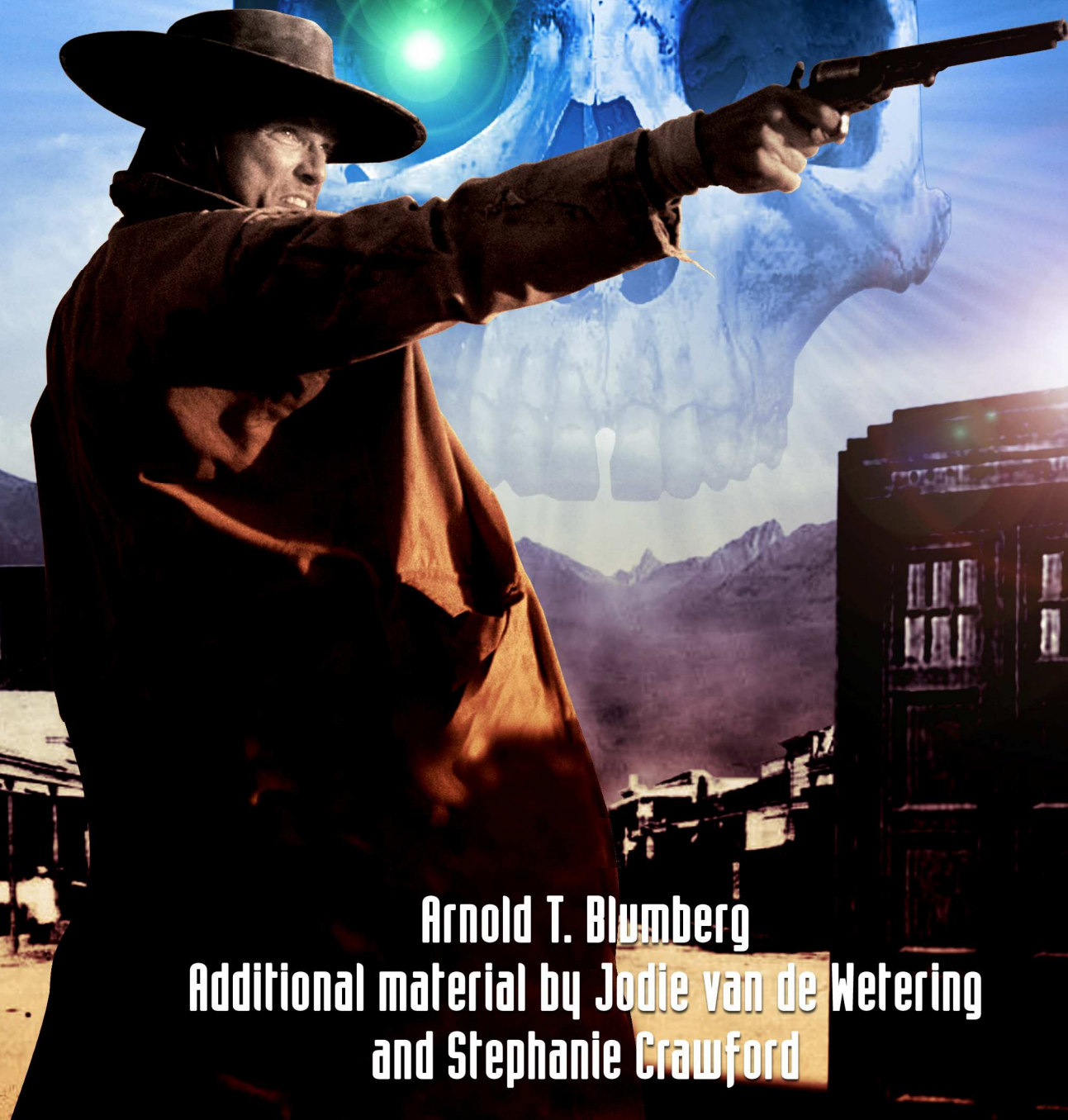


THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

**THE CURSE OF THE
JADE SKULL**



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1. The Terror Begins

Excerpt from Doctor Who and the Curse of the Jade Skull, written by D. E. Cayde, published by Taylor Publishing in New York, 1901

“The evil that men do lives after them, Mr. Cayde...but sometimes, the men themselves are damned difficult to get rid of.”

I was meetin’ with my new boss, Byron Crawford, the latest guy to pay for my services. Rich. Didn’t trust him far as I could throw him, but his money was good.

“I like how you handled your first assignment,” he said and puffed on his cigar. The green rock on his finger caught the sunlight.

I never know how to take compliments, so I just shrugged.

“You didn’t hire me to miss.”

What Crawford *did* hire me to do was track down an ornery cuss named Varney. But wait a minute, I didn’t even introduce myself yet and we should get everything set down good and proper first.

Name’s Cayde. Daniel Edward Cayde. D.E. for short. And if you don’t mind a bit of boastin’, I’m a ‘dead shot.’ Can hit anything I am for. I’m just that good. So I hire out my hand and my eye to whoever wants ‘em. The gun I throw in for free.

Oh, it’s a pretty piece, all right. Six-shooter, shining silver, ivory stock, fast action. It’s my only companion. Don’t even have a horse. They don’t seem to take to me, and I don’t have much use for ‘em anyway. I like walkin’.

Tonight I was supposed to round up Varney, a mean old cuss who’d been harassing some ladies over at the Hammerstock Saloon. I’d run across the guy once or twice, and every time he slipped away. He’s good at that. He’s a vampire. Blood sucker. And that means trouble.

They have all kinds of tricks. You’ve probably heard of most of ‘em – they can change into bats and dogs, disappear into a puff of mist, hypnotize people left, right and center ‘til they don’t know whether they’re comin’ or goin’. Thing is, a lot of ‘em keep to themselves. Feed off animals, hide from livin’ folks rather than get themselves staked or shot.

But Varney, he’s a piece of work. And he loves the ladies. Well, can’t blame him for that. But he doesn’t just have his fun, he drains ‘em dry or worse, recruits ‘em. So I was called in. Crawford figured I needed testin’. Fine with me.

Varney wasn’t hard to find. Just follow the sound of screamin’.

* * *

“I think the management would prefer it if you got your drinks at the bar downstairs, Varney.”

Varney was snarlin’ at me, the girl just cowerin’ on the bed with her dress torn and her neck bit. He’d only just gotten started so she’d be OK. Varney though, he had run out of chances.

“You can’t kill me, Cayde! You never could!”

“Ready for you this time, Varney,” I said, and aimed right at his greasy head. “Got myself a silver bullet, blessed and crossed.”

“Ha! Who you tryin’ to kid, Cayde? You can’t afford no silver bullet!”

Varney leapt at me and I just pulled the trigger, sendin' that single silver messenger o' God spiralin' into his brain. He hit the ground at my feet and fell apart right there. Had to shake my boots to get rid of the dust. Messy things, vampires.

I'm not much of a ladies' man myself, but I turned to the girl to see how she was holdin' up. She was shakin'.

"He...he said you couldn't afford a silver bullet."

"It was a gift."

She jumped up to give me a hug, but thought twice a minute later.

"Whew! Mister, you need a bath!" And she ran out of the room.

Gratitude for ya.

* * *

It was the day after that when I met with Crawford in his office.

"You didn't hire me to miss," I said.

Crawford laughed and opened a drawer in his desk, pulling out a wad of cash and putting it in front of me. I took it.

"True enough! And you didn't. You passed the test. Now I have a *real* job for you...if you're up for a challenge and double your fee."

Now he had my attention.

"Doesn't sound boring."

He laughed again. Guess I was funny.

"No, it won't be, and just to make things interesting..." He reached into the drawer and took out another stack of bills. I took those too.

"An advance. You'll get the other half if...when you come back."

"And who do I have to kill this time?"

"Possibly a great many people," Crawford said. He wasn't laughing anymore. "But that's not what I'm asking you to do. I want you to find something for me. An object of great value."

"And that would be?"

"A jade skull."

2. The Touch of Life and Death

The town of Crawford in the Wyoming Territory stood at the foot of a mountain range, one of so many dusty frontier settlements built around the desperate drive to discover wealth in the wilds of western America. Crawford wasn't exactly the site of a gold rush; the mine around which the town had first sprung only yielded some copper and little else. But shortly after the settlers had taken to the land and welcomed the chance to set down roots and avoid any altercations with the Lakota or Crow tribes, another mine was opened that gave the town its livelihood. Coal was fuel for the future, the sooty building blocks of this expanding nation, and Crawford had plenty of it locked into the land and waiting to be extracted, gathered, and sold. And so the town thrived as much as it could. Its founder, Byron Crawford, had only appeared in town once or twice – his money arrived well before he did and he preferred to stay in San Francisco. But he seemed particularly motivated to get the mines going, and he was pleased by the progress if a bit...elusive.

Deep in the inky blackness of Crawford's coal mine, nestled in the area local folks called Desperation Point, Jordy Kingsley had little time to think about rich men and their peculiar behavior. He swung his pick and rubbed soot from his eyes with his dirty, rolled-up shirt sleeve. Sweat and black dust mingled into a paste that coated his face and arms, a dubious badge of honor that marked him as part of the backbone of Crawford, and likely to die young for his trouble. The others were working in a different passage while he ventured further, always wondering if maybe, just maybe, he might find something more precious than lumps of black rock to bring back to town.

Gold wasn't likely in these parts, but no one said it was impossible. And Jordy felt his luck was about to change as his pick connected with the rock face and shattered it, revealing another passage beyond the wall. He turned to shout back at Ben and Harding, but caught himself.

