

The chapter opens with Rune narrating over various guild jobs, starting with an escort mission through Drenched Bluff.

RUNE

Ever since our Waterfall Cave adventure, Malachi has kept us plenty busy with guild work so we can be selected for the upcoming expedition, or [placeholder name] as it's been called.

We've had to earn the Normal Rank the hard way- apparently discovering and then undiscovering a new mystery dungeon doesn't count towards a promotion.

We see them doing various jobs during this portion of the narration sequence.

RUNE

Yohann found a way to spin those plants into new clothing, so Dielle is looking better than ever in her new Bling Ruff.

Oh, and Inigo's been showing off his Attack Band.

We cut to Rune admiring Dielle from afar in her outfit, and then cut to Inigo with much less fanfare.

RUNE

But somehow, despite the passing weeks, and despite the leaves changing color, I still hardly feel like I've developed in my skills.

Maybe it has something to do with Dielle starting to teach me how to read and write- Something about it feels *familiar*, but not in a good way.

I feel inadequate.

And during the night, when I fall asleep, I can't help but feel just the same as always.

Lost.

We cut away from the action and find ourselves on the night of a new moon. Rune awakens inside of a familiar place- the Dream Realm.

DREAM REALM

Rune gazes up on a familiar, serpentine form.

RUNE

Oh cool, I didn't just imagine you last time.

REQUIEM

You? Imagine someone as unique as me? I'm shocked! And here I thought I would have made a lasting impression!

But as promised, it's been a few weeks and I wanted to see you again. How are you faring? You're starting to look like your own person now, what with your cute little outfit and hair.

Rune softens up a bit.

RUNE

I... I don't even know. I've been trying to get used to this "new life" stuff you promised, but no matter what I do it feels like something's *missing*. And I'm *mad* at you, but I'm also just... Tired of being mad.

REQUIEM

Well if it consoles you at all, I also don't like when you're mad at me.

Because when I said I was assigned to *help* you, I meant it.

She summons a table for the two of them, and gives Rune some tea, which she participates in.

RUNE

I don't know, I just feel directionless with it all. Didn't you have some sort of... I dunno, *destiny* planned out for me? I was *lost*, which means you must have put me back on some path, right?

REQUIEM

The only destiny you have is to carve your own life for yourself.

Though ironically, I'd have thought my *gift* would give you direction in hard to read situations.

RUNE

Wait... Are you saying-

She recalls her Dimensional Scream occurrences.

RUNE

You're the reason I have those visions?!

REQUIEM

... Well you didn't have them before we had our exchange, did you?

RUNE

I thought that was just a Vulpix thing! Like- like all the dark and

ice and stuff!

REQUIEM

I hate to break it to you, but your little dark-type moves are also a gift from me.

But hey, the ice is all you! I'm proud.

RUNE

W-What else have I done that isn't *mine*?

REQUIEM

Now now dear, it's more of a *partnership* than anything. Just because it's a gift from *me* doesn't mean it's not yours now.

Though it looks like it's about time for you to wake up again. A shame dreams feel so much shorter than the time it takes to craft them, hm?

RUNE

No! I still have so many questions-!

REQUIEM

Fine, fine. If it'll help you from going comatose and scaring your friends, I will make time to answer any three questions you have for me on my next visit. Sound like a deal?

RUNE

I'm not done-!

And she wakes up.

SHARPEDO BLUFF

RUNE

-With you!

Huh?

She looks around bewildered, and suddenly gets a headache.

RUNE

GAAAH-! I **wasted** it by talking
about feelings-!

Malachi coughs awkwardly from behind her.

MALACHI

You... Have a good dream?

RUNE

Let's just say it was one I didn't
wanna wake up from.

MALACHI

Oh! I have those sometimes! One
time I had this dream where I grew
a bunch of teeth and had a bunch
of clothes on- OH! Wait, no time,
we gotta gather at the guild! They
have an informational announcement
about the upcoming expedition!

RUNE

Ugh... That's today? Can I just
sleep in? I've got a killer
migraine.

MALACHI

Then we'll get you a Persim Latte
on the way! C'moon, this is super
important for our team!

RUNE

Buh... Okay, for the team.

