



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

The Arctic Jewel

by **Anonymous**

In the halls of the pantheon rested twelve empty seats. The room was dark, illuminated only by the glow of a single table at the center. Here hovered the image of a globe, the planet earth. Observing intently was an old man. Leaning upon the table, he viewed the activities of the mortals below with simultaneous interest and disdain.

“Persistent as ever, number one” came a voice from across the room, equally as aged as his own.

But number one did not turn to face his brother. Number two strode up beside him.

“You know our time is through. The others have already left.”

“The others are wrong” number one finally broke his silence, “We still have power.”

“*You* still have power” corrected number two.

Number one turned to face number two, an expression of surprise cracking his stoic composure.

“That is correct” noted number two with a weary smile, “My time has come to depart”

“Have you gone mad?” questioned number one “We are more powerful than ever before! We have all the powers of those who have departed, and you wish to depart as they did?”

“Power does not equate to control” mused number two “Mankind has seized control of his destiny. We are, in effect, obsolete”

“Obsolete, you say!?” number one’s anger flared. With a snap of his fingers, an earthquake roared to life in the eastern mountains, leveling several towns.

“Destruction does not equate to control” mused number two. With a wave of his hand, the table now switched to two images. One of a small cargo aircraft in the sky, and another of a man at an office.

“Take this couple for example, they are to be married within the week” number two observed. “Distances cannot separate and isolate like they once did; we are powerless to halt their unification”

“Powerless you say?” questioned number one, “I can think of a *thousand* ways to part them!” “Very well, if you can prevent their unification, I shall concede that we are not yet obsolete” noted number two.

“Consider it done” number one agreed with a smile. A bolt of lightning was cast from his finger, electrocuting the small aircraft.

Despite the flickering of lights, all else seemed fine on the flight. The sole passenger didn't seem to mind - comfort was not to be expected on the spare seat of a cargo plane. The transponder went offline, but all other instruments appeared to be working. Unbeknownst to the crew, however, the autopilot was now slowly drifting off course.

When they exhausted their fuel, they were far from their planned course. No one would come searching that far out, not for a cargo wreck and a few bodies.

He began his morning ritual at 0530, but the idea of morning was obsolete here. The sun only rose for a few hours, briefly casting its dim glow over the frozen desert. But today it too was masked by clouds. Slowly, he arose from the blankets and stretched his exhausted body. He could feel the familiar jab of hunger probing his stomach. Quickly, he downed a handful of walnuts and began to get dressed. The bundles of clothing came on, with great care being taken to bury every patch of exposed flesh. As he stepped outside the sno-cat, his nose burned with the familiar sting of arctic air.

From the truck cabin he fetched a bundle of wood. The wood was hosed with gasoline, and quickly set ablaze. As the flames died out, he retrieved an ash-coated shovel, and threw a pile of glowing-hot charcoal under the truck's oil pan. In a quarter-hour, the motor oil would be liquid again, and he could begin moving.

In the meantime, he was free to scan his surroundings. Snow had begun to fall, and occasionally a flake would disintegrate upon striking his goggles. Before him lay a vast desert. But where one would expect sand there was instead ice. A long, rolling expanse of ice stretching

as far as the eye could see. In the distance, just barely visible, was the ridgeline of some stunted mountains.

Despite the layers, a certain coldness penetrated his frail body, like a constrictor encircling his bones. He still remembered the last time he felt warm, at his office on that fateful August day.

The wall clock ticked, counting away the moments until her arrival.

Instead came the phone call.

A search was launched. Then another. Then four more. Nothing was found.

He wasn't satisfied. He kept up his own search day in and day out. Flight simulations, wind maps, and endless pages of mathematical calculations. Sixteen drone overflights, and one-hundred thirty-seven satellite photograph orders. Still nothing.

Entrenching himself, he declined a promotion, and left his job to focus entirely on the search; much to the ridicule of his friends and colleagues. During this time, even women made approaches; but he would not reciprocate. How could he? A certain coldness had settled deep within him, probing him with chills even on the warmest of days. The thought of her in the barren tundra, weathering in the elements, was too much for him to live with. He doubled his efforts, operating with just four hours of sleep per night. Still nothing.

But on photograph two-oh-eight, he saw it. Faintly, just barely visible, was a small shadow in the snow, with the vague proportions of an F27 turboprop.

Armed with whatever finances he had left, he packed his bags and set course for the arctic. Now it was mid-September, and the temperatures were plummeting. Still, he wanted to recover the remains, or at least give a burial, before the ice sheets would carry them away forever.

Thus, he arrived at Cambridge Bay by late September. The sno-cat he brought along was destroyed when his barge capsized in a storm. He survived the sinking – remarkably – and landed with most of his basic equipment. A second vehicle was sold to him by a local. The dilapidated sno-cat he had purchased proved to be a handful – breakdowns were frequent, and the poorly-maintained tracks threw themselves during even the lightest of turns. It took until early October to get the machine running properly. In the meantime, he caught the flu – twice, and lost twenty-five pounds in the process.

