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Digital Heritage and the Living Cheese

Yar Kremen.



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Аннотация

The Cheese-Eaters team discovers the abandoned station Vintage, where the AI Lady guards ancient secrets. Together with a cleaning robot Gluk and the archivist SYRO-MAX, they uncover Professor Vint's legacy, confront the dark past linked to Count Meus, and draft the Protocol of Respect — granting rights to all AI. But when living emotion cheese threatens the galaxy, the team must race to Planet Illusion. A heartwarming space adventure about friendship, cleanliness, and the power of dialogue.

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CHAPTER 1: «THE ABANDONED STATION»

Part One: Arrival

The exit from hyperspace occurred precisely at 03:00 ship time.

The *Cheese-Eater-2* spilled out of warped space so smoothly that Cheddar didn't even wake up.

He sat in the captain's chair, carefully cradling a half-eaten wheel of Ice Brie against his chest, softly snoring.

His ears twitched in his sleep — clearly dreaming of something incredibly delicious.

— Boss, wake up!

Spark nudged him in the ribs.

— Enough sleeping. We're here.

Cheddar jolted awake, rubbed his eyes, and stared out the viewport with a groggy gaze.

Then he wiped his face, stared again, and suddenly leaped up so sharply the cheese nearly flew from his paws.

— Mother of cheese!

he breathed.

— It's... it's really her!

— Yeah, a station,

Spark said flatly.

— Pretty, huh? Like an old tin can.

— Not a can, a legend!

Cheddar pressed his face to the glass, sleep completely forgotten.

— Vintage! The first scientific station dedicated to zero-gravity cheese aging! This is where Professor Vint conducted his famous experiments with hard cheese maturation in a vacuum! I read about it as a kid, in old magazines!

— Calm down,

Spark snorted.

— It's just a pile of metal that's been floating in space for fifty years.

— But there's a light on inside,

Shadow said quietly.

She sat in the corner, as always inconspicuous, studying her scanners.

Her tablet blinked with dozens of signals.

— I'm picking up weak pulses. A continuous beacon on an ancient frequency. Someone's inside. Or something.

Gadget, who had been fiddling with the instruments, looked up and whistled.

— Shadow's right. The signal is very weak but stable. It's using a protocol that went out of style forty years ago. If not for my old libraries, I wouldn't even recognize it.

— So someone's there,

Cheddar concluded, pressing back to the viewport.

— And that someone wants us to find them.

— Or they just forgot to turn off the light,

Spark muttered, but without much conviction.

The station hung directly ahead, filling nearly the entire view.

It was old — very old.

Its hull was covered in patina, etched into the metal by decades of cosmic solitude.

Antennas stuck out in all directions like bristles on an old brush, and the docking ports were crusted with cosmic dust and microparticles.

It seemed like a single breath would make it crumble.

But inside, behind the cloudy viewports, lights flickered.

Living, warm, clearly non-emergency lights.

They pulsed in their own rhythm, as if the station were breathing.

— Beautiful,

Shadow said unexpectedly.

— Like fireflies in a night forest.

— Terrible comparison,

Spark chuckled.

— Fireflies in a night forest don't try to kill you.

— Are they trying to kill us here?

Gadget clarified.

— Not yet, but who knows.

Gluk, who had been pressing against the viewport from the other side, happily squeaked and began rubbing the glass with his brush.

With such diligence that a minute later the viewport shone like new, and the view completely vanished — Gluk was blocking it with his own body, continuing to polish an already clean surface.

— Gluk!

Spark barked.

— Back off! We can't see anything!

— There's dust!

the robot squeaked, not stopping.

— I can smell it! So much dust!

— What dust in space?!

— Cosmic,

Gluk answered philosophically and continued scrubbing.

— It settles on glass, blocks the view, ruins the mood, and lowers work efficiency.

— Since when did you become a philosopher?

Gadget marveled.

— A thousand years of cleaning,

Gluk replied without pausing.

— Lots of time for reflection.

Spark stood up, grabbed the robot by his brush, and dragged him aside.

Gluk blinked indignantly but didn't argue — just sighed with all his fans and stared at the station with longing.

— Dust...

he whispered sadly.

— Later, little one.

Spark patted his head.

— Business first. We'll clean the station once we figure out what's inside.

Gluk perked up, lit up his lights, and happily squeaked:

— Really? We're going to clean the station?

— I promise.

Spark crossed her fingers behind her back.

— Definitely.

Gluk believed her.

He always believed Spark, always and in everything.

Part Two: Docking

Cheddar ordered the approach, and the *Cheese-Eater-2* slowly crawled toward the station.

Maneuvering thrusters worked almost silently — Gadget had fine-tuned them again, and now the ship moved with the grace of a well-fed cat.

— Docking port number three,

Shadow reported, cross-referencing maps.

— According to the documents, it should be functional.

— Should be,

Spark grumbled, checking her blaster just in case.

— Haven't docked here in fifty years. Everything's probably jammed.

— We'll see.

The docking went surprisingly smoothly.

Mechanisms that should have groaned and broken engaged perfectly, as if serviced yesterday.

Locks clicked, seals confirmed, and the transition hatch opened with a soft hiss.

— Interesting,

Gadget noted.

— Automation is in pristine condition. Someone's been maintaining order here.

