



Vega and the Fashion Disaster

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. . . .

CHAPTER 1

Vega sat on her neatly made bed, staring at the holo-crossword puzzle projected into the air above her Star-Zap. With two flicks of her wrist, she switched the position of two answers, then frowned and returned them to their original places. She nodded, finally satisfied. It was perfect. Vega loved creating puzzles almost as much as she enjoyed solving them. She appreciated crosswords, riddles, puzzles, brainteasers, mazes, and games—anything that challenged her and made her think in a fun and interesting way.

With another flick of her wrist, she erased all the answers, leaving the clues and a blank grid, ready to be filled in. She took a look at her handiwork and sighed.

The real joy in creating a puzzle was sharing it with someone. She wished she could send it to her best friend from home, Enna, who loved games just as much as she. The two girls had even made up a secret holo-alphabet they had both memorized so they could communicate privately. What looked like gibberish to their classmates back at Kaleidoscope Falls Elementary might be a complex message about after-school plans or the guest list for Enna's upcoming Bright Day party.

Sure, Vêga belonged to Starling Academy's Puzzle Club, which met after school every Dododay and was filled with like-minded students. It was the first club she had joined since arriving at the school two years before. But the secret nature of the Star Darlings made this crossword something she could not share with anyone except them. So there were only eleven girls she could share it with, and unfortunately, none of them were particularly interested in brainteasers. In fact, they seemed to think Vêga's obsession was a little weird. It had been just a starweek or two earlier that she and Leona had found themselves sitting across from each other at lunchtime in the Celestial Café. After they had ordered their meals from the hovering Bot-Bot waiter, Vêga had turned to Leona excitedly and said, "Let's guess whose food will arrive first!" and Leona had just laughed.

“Everything is a game to you, Vega, isn’t it?” she said. Vega had blinked at her in surprise. It was—and why not? Games made life more interesting. She didn’t get why the other girls didn’t understand that. Not that she wasn’t serious-minded—quite the contrary: she was as focused on her studies as a Starling could be. But she could make studying into a game, too.

As she recalled the conversation, Vega realized that was one of the last times she had heard Leona laugh. Leona’s Wish Mission had been a terrible disappointment. (See 8-Down.) Although she had successfully granted her Wisher’s wish, Leona’s Wish Pendant had malfunctioned, and when she had returned to Starland, she had discovered it was blackened and burnt-looking. As a result, Leona hadn’t collected a single drop of wish energy. The usually vivacious girl had been sad and withdrawn ever since. Lady Stella had done her best to convince her it wasn’t her fault, but Leona was set on blaming herself.

Lady Stella told everyone to keep attending class (including their special Star Darlings-only class at the end of each school day), learning their lessons, and going on their Wish Missions as planned. The headmistress would be working with some leading wish energy scientists and some trusted faculty members to figure out

what had gone wrong with Leona's Wish Pendant and how to fix it. Hopefully they would figure it out soon.

Vega's bass guitar was in its cerulean case, leaning in the corner of the exceptionally neat bedroom. She imagined that it was looking at her reproachfully, as the Star Darlings band hadn't had a rehearsal in a week because of their lead singer's absence during her Wish Mission. They had one scheduled for that day. Would Leona show up? Vega certainly hoped so. They were already down one member due to Scarlet's ouster from the Star Darlings (see 4-Down), and Vega feared that the additional loss of their lead singer could mean the end of the group.

Vega glanced down at her Star-Zap. It was nearly time for practice, and she realized she wanted to be on her way there before her roommate got back from Meditation Club. Vega's strong desire to vacate the premises surprised her. She stood up quickly and smoothed the blue coverlet, which was unnecessary, as its edges were pulled so tightly you could bounce a wharfle on it. She knew because she had tried. Vega's roommate, Piper, kept her side of the room just as neat as Vega's, and Vega counted her lucky stars every day for that. But that's where the similarity ended. Piper's side was dreamy and ethereal, with a gently undulating water bed covered with the softest of linens and more pillows than you could count,

the largest embroidered with the word *dream*. Her star-painted dresser contained more nightgowns and pajamas than regular clothes; Vega was sure of it. She had not seen her roommate wear the same thing twice to bed.

