

The Game of Time

Chapter Five: Eldritch

A Pokémon Minami fanfiction by Philippa Gissing



I awaken. The others awaken next to me. I sense them before I properly sense myself, then feel as time begins to move sluggishly into being as well.

Time? Until now that had been merely a long-forgotten thing. Urged on, perhaps, by the glowing beacon which is moving softly past us just beyond the wall bordering the nothing-place. I stare at the beacon as it goes past, and realise it does not sense us back at all.

Time quickly falls dead as the beacon moves past our home, too far to stir-

My sense fails, and I slumber. Perhaps the others slumber as well. Out of time, my thoughts move differently. But they still move in their own way. I wonder what that beacon had truly been. I want to touch it, move past the billowing wall and find where it has gone.

The beacon had been light. For a moment time had nearly begun flowing and with it, light shining, but now neither of those things even exist in this nothing-place. As I slumber I remember the sensation. It is all I have. Just a memory of a distant glow before it passed us by; completely unacknowledged. No, I do not just want to touch it. I do not just want to move past the wall. I want to rip the wall into thin shreds and devour the light whole. For once we were eaters of worlds... but that was such a long time ago, before we were banished here in this dark nothing-place to hunger forever...

LITTLE ONE... Palkia said, its great booming voice sounding almost hesitant. **DIANTHUS SAID** *I* **WAS IMPRECISE, BUT...**

The legendary beckoned to her with a claw flick and together the four two celebi, Dialga and Palkia - swooped down for a closer inspection. The patch of land in the middle of nowhere was somewhat oval-shaped and barely settling in to its new home in the pokémon world. They watched in solemn silence as the edges of land continued to sink deeper and deeper into the ocean, eroding and scattering in the meantime.

LITTLE SPROUT, DID YOU MEAN TO BRING THE ISLAND SURROUNDING YOUR FRIENDS BACK AS WELL?

<No,> Grace said, ashamed, then gritted her teeth. <It was hard enough staying conscious let alone steering to the extent you're implying!> Dianthus placed a calming hand on her shoulder. <You did it, Grace. You succeeded in rescuing them from the time before time. A bold move in the game indeed. They're definitely somewhere on this island.>

Grace nodded in determination. <Yes, I can sense them too.>

<All we need to do now is find them.>

Dianthus took her hand and they flew into the dense green forest together side by side. They had barely explored the eerily quiet surrounds for a minute when Palkia's worried call reached them.

LITTLE ONES? WHERE ARE YOU?

Grace faltered through the air at the question. Confused, she looked back to where they'd left the guardians of space and time outside but couldn't spot their forms beyond the veil of greenery. <We're just inside, we'll be back as soon as we find Mew and Mewtwo.>

LITTLE ONES, IT HAS NOW BEEN A WHOLE DAY. WE MUST SOON RETURN TO OUR OWN DIMENSIONS.

<Oh no,> Dianthus muttered to herself. <No, no...>

<What?>

<Shoot!> the pink celebi swore, looking around desperately. <Time in here hasn't caught up yet! It's still settling in. We're moving much slower than outside the forest!> <What?!>

FAREWELL, UNTIL NEXT TIME.

<No, no, no! They'll be wondering where we have been all this time. Quick, Grace, we must find Mew and Mewtwo as quickly as we can and get out of here!>

The two celebi buzzed through the air towards the middle of the island at high speed, dodging trees and hanging vines till Grace's wings and shoulders were aching. The land undulated sharply until it gave way to a torn river now unable to flow properly. Small pools were forming around the broken earth.

Dianthus honed in on the largest pool of water. At its bank sat Mew, who was crouching on all fours, shaking her head and looking dazed.

<What... happened?> Mew asked weakly, as Grace joined them and landed on a dry patch of earth.

<I brought you back to your own time,> Grace said proudly. <Are you ok? Where's Mewtwo?>

<Mewtwo...> Mew sat up and cradled her stomach. <He's... in here, sleeping, protected.>

The two celebi glanced uneasily at each other. <I don't understand,> Grace said. <It matters not. It is only that he is such a part of me that made this possible in the first place. Had I not acted as I did, he would have completely ceased to exist at all.>

<Oh, he is an egg?> Dianthus asked.