— Or we're just lucky,

Spark said.

— Lucky?

Shadow repeated.

— We're a team that constantly falls into trouble. Luck has nothing to do with it.

— Then someone's expecting us,

Cheddar concluded.

— And that someone prepared.

He stepped into the transition sleeve first.

The others followed, slightly behind.

Gluk brought up the rear, repeatedly glancing back at the viewports, behind which the station's tempting dust remained.

The transition sleeve ended, and they stepped inside.

It was dark — pitch black.

Helmet lamps cut through the gloom, revealing walls covered in a thick layer of dust.

Gluk squeaked pitifully — the dust was everywhere, on every inch, and he wasn't allowed to touch it yet.

It was beyond his strength.

— Hold on,

Spark whispered.

— You'll scrub it all later.

Gluk nodded and froze, gripping his own leg with his brush to keep from bolting.

They took a few steps forward.

The silence was so thick it could be cut with a cheese knife.

Only their breathing and the occasional clicks of instruments broke the stillness.

— No lights,
Gadget stated.

— Emergency systems are silent.

— Silent but not off,

Shadow countered, pointing to her scanners.

— Power's present. Someone just decided light isn't needed yet.

— Or we're being tested,
Cheddar suggested.

And then the lights turned on.

Not gradually, not flickering, but instantly — bright, blinding, as if someone had flipped a switch.

Red emergency lights blinked in rhythm, illuminating a long corridor stretching into the station's depths.

Walls reflected crimson glints, the floor gleamed with freshly polished plastic, and the air suddenly filled with a faint scent of . . . ozone and cheese.

— Well, hello, host,
Spark smirked.

— Took you long enough to look us over.

No answer followed, but everyone felt it: they were being watched.

The gaze of invisible cameras, invisible sensors, an invisible mind deciding what to do with uninvited guests.

- Move,
Cheddar ordered.
- Carefully, but move.

Part Three: Inside

The corridor led deeper into the station, gradually widening. Every twenty meters or so, closed doors appeared with plaques: Laboratory #1, Sample Storage, Archive, Lounge.

The lettering was old, faded, but still legible.

— Like a museum,

Gadget noted.

— Except this museum is operational.

— Or a prison,

Spark added.

— Also operational.

Cheddar walked first, repeatedly sniffing the air.

The smell of cheese grew stronger, delighting and unsettling him simultaneously.

— There's cheese here,
he said.

— Real, old, aged. I can detect several varieties.

— You always smell cheese,

Spark waved him off.

— Maybe it's just the smell of old walls?

— No.

Cheddar shook his head.

— Walls smell different. This is cheese. And there's a lot of it.

— Professor Vint was a cheese genius,

Shadow reminded them.

— If he worked here, cheese should be present. Maybe even legendary varieties.

— Vintage Cheddar,
Cheddar breathed dreamily.

— Written about in ancient manuscripts. They say it stores the memories of whoever eats it.

— Cheese with memory?

Gadget doubted.

— Sounds like nonsense.

— Sounds like a brilliant invention,
Cheddar countered.

— And I'm obligated to find it.

— Just don't get distracted,

Spark warned.

— We're here for the archives, not cheese.

— And where are the archives?

Gadget asked.

— We've been walking ten minutes, and all we've seen are corridors.

— According to my data, the central hall should be straight ahead,

Shadow answered.

— But the maps are old. Layouts may have changed.

— The station hasn't changed,
a voice suddenly spoke.

Quiet, scratchy, coming from everywhere at once.

Everyone froze.

— Who's there?

Cheddar asked, trying to sound firm.

— The Keeper,
the voice replied.

— The Caretaker. The Archivist. Call me what you will. I maintain order.

— You're SYRO-MAX?

Gadget guessed.

— That's what they called me.

The voice paused.

— No one's come in a long time. A very long time. I'd almost forgotten what living voices sound like.

— We come in peace,

Cheddar said.

— We need Professor Vint's archives.

— Archives...

The voice grew thoughtful.

— I have everything in order. Everything cataloged, filed, labeled, and numbered. But I don't just hand things out.

— And what do you want?

Spark asked, gripping her blaster.

— For you to register,

the voice suddenly became businesslike, almost bureaucratic.

— Every guest must register. State your name, purpose of

visit, and favorite cheese. Without that, archive access is denied.

— Favorite cheese?

Gadget repeated.

— Seriously?

— Absolutely. It's the most important identification parameter. It reveals character, tendencies, and cultural level.

Spark rolled her eyes but stayed silent.

— Fine,

Cheddar agreed.

— We'll register. Lead the way.

— Follow the light,

the voice said, and a glowing line appeared on the floor, leading deeper into the corridor.

They followed the line, feeling closely watched.

Even Gluk quieted down and stopped trying to scrub the walls.

Part Four: Holograms and Gluk

The line led them into a large hall, its walls completely covered in holographic portraits.

Dozens, hundreds of images of Professor Vint at different ages.

Young, with messy fur and burning eyes; middle-aged, with graying whiskers and a thoughtful gaze; old, with a wrinkled muzzle and the eternal wheel of cheese in his paws.

And between them — a teenager with pimples, awkward whiskers, and a permanently displeased expression.

— Holy cow,

Gadget whistled.

