



The Scent of Wormwood

Miraskhat Ulpan



In the warm, hazy memories of a distant childhood, a pale, slender boy named Ayan runs behind the other children, dragging his injured left leg across the dusty ground. Whenever the group gets too far ahead, he calls out in a gentle, pleading voice, promising to tell them a story even more wondrous than the day before.



It was the summer of 1942 when Ayan and his elderly grandmother first arrived in the village, seeking refuge with distant relatives after his father went to the front lines and his mother passed away. They brought nothing with them but their few belongings and a single brown cow with a small calf, settling quietly into the rural community.



On a breathless, windless day, the village children split into two teams to play war, wrapping dry dirt in scraps of paper and throwing them at each other until the air is thick with floating gray dust. Squinting through the suffocating haze, they charge at one another with wild battle cries, completely absorbed in their fierce, imaginary battlefield.



Suddenly, Sadyk, the leader of the village children, stops mid-motion and points toward a clean, neatly dressed boy standing a short distance away in a crisp white shirt and dark shorts. The playtime battle halts instantly as the dusty, ragged group crowds around the newcomer, staring curiously at his pristine clothes and his perfectly trimmed bangs.



A local boy named Esikbai makes a sharp, teasing comment about the new kid's fine hair, causing the rest of the children to burst into uncomfortable snickers. Ayan blushes deeply and turns away, but Sadyk quickly steps in to break the tension, welcoming him by asking about his family's brown cow and asking for his name.



When Ayan softly introduces himself, the children repeat his name in a low murmur to make sure they remember it, instantly feeling a bond form. Sadyk reaches out with his soot-covered hand to grab Ayan's clean wrist, proudly inviting him to be friends and promising to show him the best swimming hole in the village.



As they walk together toward the water, the arrival of a new friend turns into a grand celebration, prompting every boy to loudly boast about his own talents to impress Ayan. Sadyk brags that he can hold his breath underwater while counting to sixty, while a quiet boy named Kosym proudly mentions a beautiful white shirt hidden away in his mother's trunk.



The boasting quickly turns sour when Esikbai, a tall and aggressive bully known for picking fights, shoves Kosym aside and trips him onto the hard ground. Kosym pushes himself up with scraped, stinging knees, tears welling in his eyes as Esikbai continues to mock him and aggressively push him away from the group.



The mean confrontation escalates into a brief, painful scuffle, ending with Kosym getting hurt and crying loudly as he runs back home to safety. The rest of the children watch in silence, uncomfortable with the sudden cruelty but eager to move past the tension of the bully's outburst.



Despite the rocky afternoon, the children spend the rest of the day swimming in the cool pond, basking in the golden sunshine, and playing along the banks until dusk. By evening, Ayan's kind heart, quick wit, and gentle nature shine through, making him feel like an irreplaceable part of their close-knit group.