

SALLY'S ADVENTURES

Children of Space

Chapter 1: First meeting

Our story begins in a dark alley of London, December 1940. A young lady was dumpster-diving, her stomach screaming for something to eat. Lights and noises were coming from the main street where passers-by were hurrying, their faces buried in warm fur coats.

Back in our alley, a small pile of garbages was starting to appear at the young girl's feet, thrown away after inspection. Unlike one could think when looking at her, she was already ten years-old (she'd say eleven if you asked her, her birthday being in only one month). She wasn't tall for her age, merely four feet, and very thin. Her bright brown jacket was hanging loose on her shoulders. A blue patched hat was protecting the top of her ears from the cold and a red scarf was wrapped around her neck, hiding a good half of her face. Brown hair was stuck under the cloth.

A lock escaped and fell before her blue eyes. She pushed it away irritably and went back to her search, repressing a shiver as the frozen air bit her white cheek. Sally Folker was her name and she was at the beginning of her greatest adventure, one that will take her far away from Earth and the war.

Sally was half buried in a trash can when she heard someone stumble a few feet away from her. Surprised, she jumped out of it and hid. *Stupid*, she thought almost immediately. *You're alone. It's just a cat.* Curious, and her heart still racing, she threw a look from behind the dumpster.

An old man was leaning on the wall. Sally turned back, frowning. There had been no one there just a few second ago and he couldn't have make his way from the street this fast.

Although the night had already fallen, Sally could still manage to see the new comer clearly. His goatee was so white it was shining in the dark. Grey hair was stuck behind his ears. His shoulders were hunched, as if he was carrying the weight of the world. The long black coat he had wearing was brushing the ground and almost hiding two muddy walking shoes. His hands were searching something on the red bricks.

Who was he? Sally had never seen such a strange man. First, he had appeared out of no-where and then, he was looking at a wall as if it contained the secret of life itself. And she wan't even including his outfit! The words she heard when his voice reached her didn't help his case.

'Where is this damned door?' he was mumbling while his hands were stroking, feeling and tapping the wall. 'I'll never get to see those dinosaurs.' Despite his nonsense,

his tone was as deep and leveled as those of the elders who used to scowl at Sally for being such an impetuous child.

The young girl didn't know it yet, but this man couldn't be more different from them. This man was... Well, it's hard to explain. How could a single word describe him? He had had many names but, at this time, in this universe, was mainly known as the Caretaker. Thus, this is how we'll name him for the rest of our story.

Sally should have left at this point. She certainly shouldn't have stepped out of her hiding and talked to a complete stranger. When she'll remember this moment years later, she'll realize how dangerous it had been. As for now, she was Sally Folker, this young girl of the street known in the neighborhood for her temerity.

Eyes stuck on the mad man who had now his left ear stuck to the wall, she stood up and took three small but determined steps. He was still muttering under his breath but Sally couldn't hear him anymore. She stood still, waiting for him to notice her. So she waited and waited and waited and after what felt like a hour (and was in fact only a couple of minutes), she had had enough.

'Maybe it has moved,' she said in a small questioning voice. The man jumped at her words and looked at her for the first time. Apparently, he hadn't realized her presence before. His small green eyes analyzed her from head to toe. She felt like they were looking straight at her mind and soul.

'I mean, since the door appeared out of no-where, and it has, there wasn't any door when I arrived, it can probably move,' she rambled in one breath to break the silence. It felt like the street's animation had faded away, leaving the alley in its own bubble. He didn't say a word. 'Sally P. Folker,' she spoke again, walking to him and holding out her glove-covered hand had she had been taught.

He wasn't tall, she realized. Not as tall as the men she was used to see. His face was marked by the many years he had lived. His ageless eyes dropped on to her hand before he turned around, completely ignoring her.

Sally took her hand back, too shocked to say anything more. She was about to turn around and leave this annoying man behind when he finally filled the void.

