



PROMPT #1: Write about a god desperately trying to get their chosen hero to follow the path they set out for them.

## An Empty Field of Withering Flowers

by **Eric Yang**

“**Y**ou *must* defeat the demon king, hero!”

Those are the words uttered into the small log cabin bare of everything apart from the two empty shelves, a table and a few chairs, and a candle left melting along the wooden floor for far too long. Fragments of rosemary and dandelion fills the space between heaven and earth, and in the small grassy clearing where the cabin was built upon, a warm scent almost reminiscent of sun-dried firewood wafts through the crispy air, lingering not a moment too long as the gentle breeze carries it around. Wreaths of flowers and insects alike roam about this tranquil space in a chorus of songs and sounds; and if there were anything as a heaven upon earth, it would be at this exact moment where the Lady of Time herself seems to have paused so that the world within the sunkissed clearing can dance about freely. It is here in this cabin upon this clearing that Akeeles of Somarsville resides, a simple farmer of twenty-four years who had been stolen away from his village and family to serve as a mere slave under the merciless rule of Ieslar, the demon lord who has had an iron shackle chained around the entire world for the last five years.

It is also here, in the small clearing that the beaconing sun smiles directly upon, that Akeeles rejects my offer. “I refuse,” the one-legged, raven-haired man states without a hint of hesitation in his gravel-like voice. His eyes, matching in shade to his hair yet in a hue similar in intensity to all the darkness that the world could offer, flickers to my form. “Leave me be, spirit. Time again, you return; and time again, my answer will remain the same. Humans, demons, spirits – none of that matters to me anymore,” he says with a glare, and I could sense a hint of exhaustion within the low notes of his voice. A moment passes. The human blinks. Then, as if realization hit him, his gaze softens. “Please, ████████ Let me fulfill my promise.”

“You must listen, Akeeles of Somarsville,” I protest. “In accordance with the heavenly principles, you have been named the next hero that will usher in an age of prosperity. You must not...” My words trail into the resting air as his words fully register. Although the space in this log cabin is as humble as a breath on a cold, late-season sunrise, the sparse decorations and furniture are not the only residents residing here. Numerous spirits of all sizes and shapes have found this cabin to be quite comforting as a haven amidst a palace of demons, and even as the moments pass by now, these spirits are running about the humble cabin. Normally, humans aren’t able to see these spirits. Perhaps this human has a special ability to see the unseeable.

Right. He must have mistaken me for a plain spirit.

After all, this is my first time meeting him.

I clear my throat. “Apologies, Akeeles of Somarsville. I must have forgotten to introduce myself. My name is ██████ and I am one of the four gods responsible for the planes between heaven and earth. I humbly request for your assistance in defeating the demon king Ieslar, whose conquest has destroyed the balance in the mortal realm and has caused a ceaseless number of souls to be trapped here instead of ascending to the heavenly plane. Of course, your journey as a hero will not be easy. There will be arduous challenges ahead of you, and there will be darker times than now awaiting the future. Fear not, however, because I will guide you through—”

“—through dark and day, through night and light.” Akeeles finishes the sentence.

*How strange.* I have never said those lines to him before, and yet those were the exact words that I was about to say. But my thoughts aren’t focused on that. Outside, the wind sings, the clouds dance. In the small, dimly-lit cabin of two empty shelves, a table, a candle left melting on the floor for far too long, and a numerous number of playful spirits; and in the small cabin bare of everything except for he and I, I find myself staring at the hero. His eyes linger in the space between us for a brief moment, brows heavy and lowered into a sharp, familiar gaze, as if entranced by something that only he could see. The door creaks. A breeze flows in. His raven-hued eyes snap back to reality, meeting my cerulean ones, and his expression morphs into a pleading stare. “Leave me alone. *Please.*”

“Hero, listen to me,” I say, but he does not.

Without uttering even the slightest hint of another word, and ignoring mine, Akeeles returns to his mundane tasks. His hands, calloused from years upon years of hard labor in serving Ieslar, move at a methodical yet mesmerizing pace, going back-and-forth in the motions as precise notches are carved into the flesh of the wood. *Thump, thump, thump.* The blade hits the wood as a melody to the beating heart. Not a single second was left to waste as he moved like water through his motions, a master at the blade without any known experience

listed in my records. Then, I look closer. His hands, scarred from years upon years of working under Ieslar, were trembling. Something must be preventing him from pursuing this quest as a hero, I realize; and as I stood there amidst the rising moon, my eyes tracing the shivering in the tiniest corner of his movements, a thought formed. Akeeles of Somarsville is destined to become a hero – and as his god, I have the responsibility to make it a reality.

“Stand.”

