

Sample chapter from 'Trade winds to Meluhha'

Preceding story:

Stable boy Samasin rushes to help a Meluhhan sprawled with a slashed neck in a deserted tavern in Babili (Babylon). The dying stranger presses a fish-hook in his hand and gasps, 'Give to Hiwa Haqra.'

A man named Biggie appears, steals the Meluhhan's gold necklace, and accuses Sam of the murder. The Council of Elders sentences him to a gory execution. Two close astronomical events (mentioned in Mesopotamian tablets) save him. In order to clear his name from manslaughter, Sam must escape Biggie's villains and find Hiwa Haqra.

He flees Babili and swims to a ship setting sail for Meluhha (Indus Valley Civilization). Unknowingly, he has embarked on pursuit of an evil trade wrecking the lives of many a young Mesopotamian.

Map of Samasin's Voyage (2138-37 BC)



Chapter 7

Girl from Sutantoru

Swells higher than a man's height rocked Captain Paravar's ship. His sailors sniggered as Sam sat at the base of the mast, gripping it like a child hugging its mother. Although he was used to the howling desert winds, he had never heard such ominous

rumbling every time the lightning stabbed the darkness. The waves slapped the vessel whose woodwork screeched eerily, making Sam wish he could shut his ears just like his eyes.

Had fate saved him from execution only to drown him at sea?

Shouts accompanied by a fluttering sound told Sam that several sailors were busy taking down the sail. From the Captain's bellows, Sam guessed that he was fighting hard along with his sailors to drain out the deluge of water from the vessel.

Perhaps the situation was not as grim as he feared. Shouldn't he too perform his duty? "The foal would have been scared to death by now," was his first thought.

He got up like a child learning to walk, and tottered to the animal. One look at it threw the storm out of his mind. It lay sprawled on the deck, soaked to the skin and staring at the sky.

Sam's arms slipped around the foal's neck, and he broke down.

He was not aware when the storm showed signs of abetting, and the sailors started gathering around him. A hand gripped his shoulder. He knew it was the Captain, but was unable to look up and meet his eye.

Then he heard the Captain's soothing voice. "We could save it from man, but not from nature. Perhaps it was its destiny to be buried at sea."

As the Captain's footsteps retreated, Sam thought that his palm sensed a throb. He sat up and perceived a weak pulse. Spinning around, he shouted. A couple of sailors ran to bring warm water and dry cloth as he bade. Another hurried to fetch an earthen pot containing smouldering coal to start a fire.

Cajoling the foal, Sam cleaned and rubbed its limbs. Little by little he poured warm broth into its mouth. He saw its hide shiver, and then its chest heave. Then it neighed as if under unbearable pain. He patted and cheered it. "Captain," he yelled, "your little one has got over the worst."

Sam heard the Captain hollering 'thanks', and then asking his deputy to set free one of the two rock doves in the cage. They watched the bird taking off towards the stern and fluttering away. "Turn her around," ordered the Captain.

As the crew started the exercise, Sam went to the head sailor and said, "Why did you release the pigeon? Wasn't it meant for the Captain's dinner?"



"No," said the head sailor. "Those birds are our best friends. When we lose our way at sea, we release a dove. It always flies away in the direction of land."

Sam saw the Captain studying the mast which whipped at the top. There was concern on his face. Summoning two sailors, he instructed them. They tied a piece of rope around their waists and scaled the mast. Suspended high above the deck, they commenced a long struggle to fix a supporting strut to the mast.

The foal had slipped into a nap and Sam watched the Captain with interest as he gave periodic instructions with one eye on the sky. At one point he said, "There, the *Vata-miin* is now visible. Get me the *kamal*."

Following his gaze, Sam recognised the Pole Star Thuban shining in the northern sky. The head sailor came, carrying a wooden card with a hole in its centre through which passed a string. The Captain held the string between his teeth and moved the card to and fro at the Thuban. Then he marked a position on the string with a knot.

He walked towards his cabin, measuring the length from the knot to the card with his fingers. The head sailor ran ahead of him, lighted a couple of lamps and flung open an ebony chest. Selecting a tome of barks from several stored inside, the Captain studied it for quite some time. "We're somewhere near Sutantoru¹-on-Sea," he announced at last, and strode to the rudder to take charge.

Around midnight, an excited cry woke up everybody. The Captain strained to see in the direction pointed by the sailor. "Yes," he agreed, "we were closer to the port than I reckoned."

Sam discerned a weak flicker of light far away. "That's one of your regular ports of call, isn't it?" he asked.

"No, it's one port that prefers foreign ships to our own."

"Any ship, whether local or foreign, pays the port for the facilities, doesn't it?"

"Sutantoru has its reasons," said the Captain. "One, the monsoons don't affect its route to Suméru² as they do in Alatinam³ and Port Lothal⁴. This port is accessible to Sumérian ships all the year round."

