

Prologue to Knigh't's Ambition, by Seth Crossman

The death of God took longer than Agitar expected.

Agitar twitched and fidgeted in his seat, oblivious to the merriment around him. The Festival of Lights and Feast of Feasts was under way. The great pines stood behind them, decked with bright colored balls of red and blue and orange. Streamers of spun silk in every color graced the fragrant boughs. Candles, with glowing flames of yellow and gold made the trees sparkle with light. Servants in white rushed about with silver platters heaped with food, while musicians played their harps and violyns. Women sang softly and children danced, laughing all the while. Below this level, on the lower tiers of the palace were other guests, also enjoying the feast day celebration. From where he sat, Agitar could look down on those levels and see the people rejoicing. Even the heavens seemed to rejoice; the stars were bright and twinkling and the moon hung sharp and silver in the night. Everyone was occupied with good cheer. Agitar knew there was no better time than this, when everyone was preoccupied, to do what was in his heart.

He kept looking at Adonai, the One God. His God. Adonai carefully placed his fork on the table and looked into his eyes. Could Adonai see what was in his heart? He shifted again in his chair and looked at his brother disciples laughing and talking. Agitar hadn't expected it to be like this. He felt the weight of the dagger in his pocket, and hoped it wouldn't come to that. He hoped the poison started working soon. But could you poison a god? For that matter, could you kill a god? He hoped the old crone had been right. Agitar felt sweat trickle down his back.

"Why such a sour face, brother?" asked Endarmot. "Are you not having a good time?" Over seven feet tall, people had taken to calling him the Titan of Faith. His hand swallowed Agitar's shoulder.

"The wine," Agitar said with a weak smile. "It has gone to my head."

"More like, it has gone to his heart and loins and made him long for his wife!" shouted Findegar from across the table. He hoisted a drumstick dripping with grease in one hand and a silver goblet filled with wine in the other. His lips were stained with wine and shiny from grease. "Where is the beautiful woman, Agitar?"

"Yes, where is beautiful Fontaina?" echoed Mitar. His own beautiful wife, Mysela sat at his side, smiling prettily in her white dress and shiny pearls. His children, a boy of four dressed in blue velvet and green pants and a little girl with pink ribbons in her brown hair, giggled and danced behind his chair.

Agitar felt bile rise in his throat. He forced it down with a large swallow of wine and drew his lips into a forced smile. "Home abed. She is heavy with child and it is difficult for her," he apologized. A growing hardness in his throat killed his appetite. Oh, the wicked grins on their faces. They know of my pain and yet they torment me with it!

Adonai turned in his seat and looked at Agitar with his deep black eyes. "Why do you lie to your brothers, Agitar?" His voice was soft and low, but many amongst the guests at the table turned and looked at Agitar. Talk died at the table.

Agitar rose to his feet so suddenly that his chair crashed to the ground behind him. He had had enough. "Why do you sit there while my wife is dying and my child is dead in her belly? Why did you do nothing to help them?" he nearly shouted at Adonai.

A great sadness filled the One God's eyes. A tear fell from his eye and splashed onto the table. "It must be, my son," he said softly.

"Death and darkness must be? How cruel are you, my God?" Silence met his accusation. The musicians stopped their playing and the dancers stood still. He hardly noticed. He glared at Adonai, his anger emboldening him. "You force me to come to this feast," Agitar waved at the everything around him, "this merriment, like I would enjoy it! I wanted to be with her, to hold her hand, to help her, but you order me to come!"

The poison would not work. Agitar could see that now. He had been stupid to believe it would be as simple as that. He had been stupid to wait so long, hoping the poison would do its work. He should have used the dagger long before. If he had, he would be with his wife now. He would be helping her, healing her. All he needed was for Adonai, the One God, to die.

Agitar walked slowly toward Adonai, his hands out, imploring. All watched him. "Why?" he asked again.

"In time you will understand. In time, my son."

