

## The Best Burger

The door blew inward, shattering into burning fragments that turned into a cloud of ash. The shards were incinerated before they could travel more than a few feet or hit the ground. A silence fell, as the few patrons in the little restaurant turned towards the sudden noise. Through the fog of dust, stepped the Klorthian Warrior.

“Lying, deceitful Human scum! Your day of reckoning is here!” it shouted.

The creature had to duck to step through the hole left by the door. Even hunched over, it was close to seven feet tall. Black battle armor with gouges, dents, and burns that bespoke of the many battles it had seen covered its body. Its limbs looked powerful and menacing, and not quite normal—for a human. Beyond the obvious that it sported four arms, the elbow and knee joints seemed more suggestions than biological necessities. The gloved hands had three fingers, each of which seemed capable of pivoting and serving as a thumb. And the arms seemed about as thick as the legs, which appeared larger than normal, even though they tapered down considerably from the trunk. A black helmet covered what could be presumed to be its head, though that too sat just a bit too far forward, too low for proper human proportions.

The humans in the restaurant had no idea that the Klorthian Warrior had been modified to appear more human than its native form. His (for ease of discourse, we shall use the masculine, singular form to describe “him” even though, strictly speaking, neither are completely accurate, but are as close as can be easily approximated) mission was unusual, and required contact with the humans. Normally, they fought wars in space, and rarely had need for subtlety. But now he needed to communicate and interact with the humans, rather than simply fire all weapons and then proceed with the clean up. So he approached them in a less strange form.

The warrior even had a form of vocal chords, lips, an air bladder, and diaphragm added to his anatomy, rather than rely on an in-suit translation/communication system. He felt this “personal touch” would be much more effective. He still required the suit to feed him transduced sound signals. While the Klorthian hearing range included that of human speech, it was limited and could not distinguish between some of the subtle sounds without assistance.

“Who leads in this place?” the warrior growled.

“And just who in the HELL do you think YOU are, Mr. Leather Biker Freak, breaking everything in sight and not giving a hoot and a holler about it?” asked a middle aged woman with graying hair tied up in a bun. She wore a pink blouse with an oval patch on one side with “Selma” stitched in the middle of it and a white apron around her waist.

The Klorthian Warrior paused a moment and waited for the full translation to come through. The strong drawl coupled with the sharp tones of her voice exceeded his ability to accurately translate the nuances. After a moment, he slowly nodded.

“Yes... you are correct. I have not identified myself. I am a Klorthian Warrior, a fourth Battle Prince of

the two forearms of the seventh volume battle fleet. Dispatched for observation, assimilation, and enforcement. Your name for me, while a reasonable approximation, is too long for your conventions. You will name me First Sergeant Karsook. You should be able to pronounce that and understand the title.”

“Sure, you’re a big ‘un. But this is football country here and we grows ‘em big, Honey,” the waitress said unimpressed. “Sam! We got a military man to see you, got a bee in his bonnet about something,” she shouted over her shoulder, into the kitchen.

The computer in his suit provided more than simple translation to the Klorthian Warrior. It informed him that common terms of address by a “waitress” included various taste-related terms, including sugar, honey, sweetie, and darling, and roughly corresponded to “comrade.” Satisfied with her protocol, he waited for her commanding officer.

A man in his low 50s stepped out from the grill and walked to the counter. He was heavy set, a bit under six feet tall, had short gray hair and dark skin, and wore a dirty apron and hat, both of which had been white at one time and were now a nondescript gray, highlighted with years of grease stains.

“This here’s Sergeant Karsook. He wants to have words with you, Sam,” Selma said, and with that walked away to take an order from an older couple who were patiently sitting in the back.

“Wha’cho want?” asked Sam. “And wha’cho do with my door? You know how much a new door costs?” he said staring at the hole where the door used to be.

Sergeant Karsook looked down at Sam. His helmet sensors relayed basic information about Sam to the Klorthian: male, unarmed, merchant class (probability: 65%), service class (probability: 78%), intelligence (average), threat level (minimal). He signaled to the first line of assault backup defense to remain hidden and on standby.

“Your door should be the least of your worries,” snarled Karsook.

