

GOD AWFUL REBEL



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THREE
POINTS
PUBLISHING

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Chapter 1

INTENTION

I was unconvinced that the god of love might actually *be* in love. Cupid never seemed to really understand it, so naturally I doubted that any happenstance of deep, romantic love might stick. Still, even cynics like me want to believe.

I am celibate. Gloriously so. And, as goddess of the hunt, I don't tolerate meddling males who would try to capture my free spirit and suppress my athleticism to impose their values upon me – much less claim me as their own. That's my experience with the sentiment of love. Still, I won't begrudge others their choices.

"One hundred rings, Diana," Cupid said, "for the first hundred years Tamara and I spend together." He handed me a one-of-a-kind arrow. Its tip was a single, giant blue diamond. Its fletching was made of long white feathers tinged with blue. I recognized them as Cupid's own flight feathers. The arrow's shaft was wrapped in luxurious blue velvet and encircled by those hundred rings, each unique and enchanting.

My heart pinged. How odd. Sentimentality normally has no home in my heart. I suspected that Cupid was the culprit. I shielded my body and mind from the persuasive mojo that he was likely carelessly throwing around.

He couldn't be doing it on purpose. He'd better not be. I decided to remind him just who he was dealing with.

Rather than turn Cupid into a toad or a worm, I whistled my stag to my side. The magnificent buck is my near constant companion. He's strong and agile, yet sensitive and yielding – all that a male creature should be. We have an understanding. We respect each other's power and autonomy, and he reminds everyone that those who attempt to sway me with their charms will end badly.

I felt tension positively roll off Cupid. Oh, yes, my stag did indeed remind him of Actaeon, that overeager male who centuries ago stumbled into my woods and lingered to spy. The mortal slunk his way close enough to catch me bathing, and his perverse curiosity cost him dearly. I spotted him. He tried to run, but he'd have been better off begging for mercy. As punishment for both his crime and attempted escape, I transformed him into a stag. He became clumsy as a newborn fawn, and his eyes ran red when I set his own hunting hounds against him. Their snarls were almost as loud as his screams when they tore him to shreds.

I've relaxed a bit since then.

Cupid may have been counting on that when he beckoned me.

"Great Huntress, Great Huntress, a captive begs your time," he'd called. The "begging" part is what pleased me, and I found him burning incense at a holly grove,

fanning the curls of smoke upward with his wings. He immediately apologized for the interruption. "I know we don't see each other often, Diana. My work keeps me near people and away from woodlands."

Little did he know that I did not take his regular absence as disrespect. If I wanted visitors, I wouldn't live tucked away in the woods.

After hearing his elaborate plan, which made a show of his intentions, well, I couldn't arbitrarily stand in his way. He might even finally be sincere, I reasoned, having only taken millennia to get there.

I turned the elegant arrow over in my fingers and gazed at the rings. I was impressed by their extravagance and the trouble Cupid must have gone through. Here was a vibrant jade stone, green as new grass, set atop a silver band engraved with winding French poetry. Another ring presented a rosy opal perched atop a circle of interweaving golden threads, reminding me of the braids of my nymphs. Such joyful creatures. And this ring, my favorite, was a simple wooden ring, its dark and light bands of grain breathtaking beneath a clear glaze.

"I flew the heavens and Earth to find the best artisans," Cupid said. "I'd give Tamara a new ring every day if she'd let me."

Cupid babbled a bit about how he secured others' help. Either he was trying to make polite conversation or trying to convince me to be a part of his scheme. I gave

him as bored a look as I could muster. My patience runs thin at affectation. Cupid got the hint and stopped talking. When I nodded, he gave a quick thanks and flew off.

Two mornings later, I was alerted through the eyes of my harrier hawk that the moment was here. I mounted my stag and flattened my hands atop his coat for godly speed. We stotted fast as the wind to a tree-lined mesa near the supposedly happy couple. It was a beautiful spot, encircled by trees yet open to the cliff and a breathtaking view of the sea beyond. I could smell tangy earth, sharp sea spray, and ambrosia-fed Celestials in a single whiff. I looked around and saw branches moving. The woods were filling with hidden co-conspirators. We moved to the woods as well and settled within the shadows. I slid off my stag's back and fit a ring onto each of his antler tines. He made for a magnificent sight: twitching, muscled power below elegant artistry.

I watched again through my hawk's eyes as Cupid and Tamara bounded up the seaside cliffs, heading our way. They wore brown leather tunics. His was longer and darker looking against his white skin, hers shorter and lighter against her brown skin. I noticed Cupid used a leather guard on his left arm and finger tabs on his right. Tamara apparently needed different protection from the arrow's chafing, seeing that she used two gloves. They ascended, firing arrows at hay bales wrapped in paper targets. The bales made poor substitutes for humans bustling along

an urban street unaware of impending love, but I suppose practice is practice.

