

# THE TRAVELLER

## LILY PANTOJA-LEAHY

Hettie was daydreaming, so she was more surprised than she should have been when a strange person stepped out of thin air.

The person froze and looked around. They had appeared in the Surprising Garden, among scattered trees and ferns. Then they noticed Hettie standing dumbfounded nearby.

"What the hell?" came flying out of their mouth like a weapon.

Hettie was mildly entranced.

The stranger was wearing a worn blue dress. They looked maybe a year or two older than her, or the same age, but tall. They had long, curly black hair, dark skin and a face so beautiful it held Hettie still.

She attempted to speak. "Umm... hello?"

"What just happened?" they said, quite forcefully.

"Were you here a second ago?" asked Hettie, already knowing the answer.

"No, not even close," they replied.

"Well, okay, I've never had to explain this before," she said tentatively, "but you've probably fallen from your home universe into this one."

Their eyes narrowed.

"I know, it doesn't sound true, but it is. Around here, things sometimes travel between worlds. I can't explain how, I don't know the science, but passages just open up in other places and lead... here."

"And where is this?" asked the stranger.

"Elle's Flight, an island. Um, the only thing here is the boarding school. We should go there actually, we're supposed to bring new arrivals to see the Principal. She can explain all this much better than me."



Hettie watched the stranger. They seemed to accept her explanation, but were definitely on edge. They were studying her in return. Those eyes... Hettie didn't even know how to describe them.

She told the beautiful stranger, "My name is Hettie."

And the stranger replied, "I'm Sybil."

Hettie brought Sybil up the hill to the school, found a teacher and then the principal. The principal told Sybil how, unfortunately, the island would never take her back to where she came from. But the school would help her find her feet in the unfamiliar world, and she was welcome to stay or leave.

Sybil looked out over the island towards the ocean, and stood there, wondering.

Eventually Hettie asked if she wanted to meet one of her friends.

Tiffany, Hettie's closest friend, was reading a book at a picnic table in a mossy stone courtyard. Hettie called out "Hey!" and they looked up at her.

"Hi Hettie, who's this?" Tiffany asked with a tilt of their head.

"This is Sybil. She's come through the Garden," said Hettie. Tiffany knew what it meant.

They said, "Well, hi, I'm Tiffany. Welcome to the school. Has someone shown you around yet?"

The three of them walked among the school buildings and Tiffany introduced everything. "That building in the middle there is the dorms, but the most important place is of course the kitchen, which is on the other side of the courtyard. Those are the classrooms..."

They looked out over the island. Beyond the slope and rough sandy beach lived the ocean, and beyond that sat the barely visible edges of the sprawling green coast. Hettie didn't say anything. Tiffany could chat enough for the both of them, but she didn't think Sybil was listening. She was studying the ocean intently with a kind of awed expression on her face. It made her look softer, less intimidating, so Hettie added that there was a pine forest on the other side of the island, facing out to sea.

Sybil at last spoke. "I love forests. What do you mean by 'pine'?"

Hesitantly, Hettie said, "It's the kind of tree." And then, "I love forests too."



Sybil turned and smiled at her. "I want to go there, sometime."

Hettie marvelled.

They talked with Sybil again the next day. When Tiffany asked, she said she would be staying a few days at least.

"The teachers here don't seem to know what to do with me. What are you guys doing today?"

Sybil seemed to be counting Tiffany and Hettie as People She Knew, because she kept sitting with them at mealtimes and asking them about things. Sybil was so bright and loud and wonderful. Hettie didn't know what to say around her.

One afternoon, outside in the cold spring sunlight, they walked past a group of other students that all stopped talking when they got within earshot. Sybil blinked at them.

"Were they talking about us?"

"Probably about you. You're new here. Don't worry, they'll move on soon. In a few weeks everyone will be talking about the end of year dance, anyway," said Tiffany.

"Do you get a lot of people, you know, appearing from other universes?" Sybil asked.

"No, actually you're the first one in ages. Twenty years or something. Mostly only animals come through. There was a fire-breathing bird last year, that was crazy," they replied with a grin.

Hettie chimed in, "Do you remember the lizard that ate half of Ms Farrow's hat the first month I was here?" and Sybil's laugh rang out across the room, raucous and lovely.

The next week, Sybil joined Hettie and Tiffany's geography class for a day. The teacher asked them to help teach Sybil about the world, and twenty or so students gathered noisily around the biggest table and unrolled a large, crinkly-edged map. Tiffany announced with a wave of their hands, "Sybil, we present to you, our planet!" Sybil leaned over the map, eyes wide, drinking in the shapes of the continents and oceans.

Hettie pointed out the island the boarding school was on, tiny compared to the lands spread out over the paper.

"And this city on the mainland is where most of our families live."





Their friend Meg pointed to a different country, further south, that her family came from, and Sybil asked her, "What is it like?"

"Cold and snowy, most of the year. And there are really big wild-cats in the forests."

Other students joined in with their stories, and Sybil's eyes sparked. "I want to know about everywhere."

