

Scarlet Discovers True Strength

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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, 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 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

“So you’re saying Vega heard from her?”

“Cross my stars. A holo-text. She got it last night.”

“Well, what did it say? Where has she been this whole time? Is she in Starland City? Did she run away?”

Scarlet recognized the Star Darlings’ voices outside her window immediately. She didn’t have to peer down, but she did. She could also tell right away that they were talking about her. *How dare they?* was all she could think.

Scarlet was perched up in the loft of her dorm room—her *new* dorm room—a place that, these stardays, she seldom left. It had all happened so fast it still felt like yesterday: Lady Stella’s informing her that her being assigned to the Star Darlings was all a “starmendous and most unfortunate” mistake, and that, as a result, she would need to be reassigned to a new dorm room so her replacement—some meek-looking orange-haired first-year student—could move into hers. At first, Scarlet had looked at that, at least, as the silver lining, since she and her roommate, Leona, had been bickering. But it didn’t take long for her to realize that there would never, in a moonium staryears, be any silver linings to the cloud she had found herself in.

“It didn’t say where Scarlet’s been, unfortunately.” That tinkly voice belonged to Cassie. Scarlet gazed down at the top of the first-year student’s silver-white pigtailed head. She and her roommate, Sage, were walking along the path between their Little Dipper Dorm building and the Big Dipper Dorm, where third and fourth years, like Scarlet, lived. Scarlet couldn’t help smiling as she thought how clueless they were; she was right there, just two floors above them, and they had no idea. “All the holo-text said,” Cassie went on, “was for Vega to meet

her in the hedge maze . . . which makes me wonder if Scarlet's still here at school. . . .”

Sage tossed her long lavender hair dramatically from one shoulder to the other, a habit that had always made Scarlet roll her eyes. “I don't know,” Sage said. “If Scarlet was at school, don't you think she'd go to classes? I mean, she's already been kicked out of the Star Darlings. Does she want to get kicked out of school, too?”

Kicked out! She nearly leaned out to yell, “I was not *kicked out!*”

“She wasn't kicked out . . .” said Cassie.

Thank you! thought Scarlet. Cassie always had seemed a little smarter than the rest.

“. . . exactly. I mean, she didn't do anything wrong.”

“Mistakes happen, I guess,” Sage said. She shrugged and re-tossed her hair.

Mistakes . . . thought Scarlet. *Mistakes?* Accidentally using your roommate's toothlight was a *mistake*. Being told that you, in fact, weren't Star Darlings material? That wasn't a *mistake*. It was just plain wrong!

“I don't know. . . .” Below, Cassie slowed to a stop, pulling Sage with her. Their arms were linked, as Starling arms usually were when they walked together.

“What?” said Sage.

“It’s just . . . so many strange things are going on. There’s poor Leona . . . ruining her Wish Pendant and not getting a Power Crystal when her mission was otherwise such a success.”

“Well, wasn’t that her fault? She never used her special powers.”

“I know . . . but to ruin your Wish Pendant?” Cassie shook her head.

Above, Scarlet nodded sympathetically. Leona’s ruined Wish Pendant didn’t come close, of course, to Scarlet’s losing her place as a Star Darling, but it had to hurt.

“And then, of course, there are those flowers,” Cassie went on. “Have you noticed, by the way, that we aren’t fighting anymore?”

“Oh, Cassie!” A laugh bubbled out of Sage as she started to pull Cassie forward. “You and your conspiracy theories. You are too cute! Really, you are.”

CHAPTER 1

“Hellooooo?”

Scarlet turned from the window at the sound of a reedy, shrill voice calling from below. She slid from the window seat and peered down the stairs. “Who’s there?” she said cautiously, not sure she wanted to know.

As she started down the curving ladder, a Starling came into view. It was a woman—an old woman, Scarlet could tell immediately—grinning and bent over a crystal-tipped cane.

“Hello?” Scarlet said. Her eyes swept the room uneasily for a glimpse of her roommate, Mira. “Er, excuse me,” she said, not finding her, “but how did you get in?” Usually, Scarlet was the one sneaking up on people, not the

other way around. Plus, as far as she knew, the only way to open the door was by using the palm scanner outside. Then it had to approve you. So how did the woman get in? “Er . . . can I help you?”

The little old Starling craned her neck to peer up at Scarlet. “Why, hello, and star salutations, dearie,” she said sweetly. Her voice cracked with age. Wire-rimmed star-shaped glasses rested halfway down her nose, and silvery lilac curls framed her pinched but pleasant face. “As a matter of fact, you can. I’m looking for my granddaughter, Mira. The Bot-Bot guard at the front told me this was her room?”

