



AGE OF FANTASY

THE SHORTENED PATH



SHORT STORY

Master Gilder scowled as he examined Bowen sitting at the desk before him. Then his eyes flicked over to the four other students sitting behind him. The library was uncomfortably silent; at this early hour, the typically bustling library was closed. It was only five students and the Master Mage inside.

"You have potential, Bowen," he said. "But you must learn that there are no shortcuts to knowledge. Your lack of self-control is precisely what is holding you back."

"What do you expect, Master Gilder?" A Mage called out from behind Bowen, nursing a black eye. "He's a backwater farm boy. You should tell the rest of the Master Mages to send him back to tend pigs so he can leave the spell work to his betters."

Bowen whipped his head around to respond, but Gilder gripped Bowen's shoulder tight enough to make him wince.

"Magic, Vaughn, does not hold the same respect for noble lineage as you or your family do. While their donations to Highford Academy have been generous, I would be doing them a disservice in allowing you to do as you please here."

"But why are the rest of us here?" Lynneth asked, glancing at the quiet twins sitting in the back, looking out the window.

"I heard, Lynneth, this fight broke out as you were helping both of them to cheat, but it appears neither of them changed the paper sufficiently. While the Spellwright twins just copied from each other..." Master Gilder replied with a sigh. "We have expelled students for less, but I suggested a different approach: the five of you will be tested as a single group, and your final grade shall be..."

The Master Mage coughed for a moment, letting his words weigh in the air.

"The suspiciously similar submissions on your last assignment were merely the first example of your 'group work'. Now, all of you will pass or fail together."

Lynneth's eyes widened as she looked over Vaughn and Bowen. "Those two have never studied in their lives! Look, I promise, I'll never do it again. I'll sweep the library and dust every shelf until I graduate..."

"Look, I asked Lynneth for help 'cause I ain't the best reader," Bowen bowed his head. "But I reckon that don't matter if I've got the talent. Give me a practical test and I'll ace it!"

"My decision is final," the Master Mage said. "You ought to be grateful for this opportunity to work together; each of you has strengths and weaknesses which the others may learn from. Remember, after all, that the alternative is expulsion. Now, if you need me, I will be in my office."

With that, the Master Mage turned and locked his office door.

"Alright," Lynneth groaned. "If my grades are going to depend on you, then you're going to get practice. Who here can show me a fire spell?"

"Well," Bowen gave a toothy grin, "Ol' Master Gilder always said I got a talent for fire spells..."

He lifted his staff and began to incant. A flash of fire exploded out of his staff like a fireball. Vaughn and the twins ducked behind their desks.

"You've got power, Bowen, but you need control!" Lynneth shook her head. "The mages in the council channel their power through the active caster... if we'd made that any stronger, the whole library would be on fire!"

Vaughn laughed, but Bowen's face turned red. He looked at the other four Mages that he had been assigned to work with; the two twins were both smiling with amusement in the back, while Lynneth scolded him like he was a little kid.

"Well, if I'm strong enough, then we ain't gonna need to channel magic," Bowen said. "I'm plenty powerful. All I gotta do is figure out how to control it... And none of this book learning is much good for that!"

"You know what? I agree, farm boy." Vaughn shook his head. "You go off and fail on your own if you want to. The rest of us have work to do."

"You heard Master Gilder, Vaughn! If Bowen fails, then the rest of us do too!"

Bowen started to walk away.

"Hey! Come back!" Lynneth shouted after him. "We've got to work together whether we like it or not."

As she spoke, Bowen's feet picked up speed. His walk turned into a jog, and soon he was running through the shelves. Lynneth tried to keep pace behind him, reluctantly followed by Vaughn and the twins. behind him.

Eventually though, the sounds of the other students' footsteps faded into the distance, and Bowen looked around. The shelves here were peculiar and old, catalogued with a key unfamiliar to him; he was in some section deep within the library that he had never been to before.

He'd heard rumours about strange corners of the library. Students sometimes whispered about obscure corners locked off away from students where the Master Mages hid their most powerful tomes and dangerous relics. Perhaps some old Master Mage had forgotten to lock it away after a late-night study session.

