

## **The High Baboon**

*A side story on how Zikar met Queen Elora.*

If there was one thing Zikar hated more than anything in the world, it was afternoon deliveries. The heat of the midday summer in Aspal was enough to drive even the calmest of men mad and Zikar was beginning to think that his Baba had sent him out as punishment for oversleeping in the morning.

A sigh escaped Zikar's lips as he hefted the wooden crate over his shoulders. He had managed to deliver most of the orders in record time, but there was still one more left - the High Baboon. Zikar had passed the tavern enough times to know that it was exactly the sort of place he wanted to visit. He had also known that it was exactly the type of place that his Baba never wanted to associate with, but business was business and Zikar was eager to finally visit the High Baboon.

With a bounce in his step, Zikar half-dragged, half-carried the wooden crate down the narrow streets of the Ishari District. The humidity on top of the heat had drawn sweat along Zikar's skin and only those with deliveries to make, like Zikar, were wandering the streets.

What should have been a fairly short walk took longer than normal. A few paces ahead of Zikar, he spotted the Vinia Royal Guard patrolling the streets. They looked frantic, the kind of look his family would wear whenever Zikar was dragged home for being too disruptive with his friends. He paused, watching as the guards searched through stalls and streets. Perhaps there was a thief on the loose?

The thought made Zikar's hold on the crate tighten. If he managed to get swindled again, he would never hear the end of it from Baba. Lifting the crate, he quickened his pace to his destination. The High Baboon sat on the far end of the Ishari District, close to the entrance of the rest of Aspal. He has seen it from afar nearly every day in his daily deliveries but he had never been granted the freedom to visit until now.

Managing to avoid the Vinian Royal Guards - a feat of its own that left Zikar grinning, the High Baboon eventually came into sight. It was owned by a local Ishari man and the building, made of wood, stood two storeys tall. There was already a loud raucous emanating from beyond the opened doors and Zikar hurried his steps towards the tavern.

As Zikar entered the tavern, he let out a relieved breath. He had not realised how scorching the heat of the sun was until he stepped inside the cool interior of the High Baboon. There were already patrons milling around tables and on the far end, he caught sight of a dice game that interested him greatly. The heaviness of the crate drew his attention away and Zikar let out a grumble. He still had a delivery to make before he could finally enjoy himself.

"I have a delivery to make," Zikar called, as he approached the front of the tavern.  
"From Belahm."

A kindly woman with a round face peered down at Zikar. She was nearly as old as his Ama but wore heavy beads and her eyes were lined with dark kohl.

"A delivery, eh? You must be Belahm's boy," she replied. "Come, bring the food round back. Any later and I would have had to make my fish stew again."

Zikar dutifully brought the crate to a small room behind the counter. He could smell the spiced aromas of meals that were being cooked and something sour in the air that reminded him of the beers he stole from his Baba when he was asleep.

"Here you go," the woman said, handing Zikar a pouch of coins. "Tell your Baba we appreciate his help."

"Of course Aunty," Zikar answered. He glanced at the dice table again. "I don't suppose I could stay here for a while, you know, to cool down from the heat?"

The woman laughed. "I promised your Baba that I would send you straight home, but if you look old enough to stay. Go on then, take a seat. But don't linger too long or I'll drag you home myself."

Zikar nodded, but his attention was already drawn towards the rest of the room. There were people as old as his Ama and some, even younger than Zikar, seated around the low, wooden tables. He watched as mugs were refilled and as the sobriety of the customers waned with each gulp of their drinks. But it was the sight of the dice game that drew Zikar towards the table in the back.

At Zikar's approach, an old man grumbled and tossed a heavy bag that jangled noisily onto the table. Zikar's eyes widened. If he could win a dice game, he could keep the extra money he earned for himself - enough to spend a few weeks at the High Baboon when he was done with his deliveries for the day.

"Want to take your chances against me?"

The voice was soft and drew Zikar's attention towards the woman seated at the table. She was holding the bag of coins the last man had tossed and grinned at Zikar slyly. Something about her looked familiar, though there were enough women with dark hair and dressed in drab shawls that she could have been someone he passed on the streets.

"Well?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "Or are you too scared to lose?"

Zikar scoffed, "Scared? Of what?" He took a seat. "I'm the best dice player in the Ishari District."

"I doubt that," the woman laughed.

A frown found Zikar's mouth and he decided that he did not like her very much. "Let's just play. What's the gamble?"

The woman eyed Zikar and then, the bag of coins at his side. Smirking, she pushed her bag to the centre of the table.

“How about we both bet our coins and whoever wins, gets to keep both?” she suggested.

Zikar smirked. This was going to be too easy. The woman seemed confident enough, but no one had ever bested Zikar in a game of dice in years. He tossed his bag of coins onto the table and smiled.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

The woman frowned. “Why do you need to know my name?”

Zikar shrugged. “So I might remember the woman who has made me rich.”

