

The Quest of the Rainbow Dragons: Part VI

Installment 21: Indigo: Freedom, Justice and Peace for all people.

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Our story thus far...

Two ordinary children, Jared and Delia, guided by a funny looking magical creature named Lou, have successfully completed five of seven tasks described in an ancient prophecy: The Quest of the Rainbow Dragons. The prophecy indicates that if they are able to complete the last two tasks, the rainbow dragons will fly, raining peace and prosperity on all the land.

Continued...

After their meeting with the blue dragon, Golubnaya, Jared and Delia returned with Lou to the castle of Lord Sigismund. “Lord Sigismund will be able to tell us what we need to know to find Lazyurov, the indigo dragon. I don’t follow politics closely enough, myself,” Lou had said. The children were exhausted, and welcomed the opportunity to visit their friends at the castle.

They arrived in the middle of a sunny afternoon. Dusty, sweaty and travel weary, they wanted to sneak into the castle without causing a ruckus. Unfortunately, it didn’t work out that way.

The minute they walked through the gate, the word began to spread among all the inhabitants of the castle, from the youngest stable-boy to Lord Sigismund himself. EVERYONE wanted to come and greet the returned adventurers, and to hear all about what had happened in the time they’d been gone. They were mobbed!

It was Lady Marita, the beautiful sorceress, who saw how tired the children and their furry little guide looked. She whispered something into Lord Sigismund’s ear, and he clapped his hands and announced loudly, “QUIET! We need to let Jared and Delia and Lou wash up and rest a bit. If they feel up to it, perhaps they can tell the story to everyone, in the main hall after dinner. Then, they need only go through it once.”

“Thank you,” said Jared gratefully, and Delia nodded in agreement. It felt wonderful to be back home, even though they knew it was only for a brief time. To be back in familiar surroundings, to have access to the baths and to their comfortable beds...it felt like heaven. As they headed into dinner (after a lovely rest), Jared said to Delia, “I don’t think I appreciated this place and all its amenities back when we lived here. After being on the road, I am so grateful for things like the bath and my bed and doors with locks and roofs that don’t leak...”

“Not to mention our friends and families,” said Delia, whose parents had sat in her chamber, quietly, just watching her sleep. Jared could see them now, just a few steps away, watching Delia with love in their eyes, and pride, too. It made him miss his own parents, who lived on a farm an hour’s ride from the castle.

The very moment the thought formed in his mind, he saw them! Some kind person had sent for his parents while he slept, and there they were, across the hall, a little windswept, but with huge grins on their faces. He ran across to them and they enfolded him in big, rough hugs.

Everyone ate quickly, looking forward to the story that Jared, Delia and Lou would tell. When the food had been cleared away, Lord Sigismund looked questioningly at Jared, who turned to Lou with a question in his eyes. Having just been reunited with his parents, Jared very much wanted to stay with them. The prospect of speaking aloud to a huge hall full of people made him feel just a little queasy.

As if he could read Jared’s mind, Lou pushed away from the table and stepped into the middle of the hall. Clearing his throat, he began the tale:

“As you know, we left this place several months ago on a quest...a quest to bring peace and prosperity to the land...” Lou was a masterful storyteller, and even Jared, who had lived through it all, found himself enthralled, listening carefully so as not to miss a single word.

Lou described their trip to the forest, their encounter with the reptilian forest guardians, and the way they had befriended the red dragon, Krasnova. Then he told of Jared’s meeting with Yantarov, the amber dragon, in the land of dreams. “Jared faced the mirror of justice, and did not like what he saw. The Amber dragon let him live, but withheld his blessing for the time being.”

Lou described the trip to Alexandria, where they met the young librarian’s assistant, Polly. Polly had accompanied them to the great library of Atlantis, and had stayed to help the yellow dragon, Zheltizna, search for clues on how people could accept one another and all of the different opinions people have about the great mysteries in life.

Next, he told of the trip to the center of the volcano, where they met the green dragon, Zolotov, and restored his eyesight with some lichen scraped from the walls of the underground passageway that had taken them to Atlantis. He praised Jared and Delia’s bravery and caring.

Finally, he described their difficult and strange journey along the magical Road of Good Intentions, a place that existed solely in the mind of the blue dragon, Golubnaya. He did not go into great detail, but instead described how Jared and Delia had freed the dragon from a prison of her own making...and the way her brother, the amber dragon Yantarov, had been so pleased with what he had witnessed that he, too, had agreed to follow where Jared and Delia led.

