



Time Crystal Volume 1

by Wyken Seagrave

Episode 11

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by Wyken Seagrave

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Episode 11. The Balcony.

'Are you sure he's dead?' Sam said.

'Yes,' Marianne screamed. *Does he think I'm stupid? I can recognise a dead face when I see one.*

'I'm sorry. Stay calm, Marianne. Everything's going to be all right. Are you out of the stretcher?'

'Yes.'

'Are you safe? You won't fall will you?'

She looked down. 'No. I seem to be floating.' For a moment she felt dizzy then realised that the stretcher below her was slowly spinning round on the ends of the four yellow straps. As it spun the bottom part of the bubble turned with it and a blue light swept across Robert's body.

'I can see a blue light,' she said.

'Where's it coming from?'

'From under the flaps of the stretcher.'

She heard Sam say 'She can see a blue light, Lord,' and something inside her head seemed to shift to one side. Was he talking to God? Without thinking she began to pray quietly, her eyes closed. 'Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grâce. Le Seigneur est avec vous.' She took comfort from the words and guiltily began wondering how long it had been since she had said them.

'Michael thinks it's a piece of crystal. Try to get it, Marianne. It will help us.'

Michael? She pulled on the straps running down to the stretcher. *Was it Michael that he was calling Lord?* The stretcher began to float easily up towards her. The bottom half of the bubble moved too, coloured rings running down and closing behind the stretcher. The pattern on the top half of the bubble stayed in random blotches. Then she noticed a circular ridge where the two halves of the bubble met and realised she was looking through a round window, looking out of one bubble into another. A second bubble! The two bubbles overlapped and merged together at the ridge, making a shape like a figure of eight. The bottom bubble was centred on the stretcher, the top one on her abdomen. She was so engrossed in watching the ridge move towards her that the stretcher almost hit her. She had to fend it off, then grasp and hold it to stop it floating away.

She opened the orange covers and looked inside. Something was sticking up through the hard white plastic base, something that glowed pale blue, deep down inside, near where her feet had been.

'I can see you, Marianne!' Sam shouted excitedly. 'What can you see?'

'It looks like a piece of glass.'

'Can you get it?'

She pushed the flaps back and ran her fingers over the glass. It was smooth, with straight clean edges poking through the stretcher's base. It glowed with an inner light, casting shadows across the flaps.

'No, it's stuck in the plastic.'

'You must.' Sam's voice was urgent. 'Michael says you must get it.'

She tried again but her trembling fingers could not pull it out. With a sudden inspiration she turned the stretcher over and reached across the bottom of the base. A larger chunk of the glass was sticking out. She grasped it and pulled. It came away in her hand.

'I've got it, Sam, I've got it!'

'Good girl! Now you can escape. Use the rope to get up to the surface.'

With a shudder of relief she put the glass into her jacket pocket. The two bubbles seemed to merge into one. She pulled on the rope and moved quickly away from Robert, eager to get help but feeling guilty about leaving him like this. *He died trying to help me and I was poking him.* She glanced back. Robert's dead face was slipping away behind her, disappearing from sight as the coloured ripples closed over him. *What killed him?*

She pulled herself along the rope as fast as she could, hand over hand. It wasn't hard work and the amazing thing was that she didn't fall back down again. It was as if she was weightless, floating like the stretcher. The red and green rings ran quickly past her. It wasn't until she reached the balcony that she realised she was pulling the wrong rope.



Something caught Sam's eye, he stopped staring at the pink mobile phone jiggling about in Marianne's pocket and glanced up. A tiny black speck was moving slowly across the brown triangular gap near the

top of the cave where one crystal seemed to be missing. He frowned and leaned towards it but it didn't get any bigger. It was moving very slowly.

He heard a muffled groan and his eyes flipped back to Marianne's crystal. The phone had slipped behind her handkerchief which was streaked with blue highlights.

'Have you got to the roof yet, Marianne?' he said.

