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opening extract from

Fly By Night

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Note – The Fractured Realm

Parliament

Responsible for setting up the Committee of Kingmakers, established to decide who is truly destined to wear the crown. But as the decades have passed and no decision has been reached, a fractured realm has been born. The Capital follows Parliament still, but every other fragment flies a flag to a different possible king or queen.

Duke of Mandelion, Vocado Avourlace

Rules in name in Mandelion, and petitions for the Twin Queens to be returned to the throne. Lady Tamarind is his sister.

The Guilds

With the Realm shattered and no one king or queen to look to, the various guilds of skilled working men have grown stronger. They maintain an uneasy, though jealous, alliance with one another – and so keep a kind of common order throughout the Realm.

- *The Company of Locksmiths – a guild of key- and lock-makers, led in Mandelion by Aramai Goshawk. No door can be locked against a skilled Locksmith. And their power grows in the light of this knowledge.*
- *The Company of Stationers – a guild of printers and book-binders, led in Mandelion by Mabwick Toke. Masters of the printed word and all printing presses. If a text does not bear the Stationers' seal, it is heresy and must be burned.*
- *The Company of Watermen – a guild of boatmen, policing the river and those that would travel upon it.*

The Beloved

From Goodman Palpitattle, He Who Keeps Flies out of Jams and Butterchurns, to Goodlady Prill, Protector of Pigs, these are the gods that the people of the Realm make their berry and bread offerings to. Days and hours are sacred to the different Beloved – babies are named according to the Beloved they are born under and people favour the Goodman or Goodlady of their choosing.

The Birdcatchers

Once custodians of all sacred texts, until they found the White Heart of the Consequence . . . then followed the Bad Time. But now all the Birdcatchers have been killed and the Stationers have burned their books.

Prelude – History for the Housefly

'But names are important!' the nursemaid protested.

'Yes,' said Quillam Mye. 'So is accuracy.'

'What's half an hour, though? No one will know she wasn't born until after sunset. Just think, born on the day of Goodman Boniface, a child of the Sun. You could call her Aurora, or Solina, or Beamabeth. Lots of lovely names for a daughter of the Sun.'

'That is true, but irrelevant. After dusk, that calendar day is sacred to Goodman Palpitattle, He Who Keeps Flies out of Jams and Butterchurns.' Quillam Mye looked up from his desk and met the nursemaid's gaze. 'My child is a bluebottle,' he said firmly.

The nursemaid's name was Celery Dunnock. She was born on a day sacred to Cramflick, She Who Keeps the Vegetables of the Garden Crisp. Celery had every reason to feel strongly on the matter of names. Her eyes were pale, soft and moist, like skinned grapes, but at the moment they were stubborn, resolute grapes.

Quillam Mye had a most meticulous brain. His thoughts were laid out like the strands of a feather, and a single frond out of place he felt like a tear in his mind. His eyes were dark and vague, like smoked glass.

The twin grapes looked into the smoked glass and saw a mind full of nothing they could understand.

'Call it Mosca and have done with it,' Mye said. Mosca was rather an old-fashioned name for a fly-born, but better than Buzzletrice or Caddis. He returned his attention to the task of writing his treatise. It was a history of the times in which he, and now his infant daughter, lived. It was entitled 'The Shattered Realm: A Full and Clear Account of Our Kingdom of Rags and Tatters'.

The door closed behind Celery, and Mye was dimly aware that the level of annoyance in the room had diminished. He was alone. But no, he was not alone.

From the wall a pair of eyes watched him. At the moment they were blue, but one of them already showed a peppery speckle which told Mye that one day they would be as black as his own.

The nursemaid had bound the baby in swaddling clothes as tight as an acorn in its cup, so that it could not learn to be wrigglesome. When the baby was nothing but a linen cocoon with a surprised little head peeking out, she had strapped it to a board to give it a nice straight back. The board was hung from a hook on the wall to keep it out of the way.

For the last month, for all the attention Mye had paid to it, the suspended baby might have been a picture hung upon the wall, albeit a picture whose eyes followed one around the room rather more convincingly than one might like. Now, however, it had a Name, and Names were important.

She had a name.

