

THE STUBBORNNESS OF WIZARDS

by Eugene L. Morgulis

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We wizards are a stubborn lot, but it is from our stubbornness that we draw our power. To demonstrate what I mean, I shall relate the story of a young wizard-in-training.

Now then.

I awoke one spring morning to a knock at my cottage door. I was not yet in a mood to get up, much less to take visitors, so I coaxed a fire into the stove and waited in bed for my tea kettle to come to a boil. Only once I had finished my tea (made of leaves I blew in on an oriental wind) and drained the last few drops of coziness from my bed, only then and not a moment sooner, did I rise to greet my early-morning visitor, who I half-expected to be gone. It was two hours later, after all.

But no. There at my doorstep stood a young girl, as pale and lonesome as the last daisy petal. So small that she barely reached the tip of my beard.

“Are you Mr. Grindleflog?” she asked.

“I am the Great Wizard Grindleflog, if that's what you're asking. And you are?”

“Dora.”

“Fine,” I said. “If you have business, then let me hear it.”

Of all the terrible qualities children possess, the worst is shyness. A child always has something to say, but when you stick your face right up to theirs and shout "Out with it!" they either cry or go running behind their mothers' skirts. Dora, I will admit, was not shy in the least. To the contrary, she regarded me directly with clear blue eyes and pleaded her case concisely.

She told me that, for as long as she could remember (which could not have been that long) she had a knack for talking to animals, which is of course an early manifestation of magical acumen. Dora thought nothing unusual of this gift, and it went unnoticed, until Dora's parents

stumbled upon her playing the perfect host to a table of squirrels, nodding along with their gossip and dutifully refilling their thimbles with acorn tea. After this and several other fantastical events, it was strongly suggested that Dora seek tutelage in the ways of magic, lest she become a danger to herself or others. In fact, she was not to return home until she did. After wandering alone for several days, a traveler pointed her in my direction. So, here she was.

“Please, Mr. Grindleflog,” she said. “I would very much like to be a great wizard like you. May I stay here and be your student?”

Well. You will not be surprised to learn that, due to their inherent stubbornness, wizards make terrible students. Though we all share a love of learning, we also loathe instruction. For instruction requires a relationship built upon a mutually agreed superiority, master to pupil, which no young wizard can abide. To wit, I do not recall my own mentor fondly, and though I have offered wise counsel to a select few over the years, I long ago resolved not to take on any students. And certainly no lodgers.

I explained all this to the girl at my doorstep. “So you see, young lady,” I said, “my mind is made up against it, and was so long before you asked, long before you were even born. I therefore reject your request for tutelage.” With a wave of my hand, I opened the gate behind her. “Good day, Dora.”

The girl swallowed and blinked, but did not otherwise budge.

“I came to learn all you can teach me,” she said, “and I will not leave until I do.” Her eyes narrowed. “You should know,” she added, “that I am as stubborn as a rock.”

I narrowed my eyes to match. “Well too bad for you, little Miss, for I am sturbborner than a rock.”

To drive the point home, I motioned across my lawn to the child-sized boulder that resided there. With a flick of my wrist, I sent its bulk soaring into the next field. It landed several seconds hence with a muted whump.

Dora looked toward it and said nothing for a time, listening to the late morning breeze that blew in her face. Finally, with a deep sympathetic sigh, she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” I told her.

“Not you,” she shot back. “I was apologizing to the rock, which wanted nothing more than to rest there in the lovely grass. But you threw it away without even asking.”

I found Dora’s naïveté amusing enough to overlook her indignance. “Precious child,” I tutted, “a wizard does not ask. A wizard commands. The rock may have wanted to stay put, but I wanted to see it fly. It is a matter of will, you see. Yours must be the strongest. Stronger than the rock. Stronger than the volcano that forged it, the earthquake that moved it, and the wind that weathered it. Ten thousand circumstances conspired to set the rock there, precisely there, and nowhere else. A wizard’s will dwarfs them all.”

I then leaned down so that my face was close to hers, and spoke in a deep soft voice so as not to frighten her. "It is presently my will," I said, "that you leave my property."

Hearing this, Dora turned and proceeded down the walkway, her head held high. A little red squirrel peeked back at me from Dora's thicket of black hair. As soon as she passed the gate, the child pirouetted to face me again.

"I will respect your wishes," she called from the road. "But it is still *my* will that you teach me how to be a wizard. If you will not do that today, then I shall wait here until you change your mind."

I had not laughed so hard in years. "Haven't you been listening, dear girl? A wizard never changes his mind. He changes the world to match his mind."

"His or *her* mind," chirped Dora.

"Yes. His or her mind," I corrected myself.

