The Ogress and the Orphans

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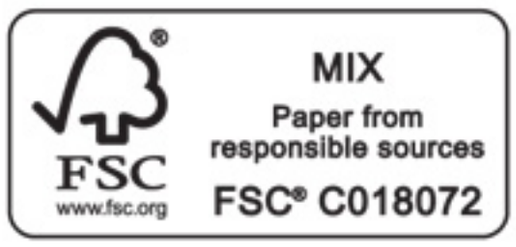
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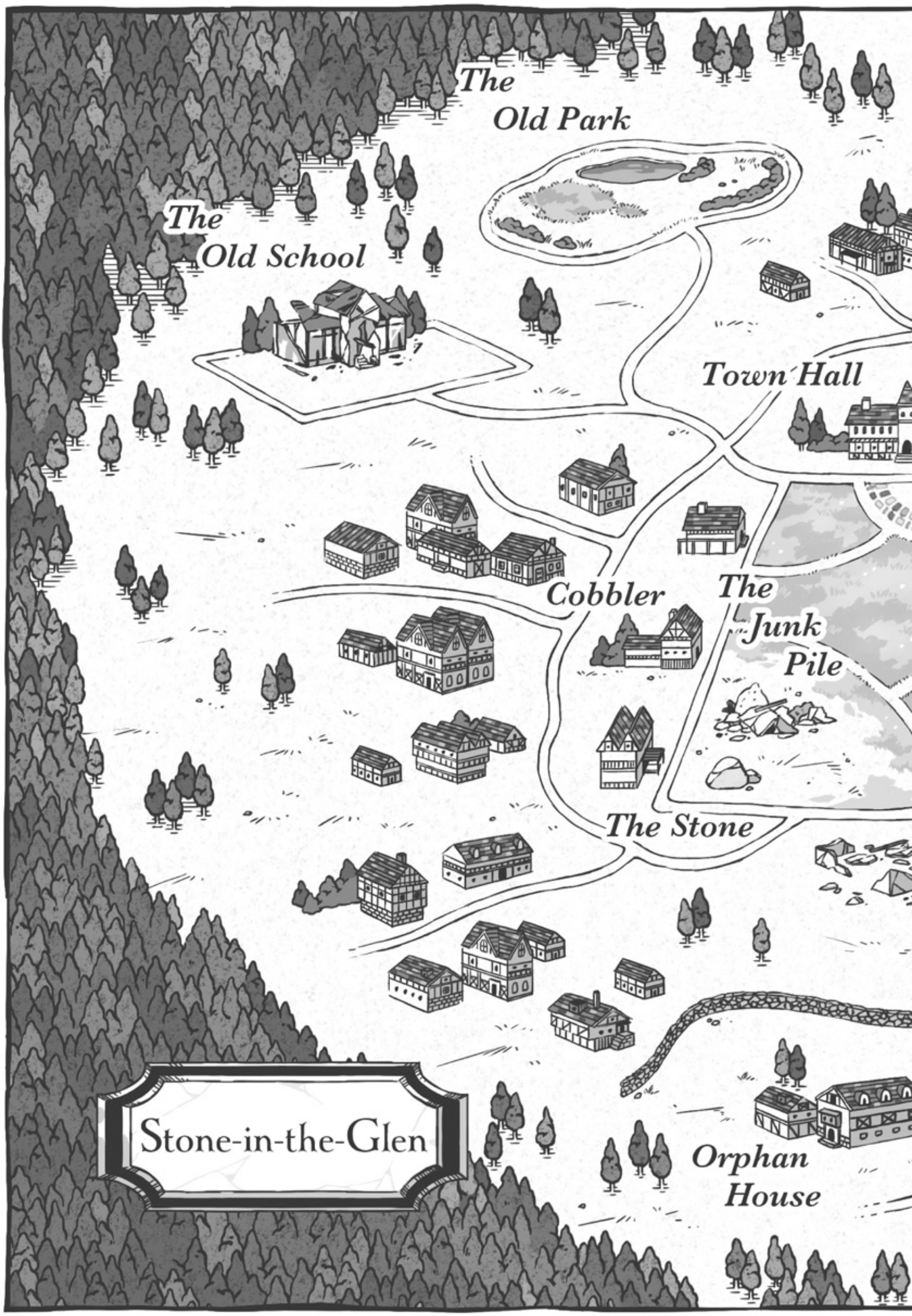