Mew shook her head slowly. <I don't believe so.>

<Well, at least you're both back safe and alive. Come on, we need to leave this island as fast as we can.>

<I... don't think I can fly yet.> Mew held out a paw in supplication, her eyes still lacking the sharpest focus and her voice sounding somehow distracted. <Maybe some more food from the creatures's cache...>

<Creatures?> Grace looked around quickly then flew up back into the air to properly scan the area. Further on along the river bank's crumbling edges were five humans lying prostrate on the ground next to their tents.

<Dialga have mercy...> she muttered as she flew towards them for a closer inspection. <There were humans living in the before time?>

Dianthus joined her, holding Mew aloft with a gentle hand. <Not as barren as we believed, seeing as flora and fauna both existed then too, apparently.>

<Should we wake them?> Grace asked, almost hesitant to even touch them.

Mew carefully released Dianthus's hand from her own paw and floated gently downwards; her focus sharpening. <It may not be that easy. Can't you feel their life forces lacking somehow? I do not believe they sleep, but... it's hard to describe...>

<Try,> said Dianthus.

Mew frowned as she looked down upon the humans, then reached down and lightly brushed the closest forehead. <Their aura is practically a flat grey,> she said finally, <but that they still even have auras is a miracle in itself. They've gone far beyond their own lifetimes, so only the shell of life remains. The rest knowledge, emotions, even willpower itself - no longer exists.>

<So what do we do with them?> Grace asked, breathing as slowly as the humans were whilst she absorbed this rather sobering information.

<I just don't know,> Mew said. <Perhaps... there may be a way to rejuvenate their auras. Give them a new life?>

LITTLE ONE! THE MYSTERY SPACE NEEDS YOU BACK!

Palkia's disembodied voice echoed around the island in unmistakeable urgency.

<I'm sorry,> Dianthus said, clasping both Grace's and Mew's hands firmly before heading towards the canopy. <I have to go, *now*. Who knows how much time has already passed outside.> <Wait! Don't go!> Grace yelled, but regretting how it sounded, followed up with, <Please come back if you can.>

<I will.>

With that she was gone.

<She won't be back until it's too late to fix anything at all.>

The flat telepathic voice came from behind both Grace and Mew. Grace swivelled frantically through the air - her heart rate doubling in fright - and came face to face with a celebi flying out of a time ripple followed by three other small levitating pokémon.

<How do you know that?> Mew asked the new celebi calmly.

Grace momentarily wished for a fraction of Mew's unshaken friendly curiosity, then concentrated a lot harder on the three strange pokémon behind the celebi.

Uxie, Azelf and Mesprit. The guardians of the three lakes. And...

<Whoever you are, at least your timing is impeccable,> Grace said, her heart swelling in warmth after its little scare. <Thank you.>

The other celebi silently nodded its welcome, its eyes closing at the lowest dip of the nod. When they opened again, their gaze fixed on Grace's and held it captive; willing her to look and think deeper once again. 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?

The other celebi blinked, and the deep-thought was broken.

<The Game will never end for us,> it continued unemotionally in its regular telepathic voice. <There is no finish line to cross. The fog is just marking when we first moved to bring Mew and Mewtwo back. We can never actually win. It will never let us go. 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.

Uxie, Azelf and Mesprit all turned their attention to Mew in synchrony and joined her in the air a little lower than the two celebi. Grace saw them apparently begin to privately engage her in their own telepathic conversation and draw further towards the earth and the five empty humans. <This is not intended as a warning,> the other celebi continued. <You shouldn't know this now just as much as I shouldn't be here, but...> Its antennae wilted completely in despair and Grace found herself frowning in pity. <I just can't not tell you.>

<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.>

<Thanks.>

The other celebi growled at her. <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.>* Grace was not satisfied. <What is it *not* right now?>

<Once upon a before time, it used to stem from the flowers of gratitude,> the celebi replied darkly, waving a time ripple into being. <But seeing as I can't exactly be grateful for anything anymore I think I'd prefer being known as Jade.>

Once again Grace's heart began pounding heavily in her chest. < What?>

<Why don't you ask your mentor Aristea?> Jade said, sneering at the name, <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.

