

The Voltrani virus destroyed my world. It swept across continent by continent, consuming – *devouring* – all intelligent life. First, it attacked the neurological pathways, rewiring the synapses, infecting and poisoning the very thoughts of the people. Their minds were corrupted, emotions heightened almost to the point of insanity. Each new outbreak violated the world to an even greater degree. Each settlement on the colony turned inward on itself, irreparably damaged by the shared delusions the disease brought with it.

And so, we did the only thing we could do – we fled. We fled to the last refuge we had, as the world fell around us. As the sky rained down, the disease and the pestilence threatening to destroy every element of life, we found our hiding place.

It had been abandoned years before, a shell of a place, though somehow it had retained some semblance of functionality. There were somehow still some vestiges of power in some of the equipment, but not enough to initiate any of the defence systems. The handful of us that were left had to barricade ourselves in as best we could, using whatever we could find in the ruin.

We thought we were safe.

...He Kindly Stopped for Me

by Andrew Weston

Yes, we thought we were safe. We thought that somehow we'd managed to evade them, to survive the infection that had torn asunder everything we'd known. It was only when we started dying that we knew that something had made it in there with us.

At first we assumed it was the virus itself, a natural conclusion to reach considering what we'd run from. One of us could have been infected, slowly but gradually spreading the sickness until we were all ravaged by the disease.

I scanned the others daily, but nothing seemed to register. No abnormality, no obvious sign of anything untoward on any occasion. Yet, the disappearances continued.

When one of us disappeared, it was as if there was no trace of them whatsoever, as if they'd been erased from existence.

Nightly, we heard the sounds outside – *them*. It could only be a matter of time before they broke in and destroyed us completely. Each time the noises were more audible, increasing in tone and pitch on each successive occasion. At first, they were like a madman's whisper, maintaining a background presence in our conscious mind but all the while threatening to overwhelm our very being to the point of complete and total corruption of our sanity. They seemed to stop for a time, each night they weren't heard being less a relief and more an anxious waiting game for when they would return to plague us.

And then they came back.

This time there was a ferocity to the noise, as if they were infecting the very air with their words. It seemed to drive many to distraction, some deserting the group, to an unknown fate. Our numbers diminished further, more of us disappearing, seemingly to nowhere, as if they had never been there in the first place.

Until...

...until...

...until... ...the only thoughts in the darkness were my own. I could barely see as I surveyed the ruins around me, yet the stillness and the quiet could mean only one thing: they had won. Perhaps they hadn't known about me, perhaps they hadn't cared, but nothing else came.

I waited. Minutes, hours, days. Nothing came. Perhaps the infection had died with them, perhaps the world was little more than a husk. Inside here I had no idea, yet I was still too afraid to venture beyond the confines of my makeshift asylum.

I gradually began to rest, to feel more at ease with the situation. The fear was dissipating, slowly but steadily. It was as if I could begin anew, tentatively take the steps to working back to something akin to reality.

Yet, every great notion has its sticking point, and mine resided with fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of my own existence – fear of what came next.

It started softly, unexpectedly, as if a thousand tiny shards of glass were being pulled apart, atom by atom, screaming as the action took place. Coarse sand scratching against itself, the sound growing in intensity. Then the image, blue smoke appearing from the ether,

forcing itself in and out of reality until it solidified. As it achieved corporeal form, the noise ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

It stood there, a blue monolith spotlighted by the few working lights left overhead. I checked my weapon, but the last of the charge was spent. I ducked behind one of the few remaining intact pillars, watching as the craft's door opened. Two occupants left the vehicle: first an attractive dark haired female, seeming puzzled by the environment she found herself in. She called back into the ship. "Doctor, if this is supposed to be that 'leisure hive'," the sarcasm clear in her voice, "then we definitely need a word with the management!"

In response, a taller, equally dark-haired man dashed out of the box, almost skidding to a halt. "Oh you... are... kidding me!" He spun around on his foot, coat tails whirling in his wake. "Honestly Clara, this is getting beyond a joke! I most definitely..." he dashed back into the box.

"...set the wrong co-ordinates?" muttered the girl, her eyes evidently raised as if she was used to such an occurrence.

"... set the wrong... co-ordinates... but then you already worked that out because you're not an idiot, whereas I... .. ah, that's interesting!" The male had run back out, spewing forth words seemingly without breath. I wished that my weapon had some sort of power left in it, if only to stun him to stop his incessant talking. I was unsure what he'd seen that had so piqued his interest, but the female – *Clara* – was following him across the room.

