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Time Raiders:

The Avenger

Written by P.C. Cast

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TIME RAIDERS

The Avenger

P.C. CAST

MILLS & BOON

Chapter 1

The dead woman sighed. Her voice sounded wistful and more than a little nostalgic. “It’s pretty here, isn’t it? There is something restful about all this open space.”

“You’re dead, Andred. Isn’t everything restful to you?” Alex said, lifting a brow at the semitransparent woman who leaned against the low wooden fence beside her.

“Do not be so literal. I am quite certain you are very aware that just because one is dead doesn’t mean one is at rest.” The spirit paused and gave Alex a knowing, sidelong look. “Your fear of leaving here is irrational.”

Alex frowned. The two things that had surprised her most about ghosts when she first started seeing them the

year she turned six were they were so damn nosy, which made them ubergossips, and they were so damn free with their advice. As if dying turned them into talk show hosts.

"Look, I'm not afraid of leaving here. I just don't like to. Even you said how restful this place is, and I love Oklahoma's Tallgrass Prairie. Not to mention my job's here—why should I want to leave?"

"There is quite a difference between loving a place so you choose to stay, and staying in a place because you are too fearful to leave."

"I said I'm *not* afraid to leave! I went to Flagstaff. I was gone for three whole days."

"You hated every moment of it."

"No, I did not. I loved seeing Tessa." *And I'm worried as hell about her.* Alex closed her eyes for an instant and against her dark lids saw smoke and fire and smelled the acrid scent of computers frying in unbelievable heat. Professor Carswell had assured her that Tessa would be fine, but after the terrible accident she'd witnessed, Alex didn't know how that could be true. *But none of that is this damn nosy ghost's business.*

"You have not left the prairie once since you returned. You've even been giving your shopping list to Sam. Alexandra, when you resort to having a hired ranch hand buy tampons for you, I'd say you are turning into a hermit."

"And what about you? Why are you still here? Hello! Aren't you the pot calling the kettle black? How can *you* lecture *me* about being afraid to leave?" Alex glanced pointedly at the woman's archaic looking outfit, which was little more than a brightly colored linen tunic, and leather sandals with straps that wrapped around her calves. "What kind of a name is Andred? How long ago did you die, anyway?"

"Andred is a very old name, as I have been here a very long time."

"And I have a feeling you should have passed on a while ago."

The ghost of the young woman shrugged. "I will. I am in no hurry."

"Well, that's no different than me. I'm in no hurry to leave, either," Alex said smugly.

The spirit turned to face her, her expression sad. "There is a vast difference between us, Alex. As you remind me often, I am not of the living. There is nothing out there for me. But you are alive. The world exists for you, except you're unwilling to live, so you hide in here."

Alex's stomach tightened. "You have no idea what it's like. You ghosts are overwhelming! In Flagstaff, with Tessa, ghosts were everywhere! I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think. Here it isn't so bad."

The spirit shook her head. “It’s not where you are, Alex. It’s you.”

“That’s such utter bullshit!”

“You haven’t always hidden yourself away out here. You used to be a part of the world. What happened?”

“I am still part of the world! I live and work on the tall-grass prairie. I’m a botanist. I give guided tours. I interact with people all the time. *Living* people. And I’m done talking to ghosts for today.” Alex climbed over the fence, and without another word, stomped into the bunkhouse and went directly to the small room she called home, forcing herself not to slam the door behind her.

“Damn know-it-all ghosts! God, they’re so incredibly annoying,” Alex muttered to herself as she went to the chic wine cooler she kept filled with a stash of her favorite reds and whites. She considered for a second, and then decided to splurge and open a new bottle of her current favorite red, The Prisoner, ignoring the irony of the name on the label. “I live!” she said as she opened the wine. “I just choose to live somewhere that doesn’t stress my brains out.” While she let the wine breathe Alex pulled off her jeans and sweatshirt, replacing them with comfy silk drawstring pajama bottoms and the matching top. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the outside of her closet and paused to smooth back her crazy hair.

Sometimes it seemed her mood translated to her hair follicles, because nine times out of ten when she was angry her thick mass of strawberry-blond hair frizzed out to look like a lion's mane.

"I should cut this stuff," Alex told her reflection, but she knew they were just words. She would cut her hair when she was really old, and not pushing thirty-five. Hell, she might not even cut it then! It'd be fun to be called "that crazy old woman with the wild hair down to her ass." At least it would give the ghosts something benign to gossip about. "Just pour yourself a glass of wine and stay away from the scissors," she told her reflection.

Alex was curled up in bed with the glass of red wine on her bedside table and a fat copy of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander*, which she was rereading for the third time in ten years, when her cell phone rang. Annoyed, she glanced at the number, sure it was her mother making her requisite once-a-month call, which Alex would ignore. When she saw the name under the caller ID, she sat straight up and clicked the answer button.

"Tessa! Are you okay?"

"Alex, it's great to hear your voice! You would not believe all the stuff I have to tell you. Man, talk about a wild ride."

"Are you okay?" Alex repeated. "There was that fire just as you disappeared, and—"

"Hey, not over unsecured lines," Tessa said quickly. "And I'm fine. Totally fine." Alex thought she heard a deep male voice in the background, and Tessa giggled. "Well, maybe I'm better than fine." Then her voice sobered and she added, "Oh, you should know that here with us I've also got—"

"Tessa, we need to talk." It was Alex's turn to interrupt. "You scared the living hell out of me. I thought you were dead for sure. And that damn professor wouldn't give me shit for information, not to mention the stick-up-her-ass general. God, I'm so glad I don't have to deal with military mentality anymore." She snorted. "Talk about an oxymoron. Anyway, we gotta talk. I need details."

"Well, Sergeant, we'd be happy to share all the details with you. There's a nonstop flight that leaves tomorrow from Tulsa to Phoenix. I'll have a car waiting at the airport to bring you to Flagstaff."

There was absolute silence on the line as Alex worked on controlling her temper.

"As I was trying to tell you, Alex, I have General Ashton on conference call with us," Tessa said.

"Lovely," Alex said dryly. "Hello, General."

"Sergeant Patton," said the general.

"Look, General, I told you before, I haven't been a

sergeant for almost five years, and I have no intention of ever being one again. Just call me Alex."

"As you wish, Alex. Your ticket is wireless. It will be waiting at Tulsa International for you."

"I'm not coming. Not tomorrow. Not the day after. Not ever. I am *not* interested in joining your…" Alex hesitated, wanted to call Project Anasazi a bunch of geeks and freaks. But Tessa was still on the phone, and, in spite of trapping her into this annoying conference call, still Alex's friend—even though she was definitely a psychic freak. After a long breath Alex settled for saying "…your team."

"We need you, Alex." It was Tessa who spoke into the dead air this time. "This is important."

"So is the reason I'm not interested. Actually, so are the *several* reasons I'm not interested, and you know that, Tessa. Look, I'm glad you're all in one piece, and I'm glad you called, even if we do have company on the line. But I am not the girl for this job. I left that life behind me a long time ago, and I'm not ever going back. If you want to come to the prairie and visit, you're invited anytime, *Tessa.*" She emphasized her friend's name so there could be no misunderstanding to whom Alex was offering the open invitation. "But I'm not going back to Flagstaff or to the military. Goodbye, Tessa." Alex clicked the end call button.

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