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GULD OF
SHADOWS
AND CHEESE POKER
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Guild of shadows and cheese poker

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Аннотация

After Mars, cheese-obsessed detective Cheddar and his team hunt Count Meus, who turned defeat into an NFT meme. They enter “Shadow of the Zodiac” — a virtual realm ruled by an algorithm feeding on hype. To uncover the Guild of Shadows, they play Cheese Poker, battle digital clones, and confront an ancient AI. The real danger? Losing themselves to fame. A wild mix of space detective, cyberpunk and absurd humor — rats fight with truth.

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GUILD OF SHADOWS AND CHEESE POKER

Chapter 1: Burrow in the Glow of Glory

The silence on the orbital station “Burrow” was new. Not the anxious silence of waiting before a jump into the unknown, nor the creaking silence of an old ship where every part was about to fly apart. This was a quiet, contented, full silence. The silence of a home that had finally been tidied up.

Two weeks had passed since the “Cheese Eaters” team returned from Mars, heroes who had cleared their names and received not only gratitude but also a solid fee. The money went to what Gadget had dreamed of for years: a full modernization of their floating home.

Now the “Burrow” sparkled. The floors were covered with anti-static coating, softly shimmering underfoot. The walls, once plastered with schematics and announcements, were now smooth panels with holographic displays showing system status or, optionally, works by Martian artists gifted by the Council. Even the air smelled different — not of ozone, dust, and old cheese, but of clean ions and a light scent of pine (Gadget had installed a new aromatization system and was now experimenting).

In the center of the command hall, on a genuine leather chair procured from a space auction, sat Cheddar. But he wasn’t commanding. He was... degusting.

Three cryostasis containers stood on the table of polished dark wood before him. Inside each lay a sample of cheese sent from Mars as a sign of “enduring gratitude.” Cheddar, wearing magnifying lens glasses, carefully extracted a tiny piece with tweezers, brought it to his nose, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Then he placed it on his tongue and froze, his face becoming focused like a surgeon’s during an operation.

— “Rusty Edam,” he pronounced finally, making a note on his tablet. — Aging... seven Martian cycles. A slight iron oxide taste in the aftertaste, reminiscent of the dusty storms of Mariner Valley. Interesting, but... simplistic.

Spark, sitting on a new reaction trainer (a gift from Martian engineers), snorted. She was all in sweat, her fur ruffled. The trainer was a room where soft balls flew from all sides, and she had to dodge them or hit them with shots from her blaster at minimum power.

— You’re becoming unbearable, boss, she said, knocking down another ball with a precise shot. — Before, you just ate cheese. Now you... analyze it. The next step is you’ll start writing sonnets about it.

— I am an official Galactic Investigator on Special Assignments, Cheddar replied with dignity, not looking away from the next sample. — My expertise must be flawless. “Domed Roquefort”... Hmm. Too sterile. Perfect blue veins, but no soul. You can feel the hand of a fanatical technocrat, possibly a former student of Count Meus. I give it no more than three stars.

From an open hatch in the floor, from where buzzing and contented grunting could be heard, Gadget emerged. His snout was smeared with grease, and in his paws he clutched something resembling a hairdryer with an antenna.

— Ready! he announced solemnly. — “Cheese Detector 3.0”! Now with a function for spectral analysis of mold and determination of the planet of origin with accuracy down to the continent!

— Why? asked Shadow. She, as usual, sat in the darkest corner of the hall, almost merging with the shadow of a new decorative plant (a Martian chameleon cactus). In her paws was a disassembled and reassembled “Mirage” — she was implementing improvements drawn from Martian masking technologies.

— Why not? Gadget was surprised. — For... for science! For accuracy! Here, let's test it on the boss!

Without waiting for an answer, he aimed the device at Cheddar and pressed the button. The device beeped joyfully, data flashing on its small screen.

— Object: adult male rat. Biochemical composition... oh. High content of lipids characteristic of mature hard cheeses. Traces present... this can't be... Edam mold? Cheddar, did you eat Edam today?

— That's me, idiot! Cheddar barked, putting down the tweezers. — Your detector is confusing me with cheese!

Gadget turned red. — Possibly needs calibration... or you're

just very... cheesy today.

Spark couldn't hold back and burst out laughing, rolling on the floor. Shadow inclined her head to hide a smile.

Cheddar took off his glasses and sighed. In this sigh was not anger, but a strange fatigue. The very fatigue that covers after a big victory, when the adrenaline is gone, and what to do next is unclear.

— All this is wonderful, he said, looking at the sparkling hall. — New gadgets, new status, recognition... But where is the case? Where is the challenge? The Galactic Police sent us a letter of gratitude and a box of candies (which, by the way, turned out to have cheese filling, Gadget, don't eat them). The Martians sent cheese. We sit here, like... like museum exhibits. Polished and useless.

— We can train, Spark suggested, getting up. — I've honed my reaction so much I can hit a fly between the eyes from twenty meters. If there were flies here.

— We can explore, Gadget said. — I got access to the galactic academic network! There are so many articles on cheese cryogenics...

— We can wait, Shadow said quietly. — Real threats don't like fuss. They approach quietly.

And at that very moment, as if hearing her words, all screens on the station — both the large holographic panels and the small service monitors, and even the screen on the "Cheese Detector 3.0" — went black simultaneously.