I moved further round the pillar, attempting to ascertain exactly what was attracting their attention. As far as I was aware, the room was devoid of any features of interest, yet something was undoubtedly the source of some concern.

"Now that, this is *very* interesting." It was the male voice, though it wasn't clear what exactly he was looking at.

I could just discern Clara moving towards him, her face set in an impression of disbelief. "How is that even possible?"

My interest was piqued, but I didn't want to reveal myself too soon, for fear of them abandoning me here. I needed to escape, to try to retain some semblance of my mind before it became corrupted absolutely.

I tried to move further round, to see what it was that had so captured their interest.

And then I realised.

Thoughts were whirring through my mind, trying to make sense of what I was witnessing. It took me several attempts to even process the image, struggling time and again to formulate the truth of what lay before me.

At first I thought it was a mirror, yet something wasn't right. The image was distorted, twisted into a semblance of reality. I moved closer, unaware of the other figures in the room, craning to see exactly what was projected. I reached out, stretching my fingers towards it, so close I could almost feel the strange disjointed texture...

...when I was pulled away. I'd become so entranced by the image that I'd been completely oblivious to the Doctor and Clara. I fell to the floor, narrowly avoiding the pair in the process.

I saw a hand reach down to help me up and took it gratefully, the Doctor hauling me to my feet. "Well, that would have a pretty big mistake. Good job Clara noticed you in time."

I adjusted my clothing and checked the scanner again. "Non-aggressive lifeforms, two, humanoid."

"You can drop the 'oid'! For me at least. He's a big haired alien." This time Clara responded, looking at me uncertainly.

I turned back to the 'mirror' briefly, glimpsing an image quite distinct from that surrounding us. I spun round quickly, weapon raised at the two strangers. "What are you doing here? Are you more of *them*?"

The Doctor adjusted his neck adornment. "*Them* is rather vague. Give us a bit more of a clue! I could be any number of things, but I'm not. Well most of the time." He gave a slight smile – possibly a nervous reaction to the situation.

I pushed the weapon further towards him, not quite allowing it to touch. "Do you think this is a game? That we're playing at soldiers? My whole world is a husk because of what they did." I stopped, feeling the rage building inside me at the thought of them, at the very coalescing of the letters of their name in my mind. "The Voltrani." I spat the word out, half shouting half screaming each syllable. "They did this. They descended and they devoured and they corrupted us. Everything we knew was torn from us, thrown into chaos and polluted beyond saving. And now... there's only me."

I could feel myself shaking with rage, not at the strangers but at the emotions I had suppressed for so long now rising to the surface.

Clara moved hesitantly towards me, sensing that I needed to be treated with care. “But, that’s the thing. It’s not *only* you, there’s *still* you. You’re hope, the survivor. That’s got to be worth something, hasn’t it?”

I felt myself nodding in agreement, though unsure of exactly how optimistic I should allow myself to get. I looked to the Doctor and could see that what I had said had clearly had an effect on him too. His face looked grave, and he seemed to view me with pity.

“The Voltrani are parasites, leeches. What they have done to your world is unforgivable.” He paused. Looking in the reflective surface again at himself, he advanced towards it, watching the other him do the same, though in a fractionally slower time, an almost imperceptible reduction in speed. “And this here is very odd.” He waved a hand, Clara doing the same. Each movement was infinitesimally different in speed, but there *was* a difference.

Clara looked to the Doctor, curiosity all too apparent in her demeanour. “When is a mirror not a mirror?”

The Doctor spun on his heel to face me. “There were more of you here, am I right?” He didn’t wait for an answer before continuing, “Good. Well, not good, but – and this is a big stretch of spacey-timey proportions when you factor in all the anomalous variables and scones and...” He could see he was angering me with his nonsensical wittering, so attempted to return to his original point. “...this isn’t a mirror. It’s a dimensional portal.”

“Which is why I pulled you back from it,” added Clara. “We don’t know where it goes. If you can get back...”

The Doctor, just discernible, whispered in her ear, “I thought we agreed I was doing the sciencey stuff?”

Clara playfully tapped him on the nose. “No, you decided that. I am something of a genius, remember?” And she flashed him a smile.

