

An Elephant's Memory

A Neverwhere Story

for ColebaltBlue

by Rodo

RICHARD STARED AT the chess board in front of him and tried to think of a strategy that might postpone his inevitable defeat for a few more moves. The Marquis de Carabas smirked at him across the board, but Richard didn't mind all that much. The Marquis had won the last game, and every game before, and he loved to gloat. He was also much fonder of winning than Richard, who could lose without being in a terrible mood for the rest of the day. Richard looked over the board once more, sighed, and moved his remaining rook. Then he waited for the Marquis to make his move. He didn't have to wait long; a few seconds later the Marquis' Cheshire cat grin spread across his face. "Checkmate."

At exactly that moment, the door opened and Door entered the house, carrying something heavy on her back. It used to be her family's home and now it belonged to her, Richard and the Marquis, though the latter still vanished for days and weeks and considered himself more of a guest and less of a housemate.

Door looked at the board. "Did you lose again?" she asked.

Richard nodded.

"I swear, I've never met a worse chess player," the Marquis joked. "And now tell us what you went out looking for, my Lady Door. I have to confess that the silence made me even more curious."

Richard looked over the rough, brownish hessian fabric with illegible letters printed on it. It looked like it belonged in a harbour, together with a lot of identical sacks, until it got lost; maybe it fell off a pallet or was left in a container by accident. A familiar smell clung to it and spread through the room when Door walked over to them, a smile on her face. "Guess."

"Peanuts," Richard answered. He didn't have to guess. "What do you need a sack of peanuts for?" he

asked, and got the feeling that it was probably utterly obvious to anyone who hadn't spend the better part of his life in London in London Above.

The Marquis' scowl said as much. "I really don't think this is a good idea," he said.

"Well, it is the only idea I have – I don't like it much, either – but I think it's worth a try," Door replied.

"That doesn't make it any less of a bad idea."

"Would anybody care to tell me what you're talking about?" Richard interjected.

The Marquis crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Door disapprovingly. "The Lady Door wants to pay a visit to the Elephant." He sighed.

Door stared back defiantly. "The Elephant knows everything – well, *almost* everything – that happens in London Below. He loves information and his servants gather it for him. I want to ask him if he knows anything about my sister," she explained.

Well, Richard thought, that didn't sound too bad. Yet. There had to be a catch. There always was one in London Below.

"There's a catch, of course," the Marquis drawled, confirming his suspicions. "The Elephant doesn't just give you the information if you ask nicely." – Of course, Richard thought – "And unlike everyone else, he doesn't trade in favours, either. He likes peanuts and bananas and fruit, whatever exotic fruit you can find, but that alone won't help a lot. He'll want to have information in return, something his servants couldn't find out for whatever reason and something that is as important a secret as whatever you want to know. That is the tricky part."

"Because he knows almost everything." Richard nodded.

"He doesn't like to have visitors, either, and if they can't keep him interested... let's just say I heard his servants will take care of any annoyances."

If the last few months had taught Richard anything, it was that everything was so much more dangerous than it seemed at first glance. He marvelled for a second that he didn't mind it in the least. Instead, he felt his heart beat faster with excitement and curiosity.

"I want to go anyway," Door said determinedly.

Richard had also learned that Door, no matter how harmless, light-hearted and young she might have

seemed at times, had a way to get people to do things they wouldn't do under any other circumstances. She was also far too stubborn to change her mind once it was made up. So he started making a list of what to take – his knife, naturally – and was halfway finished with it before she asked: “Will you come with me?”

Richard nodded while Door looked over to the Marquis.

“You'll owe me another favour for this.”

Door inclined her head.

A small, roguish smile spread across the Marquis' face. “Very well.”



Both Door and the Marquis had conveniently forgotten to mention that the way to the Elephant was “a bit dangerous as well,” as the Marquis had put it when they were sneaking through one of the many old sewers. It looked like it hadn't been used in over a century and it stank like it, too. The stench made Richard feel light-headed and he could have sworn that tiny white spots started dancing in front of his eyes. Or maybe it was just the light that was reflected by the Marquis' shiny black coat and the wet stone walls. In fact, there was water everywhere, though where it came from was a mystery.

