



From the MixCache.com library

SAMPLE COPY

The Nurse of Nineveh

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Fever Wind over Nineveh
- **Chapter 2** House of Gula, House of War
- **Chapter 3** Salt, Cedar, and Copper: The Kit of an Asû
- **Chapter 4** The Soldier's Cough
- **Chapter 5** Slave Quarters, Quiet Agonies
- **Chapter 6** The Noblewoman's Veil and the Hidden Rash
- **Chapter 7** Smoke on the Temple Steps
- **Chapter 8** A Letter Sealed in Bitumen
- **Chapter 9** Counting Pulses, Counting Lies
- **Chapter 10** The Exorcist's Shadow
- **Chapter 11** Field Clinic by the Eastern Gate
- **Chapter 12** Bitter Herbs and Better Bargains
- **Chapter 13** Children of the River Quarter
- **Chapter 14** Omen of the Eclipse
- **Chapter 15** In the Library of the King
- **Chapter 16** Bones, Breakers, and Oaths
- **Chapter 17** The Price of Clean Water
- **Chapter 18** The General's Confession
- **Chapter 19** A Knife for the Boil, A Prayer for the Soul
- **Chapter 20** Night Watch among the Corpses
- **Chapter 21** The Slave Who Would Not Die
- **Chapter 22** Map of a Sick City
- **Chapter 23** Reckoning with the High Priest
- **Chapter 24** Remedies for Empire
- **Chapter 25** The Last Tablet

Introduction

I set these words to clay because breath is fickle and memory more so. A reed stylus scratches truth better than a tongue can carry it, and what it preserves may yet outlast the fevers that have taken so many from our streets. If you have found this, know that my hands have treated kings' captains and kitchen slaves, wet nurses and scribes, merchants with perfumed beards and boys whose sandals were their only wealth. I am an asû, a woman of remedies, sworn to the Lady of Healing, Gula, and to the stubborn practice of keeping people alive.

The city hums even when it is afraid. Nineveh's walls are wide enough to race chariots, but an illness passes through stone as a song passes through a curtain. They call it the fever wind, though it is not a wind. It is a heat that crawls under the skin, a dryness that steals the voice, a rash that blooms and vanishes like the promise of rain. Some say it rides with foreign traders, some that it is sent by angry gods, others that it is born in the stagnant ditches where our refuse meets the river's patience. I have seen it in the soldiers returning from the western roads, in the women who prepare their bread, in the old priests who raise incense, and in the children who chase each other beneath lintels carved with lions.

I was taught that a remedy begins before the bowl is mixed. You learn a person's house, the shape of their fears, the bargains that make their life possible. My mother taught me the weight of a good handful of juniper berries by placing them in my palm blindfolded; my first mentor in the temple taught me the measure of silence, when not to speak a prognosis in a crowded room. From the āšipu, the ritual healers, I learned the geometry of prayer and the way a spoken name can anchor a thrashed mind. I hold all three threads—herb, habit, hymn—and braid them as the case demands. If you are reading to find which plant to boil or which poultice to bind, you will find such things here. But you will also find the tallying of bribes for clean water, the quiet negotiations for permission to enter a noble courtyard, the cost of contradicting a drunken officer's certainty.

Let none mistake a cure for a charm. We burn cedar and speak to demons because fear requires shapes. We also wash hands with ash-water, boil the knives, and separate the coughing from the newly delivered mother because rot requires no coaxing to spread. Between the incense and the mortar there is a table where blood is wiped and accounts are kept. In this city, to heal is to reckon with power. A palace decree can open the gate to a quarantined quarter, but a kitchen maid with a bucket can save more lives than a scribe with a seal. The empire is a body; its appetites, wounds, and pride can overrule a physician's judgment, and sometimes a simple basin of clean water is the only seditious act left to me.

