



Gideon

a short story

BETHANY ATAZADEH

GIDEON

Copyright © 2020 by Bethany Atazadeh

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For information contact :

<http://www.bethanyatazadeh.com>

First Edition: April 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



GRACE HOUSE PRESS

GIDEON

One Year Ago

“GIDEON, A MOMENT,” ***THE*** queen of Jinn’s voice rang out like the largest bell in the castle tower. Everyone in the halls pretended not to hear, even as they sidled closer to eavesdrop.

I turned sharply on my heel and bowed in one smooth motion. “Yes, my queen.”

Queen Jezebel stopped before me. She waved a hand at my insistence on formality. “Up, up.” But her perfect red lips curved in a smile, as always. The power radiating from the crown she wore made her every feature brighter, younger. Though she was at least two centuries my senior, her long hair was still raven black and shining, her skin free of wrinkles, and her blue eyes sharp.

Her mind was guarded against mine. When my Gift brushed up against it, it was like running into a steel wall. Most Jinn kept a vigilant guard over their thoughts, whether they knew they were in the presence of a mind reader or not.

I stood stiff, staring at the pale crown on her brow instead of her eyes as she made me wait, studying my face. Thank the stars she didn’t have my Gift. With the crown to enhance her abilities, she’d know all my secrets. And like everyone in Jinn, I had plenty.

“Have you any word of my daughter?” she asked, after two members of the Jinni court reached the end of the long, white hall and were out of hearing.

The princess had disappeared two decades prior and no one had heard from her since. Not even I. Still, the queen asked for news occasionally; twenty years was hardly long enough to be declared dead for a Jinni.

The small wince of pain that I allowed to reach my face was real. “Sadly no, my queen. My latest journey to the human lands revealed no new information on that front. However, I wrote in my report of the enormous increase of the Gifted humans abusing their abilities, along with many of our own kind. They’re breaking the laws of Jinn with alarming regularity—”

“Yes, I read the report,” she murmured. “It’s unfortunate, but the human troubles seem insignificant in comparison to my daughter’s absence. I miss her so. Gideon, do you not miss anyone?”

It was a layered question.

Dangerous.

Did I miss anyone? Yes. Did I miss her daughter? Deeply, which I knew she suspected, though for now, it worked to her advantage, so she allowed it. Did I miss anyone else? That was possibly the true question, buried beneath the others.

I’d spent the last few weeks questioning a missing piece—a place in the mind where a memory should’ve been. In the Jinni Guard we were trained to recognize spells and enchantments, and I knew enough to recognize that one haunted me now. Without meaning to, the queen had led me to wonder if the missing piece was actually a missing person.

“My queen,” I began, running through my options in one breath. “I must admit that my work has kept me too busy to miss anyone.”

Her eyes flickered, and I thought I read satisfaction in the small twist of her lips, but also suspicion in her narrowed gaze. It was difficult to say if she believed me, but she nodded and turned to walk, leaving me to follow. “That’s probably for the best.”

“Yes, my queen,” I agreed easily. I would hide what I’d learned until I could make sense of it. Especially from her.

* * *

The following day, I found my feet carrying me to an abandoned part of the castle, into a large set of rooms. White fabric draped over the furniture, creating a strange sense of a room filled with clouds.

Frowning, I studied the unfamiliar room. Training would lead me to believe it was likely more well-known than my mind wanted to believe. The worst part of a curse was standing before a vacant black hole in the mind, knowing something had once been there, but without a single clue left behind as to what it might have been.

It was while staring into that mental gap that my muscles remembered a path my mind had forgotten. They led me now to one of the chair-shaped clouds. Allowing my body to lead, I lifted

the fabric and settled into the chair, closing my eyes.

Nothing.

When I opened them, my gaze snagged on a silk pictorial hanging on the wall. It stretched from one window to the other, floor to ceiling, depicting a story of dragon slayers. Or possibly—I stared at it closer—a scene where the dragons won the day.

Tracing the story from start to finish, my eyes caught on a dragon in the corner, more detailed than the others. Each individual fang stitched carefully into the fabric. And its posture... almost as if it was pointing toward—I sat up straight.

I'm showing you this in case someone tries to attack my position to the throne, a memory of a male voice came to me. Each word was crystal clear.

Attacks happened often.

But no matter how I pressed, I could not remember who had said that to me.

With a sense of foreboding, I stood and slowly approached the dragon.

Though the Gifts of Jinn had a strict code of ethics, there were always lawbreakers willing to risk everything to hurt the royal family. It was common for every royal member to hide a *Kathenoth*—a piece of their will and proof of existence—in multiple places, showing multiple people. No matter who betrayed them, another would come to their rescue.

My fingers followed the path of the dragon's gaze.