Why let them in on the secret? he thought. *This might be my lucky day all right, and that gold is gonna be mine!*

Jordy snuck a look back down the passage but his two companions were nowhere to be seen, although he could just barely make out the echoing clicks and scrapes as they worked the rock further down and around the corner. So Jordy cleared the way with his axe and stepped through the opening into the passage beyond.

Almost instantly he could feel a change in the very air that entered his lungs. There was something fresher, cleaner about it – fragrant too, floral and very pleasant. The temperature was also cooler, but it was humid too. And there was a subdued glow – phosphorescence maybe – that made it easy to see the path in front of him. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the new light level. And then Jordy saw something out of a dream.

The cave in which he stood was covered from ceiling to floor with lichen, wild growth, shrubs, and grass. It was green and lush, as if the plant life had simply burst forth from the ground and grown with abandon across every surface, transforming the cold stone interior into a green garden. The glow was brighter in the center of the chamber, and Jordy dropped his ax and stepped gingerly through the thick grass and leafy growth to find the source of the light.

In the middle of the cave, half-buried by the greenery, was a pulsing light that seemed to infect all the surrounding plant life with its energy, giving the entire room the phosphorescent sheen that Jordy had noticed when he first broke through. And that intense, almost blinding, light was coming from a solid object at Jordy's feet. He knelt and pushed away the leaves and blades of grass and saw his treasure at last.

It was a jade skull. The crystalline form was perfectly shaped, a human skull hewn from a single piece of some kind of brilliant green gemstone, somewhat opaque and giving off light as if it was burning from inside. The thing had to have been made, carved by someone...but what the hell was it doing here? And what had happened inside this cavern to bring it to life like this?

Jordy didn't care about the mystery; all he saw was a unique gem, a true treasure that made all the gold in the world seem meaningless by comparison. He had found a piece of history, some ancient artifact that would surely fetch not only a handsome price but the attention of the intellectual folk back east, maybe even in Europe. Maybe Crawford himself would want it! The Jade Skull was Jordy's escape from the filthy coal mine, his chance to join the elite, his deliverance from an early death deep in this cold and unforgiving tomb of rock.

Jordy lifted the Jade Skull from its resting place and smiled as it glowed brighter. Even if Ben and Harding had been close enough, they would never have heard Jordy utter so much as a sound as the Skull flashed white hot, sending a wave of energy through his nervous system, burning out his mind in an instant even as the heat charred his flesh.

The burned corpse of Jordy Kingsley, his face contorted in a cry of immeasurable agony, lay in the quiet garden, the Jade Skull by his side.

3. A Legend Explained and Dismissed

Excerpt from Doctor Who and the Curse of the Jade Skull, written by D. E. Cayde, published by Taylor Publishing in New York, 1901

“A local legend,” said Crawford.

I tipped my hat back and leaned back in my chair. Thought I should get comfortable as this sounded like a long story.

“The Lakota in particular talk of their ancestors and the discovery of a green crystalline rock that fell from the sky and became the totem of their medicine man. He carved it into the shape of a skull and used its power to heal. But he abused this gift from the Gods.” Crawford smiled.

“Don’t they always,” I said.

“Indeed,” chuckled Crawford. “Soon they were supposedly fighting off an army of, well, shall we say, returning family and friends. Folks that had been long dead, now revived by the power of the skull. These...creatures were relentless. Finally they decided to bury the skull deep in the earth, to ‘silence its unholy call.’”

“And that worked, did it?” I fetched a smoke out of my pocket and lit it. “So why would you want to risk wakin’ that kind of trouble up again?”

“Legends have a way of stretching the truth, Mr. Cayde, you should know that. What I want is the previous artifact itself. Surely you don’t think it’s...magic, do you?”

“I’ve seen my share of magic,” I said, sendin’ some smoke Crawford’s way and catchin’ him in the face. The man didn’t even blink. “You just sent me to kill a vampire.”

Crawford smiled again. He did that a lot. Never trusted a man who smiles too much.

“True enough. But my research suggests these Indians are spinning yarns for white men. I just want the skull. It’s a priceless gem. If you’re unwilling, of course...”

“No, no,” I said, leaning forward, standing and resting a hand on my gun. It was time to get started, and I’d heard all I needed to hear. “I’ll get your item for ya. But if I see any dead people clawin’ out of the ground...”

“Then by all means send them back down to Hell,” said Crawford. “Nothing should stand in your way.”

I stepped closer to Crawford’s desk, close enough to smell his cologne.

“Nothin’ ever does. So where am I goin’?”

“Why to Crawford, of course.”

I had to admit, this one kinda took me by surprise.

“You’re hirin’ me to go to the town *you* set up to get this skull for ya? Don’t ya have a whole army of miners there to dig this thing out?”

“This isn’t just about digging, Mr. Cayde. This is about a treasure that men may kill for, a precious commodity that requires the skills of a very dedicated and ruthless individual.”

“And you’re busy, I guess?”

Crawford laughed louder than ever at that one. I just smiled and tipped my hat to him. I left Crawford in his office, still smilin’. I got a feeling I’d enjoy wipin’ that off his face one day.

4. The Searchers

Cayde let the door of the Broken Branch saloon in Crawford swing behind him as he moved up to the bar. The girl behind it wasn't particularly pretty, or particularly quick. Cayde wondered if her Daddy owned the joint.

"You got a room for a few nights?"

She ran a plump finger down the ledger.

"One left, Sir."

"That'll be dandy, Ma'am."

She looked Cayde up and down. The gunslinger stood there in his traveling clothes, dust from his boots tracked across the floor. Her eyes reached his and she looked away uncertainly, flinching at what she saw there.

"We'll be needing payment in advance, Sir."

Cayde slammed a wad of bills on the counter and took the key without another word.

* * *

"What can I get you?"

It was a few hours later. The white heat of noon had faded into a sticky dull orange dusk. Daddy's girl had been replaced by a podgy barkeep, sweating profusely beneath his shirt and tie. The bar was slowly filling with men, most covered in the black soot that marked a miner. The conversation was muted, and the drink flowed slowly. Money must be tight in the coal business.

"I ain't drinkin'," Cayde replied. "I'm after information."

The barkeep raised an eyebrow.

"My employer's after a rock. Green thing, all carved like. Shaped like a skull. Ringin' any bells?"

"Yeah." The barkeep leaned in closer. "A jade skull."

"So you seen this thing?"

"Nope." The barkeep moved away and resumed polishing a glass. "But you ain't the only one lookin' for it."

Cayde followed the barkeep's eyes through the maze of miners to a couple sitting at one of the saloon's tables. They were a funny looking pair. He was an old guy, the age Cayde's father would be...if he'd lived, with the air and dress of an undertaker. The girl was...his granddaughter? His employee? A whore? Hard to tell. She was young, real young, but not dressed like a girl or a woman. She wore a cowboy's tight moleskins and boots, and a checked shirt that had enough buttons done up to be decent, but only just. She had long black hair hanging loose past her shoulders, with a red streak at one temple that didn't look natural. Whoever they were, their story might be even more interesting than the skull. Cayde decided on the direct approach.

"Evening, folks," he said as he walked right up to the couple's table and made himself at home. "Name's Cayde. Daniel Edward Cayde. Word is you good people would be lookin' for a jade skull."

The girl in the shirt scowled at him. "What's it to you?"

"Silver!" The man turned to Cayde. "You must excuse her, Mr. Cayde. She's not used to..." he flashed her a look, "this sort of society. This is my traveling companion, Silver, and I am the Doctor."

"Doctor...?" Cayde asked.

“Correct,” said the Doctor with an air of finality. “And yes, we are looking for an artifact, a skull carved from jade.”

“Ain’t that peculiar. So am I.”

The Doctor peered at the gunslinger. “I’ve never been one to believe in coincidence, Mr. Cayde.”

Cayde smiled. He might like this guy under other circumstances.

“Me neither, Doc. No such thing.”

* * *

It was some time after midnight and Cayde lay on the bed, not sleeping. He stared through the darkness towards the high wooden ceiling, his mind ticking over. Co-operation didn’t sit easily with him, but there was no point re-doing a job already done, Cayde told himself. That was why he’d let the old guy negotiate a joint mission. This pair, this Doctor and his ‘traveling companion,’ seemed to have one heck of a head start on him. They’d hit town three days earlier, and they’d used them well. So he’d tag along like a good dog while this pair found the skull. And then...

Cayde reached out and gripped the ivory stock of the six-shooter on the bedside table. As always, the gun felt warm, living, an extension of himself. The thing that made him whole.

Yeah, then he’d take the skull, and co-operation be damned. But it was almost a shame. There was something about this Doctor that almost seemed to deserve...trust.

* * *

First light. Cayde squinted into the morning sky, the sleepless night heavy on his brows. Silver slouched around, kicking at stones around the yawning entrance to the mine. She was still in her moleskins and boots, but had a fresh, equally unbuttoned shirt. The Doctor was speaking to the night shift, a gang of tired looking men who’d just finished their eight hours loosening coal from rock. Cayde watched him closely, saw a wad of cash changing hands. Then he looked away and put on his casual pose as the older man looked up. The Doctor beckoned Silver and Cayde over, and with the miners they made their way into the mine.

The party made their way through the darkness, lanterns aloft. One of the Doctor’s paid miners led the way, followed by Silver, Cayde and the Doctor. Two other miners brought up the rear, hanging behind a little. As the party followed the cavern’s many twist and turns, they passed chambers filled with boxes, including one where sticks of dynamite and other blasting supplies had been stowed for later use.

“Now, Mick?”