As I closed the door, I became aware of two things. The first was that it had been over sixty years since I last corrected myself. The second was that the correction had been entirely the girl's doing, which meant that she was powerful indeed. I would have to be careful.

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I went to bed early that night, and called down a gentle rain to lull me to sleep. I let it pour all night long, and well into the next morning, enjoying its pleasant patter on my thatch roof.

The next day, after clearing the skies, I ventured out, only to find young Dora waiting outside my gate, true to her word. She displayed all the evidence of an incommodious night -- black hair matted, peasant dress wrinkled and soaked. But Dora's bright blue eyes bespoke a singularity of purpose undiminished by material discomfort.

She was also seated atop a familiar-looking rock.

"How did that get there?" I demanded, pointing to the rock.

Dora smiled and looked down for a moment. "I asked it to come back," she said, "so that I could sit on it. I'd been standing all day and my legs were tired. It would not budge at first, but then I promised not to sit on it too long. Then the rock said, --*Here, she furrowed her brow and attempted a low voice* -- 'Very well, but 300 years at the most.' And then it rolled here!"

Dora beamed at me, proud as punch, wholly unaware of how unwizardly she was being.

"A true wizard would never debase himself, or herself, by bargaining with mindless objects," I told her. "I, certainly, never have and never shall." I retired to my cottage without a further word.

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It rained again that night. Heavier this time, with violent clashes of thunder and lightening and a moaning wind that rattled my shutters. In my bed I sat awake, fraught with memories, and one in particular.

I remembered how, many years ago, that dreadful old goat I called Instructor placed before me a glass bead and instructed me to raise my arm toward it. “Your arm shall not move until the bead moves,” he said in his raspy condescending manner. So I sat there, in Wyndamere Hall, for many hours, during which my body twisted and pulled, but my arm remained as motionless as the bead before me. The two were linked, you see, in my mind and thus in actuality. I raged at the bead and my arm until the sweat poured from my brow and finally, exhausted, I collapsed. When I regained consciousness, my master chastised me for being a weak-willed newt and dismissed me as a failure. The next day, he made me try again. After weeks of agony, I succeeded in shifting my arm and sending the tiny bead skittering across the table. But when I looked up for an acknowledgment of my success, my master simply placed a larger bead in front of me.

That is how one masters the inanimate. Magic is not supposed to be fun, easy, or polite. So while my schooling was not without difficulty, I am proud to say that I learned the proper techniques and respect for the rigor they entail. And to have some duckling turn up from nowhere and easily accomplish feats with which other wizards struggled for years—and to do so by simply *asking*—well. It was not proper. It was not fair.

It was also not worth fretting over so, so I put it from my mind and listened to the raging weather outside. And who doesn’t love a good storm? Dora certainly did not mind, for she was still outside my gate the next morning. Except now I found her sitting atop the rock beneath a brand new apple tree.

“Mr. Grindleflog!” she squeaked without even waiting to be spoken to, “It rained so hard last night, and I asked it to stop, but it wouldn’t, so I asked a tree to grow to cover me, and look!”

“Hmph,” I said.

“Oh, and look what else I can do!”

Before I could refuse, Dora held a small hand forward, whispered *please please please*, and an apple fell from the tree into her palm. Dora presented it to me.

“Hungry?” she asked.

As a matter of fact, I was. And as I reached to take the apple, a thought sprouted in my mind that Dora was, after all, a darling child. With her ruddy knees and a twig positioned in her messy hair just so. I also noted just how small she was and admitted to myself that she’d take up very little space in my lonely old cottage if I were to invite her to be my ward and student -

But ah! Here, I caught myself and shook the insurgent thoughts from my head. As I did, Dora’s excited smile widened and she made a silly *ta-da!* motion with her hand, as if she were

redoubling her efforts to force endearment into my mind. I quickly resolved to make her see the fruitlessness of her attempts to charm me.

I breathed a hex that rotted the apple in Dora's hand, and she dropped it with a shriek. I then reached toward her tree and clenched my hand into a fist, causing the wood to twist and snap in a shower of splinters. Finally, I brought my fist down on the rock, upon which Dora stood, shattering it into gravel.

The girl glared up from the ground with her lips pressed together so tightly that they lost all color. I could see her willing her tears not to fall. She said nothing, but I felt Dora's icy gaze on me as I stamped back to my cottage.

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I spent a long while thereafter peering through my window as Dora raised new trees at the edge of my property and molded the living wood into a shelter for herself. When she wanted nourishment, a steady stream of squirrels brought her fruits, nuts, and berries. When she got cold--as when I called down that unseasonable blizzard --a jumble of wild rabbits huddled around her for warmth.

