

Installment seven: Orange: Offer fair and kind treatment to all people
We affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations

Our story thus far...

On a quest to complete seven tasks and bring peace and prosperity to the world, Jared and Delia, two children, and their guide, Lou, have narrowly escaped from the evil Lord Benedict and are on their way to the Land of Dreams to complete the second task: "Travel to the land of dreams and face the Mirror of Justice."

Continued...

Footsore and more than a little hungry, Delia, Jared and Lou tromped through the forest in an attempt to reach safer territory and friendly faces in the adjacent kingdom. Lou suggested they stop and try to catch a fish and cook it up for lunch. "We won't arrive at the next safe house 'til well after dark, anyway, and I, for one, am having a hard time finding the energy to keep going. Let's take a break, rustle up some more substantial food, and gather some strength, what say?"

Delia and Jared agreed enthusiastically, and while Lou patiently waited to "tickle" some fish for them, they wandered along the river bank, gathering firewood, and also finding wild onions, fiddlehead ferns, and some fresh herbs to contribute to their lunch. Soon, delightful smells were wafting from the pot over the small cook fire they'd built.

The smells must have carried, for a few minutes after they'd begun to eat, they heard a rustling sound behind them. Two painfully thin, ragged and dirty children appeared from behind some bushes.

Clearly poised to run away if necessary, the older child, a girl with brown hair and eyes, spoke in a quavering voice. "Please, do you have any food to spare? We've not eaten in two days, now, and I fear for my brother. We don't need much, and it smells so good."

Jared and Delia looked at each other, and then at Lou, and as one, they answered, "Of course."

"I hope you like fish," added Lou with a smile.

The two children ate ravenously. Delia noticed that while they were ragged, they were scrupulously clean. Her curiosity began to build.

"I hope you don't mind my asking, but where are your parents?" she asked.

"Taken," said the girl, "By Lord Benedict to work his mines. They sent us to hide in the forest when the bad men came to the house, but when we went back, our parents were gone like the others in our village. They take kids, too, but kids don't last long in the

mine. That's why our parents made us hide. We've been here, on our own, for about three weeks, now. We were able to sneak in after dark and get some stuff from our house but we finished all the food a couple of days ago."

Then she pulled herself up bravely. "I reckon if we can stay alive for a while, we'll get big enough to go rescue our parents and run away all together, maybe to that place we hear about by the sea where people are kind and peaceful. Lord Sigismund...I have a hard time trusting any Lords after meeting Benedict, but this Sigismund is supposed to be different."

"He is," said Jared. "That's where we've come from. But it's an awfully long way. Say, how is it that you know about Lord Sigismund? And living here, how come you speak English?"

"Our Dad was a trader, and he met our Mum in England. After they got married, they took over farming some land that belonged to his parents 'cause they didn't think it was a good idea to take a family on the road. In those days, Benedict's Dad was in charge, and he wasn't so bad."

No longer hungry, Delia handed the rest of her lunch to the little boy, who still hadn't said a word. He accepted gratefully and wolfed it down. She felt troubled. It was one thing to feed these kids, but now that she'd met them and heard their story, she didn't feel right about leaving them alone.

When the meal was finished, Jared offered to take the dishes down to the stream to wash them. Delia said she'd help. Lou and the children sat near the fire. He was doing magic tricks to entertain them.

When they had gotten a little ways away from the others, Delia said to Jared, "We can't leave them here on their own, you know. Either we take them with us, or we need to find them some grown-ups to protect and feed them. Or maybe we could break into the mines and set the villagers free..." Her mind was whirling.

"Wait a second, Delia. We have a job to do. I'm as sad as you are to hear their story, but we've got important places to go, important things to do, and I'm worried we're running out of time," said Jared.

"I know," said Delia. "But they're just kids! The little one can't be more than three or four. Maybe I could stay here with them..."

"No. You remember what Lou said. You're critical to the success of the quest."

"Well, that may be, but I don't think I could live with myself if I left these kids alone in the forest with no food, no shelter, and no friends!" Delia snapped. Jared had forgotten that despite her usual easy-going, positive nature, she sometimes showed signs of a fierce temper.

