

## CHAPTER 1

# The Meeting

A pale blue 5—the obsolete form—was painted on a cryer pillar. “Looks like a bony hand, don’t it?” the man remarked. “D’you know its meaning, Lettered sir?”

“It’s the number 5, glyphed the old way,” said Sas. “Not used in generations.”

A young girl volunteered, “Seen it other places, too.”

“Other places?”

“The Upper Ridge so far ... on house walls, no paper.”

“Barbarians,” seethed someone.

“Indeed.”

The girl asked, “Lettered sir, what does it signify?”

“Afraid I don’t know, but thank you for showing me. Unusual, isn’t it? I’ll let others know. Sorry, you’ll have to excuse me, I’m going to be late for the Temple service.”

“You’re late now,” smirked the girl.

Sas grinned. “You’re right. Be well.” With a nod he resumed his walk.

He was slowed by a second 5 splashed on the east wall of Nethua House, then further on by another more rushed than the last. In the distance another blue 5, large and illegible, lured him toward the Temple.

He shivered.

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“Approach and be attentive!” intoned the priest and priestess choruses. “All existent worlds bubble from the froth and foam, but the loving ocean of the One is the ultimate reality ...”

Attentiveness, devoted reflection or his stance of solemn focus which, on less eventful days, disguised the reveries he slipped into ... Impossible.

There was no warning this morning’s meeting would be so ...

*The Council expects me, Sas, to educate the barbarian invasion? Because of citations for talent under Adjudicator Kesrin? With telepathic sendings? Something’s wrong. Why am I here? The Temple’s not the best place to think. What a quandary! And I’m the solution to it? They’ve made a mistake! Sendings means they expect more than one. From me? I’m no telepath! It makes no sense!*

A young priestess moving to the center altar fount drew his eye. *She’s got the good voice but never recites anything interesting from the Liturgia. To think I might’ve been stuck up there, a lector reciting to the assembled ... the Family wanted it; Adjudicators expected it. Competition with Sirna demanded it. Could’ve had any position in the Bureautica but, thank the One, never that! But educating barbarians with sendings?*

The priestess surveyed the assembled with traveling glances—lighting here, there, never more than a moment—said to keep listeners alert and mindful. Midway along the channel founts, she noticed him staring up at her and hesitated before commencing.

“In the discernible past, after the Inaccessible became the Mysterious and when the Mysterious had given way to the Inferable ...”

*Well! The opening glyphs to the Nonspecifics of Kheas. First text in Pragmatics. Wasn’t her first choice—changed it when she saw me. Wonder why. ... Who taught me the Nonspecifics ... old Mesat. Knew his glyphs but none of their nuances. Bad bit of foam, smoke and dust! All those years of study, memorizing thousands of glyphs—starting into the Ninth Registry even—and I haven’t used half of them! Glyphs!*

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His quiet snort stirred a few people nearby to wonder what point they had missed in the priestess's mnemonic. His dark robes of the Lettered impressed quick ones to add their own snort.

*All that education and my ridiculous failure at the end. One miswritten glyph finished me! The Adjudicators may've allowed me a Qualified Mastery, but it was a failure and an ending ... and the unfolding of everything afterwards. My own largeness must've known better ... the mistake that was my escape.*

Remembering his sister Sirna's laughter could still provoke a cringe. All the time left to him on this side of the froth and foam of existence would never bury the humiliation.

"Haw, haw," she had sung out. "Everyone knows! You miswrote the definitive in the law glyph and failed the Mastery exam! 'Ageless unjust choices and balances' instead of the law glyph!" She collapsed onto a divan, shrieking with laughter while he burned in shame.

Though where was she now? She, the eldest, First-Womb Designate of the Family, had died. The water-lung plague took her along with many others—and with her, the rivalry between them. Her body, preserved in the compact, elegant jar befitting her station, stood beside those of his parents in the fourth-floor ossuary.

As part of his year-long reprimand, he tacked up the law glyph writ large on a piece of labyrinthian paper over his sleep-room door. Familiarity had rendered it invisible.

Why these thoughts of Sirna? More import—*Hah!* The answer was in the morning's meeting: He was not above tallying up totals ... even with the dead.

*They have chosen me to educate the barbarians!*

He shook his head to throw off the thought. *Dadjin wouldn't want me succumbing to vanity ...*

Others, keened to his reactions, suspected the priestess had made another slip in her recitation.