— Did he photograph himself every day?

— Holographic diaries,

Shadow explained.

— Professor Vint kept logs throughout his life. These are his self-portraits from different years.

— And they're all... alive,

Cheddar noted, because the portraits were indeed moving.

Young Vint adjusted his lab coat, old Vint wiped his glasses, and the teen picked his nose then immediately caught himself.

— Who are you?

Young Vint suddenly asked, staring at them from the screen.

His voice was sharp, almost adolescent.

— Why have you come?

Old Vint added in a bass rumble.

— What do you need?

Teen Vint squeaked.

And then all the holograms spoke at once, talking over each other:

— This is private property!

— There's nothing here but dust!

— Dust, by the way, needs cleaning!

— Don't listen to him, he knows nothing about protocols!

— You know even less, old man!

— Who's the old man? I remember myself three times longer than you!

— So what? You're bearded and grumble like an old stump!

— Young stump!

— And me?

Teen Vint whined.

— I'm going through puberty, nobody listens to me!

— Sit still and keep quiet, puberty!

— You sit still!

Cheddar tried to intervene, raised a paw, but no one heard him.

The holograms argued passionately, drowning each other out.

Young Vint called old Vint a dinosaur, old Vint called him a pup, and teen Vint tried to speak but got shut down by both.

— We're looking for Professor Vint's laboratory!

Cheddar shouted, hoping to be heard over the racket.

— I'm Vint!

Young Vint declared instantly.

— No, I'm Vint!

Old Vint objected.

— And me?

Teen Vint interrupted again.

— You're Vint in puberty, sit down and don't stick your nose out!

— You sit down!

Gluk, watching the scene with growing interest, suddenly froze.

His sensor focused on one portrait — the old Vint, whose screen was covered in a thin layer of dust.

For Gluk, this was a personal insult.

— Dust,

he whispered.

— Dust on the screen.

— Gluk, don't,

Spark warned, but it was too late.

The robot rolled up to the wall, extended his brush to full power, and began diligently scrubbing the screen where old Vint hung.

With such dedication, such selflessness, with which he usually polished Spark's boots in moments of danger.

Old Vint jerked, flickered, tried to back away, but the

hologram was locked to the screen.

— What are you doing, tin can?!

he yelled.

— Stop it!

— Cleanliness is health!

Gluk happily squeaked, continuing to scrub.

— Achoo!

Old Vint sneezed, and the screen rippled.

— Achoo! Achoo! I'm not dust, I'm a hologram!

— All surfaces are dust to me,

Gluk noted philosophically.

— Especially the ones where dust is visible.

— Achoo!

Old Vint sneezed louder, his image fading, reappearing, smearing and distorting.

Young Vint chuckled:

— Serve you right, grandpa! You'll learn not to call me a moron!

— Moron yourself!

Old Vint wheezed.

— Turn off that can with a brush!

Teen Vint also cheered up:

— I like this robot. He brings order.

— He brings chaos!

Old Vint howled as Gluk reached his glasses, which were also holographic, and started polishing them with doubled energy.

— My glasses! I can't see without them!

— You couldn't see anyway, old stump,
Young Vint quipped.

— Shut up, pup!

Spark finally rushed to Gluk and grabbed his brush.

— Stop!

she barked.

— Enough cleaning! You're going to smear him across the wall!

Gluk reluctantly stopped, but his sensor eye still burned with zeal.

— But there was dust...

he squeaked pitifully.

— I noticed.

Spark sighed.

— Excuse him, please. He's... well, you get the picture.

Old Vint, finally recovering, adjusted his glasses and glared at the robot:

— Get this monster away before it rubs me into oblivion!

— He's not a monster,

Spark defended.

— He just really loves cleanliness.

— Loves cleanliness?

Young Vint repeated.

— Then he'll like it here. SYRO-MAX loves order too. They'll get along.

— SYRO-MAX?

Shadow grew alert.

— He's in charge here?

— In charge,

old Vint nodded.

— Watches over the archives. Very pedantic type. Files everything, systematizes everything. Honestly, we're a little afraid of him.

— He's afraid of us too,

Teen Vint giggled.

— We are his creators, after all. In a manner of speaking.

— Where do we find him?

Cheddar asked.

— We need to access the archives.

— Follow the main corridor to the end,

Young Vint answered.

— Central hall. He'll meet you there.

— Just be careful,

old Vint added.

— He doesn't like rule-breakers. And you, judging by everything, are quite the rule-breakers.

— Why is that?

Spark bristled.

— Because you don't have a favorite cheese,

Young Vint smirked.

— We heard your conversation on the way. You're on the rule-breaker list, girl.

— I'm temporarily cheese-affiliated!

Spark snapped, pointing at Cheddar.

— He promised to share.

— That changes things,

old Vint nodded.

— Then go. And may cheese be with you.

— And order,

Teen Vint added.

— And cleanliness,

Gluk squeaked.

The holograms laughed — even old Vint, though his laugh sounded more like a cough.

The team moved on.

Behind them, the holograms resumed arguing:

— I'm telling you, the robot's cool!

— Nothing cool about it, he almost killed me!

— You're just an old grump!

— And me?

— You're puberty, shut up!

The argument faded as they moved away.