We see a montage of the gang meeting up with Dielle and Inigo outside the cafe while Rune downs a latte. They arrive at the guild, where many teams have gathered in the main hall.

WIGGLYTUFF GUILD

INIGO

Wow, lotsa folks here today, huh?

MALACHI

A lot more teams are eligible for
the expedition than I thought...

Then, we hear a loud chuckle off-screen.

JULIUS

Chaw-haw-haw! Lookit all the
rookies!

Everyone is hushed down, and other teams begin gossiping.

EXTRA

Is that...?

EXTRA

That's the leader of Team Skull!

EXTRA

No way!

EXTRA

I heard his team snipes jobs from
rookies...

EXTRA

I heard that they steal items from
pokemon and then collect the
bounty!

EXTRA

Well I heard that their leader,
Julius-

Has **killed** another explorer.

Throughout this speech we catch glimpses of the team
passing by in each panel. Soon, everyone quiets down when
Keaton enters the room.

KEATON

Alright everyone, time for our-

He sees Julius, and stops speaking. He seems aghast.

KEATON

You...

He quickly flies over.

KEATON

Julius!

He practically crash lands on Julius's face, and both of them are laughing.

KEATON

You *old fart*, how long has it been?!

DIELLE

Did Chatot just...?

INIGO

Old fart?

JULIUS

Heyo, Keats. Too long, I missed ya. Administrative work treating you well?

KEATON

Pah! I'm molting more by the hour. I'm about to be plucked if the stress keeps up.

JULIUS

Mmm. I see you've got new meat.

RUNE

Hey, I'm more than a piece of meat. I also have a personality.

INIGO

Maybe *too much* personality.

MALACHI

Oh yeah...! Chatot, um, how do you know... Julian?

KEATON

It's *Julius*. And I'd *hope* I know him since we were teammates for most of my early career!

Everyone is floored by this revelation.

JULIUS

Heh, yeah we were buds.

Chatot is a little flushed.

KEATON

Were, I'd hope we still are!

JULIUS

Pah, you and your fancy semantics. That's why you're the paperwork fella now.

KEATON

Is it just you here? I thought you mentioned some new recruits in your last letter.

JULIUS

Ah. Yeah. They didn't quite make the cut. Jus' me for the moment. I do have a new team name though- Team Skull.

KEATON

Not a far cry from when we were Team Ruffians, eh?

Someone coughs.

EXTRA

Not to interrupt but... The announcement, sir?

KEATON

Ah yes, of course. I got a bit caught up reminiscing.

We have called upon teams today to discuss an upcoming expedition. The goal of this is to secure the location of a powerful artifact from theft, and to evacuate nearby pokemon to prevent another tragedy like Treeshroud.

Rune looks upset at this line, but Dielle pats her reassuringly.

KEATON

As the exact location of this artifact is undetermined at this time, we will need the most adept teams coordinating to meet our goals. We will be closely monitoring the rank and growth of our guild's teams for suitable candidates, though we will be outsourcing to get additional help.

He looks over at Julius.

KEATON

Be sure to keep up the good work in order to be selected.

That will be all.

The teams disperse, and Keaton immediately goes back to chatting with Julius. The team begins to exit, when Chatot stops them.

KEATON

Ah, Team Maelstrom. A moment, if you would.

MALACHI

Oh... What's up?

KEATON

The guild's food stores are running dangerously low. Particularly the Guildmaster's favorite confection, Perfect Apples.

RUNE

That sucks. Sorry to hear that.

She makes a move to leave.

KEATON

A-**hem**, which is to say, I wanted to ask that you go to Apple Woods to replenish said stores.

RUNE

We'd love to, but ah, we-

MALACHI

Could definitely do that!

Rune glares at him.

RUNE

Malachi, we don't-

JULIUS

Aw, now hold on Keats. You can't put a rookie team out on a mission like this.

RUNE

Right. Wait, what??

KEATON

And what, send out a more *experienced* team like yours on a simple errand?

JULIUS

Why not? Actually, I think we'd do well mentoring these kiddos, don't you think? Get out those newbie jitters.

KEATON

Is that really such a good idea?

JULIUS

Who do you think you're talking to here? This would be a precious learning opportunity. It'd be a shame to waste it.