*Those 5's on the way here. Wonder how many there are. Someone'll have to count them, note the locations. Perhaps agents already have. A pattern will be found, I know it. Curious without paper—might've been traceable otherwise. The blue paint might be sourced—it's a*

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*color someone might've used to personalize a spheres set. A talent knowing the old glyphs did this.*

*It's a message or a warning ... for those who can read it. Perhaps a signal to others ... maybe a warning and a signal. It's a bid for attention—likely ours. In too public a way, like the Communion: 'Approach and be attentive.' But what now? When does the Mysterious become the Inferable? Nothing to do but wait for developments. What did what's-her-name write ... 'Patience, the virtue of the patient.' Ah, an Augury might help!*

The priestess segued from declarations to exhortations: "... refers to the dictates and the dispositions of the froth and foam. Whether we float upon them or within them, it is we who choose. Our largeness waits for immersion in the Ocean of the One but the vanities of our smallness lure us to splash about in the shallow oblivion of foam's endless experience ..."

Sas was instead mentally reciting the *Preparations for Insight* from his memorized sections from *The Concise Manual of Augurs*. He constructed and visualized three glyphs to pose the question: *WhatSignificance Number5OldStyle ThroughoutCity?*

He released them and waited expectant: his body calm; mind blank. The single glyph, when it prompted his inner awareness, was neither helpful nor reassuring.

*OnlyOneClawSeen.*

*A sign of more to come.*

*Well, enough of that.*

A little more settled and the priestess rattling on in her harmonious way, Sas could review his mnemonic record of the morning's meeting of the Council of Deliberators, especially to thresh out details he must have misunderstood about the last point raised:

*Lord Metlit:* Secretary, please encrypt this final sequence of minutes to a higher complex.

*Secretary Caplon:* Yes, lord.

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*Lord Metlit:* We face our most serious crisis. The barbarians are coming and we have no comparable weapons of any sort.

*Count Satla:* Who needs weapons when we have such skills like subtlety?

*Adjudicator Mezanlipat:* Barbarians are not especially known to be responsive to such rarefied measures.

*Count Satla (continuing):* Courage is also a weapon.

*Lady Somaladea:* Not directly they aren't. However, that is the point of subtlety, is it not? We may not be what we were, but we have those few among us who can affect certain aspects of the froth and foam to slow, delay, perhaps deflect the barbarian invasion.

*Lord Metlit:* Ah yes, of course.

*Lady Somaladea:* From current estimates, you are suggesting they will reach us by early spring?

*Lord Metlit:* It's the likeliest probability, yes.

*Adjudicator Mezanlipat:* They will certainly put a strain on our traditional hospitality.

*Count Satla (continuing):* Patience is a weapon.

*Artisan Theult:* So is action! And more effective!

*Adjudicator Mezanlipat:* The spring, you say.

*Lady Somaladea:* Unless there are those strategies to slow and delay and ...

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*(pause)*

*Elder Shoan:* Might we submit a request to the College of Ritual to pray for a heavier snowfall in the mountains this winter?

*Count Satla:* For snow? But they're not coming by way of the mountain passes, are they?

*Lady Somaladea:* Ah, of course. Excellent suggestion! And, as I recall, the account books balance in our favor where the College is concerned.

*(General concurrence.)*

*Adjudicator Mezanlipat:* Spring Fasting will end up being longer.

*Lady Somaladea:* Better than our lives being shorter.

*Count Satla:* Why for snow? They're not com—

*Lady Somaladea:* You raised the concept of subtlety. Practice it! *(pause)* We should consider other such unique ... ah, difficulties along the lines of their most likely advances. Such difficulties will only augment our reputation.

*Elder Shoan:* We might also initiate negotiations.

*Adjudicator Mezanlipat:* Smoke and foam! Such a suggestion!

*Lord Metlit:* What do we negotiate with? We have no standing army, no weapons in any military sense. If we did, we'd have little skill, let alone motivation to

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take them up. We wouldn't be Citizens otherwise. Elder Shoan, what do you mean by this?

*Elder Shoan:* If they cannot be stopped, the barbarians must be convinced of the City's usefulness; intact, fully functioning—including every life, the temples, the libraries and so forth. This is the most ancient, sacred place and their education of this truth must start, but not when they are at the Wall.

*High Priestess Bhekla:* One shudders to think what they will consider useful.

*Adjudicator Mezanlipat:* Are you saying we have to collaborate with them?

*Elder Shoan:* Their willingness to learn is what should concern us.

*Count Satla:* How do we educate them when they are so far away?

*Elder Shoan:* For the talented at the Guild of Telepaths there are no distances.

*High Priestess Bhekla:* Yes, but the Guild always makes us pay.