Sam waited for him to continue, but there was silence. He turned to see the Captain's face in the dark. "What is another?"

"Sutantoru is notorious for some sort of slavery, which would never be permitted at other ports."

"Slavery? With Sumér?"

With a sigh, the Captain started walking towards his cabin. Sam considered it best to resolve an issue that was on his mind. Catching up, he said: "The foal is too weak to continue the voyage, Captain. Shall we leave it in Sutantoru?"

"I can't abandon it, Samorist."

Sam thought that since he did not know where Hiwa Haqra lived, he might as well start his search from Sutantoru-on-Sea rather than from Port Lothal. "I'll go along with the baby if its buyer provides me shelter and food," he said.

The Captain shook his head. "Who will buy a sick animal?"

"It's not just any animal," said Sam, and he immediately realized that he had given away annoyance in his voice. He quickly added, "As I told you, Captain, it's going to grow up into a lovely mare."

"To the people who have never seen a horse, Samorist, it's no more than an exotic breed of donkey."

Sam considered it practical to postpone his search for Hiwa Haqra till the foal had grown up. A mare could be an invaluable help in Meluhha⁵, the land of long distances.

"Suppose nobody takes it away, Captain," he said quietly. "I'll stay back in Sutantoru to look after it."

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As the ox-cart carrying the sick foal rattled along a narrow muddy track, Sam jumped down to look closely at some wooden poles erected by the sides, and then ran to catch up.

"Those poles indicate the place where the dead are buried," the Captain informed.

After a long ride, they passed through a fortification wall built with semi-dressed stones. As they entered the village, Sam heard vendors enticing customers, women haggling, and children crying. Thrilled, he watched farmers, herdsman, hunters and fishermen socializing with full vocal gusto.



"We're lucky," the Captain said. "It's the weekly barter day when people living along the shore and in the wilds gather in Sutantoru-on-Sea."

They found some space near a banyan tree. Several women, wearing their hair in long plaits, were lighting earthen lamps at the foot of its imposing trunk. From the devoutness on their faces, Sam assumed that they were worshipping the banyan tree.

A whiff of acute fragrance drew Sam's attention to one of them who was approaching them. Her oiled hair was adorned with a trumpet-lily held in place with long pins made from bone. She was escorted by a young lady aged about twenty, whose eyes reminded Sam of a doe in King Shulgi's palace. A loose robe of thick cotton made the girl appear like one of those water jars on their ship. He wondered whether she too bore tattoos on her dark skin like her elder companion.



By then the two women had reached them. "Now the mariners have stooped to selling animals," said the elder woman, looking askance. Sam could not miss that she pursed her lips in a peculiar way which looked like (–).

"She isn't interested in our foal," the Captain mumbled, producing an ivory comb from his *vesti*⁶ and running it on his bare scalp. "I tell you, boy, that female is 'shopping' for small talk with a handsome man."

As the woman bent and patted the foal, Sam studied her young companion. She gave an impression of being plump, and yet her face was not so. It radiated an unmistakable glow. She too stooped to fondle the baby, and her long jet black hair fell over her shoulder upon the animal. Tickled by its touch, the foal shook its head. She broke into a peal of laughter, making Sam gape wider.

The girl moved her hand over the skin of the foal. Then she opened its mouth and peeped at the teeth. She watched its breathing and prodded nearby droppings with a stick. Sam could not hold himself. "You seem to understand horses well," he said.

She eyed him as if he were one of those burial poles by the wayside. His sight fell on her necklace and got locked on it. It was just like the one he had seen inside the dead Meluhhan's turban before Biggie performed the vanishing trick.

Sam's head trembled as he became aware that the woman was talking to him. He caught the words "She already owns a colt," and they stiffened his relaxed posture.

"Colt? Here in Sutantoru?" he asked, glancing at the Captain. "I was told there weren't any horses in Meluhha."

"You were told the truth. Recently one has come to Meluhha, although not in Sutantoru." The woman put her hand around the girl's waist. "Her father brought it from Gandhara⁷ –"

"Is it for sale?" the girl cut in, smiling at the Captain. Just those four words made Sam imagine that her voice might have vibrated many a young man's heartstrings.

"Yes, lady," the Captain answered, steadily looking at the girl's necklace.

The woman asked, "What does it cost?"

"Nothing, if you promise not to make a meal of it."

The woman smiled. "I've come to buy a horse, not horse-meat (–)"

"Then it's all yours," said the Captain indicating the foal with both his hands.

The girl clapped hers. Sam heard the woman telling her, "The foal would give a pleasant surprise to your father when you return home."

The girl giggled. Sam started untying the foal, when he heard her speaking to Captain Paravar. "Do you also call on ports farther than Dilmun⁸?"

"Yes, I do," said the Captain. "My young companion boarded it at Urim⁹."

Sam turned to face them with a broad smile, only to find that she had not thrown even a fleeting glance in his direction. Turning serious, he led the foal to the woman and handed her the rope.

