



The Game of Time

Chapter Eight: The Nothing After Death



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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.

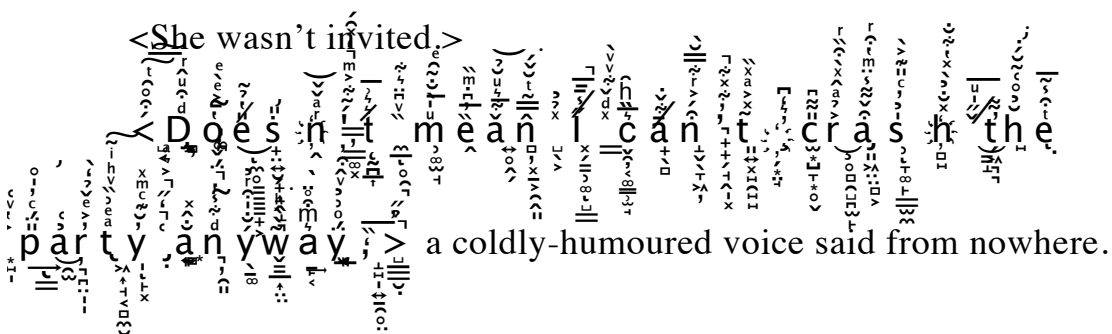
<More often than not, after we evolve into celebi we create a time pool to rest and recover our bodies. These pools are also separate



from the outside world. Their time is still, and quiet; much like a pool of water. It doesn't flow, or ripple. But the outside world - and this sanctuary - is always flowing constantly. They flow apart from each other, though; like parallel streams. You could go back in time here, if you wanted - only to the beginning of its creation of course, but the point still stands. Our sanctuary was once a small time pool. Thanks to Dialga, it is now a large stream. We got the idea from Dian->

The celebi halted.

<Dianthus?> Jade prodded. <The pink celebi? Why isn't she hiding out here, either?> *Is she still broken, somewhere outside?*



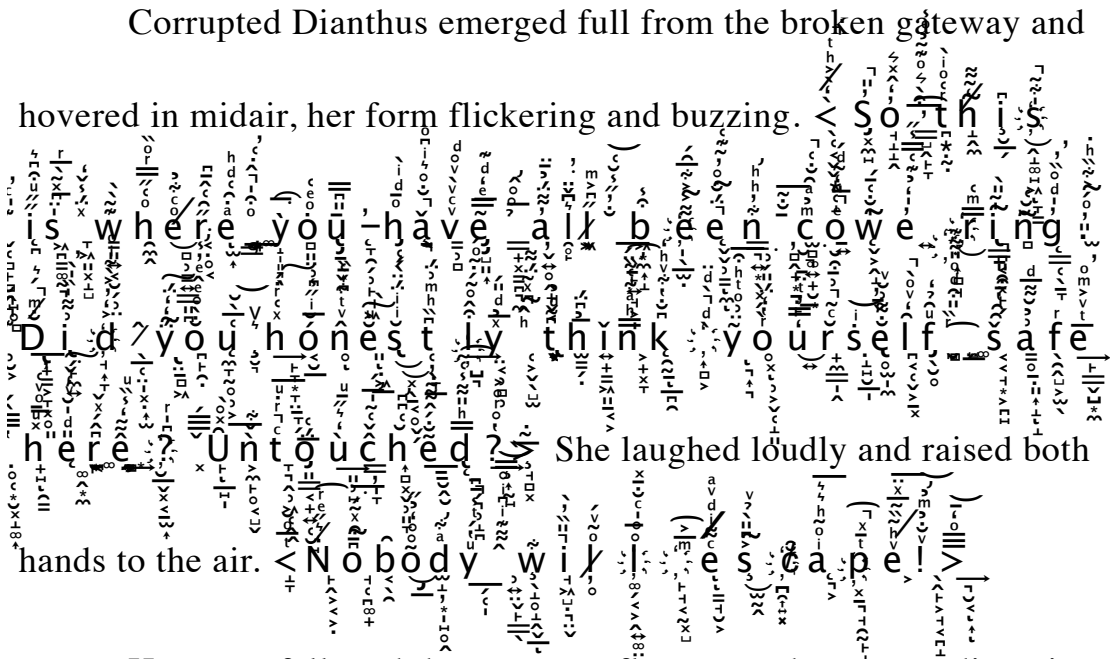
She wasn't invited to the party anyway mean a coldly-humoured voice said from nowhere.

A pink coloured claw slashed through the closed gateway and released the floodgates.

From the rent swarmed the same monsters, who hugged the sanctuary's boundaries and crept spasmodically around its spherical edges. The entire celebi gathering erupted in panic, zipping towards the centre of the space with eyes bulging; mental and physical shrieks emanating from all.

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?

Excuse me, Dianthus said, looking shrewdly in her direction.

fun, fess up to it, Dianthus. Jade gasped, backing away

through the air as far away as she could without touching the maelstrom still surrounding them.

There's no way out of this, she said. You've got to stay here.

What are you talking about? You're the one who's been here.

Dianthus said forcefully. You're the one who's been here.

That's not true, she said. You're the one who's been here.

Why? Dianthus's expression held sanity even through the vision-jarring

corruption. You've got to stay here.



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...