

From Legacy

Waiting

Many hours later, as the pre-dawn light brought shape to the veiling dark, a break in the scudding clouds allowed the moon to illuminate the farmhouse below, alone in a dark patchwork of fields. A figure sat hunched in shadow under the wide eave that swept down the west side of the house, listening to the snuffling from the pigpen behind the solid stack of firewood that sheltered him from the worst of the wind.

The man stood, stretched his aching back with arms wide, and sat again. He stroked the smooth wood of the bench and tried to console himself with thinking what a nice spot it would be on a summer's day. He sighed, hoping that there would still be a reason for him to sit on that bench come the next summer. These were good people, but they were right to be scared. In a small community like his there were very few secrets, and he knew Jharek and Sheena should be above suspicion, that they had more than proved their orthodoxy and commitment. But he also knew they could be in terrible trouble.

The frightened couple were waiting inside as he had advised. He had spent several difficult hours with them, trying to offer comfort but painfully aware that he couldn't. They had several times asked what might happen and he had eventually been forced to admit that things could go badly. He hoped he was right when he said that it shouldn't affect their son's position in the Census, but he couldn't say anything positive about their own plight other than to encourage them to be honest. In the end he had left them, as much to give himself a break as to wait outside for the examiner. And

he was certain that it would be an examiner they sent, though he had kept that to himself. He hadn't heard any talking or other noise from inside for some time, but it was safe to assume they were awake, and even more alert than he was.

As the dawn light slowly changed his surroundings from dark blues to greys, the sound of approaching horses distinguished itself from the noises of the wind. Three at least, he thought. An examiner and Commission peacekeepers.

He opened his lamp's shutters on one side, levered himself up from the bench and lifted his light high to signal the riders, trying to stretch his back again as he did so. Ignoring the guidance on saints and his own common sense, the reader prayed that the Commission had sent one of their more reasonable agents, that they hadn't sent Kelly.

As the riders approached him, the reader hung the lamp on a nearby hook and waited. Four riders: the small one must be the examiner. This was looking bad. The riders fanned out in front of him, and the short one pushed his hood back to reveal the gaunt, scarred face of Examiner Kelly. The reader felt crushed.

'Good morning, Uncle,' said Kelly as he dismounted, the heavy black trefoil that swung against his chest seeming to absorb the lamplight. The reader was shattered from lack of sleep, drained by his time with Jharek and Sheena, and now he knew there was nothing he could do to protect them. With Kelly's reputation the reader would be lucky if he came out of this untouched.

The examiner looked around as his three companions silently joined him. Commission peacekeepers, thought the reader, and hard-looking ones at that. He waited for the examiner to speak.

'I'm sorry you've had to wait for so long,' said Kelly, looking up at the taller man. 'Your roads are well maintained, but it still took us some time to find this place in the dark.' He gave the reins to one of his men. 'How many people are here, and where are they?'

'Just two,' said the reader, 'Jharek and Sheena Burton, the couple who found the relics. They're both inside.'

'Please check that,' said the examiner, pointing to two of his men, 'then stay with them. Assad, with me once you've seen to the horses.' He

turned back to the reader. 'Now tell me about the man who found the relic.'

'Yes, Examiner.' The reader gave a short, respectful bow. He wished he wasn't so exhausted, he would have to be very careful what he said if he was going to be of any help at all to the people inside, and not get himself into trouble. To avoid Kelly's gaze he looked at the examiner's scar, a savage slice diagonally across his cheek. Someone must have felt they had nothing else to lose. He suppressed this line of thought and tried to order his mind for the succinct report Kelly would require.

'Jharek Burton, a small farmer selling directly to market. His wife Sheena mostly does the market side of things, she's also been on the council for several years. Their son Erol is Census, he's been in a library in the south for the last five years. He's a very bright and committed lad that I personally recommended. He was here for harvest, but went back about a month ago. There was a daughter too, but she died young. This is their house and their farm.'

Where the scar cut across Kelly's lips the healing had pulled one side of his mouth upwards, making him look irritated. The reader thought it best to continue.

'Jharek was digging a short distance away when he came across the relic, presumably buried there during the Fall.'

'I don't like to presume anything, Uncle, not at this stage.'

'Of course, I'm sorry.' The reader felt his morale slipping further. He knew how this was going to end, and it was unjust. He had spent much of the night trying to think how he might help, but the sight of Kelly had evaporated what hope he had. He prayed for courage, he mustn't give up on them yet.