“Not yet, Buddy. Wait til the prof finds the loot. Then we jump ‘em.”

“That other guy’s got a gun.”

“And so’s us got guns. Now look Buddy, if you wanna let the prof come in an’ take that fancy rock back east an’ make a fortune from it, you better leave now. ‘Cause I got other plans. We’re the ones breakin’ our backs down this Godforsaken hole in the ground. It was one of us as found the thing. So’s I reckon it’s only right we’re the ones as makes the money out of it. We let Liam take us all down there and then we take care of the strangers.”

Mick stroked the revolver hidden under his overalls as the party made their way deeper into the mine.

* * *

“And this is where the skull was found?”

The Doctor led the way as if he already knew where to look, moving past Liam and poking at the loose rock with his cane, scrambling over the jagged surface with a youthful energy that belied his appearance. Silver followed, and Cayde begrudgingly brought up the rear with Mick and Buddy.

“Oh, do put that gun away, Mr. Cayde!”

Cayde looked at his hand as if registering the presence of the gun for the first time. With a sheepish look at the Doctor he holstered it and joined the two strangers at the wall. Mick and Buddy exchanged a look. A gaping hole near the floor of the cave lay empty, but there the skull had clearly rested for centuries.

“...until that feller just pulled it out of there and got hisself fried like a chicken on a skillet!” said Liam.

“Hmm,” the Doctor replied, touching the cane to his lips and peering around at the loose rock. He poked at some powdered stone and brought the other end of the cane to his nose, inhaling sharply.

“Micromolecular alterations,” he said. “Ancient, powerful forces at work.” He sighed and put the cane back down.

“What’s wrong?” said Silver.

“It never ceases to amaze me how threats from the Dawn of Time manage to pop up just when I’m in the mood for a quiet day.”

“Dawn of what?” Cayde pushed his hat back on his forehead. “Now you two go on and talk gibberish if you like, but if y’all wouldn’t mind translating everything into plain English sometime soon, I sure would appreciate it.”

“We are dealing with an incomprehensible threat, Mr. Cayde,” said the Doctor. “Not just to us or the town, but perhaps to the entire world.”

“Just the world?” Silver smirked.

“Oh very well,” the Doctor said, glancing down at his shoes and gathering his energy. “Perhaps to the entire created universe!”

Silver smiled. Cayde stared with a slack jaw and wide eyes. Liam snorted and Mick and Buddy looked at each other again.

“Come on then.” The Doctor quickly added, picking his way out of the rocks. “Let’s get to work.”

5. A Deadly Game

In the end, it was Silver who found it. She was kicking through the stones with the toe of her boot, borrowed lantern held aloft, while the men grunted and strained. It appeared so suddenly, it was as though it had been making its way toward her, burrowing up through the shale while she was idly looking for it. But that wasn't possible. Probably.

The smooth, green surface of the gem caught the flickering lantern light and attracted the Doctor's attention. All around them there were dead leaves and rotted vegetation, as if a vast garden in this cavern had fallen to dust and decay. The Time Lord was kneeling before the skull in a single fluid movement. He moved to brush dust from its surface, but Liam grabbed his arm.

"Hey prof, you can't touch that thing!"

"Don't concern yourself, Liam," said the Doctor. "I know a thing or two about cosmic artifacts imbued with immeasurable energy."

"Ya do, huh," said Cayde, and caught Silver staring at him. This whole situation was getting confusing, but Cayde tried to keep his focus on the job at hand.

"Is it really safe?"

"Oh no, Silver, it's incredibly dangerous," and the Doctor smiled. "But I think it will be all right to touch now. I suspect the poor fellow was caught in an explosive surge caused when it came into contact with its first living being in a very long time. The same explosion must have put paid to all the vegetation. Curious, that. All this growth...all this life...but still, first things first."

The Doctor picked up the skull as everyone else let out their breath. The skull tingled in his hands, the tactile reminder of a powerful energy source. Cayde moved in closer for a better look, intrigued despite himself. The three travelers were crouched over the gem when they heard the unmistakable sound of a gun cocking.

Cayde spun around and drew his own weapon. Buddy swung his own lantern into Cayde's face, and the gunslinger rolled to the ground. The Doctor and Silver sprang to their feet, the Time Lord holding the skull to his chest. Mick covered them with his weapon.

"OK folks, hand over the stone. Liam, get the hell out of here now!"

Liam took the hint and ran.

"Now look here," the Doctor glared at his assailant. "You simply don't know what this object is..."

The gunshot tore through the confined space. The Doctor felt someone hit him from behind and tear the skull from his grasp as he fell. Silver lunged at Buddy as he stepped over the Doctor's stunned form, but he pushed her away savagely as he and Mick made their way to the exit. Silver tripped over the Doctor, the cavern lurched sickeningly in the light of swaying lanterns as she fell.

Cayde rolled over, his face buried in his hands. He had felt the painful flash of light as he'd dived to avoid the lantern swung at his face, and was dreading lifting his head. The girl, Silver, was crouched over the Doctor. The two miners turned desperadoes were disappearing down the corridor. Cayde stood carefully. He had lamp oil in his hair and on his face, but none in his eyes. He'd live.

The Doctor stood and straightened his jacket, then gently righted the single still-burning lantern, lying on an angle in the rubble.

"Doctor, they've got the skull!"

"Hush, Silver." The Doctor held up a hand to silence his companions. Above them, just at the edge of their hearing, was a rumbling noise. Silver's voice was low.

"Is that the roof?"

“Yes, my dear. Over here.” The Doctor dragged Silver and Cayde over to where the natural cavern met the excavated tunnel of the mine. The trio stumbled over the passageway as the cavern roof above them began to groan and shift. The Doctor pushed Silver and Cayde ahead of him into the tunnel, then ducked in behind them as the roof of the cave crashed down.

Silver huddled against the Doctor as the cavern disappeared in a cloud of dust. She opened her eyes to see sunlight streaming in through the open space where the roof of the cave had been. She looked up at her traveling companion.

“So, do we go after them?”

“Ah, you’re nuts,” Cayde declared. “They had mules tied up outside. They’ll be miles away by now.”

“I’m not so sure, Cayde,” said the Doctor. “But I do think it’s time for a different approach.”

“What you got in mind, Doc?”

“Mr. Cayde, I suggest you track down our mining friends and their stolen treasure.” At that, Cayde’s eyes widened. “Meanwhile, Silver and I...”

“Wait a minute,” said Cayde. “You barely know me, we’re all goin’ after somethin’ that people will kill for, and you’re sendin’ me to go get it?”

Silver flashed the Doctor a perplexed look as well, but the Doctor smiled and placed a hand on Cayde’s shoulder.

“Yes,” he said. “And then you’ll bring it back and meet us at the undertaker’s, where I believe they’ve taken the fellow who found it first.”

“I will,” said Cayde.

“Yes, you will.”

Cayde stared a moment longer, then nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I will, Doc.” He checked his gun and got ready to start tracking the thieves, but turned back.

“Doc, is this skull really as dangerous as you say it is?”

“Oh yes.”

Cayde ran it through his head and met the Doctor’s piercing gaze. He nodded.

“Talk about trust,” said Silver.

“I don’t believe it’s misplaced,” replied the Doctor and glanced at Cayde. “What we need to do in the meantime, Silver, is examine the body of the man who found the skull. We need to know what killed him. What this artifact is capable of doing. I have a theory...”

“He always does,” Silver said with a smile at Cayde. Cayde was a bit surprised at the sudden familiarity and smiled back, not wanting to discourage her. He felt it again like he did before. There was something about this Doctor, even the girl. They just seemed...worth trusting, especially since they placed such unbelievable trust in him. It wasn’t a feeling he got too often. Maybe he should rethink things. Maybe Crawford’s money wasn’t as important. Maybe...

6. The Doctor Makes a Discovery

Silver would never get used to it no matter how many times she experienced it, the sickly odor of chemicals and cleanser masking the unmistakable aura of death. At least in a modern morgue or hospital, the air freshener would be winning, but not here in the old West. She could smell charred flesh and struggled to keep her breakfast down. The Doctor wasn't fazed in the slightest.

"And this is the gentleman who first found the skull?"

"Yes sir," said Dr. Morgan, pulling a stained sheet over the rictus of agony plastered on the face, or what was left of the face, of the miner whose fingers had closed around the jade skull's energetic surface. Morgan too looked somewhat unsettled, Silver noticed, but he maintained a valiant professional veneer. They had met Morgan when they arrived in town, along with Sheriff Hinton, who was also present for this meeting along with the undertaker, Willoughby. Hinton had given the Doctor the first information about the incident and Morgan had explained the fate of the miner. But this was the Doctor's first opportunity to see the victim firsthand.

"Burned all right," said Silver.

"But more than that, his entire nervous system was charged with energy and turned to dust," said the Doctor. "A cavern filled with vegetation, an ancient crystalline artifact that can generate life from lifeless rock or destroy a human being utterly. Life, as both a gift and a weapon. Fascinating."

Morgan and Willoughby just looked at each other and shrugged as the doctor put on his hat and grabbed his bag. Home was all he was thinking about at the moment, and Willoughby just wanted to get the body ready for burial and take it up to the graveyard. Hinton stood with the Doctor as Willoughby wrapped the body and rolled it away.

"I'm sure grateful for all your help, Doctor, but what's really going on here?"

"Sheriff, with all due respect it would take a long time to explain," said the Doctor. "But Cayde is tracking the thieves who took the skull, and I expect him to return shortly. When we have it in our possession, the danger will be contained."

