The book cover features a dark, space-themed background. At the top, a bright light source is visible. The title 'DOCTOR WHO' is written in large, metallic, block letters. Below it, 'Re-Incarnated' is written in a white, handwritten-style font. The subtitle 'April's Fools' is in a purple, serif font, and the author's name 'Alex Smith' is in a white, serif font. The bottom half of the cover shows a large, detailed image of the Earth from space, with a rocket ship flying across the left side. The Earth's surface is partially obscured by a dark, shadowed area that resembles a silhouette of a person's head and shoulders, possibly the Doctor, looking out from the planet. The overall aesthetic is classic sci-fi with a modern, artistic touch.

DOCTOR WHO
Re-Incarnated

April's Fools

Alex Smith

DOCTOR WHO: RE-INCARNATED PRESENTS

April's Fools

An original Doctor Who story

By Alex Smith

DOCTOR WHO: RE-INCARNATED

Published by Doctor Who Re-Incarnated Publications and Yolasite

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April's Fools

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'Ticket, please?' asked the inspector. He was at least seven feet high, with blue skin and a small red cap perched comically between two bristling antennae.

'Certainly,' the Doctor smiled, flipping open his wallet. 'I'm Doctor John Smith, and that-' He pointed to the pretty girl with dark hair stood by the window, '-is Miss Tracy Blaid, my plus one and travelling companion.'

The insectoid inspector leaned in, mandibles quivering. After a few moments, satisfied that everything was in order, he moved along down the spacious cabin. The Doctor pocketed the wallet and sidled over to where Tracy was standing.

'Psychic paper,' he hummed. 'Useful when you're stowing away on a luxury cruise liner...'

Tracy wasn't listening. She was transfixed by the sight beyond the window; the wide panel of glass looked out onto a sparkling, shimmering cosmos, a whole system of planets hanging suspended in the darkness of space below them. The vastness of it all was overwhelming. A huge orb, its surface tinged an angry red, glared up at them, while a tiny pale-blue sphere sat softly in the distance. Somewhere behind them, the system's star burned brightly, casting dim light across each and every one of the planets.

'It's quite something, isn't it?' the Doctor gestured vaguely at the eternity of space spread out before them. Tracy just nodded slightly, transfixed.

'It's amazing,' she whispered. The Doctor caught the look of childlike wonder on her face and felt a warm glow in the pit of his stomach.

'Attention all passengers. We will be entering descent in approximately five minutes. The seatbelt sign is now on.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Some things never change!' he chuckled, gently pulling Tracy by the arm. Reluctantly, she tore her eyes from the magnificent vista and followed him away from the observation window to their luxurious seats. The starship was sleek and the walls were pearly white. The cabin was wide, with plenty of legroom for each of the curved seats. Wide, concave windows broke up the smooth walls at intermittent intervals, providing a stunning view of the void beyond, slipping past them as they cut through the inky black of space like the hull of a boat through water. The Doctor eased himself comfortably into his seat, leaning back and adjusting his trilby hat slightly. Tracy sat down beside him, her eyes trailing back towards the window. In front of and behind them, the aisles were bustling with activity, as passengers of all sizes and shapes hurried back to their seats, or just to fasten their seatbelts. There were humans, near-humans, semi-humans, demi-humans, and a host of definitely not-humans. In the next row across from them, a middle-aged couple were squabbling. They had downy black fur covering most of their faces and arms, and in place of their hands they had long, silky feathers that protruded like fingers.

'I am telling you, Harold, it just needs turning off and back on again!'

'And I am telling you, Doris, not to interrupt me when I am trying to concentrate!'

They continued to bicker over what looked like a space-age video camera. The Doctor's mouth twitched as he tried to keep a straight face.

'I've never flown first class before,' Tracy said, stretching out next to him. He raised an eyebrow.

'I don't think you've ever flown on a *spaceship* before, either.'

'Yeah, yeah,' she shrugged casually, 'spaceships are cool and that, but come on, first class. It's all so... Swish!' She accepted a glass of something sparkling and gold from a blue insect waitress, and sipped it tentatively. 'You see? I have no idea what this is, but it tastes brilliant.'

The Doctor smiled, lounging back in his seat. 'I'm glad you're enjoying yourself.'

'Yeah, it's nice to travel in style for a change.' She looked at him meaningfully.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing.'

'Are you suggesting the TARDIS *isn't* travelling in style?'

'It doesn't land so much as crash. Violently.'

The Doctor harrumphed indignantly. 'One word more and we're going down to the cargo bay, getting back in the TARDIS and leaving.' He crossed his arms sulkily. Tracy giggled, and punched his shoulder lightly.

'Oh, come on... I was only joking!' He gave her a petulant look, but the corners of his lips turned upwards in a smile.

'Tell me where we're going, then,' she said, and he unfolded his arms, straightening his scarf as he did so.

'From what I've discerned from conversations with passengers, we're going to a festival. A renowned, planet-wide celebration of comedy and performance. The Festival of Fools, it's called.'

'Sounds like a laugh,' Tracy smiled. She couldn't help but look back over to the window, where the planets were framed beautifully against the emptiness of space that surrounded them. 'So one of those planets there – we're heading to one of those?'

'Oh no, all of *those* planets are uninhabited – too much radiation in the atmosphere, I believe. April should be somewhere below us, you won't be able to see it out of the window.'

'April?'

The captain's voice came over the intercom. '*Attention all passengers. Descent to April will begin in approximately thirty seconds. Please ensure that your seatbelt is in the correctly fastened position. I hope you have enjoyed your flight.*'

'Wait, is April the planet?'

'Yep!' the Doctor grinned, cheerily. 'Planet April. And that, just over there-' he pointed out of the window to the fiery red planet Tracy had been observing before '-Is August.'

'Let me guess. There are twelve planets in this system, right?'

'Eleven,' the Doctor shook his head, sadly. 'They demoted November to a planetoid.'

Suddenly, the whole ship took on a slight tilt, and a baby near the back of the cabin began to cry. They were coming in for landing.

'Festival of Fools, here we come!' the Doctor said, as the ship began to shake slightly as they plummeted down through April's atmosphere. 'This is going to be *fun!*'

1

Tracy stood, unsure, at the bottom of the ramp. It sloped slowly downwards from the fuselage of the starship behind her, and ended a step ahead, where the bottom of the ramp dug slightly into the earthy ground of April. This was it. Her first step onto the surface of an alien world. She felt like there should be some sort of grand announcement made, but there was nobody nearby to say anything, so instead she just took a deep breath and-

-tripped, rather spectacularly, as something bumped into her from behind and toppled her wildly off-balance. For a moment she heroically tried to remain in control of her flailing arms, but then she windmilled forwards and crashed to the ground, sprawled across the soft earth. She tasted soil and spat the mud out of her mouth, cringing. Behind her, a high voice was squawking indignantly.

'Harold! What have I told you about looking where you are going?!'

'I was too busy trying to fix this blasted transmitter – the transmitter which *you* broke!'

'Oh, that's right, play the blame game, it's all you ever do...'

Tracy felt strong, furry arms grasp her and pull her up. Two hunched, feathered figures peered at her curiously. They had long, wing-like hands, and were dressed in simple leather clothes that hung loose over their plump figures.

'I'm ever so sorry, deary,' said the first, a woman with a pinched face framed by downy dark hair that covered her exposed skin. In place of her mouth, she had a short, curled beak. 'My brute of a husband is ever so clumsy.'

'What Doris *means* to say,' Harold interjected, casting his wife an infuriated look, 'is that I was so engrossed in fine-tuning this confounded contraption-' he shook the bulky metal rectangle he was holding '-that I lost my bearings a little. I'm terribly sorry for the bother.'

