



Prologue

“Are we there yet?” Sage asked eagerly.

The only answer was a loud snore from Sage’s father, Leonard. As soon as he had programmed the coordinates into their Starcar’s console, he had fallen sound asleep—as usual. Sage’s mom, Indirra, didn’t even look up from her reading. That, too, was usual. Sage thought her mother should have been the one who was nodding off, as she was deep in a scientific holo-journal. But as one of Starland’s leading research scientists, she found it engrossing. Luckily, Indirra didn’t take her daughter’s

lack of interest in her chosen field as an insult; rather, she took it as a challenge.

Sage's seven-year-old twin brothers, Archer and Helio, paid no attention, either. They sat cross-legged on the floor, cheering on their cyber-wrestlers, which were engaged in a fierce battle. "Pin him! Pin him!" they yelled in support of their opposing fighters.

Sage stared at her family. *How can they be so blasé?* she wondered. It was no ordinary day. It was, actually, the most exciting day of her life! She leaned toward the dashboard and lifted a finger, letting it hover over the hyper-speed button. Should she press it? Suddenly, her hand was gently slapped away by her ever-watchful grandmother, a tough old lady everyone called Gran, who then uttered the words Sage had been hearing since she was a tiny Starling.

"Patience, Sage," she said.

Sage rolled her eyes. "You know I don't have any," she responded. Sage smiled sweetly at her grandmother before she added, "Just like you."

Gran shrugged and handed Sage a wrapped candy from her large purse. Sage popped the candy into her mouth and promptly spat it out. *Moonberry. Dis-gus-ting.* Sage sighed and glanced out the window. She caught

a glimpse of her reflection. Slightly sparkly skin, just like all Starlings had. Long, thick glimmering lavender hair hanging in braids that nearly reached her waist. A pointy chin and large twinkling violet eyes that gave her a slightly mischevious look. Cheeks permanently flushed pink. Rosebud lips that were usually curved into a playful smile but were drawn into an irritated frown at the moment. The car was traveling so quickly that the scenery was one big blur. But to Sage, it felt like they were going in slow motion. She just wanted to get there already!

Finally, when Sage thought she might scream, they were almost there. She looked out the window and gasped. The long, straight road that led to the gates of her brand-new boarding school was lined with towering trees, their spindly branches covered in brilliant lavender blooms. The branches stretched up into a tangled canopy overhead, forming a colorful tunnel that led to the entrance.

Gran spoke, startling Sage. “Kaleidoscope trees,” she told her granddaughter. “I haven’t seen those since I was a young girl. They’re quite rare. I forgot how beautiful they are. Keep watching—they’ll change color.” Sure enough, the blossoms began to turn a cheerful shade of pink before their eyes.

“Starmendous,” said Sage. “I wonder how they change color like that.”

“It’s because they are composed of ninety-four percent iridusvapor,” said Sage’s mom without looking up. “Of course.”

Sage and Gran exchanged grins. Indirra never missed an opportunity to share scientific information with her family. Her powers of concentration were a family legend. Once she had held a holo-conference call while the twins, convinced they needed to bathe their pet glowfur, chased it all around the house, wreaking havoc around her. She hadn’t even seemed to notice. But Gran more than made up for that with her constant attention to detail and her habit of stating the obvious.

The car hovered up to the high black iron gates, which had an oddly lovely design of delicate curls and dangerously sharp spikes. Beyond them lay the campus of Starling Academy. Sage caught a quick glimpse of neat walkways, hedges trimmed into whimsical shapes, glittering buildings, and a lone white tower reaching high into the sky. The school, on the outskirts of Starland City, the largest metropolis on Starland, had an enviable location. The campus was near the violet-hued Luminous Lake and the stunning Crystal Mountains. The breathtaking site had inspired students

for hydrongs of staryears. In the distance Sage could see the mountains in all their multicolored glory. The clouds parted and a beam of sunlight broke through, lighting up the campus with a rainbow glow while transforming the low-lying clouds into delicate spun-sugar confections. Sage shook her head. She was excited to finally be at Starling Academy, and it was almost too much to take in at once. She was superbly, stupendously, starmendously excited. That was what she had been working so hard for. Nothing was going to stop her now.

