

## 102: Reaper

Rain reached to his belt, extending the Quickstaff and raising it defensively. He had no illusions whatsoever about being able to hurt the Razorspine with the weapon, but having a solid piece of metal between him and the onrushing mountain of nope seemed better than nothing. He could already tell that running would be pointless, given the speed at which the creature was moving. Perhaps he could escape with Velocity, but the others wouldn't be able to handle the disorientation.

A blast of light from Val caught the monster right in its insectile face, doing no noticeable damage. Its health bar was still full, meaning that neither Val nor Tilson had done enough damage to punch through its resistance. *Or Tilson missed. Or it has so much damn health that the damage doesn't even show up on the bar.*

The creature didn't slow, and Rain realized that he was shouting as he slashed at it with the Quickstaff. To his amazement, the Dissolver dodged away from his strike, skittering backward and responding with two slashes of its blades that sent a pair of Acid Crescents straight into his chest. As before, the projectiles were consumed by his armor, the acid not even damaging his cloak, at least as far as he could tell. Somehow, the magic was getting broken down and absorbed harmlessly, though his saturation bar told him that it wouldn't last forever.

"Stay behind Rain!" Tilson shouted, rapidly drawing and loosing three regular-looking arrows at once. Endless Quiver made conserving ammunition less of a concern, though the arrows that it conjured took mana and still had to be drawn from behind the back. The Dissolver slashed all three arrows from the air with a single swipe, making the motion look casual.

Val didn't listen to Tilson's command, of course. Instead of staying in the shelter provided by Rain's armor, he dashed off to the left, blasting away at the Razorspine with magic from both of his hands.

"Val!" Rain shouted, reaching out after him. *You fucking lemming!*

The Dissolver pivoted to face the overconfident Light Mage, its chitinous legs cracking the ground as it launched an Acid Crescent at his head.

Val laughed as the magic flew through the air toward him, summoning one of his Hard Light shields as he vanished, using that invisibility spell of his. The Chemical magic shattered the barrier of light in an explosion of luminous crystalline shards and sizzling acid. Val gasped as he was struck by the shrapnel, though Rain couldn't see how badly he'd been hit.

After a moment, that gasp morphed into a tortured cry of agony as Val flickered back into view. He fell to the ground, writhing in pain as the monster stalked toward him.

"Go!" Tilson shouted, drawing an arrow. "I'll pin it."

Rain was already moving, sprinting to place himself between Val and the monster before it could launch another bolt of magic. Tilson's next arrow glowed with an amber light that speared straight through the creature, nailing it to the ground. The arrow itself had bounced off, but the larger ethereal afterimage remained. *Pinning Shot: roots an enemy for a set duration.*

"Got it!" Tilson shouted over Val's howls. "Thirty seconds at most! No promises!"

Rain didn't respond. He was already kneeling beside Val, Purify rolling off him like fog as he fumbled to retrieve a potion from his bandoleer. Purify's light seemed to be drawn to the splattered droplets of acid that were burning into Val's face. There was also a good deal of blood on his skin, leaking from the lacerations left by the shards of light magic. Purify was too focused on the acid to deal with that, it seemed. The acid itself wasn't vanishing, to Rain's horror. Dark smoke was rising from the wounds as the Dissolver's magic resisted the influence of his spell.

Val clamped his teeth together, strangling his screams as the acid continued burning deeper into his flesh. Tilson arrived, moving to stand behind Rain as he kept up his assault on the monster. He was launching Fire Arrow after Fire Arrow, the shots coming fast, possibly as a result of another skill, like Barrage. Fire Arrow was only tier zero, but it was faster than Shock Arrow, and the cost was low. Thanks to Endless Quiver, the Arcane Archer didn't need to worry about anything other than mana as he spammed the spell mercilessly.

The pinned Dissolver retaliated, and another bolt of green magic caught Rain in the back. He barely noticed, too concerned with the horror unfolding in front of him. "Here, Val! Healing!" he gasped, tearing out the cork from the potion bottle. Wordlessly, Val grabbed the potion from him and downed it. Then, he screamed again, his wounds still not closing.

*Shit shit shit.* Rain activated Aura Focus, flaring Purify as high as it would go using all of his modifiers. Simultaneously, he pressed his armored hand against Val's face, hoping that the metal of his gauntlet would draw out some of the magic from the acid. Four seconds was as long as he dared to wait, after which he dropped Aura Focus and took his hand away. To his immense relief, the sizzling had stopped, and the dark smoke had vanished. Val's face, however, was a bloody ruin. The burns from the acid were barely bleeding compared to the gashes from the shattered light magic. Rain fumbled for another healing potion, but Val stopped him with a strangled croak.