Hinton whistled. "You let an outlaw go after a giant gemstone? I have to say, Doctor, I don't reckon that's a wise move from a law and order standpoint. We may never see him again, and if that thing is as bad as you say it is..."

The Doctor smiled. "Sheriff, I appreciate the concern, but I have confidence in Mr. Cayde's loyalty. I'm a keen judge of character."

Hinton nodded and rested a hand on his holster. "I am grateful you and Miss Silver came to town to help. When I sent that message for some expert assistance on this whole incident, I didn't know who they'd send, but I'm glad it was you."

"We were in the right place at the right time," said Silver, remembering their arrival in San Francisco and running into the representative from the Crawford Mining Company just as he was looking for a scientific consultant to send to town after news of Jordy's death reached the home office.

"You sure were," said Hinton. "If you'll excuse me," and with a tip of his hat to both travelers, he left. Willoughby had already taken the body into the back room to get Jordy ready for his last trip, so the Doctor and Silver were alone.

"Now what?"

"We wait, Silver. I'm sure we can find some food somewhere, and then maybe some entertainment at the Broken Branch. Might as well enjoy some atmosphere before everything falls apart."

7. Rise of the Zombies

The steel blade of the spade dulled itself as Bobby thrust it into the stony earth once more. The land in these parts was stubborn, his daddy said, and didn't want to give up crops nor take up the dead. Bobby had a mind to ask old man Willoughby to give him a whole dollar a grave, since there wasn't anyone else who'd either be able to shift out this much earth or be inclined to come up the hill to the old graveyard, which even Bobby admitted was right spooky when the wind got to blowing.

Tossing out the last spadeful of dirt, he threw the shovel out over the side of the freshly-dug grave and clambered out himself. Bobby watched, panting and mopping his brow with a dirty old bandanna as Mr. Willoughby himself rode up the hill, driving a pair of horses that had to be as old as he was, pulling the shabby old farm wagon painted black that served as a hearse.

"Who's that in the box then?" Bobby asked.

"Jordy Kingsley, one of them miners from Desperation Point. Done rolled in a campfire while he was sleeping and got hisself burnt up." Willoughby figured that was a lot better than the truth, which he didn't rightly understand himself.

"Where's his mourners?"

"Ain't got none," said Mr. Willoughby, sighing. "No friends or family neither. I sent a wire to his mama down in St. Louis to deliver the condolences, but the Western Union fella down there wired back to say she died last week, and there weren't no other family there."

Bobby grunted sadly and Willoughby paused for a moment. Then he got the ropes out of the wagon and looped them loosely around the ends of the casket. As the two men finished setting the casket on the ground beside the grave, they were both startled to hear running footsteps coming along the path. The gravedigger and the undertaker watched as two miners came running with a third man hot on their heels and firing his gun at them. One of the miners was cradling something in his arm.

The two fugitives ducked behind the wagon and fired at the dusty stranger. A stray bullet whizzed past Bobby's ear. Dropping the casket and grabbing Mr. Willoughby, he jumped down into the grave, bringing Mr. Willoughby down with him. The sound of gunshots rang out over them as they cowered in the loose earth. Bobby jumped up enough to peep over the side.

Poor Jordy Kingsley lolled half in and half out of the casket, his blackened arm stretched out towards the two miners hiding behind the hearse, firing their guns at the stranger, who was himself sheltering behind one of the graveyard's larger tombstones.

"Buddy, shoot at the branch above his head!" one of the miners yelled. The other raised his arm to fire high, and as he did a jade skull fell out of his other arm and rolled down the slope, coming to rest against Jordy's blackened skin.

On contact, the skull emitted a pulse of green light traveling in a wave like ripples in a pond, and little crumbs of earth and stone began to shimmy away from their places atop the graves. Within seconds, a rill of soil broke the surface like a fish surfacing, and it was followed by a hand, then an arm. Shreds of cloth and decaying flesh still clung to the bones of Mrs. Alice Fletcher, a victim of the typhoid that had run through the mining camp last year. Other bodies began to pull themselves out of their graves, and the two miners stopped firing and stood, horrified and transfixed at the dead pulling themselves up from the ground and beginning to shamble towards them. Every one of them was glowing green, pulsing like the skull itself.

The stranger stepped out from behind the tombstone, his eyes wide, but he had enough presence of mind to grab the skull from its place on the ground just as the dear

departed Jordy Kingsley pulled himself upright too. Jordy, or the creature that had once *been* Jordy, stood all blackened and burnt, but still managed to shuffle to the head of the ranks of the walking dead.

Bobby and Mr. Willoughby pulled themselves up out of the grave and began to back towards the road, away from the corpses rising all around them. The creatures fell upon the paralyzed fugitives and began to rip and tear and bite. Bobby and Willoughby turned from the terrible sight, shivering at the sound of the miners shrieking and then falling silent, as the zombies moaned and fed. Hearing a clatter behind them, they ducked to the side of the road just in time for the wagon to clatter past them, the stranger at the reins.

“Get in! Now!” the stranger yelled. Bobby threw Mr. Willoughby into the back of the wagon and leapt in after as the wagon began to clatter down the hill. The two old nags neighed, reared, and took off like the hounds of hell were at their heels. They were almost right.

The horses ran like they’d never run before in their lives, and the wagon bounced, careening almost uncontrollably over the rocky road. A large stone in the road caught the wheel under Bobby and it shattered, dragging the end of the wagon and spilling Bobby and Mr. Willoughby out into the road. One of the spokes of the wheel had taken Bobby through the thigh, and he struggled, trying to pull it out, as the dead began to trudge solemnly down the patch. The stranger frantically worked on unhitching the team, finally pulling a knife from his boot and cutting free the traces and the pin as the dead came nearer and nearer.

Crying out in pain, Bobby jerked the long spar of wood out of his thigh and tried to crawl away as the mortal remains of Jordy Kingsley, instead of shuffling off their mortal coil, began shuffling slowly towards him. Mr. Willoughby lay still under the end of the wagon, his legs crushed under the dragging end. The stranger came and grasped Bobby’s shoulders and dragged him towards the horses as the dead fell on Mr. Willoughby’s still form. Horribly, he wasn’t dead, his thin screams piercing the air briefly as the creatures ripped into his guts. Then all was silent except for the howling of the advancing creatures.

Bobby tried to mount the horse, his punctured leg dragging as the stranger tried to boost him onto the nag.

“Come on, mount up!” the stranger urged, but Bobby had become tangled in the dangling traces, and had fallen to the ground. The stranger mounted the other horse, but those things were deceptively swift, and several of them had already drawn close enough to pull and drag at his horse.

Jumping from the saddle and pushing two of the creatures out of his way, Cayde took a last tortured look at the man he’d been unable to save and resigned himself to leaving the boy to his fate. As Bobby screamed, Cayde shot one of the things in the chest, only succeeded in pushing it back a few feet, and ran off to find cover. He’d stay hidden until he was sure where these things were headed, and then he’d hightail it back to town to bring the skull back to the Doctor.

If it wasn’t already too late.

8. Attack of the Undead

Garrity couldn't suppress a chuckle as he slipped on his coat and reached for his hat. This time it was perfect; this time he had it made.

The snake known as Garrity had traveled through the frontier, rolling into one two-bit town after another, feeling the grime and dust accumulating on his clothes and skin, smiling with brilliant teeth and cold eyes as he talked to the locals about dreams and hopes and lies. He sold them his snake oil, his balms, his baubles, bilked them out of their money – and maybe a girl or two out of her innocence – and then, just before dawn, under cover of darkness, he made his reptilian way back out of town and onto the next target.

It was a depressing life, one filled with ugly people, meager victories, the constant threat of the law or even death. But this time, oh this time, Garrity had done it. He had come up with the best plan of all, the one that would make him a fortune. It was brilliant. It was foolproof.

Garrity was going to raise the dead. Yes, bring the dead back to shambling life, draw them up clawing and moaning from their shallow graves on the outskirts of town and bring them home to see all the friends and family they so tragically left behind. But then, when the townsfolk realized the secrets and sins that these returning souls would bring with them, why they'd pay Garrity a king's ransom to send those revenge-seeking monsters back into their earthy prison!

Of course he wouldn't *really* bring back the dead, but this had to be the best deception he had *ever* conceived. He chuckled again, set his hat jauntily on his head, smoothed down his moustache and headed for the door of his hotel room. He had arrived in Crawford a day ago, dropped numerous sly hints while having a drink at the Broken Branch, and now he was going to lay it on thick. Yes folks, Garrity here, Necromancer Extraordinaire and I am going to bring the Dead back to Life! Free of Charge! My gift to all you good, clean, kind, Christian folks!

He could just see their faces now. And he could almost feel the gold at his fingertips, weighing his pockets down as he rolled out of town and onto another Amazing Mystical Demonstration of Life-Defying Prestidigitation!

Garrity's hand closed around the latch and opened the door. Even the barest whisper of a scream never made it past his lips, for in that moment the bright green, rotting hands of the corpses waiting for him outside thrust inward, grasped him by his face and legs and belly, and tore him to pieces.

* * *

Earlier that day, Ole Larsen knelt and took a handful of the freshly-turned earth, laid in furrows along the length of his first 40 acres. He raised the slightly-moist clump of soil to his nose and smelled. The smell of the soil, verdant with promise and the hint of life...but something was wanting. A sacrifice would be required.

Ole, his wife Inge, and his sons Sven and Arik had come to this country with thousands of other immigrants from their native Norway, and had slowly made their way across the continent to the Wyoming Territory, then to the tiny town of Crawford. The soil was too poor to grow much, but Sven always seemed to have bountiful crops, and was the envy of all his neighbors.

