

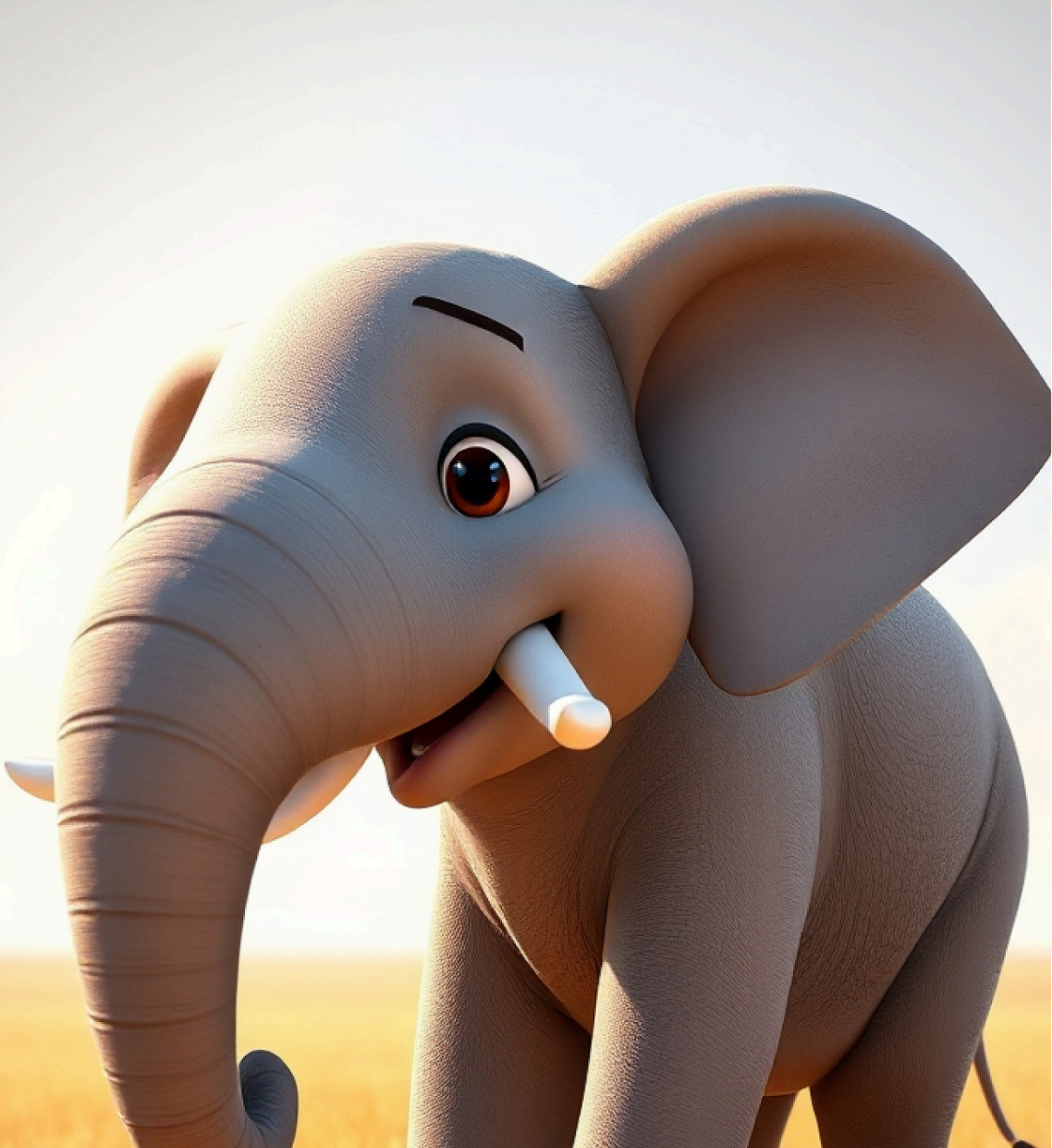
The Elephant's Friendship Tree



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On the wide, sunny savanna, the grass turned golden and the air shimmered with heat. A big grey elephant with wide floppy ears and a gentle smile stood under the bright sky. He wore a woven grass band around one ankle, yellow and green. "Oh, how I wish there were a cool, shady spot for all of us," he said with a soft sigh. His small dark eyes looked across the hot plains, dreaming of a friendly place to rest.



