

The background of the cover is a soft, teal watercolor wash that fades from a darker shade at the top and bottom to a lighter, almost white center. Scattered throughout the teal areas are small, white, five-pointed stars of varying sizes, giving the impression of a starry sky or a dreamlike atmosphere.

Tessa's Lost and Found

Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa
with Zelda Rose

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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, the result is positive energy. And the Starlings of Starland need this energy to keep their world running.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prologue

Curled up in bed, Tessa gazed at her Star-Zap screen and yawned. Her roommate, Adora, had been sleeping for at least a starhour. But Tessa needed to get a holo-mail out on the school's zap-app 3C, otherwise known as the Cosmic Communication Center.

The system had mail, calendars, announcements, holo-textbooks, and grades that were constantly updating. Right then, Tessa was writing to her Wishworld Relations teacher, asking for an extension on a holo-paper.

Tessa added a few words, then abandoned the holo-mail once again to peek at her grades in a different class, Wish Fulfillment. Maybe the stars had aligned and Professor Eugenia Bright had changed her grade since the last time she'd checked, about fifteen starmins earlier. No, there it was, exactly the same as before: A for *almost glowing*, two grades below the perfect I for *illumination*. Definitely not what she was aiming for!

Really, though, Wish Fulfillment was the least of Tessa's concerns. She had to focus on Wishworld Relations. But first she decided to check the scores for the Glowin' Glions star ball team and see how Astra had fared in the latest game.

"Moonberries!" she moaned. They'd lost to the Twinkling Twinkelopes by half a hydrong. Next she scrolled through some announcements.

"That's interesting," Tessa said out loud. The Star Darlings band's biggest rival was holding another audition. *And no wonder*, she thought, a little gleefully. Another Starling must have quit the group. A girl named Vivica was its leader. And no Starling with even a flounce of talent would stick with her band. The way Vivica and her friends treated others was downright mean.

Now what? Tessa wondered. What should she click on next? *Oh! That Wishworld Relations holo-mail!*

This time, for sure, she wouldn't get distracted. She'd finish the letter. But first she read over what she'd already written.

Star greetings, Professor Margaret Dumarre,

Hmmm . . . She hadn't gotten as far she'd thought! She nibbled one of the astromuffins she kept by her bedside, and in a burst of energy continued:

I'm writing this holo-letter while everyone else is sleeping. I should be sleeping, too, but I'm staying up late trying to finish my holo-paper, "Being Human." Of course I know that Wishlings call themselves human! I've known that since I was in Wee Constellation School. And as a third-year student, I've recently learned many of these "teenage humans" put off homework and studying so they can watch a screen called "television" and constantly check their low-tech devices: computers, tablets, and cell phones.

I've absorbed this information so well I seem to have developed some of these traits myself. I've put off this paper, and now with star apologies, I must tell you it's going to be late. Would it be possible to have an extension? Maybe another starweek, until next Dododay?

I don't mean to make star excuses, but unlike my Wishworld counterparts, I have valid reasons for being so late.

First, there's that ~~super-secret Star Darlings class~~ we take to prepare for our wish missions special class I have to take for extra help. It requires a lot of outside-the-classroom work. And I can't always judge the timing. Often Lady Stella calls us together unexpectedly. And sometimes we meet on our own. Just the other starday, we talked about ~~all the strange happenings on campus and on Starland: the basics of a successful Wish Mission.~~

Specifically, we discussed:

~~How Lady Stella tells us there's nothing to worry about, but Starland has had several blackouts.~~

~~How to recognize that you have correctly identified your Wisher.~~

~~How Scarlet was kicked out of the SD group and replaced by Ophelia. When it turned out Ophelia desperately needed Scarlet's help, Lady Stella explained that Scarlet was back in and Ophelia was out. And most shockingly, how~~

~~Ophelia later disappeared and just told us that she was lying the whole time and that Lady Stella put her up to it.~~

How to ask probing, yet innocent questions to determine your Wisher's wish.

~~How all the SD roommates were fighting because of the poisonous flowers someone mysteriously placed in our rooms.~~

How to keep an eye on your Countdown Clock, so you don't miss your wish window.

~~How Star Kindness Day was ruined by negative energy when holo-texted compliments were replaced by insults.~~

How to erase your Wisher's memory once the wish is granted and wish energy successfully collected.

