THE ABSURDISTAN CHRONICLES • VOLUME 14

TESSA AND THE SEVEN OFFICES OF EXTRA CHEESE!

A MUNICIPAL BURGER EMERGENCY



Based on a true fictional event.

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Tessa and the Seven Offices of Extra Cheese!

A MUNICIPAL BURGER EMERGENCY

For every place that is supposedly just around the corner.

A story from Goldhain and the neighbouring possibilities.

Based on a true fictional event.

Prologue - One More Slice



Tessa wanted a chilli-cheese burger.

Not just any burger. One with a toasted bun, hot sauce, onions, a proper patty and enough cheese for at least one napkin to discover its purpose in life at the first bite.

She entered the burger shop on Goldhain Market Square, walked up to the counter and ordered exactly that.

"With extra cheese," she said.

The young man at the till entered the order. The machine beeped. He tried again. It beeped a second time and displayed a yellow symbol.

"Extra cheese requires a permit today."

Tessa waited for the laugh.

It did not come.

The cashier pulled a narrow slip from the printer. "Because of the new regulation on multilayer dairy constructions."

"I want one slice of cheese."

"An additional slice."

"That is usually what extra means."

The cashier pointed across the street. A sign showing a wheel of cheese and seven arrows hung beside the town-hall entrance.

"You need approval from the responsible offices. Then I will make your burger straight away."

Tessa took the slip.

"Moron!" her tic called out.

The cashier nodded. "The regulation, yes."

Tessa looked at the town hall, then at the burger beneath the glass dome. She was hungry. Hunger turned distances into mountain ranges and forms into personal opponents.

She straightened her leather jacket.

"Keep it warm," she said.

Then she crossed the street.

I. The Anteroom

Goldhain Town Hall had seven offices responsible for extra cheese and not a single sign explaining the order in which they had to be visited.



Mrs Klee sat behind a desk in the anteroom. In front of her stood three stamps, a ticket dispenser and a plant that looked as though it had been waiting years for a signature.

Tessa put down the receipt.

Mrs Klee read it. "Chilli-cheese burger, additional slice. To be consumed on the premises?"

"Yes."

"With a transport route?"

"Four metres to the table."

Mrs Klee ticked a box. "Then you need Form CH-7, the heat supplement, proof of structural integrity and preliminary price confirmation."

She handed Tessa a thin sheet.

"Is that everything?"

Mrs Klee opened a drawer and pulled out a folder.

The folder landed on the desk like a brick.

"That is everything."

Tessa leafed through it. The first page asked for her name, address and desired quantity of cheese. The second asked whether the cheese was likely to retain its shape during consumption. The third included a box for intended emotional effect.

Tessa wrote: Satisfaction.

"Idiot!" her tic called towards the plant.

Mrs Klee did not look up. "She would like to be a palm tree. We do not discuss it."

Tessa immediately liked Mrs Klee a little.

Mrs Klee explained the route using a floor plan. The seven rooms were not arranged in sequence. Room one was on the ground floor, room two on the second floor, room three downstairs again and room four in the basement. Room five was in the annex, room six beside the anteroom and room seven at the very top.

"Why?" Tessa asked.

"Historical development."

"Can it historically undevelop?"

Mrs Klee placed a pencil and a roll of plasters on top of the folder. "At present, there is no application for either."

Tessa marked the route on the plan. It resembled the training programme of a boxer who had personally offended a staircase. Then she numbered the forms, attached the receipt with a paper clip and went to room one.

II. First Office - Order Amendments

Room one dealt with amendments to food orders that had already been placed.

Mr Brück wore a waistcoat and sorted applications into three baskets: before, after and too late. He placed Tessa's form in before.

"You ordered the burger without extra cheese and changed it afterwards?"

"I ordered it with extra cheese from the start."

Mr Brück took the application out again and placed it in a fourth basket under the table.

"Then it is not an amendment."

"Good."

"Then I am not responsible."

Tessa inhaled. Boxing taught you not to waste energy on the air.

"The slip says I need your stamp."

Mr Brück examined the box. "That is a certificate of non-amendment. I am responsible for those."

He picked up the largest stamp, pressed it onto an ink pad and placed it precisely inside the designated box.

"You are confirming that nothing was changed?"

"Correct."

"Although I wanted extra cheese from the start?"

"Precisely because of that."

Tessa picked up the folder. "Idiot!"

Mr Brück raised a placating hand. "The system."

"The system," Tessa agreed.

They understood each other. It did not help, but it saved an explanation.