A flash of hope filled Bowen's heart as he moved closer to antique tomes filling these shelves hidden away in a quiet corner of the library.

Maybe one of these books would hold the key.

Bowen wandered through the aisles, running his fingers along each book. Many were written in unfamiliar languages or codes, others seemed highly technical, filling pages with specifications of reagents or theoretical speculation. Perhaps these old tomes were valuable to Master Mages, but none offered Bowen much help.

Then, his finger caught itself on the torn leather spine of an ageing book.

Bowen leaned forward, running his fingers gently over the letters which had lost their colouring and were almost unreadable.

"Ironquill's Shortened Path: Spells Made Simple."

The title seemed strange, but it promised Bowen just what he needed. If he could grasp the secrets of this book, then the Master Mages would have no choice except to keep him.

Carefully, he drew the book out and started to leaf through it.

It was exactly what he had hoped for: a practical approach to magic. No long discussions on minute theory or technical details padding out the text, but suggestions and variations for improvement. It was simple, practical magic.

Bowen looked around, his heart beating quickly. There was no one watching him. He was alone.

He wiped his hands on his cloak, then began to trace the letters on the page. As he did so, he realised some of the words and phrases were incomplete. Still, he pushed forward, stumbling in places but never stopping.

At the end, his head snapped up, looking straight ahead. Yet, rather than the comfortable warmth of a campfire, a stiff, cold breeze blew up against his face. Instead of his intended spell, he had opened a portal.

"No, no, no," Bowen said. "There's gotta be some way to close this..."

He quickly thumbed through the pages before flipping back to the start.

"Hm, I hadn't expected that portal to open again." A beaked face examined him through the portal.

Bowen stepped back in shock, colour draining from his face as a Daemon peeked back at him. Though Bowen was no expert, the Daemon's staff and hammer told him that this was not a mere Daemon Warrior but a Champion of Change.

"You have potential, though." The Champion of Change nodded. "I can work with you. Provided, of course, you are willing to cut a deal."

"I'm not working with a..." Bowen said, raising his voice before a feathered hand covered his mouth.

"Don't be so narrow-minded," the Change Daemon replied, leaning forward. "You happen to have a lot of knowledge at your fingertips in that library, while I have skills that I could teach you. If my little book were of any interest to you, then I believe we can make some kind of arrangement..."

"What d'ya mean?" Bowen asked, his voice cracking slightly as he spoke.

"I am Ironquill. The author of the very book in your hand. Unfortunately, the portal you opened was a little too narrow," the Champion of Change said. "All I need you to do is let me in and I will take you on as my student..."

Bowen looked at the book, and then his hand and pack at the portal he had opened accidentally.

"So what d'ya get out of it?" Bowen asked, furrowing his brow, though his voice still wavered.

"I believe in exchanging knowledge, and if you are where I believe you to be," the Daemon replied. "You have quite a lot of knowledge to exchange; all I want is a few books. In exchange, I can share all of the secrets I find inside... and the means to use them."

Bowen ran his fingers along the spine of the cover; the Daemon promised him the same secrets that had caused him to pick up the book. All he wanted in exchange was a few books. No one in the library would even miss them.

"What do I hafta do, then?" Bowen said, turning his face towards the ground.

"You started the spell, but you need to finish it," the Daemon replied. "Turn the page and finish your incantation."

Bowen searched through the book before finding the page and began to mutter the incantation softly. He closed his eyes as he felt the cool breeze kiss his forehead through the portal, growing colder.

Then, a footstep: the sound of talons against the library's wooden floor. Soon followed by another. Ironquill was

through. Then another footstep and another.

Bowen opened his eyes to see Change Warriors swarming in behind Ironquill. Soon, half a dozen Change Daemons had swarmed into the library, all of them moving up the shelves and tossing through books.

"Wait," Bowen said. "Who are those fellas?"

"Some friends to help me find my books," the Daemon cooed softly. "And deal with anyone who tries to stop us."