"And what am I to do until then?" Agitar dropped to his knees and fell on Adonai's breast. "Weep like

you tell me you weep? But accept it?"

"Ah," Adonai said softly, his brow furrowing, his eyes full of pain.

"What are you doing, brother?" asked Timor, gathering the courage to speak at last.

"I am weeping," replied Agitar softly. No, he would shed no tears for a cruel god! His tears were for his wife. Even as he wept on the breast of Adonai, the One God, he felt the the god's power growing in him. He wept for he knew with that power he would be able to save her and maybe even the babe within her belly. With the power of a god he could do anything. When one of his brothers stood, he knew it was time to go.

With a swirl of his green and red festival cloak, Agitar whipped away from Adonai, striding down the dais, away from the feast table and his astonished brothers.

The Titan of Faith groaned and lurched to his feet. "No!" he croaked, his hand flung out toward Adonai. Agitar did not need to look back. He knew the Titan of Faith was pointing at his dagger buried deep in the One God's chest.

Around them the palace suddenly rumbled and great snaps split the air as the marble beneath their feet cracked and split. Agitar stumbled as the ground shook beneath his feet. One of the pines snapped the ropes holding it and crashed to the marble floor, shattering the little colored glass balls and sending streaks of burning wax across the polished stone. The linen cloth on one of the tables burst into flame. Around him people scrambled to their feet and cried out in fear.

Agitar jumped down the stairs to one of the lower tiers and grabbed the closet man. It was his general, the portly Ivan. The man had found him as he had asked. Agitar smiled despite himself.

Agitar grabbed the man by his thick shoulders. "My brothers. They have done treason as I thought. Are my men ready?"

Ivan's eyes darted around him and the fleeing people trying to get away from the crumbling tier around them. He looked back at Agitar with fear in his eyes. "Yes, favored disciple."

The man's breath stunk of wine. Agitar gritted his teeth in annoyance at this disobedience of his orders. He had ordered his men to drink no wine tonight and to be ready and waiting for his word. But there was no time for reprimands. He had to get to his wife before the whole bloody palace crumbled around him. He hadn't planned on this.

"Then seize them."

"Who, favored disciple?" His general slowly pulled his sword.

"My brothers! Anyone who tries to stop you!" Curse the idiot! He didn't have time for this. He leapt away, barely avoiding a servant that tripped and sent his tray of stuffed goose and roasted carrots splattering across the gray marble.

"Yes. But the palace...it's crumbling."

"It will pass," Agitar called out over his shoulder as he ducked into the palace by way of one of the serving doors. It was chaos inside. Servants and guests were running around, some were clinging to the marble walls as if that would save them. He could hear blocks of marble and tapestries and furniture crashing to the ground. Everyone was screaming. He ignored it all. He didn't care as long as they stayed out of his way.

His wife was beyond the Hall of Saints, beyond the Hall of Lilies, in a secluded corner of the palace where the baby could be born in peace. Only he wasn't going to be born. The healers and the midwives told him the baby was already dead. His wife would follow shortly if the baby wasn't removed quickly. They had talked of cutting it out of her, but he had quickly refused that. They were wrong. Agitar would use the power he felt coursing through him like fire in his veins - a god's power. He would use it to bring the baby back to life. He would make the birth go smoothly. Nothing would happen to his family.

He cursed Adonai as the palace crumbled around him. It was Adonai who was causing the earth to rumble and the palace to break. Take his joy from him and then try and take his life as well. Agitar laughed out loud, startling a wild-eyed servant that ran past him.

With all that power, the One God should have done something. He should have helped her! He should have saved his wife and the baby! A god should not let such a thing happen. But Adonai had. That was why Agitar had to kill him.

He raced toward the chambers where his wife lay abed, heedless of the shaking walls and the great stone bricks that were crashing to the ground around him. He reached the chamber and burst through the door. It was empty. All the midwives and healers had fled. He wanted to scream. They were more worried about their lives

than they were about his Fontaina.