The silence became tense.

— Gadget? Cheddar asked, already rising from the chair.

— It's not me! the technician squeaked. — All systems normal! Power is there! This... is an external signal! Very powerful, directed, bypassing all our protections like zero!

The screens flashed again.

But on them was not the view from the porthole or system data. On them was video.

The quality was perfect, crystal clear. The sound — live and volumetric. And the content was... impossible.

Count Meus was dancing on the screen.

He was in a pinstripe triple-piece suit, too wide for his thin figure, in spats and a bowler hat. A brisk, cheeky jazz melody began to play — saxophone, banjo, drums. And the count broke into a tap dance. His paws in lacquered shoes beat out a clear, complex rhythm. He twirled his cane, winked, his gray mustaches danced in time.

And he did all this standing on a huge, painfully familiar object. On the “Galactic Delicacy”. The milky-golden sphere with veins of the Andromeda Nebula served as his stage. He was dancing on the legendary cheese, stolen by him and, as everyone thought, destroyed in the depths of the volcano.

The team froze. Spark forgot to breathe. Gadget dropped his detector. Shadow slowly stepped out of the shadow, her eyes narrowing to slits. Cheddar stood as if nailed to the spot, his paws clenched into fists so hard the bones cracked.

The dance lasted exactly fifteen seconds. In the finale, the count took off his hat, made a deep, theatrical bow, winked straight into the camera, and said in a hoarse but cheerful voice: “Hello, Cheese Eaters! Missed me?”

The image went out. Only one thing remained in its place: a three-dimensional icon rotating in empty black space. It was a stylized piece of cheese, cut out of golden light. Below it burned the inscription: NFT #001: “Meus & Delicacy. Dance of the Defeated”. Unique. Irreplaceable. Digital memory of the triumph of spirit over matter.

And a small, flickering line: Coordinates of the prize inside.

No one spoke. The silence was thick as tar. Cheddar’s fist hitting the table broke it first — a dull, furious blow. The wood cracked. The cheese containers jumped.

— How... Cheddar began, and his voice was a low, dangerous whisper. — How does he DARE?

— This... is art! Gadget gasped, his eyes round not from fear, but from admiration. — Digital art! He encoded the performance into a non-fungible token! It’s genius!

— It’s obscenity! Spark roared. — He’s dancing on our cheese! On CHEESE! Our common, galactic heritage! I’ll burn him! I’ll melt him into a puddle of his own shoes!

— Calm down, Shadow said. Her voice was an icy oasis in the boiling rage of the room. She was already at the main console, her fingers flying over the interface. — This is a message. A cipher. And the coordinates... are not spatial. This is a network address.

— What? Cheddar approached her, still trembling with anger.

— Station “Shadow of the Zodiac,” Shadow read from the screen. — Not a physical object in the usual sense. This is a neural network hub. A cosmic dark web. A place where data that shouldn’t meet, meets. Where secrets are sold that shouldn’t be sold. Where you can find anything. Disappear forever. Or... receive a message from a runaway tyrant.

Cheddar looked at the rotating golden cheese. His initial rage slowly, like lava, cooled and hardened into something colder and sharper. Into resolve.

— He’s laughing at us, Cheddar pronounced quietly. — He lost the battle, escaped, and now, instead of licking his wounds in some hole, he... dances. He turns our victory into a joke. Into a digital souvenir.

— Then we must turn his joke into his last mistake, Shadow said, and for the first time steel sounded in her voice.

— Exactly, Cheddar straightened up. The familiar command fire burned in his eyes again. — He thinks that hiding behind screens and servers, he is safe. That we, rats, only know how to smell real cheese and shoot real blasters. He is wrong.

He turned to the team.

— Gadget! Everything you know about the “Shadow of the Zodiac”, about digital trails, about hacking NFTs — I need it in ten minutes! Spark! Put away the balls. We won’t need fire, but... light. Bright, blinding light of attention. Shadow, you lead the preparation. We need new identities. Digital masks. We are

going where you have no shadow, where Spark is invisible in the infrared spectrum, and my nose smells only bits and bytes.

— And what will we do there? asked Spark, still clutching her blaster.

— What we do best, Cheddar smiled, and his smile was sharp as a blade. — Smell. Search. And... make reposts. World-famous galactic investigators are going into cyberspace. Get ready, team. Our cheese nose has just caught a new scent. The scent of digital audacity. And we will dig to its source, even if for that we have to burrow into the rottenest data dump in the whole galaxy!

A familiar tremor of anticipation ran through the “Burrow”. The shiny new interior suddenly felt like just a shell again. A shell for something old, hungry, tenacious. For a team that had been challenged again. And this time the challenge was as insulting as it was strange.

And on the broken table, among the shards of cryostasis containers, a golden cheese cube still flickered on Cheddar’s tablet. Silent, nagging, like a tic. It was not a trophy. It was a door.

Chapter 2: Digital Aura and Cheese Poker

The “Cheese Hole”, shining with new side panels and silently operating engines, exited warp jump at the given point. Before them was not a planet, asteroid, or even a gas cloud. There was emptiness. A black, starless emptiness so deep it seemed light itself drowned in it.

