

## The Shrine of Amemasu

Kellin's eyes bounced open, the first moments of dawn starting to stream out from the horizon. He couldn't fall asleep at the last moment. The others would never let him stay on watch again if they catch him not guarding the campsite.

Kellin stretched his arms to the sky, shaking them out, trying to relieve the tightness of his muscles. Ever since he used that magic yesterday, he hadn't felt so strong since he was a little kid. It was like he never had Muscular Dystrophy. But after the night watch, his muscles were beginning to betray him again. *Back to the chair I guess...* Kellin thought.

Lightly gripping his walking crutches, Kellin limped back to the campsite. The remains of a hastily built campfire still smoldered in the growing sunlight. Five tents were set up. Well, four tents were set up; one was haphazardly thrown on the ground with Chad's head poking out of it. We'd been journeying for almost three months now, and he still didn't want to admit he didn't know how to set up the tent.

The chair was set under a nearby tree, its metallic sheen glinting in the first drops of light. Kellin, standing over the chair that held him most of his life, hesitated. He didn't want to sit back down. He wanted to feel as powerful as he did yesterday, jumping and flipping around, taking down the bad guys by himself. He didn't want to go back to being the fragile and helpless kid on a trip too dangerous for him. That wasn't who Kellin was.

Kellin looked out to the east, the vast sea spreading out before him, turning its signature light blue as daylight set in. Kellin desperately wanted to toss the chair into the waters, watching it sink to the sandy bottom, dancing on his own two feet all the while.

But Kellin knew he couldn't. He knew he needed the chair. And his muscles knew it even more, even now groaning as he stood over the chair. With a sigh, Kellin popped the armrests open, sticking his walking crutches inside the pockets. And he slowly lowered himself on the soft cushion. Back in the chair, just where Charlie wanted Kellin to always be.

But sitting down now, Kellin didn't realize just how tired he was. His eyes lolled, his neck growing heavy. Kellin shook himself awake, he had to stay awake, or Charlie and Kari will think that he couldn't handle staying awake this long. But he was eleven, and he worked in a greenhouse. Kellin had stayed up longer than this all the time. He slapped himself, trying to stay awake. The sun finally broke over the blue waters, shining brightly, the light mists over the sea receding. Kellin stared over the waters. There was someone here to help them, but Kellin didn't know who, or where they were.

As Kellin stared out across the water, the trees behind him rustled. Kellin tried to turn his head to see what it was, but his neck cracked painfully. He grunted, trying to stay quiet so he wouldn't wake the others, but it hurt a lot. As Kellin rubbed his neck, a hand rested on his shoulder. He whirled around, hurting his neck all over again. Kari stood over Kellin, "Sorry Kellin, I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, you didn't scare me," Kellin replied, rubbing his sore neck, "I was just ready for an attack. I stayed up all night waiting for someone to attack so I could beat them."

Kari gave Kellin a thin smile. She stared out over the waters, as if silently judging how far she could swim before she got tired. Her patched eye blended in with her face in the light, so it looked like her face simply molded over her right eye and blended with her nose. Kellin looked down at his feet, his shoes caked in mud and dirt. "So, do you know where we're going Kari?" Kellin slowly questioned.

Without looking back from the sea, she answered, "I just got back from a little scouting mission. I couldn't find anything important or helpful looking."

"Didn't Charlie tell you to stop going on scouting missions by yourself? What if you get captured by those guys in suits again?" Kellin shyly asked.

"Charlie doesn't have to know. Besides, those people are probably still chasing Maxie. There's no way they caught him, and they won't give up. He's way too annoying to stay off their radar. There's no one anywhere near us."

Kellin wasn't sure about that, but he wasn't going to disagree with Kari. She was the scariest one in the group, and the only one who didn't treat Kellin like he was fragile. Kari looked down at Kellin's watch, it read 6:38. "We slept in again. We need to keep moving if we're ever gonna reach the next Storm." Kari said, grimacing down on the tents.

She strode down to the tents, clapping her hands and shouting, "Alright, sun's up people, let's get going."

