



LILLIAN & CIRCLE

– Circularity is Future –

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Middle Grade book series *Yours Truly, Lucy B. Parker*



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**FROM ALBERT EINSTEIN TO EMMY NOETHER:
LOCAL SYMMETRY MAGIC**

THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



CHAPTER ONE

“So, I was thinking peonies for the centerpieces,” Archie, the royal architect and interior decorator, explained as they stood in the Emperor’s Hall that morning. It was a Wednesday. Or it might have been Friday. That was the problem—all the days blended together on the planet of Maxilla, and had for the twenty-two years that Circle had been alive.

“Although I also like the idea of white roses. But then again white roses are so overused. Peonies are still fresh,” he went on.

Circle looked out the window of the castle down towards the garden where the seamstress was laughing at something the gardener had just said. She watched as the young woman’s cheeks flushed as she threw her head back to laugh. She made it look so...*effortless*. Like a move in some sort of water ballet. *If I tried it, I’d probably throw my neck out*, Circle thought. Maybe she could find some sort of online tutorial to teach her how to do that.

“What do you think, Your Highness?” Archie asked.

Circle got closer to the window, fascinated by the way the seamstress cocked her head and wound a tendril of hair around her finger as her smile bloomed even bigger. Had the girl taken a class to learn how to do this? There had to be something out there—an online class...a book. Maybe she could just ask the girl to teach her. There’s no way she would say no. She’d have to. Circle *was* the princess of Maxilla.

Archie looked nervously at Gregor, the head butler, unsure about how to proceed.

Gregor cleared his throat. “Your Highness’s favorite flower are white roses. Isn’t that right, Your Highness?”

“Oh. Then white roses it is!” Archie replied. “Can’t go wrong with those. They’re elegant, and classic—just like you, Your Highness,” he babbled nervously.

Circle tore herself away from the window and turned to the two men. “Is that what it looks like?” she asked.

Archie turned to Gregor, confused as to what Circle meant, but Gregor took it all in stride. He’d known Circle for all twenty-two years she’d been alive, and was used to the random questions she posed. That was how it was for people who grew up living in their heads. “Is that what what looks like, Your Highness?” Gregor said gently.

“*Love*,” she responded.

At this point, sweat began to pool on Archie’s bald dome. While he had no problem talking about flowers, and decorations for coronations and weddings, matters of the heart were not his specialty. “I just remembered I have to check on the menu for the King’s luncheon with the Minister of Finance this afternoon,” he babbled. “We can get together tomorrow to continue our discussion about your upcoming wedding, Your Highness. Although you being the princess, it won’t really be a *discussion*. I mean, we *can* discuss it, but ultimately everything will be your decision.”

“Thank you, Archie,” Gregor stopped him. “That will be all.”

“Oh, thank you,” Archie sighed, relieved as he hurried out of the ballroom.

“So, is it?” Circle asked again.

Gregor cleared his throat. “I think that what they’re doing is called flirting, Your Highness.”

“Interesting. Will I do that with my husband?” she asked. “Or is it something you do before you get married?”

“I believe if you’re lucky you continue to do it after you get married as well,” Gregor replied.

“Ah. Okay. I guess I need to learn how to do that then. Is there a class I can take?” Circle missed her mom for many reasons, but especially right now. She’d know how to flirt.

“Hm. I’m not sure. But I’d be happy to research that for you, Your Highness.” It was times like this that Gregor missed the Queen as well.

Circle stretched out into a down dog posture and stretched out her calves. A year ago she set out to study yoga and had learned all 84 asanas of hatha yoga in three months. If she could do that, there was no reason she couldn’t figure out this flirting thing. “What if I don’t like him?” she asked.

Gregor was glad Circle’s face was towards the ground so she couldn’t see him cringe. “I’m sure you will.” He hoped he sounded convincing.

“I mean, if I don’t like him, I probably won’t want to flirt with him, right?”

