



The Game of Time
Chapter Three: Refusal of the call



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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...>