~~How all the Star Darlings were acting odd because we were wearing special nail polish, probably made with negative energy. My reaction: everything tasted like moonberries.~~
How to return to Starland safely when your mission is accomplished.

There's so much material to cover, in fact, the girls have an early-morning meeting in my room. ~~The future of the Star Darlings~~ Our grades may hang in the balance!

Starfully yours,

Tessa

And with those last words written and her real thoughts deleted, Tessa finally fell asleep.

CHAPTER 1

The next morning should have worked out perfectly for Tessa. All the Star Darlings were coming to her and Adora's room for an important meeting. And she was totally prepared.

Even though she'd stayed up late working on her holo-paper—and excuse note—Tessa had set the alarm on her Star-Zap for an extra-early wake-up time. Before morning, the alarm buzzed her favorite childhood tune, “Old MacStarlight Had a Farm.”

She took her sparkle shower in record time, not losing track of starmins the way she usually did. She finished so quickly, in fact, Adora was still sleeping soundly when she went back to the room.

So Tessa tidied her ultra-plush bedcovers and smoothed her soft-as-a-cloud rug. Both came from Bed, Bath, and Beyond the Stars' exclusive line of luxury items, perfect for Tessa, who liked to surround herself with sumptuous comfort.

Then she pulled on the outfit she'd laid out the night before: an emerald-green and ocean-blue striped sweaterdress that swirled around her knees. It matched Tessa's long wavy hair perfectly.

Quickly, Tessa checked her Star-Zap to make sure she was still on schedule. Yes, she was doing great. She picked up her starbrush to sweep her bangs to the side. There was just one more thing to do before the Star Darlings came over. She had to—

Tessa caught sight of the headboard over her bed . . . and everything fell apart.

The headboard was really one big holo-screen, and Tessa was drawn to it like solar metal to a magnet.

Initially, Tessa had used the screen to care for virtual pets. She loved creatures of all sizes, shapes, and glows. But then she'd programmed the screen to show her family farm in real time—real creatures in real action.

Tessa and her younger sister, Gemma—also a Star Darling—were from Solar Springs, a tiny town of gently

rolling hills. A small number of families lived on simple farms nestled in valleys. It was a lovely spot. But the town had just one general store that sold only basic items, like toothlights and starbrushes.

When Tessa wanted that starmazing luster-lotion for her skin, or the glitz gloves that felt soft as shimmer-butter, she had to put in a special order. Except for that, Tessa loved her farm life: the fresh fruits and vegetables she used for cooking, the farm creatures . . .

And that was why she couldn't turn away from the screen. Her favorite creature of all, a playful baby galliope named Jewel, was there in all her cuteness, nudging a round druderwomp bush across the ground like a ball.

The deep purple creature was all spindly legs and long neck, with a glowing feathery mane and tail. Tessa had seen holo-pictures of Wishworld ponies. She agreed they resembled galliopes. But she doubted they could hold a glowstick to Jewel in charm alone.

Tessa dropped her starbrush and edged closer to the holo-screen. "Jewel," she cooed softly. "Star greetings, little girl."

If Jewel was in the right mood, she could step out of the screen—or at least her image could—and be virtually close to Tessa. Hoping that would happen, Tessa

tapped the bottom of the screen, and a virtual starapple floated into her hand. She held out the sparkling round fruit to Jewel. Back on the farm, it wouldn't be just an image; the starapple would be real and crunchy and sweet.

Jewel whinnied, stepped out of the screen, and nuzzled Tessa's neck. "I could do this all starday," Tessa said with a giggle.

"Maybe you could, but you really shouldn't," said Adora. Tessa looked across the room. Adora had gotten up and dressed without her even noticing.

"Everyone will be here in a starsec. So pick up your starbrush and finish getting ready."

Tessa ignored her, putting her arm around Jewel. "I don't like being told what to do," she whispered, as if the galliope could understand. "You'd think after rooming together for so long, Adora would know that."

Sighing, Adora picked up Tessa's starbrush and placed it on the nightstand. "Come on, Tessa, I put away all my test tubes and experiments—even that new lip-sparkle I'm working on. The one that actually shoots out sparks."

