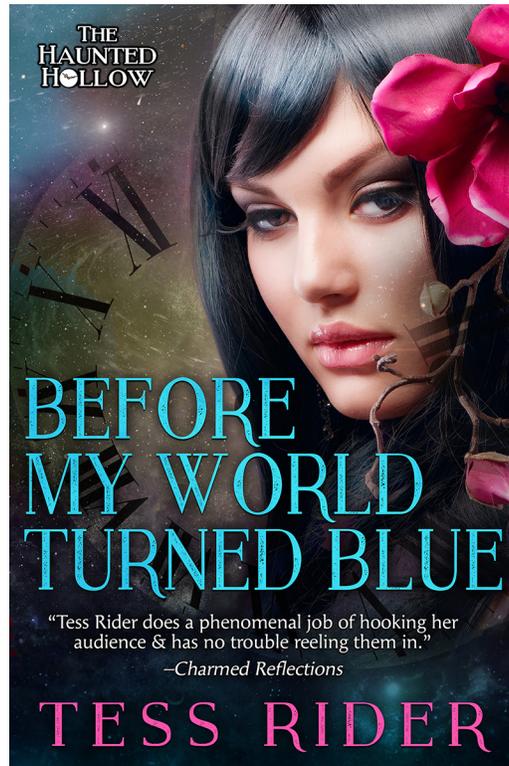


## Sample Chapter

### Before My World Turned Blue

By Tess Rider



## CHAPTER ONE

*July 13, 1972 —The Haunted Hollow, California*

“Sam, watch out!”

Sam Severin reached for his phantom blaster only to discover it was no longer strapped to his leg. Must have lost it when he saved the girl from that grotesque just now. He ducked last minute, just as a samurai phantom raider slashed at him with a massive sword. Didn't matter that the giant six-foot-seven warrior was a ghost, that sword it wielded could still chop the head off an ox. It swooshed mere inches above Sam's and the tips of his hair rained down like red snow.

“Sam!” screamed the girl, hunkered against the gritty wall of the stinking alley. A gutter baby, a kid literally born in the gutter who lived off scraps like a feral animal, she’d been on the brink of being eaten for dinner by a nasty grotesque when Sam had spotted her twenty minutes ago. No sooner had he blasted the grotesque to kingdom come and helped the girl to his car when the raider showed up, skin all phosphorescent in the night. No mistaking one, even at a distance. But Sam had been paying too much attention to the girl, trying to assess her injuries, and the raider got the jump on him. She’d screamed and darted into the alley like a sewer rat seeking shelter from a were-cat. Naturally, the raider had gone after her.

“Son of a banshee lover.” Sam dropped down and rolled out of the way, scrambled to his feet and backed down the alley, hoping to lure the raider away from the girl. The alley stank of piss and garbage, rank and ripe after all day in the summer sun. But the sun had fallen and darkness filled all the corners with shadows, shadows that hissed and seethed with hatred and dread, the dread and doubt creeping into Sam’s mind. “Papa Legba, get them out of my head!”

His cry to his guardian spirit, the trickster god of the crossroads, echoed against the brick buildings on either side of the alley and blasted the ill-intentioned shadows backward, if only temporarily. Cursed creepers. They were one of the worst types of ghosts to deal with, worse even than fighting the damned phantom raiders, even though the latter carried heavy weapons and were hell to kill. Creepers got in the head, messed with one’s confidence. And let’s face it, out here in the mad world of the haunted hollow, sometimes confidence was all the difference between life and death.

The raider wore the ancient armor of the Samurai of old Japan, from before the necro-virus swarmed the island nation and turned it into an army of undead warriors, and it wielded a twenty-eight-inch katana blade sharp enough to slice a man in half, lengthwise. Its face covered by a terrifying angry god mask, eyes empty, mouth spitting fire, the raider rushed Sam full force, sword pointed straight for Sam’s chest.

