

*one of my past selves after all! Is this somehow because of the different flow of time here?*

<Please come back if you can.> Grace was in the middle of saying.

*She's talking to Dianthus, Celebi realised with a pang. Before she was corrupted...*

<She won't be back until it's too late to fix anything at all,> she said sadly, remembering the next time her past self met with the pink celebi it was when the monsters had already started attacking Cinnabar Island.

Grace whirled to meet her - as yet unknown - future self face to face as Uxie, Azelf and Mesprit came floating out behind her to join them.

<How do you know that?> another psychic voice asked, this time from the earth. Celebi looked down and recognised Mew with a start.

*That's right - that's who I went back for with the Time Rending Spacial Roar.*

<Whoever you are,> past Grace continued, <your timing is impeccable. Thank you.>



Celebi nodded at her. *Oh, if only you knew the half of it; I don't think your praise would be quite as high.* She met Grace's gaze, well aware of the potential paradoxes that could arise should she say the wrong thing or give too much information away with such a strong psychic link even deeper than telepathy. *I should not be here at all. But I couldn't stop myself. You'll understand one day, I know. Why I broke the rules.*

*I already understand why. We can't just leave the humans here like this.*

*It is not only that which is broken. You may still be able to look deeper, but all you have been told is not necessarily as it seems.*

*How so?*

Celebi blinked to break the contact. *I can't do this. But I must. She has to know.*

<The Game will never end for us,> she said, feeling the weight of it crash down again and again. <There is no finish line to cross. The fog is just marking when we first moved to bring Mew back. We can never actually win. It will never let us go.> *What do I say to help her fix it?* <It is just always the same struggle to go back and fix events in time so they do not result in cataclysmic death and destruction. To go back

further and further each time and change even the smallest of moments in time in the vain hope the ensuing future will play out differently->

<What's the Game?> Mew asked.

Celebi broke her spiel off in frustration, realising it was the exact same one she'd heard and yet hadn't helped in the slightest. *Never mind.*

<This is not intended as a warning,> she continued. <You shouldn't know this now just as much as I shouldn't be here, but... I just can't not tell you.>

Grace was frowning. <What am I honestly meant to do with that information, anyway?>

<I don't even know. You're already well in to the Game, so there is no help for it, really.> *This isn't helping at all,* she chided herself.

<Thanks.>

Celebi growled in frustration at the pair of them. <This is not easy for me either.>

<I don't even know who you are. What's your name?>

<Celebi. And don't laugh. Right now, it's just plain Celebi.>

<What is it not right now?>

<Once upon a before time, it used to stem from the flowers of gratitude,> Celebi explained as best she could, without saying anything

further. *I can't be here any longer. I really will start to break time!* <But seeing as I can't exactly be grateful for anything anymore I think I'd prefer being known as Jade.>

<What?>

Celebi-Jade heard Grace's shock in the single word but ignored it. <Why don't you ask your mentor Aristeia?> she replied snottily, <seeing as she's *so* emotionally invested in the Game and all.>

The ripple swallowed her away to another time before she could say anything more. *I tried to fix it... but all I did was make this future an inevitability. It's over. I can't fight it any more. I tried being on my own and it just didn't work.*

Somehow her chosen destination had been an unconscious one. She tumbled out at the entrance to the celebi sanctuary, just at the right when. Time flowed normally as she slipped quietly inside.

Without meeting anyone's gaze, she flitted up onto a branch and reached for a berry, only to freeze halfway at the sight of the entire colony looking her way with open mouths of varying widths.

When she finally wrenched the berry free from its reluctant green stalk, most of them snapped shut only for their psychic voices to engulf her in surprise and unease.

<What are you doing here?>

<Where is Aristeia?>

<What's going on?>

<Quiet!> she snapped. <I'm sure she's here somewhere.>

<Well if she hasn't returned here in mere moments, we'll have to close the entrance without her,> one said grimly. <Wasn't this meant to go the other way around?> they asked to the general congregation, then turned their attentions back to Jade. <Aren't you meant to be out there and Aristeia here?>

Jade squashed the berry in her tight grip. They were all still looking at her. <Aren't we *all* meant to be out there? Helping?>

<It's in our nature to survive,> another told her, their mental voice worn with the experience of age, <even if that means lying fallow for a while... even a very long, long while. Humans hunt us constantly to corrupt and control our power, and cause time catastrophes where and when they please; reaching into time streams in a foolish bid for our future sight, destroying the natural world around them when they do. We do not forget those places and times, but we must wait apart from them until they regrow, and regenerate, before we can visit again.>

<What is that meant to mean?> Jade whispered. <Aristea has been lying about this to me the entire time?>

<You cannot blame your mentor. She did the best she could in with circumstances she was given. If only you had been prepared to do the same.>

*And what is that meant to mean?*

<It doesn't matter,> said another, waving at the entranceway and seeing it close entirely. <We're all safe in here, now.>

Jade felt the disconnect inside, in synchrony with seeing it physically. <So, Dialga helped you create this hiding place?>

Nobody around her replied for a good few moments. Jade met each of their eyes in turn and watched as their gazes either dropped from hers or stared back with a very slight hostility.

Finally, one replied, their body language looking hesitant but genuine. <Yes, they did, in part. They... stabilise it, as they do the main timestream of the outside world.>

<In part?> Jade asked, relieved that she was finally getting some answers.

<More often than not, after we evolve into celebi we create a time pool to rest and recover our bodies. These pools are also separate



Corrupted Dianthus emerged full from the broken gateway and

hovered in midair, her form flickering and buzzing.

She laughed loudly and raised both hands to the air.

Her arms fell, and the monsters flew upon the surrounding view of trees and silent empty spaces; and made them truly devoid of reality.

The resulting emptiness felt different to the brokenness of the monsters's touch on the outside world. Every celebi here - the whole group of twittering, panicked ones grasping at each other in the middle of where the sanctuary once had been, Dianthus, and her - Jade? Grace? Celebi? - was completely surrounded by a sphere of distortion.

She tried to look at it harder again - even if only to see it a little better - and got a flash of just how little time there was before they came for her and the rest of her species. Was Dianthus holding them back somehow?

Dianthus said, looking shrewdly in her direction.

fun

<I'm trying to fix it, Dianthus> Jade gasped, backing away

through the air as far away as she could without touching the maelstrom still surrounding them.

Gaming

<What are you talking about?>

Dianthus said forcefully.

be

<Why?>

Dianthus's expression held sanity even through the vision-jarring corruption.

Yo



W e e r e h a d s o m e k n o w n  
Dianthus paused.  
And she replied, gesturing.  
Her

W e e r e h a d s o m e k n o w n  
Dianthus paused.  
And she replied, gesturing.  
Her

W e e r e h a d s o m e k n o w n  
Dianthus paused.  
And she replied, gesturing.  
Her

form buckled and warped and darted from the wrong side to engulf the celebi in the middle. The monsters screeched silently and followed suit.

Unable to witness the sight any longer, Jade whipped about and - forgetting any sort of doorway - flew full into the oblivion around them now the monsters had stopped encircling and fully consuming it. It bathed her skin with icy numbness to the core.

Her consciousness began to waver in and out. Instinctively, time pulled her back into reality: acting as a kind of gravity - or else she pulled herself; like the breathing impulse after fainting... to a place she knew well and yet not at all...



# *The Game of Time*

*Chapter Nine: DeuX EX Machina*



## Chapter Nine: Deus Ex Machina

Jade woke up in midair. She floated high above the temple and watched as Arceus descended from another space and time to lay waste to Michina Town. Though Palkia and Giratina - and the swarming humans and pokémon below - fought bravely their efforts were in vain. Arceus brought swift and brutal judgement to the two legendary pokémon and the town; leaving them all dead or dying; and its rage did not abate, rather grew each passing year when it would inevitably return and deliver more attacks to the dead and dry wasteland that had once been a flourishing city.

