

Unaware of her gem's potentials, Lieutenant Helen Andros clashes with her powerful newfound parent, while both of them face growing danger from the state-sanctioned Temple of Kronos. An otherworldly being shows Helen the past-life origins of her anger and fears.

Fallout--Green Stone of Healing(R) Book Two

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Green Stone of Healing® Series

Fallout

Book Two

By C.L. Talmadge

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Medical bag over her shoulder, Helen pushed open the door to the aging barracks converted into a hospital for the 163rd Regiment. Inside, she felt as though the last eight months of her life had vanished. She was merely returning to duty after a lengthy holiday leave.

She found the Toltec soldier who summoned her tossing and turning on a broken down bed. Panting in agony, beads of sweat on his brow, he still recognized her. His leathery red-brown face lit up with a crooked grin.

“Lieutenant Angel. At last. I knew you’d get here in time.”

Helen placed her medical bag at the foot of the bed and caught his wrist to take his pulse.

“Witless as usual, Sergeant,” she retorted. “I’m not even close to an angel.”

Miklaz Aran tried to laugh and ended in a coughing spasm. Helen held his shoulders to keep him from falling off the bed. She snatched up a piece of cloth so that he could spit out fluid.

“Kronos, Lieutenant. My stomach’s on fire,” Aran whispered.

“Yes, Miklaz,” Helen said. “Unlike your dismal intelligence, I can do something about that.”

Aran grinned again. Patting him on the shoulder, Helen turned away and opened the cloth to study the sputum. It was flecked with dried blood; his bleeding was intermittent.

She found painkiller in her bag and gave him a heavy dose. For more lasting pain control, she needed to mix the drug into a drip solution. The flattened bag on the stand to the far side of the bed was empty; he was not hooked to it and probably had not been for some time. The pillowcases and sheets on Aran’s bed were coated with grime, sweat, and even worse.

Helen glanced about the room. Its gritty appearance and the faint stench of urine and vomit told her that the barracks had not been cleaned in some time. Under her direction, orderlies had scrubbed it thoroughly each day. Walking to a supply cabinet, Helen found it did not contain any replacement bags.

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Her disgust turned to cold fury. Noticing a light inside her former office and sleeping quarters, Helen investigated. A private in medical scrubs was draped over the chair, snoring.

Helen pounced on the hapless man, throwing him onto the floor. She stood over him, knuckles on her hips. The private leapt to his feet snarling, fist geared to take a swing. He recognized her and stopped in mid-punch.

“How prudent of you, Private,” she said. “Now, bring me some solution bags, and while you’re at it, some clean linens, clean towels, a basin full of warm water, and some soap.”

“We’re all out of those items, Lieutenant.”

“From my lips to the Lord Protector’s ear, Soldier. Right here, right now. Bring them! Or someone apart from your watch commander is going to find out about your sleeping habits.”

He scurried out of the building.

Helen examined the sergeant thoroughly. Before she was done, the private brought supplies. Helen set up the new drip with painkiller, and used the basin of warm water to give the sergeant a sponge bath. She washed his upper torso, demanding that the private cleanse Aran’s lower body. She returned to the storage cabinet and located a clean if rumpled bed shirt for him. She also ordered the soldier to help change the bed linens.

Helen could do little more to ease the sergeant’s pain except give him her undivided attention and her heart-felt love as a healer. She moved her medical bag to the bare mattress atop the nearest cot frame, pulled a chair to the head of his bed, and sat. She took his hand in hers and they talked. She might have asked him to keep silent except she knew he needed to speak, and sparing what little strength remained to him would not avert the inevitable.

The late afternoon wore into early evening. A dozen troops on active duty burst into the warehouse, the regiment’s second in command at their head. Like the private who had brought him word of her presence less than two hours earlier, Major Donaz Tufts could scarcely believe Helen was back on the base. He feared her father would somehow blame him for it.

Offended at the loud and rude intrusion, which unsettled her patient, Helen let go of the sergeant’s hand and rose to her feet. She used all her self-control not to glare at Tufts, whom she knew from her days on active duty. He ordered his men to stand at alert along the walls and by the door.

“The only possible enemy in this room, Major, is one you cannot defeat with force or weapons,” Helen said. “This man deserves peace and quiet. Is all this really necessary?”

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“We’re not here on his behalf, Lieutenant,” Tufts said. “Our orders are to protect you. They are direct from Colonel Orlando.”

Helen’s guts churned. If Orlando knew her whereabouts, then so did her father. She asked the major to keep his troops as silent as possible and was gratified that Tufts took the trouble to go to each man individually and relay his orders in a quiet voice. Helen turned a gracious smile on him.

She covered the sergeant’s hand with hers. “You’re going to bow out to an audience, Miklaz.”

Struggling to take in enough air, he smiled. “I always did like to make a splashy entrance, Lieutenant Angel.” He coughed hard. “Guess I’ll make a grand departure as well.”

Helen’s throat tightened. She felt helpless and useless in the presence of pain and impending death that she could not prevent or relieve any further. All that was left was prayer, along with her determination to honor her agreement with Aran as long as she was not forced to leave his side.

