

Leona's Unlucky Mission

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Disney Press

Los Angeles • New York

Introduction

You take a deep breath, about to blow out the candles on your birthday cake. Clutching a coin in your fist, you get ready to toss it into the dancing waters of a fountain. You stare at your little brother as you each hold the end of a dried wishbone, about to pull. But what do you do first?

You make a wish, of course!

Ever wonder what happens right after you make that wish? *Not much*, you may be thinking.

Well, you'd be wrong.

Because something quite unexpected happens next. Each and every wish that is made becomes a glowing Wish Orb, invisible to the human eye. This undetectable orb zips through the air and into the heavens, on a one-way trip to the brightest star in the sky—a magnificent place called Starland. Starland is inhabited by Starlings, who look a lot like you and me, except they have a sparkly glow to their skin, and glittery hair in unique colors. And they have one more thing: magical powers. The Starlings use these powers to make good wishes come true, for when good wishes are granted, it results in positive energy. And the Starlings of Starland need this energy to keep their world running.

In case you are wondering, there are three kinds of Wish Orbs:

- 1) **GOOD WISH ORBS.** These wishes are positive and helpful and come from the heart. They are pretty and sparkly and are nurtured in climate-controlled Wish-Houses. They bloom into fantastical glowing orbs. When the time is right, they are presented to the appropriate Starling for wish fulfillment.
- 2) **BAD WISH ORBS.** These are for selfish, mean-spirited, or negative things. They don't sparkle

at all. They are immediately transported to a special containment center, as they are very dangerous and must not be granted.

- 3) IMPOSSIBLE WISH ORBS. These wishes are for things, like world peace and curing diseases, that simply can't be granted by Starlings. These sparkle with an almost impossibly bright light and are taken to a special area of the Wish-House with tinted windows to contain the glare they produce. The hope is that one day they can be turned into good wishes the Starlings can help grant.

Starlings take their wish granting very seriously. There is a special school, called Starling Academy, that accepts only the best and brightest young Starling girls. They study hard for four years, and when they graduate, they are ready to start traveling to Wishworld to help grant wishes. For as long as anyone can remember, only graduates of wish-granting schools have ever been allowed to travel to Wishworld. But things have changed in a very big way.

Read on for the rest of the story. . . .

Prologue

Dear Mom and Dad,

First, star salutations for the care package! How did you know I needed a new toothlight? (Why are they so easy to lose?) And, Mom, your gamma-chip clusters are out of this world! I've already eaten half the box. They're soooooo starlicious I just can't stop! I know you said to share them with my roommate, Scarlet, and I would have, but guess what? She had to move out. Long story. (Don't worry, it wasn't my fault.) The good news is—you remember how she used to skateboard down the walls?

Well, she won't be doing that anymore, at least in my room! So for now I've got the whole room to myself—and it looks soooo much better without all that black! I'm hoping to get a new roommate soon, though, and I'll let you know when I do. Stars crossed she's into a color that goes a little bit better with gold—and that she's a lot more relaxed and not so hard to talk to.

Oh, and guess what! More big news! I formed a new band!!!! It's called Star Darlings! And I'm the lead singer (of course)! We haven't played a gig yet, but I know we will, and I'll send you a holo-vid as soon as we do. We even have a manager, so it's the real deal! Remember Clover? Her color is purple and she wears the hat? Anyway, her family is the Flying Molensas—as in the circus we used to go to every year! So she knows all about show business and she writes great songs. I know you keep saying that becoming a pop star is a moon shot, and that chances are a hydrong to one, but I have a starmendous feeling about us! And I might as well shoot for the stars, right? Isn't that what they're for?

Speaking of stars, I was looking at Grandpa's the other day, and I swear it winked at me!

Tell Felix congratulations on his promotion to assistant manager of the shoe shop. (I won't mention that Dad is his boss.) And tell Garfield I'll believe he has a

*girlfriend when he sends me a holo-pic. I'm waiting . . . !
(Ha-ha!)*

Finally, tell Duchess and Francesca I'll holo-call them tonight if I have the chance. There's a first-year student here named Cassie who reminds me so much of Duchess, by the way. She has the same thick black lashes and soft rosy eyes. She's like a little doll you just want to pick up and hug!

I miss you and I love you.

Your superstar,

Leona

P.S. Send more clusters when you can!