'It's not possible,' he said. Something in his voice made Sally shiver. She stopped. It was an ancient voice, one that made you listen to it because you knew its owner had seen more things than you could dream. 'From the moment I step outside, the door becomes a fix point. She can't move. Which means... Which means someone's blocking it.' He was

speaking lowly now, lost in his own mind. Without warning, he clapped his hands together and spun on his heels.

His eyes were lit by curiosity but Sally could also see a hint of worry in them. What could be so important about his door if it even existed? A smile appeared on the Caretaker's lips.

'Nice to meet you, young lady. Don't follow me.' On those words, he walked past an astonished Sally toward the street. It took her a moment to realize he was gone. Without thinking, she ran to the alley's end. How was she going to find him (not that she was supposed to). She didn't even know his name! Maybe it had just been a dream...

But there he was! The only walker who wasn't looking at the sky in fear of a new attack. He was walking quickly, head lowered to keep himself warm. Sally slalomed between the men and women to caught up with him. The people she crossed threw her wondering looks but had better things to do than taking care of an unknown child. Christmas was close and they all had big wrapped presents under their arms.

As soon as she was close enough, Sally slipped her hand around the Caretaker's arm.

'Grandpa! Stop!' she called him. He looked at her, surprised by the sudden contact. 'You can't g-'

'Don't call me like that,' he cut her. She rose an eyebrow.

'How do I call you then?' she replied.

'You with your stupid names,' he grumbled. 'Why should I have a name? A name doesn't define who I am, does it?'

'So I'll call you Grandpa,' concluded Sally. 'Anyway, you can't just leave like this without giving me any explanation!' It was his turn to raise his eyebrows.

'Course I can,' he retorted before freeing himself with a jolt. Sally let him go without giving any resistance. His voice had risen so slightly it was almost imperceptible but his words were full bitter and annoyance. For the first time, Sally wondered if this man was dangerous and how much he was. Little she knew...

'Alright, sorry,' she murmured but he was already gone. Thinking quickly, she waited for him to go further. Once she was sure he wouldn't notice her, Sally started to follow him. She wasn't going to give up so easily.

As she walked stealthily in the now empty streets, Sally had the strange feeling of being observed. It was like inches in the back of her head or a shiver running along her back. Though, wherever she looked, no one seemed remotely interested by her. She was

alone safe for the Caretaker who was now a mere shadow far before her, and a young man hobbling in the other direction. Wiping it from her mind, Sally returned to her spying.

She followed the Caretaker for ten minutes at least. At last, he entered a pub in a deserted street. Sally stuck her face on the dirty glass. He was sitting at the bar, a purple drink with a yellow umbrella before him. She couldn't see who he was talking to — the person was hidden by a shelf full of bottles and glasses — but from his frantic gestures, it seemed to be a pretty animated discussion.

Sally was so engrossed by the spectacle of her stranger she didn't hear the two creatures sneaking behind her.

'She has his smell,' said a sibilant voice urgently. 'Only him has this smell.' Sally tried to turn around and look at the voice's owner but it was too late. A tissue was put before her face, covering both her mouth and nose. Two strong arms kept her still. Black spots appeared before her eyes.

Unable to move, Sally did the only thing she could think of. She screamed. She screamed so loudly every single person in the bar heard her. Tiredness rushed in her mind like a back wave washing out her thoughts. She couldn't fight it.

Her kidnappers were dragging her away from the pub. The last thing Sally saw before falling unconscious was her mysterious man bursting out of the bar.

When she woke up, Sally was tied up to a chair. She rose her head slowly from where it had been resting on her chest. Her neck was hurting and the pounding in her head wouldn't stop. Trying to forget the pain, Sally looked around her.

She was facing a huge window displaying a vast construction area that had been left abandoned with the war. The Tamise was gently flowing behind it. From what she could see of the flat, it was empty and only half-built. There was no paint on the walls and tools were covering the floor. A white light was coming from a unique lamp. Someone must have taken off her gloves because she could feel the rough cords under her fingers.