Moonlight courses through the chamber as a magnificent wave, showering everything worthy of its touch in a passionate soft glow, and a thousand marble carvings stand parallel to each other against each side of the large, seemingly endless room of people and demons alike. As the single word echoes through the room, everything trembles in response. The people in chains – servants found and forced to work under the demons that controlled the world – tremble. The demons with chains – infernal spirits with a physical form of resentment and hatred, cursed to roam the world by a timeless mistake – tremble. Even the sharp, angled marble carvings depicting a god with no name, a god that had been born for only half a decade – even those carvings showered in the filtered moonlight tremble in the mighty presence of Ieslar, the forty-fifth demon lord rule the world.

*Everyone* but Akeeles trembled.

I watch as the raven-haired man stands, his one arm balancing on a thin wooden rod that seems dwarfed by his size, his one leg moving without struggle in perfect coordination with the synchronized heartbeats within this chamber. Four days. For the past four days, I followed

Akeeles; and for the past four days, I have failed to convince him to take up the mantle as a hero. Again and again, he refused. Again and again, he tells me to never appear before him again, and again and again, he entertains my insistent words with a few replies before stopping completely.

And in each day for the past four days, he has gone through the same motions.

“Come forth,” the demon lord says, and despite my attempts to see past the moonlit curtains that hid his face, something prevents me from looking closer. When I glance upon Ieslar, a pale figure obscured by a constant fog glances back, as if the world itself contorted around him to keep his face away from my sights, as if his very *being* disrupted the natural flow of the world, and the only feature I could make out were eyes that held the ocean within them – an ocean that only existed somewhere far, far away. Every part of me screams whenever I lay eyes on him, and despite shielding myself from the sight of everyone except for Akeeles with my powers, the demon lord seems to gaze perfectly into my eyes. Into my soul. He must be defeated, I thought.

The balance of the world will likely fall beyond repair of even the gods if he continues to rule.

But Akeeles, even with calloused hands covered in scars from the demon lord, even with a body filled with scars, seems to disagree. Every day, at precisely midnight, the demon lord calls upon him, and he answers. An audience watches as clawed hands reach for the calloused hand of the human, grasping tightly onto the fragile hands even as bruises begin to darken and bleed as the same motions repeat for the fifth time; as the moonlit veil converges into a single curtain that masks only the silhouettes of the two; as the false stars in the shattering sky dim for the two behind the curtains to shine; as the two shadows merge into one being for a single moment in a fractured timeline. And every day, I would watch. Every day, I would ask him one question: *will your tomorrow be the same as today?*

He answers with only a stare, his chains heavy on the cold floor.

Then, the same motions repeat.

Ieslar calls upon him.

He answers.

Sometimes, even a god will dream.

When I dream, I dream of a promise.

“Promise me... that you’ll never let go of me.”

“██████████”

At the darkest hours of night, at the few fleeting moments in the long, endless day that always seems to repeat the same motions over-and-over again as if its weaves of fate have been cut, at fragile time when both the pale mistress of the moon and the radiant son of the sun are both resting under the covers of the dim stars in the fractured sky, I hear Akeeles whispering something. The words would disintegrate as a candle smoke, but the bittersweet taste would remain in the air, lingering as if pleading to stay. “██████████” Akeeles would say, calling out a name that seems all-too familiar, yet also miles upon miles away. Then, the raven-haired man would toss and turn, his calloused hands squeezing at the fabric lining his heart; and I would find myself sitting by his side. The thoughts running through my head during the day would cease at that moment, and the only thing I wished for was to soothe his pain.

But a god cannot touch a mortal, and so I shy away.

“You never shake or tremble when facing Ieslar, so why does the mention of [REDACTED] terrify you to this extent?” I ask him. “[REDACTED] has not bound shackles to your arms, nor has [REDACTED] left bleeding marks streaking down your spine. Why do you choose to stay by *his* side?”

The candle flickers.

The wind howls.

The clouds move.

Akeeles turns, his raven-eyes meeting my cerulean ones. “These injuries will heal over time. Eventually, the skin torn apart by the shackles will return, and the bleeding wound from whips will close. No matter how painful it gets, I know that it’ll eventually heal. But when it comes to [REDACTED].. I’m scared. No – I’m terrified that if I ever deviate from this unchanging path, then one day, the fragile promise I made five years ago will shatter.” Akeeles turns away, his back shivering under the layers and layers of covers, and I longed to transfer all of my heat to him. “If

I break the promise...” He starts, but lets the flickering candle finish the rest.

A moment passes.

The empty log cabin grows dark.

Sometimes, even a god will dream.

Tonight, I dreamed of the cabin we’ve always wanted to build.

