

A Death in the Working
an Inquestor-Principal Jerre syn-Casleyn mystery story
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A Note on the Author: Haef Teliau, pseudonymous author of the Jerre syn-Casleyn mysteries, began his writing career during the early period of the Eraasian Hegemony. Although the highly popular series was not overtly political, both the setting—some three decades before the first Eraasian contact with worlds beyond the interstellar gap—and the overall tone of nostalgia for those bygone days suggest at least an unconscious agenda on the writer's part. One of the book-length works, *Death of a Star-Lord*, was in fact suppressed during the sus-Peledaen purges of 1151 E. R., though later reissues of the series saw the book restored to its proper place in the sequence. —S.V.

High summer in Hanilat, and the climate controls in the Center Street Watch Station weren't working. Again.

"I would give a great deal," said Inquestor-Principal Jerre syn-Casleyn, "to get out of this office for just a day."

"The universe hears you when you say things like that." Station-Commander Evayan tapped Jerre's desktop with a broad forefinger. "Check your files."

Jerre complied, and read through the documents with increasing disbelief. "Lokheran Hall? Wide Hills should have gotten this one, not us."

"Wide Hills, in this case, defers to Hanilat Center Street with a sigh of profound relief," the Station-Commander said. "And you've been asked for special."

"Why me?"

"Take a look at the victim."

Jerre paged through the form. "Deni Tavaet sus-Arial.¹ Inner family, senior line. Just what I needed to make my day complete." He began

¹*Deni Tavaet sus-Arial*: For Teliau's original readers, the names in this passage would carry a considerable weight of implication. The "sus-" prefix to the family name indicates birth-membership in the higher nobility—either the old (and at the time of the story, still powerful) land-based aristocracy, or the newer, and newly ascendant, star-lords. Inquestor-Principal syn-Casleyn is himself identified by the "syn-" prefix as a member of the lesser nobility; the prefix could also serve (though not in Jerre's case, as other tales in the series make clear) as an indicator of adoptive membership in a hypothetical sus-Casleyn family.

transferring the documents to a travel pad. "Of your kindness, Station-Commander—send word to the Center Street Circle and ask them for the loan of Rasha *etaze*² for a jaunt in the country."

"You'll have to do without this time, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"Protocol," said the Station-Commander. "Look at the file again."

Jerre called up the desktop copies; read them; frowned. "Deceased was an unranked Mage in the Lokheran Circle."

"And Refayal Tavaet's baby brother," the Station-Commander finished. "The Circle claims it was a death in the working. The head of the sus-Arial doesn't believe them. Hence your country vacation."

Jerre couldn't take Rasha *etaze* with him to Lokheran, but he could take her to the Court of Two Colors³ for dinner and discussion—purely in the interest of laying a proper groundwork for his investigation prior to departing for the Wide Hills District. Over a shared platter of grilled meats and vegetables at a quiet table, Jerre laid out his questions.

"The first thing I need to know," he said, "is why Refayal Tavaet considers himself entitled to a say in this investigation."

"The dead man was his brother—I suppose that's enough, if you're sus-Arial."

"Deni Tavaet was a Mage. He would have left the family altars years ago."

Rasha looked thoughtful. "Well . . . there's leaving, and then there's leaving."

"What do you mean?"

"Not everybody who goes to the Circles has their name stricken from the tablets and purged from the files." She sounded a bit wistful. "Some of them

²*Rasha etaze: Etaze* is the traditional title accorded to one of the ranked Mages in a working Circle—those who are, in the vulgar usage, "Magelords." The title is loosely equivalent to "Master" or "Mistress" among Adepts, though not all Mages will carry the rank. Rasha Jedao of the Center Street Mage Circle is Jerre syn-Casleyn's regular consultant on cases involving Magecraft.