"They ain't supposed to be here!" Bowen began to move his hands and chant, trying to remember his spell, only for the chair next to him to catch fire.

The Daemon pushed Bowen aside with his staff, leading more into the aisle. "Careful now. I can't teach you if you destroy the books that you promised me..."

The Daemon's voice was calm, almost playful. Bowen, on the other hand, turned and started to run. The Change Daemons emerging from the portal barely noticed him.

"You'll be back..." The Daemon called after him.

Running through the maze of books, Bowen panted as he tried to find his way back to the entrance. Turning a sharp corner, he felt himself collide with something, knocking him straight onto his back.

He picked himself up to see Lynneth shaking her head on the floor in front of him, dazed from the collision.

"Aren't you going to say sorry?"

Lynneth's face hardened into a scowl as she picked herself up. Yet, as she saw Bowen's pale face and heard his ragged breaths, the hardness fell from her face.

"Bowen..." Lynneth's tone was soft, nearly a whisper. "What did you do?"

Bowen put both hands on Lynneth's shoulder, facing her. "I need ya ta get help. I opened up some portal, and now there're Daemons in the library!"

"What?" Lynneth paled and looked around. "We need Master Gilder. He should be in his office."

"But what if he expels us?" Bowen said. "Can't we try ta handle this on our own?"

The sounds of the Daemon's clawed feet echoed through the aisle, slowly getting closer. Lynneth looked at Bowen and then in the direction of the Daemons.

"We'll need the other students. We'll need to channel magic, for real this time," Lynneth said. "And no fire spells."

Bowen nodded. "Okay."

With that, Lynneth grabbed him, pulling him along, until she reached the twins.

"Hey," Lynneth asked, "have either of you seen Vaughn? We have a situation here."

The two students shook their heads until a familiar shout came from a couple aisles down. Without a word, both the twins pointed in the direction of its source.

Lynneth looked out in the direction of the library door; it was far away, but with a dash, she just might back it.

"We have to help him," Bowen lowered his head. "Even if I don't like him, we can't leave him to these Daemons. After that, we can get Master Gilder."

The twins nodded and, after a moment, Lynneeth did as well.

With that, the four apprentice mages ran in the direction of the shout. Bowen turned the corner first; he saw two Change Daemons grabbing Vaughn as he struggled.

"Look," One of the Daemon said, brandishing a knife. "We don't like this any more than you do, but we can't have any witnesses so..."

Bowen looked at Lynneeth, who muttered nervously. For a moment he thought of his own spells, but instead he turned to his companion: "Lynneeth... I can lend you my power if you can cast something here."

Lynneeth chanted, while Bowen inhaled deeply. The arcane energies flowed through Bowen as he felt out a hand and focused on Lynneeth, allowing them to drain out of himself into her. In the corner of his eyes, he saw the twins doing the same, touching each other's shoulders and each extending their other hand to Lynneeth.

The Daemon turned up as Lynneeth finished her spell, banging her staff down before her. With a word, she drained the energy from both Daemons, causing them to collapse wordlessly onto the ground.

"Okay," Lynneeth said, as she panted. "We did it..."

"Vaughn?" Bowen looked at his rival. "Y'alright?"

"Yeah..." Vaughn said with a shiver. "I could have defeated them, though."

"We will, Vaughn." Bowen said, extending his hand. "Together."

With a reluctant nod, Vaughn accepted Bowen's hand, allowing himself to be pulled up.

Then a slow clap echoed through the aisle. Bowen and the others turned to see Master Gilder.

"Well done, I must admit," Gilder said, a smile cracking over his wisened face. "Though you made a rather loud commotion considering this is, in fact, a library."

"Master Gilder!" Vaughn shouted. "There's Change Daemons loose here. You have to help us."

"I... well..." Bowen turned his head to the ground. "I tore open some kind of portal from a book called Ironquill's Shortened Path. The others didn't know I was doing that, so if anyone is gonna be expelled here, it should be me."

"Such matters are to be settled later," Master Gilder replied. "For the time being, it is most important that we close that portal. I will need focus and time; for that, you will have to stand watch. As a team. Do you think you are capable of that?"

