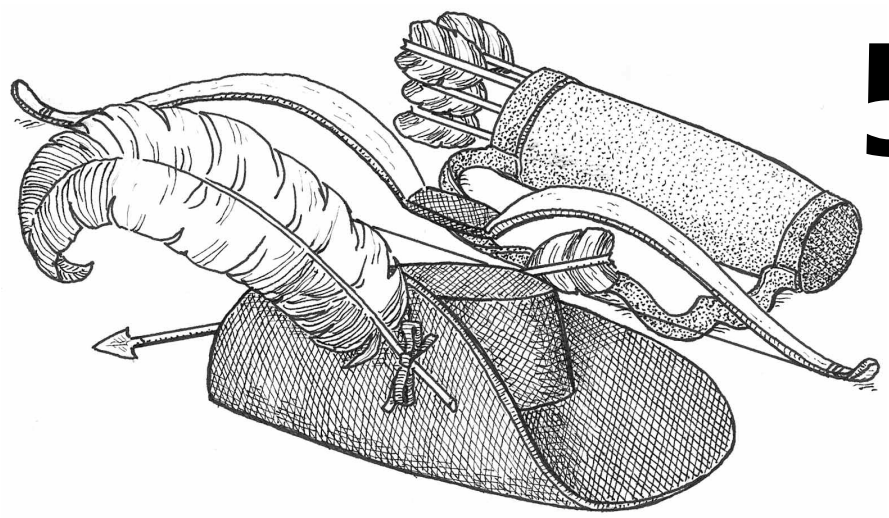

5

Elf Perception

"Who are you and what do you want with me?" Pete asked. His mind was fuzzy and it felt like all his senses were masked with gauze. Was it a concussion, he wondered, before forcing himself back to the more immediate problem of the stranger in front of him. "Are you robbing us?"

"No, no. Not at all," the stranger replied as if offended by the mere suspicion of wrongdoing. "I am Alfred, and I have come to protect you."

"Protect me?"

"Yes. I've come to protect you from the elk."

"Elk?"

"I suppose you call them moose in these parts," Alfred offered with a questioning look. Pete didn't respond.

"They're taking over your office, you know, and they can be very dangerous."

"Moose?" Pete replied groggily. "Dangerous?"

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As his vision cleared, Pete got his first real look at Alfred. He had a light blond moustache hiding under a long pointed nose. His sideburns ran from the side of his hairline to the tip of his chin in a one-inch strip, following the contours of his sharp, bony face. He wore a large black broad-rimmed hat that would have been round if he hadn't pinned the right side back. A plume of black-and-white feathers was pinned to the underside of the raised portion, sweeping back a foot above and behind him. The feathers quivered whenever he moved his head. He was wearing a sleeveless cloth vest with elaborate designs cut into the breasts, back, and along the rounded panels defining its waist. What could best be described as a puffy purple fabric made up what Pete supposed was a shirt – although it was only the sleeves protruding through the wide brown flaps that winged each shoulder of the vest. Dark stockings and tanned leather boots completed the outfit. The brown leather strap running diagonally across his chest held a quiver of arrows on his back. A large bow was leaning against the wall.

Pete was positive he had just sustained the worst concussion in history. And what was the best his injured brain could come up with? Robin Hood. Bloody great.

He continued to lie on the coarse carpet of the small conference room. Alfred knelt down beside him, wiping blood off his forehead with a green handkerchief. "Let me get you some water," he whispered. He went over to the water cooler and filled the cheap plastic cup to the brim. Heading back to Pete, he stumbled on the carpet. If Pete wasn't fully awake before, ice-cold water in the face certainly did the trick.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," Alfred stage-whispered, as he dried Pete's face with the handkerchief and attempted to dab some of the water from his soaking shirt.

"Why are you whisp—" Pete was cut off when Alfred quickly put his hand over his mouth.

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"The big bull might hear us and charge right through that flimsy door. Elk can hear pretty well."

Pete still wasn't sure he was truly in this surreal scene with this bizarre character whispering in his ear.

"He almost got me just as you came off the elevator," Alfred said. "He knows I'm a threat to him and the cows he's courting in this office." Alfred's tone grew urgent. "We should get out of here. Are you feeling well enough to head downstairs?"

Pete nodded his head.

"You'll need to wear these to see the elk, I mean, moose."

