

EXCERPT FROM THE ISSACHAR GATEKEEPER, BOOK TWO, THE GHOST WRITER

“We couldn’t tell you. You didn’t believe in the supernatural until recently. Our origins would have sounded like nonsense to you,” said Mrs. McGoo, passing the plate to Schuyler, who took another cookie. “You would have thought we were absolutely daft in the head.”

“We asked for this assignment, Lucy,” said Mr. Bill. He stepped to the table with the milk jug and refilled their glasses. “I hope this doesn’t change our relationship. We’re your neighbors and your friends. You are very dear to Vivian and me.”

“The guardians have all known that one day as a Bachar you would—”

“I’m sorry, a what?” Lucy interrupted.

“Bachar, dear, it means ‘chosen,’” said Mrs. McGoo. “As a Bachar, you were going to be tested, and you would need guidance and protection. After all, the descendants of Issachar have all been gatekeepers. Issachar has always had strong warriors. There have been twelve tribes from ancient times, and each is responsible for guarding one of the twelve gates of Ascalon.”

“Issachar? Gatekeepers? If I come from a lineage of chosen warriors, why wouldn’t others in my family have told me about this?”

“They couldn’t tell you. The names of the chosen must be kept secret. Most family members don’t know unless more than one from the same family have been chosen to operate as a team.”

“Sort of like you and Mr. Bill?” Lucy asked. She picked chocolate chips from the cookie, putting them in a pile and abandoning the crumbs.

“I suppose you could say that,” said Bill, placing the milk jug back in the refrigerator. “The Irredaemon would like nothing better than to identify who all the gatekeepers are,” he grouched. “It’s their mission to subvert the gatekeepers. The Irredaemon are so filled with evil and hatred, they want and need to destroy anything and everything, especially the gatekeepers.”

“Why? If the gatekeepers protect the gates, what is that to the Irredaemon?”

Vivian and Bill exchanged looks. Mrs. McGoo reached out and grasped Lucy’s hand. “I’m not sure how much we should reveal to you. Perhaps you should ask the High King.” Bill’s head bobbed in agreement.

“Aw, c’mon!” Lucy slapped her palm on the table. “We’ve been vanquishing ghosts and daemons for months. Schuyler and I should have proven our trustworthiness already.”

Schuyler quietly munched a cookie, observing the frustration on each face. It was evident Mr. and Mrs. McGoo wanted to tell Lucy everything but hesitated, not knowing if they were allowed or even if they should. Myriad expressions flitted across Lucy’s face. Frustration, anger, and concern for the McGoos, whom Lucy loved and respected.

“Maybe it’s better if we don’t know, Lucy,” said Schuyler. “I mean, what if knowing puts us in further danger we’re not ready to handle? If there is knowledge or information you need to know, wouldn’t I am tell you?”

“I suppose so,” said Lucy. She pushed back from the table and paced the kitchen. “Ooh, it’s so frustrating! I still don’t know how to help Paul. All these ghosts, gargoyles, and Grant’s army keep getting in the way!”

“Grant’s army? Oh! The ghost soldiers we vanquished,” said Schuyler.

Lucy stopped pacing and stared at her. “You’re not helping here.”

“Sorry, continue, wise one.”

Lucy harrumphed and resumed pacing.

“Lucy dear, perhaps this will help you understand,” said Mrs. McGoo. “We can tell you this much—the gatekeepers must protect the gates. There are inscriptions written in an ancient language adorning the gates. The runes are adorned with the jewels for which each gate is named. It’s said when the High King called the city into being, the spoken word became real. Even your earth was spoken into existence. No one except the High King knows the ancient language.”

Lucy stopped pacing. Her mouth dropped open. “Wait, what? The High King spoke the world into existence?”

“That’s right, your world was spoken into existence,” said Mr. Bill, earnestly watching her. “The worlds were prepared by the High King’s Word so that what is seen was not made out of visible things. The High King spoke, and they became.” If Lucy didn’t blink soon, her eyes would dry out. “You see, Lucy, Darnathian has sworn to learn the source of the High King’s power. He believes the ancient language is the source, but he needs access to the stones from each of the gates to find the cipher and use it. Once he has the cipher, he can unlock the runes and access the power. Or so he believes.”

“I thought he was after the Spectroscope?” Schuyler interjected. “He had the ghost of Darwin Stewart terrorizing us last summer trying to get to the artifact.”

“Yes, that is true,” said Mrs. McGoo. “He still needs the artifact because it holds the secret to the location of a key—a key that unlocks the garden gate, where the Life Tree is hidden. It is the fruit of the tree he is after.”