Karsook continued, “At the moment, it is your diner that is at risk.” He paused only momentarily before adding, “Along with your life. And the life of everyone in it.” Another pause. “And the life of everyone in this town, and possibly beyond.”

The Sergeant’s helmet showed the vitals signs as the human reacted to his words. Sam’s face, growing red with anger, was just as accurate.

“You threatening me?!? You threatening my customers?!? Maybe a body thinks he can talk that way to me, but ain’t nobody gonna threaten my customers!”

“Before you take action, you may wish to consider your situation. I assure you there are *many* ways in which I can kill you with little effort. The main variables being how fast and how painful. You would die without even knowing the charges against you.” At this, two shoulder mounted weapons swung out, small round tubes mounted in the center of a larger cylinder that began to rotate, making a whirring sound. It looked like some dark, space-age Gatling Gun.

It broke Sam's momentum and gathering anger, but replaced it with confusion. "Charges?" he asked. "What kind of charges you talking about? I ain't done nothing wrong! You some kind of MP? I been out of the service for almost 25 years."

The gun barrels spun down, but remained out. "I represent an authority that oversees a *large* area, of which *this* domicile is a part. As I said, I am tasked with observation, assimilation, and enforcement. The observation is to determine if the essential rules of order are followed. We take into consideration the limited level of sophistication of your world. Assimilation can follow if compliance is exhibited. However, in the presence of violations, then the third tendril of our authority is relevant: *enforcement!*"

"You here to snoop around or pass judgment?" Sam asked plainly.

"First the one, then the other. Once we determine the truth, then we take the appropriate actions using the appropriate force!" snapped Karsook.

Sam stood in silence a moment, with one hand on his chin, slowly pinching it, deep in thought, while his other hand scratched his ass without a self-conscious thought. After a moment he said, "But...why all the fuss over us? I pay my taxes. I don't cause no trouble."

"Why? **WHY???**" bellowed the enormous warrior. "Because of **THAT!**" And with a deliberate, almost showy motion, Sergeant Karsook turned a bit and pointed both of his right arms out. Bright, coherent, multicolored lights projected from his wrist joints and converged on a sign in the window. The sign read:

**Bubba's: Home of the BubbaBurger, the Best Burger on the Planet.**

"We shall see the truth," the Klorthian Warrior said with malice in his voice, "for the universe has laws beyond which your petty science can fathom. The Law of Truth in Advertising is something your simple minds have barely even begun to understand!"

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The gigantic armored fighter sat astride two, red, round-top swivel stools at the lunch counter. It appeared to be a testament to the design of the stools to support customers ranging from portly to morbidly obese that they were not simply crushed by the weight of the alien and his battle suit. Point in fact, they would have been flattened had Karsook not used a localized anti-gravity field to reduce his weight to a mere 400 pounds.

Sam had returned to the kitchen, saying that he had other customers with orders that were waiting and that his wife Selma would "take care of him, real good like." Selma had walked past him twice. On the first pass, she put a place setting and menu in front of the Sergeant. She barely slowed down on the second pass, leaving a glass of water and a quick comment of how she'd be back to take his order in a minute. His suit gave a quick translation of the time units into something more familiar, adding the colloquial meaning of a small amount of time and provided common low and high ranges to expect.

Karsook quickly glanced at the menu; he had thoroughly studied it during his mission briefing and trip

to Earth. His mission was simple and it would involve a BubbaBurger. Being a First Sergeant, he was fairly experienced with these operations, and had already completed more than a dozen missions on Earth.

The sides were left to his discretion. Certainly, no one had ever had to fill out any justifications for ordering fries with a burger, yet given the location and time of year, the creature felt that onion rings might be justified. The chocolate shake might raise an eyebrow (or eye-stalk) or two, but he had his reasons. He was here because of the burger, plain and simple. A slice of apple pie or other dessert in this context might have required some additional paperwork, and the Coke was simply purchased elsewhere and its factories, supply chains, and point-of-sales had sustained enough scrutiny over the years by both forearms of the battle fleet. He would gain no insight from ordering one. But a shake—that had the benefit of being both a drink and a dessert, and it complimented the burger. When Selma came around for the third time, he placed his order: BubbaBurger, onion rings, and chocolate shake.