KEATON

You make a fine point. What say you, Team Maelstrom?

Rune responds through gritted teeth.

RUNE

Sounds great.

KEATON

Perfect! You can set out tomorrow.

JULIUS

See ya then.

The team leaves the guild, looking a little upset at what just transpired.

They go to Spinda Cafe for lunch to discuss plans to get selected for the expedition.

BEV'S BAR

RUNE

Great. Now we have to go on a mission with Keaton's *weird crush*.

MALACHI

We probably wouldn't have had to if you didn't try rejecting the mission.

RUNE

If I- Hey, we have better things to do! We don't have time for menial errands.

MALACHI

But if Chatot wanted us to do it,
it must be important, right? This
might be a good opportunity to get
in the guild's favor for the
expedition.

Rune sighs.

YOHANN

Oh, if it isn't Team Maelstrom!

Yohann walks over and interrupts, with a Smeargle trailing
behind him.

MALACHI

Oh, hi Yohann. And um, guy.

AZRAEL

Azrael.

YOHANN

He's my date. You don't mind if we
join you, do you? Not a lot of
tables today.

RUNE

(Dryly) Oh. We don't wanna
interrupt your date.

YOHANN

Pah! You all are like family to
me. So what are we talking about?

MALACHI

Oh! We were just discussing an
upcoming mission.

YOHANN

Interesting. Any plans on going to
Drenched Bluff?

MALACHI

Um... No?

YOHANN

Are you sure? I was just thinking
about how I needed some Oren vines

for a piece.

DIELLE

Oran? Don't most farmers around here grow that?

MALACHI

They also don't grow vines, they're a bush plant.

YOHANN

No, no. You're thinking Oran, I need Oren. Nobody in town grows them since they're mildly poisonous.

MALACHI

Even if we wanted to, we can't.

DIELLE

Hold on, why not split up for a day? I could go with him!

RUNE

Are you sure?

DIELLE

Of course! I... I really want to see how I do on my own.

Rune smiles.

RUNE

Go for it.

Dielle beams.

MALACHI

So that just leaves me, Inigo, and Rune for Apple Woods. Everyone alright with that?

INIGO

Sounds like a plan.

We fade to the next day. In a montage sequence, we see the team obtain a bag from Chatot (which Rune holds onto), meet

with Team Skull, and begin their trek to the dungeon.

APPLE WOODS

As we enter Apple Woods, we are invited in with beautiful autumn colors, and many twisted roots intertwining with one another. The team begins their hike through the woods.

INIGO

So what now? Just pluck some apples from the trees?

JULIUS

Rule number one of exploring: check the job description closely before starting. We're looking for *perfect* apples.

RUNE

What's the difference?

JULIUS

Tastier, chaw-haw! The dungeon pumps 'em up real juicy.

INIGO

And where are we gonna find those?

JULIUS

You'll know when we see it.

RUNE

Real helpful.

The team sees a Paras ahead, strolling through the forest.

MALACHI

Hey, maybe we can ask him!

Julius steps forward, and then unleashes a flamethrower. The Paras is caught off guard by this, and tries to attack back.

PARAS

H-Hey!

The Paras is unsuccessful in slashing Skuntank, and with a sucker punch from behind, is knocked out. As he dissipates into light, he leaves behind a bag.

MALACHI

What was that for?! He was just minding his own business!

JULIUS

Second rule of exploring; Don't leave yourself open to surprise attacks.

RUNE

Seems like *you* were the only one launching a surprise attack there.

JULIUS

What I *saw* was something that could lead to a problem. Let me ask you this, when was the last time you landed the hit first in a match, huh?

RUNE

Should we count the time Malachi zapped that Lileep?

MALACHI

That was an accident!

INIGO

I dunno Shinx, I think the Skuntank has a point. We shouldn't leave ourselves defenseless.

JULIUS

Chaw-haw-haw, that's the spirit!

Julius struts over to some items left behind by the Paras, collecting them up and putting them into his own bag.

MALACHI

Hey-!

JULIUS

Hm? Problem, rookie?

MALACHI

You can't just take that, it belongs to someone!