III. Second Office - Dairy Product Classification

Room two smelled of paper and very mild cheese.

Mrs Wendel from the Dairy Product Classification Office wanted to know which variety was involved.

Tessa called the burger shop.

The cashier read the packet. "Processed cheese preparation with Cheddar flavour."

Mrs Wendel pushed up her glasses. "Preparation or slice?"

"Both," the cashier said.

"That is legally possible in food terms, but inconvenient in form terms."

Tessa held the phone between them. "Can we call it cheese?"

Mrs Wendel opened a thick directory. She leafed from Alpine cheese to Butter cheese, from there to Cheddar-like products and finally to Products that form strings when warm.

"How long are the strings?"

"I do not have the burger yet," Tessa said.

"Then we need a forecast."

The cashier put a test slice on the hotplate. After a minute, he lifted it with a spatula and estimated twelve centimetres.

Mrs Wendel entered twelve. "Under fifteen. Category M-two."

She stamped the application.

"Does that have any effect on the permit?" Tessa asked.

"No. But now we know what we are permitting."

Tessa closed the folder. Her stomach growled so loudly that Mrs Wendel stamped the supplementary sheet as a precaution.

IV. Third Office - Heat Coordination

The third office stood at the end of a corridor longer than the street between the town hall and the burger shop.

Mr Paprika ran the Coordination Office for Heat and Dairy Products. Jars of chillies in ascending sizes stood on his desk.

"Cheese reduces heat," he explained. "An additional slice changes the balance."

"Then make the sauce hotter."

Mr Paprika went pale. "That would be an order amendment."

Tessa showed him the stamp from room one. "The amendment was certified as a non-amendment."

He read the box twice. "Impressive."

Tessa had to undergo a taste test. Mr Paprika prepared three tiny spoonfuls of sauce: mild, medium and municipally responsible. Tessa tried all three.

"The last one."

Mr Paprika handed her water.

"Do not need it."

Her eyes watered. She smiled anyway.

"Moron! Fish-face!" her tic called with the clarity of an official bell.

Mr Paprika moved the water closer. "The chilli?"

"No. My tic."

"Understood." He applied the stamp. "For the record: the chilli did not take offence."

Tessa drank a sip after all.

Her stomach growled again in the corridor. This time, a filing cabinet answered with a soft metallic echo.

V. Fourth Office - Burger Engineering

The Department for Multilayer Foods was in the basement.

Engineer Leyla sat there over drawings of cakes, sandwiches and a seven-storey club loaf. When she saw Tessa, she pushed aside a small spirit level.

"Additional layer of cheese?"

"One."

Leyla took the burger's measurements. Bun diameter, patty height, onion distribution, expected sauce migration. The cashier sent photographs from four angles.

A cross-section of a building appeared on the paper.

"The problem is not the weight," Leyla said. "It is the sliding surface."

"I will hold the burger."

"With both hands?"

"Of course."

Leyla handed her a declaration of proper burger handling. Tessa signed that she would lift the burger with two hands, tilt it by no more than thirty-five degrees and avoid excessive lateral pressure.

"What happens if cheese escapes?"

"Then I eat it."

Leyla considered this briefly and added: controlled drainage through consumption.

The proof of structural integrity received a red stamp.

Tessa studied the technical drawing. "Can I keep that?"

"After the procedure is complete."

For the first time that day, an office promised Tessa something she actually wanted.

Leyla also performed a load test with a model. Two round wooden discs represented the bun, a piece of felt the patty and a sheet of shiny foil the cheese. She tilted the structure to twenty, thirty and finally thirty-five degrees. At thirty-six, the foil slid out sideways.

"You see?" Leyla said.

"I am not eating the burger with a protractor."

"You do not have to. You have steady hands."

Tessa accepted this as a compliment. Leyla drew two small arrows on the sides of the cross-section and declared the two-handed grip the preferred safety measure. The burger was now officially stable, provided Tessa held it herself.

VI. Fifth Office - Price Fairness

The fifth office examined the price.

An additional slice cost eighty cents. The caseworker, Mr Pfennig, had to determine whether eighty cents bore a reasonable relationship to weight, degree of melting and emotional effect.

He weighed a comparison slice.

"Twenty grams."

"Good," Tessa said.

"At eighty cents, that is four cents per gram."

"Also good."

Mr Pfennig produced a table. "The municipal guideline is between three and five cents. You stated satisfaction as the emotional effect. On a scale of one to ten?"

Tessa thought of the burger that had been kept warm for over an hour. "Twelve by now."