The gates rolled open slowly and the car inched forward, then came to a stop in front of a small glass booth. A Bot-Bot guard appeared and held up a hand scanner. The Starcar's window lowered, and without a moment's hesitation, Sage reached out and placed her palm on the scanner. It lit up bright blue. Accepted.

"Welcome to Starling Academy, Sage," the guard said. It handed her a holo-book.

She took it and replied, "Star salutations," the traditional Starling thank-you. She gave the Bot-Bot guard a friendly wave, which, as expected, was not returned. Her little brothers broke into peals of laughter at the clipped cybernetic voice. "Welcome. To. Starling. Academy. Sage," they echoed.

Gran looked over her shoulder. “It’s the Student Manual,” she whispered.

“Are you sure?” Sage replied, pointing to the on-screen title. “I thought it was the cafeteria menu.”

“Fresh,” said Gran, mock seriously.

Sage loved her grandmother fiercely but also liked to tease her. Fortunately, Gran liked to give as good as she could take.

Sage’s mom shut off her holo-journal and looked around at everyone, blinking slowly. “Are we here already?” she asked brightly.

Sage rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mom,” she said.

Sage’s father startled awake with a loud snort. “What—who—where am I?” he sputtered. That sent the boys on another round of giggles.

Sage ignored them. She looked around, took a deep breath, and squinched her eyes closed as the car glided through the entrance and the gates rolled shut behind them. She could really picture herself happy there. *I wish for big, exciting things to happen to me here*, she thought.

Her wish would come true.

And then some.

CHAPTER 1

“Good afternoon, Miss Sage. *Are you ready to begin your tour?”*

Sage spun around.

“Up here,” the voice said.

Sage craned her neck. Hovering in the air over her family members’ heads was a medium-sized metallic orb. It flashed in the sunlight, forcing Sage to look away.

“What *is* that thing?” Gran asked, shielding her eyes and squinting.

“It’s a floating Bot-Bot guide,” explained Sage’s father. “The neighbors hired one on their trip to Booshel Bay. They’re supposed to be quite informative.”

“Affirmative,” said the Bot-Bot guide in its clipped tone. The boys giggled, but a stern look from Gran

shushed them. “I am MO-34 and I am quite informative, if I do say so myself.” He blinked when he spoke.

“So can we go to the dorm now?” Sage asked.

The Bot-Bot guide paused, apparently running the request through his program to determine its validity. “Negative,” he answered. “Before you head to your dormitory room and bid farewell to your family, you must first receive a tour to familiarize yourself with the campus.”

“Startastic,” said Archer, rolling his eyes.

Gran poked him in the shoulder. “Don’t be rude, young man,” she said.

“Sorry, Gran,” he said sheepishly.

Sage glanced around. More Bot-Bot guides had appeared and were taking other new students and their families on their tours, setting off in all directions. She turned back to her family, then did a double take. Wait—someone was missing.

“Where’s Mom?” she asked.

“She’s right here—well, she *was* right here,” said her father, looking around. “Oh, don’t worry, we’ll find her. You know how she’s always wandering off.”

Sage did know. Her mother was a very busy—and curious—woman. She was often sent on trips to distant locations to fact-find and to give talks about her specialty,

interstellar positive wish energy. All Sage knew was that it took her mom away from the family frequently. That was why Gran had come to live with them when the twins were born.

“If you will follow me, we will begin our tour in the Star Quad, the heart of our state-of-the-art Starling Academy campus,” announced MO-34. He led them onto a moving walkway, which brought them to a lush green lawn. “Note the grass, perfect for relaxing or picnicking,” the guide pointed out. “Here you can see the dancing fountain, the shifting hedge maze, and the band shell, where concerts are held.”

