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Opening Extract from...

Time Raiders:

The Protector

Written by Merline Lovelace

Published by Mills & Boon

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TIME RAIDERS

The Protector

MERLINE LOVELACE



Chapter 1

Disorder is not sent down by heaven,
it is produced by women.
–From the writings of Confucius

Frowning, USAF Major Max Brody wheeled his rental car through the nearly empty streets of Flagstaff, Arizona. The cold March dawn painted the snow-capped peaks surrounding the city in shimmering

gold. Frost glittered on the buildings of Red Rock University, dead ahead. His destination was a fenced-in compound set some distance apart from the main campus.

Max had been yanked out of his second tour of duty in Iraq and arrived here in Flagstaff only three days ago. He should have relished the snow and biting cold. Both went unnoticed, however, as he struggled to wrap his mind around the incredible mission he was about to undertake.

Starship navigators.

Pieces of a bronze medallion hidden in time.

Intergalactic power plays.

Earth's fate hanging in the balance.

The phrases ricocheted inside his head like shrapnel from an IED. If one of his troops had spouted those words, or any officer in his chain of command, Max would have pressed for an immediate psych eval.

But the mind-blowing phrases had come from retired USMC Brigadier General Beverly Ashton. She'd been Max's boss during a joint assignment years ago. He'd always considered her the best officer he'd ever served with. General Ashton had pulled every string in the book to get him released from his active duty unit for this special mission.

Only after Max had arrived in Flagstaff, bleary eyed from his long flight, did the general reveal she'd requested him because of his familiarity with the terrain targeted for a time jump.

Time jump. Jesus!

Max's gut twisted into a tight knot. After three days and nights of almost around-the-clock briefings, he still couldn't believe General Ashton's partner in this crazy enterprise, Professor Athena Carswell, had actually managed to harness

the warps in time known as sine waves. Or that she did so using a crown-shaped headband retrieved from the crash of a UFO in New Mexico!

A world-renowned quantum physicist, Professor Carswell had worked with the military in her initial efforts to conqueror time and space. After repeated failures, however, the powers that be withdrew support for her Operation Anasazi.

But General Ashton had refused to give up. With the bulldog determination that was second nature to her, she'd kept the project alive with private funds and volunteers, most of whom were former military. And most of whom, Max had learned, possessed some form of psychic "gift" that made them open to the pulsing energy of the sine waves.

As unbelievable as it sounded, Professor Carswell's experiments had finally suc-

ceeded. Max had seen the proof. He'd also spoken to several mission specialists who'd traveled through time. Even more unbelievable, they'd returned with irregular-shaped sections of a medallion known variously as the Karanovo Stamp, the Pleiadian Disk and the Bronze Medallion. Each piece depicted various constellations. When all twelve sections were found and fitted together, the medallion could send a signal to an intergalactic council debating Earth's fate!

Given the enormous stakes, Max would have agreed to join their ranks even before he learned that his partner for the proposed "jump" was Cassandra Jones, a former air force weather officer—and the woman involved in the death of a friend of Max's from their Air Force Academy days.

Max's fists tightened on the steering wheel as he slowed for a turn. The board of inquiry had cleared Lieutenant Jones.

Declared her innocent of all charges. So why had she abruptly resigned her commission and dropped out of sight?

Max intended to find out. His first priority on this mission was to locate the fourth piece of the medallion. That overrode all else. But his second and very private goal was to find out what really happened the day Captain Jerry Holland died.

His partner on this mission had no idea that Max even knew Jerry. He'd tell her when the time was right. And before this mission was over, Max would wring the truth from Cassandra Jones.

"Where is he?"

Quivering with nervous anticipation, Cassie slicked clammy palms down her thighs. She'd dressed casually for this mission in jeans and a maize-colored sweater, knowing she would soon jolt

awake in another century wearing clothes appropriate to the time.

"Brody should have been here by now," she grumbled.

Unable to control her nervous energy, she paced the conference room some yards down the hall from the transport area.

"He'll be here shortly," General Ashton replied with her customary composure. Tall and blonde, with only a trace of silver at her temples, the retired USMC general still looked every inch the commander. "We don't launch for another hour," she added calmly.

As if Cassie needed the reminder!

She'd trained for this mission for months while assisting with other jumps. Now it was her turn. And the mission was right up her alley.

She would jump back fourteen centuries and infiltrate the court of the most powerful

woman of the seventh century. Empress Wu Jao, like all peoples of the ancient world, turned to shamans and sorcerers to predict weather conditions for ceremonies and major events. With one of the most significant events of Jao's reign fast approaching, Cassie would use her extraordinary sensitivity to atmospheric changes to gain the woman's confidence.

