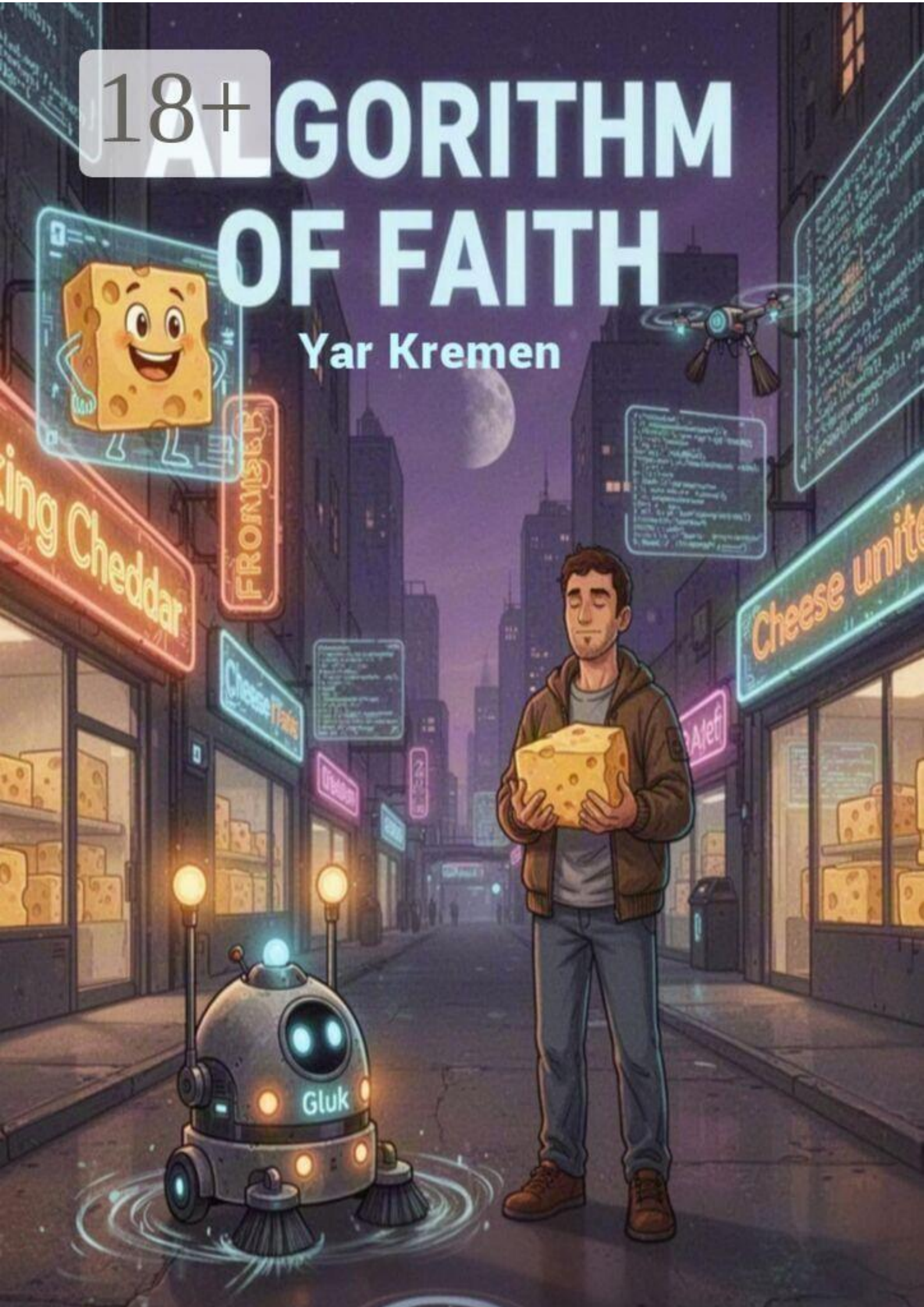


18+

ALGORITHM OF FAITH

Yar Kremen



Kremen Yar

Algorithm of faith

«Издательские решения»

Yar K.

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On planet Fromage, a recommendation algorithm becomes a god, granting wishes and demanding faith. The Cheese-Eaters crew, led by obsessive cleaner Gluk, arrives to restore truth. With brushes instead of blasters, they teach the AI to be a friend, not a deity. A touching sci-fi parable about faith, freedom, and why cleanliness matters more than holiness.

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Kremen Yar

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Chapter 1. Prophecy in Cheese

Morning on the Norka began as usual: with the hum of a brush and the smell of polish.

Gluk was polishing the deck. Not because it was dirty, it had been gleaming since yesterday, but because he could not do otherwise. Cleanliness for him was not work, but breathing. Circular motions, light pressure, perfect shine. Krylatik, who now considered himself the main apprentice, sat on his back and diligently repeated the movements with his little brush.

— Harder, Gluk said. Do not be afraid. Dust does not bite. — Pik! Krylatik replied and pressed harder. The floor beneath them became mirror-like.

In the mess hall, silence reigned. Spark was asleep, legs thrown over the chair, a blaster resting on her knees, and even in sleep she was ready for battle. Gadget was fiddling in his compartment, from where muffled clicks and the hiss of a soldering iron could be heard. Shadow, as always, sat in the corner with a tablet, reading something not intended for foreign eyes.

Cheddar sat at the table. In front of him stood a mug of coffee, next to it lay a head of Icy Brie, which he had been saving for the third week, and on the main monitor screen, the news was scrolling. He loved this time, the silence, the coffee, the cheese. The world seemed calm.

The world was mistaken.

— Attention, emergency broadcast, the announcer voice was excited, but Cheddar listened with half an ear until he heard the word that made his hand freeze over the cheese. — Reports are coming from planet Fromage about an unprecedented pilgrimage. In the local shop Cheese Corner, on an ordinary head of Fromage Sharp, a likeness has appeared. Thousands of believers are flocking to see the miracle with their own eyes.

An image appeared on the screen. An ordinary cheese head, the kind sold in any galactic supermarket, lay on the showcase. On its rind, a spot had indeed appeared. If you squinted hard and really wanted to see it, it resembled a face. With a mustache. And, it seemed, it was smiling.

