



**GOOD
AWFUL**

LOSER

S. ACEVEDO

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Excerpted from *God Awful Loser* by Silvia Acevedo.

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Three Points Publishing LLC.,
P.O. Box 210861, Milwaukee, WI 53221
www.threepointspublishing.com

The text type was set in Adobe Caslon

ISBN 978-0-9863207-0-5

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 — 6 5 4 3 2 1

The shiny, candy-apple red limousine turned the corner, and no one even noticed. No one walking his dog or on her way to work saw the slick, spinning rims or heard the laughter spilling out of the open sunroof. They didn't catch the figure in the blinding white suit rise out of it, his curly brown hair reflecting the sunlight. And no one saw him pull a sparkling golden arrow out of a bejeweled quiver and fire it.

The long, glittering arrow shot forward unseen. It cut into the steam rising from the street sewers and barreled down on its target: an innocent, hapless blonde obviously striding to work and about to have her whole world turned upside down. The targets *never* saw the arrow. And they never would. But the effects were undeniable. Potent. Lasting in a way that mere *affection* never could. The arrow struck true.

“Ha, haaaa! Buuuuuuuulls-eye! Yet another loooooove connection!” crowed the archer before lowering his upper body through the sunroof of that magnificent ride and bouncing down onto the seat where he'd been standing. His slight pooch of a belly jiggled. “And what-cha think about that, ladies?”

“Ooh, Cupid,” cooed a curvy hanger-on

accompanying him on this latest mission. The straight-haired Asian angel in the plunging white dress walked two fingers up his suit coat, cuddled up, and sighed. “You’re soooo good.” Four other groupies, tickled pink to be there, fluttered their eyelashes and giggled along. Cupid straightened his long, diamond-studded necklace in mock humility, that admired, adored, jet-setting love master.

The ladies, all five of them, leaned in to gush over their idol. Cupid’s fan club of the day was diverse: a short blonde, a curvy brunette, a fair redhead, the jet-black-haired Asian, and a dark-skinned beauty with a spectacular afro.

Cupid’s long, white face was flush with adrenaline. His eyes, beady and blue, scanned them, judging. His uncomfortably bushy eyebrows matched his brown hair and reflected nearly as much sunlight as his dazzling white suit.

He and the angelettes turned on their heels as the limo rolled past to watch the arrow-stricken woman. She was still walking. Hadn’t flinched. Was unaware of the total chaos about to enter her life the moment she turned the corner to bump into her Mr. Right.

Cupid cleared his throat to regain their attention and teased his lovely assistants with a crooked grin. “Watch this,” he said and stood back up through the sunroof. He withdrew three more life-altering arrows from his overflowing quiver and fired them off in quick succession:

one at a plump and balding middle-aged man; another at a morose, pierced teenager who was sitting on a stoop with his head in his hands; and the third seemingly at no one. Cupid's eager escorts watched in amazement as the final arrow ricocheted off a metal billboard, off a green Volkswagen Beetle, zipped within inches of a thin, severe looking woman, and hit an up-and-coming young business exec walking past her. The freshly stamped MBA graduate halted in his tracks, turned, and watched the severe woman – the new love of his life – continue on her way.

“Er,” started Cupid, but he was interrupted by applause.

“Wowwee!” shouted the blonde, pulling Cupid down by his belt. “You don't even take aim” – her eyes widened – “yet you bank the shot, clear the lady, and still hit the mark! Sooooo impressive!”

Cupid raised a brow and glanced over his shoulder at the young man now jogging to catch His Catch. “Hmmm,” Cupid said and turned back to the ladies. Seeing their adoration, he shrugged impassively and plopped onto his seat. He threw one arm behind the blonde and another around the afroed in platform heels. Both kissed his pudgy cheeks and placed possessive hands on his shapeless pecs.

“More champagne!” he ordered, and Ms. Brunette was on it, pouring with one hand and handing out filled glasses with the other. Cupid pushed a silver button on the black leather interior of the door, lowering the partition

separating driver from riders. “Tyrone, my work’s done for now. Back to Cupid Castle.”

