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The
Feast of the Drowned

BY STEPHEN COLE

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By Stephen Cole

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For Paul Magrs

How can something so big sink so fast? The thought kept drumming through Jay Selby's head. He splashed and slithered over the slippery deck. It listed so sharply to starboard he could barely keep his footing.

The wind whipped at his uniform, stung his skin. He stared around as if he might sight the enemy. Nothing. The black sky, the churning darkness of the North Sea, there was no difference between them.

'No lifeboats!' The shouts rose above the roar of the sea. 'They've taken the lifeboats!'

There was a crew of 173 on board HMS *Ascendant*, tough, capable sailors all of them. *They shouldn't be screaming*, Jay thought. He clung on to a rail as a crowd of ratings scrambled past him. *They shouldn't be screaming. We shouldn't be sinking so damned fast.*

The frigate was armed to the teeth: Sea Wolf missiles, torpedoes, the Vickers gun. She could clobber anything from a submarine to an enemy fighter, so why were they sinking without a single shot fired?

One of the ratings slipped and fell. Jay staggered over, helped him up. It was Barker, the loudmouth, the blond joker; part of the gun crew. He looked terrified.

'We've got to get to the upper deck,' Barker shouted. 'They took -'

'The lifeboats, I know.' Jay dragged him to his feet. 'But *what* took them?'

Barker gripped hold of Jay's arm, shaking with cold and shock. 'Sonar didn't show 'em. Like they came out of nowhere.'

Jay pulled himself free, slipped an arm around Barker's shoulder. 'Upper deck, then,' he shouted. 'Come on. The

Lynx must have got clear, it'll be circling. They'll radio our –'
'You didn't see?'

'I was in the stores, didn't see nothing.'

'The chopper's gone.' Barker stared at him, pale in the weak glow of the frigate's failing lights. 'The whole aft section . . .'

Then the deck lurched again with incredible force. As if launched from a cannon, they crashed into the black mirror of the sea. It was hard as glass, smashed the air from him. Jay clutched hold of Barker as they dropped down through the freezing water. He couldn't see a thing but he knew he had to keep calm, reach the surface. His limbs felt so heavy but he started to kick, to push himself up. Something rushed past him, going down. Wreckage? One of the crew?

What?

Lungs bursting, pressure swarming at his temples, Jay kept on kicking. His fingers were numb, hooked into Barker's uniform. *Don't let go. It's OK. You can do this.* Wasn't that what Keisha always used to say? *You can do this.* Whenever he messed up, whenever he just wanted out, she took hold of his arms just like Jay had hold of Barker now and told him.

He thought of her back home. They were meant to be meeting up in just a couple of weeks. He was going to cook her steaks – juicy, fat, fillet steaks, the kind they had used to dream about, the melt-in-the-mouth sort Mum could never afford. 'Cause he was doing all right now, and he wanted to show her that. Mum had never believed in a damn thing he did, but Keisha . . .

Jay thought of her face, of the hurt in her eyes when he'd left.

He kicked harder. I *can* do this.

Then Barker's body was wrenched away from him.

Jay gasped. Water jumped in like an icy fist down his throat. He choked, floundered. *Don't lose it. Don't lose it.* His chest felt crushed, his limbs were cramping. But he had to go back for Barker. What had pulled him away – sharks?

Thrashing in the water, Jay finally broke back through the surface. Choking on icy air, spitting out saltwater, throat burning. Skin numb, no sensation, as if it had died ahead of him.

He stared round. No sign of his ship, or Barker. No sign of anyone. Only him, floating alone in endless shadow.

For a long, eerie moment he felt almost calm, lulled by the wash of the sea as it shifted all around him.

Then something closed around his ankle and plucked him back beneath the waves.

Jay windmilled his arms, tried to kick free. One of his crewmates, panicking, grabbing hold of anything in the water?

Something rushed through the water again, close by. Something that slammed into his back and punctured the skin at the base of his neck. Jay felt sudden heat and pain. Wanted to open his mouth and scream. It wasn't black down here any more, there was a red, warning glow coming from somewhere. Like he was being dragged slowly down into hell.

