



Time Crystal Volume 1

by Wyken Seagrave

Episode 13

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by Wyken Seagrave

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Episode 13. Hatching.

Sam lay curled up on the floor of his transparent crystal cave trying not to tremble as he watched the monstrous head of the giant bee feeding Michael. Its two jaws gaped open at the bottom of its head and a long beak-like structure emerged from between them. This tapered down to a narrow tube which Michael had taken in his mouth. He was now vigorously sucking like a thirsty baby at the breast. Sam was so disgusted he could not watch. He looked up at the head towering over him like an upside-down mountain, wondering why he could not see its body.

That can't be the same as the bee Catty saw, Sam thought. If something that size had appeared over Dublin the whole world would have known about it.

It was clearly much larger than this pink planet and Sam assumed it would have been larger than the Earth itself. Then he heard a series of melodious squeaks and chirps. At the same time the two long antennae which sprouted from between its eyes waved up and down as if conducting an orchestra. The sounds seemed to emanate from the two short jaws. *The bee's singing!*

Michael too was obviously listening intently for he sometimes stopped feeding and tried to make a few sounds of his own before he returned to sucking. At first his singing attempts were no more than human-like hums but Michael learned fast. He soon mastered the low-pitched buzzes, then the high chirps and almost inaudible squeaks. Within ten minutes he was breaking off feeding to repeat short phrases. He and the insect started playing a game. They echoed each other's sounds, their songs growing longer and more elaborate.

They're not just making noises, Sam thought. Those sounds mean something. It's as if they're talking.

There were no repetitions now; every phrase was different. The melody was less varied but the noises were complex, with new sounds appearing, high pitched squeaks and long oscillating chirrups. Sam was watching Michael's face, wondering how he was making these noises, when he noticed his cheeks, the ones on his face, were fat and taut and shiny. *He's getting fatter!* Michael's sides bulged out like a balloon that was about to pop.

As it talked to him the insect continuously stroked Michael's long body with the hairy antennae that reached down from its face. The periods of talking were getting longer while the drinking grew shorter until Michael stopped feeding altogether. Then the insect's song got faster and louder and the antennae strokes increased to match, long strong strokes from Michael's face down the whole length of his bloated body. Michael closed his eyes, as if he was enjoying it, he moaned softly and his face turned pink. Waves of contraction followed the antennae down his body, his face turned redder then he groaned, a huge ball of excrement flopped out of his backside onto the net and a thick stream of urine began to splash over the crystal pipes as if a firefighter's hose had been turned on. Sam could see it dripping down towards the pink ocean far below.

The insect's antennae reached forward and wafted above the steaming pile of excrement which lay on the net. There was a silence and for a moment the only noise was Michael's last few trickles, then the insect sang a short, melodious song, loud and vigorous as a fanfare. Michael listened and began to sing the same song. Then he began to giggle. The giggle became a laugh. He laughed so much he almost fell off the net and the insect had to steady him with its front legs. With a final chirp the insect's head lifted and grew smaller, then the rest of its body came into view as if it was emerging from behind a wall. It turned, gave one last squeak, opened its wings and flew rapidly away until it was so small Sam could hardly see it.

Michael lay on the net dripping and softly groaning. Then his mouth closed, he frowned deeply, his face grew dark and he began to make low, long, repetitive grunts through his nose. The frowning crevice between his eyebrows slowly deepened and spread up his forehead. Sam could hear a crackling as of a drum-skin splitting in half. A crack spread rapidly down Michael's back and Sam saw something white and glistening protrude through the gap like the inner-tube of a split bicycle tyre. Michael was still grunting loudly and with every grunt there was another crack and the white inner-tube protruded more, pushing the two halves of his skin apart. Suddenly his eyes disappeared, dark holes appearing in their place, and his face lost all expression, turning into a death-mask.

