

# Lunch Menu: Shrimp

A Hakan story

"I'm telling you, there's a pile of headless monsters out there on the side of the road about a day's walk east of here. Surprisingly, it doesn't smell as bad as they look," said the red dragon.

The tavern burst into laughter. The dragon and his caravan had been traveling from the north west over the last few months. They came across a small town and decided to make camp and resupply before they continued to the next city to sell their wares.

Normally the bar would only have a few regular patrons and the occasional passing traveler, but today the place was packed. Everyone came to see a living, breathing dragon. The bartender, a portly geko, saw the opportunity for business and gave the dragon a few free drinks to keep the stories going. In the kitchen, the bartender's wife cooked away for their mass of patrons.

The fat geko's plan worked as people piled in and ordered their own drinks as they stayed to listen to the warrior dragon's tales. Hakan hated crowds, but it wasn't so bad since the barkeep kept his mug topped off. The past few years of traveling with the caravan provided more than enough stories to wow and fascinate the locals, especially one tiny geko who watched with wide eyes from behind the corner of the bar.

Since he was a tiny boy, Pierro grew up with stories of heroes and adventures that traveled across the world in search of fame and fortune. Before him was the literal embodiment of these legends, a real life dragon warrior. Images of the dragon slaying monsters with a single stroke of his sword and saving the lives of his party by placing himself between them and the threat. The dragon was everything Pierro wished he could be, brave, big, and strong

The young geko was only a head taller than the bar stools. Pierro was seventeen, but didn't look a day older than twelve. The boy was easily the runt of his litter. He worked hard for his father and mother at the tavern. Still, the size of the young geko's dreams were the complete opposite of his stature.

Also watching the dragon from a spot next to the door was a hulking horseman. He had a simple hood that managed to hide most of his long face. The snout, ears, and hooves still gave him away as a horse. His eyes never left his target and he just stood there in silence surrounded by the boisterous public.

The dragon let out a belch so loud that dust rattled on the ceiling beams of the pub. Hakan slammed down his empty mug and stood up. "Thank you for your hospitality," he said to the bartender before making his way towards the exit. The crowd that had gathered in the pub parted to allow the big dragon through. As soon as Hakan passed the threshold of the door, the horse followed him.

Buzzed and giddy, Hakan walked over to a nearby alleyway and lowered his belt so he could relieve himself. As the dirt and brick of the building grew wet, the red dragon tilted his head back to look over his shoulder. He could see the gecko kid peeking his head around the corner of the alley dart away.

From the other side, the horse man continued to watch. "You wanna suck it while you stare, Horace?" Hakan barked, knowing he'd not get an answer. He put his dick away and shoved past the horse. The two made their way back towards the caravan's camp on the outskirts of the tiny town.

Over the crest of a dusty hill, Hakan's caravan could be spotted by their large bonfire. The dragon disappeared over the top of the hill and the little geko crept forwards. The sun had already set and only the glow of the distant fire was all Pierro could make out. As he looked for any signs of Hakan, he saw only the horse standing there, staring back at him.

Suddenly something grabs the small geko and hauls him into the air. Pierro could make out the stern gaze of a very irate dragon.

"What the hell are you doing, shrimp?" Hakan growled.

"I...well, you're so cool!"

"Beat it, kid. You're gonna get in trouble. Go back to the bar," Hakan said, tossing the tiny gekko away into a patch of sand and dirt and continuing towards the caravan.

"No, please. I want to be an adventurer like you!"

"Go home, shrimp," Hakan said without turning around.

The youngster persisted nonetheless. He waited for Hakan to reach a respectable distance and crept closer. Even just the opportunity to observe a real dragon and adventurer represented the doorway to a life beyond the son of a barkeep. Pierro loved his parents, but he knew in his young heart that his destiny was beyond the valley that the tiny tavern sat in. Undeterred, the gecko watched with wide eyes.

"You're back early, they ran out of beer at the tavern?" Arik the badger asked, grinning at the brooding dragon.

"No, I was kind enough to leave some for your fat ass," Hakan replied.

"You know Hakan, you're such a nice guy. All those stories Horace tells about you being an asshole are totally wrong," chuckled Arik.

"Cut the shit, you know he barely talks. All that fucker does is watch me day and night and says maybe three words in a month," said the dragon.

"I know you said it's your job to observe Hakan, but would it kill you to talk more?" Arik asked the horse. Horace simply shook his head and leaned against a nearby tree.

The red dragon took a seat on a rock across the fire from the badger. Around the camp, their beds and tents had all been setup and skewers of meat and pots of soup surrounded the coals of the bonfire. Hakan plucked a charred morsel for himself.

"Where's everyone?" asked the dragon.

"Mary is fetching some water and the otters were checking out the markets in town. I've been just sitting here, you know, making sure no one steals our shit. Oh wait, that sounds like exactly what I pay you for!" the badger jabbed at Hakan.

A red scaly hand smacked the badger's finger away. "Please, don't try that bullshit with me. We both know the reputation of being the only merchant caravan guarded by a dragon keeps damn near any thieves or raiders away. The worst we deal with are monsters from time to time, and those beasts don't want your goods or your gold," the dragon spat back.

Arik straightened up and nodded, "Yes, the reputation has done wonders for our safety and allowed you to also take it easy. But as your employer, would it kill you to hang around the wagon more? The way you drink, you're going to pick up another reputation, one that may jeopardize the current one."

Hakan sighed. "Fine, then you're going to need to take that gecko kid spying on us over the hill back home to the tavern."

"What? What gecko kid?"

