

What distinguished evening from day was the silence, Uqnitum realized as she stirred the watery soup that was meant for dinner. Only as the sun sank, listless, into twilight did the constant accompaniment of the daytime hours cease—the dull, rhythmic boom of the Assyrian battering ram as it swung again and again against the gate of the city. The noise itself had become a weapon, as relentless as the wind or the killing sun of summer in the desert to the southwest. How did they keep it up hour after hour, day after day? How many men were swinging that ram under the cover of its wood-and-leather “horse”? Day after day, on and on, they swung it, while the defenders hurled burning torches down onto the contraption in vain.

The real question for the people of the little Mitannian city of Kahat was how long they could hold out against their besiegers, and in her heart of hearts, Uqnitum daughter of Tapshihuni knew the answer: *not very long*. She would never say it out loud. Everyone was too close to despair—her family, her neighbors, and maybe even the priests who ruled the city and directed its defense.

But nobody held out against the Assyrians forever. For nearly two months, the siege had dragged on—*longer than you dogs expected*, she thought defiantly—and food was dangerously low. They’d been penned inside before the wheat could be sown. All they’d had for weeks was a little porridge stirred up from the tiny daily allotment. A little dried fruit. The few sheep or goats within the city walls, shared out among the inhabitants. Then the final bits of dried meat from last winter’s slaughter of pigs. Then the dogs. Now they were finishing the stored grain from the temple granaries. She didn’t know what would come next. Uqnitum refused to eat a rat.

So far, she had kept her family fed. Little Wullu, her youngest son, was delicate; he wouldn’t eat just anything. Her daughter, Tatasshe, had the needs of the pregnant. Uqnitum had

stretched their sparse rations with wild dandelions, roots that grew between the stones, and a few straggly lettuces, already bolted and bitter, from the spring garden behind the house.

She'd brought her portable brazier inside so she wouldn't have to cook outdoors in the evening chill. And she could keep better watch over Wullu, asleep, exhausted, in his little alcove. They would simply have to live with the smoke. Crouched over the embers, she stirred a thin soup made with wild greens and a bone she had bartered from the neighbors—she didn't want to know what kind of animal it had come from. An onion would have been worth a king's ransom in Kahat.

The fact that they'd been the honored musicians of the temple of Tesshub and Sharrumma wouldn't do them much good anymore. No one, not even the gods, had time for elaborate services and long hymns and incense and magnificent sacrifices these days, and what would they sacrifice? Everything edible had been consumed by the gods' starving people. Even the priests were manning the walls, organizing the making of torches, and filling jars of their dwindling water, ready to pour on any fire the Assyrians might lob into the city. She hadn't practiced her vocalizing for weeks. Who had energy for singing after a long day of hauling rocks?

With a shuffle of footsteps at the door and the scrape of the wooden bar rising outside on its lever and string, her husband, Ar-tesshub, entered, throwing down his borrowed pickax on the floor with a *thunk*. He was white with dust—face, hair, and clothing all the same color as if he had been hewn from the stone of the walls—a man of stone. Uqnitum rose, creaking, to greet him and exchanged a kiss, her spoon dripping in her hand. Ar-tesshub heaved an enormous sigh of exhaustion and forced a weary smile as he sank down onto the floor mat. He arched his back painfully, leaning against the wall. His dust-stiffened hair stood out around his head like gorse.

Uqnitum remembered how Ar-tesshub's beauty had struck her when he first came to her father's house. She'd been—what, fourteen?—and Ar-tesshub nine years older, no longer a child. He'd already proven himself a better lyre player than her father.

“Good evening, my dear,” Ar-tesshub said. “It smells good in here.”

“Better than it tastes, I daresay. How goes the work on the counterwall?”

Like every able-bodied man in the city, Ar-tesshub had been reinforcing the weakening gate, piling stones against the inside of the panels so that if—when—the Assyrians broke through, they would encounter yet another impassable obstacle. If the inhabitants didn't starve first. The women, Uqnitum and her daughter included, had spent the day carrying stones from the site of destruction to the slowly rising counterwall.