



PORTAL WATCHERS OF TELBA BOOK 3

WRESTLE THE STARS

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Telba Book 3

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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 Allyson whose insights and comments on the stories led to the creation of Ally, Ne-tel's sister. She is a strong young woman with a mind of her own and a heart for God—just like you were. I can only dream that the character grows up as well as you did!

To my son Erik and his friends Tyler and Josh for inspiring the actions and appearances of Ne-tel, Garth and Bern. Perhaps when you all read the stories, you'll remember what you were like as teenagers.

Also to Lindele. You saw the jewels in the stories beyond my initial drafts and made them sing. Thank you.

Always to my amazing editor Lisa who has persevered through the drafts and countless titles.

Finally, but first of all, to my Lord for guiding my pen and my life. I couldn't do any of this without Him.

PROLOGUE

Shipmaster Yom hated his job. In his father's time, he would have commanded a great fleet that would chase the schools of fish in search of the big catch—the gloried oil fish that would make all of them rich for the rest of their lives. His dad had also hunted, smaller, edible varieties and taken them to the ports to sell. Then they would return to the sea and to the hunt. That was what Dad trained him to do.

But that was another time. When he was still too young to take over the business, the Gold Coast attracted all of Queen Subja's wealthy lackeys. So instead of honorably following in the footsteps of his ancestors, he ran a tour service full of pampered lapdogs who wanted to get a taste of what work might be like.

"Hoist the middle pole thingy!" a housewife called and interrupted his thoughts. They had two hours of lessons on the ship parts and their simple duties before coming on board. Fat lot of good that did. As an eight-year-old cabin boy he had known more than these clients.

"Shipmaster?" an old trader called down to him. "What am I supposed to do up in the crow box? I'm paying good money to help you, and I want to make sure I'm doing the job right."

"The crow's nest!" Yom groaned. "You are supposed to keep a lookout."

"What?" The old man picked up an ear horn and leaned in Yom's direction.

Yom sighed for probably the fortieth time since they had cast off. "I'll come up and show you."

"What?" the trader called again.

"I'm coming up!" Yom shouted.

"Good," the trader said emphatically. "Got to get my money's worth." Then he looked off into the distance as Yom had wanted him to in the first place.

Experience could have carried Yom to the nest in a couple minutes. Instead, he took his time, hand over hand, mulling over the inequities of his life. True, these shipmates had made him wealthier than an oil fish catch would have made his father. But their wealth had also made the prices along the coast impossibly high. He lived well when ashore, but he could not stay ashore. Trying to maintain an adequate lifestyle on the Gold Coast cost way too much. But then...there was simply the lure of the sea. She ran through his veins instead of blood complained one woman who wanted to be his wife. But the sea held a beauty in her that called to him, beckoned him. No use in trying to explain that to this pampered crew of his. They did not hear her whispers between the waves on a calm sea. They did not understand her possessive love that tried to swallow even the most experienced seaman during the swells of a summer storm.

"Ahoy, Trader Fest!" he called loudly to keep from startling the old man as he shimmied up the rigging to

check on him. This client occupied the crow's nest since he was the only one who had been willing to climb up. Too many feared heights on this round.

"There you are, Shipmaster Yom. Took you a while. Bet you're just too young to master all the jobs on ship."

Yom bit his tongue. His father would have knocked the old man out of the nest for a remark like that. He couldn't afford to, no matter how much he loved the idea. "Trader Fest. From this position, you are supposed to keep a lookout. You are supposed to watch the water and the horizon. Look for sandbars, remember? Call to the prow"—noticing the question on the face of the man, he clarified—"the front of the boat. Call to the front of the boat and let them know if they need to turn."

The old man tugged on his jersey.

"Yes?" Yom asked.

"Shipmaster, what do I do if I see that?" He pointed.

Yom followed the old man's arm. A bright light shot from the sea. He might have thought it was lightning had it come down from the sky. But this came up from the sea and was perfectly vertical. The beam remained stationary for a moment and then pulled apart, spreading the light above and below the sea. It reminded Yom of how his father's second wife would pull the curtains first thing every morning, even when he wished to sleep in. The light grew brighter and others on the ship took notice.

