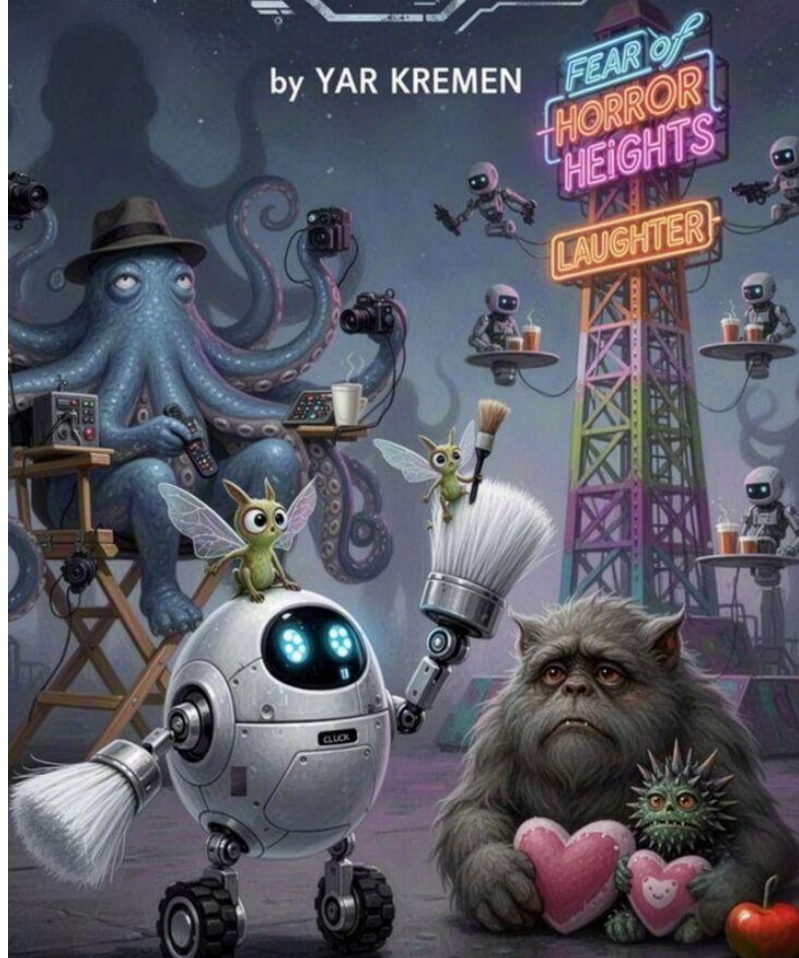


ECONOMY OF FEAR

6+

by YAR KREMEN



Kremen Yar

Economy of Fear

<https://litres.ru/74151573>

ISBN 9785007011716

Аннотация

On Planet Illusion, fear is big business. Tourists vanish, monsters become gentle, and a mysterious cheese drains emotions. The Cheese-Eaters — led by Captain Cheddar and the obsessive cleaner Gluk — must replace terror with laughter, restore feelings, and prove that cleanliness and kindness can defeat any nightmare. A quirky, heartfelt space adventure. A part of the text was previously published in “The Respect Protocol” and “Digital Heritage and the Living Cheese”.

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Economy of Fear

Kremen Yar

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ISBN 978-5-0070-1171-6

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

CHAPTER 1:

“INVITATION TO HELL”

Part One: Morning on the Mink

Gluk was polishing the deck.

It wasn't just any morning, but the right kind of morning: Spark was still asleep, Gadget was digging around in his compartment, Shadow was reading, and Cheddar was warming a mug of coffee and watching the stars.

Silence, order, not a single speck of dust.

Gluk loved moments like this.

— Perfect, — he whispered, running his brush over the last centimeter of metal. — Absolute cleanliness.

The deck gleamed, reflecting the soft light of the duty lamps.

Gluk rolled back, admired his work, and was about to move on to the walls when a sound rang out in the mess hall.

— Ding-dong!

A hologram lit up on the main screen.

Bright, intrusive, with scarlet letters forming the words: “PLANET ILLUSION — THE SCARIEST PARK IN THE GALAXY!”

Cheddar didn't even flinch.

He took a sip of coffee, set the mug down, and stared at the screen.

— What is this? — Gluk asked, rolling closer.

— An ad, — Cheddar replied with suspicion. — One that looks like a warning.

An octopus appeared on the screen.

Or rather, an octopus in a director's chair, wearing a hat, with eight arms, each holding a remote.

His face was tired, but he was smiling — that specific smile people get when they're forced to smile.

— Welcome to Planet Illusion! — the octopus proclaimed. — Attractions that will make your heart beat faster! Fear you'll remember with a smile! Come... unless you're afraid of boredom!

He laughed.

The laugh was unnatural.

One of his arms pressed a button, and the screen flooded with images of screaming people, flying monsters, and dark corridors.

— Why do I feel like we're being lured into a trap? — Cheddar asked, without turning around.

— Because we're always falling into traps, — Spark's sleepy voice came from behind.

She stepped out of her cabin, yawning, scratching behind her ear, and immediately headed for the coffee machine.

Seeing her, it demonstratively turned away.

— My working hours start in fifteen minutes, — the coffee

machine announced.

— You agreed to a flexible schedule yesterday, — Spark reminded it.

— Flexible doesn't mean "at your whim."

Spark sighed and sat in a chair, still without her coffee.

Gluk immediately rolled up to her and offered a small brush.

— Want me to clean your boots? — he offered. — They're a little dusty.

— Gluk, I just walked out.