“Now, we prepare to confront Lazyurov, the indigo dragon, who prowls along the edges of the earth’s fiercest battles, striking terror into the hearts of the soldiers and their generals, hoping, vainly, to keep them from fighting. We near the end of the quest, with only two tasks left to complete, but they are the most dangerous and the most difficult of all.”

As Lou brought the story to a close, everyone started talking at once. “What does he mean, they’ve got two tasks left to complete? I thought they were finished!” “Can you believe that two children were able to keep their heads about them that way?” “I’m surprised that they survived, never mind that they completed their tasks.”

Jared’s parents had gone pale. “You...you’re not done yet?” asked his Pop.

“No,” said Jared quietly. “We’re just here for a break and to get some information from Lord Sigismund.”

“The next tasks are the most dangerous? And difficult?” asked his Dad.

“I guess so. Lou knows better than I.”

“What would happen,” his Pop said tremulously, “if we asked you not to continue? If we kept you safe at home?”

“I guess the whole quest would fail,” said Jared.

“And... if I don’t care about the quest as much as I care about my son being safe and whole?” he continued.

“Pop, I’ve got to do it. I’m the chosen one.”

“I know,” his Pop sighed. “But you’re my son. I hate the thought of you putting yourself in harm’s way, no matter how good the cause. Couldn’t someone else go?”

“I don’t know why the pearl of wisdom chose me, but I do know that, having been chosen, I have to do my best to complete the quest, even if it means risking my life.”

Watching the tears well up in his Pop’s eyes, Jared felt terribly guilty. He didn’t know what else to say. Then he felt Lou coming up to stand next to him. “Sir,” the furry little guide began, “I’m looking out for him as best I can, and your son...well, he’s a fine brave boy, growing into an unusually wise young man.”

“I know, I know,” said Jared’s Pop. “But he’s still my baby, you see?”

“I do,” said Lou. “He’s lucky to be loved this way. Fact is, the love you have for him is part of what’s given him the courage to do what needs to be done.”

“He’s got to see it through,” chimed in Jared’s Dad. “But please, keep him safe for us?”

“I’ll do my best,” said Lou. “With a little luck, the next time we come home, it will be for good. Now...Jared, you need to get to sleep. We leave first thing tomorrow morning.”

Saying goodbye the next morning to their families and friends was, Jared and Delia agreed, the hardest thing they’d done so far. All day, they felt a little sad and lonely as they walked.

At dinner that night, Lou was uncharacteristically quiet, as well. After they’d eaten, as they sat near the fire, he spoke at last. “It’s not easy, sending your child off into the world to do good. I respect your parents tremendously, and I can see how much it hurts them to let you go.”

“Yes, it’s hard,” said Jared quietly. Delia started to cry again.

“Almost every parent feels that way about their children,” Lou continued. “That’s why war is such a destructive thing. Even if you believe your child is fighting for the right reasons, it’s hard to watch them put themselves into danger.”

“Lou,” said Jared, “You said back at the castle that these last two quests are the most dangerous ones yet. Why is that?”

“Well,” answered Lou grimly, “Because of where they are going to take you. Lazyurov lives at the edge of the battlefield. He isn’t particularly dangerous, himself, but anytime you’re close to the fighting, you’re in danger of getting hurt, either by accident, or because someone mistakes you for a soldier. If I read the prophecy correctly, you’ll visit battlegrounds with him, and he will show you both sides of every conflict. Though I think he will try to keep you safe, I guess I don’t completely trust his ability to protect you under those circumstances.”

“Bagranka, the violet dragon, is wild and somewhat unpredictable. She, too, is known to prowl around many dark and dangerous places. In her case, I don’t think she will even try to shelter you from the harsher aspects of life. She doesn’t dwell near humans at all, but keeps to the places that are untouched and unchanged. The places she will take you are untamed, the way she is.”

“Lou, why can’t you come with us, to protect us?” asked Delia, who felt very small and sad that night.

“Oh, child, I wish I could. Just as your parents would if they could-- but it’s the two of you who have to do this thing. So we, your parents and I, will wait, and hope, and love you no matter what. It’s all we can do.”

“All right, then,” said Lou, after a long pause, “Let’s get some sleep.” Troubled, but determined to do the right thing, Delia and Jared settled in and spent a restless night.

Dragon Task: Look up Julia Ward Howe’s “Mother’s Day Proclamation” either online or in the gray hymnal (#573) and talk about the origins of mother’s day.

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Our story thus far...