“Impressive,” said Sage’s father, nodding.

Sage spotted a girl with an off-the-shoulder gold tunic and a halo of golden curls around her face standing on the band shell stage. She was singing and practicing some dance moves, apparently putting on her own private concert. Several students were lounging on the edge of the splashing fountain, which was tiled in a mosaic of pleasing shades of blue.

“And over here you will find the hedge maze,” said MO-34.

Sage and her family turned their attention to a tall wall of neatly trimmed greenery with an entrance cut

into the side. Her little brothers' eyes lit up, and they took off toward it, disappearing into the maze without a backward glance.

"Boys!" called Gran. "We're still on the tour! Come back!"

"They'll be fine," MO-ᄃ4 assured her. "The constantly shifting paths of the hedge maze will keep them occupied for quite a while, and there are guides to help visitors find their way out if necessary." MO-ᄃ4 zoomed down to Sage's ear level and said, "Students, however, must discover the secrets of the maze all by themselves."

"No problem," said Sage in a tone more confident than she felt. She looked around. Where *was* her mother? It was just like her to disappear when Sage wanted her around. This was a big deal. Having her whole family—even her annoying little brothers—nearby would have been nice. But no, everyone seemed to want to do their own thing. Except Gran and Dad, of course.

MO-ᄃ4 next took them to the Illumination Library, a circular room crammed from floor to ceiling with thousands of tiny holo-books. Down the center of the room ran tables glowing with soft light, surrounded by lounge readers with built-in lamps. There was a padded window seat with fluffy pillows in front of each of the large windows.

Gran was impressed. “You should spend most of your time here when you’re not in class,” she said to her granddaughter with a nod. Sage tried not to smile as the old woman then checked out a lounge chair, which immediately adjusted to her height, weight, and preferred reading position.

Gran was less interested in the Lightning Lounge, which was housed in the same building. Sage, however, was enthralled by what she saw. It was where students went during their downtime to socialize and relax.

The lounge’s main floor was split between the snack area, which was stocked with every treat and beverage the students could desire, and the sitting area, which was brightly colored and filled with floor pillows, low tables, fireplaces, fluffy rugs, soft, sumptuous chairs, and couches grouped perfectly for getting together with friends.

Downstairs was a party room big enough for dances with other schools, which were held several times a year. Next they went upstairs to cozy relaxation rooms, which sensed your mood as soon as you walked in and chose appropriate music and changed the lighting accordingly.

“Press that button on the wall to your right, Miss Sage,” said MO-74.

Sage obliged and then jumped as the ceiling high

above their heads began to roll back. “A retractable roof for stargazing,” said MO-Ʒ4. “All the seats recline fully for optimal viewing comfort.”

Sage smiled. They really had thought of everything to help students relax and enjoy themselves during their downtime. MO-Ʒ4 next brought them to the Celestial Café, the dining hall where students’ meals were served. The view from the wall of windows was holo-card worth—the violet-hued Luminous Lake and the stunning Crystal Mountains. Sage stared at the shiny peaks. She had been dying to explore the Crystal Mountains ever since she had received a crystal for her Bright Day. Sage’s dad shook his head. “Look at all this!” he said, taking in the warm lighting, the softly playing music, the table set with finery, and the Bot-Bot waiters at the students’ beck and call. “When I was in school we had to bring our own lunch!”

“We must take good care of our students, sir,” said MO-Ʒ4. “They need to be well fed so they can concentrate on their studies!”

They next went to Halo Hall, the largest building on campus, where all the classes were held. “Connected to this building is a tower with the famous Wishworld Surveillance Deck, accessible only to students, faculty, and graduates,” MO-Ʒ4 explained.

Sage got a thrill of excitement as they peered into a neat classroom, comfortable and inviting. MO-J4 lingered in the Cybernetics Lab, a gleaming room filled with cyber-building equipment. “My home,” he explained with a hint of pride in his voice.