“I’m sure he’s a wonderful young man,” Gregor replied.

Circle stood up and grabbed her foot as she effortlessly transitioned into dancer’s pose. “I don’t understand why I can’t meet him at least *once* before the wedding. Obviously, I don’t have a lot—okay, *any*—experience with dating let alone boyfriends or fiancés, but before my father abolished screens in an effort to get us to connect on a personal level again, I do remember that that’s what people my age do.”

“I will research the area of flirting later and get back to you, Your Highness,” Gregor replied, anxious for the conversation to end. Luckily just then he was saved by the bell—literally. He tried to make his sigh of relief as quiet as possible. “Time for your singing lesson, Your Highness.”

“Cool!” said Circle excitedly. That meant she’d get to see Gregory, Gregor’s son as well as her best friend. Okay, so he was also her *only* friend because he was the only person on the planet who was her age, but even if that weren’t the case, he’d still be her best friend. They had known each other since they were born, which was three months apart. Half of Circle’s baby pictures included Gregory, including some of the two of them in the bathtub.

As she made her way to the music room (who was she kidding—it was more an entire floor versus a room) she thought about what a great boyfriend Gregory would make. Not for her, obviously, because they were like siblings, but for someone else. He was smart, and funny, and the kind of guy you could talk to about anything for hours on end. He was like a girlfriend in a guy's body.

As Circle entered, she tried not to laugh when she saw the look on Sir Harold's (or "Maestro" as he liked to be called) face, which was something between gas and having just taken a bite of a tuna fish sandwich that had been left out in the sun. The reason for this was because while Gregory may have had many terrific qualities, playing the piano was not one of them. Unfortunately, he was the only one in the castle who could.

"Oh, good. You're here," Sir Harold exhaled with relief. The thing was, Gregory didn't *know* he didn't have much talent on the piano. "Let's get started. *La la la la—*"

"La, la, la, la," Circle sang back. What Gregory lacked in aptitude on the piano, Circle more than made up for with her voice.

He nodded with approval. "Li, li, li, li—" he continued.

"Sir Harold?

He held up his finger. "Li, li, li, li—"

"Sir Harold?

"Li, li, li, li—"

"SIR HAROLD!!!!" she boomed.

At that, Gregory stopped playing, the surprise of the force of her voice causing his fingers to slip, resulting in a sound that sounded like a huge car crash.

"Whoops," Circle said. "Didn't mean to be so loud."

"What is it, Your Highness? Are you not ready to move on to *lililili*? It's just that you were doing so well with the *la*'s—"

"It's not that. I was just wondering when we were going to move on to something else."

"Like what?"

"Like something with *words*," she replied.

"*Words*?" Sir Harold said, as though the concept was foreign.

"Yes. *Words*," Circle said. "See, last night I had this dream that I was singing--"

"Cool," Gregory said. "What did it sound like?"

"Well, it sounded something like..." Circle flipped her head over so her long shiny blue hair hung over her face that then flipped it up quickly and let out an ear-piercing scream, the kind that would make any heavy metal rocker envious. Before she was done, armed guards burst into the room with their weapons drawn.

"It's okay, it's okay," Sir Harold assured them. "Her Highness was just practicing her...*singing*."

"That? Was incredible," Gregory gasped.

"Thanks," Circle replied with a smile.

"That was certainly...something," Sir Harold mumbled as he held his head. "Excuse me while I go look for some aspirin."

As he left the room, Circle plopped down in a chair and sighed.

"What is it?" Gregory asked.

"I don't know. I look at people and everyone seems to have a hobby," she replied. "Like knitting. Or hiking. Or cooking. But I find it all so boring."

"I don't know. Certain kinds of cooking can be fun," Gregory replied. "Like if it's really spicy?"

"When I sing like that, it's like I feel...*alive*, you know?"

"Not exactly, because I'm not much of a singer," he said. "But I guess I understand?"