“Yes, sir,” mumbled Tyrone. The sleepy-eyed driver tipped his hat, which matched his off-white suit. His formal wear was yellowing, duller than Cupid’s, but still contrasted nicely with his dark-chocolate colored skin. The limo veered into a billow of steam issuing from a street grate and disappeared. Not that anyone would have noticed.



Moments later, the jazzy red limo pulled up to a gated property. Guarding its tall, elaborately gilded gate was a live cherub hovering at the very top. Tyrone slowed to a stop and lowered his window. The cheeky cherub fluttered down.

“Your business?” asked the little, pink protector.

“Love,” answered Tyrone with such boredom that one had to wonder whether the word held any meaning for him. His jet-black eyes had grown dull, his smooth face expressionless, and he rarely flashed his spectacular smile anymore.

“Oooh, you must be escorting Coooopid,” cheeped the little dumpling. “I’m so excited to finally meet him. I’ve got a message!”

“You can tell me,” Tyrone said dully.

“I’m to relay the message to Mr. Cupid only,” replied the mite importantly, trying but failing to puff out his featherweight chest.

Tyrone sighed. “Whatever you say, small fry.” He ignored the little imp’s indignation and held down two buttons on his side console: one to lower the back window nearest Cupid and the other to raise his own. “Try not to sprinkle any fairy dust in the vehicle.”

“I am *not* a fa-,”

The closing window cut off his words.

Cupid stuck his head out of his now open window. “What’s the holdup?” he called.

“Oh, Mr. Cupid,” answered the flustered, celestial messenger, trying to regain his composure. “Mr. Cupid, you’re wanted by Mr. Habandash up at Jupiter Heights.” The cherub turned toward Cupid Castle, but all eyes swept past the comparatively modest building at the base of Mount Olympus, beyond, to the giant one at the peak of it. That towering, glowing palace belonged to Jupiter, god of the sky, god of thunder, and indeed king of the gods.

Jupiter’s home was so big that most heavenly peoples could only see the bottom of it. The upper part, the bulk of the colossus, was veiled by impenetrable clouds. What the people *could* see, however, was imposing enough. The white marble towers and turrets lent it nobility and strength, while the gentle, white glow all around lent it

an air of purity that only the god of gods could command.

Cupid had a feeling, though, that *purity* wasn't what Mr. Habandash wanted to talk about. Jupiter's assistant was usually too busy to prattle.

Cupid grabbed the limo's door handle, pulled it, and stepped out, against the ladies' chorus of complaints. "Now, now, my lovely angels. I'll be back soon, after I take care of my business with Jupiter."

"No one sees Jupiter but Mr. Habandash," piped up the pesky pipsqueak.

Cupid threw him a sour look before turning his face back to the window. "Tyrone will take you up to the palace. Feel free to call up a few more of your girlfriends. The more, the merrier, I always say. For me, at least. Oh, and don't touch my stuff."

He slammed the door on their continued complaints and followed the cherub up Heaven's Way, the main thoroughfare winding around the floating mountain paradise. Along the way, every lesser celestial being greeted Cupid, waving in his direction. Some stopped him for an autograph or got up on tiptoes to plant a kiss. Some matronly angels tried in vain to drag him into the house for family tea. Cupid smiled smugly and took this all in stride. It was good to be king.

Or near king. The real king was just behind that 20-foot-tall pearl door. Cupid raised a bejeweled hand to the knocker, but the door swung open to reveal a

hurried immortal. Mr. Habandash was short, portly, and scruffy-looking, the kind of celestial who was probably debonair in his youth but now, past his prime, had more frown lines and jowls than he'd care to acknowledge. He still had a great head of deep brown hair, although he made the unfortunate decision to grease it and comb the mop over the top, like the mortal actors of the 1930s. His tan robes had blue ink splotches on them. Cupid wondered if he ever looked in a mirror.

