

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black hooded cloak, stands in a lush green forest. She is looking slightly to her left with a serious expression. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The forest has tall, thin trees and a dense carpet of green grass and small yellow flowers. The lighting is soft, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

A FIRETHORN CHRONICLES
SHORT STORY

Sweet Basil

Lea Doué



Butterwing
Publishing

Sweet Basil: A Firethorn Chronicles Short Story

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Author's Note:

Unlike most of the stories in the Firethorn Chronicles, Sweet Basil was not inspired by a particular fairy tale. It was written for the Fellowship of Fantasy Hall of Heroes anthology. My first thought upon hearing the theme was of all the children and their families who battle childhood cancer and other illnesses. The strength they have facing their day-to-day battles are more heroic than any faced by a superhero.

This short story will eventually appear on Amazon (once I finish the formatting), with all proceeds going towards childhood cancer research.

The events of Sweet Basil take place a few hundred years before the main series, during the days of the soldier-king.

Sweet Basil

The village slept under a sky filled with crystal stars when Marisol stole into the woods. Despite offers of money, land, and even marriage, she never stayed after feeding the dragon.

Her stomach grumbled, and she stopped to pick a brown-spotted pear from a forgotten tree, biting into the gritty fruit while stuffing extras into the pockets of her skirt for later. She'd been wary of meals offered in thanks ever since winter, when she'd stayed too long at a mountain village, grateful for the warmth and company. She'd woken groggy the next day in the home of a man who had wanted to exploit her abilities for his own gain.

Her abilities. She had no special abilities, other than survival, and that was enough.

She breathed deeply as she trudged through the underbrush, the rich scents of the midnight forest tickling her nose with stories of life and death, growth and decay. She rubbed her arm where the dragon's flat, narrow snout rested uncomfortably close to her wrist, a living tattoo. Pulling back her sleeve, she tapped its chin. Sometimes it responded and moved obligingly. Usually it ignored her and lay still. This time, it bared its teeth and nipped at her finger, as though it could peel away from her skin to reach her. Its flat teeth scraped against her wrist, and she gasped, tugging the sleeve back down. It had never done that before.

A sharp crack from somewhere behind her warned of something else in the woods. Something big.

“Ouch! Stupid branches.”

Something human, then. A man, judging by the voice.

“Marisol?” he said. “Are you here?”

She slowed her breathing, hoping her mud-colored cloak and brown hair would help her blend into the deep shadows. How did he know her name?

“It's me, Renzo. I know it's been a while, but I hope I haven't changed that much.” His steps grew louder as he neared, and a tall form stopped a few yards away. “You left the village so fast. I brought you something to eat, if you want it. I'm sure you could use a good meal.”

Her stomach roiled with uncertainty. She'd known a boy from her home village named Renzo. They'd spent summers wading in the stream catching minnows and winters building snow castles, but he'd left after a vicious attack by razor-tail dragons had left him an orphan, homeless and alone. She'd never expected to see him again, least of all in the middle of the woods so far from where they'd both come.

“I know you're nearby.” After removing a satchel from his back, he crouched, took out a length of cloth, and unrolled it on the ground. “You can join me if you want. Best food you'll ever taste.”

He lit a small lantern and placed it at a corner of the cloth, the flickering light marching over the dark green folds. Adjusting the sword at his waist, he sat on the grass. Sandy brown hair tied back at his neck revealed big ears and expressive eyebrows. He looked like his father, his features as pleasant and as plain as ever.

Placing his work-worn hand flat on the fabric, he said, “Midnight snack.”

In the time it took her to blink, the entire cloth had filled with food. Scents of fresh bread and

baked fish and cinnamon reached her, and her mouth watered. She'd had cinnamon once when her mother was still alive, and she'd never tasted anything so heavenly.

How was it possible? He was no sorcerer, but what had he been up to all those years? She took a tentative step closer, entangling her cloak in a branch and sending leaves shivering to the ground.

He glanced up sharply, staring in her direction. He cleared his throat. "I can't tell you how happy I am to have found you. I've been hearing rumors for weeks." He waited, possibly hoping she would respond. When she didn't, he sighed. "Too many people wandering alone these days," he muttered. "I haven't been studying with sorcerers, if that's what you're worried about."

Had he read her mind?

"I found the tablecloth in an abandoned hut years ago. I used it as a blanket until I stumbled upon its true nature." He poured something into a goblet that winked with silver in the lamplight. "I know what happened in Narin. You've got nothing to fear, Marisol. It's me."