*Lord Metlit:* We have our discretionary funds for such purposes.

*High Priestess Bhekla:* Yes, but it is seldom funding they demand.

*Artisan Theult:* We don't really know very much about the barbarians, do we? Sas, your first companion was Hyur, the barbarian, was it not?

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*Sas:* Y-yes, he was, but he quite rightly doesn't see himself as barbarian. He is a fourth-generation City Citizen and unfamiliar with their current customs.

*Elder Shoan:* A sufficient beginning. And, as I remember, you were awarded two citations for talent in composition—by Adjudicator Kesrin no less. Your sendings will have to be composed with no less equal care.

*Sas:* My ... my sendings?

*Lord Metlit:* Of course, but even unlikely projections need close examination. If we begin to have an influence, or perhaps prevail, serious considerations must be given to any new directions and effects their revised advances might take.

*High Priestess Bhekla:* Or even, may the One allow, the dispersal of their army.

*Lord Metlit:* Indeed. Even dispersal will have enormous repercussions. Some of our efforts might have the opposite result and make them more determined and savage. An obvious challenge we display might be reason enough to inspire them toward their cherished goals.

*Elder Shoan:* Whatever those might be.

*Adjudicator Mezanlipat:* Is not a sending, however skillfully composed, a challenge in any event?

*Count Satla:* Then our sendings to them must be especially subtle.

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*Lady Somaladea:* That must be your favorite word these days, Count Satla. However, I must agree with our esteemed Adjudicator—they will be seen as a challenge.

*Lord Metlit:* Nonetheless, it's as Artisan Theult said, our actions must be effective and such shall be our sendings. Of course, we will make our considerations with the greatest care—long-lasting consequences lie ahead regardless. Please review this and the other strategies and present your analysis at tomorrow morning's Council. Thank you. Be well.

*Elder Shoan:* And, if it may be added, factor how this might be leveraging to the advantage of our opposition?

Stunning notion: educating barbarians—and not at the Wall.

*Sendings ... mine ... a sufficient beginning?* Sas was baffled all over again.

Shoan the Elder was the Council's strategist, and his concerns showed in the deep creases on his forehead, hedged by bushy eyebrows. Sas always waited for Shoan to spring new ideas on the Council, enticing it to venture onto new paths. Lord Metlit was reliable in opening avenues to them—it was clear the course of meetings was prearranged by these two. And the beautiful Masmé, Lady of Somaladea House was a frequent contributor. Today, it was Artisan Theult surprising him with his former companion, then Elder Shoan's shocking dictum: "Your sendings will have to be composed with no less equal care."

After all this time, their role for him lay revealed: educator of the barbarians! By means of sendings! Extraordinary—confounding.

Yes, Kesrin had granted two citations for talent in his final year of study. But how could he possibly compose sendings without telepathic training? Was this truly the reason for his recruitment? At the time, in late spring, his quiet selection was an honor, singular

yet puzzling. Surely there were more deserving and experienced candidates—who had not failed their Mastery examination. Despite it, six moons ago he had been selected, lent out for short periods to various salons in the Bureautica and only now were the true reasons emerging.

And sendings? Tales from *The Panmageon* told of the sudden, solid appearances (however temporary) of people and objects out of the very air—the old glyph for sending was *AJourneyWithoutDeparture*. There was the story of the two sisters who ... well, no matter, but if the tales were to be believed, there was a price for this kind of magical effort. He would have to reread those stories until the Council was more forthcoming.

Educating the barbarians ... utterly daunting.

And then there was the last: Leveraging to the advantage of our opposition—the shadowy adversary stalking the Council's very decisions, sometimes before they could be implemented. It was worrisome how, with increasing frequency, plans were anticipated, skewed and misdirected within the Bureautica. He assumed a more thorough discussion occurred at some upper strategy sessions to which he was not privy—he had been uninformed about the opposition until recently. Raised more and more often at morning meetings, it seemed to be the Council's circumscribed method of acquainting him with the situation. As a partial Deliberator and no guarantee of full investiture after the probationary year, he could only speak at Council if first elicited for a response.

The Temple service was finishing. His feet were aching from standing for so long. The priestess, concluding her exhortation, bowed back while the choruses intoned the Sacraments of Remembrance and Communion as attendants dispersed among the altar founts to bestow the assembled their sip of Sacred Water. Then the closing "Renew, Return, Depart" recessional was chanted over the assembled restless to get on with the day.