I pressed a hand against the brick wall.

Felt along the side of the tapestry, then underneath it.

No movement.

Perhaps there was no trigger here. Perhaps it was my overactive imagination.

There was a fog in my mind but as my fingers trailed over the wall, I forced myself to contemplate my subconscious thoughts.

The dragon's head.

Someone had been obsessed with the creatures.

I pressed the specific place on the brick wall beneath.

Nothing.

I nearly gave up, when my eye caught on the way the mortar surrounding it seemed more eroded than the rest. It took little effort to pull the brick toward me instead.

Behind it, in the sliver of space, rested a small leather-bound journal—just like I'd suspected. One very small piece of the lost memories clicked back into place, as if I'd never forgotten it. At the same time, it shone more light on the emptiness surrounding it, where other memories should

be.

The royal family. A Kathenoth. A hiding place.

Had someone erased a royal?

The last entry in the document was dated a week before the first day of Sivan.

That had been weeks ago.

Flipping through the pages, I turned to the beginning.

The first lines were written in a careful code to avoid specific references from falling into the wrong hands.

The gardener grows increasingly suspicious. When I became friends with the eucalyptus years ago, it meant nothing, but now the gardener calls into question my loyalty and ability to tend flowers. It is her own ability that gives me concern.

Who was the gardener?

I had my suspicions.

The little book was filled with more encoded details into this mysterious person's past.

Taking a blanket from the bed, I folded the book inside, hurrying out into the hall. My own quarters in the barracks were in the next building over, connected by halls for those who couldn't travel.

Spells protected bedrooms against traveling, but here in the hall, I took only a split second to glance around before flashing into the guard, into a quiet corner.

Theophilus stood with his key poised to enter the room next to mine, and he faltered, eyes drifting to the blanket in my arms.

I dipped my chin in a brief nod, turning to unlock my own room, and shut the door behind me.

Though I listened for Theophilus' thoughts, he'd finally learned to hide them appropriately, after months of lessons.

I sighed.

Pulling the small book out of the blankets, I debated which of my own hiding places would be the best fit.

My room was cramped.

Just a few steps before me, my bed nestled against the wall. The curtains on both sides had stitching for smaller items, but wouldn't hold anything this large.

The picture frame that hung above the bed concealed a small pocket of space. Useful for coins and items I wasn't too concerned about being discovered.

Terrible for anything of real value.

It would be the first place someone looked.

The second place would be beneath the floorboards in the corner, so that was out too.

My writing desk and chair sat against one wall, and my bookshelves lined the other.

I debated the merits of the secret drawer within my desk or hiding a book within a book. The second choice seemed most unlikely to be found.

Fortunately, I'd already hollowed out a hardcover on the top shelf. It was only a matter of finding a new hiding place for its contents, before I slid the little *Kathenoth* into its new home.

I hated that I couldn't read it immediately—my shift was about to begin—but I'd come back to it tonight.

* * *

"Captain," I murmured to Enoch as we stood guard over the evening banquet the following week. I'd read the entire *Kathenoth* at this point, though there were still many parts I could not make sense of.

He inclined his head to me, never taking his violet eyes off the guests.

"When you and I stood guard over the fountain last spring, do you remember how it shut off out of nowhere?"

He frowned. "What of it?"

Specifics were always best when the memory shows signs of tampering. This particular memory had come back to me just this morning with a sharp pop that left behind a terrible headache.

"Do you remember when we interviewed the culprit?" I continued casually, watching my portion of the room with vigilance. The culprit had also been the owner of the *Kathenoth*, I was almost certain.

The furrows in Enoch's brow deepened. Though he had only the slightest gray hair, he was at least a century my senior, and had been in command of the castle guard for almost as long.

When his gaze swung to mine, abandoning the room, even if only for a moment, I knew he sensed the gap.

The missing piece someone had taken.

Before I could say anything further, he returned to his watch. "Have you brought this to anyone else's attention?"

"No," I whispered. "You're the only one I trust with this."

His eyes shut and brows drew in, but the reaction passed before I could read it. And his mind

was a fortress in its own right. If he didn't want to reveal his suspicions to me right now, I would accept that. He likely wanted to wait for a less crowded place to discuss.

* * *

By late the next afternoon, I'd grown worried.

Enoch hadn't requested a meeting, hadn't given me any coded messages, hadn't even said goodnight when he released me from my shift after the evening ended.

When Theophilus knocked, I sagged in disappointment.

"I'm not in the best state of mind for lessons tonight."

"Oh, no, I came to bring you this." Theophilus shifted between his feet, eyes darting behind me into my room, landing on the blanket.

Though the object was harmless, my eyes narrowed. I snatched the parchment from his hand, reading the missive. It was only a few words.

Come to the queen's rooms.

