**BRANCH SIX**

The not so little tree tottered around, getting used to its new legs and feet. It seemed relieved to have shaken off its pot, like taking off shoes that were too small.

The Protostars were delighted with their new playmate.

Alphard began to play a simple form of tag with the not so little tree, walking away from it and then waiting for it to catch up on its wobbly new root legs. One by one other Protostars began to join in, slowly at first but getting faster as the not so little tree built up its confidence.

The not so little tree learned fast and it wasn’t long before all six of the Protostars were playing tag around the Stardom with the newest of their gang. The game took on a new twist when Spinner, the youngest Protostar, began to tire and stopped running. The not so little tree scooped Spinner up with one of its branches and placed him gently onto a branch where he could sit and rest. As the little tree scooped up the tiny Protostar, the cute red teddy star Spinner had been clutching all day fell onto the floor next to a bush. In all the excitement of their new game, no one noticed, not even Spinner. Quietly, from inside the bush, a little pair of gnotted hands closed around the teddy star, pulling it underneath.

Outside the bush, the tag game began again but it wasn’t long before the other Protostars had all been scooped up and placed on their own perches. This led to the invention of a new game the Protostars called Swoop and Scoop. The Protostars had to scatter and then the not so little tree had to catch them, whirl them through the air and plop them into its branches, running around with them until all the Protostars had been scooped up.

The little Protostar gang soon began planning some tree swings when one of them noticed that the not so little tree had started to grow something new from one of its biggest branches. “Look,” said Bok, “It is growing little wooden toys! I can see a car, a xylophone and an aeroplane!”

“And I can see farm animals!” said Alphard.

“There’s something else at the back. It looks a lot like a swing!” gasped Spinner.

“And that one looks like it is going to be something soft. Maybe a teddy twig?” asked Outburst.

“How is all this possible?” asked Starmer, gazing up at the not so little tree in complete wonder.

MJ looked at Starmer and picked up Alphard, “There’s something else happening too. The tree hollow is becoming deeper and darker.” MJ walked towards the not so little tree and said, “It’s the kind of hole that a curious Protostar would expect to find something in - a baby dragon nesting, a treasure chest hiding…” MJ said as he leant against the trunk and lifted Alphard towards the tree hollow.

Alphard reached inside the tree hollow and began to strain, tugging hard at something inside the not so little tree until,

*Riiiip, snap, thud*

Alphard fell to the floor clutching a huge, wooden book and said, “…or a … a book… growing?”

“No, not yeeeeeeeeettttttttttttttt…” shouted a voice disappearing into the distance that no one recognised. The little tree shivered and leaves and blossoms fell in a flurry to the ground.

“Did you hear that? Who was it?” asked Alphard to no one in particular.

“I’ve no idea – maybe one of the Protos messing around,” said MJ dismissively, turning back to Alphard who was clutching the book from the tree hollow. “Are you telling me the book was growing inside the not so little tree’s hollow?”

“I think so or at least it was stuck down inside there. It was attached to the inside of the hollow. I had to pull it free, like when you rip a plant out of the ground,” said Alphard.

“It says ‘*The Last Befuddle-Me Tree*’ on the front,” said MJ.

“What’s a Befuddle-Me Tree?” asked Alphard.

“I don’t know but I’m guessing they look a lot like this,” said Starmer gesturing to the not so little tree.

“I’ve never heard of Befuddle-Me Trees but I know the best person to ask,” said MJ, looking down the path into the Forever Forest. “Great Green Eye and Gadders - I’m going to need your help!”

“Can I come too? I’ll be really, really, really helpful. Please let me come. Please, please, please?” said Alphard.

“You best stay ‘ere li’l one,” said Great Green Eye. Alphard’s face fell. Great Green Eye continued, “Oi mean you got to stay ‘ere to read that there book. No one’s ever read it before and it moight say somink important oi need to urgently know when oi’m in that there Forest. Who else can oi trust to get me that message?”

“Err, any of us fully grown-” replied Quasar before Bobie covered his mouth.

Alphard jumped up and saluted Great Green Eye, “Aye aye, Captain!”

As MJ, Gadders and Great Green Eye disappeared into the Forever Forest, Alphard opened the wooden book and began to read.