Leona read over her holo-letter quickly, trying to think of what else to say. She tried to send one to her parents weekly, though sometimes she forgot. Sometimes, too, it was nearly impossible to write anything without giving her Star Darlings identity away. For instance, how could she explain Scarlet's moving out without mentioning that Scarlet had been dismissed from the group? She mailed her letter with a flick of her wrist. Hopefully, one day they'd all be able to share their secret with their families, but who knew when that would be?

CHAPTER 1

Twinkle, twinkle. *Twinkle twinkle.* **TWINKLE
TWINKLE.**

That was the sound of a Star-Zap that had been trying to get its owner's attention for quite some time. Leona, who was getting ready for bed in the blissful peace of a roommate-less dorm room, had stopped singing into her hairbrush for a moment to actually run it through her hair, and she finally heard the insistent sound. She grabbed her Star-Zap eagerly, willing it to be news of another Wish Mission, hopefully hers. But her brow wrinkled in confusion as she read the message: PLEASE COME TO MY OFFICE IMMEDIATELY. I HAVE A MATTER OF GREAT URGENCY TO DISCUSS WITH YOU. LADY STELLA. Leona, already dressed in gold brocade pajama bottoms

and a golden tank top, threw on a dressing jacket made of the softest glimmerworm silk, shoved her feet into a pair of golden flats, and raced out the door, feeling a heady mix of excitement, anticipation, and dread. As she hurried along on the Cosmic Transporter, she thought of what it could be. Would Scarlet be reinstated as a Star Darling (and be her roommate once more)? Maybe it would be Libby's Wish Blossom presentation (which had been postponed due to the Scarlet situation). Or what if someone had caught wind of their secret trips to Wishworld? She shook her head, clearing it. No, she decided, it was none of those. Then she had another thought, which made her heart beat double time: maybe she was going to be awarded some honor. Possibly Most Popular Starling Academy Student or Most Likely to Be a Shining Star. Leona arrived at Lady Stella's office door with a big smile on her face, in case any holo-pictures were to be taken. She chided herself for not changing her outfit into something a little less slumberrific.

The door to Lady Stella's office was ajar. That was odd. Leona walked inside the grand space she had come to know quite well. In the very center stood the round table where they had first met together as a team. There sat three of her fellow Star Darlings. They looked at

her nervously. "Where is everyone?" Leona asked. Sage, Vega, and Libby looked up at her and shrugged silently.

"I was kind of hoping this was going to be my Wish Blossom presentation," Libby said, twirling a strand of her pretty pink hair around her finger. "But then where's everyone else?" She looked around the office as if the other girls were hiding behind the furniture and would soon pop out to surprise her.

Lady Stella strode into the room, followed by Lady Cordial, the head of admissions. Lady Cordial was one of a handful of Starling Academy administrators who knew of the Star Darlings' and Lady Stella's plan. Smiling tightly, as she always did, she greeted the Star Darlings with clasped hands and a tidy bow. Lady Stella used her wish energy to close the door behind them—a little more forcefully than necessary, in Leona's opinion. Leona couldn't help admiring Lady Stella, so lithe and beautiful. The headmistress was as regal and confident as the head of admissions was meek and nervous. Then Leona took a closer look at Lady Stella. In her two plus years at Starling Academy, Leona had never seen the woman look so . . . so . . . irritated. It couldn't be good news. Lady Stella looked at the four girls. "Where's Scarlet?" she asked.

Leona shrugged. "I haven't seen her since she moved out of our room," she said. The other girls nodded in agreement.

"Really?" said Lady Stella. Her smooth forehead creased with concern. "That is surprising. We had a lengthy discussion after everything happened and she was very gracious. I'm surprised she didn't respond to my holo-text."

Scarlet? Gracious? thought Leona. She'd have to take the headmistress's word for it.

Libby shook her head. "It's true. We haven't seen her anywhere," she said. "Not at lunch or at band practice."

Sage spoke up. "She missed our Wish Probability class, and study group, too."

Lady Stella frowned. "I see . . . I suppose it's entirely possible that Scarlet was more upset than she let on." She inhaled sharply. "Perhaps it's no surprise that a Starling would need some time alone."

Especially Scarlet, thought Leona. *She never seemed particularly eager to be around other Starlings before anyway.*

She stood, thinking the meeting was over.

"Not so fast, Leona," said Lady Stella. "I haven't gotten to the reason I summoned you all here."

