

THE PLAGUE YEARS

BY HJALTI DANÍELSSON



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Fermar looked at the sun for the last time. His home had one of the most scenic spots on the asteroid mining colony, and if he stood at this living room window at the eve of the day, he could see all the ships coming and going.

One had docked just now. Fermar inhaled deeply, holding his breath before slowly letting it out again. His hair was grey and his hands were rough and creased, as befitted a man who'd worked in the colonies all his life. He noticed his own reflection in the window, superimposed on the starry blackness. It seemed to be smiling.

There was a knock followed by the sound of someone opening the outside door. A man's voice said, "He's in here, sir," and another said, "Thank you. I'll see myself in." The second voice was much huskier than the first, worn but not imposing. A door closed.

A man walked into the living room. He was dressed in black, stylish in a fairly classical way, and covered with a mop of dark, curly hair; noticeable, all in all, but not memorable. He was younger than Fermar by at least thirty years, but didn't carry himself with the same bullish assurance. Fermar moved like a man used to high gravity; this one sidled like someone expecting the sky to pick him up at any time.

"Terden," Fermar said.

"Hi, Fermar," Terden said.

"Get out."

"It's not what you think."

"Get out."

"I have a deal for you."

"I have a gun in working order. Get out."

Terden's expression, full of casual conviction, twitched as he looked like he was trying to hide a smile. He seemed entirely unconcerned with the threat, and instead walked over to a settee and sat down, unbuttoning his coat and pulling off his gloves. "I want to help you," he said.

"You want to do a lot of things, but help won't be high on the list."

“I ... wanted to see you on the sly, too, but I was nabbed as soon as I came in.” His whispery voice was oddly modulated; it would start off slow, get its bearings, then rush to the end of the sentence as if trying to race past the meaning of its words. “Security’s tight here,” he added.

“Of course it is.”

Terden ran a hand through his thick hair. “So you know why I’m here.”

“Your creatures are coming,” Fermar said. “I’ve heard reports. They’re settling in the area, kidnapping people. Same as they always do.”

“Which is why I’m here,” Terden said. “Hear me out, but take a seat first, please.”

Fermar looked at him for a moment, then walked over to a chair opposite the settee and sat down.

“You’re right. The people I work for ... they’re coming, they’re reaching out and they need new recruits, but nobody needs to get hurt. You could walk away completely untouched.”

“Everybody gets hurt when the Sansha come in,” Fermar said.

“We don’t want a fight, and we don’t want people to die,” Terden said, ignoring the comment. “You and I, we know each other. You remember what happened last time and I don’t want that to happen again. I want you to give up this colony and convince its people to surrender so we can move in quietly and without bloodshed.”

“You know damn well what happened in the Plague Years,” Fermar said. “Why did you even bother coming to me?”

“Because I do remember the Plague Years. And the time before them, too. I remember ... being taken in for a long while when I didn’t have anywhere to go, and I remember a family that showed me a lot of kindness when I didn’t always deserve it.”

“Damn straight, you didn’t,” Fermar said.

“And I remember Carla,” Terden said.

Fermar lurched to his feet as if he’d been stung, glowering at Terden and starting to open his mouth, hesitated, then merely stood there in silence. Finally, the air went out of him, and he sat down heavily again.

The two men sat there, unmoving. After a while Fermar said, “Drinks in wood cabinet, lounge, other room. No ice.”

Terden got up and walked out of the room. There was a clink of glasses and he returned, handing a drink to Fermar and holding one himself. "There was only one bottle," he said.

"I'm not much of a drinker," Fermar said absently. "For guests, that's about it."

"Always happy to be a guest here," Terden said in his whispery voice, and took a sip, then grimaced. "Strong stuff."

Fermar held the glass as if he'd forgotten about it. He had a faraway look in his eyes. "Why did you have to bring her up?" he said.

"When we come in, who do you think will be leading the mission?"

Fermar put down his glass and stared at Terden.

"You all did me a lot of good during hard times," Terden said. "But that's over now. These are new times. Remember the magistrate, Melvue."

"You will not mention that name again," Fermar said calmly.

"It's ages ago, the ... height of the Plague Years," Terden said, "and I won't pretend that the term doesn't apply to the Sansha, too, because they came right when everything was bad enough already. So what happens? The leader of the mining colony is approached one night at his house by a scout like me, and he gets an offer, same as you do now, and he takes the offer. We move in, not intending any violence, but then some people get it into their heads they want to fight. So ... they fight, and they get hurt, and only some of them manage to run away while others lie in the dust, all because their leader tried to make a sensible deal with us while others made a bad decision." Terden leaned forward. "It doesn't have to happen again."

"To hear you, of all people, saying this—"

"They're coming, Fermar," Terden said. "And you're the boss now. But I know you can keep your people in check, so I offer you the same deal as they did back then." He leaned back, waiting for an answer. When none was forthcoming, he said, "You know, they don't always do this. Sometimes they just... move in, especially when they're hungry for new recruits. And believe me, with the capsuleers thinning out their numbers, they're real hungry now. But I know you, and I asked to come here, to smooth things out."