Tamara risked leaning off some wedged rocks to hit the most inaccessible targets. Well, what woman or goddess wouldn't want to prove herself when competing against one of the best archers on heaven and earth? I say *one* of the best because I have yet to be beaten – unlike my twin brother, Apollo. A story for another time.

My hawk's vision zoomed in on Cupid's face in time to see him stop and smile at Tamara as if she were a brook in paradise. I think I rolled my eyes high enough to see my brain – and then felt immediate shame. Skeptic though I was, I should not mock the very union I'd agreed to bless.

Cupid continued making his way up the cliff, stealthily leading Tamara to the plateau. He took Tamara's gloved hand and walked her to the center while hundreds of hidden Celestials watched. Cupid swept his free arm overhead. The clouds above them gathered thick and wavy, like buttercream frosting.

That was my brother's cue. Rays of sunlight piled up against the clouds.

Cupid waved his hand again, and the center section of clouds dissipated. It left a heart-shaped hole, as if Cupid had pulled a massive cookie cutter from the frosting. When warm sunlight cascaded through the opening, it cast a love-shaped spotlight upon them.

Tamara looked at the ground around her and laughed, to her hidden audience's delight.

Cupid pointed upward, and Apollo drifted through the breach. My twin wore his usual sleeveless, white tunic, gathered at the waist with twisted, golden thread. The darn-near dress ended just above his knees and fluttered dangerously higher as he floated downward. Knowing him, he was naked underneath and didn't mind if anyone found out. Those who had seen him – his face, I mean – described him as handsome, which I suppose made me the same. He had dark brown hair and eyes and golden skin. Well, tugging the sun across the sky all day has to give you a year-round tan. He also had a ready smile – *too* ready for anyone who happened to catch his interest down on Earth. The playboy. Apollo was stroking his lyre, which he rarely does on demand. Cupid must have asked verrrrrrrry nicely – or promised to owe him one. Risky.

Tamara stepped back from the descending god of light and crossed her ankles to curtsy, but Cupid drew her arm upward to bring her back to full height.

Apollo landed some ten meters before her and toned down his bright aura. He always waited until the last possible moment to do that, so that the brightness would awe his audience.

His dimming was my cue.

My stag lowered himself for me to mount once more, and together we entered the clearing. He

promenaded slowly, regally. The rings on his antlers glinted at every movement. I caught Apollo flicking his fingers, like a child playing with marbles, ping-ponging the rings with superfine sunbeams to make them dazzle.

I stared into Tamara's eyes and witnessed fear cross them. She recognized me, and she'd bow unless Cupid stopped her, as is fitting. A god's chosen mate becomes royalty herself. Tamara stutter-stepped when Cupid grabbed her arm.

Her mouth suddenly formed an O, and I think she caught on: the heart in the sky, the sparkling rings, and a couple of gods – plus many minor Celestials she still hadn't seen – don't just show up at a playful competition without reason.

My stag stopped before her and rolled his head to each side.

Cupid's cue. He dropped to one knee.

Tamara put a hand over her mouth. It was a curious reaction, but one that I'd seen before, as if women feared that talking might make a suitor change his mind. I suppose it could. In such a circumstance, *I* might make the same gesture – to hold back vomit. My life allowed me no other reaction.

"Tamara, my darling, ma chérie," Cupid began. "For eons I've sparked desperate and lasting love in the hearts of countless beings. I thought I knew love's power and intricacies better than anyone ever in the history of

time. But I didn't. *You* taught me love, my treasure. Only you can turn my every moment into joy. Only you can make my – and every – heart sing.

“Tamara, I love only you. Let me show my undying love over the vast expanse of ages. Will you marry me? Will you be mine and me yours to share all eternity?” He covered his heart with both hands.

That gesture was my stag's cue. He bent his head and presented the hundred curious and creative rings. Tamara's eyes widened to the size of tea saucers. Cupid, still kneeling, reached for a ring, removed it, and petted my stag in thanks. This was off-script and potentially dangerous. My stag scarcely allows *my* hand upon him. Strange then that my stag twitched just once before calming. Perhaps Cupid's ultra-loving sentiments extended to his reach. Or maybe my stag sensed Cupid's desire to impress his animal-loving girlfriend. Word had spread even so far as to my woods that Tamara had tamed Pluto's three-headed hellhound and managed to enchant Bacchus' panthers. Bet the god of wine felt a buzzkill after that.

Cupid lifted his hand off my stag, smiled at Tamara, and raised the ring to her.

That was undeniably her cue.

Would she put her hand in his and allow him to slip the first of many rings upon her finger? Could she look past his centuries of arrogant womanizing and foolhardy self-aggrandizement?

Spoiler alert, I wouldn't. The rings looked like nothing more than pretty manacles to me.