'Lost your bearings?!' Doris echoed. 'You toppled her like a bowling pin!'

'Er, it's quite alright,' Tracy said, before Harold could open his beak to reply. 'No harm done. I'll be on my way now.'

'I'm sick of your twittering! Can't I just have a little peace and quiet, for once?'

'*Twittering?!'*

It was obvious that the couple had already forgotten about her, so Tracy took the opportunity to quietly slip away, walking out past the ramp and away from the ship, onto the surface of April.

The landing strip on which the ship had descended was pretty much the entirety of the spaceport; calling it a spaceport at all seemed far too generous, especially to Tracy, who had found herself envisioning a vast airport glimmering with sleek metal and chrome when the Doctor had first said the word. As it turned out, the long, wide streak of flattened ground on which the ship had landed was pretty much the only thing to set the port apart from the rest of the planet's featureless landscape. There was, to be fair, a rickety wooden sign which read *Welcome to April! Population 921* in faded paint, but that was the only other mark that the natives had left to distinguish the landing site. Tracy looked around, slightly confused. Apart from the passengers disembarking from the ship, who milled around in groups of four or five in the general area in front of the ship, there was no sign of life anywhere. The horizons rolled away in a sweeping sea of hills, rocky and bland. Where exactly was this festival, then?

She spotted the Doctor about twenty yards away, in the middle of an animated discussion with one of the blue-skinned insectoid people they had encountered on the ship. As she walked over, he glanced up from his conversation and gave her a wry grin.

'I see your first steps onto an alien world were nothing short of magnificent,' he grinned.

'Hey, I was pushed,' she replied sourly. 'And I think I swallowed a bit of soil, my mouth tastes horrible.'

He shook his head, bemused, and turned to the figure at his side. 'Vinnie, this pure embodiment of grace and elegance itself is Tracy, my travelling companion. Tracy, this is Vinnie. We met on the starship. He's a – how did you put it?'

Vinnie was very similar in appearance to the tall aliens Tracy had seen onboard the ship; he had dark blue skin, long antennae that protruded from his forehead, and mandibles that twitched excitedly when he spoke. His arms ended not in hands, but in small, clawed pincers. His figure was slightly curved by the weight of his carapace, which covered the whole of his back. He looked, Tracy decided, very much like a giant beetle. 'A wanderer among the stars,' he said, grandly. 'A traveller, hopping from planet to planet in search of adventure!'

The Doctor laughed and clapped Vinnie on the back. 'He's a frequent flier on starships, just like us,' he added, nodding at Tracy meaningfully. 'He's here for the festival too.'

'Who isn't?!' Vinnie cried, throwing his pincers up to emphasise his words. 'That's why the flight was organised. April was just another cosy little backwater, largely ignored, until word about the Festival of Fools got spread around. Now people are flocking here!' He jabbed at the ship they had only recently left. 'We're the first to arrive, yes, but you wait a few days and they'll be turning up in droves!'

'Sounds very popular, this festival,' Tracy said conversationally. Vinnie shook his head, antennae wobbling from side to side.

'Oh, not really. This is the first time they've had off-world visitors.'

'Then why are so many people coming if nobody knows what it's like?' the Doctor asked.

'Because...' Vinnie faltered. 'Well... Because of the rumours, of course! The whispers, the myths! People have been talking of nothing but the Festival of Fools for weeks now, back home.'

'But why is it such a big deal if no one's ever seen it before? How do they know it's any good?'

'We'd better start walking,' Vinnie replied, avoiding the question. 'We'll be the first there if we're lucky, nobody else has set off yet!'

He gestured over the Doctor's shoulder; he and Tracy turned to see the tips of several buildings, just peaking over the horizon. The sloping landscape of April meant the village was concealed from sight from most directions, with a slight indent in the hills allowing Tracy to just catch a glimpse of a small town some way away.

'Excellent idea,' the Doctor said. 'Tally ho!'

With that, he started walking briskly towards the village, with Vinnie scuttling excitedly along beside him. Tracy rolled her eyes and jogged to catch up.

She fell into pace beside the Doctor, with Vinnie several steps ahead of them – he obviously couldn't wait to arrive.

'Alright, I'm a little confused,' she said. The Doctor nodded.

'Me too. If nobody from off-planet has ever visited here before, why is everybody so excited about the festival? And that sign back there said the population of this town is 921 – that's hardly a *planet-wide celebration*, is it? This thing seems to be getting way more hype than it deserves. And how does anybody even know the festival is happening if nobody's been here? And what are the locals going to do when a bunch of tourists turn up to crash their party? And-'

'I meant, I was confused when you said we were frequent fliers on starships. We travel in a box.'

'Oi!' the Doctor laughed. 'She's not a box, she's a marvel of evolution and engineering, rivalled by none and envied by-'

'Box. All I'm saying.'

The Doctor pulled a grumpy face and folded his arms. 'Stop finishing my sentences. Your rubbishing them up.'

'*Rubbishing?* That's not a word!'

'The art or profession of making something rubbish. Which you, incidentally, serve as a full-time occupation!'

'Now, wait just a minute-'

'If you two could stop bickering,' Vinnie called back over his shoulder. 'You're worse than that married couple I had to sit behind on the flight!'

Tracy raised her eyebrows, while the Doctor pouted. '*She* started it,' he whinged. Then he caught her eye, and his petulant expression made her burst out laughing. His frown cracked into a wide grin as he joined her, and within seconds they were both in hysterics, Tracy clutching onto his shoulder for support as her laughter brought on a coughing fit. Vinnie turned round and frowned at them, which only made them both laugh harder. It took a full minute for the laughter to die down, though Tracy still had to stifle the occasional giggle.

'Er – sorry, Vinnie. Carry on.'

The insectoid clacked his mandibles together in what might have been a heavy sigh, then turned around and carried on walking down the hillside. Tracy glanced at the Doctor, who still had a huge smile on his face.

'But yeah, all that stuff you were saying is weird too,' she said. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, making a 'mhm' noise by way of response. The starship they had arrived on had completely disappeared from view at this point, the rolling, uneven terrain of the planet swallowing it up, though it couldn't have been anything close to a mile away. They hadn't been walking for very long, but already Tracy felt lost, and fixed her eyes on the tops of buildings up ahead to regain her sense of direction. Vinnie, fortunately, seemed confident enough in his navigation, and was content to lead the way while they trailed behind a little. She looked back the way they had come, and hoped that the other passengers who had been onboard the starship would be able to find their way to the village as easily as Vinnie. If not, there was every chance that the generic, unfathomable landscape of rocks and slopes would engulf them completely.

'You know what I've just realised?' she said, an interesting thought dawning on her. The Doctor glanced at her curiously and she continued. 'We're on the planet April, right?'

'Yeah...?'

'And we're going to the Festival of Fools, right?'

'Supposedly.'

'So? April, fools... April Fools?' She waved her arm half-heartedly. 'You know what I'm saying?'

'Your phrasing is about as eloquent as your first steps on April were.' He laughed when she looked at him with evil eyes. 'I see what you're trying to get at. Yes, it's very interesting how things turn out like that. On Earth, you have April Fool's day, here on April, they have the Fools Festival. Names are powerful things, Tracy. They echo through reality, reoccurring like the ripples that a skimming stone leaves when it skips across a lake.' He spread his arms wide as he looked up to the sky, almost reverentially. 'Coincidence! It's what the universe does for fun!'

'On Earth, we have months,' Tracy said, joining the dots. 'Here, they have a solar system.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Exactly. Like I said, names are powerful things.'

