

239: Sharing

After a ten minute sprint from the lower gate of Threecore, Rain skidded to a stop, turning to face Ameliah. Her armor beneath the wrappings glowed golden from the reflected light of Radiance, while the tunnel behind her was stripped clean of the vegetation the codex said grew in this area. They hadn't technically seen the Kin responsible, the few that had wandered into range having been erased out-of-sight by Immolate and Purify, but their numbers were steadily increasing with the essence density.

Kin and essence, however, were far from the forefront of Rain's mind.

"Far enough?" Ameliah asked.

"Far enough," Rain replied, barely maintaining his veneer of calm.

Dozer was less reserved. [*Unity, Unity, Unity!*] The slime sent, bouncing from Rain's shoulder to ricochet off the ceiling, then from wall to wall to ceiling to floor like a possessed bouncy ball.

"Come here," Ameliah said, beckoning to Rain, and he quickly hurried over, summoning the predicted skill card.

Unity (1/10)

Entities may use the active skills of other entities within range and in their party

Unity user must match any health, mana, and stamina costs

Maximum Skill Tier: 2 (fcs)

Maximum Skill Rank: 1

Range: 1 meter

"Gods, you're like a puppy," Ameliah said, beaming at him behind her helmet as he slipped an arm through hers.

"Do it before I explode!"

Ameliah raised her free hand, counting down with her fingers. "Three, two, one..."

There was no visual indication as the spell activated, but Rain felt the system's ethereal fingers twitch, tunneling into his soul to deposit fragments of power into the skill cradles waiting for them. It was a subtle thing, and he was sure he'd have missed it had he not been prepared.

"Woah," Ameliah said. "That's a rush."

Or maybe not, but then, she's used to swapping skills. He made a note to test it later with someone less awesome. More critical was the list, which he promptly read out. "I got Airwalk, Healing Word, Drilling Shot, Seeker Shot, Piercing Shot, Strong Draw, Endless Quiver, Sniper Shot, and Energy Well. You?"

"More than that, hold on," Ameliah said, her voice distant. "You want me to read them? Of course you do. Stupid question. I got—"

She was interrupted by Dozer, landing on Rain's head with enough force to knock it into her shoulder, then sticking there, vibrating with fury. *[No get!]*

"Dozer, I told you it was a long shot," Rain said impatiently as he pulled the slime from the side of his helmet and placed him on his shoulder. "The system doesn't count bonded entities

as party members.”

[No!!!!!! Am Dozer! Am the party!]

Smiling, Rain nodded. Then he tried; he really did.

Disappointingly, no matter how hard he willed it, the party link refused to form alongside his existing bond to the slime. There wasn't even a *hint* of resistance, which would have meant what he was asking for was possible, and he ultimately had to give up with a shake of his head. “Sorry, buddy. It's not going to work. You'll have to take it up with the system.”

[Will!] Dozer sent, rocketing off his shoulder and vanishing with a pop.

“Should I be concerned?” Ameliah asked.

“Only if he wins,” Rain said, wondering what it would be like to use Divide. Recovering quickly from the mental picture, he let his own excitement blaze back to the fore. “Okay, tell me.”

Ameliah smiled behind her visor, then took a deep breath. “Amplify Aura, Extend Aura, Aura Focus, Aura IFF, Prismatic Intent, Heat Ward, Arcane Ward, Chemical Ward, Mental Ward, Force Ward, Channel Mastery, Mana Manipulation, Immolate, Refrigerate, Radiance, Shroud, Fulmination, Purify, Winter, Detection, Essence Well, and Velocity.”

“Holy shit!” Rain said as she caught her breath, having been squirming from the very first skill she'd mentioned. “You got the metamagic! YOU GOT THE METAMAGIC! I WAS RIGHT A—!” He stopped abruptly, then tilted his head. “Wait, you got copies of the spells you already had? Did I? It didn't feel like I did...”

"Maybe it's a Jack thing," Ameliah said. "I think... I think I can swap them without waiting the hour." She extended a hand, palm up, and Rain jumped as all the pebbles in the hallway flew toward it, leaving her with a handful of gravel.

His eyes widened, then he hurriedly copied her.

Attract!

The gravel spilled from her palm as it attempted to fly to his. Attempted, as the force he'd generated had been insufficient. But it *had* moved.

