

THE FLAMES OF THE FAE

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*The story of the creation of the
British Bureau for the Arcane*

Quentin Quartermaine shook his head in quiet resignation. Everything he did was quiet. The final report from his headteacher at Eton spoke of ‘supreme quiescence’, the measure of a man who maintained a calm persona despite the odds. His father was no different. It had been a factor in Charles II choosing him as one of his four “greyhounds”, royal messengers defined by the silver canine emblem worn by each man. A role that would be eventually handed down from father to son, if the monarch so wished.

The young man’s frustration arose from the heated argument, currently ensuing in the drawing room of the house he’d rented specifically for the meeting.

The building offered the level of grandeur and luxury befitting his guests, emphasising their social standing as royalty. Its salons gave each Court equal status, ensuring there could be no accusations of prejudice or favouritism. Last, and by no means least, the manor house lay far enough outside of London to offer privacy.



St. James Park offered majestic scenery, while being close enough to the Thames for the visitors to arrive discreetly, without attracting attention. Quentin Quartermaine thought he’d considered everything.

He was wrong.

His limited understanding of the fae was to blame.

Queen Tuathla of the Summer Court was young, feisty and beautiful, a woman capable of turning men's heads and then making them regret it if they displeased her. She had, according to rumour, ordered the death of her aging father. The threat posed by the man, sat across the table, the motivation.



His subdued manner belied the Machiavellian mind behind the cool eyes and the wolfish smile. King Caolán ruled the Winter Court with an iron fist within a velvet glove. If the stories were true, his political rivals had a habit of vanishing, or finding themselves in embarrassing situations, robbing them of credibility. Neither monarch could be trusted, both employed strategies guaranteed to provoke the other, making war inevitable.

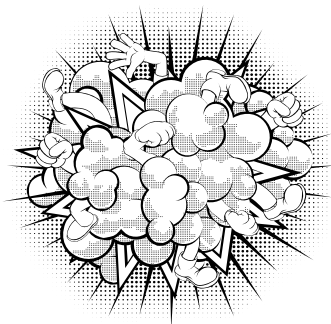
The young diplomat's problem centred around ignorance. The fae race maintained its distance from any human interaction. The cause was resentment. The fae had inhabited the Earth for longer, they considered themselves its custodians. Humanity were interlopers, a recent infestation, a consequence of their ability to breed like rats. It drove the older race to remote locations, to escape the detritus and decadence of such vermin.

Quentin Quartermaine was a curious-minded soul. In this respect he mirrored many of his generation, who had lived through the upheaval of the Civil War and Oliver Cromwell's malign Commonwealth. The Restoration brought invention and exploration – for young men in their twenties, curiosity was a prerequisite for ambition and influence. When his father, at his monarch's behest, suggested his son readied himself to intervene in the worsening political landscape of the fae, Quentin embraced the challenge. He spent time with each Court, at the invitation of its royalty, obviously.

They respected that effort, as well as his willingness to learn. At least, on the surface. His experiences, in both Courts, quickly led Quentin to believe he was being herded around like a prize bull in a country show. All he needed was a ring through his nose.

Having displayed his gesture of quiet resignation for all to see, Quentin placed his hands on the table and stood up. 'Your royal highnesses, and esteemed representatives of both Courts, I believe we have reached an impasse.' He paused to take a breath, primarily to watch the reaction to his statement. There wasn't one. Everyone remained stony-faced. 'For diplomacy to work, there must be trust. It doesn't need to exist in large quantities at first, it is built, a little at a time. Built by give and take. By compromise. I do not see that happening.'

'Not for the want of your efforts, Mr Quartermaine. We in the Winter Court recognise and appreciate your hard work in finding a solution to our predicament.' Caolán bowed his head in a gesture of respect.



Queen Tuathla stirred; her beauty clouded by anger now. 'Careful, Mr Quartermaine, be watchful of my wintry cousin. His habit is to lodge his tongue in your nether regions, while withdrawing his knife from its sheath, to stab you in your vitals.'

The man was on his feet, roaring his fury.

She was on her feet instantly, with her own knife ready. Her courtiers, who were more likely soldiers than administrators, leapt to her defence. In seconds, chaos swept across the room.

The King's Troop of Horse Guards, a recently assembled and newly professional unit, secured peace swiftly. They were men who'd seen vicious battles during the Civil War, they did not hold back from doing their job. Thirty minutes later, with injuries bandaged and blood stemmed, Quentin Quartermaine stood in front of both monarchs.

'Your royal highnesses, you leave me no choice. Your rivalry and squabbling threaten the nation's peace, a commodity we have only recently acquired. I will not have it placed in jeopardy, by your pettiness.'

The young man raised an imperious finger to halt any objections. His soldiers ensured obedience, by brandishing their weapons.