Sam skipped backward and yanked the nearest rusted garbage can into the path behind him. Then another and another. Spoiled food, greasy newspapers and empty bottles hurtled across the alley, smashing and splatting the walls but not slowing the raider down by a second. Its massive sword hacked through it all with the terrifying ring of layered steel. When the blade whispered past his ear, Sam pushed his power, the ability to momentarily slow time for everyone but him, so he could run balls out to the end of the alley.

“That’s right, you banshee lover, follow me.” Sam burst out of the alley where it opened onto East Main Street. His car stood at the nearby curb idling, passenger door still wide open.

“Sam! He’s almost—”

The girl’s scream was cut short by a horrible gurgle. Sam whirled around, ready to surprise blast the raider on his heels with an ectoplasmic pulse grenade he’d torn from the bandolier across his chest. Only the raider wasn’t there. It had returned down the alley to where the girl had gone to ground.

Now it stood in front of the grubby gutter baby, pulling its long, necro-virus-tipped sword from her chest, crimson blood dripping to the dirty ground, its jaw working in a wordless howl of victory. The girl slumped over. Dead. She wouldn’t stay that way long, though. Within seconds, the necro-virus would begin the horrific process known as resurrection. Not allowed to truly die, her soul would be enslaved. All her vital organs would be painfully replaced with clockwork

machines built by nano-sized bots called necro-tech and controlled by the evilest woman in the world, a sinister sorceress known as Scheherazade.

And he'd just given her one more victim to supernaturally exploit. Fan-fucking-tastic. He'd totally overestimated himself, or rather the raider's interest in him. It'd gone for the easy kill while Sam was trying to lead him away. He knotted his fists, shaking, skin burning hot at his failure. From all around the alley, the creepy shadows hissed in victory.

*Failure. Not quick enough to save her. Again. Losing your grip.*

The raider turned and stalked toward him, sword still dripping with the girl's blood, its blank, phosphorescent eyes glowing bright. Sam yanked the pin on the grenade and hurled it at the raider, then ran out of the alley and dove through the open door on the passenger side of his car.

A massive boom shuddered through the alley. Bits of brick, garbage and god knew what else hailed out onto the street. The explosion's shock wave shoved Sam into the car and slammed the door on his ass, the car rocking like a ship on choppy waters. Sam smashed his head into the driver's side door, jammed his knee against the dashboard and bounced on the vehicle's bench seat, springs creaking beneath him in protest.

Sam didn't stick around to see the fruits of his destruction. All that mattered was he'd pitched that grenade so the dead gutter baby was within its blast radius. If he couldn't save her, the least he could do was make sure she never suffered the horror of resurrection. *Failure!* He grabbed hold of the steering wheel and hauled himself upright, right foot stomping on the gas. He peeled away from the curb with a squeal and didn't stop until he reached his crappy motel.

And to think, the whole reason he'd ventured out after sunset in the first place was because he'd run out of booze and smokes. Then he'd made the stupid mistake of trying to be a good Samaritan and now someone was dead.

Story of his life.

\*

The motel room stank of stale beer, acrid cigarette smoke and old sweat. Vintage blood stains darkened the nappy carpet and the frayed drapes did little to block out the harsh anti-phantom halo light outside, used to keep the ghosts away from human dwellings when the sun went down. And to think this place used to be a high end hotel once.

Sam puffed on his cigarette and stared at the flickering television screen. He followed the drag with a pull on the bottle of cheap tequila he'd gone through all that trouble to get.

Fighting. Always fighting. So much killing and so few wins. Three long years of it. The most sleep he'd ever been able to get had been the several hours he'd had with *her* before she'd stabbed him in the back. Literally. Good ole Temperance Maloney. She was his brand of poison and she'd darn near killed him three days ago.

Sam took a long swig of tequila and tried his damndest to numb any memory of the auburn-haired beauty who'd captured his heart only to rip it apart. Tonight, for a few hours, he could drink until he fell asleep and claim what little respite that provided him. With any luck, he wouldn't have nightmares of the gutter baby's death, but he probably would. He always did when he failed to save someone's life.

