

169: Holdout

Sitting atop Rain-King's shoulder, Dozer listened to the humans—he remembered the word!—talking. From Rain-King, he knew that the talking was important, but he didn't really understand what it was about or why they were doing so much of it. Rain-King could be hard to understand sometimes—a lot of the time—but it was easier for Dozer to turn talking into knowing when it was Rain-King doing the talking. With other humans, it was harder. Rain-King could have explained the things that the other humans were saying, but Rain-King didn't want to. Rain-King was busy. All of the humans were busy.

[Rain-King,] Dozer sent, bouncing up and down. [When play?]

[Later, Dozer,] Rain-King sent, reaching up to pat Dozer gently with his enormous hand.

[You're being patient, remember?] Dozer wiggled happily, receiving the pats. Dozer liked pats. They were like fist bumps, but everywhere.

[Rain-King Big!] Dozer sent for what had to be the third time.

[No, Dozer small,] Rain-King explained, amused. [Rain-King normal-sized. Well, more or less. I'm bigger than I was. Them gains, you know.]

[Yes! Rain-King big!] Dozer agreed.

A flicker of some complicated emotion came through the King-Link, and Rain-King began speaking aloud. Dozer focused, listening with his membrane.

"Sorry, what was that, Samson? Dozer was distracting me." Rain-King sighed, feeling another complicated emotion. "Again."

"Here, let me take him," said Ameliah-Queen, and then Dozer was being lifted from Rain-King's shoulder by metal hands. He quivered in excitement when he realized that the hands belonged to Ameliah-Queen. He found himself deposited in her lap, receiving more pats.

[Rain-King!] Dozer sent, excited. [Ameliah-Queen big! Ameliah-Queen shell!]

[Yes, Dozer, I know,] Rain-King sent, shaking his head, then speaking aloud. "That doesn't really help. He's wireless."

"Can't you block him out?" asked another of the humans.

"I can, but..." Rain sighed. "Fine." *[Dozer, the adults are talking. Sorry about this, but I'm going to squelch you.]*

[Squelch?] Dozer sent, confused. Why was Rain-King sorry? Then Dozer understood as the King-Link snapped closed.

Dozer deflated, experiencing an emotion. He suddenly felt very, very alone. He began to tremble.

"Oh no," Ameliah-Queen said, picking him up from her lap and cupping him in both hands. She raised him to her face. It was hard to hear the shape of things when they were far away, and since the humans had grown so much, that made things even worse. Being this close let

him feel her much more clearly, but it wasn't enough. He was alone. He was still trembling violently as Ameliah-Queen spoke. "It's okay, Dozer. I'm right here."

"Relax, Dozer," Rain-King said aloud. Abruptly, the King-Link returned. *[I didn't abandon you. I just put you on mute. Now be good and play with Ameliah.]*

Oh.

Dozer suddenly felt very silly. The King-Link had closed again the moment Rain-King had finished explaining, so he couldn't share this emotion with Rain-King, but that was fine. He was still wanted. Just squelched. And squelched meant muted. Dozer knew what muted was. He had to mute Rain-King sometimes, such as when there was FILTH to be cleaned and Rain-King wouldn't stop talking. Like now.

Setting the incomprehensible priorities of his king aside, Dozer wiggled happily as Ameliah-Queen deposited him on her shoulder. Whatever the talking was about, Rain-King would take care of it. That meant Dozer was free to explore. First, he tried going left to investigate Ameliah-Queen's neck where it poked out of her shell. Her membrane was as warm and soft as he remembered and entirely free from filth as far as he could taste. That wasn't surprising.

Ameliah-Queen shifted slightly in response to the contact. "Yes, Dozer. Hello."

Happily, Dozer sucked in a bubble of air, then squeezed as hard as he could before releasing it.

pop

Ameliah-Queen changed the shape of her talking hole. It was closed, but curved up at the ends. It took Dozer a moment, but Dozer was smart. He remembered the name Rain-King had told him for the talking hole (*mouth*) and the shape it had made (*smile*). That meant Ameliah-Queen was experiencing an emotion! Ameliah-Queen was happy!