'You leave me no alternative but to restrict your activities until such matters can be resolved. You will both be held as guests of His Majesty, where I will negotiate with you individually, to reach an acceptable solution. Perhaps, denied your customary lifestyles, you will consider my compromises with greater readiness.'

The queen glared. 'You plan to hold us prisoner?'

Quentin smiled; he could provoke reaction too. 'Not at all. As His Majesty's guests, you will be afforded the care and attention you deserve, until matters are resolved.'

‘Where are you keeping us?’ the fae king snarled.

‘In the Tower of London.’

‘It’s a prison! Guests, my arse!’
Tuathla screamed, red-faced now.

‘We will make you suffer for these indignities!’ Caolán bellowed.

‘I’m sure we will find a solution to your differences. Plus, because you both believe the other is ready to wage war, that will not be possible while you are our guests. I’ll visit you both, next week.’



‘Next week,’ the pair said simultaneously.

Quentin offered a casual shrug. ‘Yes, I’m afraid I have business in France demanding my attention. But you can be assured, I will visit you the instant I return.’

He left the room, ignoring the shouts of protests from the two fae monarchs, as they were escorted to their waiting carriages. There was no business in France, Quentin simply wanted to give them time to adjust to their new quarters, and the reality they now faced.

The solution appeared to be neat and simple. Time was all that was needed to inculcate the motivation needed to arrive at a peaceful conclusion. Quentin Quartermaine was about to discover that, where the fae were concerned, simplicity was never the answer. They were far too devious for that.

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London baked. There hadn’t been any rain throughout the whole of August and the city was tinder dry. The city’s wooden buildings absorbed the heat, pushing up temperatures still further, turning the place into a huge, over-populated oven. Water supplies failed. The result was a summer of anger and frustration, that frequently boiled over to violence. Neighbours’ squabbles turned into fights, bubbling resentments exploded into feuds that sparked murders and riots. London was a melting pot of conflict, waiting for a spark to ignite a war.

After more than two months, Quentin Quartermaine's gamble had failed. Tuathla and Caolán refused to cooperate. As their imprisonment lengthened, they even refused to speak to the young man. Compromise had vanished off the table, to be replaced by the same acrimony that consumed the city. Quentin's biggest mistake lay in allowing his guests to receive visitors. They conveyed messages, stoking anger at the humans' arrogance at imprisoning their leaders. Reactions that led to a complication no one anticipated.

The outcome might have been viewed as ironic, had things not ended so badly. Both Courts set about achieving a common goal, to free their monarch, without knowing what the other side was doing.

August had melted into September and the city crackled with tension. Its human citizens knew nothing of the impending catastrophe. The fae neither. Their intentions were entirely accidental, driven by a need so deeply engrained in their DNA, they couldn't conceive of any other outcome. Or the costs it would incur.

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Darkness wrapped the silent knot of Winter Court warriors as it snuck through the narrow, winding streets radiating from the Tower of London.

Escape had been easier than anticipated. The heat hadn't eased and had left guards bleary with fatigue, and slow-witted by boredom. Intense distillations of chamomile and lavender, soaked into wads of soft cotton, rendered the sentries unconscious in seconds.

A deliberate strategy, which had nothing to do with saving human lives, but rather one that concealed their activities. A sleeping guard was not suspicious, a dead one was.



Damhán pulled his king closer, bundling him into a doorway as footsteps approached. Such manhandling would have resulted in imprisonment, or worse normally. He'd apologised in advance; their discovery would likely lead to their deaths. Caolán agreed and dismissed the man's concerns, he was more than grateful for his captain's bravery and resourcefulness. He would reward the man hugely on their return home.

Doireann, a slight, wiry soldier in Damhán's unit, threw a dark woollen blanket over everyone, turning them into shadows. They waited, listening while footsteps drew closer. No doubt the City Watch, patrolling the streets. As the sounds receded, they hurried along Petty Wales, through Gloucester Court's tavern-ringed square, and onto Tower Street.

Everything was going to plan. They would make their appointment by London bridge with plenty of time, their boat would whisk them out of the city, before the humans knew what had happened. Damhán allowed himself a smile. For someone whose responsibility for his king's safety weighed heavily on his broad shoulders, it was a luxury rarely afforded.

He would regret it.

Destiny would make sure of it.

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Naoise had brought a disguise for her queen, one that blended in with the rest of her unit. She'd bought them from a dressmaker, on Billingsgate market, the day before. An all-female group, Naoise reasoned, would draw less attention. They were just a few maids, innocent and helpless. Not seasoned warriors at all.

Taking Lower Thames Street, with its close proximity to the riverbank, was a risk. Fishermen would be unloading their catch at that time of night, ready for the markets in the morning. A group of young maids, for men who'd been at sea for several days, would be a tempting catch. To discourage the approaches of rampant fishermen, the women applied makeup that looked like pustules and warts to their faces. It worked. The frenetic activity allowed the fae women to blend in with the human traffic, amidst the night's heat and the bad-tempered bickering it provoked.