— Coordinates correct? Cheddar asked, peering into the porthole.

— Absolutely, Gadget answered, not looking away from three different screens. — But the “Shadow of the Zodiac” does not occupy physical space. It... overlays it. Like a projection. We need to activate the communication protocol and... let it find us.

He pressed a series of keys. Outside, blue waves of energy ran along the ship’s hull. A moment — and the emptiness before them trembled. Like the surface of water into which a stone was thrown. Then space tore — not with an explosion, but with a quiet, sigh-like sound. And a... portal appeared.

It was not a hole in space. It was an interface. A huge, shimmering screen floating in the vacuum. Lines of code in unknown languages ran on it, abstract symbols flashed, icons resembling either ancient runes or smileys of the distant future flashed on and off. In the center of the screen pulsed

the inscription: “SHADOW OF THE ZODIAC. ENTRY. DIGITAL AURA SCAN”.

— Here’s the reception, Gadget whispered. — Now they will scan us. Not for weapons. For... reputation. For significance. For the trace we leave in the networks.

— I have an impeccable reputation, Cheddar grumbled. — I am a hero of Mars.

— Your reputation is what the algorithms say about you, boss, Gadget corrected him. — And they say a lot about you. Especially after MiauMaster broadcasted our feed across the galaxy.

A beam of white light struck from the screen. It slid over the hull of the “Cheese Hole”, penetrated inside, ran through all rooms, touched every team member. It felt like being X-rayed through and through, but you didn’t see bones, you saw... posts, comments, mentions, likes, dislikes, ratings.

After a few seconds the beam disappeared. Results appeared on the screen. Above each of them — a stylized avatar generated based on their “digital trace”.

CHEDDAR (Avatar: Worthy Rat in uniform with medals made of cheese) Digital Aura: “Hero-icon. High recognizability. Strong narrative of “tyrant victor”. Risk: perceived as establishment, “systemic”. Recommendation for entry: “Covert Celebrity” mode.

SPARK (Avatar: Fiery Flash with blaster) Digital Aura: “Explosive content. High virality. Associations with action,

chaos, spectacle. Risk: trigger for moderators. Recommendation: accompany with warning “Possible Spoilers”.

GADGET (Avatar: Tangled Genius with soldering iron and book) Digital Aura: “Niche expert. Deep immersion. Low reach, but high audience loyalty. Risk: may bore the general public. Recommendation: use hashtags to attract attention”.

SHADOW (Avatar: Barely noticeable blur in the corner) Digital Aura: “Ghost. Minimal digital trace. Algorithms cannot form a stable profile. Risk: regarded as system error or highest form of stealth mastery. Recommendation: issue temporary digital passport “Guest-Observer”.

Spark snorted. — “Explosive content”? I like it. And “risk for moderators” is a compliment.

— I’m not “niche”, Gadget was offended. — I’m fundamental!

— I was called a ghost, Shadow stated without emotion. — Accurately.

Cheddar read his characteristic. “Systemic”. This word hurt him. He caught himself thinking that he would prefer the avatar “Dangerous Outsider” or “Untamable Sleuth”.

The portal-interface changed again. The inscription changed to: “AURA ACCEPTED. ENTRY PERMITTED. PREPARE FOR INTERFACE SYNCHRONIZATION”.

And the world behind the porthole disappeared. Or rather, it turned into something else. The “Cheese Hole” seemed to float inside a giant holographic interface. Around them stretched not space, but the digital landscape of the “Shadow of the Zodiac”.

It was impossible to describe in words offhand. It was a city assembled from information. “Streets” were data streams — vertical, horizontal, diagonal rivers of shimmering light, along which packets of information flew in the form of symbols, images, flashes. “Buildings” were databases — huge, geometric structures constantly changing shape, their walls were living screens showing everything: fragments of intercepted messages, footage from surveillance cameras of distant planets, ads for unthinkable technologies, quotes from forgotten books, memes a thousand years old.

A hum hung in the air (if it was air). Not mechanical, but digital — a quiet, continuous buzzing of millions of processes, hissing of encrypted channels, echoes of disputes on forums. And smell... there was no smell. There was a sensation. A sensation of cold, cleanliness, and infinite complexity. For Cheddar, whose world was built on smells, this was frightening.

Their ship moved smoothly along one of the “avenues”. Around them, other “entities” flew past, paying no attention — some looked like ghost ships, others like clumps of energy with camera-eyes, others like just avatars floating in the digital flow.

— Recording everything, Gadget muttered, his eyes glued to the screens. — Architecture... this is not just code. This is artificial intelligence that has evolved into its own ecosystem. It has its own laws. Its own physics. Look — there’s a “trading district”. See, structures in the form of counters? They exchange not goods, but... pure information. Security algorithms patrol

like robots... God, this is...

He fell silent, seeing something. In one of the “squares” stood a giant sculpture assembled from holograms. It was... Cheddar. Enlarged a hundred times, heroic, with raised “Ice Squall”. At his feet lay a defeated, caricature Count Meus. A plaque glowed under the sculpture: “Memorial of Mars Liberation. NFT Collection: 10,000 unique tokens. Buy a piece of history!”

Cheddar followed his gaze. His snout twisted.

— They... they are selling me? By pieces?

