

The Worst Wizard

“Next!” said a voice from thin air.

George looked around. Most of the other candidates were looking elsewhere but one or two were looking at him.

He cleared his throat. “Erm.”

“NEXT!” said the voice again. It sounded annoyed.

George jumped up, nearly knocking his chair over. He rushed to the door, and had another panic attack. He grasped the handle and eased the door open, peering round the edge.

“Come on, come on,” said the little old man seated behind the desk. “Haven’t got all day. Sit. Sit!”

“Yes, sir!” he said.

The little old man looked at him under bushy eyebrows. He held a glass sphere up and looked at George through it. He lowered it and ran his fingers through his long beard.

“Hmm,” he said. “So you want to be a wizard? What’s your name?”

“George.”

“That’s not much of a name for a wizard, is it? ‘The Wizard George?’ ‘George the Wizard?’ Nah, doesn’t have a ring to it, does it? My name is ‘Geegle’. It means ‘searcher’ in some old dialect.”

George, who was petrified, just looked at him.

Geegle sighed. “So, son, why do you want to be a wizard?”

“It’s a pretty cool profession, sir. Respectable. Besides...”

George paused and the Wizard looked at him with raised eyebrows.

“Besides what?”

George didn’t mention that he had already tried several professions and failed miserably at them.

“Besides, if I become a Wizard, my Mum says she’d be proud of me.”

“Your Mum...”

The Wizard’s face fell.

“Yeah,” George continued. “She said that Wizards are never short of money. You can just duplicate a coin or a note if you need one.”

“That’s counterfeiting,” said the Wizard sternly, although he’d reached into an empty pocket and pulled out a tenner when he was short, now and then. The trouble was, duplicates soon evaporated, so you had to move on fairly quickly if you tried that trick. It was very much a last resort and frowned on.

“Yes sir.”

“Right then, go on, son.”

“Sir?”

“Show me a trick.”

“Conjuring, sir?”

“No! Some real magic. I don’t know. Yeah, fill my coffee cup. A nice strong blend please. Full cream milk. Two sugars. Plenty of froth.”

“Is that wise, sir? I’ve never been taught, and...”

“You will have been taught the basics at school. Just do it, son. Just do it.”

“So, you want to be a sailor, do you, son?”

The grizzled old fisherman helped him into the boat.

“Yes, sir.”

“What makes you want to be a fisherman?”

George wondered if he should mention that his Mum had told him that she couldn’t keep paying for everything and that he had to get a job, or she would throw him out.

“It’s a good honest profession, sir. Does the boat go up and down like this a lot? Ulp!”

He rushed to the side of the boat and threw up.

“We haven’t even left the dock, son. Never mind. You’ll probably get used to it in a minute.”

George didn’t.

George made the short list for the Assassins’ Guild, which pleased him immensely. But things had not gone well, and he was called before the Lodge Master.

“George, come in, come in. Take a seat.”

George seated himself in front of the Master. He thought that he knew where this was going.

“You didn’t check the seat for booby traps,” said the Master.

Horried, George jumped up and started checking the seat.

“Son. Son! Relax. There are no traps. If there were, you would already be dead.”

The Master sighed and George sat down again.

“I want to talk about your future with the Guild, George.”

The Master checked his notes.

“Hmm. On your first day you cut your hand with a poisoned knife, and...”

“It wasn’t poisoned, Master. We were practising with a fake tincture, sir.”

“Hmm? Yes. How is the cut? Healing well? Good. Good. And just today you nearly gave Brother Nigel a third eye. Hmm. There have been many who have tried, but you got the closest by a long way.”

“Yes, my crossbow misfired sir. We were waiting for the target to be changed, sir.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Hmm. How would you feel if I asked you to shoot Brother Nigel? Or anyone, for that matter? Could you do it?”

“I don’t know, sir.” George considered his feet. “I’m not sure, sir.”

The Master leaned down and picked up a crossbow from behind the desk. He handed it George.

“Right, George. Here’s a bolt. Put it through Jasper there.”

Jasper was a cockatrice, and the reptile clung to the wires of his cage in the corner. He was only seventy-five years old and only about thirty centimetres long, a mere baby. The Master overfed him so he was plump and sluggish.

