

Dust.

My first coherent thought, following the obvious realization that I was still alive, was that I was covered in dust. But dust I could handle. If ever there were a dust problem, I was the girl for the job: I had been cleaning up after other people my whole life.

Brushing grit and debris from my hair, I sat up amid the rubble of the collapsed building and peered around. The space had been transformed into an eerie jumble of broken walls, the only light a flickering old incandescent that had, until minutes before, been affixed to the ceiling. The ceiling itself lay broken beneath my feet and what now passed for a ceiling, I was relatively sure, had been several floors up before the ground had shifted and much of the south district had dropped into another forgotten mine. The light fixture whined like a low-level blasting charge. I knew that sound. Before long it would be out altogether, plunging me into darkness. If I were to escape the wreckage, I had best be about it.

Dust

by the Bunny in the Tardis

It wasn't the first time I'd been caught in a mine drop and survived. No doubt it wouldn't be the last. Living on asteroid R-2112 on the edge of the Empire meant living on top of the endless warrens previous generations of *'belters* had mined and subsequent generations had forgotten. Once, such oversights had been considered criminal, but as demand for Zeiton-7-9er increased, safety regulations decreased. At least that's what Granddad always said.

I knew only too well to avoid the tangle of electrical leads and dripping water pipes as I made my way slowly through the remains of the south district city centre.

There was scarcely room to move, let alone stand up, and as I crawled on my hands and knees, sharp bits of fallen *plas-crete* and twisted iron tore at my tunic and trousers, biting into my skin. The most likely escape route also appeared to be the one furthest from the light. I looked back over my shoulder, blinking more dust from my eyes. That was there no matter where you went on R-2112. Dust from the mines. Dust recycled by faulty ventilation systems. Dust of the ages settling over the decaying mining colony. Another water pipe broke and I heard a rush like the artificial rivers in the Central Dome. There, it would have been a delight. Here, it meant the danger of electrocution was growing.

Turning back, I began to pick my way once more over the uneven surface, calling softly, then with more gusto.

“Hello? Is anyone else there?”

A rustle to one side caught my attention and as I watched, a chunk of pearl-white *plas-crete* tumbled down, revealing... a hand.

Mercy!

I drew a sharp breath, startled at the sight, afraid for a moment that it was no longer attached to its original owner. But I could see no blood, and the hand was reaching toward me as surely as if whoever it belonged to knew that I was there.

“Hello? Oh, my God,” I said, scrambling over sharp edges to get closer. “Are you all right? Are you trapped?” *Are you dead?*

A wave of crackling energy swept over me, the ground beneath my hands and knees shivering as if in response. Without an active stabilisation field we were going to be in for another bumpy ride. And if the dome itself had been compromised...

“Hold on,” I whispered, as much for myself as anyone.

I flattened myself against the debris and reached out, desperate for the warmth of another’s touch, closed my eyes, and prayed.

Darkness.

The local power supply had failed, but that was probably for the best. Behind closed eyes I’d seen a flash of blue light just before the shuddering preamble of a secondary mine drop. Then nothing. I could still hear the steady stream of water

somewhere behind me, spilling like a waterfall into the depths of the mines below. In the cloying bleakness I anchored myself to the only other living person I had found. At least I was relatively sure he was alive. And relatively sure it was a he.

“Are you there?” I whispered again, squeezing the fingers I’d wrapped my hand around before the lights had completely gone out. I hoped I hadn’t done the poor, misfortunate soul further injury.

A moment later, I felt a firm, gentle grip on my hand.

“Can you hear me? Are you all right?”

A muffled laugh was the reply. Then: “That’s debatable. Do buildings often collapse around here?”

I grinned. A sense of humour was a good sign. Granddad always said that you’d be fine if you could maintain a sense of humour in the face of disaster. It was the ones who panicked that didn’t survive. The ones that gave in to despair. I’d once waited the better part of three days to be rescued after a mine drop. You just had to believe. It was rather like Christmas back on Old Earth. So far away as the year began, but eventually, it came, rescuing you from the darkness of winter. In space it always seemed like winter.

I pulled myself closer to the man in the rubble and patted his hand gently, worried about the extent of his injuries.

“Your hand is so cold.”

“Cold hands. Warm hearts. That’s me,” a friendly voice assured me.

“I’m bel-Keegan.”

“Hello, *bel-Keegan*.” He seemed ever so relaxed for a man trapped beneath a building. “I’m called the Doctor.”