Dozer vibrated up and down and left and right in elation, but he couldn't just stay here celebrating. He had to check the other humans to make sure that they were also clean and happy. To do that, he had to be brave.

Moving away from Ameliah-Queen's face, Dozer steadied himself on her shoulder, then listened hard, identifying the closest human. It was Tall-Brother. Even at this distance, Dozer could hear the shape of his branches. Rain-King said the branches made Tall-Brother something not a human but like a human called a cervidian, but Dozer didn't see the difference. Tall-Brother was Tall-Brother. It was like *muted* and *squelched*. The humans sure did use a lot of different words for meaning the same thing. Dozer just didn't understand sometimes.

Carefully, he bunched himself up, then leapt.

"Hey!" Ameliah-Queen shouted after him in concern, but she should have known better than to underestimate Dozer's power. He soared across the gap, then splattered against Tall-Brother's cheek just as he'd intended. He bounced off to land on his shoulder, clinging as hard as he could when Tall-Brother moved violently and unexpectedly. A moment passed while Dozer secured his grip, then a low, deep sound came to him. Dozer jiggled in appreciation of Tall-Brother's magnificent rumble.

Tall-Brother spoke, reaching up to provide pats. "This is going to be a long day."

"Careful!" Rain shouted as he rushed to support the wooden trunk before it slid off the platform and crashed to the ground.

"Sorry, Captain," said one of the Vestvallen men holding the pallet atop which the trunk was balanced. The pallet looked like an aluminum ladder you might find at a hardware store, but wider, with a thin sheet of metal welded to form a platform at the center. There was no road between Vestvall and Three Cliffs, and this was the solution Tallheart had come up with for things too large to fit in a backpack, making use of their abundant metal supplies. It wouldn't be reasonable to build another forgewagon, not with the overgrown forest to the east. Everything would need to be carried.

Rain sighed, shaking his head, looking back at the Vestvallen. "You need to strap things like this down." He rapped his knuckles on the side of the wooden trunk. "Especially if the contents might shift." He gave them an appraising look, judging the strain in their expressions. "What did you put in there, anyway? Rocks?"

"I— Sorry," the man stammered, looking away. "It's...uh...books, Captain. They told us we should bring as many as we could find in the nobles' houses, so we grabbed em' all."

"Fair enough," Rain said, recalling having ordered precisely that. "This is way too heavy, though. Some unlucky pair is going to have to carry this for days on end. It might be you two. Did you consider that?"

Both men paled, the one Rain had been addressing continuing in a rush. "We'll do better, my lo—Captain. We were thinking, honest, we just—"

"Relax," Rain said tiredly, glancing at his interface. It was four in the morning. He could feel Dozer back at the camp, happily asleep in his tiny new box.

Lucky slime.

Looking back up at the man, Rain forced a smile onto his face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be hard on you. I'm the one who wasn't thinking. I didn't realize there'd be this many books to be found, so I should have set a limit. The nobles were really holding out on us." He sighed.

"Look, what's your name?"

"Lealus, sir," the man replied instantly, then winced. "Sorry, I didn't mean to call you sir, unless you want—"

Rain sighed again. "I said relax, didn't I? Yes, I don't like being called sir, but I'm past the point of caring about that right now, and even if I wasn't, I wouldn't punish you for it. Now let's get this trunk set down and lightened up. You can make two trips. We'll sort out what's worth bringing and what's not back at camp. Here's hoping there's a decent map in there somewhere."

Rain glanced at the man holding the poles on the other side, who'd been silent all this time.

"Okay, Bargem, down slowly on three."

The man's eyes went wide. "You know me?"

Rain chuckled. "Your sister pointed you out to me like six hours ago. Sorry, we don't have time for the test right now, but feel free to take it once all this dies down."

"Damn it, sis, Bargem grumbled. "I said I was thinking about joining, not that I'd made up my mind."

Rain smiled. "Okay, here we go. Three. Two..."

Once he'd finished helping the book hunters, Rain resumed his supervision of the scavenging operation. He was here largely for defense, but that didn't mean he had to stand idle, not when there was so much to be done. Everything that might be needed had to go, from pots and pans, to animals, to wooden adventurers. He wasn't about to make a child leave their favorite toy behind, but a line would need to be drawn somewhere regarding personal items. Fortunately, he had a full company assisting him with the effort. Vanna was back at the camp, supervising the formation of the caravan and making such difficult decisions. Ameliah was there too, but she was supposed to be resting.

