

ALFIE
BLOOM

Also by Gabrielle Kent:

*Alfie Bloom and the Secrets
of Hexbridge Castle*

ALFIE BLOOM

and the
Talisman
Thief

Gabrielle Kent

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For my family



1



Raiders from the Oak

Alfie rolled on to his back and smiled up at the stars as the wind whipped through his hair and flapped his pyjamas. He patted the fur beneath him – flying bearskin was the only way to travel.

“You’re quiet tonight,” said a deep voice by his ear. “Everything OK?”

“Just enjoying the peace, Artan.” Alfie reached back and scratched the bear’s head. The whole rug rippled beneath him as Artan growled with pleasure.

The moonlight glinted off Lake Archelon, highlighting the silhouette of Hexbridge Castle sitting high atop one of the hills overlooking the

village. Alfie still couldn't believe he lived there. His dad was fast asleep inside and so was his best friend Amy Siu, who was staying for the Easter holidays while her gran recovered from a bad bout of flu. His cousins Madeleine and Robin had left a few hours ago after spending the whole weekend at the castle.

Alfie loved having so many people around, especially after his former life in a gloomy basement flat with only his dad and his cat, Galileo, for company. Inheriting a magnificent castle from Orin Hopcraft, the last of the great druids, had changed his life completely, but he still enjoyed his own company sometimes. Where better to be alone than in the clouds?

It seemed like years since Christmas, when his head teachers, Murkle and Snitch, had turned into a dragon and tried to eat him. The ancient magic Orin had hidden inside Alfie had saved the day by stripping away their magic, but the feeling of power it had given him as he used it was almost as terrifying as the dragon. He shivered despite the warm night; he still had nightmares about it sometimes.

Tonight's dream had been the worst yet. He had turned into a dragon and eaten his family. It felt

so real that he could have sworn his arms were still green and scaly when he woke up. He'd taken to the skies before going back to sleep. A peaceful flight usually cleared his mind, but this time the nightmare was hard to shake. He touched the talisman that always hung around his neck. Feeling it there, keeping the magic inside him hidden and controlled, helped him to feel safe.

“OK, take us home, Artan.”

“Homeward-bound,” rumbled the bear. “Hold on tight!”

Alfie buried his fingers into Artan's thick fur as the bear turned in a big swooping arc over Wyrmwald House school before soaring back towards the castle. Alfie was enjoying school life since Murkle and Snitch had been arrested. He hoped they'd be locked up for a long time somewhere very far away. His favourite teacher, Miss Reynard, had taken the role of headmistress. Alfie was pleased about that. She seemed the least likely person to turn into a ferocious dragon.

They glided over Archelon Lake towards the gentle roar of the river that flowed around the castle before cascading over the cliff behind it as twin waterfalls. As the bear sailed over the castle walls, the oak tree in the cobbled half of the

courtyard caught Alfie's eye. It was lit with a blue light that flickered out almost as soon as he noticed it. Was he imagining things? He clamped his hand over Artan's muzzle and pointed down. Artan nodded and quietly floated over to land behind the stone battlements.

Popping his head up to peer through one of the gaps in the stonework, Alfie could just make out a shadowy figure moving around near the tree. The drawbridge was still up, so how had someone managed to get in? The figure moved out from under the tree and headed towards the castle doors. Alfie leapt to his feet, but just as he opened his mouth to yell down at the intruder, he recognized the figure as Ashford, the butler. He dropped back down behind the stonework, not wanting to explain what he was doing out in the middle of the night. He watched the butler tuck something small into his pocket before heading into the castle. Alfie wondered what he was doing up so late.

Waiting until Ashford had closed the door, Alfie gave Artan a pat and they swept up to his open bedroom window. He still hadn't told any of the adults about the bear. He was half afraid his dad would want to run experiments to figure out how he could talk and fly. Only Amy, Madeleine and

Robin knew about him, and they were under strict instructions to keep their lips zipped or else lose their flying privileges.

The bear glided silently through the sleeping castle. Alfie hopped off outside the castle library and Artan floated back to his cosy little room in the southern tower. Alfie was still wide awake after his nightmare. He grabbed a few of his favourite comics from the library to read in bed, hoping they would help to replace the dragon in his dreams.

Passing the staircase, Alfie heard an unfamiliar voice echoing up from the ground floor. He froze and listened. It was melodic yet harsh. Every word carried menace.

“You were a fool to return. Did you think we would forget what you stole from us?”

