CHAPTER 1

A City to Wake Up In

A donkey brayed in the courtyard below Yusuf's room.

He woke expecting to see open sky above him. Instead, morning light entered through a wooden shutter, and Amma was folding a blanket beside the wall.

They were in Damascus. He remembered arriving the day before, the crowded entrance and the pleasure of sitting down somewhere he would not have to leave before dawn.

“Is the donkey ours?” Yusuf asked.

“It belongs to another traveller. I think it has decided to stay where it is,” Amma replied.

From below came a man's patient request to move. The donkey answered with another bray.

Yusuf laughed and sat up.

After washing and prayer, he followed Amma downstairs. Hamza was sitting near the stairs with bread in his hand.

“You missed the onions,” Hamza said.

“What happened to them?” Yusuf asked.

“The donkey backed into a basket. Its owner was trying so hard to make it go forward that he forgot it might go the other way,” Hamza said.

Across the yard, a man was collecting the last onions from beneath a bench. Yusuf fetched one that had rolled near the stairs and returned it.

The man thanked him. “At least they didn't go into the water jar.”

Hamza offered Yusuf a piece of bread. They ate while watching the donkey finally consent to move towards the entrance.

Baba and Harith stood beside the paper bales. Harith had arranged two porters to carry them through the city streets. A porter was someone paid to carry goods, often on routes where a large animal or cart would be awkward.

“Will the camels come too?” Yusuf asked.

“Not for this short delivery,” Harith replied. “The porters know how to get the bales through the lanes. I'll walk with you to the customer's courtyard.”

Amma spoke to the woman who managed the lodging about drinking water and their evening meal. Yusuf liked knowing they would return there. It gave the day's exploring somewhere to finish.

He brought his drawing board and offcuts.

“May I take these?” Yusuf asked.

“Yes,” Amma said. “Keep them with you, and remember that we have a delivery to make before you settle down to draw.”

Outside, the street was cool between high walls. Sunlight touched pale roofs above them. A shopkeeper rolled back an awning, and the light caught a row of bowls arranged beneath it.

Yusuf tried to look upwards and ahead at the same time. After nearly stepping into a basket, he chose to look ahead until there was room to stop.

“I want to remember which way we came,” Yusuf told Hamza.

“I want to find breakfast again,” Hamza said.

“We've had breakfast,” Yusuf said.

“There may be more.”

They followed the porters past a seller laying out lengths of cloth. Amma noticed a blue piece with a border of small squares.

She asked to see the edge while the others waited for a laden donkey to pass.

“Would it make a strong bag?” Amma asked the seller.

“Depending on what you put in it,” the cloth seller replied.

“Mostly the things I discover I need while I'm away from home,” Amma said.

The woman smiled. “Then you may want quite a large one.”

Amma explained that she liked the border but did not want to cut away the best part. The seller showed her how it repeated.

Yusuf had not noticed the difference between the edge and the middle until they pointed it out. He liked hearing Amma discuss something she understood. Baba listened too, though the porters were ready to continue before she had finished looking.

“May I come back another day?” Amma asked.

“Of course. The cloth may still be here,” the cloth seller said.

“Then I have a good reason to remember this street,” Amma said.

She thanked the woman and caught up with them.

Their customer, Rashid, traded goods through a courtyard and storerooms a little farther on. He had ordered the two bales from Baba's Baghdad workshop, and this morning he was expecting their arrival.

He greeted them near a low table, wearing a moss-green robe and a loose cream headcloth.

“Ali, you've reached us at last. How was the journey?” Rashid asked.

Baba introduced Amma and the boys before answering. Rashid listened while a worker cleared space for the paper.

“I'm glad you've all arrived safely,” Rashid said. “Let's see what you brought.”

The porters lowered the bales onto a clean, dry mat. Baba loosened the wrapping and asked Yusuf to fold the outer cloth back without letting its dusty side touch the sheets.

Yusuf did it carefully. He had helped smooth some of this paper at home, and he wanted Rashid to like it.

The pale stacks looked different now they were in someone else's courtyard. At the workshop, they had been part of familiar work. Here people were coming to inspect them as goods they had ordered from his family.

Rashid lifted sheets from more than one part of the bale, feeling their surfaces and looking at their edges.

“Why doesn't he just look at the top?” Hamza whispered.

Yusuf answered quietly. “He needs to know what the rest is like as well.”

Baba heard and nodded.

“An order isn't one good sheet. Rashid needs the agreed amount and quality throughout,” Baba said.

They checked the smaller bundles inside the bales against their written agreement. Rashid's worker counted with Baba. When the men reached the end of one stack, they kept it separate from those still waiting, so nobody would count it twice.

Yusuf knew how easy it was to lose his place when somebody asked him a question. He watched the worker pause his conversation until he had finished the bundle.

“Could I help?” Yusuf asked.

“Keep these checked bundles on this side of the cloth,” Baba said. “Then we'll all know which are finished.”

Yusuf moved only what Baba had checked, pleased to have a part in the work.

Rashid asked about a sheet with a slightly uneven edge. Baba showed him that the writing area was sound and compared it with the grade they had agreed.

“Making them by hand leaves small differences,” Baba explained to the boys. “What matters is whether the paper does the work it was sold for.”

When the checks were complete, Rashid brought the payment. Baba counted it before agreeing that the order had been settled. Rashid recorded the delivery, and the paper was carried into his store.

Yusuf watched the final bundle go.

“Does it belong to him now?” Yusuf asked.

“Yes,” Baba said. “We've delivered what we agreed, he's accepted it and paid us. We won't take those sheets away again.”

Their empty reusable wrapping came back to Baba. Yusuf felt pleased, then unexpectedly sorry. The bales had been beside them for so long that it seemed strange to leave without them.

“I thought somebody might ask which sheets I helped make,” Yusuf admitted.

Baba looked at him kindly.

“They were mixed into the order with the others. Rashid wanted good paper, and some of your work helped us supply it,” Baba said.

“I couldn't recognise mine,” Yusuf said.

“I couldn't either, once they were finished and sorted,” Baba replied.

That pleased Yusuf more than he expected.

Rashid returned from the storeroom.

“You said you were bringing separate samples, Ali. The governor's buyer is considering paper for his household's writing. I could introduce you this afternoon,” Rashid said.

The governor was the official in charge of the region. Yusuf had heard adults discuss governors before, but he had never imagined one might use paper from their workshop.

“For the governor himself?” Yusuf asked.

“For the people who write his letters and keep his records,” Rashid explained. “There is a great deal of work to do.”

Baba glanced at Amma, then at the bag containing his sample packet.

“I'd welcome an introduction. Any new order would have to be made and sent from Baghdad. The two bales we've brought are yours,” Baba said.

“Of course. Bring your samples after the midday prayer. We'll walk over together,” Rashid replied.

Outside, Yusuf looked at Baba's bag as though it had become more important.

“Do you think he'll want them?” Yusuf asked.

“He may. First we need to find out what he wants and whether we can supply it,” Baba replied.

Amma smiled at Yusuf's expression.

“We can be pleased about the possibility before we know the answer,” Amma said.

He was pleased. Very pleased.

Hamza looked at the unused board beneath his arm.

“You've carried that through half the morning without drawing anything,” Hamza said.

“I know. I keep finding another thing to look at,” Yusuf replied.

Yusuf had intended to draw the market. Now he was wondering what happened in the courtyard where a governor's buyer worked.

They returned to their lodging to eat, rest and prepare the samples. There was still time before the afternoon visit, but Yusuf found himself asking how soon they would leave.