“Oh . . .” That made a little more sense. Scarlet guessed family members’ hands must work on the palm scanners, too. Not that she would know. After two and a half staryears at Starling Academy, her own family had still never visited her, not once. The only time Scarlet saw her parents was when she met them on tour. They were classical musicians and composers, famous throughout Starland for their otherworldly sounds and scores. Scarlet’s mother played the halo-harp, her father the violin, and they traveled staryear-round throughout Starland, recording holo-albums and selling out the most prestigious concert halls. Even when they played in

Starland City, Starland's capital and the home of Starling Academy, rehearsals and interviews kept them so busy that Scarlet always had to go to them. Their schedules were simply too full to fit in a visit to the school.

Growing up, Scarlet had toured Starland with her parents, living out of suitcases, staying in five-star hotels. In between shows, her mother or father—depending on whose turn it was—would tutor her backstage as they tuned their precious instruments. By the time she had reached the Age of Fulfillment, Scarlet had met every dignitary on Starland—but not many other kids.

Scarlet's parents were naturally proud and not surprised when she showed an interest in music. They were astonished, however, when she chose to play the *drums* and began to wear a lot of black. At first, she'd just wanted to shock and annoy them and rebel against their stodgy ways. And she succeeded—particularly when she started adding black streaks to her hot-pink hair. Soon, though, she found herself loving the drums and her adopted color, too. Both made her feel strong. Both let her show her feelings without having to say a single word.

Still, Scarlet needed more. She needed a life that was truly her own, which was why she had applied to Starling Academy. She was stunned when she got in and sure she

would struggle in her classes, but she found they were easy for her. The only things that were hard were fitting in and making friends.

“What’s the matter, dearie?” The elder Starling chuckled. “Glowfur got your tongue?”

“Oh . . . star apologies,” Scarlet said quickly. She was suddenly aware that she probably seemed rude. “Uh, yes. Yes, this is Mira’s room. But, well . . .” She looked around and shrugged. “She’s not here.”

“Oh, what a pity!” The woman’s face folded into a pained expression, like one of those comedy/tragedy masks that hung over Mira’s bed. She sighed and shook her head slowly. “Well. I suppose I’ll just wait for her, then. I should have told her I was coming. Hopefully she won’t be long.” She shuffled across the room, smiling sweetly and looking ever so slightly confused. “Please do forgive me for surprising you. I didn’t realize she had a roommate, you see. I could have sworn the last time she wrote to me she said she lived alone.”

“She did,” said Scarlet. “I just moved in.” She tried to sound less bitter than she felt.

“Ah, good!” said the old woman. “Glad to know I wasn’t wrong.” She tapped her head just above her ear. “Two thousand and three and still sharp as a prism. So what’s your name, my dear?”

“It’s, um, Scarlet.”

“Scarlet! How lovely! We had a glowsow on the farm with that name when I was a girl. So!” She crossed the star-trimmed corners of her shawl. “Just moved in, you say. Does that mean you’re new?”

“No, ma’am . . .” Scarlet shook her head and turned back to her loft, longing to climb back up. She was usually so glad her new roommate, Mira, was always at “play rehearsal,” or whatever that drama stuff she loved so much was. For once, though, Scarlet wished she would hurry back to their room so her grandmother would have someone else to talk to.

The old woman, meanwhile, settled onto the bench in front of Mira’s dressing table with a frail yet eager sigh. She took a moment to catch her breath and take in Scarlet’s side of the wide, softly lit room. Her eyes lingered on the hot-pink drum set perched on a raised platform across from Scarlet’s black-and-fuschia-covered bed. Scarlet’s things had been moved for her the same starday Lady Stella had broken the news. When her Star-Zap finally led her to her newly assigned room on the other side of the Big Dipper Dorm, it wasn’t clear who was more put out: Mira, who’d been quite content having a single, or Scarlet herself.

“Are those drums?” asked the old woman, pointing.

Scarlet nodded. What else would they be?

“Ooh! What fun! Can I try them?” She was already out of her seat. She hobbled over to the platform, raised her cane, and gave the cymbal a powerful smack.

CRASHHH!

“Don’t! *Stop!*” Scarlet cried, hurrying over. “I mean, I’d rather you didn’t, um, please.” Scarlet didn’t want to be rude, but nobody—not even a little old Starling—was touching her precious drums. “Maybe you’d be more comfortable waiting for Mira in the Illumination Library. I’m sure a Bot-Bot guide could show you the way.”