“Well? What are you waiting for?!” barked Habandash. “An invitation? You were summoned. Get in here!” He turned and scuttled into the palace, taking tiny but fast steps. Habandash kept a brisk pace; Cupid hustled to keep up. They stepped into a huge room emitting deafening noise.

“Do you know what happens in this room?” the assistant demanded, flipping both hands onto his hips.

Cupid, who wasn't accustomed to being treated with anything less than veneration, lifted his chin and slowly – very slowly – swept it from left to right to survey his surroundings. Habandash's office was obviously a hub of communication. Electronic maps hung on the walls, each blinking with dozens of lights depicting angels on errands. So many emergency radio scanners squawked that Cupid wondered how anyone could penetrate the din to hear anything. “I suppose you're going to tell me.”

Habandash frowned and stormed to a map, where

he pointed at a single brown dot, which Cupid hadn't noticed next to all the bright angel dots. "In this room, I keep track of all of the activities by gods, angels, assistants, and any other beings who are under Jupiter's command." Habandash stormed back toward the door and gestured with both hands down the gaping hall. "You know, the boss?!"

Cupid sauntered to him and gazed down the hall. He was immediately captured by the beauty of the grand, opal-iridescent, double stairway leading into clouds. That staircase had mesmerized him more than once. The music it exhaled was deeply entrancing. Enticing. Suddenly irresistible. Cupid just *had* to get up those stairs. Like the last time. And the time before that. It was imperative that he find out where those stairs would take him. To see Jupiter, he was sure. Cupid took a step forward, but suddenly a pudgy hand slapped hard across his chest, barring his path. Again.

"No one sees Jupiter but me," Habandash reminded him coldly.

Crestfallen and somewhat embarrassed by his own idolatry – *Aren't I a god, too? Why am I acting like a stalking fan?* – Cupid stepped back into Habandash's office.

"Then why am I here?" Cupid touched the side of his mouth with his forefinger and inquired in a tone sweet enough to rile even the most patient kindergarten teacher. "Please, do tell."

“You are *here*,” Habandash continued with derision, “because *you* are screwing up. That brown dot is the young man you hit with your final, ill-aimed arrow who is now in love with your intended target who should have fallen in love with her landscaper.”

“Ooooh, welllllllll.” Cupid cleared his throat and pulled on a particularly long, brown curl. “It’s all right. Now *he’s* in love, too. It’s my job to share love. No harm done.”

“YES, HARM DONE!” roared Habandash. “There is someone for everyone, and your carelessness, had I not caught it, might have taken away that someone from someone else, namely the four involved.”

“What four?” asked Cupid, confused.

“The young man, his future wife, the target, and her landscaper!” Habandash threw his hands up in exasperation. “This is the twentieth time this month that I’m having to send out a lesser angel to fix your mistakes. You. Are. Slipping. Up! And I will remind you that there are a hundred lesser angels who would love to have the job of Lead Love Angel and hold the title of *Cupid*. So you’ve had the position for ages – so what?! The position is *earned* – and can be lost.”

Cupid chuckled. Then, seeing Habandash’s nostrils flare, he put a hand to his mouth and closed his eyes. He’d hold his breath. Until ... until he couldn’t. Then a spray of spit and air burst out of him as he erupted into laughter.

Habandash yawped in disgust and pulled a filthy handkerchief out of his sleeve to blot the spittle off his face. “And just what’s so funny?” he hissed.

“Another *Cupid?*” asked Cupid between howls of laughter. “C’mon, Habbi!” – he used the nickname that Habandash most detested – “You and I both know why I’m the only Cupid. I’m the son of Venus, goddess of love, remember? My arrows are more potent and spark true love better than anyone else’s. It would *take* a hundred angels to equal one of me.”

Habandash’s eyes sparked.

“Oh, all right, all right,” soothed Cupid, hands raised in mock defeat. “I’ll be more careful. I’ll actually take aim,” he acceded, adding under his breath, “even though it’s so much more impressive with the ladies when I don’t.”