Slowly, Alfie lay down on the carpet and peered through the banisters into the hall below. There were four people down there in the dark. Three of them were very tall and wore long tunics with some form of leather waistcoat. They were holding on to the arms of the shortest figure, who was struggling to free himself from them.

“Tell us where it is.”

The sharp-faced owner of the voice stood almost nose-to-nose with their captive, who answered

defiantly, “The one place you’ll never be able to take it from. Muninn and Bone’s vaults.”

The second voice Alfie knew well. Ashford. The castle was being burgled and the robbers were threatening their butler! Alfie didn’t know what to do. He could wake his dad and Amy, but two twelve-year-olds, a butler and a skinny inventor would be no match for the fierce-looking men in the hall.

There was a grunt from Ashford as one of the men drove a fist into his ribs. Looking around frantically, Alfie spotted a large sword held by a suit of armour. He considered grabbing it and charging down the stairs but doubted he’d even be able to lift it high enough to threaten the thieves.

“You will take us there.”

“No one can travel there without one of their coaches,” replied Ashford.

“Then call one.”

The man was holding a knife to Ashford’s neck. Alfie’s instincts took over. He leapt to his feet and threw his full weight against the suit of armour, sending the whole thing crashing down the stairs.

“Hey, you! What are you doing? Get out of here!” he yelled at the top of his voice as the armour crashed and banged its way down the stairs. He

picked up one of the shoulder pieces and clashed it against the wall, hoping that if he made enough noise the men would think there was a whole army upstairs.

“Alfie, duck!” shouted Ashford.

Alfie dropped to the floor, and not a second too soon. Three arrows thudded into the tapestry behind him in quick succession.

“What’s going on?” shouted Alfie’s dad, dashing out of his bedroom at the same time as Amy emerged from hers in tartan pyjamas, brandishing her baseball bat.

“What is it, Al? Are you OK?”

Alfie crouched behind the stone balustrade, making himself as small as possible as the two of them raced down the corridor towards him. “Stay where you are!” he shouted as he kicked out at another suit of armour, sending it toppling downstairs after the first. “They’re firing arrows!”

“Who, Alfie? Who’s down there?” called his dad over the clanging and clattering of metal.

“I don’t know,” mouthed Alfie. He pulled his arms in tight just as another arrow chipped the stone near his elbow.

The last piece of armour crashed down into the hall below. Alfie risked a peek. A fight had broken

out. Ashford had wrestled himself free and was spinning furiously, aiming punches and kicks at the intruders with pinpoint accuracy. *Where had he learnt to fight like that?* Alfie wondered. One of the men was on the floor near the bottom of the stairs; the other two were circling warily, waiting for a chance to attack.

“What do we do?” whispered Amy, wriggling across the floor towards Alfie on her elbows.

Alfie was wondering that himself. His dad seemed to have a plan, and had grabbed a shield and spear from the walls as he crawled over to join them.

“Get to one of the bedrooms and lock the door until you hear my voice,” he hissed over the yells and crashing sounds from below.

Alfie stared at his dad. He had never seen him look so fierce and determined. “No way! You can’t go down there alone. I’m not leaving you.”

“You don’t have a choice. Get to your room. I’ll help Ashford.” Before Alfie could argue there was a yell from Amy. She had leapt to her feet and was shouting down over the banisters.

“Ashford! Look out!”

Another figure had appeared in the doorway: a woman. She was tall, with a coldness to her

angular features, and she stood with a bow raised to her shoulder. Ashford hadn't seen her; his face was turned up towards Amy. Alfie joined Amy in screaming and pointing towards the door. Ashford turned and two of the men leapt at him, trying to pin him down. He fought his way out of their grip, but it was too late. The second his eyes met those of the woman at the door, she released her arrow. It tore through his clothes and thudded into his shoulder, the sheer force of it knocking him to the ground.

"No!" Alfie and Amy screamed as one. Alfie ripped the spear from his dad's hand and hurtled down the stairs, screaming at the top of his lungs, his dad and Amy following close behind.

A sack was pulled over Ashford's head as his attackers dragged him towards the doorway where the woman with the bow stood, her pale face lit up with cruel delight.

"Stop! Leave him alone!" Alfie yelled, hurling the spear in fury. It clattered uselessly to the ground behind the intruders as they disappeared through the door. He leapt down the last few steps and charged across the hallway.