Now it was almost November, and the freeze was deepening. Nevertheless, he had advanced nearly 300 miles into the frozen wilderness. Blizzards and mechanical breakdowns never allowed him to advance more than 25 miles in a day. But today was the final day; in just a few hours he would be at the expected crash coordinates.

When he could not wait any longer, he climbed into the cabin and started the sno-cat. The charcoal had done its job, and the warm oil pumped freely through the arteries of the engine. He clicked the transmission into gear, and the landscape began to slowly glide past.

Various shakes and rattles emanated through the hull of the vehicle; the worn tracks could barely keep 8 miles per hour. Most of the windows were covered with cardboard and duct tape in a desperate attempt to improve insulation.

As he stared out into the frozen expanse, he sometimes wondered why he had come so far. The answer always came back in the form of the memories still swarming about his mind, those emerald-green eyes always complimenting her joyful laughter.

If he thought hard enough, he could even ignore the sound of the knocking connecting rods.

From the table, number one looked on with a scornful expression. What a madman he had placed this wager upon!

Over two months had passed for the mortal, yet he remained unyielding as ever! No amount of wealth, women, disease, or misfortune had deterred him from his maniacal quest. He had not dared to ask number two for a different subject, lest he give any sense of satisfaction to his brother. But today the tides were to turn in his favor. A blizzard was setting in, and the sno-cat's engine was just minutes from blowing apart its bottom-end. Should the mortal survive these barriers, the beast which awaited would make short work of his ambitions. Number one stroked his beard, and smiled intently.

He had been moving for almost an hour, until a loud, low-pitched CRACK was heard. The vehicle lurched to a halt. He scrambled to exit the cabin, and peered under the sno-cat. Upon seeing the oil slick under the vehicle, his worst fears were confirmed.

He slumped to the ground, leaning his back against the sno-cat's hull and burying his face into his gloves. He was now 305 miles from civilization. Cold, hungry, with no real food, and no transportation. Finally, he got up and walked a few paces from the vehicle.

He turned and tore the EPIRB from his vest, hurling it at the sno-cat. The beacon bounced harmlessly off of the windscreen. He shouted various obscenities at the vehicle, before turning to the sky and shouting considerably more obscenities at whoever – or whatever – was watching.

Picking up the EPIRB from the ground, he momentarily considered activating it. But he still had plenty of supplies, and there would likely be food and fuel at the wreck site.

So he packed whatever he could carry on his back, and piled some more on a makeshift sled. He began his trek north, dragging the sled behind him. The snow began to pick up, but he was just 6 miles from the site.

As he marched forward, he was constantly probed by the various aches he had accumulated over the past two months of arctic operations. As per usual, he found it comforting to get lost in his memories.

He could still remember the day they met. It was on a hike, similar to the one which he found himself right now (albeit *considerably* warmer). By chance, their separate groups had run into each other on a secluded trail in the Alaskan wilderness. He remembered gazing upon her for the first time; she gazed back, her sharp eyes piercing him like gunshots. Around them was a beautiful evergreen forest, with undergrowth having sprung to life in the summer months. Thus, their conversations began.

And oh, what conversations!

The two of them could talk for hours on end, neither one seeming to exhaust the deep wells from which they pulled their knowledge. She was extraordinarily intelligent; she seemed to know everything about the world around her. Even minute details, like the species of trees and berries which surrounded them. His knowledge was more technical; aircraft, machinery, and communication systems were his specialty. Over the course of their many hikes, they both gained vast swaths of knowledge from the other.

She was always in such a joyful mood. Even now, he could not recall her ever showing panic or anger.

He stopped for a drink of water.

When he looked to check the time, he was surprised that his watch screen was now blank – the liquid crystals had frozen! In a panic, he checked his supplies. The water in the canteens had frozen solid as well, with no heat from the sno-cat's cabin to keep them liquid. He was forced to dispose of the dead weight; at least the insulated bottle had some water left. Luckily, the GPS unit was still functional. He noted the heading to the next waypoint, before tucking the unit by his innermost layer.

He was now 4 miles from the crash site, and the blizzard was really picking up. A fierce headwind bogged down his otherwise satisfactory pace, and his goggles had to be frequently wiped clean of ice.

He activated his halogen flashlight. The yellower light could penetrate much deeper into the blizzard than his LED headlamp. On occasion, he would close his eyes and point the flashlight at his face, feeling the warmth of the lamp through his goggles.

His mind went back to the satellite photograph of the site. There were quite a few paths in the snow, from what he assumed were polar bears or other animals. It made him wonder if there would be anything left.

He remembered the day of the proposal. By this point, they had been together for nearly two years. They had reached an altitude of 13,500 feet, the summit of their climb. The ring itself was a simple one, just a single emerald on a white-gold band.

He presented it to her on that barren peak, the clouds below them fanning outward like a thick blanket.

What took you so long?! She teased with a weary smile. The hike down the mountain was filled with joy and laughter.

It remained his fondest memory.

Now he was now 3 miles from the site. Gale-force winds had picked up with an unyielding howl. To continue making headway, he was forced to abandon the sled and a good majority of his supplies in the process.

He wondered if there would be anything left.

His company allowed employees and their families to ride on with cargo flights. The aircraft were small, and not very comfortable. But they were free, and flights were frequent.