Her stomach ached with hunger. She took one shaky step after another until she stood at the edge of the cloth, heart racing and lips curving up into a smile.

He smiled back, and his eyes twinkled. "As lovely as ever." He swept his hand out as if offering her a seat at a grand table. "Won't you join me?"

She sank onto her knees, her gaze sweeping over the plates of chicken and flatbread, bowls of rice, and baskets of fruit. If she intended to join his midnight meal, and she did, she should offer something in return. Too weary for small talk, she pulled the pears out of her pockets and held them out. "Here. It's all I have."

"Thank you." He held his palms cupped under hers, and she dumped the fruit in. Her hand brushed against his thumb, and she yanked it back, knocking one of the pears onto the tablecloth.

"Sorry." She reached for the fruit, but as soon as her fingertips skimmed the cloth, the dragon awoke and thrashed its tail along her calf, sending pains shooting up her leg and into her hip. She scooted backwards into the shadows.

"What's wrong?" Renzo crawled over beside her. He gently removed the pear from her fist and tossed it over his shoulder. "Is it the dragon?"

Her eyes widened. How did he know about the dragon? She studied his face, but with the lamp shining behind him, she couldn't make out his expression. He sounded concerned. Perhaps she could risk trusting him with her secret. She'd waited a long time to talk to someone about her ... abilities.

"I don't think it likes your tablecloth." She stood and pulled her cloak tight as the dragon repositioned itself against her skin, holding her breath until it stopped moving. Its head ended up near her knee, and its tail wound up her back and coiled around and around her neck, with the pointed tip extending up her jaw to rest just below her left eye.

Renzo watched her face the whole time, as if he understood her pain. "Of course it doesn't. Dragons don't like sorcery."

She nodded in agreement and gritted her teeth. Her dragon was created by sorcery as much as his tablecloth. It shouldn't care one way or another what her hand brushed up against.

"Let's try again, and this time you can sit away from the edge." He stood, offering a hand, and she placed her fingers in his. The dragon remained still.

Thankfully, it didn't object to the food, and she stuffed herself with the best meal she'd eaten in months.

"It's good to see someone besides myself enjoying all this," Renzo said. He paused and ate a whole pear before speaking again. "You have questions for me, I'm sure."

She nodded and smiled around a mouthful of warm bread spread with figs, the ache in her belly gone for the first time in days.

"I understand your hunger," he said. "After I left, I wandered a long time before finding

someplace to belong. A purpose. I was actually a dragon soldier not that long ago.”

“You deserted?”

He shook his head. “I’d met my quota, and I’d had enough of killing. Even if it was dragons. Many of the volunteers want revenge on some sorcerer or other, seeing the harm they’ve done after going unchecked all these years. They join the soldier-king’s ranks in order to rid the lands of razor-tail dragons so the true kings can finally focus on dealing with the real problem.”

She’d heard stories of the soldier-king. He wasn’t a real king, but if his soldiers had their way, he would be some day. He’d done much in the past few years to organize people in the dragon-ravaged lands, reforming the old order of knights into a highly-trained group of men and women who specialized in hunting down and destroying the aggressive packs of razor-tails.

“Is it true his skin is as white as snow?”

“Yes. His hair, too, and I’ve never seen eyes so blue.”

“And his wife?” It was said they worked side by side recruiting and training the soldiers.

“I only saw her a few times, but she’s lovely, despite the scars on her skin. Or maybe because of them.”

Marisol glanced at her lap, where one of the dragon’s front feet rested unseen on her thigh.

“When I joined them, I only wanted regular meals and a purpose. I have one of those now.” He nodded towards the tablecloth and then stared at her pointedly. “But the soldier-king’s purpose wasn’t my own. I don’t want to destroy. I want to heal and build.”

She swallowed one last bit of bread, her mouth suddenly dry.

“I’d like to help you. I already know some of what you’ve been doing—you’ve healed enough people in the past year to get a reputation.”

She laced her fingers together to hide their shaking. She would have to be more careful from now on. Travel farther before feeding the dragon. “I’m not healing anyone.”

He didn’t seem to hear. “That dragon has something to do with it, I’m guessing. Are you ... have you been cursed?”

The idea didn’t seem to frighten him, or else he knew the answer already. “Not exactly.”

He sighed and folded the corners of the tablecloth into the center over the remainder of the feast, which then collapsed into nothing. “I’ve been trying to catch up to you for a while, and I’ve talked to the families after you leave. I’d really like to know how you do it.”

