

The Quest of the Rainbow Dragons: Part IV

Installment thirteen: Green: Grow by exploring what is right and true in life.
We affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning..

Our story thus far... An ordinary kitchen boy name Jared has become the somewhat unlikely hero foreseen in an ancient prophecy entitled The Quest of the Rainbow Dragons. Along with his best friend, Delia, and a funny, furry little guide named Lou, he has traveled far and wide, and met the red dragon, Krasnova, the amber dragon, Yantarov, and the yellow dragon, Zheltizna. Now the three of them are on their way to the Ring of Fire...a mountain range of active volcanoes, where Zelyonov, the green dragon, dwells.

Continued...

Their voyage to and from the remote island that marked the entrance to the underwater passageway to Atlantis had been long, and, on the way back, quite stormy. Delia and Jared alternated between feeling nauseous, feeling terrified, feeling terrified AND nauseous, and throwing up over the ship's railing.

As a result, they elected to rest for a few days before heading out on the next part of their journey. They stayed at an inn run by yet another of Lou's many friends.

One night, after the dinner dishes had been cleared away, the innkeeper came over and sat down at the table near the fire where Lou was pointing at a large map, explaining the route to the Ring of Fire to Jared and Delia.

"Oy," he said, when he saw where they were headed, "you're heading across the desert! Barren, rough place, it is. Best bet's to find a caravan."

"See, on the other side of the desert, you'll meet up with the tribes. They're rough, wild folk, them. Keep the girl's face and hair covered up. In fact, you might want to disguise her as a boy. Sometimes they like to steal young girls and force 'em into marriage out there. I've got a buddy who runs a caravan. You want me to see when he heads out next?"

Delia and Jared looked expectantly at Lou. "No, thanks," he said nonchalantly. "I've got friends in the desert."

The innkeeper laughed heartily, "You are a funny one. Well, if you change your mind..."

"I won't," said Lou more firmly. "but thank you for your concern."

The innkeeper scraped his chair back and headed off to his rooms. Jared immediately turned to Lou, "Lou, shouldn't we take his advice? I mean, surely, he knows the area

better than we do. I think it'd be fun to travel with a caravan! Sleep in tents, ride on camels..."

Lou shook his head. "Nope. Camels are extremely cranky beasts, and they smell bad, too." (This was quite a statement, coming, as it did, from a creature who occasionally smelled as if he'd been rolling in dead fish.)

"Wouldn't it be safer to be a part of a crowd? The camels carry extra supplies and water, and it does look like an awfully long trip to get across," asked Delia.

Again, Lou just shook his head. "Nope. We'll do fine."

"Oh, I know we will," said Jared. "But maybe it'd be more comfortable..."

Lou snorted, disgusted. "You two. Don't you trust me? Trust my judgment? Have I led you astray once?"

"No," said Jared, "But even you admit that a lot of this is guess work. And...I hesitate to mention it...but you have a habit of disappearing just as we get to the dangerous parts."

Lou looked Jared in the eye, and for a moment, trapped by his gaze, Jared was reminded of the eyes of the giant sea turtle that had carried them to Atlantis. He shook his head to clear his thoughts, and waited for Lou to answer.

"Jared, Delia," said Lou wearily, "You're right. We'd be a lot more comfortable traveling with a caravan. But the two of you have things to learn about the desert, things you'll only learn if you head out into it without all the comforts that a caravan provides. By the time we get to the Ring of Fire, you'll understand the soul of the desert, and that understanding is worth a little discomfort. Now, get some sleep. We leave in the morning."

The next day, wearing flowing white robes and headscarves, they headed out into the desert. Delia and Jared were somewhat surprised when, after just a few hours of walking, Lou stopped and began to set up camp in the shelter of a rocky outcropping.

"Shouldn't we keep moving?" asked Jared anxiously.

"No. First lesson of desert travel. Move in the morning and the evening. Rest during the middle of the day—in the shade if you can find any. Here, have an apricot."

So the three of them sat, sometimes chatting quietly, sometimes even dozing a little. As the sun sank down closer to the distant mountain peaks, Lou climbed to the top of the rocky outcropping and scanned the horizon. "Jared? Delia? Come here for a minute. I want to show you something."

The two children clambered to the top of the stone and looked where Al was pointing. A few miles away, they could see a spot where the smoothness of the sand was disturbed by a darker, rougher place. “See that spot, there? Looks a little different than the rest of the sand around it? That’s plants. We’ll be able to find water there, though we might have to dig for it.”

They took a reading with Jared’s compass, and headed off toward the place they had spotted.