Adora spoke as calmly as ever; Tessa had rarely seen her ruffled or emotional. And they generally got along.

But Tessa had cleaned up! What was one little starbrush in the grand scheme of things? Still, the Star Darlings were coming over. . . .

Tessa waved good-bye to Jewel, and the galliope stepped back into the screen. “See you soon, little girl. Next time we’ll play and we’ll—”

“Starland to Tessa!” Adora snapped her fingers in front of Tessa’s face. “The Star Darlings meeting is—”

“*Knock-knock*,” sang Leona from the other side of the door.

“Now!” Adora finished, nodding toward the door so it slid open quickly. The other ten Star Darlings walked into the room and settled on beds, chairs, and rugs.

“Oh, Tessa,” Gemma said, disappointment in her voice. She eyed Tessa’s cleared-off table. “I thought for sure you’d have a whole breakfast spread for us.”

Tessa groaned. That was what she’d been planning to do! Before she was distracted by Jewel, she had been about to bake breakfast treats in the micro-zap!

Scarlet shook her head emphatically, her dark hood falling to her shoulders before she quickly pulled it back up. “Breakfast is not important,” she said brusquely. “We’ll have plenty of time to go to the Celestial Café after the meeting.”

“Still, we could have met a little later,” Piper said wistfully, covering up a yawn. Tessa knew Piper liked her rest more than the average Starling.

“No, meeting now makes the most sense,” said Vega. “This way we take care of business and keep the rest of the starday free for studying.”

“I would have voted for a bit later so I’d have had time to warm up my vocal cords.” Leona’s voice started out deep, then rose higher with every word: “Now I have to do my exercises in regular conversation.”

“Please, spare us,” Scarlet said.

Tessa sighed. Those roommates were a much bigger mismatch than she and Adora! She doubted they would ever get along.

Cassie held up a hand, and everyone quieted down. She was the smallest Starling of the group, but her words carried great weight. “The fact is, spies could be anywhere on campus. I don’t know whom we can even trust! Not even Lady Stella.”

Tessa laughed. “You don’t really believe what that crazy Ophelia said, do you? She was clearly making it up.”

Half the Star Darlings nodded in agreement. Others didn’t look quite so convinced.

Libby stood up. "Okay, everybody, let's focus!"

Tessa nodded in agreement. It would also be great if they could move the meeting along so they could make it to breakfast in a timely fashion. Without her usual pre-breakfast snack, she was hungry.

"Fine." Cassie nodded. She took off her star-shaped glasses, polished them so they shone, and nodded again. "Someone is clearly trying to sabotage the Star Darlings. If it isn't Lady Stella, then who is it? And why? I mean, there have been so many crazy problems. . . ."

"Like our holo-text compliments coming out as insults," interrupted Piper indignantly.

"And every student invited to try out for my band," Leona added, "when it should have just been Star Darlings!"

"And those are just communication issues," Cassie continued. "What about everything else? The poisonous flowers? The strange nail polish that wouldn't come off? Who is responsible?"

Scarlet shook her head irritably. "It's so clearly Lady Stella," she said. "Why can't you all see it?"

The Star Darlings began to argue.

Lady Stella was the head of the school. She was revered in academic circles for her principles and forward

thinking in education. She was held in highest regard all across Starland. Business Starlings, Starling scientists, and heads of state constantly consulted her, and wee Starlings wanted to grow up to be just like her.

Tessa had actually dressed as Lady Stella once for Light Giving Day, when young Starlings dressed in costume to hand out flowers and welcome the growing season. She guessed a couple of others may have, too.

Tessa thought back to one of her first days at the academy, well before the Star Darlings had been formed. She had been curled up in a chair in the Lightning Lounge, holo-texting Gemma back home and feeling homesick.

Lady Stella had come over and sat down next to her. She seemed to know all about Tessa without Tessa's saying a word, and she led her on a tour of the Celestial Café kitchen, where Bot-Bot cooks and waitstaff worked.

"You can come here any time you like," she had said, "and cook, bake, or just relax. The Bot-Bots will be informed."

Then they'd sat in a corner and munched on astro-muffins together—moonberry for Lady Stella (she said they were her favorite) and lolofruit for Tessa.

Lady Stella couldn't be capable of any wrongdoing whatsoever!

