

The Land of Fear

*Wisdom is better than weapons of war.
- Ecclesiastes 9:18*

Once there was a girl named Elisabeth, who had a most amazing adventure.

She lived in a cottage with her father and two sisters (Their names were Aline and Celeste), in the village of Brumbling, not far from the River of Fear. Now this was a terrible place where only the bravest or the most foolish people ever dared to go, for no one had ever returned.

All sorts of things were whispered about it by the people of Brumbling. Some believed that there must be a dragon, and others spoke of a terrible sorcerer in a tall black tower. A few told stories of things even more frightening. But everyone also agreed that there was a treasure so wonderful and amazing that it could not even be described.

Elisabeth had heard these things all her life long, and she burned with desire to know the real truth of the matter.

In those days a great war had come to Brumbling, and the village stood almost empty. Elisabeth was not old enough to help, and she had been left in the village with her older sisters to tend the fields and the house. Their father was an excellent bowman, and had gone away with the army for a little while. Elisabeth knew that it was necessary, but she still felt lonely without Father.

For one thing, Aline and Celeste were not very kind to her. They seemed to think that Elisabeth should do all the nasty, tedious chores that they didn't want to do, and Aline especially would pinch her unmercifully. Elisabeth endured all this until the day the town crier ran through the village, shrieking that the barbarians had defeated the army of Brumbling, and that they now demanded a mountain of gold from the people by the end of the day, or they would utterly destroy the village at sunrise tomorrow morning.

Aline and Celeste wept and screamed when they heard this news, and immediately began packing bags to run as far away as possible. Elisabeth was angry with them for being so cowardly, and told them so. But Celeste only threw a bag at her and told her not to be a fool, and Aline pinched her arm hard enough to leave bruises.

Elisabeth made up her mind that she would not run away from the barbarians with her sisters. She decided that she would herself get the mountain of gold that they demanded, by going into the forbidden lands near the River to find the treasure.

Therefore she packed the bag Celeste had given her, but instead of waiting for her sisters, she slipped quietly out the back door and ran to the barn. The hay loft was nearly full with fresh straw, and Elisabeth hid herself quite carefully in the darkest corner she

could find. Aline and Celeste never visited the barn if they could help it, for they hated to get dirty, and Celeste especially was afraid of the cows. Elisabeth herself rather liked the animals. She had spent many mornings feeding them and collecting the milk.

It wasn't long before she heard Aline calling her name, and shortly after that she heard her sister's footsteps running into the byre.

"Beth!" she called, so loud that Elisabeth could imagine her standing right under the hay loft. She kept very quiet until she heard Aline go away. That didn't take long, for she knew Aline wouldn't spend any more time looking for her than she had to.

As soon as she was sure Aline was gone, Elisabeth left the barn and walked briskly to the little creek that flowed behind her house. It was not much more than ten feet across, and she immediately began to follow it downstream, for she knew it would lead her to the river before too long. That was a good thing, for she had no wish to become lost in the woods on her way there.

Indeed it wasn't very long at all before the creek entered the edge of the forest and lost itself among the tall dark trees. Elisabeth had never been inside the forest before, for it was far too near the river for anyone's comfort, and there were the most horrifying stories told about what went on there.

One of these stories in particular was on Elisabeth's mind as she looked at the opening. Her Tante Cheri had told her, long ago, that there were ghouls that haunted the woods, hideous beasts wrapped in rotting grave clothes who waited with dripping mouths to kill and eat anyone who ventured into the darkness under the trees. Elisabeth had pretended not to be scared at the time, but now she couldn't help wondering if there might not really be something in there after all. The woods looked very dark and scary.

However, while she hesitated at the edge, she suddenly heard the very last thing she wanted to hear.

"Beth!" came Celeste's voice, somewhere not too far behind her. Elisabeth made up her mind quickly. Without even looking back to see how close Celeste might be, she took off running toward the woods as fast as she could go. She could move very quickly when she wanted to, and it was no more than a few seconds before she felt the trees close in around her. She didn't stop even then, but continued running along the creek bank until the edge of the woods was far behind her. Celeste would never follow her among the trees, of that she was certain. She hadn't forgotten about the ghouls, but she determined to go ahead anyway.

The creek gurgled and bubbled placidly along beside her while she walked, and after a few hours (during which she saw no ghouls at all), Elisabeth came abruptly to the

bank of the river. The creek flowed out past a little cottonwood tree and lost itself in the main current, so that she now had no path to follow.

