**BRANCH FIVE**

The roaring and spluttering grew louder and the red Sharabang they all knew and loved came into view. It soon became clear that the smoke was spewing from some green globs of goo gunged onto the Sharabang.

The Sharabang hovered overhead before spluttering and plummeting through the air. It screamed to a halt just above the Sharabang Dock and then collapsed in a heap.

Gadders jumped out and inspected the still smoking Sharabang. He jabbed one of the globs of goo, which exploded in his face, covering him with bright white foam. “Unbelievable,” muttered Gadabout, wiping his eyes and walking over to the crowd.

“What a complete nightmare of a trip,” said Gadders. “I was attacked by what can only be described as mutant jelly gungeules above the Sporedom. Think it damaged the engine. The rotor keeps cutting out. Didn’t think I was going to make it.”

“Are you OK?” asked Normy. “What have you been doing?”

“I was transferring Butt-Butt and Great Green Eye to-”

“And the teddy star!” said Alphard, one of the Protostars who had left the little tree and joined the crowd when he saw Gadders fall from the sky.

“Sorry, the what?” said Gadders.

“And the teddy star,” said Alphard. “I’ve been following Butt-Butt’s Caribbean adventure in the Weekly Portal. Butt-Butt always takes his teddy star with him on adventures. He never leaves it behind. He had it with him in all the photos in the Weekly Portal. It goes everywhere with him. It’s a little Great Green Eye snuggly. It must have come back with them.”

Gadders always forgot that the Tumble Stars were heroes to the little Protostars, who knew everything there was to know about Tumble Stars. Gadders winked at Great Green Eye and then smiled at the little Protostar. “Yes, the teddy star came too. I was flying Great Green Eye, Butt-Butt and his teddy star home from the Crystal Phoenix, which they have moored just outside of Nassau in the Caribbean. They’ve been out there on a secret mission for Lylee and James but wanted to come home for Lylee’s birthday and Christmas. Dropping Butt-Butt off --” Gadders looked at Alphard gazing up at him with large eyes, “Sorry, dropping Butt-Butt and his teddy star off at Willow Tree Cottage was easy enough but then I had to fly Great Green Eye back here. Lylee had asked him to check on Starmer, something about a Happy Haze? Anyway, that was easy too but, on the journey, back I hit these jelly gungeules mid-air above the Sporedom. That’s never happened to me before and I’m still not sure what to do about it.”

“Might have been some spores exploding – that happens at this time of year,” said Starmer.

“Well whatever it was it made the Sharabang’s rotors all sticky. I had to land on the ridge by the Spikicle to try to clean them off,” said Gadders. “I’ve never been there before. What a place. I bet you could see the whole of Astaroidia from the top.”

“They say that aside from the Nevergo-” Starmer paused and looked at Alphard, “And we never go to the Nevergo, do we Alphard?” Alphard shook his head slowly. Starmer chuckled and looked up at the Tumble Stars again, “Aside from the Nevergo, the Spikicle has the best views of Astaroidia. You can see for miles in all directions.”

Normy laughed then said, “You’d have to climb up there first and no one has ever done that – it’s solid ice so it’s bitterly cold and slippery.”

“Having been there, I’d have to agree,” said Gadders. “I could fly someone up there but there’s only room for a couple of you on the top.”

“Can we do that please? We could try. It would be so exciting, just like one of your adventures I’m always reading about. Please Gadders! I could be your ray man,” said Alphard, struggling to contain his enthusiasm.

“Absolutely not,” said Starshine. “Flying up the Spikicle sounds like a horrendously dangerous mission and there is absolutely no reason to try it.”

“There is,” said Alphard. “We need somewhere to put our first Christmas tree and that would be the perfect place. You said it yourself, everyone would be able to see it, especially at night.”

The little Protostar had a point. Everyone fell silent.

The little tree, who had crept up behind the group and been listening intently, turned around and started to bounce back towards the Protostars.

*Kdunk, kdunk, kdunk, kdunk, kdunk, kdunk.*

“Oh isn’t it beautiful.”

*Kdunk, kdunk, kdunk, kdunk.*

“Look at those glistening leaves. I’ve never seen anything so extraordinary.”

*Kdunk, kdunk.*

“You can see it growing.”

*Kdunk, kdunk, kdunk.*

“Hey! There’s my newspaper. Has it been there all along? How did I miss it?”

*Kdunk.*

“The little tree is so big now.”

*Kdunk, kdunk, kdunk, kdunk, kdunk.*

“It’s a not so little tree!”

*Kdunk, kdu- crack, smash.*

Starmer looked around. The not so little tree’s pot had smashed and its roots were spreading out, forming legs and feet. It froze, branches drooping as its leaves and flowers began floating to the ground.

“It’s scared,” said Starmer, rushing over and hugging the not so little tree. “Shhhh, it’s OK. I don’t know what’s happening but we will fix it together. There, there. It’s OK.”

As the not so little tree calmed, the leaves and flowers stopped falling.

Starmer moved a couple of paces away from the not so little tree and held out his arms. Starmer beckoned the not so little tree forward with his hands and said, “Now why don’t you try walking to me.”

At first, there was a flurry of leaves. But then the not so little tree twitched one of its roots and began to stretch its new foot out. Next it rocked from side to side, faster and faster, building up momentum before taking its first wobbly step. Then another and another.

The not so little tree was toddling.