"Scarlet, you're going galactic!" said Libby, apparently agreeing with Tessa. "The person or people responsible don't even have to be part of Starling Academy! He or she could be from outside the school."

"I doubt that," Cassie said nervously. "Whoever is doing this would need to be here full-time. And Lady Stella is here 36/8."

"You're *both* going galactic!" Sage said to Scarlet and Cassie. "Lady Stella has been starmendous to each and every one of us!"

"Well, count me out of that lucky stargroup," Scarlet shot back. "Here's a fact for you: my grades were switched with dimwit Ophelia's so I'd be kicked out of the Star Darlings. Who else would be able to do that? And why would Ophelia lie?"

The girls fell silent. It was hard to disagree with Scarlet; plus, she could so easily go supernova. Tessa looked at Leona, who stood up to Scarlet regularly. But Leona had been uncharacteristically quiet. Then Tessa glanced at Gemma. What was her sister thinking? She, too, had been quiet.

"Well, lots of Starlings could have access to records,"

Tessa finally said. "What about the Bot-Bot guards? They have access to every room on campus."

Gemma finally spoke up. "That's right! Once, when I was walking past the teachers' lounge, I was hurrying really fast down the hall. I can't even remember why I was there. Maybe because I had to go to the Radiant Rec Center and I was a little nervous because I had never—"

"Get to the point of the story," said Scarlet.

"Well, once there was a Bot-Bot repairman outside the lounge door, stooping over. He could have been trying to listen in!"

"Or fix the hand scanner," said Scarlet.

"Lady Cordial keeps close watch on all the comings and goings in that hall," Cassie noted, "because the admissions office is there. She'd notice anything strange. So forget about the Bot-Bot!" She sighed. "Lady Stella clearly set up the whole Scarlet-Ophelia switch. She told me Ophelia was an orphan. She lied. And as we all know, Ophelia was never even in an orphanage!"

Scarlet leaned closer to Sage with an almost compassionate expression. "I was fooled, too, for a long time." A shadow passed over her face. "But Lady Stella pulled the glimmersilk over my eyes."

Finally, Leona spoke up, as if she'd been weighing the information and had made up her mind. "Well,

I spent the most time with Ophelia of all of you, and frankly, I think she's telling the truth."

"But why would Lady Stella want to sabotage our missions?" Vega asked. "It doesn't make sense. The missions were her idea to begin with!"

The girls all spoke at once.

"Maybe she wants Starling Academy to fail so she can start a new school."

"Maybe she wants to move to Wishworld!"

"Maybe she's just a hologram, and the real Lady Stella is being held captive in one of the underground caves."

Tessa shivered. The last comment, which had come from Piper, was especially creepy.

"I don't know why she's doing it," said Scarlet. "But we have to confront her, and soon."

"I just don't believe it," said Tessa stubbornly. "I need real proof."

"I don't believe it, either," Sage said.

The room fell silent. The girls eyed each other nervously. No one knew what to say. But then Tessa's stomach rumbled loudly. Gemma laughed, breaking the tension.

"I say we've talked enough for now. It's time to eat," said Tessa.

Cassie nodded and stood up. "Before we confront

anyone," she said to Scarlet, "we should do more sleuthing." Then she turned to Tessa. "And you're right, of course. We should all go to breakfast."

Cassie is smart, Tessa thought as everyone left the room, *even if she does suspect Lady Stella. And she's read all those detective books her uncle wrote; she must know about sleuthing.* She'd stick close to Cassie, find out what was really going on, and put in her two stars to defend Lady Stella whenever she could.

Tessa stepped onto the Cosmic Transporter, careful to get in place right behind the younger Starling.

Cassie and Scarlet were standing side by side, whispering. Tessa edged closer, trying to listen. *It's not like I'm really eavesdropping*, she reasoned. *We're all just heading to the Celestial Café at the same time.*

But all she heard was: "Mumble mumble Lady Stella." "Mumble mumble Leona." "Mumble Ophelia." "Mumble mumble mumble."

Nothing new there.

Then Cassie said "Star Caves" loud and clear. Scarlet gave her a "shut your stars" look. "Later!" the older Starling whispered harshly.