Ahead of them, Vinnie stopped suddenly, looking around in bewilderment. He shook his head slightly, as if to clear it, then turned dizzy back to the Doctor and Tracy. 'Sorry about that – the excitement's making me a little dizzy!' Then he pointed to a slight rise ahead of them, where the hill curved to its apex. 'Just over there, and we'll be a stone's throw away from the settlement!'

He began to walk up the hill with the quick steps of an eager explorer on the verge of a grand discovery. The Doctor jogged up behind him, with Tracy in quick pursuit.

'Am I the only one who's worried what the *inhabitants* of said settlement will do when they find us intruding?' the Doctor called, but Vinnie was too wrapped up in his fever of excitement to hear him. He reached the crest of the hill and took a moment to survey the view stretched out beneath.

'Would you look at that,' Vinnie gasped, mandibles twitching with delight. The Doctor and Tracy joined him, side by side, and caught their breaths as they looked down on the April village.

It was bigger than Tracy had expected; with a population of over nine hundred, it would have been silly to expect nothing more than dusty shacks, especially since she had seen the skyline from some way away. Nonetheless, the bareness of the landing site had given her the impression that the village would be similarly empty. On the contrary, it was huge; stretching away into the distance, filling up a large valley that had formed in the surrounding hilly landscape. The houses were mostly square, built from wood by the look of it, with metal chimney pipes extruding from many of them. Several of the buildings were tall, two or three storeys high, with simple spires or pointed roofs that had made them visible from a far distance. Dirt paths connected the houses together, and a low fence ran around the outskirts of the town. The most impressive thing of all, though, was the stadium. It was massive, wider than a football field, casting a shadow on many of the surrounding buildings; a vaguely circular structure, it had high walls that gleamed in the dim sunlight like polished silver. Though the sides were pointed and tall, they reached no taller than any of the other dwellings – ingeniously, it had been constructed at the center of a steep decline, a pockmark on the valley's skin that declined steeply. It simultaneously loomed over the rest of the village and stood equal to it. The Doctor whistled appreciatively.

'No prizes for where the festival's taking place, then.'

'Come!' Vinnie said, 'Let's make haste! We're almost there!' he began to scuttle, bowed legs hurrying as he dashed towards the town. There was a tall arch, made of strong wooden pillars, that marked out the entrance to the village past the fence that encompassed it, and it was this arch that Vinnie made his destination. Tracy felt dizzy from the scope of it all, and put a hand on the Doctor's shoulder to steady herself.

'Careful. Wouldn't want you to faint again.'

She pushed off, punching his arm. 'I fainted *one time*! And it was only because of you and your stupid bo-'

He glared at her.

'-starship.'

A satisfied smile played across his features.

'Your box-shaped starship.'

The smile disappeared, but Tracy was already cheerily sprinting after Vinnie, so the Doctor had to contend with muttering to himself as he hurried to catch them up.

'Lights!'

Strong, multicoloured beams flooded down from their positions on the stadium walls. The spotlights crisscrossed the wide arena floor, flickering over the forms of figures hard at work. At the center of it all, the Ringmaster stood, surveying his workforce with an eerie calm. Everything was in place now; it was simply a matter of arranging the final touches, adding bells and whistles. His fellow performers were all engrossed in their tasks, adjusting props, working on set pieces, readying themselves for the festival that was drawing ever nearer. One of the beams of light caught the Ringmaster's eyes and he looked up, holding out a hand to shield his gaze. The light passed, and he found himself looking up to the vast array of seats that encircled them. Soon, those seats would be teeming with life, as onlookers came from across the village to enjoy the show in their thousands. But they would not be alone; the off-worlders would be here soon, too. The foreigners, the real prizes. He could almost taste their excitement, their anticipation, their awe. He felt as though he could drink it in, savouring it like syrup. That was his purpose. To put on a show. To entertain.

That was his purpose, and he would fulfil it. The Festival of Fools was about to begin.

The villagers reaction, all things considered, had been significantly less hostile than the Doctor had expected. As they had walked through the wooden arch that heralded the town's entrance, they had spotted a gaggle of young children, playing on a small patch of land between the perimeter fence and the first of the houses. Before Vinnie had done anything more than raise a pincer in greeting, the first of the children had leapt up, shouting 'Welcome! Welcome!'

What felt like many hours later, and people were still coming up to them, offering handshakes and hugs, welcoming them to April, asking them about the flight over, offering them drinks and food. More travellers from the spaceship had arrived since then, following Vinnie's path into the village, and they all mulled together in loose groups around the Doctor. The native people here were almost human in appearance, though they had silky skin that seemed to shimmer and blur in the sunlight. A young woman glided towards the Doctor, carrying a platter of strange fruits, but he politely declined, shifting away from the group. They were stood in a town square of sorts, with dirt paths stretching off in every direction. Vinnie sat at the hub of the crowd, with several small toddlers clambering eagerly over his tall figure. He seemed content to let them play, laughing good-naturedly as one of the children clung around his shoulders. He didn't mind being the centre of attention. The Doctor sidled away, over to where Tracy was standing; she was watching the native people talk animatedly amongst themselves, and to other guests.

'Tell me I'm not the only one who sees the problem here,' he muttered to her. She glanced sideways at him as he spoke. 'These people shouldn't be so friendly if we're the first visitors from off-planet they've ever had. They're a primitive society, not even a level five civilisation. They shouldn't be so... Accustomed to alien visitors. They should be pulling out the torches and pitchforks, instead they're serving up juice and nibbles.'

'Maybe Vinnie was wrong,' Tracy suggested. 'Maybe spaceships land here all the time.'

'But then there would be more of a spaceport than just that one landing strip,' the Doctor shook his head. 'No, there's something very strange going on here. I'd bet my hat on it.'

The Doctor moved away, leaving Tracy with the villagers and other tourists. He set off up the nearest dirt pathway, intending to explore the village. The natives, though helpful and enthusiastic, were next to useless when it came to answering questions. They were naturally evasive, constantly talking but never saying anything of importance. He would make more progress if he searched the town himself before the festival began. He had only taken a couple of steps, however, when something caught his eye; a wide metal plate, embedded into the ground behind one of the houses. It had been placed inconspicuously, but the sharp metal it was constructed from meant it stood out against the wooden houses that surrounded it. It looked polished and shiny, but it didn't glimmer in the sunlight as might be expected.

'What have we here?' the Doctor murmured to himself, advancing towards the disc cautiously.

Barely a moment later, he felt strong arms grasp him from behind.

'Excuse me sir – what are you doing *here*?' asked the native, a bulky man with a low forehead. The Doctor whirled round, putting on his most winning, sincere smile.

'Who, me?' he asked, innocently. 'I was just going for a walk, when I saw that absolutely lovely... Er... Plate, you've got there. What's it for?'

The local stared at him blankly, his skin shimmering like the haze of a mirage. 'Plate, sir?'

The Doctor nodded slowly. 'That one. Over there.'

The local looked over his shoulder, peering at the wide disk strangely. Then a smile broke over his features.

‘Ah! Don’t worry about that. It’s just a manhole cover for the village’s sewers. Can’t do maintenance without an entry hatch!’ he laughed, slapping the Doctor over the shoulder hard enough to make him splutter for breath. ‘Now come, sir, the Festival of Fools wait for no man!’

The native man took the Doctor’s arm firmly, and began to walk back to the town square. It was a friendly enough gesture, but the Doctor suspected that if he tried to break free, the grip on his arm would tighten like a vice.

