



Andrew
and the
Firedrake

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Prologue

The difficulty with telling a story like this is that people, particularly grandkids, want to know if the story is true or not, or how I found out about it. And I have to say to them, and also to you, that I am not really in a position to answer any of those questions. But I can say that if it really happened, then it happened as I have told it. If it did not, then it should be reckoned as the kind of fairy story that is still truer in many ways than the true histories that some people think they like to tell.



The Firedrake

The walled garden was very near the summit. A cliff face rose steeply from the back of the garden up to the top of the mountain, which was about a hundred feet higher. The wall of the garden formed a semicircle and was broken only by the gate in the middle, which faced the steep mountains on the other side of a very deep valley. The mountains were all very high, but there was no snow on them. The air was still and thin, but not cold.

He had been told to stand just inside the gate and to guard it, and not to let anyone enter, but he could not

remember who had told him this, or why. Neither could he remember how long he had been there. He was vaguely hungry, and so he picked a large golden apple from a nearby branch, hanging low, almost to the ground. Though he did not know why he was there, he was nevertheless well content. He ate the apple slowly, gazing at the grass in front of the gate.

The grass was lush, but very short. It did not appear to have been mowed, but simply to have reached its full height. The lawn sloped away from the garden and after about fifty feet the slope dropped away into a tumbled mass of boulders and smaller rocks. The young boy, who was about fifteen years old, walked forward and stood in the gate.

Behind him the garden was filled with fruit trees around the perimeter of the wall, and inside that band of fruit trees was another circle of very rich but very ordinary vegetables. If the boy had been curious, he would have wondered at presence of such ordinary plants in such a mysterious garden. But he was not curious at all—and the emerald beans hung over their supports like royalty. At the very center of the garden was a complicated pattern of pathways through a crosshatch of flowerbeds. At the center was a carved throne on a dais, and around the base of the throne were a series of faded runes. Behind the throne was a solitary oak, ancient and yet still small.

The air was completely still, and the boy could not hear anything, not even the faint murmuring of insects. And this is why, after about a half an hour, his attention was drawn to a distant metallic sound, like silver coins being stirred in a chest in a distant room. This interruption caused him to look around at his surroundings with interest, for the first time since he had been left there. He soon located the direction of the sound—it was coming from a spot over the opposing mountain range, moving toward him. At first, he assumed it was a large bird, but as the sound grew he could make out three pairs of wings on the creature's back. It did not occur to the boy to be afraid.

The creature came almost directly overhead, and the boy almost turned around to watch it fly over the mountain behind him. But at the last moment, the dragon (for it *was* a dragon) reared back, and slowly lowered himself to the ground with long, lazy beats of his six wings. His rear haunches touched the ground in front of the garden and his wings folded back along his sides with something that seemed like a clatter. His long-scaled sides were both black and silver. His chest was a deep crimson, and his head was like burnished bronze. He settled down on his belly and yawned deeply. The boy could see a glow in the back of his throat.

They both looked at each other for many minutes. Finally, the dragon spoke, and his voice was a mountain

brook clattering down over a steep jumble of rocks. "You think yourself the master of this garden?"

"No. But I have been asked to guard it."

"What is your name, small one?"

The young boy thought for a moment, interested in the question. "Andrew," he finally said. "What is your name?"

"You could not pronounce it. But men call me Silverdrake."

Andrew nodded at this and stood quietly. After another moment he asked, "Why have you come?"

"I have come back to my home. This is my garden. And I must ask you to let me in."

Andrew could not remember who had commanded him to guard the gate. And he could not remember where he had come from, or what had brought him. And yet, he could remember the feeling he now had in his throat again. Some other time, in some other place, he had disobeyed. And that was why he was now here. Andrew could not remember how he had disobeyed, but he did remember the constricting of his throat before he had, and the sickness in his chest after. Whatever he did, he could not disobey again. And so he shook his head.

"So you will not allow me to pass?"

"I cannot let you pass with my favor and blessing. You can fly, and the wall is low. You are large, and I am small—you can walk past me, or over me. If this really were your

home, I cannot see why you would even speak with me. And if it is not, I cannot see why I should disobey.”

The dragon leaned his head to the side. “Disobey? You have a master, then?”

