The Alabaster Tablet

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Introduction

Before there were empires with names carved in stone and kings whose boasts ran on for miles, there were cities that declined to announce themselves. Their bricks were measured, their streets rectilinear, their drains deep and discreet, and their script—if it is a script—kept its counsel. The Indus cities have always been a paradox of silence and precision, a civilization that standardized weights yet withheld words. To step into their shadow is to feel a vast order hum beneath the surface and to be told almost

nothing of the people who kept it running. This novel walks those streets with a craftsperson’s gaze, searching for the city’s pulse through the things it chose to make well.

The Alabaster Tablet begins, as so many urban stories do, with a flood. In a low-lying quarter where the water seeps back into the alleys long after the storm has passed, a small tablet rides the current into a heap of silt and reeds. Its edges are smoothed by handling rather than time, its relief still crisp enough to catch a thumbnail, its pale surface veined like bone. A local sculptor—someone who reads stone with his palms as much as with his eyes—finds it where the drainage fails and the city’s under-voice breaks the surface. He cannot read the signs carved upon it in any accepted way, for no one can, but he knows the grammar of craft: how a chisel hesitates, where a carver breathes, what a patron demands, and what a guild refuses to say aloud.

It is through this sculptor’s investigation that the city yields its secrets, not with the certainties of an inscription but with the inferences of a maker. He notices where the drains overreach their design and where they have been quietly improved, brick by patiently placed brick. He watches who is summoned to clear the gutters and who is not, who worships in open courtyards and who disappears into narrow, sanctified rooms where the air is always a little cooler. He sees the marks on kiln-fired bricks that match the marks on ledgers of clay, and the way a ritual procession times itself to the opening of a floodgate. The tablet does not translate itself so much as gather these observations into a pattern, a pressure, the sense of a sentence forming beneath the surface of the city.

The Harappan world has often been introduced to us through the singular marvels of its architecture—the Great Bath, the citadel mounds, the precision of a grid that seems to stretch logic across clay. Yet a city is not its plan; it is the friction against the plan. This book lingers in the frictions: the alley where an artisan quarter meets a merchant’s house and the drainage channel is curiously narrow; the plaza where ritual fire burns hot enough to harden clay offerings but leaves the surrounding bricks unblackened; the dock where cargo is tallied by touch and sound rather than proclamation. In such seams, the sculptor finds the city’s true voice, a chorus of accommodations, innovations, and exclusions.

There are no kings here to anchor a story, no named dynasties to march across the chapters. There is, instead, a council of habits and agreements, a civic order maintained by people who prefer to argue with materials rather than with monuments. Our sculptor moves among them, a man whose status shifts as easily as the slip between clay and water: essential, invisible, indispensable, suspect. He is admitted to workshops and courtyards on the strength of his hands, then turned away when those same hands begin to ask the wrong questions. The tablet he has found—alabaster, portable, anonymous—becomes an irritant in the city’s smooth surface, a thing that attracts other hidden things to itself.

As the waters rise and fall with the season, the novel follows the routes the runoff takes: from rooftop spillways to street-edge gutters, down through settling tanks into the long, dark drains that hum beneath the feet of the unknowing. Water is not merely a hazard here; it is the city’s other language, a mediator between ritual and engineering, a daily rite of cleanliness that masks deeper divides. The sculptor learns to read the water as he reads stone, to see how both are channeled by decisions that announce themselves as common sense while concealing their costs. His search for the tablet’s origin becomes a study in where the city places its thresholds—between clean and unclean, public and sacred, planned and improvised.

This is a work of fiction, but it owes a debt to the material stubbornness of the ancient world: to bricks that hold their shape long after names have drained away, to weights that still balance on modern scales, to drains that continue to dictate the path of water even when their makers are gone. The characters you meet here walk a city assembled from what the ground has agreed to tell us and from what the imagination must supply to make a life within those outlines. Their conflicts are not those of conquest but of maintenance, of who labors unseen to keep the surface livable and who writes the rules for the underground.

If the Indus script refuses us, perhaps the city itself does not. Perhaps its sentences are composed not of signs but of right angles, gradients, courtyards, wells, and the choreography of a thousand small tasks repeated until they become a civic liturgy. This book invites you to read with a maker’s patience and a citizen’s curiosity, to follow a single object as it gathers silt and story, to discover how a planned city negotiates with a river that does not plan. Somewhere in that negotiation, the alabaster tablet will speak—not to tell us what the Indus people called themselves, but to show us how they agreed to live together, and at what cost.