"Okay, so that's working," Ameliah said, her own excitement finally bubbling through. "We won't have to grub for Tel once we find the eggs. What do you think? should I take Light Ward? Actually, wait a minute... Damn, that doesn't work. I can't take Discombobulate or Impediment even though you have the prerequisites. So much for that."

Rain blinked. "Wait up, let me check if—"

Not bothering to voice the rest of the thought, he summoned a skill card.

Aura Synergy (20/15)

Increase all aura output by 2.0% for each rank in any aura

Effective boost: 482.0%

"It works with Aura Synergy!" he gasped, pointing. "The boost's two percent higher! It's counting the rank in Energy Well!"

Ameliah tilted her head. "Huh. Too bad Aura Synergy itself isn't shared. I suppose I could take it, but you'll be the one casting all of these." She paused. "I wonder if... Hold me."

"Hold you?" Rain asked, only to grunt as she threw her arms around him and went limp. His Strength was high enough not to stagger from the unexpected weight, and she was already back by the time he realized she'd only used Aura Focus.

"Damn," she muttered, straightening but not removing her arms from his shoulders. "I tried boosting Unity with Channel Mastery, Amplify Aura, and Aura Focus, but my interface says I've only got the shared skills at rank one. I've maxed them before, so I hoped it would just let me use them at full power. Guess not."

"Did Unity's cost go up when you boosted it?" Rain asked, running the numbers.

"Yeah," Ameliah said.

"So power does *something*," he replied. "If boosting Unity proportionally lowers the Focus threshold, you wouldn't have hit the tier-three breakpoint with that combo. You would have if your metamagic was at full power. Seems plausible."

"Sounds like something we can test," Ameliah said. "Science time?"

Rain laughed, stealing a kiss through their helmets. "Hells yes!"

Half a day later, Rain was in an *unreasonably* good mood. Getting Unity to rank ten hadn't been hard, and Ameliah hadn't gotten a headache doing it. She hadn't needed to re-level her metamagic, and power *did* lower the Focus requirement.

Tier-three skills *could* be shared.

With some bootstrapping.

Unmodified, Unity required 10,000 Focus for tier three, but the math grew confusing if you tried to apply the modifiers to that number. It was better to apply them to Focus, then take the base-ten log minus one to get the maximum tier. For example, the Ameliah number was 1801.8 at the moment, being her per-stat value of 693 times her Jack mod of 2.6. Plugging that into the formula gave $\log_{10}(1801.8) - 1$, which evaluated to 2.26, or tier two when rounded down. Simple.

Amplify Aura was a 2x modifier. Applying that to Ameliah's Focus and turning the crank on the formula gave 2.56. Adding Channel Mastery brought the multiplier to 4x for a result of 2.86—still not enough. Aura Focus, though, was more potent. Without even needing Channel Mastery, Amplify Aura and Aura Focus combined for a 6x Focus multiplier and a max tier of 3.03—just over the line.

There had been much rejoicing.

As exciting as tier-three sharing was, Ameliah having to suffer sensory deprivation to maintain it wasn't ideal. Fortunately, with tier-three sharing came Aura Compression. Powerleveled—for it wasn't an ability she'd had previously—the metamagic gave a 2% boost for every meter of compression. Twenty meters of compression plus Amplify Aura and Channel Mastery equated

to a boost of 5.6x. While that sounded significantly lower than the 6x it had taken to enable tier three, logs were logs. They weren't linear. Doing the math revealed that it was still over the line, if only by a hair at 3.004.

Despite the nominal success, there had been much mild profanity.

The result was *infuriatingly* shy of what it needed to be. Plenty of range was available for Aura Compression to eat up when Aura Focus was active, but the idea was to *not* have it active. Extend Aura got Unity to twenty meters, and while it technically only took nineteen and a half meters of compression, fractional steps were difficult. Of course, Ameliah was awesome and could doubtless have managed it with a few minutes of practice, but she'd opted for the practical option: taking Aura Synergy.

Upon which there had been more mild profanity and rejoicing in that order.

Whether it was a bug or a deliberate tweak by the system builders, Aura Synergy didn't boost Unity's power. Neither he nor Ameliah had realized the oddness before she'd taken it, despite already having all the information they'd needed to do so. After all, Rain had worked out the formula with his own interface, and nowhere had Aura Synergy shown up as a factor in the tier calculation. It did still boost the range, though, and that was enough. It was the difference between a dubious half-meter range and a workable three-meter one that would only get better as she leveled her metamagic.