George raised the bow and sighted it on the reptile. Jasper looked back at him. Well, one of his eyes did. The other eye was looking in another direction. George paused for a moment, then he raised the crossbow.

“I... I can’t do it, Master. I’m sorry.”

George lowered the crossbow and somehow the bow fired. The bolt passed just over the Master’s shoulder and smashed a small porcelain statue on the cabinet behind him. The Master, a true pro, didn’t even flinch.

“George, I don’t think that you are cut out to be an Assassin. Killing is what we are about, after all. I’m sorry, you will have to go, but I’ll allow you one month’s pay for your trouble.”

When George had gone, the Master pulled the bolt from the cabinet with some difficulty and looked at it.

“Hmm,” he said. “That was a bit close, Jasper. But I knew that you weren’t in danger, old pal.”

He dropped a wriggling worm into Jasper's cage and Jasper shot out his tongue and the worm disappeared.

Geegle looked at George, and George looked back at him with a nervous smile.

"Well, that was... interesting."

They watched the bullfrog crawl across the desk. It fell off the edge, made an indescribable noise and waddled round the rubbish bin. Geegle scooped it up and looked at it, and it changed back into his coffee cup. The cup was full of coffee and some of it spilled onto his hands. Geegle jumped.

"Yowch!"

"Is it how you like, it, sir?" asked George.

"I prefer it with a little more sugar, and looking less like a bullfrog, but, yeah, pretty good. I'm favourably impressed. Wait! What's that?"

Sounds of alarm and distress and a strange hooting could be heard behind the closed door to the waiting room.

"Side effects..." said George, but Geegle wasn't listening to him.

The wizard strode to the door and threw it open. In the waiting room, everything was chaotic. The waiting candidates were rushing around, standing on chairs, and generally panicking, and the receptionist was hiding beneath her desk. The cause of all the chaos was a small reptile, a cockatrice, which was running from place to place, hooting in confusion.

"What in the world..." said Geegle.

"Jasper! Come here, boy!" said George, and the little reptile waddled up to him and allowed him to pick it up.

George stroked the little creature, and it clung to him as the chaos died down.

"It's only a cockatrice! Idiots. Calm down and sit down, please!" said Geegle.

He drew George back into his office and indicated that he should sit down.

"Idiots! It's only a young one, and if they can't recognise that, they are numbskulls. Wait, you called it 'Jasper'. How do you know it, boy?"

"He belongs to the local Lodge Master of the Assassin's Guild, sir. I met Jasper when I was trying out for the Guild. The Master wanted me to shoot him, as a test, sir."

"Hmm. Which you failed, I deduce. Any idea why it suddenly appeared in my waiting room?"

"Side effects, sir. If you look at my school report, sir, you will see that any time I did any magic, there were side effects."

"Mmm," said Geegle. He read the school's report on George. "Mmm. Yeah. A dog? A retriever? Ah! A shark?"

"Yeah. In the swimming pool. During a competition."

"Hmm. But everyone was OK?"

"Yes. It didn't try to attack anyone. It didn't seem hungry, sir."

Geegle looked at George. George looked back at him. He was resigned to another rejection.

"OK, George. I'll take a chance on you. You're admitted. For the first year anyway."

"Really? Oh, the little gods! Thank you! Thank you!"

"Now take that little monster back to the Lodge Master before he sets his Assassins on us! Tell Phil I send my regards."

George took Jasper back to the Assassins' Guild.

"Erm, where can I find the Lodge Master, please sir?" he asked a passing Assassin.

"He's busy. He's looking for his pet. Wait a minute. Is that Jasper? Come this way."

“Jasper! Thank goodness you found him, son. Thank you. George, isn’t it? How come you have the little reptile? What’s going on?”

“I didn’t steal him, sir. I was trying out for the Wizards’ Guild and I think it’s a side effect. Sorry, sir.”

He explained to the Master what had happened. The Master was nodding his head.

“Hmm, yes. A shark in the swimming pool? A bullfrog? Yes, yes. Jasper was in the waiting room? Very interesting. But old Geegle is taking a chance on you, is he? Well done, son. Well done. You’d have been too dangerous to have around here.”

George was happy with that assessment, so he just passed Jasper over to the Master.

“You know Wizard Geegle, sir? He sends his regards.”