Hmmm, thought Tessa. Now that was interesting. They must think the secret underground tunnels, where

the special Star Darlings Wish Cavern was hidden, held clues. *Maybe—*

Suddenly, the star above the Celestial Café dimmed, signaling that breakfast was about to end. Tessa forgot about the caves. She took off past the other Starlings, thoughts of warm astromuffins and tinsel toast filling her head.

CHAPTER 2

After breakfast, Tessa's starday was basically back-to-back classes. Some flew by like a comet. Others seemed to last an entire Cycle of Life. So much of what the professors taught had already been covered in the special Star Darlings class.

Tessa's final class before Star Darlings lessons was Wish Fulfillment, taught by Professor Eugenia Bright. Usually, Tessa paid attention to Professor Bright's lessons; the teacher was warm and engaging and cared about each student. Besides, Tessa wanted to raise her grade.

That day Professor Bright was lecturing about wish fulfillment history: how Starlandians had first discovered their connection to Wishworld.

“During a space exploration trip,” the teacher explained, “scientist Dusty Particulus forgot to transfer shooting stars. She wound up landing near a group of Wishling stargazers just as they wished on a different shooting star. One Wishling said, ‘I wish I could come face-to-face with someone from another planet.’ So Dusty stepped right in front of her, and suddenly a surge of energy . . .”

Yes, it was starmazingly interesting. But Tessa had heard the story so many times she found her mind wandering back to the Star Darlings meeting.

It was true: much had gone wrong for the Star Darlings. Right there on Starland, there had been the band tryouts, the flowers, the nail polish, the holo-texts, and, of course, the power failures that affected the whole planet. And they’d had trouble on Wishworld, too. There had been Leona’s burnt-out Wish Pendant that lost wish energy; and her scary trip back, when she almost hadn’t made it home; and all the Starlings’ misidentifying of Wishers and wishes.

But Lady Stella? How could some of the Star Darlings think she was responsible?

“Star excuse me, Tessa.” Tessa looked up. Professor Eugenia Bright was standing over her desk, smiling. They were the only two in the classroom.

“Is there something you’d like to discuss with me?” the teacher asked kindly.

Tessa eyed the professor. She had to say something, but she certainly couldn’t say she’d been lost in thought, wondering if Lady Stella was sabotaging Starland.

“I like your earrings!” she sputtered. She turned deep green with embarrassment, but it was true—she did like them! The glittery cylinders hung almost to Professor Bright’s shoulders and twirled when she moved, giving off sparks. They were exquisite and classic and must have come from Starland’s most acclaimed jewelry store, Starrier’s, where the rich and famous shopped.

Professor Eugenia Bright lowered her voice. “I found them at the Brilliant Bargain Basement in Old Prism. Sure, it’s a tourist town, but you can still find starmazing deals there.”

Tessa laughed and stopped worrying about Lady Stella and Star Darlings problems—at least for the moment.



That afternoon, Tessa joined the Future Farmers of Starland after-school club. They visited a new colony of glitterbees at the foot of the Crystal Mountains. And it

was well worth the trip, Tessa thought on the way back. One delicatacomb in particular was starmendous, as big as a Starcar! Plus, she even managed to bring some of the sweet liquid back to campus. It was starrific for baking.

But now, standing in front of Halo Hall, saying good-bye to her fellow future farmers, Tessa felt restless. She paced back and forth, her mind returning again and again to Lady Stella. She thought fleetingly of her overdue Wishworld Relations paper. She even took a few tentative steps toward the library. But how could she settle down to work when her mind was in such a state?

Tessa's feet switched course and she found herself heading to the Celestial Café.

I'll just bake for a starhour or so, Tessa thought. It will calm me down, help me focus, and then . . . "On to my 'Being Human' paper!"

"You're still working on that?" Cassie asked. Tessa hadn't realized that she'd spoken out loud, or that Cassie was walking next to her. She shook her head to clear it. She really did need to bake!

"Yes, but cross my stars, I'll get an extension. I'm still waiting to hear from Professor Margaret Dumarre. Right now I'm going to the kitchen."

Cassie brightened, and her pale skin glittered, showing her interest. “Are you baking? Can I tag along? I promise I won’t talk about Lady Stella. We can agree to disagree until more facts are in.”