She went back time and time again to try and somehow rouse Dialga from some unknown place to tip the balance. Her past selves never reappeared as they should have. She even flew into the middle of the battle and screamed at Palkia for some - any - assistance with stirring him only for the momentary distraction of confusion (**WHO?**) to

prove near fatal for the pair of them. She time-danced it away. Palkia could not.

Jade tried again and again to change the events of that day; going further and further back to change the smallest of things - to no avail.

Arceus still returned from hibernation in an inconsolable rage. It had to do with the time the humans had betrayed it in the distant past, she finally found out, after going so far back it was nearly to the time where she had originally dropped Sparkling off. But no matter what she tried she couldn't even stop that from happening to start off with. The humans still acted the same whether she appeared to them or not. It became even worse if she did - for they proclaimed she was to be their good luck charm in the ensuing struggle against the legendary pokémon when it arrived to claim the Jewel of Life back. The magical creatures would not go against the human's commands no matter how long and hard she begged. And trying to speak one-on-one to Arceus itself? She was never even acknowledged let alone replied to.

She let the jailed human out - he soon turned against his trusted pokémon friend. She left him in there and the other human attacked Arceus all the same.

She tried everything. Wishing for even Dianthus and the monsters to reappear and eat the lot of them - if only to stop the ensuing devastation. Shouting whatever she could to some invisible Lord of Time that had simply vanished away for a reason she didn't understand. *Was it me that did this? Is it all my fault?* The bitter empty silences far worse than any reply in the negative.

Exhausted after she had lost count of how many times and how many ways she had tried to make Arceus's trial and judgement day turn out any better, Jade stopped flying halfway through a time ripple and simply slept.

Some unknown time later, Jade's ripple spat her out the other end. Amazingly, below her she could see her long-lost past self from some point talking to Aristeia. *Where were you when I was trying to save Michina Town?* The sight invigorated her more than the wind chill ever could. She barely had a thought for the *when* before she kicked her feet up in the sky and charged head-and-hands-first at the pair of them.

She made for Aristeia at the last moment. *I'm the reason why she never got to the sanctuary*, she realised. As the pair of them connected

they smashed skulls. Jade shook off the disorientation and squeezed her mentor to her side to keep a proper hold in the immense wind drag.

Aristea started screaming; wriggling against Jade's tight hug. Grimly, Jade somehow held on to the slippery celebi. *I need you*, she thought. *Two single celebi, maybe...*

<You'll thank me one day!> she shouted to Grace her past self. *I hope Aristea does, as well.* <This one would have deserted you here and now mere seconds before the Game begins! hidden in the secret sanctuary with the rest of them and dodged the whole thing!> *Only to fall victim to something much worse.*

<What?>

<Don't you get it yet?> Jade shouted, wondering how far back this was. She barely had any memory of this moment in the adrenaline rush of it all as Grace. Was she saying the same things? <There's only one celebi in the Game, ever; and that's you! You're the one they chose to take the fall for them!>

<We're all falling, Jade!>

*Oh, I remember that one; guess I am repeating the same script.*

She laughed bitterly and summoned a time ripple to a time far further in the Game. Aristea screamed louder at the sight of it.

<It's your turn now,> Jade said, ignoring the other celebi's fright.

*It is not as bad as what would happen if you weren't roped in.*

By the time they'd all flown out of the ripple Grace was already barraging Jade. <Are you my future self?>

*Alright. Time to say something different to last time.*

<I'm just one of your potential future selves. How this present plays out this time around will determine whether you become me or not.> *That's exactly the same! Aargh!*

Grace kept speaking but the words were beginning to mesh together to Jade; until Aristeia broke in and spat a slur at her.

<You think I care about creating paradoxes when the whole *world* is breaking? Go on, run - yes, time ripple away from here and back to your sanctuary with the rest of them. Hide. Listen to the distant rumble of chaos and destruction and *think yourself safe*, if you dare. Think yourself untouchable until they eat the very sanctuary away from underneath and around you.>

The pair of them were staring at her, their green skin fading to white.

<I'm not even meant to be here,> Aristeia finally said. <What can I possibly do to stop it?>



<You can *move*, damn it. *A single celebi flapping its wings in the past,*> Jade said, insistent on the hope that one extra celebi in the form of Aristeia might tip the balance in their favour.

Aristeia finished the saying with a tremulous smile, then said,  
<But I don't know how to move. What do I do?>

<Fix the past to fix the future,> Jade explained. <That's the whole point of the Game. Or if you want to really show off, *mentor*, fix the future to fix the past - but I wouldn't recommend going any further in time than around nowish to have a look. It gets pretty messy.>

<Want to come with me to talk with Dialga?> Grace asked her.  
<I kind of need to apologise for something. We'll go back to after my past self goes back to the before time, and leave before I return; to escape any confusion.>

<That might not be possible,> Jade said, her worry for her past self deepening.

<Why not?>

<Grace, Dialga... I'm so sorry, but time is really broken, and I don't know why. The Guardian of Time... Dialga... He's gone.>

<Gone?>

Jade unconsciously grabbed for her drooping antennae. <I've been trying to fix it!>

<Gone as in... dead?> Grace asked with dread in her voice.

<I don't know, but it's something I plan to find out.>

<How do we even find something like that out?> Grace asked.

<Lord of Time!> she shouted mentally. <Can you hear me?>

Jade shook her head in the ensuing silence. <I've already tried that.>

<Of course you have, because Grace just did,> Aristeia said, her voice wavering in tension. She turned to Grace. <Please, I'm begging you; let me take sanctuary.>

*There's no point, you fool!* Jade thought. *What about everything I just warned you about? The sanctuary is not safe!*

Grace looked back at her for a moment. <Alright. But first tell me what Jade meant before about everyone else dodging the whole thing.>

<Only celebi can find the sanctuary, for it's deliberately not in time with the rest of the world. It remains hidden, that way. Dialga helped us grow it. Also, nobody can get there from this time because the Game has already begun. You'll be diverted all the way to the end of it

if you try.> Aristeia breathed deeply. <We can all go back in time to hide there now if you like, it was wrong of me to ask you to do this thing for us->

<You're only saying that because you're scared,> Grace said.

<Have you been to the end of it? Is it going to that future which is scaring you so much now?>

<Think about it,> Jade said, crossing her arms. <There's no definitive future after this point. Aristeia explained all this to you when you rejoined the hive: the fog of infinite possibilities. You've been to one, at least. But what can you do to change it to another? Think of it as a *game*. Except she left out the part where it turns out nobody else is brave enough to face the responsibility.>

<Well, if we can't contact Dialga right now, let's go even further back to when we can,> Grace said.

*Did she even hear any of that?* <I don't think you understand fully what has happened. The future has directly impacted the past in an enormous way. No matter how far back you go - and believe me, I tried - Dialga is nowhere to be found.>

<But... I talked to them! I saw them! Did that not happen in the past any more? Why can I still remember it?>

<It happened... And didn't, at the same time. It's broken, all broken...> Jade said.

Grace glared at her. <I can't even tell if you're telling the truth, but I don't want to believe what you're saying.>

<I'm not lying to you. Please believe me. You don't know what'll happen if you leave right now, but I do. Stay.>

<I guess you're right,> Grace continued, and fell silent, her arms and antennae hanging slack.

Jade's fingers began to tingle and she brought them to her face, staring as their tips began to fade from sight. She smiled at the sight, her heart fluttering in response with its already light rapid beats, then began to chuckle.

<Why are you laughing?> Aristeia asked, her expression concerned.

<Because in breaking the rules of time, and contacting my past self, I may have just saved her. Well, hopefully.>

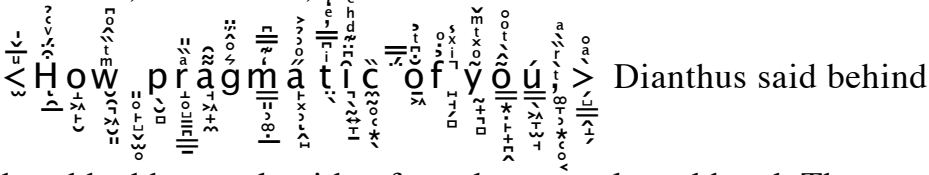
<But you'll disappear from existence itself!>

Jade continued to study the odd fade about her fingertips.