“Oh, starry nights, no.” The old woman grinned and set her cane back on the polished star-studded floor. “I’m just as comfortable as can be. Where is my lovely granddaughter, though, do you know? I’m just as eager to see her as I can be.”

Scarlet didn’t know, though she wanted to be helpful. If Mira had ever said anything to her about where she was going, Scarlet was too focused on her Star Darlings problem to care. Besides, Scarlet preferred for other Starlings to keep their noses out of her business, so she tried to set an example by keeping her nose to herself, too.

“I’m not sure . . . maybe play rehearsal?”

“Oh, yes, you’re right, I’m sure!” crowed the old woman. “That Mira is quite an actor! Destined for stardom! Don’t you think?”

“Is she? I don’t know,” Scarlet confessed. “I’ve never seen her act.” Since leaving her parents to attend Starling Academy, she’d tried to steer clear of theaters and auditoriums. Quite frankly, she also had yet to see the appeal in running around, dressed up like a fool, pretending to be somebody else.

“Moon and stars!” Mira’s grandmother gasped. “Never? What a shame. Oh, but surely you’ve seen her act *sometime*. . . .”

Scarlet shook her head. “Star apologies. No.”

“Never?” The old woman leaned forward, twisting slightly. The corners of her mouth twitched, one at a time. A bluish star-shaped freckle on her cheek began to sparkle. Scarlet watched it closely, the familiarity clicking at last. How hadn’t she noticed it before?

“All right, I’ll admit it.” Scarlet sighed to hold back a groan. “I saw her once.”

“Really? You did see her? When?”

“The Time of Shadows production. Our first year at school.”

“Oh, that was a good one!”

Scarlet stifled a smile as she clicked her tongue and slowly shook her head.

“It wasn’t?” The woman’s blue eyes grew round. “You really don’t think so? Why not?”

“Well, some parts were good . . . like the scenery. . . . And the props could have been worse.”

“What about the acting?” croaked the old woman.

Scarlet looked down and smiled.

“*Well?*” Mira’s “grandmother” waited, tapping her cane against the floor, sending sparks into the air. “Wasn’t it good? Of course it was! We got a standing ovation at the end!”

“*We?*” Scarlet glanced back up, raising one eyebrow in a sharp arch.

The old woman threw back her head. “*Starf!* You knew it was me!” she groaned. Then she laughed and tossed off her shawl so it dangled behind her. “Tell me I had you going there for a while, though,” Mira said as she pulled off her wig. Her long indigo hair spilled down her back in shimmering waves. Beneath a thick layer of stage makeup, a whole galaxy of bright blue freckles flashed like sunlight on a lake.

“For a starmin,” muttered Scarlet. She did have to live with her, after all.

“Really? Is that all?” Mira sighed. “Sunspots. I guess that’s why you’re not in that remedial group anymore.” She grinned at Scarlet—then blanched in the heat of Scarlet’s simmering glare. “No offense!” she said quickly. Like everyone at Starling Academy, it seemed, Mira assumed the special class the Star Darlings went to last period was for extra help so they didn’t fail out of school. “Star apologies. I just thought . . . you know . . . since it was a mistake and all . . .”

“It was a mistake, all right,” hissed Scarlet.

“Are you mad?”

Am I mad? thought Scarlet. Did a glowfur eat green globules? She was mad, all right. Madder than Leona when she’d had to try out for her own band!

Suddenly, Scarlet’s Star-Zap beeped. A holo-text was coming in.

She read it: IN THE HEDGE MAZE. R U STILL COMING?

It was Vega, waiting to meet.

“Forget about it. I’ll be fine,” Scarlet snapped as she climbed off her bed.

She’d be perfectly *startacular* . . . just as soon as she set everything straight again.

CHAPTER 2

Scarlet burst out of the Big Dipper Dorm and hopped onto the Cosmic transporter. She passed the dancing fountain as she headed to the hedge maze, ignoring the water's friendly wave. She knew all too well that once encouraged, the fountain would only work harder to try to keep a Starling there.

The campus was quiet, as it often was after dinner, when most students flocked to the Lightning Lounge. That was a place, though, that Scarlet usually avoided. Everyone was far too sociable and eager to hang out and chat. One couldn't even lie back and gaze at the stars from underneath the retractable roof without some shiny Starling leaning over and saying, "Ooh! Aren't

they pretty?” or “Do you think they look the same from Wishworld?” Scarlet’s jaw ached from holding back rude responses, like “No, they look like globerbeams from Wishworld. What a startacularly silly question! Of course they look the same!”

