**"Anima. The Golden Swift" by Catherine Sobol.**

*Prologue*

It all began when a boy wandered far, far away into the woods.

Although, of course, that's not really where it began - the big story was already racing forward at full speed by then - but for the boy and his land, the starting point was just that clear summer morning.

History loves accuracy, and here are a couple of numbers: the boy's tribe numbered eight hundred and forty-two people, the time, if anyone in this area had a clock, would be six in the morning, and what about the year - this question is too important to answer without any preparation.

So the boy moved forward with determination, scattering branches of bushes and dry stems in front of him. His face was already pretty scratched, but who cares about small inconveniences on the way to the great goal? And he had a goal: It was to get to the lake where the ducks grow their chicks in the reeds and carry a couple away to raise them in the pond near his home. Even if the babies had to be taken from their mothers, he thought as he went, they were destined for an honorable destiny: to become the ancestors of an entire tribe of ducks. He had to explain this to the ducklings and their mother, and then she probably wouldn't mind. He's not a magician yet, of course, and he can't communicate his thoughts to other living creatures so well, but what if, if he tries many times in a row, he can still do it?

«Hello,» someone's voice suddenly said.

The boy looked around suspiciously. No one.

«Hello,» he nodded, looking behind the nearest trees. There was no one there, either. But why be afraid? He's home, on his land, and nothing bad can happen here. «Are you lost?»

«Not yet,» the voice answered, suddenly sad. «But unfortunately, it will happen today. Oh, forgive me for not introducing myself: I am the spirit of your land. It's good that you came here. I really wanted to say goodbye to anyone and we don't go near the dwellings.»

«Why say goodbye? Didn't you find the presents?» the boy was frightened. «We leave the apples for you under the big tree in the clearing, and the turnips...»

«I found it, that's not the point,» the spirit sighed. His voice was a little burry, surprisingly human for a disembodied creature. «It's just that your land is going to be invaded today, and I'm not going to let that happen.»

The boy frowned. Can a land be invaded? Last summer a neighboring tribe tried to seize a cow belonging to his uncle, but he woke up in time, took out a special pin, which, as it turned out, he had been saving for such an occasion for thirty years, and threw it at the invaders. They grew sheep ears, and they walked like that for a week, to the delight of everyone around them, until their ears dissolved: magic is a rarity in their backwoods, you don't see it every day! The uncle was glowing with pride and even invited the poor creatures to a feast of friendship, everyone made up, and the boy dreamed of becoming a magician so that he could learn to make such interesting objects himself.

«Do they need cows again?» he asked. «We can trade them for sheeps.»

The voice gave a dry chuckle.

«You don't seem to know the news here at all. A thunderstorm even got here,» the boy turned around, but he didn't see any thunderstorm at all; the sky was pure blue. «Who knew that magic could be woven from Shadow, not just anima? Oh, peaceful lands!»

«Are you really going to die?» the boy frowned. «Look, take this, it's for you. It's only for a day, but Dad said a day is more valuable to a dying man than a healthy one.»

The boy concentrated and tried to transfer the anima from his heart to his hand. Oh, he had mastered that trick already! A warm golden glow slipped into his palm, and a light flickered on it.

«Anima,» the spirit whispered. «The most precious thing in the world. The power of life itself, the soul and joy, for it is all the same.»

«I gave some to Grandpa a month ago, he wasn't feeling well at all,» the boy said proudly. «So I gave him the same amount, and then he lived the whole day, said goodbye to everyone, finished his business, and went to sleep peacefully. Daddy said I was good.»

«Didn't he say that by giving someone one day, you're taking it away from you?»

«He did. And he also said that I am strong and that I would accumulate a lot of anima over my life by good deeds. And that wizards in fairy tales have always been able to share. And I really, really want to be a wizard.»

The boy felt someone squeeze his open palm into a fist and the golden glow soaked back into his skin.

«You'll need it for yourself,» said a voice very close and loud, and the boy felt as if something invisible was viewing his face. «There are hard times ahead.»