JULIUS

Kiddo, you gotta get rid of that mentality if you're gonna make it when exploring. It's being *resourceful*. If he really wanted to protect his items, he would have kept an entercard on hand.

Malachi frowns at this response, but Rune's curiosity is piqued.

RUNE

Entercard?

JULIUS

Lil talismans that manipulate dungeon energy to do what ya want it to. Yer badge works the same way.

MALACHI

... Yeah, that's why they can teleport us to our base.

Inigo hears a rustling in some nearby bushes, and unleashes a poison sting. A Butterfree flies out carrying a basket full of apples, irritated.

BUTTERFREE

Wh- Hey, why don't you mind your own business-?!

Their sentence is cut short by Inigo using double kick to knock her out.

INIGO

Heck yeah! I could get used to this!

Malachi frowns and looks uncomfortable as we transition to a montage of the team fighting various pokemon in the

dungeon. Malachi is very pointedly not participating, looking on with disapproval. Soon...

RUNE

We wouldn't happen to be close to this tree, would we? My feet are killing me.

JULIUS

Yer a Vulpix, ain'tcha? All pokemon have a certain set of skills when exploring. You 'n me, we can *feel* the pull of the dungeon.

RUNE

Huh?

JULIUS

Haven't ya ever felt like you knew the way to the center of the dungeon in yer heart? Instinctively?

While he says this, Rune recalls how she felt at Waterfall Cave.

RUNE

I... Guess so.

JULIUS

You gotta close yer eyes and reach down wit' yer aura. Feel it get pulled by the ley lines of the dungeon.

RUNE

Slow down, ley lines?

JULIUS

Geez, do they teach you anything anymore? Ley lines are the energy of the dungeon. Its blood. They're what make it go. Now stop yappin' and close your eyes.

RUNE

Okay, okay.

Visually, we see her aura begin at her core, and then spread to her feet like roots. Soon, it taps an orange aura- and she feels herself being pulled in its direction.

JULIUS

That's it, now yer gettin' it.

His thought is interrupted by a loud rustling. The team looks, and sees an enormous tree slowly pulling itself across the ground with its roots.

MALACHI

Wha... This is incredible!

RUNE

Buh- Tree... moving...

JULIUS

Ah, there she is.

Julius hops on.

JULIUS

Climb aboard!

The team joins him, scrabbling up the wood onto a solid part of the trunk.

RUNE

I wonder how Dielle's doing with her mission...

INIGO

Probably fine.

RUNE

[Worried] *Probably?*

Inigo snickers. Julius continues the conversation,

JULIUS

So I'm curious, how is ol' Wigglytuff?

MALACHI

The guildmaster? He's, um,
eccentric.

INIGO

And wicked strong. I don't know
what move he uses, but it reminds
me of a dark-type move.

JULIUS

Dark, eh? Isn't that odd for a
fairy-type?

Rune looks mildly uncomfortable.

RUNE

It's not that weird, is it? I know
one.

JULIUS

That's prolly because one of your
parents knew it. Fae don't learn
dark-type moves otherwise.

RUNE

I'd say his personality is more
baffling than his abilities. I
don't know how Keaton puts up with
him.

JULIUS

Oh, you didn't know? He's enamored
with Wigglytuff. Had been for
years.

MALACHI

Enamored with...

RUNE

Wigglytuff...?

JULIUS

Hard to believe, eh? A shame,
considering how oblivious the pink
guy is to his feelings.

RUNE

Yeah. *Wigglytuff* is oblivious to

his feelings.

INIGO

It *is* hard to get a good read on him.

JULIUS

Heh, I can see that. 'Specially considering how little he seems to care about his title.

MALACHI

What do you mean?

JULIUS

How 'bout I put it this way, why do you think he acts so childish? Surely you don't think that's how he got where he is today?

MALACHI

Yeah, I guess it's a little confusing, but...

JULIUS

Do you ever wonder if he plays dumb to hide something?

The team goes quiet.

JULIUS

Bah, I forget you're young. Don't worry your little heads about it.

Now *this* is more like it.

They arrive at the peak of the tree, where perfect apples hang down from above.

JULIUS

Hm. Dun' feel like climbing up.

