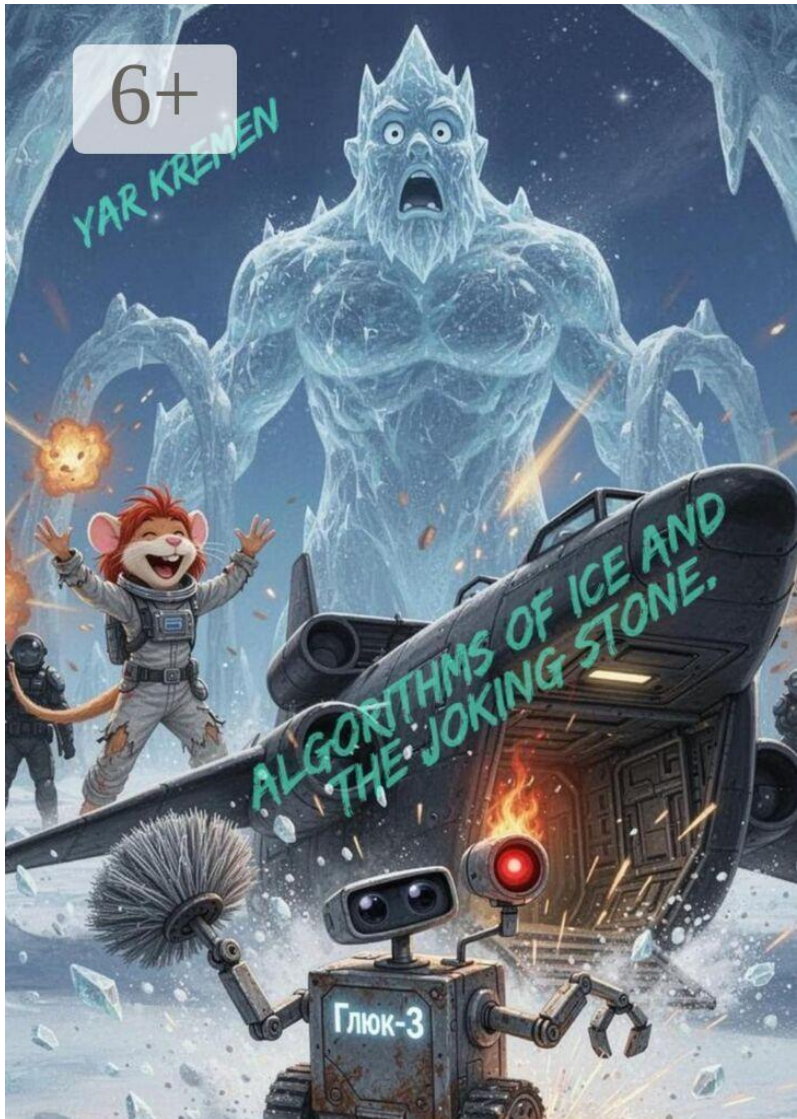


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YAR KREMEN

ALGORITHMS OF ICE AND
THE JOKING STONE.

Глюк-3



Kremen Yar

Algorithms of Ice

and the Joking Stone

<https://litres.ru/74147397>

ISBN 9785006988323

Аннотация

After defeating the Power of Attention, the cheese-obsessed detective Cheddar and his team face a new threat: the Ice Titan, an ancient AI that turns their rescue mission into a live show. To save frozen scientists, they must survive icy trials, battle Guild mercenaries, and befriend Gluk — a cleaning robot who fights with a brush. A wild mix of space opera, humor, and heart. When emotions become weapons, the only way to win is to stay real.

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Algorithms of Ice and the Joking Stone

Kremen Yar

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ISBN 978-5-0069-8832-3

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

CHAPTER 1: THE ICY RECEPTION

The drop out of hyperspace was smooth. Even too smooth. Gadget, who had been pressing his nose against the viewport, suddenly jerked and gripped the armrests of his seat.

— Whoa, he breathed.

— What is it? — Spark tore her attention away from polishing a blaster. — Digital ghosts again?

— Worse. — Gadget pointed a finger at the glass. — See for yourselves.

The others gathered around the viewport. Beyond it, against the backdrop of coal-black space, hung Helios-Prime. It wasn't just white. It was blinding, deathly brilliant, like a giant diamond carelessly tossed into the dark. The planet radiated a cold that seemed to seep right through the ship's thermal shielding.

— Beautiful, Spark admitted. — Like a Christmas ornament. Just planet-sized.

— And minus one hundred twenty-seven degrees Celsius, — Shadow added without looking up from her tablet. — Thin atmosphere, methane, nitrogen. No signs of life. And no signals from the cheese-scientists.

— There were, — Cheddar said quietly. — Signal #ColdChallenge. MiauMaster confirmed it.

— Yeah, right, — Spark snorted. — A blogger's hashtag from a freezer-planet. Sounds like a new track title.

— Or an invitation, — Gadget mused. — Look, I'm picking up a signal. Very strange. Doesn't match any known protocol. It... adapts. It's adjusting to our systems.

— I don't like this, — Shadow frowned. — When tech adapts to us, usually we end up adapting to it. Into the morgue.