Orlando arrived not long after. Alarmed about Helen’s welfare, he rushed into the warehouse, saw her wiping the soldier’s brow, and halted, stunned. That sacred light was around her and her patient, as it appeared many times before when she tended the seriously ill or the dying. He had to resist the urge to bow his head and kneel.

Turning to the business at hand, Orlando answered Tufts’ salute with a brief nod since he was neither in uniform nor on active duty. Once he exchanged information with the major, Orlando ordered the watch continued. Drawn irresistibly to that light, he scrounged for a chair and placed it on the other side of the bed. Helen welcomed him with a preoccupied smile and asked the private to fetch a small bucket of ice cubes.

Aran opened his eyes and looked first at Helen, then at Orlando. “Uh, oh. We’ve been discovered, Lieutenant Angel.”

He flipped his gaze toward Helen. “Are you in trouble for visiting me?”

“Of course not, Miklaz. The colonel is here to safeguard your virtue.”

The sergeant cackled. “Life is damned cruel,” he said between coughing spasms. “I finally get the most beautiful girl in Azgard one step away from my bed, and I can’t do a damn thing about it.”

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The rotor trip from the palace south to the base was a journey of nearly an hour, even at top airspeed. Once he knew his daughter was unharmed, Lord James vacillated between rage and bewilderment.

He pushed the craft as fast as it could go. Part of his dread was the possibility that she had stolen back to the regiment for a tryst with some would-be lover she conveniently failed to mention. Not knowing what to expect, not sure he wanted to find out, Lord James was nonplussed when he entered the warehouse and located her. This was not what he imagined.

Thirteen soldiers snapped to attention at his appearance. Orlando stood up and bowed. Helen managed to hang onto her patient with one arm and drop a shallow curtsey.

Lord James walked toward the bed, nodding at the major to grant him and his men permission to stand down. Orlando found another chair, wiped off the dust with his shirtsleeve, and brought it to the foot of the bed. The Lord Protector sat in silence. He issued no orders to anyone; he simply watched his daughter as she worked.

Helen wrapped part of an ice cube in a piece of cotton and held the exposed portion to her patient's cracked lips for him to lick. When she leaned to return the empty cloth to the table, Aran noticed who was at the foot of the bed. He scrambled to push himself into a sitting position, resisting with astonishing ferocity Helen's gentle efforts to discourage him.

His effort cost Aran almost all the reserves he had, and he lay semi-upright for many minutes, panting hard, until he could draw sufficient breath to speak. "Please do not blame the Lieutenant, Lord Protector."

The intensity of his emotion propelled his voice. "She is here only to keep her promise to a broken down, dying soldier."

A round of coughing interrupted him; Helen caught him by the shoulders or he would have toppled off the bed.

"Miklaz, please," she whispered to him after his spasm finally stopped. She held another cloth to his mouth.

"What's the worst he can do to me, Lieutenant? Kill me? I'm way ahead of him in that case."

She eased him onto the pillows, examined the fabric in her hand. He was right. The increasing amount of red in the sputum was bright instead of dark. His lungs and perhaps other organs were bleeding again. The end could not be far.

With his last strength, Aran looked up at Helen once more and then turned to Lord James. "She was a gift from the Father of Kronos to all of us

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in this regiment, Lord Protector. Treasure her.”

He lost consciousness, never to speak again. His breathing grew labored. Helen changed her position so that she rested on the bed next to his side, her arm under his neck, rarely looking elsewhere except at his face, lined from laughter and pain. Orlando moved to the chair she had occupied so that he could hand her a cloth or ice as needed.

Although Lord James relieved the troops of guard duty, most of them remained, or left the warehouse only for a short time, returning soon with mugs of *kaf* and food for themselves and others. Aran was respected and well liked among soldiers of all ranks. Word of his impending death had brought activity on the base to a standstill.

Sitting beside her patient, listening to the wheezing rattle characteristic of the last stages of dying, Helen recalled what Aran asked her when she told him all those months ago about the disease that would claim his life.

“What is it like to die, Doctor?”

She could not think of what to say to him back then. It occurred to her that perhaps he was still hanging on because he still needed an answer. It was worth a shot; she so much wanted his suffering to end. What could she tell him? As always when she needed comfort or guidance, Helen placed her hand on the green gem that lay hidden beneath her blouse. The stone was warm and seemed to vibrate. She held onto it for many minutes before releasing it, her heart and spirit calmer.

Helen wiped Aran’s brow with the cloth and put her lips to his ear. “I’ve watched many men die, Miklaz. Most of them seemed to find it peaceful. At least, that was the expression on their faces.”

Aran’s breathing became even louder, as though somehow he heard her. Helen next spoke in a volume sufficient to carry throughout the barracks. “Time to let go, Sergeant. This war is over and you have performed with great honor and valor. Leave in peace and go home. That’s an order, Soldier.”

Maybe a minute later, Aran’s rattling breath ceased. No longer pinched into tight lines, his lips and the corners of his eyes relaxed into a look of serenity, most unusual for a face that had always been animated.