“Yeah. We went to college together, back when he was still called William.”

The Master put Jasper back in his cage and the little beast rolled over onto his back with his feet in the air. That’s how cockatrices sometimes sleep, with poison claws extended.

“Aww! You’ve tired him out, son.”

Stunt poured himself a beer from the pitcher. Of George’s friends he was the biggest, and drank the most, but he paid for his share of the beer, so his friends didn’t mind. Since they were all trainee wizards, they had had the brilliant idea that they could use magic to keep their pitcher full. Of course, they had found, like countless predecessors who also had the same brilliant idea, that the magically produced beer tasted much like plain water.

Jasper skittered around George’s neck. It seemed that the only consistent side effect of George’s attempts at magic was that Jasper would end up in George’s vicinity. After the first few incidents, George and the Master Assassin came to the understanding that George would return Jasper to his cage as soon as possible. As a result of Jasper’s excursions, he had become a slimmer, trimmer and faster version of his previously pudgy self. He snaked out an amazingly long tongue, but George had kept his hand over his glass.

“How did you go in the exam, guys?” George asked.

“OK,” said Zelda. She regarded her glass and swirled the remaining centimetre or two of beer. She reached for the pitcher.

“That bad?” said Smoll. Smoll was by far the smallest of the group, so they made sure that he used the smallest glass. Smoll became aggressive if he was drunk, and if he used full sized glasses, he got drunk quickly.

“Nah,” said Zelda. “I’m pretty sure I passed, but old Geegle slipped in a few hard ones.”

Nods of agreement from all.

“At least this one was theory,” said George. “I’m dreading the practicals.”

Nods all round again.

“You’ve got more reason than us, though, George,” said Stunt. “What does old Geegle say about that?”

“Just that if I couldn’t control it, I didn’t deserve to pass.”

“That sucks,” said Zelda, but Zelda was always gloomy. “That sucks.”

She emptied the pitcher into her glass.

“Bugger,” she said, remembering that Stunt had been the last to refill his glass.

The group rule was that whoever finished the pitcher refilled it. She sighed. Since Stunt used a large glass and Smoll used a small one, it worked out reasonably fairly, but whoever filled their glass up after Stunt was likely to be the one to buy the next refill. She got up and headed for the bar.

“Right,” said Geegle, addressing the class. “Side effects. You need to know about side effects.”

“This one’s for you, George,” sneered a front row student in a stage whisper.

George fumed, and all the students, except for his friends, laughed.

“Yes, well, thank you, Weezle,” said Geegle. He hadn’t laughed or smiled. “Anyway, all magic has side effects.”

Geegle drew an equation on the blackboard, or rather a stick of chalk did as Geegle moved his finger in the air. The stick of chalk snapped and so did Geegle.

“Weezle, you will behave or you will leave the room. Understand?”

Weezle’s smirk faded, as Geegle suddenly no longer seemed to be the benign old gentleman that he usually appeared to be. For some reason, he seemed to be threatening, powerful and more than a little dangerous.

“Yes, sir.”

“Anyway, you can see that the equation can be rearranged like this, and falls naturally into two parts. This bit, well, can anyone tell me what that bit is?”

“Desired outcome, sir,” said someone.

“Exactly, Forbes. Exactly. And this bit? Anyone?”

“Side effects?” said George.

“Exactly, George.”

He tapped the board. Or rather the chalk did.

“Notice the distribution function here. Very important. Usually the frequency distribution, here, is quite wide, and consequently the amplitude, here, is quite small. In other words, small effects spread over wide range of space and time.”

“Sir?” asked George.

“Your own ‘problem’, George? These are probability functions, so they only predict the probability that something happens. Right, everyone. Use that equation to predict the probability that George summons a ... What was it, George?”

“A baby dragon, sir”.

Jasper and the dragon had played together. Everyone agreed that they were cute.

“Baby dragon. Yeah. The probability that George summons a dragon when ironing a shirt by magic. Right. Get to it.”

There was furious scribbling and discussion between the students. Probability tables were consulted. After a few moments they all sat back and relaxed.

“Right. Who’s going to attempt an answer? Grace?”

“I’m not sure, sir. I get a very small number. One point six in ten million. If the dragon is any age, I have two point four in ten million.”