From the look on his face, it was clear that he was trying to be helpful, but Circle couldn't help but feel even more alone. Part of it had to do with the fact that she never felt like she fit in on her planet. She wanted more. More of what, she wasn't quite sure, but she was sure that it was out there somewhere. When her parents had told her around three

years earlier that they had a number of suitable princes for her in mind, her anxiety had gotten worse and worse. She knew that she had to do something.

And in that second—she knew exactly what.

She jumped out of her chair and grabbed Gregory's arm. "Come on."

"Where?"

"You'll see," she said.

Three stairwells later, they arrived at a door that read Royal Space Center.

"We couldn't have taken the elevator?" gasped Gregory as he stumbled to catch up with her.

"Didn't want to risk getting caught," Circle replied, looking around to make sure no one was looking as she tried the door. It was locked, which wasn't a surprise, but she was quickly able to open it with one of the bobby pins that were holding up her blue dreadlocks.

"Well, if you ever decide to stop being a princess, you always have a career as a thief," Gregory said impressed as they entered.

The room was as musty as it was dusty, which made sense seeing that it was rarely used anymore. It was full of computers which the king liked to avoid as much as possible. As she turned one on and waited for it to boot up, Gregory turned to her. "What are you looking for?"

"You'll see." The search engine came up and Circle typed in *best planets to have fun and live life*.

"Circle--" he said in a warning voice.

"Shh—it will be fine," she assured him.

Suddenly the sound of footsteps could be heard coming towards the room.

"Until it's not!" Gregory whispered as he yanked her into a closet with him. Whoever it was entered the room and, seeing nothing out of order, turned off the light and closed the door. Once the coast was clear they came out and went back to the computer. As Circle clicked the computer out of

sleep mode, the screen went black. “Huh. That’s weird,” she said.

“Talk about a smart computer,” Gregory said.

“Ha ha,” she replied as she went into the history of PWS, the planet web search. As it came up, the entry underneath caught her eye: *Princes of high-tech civilizations*. She clicked on it and a video started displaying a large group of men—tall, short, thin, fat, old, young. Despite their looks, they all had one thing in common: each one was creepier than the next.

“Who *are* these guys?” Gregory asked.

“I have no idea, but if my future husband is one of them, I can’t get out of here soon enough,” Circle replied.

As she was still looking at the screen, Circle missed the way that Gregory’s face dropped.

“I keep hoping that maybe my father will change his mind and I won’t have to get married,” she went on.

“That would be cool,” Gregory said hopefully. “But you want to get married eventually, right?”

She shrugged. “I guess.”

Gregory looked nervous as he took a deep breath, as if he was about to ask her something, but before he could go on, Circle turned the computer off and turned to him. “We should get going.”

His neck fell down into his shoulders like a turtle. “Yeah. You’re probably right.”

#

The next morning after Tai-Chi, and Meditation, and Flower Arranging, Circle was ready for a nap. Her parents had explained to her that these were all skills that would come in handy later in on life, but she had trouble believing they’d be good for anything other than inducing sleep. When she got to her room, there was a letter waiting for her on the

desk. From the heavy ivory linen envelope, she knew right away it was from her father.

"I'm pretty sure in most families, people just yell into the other room when they want to talk to their kids," she said aloud as she opened it. "Not send letters written by professional calligraphers with royal seals." As she read it, her face paled. "No way. Uh uh. Not happening!" she said firmly as she spun on her heel and marched out of the room.

"Your Highness," Gregor said surprised as she entered her father's chambers. No one was supposed to enter the king's chambers unannounced, not even a family member, but Circle didn't care that she was breaking the rules. There was no way she could wait to get on her father's schedule to talk to him about this.

"I need to talk to him," Circle demanded.

"He's in with the--"

Before Gregor could finish, Circle had blown past him and pushed the door open revealing her father in conversation with the Minister of Agriculture. The king's passion was climate change, and lately he had been spending a lot of time trying to figure out how the planet could subsist completely on a plant-based diet.