"No, save it."

"Val, don't be an idiot," Rain said, practically pouring the potion down Val's throat. *These potions won't save anyone that takes a direct hit. They're not strong enough.* He reached back to his bandoleer, removing a small wooden disk, carved with the common rune for the Chemical aspect.

"Acid...Crescent...hurts," Val said, letting his head thump to the ground.

"No shit?" Rain said, readying the disk. The Dissolver screeched behind them, but Rain ignored it. "Maybe don't catch one with your face next time. Why the hell did you run out?"

Val shook his head weakly, struggling with the pain.

Rain hesitated, his hand holding the wooden disk hovering above Val's chest. He grimaced and pulled it back, pressing the disk against his own chest instead, then activated it with a puff of mana.

The disk was a Chemical resistance ward-charm, one that he'd purchased before delving into the Fells, but that he'd never had an occasion to use. The fifty Chemical resistance that it granted wouldn't do diddly-squat for Val if he got hit again; thus, it made more sense to use it on himself, insignificant as the buff seemed in the face of the Dissolver. Rain took his hand away, the charm remaining stuck to his armor as the shopkeeper had promised it would. The magic-absorbing metal didn't seem to bother it, for whatever reason.

Rain didn't question it. He had more important things to worry about. He looked up at Tilson, shaking his head. "Don't get hit. Those Acid Crescents do fifteen hundred damage each."

"Fuck," Val croaked. He coughed weakly. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"He shouldn't have needed to," Tilson said curtly, blasting the Dissolver with another Fire Arrow. "Fucking Guilders. It's a reaper. What did you think would happen?"

Val just groaned, clutching at his injured face. Rain pushed aside his concern, forcing himself back to his feet and turning to face the monster. The Arcane Archer's barrage had made an impact, though a small one. The Razorspine's health had dropped by a bare tenth. It was shrieking in rage as it tore at the ground with its blades, trying to break free from the magic holding it in place.

"It will escape soon," Tilson warned as he charged another Shock Arrow. "I'm surprised it hasn't already. Rain, can you turtle it once it does?"

"Not for long," Rain said as another blast of caustic magic struck him in the chest. "Five or six more hits and my armor will be saturated. I'm not sure how I'll do in melee."

"Run," Val coughed. Rain glanced at him, then he blinked as the man vanished before his eyes. "Leave...me."

There was a sudden screech of triumph from the Dissolver, and Rain whirled to see that the ethereal arrow that had been pinning it to the ground had vanished in a cloud of amber motes.

"Shit!" Tilson swore. "Sixty seconds until I can pin it again!"

"Going in!" Rain shouted, pushing off hard from the ground, sprinting straight for the monster. *We can't run; it will catch us, and I can't keep tanking its magic forever. Force Ward should be able to block those blades, though, at least for a little while.*

He did the math as he ran. As he came into range, he jabbed at the Dissolver using one of the basic staff strikes that Val had taught him ages ago. He grinned as the overgrown bug hissed and retreated, dodging the blow. *It's afraid of getting hit. Joke's on you, bub. You wouldn't even feel it, but you don't know that, do you?*

"Yaaaaah!" Rain shouted, chasing after the retreating Razorspine. He used a quick blast of Velocity to hasten his next strike, the staff whipping through the air. The Dissolver skittered back again, dodging. Then, to Rain's horror, it retaliated. The swipe of its claw came faster than he could react, not even to activate Force Ward. The monster's blade crashed down on his shoulder, slicing effortlessly through his cloak and severing his leather bandoleer. The razor-sharp chitin ground against his armor but didn't cut through.

Rain was pushed back by the force of the blow, his knees bending with the impact, though the Forceweave underlayer distributed it well enough that he didn't take any damage. His armor wasn't so lucky. The durability had dropped, the metal of his pauldron now bearing a deep scratch. Rain quickly crunched the numbers based on what his HUD was telling him.

"Two thousand damage from the blades!" he shouted. *My armor took twelve hundred ish, but it has eight hundred and four hardness. That means it can take around nine more hits.*

He pulled his staff back defensively, retreating before the monster could follow up with another strike. Luckily, it was distracted by catching another Shock Arrow in the chest. The arrowhead didn't penetrate, but the crack of thunder and the discharge of electricity made it hiss in pain.