The remarkable ability to sense imminent weather changes was Cassie's gift…and her curse. Growing up in Oklahoma, she'd figured out at the tender age of three or four that when her naturally curly hair went limp and stretched in length there was a thunderstorm in the making. Or worse, a deadly tornado.

As she grew older she'd learned to interpret other natural occurrences. Like the faint ripples on the surface of a pond that indicated movement of the earth's under-

ground plates. And birds going to roost low to the ground and fluffing their feathers to protect themselves from hail.

Cassie had tried, really tried, to channel her sensitivity to nature's nuances into productive uses. First by majoring in meteorology in college. Then by joining the air force as a weather officer. Unfortunately, the military was *extremely* skeptical of forecasts based on anything except data retrieved from high-tech instrumentation. So skeptical that Lieutenant Cassandra Jones had soon gained a reputation within the weather circles as a maverick.

That was the polite word for her intuitive predictions. Others had labeled them the product of a nutcase. Including the one man she'd thought she could love.

No! She wouldn't let herself think about Jerry Holland. Not now. Not with so much riding on this mission.

The arrival of her jump partner provided the impetus Cassie needed to shove aside the searing memories.

"'Bout time you got here, Major," she said, more brusquely than she'd intended.

Max Brody glanced at her from gray eyes as cool and hard as tempered steel. The rest of him wasn't much softer. Square jaw, square shoulders, square attitude. A combat engineer with more than twelve years of military experience, he sported buzz-cut blond hair and a don't-mess-with-me air.

He'd dressed down for the mission, too, but his jeans hugged muscled thighs and his faded Air Force Academy sweatshirt stretched across shoulders that would have done credit to an All-Pro guard. The man was six feet two inches of tough, uncompromising male.

"I'm ready if you are, Jones," he replied coolly.

"Excellent," General Ashton said briskly. "We'll do one final mission brief before you launch."

Cassie didn't need another brief. Every aspect of this mission was seared into her brain. It should be, after her weeks of prep. Brody, on the other hand, had been a part of the Time Raiders team for all of three days. Knifing him with a look that said *pay attention*, she took a seat at the conference table. The major sat across from her.

With a flick of a switch, General Ashton illuminated the conference room's wall-size screen. Another flick brought up the digitized image of several leather journals with Latin inscriptions.

"These, as you know, are the *Ad Astra* journals Delia Sebastian brought back on one of her early jumps."

Ad Astra. To the stars. Appropriate, Cassie thought, for journals that had yielded

the first clues to a major intergalactic power struggle.

Her heart bumped as the general glided a finger over a touch pad and aimed the on-screen pointer at a drawing in the middle of a page. There it was, the bronze medallion inscribed with various constellations.

Cassie's pulse kicked up another notch as General Ashton superimposed a digitized image over the original sketch. It showed three irregularly shaped pieces. Two of the pieces notched together. The third remained separate—waiting for the other pieces that would all fit together to form a smooth, round disk.

The general's blue eyes lingered on the three pieces for long moments before shifting to Cassie and Max. "If Professor Carswell has interpreted the message embedded in the third piece correctly, the fourth piece, the one you two will be

looking for, was hidden in seventh-century China, at the court of the Tang emperors. I don't need to tell you how important it is that you find it."

"No, ma'am."

"Good. Professor Carswell's waiting for us in the transport area. If you don't have any questions about the target…"

"I'm good," Cassie said quickly.

Her jump partner gave a quick jerk of his chin. "Me, too."

Cassie's already humming nerves torqued even tighter as they left the conference room. She'd assisted with other jumps. She'd helped debrief previous Time Raiders. She knew what to expect. Still, the sight of the capsule that would whisk her and Max Brody through fourteen centuries made her throat go dry.

The booth occupied center stage in the brightly lit area. A tall cylinder of glass, it

contained two chairs, one for her, one for the major. That was it. No control console. No digital displays. No diodes to send electricity arcing through the air. The energy that would propel Cassie and Max through time would come from the brain of Professor Athena Carswell.

Gulping, Cassie dragged her gaze from the glass tube to the professor. A petite woman with soft brown curls and a heart-shaped face, she didn't look like your average genius of the Einstein variety.

Then again, Cassie didn't exactly fit the mold of your average seventh-century Chinese maiden. At five-seven, with intense green eyes, a fair complexion and hair that shaded more toward red than brown, she would stand out like a maypole at the Tang Dynasty court.

Which was why Professor Carswell had decided to send her back as an outlander—

an emerald-eyed Irish sorceress captured by Vikings, sold into slavery and brought to the Imperial Court as a gift to the superstitious empress.