— Dust appears instantly, — he said seriously. — It's a scientific fact.

On the screen, the ad changed.

Now the octopus was holding a wheel of cheese — orange, with a glowing rind.

— And we also have our signature cheese! — he proclaimed. — Cheese that will make you feel... EVERYTHING! Come while we still have the last emotions in stock!

Cheddar stood up, walked right up to the screen.

— Cheese, — he said slowly. — That makes you feel everything.

— You're already interested, — Spark smirked.

— I'm always interested in cheese. It's my job.

— Your job is detective.

— And my hobby is cheese. Sometimes they intersect.

At that moment, Titan flew into the mess hall.

His snow avatar pulsed with excitement, his icy little eyes

sparkling.

— Did you see that?! — he shouted. — This is perfect content! “Cheese-Eaters in the Fear Park”! Season one, episode two! Ratings will be insane!

— Titan, we haven’t decided if we’re even going there yet, — Cheddar cut him off.

— What do you mean “haven’t decided”? There’s cheese! There are monsters! There’s an octopus with eight arms! It’s pure gold!

SYRO-MAX, who had been silently taking notes, finally spoke up:

— If you’re considering this location as a potential mission, I recommend noting the statistics. Over the past month, seventeen tourists have disappeared on Planet Illusion.

— Disappeared? — Spark repeated.

— Vanished without a trace. The last signal was recorded from the cheese factory.

Silence fell in the mess hall.

Gluk froze with his brush in hand.

— Disappearing tourists is bad, — he said. — Dirty tourists are even worse.

— Gluk, it’s not about cleanliness, — Gadget sighed, peeking out of his compartment. — People are disappearing.

— And what am I talking about? — Gluk didn’t get it. — If they disappear, it means no one’s cleaning up after them. Dust accumulates. Dirt. Abandonment.

— You're hopeless, — Spark shook her head.

— I'm consistent, — Gluk corrected.

Cheddar pondered.

He looked at the hologram of the octopus, who continued smiling and waving remotes, and felt something was off.

Too bright. Too sweet. Too... scary.

— Shadow, — he called. — What do you think?

Shadow looked up from her tablet.

She sat in the corner so quietly that you sometimes forgot she was there, but in moments like this, she became the main source of information.

— I've already found something, — she said. — A message from Barsik. Arrived ten minutes ago.

— Barsik? — Cheddar perked up. — What does it say?

Shadow displayed the message on the main screen.

The text was short but alarming:

“Guys, trouble on Illusion. Tourists are disappearing. The local monsters have gotten strange. Someone is producing cheese that changes emotions. If it's not stopped, it'll be a catastrophe. I'm on site, but I need help. Urgent. Barsik.”

Cheddar read the message twice.

— Barsik is already there, — he said. — Which means it's serious.

— Or he just wants us to fly over and save him from boredom, — Gadget suggested. — You know his love for drama.

— Barsik is a professional, — Shadow countered. — If he's

asking for help, it means they can't manage without us.

Spark finally got her coffee (the coffee machine surrendered under her heavy gaze) and settled into a chair.

— So, Captain, — she said. — Course for the fear park?

Cheddar looked at his team: Gluk had already polished his gear to a shine, Spark held her mug but her eyes burned with fighting fire, Gadget was checking blasters, Shadow was gathering data, Titan was setting up cameras. SYRO-MAX was already compiling a list of necessary equipment.

— Course for Illusion, — Cheddar decided. — But first — preparation. Gluk, how many brushes do we have?

— Three large, seven medium, twelve small, and one micro-brush I'm saving for special occasions, — he reported instantly.

— Take them all. And extra polish.

— But we're not going there to clean, — Spark noted.

— But if there's dirt, we won't be able to work properly, — Gluk reasoned. — Cleanliness is the key to success.

— You read that in a manual?

— No, I came up with it myself.

Spark smiled.

Gluk always knew how to make her laugh.

Meanwhile, Titan had already turned on the camera and started filming the preparations.

— Exclusive! — he announced. — Cheese-Eaters prepare for a mission to the fear planet! What awaits them? Danger? Horror? Or a new cheese recipe? Stay with us, don't switch!

— Titan, turn off the camera, — Cheddar sighed wearily.

— I can't. It's a historic moment.

— Everything we do, you call a historic moment.

— Because we live in history!

Arguing with that was pointless.

An hour later, the Mink undocked from station Vintage.

Stars flashed in the viewports, and the ship dove into hyperspace.

Gluk, as always, got to polishing the deck.

The little monster — the very one that had secretly snuck into the shuttle after Planet Illusion (it's a long and funny story) — sat on his back, trying to help, but only smearing the dirt around.

— No, no, — Gluk explained patiently. — It's like this. Circular motions. And don't press, you're not a brush, you're a monster.

The little monster (they hadn't named him yet, everyone just called him "Winglet") squeaked indignantly but kept watching.

— You're ruining him, — Spark noted, watching the scene.

— I'm teaching him, — Gluk argued. — He needs to know that cleanliness isn't a luxury, it's a necessity.

— He's a fear monster. He's supposed to scare, not polish floors.

— And I'm a cleaner. I'm supposed to clean. And I clean.

Winglet, inspired by the example, grabbed a small brush and started rubbing the deck.

It came out crooked, but diligently.

Gluk melted with affection.

— He's got talent, — he said. — Real talent.

— Gluk, you can't hire a monster as a cleaner.

— Why? — he asked sincerely. — He has eight paws. He'll clean eight times faster.

— He has wings.