A Doctor? I had no idea that any Doctors had been in the building that morning. If he wasn’t too badly injured he would be worth his weight in Zeiton 7-9er once we were free and he could ply his trade among the survivors.

“Which Doctor are you?” I asked, stroking his hand, hoping that he would keep talking to me. His voice was nice and it was so dark here. I hadn’t been frightened before, but it was getting warmer, the air closer.

“Nope,” he said, “not a witch Doctor. Just the Doctor.”

I smiled. "Just the Doctor?"

"Hello!" he said cheerily, and he squeezed my hand.

"Hello," I said back, feeling more than a little foolish, but people said strange things and acted in strange ways during times like this. I ought to know. I'd been not far from here last year when part of the old town had gone down. That time I had been trapped with six others. Only four of them made it out alive.

"So. What do we do for fun now?" he asked. I could hear him shift somewhat on the other side of the rubble. "Just sit around and wait for someone to notice this entire sector is sliding into the centre of the asteroid?"

"I can start digging –"

"No! No," he said again, more calmly. "Too unstable. No. Best you stay right where you are. I expect help's coming. Or will be."

A faint *whir* tickled at my senses and I swallowed deeply, wondering what bit of equipment might still be powered up. A moment later it was gone.

I coughed, feeling the dust settling in my lungs. That was the greatest danger – if you didn't fall through into a deep shaft – not getting enough fresh air. Sometimes the disaster response teams drilled holes into the wreckage, piping in good, breathable air. If you were lucky they ran lines from the centre of the city where everything was maintained better. If not... it was just more recycled dust. It rather depended on where you were and who you were trapped with. No one would be looking for me. I knew that. But if they knew a Doctor was in the building... I licked my lips, hating to spit precious moisture away but knowing that was preferable to letting the dust clog up my airways.

"Are you all right?" the Doctor buried in the rubble asked.

"Fine and dandy," I answered. That's how Granddad always put it. "You?"

"Couldn't be better. Well," he amended, "maybe I could. But I've got good company and that's what counts, eh, Keegan?"

I blinked, nodding my head even though he couldn't see me. It was kind of him to drop my class distinction and just call me by the name my mother had given me. Yes. Good company was what counted. I did not realize that I hadn't told him so out loud.

“...in the end there wasn’t much for it, so I just held my nose and I jumped!”

I smiled at the image of the Doctor running from a swarm of furry little... *mice*, he called them... and being forced to take the plunge into a vat of orange marmalade. Mice, I’d never seen, but I’d found a tiny jar of marmalade in my Christmas stocking once. I’d have been willing to face a hoard of those fiendish unknown mice in pursuit of such a rare delicacy.

I liked the Doctor. He told a good story with an accent unlike any I had heard before. He was tall, I thought, judging by his fingers. His hand was smooth, but strong. I hated the thought of him being trapped like this, crushed under the weight of so much misery. It hadn’t occurred to me until then to wonder in which part of the old asteroid colony he resided. I didn’t care. It didn’t matter if he wasn’t a native *’belter*. He was the Doctor. *My Doctor*. The only Doctor to have visited the south district since the dome shift had forced everyone who had the means to relocate to leave. I could have gone. I’d saved my wages. But Granddad was still alive then and stubbornly wished to remain. I would have missed him if I’d gone then.

“Keegan?” the man asked suddenly, tightening his grip on my hand. “You still there?”

“Yes, yes, I’m here,” I assured him, squeezing back. I stroked his cool fingers. “Don’t worry, Doctor. I’m not leaving you.”

“That’s a relief.”

“You’ve had so many adventures,” I sighed. “I should like to see some of those places.”

“Well, it just so happens I have a ship, Keegan. What do you say you come with me – once we’re clear of this place, that is. Anywhere you’d like to go. My treat. How does that sound?”

That sounded wonderful! I’d dreamed of travelling off-world, however unlikely such an eventuality might be. Not someone born to the asteroid belt mining class. Oh, it had happened, I knew. My own aunt, my mother’s older sister, had left years ago, on an outbound Old Earth transport stopped over for repair, and never looked back. At least she never *came* back. We’d heard from her now and again, how she’d taken a husband on a faraway world and raised her children to become

scientists and teachers and dancers rather than miners or menial servants like so many generations of her family had since they had indentured themselves to the *Faolchu Olc* Corporation. Always indebted to someone else. Always looking after someone else's children. Tidying up someone else's home. Sweeping up someone else's dust. Well, not me. I was going to fly away. I was going to fly away with the Doctor, and I wanted to tell him so, but I was so tired that I lay down my head against his cool, tender hand, and slept.

