

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 an 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, the result is 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 disease cures, 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

Holo-letter sent from Cassie's Star-Zap, to be auto-delivered Reliquaday, three starhours following Tessa's Wish Blossom ceremony:

Dear Star Darlings,
Greetings and salutations, friends and fellow Star Darlings. You may be wondering why I'm sending a holo-letter when I've just seen you all at the ceremony. (Starkudos, Tessa, on a mission well

done!) There are many answers to that question. And I'll get to the most important one at the end of this holo-letter. So keep reading.

In short, I am writing to clarify the dangerous situation on Starland and, in doing so, explain my own actions. Wait! Don't delete this letter! Please hear me out! (This means you, Sage and Libby, who have turned a blind eye to Lady Stella's involvement.) And don't roll your eyes. (This means you, Adora! I do not overreact to problems.) I am not imagining that Starland is in major trouble. It is. I am not imagining conspiracies or villains. They exist.

To support my stand, here are the issues in no particular order:

The Issues on Wishworld: Problematic Missions

Why do the Star Darlings even exist? As we all know, Lady Stella brought us together to test her theory that if the wishes of young Wishlings were to be granted by young Starlings, this special combination would produce an even greater amount of positive wish energy than adult Starlings could ever collect. And now, since we know that Starland

is having a serious wish energy crisis, our wish missions are even more important than ever.

Why are our Wish Missions—even the successful ones—always in danger until the last starmin? We’ve been trained, schooled, and are starmendously capable, yet something always goes wrong. And that does not even take into account Leona’s mission into account. Not only was her Wish Pendant destroyed, making it impossible for it to absorb any wish energy, but she almost didn’t make it back on her shooting star! And she obviously (sorry, Leona!) didn’t get her Power Crystal.

The Issues with Star Darlings: 1) Fighting within Our Group and 2) Strange Behavior

(Both designed to keep us from acting together and from acting at all!)

Specifically:

Why were we fighting with our roommates? The poisonous flowers from the Isle of Misera which were placed in our rooms.

Why were all the Star Kindness Day compliments changed to insults? That one speaks for itself!

Why were we all acting so odd and not even realizing it?
Because of the poisonous nail polish from the Star Darlings-only mani-pedi party! Whoever created the polish knew this strange behavior would interfere with our missions. Not to mention it was starmendously embarrassing for everyone. (Libby falling asleep anywhere and everywhere; Scarlet skipping anywhere and everywhere; and probably the worst: me, bragging anywhere and everywhere.)

Additional Star Darling Issues: the Band and the Star-Zap

Why was Leona's band named the Star Darlings, with tryout info sent out to the whole school? To bring our secret group into the starlight is my guess!

Why was my Star-Zap not working properly?
So someone could intercept Star Darlings communication. Again, that's my guess.

My Issue with Lady Stella: She Is Responsible for All This

(Again, Sage and Libby: hear me out.)

Specifically:

Why was Scarlet kicked out of the Star Darlings and replaced Ophelia? To sabotage a mission, of course.

And who set that in motion? Lady Stella! She switched admissions test results so it looked like Scarlet had low scores and Ophelia's were high as the moons. (Starkudos to Scarlet. Impressive work, really!) Then she instructed Ophelia to lie—about being an orphan, about being a gifted student, everything! And that information, Star Darlings, came from Ophelia herself.

And that, finally, brings me to the real purpose of this holo-letter.

The Real Purpose of This Holo-Letter

Why did I write it? Scarlet, Tessa, and I have decided to explore the Star Caves, deep underground our school. We are looking for clues in the very labyrinth Lady Stella introduced us to—clues about the headmistress, clues about our missions, clues about anything and everything. (Yes, Gemma, your sister, Tessa, is with us, even though she just came back from her mission and is not a fan of dark, dank, spooky places.)

I have a feeling something big will come out of our search. We are just now setting off. But if you are reading this, it means we have not made it back. We are still underground, in the tunnels, maybe trapped and most definitely in trouble. So . . . help! Find us as fast as you can!

Yours in jeopardy,
Cassie

CHAPTER

1

“Mmmmmmm, hmmmm, mmmm, hmmmm.” Adora hummed tunelessly, alone in her dorm room.

It felt nice to have the room all to herself. Still, it was a little strange that Tessa, her roommate, wasn't there.