— Your legend, boss, Gadget corrected. — Your digital image. This... is an honor, actually.

— It’s filth, Cheddar said through his teeth. — I feel like a dressed carcass at the market.

— Hold on, Shadow said. — We need to find Meus’s trail. Not his statue, but him himself.

— Data from the NFT leads here, to the very center, Shadow said. She was not looking at the holograms, her gaze was glued to invisible data streams that her modified “Mirage” displayed on a separate screen. — But there is too much noise here. Millions of signals. Need a filter. Or... bait.

— What bait? Cheddar asked.

— The one he will bite, Shadow answered. — He sent us a challenge. Means, he’s watching. Means, he’s waiting for our reaction. We must give it. Bright. Loud. Such that all algorithms of the “Shadow of the Zodiac” pay attention to us for a second. Then his system, if he is here, will react. And we will see the

response.

— I can blow up something digital! Spark suggested hopefully.

— No explosions, Cheddar said quickly. — We'll get banned, or worse, deleted. We need... to declare ourselves. In a new way. Gadget, what is currency here? What is valued?

— Attention, Gadget answered without hesitation. — Likes, reposts, mentions, subscriptions. And... information. Especially rare, exclusive.

Cheddar thought. His gaze fell on the samples of Martian cheese he had grabbed at the last moment. An idea, wild and cheesy, formed in his head.

— Excellent, he said. — We will hold an auction.

— Of what? Spark and Gadget asked in chorus.

— Information, Cheddar smiled. — Exclusive. About what didn't make it into the official reports about the Mars case. About what only we know. We will go to the main... what's it called... "feed"? And offer it in exchange for something. For access to archives about the Guild.

— What information? Shadow was alert.

— The spiciest, Cheddar's eyes gleamed. — For example... the truth about how Count Meus panically fears... water. Yes. After he fell into a fountain as a child. Or about what funny sound he made when we iced him into the ceiling with the ice beam. Unbelievably similar to a kitten's meow. We will post a teaser. And the full version — only to whoever gives us what we need.

— This is black PR, Gadget said, but admiration sounded in his voice.

— This is detective tactics, Cheddar corrected. — We use his own weapon — mockery. Only ours will be... more aromatic.

He took a sample of “Olympus Dust”, brought it to the internal surveillance camera, which Gadget redirected to the external broadcast channel.

— Attention, “Shadow of the Zodiac”! Cheddar said, and his voice, amplified and processed, spread across their local network segment. — Galactic Investigators Cheddar and Company on air! Information about the so-called “Guild” is wanted! In exchange, exclusive is offered: unpublished, spicy details about a certain Count M... the very one who dances tap. First teaser free: he panically fears wet socks. Seriously. Bargaining acceptable. Seeking contact in personal messages. Hashtag: #CheeseTruth.

He sent the message. For several seconds nothing happened. Then, like circles on water, the reaction went.

First, a flurry of connection requests, messages, memes with wet socks fell on their ship. Then answers began to appear. Mostly spam, offers to buy anything, from fake diplomas to plans of someone else’s planet. But there were others.

One message stood out. It came not to the general channel, but directly, over a protected, almost invisible line. It contained only one phrase: “Want to know about the Guild? Win at poker. Cheese Poker. MiauMaster Table. Applications accepted for the next 5 minutes. Stake — your legend.”

And coordinates. Coordinates of a virtual “casino”, deep in one of the most protected clusters of the “Shadow of the Zodiac”.

— MiauMaster, Gadget whispered. — That same streamer? Who hosted our feed from Mars?

— Looks like his audience is here, Shadow said. — And he knows the rules of the game.

— “Cheese Poker”? Spark repeated. — Is it like regular poker, but chips made of mozzarella?

— Worse, Cheddar said, reading the rules that came with the coordinates. — Players make stakes not with chips, but... with stories. Everything related to cheese. Personal memories, secrets, legends. Each round — a new cheese variety, theme. The winner is determined not by card combination, but... by audience reaction. Likes, dislikes, comments. MiauMaster hosts a live stream. His viewers are the judges.

— This is idiocy, Spark stated.

— This is their reality, Cheddar said. — And our only ticket to the archives. If MiauMaster is really connected to the Guild or knows about it... this is our chance.

— Huge risk, Shadow said. — If we lose, we won't lose money. We will lose control over our own history. He can expose us as fools to the whole galaxy.

— And if we don't try, we will just circle here like blind kittens, Cheddar parried. — I'm going. Alone. The rest — my support group. Gadget, look for vulnerabilities in the broadcast system. Spark... be ready if suddenly virtuality becomes too real.

Shadow, watch the perimeter. For any strange data movements.

— Cheddar, this is a trap, Shadow said quietly.

— Of course, it's a trap, Cheddar smiled. — But it's also a stage. And on stage, team, I know a thing or two. After all, everything I've done the last few years is tell stories. Usually — to investigators or clients. Now I'll tell a streamer and his audience. Cheese stories. The best I have.

He accepted the invitation. The coordinates flashed, and the “Cheese Hole” smoothly turned, heading deep into the digital city, to the place where a game awaited them, the stake of which was not only information, but their own faces. And over all this, invisibly, hovered the spirit of Count Meus, somewhere watching and, probably, smirking. His dance was only the beginning. The real show was yet to come.

