



PORTAL WATCHERS OF TELBA BOOK 1

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Susan Lyttek

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Portal Watchers: The Portal Watchers of Telba Book 1
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The Portal Watchers of Telba Series

Portal Watchers
Heartbeat of Fear
Wrestle the Stars
Three Impossible Tasks
Outside Space and Time
Sum of All Expectation

Dedication

To: Andrew, who had the germ of an idea, and Daryl who tested the story for me. Unfortunately, boys become men faster than stories become books.

PROLOGUE

In the last age of Telba, great beasts will walk the land, soar through the skies and swim in its seas. In that day, these terrible lizards, creatures unknown to this world and time will sway the hour of prophecy. Look for them and guard the windows of their entrance, for these, these dinosaurs as the old tongue calls them, will be the doom and the saving of our world.

Prophet Wal, on the arrival

Queen Subja summoned them and they came. Let told her it would be so. She admitted she had doubted he was right about the Northern president... After all, that country owed no allegiance and paid no tithe, but the Free North woman came as Let said she would.

She mounted the stairs to her throne. From there, high on the dais, all heads bowed to her whether they wanted to or not. She had designed this room without windows except for a large skylight. It bathed her alone in its light and showed off the beauty she had paid for so dearly.

She looked down on her five guests. Present in her audience room were Olaten, the Northern President, Atta, the trader, Ik-son, the farmer, Yok, the shipbuilder, and Kiv, the jewel smith. Three who came were unswervingly loyal to her, one, questionably so, and one, decidedly against her. But they were here. She

let them suffer under her gaze for a while. They were almost afraid, and it delighted her. Soon. Very soon they would give her the fear she needed.

“Atta,” she called, “step forward.”

The trader whom she called was a rich man from the Gold Coast. He loved money, she knew, as his father before him. Officially, he was a trader in fine cloth. Unofficially, and more importantly, he led the black market. The gaudy fool wore rings on every finger and only the finest of his wares.

“Your Majesty.” He bowed deeply.

“Report. What have you found out about the prophecies of my enemy?”

“Your Majesty, my people, in reverence for you, have little use for books. One of my traders, however, when trying to ensure a better profit...”

“Atta, you forget to whom you speak. I know your ways and those of your cartel. If you didn’t serve me so well, these repeated attempts to avoid the trade tax would mean your death.”

She could see the man squirm beneath his polished exterior. How she enjoyed their fear during these audiences!

He cleared his throat and bowed again before continuing. “Yes, my queen. A thousand apologies. This trader I refer to stumbled upon a hidden cave. On its walls were pictures of odd creatures never seen in our years upon Telba. These beasts resemble lizards in part, but some possessed wings, some had long necks and others the teeth of a lion. The artist wrote in the old language that the beasts would arrive in great

power before the end of time.”

Subja could not stop herself from smiling. “Well done, Atta. You have copies of these pictures?” In spite of the polite words, she meant it as a command to produce these copies.

“Yes, your Majesty.”

Atta held out a large, rolled parchment to her Vil attendant. The Vil took it silently and quickly. She never went anywhere without at least one Vil. They were her personal slaves. Once human, they sacrificed their humanity for great power and the opportunity to serve her forever. Many, while human, had thought that they loved her. But after receiving the third and final kiss from her, all such nonsense evaporated, and they simply served.

Yok, the shipbuilder from the South Coast, stepped forward next, bowing deeply.

By pretending to cough, she just managed to cover her hysteria. This, she knew, was not a moment that Let would approve for laughter. But the shipbuilder’s expression was priceless. A gruff seadog, he tried his best to smile in her presence, but his face was so unaccustomed to the expression that he looked as if he had just swallowed a pint of brine.

“May I see his parchment, my queen?”

The creature with the sightless eyes unrolled the parchment in front of the shipbuilder. “Thank you, your loveliness.” He studied the drawings for a moment, and then attempted once again to smile. “Yes. We, too, have seen pictures of such creatures in a book found in the remains of one of the ancient libraries. It

spoke of their great power." As the Vil rerolled the scroll, Yok pulled a battered book from one of the many pockets in his great coat and turned to a marked page. "When the dinosaurs come, whoever harnesses their power controls the throne. When the beasts from aforetime walk again on Telba, the wise will cower in their wake, and the weak will find strength."