What will the Empire think, I wonder? Are they watching us? They must be by now.

Rain shook his head and got back to work. True dawn came and passed, and the work continued. Eventually, however, Rain removed himself from it, as there was another matter he needed to attend to now that the sun was finally up.

He began making his way toward the largest remaining building in Vestvall, removing his helmet from where he'd tied it at his waist and slipping it back on his head. He lowered the visor as a group of twenty or so guards rushed across the open lawn that surrounded the mansion, assembling themselves into formation, pointing their crossbows at his chest. The

two ballistae mounted incongruously on the building's roof had long since swiveled in his direction.

"You know force won't work," Rain said, spreading his hands peacefully. "I don't want to have to hurt you. I'm just here to talk."

"We have our orders," said a twenty-something man wearing an embroidered black doublet. Unlike the others, he wasn't wearing a helmet. Instead of a crossbow, he had a pair of hand-axes looped through his belt. Rain provisionally placed him as Emerton, the leader of Lady Sale's household guard. He'd never met the man himself, but Mlem had been meeting with him frequently, though to little result. To hear Mlem tell it, the man was unwaveringly loyal to his mistress.

"Are you Emerton?" Rain asked, pivoting his head to face the man.

Emerton nodded. "Lady Sale has commanded that you be shot on sight."

Rain lowered his hands, extending one of them toward the man to shake. "I'll take the fact that I remain unpunctured to be a good sign then."

Emerton snorted. "You have already demonstrated that crossbows cannot harm you, and now that my eyes have been opened, I hold little hope for the ballistae. It is the spirit of her orders that I follow these days. In this case, it is my duty to insist you leave at once."

Rain arched an eyebrow, keeping his hand extended. "Your duty? Clearly you care for your lady greatly. Should you not concern yourself more with her best interest? You've heard the

news of what's happening by now, I'm sure. Everyone's leaving. I'm not going to let anyone stay here to die on their own."

"Lady Sale believes we will survive just fine," Emerton said as the guards around him shifted nervously. "We have food, weapons, supplies...everything we could ever need. She has been preparing for this for as long as I have been alive."

Dozer help me, she's a prepper. And she was right, too. The apocalypse WAS coming. She's going to be impossible.

Rain shook his head slowly, keeping his tone diplomatic. "And you? What do you believe? Do you really think twenty guards with crossbows will be able to keep you safe from the monsters? From the Adamant Empire?"

"I do not," said Emerton.

The other guards murmured in surprise, and Rain smiled.

"So?" he asked, his hand still extended.

"So," Emerton said, stepping forward and taking it in his own.

"Oh, thank the gods!" said one of the guards, sinking to his knees and letting his crossbow thump to the finely kept lawn.

"Stand down, everyone," Emerton said, releasing Rain's hand and turning to face the mansion. He gestured widely, and the ballistae were raised to point at the sky.

"Great," Rain said with a satisfied nod. *Finally*. "Now please, take me to her. Don't worry. Like I said, I'm not going to let anyone stay here to die on their own. She's coming with us."

Emerton hesitated, then shook his head and gestured toward the mansion. "This way. Please be patient with her. She can be...difficult."

Upon entering the foyer, Rain noted a grand, gilded staircase leading up to the second floor, but that wasn't where Emerton led him. Instead, he took him to a small side door, opening it with a key to reveal a second door behind it, this one of rusted iron with an enormous metal padlock. He unlocked that in turn, hauling the door open with a groan to reveal a narrow stone stairwell burrowing into the earth.

Rain blinked. Detection hadn't informed him of anyone being present in the building's cellars. He pinged again. The cellars were there, as they had been on his initial scan, but they were empty of people.

A trap?

His next ping was at full power, and this time, he got a response. There was one person down there after all. Tilting his head, he looked at Emerton. "Wards?"

"And traps," Emerton replied, gesturing at a suspicious hole in the wall as he passed. "Don't worry. I disabled most of them years ago. Don't tell her. It's just the anti-Divination array in her room that's still running. I couldn't turn that one off without her noticing. It glows, you know."