The two had just come back from a Wish Mission. It was Tessa's mission; Adora had yet to be chosen for her own mission to Wishworld. But Adora had been sent to help when the situation looked dim. Of course, she'd quickly helped set things straight. Really, Tessa had been so caught up in her Wisher's emotions that she couldn't see the orchard for the ozziefruit trees. Luckily, Adora had set her straight. So, thank the stars, the trip had been successful and really quite exciting.

After the Star Darling ceremony, where Tessa had

gotten her Power Crystal, Adora had expected her to come straight back to their room. Tessa was quite the homebody after all. And there were her virtual galliope, Jewel, to feed and her micro-zap waiting to bake yummy astromuffins.

But Tessa hadn't so much as stopped off at the room as far as Adora could tell. Probably, Adora reasoned, she was catching up with her younger sister, Gemma. And Adora planned to take full advantage of her alone time.

Adora had been right in the middle of an experiment when she'd been called on to help Tessa. She'd been itching to get back to it for over a starday now. It combined her two biggest passions: science and fashion. Specifically, sequins.

Adora wanted these sequins to be extra twinkly. That alone wouldn't be so difficult. But she wanted that newfound sparkle to bring out each sequin's color, too, to make the shades themselves brighter, warmer, more radiant.

The gold sequins that Leona favored had to become even more brightly golden; Cassie's silvery pink ones even more silvery pink; Clover's an even deeper, more brilliant purple. And Adora's goal was to do it with just one formula.

She wanted the formula to work with every shade

under the suns, and that was twelve in the Star Darlings group alone. Add in all the different tones at Starling Academy, or furthermore all of Starland itself, and the numbers were starmazing!

Adora had already removed natural elements from glittery yellow calliope flowers, fiery red florafierces, and other plants and trees. Now she needed to add twinkle-oxide—with a spark of glowzene for good measure—into each mixture. The combination had to be just right, so the formula would react with any Starling shade.

Luckily, it was Reliquaday, the first starday of the weekend, which left her plenty of time to test her ideas. Adora would be logical and methodical as always. But she wanted to get it done sooner rather than later, so the sequins could be sewn onto outfits the Star Darlings band members planned to wear for the upcoming Battle of the Bands on Starshine Day.

“Mmmmm, hmmm, mmmmm.” Adora hummed, pouring 5.6 lumins of twinkle-oxide into a beaker. *“Mmmm, hmmmmmm.”* She turned on her personal bright-burner to 179 degrees Starrius and waited for the mixture to heat. *“Mmmm.”*

Alone in the room, Adora felt free to sing to her heart's content. Her own music skills were nothing to

brag about, but Adora wasn't much into the arts anyway. For her, it was science, science, science—and fashion, fashion, fashion.

Adora planned to be a style scientist, maybe the first in all of Starland. And she'd show everyone she could be the brightest in both.

Adora's parents owned a trendy clothing store in Radiant Hills, the ultraexclusive community in Starland City, where Libby had grown up alongside glimmerous celebrities and famous Starlandians.

Adora herself lived in a perfectly nice neighborhood of modest, comfortable homes. She couldn't complain. She and her parents shared a simple one-level house where they each had their own workspace, creating designs to sell in the store. Even as a wee Starling, she'd had a microscope and a star-sewing machine, creating lustrous new fabrics for her parents to use in their clothing designs.

Adora pushed back sky blue strands of hair that had fallen out of her loose bun and adjusted her knee-length glittery lab coat and gloves. She checked her pockets, making sure the extra test tubes she always carried around were closed up tight.

Finally, with great care, she straightened her safety starglasses. Safety first, she knew from prior experience.

Tessa had just mixed a batch of glorange smoothies. Adora, meanwhile, had been working on special fabric that would sparkle extra bright when it got wet. She'd combined orangey lightning in a bottle with starfuric acid, and was ready to soak the fabric. The mixture did look a bit like the smoothies, Adora had to admit. So it was no wonder Tessa reached for the wrong container and lifted it to her lips, about to take a sip. Adora had to make a running dive to knock the liquid out of her hands.

Right after that, Adora had established rules, including clearly separating food from experiments and wearing safety starglasses. That last part was particularly important, Adora realized a starsec later, when—

Bang! Her sequins mixture fizzled and sparked, overflowing from the beaker and spilling onto her workspace. Immediately, the smoking liquid disappeared, thanks to the self-cleaning technology featured in all Starland dwellings.

Adora's side of the room in particular was squeaky clean and spare—some might say sterile and uninteresting—with a neat desktop and lab space, with carefully arranged beakers and test tubes. Even the “fashion section” had neat cubbies for bolts of fabrics and a carefully polished star-sewing machine.