Scarlet didn’t care much for the hedge maze, either—for a different reason. The hedge maze drove her crazy, the way its pattern constantly changed. No sooner would she think she’d found a way out than a path would turn, a wall would shift, or a leafy new hedge would suddenly appear. Where the fun in *that* was, Scarlet had no idea. She thanked her stars for the single red blossom in every hedge wall that would open a door when plucked. She plucked one every time. Vega, on the other hand, would never have dreamed of doing such a thing. She loved the maze and spent more time there than all the other Star Darlings combined, so it was the best place Scarlet could think of to get a few words with her—alone.

Even before she spotted Vega, Scarlet saw her sapphire aura. The constantly changing maze, however, made actually reaching her hard.

“Vega!” Scarlet finally shouted through the glittery hedge wall. “I’m over here! Come! Hurry up!”

Vega was beside her in a starsec, only slightly out of breath.

“How did you get here so fast?” asked Scarlet as a new wall of hedge popped up behind Vêga.

“Easy,” Vêga said. “I waited for the hedge to shift left, then ran south ten degrees, then doubled back through the—”

Scarlet held up her hands. “That’s all right. Never mind. I don’t care.” At the same time, though, it was exactly this love of puzzle solving that gave Scarlet hope that Vêga could help.

“So what did you want to talk about—*finally*? It’s good to see you, by the way. Where in the universe have you *been*? We’ve been worried about you for star-days. So . . . did you want to hear about my mission?” Vêga smiled proudly, ignoring Scarlet’s immediate sneer. “You’ll be happy to know that—unlike Leona’s . . .” Vêga sighed. “Poor thing. Anyway, unlike Leona’s mission, mine was a *great* success. Another Power Crystal collected! Not that I didn’t have a little issue—but everyone does, it seems. I found my Wisher fairly easily. It’s the wish *identifying* that’s so tricky. I know they always tell us that, but you don’t really know until you try. Luckily, Clover came down and helped me figure it out in plenty of time. It was actually quite an interesting wish. . . .” She paused, finally noticing Scarlet’s pained expression.

“Really, Vêga? Do you truly think I wanted to meet to hear all about a Star Darlings mission when I can’t go on one anymore?” Scarlet shook her head and her black hair swung back and forth across her eyes. “I thought you were smarter than that. That’s about the *last* thing I want to talk about.”

“Of course!” said Vêga. “What was I thinking? Star apologies.” She reached out to pat Scarlet’s shoulder, but Scarlet shrank away. “So then . . . what is it? Oh!” Vêga nodded. “It’s the *band*! You want to come back. That’s startastic!” She clapped. “We need you! We really do! Clover was filling in, but she couldn’t take Leona anymore. Not that *you* should worry about her. Yes, she’s mad that you dropped out, but she also knows what a starmendous drummer you are.”

“Freakin’ fireballs,” Scarlet groaned. “The band is the *second-to-last* thing on my mind!” Sure, she missed the band—well, she missed playing the drums—but she definitely wasn’t ready to go back to it, and she wasn’t sure she ever would be. Of course Vêga, who played the bass, was fine. And Sage and Libby were okay, too. Sage wasn’t the best guitarist, but she had good instincts and worked to improve. Libby tried way too hard to make everyone happy, in Scarlet’s opinion, but she was

startastic on the keytar. It was Leona who drove everyone crazy by bossing them around. Frankly, Scarlet was surprised she didn't try to play every instrument herself.

"Then *what?*" said Vega. Under her bangs her forehead wrinkled. For Vega, the only feeling worse than having the incorrect answer was not having an answer at all.

"Something's wrong. Very wrong," said Scarlet.

"Ah." Vega nodded. "I see. I know. You're right. It's so unfair. It really is. And I'd feel exactly the same if I were you, I'm sure."

"What? *No!*" Scarlet scooted out from under Vega's hand again. "I mean, yes. It's unfair. Of course. But it's unfair because it's a huge mistake. That new girl—Ophelia, or whatever her name is—should never have been picked to take my place!"

"You don't think so?"

"I do not!"

Vega sighed and crossed her arms. "Truth be told, you could be right. I've been wondering about her myself."

"You have?"

Vega nodded. "She's so far behind in Star Darlings class—which made sense in the beginning. No one

expected her to know anything yet. But she's just not catching up. Do you know she still can't manipulate a watt of energy? Not a single watt! Ooh!" She suddenly jumped as a branch reached out to tickle her ribs. "Come on, we should keep moving," she told Scarlet. "The maze doesn't like it when you stop."