Rain shook his head in disbelief, descending the stairs and making sure that his macros were configured for combat. He really didn't want this to come to blows, but he would be ready if it did. He had a full set of accolades, having rented them back out of stock with the threat of the Knives looming on the horizon. The pouch at his waist also contained one of their precious Message scrolls and several potions in case things went really sideways.

Not that I'm afraid it will. Okay, maybe I am a little, now.

Rain's mind was spinning as he descended, coming up with ways that a silverplate could be disabled without bypassing the damage limit. Say, for example, a section of the ceiling rigged to collapse, burying him beneath tons of stone to suffocate. That would be problematic. Detection could only do so much. As far as he could tell, the ceiling seemed nice and sturdy, but boosting a scan enough to punch through any concealing wards would have left him a drooling mess. There was just too much stone around, and looking for air at that kind of power level would have been an even worse idea.

To-do: synesthesia training.

Shaking his head, Rain forced himself to return to more realistic concerns, such as Lady Sale herself. She had been an Axe Warrior in her youth by all reports, though no one had seen her fight for dozens of years. While Rain didn't know her exact level, no credible source had placed it above ten.

Before long, Emerton stopped at a surprisingly normal door, albeit one that had nothing on the other side according to Detection. He knocked. "Lady Sale, Captain Rain of Ascension to see you."

"Well, hurry up then," a quavery voice called from within. "I'm not getting any younger."

Emerton raised an eyebrow, giving Rain a look. Apparently, he hadn't expected that reaction. After a moment, he motioned Rain to step back, then reached up to the evertorch burning in the sconce beside the door. "She still checks this one," he said by way of explanation as he twisted it clockwise until it clicked.

Rain shook his head, speechless. He hadn't sensed a thing.

Emerton turned the doorknob, then released the torch, allowing it to rotate back into position as he pushed the door open and stepped through.

Rain peered after him, taking in Lady Sale's bedroom. It was richly furnished and carpeted, dimly lit by candles here and there. It would have given it a cozier feel if it hadn't been flirting with the risk of monster spawns. Tapestries hung from the walls, partially obscuring runes that glowed with a faint white light. From what Rain could see of the magical formation, it was similar to the one that the Watch had used in their interrogation room.

No matter how this goes, I need to get Romer and Tallheart out here to take a look.

"Well?" Lady Sale croaked, beckoning from where she was lying on her canopied bed, covered by a blanket. "Are you going to come in and kill me or not?"

Rain directed his attention to the noblewoman, his eyes gradually adjusting to the dim light. Lady Sale was positively ancient, with thin, stark-white hair, skeletal features, and dry, splotchy skin. He would have sworn he was looking at a desiccated corpse if not for the surprisingly

blue eyes and the finger pointed accusingly his way. The old woman's bony arm was shaking, but there was not an ounce of weakness in her glare.

"I'm not here to kill you," Rain said, entering slowly.

"So you say, boy." Lady Sale replied, letting her arm drop back to the covers. She snorted, her tongue darting out to lick her withered lips. "I guess the rumors were right. You are soft, after all. A real man would have done it by now." A cloud seemed to pass over her expression, and her entire demeanor seemed to change in an instant. "Emerton, what are you doing? Don't be rude. Get our guest a drink."

Emerton hesitated, then moved toward a dresser bearing a crystal decanter and several goblets.

"I'm fine, thank you," Rain said, hiding no small amount of unease. *Uh...what just happened?*

"Nonsense," Lady Sale said as Emerton uncapped the decanter and began to pour. "Emerton, serve our most courteous guest, then stand over there out of the way."

Emerton walked apologetically over to Rain, handing him a goblet filled with an amber liquid that exuded a powerful aroma of alcohol. "I wouldn't drink that if I were you," he whispered. "She never does."

"You're in the way, Emerton!" Lady Sale snapped, both with her voice and with her fingers. She pointed at the wall next to the dresser. "Shoo, so I can see how our guest likes the brandy." The angry tone vanished as Emerton obeyed, and she smiled at Rain, revealing broken and missing teeth. "Do have a taste, won't you?"