<Perhaps, or perhaps not. Technically, I should have ceased to be the moment Grace listened to me. After all, Dialga is not here to stabilise

any paradoxes any longer, and the damage here hasn't extended, yet. But

if it does... well, c'est la vie, celeb!>

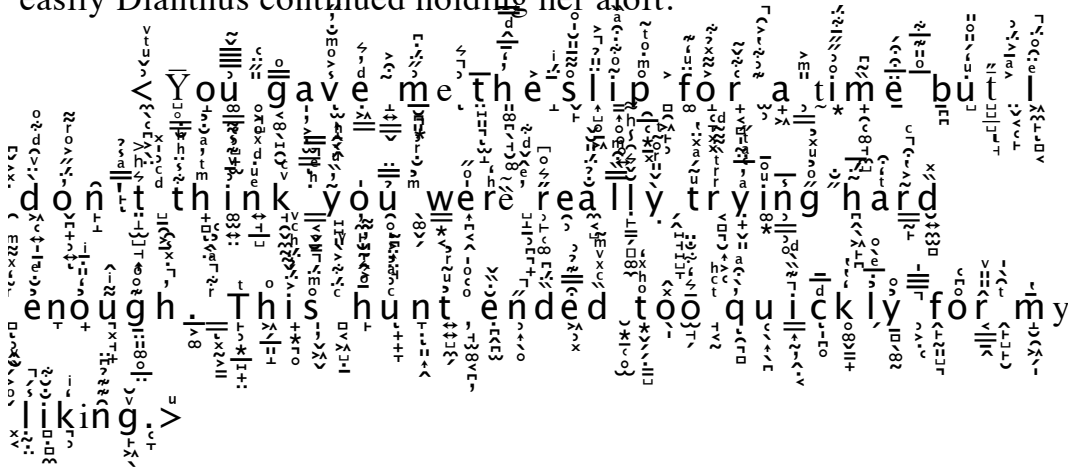


her, and grabbed her neck with a frayed, many-clawed hand. The raw

iciness of the pink celeb!s corrupting touch froze her body completely

and her wings fell to her back. Even without their lift she could feel how

easily Dianthus continued holding her aloft.



<Please, Dianthus,> Jade said, with a mind that was fast growing

hard to think at all with. <Don't-

Aristea and Grace fled across the sky in different directions.

Dianthus squeezed tighter around Jade's neck and went after the fleeing celeb!; Jade in tow just like she had dragged Aristea moments beforehand. Dianthus snatched Aristea's ankle with her other hand, dug in and threw her back the other way to stop her progress entirely.

Aristea yelped in surprise and pain, and fell prone; hanging upside down with the same expression on her face that Jade could feel on her own.

Dianthus swept back and turned to sight the other. Jade's gaze flicked furiously about to try and spot Grace but saw only the remainder of a rapidly closing time stream.

"It's time to let go of everything," Dianthus said coldly, growling verbally to accompany her mental voice

"I'm fast running out through the cracks of reality soon the world is going to come to a complete halt and we are going to watch happen."

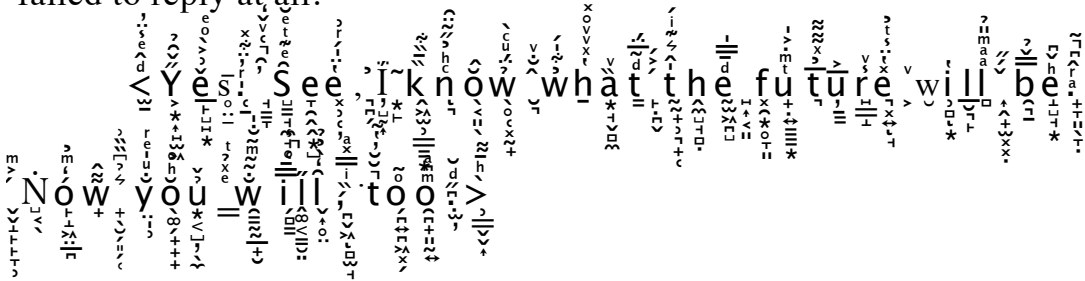
Jade struggled to reach up with her hands, take Dianthus's handhold at her neck and shoulders, and pry it loose. She could barely even place them upon her chest halfway before the weakness grew too much.

The pink celeb shook her head at the pair of them wriggling about. "You won't get free. We're refused to let you go even if I wanted to, I couldn't."

Jade deliberately cast any sort of thought about what that entailed away, before gritting her teeth and looking at the dangling Aristeia in desperation on Dianthus's other side. *Help me*, she thought.

<You're just going to wait?> she asked Dianthus after Aristeia

failed to reply at all.



The vision of the future Dianthus sent through to Jade - and Aristeia too, perhaps - almost reminded her of the silent, empty sanctuary. A nearly-world: waiting on the knife's edge of existence and the void - only from the wrong side of the equation; as if all the vibrancy had been removed at the end of it all, rather than about to be filled in at the beginning.

She was alone, standing rather than hovering for once on flat grey earth dotted with just-as-grey trees. The air as dead as the ground below; nothing moved around her as if time had died altogether.

Where was this?

Jade moved into the warped, knobbed and completely bald trees, and soon came across a half-crumbled shrine. Ah, Ilex Forest; its warm, golden-green beauty of natural stillness lost in this cold eventuality.

*Don't you understand yet?* Dianthus said from nowhere. *Resign yourself. There is nothing you can do to stop it.*

*That's not good enough. Celebi are time travellers,* Jade said simply, rubbing her now freed neck and shoulders with relief. She went over and touched the deadened stone shrine in what she was now sure had to be a vivid hive-mind vision. *You want to play little games with me, Dianthus? Well, I'm too busy playing the big one at the moment.*

*What?*

*This is never going to work,* she thought to herself; and somehow willed up a connection to the trees around her. More of a long slumber, than true death, she surmised; yet when the Voice of the Forest began to gently move the tallest branches in a little nodding motion, it barely brought any of the gathering strength along with it. Jade frowned and dug deeper in to her powers. A whistling, moaning sound began emanating around the grove, pained and hesitant though it was rather than the close-by storm wind Jade was more accustomed to hearing.

*Answer me,* Dianthus growled.

*This is the Game of Time,* Jade said. *Nobody can just stop playing. Not even if trapped in another's mind.*



She felt Dianthus's shock and anger reverberate around the encircling horizon and turn into ravenous monsters surging towards her shrine and eating the world into nothingness as they came. *What?!*

*Let's play, pink pixie,* she jeered, and threw an arm down to mark her first move.

Dianthus came to in front of another celebi who was gazing down at her with an expression akin to patient understanding and yet just a tad of unsure hesitation.

<How are you feeling?> the other celebi asked gently.

Dianthus looked up further into the other celebi's eyes and felt her emotions surging and swelling inside. <All my life,> she said; practically whimpering, <you've told me my differences make me unique and special. But why then must we forget these differences growing up and instead conform?>

<I don't quite understa->

<Look!> she said, shoving her pink palms out towards the other celebi's face. She dropped her gaze and stared at them, wide-eyed in bitter despair, before continuing on. <Evolving has made me green in

the mind but not everywhere else! I don't have to hear them say things to my face any more! They're constantly repeating in my head!>

The other celebi backed away, their own eyes widened in shock.

<Quickly, into your time pool.>

<I'm never coming out again,> Dianthus said as she reached for its comforting stillness. She fell into it and slept for ages uncounted; taking refuge from her own waking mind.