Vega moved to link her arm with Scarlet's. But Scarlet had never been the touchy-feely, arm-linking, hand-holding type. Instead, she put her hands behind her back as they moved along the ever-twisting starlit path.

"You know," said Vega, sensing Scarlet's impatience with their route, "if you just focus and look for a pattern, you have a much better chance of making it out. It's when you try to fight it that you end up feeling trapped."

"Whatever," said Scarlet. "Just get me out of here."

So Vega linked arms with Scarlet (despite her protests) and they quickly made their way out of the maze.

"Star apologies," said Scarlet, "but I just can't play peekaboo with a bush and think at the same time. You're good at solving puzzles, Vega. I've never had patience for them. So think: why would someone so new and totally unprepared to grant wishes be picked to take my place when my wish-granting potential's so starmendously high?"

“You’re right. I do like puzzles . . .” said Vega. “At the same time, though, this was Lady Stella’s decision, and we have to trust her, don’t you think? Still . . .” She paused. “It is strange.” Scarlet could sense that an idea was being born in Vega’s mind. “And if you talked to Cassie, she’d tell you that’s not the only strange thing going on.”

“I know,” said Scarlet.

“You do?”

Scarlet shrugged and scowled. “I might have . . . overheard her . . . talking about me, and Leona’s Wish Pendant.”

“And the whole flower thing?” Vega’s bright blue eyebrows shot up.

“She did say something about flowers . . . but I didn’t actually get that part. What flowers was she talking about?”

“The bouquets,” said Vega. “You know. The ones we all—all the Star Darlings, I mean—had delivered to our rooms?”

“Oh, those.” Scarlet nodded. She did remember, though she hadn’t thought it strange at the time. “So you still don’t know who they’re from?”

“No,” Vega said, “but that’s not even it. Cassie has this crazy idea that they were making us fight with each

other over the littlest things. In fact, she's so sure, she took my bouquet to the botany lab to be evaluated. She'd already thrown hers and Sage's away."

"What do *you* think?" Scarlet asked. "Do you think Cassie might be right?"

Vega smoothed her hair back. "No, I don't. In fact, we made a bet. If I was right, she would do a puzzle with me every day for a double starweek."

"And if she was right?"

"I'd help her study for her Astral Accounting test."

Scarlet frowned.

Vega winked. "I know. Win-win. But I'm not too concerned about helping her study. Piper's still annoying me as much as ever. She makes these sounds when she's meditating. . . ." Vega closed her eyes and cringed. "Ugh! I can hear them all the way from upstairs in her part of the room. It sounds like a Bot-Bot on the fritz. Like this high, whiny *ohmmmm*." She winced. "How about you and Leona?" she asked Scarlet. "How were you getting along? Before you switched rooms, I mean."

"Oh, I don't know. Leona and I had our testy moments. . . ." Scarlet shrugged. "But I'm sure we would have anyway. So what did the botany lab say?"

"Nothing . . . *yet*. But we should probably hear soon."

“Promise to tell me when you do.”

Véga drew an X over her heart. “Cross my stars—and moons. But . . . how? I mean, when will I see you again? Where have you been all this time?”

“I’ve been . . . around,” said Scarlet vaguely. “They gave me a new roommate. Her name’s Mira.”

“I don’t know her,” said Véga.

“Neither did I.”

“Is she nice?”

“She’s fine,” said Scarlet. “We don’t really know each other yet. She isn’t around that much, and I pretty much stay in my loft all the time, so maybe we never will. . . .”

“Have you been to any classes since . . .”

“No,” said Scarlet bitterly.

“Don’t you think you should?” Véga gently asked. “I mean, I can understand dropping out of Leona’s band. No one—well, except Leona maybe—blames you for that. But even if you’re not in the Star Darlings anymore, you’re still a student at the school, and you can still go to Wishworld and grant wishes one day . . . but only if you graduate, of course.”

Scarlet looked over her shoulder, past the hedge maze, toward the majestic Crystal Mountains, which glimmered across Luminous Lake. Véga was right, she guessed. Not that Scarlet was worried about falling

behind in any subjects. Her classes seemed to get easier for her every year. But hiding from everyone and everything, while it made life simpler right then, wasn't helping her solve her problem, either.

"You can't hide forever," Vega went on, almost as if she'd peeked into Scarlet's mind. "How about I make you a deal like I made with Cassie?"

"I don't make deals," muttered Scarlet. "But what?"

"You start going to your classes, and I'll do whatever I can to help you get to the bottom of what went wrong."