Not that the threats outside weren't still there. He'd just broken down and hired a young kid he'd met at the diner downstairs. Kid had lost his parents to the ghosts and was hustling to

stay alive. So Sam paid him to watch the window for him, to let him know when anything inhuman came into view.

“Why? Whatcha gonna do about it?” the kid had asked, popping his gum. He had tattoos all over his scrawny body, but none like the spellbound ones Sam wore. His were all homemade and were all names. Names of everyone he’d lost. For one so young, there were too many. He could have been Sam’s kid brother, reminding him too much of his own younger sister, lost so many years ago to this same, horrific ghost war in a future this boy couldn’t even conceive of. This world of 1972 had no idea what was still to come.

Sam did. His home was the mid-twenty-second century. The only remaining human beings, who numbered just over three thousand, lived in a temporal bubble outside time in a preserved swath of old Earth. Everything else around them lay in ruin.

“You see a grotesque or a phantom raider, you tell me. I’ll kill it,” he’d said to the kid and took a swig of tequila, unable to let go of the bottle until it was drained. Then he’d sucked on a cigarette until the toxic smoke filled his lungs.

*She* hated cigarettes.

“I don’t know nobody who can kill a phantom raider,” the kid said, sounding doubtful of his abilities.

“If you ‘don’t know nobody,’ that means you do know somebody. Me. Now keep an eye out and let me get some quiet time.”

“How do you know I won’t just walk out on you soon as you fall asleep, huh? I could steal all your stuff and —” The boy gasped when Sam withdrew his phantom light pistol from the holster under his arm.

Aiming down the sight at the kid, despite his inebriation, Sam glared. “I’m a light sleeper, boyo, and I’ve got an itchy trigger finger. Don’t make me regret giving you that fifty.”

The kid’s face closed tight like a trap and he shook his head. “Don’t worry, mister, I don’t go back on my word like lots of gutter babies do. I’ll keep watch for you. If you really can kill a raider, shit, I’ll watch your back any time.”

He’d meant it, too. He was desperate for a hero. But Sam wasn’t that hero. Hadn’t he just proven that a few hours ago? His gut roiled on the memory of the poor, desperate girl’s death, her eyes wide open with terror, the blood so very crimson on the raider’s sword as he yanked it from her chest.

Sam puffed on his cigarette, took yet another swig. Stared into the television. Fell into a stupor. The flickering static of the television screen shook, then shook again, the impression of a knuckle, then a blade, then the body of a human being taken down by a ferocious ghost tiger punched through the glass into the motel room.

Sam jerked and blinked.

The TV buzzed with the hum of the formless static.

Not good. He was hallucinating again. Remembering. So many nightmares. His past punching through his armor of confidence. Nightmares of a sadistic sorceress and her giant pit surrounded by Fae spectators, filled with human men, women, even children fighting for their lives against the far more numerous grotesques and the much deadlier phantom raiders. From above came the shrieks of banshees, their kill call deadly when within a certain range. And then there were the creepers, those insidious ghosts that fed on your fears, magnifying them until they overwhelmed you.

Worse still? The roar of the screaming fans, the elite Fae in their finery, betting on who would survive the battle and who would become fodder for the necro-virus-infected ghosts. Blood pounded in his ears, thumping so loudly it drowned out the screams of his family as they were ripped apart around him. His heartbeat. His fear. Paralyzing him.

*A raider strides toward him, long sword drawn and ready to slash his head from his body. Sam wet his pants and still could not move. Coming closer, the blade's edge crimson, dripping with his family's blood. The raider's skeleton jaw works in silent, hideous laughter. He strikes.*

The clanging of the motel telephone jerked Sam awake. The bottle slipped from his hand. He snatched it quickly, reflexes impeccable despite the fact the bottle was over half empty. Nope, nothing could scare him now. Even tonight's disaster couldn't faze him. He'd seen it all.

Or that's what he liked to tell himself.