Andrew nodded.

“What is his name, Andrew?” The dragon’s voice was soothing, subtle, and very wise.

“I do not know.”

“Then perhaps he sent me.”

“No,” said Andrew.

“Perhaps I *am* he,” the dragon suggested.

“No,” Andrew said again. He knew that since he knew nothing and could give few reasons for his refusal, he needed to stop speaking. So he stepped back into the garden, and swung the long gate shut. When the brass gate found its latch, Andrew was comforted with a decisive *clack*.

Outside, the firedrake lay down his head and went to sleep.



Stone Cherubim

When Andrew opened his eyes, he was still in a garden, but it did not look like the same one he had been in before. He looked slowly around and saw he was lying on the grass, next to a low stone table. He did not remember the previous nightfall. Rising quickly to his feet, he walked out to the front gate to see if the dragon was still there. He knew this did not make any sense because if it were a different garden, why would it have the same dragon? But still, he needed to check. There was no dragon.

There was a gate, just like before, and a sloping lawn of grass running out to a boulder-strewn drop off. The same mountain range he had seen yesterday from the first garden was still across the deep valley. Andrew walked out to the edge of the jagged cliff and looked down. The cliff was not straight up and down, but was nevertheless too steep to walk down. An expert climber could do something with it, but Andrew turned away. But just as he did, he noticed something, a small patch of green far below him. Staring at it, he finally decided that it was another garden, either the one he had come from, or yet a third garden. He turned around and looked up. He was clearly farther down the slope than he had been yesterday. It looked as though there was a line of gardens running down the slope of this enormous cliff. The bright orange glow of an approaching daybreak spread along the sky along the opposing range of mountains.

He turned back and walked slowly toward the gate of the garden. He was coming up to the garden when a flash of some quick motion caught his attention. Andrew looked up, startled, and standing in the gate, on four tawny legs was a . . . I don't know what to call it. Andrew told me later that it was really hard to explain. You could never look at it straight on to see what kind of animal it was, but it was still clearly an animal. It flashed past the gate on the inside, and then leapt up on top of the wall on the right side next

to the gate. Andrew looked quickly over to the left side and was surprised to see another of the creatures already sitting there, silently, as though he were waiting.

“Welcome to my home,” the creature on the right side said. His voice sounded deep, like black gravel. At first Andrew had thought the creature small, because of how quickly he had moved past the gate, but now he could see that it was quite large, a bit bigger than a lion. Two enormous wings swept back over its haunches, and its legs were more like a lion’s than a bull’s, but they were identical to neither. Even that was a guess, because it was hard to tell—it seemed that the creature was moving at a frightful speed just to remain where it was. It was hard to focus on any part of it, but looking at the head was particularly difficult. At first, the head looked like a bull, but it kept changing, or Andrew kept changing his mind about what it was—he was not sure. After the bull, he thought it was an eagle, and after that, it seemed like a man. Andrew looked off to the side so that he would not have to decide what he was seeing. He was terrified in some way—at least in his legs which felt like pillars of stone. But for some reason his mind remained calm.

“Thank you,” Andrew said. “What are you?”

“I am the guardian of gardens. I have even walked in the garden of God.”

“Are you a servant of God?” Andrew asked.

“I do not guard my gardens by answering questions. I pose them. I ask my questions. Those who answer my riddle may enter, and those who do not are therefore given to me.”

Before he had been inside, and the dragon was out. All he had to do was say *no*. But now, he was outside and had to do more than simply make a decision. “What do you do with those who are given to you?”

“I devour them.” The creature did not say this as though it were angry, or hungry. It just said it.

“And suppose I do not choose to answer your riddle? Suppose I do not play the game?”

“Those who are cowards are given to me as well.”

Andrew’s mind was still calm, although he didn’t know why. “Ask your riddle then.”

The creature threw its head back and with a strange chanting sound he said the riddle, as though it were a holy thing:

What falls but never breaks?

What breaks but never falls?

Andrew turned and walked back to the edge of the cliff. He had no doubts that the creature could catch him if he tried to climb down. And neither did he doubt that it would devour him if he failed at the riddle. What was curious was his confidence that this—he decided at that