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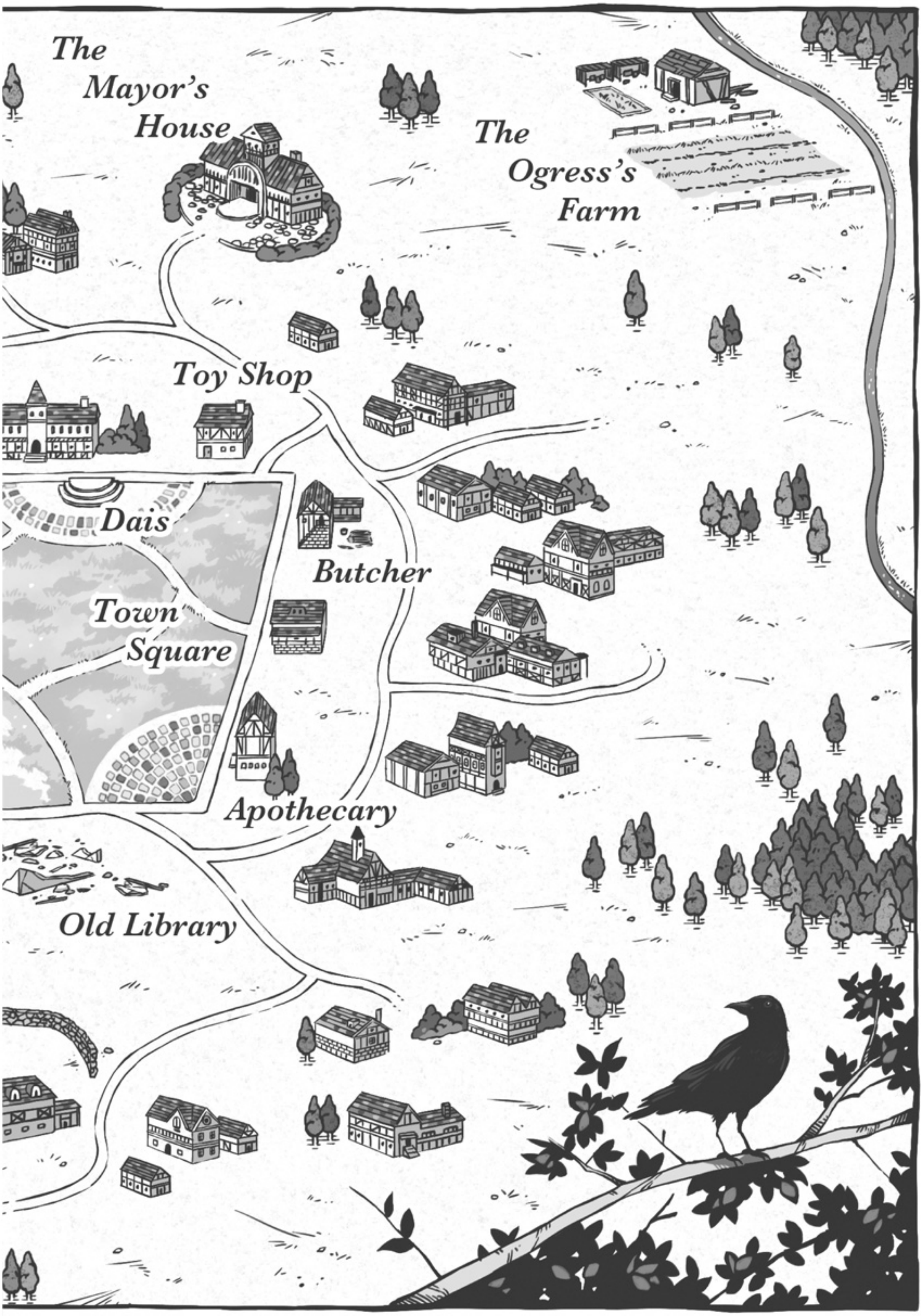
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The Old Park
The Old School
Town Hall
Cobbler
The Junk Pile
The Stone
Stone-in-the-Glen
Orphan House