The first up was Chad, trying to leap to his feet, but he was ensnared by his flattened tent, so he ended up just worming around on the ground. Chad eventually shook himself out of his nylon cocoon, popping up to his feet, striking a natural pose, even though it didn't look very natural. "Nice to see you up Kari, I've been dying to scout out the perimeter with you!"

Kari, as usual, simply walked past him without saying a word. Chad just smiled and said, "Alright, maybe later then."

Next was Nia, her head popping out of her tent, her hair sticking up wildly to the air, like she had just been shocked. She then rubbed her eye, yawned, and went back in the tent.

Right next to Nia was Jerry. Jerry seemed to thrash around wildly inside his tent, or maybe he was just doing his morning “speed yoga.” Kellin had known Jerry for years, and he still didn’t understand why Jerry did the things he did.

Charlie deftly opened the tent, stepping swiftly out as he tied his long hair back. He scowled at Kari, but didn’t say anything. He grabbed the checkboard that sat on the dirt next to his tent, looking over the itinerary that he writes every night for the next day.

Charlie traipsed up the hill to Kellin, “How are you feeling this morning, Kellin?” Charlie asked Kellin without looking up from his board.

“Doing great, I didn’t see anything all night!” Kellin said with a smile.

“Good, you are now relieved of watch duty. Make sure you stay in the chair today, I don’t want you overexerting yourself like yesterday.” Charlie said.

Kellin silently glared at the ground as Charlie walked away. Kellin didn’t overexert himself, he saved everyone here. He also didn’t know what overexert meant. Kellin then reached into the bag that hung behind his chair, pulling out the granola he got from Maxie’s home. Kellin wondered where Maxie was right now. He had distracted the men in suits so that the Kellin’s group could get away. Maxie was really good at magic, so Kellin hoped he was fine, but Kellin barely managed to fight off the two guys yesterday, and he felt so strong. Maxie had to deal with a lot more.

As Kellin shoved handfuls of granola into his mouth, the rest of the group gathered their stuff. Except Kari, who was trying to get Nia out of her tent. Charlie spoke up, “Alright everyone, today, we’re going to search the coast. Maxie said he knew someone who could teach around this area. We have about 16 hours of sunlight today, so we’ll have to move fast if we want to find the teacher, learn what we can, and get to the next Storm.”

“Wait,” Chad asked, “why do we need to learn it today? Why not just stay with this teacher like we did with Maxie.”

“If you weren’t aware, that didn’t go so well. We can only hope Maxie hasn’t been captured and told them where we’re headed. So we need to put as much distance as we can between us and the agents.” Charlie huffed.

“Aw man, we have to go back to hiking? ...” Chad said sadly, hanging his head.

The group quickly unpacked food to eat, Charlie pulling out one of the few oranges we had saved from the Community greenhouse. Kari eventually managed to coax Nia out by taking down the tent with Nia still inside. Nia scurried out, her arms full of the leaves and sticks she slept on.

Everyone tried to eat slowly, delaying the massive amount of walking they would have to do. Kellin was almost glad he had to sit in the chair. As the sun climbed ever so slightly higher in the sky, clouds began to roll in from the opposite direction, pitting the blinding light of the sun against the dark shadows of the clouds in the battlefield of the sky.

As everyone sat eating breakfast, they were so enthralled with their food, they didn't notice the stranger that had seemed to appear standing in their midst. Jerry was the first to notice, his eyes widening, as he nudged Chad next to him with his stunted arm. Chad did a double take on the tall stranger, threw his food down, and raised his fists, shouting, "Who are you!"

The man was tall, almost as tall as Chad. It was hard to see his body as they were completely cloaked in long, billowing, silky robes. They were a deep blue, with a gray scarf draped around his thin neck. The man looked old; his tanned face was covered in wrinkles. Even his completely bald head seemed to crease and fold in places, like his skin was pruning. He had a broad smile, his eyes hidden by his expression. "Welcome, all of you, to Sea of Spirits." He said, his voice spreading over the area like a calm ocean wave.