"I'm going to run out of mana before we kill it!" Tilson shouted. Rain grimaced, quickly freeing himself from the remains of his bandoleer. He planted his feet, waited a beat for the monster to approach, then stepped forward, lunging with the end of the staff. He fully expected to take another hit from the creature as a consequence, but he couldn't show fear. Its wariness of him was the only hope he had. As he struck, he also let loose with Immolate, compressing it to one meter and boosting it to two hundred percent intensity with Channel Mastery.

**Immolate (10/10)**

355-405 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 100 mp/s

The staff struck the monster in the torso, the tip skittering off its chitin exoskeleton ineffectually. The aura was slightly more effective, burning away the tiniest sliver of health. The sudden magic, visible as a flash of crimson light from Rain's armor, startled the Dissolver, and it aborted its strike, retreating again. Rain likewise backed away, sucking in a lungful of scalding air.

*That did damage, but nowhere near enough. I can't kill it this way.*

The Razorspine paused, tilting its triangular head. It looked down at its chest where the staff had struck, clearly confused about something. It touched the spot lightly with one of its blades. The motion looked at once alien, and also disturbingly human.

It slashed one of Tilson's Fire Arrows from the air with a contemptuous flick of its other arm. Then, without warning, it hissed and lunged forward, lightning-fast. Its blades rose, then screamed down toward Rain in an X.

Rain's eyes widened, and he instinctively raised the Quickstaff to block. Too late, he realized that he hadn't activated Force Ward. The monster's blades sheared neatly through the Quickstaff with a jolt, then continued, crashing against his neck, one on either side. His armor saved him from losing his head, but he could feel the force of the impact, even muted by the Forceweave. There was a tortured screech of metal as the Dissolver pulled him in close, its blades scraping against his back. It opened its mouth, hissing loudly, mandibles dripping acid.

Rain panicked a little bit.

**Immolate** (10/10)

4985-5697 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 2700 mp/s

The world exploded in a maelstrom of fire as the Dissolver ignited. It instantly released him and fled, taking most of the flames with it, but Rain didn't even notice, distracted as he was. It felt as if he'd been dunked into boiling oil. The pain only grew worse as the scorching air seeped in through the gaps in his armor, the Forceweave providing insufficient insulation. It was the worst by far on his face. His head had been turned away, and his eyes had been closed, but that hadn't saved him. It felt as if the flames had blasted through the slit in his visor, projecting a searing bar of agony across his face. His health was dropping precipitously as the hot air pressed in on him. One hundred damage. Two hundred.

*Refrigerate Nova!*

The spell didn't activate. Rain's mind frantically kicked into high gear, and he removed Extend Aura from the modifiers and tried again. This time, he had enough mana to trigger the spell.



**Refrigerate (10/10)**

3270-3738 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 900 mp/s

The blast of cold was almost as intense as the heat had been. There was a flash of blue light from Rain's armor, and he fell to the ground, the air temperature plummeting. There was no burst of snow, however, as the air never reached the freezing point. The power of the icy nova was insufficient to completely cancel the heat from Immolate.

The pain didn't relent. Rain still felt as if he was on fire, and, after a moment, he realized that he literally was. His cloak, which should have been protected by the influence of his soul, had been ignited, likely from contact with the flaming Dissolver. He rolled, batting at the flames and managing to snuff them out before he took any more damage. He fell onto his back, staring up at the sky as he gasped for air.

The Razorspine's shriek was the only warning he had before a flaming blade slammed down onto his chest, like an icepick coated in burning gasoline. The impact compressed his lungs, driving him into the ground. The Forceweave stopped him from taking any serious damage, but his armor wasn't so lucky. The durability had dropped down below fifty percent with the strike.

The Razorspine reared back, raising its blade from the divot it had pounded into his breastplate. The monster's health bar was visible through his visor, still showing as over half full. Rain didn't even have time to process the futility of his situation before the Razorspine opened its mouth, spraying him with a torrent of acid that rivaled the outflow from a fire hose. The green fluid didn't ignite as it passed through the flames, which was only a small comfort.

His armor's saturation, which had been slowly recovering, shot up to full in an instant. There was a plume of dark smoke and a loud hiss, which cut off abruptly as the metal swallowed the majority of the acid's magic. The Dissolver sprung away, shrieking angrily as it reacted to something that Rain couldn't see. A crack of thunder followed, marking Tilson as his savior.