"Alfie, wait!" called his dad, but then he let out a cry of pain. Alfie looked back to see him tumbling

over the armour that littered the stairs. Amy stopped to pull him to his feet as Alfie sprinted out into the courtyard, leaving them behind,

The oak was lit up again with the weird blue light. This time Alfie could see that it was coming from a gaping hole in the tree's trunk – it was some kind of portal. Ashford's captors stepped through into the light, dragging Ashford with them.

“Stop!” Alfie shouted as he ran. He reached the tree just in time to see Ashford's feet disappearing through the portal. With barely a thought, Alfie thrust his arms into the light. It felt cool and rippled like water around his arms as he grabbed hold of what felt like a leather waistcoat. He planted his foot against the tree trunk and pulled as hard as he could, staggering back as a figure emerged. It was the woman who had shot Ashford. She was smiling, her beautiful green eyes glittering with malice as she grabbed his wrists in a vice-like grip and twisted until he let go of her clothing. Alfie cried out in pain, struggling to free himself.

“Get off him!” screamed Amy, racing towards them. Alfie's dad followed, limping badly. Just as Alfie's wrists felt like they were about to snap, the woman released her grip with a cry of rage. Amy had batted one of her baseballs through the air to

smash into her cheek. A purple bruise blossomed instantly on the woman's luminous white skin. She snarled something at Alfie in a language he didn't understand. Amy threw herself on to the woman like a wildcat but was swept aside with an effortless blow that hurled her across the courtyard. The woman turned and stepped back into the tree.

"Alfie, stop!" called his dad as Alfie lunged towards the portal.

He could barely see anything through the light that suddenly surrounded him. He tried to take a step forwards, but his dad's hands grabbed at the back of his pyjamas and he felt himself being dragged back out of the tree.

"No!" he screamed, straining to move forwards, the portal crackling around his ears as his legs were pulled back into the night air. "We've got to stop them taking Ashford!"

He could hear his dad and Amy screaming his name as he held on to the sides of the portal and struggled against their grip, willing all the strength he could muster into his arms. Straining to pull himself forwards, his fingers appeared to twist into claws, and scales ran up his arms, just like in his dream. Was the portal doing this to him?

As he tried to blink away the image, a figure

materialized through the blinding light. It was the sharp-faced man who had threatened Ashford. His cold eyes were emotionless as he stared down at Alfie. His foot snapped out to kick Alfie in the chest, sending him flying back through the portal, where he landed in a heap on top of his dad and Amy. Struggling to catch his breath, Alfie watched the portal shrink back into a long blue line before its light winked out completely.

Staggering to his feet, he frantically pounded his fists on the bark, but the portal was gone. And so was Ashford.



2



The Stolen Lens

Alfie gazed at the threadbare arm of the sofa he had slumped on to – each loose thread jarringly clear. They had gathered in the Abernathy Room, in which Alfie’s dad had recreated the living room of their flat in Abernathy Terrace. Their old furniture felt comfortingly familiar now.

It hurt each time Alfie took a breath but the shock of Ashford being torn from them was more painful than his bruised chest and wrists. Amy was sitting next to him and his dad was holding an ice pack to her eye, which had already started to swell.

“Are you OK, Dad?” Alfie asked, breaking the

numb silence they had fallen into since the portal closed.

“I’ll live.” His dad left the ice pack with Amy and limped painfully over to his armchair. “But what have I told you about leaving things on the stairs?” Alfie couldn’t even muster a smile at his dad’s weak attempt to lighten the mood.

“Are you going to call the police?” asked Amy.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. What would we tell them?”

Alfie knew his dad was right. Caspian Bone, their strange solicitor, had worked some kind of magic over the whole village – no one remembered that a dragon had nearly destroyed the town before Christmas. Inspector Wainwright would think they were nuts if they told him that Ashford had been dragged through a magic portal in the oak tree.

The old brass telephone in the hall began to ring. Alfie jumped to his feet, glad of an excuse to get out of the room, which seemed to be closing in around him. Crossing the silver shafts of moonlight cast down into the entrance hall through the landing windows, he picked up the receiver. A sweet voice spoke with a serious tone.

“Alfie, it’s Emily Fortune, senior administrator

at Muninn and Bone. Our ravens have told us what has happened. Don't try to follow Ashford. Close the doors and keep out of the courtyard until the phone rings three times. Caspian Bone is sending a carriage for you."

Emily's voice made Alfie feel calmer. Caspian might be odd but Alfie was sure he would know just what to do in a situation like this.

Thanking Emily, Alfie put down the receiver and noticed his cat, Galileo, prowling the area where Ashford had been attacked. He was sniffing the ground, hackles raised as he emitted a low growl.