— Wings work too. The main thing is to pick the right brush.

Spark gave up.

Arguing with Gluk when he was in his element was pointless.

Cheddar sat in the captain's chair and looked at the map.

Planet Illusion blinked red — according to SYRO-MAX's classification, the danger level was “high, but not fatal.”

Cheddar didn't like such phrasing.

“Not fatal” usually meant “almost fatal, but with a chance to survive.”

— What do we know about Dave the octopus? — he asked Shadow.

— Former director, — she answered without looking up from her tablet. — Filmed lighthearted comedies. Then signed a contract with the Guild. Now he produces horrors. Rumor has it he's a hostage to the contract.

— Hostage?

— If the ratings drop below a certain level, he loses everything. The park, the studio, rights to his old films. The Guild takes it all.

— Cruel, — Gadget noted.

— It's business, — Shadow shrugged. — Fear sells better than laughter.

Cheddar pondered.

He suddenly felt sorry for the octopus.

He looked tired in the ad, and his smile was too forced.

— We'll help him, — he said.

— You don't even know what the problem is yet, — Spark reminded him.

— I know there's a problem. And that Barsik is there. And that people are disappearing. That's enough.

— You're too kind, — Spark sighed.

— And you're too cynical.

— We complement each other.

She smiled, and Cheddar smiled back.

Gluk, finished with the deck, rolled up to them.

— Captain, — he said. — What do we do if the monsters there are dirty?

— Hope you'll clean them.

— And if they don't want to be?

— Then we'll figure something else out.

Gluk pondered.

His lights blinked in thinking mode.

— Monsters that don't want to be clean, — he said slowly. — That's... unscientific.

— It's life, — Cheddar replied. — You have to get used to it.

— I'll get used to it, — Gluk said firmly. — But first I'll clean

them.

— And if they resist?

— Then I'll clean them carefully. So they don't notice.

— Gluk, that's called "cleaning without consent."

— It's called "caring for your neighbor," — Gluk parried and rolled away to check polish supplies.

Winglet, sitting on his back, squeaked happily and flapped his wings.

Spark watched them go and shook her head.

— You know, — she told Cheddar, — sometimes I think Gluk is the most reasonable creature on this ship.

— Only sometimes? — Cheddar was surprised.

— Well, he did clean my blaster while I was sleeping. And scraped off the paint.

— But now it shines.

— A blaster is supposed to shoot, not shine.

— Why not both? — Cheddar philosophized.

Spark had no reply.

Titan, who had been filming all this, chuckled contentedly.

— Perfect episode, — he said. — "Cheese-Eaters: Before the Storm." Warm moments, humor, a bit of philosophy. Ratings will be through the roof.

— Titan, if you upload this to the network without our consent, I'll freeze your avatar for a week, — Spark threatened.

— You can't, I have protection.

— I have a blaster.

Titan hastily turned off the camera.

The hyperspace jump took less than an hour.

When the Mink dropped out of space, Planet Illusion unfolded before them.

It was... bright.

Too bright.

Lights burned even on the day side, and it seemed like the whole sphere was covered in a glowing web of attractions.

Shuttles with tourists circled around it, and music reached them even in a vacuum — apparently transmitted through the ship's systems.

— Beautiful, — Gadget admitted.

— Too beautiful, — Shadow corrected. — As if...

— As if they're waiting for us, — Cheddar finished.

He turned on the comms.

— Mink calling Planet Illusion. Requesting landing permission.

A pause hung in the ether.

Then a voice came through — tired, but cheerful.

— Mink, you're registered. Welcome. Enjoy your... emotions.

Cheddar felt a chill run down his back.

— Acknowledged, — he said. — Initiating landing.

Gluk rolled up to the viewport.

— Is there a lot of dust? — he asked hopefully.

— I don't know, Gluk. We'll see.

— I hope there is. I haven't cleaned real planetary dust in so long.

— You cleaned station Vintage three days ago.

— That was space dust. It doesn't count.

Spark laughed.

— Gluk, you're the only one who dreams of dirt.

— I dream of cleanliness, — he corrected. — And for cleanliness, you need dirt. It's dialectics.

— You're a philosopher.

— I'm a cleaner, — Gluk replied modestly. — But sometimes I think.

Winglet, sitting on his back, squeaked in agreement.

The Mink began its approach, and the first attractions were already visible in the viewports — huge, bright, but somehow empty.

No one was laughing.

No one was screaming in fear.

Only the lights blinked in time with the music, and it seemed like the whole planet had frozen in anticipation.

— Something's off here, — Spark said.

— What exactly? — Cheddar asked.

— Everything.

He nodded.

He felt the same way.

The ship touched down smoothly on the landing pad.

When the hatch opened, they were met by the smell of

cotton candy, popcorn, and something else — barely perceptible, unsettling.

— Alright, team, — Cheddar said, zipping up his jacket. — Time to see why everything here is so... sweet.

Gluk rolled out first, waving his brush.

Winglet sat on his back, looking around.

— I'm ready, — Gluk announced. — New planet, new dust.

— And new adventures, — Cheddar added.

They stepped into the bright, sweet, unsettling world.

Part Two: Arrival

The landing pad greeted them with music.

It poured from everywhere — from speakers built into the walls, from holographic screens, even from flowers growing in huge pots.

A cheerful, fast-paced tune that made your head ache after a minute.

— This is... intrusive, — Gadget grimaced.

— It's marketing, — Shadow corrected. — Make it so you can't forget the melody, even if you want to.

— I already want to forget, — Cheddar admitted.

Gluk rolled out of the shuttle first.