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Masme, Lady Somaladea, had spotted Sas standing dazed in front of Metlit House. *Poor soul. It was to be me. Don't envy him for what awaits.*

She entered the litter and twitched the curtains closed. The litter was lifted and the carriers started for home.

*Another meeting over and with what results? She was in no mood to swallow frustrations yet again. This is all too slow! We're going to fail under Metlit's plodding. Doesn't matter whether it's an invasion or the opposition, I spoke my lines, performed my player's role, but to what purpose? With so much depending on young Sas? The Companioned Heart? Foam! Is this the best we can do? Feels like another bungle in the making.*

*Count Satla is a fool. They have to shut him up. One of these days I'll say something crushing, and nothing from their player's script. I had my part to play today; what in the great bubbling of existence was his! He's driving me to madness.*

The carriers felt Lady Somaladea shift in the litter again—she was tetchy of late after morning meetings at Metlit House.

Early in her tenure, she asked Lord Metlit why Satla was a Deliberator. Everyone knew a titled member of the ancient, aristocrat Families had to occupy a divan on Council. Not that “oldest Family status” meant much anymore—his glaring inadequacy was example enough. Did it *have* to be him? If it was a question of status, any Upper Ridge Citizen could warm the divan. Was it a personal debt? If so: unacceptable. Why was Satla there?

“Because he asks the obvious questions. Obvious questions sometimes need to be voiced,” was Metlit's reply.

“Sometimes, yes, but surely not *all* the time!” she had retorted.

*Obvious questions! He doesn't do anything. It squanders a valuable divan. He should be demoted to a partial or called on to resign. It would open us up to new ideas and fresh appraisals.*

Legal dictate stated that only nine Deliberators could occupy the Council divans. Partial or half Deliberators, created centuries earlier, were helpful to increase the number, despite partials having limited influence. Young Sas was one. Caplon, the Deliberators' (and Metlit's Family's) secretary, was the other who might have been

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considered a half Deliberator on the Council, but due to his position the full designation was included as a courtesy honor.

*They're all too slow!* Masmé thumped her fists on her thighs.

The City was not as it was. No true Magician had existed for some time. Yes, yes, there was an occasional talent at the College of Ritual, but scarcely more than that. Aside from which, during the wrangling of the ancient schools it had been declared ritualists were no longer true Magicians. It was the City of the Deliberators and Temple Market profits, not the City of the Magicians of intents and purposes. Even the Council had once been called the Council of Mages centuries ago, until the historic Niswagea, the one intrepid, honest soul, had changed the Council's name and structure to reflect the times.

*The times! Threadbare we are. Thank the One for Elder Shoan's strategist mind—his talent for unusual detail and tactical insight. But always under Metlit's ditherings.*

She peeked through the curtains—she had been oblivious of the lovely fall day. *The curse of beauty!* It was an old, sour thought. She kept the litter curtains closed except during hot weather to curtail the stares. From before her first menses, offers from boys and girls, men and women to be companions at one intent or another: first, sole, secret, shared—the usual variations. Toying with some, tempting and teasing herself as much as tempting and teasing them, she realized anyone was a compromise. An air of perpetual preoccupation lessened the entreaties, though protecting integrity fed frustrations. Annoyingly, Lord Metlit's eldest son Chesweh had exhibited silent, shy, gawky interest, and she suspected it was another reason she was on Council.

*Mine is not the womb that'll foam with children.*

Lurches within the litter indicated Lady Somaladea was heating to a boil. The household would have to be warned.

*Why am I a Deliberator now I'm no longer bait for The Companioned Heart Strategy? Prettiness's sake? With all these crises, what's my talent? To worry? Voicing them produces nothing. Are there any talented among us Deliberators? If I remain, there's only Shoan*

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*I trust enough to ally with. But how to extricate him from Metlit's formulaics ...*

*At last Sas is announced as the solution, but he was unprepared for it. Odd they informed me of the role but not him ... they must have concerns about him. Thank the One; six months before the barbarian leader arrives and I'm free of it! Though am I? Doesn't feel like it. I'm in a state of hiatus ... but what am I waiting for?*

She flung back the curtains. "Stop the litter. I will walk the rest of the way."

She ignored the carriers' surprise and relief, stepped from the litter, and started toward a less frequented laneway.

*Mezanlipat's point should've been discussed. Sendings will be perceived as a challenge, especially by barbarians. So hopeless ... they've dallied with this simplistic scenario for over a year and can't critique it properly anymore.*

"Lady Somaladea is walking!" whispered several Citizens, amazed by the sight.