Leona sat down with a thump.

"I have two words for you girls," the headmistress said grimly. "Star Darlings."

The girls looked at her blankly. She continued. "What in the stars were you thinking, naming your band after our secret group?"

Leona gasped. She had been so excited about being named the lead singer of the band that the actual name had barely registered with her at the moment. It *was* strange, come to think of it. Quickly she explained to Lady Stella exactly what had happened, the other girls breaking in and adding their thoughts. She had always wanted to start a rock band—since her younger years, in fact, back in Flairfield—so that she could be the lead singer, of course. And as soon as Lady Stella formed the Star Darlings, Leona couldn't help thinking that it would be the perfect place to start.

Many of the Star Darlings already played instruments, Leona knew, and it would be a startastic way to get to know each other even better than they already did.

There were never supposed to be open auditions. That was something Leona had thought she'd made perfectly clear. Somehow, though—it was still a mystery—a holo-flyer was sent out to every Star-Zap in the school. Except the Star Darlings' Star-Zaps, which just made

everything even weirder. Worse was that Leona couldn't even pick the band members in the end, even though it had all been her idea. Starling Academy rules—ever fair and balanced and just—stipulated that any tryout on school property be overseen by a school official using a Ranker, a judging machine designed to be completely objective and keep any contest a hydrong percent fair.

So the Ranker had chosen a group of girls and also the name of the band. And it just so happened that the five girls who were chosen were all Star Darlings, and that the name it picked was . . . the Star Darlings.

Lady Stella shook her head. "This is very odd indeed."

Lady Cordial piped up, "S-s-s-so very s-s-s-strange Lady Stella. S-s-s-so very s-s-s-strange."

Lady Stella looked at the girls and her expression softened. "So you girls had nothing to do with this?" They shook their heads.

"And who was the professor in charge?" Lady Stella asked.

Leona thought. "It was Professor . . . Professor Leticia Langtree."

Lady Cordial touched Lady Stella's arm, and the headmistress bent down so the shorter woman could whisper in her ear. Lady Stella listened, nodded, then

straightened, her mouth set in a grim line. "I will make a delicate inquiry with her to determine if this was a random mistake or done deliberately." She shook her head. "But really, what are the chances of a Ranker picking the same secret name?" she mused aloud. "What are the chances?"

Her question was rhetorical, but Starlings were born with an innate knowledge of mathematics, and the answer was on the tips of their tongues in no time. "One in five hydrong mooniums," everyone chorused.

As they stood and began filing out of the room, Lady Stella was shaking her head. "The revelation of your group's secret name is very concerning to me. Very concerning."


Leona and the rest of the band walked down the hallway, nobody saying a word. They stepped out into the still night, the sky clear and filled with twinkling stars. They all paused for a moment, looking up and taking it all in. Most of their other classmates were already in bed, dreaming their Starling dreams as they absorbed their lessons for the day. Then, without a word, the four Star Darlings headed to the campus Cosmic Transporter, the moving sidewalk that whisked Starlings across the school grounds. It wasn't until they were moving toward the dorms that Leona broke the silence.

“So what?” she said. “What is the big deal that our name is out there? I mean, we’re still secretly going on missions. That hasn’t changed. I think Lady Stella is totally overreacting,” she said firmly.

Vega shook her blue-bobbed head from side to side. “I don’t know, Leona. Lady Stella seemed pretty upset. There must be more to it.”

“Time will tell,” said Sage wearily. “Time will tell.”

And with that, the four girls went their separate ways to try to get some sleep.



CHAPTER 2

BAM!

Leona looked up. What had that been? Had it come from the hall? It was always so quiet. Intrigued, Leona jumped off the bed to see what was going on.

Leona ran to her door and pulled it open—just a crack. She peered down the hall to see Tessa, fists clenched, facing her own door. Tessa seemed about to tell the door something, but she changed her mind and turned away. Leona watched for another starmin as Tessa stomped onto the dorm’s Cosmic Transporter. Bright green sparkles flew from her hair as it swung back and forth.

Tessa could be stubborn, Leona knew, but this was a side she’d never seen before. In fact, in the two plus

staryears they'd been together at Starling Academy, Leona had never witnessed Tessa losing her cool, not once. Not even with Gemma, her younger sister—a first-year student and their fellow Star Darling—whose mouth was as big as Wishworld's sun. No, Tessa was always the even-tempered Starling, the peacemaker if anyone quarreled. Her roommate, Adora, must have done something pretty outrageous to get a reaction like *that* out of her.