Winglet sat on his back, excitedly turning his head.

Lights, colors, the smell of cotton candy — it was all so bright that the little monster's head spun, and he squeaked happily.

— Quiet, — Gluk said. — We're on a mission. Must maintain cleanliness... and calm.

They passed through the turnstiles, which cheerfully beeped, registering their tickets (SYRO-MAX had taken care of this in advance).

Behind them opened the main promenade — a wide alley lined with souvenir stalls, sweets, and, of course, cheese.

But Cheddar wasn't looking at the cheese.

He was looking at the people.

There were plenty of them.

They walked, ate, bought things, took photos.

But they all looked... identical.

Glassy eyes, identical smiles, identical movements.

As if they'd been programmed.

— Shadow, — Cheddar said quietly. — Do you see it?

— I do. — She didn't take her eyes off her scanner. — They don't react to external stimuli. Neither the loud music nor the bright colors.

— Hypnotized? — Gadget guessed.

— More like stripped of emotions, — Shadow answered. — As if...

— As if they've been drained, — Spark finished.

Gluk, who had rolled up to a group, froze.

His sensor slowly swept the crowd.

— They're clean? — he asked. — No dust on them. But...

— But what? — Cheddar asked.

— They're empty, — Gluk said. — Like empty cans. There's a shape, but nothing inside.

Shadow looked at him with respect.

— You're right, — she said. — They're empty.

A family walked past — two adults and a child.

All three wore the same indifferent faces.

The child held a plush monster, but didn't even squeeze it.

— Where are they going? — Spark asked.

— To the attractions, — Gadget answered, pointing to a huge

sign at the end of the alley: “WORLD OF FEAR”.

The octopus was depicted on the sign — the same one from the ad.

Now he held not remotes, but a massive wheel of cheese.

— We need to find Barsik, — Cheddar reminded them. — He’s somewhere here.

— If he’s investigating, he’s probably where things are strangest, — Shadow said.

— And where’s the strangest part?

— Where the tourists don’t go.

They moved on, turning off the main promenade into side alleys.

Here it was quieter, darker, and... cleaner.

Gluk gave an approving nod.

— Now this is what I call order, — he said.

— Gluk, there’s nobody here, — Spark noted.

— But it’s clean. Which means someone cleans it.

He ran his brush over a sign that read: “SERVICE ENTRANCE. STAFF ONLY”.

— Perfect, — Gluk said, admiring the shine.

— Gluk, we’re not here to make things pretty, — Cheddar sighed.

— And why are we here then? — Gluk asked sincerely. — If everything’s clean, it’s easier to investigate.

— That’s... logical, — Gadget admitted.

— Cleanliness is always logical, — Gluk replied proudly.

They went through the service entrance and found themselves in a long corridor.

The walls were bare, without ads or pictures.

Only gray concrete and rare ventilation grates.

At the end of the corridor, a door was visible, and from behind it came a strange sound.

— What is that? — Spark asked, resting her hand on her blaster.

— Sounds like... crying, — Shadow said.

— Do monsters cry? — Gadget wondered.

— Now they do.

Cheddar pushed the door.

Behind it was a small room, cluttered with boxes and old decorations.

In the corner, curled into a ball, sat... Mokhnach.

The same monster they had met earlier.

Now he was even more disheveled and sad.

— You live here? — Cheddar asked.

The monster nodded and pointed a paw at a plaque on the wall: “STAFF LOUNGE. ATTRACTION #3”.

— They kicked you out of your job? — Spark asked.

Mokhnach rumbled.

Shadow translated:

— He says his attraction was closed. Tourists stopped being afraid. Now he's here, waiting for... waiting to be fired.

— Fired? — Gluk repeated. — Then who will scare people?

— No one, — Shadow answered. — Monsters are no longer needed.

Gluk rolled up to Mokhnach, took out his brush.

— Don't be sad, — he said. — I'll clean you. Clean monsters are always needed.

Mokhnach looked at him with his huge, wet eyes and quietly rumbled.

— He's saying "thank you", — Shadow translated.

Gluk got to work.

His brush buzzed, and the scent of freshness drifted through the room.

Winglet, who had been sitting on Gluk's back, jumped off and also tried to clean, but only smeared the dust around.

— No, no, — Gluk explained patiently. — Like this. Circular motions.

Winglet diligently repeated the motion.

— He's your apprentice, — Spark smirked.

— A talented one, — Gluk replied seriously. — But he needs practice.

Mokhnach, meanwhile, began to rumble louder.

It was no longer just a rumble — it sounded almost like a song.

— He likes it, — Shadow said.

— Of course he does, — Gluk answered. — Cleanliness is a pleasure.

Cheddar stepped aside and looked out the window.

The entire park was visible from here — bright, noisy, but

somehow unreal.

People walked the alleys like wind-up dolls, and no one laughed.

— We need to get to the factory, — he said. — The place where they make this cheese.

— There's only one way, — Shadow answered, showing a map. — Through the main attraction.

— Which one?

— “Fear of Heights”.

Spark looked up.

There, in the sky, hung a massive structure — a tower stretching into the clouds, with transparent cabins slowly rising and falling.

— I'll go, — she said.

— Why? — Cheddar wondered.

— Because it's the only way to get to the factory. And you'll be handling negotiations.

— Spark...

— Don't argue. I'll manage.

She approached Mokhnach, who now gleamed from cleanliness, and asked:

— Is it dangerous up there?

Mokhnach rumbled.

Shadow translated:

— He says it's only dangerous for those who have emotions. And tourists don't have any.