Vega stole a quick glance at the mirror hanging on her closet door. Neatly bobbed blue hair, smooth and shiny. Electric blue jacket, sparkly tunic, leggings, and soft ankle boots. She was crisp, polished, and neat as a pin, as usual. She grabbed her bass and turned to head out of the room. The door slid open. Too late.

Piper stood in the doorway, blinking at Vega in her usual sleepy fashion. Her seafoam green hair rippled down her back, past her waist. Her long dress billowed around her feet. She was tall and slender, and whenever Vega looked at her, she couldn't help thinking of a graceful, flowing waterfall.

"Hey," said Vega.

"Hello there," said Piper languidly. She smiled slowly and sighed contentedly. "Meditation Club was starmen-dously relaxing today." She swiveled her head around and shrugged a couple of times. "I feel like a wet noodle, like I could just collapse in a heap."

"Maybe you need a nap," Vega suggested sarcastically.

Piper's light green eyes lit up. "What a great idea!"

she said. She sauntered to her side of the room and reached for one of the week's worth of sleeping masks that hung from the wall on pretty pegs before kicking off her slippers, pulling on the mask, and curling up on her chaise lounge. She arranged a loosely knit pale green blanket over her. Within arm's reach of her lounge were a basket of holo-diaries for jotting down dreams and a large bouquet of glittery coral-colored flowers, which perfumed the room with an almost magical fragrance. Piper inhaled deeply. "*Mmmmmmm*," she said sleepily.

Vega tried as hard as she could not to roll her eyes at her roommate. Not that Piper could see from under the sleeping mask anyway. Who needed to take an after-meditation nap? Wasn't that redundant? But then she immediately felt bad. From day one it had been quite obvious that ethereal Piper and practical Vega were complete opposites. Vega was direct and serious, and she liked rules. Piper was emotional, otherworldly, and unhurried. But they quickly learned that they had a common love of order and that they often saw situations from two very different angles, which gave them a multidimensional view on many issues.

Soon they developed a grudging admiration for each other. It was a struggle sometimes, but they had made it work. But then, as Vega recalled, things had changed

dramatically. They had gone to bed planning a hike to the Crystal Mountains, debating what to bring for lunch, and had woken up the next morning scowling at each other. Piper had started relaying the previous night's dream, which apparently had featured Vega in a starring (and not very flattering) role, and Vega had just cut her off. Now relations between the two were chilly, though usually polite. She could tell it pained the sensitive Piper, and it wasn't pleasant for Vega, either. But there didn't seem to be anything they could do to fix it.

Piper raised her eye mask and looked at Vega. "Are you going to band rehearsal?" she asked.

"You're a regular detective," Vega heard herself say, an edge to her voice as she held up her guitar case. Piper gave a thin-lipped smile and pulled the mask back over her eyes.

Immediately feeling guilty for her rudeness, Vega quickly opened the sliding door, walked out, closed it, and stepped onto the dorm's Cosmic Transporter, a moving sidewalk that ran through it.

Unbeknownst to each other, once they were alone, the two girls gave simultaneous sighs of relief.

CHAPTER 2

★

“No, no, no, no, no,” said Leona, stamping her foot so hard her golden earrings jangled. “You’ve got it all wrong. All wrong!” She dug her hands into her halo of golden curly hair in frustration.

Vega bit her lip, beginning to wish she had skipped rehearsal. From the looks on her fellow band members’ faces, she suspected they felt the same way.

Leona turned to the band’s lead guitarist. “Sage,” she said. “You’re playing too slow. This is rehearsal for a rock band, not an End of the Cycle of Life procession, for stars’ sake.”

Before the girl could respond, Leona turned to Libby. “And *you’re* coming in too soon on the keytar,” she scolded.

Libby sucked in her cheeks and stared down at the keys on her portable keyboard.

Vega held her breath, hoping she would be spared Leona's wrath. No such luck. Leona spun around and stared at her for a minute before she spoke.