Chapter 3: MiauMaster and the Rules of the Game

The “Luck Casino” cluster represented not a building, but a whole planetoid structure assembled from clumps of light resembling dice, card suits, and spinning roulette wheels. All this shimmered, iridesced, and emitted quiet, pleasant sounds — rustling of cards, clatter of bones, brisk jazz, nothing like the one under which Meus danced.

The “Cheese Hole” docked to a virtual pier — a platform of holographic energy. Cheddar, putting on a simple digital mask-suit (avatar of a “modest guest”, generated by the system), exited the ship. The rest stayed inside, on comms, their voices sounding in his ear through a hidden channel.

— I’m on comms, boss, Gadget said. — The casino system... incredibly complex. But I see loopholes. MiauMaster is hosting the stream from the central table. Viewers... god, several billion connections. This is half the sentient galaxy.

— Excellent, Cheddar muttered, walking down the transparent corridor. Around him other avatars floated — strange, abstract, terrifying or funny. This was the scum of the digital universe. — The more viewers, the more chance someone among them knows something useful. Or that MiauMaster himself slips up.

— Be careful with formulations, Shadow warned. — Live broadcast. Every word is analyzed. Algorithms track engagement.

Cheddar entered the main hall. It looked like a giant amphitheater, but instead of seats — countless floating windows with viewer avatars, their comments ran down the walls in a waterfall of text. In the center, on a elevation, stood a lone poker table with green cloth. Three figures were already seated at it. And one — was standing.

The one standing was MiauMaster.

Live (if this word applies to a hologram) he was smaller than on the screen. A young cat, almost a kitten, with incredibly fluffy aquamarine fur, which he was clearly adjusting in a graphic editor. He wore a fashionable, glowing jacket with a hood, studded with mini-screens, on which the main stream metrics were immediately displayed: number of viewers, likes, donations. His eyes, huge and green, looked not at the players, but at a floating invisible window with a chat that poured at the speed of thought.

— Yo-ho-ho, friends! he shouted in a shrill but put-on voice, addressing the camera. — Look who joined us! A real legend! The one who made Count Meus a meme! Rat-detective CHEDDAR! Give him applause, brothers and sisters! Hashtag #CheddarInCasino!

A wave of virtual applause, explosions of emojis and likes rolled over the walls. Cheddar felt his digital skin tingle slightly

— the system was transmitting “feedback”.

He nodded, trying to look calm, and took a free seat at the table. The other players were no less colorful: Gray Cloud — an avatar in the form of a cloud with a pair of piercing eyes, radiating an aura of mystery; Sir Vint — an old, battered robot with one camera instead of a head, quietly crackling; and Golden Tongue — a smooth, oily humanoid figure who constantly smiled, showing perfect holographic teeth.

— Glad to join, Cheddar said, his voice sounding clear and even on air.

— Rules are simple as a cheese crust, friend! MiauMaster clapped his paws. He didn’t sit, he fluttered around the table like a hyperkinetic butterfly. — This is “Cheese Poker”! Each round — a new cheese variety, chosen by a random generator! Players take turns telling a story related to this cheese. Personal, scary, funny, instructive — doesn’t matter! But it must be ENGAGING! The audience is our judge! Likes, hearts, fire — your currency! Whoever gains more engagement by the end of the round — takes the bank! And the bank — is information! Today’s jackpot — access to my personal... archives about some dark organizations. — He winked. — Let’s start! First cheese... oh, magnificent! The generator gives us... “Stinky Brie from Planet Camembert-4”!

A hologram of cheese materialized on the table — a huge, creamy head with a white mold crust. Even in digital space, a phantom, saturated smell seemed to float from it. Cheddar

wrinkled his nose.

— Who's first? MiaoMaster looked at the players. — Senior starts! Sir Vint, you've been in the game long!

The robot creaked, its camera-head turned to the cheese. — Analysis... “Stinky Brie”. Association... year 3045 galactic. Mission to Camembert-4. Crew... ate local delicacy. Life support systems... clogged. Smell... penetrated memory. To this day... in оперативной memory. File: “smell_of_horror. dat”. Story... exists. Telling.

The robot's voice was monotonous, but there was horror in it. He told about how his crew explored caves where that very brie matured, how the smell was so strong it disabled sensors, how they got lost, orienting only by... stench. The story was technical, detailed, but devoid of emotion. Comments in the chat were boring: “Boring”, “Robot is robot”, “Where's action?”. His engagement counter barely crawled.

Next was Gray Cloud. She exuded mystery. Her story was about a ghost of an ancient cheese factory, who appeared in the form of a cloud with the smell of brie and predicted fate. The story was mystical, beautifully presented. The chat livened up: “Wow!”, “Creepy!”, “Believe!”. The counter went faster.

Golden Tongue told a dirty but incredibly funny anecdote about a cheese merchant and a farm woman. He gestured, changed voices, was artistic. The chat exploded with laughter, likes, laughing emojis. His engagement skyrocketed.

And now Cheddar's turn. Billions of eyes (and cameras)

looked at him. MiauMaster flew very close, his camera catching every micro-mimicry in close-up.