Mr Pfennig entered ten because the form did not allow for more.

"Would you like to lodge a complaint against the limit?"

"No."

"That would be room one."

"No."

He stamped the form. Then he offered Tessa a biscuit.

She took it. It tasted like cardboard, but was evidently uncomplicated in legal terms.

Mr Pfennig placed two more beside it. "For the journey."

Tessa thanked him. Bureaucracy was not made only of forms. It was also made of people who knew how far it was to room seven.

VII. Sixth Office - Public Compatibility

The sixth office assessed whether additional quantities of cheese might impair the public good.

Mrs Harmonie sat in a bright room containing twelve empty chairs. Hearings normally took place here. Nobody had appeared for Tessa's slice of cheese.

"There has been no objection," Mrs Harmonie said.

"Who was supposed to object?"

"Local residents, consumer organisations, opponents of cheese."

"Did anyone know about it?"

"The application was posted on the noticeboard for eleven minutes."

Tessa remembered a sheet in the stairwell. She had taken it for an evacuation plan.

Mrs Harmonie was about to close the hearing when the door opened. Mina came in with a blanket around her shoulders and a mug of cocoa in her hand.

"I was summoned as the public."

Tessa stared at her. "By whom?"

"Lena. She says you have been in the town hall for an hour and a half because of cheese."

Mrs Harmonie asked for Mina's statement.

Mina sat down. "More cheese is fine as long as I do not have to stand up."

"Consumption will take place in the burger shop."

"Then I have no objection."

Public compatibility had been established.

Mina gave Tessa a piece of chocolate for the journey and did not come with her. She had fulfilled her role as democracy in full.

VIII. Seventh Office - The Final Stamp

Room seven was on the top floor. The staircase had ninety-seven steps and a lift bearing a sign that said temporarily out of service.

Tessa climbed.

At step forty-three, her tic called "Idiot!" into the stairwell. The echo answered from several floors. At step eighty, she carried the folder like a championship belt. At step ninety-seven, she was ready to stamp the building personally.



Mayor Amsel sat behind the final door.

"Extra cheese," she said and pointed to the folder.

Tessa put it down.

The mayor checked six stamps, three supplements and the technical drawing. Then she stopped at the first page.

"The estimated duration of consumption is missing here."

Tessa looked at the empty box.

"Five minutes."

"With this construction?"

"Four."

The mayor wrote four to five minutes. She opened a small case. Inside lay the seventh stamp, heavy and gleaming.

"This permit authorises you to consume one additional slice of Category M-two processed cheese preparation on a chilli-cheese burger with municipally responsible heat."

The stamp fell.

The sound echoed through the room like the bell at the end of a boxing round.

Tessa smiled. "Finally."

The mayor pushed back the folder and opened a second drawer. It contained little cards for successfully completed administrative journeys. Tessa's card had seven empty circles. The mayor stamped each one separately.

"Is that necessary?" Tessa asked.

"No. It is recognition."

By the seventh circle, the card was so heavy with ink that its edges curled. Tessa pocketed it anyway. Anyone who had survived seven offices was entitled to take home a trophy, even if it was made of cardboard.

"You could have said no," Mayor Amsel observed.

"To the cheese?"

"To the procedure."

Tessa picked up the folder. "The procedure should have said no."

IX. The Missing Slip

On her way downstairs, Tessa checked the folder.

She had all seven stamps. But the narrow receipt that had started everything was gone.

Without it, the burger shop could not match the order.

Tessa stopped on the landing.

The hunger inside her became very quiet.

She searched every pocket, every supplement and the biscuit wrapper. Nothing.

Then she retraced her route. Room six: no slip. Room five: only crumbs. Room four: technical drawings. Room three: a red sauce stain, but no receipt.

In room two, Mrs Wendel found a narrow strip of paper in the cheese directory. It had become a bookmark at Products that form strings when warm.

"This is yours."

Tessa took it in both hands. "You have just saved my life."

Mrs Wendel smiled. "In form terms, I merely returned third-party paperwork."

Tessa put the slip into the inside pocket of her jacket and closed the zip.

Some lessons required seven offices.

X. The Way Back

By the time Tessa left the town hall, the afternoon was almost over.

Mrs Klee in the anteroom raised one hand. Mr Brück happened to be standing by a window. Mrs Harmonie came downstairs carrying a file. One by one, several caseworkers looked out through doors and windows.

They had accompanied the application. Now they wanted to see whether the cheese reached its destination.