“And then we’ll go straight out these doors to the balcony, where we can get a stunning view of the fruit orchards to the north and south and of course the incomparable Crystal Mountains and Luminous Lake to the west.” Everyone stepped outside and took in the view, nodding appreciatively. It was a truly breathtaking sight.

“Lovely, simply lovely,” Gran murmured.

Sage’s father put his hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “I can’t believe this is really happening,” he said. “Our little Sage is about to start Starling Academy.”

Sage was about to groan, “Dad, you’re embarrassing me,” but she held it in. Her father’s eyes were shiny, and the last thing she wanted was for him to start crying. Plus he was right. This was momentous. She just didn’t feel like talking about it.

“In the middle of the lake are the Serenity Gardens, accessible only by boat; and of course you can see Stellar Falls in the distance,” MO-J4 noted.

“On the other side of the lake is our brother school,

Star Preparatory. Perhaps your little brothers will attend that school someday.”

“Perhaps,” muttered Gran before Sage could respond. The thought of her wild little brothers being studious enough to attend the prestigious school seemed like hydrons of staryears away to Sage.

After showing them the gigantic practice Wish-House and the faculty residences—freestanding homes, each with a small backyard and garden—MO-Ƴ4 said, “Next we will move on to the Radiant Recreation Center. This is our last stop before we go to your dormitory. The recreation center is a state-of-the-art building with equipment available for every interest and sport we play on Starland. It is where our champion E-ball team, the Glowin’ Glions, play every—”

Sage couldn’t take the suspense any longer. “Can I go to my room now, please?” she asked. She was dying to see her room and, more important, meet her roommate.

“Sage,” said Gran. “Your manners!”

MO-Ƴ4 paused again to see if the change of plan fit in with his program. “Affirmative,” he concluded. Sage and her family were led past the round, gleaming rec center, along a pathway to a large white building. They stopped in front of the steps that led up to the entrance.

“There are two dormitories on campus: this is the Little Dipper Dorm, for first- and second-year students, and nearby is the Big Dipper Dorm, for third- and fourth-year students. Rooms are completely furnished for the students, with all the comforts of home, and roommates are carefully chosen to both complement and challenge each other.”

Complement and challenge, thought Sage. Interesting.

Sage’s father spoke up. “Sage was told not to bring anything but the clothes on her back,” he said, a bit anxiously. “Are you sure she’ll have everything she needs?”

“I guarantee it,” said MO-ᄆ4. “Don’t worry. You’ll soon see what I mean.”

“All right, then,” said Sage’s father.

“This is where I say good-bye,” said MO-ᄆ4. “Once you step through the doors, hop right onto the Cosmic Transporter, which will take you directly to your room. It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Sage. I hope we’ll meet again. I will send your brothers to you. Good luck, and don’t forget to count your lucky stars.”

“Star salutations!” Gran and Sage’s father called.

“Star salutations,” Sage repeated. But MO-ᄆ4 was already gone, floating off to find her brothers.

“You should start reading it right away,” Sage’s

grandmother said once they had gone inside and were standing on the Cosmic Transporter, a moving sidewalk that looped throughout the entire dormitory.

“Reading what?” Sage asked.

“The Student Manual,” said Gran exasperatedly.

“Oh, right,” said Sage, fishing around in her pocket until she located the holo-book. She pressed a button and the manual was projected into the air in front of her. “‘Welcome to Starling Academy,’” she read aloud. “‘Now that you have explored the campus and are settling in, keep one extremely important thought in mind: the future of Starland depends on you.

“‘As every Starling knows, the positive energy that comes from the Wishlings who live on Wishworld is our most precious natural resource. We rely on it to power our Starcars, illuminate our lights, and, in short, provide Starland with the energy it requires to function every starday.

“‘You are tasked with learning how to help make Wishers’ wishes come true so you can become members of the next generation of Wish-Granters. That way, the Wishers will keep making these crucial wishes, and life, for Starlings and Wishlings alike, will continue as we all know it.