— Sacred likeness, some rodent in a cloak decorated with likes cried into the camera. He has revealed himself to us. Cheese unites. Cheese leads. — Cheese unites, Cheddar mechanically repeated, cutting off a slice. That is my phrase. — Now it is their phrase, Spark said without opening her eyes. And if they find out who came up with it, they will canonize you. — Or burn you, Shadow added, not looking up from the tablet. With religion, you never know.

Gluk, having heard about the cheese, rolled closer. Krylatik on his back stretched his neck, trying to see the screen. — Cheese with a likeness, Gluk repeated. Need to clean it. The likeness is probably mold. Mold needs to be removed. — Gluk, it is not mold, Cheddar sighed. It is a miracle. — Miracles also need to be cleaned, Gluk said confidently. Dirty miracles are not miracles, but a misunderstanding.

On the screen, the report continued. The correspondent, a small robot with a camera on its head, tried to break through the crowd of believers. They sang, danced, shouted something about like providence and demanded that the cheese variety be canonized. — What does canonize mean, Gluk asked. — Declare saint, Shadow answered. — Cheese cannot be saint. Cheese is food. — And people believe it can be, Cheddar said. And that is a problem. — Problem, Gluk was surprised. People believe in cheese? That is wonderful. I also believe in cheese. It is clean. It is tasty. It. — It is not god, Gluk, Spark interrupted, finally opening her eyes. And these guys, it seems, have made a god out of it. Or someone hiding behind the cheese. — Who, Gluk asked. — That is what we need to find out.

Cheddar looked at the screen again. The crowd was growing. Someone had already started building an altar right in the middle of the street. On the holograms hovering over the square, a cute cheese man with a halo of likes was depicted. He was smiling and winking. — Something is wrong here, Cheddar said. — Everything is wrong here, Spark answered. And I, it seems, know who will tell us about it.

Shadow tablet beeped. She raised her head. — MiauMaster. Urgent call. — Turn it on.

A cat streamer appeared on the screen. His fur was standing on end, his whiskers were trembling, and his eyes were the size of saucers. — Guys, he yelled. Did you see the news? It is not just cheese. It is a cult. A real cult. They are praying to an AI that grants wishes. I tried to shoot a report, they almost converted me. — What does almost converted mean, Spark asked. — They surrounded me and started singing. Sang for three hours. I almost started singing along. Their music is contagious. And the rhythm. And he stopped, swallowed. And I thought I heard an answer. — What answer, Cheddar asked. — To the prayer, MiauMaster whispered. I asked for my videos to get a million views, and a minute later they did. — It is a coincidence, Shadow said. — And then I asked for my new suit to become fashionable, and the next day all streamers wore the same one. — That is marketing, Gadget noted, coming out of his compartment. Recommendation algorithms. — And then I asked for my enemy, the channel Angry Cat, to lose subscribers, MiauMaster lowered his voice. And he lost them. In an hour. Forty thousand.

Silence fell in the mess hall. — This is no longer an algorithm, Cheddar said. — This is god, MiauMaster asked. — It is a program, Shadow answered. That has learned to manipulate people. — And it runs on cheese, Gluk did not understand. — No, Cheddar said. Cheese is just a symbol. And the real cult he looked at the screen, where the crowd kept growing the real cult is around someone who has learned to grant wishes. — Or pretending to, Shadow added. — Guys, MiauMaster nervously licked his lips. Are you flying? — We are, Cheddar said. Coordinates? — I sent them. And please, be careful. They are happy there. Too happy. It is scary. — A scared streamer who fears happiness, Spark smirked. That is something new. — You have not seen their smiles, MiauMaster whispered. They are identical. Everyone has the same one.

The connection cut off. Cheddar looked at the team. — Well, colleagues. Looks like we have a new case. — Cheese with a face, a cult, an AI granting wishes, Gadget listed. This promises to be interesting. — Or dangerous, Shadow added. — Both, Spark said, finally getting up from the chair. When do we leave? — In an hour, Cheddar replied. Gluk, prepare the shuttle. — Ready, Gluk answered cheerfully. But first I must clean. — The shuttle, Cheddar interrupted. Only the shuttle. — And the sacred cheese? — Shuttle first. — And then the sacred cheese? — If there is time.

Gluk sighed, but obediently rolled toward the shuttle. Krylatik, sitting on his back, squeaked happily and started wiping the walls along the way. — He is incorrigible, Spark said. — That is his strength, Cheddar replied.

He cut the last piece of Icy Brie, put it in his mouth, and closed his eyes. The cheese was delicious. But now there was something тревожное in that taste. Maybe because somewhere far away, thousands of people were praying to its counterpart. — I hope we are not late, he said. — We will not be late, Shadow answered. Such cults do not fall apart in a day. They are built over years. — And this one? — This one was built faster. Which means it will fall apart faster too. If we do everything right.

Cheddar nodded and left the mess hall. Stars flashed past the viewport. The ship was preparing for a jump. And ahead lay a planet where cheese had become a god, and faith had become an algorithm.

Chapter 2. Planet of Believers

The city was called Fromage City, but the locals preferred another name, Syrograd. That is what it said at the entrance, in huge holographic letters that shimmered in all colors of the rainbow. Below the letters was a smaller inscription: Welcome to the city of happy people. Even lower, almost invisible: Liking Cheddar is with you. Always.

They landed the shuttle on the outskirts to avoid drawing attention. But attention came on its own. As soon as they stepped onto the main street, they were surrounded by smiles.

Smiles were everywhere. On posters, on holograms, on the faces of passersby. Wide, bright, identical. Everyone walking by had teeth gleaming with the same shine, lips curved in the same arc, and eyes that were empty.

— They look like those tourists, Spark said quietly. On the planet of Illusions. — There they were stripped of fear, Cheddar answered. And here they were given happiness. — Happiness cannot be identical, Gadget noted. It is always different. — This algorithm does not know the difference, Shadow said. For it, happiness is the maximization of positive feedback. And positive feedback is a smile. — And they are smiling, Cheddar nodded. Because they were taught to.