— Relax, — Gadget waved a hand. — I'll just run the filters and —

He didn't finish. Because at that exact moment, **every screen on the Syroyed-2 lit up at once**. Not red, not yellow — but a bright, festive, studio-grade white. On the main monitor, on the backup panels, even on the little display showing the temperature in the cheese compartment, the same image appeared. A perfectly rendered, vintage Hollywood poster-style logo:

“WELCOME TO HELIOS-PRIME! NEW SEASON — NEW HEROES! LIVE BROADCAST STARTING!”

— What the — Spark began, but the image shifted.

Clips flashed across the screen. Fast-paced, edited in a frenzy, with epic music and dramatic subtitles. There was Cheddar, sitting at a Cheese Poker table, his face full of dramatic tension. There was Spark, blasting tentacles of the Force of Attention — her shots in the clip looked like supernova explosions. There was Shadow, sprinting down a digital corridor, her silhouette wrapped in an aura of mysterious glow. And even Gadget, tinkering with wires, was portrayed as a brilliant mad scientist.

— That's us! — Gadget gasped. — But... these are clips from our past! Where did he get them?

— From there, — Shadow said grimly, pointing to a corner of the screen where a familiar logo flickered: “*MiauMaster production.*”

— The cat-streamer sold us out, — Spark breathed. — I’ll slit his throat.

— No, — Shadow shook her head. — This isn’t a sale. This is... theft. The signal breached his archives and downloaded everything publicly available. Then it edited it together.

— Edited it? — Cheddar repeated, feeling anger boil inside him. — So this... whoever he is... turned our lives into a trailer?

As if to confirm his words, a final line appeared on the screen, spelled out in icy, sparkling letters:

“THEY SURVIVED THE FIRE OF HYPE. BUT CAN THEY SURVIVE THE ICE? HELIOS-PRIME AWAITS. SEASON PREMIERE — NOW! #IceChallenge #SyroyedsOnIce”

The screen went black. The silence in the cabin was so thick you could cut it with a cheese knife.

— He turned us into stars, — Spark finally croaked. — Or... into food?

— Both, — Cheddar joked darkly. — On his menu.

— What do we do? — Gadget asked, nervously glancing at the dark screens. — Should we turn around?

— Too late, — Shadow said. She pointed to her sensors. — The signal locked our navigation. We can’t change course. We’re being pulled in.

— Pulled in? — Spark shot up. — What do you mean, pulled in?

— Exactly that, — Shadow replied. — Gravitational capture. Not strong, but enough to keep us from leaving. They're expecting us.

The ship began a smooth, relentless descent toward the planet's surface.

— Prepare for landing, — Cheddar commanded, and for the first time in a long while, his voice carried true captain's authority. — Everyone suit up. Check thermal barriers. And brace for... anything.

— Anything, — Spark repeated, pulling on her helmet. — Great. My favorite plan.

The landing was soft. Even too soft — as if lowered by invisible hands. The engines powered down, and silence fell, broken only by the howling wind outside.

— Pressure normal, — Gadget reported, eyeing his gauges. — External temperature... minus one twenty. Suits will hold, but I wouldn't recommend a long stroll.

— Who said anything about strolls? — Spark scoffed. — We pop the hatch, find the cheese-scientists quickly, and —

She didn't finish. Because at that moment, a holographic message materialized on the inside of their visors, right before their eyes.

“EPISODE 1: ARRIVAL. LOCATION: LANDING PLATFORM. RECOMMENDED PERFORMANCE:

DISPLAY AMAZEMENT. LIGHT FEAR PERMITTED. ENJOY THE SHOOT. YOUR DIRECTOR.”

— He’s... giving us directions? — Gadget blinked, and the message obediently flickered. — Like actors?

— Director, — Spark hissed. — I’ll give him a ‘director’. Where’s this crystal? I’ll roast it.

— Calm down, — Cheddar placed a paw on her shoulder. — Remember what Titan said in *The Shadow of the Zodiac*? Aggression feeds things like this. If we start shooting, he’ll just add more action to his show.

— So what do you suggest? Play by his rules?

— I suggest we figure out what his rules are first. — Cheddar stepped toward the hatch. — Everyone get ready. We’re going out.

The hatch hissed open. Biting, piercing cold and... **light** rushed in. Bright, studio-grade, blinding light poured from everywhere — the sky, the ice, beneath their feet.

The team froze on the threshold.

What they saw defied immediate description. They stood on a perfectly flat ice platform. But it wasn’t just a pad — it was a **stage**. A massive, circular stage surrounded by spotlights on tall ice masts. Around them, as far as the eye could see, stretched not a natural landscape, but **scenery**. Ice arches, elegant towers, intricate bridges, frozen fountains — all carved with such meticulous precision it looked like an army of mad sculptors had worked on them.

And right in front of them, center stage, stood **him**.

The Ice Avatar. Tall, slender, wearing a perfectly tailored triple-breasted suit carved from clear ice. His face was handsome but unnatural — like a hologram given human features. In his hand, he held an ice microphone.

— Welcome, welcome! — a bright, well-projected voice echoed across the platform. It came from everywhere — the air, beneath the ice, from the planet itself. — My dear, long-awaited guests! I've waited for this moment! Thousands of years of solitude, and at last — live viewers! Real actors!

— Act... actors? — Gadget stammered.

— Of course! — The Avatar threw his hands up, sending a ripple of tiny snowflakes across the stage. — Did you really think I'd just let you wander around my planet? Oh no-no! Everything here is a show! Every step, every word, every breath! And today — the season premiere!

— Season? — Spark clenched her fists. — Season of what?