"And, Vega, you were in the wrong key." She leaned her face close to Vega's. "Don't do that again," she concluded.

Vega felt her cheeks turn red. She generally appreciated Leona's big personality and even occasionally found her dramatic outbursts somewhat entertaining, but that day she felt the girl was just being a big bully.

She watched as Libby took a deep breath, closed her eyes, wiped the frown off her face, and opened her eyes. "Leona," Libby said kindly, "do you need a break?"

This only served to infuriate Leona further. "I don't need a break!" she screeched. "I need a new band."

Clover, who had reluctantly agreed to sub for Scarlet when she hadn't shown up for the last rehearsal, raised her drumsticks and hit the cymbal with a loud crash. She stood up. "That's it," she said. "Guess what, Leona? I don't need to take this. I'm just doing this as a favor. And now I'm out of here." She shoved her drumsticks into her back pocket and stormed off.

Leona spun around, throwing her hands into the air.

“Great, guys, just great,” she said. “Now we’re drummer-less again. And she wasn’t even the problem. It’s the three of you!”

Libby, Sage, and Vega glanced at each other. Nobody seemed to be in any rush to argue with the enraged diva. Finally, Libby spoke up. “Leona,” she said, putting her hand on the girl’s arm. “We understand that you’re under a lot of stress right now. But you also have to see things from our point of view. We’re learning new songs and we’re trying hard and you need to be patient with us. Nobody is going to want to be in your band if you yell all the time. And I don’t think you want us to quit, do you?”

Vega was impressed. Libby always could see both sides of a situation and lay them out clearly in a nonjudgmental way. And Leona actually seemed to be listening to her.

“Yeah,” Vega added. “You’d have to have tryouts all over again. What if Vivica comes back?”

Vivica was Leona’s biggest rival and was still angry that Leona had beaten her to be lead singer of the group. Starting over would be completely unacceptable. Leona’s shoulders sagged. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m just so upset about everything and I guess I’m taking it out on you guys. . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Of course you’re upset,” Sage said in a calming

tone. "Listen, it's all going to be okay. We're a good group! Don't forget that we were the ones who were picked out of all the students who tried out. Maybe we should just hold off on practicing until you're feeling better about . . ." Vêga noticed that Sage's eyes had lit on the empty spot on Leona's wrist where her Wish Pendant used to be. Once you noticed that, it was almost impossible to look anywhere else. Vêga forced herself to stare at Leona's face. "Um, everything that happened," Sage concluded.

"Okay," said Leona softly. She gazed at the ground, unable to look anyone in the eye. "I'll let you know when I'm feeling more up to it." She smiled sadly. "I'm sorry."

The three girls watched as Leona headed toward the Big Dipper Dorm, the slightly bigger and fancier dorm where all the third and fourth years lived.

Vêga turned to the two other girls. "Wow," she said. "Do you think she's ever going to get over what happened?"

"She had better," said Sage, "or she's going to lose all her friends. If she hasn't already." She shrugged. "Well, see you later. I have plans to meet some friends and listen to music at the Lightning Lounge." She turned and hurried off.

"What do you think?" Vêga asked Libby. But the

pink-haired girl was holo-texting and held up a finger for Vega to hold her thought. Vega did.

“So what do you think about that?” Vega repeated when Libby was finished.

“What do I think? I think we’d better find Scarlet if we want to keep this band together,” said Libby. “As much as she and Leona didn’t get along, Leona usually behaved around her. And Clover was mad. I don’t think she’s coming back.”

“So no one has seen Scarlet since . . . that day?” Vega asked.

“Well, Tessa told me that Scarlet stopped showing up for their Astronomy class,” said Libby. “It’s totally bizarre. Nobody’s seen her. And nobody knows where her new dorm room is—or even if she has one.” She shook her head. “It’s a mystery.”