³Tel'ia's choice of setting, here, can be taken as an indication of his political sympathies. The Court of Two Colors, in its heyday perhaps the best, or at least the most notable, hotel and restaurant in downtown Hanilat, would have been in operation for perhaps five years at the time of this story. For Tel'ia's readers, the Court—having been largely destroyed by an incendiary device in 1142 E. R. as part of the ongoing power struggles among the star-lords—would have signified nostalgia for the older regime of land and merchant aristocracy, and would have stood as a covert rebuke to the ruling fleet-families.

even go home for weddings and holidays and things like that."⁴

"And you think Deni was one of those?"

"He might have been." Rasha skewered a curl of shaved meat and dipped it into the puddle of sauce. "Or there could have been other reasons."

One more thing remained for Jerre to do before leaving Hanilat for the Wide Hills District: He paid a social call on Refayal Tavaet.

The head of the sus-Arial family kept a town house in one of the most elegant of Hanilat's residential neighborhoods. Jerre presented himself to the doorkeeper-*aiketh*⁵ early in the forenoon, and identified himself as Jerre syn-Casleyne rather than as Center Street's Inquestor-Principal. Refayal Tavaet might have asked the local Watch for assistance in the matter of his brother's death; but that didn't mean he wanted its official presence intruding on his household.

Jerre drank red *uffa*⁶ from a crystal glass and asked the head of the sus-Arial, "Why don't you accept the Circle's account of your brother's death? Is there bad blood between your family and the Lokheran Circle?"

"I hadn't thought that there was," Refayal said. "But my brother is dead."

"I don't wish to make light of your grief, but he was a Mage, after all.⁷ The possibility was always—"

"I know all about the possibilities." Refayal's voice was harsh; Jerre,

⁴Rasha Jedao's family ties and Circle life are explored in depth in the second Jerre syn-Casleyne novel, *An Unkind Corpse*, which introduces the Center Street magelord to the series as a continuing character.

⁵*aiketh* (pl. *aiketen*): Prior to the pacification of the Mageworlds in A. F. 980, the people of the Eraasian Hegemony made extensive use of these robotic servitors. The *aiketen* relied upon quasi-organic components rather than silicon for their computational power, making them difficult to mass-produce but capable of handling instruction sets of great subtlety. Whether or not an *aiketh* could achieve true sentience remains unknown; no *aiketen* have been made or instructed in the classical manner since the fall of the Hegemony, and even the savants of Eraasi's own golden age disagreed on the theoretical possibility.

⁶*uffa*: a mildly stimulating herbal drink, similar in its effects and social uses to cha'a, and like cha'a, usually served hot; it comes in dark and pale—or "red" and "yellow"—varieties.

⁷Of all the practices of the Mage-Circles, the raising of power through ritual combat—always real and sometimes fatal—is the one most alien to the rest of the civilized galaxy. It is a common misconception, even today, that those Mages who meet their deaths in this fashion are unwilling sacrifices. In fact, such duels for power are consensual, and (as Jerre syn-Casleyne obliquely points out in this passage) one of the known hazards of life in a Circle.

listening, supposed that his anger and sorrow might well be genuine. "Deni's private funds and property go to the Circle. And not even Mages are above temptation."

The Lokheran Circle lived and worked in a three-story brick building two blocks off the central street of Lokheran proper.⁸ The Mage who answered was painfully young and earnest, reminding Jerre of Center Street's recruits-in-training. He made a note to interview her as soon as possible, before her superiors could take her aside and instruct her in what to say; she wouldn't have been with the Circle long enough to know in her bones which things were spoken of to outsiders and which were not.

Unfortunately, good manners and standard procedure both required that he speak with the First of the Lokheran Circle before asking to speak with any of its members.

"I'm Inquestor-Principal Jerre syn-Casleyn of the Center Street Watch," he said. "My message preceded me, yes?"

Her eyes widened. Jerre suspected that she'd never dealt in person with a member of the Watch before this, and that she didn't know whether to be frightened or embarrassed about it. "Yes, *etaz*-- sir. Lord syn-Casleyn. He's waiting for you in the downstairs office."

Grei Vareas, First of the Lokheran Circle, was a stocky, greying man who could have been own cousin to Station-Commander Evayan back at Center Street. Like the young Mage who had answered the door, he wore everyday clothing in the local style,⁹ a season or two behind the fashions of Hanilat.