When they returned, the younger boy was asleep, his head in his sister's lap. She looked up at Delia and Jared and said calmly, "You'll be leaving now. Thank you for the food, and for the company. It's nice to have someone to talk to who talks back," and she stroked her brother's hair fondly.

"I don't feel right about leaving you here," began Delia.

"Lou," interrupted Jared, "Can you think of a safe place nearby, with people who could look after these two?"

Lou smiled and nodded. "Good thinking. I know a family just a few miles from here who could probably take you in..."

"What about our parents? We can't just forget about them," she said.

"I'm not suggesting you do," answered Lou calmly. "But you said yourself that you need to grow up a bit before you try to rescue them. No reason you couldn't grow up in a warm house, with plenty of food, and some kind folks looking out for you."

"You've got a point," said the girl. "Can we wait 'til my brother wakes up, though? This is the most peaceful sleep he's had in quite a while."

"He can sleep while we walk," said Lou. "Just a second." He stood up, rustled around in his pack for a bit, and extracted a long bit of cloth. Then, closing his eyes, he screwed his face up and gritted his teeth. Amazingly, his legs began to grow, and his arms, too. His body elongated...and suddenly the potbellied little guide looked more like an upright bear. He opened his eyes and winked at the children, who were all slack jawed with amazement and shock. "Easier to carry him with a little more height, you see," he said with a wink. Gently picking up the sleeping toddler, he fashioned a sling around his body and nestled the boy in snug and safe.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he asked the others, who then packed up quickly, and put out the fire. Then the lot of them set out for the safety to be found on the far side of the forest.

When they arrived, late that night, at the farmhouse where Lou's friends lived, they found an aging couple with rosy faces and roughened hands. After eating and drinking their fill, Delia, Jared, Lou (who had shrunk back down to normal size) and the two children lay down in front of the hearth and slept for a long, long time.

The next day was a day for stories. Lou told the story of their escape from Lord Benedict's castle. The children told the story of their parents' capture. Their hosts told THEIR story, of raising four healthy boys, each of whom had moved on and started their own family, and of being lonely. They were delighted to serve as foster-parents for their

new guests, for as long as needed. Then, with many hugs, well wishes, and tears, Lou, Delia and Jared packed up their things and prepared to leave.

Just as they were leaving, though, they heard a cry behind them. It was the little boy, who ran after them, and launched himself at Lou, wrapping small arms around Lou's furry legs. "Fanks, Loo," he said, and then turned around and ran back to his waiting sister, who had tears in her eyes.

"You're welcome," said Lou gently, with a wave and a tear or two of his own. When the three of them had passed over a hill, out of sight of the cottage, Lou said, "I'm glad those little tykes found us. A real piece of luck, and some courage on their part, too, to approach strangers and ask for help. I'm so glad you spoke up and suggested we see them safe. That was just the right thing to do."

Jared grunted. "We lost precious time, though. I mean, the little guy was cute and all, but what does he have to do with us, really? I think it was bad luck they found us, but Delia wasn't about to leave them there. Did you see, she even gave her food away!"

"Jared," Lou sighed, "it's not just the ends of this quest that matter, but the means. Haven't you figured that out, yet? The success of your work, yours and Delia's, rests on the both of you listening to your hearts, and acting with kindness and compassion whenever you can."

"If you had left those kids alone, you would have felt guilty, and the guilt would have eaten at you, making it harder to see the right thing to do down the line. When we make choices, it affects the outside world, but it also affects us, on the inside. Do you really want to become the kind of person who can leave innocent, defenseless children alone in the woods to fend for themselves? I don't think you do."

Jared walked in silence for a moment, thinking over what Lou had said. Delia and Lou were quiet, too. Finally, Jared spoke again, this time to Delia.

"Delia, I owe you thanks—again. If you hadn't spoken up, I would have left those kids, and Lou is right. That's not the kind of person I want to be. I guess you're the kind of person I want to be."

Delia smiled, delighted, and said, "Nope. You don't get to be like me. I'm the only one who does. You have to be your own good self, and you have to become your own best self."

Lou looked startled. "You are a wise, wise young lady," he said. The three of them went on, walking and breathing and letting the warmth of the sun sink into their bones.

Dragon Task: Think about the kind of person you want to be, and do something helpful for someone else as practice.