Cupid turned on his heels and walked out of the room, not having been dismissed and ignoring the calls to come back. He stepped out into sunny Olympus only to learn that his cherubin escort had left him. *Humph*, he thought. *The little brat.*

Turning onto Heaven’s Way, Cupid particularly enjoyed, after that ridiculous scolding, the attention and stares he got from adoring and swooning fans. *They* knew who the real Cupid would always be. The female angels up ahead shivered as usual – but – it was odd how they shivered *before* he’d gotten there.

Cupid heard a crowd approaching and saw the little munchkin who should have been escorting him coming his way, escorting someone else. Another angel. A stranger. Or at least no one that Cupid had ever taken the time to notice. And it was this new angel who was drawing the crowd and inducing shivers.

Cupid watched as if in slow motion as the newbie sauntered by. The stranger wore a glittering, diamond-speckled, silver tuxedo and had the sort of rugged good looks that made everyone stare. Tall and dark haired. A square jaw that not only held when he smiled, but also revealed deep dimples. Mocha brown eyes, full lips, and an undeniably sexy glow that allowed him his confident swagger.

“And you’ll be seeing Mr. Habandash,” explained the cherub in a servile tone. “He has a speci-...”

But Cupid couldn’t hear the rest as the gaggle of female angels pursuing the pair twittered shamelessly about how handsome he was.

And Cupid realized the “he” to whom they referred wasn’t him.

TAKING AIM

OR

FLUSHING

Cupid continued on his way back to Cupid Castle, and, the farther he distanced himself from the stranger, the more regular became the attention lavished upon *him* again. The waves and hellos he got en route restored Cupid's aplomb. To each who doted upon him, and rightly so, he thought, he generously nodded. This unescorted walk, in his mind, became a gift, a promenade of unfiltered celebrity for the lesser celestials to enjoy, and it further served to swell his hugely inflated ego. It was good to be back with those who loved him.

“Tyronne, we’re going back out!” shouted Cupid, jogging through the pillared portico of his domain and into the master lounge. “Ladies, back into the limo! I feel like showing off a bit.”

Cupid expected to see the angelettes leap up from the many plush sofas dotted with soft pillows, excited to go out, to be seen with him again – or maybe they’d be near tears for not scoring an evening alone with him. But he saw none of that. Instead, he saw greenish-blue light spilling out of his side rec room, the room in which he kept his ERP, or Earthly Reflecting Pool.

All the gods had one. The sink-sized pool held a greenish-blue liquid, which was a mixture of water and ambrosia, the food of the immortals. It was this liquid that allowed the gods to see earthly activities. The viscous goo swirled languidly in ornate bowls supported by tall bases, and each ERP was decorated in the style of the god who owned it. Cupid's pink marble bowl looked like a giant, hollowed candy heart supported by a bouquet of bronzed, long-stem roses.

Tyrone had permission to use the ERP, but not when Cupid was entertaining guests.

"Tell me you did not send the ladies away just so you could watch gods' cable," warned Cupid, startling Tyrone out of a deep daze.

"Sir," gasped Tyrone, gripping the rim of the ERP as if it were threatening to sprout legs and run away. Tyrone was almost unrecognizable; Cupid was used to seeing him looking bored out of his skull.

"Sir, thank goodness you're here. I'm sitting in the kitchen when I hear the ladies scrambling out of here, clicking their heels on the marble, and I ask what's going on, and one says the ERP says it all. Sir, see for yourself."

Cupid sighed and stepped forward reluctantly. "All this fuss better not be for another hurricane or giant whirlpool. Neptune's always whipping those up for attention." Cupid remembered the time he and Tyrone drove across the ocean on a transatlantic short-cut and the sea

god chased them down with a giant wave. Cupid guessed that Neptune was insulted by not being asked permission to pass over his domain. Or maybe the sea god was just grouchy.