"Circle? Did we have a meeting scheduled?" the king said, surprised.

She held up the letter. "*This* is how you tell me?!"

The king sighed. "I see you received my letter. I had a feeling you might be a little upset by it."

"A *little*?!" Circle yelled.

The Minister quickly gathered his files and stood up. "I'm going to go," he said nervously.

"Can you take me with you?" the king asked.

The Minister stopped, unsure what to do.

"That was a *joke*," he said.

"Oh," the Minister said, laughing as if it were the funniest one, he had ever heard before running out as fast as he could.

“Gregor, could you leave us, please?” the king asked.

Gregor looked uncertain. While technically he worked for the king, Circle was like a daughter to him and he was one of the few who knew how to calm her down. Usually, it consisted of a pint of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream with crumbled peanut butter cups.

“It’s okay, Gregor,” Circle said. “I promise I won’t kill him.”

After Gregor walked out, Circle turned to her father. “Six months?!”

He sighed. “I really wish your mother was here. She’s so much better at this stuff than I am.”

“You promised me that I wouldn’t have to get married for at least two years!”

“I know, but this opportunity came up—”

“I have things to do before I get married!” she cried.

“Like what?”

“Like...travel.”

“You can travel with him,” the king responded.

“And make friends and hang out with them.”

“You can make friends together!” the king said brightly.

From the look on Circle’s face, she wasn’t convinced.

“Circle, he’s a wonderful match for you,” he went on. “His planet has a terrific record with keeping their carbon footprint at a minimum. This kind of merger will result in huge strides at regaining equilibrium when it comes to ecology--”

“So, it’s just a business deal?!” Circle cried.

“Of course not.”

“That’s what a merger is.”

The king sighed. “I know it’s quick, but I promise you, you’ll really like him. At least I think you will. I mean, I hear he’s very nice.”

“So, you haven’t even *met* him?”

“Well, not *exactly*.”

“So, you’ve met his parents?”

“Well, not really.”

“So, what, you picked this guy’s name out of a hat?”

“Of course not!” the king replied. “Off of a list.”

Circle shook her head, too upset to continue the conversation. As she stomped out of the room, she was intercepted by Gregor. “Your Highness? There’s something waiting for you in the kitchen.”

Even though she was still angry, when they walked in, Circle couldn’t help but smile. There was a pint of ice cream with a spoon sticking out of it waiting on the counter. “You always know the right thing to do, Gregor,” she said as she hugged him.

“Your mother would have done the same thing, Your Highness,” he replied. “And then made you brush your teeth three times.”

Circle laughed. “You’re right.” She sighed. “I wish she was here.”

“I do as well, Your Highness.”

As she settled into her chair, she looked at him. “I wish someone would finally tell me why she left.”

Gregor sighed. “It’s...complicated.”

“It can’t be any more complicated than the way that no one will look me in the eye when I bring up her name,” Circle shot back.

“Fair enough,” Gregor said as he busied himself rubbing an imaginary stain off of the tablecloth so that he, too, didn’t have to look her in the eye. “As I’m sure you’re aware, your father is somewhat-”

“Clueless when it comes to how to have interpersonal relationships?” Circle suggested. “Yeah, I’ve noticed.”

“That’s one way to put it, I guess,” said Gregor diplomatically. “And your mother—the queen—knew this better than anyone. Obviously, he has some wonderful qualities as well, but when it comes to matters of the heart, he’s just a little--”

“Challenged?” suggested Circle.

Gregor relaxed. Maybe this wouldn't be as hard as he thought. "That's a wonderful way of putting it. Anyway, on your parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary--"

"The one that he *forgot*, and when reminded, thought it was their tenth?" Circle asked.

"Yes, that would be the one," Gregor admitted.

"Just checking. Go on."

"Well, when your father had me ask your mother what she would like for a gift--"

"Why couldn't he ask her himself?" Circle demanded.

"Well, that's a very good question," he stammered. "Probably because, ah--"

"Never mind. Go on," she said.