A few moments later the inner-tube began to wriggle and bend. It lifted upwards and Michael's new body emerged from his old skin. He was white and segmented like a maggot. His face was still there but

he had lost his arms and legs. Sam wasn't sure about the rest. The maggot was lying on top of its old skin, still breathing hard, swelling as it pumped air into its body. When it stopped a few minutes later it was huge, much larger than the airship had been. Its limbs had gone. Sam could see them sticking out of the sides of the shed skin. The swelling slowed and finally the maggot lay still, panting, its white skin darkening to creamy-grey. For a while Michael seemed to sleep. Sam looked at him in horror.

What's happening to you, Michael Zhang? You're certainly not human any more, but then you're no god either. Call you Lord? Call you a maggot! By Jesus I wish I'd died in that black hole. This is a living nightmare, you bloated with food, me starving to death, people in crystals, Marianne pregnant and injured and with no doctor. Maybe this is what hell's like?

Sam didn't believe in God and only went to church when he had to accompany Brigit on some official business, but to his own surprise he found a prayer running through his mind and a passionate desire for help in his heart. *Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.* He listened to the words then began fervently speaking them aloud, his hands clasped together like a child in one of his own school assemblies, half-ashamed of himself for his weakness but hoping against hope that there really was a God, a real God who could hear him and do something to help. But he didn't think there was. *If anyone's going to do anything to help it has to be Alex Karolyi.* He sighed, looked up, checked that the brown sky was clear of nearby insects, stood and began peering into the crystals. When he looked into the crystal Marianne had found he heard people talking in a foreign language. He stared at the yellow material visible in the crystal and listened for a moment, trying to work out what they were saying. The crystal was obviously in Alex's pocket, and one of the voices was his, but who was he talking to? Sam did not understand a word but soon recognised George Gabor's deep bear-like growl. He was about to call out to them when he heard a soft voice above him say:

'What's happening Sam?'

The thought *It's God!* flashed through Sam's mind and he spun round. What he saw was Michael's gigantic face smiling down at him from the front of the maggot's body. Shocked at its enormity and closeness, Sam slipped and fell to the crystal floor. He lay on his back looking up at it. The maggot must have crawled carefully and silently over the crystal network because Sam had felt no vibrations and heard nothing. He could see its enormous yellow teeth. He could not get out of his mind the thought that it was going to eat him. The maggot wriggled closer until it was smiling directly down at him as if it was amused at Sam's obvious discomfort. 'Don't worry, Sam,' it said softly. It still sounded like Michael. 'Everything's all right. What's happening on Earth?'

Sam could hear the fear trembling in his own voice as he said 'Alex has revived George Gabor, Lord.'

'George Gabor? That is very good! Well done!'

'Thank you, Lord.'

'Look, Sam, call me Michael. You and I have to work together. We are the only humans here.'

Human? You're not human!

Michael smiled as if he could read Sam's thoughts. 'I am not going to hurt you,' he said softly. 'How are you feeling? You look a bit rough.'

Sam was confused. Michael had changed from a devil pretending to be a god into a maggot pretending to be his friend. But Sam was in need of a friend right now. 'I feel terrible. I don't understand what's going on or where we are or what's happening to us.' He meant 'to you' but was afraid to say it.

'I think it's time you got an explanation. You deserve to know. I've learned a lot in the past ten minutes. We are on a planet called Ent.'

'Ent? Our Universe is inside a planet?'

'Not inside. On. Oh, you think it's that?' Michael's body writhed and his front segment tossed dismissively towards the pink planet. 'No, Ent is far larger than that. Our Universe and you and I and Oesirisi we are all on Ent.'

'Ersi who?'

'That's the creature we saw. She's an Entroilian. As you saw, invertebrates here are highly evolved. They have language and apparently—'

'So wait a minute. The Earth's a planet in our Universe, right? But we've come out of that Universe onto another planet called Ent? Is that right? So where is this planet?'