Libby’s Star-Zap pinged, telling her she had a holo-text. She read it, smiled, and put her guitar back in its pink case, then snapped the case closed. “Adora’s at the Serenity Gardens,” she reported, “so I’m going to paddle out there and hang out with her until dinnertime. Want to join me?” Vega declined, even though she enjoyed the gardens, a chain of star-shaped islands connected by footbridges that sat in the middle of Luminous Lake. Lush and beautiful, it was a wild place with towering

trees, shady nooks, blossoming shrubs, creeping vines, and more varieties of flowers than you could count. The air smelled tantalizingly delicious. But there was a place she liked even better.

“See you at dinner, then,” said Libby, walking off toward Luminous Lake. Vega knew she’d grab a hover-canoe at the boathouse on Shimmering Shores. Vega slung her own guitar case over her shoulder and headed to the hedge maze, her favorite spot in all of Starling Academy. The trickily curving paths, which led, eventually, to a lovely seating area in the middle, were surrounded on either side by tall green hedges, so you couldn’t see over to the next turn. But this maze was special. Its paths were constantly shifting, so it had limitless possibilities. You never went the same way twice. It was quite challenging. This was delightful to Vega but entirely frustrating and confusing to most of the other students, so Vega knew she would have her privacy. An escape route had recently been added, after a first year had unwisely gone into the hedge maze without her Star-Zap and, unable to find her way out, had to sleep under a hedge overnight. Now a single red florafierce could be found blooming in each wall of the maze. All you had to do was pick it and the maze would immediately form a doorway out. But Vega would never consider using

it. Finding her way in an ever-changing maze was too much fun.

Vega could feel all the frustrations of the day magically lift as she stepped between the leafy maze walls. She loved the way the thick hedges towered over her head and framed the blue sky above. She was convinced she did her best thinking as she wandered through its pathways.

She switched on her Star-Zap's holo-video and began recording. She liked to take holo-vids of her day and review them before she got into bed for the night. After she made the first turn, she had a choice of going left or right. Without hesitation, she took the left path. Turning, and turning, and turning some more, she meandered through until she found herself in the center of the maze, which that day featured a display of lallabelle flowers, formed into a star shape, of course. Nearby was a pretty little swing hung with creeping zeldablooms, fragrant and lush. She sat on it and swung back and forth, the slight breeze ruffling her short hair.

Vega opened her guitar case, lifted the blue embroidered strap over her neck, and began to strum, practicing her scales, starting with C major. Her fingers alternated over the frets as she picked out a sequence of notes. Practicing her scales soothed and calmed her, which was

good, because Leona's outburst during band practice was still bothering her. It wasn't only that the girl had berated her fellow band members (Vega did not appreciate being yelled at for no good reason), but also that the usually confident Starling was feeling so downtrodden. Plus, she wondered, if they could even find Scarlet, could they convince her to return to the band? Not if Leona was acting like this; that was for sure. Vega thought there must be something she could do to help. Her fingers playing the notes, she swung back and forth, lost in thought. *That's it! I'll holo-text Cassie!* Cassie had struck up an unlikely but warm friendship with Leona. Unlikely because Cassie was as reserved and shy as Leona was loud and confident. But their opposite-personality friendship worked. Vega felt a twinge of remorse. It was just like how she and Piper used to balance each other out.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her Star-Zap. I'M IN THE HEDGE MAZE. DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE TO TALK ABOUT LEONA? she holo-texted.

The response was immediate: I'LL BE THERE IN TEN STARMINS.

So Vega continued to play, lost in her thoughts about Leona, Scarlet, and Piper. Glancing at her Star-Zap, which sat nearby, she realized the ten starmins were almost up. She put her bass back in its case and

began making her way toward the maze entrance. Then her Star-Zap beeped and flashed a small icon of her mother's face. It was in a red star, a reminder that she had not yet returned her mother's holo-call from two stardays earlier. Vega considered doing it right then and there, but she still wasn't ready. She knew her mom was going to ask her to come home for a visit (again), and Vega needed to come up with a reason that she couldn't (again). She had already used a fellow student's Bright Day celebration she couldn't miss, a Glowin' Glions game, and an extra-credit assignment. She was running out of excuses. Vega felt uneasy. She wasn't exactly sure when things between her and her mom had gotten so complicated, but she figured it must have been around the time the two had seemed to switch roles. Vega had reached the Age of Fulfillment and overnight, it seemed, had transformed from a carefree child to an über-responsible, grades-obsessed perfectionist. She was determined to get into Starling Academy at any cost and had focused all her energy on studying. (She took the entrance examination five times to get the rare perfect score, which she was sure would guarantee her acceptance. Luckily, she loved tests, seeing them as the ultimate game.) And perhaps because her mother, Virginia, realized she no longer needed to worry about