All his training from cradle to captaincy snapped

into place despite the amazement. "Helm, turn to starboard," he barked. The ship responded immediately under the efficient control of his first mate, Dral, the only other real seafarer on board.

"So, shipmaster?" The man asked again. "What do I do?"

"Climb down, you fool, and help them steer the ship away from this thing."

If the old trader took offense, he gave no sign, but started down.

Yom could not take his gaze from the light. When he thought the anomaly could spread no farther, it widened still. The brightness almost made him blink, but curiosity made him stare. Through the shimmer he saw a world of sea and adventure. Creatures leapt above the waves in such abundance, he felt sure that the waves below teemed as well. But these beings were unlike anything he had ever seen. And coming to him, in a school of dozens, a leaping swimmer larger than any oil fish he had ever dreamed of. Grinning mouths of razor teeth, housed in sleek bodies in shades of green, blue, and silver sprang through the light.

The opening snapped shut.

Just as Yom wondered if sunsickness had clouded his vision, screams erupted from the deck, and the boat rocked beneath him. Whatever these beasts were, they were huge, and they were in his sea.

"Steer for harbor!" he called to Dral.

The passenger crew huddled in corners or looked over the side for the next spectacle. When they realized

these sea beasts were real, they would long for shore. They wanted no real adventure, just a play one for a day.

He would forego passengers for a while. The hunt was on.

~*~

Queen Subja walked in her gardens. She did not go outside often, but today was a day to celebrate. The Vil had returned. Even with the loss of their king, they had been successful. What a fitting tribute to the thorn that had so long been in her crown. Her Vil, armed with the new portable subverters, had vanquished the North. According to reports, that annoying president was dead, along with her leadership. Most adults had also met their end. And as a gloriously wonderful side effect, dozens had become her willing servants under the subverter's ray. At this moment, the Vil led those controlled Northerners here. Each step along the mirrored corridor past leafy trees and bubbling fountains brought them closer to her.

A few adults might remain, but not enough. No help would come to the Portal Watchers from the North. Starving and hiding children and destroyed technology were all the formerly glorious Free North had to offer now.

Her pale skin suddenly shivered in warning.

Let approached.

"Yes, my lord?"

The demon shimmered into her reality and

stretched out a bony finger to touch her cheek. "The deaths of my enemies have fed me well, my dear. I thank you."

She smiled at the rare praise. Then the deadly fingers spread out and slapped her cheek. In the mirror behind her master, she watched the glow of a red handprint emerge on her white cheek. She wondered how she would cover up the mark before her next audience. "Have I displeased you, Let?"

The demon growled. "You have been so satisfied with your success in the North that you did not feel that the enemy has been working again. Somewhere, somewhere on this world, a new portal has opened and his creatures have entered."

Subja opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it. Words failed her. She had not felt it. Her master was correct. She was too locked into the moment of triumph to sense the movements of her enemy.

She watched the demon rip a thornpetal blossom from the bush. He stared at it. Then he handed it to her, his chief servant, pressing it into her hand until the thorns eked out a couple of drops of her blood. "Look and learn."

Obediently, she watched the life fluid drip off her hand and to the ground.

"Moments of pain generally hold an education. The scrawny forces of the Unnamable One have not noticed the arrival either. We can put their ignorance to our advantage."

The queen opened her hand and let the flower fall. She licked her wounded hand to stop the bleeding.

“Do you know where, my Lord?”

“No.” The word came out choked. “No. We must listen and spy. Keep your Vil roaming and listening for rumors.”

The queen bowed her assent as the demon disappeared. Then she stepped on the fallen flower, grinding it with her heel until it was unrecognizable.

Satisfied, she grabbed the first servant she could find and slapped him as hard as she could. She pointed to the mess that had once been a flower. “Clean that up!” Then she headed for the palace. She had work to do.