A door slammed behind her before she could try to undo the knots. Two people entered. Sally went rigid, not daring to move a finger. Her heart raced, her breath stopped.

'Good, you're awake.' It was the same voice as earlier. Sally opened her mouth to say something, threats maybe, but her throat was so tight no sound came out. Finally, the two criminals entered her sight. It's fair to say she had one of the most surprising moments of her life.

The two creatures before her could almost look human if it wasn't for their red swollen skin and their heads. Their faces were larger than long with a small protuberance at the bottom. They didn't have any hair. Two big black eyes were set on each side, as far from each other as possible.

'Hello,' one of them said. Sally's eyes widened even more, if possible. The creature's lips hadn't moved because it *didn't have* lips. Instead, a black hole had appeared between their two eyes.

'We're the Schraduns,' continued the other, oblivious to Sally's distress. Their voices were completely identical. 'We've sent a message to your friend. He'll be here soon.'

Sally swallowed hard. Once the first shock passed, they didn't look threatening. As for why they'd brought her here...

'Which friend are you talking about?' she asked in a shaking voice, though she had already guessed.

'The Caretaker, of course!' answered one of the Schraduns. 'You have his smell.' The other creature rose their head and sniffed. Outside, the moon was half way through its small rise to the sky.

'He shouldn't be long now,' they announced.

'I barely know him,' Sally pointed, though it wasn't the best move considering her position. 'I don't know him, actually. We've talked for less than five minutes.' The Schraduns looked surprised by her declaration. They must have some sort of secret communication system thought Sally because, after looking at each other for a few seconds, one of them nodded and turned their red head to Sally.

'It doesn't matter,' they said. 'He'll come.' Those words concluded the conversation. The two of them headed back to where they had come from despite Sally's shouts and questions. The door closed behind them.

Sally sighed. Alone, again. Not that it was unusual for her. The ropes were too tight for her to hope to free herself. The chair was fixed to the floor so that she couldn't fall and grab a tool. She was trapped.

It was half an hour later, Sally estimated, when someone was heard walking up the stairs heavily. The Schraduns came back in a hurry. Sally couldn't see them but the atmosphere was so tensed she knew better than to talk. She didn't know, however, if she should feel relieved or not by the Caretaker's arrival. On the one hand, it meant she wouldn't be alone in the gloomy room anymore. On the other hand, the outcome of the night was hardly predictable. The door creaked.

'Hello.'

It was definitely relief. Somehow, this voice, this smooth and ancient voice, made Sally feel safe again. She shifted on her seat, desperate to know what was happening.

'I thought I had told you not to follow me,' continued the Caretaker. It took Sally a whole minute to understand he was talking to her.

'Yes, well, I'm not one for orders,' she responded.

'So,' the Caretaker spoke again after her answer, 'Schraduns. It's been a while since I've last seen one of your kind. You brought me here. What for, if I may ask?' Sally could feel the two Schraduns who had stayed silent shiver under his stare. She couldn't help but sympathize.

'We arrived on Earth twenty-years ago,' one of them started, 'and we've lived in peace since then but the war...' The Schradun who was talking gulped while the other one shivered. 'Our ship is long lost. We need a lift to another planet. You can take us with you.'

Sally couldn't see it but at the mention of the war, the Caretaker's face had considerably darkened.

'Human beings,' he whispered. 'Capable of both the worst and the best... So I guess you're the ones who blocked my door. How?' His voice was low and serious. It was clear to every one else that he wasn't playing any game and wanted answers.

'A stolen technology,' answered a Schradun in a surprisingly firm voice. 'It was given to us by the same person who talked about y-.' The other Schradun hissed but it was too late. They had already said too much.

'Really?' said the Caretaker, surprised. 'That's not good, not good at all... Such a power at the disposal of anyone... Who was it? Who told you about it?'

