

Helen Andros and her newly reconciled father endure proscription and savage punishment by the Temple of Kronos. Helen learns basic energy manipulation from the Mist-Weaver and first uses her green stone for healing. A treacherous ally plots her father's assassination.

The Scorpions Strike--Green Stone of Healing(R) Book Three

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Green Stone of Healing® Series
The Scorpions Strike

Book Three
By C.L. Talmadge

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sleep eluding her as it had most nights since her father returned to the Sacred City, Helen threw back the coverlet and sat up. Exhausted yet awake, she turned on a light-stick. The wolfhound, on the rug beside the bed, lifted his head and stared at her. She leaned down and massaged the furry gap between his ears. "Poor Major. I'm keeping you awake, too."

In slippers and robe, a shawl across her shoulders for extra warmth, Helen went into the sitting room and stoked the fire until it burned brightly. The dog at her feet, she sat in her rocking chair, flicked on a second light-stick, and resumed working on the blouse she was making as part of the wedding present she planned to give Lady Samantha. It was just the sort of repetitive task that Helen found relaxing, since it absorbed her attention enough to distract her from her inner turmoil.

She looked up from her task only when Major growled softly, the ruff of fur around his neck bristling. The skin on Helen's neck tingled and the wall beside the mantel dissolved into shimmering waves. The Mist-Weaver soon took shape and floated before her rocking chair.

"You have been distressed of late by separation from your parent, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand."

Maguari seemed to be even less versed in small talk than she. His insights into her thoughts and feelings no longer surprised Helen.

"Even if you are not together in the flesh, you can be with him in spirit."

"I think about him often and pray for him daily, Master Maguari. What else is there for me to do when we're apart?"

He replied with a blast of impatience bordering on urgency. Helen could not recall ever feeling anything so intense from the Mist-Weaver.

"I do not speak in the abstract. It is possible to use the energy of spirit to connect with your father in a most literal manner, even if it is not physical."

"How?"

The Mist-Weaver lowered himself almost to the floor, the cowl obscuring his face. "Energy does not have the limitations of matter, Child of Kronos-

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Thunderhand. Matter gives rise to the impression, shall we say, of distance. Energy bridges that distance. How is it that I can tell what you are thinking and feeling even when I am not in the same room?”

“Because you are a very strange, inquisitive creature,” Helen shot back. She could not tell whether Maguari was shaking from laughter or anger.

“Patience, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand. The topic of energy is not idle nonsense. It has very practical uses. I healed your wounds through energy manipulation.”

That gave Helen pause, wistfully remembering the loving light and the longed-for feeling of acceptance.

“Energy can also alert you to others who may be close to you, and to their intentions toward you, even if your physical eyes cannot yet detect their proximity. In your current circumstances, the skill of energy discernment might just save your life.”

Helen shivered, recalling the death mark. “How do I learn these skills, Master Maguari? They seem impossibly difficult.”

The Mist-Weaver issued one of his snorting sounds, which Helen decided must be his equivalent of laughter. “You already use energy discernment, child of Kronos-Thunderhand. Remember the guessing games you played with your mother when you were young?”

Helen nodded.

“You also use energy discernment to determine what ails your patients. The difference now? I can teach you how to make conscious, directed use of this skill, so that it does not blind-side you when you least expect it, or elude you when you need it. Does this interest you?”

Helen felt an echo of the Mist-Weaver’s urgency and, unable to think of any other questions, nodded again.

Maguari directed her to set aside her work, lean back in her rocking chair, and shut her eyes. He taught her and then put her through a series of meditation exercises similar to those Judith had shown her many years ago, except Helen could tell the effect was far more potent. She soon had the strangest impression of what she called looseness, for lack of a better way to describe the experience. It was as though she could not tell where her person left off and the rest of the room began.

“Excellent,” the Mist-Weaver said. “You have relaxed the boundaries of your energy field to some extent.”

Helen breathed in sharply, then wondered why she was surprised that Maguari knew what she was going through.

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He continued the lesson. "Gently direct your energy toward any physical object in the room. Use your energy like a finger and explore all parts of that object, even with your eyes closed. Go to those places you could not see even with your eyes open."

Helen stretched out her energy to the armchair close to the fireplace. To her astonishment, she could readily tell the difference between the smooth surface of the chair's short wooden leg, and the plush texture of the fabric that covered the cushion. Excited and intrigued, she rolled her energy over more of the chair. Although she was not certain, it seemed that the padding in the seat was packed more densely than the padding in the back. It was harder to move through. Perhaps that was merely a logical deduction, a part of her argued. She slipped her energy-digit beneath the chair and explored the covering on the underside of the frame. It felt very different from the brocade. It was a coarser weave with no variations in the depth of its surface.

Helen opened her eyes. "There is a tear in the fabric underneath the seat of that armchair. I felt it."