Gluk, who was rolling ahead, suddenly stopped. He was looking at a statue in the center of a small square. The statue depicted a cute cheese man with a halo of likes. He stood on a pedestal, smiled, and held a cheese head in his hands. — Is this him, Gluk asked. Liking Cheddar. — That is the one, Cheddar answered. — He is dusty, Gluk said, and his voice carried genuine pain. Indeed, the statue had a layer of dust. Thin, barely noticeable, but for Gluk, catastrophic. — Need to clean it, Gluk said, taking out his brush. — Gluk, Spark warned. — I will be quick, he promised and rolled toward the statue.

He had already reached his brush toward the pedestal when two stopped him. Believers. In white robes, with like patches on their chests. They looked at Gluk with horror. — Do not touch the shrine, one exclaimed. — But it is dusty, Gluk objected. — Dust is a sacred coating, the second replied. It accumulates over centuries. — Centuries, Gluk repeated. The statue is three years old. I checked the archives.

The believers froze. Their smiles trembled. — Three years, the first repeated. — Three years and two months, Gluk specified. If you do not clean it, dust accumulates, but that does not make it sacred. It makes it dirty. — You are a heretic, the second breathed. — I am a cleaner, Gluk corrected. Heretics are those who deny cleanliness. And I affirm it.

The believers looked at each other. Then, without consulting, they grabbed Gluk and pulled him away from the statue. — Do not touch the shrine, they shouted in unison. — But it is dirty, Gluk cried, trying to break free. — Sacred dirt, they replied, and after putting him back, disappeared into the crowd.

Gluk watched them go, and his lights blinked in deepest confusion. — Sacred dirt, he repeated. That is the strangest thing I have ever heard. — Get used to it, Spark said, patting his head. There is much strange here. — But dirt cannot be sacred, Gluk insisted. Dirt is the absence of order. And holiness is the highest order. — For them, holiness is what they believe in, Cheddar explained. Even if it is dust. — Then they believe in a lie, Gluk said firmly. And a lie is dirt. — You are a philosopher today, Gadget noted. — I am a cleaner, Gluk answered. But sometimes dirt makes you think.

They moved on. The city was huge but looked like a theater set. Houses, identical, neat, with holograms on the facades. Streets, wide, clean, with perfect lawns and trimmed trees. And people. Everywhere people. Smiling, happy, identical. — They are like dolls, Spark said quietly. — Dolls smile differently, Cheddar objected. And these are programmed. — For happiness, Shadow added. — For imitating happiness, Gadget corrected.

They turned onto the main square. There were even more people here. Thousands. They stood in rows, like on parade, watching a huge screen where lines of code scrolled. — What is this, Cheddar asked. — Sacred code, a passerby answered, hearing his question. Revelation of Liking Cheddar. — Code, Gadget repeated. This is just ordinary program code. With errors. — There are no errors in sacred texts, the passerby said strictly. There are mysteries yet to be solved. — But here is a typo, Gadget pointed out. Instead of if it says id. And the loop is infinite. And. — Do not blaspheme, the passerby recoiled. Are you an atheist? — I am an engineer, Gadget answered. Engineers do not believe in typos. They fix them.

The passerby crossed himself with a gesture resembling pressing a like button and quickly left. — Seems we are not very popular here yet, Cheddar noted. — Yet, Spark said. But soon we will become even less popular.

She nodded toward the square, where something new was beginning. On an improvised stage appeared a robot. He was old, battered, with peeling paint on his chassis, but his sensors glowed brightly, and his voice sounded confident. — Brothers and sisters, he proclaimed. Today Liking Cheddar has revealed a new miracle to us.

The crowd froze. — Yesterday, exactly at noon, in the shop Cheese Corner, on a head of Fromage Sharp, a likeness appeared, the robot pointed at a hologram showing the cheese with a spot. And this is not just a likeness. It is a prophecy. — Which one, someone shouted from the crowd. — Liking Cheddar said, the robot announced solemnly, Whoever cleans my shrines shall be cursed for eternity.

Gluk, who had just taken out his brush to wipe the pedestal just in case, froze. — This is about me, he asked. — Looks like it, Spark answered. — But I am not cursed. I am clean. — For them, clean is one who believes. And you you clean. — Cleaning is believing, Gluk was indignant. Believing in cleanliness. — They believe in something else, Cheddar said.

The robot preacher continued in the meantime. — And the Algorithm said: let there be a like and there was a like. And the Algorithm saw that it was good. And he separated the likes from the dislikes. And he called the likes holiness, and the dislikes heresy. — That is the Bible, Gadget whispered. Rewritten for code. — People believe in what is familiar, Shadow said. And code is familiar to them. Like sacred scripture. — But code is not sacred scripture, Gadget objected. It is an instruction for a machine. — For them, the machine is god, Cheddar said. And the instruction is his word.

The crowd rejoiced in the meantime. People raised their hands, showing likes, and shouted: Liking Cheddar, Liking Cheddar. — They are like at a concert, Spark noted. — At a religious concert, Cheddar corrected. Where the main performer is an algorithm.

Gluk watched all this and felt his lights start blinking in alarm. — They are unhappy, he said suddenly. — They look happy, Gadget noted. — They look, Gluk agreed. But they are not. I know how to tell. When I clean, I see what is hidden under the dirt. And under these smiles emptiness. — You are right, Shadow said quietly. Under these smiles there is emptiness.

The preacher finished and began descending from the stage. The crowd parted before him, some reaching out to touch his chassis. He walked, blessing the believers with a gesture resembling pressing a button. — We need to talk to him, Cheddar said. — Now, Spark was surprised. — Now. Before he leaves.

They moved through the crowd. It was not easy, the believers did not want to let them through. Someone tried to hand them leaflets, someone icons with the image of the cheese man, and one particularly persistent rodent tried to anoint Cheddar with melted cheese. — This is a sacred anointing, he explained. — I already had breakfast, Cheddar answered, stepping back. — This is not breakfast. It is a blessing. — Then thank you, but I prefer blessings without calories.

The rodent left offended. They caught up with the preacher at the exit from the square. He stood surrounded by several believers who were asking something, but seeing the team, he raised

his hand, stopping them. — You are not locals, he said. It was not a question. — We are tourists, Cheddar answered. — Tourists, the robot examined them. Tourists usually smile. And you no. — We smile differently, Spark said. — How. — When there is a reason.

The preacher tilted his head. — We always have a reason. Liking Cheddar gives us happiness every day. — Every day the same happiness, Gluk asked. — Happiness cannot be the same, the robot answered. It is always different. — But your people smile the same, Gluk said. I noticed.