More leveling, though, would need to wait.

"Hold up," Rain said, raising a fist. "Party ahead." He abandoned his laughably bad efforts to figure out Airwalk, and the sensation of wading through gravel disappeared as he came to a stop.

"How do you want to handle this?" Ameliah asked, likewise releasing Shroud, which had been fighting and losing against Radiance while she trained with it.

"That depends on them," Rain said. "I'm pulling Immolate back so I don't tip our hand. If they confront us, you do the talking. I'll follow your lead so I don't get us into trouble."

"Oh, you would do fine," Ameliah said, laughing. "Do they know we're coming?"

"Doesn't seem like it," Rain said. "They haven't changed direction or speed since I picked them up. Eight people. Four with swords. One with daggers. One with a bow. One with a staff. One with a wand." Left unsaid was the probable disposition of their classes. Mora's intel was easy enough to match up to the weapon distribution. This was the strongest of the three parties they were up against.

Not sure if that's good luck or bad.

"Aaaaand here come the Kin," Ameliah said, giving him the feeling she'd crinkled her nose.

"Ew."

Following her gaze, he beheld the gibbering pack of monsters that had chased his retreating magic around the bend in the tunnel and couldn't help but agree. Unlike the Fire Kin they had encountered before, these were the unsuspected base model. Somehow, that made them even more upsetting. They looked like demented demon babies, sporting deathly pale skin and

massive tooth-filled heads supported by twiggy scarecrow bodies. As they saw him and Ameliah, the screeching and hissing redoubled as their too-wide mouths unhinged to reveal enough jagged fangs to make even the most steadfast shark dentist hang up their drill.

Rain, though he was disturbed, wasn't at all concerned.

Blinded by hunger and too dumb to realize their doom, the Kin sprinted straight through Immolate's invisible boundary. Moths to a flame, they died instantly, muffled dings pattering in his ears as the system fed him experience—a trickle compared to what he'd been getting when his spell had been killing them out of sight. He was then treated to the unpleasant sight of the bodies dissolving before his eyes, Purify eating hungrily through flesh and bone until nothing remained. Preferring to see less of the process, he pushed power into the magic until it became visible as a bubble of luminous mist, simultaneously dropping Radiance to avoid being blinded. With Immolate set to the same radius and the environmental output suppressed, the effect was spectacular. As they resumed their progress down the tunnel, Rain felt like some sort of avenging cleric, marching against the forces of darkness and purging them with the fire of his holy domain.

The light show and the movement of the Kin didn't go unnoticed for long. Soon enough, they heard a startled cry from ahead.

"Something's coming!"

The words were in common.

"Someone, you mean!" Ameliah called back, correcting the speaker. "Actually, two someones."

And then they were out into a widened section of tunnel where the huddled Guilders had formed up to face them. By their souls, that defense wouldn't have even stood against the Kin, though the monsters weren't attacking them. The place was positively lousy with the things, all rushing to hurl themselves into Rain's faux-divine fire, but they streamed past the Guilders like they didn't exist. That was probably thanks to the layer of crud encrusting them. Crud...or something.

It looked like literal shit. Rain was glad he couldn't smell them.

"State your intention!" the apparent leader of the party shouted, the only one who hadn't drawn his weapon. "Are you Guild?"

"No," Ameliah replied, ignoring the first request—or perhaps answering it in a different way. She clapped Rain on the shoulder, then pointed. "Look. I told you there'd be eggs. A nice little bonus."

"Awww, yis," Rain said, greedily rubbing his hands together. He removed Ethereal Aura from Immolate, and the temperature began to skyrocket.

"H—hey!" the woman with the daggers shouted, raising an arm against the fiery wind suddenly escaping Immolate's boundary. "This is our claim!"

"Ask us if we care," Ameliah replied as the eggs in the nearest cluster burst like popcorn.

Rain walked forward, bringing his bubble of scouring fire with him. As egg fragments and burning goo evaporated, he used Attract to call the revealed Tel to his hand, doing his best not to drop them. It was good practice. The skill required a surprising level of finesse.

"Stop!" another of the Guilders shouted, the one with the bow. He drew back on the string, aiming at Rain's face.

Rain tensed, but the Mage with the staff grabbed the weapon and hauled it aside. "Put that down, idiot!"

"They're stealing our Tel!" the archer protested, struggling.