“As a student at Starling Academy, you will receive extensive, rigorous training in wish identification, wish fulfillment, wish energy capture, wishful thinking, wish probability and statistics, plus art, music, dance, and a variety of sports. . . .”

Sage’s voice trailed off. “Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” she concluded, shutting down the holo-book with a flick of her wrist. She rolled her eyes. “No pressure or anything!” she said.

Gran laughed, but then her wrinkled face grew serious. “Sage,” she scolded, “you need to pay attention. There could be some important information in that manual. It might even be on an examination!”

“What examination?” Sage asked teasingly. Her grandmother was so old-fashioned sometimes.

“An *important* examination,” Gran insisted.

Sage leaned against the railing of the Cosmic Transporter. As they passed open doorways, she peeked into several of the rooms. There were girls crying as they said good-bye to their families, and others who waved merrily as their parents departed. That all made Sage even more impatient. She simply couldn’t wait to see her room and meet her roommate. Finally, the transporter began to slow down. Sage straightened up as she

and her family were deposited right in front of a doorway—room 261. They all stood there for a moment in silence.

They hesitated in front of the door. Suddenly, Helio and Archer came running down the Cosmic Transporter, nearly knocking into a student and her parents, who stared angrily at the boys. They jumped off the mover and dramatically rolled on the floor before coming to a stop. They bounced to their feet, not even out of breath.

“This place is pretty starmendous!” Helio shouted. “Did you see the boathouse?”

“I guess this is it,” said Sage, feeling an unfamiliar fluttering in her stomach. “I . . . I think I’m a little nervous!” she admitted. Gran gave her a quizzical look. Her dad raised his eyebrows and gave her shoulder a quick squeeze.

At the same time, Archer—just as impatient as she was—reached up and slapped the hand scanner in the middle of the door.

There was a red flash and an irritating buzzing noise.

“Access denied,” the Bot-Bot voice said sternly.

“Out of my way,” said Sage, ruffling her brother’s hair as she pushed past to show him she really wasn’t mad, just pretending. She placed her hand on the

scanner. “Welcome, Sage,” the Bot-Bot voice said pleasantly as the scanner glowed a bright blue. They were in the right place.

The door slid open, and there stood Sage’s mother.

“There you are!” she exclaimed, as though they had been the ones who had wandered off.

“How did you get in?” Sage’s brother demanded.

“Oh, Sage’s roommate was here,” explained Indirra.

“Where is she?” Sage asked excitedly.

“She stepped out for a starmin,” her mother replied.

“Where did you go, anyw . . .” Sage started. But then her eyes took in the dorm room furnishings and her voice trailed off. She stared around in disbelief. Now she understood why she had been told to come to Starling Academy empty-handed. The room was amazing. They had decorated it just the way Sage had hoped. They had asked so many questions on the school application, but this far exceeded any expectations she’d had. It reflected her personality and her love of lavender to perfection. It even had holo-powered windows so Sage could control the view!

“They’ve thought of everything,” said her mother.

The room was circular, Sage’s favorite shape, and she had a round bed and what looked like an extraordinarily

comfortable round chair. Two softly glowing plants stood at either side of the bed—the perfect nightlights, in her opinion. A glimmering chandelier hung from the ceiling.

Her father blinked. “Unbelievable,” he said.

Her roommate’s side was pretty, too, with a star-shaped rug, a glowing staircase that led to a bed that looked a little like a very large cradle to Sage, and a single gigantic picture window with a window seat covered in sumptuous pillows.

Sage’s father immediately sat on Sage’s bed. “Comfy,” he said.

Sage gaped at the rows of bookshelves that lined her roommate’s walls. “Look at those holo-books,” she marveled. “You think my roommate is a librarian or something?”

Her brothers laughed.