'No. I've come to the balcony. I was pulling the wrong rope.'

The balcony! Sam immediately thought of the leader of the firefighters George Gabor. George was the obvious person to do what Michael wanted, powerfully built and an expert at dealing with danger who had already shown gritty resolution when he came down to rescue them after the stairs collapsed. The last time Sam had seen him George had been standing on one of the balconies that ran along the tall cavern wall, controlling the stretcher as it swung out towards the huge ATLAS detector. Catriona had been there too, standing between George and the young man Alex Karolyi. 'Is George Gabor there?' Sam said.

'I don't know. I can't see anything outside this bubble. I'm going back.'

What bubble does she mean? 'No, wait Marianne! Let me see. Take the crystal out of your pocket.' He saw Marianne's hand come into the pocket and feel round for the crystal. The handkerchief fell away and Sam glimpsed Marianne's face, concrete dust greying her matted hair, her cheeks hollow, her eyes sunk in two dark wells of pain.

Behind her he could see the white rope dangling from the ratchet device George had been using to control the stretcher. It was tied to one of the beams supporting the upper balconies. Beyond that he could dimly see the ATLAS detector looming in the darkness of the cavern but very little of the balcony was visible from this angle. He leaned sideways to get a better view, the scene kaleidoscoped and he was looking along the balcony. Two people were leaning over the handrail. The nearest one was Catriona. Her blouse looked as if it was completely covered in concrete dust and her hair was an unruly bale of pale grey straw. Sam was elated to see her, but also puzzled. Why was she as colourless as a black-and-white photograph, her body rigid, her mouth locked open? Alex Karolyi stood beside her, also grey and unmoving, a look of horror fixed on his face. Sam couldn't see George Gabor.

'What d'you think's happened to them?' Sam said.

'Who?'

'Catriona and Alex.'

'Alex? Where is he?'

'Just along the balcony. Can't you see them?'

'No. I can't see anything outside the bubble.'

'How big's this bubble?'

'About three metres across.'

Sam's eyes followed the handrail. It changed from blue to black a short distance away. Everything beyond that point was colourless. Could that point mark the edge of this bubble? 'They're just along the balcony, Marianne. Can you move along it?' Now that he had found Catriona he could not let Marianne go without checking whether she was still alive.

He saw Marianne's hand reach out and pull the handrail. The coloured boundary moved forward.

'I need two hands,' she said. Her fingers wrapped around the crystal, she put it into her pocket and Sam glanced up at the triangular gap in his cave. The little black shape was still moving across the brown background, a bit bigger than before. Sam squinted, wishing his glasses hadn't broken, and what he saw made goose bumps break out on his neck and run down his body into his legs.

Sam had always assumed that Catriona's story of a man and a bee coming out of a spaceship and flying across the sky on the night of her father's death were some sort of hysterical illusion, the imaginings of a little girl desperate to explain a horrible accident. Perhaps also it was her way of trying to get over some sort of guilt which, Sam assumed, she might be feeling about her father leaving home. He had even considered taking her to a child psychologist he knew, but she hadn't persisted long with this story and never mentioned it after he married Brigit.

Now he was standing in a cage outside the Universe so he knew that anything was possible. And when he squinted up out of that cage what he saw made him certain that her story was true. For through the blur of his eyelashes Sam saw the unmistakable shape of an insect, with three parts to its body. From the way it flew he was almost certain it was a bee, going slowly back and forth across the brown gap as if it were looking for something.

Sam suddenly and unequivocally knew that Catriona had been telling the truth all those years ago. He felt like crying for the poor little girl. She had been telling the truth and nobody had believed her and she had somehow managed to cope with it and grow up into a fairly normal sort of teenager. His respect for her had never been as strong as it was at that moment.

I think it would have driven me mad to be in that situation.

Then, as he squinted harder, Sam saw another one of them. This one flew out of the triangle and took on a blue hue as it went behind one of the crystal walls. *So they're outside the cave. Wonder how far away they are?* He searched the other crystals near the gap and had found about a dozen more of the insects when he heard a scream. Sam's head jerked round and he looked again into Marianne's crystal. It was still in her pocket.