In the bedroom, a gap in the ceiling from where the stones had crashed down bared the night. Those stones had crushed Fontaina's maid. Her blood was splattered across the white sheets of his wife's bed.

A cry tore from his throat. Fontaina's belly had been crushed by stone. Her head lay twisted to the side, her brown hair covering her beautiful face. He stumbled to the bedside, blinded by tears. He pushed the stone off her belly and pulled her into his arms.

She was still warm. He had time! With his shoulder he wiped away the tears, and then ripped her dress clear down to her battered belly. The sight of it made him gag and retch. He placed his hands on the torn flesh and willed all the fire out of his veins. He would heal her. He would! He would heal the baby too. Names flashed through his head. Samuel if it was a boy. Mia, if it was a pretty little girl. He would heal them both.

Agitar could feel the power in his hands. It was so strong! His fingers tingled and then they burned, but he didn't pull them away. He left them there, the fire raging through his blood until he thought his heart would burst.

He pulled away his hands but could see nothing different. Fontaina was still broken, her skin cut and torn and bloody. It wasn't enough. He hadn't taken enough of Adonai's power. If only he had had a moment more. If only he had drunk up a little bit more power.

Agitar wept. His tears spilled into his mouth and tasted of salt and bile. What had he done? He pulled her crushed body to him and shook with the force of his sobbing. Around him the palace continued to shake, but he only had room for his tears and his pain. His heart was gone. He could feel the vacuum of it sucking the life out of him. It hurt like nothing he had ever felt. Another stone crashed to the bed.

He needed more time. That's all he needed. He wiped away the tears. What good would it do to die here? He needed time to understand the power he had usurped. He would wait until that power grew in him and until he learned how wield it.

Agitar ripped off his festival cloak and wrapped Fontaina in it. He rose and walked slowly out of the room, carrying the body of his wife with him. He was oblivious to the destruction around him, the crumbling walls and the earth and dirt that was spilling out of the cracks in the ground. He walked around steaming fissures, down hallways until the sound of pounding feet alerted him. They were coming for him.

Chatara, Timor's wife, glided across the marble floors of the Hall of Lilies, past the great glass-paned windows and crystal vases full of flowers. Agitar wanted to laugh. His dear brother disciple had sent his wife instead of coming himself. A throng of olive-cloaked guardsmen followed in her wake carrying long spears. In the distance, a bell was ringing. It sounded to Agitar like the low clang of doom. Yes, the One God's doom, not his.

Chatara was a beautiful woman made more beautiful by her recent motherhood. Her long blonde hair was tucked behind her ears and then cascaded down across her shoulders. Her blue eyes were soft but her mouth was painted in a grim line. The voluptuousness of childbirth still clung to her. Agitar could see it beneath the dark green of her gown and in her flushed face. She had just given birth to twins, not a moon past. That was why they had sent her. More torment.

"Come to gloat? You always were jealous of Fontaina. She was more beautiful, more graceful, and far kinder."

Chatara shook her head, disappointed. "No. To take you in hand. You have murdered the One God." A tear gathered at the corner of one eye and threatened to fall. She wiped it away. "How could you?" Sadness and anguish twisted her face.

Agitar sighed. Already, her voice had the motherly tone, the chastising tone and she was not yet a mother for a month. "You're a new mother. How would you feel?"

"I would feel devastated, but I would not kill. I would not kill our god."

"He was a cruel god." He was a good man. Why would no one believe that? He had killed a god, but it had been a cruel god. "You will step aside, Chatara."

She shook her head again. "No. I will take you in hand and see that you are punished for your crime. Guards, seize him." She thrust a condemning finger at him.

Agitar's eyes narrowed. He had the length of the hall. He turned and gently set his wife down on the floor. She looked like she was sleeping peacefully. But no, she was dying, and it seemed no one cared to help her. Except him. No sooner was her head resting on the cold stone, than he whirled and pulled his sword. The

soft sing of the blade as it cleared his scabbard sent his blood roaring. He could feel the power surging through his veins. He stalked toward the rushing guardsmen.