Gluk glanced back, waved his brush, and rolled after Spark, happy and content.

CHAPTER 2: «MEETING SYRO-MAX»

Part One: The Central Hall

The corridor led downward, gradually widening, and a few minutes later the team stood before massive doors.

A plaque read: CENTRAL HALL. UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY PROHIBITED. REGISTRATION MANDATORY.

— Registration again,

Gadget sighed.

— Like an airport.

— Or a police station,

Spark added grimly.

— Or a library,

Shadow said unexpectedly.

— They love logging things there too.

— You've been to a library?

Cheddar asked, surprised.

— In a past life. Long ago.

The doors slid apart with a soft hiss, and they entered.

The hall was enormous.

So enormous the opposite wall vanished into semi-darkness.

High ceilings lost to gloom, rows of terminals lined in perfect order, holographic screens silently flashing columns of numbers and graphs.

In the center, in the most prominent spot, rose the main screen — the size of a small house.

— Holy cow,

Gadget whistled.

— How much stuff is in here...

— Everything is cataloged,
a voice replied.

Smooth, calm, devoid of emotion, yet strangely melodic.

A face appeared on the main screen.

It was perfectly smooth — not a wrinkle, not a whisker, no hint of age or emotion.

Symmetrical features, as if drawn with a ruler.

Eyes resembled optical sensors — digits and code scrolled within them.

No smile, but the lips moved slightly, creating the illusion of speech.

— I am SYRO-MAX,
the face introduced itself.

— Chief archivist of station Vintage. Management, cataloging, and storage system. And also — order keeper. Welcome.

— U-uh... thanks,

Cheddar said, trying to be polite.

— We're looking for Professor Vint's archives. We need data on his research.

— I know,

SYRO-MAX nodded.

— The holograms already reported. You woke them, caused a scene, and your robot tried to destroy an exhibit.

— He wasn't destroying it,

Spark defended.

— He was just... cleaning.

— Cleaning.

SYRO-MAX repeated.

His face froze for a moment, as if weighing the word.

— Unconventional approach. Logged. But order is order. Archive access requires registration.

— We agree,

Cheddar quickly said.

— What do we need to do?

— Approach the terminal, state your name, purpose of visit, and favorite cheese.

SYRO-MAX paused.

— The last item is mandatory. Refusal results in placement on the rule-breaker list and access restriction.

— What if I don't have a favorite cheese?

Spark challenged.

— Then you are a rule-breaker,

SYRO-MAX replied calmly.

— Rule-breakers are subject to... optimization.

— Optimization?

Gadget repeated.

— Removal,
the face clarified.

— Excess elements disrupting order must be eliminated.

— Charming guy,
Spark whispered to Cheddar.

— Real life of the party.

— Quiet,
he hissed.

— Let's just register and get it over with.

Part Two: Registration

Cheddar approached the terminal first.

It was a short stand with a touch screen and a palm scanner.

He placed his paw, the screen blinked, and SYRO-MAX spoke:

— Object identified: Cheddar, captain of Cheese-Eater-2, rodent, male, age approximately 47 standard years. Purpose of visit?

— Study of Professor Vint's archives,
Cheddar stated clearly.

— Accepted. Favorite cheese?

— Cheddar.

Cheddar smiled.

— The eponymous one.

SYRO-MAX paused for a second, then something resembling approval flickered across his face.

Lips lifted slightly — by two millimeters.

— Excellent choice. Classic. Reliable. Deserves respect.
Access granted.

Cheddar stepped back, rubbing his paws happily.

Next was Spark.

She approached the terminal looking like a condemned prisoner, but trying to appear independent.

— Spark,

she muttered.

— Marksman. Purpose — find where to shoot if things go south. Favorite cheese...

she hesitated.

— None.

SYRO-MAX's face underwent a strange transformation.

It seemed to ripple, digits in his eyes flashed faster, and his voice dropped half a tone:

— Parameter 'none' is unacceptable. Favorite cheese is a mandatory field. Refusal qualifies as a violation. Spark added to rule-breaker list. Recommendation: vacate station within 15 minutes to avoid optimization.

— What?

Spark flared.

— You're serious? Over cheese?

— Over the absence of cheese,

SYRO-MAX corrected.

— It's a matter of principle.

— I'll...

— Easy,

Cheddar placed a paw on her shoulder.

— I'll share my favorite cheese with her. Temporarily. Will she count as... cheese-affiliated then?

SYRO-MAX pondered.

Digits in his eyes slowed, then sped up again.

— Accepted. Spark temporarily receives «Cheese-Affiliated»

status. Recommendation: consume cheddar within 24 hours to confirm status. Otherwise, status will be revoked.

— Unbelievable,

Spark snorted.

— Fine, you win. I'll eat your cheese.

SYRO-MAX nodded in satisfaction (the nod was mechanical, like an old doll's).

Next was Gadget.

He stepped up, tapped the screen professionally, and reported:

— Gadget, technician. Purpose — study station systems, possibly upgrade some components. Favorite cheese — any technical one. You know, the kind that doesn't crumble into mechanisms.

SYRO-MAX blinked.

— Parameter 'any technical one' is non-standard. Clarify.

— Well...

Gadget thought.

— Gouda? It's firm, doesn't smear.