"I'm sorry that Refayal Tavaet is still grieving for his brother," he said to Jerre. "Nevertheless, Deni's death was as we reported it."

⁸Once again Teliau's unstated political agenda makes itself apparent, this time in the attention paid to the autonomy and strong local focus of the Lokheran Circle. Teliau wrote during the Early Transitional period; he would have been a witness (perhaps even a participant—see Hithu and Bareian, *Survey of Eraasian Literature*, for a good summary of the arguments pro and con in the Teliau-as-Magelord controversy) to the struggles out of which came the Classical and Expansionist tradition of hierarchical structure and of shared and subordinated power.

⁹Mages in the pre-Transitional period for the most part dressed in the garments customary to the region or community they served, donning the already-traditional black robes only for Circle meetings and group endeavors. Nor did the Circles yet work masked; the *geaerith*, or full-face hardmask, did not become universally worn until well into the Expansionist period. Then as now, however, a Mage and his or her staff were inseparable, and the black wood cudgels—formidable weapons even without a Circle's intention to add strength to the blows—were worn even with everyday garb.

Jerre nodded. "In the line of duty' can be hard for family members to take sometimes."

"Yes."

"Especially if it's unexpected . . . Lokheran doesn't seem like the kind of place that would demand a great working."¹⁰

"No," said Vareas—lured into confidence, as Jerre had hoped, by the show of sympathy. "Farming, banking, a bit of light industry. The last great working before this one was back in '59—the drought year. A fire in the factory district threatened to burn out of control and destroy the center of town."

"Before your time?"

"Almost. I was even younger than Keshaiia, whom you must have met."

"The little doorwarden?" Jerre took advantage of the opening Vareas had provided. "I'd like to speak with her next, if I may. Purely in the interest of rounding out my report."

Jerre met with Keshaiia in a small office near the back of the building's ground floor. The room didn't seem to belong to any one of the Lokheran Mages in particular; when he asked Keshaiia, she confirmed his suspicions, explaining that the Circle-Mages took turns using it for personal business.¹¹

"Deni also?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "He talked with his legalist and his financial advisor at least once a quarter."

Jerre had trouble picturing a Mage with a private financial advisor, and said so. Keshaiia was an open and unsuspecting young woman—she really hadn't been a Mage for very long, he thought—and the artfully timed confidence worked as Jerre intended.

"Deni was a money whiz," she said. "He played with it, like some people do puzzles or—or build little models out of kits. For a game."

"Was he good at it?" Refayal Tavaet was claiming that the Lokheran

¹⁰The so-called "great workings"—those endeavors and intentions where the combat results in the death of one or more participants—are much less common than popular opinion in the Adeptworlds (and sensational fiction on both sides of the interstellar gap) would have us believe; available statistics (see, once again, Hithu and Bareian for a concise summary) confirm that a Mage in an ordinary Circle could reasonably expect to see only one or two such workings in the course of a lifetime.

¹¹Domestic and financial arrangements among the Mage-Circles have always been subject to considerable variation. Even in Circles tied to a particular area or institution, it was and is not uncommon for individual Mages to have occupations and business interests of their own, separate from the affairs of the Circle proper. Some Circles, of which the fictional Lokheran Circle was apparently one, live communally; others have only a meeting-place in common and—in this latter day—may never have seen one another unmasked.

Circle had killed Deni for his private money; maybe Refayal had a point after all. Younger siblings who'd left the family altars didn't usually carry a great deal away with them, but a small competence could grow into a sizeable fortune if properly tended. Jerre scrawled a question on his travel-pad and sent the message off to Center Street with a flick of his stylus, then went back to taking notes.

Keshaia shrugged. "I suppose. He kept on doing it, and he seemed to be having fun."

"It takes all kinds," Jerre said. "I need some background here. How much can you tell me about the working?"

"The one where Deni . . . ? Not much. I was there, but I wasn't a part of it."

"How did that happen?" Jerre arranged his features into an expression of nonthreatening curiosity, and waited. Given an expectant silence, people were more likely to fill it than not, and Keshaia proved no exception.