They talked of snow, rushing rivers, windswept cities. Places where people wrote books, and danced, and worked in offices, and flew planes through the air. Songbirds, deserts, herds of wild creatures, the many faces of the many seas. Everything they had heard of and everything Sybil had never seen, until she laughed and sat back, saying, "There's so much of this world," like it was a dream she had never expected would be true.

A few days later, Hettie asked Sybil if she wanted to visit the forest. When they saw it she exclaimed "Damn, those trees are huge!" and Hettie grinned. They walked into the gentle shade between trees stretching up to the sky. Hettie breathed in the sharp smell of pine needles. Everything felt so still, yet so alive.

In the embrace of the forest, she let down her guard around Sybil. She told her, "I like to come out here by myself, whenever I want some peace. I can walk for hours, with just my thoughts and the forest."

"I loved the woods outside my village. That's where I was just before I showed up here, actually." Sybil stopped at a tree and ran her hands over the thick, fractured bark. Looking around, she said, "This forest is so different from there. Kind of spooky, even. But it's very similar too."

They sat against a tree. Sybil picked up a handful of pine needles and scrunched them between her fingers. She tilted her head back to see the spiderweb of dark branches overhead. Hettie watched the smooth curve of her throat, then looked away.

A while later, Hettie said, "It's not something I want to ever happen to me, falling into another universe. It's scary. In the difference between one step and the next, you travel from somewhere you know, to somewhere else..."

"When I got here, I thought it was the best thing that could have possibly happened to me," Sybil said quietly.

Hettie looked over at her. She was staring down at her hands. "I had been longing for a way to leave my village. To be free of it. Once I left, I could go anywhere, do anything."





Sybil laughed to herself and faced the sky. "You know why I was walking through those woods? That day? It was because the stories said that sometimes, faeries walked there, and they might steal you away to the faerie lands. I didn't really believe it, but it was hope. And now, I'm here. I've finally got my freedom."

She smiled a charmingly crooked grin right at Hettie. It made her lungs stop working. Sybil finished, "Now I just have to figure out what to do with it."

The days went on, and spring bloomed into summer. Soon the school buzzed with excitement for the upcoming end of year dance.

Hettie made a decision.

She had to do something, because whenever she saw her, it was as if Sybil shone in the sunlight. Or maybe she was the sun.

She found Sybil and Tiffany at breakfast that morning. Sybil was waving her hands about and saying, "I cannot believe you do not have toast here. Why would you not have toast? It's one of the best foods ever created."

Will you...

She wanted to ask her when they were alone. Tiffany and Sybil talked, with Hettie's question fluttering in her throat, until Tiffany eventually left. She felt her heart beating, fast, as she looked at Sybil. Just one question.

She would ask Sybil, the radiant sun, if she would go to the dance with her. As her date. Then Sybil said, "I've got something I need to tell you."

Hettie went still as Sybil smiled, so earnestly.

"I am going to leave... I'm going to travel the world! I've got a plan. I'll get the ferry across to the mainland, spend a while in the city, pick another place and walk, and not look back."

She opened her mouth but made no sound.

"It's brilliant, Hettie, I'll be able to go anywhere. I can see the sparkling cities, I can walk the trade roads, I can travel by bicycle, anything!"

Sybil really, truly meant it. Hettie saw it in her gleaming eyes.

"When will you leave?"

"In three days," Sybil said. "I haven't told the others yet. I wanted to tell you first."



Three days. A week before the dance. Hettie broke a little. She looked away, across the courtyard, all her hopes crushed and scattered to the wind. The only thing she could say was, "Why don't you stay here?"

"Because... I've been stuck somewhere my whole life. Because I dream of those far away places. I hear stories and something in me needs to be there, to know the wonders. Don't you ever feel like that?"

Hettie shook her head. She knew she was not even close to that kind of person. But bold, passionate Sybil?

Sybil wouldn't be content to stay. Hettie realised she should have seen this coming. Her leaving was inevitable.

Hettie sighed.

Sybil departed on the ferry three days later with a bag of supplies. Only Hettie and Tiffany saw her off at the dock.

"Farewell, Sybil," said Tiffany cheerily. "If you go all the way round the globe and end up back here, say hi!"

Then they looked at Hettie and Sybil and left them alone.

Hettie breathed in. "You know I'll miss you, don't you?"

Sybil seemed to understand. "I am sorry. I'll miss you, too." Hettie thought she meant something by it. A sad smile flitted over her face.

She told her, "I hope you have a good journey." It was true.

Sybil stepped back and climbed onto the waiting ferry. As it set out, she cast a long look over the island, then waved, before heading to the front of the boat, out of view. Hettie wanted to remember this moment. The grey sky cast bland light on the boat, growing smaller in front of her. The wind snagged her hair and the sea murmured. Behind her, Tiffany approached and carefully asked, "You okay?"

She considered. "Yeah. Or I will be, anyway."

Hettie turned and went back to the island with them. Hettie went still as Sybil smiled, so earnestly.

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