her daughter, she changed from a constantly stressed-out single mom into a relaxed, fun-loving person. The two rarely saw eye to eye on anything these days, so Vega alternately missed her mom terribly and was relieved by the distance between them.

Vega turned a corner and spotted Cassie, who looked flustered. She had somehow gotten turned around and was headed the wrong way.

“Hey, Cassie,” Vega called.

Cassie spun around, a frown on her pale, pretty face. She was wearing a white diaphanous baby-doll dress shot through with silver thread over a pair of calf-length white leggings and a white tank top. She had delicate silver sandals on her feet.

“Oh, there you are,” Cassie said, sounding faintly put out. She blinked up at Vega through her star-shaped glasses, her silvery hair done up in her signature pigtail buns. Vega smiled at the girl.

“Stop it,” Cassie snapped.

“Stop what?” Vega asked innocently.

“You’re looking at me like I’m some precious little doll,” Cassie replied. “You know how much I hate that.”

“Sorry,” said Vega with an embarrassed grin. She couldn’t help it. It was true. Cassie was so tiny and cute, even when she was scowling.

“Well, thank goodness I found you,” said Cassie. “You know how this maze drives me crazy.”

Vega opened her mouth, about to mention that it was actually *she* who had found Cassie. But the irritated look on Cassie’s face told her to keep that thought to herself.

“I’m glad you holo-texted me,” Cassie said as the two girls made their way back to the hedge entrance.

They reached a place where they could turn either right or left. Cassie started to go to the right and Vega tapped her on the shoulder. “This way,” Vega said, pointing in the opposite direction.

Cassie shrugged. “Whatever you say. You’re the expert.” She glanced at Vega. “So was Scarlet at practice today?”

Vega shook her head.

Cassie looked disappointed. “So weird,” she said. “No one’s seen her since that awful day. . . .” Her voice trailed off.

Vega winced, recalling the fear in the pit of her stomach when they all realized Lady Stella was going to tell one of them that she was about to be ousted from the Star Darlings. After all her hard work, it would have been such a blow to her. She had actually frozen with terror at the thought. But as she had looked around the

room, she'd realized that each of the eleven other girls felt the same way.

Cassie looked at the ground. "I still feel guilty over how happy I was that it wasn't me," she said.

Vega nodded. "I think we all do."

A sly smile crossed Cassie's face. "Everyone except Leona," she said. "I think she was glad to see Scarlet go." The smile quickly left. "But now Leona's got her own troubles." She looked up at Vega. "Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

Vega took a deep breath. "It's just that Leona's not herself," she said. She filled Cassie in on that afternoon's outburst.

"Oh, that's bad," said Cassie, biting her lip. "She loves the band. That's such a shame."

Vega put her hands to her forehead. "We should be able to help her get through this. Get everything back to normal. But I have no idea how. That's where you come in. You two are such good friends." The thought of losing the band was very upsetting to Vega. She took everything seriously—her classes, her studies, the meals she ate (to give her energy), the time she went to bed (so she'd be well rested for the next day's classes). Even her beloved games—she was a stickler for following the

rules. When she played her bass, it was the only time she ever really let loose and relaxed. She did not want to give that up.

Cassie grimaced. “We *used* to be good friends,” she said. “But she’s been keeping to herself lately. The only person she seems to want to spend time with these star-days is her new roommate, Ophelia.” She thought for a moment, then nodded as if she had made up her mind. “I’m going to try to talk to Leona after dinner,” she said. “Will you come with me?”

“Sure,” said Vega, shrugging.

