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Assault on the Gods

Stephen Goldin

**Darsina
PRESS**



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Dedicated to Dorothy Fontana,
for reasons that would take another book to enumerate

“I hope, for His sake, that God does not exist—
because if He does, He has an awful lot to answer
for.”

—Philip K. Dick

Chapter 1

Just as a child needs its parents, so does an immature society need its gods. Freedom is always hard to bear, and the weight of self-responsibility can only be carried after a certain level of sophistication has been attained.

—Anthropos, *The Godhood of Man*

The road, if such it could be called, was a simple track along which the local equivalent of horses—six-legged beasts called daryeks—could pull rickety wooden carts. The ruts worn by wagon wheels were several centimeters deep in water, while the rest of the road was mud. With no traffic at night, Ardeva Korrell had the trail entirely to herself. The planet Dascham had no moon and the overcast sky blocked out the stars, so her universe was a darkness broken

only by the light of the small electric lantern she carried as she trudged along on foot.

“In the ideal world,” she mused to no one in particular, “a spaceship captain would not have to serve as her own shore patrol as well.” And she sighed. Dascham was about as far from the ideal world as she ever hoped to get. She might as well wish for a ship of her very own, a competent crew, and the respect due her rank and experience. They were all equally distant from reality.

The dark clouds overhead threatened rain—not unexpected, since it rained every night in the inhabited parts of this planet. A biting wind accompanied the clouds and chilled her spirit, despite the spacer uniform that insulated all but her head.

“I hope Dunnis and Zhurat are drunk,” she said. “It will give me such pleasure tomorrow to yell into their hung-over ears and give them penalty duty.” The thought warmed her for a moment then died as her religious training came to the fore. “Vengeance eases frustrations only in the insecure mind,” she quoted. “Sanity does not require the evening of natural imbalances.’ I know, I know. But I sometimes think life would be a lot more fun if I were a little less sane.”

She thought of her warm, if cramped, cabin back aboard *Foxfire*, and about the books waiting for her there. This slogging through mud towards a shantytown to retrieve two drunken crewmen was not her idea of a pleasant way to spend a cold, damp night on an alien world. But it was necessary. She’d told them she wanted them back in four hours; when six had gone by without their return, she knew she’d

have to take disciplinary action. Being a female captain put her in a precarious enough position without letting the crew take advantage of her.

At least she wouldn't have to walk back. The Daschamese had generously provided the ship with a small cart for transportation to and from the village, but the two errant crewmembers had taken it with them into town. The only other transportation short of Shanks' mare was *Foxfire's* lifeboat, wasteful for a two-kilometer jaunt.

So she walked, with mud sucking at her boots as she lifted each foot, thinking alternately about her bed and books aboard ship and about what she could do to Dunnis and Zhurat if she were a less-sane, vengeance-seeking person.

She came upon the town suddenly. One moment the glow of the lantern showed nothing around her but open fields and, in the next, crude hovels that served the Daschamese as houses surrounded her. The ground underfoot, no better for being within the village, had been churned up from the volume of traffic that crossed over it daily.

To Dev, the settlement looked haphazard, squalid, and depressingly medieval—in short, identical to the three others she'd seen since *Foxfire* arrived on Dascham a week ago. Huts, rather than houses had been built out of a reedy material resembling bamboo; large chinks in the walls were filled in with mud—hardly the warmest possible arrangement. Little wonder, then, that the Daschamese wore heavy, coarse clothing. Something had to be done to keep pneumonia from wiping out the race.

The roofs, thatched with what appeared to be twigs, probably only kept out ninety percent of the water. Dev wondered whether the Daschamese would die if moved to a temperate climate; even their broad, flat feet seemed adapted to walking in mud.

Dev shook her head. It depressed her to see intelligent beings living in such physical poverty. Something was missing from their racial character, a sense of pride and accomplishment. Probably due to those gods they worshiped; the religious taboos were so strict they barely allowed the people a subsistence living. "Gods fit the minds of those who serve them," Anthropos had once observed. It made her wonder about the health of the Daschamese intellect.

The village was dark and preternaturally quiet. Dev estimated the population at several thousand, yet after dark there was little indication the region was even inhabited. It was the gods again, naturally—strict taboos against being outside after dark, except under certain circumstances. To be sure, even the dismal Daschamese had their nightlife, but it was a pale pleasure compared to those of human civilization.