“Um, hello,” said a small voice. Everyone turned to the open doorway, where a baby-faced girl with pale skin, big round glasses, and pinkish-white hair done up in perky little pigtail buns stood. It looked like she was trying to decide whether to step inside or run away. Despite the girl’s embarrassment, Sage noticed that the girl’s lashes were so thick and dark that they almost looked fake. She was wearing a light, loose shirt with

spaghetti straps, shorts, swirly leggings, and pale pink ballet slippers, which laced up her legs. She was so small and neat-looking that she made Sage, who was tall and lean, feel like she was all gangly arms and legs. The girl seemed to make a decision, and she walked up to Sage uncertainly. "I'm Cassie," she said softly.

Sage gulped and smiled at her roommate. "Sorry!" she said. "It's just that you have so many books."

Gran elbowed her in the side. "And, um, I'm sure they're all very interesting!" Sage said. Impulsively, she lunged forward to hug her new roommate. Startled, the girl took a step back. She lost her balance and knocked into a pile of holo-books which sat on a table. The two girls bent down to pick them up at the same time and cracked heads. Sage rubbed her sore head and gulped again. What a way to make a first impression!

Her brothers burst out laughing. "Startastic, Sage!" Helio cried.

Sage glared at them, then turned toward her new roommate. "Sorry about that," she said. She had already apologized two times in as many starmins. That had to be some sort of new roommate record! "Um, pleased to meet you. I'm Sage and this is my family." She made a sweeping gesture. "You already met my mother. The

man lying down is my father, Leonard. This is my grandmother. You can call her Gran. And the two little boys who just disappeared under your bed are my twin brothers, Helio and Archer.”

Cassie looked mildly surprised at that bit of news. She stood up, adjusted her glasses, and gave Sage a tight smile—more like a grimace, actually.

“So no offense at the librarian comment?” asked Sage. “I was just trying to be funny. Just ignore it. I didn’t mean any harm. The room looks great. Very homey. Actually, I love libraries. And librarians. I mean, who doesn’t?” she said all in a rush.

Cassie shrugged. “No offense taken.”

Sage could tell that maybe a tiny bit had been taken. But she was certain it was nothing she couldn’t fix.

After taking a quick peek under her bed, Cassie began to rummage through her already jumbled drawers. Sage’s father got up from her bed and stared out the window, lost in thought. Gran took one look at the slightly ruffled bed and, without warning, stripped off the linens and began remaking it. Gran certainly liked to keep busy! Sage wandered around the room, taking it all in. She stopped at the nearest closet and slid the door open.

“No!” Cassie shouted. She darted across the room,

reached past Sage, and slammed the door shut. “That’s *my* closet!” She spun around, her cheeks flushed. She took a deep breath to collect herself. “I mean, um, *that* is your closet,” she said more calmly, pointing across the room. Puzzled, everyone stared at her for a moment.

Note, thought Sage, *roommate is very private about her clothes*. She wouldn’t be making that mistake again.

Gran fluffed Sage’s pillow, then reached over to pick up a small handheld device that was sitting on Sage’s desk. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Got me,” said Sage.

“That’s a Star-Zap,” Cassie explained. “We all get one. We have to keep it with us at all times, because that’s how the school corresponds with us.” She then gave Sage a quizzical look. “It’s discussed in great detail in the Student Manual.”

Gran tsk-tsked at Sage, who shrugged.

“Can we go home now?” Archer whined as he crawled out from under Cassie’s bed.

Sage’s mom gave a brisk nod. “Time to go home,” she said. Sage’s dad turned to Sage slowly. “I guess . . . it’s time to leave,” he said reluctantly.

“Look what I found!” cried Helio, rolling out from underneath Cassie’s bed, holding a small bag of pellets.

“These look like Green Globules!” Sage gawked. They *did* look remarkably similar to the food her brothers fed their pet glowfur. (It also loved to eat flowers late at night.)

Cassie’s eyes widened in alarm. “Oh, no!” she cried. “Um . . . that’s actually a special snack I brought from home.” And before everyone’s astonished eyes, she selected a pellet and popped it into her mouth. “*Mmmm, delicious,*” she mumbled. But her face told a different story.