Alfred pulled a pair of glasses with heavy black frames from his vest pocket. Pete put them on. They didn't seem to change his vision at all.

Alfred crept to the door, slowly. He opened it and stuck his head into the hallway, quickly twisting it from side to side. He motioned Pete to follow him. Pete rose to his knees. A sudden wave of nausea passed over him. He took hold of the conference-room table and got to his feet. I could really use a couple of stress beans right now, he thought.

Alfred grasped his huge bow and inched cautiously out into the hall, with Pete stumbling behind him. As he passed through the door to the stairwell, a huge bull moose rounded the corner on the other side of the elevators. It lowered its great rack of antlers and started to charge.

"Come on!" Alfred grabbed Pete's arm with surprising strength and pulled him through the stairwell door. In his rush to shut the door on the moose, he slammed it on Pete's arm. Pete almost fainted from the pain but managed to pull his arm through the door just as he felt the bull's antlers brush by.

They ran down the stairs and burst out into the front lobby. "Let's sit over here for a minute," Alfred said, pointing to a couple of overstuffed chairs. Pete dropped into the closest one

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and took a few moments to catch his breath. His arm throbbed and his forehead ached. Alfred went to sit on the chair's arm, but misjudged and nearly fell to the floor. His bow flew from his hand and spun across the shiny fake marble floor.

"Who are you and what the hell is going on?" Pete asked. "If you're a hallucination, I'd like to trade you in for another model. Preferably without the tights and cutesy outfit."

"I am your guardian elf, and I've been sent here help you deal with your moose problem."

"What an amazing coincidence. Until you arrived, we didn't have a moose problem."

"Actually you've been gradually building toward the major moose infestation you now have. The longer you ignore it, the harder it will be to get the problem under control."

"Well, I never saw any moose before you gave me these godawful ugly glasses."

"What about the moose outside your office window and the one you and Harold almost hit on the way home from the bar?"

"Those were just figments of my imagination … Hey! How did you know about those? Unless you're also a really bad figment of my stressed-out imagination – or a bad dream I'm stuck in."

"Unfortunately for me, I'm not a figment of your very limited imagination. And I've been forced to learn much more about you and your pathetic life than I ever wanted to know. You have got to be the biggest coward I've ever seen. You wouldn't last a week where I come from."

"And if you don't come from my own mixed-up mind, then just where do you come from?"

"From a long line of English hunters. Elk – or what are called moose in North America – are our main prey." He walked over and picked up his longbow.

"So why is there suddenly a bull moose terrorizing our office?" Pete asked.

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"There's nothing sudden about his appearance. That moose has been battling with another bull over the cow moose growing up in every office and cubicle in your company. It's grown to be quite the herd."

"Where do they come from, and why can't we see them?"

"We're still trying to figure some of that out. The moose seem to thrive in environments where people have real issues communicating with each other and spend a lot of time dodging problems they know have to be resolved. The more the issues are ignored, the bigger the moose grow. The hunters in our band appear to be the only ones who can see them without the special glasses I gave you. Although I do have to say that Jason Reynard did a good job in today's workshop of describing what seems to be happening."

"Stupid metaphor," Pete said.

"Well, you *met a four* … legged … animal …" Alfred paused for effect. When Pete ignored the bad pun, he continued, "That was pretty real tonight, didn't you think? What we don't understand is why we're not able to shoot these moose. I've tried a few times, but my arrows pass right through them."

"So they're not real!"

"Oh they're real. I still have a nasty scab on my butt from the last time I got the sharp end of your metaphor. I tripped trying to get away from the other bull in your office." Alfred stood up. "Do you want to see it?"

"No!" Just then Pete noticed the night janitor drive his truck up to the front door. "That's all I need," he said. "Word getting out that I got caught in the lobby with some nutcase with his tights around his ankles."

Alfred followed Peter's gaze to the janitor. "You're the only one who can see me. He'd have no idea what you're looking at or who you're talking to."

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"Oh, that's sooo much better. I'm sitting in the lobby talking to myself."

Pete quickly pulled out his phone earpiece and fitted it around his ear.

"Good evening, Mr. Leonard," the janitor called out as he came into the lobby.

Pete waved, pointed to the earpiece, and bobbed his head as if listening to someone on the other end of the phone call. The janitor waved back and nodded, then headed for the elevator.