The Mayor's House
The Ogress's Farm
Toy Shop
Dais
Butcher
Town Square
Apothecary
Old Library



Pay Attention.

Listen.

This is a story about an ogress.

She is not who you might think she is.

(But really, is anyone?)

The Ogress lived in a crooked house at the far edge of town. She enjoyed baking and gardening and counting the stars. Like all ogres, the Ogress was quite tall—even sizable adults would have to crane their necks and squint a bit to say hello. She had feet the size of tortoises, hands the size of heron's wings, and a broad, broad brow that cracked and creased when she concentrated. Her skin was like granite, and her eyes looked like brand-new pennies. Her hair sprouted and waved from her head like prairie grass—stiff and yellow and green, sometimes spangled with daisies or dandelions or creeping ivy. Like all ogres, she spoke little and thought much. She was careful and considerate. Her heavy feet trod lightly on the ground.

This is also a story about a family of orphans. There were fifteen orphans living in the Orphan House at the time our

story begins, several years after the Ogress first arrived in town. There were too many children for one house, but they made do. Their names were Anthea, Bartleby, Cassandra (who preferred Cass), Dierdre, Elijah, Fortunate, Gratitude, Hiram, Iggy, Justina, Kye, Lily, Maude, and the babies, Nanette and Orpheus. They were good children, these orphans: studious and hardworking and kind. And they loved one another dearly, ever so much more than they loved themselves.

The Ogress, too, was hardworking and kind and generous. She also loved others more than she loved herself.

This can be a problem, of course. Sometimes.

But it can also be a solution. Let me show you how.



The Dragon

This is also a story about a dragon. I do not like to talk about him much. I don't even like to think about him.

I should clarify: It is not my intention to speak ill of dragons generally. It is a terrible practice to prejudge anyone, be they ogres or orphans or dragons or nosy neighbors or assistant principals or people with unusual manners. It is important, always, to treat everyone with compassion and respect. This is well known.

As for dragons in particular, they are as diverse in their dispositions as any other creature. I, myself, have encountered dragons of every personality type—shy, gregarious, lazy, fastidious, self-centered, bighearted, enthusiastic, and brave.

But *this* dragon, I'm sorry to say, was none of those things. This dragon was greedy, perfidious, and indifferent. He felt no remorse, and he had not been redeemed. He delighted in discord and sowed acrimony wherever he went. These are all large words, and I apologize for them. But my feelings about this dragon are *large*.

Listen.

I would like nothing more than to tell you that every person—human, dragon, or any other kind of creature—is fundamentally *good*. But I can't tell you that, because it is not in my nature to lie. Everyone starts fundamentally good, in my experience, and nearly everyone stays mostly good for the most part. But *some* . . . well. They choose to do bad things. No one knows why. And then a small number of *those* choose to *stay bad*. I wish it weren't true. But it's best you know this now, at the beginning of this book. Every story has a villain, after all. And every villain has a story.



The Town

This is also a story about a place, called Stone-in-the-Glen, which used to be a lovely town.

Everyone said so.

Stone-in-the-Glen had been famous for its trees. Shade trees in parks, blossoming trees in the walkways. Fruit trees lining the neighborhood streets, with limbs that bent under the weight of an abundant harvest each season. Anyone—any neighbor or friend or visitor from far, far away—could reach up when the time was right and simply help themselves. People filled their baskets with apricots and persimmons, cherries and plums, apples and pears, depending on the time of year. They perfected recipes for tarts and pies and jams. They cooked fruit into candies, which they kept next to their front doors to give out to neighborhood children as they passed by.

The streets in Stone-in-the-Glen were a thing to behold in those days. People walked slowly under blossoming, or green, or fruiting boughs, taking their time as they enjoyed the dappled shade. Each night, street sweepers and scrubbers washed the

cobblestones clean. The lamps, made from blown glass and polished lovingly by hand, glittered at night, like stars. The street signs hadn't yet gone missing, nor had the public art, back when it was a lovely town.

In those days, townspeople lounged in the promenades and the public square, discussing literature or politics or philosophy or art. All roads in town then led to the Library, which had wide windows, tall shelves, and deep cushions on the sofas, and which welcomed everyone. There were hand-bound books and modern books and ancient scrolls, and even texts carved into stones. The librarians bustled this way and that, sorting, preserving, shelving, and shushing. Even their shushes were lovely.