"The really big workings—nobody knows how long one's going to last once it starts. So you'll usually have a watchkeeper --somebody who stays out and keeps an eye on things."¹²

"What kind of things?"

"Trouble from outside. Somebody inside the working getting sick, or hurt. Stuff like that."

"I see." Jerre checked his travel-pad under the guise of making a note. Center Street had picked up his message; good. "So you—the Circle, that is—knew in advance that this was going to be a major working."

"Sort of. Grei *etaze* warned me it could go on for quite a while, but that was because things might get complicated—it was supposed to be a luck-of-the-town intention, and there's a lot of threads in one of those, he said."¹³

¹²Much of what is known of Circle practice in the pre-Transitional period comes from passing references made by outsiders. Then as now, working Mages preferred to pass on their teachings through personal instruction, and entrusted very little to the written word or to any other archival medium. (As inconvenient as their reluctance may be for interested scholars, it should come as no surprise to anyone on this side of the interstellar gap; the Adepts' Guild has always been similarly unforthcoming about its own history.) The reliability of popular fiction as a source of information on the subject remains a matter for considerable debate.

¹³On Eraasi and elsewhere, Mage-Circles interact with the universe through the manipulation of a complex of quantities and characteristics for which "luck" is the simplest and most usual (though perhaps not the most entirely accurate) translation. The luck is most commonly described, by those Mages willing to speak of it to outsiders, as complex patterns of silver, grey, or iridescent thread, which they call *eiran*; Eraasian philologists trace the word's origins to an unattested pre-Archaic root *ei* or *ai*, meaning, roughly, "to live".

"But no one expected it to grow into a great working?"
Keshaia shook her head. "It just happened."

Center Street was being efficient today, which was good. Jerre had the reply to his message before the afternoon was out. New information in hand, he went back to talk again with Grei Vareas in the latter's office.

"Lord syn-Casleyn." If the First of the Lokheran Circle was annoyed at having to speak with a man from the Watch twice in one day, he was hiding it well. "Is there anything further we can help you with?"

"Just a couple of things that I need to clear up."

"Of course."

Jerre made a show of consulting his travel-pad. "First —Keshaia says that nobody expected the, what did she call it, the 'luck-of-the-town intention' to become a great working. Is that correct?"

"Yes. The Circle does such workings regularly, as part of our relationship with the town. We anticipated that this one might prove arduous, but nothing more than that."

"Does it happen often that a routine working turns out to demand a death?"

Vareas frowned. "Not a death," he said. "It isn't a death that the great working demands from us. It's a life."

"A life, then." From the Watch's point of view, Jerre reflected, it came to the same thing in the end—a man who'd been alive when the working started, wasn't alive any longer—but he was willing to grant Vareas the distinction.

"Do things like that happen often?"

"No. But we know that they always can."

"Thank you," Jerre said gravely. "I have one more favor I'd like to ask, *etaze*—if it doesn't do too much violence to your Circle's customs, I'd like young Keshaia to show me the room where the working took place."

The Lokheran Circle, it developed, carried out its workings and intentions in a large, windowless room on the building's second floor. The chamber had clearly been converted to its present use from some other purpose; the three tall windows along its rear wall had been bricked over and then, like the walls themselves, painted solid black. The hardwood floor was also painted black, with a white circle several yards across in the center of it.¹⁴

¹⁴The typical meditation chamber, as described here by Teliau, has changed little over the intervening centuries. Similar circles were in use aboard Eraasian trade and exploration vessels, and in the hidden bases that made possible both the First Magewar and the Second. They are not, however, indispensable. During periods of conflict and repression—such as the

The floorboards looked like they had recently been scrubbed clean, but Jerre knew that a good forensic team would find traces of blood on them just the same—Deni Tavaet's blood, shed in the working, and the blood of whichever member of the Circle had matched him.

Which would mean nothing at all, he reminded himself. Nobody was trying to hide the fact that Deni had died in the working, and the blood alone wouldn't be proof even of that.