Tracy took her seat, stifling a nervous cough. She was an independent sort of person, but independence only went so far, and she felt slightly apprehensive about being separated from the Doctor. He had wandered off to explore the town, leaving her alone with nobody but aliens for company. Though he was almost definitely safe and well, she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that without him she was stranded on an alien planet, quite possibly in the far future, hundreds of millions of miles away from home. The thought made her throat tighten uncomfortably, so she distracted herself by looking around, concentrating on her surroundings. She was sat in one of many rows that ran in concentric circles around the stadium; shortly after the Doctor had left the town square, the natives had begun to shuttle the tourists and off-worlders towards the colossal structure, babbling excitedly of how the festival would soon begin. She had been ushered to the seats with only Vinnie for company, and the insectoid figure was too busy talking cheerily to a local man sat next to him – regaling him with a tale of some visit to a faraway planet with an unpronounceable name – to help quell the feeling of isolation and unease that had settled in the pit of her stomach. She felt almost as if the stadium was swallowing her alive, as she was one of a great many people filling the stands. Estimates had never been a particularly strong point for her, but she would have guessed there were at least ten thousand people lining the rows, most of them locals, but with a spattering of tourists sat mostly near the entrance, as she and Vinnie were. The show was close to starting, and the last few people were taking their seats.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped out of her seat, her eyes wild.

‘Easy, easy! Just me!’ the Doctor gave her a reassuring grin as he vaulted the seats behind her, dropping into the empty space next to her. Relief surged through her, and she sank back down into her place, sated.

‘You okay?’ he asked, looking concerned. ‘You look quite pale. And you’re jumpy. *Very* jumpy.’

‘I’m fine. You scared me, that’s all,’ she shrugged, trying to hide how happy she was to see him. She had been feeling unusually anxious since they had been separated.

‘Right... Well, something very interesting just happened to me,’ he said, leaning in conspiratorially. ‘I was snooping about the town when I found this weird disc thing, like a cover for something underground. One of the locals told me it was a sewer manhole, but that can’t be true – the cover looked ten times more valuable than any of the other building materials I’ve seen used here. There’s no way it was for a sewer. And besides, I doubt a town this size even *has* a proper sewage system.’ Tracy opened her mouth to ask him what he thought the disc really was, but was interrupted by a hunched figure hurrying past on the row behind them, knocking her as he struggled into his own seat. Tracy turned around, a frown forming, and found herself staring at a thin, beaked face.

‘Oh lord, I’m ever so sorry, miss,’ said Harold, glancing left nervously. ‘I’m still trying to get this wretched thing working. Let’s not mention this to my sweetie-pie, eh? Not after last time...’ He still had the large, rectangular metal box clutched in his feathered fingers. Tracy took a moment to get a closer look at it, and decided it resembled one of those big cameras that news crews wheeled around, but compacted. It was bulkier than a handheld video camera, but much smaller than a professional one. She wondered what it was actually for.

‘It’s fine. No harm done,’ she smiled. Just as she said it, Harold’s “sweetie-pie” came into view, hurrying down the row towards him.

‘Harold,’ Doris hissed, making a low clucking noise in her throat, ‘I have told you before about bothering people with idle chitchat.’

‘I was having a dignified conversation, darling,’ Harold replied, his expression darkening like a thunder cloud.

‘Dignified? You? Don’t make me laugh...’

Doris took her seat next to Harold, the bird-like couple staring daggers at each other. Tracy turned away in time to catch the Doctor roll his eyes.

‘You always end up with either a crying baby or a bickering couple,’ he said crossly. ‘And then a human giraffe takes the seat in front. I’m being completely serious, one time I was at a 5D Hyperplex and a human-giraffe genetisplice just waltzed in-’

Before he could continue his anecdote, the lights dimmed in the stadium, and the low hum of conversation in the arena dimmed with it, as people turned in anticipation to the centre of the ring. If you had looked down at the stadium, directly from above, it might have appeared to be a giant dartboard, with the rows of seats on the outer rings and the performing area at the bull’s-eye. It wasn’t anything special, just a wide, circular expanse of flat ground, encompassed on all sides by the high seats. The spotlights mounted over their heads swivelled as the sun itself seemed to flicker and fade, and within moments, every light in the arena was focused on a small raised platform, maybe only a meter wide, at the exact midpoint of the performance area. For a few seconds, all was quiet. Then slow, rhythmic footsteps began to echo up and out of the stadium. They were clearly amplified, but that didn’t make them any less effective. Slowly, with the self-assured lope of a big cat closing in on its prey, the Ringmaster stepped into the spotlight.

‘Welcome,’ he said, in a voice like silk, ‘to the Festival of Fools.’

The crowd erupted, ten thousand April natives and at least one hundred tourists applauding furiously. The Doctor clapped, a smile on his face, while Tracy tried to whistle with her fingers in her mouth and failed miserably. Vinnie snapped his pincers rapidly. Doris muttered something under her breath from behind Tracy’s left ear, but reluctantly joined in the applause nonetheless. The Ringmaster said nothing more, merely watching while the hordes of spectators cheered. He had a content smirk on his lips. His outfit was a garish suit of alternating blues and pinks, with a jacket that stretched from the high collar around his neck to the tailcoats at his ankles. Underneath, he wore a checked waistcoat. In one hand, he clutched a long black cane, and in the other he held a top hat. As the audience gradually fell silent once more, he twirled the top hat around and then rooted it firmly on top of his slicked back hair. Then, he opened his mouth and spoke again.

‘First and foremost, before we begin...’ he looked around, his eyes gleaming, at the assembled crowds. ‘Thank you all for coming. As you know, it is customary for the Festival of Fools to begin with a performance from the finest troupe to ever grace this planet’s surface – April’s Fools!’

The audience applauded again, the natives whooping and cheering at the name. Buffeted by the enthusiasm that surrounded them, the other tourists and off-worlders began to join in, clapping with more energy and delight. Tracy could almost feel the audience swelling with happiness, and laughed with exhilaration. The noise switched to a cough halfway through, and she began to choke violently. The Doctor patted her on the back, a shadow of concern dancing under his eyes.

'Are you okay?' he asked. She nodded as the coughing fit began to die down.

'Yeah, just – had a bit of a cough lately, it's nothing.' Her eyes were watering, so she rubbed them dry. The Doctor frowned.

'In my experience, it's never nothing,' he murmured. Just then, a drumbeat began, slow and strong, reverberating through the stadium.

'Ladies and gentlemen and variations thereupon,' the Ringmaster said, with a sly grin. 'Please welcome April's Fools to the arena – and let the Festival of Fools begin!'

Suddenly, colour exploded around them. The spotlights spun around, dissolving into several separate beams of light that each focused on a different figure. While the Ringmaster had been speaking, several of the natives had crept onto stage, and now their show was ready to commence. They were April's Fools, and even Tracy, who was by no means an expert when it came to the performing arts, had to admit that they were magnificent. Maybe fifteen of them in total, each with the blurry, shimmery skin of the local people, each dressed in flamboyant outfits of various outlandish shades of colour. The drumbeat sped up as they moved in circles, spiralling and flipping, moving so simultaneously they appeared to be one creature. They ducked and rolled, they leapt into the air in unison, they threw themselves violently towards each other but never seemed to connect. Already Tracy could feel awe and excitement flooding through her, as she watched the talented performers going about their work.

'Doris! Doris! It's working!' cried a squawking voice from behind her; the sound of the crowd and the drumming meant that she could barely hear it, even though the speaker was clearly bellowing at the top of his lungs. She turned to see Harold gesturing excitedly to the metal box he had been fiddling with since his arrival. He was jabbing at a complex array of buttons mounted onto the rear of the box, gesturing to his wife with long, feathery strokes of his hand.