Well, that was weird, Sage thought. Her family just stared at Cassie.

“That really did look like a Green Globule,” Archer said, shaking his head. “Disgusting.” He knew that quite well, Sage remembered, because he had once eaten one himself on a dare from his twin.

“Well, thanks for everything,” Sage said brightly to her family. “Bye!” She hated long, drawn-out farewells. When Sage had said good-bye to her friends back home, she had made it short and sweet, too. Sure, she was sad. But there was no sense in making something painful even harder than it needed to be.

Her father squeezed her tight. “I’m so proud of you, Toodles,” he whispered into her ear, using her embarrassing family nickname. He opened his mouth as if he

was going to say something else, then just settled for another hug.

That gave Sage an uncomfortable lump in her throat. She squirmed out of his grasp. “Good-bye, Dad,” she said.

Gran hated good-byes, too. “See ya around, kid,” she said with a wink.

At their father’s urging, the twins each gave Sage a hug, as well, but each one was so brief that it was as if she had a contagious illness they were afraid of contracting. Still, Sage knew they would miss her, if only because she helped them with their homework and would, if asked nicely, eat all their garble greens for them so they could get dessert.

Sage’s mom put her hands on Sage’s shoulders and gave her a quick, firm embrace. She stepped back and looked deep into Sage’s violet eyes. “Make me proud, my dear,” she said. Then she leaned forward and whispered in her ear, “You’re startacular, and don’t you forget it.”

Sage snapped back her head to stare at her mother. “Th-thanks, Mom,” she stammered. Her mom’s compliments were rare, so when she gave one, you knew she meant it. When Sage was younger, she used to be jealous of kids whose mothers smothered them with accolades. “You’re the brightest star in the galaxy” or “You glimmer

like a supernova.” But as she got older, she grew to appreciate her mother’s measured but heartfelt words of praise. It felt like Sage had earned them.

Studies had never been easy for her, and she sometimes felt like she was disappointing her mom. Sage had had to work hard for every I (which stood for Illuminated, the top grade a student could receive) she was awarded. So her mother’s words really meant a lot.

Indirra touched her daughter’s cheek, then joined the rest of the family in the hallway. After a moment, Sage slid the door closed behind them.

The two girls stared at each other for a moment.

Sage flopped down on the bed Gran had remade so neatly, and clutched her pillow to her chest. “So, tell me everything about you,” she said to Cassie. “Don’t leave anything out!”

Cassie looked around the room wildly, positively panicked. “Um . . . I . . .”

Just then their Star-Zaps beeped. They both looked down at their display screens: REPORT TO THE STAR QUAD IN TWENTY STARMINS FOR THE START OF THE WELCOME PROCESSION.

“Welcome procession?” said Sage.

Cassie gave her a look.

“It’s in the Student Manual?” Sage guessed.

“It’s in the Student Manual,” Cassie answered.

Sage considered that. “Want to fill me in?” she asked.

“Well, it’s a Starling Academy tradition going back hydrons of staryears. New students parade around the campus as the faculty and upperclassmen welcome them. Everyone wears fancy clothes and it’s said to be really special. Supposedly, we’re about to receive the most amazing outfits we’ve ever seen,” said Cassie.

As if on command, there was a knock at the door. When they opened it, a Bot-Bot deliverer was hovering in the hallway, holding aloft two remarkable outfits—one lavender, one white.

“Wow,” said Sage, grabbing the dresses. “Star salutations.” She brought them inside and handed the white one to Cassie.

“It’s startacular,” said Cassie softly, touching the shiny material.

Sage nodded. “It’s like they took the best parts of all my favorite dresses and made one perfect outfit.”

“Once we’re dressed, we’ll head to the quad. Lady Stella will greet us and the procession will begin,” Cassie said.

Sage looked at her beautiful dress, her eyes shining. She grinned. Things were finally starting to happen. It was about time!