



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.

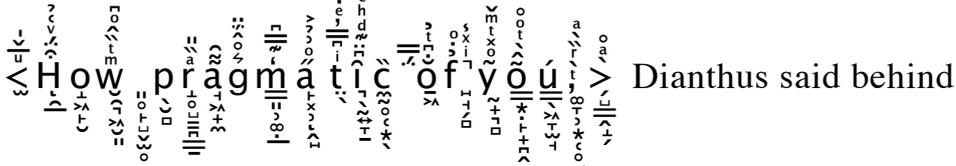
<Because in breaking the rules of time, and contacting my past self, I may have just saved her. Well, hopefully.>

<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

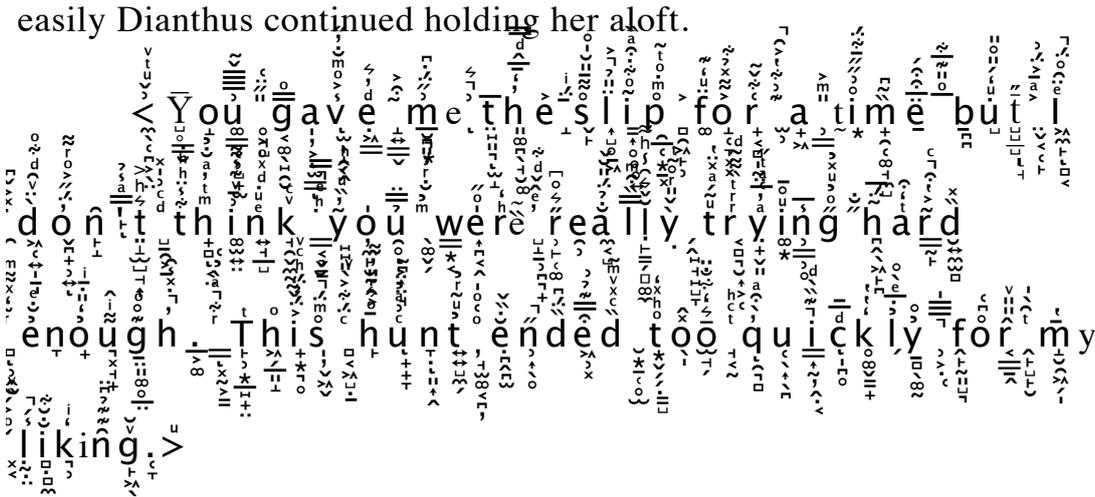
any paradoxes any longer, and the damage here hasn't extended, yet. But

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.

Its time to let go of everything. Dianthus

said coldly, growling verbally to accompany her mental voice

Time is fast running out through the cracks. A complete halt and we're going to watch it 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 celebri shook her head at the pair of them wriggling about. You won't get free. We're refused to

couldn't let you go even if I wanted to.

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 celeb 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 celebrative 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, eying 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.>

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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.