Julius rears back, and uses Sucker Punch on the base of the tree. Some apples fall, and the team starts to collect them. After a few hits, Malachi interjects,

MALACHI

U-um, I think this is enough for
the guild-

But Julius keeps going. Malachi gasps as a large crack starts forming on the tree while he continues to punch the tree.

MALACHI

I said **stop!**

Malachi zaps Julius, who turns slowly.

JULIUS

We came here to get apples. I'm
getting them.

MALACHI

Don't you see you're damaging the
tree?! Pokemon live here, they
depend on this tree for food!

JULIUS

What, *feral* pokemon?

Malachi visibly recoils.

JULIUS

Pokemon who live in dungeons think
they're hot shit, that they own
the *whole dungeon* in a world built
for exploration. When really,
they're no smarter than the
squirrels in these trees.

Malachi is becoming visibly furious.

MALACHI

Wild pokemon are just as smart as
town-dwelling pokemon!

JULIUS

Really? They really think our
society is better off eating *nuts*
in the forest and picking fights
with strangers than living in
order? They don't want to be
pokemon, they want to be *animals*.

He hits the tree again, this time causing a branch to fall down, as the tree trembles underneath them as if in pain.

MALACHI

You're the only one acting like an animal here! Don't you see you're damaging the tree?!

I'm going to report this to Keaton.

Julius stops.

JULIUS

Really, you're gonna report me to the guy who didn't want you to be recruited? The guy who told me,

"They're unprepared, irrational children the Guildmaster pitied and give pretend jobs to to play out their fantasies."

That guy? The one who thinks your *half-evolved* form is something to pity?

The team looks furious, Malachi especially.

RUNE

Hey.

I don't care *what* Keaton says about us. The work we're doing has been important to *us*. Even if they're small errands, maybe there's good reason for us to work our way up.

And if you can't respect that, if *Keaton* can't, we'll stop you ourselves.

Malachi turns quietly to her with a sad smile and says,

MALACHI

Thanks.

INIGO

Prepare for a pummeling!

JULIUS

Cute. You really think you can
take on a seasoned veteran?
This'll be good for a laugh.

The fight scene begins with Malachi shooting a Thunderbolt
in Julius's direction, which is met with a flamethrower.
Inigo moves next, running close to him.

INIGO

Vulpix, stun him with ice!

She nods and obliges, shooting a powder snow towards his
face.

JULIUS

You really are rookies.

Julius shoots a Tar Shot at Inigo.

INIGO

Huh? Tar?

Julius then uses flamethrower, and it does extra damage to
Inigo as a result. Inigo faints from the damage sustained.

JULIUS

My gramps was a Coalossal, I'll
have you know.

Whelp, this was fun, but I'm gonna
wrap it up here.

He then unleashes the noxious gas combo- a linked move
containing Toxic and Venoshock. Rune and Malachi start
coughing and gagging.

MALACHI

It stinks-!

They both collapse, and as Rune fades out, she sees Julius step in front of her.

Rune wakes up in the med bay of the guild, and Malachi who is nearby weaving a basket immediately notices her stir.

MALACHI

Oh, you're up!

RUNE

Guh... What... What's happening?
Where's Inigo?

Malachi frowns.

MALACHI

Inigo healed up before us and went for a walk. Apparently you were doing really bad for a while...

Rune coughs.

RUNE

I... still don't feel great. It hurts to breathe, it's like my throat is really tight...

MALACHI

The nurse said you'll probably need another week or two to get better. You're not exactly a fairy-type, but being in the same line means you're susceptible to poisoning.

And ... Keaton wants to talk to us... It has me worried.

Rune gives him a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

RUNE

Whatever he says, you did the right thing Malachi. You stood up for what you believed in.

MAELSTROM
LIKE A TRUE HERO, CHAMPION!

Malachi gives a melancholy smile, and there's a knock on the door. Keaton enters the room with Julius and Inigo, Inigo looking healed.

KEATON
Take a seat.

Inigo sits next to Rune and Malachi while Keaton begins speaking.

KEATON
Julius told me everything. And I want to say, I'm furious with your behavior. I'm sure you thought you were being very sly, sabotaging this mission because you're *dissatisfied* with the work we're providing you.