"How'dya get that corn to grow so tall and green, Ole?"

"Your tomatoes are so big and plump, they're the size of cantaloupe!"

His church-going, God-fearing neighbors had no idea that Ole and Inge and their

sons still followed the old ways. For hundreds of years, the Scandinavian lands had been ruled by the old gods, fire feasts and sun feasts directing the lives of all, until the coming of the Christ, brought by missionaries from the sun-warmed lands to the south. Ole had been taught by his father and his father before him that reaping the bounty of the earth required a sacrifice, and even here in the New World, perhaps even more so, the gods were watching and waiting. A sacrifice would be required. But he knew how the other townsfolk might react, and he knew it was best to perform the ritual under cover of darkness.

Ole waited until night fell and then went to the barn. He brought out his best nanny goat and led her into the furrows. Inge and he boys were already there, and Inge's butcher knife was honed to a razor's edge. Ole glanced at the hills surrounding them and began to speak the invocation. As he began to say the words, the green men began to arise out of the hills and hollows, and began their slow inexorable march down to the field. Ole smiled inside, knowing now more than ever before that in this new land, the gods could hear him. They'd even sent the Green Man, no, *Green Men*, to accept the sacrifice!

As the figures drew near and their features came into view, Ole realized that he'd been wrong. As the figures surrounded his family and began to close the circle, he knew the deaths the gods required were those of his family. His wife screamed as the figures fell upon her. Blood splashed Ole's face as the figures began to rip and tear and gnaw them all. His eyes darkened as he felt his blood seeping into the soft, moist earth, and the fading screams and whimpers of his wife and sons accompanied his final thought.

The crops would be particularly good this year.

* * *

Martha Jane McCormick rolled the black stockings up her plump thighs and snapped the garter on. Smoothing the ruffled hem of the silly can-can skirt down over them, she began to paint up for the evening. Henry Billings, proud owner of the Broken Branch, had seen a silly Mutoscope reel of some dance hall in Gay Paree last year when he went down to Cheyenne, and now he wanted the girls to dress up and do that kicky dance like them Frenchy girls.

Always had big ideas of himself, did Henry, thought Martha Jane as she rouged her lips and cheeks, kohled her eyes, and made ready for her show. Lilly and Amy were similarly readying themselves for the girls' next performance. Through the rough-pine floor, they could hear the shouts, Injun yells, jangling piano, clinking glasses, and occasional fight-sounds of a regular night in the saloon. Suddenly the sounds changed from the good-natured noise of a friendly if somewhat rowdy party to something different. Screams, shouts, gunfire. The discordant jangle and thump of the piano rolling into the wall.

Martha Jane grabbed the cowering girls and pressed the secret latch behind the wardrobe, shoved in Amy and Lilly, and followed them herself. The secret closet back here was Henry's idea too, but he didn't know she knew about the hidey-hole he had for his share of the gold and silver brought in by the prospectors coming in from their claims. The earthy-metallic smell of gold surrounded them as the girls sat huddled in silence. Soon they heard the stairs creaking.

"Don't move, don't even breathe," Martha Jane hissed as the steps reached the top floor. An eerie green glow filtered in through the crack under the hidden door. Someone (glowing?) paced around the room slowly. Martha Jane could hear whoever it was moaning and sniffing the air. Then there was a grunt as he trudged back down the stairs.

Martha Jane waited a few minutes, then took the rifle Henry kept in this little closet, checked it was loaded, and grabbed a box of the .30-30 cartridges beside it and

tucked them into her sash. She cocked the rifle, slipped off her shoes, and crept to the top of the stairs, leaving Amy and Lilly to happily hide. She peered over the banister into the saloon below.

If it wasn't for her being a farm girl and used to the sight of blood, she would have fainted right then and there. There was half a guy in the chandelier, for Christ's sweet sake, his innards hanging down like party streamers; it was old Doc Morgan. Billy, the piano-player she'd half had her eye on until she'd seen his mean streak when he'd slapped Amy for no reason other than she wouldn't kiss him, well he didn't have his eyes anymore. Somebody had gouged them out and damn near cut him in half crushing him against the wall with the piano. And Henry, oh my god, Henry was laying on the floor, a huge hole torn in his stomach. One of the glowing green monsters was still there, knelt next to Henry's body. It was *eating* him!

Martha Jane didn't even think. She aimed the rifle and shot the thing right between the eyes. Its head exploded and the remains lay still on the floor. Martha Jane threw up quietly in the corner but she didn't faint. She lifted the locket hanging around her neck and looked at the picture of the famous Calamity Jane framed in the pendant.

"Mama, you'd be so proud of me," she whispered. As she loaded the gun again, she heard a sound. Maybe it was that useless Sheriff Hinton finally showing up to do his job.

She looked up to see the long coat and boot-heels of a stranger step into the ruined saloon. She'd seen him before when he and his young friend had first arrived in town, seen them talking with that gunslinger earlier too. The girl with the oddly colored hair came in after him and began to heave herself. The Doctor pushed her outside and walked back in, staring right at Martha Jane.

"Are you all right?" he said in an English accent.

9. The Secret of the Skull

The Doctor and Silver left Martha to help Lilly and Amy to safety when Cayde came out of the night, running and carrying the skull in one arm. The Doctor clapped him on the shoulder.

“Stellar job, Mr. Cayde! And just in the nick of time.”

“No, Doc,” Cayde said as he shook his head and paused to catch his breath. “Well after it I think.” Cayde filled them in on what he’d seen, and while Silver was somewhat surprised, the Doctor merely nodded.

“It’s starting to make sense,” the Doctor mused more to himself than his companions. “Buried for so long, when it came into contact with a living being, the reaction was explosive and unpredictable. And now, when it touched death, was surrounded by it on such a scale, all those human dead. Well it just had to correct that. It had to bring Life.”

“I plum don’t know what you’re yammerin’ about Doc, but listen to that!”

They heard the howling and moaning of the zombie horde as it continued to flow into town from the other end of the main street. Cayde knew of a shed just outside the opposite end of the town where they might be able to hide for a while and think. But not for long.

Along the way, they came across a few victims of an attack. One miner laying on the ground outside the saloon was half drenched with blood, several chunks of his flesh just...missing. Bitten out of him. The Doctor said the answer was obvious. Silver turned white.

“You don’t mean...they’re actually...”

“Consuming the flesh of the living,” the Doctor said matter-of-factly. “Yes. It has been known. And it all fits. They’re seeking out and eating the very matter of Life.”

“Oh my...” Silver put a hand over her mouth and the other on her stomach.

Cayde pushed his hat back on his forehead. “Yup, that’s what I saw them doin’ up at the graveyard too. Just came out of the ground with an appetite.”

Silver straightened. “I swear I will never watch another zombie movie as long as I live.”

“I don’t know why you would,” the Doctor said as he stepped around the remains and led them away. “The vast majority of them are poorly produced rubbish anyway. They rarely come close to capturing the true horror of the situation.”

“But what about Sheriff Hinton and the others?”

“I wouldn’t waste time on that one,” Cayde said. “On my way to find ya, I saw a whole posse of those things headin’ into Hinton’s office. Nothin’ livin’ came out, I can tell ya that.”

The three travelers eventually reached the shed and Cayde stood at the open door, peering into the darkness to see if the creatures had figured out where they’d gone. The howling was overwhelming, but it seemed the zombies had found enough to occupy them inside the buildings that lined Crawford’s main, and only, street.

“I don’t think it’ll be too long before they sniff us out though,” said Cayde. “That is...if sniffing is something they do.”

“They’re animals, Cayde, reduced to the most primitive instincts for self-preservation,” said the Doctor as he took a seat on the wooden floor. “They’re only interested in feeding. They will indeed, as you say, ‘sniff us out.’ But I need a minute or two to think. That skull...”

“Yeah, pretty thing, ain’t it,” Cayde offered half-heartedly, tossing the skull to the Doctor when the Time Lord gestured for him to hand it over. Cayde poked his gun outside as he glanced back into the night.

"I suspect it's considerably more than just an attractive bauble, Cayde," spat the Doctor, turning the skull over and over. "In fact, I think it may be a Key."

"It sure seems to be at the heart of this whole thing, yeah," said Silver.

"No, no, not that kind of key, Silver," said the Doctor, irritated as usual with the fact that everyone around him was one step behind. "A Key with a capital 'K.' A cosmic artifact that has existed for untold eons. Like the Key to Time."

"The Key to..." Silver was interrupted by a loud crash as she turned back to see Cayde wrestling with two zombies at the open doorway. He had been listening to the Doctor as had Silver, and they had completely failed to notice the arrival of the first few corpses as they shambled around from the far side of the shed; they had spread out surprisingly fast given their obviously slow gait. In a minute, another half dozen or so had lined up at the door.

"Ya know if you're gonna make a move, Doc, now might be the right time!" Cayde yelled as he fired twice, knocking two of the undead out of commission with well-placed head shots and tumbling a few others back as the now truly dead bodies toppled over like bowling pins.

"Focus, Cayde, focus! I have to think. Just hold them off until I come up with a plan!"

"Hold them off. Yeah, sure, no problem." Cayde slammed the butt of his revolver down on a grasping claw of a hand and winced as he heard the unearthly howl. Holstering his gun, Cayde shouldered the door closed and slammed the brace down across its width. The shed echoed with the sound of scrabbling fingers and pounding fists. Cayde looked around for something else to brace against the door, but Silver was already crouching next to the Doctor as he sat on the floor in thought. She was thinking about what he said moments ago.

"What's the Key to Time?" Silver said.