There was a sort of beach at the place where she stood, of rocks and sand. The river was nothing special, as far as Elisabeth could tell. There was certainly nothing scary or unusual about it. Since she had come back out into the daylight, the whole idea of ghouls and magic had begun to seem rather silly again. She looked up and down the bank without seeing anything to give her a goal to move toward, so she sat down on the warm sand to think about it a while.

Elisabeth had often gone down to the creek to play in the sand or skip rocks on the water if she could find any good ones, and she began absentmindedly tossing pebbles into the river while she thought about what to do. The current must have been swift, for it snatched away the ripples almost as soon as they formed. She hadn't been doing this for very long when a huge silver fish came to the top of the water and looked at her.

"I do wish you would quit dropping rocks into my bedroom," the fish growled, in a bubbly, fishy sort of voice.

"I'm sorry. . . I didn't know you were there," Elisabeth said, too startled to think of anything else to say.

"What?! You didn't know that fishes live in the river?" the fish demanded, insulted.

"No. . . I mean yes, I did know that; I just never thought about it before," Elisabeth admitted.

"Humph," the fish grumbled, "Well, I forgive you just this once, since you're only a girl and couldn't possibly be expected to know any better, but it had best not happen ever again."

Now Elisabeth thought the fish was being very rude, and she stood up to tell him so, but just as she reached the edge of the water she twisted her ankle on a loose stone and fell down. It hurt fairly badly, and she began to rub it.

"Tsk, tsk. . . clumsy as well as stupid," the fish commented, watching her. Elisabeth lost her patience, for she disliked rude and insensitive people.

"You could at least ask if I was alright. I might have broken my ankle, you know," she told him disapprovingly.

"But you didn't, now did you?" he asked her cheerfully, as if that solved the whole matter. She was still trying to think how to reply to such a question when the fish went on without waiting for her answer.

“Still, you might have an idea. That could be a nasty bruise later on. I’d better get you something for it,” he said, almost to himself. Before she could reply, he disappeared under the water again.

The fish wasn’t actually gone very long, but Elisabeth did have time to stand up and put some weight on her ankle. The pain was too much to bear, and it forced her to sit down again. Before long the fish reappeared, holding a thin sliver of what looked like beaver wood in its mouth. He spit it out on the beach, then coughed up a bit of mucus and blew it into the water. Elisabeth looked at him with disgust.

“Well, are you going to pick up the stick, or what?” the fish asked her impatiently. Truthfully, Elisabeth would rather have had nothing else to do with the fish, but she decided that if he meant to help her she ought to be polite. She reached out and picked up the beaver stick. It was still slimy from the fish’s mouth and from whatever nasty place it had been taken from. She held it with distaste.

“Well, aren’t you going to use it?” the fish demanded.

“What’s it for, and how am I supposed to use it?” she asked, getting annoyed herself now.

“I would have thought even a little girl would know what to do with *that*,” the fish told her. She could almost imagine him rolling his eyes at her. . . if he had had any eyelids.

“But never mind. Touch the stick to your ankle,” he told her. Elisabeth did so, and instantly the pain disappeared. She stood up carefully to test it out, and to her surprise she found that her ankle was completely well again. She looked up at the fish.

“Thank you,” she told him, and meant it.

“Well. . . I couldn’t have a litterbug lolling around on my doorstep all day,” the fish muttered. Elisabeth was willing to tolerate his gruffness now, so she let it pass. She started to hand him back the stick.

“No, no. . . you keep it, missie. I don’t need it anymore,” he grumbled. Elisabeth slipped the stick into her pocket and fastened the button, and while she was thinking about what else to say to the fish, he suddenly disappeared back into the river, without so much as a flick of his tail to say goodbye.

“Well, Mr. Fish, I’ll certainly remember not to throw any more rocks into your bedroom,” she said to herself, looking at the spot where the fish had disappeared. A few bubbles were coming up from somewhere below, but she couldn’t tell if he heard her or not.

After a while, Elisabeth realized she couldn’t stand on the bank all day. She had to find some way to keep going. Upstream was a thicket of bamboo, which looked so

tangled and heavy that she doubted she could ever get through it. Behind her was the ghoulish forest, and she was still uneasy about going back in there. Ahead of her was the river, much too wide and strong to think of swimming.

“And so,” she said to herself, “that really leaves only one way left. Downstream it is.” In that direction the rocky beach went on for quite some time, and Elisabeth followed it. Now and then she had to stop and dump sand and pebbles out of her shoes, but otherwise the going was not too difficult.