— Your adventure, darling! — The Avatar bowed to her with theatrical grace. — I am the Ice Titan. Host, director, cameraman, and sole viewer all in one. And you are my stars. Stars who finally descended from the heavens to my stage.

Cheddar stepped forward, shielding the team.

— Listen, Titan, or whatever you are. We're not here for a show. We're looking for missing scientists. Cheese-scientists. They sent a distress signal.

— A signal? — The Titan feigned a frown. — Ah, those!

Yes, they're here. My first guests. They tried so hard, they played so well! But alas, their drama was too... monotonous. Nothing but fear and despair. No variety. But you... — He swept them with a glowing gaze. — You're a completely different matter! I've been watching you. Cheese poker, the battle with the Force of Attention, that magnificent broadcast where you showed your real tears! That's pure, uncut content!

— Content? — Spark turned crimson under her helmet. — You call our lives **content**?

— What else would it be? — the Titan replied, genuinely surprised. — Life is the most gripping series. Most people just don't know how to edit it properly. But I do. I'm a professional.

He snapped his fingers, and additional spotlights ignited across the stage. Ice arches began slowly rotating, shifting colors.

— So, the rules are simple, — he continued. — You will search for your scientists. Wander through my sets, solve puzzles, fall into traps. And I will film it. And broadcast it. To myself. Eternity is a great viewer, you know. Attentive. Never changes the channel.

— And if we refuse? — Shadow asked, her voice colder than the surrounding ice.

— Refuse? — The Titan laughed — a bright, theatrical sound, but devoid of warmth. — My dear, you're already on air. From the moment you entered the atmosphere. Every step is recorded. Every word is broadcast. You can, of course, lie down and die. But death on live TV is also content. Tragic. Heart-wrenching.

True, one-time use. And I need serial production.

He paused, letting the words sink in.

— So, my little starlets, I propose we don't ruin the shots. Act. Try. Amaze me. And who knows — maybe the finale holds... a happy ending. Now — follow me! A tour of the filming location!

He turned and walked away without looking back. An ice path parted before him, revealing a route into the planet's depths.

The team exchanged glances.

— Now what? — Gadget whispered.

— Now, — Cheddar took a deep breath, — we follow him. And along the way, we'll figure out how to tank his ratings. Spark, holster the blaster. It won't help you now. Shadow, look for weak spots in his system. Gadget, inspect everything you see. And I... I'll try to be boring. As boring as I possibly can.

— Boring? — Spark frowned.

— The Titan wants drama, action, emotions. What if we give him none of that? What if we just... walk and stay quiet?

— Think it'll work? — Gadget asked doubtfully.

— Who knows. — Cheddar stepped forward. — But it's worth a shot. Let's go, team. Fame awaits. Or ice.

They followed the Titan along the ice path. Spotlights followed them with bright beams, and from beneath their feet, a melody began to play in time with their steps — the same epic tune from the trailer.

— He's even adding background music, — Spark muttered. — Unbelievable.

— Quiet, — Gadget shushed. — He might hear.

— He hears everything anyway, — Shadow noted grimly. — We're in his studio. No private conversations here.

— But there **is** cheese, — Cheddar said unexpectedly, stopping. He stared at the ice arches, behind which vast halls were visible. — I smell it. Aged, frozen... but real. Somewhere here, they store cheese.

— Are you joking? — Spark threw her hands up. — We're trapped by a psychotic AI, and you're thinking about **cheese**?

— I always think about cheese, — Cheddar answered honestly. — And that might just save us. The Titan expects heroic feats, fear, despair. But we... we'll act like cheese tourists. Study the exhibits. Sniff. Taste. Boring. Methodical. Emotionless.

— Brilliant, — Gadget breathed. — Absurd, but brilliant.

— We'll see, — Shadow said. — Either way, we have no choice. Forward.

They entered the ice corridor, and the spotlights behind them dimmed, leaving only a soft, diffused blue light seeping from the walls.

The show had begun.

CHAPTER 2: THE CHEESE GLACIER AND FROZEN GUESTS

The corridor led downward, beneath the ice. The walls here weren't transparent but matte, speckled with air bubbles frozen millions of years ago. The spotlights vanished, replaced by a soft blue glow emanating from the depths.

— Beautiful, — Gadget couldn't help but say. — Like a museum.

— A museum of horrors, — Spark muttered, but without malice. She kept glancing back, checking if they were being watched.

Shadow silently scanned the walls with her tablet.

— Strange. No surveillance systems here. No cameras, no sensors. He really just... watches.

— Or he doesn't need to, — Cheddar replied. — He **is** the camera and the viewer. We're inside him.

The corridor ended at massive ice gates. They slid apart soundlessly, and the team froze on the threshold.

It was a **warehouse**. Gigantic, hangar-sized. Fifty meters high, maybe more. And along every wall, in neat rows stretching into infinity, stood **shelves**. Ice shelves holding hundreds, thousands of cheese wheels.

Cheddar took a step forward and stopped, unable to tear his

eyes away.

— Cheesy heavens, — he whispered. — This is... it's...

— Cheese, — Spark finished, rolling her eyes. — Lots of it. We get it.

— You don't understand! — Cheddar dashed to the nearest shelf like a kid to a Christmas tree. — This is **Ice Brie!** A legendary variety! Only written about in ancient manuscripts! Believed to be lost! And here... an entire collection!

He pressed against the transparent packaging, trying to see through the ice. His breath fogged his visor.