Fermar said, "We might fight back this time, too. I have contacts, and I heard of the Sansha coming. I made sure we have weapons."

"That's stupid," Terden said. "Stupid and suicidal."

“They have my daughter. You know this,” Fermar said. “You people are on the other side of everything.”

Terden looked around. “Yeah, I know. Thanks for the reminder. It’s not like I’m here trying to help you or anything, you ungrateful old fossil.” He looked back at Fermar. “I wasn’t going to bring up family, but since we’re on the subject, how’s your wife?”

“She’s dead,” Fermar said.

“That a fact? Is that why there are no pictures of her?” Terden said. He waved his hand at the walls. “I see pictures of your daughter here, but not your wife. Odd, isn’t it?”

Fermar sat silent, jaws clenched. Terden continued, “I think she’s dead to you. Which is usually a little different, though right now it comes out to about the same.

“When did you lose her? After we came last time? Long after?”

“Why the hell could you possibly think asking me this might help you?” Fermar said.

“Because the ... only one who matters to you now is Carla, and I don’t believe for a second that you’re running this rotten, nowhere place because you want to. It’s because you’re a sensible man with a good head on his shoulders, who’s lost so much that now he only wants to wait until life catches up with him and steals his last breath.”

Terden took another sip of his drink and quietly added, “You could see Carla.”

Fermar’s breath caught. His own drink was untouched; he reached for it, hesitated, then reached again but didn’t pick it up, only held on to it as if for ballast. “What did you say?”

“I can’t guarantee that you will spend much time together, but at least you will meet again. She’s close enough that she could be brought over, and I’ve told the Sansha of her connection to you. But that’s not going to happen if you bring a fight.”

“They won’t send Carla if I fight?”

“Oh, they will definitely send Carla if you fight. She’ll arrive with a gun in her hand, and this is the first house she’ll come to. They’ll dock, and they’ll swarm in, and they won’t enter a single house until they’ve entered yours, dragged you out, and put a bullet in your brain. They will make an example out of you.”

Fermar studied Terden for a while, then said, “I believe you. Speaking of which, that traitor magistrate you mentioned earlier. How’s he doing?”

Terden's tone changed subtly from confrontational to elucidative. "Melvue made the right choice, so he's doing fine, enjoying his life."

"That so?"

"Absolutely," Terden said without hesitation.

Fermar said, "See, that's interesting. Because the last time I saw him, he was tied to a chair in a noiseproof room, and there was precious little life left in him to be enjoyed."

Terden, sipping from the glass, froze up.

"You're right," Fermar said. "He did make the right choice, back when he was magistrate on the colony. It was right for him and nobody else. And we never forgot it."

Fermar, glass in hand, slowly rose to his feet and walked over to Terden, towering over him. "I lost Carla, who your people took, and I lost my wife, who couldn't stand the loss and the aftermath. The Sansha took everything from me; and that miserable excuse for a man, he paved their way."

He poured the contents of his glass on the floor beside Terden, who momentarily looked down at his own glass before looking up again with a puzzled expression.

Fermar continued, the words now pouring out of him without pause, "For years I couldn't even think straight. Carla had been taken and I wanted to get her back at any cost. I made contacts, I moved around, and I started to learn about the people you serve, but there was no way to get to her, or even discover where she was." He leaned in close. "Until, at long last, I tracked down my old magistrate. He was a spy by that point, working for you people in another colony, reporting on its setup and getting in with its leaders."

In a cold tone, Terden said, "And you ratted him out. To be tortured and killed."

"During which time I discovered that life among the 'true slaves' really isn't that pleasant. In fact, it's downright rotten. You're taken in and made into a mindless drone, subject to the whims of a single person who certainly doesn't have your best interests at heart, and it eventually drives you insane. Doesn't matter what level your implants are; there's a threshold beyond which you start to rebel against the lack of free will, and your subconscious realizes that it's been trapped. It's extremely painful in the long run, and the symptoms break out in unusual ways. You've never thought about how willing these people are to die for their master? You would think that even his machinery couldn't erase the survival instinct. But once you've been his slave for long enough, apparently all you want to do is die."

Terden took a long, slow sip. "I'm perfectly ... fine," he countered.

"You scouts get more autonomy than the rest," Fermar said. "All they need is to keep tabs on you, not control you. They'll have vetted you and found that you're one of that rare breed

who'll willingly join the Sansha. You're safe," he spat.

Terden stared at him, wide-eyed. "Was there ... something wrong with the wine?" he said at last, nodding his head toward the puddle of alcohol on the floor, then lifting his own glass to his nose and taking a careful sniff from it.

"Oh, it's poisoned," Fermar said.

Terden froze. He slowly swallowed, then said, "I've finished half a glass, Fermar."

