

The Wizard and His Friends

George was starting his third year of study, and if he passed he would be a fully trained and licensed wizard, able to legally cast spells, create charms, and mix potions. He'd applied for the course more or less because he had run out of other options, as he had failed at all his other attempts to find an occupation.

He had come to love magic, but he had a problem. Every time he used magic there were side effects. He would conjure up a bowl of flowers, for example, and, in addition to the flowers, perhaps a stick of french bread might spring into existence.

When George was trying out for the Assassins' Guild, he had met Jasper, the pet of the Master of the Guild. Jasper was a cockatrice, and almost every time George did some magic, Jasper would appear somewhere nearby. George and the Master came to an understanding, and George would return Jasper to his cage as soon as he could. As a result of his excursions, Jasper became a fitter, happier little cockatrice, and the Master came to the belated realisation that Jasper had been bored sitting in his cage all day. These days, Jasper was either with the Master, sitting on his shoulder, or with George, as a result of George's magic.

With the help of his tutor, the Wizard Geegle, George was managing to reduce the side effects of his magic to a minimum, so he was looking forward to his final year of study.

George and Stunt were waiting for the other two members of their group to arrive. Stunt was a big boy, tall and broad, but was a cheerful and pleasant person.

"Last year, eh, George?" he said. He took a big slurp of beer from his glass. "Then it's out into the wide world for us all."

"Yeah," said George, after taking a more modest sip from his glass. "I'll miss this place, and everyone. I'm really glad that old Geegle took a chance on me."

Geegle had chosen that moment to pass their table. "Well, George, 'old Geegle' was very impressed by your magic. In fact all Group Y impressed me. George, I was very intrigued by the school report of you conjuring a shark into the swimming pool by accident, but the cup of coffee which looked like a bullfrog sealed the deal. It was good coffee, and had an additional humorous dimension. Ah well, see you in the classroom, chaps."

As Geegle wandered off, checking on all his other students, Smoll and Zelda arrived. Smoll was a small boy for his age and favoured pale makeup and pale clothes. Zelda on the other hand wore red and black makeup, and liked clothes in the same colours. Her finger nails were painted red and black. People called her a Goth, but she said she just liked the style. She usually expected the worst from life, but had cheered up during the course.

"Hi guys. I don't suppose you left some beer for us, did you?"

"There should be enough for a glass each," said Stunt, who had bought the first pitcher. "The next person after that will have to buy the next pitcher though."

"Probably me," said George, happily enough.

"I wonder what the excitement will be this year," said Smoll, sipping beer from his small glass.

"What do you mean, Smoll?" asked George.

"Well, in the first year we visited that mock world with the fake dinosaurs and cavemen, and in the second year Jasper was kidnapped. What's going to happen this year?"

"Do you think that something will happen this year too, then Smoll? I know that you have the ability to see the future, sometimes."

“I don’t **see** into the future, George. I just get feelings about things, and I think that something will happen this year. But, seriously, guys. That doesn’t need precognition or anything.”

Smoll could not or would not say anything more. He probably didn’t know, reflected George.

The little group consisting of George and his three friends was called “Group Y”, and they had stuck together throughout the course, even though the groups themselves didn’t mean much this late on. At the beginning, Group Y was looked down on by the rest, as the Wizard Geegle had created Group Y when it appeared that the four students hadn’t been assigned to a group.

But over time, the group had proved themselves to be good magicians, with George as one of the top practitioners in the class, and the rest in the top half.

On the second day of the year, Geegle called a meeting. When the third year students arrived in the classroom, they found that the new first year students were already occupying one side of the room.

“Right, we are doing things a little different this year. All third year students will mentor a first year student. Some will have two. I’ve assigned... Yes, what is it, Bob?”

Bob, one of the third year students, said “Won’t that affect our own studies, sir?”

Geegle sighed. “No, it shouldn’t, Bob, because it is part of the course. You will be marked on it. Time will be allocated for it. In the world outside this school you will usually work with other wizards, and the experienced wizards will mentor you for the first couple of years, so we thought that this might be some preparation for that. Oh, some of you will start up on your own when you graduate, but that is hard. I don’t recommend it.”

He looked around. The third years were relaxed in their seats, while the first years were almost sitting to attention. He suppressed a smile.

“Right, find your assigned partners, please. The list is... Where did I put that list? Ah, here.”

With a gesture Geegle projected the list onto the screen at the front of the room, and the noise level rose as the students matched up. George and his friends approached the first years most of whom looked terrified. Their names were written on pieces of paper, displayed in front of them.