'Don't worry, Catriona,' Marianne said. 'It's only me, Marianne Schneider. Look at me, Catriona.'

So she's alive! He heard Catriona yell 'She's floating! She's floating like the man!' then he heard her whimper like a whipped dog and he knew exactly what she was thinking and his heart broke for her. She must be going through a real trauma.

Alex said 'Marianne? How did you get up here? And what the hell is that freaking thing?'

'It's all right, Alex,' Marianne said. 'It's just some sort of bubble. It won't hurt you.' *So Alex can see it too,* Sam thought. 'I need your help, Alex.' Marianne seemed to be gasping for breath. 'There's something wrong with the baby. I need to see a doctor urgently. I think...' She breathed deeply. 'I think the baby might be coming.'

'Oh no!' Catriona groaned.

'Shall I go for a doctor?' Alex said. 'How long have we got?'

'The contractions have to be about two minutes apart before the baby comes,' Marianne said.

'And how far apart are they now?'

'I don't know. I've just had one. Can you time them for me?'

'Little Kata can do that, can't you sweetie? It'll give her something to do.'

Catriona groaned then said 'Have you got a watch?'

Good girl! Catty, Sam thought. *She's coping with this really well.*

Alex said 'Sure' at the same time that Marianne said 'Here'.

There was a pause. 'Which one's right?' Catriona said. *Sounds like she's got both their watches now.*

'What do you mean?' Alex said. 'Let me see. Oh yes, I see. Your watch stopped at three minutes past eight, Marianne. Better use mine, Kata.'

'All right,' Catriona groaned. 'So it's twenty-four minutes past eleven. What happens now?'

'We have to wait for the next one,' Marianne said.

There was silence. Sam longed to see Catriona. *She sounds as if she's in a bad state, but at least she's alive, and Alex too. Thank God! He'll be able to help Marianne. Wonder if their colour's come back?* He moved his head away from the crystal and said 'Marianne has revived Catriona and Alex, Lord.'

'Excellent!' Michael said. 'Tell her to give the spare crystal to Karolyi, and tell Karolyi to collect all the other crystals he can find and bring them down the tunnel. Tell him...What's that noise?'

Sam listened. A low droning seemed to be vibrating inside his head. He looked up. The insect was closer now and clearer. The head had two long antennae on the front and two large eyes on the sides. It was flying straight towards him.

'There's a wasp or something up there, Lord.' Sam didn't want to call it a bee. If Michael really had been there on the night of John O'Brien's death then he might know something about them. *Let's see what he calls them.*

'A wasp? Where?' Michael's long body arched so his face lifted upward. 'Holy shit! They're coming! Tell Karolyi to be quick, for God's sake Samuel!'

Sam turned back to Marianne's crystal with a chill churning his stomach. *That sounded genuine,* he thought. *I don't think he's ever seen anything like this before. So may be he didn't see the bee that Catty saw that night.*

'Is it cold in here?' Catriona moaned. 'My feet feel frozen.'

Sam called her but she didn't seem to hear him.

'I think you need to get closer,' Marianne said. 'You know the fireman Robert? He's dead.'

'Oh no!' Catriona wailed. 'Poor Robert!'

Sam called Alex and Marianne but they just kept talking.

'And what is that coloured thing?' Alex said.

‘The bubble?’ Marianne said. ‘That’s what I’m trying to—’
Sam gave up and moved his head away from the crystal.
‘They can’t hear me, Lord,’ Sam said. ‘The crystal is in Marianne’s pocket.’
‘Keep trying,’ Michael said. Sam could hardly hear him, the buzzing was so loud, then without warning it stopped. The silence seemed louder than the noise had been. Sam looked up but the insect was nowhere to be seen. ‘Hurry, Samuel. If that thing finds us we’re done for.’