"Thank you," Gregor said with a relieved sigh. "So, there was just one thing she wanted..."

"A composter?" Circle asked.

"No."

"A ruby necklace?" she guessed.

"No."

"What then?"

"She wanted him to look her in the eye and tell her he loved her."

Circle cocked her head. "Isn't that something that you tell your partner every day regardless of whether it's your anniversary or not? I mean, all the articles I've read about love say that's one of the best habits to have."

"Well, yes. But for your father it's not that easy."

"Why's that?"

"I'm not sure. You'd have to ask him," Gregor replied. "Regardless, I put it on his To Do list and the day of their anniversary I set an alarm with a reminder for him to do it first thing in the morning, but he...forgot."

"Uh oh," Circle said.

"*Uh oh* would be correct," Gregor agreed. "So, she left."

"Wow. That's impressive."

Circle watched Gregor's face bloom with surprise.

"I mean, obviously I miss her, but she was true to herself. I think that's great," she added.

"Yes. She was."

Suddenly Circle stood up and began to run out of the room.

"Your Highness, where are you going?" Gregor yelled after her.

But she was already long gone.

#

"I really don't think this is a great idea." Gregory warned as Circle clicked away on the keyboard. They were back in the control room with the computers.

"Thank you for saying that for the *third* time, Gregory," she replied. "Aha—this is the one!"

Gregory looked over her shoulder. "Earth?" he said, surprised.

"I think that's the way you pronounce it," she said. "It sounds *awesome*! There's over seven and a half billion people, and they're all different colors, and speak all different languages, and the food looks amazing and the MUSIC—Gregory, you've got to check it out—SO. MUCH. MUSIC!"

She clicked off and ran to the elevator as he trailed after her.

"Wait—what are you doing?!"

"Going to my room to pack," she called over her shoulder.

"For what?"

"It's time for me to be true to myself!" she declared as the doors began to shut.

CHAPTER TWO

"Okay, Lill, let's try it again. From the top," Ernest said into the microphone from the control room of the music studio. For what was probably the tenth time.

Lill didn't move.

"Don't tell me you're meditating *again*," he sighed.

Still nothing.

"LILL!!!" he yelled.

At that, she snapped to, her pink dreadlocks flying out at all angles, and the glint off of her various bangles, nose ring, and multiple earrings blinding Ernest all the way back in the booth. "Huh? What? Did someone say something?" she sputtered.

The technician in the booth turned towards Ernest. "Is she always this out of it?"

"Oh no. Of course not," he replied. "She's usually ten times worse." He leaned into the mike. "From the top, Lill."

She grabbed the edges of her blouse—made of the finest silk, and full of rips and tears on purpose ("Isn't it great?" she had said to the technician when he complimented her on it. "It's Gucci. My stylist got an amazing deal on it—only two thousand dollars!")

"I meant start the *song* from the top."

"Oh that. Okay." She closed her eyes and flipped her hair back, taking a deep breath before she started singing. But when she opened her mouth, instead of a song came a steady stream of coughs. Out of the shadows near the door, a 20something guy with thick brown hair that flopped in his eyes grabbed a bottle of water and ran it over to her.

After taking a long chug, she choked some more before turning to him. "What is this...*water*?!"

"Um...I think so?" he replied.

"Why would you give me *water*? Where's my vodka?!" she demanded.

"Sorry. I thought....my bad...never mind," he said as his head disappeared into his shoulders like a turtle.

Ernest sighed. "Let's take a break," he said into the microphone. "You—come here," he ordered the guy.

The guy made his way up towards Ernest, his head disappearing even further.

"Are you her new dealer?" Ernest demanded.

"Her card dealer?" he asked, confused. "Like...poker?"

"No! Her *drug* dealer."

The guy looked panicked. "What? Of course not! You're always supposed to say no to drugs!"

"Then who are you?"

"I'm her...um...well..."