Geegle nodded. “Sounds about right. Think about that, folks. It’s very unlikely. OK. For extra credit, work out what changes need to be made to reduce the odds to, say, one in a thousand. Much more likely. Go.”

The baker looked at the tray.

“What are these, George?”

“Cinnamon rolls, sir.”

“Rolls?”

The baker picked one up. He tapped the table with it, and it sounded like two blocks of wood being rapped together.

“Hmm. Cinnamon, you say?”

“Yes, sir.”

The baker sniffed the object.

“Could it have been turmeric?”

“Ah, possibly, sir. I might have picked up the wrong jar, sir.”

The baker looked at George.

“Then there was that batch of loaves. I still don’t know you managed that. They were four times the normal size and all full of holes. We had to scrape the tops of the ovens!”

“Yes, sir. There were those flans, sir. People liked those.”

“Yeah,” acknowledged the baker. “It was lucky it was ‘Bloody Friday’, the day when the dead are traditionally supposed to rise. They were red. We sold them as ‘Blood Pies’.”

“That would be the beetroot, sir. It should have been pumpkin, but I dumped the wrong bowl into the mixer, sir.”

“Still, as you said, people liked them. I can use that idea next year. Thanks. But George, everything else you tried ended in a disaster, didn’t it? And you dropped your hygiene hat into the custard vat. We had to throw it all out, and old Elron thought that someone had fallen in and nearly had a heart attack.”

“Yes, sir. I suppose that means I’m fired, sir?”

“Yes, George. Sorry. But I’ll pay you for two weeks. It’s been... interesting.”

“Did you guys try for any other jobs before this one?” asked George.

Smoll emptied his glass and refilled it.

“Yeah,” he said. “The first one was in the family mine. After the mine collapsed for the second time, Uncle told me to leave. He didn’t want to risk it, he said, but it wasn’t my fault! Then I worked in the corner shop. I couldn’t reach the top shelves. And the pig farm.” He shuddered. “I’ll not talk about that.”

Zelda said “I tried a few places too. The dress shop. The owner said that I should be more cheerful. I couldn’t do it. But she was a miserable cow, herself. Lips like a pencil line. I tried the funeral place, but they said I was too morose, even for them. They wanted sombre.”

The group nodded. They were used to Zelda.

Stunt swallowed a mouthful of his beer. George calculated in his head. Zelda had refilled the pitcher after Stunt had filled his glass, and then she had filled her glass. Smoll had filled his glass after that. There should be enough left for him. He reached for the pitcher.

“My dad would never even let me into the family shop,” Stunt said.

“What do they sell?”

“China.”

“Ah.”

“So this is the last resort for us all?” asked George.

They all nodded.

“Ah,” said George. “We ought to go home soon and revise for the practical.”

They all agreed, and naturally, being students, they stayed in the bar all evening instead.

When George turned up for the first day of the Wizarding course, he found about thirty other young people of his age milling around.

“Come on, come on,” called Geegle.

He held a large clip board, and tapped it with a bent stick. George wondered if it was a wand, but Geegle tossed it away over his shoulder.

“Right, who is in Group A? Move over here, please.”

The assembled students looked at each other in puzzlement.

“Sir,” said someone up at the front, “We don’t know which groups we are assigned to, sir.”

“Nonsense!” said Geegle. “You were all sent the information. Did you not read it?”

There was a buzz as the students compared notes.

“Sir, none of us received any information about groups, sir.”

“Really?”

Geegle seemed puzzled.

“OK, OK. Hmm, if I call out your name, you are in group A. Weezle. Blitz. Hammer. Err, Bob. Over here.”

The level of noise rose as Geegle split them into groups. George waited for his name to be called, but it wasn’t. He was left standing with three others. They looked at one another in dismay.

“Right, all groups, follow me. I’ll take you on a guided tour. Remember what I say. It is important stuff.”

“Err, Sir? Sir!? What about us?”

“Erm. What are your names?”

“Stunt, sir.”

“Smoll, sir.”

“Zelda, sir.”

“George, sir.”

Geegle checked his list. “Your names aren’t on my list. But they sound familiar. You can be Group Y. Right follow me.”