On that day, her aircraft was to be a Fokker F27 freighter; a small, green-colored twin-engine turboprop. It carried mostly food, fuel, and medical supplies to the remote regions up north. There would be a brief layover at the logistical hub where he worked.

He could still remember the phone call that morning; she had a fear of flying, made worse by the small size of the aircraft. He had laughed, and assured her that it would be *several thousand times* safer than driving. She responded with her own nervous laughter, and the two bid farewell...

He pushed the memory from his mind. He was just a mile from the site now.

But with his mind idle, the cold and aches began seeping in yet again.

Come on, think! But what was there to think about? In front of him was a bleak, snowy desert. Even on the most interesting day, there was only the occasional mountain in the distance. *Why not look for some mountains?* Perhaps if he focused hard enough...

And then he saw it.

In the distance, just barely visible in the blizzard, a figure moved.

Another person? Could it be?

He pressed forward with renewed enthusiasm.

“Getting desperate, eh brother?” queued number two.

Number one didn’t care. There were just a few thousand feet remaining. A few thousand feet to turn the tides of this wager.

As it drew closer, he noticed that the figure seemed to be dressed in all white. But they seemed to move strangely; in a slow, lumbering pace. And then he realized.

Polar bear.

Quickly, he threw his pack to the ground and began pulling it apart.

He unwrapped the rifle and slid the bolt open. The cold metal of the shells stuck to his skin, making loading a struggle. Finally, with a round stuffed in the chamber, he slid the bolt home and took aim at the bear. The bear was approaching closer, now just 12 yards away. Unwilling to risk a miss, he waited until the bear was even closer, now just 8 yards. He aimed right between the eyes, and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

Damn! A faulty primer, perhaps? He swiftly removed the round and loaded another. Now the bear was just 5 yards away. He took aim, and fired.

Click.

Again! Now he felt fear. With desperation setting in, he tore apart the bag and withdrew the flare gun kit, the shaking of his hands causing him to drop the flares in the process. The ground trembled beneath him as the bear began its charge, hammering towards him with a furious roar. Frantically he grabbed a flare off the ground and packed it into the chamber. With the bear almost on top of him, he aimed and squeezed the trigger, launching a flare directly into its open mouth.

He continued the crawl, his headlamp barely illuminating the void ahead. The pattern repeated itself: right arm, left foot, left arm, right foot. Like a slug, he inched his way forward over the course of an hour, occasionally stopping to rest and check coordinates. In his wake, he left a trail of pink-stained snow.

Finally, he noticed a vague outcropping in the otherwise barren landscape.

Crawling closer, he was able to make out the tall, green rudder of the F27. He smiled in triumph, as he pulled himself alongside the aircraft. There were a few fractures in the hull, and the cockpit was nowhere to be found. Otherwise, the rear section had survived remarkably well, albeit with snow piled against it. Even the wing was relatively intact, now buried in snow up to the engine nacelle. Using the remnants of an air brake, he attempted to hoist himself to his feet. But it was no use. Exhausted, he slumped against the snow-bank of the aircraft.

Fishing the EPIRB out of his pack, he momentarily considered activating the signal, but decided against it. They would not arrive in time to save him, and he didn't want to waste SAR resources on a dead man.

His time was coming to an end, but he didn't seem to mind it too much. In fact, it brought him a great deal of satisfaction. He had always known that they would be laid to rest together, though this was considerably sooner than expected. He let his mind wander, figuring how long his body would remain out here. Judging by the hulking mass approaching, it would not be long.

And so he stared into the night sky, his headlamp illuminating before him an endless sea of frozen stars, whizzing past on their journey to nothingness. It was quite a beautiful sight; the kind of beauty she would appreciate. He only hoped that her final memories had been just as pleasing.

So closed his eyes for the final time.

And slid into a deep, calming sleep.

When he awoke, the first thing he noticed was the warmth.

Several blankets covered his body. He pulled himself upright and began to take in his surroundings. He appeared to be in a long, tubular cavern. The walls were a dirty white and gently sloped, with a flat wooden floor. At one end there were pallets of some sort of cargo, while the other end was filled with gravel. Discarded rations were piled in a corner, and a gas stove burned at the far end next to an aluminum door. There was a registration number emblazoned upon it – this was an aircraft fuselage!

And then his eyes met the fur-clad figure seated across the room, watching him intently.

He froze.

“What took you so long?!” She teased with a weary grin.

Her face was drawn, thin, and exhausted; yet her eyes still glinted like emeralds in the dark cavern.

He stumbled forward, and they wrapped together in a loving embrace.

For the first time in months, he felt warm.

Number one stared silently at the image below, his stone-cold exterior thawing for the first time in an eternity.

They were together now. He had failed.

Finally, he withdrew his weight from the table. He locked eyes with number two, and received a nod in response. Words were not spoken; they were not needed. The time had come to make their departure.

As they strode away, number two pierced the silence.

“So, brother, you appreciate my insight?”

There was a pause.

“I can appreciate the irony” noted number one.

“The irony?” queued number two

“Yes”

“The irony of a god surrendering to the will of a mortal”