Twinkle-twinkle.

On her desk, Leona's Star-Zap rang. A holo-call was coming in. She dashed back to answer it. "Star greetings?"

Her fellow Star Darling Cassie popped up, waving. "It's me," Cassie chirped. She was in her reading nook in her dorm room, surrounded by star-shaped quilted pillows and piles of holo-books and holo-magazines. "So, have you heard anything more from Scarlet? I'm worried about her, aren't you?"

"I guess." Leona shrugged. "Right now, though, I'm much more interested in this fight Adora and Tessa just had."

"Fight? Tessa and Adora?" Cassie's pale skin shimmered in her surprise.

Leona made an X on her chest. "Cross my stars and hope to shine."

“Moon and stars . . . What happened?”

“I don’t know. All I saw was Tessa storming down the hall.”

Just then, a tiny star flashed in the upper corner of her Star-Zap, indicating that lunch would soon be served.

“Lunchtime already?” exclaimed Leona. “Sunspots! Where did the morning go? I still have to take a sparkle shower! Give me ten starmins, and I’ll meet you outside, between the dorms.”



Freshly sparkling and dressed in her favorite gold tunic, marigold-colored leggings, and golden boots, Leona joined Cassie in the courtyard between their neighboring dorms. Cassie, who was just in her first year at Starling Academy, roomed with Sage, their fellow Star Darling, in the Little Dipper Dorm. The building was where all first- and second-year students lived. As a third year, Leona lived with all third- and fourth-year Starlings in the only slightly larger but more luxurious Big Dipper Dorm.

Arm in arm, as was the custom for Starlings whenever traveling in pairs, they strode past the Star Quad, the star-shaped heart of the Starling Academy campus, where the iconic dancing fountain cheerfully sparkled

and splashed. Just past the quad rose the semi-star-shaped band shell, Leona's favorite place on campus apart from her room. Her brand-new band hadn't played there yet, but they would soon. A few more practices and they'd be ready to take the stage and rock the school!

Behind the band shell stood the academy's enormous dining hall, the Celestial Café. In case anyone missed the signal on her Star-Zap, a great glowing star above the door flashed, announcing mealtime to everyone.

Inside the vast, warmly lit dining room, which was somehow cozy and elegant at once, Leona and Cassie joined Piper and Gemma, their fellow Star Darlings who were already seated at the table the group had made their own. Ever since they'd been chosen, the girls had eaten their meals together at the table by the window with what many thought was one of the best views from the school. Gazing out, one could see both the jewel-like Crystal Mountains and the glistening, violet-hued Luminous Lake. These landmarks were the pride and joy of Starland City, and they were beautiful indeed. Still, Leona personally enjoyed the view from her own dorm room window even more: it was of the glimmering skyline of downtown Starland City, the place she'd grown up dreaming about moving to—as a superstar, of course!

Before the girls could even exchange star greetings, a Bot-Bot waiter appeared. It filled their crystal goblets with sparkling water and placed a piping-hot roll fresh from the oven for each of them on their china plates.

“Star greetings, Leona, Cassie. What is it that you desire?” asked the Bot-Bot waiter.

“Hmm . . . let’s see . . .” Leona’s forehead wrinkled. What would she have that day?

There was no menu for them to choose from. They could truly order anything their Starling hearts desired, and Leona prided herself on never having ordered something more than once since she had been at Starling Academy.

“A garble-green soufflé for me, please,” said Cassie.

“Really? Again? You don’t get tired of that?” Leona asked.

“Not really,” said Cassie. “It’s tasty. And it’s healthy. Why mess with something that works?”

Leona cocked her head and grinned, wagging her eyebrows. “I don’t know . . . because you *can*?”

“And for you, Leona?” The Bot-Bot waiter hovered politely near her shoulder, ready to transmit her request to the café’s gourmet Bot-Bot chefs.

“Right . . . okay . . . for me . . . What are you having?”

Leona asked Piper, eyeing the glossy emerald tendrils piled on her plate.

“Who, me? Oh, a starweed salad.”

Leona scrunched up her nose. “Hmn . . . I’ll pass. What about you?” She turned to Gemma.

“Me? A druderwomp burger,” said Gemma, moving in for another bite.