Cassie’s mood brightened considerably. Vega thought that it was probably both because they had a plan and because they were approaching the end of the maze. Cassie breathed a sigh of relief as they walked out the leafy doorway. The Celestial Café came into sight, and Vega’s stomach rumbled at the same time that the large star above the door began to blink, letting everyone know that it was dinnertime. Perfect. The two girls headed to the building. Inside the large, warmly lit room, soft music was playing. There was the soothing sound of students softly chattering and the clink of silverware against fine china. They headed to the table that had unofficially become the Star Darlings’, with its stunning view of the Crystal Mountains. To the rest of the

school, they were a group of girls—four first years, four second years, and four third years—who attended regular classes but required some extra help during last period. Only the Star Darlings; Lady Stella, the headmistress; Lady Cordial, the head of admissions; and a handful of professors knew who they really were. Vega found that some students treated her differently (a small number of those scornfully, though many were sympathetic), while most didn't seem to care that she was "different." Little did they know that Vega and her fellow Star Darlings were really special in the very best way. That didn't matter to Vega, who didn't really care what others thought of her. It was enough for her to be singled out as special by someone she had admired for a long time: Lady Stella. In the hopes that she would one day be chosen to attend Starling Academy, Vega had devoured every holo-article that had been written about the headmistress.

There were three empty seats at the table, and Cassie and Vega sat next to each other. They missed out on the seats facing the radiant Crystal Mountains, but the light of the setting sun hit the mountain peaks, refracting into stunning mini rainbows that bounced off the shining goblets and illuminated everyone's face.

"So how was Wish Theory class today, Adora?" Vega asked as she unfolded her soft cloth napkin and laid it on

her lap. The Star Darlings always made certain to limit their conversations to non-Star Darlings business when they were in eye- and earshot of the rest of the student body. They had been warned countless times that the work they were doing was top secret. Even most of the faculty had no idea what was going on.

“A snore,” said Adora with a rueful grin. Professor Illumia Wickes liked to let her students run the class discussions, which was oftentimes wonderful, unless you had an incessant talker in the class. “This girl named Moonaria would not stop talking. No one could get a word in edgewise.”

Vega nodded in sympathy. She watched as Tessa entered the cafeteria and, seeing that the only free seat was next to her roommate, Adora, leaned over and whispered in her sister’s ear. Gemma rolled her eyes and moved into that seat, leaving the seat next to Leona open for Tessa. Vega noticed that Cassie was openly staring at Leona, who kept leaning over to whisper in Ophelia’s ear. Leona was being unusually quiet, and the rest of the girls stole glances at her, as well, used to being entertained by the girl at mealtimes. She would often lead the girls in a sing-along or start a game of holo-telephone. Once the message had started off as “Glow for it! You are starmendous!” But by the time it got to

the end of the line, it had been completely mangled, and poor Cassie had squeaked out, “You’ve got it! Glowfurs are delicious!” and everyone roared with laughter. Cassie had seemed way more humiliated than she should have been about her mistake, in Vega’s opinion. But she had not been able to figure out why.

Astra leaned over. “Why so quiet, Leona?”

Leona simply shook her head. Her expression clearly read *Leave me alone*. Astra looked like she was going to try again, but Cassie elbowed her in the ribs.

“Ouch,” said Astra, rubbing her side. She and Leona both had very big personalities. The two usually enjoyed a friendly rivalry, which occasionally resulted in the butting of heads and angry words. But they rarely stayed mad at each other for long. Astra looked confused.

Finally, Cassie leaned over and whispered in Astra’s ear. Vega wasn’t sure what she had said, but she thought she could guess the gist of it: *Leave Leona alone; she’s fragile*. Astra looked disappointed. Whether it was that she felt sorry for Leona or missed her sparring partner, Vega was not sure.