Written in Enoch's hand. The guards stationed at the queen's quarters were those who'd risen in the ranks long ago. I had a few decades of hard work before I'd even be considered for the role.

That first flush of excitement drained out of me before it had even fully landed, and a nervous sheen of sweat broke out on my brow.

Theophilus' eyes widened. "Are you okay?"

"We shall see," I muttered to the piece of paper, reading it again, and then again, as if it might give me some clue as to what to suspect.

Had Enoch guessed what I had? That the queen was involved in the disappearance of the crown prince? That she might even be behind it? If he had, why in the name of Jinn would he have confronted her without me? Unless... unless he hadn't come to that conclusion yet. In which case, I might be walking into a trap...

"Enoch wanted you to come right away," Theophilus said, pointing at the paper as he took a nervous step back. "With the way he looked, I wouldn't keep him waiting."

I nodded to the young Jinn, even as I slammed my door in his face.

In the precious moments I had, I removed the little book from beneath my pillow, where I'd hidden it at the knock, and rushed to hide it back inside the hardcover book, placing it on the top shelf, making sure the books around it were thoroughly dusted to avoid it standing out.

Only when satisfied, did I strap on my full armor of the guard to answer the summons, stepping into the hall and locking my door behind me. Theophilus still stood there.

Though my instincts begged me not to say anything, to protect my secrets at any cost, I strode

toward him, gripping the front of his shirt to pull him close and whisper in his ear, “If I don’t return, spread the word that the Jinni prince is missing. Do you understand?”

I pulled back.

He grimaced, no doubt struggling with the weight of the curse, and seeming to lose, because he opened his eyes to ask, “What prince? Do you mean the king? He’s not missing, he died of the—”

With a hiss of frustration, I traveled, leaving the guard hall behind in a flash to appear before the door to the queen’s chamber.

* * *

My fist rapped loudly on the door. The echo was ominous. Was the queen’s portion of the castle always this empty during the day? The sun hadn’t even set.

“Come,” the queen’s command rang out with the crown’s power.

There was nothing to be done except obey.

Passing through the small hallway that led into the queen’s chambers, the room opened up into a grand space, the size of twenty guard rooms put together. The high, domed ceiling was made of glass, which filled the room with afternoon light. A rainbow of colors danced on the walls through the stained glass designs.

In the center of the enormous room, the queen lounged on a chaise while Enoch stood watch. Normally, the guard would stand at the edge of the room. Tonight, Enoch stood close enough to take the queen’s glass of wine when she handed it to him and stood.

“Come in, Gideon,” the queen murmured. “Don’t stand in the doorway.” Softly spoken, but a command nonetheless. Her long white nightdress clung to her, making me uncomfortable, and her feet were bare, though her crown still rested on her brow. I’d never seen her without it.

Instead of staring at her, as she undoubtedly wanted me to, I glanced toward Enoch as I strode toward them. His shoulders were bowed. He didn’t meet my gaze. When he did glance up, his eyes landed on a small decorative amulet on the queen’s writing desk, instead of the two of us.

Something was wrong.

I stopped with a dozen paces still between us, turning to the queen.

“What have you done?” Insubordination on my part, to question a royal.

But the queen just smiled and closed the distance between us. She was as tall as I, her blue eyes level with mine, warm smile. She was captivating. That was her Gift. Drawing everyone to her, conveying innocence, utterly believable. “What, pray tell, are you referring to?”

My Gift struggled to fight the illusion. Her thoughts were hidden from me. The only saving

grace was my ability to sense the cold depths beneath that warm surface.

“I’m referring to the missing prince,” I raised my voice for Enoch to hear, though I didn’t know if it would do any good.

This wasn’t how I’d intended to face her.

Alone.

Without any witnesses.

“What prince?” the queen murmured, reaching out to brush something from my armor, though I knew it was impeccable.

“The... prince.” No matter what I’d tried, or where I’d looked, I couldn’t find evidence of his name.

“I have no memory of a son.” A tiny frown line appeared between her brows, as she pretended to contemplate. “What was his name?”

“I... have yet to discover it.”

“Mmm, so you’ve no proof.”

I didn’t answer. She would not get her hands on the book hidden in my rooms.

“Enoch, if you please,” the queen waved him over. He handed her the glass of wine, which she passed to me. “Drink.”

The Jinni Guard never accepted a foreign substance.

I couldn’t drink it.

But the queen commanded me.

So, I could not refuse.

One sip was all it took for me to recognize the toxins within the bitter wine. My tongue grew numb. Thoughts scattered. Though I tried to form a sentence, to warn Enoch, as I should’ve done sooner, the words wouldn’t come. My mouth wouldn’t cooperate.

“Gideon is a traitor to the throne,” the queen said to Enoch. “Hold him, please.”