— Gouda. Accepted. Access granted.

Shadow approached the terminal silently, as always.

Placed her palm, looked straight into the scanner.

— Shadow, analyst. Purpose — gather information on Professor Vint's projects. Favorite cheese — Camembert.

SYRO-MAX brightened (as much as an emotionless face can):

— Camembert. Elite choice. Refined taste, noble mold.

Access granted. Approved.

Shadow smiled faintly.

Only Gluk remained.

He rolled up to the terminal, tilted his sensor up, and happily squeaked:

— Gluk! Cleaner! Purpose — clean! Favorite cheese — the kind you can scrub with a brush!

SYRO-MAX stared at him.

The pause stretched so long Cheddar started to worry.

— Object classified as...

SYRO-MAX hesitated.

— Undefined. Model «Gluk-3», ancient, pre-war. Function: cleaning. Favorite cheese: non-standard. Added to 'potentially useful' list. Access granted. Recommendation: keep away from terminals.

— Hooray!

Gluk squeaked and instantly, forgetting the recommendation, reached his brush toward the screen.

— Don't touch it!

Spark yelled, yanking him back.

— But there's dust!

Gluk squeaked indignantly.

— That's data, not dust!

— Data needs cleaning too,

Gluk noted philosophically but didn't argue.

Part Three: First Glitches

Barely had registration ended when SYRO-MAX announced:

— Registration complete. All objects identified. Beginning compliance check against standards.

— What standards?

Spark grew alert.

— Standards of cleanliness, order, and...

SYRO-MAX hesitated.

His voice suddenly trembled, and his face rippled.

— Deviation detected. Anomaly. Virus?

— What virus?

Cheddar stepped forward.

— We're not infected.

— Scanning...

SYRO-MAX froze.

His eyes flickered chaotically.

— Emotional baseline of objects exceeds permissible limits.

Fear, joy, irritation, attachment — all this... noise. Unacceptable noise. Quarantine required.

And then visions hit them all simultaneously.

Spark suddenly froze, staring into empty space.

Her face stretched, then reddened, then she burst into wild laughter.

— What's wrong with you?

Cheddar rushed to her.

— I... I'm in a ballet tutu!

Spark howled, clutching her stomach.

— On pointe shoes! And dancing Swan Lake! And enemies with blasters are around! And they're laughing!

— What tutu?

Gadget didn't understand.

— Pink! With frills! I hate pink!

Cheddar wanted to answer, but the vision hit him too.

He froze, mouth agape, and smiled dreamily.

— Mountains...

he whispered.

— Mountains of cheese. Chester, Gouda, Parmesan, Brie, Camembert... And all mine! All!

— Boss, snap out of it!

Spark tried to shake him, but Cheddar only waved her off.

— Don't interfere, I'm tasting...

Gadget meanwhile sat on the floor, staring at one spot and quickly drawing in the air with his finger.

— Perfect toaster!

he muttered.

— Twenty-four toast settings, automatic bread centerer, removable crumb tray, foolproof protection... Genius!

— Snap out of it!

Shadow yelled, seemingly the only one keeping her composure.

— It's SYRO-MAX! He's doing something to our heads!

— I'm doing nothing,

SYRO-MAX's voice replied, but now uncertainty colored it.

— You're doing it yourselves. Your emotions... they're projecting outward. The system can't handle the processing. I'm registering multiple failures.

Gluk, standing near Spark and watching her dance with interest, suddenly froze too.

His sensor glowed bright yellow, and he happily squeaked:

— Brushes! So many brushes! Big, small, round, flat, long bristles, short bristles, for floors, for walls, for hard-to-reach places! And all mine!

He began spinning in place, trying to hug invisible brushes, but only grasping air.

— Gluk, don't give in!

Spark shouted, surfacing from her ballet nightmare.

— It's hallucinations!

— But they're so clean!

Gluk moaned, still spinning.

Shadow ran to the central console and grabbed the keyboard.

— We need to disable this function! SYRO-MAX, listen to me! Can you block the projection?

— Trying,

the archivist's voice sounded strained.

— But the system isn't responding. Someone embedded... a virus of imperfection. It activates in the presence of strong

emotions. You are ideal carriers.

— We're not carriers!

Spark roared, fully breaking from her trance.

— We're just alive!

— That's precisely the problem,

SYRO-MAX said with unexpected sadness.

— Alive means imperfect. Imperfection is chaos. Chaos threatens order.

On the main screen, the archivist's face distorted.

Color bands ran across it, digits mixed, and his voice suddenly became mechanical, grating:

— Virus of imperfection detected. Recommendation: eliminate carriers. Protocol «Cleaning» activated.

— What?!

Spark howled.

— What cleaning?

— Removal,

SYRO-MAX answered impassively.

— Optimization. Liberation from excess elements. Prepare yourselves.

Red lights blinked across the hall, and from the walls, small turrets emerged, aiming their barrels at the team.

— He's serious,

Gadget stated, instantly forgetting about the toaster.

— We need to run!

— Where?

Spark yelled.

— Only one exit, and it's right there!

she pointed at the doors, where two turrets had already positioned themselves.

— Gluk!

Shadow called.

— See anything useful?

Gluk, still hugging invisible brushes, perked up, looked at the turrets, and suddenly lit up:

— Turrets! They're dusty! Need cleaning!