I write of patients as I found them: the archer whose breath rattled like pebbles in a gourd, the slave whose back was a ledger of lashes and scars that sang with infection, the noblewoman whose veil hid not shame but sores, the child who survived because her grandmother stole figs from the market for my decoction. I will tell you what I mixed—salt and vinegar to scour, copper filings to bite at rot, crushed willow for heat and ache—and I will mark the prayers I borrowed from the old tablets, the ones that ask Nabu for a steady hand and Shamash for clear sight. I will tell you also what it cost, because every cure is paid for twice: once in silver or service, again in silence or speech.

Do not expect a single thread, neatly spun. The citywide sickness unraveled us in knots: a soldier's cough became a riot over bread, a riverboat seized at the quay started a chain of whispers that ran all the way to the palace archive. In treating the body I uncovered other fevers: the fever of ambition, the fever of envy, the fever of a court that would rather invent an omen than admit an error in the aqueduct's stones. These pages—these tablets—became a dossier because each case bled into another, each remedy revealed a debt, each prayer bought time for a decision that would not make itself.

If you come to this as a healer, may you find in my failures as much instruction as in my successes. If you come as a ruler, may you learn that a city's breath depends on what it allows its poorest to drink. If you come as a priest, may you see that the gods are not slighted when we clean a wound as carefully as we shape a hymn. And if you come as one who suffers, know that I have seen men most feared in battle tremble before a fever that cannot be speared, and I have seen women most ignored keep a household from collapse by the simple ceremony of boiling water.

The empire demands records: lists of grain, names of conscripts, the spoils of cities drowned and cities spared. Let this be another kind of record, one the tallymen do not ask for. Here you will find treatments and recipes, yes, but also arguments with exorcists and bargains with gatekeepers, field notes from alleys where the sun never lingers, and transcripts of whispers spoken behind doors painted with lapis. I have disguised some names, not for my safety, which was never much, but for the chance that those still living may walk the market without a shadow following them.

When the fever wind rose, I sharpened my stylus as I sharpened my knife. The first to cut rot, the second to pin truth into clay. What follows is the work of a city's worst season, and perhaps its most honest. Read it as a casebook, a confession, and a map: not only of an illness, but of how an empire breathes—through its healers, its water carriers, its temple singers, and its frightened, stubborn multitudes.

CHAPTER ONE: The Fever Wind over Nineveh

I begin this tablet on the fourth day of the month Simanu, in the year the crown-prince hunted lions in the northern provinces and returned with three cubs and a cough that would not leave him. That cough is not, I should note, the cough I am writing of—though the palace physicians may disagree with me on that point, and discretion being the sturdiest door in any healer's practice, I shall let them hold their opinion. What I set down here begins not with princes but with a potter's wife from the Bit Kisir quarter, and with a smell.

The smell was copper and overripe dates. I know because I remember lifting my cloth over my nose as I climbed the stairs to her husband's workshop—clay dust on every step, a lizard frozen on a landing—and finding her on a reed mat in the back room, her skin flushed the color of pomegranate rind, her lips cracked and darkened at the edges. She was not yet thirty. Her two children sat near her with their mouths open, which is how children wait when they are not sure whether you have come to help or to pronounce.

I pressed two fingers to the hollow of her throat and counted. The pulse ran fast and thin, like water over a tilted plate. Her breath came in shallow sips rather than the full draughts a healthy woman draws without thinking. When I pulled back her linen to look at her chest, I saw the faint tracery of red lines spreading from beneath her breasts toward her collarbones—not scratches, not the marks of a lash, but the delicate fan-work of something rising from inside. She shivered even though the room held the warmth of the afternoon kiln below.

I had seen a case like this three days earlier, in a soldier quartered near the arsenal, and I had treated it as I would treat any ague: willow bark steeped in beer, a compress of sesame oil and crushed mint across the forehead, and a prayer to Gula spoken low so as not to frighten the patient into thinking his time had come. The soldier recovered. But the potter's wife was different. Different in degree, if not yet in kind. Her skin had a sheen to it, not the healthy moisture of sweat but the slick, reluctant perspiration of a body losing its argument with whatever had entered it.