Grace hung in the air, ignoring the four other guardians below her.

Could that have been me from a future time? Is that even possible? What paradoxes have been created now I've spoken to her?

She decided to leave the four remaining legendaries to their own devices and carved a ripple through the air towards the celebi sanctuary.

I need answers.

<What's the Game?> Mew asked.

Uxie, Azelf and Mesprit all turned their attention to Mew in synchrony and joined her in the air a little lower than the two celebi.

<It's the Game of Time,> Uxie said. <Some time-travel thing for bored celebi, as far as I can tell from what was a rather rushed explanation. We were roped in after affiliating in this whole 'Council' business... something about granting new lives to five humans?>

Mew gestured downwards. < There are your humans.>

<Hmm...> the three replied together. Uxie circled them once in the air and seemed to come to a decision. <Join their hands.>

The four diminutive guardians struggled with the dead weight of the humans's arms and hands, lifting them carefully until proper skin contact had been made between the group. <You first,> Mesprit said to Uxie, the sly smile on her face only accentuated by her lidded gaze. <Mew, you *might* want to shut your eyes for this.>

<How come?>

<Uxie's going to open *hers*,> Azelf explained. <When she looks upon someone who already has knowledge, it shall be taken away. Luckily for these humans, the reverse also holds true, but for you - the mother of all? Please, keep them shut until we say it's alright to open them.>

Mew shut her eyes lightly. <Where does that knowledge come from?> <From someone it has been taken away from,> Uxie said in a voice of tight concentration. <I'd forgotten *colour...>*

Mew fell silent in wonder, the play of light and shade over her eyelids dancing rapidly and sometimes almost violently as Uxie opened her eyes to the humans.

<It's fine to open them again,> Mesprit said, finally. <They have been granted with knowledge of their new world. Now, it's my turn.> She flew down and laid both her glowing hands on one of the human's faces. <Dare not touch the pokémon's body. In but three short days, all emotions will drain away.>

<You're giving them stolen emotions?>

<That's a bit of a loaded word, 'stolen',> Mesprit replied, still looking down at the human with a serious expression. <When the majority of these creatures just want nothing but to steal our freedom and our powers.>

<I was just hoping you'd give them good emotions; make them good people. I'd like to think they were good people before.>

<Every human wants to think they are a good person who does good deeds,> Azelf said dryly, taking Mesprit's place and the human's hand in her stead. <We are not here to take control once granting them the elements of true spirit. They become autonomous from here on in; and it will be solely up to them whether they do more good or bad in this world for the rest of their lives.>

Her form suddenly froze and the human she was touching jerked randomly upright, its eyes flashing open blindly. Then just as it settled and lay down again, its eyes closed once more, it happened to the two next to it and further along the physical link... until Azelf began moving properly once again in the air and released her hold on the human's hand.

<They sleep naturally now,> she explained. <They remember nothing of their past lives and - thanks to Uxie - have knowledge of their new life here.>

<One which they didn't actually live.>

<No, but save ageing them backwards - which is impossible - to a time in childhood they wouldn't remember anyway our only other option would be to release their bodies from that strange limbo of half-life. And *that*, Mew - I hope you agree - is no option at all.>

Mew nodded her agreement, holding her tongue regarding the impossibility of ageing backwards. The less anyone knew of Mewtwo's current situation, the better.

<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.>

Surely Uxie was not insinuating that these people are not pure of heart...

When she looked up again, though, after receiving no reply, she realised she was alone again with the sleeping humans. *Wake soon*, she willed them. *There is much which awaits you here in your new world*.