It was a rule of the Universe that warm-blooded protoplasmic creatures could be affected by fermented beverages. It was also a rule that intelligent minds often sought relief from oppressive realities by indulging in some form of mind-alteration. The combination of those two rules meant there would be the equivalent of a bar on any world a human being could tolerate.

The Daschamese bars, built in the same architectural style—or lack thereof—as the houses, were

only slightly bigger. They would be lit at night, in contrast to the darkened sleeping hovels, and they would also tend to be slightly noisier—though from what Dev had seen of the natives, she wagered the Daschamese were quiet drunks. The bars seemed to be the only places on the entire planet offering respite from the dreariness of Daschamese living—and it would be in one of these bars that she would most likely find Dunnis and Zhurat.

There were no streets in the village. Huts were built wherever the owner felt they were convenient, which meant a resident had to find his way about by instinct.

Dev slogged through the mire, searching the random town for her crewmen. It began to drizzle before she found even the first bar—a monotonous heavy mist that blurred the outlines of objects around her. Her close-cut brown hair got damp, plastering itself to her forehead and neck. But aside from the steaming of the rain as it hit the ground, there was no sound—no babies crying, no people talking, no pets yapping. It seemed as though the village crouched in fear from some nameless horror. Finally she spotted a larger hut with lights shining between the chinks—a bar. She increased her pace to just short of a run. She didn't want to move too fast and fall in the mud; it would give those two clowns something more to laugh about if she went inside in such a disgraceful condition.

Entering the bar, she blinked at the mild lighting provided by candles in sconces around the walls. After being out in the pitch darkness of the Daschamese night, it took time for her eyes to ad-

just. Besides, there was a smoky quality to the atmosphere, which Dev guessed was produced by some local drug other than alcohol. The smoke burned her eyes and made her rub away the tears with the backs of her hands.

When she could see again, she surveyed the interior. Four small tables dotted the floor, each with four chairs around it. The proprietor stood behind a slightly longer table—more like a workbench than a bar. The floor was bare wood and the walls—except for the sconces and some blankets to cover the larger chinks—were devoid of decoration.

Several Daschames occupied the tables. Dev's hundred and eighty centimeter height towered over the natives, who only averaged a hundred fifty-five. The Daschamese looked like nothing so much as animated teddy bears. Thick, matted fur in varying colors covered their bodies. They walked on broad, flat feet, and they wore heavy woolen clothes. Their short, stubby hands each contained three fingers and an opposable thumb. It was impossible for a human to read any expression in the ursine faces, but their eyes lacked the vibrant luster of the truly alive.

At the sight of her, the natives rose quickly to their feet—whether out of respect or fear, Dev couldn't say. Probably a little of each, she supposed. After all, she was one of those strange beings from the sky. Many of the Daschamese may never have seen a human close up, since their planet was well outside the normal trading routes, and few ships ever ventured here. To the locals, with their primitive technology, humans must seem almost as powerful as their own gods.

Reaching up to her cheek, she switched on her translator. “Please don’t be startled,” she said into the mouthpiece, and heard her own voice coming out of it in the growly Daschamese tongue. “I am merely looking for two of my friends. Have any of you seen them?”

Silence for a moment then low growls, which the computer informed her were a chorus of ‘NOs’. She thanked the people and, with a sigh, ventured outside once more.

The drizzle had become a downpour in just the short time she’d been inside the bar. Dev wished she’d been able to bring her helmet with her, but she would have had to bring some oxygen tanks along in that case, and *Foxfire’s* stores could ill afford that expenditure. So her brown hair turned stringy, and water dripped down the back of her neck as she trudged wearily through the darkened village to find the next bar.

It had been a drier, if more desperate, Captain Korrell that had walked up to the door of Elliptic Enterprises two months earlier in search of a job. The planet was New Crete and the situation was critical. Her landlord had eyed her intently as she left the apartment; she could almost hear him wondering how long it would take to fumigate the place and move in a new tenant—one who paid rent when it was due. Her meager savings had all but evaporated, and the prospects of a job for a ship’s captain who was both a woman and an Eoan were slim at best.