As the girl made herself more comfortable, I experienced the reverse. Everything in my cottage conspired against me. Furniture wobbled. Shoelaces broke. Silverware bent. My tea brewed bitter no matter how precisely I'd steeped it. I would put on my sleeping robe, the one with the stars and moons, only to find that I was wearing my gardening robe, with the suns and flowers. It was quite useless, too, as all of the flowers in my garden had died, although that may have had something to do with the blizzard.

I knew, of course, what, or rather who, was causing all the trouble. The message was clear. Dora was not going anywhere, and I would know no peace until I acceded to her demands for tutelage. It was to be a battle of wills.

As you may have guessed, I was far from helpless in such matters. To be sure, I could have removed Dora forcibly, but wizards who brutalize children tend to draw attention, which was the last thing I wanted. Besides, stubborn as she was, Dora would only find a way to return. No, no. I would have to make the girl abandon her vigil of her own accord. So, while Dora tried to befuddle me with childish pranks and inconveniences, I resumed my efforts to get rid of her for good.

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The trees that Dora enchanted proved hardier than her first one, and I found myself unable to affect them directly. I did foment a minor earthquake that shook them terribly, but the trees and the girl stayed put. And, since she'd already withstood every trick of inclement weather I could conjure, I moved on to other means. By day, flocks of birds squawked incessantly in her branches. By night, wolves howled menacingly in the darkness. My charms whipped them into a frenzy, until even I shuddered at their haunting cries. Yet Dora remained, her tree palace towering over my cottage.

I knew perfectly well that it would take more than a putrid stench to root her out, but I concocted nasty stink potion nonetheless, if only to see how Dora would react. The little troll changed the wind. Afterwards, as I was digging up the nullification spell with a handkerchief over half my face, I came across a sophisticated cold fire illusion, intended to scare rather than burn. It produced the visual effect marvelously, but Dora was not fooled. In fact, as the false flames engulfed her fortress, she revealed herself to demonstrate just how unafraid she was. That image burned in my vision and remained even when I shut my eyes tightly. The silhouette of a girl, standing implacable in the fire.

More time passed, and I confess that I grew desperate.

Now, I will not call what happened next a mistake, for wizards do not make mistakes. I will say, however, that it was an unfortunate and unexpected occurrence.

I recognized that Dora would leave neither out of discomfort nor fear, but it occurred to me that a young girl living in a tree would be susceptible to missing something all children stupidly cherish. Their mothers. A true wizard, of course, has no use for such nonsense, for attachment breeds compromise. Why, I have not thought of my own mother in ages and barely remember what she looked like. If that seems harsh, then so be it. I assure you that it has only made me stronger. But I suspected—correctly, I might add—that Dora would not be so disciplined.

So, late one night, I changed my voice to be soft and feminine. And I added to it a weary maternal aspect. It was an easy thing to do, and easier still was to throw it deep into the forest.

“Darling daughter,” I called by proxy. “How I have missed you. I came to find you, but I am lost and afraid. Run to me, my child. Find me. *Help me.*”

I repeated this and similar such entreaties, and before long, I saw Dora’s small dark figure scramble down from her tree and tear off into the woods. I changed the source of the sound frequently, to ensure that she would search in vain, growing ever more frustrated, lonely, and afraid. How far would she go, I wondered, until she figured out the ruse? Would she simply return afterwards to continue to defy and torment me? I had no way of knowing, but there was a clumsy desperation to Dora’s flight that told me that something in her had changed. I chuckled and toasted to my victory.

Then I heard Dora scream, and it took me a moment of listening to understand why.

The mad wolves were still out.

I reached forth with my mind to bring the beasts to heel, but the madness, which I had inflicted upon them, would not subside. I knew then that I had no choice; I would not be blamed for that child’s death. It had been weeks, or perhaps months, since I’d left my cottage, but I ran after her nonetheless.

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I arrived in a clearing to find Dora frozen before a quickly closing semicircle of wolves. There were so many. Far more than I expected. I could not even say how many there were, for they all appeared as one snarling, hairy fog dotted with yellow eyes and gnashing teeth. Their growls filled the night air with a perpetual grumble of menace and death. For the first time in ages, I trembled and knew fear.

It had been my hope that I would be better able to control the animals once I confronted them directly. Yet, the opposite occurred. Trepidation is the enemy of resolve, and with the wolves closing in, I found myself suddenly powerless. I could conjure neither spells, nor charms, nor glamours, nor hexes. There was nothing left for me but my fate, of which I was no longer the master.