Grace flew to the edges of the forested celebi sanctuary from the time ripple and found night had shrouded the clearing in deathly, eerie silence. She flitted into the centre of the clearing to clear her mind yet found her unease deepening every second which passed by.

The celebi who frequented this place couldn't have just been sleeping somewhere nearby; the place felt so cold and empty it began to have the same effect on Grace's body. The natural flow of the subtle flora aura about the forest had completely stilled here. It felt deserted, as if it had been for days - no, *weeks*.

When in time am I? Grace thought.

<Aristea?> she called, and hoping to seek the other celebi's presence, as she'd done before when firstly opening her mind to her ability, she turned up the range as much as possible.

Aristea's presence did not appear in her mind, even though Grace waited several nearly breathless minutes waiting. She tried conjuring up the most vivid memory she had of the time she had turned the psychic connection completely up and Aristea had found her almost instantly afterwards. What was different this time? Then she realised that, like the forest around her, her mind was completely silent.

The silence slowly started to become absolutely deafening.

Where was Aristea? Dianthus?

Where was every other celebi? Where that constant buzz and twittering, like a multitude of conversations just far enough out of range to dull to the point of obscurity and become its own silence? Right now, the true silence felt and sounded like a low roaring instead of the normal void of sound.

You may still be able to look deeper, but all you have been told is not necessarily as it seems.

The only celebi left to speak in her mind was Jade: but it was merely a memory of her previous dire warning. Could Grace still look deeper? What was something she didn't know now but could find out thanks to the hive mind? She needed to find Aristea in the physical realm, was there a way to do that without locating her mentally too?

She thought deeper, and still the seconds ticked by. In the end, Grace had to shut her eyes and place her hands on either side of her head to focus deeply enough to find an answer.

The fog of the Game of Time separates the players inside from the observers outside.

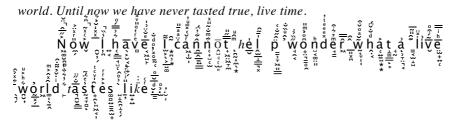
<Aristea is not playing at the moment?> Grace muttered, confused. <Why not? when things are at their worst? Perhaps... she doesn't realise.> So she, eager to escape the uncanny quiet of the sanctuary, wove another ripple through time which broke through the fog to the clear of before.

The beacon is not light this time, but a crack. The slightest crack, slivering at an excruciatingly slow speed down the wall. Something begins flowing through the crack. I feel it flowing past my self and attracting the rest of the flock. They gather behind me, cautiously, but I can feel their brimming eagerness as well.

The something is true time from a live world, I realise, as I take the first sip. It is wholly thirst quenching and yet afterwards I realise I must have more. I must have all of it. The flock jostle one another in the darkness and silence of this place, catching precious drips of true time one by one that I miss. Yet not a bit is wasted. We are most methodical.

For a small time - just a droplet really, before it is eaten - I ignore the slow leak and instead watch the broken wall. It seems the crack has stabilised as it stands now. We cannot touch it, so something on the other side must have caused the disturbance. possible it will widen, causing more time to leak through? Has this ever happened before like this? We have been unleashed before, but never on a live

Will there be more disturbances now this crack has appeared? Is it



<Aristea,> Grace said, extending her palms; so relieved she'd finally found her in the past above the sanctuary's canopy just a few moments before Grace's past self was about to start her first move with Dialga and Palkia. <I need your help in the Game.>

Her mentor turned to meet her and went pale. <G-grace? What are you doing here? You're already meant to be with Dianthu-> Then her eyes went even wider, her pupils pinning into not only shock but pure fear. <You're not meant to be here at all!> she said. <You can't be here! It's totally against the rules! Go back!>

Startled, Grace let her hands fall back to her side. <I'm in trouble, the Game's not going how it should at all->

<You must return *now*, and keep moving, and let it play out as it will! Don't come back here until it's done, Grace.> Aristea reached out for her but the motion faltered just before their skin made contact. <No, that's dangerous,> she muttered.