I can't do this, Keisha. He could see horrible shapes twisting and spiralling in slow-mo through the gloom. Cartwheeling corpses. Chunks of metal and equipment, juggled by unseen hands. Other things, too. Swift, hunting things. Creatures.

Was it one of those gnawing now at the back of his neck, as hungrily as he and Keisha would take those steaks? He breathed in water, wanted the blackness back.

But Jay could see everything now, and the cold dead eyes of the hunting creatures might just as well have been his own.

ONE

I'm so sorry, Keish.' Rose Tyler sat on the threadbare sofa and held her old mate close. She couldn't think of anything to say that didn't sound useless and hollow, but she kept trying. 'I'm really, really sorry. When Mum told me, I just . . . Well, it's so hard to take in.'

Keisha sniffed noisily and pulled away. She was one of Rose's old clubbing crowd, wildest and loudest and craziest of the lot. She looked totally gorgeous when she was glammed up. But right now her black curls were ratted and her light brown skin was snail-trailed with snot and tears. 'Jay was my brother,' she murmured. 'And now he's just gone.'

There was a picture of him on the cheap Ikea sideboard – a big, grinning, burly boy. The chipped, imitation pine looked too thin to support such a warm and healthy figure.

'Have they told your mum? The navy, I mean.'

'Doubt it. Got no address for her, no phone number . . . She wouldn't care anyway. Got her other family now.'

'Yeah, but she still . . . I mean, she *must* . . .'

Again, Rose found herself trailing off. This wasn't helping.

Keisha wiped her nose on a sodden tissue. "'Missing in action," they told me. Yeah, right. His ship's been towed up the Thames in, like, a million bits. Why can't they just own up that he's been killed and they can't find enough of him to send back home?'

'Keish, there's always a chance –'

'It's been three months now, and nothing. Nothing left of anyone on that ship.'

Rose felt so weird inside. She'd had a crush on Jay when she was fourteen. That was five years ago and, daft though

it was, she'd never really been able to talk to him properly since. Now she never would, and it didn't seem real.

So much had happened in her own life since then . . . She'd seen so much death in so many far-flung times and places, she was sort of hardened to it. Now someone from her old life here in London was never coming back, and Keisha was showing her the repercussions up close and personal. Rose found she had no idea how to relate to it.

The Doctor was being no help at all of course. He just stood there, staring out of the window. She wasn't sure if he was sulking 'cause she'd dragged him along here today, or if he was actually just enjoying the grey concrete view of the surrounding high-rises from here on the third floor. Who could tell? She'd known him for ages now, but still she couldn't always read his moods.

'Who's your mate?' Keisha whispered, wiping her nose.

Rose shut her eyes. *A 900-year-old alien, actually. He lives in a police box that's really a spaceship called the TARDIS and we fight monsters and save planets. It's brilliant, you should try it.* Maybe not, she decided. 'He's just the Doctor.'

Keisha shot her a suspicious look. 'I don't need a doctor.'

'Not *that* sort of doctor, Keish, he's . . . Well, he's . . .' Rose floundered, looked over at him in his brown pinstripe suit and grubby sneakers, hoping for inspiration. 'He's sort of like those disk doctors down the big PC shops. Good with computers and that.'

'Oh.' Keisha nodded, apparently satisfied. 'You met him when you went away that time, yeah?'

'Kind of.'

'Suppose you must have met all sorts, living abroad for a year . . . while your poor old mates left behind were worried sick.' Rose caught the disapproval behind the smile. 'We thought that loser Mickey had topped you or something.'

'Long time ago now.' Rose hid behind a rueful smile, cringing inside. When she'd first gone off into space and time, the Doctor claimed he could bring her back to Earth

the day after she'd left. But he'd messed up. They'd come back a whole twelve months later.

'You could have told us you were going.' Keisha nudged her. 'Better yet, could have taken us with you! And you've been back in the country for months and months, ain't you? Where've you been? It ain't been the same round here without you, babes. I've really missed you.'

'It's good to see you too,' Rose said. 'I'm just sorry it took . . . something like this to put my bum in gear and make me get my act together.'