— Well, hero? he hissed, but so everyone could hear. — Your turn. Surprise us. Tell about “Stinky Brie”. But just remember — here they value not feats, but zest. #Pressure

Cheddar looked at the cheese hologram. Then at the chat, where comments were already flashing: “Come on, cheese cop!”, “Intrigue!”, “Surely a boring service anecdote”.

And Cheddar began. Not with a detective story. With a personal one.

— You know, he said quietly, and his voice, unexpectedly devoid of pathos, made the chat quiet down a bit. — “Stinky Brie”... I don’t have a investigation story connected with it. But a story of shame. My first big failure.

He paused, letting the words hang.

— I was young and stupid. I wanted to impress... one lady. Decided to arrange a candlelight dinner. The most romantic cheese I knew — this one, brie. Bought a whole head. Brought home. Didn’t know one thing: this variety needs airing. Good airing. I left it in the kitchen, in a closed box... and went to cook everything else.

He paused again. There were no more mocks in the chat. There was: “Oh”, “Continue”, “What happened?”.

— When I returned... the smell. It was everywhere. It ate into the wallpaper, into the curtains, into my only good shirt. It was so concentrated, it seemed it could be cut with a knife. And that

lady... she had allergic senses. She entered, took one breath... and vomited. Right on the threshold. On my new shoes.

Explosion in the chat. But not laughter, but some sympathetic hysteria. “OOOOH NO!”, “Poor guy!”, “That’s cruel!”, “And the lady?”.

— The lady, Cheddar said with a light, sad smile, — said that I probably secretly breed chemical weapons, and never talked to me again. And I aired this stench from the apartment for three weeks. Since then “Stinky Brie” I eat only outdoors. And with very, very good ventilation. And never — for romance.

The story was simple, human (rat), about failure, about shame. There was no heroism. There was vulnerability. And the chat loved it. Cheddar’s engagement shot up, overtaking even the artistic Golden Tongue. People put hearts, crying smileys, wrote: “I messed up like that once too!”, “Real hero is one who admits his flaws!”, “Now I love Cheddar even more!”.

MiauMaster looked at the metrics, and his smile became a bit frozen. He expected heroic tales, and got a confession. This was fresh. This was... viral.

— O-o-okay! he drawled. — Unexpected twist! Cheddar surges into the leaders of the first round! But this is only a warm-up! Next cheese... “Moon Blue from Enceladus”! Rarest, most expensive! And the round theme... “Loss”!

Cheddar felt a chill. “Loss”? Too leading. But the game continued. This time the stories were different: Sir Vint told about losing cargo with this cheese in a meteorite storm (boring).

Gray Cloud — about a legend how a whole civilization lost the recipe (mystical). Golden Tongue — about how he “lost” conscience, selling a fake (cynical and funny).

Cheddar, when his turn came, again went an unexpected way.
— “Moon Blue”, he said, looking at the shimmering hologram. — I didn’t lose it. I... gave it away. To a thief.

Question marks in the chat.

— It was long ago, I was working on a smuggling case. Caught a thief, young, hungry, who stole a piece of this cheese not for sale, but to feed his old, sick mother. They had no money even for bread. And she, as it turned out, before dying dreamed of trying exactly “Moon Blue”, about which she read in an old book.

Cheddar paused. There were no more words in the chat, only streams of hearts and crying emojis.

— I could have jailed him. By law — should have. But... I looked at this piece of cheese. And at him. And gave the cheese. Said: “Take it to mother. Say you found it. And then... come to me and work off the debt. Cleaning my ship”. He came. Worked it off. Then... went to study to be a cheese maker. Now makes decent cheddar on one of Jupiter’s moons. Sometimes sends me a head. So I didn’t lose cheese. I acquired... a person.

This was not a detective story. This was a parable. About mercy. About how even law has a cheese heart. The chat howled with delight. Engagement was off the charts. MiauMaster looked at Cheddar with a new, evaluating look. This rat played not by their rules. He played deeper.

— Delightful! Simply delightful! MiaoMaster shouted, but there was already a false note in his delight. — What depth! What... humanity! Friends, do you see? Our hero is not just a cool detective, he... a philosopher! #CheeseSage

Third round. Cheese: “Fiery Cheddar from volcanic plantations of Io”. Theme: “Betrayal”.

Stories became harder. Golden Tongue told how his partner betrayed him, stealing a patent for cheese (viciously). Gray Cloud — about a volcano spirit who betrays his priest (confusingly). Sir Vint — about a logic failure, which he called “betrayal of self” (unclearly).

And again Cheddar. He was on edge. The theme “betrayal” hung in the air like a cloud. He thought about Meus. About the Guild. About how they, possibly, play not just poker, but someone else’s game.

— Betrayal, he began, and his voice became hard as rock. — This is when those you trust turn out not to be who they seem. I didn’t have a personal story about “Fiery Cheddar”. But I have a story about... an ice wall. Which looked like salvation, but turned out to be a trap.

He told. Without naming names, without indicating the planet. He told about Count Meus. About how he offered them an “ideal world” under a dome. How it looked like salvation for his people. And in reality was betrayal of everything living, betrayal of the very spirit of Mars, betrayal of freedom. He spoke not about himself, but about the treachery of an idea covered by good.

