CHAPTER 1

Too Much to Carry

Yusuf had packed enough drawing paper for a city, three camels and a horse. He had not left room for his blanket.

He sat on the floor beside his travelling bundle and considered whether he could wear the blanket all the way to Damascus.

Amma came in with their breakfast wrapped in a cloth.

“That looks uncomfortable already,” Amma said. “And we haven't left the house.”

“I thought I could carry it over my shoulders,” Yusuf said.

“You can wear it when you're cold,” Amma replied. “What will you do with it when you want to take it off?”

Yusuf looked at the bundle. A corner of his large drawing board stuck out beside his spare sandals.

“Perhaps Baba has room,” Yusuf suggested.

“Baba thinks I have room.” Amma sat beside him. “Let's see what you actually need. I had to unpack my bag twice yesterday.”

That made Yusuf feel better. He had imagined the grown-ups putting everything in once and finding that it fitted.

They opened the cloth. There were his spare tunic, sandals, paper offcuts, drawing board and two pieces of charcoal wrapped to keep their dust off his clothes.

“Those can all be useful,” Amma said. “But the board is nearly as wide as your bundle. Would a smaller one do?”

“I want to draw Damascus,” Yusuf said. “What if I can't fit it on?”

“Then you might need more than one picture,” Amma replied. “You don't have to put a whole city on a single sheet.”

Yusuf had been imagining one enormous drawing, with every building in its proper place. He was not sure how he would know where all the buildings belonged. Perhaps starting with one street would be sensible.

He took the large board back to the workshop.

Two paper bales stood ready near the door. Each contained stacks of sheets protected by firm supports and layers of wrapping. Yusuf had helped smooth some of the paper before it was packed. He liked knowing that part of his own work would travel with them.

Baba was talking to the senior apprentice, the young man who would oversee the workshop while he was away.

“Hasan will need his next delivery before the end of the week,” Baba said. “The sheets are ready on the high shelf.”

Hasan was a bookseller and an old family acquaintance. As well as selling books, he arranged for copies to be written and repaired books whose pages or covers had come loose. He bought paper from Baba for that work.

“I've put his order on the list,” the apprentice said. “I'll take it myself.”

“And if anyone asks for a larger order than we discussed, write down exactly what they want,” Baba added.

The apprentice smiled. “I will. You showed me where to keep the new requests.”

Yusuf had heard Baba explain the arrangements the previous evening. He wondered why his father needed to say them again.

When the apprentice went to check a drying sheet, Yusuf asked Baba why he had repeated the instructions.

Baba rested a hand on one of the bales. “Because I'm used to being here. I keep remembering jobs and wanting to make sure someone knows about them.”

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

“No,” Baba replied. “I think I shall have to get used to letting him do the work without me looking over his shoulder.”

Yusuf tried to imagine leaving his own drawing for somebody else to finish. He would want to explain it several times too.

“Will you miss the workshop?” Yusuf asked.

“Some days. Other days I expect I shall be very pleased to be somewhere else.” Baba looked at the board. “Has that become too large for your bag?”

“It was always too large,” Yusuf said. “I've only just agreed.”

Baba laughed and found a smaller board among the clean pieces beneath the bench. It fitted comfortably across Yusuf's knees.

“You can still draw plenty on this,” Baba said.

Yusuf imagined a camel on one sheet and its long neck continuing onto another. He might need to think about the space before beginning.

Outside, his friend Safiyya was waiting with a parcel for Baba. She was eleven, like Yusuf, and Hasan was her father. They often spent time together in the bookshop, looking at drawings or wondering about places mentioned in travellers' books.

“Father sent back the spare sheets you lent him,” Safiyya explained. “He said you would tell him there was no hurry.”

“He knows me well,” Baba said, accepting them.

Safiyya looked at Yusuf's travelling bundle.

“Have you put all your drawings in there?” Safiyya asked.

“Only the paper I haven't drawn on yet,” Yusuf replied.

“That's sensible. You'll need something to do when the camels are asleep.”

“I want to draw one for you,” Yusuf said. “What should I put beside it?”

“A person, so I can tell how big it is,” Safiyya replied. “I've seen camels outside the walls, but they never stand still when I want to look properly.”

“I'll put you beside it.”

“Then make sure you leave room for my head,” Safiyya said.

They laughed, but Yusuf wished she were coming. He could tell her about the journey afterwards; that would not be the same as seeing it together.

“What will you do while we're away?” he asked.

“Help Father, mostly,” Safiyya replied. “He's showing me how to keep the holes in the pages lined up when we sew a book. Mine keep wandering.”

"You could save one to show me when I come back."

"A good one," Safiyya said firmly. "You must bring me a good camel in return."