"It's OK, boy." Alfie reached down to stroke him, but Galileo slipped out from under his fingers, crouching low to the ground as he darted outside, following a scent to the courtyard.

"Leo! Get back here." Galileo was sniffing around the tree. Alfie called again but the cat paid no attention to him. After pretending to close the large castle door several times Alfie gave up and closed it completely. He guessed Galileo would be able to look after himself.

"Caspian is sending a carriage," said Alfie as he rejoined his dad and Amy. "We've got to stay inside until the phone rings."

“In case they come back?” asked Amy. “Do you think they will?”

“I don’t know. They wanted something from Ashford. I think they’ve taken him to get it for them.”

“What if he refuses?”

Alfie didn’t reply. He didn’t want to think about the danger Ashford was in.

Twenty minutes later the phone rang three times. “That’s the signal. Come on.” Alfie hooked his arm around his dad and helped him limp to the door.

Amy’s jaw actually dropped as she saw a polished black coach sitting in the courtyard. Alfie recognized it as the very one that had taken him and his dad to Muninn and Bone’s offices nearly a year ago, where he had first learnt he was to inherit Hexbridge Castle. Six midnight-black horses steamed in the moonlight as they stamped on the cobbles.

Johannes the driver nodded to them. The coach door clicked open. Two short, stocky, bearded men in leather overalls and stout boots jumped out and grabbed a heavy black bag from the back of the coach. They dragged it towards the oak and then circled the tree, tapping it and scratching their beards while making tutting noises.

Leaving the two men to examine the tree, Alfie climbed into the velvet darkness of the carriage, followed by his dad and Amy. He felt out of place in the elegant interior and wished he had changed out of his pyjamas first.

“You are hurt.”

They jumped as a voice sounded from the shadows. The oil lamps in the carriage dramatically flared to life to reveal Caspian Bone sitting opposite them. “Your injuries will be tended to at our offices.”

“Caspian!” cried Alfie, his chest hurting as he shouted out with relief to see the solicitor. “Someone took Ashford. They dragged him into that portal thing in the oak tree. We’ve got to get him back!”

“They shot him with an arrow,” burst out Amy. “They were really tall and strong; we couldn’t stop them.”

“I didn’t know whether to call the police,” said Alfie’s dad. “I mean, what would we say? What *could* we say?”

Caspian listened to their wild ranting in impassive silence, and then rapped the wall behind him with a black-and-silver cane. The coach began to move. “Your police cannot be of help. I will deal

with this matter alone.” Over Caspian’s clipped tones Alfie could hear the horses clatter over the drawbridge, their hooves pounding the ground as they galloped down the hill. As they reached full speed the coach tilted back as though the horses had leapt into the air and were galloping into the sky. He noticed Amy straining to see through the black glass windows.

“Are we fly—” began Amy.

“Not important,” interrupted Caspian. He twitched his head back to Alfie, who noticed Amy raise an eyebrow at being cut off so sharply. “The talisman – is it safe?”

Alfie pulled it from his pyjamas and showed the solicitor.

“Good. They still think it is at our offices. We have arranged for the oak to be bound with iron so that the elves cannot return through that portal while we negotiate Ashford’s return.”

“Wait . . . *elves*?” asked Alfie. “Those people were elves? Are you serious?”

“Do I ever joke?”

Alfie thought that would be too much to hope for.

Amy’s other eyebrow joined the first as Caspian casually confirmed the existence of a supposedly

mythical race. “What did they want from Ashford?” she asked.

“I suppose it serves no purpose to keep the information from you now that they have found him again.”

Alfie was even more surprised that Caspian was about to give him some answers than he was about the revelation that elves exist.

“The lens in the talisman,” continued the solicitor. “They wanted it back.”

“My talisman?” asked Alfie, automatically reaching for the golden disc hanging from his neck. He ran his thumb over the spiralling runes that encircled the purple lens fixed into its centre.

“Alfie’s talisman belonged to the elves?” asked his dad.

“Not the talisman itself – the lens that sits within it. It is made from a rare gemstone, one of a kind. It can focus and control other powers and energies. The lens was designed to focus the powers of a crown the Queen of the elves had been developing for centuries. She intended to use it to expand her realm, enslaving other tribes and races. An elf close to her warned us of their plans and my partner, Mr Muninn, enlisted Ashford – a

talented thief who was duty-bound to us – to take it from them. Ashford agreed when he heard that the druid Orin Hopcraft needed a lens such as this to create a talisman – the talisman that controls the magic he hid within you, Alfie. When Ashford returned, we sent the lens back to Orin. Much as I detest thieves, I will acknowledge that this theft saved many lives, as well as protecting yours. But it appears that the elves never gave up hope of retrieving the lens. How they found Ashford, I do not know.”