“No, sir. Please look,” urged Tyrone.

Cupid bent over the ERP and saw Earth as usual, so he concentrated to zoom in. It was then that he saw a trail of glitter across half of Paris with golden arrows soaring out of it. He lowered his nose to within an inch of the water and looked closer. Closer.

Just ahead of that streak of gold and silver glitter – and shining even brighter – was ... the stranger. The glitter was flowing off his giant, muscled wings, which were in much better shape than Cupid’s as the latter had taken to not exercising them much, instead stuffing them into his suit and traveling by limo. The stranger’s silvery suit had custom-made wing-slits, and Cupid noticed that the cut of the stranger’s suit was more tailored and refined than his own.

Cupid might have thought, *No big deal; he’s just taking in the sights*, had it not been for the rapid fire of golden arrows striking people.

“Sir, what’s happ–”

“Saddle up!” Cupid insisted. “We leave NOW!”



The limo slammed down onto the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris' most famous street, and nearly collided into a chestnut tree before Tyrone managed to swerve and hit the brakes. The limo screeched to a halt next to a café, and, as usual, not a soul saw or heard it.

Except the immortals.

There were a dozen of them: Mr. Who-Do-You-Think-You-Are New Guy; the flighty little cherub for whom Cupid was developing a severe dislike; and ten – count 'em – ten angelic assistants, five of whom were the same ladies who'd escorted Cupid this morning and another five whom he didn't know but looked just as tempting.

Tyrone scrambled out of the limo and rushed to open Cupid's door. It was the fastest the Olympic chauffeur had moved since entering the afterlife.

Cupid leapt out and took one angry step onto the grand avenue before remembering who he was: a *god*, as in, *powerful. Dignified. Unique.* He slowed his stride and straightened the lapels of his magnificently white suit. Thus reassured, he crossed the street slowly, deliberately. Cars zipped right through him, their drivers unaware that they were committing hit-and-run on a god, although they'd feel curiously wonderful the rest of the day for the divine contact.

When Cupid reached Mr. Gorgeous, he casually plucked the newbie's bow from his hands and turned it

over in his own. Then he ran his beringed finger along every inch of it: from the nock to the sight arrow to the grip to the other nock and all along the bowstring, testing its feel. It was a move meant to show the newcomer that Cupid could take and handle any bow he wished. He could break it if he wanted. Cupid handed it back with a slight sneer to show his distaste for what he deemed an inferior product. Mr. Gorgeous took it without a sound or gesture, but the cherub dropped down to flutter right between the two of them.

“Would you like something, Mr. Cupid?” it asked, using the proper words but hinting at frustration in its tone.

“Tsk, tsk,” clucked Cupid, waving a hand as if to shoo a fly. “I think you’ve led this lesser love angel astray, and here your job is to see that that doesn’t happen. Pity, that slip-up.”

Cupid turned to the stranger, who he only guessed was a new love angel by the fact that he was in possession of love arrows. “You’re in the wrong place,” Cupid pooh-poohed. “You may not know this, being so greeeen and inxpeeerienced, but lesser love angels never do Paris. They work Afghanistan or North Korea or, in your case, I’d recommend Antarctica as a start. Paris, however, is *my* territory. No one works the City of Love but me, Cupid, because *I’m* the one who *makes* it the City of Love. My *érotisme* and I are what make this place what it is, and you, Mr.-Whoever-You-Are, are not up to it. I suggest

you leeeeeeave,” he said pointedly, sweeping his arm toward the sky in invitation.

The new angel, who hadn’t said a word during the public rubbing, merely cocked an eyebrow at Cupid and asked him in a smooth, deep voice, “I am not up to ... what? Pricking Paris? I believe I am.”

“And that’s exactly what he’s been sent to do, Mr. Cupid,” the little varmint pitched provocatively. “Mr. Habandash asked that I try him out here and see if his aim is more accur-,” the little imp stopped himself, cleared his throat, and continued simply, “see if his aim is accurate.”