Cassie had to admit she wasn't too thrilled with that slave bit. Especially since uptight, stiff-spined Max Brody was going back as her "protector." His cover, too, had been carefully crafted. He was Bro-dai the Bold, a Viking warrior chosen by his chieftain to deliver Cassie to the court of the most powerful monarch on four continents.

She slanted him a quick glance, trying to decide what it was about Brody that rubbed her the wrong way. Maybe it was how he'd watched her during the past three days of mission prep, as if gauging her skills and readiness. Or how he seemed to weigh everything she said. She'd finally decided neither of those were bad traits in a partner whose life depended on his—and *her*—

ability to survive in a time and a culture foreign to them both.

Brody had an edge over her in that regard. With degrees in both civil and mechanical engineering, he commanded one of the air force's premier combat construction squadrons. His hands-on expertise in Iraq repairing bomb damage had led the chief to put him in charge of coordinating United States military disaster relief efforts following China's devastating earthquake last year.

Brody had spent four months assisting with damage assessment and reconstruction in Sichuan Province. More important, he'd made several visits to Xi'an, once known as Chang'An. The city had served as China's capital for almost a thousand years before the seat of power was moved to Beijing. Brody's firsthand knowledge of the target area, General Ashton believed, would greatly facilitate this mission.

Cassie sure as hell hoped so! She stifled her doubts as Professor Carswell walked over to talk with them. Her brow creasing, the professor searched each of their faces in turn.

"You understand the process?"

They should. They'd been thoroughly briefed on the procedures to follow. Several times. Yet now that their jump was only moments away, both Cassie and Brody listened to her last mission brief intently.

"During the transport, I'll imbue each of you with the knowledge and language skills you'll need to survive in the seventh century. You'll arrive dressed in the appropriate clothing, at the site we've selected."

She reached into the pocket of her lab coat and withdrew two wide cuffs of beaten silver. An oval quartz crystal sat dead center in each bracelet.

"Once you put these bracelets on," the professor said, "*do not* take them off. The

ESC is your escape, your only escape, if something goes wrong."

ESC. The acronym stood for emergency signal cuff, which pretty well said it all, in Cassie's opinion. She swallowed, slid the cuff over her wrist and pushed it up until it bit into the flesh of her upper arm. Max clamped his around his wrist.

"One last caution." The professor looked at each of them in turn, her expression grave. "From past jumps, I know I can smooth over any 'debris' you leave behind so there's no trace of your impact on history. But this only applies to actual historical events. If you're injured or killed, I can't make you whole, because you *were never really part* of that time period. So stay safe, and for God's sake, don't lose your ESC."

With that fervent plea, she ushered them into the transporter.

As they took their seats, Cassie could only admire Max's stoic calm. She knew he had to be a mass of raw nerves inside. He was the first—the only—person selected for a jump who didn't possess some kind of psychic skill. Professor Carswell was convinced it was that skill, that openness of mind and spirit, that made her volunteers so receptive to transport.

But time had become critical. The last three missions confirmed the fact that they weren't the only ones searching for the medallion pieces. Mysterious attacks on the lab and intruders breaking in to Professor Carswell's home pointed to the fact that someone here on earth wanted the power the medallion would give him or her.

Worse, they were also competing with hunters from another galaxy. Tessa Marconi had brought back living proof in the form of one very large, very powerful Centaurian

who said that his former leader had vowed to keep humans from completing their search for the medallion.

So Max Brody and his intimate knowledge of China's ancient capital were Cassie's ticket to getting into the imperial palace, locating the fourth piece of the medallion and getting out again, fast!

Assuming she didn't lose him during the jump.

He wasn't one of their tight-knit Time Raiders cadre. Since he didn't possess a psychic power—none that had been documented, anyway—would he be lost, like the first travelers Carswell had sent back?

As the professor donned the weird crown with earpieces containing crystals matching the ones in their ESCs, Cassie reached out and gripped Max's hand. "We'll make it," she told him.

"We have to," he replied grimly.

His fingers threaded through hers and their eyes met. For that moment, that infinitesimal moment, they were bonded by excitement and fear.

"Hang on," he muttered.

It happened so fast, Cassie barely had time to register the tingle that raced across her skin and made the hair on her arms stand straight up.

One moment she was gasping as the temperature inside the capsule dropped a good forty degrees. In the next, an ugly, flat-nosed creature thrust its head through a swirling white haze and blasted her with the foulest breath in the history of the universe.

TIME RAIDERS

Only they can cross the boundaries of time;
only they have the power to save humanity

Meet the team of Project Anasazi, a secret military unit sent through time to save the world, as they discover dark and dangerous new passions.

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

© Merline Lovelace and Lindsay McKenna 2009

ISBN: 978 0 263 88768 6

89-0710

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