Mye was suddenly sorry that the girl would not have green eyes, like her dead mother. If he had thought about this for another moment, he might have regretted spending so much time among his books, writing of the fates of nations, while those green eyes were still open. However, he very sensibly caught himself in time and decided to think about something else.

But what would he do, now that his sight was weakening? He had always thought that in years to come dear Jessamine would help him with his papers.

Those wide, pepper-speckled eyes, watching from the wall . . . what a pity the child was a girl, and not a boy to be schooled!

'Well, you will have to do. If you had died along with your mother, I would have taught the cat to read.' Mye felt a brief qualm at the idea of turning his daughter into a freak by teaching her letters, but it could not be helped.

The baby watched as he stooped over his manuscript once more and picked up the quill. The study was so quiet and lonely, snug and sealed like a ship's cabin against the rain-blasted world. Once, while he still lived in the city of Mandelion, Mye had longed for such quiet, an escape from the distractions of horse-clatter and hawker-cry. His exile to the remote village of Chough had left him weary of stillness and the dismal, eternal trickle of water outside his window.

Mye laid down his quill again. He had no idea how to speak to a baby, he had no stories for children, and

he was embarrassed by the fact that, just for once, he wanted – or rather needed – to talk.

'Well, I suppose if you are to be of any use to me, then I had better start putting sense into your head before foolishness can blot the page.' Mye searched his pipe bowl for inspiration, and then thoughtfully fingered the dry wove of his manuscript. In it he had tried to make sense of the last thirty years of the Realm's history. It was hardly a bedtime story for a child.

But perhaps, told another way . . .

'Perhaps . . . we had better start with a story.

'Once, in a day that some still remember, there was a king who spent a lot of time devising beautiful gardens and thinking clever thoughts about the stars. He meant very well, and ruled very badly, and in the end they cut off his head, and melted down his crown to make coins.

'The Parliament ruled the country after that, and all the people who still thought there should be a king went into hiding, or retreated to the hills, or fled to other countries. The Parliament's leader ruled very like a king, but no one called him a "king", because names are important.'

Mosca, the newly named Housefly, offered no comment.

'The dead king had a son, whom loyal servants rescued and carried abroad. The boy prince travelled afar and became a man prince. He spoke with other kings, some of whom promised to help him win back his throne. He learned the etiquette of court, and found out which princesses were worthy to be his queen. And

then, while he was visiting a far-distant king in a land of burning sands, his camel unexpectedly bit off his nose. The prince took a fever and died the next day, through surprise as much as anything else.

'Those who thought there should be a king or queen now argued among themselves. Some thought the old king's daughter should rule, some his sister, some his cousin's son.

'Twenty years passed in this way, and the Parliament fell out with one another as well. They were too busy squabbling to notice their power being stolen away by a clever new enemy.'

Mye hesitated. Like everyone else who had lived through that time, he carried his share of terrible memories and once again he felt them stir, like the breath of a tiger against the back of his neck.

'A Bad Time came upon the Realm. For ten years . . .' Mye halted, looking up into his infant daughter's face. There was still a great deal of blue in her eyes. A fancy struck him that if he spoke aloud of the tortures, the mass gibbets, the screams from the pyres, he would see inkiness flood his daughter's eyes, to leave them as black as his own.

'Perhaps I . . . will wait until you are older before I talk to you about the Years of the Birdcatchers.

'But the Birdcatchers were overthrown and the Bad Time did pass. Afterwards, the monarchists and the Parliamentarians resumed their struggle for power. Each group of Royalists gathered an army and prepared to snatch the throne for their monarch of choice.

Parliament was frightened and prepared their own armies for war.

'And then one day, to their surprise, the leaders of the Parliament found themselves drinking tea with a group of quietly insistent men in very clean but well-used overalls who explained to them that they were not going to do anything of the sort. The Parliament were surprised, for these men were the heads of the guilds, the leaders of the watchmakers and locksmiths and stationers, and other skilled working men.' Mentioning the Stationers, Mye felt a tiny sting of bitterness, but he continued, '"If you go to war," said the guild heads, "you will suddenly find that there are no boots or coats for your troops. You will find that there are no flints for your pistols and no shot for your muskets."