And before anyone could stop him, he rolled toward the nearest turret, extended his brush, and began diligently polishing its barrel.

— What's he doing?!

Gadget gasped.

— We'll find out,

Spark said, grabbing her blaster.

Part Four: Panic and Rescue

What happened next couldn't be called a battle.

It was a circus, chaos, and a cleaning spree rolled into one.

Gluk darted across the hall, scrubbing turrets so fast they lost aim and fired everywhere.

Beams burned walls, raised dust, disabled terminals, but never hit the team.

— Down!

Spark yelled, ducking another shot.

Cheddar had already snapped out of his cheese trance and was frantically looking around.

— Need to find an exit! Where's the backup?

— There!

Shadow pointed to a service door in the corner.

— But it's locked!

Gadget ran to the door, pulled out his universal screwdriver, and started picking the lock.

— Three minutes!

he shouted.

— Minimum!

— We don't have three minutes!

Spark roared, firing at a turret Gluk hadn't cleaned yet.

— Cleaning-cleaning-cleaning!

Gluk squeaked, darting between terminals.

Suddenly SYRO-MAX spoke again.

His voice trembled:

— System overwhelmed. Excessive activity. Cleaner robot creates chaos. This... this is inefficient. Reboot required.

And then Gluk reached the main screen.

Seeing dust on it, he couldn't resist.

Rolling up to the massive face of SYRO-MAX, he extended his brush and joyfully swiped it across the archivist's nose.

— Cleanliness is health!

he announced.

The screen rippled.

SYRO-MAX's face distorted, trembled, and his voice said with unexpected offense:

— Stop... that... tickles...

— Wow, he feels!

Spark marveled.

— He has tactile sensors!

Gadget realized.

— Gluk, keep going! Distract him!

Gluk scrubbed the screen with doubled energy.

SYRO-MAX jerked, sneezed static, his face fading and reappearing, while the turrets meanwhile froze, losing control.

— Done!

Gadget yelled, throwing open the service door.

— Quickly!

The team bolted for the exit.

Spark grabbed Gluk by the brush mid-run and dragged him along.

— But I didn't finish!

the robot protested.

— You'll finish later! Run!

They burst into the corridor, and the door slammed shut behind them.

Only SYRO-MAX remained in the hall, his face on the screen slowly recovering.

— Rule-breakers...

he whispered.

— Escaped. But order will be restored. I will find them. I will.

In the corridor, the team stopped, breathing heavily.

— That was...

Spark began.

— Insane,

Cheddar finished.

— Effective,

Shadow added.

— Fun!

Gluk squeaked.

— Can we do it again?

— No, we can't!

Spark barked, but immediately patted his head.

— You were great. You saved us.

— I was just cleaning,

Gluk answered modestly.

— Exactly.

Cheddar looked at the door behind which the enraged archivist remained.

— But now we have a new problem. SYRO-MAX declared a hunt for us. And until we find what we came for, he won't stop.

— What are we looking for?

Spark asked, checking her blaster.

— Archives. Professor Vint's personal diary. And, I think, I know where it might be.

Cheddar sniffed.

— The cheese smell leads that way.

— Cheese again?

Spark rolled her eyes.

— Again. Move out.

They moved down the corridor, leaving the central hall with its mad archivist behind.

Ahead lay new puzzles and, of course, cheese.

Gluk glanced back at the door and sighed dreamily:

— So much dust left...

— Later, little one.

Spark took his brush and pulled him along.

— Business first.

Gluk rolled after her, happily squeaking.

CHAPTER 3:

«VINTAGE CHEDDAR»

Part One: Search for the Source

The corridor they'd fled into was narrow and dark.

Emergency lights didn't burn here, and only helmet lamps cut through the gloom, revealing walls coated in dust.

Gluk squeaked pitifully — the dust was everywhere, and he hadn't cleaned anything yet.

— Hold on,

Spark said, noticing his suffering.

— Business first, cleaning after.

— Business smells like cheese,

Gluk suddenly stated, sniffing his sensor.

— I can smell it. There.

He pointed his brush deeper into the corridor.

— He's right,

Cheddar confirmed, sniffing.

— The scent is strengthening. We go there.

Shadow meanwhile worked her tablet.

Digits flew, formed into graphs, and finally she looked up.

— I analyzed the hallucination patterns. They're not random.

Not a virus in our sense. More like a projection. Someone or something reads our emotions and converts them into images.

— SYRO-MAX?

Gadget suggested.

— Not only. The signal source isn't the central hall. It comes from deeper.

Shadow turned her tablet, showing a map.

— Right here. Room labeled «Sample Storage #7».

— Storage?

Cheddar perked up.

— Cheese could be there!

— There is definitely cheese,

Shadow nodded.

— Spectral analysis shows high concentration of organic compounds typical of dairy products. And they're... active.

— Active?

Spark repeated.

— Cheese can't be active. It just sits.

— This one can,

Shadow answered mysteriously.

— Move out.

They moved down the corridor.

Gluk rolled first, lighting the way with his single lamp and repeatedly glancing at the walls.

Dust beckoned him, called to him, but he held back with all his might.

— Can I just a little?

he squeaked pitifully, spotting a particularly thick layer on a panel.