The Mist-Weaver's cowl bobbed up and down. "Why not check to make sure? Perhaps that way you will stop second-guessing yourself."

She took the light-stick from the table and set it on the rug near the armchair, which she turned on its side. Sure enough, she found a small rip in one corner of the covering. She set the chair upright once more and returned to her rocking chair.

"I never looked under that chair before," she said, as though trying to convince herself more than anyone else. "How did I know about that hole?"

"You used your own energy field to bring you new information," Maguari said. "The ability to attain new information is one of the gifts of the spirit. We were never meant to stumble blindly through our material existence, completely ignorant of that which awaits us."

Helen recalled her mother's letter, which mentioned the same phrase about gifts. The realization that her mother thought this was important encouraged Helen to continue. She allowed the Mist-Weaver to talk her through a first spirit-visit to her father. It all seemed so simple. Deep relaxation, the sensation of detachment from the limitations of her physical body.

Helen's awareness drifted off; the next thing she knew, she was looking down into a room as though she were hovering near the ceiling. Everything in her peripheral vision was blurred. She could clearly perceive only what was directly below her. A man in a robe, his hair loose about his shoulders, was

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sitting at a table, writing on a Gridpad, occasionally checking something on the screen by his elbow.

Suddenly he looked up over his shoulder straight at Helen's awareness and she saw his face. *Papa! You're getting as little sleep as I do.* He frowned briefly and resumed his work.

Helen snatched her energy from the room. Her awareness came crashing back into her body, causing her to awaken abruptly, her breathing rapid. She tried to shake off her dizziness.

Maguari floated nearby. "You returned too quickly to your body, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand. That is the cause of your disorientation."

"I was startled. Papa looked right at me, but he didn't seem to see me."

"He detected your energy with his own. But since he insisted on perceiving only with his physical eyes, you were not visible to his conscious mind," Maguari explained. "But his heart and spirit knew you were there with him."

Helen eased back into the rocker, her heart too full of emotions to speak. One of her greatest fears was that the death mark would separate her from her father, possibly forever. If she could learn to do it without such a hard landing, this energy discernment skill might be one way to remain close to him. A tear slipped down her face.

"You must practice on your own now, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand. When you refine this skill, you will be able to manipulate better through the physical surroundings and won't have to drop into a room from the top."

Maguari made that bizarre laughing sound again. His form faded and flickered until, mist-like, it seeped back into the wall next to the hearth. His ears twitching backward and forward, Major sniffed the floor below the point where the Mist-Weaver vanished.

Helen stood up and stretched, then got herself a glass of water. She decided it was best to try the skill on her own right away, so that her memory of how Maguari had taught her would be fresh. She took herself into a deeply relaxed state and expanded her awareness until she found herself over the gray-walled garden. She could sense that above her, clouds streamed by and below, the shrubs and bushes swayed in the flowerbeds. With a shock, she realized that she was both looking down into the garden and seated on the curving stone bench inside the garden. *How can this be?*

She caught muffled sounds of voices around the Helen in the garden yet could not see who was with her or make out what they were saying. She did sense it was urgent, a matter of life or death.

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Her focus shifted to the wooden entry within the wall. The skin on the back of her neck tingled. In growing horror Helen watched the gate swing open to reveal two *Shaktim*, poised to deliver the Temple's vengeance against her.

Helen froze in terror. She couldn't move or call out. She heard a heavy pounding.

"Lady Justin!"

She opened her eyes and sat upright, gasping, heart thumping, fingers cramping. The wolfhound was between her and the door to the suite, low-pitched warning growls issuing from his throat. She grasped the dog's collar just as Tufts, followed by half a dozen members of his detail, charged into the sitting room. They halted and bowed as soon as they spotted Helen.

"Forgive this intrusion, Lady Justin," Tufts said. "I had to make certain you were safe. There has been a security breach."

Helen's flesh crawled anew. Somewhere on the grounds of the manor in the early morning they had caught a warrior-monk. How they recognized him before he acted on his mission was a mystery to her. Hanging onto the dog, she returned to the rocking chair and sat to regain her shattered composure.

"Quite unharmed, Major Tufts. Please do not apologize for doing your job."

After the men searched the suite thoroughly, Tufts ordered Lieutenant Denis Aran to complete his watch inside the sitting room instead of in the hall. Tufts would not allow Helen to take the wolfhound for a walk or to feed him, ordering another member of the security detail to do so.

Recalling that she wore only a robe, Helen retired to her bedchamber to shower and dress. Upon her return to the sitting room, the eastern horizon glowed with the impending sunrise. The fire was stoked, the gift blouse was folded atop the sewing basket, and a tray with a pot of *keaf*, muffins, and winter fruit was on the table in front of the hearth.