The twins nodded quickly.

"Yeah," Lynneeth said, "Anything to get them out of here!"

Vaughn grumbled, "But Bowen here set them loose!"

"This is not the time for such matters, Vaughn," Gilder replied. "You must draw on all the strength you can get rather than tear each other down. Furthermore, I suspect young Bowen is the only one who can lead us to the portal."

Bowen nodded and started running with the others close behind him. As they ran, the clicking of Daemonic talons against wood followed after them; no doubt the Daemons knew that the Mage was running back to seal the portal.

Weaving quickly around a corner, Bowen arrived at the corner of the stack where he opened the portal. As its glowing edges shone from behind the stack, a smile crept over Bowen's face.

Gilder stepped forward and nodded. "I can seal this, but I will need time."

"A shame then," Ironquill crowed from down the hall, "that time is the one thing you do not have."

"We'll see about that, runt," Vaughn said, stepping forward and cracking his knuckles.

"Stall him," Gilder said, "I must concentrate on the portal. Do not allow him past."

Vaughn waved his hand in the air and began casting; Bowen saw his companion's skin beginning to thicken, taking on a muddy crust.

Yet as the spell started to take effect, Ironquill began to wave and chant as he approached slowly.

"Foolish child," Ironquill said as he stepped forward. "Do you think you have greater command of the arcane than me?"

Vaughn's eyes widened as he looked back to Bowen and the others. His fingers stilled, as though the spell had been snatched from his grasp.

"I will take some pleasure in punishing you for your arrogance," Ironquill said, looking at Vaughn as he brandished his hammer. Then the Daemon's eyes shifted to Bowen. "And for your betrayal. Perhaps I'll use my hammer to bash in each of your bones while I tear your magic from you..."

"You might be more powerful than Vaughn," Bowen stepped forward, "or me. But are you more powerful than all of us together? Everyone, we're supposed to be a Mage Council! Let's try to act like it."

With that, Bowen began to chant his spell, holding an open hand forward as he tried to concentrate.

Ironquill's tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth as he began casting again, trying to snatch the power out from Bowen's hands. Time seemed to slow as the Daemon stepped towards him. Ironquill's magic pulled away at his spell, threatening to unravel it like a ball of yarn before Bowen could even summon the energy to cast it. The heat of the magical flame forming in his hand seemed to flicker and fade as though it were a real flame, struggling for air.

Then, Bowen felt a sudden surge of arcane energy flowing through him. He felt the heat of the fire in his hand once more. Even as Ironquill tried to pull it away, Bowen only felt a greater surge of arcane power. For a moment he looked back, and over his shoulder he saw Lynneeth, Vaughn and the twins channelling their power to him. Locking his eyes onto Ironquill, he launched the fireball forming in his palm.

Caught off guard by the unexpected spell, Ironquill was knocked back into a shelf, sending it to the floor with a crash. The fireball, whether due to Ironquill's syphoning or through the efforts of his friends, was precisely the strength that it had needed to be. The aroma of cooked bird wafted into the air as Ironquill pressed his arm against his wound, but the surrounding books were safe.

"It's over Ironquill," Bowen said. "You can't beat all of us."

"No! I will not be denied my books!" Ironquill called out, "Get the Humans before they seal the portal!"

The footsteps of the Change Warriors grew closer as they burst through the shelves.

Vaughn looked at Bowen and then the others and said, "Lend me some power! I can cast my spell again!"

Bowen nodded. He felt drained from casting his own spell, but he closed his eyes and began to concentrate on Vaughn. At first, he imagined his classmate's sneering face, and then his black eye. But then Bowen thought of Vaughn confronting Ironquill first; while Vaughn could be annoying, he was clearly brave too.

Maybe, if they survived all of this, the two of them could maybe be friends. As Bowen thought of this, he held out his hand, giving what power remained to him to Vaughn. As he did, he felt his skin warm.

Bowen opened his eyes; licks of flame danced over his skin and clothes, while Vaughn turned to stone, and Lynneth's skin emitted a blinding light.