Fermar looked at the spreading stain on the floor. Terden followed his gaze, dropping his own glass in the process. When Terden looked back up at Fermar, the old man had a gun in his hand.

Terden's eyes widened and he started to rise, but Fermar shot him, first through the knee, then through the right shoulder. Terden dropped to the floor, screaming, and Fermar knelt down beside him. "Before you go into shock, I want to tell you something. I know this won't get to the Sansha, because they don't use direct feeds on their scouts.

"First off, the wine wasn't poisoned. I wanted to slow you down for a minute, make you comfortable, and distract you at the end. Which is funny, because it's pretty much what you bastards do when you're about to pounce on innocent people.

"Second, I already know Carla is in this region. She's been here for a while. It was a long time before I realized that I couldn't possibly go after her, that if I tried they'd either kill me or move her somewhere that I'd never find her.

"So I'm bringing her to me."

Terden was quiet, gasping for breath.

Fermar arose, grunting with the effort. "Once everyo—" He started, then fired another shot into Terden's hand. Terden screamed, and the hand, which had been reaching into his clothes, dropped back into view, a small pellet rolling out of its grip.

"Leave the suicide dose alone, thanks. I want you to hear this." Fermar ambled over to his seat, keeping his gaze on Terden. "This entire colony is wired with explosives."

Terden's grimace turned to surprise, and he stared at Fermar in shock. "You're insane," he said.

"Everyone has left, just about. I knew you people were coming even before you did. I still have my contacts, and I watch the solar winds. When they put me in charge, I told them of my Sansha experience, and one of the first things I did was implement an escape plan in case your employers decided to move into the area. Which you have, after a good long while, and I've had my people practicing for a long time now."

He had the gun trained on Terden still, and now his eyes narrowed. “When I found out that you of all people had been posted to this part of space, I knew it wouldn’t be long, and that you’d be the one they’d send. I fired up the plan, and everyone left quietly and efficiently. The only people still here are a skeleton crew, and after you and I are finished, they will leave too. Nobody here will get caught by your zombies. Nobody.”

“Your daughter will come here,” Terden said, gasping. “She will ... come to your house, looking to kill you, and if I don’t return you’ll never get her back.” A puddle of blood was spreading slowly around Terden’s body, and his voice quavered with exhaustion.

“Oh, I will. But not the way you think I want,” Fermar said. He got up again and walked over to Terden, this time kneeling on the man’s damaged hand. Terden hissed in pain, but kept his eyes open and staring straight into Fermar’s.

Fermar said, “Once someone has been taken in by the Sansha, modified to Carla’s level and kept for as long as she has, there’s no turning back. The only thing I can do for her now is ease her misery, and my own, and that of anyone else you people send to this miserable rock. And if I can’t do it, for some reason, then the explosives will.”

“Murderer,” Terden croaked.

“Yes,” Fermar replied calmly. Terden’s expression showed that he hadn’t expected this reaction. “After my team has gone, everyone left here will die,” Fermar said.

“Including me,” Terden said, clearing his throat and taking deep, rattling breaths.

“Including you.”

“You really are a vengeful old fossil, aren’t you?” Terden said, trying to shift so that he could glare at Fermar. “And you’ve lost it. You tried rebelling once when you had a perfectly good chance of saving everyone you cared about, and you failed, so now you want to finish the job and make sure they’re all dead!” He had lifted his head with the effort, his shoulders giving him no support, and now he slumped back to the ground, breathing heavily, his one good hand making a fist.

Fermar thought about this, then said, “I’m finishing what needs to be finished. And confronting something no one else would, which is something you and all the other human traitors should have learned a long time ago. If it wasn’t for people like you, you and that old magistrate, we never would’ve suffered, and I wouldn’t have lost my daughter.”

There was no response.

Fermar sighed, aimed his gun, and shot Terden in the head. Terden twitched with the impact, and then lay still in the spreading pool of his own blood.

Fermar set the gun down on his chair, then walked over to the comms console and activated it. "It's done," he said.

Very shortly after, several men came into the room. "You all right, sir?" one asked.

"Yeah, it's all confirmed," he said. "Thanks for waiting. You were close?"

"Outside the door, practically," the man replied, and grinned. "No worries, we didn't listen in. After we heard the shot and his scream, we knew you had him."

"Alright. Clear out the body, please, then get in your ships as fast as you can. You have a little time, but not much."

The men nodded, and carried Terden's body out of the room. Fermar had turned and was about to put away the drink glasses when he heard them all come back in. They walked up to him in silence, and every one of them shook his hand. Then they left.

Fermar sat down to wait. If he had failed with Terden, these men would have taken over, after which they'd have primed automated triggers that would set off the explosives as soon as the Sansha had entered the colony.

Now that his suspicions had all been confirmed, the only thing remaining was to sit it out. If something were to happen to him now, the triggers would still work, but he hoped he'd see it through. He hoped he would hear a knock at the door and see another familiar face, if only for a second, before the end.