My mind was further confused, both as to the nature of their partnership, who they were, and how it all equated with what I’d initially seen when I looked in what I *had* thought was a simple mirror.

As I was attempting to make sense of the situation, I once again failed to notice them turn to look in my direction, two sets of eyes staring deep into me. “So, if it’s not a mirror, how did I see your reflections in it?”

Before the Doctor could step in, Clara spoke. "It's still a reflective surface, of a sort, but..."

The Doctor was keen to interrupt, presumably just to highlight how clever *he* was too. "...it is more a bending of time *and* light than just light, hence why the reactions seemed slower in the reflections of us. Which I imagine doesn't help you to understand the other question that you are so obviously wanting to ask." He looked at me. "But then you already know the real answer to that, don't you?"

I walked to the portal, looking hard at my reflection this time. Yet, it didn't appear to be me. The clothes were ragged, torn, my mouth unlike any human's with mandibles protruding in place of teeth. My limbs were spindly, almost insect-like in composition. My body had been infected, changed beyond recognition by the virus that *they* had brought. I had been in denial of my reality for who knows how long...

...yet, I looked again, and my features were unchanged, my form as it always had been. Some bags under the eyes, an unshaven face and scars that now adorned my once smooth skin.

I looked once more, and this time... this time...

"Where... how... ?" I turned to the Doctor, an undoubtedly incredulous look crossing my face.

His eyes looked like they hid far more years than his youthful exterior, the sorrow of the universe hanging on his shoulders.

"There are threads that bind time and space together. Fragile, delicate strands that weave complex patterns and cause headache and heartbreak and joy, ensuring that all possibilities exist in some form." He looked at me. "And you, you are the tragedy and the ecstasy all kaleidoscoped together. You are the saviour of your people and you don't even know it."

I felt flickers of memory returning, sparked into life by the Doctor's words. Images rushed before my... eyes? No, that didn't seem right. I held up a hand but... no that wasn't right, was it? It felt as if I existed outside of my body, hovering above it, gazing down like a god on high.

And suddenly, I remembered.

I remember when they crowded outside, driving us in, forcing us back exactly where they wanted us. They were shepherding us, like cattle, driving us deeper into the ruins

towards... the portal. We thought they'd come from the stars, but their lack of spacecraft never seemed to alarm anyone. Yet in that moment, realisation dawned on us all. It was here they had come from, through the portal. From an alternate world, another dimensional representation of our own.

All we could do was hide, and try to think of how to defeat them, all the while our minds and bodies corroding from the virus. The pain at having to sacrifice lives so that some may live, until only I remained.

What I did was the only thing I knew to do, the only thing I *could* do. I uploaded my mind into the seemingly defunct computer system, though leaving a fraction of my being in my physical form. I lured them, knowing they could never really kill me. I used the systems against them, forcing them back, and closing the breach behind them, trapping them on their own decaying world once more.

And then I went mad.

I lost myself in a fantasy of my own creation, a fantasy built to save the world.

I had no concept or indication of what was happening on the outside, my mind believing that I was still defending this last outpost against the marauding hords. Yet, it was done, and only now did I see it.

The flesh puppet that was once my true form dropped to the floor.

"Doctor, what do I do?" I could hear it, my own pitiful voice echoing in the cavernous ruins of this place.

Clara looked up, at one of my observation devices. "You're the survivor. You're the victor. You've beaten a whole army, saved a world."

Now, I could hear the synthetic resonance in my speech. "But it is not enough. I am not me, I am not who I was. I need... " What was it I required? "I need... to live. This is not living, this is existing."

The Doctor bowed his head sadly. "I know what you're asking, but I can't. I'm sorry. I've been accountable for too much sadness in my long lifetime, and I'm not about to be responsible for any more." He looked up, affecting a more cheerful facade. "Besides, you've got a planet to rebuild! Wire yourself into the planetary mainframe, think of the good your intellect can do for this world."

I noticed him ushering Clara towards a blue box not far from them, as he backed slowly towards it himself. I could have tried to stop them leaving, but what would have been

the point? I had no way of forcing him to shut me down, assist in mechanical euthanasia. I had to content myself with my own company once more.

And pray that this time I could retain my sanity.

DOCTOR WHO

CLASSIC DOCTORS - BRAND NEW ADVENTURES

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THE CCPS VOL III - LOGORRHOEA OF THE LOOKERS-ON



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