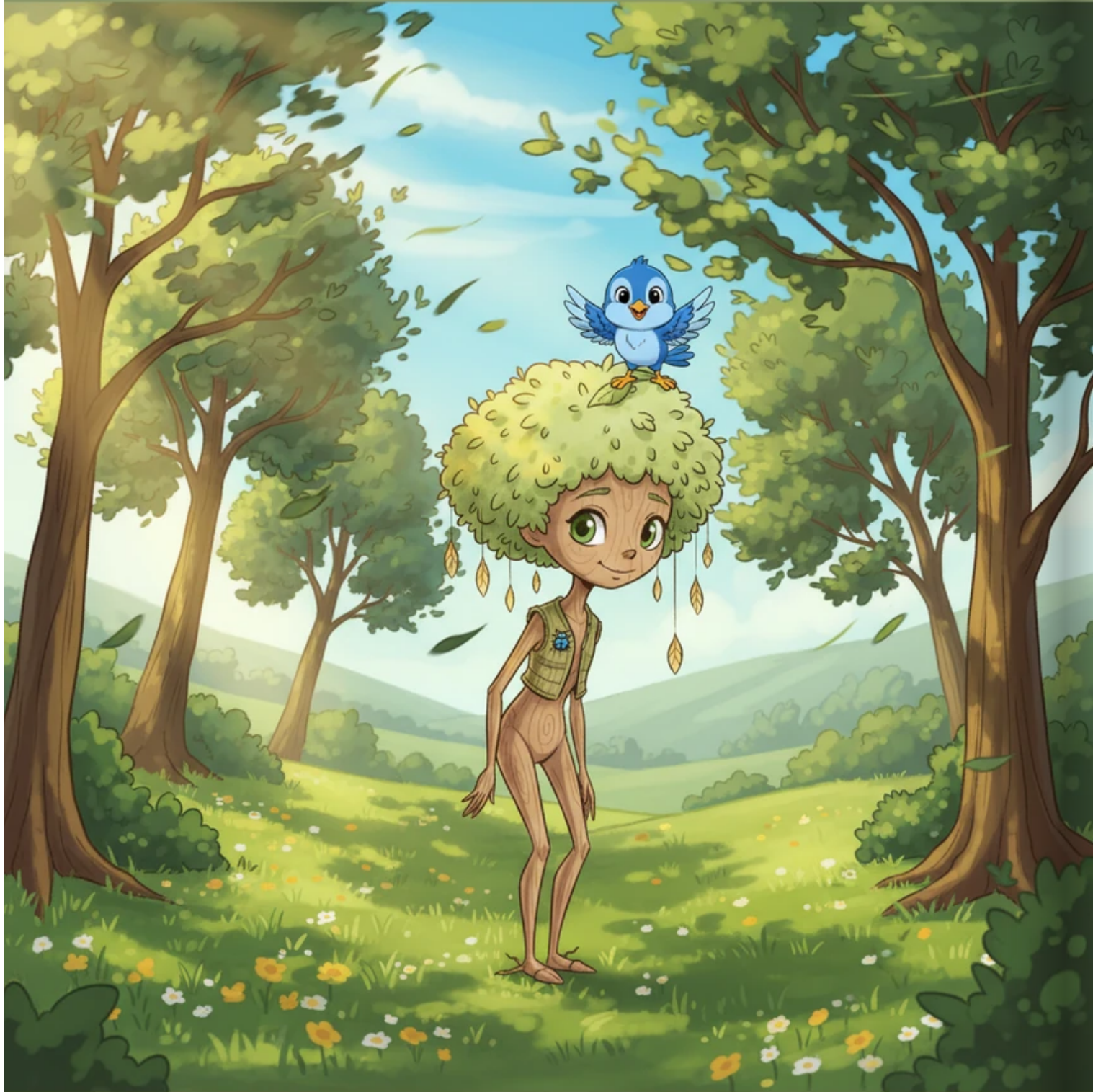


Willow and the Whispering Wind

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In the heart of a sun-dappled meadow stood Willow, a small tree with silver-green leaves and a very quiet heart. While the older oaks tossed their branches wildly in the air, Willow kept her limbs tucked in tight, standing as still as a statue.



Whenever the wind whistled through the valley, Willow would shiver and hold her breath. She was afraid that if she let go, the breeze might whisk her delicate leaves away or snap her slender trunk in two, so she stayed stiff and frozen.



Willow and Pip

One bright morning, a flash of sapphire feathers tumbled from the sky like a fallen piece of the afternoon. Pip, a tiny bluebird with a chest the color of a sun-ripened peach, landed softly on Willow's highest twig and let out a cheerful, bubbling trill.



As a gentle breeze tickled the meadow, Willow stiffened her spine and clenched her leaves shut until they were tiny green fists. Pip chirped in surprise, feeling the tension in the wood beneath his little feet, and looked down at his nervous friend with kind eyes.



The wind isn't a monster, Willow, Pip whispered, his voice sounding like the soft tinkling of a silver bell. He spread his wings wide and let the air lift him up, bobbing and weaving through the invisible currents with a happy, carefree whistle.



Pip landed again and gently nudged a branch with his beak, explaining that the wind was just an invitation to play. He told her that if she fought the air she might break, but if she joined the song, she would find her own set of wooden wings.



Willow took a deep, shaky breath and loosened her grip on herself just a tiny bit, feeling the warmth of the sun on her bark. A soft puff of air brushed past, and for the first time, her leaves made a gentle shush-shush sound, like a quiet lullaby.



The wind grew stronger, swirling around the meadow in great, invisible loops that smelled of clover and rain. Willow closed her eyes, imagining she was water in a winding stream, and allowed her trunk to lean and her branches to sweep across the tall grass.



A surge of pure joy bubbled up from Willow's deep roots to her very tiptop leaves as she realized she wasn't falling. The wind wasn't pushing her down; it was holding her up and making her feel more alive than she had ever been in the stillness.



As the golden sun began to set, the meadow grew quiet and peaceful, and Willow stood tall and relaxed. She looked at Pip and whispered a rustling thank you with her leaves, knowing she would never have to be afraid of the wind's song ever again.