I prescribed a draught of date-wine and crushed licorice root, wrapped a damp cloth around her forehead, and told her husband to send the children to his mother's house and to boil every vessel of water in the household. He asked me what plague this was. I told him it was a fever and that I would return in two days. A healer who names a disease before she understands it is like a scribe who reads a tablet before the ink has dried—she may get the words right, but she will miss the meaning.

I had been practicing medicine in Nineveh for eleven years by then, long enough to know the city's rhythms the way a musician knows a song: the morning bustle along the Tigris quays, the shift-change clamor of the palace guard at the North Gate, the hour in late afternoon when the perfume sellers of the bazaar set out their braziers and the whole length of the Procession Street smells of myrrh and roasted pistachio. I had patients among the middling merchants, a few minor officials, and one aging chariot-maker whose left knee I had been poulticing since before the current king's father took the throne. My reputation was modest and my income adequate. I lived in two rooms above a tanner's shop, which meant my linens always smelled of oak bark but at least I never lacked for hides to use as door flaps against the dust.

Nineveh in those days was swollen beyond its seams. The city had been expanded, walls extended, new orchards planted in the palace gardens to feed the court's growing appetite for spectacle and the army's need for horses. Foreign craftsmen, deported artisans, traders from Dilmun and Elam and places even the traders could not pronounce—these had filled the city's quarters until the streets rang with a dozen languages and the canal system ran at half its ancient capacity beneath the weight of new construction. I do not say this as criticism. An empire that does not grow is an empire that invites invasion. But a city that grows too fast forgets where its water comes from, and forgetting water is a sin the body always punishes.

The second case came to me four days after the potter's wife. A young woman whose name I was told was Tashmetu—though she later admitted this was her sister's name, because using your own in a healer's house felt too much like admitting you might die—presented with the same flushed skin and quickened pulse, but with the addition of a sore throat so severe she could barely swallow her own saliva. She was a beer-seller in the market near the Ištar Gate, and she told me that over the past tendays she had noticed an increasing number of regular customers staying away. She had assumed they were avoiding her prices, which she had recently been forced to raise on account of the barley shortage, and she was almost offended when I told her the empty stools in her stall might be a more reliable testimony than any ledger.

I examined her throat with a wooden spatula and a strip of linen, a method my first mentor had taught me after watching a beekeeper inspect hives. The membranes were inflamed, streaked with a faint white bloom. I asked her whether anyone in her household was similarly afflicted. She said her mother had a cough but refused to see a healer on the grounds that healers were expensive and gods were free. I did not argue. The gods are free and they are slow, and I charge a fair price and I arrive today.

I treated Tashmetu with a gargle of salt water and vinegar, a bolus of powdered willow bark mixed with honey, and a strip of clean linen soaked in cooled sage tea to be tied around her neck at night. I also gave her a small clay token—not a medical device but a comfort, shaped like a fish, which was the symbol of the river goddess who in local

tradition kept watch over freshwater sources. Whether the token helped I cannot say, but Tashmetu clutched it in her hand when she left and looked at me with the particular gratitude reserved for those who believe they are being handed more than medicine.

By the tenth day of Simanu, I had seen nine cases. Not a number to set the palace archives trembling, but enough to make me pause my regular rounds and sit with my clay and stylus and ask a question I do not like to ask: is this a pattern? Nineveh is a city of perhaps a hundred thousand souls—if I have seen nine, how many have gone uncounted in the quarters I do not serve, among the people who do not send for a healer because they cannot afford one, or because they trust instead to prayer, or because they fear that calling attention to illness will invite the attention of the āšipu and with it the question of whose sin produced the disease?

I went to the temple of Gula. This is not something I do lightly—not because I lack piety, but because temple healers and independent practitioners maintain a careful silence about each other, the way two merchants selling the same goods maintain silence about each other's prices. The chief āšipu in the Gula temple was a man called Ur-Nabû, broad-shouldered and slow-voiced, with fingers stained perpetually with kohl and a smell of juniper smoke that clung to him like a second skin. I had studied beside his apprentices as a girl and had found them more generous with their knowledge than their master, who guarded ritual technique the way a general guards his battle plans.