She laughed in response, the sound lilting and for a moment, Zikar was struck by how young she looked. They must have been around the same age and by the way she spoke, he realised that she must be very wealthy to be able to gamble away a bagful of coins over a dice game.

“Call me Ellie,” she answered. “And will you grant me the same honour of giving me your name?”

Zikar smirked. “Zikar, but you will only remember me by the man who beat you.”

Ellie laughed again, amusement in her dark eyes. She looked so familiar and Zikar frowned, peering at her. Had she visited Baba's shop? But before Zikar could ask Ellie about it, she rolled the dice. They were made of wood and each side had a carving depicting an animal. Two serpents meant an automatic win and the player with the most points after three rounds were declared a winner.

“I’ll go first,” Ellie announced.

Zikar shrugged. "Go ahead. I'll still win."

Ellie smirked as she rolled the dice in her hands. Casting it across the table, Zikar watched as she managed to roll two serpents. His eyes widened and for a second, he found his breath lodged in the back of his throat.

"Oh, looks like two serpents," Ellie remarked. "Your turn."

"You're cheating," Zikar accused. "There's no way you could have gotten two serpents on your first try."

Ellie shrugged, leaning back in her seat. "I never said this was my first try. Besides, you did say you were the best dice player in the Ishari District or was that just a lie?"

Zikar huffed. "*Stars*, you're infuriating. Very well, prepare to lose because fortune is on my side."

It turned out that fortune was not at all on Zikar's side. After losing two rounds to Ellie, he knew that even if he managed to get two serpents in the third, it was not enough to beat her. He stared at the bag of gold that he was supposed to bring back to his Baba and felt a sickening twist of his gut. Ellie stared at Zikar, her lips pulled into a wide smirk. Zikar decided then that he was never going to play dice games again.

"This cannot be," Zikar groaned. "I demand a rematch. No- you've cheated. You must have cheated."

He stared at the bag of gold that he had foolishly gambled away. What was he going to tell Baba?

"Forfeiting the game?" Ellie asked. "I cannot fault you. Well, it seems that you owe me—"

Her words were cut off as the doors of the High Baboon were pushed open. The Vinian Royal Guard, at least five of them, entered the tavern. They began searching the tables while the one in charge approached the woman behind the counter.

“Have you seen Her Majesty?” he questioned. “We have received word that Queen Elora was last seen around your establishment.”

“Oh no.”

Zikar turned towards Ellie, who had drawn her shawl around her head and was nearly under the table. He frowned at her. Was she hiding the fact that she had cheated- Realisation dawned on Zikar. He stared at Ellie until he was certain why she looked so familiar. In the aftermath of the King's death, his daughter had been placed on the throne. Everyone had gone out to watch the young princess give a speech in the centre of Aspal, including Zikar and his family.

“You're Queen-”

Ellie pressed her palms over Zikar's mouth, muffling his voice. Her eyes narrowed at him and could smell the faint scent of jasmine perfume on her hair.

“Help me sneak out without being noticed and I'll give you both bags of coins,” she whispered.

Zikar stared at this woman, the Queen and for a moment, was almost tempted to give up her ruse to the Vinian Royal Guard. But another part of him dreaded having to explain to his Baba why he had returned home penniless and reeking of defeat.

“Fine,” he hissed. “But you also declare that I rightfully won this game-”

“Don't push your luck,” Ellie warned. “I won the game and you know it.”

Zikar rolled his eyes. “Very well. Gather your things and get to the ground.”

Crawling across the tavern floor proved to be a journey in itself. It was sticky and the straw that had been scattered about needed replacing. Zikar turned around and found Ellie right behind him as they navigated beneath the tables and countless legs while the Vinian Royal Guards seemed to get closer with each second. Perhaps fortune truly was on their side for they managed to escape the High Baboon without being spotted.

“Hah, pay up,” Zikar declared.

Ellie rolled her eyes but there was a glimmer of a smile on her lips. “Fine, I suppose you do deserve a reward for your help.” She handed him the two bags. “My greatest thanks, Zikar.”

Zikar grinned at Ellie, weighing the bags in his hands. This was going to get him a lot more than a few weeks in a tavern. Glancing at Ellie, he raised an eyebrow.

“What are you even doing here?” he asked. “Why are you dressed so plain?”

Ellie shrugged. “What? A ruler can’t spend time with her people?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Zikar answered. He was going to buy a few beers tonight. “I suppose, it was a pleasure doing business with you Ellie. Until next time.”

Ellie snorted, “I never said there would be the next time.”

“I don’t know,” Zikar replied, smirking. “I did ask for a rematch.”

The guards were beginning to approach the doors and Ellie glanced towards the tavern. “I suppose you did. Perhaps another time, hm?”

She waved at Zikar before darting down a winding street that went around the High Baboon. For a moment, Zikar could only stare at the place where Ellie had been standing. The guards came out and Zikar shuffled out of the way. Who would have

thought that he could have earned this much by helping a royal? Next time, he was going to be betting at least five bagfuls of coins.