Subja snapped her fingers. The Vil whom Let had tuned into her very wish, placed the scroll under one arm and grabbed the book from the shipbuilder's hand in one movement.

The startled representative backed to his place without speaking. She enjoyed the shock on his face even better than the attempted smile. The fear in the room grew. She fed off it. Very good. Only the will of that one president interfered with the experience.

She turned her focus to the moment. "Dinosaurs," she said aloud. "So that's what they will be called." She eyed her next guest. "What have you to tell me, Ikson?"

The farmer from her colonial territories looked terribly uncomfortable in the trousers and robe that he wore. He kept adjusting the robe and pulling up the trousers whenever he thought she wasn't looking. She imagined he was wishing for his daily dungarees and a scythe in his hand.

"We confiscated several old books from His followers, your highness." He opened his satchel and pulled them out for her to see. "Only one of them, however, mentions anything about what that *one* will do with these creatures. It is a book of the proverbs of

Sentel. In it, he said, 'In that day of the windows, if my young guard the dinosaurs within, and protect that harvest with their souls, even the greatest evil may be thwarted. In that day, when love motivates youth and my people thaw slowly, the efforts of a few can change the future. In the sight of marvels and their devotion, Telba will return to me.'"

The words ate at her. It was a moment before she could speak. "Rubbish," she growled. How dare that being say that Telba would be his again? How dare he! She turned to the Vil. "Burn those books."

The tall, wraith-like creature held out its long arm and pointed one finger in the direction of the books. A stream of blue fire shot from its finger and consumed the books as Ik-son backed away as fast as he could from the blaze.

She stood and stared at her guests. She knew what must be done. That is why the two women had been invited. She had to do everything in the power Let gave her to ensure that the worst of the prophecies did not come to pass.

"Ladies?"

The president nodded but did not bow. "We have found many words of these *dinosaurs* in the ancient books. They have long puzzled our scholars. When your invitation came, they were the ones who insisted I come. "

So that was why she was here.

"Jewel smith?"

Kiv bowed and stepped up to join the other woman. "I live in the same region as Atta, your

majesty. His report and mine have no differences to speak of. In fact, I am at a loss as to why both of us were called. He gave you the report just as well as I could."

Subja said nothing for a while. Then, she motioned to the Vil. "Usher the three gentlemen out with my thanks." When they were gone and the door shut, she spoke again. "I called you women more for your skills than for your ability to gather knowledge. The men have confirmed what my other servants have found. These beasts, these dinosaurs, are coming soon." She looked to the president. "Your people have a device that trains animals."

Olaten did not disagree. "We do not share our technologies with others."

The queen opened her mouth, then shut it and bit her tongue. The taste of her own blood stilled her anger. "I am not asking for the secret, dear president. I simply want you to use your knowledge to work with the jewel smith on a tool for me. Install it in a room of the palace."

"A tool? Installed for you?" She listened with indifference to indignation in the president's voice.

"Yes. One that will allow me to bend the dinosaurs to my will."

Olaten processed the words and the ideas behind them. "And if I refuse?"

"Your safe conduct agreement will mysteriously disappear. Then you will meet with an unfortunate accident as you return home." The woman was strong. The thought of her demise did not increase her fear the

slightest iota. "Then, who can say the fate of your people?"

"Tel will protect us."

The fool had sealed her fate by saying the forbidden name. "Bring the boy," she told the Vil.

Seconds later, the creature carried in a young boy.

"Mamma!" he cried, reaching for Olaten. But the small child could not escape the Vil.

"I have not harmed the child. I will even send him home to his father today and allow your own messenger to confirm his arrival. All you need do is to agree to my terms."

The woman wavered.

Kiv encouraged her. "We can do what she asks, President, and return to our lives. Then your boy will be safe."

"Who can be safe when agreeing to help the cobra?" Olaten quoted.

"The Vil have been asking for a human subject to practice their transporting skills on. Perhaps that subject will be your son?"

At last, the fear came. Subja savored it as a fine wine.

Olaten hung her head. "You will have what you wish."

