The Game of Time

Chapter One: What Happened to the Mouse

A Pokémon Minami fanfiction by Philippa Gissing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We'll make it happen, Miss."

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

If in fact they had all been empty...

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

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

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

I hate this place.

I hate water.

I hate everything.

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

Where is something to kill?

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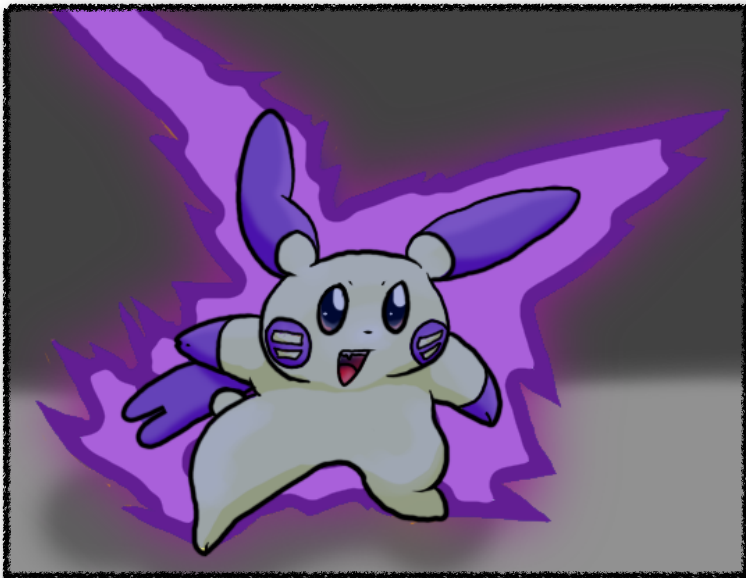
And still the water dripped.

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

"Oh Gods," a voice said. "We've got a live one. Over."

"Capture on, Ranger. Over and out." *bzzt*

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

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

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

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

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

"My turn."

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

It hurt so much.

I want to help you. Please.

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

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

She heard an electronic sound of alarm and a quick curse from the human. "Nngh! One more hit like that and I'm done!"

"Status report? Over."

"It's gone into hyper mode! Over."

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

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

"Neu!"

So much pain. Too many words.

"Oh! This might do the trick instead."

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

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

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

It smelled like home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'm not a pokémon. I'm only a copy.

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

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

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

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

"Capture complete," Tim murmured in relief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<Open your heart, Pikachutwo.>

Pikachutwo gaped at the name. *"You know me?"*

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

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

<Yes. Where is your home?>

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

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

<Where do you want to go?>

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

"Do you know a place like that?"

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

"Please," Pikachutwo said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<Not long now,> Celebi said calmly.

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

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

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

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

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

"Rai!"

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

"What should I do?" Pikachutwo asked.

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

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

The raichu slowed his pace as he drew nearer.

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

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

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

"It is?" Pikachutwo asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Run with me," Chur said.

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

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

"Let's run."

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

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

He's not running at full speed.

"Playing nice, are you?" she said with a smile.

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

I'll show him.

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

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

"Chaaaa..."

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

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

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

"Thank you," she whispered.

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

"It's a long story."

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

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

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

"I came from the future," she said.

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