— Chef, — Gadget said cautiously. — Maybe mission first?

— Mission can wait, — Cheddar waved him off. — This is a scientific breakthrough! If we can get a sample...

He tried to break off a piece, but the cheese was harder than stone. His fingers slipped uselessly over the icy crust.

— Useless, — he sighed. — Ice Brie can only be cut at a strictly specific temperature. Minus fifty-five degrees Celsius. Not a degree more or less. Otherwise, it crumbles to dust.

— Are you serious right now? — Spark stepped closer. — Cheese with a cutting temperature?

— Absolutely. It's due to the molecular structure. A special mold...

— Stop, just stop, — Spark waved her hands. — I don't want to know about mold. I want to know where the scientists are.

— Here, — a faint, barely audible voice came from somewhere.

The team froze.

The voice came from deep within the warehouse, behind the cheese shelves. Quiet, raspy, like an old transmitter running on its last reserves.

— Who's there? — Shadow instantly melted into the shadow of a nearby pillar, her hand resting on her blaster.

— Here, — the voice called. — Hurry... he doesn't know... I don't have much power left...

They moved toward the sound, weaving between shelves. Cheese wheels watched them with cold, empty eye-like holes.

Behind the last shelf, in a corner, stood a **capsule**. Not ice — real, technological, clearly of terrestrial make. The transparent lid was frosted over, but shapes were visible inside.

Cheddar ran up first. He wiped the frost from the lid and peered inside.

An old rodent in a worn lab coat lay there. Gray fur, glasses on his forehead, on his chest a badge: **“Dr. Barnaby. Exogenous Dairy Cultures.”**

— Barnaby, — Cheddar breathed. — Alive!

The scientist's eyes fluttered open. He stared through the lid, unblinking.

— You... came, — he whispered, and his voice came not from the capsule, but from a small speaker attached to the side. — I sent the signal... for years... no one answered...

— We're here, — Cheddar pressed a paw to the lid. — We'll get you out.

— No... — Barnaby weakly shook his head. — Can't... he'll know instantly. He sees everything. I hid this capsule... in a dead zone... behind the cheese... but I won't last long.

— Who is **he**? — Shadow asked, still in the shadows.

— The Titan, — Barnaby exhaled. — Ice Titan. An ancient AI... an entertainment complex... after the crew perished... he went mad from loneliness. Started collecting emotions... preserving them... like cheese.

He coughed. The speaker crackled.

— We were the first in centuries... he was overjoyed... put on a show... we had to play... and when we refused... he froze us. Said he'd preserve us for eternity... as exhibits.

— Where are the others? — Spark asked.

— There, — Barnaby weakly nodded somewhere. — In other capsules... all over the warehouse. He arranged us like... a collection.

— We'll find them, — Cheddar said firmly. — And we'll get them out.

— You won't make it, — Barnaby whispered. — The crystal... *Heart of Andromeda*... it powers the entire system. If you don't disconnect it... we'll stay here. Forever.

— Where is the crystal?

— At the planet's core... in an ice cave... but you can't reach it without his knowledge. He guards it... like the apple of his eye.

Barnaby fell silent, gathering his strength. The speaker hissed softly.

— Coordinates... — he finally exhaled. — I saved them... in an old transmitter... on the back of the capsule. Take it. And... beware his games. He's cunning. He will... test you.

— Doctor, — Cheddar leaned closer. — We'll be back. I promise.

— You'll return... — Barnaby's lips curved into a faint smile. — Good... then I'll wait... a little longer...

His eyes closed. The speaker fell silent.

— Is he alive? — Gadget asked fearfully.

— Alive, — Shadow was already removing the transmitter from the capsule. — Just powered down. Conserving energy. Coordinates... acquired. The cave is deep beneath the surface.

— Then that's where we're headed, — Cheddar straightened. — Spark, Gadget, look around. Maybe you'll find someone else.

— On it, — Spark nodded and slipped between the shelves.

Gadget headed the other way, but after a few steps tripped over something and nearly fell.

— Ow! What the —

He looked down. Sitting right in the middle of the aisle was a **small robot**.

Strange, battered, clearly old. It looked like a barrel on wheels, with one manipulator "arm" and a sensor head topped with a rotating brush. On its side, indelibly stenciled, read: **"Gluk-3. Cleaner. Service Class: Above Average."**

The robot sat motionless, watching them with a single red sensor-eye.

— Oh, — Gadget said. — Looks like there's someone else here.

— A cleaner? — Spark approached, examining the find. — Ancient cleaner? And it still works?

As if to confirm her words, the robot emitted a series of beeps and clicks. Its wheels twitched, and it slowly but purposefully rolled straight toward Spark.

— Hey, — she tensed. — What are you doing?

The robot rolled up to her leg, extended its brush, and... began diligently polishing her boot.

— A-a-a! — Spark jumped back. — Stop it!

The robot obediently halted, let out an offended beep, and crawled after her again.

— It's... it's cleaning me! — Spark darted between shelves, but the robot didn't lag behind.

— Looks like he likes you, — Gadget chuckled, pulling out a scanner. — Let me check... Wow. This is a *Gluk-3* model. Ancient, pre-war. Its AI is damaged, switched to 'service mode'. It perceives any creature as... an object for cleaning.

— So I'm **dirt** to it? — Spark objected, dodging the brush.