1

*“Tel called us out of darkness and gave us Telba, the green planet. He took us from death and gave us life.”
Prophet Wal, on the arrival*

“Come on, you’ll miss it!”

Garth Vieta struggled across the desert mountains after his father, Wirth. Trekking these high wastes wasn’t his idea of fun. He’d never have come out here on his own. But his dad had made it sound noble—like a pilgrimage. He’d told Garth that they’d see traces of the former Telba—where majestic rivers once flowed, large desert plains where fields used to blossom, and mighty forests where animals danced and played. But Garth only saw desert. Orange desert, tan desert, pink desert, and grey desert. But lots and lots of desert. Garth wanted to call it quits and head home. “I’m coming,” he huffed. “What’s the hurry?” It would just be another beautiful valley. More sun glinting off the rocks on the sides of the cliffs. His dad got excited about every valley view.

As his gaze followed his dad’s arm, Garth could see a bright light stretching from the cliff to the valley floor. It hung suspended for a moment. Then the light spread evenly across the valley like shutters being

pulled aside. Through the large square of light, Garth could see another valley—deeper, golden, and lined with an emerald green river. In the other valley, a giant creature flew easy circles, perhaps searching for something. For a moment, it appeared to be a hawk or an eagle. But the color? A barely blue sheen reflected off its head and wings. And rather than being covered in feathers, it had skin that seemed to stretch over the bones of its body.

“What is that?” Garth whispered, afraid to scare or attract whatever flew in front of him.

“I don’t want to guess,” said Wirth. “Holy Tel,” he mumbled, not meaning Garth to hear, “is this the end?”

As they watched, the light began to close and disappear. With one beat of its wings, the creature made it to their side of the light before the vision vanished. And there it remained. Still circling, still searching.

It seemed to spot something on the valley floor and began to dive.

At that moment, Garth felt a familiar wave. The air filled with the taste of fear. Then the purple haze settled on the opposite cliff.

His father felt it, too. The older Vieta steered Garth over to the only clump of overgrowth in sight. There, they prayed that the approaching Vil had no awareness of them.

The Vil were the servants of the queen. Once human, they had sacrificed their humanity in their desires for power. They could come and go at will.

They could suddenly appear anywhere, though they were not supposed to enter the free zones, they did “by mistake” on occasion. But the price of their instant transportation “disturbed” the air. Anyone who had ever experienced a Vil’s arrival never forgot the sensation. So, when they needed to arrive undetected, Vil would travel by more normal means—in a wagon, on horseback or even on foot. Rumors of their great magic grew yearly like the size of the fish Uncle Murenn caught.

Garth didn’t know about the truth of the rumors, but he knew they could kill. He remembered seeing a student burnt alive by the finger of a Vil. The student had been unfortunate enough to change his allegiance from the Queen to the free territories—and had been caught. Yes, Garth knew of the Vil. And he had no desire to be found where one appeared.

The purple glow faded and then cleared. From its shadows, the tall, thin, and heavily robed figure of a Vil slave became visible.

Garth held his breath.

It seemed oblivious to them. Instead, it focused on the creature that flew below them. A glaring beam of purple energy shot from its extended finger. The creature’s descent halted. It battled against the power of the Vil, but it had no magic, only natural strength.

His dad looked more nervous than Garth had ever seen.

The Vil unnerved him, but something else drove him to his knees, trembling. “The prophecy. It’s the prophecy,” he repeated over and over.

Garth had never heard of the prophecies. His father had not told him. And since Queen Subja held increasing control, they were not taught. Not even in the free schools. But as Garth watched the great wings struggle against the beam, he knew one thing. The creature did not want to go with the Vil. As large and terrifying as the strange animal was, it feared the queen's emissary. Its eyes darted every which way. The wings pushed and tugged, hoping for a weakness.

Garth couldn't take it anymore. "In the name of Tel," he said, invoking the only holy oath he'd ever heard, "leave it alone!"

The evil servant seemed to have heard nothing. Its actions were unchanged. But it had trouble maintaining the energy of its beam. The Vil's arm trembled a moment before regaining control.