"I don't think I will," said Rain, glancing around. He set the goblet down on a nearby table, next to a candle in an elaborate holder shaped like a swan.

"Bah, you can't blame me for the attempt," said Lady Sale with a huff, crossing her arms. "Take off that fancy bucket so I can get a look at you before you slit my throat."

"I don't think I'll do that either," Rain said. "And I told you, I'm not here to kill you. I want you to come with us. You do know what's going on up there, right?"

"She does," Emerton confirmed.

"What?" Lady Sale said loudly. "Emerton, tell him to speak up. I can't hear him from way over there. My old ears, you know."

"Please stop trying to kill him and listen to what he has to say," Emerton said.

"What?" Lady Sale hollered even louder this time, raising a hand to her ear.

"I jammed the release for the spikes years ago," Emerton replied at a normal, drawing an indignant gasp from Lady Sale, followed by an impressive string of curses.

Rain froze, having already lifted his foot to step closer. He glanced up at the ceiling, then winced. In the dim light, he could faintly see a metal frame hanging there, indeed home to quite a number of vicious spikes.

Damn it. Why is remembering to look up so hard?

"So, your betrayal is complete, bastard," Lady Sale said, glaring at Emerton venomously. "I should have never let you stay, not after your father went and got himself killed and doomed our house. He turned out to be a disgrace, so what's that say about you as a disgrace to his memory?"

"Great Grandmother, please," Emerton said, sounding shocked and hurt.

Lady Sale sniffed. "I don't recall ever giving you the right to call me that." She sat up, the covers falling away to reveal her shrunken torso, wrapped tightly in bandages like a mummy. She threw aside the blanket, rising on twig-like legs, and Rain saw that her whole body was wrapped in the same way. She began tottering unsteadily toward a table buried in scrolls, looking every bit like a walking corpse. "You know, I was hoping to save this for someone worthy. Such a pity."

That was all the warning Rain had before Lady Sale lunged for the table, her feebleness vanishing in an instant. He tensed as scrolls flew through the air, and the candlelight glinted off something metallic. There was a sound like thunder, and an enormous hammer of force slammed into his chest, blasting him out into the hallway to crash against the wall. A dialog appeared in the center of his HUD for an instant before it vanished as quickly as it had come.

dmgnum.sh version 0.0.1
2,500 (>9,999 physical)

His ears ringing, Rain rebounded from the wall to land on his feet. The sound of metal sliding on stone made him turn his head, seeing the projectile that had struck him skid to a stop after its ricochet.

A harpoon? What the shit?!

Activating Force Ward—though it was a bit too late—he shook his head. His armor’s hardness was over the damage limit, but that didn’t make him invulnerable. The passive resistance cap applied to physical attacks no less than it did for magical ones.

She can hit the damage limit. This might be bad.

“Oh ho ho?” Lady Sale said. “Survived that, did you? I guess you were worthy after all.”

Within the room, Rain saw her standing there like a scarecrow, a two-handed crescent axe resting across the back of her shoulders. There was a metal tube-like object lying discarded on the ground, smoke curling from both ends.

A bazooka!? What!? But they don’t even know about gunpowder!

Lady Sale beckoned. “Come on then. I still remember how to dance.”

Shaking away his shock, Rain carefully stepped forward with his arms held out defensively as he spoke through clenched teeth. “I...am not here...to kill you! For someone who doesn’t want to die, you’re working awful hard for a Darwin.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Lady Sale said. “The Spiker make a crack in your skull, boy?”

Rain came to a stop in front of her, watching as she lifted the axe from her shoulders, gripping it with two hands in a ready stance. Her skeletal limbs were no longer shaking.

Deciding to take a risk, Rain let his arms fall to his sides.

Lady Sale seized the opening, her axe bursting into flame as she leapt forward. There was a faint blur that he recognized as Flash Step, and she vanished. Rain didn't move, trusting in his armor as the crescent blade slammed into the back of his neck. He felt the impact and a tiny puff of heat, but his damage dialog didn't appear. The script responsible was only a prototype, but a quick glance at his armor's saturation confirmed that the lack of response hadn't been an error. The Heat damage from her skill hadn't been enough to surpass his resistance, nor had the physical damage exceeded 7,499—the threshold at which Force Ward would have kicked in. She couldn't hurt him.

