

The Wizard's Wand

by Christy Noel

“Get back in there!” boomed Master Theodophorus.

“Do I have to? It smells like bat droppings!” whined Erickephanes, his young apprentice. “Why can't we just use magic to find the wand?”

“Why can't we just use magic?” Theo mimicked Erick's fretfulness. He stiffened. “Did you not lose my best wand in the dragon's lair?”

The youth nodded, biting his lip.

A ragged hole scarred the mountainside nearby. One of two entrances, the tunnel burrowed through a quarter mile of rock before reaching the main chamber. It was the only safe way to enter — without magic.

The youth remembered how he found the treasure trove. It started when a traveler mentioned the bejeweled chamber. Tempted by riches, Erick 'borrowed' Master Theo's wand for magical protection. The dragon returned while he explored. He forgot the invisibility spell he had used on himself and fled in panic, losing the wand in the process.

“Stupid boy,” said Theo. “The secret to becoming a truly great wizard has very little to do with magic. You must learn to use your wits.”

Erick tapped dirt with his shoe. “But how will I hide if the dragon returns?” he squeaked. He had just hit puberty that summer, and he hated it when his voice shifted.

“That's your problem!”

He crept through the darkness, using an easy glimmer spell to cast a soft glow. Water dribbled over the granite walls.

A moan echoed. Shivering, he hoped it was just the wind.

How was he going to find the wand? A brilliant wizard, Master Theo could have easily summoned it. Erick wondered if he would ever be so powerful.

The tunnel opened out, and he stumbled. A hollow clatter bounced off the walls. He looked down to see what had tripped him and nearly fainted. *Bones!*

Rubies and sapphires glimmered in scattered piles. On the opposite wall, a large opening let in a tiny amount of daylight. The entrance was a few hundred feet through there, but the dragon could fly faster than he could run, so it was a bad escape route.

A golden gleam caught his eye — reflection from eggs in the giant nest. Instinct told him to look there first.

There seemed to be more eggs this time. He climbed over the dry branches, careful of his step. The wand was not in sight; it must have fallen down between the burnished yellow eggs, as big as a man's head. He took care not to damage any. Dragons could smell as well as bloodhounds, and if he crushed even one egg, the dragon would sniff him out for maternal revenge.

Erick wanted to try a levitation spell, but he feared it would wobble the eggs and crack them. Moving them by hand was the only choice.

Sweat dripped from his brow after ten minutes of cautious labor. At last, he spied the tip of the wand. Just a few more eggs to move...

A sulfurous odor tickled his nose. Something shuffled outside. The creature was home.

Heart pounding, Erick grasped the wand. He hastily recited the invisibility spell. Nothing happened. The wand failed to emit a single magical spark.

He gulped, realizing the magic had dissipated after being away from its master for too long.

Intensely aware of the danger, he scrambled out the far side of the nest. Then he waded through the maze of gems, clutching the wand so hard his knuckles turned white.

The mystical lizard settled herself over the eggs and groomed one unfolded wing with bird-like finesse.

A pebble rolled, and he froze.

The dragon turned. She sniffed, catching his scent. Her emerald eyes narrowed. Dragons sighted on movement; if he kept still she could not spot him. His knees trembled.

She lumbered over. Her rotten-egg breath nearly made him gag.

Finally, the monster turned away, apparently unable to discern his smell over her own overpowering odor.

Erick breathed a sigh of relief and continued. The exit was not far now.

The discarded bones caught his toe and scattered.

The dragon lifted her head and snorted. Smoke poured from her nostrils. Spotting him, she lunged.

Erick scurried into the narrow tunnel. Her long neck extended after him. Billowing fire erupted from the creature, and the boy screamed.

The flames curled his neck hairs just as he rounded a bend. His feet splashed through puddles. The dragon howled, and furnace-like rumbling preceded another blast, but he was out of range.

“Master!” His voice cracked. “I got it!” he cried. “Master?”

The old man was gone.

He followed the path back to the village, passing a grove of trees populated with chirping sparrows. How could he put magic back into the wand? The balanced metal rod was expensive. Would his master punish him when he found out it was now useless?

The birdsong quieted. A shadow passed over the sun. He cupped a hand over his eyes and gazed up at the sky.

Far above, a tiny shape circled.

He gasped. The dragon was hunting him!

“When performed correctly, the invisibility spell covers sight as well as smell,” he remembered his master saying.

The silhouette grew more distinct; green scales flashed against the sunlight. He could not outrun it.

Seven years of training taunted him: spells, meditations, practice lessons. He imagined the scolding voice of his teacher. “Have you learned nothing?”

The spell *had* to work, with or without the wand. Closing his eyes, Erickephanes lifted the rod and recited the incantation.

A few sparks trickled from the tip.

A distant flapping reached his ears, like the snapping sails of a clipper, but he forced himself to concentrate and repeated the spell. The wand blazed to life, and his form faded from view just as the dragon dove.

He peeked. The creature skidded into the dirt, producing a dusty cloud. When the air cleared, Theodophorus stepped forward. The dragon had vanished.

“Master?” squeaked the youth, undoing the spell.

“Well, well,” said the old man. He pulled an apple from his pocket. “So you *have* learned something.” With a wink, he shimmered and transformed into the traveler — the one who had told him about the cave — then changed back again and crunched on his apple.

Erick gaped.

“You can keep the wand,” added Theo. “You earned it.”