*Get out of my head*, the corrupted pink celebi snarled, and shoved Jade away with one move from the memory of that time; flinging the pair of them elsewhere.

Grace blinked awake and heard the haunting melody of a time flute tugging at her insistently. This memory, she at least recognised as her own. Ridiculously curious as to what she'd find on the other side she zipped so quickly into Relic Forest it barely took her two breaths.

The Ranger looked normal. Neutri, comfortably resting in the human's backpack, also normal. But Pikachutwo, standing on the Relic Stone and looking up at her unblinkingly; her form was broken and jagged-edged, and almost winking out for a split second then back into

view. All the same, Grace's heart leaped at the sight. *Sparkling! You still exist! Even in memory!*

She felt Dianthus's surprise from somewhere - as the pink celebini was nowhere to be seen also inhabiting the memory. *That is why she is broken*, she said back to Grace. *Cancelled out by reality. She's but a dream fragment now. What do you mean to gain with all this manic fluttering around the last candle to go out before nightfall? Your wings will catch alight and burn away...*

Grace moved once again. She flew down but rather than try and heal Sparkling as she had done in the past, she grabbed at the pikachu's paws - expecting her faded fingers to pass right through - and felt them connect with her solid furred pawpads. Elated, she hauled the silent, non-reacting Sparkling upwards with every vestige of levitation power she could muster, aiming for the sun.

*My turn*, said Dianthus.

The sky turned dark and Relic Forest whisked away; leaving choppy, black-blue sea below them.

Dianthus let Sparkling go and the pikachu fell - but rather disappear into the waves to sink, she landed back-first a mere foot above them onto an invisible surface, and lay prone.

Lost for moves, Grace gaped down at Sparkling. She made to swoop down and try to pick her up again but another invisible wall blocked her way downwards. In panic, she reached out in all directions and found herself trapped in what felt like a cube-shaped cage of invisible barriers.

The monsters appeared on the endless horizon of water from beyond existence, consuming the entire vista into nothingness as they came for her.

*Dianthus!* Grace shouted, flailing at the box surrounding her. *You can't move twice in a row!*

*I don't answer for them,* she replied. *We're not the only two playing, after all.*

*Of course we are! We're in your mind!*

*So are they.*

The monsters were making sounds now as they drew nearer; a scratchy, yammering, frantic call which was anything but musical.

*Admit it, they won,* Dianthus said. *I don't know why you're playing this foolish game of hide-and-seek in the first place; but you've been thoroughly beaten at it all the same.*

Grace forgot shoving madly in all directions in this strange memory on the night-time sea and shoved at Dianthus's presence instead; casting one last pained look at Sparkling for leaving her behind. The scene whipped away - as did the monsters converging on them from all sides.

Dianthus slumbered, away from time and space flowing naturally in the world she'd fled. No Time Flute summoned her from her time pool. Nobody disturbed her. Her space was her own. She came full into her celebi body; and yet she did not wake, not even when fully matured. Rather, when her long-shut eyes finally opened only by reflex and saw her surrounds enveloping her, her unconscious mind pulled and tugged outwards at this little bubble of reality; until a shadow of the memories of life as a celeva in the large bright world beyond emerged in it.

It was not long until this microcosm grew further and gained attention from the Lord of Time, the Lord of Space; and a few of their own underlings (only as celebi were Dialga's underlings) silently shadowing them. As abrupt as the two Guardians were; they saw her mysterious little world come to proper life with its own means of regulating time and space - and life. It was then that Dianthus woke up.

<Why did you help me?> she asked the two, before they left her to go back to their own dimensions after gazing proudly at their flourishing world for a fair length of time.

**THERE ARE OTHER WORLDS THAN THIS**, they said in unison.

**YET NONE LESS THAN ANOTHER**, Palkia said.

Dialga inclined their head in a nod. **AND NONE MORE IMPORTANT.**

<Thank you,> Dianthus said.

<Enough!> The Dianthus of the present battered their way out of the memory. They landed in a forest of thick brown trunks and canopy so thick the warm yellow sunlight fell in dappled stripes on the mossy earth; their form sporadically darting through the air with pained squeaks of fear.

Startled, Grace kept looking left and right for hopes she could identify the place. *Whose memory is this?*

*I don't know*, Dianthus said; her voice retreating in confusion.

The celebi whose body they were both inhabiting lifted its head and keened a high note of power into the trees.

*It's mine*, Aristeia said grimly, taking control. *And this is my move; so hang on tight.*

*I don't think so*, Dianthus replied, pushing her back. In the time it took the celebi body near fell out of the sky and the pursuing pokémon leaped in a last gambit attack to swat her down onto a bed of flowers and latch hold around her head.

Grace wrested control from Dianthus in a surprise snatch and used the time to ensnare both enemies - she couldn't even make out what they were - in a bind attack with little vines snaking their way out of the ground.

<Get out!> Aristeia roared. <I've had enough!> She pushed them away so far that the memories completely faded; leaving them back in their physical bodies close to where they had started - except for the vivid blue light cascading in circular rings above them through the canopy.

How had they ended up inside the forest, not above it?

Aristeia's body was taut and trembling with power even as Dianthus held it upside down.

<What are you doing?> asked Dianthus.

<Moving,> Aristeia grunted. <I've actually been moving quite a lot whilst you two novices went off on your little mental duel.>

<Impossible!>

Inside, Jade cheered through her concern.

<These monsters-> Aristeia said, looking like she was finding it distracting to talk and hold on to the Voice of the Forest above them, <-they're destroying everything. I have to try one last thing to stop them. Nothing else we've tried has worked so far, Grace. But I have to trust that *this* might. Otherwise it'll all be over, just as Dianthus said.>

<We've tried?> Jade spat.

Aristeia fluttered into an upright position, twisting Dianthus's wrist. <Yes, *we*. We are all connected, we are all one, remember?>

<No.> Dianthus squeezed tighter with both hands, and beyond them Jade heard the same fragmented noise she had before; indicating the monsters were not far off.

<If you hear the Voice of the Forest,> Aristeia said, <stop and stay completely still, or it will catch you and take you through time.>

The sound grew louder, then louder still. Jade shrunk into herself as it became impossibly loud; trying to pinpoint them through the trees. How could they not have appeared yet?



Aristea took a breath just as they finally rippled into sight and darted down like barely-visible remora through water. Just as the spearhead of the horde made to reach the centre of the three struggling celebi Aristea screamed verbally into the air; her back contorting with the strain.

All three glowed with blue light. Dianthus yelled out angrily against Aristea's purer cry and flailed both arms and batted useless wings against the others. Closing her eyes, Jade lent her voice to Aristea's and wailed along with her.

Monsters around them, howling as the wind of time energy caught them in the circling slipstream; for once, unable to break the rules of this world and simply move out of the time trap by thought.

Aristea breathed in once again for another celebi cry, and as the energy surged larger and larger it sparked bright and incandescent; flaring up in yellow and green, then shrinking suddenly into nothingness. Aristea's cry echoed thrice and then faded, leaving the forest near untouched as if it had never happened.

*Where are we?*

Time did not seem to behave the same way inside the Voice. Jade opened her eyes in full in a foetal position, and saw Aristeia and Dianthus lying in a similar way next to her; the instinctive celebratory defensive stance. Why was the light not fading?

<I tried...> Aristeia said, her voice small and sad.

<When are we?> Jade asked.

<Before *when*. Trapped in a little bubble of time energy which is going to fast run out and leave us stranded.>

<We're before when time started to flow?>

<I can't even tell,> Aristeia said. <I think we're trapped between my will - the Voice's destination - and the barrier between the nonexistence of time and its birth. The Voice cannot travel unless through time.>

Jade sought words to no avail. Finally, <It was worth a try.>

<More than that,> Aristeia said. <It has stopped the monsters - and Dianthus - entirely.> She looked up and around in wonder. <I think we're nearly there. We're practically... touching.>

Her hands reached out where the light dimmed further, away from the core, and pressed on even as she parted the swirling ripple of unseen monsters caught in the pull with a wince.