'S'all right. Nothing really lasts, does it?' Keisha shrugged, staring into space again. 'Friendships . . . family . . .'

Rose shook her head. 'Hey, come on, Keish. Look, I'm gonna be around for a few days -'

'A few days!' The Doctor snapped into life, whirled round, gave her a look as sharp as his angular features. Then he realised Keisha was watching him and his face softened. He started nodding. 'Yeah. A few days, course we are. Thought so.' When Keisha looked away he grimaced and mouthed at Rose, 'A few *days*?'

Rose gave him an *and your problem is . . . ?* look back, then squeezed Keisha's hand. 'So anyway, I'll be around. A proper mate. We can do stuff - go out, or . . . maybe just stay in, yeah? Watch videos or something.'

'What did Jay do in the navy?' the Doctor asked abruptly.

Keisha blinked. 'He did something in the ship's stores. Spare parts and stuff.'

'Naval Stores Sub Department.' The Doctor wore a proper boy's smile. 'Oh, that's a brilliant job. There are 42,000 spare parts on your average frigate - think what you could make with that lot! And they call those stores assistants Jack Dusties, don't they? Why is that?' The smile became a crooked grin. 'Imagine if your name was Jack Dusty and you became a Jack Dusty! And then if Jack Dusty the Jack Dusty went to the planet Jacdusta in the Dustijek nebula and joined *their* navy, he could . . .'

Keisha was staring at him as if he had two heads. Rose had turned her *pack it in* glare up to 11 and he finally noticed.

‘Chips,’ the Doctor said suddenly. ‘Chips would be good now. Who wants chips?’

‘Sounds great,’ said Rose quickly. She pressed a fiver into his hand, in case he tried to pay with a twenty-zarg note or something. ‘The Chinese round the corner does them good and greasy.’

‘In foil trays, I suppose?’ The Doctor looked suddenly crestfallen. ‘You know, chips have never tasted the same since they stopped wrapping them in newspaper. I liked them in newspaper.’

‘Well, there’s a newsagent’s next door. Buy a paper with the change on your way back!’

He perked up. ‘Good thinking. Yeah, nice one. OK! Back in a minute.’

He picked his way through the clutter in the poky flat to the front door and slammed it closed behind him.

Rose could relax at last. ‘Sorry. Sometimes he gets a bit . . .’

‘Fruit-loops?’

‘Hyper.’

Keisha nodded. ‘He’s cute, anyway. Not really like your mum described, though.’

Rose smiled to herself. ‘You could say he’s pretty indescribable, yeah.’

They sat in silence for a while, the atmosphere lightened a little by the Doctor’s odd outburst.

And then a ghost appeared in the corner of the room.

Rose stared dumbly, her skin puckering with goosebumps. Keisha gripped hold of Rose’s arm, dug her nails in tight.

It was Jay. He was standing between them and the turned-off telly, a terrified, translucent phantom, soaked and shivering.

‘D’you see him, Rose?’ Keisha whispered, starting to shake. ‘Am I crazy, or –’

‘No, I see him,’ Rose croaked, rooted to the spot. ‘I see *something*, anyway.’

‘Then he’s not dead! He – he’s all right!’

Rose didn’t answer as she gently prised Keisha’s fingers free. Whatever was standing in front of them was a long way from being all right.

‘Help me, Keish.’ Jay’s ghostly voice was muted and faint, and his lips didn’t move in time with the words. ‘Help me.’

Keisha swallowed. ‘Jay? Jay . . . What is it, babes?’

‘Come to me,’ the phantom whispered.

‘Come?’ She shook her head, fresh tears falling. ‘I – What d’you mean?’

‘Come to me.’

‘Where are you?’

‘You gotta come to me,’ Jay said. ‘Before the feast.’

‘Feast?’ Rose summoned her courage and got up unsteadily. ‘Jay, if that’s you –’

Jay turned to look straight at her. ‘Little Rose Tyler.’ She felt a shiver graze her spine as a smile crept on to his face, as his image grew a little brighter, a little more solid. ‘You gotta come too.’ He took a silent step towards them. ‘Please.’

Trembling, Rose sat straight back down on the bed. ‘Come where? I don’t –’

‘You’ve got to get to me before the feast.’