Rain wasted no time, activating Purify to deal with the acid before it could get in through the joints of his armor. The green liquid vanished, offering little resistance without its magic to sustain it. Rain gave it a moment, then switched back to Winter. Without Aura Focus, he had little hope of recovering enough mana for it to matter, but it was better than nothing.

A screech shook him out of his daze, and he pushed himself up to hands and knees, searching for the monster. He spotted it a short distance away, flailing wildly and trying to extinguish the flames that still covered it. As he watched, it crashed into a building, burying itself in a shower of rubble. Cries of terror rose from within the structure.

"Fuck!" Rain swore, lurching to his feet. *There're people in there.* He only had around two hundred mana left, but he wasn't about to let the Razorspine just run wild.

"You okay?" Tilson shouted. He'd moved away, standing a few meters to Rain's left. He had an arrow drawn to his cheek and was charging it with lightning as he waited for the monster to free itself from the rubble.

"I'm alive," Rain shouted back. "Low on mana. Can't take much more of this."

Tilson's reply was cut off as the Dissolver freed itself from the building, the flames extinguished. Tilson loosed his arrow, the bolt crackling with electricity as it flew toward the monster and struck it in the abdomen. The arrow penetrated the chitin this time, remaining lodged there as it discharged a powerful bolt of lightning. The Dissolver lost another sliver of

health, but other than that, the hit only made it even angrier. It raised its blades as it launched itself toward Tilson, its six legs propelling it rapidly across the shattered cobblestones.

“Hey!” Rain shouted urgently, intending to place himself between the archer and the onrushing beast. He realized he wasn’t going to make it before he’d even taken a single step. *Shit.* He activated Force Ward instead, making sure that the spell would reach far enough to cover Tilson. It was the best he could do, and with his low mana, it wouldn’t be nearly enough unless the Watch officer had some serious defenses of his own.

Tilson cursed and dove, rolling out of the way, dodging the Razorspine’s blades by centimeters. Rain rushed toward the monster, which whirled at the sound of his footsteps. It slashed at him, fast, but not faster than he’d been expecting. Rain copied Tilson’s technique, rolling under the strike. His tattered cloak, already shredded and weakened by the acid and fire, tore away completely. Coming back to his feet, Rain joined Tilson in flight. A green crescent of acid struck him in the back, pushing his armor’s saturation back to full and cutting into its durability with a sizzling hiss. The Dissolver roared. Rain glanced over his shoulder, seeing it charging after him. He broke left, heading away from Tilson.

“Where are you going!” Tilson shouted, but Rain ignored him, charging straight for a stone wall. He could hear the monster hot on his heels, gaining quickly. He had no hope of outrunning it, even with Velocity, but that didn’t mean the aura couldn’t save him.

Moments before he reached the wall, he threw himself to the ground, then activated the speed-boosting aura, targeting not himself, but the monster.

**Velocity** (10/10)

468% boost to speed for all entities

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Unfortunately, the spell didn't have the effect that he'd hoped for. If the aura affected the monster at all, it didn't show it, coming to an abrupt stop before it crashed into the wall and scything down at him with its blades. Rain rolled, scrambling to get out of the way, but he wasn't fast enough. He was again smashed into the ground, his armor taking the strike on one of his pauldrons. The metal plate crumpled under the blow, jamming into Rain's shoulder before it ripped away with a tortured screech of metal.

Dropping Velocity, Rain switched to Force Ward as the monster readied its next strike.

**Force Ward** (10/10)  
Increase physical resistance by 62.42% for all entities  
Range: 0 meters  
Cost: 0.85 mp/dmg mitigated

Numbers flashed through his mind like lightning as the blade descended toward his face. *Two thousand damage from the strike, times the 37.5% not mitigated, makes seven-fifty left over, which should be handled by my armor and the charm. Blocking the twelve-fifty will cost me 1062 mana, which I don't have. Should I lower it further, or—*

Out of nowhere, a colossal, shaggy shape crashed into the Razorspine Dissolver like a freight train, smashing it through the stone wall before its blade could make contact with Rain's chest. He gasped as he recognized the shape for what it was.