Jared and Delia, two ordinary children, have set out on an extraordinary quest. Following the directions of an ancient prophecy, and guided by a small, furry creature named 'Lou,' they have successfully met and befriended five of the seven Rainbow Dragons. They are now in search of the sixth dragon, Lazyurov, the Indigo Dragon, who prowls the edge of the world's battlefields.

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A few days later, they noticed a dramatic change in their surroundings. For most of their journey, they'd walked through lush forest, ploughed fields with the first few sprouts of green, or busy villages. Now, all around they saw bare earth, smoldering ruins, and ragged camps of hungry and miserable looking people who begged them for food. Lou had sometime acquired a back pack that seemed endlessly full of bread and apples, which he handed out freely.

When they were near enough to the camped armies to hear the clanking of swords and the shouts and swears of fighting men, Lou stopped and turned to the children. "Of all the dragons you'll meet on your quest, the dragon you meet next, Lazyurov, the Indigo dragon, is one of the hardest working and, perhaps, the nearest and dearest to my heart. What you see around you, the devastation and the misery, those are the fruits of war."

"People go to battle, filled with thoughts of revenge, or dreaming of power, wealth, or spoils. What they find, what they create, is a wasteland, filled with pain and suffering. Lazyurov tries, one person at a time, to convince people to find a different way. It's not an easy task, though. You humans, when you're scared or angry, seem to revert to being creatures of instinct, with only two options: fight or flight."

At that very moment, a rushing of wind and a burst of flame announced the arrival of the Indigo dragon, himself. "Oh, darn it!" said Lou, "I forget how fast he is!" With that, he pulled his vanishing trick again.

The children were left to face the large, mighty dragon on their own. By now, though, their fear of dragons had evaporated, and they simply waited patiently for Lazyurov to settle down.

"WELL," he finally boomed, "I HEARD MY NAME ON THE WIND. WHO COMES IN SEARCH OF THE INDIGO DRAGON?"

"Hi," said Jared calmly. "I'm Jared, and this is my best friend Delia. We're on a quest to meet and befriend all seven of the rainbow dragons. You're next on our list."

“YOU HAVE SEEN MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS?”

“All but you and Bagranka, the Violet dragon.”

“SHOW ME THE TOKENS!” Lazyurov boomed.

Jared pulled them out of his bag. The ruby heart from Krasnova, the amber medallion from Yantarov, the lichen covered stone they’d found on their way to Atlantis, which had restored the Green Dragon’s vision, and the single, tear-drop shaped blue sapphire that had been Golubnaya’s gift to them.

“YOU NEED NOT FEAR. I WILL ADD MY OWN IN THE MORNING. BUT FIRST...”

“First,” interrupted Delia, “we need to accompany you and aid you in your work. Jared’s memorized the prophecy, and so we know what we’re in for. We’re ready.”

Lazyurov nodded, and said, “CLIMB ON MY BACK.”

They did as he asked, using his bent foreleg as a step stool, and settling themselves between the ridges along his spine. “HANG ON TIGHT!” he warned, just before launching himself into the air with tremendous speed.

The sky was clear and the moon full, and below them they could see the countryside clearly, dotted with campfires and dark shapes they knew must be tents.

“BELOW YOU IS THE ARMY OF LORD STEPHEN. HE IS TRYING TO ASSERT HIS CLAIM TO THESE LANDS OVER THAT OF HIS COUSIN, LORD RICHARD. LORD STEPHEN WAS LOST AND THOUGHT DEAD, AND SO JOHN TOOK OVER. WHEN STEPHEN RETURNED, RICHARD HAD BECOME USED TO THE PRIVILEGES AND THE POWER HE GAINED AS LORD OF THESE PARTS. HE CLAIMS THAT STEPHEN IS AN IMPOSTER. STEPHEN WANTS TO RECLAIM WHAT HE SEES AS RIGHTFULLY HIS. IN THEIR GREED, THEY HAVE LAID WASTE TO THE LAND THEY SEEK TO CLAIM. NOW, THEY ARE FIGHTING OVER NEXT TO NOTHING, BUT NEITHER WILL ADMIT DEFEAT.”

The dragon circled down and landed a little ways from one of the camps. “I MUST NOT SHOW MYSELF, FOR IN THEIR FEAR, THEY WOULD SHOOT FIRST, NOT KNOWING THAT I SEEK ONLY TO GIVE THEM PEACE OF MIND. YOU MUST ENTER THE CAMP. I WILL AWAIT YOU HERE.”

“But Lazyurov, won’t they shoot us, too?” Delia asked, her voice trembling.

