**BRANCH one**

The little tree was a strange thing to find in a forest.

Now before you say anything, I do realise that most trees aren’t strange things to find in a forest. But what you have to understand is that this was a most unusual little tree. It had been in the Forever Forest for hundreds of years and in all that time it had never grown an inch, never even grown a leaf, and it was still sitting in exactly the same pot it had arrived in.

At first glance it could easily be mistaken for a dead little tree. But if you took the time to look carefully, you could see little brown buds along each of its little branches, just waiting to burst into life.

After years of practice, the little tree had become an expert at waiting. So you can imagine its surprise when one day Starmer, who was on his daily forage, scooped it up and carried it out of the forest and back to Starmer’s Potting Shed.

Over the months Starmer had tried every condition possible to help the little tree grow – sun, shade, inside, outside, wet, dry. But nothing seemed to work and its little buds stayed brown.

The little tree was still waiting.

Starmer didn’t know why, but he knew it was.

In fact, it’s fair to say that Starmer had all but forgotten about the little tree until day that MJ came to visit.

MJ was organising Astaroidia’s very first Christmas and had with him a box of Christmas Cheer Lylee and James had sent through the previous year.  MJ wasn’t a world class expert on Christmas by any standard, but he was keen - very, very keen - and he was carrying around with him every single Chrismassy thing he owned.  Most of these had been given to him during the Maiden Voyage of the SMS Pea, an adventure he had gone on last Christmas in a boat built by Lylee and James.  He had mince pies he had baked with Carnival, mocktail recipes, bells, tree garlands, adventure calendars, lanterns, snowflakes, gingerbreads, books, pictures.  He also had his most prized Christmas possessions, an elf training game (that he had copied from a game Jo had invented), snowman slam game and his beloved Christmas stocking.  Until a couple of days ago, MJ’s box had also contained his wishament, a new tradition being started that requires you to make a double-sided Christmas tree ornament.  On one side you draw something wonderful that happened this year and on the other you draw your wish for the coming year.   MJ thought he had lost his wishament somewhere in the Stardom but he was so excited about Christmas that he wasn’t really sure.

“Good morning, Starmer! I’m here to find out if there is anything you would like to do towards Christmas this year? We have decided our Christmas should mix traditional Christmas things with some new Astaroidian Christmas traditions,” said MJ.

MJ looked down at his clipboard, “Starshine and the Protostars are making the Christmas decorations, Normy is painting the Christmas cards, and Starmalade is cooking a batch of Christmas gingeybreads to help with the cooking – let’s just hope they turn out to be helpful as well as cheeky this year!

MJ looked back at his list. “Someone is going to have to make some toys for the Protostars, no Christmas would be complete without toys being delivered to the little ones.”

“What kind of toys are you after?” asked Starmer.

“Funny you should ask,” said MJ. “I have been going through the Christmas books James and Lylee sent and also the Christmas books in the Astaroidian Archives.” MJ held his sketchbook up and showed Starmer some pictures. “The most popular toys seem to be ones that play music, things with wheels, animals and also swings. We don’t have any swings here so they would make an excellent gift.”

“I’m sure Bozz can make you some of those,” said Starmer.

“Actually, Bozz brings me to the new Astaroidian Christmas traditions…” MJ said, raising his eyebrows and looking dubiously back at his list. “Bozz and Nebula are experimenting with something they are calling Crack-Ups - all in one crackers that make jokes and host a Christmas quiz. When I last checked they were onto Version 4. Version 1 exploded so violently it blew a hole in the side of the Burping Cauldron. Version 2 briefly turned them both a mouldy green and Version 3 filled the air with the smell of… well… if I said, “Toot,” I’m sure you’d get the general idea.

“Quasar and Bobie are inventing some special lights they call Twinkletastics that are supposed to combine fairy lights with atmosphere setting music and falling snowflakes. But so far they have only managed to create some that twinkle while they sing, “Silent night, holy night, all is calm-” and then suddenly explode with a screech. I’m sure these two projects have got mixed up somehow but I can’t work out how.

“The thing we are missing is a Christmas tree… that’s where I thought you might come in.”

MJ looked around Starmer’s gardens and his eyes came to rest on the little tree.

MJ walked over and pulled the little tree out in front of the Potting Shed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a tree like this before… What type is it?”

Starmer laughed and said, “No idea! I came across it on a forest forage years ago. I had never seen anything like it before so I knew the forest paths had lead me there for a reason and I should bring it home. In all that time it has never changed, never grown at all. I think it’s asleep or something.”

“You mean it was there all alone. A potted tree in the forest? How strange.” MJ looked at the tree, “The pot is unusual too - it looks like it’s been carved from wood.”

“I don’t think it’s been carved,” said Starmer. “More like it’s been grown.”

“Well, whatever it is it looks pretty sad and we can’t have that. We learnt last year that we need maximum Christmas Cheer to bring about our first Christmas,” said MJ.

Starmer began rummaging around in MJ’s box of Christmas Cheer, pulling out a red bow and tying it to the top of the tree. He stroked the little tree’s branches and said, “There, that looks beautiful. Now come on, let’s go back to town and see about that Christmas tree, not to mention checking to see if the Crack-Ups have stopped farting and the Twinkletastics have stopped screeching. If that story doesn’t pay the troll then I don’t know what will!”

MJ and Starmer left the Potting Shed and walked along the path towards the Troll Bridge and the rest of town.

As the daylight faded, something stirred inside the little tree and a little bud on a little branch began to swell.