**The Crystal of Aztares**

The Doctor was furious. That was an unusual emotion for him. Irritated, yes. Irritating, oh definitely, yes!

But outright fury was something Sarah-Jane Smith hadn’t seen in either of the incarnations of The Doctor she had known so well.

The reason for the fury was a small, blue-white light flashing urgently on the TARDIS communications array.

Sarah-Jane recognised the signal. It was the one The Doctor had grudgingly installed as a compromise between his desire to roam the universe and his promise to be available as UNIT’s scientific advisor.

The Brigadier was calling him across the cosmos.

He was needed back on Earth in the late twentieth century.

“It IS only the second time the Brig has used the recall signal,” she pointed out soothingly.

The Doctor was not in a mood to be soothed.

“Recall! It is NOT a recall signal. I am a Time Lord. I don’t answer summonses. I am at nobody's beck and call. That signal is strictly for emergencies.”

“Then it must BE an emergency,” Sarah-Jane reasoned. “The Brig isn’t one to panic over nothing. He wouldn’t call you if it wasn’t really necessary. Last time, after all, the Zygons were trying to take over Earth. It must be something just as important.”

The Doctor made a noise something like ‘hmmph', but his anger was subsiding and he reached for the switch that transferred the signal’s origin coordinates to the drive control.

“The Brigadier is not at Headquarters,” The Doctor remarked, studying the coordinate after engaging the new destination. “Looks like he's somewhere in Europe... Switzerland, I believe. You’d better dress for snowy slopes. “

Sarah-Jane harboured a suspicion that she ought to dress for the Caribbean, given the TARDIS’s usual inaccuracy with exact destinations. She changed into a pair of ankle boots but stuck with the business-like skirt suit she was already wearing.

And it seemed to be the right kind of outfit for the cool, bright but not especially wintry weather they encountered as they stepped out of the TARDIS. Sarah-Jane breathed deeply and looked out over a sparkling lake Geneva to the mountains on the other side. It was a beautiful, tranquil sight.

But that tranquil view was misleading. When she turned around there was a scene of utter devastation.

The smoking ruins of a large, once white-walled building literally looked as if a bomb had hit it. The fact that soldiers were carefully picking through the rubble certainly suggested the aftermath of an act of terrorism.

But the soldiers wore the powder blue berets of UNIT, the international military taskforce dedicated to protecting Earth from alien interference. They didn’t deal with ordinary terrorism.

“What happened here?” Sarah-Jane asked aloud, but really not expecting an answer.

“If it turns out to be a gas leak I am going to give the Brigadier a piece of my mind,” The Doctor said.

“It wasn’t a gas leak,” said a familiar voice. Sarah-Jane looked around and smiled at Warrant Officer Benton whose rugged chin dimpled as he returned the smile.

“Miss Smith, Doctor... His nibs said you’d arrive here. He wanted you to see ‘ground zero’ before talking to him. I'm to drive you to HQ when you’re ready.”

“I'm ready,” The Doctor decided. He lined the sonic screwdriver up with one of the few standing pieces of wall and took a reading of some kind before turning towards the khaki coloured Land Rover with UNIT insignia on the roof. Sarah-Jane slid beside him in the back seat as Benton took the wheel.

“A bomb did NOT drop on that building,” The Doctor commented in a matter of fact tone. “The seat of the explosion was inside, pushing those heavy walls outwards.”

“The Brigadier thought the same,” Benton admitted.

“What was that building?” Sarah-Jane asked. “Some sort of army building? An armoury, or….”

An accidental explosion in a room where live shells and ammunition was stored might happen, though not if safety regulations were followed. Then again, what she mentally dubbed ‘ordinary’ terrorism made any part of an army facility into targets these days. It could have been the dormitory block or a gymnasium.

“Nothing to do with the military at all, Miss,” Benton answered. “I suppose you’ll know as much as we do when you’ve talked to the Brigadier, so no harm in saying. It was a convent.”

“A convent!” Sarah-Jane was appalled. What kind of target for terrorism was that? “Oh… no… not a school?”

“Not so as I know,” Benton answered quickly. “Just women in very unfashionable clothes. But that’s bad enough. Civilian deaths always are. We’re here in Switzerland on ‘manoeuvres’, but we felt and saw the explosion from ten miles away around the lake. We were the first on the scene to try to help. But… you saw what it was like.”

Sarah-Jane didn’t say anything else. She had a feeling Benton didn’t want to talk about it. He might have been a career soldier, but that didn’t make him immune to shock in a situation like this.