'We're nearly there, your majesty,' Naoise whispered to Tuathla. 'We'll soon have you home.'

It was to be another statement of complacency the woman would regret.

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Destiny requires coincidence. Moments in time which merge, to synchronise into events that play their part in history. Kept in different parts of the Tower of London, the two monarchs and their forces, never met. If they had, in such a constrained space, matters would have been different. The likelihood is they would have killed each other and that would have been that.

Instead, they escaped the Tower and followed different routes through the city. The chances of them encountering each other reduced massively, given the plethora of streets and alleyways. Their plans had involved such secrecy, it never occurred to anyone to spy on the other side's intentions. With only one quay on the Thames near enough to aid their escape, London Bridge would have posed the choke point.

Neither team made it there.

New Fish Street, as it was called at the time, served one purpose. To transport the day's catch from the river to the marketplaces in the city. The road was straight, to allow horses and carts to pass each other, in the rush to convey huge quantities of fish quickly, ensuring the produce remained fresh.

The two Courts arrived at either end of New Fish Street, at exactly the same time. They spotted each other instantly, despite the rumbling carts, the harassed drivers and the fishmongers returning from perusing the latest catch. The humid air made the whole place stink. The heat made the toiling workers sweat. Temperatures made tempers flare. Amidst all of this human exasperation, two enemies faced one another, suspicion and distrust flourished.

There could be no coincidence. The other side had planned a trap.

That was all it needed. Heat, exasperation and coincidence.

The two forces attacked each other.

Both sides came prepared, though their weaponry had been intended for human enemies. Ordnance which humans would never have recognised. Having fought in the Civil War, humans would have been familiar with a flintlock pistol and its accompanying powder flask, as well as pikes and swords. Instead, they saw devices that discharged, what one eyewitness described as, "a line of light so bright, it could have been a ray from the sun." A few recognised crossbows, but not "arrow-like projectiles made of fire".



Fire.

Beams struck buildings, setting alight timber dried out by the relentless heat. As the combatants responded, humans sought cover behind whatever objects they could find. Without much in the way of defensive positions, the battle spread quickly. To the humans, confused and dazed by the attack, it felt like they were the ones being pursued. Some fought back, improvising with whatever objects came readily to hand.

It was a frightened horse, still attached to an empty wooden cart, that caused the most damage. Terrified by the flames leaping from the cart, the horse stampeded along New Fish Street and onto Pudding Lane. A baker, Thomas Farriner, was already up and about, with his day's produce already in the ovens. He'd stepped outside to find the cause of the mayhem and stepped into the path of the runaway steed.



It veered out of his way and straight into the bakery. The heat of the bakery, the rotting beams that held the building upright, the animal's panic, was enough. The cart broke apart, freeing the horse, allowing it to escape the chaos. The fire quickly took hold. Mr Farriner watched his business go up in flames, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

And the rest is history.

Except it isn't.

The battle on New Fish Street and its surrounding alleys, continued until the flames offered enough of a distraction to halt the conflict. Those humans not involved in defending themselves from the people with weird weapons, set about finding leather buckets to fill with the scant quantities of water available. Defending themselves from their sworn enemy, as well as hostile and belligerent humans, turned into a rout for the fae.



Both monarchs recognised the need to escape, before blame could be apportioned. They clung to the hope none of the human witnesses would recognise who they were.

A futile one, given the technology used, which numerous witnesses insisted on calling 'magic'.

They, along with the surviving warriors, raced to the riverbank, to flee on the boats impatiently waiting for their royal passengers.

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The Great Fire, as it was quickly named, destroyed thirteen thousand, two hundred houses, eighty-seven parish churches, The Royal Exchange, Guildhall and St. Paul's Cathedral. The Royal Navy used gunpowder, to destroy houses to create fire breaks, a desperate measure intended stop an inferno from engulfing the city. The financial cost was enormous. The annual income of the city in 1666 was twelve thousand pounds. The cost of rebuilding amounted to ten million pounds.

Samuel Pepys, the diarist, described seeing King Charles II himself, fighting the flames. It's not surprising it heightened his interest in seeking retribution.



Tuathla and Caolán were recaptured and imprisoned in the Tower of London for a second time, though in less salubrious accommodation. The king took personal control of the writing of the peace treaty, which ensured the end of all hostilities.



It placed great emphasis on the execution of either monarch, guilty of precipitating any further conflict. Charles meant business.

It was Quentin Quartermaine who sought out the king, after the treaty, called the Carolean Codex, had been signed and ratified. He explained if the treaty was to have any meaning, it needed to be monitored, by an organisation capable of interceding, should that be necessary. Both men now understood the foolishness of trusting the fae, who would never cooperate in a peaceful manner.