"Who's waiting up top for you, Keegan?" the Doctor asked me sometime later.

I blinked, alarmed that I had drifted off and left him alone in this awful place. That wouldn't do at all.

"No one anymore," I told him. Granddad had been the last of my family, and he was gone these three years. I missed him terribly. "And you?"

"Me? No, no one waiting up for me," he said, his voice trailing off. "Not anymore. On my own. Knockin' about. Tumbled about, to be honest."

"Have you been to Earth?" I asked him suddenly. I knew it was unlikely. Earth was so very far away. Too far to reach in a lifetime. But it seemed to me that he was rather like Father Christmas, someone that existed outside of normal Time. And if he had his own ship, he was living well, somewhere in the colony.

"Earth?" he asked, sounding distracted again. "That backwards little blue marble? Spent a lot of time there when I was... younger."

"Oh, but you couldn't have!" I cried, loving the delicious sense of absurdity, and quickly asked him: "Is it true that the sky is blue? And there are oceans of water? And on Christmas morning they serve forty types of marmalade?"

"Most of it," the Doctor told me with a short laugh. "Mind you, I've not tasted forty flavours of marmalade, but I'd be willing to have a go. Shall we then? Is that where you'd like to go, Keegan? To see the Earth and sample Christmas marmalade?"

"Yes, please," I told him, once more feeling the choking dust. More of the building had settled around us, creaking, groaning, pressing us deeper into long-abandoned mine shafts. We didn't have much time. But I refused to trouble

him. He was being so brave.

“Christmas on Earth it is, then,” the Doctor told me.

I wanted to tell him to rest. Save his breath. Save his strength. For all I loved the sound of his voice, I didn’t want it to be the last thing either of us ever heard.

“Keegan? Keegan, are you still there? They’ll have got the signal by now. *Keegan...?*”

I closed my eyes and whispered for him to rest. Perhaps he didn’t hear me.

The glaring lights of a rescue squad intruded on my dreams. I was imagining the ship the Doctor had told me about – beautiful and blue. I liked the idea of a blue space ship. The Earth’s sky was blue. The Doctor had confirmed it, and I was glad it was true. Not everything in the histories was. That’s what Granddad had always said. But he had shown me the holo-vids archived in the little museum that used to stand not far from where we were trapped. All that had been destroyed during the last mine drop.

“Here’s one,” a voice said, a man’s voice, but not the Doctor’s voice. Not that kind voice whispering to me from beneath the rubble, through the dust. “She’s a *’belter*, but at least they’ll have a pretty face to put on the vids in the morning.”

A face swam into view, covered by an oxygen mask. It made him sound muffled, almost like he wasn’t really there.

“Hello, missy. You’re lucky we found you this far down – and with the dome venting atmosphere at this rate. How’d you manage it? I didn’t know the old containment fields still worked in this sector.”

I blinked more dust from my eyes and coughed more grit from my aching lungs as they lifted me from the wreckage and began to make their way to safety. They would have uncovered the Doctor by now, I thought, and would be transporting him alongside me. Where was he?

“Wait,” I sputtered, pushing the oxygen mask they had strapped over my head to the side. “Wait. Where’s the Doctor? He was trapped with me. I was holding his hand – ”

“A Doctor? Down here? Don’t be a fool, girl. We’d have been notified of that.

You were alone. Well, you were the only one alive.”

The oxygen pressed back over my dry lips as I was handed up, up, up out of the rubble, over the carnage of those who had not been so lucky. I tried to tell them again that they must go back, but no one was listening to me. Why should they? In the end I did not have the strength to argue and instead could only cry silent tears for the Doctor and his blue flying machine.

Keegan...

I drew a painful breath into raw lungs and opened my eyes. But I was alone in the sub-basement ward. The only *'belter* to have been found at the mine drop site. Pretty enough for the holo-vids, but not pretty enough to afford a proper room in the infirmary.

“*Keegan.*” I heard my name again, clearer. Louder. “K-E-E... look, I don’t know how to spell it! Yes I’m sure that’s the right name... all right, *bel-Keegan* if you’re so caught up in your ridiculous, petty distinctions. Of course I know her, why else would I be asking after her? Help me find her, or help me by getting out of my way!