Eventually, though, she came to a knot of wild thorn trees that completely blocked the way. Elisabeth was not anxious to go in among the thorn trees, because they were wickedly sharp. The river looked a bit shallower near the edge, and she decided after much thought to try wading in the shallows until she got past the thorn thicket. Then maybe she could continue on her way.

She took off her shoes and held them so they wouldn't get wet, and then gingerly stepped into the water. It was warm as summer, not freezing cold as she had half expected it would be. The bottom seemed to be mostly gravel in that place, which made it easy to keep her footing.

Not quite easy enough, though. She had made it most of the way around the thorn thicket when she lost her balance and fell into the deep water with a huge splash. The current snatched her at once, and almost before she knew what was happening it had carried her far from the shore. She lost her shoes and tried her best to swim toward the bank, but the swirling river was too strong, and she was getting farther away from land every second.

Elisabeth began to get frightened, and that is always a very bad thing to do when one is swimming. But before she could get really terrified, she felt her feet drag the bottom for just a second, and she turned her head to see an island right behind her.

Elisabeth wasted no time forgetting about the distant shore. She could reach the island, and that was all she cared about. She grabbed a muddy root that hung out into the water and hung on for dear life. The current tried to tear her away, but gradually she was able to pull herself along the root until she reached the shore. She climbed up out of the water, soaking wet and shivering in the light breeze.

The island wasn't very big. In fact, it was barely more than a sand bar with a few tough bushes growing on it. Elisabeth looked out across the river and immediately gave up all hope of swimming back to the bank she'd just come from. It was much too far, and the river was too swift.

She crossed the island and found that it wasn't nearly so far to the bank on that side. Only about a hundred feet of sluggish backwater separated the island from solid

ground. But that way was choked with fallen logs and brush that didn't look appealing at all. Elisabeth knew she couldn't stay on the island forever, but how was she to get off?

She was staring at the log jam, wondering if she might possibly risk walking across it, when she got a nasty surprise.

"Hello, miss. Can I help you?" a cheerful voice asked her. Elisabeth was startled, and looked down at her feet to see an alligator floating in the water. He was much too close to her feet for comfort, and Elisabeth stepped back hastily. The alligator giggled. Not a deep laugh like you might have expected, but a high-pitched giggle that reminded Elisabeth of her sisters in one of their silliest moods.

"Surely you're not afraid, are you?" it asked her, and giggled again.

"Um. . . just a little bit," Elisabeth admitted, for she was a very truthful girl. The alligator stopped giggling to itself and looked at her for a long time.

"Hmm. . . . no, I don't think you'd make more than a mouthful, so you need not be afraid," it told her. Elisabeth didn't like that answer much, but she thought it was best not to argue. The alligator might change its mind.

"I need to get across the river," she told him, changing the subject.

"I'd be glad to give you a lift over the water," the alligator said brightly, with a toothy smile that didn't do anything at all to make Elisabeth feel better. While she hesitated, the alligator went on without waiting for an answer.

"What are you doing here by the river, anyway? We don't often get human beings down this way," he said.

"An army of barbarians has invaded my village, and they want a mountain of gold or they'll destroy everything. So I came here to find it," she told him.

"Hmm. . . well now that's not very nice of them, is it? No, not nice at all," the gator giggled.

"It's not really very funny," Elisabeth scolded him.

"Ah, no, no, I suppose it isn't," the gator agreed, still smirking. Elisabeth was about to decide the alligator was just as annoying as the fish had been, if that was possible. But the fish had helped her, and maybe the alligator could help her too.

"Do you know where I could find any gold?" she asked him hopefully.

"Ah, gold! No, there's no gold anywhere near the river. We have no use for that sort of thing," he declared. Elisabeth was crushed, for it seemed that her trip to the river was a huge waste of time after all, and tears began to fall from her eyes into the water.

"Ah, missie, you mustn't cry now," the alligator told her hastily. Elisabeth lost her patience.

“The barbarians will destroy my village if they don’t get that gold. Why shouldn’t I cry about that?” she demanded hotly. The gator seemed taken aback for a moment, but he soon regained his composure. He giggled again, which irritated Elisabeth to no end.

“Well now, I might be able to tell you something useful about that, I might. I just might,” he said, smiling mysteriously. He was obviously enjoying himself very much. Elisabeth stopped crying and waited for him to tell her what it was, but he didn’t say a word.

“What was it you could tell me?” she finally asked, when the silence had stretched out for a minute or more.

“I thought you’d never ask!” the gator exclaimed, with another attack of giggles.