“The fruit? Why?” Lucy asked. “What would happen if he did find the tree?” The McGoos exchanged another look. Then Bill nodded at Vivian.

“It is called the Life Tree because the fruit gives eternal life to whoever eats the fruit.” Mrs. McGoo shuddered visibly. “It means Darnathian might never experience death or destruction if he eats the fruit. If he also learns to use the power of the ancient language, who knows what could happen.”

The enormity of Mrs. McGoo’s words suddenly settled over Lucy’s heart like a heavy rain-filled cloud, ready to drench her with guilt if she failed to protect the secrets entrusted to her. Her stomach felt queasy.

Schuyler was silent, her cookie suspended halfway to her mouth as she sat unblinking. She swallowed hard. The cookie dropped to her plate.

“That would be very, very bad, wouldn’t it?” Lucy said. Mrs. McGoo blinked rapidly and gave a quick nod. Lucy sighed, her shoulders slumping under the weight of responsibility.

“Don’t be fooled. Darnathian is not undefeatable,” said Mr. Bill. “Even if he does find the garden, the tree, and the fruit.” His companions whipped their heads in his direction, hope and bewilderment etched on their faces.

“Well, it’s written in the Chronicles of Ascalon.”

“What’s written?” Vivian asked, staring at her husband.

“The Chronicles are the recorded history of Ascalon,” he explained to Lucy and Schuyler. “In the Chronicles, it states, ‘We should fear the One who can destroy both body and soul.’ After all, who spoke the great city into being? It was the High King. If he can create, he can also destroy. Darnathian knows all this.”

“You know, you may be right, dear,” said Mrs. McGoo, nodding thoughtfully. “I do remember something along those lines, now that you mention it.”

“Oh. My. *Goodness!*” Lucy exclaimed. A chill rippled along her spine, and her legs felt like rubber. How many times had she been with the High King and never realized how powerful he was? She pursed her lips and dropped into her chair with a hard thump.

“I’ve always thought of Iam as being like my grandpa—funny, wise, kind, and compassionate. All this time, he’s had the power to blast me to smithereens.” She swallowed hard. Her throat was dry and constricted.

“To be sure, dear,” said Mrs. McGoo. “He is to be greatly feared, but love rules out fear. Don’t be afraid to love him. It’s all he asks of us because he first loved us.” She grabbed Lucy’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Can we get back to the gatekeepers?” Schuyler asked. “You hinted about them being in danger from the Irredaemon. Is Lucy in danger?”

“Lucy is the prime target, so yes, she is in danger,” said Mr. Bill. “She is the keeper of the Spectroscope and the secret to finding the key to the garden gate. She is also a gatekeeper of the Issachar Gate.”

“Oh, this is ridiculous! How can I guard a gate I know nothing about?” Lucy erupted from her chair and paced the kitchen again, flinging her arms about like an orchestra conductor. “The gates are in Ascalon, and I’ve never ever been there! I don’t even know where it is!”

“The Spectroscope is engraved with your name, Lucy,” Schuyler reminded. “It says, *Lucy the Gatekeeper.*”

“Lucy,” said Mr. Bill, “there are portals on earth that connect to the gates. The portals will take the person directly to the city—”

“Which means access to the gates, the stones, and the runes.” Lucy sighed.

“Uh-oh,” said Schuyler thoughtfully as she munched another cookie. “So, the twelve gate portals and the twelve warriors guarding them are here, on earth, like us.” The cookie punctuated each point. The McGoos both nodded vigorously.

A noise behind them alerted them someone was coming. Dale wandered into the kitchen from the back stairs. Bleary eyed and sleepwalking, he opened the refrigerator and reached for the milk jug.

He yawned, then paused to sniff the air. “Yum, I smell cookies!”

Mrs. McGoo laughed. She watched the groggy teenager retrieve a glass from the cupboard and fill it with milk. She slid the plate of cookies through the Shield onto the counter behind Dale. He sniffed again, following the delicious aroma to the plate. He blissfully munched the last of the cookies. “Man, these are good,” he mumbled and gulped the cold milk. “Must be Mrs. McGoo’s cookies. They’re definitely not Lucy’s.”

“Hey!” Lucy glared at Dale, though he couldn’t see them through the Shield. He finished his milk, then left the dishes in the sink and bumbled back upstairs.

“Well, he’s right about that,” said Schuyler. “You really can’t—”

“Don’t you start!”