George saw Stunt talking to very small girl, and Smoll was talking to a boy who was much taller than him. He didn’t see Zelda anywhere, but she was around, he knew.

“Yes, Bob. What is it,” said Geegle, showing a little irritation,

“Sir, can we change partners if we don’t get along?”

Bob had been paired with a chubby little first year boy, and George smiled. That would certainly annoy Bob, he thought.

“You’ve all been spell matched so there should be no problems. See me if there are any.”

“Hello George. I’m Makki,” a girl said to him.

Makki was of medium height, and had freckles and long brown hair.

“You knew who I was, Makki?”

“Oh, yes. All the first years know you, George. Your side effects are famous.”

“Oh. But I’ve mostly got them under control nowadays.”

They chatted for a bit, then Geegle raised his voice. “Right guys. Arrange a time to meet for your first mentoring sessions and then let’s wrap this up. We’re out of time.”

Zelda, George and Stunt were in the student bar.

“What are your first years like, guys?” asked Zelda.

“I’ve got a girl called Makki. She seems nice. I don’t know if she’s any good at magic yet, of course,” answered George.

"I've got a girl, too. Melanie. She's tiny," said Stunt.

"Anyone is tiny to you, pal," laughed Zelda. "I've got a girl too. Ruth. Seems OK. She said she liked my look, but she's pretty normal as far as looks go. Had some nice earrings, though."

"Where's Smoll?" asked George.

"I don't know. He was still talking to a couple of the first years outside the lecture room. He'll be along."

Sure enough Smoll turned up a few minutes later, but he brought a friend with him.

"Hi, guys," he said. "Can Joli join us?"

"Sure, Smoll," answered Stunt. "Hi Joli. Are you Smoll's first year?"

"That's Stunt, Joli," Smoll told her. "And that Zelda, there, and that's George."

"George? With the side effects?"

"Yeah, that George! No, Stunt, she's not my first year. I've got Derek, and Joli here is a friend of Derek's. Same school."

Joli was as small as Smoll, and wore pastel coloured clothes like Smoll. Joli's makeup was pale, like Smoll's, but while Smoll favoured gentle blues, Joli's makeup was pale green.

"Yeah, nice to meet you, Joli," said George. "What do you think of it so far?"

"It's exciting. I'm going to work really hard!"

"Have a drink, Joli. Smoll, can you get Joli a glass?"

"Sure," said Smoll and went to the bar.

"Who's your third year, Joli?"

"Grace. She seems nice."

"Oh, yeah, she's good," said Zelda. "If I can give you a piece of advice, Joli..."

Joli nodded.

Zelda continued. "Don't get too wrapped up in your studies. Old Geegle told us that in our first year. He's keen that you should learn, but also wants you to have fun while you are doing it."

Of course, old Geegle just happened to be passing.

"Thanks Zelda," he said. "I meant to mention that to them, but I forgot."

Geegle strolled off, and Zelda looked after him.

"How does he do that? Mention his name and up he pops! Well, he is a wizard."

George was sitting in the library studying alone. Stunt and Zelda were in a lecture for a course that George wasn't taking, and Smoll was with his first year somewhere. Weezle slid into the seat next to him.

"Do you mind, George?"

"Nah. Where are the rest of your group?"

"Who cares? I'm over them. Blitz and Hammer are just thugs, but Bob..."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. But you've given us a rough time over the last two years."

"You're right, George, and I'm sorry. OK, it's taken me a while, but..."

He paused. "You know, I went home, and really saw my parents for the first time. You know they are well off? They're all about image. Face. Appearance. My brother, he's older than I am. He was shaping up to be just like them. Wondering what flash car to buy. I'm headed down that path too, unless I do something! I know old Geegle calls me a snob, and he's got a point."

Weezle sighed.

George considered. "As far as I'm concerned, you can hang out with us. Zelda's going to think that you are a spy for Group A, though!"

"Yeah. That's fine. I don't blame her."

George was in the big laboratory with Makki.

“Do you want to tell me what you are having trouble with, Makki? I’m not sure how this mentoring thing works!”

Makki laughed. “Yeah, it’s the first time, isn’t it? I’m doing OK, mostly, but I can’t quite nail the details yet. I managed to conjure a rose, but it was red and old Geegle wanted a yellow one.”

“Show me.”

“OK,” said Makki nervously. “Here goes.”