“Of course!” It would be an opportunity to find out about the caves with Cassie. Usually when she baked, every bit of her energy went into creating the perfect dish. But this time, she’d multitask. Smiling, she motioned for Cassie to join her as she stepped off the Cosmic Transporter.

“I want to use fresh delicata,” Tessa went on, “so I’m thinking about mini comet cakes. Only instead of sparkleberries, I might add cocomoons with a starburst of solar cream.”

“Mmm-mmm,” said Cassie as they entered the kitchen. “Sounds starmendous. What can I do to help?”

“For starters, set the micro-zap for a moonium and four degrees.”

The two girls got to work, Tessa humming as she measured and mixed, crimped and coated, sometimes telling Cassie what to add.

“A flounce of milk.”

“Two quax of sunflour.”

“A zingspoon of sparklesugar.”

Then she poured the batter and popped the tray

into the micro-zap. "Two point six seven starsecs," she instructed Cassie. She grinned happily. "Star salutations for your help!" Then she remembered: the whole time, she was supposed to have been getting more information!

Before she could say anything else, the comet cakes were ready. There were twelve mini comet cakes, one for each Star Darling. Tessa couldn't help admiring the treats, with their perfectly round shape and tapered tails made from starberries. The bright red fruit looked just like a comet's fiery stream.

Cassie sniffed. "They smell so good! Can I have mine now?"

Tessa grinned. "Tell you what. Let's have as many as we want. Then we can make another batch!"

Cassie stretched out her hand, but Tessa held the tray high over the small Starling's head. It was a little unfair, she knew, to hold back the treat. But she had to work fast now to get some information. And she knew from when Gemma was younger that this was the best way to get it.

"Tell me what you and Scarlet were whispering about on the Cosmic Transporter this morning."

"What? I don't know what you mean," Cassie said, turning away so she wouldn't have to look Tessa in the eye.

"Oh, I think you do." Tessa sounded more confident

than she felt. "I distinctly heard you say 'Star Caves.' And I bet you two are convinced those caves have something to do with your Lady Stella suspicions."

The caves were real, not a theory or an idea, and they were something Tessa could reach out and touch—something that could hold solid proof of Lady Stella's innocence. *Or guilt*, Tessa thought for a starsec, before she could help herself.

She lowered the tray and waved it tantalizingly under Cassie's nose.

"Oh, okay!" Cassie grabbed a cake.

She paused to take a bite. "Scarlet's explored the caves. She found another entrance, and she's gone down a bunch of times. I guess she likes the bitbats and the feel of the tunnels—the mystery and the isolation. But it's not as if she's found anything revealing there."

"Is that all?" Tessa asked, disappointed.

"Well, I have my own ideas about the caves," Cassie went on. "There are so many twists and turns. They could hold so many secrets, and they're so closely tied to our missions I just feel there could be clues down there—answers to what's been going on."

"Exactly!" Tessa exclaimed. "So what are you two going to do next? For your sleuthing?"

“Nothing,” said Cassie, squirming a bit.

Was Cassie skirting the truth? She seemed uncomfortable, and Tessa guessed the Starling didn't really like to lie. So she didn't want to call her on it. But she needed to keep pressing her.

“The next time Scarlet explores the caves, we should go, too,” Tessa said. “We may spot something she's missed.”

Tessa gave a little shudder. Really, the last thing she wanted to do was trek through those damp, spooky tunnels. Going with the Star Darlings to their special Wish Cavern was one thing. But just roaming around—unescorted—was a galliope of an entirely different color.

Meanwhile, Cassie had polished off four comet cakes and was reaching for a fifth. “Well, I can ask her. I have no idea what she'll say, though, and there's no way we can go alone. We don't even know how to get in.”

Cassie popped the round cake into her mouth and sighed. “These are really good, Tessa. I wish I could bake like you.”

“You can!” said Tessa. “You already watched me once. So this time when I bake, holo-vid me with your Star-Zap and use it for reference.”

“Can I borrow yours?” asked Cassie. “I brought

mine in for repairs. It's been weird lately, and I haven't been able to get holo-messages, or even send them."

"Uh-huh," Tessa murmured, not really listening. Already she was measuring sparklesugar and pouring it into a bowl. Maybe this time she'd add just a flicker more *delicata*. . . .