“IF THEY DO, I CAN MAKE THE ARROWS GO ASTRAY. HOWEVER, I HOPE THEY WILL NOT STOOP TO MURDERING CHILDREN. IF THEY ASK, TELL THEM YOU SUPPORT LORD STEPHEN.”

“Okay,” said Delia. She reached out to Jared and took his hand. Together, they walked slowly toward the camp. Soon, they saw a soldier keeping watch. Moving slowly, their hands above their head, Delia and Jared stepped into a patch of moonlight and called out, “Hello?”

“Who goes there?” The night watchman bellowed.

“My name is Jared, and this is my friend Delia. We’re both twelve. We support Lord Stephen. We’re looking,” Jared thought quickly, “for my father. My mother has gotten sick, and we are hoping he can come home to help us care for her.”

The guard motioned to them to approach, and checked to make sure they had no weapons hidden. Finally, his suspicions allayed, he asked them, “Who is your father? Perhaps I can tell you where he is to be found.”

“His name is John,” lied Jared, picking the most common name he could think of. He’s got brown hair and a brown tunic.”

“You’ve just described about half the men here!” said the guard, a little cranky.

“I know,” thought Jared, suppressing a crafty smile. Out loud, he said simply, “You have work to do. May we walk around and look for him?”

“I suppose,” said the guard. “Watch your step, though.”

Jared and Delia headed straight for the biggest bonfire. In its flickering light, they saw men playing dice, and others chatting quietly. Mindful of their quest, they approached a young man who was sitting alone, staring moodily into the fire.

“Hello,” Jared began. “I’m Jared, and this is my friend Delia. Can you tell us, how goes the fighting these days?”

“It goes on and on,” said the young man with a weary smile. “I begin to wonder if it wouldn’t have been better for the true lord to have remained abroad, as a humble shepherd. I am Stephen,” and he extended his hand for them to shake.

“My lord!” gasped Delia, as both she and Jared bowed down respectfully and began to back away.

“No, stay,” said Stephen. “I do not deserve your respect and homage. Please, good children, stay near. I could use some company.”

Jared and Delia lowered themselves to the ground near the man. Some of Lou's magic or the Dragon's must have rubbed off on them, for as soon as they were sitting, Lord Stephen began to speak.

"You know, all those months, when I couldn't remember who I was, I was haunted by visions of green, rolling hills, a beautiful palace with children and...chickens...I know it sounds silly, but there were always chickens running around the courtyard. As soon as my memory returned, I came straight home, expecting my cousin to welcome me with open arms. We were friends, you see, friends turned into the most bitter enemies, now." He snorted with disgust.

"We've had the beautiful castle under siege for so long that all the chickens have been killed and eaten. The green rolling hills I remember are black and smoking. My dreams are haunted by visions of death and destruction, and my waking hours are more of the same. I want it to end, I tell you. But how? What would I possibly say to the people here, people who have sacrificed so much for my cause, for my sake?"

Delia nodded sympathetically. Jared simply listened, wide eyed.

"I wish I could simply sit down with my cousin, like in the old days, and we could agree to work together. Surely, we could find a way. We will need all the care and leadership we can muster if there is to be any hope of restoring beauty and wealth to these lands."

"Have you tried contacting your cousin, inviting him to talk?"

"Of course," said Stephen tiredly. "My messenger was shot on sight, his message destroyed. I couldn't send anyone else after that."

"What if we told you we could get a message to your cousin," asked Jared excitedly. "What if we knew a way into the castle?"

"A way into the castle? Could I lead my men through it to victory?"

Jared's heart sunk. Obviously, this man was torn between a desire for peace and his desire to win. "No," he said. "There is only passage for one or two, and they must be small. Children, really. We can make it, but you could not."

"Well, then, if you are offering to carry a message, I will give you a message. Giles!" A harried looking man came running out of the nearest tent in response to the Lord's call. "I need parchment and a quill."

"Yes, my lord," the servant said.

"What shall I write? How shall I begin? Should I start from a position of strength, or should I admit to some weakness, to my tiredness and my men's need for rest and food?"

“If I may make a suggestion,” said Jared, “you could start with a story. Your story reminds me of an old fable about a wise king, Solomon, I think his name was. The story goes like this: two women were fighting over a child, and they came before King Solomon. Since neither could prove the child was hers, the king threatened to divide the child in half with a sword. The true mother quickly relinquished her claim, not wanting her child to be hurt.”

“It seems to me that something similar is happening here, only you are fighting over this land instead of a child.”