She did like an orderly room, with minimal possessions. Tessa, on the other hand, had brought a moonium knickknacks—along with plants and herbs and old holo-cookbooks—from home when they first moved in together.

Adora didn't quite understand. She didn't get attached to things. Out with the old, in with the new, she thought frequently, deleting old experiment notes and equations. She was thinking that now, in fact, as she struck the sequins formula from her holo-lab notes.

"*Starf*," Adora said, eyeing the now blank screen. She'd have to start over, maybe lowering the bright-burner to 147 degrees. But that was okay. That was what science was all about—trial and error and patience.

And that was all part of the lightentific method, Adora's personal approach to experimenting: Ask a question based on observation. Come up with a reasonable hypothesis (a guess, really) to answer the question. Create an experiment to see if the guess was correct, and analyze the results. Finally, draw a conclusion: either the experiment worked or it failed.

But Adora wasn't one to accept failure.

"*Mmmmm*." Adora's voice grew more powerful as she started on a new hypothesis. It was a relief, really, to be loud. She had been so frustrated when no one had

been able to hear her for so long, only later realizing the poisonous nail polish was causing her to whisper. At least it had been better than giggling nonstop like Sage, though. Or pulling practical jokes like Astra had done. No one liked it when their drinks were switched at the Celestial Café!

Adora was carefully carrying fresh batches of the mixture to the bright-burner when her Star-Zap buzzed.

Should she ignore it? Just keep concentrating on her experiment?

Part of her wanted to do just that. But with all the strange goings-on lately, it could be an important message. Or maybe it was an announcement for the next mission!

“Oh, moonberries,” she said, using Tessa’s favorite expression as she set down the beakers. She’d just have to check. She reached for her Star-Zap and glanced at the screen.

A group holo-letter from Cassie? she thought. That was a little bizarre. Why would Cassie write a long letter when she could just talk to the Star Darlings or send a brief holo-text?

Adora tapped the screen and the letter appeared in the air, floating at eye-level. Quickly, she read the note, then read it again just to be sure: Cassie was with Tessa—and

Scarlet—and they were trapped in the Star Caves. There Adora was, happily going about her experiment, pleased as sparkle-punch to have the room to herself, while Tessa had been in trouble the whole time.

Every problem had a solution—scientific, mathematical, or otherwise. It just took a cool, clear mind to figure it out. But Adora had to leave the room, step away from Tessa’s knickknacks and holo-photos from the farm, to think things through. Calmly, she went outside.

“Adora! Thank the stars you’re here!” Leona shouted, rushing down the hall, her golden curls bouncing behind her. “Did you see Cassie’s holo-letter?”

“Shh!” hissed Adora. She glanced pointedly in the other direction, where two other third-years were getting off the Cosmic Transporter and eyeing them curiously.

“Just the SDs being SDish,” one said with a laugh.

Ask just about any Starling Academy student and they would say SD stood for Slow Developers, a nickname given to the twelve girls because they all attended a special class for extra help. Little did the students know, however, that SD was also short for Star Darlings. And the “extra help” was lessons that they used on actual Wish Missions.

Adora shrugged off the label and the idea that anyone

would think she was a weak student. It just went to show you how dim other Starlings could be, she thought. Particularly those girls still hanging around the hall, trying to eavesdrop on her conversation with Leona.

“We should all get together to talk about the holo-letter,” she told Leona. “Right now.”

“Must be an SD assignment,” one of the eavesdropping girls said. “A sloooow assignment.” Happy with their insults, the other girls moved on.

“Of course,” said Leona in a calmer voice. “I’ll holo-text everyone right away. We should meet in my room. It’s the perfect place. You know I have my own personal stage? So it’s all set for a group discussion. Whoever wants to talk can use the microphone.”

“Right,” said Adora, though she didn’t think they really needed a microphone. What they needed was a plan.

CHAPTER 2

Adora was sitting crisscross starapple sauce, as they used to say in Wee Constellation School. Most of the Star Darlings gathered in Leona's room sat the same way. Of course Piper went one better, twisting so her feet were *on top* of the opposite legs and placing her hands palms-up in a meditative pose. It wasn't the most comfortable position, Adora knew.

She'd actually tried it when she'd joined Piper in a meditation class. She'd wanted to test the effectiveness of being in the moment, of being aware of each movement. Adora had left with a healthy respect for mindful thinking—and sore legs.