'Jharek is a good man, well-regarded here, as is his wife Sheena. They're very alarmed by all this.'

'I will talk to them in a moment,' said the examiner. 'What else can you tell me, Uncle?' The reader slumped again. He had been dreading this moment.

'Jharek's parents were taken about thirty years ago. I don't know why, of course. Rumours here are that his father was an independent, perhaps his mother too. Jharek was too young to be examined himself. He was brought up by an aunt. This was his father's house.' He didn't dare add that he

thought it was likely that the relics belonged to the father, he feared he had already antagonised Kelly. He should have been more judicious in what he said. Too long in the country had made him complacent, and a difficult and sleepless night had further fogged his wits.

The examiner seemed to consider what he'd been told, though it was likely that he already knew this, and probably much besides.

'You can tell me more shortly. Now, can you show me the relics?'

'Over this way,' the reader said, pointing, 'past the cart.'

The examiner indicated for him to lead the way. A short walk took them to the hole, where the two men stood looking in, Assad standing back. The reader could see the end of the peacekeeper's sword beneath his riding cloak. He hated weapons. He shivered and tucked his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat. The other men seemed immune to the weather.

'Will you be able to find me someone to make a secure container to transport this in?'

'Yes.'

The examiner knelt by the hole. 'Have you looked at it?'

'No,' said the reader. 'Or at least, no more than we are doing now, and that was just to check where it had been left, so I could show you.'

'Does anyone else know about this?'

'No. I sent a sealed note rather than use a messenger, but you know small places, I imagine everyone will be speculating.' The reader regretted what he said as soon as it was past his teeth. For a flash he saw the whole village being interrogated by a school of examiners, before he thought how ridiculous that would be. He hoped it would be ridiculous.

The examiner muttered a quick, short prayer, the reader joining with the words. The kneeling man leant forward and felt around the box before trying to pull it out of the hole.

'Help me here, Uncle, if you would.' The reader stood where he was, unsure what exactly to do. Why didn't he ask Assad? The examiner looked expectantly at him, and he realised that any danger from the relics themselves was much less present than that from Kelly. He knelt down next to him, and between them they wrestled the box from the hole.

The reader stood up and moved back a few steps, careful to ensure he could still see everything. Assad was watching the box intently, sparing

quick glances around to check that they were alone. The examiner picked out the larger clods of earth that had fallen into the box and tossed them away. Satisfied, he gently lifted out a parcel from inside, a grey package perhaps the size of two open hands. Remaining on his knees, he carefully turned his new acquisition over. The reader drew his breath in – silently, he hoped. It was certainly the right shape for a book.

The examiner took a long, black-bladed dagger from the sheath at his side and ran the point tenderly along one edge of the item. Layers of an impossibly thin, transparent material fell away, curling slowly into almost invisibly slender straws where they lay, revealing a rectangular object. Kelly sheathed his dagger and carefully collected all the packaging and returned it to the box. The reader cautiously edged round to a better vantage point. Assad moved nearer.

‘Do you know what this is, Uncle?’ asked the examiner.

‘No, Examiner.’ He was sure it was a book.

‘Well, it is a book, and at first sight very well preserved, not that that will matter in the end.’

Kelly held the book gently, sheltered by his body from the light drizzle. He turned it over, put both his thumbs on one edge, and divided it so the pages were exposed.

The reader stopped himself from saying anything just in time. Surely he wasn’t going to try and read the book? He looked to Assad, and was startled to find him almost between them, his riding coat fully open, his sword and a long knife on the other hip exposed. For a mad second the reader thought he might kill them both.

‘Well, that’s a coincidence. Listen to this, Uncle.’

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ said the reader, failing to stop himself from challenging the other man. Assad hadn’t moved.

‘Your orthodoxy is noted and appreciated, but I’m confident we will survive. Now listen to this, the first words I saw. It’s an old script, but I think it says, “It was a strangely beautiful book. Its smooth paper, yellow with age, had not been made for forty years. He guessed that the book was much older than that.” Interesting coincidence, don’t you think, assuming I read that right? I wonder how old this book is?’

The examiner’s voice seemed to have mellowed, becoming almost

dreamy. The reader felt confused, but thought he should say something. 'It must be Legacy, mustn't it?'

'I think it might be. That would be unusual, but not unknown, especially with some of the materials they had then, and this is definitely not normal paper.' The examiner pushed himself to his feet. 'Assad, please bring the box.' Kelly gripped the reader's arm and turned him back towards the house. 'Let's go and talk to these farmers.'