Door stayed between them and carried the sack, even though Richard had been a gentleman and offered to carry it. At least this way he had his hands free and his knife out while guarding the rear. The Marquis took the lead and peered into the darkness as if he could see in it.

“Why are we sneaking, anyway?” Richard whispered.

The Marquis froze and turned around. “Because of the Ravens. Now do us all a favour and be silent or they might hear us, and I assure you that they would be delighted to make your acquaintance, Richard,” he hissed, baring his astonishingly white teeth.

“This area belongs with the Raven's Court,” Door murmured almost inaudibly. “They don't like trespassers very much. And they're always arguing with the neighbouring baronies about their territory. You wouldn't—”

Door was interrupted by the Marquis' hand, which closed over her mouth before either of them had

noticed that he'd moved. Her eyes widened and Richard became instantly alert. He peered at the darkness in front of him and listened for something. At the same time, he followed Door's and the Marquis' lead and hid behind a pile of rubble at the side of the sewer, making as little noise as possible. And just in time.

He heard footsteps ahead. They were slow and deliberate and unsure, as if the person weren't quite used to walking. Richard listened tensely as they came closer and the seconds stretched to minutes in his mind. He gripped the handle of his knife tighter and dared a quick look at the newcomer. Then he saw it.

It was called a Raven for a reason: its feathered body was black as coal, the legs were those of birds and it had wings instead of arms. It was as tall as a human, however, and its face was human, too – only intensely beautiful and sexless, with eyes that carried nothing human in them. It was otherworldly, in the same way Islington had been otherworldly. A harpy, Richard thought dimly. A real one, not just the weak metaphor people in London Above used to describe women they didn't like.

It took ages for the creature to pass by them. Richard didn't think he breathed at all while he could still hear it taking its odd steps. He didn't speak when the Marquis beckoned them to follow him either, but he paid close attention to every movement in the shadows and to every flicker of light. His knife was always ready.

It took the better part of an hour to get out of the sewer and into an old maintenance tunnel that had seen better days but was at least dry. It didn't stink, either. Richard could feel the tension leaving the Marquis and Door; he saw their shoulders and features relax and finally took the deep breath that had been waiting in his chest since their encounter with the Raven.

“So that was a Raven?” Richard asked, receiving disbelieving glances in reply.

“Count on Richard to state the obvious. Yes. They're not as bad as they seem, once you meet them in a more... official capacity. And only in an official capacity. They only tolerate humans if they have a very good reason to, so I wouldn't recommend getting too close in any case. Not that you will, I suppose. Nobody talks with the Ravens unless they really have to,” the Marquis answered while he eyed the wall of the tunnel.

Or if you get paid enough, Richard thought, remembering that the Marquis had negotiated with the

Raven's Court for the Earl. But, then again, he was the Marquis and you'd be a fool to expect him to behave like other people.

"It's over there," Door said, nodding at a derelict metal fence that had once possessed a door and a lock.

"Are you sure?" the Marquis asked.

"Of course I'm sure. It's a door after all."

And it was indeed a door, although it was hard to tell just by looking at the tunnel walls, which were in the exact same shade of grey. There was no handle, either; it had probably fallen off years ago. Or maybe someone took it because they didn't want the door to be opened. The lack of a handle didn't pose a problem for Door, naturally. She touched the door and within seconds it slid open without a sound, as if it were a dog that enjoyed being petted by his owner. Door smiled. "Come on, we're almost there."

Door hadn't exaggerated. They really were almost there. Richard could see a flickering light at the end of the small corridor they squeezed themselves into, and he could hear small, shuffling noises. He tensed again.

The corridor led to a big cavern that must have surprised everyone used to the tunnels of London Below. It reminded Richard vaguely of an ancient cistern that he had seen in a documentary once. Its walls were made of stone and it was far bigger than should have been possible in London. In the middle of it sat a grey elephant with tired eyes and a howdah in the form of a miniature castle on its back.

The Elephant hadn't noticed them yet. He was picking listlessly at a number of branches that looked like they had seen better days. Among the branches with the dulled green leaves, something tiny and grey moved – many somethings, in fact. They were in the castle, as well. Mice. Richard had always thought that elephants were scared of mice.