Even though Sally would have found their talking very interesting, she wasn't paying attention to it at all. The biggest rats she had ever seen had appeared from behind the window and entered the room through the wall. They had run to Sally, who had shrieked at them, and had started to gnaw her ropes. Their work was done very quickly thanks to their big sharp teeth. They went back to where they had come as if nothing had happened.

As soon as she was free, and choosing to add what had just happened to her long list of questions, she turned around to face the rest of the room. The Schraduns had their back to her. The Caretaker was facing them alone. He made eye contact with Sally and nodded very slightly. His eyes moved back to the two criminals.

'Let's make it clear,' the Caretaker told them very slowly. 'If you hadn't kidnapped an innocent, I would have helped you. But you had to, didn't you?' At his refusal, the Schraduns's behavior changed totally. It seemed that they were more afraid by the war than by him. They straighten and pushed their shoulders back to look impressive.

'Even though the Schraduns are non violent by nature, the both of us can easily manage you,' they threatened. The Caretaker took an offended face.

'Never underestimate an old man,' he replied. 'We have more than one trick in our sleeves.' While he was keeping them distracted, Sally had come closer to the Schraduns. Without warning, she pushed them strongly in the back. They tripped and fell on each other.

The Caretaker reacted immediately. He took a strange-looking device Sally hadn't noticed before, grabbed her wrist and ran to the stairs. Sally let him lead gladly.

'Leeeeeemon,' he shouted as he rushed down at a surprising speed for his age. Once downstairs, they ran outside the building and hid behind a half-finished construction.

'Why are we stopping?' panted Sally, out of breath. 'We should keep moving. They're going to follow us.'

The Caretaker, who wasn't listening to any of her words, had kneeled before the device. He was looking for something in his coat. It was a tall black device with a large handle on its top. A small green screen was displaying lines of numbers that meant nothing to Sally.

'By all the universes, where is it?' the Caretaker muttered. From where she was, Sally could see a multitude of pockets on the inside of the coat. All of different sizes, forms and colors: big and blue, pink and deep or even yellow and round. After a few more seconds of searching, he opened his hand with a loud and triumphant 'Aha!'

*Hell, he's definitely going to get us found,* thought Sally with a worried glance around them. Unknown to her, the two Schraduns were still upstairs and were arguing about whose fault the prisoner's escape was.

'What is it?' asked Sally instead of sharing her worry. In the old hand was a small black square perfectly ordinary in her opinion though she didn't know what was its use.

'This,' the Caretaker said dramatically, 'is an annihilating chip. She can stop any and every program. Well, it's more than that, really. First she examines the code, then she stops it and, as a measure of precaution, she creates a bubble around the device to block the waves it could either receive or emit. A wonderful invention. Invented during the twenty-third century by T-'

'Can you do that again?' exclaimed Sally, completely lost. She hadn't understood a single word. The Caretaker sighed and stuck the chip on the handle.

'It'll turn off the device,' he said simply.

'Wouldn't it be easier to just destroy it?' asked Sally as he stood up. 'What if they take it again? They'll just have to take off the ship.' He shook his head in despair.

'You humans, always for destruction. They won't put a hand on it again. We'd better get away. They won't be long.' True to his words, the two Schraduns had finally agreed that they were both to blame and were hurrying downstairs.

So Sally and the Caretaker ran. He led her through the maze of future buildings until they morphed to the low houses of the London's outskirts. They ran for so long Sally thought she was going to fall. Her legs couldn't take it anymore. How was he doing? He wasn't showing any sign of weakness, always before, always totally aware of his surroundings, always showing the way in the now taller buildings. Finally, after an eternity of short breaths and sour muscles, they stopped.

The Caretaker had led them back in the alley where all had begun. Nothing was different save for the moon which was now high in the sky, and the door. The door! It was a normal one as far as could Sally tell, disappointed. White, in wood, around six feet high with numbers written in the place of the handle and at the top.