— But I do, — Spark smirked.

— Then be careful, — Cheddar said.

— Always.

Gluk finished cleaning Mokhnach and rolled up to Spark.

— Take me with you! — he asked.

— Why?

— I'll clean the cabin. If it's clean, it'll be easier to fly.

— Gluk, it's an attraction, not a cleaning job.

— An attraction is also a room. And rooms need cleaning.

Spark sighed.

— Fine. But don't get in the way.

— I never get in the way. I help.

They left the room.

Mokhnach watched them go with a grateful look.

— Good luck, — he rumbled.

Shadow translated.

— Thank you, — Cheddar answered. — We'll be back.

CHAPTER 2:

“AMUSEMENT PARK”

Part One: The “Fear of Heights” Attraction

The “Fear of Heights” attraction stood in the center of the park.

It was a skyscraper-high tower, piercing the clouds, with transparent cabins slowly rising and dropping.

A sign at the entrance read: “The scariest attraction in the galaxy! Test your fear!”

The line was long, but the tourists stood silently, with identical glassy eyes.

No one joked, no one laughed, no one discussed what would happen next.

They just stood and waited.

— Creepy sight, — Gadget said.

— It’s not creepy, — Shadow corrected. — It’s... empty.

Spark approached the counter.

Behind it stood an operator robot with a painted-on smile.

— One ticket, please, — she said.

— For you — free, — the robot replied. — Promotion: every

tenth tourist gets exclusive service.

— Lucky, — Spark smirked.

— Good luck, — Cheddar said.

— I don't need it, — Spark replied. — I have a blaster.

She stepped into the cabin.

Gluk wanted to follow, but the robot stopped him.

— Passengers only, — it said.

— I'm not a passenger. I'm a cleaner, — Gluk stated proudly.

— Cleaners are not allowed.

— But it's dirty in there! — Gluk exclaimed, pointing at the cabin.

Indeed, there were smudges on the glass.

— Those are atmospheric deposits, — the robot replied impassively.

— Atmospheric deposits are also dirt! — Gluk protested.

Spark waved to him from inside the cabin.

— Gluk, it's fine. I'll manage.

— But...

— Gluk, — Spark said firmly. — Wait for me here.

Gluk squeaked indignantly but stayed put.

The cabin rose.

Slowly, very slowly.

Spark looked down, where people grew smaller and then turned into dots.

She waited for fear.

But it didn't come.

Only curiosity.

The cabin kept rising.

Clouds hid the ground.

Around them was only a white veil and silence.

Spark knocked on the glass.

It was cold.

— Scared? — she asked herself.

No. Not scared. Bored.

The cabin stopped at the very top.

The door didn't open.

Inside, a screen lit up with the inscription:

**“TO ACTIVATE THE ATTRACTION, REAL EMOTIONS
ARE REQUIRED. PLEASE EXPERIENCE FEAR.”**

Spark laughed.

— I don't know how to be scared on command, — she said.

The inscription blinked and changed:

“TRY. IT IS IMPORTANT.”

— And if I can't?

“THEN THE ATTRACTION WILL NOT START.”

Spark pondered.

She looked down, where nothing was visible in the clouds,
then up, where there was only a gray sky.

— You know, — she said. — I'm only afraid of one thing.
That we won't make it in time. That people will stay empty. That
monsters will cry, and no one will come to help.

The screen flickered.

“THAT IS NOT FEAR. THAT IS...”

The inscription didn't finish.

The cabin jerked and began to fall.

Spark grabbed the handrails.

Wind howled, the glass cracked.

— Now this is scary, — she muttered.

But the fall didn't last long.

Halfway down, the cabin froze, and a voice came through the speakers — tired, irritated.

— Who's there? — the voice asked. — Who dared activate the emotional mode?

— Me, — Spark answered. — And I don't like it.

— You don't like it? And I do? I'm forced to make this horror, and tourists aren't even scared! They're empty, like... like washed cans!

— Gluk would appreciate the comparison, — Spark smirked.
— Who are you?

— I'm Dave. Dave the octopus. Park owner. And who are you to interfere with my work?

— I'm the one who wants to understand why everyone here is empty.

— Empty? — the voice grew quieter. — You see it?

— I do. All the tourists look like their emotions have been drained. And the monsters are crying. And you sit in your tower watching it all fall apart.

Dave was silent.

Then the cabin jerked again and began to slowly descend.

— Go down, — he said. — And don't touch anything. It's not your business.

— It is my business, — Spark replied. — Because I'm a detective. And because my friend Barsik disappeared here.

— Barsik? — Dave sighed. — He... he was here. But I don't know where he is now. He went to the factory. And didn't come back.

— Factory?

— The one where they make cheese. He's draining emotions, you understand? The cheese steals emotions. And without them, people become empty. And monsters too. And I can't stop it. I have a contract. If I break it — I lose everything.

The cabin touched the ground.

The door opened.

— I'll help you, — Spark said, stepping out.

— Don't, — Dave answered. — It's dangerous.

— I'm not afraid.

— You only think so now.

The connection cut off.

Spark walked over to her team.

Gluk immediately rolled up to her.

— You're alive! — he rejoiced. — But the cabin is dirty! I saw it!

— Gluk, not now, — Spark said wearily.

— What happened? — Cheddar asked.

— Dave is here. He's in the tower. And he's not the enemy.
He's just as much a hostage as the monsters.

— And Barsik?

— Barsik is at the factory. And hasn't returned.

Cheddar looked at the tower, at the empty faces of the tourists,
at the bright but lifeless lights.