But love makes people foolish, from what I've heard. It certainly had that effect on all the other Celestials and mortals I'd seen over the millennia. Lust has the same effect, but no one could witness this grand declaration and confuse it with lust.

Tamara's eyes softened and shone with reflected rapture. The hand that had covered her mouth had fallen at some point to her heart, as if she hoped to quiet its beating, lest it be heard by the outside world. I found it both cliché and adorable. *She*, at least, loved *him*, even though males are so tragically *male*. I looked to my brother's eyes and saw no guilt or contemplation despite his being as big a womanizer as Cupid had been – and Jupiter and Neptune still are – and even Pluto, who outright stole his woman.

Movement drew my eyes back to Tamara. She planted both hands on either side of Cupid's pudgy, ruddy face and ran a thumb along one bushy eyebrow. Cupid's brown curly hair waved in the breeze like seaweed in the current. Tamara's black, wavy hair brushed across her shoulders at each gust. She bent to kiss him – respectfully, considering her public audience.

"Yes," she breathed aloud after drawing away. "Yes, I'll marry you."

Several hundred of the angels that Cupid and Tamara restored to Olympus set to flight. Tamara started

at the rush of wings and stir of branches. Cupid leapt to his feet. The Celestials filled the sky and burst into song, a literal heavenly chorus. Apollo shone rays of pink and golden light everywhere, shooting them off his fingers like the outlaw of a Wild West showdown.

“Oh my gods,” Tamara said in a breath. “I can’t believe this. And look!” She pointed at three angels flying out of the crowd and toward them, all wearing white suits: a rotund, pink-faced redhead; a brown-skinned smiler with a thin mustache; and a much darker-skinned, dapper angel who carried himself with authority. Behind them was a buggy creature, ostensibly a cherub, flapping his transparent wings if he were in a raging wind tunnel. I noticed he wore a winged hat and sandals, and I immediately remembered they’d belonged to Mercury before the god of thieves was banished.

The angels dropped hard in front of Tamara and enveloped her in rough arms. The cherub followed seconds later.

“Cornelius! Tommy! Tyrone!” Tamara shouted in surprise and gasping for breath. “And Pip! Oh, how wonderful you’re here! And Jarel?”

“Still trainin’ with this one’s dad,” Tommy answered, pointing at Cupid, then turning to face him. “Glad ta see yer finally making this hookup honest, Junior.”

Cupid narrowed his eyes ever so slightly. I wondered if I’d witnessed an insult – always dangerous when

levied against a god – but Cupid grinned, laughed, and pulled the troublemaker in for a half-hug-half-handshake sort of thing. I decided the Fabulous Fallen Four must be as close as the rumors say – minus the one playing war intern.

“Jarel do say hi,” Tommy said to Tamara.

I stood corrected.

As they pattered on, I turned toward the woods and raised my hand. The thousand birds I’d summoned burst into flight and formed a wide and colorful halo encircling everyone overhead. They twittered with joy.

Scores of rainbows shot across the waters just beyond the cliffs, and I realized Neptune must have been brought into the plans as well. I imagined Cupid thanking the constellations for friends in high places.

Cupid snagged Tamara’s waist and twirled her with unbridled happiness.

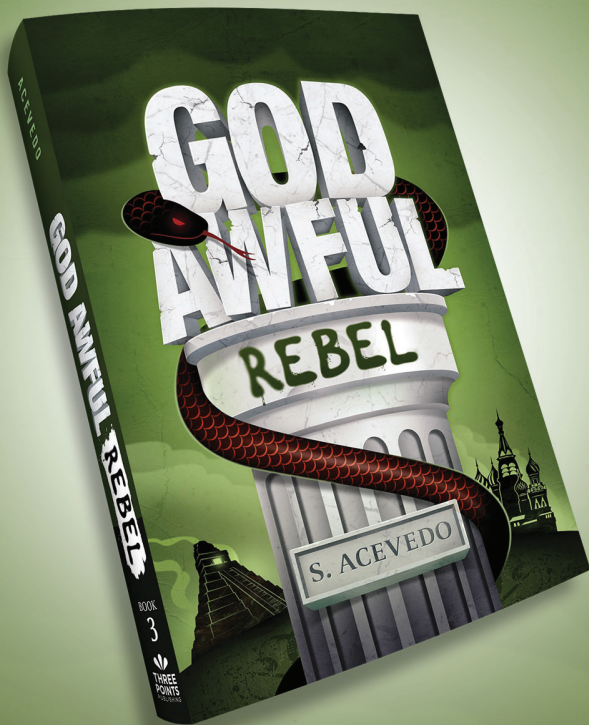
I swallowed a lump and realized that this truly was a moment I was glad to have witnessed. There’s a lot to be cynical about, especially over the course of an eternal life. But not this. This was true love – and a glorious proposal.

I’d give them a full day together before breaking the news.

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