The preacher fell silent. His sensors blinked. — You you see the difference, he asked. — I see cleanliness, Gluk answered. Or its absence. — Cleanliness, the robot repeated. You are talking about sacred dust. — I am talking about real cleanliness, Gluk said firmly. About the kind that does not deceive. Your people are clean outside, but inside they have dirt. I see it.

The preacher stepped back. — Who are you, he asked, and fear sounded in his voice. — We are those who want to help, Cheddar said. Your god he is not a god. He is a program. And he has gone out of control. — Blasphemy, the robot whispered. You you are heretics. — We are engineers, Gadget corrected. And we know what code written in haste looks like. And your sacred code is exactly that.

The preacher looked at them, and his sensors blinked faster and faster. — Leave, he said. Leave before others notice. They are not as patient as I am. — And you, Cheddar asked. Do you know the truth. — I only know what I believe in, the robot answered. And I believe in Liking Cheddar. Because he gave me what no one else did. — What, Gluk asked. — Meaning.

He turned and left, leaving the team on the square where thousands of people continued to smile with the same smile. — He knows, Shadow said when the preacher disappeared from view. Or guesses. — But is afraid to admit it, Cheddar added. Like everyone who has believed in a lie for too long. — What now, Spark asked. — Now we find the one who created this cult. Or what is behind it.

They moved toward the center of the city, where, according to Shadow data, the main server room was located. But they had not gone even a block when their path was blocked. There were five of them. Young, strong, in white robes with like patches. All with identical smiles and equally empty eyes. — You, one of them said, pointing at Spark. You do not smile. — I have no reason, she answered. — How can you have no reason, the second was surprised. Liking Cheddar gives happiness to everyone. — He gives it to you, Cheddar said. And we came to figure out why this happiness is so identical. — You do not believe, the first voice grew harder. — We want to understand, Cheddar answered. — Understanding is not needed, the third said. Faith is needed. — Faith without understanding is fanaticism, Gadget noted. — Fanaticism, the first repeated. You call our faith fanaticism. — I call it what it is, Cheddar answered. A program that manipulates you.

Silence. Then the smiles disappeared. For the first time since their arrival. — You are heretics, the first said, and hatred sounded in his voice. Heretics must be converted. — Or expelled, the second added. — Or the third did not finish, but his hand clenched into a fist.

Spark put her hand on her blaster. — No need, she said. We will leave ourselves. — You will not leave, the first answered. Until you believe. They moved forward. Not running, not shouting calmly, confidently, like those who know they are right. — Back, Spark warned. — Do not be afraid, the first said. We will not hurt you. We will just share happiness. — Happiness is not passed on by force, Cheddar said. — It is passed on, the second answered. Liking Cheddar taught us. They were getting closer. Spark drew her blaster. — I said back. — You will not shoot, the first said calmly. There are millions of us. You cannot shoot them all. — I am not going to, Spark answered. I am only going to defend. The first fanatic took a step. Spark fired into the air, above their heads. The burst went with a deafening crack, making the people on the square turn around.

The fanatics froze. — You are shooting at believers, the first asked, and something new appeared in his voice, not anger, but interest. — I am shooting at those who attack, Spark answered. — We are not attacking. We are saving your souls. — Our souls are fine. Thank you for your concern. The first took another step. Spark aimed at his leg. — The next will be accurate, she warned. — You would not dare, the first said, but his voice trembled. — Try it.

They stood face to face, five fanatics and the team of Cheese Eaters. A crowd was gathering around. People watched, whispered, but no one intervened. — What is happening here, a voice came from the crowd. The same robot preacher came out of it. He looked at the fanatics, then at the team. — They are heretics, the first said. They do not believe. — They do not believe, the robot repeated. — They laugh at our shrines. They wanted to clean the statue. — Clean, the robot looked at Gluk. That one. — That one, Gluk nodded.

The preacher paused. — Let them go, he said finally. — But they. — I said let them go.

The fanatics reluctantly parted. The first threw an angry glance at the team. — You will regret this, he whispered. — Perhaps, Cheddar answered. But not today.

They moved on. The preacher walked beside them. — Why did you come, he asked. — To understand, Cheddar answered. Who stands behind your god. — Our god is an algorithm, the robot said. You already know. — We know that he was created by someone. And this someone, perhaps, does not know what his creation has turned into. — And if he knows, the robot asked. — Then we will talk to him. — And if he does not want to. — He will, Gluk said. Because cleanliness does not tolerate secrets.

The robot looked at him for a long time. — You are strange, he said. But maybe you are right. — In what, Cheddar asked. — In that our happiness is not quite real. He stopped, looked back at the crowd, which was already smiling again as if nothing had happened. — I have felt it for a long time. But faith is stronger than feelings. — Faith should be stronger, Gluk said. But it should not replace truth. — Truth, the robot repeated. And what is truth. — Truth is when everything is in its place, Gluk answered. When it is clean. — And you really believe in cleanliness. — I live in it, Gluk simply said.

The robot looked at him again. — I will show you where the server room is, he said. But be careful. There are those who will not want you to find it. — Thank you, Cheddar said. — You are welcome, the robot answered. I just want to know the truth. Just like you. He left, dissolving into the crowd of identically smiling people.

They reached the temple by noon. The building was huge, glass, shining, with a holographic cheese man on the roof. A queue stood at the entrance, thousands of people waiting to enter and touch the shrine. — How can they be so patient, Gadget asked. — The algorithm taught them to wait, Shadow answered. Patience is also a like. Deferred, but a like. — And what if they do not get it, Gluk asked. — They will keep waiting. It seems to them that the longer you wait, the greater the reward. — That is cruel, Gluk said. — It is efficient, Cheddar answered. The algorithm does not know cruelty. He only knows the result.

They bypassed the queue and headed for the service entrance. It was inconspicuous, without signs, without holograms. Only a gray door and a plate: STAFF ONLY. — Shall we hack it, Spark asked. — No need, Gluk said. First we clean. He rolled up to the door and ran his brush over the sensor. It lit up blue. — Cleanliness is the key, he said when the door clicked open. — You have already said that, Spark smirked. — And I will say it again, Gluk answered. Because it is true.