The look on Cassie’s face as she watched Leona from across the table was also impossible to decipher—jealous, wistful, or maybe just curious. Next Vega studied Ophelia, who was smiling shyly, her orange-pigtailed

head bent to the side to listen to Leona's whispered comments. She seemed like a very nice, quiet girl, and Vega found herself wishing that *she* was the Star Darling who had been assigned the new roommate instead of Leona. The fact that Piper would have to have been expelled from the Star Darlings for that to happen did not escape her, and she silently chided herself for her unkind thoughts.

Vega found her appetite was not diminished by the strange goings-on and polished off her garble-greens soufflé and moon cheese popovers. After the Bot-Bot waiters had cleared the table, she ordered a mug of piping hot Zing and a cocomoon pavlova. The food at Starling Academy was top-notch, and although she wasn't quite as into food as Tessa (who hadn't been able to decide between two desserts, so had ordered both), she appreciated eating well—especially after many nights of popping a premade Sparkle Meal into the oven when her mother was on the overnight shift at the hospital. As a nurse, her hours were long and she couldn't miss a day unless it was an absolute emergency. Vega had learned at a young age what constituted an emergency: not much. She sighed, remembering the many nights she had eaten alone at the kitchen table while doing her homework.

She looked around and smiled. Maybe that's why she felt so fierce about being a Star Darling and keeping everyone together and happy. It was nice to be part of a group, to literally have a place at the table among friends.

After polishing off the last bite of her dessert, Vega swigged the rest of her Zing and stood, pushing her chair back from the table. She was ready to march over to Leona, and she turned to ask Cassie to join her. Cassie grabbed her arm. "Let's wait a minute," she said softly, "and see where Ophelia goes. I'd like to talk to Leona alone." They discreetly followed the two Star Darlings out of the cafeteria. Sure enough, once outside, the two girls parted ways.

After a moment, Leona noticed their presence and gave them a wan smile. "Hello, girls," she said.

Cassie leaned forward for a closer look at Leona. "Did you take your sparkle shower today?" she asked in a concerned voice. Vega blinked, suddenly realizing that Leona's skin was not quite as glittery as usual. She once again wished she was as observant as Cassie, who never seemed to miss a detail. All Starlings had a shimmery glow, and they supplemented it with daily bathing in a shower of weightless sparkles. It was a great way to start the day, as it revitalized and invigorated you, improving

your mood and outlook and also refreshing your sparkle. Some Starlings took them twice a day, but Vega felt that was a bit excessive and a daily shower was perfect. It was funny: Leona, with her golden hair, coloring, and clothing, always managed to look extra glittery. But not that night.

“Of course,” said Leona. Then she paused and wrinkled her brow, thinking about it. “I mean, I think so. Maybe,” she concluded.

Cassie gave Vega a despairing look. Leona was usually vain about her appearance. This was so unlike her.

The Cosmic Transporter dropped them off between the two dorms. The first and second years lived in the Little Dipper Dorm, and the third and fourth years lived in the Big Dipper Dorm. Cassie clearly wanted Leona to invite them to her room, but the girl was not cooperating. She looked at them quizzically as they shifted their feet. “Well, I’ll see you la—” Leona started.

“Hey, mind if we drop by?” Cassie interrupted. “I haven’t been over in a while.”

Leona shrugged halfheartedly. “Sure,” she said.

They walked through the doors and stepped onto the Cosmic Transporter that looped its way through the large dormitory, dropping students off in front of their

doors. They headed to her room in a silence that seemed awkward to Vega. She and Cassie weren't used to having to carry a conversation when Leona was around. The transporter deposited the three in front of Leona's door, and she placed her hand on the scanner. The simple gesture seemed to take considerable effort. "Welcome, Leona," the soothing Bot-Bot voice said, and the scanner glowed bright blue as the door slid open. The girls stepped inside behind her.

"It's a little messy," Leona said awkwardly. "I've been kind of, um, busy lately."