Chad, fists still raised, looked confused at the warmth in the man's voice, as if trying to weigh the options of whether or not he should still punch the man. Charlie stood, his eyes locked on the man, tightly gripping his lucky pen in his hand, ready to wield it if the man showed any sign of aggression. "Sea of Spirits?" Charlie asked.

The man gestured to the water; his hands slowly appearing from his robe. His bony hands were incredibly gnarled and wrinkled, like he had sat in a pool for years. Kellin shuddered to think what the rest of the man looked like. "Yes, these waters are called the Sea of Spirits. The Great Beasts of the Earth often come here to relax and refresh. I've even witnessed The Dominants taking a drink from these waters."

Kellin didn't know what the man was talking about, but it looked like no one else did. Except for Nia, who said, "There's no way you've seen The Dominants. They never come to the surface. If they did, everyone in the world would know."

"Oh, they sometimes come up from the ground when they need a drink. Even spirits need water."

“They do?” Nia said incredulously, looking out over the water, and then launched into a flurry of questions, “Are they huge? Are they as cool as the stories say they are? Did any of them ever notice you? If they did, how are you still alive? You’re not some creepy Beast that looks like an old man to trick us, are you?”

The old man chuckled, replying with, “No, I am as human as you. Though a bit older by the looks of it!”

The old man laughed to himself while the rest of the group looked at each other, daring the other to make the next move. But the old man spoke again, “And The Dominants don’t come out often at all, the last one must have been 3 years ago. But trust me, young man, they are a sight to behold.”

Nia winced, “Actually, I’m a her, if you don’t mind.”

The old man looked confused for a moment, before his broad smile returned to his face. “Ah, I see your soul is trying to shine through your flesh. Good for you, child.”

Nia stood stunned at his words, with Charlie then turning the conversation back on topic, “Who are you?”

The old man looked at the rising sun for a moment, then began to walk towards the sea, gesturing for the rest of the group to follow. Charlie promptly packed his things into his bag, and the rest of the group followed his lead. The old man answered, “I am Akashi Motomori. I wander the Sea of Spirits, going wherever I am called to. I watch over the Shrine of Amemasu, helping humble travelers like yourselves whenever I can.”

As he walked, his pace steadily increased, starting from a slow hobble, and growing into a speed walk. The rest of the group tried to keep up, Kellin having to go full throttle with his chair. If Akashi went any faster, Kellin would be left behind as he wound his chair through the inclined, grassy field.

As they kept pace with this strangely fast old man, Charlie pressed further into the man with questions, “How long have you been out here? And how did you know we were here?”

“Child, I know when others come near the Sea of Spirits. It is my home, and I can feel the energies of beings nearby. It is one of my greatest skills I’ve learned from the Beasts. That and, the big fellow here snores very loudly.” Akashi said.

Chad just looked proud at this statement.

Charlie questioned, “What’s the shrine of amenansu?”

“Shrine of Amemasu, child,” Akashi corrected, “And you will see soon enough.”

As the group questioned Akashi, everyone seemed to move faster. The grass around them whipped around like they were blowing in the wind. Kellin looked down and noticed that Akashi almost seemed to be floating off the ground, his robes rippling and waving. They very quickly reached the shore of the waters, as Akashi sharply turned right with no hesitation, almost bowling over Jerry in the process. They moved incredibly quickly, Kellin knew his chair couldn't go this fast, especially not across this wet sand on the shore.

As the group seemed to glide across the ground, the clouds above moved in closer above them, charging against the rising sun that stood in the clouds way. Soon, the group reached the edge of a copse of thin and tall trees. Akashi stopped abruptly. Jerry tried to stop just as quickly, but ended up tumbling forward into the sand. Akashi tried to help Jerry up, but Jerry stayed down, caressing the sand below him, saying, “Wow, this sand is really soft. This is way softer than my bed back at home.”

Akashi struggled to pull Jerry to his feet, as Jerry shoved his pockets full of sand. Akashi then turned to the rest of the group, raising his arms to the trees, and said, “Welcome, to the Shrine of Amemasu.”

The group looked confused, as all that was there was a small group of trees standing next to the water. There was nothing that looked like a shrine. “Is it behind the trees, or...?” Nia asked.