The phone rang again and again, annoying in its insistence. No one knew he was here. No one should be calling him. Maybe it was the motel receptionist phoning to tell him to turn down the television, which he'd cranked up loud enough to drown out the sex worker and her john in the next room. The world may be going to hell around them, but people still needed to get off. Sam just didn't have to listen to it.

"You gonna answer that, mister?" the boy asked with a whine.

Since the cursed thing wouldn't stop ringing, Sam forced himself to his feet and trudged to the side of the bed. He lifted the receiver like it was made of lead instead of plastic.

"Yeah?" he asked the asshole of a caller.

"You're a hard man to find, Phoenix. You've been off grid for three days. You forced me to get resourceful."

Sam shut his eyes. The fact he'd been off grid and holed up in this shitty motel room for the past few days was Tempe's fault.

"Speak up," Thea Maloney Wyatt said when he didn't answer. "I can't hear you."

"This line can't possibly be secure." Sam took a pull from the bottle again, the fiery burn coursing down his throat.

"It's not, so call back through proper channels. Do not make me bring out the big guns." The line disconnected.

Sam grumbled but got up. He dug into a pocket in his cargo pants and pulled out a twenty. "Kid, I need some privacy. Go get us some breakfast down there at the diner, 'kay?"

The boy got up from his post by the window and snatched the money from Sam's hand. He frowned at Sam. "You even gonna be here when I get back, mister?"

"Are you even going to come back? Now get gone."

The boy hunched his shoulders more, threw his hoodie over his head, and stepped outside. So long as he stayed in the sheltered hallways of the motel he'd be fine and he'd be safe in the diner. The ghosts hadn't gotten bold enough yet to attack in the light. The kid didn't need Sam, not really. Kid like him, he was a scrapper. He'd be okay.

Denial firmly in place, Sam moved on to what he'd been dreading doing for three days. From a holder on his utility belt, he withdrew a slim, handheld device with a smooth, polished crystal surface. He tapped the surface in a specific pattern and the device lit up, revealing a screen with buttons. He tapped in the temporal coordinates he wanted to reach and pressed INITIATE. The temporal wave signal rode the ripples of time to a place over one hundred fifty years in the future.

The line picked up immediately, the connection marred by a soft hiss and crackle. "It's about time. You go dark on us like this again and I will tell him."

He knew exactly who she referred to and no, that wouldn't be a good idea. Sam shuddered and shut his eyes. His knees weak suddenly, he sank to the bed. He was in no shape to see the General, his mentor, his idol. When that raider had been about to slice and dice Sam all those years ago, it'd been the General's phantom blaster that had taken the raider down. It'd been the General's skeleton warriors, the *Cazadores de los Muertos*, humans in full body armor painted with skeleton bones, tech interfaces in their helmets and weapons the likes of which the ghosts of the haunted hollow had never seen, who had freed everyone still alive in the Pit that day.

The General had been Sam's salvation. In a universe destroyed by fractured timelines and ravaged by an apocalyptic ghost war, where humans were the very bottom of the food chain, the General and his *Cazadores de los Muertos* had put Sam's faith back in the gods again. For surely they'd finally heard the prayers of what humans remained. Finally they'd sent a true hero.

The General had saved them in an astonishing ambush of Scheherazade's elite guard. He'd even sent her on the run. Anyone who could strike fear in the most feared necromancer on the planet was someone Sam wanted to stick very close to. After the battle, the General had led the hundreds of humans he'd rescued to the promised land, a place outside time called the League of the Helping Hand. A little spot in a bucolic Radley's Hollow where humans could live without fear.

Sam cleared the lump in his throat. He'd been an asshole to go dark like he'd done, but after the last completely botched mission with T—*her*, he'd needed time alone to reflect. And to rage. "Please don't tell him. I'm here. I'm back. I won't disappear again."