The Gift of Immobility wasn’t Enoch’s strongest Gift, but the queen only needed a few moments to clasp the back of my neck with her hand and tilt the wine cup against my mouth with the other.

I choked, trying to turn away. My head was immovable, in a mold made of air. I did my best to spit the liquid out, but she continued to flood my mouth with the entire glass until I was forced to swallow.

“He has made unforgivable accusations,” she continued, turning to set the glass down on a nearby table. “Thus I am forced to sentence him to banishment. Effective immediately.”

My drooping lids flew open wide. Though my response was too garbled to make out, I understood her perfectly. Banishment was the worst criminal punishment a Jinni could receive. Despite the false accusations, it stung.

She couldn't risk having me in the dungeons, or in Jinn at all.

Fury and pain at the betrayal warred inside me.

To be banished was to cease to exist. Though I had little in the way of family, the Guard was my life. I'd never be allowed back. Worse, not one of them would speak of me again.

Theophilus, My drugged mind whispered. *He might remember what you said.*

But I doubted it.

Enoch could escape the queen's clutches. If he only had a full day to himself, out of her presence...

She'd never allow it.

* * *

The setting sun blinded me.

I closed my eyes, drifting. The ground beneath me felt like a cloud and I floated on the wind. *Or on a drug-induced high*, my mind whispered.

Someone yanked me to a sitting position. My head flung forward to hit my chest. As I was pulled up to stand, I frowned at the grass beneath my feet.

How did I get here?

Hands tugged at my armor.

"No," I tried to say, but it came out as a muffled groan. My head fell back and my eyes met those of my Captain. The one I'd trusted. The betrayal came rushing back.

"Gideon." Enoch's low voice was solemn. "You are charged with treason. Your crimes are against the throne. The punishment is banishment from Jinn."

I swayed on my feet and my eyes threatened to roll back into my head. Blinking, I struggled to focus on his face. "No," I said again, but it was still unintelligible. "No," I enunciated, straining to be understood.

"Yes," Enoch said in response.

We stood far outside the capital city of Resh, at the very edge, near the clouds. The River Mem flowed close enough for the roar of the water to reach us.

The queen stood a dozen paces behind him, observing.

No one else.

If I was not mistaken, this was the closest *Daleth*. A door to the human world, wielded as a

weapon by the only woman in all the worlds with the power to open and close them. The crown on her brow glowed with proof of that.

This particular door rested right where sky met land. If my muddled memories could be trusted, this *Daleth* stood directly above the vast human ocean.

Where are the guards posted here? My banishment would not even observe the appropriate laws. This humiliation seemed almost worse than the others.

Enoch grasped the fabric of the simple tunic I'd worn beneath my armor, drawing me toward the edge of Jinn. Where one slip would lead to a long fall.

In a soft voice, Enoch added, "I'm sorry, my friend."

Straining, I fought against the poison in my system, trying to find the words I needed, but failed.

He drew me up to the portal.

"Wait."

The queen's firm voice made Enoch pause. He turned to her.

She strode up to us, smiling into his eyes. "Allow me to do the honors, while you witness."

He nodded. Stepping back to where she'd been, he stood tall, hands clasped behind his back.

The queen moved between us, filling my vision. "I wish this didn't need to be done." Her voice dripped with apology, but her eyes were clear, unrepentant.

She leaned closer.

Her lips brushed my ear.

In a whisper too soft for Enoch to hear, she added, "You'll never find him."

My heart lurched.

I'd been right.

Before my foggy mind could fight back, she pushed.

I fell from Jinn.

Dropping into the clouds, my body flipped end over end, surrendering to the whims of the wind. My muscles didn't respond, weakened by the drink. My Gifts were out of reach, traveling was impossible.

I fought to take control of my body.

If I hit the cold water like this I would sink like a rock.

But as hard as I tried, I could only watch as the dark waves of the ocean below rose to meet me.

If I somehow survived this, I vowed I would find the prince.

Even if I could not remember his name.
Even if it took the rest of my life.
The freezing water knocked the air from my lungs and swallowed me.
My paralyzed body sank like a rock.
Darkness filled my vision.
The light of the sun faded to a distant pinprick of light.
Something brushed my arm, but whether creature or seaweed, it ceased to matter.
Spots filled my vision as I ran out of air.

T H A N K Y O U F O R R E A D I N G !

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THIS SNEAK PEEK FROM THE STOLEN KINGOM SERIES

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KEEP READING, HERE'S THE LINK TO :

[THE STOLEN KINGDOM](#)

-

[THE JINNI KEY](#)

[THE CURSED HUNTER](#)

[MY OTHER BOOKS](#)

<3

B E T H A N Y A T A Z A D E H