“No, this is the Shrine of Amemasu, guardian of the Sea of Spirits.” Akashi asked.

“Is it a natural shrine?” Charlie asked.

“Can you not see it children? Look closer. Is there not something odd about the trees.” Akashi said, standing behind the rest of the group.

Kellin couldn't see anything; it just looked like a bunch of trees. What was this guy talking about? Then Kari spoke up, “You're right, there is something off. Look at the shadows.”

The shadows of the trees were barely visible in the shady areas, but they did seem to be much shorter than they should be with the rising sun only a bit above the horizon. Akashi clapped his hands, “Very good! You, child, have an eye for seeing the truth, don't you?”

Kari simply nodded, as Akashi smiled widely. “She is correct, children. The trees are not what they seem. They are extra protection for those who would do harm to the Beasts, especially Amemasu.” Akashi said, stepping forward.

“Amemasu is quite a fan of using the perception of our surroundings against us. I’d have to agree, it is quite fun.” Akashi said with a laugh.

Akashi then slowly outstretched his arms, palms up. He slowly raised his hands skywards, then swiped his hands down and out. As he did this motion, clouds of fog materialized from the trees, flowing out like rushing water. The rushing fog blew around the group, wind billowing out of nowhere. Then, as the fog began to clear, the sound of a river filled their ears. Once the fog was completely gone, the group was sopping wet, and an old hut sat where the trees once stood.

“Now, you all can see it, can’t you?” Akashi grinned.

A dirt path led under a tall, inverted archway, its curved wood covered in moss. A bridge extended over a small river that had not been there before, rushing into the sea. The shrine stood elevated from the ground, long poles plunged deep into the water. The wood of the deck that was attached to the shrine was dark and rotting, some boards even dipping into the water below. The tall, fancy roof was painted a blue that perfectly matched the color of the water under the shade, though the paint was beginning to peel off. The shrine itself was ornate and decorated, but looked gray with age and was dripping with water. “Oh, it’s...uh...very nice.” Chad stammered.

“Yes,” Akashi replied, “I built this shrine myself when the wars began. It was originally to pray to the gods, but it became a worship site for Amemasu.”

The group began to look around, delicately inspecting the archway, peering out to the water. Kari asked Akashi, “How did you pull off that illusion? There isn’t a Beast anywhere near here.”

Akashi just chuckled, saying, “Maxie taught you the things of the world’s magic. He’s taught them well, but even he doesn’t know everything.

“How do you know Maxie?! And how did you know we knew him?” Kari asked, backing away from Akashi, drawing her knife.

“Who do you think the teacher near these waters was? I taught Maxie what he knows; I’m just surprised he taught you anything. The man likes to be by himself most of the time; it took months to break his tough exterior. But I told him if he did ever find students, he should send them to me, and here you are.” Akashi kindly responded.

Lowering her knife, Kari said, “Oh, you’re the teacher. Sorry.”

“No, no, you have no need to apologize. Had I been a mere illusion tricking you, you would have responded perfectly. You have quite a gift of seeing the possibilities, despite your lack of vision.”

Kari’s hand instinctively went to her patched eye as she responded, “It’s called paranoia, and it’s usually right. Unless it’s wrong.”

“Good, what you need now is to control that caution into something else.”

“Do you mean that you can teach me magic, like Maxie and Kellin did?”

“Perhaps not exactly like theirs, each Beast’s magic is different, and how its user casts magic is different from another user. It all comes down to what the Beast wants, and how much it wants to help you.”

“But you can teach magic, can’t you?”

“I can only teach what cannot be done beforehand. What you do with my wisdom is entirely up to you. I can’t promise you will cast magic, but you will know how when the time is right.”

With this, Akashi gathered everyone to the water’s edge. He stepped into the sea, his long robes billowing up in the water. Turning to the group, Akashi announced, “Welcome, all of you. Much like Maxie said I am the teacher you seek. You do not need to worry about anything outside of this shrine. We are protected by the illusions provided by Amemasu. You may stay at this shrine for as long as you wish.”

“You know Maxie?” Kellin piped up.