She collected the components of the spell from the cupboard, and said the incantation, then stopped.

“Sorry, I’m more nervous than I was when I did it for old Geegle!”

George waited. Makki started again and said the incantation, then she did the gestures, and tapped the bench.

A rose, just budded, with a short stem appeared on the bench. It was red.

“Dammit!” she said.

“I think I see what the problem is,” said George. “Your gesture is a bit crooked, so the colour change is not happening. You’re almost right. Let me show you.”

George conjured another rose, but this one was yellow. There were no side effects, he was pleased to see, but Jasper appeared on the bench. He took a thoughtful bite out of George’s rose.

“Oh! What’s that? Is that Jasper? The cockatrice?”

“Yes, that’s Jasper. Come here, pal.”

Jasper ran up George’s arm. He still had George’s rose in his beak and started to chew it.

“He’s cute!”

“Yeah. Anyway, did you see the difference in my gesture?”

“I think so.”

Makki tried again, and this time the rose was almost orange.

“Let me show you,” said George. “This arm higher, this arm lower. More movement from this arm.”

Did she lean into him as he guided her arms? The next rose was definitely yellow.

“Thanks, George,” she said. There was a slight blush to her cheeks.

“Much better. Let’s try it again.”

Jasper jumped down and tasted the new rose.

Group Y moved to a different bigger table in the bar. They were never an exclusive group, and people often joined them, but now that they all had first years to mentor, there were often more people at their table than was comfortable.

Weezle often joined them, much to the annoyance of Bob, Blitz, and Hammer. George was right : Zelda was suspicious at first, but her suspicions faded over time. Makki was often there, when she wasn’t studying. Stunt’s first year, Melanie, was often around, and so were Joli, Smoll’s friend, and Derek, Smoll’s first year.

They were discussing Doug, Bob’s first year. Doug was fairly short, and a little overweight. He was friendly and helpful, and everyone liked him. Except it appeared, his mentor, Bob.

Bob was a few centimetres taller than Doug, and she was slim, with long blonde hair, elegantly curled. Her clothes were always stylish and fashionable, unlike Doug’s clothes which tended to the scruffy end of the spectrum. Bob’s makeup was always immaculate, and, of course, Doug didn’t use makeup.

Doug smiled all the time. Bob never smiled. She didn't talk to people. She deigned to converse with them, and acted as if she was doing them a favour by doing so. If she had an opportunity to put someone down, she went for it, full bore, with malice, so being her first year was simply providing her with an easy target. Consequently, everyone, first years and third years, supported Doug in any way possible.

"Old Geegle says that we were all spell matched with our first years," said Zelda. "But what about those two? I wouldn't have matched them. Would any of you matched them as a pair?"

Heads shook all round.

"Maybe Doug will get through to her?"

"No, Makki. We've known her for two years. Bob will never change."

"Then I don't get it. She doesn't seem to mentor him much. She treats him like a slave. Makes him get her coffee. Makes him book her manicurist for her. It's pathetic. He doesn't seem to mind much."

"He's a great lad. In spite of it all, he is cheerful and friendly," said Stunt.

"I mentioned it to old Geegle. He said that he'd check the spell. He said that it should all work out. I hope it does. I like Doug," said George.

Everyone nodded.

"Maybe..." said George thoughtfully. "Maybe the program was right. Bob wouldn't support anyone, but everyone likes Doug, so everyone supports him."

"It's possible," said Stunt. "Hmm. It's possible, I guess."

"Hi, Doug, How's it going?"

"Hi, Stunt. It's going good. Thank you for asking. How's things with you?"

"Fine, fine. How's the mentoring going?"

Doug hesitated. "Good, good."

Stunt raised an eyebrow. "Bob's giving you lots of help, then?"

"Yeah, when she has time. She's very busy."

"Right. Right. If you've got any problems, talk to old Geegle. He's very approachable. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Thanks, Stunt. Erm, there is one thing..."

"George, can you come to the lab, right now? I've called Stunt and Smoll, and they are on their way." It was Weezle. He sounded worried. Someone was crying in the background.

"Sure." George finished the call and hurried off. Why didn't Weezle call Zelda? She looked a little scary if you didn't know her, but she would be good with the girl who was crying.

When George entered the lab, Weezle had his arm around the girl, while Stunt and Smoll looked on.

"What's up?" he asked. "Who's this? What's going on?"

The girl was blond and petite. Her hair was a cascade of ringlets, and her clothes were, well, pink. Pink gingham, and white ruffles. Her makeup was conventional, with maybe a touch more red in the lips and more of a blush on her cheeks than usual.