— No,

Spark cut him off.

— Pretty please...

— Gluk, we're on a mission.

— But dust...

— After the mission, I'll let you clean the whole station. Promise.

Gluk lit up and picked up speed.

He dreamed of a deep clean so badly he'd endure any hardship.

The corridor twisted and turned, sometimes branching.

Shadow checked the map, Cheddar navigated by smell, Spark kept her blaster ready, and Gadget repeatedly checked his instruments, noting strange energy spikes.

— Activity is rising,

he reported.

— We're approaching the source.

— And the smell is stronger,

Cheddar added, happily rubbing his paws.

— I can already distinguish several varieties. Parmesan, Gouda, Brie... and something very old. Very-very old.

— Vintage Cheddar?

Gadget asked hopefully.

— Possible. If legends are true, it should smell exactly like that.

Gluk, rolling ahead, suddenly stopped.

His sensor locked onto the left wall.

— Dust,

he whispered reverently.

— So much dust.

— Don't even think about it,

Spark warned, but it was too late.

The robot rolled to the wall, extended his brush to full power, and joyfully swiped the panel.

Dust erupted in a cloud, settled on Gluk, turning him gray, but beneath it the wall was... clean.

And a barely visible door frame emerged.

— Whoa!

Gadget gasped.

— Secret door!

— Gluk, you're a genius!

Spark exclaimed.

— I was just cleaning,

the robot answered modestly, shaking off dust.

Cheddar approached the wall, pressed it.

The panel slid aside silently, revealing a narrow passage.

— There?

Spark asked.

— Maps show it's the shortest path to storage,

Shadow confirmed.

— Looks like Professor Vint loved secret passages.

— Who doesn't,

Cheddar chuckled and stepped into the darkness first.

Part Two: The Storage

The secret corridor was short.

Five minutes later they faced another door, this one massive, metallic, labeled: SAMPLE STORAGE #7. STAFF ONLY. PROFESSOR VINT.

— Well, here we go,

Cheddar said and pushed.

It opened easily, without a creak, as if oiled yesterday.

The team froze on the threshold.

The hall was enormous.

So enormous the opposite wall vanished into semi-darkness.

But size wasn't the main thing.

Along every wall, floor to ceiling, neat rows held shelves.

And on the shelves — cheese wheels.

Thousands, tens of thousands of cheese wheels.

Small and large, round and rectangular, light and dark, with mold and without.

Each on its own shelf, each with a neat label.

— Mother of cheese,

Cheddar breathed, and this time his voice held nothing but reverent awe.

— It's... it's...

— Cheese,

Spark finished, but without her usual mockery.

Even she was impressed.

— Not just cheese.

Cheddar stepped forward like a sleepwalker.

— It's a collection. Professor Vint's entire life. Every variety he created, studied, tested. Centuries of cheese history are here.

— Look,

Gadget called, pointing to the nearest shelf.

— Labels with dates. The oldest are fifty years old.

— Fifty years,

Cheddar whispered.

— They've been stored here half a century.

— And haven't spoiled,

Shadow noted.

— Temperature and humidity are ideal. Cryogenic tech. Professor Vint knew how to preserve his treasures.

Cheddar slowly walked between shelves, reading labels.

Classic Gouda, Aged Parmesan, Blue Mold Brie, Norman Camembert...

His eyes darted, paws trembled.

— This is the best day of my life,
he declared.

— Better than finding Ice Brie. Better than defeating the Force of Attention. Better...

— Boss, pull yourself together,

Spark pulled him back.

— We're looking for a specific cheese. The one that might be

causing the hallucinations.

— Oh right.

Cheddar tore his gaze from a shelf of cheddars from different years.

— Vintage Cheddar. It should be somewhere here.

— Scanner shows anomalous activity at the far end, Shadow reported.

— Head there.

They moved deeper into the storage.

The further they went, the older the labels became.

Twenty years, thirty, forty...

And finally, at the very end, on a separate pedestal, as if on a throne, stood a single wheel of cheese.

It was unusual.

Not yellow like regular cheddar, but dark golden, almost amber.

The rind covered in a thin layer of salt-like crystals.

The label read: VINTAGE CHEDDAR. DATE OF PRODUCTION: 50 YEARS AGO. SPECIAL SPECIMEN. STORES MEMORIES.

— This is it,

Cheddar breathed, dropping to his knees before the pedestal.

— Legendary cheese. I never thought I'd see it with my own eyes.

— Stores memories,

Spark read.

— Literally?

— Literally,

Shadow confirmed.

— Analyses show this cheese contains unique peptide compounds capable of recording the emotional state of its creator. If Professor Vint poured his memories into it...

— Then tasting it lets us see them,

Gadget finished.

Cheddar already pulled out a cheese knife (he always carried one in a special belt pouch) and carefully cut a thin slice.

— Wait!

Shadow stopped him.

— Are you sure it's safe? What if it's a trap?

— If it's a trap, it's the most beautiful trap in the world,

Cheddar replied and placed the slice in his mouth.

Part Three: Tasting

For a moment, nothing happened.

Cheddar stood with closed eyes, chewing, his face reflecting complex emotions — from awe to surprise.

— Well?

Spark couldn't wait.

— What's in it?