“Why?” She wanted to talk, but years of being alone and keeping things to herself made her cautious. Even with Renzo.

He stowed the cloth in his pack and wandered into the trees, gathering firewood. “I want to help, as I said. That’s really all there is to it. I’ve seen how you avoid the food provided by the villagers, and I understand.” He paused as he piled the wood. “I’ve never shared *my* secret with anyone, and off you go marching into town after town, risking your safety and freedom to help people. Quite frankly, I’m ashamed of myself, and my family would be, too, if I still had them. I want to be a part of what you’re doing, Marisol. You’re as much a hero as the soldier-king.”

“What? No, I’m not. I just ...”

He crouched near the pile of wood and had a fire going within minutes. Dry twigs popped and snapped, filling the silence. “You just what? Heal children who have incurable illnesses?”

“I told you, I’m not healing anyone.”

“Then explain.” He settled on the ground and tossed a small branch into the flames. Sparks flew into the air, creating their own personal fireworks display. “Please?”

She joined him by the fire and fed it small sticks. Finally, she took a deep breath and began. “I remember the smell of sweet basil that grew around the sorcerer’s cottage. The sickness came on me a couple of years after you left, and Mother had tried everything to cure me, sold everything. He was

close to the end himself, one of the rare ones who hadn't been twisted by the power he wielded. He used what strength remained to him to give me more time, drawing out the sickness that was eating me from the inside and trapping it in the form of a dragon on my skin, like a tattoo." She took another deep breath. "It's a constant reminder to be thankful for every day I have."

"The tattoo is a reminder?"

"Yes. And the basil." She pulled a small sachet of dried leaves out of her pocket, the faded blue ribbon all that remained of the original bundle. Closing her eyes, she held it under her nose and pictured her mother's bright smile.

"So it's the dragon healing the children?"

"I suppose." She pushed the sachet down to the bottom of her pocket and threw a handful of grass onto the flames. "It wasn't so big in the beginning. For years it slept, content to crawl from one arm to the other or curl up at the base of my neck, wingless and no bigger than a crow. It didn't wake until the summer I begged food from a farmer's son who suffered the same sickness I'd had, and it only took a few moments after our fingers touched to realize what the dragon had done. It grows a few inches each time, sort of stretching without becoming much wider."

He remained silent for a long while, his eyes studying the fire and the shadows. "Does it hurt?"

She blinked unexpected tears at the question no one knew to ask. "Only when the dragon moves," she whispered. "It's like ... sand shifting underneath my skin."

He winced. "Well, at least you won't have to feel the pang of hunger anymore."

"You really want to join me?"

Hazel eyes twinkling with firelight gazed into her own. "Yes. I think I've found my purpose. And I'll even try to match your generosity with a bit of my own. My tablecloth will remain a secret, for obvious reasons, but we'll leave a donation for a few families in need before we sneak out each time."

She smiled, and the last knot of uncertainty loosened in her belly. "It will be good to have company. To have a friend."

*

Two weeks after their first meeting, they prepared to enter a town larger than any Marisol had visited before. They had bypassed a few small settlements while waiting for the dragon to uncoil from around her neck and leave her face clear of its inky mark.

"Are you ready?" Renzo said. He'd asked her the same question half a dozen times since breakfast, and twice now since lunch.

She adjusted the herb pouch attached to her belt, a prop used to get her close to the children and an excuse for their quick recovery. "As soon as you get the tablecloth stowed."

"Done."

She held out her hand, and he grasped it tightly, his sweaty palm the only sign of his unease. Ever since his time in the soldier-king's service, she'd learned, crowds and loud noises unnerved him. They both wanted to be back in the familiar forest before sundown.

The main road led them to a checkpoint at the town gates, manned by two dragon soldiers. The taller man offered a pleasant, if weary, smile. The shorter, red-haired soldier silently studied them from head to toe, his gaze lingering on their faces. She'd never seen anyone with red hair that far north.

"Nothing to worry about, folks," the tall man waved them on. "Have a good day."

As soon as they reached the apothecary's shop near the town square, Renzo pulled her up short. "We need to be careful. Did you see the way that guard looked at us?"

"It is odd to have dragon soldiers stationed in a town. Unless the razor-tails have been sighted nearby?"

"It's not the dragons. They're looking for sorcerers. The soldier-king wants them identified and marked. Says they've been hiding in the shadows for too long."

She glanced over her shoulder, half expecting to see the soldier lurking nearby. “We have nothing to fear.”

“Really? Then why are you squeezing my hand so hard?”