<I can pull us there, I think,> Aristeia said, reaching out and feeling with both hands. Beyond the corrupted surface Jade couldn't see a thing. She wondered if Aristeia could, just as the other celebi threw her shoulders up and spasmed her whole body, holding onto something tightly. <I'm through! Quickly, take my hands!>

<What?!>

Aristeia tapped her on the shoulder from the other side of the sphere.

Jade grabbed the hands behind her instinctively and felt as both palms took a firmer grip and pulled her through the barrier without another word. She fell into a world of black nothingness and hazy grey shapes at her feet that she could not feel. Was she in the air? But there was no air; only a large white egg-shaped sphere before her.

*Aristeia?* she thought, looking around. *My body is not moving.*

Claws and a head appeared from nowhere and looked her over, with some evident distress, until disappearing and reappearing much closer by along with a glowing golden sphere cradled at her chest.

Time bathed her body.

<What are you doing?> she asked, simply for the sake of talking again after feeling her body frozen and unable to at all.

<Doing the most irresponsible thing since the dawn of time,>  
Aristea grumbled. <Oh wait - since *before* the dawn of time, I should  
say.>

Jade looked at her curiously. <This could be the dawn of time,>  
she said, pointing at Aristea's precious object keeping them animated.

<Don't even joke about it. Just... wait.>

<For wha->

<Shhhh!>

The egg glowed and unfolded, bringing forth a great white  
pokémon Jade was hoping she had finally seen the end of. *Arceus*. The  
legendary cantered gracefully out further into the void and looked upon  
it for a long time - how Jade knew this given there was no time yet save  
for their little remnant from before to keep the both of them animated  
she couldn't tell. Arceus stared so long out into the nothingness she  
began to fidget with self consciousness. When Aristea pinched her to get  
her to stop, she couldn't help letting out a small squawk. It failed to  
reverberate at all in the void.

***LITTLE ONES***, Arceus said, the legendary's words not a voice  
so much as an impression upon their minds. ***I SEE YOU***.

<Where's Dialga?> Jade said.

**WHO?**

<Dialga!> Jade screeched, beyond frustrated. <The Lord of Time!>

***I KNOW THEM NOT. I DO HOWEVER KNOW THE ONES WITH YOU, AND THEY DO NOT BELONG HERE - EVEN MORE SO THAN YOU. I DEMAND JUSTICE BE SERVED!***

Arceus turned around and glared with its eerie red-green eyes at them, and stamped a hoof with finality. The shockwave which emanated swept across the swirling circular malestrom of corruption and cast it all away as if it had never been; erasing its very existence.

Nearby, Dianthus's body shimmered and reappeared without the fragmented look to her. The pink celebi blinked and instinctively shook her entire body from top to bottom with a mental sound of relief. She looked at her hands in speechless wonderment.

Jade looked back to Arceus in similar wonderment. Everything she had tried had failed - and yet it had been that quick and easy for the legendary to erase the problem in one fell swoop of righteous judgement?

<What were they? How do you know them?> Aristeia asked.

Arceus continued surveying them silently. Then, ***THEY ARE THE EATERS OF WORLDS.*** In Jade's amazement, its mental voice began to shudder as it continued. Was it possibly trepidation she could hear from the seemingly omnipotent pokémon?

***THEIR NUMBERS WERE SEALED AWAY LONG AGO, FOR THEY DID WHAT WAS NEEDED; AND THEN WERE NOT REQUIRED ANY LONGER IN THIS PLACE.***

<I don't understand,> Jade said, feeling herself catching onto the fear and mirroring it as she looked around to the other celebi and Arceus in turn with nervous flicks of her eyes. She couldn't bear looking past them into the void of nothingness and feel her gaze struggle to focus on that bizarre infinite horizon.

<I think I do,> Dianthus said. <The rules changed. The time before time began had one set, but our time - our world - has another, completely different. They had time and space, maybe; but no overseers to guard and defend them, and keep them constant.>

***YES,*** Arceus said, its eyes gleaming. With another hoof stamp, differently coloured plates emerged from its sides and began encircling its form. At its left and right sides, Jade saw two white glowing shapes appear and grow, as if being imbued with the energy from the plates.

***TRANSCEND THE CONFINES OF TIME AND SPACE!***

Arceus bellowed. ***DIALGA! PALKIA!***

The two shapes grew to the same size of Arceus and the white energy faded, leaving the slumbering guardians of time and space still and silent, their eyes shut. Very slowly they roused, taking their first inward breath, then outward; and with a surge the entire void whirled into activity as time and space expanded. Aristeia's golden time sphere enveloped with an entire universe of the same; and the void given life even in its dark and silent emptiness.

<You're alive!> Jade said in relief.

**YES**, Dialga said. **I AM ALIVE.**

<By the Voice, it *is* good to see you,> she continued, excitement speeding her words. <I've been looking for you for so long, I started to worry you'd been somehow erased from time itself->

**LITTLE ONE. I AM TIME ITSELF**, Dialga reminded her.

**BUT, WHO ARE YOU?**

<We're celebi, from the future,> Aristeia said. <Celebi are time-traveller pokémon.>

**WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE HERE?** Palkia asked.

<It's all we knew to do in the end to trap the monsters. They were destroying everything,> Jade continued. <I don't know when and where they came from but they broke time so it didn't follow the proper rules any more and->

***THEY HAVE MANY ABILITIES, BUT BREAKING TIME IS NOT ONE OF THEM. THAT, AT LEAST, IS BEYOND THESE ENTITIES. MORE LIKELY THAT SOMETHING ELSE BROKE TIME AND THEY WERE THUS RELEASED INTO THE WORLD BY ACCIDENT... AND YOU SAY YOU ARE TIME-TRAVELLERS?***

Arceus's glare turned even more flinty as it spoke.

<It wasn't us!> Jade insisted. <We followed all the rules! And besides, that happened way after the fog started and if it had have been any of us we would have felt it. If the fog hadn't had existed this wouldn't have been a problem in the first place. There wouldn't need to be a Game of Time played at all. Anyway, how could anyone possibly break time itself?>

**QUITE EASILY,** Dialga said, **IF ONE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING.**

<Well, we do,> Aristeia said snippily.



**PARADOXES, FOR INSTANCE,** the Lord of Time continued.

**A FAR REACHING PARADOX WHICH AFFECTS A LARGE  
AREA OR TIMELINE MAY VERY WELL BE ENOUGH, OR  
TRAVELLING TOO FAR BACKWARDS OR FORWARDS,  
PERHAPS...**

***YOU THREE HAVE TRAVELLED TOO FAR BACKWARDS  
FOR MY LIKING EVEN IF YOU AREN'T THE ONES THAT  
BROKE TIME,*** Arceus growled. ***YOU BEING HERE IS PARADOX  
ENOUGH.***

<I'm not even meant to be in this world let alone this time,>  
Dianthus grumbled back, <and Palkia probably doesn't know me well  
enough yet to take me back to the mystery space. None of 'you three'  
know us enough to even offer to help with the little problem in the  
future of the *entire prime world being corrupted.*>

Dialga considered her. **LITTLE ONE, YOU ALL COME  
FROM THAT FUTURE REALITY ONE WAY OR THE OTHER. IF  
WE NOW SEE IT PLAYED OUT ANOTHER WAY, YOU WOULD  
HAVE NEVER COME HERE TO WARN US IN THE FIRST  
PLACE. YOU WOULD HAVE US CREATE THE ULTIMATE**

**PARADOX BEFORE THE VERY WORLD AROUND US IS GIVEN  
NEW BREATH AND LIFE?**

<Call it a game,> Jade shrugged, staring at her barely-there hands; the transparency now spreading to her arms.