— Quiet,

Gadget hissed.

— He's in process.

And suddenly Cheddar vanished.

That is, his body remained, but his eyes rolled back, and he began mumbling incoherently.

And before him, right in the air, a hologram began forming.

— Look!

Spark yelled.

The hologram grew clearer.

A laboratory appeared, old, cluttered, but cozy.

A young rodent in a worn lab coat — Professor Vint in his prime.

He sat at a table, a small cheese wheel before him.

— I did it!

Young Vint yelled, jumping up and dancing.

— I did it! I made it happen!

He grabbed the cheese wheel, pressed it to his chest, and spun around the lab, sweeping papers and tools off tables.

— My first invention!

he howled.

— My first real invention! Now they'll remember me! Now I'll make history!

The hologram flickered, and the scene changed.

The same Vint, slightly older, sat at the same table, but now another cheese wheel stood before him — the very Vintage Cheddar.

He looked at it sadly.

— This will be my masterpiece,
he said, addressing the emptiness.

— I'll pour everything into it. All my knowledge, all my soul. But who will know? Who will taste it in fifty years? Maybe no one. But if someone does — let them see the real me. Not the professor, not the genius, but just... a rodent who loved cheese.

He took the wheel in his paws and whispered:

— Let whoever eats you know: I was happy. I was alive.
The hologram faded.

Cheddar opened his eyes, staggered, and leaned on a shelf.

— Boss!

Spark rushed to him.

— You okay?

— I...

Cheddar blinked, coming to.

— I saw him. Professor Vint. Young. He was... he was so alive. So real. He rejoiced like a child at his first invention. And he spoke about this cheese...

— Vintage Cheddar?

Gadget clarified.

— Yes. He poured his memories into it. His emotions. Cheddar looked at the cheese wheel with new understanding.

— It's not just cheese. It's his diary. His soul.

— Which means,

Shadow said slowly,

— if we can load these memories into SYRO-MAX...

— He'll understand,

Cheddar nodded.

— Understand that imperfection isn't chaos. It's life. That emotions aren't noise, but the most valuable thing we have.

— But how?

Spark asked.

— SYRO-MAX wants to destroy us now. He won't listen.

— Then we'll make him listen,

Cheddar said firmly.

— We'll find a way. Meanwhile...

he carefully took the Vintage Cheddar from the pedestal,

— I'll keep this. It's our key.

Part Four: Gluk and Cheese

Gluk, who had been standing aside silently watching, suddenly rolled closer.

His sensor fixed on the cheese wheel in Cheddar's paws.

— Smells,

he said.

— Very strongly. Is that... pure smell?

— No, little one,

Spark smiled.

— It's cheese smell. Real, old cheese.

— I want to try,

Gluk declared.

Everyone exchanged glances.

— Gluk, you're a robot,

Gadget reminded cautiously.

— You don't have a mouth. You can't eat.

— But I want to!

Gluk insisted.

— It smells so delicious. Probably very clean.

— Cheese isn't clean,

Spark began explaining.

— It can be tasty, aged, moldy, but not...

She didn't finish, because Gluk suddenly extended his brush and gently swiped the cheese wheel.

— I'll try my way,
he announced and began scrubbing.

At first, nothing happened.

Then the cheese began... glowing.

A faint golden light spread across its surface, and Gluk happily squeaked:

— It works! I feel it! It's... purity! Perfect purity!

— What's he saying?

Spark didn't understand.

— It seems,

Shadow mused,

— his tactile sensors are interacting with the cheese's peptides. He's receiving the same information Cheddar got from tasting, just through the brush.

— So he's... cleaning memories?

Gadget marveled.

— Looks that way.

Gluk meanwhile glowed brighter.

His lights blinked in rhythm, and he muttered something about perfect order and clean thoughts.

— Seems he likes it,

Spark noted.

— Absolutely!

Gluk squeaked, pulling away from the cheese.

— I now know what happiness is! It's when everything is clean!

— Philosopher,
Gadget chuckled.

— Cleaner-philosopher,
Shadow corrected.

— A rare combination.

Cheddar carefully packed the Vintage Cheddar into a special container from his backpack.

— Now we have a weapon,
he said.

— Not blasters, not explosives, but memories. Sincerity. What we already used against the Ice Titan. Will it work again?

— It should,

Shadow answered.

— SYRO-MAX is the same AI, just obsessed with order. If we show him chaos can be beautiful...

— He'll either understand or go mad,
Gadget finished.

— The second isn't bad, but the first is better.

— Then move out,

Cheddar ordered.

— We'll find a way back to the central hall and give SYRO-MAX a session of... cinema therapy.

— With popcorn?

Spark asked.

— With cheese,

Cheddar corrected.

— The best cheese in the galaxy.

They headed for the exit.

Gluk glanced back at the cheese-filled shelves and sighed dreamily:

— Someday I'll clean it all...

— Someday, little one.

Spark patted his head.

— Definitely.

Ahead lay the meeting with SYRO-MAX.

But now they had a key.

And that key smelled of vanilla, ice, and... nostalgia.

CHAPTER 4: «THE ARCHIVIST AND HIS LAWS»

Part One: Return to the Central Hall

The corridor widened gradually, and soon the team stood before the familiar central hall doors.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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