The ten miles were easily covered in the Land Rover. Sarah-Jane looked with interest at the big, beautiful mansion that was UNIT’s Geneva headquarters. She had heard talk about it often, usually when The Brigadier was here rather than the UK headquarters, but she had never even seen a picture of it. There were ordinary, Barrack style buildings behind it, but this lovely house with carefully kept gardens was clearly the main focal point.

The Brigadier was in the hallway, trying not to look as if he had been anxious about The Doctor’s arrival.

“Come this way,” he said, heading for a wide, sweeping staircase. “You saw the ruins….”

“We did,” The Doctor answered.

“What kind of bomb DID that?” Sarah-Jane again asked.

“Miss Smith,” The Brigadier answered in a tone best described as ‘terse’. “I’ve been a soldier a long time. I’ve seen the results of bombs dropped from planes, artillery attacks, bombs planted inside buildings, bombs in cars left outside buildings. What happened at the convent is not like any ordinary bomb blast.”

“You…don’t mean it was nuclear?” Sarah-Jane gasped.

“Can’t be,” The Doctor answered her. “No radiation. I checked.”

“So did I,” The Brigadier told him. “My men wouldn’t be there unprotected if there was any doubt. Besides….”

He opened a door on the middle floor of the house and held it for The Doctor and Sarah-Jane to enter.

They noted at once that the room was fitted out as an infirmary. There were hospital beds with curtains that could be pulled around and hooks for medical charts. The window was open for healthy fresh air but the smell of disinfectant wasn’t quite dispelled.

There were three people in the room. One, a woman, was a patient, lying asleep or unconscious, in the only occupied bed. The other, sitting at her side was a priest who was reading softly from a leather bound bible. He might well have been the reason why a crucifix was hung above the headboard alongside the slim receptacle holding a thermometer. He looked up briefly at the new arrivals, frowned, then turned back to his reading.

“That’s Father Dominic Sinclair,” The Brigadier said very quietly but in irritated tones. “He wasn’t asked to be here, but he came anyway.”

The third person was dressed in a doctor’s white coat and when he turned towards the visitors he smiled widely.

“Harry!” Sarah-Jane cried and ran to hug him.

“Doctor Sullivan,” The Doctor said with a nod as of one professional to another. In his own environment, in the TARDIS, or on alien worlds, he had teased the young navy surgeon mercilessly, but this was Harry’s proper place, a doctor in charge of a patient and he showed him due respect.

“So, Lethbridge-Stewart called you in?” Harry asked. “You’ll be wanting to see my patient?”

The Doctor hadn’t even considered that until now.

“She is a victim of the bombing?” Sarah-Jane asked.

“The only survivor,” The Brigadier explained.

“Your opinion of her condition would be welcome, Doctor,” Sullivan said. It was a matter of protocol. Another consultant needed his permission to approach the bedside.

The Doctor pulled his sonic screwdriver from his pocket and used it in analysis mode to examine the patient. Her age was hard to determine, perhaps between seventeen and twenty years old. She had short blonde hair and a petite, waiflike figure that reminded The Doctor of his own granddaughter, Susan, or the lively teenager, Vicki, who had been his fellow TARDIS traveller a long time ago.

There were no obvious wounds, not even bruises, but she was in a deep coma.

“Very little brain activity,” The Doctor noted. “Yet there seems to be no concussion, no haematoma. There is no reason why she shouldn’t wake up in the fullness of time. She escaped the building in this condition?”

“She did,” Harry answered. “Her clothes were ripped to shreds, but there wasn’t a scratch on her.”

“A miracle,” said the priest. “It is not for us to wonder why or how, only to marvel that it is so.”

“Do you know this young lady?” The Doctor asked, passing over a debate on the nature of miracles.

“I was sent by the Bishop of Geneva to make sure she is being treated in a Christian manner,” the Priest said.

“She is in the care of a British Navy surgeon,” Sarah-Jane said. “That goes without saying. But does she have a name?”

“She is Sister Maria Immaculata,” the priest answered. “She has lived at the Convent of St. Wiborada by the Lake since she was eight years old, when her religious visions first came to the attention of the Church.”

Sarah-Jane’s first thought was ‘poor girl, shut up in a nunnery for life’, but the priest didn’t look like he would appreciate such a comment, so she held her tongue.

“Visions?” The Doctor queried. “Precognitive or merely messages from Heaven?”

“There is nothing ‘mere’ about the word of God passed to mortals through an organ like Sister Maria,” the priest answered with a wooden expression. “But many of the visions HAVE, indeed, been of a precognitive nature. Some of her predictions have already come to fruition. Others… if they do come to pass in fullness of time, the godless will find it too late to repent.”

“Doctor….” The Brigadier handed him a sheet of paper. It was a transcript of words the young nun had apparently spoken in her coma. One particular word attracted The Doctor’s attention.

“Daleks… She has seen Daleks in her visions and mentioned them by name?”

“No!” Sarah-Jane gasped.

“Yes,” The Doctor contradicted her. “This… she has spoken of a plague that decimated the human population followed by an invasion of Daleks who enslaved the people….”

“Yes,” The Brigadier agreed. “It doesn’t correspond to any of our experiences of the Daleks, all of which, in any case, are sealed files of which she should not have had sight.”

“The invasion doesn’t happen until 2163,” The Doctor replied. The Brigadier opened his mouth to ask a question then thought better of it. Besides, The Doctor was looking closely at the patient’s hands.

“What is she holding?” he asked.

“A Holy rosary, of course,” Father Sinclair responded.

The Doctor had already noted the beads looped around her fingers, but they had obviously been added by the priest. There was something else closed within her palm.

Very gently he lifted her hand and prised open the fingers. He held up a crystal the size of a hen’s egg and a glowing orange colour.

“What is that? It can’t be real?” Sarah-Jane commented.

“That depends on your definition of ‘real’,” The Doctor answered. “It is not one of the highly compressed compounds of carbon and other minerals prized by humans. But it is certainly a very real and very potent crystal.”

“Not one of those wretched things from Metebelis Three?” The Brigadier asked.

“Wrong colour,” The Doctor answered as he looked into the heart of the glowing crystal. “Very interesting, indeed. Very….”

His expression changed as he brought the crystal right up to his left eye and stared into it.

“This isn’t any old crystal….” he said. “I wonder just HOW she came to be holding it.”

“Why? What is it?” Sarah-Jane asked.

“Possibly a miracle,” The Doctor answered. “If I’m right. Sullivan, have you taken blood samples from this girl?”

“Yes,” he answered. “But the lab is in Geneva. The results haven’t come back, yet.”

“When they do, I expect they’ll be a puzzle to you,” The Doctor predicted. He turned to Father Sinclair. “What do you know of this girl’s family?”

“How is that relevant to what has happened, here?” the Priest answered.

“It is VERY relevant, though in ways you may not be able to appreciate.”

“Nothing is known about her family,” the Priest conceded. “She was placed in a Catholic orphanage as a baby. When her special talents became known, she was transferred to the convent. The Church is her only family, and the only one she has ever needed.

“Hmmph,” The Doctor replied to that. “Tell me, Brigadier, did your men find any other bodies or body parts in the wreckage?”

“No, we didn’t,” The Brigadier answered. “That’s another odd thing. There were some fifty nuns who ought to have been in their dorms or barracks or… whatever they call their sleeping quarters….”

“Cells,” Sarah-Jane supplied.

“The ferocity of that explosion….” Harry interjected. “Anyone near the seat of it would have been more or less vaporised…. There would be nothing to find except possibly blood stains. But… still… we ought to have found body parts further away.”

“If I’m right, your patient was at the centre of the blast,” The Doctor said.

“Impossible,” Harry and The Brigadier said together.

“Not if what happened is what I think happened,” The Doctor answered.

“A miracle,” the Priest said again. “Doubters will never understand.”

The Doctor sat down in a chair and pulled one up for Sarah-Jane. “Brigadier, Harry. Sit down, both of you. Let me tell you all a story. You might not believe it, Father Sinclair, but just bear in mind what you just said about doubters and stay quiet till I’m done.”

The Brigadier and Harry both sat, though both very upright and alert in case they were needed. The Doctor leaned back in his seat as if about to read them all to sleep.

“The Aztares, from a planet in the Ganymede sector, were a very remarkable people,” he began. “They were physically beautiful, pure of mind, heart and body. They lived a peaceful life of philosophy and poetry. They all had the gift of foresight.”

“You mean… telling the future?” Sarah-Jane asked. “All of them?”

“Yes. It varied, of course. Some were better at it than others. The best at it could foresee up to a month ahead. Some just got a sense of déjà vu when their dreams caught up with them.”

Father Sinclair looked dubious, but The Doctor gave him a glare that silenced any comment.

“Ok… so far,” The Brigadier said about the tale. “But I get the feeling there’s going to be some kind of disaster on the horizon.”

“A woman who had been thought of as one of the weaker foretellers suddenly started to have stronger predictions than anyone ever had before. The lady told people that a war was coming. Terrible invaders were going to come and wage war on the peaceful Aztares. Of course, they didn’t believe her. None of their greatest leaders could see such a thing in the future. They dismissed her claims.”

“I bet the ‘leaders’ were all men,” Sarah-Jane commented with the wounds of a confirmed feminist in her tone.

“I don’t know,” The Doctor answered. “This is all from the Time Lord archives. I’ve never been there. The point is, they stopped the young woman from making her predictions known, in case it caused panic. They said the visions were false. What they didn’t know, until it was almost too late, was that her visions were much further into the future. She saw nearly two years ahead. Eventually, they, too, saw the same visions, but by then it was too late. They couldn’t even evacuate the most vulnerable of the people. Their solar system was already under siege. Any attempt to get ships away would have seen them blown out of the sky. Eventually the invasion came. The Xtari were ruthless. They killed millions... mostly those with only low level foresight. The rest were taken prisoner and forced to make predictions for Xtari warfleets, to ensure their success in battle.”

“That’s terrible,” The Brigadier said. “But what does that have to do with what happened here?”

“There was always a rumour… a legend… that the woman who had made the prediction had left Aztares long before the invasion. It is also believed she was with child. I strongly suspect that Sister Maria is that child.”

“A super-child left on Earth to avoid disaster on the home world. I think that’s been done before,” The Brigadier observed with a wry smile. Harry laughed, too.

“Nevertheless, I believe it was what happened. Her precognition is even stronger than her mother’s. She saw events that are centuries away in Earth’s future. That isn’t surprising. Such gifts are likely to increase exponentially each generation. Besides, I think she may have seen something happening much sooner than that.”

“You mean…. What happened at the convent?” Harry asked. “But she didn’t try to escape. She was there in the thick of it.”

“She stayed to save everyone,” The Doctor said. “Let’s see what she has to say about it.”

“She’s in a coma,” Sarah-Jane pointed out.

“She’s ready to wake up,” The Doctor asserted. He took the young woman’s hand, stroking it gently. Harry Sullivan gasped in surprise. He had tried everything to revive the poor girl, but The Doctor just stroked her hand, speaking quietly. Sister Maria’s eyelids flickered and she gave a soft sigh. Slowly she opened her eyes fully and looked around.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” The Doctor said to her.

“I….” Sister Maria looked at her hands and groaned in despair.

“No, its all right. I’ve got it safe,” The Doctor assured her. “We’ll deal with that later. You must tell me how you knew what to do, some time. The crystal isn’t Aztares technology. But just lie quiet for a moment. You must have the explosion still ringing in your ears.”

Sister Maria nodded, perhaps slightly surprised to be alive, even more so to be talking to somebody who understood why she was alive.

While she struggled to find something to say Father Sinclair stood up abruptly. He strode towards the door. The Brigadier headed him off.

“You’re leaving? I thought you were concerned for this young woman?”

“This…. She… Is NOT…. If what I have heard is true…. She is not even a Human being… let alone a CHRISTIAN. I am not… responsible… for abominations.”

“Sit down,” Sarah-Jane told him before The Brigadier had a chance to draw breath. “I’m not sure what Sister Maria is. But YOU are meant to be a Christian, and you can do your job.”

The priest looked at Sarah-Jane, at The Brigadier, at Harry and The Doctor – at everyone except the girl in the bed. Then he sat down. Perhaps something of Sarah-Jane’s rebuke had reached his soul, perhaps he was just stubborn. Anyway, he sat.

“You’ll be needed later, anyway,” The Doctor told him, then he turned his attention back to the patient. “You knew the Xtari were coming for you… the last of the Aztare. You saw it in your mind.”

“Yes. That was when I saw the purpose of the crystal. I think my mother must have given it to me. I always had it. As a child, I thought it was her way of knowing me if she came back. But all of a sudden, I knew what it was… a weapon and a refuge both at the same time. When the Xtari came….”

“Wait… there was an alien incursion ten miles from our headquarters… and UNIT didn’t even know?” The Brigadier was dumbfounded. “What are all our efforts for?”

“You wouldn’t have been ready for this, no matter what you did, I’m afraid,” The Doctor told him. “The Xtari don’t use flying saucers to invade. They open wormholes across galaxies. They must have focussed on Maria in her convent and come through in force.”

“I waited until they were all there…. They forced the sisters into the chapel, threatening to kill them unless they gave me up. But by doing that, it made using the crystal easy. The enemy was there, all in the confined space. I waited until the very last moment and then….”

“You killed everyone?” Sarah-Jane wasn’t sure what to think. She killed a terrible enemy, but also so many innocent people….

“Not everyone,” The Doctor told her. He passed her the crystal. “Just look in there, carefully.”

Sarah-Jane did so. For a moment she didn’t understand.

Then…..

“Oh…. oh… Oh wow.”

“You took a big risk,” The Doctor told Maria. “The protection the crystal could offer to the one holding it, at the eye of the storm, was minimal. You might have died.”

“I had to do it,” Maria insisted. “The Xtari would have destroyed this world… just because it had been my refuge. I had to do it, even if I lost my life. I prayed hard. Not for myself… but for the sisters… my family since I was a child. And for this world.”

“But not for yourself?” Sarah-Jane asked. She looked coldly at the priest. “Sounds like the definition of Christian thinking to me.”

The priest looked at least slightly abashed.

“But so many dead… so many innocent lives….” he managed.

“You still don’t get it,” Sarah-Jane told him. “Neither did I at first. Not even when The Doctor said it.”

“I don’t get it, either,” The Brigadier admitted. Harry looked as if he was thinking over The Doctor’s words for the past half hour.

“Brigadier,” The Doctor said. “You need to organise temporary accommodation, beds, bathroom, food, for about fifty people… fifty women, none of whom will be happy about being around men, especially soldiers, so if you could at least make sure weapons are put out of sight it would help. Father Sinclair… YOU need to start looking around for a suitable building to replace the destroyed convent. The diocese might have to spend money, but that can’t be helped. First things, first. I think we need a nice, quiet, open place down by the lake. Somebody find Sister Maria some shoes and a warm coat.”

Sarah-Jane had an inkling of what was happening. Everyone else was in the dark, but when The Doctor started giving out orders it was impossible to ignore them.

Within a very short time, they were all standing on a grassy meadow next to Lake Geneva. The Doctor gave Sister Maria the crystal.

“A good throw, right into the middle of the grass,” he said. “That should do it.”

Maria nodded and threw, underarm, like a girl, but a strong throw all the same. The crystal landed in the grass with a thump and a very slight cracking noise.

Moments later a noise like a hurricane in reverse filled everyone’s ears, followed by screams and cries of fear and confusion.

The cries died down as fifty nuns looked around, blinking in the sunlight, and realised they were all alive and safe.

“The crystal is something a little like TARDIS technology, but more organic,” The Doctor explained. “Everyone Human in the vicinity of the explosion was pulled into the dimensionally transcendental space. Everybody else, except Maria in the epicentre, died instantly… vaporised. You can call your men back from the site, Brigadier. There won’t be any evidence of alien life. Even the wormhole will have been closed. And now… these ladies will need a cup of tea and a calming prayer. The Army are good for the tea. Father Sinclair….”

“Yes… of course. That’s my job,” the Priest admitted. He took hold of Sister Maria’s hand. They both went to greet the confused but relieved nuns.

“Sergeant Benton,” The Brigadier barked out. “Tea for fifty. See to it.” Sergeant Benton did as he was told without question.

“What about all her predictions?” Sarah-Jane asked when she and The Doctor quietly watched the sun go down on Lake Geneva. “They obviously don’t come from God. Will the diocese lose interest in her?”

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing if they did,” The Doctor answered. “Humans are not really meant to know too much about their future. The Brigadier is a bit too interested in getting information from her, too. I’m going to have to be stern with him. Let her go with the Sisters to wherever their new home is and live out her life in peace.”

“If she’s a nun, she won’t have any children of her own… so no more generations having visions. That’s a good thing, too, I suppose. Considering what the Xtari did to them.”

“Quite so,” The Doctor replied. He looked out over the lake and sighed with contentment. “Do you know, Montreux is just over that way, where some of the greatest rock music of your generation was recorded. I mention it… just to take your mind off nuns and alien invaders.”

“I know,” Sarah-Jane answered. “Smoke on the Water was about a fire that broke out over there while Deep Purple were recording an album.” She paused and noticed The Doctor’s expression. “YOU didn’t start the fire, did you? Tell me you didn’t.”

“Of course not,” he answered. “I just hummed a couple of bars of a guitar riff while they were all looking out over the lake.”

Sarah-Jane rolled her eyes.

“Ok…..” she conceded.

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