*Wolf!*

A grumbling, basso roar, like that of a lion, vibrated through the air. Rain felt the sound in his chest, and as the dust settled, he saw the colossal form of Wolf facing off against the reeling Dissolver, her teeth bared. Almost faster than he could follow, Wolf exploded into motion. The

bug-like monster swung its blades defensively, the razor-sharp chitin biting into the shaggy fur of Wolf's back as she crashed into it.

Rain's heart leapt into his mouth, but Wolf just shrugged off the hits. She had moved too quickly, blasting the monster back and robbing the power from its strikes. Her teeth found its throat, wedging its head up and back as she forced her jaws around its neck. The Dissolver flailed, mandibles clicking angrily as it slashed at Wolf's back again and again.

Wolf snarled, then twisted her whole body, pulling the monster down to smash against the ruins of the courtyard beyond the wall. Tilson took the opportunity to send a Piercing Arrow into its more lightly armored underside, the expensive skill identifiable by the silver streak of light that it left in the arrow's wake.

The Dissolver's six legs scabbled against the stones as it tried to free itself from Wolf's death grip on its neck. As powerful as the transformed Watch officer's attack seemed, it hadn't done much in terms of damage. The monster's health was still just under half, Wolf's teeth unable to crack the chitin.

Rain pushed himself back to his feet, staring as the two titans waged their vicious battle. The Dissolver made one last ineffectual attempt to dislodge Wolf with its blades, then shrieked and changed tactics. Instead of trying to break free, it wrapped its arms around Wolf in a razor-sharp hug, squeezing tight. Blood was already flowing freely from Wolf's back, matting her fur, and the blades looked to be cutting deeper by the moment.

Rain clenched his fists, watching helplessly. *I need to do something. I need to save her, but there's nothing...*

Crimson light flickered, cloaking the Musk Wolf in a cowl of bloody light. The Dissolver keened in surprise and pain as Wolf's teeth punched through its armor at last, sinking deep into its neck. It immediately released her, but Wolf didn't let go, savaging the monster viciously with her claws as its health started to drop. This didn't last for long, as with a pained yelp, Wolf released the creature, her snout covered with its green blood. The telltale smell of dissolving flesh filled the air as Wolf scrambled away, smoke rising from her fur.

Rain knew what he had to do. He sprinted for Wolf as she backed through the destroyed wall, flinging himself toward her neck. "Hold still!" he yelled, then forced his armored hand into her mouth as he triggered a Purify Nova. Two seconds passed, and the spell flickered and died as Rain's mana dropped to zero. Rain didn't have time to see if it had worked; Wolf had clamped down onto his arm with her teeth and jerked her head, flinging him through the air and wrenching his shoulder horribly. He had a good view of why she'd done that as he flew through the air. The Dissolver barreled into Wolf scarcely a second after she'd gotten him out of the way, sending her tumbling to the ground.

Wolf and the Dissolver spun out of view as Rain spun through the air. He knew he was out of mana, but he tried to activate Force Ward anyway. Unsurprisingly, it did nothing, and he hit the ground hard, his arms collapsing in a feeble attempt to stop his face from slamming into the cobblestones.

He felt his nose break as his head slammed against the inside of his helmet. The Forceweave padding that he'd added didn't extend under the visor, a design flaw he resolved to fix if he somehow managed to survive this fight. He gasped in pain, flailing wildly as he skidded along the ground. His neck felt as if it would snap from the force, but his momentum soon carried his legs up and over, relieving the pressure and somersaulting him onto his back.

Dazedly, Rain waved his arms like an upturned bug, pain and adrenaline barely keeping him conscious. In the agonizing minute that it took him to recover, the battle raged on without him, Wolf's roars and the angry tea-kettle noises of the Dissolver cutting the haze and stirring him to action. *I have to get up.*

Rain growled, fighting to raise himself off the ground. The discomfort from his twisted shoulder barely rated, not when compared to his broken nose and horribly burned skin. Blood was filling his mouth, and he spat, shaking his head. There was a screech from the monster, and he looked up to see Wolf crash into the ground, landing hard after a flight not dissimilar from his own. The Dissolver had sunk one of its blades deep into her back leg like a meat hook and sent her soaring through the air.

"Wolf!" Tilson shouted, his voice coming from immediately to Rain's left. An arrow followed his cry, striking the back of the Dissolver's head and sticking there. The monster's health, now down to a quarter, dropped further.