<Come with me,> Grace begged. <Help me with it. Maybe you'll remember something from your first time playing... It's worth a try, right?>

<I...>

<It's been crazy in there, you have no idea. I can't do this on my own. No celebi could, I realise now. That's why I was so confused when I couldn't find you or any other celebi inside the Game. Time's pretty messed up in there already so I figured it was just owing to that, but...>



<I can't stay here any more,> Aristea started again, her face downcast, when out of nowhere Jade flashed into their line of vision like a green blur and tackled her savagely across the sky.

Grace had barely any time to react before her instincts did so for her. She flipped her body around and followed the pair at breakneck pace for a reason she couldn't even understand.

Aristea telepathically screeched panic and terror the whole way, struggling in vain. Jade had her lips open in a snarl, her teeth bared to the wind and her arms and legs wrapped up tightly around the other celebi's body.

<You'll thank me one day!> Jade yelled to the pursuing Grace, suddenly dipping and - headfirst - aiming for the earth instead. <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!>

<What?>

<Do you get it yet?> Jade shouted back, the wind whistling almost as shrilly as Aristea was. <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!> Grace cried, the earth rushing towards them far too quickly.

Jade freely laughed at her reply, and without saying another word reached for the earth, her fingers outstretched as they willed a time ripple into being. The ripple curved and stretched and grew, far larger than any Grace had seen before, beckoning them onwards to evade the treetops and warp through time instead.

Aristea must have caught the motion and concentration on Jade's face for she managed to crane her neck around and spot their fate; a whirling maelstrom of green and white shards splintering in a circle.

<No!> she screamed. <Please don't!>

<It's your turn now,> Jade said darkly, and so the three entered the ripple; one unwillingly, one determinedly and the other simply curiously; wondering how on earth things had gotten so confused so quickly.

Fuji opened his eyes to the beautiful relaxing view of deep green treetops reaching for the blue cloudless sky. He squeezed the warm hand enfolded in his own and next to him Renee - the hand's owner - groaned into wakefulness.

He suddenly realised he had someone else's hand in his other, and let it fall as he sat up, shaking the groggy vague feeling from his mind with a brisk ruffle of his hair, and blinking slowly to hopefully reorientate himself.

"My back's wet," Renee croaked.

At her voice, a rush of sudden relief gathered at his chest and swept through his body. *She's alive, I'm alive...* He took a firmer grip of her hand and bent across, gripping her closer. *Of course we are*, his internal voice said. *Why wouldn't we be?*

Renee scooched over further towards him and returned the hug, holding his shoulders tightly. "Feels like I've been out for ages - what happened?"

"Must have been an earthquake," he mumbled against her warm coat. "Look, the ground's all broken up."

She nodded against his back. "Is everyone else ok?"

Fuji looked to the other research team members. They were slowly blinking and stirring too; sitting up and taking stock. He gave them all a shaky grin. "Some trip, huh?"

"At least we got what we came for," Tess said, reaching slowly around for her camera. She finally succeeded in digging it out of her bag and aimed its lens towards something behind Fuji.

With movement so slow it was almost unbearable with the curiosity he was feeling, Fuji turned his head and the shape of a pokémon curled up a few paces next to them on the ground swam into his peripheral vision. It was pink furred and delicately proportioned.

"A new species?" he wondered softly.

"I've never seen anything like it before in my life," Renee said, her attention rapt. "It's bound to be rare."

"Anyone have a pokéball?"

"No, we'll have to come up with a cage for it."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, here," Fuji chuckled. "We'll need to catch it first."

"I'm on it," Daniel said, creeping around behind the still form of the pokémon, his arms out for balance.

The pokémon turned its head to blink curiously at him, and Daniel froze only a few steps away from its prone form. "Mew," it said softly, and without further ado shimmered into invisibility and was completely gone from their awarenesses.

"Balls," Daniel said, his hands falling back to his sides as he stood up, flummoxed. "Lati eat your heart out, the thing's a mirage."

Fuji felt the disappointment spike in his chest. This adventure made less and less sense the more he thought about it. No pokéballs? No other capture devices? On a trip to discover and retrieve new undiscovered species for research and study? Had they simply run out of pokéballs at some point?