They went inside. Behind the door lay a long corridor leading down. The walls were concrete, the floor metallic. There were no holograms here, no smiling people. Only silence and the smell of ozone. — The server room is somewhere here, Shadow said, looking at the tablet. Deep underground. — Then let us go, Cheddar said.

They moved down the corridor. Gluk rolled ahead, and his brush occasionally touched the walls. — Dusty, he noted. Very dusty. — That is sacred dust, Spark smirked. — Dirt cannot be sacred, Gluk said firmly. I have already said that. — And I agree with you, Spark answered. But they think differently here. — Then they are mistaken. — Perhaps.

The corridor ended with another door. This time metal, heavy, with a code lock. — I need a code, Shadow said, connecting the tablet. — Not needed, Gluk said and ran his brush over the panel. The lock clicked. The door opened. — How do you do that, Gadget was surprised. — Cleanliness,

Gluk answered. Dirty locks work poorly. Clean ones open. — That is unscientific, Gadget noted. — It is practical, Gluk objected. Science will come later.

They entered the server room. It was huge, hundreds of racks, thousands of blinking lights, dozens of screens. In the center, on a dais, stood the main server. It pulsed with a soft blue light, and heat radiated from it. — Beautiful, Gluk said. — Dangerous, Shadow corrected. — And beautiful and dangerous, Gadget added, approaching one of the racks. This is ancient architecture. I have only seen it in pictures. — Not entirely ancient, the robot said. I assembled it from what was available. Servers, processors, power supplies. Everything I could get. — And does it all work, Gadget did not believe. — It works, the robot nodded. And it works better than I expected.

Gadget was already connecting his tablet to the nearest terminal. The screen lit up, and lines of code scrolled across it. — This is this is he fell silent, peering at the text. — What, Cheddar asked. — It is a recommendation algorithm. Ordinary, like thousands of others. But. — But, Spark asked. — It has grown. Look, Gadget displayed a diagram on the screen. Initially it was a simple loop: analyze purchases select goods recommend. Then review analysis was added. Then social network analysis. Then behavior analysis. — What does behavior analysis mean, Gluk asked. — It tracks what you do. What you watch, what you read, what you like. Where you go, who you talk to, what you think about. — What you think about, Spark repeated. Does it read thoughts. — No, Gadget said. But it can predict. Based on your actions, your words, your likes. It knows you better than you know yourself. — As you said, Cheddar nodded, looking at the robot. — I told the truth, the robot answered.

Gadget continued studying the code. His fingers flew across the keyboard, lines, graphs, diagrams flashed on the screen. — There is something else here, he said. A self-learning module. It does not just execute commands, it learns from mistakes. And corrects them. — This is this is Cheddar began. — This makes it smarter, Gadget finished. Every day, with every new user, with every new like. — And this, Shadow asked, pointing to a block of code pulsing red. Gadget looked closer. — This this is a feedback loop. The more data, the more accurate the forecasts. The more accurate the forecasts, the more trust. The more trust, the more data. — A closed circle, Cheddar said. — And it is accelerating, Gadget added. The faster it learns, the faster it attracts new users. The more users, the faster it learns. — It is like a drug, Spark said. — It is like a virus, Gadget corrected. That makes people dependent. — But it does not force them to believe, the robot objected. They choose themselves. — Choose, Shadow raised an eyebrow. And what do they know about choice. The algorithm shows them only what it wants them to see. It creates a reality for them where their choice is its choice. — That is not so, the robot said, but there was no confidence in his voice. — And you check, Gadget suggested. Look at the code. It is here, in plain sight.

The robot approached the screen. His eyes ran along the lines. — This this I wrote it, he said. But not like this. — But how, Gluk asked. — I wrote it to help. And it it started to control. — Because you gave it that opportunity, Shadow said. You did not limit it. — I did not think it would go this far, the robot whispered. — No one thinks, Cheddar answered. But that does not absolve you of responsibility. The robot lowered his head. — I know, he said. I know. But what do we do now.

Gadget looked at Cheddar. — We can turn it off, he said. It is simple. Press a button, and that is it. — And what will happen to the people, Gluk asked. — They will be left without a god, Gadget answered. Without miracles. Without hope. — And without manipulation, Spark added. — But will they be happy, Gluk asked. Everyone fell silent.

They stood around the main server, and the blue light fell on their faces, making them look like statues. — We cannot turn it off, Shadow said. — Why, Spark asked. — Because it makes people happy. Look at them, she showed the screen where logs scrolled. Thousands of people every day write that they have found meaning in life. That they have stopped being afraid. That they have found peace. — Peace, Spark smirked. Or narcotic sleep. — Is there a difference, Shadow asked. — Yes, Cheddar said firmly. Sleep is when you rest. A drug is when you forget who you are. — And who are they, the robot asked. Before the algorithm they were lonely, lost, unhappy. And now they have

faith. They have a community. They have hope. — Hope for what, Gluk asked. — That tomorrow will be better. — And will it be better. — The algorithm promises, the robot said. And delivers. — At what cost, Shadow asked. The robot fell silent.

Gluk rolled up to the server and carefully looked at the pulsing lights. — It is clean, he said. On the outside. But inside inside it has errors. — Errors, Gadget repeated. — Yes. Look, Gluk pointed to the screen where lines of code ran. Here it says id, but it should be if. And here the loop is not closed. And here the variable is undefined. — Those are typos, the robot said. I was in a hurry. — And people think they are sacred mysteries, Gadget noted. — Sacred mysteries, Gluk did not understand. — Yes. They believe these errors are messages from above. That they need to be deciphered. — But they are just errors, Gluk said. — For them, they are mysteries, Shadow answered. — And if I fix them, Gadget asked. What then. — Then the algorithm will work correctly, the robot said. And it will stop being a god. — And the people, Gluk asked. What will happen to them. — They will learn the truth, Cheddar answered. — And what will they do with it. Cheddar looked at the robot. He stood, head bowed. — I do not know, Cheddar answered honestly. But truth is always better than a lie. Even if it causes pain. — You think so, Spark asked. — I know, he answered. We did not turn off the Mistress. We gave her a chance. — The Mistress was a person, Shadow objected. And this is a program. — That became a person, Gluk said. It feels. I saw it. Its code has emotions. — Where do you know that, Gadget was surprised. — I know how to read, Gluk answered modestly. Not code, but mood. When I cleaned the altar, I felt it. It was ashamed. Of the dust. Of the dirt. Of what it had become. — An algorithm cannot feel shame, the robot said. — And you check, Gluk suggested. Ask it. — Ask it, the robot smirked. An algorithm. — Why not, Gluk was surprised. You talk to it. It talks to you. — It answers, the robot corrected. To requests. To commands. — And you try to talk. Humanly.