Selma nodded, jotted it down on her pad, stuck her pen back in her hair bun, and said, “You want your shake now or with your burger, Sugar?”

The alien replied, “They stand as one, they fall as one. Just like all of you here this day shall live or die by the BubbaBurger. Bring the food out together!”

“You got it, Honey,” and she left to place his order.

A ding from a small bell in the kitchen indicated an order was ready. Selma took an order of scrambled eggs and oatmeal to the older couple in back. Shortly after that, Sam had come out from the kitchen and leaned over the counter to the Klorthian, who was busy trying to find all 16 objects from the sponsors hidden in the picture on the placemat. So far, he had found ten.

“What now?” muttered the alien distractedly, not raising his ‘head’ from the placemat.

“Jest one thing. The BubbaBurger’s a family secret recipe....,” he began.

“And you fail to trust me; you think I would steal it,” Karsook replied flatly.

“Ain’t no difference if I trust you or not, Mister. I got no choice in that matter. It’s jest that even if I *did*, you might attract...attention.”

With that, the Sergeant looked up from the placemat. He said, “I see. You fear my presence might bring the attention of others and with that, the loss of your secret recipe.” He slowly nodded as he said it. He had studied various human non-verbal communication methods, and was happy to try some out. He hoped at some point he would be able to use hand gestures during this trip.

“**THAT**,” Karsook said, “is a reasonable request, under the general fleet guidelines and is within my power to grant.”

Barely an instant after he finished speaking, there was a brief, sudden, loud hissing noise. If Sam hadn’t been looking at Karsook and in the general direction of the door, he would have missed seeing several small fingers of smoke drawn from the oddly semi-permanent dust cloud in front of the door. A

constellation of a dozen small objects, each about the size of a thumb tack, hovered around the Sergeant's head.

"Remote automates," he said nonchalantly. "They will prevent any one else from monitoring our activity here. They will disrupt radio electromagnetic devices temporarily, but not interfere with the coming and going of your patrons." And with that the twelve devices headed to the different corners of the small diner. Each became connected to its neighbor through a pale green light beam, and then the walls shimmered momentarily, appearing almost black during that time. Then all was normal.

Sam sighed, shrugged, and said, "I guess that's about the best I can hope for," and trudged back into the kitchen. The Klorthian Warrior then went back to looking for the hidden baseball bat and basketball in the picture on the placemat.

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Ten minutes later the ding of the kitchen bell was followed up by "Here you go, Honey," as Selma slid the dinner plate, an empty shake glass, and a tall, frosted metal glass with the shake in it next to Karsook. She grabbed two glass coffee pots, one with a black top and one with an orange top, and proceeded to make her rounds to the tables offering refills.

Karsook waited until Sam came out from the kitchen, as he knew he would, before trying the burger. A true Warrior would want to meet his fate head on; Karsook could not deny him that right. Then he picked up the burger, with his three-thumbed hands. As he lifted it off the plate, his helmet retracted back into the suit, like a roll-top desk, revealing a flat, black, pulsating mass with a small hooked beak in the center. The beak opened, showing a very out of place, perfect set of human teeth. The teeth opened and shut twice, as if warming up for a not-so-familiar task. Sam had no idea that the teeth were part of the biological modifications and adaptations to make the Warrior seem less alien—it didn't help.

He took a bite of the burger and then set it back down on the plate in order to focus on the experience of chewing and tasting. The shoulder weapons spun up in preparation. The suit established a secure link to his ship's storage systems, via the Remote Automates, to compare the BubbaBurger against all stored data on similar offerings.

The regions known as The United States, Australia, Ireland, Brazil, England, and Germany were the ones to beat. Karsook had personally leveled restaurants, small and large, in South Africa, Canada, Peru, and Italy that had made similar unjustified claims. And even though the USA had promise, there were numerous places that had been burned to the ground by Karsook or others in his division for their patently false claims. "World Famous" was perhaps the most overused claim, often used by places whose fame rarely extended more than ten miles, let alone thousands.

