

CHAPTER 1

The Papermaker's Son

Yusuf wanted to make one good sheet of paper before Baba took him to the market.

A pigeon at the workshop window was trying to carry a long twig through the narrow opening. Yusuf had stopped to watch it.

"Why doesn't it turn the twig sideways?" Yusuf asked.

"Perhaps it will in a moment," Baba said. "Come and try your sheet, and we'll see how it's getting on when we finish."



Yusuf joined him at the vat, a deep tub filled with water and pale, soft pulp. The pulp had begun as old linen cloth. After cleaning, soaking and beating, the cloth had broken down into tiny fibres—the fine strands from which it had been made. Baba would use these fibres to make new sheets of paper.

Across the workshop, Baba's apprentices, the young men learning his trade, were working on yesterday's paper. The room smelled of damp cloth. Through the open door came the warm smell of bread from a neighbouring oven, which made Yusuf hope that making one good sheet would not take all morning.



Baba handed him the mould: a wooden frame with a fine screen stretched across it. Yusuf knew what was supposed to happen. He would dip it into the vat, lift a thin layer of pulp and let the water drain away. The fibres would remain on the screen in the shape of a sheet.

Yusuf was still learning how to spread the pulp evenly across the screen. He dipped the frame, lifted it and shook it. A thick ridge gathered at one side.

"Why does it always go there?" Yusuf asked. "I'm trying to spread it out."

"You're moving it farther than you need to," Baba said. "Watch the fibres while I do it. The movement is quite small."

He showed Yusuf, then let him try again. This time Yusuf scarcely moved his hands at all. Water streamed back into the vat, leaving a pale layer behind.

"Like that?" Yusuf asked.

"Much better. Keep it level now," Baba said.

Yusuf looked closely. Near one corner the layer was so thin that he could see the screen beneath it.

"Would someone's pen go through that part?" Yusuf asked.

"It might tear. We need the whole sheet to be strong enough to use," Baba replied.

"Even if the rest is good?"

"Imagine you'd nearly finished a letter, and the paper tore under your last line. You wouldn't be very pleased with the papermaker," Baba said.

Yusuf imagined having to write a whole letter twice. He lowered the frame into the water again.

"I'll have another go," Yusuf said.

Baba stayed beside him. On the next attempt, the layer was more even. They transferred the fragile sheet to a damp cloth, where it would join others ready for pressing. There was still water to squeeze out, drying to do and the surface to finish before anyone could write on it, but Yusuf had done his part without spoiling the corner.

He was pleased enough to look towards the window again. The pigeon had finally brought its twig inside.

"We both managed it," Yusuf said.

From cloth to paper

1 Cloth



Old linen is cleaned and soaked.

2 Fibres



The softened cloth is beaten into fibres.

3 Pulp



Fibres are mixed with water in the vat.

A sheet ready to use

4 A wet sheet



The mould lifts a thin layer. Water drains away.

5 Pressing



Cloths support the wet sheets while water is pressed out.

6 Drying and finishing



Sheets dry, then their surfaces are finished for writing.

By midmorning, Baba was ready to pack the deliveries. Their first customer was Hasan, a bookseller who had known Yusuf's family for years. He sold books, arranged for new copies to be written and repaired volumes whose pages or covers had come loose. Yusuf loved exploring the shelves in Hasan's shop and visiting his friend Safiyya, who was Hasan's daughter.

"Hasan is waiting for this bundle," Baba said. "Would you like to carry it?"

"Yes, please. Is any of it paper I helped with?" Yusuf asked.

"Some of these sheets, yes. I checked them yesterday," Baba replied.

Yusuf looked at the neat stack with new interest. Once Hasan had sold it, somebody might write a story on it. Perhaps the sheets would be sewn into a book and carried to a city Yusuf had never seen.

"Do you think he'll know which ones are mine?" Yusuf asked.

"Only if you tell him," Baba said. "The sheets you helped with were just as smooth and strong as the others."

There were two other deliveries: paper for a scribe by the river, whose work was writing for other people, and a smaller packet for a merchant who bought and sold goods. Baba packed those in his shoulder bag. Yusuf's bundle went between two clean boards to protect its edges, with a cord tied round it.

Then Baba brought out the accounts tablet.

It was a small wooden board with a shallow layer of wax inside a raised rim. Instead of using ink, Baba scratched his notes into the wax with a pointed tool called a stylus. When a note was no longer needed, he could smooth the wax and use the space again.

Yusuf had often carried the tablet. Today, Baba held out the stylus as well.

"I'd like you to keep the accounts on our round. That means writing down what each customer pays us, and any new paper they ask us to bring," Baba said.

Yusuf had practised sums before, but this would be the first time he used them to keep track of the workshop's money.

"All three customers?" Yusuf asked.

"All three. I'll check with you as we go," Baba replied.

He showed Yusuf the two parts of the tablet. Across the top he wrote *Payments*. Lower down, beneath a dividing line, he wrote *New orders*.

"The payments tell us what we've received," Baba explained. "The orders tell us what we still have to make. They must stay separate, or we might mistake a promise of work for money already in the bag."

"What do I put under payments?" Yusuf asked.

"The customer's name, then the number of coins. Today we've agreed to take the same small coins from all three customers. Each coin is worth the same, so we can count them together," Baba replied.

Baba made four short strokes in a clear corner of the wax.

"Suppose I give you four coins. You could make one mark for each coin, like these. Four coins, four marks. They're called tally marks," Baba said.

Yusuf counted them with the point held just above the wax.

"And if there are lots?" Yusuf asked.

"Leave a little space after every five. That makes them easier to count again. You won't have to start at one each time," Baba replied.

"Could I just write the number?" Yusuf asked.

"You could. Today, let's use the marks so you can check each one against a coin. When we get home, you can help me put the amounts into our paper record," Baba replied.

Yusuf looked at the four practice marks. "What if I write down the wrong amount?"

"Then we count again and correct it. That's why we check before we leave the shop. You don't have to remember everything in your head," Baba said.

That was a relief. Yusuf had been imagining returning with a tablet full of mistakes and no way of knowing which coin belonged where.

He smoothed away the practice marks, leaving the headings ready. He understood why Baba kept the little board close on every round. By evening, it would be easy to muddle the payments and orders from three different customers. Yusuf would have to listen carefully and record each one before they left the shop.

At the door, Amma came to see them off. She had tucked a small parcel of bread into Baba's bag.

"For when you've finished your deliveries," Amma told Yusuf.



"We might be hungry before then," Yusuf said.

"Then you'll have something to look forward to." She looked at the tablet.

"You're keeping the accounts?"

"Baba's going to check them," Yusuf replied.

"Good. Bring me back some news as well. I'd like to hear what you see," Amma said.

Outside, their familiar lane was filling with people. Yusuf knew the baker's doorway and the grapevine over the neighbour's wall. He knew where rain left a hollow in the ground, and where a cat usually slept in the sun. Farther on, the lanes opened towards the markets.

He was looking forward to seeing Safiyya and watching the boats at the river after their deliveries.

A mule carrying two wide baskets had stopped across the road ahead. Yusuf and Baba had to wait until it moved before they could pass.