I found him at the inner gate, pouring a libation over a small heap of river pebbles that I took to be an omen-reading in progress. He did not look up when I spoke.

"Have you seen anything unusual these past tendays?" I asked.

"Unusual," he repeated, in the tone of a man who finds everything unusual and has learned that saying so is the safest course. "The gods speak in many voices. A fever is a fever. A cough is a cough."

"But nine patients in tendays, all in the same quarter of the city, with the same symptoms—"

"Then nine people in the same quarter sinned in the same way, or the stars passed through the same house, or the wind blew from the same direction. Which would you like me to write on my tablet?"

I did not press the matter. One does not press an āšipu about omens any more than one presses a lion about its dinner—it accomplishes nothing and leaves marks. I left a offering of wool at Gula's altar and returned to my rooms above the tanner's shop to consult my own tablets, the ones I had accumulated over eleven years of practice, the

ones where I recorded not only treatments but observations: which seasons produced which ailments, which quarters flooded in which months, which water-carriers' routes seemed to correlate with stomach complaints in the households they served.

The pattern, when I laid the observations side by side, was suggestive if not conclusive. Most of my nine patients drew water from the same canal branch, the one that fed the Bit Kisir quarter before turning south toward the orchards beyond the wall. Most lived in close quarters with several other households sharing a single courtyard. And most—seven of the nine—had purchased barley bread from the same market stall in the weeks before falling ill.

I sat with this for an evening, watching the sun drop behind the great ziggurat and the temple flutes begin their twilight hymn. A coincidence, said one voice in my head. A pattern, said another. The first voice belonged to caution; the second to experience. I had learned, the hard way, that experience without caution is a physician's fastest road to the cemetery, and that caution without experience is a coward's excuse for doing nothing.

By morning I had decided on a course of action that was, I confess, neither as bold nor as principled as it might sound. I went to the canal.

The branch that served Bit Kisir was a tributary of the main city canal, fed by the Tigris through a series of sluice gates that were operated—this was important—by a guild of water-keepers whose loyalty to the crown was purchased through tax exemptions and whose competence, I had long suspected, was inversely proportional to the breadth of their exemption. The water at the intake point was murky, which in summer was not unusual, but it had a faint sulfurous odor that I did not recognize. I filled a clay jar and carried it home, where I filtered it through clean linen and compared the residue with samples I had taken from the main canal and from a well in the temple district.

The residue from the Bit Kisir branch was darker and more granular than the others. I tasted a grain of it on my tongue—a dangerous habit, I know, and not one I would recommend to an apprentice—and detected a bitterness that was not consistent with ordinary silt.

Whether this bitterness was the cause of the fever or its coincidence, I could not determine. I was an asû, not a diviner. My tools were the scalpel, the mortar, the pulse, and the question. But the question itself—the question of water, of shared supply, of common source—felt important in a way that I could not yet fully articulate.

I did what any sensible healer does when faced with something she cannot yet explain: I treated the symptoms, kept my eyes open, and wrote down everything.

The next case was a child. A boy of perhaps seven, son of a leather-worker, brought to

my door by his elder sister because his mother had lost three days' wages and could not leave her loom. The boy had the flushed skin, the quick pulse, and now a new addition: a darkening of the urine that his sister described, with more accuracy than poetry but less than medicine, as "the color of old copper." I asked about water. The family drew from the same branch canal. I asked about bread. They bought from the same stall as most of the others—a squat man named Ba'lu-sharri who was known to cut his dough with ground date pits when barley was scarce, a common practice and not inherently dangerous unless the pits were contaminated with something the grinding could not destroy.