"Six white crystalline segments scattered throughout time and space. When reassembled, if only for a moment, they give any being that possesses them extraordinary power to manipulate Time, restore balance to the entire universe...or disrupt it."

"But this skull isn't white, it's green."

The Doctor smiled.

"There are other essential forces governing our universe, Time is only one of them. Several incarnations ago I discovered that a variety of blue crystals I had encountered in my travels were actually fragments of another cosmic Key, this one attuned to the power of pure thought. The Key to Mind could give its owner immense psychic power and unlimited knowledge, or leave them emptied of every shred of information or memory."

"I'm starting to see a pattern emerging. So if this is a Key, or a piece of one, which one would it be?"

"Think about it Silver. Logic. These artifacts represent and control fundamental universal energies. Given what I've already told you, what sort of Key could, if misused, resurrect the dead and reverse the very order of nature?"

Silver looked at the jade skull, its hollow eye sockets staring back at her. She shivered.

"The Key to Life."

It was at that moment that the worm-eaten wooden slats behind Silver's head exploded inward and decaying hands thrust inward to grasp and claw at her hair. The Doctor calmly extricated her and caught her as she tumbled forward into his arms. He sighed.

"I think it's about time we got out of here, don't you?"

10: A Convenient Door

“Just how do you suggest we manage that, Doc?”

“Blunt force trauma, Cayde!” The Doctor pointed up to where the corrugated metal roof of the shed was shaking along with the rest of the small building under the weight of the growing zombie horde. “Enough of a blow to their rotting, softened skulls will do the same job as a bullet. All we need to do...”

“...is let them in and then drop the roof on their heads! Not a bad strategy, Doc, except for one small detail.”

“Yeah, we’re in here too!”

“Silver, your confidence is so reassuring.” The Doctor tapped his cane on the floor where he was sitting. The slats underneath him were surrounded by a small seam with an iron handle bolted onto one end.

“A trap door!”

“A makeshift cellar, I suspect,” said the Doctor, standing and lifting the door. Underneath was a narrow passage dug out of the earth. “Probably only a small space, but with luck...yes there should be enough room. Cayde?”

“I get the picture, Doc, you two get under cover. I’ll be along directly!”

“Excellent. Silver?”

The time travelers slipped down the opening and huddled against the shallow walls of the small cellar, nudging a few boxes and bottles out of the way and hoping that Cayde had just enough space left to jump down inside when the time came. Above, Cayde was reloading as the grasping hands of the undead multiplied all around him. The walls were splintering, the doorway almost split from its hinges. The sounds of the shed tearing apart under the pressure of so many bodies were deafening as Cayde fired several shots into the load-bearing beams that just barely held the shed in place.

Cayde started and turned as one of the walls partially collapsed. Two zombies shambling forward and tried to wrestle Cayde down and bite his throat and leg, but he swung around, grabbed a nearby shovel and slammed it into both skulls. Testing the weight of it, he hefted the shovel and slashed at the weakened supports. The place was reduced to little more than a haphazard pile of wooden slats and beams about to give way, so Cayde tossed the shovel to the corner and yelled as the sound of smashing and moaning reached a crescendo.

“One dusty gunfighter coming down!” Cayde leapt down as another wall gave way and corpses surged into the small shed. The Doctor and Silver held tight to Cayde to make the best use of the tiny space, and Cayde reached up and slammed the trapdoor shut.

“Don’t breathe out,” joked Cayde. The Doctor grunted and Silver managed a smirk.

“Think they’ll figure out how to open the trapdoor before...”

Silver’s question was drowned out by an enormous crash as the rest of the building collapsed and the metal roof came down on the undead wandering around on the floor above them. Dust and grime, some from the shed and still more from the corpses themselves, filtered through the slats and covered them with a fine and unpleasant mist. Cayde and Silver coughed, but the Doctor somehow managed to withdraw a cloth from his coat pocket and place it over his mouth.

“One thing we may not have thought of at the time,” said Cayde. “There’s now a big pile of wood, metal and people on top of us. What if we can’t...get out?”

“First Silver, now you,” said the Doctor quietly. “I find your lack of faith disturbing.”

The Doctor pushed against Silver and Cayde while trying to position himself under the trapdoor. Standing on tiptoes and shouldering the boards, he dislodged it from debris

piled above it and it swung most of the way open with little difficulty. There was no sound from the zombies – they had all been crushed by the roof. As the Doctor smiled triumphantly and prepared to climb back up via the rickety ladder embedded in the earthen wall below the door, a greenish hand fell into his face. Silver and Cayde both yelped, and Cayde flashed a guilty look a second later.

The Doctor swatted the hand out of the way, and it fell, protruding bone and all, into the cellar. Silver stifled another yelp but hopped away to avoid contact. Cayde readjusted his hat.

“That’s two collapsing roofs in a few days. Gettin’ to be a habit,” said Cayde.

“Shall we go?” the Doctor said and climbed out into the night.

11. Escape to Danger!

Cayde ran alongside the Doctor and Silver as they left the ruined shed. For an old guy, Cayde thought, the Doctor could move along pretty fast.

“That wasn’t all of them, ya know Doc. If we don’t get away from town we’re going to come right up against another couple dozen of those things!”

“Mr. Cayde, right now the only thing that matters is getting back to the mine, where the skull was first found! If we don’t get that skull away from Crawford and back in its proper place, there will be a lot more to worry about than a few reanimated corpses.”

“The mine?” Silver huffed and puffed. “How can that...”

“Elementary, my dear Silver,” the Doctor said. “Until the Key was shaken loose from its stone prison by the first blasting in the mine, it was presumably buried here for millennia, safe and sound. The Key had been placed here for sake keeping by a Guardian, its designated keeper...”

“If you say so.” She glanced over at Cayde, who shrugged. He was doing a lot of that lately.

“Silver, there had to be a reason! Why here, why in this time zone, why this planet? What unique properties does this location possess that would make it the perfect resting place for the Key to Life? It would have to be a place that could suppress its boundless energy, keep it contained, and also keep it shielded from the far-reaching consciousness of the Black Guardian...”

“The who?”

“Yes, a very good question!”

The three travelers stopped dead in their tracks and turned at the sound of a new voice. Cayde was the first to respond.

“Crawford! What the hell are *you* doin’ here?”

“Oh, just popping into the field to check on operations,” said Crawford, smiling as usual. He was standing between them and the town, framed by the flames and smoke that had begun to engulf the mining settlement since the zombie horde began its attack. Silhouetted by this hellish image, Crawford stood calmly, a gun gleaming in his hand.

“Who is this gentleman?”

“This is the guy who hired me to find the skull, Doc, and to...well, uh...you know at the time I felt differently about it all but...”

“You weren’t supposed to let anyone else get their hands on it, I presume,” said the Doctor. Cayde nodded.

“And it seems you didn’t exactly follow instructions, Mr. Cayde,” said Crawford. “Most disappointing. But then you did find it, so I suppose it wasn’t a total loss. Now then, Doctor, hand it over.”

“And your interest in the jade skull would be?”

“Doctor, surely you of all people understand the power in such an artifact?”

“You said you didn’t believe the legends,” Cayde said, fingers edging toward his gun.

“Oh do shut up,” said Crawford and fired at Cayde, sending a bullet crashing into his chest. Cayde looked down at the smoking hole in his shirt as Silver gaped and the Doctor grimaced at Crawford.

“I’ve been shot,” said Cayde. “How about...” He crumpled to the ground.

“Utterly unnecessary.”

“Yes, perhaps,” said Crawford. “But needs must. Now, the skull?”

“It’s a pretty piece of art, I’ll admit, but it isn’t really worth...”

“It’s a bit late to try to bluff me, Time Lord,” Crawford said, his smile gone. “The Key to Life is mine. My Lord and Master has won.”

The Doctor peered at Crawford as if seeing him for the first time. Silver hazarded a step forward.

“You...know who he is?” Crawford nodded. “Then who are you, really?”

“I am but a pawn in a very long game, human. It was foretold by my Lord and Master that you would arrive here and now and that the Key to Life would be revealed. All of he pawns, including the townspeople of Crawford and even Mr. Cayde there, had to be assembled and put into their proper places for the final revelation of the Key. That moment has now arrived.”

“So you’re not human then?”

Crawford laughed. Silver shivered at the sound, then blinked and tried to clear her vision as Crawford seemed to shift and melt, his clothing and features rippling and circulating like waves on the ocean. He walked forward, and when he came face to face with the Doctor, he was no longer Crawford at all. His tailored suit, slicked hair and elaborate moustache was gone, replaced by a swirling, dirty black shroud that hid what Silver could only assume was still a humanoid shape. She could barely see his face under his hood, but what she saw chilled her blood. He looked as if he had taken on the features of the jade skull himself. Half of his face had transformed into a calcified skull-shaped mass with no eye sockets, while the bottom half still seemed vaguely human with flesh and a normal mouth. At times the creature seemed to fade, become less substantial.

Like a Shadow.

“No, I am not human. Oh, the *real* Byron Crawford was human, but he was eliminated long before this entire game began. My Master has cast many Shadows across space and time. Each of us are charged with fulfilling his grand plan to bring the beauty of unbridled Chaos to the universe, and control of the Keys that shape and bind that universe is crucial. My brother Shadows have sought the other Keys. I believe you met one of them once before, Time Lord.”

“Indeed I did,” the Doctor said, staking his cane in the ground. “Incompetent oaf he was too. Runs in the family, does it?”

“Have a care, Doctor, for I have succeeded where my Brothers have failed.” He held out his claw-like hand and to Silver’s astonishment, the Doctor admitted defeat and handed the skull to the creature.