Dialga's body seemed to sag in disappointment. **SO BE IT. WE  
HAVE FAILED BEFORE WE EVEN STARTED. THERE WILL  
HAVE TO BE NO CELEBI OR ANY OTHER TIME-TRAVELLING  
CREATURES CREATED IN THIS NEW WORLD.**

<What?> Aristeia squawked.

**WHAT OF DIMENSION-CROSSING?** Palkia asked.

**THEY AREN'T HERE CAUSING ISSUES, ARE THEY?**

Dialga replied.

<You'll erase us from existence simply to stop the Game from even starting?> Jade asked, shaking her head. <Doesn't that create a paradox as well, considering we're here and existing already?>

Dialga growled at her, eyeing her arms. **NOT FOR VERY  
MUCH LONGER.**

***ENOUGH,*** Arceus said. ***I GROW TIRED OF THIS  
STALEMATE. THERE WILL HAVE TO BE ANOTHER WAY.***

<There is another way,> Uxie said, and the three lake guardians shimmered into existence behind Arceus's head. <This world can still survive. The damage may have already been done, true; but it can be restored in time. It would be such a shame to see it rejected and abandoned. Rather have it remembered; and rejoiced in.>

***EXPLAIN.***

<Why give up on such a flawed, flawless world? Surely, things go wrong; but that is part of what makes life amazing when things go right against all the odds. Perhaps the monsters did arrive, but so did heroes. The monsters have been put away. Perhaps time did break - but time can be fixed. Work out where time went wrong; and repair it.

<And now, Jade; I come for my asking price. Your precious memories.>

<W-what? No! I need to remember how it goes so my past self can rely on that knowledge! Otherwise it's all foggy!>

*Oh, dear Dialga - this is what the fog means?!*

Uxie reached for Jade's now invisible hand as she froze in her shock and somehow still took it, then clasped it firmly and nodded as it - and Jade's other limbs - slowly reappeared.

<This is for the sake of celebi everywhere,> Uxie said.

She opened her eyes. Jade stared deeply, lost in the swirl of colour and depth. Behind her, Aristeia and Dianthus also stared; rapt.

<Ah,> Uxie breathed, drinking her fill of knowledge. <The one whom you are seeking is lost to a world of no return. They would do well there; except for our little problem in the future which requires their return. Arceus, would you be so kind as to act as emissary and have them brought back?>

***I DO NOT KNOW WHO THEY ARE.***

<The boatman will,> Uxie replied, still staring deeply into Jade's eyes.

***THAT IS BREAKING THE RULES,*** Arceus said.

<Rules are there to be broken,> Uxie said flippantly. <Especially when one is playing a game.>

***THIS IS NOT A GAME.***

<Oh,> Uxie said, chuckling, <oh, Arceus; how wrong you are.>

~~~

The being sat with Clair, thinking of their unknown past from time to time.

“I’m sure had a name once,” they said. “I had a history, too. I just can’t remember either.”

Clair nodded, their lips pursed. “Sometimes things just aren’t meant to be remembered.”

The water fractured before them. The being looked out into the gloom and spotted the gondolier coasting easily into the shore. Their eyes held a haunted look, and their boat held no passenger.

“I-” the gondolier began, then faltered. “This has never happened before. But... I feel I have to take you back.”

“What?” the being asked. “Me? Back to the place I came from?”

“Yes.”

The being looked at Clair, and they back. Clair’s eyes burned with intensity. The being took their hand, and held its warmth to its chest; and knew instantly what they wanted to do.

“I wish for Clair to take my place.”

“No!” Clair said, gripping the being’s hand back. “No, this is your right.”

“I have no more ties to that place,” they replied, trying to explain as best it could. “I cannot even remember my life there, or my name.

You remember so much more; this could be your one opportunity to continue on. Please. Get in the boat. For me.”

The gondolier frowned. “This is most untoward. I have never ever taken anyone back; let alone the wrong soul-”

“I insist,” the being said. “If anyone deserves a second chance, it is Clair.”

“I don’t know whether it’ll work-”

“Try.”

Clair swept the being into a hug; the eager, hungry, *needful* look on their face unmasked. “You don't know what this means.”

“Perhaps not... but I think I have an inkling.”

“I’ll come back for you; if I can,” they said, taking the gondolier’s skeletal hand and stepping lightly upon the boat, then seating and fixing the being with the enduring gaze of goodbyes.

The being did not reply as they stood watching, whilst the gondolier resettled themselves and pushed away from the shore. By the time they had eased into that graceful stroke of the oars it was difficult to make out Clair’s face as they continued making eye contact.

Still they watched; until the boat was entirely swallowed up by the darkness.



# *The Game of Time*

## *Chapter Ten: Timey-Wimey Ball*



## Chapter Ten: Timey-Wimey Ball

*Look not into the Pokémon's eyes.*

*In but an instant, you'll have no recollection of who you are.*

*Return home, but how? When there is nothing to remember?*

*Dare not touch the Pokémon's body.*

*In but three short days, all emotions will drain away.*

*Above all, above all, harm not the Pokémon.*

*In a scant five days,*

*the offender will grow immobile in entirety.*

*~ A Horrific Myth*

Knowledge was power. To Uxie, this old adage rang the truest; and hers was undoubtedly the most revered of all three tenets. For what was stirring emotion and the will to see things accomplished for if not for the wisdom guiding the actions in the first place?

*I need to know what happened in this celebi's future.*

The glimpses she had were at times sharp and vivid, others dark and hazed over. The information did not arrive in a constant flow; there were small flashes of pitch black in amongst the sight of so many



creatures from the future. Flashes which seemed almost like blips of nothingness where there should have been something. Anomalies... mistakes. Paradoxes, even?

Uxie was not meant to know about the boatman and the location of one of the largest, emptiest blips. Somehow she'd simply... learned it as some stage. Yet was it so surprising that she was the one guarding that knowledge; like the rest of the secrets of what lay before Dialga's first breath that she kept close? It was only right that most remain unspoken. What mattered now was that they remained motivated to move as a team. Even a Council, perhaps.

<Dialga,> she said, closing her eyes slowly and releasing the three blankly staring celebi from her mental grasp. <It is no wonder time breaks under the strain of this future.>

Whilst Aristeia's and Dianthus's eyes closed and heads bowed, Jade's body remained completely still.

### **WHAT DO YOU MEAN?**

<You are not only the Guardian of Time. You are the embodiment of a single, straight timeline. A direct progression of cause to effect.>

**YES?**

<Celebi are *meddlers*, Lord of Time!> Uxie stressed, letting her close-eyed gaze meet Dialga's and allowing a little knowledge to flow through their psychic link. <They cannot help but flit about time as part of their daily duties. How can you possibly keep track of all the changes they produce flapping their wings about where they shouldn't?>

**I MUST, SO I DO.**

<That's too many futures->

**CONSIDER THIS**, Dialga said proudly, arching their neck up and baring their teeth. **A CELEBI TAKES A HUMAN AWAY INTO A FUTURE WHERE HE HAS BEEN GONE FOR FORTY YEARS. HOW? BECAUSE THE CELEBI DIED AND WAS UNABLE TO TAKE HIM BACK TO HIS OWN TIME. ONE FUTURE.**

**THEN, THE OTHER CELEBI MEDDLE AND HEAL THE FIRST CELEBI; CREATING A NEW FUTURE IN WHICH THE BOY DOES RETURN AFTER ALL. TWO FUTURES. BOTH EXISTING AT THE SAME TIME.**

<Oh,> Uxie said in a small voice. Then, <Oh,> she repeated louder, somehow getting wide-eyed without letting her eyelids crane open again. <Dialga, this is just what I'm saying. That's only just one

time they will change the course of history in a very impacting way.

You're saying you are somehow able to allow both futures to occur?>

**YES.**

<In close-by parallel universes with Palkia's assistance?>

**NO, IN THE SAME UNIVERSE. I DO NOT NEED PALKIA.**

<That wouldn't even work.>

**I MAKE IT WORK.**

*THAT IS MOST FOOLHARDY*, Arceus said from behind them,  
*AND VERY PERTURBING TO HEAR.*

**CONSIDER THIS ALSO THEN, ARCEUS. YOU EXACT  
YOUR JUDGEMENT UPON THE HUMANS FOR BETRAYING  
YOU. I MEDDLE TO PREVENT OUR DEATHS AND SEND  
SOME HUMANS BACK TO STOP THE BETRAYAL IN THE  
FIRST PLACE. IT WORKS, BUT THE TWO FUTURES MUST  
STILL EXIST - OTHERWISE SEE THE ORIGINAL EATEN  
AWAY TO NOTHINGNESS. THERE ARE NO DEAD WORLDS  
HERE. MY LIFE KEEPS THEM ALL ALIVE. ALL ANCHORED.**

<Except for that last final meddle... a paradox too large and far  
reaching and too unknown to you. Something that - for once - had  
practically nothing to do with celebi at the time,> Uxie wondered, her

two tails whisking about the space. <Stretched out so thin already what with Jade's chaotic Game of Time - how many times did she jump back and forth changing things here and there...? No wonder it was impossible to keep track of each and maintain them before the final blow. You've made your point. Hold on.>

Uxie closed herself to the outside world and let her brain whirl as it would; in hopes it could come up with a solution with all the extra knowledge of the future celebi now her own.

Dialga watched her silently, impassively. Palkia and Arceus too; hovering close by in the still slightly claustrophobic space and time of the void. Her sisters on either side, taking one of her hands each and giving them a supportive squeeze.

Would it be possible for Dialga to muster enough strength to support this large paradox that had originally broken time itself? But how? when even she was struggling with keeping them all in mind, let alone being the cause of their existence? That could even branch out so much to an infinite number of futures if the celebi were left unchecked. So this ridiculous reality that Dialga had taken upon themselves to look after on their own was not a viable solution.

But what if they tried the complete opposite and unleashed the MissingNo on the less than desirable futures to erase them from existence? Uxie could not stop her skin from creeping at the idea of their reality - even one a celebi had tried to fix - being deleted to make way for a 'better' version. Since - she wasn't sure, but after an informed guess figured - the celebi which had brought about that new future still came from the old one and would likewise be eaten. And what had Dialga said? Eaten *away to nothingness*? No, that could never be a future here. She refused.

<Dialga, do futures ever amalgamate after splitting?>

**NO.**

<Could they?>

**... NO. THEY ARE TOO DIFFERENT.**

Uxie sighed. Another possibility that just wouldn't work. If only the celebi hadn't all hidden away in the sanctuary... no celebi had ever reached the end of the Game and in essence conquered the fog; and Dialga - time itself, too - had broken. By Uxie removing their knowledge of what happened in the Game, she knew she had sealed their fate in this future.

Or had she? Knowledge could be learned as well as forgotten. Knowledge of how to finally win at this Game - aeons before the celebi even noticed the strange fogginess to the future and decided to send their sacrificial seedling into the unknown.

It would have to be done so carefully though, so precisely that she did not create a paradox by ultimately fixing the problem to the extent that these three would not have ended up here at all. Knowledge was power, but too much knowledge would ruin it entirely. She would have to trick time... trick Dialga - and the entire celebi species, too.

<I'm sorry to do this, Grace,> Uxie whispered, her eyes opening to the single sacrificial celebi again. <But it is the only way I know how to cheat the Game.>