'It was just a loose wire, that's all, but I've got it transmitting again now!' he pointed the box out, towards the arena where the April's Fools were spiralling in and out of formation. 'Do you think they're seeing this back home?'

'I would imagine so. That is rather the point of a transmitter, darling.'

Harold snapped his beak agitatedly. 'It isn't just a transmitter, it's a receiver, too! We could be downloading the latest episode of *Birds Behaving Badly* for all you know!'

Tracy turned away from the slightly surreal conversation to see the Doctor grinning at her.

'Future technology,' he shouted (though it sounded like a whisper in this noise), answering her unasked question. 'It either transmits sounds and images to another location, like a video uplink, or it can receive sounds and images from other signals. Like a video camera combined with a portable TV, sort of. So you can connect it to a computer screen back home, and everything you film, your family can see.'

Tracy nodded, wondering silently if the family of the strange, bird-esque pair would enjoy listening to their bickering for the remainder of the festival, however long that was going to be. Down on the stage, one of the dancers split off from the group and wheeled spectacularly through the air. If the stadium had a roof, the cheering of the audience would have raised the roof; thousands and

thousands of April locals – Aprilians? She hadn't asked – went berserk for the incredible performance.

Something occurred to her. The Doctor had spent most of his time since they had arrived pointing out problems and logical inconsistencies, but there was one staring him in the face that he was yet to notice.

Welcome to April!

The sign at the landing site, the "spaceport".

Population 921

It had pinned the village's inhabitants at being less than a thousand in number. But the stadium could easily have held ten times that, and it was full to the brim. Huge oceans of people, the natives, all with their mercurial skins that shimmered and shone...

Without warning, a feeling of dizziness swept through her. Maybe it was the pulsating movements of the chanting crowds, or the loudness of the drumming, or the endless flashing of the lights, but for whatever reason she suddenly felt very lightheaded. A mess of fuzzy, flickering lights filled her eyes, and it took her a few moments to realise that she was on the verge of fainting.

Not again, she thought numbly to herself. Then she slipped out of her seat as the world turned upside down, and everything went black.

‘What do you mean, *it’s gone?*’ Vinnie asked, his mandibles quivering nervously. All the Doctor could do was shake his head, breathless.

‘Not just the ship... The landing site, the welcome sign,’ the Doctor gasped. He was doubled over, panting for breath. ‘Everything’s just vanished into thin air.’

Vinnie had barely even registered Tracy’s collapse before the Doctor had sprung into action. He had caught her before she slumped to the ground and swung her into his arms. He wasn’t a particularly stocky man, and Vinnie had been surprised to see that he could carry the young woman. He had rushed from the stadium’s stands with the show still ongoing, and Vinnie had reluctantly followed, torn between the grandeur of the performers and the wellbeing of his new friend. Outside the stadium, the Doctor had carefully dropped Tracy down to the ground and scanned her with some sort of sonic probe device that Vinnie was unfamiliar with. After a few moments of severe silence, the Doctor had looked up, worry in his eyes.

‘She’s showing early signs of radiation poisoning,’ he had said. Before Vinnie could respond, the Doctor had grabbed him roughly by the shoulders and stared at him, boring a hole through Vinnie’s skull with his gaze. ‘Can I trust you, Vinnie?’

Vinnie had stammered, confused by the sudden change of mood; the Doctor’s eyes seemed dark and dense, like storm clouds were brewing behind the lids. But he had nodded, and with conviction, replied ‘Yes.’

It was all the confirmation the Doctor needed; Tracy’s limp form had been thrust onto Vinnie’s arms only a moment later. ‘Take care of her,’ the Doctor had said. ‘I have a ship of my own, inside the starship’s cargo bay. I’ll fly it back here and take her inside – I’ll be able to heal her there.’ Without another word, the Doctor had turned round and sprinted, his red scarf fluttering wildly as he had covered the distance between the outskirts of the stadium and the town exit with remarkable speed. It had only taken a matter of minutes for him to reach the perimeter fence, which he bounded over without breaking his step, and then he had disappeared from sight, leaving Vinnie cradling an unconscious human in his hands, feeling thoroughly bewildered. He didn’t know what was going on, but he had enough sense to realise that things were spiralling out of control.

The Doctor’s return, however, threw him; ‘It can’t be gone,’ Vinnie said indignantly, Tracy still slumped in his arms. ‘They wouldn’t have taken off without us! Not in a hundred millennia!’

‘You don’t understand,’ the Doctor said, crouching low as he caught his breath. ‘I don’t mean they’ve left, I mean everything up there has literally vanished. Like there was never a starship here at all.’

Tracy stirred in Vinnie’s arms, causing him to jump. He placed her down on the ground, and the Doctor anxiously leaned over her, the slim metal device Vinnie had seen him use earlier in his hand.

‘Keep your bloody screwdriver away from me,’ Tracy mumbled, delirious. The Doctor laughed, but the humour didn’t reach his eyes; they stayed as they were, filled with worry.

‘You’re ill,’ he said, running the humming device over her prone form. ‘Some type of radiation sickness.’

‘It’s not contagious, is it?’ she giggled. The Doctor smiled back, then frowned as a thought occurred to him. He turned the screwdriver on Vinnie, who winced at the gesture. The buzzing noise the sonic screwdriver gave off fluctuated slightly, and the Doctor’s frown deepened.

'Vinnie... You're the same. Early signs of radiation poisoning.' Vinnie gasped, his bowing legs shivering, as the Doctor spun the device in his hands and pointed it at himself. 'And me,' he sighed. 'We're all sick. Tracy was just the first to collapse.'

'So what? We've all been poisoned?' Tracy asked, trying to sit up. The effort made her wobble, and she sank back to her lying down position. The Doctor took off his hat, scratched at his hair, then replaced it.

'I don't know, I don't know... Vinnie!' he looked up, his face alight. 'The other planets in this system. August and February and June, all of them.'

'Er... Yes?'

'Why aren't they inhabited?'

'Because of the... ' Vinnie's eyes clouded over. '...The radiation in the atmospheres... But that's not right, Doctor, surely? I mean, there's a whole town here! April can't be poisonous too... Can it?'

'Who told you it wasn't, Vinnie?' the Doctor asked. He had a solemn look to him. 'When we were talking on the ship, you told me that April was the only planet that wasn't coated in radiation. Who told you that?'

Vinnie thought about it for a moment, his antennae aquiver, his eyes flitting from side to side. 'It's just... Everyone knows it's safe! They must do! The starship wouldn't have landed here otherwise! 'Just like everyone knows about the Festival of Fools, even though nobody's ever seen it before... ' The Doctor stroked his chin, a picture of concentration. 'I think we've been tricked. Some sort of telepathic broadcast. Everyone knows about the festival even though nobody ever told them about it. Everyone knows the planet's safe to land on, even though all the evidence suggests otherwise. It'd take a massive source of power to convince that many people... An entire starship... Whatever drew us here, it must be incredibly powerful...' the Doctor trailed off, deep in thought.

'Good heavens, is she alright?!' cried a voice behind them. The Doctor and Vinnie looked round to see a stooped man wearing plain leather clothes rushing towards them. His skin was covered in smooth, downy black fur, and his beak was hooked.

'I wanted to come immediately,' Harold panted, brushing a bead of sweat from his forehead with a long feather. 'But Doris insisted I stay to catch the rest of the first dance. They're just prepping up for the next act now.' He pointed back to the stadium that towered over them.

'Harold,' Tracy muttered, and he hopped over to where she was lying. He looked nervous; he was wringing his feathered hands together.