1

“Disappointments are but opportunities in disguise. It is up to you to take off their costumes and find the joy within.” Prophet Quizon in his advice to the children

Ne-tel thought he’d never admit it, but he rather liked Garth now.

His cousin, Bern, who had been Garth’s friend from forever had brought him into the group. He’d had his doubts the three of them could work together when the Prophet Nevv told them about the *cord of three* and *the young shall protect the fruit of my windows* all those months ago. And while he still thought Garth was far too moody, Ne-tel could see that the dark-skinned boy was fair and balanced.

Ne-tel sat on Garth’s bed while the three of them planned how they would move the hatched and growing brachiosaurs to Nevv’s retreat.

“Ne-tel has a great idea,” Garth said. “We should make up leads for the hatchlings. The combination of that and the sweet roots they love should be enough to lead them mile after mile.”

Amid Ne-tel’s glory moment, Mrs. Vieta leaned in around the half-opened door and knocked on it to get their attention. Swaddled to her hip was Garth’s new

baby brother, Quizon. The infant looked like a regular baby in all respects except the eyes. His deep-set, coal black eyes seemed to look right into your thoughts. While Ne-tel thought a baby might do his mom and dad some good, he was grateful they did not have this one.

“Ne-tel,” she said, “Tom-tom said your dad is looking for you.”

So Dad sent the community messenger to fetch him. “My father?” What could his father want that was so urgent? Certainly, nothing more important than what Ne-tel did at this moment. Not that Gunston Di’in put any stock in the decisions or activities of his son. “This can’t take long,” Ne-tel said. “Don’t finalize the plans without me, OK?”

Ne-tel made his way from Garth’s home and Mr. Vieta’s shop through the village. True, he could have moved faster, but he simply obeyed the summons. The sandy dirt from the well-trod paths clouded around his feet. He took comfort in the familiarity of that dust and the path he could walk without thinking of aim or direction. His feet knew all the ways of the village.

The door to his home opened before he could reach for the handle.

“Ne-tel,” his mother sighed. “Finally.” She drew him inside. “We need to hurry.”

“Hurry?”

“Your dad is out back packing the wagon. We are heading to the Gold Coast.”

Ne-tel slumped in dread.

“It’s not so bad.”

Obviously, his mother had noticed his reaction.

“Why can’t Father go on his own? Why does he have to drag us on his latest business deal?” Ne-tel slammed the door behind him. Perhaps, if he played his emotions right, his mom could get him out of this.

True to form, she wavered a little, and then tentatively slid her arm around his shoulder. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I know this is important to you. But this isn’t trading. Even if it were, you have to remember your dad always tries to do his best.”

Knowing his mother watched him intently, Ne-tel contorted his face into his angriest scowl. She had to know that Bern’s father tried to do his best. But not Ne-tel’s father. Bern might have a dad, but Ne-tel didn’t. He had an obsessive, controlling father.

His look was wasted. His mom didn’t seem to notice because she kept talking.

“Dad may do a little business this trip, but that’s not the reason we’re all going. Your Aunt Bela thought she saw Ala-tel.”

To hear the name aloud surprised Ne-tel. He knew about his twin sister from what he had overheard and vague memories. She had been taken on the day Bern’s mom, his Aunt Kattya, sacrificed her life to save the boys from the queen’s wrath. The surprise abduction of the girls—especially his twin—had torn something from his father. He had become a man of extremes. If it did not focus on money or his lost daughter, Gunston Di’in did not see it. Sometimes Ne-tel would give anything to fit in one of those two categories.

Lost in his own thoughts, Ne-tel did not hear what his mom had been saying. He rejoined her in mid-sentence. "...somewhere near Forgotten Beach. She couldn't be certain, of course. But you know your dad..."

"Yes. Yes, I do." He made certain all the irritation and frustration came across in every syllable.

His mom recoiled as if she'd been struck. "Ne-tel! That's not fair!"

"I only said I know him."

She clicked her tongue in reply. "And I am your mother." She sighed deeply. "Some people heal slower, dear one. Especially when they won't allow Tel to help them."