'Thank you,' the Caretaker was saying. 'We're square now.' He was hunched near the garbage. Sally came closer. There, on the top of the pile of garbage she had inspected what felt like days ago, their head held up as if they were understanding what was told, was a huge rat very much like those who had freed her.

'What- What are they?' she asked as the beast nodded to the Caretaker and disappeared in the dark.

'Uh?' The Caretaker looked at her as if he had forgotten she was here. She would've been hurt had the events of night not turned her world upside-down.

'Those... things,' she explained, pointing at the now empty spot. 'What are they?'

'Oh! They're the Trucks,' he answered as if it was common knowledge. 'And you should be nicer to them. If it wasn't for them, you'd still be with the Schraduns. Luckily, they owed me a favor. I saved them from a rat extermination a few years back.'

'But what *are* they? Where do they come from?' insisted Sally. The Caretaker moved to the Schraduns' device to examine it.

'They're on many planets,' he answered distractedly. 'They eat stolen belongings. Well, they feed from the memories those belongings held. That's what happens when you

lose something. It's eaten.' Sally nodded slowly. This was absurd and yet, she couldn't not believe it.

'What about the Schraduns? Is there many like them on Earth?' He shrugged and turned to the door.

'Earth's supposed to belong to the human race according to the Intergalactic Laws but as long as they stay discrete and don't reveal their existence, other species are allowed to live here. As for the Schraduns, they travel from one planet to another until they settle down, take the appearance of the locals as much as they can and steal to live. Excellent thieves but not clever at all.' Once his examinations complete, he faced Sally who was shivering. Her coat and scarf had been lost during the running. 'Time to go,' he announced, clapping his hands together. 'Goodbye, Sally Folker.' Just as he was about to push the door, Sally took her chance.

'Wait,' she shouted, taking one step ahead, hands reached as to grab him. He froze, much to her relief. 'Can I-' she stammered.

*Deep breath, Sally, she thought. This is your one chance.*

'May-I-come-with-you-please?' He turned on his heels, grey eyebrows risen in surprise. He looked at her for a good minute before answering.

'Aren't your parents worried?' he asked. 'Or whatever you call your tutors.' Sally bit her lips. She should tell him. She had to tell him. Her eyes watered. She wiped her tears angrily.

'They're gone,' she blurted out. 'The coat... It was my father's.' Sobs took over her at the mention of the lost clothe. It had been her only memory of her parents. The Caretaker had lowered his head, respectfully waiting for her to continue. 'They died in the bombings. Our- our house exploded. Everybody was asleep. We've been woken up by the siren. They weren't fast enough. Mum... She got me out. She told me too run... I didn't want. I didn't want to leave them. There was flames and ashes everywhere. Everybody was screaming.'

Sally's sobs were the only sound breaking the night's silence. The Caretaker was standing silent before the door. He looked torn apart between staying where he was and going nearer. Finally, as Sally's sobs faded away, he gave in.

'Fine,' he sighed. 'Come along.' Sally, who had been certain he was going to take her to one of the orphanage she had spent her time avoiding, felt like her heart was on the verge of exploding.

'Really?' she asked with a small, hesitant smile. He nodded smiling back.

'Oh, and eat that,' he told her. He handed her what looked like a chocolate bar. 'You look famished.

'I have one last question,' Sally announced as she took the bar. She took a small bit. It turned out to be the best chocolate she had ever eaten. It melted on her tongue like the sun's warmth stroke the skin on a summer day. She wolfed down the rest of it completely shamelessly.

'Go ahead,' the Caretaker said in a resigned tone.

'Why did you shout "lemon" earlier?'

'Well, it wasn't a situation for strawberries, was it?' he answered as the door opened behind.

Notes

First of all, thank you for reading this. It means a lot to mean.

If you liked this story (or didn't), I'd love to hear what you thought about it. This isn't the last version and modifications will be added before the official version comes out.

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