“Oh, and one more thing. You’d best evacuate the colony, because this whole miserable little asteroid is splitting in two. I give it six hours, tops. Bye!”

I knew his voice, but the man striding purposefully toward me through the shadows of the empty ward was a stranger. Could this be the same man? This lean-faced visitor in an ill-fitting, dusty green frock coat from some bygone era of Old Earth. This was my Doctor? Granddad would have had a thing or two to say, but I couldn’t help but stare.

He glanced behind him.

“Were you expecting someone else?”

“No,” I said, struggling to sit, gazing into his bright blue eyes, searching his face for any sign of injury. “You just... look different than I expected you to.”

He grinned at me and pulled a bent metal chair alongside the bed, ignoring the bleak room, the dim lights, the dust. At that moment I was his whole world, and I felt warm and safe. And free. Like I could breathe. Like I could fly.

“So tell me, what do I look like?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I’ve been distracted,” he told me, that cheerful tone he’d used while we were trapped together in the wreckage ringing through again. “Had a bad day or two before I got here. Haven’t even changed my clothes.”

He twisted around in his chair to survey the room, his gaze passing over rows of empty beds. I wondered what he was hoping to find.

“It’ll wait, I suppose. At least I don’t need a haircut,” he said, running his fingers through his short, brown hair. “You know, I’d only just got into town – dropped in, in more ways than one – had a building collapse around me, and met you trapped in the rubble – ”

“I thought *you* were trapped,” I told him. “I didn’t want to leave you – ”

“I know you did. And I’m glad you didn’t. Tricky business keeping an old containment field like that running. They took their own sweet time answering my signal to come for you as well.”

“You did that?” I asked him softly. “For me? But... why?”

“They really do have you brainwashed out here, haven’t they? It’s high time this colony was disbanded. Good riddance to the lot of them.

“So, Earth. How does the turn of the Twentieth Century sound? We can watch Quebec cream Moncton and pick up a 1st edition of *Tarzan of the Apes*. Speaking of apes, we could go to the Piltdown Gravel Pit and laugh at Charles Darwin. Did I mention it was a Time Machine as well as a spaceship? And you aren’t interested in any of that, are you?”

“I – I don’t know,” I told him, at once tantalized and terrified and wondering where in the midst of all these things might be the dreaded *mice*.

“And I’m scaring you half to death now, aren’t I? That’s new. I’ll have to get used to that. And here I was thinking to myself that I could do with a little polite company. I’m sorry I’m not the man you thought I would be, Keegan. I’m not sure I know who I am myself.”

I said nothing at first, unsure how to answer him. If he didn’t know who he was, how could I be sure either? I needed to see his hand. Needed to feel the cool, strong fingers that had been as much my life line as I thought I had been his. What a

fool I had been... thinking myself as important as all of that. As if sensing my thoughts he gathered my hands in both of his and squeezed gently. I closed my eyes briefly and smiled. Yes. Yes it was him. It could only be him.

“Doctor.”

“Hello,” he said again, so merry and yet, now that I could see his chiselled face and bright eyes, so sad. As if he had seen something so terrible, so painful, that it was written on his soul. I would have done anything to change that.

“It’s the dust,” I said at last, brushing a bit from one of his velvet sleeves. “It settles on everything, covering you up, making it hard to breathe. It’ll bury you. If you let it. It’ll take away your dreams.”

He tilted his head to one side as I spoke, his gaze so intense I almost looked away. I pulled my knees up underneath me and leaned toward him. I took his hand once more.

“Don’t let it.”

He looked down at my hand, so small next to his. The unseen hand that had touched his in the rubble when I’d thought he was dying. Maybe he had been. There are more ways than one to die. And in that moment the fire that I’d seen burning in his eyes went out, and in its place I could see a thousand adventures waiting. Adventures and, just possibly, some mice.

Alarms sounded, echoing up and down the halls and through the infirmary ward. The Doctor pulled a vintage fob watch from his pocket and silently marked the time as he pushed the chair out of his way.

“They certainly waited long enough. They’ll have just enough time to evacuate the colony – if they pay attention. Now. Keegan. Forget everything else I said. You asked about blue skies – ”

“ – and forty flavours of Christmas marmalade?”

“And forty flavours of Christmas marmalade. Fantastic.”

I took his hand and followed, leaving only my small, bare footprints in the dust behind me.