Around them the great granite foundation stones continued to shake. The glass in the windows rattled and cracked, smashing to the floor and scattering like shards of ice. Agitar ignored the noise and the tremors. He would have to deal with the soldiers quickly. It would be no good if he were crushed beneath the stone. Then he wouldn't be able to save her.

He gritted his teeth and met the soldiers with a blur of his sword arm. One soldier dropped. He side-stepped around the clumsy thrust of a second guardsman's spear and with a side slash sent his entrails spilling to the floor. Still moving forward he knocked aside another spear and crashed into the guardsman, sending him reeling. He lopped off the head of another spear and then shoved his sword into the surprised guardsman's stomach. With the sickening sound of a rotten melon being sliced, he pulled his sword free and slammed it down in the chest of the guardsman he had knocked down. It took only a few brief seconds and half Chatara's guardsmen were slain.

He looked up at her, blood dripping off the tip of his sword. She looked frightened now. The dagger in her hand trembled.

Three of the four remaining guardsmen warily approached down the hall. They had seen how dangerous he was and were determined to be more cautious. He picked up a spear in his free hand. Then they were on him. A block, a thrust, spin, a thrust, a block. He moved like water, sliding, slipping, thrusting. Three more fell hard to the floor and then he whipped the spear down the hall. It took the fourth and final guardsman in the chest.

Agitar advanced. He was upon Chatara before she could run, his hands on her throat, squeezing.

Her fingernails raked at his chest. He ignored them. He didn't want to have to kill her, but she was trying to stop him from saving his wife. He couldn't let that happen. No one would stop him from saving Fontaina.

He looked down at Chatara's pale face. Even in death she wouldn't look into his face and see the agony there, to see why he had done it. Instead her blue eyes were staring off into the distance. He followed their gaze and saw the form of his wife lying on cold marble. He let the limp form of Chatara fall to the floor. It had to be done. She wouldn't just let him go. She had asked for death. The blame wasn't on his hands.

Agitar ran back and picked up his wife. He had to make it out of the palace before it collapsed. He couldn't face any more obstacles. He skirted the courtyards and well-traveled hallways, choosing instead the darkened servant's passages that led down through the palace to the streets below. His army waited there. He would be safe when he reached it.

Fontaina was light in his arms. Much too light, but Agitar pushed that from his mind. He would think about it later when she was safe from the City of God and its crumbling palace and the mountain rising beneath it. It wasn't long before he reached the streets and soon after the waiting torches of his men. Even here though, the ground trembled and broke. Steam hissed from the fissures. The night air was hot and filling with thick ash that puffed up from the ground.

"We withdraw," He growled at his commander, when he reached the line of soldiers waiting and watching the palace crumble before their eyes. "The city is falling apart." Agitar looked back and saw a marble tower tilt and break off, snapped like so much kindling. "It is death to stay here."

"As you say, favored disciple." His commander turned and began shouting orders.

Anger boiled beneath Agitar's skin. It was a mixture of rage and agony and frustration eating away at his insides and threatening to explode at the same time. He had been a fool to believe all the One God's power would be his with a single killing stroke. He must not have waited long enough when he thrust the dagger into Adonai's heart. He could feel a strange power in his bones, in his blood - the power of a god, but it was not complete, and would grow no stronger in him. He saw that now. The rest of Adonai's power throbbed and seeped into the ground beneath the palace, causing the ground to shake and the earth to heave and mountains to rise up. He had somehow released the power into the earth instead of into himself.

Agitar turned from the burning city and its crumbling palace, walking past his people and their families, leading the way west with Fontaina still in his arms. He would find a way to save her and breathe sweet life back into her. Someday, he would come back and claim the power that was rightfully his and make things right. He would be a greater god than Adonai.