“Thank you, Pip,” said the newbie to the cherub.

The little fart has a name? thought Cupid, who instantly imagined himself popping Pip.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Mandre,” was the answer. The angelettes shivered.

What kind of a name is Mandre? thought Cupid. *Manly Mandre, ooooh.* He bristled, angry. Now Cupid didn’t have just *one* person questioning his skills, but three: Mr. Habandash, the cherub (*who should be falling on his face in servitude*, Cupid thought), and this lesser angel.

“And to prove that I’m up to the challenge,” continued Mandre in his cool manner, as if the whole conversation were no great insult, “I propose a test of skills.” He pulled from his suit pocket a sheet of glittering golden paper which Cupid recognized as the daily Hit List, the index of names of those to be lovified. “Six names remain. We

each get three. He with the most spectacular hits wins.”

Cupid suffered three shades of rage before raising his voice. “Listen, Mongrel,” as he’d decided to call him.

“It’s Mandre.”

Cupid went on raging, “A god does not prove his position to anyone! I’ll—”

“But,” Pip interjected. “Mr. Habandash – Jupiter’s executive assistant, mind you – gave the order that this angel be tried.” Pip rubbed his chin and looked as if he were struggling for the right words. “If you forbid Mr. Mandre from obeying his orders, you flout Jupiter. However, if you wish to show *ho-o-o-o-oow* superior you are,” Pip said delicately, “you could accept the challenge and prove that any questioning of your skills was folly.”

Cupid bared his teeth, and Pip soared upward out of reach.

Mandre tore the Hit List, separating the bottom three names from the rest. He then pulled a silver dagger out of his front inside pocket, held the torn strip of paper up to the nearest chestnut tree, and stabbed it into place.

No mortal saw the glint of the swift blade striking nor the note left hanging nor Mandre spreading his wings and taking off, but all the immortals did. They gave chase, and Cupid realized he had to, too. He thrust his wings outward, tearing his suit in the process, and cursed the Titans for this brazen interloper.

The new angel was furiously fast, and his glittering

trail was like a wall of dust that Cupid struggled to penetrate. Cupid couldn't see much more than brilliance until he caught a glimpse – and heard the familiar zing – of a flying arrow.

It's way off course! thought Cupid gleefully. The arrow soared toward a rooftop, nowhere near people. It hit a rain gutter with a thwack. “Ha, ha!” Cupid started laughing, but his laughter soon died out. He watched in horror as the arrow ricocheted, sailed through an elaborately engraved metal wind chime – setting off the most beautiful music any nearby mortal had ever heard – hit the base of the chime, ricocheted horizontally, and finally sailed directly into the heart of a sad, middle-aged woman wearing a sweater of crocheted hearts. The arrow centrally sliced both the yarned heart and her yearning one.

“Yay!” shouted the lady angels. “Bravo!”

“A solid hit,” said Pip, “featuring two controlled ricochets with such musical accompaniment that shall cheer the nearby humans the lasting day. Well done.”

Cupid stamped a foot and hissed, “I never agreed to any challen—”, but Mandre took flight again, and the swoosh of the ladies and Pip following triggered a gust of wind that muffled Cupid's protests.

Cupid growled and again shot forward to catch up. He sprinted past the angelettes and almost had that malignant Mandre in his grip when the underhanded sneak plummeted toward the ground.

Mandre dived downward face-first and flipped at the last possible moment to slide skateboarder-style down one edge of the Louvre Pyramid in front of the famous Louvre Museum. Just before reaching the ground, he reached over his shoulder for his quiver and shot an arrow toward the towering statue of King Louis XIV, a monarch who Cupid supposed came as close to godly power as any mortal could.

The arrow skidded along the bronze flank of the king's reared horse and traced the bend in its front leg. Losing speed, the shaft finally gave in to gravity and fell to the ground in a graceful arc, gently pricking the chest of a 20-something tourist with red hair who was admiring the piece. The young man turned to the girl next to him and earnestly declared his love in broken French distorted by his strong Irish accent.