Group Y looked at one another. George shrugged.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Group Y found themselves at the end of the queue for everything, because they weren’t on any lists. Lectures, tutorials, labs. Everything. Zelda wasn’t surprised, but then, Zelda always expected the worst. Their group gelled, though, and they were all doing well. George had a problem with the practical stuff though.

“What is it, George?”

“I don’t know. It just appeared when I grew the grass.”

Jasper flicked out his tongue at it, experimentally, and on a hunch George grabbed him. He felt a tug, but Jasper seemed OK, though he flicked his tongue about for a while afterwards.

Geegle came over.

“What’s that black hole doing there?”

He flicked it away.

“It’s a good job it was a long way away. It could have sucked in the whole lab. George?”

George admitted responsibility.

“Sorry, Professor. A long way away? It was right here on the bench.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of hard to explain. It was a long way away, but the local wormhole was right here.”

“Sorry sir. I did make the grass grow though.”

The grass was about thirty centimetres high, and meadow flowers were scattered about in it.

“Mmm. Yeah! Good, George. Very good.”

Geegle looked around the lab. George's grass was the most luxurious patch in the whole lab, and Geegle thought he saw something move in it. Good attention to detail!

He wandered off murmuring "Side effects!"

Group Y assembled in Geegle's lab for the final practical exam. George took his seat and Stunt's heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Luck, pal," he said.

"Yeah, luck, George," said Smoll.

"You can do it," said Zelda.

A positive Zelda felt a bit odd, but he appreciated the thought.

"Same to you guys!"

Geegle had watched them come in.

"Hi everyone. Let me first say that you have all done well. You might have guessed that you were the ones that I was the most doubtful about, but Stunt, that analysis of the Assassin poison was excellent. The Lodge Master was impressed. You only missed the celery, which of course wasn't necessary for the potion and wasn't detectable by magic, of course."

"Zelda, the Jokesters were impressed by your magical analysis of their latest comic monologue. They're thinking about adding a few of your suggestions. They agree about the timing problems in the second part. Well done. Good use of magical rhythms."

"Smoll. Your use of applied magic to the construction of the bridge saved the Builders Guild a lot of money. They liked the spell that stopped the concrete setting in the truck. Simple, but effective. They're very pleased."

"George." Geegle frowned. "George, everything that you've done has been excellent. Excellent. In every single practical test you have exceeded the standards by a wide margin. You know the downside, though. Side effects."

He fell silent and regarded George under his bushy eyebrows.

"Those weren't George's fault, sir," said Smoll.

"Yes I know."

"And none of them hurt anyone," said Stunt.

"Yes, I know... What?"

"Nobody got hurt as a result of the side effects, sir," said Zelda.

"Yeah. That's true."

Geegle pondered for a moment or so.

"Anyway," he said, "You all pass, provided you do reasonably well in this last practical exam. OK?"

They all nodded.

Geegle braced himself for the usual set of student projects. He expected simple projects of somewhat limited application. He didn't expect to be disappointed in this expectation, but maybe George's project might be different.

"OK," said Geegle. "You first Smoll. What have you got for me?"

"Ah, a belt, sir. It's a bit like a standard flying belt, but it's for use indoors. Say you have a high shelf or cupboard and you aren't very big you can use the belt to reach it. You don't have to lug a ladder around."

He put on the belt and rose to near the ceiling and drifted towards the top of a cupboard.

"Oh, there's something up here, sir. A notebook."

Smoll drifted down to the floor.

"The belt has safety features, sir. It will let you down gently if the power is depleted sir."

"Very good, Smoll. Much better than a noisy mechanical one. What did you find up there?"

Geegle investigated the notebook.

"So that's where it went! Those bullying bastards!" he muttered. "It's been up there all those years. Still, I got my own back in the end."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. I'll take care of this... notebook. Thank you."

Geegle thought back to the time when he was a student. They weren't happy times as he was small and good at magic, and as a result the bigger boys and girls often picked on him.

"OK," he said, pulling himself back to the present. "Zelda. Your turn."

"It's a sort of screen, sir, that will let friends through, but bars others."

She set up the screen and Geegle watched with interest.

"Sorry, sir. I'm not sure how to test it."

Geegle suddenly looked like Weezle.

"Extraordinary," said the Weezle lookalike. "I can't see you or even the screen. I wonder if..."