"We're not getting off on the right foot, Phoenix," Thea said. "If it's because I'm Tempe's niece—"

"It has nothing to do with Tempe," Sam lied in a rush, spitting out her name even though he was loathe to speak it, let alone think it. The second he did the rage started. Unless he wanted to severely disappoint the only man whose opinion of him had ever mattered, he had to keep that rage in check. He forced out a question to stall for time while he got his shit together. "Why, what did she say?"

"It's one of the reasons I've been trying to reach you. We haven't heard from her since she rendezvoused with you in 1977. So you don't know where she is either?"

"No," he said between gritted teeth, one hand tightening involuntarily into a fist. "And I don't give a banshee's ass."

"Right," Thea said with a heavy helping of sarcasm. "If something's happened related to the mission that I need to be aware of—"

"The last time I saw her, she was walking away from me while I was bleeding out on the ground." Sam touched the still tender area just above his left shoulder blade. Even though he'd repaired the knife wound with nano-salve, pain lingered and it had migrated to his chest. It ached with every breath he took, remembering too clearly gasping for breath, calling for her, her form disappearing into the foggy street.

"What the hell? Why didn't you report this immediately?" Thea said. Anger snapped over the temporal waves to rip him out of his dangerous vortex of memories.

Sam shut his eyes. Opening the wound that was Temperance Maloney meant opening the floodgates to all the horror and terror in his past.

"We got into an argument," he said, severely abbreviating the event. "It got heated. So she effing stabbed me and left me for dead. What's there to say? If you know, please tell me because I've been wracking my brain trying to understand why the woman I love did that to me. And I still don't fucking understand. So yeah, that's what I've been doing the last three days, ma'am."

"Do you want to come in from the cold?" she asked, voice gentling.

Sam stiffened. Go home? No, not now when his mission was far from over.

"You don't have to stay out there. Not anymore. Tempe gave you the upgrade to your device, right?" she asked.

"What upgrade?"

"I don't like the sound of any of this. We'll get to the upgrade in a minute," Thea said. "Nothing in her mission profile had anything to do with you. I...I'm honestly shocked by what you've told me."

Sam grunted. "What exactly was her mission profile? Wreak havoc? Cause that's about all she did."

"I get it. You're pissed. I'll find out what's going on. I can't believe she stabbed you." Thea paused and then said slowly, "Listen, there have been some significant developments recently and the League needs your A game, Phoenix, but if you're not ready to bring it, I understand. I get it. I know we don't know each other that well, you went on your mission back through time not long after I arrived here, so you tell me what you need."

Sam barked with laughter and then turned it into a cough. No way the General would have asked him what he needed, he'd have known. But with the General handing over his command to his new wife and taking a back seat Sam, and no doubt all his brethren in the *Cazadores de los Muertos*, were having to adjust to an all new kind of command.

Sam sighed. What he really needed was a direction, a target to hit, a fuse to light. This mucking about through a morass of broken timelines wasn't getting him anywhere. He'd battled more ghosts and demons than he cared to count on his journey backward through time trying to find a point in any timeline when things weren't all fucked up. So far no joy.

"You got a special op for me?" he said. "Something I can finally do that's truly productive."

"As it happens, I do, if you're ready. Your wounds have healed?"

Sam grunted, taking her double meaning. "Yeah, I'm good to go. Hit me."

"Based on our analysis of Cole's temporal map and feedback from the new temporal sensors Luke and Cole created to monitor the broken timelines, there are pivotal events in the history of Radley's Hollow that we need to lock down first and at the same time. They'll help us get the rest of the broken timelines back into a single line that travels into the future, instead of back in on itself like our current universe does."

Back in on itself like a snake eating its tail, an ouroboros or a black hole. ,

"I take it you've figured something out?" Sam relinquished his death grip on the tequila bottle and set it down on the bedside table. "Which pivotal events matter the most?"

"We have," she said. Simple words that ended his years of wandering in a split second. "We have coordinates to the exact points in the timelines that we need to control. Luke's sending

you a data packet over this temporal connection. It contains an upgrade for your device so you can pre-program your jump coordinates as well as go backward and forward through time. I'm also sending the coordinates to your first event."