"Impressive. That was quicker thinking than I've come to expect from you," Alfred said, after retrieving his bow. As he turned to face Pete, his longbow swung around behind him, knocking the glasses off Pete's face and poking him in the eye. Pete yelped and nearly fell out of his chair. Alfred rushed over to see if he was okay.

"Stay away from me, you clumsy idiot! I'll be fine if you just get out of my life." His eye stung and his sight was blurry. He rocked in his chair, holding his eye with both hands. "Guardian elf, my ass! You're a purveyor of pain. The custodian of calamity."

"That doesn't do much for my elf-confidence," Alfred said. "Besides, I'm the one getting the truly crappy part of this deal. I'm stuck trying to help a coward like you live up to your name. In fact, you're a mockery to every Leonard who's come before you."

"What are you talking about?" Pete said. The pain was easing from excruciating sharp stabs to dull thuds pounding against his eyelids.

"Your last name – Leonard – means 'brave lion' in English. It's derived from the Germanic element 'leon' or 'lion,' combined with 'hardy.' But you're about the farthest thing from brave or hardy I can imagine."

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"Why do you say that?"

"Look at your life, Pete! You're a walking wonder of nature: a spineless creature who can still manage to stand upright. Well, almost upright," Alfred said, looking at Pete's drooping shoulders. "What about that meeting last week? There were moose standing on the meeting-room table. But you all chose to ignore them. That just makes them bigger and bolder. Why didn't you stand up to your bully boss?"

Alfred paused and shook his head. "Then a couple of you slunk into the men's room and talked about how you really felt. You all knew Omar was right, yet you let him swing from the antlers of the biggest moose in the room. That's the kind of cowardly behavior moose love."

By now Alfred had retrieved Pete's glasses. "Did you know that the word 'moose' comes from the Algonquian natives here in North America? It's derived from their word 'mons' or 'moz' – depending on the dialect. The loose translation is 'twig eater,' because they browse on tips of twigs, especially recent growth."

Alfred handed Pete his glasses. "Unresolved issues that aren't discussed are providing lots of new twigs for them to graze on in your office. And we've noticed that cowardly e-mails – where people say things they won't say in person – seem to provide especially good forage for them."

"Screw courage! I want to keep my job," Pete said. "You're being way too harsh. We all have mortgages to pay and pensions to protect. That's something you obviously don't understand."

"What I don't understand is why you don't speak up and deal with the moose. If you coast along to retirement without addressing the issues, then what? How will you feel about yourself? Is that all there is to life – getting by? You're no Leonard; you're a cowardly lion."

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Alfred pointed to their reflection in the rain-streaked lobby window. "Fifteen years ago, is that the Peter Leonard you expected to be looking at today?"

Pete saw an overweight old man with rounded shoulders slumped in a chair. He ached all over. The familiar vice was squeezing his head. I could sure use a drink, he thought. He turned away and reached into his pocket for some pain relief. He shook a few of the comforting pills into his hand.

Alfred dropped his longbow and leapt from the arm of his chair. In a quick, sweeping motion, he smashed the container and pills from Pete's hands. They spun across the lobby floor and banged up against a wastebasket. "You've got to stop using those coward pills and start dealing with your issues," he said. Then he ran over to the pill container and stomped on it a few times with his tan leather boots. The small plastic bottle split open, leaving left little piles of mashed white powder all around it.

Alfred strode back to Pete. "You can't keep taking pills to dull your pain. Your go-along-to-get-along philosophy is a disaster. If it doesn't literally kill you, it will suck out your soul and leave nothing but this revolting dead-man-walking shell behind."

Alfred gave Pete a hard and very painful punch to his left shoulder.

Great, Pete thought. Now he had a matching ache to his other arm.

"What is with you people?" Alfred shouted. "The pile of pills this society uses is unbelievable. Nobody seems to want to deal with the root causes of pain and unhappiness. You flock together and take comfort in numbers like a bunch of sheep. If a room full of cowardly people all say something cowardly, it's still cowardly."

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Pete studied the floor as he rubbed his throbbing left shoulder. At that very second he knew exactly what was causing his pain and it looked a lot like a guy in tights.

Alfred flopped back into his chair with a loud sigh. "So after the meeting of the meek, there you were sedating yourself with alcohol in the middle of a Pity Party at Rocky and Bullwinkle's. A sadder bunch of spineless whiners I have never seen. You're all brave warriors when you're down the street huddled together over glasses of liquid courage. And you gutless complainers had the gall to criticize your *staff* for doing the same thing! Whose example do you think they were following? How can whiny weaklings be strong leaders for them?"