The spirit was silent, and the sensation of the attentive gaze from the void was gone. The boy was about to move on; he couldn't wait to hold the duckling in his hands, but the spirit suddenly spoke again:

«I think I'd better give you something, in case you need it someday! This is what the good wizard dropped in the woods here. He had holes in his pockets because, like all true wizards, he was very poor.»

A wooden comb fell at the boy's feet. He picked it up and held it in his hands: it looked nothing special, not even carved, but his fingertips tingled with magic. Only true wizards know how to put part of their anima into objects, to give them special properties. Wow, what a gift! That kind of thing is very expensive, uncle hadn't spent his pin in thirty years.

«It makes your hair grow faster, doesn't it?» the boy exhaled. «Thank you, I'll give it to my sister; she wants it to grow to the ground, just like my mom's. And someday I'll make combs like that myself! I'll learn a few tricks first so my parents could send me as an apprentice to some wizard, and then...»

«It's not a good time for this dream,» the spirit said cautiously. «If I were you, I'd...»

«Come on!» the boy cheerfully interrupted. «Mama says you can do anything if you just want to. I'm going to be the best wizard in the world!»

Spirit sighed heavily.

«Then good luck to you, good boy,» breeze ran through the trees, and the spirit's voice became quieter. «Dreams are a great power; they are the very essence of magic.»

But the boy was no longer listening - he suddenly noticed that the wind was picking up, though there were no clouds at all. A bird cried out anxiously in the air.

«I'm going to miss all this,» the spirit whispered. «Your land is amazingly beautiful. Everyone brags about their possessions, and it's a pity I'd never had the words to describe mine.»

The boy looked around: yes, it was a nice day, the cobwebs gleamed thinly between the branches of the bush, and the forest was stunningly green, as it should be in the height of summer, but what was wrong with that? What bothered him more was that the wind had begun to tear the leaves from the trees. Probably all the ducklings had gone into the reeds, and there was no way to find them now.

«Hurry up. Run home,» the spirit said. «You'll be safe there; it's not time to be a hero.»

«What if I want to be a hero?» asked the boy, who rarely had the chance to participate in such an interesting conversation.

The spirit was silent for a few moments.

«Then stay. You're brave, and you have a lot of anima in you. If you don't die, you can be great one day, because I met you today for a reason. But it's too big a decision for such a little boy.»

«I'm not a *little* boy! And I'm dying to be a hero,» the boy blurted out. «What do I have to do?»

«Nothing. You've already said what needs to be said,» the spirit replied.

The boy shuddered. He belatedly thought he'd done something stupid, but it was too late to back out now; he had to pretend he doesn't care.

«Oh, I've got something else! I almost forgot about it,» added the spirit. «It's a secret, and I overheard it under very awkward circumstances. I wanted to trade it for something, but it's too late; the Hawks are already here. Such value mustn't go to waste, right?»

And he whispered the secret to him - the boy felt a breath at his ear, fluttering strands of hair as if invisible lips had approached him.

«Just don't tell anyone,» the spirit added.

«But you told me,» answered the boy, shivering in the cold wind.

«A secret revealed to a child doesn't count as revealed, kids are always forgetting or mixing things up. But you don't forget, okay? Goodbye, a young man from the beautiful land. In fairy tales, people usually get three gifts, but I don't have anything else.»

And then the boy turned around and saw. A thundercloud was coming toward the forest, creeping inexorably forward, and it was more than just a storm: lightning flashed in its gray bowels, reaching all the way to the ground.

«Hey!» the boy shouted. «Where are you? Come back here!»

But it was quiet. Something had changed, not only in the sky, but in everything around him, even in himself, but he didn't know enough words to explain it. The lightning flashed closer and closer, and then the birds screamed everywhere.

Every corner of our green planet has its own spirit, and all of them, even as children of the same mother earth, are quite different from each other as are the peoples who live in their domains. The spirit of this peaceful land, inhabited by cheerful, honest, and, admittedly, somewhat foolish toilers, was also peaceful and simple-minded and didn’t even realize what precious secret it had managed to pass on before it disappeared.