

## Prequel: Elfkind Origins

Though he knew his dad didn't like him walking through the city central square without a shirt, Bert just hadn't put one on right away when he removed his carpenter vest. That leather apprentice garb kept slivers out of his shoulders when carrying the construction materials to and from the master builders. In that hot late-September weather, even the master craftsmen rarely wore anything more than the boots, sturdy-cotton or "denim" leggings and perhaps a leather apron or vest while working—and training their apprentices.

Bert's dad, Robert, had tried to raise him with a semblance of decorum. Rob had been gentle, but strict, with Bert ever since his wife, Evelyn, had died of a mysterious fever when Bert was ten. But because he was a former paladin, now working at the police-hof in the duke's city, Robert tried to keep as strict a dress code as he could with his 16-year-old son—who snuck out of uniform every chance he could. After Bert's required years in the cathedral school to learn the basics, Rob had apprenticed him to the Magic User's guild. In his first year of learning the fundamentals of how matter and form worked together, Bert had not been good with calculations or making potions, but had shown some skill in making magical devices—particularly forging swords with the hammer and anvil. Since Bert was agile like an elf but strong like a dwarf, the guild's leadership traded him to the construction guild for a year to learn parallel skills in wood and stone. If he mastered that, he could begin to learn how to make the stained glass for the windows that were becoming popular in churches.

Tall and lanky, but with well-tanned muscles from both the anvil and now the construction labor, he was trudging home in the sultry dusk, sore from the day's labor, working high on ladders, but daydreaming of how he could help wood and stone cooperate to form an arch or roof support—almost like magic. Passing the Cathedral churchyard as the twilight deepened, he heard voices. Were they ghosts? Daring to peek over the hedge, he could tell they were human voices, raised in anger. He was surprised to hear them coming from the cloister. They changed to choking sounds, followed by a thud. A small coin-purse came flying over the cloister wall into the edge of the churchyard. Two halflings, probably thieves from the Fox Clan, had also been listening and saw this too. They bolted over a low portion of the hedge, grabbed it and ran. Bert shouted after them... but it was no use.

Instinctively, Bert also glanced at where the purse had come from. There he caught just a glimpse of a lacey, black-robed figure on the other side of the churchyard—who also noticed him before it disappeared into the cloister shadows. Daring to enter that hallowed space, he found the bishop—choked to death, but with a torn remnant of black lace clutched in his hand.

Immediately he ran to the police-hof, still shirtless and sweat dripping from his face, where before he could even catch his breath and describe what he just saw happen, his dad berated him for not being in proper uniform. "Albert John Plugger, you know better than to show up here dressed like that..." Finally catching his breath, Bert shouted "the bishop is dead!"

Hearing that, the police chief jumped up from his desk behind his dad at the intake counter and rushed over. Between gasps of air, Bert related what he had just witnessed. Immediately the chief handed Bert a damp towel and dispatched two runners to investigate and secure the area while he sent others to alert the guards at the city gate. He also sent one other runner to the duke's castle to alert his superiors and request an investigation team.

As Bert continued the report while his dad took notes, Rob started to get more and more nervous. Realizing that Bert is probably the only witness, and also that he was seen by the suspected perpetrator (who was most likely a member of the Assassins' Guild), he went over to talk to the chief privately. Explaining that he had already lost his wife and didn't want to lose his son, he begged for protection. Knowing the assassin techniques, the chief told Rob to send Bert outside the city, as far as he could, right now! Rob took his son aside, told him to "race home, gather his survival gear and some food for a few days and head to your mother Evelyn's parents on the other side of St. Asaph's at the far eastern edge of the dukedom—and do whatever your grandparents tell you." He gave Bert a big hug, handed him a "safe conduct" pass to get out of the city, and even told him he didn't have to put his shirt back on till he got to wherever his grandparents sent him.

Sensing his dad's anxiety, Albert did exactly that—quickly. The guards at the southern gate reluctantly let him pass, after he identified the two Fox-clan halflings being detained there—with the bishop's alms purse. They had tried to hide in the city shadows and act unsuspecting while trying to escape from the city among the usual crowds leaving at the close of the workday; but the police runner had beat them to the drawbridge with the quick description Bert had provided. Their possession of the alms purse sealed their doom.