He was growing fainter.

‘Jay!’ Keisha shook her head. ‘Stay with me, babes. Don’t go.’

Then, as Rose stared in horror, Jay’s features began to run, like a chalk drawing left out in the rain. His uniform too, it was dripping away. His jaw dropped open and Keisha screamed as water gushed out from his mouth.

Then the image was gone. All that was left was a large pooling puddle on the carpet in front of the telly. Then that

seemed to soak away, leaving nothing behind.

Rose started as Keisha's icy fingers grabbed at her hand. 'Gone,' she breathed. 'Was that really him? Was that Jay?'

'I dunno.' Rose squeezed her friend's frozen hand.

'That *was* him,' Keisha decided, wiping her eyes with her free hand. 'Why was I so scared? It was *him*, Rose! He needs me!'

'Me and all, apparently,' Rose reminded her, still reeling. 'But what's all this about a -'

'Feast your eyes!' cried the Doctor, bursting into the room with a steaming white plastic bag. Rose gasped and Keisha almost jumped a mile. 'Hot, salty chips. Foil trays, no papers I'm afraid - newsagent's shut, full of fainting customers. Maybe it's his prices, what d'you reckon? Anyway, ambulance is on the way so I didn't hang around. Where are the plates? Nothing worse than cold chips . . .'

'Doctor,' Rose began shakily.

Finally he seemed to take in that something was wrong and his features sharpened in alarm. 'You all right?'

'No!' She shook her head. 'I - we saw - that is . . . I think we just . . .'

Keisha was quite calm, her eyes shining as she stared into space. 'Jay came back.'

The Doctor blinked. 'What?'

Rose nodded. 'He did. We saw him.'

'This could be serious,' said the Doctor gravely, dropping the plastic bag. 'I only got enough chips for three.'

TWO

Rose went a step or two ahead of the Doctor through the concrete walkways of the estate. Keisha had asked them both to leave, said she was tired out, and Rose could hardly insist they stayed. But she wasn't sure Keisha should be left alone, especially after what they'd witnessed.

'I'll come back later on, yeah?' She'd lingered in the doorway, uneasy. 'You hope he's gonna come back, don't you?'

'He's my brother,' said Keisha simply.

Out here in the pale sunlight Rose found it hard to believe how scared she had been; hard to believe it had happened at all. Now she and the Doctor were on their way back to her mum's. She could sense how eager he was to get going, to escape this world and the remnants of her old life, to remind her of how fantastic her new life with him could be.

But Rose wasn't ready to move on again just yet. When they reached the garages, she stopped walking. 'What do *you* think we saw?'

The Doctor carried on for several paces before he realised she was no longer beside him. 'I don't know.'

'A ghost?'

'I've never seen a real one. Things that *look* like ghosts, yeah – loads and loads of them. But as a general rule people never come back from the dead.' Suddenly he sounded almost bitter, like a frustrated kid. 'There's always been another explanation.'

Rose sighed. 'I s'pose the navy did say Jay was only missing in action. But what sort of action could turn him into a . . . a whooshy hologram thing? And why wait three months before coming to haunt his sister?'

‘Maybe he followed his ship home. Keisha said it had been towed up the Thames, didn’t she?’ He pulled a face. ‘Why bother, though? Why bring it into the middle of London?’ Then he spun round and tried to set off again.

‘Oi!’ Rose pulled on his arm, stopped him. ‘I know you’re dying to get off . . . But can we try to find out first?’

‘Course we can. First stop, Mickey’s place. We need to find out more about the *Ascendant* – where it sank, what’s happened to it since then, see if anything fishy’s been going on. Quick dolphin-friendly trawl through the Internet should do it. Then we’ll take it from there.’

‘Wow,’ said Rose, batting her eyelids at him. ‘I never knew – my wish really is your command.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘One bag of chips and I’m anyone’s.’

‘Ten-foot green aliens, I can handle. Warrior monsters in dirty great spaceships, I’m your man. But ghosts?’ Mickey Smith grinned, shook his head. ‘You’re winding me up.’