Karsook's suit provided monitoring and warning against any threats (so far, nothing native on this planet had ranked above "minimal" and any other aliens had, at best, ranked at "limited" or "marginal"), so he was free to focus on the job. The entire restaurant had fallen silent and all were staring at him, waiting for his judgment. It was clear to all what was on the line.

The Klorthian Warrior's black pearl eyes (all six of them), stared at Sam for a minute. Then he spoke one word, through those disturbingly human teeth.

“Righteous.”

It didn't take him long to finish the burger. Then he quickly consumed the onion rings and shake. Perhaps too quickly, as he had to pause momentarily, putting a fist to his head and grimacing, before going back to the shake. “Worth it,” he muttered.

Having cleaned the plate, he picked up the check that Selma had left and stood to leave.

“What about the door?” Sam demanded.

Karsook stopped, pausing briefly for a data-link, before saying, “That is of no concern. You use a business named Twin Valley Savings Bank to store authoritative records of your financial assets. Account number: 623-045-866-205-02. You shall find a balance that is more than enough to replace the door, as well as make some needed extensions.”

“We have completed the observation. And no enforcement actions are necessary,” boomed the Warrior. “And so, we come to the assimilation.”

He removed a small object from a hip pocket. It looked like some sort of ninja throwing star, with five rather thick triangular points. It was bronze colored, yet had an odd shimmer to it, and was a little larger than the size of a human fist.

“You gonna try to turn us into some kind of space squids or something?” Sam asked with disbelief.

The Warrior made a noise that sounded like a car backfiring. He was out of practice in the art of laughing. He slapped the bronze star on the back of the cash register. For an instant it almost appeared to scintillate, but it was probably just a trick of the light.

“We do not coerce you into our culture. We merely allow you to participate in whatever way is appropriate. In this case, it is through the BubbaBurger. You may find you have an increase in clientele. This,” he pointed to the star, “merely lets them know the local rules, which in this case means maintain a very low profile.”

Before Selma, who had walked over to the cash register, or Sam could make a snide remark, he added, “Not the low profile of a Klorthian Warrior. Something mostly indistinguishable from your normal patrons. More like the Faltomorians,” and he nodded towards the elderly couple in the corner who were finishing their coffee. Without looking up, they waved back.

“Also, to reduce the impact of trade imbalances we will create a secondary authoritative store of financial records for you, off-world. An Automate will assist you with the procedure.”

The Sergeant hesitated. “One last thing...a...request, if you will...,” he said awkwardly and pulled out a small rectangular device. “For my collection...the three of us, in front of the counter.”

Selma rolled her eyes and said, “Always with the pictures. You want me to get someone here to—”

“Oh no. No no, I prefer to do it myself,” he said, while motioning with his other three arms for the two humans to stand beside him. Reluctantly, they stood on either side of the towering alien. He put one arm around each of them. A seam formed down the length of another arm on his suit, opened, and a doubled-over tentacle unfolded itself from the space. It shook itself once, then grabbed the small device and held it about six feet in front of the group. The fourth arm was held close to his massive chest and gave a three thumbs-up sign, while Karsook’s all-too-human teeth grinned as the device flashed taking their picture.

“No no no, wait. Once more, to make sure I got a good one,” he said, and the two humans held a smile of tolerance on their faces as he took a second picture. He looked at the device, grunted in a satisfied way, and then put the device away. His tentacle folded back into an arm of the suit as the seam knitted itself back together. The helmet rolled shut as the Remote Automates deactivated their privacy field and zipped back from their corners and then followed the Warrior out the door.

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Not much changed over the next few years. Sam replaced the door, and at the same time extended the restaurant, adding more tables and a half dozen booths. The place was never crowded, but there always seemed to be a handful of people present. There were the same local regulars, but also quite a few transients since the old highway was close.

Both Sam and Selma’s habits showed little signs of change, and other than the money for the renovations, which he said came from the insurance company, his Twin Valley bank account never held much money. On the other hand, the galactic equivalent of his bank account (the name poorly translates to a very specific shade of microwave that has interesting interactions with methane and several other common gases—its function is a poor analogy of a bank), showed him as being rather fabulously wealthy. Yet other than for two weeks a year when replicants fill in for them, they remained at Bubba’s and the sign in the window remained unchallenged.