The Weezle lookalike changed to a lookalike of the Head Wizard.

"Darn," said the Head Wizard lookalike. "I can see you and the screen."

"Yes, sir." Zelda switched it off. "I don't have any need to hide from the Head Wizard, sir."

Geegle reverted to himself with a start. "Not that I would want to hide from him myself, of course. Um, very good. Very good. I look forward to reading your report. Erm, Stunt, you are next."

"'Cause I'm big, sir, I keep bumping into things, so I made a belt, like Smoll did, but my belt stops me knocking things over."

He careful set up a delicate tray of cakes on a spindly china cake stand. Then he put his belt on, closed his eyes and spun around. Although he came close sometimes, he somehow missed the cake stand and cakes.

"Very good, Stunt. Very good," said Geegle. He grabbed a cake from the stand. "Your family's china?"

"Yes, sir."

Stunt took off his belt and as he turned to sit down accidentally nudged the cake stand. Geegle caught it just before it shattered on the floor.

"Thank you, sir," said Stunt as he packed it away very carefully.

Geegle turned to George.

"Right, George. Let's do it."

"What was the spell again, George?"

"Just a bookkeeping spell, sir. I'm good at maths, sir, and when I tried out for an accountant job I was annoyed that I couldn't get the books to balance, first time. I kept making mistakes even with the simple stuff, but I don't know why. My spell just checked each line as I entered it, sir. The accountants don't like spells, but I thought that they might find it useful."

"'Don't like spells'? I need to contact my college friend, Arnie, I think," said Geegle, mostly to himself.

Geegle looked around.

"So, George. Nothing to do with swamps and gigantic dragonflies?"

"No, sir."

"Hmm. A side effect, then."

George and his friends were still sitting in a half circle around Geegle, but they weren't in Geegle's lab. They were in a clearing surrounded by tree ferns and enormous horsetail plants. The ground was mossy and damp, and apart from the large whirring dragonflies there were also tiny biting flies.

"Let's get out of here," said Geegle, and he stood up and started off towards higher ground. His students followed him.

Geegle waved his hands and the insects stopped bothering them.

"That's better," he said.

"Sir, what about the chairs, sir?" asked Stunt.

"Leave them. They'll return by themselves when this 'side effect' ends, won't they George?"

"I think so, sir. What's up, Jasper?"

Jasper had appeared on George's shoulder when they had found themselves in the clearing in the swamp. He was agitated, running from one of George's shoulders to the other, cheeping all the time.

"Sir?" said George and Geegle stopped.

"Hmm, what's up with the little thing?" wondered Geegle.

Round the corner of track came a creature the size of a turkey. It had a horny upper jaw and lower jaw and a full mouth of sharp teeth. It had long powerful legs ending in three toes and sharp claws. Its round body was covered in quills or primitive feathers which it raised and rattled at them.

"I've seen one of those in the museum!" said Smoll. "Dinosaurs evolved into birds, and one of the ancestors of birds was a thing like that. But they are extinct!"

Jasper leapt off George's shoulder and glided on his little wings down to the track in front of the dinosaur bird. He was hissing and spitting and obviously furious. He raised his ruff or collar which glowed a bright orange and shook it at the dinosaur bird. The bird squawked and nearly fell over itself as it turned tail and ran away, still squawking. Jasper ran back to George and climbed back onto his shoulder. He chirped angrily in the direction that the dinosaur bird had gone, but calmed down after a minute or two.

"Sir, have we gone back in time?" asked Zelda. "Smoll says those things are extinct!"

Geegle stroked his beard. "I don't know. Somehow this doesn't seem right. That dinosaur bird was scared off by the cockatrice, but they never did exist alongside one another. The dinosaur bird wouldn't have seen a cockatrice. Cockatrices, basilisks, chimera and creatures like them came from a totally different place and time. Hmm. Anyway, let's press on."

"Where are we going, sir?" asked Zelda.

"Hmm? I don't know. We could have stayed where we were I guess, but... Hmm. What's this?"

'This' was a fragile looking rope bridge. Stunt in particular regarded it with suspicion.

"Here, pal," said Smoll. "Take my belt. It will help you float across. It won't support all your weight, but it will make you much lighter."