Rain's eyes widened as the Dissolver whirled, whipping an Acid Crescent at the archer. His body almost moved by itself as he rushed to intercept the strike. His armor had bled off some of the magic that it had absorbed, but the saturation bar quickly filled again as strike after strike splashed over him. The Dissolver, furious at being wounded, was stalking toward them menacingly, not letting up its rapid-fire assault. Tilson returned fire, his arrows sinking deep into the monster's chest, but not stopping it. There was a flash of amber light as he used Pinning Shot, but Rain's sudden hope died as the Dissolver skittered to the side, dodging the arrow.

"Depths!" Tilson cursed from somewhere behind Rain. "Run for it!"

Rain didn't need to be told twice, as the monster was practically on top of him. He abandoned his defensive position, diving to the side, but he was too slow. The Dissolver's slash caught him under the arm, cutting deeply into the weakened armor and sending him tumbling once more through the air. His flight was brought to a rapid halt by an inconveniently placed building.

Wood splintered as he rebounded from the impact with the second story. Rain flailed as he fell the four meters to the ground, landing in a graceless belly flop against the cobblestones. He almost blacked out as his broken nose struck the inside of his helmet again, his health dropping to around three hundred. A normal human would likely have been dead. Even with the advantage of his greater health and the protection of the Forceweave, the impact was devastating. The world swam, and colors flashed in his vision as he fought to lift himself from the ground, his heart pounding loud in his ears.

Rain gasped, gulping for air. His chest felt restricted by the dent in his breastplate, and several of his armor's joints had been warped by the forces that they'd been subjected to, further hindering him. The armor's durability showed as a quarter full, but it looked even worse than that. There was a huge gash in the left side of the breastplate, revealing the sliced Forceweave below, crimson with his blood.

The Dissolver stalked toward him as he feebly rolled himself over and pushed himself to his knees. He grasped frantically for his magic, willing something, anything, to activate. Immolate flickered for a second, consuming the three points of mana that he'd managed to regenerate, but the feeble spell barely even warmed the air.

"Hey!" a high-pitched voice shouted unexpectedly. A bolt of fire impacted the monster's head, and it whipped around, searching for the source.



Rain blinked in disbelief as his eyes locked on to Ava. The seven-year-old girl was standing atop a building, pointing her finger at the monster. As Rain stared, another Firebolt flickered into existence at the tip of her finger. The Dissolver hissed and slashed the magical projectile apart with a contemptuous flick. It turned its head back to Rain, alien eyes filled with rage.

It took a single step, but then, there was a pop of teleportation, and Mlem's scimitar slammed down onto its back. The metal blade bit deep into the monster's carapace, the edge shining with azure light.

"Good work, Ava!" Mlem shouted over the hiss of the monster. "Nice distraction!" He dodged backward as an arrow from Tilson speared through the Dissolver's open mouth, the head of the bolt piercing through the back of the monster's neck. The Razorspine still had plenty of health left, but its bar rapidly crashed to zero moments after the bolt struck. It gave one last hiss of pain, then fell to the ground with a clatter. Green blood pooled around it, and Mlem stepped back quickly, hiking up the hem of his orange robe.

Relief washed over Rain like a wave as the system's chime sounded, informing him of the monster's death. He let his trembling arms collapse, rolling onto his back as he fell to the ground.

Your party has defeated [Razorspine Dissolver], Level 15  
Your Contribution: 71%  
0 Experience Earned

Straining against the pain, he opened the settings for the Malleable Ring and dropped his strength boost to zero, sacrificing just over a hundred health in the process. There was a sickening crack as his nose snapped back into place, and he shouted in surprise at the sudden spike of pain. It didn't last, fading away and leaving him with the continuing agony of his

other wounds. The overhealth had only taken the edge off, however, and the colors had cleared from his vision.

Rain rolled his head to the side weakly, panting for a moment, then forced himself to his feet. He knew that if he lay down, he'd probably pass out, and there was still work to do. He took one unsteady step, then another, straightening his shoulders. The world spun, and he staggered, barely catching himself before he fell.

"Woah there, Rain, are you okay?" Mlem's voice buzzed in his ear, distant, like the humming of a fly. Rain wasn't listening. Through a gap in the buildings and over the still dark surface of the river, he had seen the first light of dawn, glowing warmly in the distance. Wolf was sitting propped against a building, back in human form and cradling her leg, but clearly alive.

Rain closed his eyes, tears of pain and relief mixing with the blood on his face as he took a shuddering breath. Warily, and with great pain in his shoulder, he raised both arms above his head, turning to face the light.

"Praise the sun."