CHAPTER ONE: The Flooded Quarter

The rain had not fallen with the rhythmic grace of a seasonal blessing; it had hammered against the city of Lothal like a series of closed fists. By the third day, the sky was the color of a bruised plum, and the dust that usually defined the streets had been churned into a hungry, copper-colored slurry. In the lower town, where the workshops of the bead-makers and the potters huddled together in a precise but crowded grid, the water had stopped behaving like a guest and started acting like an occupier. It rose past the thresholds of the brick dwellings, swirling around the base of the hearths and soaking into the lower courses of the meticulously laid masonry.

Hariyappan stood at the edge of the embankment, his toes gripping the slippery mud. He was a man who lived by the logic of stone, a sculptor by trade and a scavenger by

necessity. His shoulders were broad from years of swinging a mallet, and his hands were permanently etched with the fine, white dust of steatite and limestone. To Hariyappan, the flood was not merely a disaster; it was a revelation. The water acted as a great leveler, exposing the flaws in the municipal design that the elders usually preferred to ignore. It sought out the cracks in the drainage pipes and pooled in the places where the ground had subsided under the weight of too many years and too many people.

The Lower Quarter was a place of industry, a tangle of narrow alleys that fed into the primary arterial roads. Here, the drains were capped with heavy limestone slabs, a marvel of engineering that usually kept the city smelling of salt and baked clay rather than the refuse of ten thousand souls. But the sheer volume of the monsoon had overwhelmed the system. A main channel had choked on a mass of reeds and discarded kiln-slag, causing the runoff to back up and erupt through the street vents. Hariyappan watched as a group of laborers, their bronze-toned skin slick with sweat and rainwater, pried at a blockage with long wooden poles.

“It’s no use, Hariyappan!” one of the men shouted over the roar of the downpour. “The silt has turned to mortar down there. The whole channel is blind.” The man was Zagu, a bricklayer who knew the subterranean layout of the quarter better than he knew the faces of his own children. He looked exhausted, his loincloth heavy with mud, his eyes red from the sting of the wind. The city’s pride—its ability to move water away from the living—was failing in real-time, and the consequence was a slow, stinking inundation that threatened to dissolve the very foundations of their neighborhood.

Hariyappan nodded, though his attention was caught by something else. A small eddy had formed near the mouth of a secondary drain, a swirling pocket of froth where the current met a protruding piece of timber. Tangles of debris were being spat out of the dark hole—shards of broken pottery, bits of charred wood, and the usual flotsam of a city in distress. But amidst the brown foam, a flash of startling white caught the light. It was a pale, clean luminescence that did not belong to the dull reds and greys of the Harappan streetscape. It bobbed once, vanished beneath a wave of silt, and then reappeared, wedged against a clump of river-reeds.

He didn't think about the depth of the water or the filth it carried. He stepped off the higher ground, his feet sinking instantly into the cold, thick muck of the gutter. The water reached his knees, pulling at him with a surprising, visceral strength. He waded toward the eddy, his hand outstretched. To a sculptor, an unusual stone is a magnetic force. He had spent his life seeking out the specific densities of various earths—the soft giving of soapstone, the stubborn resistance of granite, the translucent promise of carnelian. This white shape had a quality of light that suggested something far more refined than the common rubble of the street.

His fingers closed around the object just as a fresh surge of water threatened to sweep

it down the main channel toward the distant dockyards. It was heavier than he expected, a dense, cool weight that settled into his palm with a sense of permanence. He pulled it from the water and wiped away the clinging silt with his thumb. Underneath the grime lay a rectangular slab of polished alabaster, no larger than a man’s hand but thick enough to feel substantial. It was a material rarely seen in the lower quarters; alabaster was the luxury of the high citadel, the stone of oil jars and ritual lamps that burned in the houses of the overseers.

Hariyappan climbed back onto the dry pavement of a raised porch, his chest heaving. He ignored the stares of the passing laborers and the frantic shouts of the drainage crew. He turned the tablet over in his hands. It had been worked with an exquisite, almost clinical precision. The edges were perfectly squared, and the surface had been buffed until it glowed with an internal, milky light. But it was the carving that stopped his breath. This was not the common script of the marketplace—the hurried tallies of grain or the standardized stamps of the merchant guilds. This was something deeper, a series of glyphs and lines that seemed to describe a geometry he didn't quite recognize.

The carvings were shallow but incredibly sharp, executed by a hand that did not tremble. There were the familiar signs—the stylized fish, the U-shaped vessels—but they were arranged in a tight, circular pattern that defied the usual linear progression of the city’s ledgers. In the center of the circle was a series of intersecting lines that looked suspiciously like a map, or perhaps a diagram of a machine. Hariyappan’s thumb traced the grooves. As a maker, he could feel the intent behind the tool; the carver had used a fine copper burin, likely tipped with a diamond point, and had worked with a rhythmic, pulsing pressure.