“I am the Shadow that has claimed the prize for my Lord. I am the Shadow that has defeated the Time Lord champion. With mastery over Life and Death, my Lord will hold the universe in his hands. The Keys to Time and Mind will be given to him freely, for he will have the power to give or take Life at his whim. And then...”

“And then all will bow to his will and so on and so forth,” the Doctor said wearily. “There’s no need to go through it all, I’ve heard it all a thousand times before. And from far more threatening individuals than you.”

“Petty insults do not become you, Time Lord,” said the Shadow. “And they will avail you nothing. The time has come. My Lord and Master awaits his prize. And you and your pets will be left to die at the hands of my undead minions.”

“So where is your Lord then? Does he plan to turn up and gloat like he used to? Will he be wearing his full feather dress for the occasion?”

“My Lord wages a war at the highest levels of Creation. He has no Time to engage in banter with the likes of you, Time Lord. For all your frustration of his plans, you have been nothing more than an insect, an irritant.”

“Happy to oblige. But really, zombies? Rather low budget of our black-hearted friend, isn’t it?”

“Life and Death will cease to have meaning. In a universe shaped by My Lord and Master, the dead shall walk amongst the living and feed, the living will suffer never-ending torment with no hope of peace or rest. Existence shall have no meaning, no ending, but that My Lord wills it to be so. There shall be...Chaos.”

“He paints such a pretty picture, doesn’t he?” The Doctor addressed Silver, smiling nonchalantly as he removed his cane from the ground and swung it over his shoulder.

The Shadow laughed and lifted the skull to his face.

“My Lord and Master has wished for this moment for an eternity! The re-animated dead of this world are now called to the Key! They will tear you and your pet limb from limb, and then I will leave this world to deliver the Key into the hands of My Lord! You have failed, Time Lord! The cosmic war ends...now!”

The jade skull shone in the Shadow’s hands, waves of light bursting forth as the Doctor and Silver shielded their eyes. In the distance, they heard the groaning cacophony of the zombie horde as they emerged from Crawford to answer the call of the Key. Wind whistled around them, the four figures caught within a maelstrom of dust and raw, naked energy as the undead drew closer. The Doctor held his hat on his head and yelled over the sound of the wind.

“Mr. Cayde, perhaps now would be a good time to demonstrate your sharp-shooting expertise!”

“What...?” Silver looked over and saw Cayde struggling to stand, his blood-soaked shirt clinging to him as he drew his gun and rasped a reply.

“You...got...it...Doc.”

“You fool!” The Shadow laughed again, holding the Key higher. “I cannot be killed! Not while I hold the Key! Even without its all-powerful influence, I cannot be felled by the primitive weapons of this world!”

“Who said anything about shooting you? Mr. Cayde?”

Cayde squinted, leveled his gun and fired at the jade skull. The bullet didn’t even scratch the surface of the cosmically infused crystalline material, but it did knock the artifact from the Shadow’s hands. The Doctor swept his cane down and batted the skull over to Silver, who dove to gather it in her arms. She looked at the Doctor, who pointed his cane to the mine entrance in the distance. He nodded to Silver and Cayde, and both took off for the mine, Cayde getting up to speed after a moment of finding his feet again.

The Shadow fumed, but soon his laugh pierced the air, rising above the moans and grunts drifting closer and louder as the zombies approached the mine.

“You have gained nothing, Time Lord! The undead are coming to heed the call of the Key! They will feast on you and your pets and I will simply reclaim the Key and be gone!”

“Do be quiet, and go float on a wall somewhere!” The Doctor yelled back as they approached the entrance to the mine. Behind them, a wave of zombies closed in, surrounding them completely.

12: An Explosive Solution

“This way!”

“And where exactly are we going, Doc?” Cayde looked around the dark confines of the cave and suppressed a shudder as the cold air reached him even under layers of leather and wool. He coughed and reached for his chest, but decided he’d rather not. They followed the Doctor through one tunnel after another, but Cayde saw Silver staring at him. The Doctor never looked back but in some way he sensed Silver’s unspoken question.

“Yes, Silver, Cayde is back from the dead,” said the Doctor.

“And it ain’t that I ain’t grateful Doc,” choked Cayde, trying to catch up. “But what the hell happened to me?”

“You can thank the Key. This way,” he added and ducked down a side path. “All that energy pouring out, all those corpses re-animated and emanating more energy. You did die, that shot pierced your heart.” Silver looked at the hole in Cayde’s shirt and gulped. “But you died in such close proximity to the Key and at just the right moment. It brought you back like it resurrected the bodies from that graveyard. Fortunately, it brought you back swiftly. You still have your own personality.”

“So I won’t be gnawin’ on anyone anytime soon?”

The Doctor was strangely silent and Cayde decided to change the subject.

“Kind of a dead end down here, ain’t it? I mean, literally.”

“He’s right, Doctor,” said Silver. “We’ve trapped ourselves in here with no way out and zombies at the only exit!”

“With friends like these...” quipped the Doctor. “Just follow me and be quiet, will you?”

“Just a hint then?”

“Oh very well,” said the Doctor, peering down first one then another rocky corridor at the junction between three passageways. “Like I was trying to explain before we were interrupted by that miserable Shadow, the Key was deliberately placed here because of this location’s special properties. Whatever combination of atmosphere, mineral composition, latent cosmic energy and other factors exist here, this was the best place to hide the Key to Life from those who would use it for exactly the kind of thing we’re seeing here in Crawford.”

“But it’s been found before,” Cayde said, and slumped against the side of the passage. The Doctor reluctantly stopped and Silver touched Cayde on his arm. He smiled and shook his head.

“It’s OK, Ma’am,” Cayde said. “I just need a minute. Maybe I ain’t the man I was, can’t catch my breath like I used to. That is, if I’m even breathin’ anymore.”

“I doubt it,” said the Doctor. “But yes, it was found before. The local legends would suggest it had been unearthed by a nearby tribe, carved into its totemistic shape and then returned to the mountain after the carnage ensued the first time. But why it failed to draw the attention of a Shadow then, I can’t say. Perhaps they were occupied elsewhere.”

“And now here we are, but this time there’s a Shadow here waiting to take the skull...the Key,” said Silver. “It’s not going to be as easy as burying it in the rock. He’ll just send someone in after it again or go for it himself.”

“Yeah, and why hire me in the first place? If the creep wanted the damn thing so much and showed up to get it anyway, why send me after it?”

“On the level upon which these beings operate, even for those who are evil, there is a protocol,” said the Doctor. “A sort of set of rules that govern their interaction with lesser beings.” Cayde raised his eyebrows, as did Silver.

“Lesser, huh?”

“Yes, Mr. Cayde, like humans. They try to keep their physical intercession to a minimum. Just the fact that he’s here now and taking such steps to claim the Key should be proof enough that this is an extraordinary moment in Time. He cannot be allowed to take it to his master.”

“So what are we gonna do, Doc, drop another roof on the guy? We’re gettin’ good at that.”

“I’m still working on it, Cayde,” said the Doctor, and moved to leave the passage. “I think we’ve rested enough. You can be sure those creatures are already in the cavern and heading our way. If you listen...”

They did, and heard the faint echoes of the unearthly moaning that heralded the arrival of the zombie horde.

“So how the hell are we goin’ to get rid of this thing, escape from all those zombies, *and* kill a thing that’s some kinda God or demon or whatever he is?”

“First things first,” said the Doctor as he led them through another turn and into a chamber filled with mining supplies. “Ah, here we are. Remember when we came down here the first time, our guides led us past this chamber? This is where they had stored some of their blasting equipment.”

“You mean...”

“Precisely, Silver,” said the Doctor and smiled. “Mr. Cayde was right. We’re getting rather good at dropping roofs on people. Twice so far.” The Doctor indicated the dynamite. “Third time’s the charm.”

* * *

The Doctor led Silver deeper into the mine nearer to where the skull had first been found while Cayde stayed behind to wire up the dynamite. Soon they reached a point beyond which the miners had dug completely, forcing them to stoop and climb and work their way past narrow passages and collapsed pieces of rock and debris. Silver was getting nervous as the space grew smaller and smaller.

“Are we there yet?” she said, half joking.

“Just about,” said the Doctor. “We have to be sure the skull will be completely encased. If I’m right, the energy that it emanates will be cut off. Since those creatures seem to be energized by the power of the skull, that should allow them to revert to inert corpses once again.”

“No more zombies, good plan.” Silver watched as the Doctor reached a small fissure and jammed the skull into the gap. Then he withdrew a stick of dynamite that he’d retrieved earlier and stuck it next to the skull.

“If you would do the honors?”

Silver pulled out a lighter and the sparking fuse made her hands shake. *Definitely* time to leave.

“Let’s go!” said the Doctor and the two scabbled away, heading back to Cayde as the minutes ticked by.

* * *

Cayde was finished and waiting to light the fuse when he heard the howling growing closer. He wondered if they’d ignore him, since he was one of them and all, or if they’d just tear

right into him anyway. Just then, the Doctor and Silver came running into the chamber and past him. The Doctor held onto his hat and cane and yelled back at Cayde.

“Light it and get out if you value your existence!”

Cayde struck a match, lit the fuse, and joined the two travelers.

“You realize we’re running right toward all those zombies?”

Silver looked at both of them as they ran up a steep passage. The Doctor’s mouth was a line.

“Oh yes, I know. Timing, Mr. Cayde. Timing is everything.”

* * *

The first explosion, the stick of dynamite next to the skull, went off as they ran, sending an echoing rumble as the rocks collapsed around the fissure and then the tunnel that led to the gap came crumbling down. The cavern began to shake as the disturbance shook loose rock and debris in some of the other passages.