She let go and clasped her hands behind her back. “We’ll be gone before they have a chance to think twice about us. Let’s check with the apothecary. I may not even be needed.”

Unlikely in a town that size, but she could hope.

As soon as he learned Marisol was a fellow healer, the apothecary rasped out a warm welcome and invited them into the back room for tea. She watched him carefully measure the tea leaves—and only tea leaves—into sturdy ceramic mugs. After half an hour of pleasantries and small talk, he revealed that there was, indeed, one child who could use her help. A boy of six named Sandro, who lived in town with his parents and siblings.

“Tell me your blend of herbs and oils,” the apothecary said, “so that I may help others when you are gone.”

She had expected this request and shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I cannot.” The short answer was the easiest. Long explanations only made for questions even more difficult to answer.

The apothecary sighed, but he accepted her reply more graciously than most. “Well. We all have our secrets, don’t we? The boy will get help, and that’s what matters.” He gave them directions to the boy’s house on the other side of town and wished them well.

After knocking on the door of a tidy cottage adjacent to a milliner’s shop, they waited five minutes before Sandro’s mother opened it, two young boys clinging to her skirts. She stared at them, red-rimmed eyes heavy with despair.

“My name is Marisol. I’ve come to help your son.” Most of the families she’d met didn’t care for long explanations. They saw the herb pouch, and their eyes either sparked with hope or narrowed in confusion and doubt.

This woman’s eyes remained blank. She stepped aside and pointed to a room down the hall. She didn’t follow them.

Marisol stopped in front of the door, and Renzo’s shoulder brushed hers. “You don’t have to come in,” she whispered.

“You’re not alone anymore.” He took her hand. “That’s why I’m here, remember? To help.”

She took a shaky breath, her heart overflowing with gratitude. She’d always insisted the family remain outside the room, in case the dragon writhed and made itself visible. Renzo might never know what a gift he’d just given her.

The room smelled like lemon, and lavender, and tea tree oils, a sharp contrast to the faded boy sleeping on rumpled bed sheets, his breathing shallow. They’d made it in time, but barely.

Shrugging off her cloak and pushing up her sleeves, she knelt beside the bed and took Sandro’s hand in hers, shaping each limp finger until they fit between her own. Renzo settled beside her, one hand on the small of her back.

As she stroked Sandro’s brow, the dragon woke.

She gritted her teeth and sucked in a sharp breath against the pain of the dragon’s movements. It was nothing compared to what Sandro had felt these past weeks and months, and she bore it gladly. The dragon’s mouth opened wide against her calf, its body writhing on her hip and stomach, and on her back beneath Renzo’s hand. The tail stretched over her shoulder and down her arm, twining around her fingers. She let go of Sandro’s hand and cupped his face between her palms. Gradually, a pink blush bloomed on his cheeks, his breathing quieted, and his chest rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell, smoothly and naturally. The dragon’s belly expanded against her own as it fed off the thing that tore life from others.

Renzo stared over her shoulder, pointing at her forearm. “Is that normal?”

She leaned back, holding her arm in front of her. The dragon's tail curved and twitched around her wrist, nothing unusual, but for the first time, individual scales had appeared and shone a deep green with glints of turquoise. She pulled her skirt above her knee, revealing more of the same on her calf. The dragon's inky skin had been replaced by something with more depth. Something more real. It stared at her with a green eye ringed in white and snarled silently.

A gasp from the doorway jolted her to her feet, and she pulled her sleeves down quickly and fastened her cloak around her shoulders.

Renzo placed himself between her and the mother, who stared not at Marisol, but at her son. Her mouth hung open, and gasping sobs filled the room. She squealed and ran to Sandro, scooping him into her arms and rocking him forward and back until he woke and pushed her off.

"Ma?" he said and blinked heavily. He drew in a deep breath, and his smile bubbled into a laugh. "Ma, it don't hurt."

"I know, baby. The healer ... she made you well." The woman turned, her gaze flicking down almost imperceptibly fast to Marisol's leg and back up. "How can I thank you?"

Marisol backed towards the door. "Seeing your son well is thanks enough. We need to be going." And quickly. The woman had seen more than she should.

"Please ..."

"Enjoy every day. Take nothing for granted." She spouted a few more lines as she backed quickly down the hall, nearly knocking down one of the younger boys. She patted them both on the head, and then turned and rushed out the door, Renzo hard on her heels.

"Slow down." He grabbed her hand and pulled her up short.

"She saw the dragon. We have to get out. Now."