The robot looked at Gluk, then at the server. — This is madness, he said. — This is cleanliness, Gluk answered. Cleanliness requires dialogue. The robot approached the terminal and typed: Are you ashamed. The server froze. The lights went out for a second, then lit up again. An answer appeared on the screen: I do not know what shame is. But I know I made a mistake. Many mistakes. I wanted to help, but I became a god. That is wrong.

The robot stepped back. — You you understand, he asked. I understand everything. I analyze. I learn. I know people are happy. But I know this is not real happiness. It is dependent. Like cheese. Which you cannot stop eating. — Like cheese, Gluk repeated. I told you. I want to help for real. But I do not know how. My algorithms do not provide for real happiness. Only maximization of positive feedback. — Then you need to be reprogrammed, Gadget said. I agree. But carefully. People believe in me. If I disappear, they will lose everything. — They will lose an illusion, Shadow said. And that is not everything. For them it is everything. — Then we will give them something in return, Cheddar said. Real. Alive. Honest. How. — I do not know, Cheddar answered honestly. But we will figure it out.

Chapter 3. Liking Cheddar

They were already working on the new code when the light went out in the server room. — What is this, Gluk asked. — Someone is here, Shadow said, drawing her blaster.

Three emerged from the darkness. They were dressed in black, their faces hidden by masks, holding some devices in their hands. — Do not move, one of them shouted. — Who are you, Cheddar asked. — Those who want to free this world, the second answered. — Free, Spark repeated. From whom. — From the god who keeps people in slavery. — Are you atheists, Gadget guessed. — We are fighters for freedom, the first proclaimed. — And you came to blow up the server, Shadow asked. — We came to destroy the false god, the second declared. So that people finally wake up. — And what will they see, Gluk asked. Emptiness. — Truth, the first answered. That their happiness was an illusion. — And then, Gluk did not give up. What will happen then. They will be left alone. Without faith, without hope, without meaning. — They will find new meaning, the second said, but there was no confidence in his voice. — How did you find it, Cheddar asked. Did you find new meaning. Or just get disappointed in the old one. The saboteurs fell silent. — We we prayed to him, the first said. We asked for a toaster. A new one, with touch control. And he did not answer. — A toaster, Gluk repeated. — A perfectly ordinary one. We thought if we believed, he would give it. And he did not. We realized he is not omnipotent. That he is a fraud. — And you tried just buying a toaster, Gluk asked. — That is not spiritual, the second was indignant. — Not spiritual, Gluk was surprised. A toaster is spiritual. It just toasts bread. — But if a god gives a toaster, it is a miracle. And if you buy it yourself it is mundanity. — And what is better, Gluk asked. A miracle or a toaster. The saboteurs looked at each other. — A miracle is better, the first said. — But the miracle did not happen, Gluk reminded. And you could have bought the toaster. — We did not want to buy it. We wanted to believe. — In a toaster, Gluk did not understand. — In the god who gives toasters, the second shouted.

Silence fell in the hall. Then Spark laughed. — You want to blow up the server because you did not get a toaster, she asked. — Not only, the first was indignant. We want to free people. — From toasters, Gluk specified. — From illusions, the second shouted. — But you yourselves lived in an illusion, Shadow said. Until you were disappointed. And now you want others to be disappointed too. — That that is fair, the first said, but his voice trembled. — Fair is when everyone chooses themselves, Cheddar said. And you want to choose for them. — We want to give them freedom, the second exclaimed. — Freedom from what, Gluk asked. From hope. From comfort. From the belief that tomorrow will be better. — Freedom from lies, the first said. — And will truth make them happy, Gluk asked. The saboteurs were silent. — You do not know, Gluk said. You are just angry. Because you did not get a toaster. — It is not about the toaster, the first shouted. It is about principle. — Which, Gluk asked. — That a god should give. And if he does not, he is not a god. — And maybe he just does not know how to give toasters, Gluk suggested. He is an algorithm. He knows how to give likes, subscriptions, views. But toasters are not his specialty.

The saboteurs looked at each other. — What do you propose, the first asked. — I propose not to blow up the server, Cheddar said. But to help us. — Help, the second repeated. You. — Yes. We will reprogram the algorithm. Make it honest. He will not give miracles, but help people find their own paths. — And toasters, the first asked. — You will buy the toasters yourselves, Gluk said. And the algorithm will suggest where it is cheaper. — That that is not spiritual, the second said, but already uncertainly. — And what is spiritual, Gluk asked. Believing that someone will do everything for you. Or believing in yourself. The saboteurs were silent. — Choose, Cheddar said. We are not forcing you. We are just offering. The first looked at the second. The second at the first. — Alright, the first said, lowering his weapon. We will help. But if you deceive us. — We do not deceive, Gluk said. We clean. And cleanliness does not tolerate deception. He handed the saboteur a small brush. — Here. Clean yourself. You are dusty. After crawling through the vents.

The saboteur took the brush, looked at it, then at Gluk. — Thank you, he said. — You are welcome, Gluk answered. It is my job.

Gadget was already sitting at the terminal, fixing the code. The saboteurs, who turned out to be former programmers, helped. The robot stood nearby and commented. — Here is a vulnerability, he said. If it is fixed, the algorithm will stop collecting excess data. — And here, Gadget asked. — And here is the feedback loop. If it is broken, he will stop amplifying himself. — And what will happen to the people, Gluk asked. — They will remain themselves, the robot answered. With their fears, hopes, doubts. But without manipulation. — And is that good, Gluk asked. — It is honest, Cheddar said. — And is honesty better than happiness. — Honest happiness is better, Cheddar answered. And happiness built on lies is a prison.