The public could never know the real cause of the fire. It risked losing the fragile trust which existed across the country, after the Civil War and Cromwell's rule. Differences were not tolerated in Restoration England, blame and vengeance still held sway over the general public.

King Charles II, who'd lost his own father to such dangers, understood all too well what Quartermaine meant. He agreed and, despite the financial strictures, funded the creation of the British Bureau for the Arcane. He invited Quentin Quartermaine to become its first leader.

Quartermaine insisted on avoiding the traditional command structures seen in the army and navy, the Bureau was not a military agency. Finding an appropriate title proved difficult, the role needed to espouse leadership but in a subtle way that shunned formality. It was the king who came up with the idea, as he wrote Quentin Quartermaine's name on the Bureau's charter.

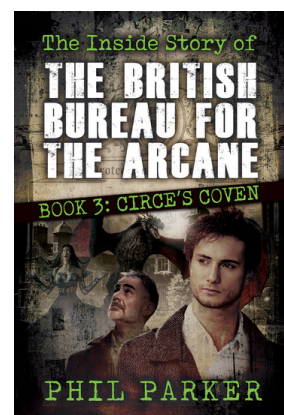
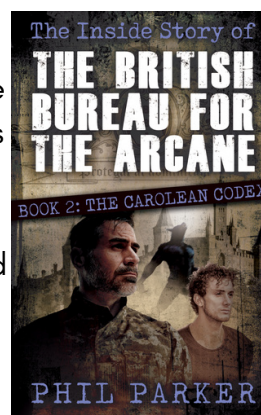
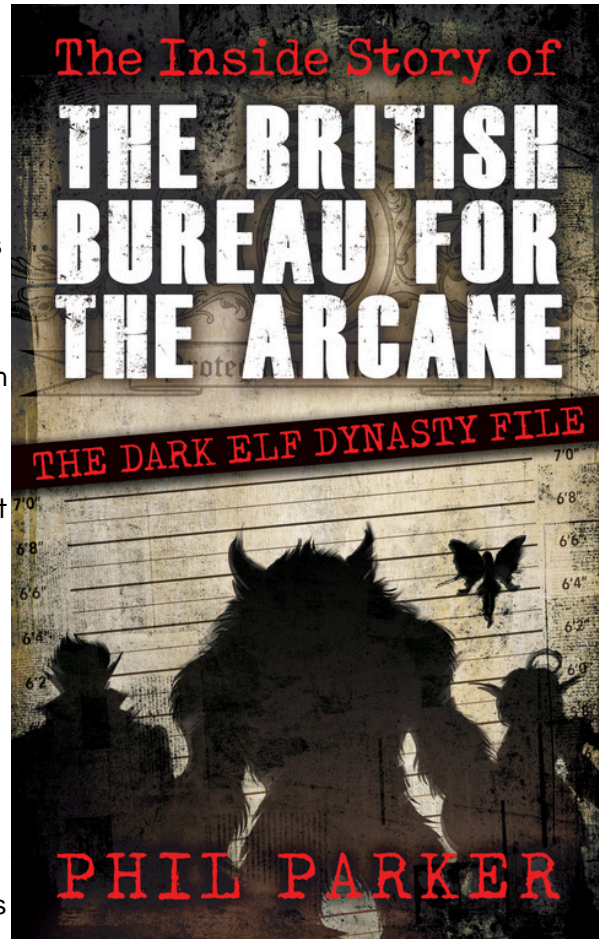
'The leader of the British Bureau for the Arcane will be called Q.'

THE BRITISH BUREAU FOR THE ARCANE SERIES

The British Bureau for the Arcane has kept people safe for centuries from the arcane species that seek to harm human beings. Their range extends to Commonwealth nations that were part of the British Empire. A once-proud part of the British Secret Service, their success in controlling the arcane races has been their downfall.

These beings now live on the edge of survival in remote parts of Britain. Or, at least they did. For Arlo Austin, a loyal but troubled agent for the Bureau, something is wrong. When he's sent to protect the citizens of the Shetland Isles from rampaging Norwegian trolls, it soon becomes apparent it was an attempt on his life. When another agent dies in mysterious circumstances, and Arlo is warned of an impending war with arcane species, his instincts are proved right.

But who is behind this rebellion? Could it be linked to Arlo's own bloodline as a Dark Elf? His traumatic childhood holds secrets, ones that are going to test his loyalty to the Bureau. In their cells another Dark Elf is held prisoner, one who is so despised by its staff, their hatred has extended to Arlo. This species is violent and vengeful, can they recruit one of their own to bring about the destruction of the Bureau? And in so doing, enable the arcane races to wage war against the human race.



Described by one reader as the “fantasy version of Men in Black”.



More details: https://linktr.ee/phil_parker