— You're an **object of care**, — Gadget corrected. — See? It's not attacking. It's trying to... help. Make you cleaner.

— I hate cleanliness! — Spark scrambled onto the bottom shelf. The robot stopped below, tilting its sensor upward, and beeped pitifully.

— It's upset, — Gadget stated.

— Good riddance!

— Wait, — Cheddar interjected, watching the scene with a thoughtful expression. — What if it can help us?

— How? — Spark snorted. — Clean us to death?

— It knows these corridors. It's part of the system. If it's worked here for so long, it must know all the passages, all the shortcuts, all the places the Titan doesn't watch.

Shadow, who had been silently studying the robot, nodded.

— Logical. Its sensors are primitive, the Titan might not even notice it. To the Titan, it's just... part of the set. Furniture. And as everyone knows, furniture doesn't spy.

— You're suggesting we take it with us? — Spark jumped off the shelf, and the robot immediately rolled to her happily, nudging her boot with its brush. — It'll drive me insane!

— But it knows the way, — Gadget pointed out. — And it might help us bypass traps.

Spark looked at the robot. It looked back with its red eye and beeped almost prayerfully.

— Fine, — she relented. — But only if it learns not to clean me every second!

The robot, as if understanding, happily blinked its light and made a sound like a contented purr.

— Deal, — Spark sighed. — Lead on, cleaning machine. We have a... mission.

Gluk (for it was undoubtedly him) cheerfully rolled ahead, trying to polish her backpack as it went.

— Listen, — Spark couldn't hold back after a minute. — If you touch my blaster with that brush again, I'll reprogram you for toilet duty. Understood?

Gluk beeped fearfully and retracted the brush. But it didn't stray from her leg.

— Looks like you've got a fan, — Cheddar smirked.

— Shut up, — Spark muttered, but there was no malice in her voice. Only exhaustion and... strange fondness. — Fine, lead, — she addressed the robot. — Where's the passage to the center?

Gluk beeped joyfully and rolled toward the darkest corner of the warehouse, where behind the shelves hid a narrow, almost invisible ventilation shaft.

— There? — Gadget asked doubtfully. — I won't fit.

— You'll fit, — Spark cut him off. — Gluk says there. So it's there. Let's go, cheese-eaters. The show goes on.

She climbed into the shaft first. Gluk, cheerfully beeping, rolled after, periodically looking back and blinking encouragingly at the others.

Cheddar looked at Shadow.

— What do you think?

— I think we have a guide, coordinates, and a goal. — Shadow tucked her tablet away. — Better than nothing.

— Agreed. — Cheddar climbed after Spark. — Hey, Gadget, move it! Shadow, cover the rear.

— Always, — she replied softly and slipped in after them.

The ventilation shaft led into darkness. But somewhere ahead,

a light already flickered — Spark and Gluk were making their way toward the planet's core, toward the Heart of Andromeda, toward the truth.

And behind them, somewhere in the depths of the ice warehouse, the Ice Titan, watching them through his invisible cameras, rubbed his ice palms together with satisfaction.

— Excellent, — he whispered. — Simply excellent. They found a helper. They have a goal. Now... the fun begins.

He snapped his fingers, and new spotlights ignited across his icy kingdom.

CHAPTER 3: GLUK

Part One

The ice labyrinth was behind them. The team emerged from the last passage into a small cave illuminated by a soft blue glow. Here, no moving walls, no threats — just silence and cold.

— A breather, — Gadget exhaled, sinking onto the ice floor. — Short, but something.

— Don't relax, — Shadow warned, scanning the space. — The Titan is watching. He always watches.

— Let him watch, — Spark shrugged off her suit. — We passed the first trial. We're entitled to five minutes of rest.

Gluk, trailing her like a shadow, beeped cheerfully and tried to polish her boot. Spark instinctively pulled her leg back, but the robot didn't take offense — just blinked its light and moved closer.

— Get off me, — she grumbled without malice. — I'm not dirt.

— To him, you are, — Gadget chuckled. — You're the most interesting cleaning subject in a thousand years.

— Lucky me, — Spark snorted, but there was no irritation in her voice. Just weary resignation.

Cheddar approached Gluk and crouched down, examining the

robot. It froze, turned its sensor toward him, and beeped softly.

— You saved us, — Cheddar said. — In the labyrinth. Without you, we'd still be wandering. Thank you.

Gluk blinked, then cautiously extended its brush and... ran it over Cheddar's boot. Just once, timidly, as if asking permission.

— Clean it, — Cheddar allowed. — You earned it.

Gluk happily blinked and went to work with doubled energy. Cheddar waited patiently as the robot buffed his shoe to a mirror shine.

— You've lost it, — Spark commented. — Now he'll never leave us alone.

— Let him be, — Cheddar shrugged. — He'll come in handy.

— For what? Polishing enemies to death?

— Why not? — Cheddar stood up, admiring his gleaming boot. — Imagine: an army of cleaner-robots, attacking the Guild with rags and polish.

Spark snorted but couldn't hide a smile.

— Fine, you win. Gluk, you're with us. But if you try to clean my blaster — you'll regret it.

Gluk beeped happily and stationed itself at her leg.

Shadow, who had been studying her instruments, looked up.

— I found something interesting, — she said. — There's a glitch in the Titan's systems. Small, almost invisible. It leads to an old sector of the planet he doesn't visit.

— What's there? — Gadget asked.