'I'm ever so sorry for knocking you over, miss – is that's what wrong with her? Has she bumped her head? We've had one or two, ah, rather clumsy encounters earlier today...' he clearly considered himself directly responsible for her condition. Tracy smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

'No, no, it's not your fault. I'm sick, apparently. Radiation poisoning.'

The colour drained from Harold's face. 'Really?'

'Yes, and so have you, I'm afraid,' the Doctor interrupted, the sonic screwdriver whirring. 'Just as I thought, everybody's been poisoned. It has to be the atmosphere here. We need to get off this planet, fast.'

Harold gave a squawk of alarm, and jumped to his feet, pointing across the village. 'To the ship!' he cried. 'We need to get everyone back to the ship! They'll have medical supplies there-'

'The ship's gone,' Vinnie interjected, tapping one pincer against the side of his head. 'Disappeared, so the Doctor says.'

Harold whirled on the spot to face the Doctor. He had the air of a man who's day was snowballing towards disaster, and who had no idea how to prevent it. The Doctor nodded.

'I don't think it's actually moved at all,' he continued, voicing his theory. The assembled group turned to face him, aware that he was the most intelligent of them. 'I think whatever's creating the telepathic field – that's the thing that convinced us to come here, Harold, very complicated, I'll explain later – has messed with my head so I can't find the way back to the ship. And it'll have done the same to all of you, to stop any of us from escaping.'

'Can you fight off the telethingy?' Tracy asked. He cocked his head, considering the possibility. 'If it's strong enough to fool an entire starship of people... I think we're better off just facing whatever's causing this, head on.' He hopped to his feet, a resolute look of determination about his features. 'I have a plan. Come on, everyone!'

Tracy grabbed him by the arm and, cautiously, pulled herself up until she was in a standing position. Her legs were shaky, and she had to hold onto the Doctor, but she could walk.

'Why is it that I'm the only one who's collapsed?' she asked. The Doctor glanced at Harold, who was dithering on the spot, unsure whether to go with the Doctor or return to the stadium.

'When you fell out of the ship, you said you had the taste of soil in your mouth. If you had swallowed some, even a tiny bit... You'll be in a much more serious condition. This earth is probably all soaked in deadly radiation.'

'So in a way, it was Harold's fault that I collapsed.'

'I wouldn't mention it, he looks worried enough as it is.'

He walked as quickly as he could with one arm around Tracy's shoulder, supporting her shaky legs.

Vinnie scuttled ahead to their destination of the town square, while Harold hung back slightly.

'Doris is going to kill me when she hears about all this. I'm the one who booked the holiday...' he muttered to no one in particular. Tracy resisted the urge to laugh. Her left knee buckled suddenly, and she had to catch herself to make sure she didn't stumble to the floor. The Doctor pulled her up, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

'I can see that fainting is going to be a regular issue for you,' he sighed. Tracy gritted her teeth.

'The next time I collapse, I'm bringing you down with me,' she grumbled. The Doctor smiled mischievously.

'We'll see about that...'

They arrived at the town square, the crossroads where several dirt paths interlinked, to find Vinnie tapping his foot impatiently. He jumped up as they rounded the corner and came into view.

'Doctor, I'm getting worried. If we can't find the starship, we're going to *die* here!'

'As I said, Vinnie, I have a plan. After me!'

The Doctor, still supporting Tracy's shaky figure, guided them down one particular path. He found what he was looking for within moments; inconspicuously placed behind a wooden house, a flat, circular plate made from sharp metal, embedded into the ground.

'Er... What are we doing here, exactly?' Harold enquired. Before the Doctor could reply, one of the natives walked down the dirt path, a stern look on his face.

'Yes, what *are* you doing here?' he said threateningly. His demeanour threw Tracy, who was used to the friendly, enthusiastic people she had seen at the square earlier that day, or within the stadium walls. The Doctor rounded on the man, pointing the sonic screwdriver in his direction. Without a word, the Doctor pressed down a button and the tip fizzled bright orange. The local man stopped in his tracks, unsure.

'What are you...' he tailed off, gazing at his own palms. His skin was blurred and indistinct, shimmering in the light like that of every other inhabitant of April they had seen; but, as they watched, it began to blur more and more, as his figure slowly turned into a cloudy haze, undefined and transparent. The man looked up, with blind rage in his eyes.

'DOCTOR!' he screamed, in a voice that made the hairs on the back of Tracy's neck stand on end. It was like a pack of wolves, howling in unison, several different voices screeching in one horrific melody. Then the man faded completely, blurring into nothingness, and the path was empty.

'You... You murdered him!' Vinnie cried, looking fearfully to the Doctor.

'No. He was never real,' the Doctor said, pocketing the screwdriver. 'None of this is real. This entire village is a projection. A hallucination – one we can touch and feel, but a hallucination all the same. Created by the telepathic field.'

Harold gaped at him, while Tracy brushed her hair to one side as she tried to digest the information.

'So... No, you've lost me again.'

'It's obvious, really, if you look at all the inconsistencies. There's so much wrong with this village – how did they know to expect us if nobody's ever been here before, and how did they build the houses from wood when there's not a single tree in sight? This entire place is a fabrication, designed to welcome us to the planet, make us feel safe.'

Vinnie looked aghast. 'So the festival...?'

'Doesn't exist. It was a trick, to draw us here. Those dancers were illusions like everything else. What I don't understand is *why*,' the Doctor said. 'What does whatever's doing this want from us now we're here? It can't just want us to die, it could have killed us a hundred times over by now.'

'Doctor,' Harold squawked, fear in his voice. 'Whatever your plan is, can we hurry it along a bit?'

The group looked up to follow Harold's gaze to see a gang of locals, five or six in total, running towards them from the other side of the town square. The expressions on their faces did not suggest anything other than violence.

'I don't suppose them not being real means they can't hurt us, right?' Tracy asked. The Doctor looked grim.

'Well, pain is all in the mind, so...' One of the natives smashed through a wooden fence as she sprinted at them, teeth bared. 'I think the most logical plan of action would be to – run!'

He jumped towards the circular disk in the ground, leaving go of Tracy. She staggered, but managed to support her own weight and stumbled after him, with Vinnie and Harold in hot pursuit. The Doctor skidded to a halt beside the plate and began to heave at the rim with as much strength as he could muster.

'Maybe you should turn your probe on them, Doctor!' Vinnie said nervously, pincers raised in a defensive stance as the natives bore down on them. 'Get rid of them like you did the first one!'

'It takes time to degrade a telepathic projection, Vin, and time is something we don't have right now!' the Doctor yelled. 'And it's a *screwdriver*!'

Just as those words were leaving his mouth, the sharp metal disc creaked and swung away from the ground. Tracy caught a glimpse of the blackness that lay below it and swallowed nervously; the Doctor looked up and saw that the locals were almost upon them.

'Everybody jump!' he yelled. Harold looked at him like he had suggested they eat themselves.

'Down *there*? Good lord, man, are you-ack!' Harold's sentence ended in a rather comical squeaking noise as the Doctor pulled him forwards, dropping into the pit beneath the disc. Without hesitating,

the Doctor dropped down after him, and the black hole below swallowed them up. Tracy looked at Vinnie, indecision riddled across his face. With the locals literally meters away from them, he nodded.

'I told the Doctor he could trust me,' Vinnie said. 'And so I will trust him.'

Without another word the blue figure pushed himself forward and beneath the plate, plummeting down to whatever it was under the surface. Tracy's legs gave way and she fell to her knees at the edge of the pit. She glanced backwards – one of the locals reached out to grab her – She fell.