Rose scowled. Usually she loved Mickey’s smile. It was one of the first things that had attracted her to him – that and his smooth dark skin, his playful eyes, his easygoing outlook on life. But right now he was bugging her big-time.

‘I said he *looked* like a ghost. Don’t you believe me?’

‘I’m your ex, not your exorcist.’

He said it lightly but there was an edge to his words. They’d been going out before she’d gone off with the Doctor. Now they were still close, but in a different way. More like friends. Kind of.

Sometimes it did Rose’s head in.

She looked past Mickey at the Doctor, who was on the computer in the untidy bedroom. He was staring intently at the screen, hammering the keys and slamming down on the mouse, tutting and cursing under his breath. ‘This is so slow!’

‘Oi, don’t break it,’ Mickey told him. ‘What are you looking up, anyway?’

‘Anything on that ship, the HMS *Ascendant*.’

‘Oh, that. You should’ve said.’ Mickey stroked his chin, playing the great thinker. ‘Type twenty-three, 430 feet long and weighing almost 5,000 tons. Stealth design. They can operate anywhere in the world.’

‘They can sink anywhere in the world too, by the looks of it.’

Rose looked at Mickey suspiciously. ‘How come you know so much about it?’

‘I’m a boy. It’s genetic.’ He picked up some printouts from beneath a bundle of clothes on the floor and tossed them over to the Doctor. ‘And ’cause I did some research on that boat when it got tugged up the Thames. Thought it sounded a bit sus.’ He looked pointedly at Rose. ‘It’s what I do now. Dig around and find stuff you might want to know about next time you drop in.’

‘Nice one, Mickey.’ The Doctor slapped him on the back. ‘Who says you’re a total waste of space with no life?’

‘You do.’

‘And I’m right too, aren’t I? You really need to get out more.’ He riffled through the papers. ‘Hmm, sank just over three months ago . . . all hands lost, big tragedy . . . Full government inquiry, blah blah blah . . .’

‘Ninety million quid, that ship cost. Now it’s just scrap.’ Mickey shook his head. ‘They’re bound to want to find out what happened.’

Rose shrugged. ‘Won’t bring back the sailors, will it?’

‘Maybe it already has,’ said Mickey. ‘If this Jay bloke really did show up.’

‘Keisha saw him too!’ said Rose hotly.

Mickey folded his arms. ‘Yeah? Doesn’t say much, does it?’

‘Oh, right, now I get it. This is about Keisha, right? Any other time you’d say you believed me even if you didn’t, just to shut me up. But because it’s her we’re talking about, you don’t want to know.’

‘That’s not true!’

The Doctor nipped in between them, waved a printout under Rose's nose. 'Hooray! Look. Stanchion House. Government-owned marine engineering plant on the bank of the Thames, near Southwark. Now we know where the ship's been taken. That's good. Bunting alert! Isn't that good?'

'Great.' Rose crossly snatched the paper and glanced at it. 'I know you never liked Keisha, Mickey. "Oooh, ditch her, babe, she's a bad influence -"'

'She is!' He shook his head. 'The state of you after a night out with her!'

'Oh, and I was so much worse than you coming back from your stupid lads' get-togethers . . .' Rose tailed off. 'Pieces.'

'What?'

'Why did they bring Jay's ship back in pieces?'

'I dunno . . .' Mickey shrugged, suddenly wrong-footed. 'It's been three months. Maybe they dismantled it, ready to send different bits to different departments at this Stanchion House place.'

'Good theory.' The Doctor shoved the papers back into Mickey's hands. 'Why?'

'So they can study all the different bits quicker, maybe?'

The Doctor picked up a newspaper from the desk. 'No, I mean, why was Keisha a bad influence?'

'She wasn't,' said Rose flatly.

'Oh yeah, right,' said Mickey. 'I've heard about some of those dives she dragged you to. And about the blokes who go there.'

'That's not fair.'

'Was it fair when she got her mates to push things through my letter box?' he said more quietly. 'Or when she tried to have them beat a confession out of me?'

'What are you on about?'

Mickey nodded across to the Doctor. 'When you went off in the TARDIS with *him* for a year. And your mum told everyone I'd done away with you.'