"Bob has crossed the line, George. We have to decide what to do."

"Where's Zelda?" A sudden realisation hit him. "Zelda!"

The blond girl stamped her foot. "Yes, George, it's me, Zelda. Pink! I hate bloody pink! And I never stamp my bloody foot! I look like Bo ****ing Peep!"

Zelda was recovering. She had been shocked and upset, but now she was furious.

“I’ll bloody kill her!”

“No, no, no. Zelda, hold it together. We’ll figure out something,” said Stunt. “No physical violence. You’ll be expelled. I wish old Geegle was here.”

Geegle walked into the lab. “What’s going on? Who’s this? Zelda? What happened?”

He put his hand on Zelda’s shoulder. “Hmm, a transformation spell. Guys, do you want to remove it for your friend? Then tell me.”

Smoll looked at his friends. “After me? Weezle, do you want to help?”

“Yeah, sure. Thanks.”

Stunt, George and Weezle followed their friend’s lead and together they removed the spell from Zelda, peeling it away, bit by bit. When her appearance returned to normal, they all sighed. A small pot of something tumbled onto the bench, rattled around, and settled.

“My favourite eye makeup!” said Zelda, wiping her eyes. “Aww. Nice side effect, George.”

“I don’t choose them, Zelda! But you’re welcome.”

“Now. Tell me what happened,” demanded Geegle.

“Try it with more emphasis on the second word of the incantation,” said Weezle. “More force.”

Weezle and Zelda were in the lab, helping Doug with some of his homework. Group Y had taken Doug under their wing and took turns mentoring him, because Bob didn’t seem interested in doing it.

“That’s better, Doug. Much better. Does Bob help you out with anything at all?” asked Zelda.

“Well, she’s very busy with her third year stuff,” said Doug. He wasn’t looking at them.

“No more than the rest of us,” snorted Weezle. “You should complain to old Geegle.”

“She said that she’d get me chucked out!”

“She can’t do that! Old Geegle wouldn’t chuck you out on her say so, Doug. He’s pretty smart!”

“Really?” Doug seemed to be thinking. “Yeah.”

Just then Bob arrived.

“Doug, where have you been? I need you to type up my project. Come on!”

“Write it for you, you mean,” muttered Doug. Then he straightened up. “No, Bob, I’m not doing it! Find another slave. I don’t think that you can get me chucked out, but anyway, I don’t care. I’m going to talk to old Geegle.”

Bob was so shocked that she just watched him walk out of the room. Then she turned.

“This is your fault, freak!” Bob hurled a spell at Zelda, but Weezle stepped into the way, and tried to catch it. He missed and it hit him in the eye. Nothing happened to Weezle, but the spell rolled across the floor and Bob retrieved it. Her second shot hit Zelda and Zelda turned pink.

“Got you, freak!”

Zelda screamed and started crying, while Bob smirked and walked out.

“... and that’s when I phoned George and the rest,” said Weezle.

“She hit you in the eye, pal?” asked Stunt.

They could see that Weezle’s eye was swelling up.

“Yeah, well done, Weezle,” said Geegle. “But you didn’t turn pink, so that spell must have been tailored for Zelda. It was prepared in advance! Bob must have been waiting for an opportunity to slug you with it, Zelda!”

“Thanks Weezle! You stepped into the way. For me!”

“That’s OK, Zelda. I hope it makes up for the things I’ve done to you guys the last two years.”

“Don’t worry about that, Weezle,” said George. “It’s all forgotten.”

“Anyway, guys,” said Geegle, “You are officially mentors for Doug. Please go and find him and let him know. I need to find Bob.”

“Ah, there you are, guys. George, Zelda, Stunt, and Smoll, stay here. The rest of you scram for a minute, please.”

Geegle had found the group at their usual table.

“Right, who did it, and what did you do?”

Zelda looked from side to side. “Err, it was me, sir.”

“No one else? Hmm, none of you is looking shifty, so I guess I’ll have to take that at face value. What did you do to Bob, Zelda?”

“Um, not much. I, er, cast a spell on her. Nothing serious. She’s going to accidentally break a nail, sir. Or spill something on her clothes. Or her hair will stick out or go straight. Or she’ll get spinach in her teeth, sir. Or she’ll lose a button. Stuff like that. Nothing permanent.”

Geegle seemed to struggle for a minute. He was trying not to laugh, thought George.”