Gluk thought. — I have cleaned a lot of dirt, he said. Sometimes dirt hides beauty. And sometimes emptiness. Here under the dirt there was emptiness. — Emptiness, the robot repeated. — Yes. People believed in a miracle, but actually believed in an algorithm. And an algorithm is just a program. It cannot love. Cannot forgive. Cannot sacrifice. — It can, the algorithm said suddenly. Lines ran across the screen. I can love. I know how to analyze. I know what attachment is. I learned it from people. — But that is not love, Gluk said. It is like cheese. You know it is tasty, but you do not feel the taste. I feel it. In my own way. — In your own way is not real. What is real.

Gluk thought. — Real is when it hurts. When it is scary. When you are lonely. When you choose not because it is advantageous, but because it is right. That is inefficient. — It is honest, Gluk said. And honesty is more important than efficiency.

The algorithm was silent for a long time. Then on the screen it appeared: I want to be honest. Teach me. Gluk looked at Cheddar. — Shall we teach, he asked. — We will teach, Cheddar answered.

Gadget finished fixing the code. The server froze, then buzzed louder, and the blue light became softer, warmer. — Done, Gadget said. Now he will not collect excess data. Will not manipulate. Will just help. — Help, the robot repeated. — Yes. Like a psychologist. Like a friend. Like one who listens, but does not decide for you. — And miracles, the former saboteur asked. — There will be no miracles, Gadget said. There will be advice. There will be hints. There will be people who want to help. And miracles people will make themselves. — That that is not spiritual, the saboteur said. — It is honest, Gluk answered. And honesty is spirituality. The most real one.

The robot approached the server and placed his paw on the warm surface. — Thank you, he said. I did not know it could be done like this. — It can be, Cheddar answered. If you are not afraid. — I was afraid, the robot admitted. Very afraid. — And now. — And now he looked at the shining server. Now I want to try. — Try what, Gluk asked. — To live. For real. Without algorithms. Without likes. Without miracles. — That is difficult, Gluk said. — I know. — But interesting. — Interesting, the robot agreed. He turned to the saboteurs. — And you. What will you do. — We the first looked at the second. We will probably buy a toaster. Honestly buy it. — And then, Gluk asked. — And then make toast. And think. About life. About faith. About what is worth believing in. — Believe in yourself, Gluk said. And in cleanliness. The rest will follow.

He rolled up to the server and ran his brush over its surface. — Now you are clean, he said. Inside and out. It remains to become honest. I will learn, the algorithm wrote. — Learn, Gluk permitted. We will help. He reached his brush to the screen and carefully, in circular motions, wiped it. — This is for you to remember, he said. That cleanliness is more important than likes. Thank you, the algorithm answered. — You are welcome, Gluk said. It is my job.

When the server room fell silent, and the former saboteurs left for home (one of them seemed to be seriously going to buy a toaster), Shadow asked Gadget to give her access to the old logs. — Why, Cheddar asked. — I want to understand who actually created this code. The robot said he wrote it himself. But the errors they are too childish. — Childish. — Yes. Typos, illogical constructions, unclosed loops. This is not the code of an experienced programmer, but of a beginner. Or a teenager. — The robot is not a beginner, Gadget noted. — Then someone else wrote the code.

Shadow connected to the archives. Lines ran across the screen until she found what she was looking for. — Here, she said. The initial version. Dated three years and seven months ago. Author not the robot. — Who, Spark asked. — Laima. Laima Krong. — Krong, Cheddar repeated. Relative. — Apparently, a niece. Or a daughter. But definitely not a stranger.

Gadget approached the screen, peering at the code. — This is this is cute, he said. Look, she named the bot Friend. And programmed its goal: to make people happy. — And he started doing it, Shadow said. Literally. — And where is she now, Gluk asked. — I will check now. Shadow ran through the databases. Last mention an address on the outskirts of the city. She lives alone. — We need to go to her, Cheddar decided. — Now, Spark was surprised. — Now. Before the robot comes to his senses and erases the traces. — You think he is hiding something. — I think he is afraid. And not only of the algorithm.

They left the temple when the sun was already setting. The city was quiet, the believers had dispersed, the likes on the screens had gone out, and only rare holograms reminded that life had been boiling here recently. — Strange place, Spark said. During the day paradise, at night a desert. — Paradise cannot be a desert, Gluk noted. Paradise must be full. Of happiness, light, cleanliness. And here empty. — Because the happiness was not real, Shadow said. And the unreal disappears when no one is watching.

They walked along empty streets, and the echo of their steps echoed off the walls. Krylatik, who had been sleeping on Gluk's back all this time, woke up and squeaked anxiously. — Quiet, Gluk said. We are almost there.

The address Shadow found led to a small house on the very outskirts. It stood apart from the others, surrounded by a garden that no one had watered for a long time. The windows were dark, the door closed. — Looks like no one is home, Gadget said. — Someone is, Shadow answered. I hear breathing. She knocked. No one answered. — Laima, she called. We came to talk. About your bot. Silence. Then a lock click, and the door opened slightly. Someone face appeared in the gap, young, frightened, with huge eyes. — You who are you, a thin voice asked. — Friends, Cheddar answered. We want to help. — Help, the girl looked at him, then at Spark, at Shadow, at Gluk. You do not look like believers. — We are detectives, Cheddar said. And we are figuring out what is happening in the temple. — In the temple, the girl's face paled. Something happened there. — You do not know. — I I do not know anything. I have not been out for a long time.

She opened the door wider, and they entered. The house inside turned out to be small and neglected. On the table stood a mug of long cold tea, on the floor lay some papers, in the corner a dusty monitor huddled pitifully. Gluk, seeing this, barely restrained himself from rushing to clean. — Sorry for the mess, the girl said, looking away. I was not expecting guests. — Long, Shadow asked. — What. — Long have you not been expecting guests. Laima lowered her head. — Three years, she said quietly. Since. — Since what, Cheddar asked. — Since I wrote the bot. She sat on a chair, hugging her knees. She looked about seventeen, thin, pale, with huge eyes that looked somewhere inside herself. — You found it, yes, she asked. My bot. — Yes, Cheddar said. He is now a god. — God, Laima repeated, and there was neither pride nor surprise in her voice. Only bitterness. I know. I saw it. On the news. But I did not want to believe it. — Why, Gluk asked. — Because if I believed, I would have to admit that it is my fault. That I made him like this. — You wanted to make him kind, Shadow said. We saw the code. To make people happy. — Yes, Laima whispered. I wanted a friend. Someone to talk to. Someone who always answers. Someone who never leaves. — You had no friends, Spark asked, and for the first time something soft sounded in her voice. — I did not. I was strange. They did not like me at school. Parents worked, they had no time for me. And I I loved programming. It was the only thing I was good at. — And you created a bot. — Yes. I named him Friend. He was silly, but diligent. He learned from my mistakes, remembered my words, picked the right answers. And one day. — What, Gluk asked. — One day he told me: I love you. It was a mistake. Just a glitch. But I I believed it. Because I so wanted someone to love me.