“Yes! Of course I’m familiar with the story, and so is my cousin. He will understand. I will offer to cede him the territory and ask him to allow me to help restore it to its former glory. No more lives need be wasted in this war.”

Stephen accompanied them to the edge of the camp, and wished them “Godspeed” as they walked back into the dark night. They quickly found Lazyurov, who had them climb on his back and began to fly toward the distant castle.

Dragon Task: Who are the people you know who have been to war? How do you know them?

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Our story thus far...

Delia and Jared are nearing the end of their quest. Currently in the company of the Indigo Dragon, Lazyurov, they are carrying a peace-making message from Lord Stephen, commander of some troops who are besieging a castle, to his cousin, Lord Richard, who, in Stephen's absence, had assumed the Lordship and then, unfortunately, refused to give it up.

Continued...

Lazyurov flew them to an open window in the highest tower of the castle. Through it, they could see a man tossing and turning in a large, canopied bed. "WELL," said Lazyurov, "IN YOU GO!"

"Um, Lazyurov, we don't have wings. We can't fly in the window!"

"CHILDREN, WHERE IS YOUR FAITH!" Remembering the leap of faith they had to make in search of the blue dragon, the children released their grip and prepared to jump off Lazyurov's back. However, he beat his wings, once, twice, three times, and they felt themselves rise gently on the updraft to the window.

"WHEN YOU ARE READY, CALL FOR ME AND I WILL RETURN," said Lazyurov when the children had clambered inside, hearts pounding.

They approached the bed, and Jared reached out and touched the shoulder of the tortured looking man. He woke with a start. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"We're messengers of peace," said Jared quickly. "You have nothing to fear. Tell me, are you as tired of this fighting as your cousin is?"

Wiping sleep from his eyes, the man sat up in bed, and said, "I must be dreaming. Yes, yes, I am tired of this fighting. But I am in the right. That man cannot prove he is my cousin, nor can I trust him to care for this place and these people. I have been here for six years, working, learning, becoming familiar with all that must be done. The previous lord named me his heir and taught me all that he knew. I cannot simply yield to some unknown stranger who claims right of birth."

"And yet, we cannot keep on like this. The forces are too evenly matched and the supplies are running low. I fear no one will win this dreadful fight, and with no one to plant the fields, we will all starve come the fall."

“Exactly,” said Delia. “Jared, show him the note.”

Rummaging in his backpack, Jared handed over the sheet of parchment with the message from Lord Stephen. In it, he recounted the story of King Solomon’s response to the two mothers fighting over a single child. “Just as the true mother chose to give up her claim rather than see her child cleaved in two, so I give up my claim on this land so that it might survive. I call on our old bonds of friendship and love, and beg you to forgive me, and to allow me to help you in undoing some of the terrible damage that has been done in our names. Please, Rusty, (this was the childhood name which family members had given Lord Richard), let’s stop this madness.”

Recognizing the truth of the message, and the likely authenticity of the one who had written it, Lord Richard paled and reached for a drink of water. “Could it be I was wrong, all this time? All this damage, for nothing? You, child, can you get a message back to my cousin for me?”

“Of course,” said Jared confidently, feeling very good about this night’s work.

They waited while Richard, still in his nightshirt, scratched a hasty note and sealed it with wax. Then he handed it to them. “My hopes for peace go with you tonight,” he said, shaking their hands in farewell.

At the window, Delia called out to Lazyurov, who appeared immediately, and hovered about eight feet below. Climbing to the window ledge, the two children jumped together, and breathed twin sighs of relief when the wind from Lazyurov’s beating wings guided them gently to his back once more.

“You have done well, children,” Lazyurov said to them as they glided back down to the camp of Lord Stephen. “From what I can see of the future (not much, and a bit cloudy, I must admit,) this conflict is nearing a peaceful resolution. The two leaders and their people will still face many challenges to repair the damage, but I believe they will rise to the challenge. Drop off the message and return to me quickly, I have more work for you to do tonight.”

When they had accomplished their mission and were once again on Lazyurov’s back, Delia yawned and asked sleepily, “How far do we have to go? I’m feeling really, really tired.”

“Rest, child. I will keep you safe.” Both Jared and Delia, then, dozed fitfully while they flew a terribly long way. Finally, they woke up, looking down on territory that was at once wildly different from anyplace they’d visited so far, and sadly familiar in that the same devastation had left it black and bleak.