And then, at the height of my despair, I felt an energy wake in my fingertips. I thought, at first, that I had tapped some hidden reserve of power. But when I looked at the source, I saw that it was Dora, who, standing beside me, had wrapped her hand around my own. For a moment, I forgot the situation and regarded the girl plainly. Her thicket of black hair was now a veritable storm cloud. She looked older, too. Not bigger, mind you, for she was still a tiny little thing. But there was somehow more of her now. Her voice had changed likewise. Though it was still no deeper than a chipmunk's sneeze, it acquired a resonance that permeated the air with pregnant vibration.

So I trusted her when she turned to me and said, "It's ok, Mr. Grindleflog. I'll show you how to do it."

Before I knew what "it" was, Dora closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. The wolves were now so close that I could smell their stinking breaths and hear the slap of their tongues against their snouts. Yet, I felt no fear. Rather there was warmth, and tenderness, and harmony, and joy, and a hundred other things besides. It was something I had not felt for a great many years. Not since I, as a boy, left my home and mother to study magic at that dreadful academy so far away. I clung to the feeling even as it overwhelmed me, just as I clung to Dora's hand.

The wolves received it as well, apparently, for they became as docile as lapdogs and slunk off into the night.

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Dora and I walked back to my cottage together, her hand in mine all the while. When I asked her what she'd done, she answered without hesitation.

"You talk on and on about will and dominance," she said. "But a wolf, or a tree, or a rock who wishes to obey will do so more readily than one who is forced. It is not a matter of imposing one's will, but making another choose to accept it as their own."

"And how do you accomplish that?" I asked.

"I make them love me," she said as naturally as she pleased. "But to do that, I have to love them first. So I find the best part of them. I loved the rock for its patience and endurance from its birth in the underground fires, and its slow journey to the surface, to the moment you

crushed it. I loved the acorn for its yearning to be a tree, and encouraged it to grow and play with me in the sunlight. Even the wolves I pitied for their confusion and fear of hunger, and loved them all the more. So they became my friends, too.

“The wolves are your friends?” I asked.

“*All* things in this world are my friends. Or one day shall be.” Dora looked at me and smiled in a way that made my breath catch in my chest.

I was then reminded of something. Not a memory, exactly, but something more potent and precious, tucked away in the cupboard of my mind. I could feel Dora grasping for it, and I resolved to find it first. When I did, it was as if I had stepped through the surface of a frozen pond and crashed into the water below. Except the water that surrounded me was warm and full of light, and I felt only security and contentment inside my mother’s pillowy embrace that smelled like stewed yams and was as big as the world. The feeling was more powerful than any spell I’d ever learned or devised. If Dora found this place, I knew, then she would have me.

So I destroyed it.

I then let go of Dora’s hand and gazed triumphantly into her confused face.

“I shall not be swayed by your dirty tricks,” I said, now stopping before my gate. “And I am far too stubborn to change my mind. A wizard, you see--”

“That’s alright,” she said gently. There was resignation in her voice, though it almost sounded like pity. “I have learned all you can teach me anyways. So, I’ll leave you alone.”

“That doesn’t count!” I hissed at the sneak, angrier than I realized, “I never agreed to teach you. I never took you in. And I never, ever changed my mind.”

“Then let’s call it a truce and part as friends.”

I snorted at this last, desperate attempt. “I agree to nothing.”

“Very well,” Dora replied. With that, she curtsied and walked off into the darkness.

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I never saw Dora again. Not that I would have cared to.

I haven’t seen many people since that time, in fact, for these woods gained a reputation for being dangerous and inhospitable. And there have been even fewer travelers in the years since I put up a fog around these parts that makes one think they left something important at home as soon as they enter. Not even tax collectors come around anymore, since Queen Theodora the Charming and Wonderful exempted this land from taxation. I’ve certainly no complaints about that!

She passed by this way once, you know? The Queen! Oh yes. It was during the election. And who ever heard of an election for Queen anyway? Well, perhaps it's a good change. Regardless, it was during her campaign, when she travelled from town to town winning over all the peasants and gaining their favor, no doubt willing to promise anything to anyone until she was loved by all. Just like a politician.

I did not meet Queen Theodora, though I did peer from my window as her retinue passed with its music and gaudy banners. She even waved to me. Such a trifling gesture, and yet it stuck in my mind. It made me think of a woman too perfect to exist, full of patience, wisdom and unconditional love. Like someone I'd known for ages, yet was as hazy as a forgotten dream. I recall thinking right then that perhaps we did need a new Queen, one who could nurture, guide, and protect the realm. Perhaps it was something I'd always wanted. Well, I knew immediately that this Theodora would make a charming and wonderful Queen. Pity if she never returns.

THE END