*We're our own opposition if we insist on this methodology. We need to change, and fast. We're squandering our last opportunity to prepare well.*

*If I don't develop a stronger say with Shoan, might as well resign my divan. All our hopes rest on his shoulders ... and those hopes are but the first of his burdens.*

She passed several people discussing something about blue painted 5's, but her inner rant was in the ascendant.

Her quick review of Shoan's tendency for resisting strategies: never for his own benefit, his devotion to civic service was as a support, seldom an instigator, his skills dependent on the worthiness of others. If the worthies were inspired, then Shoan rose shrewd, dynamic with unusual ideas. She counted the occasions he had shown ... no, it was true. It was rare for him to initiate anything unless a crisis impelled him to decisiveness.

*My one course is to convince him ... no, inspire him—the danger's at hand. Not six months hence but now ...*

Nearing home, someone brushed past her in the opposite direction and she caught a whiff of it again. Reminding her ...

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someone at the meetings had taken to wearing an exotic perfume, she did not know whom. At first she presumed Lady Sarwa, Metlit's first and sole companion (an empty-head, in her estimation), had traipsed through the reception salon beforehand, leaving wispy traces behind. But no, faint, persistent wafts during meetings irritated her disapproval toward whoever was indulging in such a vanity. Reluctantly, she determined it was not Satla. Unfortunate—she would have had no qualms in exposing and shaming him to desist.

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*Private Minutes – 9336 – sequence 4, in the Getaswa cipher.*

*Metlit:* What? You got *OnlyOneClawSeen*, too? So did I!

*Shoan:* Hmm. An indicator of significance ... well, for an Augur.

*Metlit:* We should find out if anyone else got this answer.

*Shoan:* Yees, but with City discretion.

*Metlit:* More claws are coming.

*Shoan:* Apparently, but what of the paws they are attached to and the size and nature of the beast to which they belong?

*Metlit:* There's something ... oh, I don't know ... familiar about the 5's. Did you see it?

*Shoan:* What do you mean?

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*Metlit:* Oh, not sure ... the style, perhaps?

*Shoan:* Well, if anything comes to mind ... a total of eleven were found going in the general direction of the Temple. The ones nearer the Temple were more quickly executed.

*Metlit:* We still don't know what 5 means. What do you think *Claw* refers to?

*Shoan:* Defense. Attack. Both. Some claws are meant for digging, hence underground as well.

*Metlit:* Interesting. An underground connection. And you think this might be our opposition?

*Shoan:* Might be. Conjectures at this time are premature.

*Metlit:* You've assumed they've infiltrated City agents by now ... you're certain?

*Shoan:* At the very least. Third- and fourth-level problematics predict it. Whom would you suspect?

*Metlit:* Bokma, Director of the Salon of Agents. Perhaps an inviting net should be set up to capture her, don't you think?

*Shoan:* Our own handlers have been precipitous on occasion, so it would be better to probe her with an interrogation via an intermediary rather than capture. If we are wrong, a capture would be hard to answer and would tip them off. An interrogation, less intrusive, may be more informative. It will match their slipperiness.

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*Metlit:* You're right, old friend. Of course! Much better. But there's only one probe I know of ... do you think she'd do one for us? And who else can you trust to collect the revealings as intermediary?

*Shoan:* Why ask me? You know the answer as well as I. She will refuse, of course. Yet she might do it for you. As a Family favor. Under the circumstances. Particularly if we use someone else as intermediary.

*Metlit:* But I'm already asking for her assistance.

*Shoan:* That is an official request. They will extract their price from us as usual. This is different. Very different.

*Metlit:* Yes, I know, but she won't leave her tower. For the probe itself: Do you think ... think Sas might be acceptable as intermediary? He's got the necessary memory and composing skills. We do need to speed up his training.

*Shoan:* Probably, but he also needs to conserve his strength for the sendings.

*Metlit:* Do you think we will survive this? I mean, our own private Augury was far from reassuring: *InvasionFromWithout, CorrosionFromWithin.*

*Shoan:* Yes, I admit our private Auguries were not at all favorable, but that is their usefulness, is it not? They warn us what needs to be done. Since we started this player's piece rather late, we must push the dispositions of the froth and foam all the harder until they change.

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*Metlit:* But what if all these are dictates of the froth and foam and not mere dispositions? We'll live to see the destruction of everything we hold dear and sacred.

*Shoan:* Then we should all take the claustral vows and join the Ecstatics of the One.

*Metlit:* You've *got* to have a reason for that one!

*Shoan:* It is good to see you smile, Ulin. The Ecstatics, remember, recognize neither dictates nor dispositions.