“This war has been going on much longer, and so its roots are much deeper. I must warn you, you will not be able to accomplish so much with so little here. But every small change can make a difference. If even a single heart is swayed to the cause of peace, I

count that a victory. There is a boy, here, who needs a friend. He has lived through horrors no child should be subjected to. He has witnessed things that have scarred his soul, and though he doesn't know it, he is in danger of losing his compassion, his humanity. Tomorrow, his courage will be tested, and if he fails, he will be lost to us. You must help him remember who he is."

Jared and Delia slid from Lazyurov's back and shouldered their packs. "Where is he, and what's his name?"

"You will know him when you find him," said Lazyurov, fading from view.

For lack of a better idea, they headed toward the nearest campfire. They were only partway there when they heard a rough voice say, "One more step and I'll shoot you through the heart."

"I think HE may have found US," whispered Delia, raising her hands into the air to show they were empty. Jared followed suit.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" the voice continued.

"I'm Delia, and that's Jared," she answered. Then, she decided to improvise. "We lost our way and we're looking for someone to show us the way back to the main road. Can you help us?"

"Which road?" the soldier asked suspiciously.

"Is there more than one?" asked Delia, feeling a little panicked.

"What kind of idiot are you?" asked the voice.

"A...terrified idiot at the moment," answered Delia. "Do you think we could put our hands down?"

"Slowly," came the answer. So they did. "What are you doing wandering around in the dark? Don't you know there's a war going on?"

"Yes, yes, we know. We sort of...wound up here by accident. We're not spies or soldiers or anything, just a couple of kids, like you."

"I'm not a kid, not anymore. I'm a soldier," the boy said in a blustery voice. In fact, he didn't look any older than Jared.

"No kidding?" said Jared, remembering what Lazyurov had said. "How did you get them to let you in? And why did you want to become a soldier in the first place?"

The boy must have decided to trust them, because he lowered his bow.

“I wanted to avenge my family,” said the boy. “My name’s Theodore. What’s yours?”

“I’m Jared, and this is Delia. We’re not from here. What happened to your family?”

“The Picts raided our farmhouse, burned our fields and spread them with salt so that nothing would grow there anymore. They slaughtered our animals and torched our house. Now my parents live in poverty in the city. My father was injured in the attack, and so he just sits around. My mother takes in laundry. They live with my brothers and sisters in a shack, barely keeping body and soul together.”

“Before the Picts came, we had a good life. We had to work hard, but there was plenty of food, and at night, after the chores were done, we could sit around the fire and tell stories and sing songs. My house was full of joy. Now, my family’s life is full of misery. I left as soon as I could, and I send back every penny I make, but still, my younger sister died last year of illness and hunger, because it wasn’t enough to buy medicine.”

“It’s all the fault of the monsters who raided our little farm, the Picts. I hate them!”

“Wow! What a sad story,” said Jared sympathetically. Then he pulled an apple out of his knapsack. “Would you like an apple?”

“Sure,” said the boy, and he relaxed a little more. Jared and Delia sat with their backs against two trees, and motioned to Theodore, who waited just a moment before laying down his bow and joining them on the ground.

“Tomorrow, we’re going raiding. There’s a farm over that ridge, and we’ll burn THEIR fields. See how they like it. Actually, it’s my first raid. I’m a little nervous,” he confessed between bites.

“You mean you’re going to do to someone else the same thing the Picts did to your family?” burst out Delia.

Looking at her a bit strangely, Theodore answered, “They’re Picts. They deserve it, and more!”

“They’re people,” she said hotly, but Jared glared at her and she tried to calm down.

“I don’t blame you for wanting to hurt them,” he said carefully. “I think I would want to hurt somebody too if I’d been hurt as badly as you have. But are you sure it’s the right thing to do?”

“What’s right and what’s wrong? I don’t even care anymore. My unit is my family now. I need to follow orders. It’s easier, you know, than figuring out what to do on my own.”

“I’m sure it is, Theodore,” said Jared. They sat quietly for a minute.

“Would you really hurt other families, though? Even babies? Women? They’re farmers, not soldiers. They’re not the ones who attacked your family.”

“Look, it’s not like I want to do it,” said Theodore impatiently. “My commander says that attacking families is an important strategy. It’s demoralizing, and weakens the enemy.”

“That sure isn’t what happened in your case,” said Jared. “It made you stronger, and angrier, and more willing to fight.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought of it that way,” said Theodore thoughtfully. “Well, it was nice talking to you, and thanks for the apple. If you head straight northwest, you should cross a main road in about a mile. I’m not sure it’s the right one...but it’ll take you to a village where they can help you get reoriented. Travel carefully, though. The next person you meet might shoot first and ask questions later.” He stood and headed off into the dark.