"Is there a man named Kayl on board?" the girl asked.

"Owlish? Possessing a tortoise head under the shell of a turban?" said the Captain as his hand rose to his chin. "Habitually whistling tunes?"

"That's him," she cried, clasping both her hands together. "Is he here?"

"No, he isn't on board, but he travelled with me from Alatinam to Urim on this voyage."

The woman addressed the girl. "Kayl is your father's right-hand man, I suppose – the one who delivered your message to me?"

"Yes, Auntie."

With a subtle wave of his hand, the Captain beckoned Sam. "This young man Samo – I mean Samasin – possesses a deep understanding of horses," he told the woman. "He would serve you well."

"Sure," she said. Sam flashed a smile at her in general and at the girl in particular. The girl tapped her aunt's elbow, leaned and whispered in her ear. "On second thought," added the woman, "we could do without any help."

"As you wish," the Captain shrugged his shoulders, and turned to the girl. "By the way, young lady, I've rarely seen as beautiful a piece of jewellery as your necklace."



Sam was glad that the Captain had noticed the necklace too. He looked forward to knowing more about it.

"Superb, isn't it?" she cooed. "My father gifted it on my birthday."

"I would like to buy one for my wife," said the Captain. "From where did he get it?"

"From Gandhara, I guess. Lately he travels there often."

The Captain sighed, "The old girl will have to make do with local jewellery then."

Sam wished that the Captain had sought details about her father instead. He walked to the foal and gave it a big hug. As it weakly followed the women, Sam's eyes shone with tears. Then they shifted to the taller of the two departing forms. More the naïve Sumérian observed the girl, faster did his heart pound.

His arm received a soft punch. "Samorist," he heard the Captain's voice. "Let's rush to the docks. I want to leave before dusk."

Sam boarded the cart, pondering how to elicit more information from the Captain without raising interest in his tender feelings. "Which products do you carry from Meluhha to my country, Captain?" he asked.

"Cotton textiles, ivory products and gold jewellery with carnelian beads," the Captain said, stretching out his legs. "But from the next season, I'd be mostly carrying timber."

"Wouldn't timber be difficult to handle in a storm?"

"Storms only hamper you after the monsoons arrive," said the Captain. He picked up a crane-necked flask, drank from it and passed it to Sam. "This time we got caught because we were late leaving Sumér. My client in Lagaš refused to sign his order in the temple of Šamaš when the Sun God disappeared from the sky."

"It happened in Lagaš too?" Sam's hand holding the flask remained suspended half-way to his lips. Had the Captain's ship not been delayed by the Sun God, he couldn't have escaped the killers.

"Yes," said the Captain. "I had to wait for a week till the following Day of Šamaš to get my big timber contract."

Sam realized that he was not getting anywhere, so he asked straightaway, "Where is Gandhara, Captain?"

"It's high up in the mountains," said the Captain with a knowing glint in his eye, "where lapis lazuli is mined."

"The Sumérian connection."

"Yes, your country is a big market for lapis beads. The man about whom the girl enquired –"

"Your passenger named Kayl?" Sam asked, brightening up.

"Yes, he was carrying lapis to Babili¹¹."

"Babili?" Sam's head reeled as his hand slipped inside his gown to the piece of cloth holding the fish-hook. What he had not realized earlier was that the Captain's description of Kayl perfectly matched the murdered Meluhhan's appearance. The stunning similarity between the necklace found in the dead man's turban and that worn by the girl also supported the assumption that he was none else than Kayl.

Was Hiwa Haqra – the man Kayl had mentioned – the father of the damsel who had stolen his heart?

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Glossary

1. Sutantoru - Fictional name for Sutkagen Dor site near Pakistan's border with Iran
2. Sumér - Older name for Mesopotamia

3. Alatinam - Fictional name for Indus Valley site of Allahdino, 40 Km. east of Karachi in Pakistan. Now land-locked, Allahdino was a port during the Bronze Age.
4. Lothal - Site 85 Km. south-west of Ahmedabad in western India. Now land-locked, Lothal is the oldest port in the world excavated by archaeologists.
5. Meluhha - Indus Valley Civilization as mentioned in Mesopotamian tablets
6. Vesti - Piece of unstitched cloth worn by men (Tamil language)
7. Gandhara - Afghanistan as it is mentioned in ancient Hindu and Buddhist scriptures
8. Dilmun - Present day Bahrain as mentioned in tablets discovered on Mesopotamian sites
9. Urim - Ur, now Tell al-Muqqayar site which is 240 Km. from the Persian Gulf. Abraham's native place in the Holy Bible, it was a sea port according to Mesopotamian tablets.
10. Lagaš - Lagash, now Tell al-Hiba site, 22 Km. east of Ash Shatrah in Iraq
11. Babili - Babylon, now Al Hillah city in Iraq

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