Down

Down

Down

Down

Down

Down

The sensation could only be described as flying. Tracy was *flying* down the pit, still falling, but with a kind of weightlessness that told her, if she were to will herself to stop, she could – just hover there, inside the black tunnel, for as long as she liked. But she had no intention of being left alone in the dark, so she continued to fall, following the Doctor, Vinnie and Harold. After what seemed like several hours but was probably less than a minute, another light appeared; not the rapidly shrinking speck from above, but a warmer, more radiant light that seemed to filter up from below. Tracy saw an end to the vertical tunnel, hurtling towards her from below, and had just enough time to think *what happens when we hit the bottom* before she hit the bottom. It was surprisingly comfortable; like landing on a nest of cushions, though the ground appeared to be solid. She certainly didn't feel as though she had fallen thousands of feet, though from the height of the tunnel it had definitely been that, if not more. She glanced around, and saw Harold leaning against a rocky wall, rubbing his winged hands together nervously. The space they were in was a cramped cavern of some sort, far beneath April's surface, lit from below by some sort of natural light. She nodded to Harold, who smiled weakly back.

'I'm not much of a one for heights,' he managed to stammer out. Tracy considered that for a moment, and decided she had more important things to do than ponder the oddities of a bird who was scared of heights at this particular moment in time. She patted Harold on the shoulder in what she hoped was an encouraging manner, then set off down the rocky corridor in search of the Doctor. She hadn't taken more than a few steps, however, when Vinnie came bounding out of a small curve in the stone wall behind her, his mandibles quivering like mad.

'You have got to see this!' he said, as excited as he had been when they first arrived on April. He hurried back into the curve, which Tracy realised was actually a thin passageway; the way the light cast the shadows on the walls made it all but invisible until you were right next to it. Cautiously, she followed Vinnie through the narrow crack in the wall, shuffling sideways through the tight nook until-
Oh.

The passageway opened up into a vast underground chamber, the exact opposite of the cramped room they had landed in. The chamber was almost perfectly spherical, curving downwards from the entrance of the chamber. The Doctor was a step or so away from the entrance, but his back was to Tracy; he was staring, as they were, at the *thing* at the heart of the chamber. It seemed, to Tracy at least, to be a ball of pink light; a swirling, glowing, cascading sphere of bright energy, tossing and turning and shifting but never losing its rounded shape. And then, in a voice like an ocean crashing on cliffs, like wolves howling in harmony, it spoke.

'DOCTOR.'

'You know me?' the Doctor asked. His voice was even, but Tracy could tell from the way that it captivated his attention that he was in awe of the light.

'I KNOW YOU NOW. YOUR THOUGHTS ARE MY THOUGHTS, TIME LORD. I AM ONE WITH YOUR MIND. WITH ALL YOUR MINDS.'

'So you're the one who's been projecting the telepathic field,' the Doctor nodded, slowly. 'I've got to say, I had a lot of theories as to what might be down here, but... Well, I never suspected this.'

'YOU ARE INTELLIGENT, DOCTOR. YOU FOUND MY WEAK SPOT, AND SAW IT FOR WHAT IT TRULY WAS.'

'Doctor, what is that thing?' Tracy called to him, but the Doctor ignored her, enraptured.

'I understood it enough to know that I could get inside it. But I never thought I'd find something like you down here.'

'THEN YOU UNDERSTAND THAT YOU CAN LEAVE. RETURN TO THE SURFACE VIA THE TUNNEL IN MY SKIN. I HAVE NO WISH TO SPEAK WITH YOU.'

'I'm afraid I can't leave while people are in danger,' the Doctor said, firmly. He turned to Tracy, dragging his eyes away from the ball of light. 'Tracy, what we're looking at here is the core of the planet. This is April. It's alive.'

Vinnie's eyes widened, and Tracy stared at the Doctor like he was insane.

'But – but the core of the planet is supposed to be hot, right? Like, *very* hot. Volcano hot.'

'Your planet is,' the Doctor shrugged. 'Not all of them. Some of them are *sentient*.' He turned back to April's core and spoke in a strong, hard tone. 'Why did you lure a starship full of people to your surface under false pretences? And why did you trick them into seeing ghosts and illusions?'

April's core rumbled, the walls of the cavern shuddering slightly.

'I NEEDED TO FEED.'

'Feed on what?' the Doctor enquired. 'You don't need physical sustenance to survive, you're a living planet.'

'NOT PHYSICAL SUSTENANCE, NO.'

The Doctor considered that for a moment. 'So... Energy of some sort.' He frowned. 'Come on. Tell me what you need. Help me to help you.'

'I FEED ON... FEELINGS.'

The Doctor sounded surprised when he replied. 'Feelings?'

'EMOTIONS. I AM A BEING OF PURE THOUGHT. EMOTIONS ARE AN ALIEN CONCEPT TO ME. INTANGIBLE, ILLOGICAL. DELICIOUS.'

'Okay,' the Doctor said. 'So you feed on emotions. So why did you... Ah... Hang on...'

'I CAN SEE FROM YOUR THOUGHTS, DOCTOR, THAT YOU HAVE CALCULATED MY PURPOSE.'

'Yes,' the Doctor snapped his fingers. 'Yes! Of course – you trick them into watching the greatest show of their lives, the Festival of Fools. You surround them with people who are cheering and applauding and you make them *feel* the moment. Make them live it. And then you drink up the residual emotional energy.'

'I AWOKE FROM A HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS OF HIBERNATION AND FOUND MYSELF STARVED OF ENERGY. THE PEOPLE WHO ONCE LIVED ON MY SURFACE, MY SKIN, LEFT THIS WORLD A BARREN HUSK A LONG TIME AGO. HOW WAS I TO FEED WITHOUT THEM?'

'Luring people to your surface and tricking them isn't the way. Especially not when you're condemning them to die here. Your surface is soaked in lethal radiation.'

'...I MISJUDGED YOU, DOCTOR. YOU ARE NOT A THREAT. PERHAPS... PERHAPS YOU CAN HELP ME.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Yes. Perhaps I can. Harold!'

A terrified squawk echoed from behind the thin passageway in the rock. A couple of seconds later, and Harold shuffled sheepishly through the narrow space.

'I wasn't sure if I should come through,' he mumbled. 'Didn't want to interrupt.'

'Do you still have your transceiver?' the Doctor asked. Harold's expression changed to one of confusion, but he pulled out the metal box from a leather pouch strapped around his shoulders all the same. The Doctor took it, cradled it in his hands, examining the wiring.

'Right,' he muttered to himself. Then he turned, to face April, the luminous ball of light and spirit. Slowly, carefully, he flicked a small switch on the side of the device, then placed it beneath April's core, at the lowest point of the spherical chamber's decline.

'April?'

'DOCTOR.'

'I have an idea. But after I help you with this, we return to the surface, get in our starship, and fly away. Agreed?'

Silence fell across the wide chamber. Vinnie clicked his pincers nervously. Harold glanced anxiously at the transceiver on the ground, then at the Doctor, then at the amorphous ball of liquid light in front of him. Tracy held her breath.

'I'M LISTENING.'

'Doctor, my health is at risk and I demand that you absolve this issue immediately!'

'Doris!' Harold hissed at his screeching wife. 'Stop being so rude! This man saved our lives!'

'Yes, and lost us an extremely expensive transceiver-cam,' Doris grumbled. 'Now, am I going to get these anti-radiation tablets or not? How long until my feathers start to fall out?!'

'You can have your tablets when you've joined the queue and waited your turn,' the Doctor said, a steely smile at his lips. Doris, fuming, stomped away to the back of the long line of people, which stretched the entire length of the starship's cabin. Harold mouthed a "sorry" over her shoulder, gave a friendly wave, then disappeared in the crowd. The Doctor had been giving out packets of tiny yellow capsules – which he had found in a drawer somewhere in the TARDIS – for a good half hour now, with everyone on board the ship lining up to cure themselves from the early symptoms of radiation poisoning.