~~~

The raichu dozed at the peak of the grassy hill during the heat of the summer's day. His ears pricked up at the feeling of the air about him shifting strangely unlike the soft breeze of beforehand; more like being pushed rather than flowing about.

He raised his head and blinked up at two other magical creatures levitating before him; neither pairs of eyes open.

<Your name?> one said.

“*Chur*,” he replied, still blinking away the last of his sleep and shaking his body from head to toe to rid himself of the awkward feeling of being stared at by four unopened eyes.

<At last I’ve found you,> it continued in triumph. <Look deep, Chur; and remember - then come with us.>

The next thing the raichu knew he was standing in a forest with the two others. The little alcove was quiet and still; golden light permeating through the canopy above. A strong beam of sunlight hit the wooden shrine the three were facing.

“*Where are we?*”

<In the future,> the other replied. <Go to the shrine.>

Chur padded forward hesitantly. “*What is this - what are you doing?*”

<Hoping for a miracle.>

Chur gulped and reached for the shrine’s doors. Before his hand could reach either of the knobs there was a blinding flash of energy

which knocked him back and a resounding roar of thunderous backlash ringing in his ears.

<Sorry, Dialga,> the other pokémon said. <Didn't expect that.>

Chur kept his eyes closed for a time, feeling the energy still flowing around his body and making it ripple uneasily. When he opened them, the shrine looked untouched. Below it huddled a young pichu with strange tufts of fur about its left ear. His heart raced at the sight of her.

*"Who is she?"* he gasped.

<Nobody you know... yet,> the pokémon said, taking his red cheeks in its hands and opening its eyes to him. <But you will.>

The man struggled onwards through the bitterly cold snowstorm, only the memory of a thread of light leading the way. He clambered up a high rocky ledge, his breath clouding at his face, and gasped in recognition as he came upon a large, almost diamond-shaped plate embedded in the detritus of the asteroid's explosion.

The plate felt smooth and glassy as he fumbled it into a solid hold under his arm with nearly numbed fingers. As he neared the great legendary and all the magical creatures huddling about it sharing their warmth in their last efforts to keep it alive the plate shifted out of his



grasp into the air, glowed with colourful energy, and flowed back into Arceus's form.

The crown on Arceus's waist glowed in summons; and all the other plates which had been scattered to the earth followed suit; rejoining their wielder.

The magical creatures about drew back as they felt the surge of energy revive the great legendary. As Arceus absorbed the last plate, their body glowed with golden light; and slowly they stirred and rose to their feet in triumph; taking to the air. The clouds shifted and parted, revealing the sun's rays of hope after the great tragedy had been averted.

*Human*, Arceus said wonderingly. *Are you the one who saved me?*

“Oh - no, no, Arceus. It was you who saved us!” the man said, lifting his hands in thanks.

Weeks later, the man looked down at what was left of his home village and surrounding devastated farmland from a high clifftop. “If it keeps up like this, we won't survive the winter.”

*Damos*, Arceus said from behind him. *You want to revitalise this land, don't you?*

“Yes.”

With their link transcending normal confines between human and magical creature, Damos reached out to Arceus and envisioned the lands stretching out before them as he wished them to be; a lush green paradise with the clean waters of a river feeding them as it wined through the centre.

*How... pitiful*, the legendary replied as the vision faded to dust brown, and took to the skies to circle back and face his human companion square in the eye. *Alright. I shall lend you my strength.* With a toss of a hoof, the sixteen plates flew out and began encircling their body. *These keep me alive. They're a part of my being. The power of ground, water, and grass; and combined with this, the power of electricity, they all meld together. And with the power of dragon, they increase.*

As Arceus listed each plate, so did it leave the circle and swoop towards Damos. The five plates combined in the air to form a spherical shape.

*Use this Jewel of Life for the greater good. To make the land rich and fertile*, Arceus said.

Damos took the jewel from the air. "The Jewel of Life," he breathed.

*But... without that Jewel... my life is diminished. Damos, I am trusting you. Trusting you with my life.*

“Arceus, I thank you.” Damos’s smile was proud as he looked down at the Jewel and back at Arceus, his eyes glimmering with tears. “You have my word. I will return it back to you!”

*I have one more thing to entrust to you, friend, Arceus said. Before I depart, I would see these two magical creatures remain here safely in this land to the end of their days under your protection.*

It gestured, opening up a rent in the air before Damos. Two little pichu, slumbering in foetal positions, flew out.

Instinctively, Damos held out his arms to bring the pair to his chest. “They will,” he said huskily. “I’ll protect them well.”