'"No matter," said the leaders of the Parliament. "Our troops will be so inspired by their cause that they will fight in their shirts and their socks, and will use swords and stones if they cannot have guns." "Perhaps," said the guild heads. "But in the meantime even you will have no tea or marmalade for your breakfast tables, and no tailors to darn your robes of office when they tear." And so the leaders of the Parliament went pale and asked for time to think about it.

'Meanwhile, on their own lands, the Royalist supporters prepared to march on the Capital. But each and every one found themselves, one day, talking to a group of quietly insistent men in very clean but well-used overalls who explained to them that they would do nothing of the sort. "You will promise loyalty to the

Parliament," said the guild heads, "or your cityfolk will have no flour for their bread or slate for their roofs."

'"Our cause is so just," said the Royalist leaders, "that our people will hold out against a siege even if they are hungry and the snow piles up in their beds." "Perhaps," said the guild heads. "But in the meantime no one will set your wives' hair into ringlets, and your horses will be ungroomed." And so the Royalist leaders trembled, and said they would give an answer next day.

'The next day, the Parliament said that a monarch would be no bad thing, and set up a Committee in the Capital to look into it. One by one, the Royalist leaders came to join the Parliament, and waited to find out who was destined to take up the crown and return the nation to its remembered glory.

'That,' said Quillam Mye to his daughter, 'was seven years ago. Today the Realm still awaits the Committee's Decision. Shall I tell you what has happened since then? I will show you our nation. It is . . .' He reached for his supper plate. 'It is *this biscuit.*'

The Housefly stared at the biscuit obediently, perhaps trying to imagine that the ground beneath her was crunchy and full of almonds.

'Our "kingdom" is like *this.*' Mye brought his fist down sharply on the biscuit, fracturing it. 'See? It still looks like a whole biscuit, but it is cracked beyond repair. Every fragment flies a flag to a different king or queen. You see this?' He picked out a butter-browned fragment. '*This* chunk is the Capital and its lands. And *this* piece –' a piece crested with a large nut – 'is

Galdspar. *This* is Mandelion, and *this* is the counties of Amblevetch. But there is no biscuit any more. The biscuit where we once lived is dying . . .'

Familiar pains were throbbing behind his eyes, and he paused to let them pass. Little pale points came and went before his sight, as if a giant cat were kneading the tapestry of the world and letting its claw tips show through the cloth. He sighed, swept away the crumbs and dipped his quill to continue with his writing, then looked up at the baby one last time, as if she had said something to interrupt him.

'Well, if you are to help me with my work, you had better get used to stories without endings. True stories seldom have endings.'

Quillam Mye's great treatise on The Shattered Realm was never given an ending. Eight years later the historian Quillam Mye was dead, and his books had been burned. Twelve years after the night she was named, his daughter could be found hiding inside a dovecote, with a goose tucked under one arm.

A is for Arson

It was often said that only divine flame could persuade anything to burn in Chough. Many joked that the villagers cooked their dinners over marsh-lights.

Chough could be found by straying as far as possible from anywhere comfortable or significant, and following the smell of damp. The village had long since surrendered to a seeping, creeping rot. The buildings rotted from the bottom upwards. The trees rotted from the inside out. The carrots and turnips rotted from the outside in, and were pale and pulpy when they were dug out.

Around and through the village, water seethed down the breakneck hillside in a thousand winding streamlets. They hissed and gleamed through dark miles of pine forest above the village, chafing the white rocks and learning a strange milkiness. Chough itself was more a tumble than a town, the houses scattered down the incline as if stranded there after a violent flood.

By day the villagers fought a losing battle against the damp. By night they slept and dreamed sodden, unimaginative dreams. On this particular night their dreams were a little ruffled by the unusual excitement of

the day, but already the water that seeped into every soul was smoothing their minds back to placidity, like a duck's bill glossing its plumage.

One mind, however, was wakeful and nursing the black flame of rebellion. At midnight the owner of that mind could be found hiding in the local magistrate's dovecote.

This dovecote was large, and from the outside its conical roof bore a remarkable resemblance to a castle turret. At the moment, the dovecote was remarkably free of doves and remarkably full of twelve-year-old girl and oversized goose.