Sam straightened up. The improvements were significant upgrades. "This is new. Luke's been hard at work. So what's the op?"

"I'm sending you to 1942, two days before Ruby Radley's wedding to Hamilton Rutherford. Information in Luke's data packet has the specifics, but the short version is we found a particular timeline that is perhaps the least corrupted by magic, though it does exist to a limited extent. We're calling it the prime timeline. We need you to ensure events go a certain way and then set a temporal beacon to lock down all the other timelines to the prime's specific outcome."

Sam's breathing stilled in his chest. Little fingers of cold brushed at the back of his neck. He had to be sure he'd heard it right. "*The Ruby Radley?*"

"Is that going to be a problem, Phoenix?" Thea asked.

Sam's eyes drifted to the static on the television. Thea's husband may have saved Sam that day many years ago, but Sam had lost his entire family and only one person was to blame for that. The one who had started the ghost war, the witch of the haunted hollow, Scheherazade, a nearly all powerful sorceress who had once been the young Radley heiress, Rosalind Ruby Radley.

Sam's mouth went dry and his fingers tingled to hold his phantom blaster. His heart hammered and he dreamed of sighting down the barrel, aiming squarely at Scheherazade's heart and blowing her away.

If he was now going to have the power to free jump, if he was being sent to a point in time *before* Ruby was turned into Scheherazade, wasn't it his duty as a human being to make sure she never got the chance to become the most destructive force on the planet? Didn't he owe it to his family and the girl who'd died today? To the kid he'd just sent to the diner? To every single human being who'd been murdered by this woman and resurrected as an abomination? Oh gods, yes, he'd take this mission.

"Phoenix," Thea said, a note of warning in her tone. "This is *not* a kill mission. In fact, if you kill her at this point in time, not only will you upset our extremely delicate plans, but you will end the life of my husband and your mentor before he even has a chance to be conceived."

"Much as I love the man, ma'am, if Ruby Radley dies before she becomes Scheherazade we don't need a savior. There won't be a ghost war in the first place."

"Don't be so sure. We're playing a four dimensional chess game with an opponent we don't yet know much about, someone who can see far ahead of us while we can only look back on tangled timelines and use Cole's temporal map as our guide. And according to that map, Ruby, not Scheherazade, is pivotal to our mission to fix time."

"Are you shitting me? You're going to give me this shot to stop the bitch before she can do any harm and you won't let me take it?"

"We know Ruby is heir to enormous power. And so is her son. We're going to need both of them, Phoenix, if we're going to carry off a full scale rewrite of the last three hundred years, which means we need to make certain she doesn't become Scheherazade in the first place. *That* is your mission."

Sam glowered at the communicator. "And how in the hell am I supposed to do that?"

“By making sure nothing impedes Ruby and Justin Wyatt from acting on their attraction in 1942 and by ensuring Justin survives World War Two and comes home to Radley’s Hollow, Ruby and their son by 1947. It’s their love that will prevent Ruby’s transformation into Scheherazade and, I suspect, save Justin’s life as well.”

Sam nearly gagged. Just because Thea and the General were wildly in love didn’t mean love solved everything. In fact, love could make things a whole lot worse. The ache in Sam’s back proved it. But he didn’t say anything.

Thea continued. “I get it, things with you and Tempe went badly—”

“Are we done, ma’am?” Sam interrupted before he got embroiled in a heart-to-heart with his new commanding officer.

“Stick to the plan,” Thea said. “It’s detailed in the data packet Luke sent. And remember, someone has a vested interest in destroying Ruby and Justin’s love. *That’s* who your enemy is, not Ruby.”

Sam studied the documents that had been loaded to his device, flipping through them on the liquid crystal screen. He’d go over them in detail later, but even on first glance he could see Thea was right. He grumbled. After everything he’d been through, now he had to protect the future of the very woman who’d completely destroyed his? Un-fucking-believable.

“Stick to the plan,” Thea said, clearly doubting his ability to follow orders.

After everything he’d been through, so was he.

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