Tessa crossed the market square. The folder was under one arm, the receipt safely inside her jacket. At the other end of the square, the burger shop glowed like an inn after a long journey.

The cashier saw her coming and switched on the hotplate.

"All the stamps?"

Tessa put the folder on the counter.

He leafed through the pages. His eyes widened. "You really went everywhere."

"Put. The. Cheese. On."

"Of course."

He took the prepared burger, placed a fresh slice on the patty and waited for it to melt. Then came the additional slice.

It slowly sank over the first, gleaming and fully authorised.

Seven windows in the town hall watched the operation.

XI. The Handover

The burger was served on a plate. Beside it lay chips, two napkins and the technical drawing, which Leyla had returned by messenger.

Tessa sat down.

The cashier added a third napkin. "Just in case."

She picked up the burger with both hands, as required by the proof of structural integrity. The bun did not tilt. The sauce remained within the permitted range. A string of cheese stretched for approximately twelve centimetres.

Category M-two.

Tessa took a bite.

The cheese was warm. The chilli was hot. The onions crunched. For one moment, the town hall, the forms and the ninety-seven steps disappeared.

"Well?" the cashier asked.

Tessa chewed. Then she raised one thumb.

Applause came from outside. Mrs Klee, Mr Brück, Mrs Wendel, Mr Paprika, Leyla, Mr Pfennig and Mrs Harmonie stood at the window. Even Mayor Amsel could be seen upstairs in the town hall, holding up the stamp.

Tessa swallowed.

"Morons!" her tic called affectionately towards the entire administration.

Seven people bowed.

XII. The Reform

The case was discussed in the town hall the next morning.

Not because something had gone wrong. Precisely because everything had gone according to procedure.

Seven offices had worked for two hours so that twenty grams of cheese could be placed on a burger. The mayor called this "exemplary and open to expansion", although nobody was sure which part was to be expanded.

Tessa's folder lay in the middle of the table during the meeting. Mrs Wendel had brought cheese samples. Mr Pfennig had calculated the cost of every individual inspection and then quickly covered the total again. Leyla's cross-section hung on the wall like the plan for a new bridge.

Mrs Harmonie read Mina's statement aloud. More cheese is fine as long as I do not have to stand up. It was unanimously chosen as the guiding principle of the reform, although Mina only learned about this later.

Mr Brück initially wanted to introduce an application for abolishing the application. Mrs Klee took away his pen.

Mrs Klee proposed a single short form. Leyla reduced proof of structural integrity to the question of whether the burger would be held with

two hands. Mr Paprika declared that changes in heat beneath one additional slice would henceforth be acceptable as a matter of course.

One week later, a new form hung in the burger shop.

It had one page.

The cashier only had to tick: Extra cheese requested?

Underneath, it said: Consume at your own satisfaction.

Tessa received the first copy in a frame. She kept the large folder at the boxing gym. It was heavy enough to use as a training weight.

At the first training session, she lifted it above her head ten times. On the eleventh set, a supplementary sheet came loose and sailed to the floor. It was the declaration of proper burger handling.

Tessa framed that sheet too. Not because it was useful, but because nobody would believe her that it existed.

The others at the gym listened to the story. Afterwards, they ordered burgers together. Three wanted extra cheese. The cashier made three ticks

without so much as looking at the town hall.

Tessa found the process almost eerily beautiful.

No stamp fell. No corridor grew longer. Only cheese melted, as cheese had always done without municipal supervision.

On the back, it said: SEVEN OFFICES - ONE SLICE.

This time, the wording was not official.

But it was correct.

Finale - One More Slice

A few days later, Tessa returned to the burger shop.

The cashier smiled. "The usual?"

"Chilli-cheese, extra cheese."

He took the new form, made a tick and put the additional slice on the grill.

The entire process took eleven seconds.

Tessa stood at the counter, unsure what to do with all her remaining readiness for combat. No corridor. No stamp. No hearing. Not even a biscuit.

She sat down by the window with her burger.

Across the street, Mrs Klee looked over and raised her coffee cup. Tessa raised the burger. Two veterans of a very small reform saluted each other.

Tessa took a bite.

The cheese formed a string thirteen centimetres long.

She examined it.

"Category M-two," she murmured.



The cashier leaned over the counter. "Would you like another slice?"

Tessa looked at the town hall.

Seven windows suddenly seemed alert.

"No," she said.

Then she thought of the taste, the folder and the mayor with her stamp.

"Well… perhaps."

Somewhere in the town hall, a plant fell over.