— And you know what’s the scariest? he finished, looking straight into MiauMaster’s camera. — Sometimes betrayal doesn’t come with sword and fire. It comes with a dance. With a smile. With a beautiful picture that says: “Everything will be fine, just trust me”. But behind this picture — emptiness. Cold. Control. This is what real betrayal is. It doesn’t wound the body. It poisons the soul.

Silence hung in the hall. Even the chat froze for a second. This was no longer a story. This was an accusation. Encoded, but recognizable.

MiauMaster stopped smiling. His fluffy snout became serious. He looked at Cheddar, and something flickered in his green eyes. Not malice. Something more complex. Respect? Warning?

— Deep, he finally said, and his voice lost its shrillness. — Very... deep. Round over. By engagement... Cheddar wins. By a large margin.

A holographic key materialized on the table — access to the archives.

— Jackpot is yours, detective, MiauMaster said, and new notes appeared in his tone. — But the game... is just beginning. You won access. But can you use it? Archives — they are alive. They are guarded not by code. They are guarded by... Attention.

He raised his paw, and the wall behind him came to life. A giant, all-seeing Eye manifested on it. But this was not just an eye. It was an interface. Hashtags, trends, view counts, popularity graphs ran in its pupil. And around the eye — fluttered, like

moths, millions of tiny icons: likes, dislikes, reposts, hearts.

— Meet, MiauMaster said, and fatigue sounded in his voice for the first time. — The Power of Attention. It feeds not on energy. Not on data. It feeds... on us. On our interest. On our emotions. The louder the story, the more viral it is, the stronger it is. My archives... this is its pantry. You won the key. But to get to the needed shelf... you will have to pass Through It. And It is very... hungry.

The Eye on the wall slowly turned. Its gaze fell on Cheddar. And Cheddar felt not virtual, but the most real, animal cold. The cold of one who was just seen by something huge, ancient and completely indifferent. Something for which he was just... content.

The poker was over. The real game began now.

Chapter 4: The Power of Attention and the Cyber-Ghost

The Eye. It was everywhere and nowhere. It didn't look — it scanned. Its pupil, a shimmering whirlpool of trends and hashtags, sucked in everything: their postures, micro-expressions on digital avatars, pulse frequency (transmitted via bio-sensors), even the emotional color of thoughts, caught by the system through elusive brain activity patterns.

Cheddar felt his own, real fur stand on end somewhere far away, in the cockpit of the “Cheese Hole”. This was not a metaphor. The entity MiauMaster called the Power of Attention was a predator. But a predator of a special kind — it hunted not flesh, but narrative. Story. And now it was evaluating them, like a chef evaluating ingredients for a new dish.

— “It's... reading us,” Gadget's voice whispered into the hidden mic, full of horror and awe. — This isn't just a data aggregation algorithm. It's an emergent artificial intelligence arising from the very flow of information of the “Shadow of the Zodiac”. It is a product of all likes, reposts, comments, views. It knows what people want to see before they realize it themselves. And it... serves it to them.

— So, is this the judge? — asked Cheddar, not taking his eyes off the Eye.

— It is the judge, the executioner, and the director, — MiauMaster answered. His playfulness had disappeared, deflated like a balloon. Now he looked tired, almost aged. — I feed it. My streams, my broadcasts, my provocations — it's all for it. It gives me an audience. And I give it... food. Your story, Cheddar, about Count Meus... it liked it. It's juicy. Full of conflict, moral dilemmas, hints of conspiracy. It wants more.

— More of what? — asked Cheddar.

— Drama, — MiauMaster said simply. — Resolution. So you try to access the archives. So it can broadcast it. So the viewers hold their breath. And if you lose... if you get “eaten”... it will be even bigger hype. #FallOfTheHero. Eternal trend.

— So, it's a trap. You lured us here to feed this... this rating monster.

— I gave you a chance! — MiauMaster suddenly flared up. — You came yourselves! You threw down the challenge! I merely... created conditions. In this world, Cheddar, either you feed the Power of Attention, or it eats you. I chose the first. And you? You want the archives about the Guild? They are there. — He nodded at the Eye. — Behind it. Pass through it. Tell a story that will make it get distracted for a second. Or... become the story yourself.

Cheddar turned, looking at the ghostly figures of the other players. Gray Cloud was already fading, dissolving into digital fog — her engagement was low, she had become uninteresting. Sir Vint was slowly driving away from the table, his motors

quietly whining. Golden Tongue was smiling, but his smile was glassy; he understood that the show had moved to a new level where his obscene anecdotes were useless.

— Team, — Cheddar said quietly into the mic. — Did you hear?

— We saw, — Shadow's voice answered. It was calm, analytical. — The entity has no physical core. It is distributed across the entire "Shadow of the Zodiac" network. Nothing to attack. It can only be... deceived.

— How? — Spark asked. — Blow up the main server?

— There is no main server, — Gadget said. — But there are patterns. It reacts to narratives. To stories. MiauMaster is right — it is hungry for content. We can create a distracting narrative. So loud, so viral, that it will switch to it, leaving the archives unprotected.

— Fake news? — Cheddar suggested.

— No, — Shadow said. — Too crude. Its algorithms will filter it already. We need... something on the verge of truth. Something it will want to believe. What billions of viewers will want to believe.