He turned to Keshaiia. "You were present in this room during the working, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Looking at it, but not seeing it from the inside?"

Rasha *etaze* had told him once that what she saw during a working was something other than the physical world—other, but not unreal. He was willing to take her word that there was a distinction; in the present case, it meant that none of Lokheran's Mages except for the youngest and most inexperienced counted as a reliable witness for his particular purposes.

"Yes," Keshaiia said. "I had to stay out, to keep watch."

"Good. I want you to tell me exactly what you saw. Start with who was in what place when the working began, and go on from there."

"All right." Keshaiia walked to a place on the perimeter of the painted circle. "The First was here." She crossed to the other side of the circle. "Chiwe *etaze*—" Jerre consulted his notes; Chiwe Raiath was Lokheran's Second—"was over here."

"What about Deni?"

She moved a few steps to the left along the edge of the painted circle. "He was here. Kneeling and meditating on the intention, like everybody else."

"And that went on for how long?"

"I didn't have a timepiece; I'm not sure. A long time."

"Then what happened?"

"The *eirán* started pulling tight," she said. "I wasn't even inside, and I could see them. I wasn't worried yet, not really; the First had warned me it could be a hard working. I was expecting that he and Chiwe would raise the power, like I'd seen them do before, and that the worst that would come of it was that we'd have to patch one or the other or both of them up in the infirmary afterward."

"But it didn't happen that way," Jerre said. "Something went wrong."

Occupation following the end of the First Magewar, or the long struggle in the immediate pre-Classical period between the so-called Old Tradition and the rising power of the New Circles—Mages have often done their work without the use of these obvious and betraying diagrams.

"No, no—not wrong. Workings go the way the universe wants them to go; 'wrong' isn't part of it." Keshaiia paused, then said, "But this one did go—not how we'd expected."

"In what way?"

"Well," she said, "first Grei *etaze* got up and said we needed more power, and who would match him. And Chiwe never got a chance to answer because Deni was already standing up and answering for him. And after that—" she swallowed—"after that, it was a staff-fight, like we do every day in practice only this time for real, with the threads of the *eviran* going into it and weaving out again and the pattern drawing tighter and tighter until Chiwe got past Deni's guard and struck him dead. The pattern was done then, and that was the end of the working."

Two days later, Jerre syn-Casleyn paid a second social call on Refayal Tavaet sus-Arial. The two men spoke, as was courteous, of the weather and other trivial things until the red *uffa* was brewed and poured into the crystal glasses.

Then Jerre said, "I've made my final report to Center Street."

"And?"

"It was as the Circle told you. A death in the working."¹⁵

"That's all?" Refayal frowned. "I don't believe it, syn-Casleyn. I can tell when I'm not being told something, and you're not telling me something now."

"Very well," Jerre said. He set aside his glass of *uffa*. "You were intending to purchase Lokheran Premium Container and Packaging. The initial overtures are a matter of public record, and the Financial and Accounting Division at Center Street was able to find them for me with no difficulty. I'm told there was considerable worry in some quarters about whether you intended to break the company up and move its talents and assets elsewhere, or continue to operate it in its current location."

"I honestly hadn't decided yet," Refayal said. "It's all moot now anyway. The Lokheran town council managed to top my offer—they scraped up enough money from somewhere at the last minute, apparently."

"Yes," said Jerre. Refayal Tavaet wasn't going to like what he heard next, but he'd asked for knowledge and it would come to him in the way that the universe willed—just as it must have come to Deni himself in the course of the working. Jerre wondered if Refayal would be as willing as his brother to accept

¹⁵Such deaths, according to statute law in most of the modern Eraasian Hegemony, still count as "by natural causes" provided the deceased is truly a Mage. Since the end of the second Magewar, the precedent has also been applied elsewhere; see *Citizens of Gyffer vs. Calentyk*, 1009 A. F.

that knowledge. Not Center Street's problem, thankfully; an Inquestor's work, as always, was merely to report the truth as he knew it, and move on. "The money was a gift from the Lokheran Circle, for the health and welfare of the town of Lokheran."

END