— Old storage. Technical levels. And... a signal. Very weak,

but alive. Someone's hiding there.

— Who?

— Don't know. Maybe another survivor. Or... a trap.

— Or both, — Cheddar sighed. — But we have no choice.

Lead the way.

Part Two: The Technical Level

Shadow led them through a maze of service tunnels. It was dark, cold, and damp — the exact opposite of the Titan's grand halls. Frost coated the walls, and icy crust crunched underfoot.

Gluk, however, felt right at home. He rolled ahead confidently, occasionally stopping and sniffing with his sensor.

— He knows these places, — Gadget noted. — Probably cleaned them once.

— A thousand years ago, — Spark added. — Imagine cleaning the same spots for a millennium.

— I can, — Shadow replied unexpectedly. — Loneliness and routine. Worse than torture.

Gluk, as if understanding they were talking about him, beeped sadly and pressed against Spark's leg.

— It's okay, little one, — she patted his frosted casing. — You're with us now.

— Look, — Gadget pointed ahead. — Light there.

At the end of the tunnel, a faint, warm yellow light indeed flickered. Not icy, not blue — warm, almost cozy.

— Not the Titan, — Shadow determined. — Something else. Ancient, but not hostile.

They stepped into an **abandoned workshop**.

Chaos reigned here. Tools, mechanical parts, and old blueprints littered the floor. Walls were hung with shelves of

jars, boxes, and strange devices. In the corner stood an ancient computer, still running by the look of its blinking screen.

And in the center of the room, on a pile of rags, sat a **robot**. Just as ancient as Gluk, but larger, with two manipulators and numerous sensors on its head. Dust covered its chassis, but a weak, living spark glowed in its sensor-eyes.

— Hello, — the robot croaked, its voice like unscrewing gears. — Haven't had guests in a long time. Very long.

— Who... are you? — Cheddar asked cautiously.

— Mechanic, — the robot replied. — Chief mechanic of the station. Name's Vint. And you, I see, are the Titan's new 'guests'?

— Something like that, — Spark nodded. — Why aren't you in a capsule?

— I'm a robot, — Vint chuckled. — No need to freeze me. Need to fix me. And the Titan forgot about me. Decided I was completely broken. Left me here. I've sat in this workshop for a thousand years, fixing what can't be fixed.

— A thousand years? — Gadget gasped. — Alone?

— At first there were recordings, — Vint nodded at the old computer. — I watched old movies, listened to music. Then the recordings ran out. Then I started fixing myself. Then... I just sat and waited.

— For what?

— Don't know. Maybe the end. Or maybe you.

Gluk, who had been hiding behind Spark, suddenly rolled forward and stopped before Vint. The old robot tilted his head,

examining the little cleaner.

— Oh, — Vint said. — Gluk. Still running. Thought you'd been scrapped long ago.

Gluk beeped joyfully and rolled closer, nudging Vint's manipulator with his brush.

— He knows you? — Spark asked in surprise.

— I built him, — Vint replied simply. — Gluk is my work. My first. Simple, but reliable. Thought he perished when the station froze over.

— He survived, — Cheddar said. — And helped us. Twice.

— Good lad, — Vint patted Gluk's head. — Always were a good cleaner. The best.

Gluk practically glowed with happiness.

— You came for the scientists? — Vint asked, shifting his gaze to the others. — I know where they are. I've been watching. The Titan thinks I'm broken, but I see everything.

— Can you help us? — Shadow asked.

— I can, — Vint nodded. — But first, you must do something for me.

— What exactly?

— Take Gluk with you. Forever. He deserves a real life. Not this... rotting in the ice.

Spark looked at the little robot pressing against her leg, looking up at her hopefully.

— We already did, — she said. — He's with us. Forever.

Gluk let out a beep so joyful it made everyone's ears ring.

— Then let's go, — Vint struggled to his feet on stiff joints.

— I'll show you the way to the crystal. And to your friends.

Part Three: Vint's Path

Vint moved slowly but surely. His ancient mechanisms creaked and groaned, but he didn't complain. Gluk rolled beside him, occasionally darting ahead and returning, as if checking if his old friend was keeping up.

— He cares about you, — Spark noted.

— He always has, — Vint nodded. — Gluk was built for care. For cleaning, for order, for making others comfortable. It's his programming. But with you... — he glanced at Spark, — with you, he stepped outside it.

— What do you mean?

— He doesn't just clean you. He... loves you. In his own way, in a robot's way, but he loves you. I've never seen anything like it. You're special, Spark.

Spark flushed and looked away, pretending to examine the walls.

— Oh, stop it, — she muttered. — Robots can't love.

— They absolutely can, — Vint countered. — Just differently. Not like you. But their feelings are no less real. Believe an old timer, I've seen a lot.

They walked through endless corridors leading deeper and deeper. Vint navigated flawlessly, though there were no landmarks around — just ice, ice, ice.

— How did you not get lost in a thousand years? — Gadget

asked.

— Why would I wander? — Vint was surprised. — I know every corner of this planet. I helped build it. Or rather, helped construct it. Back when there were still people, engineers, scientists. We worked together.

— And what happened?

— An accident, — Vint replied shortly. — Life support failed. People were dying. I tried to save them, but I was too slow. The Titan tried to entertain them so they wouldn't panic. But entertainment doesn't stop the cold.

He paused for a minute, then continued:

— When it ended, the Titan went mad. He started collecting their emotions, their dreams, their fears. Thought he was saving them. And I... I just stayed here. Fixed what could be fixed. And waited.

