

Too Much to Carry

Yusuf knelt on his bundle and pulled the corners together. They almost met. He shifted one knee, reached for the cord and felt something hard press through the cloth.

His drawing board.

He had put it beneath his spare tunic, where he thought it would take up less room. Now one corner stuck out beside his shoe.

“Are you taking the floor with you?” Layla asked.

She stood in the doorway with their breakfast wrapped in a cloth. Behind her, the workshop was already busy. A board scraped across the bench, and Baba called for someone to bring the smaller packet of samples.



“It fitted last night.”

“You hadn't put the blanket in.”

Yusuf looked down. He had forgotten the blanket altogether last night. This morning, after prayer, the floor had been cold enough to persuade him.

His mother set the food aside and crouched beside him. They opened the bundle. Out came the tunic, a spare pair of sandals, the blanket and a packet of paper offcuts. Last came the large board.



Layla lifted it. "Ask your father for one of the little ones."

"I can't draw much on those."

"You can turn the paper."

He considered this. He wanted to draw Damascus, and camels, and whatever the desert looked like when there were no buildings in the way. It would be awkward if everything had to fit between his knees.

He went to the workshop anyway.

Two wrapped bales waited by the door. Baba had spent weeks preparing the paper inside them for a merchant in Damascus. The samples were for showing other buyers. Yusuf had helped polish some of those sheets and knew which packet held the best ones.

Baba was speaking to the oldest apprentice, who held a list with both hands.



“Hasan knows you'll bring his order. If he wants anything different, write it down.”

“I know.”

“And the drying room—”

“I've checked the roof.”

Layla came in carrying Yusuf's blanket. “Ali, he'll still be standing here when the camels leave.”

Baba looked round the room once more. Then he gave the apprentice the keys.

Yusuf found a smaller board beneath the bench. Baba glanced at it and nodded, and Yusuf returned to pack. This time the corners met. He tied them before anything else could be added.



Outside, Safiyya was waiting with a paper parcel beneath her arm.

"Father sent these," she said, handing the parcel to Baba. "The sheets you lent him."

"You could have kept them till we got back."

"He said you'd say that."

While the adults spoke, she inspected Yusuf's bundle.

"How many drawings will you bring home?"

"I don't know yet."

"Draw a camel. With someone beside it, so I can see how big it is."

"You could come and draw them yourself."

She looked towards her father's shop. "Someone has to finish stitching those books."



Yusuf had seen the stack. It would take her days.

"I'll draw you beside it," he said.

Two hired porters lifted the bales. Layla checked that their food was with the travelling bags, then turned to the apprentice at the door.

"The neighbour has the other house key. She'll come tomorrow."

She touched the doorpost as she passed it, feeling for a splinter that had caught her sleeve. Then she was walking beside Baba, discussing where to find the carriers. Yusuf hurried after them. At the turn he looked back and raised his hand to Safiyya. She waved the empty parcel cloth.

The streets grew busier towards the gate. A basket knocked Yusuf's elbow; he shifted his bundle to the other arm. Usually he knew what came after a walk through Baghdad: a delivery, some bread, home. Today the porters kept going.



Beyond the walls, camels stood or knelt among heaps of baggage. A grey mare shook her mane beside a string of laden camels. Men called to one another across the gathering, and a woman was arguing that her cooking pot should remain where she could reach it. Yusuf stopped to watch a camel chew. Its lower jaw moved sideways beneath a fringe of pale hair.

"Here, Ali!"

A broad-shouldered man beckoned Baba towards two waiting animals. A boy about Yusuf's age stood beside him, holding a folded saddle cloth against his chest. His dark hair escaped from the cloth wrapped loosely round his head.

"Harith," Baba said. "My wife, Layla. And Yusuf."



They exchanged greetings. Harith directed the porters to set down the paper, then bent to feel beneath a saddle pad.

The boy put down his cloth. "I'm Hamza. Is all that yours?"

"The paper is."

"I meant that." He pointed at Yusuf's bundle.

Yusuf lowered it. His arm had begun to ache.

Hamza crouched to move a trailing cord out of the dust. "Put it with your other bags. Father's loading those next."

"I can carry it."

"All the way to Kufa?"

Yusuf put it down.



Harith and another handler lifted the paper bales onto opposite sides of a camel. Baba watched the bindings, then reached towards the nearer bale.

“Will that rub through the wrapping?”

Harith slid a folded cloth beneath the rope. “Feel there.”

Baba did. He asked another question, and the two men bent over the fastening together. Yusuf edged closer until Layla caught his sleeve.

“Give them room.”

She was studying the baggage animal. “Our water is on that side. Keep the drawing paper in the dry bundle.”

Hamza pointed out a place above the bedding, and she passed Yusuf's bundle to the handler.



“Are you going to Mecca?” Hamza asked him.

“Damascus.”

Layla leaned round the baggage to hear them.

“Mother wants to see Damascus too,” Yusuf added.

“Your father has been telling me about it for years.”

Baba straightened. “I’ve never been there.”

“You’ve told me what other people say. Now I’d like to look.”



The call to move passed through the gathering. Hamza retrieved his cloth and took it to his father. Camels rose in stages, pitching their loads forwards and back before settling onto all four feet. Yusuf stepped beside his mother as the first string began to walk.

He had expected everyone to leave at once. Instead they waited while a donkey was led out of the way and a traveller went back for a bag. Beyond them, the road ran between low walls and patches of cultivated ground.

At last their own animals moved. Baba walked beside the paper, Layla adjusted the wrap across her shoulders, and Hamza fell into step with Yusuf.



“Where do we sleep tonight?” Yusuf asked.

“At a khan, if we get there in time.”

“Have you been to it?”

“No.”

Yusuf looked at him. Hamza shrugged and followed his father along the road.

For a few steps Yusuf could still hear people calling at the gate. Then a camel came between him and the walls, and he had to walk faster to keep beside his mother.