“Sounds like we may not have even needed the rest of the dynamite, Doc,” said Cayde as they ran. Looking ahead, he saw an eerie green glow filtering through a passageway and casting light on the rocky wall ahead.

The zombies.

“Um, Doc, should we...”

The Doctor skidded to a halt as did the others, and they stood in the passage as the mine shuddered around them.

“The rest of that stuff is going to blow in a couple more minutes, Doc. I think we might really be...”

“Just a moment!” The Doctor held his finger to his lips as the howling rose. Silver reached for the Doctor’s arm, and he patted her hand. Withdrawing his pocket watch, he examined the face and calculated the elapsed time. The skull was sealed behind a considerable amount of rock, even deeper than it had been before. Given the amount of energy it had been emitting, the residual radiation possessed by the zombies, it should only be...

The glow ahead of them faded, and then they heard a softer sound that wasn’t collapsing rock. The Doctor replaced his watch and urged them on. Cayde whistled and Silver sighed heavily as they reached the far end of the passage and turned the corner.

Like puppets with their strings unceremoniously cut, the zombies had dropped as one to the ground, leaving nothing but piles of rotted flesh and bones. The corpses of Crawford lay in the dust, finally at peace.

“Not a minute to waste, there’s a considerably larger explosion on the way. It’s time to let the skull rest along with the dead of Crawford,” said the Doctor. “Let’s leave this place with all haste!”

The three travelers ran up and out, past the rotting flesh and shattered stone until they saw the night sky. Running away from the mine, they didn’t stop to look when the rumbling reached a crescendo and the entrance exploded outward in an orange-red ball of smoke and dust and flame. The ground shook as they kept running, but soon everything settled down. Where the mine entrance once stood, there was just a pile of huge boulders and earth. The Doctor finally stopped and took a breath, as did his companions...or at least Silver. Cayde just stood there.

Desperation Point was no more.

“So when it all comes down to it, we solved the whole thing by just blowin’ somethin’ up?” Cayde said.

“Wicked, eh?” said the Doctor
Silver looked quizzically at the Doctor “What?”
“Never mind,” the Doctor said. “Old habits.”

13: The Aftermath

“But wait a minute, what about...”

Cayde was cut off by a shriek. They turned to see the Shadow approaching them.

“You have proven to be far more trouble than my Lord and Master had foreseen, Time Lord! But you have only gained time. Do you really think I will be stopped by a simple wall of rock? First, I will destroy the three of you for your insult to my Lord, and then I will...”

“You’ll leave town quietly and never return,” said a new voice. It was Sheriff Hinton, who walked up behind the Shadow, framed by the burning town behind him. “You’ve destroyed everything these people built, and it’s my job to see things are put right.”

“Sheriff!” Silver was happy to see him alive, but Cayde took a step.

“I coulda sworn...”

“Not now, Cayde,” said the Doctor. “Sheriff Hinton, this...person is not someone you can simply apprehend! He is considerably more dangerous than anyone you have ever dealt with before.”

Heed the Time Lord’s words, human,” said the Shadow as he faced Hinton. “You are but an insect to one such as I.”

“Ah, well that’s where you went wrong, my friend,” said Hinton, and drew his gun. “Now who said I was human?”

“What?” said the Doctor.

“You take a message to your Lord and Master,” said Hinton. “The skull is off limits. He tried and failed. That’s it. No second chances.” He aimed at the Shadow’s chest.

“Now get out of my town.” He fired, and the bullet struck the Shadow, igniting him in an incendiary golden glow that engulfed him. The Shadow shrieked and vanished into nothingness. Hinton blew on the end of his gun and holstered the weapon.

“I think that wraps things up, don’t you think, Doctor?”

“I would say so,” the Doctor said, stepping up to Hinton as the others merely gaped. “But couldn’t you have done something sooner? All this waiting on the sidelines nonsense, it doesn’t do your cosmic reputation any good.”

Hinton smiled. “As I believe you once said Doctor, there’s no point in being grown up if you can’t be childish sometimes. As high as the stakes often are in our plane of existence, one can’t begrudge us enjoying the game.”

“Game? Game?! People died!”

“Please, Silver, not now.”

“Doc, what’s goin’ on here? How can you just...”

“Mr. Cayde, trust me,” said the Doctor. “Sheriff Hinton is after all the Guardian here...aren’t you, Sheriff?”

“This is true,” said Hinton. “Now that the game is over, it’s time to tidy up the board and put all the pieces back where they belong.”

Hinton closed his eyes and muttered something under his breath. As Silver watched in awe, a concussive wave of pure energy appeared around Hinton and radiated outward, encompassing the entire town behind him.

The corpses vanished and the damage to the buildings melted away. A moment later, it was daylight, and she saw familiar faces walking to and fro, attending to business and getting on with another day in Crawford. She could hear the tinkling of the piano in the saloon, the sound of hooves along the main road, the hustle and bustle of a mining town that had never witnessed such a nightmarish apocalypse.

“A bit *deus ex machina* of you, isn’t it?” said the Doctor.

“My dear Doctor, am I not entitled to employ exactly that device if I wish?”

“Wait just a second,” said Cayde. “I got a question. Um...if you don’t mind.”

Hinton looked expectantly at Cayde, a pleasant grin on his face.

“How come I’m still...”

“That was me, Mr. Cayde,” Hinton said. “When the Doctor sealed the skull back in its resting place, you should by all rights have fallen dead with the rest of the, shall we say, re-energized humans. But I shielded you from that. I believe your role in this matter deserved...special dispensation.”

“Hmm. Well thanks...I think.”

“And now I think it’s time you and Silver were moving on, Doctor. You too, Mr. Cayde. The town of Crawford has seen enough excitement for one millennium, and there are always Shadows to dispel in other times, other worlds. You should see to that, Doctor. The Key to Life will be safe here with me for the time being.”

“Very well then,” said the Doctor, nodding to Silver and pointing his cane off in the distance outside of town, where the TARDIS waited. Silver thought a moment and walked up to Hinton. She offered her hand, and he looked at it quizzically, then took her hand in his.

“Goodbye Miss Silver. You did well.”

“Are you really staying here?”

“In a way, Miss Silver, yes.”

“But you’re not really a sheriff, are you?”

Hinton smiled warmly and withdrew his hand.

“A sheriff is charged with protecting and preserving Life in his community, is he not? That is in fact my role.”

“I thought a sheriff was all about justice, morality,” said Silver. “You know, standing up for what’s right.”

“Ah, well, you might want to ask the Doctor about that. We all have our parts to play, after all. One day.” Hinton tipped his hat to the three travelers and walked back to Crawford. The Doctor put his arm around Silver’s shoulder and guided her to the TARDIS, but she turned to say goodbye to Cayde. He was already walking off in the other direction.

Not one for goodbyes, she thought. But then neither is the Doctor.

Silver turned back to Crawford and Hinton was nowhere to be seen. Even his footprints had vanished from the ground, and all she could see were the people of Crawford going about their business, oblivious to the horror that had befallen them and had now been swept away like the dust that swirled around their town and obscured it from Silver’s sight. Crawford itself was now indistinct, like a desert mirage fading into memory as the hum of the police box welcomed Silver home.

14: Another End, Another Beginning

Excerpt from Doctor Who and the Curse of the Jade Skull, written by D. E. Cayde, published by Taylor Publishing in New York, 1901

That was pretty much how it happened. Zombies and Time Lords and cosmic what-have-yous and a lot of stuff that just went completely over my head. When Hinton, or whatever he was, said it was time to go, I just went. Didn't say goodbye. Just started walkin'.

Flipped a coin and headed east. Figured I might find some work on the coast, maybe even a boat to take me across the ocean. Had a hankerin' to see Europe now. Learn a bit more about all this supernatural mumbo-jumbo, especially since I now had somethin' to do with it all. Us undead gotta stick together. Although with some of them bein' like that ol' Varney, well...maybe brotherhood ain't what I'm lookin' for.

I always thought there'd be a long road ahead of me, but now...well, I don't rightly know what's comin'. Even the Doctor couldn't tell me, and he seems like the type who's got an answer for everythin'.

One thing though. When we'd gotten out of the mine, and before that Shadow guy showed up the last time, the Doc told me that I was the only one of my kind he could remember that kept his human memories intact. He also wasn't too sure he should let me live, or whatever you call what I'm doing, but Silver talked him into it. She seemed kinda nervous about it too, so I'm guessin' when his back's up against the wall and his mind's made up, the Doc is capable of almost anythin'.

But as the Doc had gathered right from the very beginnin', I'm a pretty reliable guy. I promised I'd do my damndest to resist any urge to chew on other people. We had a laugh about that, but I'm actually kinda worried about what might happen. I guess I'll find out. I also have this strange feelin' that if I ever went south, I mean really turned ornery and all monster-like, the Doctor would show up again to sort things out.

So for now I'm gonna focus on what matters. Doin' a job, seein' the world, and most important, rememberin' who I am. Who I was. I gotta keep rememberin' no matter what. So let's go over this one more time.

The name's Cayde. Daniel Edward Cayde. D.E. for short. I'm a drifter, a gun for hire. A nobody with a name.

I'm also a zombie. A re-animated corpse, one of the walkin' dead. Some people might get all worked up about that, but me, I don't see it as a big problem. Livin's livin', even when you're dead.

Anyway, there's that long dusty road ahead. People to see. People to kill. With a little luck, they'll stay dead. Me, I'll just keep on walkin'.

Beats the alternative.

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