“It’s true there’s no gold in this place, but there’s something much better,” he whispered. Elisabeth was interested now and leaned close to hear better.

“What is it?” she asked.

“On the far bank of the river, a little downstream, there’s a ruined stone tower. And in a room at the top of that tower there lives a huge snowy owl. And if you bring him something he likes well enough, he can grant you a wish. Anything you want. Even a mountain of gold,” the gator informed her. Elisabeth was overjoyed at that news, and her face lit up. The gator saw it.

“Ah, not so fast, missie! If you go to the owl emptyhanded, or if you bring him something he doesn’t like, then he’ll eat you for supper instead of giving you a wish,” the alligator warned her. That did put a crimp in things, Elisabeth had to admit. She wasn’t ready to give up yet, though.

“What does the owl like?” she asked.

“No one has ever figured that out. Only one man ever came back out of the tower alive, and he isn’t talking,” the gator told her, nodding mysteriously again.

“Where can I find that man? Why won’t he talk to anybody?” she demanded.

“Because, when he came out from visiting the owl he tried to cross the river, and I ate him up,” the gator told her with another one of those toothy smiles. Elisabeth stepped back from the shore in sudden alarm. The gator slipped into another attack of giggles, so much so that he choked on a mouthful of water and had to cough.

“Just pulling your leg, missie,” he told her, when he was able to contain himself.

“That wasn’t funny,” she scowled.

“Ah, but it was! But truly, I’ll be glad to give you a ride across the water on my back, if you like,” he offered again.

Elisabeth honestly didn't like that idea at all, but she couldn't think of any other way to get off the island. She had to get to the owl. As soon as she figured out what would keep him from eating her for supper, that was. So she gathered her courage and climbed on the alligator's back. He faithfully carried her across the river as he said he would, and deposited her on the shore. She was glad to be on solid ground again.

"Just follow the river downstream, and you'll come to the tower before long!" he called out as he swam away, and giggled again. Elisabeth watched him until he disappeared, and then set off down the bank. Walking barefoot slowed her down considerably, and she wished she hadn't lost her shoes.

Even so, it wasn't very long before she saw a black stone tower rising above the trees near the bank, just as the alligator had said she would. There she stopped, because she had no idea what the owl might like. What could she give him that he didn't already have?

It was also still daylight, and she remembered that owls liked to sleep during the day. She certainly didn't want to annoy him by waking him up early. So in the meantime she sat down on a dead log to wait.

By the time it started to get dark she still hadn't thought of any good answer to the question of what to give the owl, and she was afraid he would soon leave the tower to go hunting for the night. Elisabeth knew there wasn't time to wait and think about it any longer. The barbarians would destroy Brumbling at sunrise if they didn't have the gold by then.

She therefore decided to go in and speak to the owl boldly, and try to make a deal with him. She hadn't forgotten what the alligator said about being eaten for supper, but that was a risk she decided she'd just have to take.

She approached the tower slowly, not eager at all to face the owl any sooner than she had to. There was a door in the base of the tower which seemed to be the only way in, and at first she was afraid it would be locked. But when she touched it, she soon discovered that it was made of wood so rotten that she could pull it apart with her bare hands. She tore down enough of the door to squeeze through, and found herself in an open room that took up the entire bottom floor of the tower. There was a stone staircase that circled the outer wall and led up through the ceiling, and she knew that had to be where the owl lived. She took a deep breath to calm her fear and then very resolutely climbed up to meet him.

There were three floors to the tower, and when she reached the top one, Elisabeth found the owl. He was sitting on a nest made of branches and straw, looking out into the gathering dusk through a big ragged hole in the stone wall. He was white as snow, and

he had to have been at least the size of a horse. His eyes were big as dinner plates, and his beak looked sharper than a knife, with a cruel hook on the end. He must have heard her coming up the stairs, for he turned to look at her when she came in.

“Why have you come here?” he asked, getting right to the point. For a moment Elisabeth was too terrified to speak, but at last she found her voice.

“Sir Owl, I’m sorry to disturb you. But an army has attacked my village, and they will destroy it this very sunrise unless we give them a mountain of gold. I came here because I was told that you could do this, if I wished it,” she said, in a voice that she hoped sounded braver than she felt. The owl studied her with its dinner-plate eyes for a while.

“Not many are brave enough to come here and ask, but yes, I could do that. But surely you know the price. What have you brought me?” he said at last. This was the moment Elisabeth had been dreading.

“Sir Owl, I had no idea what you might wish for, but if there’s anything I have or can get for you, I will do it,” she told him. The owl looked impatient.