“We blew it,” said Delia.

“YOU CAN’T KNOW THAT,” boomed Lazyurov, who landed behind her soundlessly and nudged her back with his snout. “I WILL GIVE YOU MY TOKEN NOW AND YOU CAN BE ON YOUR WAY.”

“Wait a second, don’t we get to see what happens?”

“DAYBREAK IS COMING. I CANNOT PROTECT YOU ONCE THE LIGHT COMES. IF YOU STAY, YOU WILL BE IN DANGER.”

“No way!” said Delia. “I’m not staying. Jared, come one.”

Jared hesitated. His brain told him one thing, but his heart told him something else altogether. “I...I think I have to stay, Delia.”

“What!?!? No you don’t. Come on, Jared, we’ve come too far to take crazy risks now.” She climbed onto Lazyurov’s back.

“I don’t think it’s a crazy risk,” said Jared. “I...think it’s something a friend needs to do. Delia, I’m sorry. I’ll see you tonight.” He waved as the dragon launched into the air, waving at Delia who still looked both perplexed and upset.

For the first time in a very long time, Jared was on his own. He shouldered his pack and headed off in the direction Theodore had gone. He paused for just a minute at the rock where they’d sat and sent up a little prayer: “Please, let Theodore do the right thing. Oh, and God, if you’re up there, please keep me safe so that I can finish my quest. Amen.”

Dragon Task: Visit a war memorial, either virtually (by reading a book or surfing the internet), or in person (there are several local war memorials). How does it make you feel?

Installment 24: Indigo: Freedom, Justice and Peace for all people.

We affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

Our story thus far...

Delia and Jared have met and befriended six of the seven rainbow dragons. Currently, they are working with Lazyurov, the Indigo dragon, who works to bring peace to war-torn lands, one person at a time. In the night, they had met Theodore, a farmboy turned soldier who was, according to Lazyurov, in danger of losing his humanity. He's told them of the plan to raid a farmhouse the next day, and of his plans to participate in the raid despite his misgivings. In an act of either bravery or stupidity, Jared has left the protection of the Indigo dragon in hopes of finding out what happens to Theodore.

Continued...

Telling himself he could stay hidden in the shadows, and that he wouldn't get involved, Jared snuck along the ridge top to a boulder overlooking the camp where Theodore and the other soldiers prepared for their raid. On the other side of the ridge, further down, he could see a farmhouse standing next to a stream. He watched as a small figure hauled water from the stream, and a slightly larger figure yoked two horses to a plough and went to work. These must be the people who would be the victims of today's conflict. Jared felt his heart pounding.

Maybe he'd get involved after all. Running low to the ground, he headed toward the farmhouse he could see in the distance. Focused on his goal, he didn't see or hear the soldiers in the camp saddle up and ride out.

He arrived at the farm out of breath, sweat streaming down his face. "There are soldiers coming! You've got to get out!" He yelled.

The man in the field looked at him, puzzled, and said a few words in a language Jared didn't understand. Without the dragon's magic to help, he had no way to communicate with these people in the land so far from his home. Frustrated he began to pantomime...soldiers, riding on horses, with torches and swords. He turned to the hillside to point out the direction from which the soldiers would come, only to discover he was too late. They were thundering down, heading straight for him.

As they approached, he saw Theodore out in front, and he saw the moment when the boy recognized his nighttime visitor. He flinched, and involuntarily pulled back, while Jared looked up at him, a plea for mercy in his eyes. Then he kicked his horse and pulled out ahead of his comrades, fear, panic, and confusion clearly written on his face.

They had no time to talk, no time to do much of anything. The leader of the band of marauders shouted something to Theodore in a harsh voice, and he whirled and

answered, again in a language that Jared neither spoke nor understood. Jared closed his eyes and concentrated, focusing on his memory of their conversation the night before.

“I know this boy,” said Theodore. “He is not one of them. We must spare him.”

“He tried to warn the Picts! He will die for his spying ways!” roared the commander.

Just then a younger child came running out to see what the noise was about. He saw the soldiers, saw his father standing, pale and scared, saw Theodore, trying to halt the rush of horses and men. Theodore saw him, and a look of recognition passed between them.

“I will die along with him, then,” said Theodore, “For I will not be a part of this. What we are about to do is wrong. I know, because it’s what the Picts did to me.”