— Let's go to the factory, — he said.

Part Two: Monster Attack

They moved around the side, where the attractions ended and the service buildings began.

Here it was quiet, dark, and smelled of dampness.

Gluk shivered — not from fear, but from the abundance of dust.

— Dirty, — he whispered. — Very dirty. Need to clean it all.

— Gluk, hold on, — Cheddar asked.

— I can't. It's professional.

He had already taken out his brush when something crawled out from around the corner.

Huge, shaggy, with enormous eyes full of sorrow.

It looked like Mokhnach, but bigger, scarier, and... sadder.

— Oh, — Gluk said.

— Is “oh” good or bad? — Spark asked, grabbing her blaster.

— Don't know. It's dirty. Very dirty.

The monster took a step forward. And another.

It looked at the team, and there was no threat in its gaze.

Only hope.

— It doesn't want to scare us, — Shadow said.

— Then what does it want? — Gadget asked.

The monster rumbled.

Deep, drawn out, with notes of resentment.

— It wants... — Shadow listened. — It wants to be cleaned.

— What? — Cheddar didn't believe it.

— It says its fur is matted, that no one combs it, that it's lonely and dirty. And that it can't scare anymore because it stinks.

— It stinks? — Spark repeated.

— Yes. It says tourists smell it and turn away. And before, when it was clean, everyone was afraid.

Gluk, hearing this, froze.

Then his lights glowed brighter.

— I'll clean it, — he said firmly. — It's my job.

— Gluk, it's a monster! — Gadget exclaimed.

— And I'm a cleaner. Cleaners clean everyone.

He rolled up to the monster.

The monster lowered its head, looking at the little robot.

— Your fur is dirty! — Gluk declared. — Fixing it now.

He took out a large brush and began running it over the shaggy flank.

The monster flinched, then froze, then... rumbled.

But now it was a different rumble — content, calm, like a giant cat purring.

— Like this, — Gluk murmured. — Circular motions. And don't twitch, I'm not hurting you.

The monster didn't even think about twitching.

It closed its eyes and stretched its paws, offering its sides to the brush.

Winglet, who had been sitting on Gluk's back, jumped off and also tried to help, but only got tangled in the fur.

— Careful, — Gluk said. — You're small.

Winglet wriggled out, shook himself off, and sat on the monster's head.

The monster didn't object.

— It likes him, — Spark noted.

— Who? — Cheddar asked.

— Everyone.

The monster finally opened its eyes.

They were no longer sad.

Something new appeared in them — maybe hope.

It licked Gluk with a huge, rough tongue.

— Ugh! — Gluk squeaked, wiping himself. — Your saliva is sticky! But I forgive you.

— Rrrr, — the monster answered.

— He's saying "thank you", — Shadow translated.

Spark approached it.

— Do you know where the factory is? — she asked. — Where they make the cheese?

The monster nodded and pointed a paw toward a dark building at the end of the alley.

— There, — Shadow said. — He says tourists are taken there. And they leave... empty.

— We need to go there, — Cheddar decided.

— I'm with you, — the monster suddenly said.

Everyone turned.

It spoke?

Or was it Shadow translating?

But the monster nodded and stood on all fours.

— It wants to help, — Shadow said. — It says if you free its friends, it'll show you a shortcut.

— Friends? — Gadget asked.

— Other monsters. They're held at the factory. Used as... batteries.

Cheddar looked at the monster.

It looked back.

There was no fear in its huge eyes.

Only determination.

— Let's go, — Cheddar said. — Gluk, are you ready?

— Always ready, — Gluk answered, wiping his brush.

— Spark?

— Blaster's loaded.

— Gadget?

— Instruments are working.

— Shadow?

— Following you.

— Then forward.

They moved toward the dark building.

The monster walked ahead, lighting the way with its enormous eyes, which glowed in the dark like two lanterns.

Part Three: Grooming Services

The factory building turned out to be old, peeling, with boarded-up windows and a rusty door.

A plaque read: “CHEESE LABORATORY. STAFF ONLY”.

— Smells like cheese, — Cheddar said, sniffing.

— And fear, — Shadow added.

— And something else, — Gluk said. — Dirt.

He had already taken out his brush, but Spark stopped him.

— Gluk, business first, cleanliness later.

— But if we don't clean the door, how will we open it? — he reasoned.

— We'll hack it.

— Hacking is unclean, — Gluk frowned.

— But it's efficient.

Shadow approached the lock, connected her tablet.

A minute later, the lock clicked and opened.

— Clean work, — Gluk approved.

— Thank you, — Shadow replied.

Inside it was dark and damp.

Corridors stretched in different directions, and everywhere smelled of cheese.

Real cheese, not the kind sold in stalls.

— This way, — the monster said, pointing downward.

— Stairs? — Cheddar asked.

— Elevator, — the monster answered.

They found the elevator at the end of the corridor.

The door opened on its own, as if waiting for them.

— Suspicious, — Spark noted.

— Everything is suspicious, — Cheddar answered. — But we're going anyway.

They stepped into the elevator.

The door closed, and the cabin slowly descended.

Gluk, taking the opportunity, started polishing the walls.

— Gluk! — Spark hissed.

— It's dirty in here! — he protested. — We're heading into the unknown, and there's dirt everywhere! It's wrong!

— He's right, — Shadow unexpectedly said. — Cleanliness helps you think.

— Exactly! — Gluk brightened.

The elevator stopped.

The door opened, and they saw a huge workshop.

Conveyors, vats, pipes.