The door opened at her buzz, and she entered the outer office. The surroundings weren’t as bad as

she'd expected. True, the office was located in the less fashionable part of town, but an effort had been made to preserve dignity and comfort. Carpeting covered the floors, and the walls were painted a restful, pleasing blue. Interesting bits of sculpture were tucked into the crannies and a pair of silver mobiles hung from the ceiling. The secretary's desk looked to be real wood and its top surface was busy but uncluttered. Nothing in the room completely matched anything else, but at least some effort and pride had taken place to make it habitable. Dev had applied at some offices with bare floors and walls, and large insects crawling nonchalantly over the desktops. This was a distinct improvement.

The secretary—a pleasant, middle-aged woman—took her name, invited her to have a seat and went into the inner office to inform the boss of Dev's arrival. Dev started looking through some magazines as she waited—at first just to keep down the jitters, but after only a minute she was absorbed in the subject. She considered it almost an intrusion when the secretary returned to tell her Master Larramac would see her now.

She followed the woman into the inner office, a tribute to eclecticism. Larramac was obviously a collector of knick-knacks, because the room was festooned with odd little gadgets: an old-time fire hydrant, an assortment of colorful rocks, a set of porcelain flowerpots and many little things her eye did not recognize immediately. Posters covered the walls: "Work is what you do so some day you won't have to do it any more" and "I believe in getting into hot water—it keeps me clean."

Then Dev noticed the man behind the desk. He was very thin, and his body seemed composed entirely of acute angles. His clothes were of violent reds and blues, and his codpiece was just a trifle overpadded. His goatee was graying and his hair thinning a bit—though not quite enough to justify a transplant. The shaven part front to back along the center of his scalp—an affectation indicating he hoped someday to join Society—was tattooed with a design of numbers skillfully interwoven to form an intriguing pattern. His eyes never stood still, but darted around the room, as though fearful of missing some momentous event.

“You’re Ardeva Korrell?” he asked as they shook hands.

“That’s right.”

“There aren’t many female ship’s captains, are there?” His speech was as quick as it was blunt. Dev couldn’t decide whether that was a good or bad trait.

“There was one other beside myself in my graduating class of a hundred and ten,” she answered formally. “However, there are even fewer red-haired, left-handed midgets in the profession.”

“I suppose so. Where are you from?”

“Eos.”

Larramac raised an eyebrow but said nothing, a gesture that made it impossible for Dev to interpret his thoughts. “And you want to be a spaceship captain.”

“I *am* a captain. My credentials and licenses are all in order. What I’m looking for is a ship.”

Larramac nodded. “My problem is I’ve got a ship and, at the moment, no captain. Do you ask a lot of

questions?”

“In what way?”

“Do you have to know every single thing that happens on board your ship?”

“It’s a captain’s duty to know everything that’s going on—”

“I fired my last captain for being too inquisitive.”

“—But there are some things that are not as important to know as others,” Dev temporized quickly. Personal preferences must sometimes bow before the winds of necessity, after all. “My primary job would be to get the ship safely from one port to another. Everything that touches on that is my responsibility, from maintenance through astrogation. Other matters may be peripheral to the running of the ship, and on those I can tread most delicately.”

Larramac ruminated for a moment, stroking his goatee. He reached into a pile of papers and took out a sheet Dev recognized as the application she had submitted the week before. “According to your resume, you’ve had a lot of different jobs. You haven’t stayed with any ship more than a year. Why is that?”

Dev sighed. Someone always asked this question, though the answer always seemed so obvious. “Prejudice. A lot of men don’t like serving under a female captain. Those who don’t mind that are uncomfortable about my being an Eoan. You’ll notice if you check my references that my employers usually give me the highest recommendation. I’m a good captain who’s been the victim of circumstance.”

“I don’t pay very much; I can’t afford to. Six hundred galacs a month, plus standard benefits.”

For a captain with her training and experience, that sum was laughable; unfortunately, her financial situation was not. "I should be earning easily twice that," she said. "But business, I suppose, is tight."

"I'm hardly in the same class with Lenning TransSpacial or deVrie Shipping," Larramac admitted. "I go to the little planets they miss, the ones with the lower profit-to-cost ratios. I have to lick the bowl they hand me, so to speak. I get by, and I've been able to build. The company has grown over the last couple of years, and I don't see any reason why that growth shouldn't continue. I keep people on if they can do the work, and I'm pretty good about raises. If I like the way you make the first run, we can talk about a salary increase."

