**BRANCH four**

The walk to the Stardom was a little slower than normal. To begin with the little tree could only bounce three times before having to rest but as Starmer and Great Green Eye showered it with love and affection, it grew stronger and was able to bounce in longer and longer burst.

By the time the trio reached the towering Time Palace at the centre of the Stardom, the little tree had grown another six centimetres, shot out five more branches, and burst into another ten flowers. Its bark was changing too, from smooth to translucent, revealing rivers of gold swirling inside it.

A crowd of excited Tumble Stars gathered around the little tree, keen to see this newly-discovered species. Amongst them were Normy and Superstar, who were working together to decorate the town square

and Zazzle and Norse who were putting up giant candy canes.

Also there was MJ, who although a Pumpkin Head, has had honorary Tumble Star status ever since he saved the Stardom from an avalanche of rubbish and junk blown up from Earth when Vortex tumbled through Astaroidia. Stinky times.

Standing nearby were an embarrassed looking Nebula and Vortex, who were surrounded by a suspicious cloud of green gas. Before MJ could stop him, Great Green Eye walked over and said, “’Ello me ole dears! Woi are ye standin’ over ‘ere all on your li’l lonesome? Are you feelin’ OK? You’re looking a li’l green about d’a gills. And you seem d’a be surrounded boi a cloud o’ green gas… why it’s everywh… oh moi goodness… wha’s that awful smell?”

Quasar and Bobie were there too, still fighting to make their Twinkletastics a little more silent night than silent fright. Quasar was pleased to see Starmer and said, “Hey, you are just in time for the next Twinkletastic trial!”

“Oh… oh great… I’ve errr… heard a lot about those…” said Starmer looking around for somewhere to take cover.

“I bet you have – our Twinkletastics are quite something aren’t they! And we’ve just made them even better. At least I think we have… If I could only find my copy of the Weekly Portal with the Little Tree in it. Then I could be sure. I wrote a formula improvement on it but I seem to have misplaced the paper now so…well…I’ve had to guess the right proportions. Wait and see what happens when you switch them on now. I mean, your guess is as good as mine! Anything could happen… Just joking! But this really will be as much of a surprise for me as it is for you! You’re going to love it though, I know you will!” said Bobie, clapping his hands as one by one the Twinkletastics lit up with a flash of rainbow colours and a burst of, “O holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of-”

*Kaboom, Kpow, Keeeew*

The tranquillity was shattered as one by one each of the Twinkletastics exploded.

“Aaaagggghhhh! Take cover,” shouted Starmer, diving under a bush.

“Back to the Drawing Board!” said Bobie, trying to laugh, and then added, “If only I could find that newspaper…I don’t understand it…”.

But Starmer understood it. The Stardom was the busiest he had ever seen it. There were stars everywhere and everyone was so busy and excited and happy. It was no wonder Bobie had misplaced his newspaper. Who needs to read about life when it’s all actually happening right in front of you!

Starmer stood up and brushed himself down. He had landed near the poster board in the centre of the Stardom. On it, he noticed a Lost and Found poster showing an old blue hat with multi-coloured flowers along its brim. The poster was roughly put together and had lots of spelling mistakes, but Starmer felt sure the hat in the picture had belonged to his scarecrow, Barley Mow.

The hat had blown off during a windy storm and had been missing for months. It was Barley Mow’s favourite and Starmer had searched high and low but without success. In the end, Starmer had given up. He thought it most likely the hat had blown into the Forever Forest.

The paths of the Forever Forest aren’t like normal woodland paths. Noone knows how, but these paths can magically shift. They will only ever lead you where you most need to go, even when where you most need to go isn’t where you actually want to go! Starmer didn’t often walk along the paths of the Forever Forest. He saw it as far too dangerous – he could end up anywhere and he liked his little life in the Potting Shed too much to risk losing it. But as Barley Mow was so upset, Starmer had made an exception and had walked a little way into the Forever Forest. When the paths had not immediately led to the missing hat, Starmer had given up. In the Forever Forest, you either arrive where you want to go quickly or not at all.

Luckily, Starshine and the class of little Protostars were nowhere near the cloud of noxious toot gas or the exploding lights. They were enjoying an outdoor Adventure class that combined map reading with a scroll mail treasure hunt. These specialised treasure hunts use the Scroll Box system to send and deliver clues and answers. Each Protostar was working on a different clue, so they were all spread out across the Stardom giggling and enjoying themselves.

Starmer looked around for the little tree. This was the first time the little tree had seen other children and it was bouncing around after them, trying to keep up. The first Protostar to notice the little tree was trying to play with them was Alphard, a daring little Tumble Star who you may remember as one of the Tumble Stars who travelled in Echino’s hot air balloon.

Alphard began to play a simple form of tag with the little tree, leaping a few jumps away from it and then waiting for it to bounce up. One by one the other Protostars began to join in until all six of them were springing around the Stardom. The game took on a new twist when Spinner, the youngest Protostar, began to tire and stopped running. The little tree scooped Spinner up with one of its branches and placed him gently onto a twig where he could sit and rest.

All this love and excitement transformed the little tree from a weedy sapling into a bushy and substantial tree. The more it stretched up, the more it stretched out - its branches broadened, its canopy thickened and its trunk widened, developing a tree hollow.

Now for those of you who aren’t sure, a tree hollow is a little cave in a tree’s trunk. You know the sort, the holes that make a tree look like it has a mouth – sometimes small, like it’s whistling;

sometimes wide, like it’s yawning;

sometimes bent, like it’s scheming.

The little tree’s hollow was U-shaped and about the size of a Lego brick when Starmer had first found it, so small and shallow you might not even have noticed it. But it grew quickly to become the size of an apple, then a toilet roll, a football, and finally the size of your pillow.

After about an hour of playing with the Protostars, the little tree was about as tall as five Tumble Stars and as wide as two.

*Kdunk, kdunk, kdunk. Giggle, giggle, giggle.*

“I can’t believe how rapidly it’s growing,” gasped MJ.

*Kdunk. Giggle.*

“It’s magnificent,” said Starmer, watching the little tree cavorting.

*Kdunk, kdunk. Giggle, giggle.*

“It’s reacting to the positivity, sucking it all up like a normal plant would suck up water,” said Normy. “I wonder what would happen if someone said something negative to it?”

*Kdunk, kdunk, kdunk. Giggle, giggle, giggle.*

“That doesn’t sound like a very kind experiment,” said Starmer. “I’d rather we didn’t find out. The best-case scenario would be that it doesn’t grow, the worst-case scenario would be… well… let’s not even think about that. We need-”

Starmer was interrupted by a roaring. Something was hurtling through the air towards them, lurching from side to side with smoke billowing behind it. Then it went silent and started dropping through the air, before spluttering back into a roar and lurching from side to side again.

“It’s the Sharabang,” said Normy, “And it’s in trouble…”