"Do you have a hole in your brain?" One of the sword-wielders asked, looking at the archer over his shoulder as he pointed blindly with his weapon. "Look at that magic! What even *is* that?"

"We can take them," the dagger wielder said, moving to support the archer. "There are only two."

"Two *alone*? In full plate? With no visible weapons or backup, strolling around a rank twelve zone, vaporizing Kin like leaves in a bonfire? Gods, you're both morons. El must not have spent much time on you."

"All of you, hush!" the leader barked, shielding his face from the heat. He raised his voice.

"Please, honored silvers, if you could dampen your flames so we might come to an understanding."

"What's to understand?" Ameliah asked, crossing her arms. She was walking beside Rain within the bubble, the glowing mist streaming around her. "This is our hunting ground now. Clear off and find yourself a new one."

Or we'll make you, her tone said, in perfect alignment with the surface of her soul.

Rain suppressed a shiver. *She's good at this. All that Nine Dice is paying off.* He shifted his course closer to the Guild party, and the last of the Kin vanished in a curl of flame as he homed in on the densest egg cluster. The physical intimidation underlined Ameliah's words, sending all but the leader stumbling back.

"Please, just listen for a moment," the leader said, coughing and holding out his hands as he stood his ground. His voice sounded dry as the temperature in the tunnel continued to soar. "We've got an arrangement with other teams in the area and a salve that turns the Kin passive. If you join us, we can sustainably farm this place for months. We're making a fortune, and the Entente can't do a thing about it."

Major points for courage, Rain thought as he walked relentlessly closer.

"Do we look that patient?" Ameliah asked, lightly slapping Rain on the back. "Hey, did you hear that? The nice man just told us they've been farming. That means there are more clusters nearby. I want to get them all before we get back to our mission."

"Sounds like a plan," Rain said, taking a step. "You should move," he continued, taking another. The third would have brought the leader inside the bubble had the man not cursed and dodged away. Little did he know he would have been in no danger beyond getting an even drier throat.

"Assholes!" the archer called from the mouth of a side tunnel where the rest of the party had retreated.

Ameliah gave him a flat look as the leader retreated. "Do you *want* us to notice that you've got sacks of Tel on you? Calling us names is a good way for that to happen."

"Come on," the leader said, laying a heavy hand on the archer's shoulder as he passed. "It was nice while it lasted, but might rules the deep." He coughed. "Depths, it's hot in here. I need a drink."

"Smart man," Ameliah said coldly, crossing her arms.

Rain smiled, listening to the party bicker as they retreated down the tunnel. He finished scouring the egg clusters, occasionally pausing to dump handfuls of Tel into his belt pouch. By the time he finished, the other party was well out of hearing.

"How was that?" Ameliah asked as Rain returned Purify to a more normal level. "Too mean? That felt too mean."

"Nah," Rain said. "Just the right level of mean." *They shouldn't question why we bullied them. Mora's secret quest is still secret.* Already completely relaxed again, he smiled. "Do you think they'll warn the others?"

"Probably not," Ameliah said, looking speculatively down the tunnel. "Not like it makes a difference if they do. I didn't expect them to be so weak. Kin aren't a joke in these numbers. Whatever that stuff was that they were wearing, they're putting a lot of faith in it."

"Mmm," Rain said. "What level did you make them to be?"

"Ten?" Ameliah asked, then wiggled a hand. "Eleven?"

"Eleven was my read," Rain said, grinning. He pointed. "Detection says there are more eggs that way. Let's clean up and get paid."

"Let's," Ameliah said with a laugh. "Oh, since the hard part's over, here." She summoned her bow—except it wasn't her bow. It was a normal one. Made of wood. And she was holding it out to him. "Something to play with. I grabbed it from the armory before we left. Be careful. It's not enchanted."

"One of Shena's?" Rain asked as he eagerly accepted the weapon.

"Mmhmm," Ameliah said. "It's stronger than it should be, but if you pull too hard, you'll break the string. Here. Arrow."

"This is pointless, you know," Rain said, taking the wooden projectile with a grin. "I'm never going to get decent damage numbers."

"I did say play," Ameliah said with amusement.

Rain laughed. "You know me too well."

She smiled. "That's a real arrow, not a copy, so you should be able to duplicate it."

"Awesome," Rain said, doing exactly that. "Have I mentioned I love you?"

"Once or twice."