"What did we do yesterday?" he found himself asking the group at large.

They all looked baffled at him. "We did that thing, the thing that..." Tess said, then faltered.

"We explored," Renee said, the confidence in her voice spilling into the silence. "We researched and compiled and all that." Suddenly the confidence seemed to have completely run out, and her eyes began to water. "And then we decided to go home after the earthquake."

"Agreed," Abby said, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

The five stood and gathered their scattered belongings in silence. Fuji was not yet convinced somehow. Whilst the others packed their bags more securely he began rummaging in his own, eventually pulling out a notepad:

July 4th

Guyana, South America

We finally hit the river. Saw a strange magical creature on the riverbank. I have no idea what it was.

"We're in Guyana, apparently," he said. "Somewhere in South America." This can't be my journal; they haven't been called magical creatures since...

"How far is that to Kanto?" Daniel asked. "I'd rather not attempt to swim it. Did anyone bring a water pokémon?" "We don't have any pokémon," Renee said, her tone dead. She adjusted her backpack and walked away.

Fuji followed her and heard the rest follow him. After closing his own backpack he looked further at the notepad still in a hand and saw it had a pen in its binding. Whilst he walked, he flipped it open and mused upon the next blank page.

Diary: July 5 Guyana, South America A new pokémon was discovered deep in the jungle.

"Mew?"

Fuji jolted back into his spatial awareness to find the pokémon bobbing alongside him in the air, fully visible. The moment he stretched out an arm towards it though it whisked backwards in the air and shimmered from his sight again.

"So you'll tag along with us as a free pokémon, will you?" he asked the empty air, smiling. "That sounds a good deal. No strings attached, promise. I won't try capture you again." His colleagues, even Renee when she turned around to look, all shared the same smile when it appeared to them again and followed close by through the winding dense jungle towards home.

On the jagged coast of their little island jungle where dense greenery met sea the five humans stared desperately at the empty oceans around them. Besides their own little Guyana there was not another landmass to be seen.

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Renee took a long audible breath. "I really don't even want to ask this question, but..."

"Don't, please," Fuji answered. "I don't think anyone can answer."

The question was already on everyone's lips. *How did we get here in the first place if we have no transport - mechanical or living - to get back?*

"Mew," the pokémon said, and instead of turning invisible, it teleported away; leaving an afterimage of jagged pink in Fuji's field of vision. To say the humans were discouraged after an hour or two of it not reappearing would be putting it lightly. It was, then, an enormous shock to be nudged awake at the dawn of the fifth day gone with excited mumbled squeals from not only it but a pod of lapras milling about at the banks of the island. "Water," Fuji mumbled vaguely, after coming to with a violent jerk of his entire body, as he blinked the dirt from his eyes to look upon the excitable pod and a pink pokémon doing loops in the air. His stomach was by this stage in shrunken disuse. They'd run out of bottled water the previous day and had resorted to sipping from the pools about the island which were mostly just puddles of wet dirt by this stage. The last of the jerky had all gone the day before, not aiding their dire water situation in the slightest.

The pokémon flew down and perched at his side, looking curiously down at him. It seemed to come to a conclusion and squeaked in happiness, bringing its paws together and a force of water brimming out, splashing and wasting upon the earth.

Fuji's eyes shot open and he rolled his head underneath the deluge of the water gun; gasping and spluttering it down until the pokémon suddenly moved over to the other four for the same treatment. That had been the cleanest, most crisp cold water he had ever tasted. Grinning, he stood; feeling the water sloshing around in his belly, and hoisted himself onto the nearest lapras. It hummed happiness and moved away from the banks of the island, trilling a tune to the rest of its pod. The pink pokémon followed close by at Fuji's head. "Mew," it said, its tone almost apologetic.

Inspired, Fuji grabbed the journal again.

Diary: July 10

We christened the newly discovered pokémon, Mew.

And so the unlikely group took the long journey from Faraway Island to

Cinnabar Island, Kanto.