Ever cautious, Tufts kept Helen locked in her suite with a bodyguard until the afternoon. She split her time between completing her embroidery project and gazing at the ocean, trying to make sense of what happened that morning. She suspected that she had experienced a vision of an event yet to transpire. She also did not understand how she could perceive on more than one level at the same time, both as Helen in spirit and as Helen in body in the garden.

She wordlessly implored Maguari for answers, knowing that the Mist-Weaver would respond only in his own time and manner. She held a hand

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over the green stone, hoping the gem might bring her some insight or at least offer her a measure of much needed comfort and reassurance. For all her success with energy perception, Helen was feeling very isolated and bereft, even if the logical part of her knew that her father was doing as much as he could to keep her safe. Would it be enough? Her glimpse of the future suggested it might not.

The incursion prompted Orlando to leave for Alta ahead of the duke and duchess. After arriving, he did not stop to eat or even to remove his coat before visiting Helen. The colonel dismissed Captain Chad Aran, who was just ending his duty shift. Helen had to fight her impulse to leap up and throw her arms around Orlando in relief and joy.

He did not like the dark circles under her eyes. She seemed to have lost more weight. “You are well, Lady Justin?”

“Of course, Colonel. If Major Tufts had not sat on me all morning like a hen on an egg, I would never have known anything was amiss.” Helen feared he would think her hysterical or demented if she even hinted at the vision or whatever it was she experienced in the dark before the dawn.

Orlando could tell she wasn't being entirely candid. Helen detected his skepticism. “And what will you do with your other prisoner, Colonel?”

“You are not a prisoner, Lady Justin. These measures were temporary, for your safety.”

Helen slid off the window seat and displayed what Orlando considered a reassuringly arch expression. “You didn't answer my question. How did your men even know his true identity?”

“That is a different question, Lady Justin. I am not at liberty to respond to either of them.”

She stalked out of the sitting room as a way of conveying her annoyance, which the colonel took as another encouraging sign that she still retained some spark, even if something was deeply troubling her. Beyond Lord James' order not to speak of it, Orlando did not want to tell Helen what his duty next demanded of him. He knew she would not understand the necessity and would blame herself unfairly.

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Deep in the bowels of the manor was a windowless chamber used on occasion as a prison. Tufts at his side, Orlando permitted the sentry to unlock the door and switch on the room's light-stick. The major gave the colonel a leather sheath embossed in gold. A gem-laden handle protruded from the opening.

"Shall I assist, Colonel?"

"No, Tufts. Lock the door behind me and await my signal."

Stripped, the *Shakti* was immobilized by short chains on his wrists and ankles that were secured to the wall. He did not seem to shiver although the cold was sharp and unrelenting. The warrior-monks were rumored to possess strange powers of mental concentration and physical agility. The colonel had no desire to put that to the test. He just wanted to get it over with.

He yanked the wad of cloth out of the man's mouth; he spat and glared at him. "You dare defile a Blade of Retribution by touching it with your unclean hands?"

Orlando removed the dagger from its covering and lifted it toward the light-stick. The keen edge glinted as he tilted it from side to side. "Not bad. A little heavy in the handle."

"You will burn in the Fires of Kronos."

"Not before you."

Orlando raked the blade across the captive's throat. The chains kept the dying *Shakti* upright. The colonel watched until the body stopped twitching, then placed the knife on the stone floor and used his boot heel to break the weapon into two parts. Orlando put the hilt in his pocket and gave the blade back to Tufts. There would be no evidence the *Shakti* ever existed, apart from the hilt, which would have its uses.

Helen went to the kitchen, glad to be free of her sitting room. She paused at the entry, scanning the area by the ovens to make sure the assistant cook was not yet on duty. Although the woman restrained her hostility in the presence of others, Helen was still cautious. She did not want to provoke another scene.

On her way to the *kaf* pot, Helen overheard a conversation in the larger pantry. She recognized the voice of the chief housekeeper. "It does little good to weep about it, Amanda. If the new duchess does not wish our presence in this household, then we must leave."

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Pulling a mug out of the cabinet, Helen's eyes widened at the sound of sobbing that lasted for several minutes.

"But where would we go? What would we do? Who else would give us employment or pay us as well?"

"I cannot answer those questions. Right now we have a job to do, at our lord's request. Let us tend to it and trust that all will work out."

The two women entered the kitchen and halted. Helen finished filling her mug, giving no indication that she heard anything of their discussion. She smiled at them and took her brew, making her way to the great room, where she stood in front of two-story windows that overlooked the northern shoreline.

Sipping her *kaf*, Helen tried to understand the source of the servants' distress. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, then touched the stone and expanded her energy at the same time. The information returned to her instantly, bringing more questions that only Lady Samantha could answer. Her father's new wife had always treated her with such kindness that Helen could not imagine the new Duchess of Alta would act differently toward the servants.

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