That break allowed the creature to sweep forward. But before it could completely escape, the Vil redoubled its efforts and extended both arms in a blast of fury. The force pocketed the skin on the creature's wing with holes.

Slowly, soundlessly, the great beast began to swing in wide uneven movements toward the valley floor.

2

"It is our fault. We, the prophets, the called ones, should be leading the people. Instead, we hide in tunnels and caves arguing over which of the words we hold are Tel's, which are merely good thoughts, and which are altogether wrong. Then we wonder why Subja holds sway. She holds sway because we have done nothing against her." Prophet Tolta of the five, year 790

The Vil gestured an expletive and vanished in disgust. It would not be eager to report to its queen about a failure.

"Dad," Garth said, "let's see if we can help it."

His father shook his head. "I'd rather not. What if another Vil should turn up? We need to put as much distance between us and this spot as possible. Besides, what can we do for the creature? It's probably dead already. If not, I'm no healer."

"I know, I know." Garth expected these excuses. Normally, he'd agree with them. "But did you see the look in its eyes as it fought the Vil? It didn't act like one of their creatures. It was *good*."

Wirth sighed.

Garth understood. He didn't usually argue with his dad.

“Ok, we can go look.” His dad readjusted his pack for the climb down. “But if I say it’s too dangerous, we scoot. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Garth enjoyed the trail down into the valley. Up until now, the day’s walk had been a chore. But now, he leaped toward discovery—curiosity driving him on. This morning, when they left for a two-day hike into the desert mountains that ringed their home, his father had all the excitement and energy. Now, Garth did. Just walking wasn’t fun for him. He needed a purpose, a reason. In the mystery of the creature, he had it. Sweat still poured down his brown arms, their warm color deepened by the constant sun. His legs throbbed with exertion as if he could sleep for two days straight, but he didn’t care. He wanted to see the flying animal. He didn’t know why it mattered so much.

As they neared the valley floor, occasional vistas let them see the creature. Though not yet dead, the animal had received so many wounds it could not last long. With its last remaining energy, it continued its search. Slowly and painfully, it moved. Sometimes its head hung so low, Garth could have sworn he heard it scrape the dry ground. It also dragged the broken wing. Every movement forward extended the bloody trail.

“I don’t know about this, Garth,” said his father. “You never know what a dying animal might do.”

Garth nodded without turning around or stopping. “I know, Dad.” Why couldn’t his father sense the importance of what they were doing? “We’ll just

have to stay out of sight until the creature seems calm.”
Or until it dies.

Wirth did not answer his son. But father and son kept on with their descent.

The next time Garth saw the winged animal, it had stopped moving. Its head, cocked impossibly sidewise on an outcropping of rocks, appeared sadly grotesque. Everything about its posture suggested death. Everything, except a partially raised claw that gripped something beneath it.

Wirth looked relieved. “I think it died, Garth. There’s nothing else that we can do.”

“But Dad, why did it fight the Vil? What drove it on when it knew it would lose? What did it search for? What required its life?” Without waiting for an answer, Garth scurried down the last of the mountainside and toward the creature. As he neared the huge form, larger than one of his dad’s oxen, he slowed. Finding a dead sandtree nearby, Garth broke off a long, narrow limb and used it to probe the creature. It did not move. Satisfied that the flying animal had truly died, he dropped the stick and went around to the front. There, the item protected under the great claw became visible.

“Dad!” shouted Garth. “It had eggs! Three of them!”

3

“Have you forgotten me? Have you forgotten my care for you? Then I will do something so mighty, so extraordinary that you will see me again. Then seeing me, you will seek and believe.” The words of Tel as told through King Evad of Telantia

Gingerly, Garth lifted the claw and slid the egg-filled nest forward. For the size of the creature, Garth wondered at the lightness of its limb. He raised it easily.

His father came down to his side. “Why are you moving the nest?”

Garth blinked, confused. “I’m taking the eggs home.”

“Whatever for?”

“I can help them hatch.”

His father looked back at him just as confused. “And then what? Do you think the Vil will let us raise these creatures? After the way they knew about its mother and tried to take it?”

“But Dad,” Garth said, “that’s why we have to help them. Their mother would have wanted it. Besides, the Vil aren’t perfect. They didn’t know about the eggs.”