Ne-tel had asked thousands of times why his father, the man who had been so dedicated to Tel that he left wealth on the coast to move to a free village, and named his children after the creator, would shut himself off from that same faith. The question was on his lips again when his mom held up her hand to stop him.

She gently reached over and put a finger on his mouth. "Shh. Unending questions are best turned to prayers." She stepped into him and gave him a hug as she did when he was little.

He was too big to relax into it as he used to, but it helped a bit. "Now, go and pack, my Netly. Pack and pray."

2

The strength of the North will rise. The power of their hearts triumph when the window is torn and the bow broken. The strength of the North will rise. In that day, the usurper trembles. In that time, truth cracks the grip of evil and dinosaurs dance. Nosun the bard in the year 67 of the new Telba, verse 2

Masa ducked behind the crumbling remains of the gathering house. How many, he wondered, had the Vil sent to cleanse the cantrev? If he knew, perhaps he could find a good place for the children to hide until they left.

Being the oldest in the village put him in charge. How he wished even one adult had survived Subja's purging! And he, who had once loved Tel and had longed to be a prophet, now hated the creator of their world and author of prophecy. The word of one such prophecy, Nosun's song of ancient days, had doomed his village, even the whole of the Free North that he loved. The Free North that remained was a shadow, a ruin of all he held dear.

Masa saw but two men. No Vil had come this time. Good. They did not think a handful of children worth their time and trouble. That assumption would

be their undoing and the children's salvation.

It had not been like that when the Vil had first come. They had come in full force. A few carried a new weapon of Subja's design for use on the dinosaurs. They came to test it on the adults. The enemy queen thought it fitting to test the weapon on the very people who had refused to build the portable subverter for her.

With all the scientific advances of the Free North, they still could not predict Subja's movements. Though none in the north called her queen, they knew better than to ignore her existence. A viper does not cease to be a viper if one fails to acknowledge its presence.

The border alarms went out only moments before the Vil force invaded. Parents had enough time to hunt for a weapon to defend themselves and hide their children. Nothing more.

His mother had hidden him in the storm shelter as the Vil approached with the troops. Their arrival stirred up the sand like a cyclone and she thought only to protect him. She had tucked him down in the storm cellar and run to find his father. How Masa wished she had hidden with him! It probably wouldn't have mattered, he admitted to himself. The Vil had not paid attention to the children, but they had sought out the adults. Women were killed instantly. Some men were spared if they promised to become Vil once taken to the queen. Most refused. Through the cracks in the cellar door, Masa had watched horrified, as his own dad and the fathers of his friends, the leaders in his village felt the blow from the weapon.

It changed them.

In the beam of the weapon, many died. Masa concluded that these were those who loved Tel. His father had been among those. But others... He shuddered just thinking about it. It was as if the weapon erased all the goodness in their souls.

Silently, with all the stealth of a cat, Masa edged closer to the men. He needed knowledge to protect the others. Finally, he began to make out words.

"...sent here. There's nothing left to do."

"I know," the other agreed. "But until the queen is confident that all the strength of the Free North is obliterated, she will keep sending patrols."

The first gave a wry laugh. "What strength can we find in ruins and starving children?"

So they knew some children remained. They needed to be more careful.

The other tapped the tip of his bayonet into the remains of a wall and smiled as many of the bricks toppled. "It's that lousy prophecy." He began to recite in a singsong voice as if forced to memorize the words. "'The strength of the north and a cracked window will bind together in love. In harmony and unity, they will guard my third gift. In wisdom, they will stir the seas themselves against the forces of evil.' As if that will happen! There are so many words from the ancients I don't know how they can tell what's true and what's not."

The first man shrugged. "It doesn't make a difference to me as long as I keep getting paid."

“True enough, friend, true enough.”

They shouldered their weapons and began to walk toward the houses.

Once Masa was certain they would not hear him, he got up and moved the other way, toward the caves and inlets that dotted the beach. Toward the only strength the North still possessed. Toward the children.