“Yes, child of magic, I taught Maxie what he knows. Now, I would be more than happy to teach you all what--” Akashi warmly replied.

“Sorry sir,” Charlie interrupted, “But we have to move on by sunset. We have places to be, people to save.”

“Please, child, you must reconsi--”

“Stop calling me child!” Charlie burst.

Akashi looked hurt, but quickly returned to his calm exterior. “Very well, but at least stay for what I have to say. Perhaps I can even show you some magic.”

“Fine, but only until sunset. Then we have to leave.”



Akashi nodded, then said, "Then please, help yourselves to the shrine. It was built to give weary travelers rest."

As the group walked to the shrine, waves began lapping against the shore. The temperature seemed to drop around them. Akashi squealed in excitement, "Children, children! Come back! He is here! He is here!"

Akashi spread himself on the ground in a bow, motioning the rest of the group to do the same. Hesitantly, the rest of the group followed suit, but Kellin could only sit and stare. "Imbecilic Child!" Akashi shrieked, his calm demeanor vanishing, "Get rid of that mechanical contraption, He will not show himself if he senses a machine!"

With Chad's help, Kellin managed to stand long enough for Chad to aimlessly heave the electric wheelchair into a cluster of bushes. Kellin hoped Chad hadn't just broke his chair, but his legs were too tense to think about it, and Kellin collapsed on the ground, mimicking Akashi as best he could.

Everyone, bowing to the sea, waited with baited breath for something to happen. But the waves began to shrink, the sea calmed. The clouds overhead finally clashed with the rising sun, blotting out the light of the heavens. The group looked at each other from their awkward positions, wondering what was going to happen. "So, uh, who was coming?" Charlie asked, beginning to stand up.

Akashi's hand abruptly shot out, grabbing Charlie's shoulder and shoved him back to the sandy mud. "Silence! Just wait!" Akashi whispered.

As they all lay prostrate, the clouds above released a light rain, the tears of their hard-fought battle with the sun falling from the sky. Far in the distance, lightning cracked through the silent sky. The sea fell totally calm, as rain began to pelt its smooth surface.

Then, as the group began wondering why they were laying on the now wet mud, a massive column of water burst from the surface of the sea. It quickly raised several stories above the group, the water of the sea shrinking, flowing into this massive jet. The column churned and bubbled, swirling around in whirling cloak of blue. Then, the water slowed to a stop, and fell to back to the sea. But in the column's place, a massive Beast loomed over the group.

It's shining, transparent body was covered with drops of water. It looked to be a giant fish, though only a bit. Its fins were clear and defined, the outline glowing brightly, with similarly gleaming claws tipped at the ends. The Beast's body churned with sparkling light, filling the area with a thick fog. Its tail was sharp, gleaming with blue light, and lifted from the

water, pointed directly at Akashi. The Beast's head was the most bizarre of all. Golden-glowing, plate-like teeth jutted from its open mouth. A single, impossibly huge, transparent eye stared intensely at the group. It darted between everyone, as if searching. Akashi was the first to break the terrified silence, "Amemasu! You've returned! What is it you seek at your humble shrine!" he said with joy.

The Beast exhaled, blowing a golden-blue light, throwing the group around wildly. All except Kari, who knelt silently, trying not to look up at the Beast. Her face was beaded with sweat, as her breath turned ragged. Akashi noticed her stillness in the Beast's wind. "Child!" He called above the wind and waves, "Stand before Amemasu! You must!"

Kari looked at Akashi with disbelief. But, her legs badly shaking, began to stand, her face intensely pale. The wind had blown Kari's patch off, revealing the empty socket, as she stared up at the Beast. The glowing Beast's wind seemed to swirl around Kari, her hair wildly blowing every which way. As Kari reluctantly stared at the Beast, her eye came to meet its. As she did, the water around the Beast began to rise again, covering the beast in a water column. Once it enveloped the Beast, it gave a mighty screech, like a thousand chalkboards being clawed at simultaneously. Then, it surged forward, directly at Kari. Chad rushed forward to grab her, but he was not nearly fast enough, as the water engulfed Kari, and leaped back into the ocean behind them.