Two hired porters arrived to carry the paper to the caravan. Amma checked that the apprentice had the house key and that their neighbour knew when to call. Then Baba thanked everyone, and the family stepped into the lane.

Yusuf waved until the turn hid Safiyya and the workshop door.

For a little while, Baghdad looked exactly as it did on an ordinary delivery morning. A baker carried bread past a doorway. A woman asked a boy to move his basket out of the road. Yusuf knew which lane would lead to the booksellers and which would take them towards the river.

Today they kept walking towards the city gate.

"It feels as though we ought to turn back soon," Yusuf told Amma.

"I know what you mean," Amma said. "I keep thinking of something at home and then remembering I won't be there this evening."

"Have you forgotten something?"

"Probably," Amma replied. "I hope it isn't important."

She sounded cheerful enough that Yusuf stopped trying to think of things she might have left behind.

Beyond the gate, merchants and carriers were assembling their loads. Camels knelt among bundles, baskets and rolled bedding. A grey mare stood beside a string of baggage animals, twitching her ears towards the voices.

Baba pointed out Harith, the camel handler who had agreed to carry their paper. He had arranged the journey with him before the family began packing.

“He knows the road as far as our next trading stops,” Baba explained. “For other stages, we'll travel with guides who know those places.”

Harith came to greet them. Beside him stood a boy holding a folded saddle cloth.

“This is my son, Hamza,” Harith said. “He's eleven. He'll be travelling with me to Damascus.”

Yusuf was relieved. Until then, he had pictured himself surrounded by adults discussing loads and prices for weeks.

Hamza seemed pleased too.

“Have you brought all that paper to draw on?” Hamza asked.

“The bales are for a customer,” Yusuf replied. “I only have scraps in my bag.”

“I wondered. You'd need a very large picture.”

Yusuf showed him the smaller board. “I nearly brought a bigger one.”

“Father made me leave a piece of wood I was carving,” Hamza said. “He said it was mostly the tree still.”

Yusuf grinned. At least he was not the only boy who had tried to bring too much.

Harith directed the porters to place the bales on a dry cloth. Yusuf watched him and another handler prepare the camel's load. They needed weight on both sides, arranged so that it would sit steadily rather than pull the animal sideways.

Baba asked about a rope pressing against the paper's wrapping. Harith showed him the padding beneath it and added protection where the cloth might rub.

“Could all the paper go on one side?” Yusuf asked.

“Then we'd need a suitable load on the other,” Harith said. “It isn't enough to put the same number of bundles on each side. A small bundle can be much heavier than a large one.”

Yusuf thought of a sack of wool and a sack of stones. He could understand why counting sacks would not settle it.

Amma asked where their drinking water would go. Harith showed her the place for the skins, kept apart from the paper.

“Can I carry my bag?” Yusuf asked.

“For a little while, if you want,” Amma said. “But there is room with our bedding. You'll have plenty of walking to do.”

His arm already ached from the walk out of Baghdad. He handed it over, rubbing the place where the strap had pressed.

Hamza did not laugh. “I like carrying mine when we arrive somewhere. That's usually long enough.”

“Have you been to Damascus before?” Yusuf asked.

“No,” Hamza replied. “Father has, but I haven't. He says there are gardens outside it.”

Yusuf looked at the grey mare. “Have you ridden her?”

“Yes, with Father nearby,” Hamza said. “Would you like to try?”

“Very much,” Yusuf replied. “I don't know how, though.”

“I'll ask him when we stop somewhere with room,” Hamza said. “He won't let either of us ride off on our own.”

“And Damascus has gardens?” Yusuf asked. “I thought there would just be desert.”

“There will be plenty of desert on the way,” Hamza replied.

Yusuf looked beyond the waiting animals. The road ran through cultivated land, with low walls and people working near the fields. The desert did not begin at the city gate as he had imagined.

When the call to leave passed along the caravan, the whole gathering did not move at once. One handler was still checking a fastening. A donkey had to be brought clear of the road. Then the first animals began walking and the rest followed in their turn.

Yusuf stayed beside Amma while Baba walked near the paper. Hamza joined him.

“Where do we sleep tonight?” Yusuf asked.

“At a khan, if we reach it as planned,” Hamza said. “It's a place where travellers can stop with their animals.”

“Have you stayed there?”

“Not that one,” Hamza replied. “We can look at it together.”

Yusuf glanced back. Baghdad's wall was still enormous, but it was behind them now.

He had brought less paper than he wanted and a smaller board than he had intended. He had left his familiar lane and Safiyya's company.

Beside him, Hamza pointed out a camel with a tuft of hair standing straight between its ears.

“That one would make a good drawing,” Hamza said.

Yusuf looked. The tuft shook with every step.

“I'd have to draw it before the wind tidied its head,” Yusuf replied.

They walked on together, watching for the next thing they wanted to show each other.