They went across in order of size, Smoll first, Zelda second, then Geegle, and then George. Stunt hesitated.

"Come on, boy," said Geegle. "You can do it. My calculations say that there is a twenty percent safety margin."

"Twenty per cent? Is that all?"

Stunt started across. He was sweating and had his eyes closed. Steadily, step by step he crossed the bridge. When he reached solid ground he fell onto his face and grasped the grass with both hands for a minute or two. He sat up.

"Whoo! I'm not going to have to do that again for a while, I hope."

“Well done, Stunt,” Geegle said. “Well done.”

They trudged on. It was hot and humid, but Geegle kept the insects away from them. They turned a corner and someone jumped out and barred their way. He wore a simple loin cloth and waved a bent stick at them. It wasn't much of a spear, but it was pointed and fire-hardened.

“Hmm, dinosaurs and humanoids,” said Geegle. “Another anomaly.”

He walked up and inspected the guard, who was taken aback by the inspection. The guard waved his spear at Geegle but Geegle just pushed it aside.

“No tattoos. No body-paint. No helmets or armour. They're pretty primitive.”

The guard said something and gestured them past. They followed his directions and, turning a corner, found themselves in a small circle of huts, where a group of twenty or so humanoids gathered around them chattering in astonishment. George thought of them as ‘cavemen’ but that was inaccurate as they apparently lived in huts. They did seem to be primitive humans though, with strong jaws and solid faces.

“Hello!” said Geegle, “How are you doing?”

The guard muttered something in a guttural, throaty, language, and the villagers replied in the same way.

“Can't understand them,” said Geegle, but he didn't seem worried.

The villagers indicated that they should sit down with them. They brought out food and drink for their visitors.

“Psst! George! They seem really interested in Jasper,” said Zelda.

“Yeah, Zelda, and in your makeup.”

“Yeah. Hey, Smoll, Shall we give them a makeup tutorial?”

Zelda's makeup was dark, favouring blacks and reds. Smoll's makeup was more pixie than goth, but they got to work showing the villagers how to colour their faces. Zelda's red eye-liner was in heavy demand, but some preferred the pale colours that Smoll mixed up from the ashes of the fire.

Stunt, George, and Geegle were relaxing, watching the face painting, when an obviously important individual strode into the village. He wore a bonnet with horns, shaggy boots fashioned from the fur of a hairy animal, and held a staff with a curled animal horn on it. He raised the staff, thumped it on the ground, and the chatter died away and everyone looked at him. The man with the bonnet didn't seem happy.

The shaman or priest pointed his staff at George and said something.

“I don't know, pal,” said George.

This didn't satisfy the shaman, who shook his staff and said something else.

“I don't know.”

The shaman waved his staff in a ‘come on’ gesture and headed out of the circle of huts.

“Better follow him,” said Geegle.

The shaman led them out of the village and down a short track to a clearing, which contained a large outcrop of rock, one side of which was smooth. They all gasped when they saw what was drawn on the smooth rock.

“Hmm,” said Geegle, as he approached the rock. “It's a bit primitive but well done. So that's why they were so interested in Jasper.”

The drawing did portray a cockatrice or basilisk, George thought, though the animal portrayed on the rock looked much fiercer than Jasper. The shaman held up his staff and blocked Geegle's approach to the rock.

“OK, OK,” said Geegle backing off. “So it’s taboo, eh?”

The shaman was obviously annoyed about something and gestured at George.

“I think he wants you to give him Jasper,” said Stunt.

“No!” said George backing away, and the shaman advanced on him.

George and his friends backed away, and the shaman waved his stick, urging the villagers to advance on them. Then someone threw a rock, which hit Stunt on the ear. It didn’t seem to do the big boy any significant damage but his ear started to bleed and the stone ricocheted into Smoll, who fell down. Zelda and Geegle turned to check on him and someone whacked Geegle on the ear with a club. He went down too. Two of the villagers grabbed Zelda and tried to restrain her.

George was horrified. He wasn’t being attacked, probably because he had Jasper on his shoulder, but he was shocked and scared. Then someone stuck a spear in Stunt’s shoulder. The spear was primitive, little more than a sharpened stick, but it was effective,

George was suddenly furious.

“Leave my friends alone!” he screamed.