Mosca wore the wide-eyed look of one who is listening very carefully, and she chewed gently at the stem of her unlit pipe as she did so, feeling the splinters working their way up between her teeth. Her attention was painfully divided between the sound of approaching voices and the pear-shaped silhouette of a single dove against one of the little arched doorways above her. Trying to balance her weight on the slender perch poles with an agitated goose under one arm, Mosca was already regretting her choice of hiding place.

Each time a bird appeared at one of the openings, Saracen hissed. If the doves seemed to be hissing, this might make someone curious enough to investigate and discover Mosca hiding there at midnight with someone else's goose. Mosca had excellent reasons for not wanting to be dragged back home to face her Uncle Westerly and Aunt Briony. She had plans of her own, and none of them involved the sorts of punishments that would be

waiting for her if she was caught on this night of all nights.

'We're much beholden to you, sir. If you had not chanced by and warned us, the fellow might have been fleecing our gullible housewives a month hence.' It was the magistrate's voice. Mosca froze.

'It was not entirely a matter of chance.' A young man was speaking, his voice gentle and reassuring, like warm milk. 'When I changed horses at Swathe someone mentioned that a man named Eponymous Clent had been staying here for the last week. I knew him well by reputation as a villain and swindler, and your village was only a little out of my way.'

'Well, you must delay your journey a little longer, I fear. You shall stay the night and let me thank you in broth, beef and brandy.' The snap of a snuffbox opening. 'Do you indulge?'

'When it is offered so hospitably, yes.'

The dove stared. It could see something crouching among the tangle of perches. Something big, something dark, something breathing. Something that gave a long, low hiss like skates across ice.

Mosca kicked out, and the toe of her boot caught the dove just beneath the snow-white plum of its chest, causing it to tumble backwards into flight.

'Is something amiss?'

'No, I just thought for a moment . . .'

Mosca held her breath.

'. . . I thought I could smell smoke.'

'Ah, the snuff does have a touch of brimstone in it.'

'So . . .' The younger man sniffed once, twice, to clear his nose, and then spoke again in a less nasal tone. 'So you will no doubt keep Mr Clent in the stocks for a day or two, and then have him taken to Pincaster for further punishment?'

'I believe we must. Chough has a magistrate but lacks a gibbet . . .'

The voices faded, and a door clicked to. After a time, the faint orange ache of candlelight in the nearest window dulled and died.

The roof of the dovecote stealthily rose, and two sets of eyes peered out through the gap. One pair of eyes were coal beads, set between a bulging bully brow and a beak the colour of pumpkin peel. The other pair were human, and as hot and black as pepper.

Mosca's eyes had earned her countless beatings, and years of suspicion. For one thing, they had a way of looking venomous even when she held her pointed tongue. For another thing, her eyes wielded a power that was beyond everyone else in Chough except the magistrate. She could read.

Everybody knew that books were dangerous. Read the wrong book, it was said, and the words crawled around your brain on black legs and drove you mad, wicked mad. It did not help that she was daughter of Quillam Mye, who had come to Chough from Mandelion amid rumours of banishment, bringing city thoughts crackling with cleverness and dozens of dark-bound, dangerous books. Mosca might as well have been the local witch in miniature.

After her father's death, Mosca's eyes had at least earned her a roof over her head. Her uncle, the older brother of her dead mother, was glad to have someone to take care of his accounts and letters. His niece was useful but not trusted, and every night he locked her in the mill with the account book to keep her out of trouble. This evening he had turned the key upon her as usual, without knowing that he was doing so for the very last time. He was now snoring like an accordion amid sweet dreams of grist and fine grain, with no inkling that his niece was loose yet again and embarked upon a desperate mission.

Mosca wrinkled her pointed nose in a sniff. There was a faint hint of smoke on the night air. Her time was running out.

A week before, a man named Eponymous Clent had arrived in Chough and talked his way into every heart and hearth. He had bewitched the entire village with an urbane twinkle. That afternoon, however, Chough had fallen out of love with him just as quickly and completely. Word had spread that a visitor to the magistrate's house had exposed Clent as a notorious trickster and cheat. Dusk had seen him shackled in the stocks and almost friendless.