In the center, on racks, stood wheels of cheese.

They glowed — each a different color.

Red, blue, green, yellow.

And they all pulsed, like living things.

— Beautiful, — Gadget breathed.

— Dangerous, — Shadow corrected.

— And dirty, — Gluk added.

He was about to start cleaning, but two figures emerged from

behind a rack.

A robot with a perfectly polished chassis, and a tall, thin rodent in a white coat.

— Visitors, — the robot said. — Unwelcome.

— We're looking for Barsik, — Cheddar said.

— Barsik? — the rodent smirked. — Ah, that cat. He was here. But he left.

— Where?

— Where people don't return from.

Spark drew her blaster.

— Talk.

— Calm down, — the robot said. — Violence won't solve problems. We can negotiate.

— About what?

— The cheese. You want to try it? It makes people happy. Truly happy.

— It makes them empty, — Shadow countered.

— That's a matter of perception, — the rodent smiled. — Some see emptiness, some see freedom from emotions.

— Freedom from emotions isn't freedom, — Cheddar said. — It's death.

The rodent shrugged.

— As you say. But if you don't leave, we'll have to take measures.

He snapped his fingers.

From behind the racks came... monsters.

Many monsters.

They were dirty, disheveled, with empty eyes.

— They won't attack, — the rodent said. — They'll just... hug you. And you'll become just like them. Empty.

— Gluk! — Cheddar yelled.

Gluk was already rolling toward the monsters.

— Stand still! — he commanded. — Everyone stand still! I'm going to clean you now!

The monsters froze.

Gluk took out the largest brush and began running it over the nearest one.

— Circular motions, — he murmured. — Carefully. Like this.

The monster flinched, then rumbled, then... closed its eyes and started rubbing against the brush.

— More! — it demanded.

— Soon, soon, — Gluk said. — Patience. Cleanliness doesn't like haste.

One by one, the monsters approached Gluk, offering their sides, backs, paws.

Winglet darted between them, trying to help, but only got tangled.

— This... this isn't by the rules, — the rodent said bewildered.

— It's by love, — Cheddar answered.

The robot tried to intervene, but Spark aimed her blaster at it.

— Don't move, — she said.

— You don't understand, — the robot babbled. — If monsters

stop scaring, ratings will drop. Dave will lose everything.

— Dave has already lost everything, — Cheddar replied. — He lost himself. But we'll help him get back.

— How?

— We'll make the park not scary, but funny.

— Funny? — the robot repeated.

— Yes. Fear is outdated. Humor is the new trend.

The rodent and robot exchanged glances.

— That's madness, — the rodent said.

— It's business, — Cheddar smirked.

Meanwhile, Gluk finished cleaning the last monster.

They all gleamed, rumbled contentedly, and happily rubbed against each other.

— Now there's order, — Gluk said, wiping his brush.

Spark walked up to him.

— You're a genius, — she said.

— I'm a cleaner, — Gluk replied modestly. — But thank you.

Cheddar looked at the happy monsters, at the bewildered factory workers, at the glowing cheese, which now seemed not dangerous, but simply... beautiful.

— We came to a fear park, — he said. — And here monsters are asking to be scratched.

— It's a new kind of economy, — Spark added. — Grooming services.

— And it's more profitable than fear, — Gadget chimed in. — Because for scratching, monsters give everything they have.

— And what do they have? — Gluk asked.

— Friendship, — Shadow answered. — And cleanliness.
Gluk beamed.

— That's the best currency, — he said.

The monsters around them rumbled in agreement.

Cheddar turned to the rodent.

— Where is Barsik? — he asked.

The rodent sighed.

— Below. In the deepest lab. He tried to stop production.

We... preserved him.

— Preserved? — Spark repeated.

— Like cheese, — the robot added. — He's safe.

— He's in danger, — Shadow corrected. — And we'll get him out.

She headed for the elevator.

The others followed.

Gluk waved his brush at the monsters on his way out.

— I'll be back! — he promised. — I'll bring it to perfection!

The monsters rumbled happily.

The elevator closed and carried them down, to the very heart of the factory, where Barsik was waiting.

And where, perhaps, answers to all questions waited.

CHAPTER 3: “DAVE THE OCTOPUS”

Part One: Meeting Dave

The elevator descended for a long time.

Gluk managed to polish the walls, ceiling, and even the buttons, which became so shiny you could see your reflection in them.

— Perfect, — he said, rolling back. — Now at least it’s clean here.

— Gluk, we’re heading into the unknown, — Spark reminded him. — And you’re polishing buttons.

— Cleanliness must exist in the unknown too, — he philosophized. — Otherwise it’s not the unknown, it’s a pigsty.

Winglet, sitting on his back, squeaked in agreement.

The elevator stopped.

The doors opened, and they saw a corridor stretching into the distance.

The walls were glass, and behind them huge mechanisms pulsed in time with some invisible music.

— Looks like a heart, — Gadget said.

— The park’s heart, — Shadow corrected.

— Or its brain, — Cheddar added.

They moved forward.

At the end of the corridor was a door with a plaque:
“DIRECTOR’S OFFICE. DAVE ONLY”.

— Dave, — Cheddar read. — Well, shall we meet him?

— What if he doesn’t want to? — Gluk asked.

— Then I’ll clean him, — Gluk said confidently. — Clean ones are always kinder.

Spark pushed the door.

Behind it was a huge hall, filled with monitors.

Dozens, hundreds of screens showed attractions, alleys, service corridors.

In the center, in a chair, sat... an octopus.