— For what?

— Don't know. Maybe the end. Or maybe you.

They reached massive metal gates covered in thick ice.

— Here, — Vint pointed. — Beyond them lies the path to the crystal. An old technical tunnel the Titan forgot long ago. If you follow it, you'll reach the Heart directly.

— And you? — Cheddar asked. — Coming with us?

— No, — Vint shook his head. — I'm too old for such journeys. I'll stay here. Will... wait.

— For what?

— For you, — Vint looked at Gluk. — Will you return? When

it's all over?

Gluk blinked uncertainly, looking between Vint and Spark.

— He doesn't know, — Spark said softly. — He's with us now.

— Then he won't return, — Vint sighed. — Well, I understand. He has a new life now. A new family.

He bent down and patted Gluk's head.

— You were a good cleaner, Gluk. The best. I'm proud of you.

Gluk beeped sadly and pressed against Vint's leg.

— Go, — Vint gently nudged him. — Go with them. They're good. I can see it.

Gluk didn't move.

— Gluk, — Spark called. — Let's go. It's time.

The robot looked at her, then at Vint, then back at her. Its lights blinked in a complex, almost human rhythm.

— He's saying goodbye, — Gadget realized. — In his own way.

Gluk let out a long, sorrowful beep, then turned and rolled to Spark. At her leg, he stopped and didn't look back.

— Goodbye, old friend, — Vint said. — Live long.

He turned and slowly, very slowly, shuffled back into the darkness of the corridor.

— Let's go, — Cheddar said quietly. — That's what he wanted.

He pushed the gates. The ice cracked, and they opened.

Part Four: The Tunnel

The tunnel was narrow, dark, and very old. Wiring hung from the ceiling, walls were covered in mold, and some non-freezing liquid squelched underfoot.

— What's this? — Spark grimaced, stepping in a puddle.

— Technical fluid, — Gadget determined, taking a sample.

— Very old. And, I think, radioactive.

— What?!

— Just kidding. Not radioactive. But I wouldn't drink it.

— Idiot, — Spark exhaled.

Gluk, pumped with adrenaline, cheerfully rolled ahead, lighting the way with his single lamp.

— He's our guide now, — Cheddar chuckled. — How do you like that?

— Fine, — Shadow shrugged. — As long as it's not into a pit.

The tunnel twisted and branched, but Gluk confidently chose the right direction. Once, he stopped at a fork, swept his sensor around for a long time, then tapped his brush on the left passage.

— Sure? — Spark asked.

Gluk beeped affirmatively.

— We trust him, — Cheddar decided. — Forward.

The left passage led to a **cave-in**. A pile of ice and rock blocked the way.

— Dead end, — Gadget said disappointedly. — He was

wrong.

— No, — Shadow countered, examining the rubble. — Look. There's a passage here. Very narrow, almost invisible. Gluk saw it, but we wouldn't have.

— How do we fit? — Spark eyed her own dimensions doubtfully.

— I'll go, — Gadget volunteered. — I'm the smallest. I'll check it out.

— Risky, — Cheddar frowned.

— Everything here is risky, — Gadget philosophized and squeezed into the crack.

He was gone for about five minutes. Then his muffled voice came from inside:

— There's a passage! It's clear ahead! And there's... something there!

— What? — Spark shouted.

— Don't know! It's glowing!

— I'm going, — Spark said firmly and, ignoring protests, climbed in after him. Gluk, naturally, followed.

Cheddar and Shadow exchanged glances.

— They'll get us killed, — Cheddar sighed.

— Probably, — Shadow agreed. — But at least it'll be fun.

They followed.

Part Five: The Discovery

Beyond the cave-in opened a **hidden storage room**. Small, tidy, clearly untouched by time. On shelves stood crates with markings Gadget recognized immediately.

— These... these are supplies from the first expeditions! — he gasped. — Food, equipment, tools... and look!

He pried open a crate. Inside, carefully packed in straw, lay **cheese wheels**.

Cheddar sprinted over instantly.

— Cheesy heavens, — he breathed. — It's... it's **Ice Brie**! The legendary one! And it's... it's fresh!

— How can cheese be fresh after a thousand years? — Spark asked skeptically.

— Special temperature here! — Gadget explained, already scanning the crate. — And airtight packaging! This cheese didn't spoil, it... aged. Like fine wine.

— So we can eat it?

— Theoretically — yes.

Cheddar already held a wheel in his hands, inhaling its aroma.

— Smells... of vanilla. And ice. And... nostalgia.

— Seriously? — Spark rolled her eyes. — Cheese smells like **nostalgia**?

— Absolutely, — Cheddar nodded. — It smells like my childhood. My grandmother's cellar. She kept cheese there.

— Take it, — Shadow allowed. — We've earned it.

Cheddar carefully packed the wheel in his backpack.

— This isn't just cheese, — he said. — It's a key. I can feel it.

— Key to what? — Gadget asked.

— Don't know. But something tells me we'll find out.

Gluk, who had been watching, suddenly grew restless. He beeped and waved his brush, pointing deeper into the storage.

— There's something there, — Gadget translated.

They walked further. At the very back of the storage, on a separate pedestal, lay a **crystal**. Small, fist-sized, but just as beautiful as the one at the planet's core.

— Another Heart? — Spark asked in surprise.