'It's all around us. No doubt you'll see it soon. According to Oesirisi there are lots of little universes here. Somehow the Entroilians create these universes and then wait until creatures inside evolve to be

sufficiently intelligent to emerge, like you and me although she didn't notice you, Sam. She called me an Emergent.'

'I still don't get it. How can that pink thing be our whole Universe? What are all these blue pipes? And why did you break one of them? How can I see things in these crystals and, and why is it so important that we get somebody to—'

'Woa, Sam, slow down. One thing at a time! Let's take it from the top. You remember the rain falling out of these pipes when we first arrived? They were time quanta. When they fell into the Universe they built up a permanent record of history, like geological sediment on the surface of the planet. That's what that pink ocean is, a record of history, and apparently it's important for Entroilians. Oesirisi said that a universe historian will come along soon and study those records to find out how we evolved.'

That sort of made sense to Sam. He took his courage in his hands and said 'And what about your body? How did it get changed? Why were you changed and I wasn't? We both fell into the same black hole.'

'When we came out of our Universe I swallowed some of that pink ocean. That was how I attained my wisdom and became an Entroilian egg.'

'You're an egg?' Sam gasped.

'I was an egg. Now Oesirisi has fed me and I've been transformed into an Entroilian larva. Over the next couple of weeks I will grow and pupate and metamorphose into an Entroilian drone.'

'So you're turning into a wasp?'

'Well, Entroilians have a lot in common with bees on Earth, yes.'

'And you don't mind?'

'Mind? I'm honoured. Oesirisi said I had King's Shit! It sounds like I'm going to be one of the senior members of Entroilian society. It's all to do with the genes, apparently.'

Sam's mind just could not cope with this. He decided to move on to another of his burning questions. 'Why did you break the pipe?'

'I didn't want the whole Earth getting sucked into the black hole. I guessed that if I broke the machine, time would stop in the Universe. That was—'

'So time has stopped in the Universe?'

'Yes, everywhere except near one of the fragments of crystal. That was the only way I could think of to stop the whole world being absorbed, and many more people, perhaps millions, following us here. Looks like I managed to save the world but then the net trapped me and sent out a signal to let the Entroilians know I was here. I hadn't anticipated that.'

'And why do you want me to make somebody collect the crystals and bring them here?'

'I was hoping that if I got the crystal back I could fix the pipes and restore the machine before the makers arrived. All I knew then was that the Universe was a machine that somebody had built. I thought they would treat us as scientific specimens and tear us to pieces, and perhaps destroy the universe. That still worries me, what this universe historian is going to do. I wanted somebody to bring the crystal here in the hope that if I could fix the machine the makers wouldn't bother to come. But it's too late for that and anyway these Entroilians seem to be fairly benign. Oesirisi said that the historian would not destroy the Universe, just examine it and keep a record. Then they will wait for more Emergents. This seems to be part of their life cycle, but I couldn't really understand what she was saying. I don't think she really understood it herself. So that's it, you know as much as I do. Are you feeling any better now?'

'Yes, a bit better now I understand, but I still don't feel good. I'm worried about Catriona and Marianne.'

'Of course you are. I think we'll have to wait to see what the universe historian says. She might be able to fix the machine and restart time, but I don't see how she can do that without the Earth being sucked into the black hole. In the meantime you need to eat. I've fed your mind, now I'm going to feed your body. Stand back.'

Sam stood up and moved to the opposite side of the floor. Michael lifted his front few segments upwards, bent them down so his mouth was above the gap in the crystal cave and his body began to heave. A drop of amber liquid appeared on his lips and began to drip into the cave like a goblet of thick spit. It splattered heavily onto the floor where it formed itself into a glistening sweet-smelling golden dome. In spite of his revulsion at the way this substance had been produced, and his fear that he would become like Michael, Sam's mouth watered at the smell. It was hours since breakfast.

'Don't worry, Sam. You won't become like me, if that's what you're afraid of. Go ahead. Try it.'