A little! That was the understatement of the star-century. Vega was shocked by the state of the room. Offices, dorm rooms, public spaces, houses, classrooms, restaurants, stores—every space on Starland—were self-cleaning. Scrubbing, scouring, mopping, sweeping, vacuuming, and washing were unheard of on Starland, which was why Wishling tools such as mops, brooms, pails, cleansers, sponges, and, most of all, the frighteningly loud contraptions Wishlings called vacuums completely confused Starlings. But Starlings weren't entirely off the hook when it came to cleanliness: they still had to hang their clothes, place their holo-books on the shelves, and throw their garbage into the vanishing

garbage cans. Leona had clearly not tidied up in a while. Vega shuddered with distaste as she took in the clothing draped over chairs, the burned-out lightbulb in Leona's three-sided vanity mirror, the pile of jujufruit peels on the floor. Her large round pedestal bed was unmade. Gliony, Leona's stuffed talking lion who never said the same affirmation twice, sat forlornly on the floor, on his head. Cassie picked him up and righted him. "Shine on, bright Starling," he said. Cassie placed him on Leona's shelf and patted his mane.

Vega looked around the room. Leona's stage, a golden star-shaped platform used for her daily performance, was littered with star-shaped stuffed creatures, pillows, and holo-magazines. The disco ball, which usually spun, filling the room with dancing stars of light, was turned off. The trunk she used to store her glamorous golden costumes was empty, its contents strewn about on the floor. The sheer messiness of Leona's side made the contrast with the other side of the room even more shocking. Leona's untidy half was giving Vega a headache, but she was shocked to see that Ophelia didn't seem to have anything *to* organize. Her side was just . . . sad. There was a plain solar-metal bed with a simple white moonfeather comforter. The tiny chest of drawers made it clear she didn't have a lot of clothing, either.

The lone spot of color on Ophelia's side of the room was a thin orange ribbon that trimmed her plain white bedding.

"Your roommate doesn't have a lot of belongings, does she?" Vega observed.

"No, she doesn't," said Leona with a hint of defensiveness. "She likes to keep things simple."

"Not a holo-book or a holo-photo?" Cassie pressed. "Not a single stuffed creature?" It was clear she was trying to keep her tone light, but Vega could see that Leona was starting to bristle at the questions. To Vega's surprise, the usually sensitive Cassie plowed on. She picked up a tiny crystal that sat on Ophelia's dresser and placed it in her palm. It was a miniature version of the beautiful crystal her own roommate, Sage, displayed in their dorm room, which she had received as a Bright Day gift.

"So tiny!" she marveled. "More like a chip than an actual crystal . . ."

"Put that down!" Leona snapped.

Cassie's eyes widened and she set it back on the dresser like it was burning her hand. She stared down at her silver slippers, looking like she might cry. Then she seemed to gather herself, taking a deep breath and sitting next to Leona on the rumpled bed. She launched into more questions.

“So what’s your new roommate like?” Cassie asked. “Where did she come from? How did a first year get assigned to a third year, anyhow?”

Vega was staring at Cassie, willing her to slow down, but the girl was just getting started.

“You have to admit that it’s a little weird that she doesn’t have any belongings,” Cassie added. “Where’s her desk? Her bookcase? Her shelves?”

Leona stood up. “Did you come here to interrogate me about Ophelia?” she asked angrily. “Well, here’s a star flash: I think she’s great. She’s sweet and the perfect roommate. Especially after that Scarlet,” she spat out. “I’m so glad not to have to look at *her* weird stuff anymore.”

“Leona, we were just—” Vega started.

“Ophelia’s going to be back from the library soon, so why don’t you just ask her yourself?” Leona interrupted. There was a grin on her face, but it looked angry and mocking. “Or better yet, why don’t you just leave us both alone?”

“Sorry to have bothered you,” Cassie muttered, jumping up from the bed. Vega followed her to the door, which Leona slid open with her wish energy manipulation skills. *She’s good*, thought Vega. *Almost as good as I*

am. Vega hurried into the hall, relieved to be out of the tense room. She felt lighter just standing in the hallway.

“Why are you bothering me, anyway?” Leona called after them. “You’re just as annoying as Scarlet.”

Cassie spun around so quickly that she knocked into Vega, who had to shoot out a hand and brace it against the wall to steady herself.

“Wait, you saw Scarlet?” they both cried.

But the door slid shut behind them with an angry bang.