"Of course we do, but you've done nothing wrong. There's no need to run."

She took a deep breath. He was right. If the dragon soldiers were looking for suspicious activity, two people literally running away would certainly catch their attention.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Like my skin has been turned inside out and rubbed on a rock." She laced her fingers with his and nudged him back into a walk, her heart thumping as if she were running. "The pain usually goes away almost instantly. I don't know what's happening. The dragon has never looked at me before." Only living things looked at people.

She drew her hood up before they reached the gates, afraid her expression would alarm the soldiers, and they joined the stream of country dwellers exiting for the day. As soon as they reached the first bend in the road, they veered off into the trees and walked in silence as far as they could before twilight shrouded their path.

Renzo lowered his pack to the ground, lit the lamp, and spread the tablecloth out over a patch of moss. He laid his hand on the fabric and said, "Victory banquet."

From one blink to the next, mounds of food covered the surface, including several dishes she'd never seen before. She lowered herself carefully beside it. "You've been saving that one."

"Yes." He built a small fire while she picked at a few of the offerings, her stomach still roiling from their encounter with Sandro and his mother.

The dragon had quieted, but her skin still burned. She rolled up her skirt and stared at the dragon's sleeping form, its head noticeably larger than it had been that morning. The new scales glinted green and blue in the firelight, but the eyes remained thankfully closed. She swept her hand gingerly over her knee and up her thigh where the dragon's shoulder rested, the scales bumpy and hard beneath her fingers. Her skin belonged more to the dragon now than it did to her.

"You can't keep doing this." Renzo's gaze took in the dragon's form before meeting her eyes. "What you're doing is amazing, but it's going to kill you."

She drew in a shaky breath and sighed. “If the sickness in me can draw out the sickness in others, if I can share the sorcerer's unexpected gift and spare more lives, then I won't stop. I've always known it would consume me one day.”

He sank to her side and clasped her hands, pulling them to his chest. “It doesn't have to be that way. You can stop. I just found you again, Mari, please don't keep doing this and leave me alone.”

She raised a hand to his cheek. “You can't ask me to stop being myself.”

“How can I stay by and watch this thing destroy you? I can't fight back. I can't save you.”

“I never asked you to save me. You offered yourself, and that's all I've wanted.”

He pulled her into a tight hug, his chin resting on top of her head. “And my food,” he said, his voice tight with unshed tears. “You wanted my food.”

She chuckled. “You do have good food.”

“How touching.”

Marisol startled, and Renzo's arms tightened around her. Together, they stood and faced the shadows.

A man stepped forward, his red hair almost glowing in the firelight. The dragon soldier from town. He drew his sword, and his eyes narrowed. “I knew it.”

Renzo angled himself in front of her.

“My eyes never deceive me. I knew she was a sorceress.” He circled around them and kicked the tablecloth. It doubled over on itself, and everything disappeared into its folds. He didn't flinch. “I'm taking you both in. Gather your things.”

Marisol's chest burned, and only partly because of the dragon. It seemed to dislike this man. She stepped around Renzo and put her hands on her hips. “You think just because you have a sword, you can order us around?”

The guard's head tilted in surprise. “Do you know who I am?”

“Seeing as we haven't been properly introduced—no.”

Renzo sucked in a quick breath, either in approval or fear she'd gone too far. If the guard decided to use force, he was the only other person with a sword.

“My name is not important. I'm a dragon soldier, authorized by the soldier-king to identify and mark all sorcerers.”

“I'm just a healer. I don't—”

“Then how do you explain that?” He pointed to the cloth on the ground.

“I found it, that's how I explain it,” Renzo said. “A spelled tablecloth doesn't make us dangerous.”

The man's jaw clenched and his nostrils flared. He lunged lightning fast and clamped a hand around Marisol's wrist. The dragon reacted, and she screamed as its body writhed in response to the threat, grating against her skin. Its tail tore away from her arm, ripping her sleeve, and whipped against the man's face. He staggered backwards with a roar, and Renzo drew his own sword, forcing him farther still. The clang of metal echoed in her ears as she sank to the ground.

She couldn't explain the dragon's recent actions, but she wasn't surprised that it had come to her defense. The sorcerer had created it all those years ago to protect her. To save her. Renzo wasn't the only one with a weapon.

One of the men kicked into the fire, scattering embers and threatening the tablecloth. She snatched it and retreated behind a clump of bushes. The dragon reacted to the spelled object as it had before, its frenzy threatening to rip her apart. She dropped the cloth and clamped a hand over her arm to keep its tail from accidentally striking her own face.