“Now don’t tell me you’re one of *those* kind,” he said in disgust. Then he seemed to think better of it.

“As a matter of fact there *is* something I want, but you could never get it for me. It lies at the bottom of the river, and the current is very deep and strong. Since you came here for someone else’s sake and not for greed, I’ll let you go without eating you tonight, but don’t bother me again,” the owl told her, and then turned as if to go. Elisabeth couldn’t let her only chance slip away.

“Sir Owl, what is this thing you want? I promise I’ll find a way to get it for you!” she cried. The owl looked back at her in annoyance.

“Still here? I thought I told you to go away before I eat you,” he growled.

“I have to know what will save my village,” she told him, not backing down.

“You’re a plucky one,” he commented, half to himself. “Alright, then, girl. If you’re so sure of yourself then I’ll tell you what I want, and if you can bring it here before the night is over then I’ll grant your wish. But if not, then I’ll find you and eat you for breakfast, no matter where you may try to hide. Will you make that deal?” he demanded.

“Yes sir,” she told him without hesitation. He looked amazed, but he didn’t try to talk her out of it anymore. He simply began to tell her what she needed to know.

“Long ago, I had a magical piece of wood that kept me young and strong at all times, and it could heal any sickness or injury there was. But as I flew across the river one night, another owl attacked me by surprise. He thought he could kill me and take my

tower and my magic. How the feathers flew in the moonlight! I ate him for supper that night. But during the fight I dropped my stick in the river, and without it I'll soon grow old and weak, and then another owl will take my place after all. But no one can dredge it up from the bottom of the river, even if it hasn't been washed down to the sea. You won't be able to do it either, but maybe you'll taste better than a deer or a goat in the morning," the owl said.

Elisabeth shivered, but she reached in the pocket of her dress, thankful indeed for the button that held it shut.

"Is this what you want, Sir Owl?" she asked, pulling out the stick she'd gotten from the fish. The owl gasped when he saw it, which sounded very strange.

"Where did you find that? Give it to me at once!" he cried. Elisabeth held out the stick so the owl could grasp it in one of his razor-sharp talons. He snatched it from her as fast as he could get close enough, as if afraid she might change her mind. When he managed to contain his pleasure, he looked at her again.

"Well! You lived up to your end of the bargain, so now I must live up to mine. You get just one wish, missie, so take care! Use it wisely," he told her.

"Then I wish for a mountain of—" she began, but the owl interrupted her.

"I'll offer you a bit of advice, missie, and if you're wise then you'll take it. Don't ask for that mountain of gold, because if you do then who's to say the barbarians will keep their word? They may take the gold and destroy the village anyway. And even if they don't, then another enemy may appear someday, or another disaster may come. Think of more than just today," he urged her. Elisabeth saw that this was good advice, but it left her wondering what she should ask for.

"What should I wish for then?" she finally asked the owl.

"Hoo. . . no one has ever asked me that before," he told her, seeming surprised.

"But I need to know," she insisted.

"Then ask for wisdom, missie. Because wisdom is the chief thing, and if you have that, then everything else will fall into place," he told her. It seemed just like the sort of thing an owl would say.

"Then I wish to be the wisest person in the world," she said. The owl couldn't smile with his beak, but Elisabeth was certain she could hear it in his voice when he spoke.

"Your wish is granted. And because you trusted me and asked for the best thing of all, I will destroy your enemies myself," he told her.

And it was so. Elisabeth made her way back to Brumbling with no further adventures the next day, and she found that all the barbarians had been destroyed or driven away during the night, just as the owl had promised her.

No one thought to ask where Elisabeth had been. No one except Celeste, that is, who had seen her go into the forest. But when Celeste pressed her to know what she had seen and done, Elisabeth would only smile and say nothing.

Thus it was that no one in Brumbling ever knew that Elisabeth had saved them from the barbarians at the risk of her life, and she was content to have it so. But in later years, her wisdom was such that the people often came to her for help with their most difficult problems, and they were often amazed at the words that came from her mouth.

In time, her fame spread even to other villages, so that there were always visitors at the little cottage who wished to speak with her. Many of the visitors were wealthy and important people, and left rich gifts at her feet. And at last she was held in such awe by the people of many lands that no one would have dreamed of attacking Brumbling ever again. Thus it happened even as the owl had told her it would; by asking for wisdom, she had received wealth and honor and power as well, without even needing to ask.

And Elisabeth lived a long and happy life in blessedness.