"Her new singing coach? Filling in for Rainbow-Pam?" Ernest asked.

"Yes," he relaxed. "That's exactly who I am. I'm the replacement for...Rainbow-Pam." He cleared his throat. "*La la la la la...li li li li li*" he screeched.

Ernest cringed. "That's the last time I tell Gladys to try and save some money. What's your name?"

"Eco," he replied.

"Echo," Ernest repeated.

"Yes. Eco," Eco said again.

"Yes, echo," Ernest repeated.

Eco hesitated for a second before Ernest laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "I was echoing you! Get it?"

"Oh. Yes. That was...very funny. But it's actually e-c-o. As in ecosystem."

"Ah. So, your parents were hippies?"

"I need some more quote-unquote *water* over here!" Lill yelled.

"Okay, Eco or Ecosystem or whatever environmental name you prefer, we'll get back to the singing in a bit." Ernest said. "In the meantime, if you could just help get us

through the next hour without this train going completely off the rails that would be great.”

Lill teetered over to them in her six-inch stiletto boots. “Who are you?” she demanded.

“I’m Eco,” he replied. “Your new singing coach. But I’m not a drug dealer.”

“Oh bummer. I mean, nice to meet you,” she said.

Just then Gladys, Ernest’s assistant, rushed in, both arms full of garment bags. “Sorry, sorry, sorry...traffic was awful... and the smog was, too...because of the traffic.” She stopped and grabbed her head. “Just thinking about that vicious circle makes my head hurt.”

Lill perked up. “I’ve got some pills for that if you want!” She pointed at Eco. “He might have some, too.” She leaned in. “He’s my new singing coach. Which we all know is another name for drug dealer.”

Eco looked alarmed. “But I’m not--”

“Of course, you’re not,” she said with a wink.

Gladys held up a poster that said 2021 Meyer’s Children’s Planet Foundation Gala. “So, I’ve got some big news. Beyonce was supposed to perform at this, but she’s now got to take Blue Ivy on a Girl Scout camping weekend so she can’t do it and they want you. It’s a fundraiser for the Circular Economy.”

“What’s that?” Lill asked.

“This is huge!” Ernest yelled. “We’ve never gotten a chance to get Beyonce’s table scraps! What I mean is...I’m glad they came to their senses and realized they should have a *real* star perform. Especially when it’s for the Circular Economy. Whatever the hell *that* is.”

“Oh, the circular economy is awesome!” Eco cried.

Ernest rolled his eyes. “Figures you’d know what it is.”

“So, what is it?” Lill asked.

“It’s a great idea for making our future eco-intelligent and climate-smart,” he explained.

“There he goes with the eco thing again,” Ernest sighed.

“Not to mention a great way of redesigning our economy from a linear model of take-make-waste.”

“Uh huh. Cool. But here’s the important question: so, like, if I wanted to wear something with fur on it, would they give me a hard time?” Lill asked.

“Not if it was grown organically in a lab,” Eco said.

“Speaking of cool clothes,” Gladys said, “I brought you a few options for tonight.”

“What’s tonight? The fundraiser for Save The Turtles? No, that was last week. Oh, I know—the one for cats with three legs. Wait—that was last month.” She grabbed her head. “Trying to keep this all straight is hurting my head. Does anyone have a pill?” She turned to Eco. “You must, right?”

“I told you—I’m not--”

“Tonight, it’s a fundraiser for that new drug and alcohol treatment center that opened up in Malibu,” Ernest interrupted.

“Oh right,” Lill replied. “I heard it’s pretty ritzy so I’m sure there will be only top-shelf liquor there so that will be cool!”

“I don’t think that serving booze is what a drug and alcohol treatment center lives for,” Eco murmured.

Ernest looked at Eco. “Maybe you *should* think about getting some vitamins. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long night.”

#

“*La la la la la*,” Eco sang nervously, out of key, in Lill’s dressing room, later that night.