It didn't stop her from trying. True to her word, Lady Sale danced, moving in a whirlwind too fluid to be anything other than a Kata. She struck again and again, with flames and without, targeting his joints. Rain's cloak was quickly reduced to charred ribbons by her flaming axe, but that wasn't a big deal. It just put him in the same company as Ameliah. He took the punishment silently, only making sure that the old woman didn't manage to cut away his pouches or strike his visor too strongly. The catch that held it closed could be overcome with enough force—something he'd been meaning to talk to Tallheart about.

If Lady Sale was upset by his lack of resistance, she didn't show it. If anything...

She's...smiling? She's actually insane, isn't she?

Finally, after about three minutes, the ancient woman stopped, panting heavily as she backed away, coming to a stop near the dresser where Emerton was watching helplessly.

"Well," she said, reaching up to brush her limp hair back from her sweaty brow. "So maybe you aren't all talk." Her tongue darted out to lick her lips again, then she spat. "Are you happy with yourself? Standing there like a stump, enjoying an old woman struggling for her life?"

"How many times do I have to say it?" Rain asked, turning his palms outward as he turned to face her. "I'm not here to kill you."

"We are leaving, my lady," Emerton said, hesitantly reaching over to lay a hand on the haft of her axe. "We all are. I already let the guards go. We want you to come with us."

"NO!" Lady Sale shrieked, sudden rage bursting forth from nowhere as spittle flew from her mouth. She wrenched the axe away. "I'm not leaving!"

"My lady, be rea—" Emerton began, but Lady Sale didn't let him finish.

"This is my house!" she screamed at him, raising the axe threateningly. "Mine, mine, mine!"

Rain stared at the axe. *Crap. Force Ward won't be enough to save him if she lights it up again.* Hurriedly, he stepped forward to recapture Lady Sale's attention, which worked, as her gaze immediately snapped to him.

Her old face split into a wicked grin, once more revealing her missing teeth. "So, you like the bastard, huh? You're a softy after all, just like the rumors said. That means I win." Before Rain could stop her, she blurred, appearing behind Emerton to wrap one spindly arm around him. She slid the other up the haft of her axe, pressing the blade to Emerton's neck. "Go! Go, or I'll ki—"

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info: macroset running in verbose mode
script: limit_optimized
script_version: v1.1.1
direct_args: 0 5
```

IFF Whitelist Mode

>[Lady Sale]

Amplify Active

Focus Active

rangearg 5

>Compression set to 80.35 meters

Focus Boost

>Reallocating: 70 RCV, 122 VGR

>Focus Boost: 192/198

limitarg 0

>Damage Limit set to 9,999

>Optimizing...

>Channel Mastery: 145.25%

Radiance (10/10)

9,999.56-11,428.07 light (fcs) damage per second to entities

Brightens environment (fcs)

Range: 5 meters

Cost: 653.6 mp/s

Lady Sale might have screamed as the blinding flash of golden light filled the room, but Rain wouldn't have heard it if she had. When his senses returned, there was a glowing afterimage dancing across his vision, despite having squeezed his eyelids shut. He ignored it, rushing forward in response to Emerton's wail of agony. The man was clutching at his eyes as he staggered away from Lady Sale's corpse. The old noblewoman had fallen flat on her face, with a charred hole burned straight through her skull.

Rain reached Emerton, then knelt and fumbled at his pouch as the man collapsed. Emerton's wail finally ended in a rasping gurgle, his blood darkening the carpet. As quick as Radiance

was, it clearly hadn't been quick enough. Deliberately or not, Lady Sale had managed to slash Emerton's neck as she fell, making the mageburn a secondary concern, as bad as it was.

Freeing the cork from a potion, Rain activated Purify to wipe away the blood, then dumped the potion out onto Emerton's neck, seeing the flesh knit back together before his eyes. He was already reaching for another vial, which he practically poured down the man's newly-mended throat before making sure he swallowed. Emerton managed to get it down just in time, passing out seconds later.

Casting the bottle aside, Rain scooped up the man's limp body, then sprinted for the door.

FUCK!