Dev looked her prospective employer over. He seemed the honest sort; a bit over sincere, a bit given to enthusiasms and brashness, but far from the worst of bosses she'd served.

"I've taken the liberty," Larramac went on, "of looking up your name on my chart."

"Chart?"

"Yes, the patterns of letters all have meanings, whether you know it or not. You've got a good name; it blends in well with everything else."

"I'm sure my parents would thank you; it was their choice," she said dryly. She wondered briefly about the sanity of someone who would chart a person's name before deciding whether to hire her. *Oh well, anyone who runs Elliptic Enterprises must have a few eccentricities.*

"There is one thing I would like to specify," she continued. "I must have complete disciplinary au-

thority over my crew.”

“Why is that?”

“For one thing, it’s traditional. But more than that, the crew must know you back me on all matters. As I’ve said, some men resent taking orders from a woman. Unless my word is law—enforceable law—I cannot guarantee the smooth running of the ship.”

“Sounds reasonable. Have we got a deal, then?”

Dev nodded. “Deal. When do you need me?”

“*Foxfire* is due to leave in two weeks. I suppose you’ll want to come down and see her firsthand before then.”

Only two weeks to get to know a cargo ship from top to bottom? “Space, yes! I’d better start tomorrow getting the feel of her, learning her capabilities and idiosyncrasies.”

Larramac looked at her strangely. “I thought you Eoans didn’t swear by Space.”

“Popular misconception. We aren’t particularly awed by the mystic powers of the Universe, it’s true; but when I’m speaking Galingua I have to make do with the phrases that express my thoughts, including the conversational clichés. Ideological purity is no substitute for comprehension.”

“You’re a strange woman, Captain Korrell.”

“I shall choose to accept that as a compliment, Master Larramac.” She smiled. “Anything that isn’t a direct insult is easier to accept as a compliment.”

“I insist on being called Roscil.”

“And personally, I prefer Dev for myself.”

“Then Dev it is. Would you care to have lunch with me?”

Dev hesitated. That, though she hadn't mentioned it, was another of the reasons she had moved from job to job—overly amorous employers who thought a female captain's duties were horizontal as well as vertical. She was neither a prude nor a virgin, but she'd learned, through bitter experience, that sex frequently fouled up business relationships. On the other hand, her financial situation was such she couldn't afford to turn down a free meal. Larramac's bluntness was refreshing, but it could become just as obnoxious as someone else's fanny-patting. *I suppose I'll have to find out about him sometime*, she thought. *It might as well be sooner than later.* "That sounds like a good idea," she said.

As she trudged through the Daschamese rain, Dev thought warmly of that lunch. Larramac's brash exterior might intimidate most people, but she'd seen beyond it. Larramac, a lonely man inside, would rather reject than be rejected. He didn't make a single pass at her that time, for which she had been grateful. He'd made one about a week later, which she had been able to fend off skillfully without hurting him. Ground rules thus established, he kept politely within them.

Of course, there were other things she could have strangled him for—such as his insistence on coming along on this first trip to "see how well you do." Despite that, she was reasonably satisfied with him.

Lights from another Daschamese bar twinkled faintly in front of her, and she turned toward it. As she approached, she could see, standing beside the building, the cart the Daschamese had lent the ship

—a pretty fair indication her wayward crewmen were there. She quickened her pace.

The two men were easy to spot the instant she entered the bar—they were the only splash of color in the place. Gros Dunnis, the engineer, was a hulking male, a full two meters tall and clad in a spacer uniform of dark green and silver. His red hair and full red beard were matched, at the moment, by an almost equally red face that signaled his intoxication. Dmitor Zhurat, the robot-wrangler, was a much shorter, squatter man—in fact, he was about the same size and shape as the natives. Still, his red and blue uniform stood out easily among the drab earth colors used in the Daschamese clothing.

Zhurat was the first to spot her. “Well, if it isn’t our pretty little cap’n comin’ down out of her tower to join us. Gros, we have a distinguished visitor. We musht show her dignity.”

Dunnis, a more pleasant drunk, beamed at her. “Hello, Captain, care to have a drink with us?”