“See,” began Lou as they walked, “people think the desert’s just a bunch of sand. But there’s life out here, same as anywhere. Some of it waits for water. You should see those hills after the spring rains. Covered with wildflowers, in every color of the rainbow! The seeds just wait, sometimes for years and years, for the water to come, and then they put down roots, sprout up toward the sun, bloom, distribute a new generation of seeds, and then die, all in the space of a few days. Then the new seeds wait until the whole thing happens all over again, years later. Amazing!”

Delia and Jared mumbled their agreement, pretty focused on finding their footing in the shifting, slippery sand.

“There are birds here, and lizards, and scorpions. Snakes, jackrabbits, probably even a coyote or two. Fact is, deserts have plenty of plants and animals, all of them designed to do okay in spite of the high temperatures, the lack of water, the scarce food. People can do okay in the desert, too. We just have to pay close attention to our surroundings, and adapt our ways of doing things so that we stay relatively cool and rested, and have enough to eat and drink.”

“Whatever you say, Lou,” said Jared.

Delia, meanwhile, had heard the word “snakes” and suddenly got even more careful about where she put her feet.

The setting sun turned the sand a rich, reddish gold color. When the sun sank below the mountains, it didn’t get dark right away. Now the sand looked bluish, almost lavender. Darker patches turned out to be low bushes and cacti.

Lou seemed to be looking for something in particular. Finally, he stopped, and took off his pack, removing a little shovel.

“See, there, where those little green plants are growing? There’s water underneath. You can tell, because in other places, the same plants are already brown. So...let’s get digging.” He stuck his shovel into the ground, carefully avoiding the little plants. Jared and Delia stood watching, feeling awkward.

“We didn’t bring shovels,” said Jared.

“What are hands for, then?” said Lou. “Dig over there, on the other side, so you don’t get in my way.”

Lou hit water first, about two feet down. Delia and Jared kept digging until they, too, felt the telltale cool seep of liquid on their fingertips. They kept digging until several inches of water pooled at the bottom. “Leave it, now. Let the sand settle,” said Lou. So they did.

After they’d eaten, they refilled their water bottles and drank their fill. Then they lay down to sleep. It seemed they’d hardly closed their eyes when Lou was shaking them awake. They drank again, refilled their water bottles, and carefully filled in the holes they had dug.

Soon, the pattern became familiar to them. Wake up before dawn, walk until the heat of the day, rest for a time in shade, then climb up to scout ahead for their next stopping point. Lou found edible roots, melon-like fruit, and some tasty seeds to supplement their stores. He even caught rabbits in snares over night a few times so that they could have stew for breakfast.

On their last night in the desert, they lay down next to each other, and looked up at the stars.

“I didn’t know there were so many!” said Jared.

“What? You’ve never looked up before?” asked Lou.

“Of course I’ve looked up,” laughed Jared, “but usually there are clouds in the sky. And even when it’s clear, I don’t remember there being this many stars.”

“There are no other lights out here to distract us,” said Lou. “Our eyes are more used to the darkness, so we can see even the little stars, and the ones far away.”

“Tell me, Lou, what are stars? Are they pinpricks in the sky, with a bright light behind them?” asked Delia.

“Oh, no,” laughed Lou. “Every one of those stars is like the sun. Some of them even shine down on other planets the way our Sun shines on us. Only the stars are so far away they look tiny to our eyes. Fact is, most of them are bigger than our sun.”

“Really?” asked Delia, surprised. “They must be REALLY far away then.”

“Yes,” answered Lou, “they are. This planet that we’re on is only one tiny planet out of many. There are as many stars as there are grains of sand in this desert.”

“Lou,” asked Delia, “If all of the stars are like suns, and some of the suns have planets, and if this is only one tiny planet out of many, does it really matter what happens here?”

Lou looked at her solemnly and said, “Oh, yes, Delia. Every single grain of sand on every single planet matters. Don’t you ever doubt it.”

The next morning, they walked the last little bit, and found themselves in the foothills at the base of the Ring of Fire. They stopped, as usual, at midday, and Lou said, “Oh, good. The tribe’s nearby.” He climbed down from the scraggly tree he had used as his scouting point, put his hands to his mouth and called out a greeting in a language neither of the children recognized. Soon, they heard the thundering of hoof beats, and six horses, bearing six blue-robed, dark eyed people, rushed up the hill to meet them.

Hearts pounding, Delia and Jared waited while Lou spoke to the fierce looking riders. Then, with an abrupt motion, Lou jumped up behind one of the riders, who immediately took off. He yelled over his shoulder, “See you at the camp!” and didn’t see the way the riders took away Jared’s practice sword, or the way they removed the cloth covering Delia’s long, curly hair.

Dragon Task: Look at something very carefully—either something big, like a star, or something small, like a plant.