**BRANCH Eight**

Alphard began to read again.

Eye-witness accounts - letters from Germander Speedwell to Amanita Muscaria.

**My darling Amanita,**

**I had to write to you again this morning because a most extraordinary thing has happened. Last night we went to sleep as usual, surrounded by meadow flowers and toadstools, only to wake up in the heart of a forest!**

**When I first looked out of the window, I assumed our house had somehow moved. But when I went outside and saw all the usual flowers and toadstools, the old shed and the rock where we carved our names, I realised it wasn’t the house that had moved but the trees.**

**We are quite surrounded by Befuddle-Me Trees! I only wish you were here to see this with me.**

**Yours for always,**

**Germander x**

**My darling Amanita,**

**I woke up this morning to discover the majestic Befuddle-Me Trees had left in the night. They were here for a little over two days.**

**Yesterday Fluvius wrestled one of the Befuddle-Me Trees to the ground and is keeping it captive. He is hoping to see if the legends are true and the Befuddle-Me Tree really will grow him treasure. The poor tree has only been in captivity a few hours but has visibly wilted and its leaves are cascading to the ground.**

**Tonight, at midnight, we are going to set it free. It won’t be easy but we have to try.**

**Yours for always,**

**Germander x**

“There’s another letter here called ‘Growing a Befuddle-Me Tree’. Shall I read it?” Alphard asked.

“YES!” everyone shouted, eager to hear more.

Letter Account - Growing a Befuddle-Me Tree

Dear Molaquin,

I received your letter this morning. I am afraid you may have wasted your Squink. There is, unfortunately, very little I know about obtaining your own Befuddle-Me Trees. I suppose you have two options – capture one or grow one.

The easiest way to capture a mature Befuddle-Me Tree must be to separate it from its Tree Spirit. This will root it to the spot in a matter of hours. I know of trees this has happened to in the past. Not many people know, for example, that the Repositrees are in fact Befuddle-Me Trees who put down roots in the Forever Forest.

It may be easier to grow a Befuddle-Me Tree than to capture one. I believe a Befuddle-Me Tree begins with a single seed of imagination. This is an idea planted in the seedbed deep inside a mature Befuddle-Me Tree’s Hollow.

Creating a Seed of Imagination requires you to imagine a Befuddle-Me Tree. Here are the steps I would follow:

1. Imagine in great detail what you would like your tree to be like.
2. Will your tree be blue, red, green, gold or maybe invisible?
3. What kind of leaves and flowers will your tree have?
4. What is its Tree Spirit like?
5. What items will your tree grow?
6. What does your tree enjoy doing?
7. What are its Riddle-Me-Rees and its Treesure?
8. Once you have designed your tree, you then have to create it – draw a picture, write a description or sculpt it out of something. Then decorate this in as much detail as possible. Create and add as many decorations as you like – the more meaningful the better!

Together your concentration, imagination and effort will create a Seed of Imagination. Seeds of Imagination must then be planted in compost created inside a Befuddle-Me Tree’s Hollow by many years of decay, just the right fungus and a Tree Spirit able to nurture the breakdown process.

The Seed of Imagination is looked after by the Befuddle-Me Tree’s Spirit. As the seed sprouts, the Befuddle-Me Tree will grow a wooden pot around it, lifting the Fuddling and some compost up and out of the seedbed.

When the Fuddling is strong enough to survive outside the Befuddle-Me Tree’s Hollow, the Tree Spirit will detach the pot from the tree so it can be lifted down into the world outside.

The Fuddlings stay with their parent tree, sometimes resting inside the tree hollow and sometimes bouncing around in the world outside, until they are old enough to meet their own Tree Spirit at the Matching Ceremony on the Winter Solstice.

Once united, the Fuddling and its Tree Spirit return with the parent tree to the safety of the Forever Forest. Now united, the Fuddling will grow rapidly until it bursts out of its little wooden pot and learns to walk. I do believe that a Fuddling cannot grow big enough to burst out of its pot until it is reunited with its Tree Spirit --”

Alphard stopped reading and a huge smile spread across his face. “Starmer, you’re a tree spirit!” he said, eyes twinkling. Starmer blushed. He was thinking the same thing but it felt good to know someone else recognised it too.

“This is incredible!” gushed MJ. “Has anyone ever seen or heard anything like this?”

“Not exactly like this,” said Scribbler. “But I know of something similar and I am surprised MJ hasn’t made the connection. Doesn’t this remind anyone of The Creeper?”

“Hmmmm…maybe but The Creeper is a pumpkin vine. It’s not a tree. And it doesn’t grow things like the not so little tree does.”

“Except giant super pumpkins!” said Scribbler. “Isn’t that what Popping the Creeper is all about?”

“Maybe – in honesty I have never seen that ceremony. I am hoping maybe this year--” said MJ.

“I know. I know. I know. I’ve got the best idea!” said Alphard, interrupting. “The not so little tree could be Astaroidia’s first Christmas tree. It’s beautiful and magical and already growing toys. We can collect those and give them out as presents. It would be so special.”

“Ooooh! A little Saint Nick tree!” gushed Bok.

“Yessss!” squealed Outburst.

“Some of the toys have already fallen from the branches. Here is a little Sharabang and a little wooden Starmer,” said Fragment.

“And this is the troll bridge!” said Infrared picking up a wooden model of a bridge. “They’re all things the not so little tree has seen here! That’s so wizard!”

“…and this one is the soft teddy twiggy thingy,” said Fusion, one of the youngest Protos, reaching down to pick up a small brown snuggly with big but uneven eyes and extremely gnobbly arms and fingers. She looked at it carefully, seemingly unsure. “Actually, what is this exactly? Where has the not so little tree seen something like this?”

Noone answered. Noone knew.

“Sounds like your plan is a hit!” said MJ, changing the subject. “But you will need to see what Starmer thinks.”

“She looks pleased to me,” said Starmer, looking at the not so little tree whose leaves had started to twinkle and glow gold and white.

“I think it’s time for a Christmas carol,” said MJ. “And I know the perfect one. Let’s sing “Oh Christmas Tree” but instead of singing ‘green leaves’ we should sing ‘gold leaves’.”

Everyone agreed it was a fantastically festive idea. They gathered around the not so little tree and began to sing:

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

How lovely are your branches!
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

How lovely are your branches!
Not only gold in summer’s heat,

But also winter’s snow and sleet.
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,

How lovely are your branches!

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

Of all the trees most lovely;
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

Of all the trees most lovely.
Each year you bring to us delight

With brightly shining Christmas light!
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

Of all the trees most lovely.

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

We learn from all your beauty;
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

We learn from all your beauty.
Your bright gold leaves with festive cheer,

Give hope and strength throughout the year
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,

We learn from all your beauty.

With every line, the not so little tree shivered, sparkled and shone, twinkling along with the carol. Its leaves took on a life of their own, each spouting like a tiny golden fountain fizzing golden shimmers into the air to gently float on the breeze.

“Christmas magic!” said Alphard.

The carols continued into the evening, celebrating the not so little tree, and blanketing the Stardom in a peaceful warmth. But despite all the happiness, excitement and Christmas magic fizzing through the Stardom, by the next morning, the little tree had vanished.

As with every ending, this was also a beginning, but to find that beginning we will have to start with another ending.