Cheddar looked at the giant Eye. An idea, daring and desperate, began to form in his head. It was born from his last story. From the theme of "betrayal".

— MiauMaster, — he said loudly. — You are broadcasting all this. Live?

The cat-streamer nodded, his own gaze glued to the metrics,

which now showed crazy growth: billions of new connections. The Power of Attention had clearly signaled its “subscribers”: the main show begins.

— Then I propose a deal, — Cheddar said. — Not to you. To her. — He pointed at the Eye. — I will give you a story. Not about the past. About the present. About what is happening here and now. But with one condition: if the story works, if engagement flies higher than all your records, you will give me not just access to the archives. You will show them to everyone. Live. To all your viewers.

In the chat, which now filled all the walls of the hall, silence fell. Then it was flooded with a wave: “YES!!!”, “WOW!”, “THIS IS INSANE!”, “LIVE BROADCAST OF SECRET ARCHIVES!”, “HASHTAG #TRUTHLIVE”.

The Eye didn’t blink. But in its pupil, the graphs jerked, the lines crawled up. The offer was accepted. The risk — colossal. The reward — unprecedented. The Power of Attention craved exactly this: high stakes, total transparency, impossibility of retreat.

— What are you planning, Cheddar? — MiauMaster asked, and interest appeared in his voice again, almost professional.

— I plan to show everyone who is really behind the Guild, — Cheddar said. — And for this I will need not a key. I will need your help. And... something from our archives. Not about the Guild. About us.

— Explain, — Shadow demanded in his ear, but Cheddar

already knew what to do.

— Gadget, — he said. — Do you have everything we recorded on Mars? All negotiations with the Count? All our clashes? Especially... personal moments. When we argued. When I doubted. When Spark almost fried Gadget. When Shadow swore (once, but it happened). Everything raw, unedited.

— Uh... yes, — Gadget answered, stunned. — But this is... this is our personal stuff! It's unprofessional!

— Exactly, — Cheddar said. — MiauMaster, can you create a hologram? Not perfect. With glitches. With interference. As if it's a leak. A hack of our personal logs.

Understanding flashed in the cat's green eyes. He slowly smiled. This was not his former, commercial smile. It was the smile of an accomplice.

— You want to create an alternative narrative, — he whispered. — Not about heroes who defeated the villain. About... a team. A real one. With all glitches, fears, stupidity. You want them to see people. Not icons.

— Yes, — Cheddar nodded. — The Power of Attention feeds on glossy stories. Heroism, villainy, unambiguity. And what if we give it... chaos? Humanity? Real, unedited life? It won't be able to digest it. Its algorithms will loop. They are created for clickbait, not for confession. It will be like a piece of real, stinky cheese in a sterile digital diet. It will choke.

MiauMaster looked at him with silent admiration. — This... is genius. And insane. If it works, it will lose focus for a second.

Its protection on the archives will falter. But if not... it will tear your image to shreds. You will become not heroes, but clowns. Memes forever.

— We are already memes, — Cheddar shrugged. — After your broadcast from Mars. So let's be memes that we control ourselves. Gadget, start the transmission. MiauMaster, prepare the channel. Shadow, as soon as the protection falters — you are inside. Look for everything related to the Guild, to Meus, to “Project Constellation”. Spark...

— I will make sure no one interferes in real life, — she responded. — Although there seems to be no one to shoot at here.

— There is someone, — Shadow suddenly said. Her voice became sharp. — I am tracking strange data movement on the periphery of our segment. Someone else is watching. Not the Power of Attention. Someone... more specific. The digital trace is similar to... the trace from Meus's NFT. Only older. Deeper.

— He is here, — Cheddar understood. — Watching. Waiting. Excellent. Let him watch. Let him see how his beautiful digital toy glitches.

MiauMaster waved his paw. The space of the hall transformed around them. They found themselves in a virtual studio — but not a perfect one. Pixels dripped from the ceiling, walls flickered like a bad signal. Several hologram screens hung in the center.

— Starting “leak live broadcast”, — MiauMaster said, and his voice became глyx, mysterious. — Friends! You have witnessed the incredible! Our servers have been hacked! Data leak from the

board of the ship “Cheese Hole”! Personal logs of the “Cheese Eaters” team! What you would never see in official reports! Watch until blocked! Hashtag #CheeseEatersLeak!

Fragmented frames flickered on the screens. Here is Cheddar, sitting in an old, creaky cabin (before the renovation), banging his fist on the table and shouting: “I don’t know what to do! They all look at me, and I just want to find cheese and eat in peace!”. Here is Spark, crying from anger, because her blaster broke again at the most inappropriate moment. Here is Gadget, in a panic, when his “Sizer” started reducing everything in a row, including his socks. Here is Shadow, standing at the porthole, quietly saying into the void: “Sometimes I forget who I really am. The mask becomes the face”.

These were raw, uncomfortable, shameful moments. Weaknesses. Panic. Stupidity. No heroism.

The chat first exploded: “OMG!”, “SHOCK!”, “I CAN’T BELIEVE IT!”. Then other comments went: “God, they are like us...”, “I panic at work too”, “Look, Spark is crying! I thought she was made of iron!”, “Gadget is so cute in his stupid socks!”, “And Shadow... is she lonely?”.

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