“*Lo lo lo lo lo*,” she slurred back before letting out a loud and very long burp. “Whoops. ‘Scuse me.”

Eco looked over at Madison, Lill’s best friend, for some help. Madison had the same shiny, glittering pink hair color as Lill, not to mention the same nail polish color, makeup, and shoes and was currently scrolling through Instagram.

“Do you think Kim Kardashian’s hair is naturally this straight?”

“I have no idea,” Eco said. “But, uh, do you think you might be able to help me out over here?”

“Sure. What’s wrong?”

“Well, I mean, she’s a little...out of it.”

“Oh, that’s nowhere near out of it. ‘Out of it’ doesn’t happen until 9:30 or so,” Madison replied. “Lill.”

There was no reply. Probably due to the fact that Lill had slumped down to the floor and curled up in a ball.

“Okay, so maybe she’s a little out of it,” Madison admitted as she stood up and walked over to her. “Oh, Lill! Your shoes don’t match your bag!” she said loudly.

At that, Lill scrambled to her feet. “What?! They don’t?! How did that happen?”

Madison looked at Eco and flashed a blinding white smile courtesy of hours of wearing whitening strips. “Works every time.”

There was a quick knock on the door before it opened and Ernest stuck his head on. “You’re on in five, Lill.”

Lill gave a thumbs up...right before she slid to the floor and passed out.

CHAPTER THREE

"Okay, so I've got clothes, shoes, shampoo, my noise-canceling headphones," Circle said as she hunted through her travel bag.

Gregory sat on her bed and watched her. He took a deep breath. "Circle?"

She looked over at him with a smile. "What am I missing?"

"I need to say something--" he started to say.

"Toothbrush and toothpaste!" she went on. "Can't forget that," she said as she ran towards the bathroom. After she stuffed it in her bag, she turned to Gregory. "Sorry—you were going to say something. What was it?"

"Oh. I, uh...I was just going to..." He could tell by the way she shifted from foot to foot that she was being polite, but really wanted to get going. "You know, it's nothing...I mean, it's not *nothing*...it's *something*, but...uh...I can see you're busy."

"I'm never too busy for my best friend," she replied with a smile.

He sighed again. "It's okay. It can wait."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." It had waited this long.

"Okay." She went over and gave him a hug. "I'll miss you. Are you *sure* you don't want to come?"

"I'm good."

She hoisted her bag on her shoulder. "Alright then—wish me luck."

"Luck," he said with a bittersweet smile.

She began to walk out of the room and headed for the Royal Space Center where she would beam herself to planet Earth in quadruple-hyperspace that reduced light years in a regular space to a trip of a few hours.

"Circle?" he called.

She turned. "Yeah?"

He looked at her. This was the moment. The one to finally tell her how he felt about her. That, yes, they were best friends, but that he was also totally, completely, one hundred and one percent in love with her.

"Have a great time," he finally said.

#

Because she was such a huge star, the crowd turnout for Lill's press conferences were always big, but this one was larger than usual, thanks to her Academy Award performance the night before for "Best Performance of a Pop Star Passing Out At A Fundraiser For a Rehab". Of course, Ernest didn't tell the crowd his client had passed out. Instead, he said that she had gotten food poisoning from eating sushi that apparently had gone bad, even though it was from the most expensive sushi restaurant in all of L.A. ("Make sure that part is in bold," he told Gladys twice while dictating the press release to her.) But it was a slow news day, so the ballroom of the Beverly Hilton was packed.

"So, Lill, when you say you're taking some time off, what exactly does that mean?" asked a journalist in the crowd.

Lill cringed behind her giant sunglasses and held her head.

"Could you please stop screaming?"

"I wasn't screaming." He turned to the reporter next to him.

"Was I?"

The woman shook her head.

"Now what was the question again?" she asked.

"What does it mean when you say you'll be taking some time off?"

"Well, it means...uh...that, like, I'll be taking some time off." She turned to Ernest. "Do you have any aspirin? My