In the corridor that seems to stretch on forever, a permanent chill burdens any visitors.

The chill, however, does not function like all the other ones. It is lifeless and unending, like the Lady of Time herself has paused at this moment, and no matter how much I try to heat myself up, the chill persists, seeping through the torn fabric that I wear, seeping into my very being. I try to ignore the chill, and I try to ignore the familiar carvings that line the side of the corridor, and I try to ignore the familiar windows and the familiar melodies played outside this room that seems to act both as a prison and a haven for all the souls wandering the night.

“Let Akeeles go,” I demand from the other side of the veiled curtains.

But the only response I got from Ieslar is my own words mirrored back.

*Let Akeeles go.*

Even as the world spun in the hands of fate, even as the chamber empties of humans

and demons alike, one figure remains in the room of nameless carvings. The veil stays, the moonlight stays, and the demon lord stays, forever unchanging, forever unmoving. And within the veil, I see the same depthless eyes that reflected the ocean – and I see my own cerulean eyes reflected back at me. Outside, the winds sing a bittersweet tune that celebrates the end of an era, and the clouds dance a merry song that ushers in a new age. Outside, the world cheers and cheers as one man cries. Outside, the world cheers and cheers as the stinging tears bathed in sunlight reaches the corpse of a cerulean-eyed human, fragile and mortal in his mortality.

Right.

That corpse was me.

Five years ago, Ralsei died in the final battle against the demon lord.

Five years ago, Akeeles survived.

Sometimes, even a god will dream.

I dreamt of the day I died. The Lady of Time did not pause that day.

But on that day, the time for two people had slowed to a stop.

No longer will that be the case.

Fragments of rosemary and dandelion fills the space between heaven and earth, and in the small grassy clearing where the cabin was built upon, a warm scent almost reminiscent of sun-dried firewood wafts through the crispy air, lingering not a moment too long as the gentle breeze carries it around. Wreaths of flowers and insects alike roam about this tranquil space in a chorus of songs and sounds; and if there were anything as a heaven upon earth, it would be at this exact moment where the Lady of Time herself seems to have paused so that the world within the sunkissed clearing can dance about freely. It is here in this cabin upon this clearing that Akeeles of Somarsville resides, a simple farmer of twenty-four years who had saved the world alongside Ralsei of Harborbay. It is also here in this cabin upon this clearing that time, for the one that survived, had become frozen in a single moment of agonizing fantasy.

“You must defeat the demon lord, hero,” I say to the resting figure.

Akeeles does not meet me in the eyes. “I refuse.”

“Why?” I ask, although it comes out as a whisper. Outside, the wind gently sings along with the birds and insects, and outside, the clouds move along with the wheels of time, drifting as the moments pass by, drifting as life moves on. Five years. Somehow, in the blink of an eye, five years have passed. I never imagined what five years could look like, but seeing the gentle

sway of the blooming trees now, I feel a bit of regret for missing out on this sight for all these years. “The prophecy can only be fulfilled once you defeat the demon lord, Akeeles. You know that. I was the one who gave you that prophecy when we first met, after all... although it was definitely a lie I made to distract you enough to pickpocket you. It was a shame how quickly you caught on.”

Akeeles keeps his eyes closed. His voice comes out shaky. “I know.”

“Then why refuse?”

“I’m scared to let go.”

I rest my head on his arms, and for a brief moment that seems to stretch on for a long, long time, a moment where the sun casts his blessing upon the two of us, a moment where everything in the world is finally at peace, I let myself smile. “It’s been five years, Akeeles. I’ve already become part of this clearing that I was buried in. What more do you have to let go?”

Finally, he opens his eyes, and I find myself falling in love all over again.

“Everything.” He breathes. “If I let you go now, then I’ll lose everything.”

I chuckle. “No, Akeeles. You still have me. All the memories we’ve shared together – like that one time you tried to chase after me but ended up falling into that pigeonfrog pond – will always remain with you. Letting me go now won’t change anything.”

A moment passes.

The world sings, and the world dances.

“I know,” he finally whispers.

His hands, calloused from years upon years of trying to keep his promise, reach towards mine, and as the rough palms meet my own, as the pulse in his hands beat in a rhythmic motion, as we share the warmth of this final lingering moment together, I take in a deep breath. In these final few moments that seem longer than the five years of lies we built together, everything seems much more clear. No more hazy fog, and no more seeping chill. No more corridors that stretch forever, and no more flickering candles that need to be lit. Our hands intertwine for that moment of everything, and when it comes time to let go, no words nor promises are shared; only a lingering warmth that one day, as the wheels of time turn, we will meet again.

— An Empty Field of Withering Flowers, Bloom Once More