



The Game of Time

Chapter Seven: Clock Roaches



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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 ghastrly 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't 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 cebebi 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 cebebi 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 cebebi 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.