Pip and the ladies landed at the base of the pyramid next to the flustered Cupid.

"Target number two! A fantastic action shot tinged with art and a gentle landing," declared Pip, marking a check on his clipboard.

Cupid was not going to let this showboating continue. He turned with a raised finger to berate the malevolent Mongrel, but the show-off took flight again. This time, Cupid was ready and gave chase. He was again within arm's reach when that meddler – that trespasser, as Cupid saw him – dived toward the Eiffel Tower and shot

his third arrow mid-descent.

Mongrel spiraled to slow himself and grabbed hold of the tower about half-way down. Cupid threw out an arm and snagged the Tower – well, crashed into it – just a bit lower down. Cupid peered above him and found Mongrel resting there, looking like a bright King Kong, except that King Kong wasn't such a hotshot.

A spark of light drew Cupid's attention to his right. It was Mongrel's arrow, bouncing again and again in the tower's lattices, pinging off one iron strip after another, spraying each with a tiny circle of light. It looked like a game of celestial pinball.

No humans looked up at the bouncing "firefly." None of them saw the light. But one human was struck by the arrow, sure and true, after the final ping: a beautiful, muscled, athletic brunette wearing a fitted white dress and red hat. The arrow jetted right through her and stuck in the side of another human, a famed Olympic soccer coach who was gazing upward at the tower. He was the only man in the area not watching her at the moment, but the pinprick that he never felt nonetheless drew his eyes down to his true love. He determinedly held out an arm to escort her wherever she wished. She stutter-stopped, put a hand to her heart, and accepted the gallant offer. Of course she did; she'd accept his gallantry forevermore, for the entirety of their happy lives together.

"Oh, nicely done!" lauded Pip. "A show of lights

to a 2-in-1 hit. Beautiful *and* economical. You've done marvelously, Mr. Mandre. And now, Mr. Cupid," said the peckish speck, "would you do us the honor?"

"I will not!" declared Cupid. He stalked a slow circle around Pip, forcing himself to contain his rage. "Listen, Pimple," as he'd decided to call him.

Pip bristled. "It's Pip."

"Right. Pup." Cupid ignored Pip's gasping mouth. "I will not perform on demand like a caged animal. I discharge my *duties* out of honor." He stopped and folded his arms, holding his ground for his final statement. "And I hold my *title* through divine right!"

"Then I will have to report to Habandash that the challenge is won by Mr. Man—"

"You'll do no such thing!" stormed Cupid, stomping his feet like a petulant child.

"I have no choice, Mr. Cupid, but to report my findings."

Cupid was enraged at the idea of doing anything at the commands of a lesser angel or a cherub, but Jupiter's will, even if it were through Habandash, could not be flouted. The challenge was already too far along, and there were too many witnesses for Cupid to back down. Besides, he reminded himself perhaps too smugly but trying to soothe his jangling nerves, he could outdo a *hundred* angels.

"If you must report, then report my victory!" Cupid thrust out his hand, and the three-name Hit List which

had been daggered to a tree on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées ripped itself free and jetted his way.

As soon as it touched the tips of his fingers, Cupid sensed the names inscribed. He shot into the sky to find his first hit: a young teen, probably 16 years old, about to be one of the lucky ones who finds his future wife in high school. Too bad he was currently in a bathroom stall in one of the city's dingiest educational institutions.

Cupid dived through the bathroom window, which remained fully intact but, in the eyes of immortals, shattered spectacularly. Enchanted shards of glass flew all around him as Cupid twisted in mid air and shot a bullet-fast arrow. It pinged off the dingy mirror, banked upward to the hanging lampshade, and plunged back downward to hit the boy squarely on the top of his red head. It might have been impressive, perhaps, had the boy not hit the flush button a half-second earlier. The gurgle of the quickly emptying toilet echoed around the room.