“Ashford stole it . . . for *me*?” said Alfie, holding the talisman tightly in his fist. “He didn’t even know me!” The only thing that had been making him feel a bit better was the fact that the kidnapping wasn’t related to his inheritance, and now Caspian was telling him that it was. He could hardly breathe.

“Believe me when I tell you that it was as much in his own interest as yours.”

“Are you saying that you sent a wanted thief to work for us?” asked Alfie’s dad incredulously.

“Yes,” said Caspian coldly. “But a thief who has pledged his loyalty to your family. You may trust him completely.”

It wasn’t like Caspian to praise Ashford. Alfie

had always suspected there was some unspoken history or rivalry between the two.

“Why is the talisman so important to them? Enough to half kill him for!”

“Emily Fortune will discuss the minutiae with you when we arrive. I must attempt to open negotiations with the Queen. We have sent a coach for her. Ashford has told her that we hold the talisman here, but if they break him they will find a way to return to the castle and get it.”

“Break him? They’re going to torture him?” cried Alfie. “Then you can’t waste time talking to this Queen; you have to find him and stop them! If they want the talisman I’ll give it to them. Just get him back!”

The oil lamps flickered, sending shadows dancing around the carriage as Caspian’s expression darkened. Amy snapped her eyes away from the window and they all shrank back a little in their seats as the solicitor seemed to tower over them without even moving.

“I do not *have to* do anything – except observe proper customs and protocol. We do not charge into another people’s land and jeopardize peace with brash demands. Do not presume that you have any say in this. Giving up the talisman would

risk the lives of many for just one man.” The lights stopped flickering and the darkness fled as Caspian leaned back into his seat.

Alfie’s stomach was churning. Ashford could be getting tortured while they spoke, and there was nothing he could do about it. He glanced at Amy. For the whole journey she had remained as cool as if she was in an ordinary car, but by the way that she was sitting so stiffly he knew she didn’t like the way Caspian spoke to them at all. Alfie was used to the solicitor’s coldness by now, but Amy never let anyone get away with trying to intimidate her. She looked Caspian up and down.

“Who do you think you are?” she asked. Alfie exchanged a nervous glance with his dad.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. *You* might not have an ounce of compassion, but *our* friend has been hurt and kidnapped and all you can do is talk down your big nose and bully Alfie into shutting up.”

Caspian glared and the lights started to flicker again.

“Don’t start that nonsense.” Amy got to her feet and pointed at him. “You’re not half as intimidating as you think you are. You’re Alfie’s solicitor. It’s

your job to help him and answer his questions. So stop being so . . . so obtuse!”

The carriage was silent as Amy and Caspian seemed to be locked in some kind of staring competition. Alfie held his breath. Caspian broke the silence first.

“Obtuse?”

“Yeah. It’s a word. Look it up!”

“I *know* what it means,” said Caspian. Alfie wasn’t sure, but he thought he might have seen the slightest trace of a smile flicker across Caspian’s lips. He spoke again in a very slightly softer tone. “I’m afraid I am not one to offer false hope and reassurance. The most you can do is hope that there is something, other than the talisman, that she is willing to accept in exchange.” Alfie and his dad stared at Amy in a mixture of amazement and admiration, unable to believe that she had faced down the haughty solicitor.

At that moment the coach bounced and shuddered. The horses dropped from a gallop to a canter before slowing to a stop. Alfie wondered if he would ever be allowed to travel up top with Johannes to see their journey. He didn’t think it was likely – everything about Muninn and Bone’s operations seemed extremely secretive.

The doors popped open and Alfie leapt out into the huge coach house, glad to be away from the silence that had descended on the carriage. Johannes jumped down to tend to the horses as Caspian swept ahead, leading them through the door to the entrance hall. Alfie could tell that Amy was dying to stop and investigate the array of coaches as they hurried after Caspian.

“Emily will join you shortly,” said the solicitor as he strode across the grand reception to stand on the round brass crest that served as a lift to the upper floors. The brass cylinder that formed the walls of the lift descended from the ceiling. “I must prepare to meet the Queen and begin our negotiation.” The cylinder clanked down around him. There was a hiss of steam and a whooshing noise that lasted nearly a minute before the cylinder retracted back into the ceiling, leaving them alone in the entrance hall.