"Elemental Form," Lynneth said with a nod of approval. "That's a difficult spell."

"We need all the help that we can get," Vaughn said as the Daemons came into sight. "Be ready."

The Change Warriors charged forward. The twins stepped forward, firing off some bolts of arcane magic as the Daemons moved.

"No fireballs," Lynneth said. "They must be afraid of damaging the books. Be ready."

Vaughn charged forward; Lynneth and Bowen moved after him. Bowen punched, and the flames over his body caught on the feathers of the Daemon fighting him, forcing it to flee.

Lynneth battered another Change Warrior as he tried to shield his eyes from the blinding light engulfing her.

Vaughn, on the other hand, had the misfortune of coming against Ironquill himself. The Daemon Champion dodged his initial blow and then swung his hammer into Vaughn's stony form, knocking the apprentice mage into a shelf.

As Vaughn let out a shout of pain, Bowen rushed to him. The stone covering Vaughn's form began to fade, along with his spell as he fell onto Bowen's shoulders.

"Ah," Ironquill cooed as he prepared to bring down his hammer on Bowen's head, "It's wonderful when things work out so smoothly..."

"Have they?" Bowen asked, looking up at the hammer, "What about the way back?"

Ironquill tilted his head at Bowen before turning to the portal; soon it would be as narrow as it had been when Bowen first opened it.

"Whelp," Ironquill said with a tut, as if trying to make up his mind. Then, he dropped his hammer and began to run.

Seeing their Champion flee, the rest of the Daemons tossed aside their weapons and stolen books to hurry quickly after him. Master Gilder did not react, absorbed in his spell as he channelled his magic to close the portal even as Ironquill and his warriors squeezed through.

As the last Daemon pulled his leg through, Gilder spoke the final word of his spell, snapping the portal shut, leaving a single talon behind.

Taking a deep breath, the Master Mage looked over the damage of the library; Daemon weapons and books were scattered over the floor and more than a couple of shelves knocked over.

"It is over now." Master Gilder looked over the ransacked library. "Though, there is still the matter of consequences..."

Bowen bowed his head and let out a long breath.

"It ain't anyone else's fault but mine," Bowen said. "I stormed off and reckoned that I could prove myself all on my lonesome. So, if you're going to expel anyone..."

"No," Vaughn interrupted. "It was me. My family can pay for the damages, so no one needs to be expelled."

Master Gilder nodded sternly and turned to the others. "It seems we have two contradicting sources... what do the rest of you have to say? Does anyone else want to step forward?"

The twins glanced quickly at one another and then stepped up to Master Gilder, bowing their heads.

"What about you, Lynneth?" Master Gilder said. "You know the truth of the matter. What have you to say about this?"

"Well," Lynneth said. "I'm not going to say I did it... but we're supposed to be acting like a proper Mage Council, so I guess we're all responsible."

Master Gilder nodded sagely and touched his chin. He picked up the book which Bowen had used to open the portal and slipped it quietly into his robe.

"I cannot say I appreciate you trying to hide matters from your instructors, particularly matters as serious as this." Gilder paused, looking over the group. "But you have taken to heart some part of my message and acted as a team. I believe the lesson about not interacting with Daemons is one which you will not soon forget either. So, I will not report this matter. You all would be wise to keep it quiet as well."

Bowen's face relaxed. Bowen let out a long breath before turning to Vaughn, who managed a smile even as he gripped at a wound that Ironquill had left him. Lynneth tried to keep a straight face, but Bowen saw her pump her fist in celebration.

"But that does not mean there will be no consequences. All of you are to clean up the mess you have made in the library, and you will be back to clean up this library every week until you have finished your courses," Master Gilder said. "My terms from before stand as well; you will help each other to study, and if any of you fail, then all of you will. There may be no shortcuts to knowledge, but that does not mean you cannot help each other along the path."

"Thanks a load, Master Gilder!" Bowen said, throwing his arms around him. "Say what you will about Dustin's books; I'll take it over mucking out pig sties back home!"

A laugh echoed through the library as the young Mage Council in training set to work.