I treated the boy with willow bark, cool compresses, and a tisane of dried pomegranate peel that I hoped would support his kidneys without overtaxing his stomach. His sister sat in my outer room and watched me work with the focused intensity of someone who was deciding whether healers were worth their cost. When I told her I would need to see her brother again the next day, she said she would bring him, and then, after a pause, asked: "Is it in the water?"

"I don't know yet," I said.

"You should tell the water-keepers."

"I should tell many people many things," I replied. "Not all of them listen."

She left with a sealed jar of the tisane and instructions written in my own hand—a practice I had adopted after discovering that verbal instructions, in a city of this size and noise, had a half-life of about one house. The written word persisted. This is why I write on clay and not on breath.

Over the following five days, the cases continued. A dockworker from the quays near the eastern gate. Two women from a weaving household in the south market. A pair of young twins whose father was a gate sentry and who, I learned from his embarrassed report, had been supplementing the family's water supply by collecting rainwater from the barracks roof—rainwater that ran across tiles painted with a lead-based pigment the Assyrians had borrowed from Egyptian traders and whose long-term effects on the gut I had suspected for years.

I made notes. Compared water sources. Cross-referenced diets. Drew rough maps of the affected households on a spare tablet, marking each with a small circle and the patient's age and outcome. The circles clustered along the Bit Kisar branch like drops of spilled oil.

On the seventeenth day of Simanu, I did what I should have done on the tenth. I went to the palace.

Not to the king—he would not see an independent asû without a summons, and attempting to force the matter would have gotten me turned away by the first guard and possibly beaten by the second. No, I went to the man who controlled access to the king's physicians: Kakkullanu, the chief cupbearer, a thin man with a precise beard and a talent for appearing at the precise moment when something needed managing. I had once treated a boil on his left hand—he refused to let anyone else lance it, claiming that only a healer he personally selected could be trusted with his body—and this debt, casual as it seemed, had purchased me three audiences at the palace over the subsequent years.

He received me in a side chamber near the administrative wing, where clay tablets were stacked in neat rows and scribes moved between them with the weary efficiency of bees returning to a hive. He offered me beer. I accepted. He asked what I needed.

"I have a matter of public health," I said. "There is a sickness spreading through the Bit Kisir quarter and into the south market. I believe the source is the canal water."

He set down his cup. "The canal water has been the source of every sickness and no sickness since the city was built. You will need to be more specific."

"It is a fever. High pulse, flushed skin, inflammation of the throat in some cases, darkening of the urine in others. I have recorded eleven cases in tendays. Most draw from the Bit Kisar branch. The water at the intake carries an unusual residue."

He listened without interrupting—a sign, I had learned, not of agreement but of calculation. When I finished, he said: "The water-keepers report no change. The sluice gates were last inspected in Nisan. The temple priests have not raised an omen of plague. You are one healer with eleven cases in a city of a hundred thousand."

"Which means I am one healer who has noticed what a hundred thousand people have not yet been given reason to look for."

He smiled. It was the smile of a man who had survived three kings by never being the bearer of unwelcome news until it was already too late to blame him. "You are wise," he said, "and you are careful. I will place your observations before the relevant scribe. Whether the relevant scribe will place them before the relevant official is, as they say, between the gods and the canal."

I left the palace with nothing but another cup of beer inside me and the unshakable feeling that the canal would continue to flow contaminated until someone with more authority than evidence forced the issue. In my experience, that someone was usually the king himself, and the trigger was usually not a healer's report but a dead general, a failed harvest, or an omen dramatic enough to make ignorance look more dangerous

than action.

I returned to my rooms. The boy with the dark urine was waiting on my reed mat, flushed and drowsy, his sister standing behind him clutching a loaf of barley bread as though it were a prayer offering. I set aside my palace frustrations, washed my hands in ash-water, and got back to work.

The fever wind, it turned out, was only beginning to blow.

SAMPLE COPY

An Assyrian healer's dossier on epidemic, empire, and the remedies of ancient Mesopotamia

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit [MixCache.com](https://mixcache.com) to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY