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Time Raiders:
The Slayer

Written by Cindy Dees

Published by Mills & Boon

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TIME RAIDERS

The Slayer

CINDY DEES



Chapter 1

Her entire life had come down to this moment. Tessa stepped into the time-travel chamber and closed the booth's curved door. Deep silence surrounded her. The lab staff stood outside, watching her through the clear quartz panels, holding their collective breath as she settled into the comfortable recliner chair. Outside the booth, Dr. Athena Carswell did the same. Tessa watched the professor sink deep into her chair and don the crownlike brainwave amplifier that would allow her to fling Tessa back in time more than two thousand years.

Calm suffused Tessa. Profound relief. Finally, an end to it all. A goodbye to this life one way or another—either by succeeding and leaping into a

far-removed past or by failure of the jump and death. But either way, Tessa Marconi, weird kid turned psychic adult, was done with the mortal coil of the twenty-first century.

The hair on her arms stood up a moment before her skin began to tingle. The sensation built from mildly uncomfortable to an annoying itch to tongues of agony. It might have made a lesser person scream, but she embraced the pain.

She became aware of a subliminal hum—Athena Carswell's breathtaking brain power weaving a psychic bubble around her. The power swirled dizzyingly, and Tessa felt faintly nauseous. *Don't fight it. Ride the wave.* Previous time travelers had reported becoming ill, and it was possible that a few had even died because they'd failed to properly surf the time currents.

Athena herself looked to be an oasis of calm, as relaxed as if she were taking a nap. The only incongruity to the picture was the odd-looking headband she wore. Tessa didn't know the details, but the contraption's twin quartz crystals transformed the professor's thoughts into this crackling pocket of energy.

The lab seemed to waver and shimmer, and Tessa belatedly squeezed her eyes shut tightly. It was important that her brain receive no extraneous input that could anchor her too firmly in this time and place.

Any second now, the bubble would be complete and she would land in the past—twenty-five hundred

years ago on a mission so important it might very well help determine the future of mankind. A nimbus of light built around her, bright enough that she had to restrain an impulse to lift her hand to shield her closed eyes. Her body started to feel lighter.

Ready or not, here goes nothing.

Abruptly, a new sound intruded upon Tessa's unnatural detachment—an earsplitting jangle of noise that startled her eyes wide open. Athena lurched in her armchair, jolted out of her trance. Alarm exploded across the scientist's features.

Not good.

The bubble around Tessa abruptly radiated a heat so unbearable she feared she might burst into flame. Frantically, she squeezed her eyes shut again.

Someone screamed, "Noooo!"

And then everything exploded around her.

Alexandra Patton, psychic medium and soon-to-be time traveler herself, raced across the lab toward Athena, shouting over the earsplitting Klaxon. "What the hell's going on?"

"Fire alarm!" one of the lab techs shouted back.

Alex frowned. "A fire? Here in the lab?"

The tech shook his head. "The computers are fine."

Alex lunged forward to help Professor Carswell struggle weakly to her feet. She steadied the scientist and they both rushed over to the complex panel of monitoring equipment, which was flickering ominously.

"Did you see her go?" the professor bit out.

Alex glanced at the empty transit platform. "No. I was distracted by the alarm. Why? Was something wrong with the jump?"

"I don't know. There was a disturbance in the time flow—"

The lab's door burst open. Alex whirled and snapped to the guard stumbling into the room, "I thought there were supposed to be *no* intrusions in this lab under any circum—"

A cloud of black smoke billowed in, carrying with it a fireman in full gear. He shouted through his Plexiglas face mask, "Clear the building, folks. Immediately."

"How close is the fire?" Alex asked sharply.

The man beckoned urgently with a gloved hand. "Let's go! One of you grab the back of my coat and the rest of you hang on to each other. The smoke's too thick to see through. Hold your breath and stay low. It's not far to the emergency exit."

Alex grabbed on to Athena's lab coat while the professor snatched at something on the way past her armchair, tucking it inside her clothes. They stumbled out into a darkness so thick and oppressive Alex literally couldn't see her hand in front of her face. It smelled awful, a noxious mix of burning wires and sulfuric stink. The smoke made her eyes water furiously, and long before they reached the exit, she was coughing violently. Thank God the guy had told them to hang on to each other. She clutched

Professor Carswell's jacket grimly and staggered along behind her boss.

They burst outside, gasping for air. Alex fell to her knees, her eyes watering copiously while she coughed up a lungful of smoke. A half-dozen blurry black shadows sprinted past, heading into the building. Must be more firemen, or maybe they were spirits of the dead. God, she couldn't wait to get back to the peace of the tall-grass prairie, her refuge.

As soon as her lungs and eyes cleared enough to do it, Alex took a head count of the lab's staff. All present and accounted for. Except, of course, Tessa Marconi. She was gone. But where? Or more precisely, when?

Tessa slammed into something hard and cold, and lay on her side, gasping for air. *Nobody had warned her the landing would be so violent.* But hey. She felt pain. That meant she was alive, right? Relief washed over her.

Slowly she pushed up onto her hands and knees. And promptly got tangled up in the loosely draped fabric of a long cloak. Thankfully, appropriate clothes had materialized around her during the transit. In addition to flinging operatives all over creation, Athena Carswell was also able to produce period clothing and implant local language and customs in her agents as part of their time jumps. Thank goodness. Showing up here buck naked was the last thing Tessa needed. Wherever *here* was. Or more to the point, *when.*

In theory, time travel was as precise a science as flying a jet halfway around the world and landing on the first brick of a specific runway. But only a handful of people had ever done it, and only a few of them successfully.

Inky blackness swathed her. If she were lucky, that meant nobody had seen her blink into existence. She was in a small chamber of some kind with a stone floor. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she made out a faint outline, maybe a doorway.

Using the wall at her back for support, she crawled to her feet. Dizziness washed over her, and she leaned her forehead against the cool stone until the sensation passed. Still a little woozy, but burning with curiosity to find out when and where she was, she pushed away from the wall.

Something scuffed outside and she leaped to one side of the opening, plastering herself against the wall. Her head spun once more and she blinked hard to clear the stars from her eyes as she listened frantically for whoever was out there. What she wouldn't give right now for riot gear and a high-powered flashlight! But the ancient time into which she'd hopefully jumped precluded any modern equipment. Except, of course, a tiny emergency first-aid kit with antibiotics, painkillers, suture gear and a tiny toothbrush and dental floss. Athena had also promised to send Tessa a knife, fire-starting stones, a waterproof pouch and a handful of gold coins. There should be a few other sundries in her bag—a comb, some dried

berries and nuts, a length of rope. And then there was her arm cuff, of course. The warm bronze armband clasped her left biceps reassuringly, holding the all-important quartz crystal imprinted with Tessa's unique brain wave pattern. Pressing upon the crystal would signal Athena to bring her back into the twenty-first century. It was Tessa's only ticket home.

Cautiously, she peered outside the tiny chamber. A towering stone column cast a deep shadow over the doorway. She'd seen similar columns in ancient ruins, but this one was intact and didn't show any wear and tear. As her eyes continued to adjust to the dark, she noticed colorful images painted upon its surface.

She'd done it. She'd arrived in some ancient time, and from the looks of that column, near some grand civilization.

Somewhere beyond the magnificent column, a dim flicker of light announced the presence of humans. She stepped through the doorway and stopped, staring in wonder. An entire colonnade of pristine Ionic columns stretched away in both directions. Could it be? Was she really standing in 480 B.C.? A thrill of delight raced through her.

"You there! What are ye about?" a gruff voice challenged from behind her.

She whipped around, her hands coming up into defensive readiness. *A short, thick man. Shaved head. Bare chest. Walnut-colored skin. Dressed in a short affair that was part skirt and part diaper.*

But what riveted her attention was the lethal-looking scimitar he held, as if intimately familiar with its use.

"State your business, woman!"

Athena said Tessa had merely to think in modern English, and information implanted in her brain during the jump would make the translation to Persian as the words came out of her mouth. To test her supposed ability to speak the ancient tongue, Tessa spoke cautiously to the guard. "I'm lost."

"Who be ye?"

"I am Tessa of Marconi, a noblewoman in my homeland, but a stranger to this place."

The soldier's eyes narrowed. "Where be thy retainers and slaves if ye be noble?"

The guard definitely understood her. Whatever language she was speaking was appropriate to this place and time. She replied, "There has been an accident. My ship was wrecked upon these shores. I am alone."

He still looked suspicious. Crud. In her army experience, being in charge wasn't always about rank. Sometimes it was purely a function of who stepped up and took charge. She announced with authority, "Take me to whoever receives noble visitors." For good measure, she added firmly, "Immediately."

Apparently well-conditioned to following orders, the guard bent low at the waist in a bow. She followed as he walked briskly down the colonnade. Ahead of them, a buzz of noise gradually resolved

itself into laughter, shouting and music, as if a party was in full swing.

Guards dressed like her escort were spaced at regular intervals along the colonnade. Shallow bowls rested on chest-high bronze stands, holding some sort of flaming oil that lit the open-air hall. The gaiety grew louder. The smells of spicy food, rancid wine and sweat assaulted her nose. People spilled out of the feast in pairs and groups, some laughing drunkenly, others singing bawdy songs in various tongues. She recognized snippets of Greek and Egyptian from her studies of ancient languages and heard several dialects she couldn't even begin to guess at.

A few guests indulged in more physical entertainments. She averted her eyes from the graphic sight of a fat, bald fellow partaking of a young man on his hands and knees behind one of the columns. The catamite caught her eye and smiled lewdly at her, licking his lips.

A woman screamed, the sound cut off abruptly as a group of young men closed in around the female in question. Tessa didn't want to know.

Her guide stopped at the entrance arch to an enormous hall and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "I present to you the imperial court of the king of kings, ruler of the Medes and Achemens, of Ethiopia and India and all between, His Glorious Majesty Emperor Xerxes of Parsa."

Xerxes. Athena had done it. The professor had

managed to deliver her to her exact destination—the court of the legendary Persian emperor. If Athena's timing had been as accurate, Xerxes had already marched his massive army across the Hellespont, and around the northern shore of the Aegean Sea. He should be in the final stages of preparation for his assault on Athens.

Tessa stepped up beside the guard. And stared.

The imperial court of His Glorious Majesty Emperor Xerxes of Parsa was currently engaged in a giant, drunken orgy.

"Wait thou here while I find thee a member of the court."

She nodded, unable to tear her gaze away from the decadent scene. Bright colors assaulted her eyes everywhere she looked in the dim cavern: women bedecked in jewel-toned gauze; elaborate rugs on the marble floors; mosaics and frescoes on the plastered walls and ceiling depicting bloody battles, hunts and lascivious sexual indulgences.

Huge brass braziers emitted flickering light and sweet-smelling smoke that curled, serpentlike, around the pillars and contributed to the thick haze hanging over the room. Slave girls fed reclining men orange slices and red grapes. Young men danced drunkenly to the strains of twangy stringed instruments and nasal-sounding horns.

And bodies. Half-naked or exposed in all their glory, bodies writhed everywhere in a mass of multiethnic humanity that covered every horizontal

surface—the floors, the low, cushioned couches around the edges of the room, even the tabletops. In a single glance, Tessa observed more variations upon a sexual theme than she could ever possibly imagine.

Purposeful movement drew her eyes. Her guard was returning with a man who was blessedly dressed and walking in a straight enough line that he must not be completely snockered.

This new man stopped in front of her. He gave her dark cloak and hood a once-over while she clutched both more closely about her. "Welcome to the court of Emperor Xerxes, my lady. With whom do I have the honor of conversing?"

Time to put her cover story into action. The historians back at the Project Anasazi lab had worked it out. They'd decided it would be too dangerous for her to come to this time as a female commoner. She would have to pose as at least a minor noble so that no one made her a slave and restricted her movements while she searched for a piece of the medallion.

She replied as regally as she could muster, "I am Lady Tessa of Marconi. I come from lands far to the north and west of this place. A storm has cast my ship upon these shores. I fear I am the sole survivor."

Interest sparked in the retainer's gaze. "What empire holds sway in your country?"

"No empire. The holdings of each local lord are his alone to protect and rule."

"Are these holdings large? Rich? Fertile, perhaps?"

She shrugged under her cloak. "Large, yes. Rich?" She gazed around the hall. "Not by these standards. Fertile? Famine is completely unknown in my home. We have such an abundance of meat and grain that my people sell a huge surplus each harvest." And wouldn't the average American farmer get a kick out of being described that way?

The retainer looked decidedly intrigued now. Almost as if he were calculating the income from seizing her lands. "Have you supped, Lady Tessa?"

"I have not."

"Come. Let us break bread together."

Something tickled the back of her mind about the significance of breaking bread with someone—must be some local custom that Athena had implanted. Tessa frowned. Better safe than sorry. "Forgive me, kind sir, but I do not hunger. Perhaps I may warm myself by a fire for a few minutes and then seek my rest?"

The retainer frowned, but replied courteously enough, "As you wish. Come with me."

She picked her way gingerly across the room, dodging some of the more…athletic endeavors of the guests. Her host deposited her by a fireplace so large she'd need to stand on a chair to touch its mantel. A roaring blaze poured out heat. She was already warm under her sturdy cloak but wasn't about to take off the garment and risk rape in this assembly of debauched drunks.

Not to mention that the professor could very well

have dressed her like a freaking harem girl under this cloak. Tessa had already registered a complete lack of undergarments, and a suspicious breeze had wafted up her skirts as she'd followed the guard earlier.

If time of day translated during time travel, it should be barely 9:00 p.m., but this party looked to be well advanced. She was hungry and hot and more than half tempted to leave. But academic curiosity got the best of her. Was Xerxes here tonight, in the flesh? The name of the fabled Persian emperor still echoed down through history. He'd assembled the largest army in the history of mankind for the purpose of invading Greece, but ultimately failed. Tessa had studied the histories of the invasion in detail. She probably knew the names of many of the lesser kings and generals in this very room.

She scanned the hundreds of men in the hall, seeking some indication of which one might be the mighty emperor. Many wore jeweled circlets and a few wore the crowns of kings who served the Persian emperor. The variety of race and dress was impressive. But then, the Persian Empire spanned North Africa, Eastern Europe, all of the Middle East, and stretched well into Central Asia.

Which of these were General Masistes, Xerxes's brother, and General Mardonius, ill-fated commander of the doomed invasion of Greece? Was Artaxerxes, heir to the throne, here? Maybe even Xerxes's Jewish Empress, Esther, of Old Testament

fame? Despite the perspiration plastering Tessa's dress to her skin, the thought of standing in the presence of these giants of history made chills race across the back of her neck.

Unfortunately, historic celebrity spotting wasn't her purpose for being here. Finding a piece of the Karanovo stamp was. The stamp was an incredibly important bronze medallion, decorated with depictions of the constellations of the zodiac. When all twelve pieces of it were assembled, it was supposed to signal some faraway council that mankind was ready to enter the ranks of star-traveling races. Tessa's job was to find and retrieve a piece of the medallion.

To that end, she cast her mental awareness outward, seeking the distinctive sine-wave signature of the bronze wedge. *Hmm.* Not in the room, but definitely in the vicinity. Off to the east. She zeroed in on it more tightly. A clear pinprick of energy tickled her second sight. It was not buried; rather it was out in the open in some way. She sensed wood near it. Moving toward water. The signature was unmistakable, just like the other Karanovo piece she'd handled.

Outstanding. This mission was going to be a piece of cake. She'd make a graceful exit out of this den of iniquity, find the segment of the medallion, then activate her cuff and let Athena bring her home.

If anything, faint disappointment filled her at how easy this was turning out to be. She'd hoped to spend

a little time here. But if all went well, she might be in this era for only a few minutes. Bummer.

A raucous cheer went up twenty or thirty feet away from her, making her jump. A stunning brunette had stepped up onto a raised dais at one side of the room. Her high-waisted red gown was elaborately embroidered—and transparent. The diaphanous silk barely clung to her breasts, in open defiance of gravity. A gaudy necklace dripping with what looked like pigeon's-blood rubies encircled the woman's long neck. She raised graceful arms, swathed in jeweled bangles.

Her voice was huskier than Tessa expected, earthy and dripping in sex, when she called out over the din, "Do you wish to see my sorcerer perform?"

A roar went up. Many of the otherwise occupied guests disengaged, to make their way toward the woman. With an excellent sense of theatrical timing, the brunette waited until the noise died down and the musicians had been waved to silence.

When every eye in the place was firmly fixed on her, she called with grand dramatic flair, "Bring forth my magician! I, Queen Artemesia, present to you the shape-shifter of Halicarnassus!"

Artemesia! Tessa stood up eagerly to get a better look at the legendary woman who'd ruled the seafaring kingdom of Halicarnassus single-handedly and with great success. How incredible to have read about this Persian noble in Herodotus's histories and now to be standing before her in the flesh. Delia

McCowan, a colleague back in Arizona and a time-travel veteran, had warned her of how strange it could be finding oneself in the midst of living history. But this…this was beyond amazing.

Artemesia was speaking again. Something about a man who could become a beast before their very eyes. Tessa raised a skeptical brow. She didn't for a moment doubt the existence of psychic skills—hers were formidable—but *shape-shifting?* This she had to see. She looked across the crowd at the heavy curtain behind Artemesia. One of the advantages of being five foot seven in ancient Persia was that in this assemblage, she was taller than all of the women and many of the men.

The curtain behind Artemesia swept open.

A tall man stepped forward—tall even by modern standards. Such was the arrogance of his demeanor that, had he not already been identified otherwise, Tessa would have pegged him as Xerxes. His skin was bronze, but more as if tanned than genetic. Dark brown hair flowed in a mane about his shoulders. His eyes were blacker than any depravity this room could hold, snapping with disdain for the mere mortals at his feet. No wonder folks in this time period believed in gods, if men like this walked among them!

His features were classic—strong jaw, high cheek-bones, smooth brow. His nose was as arrogant as he was. A slave ran up and unlatched the man's cloak, whisking away the scarlet wool with a flourish.

A sigh went up from the assemblage. The sorcerer was naked above the waist, his lower body draped in little more than a linen towel held in place around his hips with a jeweled belt. And what a body. It was as perfect as his face. His shoulders were broad and powerful, his arms wreathed in corded muscles.

Artemesia stepped close to him and ran her hand possessively across his belly. The sorcerer's stomach muscles contracted into a six-pack a bodybuilder would envy. The queen's long fingernails left four red trails across his skin. Tessa's gut tightened, as well. There was something…primal about this man. Almost animal. Raw and sexual.

Artemesia looked toward the far end of the room and called out, "Majesty, perhaps you would honor us by choosing a beast for this display!"

Tessa craned her head to see who the woman addressed, but a large cluster of guards crowded around whoever answered. A male voice shouted back, "Let us have an elephant!"

A cheer went up and all eyes fastened on the sorcerer.

Tessa watched with interest as the magician raised his hands chest high, his palms facing outward toward the crowd. He closed his eyes and released a slow breath. Several women screamed. People in the first few rows of the audience cringed back in terror. A collective gasp rose around her. Tessa glanced around, startled. Everyone stared at the sorcerer. Quickly, she glanced back at him. *What*

was going on? He looked fine to her, just standing there with his hands out.

His contemptuous gaze raked across the crowd, passed over her, then jerked back. Across the heads of the assemblage, the two of them locked gazes. His black eyes drilled into hers with an intelligence, a razor sharpness, that stripped her bare. And she had plenty to hide. As the stare stretched out, it was as if he willed her to come to him and submit to him. But she was no wilting lily to be so easily intimidated. She was a military officer, a combat veteran who'd braved the mostly male ranks of the U.S. Army and earned the grudging respect of men determined to despise her. At least until they'd discovered her little secret. It turned out that the army rank and file weren't quite ready for psychics to command them.

The sorcerer was staring at her as if he already knew about her gift—or curse, as it were. His hands fell heedlessly to his sides, his gaze still locked on hers. Another gasp went up from the crowd, and then cheers and wild applause erupted, along with shouts to do it again.

Still he stared at her.

Okay, he was starting to creep her out, here.

"A monster! A monster!" the crowd shouted. "Make yourself into a monster!"

Tessa took a step back, then another. An intense need to get away from this man and his sledgehammer charisma overwhelmed her.

He took an aggressive step forward, but Artemesia grabbed him by the arm and pulled. Impatiently, he shook off the queen's hand, still staring at Tessa. Thankfully, he didn't pursue her as she backed away from the fireplace. From him.

Clearly irritated, he glanced down at his queen, who was saying something inaudible to him. Tessa seized upon his momentary distraction. Turned. And fled like a big dog from the Sorcerer of Halicarnassus.

TIME RAIDERS

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First published in Great Britain 2010
Harlequin Mills & Boon Limited,
Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1SR

© Cynthia M. Dees, Lindsay McKenna and Merline Lovelace 2009

ISBN: 978 0 263 88766 2

89-0610

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Printed and bound in Spain
by Litografia Rosés S.A., Barcelona