**BRANCH two**

By the next morning the little bud had burst into a rosette of crystal-clear leaves with golden veins. Starmer couldn’t believe his eyes. He decided it must be something to do with the red bow and started experimenting by adding other Christmas decorations to the little tree.

Now it was Starmer’s turn to wait. He waited and waited and then waited some more but nothing happened. The little tree had stopped growing.

Starmer took the Christmas decorations off again. “Well little one,” said Starmer, stroking the little tree’s branches. “If it’s not the Christmas decorations then what was it? What is it that made you suddenly grow such beautiful leaves?” And just like that, little buds all over the little tree began to burst into leaf.

Starmer felt sure that the little tree was growing taller too. When it had first arrived, it had only been as tall as Starmer’s belly but now it was reaching up to his mouth.

Starmer pulled the pot up to the house and marked the little tree’s height on the wall. “We’ll soon see what’s going on, little one,” Starmer said, smoothing the little tree’s branches.

Before Starmer had even finished speaking, the little tree exploded with leaves. Starmer was stunned. The tree wasn’t reacting to the Christmas decorations, it was reacting to his voice.

Starmer sat next to the little tree and started to tell stories, sing songs and make jokes. The tree thrived. Buds swelled and burst into leaf. Leaves shimmered and sparkled. Bark changed, pulsing with undulating patterns and textures. Then, just as Starmer thought nothing else could possibly happen, a different type of bud emerged, smaller and more pointed than the others.

The tree was nothing short of spectacular. Starmer was transfixed.

In fact, Starmer was so focussed on the little tree that he hadn’t noticed MJ approaching, clipboard in hand, with Scribbler, Startoonist and Shutterbug, the Weekly Portal team. “Hi Starmer! We were just coming to write an article about our hunt for Astaroidia’s first Christmas tr- ” MJ stopped, “Is that the… What’s happened to… I don’t understand… How have you… W… Wow…”

“I know,” said Starmer, “Isn’t it glorious!” As Starmer spoke, the little tree trembled. Its new, pointy buds started to explode and rainbow flowers cascaded from its branches, showering the ground with tiny stars that bounced along the floor and then snapped in a shiver of sparkles.

The little tree was blossoming.