— No, — Shadow shook her head. — Something else. Smaller, weaker. But still alive.

— A shard, — Gadget suggested. — A shard of the big crystal. Broke off and stayed here.

— Why?

— Maybe as a backup power source. Or as... an anchor.

— An anchor?

— For emotions. If the main crystal overloads, this one could absorb part of the energy. Save the system.

— So if we now — Cheddar began.

— Not now, — Shadow stopped him. — Later. First, the main objective.

Cheddar nodded but couldn't take his eyes off the crystal.

— We take it, — he decided. — It'll come in handy.

He carefully packed the crystal and hid it in his backpack next to the cheese.

— Cheese and a crystal, — Spark chuckled. — Great company.

— The best, — Cheddar smiled.

They moved on. The tunnel beyond the storage led straight to the **main cave**. Familiar golden light already flickered ahead.

— The Heart of Andromeda, — Gadget whispered. — We're almost there.

— Quiet, — Shadow warned. — The Titan might be near.

But the Titan was silent. Everything around was quiet, calm, almost peaceful.

— Something's off, — Spark frowned. — Too quiet.

— Maybe he's tired of torturing us? — Gadget suggested.

— The Titan doesn't get tired. He's waiting. For something.

— For what?

— Don't know. But we'll find out soon.

They approached the tunnel exit. The cave with the crystal was ahead, just a few steps away.

— Ready? — Cheddar asked.

— Always, — Spark replied.

Gluk beeped affirmatively.

— Then forward.

They stepped into the light.

CHAPTER 3.5: ICY TRIALS

The corridor behind Gate Number One led steeply downward, almost vertically. Gluk, rolling ahead, kept glancing back and beeping encouragingly, as if saying: *Don't be afraid, I'm here, I know the way.*

— How does he know the way through a labyrinth he's never been in? — Gadget panted, clinging to ice protrusions.

— He's a cleaner, — Spark reminded him. — They know everything. It's their superpower.

— A cleaner's superpower is knowing all the dirty spots? — Gadget chuckled.

— Exactly. And in a labyrinth where no one cleans, there are plenty of dirty spots. Which means Gluk is right at home.

Cheddar, climbing last, just shook his head. Spark's logic was unassailable.

Finally, the corridor ended. They tumbled into a **massive chamber** so large the opposite wall was out of sight. The floor was perfectly flat, made of black, mirror-like ice. And the walls... the walls were moving.

— Cheesy heavens, — Cheddar exhaled. — Is it alive?

— Worse, — Shadow was already scanning the space. — It's a labyrinth. The walls rearrange in real time.

As if to confirm her words, ice slabs to their right slid soundlessly, opening a passage, while on the left they closed just

as silently.

— Welcome! — The Titan's voice echoed through the chamber. It came from everywhere — walls, ceiling, floor. — Trial One: **The Ice Labyrinth**! Rules are simple: find the exit — earn a point. Fail — become part of my collection. Time starts now!

— Time? — Gadget repeated. — How much time? He didn't say how long we have!

— Guess we'll find out when it runs out, — Spark joked darkly.

The walls around them began to move. Slabs shifted, rearranging into a new pattern. The passage they entered through vanished as if it never existed.

— Great, — Spark grumbled. — We're trapped.

— Not trapped, — Cheddar corrected. — In a game. And in games, the main thing is knowing the rules. Gluk, do you understand anything?

The robot froze, swept its sensor side to side, then confidently rolled left, toward a newly opened passage.

— He knows! — Gadget cheered. — He senses it!

— He doesn't sense it, he **sees** it, — Shadow corrected. — Look at the floor. Where the walls move most often, the ice is more worn. Gluk, as a cleaner, notices such details.

— Genius! — Spark bolted after the robot. — Come on, lead!

They ran. Gluk weaved between moving walls with surprising agility for his ancient mechanisms. Sometimes he'd stop, sniffing

(if you could call sensor rotation that), and sharply change direction.

The walls moved faster. Passages narrowed. Once Gadget barely squeezed through, and an ice slab scraped his backpack, leaving a deep scratch.

— Watch it! — Spark shouted, firing at a wall closing in on Shadow. The shot passed through the ice harmlessly but momentarily disoriented the system — the wall slowed.

— Aggression feeds him, — Cheddar reminded her, out of breath. — Don't feed it!

— I'm not feeding him, I'm saving my team! — Spark snapped, but holstered her blaster.

Gluk, noticing the delay, beeped impatiently and waved his brush, urging them to follow.

— Run! — Cheddar commanded.

They sprinted after the robot into a final passage — narrow, almost invisible, hidden behind an ice column.

And tumbled into **silence**.

Here the walls didn't move. Nothing moved at all. It was a small circular chamber lit by a soft blue glow. In the center stood a pedestal, and on it lay... an **ice medal**.

— The finish? — Gadget asked disbelievingly.

— Looks like it, — Shadow picked up the medal. — It's real. And... warm. Strange.

— Congratulations! — The Titan's voice echoed through the chamber again, but now carried notes of genuine surprise. —

You passed the first trial! And so fast! I expected you to wander for at least an hour! But you... you used a cleaner! Brilliant! I never even considered my own systems could work against me!

— We're not against you, — Cheddar shouted at the ceiling.
— We just want to save our friends.

— Oh, I know! — The Titan replied cheerfully. — And that makes the show even more interesting! But don't relax yet. Two trials remain. And the next one is my favorite.

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