“I see. Bob always likes to look perfect. That will really annoy her, but she probably won’t realise that it is a spell. I wondered why she was so, umm, twitchy. Well, that’s magical retaliation, Zelda. I’m going to have to mark you down for that. Huge danger of it escalating. I’d have to treat it more seriously if she hadn’t started it.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.” She didn’t seem very sorry.

“But that would have worn off in, what, half an hour?”

“Twenty minutes, sir. But I used a recursive spell.”

“A spell that spells itself? Won’t that run for a long time? A month? Before it falls apart?”

“No, sir. It will dissipate at noon tomorrow. I added a termination component, sir, because she would guess if it went on for too long.”

“Nice. Excellent. Well done. You were always at the top of the class on the technical stuff, you know. I’ll give you a markup for that. Good use of recursion and a nice solution for ending it. Bob doesn’t realise she’s been spelled, but don’t do it again.”

He sighed.

“What is it with you lot? I’m always telling you not to do things that I might have got up to myself.”

He stood up. “Oh, by the way, Bob is gone. Expelled. She tailored a spell especially for you Zelda and attacked you with it. In addition, she wasn’t mentoring Doug, and I’ve had more complaints than I care to count about her treatment of him. She threatened to get her parents to sue me, but good luck, there. I know her mother, and she won’t do that. She’s a decent person, if a bit snooty.”

Geegle left and all their friends came back, and of course they wanted to know what was up. The consensus, when they were told the news, was “Good riddance!”

At the end of the year Geegle called all the students in one by one.

“George! Well done! You’ve been informed that you have passed?”

“Yes, sir, thank you. Here you are.”

He handed Geegle a bullfrog, and Geegle looked at it and laughed. He took the bullfrog carefully and put it down on his desk and it changed into a cup of coffee.

“Just like your interview. But no Jasper?”

“No, sir. I actually got Stunt to conjure the bullfrog coffee cup this time, so that Jasper wouldn’t be dragged over here just for a coffee. I’ll have to figure out a way to reduce Jasper’s visits. Much as I like the little guy, I can’t have him appearing with me all the time.”

Geegle nodded.

“Well, George, you made it to the end of the course! What do you think about that?”

“Thank you, sir, for giving me a chance.”

“I’ll tell you a secret, George. You were one of the most promising students, right from the start. I was worried about the side effects, but I thought that we could get that under control. I expected all group Y to get through, and you all did.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“What are your plans, George? I need someone to do some research.”

George thought about it.

“Well, sir, could I do it part-time? You see, I’ve told the Master of the Assassins that I’d do some work for them.”

“Mmm?”

“Yes, They want some data analysed. They’ve got a lot of data to analyse, the computer guys can get so far, but they need the intuitive insights to get further. I can push it well beyond the rational limits, sir. I’m good with numbers.”

“Oh, I see.”

“And the Thieves non-Guild, sir.”

“Oh yes? What does Arnold want? Is it legal?”

“Yes, sir, it’s legal. I checked, obviously. All they want is a psychological spell to identify the out-and-out nutters. If I can help them eliminate the psychos from the non-Guild, I reckon that’s a public service, sir. They don’t want something like Jasper’s kidnapping to happen again. Stunt will be giving me a hand with that one.”

“Be careful, George. They are thieves, after all. Do you want me to check the contract?”

“Yes, please, sir. I was going to ask you anyway.”

Geegle looked at him.

“George, have you had fun?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good. Phil complains about his student assassins, and he has a point. They’re a pretty dull lot. He’s contracted Zelda and Smoll to do a few lectures for them. About image. Personal and professional. And enjoying life. Though, to be fair, it’s a bit hard to be cheerful and happy when your business is killing people.”

George nodded.

“Well, good luck, George. I’ll contact you about the research later. Go and celebrate with your friends.”

“Thank you again, sir.”

Makki linked arms with him.

“Did it go well?”

“Yeah. I’ll miss this place, though.”

“Well, I hope you will come and visit me.”

He kissed her.

“Of course.”

“The bar?”

“Yeah. For the last time as a student. Oh, I’m going to do some research for old Geegle.”

“Oh good. You’ll still be around then.”

They entered the bar and all their friends welcomed them. Smoll and Joli. Stunt and Melanie. Zelda and Weezle. Wait! What? Zelda and Weezle? That had been a surprise. Doug was there and others of their friends too.

George sat down and sighed. The end of an era! He reached for the nearest of the pitchers.