Neighbors worked together to make soup for the sick and cookies for classrooms. They swarmed like worker bees when a tree fell on a fence or when a roof needed mending or when somebody's mother had broken a leg. Neighbors cared for one another once upon a time. Back when it was a lovely town.

But then, one terrible night, the Library burned.

Different people remember terrible events differently. There were many stories explaining what happened that night in Stone-in-the-Glen, and nearly all of them disagreed. Some insisted that it was a miscreant who set the fire, claiming that they had heard footsteps echoing with sinister purpose, moving toward the venerable building and then scampering away once the flames erupted. Others swore they had heard the wings of a dragon flying overhead. Dragons were more common in those days than they are now, after all. And who loves fire more than a dragon? Others shook their heads and said that the fire had

been inevitable—the place was a tinderbox. Old wood and old paper and the occasional candle that someone left unattended. *A disaster waiting to happen*, they said gravely.

(If anyone had asked me—and no one did—I could have told them that they were all correct. There was indeed a candle left burning. And then, I heard the malevolent footsteps, approaching in the dark. Within moments, a dragon unfurled itself into the fullness of its size and power at the back of the Library, the bright gleam of its scales shattering the night. I watched as it slithered up the side and coiled its long neck around the western turret. It grinned as it unhooked its jaws. I would have told anyone if they had asked me. But no one asked.)

While there was little consensus among the townsfolk about the fire's cause, everyone was in perfect agreement regarding what happened next—how the bells rang in the middle of the night and everyone, from the oldest to the youngest, raced from their beds, pulling coats over their nightclothes and sliding bare feet into galoshes. They ran through the darkened streets, carrying buckets, following the billowing smoke and that awful firelight. The fire, they say, rose in great towers over the Library, so bright it hurt their eyes just to look at it.

Heat poured from the building in great waves, crackling people's eyelashes and shriveling the leaves in nearby trees. Books flew out the melting windows like panicked birds, their wings bright and phosphorescent. They were beautiful for a moment, the town remembers, the way a heart is beautiful in the moment before it breaks.

The people of Stone-in-the-Glen arranged themselves into a line, desperately passing buckets, throwing water onto the

flames. It was a useless exercise. The fire was too big. The wood beams were too dry. And paper has no choice but to burn.

For years after, the burned library remained in place, a tangle of ash and old metal and fallen, charred stone, situated between the Orphan House and the Center Square. No one had the heart to clear the debris away. No one could bear to touch a single stone. When people walked by, they held their breath.

The children in the Orphan House grew up next door to the remains of the Library. They could smell the smoke and ash. At night, the ghosts of old books haunted their dreams.

After the Library burned, the town's school, too, burned down. A tragic coincidence, everyone agreed. They held on to one another and grieved. Soon after, several other buildings burned as well—homes, shops, beloved spaces—in a rash of fires that spanned a little more than a year. After the fires, the fruit trees, and then the blossoming trees, and then the shade trees began to die off. A blight, people said. Perhaps caused by the smoke. Or that terrible heat. Or terrible luck. The people in town watched in sorrow as tree after tree came down.

And with the trees died the shade. The light in Stone-in-the-Glen became a constant, searing whiteness, and difficult to bear. People squinted to look at one another, their faces creased into permanently angry expressions.

Without the trees, there was no root system to soak up the water when it rained, and Stone-in-the-Glen began to experience damaging floods, one after another, which finally caused an enormous sinkhole to open up right next to the beautiful park where the children in town used to play, nearly swallowing it whole. It was too dangerous to play there anymore.

Indeed, it began to feel too dangerous to play anywhere in Stone-in-the-Glen. There was no shade. There were no trees to climb. The whole town seemed to scowl. Neighbors glared at one another with creased brows and narrowed eyes.

People retreated into their homes. They stopped letting their children wander freely. They locked their doors and latched their shutters. Shut away and apart, they stopped thinking about their neighbors and stopped helping their neighbors. There was no more soup for the sick, no more sweets for children, no more cookies for classrooms (well, that goes without saying, as there were no more classrooms). Best, people thought, that we keep to ourselves.

And so they did. They peeked through their shutters at the empty streets, with a sadness in their hearts.

It used to be such a lovely town, people said.

But it isn't anymore.