The chirp of Pete's phone ringer echoed through the lobby. It was Michelle. "Yes, the leadership workshop was interesting," he told her. "I was tied up longer than I expected at the office and am just heading home."

"I'll ride with you and we can talk some more," Alfred said as he gathered up his longbow and followed Pete to the front door.

"Oh that would be just super," Pete said. "I love being insulted and assaulted by you because it feels so good when you stop."

In his attempts to jam his longbow into the back seat of Pete's Honda, Alfred hit the back window on the driver's side so hard, Pete looked closely for a crack. He didn't find one. Alfred didn't seem to notice or care as he put his hat with the big black-and-white feather on the floor. Cold rain continued to fall as they drove out of the dim parking lot.

"So if the plural of mouse is mice, is the plural of moose meese?" Pete asked as he stopped at a red light.

"No, the plural of moose is actually moose. And the biggest moose of the herd hangs around your office. He has

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one of the largest racks of antlers and the biggest bell I've ever seen."

"What's a bell?"

"That's the flap of skin and long hair that hangs down from his throat. It seems to indicate male virility."

"Ah, I can just picture it now. Two moose cows are chewing twigs together and one says to the other, 'Hey, Ethel! Take a good look at the clapper on that burning hunk of moosehood!' "

The elf looked puzzled at this.

Obviously there was a reason he'd never heard of an elf doing stand-up comedy, Pete thought. "Oh, never mind, after tonight, I need a bit of levity to save me from going totally over the edge," he said.

"That driver is really staring at you," Alfred said nodding toward the window. "I think you'd better wear your talking ear thing again."

Pete pulled out and positioned his earpiece. "Honest, officer. I haven't had anything to drink. And I am not talking to myself. I have been chatting with my old buddy Alfred here. He's an ancient moose hunter that only I can see. He's come from god-knows-where to save me from a herd that's taking over my office right here in the middle of the city. Sounds believable, don't you think?"

Alfred reached over and gave Pete's nose a very hard flick. "You convinced me, big guy."

They drove in silence along the wet streets. Finally Pete turned to Alfred and asked, "Why is the biggest moose hanging around my office?"

"Because there are so many issues there to feed on. Since you've become such a big coward, you're too afraid to address them. So the moose knows he's safest there. In heraldry, a *lion couard* – or cowardly lion – was depicted with his

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tail between his legs. That's what you've turned the noble Leonard name into, cowardly Pete."

"Very educational. I'm just going to ignore your rude personal put downs."

"In keeping with your gutless character."

"What do I need to do to get rid of the moose?"

"To start with, you need to find the courage to listen to your own team. Despite your much-proclaimed open-door policy, everyone in your organization has stopped coming to you because you refuse to even acknowledge that the problems exist. Or you find creative ways to avoid them. Or worse still, you try to blame someone else. It's classic victim behavior. You used to navigate these things so well when you first came aboard the good ship NMTS. Now it's like you're going to sink if you make the slightest decision or take on any responsibility. And now the waters are flooding into your personal life."

"So what do I do?"

"I think you need to identify and address the biggest moose issues in your own team."

The windshield wipers kept a steady, hypnotic beat as Pete drove on. Just before he pulled onto his street, he asked, "So are you going to follow me into my house too?"

There was no response. The passenger seat was empty. Pete looked in the back seat. The longbow was gone. There was nothing on the floor mat where Alfred's hat had been.

Michelle had kept Pete's dinner warm for him – again. She tried to get the conversation going as he ate, but his mind was somewhere else. She finally gave up and left the table. Pete hardly noticed that she was gone.

Moose on the loose? A guardian elf? This is nuts. Had he imagined Alfred? Was all the stress putting him into some weird state of elf hypnosis? Pete's aching body made him

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pretty sure of Alfred's existence. If this was all real, Alfred was probably right. He should deal with some of the festering issues within his organization. At the mere thought of that, he decided he needed a drink.

Just as he rose to leave the table, his chest tightened, as if a huge elastic band was squeezing it. Spots began flashing in front of his eyes. Then the room went black. Pete crashed to the floor, dragging his place setting down with him. The plate and glasses exploded into tiny splinters. Michelle raced into the kitchen. After a quick look at Pete sprawled on the floor, she dialed 911.

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