He threw a fireball at the shaman and missed. It hit the big rock and split it, but George’s second fireball hit the shaman in the chest and knocked him down. George turned but all the villagers had stopped, with shock and dismay showing on their faces.

George moved towards his friends to check on them but suddenly they were all back in Geegle’s lab, sitting in a circle. They all looked fine, if a little shocked.

“Well, er, thank you, George,” said Geegle, as if George had just demonstrated his practical project.

“Sir?” said Smoll.

“Later, Smoll,” said Geegle. “Later. OK, Smoll, Stunt, and Zelda. You all passed. Now, I need to have a word with George. Please leave the room. He won’t be long.”

“But...”

“Later, I said.”

George watched his friends go, resigned to the worst.

“Side effects,” said Geegle.

“Yes, sir, I’m sorry...”

“Never mind, George. Now George, I believe magic was not your first choice of profession? Erm, well I know it wasn’t because I checked. So you never had a burning desire to be a wizard?”

“No, sir, not at first. Sorry, sir.”

“That place. The one that we just visited. The dinosaur bird was scared of Jasper, but it couldn’t have met a cockatrice. Those autochthones. Didn’t live in the same times as the dinosaurs. They lived in huts, quite sophisticated huts, but the real primitive peoples didn’t. It was all wrong. It wasn’t a real place, at least for most interpretations of the word ‘real’.”

“Sorry, sir,” George said again.

“Don’t be. That all came about as a side effect of your practical project.”

“S...” George was going to apologise again, but stopped. “Yes, sir.”

“Now, tell me, George, what was the side effect of your fireballs at the end?”

“It ended the side effect, sir?”

“No, no, George. Your fireballs resolved the situation that we were in, it is true, and the side effect ended as a result. Hmm. The answer, George, is that there was no noticeable side effect. And why do think that was, George?”

“I was angry?”

“No, not exactly. You felt it passionately. You didn’t like us getting hurt and you lashed out with all the power available to you. I’ve seen this before. Wizardry is not a calling for you. It’s a profession. Magic has a strong component of passion, and you don’t innately have that passion.”

George stared at the ground. “So that’s it. It’s a pity because I’ve come to like magic. So I’ve failed.”

“What? No, George. We can work on that! Take old Weezle. He’s doing OK for someone who can’t give a toss about magic, unless it can make him look big and important, the little prig! You, George, like helping people, don’t you? We can use that. We can develop the passion from that.”

“You’re passing me?” asked George. He could barely believe it.

“Yeah, George, you’ve passed. We’ll need to do some extra exercises, but we should be able to get those side effects under control. I did wonder, right from the start. I probably should have intervened earlier, but I wanted to see if it would resolve itself.”

“Thank you, sir! Thank you.”

“Ah, George. You’re likely to be voted the ‘The Worst Wizard’ at the awards ceremony. I suggest that you treat it like an honour. You’re actually quite a strong wizard, you know. You’re intrinsically much stronger than that worm Weezle.”

So George received the “Worst Wizard” award and accepted it triumphantly. He was given a standing ovation by everyone except Weezle and his cronies.

“Guys, do you remember when we had the brilliant idea of magically keeping our pitcher full?”

“Yeah. That didn’t work, did it? Tasted like water,” said Zelda.

They were sitting at their table at the awards ceremony. It was towards the back, but they were happy with that. Jasper was dozing round George’s neck, like a scaly scarf. His tail twitched now and then.

“I know. But suppose we did it by magically transferring the beer from Weezle’s pitcher to our pitcher and then duplicating it back to Weezle’s pitcher.”

“Brilliant!” Zelda grinned a grin which could only be described as evil.

So they did it. Weezle’s group got upset and complained to waiting staff about their beer, but they got little sympathy from them.

Geegle slid into a seat at their table.

“Very funny, guys, but please don’t. Weezle’s parents will complain and I will have to sort it out. OK?”

“Sorry, sir. We won’t do it again.”

Geegle started to get up. “No side effects, George?”

“No sir. I really enjoyed pinching their beer.”

“I didn’t hear that, of course. But, see what I mean, George?” said Geegle as he left.

“Hey!” said Stunt, “Our pitcher’s full. Old Geegle must have done it.”

“Yay! After you, old chap,” said Smoll. “Your health, George!”