“You both should have been back at the ship two and a half hours ago,” Dev said evenly. “I think you’d better come along with me.”

“We musht have forgotten the time,” Zhurat sneered. “But join us in a drink and then we’ll go.”

“You know I don’t drink.”

“That’sh right. You’re too good to drink with ush, aren’t you?”

“The sane mind needs no external stimuli to relax,” Dev quoted.

“Are you calling me crazy?”

“I’m calling you drunk and disorderly. Your pay is going to be docked, and you’ll be given penalty duty.

I'd advise you to come along peacefully, before there's trouble." She spread her feet slightly in a crouched stance, prepared for anything.

In the corner, the proprietor showed signs of agitation. He kept repeating something over and over. Without taking her eyes off Zhurat, Dev switched on her helmet translator once more. "...too many in here, there are too many in here," the bartender was saying.

"My friends and I will be leaving in a second," she told him.

The proprietor; though, was little comforted by her promise. He clapped his hands together several times in what Dev had come to understand was the Daschamese gesture of nervousness. "The gods will be offended, there are too many," he said.

Dev ignored him and continued speaking to Zhurat. "I'll tell you only one more time. Let's go."

"Damned shnotty Eoans," Zhurat muttered. "Think they're better'n anybody elsh..."

Dev moved smoothly across the room and clamped a hand on her subordinate's shoulder. "Come on, Zhurat, it's time to go. You'll be a lot more comfortable back on the ship. We don't want to offend these people's gods, do we?"

"Let go of me!" Zhurat bellowed. He shrugged his shoulder to rid it of the captain's hand, but the fingers clamped tightly, painfully, and would not leave. He stared up at Dev's face and found it as stern as a marble statue. He looked back down quickly at his half-empty glass.

"You don't want to make anyone angry," Dev repeated in mild but firm tones, "the gods, or me."

“Gods!” Zhurat snorted. He stood up and Dev removed her hand from his shoulder. “There are no gods.” He turned his own headset back to translate and repeated his remarks. “There are no gods!” he said loudly.

He staggered to the center of the room. “You’re sheep, all of you,” he said. Dev assumed the computer translated “sheep” into an appropriate local reference. “You have no guts, you have no fun, you have no lives. You live in these miserable little huts because you’re afraid to grab life for yourselves, and you make up these big, bad gods as an excuse so you don’t have to do anything. You’re frauds, all of you, and your gods are the biggest frauds of all.”

The atmosphere within the room had become deathly quiet. All eyes, human and Daschamese alike, were turned on Zhurat. The silence was like the one between the last tick on a time bomb and its detonation. Dev cleared her throat. “I think you may have hurt their feelings,” she said.

The remark only fed his fires, though. “I’ll show you,” he shouted. “I’ll show you all.” And he raced suddenly out of the bar.

“Come on,” Dev said to Dunnis. “Help me catch him before he hurts himself.”

The rain was coming down even harder as they went out after him, a cold, beating rain that dimmed the vision and pounded the head. The rhythm of the falling drops was almost enough to drown out her thoughts. Dev felt disoriented, and the glow of her lantern went only a few meters before the blanket of darkness absorbed it. Zhurat was nowhere in sight. She had no idea which way he had gone, but straight

ahead seemed the best choice. She grabbed Dunnis's hand and pulled him along behind her like a little child.

Twenty meters ahead, they saw Zhurat standing alone in a small cleared space between some huts. "Come on, you bastards," he shouted. "Where are you? Let me see the power of the great gods of Dascham!"

Dev grew aware of eyes peeking through chinks in the huts, likely staring in disbelief at this strange being who challenged the gods. Was he brave, foolish, or a god himself that he could speak like this?

"I defy you!" Zhurat yelled. "I, Dmitor Zhurat, defy the gods!"

Forever after, that scene remained etched in Dev's memory. Zhurat standing alone in the clearing, his arms raised to the sky, fists clenched and waving in the air. Then a deafening explosion, and a quick flash, blinding in intensity, caused Dev and Dunnis to close their eyes. Dev could have sworn she heard a crackling sound and...was that a scream over the driving rain? She could not say.

When Dev could open her eyes again, Zhurat had disappeared—only his smoldering uniform lay on the ground amid a pile of quickly dampening ashes.