The girls were grouped around Leona's mini star-shaped stage, waiting while Leona searched for her

microphone. “I know it’s here somewhere!” Leona shouted, flinging starbrushes shoes, and accessories everywhere.

The room was bathed in a golden light, filtering through gauzy starlight curtains. Adora couldn’t help wondering if she could capture that exact shade for Leona’s sequins.

Adora’s eyes swept over the other Star Darlings, noting their coloring. Sweet-looking Libby with her jellyjoooble pink hair leaned forward worriedly. Sleepy Piper half-closed her seafoam green eyes.

Fiery red-haired Astra—a perfect match for the florafierce flower extract, Adora realized—dusted off her star ball uniform.

“You know, I got Cassie’s message right in the middle of the Glowin’ Glions star ball game,” she was saying to Piper, “And when I was leaving, I spotted Leebeau in the stands!”

Adora frowned. She’d heard about this boy, Astra’s “biggest fan”, who went to Star Preparatory, the school across Luminous Lake. Astra had met him on a starbus, on the way to visit an orphanage on the search for the missing Ophelia. And she’d been keeping an eye out for him in the stands at every game since.

There might be some scientific explanation for

Astra's sudden interest in the boy. That would be interesting to pursue. But it didn't quite figure into Adora's own game plan.

"So he's finally here," Astra continued, "and I had to leave! And miss the rest of the game!"

Piper nodded sympathetically. "If you're destined to see him again, it will happen."

Surprisingly, Astra nodded. "It's true. This is an emergency situation."

"Yes!" Adora agreed, standing to address the group. "So what are we going to do about it?"

"Ahem!" Leona cleared her throat, hurrying over. "I found the microphone." She tapped it to make her point, and the thudding sound echoed loudly. "If anyone wants to speak, just signal me and I'll give you the mic."

"Just wait a starsec, Leona," Adora said. "We can't start yet. Where's Gemma?"

Just then there was a knock at the door. Leona opened it from across the room with a flick of her wrist, and Gemma bounded inside.

"I can't believe Tessa would do this!" she cried, her ginger eyes flashing. "Going down into those creepy caves? If I went down there, she'd be saying, 'It's too dangerous, Gemma. You need to be careful, Gemma. What were you thinking, Gemma?'" Glittery orange tears

trickled down Gemma's cheeks. "I'm so worried about Tessa. About them all! What were they thinking? What were—"

"Star excuse me, Gemma," Leona interrupted. "I have the stage . . . I mean floor . . . I mean microphone. And we need to begin a real discussion, now that we're all here—except for Cassie, Tessa, and Scarlet, of course."

Scarlet and Leona were roommates. They were a combustible mix, worse than sparkle-oxide and phenol-twinkle. And while Adora and Tessa had their differences, those two definitely did not get along.

As if on cue, Scarlet's skateboard slid down her ramp-like wall, rolled across the room to Leona's side, and came to rest right by the stage.

Piper gasped. "It's a sign. We need to hurry up and do something. Scarlet needs us!"

Sage nodded vigorously. "Yes! Why are we sitting around like a bunch of Starlings in their twilight years?" She jumped up impatiently. "Let's go."

Gemma was already halfway out the door.

"Whoa," said Adora. "Slow down, you two. We all want to find our friends. But we need to approach this methodically and thoughtfully, not like a bunch of bloombugs during a full moon."

Vega nodded, her short blue hair bobbing. "That's

right. It's like a puzzle. We need to fill in the missing pieces to see the whole picture. We know they went down hoping to find some clues about Lady Stella. Now they're in trouble. We need to rescue them." She paused. "And here's the missing piece: how?"

"The only way I know down to the Star Caves is through the secret passage in Lady Stella's office," Astra mused aloud.

The girls exchanged nervous glances. Adora paced back and forth, thinking.

Some professors would have access to the office: Lady Stella's inner circle, those teachers who knew about the Star Darlings and gave special lectures to their class, for instance. But no school visitor—no matter how glimmerous, no matter how famous, no matter how important—was allowed into Lady Stella's office without her personal invitation. As for students, it was strictly forbidden. Bot-Bot guards roamed those halls at all starhours.

Adora didn't know what would happen if a student was caught. Would she be expelled? Refused admittance to any other school? She didn't want to find out.

"Let's analyze this," Adora said out loud. "Maybe the girls didn't go down through Lady Stella's office. Maybe they found another way. Does anyone have thoughts on that?"