Helen asked Orlando for her scope. She felt Aran’s wrist; there was no pulse. She heard no heartbeat or lung movement. Wrapping the scope around her neck, she lingered for a moment, caressing Aran’s brow. Then she drew the sheet over his head.

“Sergeant Aran is dead, Lord Protector.”

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No one stirred or said a word. Helen sank to her knees at the bedside. “Father of Kronos, Lord of Creation, let not a humble plea from these unworthy lips move you to reject your departed servant, Miklaz Aran. Unto you, Light of the World, we commend his soul to eternal keeping, even as we will send his mortal remains back to the ash from which they sprang.

“Amen.”

Two-dozen voices, including her father’s, closed the prayer in unison with her. The group broke up, the soldiers leaving the warehouse in twos and threes, talking among themselves.

Finally aware of her exhaustion and hunger, Helen was struggling to get off the floor when she felt hands lift her to her feet. She looked into her father’s eyes, which, even in the poorly lit warehouse, were glinting, whether from anger or some other emotion she could not tell and dared not guess.

“Come away now, Helen. We must talk.”

His hand on the back of her neck, Lord James steered his wayward daughter into the Consort’s solar, even though it was close to midnight. The Exalted Lord and his wife, who had asked Lord James to stop by upon his return to Agarthi, were playing cards.

In her usual place across from Lady Naomi’s armchair, Judith felt hopelessness and pain radiating from Helen, and lingering anger and pain in Lord James’ energy. She needed all of her willpower to resist the urge to intervene. They had to settle things between them on their own this time, or they never would. Judith aimed a very pointed glance at the Consort.

Although her father had not asked her to do so, Helen sank to one knee and apologized to Kefren and Lady Naomi for any alarm she might have caused them, and for disrupting their day.

Lord James collared her again and led her to their suite of rooms. He dismissed the servants and told Helen to be seated.

Ashamed, she stared at her shoes. *I feel about as scuffed as they look.*

Removing his uniform jacket, Lord James stood before her. “Is this your idea of submission, Helen?”

She flinched. He pressed her. “You will answer me, young woman.”

“It was my idea of keeping a sacred promise to a dying soldier, my lord.”

“By running off without a word? Why did you not come to me and ask?”

She wrung her hands. “I was afraid you would say no, my lord. You did

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remove me from active duty.”

He swung a chair into place in front of her and sat. “This was not the same situation. This was a matter of personal honor.”

Helen raised her head. “I did not think my honor was of any great concern to you, my lord. I thought it mattered only to me.”

The sorrow in his daughter’s eyes and her air of dejection caused Lord James deep pain. “How can you say something like that?”

She stared at him in confusion. “How? When you pulled me off active duty, my lord, I felt dishonored.”

She realized only as she spoke that this was one of the reasons his order so distressed her all those months ago. “I have always regarded my commission as a sacred promise to care for the soldiers of the regiment, as long as I was capable of doing it.”

He shook his head at her. “There is no dishonor in obeying the orders of a superior officer, Helen.”

Her skeptical look prompted him to explain. “I took you off active duty out of my concerns for propriety and your safety.”

Lord James stoked the fire. Although it was not yet autumn, a chill already touched the evenings and nights in the Sacred City.

“A matter of your personal honor is also a matter of my personal honor,” he added. Helen was too stunned to respond.

“You are no longer alone in this world, Helen. What you do affects me every bit as much as what I do affects you. I consider any promise you make as a promise I also must keep.”

A tear rolled down Helen’s cheek. She realized she had entirely misjudged him and the situation.

“Why did you not come to me and tell me about it? I would have arranged to have you taken to the base.”

Helen was sorely tempted to lie. “I guess I did not trust you, my lord. Perhaps I know better now.”

Her candor encouraged him. He sat across from her again and took her hands in his. “Do you have any idea how I felt when I could not find you? Do you even care?”

More tears glistened on her cheeks. “Yes, my lord, of course I care. No. I have no idea how you felt. Please tell me.”

“I felt just like I did all those long years ago when I came back from war and could not find your mother. She left me without a word or good-bye. I never saw her again, Helen, and I was terrified I might never see you again as

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well. That pain was the worst I have ever endured or ever will face in my life.”

Helen was moved beyond words by her father’s admission of fear and pain. Never before had she perceived that he could be vulnerable. In that moment she hated herself and detested her stupid pride for having hurt him so deeply.

“I am not my mother, my lord. I will never run away from you again.”

Lord James accepted her reply as her apology. He had no stomach for punishing her; they both had suffered enough.

He reached out and pushed strands of her soft hair away from her face. She folded her fingers over his hand and pressed it to her cheek, closing her eyes. She held on for many minutes, sorrow and contentment in her expression.

The duke finally checked the time. It was very late. He asked Helen to retire and urged her to arise later than usual.

After she curtseyed and left for her bedchamber, Lord James summoned Orlando and assigned him the task of determining why the regiment was so low on basic medical supplies and medications. The Lord Protector found the condition of the hospital entirely unacceptable.

After Orlando was gone, Lord James remained in the chair, a dead man’s words echoing in his head.

She was a gift to all of us in this regiment. Treasure her.

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