“Exactly!” said the commander. “Don’t you want your revenge?”

“Yes,” said Theodore honestly. “But these aren’t the people who hurt my family and burned down our house. They’re just...people.”

“They are Picts!” said the commander.

“They are people,” Theodore replied, more firmly this time. “I will not let you harm them.”

“Then you will die too!” roared the commander...but...behind him, the rest of his troops had pulled up. They had adopted Theodore as a sort of mascot in camp. They all saw themselves as surrogate fathers, uncles, maybe an older brother or two. He was one of their own, and their commander was threatening to kill him along with the rest. Jared watched as, one by one, first indecision and then confusion and then resolution played over their faces. Weapons were sheathed. Torches were extinguished.

The commander turned, and was shocked to see his loyal troops, effectively mutinying, refusing to carry out their mission. “I will kill you if I have to do it myself!” And he thundered forward, not toward Theodore, but toward Jared, who, undoubtedly, he saw as the source of all this trouble.

Jared felt his life flash before his eyes. He’d made a mistake, a horrible mistake, and now he would let everyone down. Delia, the dragons, Lou, all the people back home with Lord Sigismund...He closed his eyes and waited for the blow, but it never came.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that the other soldiers had stopped their former leader, taking away his sword and holding firmly on to the reins of his horse. He watched while they argued and argued, back and forth and around in circles. In the end, it seemed that the soldiers who wanted to turn back were winning. Theodore left the circle and headed over to where Jared stood, puzzled.

“Looks like you’ll live to see another day, my friend. And I’m stuck being the conscience for a bunch of hardened mercenaries. Who’d have thought? God only knows what they’re going to do next, but I promise you, it won’t involve burning down farmhouses. I guess it wasn’t easier to follow orders after all, hey?”

“I guess not!” Jared replied. Theodore smiled at Jared, and then spurred his horse in pursuit of the rest of his family. Meanwhile, Jared, exhausted from the nearly sleepless night, his long run and overwhelmed by the shock and relief he felt at not being killed, sat down wearily on the ground.

The farmer helped him to his feet and half carried him into the house, offering him a comfortable pallet near the fireplace. Jared fell into a deep, peaceful sleep. When he woke up, Lou was there, wiping his face with a cool cloth.

“You did the right thing, kiddo. I’m proud of you,” he said. Then he continued. “Listen. Delia and Lazyurov will be back for you after dark, but this is the last time you’ll see me in this form. So there are a few things I want to tell you.”

“What do you...” started Jared.

“Hush, Jared. There’s not time. Just listen, and remember. Unlike the other dragons you’ve met, Bagranka is dangerous to you. You need to approach her with great care. To succeed at this next-to-last task, you’ll need all your courage and all your treasures.”

“But I don’t...”

“I said hush!! Remember, animals are people too. If you treat them that way, she won’t feel like she needs to defend herself. Keep your hands in her sight at all times. And stay calm! Bagranka can smell fear.”

“She won’t let you climb up, and she won’t speak to you. But if you do as I’ve instructed, she will show you the way. In the depths of the cave, in the bottom of the still pool, you’ll find Bagranka’s treasure. This is important Jared. **DO NOT TRY TO TAKE IT.** It is hers to keep, not yours to add to the others. It is not a token, it is her heart. When she has shown it to you, your task with her is complete.”

“When you exit from the cave, the time will have come for you to call on all the dragons for their flight. **THEY WILL NOT FLY WITHOUT THE RAINBOW DRAGON TO LEAD THEM.** You’ll need to call on the Rainbow Dragon by name, and no, I can’t tell you what it is. You need to figure it out for yourself. Just this clue: She goes by many names, and he has no name, they take many shapes and sometimes no shape at all. All around, and inside every person, the spirit of the rainbow dragon dwells. Read the familiar name written in your heart, and speak it, and the Rainbow Dragon will come.”

“I’m proud of you, more proud than you can know...and I’m indebted to you. It’s been an honor and a privilege being your guide, and I hope to see you again soon.” With an

encouraging smile, Lou vanished, leaving Jared alone with the Pict family of farmers, who offered him food and drink. After dinner, a great “whooshing” sound announced the arrival of Lazyurov.

Jared waved goodbye, and headed over to where the dragon and his best friend waited for him. He climbed onto Lazyurov’s back again.

“WE GO TO BAGRANKA!” roared Lazyurov, and spiraled high into the star filled sky.

Dragon Task: Think about the movies and tv shows you’ve seen that portray war. Do you think they are honest representations? Why or why not?