Just when he had that thought, Door took a step forward and cleared her throat. The movements in front of them stopped abruptly, but the Elephant's eyes suddenly became alert. He snorted and the mice scurried off to the walls and hid amidst more branches, leaves and assorted rubbish they had collected. Then the Elephant sat up straight and raised his head and trunk high. He looked a lot bigger and more dangerous all of a sudden and Richard remembered nervously that there were war elephants back in Roman times and that they were a very effective weapon as long as Alps weren't involved.

“Sir,” Door said and bowed respectfully. Richard and the Marquis de Carabas followed suit.

What leads you here, Lady Door, Warrior, de Carabas? the Elephant asked, his deep and inhuman voice booming through the air. Richard felt it vibrate in his body.

Door, seemingly unfazed, took another step towards him. “Information, of course.”

The Elephant hummed and Richard could see the mice dashing around in the corner of his eye. *You brought me something, I hope?*

“Yes,” Door replied, and took the sack off her back. She didn’t falter when she went forward and handed it to the Elephant, who grabbed it with his trunk and looked at it with a pleased expression. Or with what Richard hoped was a pleased expression.

Peanuts! Excellent! I haven’t had any in far too long. My servants have become lazy, I’m afraid. – the mice became more frantic and Richard could hear small, terrified squeaks as they jumped up and down the branches – *Now – what do you want to know?*

“I want to know about my sister. If she is still alive and where I can find her.”

Hmm... that will take quite a bit. It was rather difficult to obtain that piece of information and I would hate to part with it. So lovely and secret and important. The Elephant sighed.

“What do you think would be adequate payment?” Door enquired, and Richard could make out the first faint traces of insecurity and doubt since they had set out for this endeavour.

The Elephant stayed silent for what seemed like half an eternity to Richard. The Marquis spent most of this time taking in every detail in the cavern, no doubt looking for potential escape routes. Richard felt his eyes drawn to the mice that had now come out again to inspect the visitors. A few of them even dared to nose at their shoes. And then, of course, there was the Elephant who had opened the sack of peanuts and was now idly chewing on them while his trunk moved to music only he could hear.

Well... he finally said. *You could tell me where the Angel Islington is. And his henchmen.* He looked at Door as if he were expecting to find the answer in her face and Richard wished he could see more of her than her tense back.

“I... I don’t know where he is,” she answered slowly.

The Elephant grumbled. *That is unfortunate.* He moved and seemed even more threatening than before.

“There has got to be something else!” Door argued.

The Marquis stood still but seemed ready to flee at any moment. Richard noticed that they were now standing in a circle of mice that just watched them calmly, waiting. Their tiny beady eyes sent shivers down his back.

The Elephant bristled and Richard snapped. “She really doesn’t know where they are,” he shouted. “She just opened a door to as far away as she could and sent them halfway across space and time. I doubt the place even has a name!”

And then the Elephant unexpectedly calmed down and cocked his head. *Your sister is with Arethusa of the Seven Sisters. She hoped for Islington’s help to better her standing among them.* Then he fell silent.

Door bowed again and took the lead when they left the Elephant, who was still munching his bribe. The mice remained where they were and left them only a small passage to retreat.

“I hate mice,” the Marquis mumbled once they were out of earshot and back in the maintenance tunnel. “Little opportunistic buggers. Rats are much better, makes you wonder why *they* have the bad reputation.”



“So how can we save her?” Richard thought out loud once they were back in the safety of their home. “Because I guess it would be far too easy if we could just ask nicely, right?”

“Nothing is ever that easy,” the Marquis de Carabas agreed. “No, Arethusa will know by now that Islington will not be of much use to her. She probably thought her own personal opener would be better than nothing.

“I’d like to know how she keeps her there,” Door wondered. “My sister is young, but she can make doors, especially given enough time. They’d have to watch her all the time. Or they did something to her.” She stared at the fire in the fireplace and started chewing on her nails.

“Well, I suppose asking her sisters always is an option,” the Marquis drawled. “If they don’t kill us first, that is.”