Almost, but not quite. Since the burning of her father's books, Mosca had been starved of words. She had subsisted on workaday terms, snub and flavourless as potatoes. Clent had brought phrases as vivid and strange as spices, and he smiled as he spoke, as if tasting

them. His way with words had won him an unlikely rescuer.

The magistrate's house had originally been built on a raised lump of land with two deep cracks cut around it on either side, providing a channel for the water. This had been all very well, until the water had enjoyed one of its wild nights, in which it pulled the hillside into new shapes and threw boulders like dice. In the morning, the magistrate had found a hill of white silt and rubble piled up against the back of his house, and the sweet spring sunlight gleaming upon the streamlets as they poured across his roof and dripped in diamonds from his thatch.

In an attempt to snatch the magistrate's vegetable garden from the domain of the ducks, a local carpenter had constructed a simple shaduf, a long pole which seesawed on a central strut and had a bucket on one end to scoop up the water. The base stood on four wheels so that it could be moved around the garden.

Mosca slipped to a window of the magistrate's house, slid a knife into the frame, and levered the window slightly ajar. Against the opposite wall of the darkened parlour hung the magistrate's ceremonial keys.

Champing furiously on her pipe, she pushed her handkerchief into the bottom of the pail, then manoeuvred the long arm of the shaduf in through the window. The machine proceeded in jolts, as the wheels caught on rough ground, and the bucket swayed dangerously, now nearly rattling a pewter plate, now nearly chiming against a warming pan. A jolt forward, another jolt . . . the ring of keys was nudged off its hook

and fell into the bucket, its clang muffled by a handkerchief. The metal bucket gonged gently against the window frame as Mosca drew it back, and a moment later the magistrate's keys were in her hand. The key to his chest of silver plate, the key to the village's tithe box . . . and the keys to the stocks.

Mosca pulled off her boots and slung them around her neck, then hitched and pinned her skirts. Like many of the younger girls of Chough, she wore knee breeches under her skirts, to make wading easier.

She stooped to scoop up Saracen once again. Anyone else taking such liberties would have staggered back with a broken arm. However, Mosca and Saracen shared, if not a friendship, at least the solidarity of the generally despised. Mosca assumed that Saracen had his reasons for his persecution of terriers and his possessive love of the malthouse roof. In turn, when Mosca had interrupted Saracen's self-important nightly patrol and scooped him up, Saracen had assumed that she too had her reasons.

Beneath them, the white roofs of lower Chough glimmered under a bright moon as if they had been iced.

The milky water of Chough left white bathtub rings on the sides of stream beds. Plants that trailed in the flow grew chalky, until they dabbled in the water with leaves of stone. A sock left in a stream would petrify, until it seemed that a careless statue had left it there after paddling.

Children of Chough were told that if they misbehaved they would be hung upside down by their ankles

beneath the drip, drip of a waterfall, so that in the morning they would be stone children, their mouths still making whistle-shapes from spitting out the water.

There was no escaping the sound of water. It had many voices. The clearest sounded like someone shaking glass beads in a sieve. The waterfall spray beat the leaves with a noise like paper children applauding. From the ravines rose a sound like the chuckle of granite-throated goblins.

The goblins chuckled at Mosca as she scrambled down the slicked roof of Twence the Potter's hut. She realized that she would never hear the sound of their chuckle again, and to her surprise felt a tiny sting of regret. There was no time for hesitation, however.

The next house down the slope belonged to the Widow Wagginsaw. Mosca misjudged the leap on to the domed roof, and landed heavily. Her bootsoles slithered, and she fell to her knees.

Below, a sleep-choked voice quavered a question, and a tinderbox hissed and spluttered into life. Here and there across the cracked surface of the roof, Mosca saw veins of dim, reddish light appear. Someone was moving slowly towards the door with a candle.

Mosca hugged herself close to the chill, wet stone, and started to wail. The wail started deep in her throat, soared like an off-key violin, then dropped into a guttural note. She repeated it, and to her intense relief it was answered by a choir of similar wails below, all tuned to different pitches.