"Little shrimp, probably the tavern keeper's kid. The brat followed me back. Saya wants to be an adventurer. If you want me to hang around more here, then you can take care of that kid."

"Fine..." the badger agreed and spotted the tiny lad at the top of the hill. As he started towards the boy, Pierro ducked away.

"Oh! And while you're back at the tavern, bring me back a drink!" requested Hakan.

"I'm your boss, not your server!" the badger shouted back.

As Arik left to fetch the boy, the dragon watched the crackling flames of their camp fire. A few moments later, Hakan could hear the sound of sloshing. He could see Mary walking towards him from the nearby river. The mink was holding two large buckets that she easily hoisted and emptied into a nearby barrel.

"Good to see you're back Hakan, where's Arik?" Mary said as she dusted off her skirt and took a seat next to the dragon.

"Oh, some damn kid from town followed me back. I asked him to catch the brat and take him home while I watched the camp," said the dragon.

"What's a kid from town want with you?" asked Mary.

"The shrimp thinks I'm some sort of hero and wants to be an adventurer. I told him to go home, but he was still hiding up on the hill over there. Arik should have snuck up on him by now and the kid should be on his way home," Hakan replied while looking over the hill to see if he could spot either of the two.

Half an hour later, the otter twins and Arik return to the camp. It was getting late and what remained of their fire were just some smoldering charcoal. Hakan still sat on his rock, watching the group return to their camp.

"I'm telling you, we should have just traded the kid," said one of the otters.

Arik slapped both of them on the back of their heads.

"Ow, what the hell was that for?" asked the other otter?

"First, what Po suggested is wrong. Second, being the twin of Po, I know that Jo was also thinking the same thing," the badger said as he pushed the two faster towards their camp.

"Welcome back everyone," greeted Mary.

"Hey Mary," the three said in unison.

"Is everything packed and the horses have been fed?" Arik asked.

"Everything except whatever Po and Jo bought at the market," Mary said.

"Ok, get your stuff stowed away, we're leaving tomorrow before noon," said the badger.

"You take care of the kid?" Hakan asked.

"Yeah, got the little guy back to the pub. I had to tell him stories about you to get him to follow me. That kid seems to be your number one fan. Hmm, to be that young and naive again," Arik sighs.

"Very well. Let's get some rest," Mary said while kicking some sand and dirt over the coals of the campfire.

"Ugar is a week's worth of travel to the south, get some rest everyone. I doubt we'll see another town for a while," Arik said as he climbed into the back of the caravan.

The night passed uneventfully and the group disembarked right before the sunrise. Hakan walked in the front to scout out any possible trouble. Mary and Arik rode in the caravan pulled by a couple of feral horses and Horace followed silently in the back. The crew

traveled quietly down the smooth road for a few leagues to their next trade destination.

When the roads became rocky and uneven, the wheels bucked against small holes in the road, Horace's ears picked up an unusual sound. Normally the caravan had a bit of rattling as they hit bumps in the road, but they sounded oddly muffled. Leaning down, the horse could see some dangling cloth.

Horace reached for the strip of cloth and yanked at it with a mighty tug. From under the caravan, Pierro fell and hit the ground with a thud.

"You? The one he calls 'shrimp'," said the horse with a look of surprise.

The two otters popped their heads out from the back of the caravan.

"Did Horace just say something?" asked Po.

"He never talks," says Jo.

"Oh shit..." they both said in unison when they saw the kid they returned last night.

"Let me go!" Pierro cried as Horace lifted him in the air by the scruff of his collar.

Soon the caravan came to a halt and everyone came to see what the commotion was all about.

"What the fuck? I told you to get lost, kid," Hakan shouted as he saw Pierro.

"But...I don't want to go back. You can't make me," Pierro says as he continues to kick and struggle.

"What are we going to do? We're too far to turn back and make our next rendezvous on time,"

"Damn it, you're right. We're going to have to keep going and see if there's any way we can send word or hire an escort for him," said Arik.

"We could just leave him here," Hakan suggested.

Mary slapped the dragon ineffectively across the face. "How dare you! He's just a child, Hakan!"

Actually upset by the gesture, Hakan acquiesced. "Fine, but as soon as we find a way to get out, he's gone. Now let's keep moving."

The dragon took back his position in the front and soon the caravan was on the move once more. The now discovered gecko hopped in the back with Po and Jo. He would peep from between Arik and Mary to keep watch on Hakan.

"You really like watching Hakan," said Po.

"I don't see what's so interesting about him. He's a grumpy drunk," said Jo.

"But he's a dragon! A real life breathing dragon," Pierro replied.

"Pierro, you should really find better role models in your life," said Po.

"Like you, Po?" teased his twin.

"Shut up, you're just jealous I'm the better looking one," retorted Po.

"Aren't you twins?" asked Pierro.

"Yes, but I'm still the prettier twin," said Po. The two otters began to fuss and fight one another.

"What's the deal with the horse?" inquired the gecko.

"Hakan mentioned Horace is here to observe him. But the horse seems pretty harmless," Jo said before biting his brother's tail.

"Ow! I heard Hakan called him a spy once, but Arik convinced him not to kill the fellow. It makes the caravan seem like we have more muscle and are less likely to run into problems," said Po as he kicked his brother off of his tail.

Pierro turned around and stared at the quiet horse following in the back. He kept his hood over his eyes and kept pace easily with the rest of the caravan. Unsure what to make of Horace, the young gecko

returns to watch his idol with wide eyes and a heart that seeks adventure. His world tilts slightly as he watches the dragon scratch his ass and let out a loud belch as the rest of the caravan followed.