MALACHI
Sabotaged?! What do you-

KEATON
Silence. You went out of your way to instigate a fight with a senior team member who showed enough compassion to take time out of his schedule to show you the ropes. And if that wasn't bad enough, the *entire* stock of apples was destroyed in the ensuing battle! Do you have *any* idea how furious the guildmaster will be with you lot?!

MALACHI
B-but, he started it!

Keaton narrows his eyes.

KEATON
Oh? Did you not attack him first when he didn't decide to *slack off*

and leave the mission incomplete?

INIGO

Hey! He-

KEATON

I will have none of this! *And* you lost the traded goods to boot, so now the Perfect Apple Tree has suffered immense damage *and* the guild's reputation has been tarnished with the community. Ohh when the guildmaster comes back, I swear-

JULIUS

Hey, *breathe*. The important thing is, everyone's alive, and you can take food from my team's personal pantry to feed your staff.

KEATON

Oh Julius, you don't have to...

JULIUS

I insist. It's the least I can do after putting the Vulpix in such critical condition. Lucky I had the sense to heal her up, eh?

Keaton smiles at him, while the team stares him down furiously.

But quickly, the tone shifts as Wigglytuff walks in with a steely cold gaze.

GUILDMASTER

I want a word with Rune.

Everyone moves out of the way for him, as Keaton turns to the team.

KEATON

I cannot express my disappointment in what transpired today enough. You're *lucky* that Rune survived

today's ordeal. Were it not for Julius's swift action, she could have *died* from this needless battle. He had no way of knowing her tolerance to his attack.

I know this must be stressful for you to hear, but I'm afraid I cannot recommend your team for the expedition. Your teammate is gravely injured, you failed a fairly simple errand and had very valuable goods stolen!

MALACHI

... Yes sir.

KEATON

Now, rest up. Be wise and take a break from exploring before going at it again.

He hops away, molting many feathers in the process. Once he's gone, Inigo chuffs.

INIGO

I'm not gonna let him beat me again. Mark my words.

We cut to Rune and the Guildmaster in the med bay.

RUNE

Um... Guildmaster.

I... I'm sorry. I don't know what happened, everything came and went so quickly, and we failed this mission, and because of that we aren't gonna be able to go on the expedition, and the food stock is-!

GUILDMASTER

Hey.

They're just apples.

Rune seems taken back.

RUNE

Uh... Y-Yeah.

She looks down.

GUILDMASTER

I'm glad you're doing better. I was worried.

RUNE

... Thanks.

GUILDMASTER

Of course.

RUNE

I'm just... Really glad that it was me. I don't know what I would have done, especially if Dielle was on the mission with us and also got hurt-!

GUILDMASTER

But you need to take care of yourself, too.

RUNE

I guess. But I always feel so weak, it's like I'm...

GUILDMASTER

Not in sync with your body?

RUNE

Y-Yeah. Wait- you know what that's like.

The Guildmaster smiles.

GUILDMASTER

Well, I should. I'm a human like you.

RUNE

You're... what? What are you saying?

GUILDMASTER

Maybe I'm not always super honest, but I had a hunch for a looong time that you were like me. You're not coordinated, you were missing your aura for a bit, but most importantly... You have the mark of a human champion, like me!

RUNE

W-

GUILDMASTER

And... It's been so *lonely*. Humans don't exist anymore. They *haven't* existed for thousands of years. I-I've been looking for someone like me for so long now,

RUNE

But I'm **not** like you.

GUILDMASTER

Hm?

RUNE

I'm not a human! I'm a Vulpix, and I have a family, and-

GUILDMASTER

Huh? Do you... Really not remember anything?

RUNE

Why does everyone ask me that?! No, I can't!

GUILDMASTER

But... You should *remember* your life as a human. I- I lived in Kalos,

RUNE

Well, I don't remember *anything*!

Just my name! That's it, that's
literally the **only** thing.

A silence hangs in the air.

GUILDMASTER

I... I'm sorry. I got ahead of
myself.

He rubs his face as a stressed tic.

GUILDMASTER

I didn't mean to put you on the
spot. Um... I hope you recover
well. If you wanna talk more, let
me know.

He leaves, while Rune sits in the med bay. She looks down
at her paws.

RUNE

I *can't* have been human... Could
I?