Leona spoke into the mic. “Scarlet.”

“What?” said Sage. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” Leona continued, “that she’s always been fascinated by the caves. From the very first time we went down, Scarlet couldn’t wait to go back. Whenever we got a holo-text that a Wish Orb was ready, her glow would flare with excitement. Honestly, I’ve seen her smile more in those caves than just about anywhere else. She might have found another way down there.”

“Once Scarlet went left when everyone else was going right,” Astra added. “I grabbed her arm, thinking that she just wasn’t paying attention. But maybe there’s something more there. Maybe she was trying to explore on her own.”

“Hmm.” Adora pondered the idea. “I believe she does enjoy the caves. I noticed a bitbat land on her shoulder one time, and she actually petted it. So maybe she has gone down on her before, most likely through a different entrance.” Adora shook her head, clearing her thoughts. “But we don’t have time to waste trying to find it. I think we are going to have to go down there the only way we know—through Lady Stella’s office. So how do you propose we get inside?”

“Well we certainly can’t ask Lady Stella,” said Leona. “She’s probably the one who trapped them!”

Adora looked around the circle. Astra tapped her foot, shooting off sparks of nervous energy. Gemma chewed on a fingernail. Even Piper had shifted into a tense, upright position.

“Listen,” Adora said calmly. “There’s a chance this has nothing to do with sabotage or anyone purposefully trapping them.”

“That’s right,” Clover put in. She tipped her ever-present purple fedora in a hats-off gesture to Adora. “They might have gotten lost and now they can’t find a way out. That would be scary for them, sure, but not very dangerous.

“My family is so big I once got left behind and no one even realized it! We were traveling from New Prism to Solar Springs with the circus, and I was getting supplies for our star swallowing act when the circus swift train took off without me. My uncle Octavius had to teleport back to pick me up.”

Adora always found Clover’s circus stories interesting. (The Flying Molensas not only used scientific equations to figure out trapeze trajectories, but they also wore starmazing outfits.) But right now they needed to focus on the task at hand: rescuing their friends.

“So we need to come up with a plan to get into Lady

Stella's office," she said out loud. "Without getting caught."

"I think we should choose a leader," Libby added. "Someone to be in charge."

"So we don't have endless discussions," Clover cracked. "Like this one."

"Like a team captain!" Astra put in eagerly.

"Or light leader," Libby told the group. "I say we take a vote."

"I nominate Leona!" said Leona.

"You can't nominate yourself!" Astra exclaimed. "But if someone would like to nominate me, I think I could do a starmendous job. I understand group dynamics and winning, and—"

"How about we don't nominate anyone and just all vote anonymously?" said Adora. She quickly set up a survey site on her Star-Zap, then made a few adjustments for the group to vote.

Immediately, everyone tapped in their responses. Only Adora waited, thinking for more than a starmin. She considered Astra first, then Libby—who had shown leadership suggesting the election—then everyone else equally. But in the end, weighing all the evidence, she clicked on a checkmark next to her own name.

Libby did a quick tally. “Adora!” she announced.

“Starkudos,” said Astra quickly. “You’ll make a great leader.”

Adora hadn’t really expected to win. These things tended to be popularity contests. Sure, Adora thought she was popular in her own way. After a hard day’s work at the lab, she liked to socialize as much as the next Starling. But that didn’t mean she had many close friends.

Adora was certain that many Starlings thought she could be a little cold and unfeeling. But she disagreed. She was just calm and logical. She didn’t let feelings get in the way of decisions. And apparently that was the best approach right now.

“You won’t be sorry,” she told everyone.

“I know,” said Gemma, reaching out to touch her hand. “You’ll get everything under control.”

Adora nodded. “But I don’t want to be the lone voice.”

“Surely *my* voice should be heard,” put in Leona. She grinned graciously. “Even if I’m only a backup singer.”

“All right,” said Adora. “I propose another vote. Should I choose one or two girls to go with me down to the caves? Or should we all go together?”

This time, no vote was actually necessary. Everyone shouted, almost as a group: “Together!”

Adora looked at Astra and grinned. “Let’s do this the Glowin’ Glions’ way.”

Everyone moved onto the stage, drawing closer and placing their hands in the center of the group, one on top of the other.

“But instead of a team name,” Adora continued, “let’s say—”

She didn’t even have to finish the sentence.

“Star Darlings!” they all cried.