The elephant lifted his long trunk and pointed to a small patch of open ground. "I will plant a tree right here," he said. "A tree that will grow tall and wide, with leaves that make cool shade for everyone." He dug a hole with his big feet and gently placed a tiny seed inside. "But I cannot do this alone," he thought. "I will ask my friends to help."



The elephant walked to the waterhole, where he met a young zebra with black and white stripes and a red water pouch across her back. "Zebra, will you help me grow a friendship tree?" he asked. The zebra's bright eyes sparkled. "Of course! I can carry water every day," she said. "And I will keep everyone smiling!" She trotted off to fetch the first pouch of water.



A small bird with bright blue and orange feathers flew down and landed on the elephant's tusk. "What are you doing?" chirped the bird. "We are planting a tree for shade," said the elephant. "Can you help?" The bird's tiny black eyes twinkled. "I can scatter seeds and sing songs to cheer you on!" she said. She flapped her wings and darted away to find more seeds.



A monkey with soft brown fur and a long curling tail swung down from a branch. He had a small green leaf tucked behind one ear. "Did someone say tree?" he chattered. "I can pull weeds and keep the ground tidy!" The elephant smiled. "Welcome, Monkey!" he said. "Together, we will make something wonderful." The monkey danced a happy little jig, and the work began.



Each day, the zebra carried water in her red pouch and poured it gently around the little seed. The bird flew far and wide, scattering seeds across the soil. The monkey pulled weeds with his quick hands, chattering and making everyone laugh. The elephant used his trunk to dig and pat the earth. "What a fine team we are!" said the elephant. The sun shone, and the seed began to sprout.



Days passed, and a tiny green shoot pushed through the soil. "Look! It's growing!" cried the zebra. The bird sang a happy song, and the monkey clapped his hands. The elephant watered the shoot with his trunk, careful and slow. "Little tree, grow strong," he whispered. The savanna breeze ruffled the leaves, and the shoot stood a little taller.



But one day, the sun blazed hotter than ever. The little tree drooped, and its leaves curled. "Oh no!" said the zebra. "It needs more water." She ran to the waterhole and back, but the tree still looked sad. The bird fanned it with her wings, and the monkey pulled more weeds. "We must work together," said the elephant. "And we must not give up."



The elephant had an idea. "We need a way to keep the water close," he said. He dug a small ditch with his tusks, and the zebra lined it with stones. The bird dropped seeds along the ditch, and the monkey packed the earth. "Now the water will flow to the roots," said the elephant. They all stepped back and watched. Slowly, the little tree lifted its leaves again.



The tree grew taller and wider. Its branches spread out like welcoming arms, and its leaves made a cool, green roof. "It's working!" cheered the monkey. The zebra brought more water, the bird sang louder, and the elephant smiled his gentle smile. Animals from all over the savanna came to see the growing tree. "What a lovely place this will be," said a giraffe.



One afternoon, a strong wind blew across the savanna. The young tree swayed and bent. "Hold on!" cried the bird. The monkey grabbed a branch, and the zebra braced her legs. The elephant wrapped his trunk around the trunk of the tree. "We are stronger together," he said. The wind howled, but the friends held on. When the wind stopped, the tree stood straight and proud.



The tree was now tall and strong, with wide branches full of green leaves. "We did it!" said the zebra. "We grew a friendship tree!" The bird sang a joyful song, and the monkey swung from branch to branch. The elephant looked at his friends with happy eyes. "This tree is not just mine," he said. "It belongs to all of us. And its shade is for everyone."



The animals gathered under the Friendship Tree. The zebra rested her tired legs, the bird perched on a branch, and the monkey hung by his tail. The elephant stood in the middle, his large ears flapping gently. "When we cooperate," he said, "wonderful things grow." All the animals nodded. They knew it was true. The tree rustled, as if it agreed.



From that day on, the Friendship Tree became the heart of the savanna. Animals came from near and far to rest in its cool shade. The zebra shared water, the bird sang songs, and the monkey played games. The elephant welcomed everyone with a warm smile. "There is room for all," he said. And they all lived happily together under the leafy branches.



The elephant learned that a community grows through cooperation. Each animal had a special job, and together they made something beautiful. The tree stood as a symbol of their friendship. "We are like the roots of this tree," said the elephant. "We hold each other up." The others cheered, and the savanna echoed with happy sounds.



And so, the Friendship Tree grew taller every year, a shady place where all the animals gathered. The elephant, with his grass ankle band, sat beneath it and smiled. "When we work together," he said, "we can do anything." The zebra, the bird, and the monkey nodded. They knew that their friendship would last as long as the tree. And it still stands today, a home for all.