“Ah! Now that’s a vegetable I like! I think I’ll have that, a druderwomp burger—well done—with extra mooncheese. I haven’t had that before, have I?”

The Bot-Bot waiter scanned its memory to check. “No,” it replied decidedly. “Never with extra cheese.”

“Starmendous. Star salutations.” Leona thanked their server with a wave. “*Soooo?*” she went on, gazing around. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Well, we know where Scarlet’s *not*,” said Gemma as a glob of bright-orange mustardia-blossom sauce dribbled down her chin and onto her shirt. She glanced down, not sure where to wipe, since it was the same color as her top.

“Well, *that* I knew,” said Leona. “You do know she’s moved out of my room?”

“Really!” said Gemma. “Already!”

Leona nodded. “Completely. Everything’s gone. Not a speck of hot pink or black. It’s like she was never there.” She smiled.

“Ah, but she was. Don’t forget that,” said Piper.

“Uh, I wasn’t going to. But star salutations.”

Piper tossed her pale green hair over her shoulder.

“You’re welcome,” she replied.

Cassie spoke up. “Well, Scarlet still has to eat. Even if she’s not a Star Darling, she’s still a student. Is she sitting with someone else?”

The dining room was so vast it was hard to identify each and every sparkling face. But Scarlet had always stood out in a crowd in her palette of hot pink and jet black. The four Star Darlings scanned the wavy rows of tables. One by one, each shook her head. If Scarlet had been in the café, they would have spotted her in the rainbow of students, without a doubt.

“It wouldn’t be the first meal she ever skipped,” said Leona. “You know how antisocial she can be. Honestly, I never could see how Lady Stella ever sensed Star Darling potential in her, let alone see her granting wishes.”

“Well, don’t tell Libby that,” Gemma warned. “She’s really upset about the whole thing. And her stars get out of line so easily lately. You’d think a successful mission would have helped, but *nooooo*,” Gemma groaned. “Honestly, I don’t know how much longer I can room with her.”

“Hey, here come Clover and Astra,” observed Piper, pointing with her chin.

Leona and the others turned, eager to find out what news the second-year roommates might have. If they did have any, though, it didn't look like it was very good.

"What's wrong?" Cassie asked as they reached the table.

Clover shrugged and nodded toward Astra. "Ask her."

"No, ask her." Astra slid her warm auburn eyes to Clover. "Seriously, what were we fighting about again?"

"Well . . . if I remember correctly, you were cheating."

"But I wasn't."

"But you were."

"Oh, just admit it, Astra," Gemma cut in. "Everyone knows you hate to lose."

Astra glared down her nose at the ginger-haired Starling. Her own flame-red hair flickered indignantly. "That doesn't mean I'd cheat, Gemma. Who asked you, anyway?"

"Could somebody please start from the beginning?" said Cassie.

"It's no big deal," said Clover, shrugging the whole episode away. She shook off her plum jacket and tossed it over the back of her chair. With a flick of her head, she shook her violet bangs out of her eyes and sank into her seat. "I'm not even mad . . . anymore. . . . We were

playing a friendly game of holo-cards in our room, and Astra cheated. The end.”

“But I didn’t cheat,” groaned Astra. “I mean, what kind of Starling do you think I am? Besides, Clover, I didn’t even need to cheat to win. You tried to shoot the moon when you knew I’d broken hearts.”

“Let’s just forget about it,” said Clover, bowing her head.

“You know, I was kind of missing having a roommate,” said Leona, chuckling. “But not so much anymore.”

“It’s not funny,” Piper said, leaning intently over her salad. “I don’t know if you Starlings have noticed it, but lately I’ve been sensing a lot of tension in the air, including from my own roommate, Vega. She wasn’t talking to me this morning when she left. In fact”—Piper frowned and slowly sat back—“I wonder if that’s why she’s not here, because she’s still so mad . . .”

“Like Tessa and Adora!” exclaimed Cassie.

“What about Tessa?” Gemma’s ears glistened at her sister’s name.

By that time, though, a duo of Bot-Bot waiters had returned to take Clover’s and Astra’s orders and serve Leona’s and Cassie’s food.

“Mmm! Star salutations!” Leona licked her lips

and used her wish energy manipulation skills to mentally flick open her napkin, a crisp cloth square, which she then laid across her lap. “Could we worry about all that stuff later and worry about eating right now?” she begged.