Arceus smiled at him. *And they you, perhaps.*

<Dialga, I need to reach the timeline where Sparkling exists as a pikachu.>

The Lord of Time looked at Uxie square in the face. **THE BROKEN ONE?**

<Yes.>

## **IS THE URGE TO MEDDLE RUBBING OFF ON YOU?**

Dialga asked, casting a suspicious eye at the prone Grace still shadowing Uxie's form; eyes shut and immobile.

<Please, just this one thing,> Uxie said. <Then I think I'll be done.>

Dialga rumbled in disquiet, but then bowed its head. **VERY WELL.**

"I came from the future," Sparkling said.

Chur's mouth quirked oddly. "So did I," he said woodenly, and then as if mirroring Sparkling's surprise the sky fractured above them.

Uxie and Grace appeared to them and with wooden, halted movements - as if puppeted by another - Grace flew down and grabbed at them.

Chur bellowed fright the whole way. The time stream shook with the force of four pokémon tumbling haphazardly through; Uxie barely keeping control of the tricky connection.

They came out over a lake. Uxie shoved her eyes open and held their gazes intently. For them, their knowledge of time passing disguised as this time seemingly not existing at all.

Mew ascended from the lake just as Uxie had hoped she would with the irresistible lure of curiosity at the surge of power just above her slumbering place.

<Do you want to play a game?> Uxie asked her.

~~~

*It's in our nature to survive, even if that means lying fallow for a while... even a very long, long while.*

*~ Celebi Elder*

She knew she was Celebi, and that she was to guard the secret future. That was for sure. She knew someone important had just removed her from a strange nothing-place and placed her here on this barren nothing-land to lie fallow for a long time; sleeping away the aeons of time and space that cascaded above and around her; creating and changing the world almost as if a hand guided it deliberately. Perhaps it did, though she could not entirely be sure of that.

At any rate, she was Celebi-guard-the-secret-future; but as the years flowed into decades her little body curled up tightly in the ever-

shifting earth began to wither, then as the decades flowed into centuries she realised with surprise that she had grown out of it at some stage as her aching need for air and sunlight had far surpassed her satisfaction from the healthy earth and water which had always nourished her.

All these things, she realised, had been nourishing the world around her for this whole time as well. Far from the barren nothing-land she vaguely remembered from the beginning. This land was flourishing and healthy and she was a part of it. No longer Celebi-guard-the-secret-future. Who was Celebi? Nobody she knew. Secret future? She had forgotten it. Had she ever known it at all? Of course the future was secret. Nobody knew what would happen in the future until it had become the past.

Thus she remained pragmatic on the day one of her as yet unopened blossoms decided to swell and glow and hatch into a magical creature in damp-winged fragility rather than flower into petals as all its brothers and sisters did. After a moment to compose herself, she named it Guardenia; her protector, this land's protector. For once she had been Celebi-guard-the-secret-future, but the secret future she had guarded had come to pass, as surely as it would continue to come to pass, so now she

was just one tree amongst many; and this magical creature whom had sprung forth would be their defender.

~~~

Clair sat on the boat with the gondolier, listening to the steady smack of oars against water. She tried - just once - to say something to them; but soon realised there was nothing more to say. Hope, and unease, flitted about her chest.

It grew dark, and darker still. The gondolier's form grew shadowed and distant, and soon she felt her eyes slipping shut. Nodding to herself, she bent over and lay down on the hard wooden seat to slumber.

She dreamed she was flying. Flying high, above a city; its pinpoints of golden, red and white lights a secure promise of the stability and reality of below. If she chose to descend, she'd find it bathed in light and bustling in life, in stark contrast to the forgotten place of before.

She hovered, and flew, and hovered some more - then something changed. Somebody else came into her space. They, too, were hovering close by, their form faded and grey.

“Hey - it’s you!” they said.

Clair faced them. <Me?> She looked at the form and saw it was a young human boy. <Do you know me?>

“You’re my friend,” the boy said. “My pokémon friend.”

<Pokémon?>

Clair raised her hands to her face and felt her eyes widen at the sight of them. She’d lost a few fingers; but the three that remained had apparently swelled and grown to compensate. <Is this who I am now?>

“What are you doing here?”

<I might ask you the same,> Clair said. <Can humans astral travel in this world?>

“Astral... huh? I don’t get it. We’re just dreaming, I guess. So let’s have a bit of fun!” The boy grinned and laughed, and whirled up and around with his arms outstretched, whooping his excitement.

Clair watched his antics, stunned, then giggled herself. <Alright. Fun. I can roll with that.>



She gathered her awareness of her body - her new and very different body, she surmised - and tried a wide loop-de-loop herself. The wind rushing around her body felt invigorating on her fur and skin. She couldn't help cackling a bit.

“Isn't it great?” the boy said. “C'mon!”

The pair flew over the city, past the surrounding villages and met with nature at its most untouched before discovering more hidden pockets of human society amongst the decadent nature reserves filled with amazing creatures of all shapes and sizes.

<These are pokémon, too?> Clair asked, as they flew on.

“Yup! And one day, I'll make friends with one and become a pokémon master!”

His positive excitement was contagious. Clair felt a surge of heart-thumping happiness at all he was showing her in the vivid dream. Her chest felt filled to burst. This energy - was it how pokémon sometimes felt? She let it do as it would, and as it rippled across her body from the tip of her head to her toes she paused in the air in wonderment.

The boy's eyes crinkled in a wide open grin that practically split his face. “Woah! That's awesome!”

The burst of energy had changed her yet again. She cast a quick look down at herself to take stock yet again; but soon realised the brimming energy within her demanded she do something more with it - and fast.

With a shout of laughter, she gathered her inner momentum and shot across the sky in blinding-fast speeds. She continued burning across the sky for moments on end, her power feeling limitless.

“Hey,” the boy called from somewhere far away where she’d left him. “Don’t go too far, you’ll reach the edge.”

*There is no edge.*

“There’s a limit, I think,” he said; for once his boyish enthusiasm dampened by a strange wisdom.

<I want to go beyond the limit,> she insisted; but slowed down, and allowed his voice to materialise his form back next to her as if she had barely even left. With another strange shifting of power, her body suddenly morphed back to normal now the surge of excitement had waned.

“I think I’m waking up,” the boy said, who was starting to drift away even as he had appeared. “You should try to wake up, too.”

<I’m not awake yet?> Clair asked. *It all feels so real...*

The boy shook his head. “This is only a little bit of what you can see in the real world. It’ll be even better when your eyes open for good.”

<I can’t wait for that,> Clair said honestly. <I’ll come find you when I do.>

“Can’t wait to meet you again!” He raised a hand to wave.

<What’s your name?> she asked.

“I’m Ash. Ash, from Pallet Town.”

<I’m...>

*Who am I?*

But she had no time to answer him. The boy was gone.

~~~

*The being stood still. Forgotten.*

*The gondolier had not returned. The other souls about the place had seemingly vanished whilst the being hadn’t been looking.*

*They looked to the water’s edge, and decided to walk it a while.*

*As they walked they told themselves another story.*

*“Once long ago, I wanted to be forgotten forever. It would protect me, and the ones around me. But try as I might, they*

*remembered; and they came for me. Some with evil intent; others with good. Being forgotten was not the perfect solution. And is it now? No - still, even here in this place, somebody came for me."*

*And the being had given the seat to Clair.*

*"Was that somebody of evil, or good intent? Down here, forgotten, I will never know. It is not my purpose to know. The forgotten cannot have purpose. I wanted so long for such things... once a long time ago. Do I want it again?"*

*The water rippled softly in reply.*

*"Yes," the being decided, and stopped short on the shore. Their toes nearly touching the side of a sleek black-wood craft neatly beached at the end of the sands. There was no more land to traverse. Only the river which bordered this place to the last - or next.*

*The being smiled, lashed their tail, climbed into the boat, and took the oars firmly with a three-fingered hold.*

Thus ends 'The Game of Time'

The saga will continue