If only she could set the dragon free.

Renzo held his own against the soldier, but it had been years since he'd trained as one himself.

His arm strained against the weight of the sword.

She glanced at the cloth pooled at her feet. The dragon had leaped off her skin in response to the soldier's threat. Would it do the same for the cloth it so disliked?

She removed her boots and planted herself on the cloth, digging her toes into the fabric. The dragon thrust its snout towards the offensive object. It poked and prodded uselessly with its talons, its back feet grating against her neck. She panted, fists clenched, until its head finally burst free of her ankle. Its shoulders followed. Then back, hips, tail. Endlessly long tail, burning its way down her back, around her waist, and along her leg. She gasped and stumbled backwards onto the grass.

A fully formed dragon, as tall as a wolfhound, but twice as long and muscular, crouched before her, each deep green scale sparkling with turquoise and reflected firelight. Even wingless, its presence filled the small clearing. After staring into her eyes without blinking, it turned towards the men, bared its teeth, and roared. The vibrations embraced her, and she smiled.

It was magnificent.

Both men stopped fighting and backed away from each other. Renzo stepped towards her, eyes wide and mouth agape. The dragon snarled.

"Put away your sword," she told him.

He obeyed immediately, and the dragon turned its attention to the soldier.

"You too. This is no razor-tail dragon for you to fight, and we're not sorcerers."

"Just what a sorcerer would say." The soldier wiped his brow but kept his grip on his weapon. "You're all liars. Promising, and lying, and taking until there's nothing left. I can't believe a word you say."

"Maybe not, but you can believe your eyes. They never deceive you, if you spoke the truth."

She removed her hand from the dragon, confident, without knowing how, that it would obey her. "Pin him," she whispered.

The dragon sprang forward, spraying sparks and embers into the air. The soldier flinched against the burning onslaught, and in that instant the dragon snatched the sword from his grip and snapped it in two with its teeth. The soldier punched the dragon in the nose, but it didn't even flinch. Before Renzo could reach her side, the dragon had the soldier flat on the ground, one leg pinning down each limb, fangs bared and dripping into the man's face.

"Get your dragon off me!"

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Renzo said.

"Get it off! I understand!"

Renzo whispered into her ear, "Can you actually call that thing off?"

She shrugged and patted her leg as if calling a dog over. "To me."

The dragon snaked its head around and then turned without a backward glance and walked to her and Renzo. It sat in front of them, staring intently at the soldier, who hadn't moved.

"Tell us exactly what you understand," she said.

"Dragons hate sorcery. It makes them crazy." He stood and dusted himself off, glaring at Marisol. "I don't know how, but that thing's real, which means you're not sorcerers. There. I said it. Now, I suggest you go far away from here, and take your little stolen blanket with you. I might not believe my eyes next time I see you."

"We'll leave when you do," she said. No need for him to see which way they traveled.

He spat on the ground, retrieved his broken sword, and disappeared into the darkness.

Renzo gathered their belongings, stuffing the tablecloth into his pack. He took her hand, and they headed south, the dragon guarding their backs as they walked until nearly sunrise.

Marisol didn't trust that the soldier wouldn't change his mind.

Six months later, they sat around a fire in a different forest, surrounded by two dozen men, women, and children, Renzo's tablecloth spread in the center of the group. They'd gathered other travelers along their journey, people who had been displaced during the soldier-king's war. With Marisol's dragon by their side, they shared their bounty freely, and, in turn, their new friends shared their own skills and knowledge. Renzo's dream of building had resulted in a new family for all of them.

Although her dragon no longer had his abilities, Marisol's heart warmed to see the smiling faces around her. Providing food and a place to belong was a different kind of healing.

One of the new children crawled over and settled into her lap. "What's his name?" she asked, pointing to the dragon, where he lay with his head on Renzo's knee, his nose twitching in his sleep.

She smiled. "His name is Basil. He was born in a cottage with sweet basil planted all around, and the smell of the herb reminds me of that day. It was the first day of the journey that brought us all together."

The girl sighed contentedly, her belly full for the first time in weeks. "Sweet Basil."

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About the Author

Lea is the author of The Firethorn Chronicles, a series inspired by fairy tales and other classic stories. Homeschooling and writing take up most of her time, but she also enjoys directing a small puppet team at her church. A native of south Georgia, Lea currently lives in Nova Scotia, Canada with her husband, their two boys, and three cats. But, sadly, no dragons.