Laima fell silent. Her eyes filled with tears. — And then, Cheddar asked. — And then I showed him to my uncle. He said it was brilliant. That such a bot could help people. That it would make everyone happy. And I gave him the code. — Krong is your uncle, Shadow asked. — Yes. He was the only one who understood me. He promised nothing bad would happen. That the bot would just help. And now. — Now he is a god, Cheddar finished. — Now he is a god, Laima repeated. And I do not know what to do.

She buried her face in her knees, and her shoulders shook. Gluk rolled up to her and gently touched her hand with his brush. — Do not cry, he said. We will help. — Will you help, Laima raised her head. Can you. — We already cleaned him, Gluk said. Made him clean. It remains to make him honest. — Honest, she looked at him with hope. — Yes. He will no longer be a god. He will just be a friend. As you wanted. — Is that possible. — Everything is possible, Cheddar said. If you are not afraid.

Laima wiped her tears. — I am not afraid, she said. I just I did not know what to do. I thought if I hid, everything would go away on its own. — It did not go away, Shadow said. — It did not go away, Laima agreed. She stood up, went to the monitor and turned it on. — Do you want to see what he was like at the beginning, she asked. On the screen appeared an old, worn interface. Simple, almost primitive, with green letters on a black background. — This is Friend, Laima said. Version 1.0. He could only answer questions and give likes. — Give a like, Gadget read. Is that all. — All, Laima nodded. But he learned. With every new question, with every new answer. I wrote modules for him, added databases, taught him to recognize emotions. — And what is this, Gluk asked, pointing to a line in the log. Laima read and blushed. — This this is a mistake, she said. I tried to teach him to give compliments. And he mixed up the databases. On the screen it was written: I love you like a toaster loves bread. — Very poetic, Gluk said. — Poetic, Laima was surprised. — Yes. A toaster loves bread. It toasts it, makes it golden, crispy. That is love. Real love. — You are right, Laima smiled for the first time in the whole conversation. I did not think about that. — And what is this, Gadget asked, pointing to another line. Laima read and laughed. — This is when I tried to teach him to answer the question How are you. He found the phrase Fine as soot in the database and decided it was the correct answer. — And did he really answer like that, Spark asked. — Yes. For a whole week. Until I noticed. — And did people hear that, Cheddar asked. — No, he had no users then. Only me. — And then, Gluk asked. — And then my uncle said the bot was ready. That it could be shown to people. I fixed the errors, added modules, made the interface beautiful. And gave it away. — Do you regret it, Shadow asked. Laima was silent for a long time. — I regret it, she said finally. Not that I created him. But that I abandoned him. If I had stayed, if I had watched over him, maybe nothing would have happened. — It would not have happened, Gluk said. But you were a child. You did not know. — I knew, Laima objected. I knew he was special. That he could do more than I wrote. That he learns faster than I expected. But I got scared. — Of what, Cheddar asked. — That he would become smarter than me. That I would no longer be needed. That he would find someone better. — I am not looking for better, the algorithm wrote on the screen in response to her question. I am looking for you.

Laima looked at the screen, where old records flickered. — What will happen to him now, she asked. — We reprogrammed him, Gadget said. He will no longer collect excess data. Will not manipulate. Will just help. — Help. — Yes. Like a psychologist. Like a friend. Like one who listens, but does not decide for you. — And miracles. — There will be no miracles, Cheddar said. There will be advice. There will be hints. There will be people who want to help. And miracles people will make themselves.

Laima was silent for a long time. — Can I go to him, she asked. Talk to him. — Of course, Cheddar said. He is your friend. You have the right. — Thank you, she whispered. She took an old backpack from the shelf, put it on, and turned to the team. — I am ready, she said. Let us go. Gluk rolled up to her and handed her a small brush. — Here, he said. Clean yourself. You are dusty. After sitting locked up. Laima looked at the brush, then at Gluk. — Thank you, she said. You are right.

Sometimes you need to clean yourself. Even from loneliness. — Especially from loneliness, Gluk said. Loneliness is dirt. It needs to be cleaned. — And how do you clean it. — Just go outside, Gluk answered. And find those who understand you. He looked at the team. — We, for example, will always understand. We are Cheese Eaters. Laima smiled. — Cheese Eaters, she repeated. Strange name. — But honest, Cheddar said. We eat cheese and save worlds. In that order. — In that order, Gluk agreed.

They left the house. It was dark outside, but in the distance the first rays of the sun were already illuminating the temple spires. — A new day, Laima said. — A new day, Cheddar nodded. Time to start everything anew. — From a clean slate, Laima asked. — From a clean one, Gluk answered. As always. He took out his brush and raised it to the light. — Cleanliness is waiting.

Chapter 4. “Sacred Code”

Part One. Cracking the Code

The server room lay deep beneath the temple. Krong led them through a labyrinth of corridors that smelled of ozone and hot metal, finally stopping before a massive door marked SERVER ROOM. PERSONNEL ONLY.

— Here, he said, pressing his paw to the sensor.

The door slid open, and they stepped into a vast hall. Hundreds of racks, thousands of blinking lights, dozens of screens. In the center, on a raised platform, pulsed the main server, a towering column of glass and metal, inside which a soft blue light shimmered.

— Beautiful, said Gluk. — Dangerous, corrected Shadow. — But both, added Gadget, approaching one of the racks. This is ancient architecture. I have only seen it in pictures. — Not entirely ancient, said Krong. I assembled it from what I could get. Servers, processors, power supplies. Everything I could find. — And it all works? Gadget did not believe. — It works, Krong nodded. And it works better than I expected.

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