"Hmmm," Pip muttered, fluttering through the dingy windowpane. "Two banks, but unfortunate timing. The watery swoosh is *less* than musical."

Cupid wasted no time arguing. How could he? He took off again, this time in pursuit of Hit List Person Number Two: a reserved brunette in her late 30s who'd just gone through a divorce – *because she didn't wait for me to strike*, Cupid thought, pumping himself up.

The woman was about to enter a library. Wanting

to catch her outside, Cupid recklessly fired without so much as aiming. Well, the haughty, highfalutin' Herald of Love should have set his sights straight. The arrow swept right past the woman and struck the metal door for which she was reaching. There was no ricochet; the arrow stopped dead at the door and dropped like a bird shot mid-air. It did manage to scratch the target before plopping to the ground and being trampled underfoot.

"Welllllll," mumbled Pimple, even more reluctantly this time around. "You *did* hit the target, but just barely. Um, surely, Mr. Cupid, you can do a bit better tha-"

Cupid ignored the cheeky little zit, expanded his wings for a third time, and again took off.

Finally, the Love Lord would get a target at an interesting location! The Arc de Triomphe. Cupid immediately thought of his dad, Mars, the god of war, who loved all military pomp. The Arc de Triomphe was one of his favorite military monuments. The stone block had a tall arch in its center, which opened it to foot traffic, and highly detailed sculptural reliefs on each face.

Gotcha, thought Cupid, spying the 50-something, greying city worker who was his final target. The man was refreshing the white paint on the fence posts that corral the Arc.

Cupid soared downward and did an opposing arch of his own, swooping through the monument's opening and rising up the other side. He was reminded of the

World War I pilot who flew through the monument in nearly the same way after war's end. The pilot's flight was captured on newsreels; Cupid's could be seen only by immortals.

When he reached the apex of his momentum, high in the sky, Cupid spun on his heels and aimed for the fence post directly *beside* the target. The arrow plunged groundward. It struck the first black link below the fence post and gracefully skimmed the chain, down and up, imitating the flying arc that Cupid himself had just performed so magnificently. When the arrow ran out of chain, it pierced the lucky worker perfectly through the pectoral. Instant change. By tonight, the man would be considering how to propose to that special woman working the grocery store checkout.

“Graceful and perfectly executed,” commented Pip, fluttering beside Cupid's head like a pesky mosquito. “But I'm afraid you've been outdone, Mr. Cupid. Mr. Mandre's won the challenge and the day's accolades. I must report my findings.”

Pip reached into his armpit and pulled out a handful of glittering dust even while Cupid was telling him to wait just a moment. Pip did not. Instead, he sprinkled the dust onto the paper at his clipboard, tore the paper free, and threw it into the sky. It disappeared almost instantly.

Turning to Mandre, Pip said, “You, sir, will now have the privilege of saying you're the only love angel to

ever defeat Mr. Cupid.”

The color washed from Cupid’s face. A smirk crossed Mandre’s. A flash of light brought a new piece of paper sprinkled in glittering dust, which Pip snatched from the air.

“Ha, ha!” laughed Pip. “And, Mr. Mandre, there’s more! We must return to Mt. Olympus at once. Hurry!”

His entire group flew off in an instant. Another bright light brought another note. Cupid snatched this one and found it addressed to him from Mr. Habandash. He was to report immediately, too.

Cupid felt the cold hand of unease grip him, but he was quick to explain it away: just residual anger from the stupid *duel*, he reasoned, which wasn’t really a duel because he never agreed to it. No one could claim it was legitimate, least of all Habandash. Still, Habandash had the powers to summon Cupid, report to Jupiter, and who knew what else, so Cupid decided the right hand man might deserve to be shown a bit more respect from here on out.

Cupid plucked a feather from his wing, tossed it into the sky to summon Tyrone, and soon found himself dropping in through the limo’s open sunroof.

“Paradise Plaza, Tyrone,” he commanded his driver with creeping dread, “and step on it.”