“Find something worth drowning for?” Zagu asked, leaning on his pole as he took a moment to breathe. The bricklayer wiped his face and looked down at Hariyappan’s hand. He squinted at the tablet, his brow furrowed. “That’s citadel stone. What’s it doing floating in the gutter of the bead-makers? Usually, the only things that come down from the high mound are broken pots and the arrogance of the priests.”

Hariyappan didn't answer immediately. He was looking at the way the silt had settled into the deeper cuts of the carving. The mud was a dark, fine-grained clay that didn't match the local earth of the Lower Quarter. It was the grey, silty deposit of the deep river-bed, the kind of sediment that only gathered in the lowest reaches of the Great Bath’s drainage system or the primary conduits that fed the dock’s sluice gates. The tablet hadn't just fallen out of a window; it had traveled a long way through the dark, hidden veins of the city. It had been washed through the guts of the urban grid before the flood spat it out at his feet.

The sculptor stood up, tucking the tablet into the waistband of his wrap. The rain was beginning to slacken, turning into a fine, pervasive mist that blurred the outlines of the

terraced houses. To the north, the citadel mound rose like a silent sentinel, its massive walls of baked brick shimmering in the wet air. The elite lived up there, governed by an order that prized anonymity and uniformity above all else. They planned the streets, they regulated the weights, and they ensured that every brick in the city followed the same ratio of four-to-two-to-one. It was a city of perfect proportions, yet here was a piece of stone that felt like a scream in a silent room.

“I’m going back to the workshop,” Hariyappan said, his voice low. He felt a strange prickle of apprehension. In a city where everything was counted and every resource was tracked, an object of such obvious value being lost in the trash was an impossibility. It suggested a lapse in the meticulous record-keeping that kept the Harappan world turning. Or, more likely, it suggested that the tablet was something that was never meant to be recorded at all. He looked at the receding floodwaters, which were now leaving behind a thick carpet of stinking mud.

As he walked through the narrowing alleys, Hariyappan noticed things he usually ignored. He saw where the brickwork of a merchant’s house had been repaired with inferior, sun-dried mud bricks instead of the fire-hardened standard. He saw a drain cover that had been shifted, not by the force of the water, but by a pry-bar, leaving a gap just wide enough for a man to slip through. The city was a machine of commerce and ritual, but the flood had stripped away its skin. Beneath the orderly grid, there was a layer of improvisation, of decay, and of secrets that were literally being washed into the light of day.

He reached his workshop, a small, two-room structure tucked behind a dyer’s vat. The smell of vinegar and indigo hung heavy in the damp air. Inside, his tools were neatly arranged on a stone bench—chisels of bronze and flint, polishing stones of varying grits, and a small bow-drill. He laid the alabaster tablet on the workbench, the white stone contrasting sharply with the dark, oil-stained wood. In the dim light of the afternoon, the carvings seemed to shift. The lines weren't just decorative; they were functional. They looked like the blueprints for the very drains he had just been standing in, but with additions that made no sense to a common builder.

He pulled a small oil lamp toward him and struck a spark. The flame flickered, casting long, dancing shadows across the tablet. Hariyappan realized then that the tablet was not a single story; it was a palimpsest. Someone had carved the original map, and then someone else—perhaps much later—had scratched smaller, frantic signs over the top. These were the hidden scripts mentioned in the old rumors of the guilds, the marks used by the night-crews and the engineers who maintained the city’s hidden underside. It was a language of necessity, carved in a stone of luxury.

He sat for a long time, listening to the drip of water from the eaves. The flood had begun to retreat, but the city it left behind was not the one Hariyappan had woken up in. The water had moved things. It had shifted the silt, revealed the rot, and delivered

a piece of the citadel into the hands of a man who knew how to make stone speak. He knew that by keeping the tablet, he was stepping out of the orderly line the city demanded of its citizens. But a sculptor's curiosity is a dangerous thing; it is a desire to see what lies beneath the surface, to find the grain of the truth even if it requires breaking the mold.

Outside, the first torches of the evening watch were being lit along the main thoroughfare. The bells of the Great Bath rang out, signaling the evening purification rites. The city was trying to reassert its dignity, to wash away the mud and pretend the flood had never happened. But Hariyappan, looking down at the glowing alabaster, knew that the water had already done its work. The silence of the Indus was being interrupted, and the first word of that interruption was currently resting on his workbench, cold, white, and heavy with the weight of things unsaid.