The vertical tunnel they had fallen down had also served as a means to return to the surface. As he had theorised, it was some sort of absorption tunnel, designed so that April could funnel in any emotional energy from the outer layers and channel back into its core. As a result, there was a free-flowing stream of energy in the tunnel, and that meant they could travel up or down it without fear of gravity effecting them. After he had ascended from April's core along with Tracy, Vinnie and Harold, he had reached the surface to find a substantially different situation from the one he had left. The entire village had vanished, leaving behind only a blank valley, pitted and uneven in places, but completely barren. The stadium had disappeared too, and all of the performers and natives along with it; the off-worlders, however, had remained, standing in a confused huddle where there had once been a row of seats at the stadium. A few quick conversations had established that everything had gone blurry, and they had each passed out – only to reawaken safe and sound, at the rim of the curved indent in the ground where the arena had once been. Doris had strode forward from the crowd, murder in her eyes, stalking towards Harold like a buzzard going for the kill. Harold, for the most part, had done an excellent job of not running away.

'*Where have you been?!*' she had shrieked. He had simply shrugged and said;

'I was saving the day, darling.' To be fair, it was partially true; his transceiver had saved the day.

Just as the Doctor had hoped, the starship had been exactly where they had left it, the cabin crew and pilot waiting bewilderedly for their return. His suspicions about April's telepathy stopping him from finding his way back earlier had proven correct. The group had gathered on board to discuss what had happened, and it was only once every passenger had returned to their seat that the Doctor explained April's true nature. Panic and mild hysteria had followed, but before long everyone had quietened down and formed an orderly queue to receive anti-radiation medication from the Doctor. 'I've got to say, I think this has been my best adventure yet, Doctor.'

The Doctor looked up to see Vinnie stood at the front of the queue. It was impossible to tell if he was smiling or not, but there was a knowing sparkle in his eyes that suggested a grin. The Doctor was certain that if Vinnie had a mouth, it would be stretched wide and beaming.

'To your next adventure then, Vinnie,' the Doctor laughed, passing him the small plastic packet which contained the pills. 'Good luck and great fortunes!'

Vinnie took the pills in his pincers, but paused as he went to move away. 'This ship of yours in the cargo bay, Doctor – I suspect you'll be leaving in it?'

The Doctor winked at him. 'Just don't bother saving a window seat for me on the flight home, that's all I'll say.'

When the Doctor finally got back to the cargo bay, deep below the luxury seating of the starship's first class fuselage, he found Tracy waiting for him, leaning against the TARDIS, her head drooping slightly to one side. Her eyes were half closed. He had made sure she had gotten the anti-radiation pills before everybody else, and he'd given her a stronger dosage just to be sure. As a result, she was feeling a little drowsy; when she saw him waltzing towards her, however, she straightened up.

'Everyone's okay then?' she asked. He nodded, smiling, as he unlocked the TARDIS door and stepped inside. She followed him in, shaking her head as if to clear her thoughts.

'It's all very clever, if you think about it,' he said. Once again, he had anticipated her question before she had asked it. She closed her mouth, and stepped up to the console where he was leaning.

'Go on then. Explain your brilliant plan, oh great one,' she teased him gently. He smirked.

'The transceiver has two functions. It can transmit and receive. Harold and Doris were using it to transmit, sending videos of their holiday back home. But flick one switch, and it becomes a receiver. The screen stops taking in images and sounds and starts displaying them instead. This is way beyond your time, remember – there's easily tens of thousands of TV channels being broadcast across the stars right now, and April can receive any one of them. Dramas, comedies, romances, horrors... every flicker on the grand spectrum of emotion, right at its proverbial fingertips.' He drummed his own fingertips against a panel on the TARDIS console for emphasis. 'It doesn't need to kidnap people and drain them of emotional energy when it can just absorb it second-hand. A harmless solution.' He pulled a lever on the console and the ship began to groan and shudder.

'So, that's it? The planet's not going to, I don't know, hypnotise any more people into landing there?'

'No. Problem solved.' The Doctor smiled as the TARDIS began to dematerialise. Tracy nodded, content, and tilted her head so she could listen to the sound of the engines as they propelled the ship off into the time vortex.

'Actually, there was something else I wanted to talk to you about,' she added. The Doctor barely glanced up; he was too busy fiddling with dials and buttons to take much notice. Tracy continued regardless.

'There was something it said to you, right before we left the underground. Something I didn't quite understand.'

The Doctor took notice then, glancing up from his controls. 'Yes. I remember.'

'THANK YOU, DOCTOR. THIS.. BOX, WILL KEEP ME SUSTAINED FOR MILLENNIA TO COME'

'Don't mention it,' the Doctor smiled. 'Just try not to complain when there's nothing good on, alright? Oh, and whatever you do, stay away from ITV...'

'DOCTOR?'

The Doctor turned, halfway out of the chamber, halfway in the thin passage that led back to the cavern they had entered from. Vinnie and Tracy were waiting expectantly on the other side. 'Yes?' 'I SEE YOUR THOUGHTS. I SEE THE SECRET THAT TROUBLES YOU.'

The Doctor looked back, shocked. 'What do you know about that?'

'ONLY THIS – YOU ARE NOT READY TO UNDERSTAND. YOU ARE NOT READY YET.'

'You are not ready yet...' Tracy murmured softly. 'What did it mean? The secret that troubles you?' The Doctor looked at her for a long time, staring blankly, as if he could see right through her. Then he shook his head.

'It doesn't trouble me. I've moved on. Don't worry about it.'

He smiled his most disarming smile, and Tracy smiled back. But when she looked away, his grin froze on his face; for as much as he tried to bury it, there was still a mystery haunting him. He should be dead, and he was no closer to understanding why he survived than he had been when he first woke up. He shook his head again, but this time it was to clear his thoughts, to empty his mind.

'Not ready yet...' he whispered to himself, as the TARDIS plunged through the vortex and away from April.

Coming next month to
Doctor Who: Re-Incarnated...

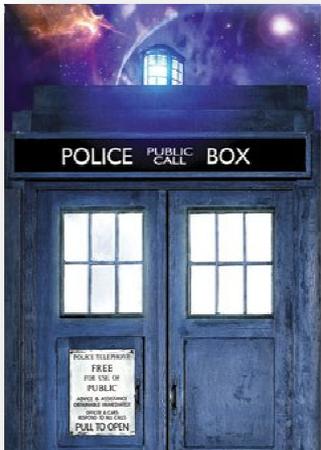
Highway to Hell

By Mark Lee

'Stand and deliver!'

The 65A bus isn't the most glamorous of vehicles. There's chewing gum on the seats, empty beer cans rolling in the aisles and surly youths threatening passengers from the back row. But when an archaic highwayman from the 18th century attempts to rob the 65A, things go from bad to worse...

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About The Author

Alex Smith lives in Merseyside, England. He spends most of his time procrastinating, unless he can think of something better to do. When he does eventually put pen to paper, he writes short stories, Doctor Who fanfiction, and bad poetry. He enjoys writing about himself in the third person.

You can follow Alex on twitter @KingOrokos, or visit his blog at NotEntirelyIncoherent.blogspot.com.



'This is going to be fun!'

A chance landing on a luxury starship takes the Doctor and Tracy to the planet April - where the famed Festival of Fools is about to begin. A celebration of comedy and performance, the Doctor can't wait for the shows to start; but it soon becomes apparent that something sinister is happening on April...