Taking a circuitous route through clan territory, stopping for just a moment to explain his plight to the druid commune outside Dennis-town and grabbing a bite to eat from them, he trudged on to his grandparents. It was well after midnight when he got there and had to convince their watchdog he was friendly. After his grandpa called off the dog and his grandmother heard the story, they knew what had to be done. First, she cast her "untrack" spell back up his trail, far enough to connect with what the druids had done for him. Next, seeing how exhausted he was, she insisted he spend the rest of the night there and leave in the early morning, after a hearty breakfast for the journey, to her parents' relatives, far to the southeast in the borderlands of the Kumberland dwarf community. She even sent one of her watchdog's yearling puppies with him to help him stay on course. Finally, she and her husband, who had a brother who was a priest and had been in the seminary a few years himself and knew how to detect evil, used their forest magic to remove all trace of his having stopped there. That "detect evil" quality enabled them to notice any assassin who might come looking for their grandson.

Their efforts worked, and he got away safely.

Once his grandmother's tribe had tested and accepted him, having seen the tokens she had sent and hearing his story, Bert settled in. Knowing that it might be years before he saw his dad or grandparents again—if ever, he focused his efforts on being accepted into their tribe. It was fairly easy for him to do, because many of them had deep elven roots and recognized him as one of their own. They also liked his skills in metallurgy and construction—as well as the trace of paladin characteristics he has picked up from his father: a willingness to see the good in everyone and go out of his way to help where needed. By the time two years had passed, both Bert and the tribal elders had forgotten that he hadn't grown up there.

This worked in his favor when he caught the eye of Katherine, a beautiful, sandy-haired bard that traveled through the encampments of that tribe. She also saw qualities in him, like his altruistic yet playful spirit and his employable skills. These warmed her to the thought of having a solidly stable husband like him, rather than the other bards she knew who were significantly more whimsical. After another year of proper courtship, they were married by the circuit-riding priest who came through their tribal area every few months.

Though Bert and Katherine settled in well and had a baby boy, their life there felt somehow incomplete. Katherine still had a wanderlust from her training as a bard as well as from her elven ancestry which ran even deeper in her than in Bert. He, on the other hand, dearly longed to see his dad again—and show him his grandson, Patrick. Despite misgivings about heading back to the duke's capital city with its Assassins' Guild still lurking there, the couple either sold or packed up all their belongings. They loaded these, Bert's grandmother's dog, and their infant son in his well-built, almost seaworthy cradle Bert had made, into an old wagon and headed back to the Markasandra Valley.

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Bert's grandparents were delighted to meet his wife and hold their greatgrandchild, but were apprehensive about his return to the area. Though there was a new bishop, and the case of their previous one's murder had officially been closed with the hanging of the two halfling thieves, Bert was still the only witness to verify their claim that they had "found" the alms purse in the graveyard, and he was the only one to have seen the black, lacey figure leave the cloister. Most people suspected that those two halflings could not have killed the bishop without tackling him first, which was unlikely; and no one could explain the black lace in his dead hand—which had no counterpart on the thieves. Bert's testimony to his dad at the police-hof was thrown out by the head judge as mere hearsay—without Bert being there to swear it in court—and the police didn't investigate further, lest they find out more than the Assassins' Guild would want them to know. Bert and Katherine's arrival could change all that.

Undeterred, Bert and Katherine headed for the duke's city, Russelburg, to at least let his dad hold their baby too. If he also wanted them safely elsewhere, they'd head back to Katherine's home area after that. Though

Robert was delighted to see his son again, and meet Katherine, he was even more apprehensive that his in-laws were about them being there. Nevertheless, he held baby Patrick while Bert showed Katherine around. Though she liked the Markasandra Valley very much, she could sense the danger in the air. Eyes were watching them, even though Bert kept to the shadows and didn't visit anyone else. By the time they returned to the police-hof, all the characters there had fallen in love with the baby, especially the slightly pointed ears. They were torn between wanting them to stay and fearing for their safety.

Reluctantly, Robert convinced his son to take his only family far from the city. He recommended the Eagle Clan area far up into the knob land, way past the south bank of the Markasandra. The chief gave him a few hours off duty to escort them out the southern gate of the city and across the drawbridge. Turning back into the city after waving goodbye, he headed back to the police-hof—but never made it back there. Enticed into a dark alley by screams for help and the glimpse of a child being abducted, his body was found, backstabbed, and again with traces of black lace clutched in his hand. The Assassins' Guild felt he knew too much and took care of that detail. They would see to the others before nightfall.