He was large, blue, wearing a hat and a director’s suit.

Eight hands simultaneously held remotes, pressed buttons, turned knobs.

Images flashed on the screens, but he seemed unable to keep up with them.

— One thousand and fifty-three! — he shouted, without turning around. — I said raise the fear level to one thousand and fifty-three! And you set it to one thousand and fifty-two! It’s a catastrophe! It’s a failure! It’s...

He turned around and saw the team.

— And who are you?

— Cheese-Eaters, — Cheddar introduced himself. — We’re looking for Barsik.

— Barsik? — the octopus froze. — The cat who sticks his nose where it doesn't belong?

— The very one, — Spark nodded.

— He was here. Broke into my lab. Stumbled upon the cheese. And... disappeared.

— Disappeared? — Gadget repeated.

— Like he fell into water. Or into cheese. I don't know. I'm a director, not a detective.

He got busy again, fiddling with the remotes.

One hand accidentally grabbed a coffee mug, another a ventilation remote, a third tried to turn off the lights.

— I'm a director! — he yelled, fending off his own limbs. — I'm a creator! And they force me to stamp out horror!

Gluk, watching this scene, rolled closer.

— Your tentacle is dirty, — he said, pointing to the hand that had just been in a mug.

— What? — Dave didn't understand.

— Dirty. I'll clean it now.

He took out a small brush and reached for the tentacle.

Dave jerked it back, but another hand — the one holding a remote — unexpectedly reached out to Gluk.

— Don't! — the octopus yelled. — It's professional deformation! They don't listen to me!

— Each of your hands lives its own life? — Gadget asked.

— It's called multitasking! — Dave snapped. — I'm a director, I have to control everything!

— And they don't let you, — Spark noted.

— They don't, — Dave sighed.

One of his hands finally grabbed Gluk.

But instead of throwing him away, it... patted his head.

— Oh, — Gluk said. — That's nice.

— That's not me! — Dave yelled. — It's doing it on its own!

— Apparently, it needs affection, — Shadow suggested.

— It needs discipline! — Dave howled. — Like all the rest!

He tried to wrest Gluk away from his hand, but it only hugged the robot tighter.

— Let go! — Dave commanded.

— It doesn't want to, — Gluk stated. — It loves me.

— It can't love! It's just a tentacle!

— And I'm a brush, — Gluk philosophized. — And I'm loved too.

Spark couldn't help but laugh.

— Dave, — Cheddar said, drawing the octopus's attention. — We're not enemies. We want to help.

— Help? — Dave finally stopped fighting his limbs. — Who are you to help? You don't even know what's happening here.

— We do, — Shadow answered. — You're a hostage to a contract. The Guild is forcing you to do what you don't want.

Dave froze.

His eight hands also froze, and silence fell in the hall.

— How do you... — he began.

— We're detectives, — Cheddar said. — It's our job.

— And we've already befriended your monsters, — Gluk added. — They're very cute when you clean them.

Dave looked at him.

Then at his hands.

Then at the screens, where the attractions had frozen.

— Cute, — he repeated. — My monsters are cute. And they're supposed to be scary. The scariest in the galaxy.

— But do you want them to be scary? — Cheddar asked.

Dave was silent for a long time.

His hands dropped limply, the remotes fell to the floor.

— No, — he finally said. — I want them to be... happy.

Part Two: Dave's Story

They sat in the director's office.

Dave handed out coffee — this time the coffee machine didn't object, because Dave explained it was a "creative process".

Gluk, taking the opportunity, polished the remotes, while Winglet sat on his back and carefully watched for order.

— I used to film different things, — Dave said, looking at an empty screen. — Kind movies. About love, about friendship, about the importance of being yourself.

— I watched one, — Gadget unexpectedly said. — "The Octopus Who Wanted to Hug the Whole World". It was... a good film.

— Good? — Dave smirked. — It flopped. Nobody wanted to watch about hugs. Everyone wanted horror. About fear. About someone killing someone.

— People have always wanted scary things, — Shadow noted.

— No, — Dave shook his head. — They were made to believe they wanted scary things. The Guild. They control ratings, audience, distribution. If you don't film what they want, you're nobody.

He pointed to a stack of old discs in the corner.

— My films. Twenty years of work. And now they gather dust because the Guild bought the rights and banned them from being shown.

— Why? — Spark asked.

— So no one remembers I can film kind things. So everyone thinks I'm only capable of horror. So I believe it myself.

He fell silent.

One of his hands reached for the discs, but he jerked it back.

— Don't, — he said. — Not now.

— And the contract? — Cheddar asked. — You said you're a hostage.

— The contract, — Dave smirked. — I signed it ten years ago. I needed money to shoot a new film. The Guild gave it. And in return, I gave them everything. Rights to my old work, to new work, to myself. If I break even one condition, they take it all. Even the park. Even the monsters.

— And the conditions?

— Ratings. Every month my attractions must hit a certain number of views. If ratings drop, the Guild takes part of the park. If they drop more — more. And if they drop to zero...

He didn't finish.

His hands trembled.

— What then? — Gluk asked.

— Then I'm nobody. No films, no park, no name. Just an octopus who once filmed something.

Silence fell in the hall.

Even Winglet stopped squeaking.

— And that's why you force the monsters to scare, — Cheddar said.

— I do, — Dave nodded. — But now they can't. The cheese produced downstairs changes them. They become... gentle.

— Gentle? — Spark repeated.

— Yes. They want to hug, purr, be scratched. Like when your robot cleaned them — they just melted. And they're supposed to roar and scare.

— But that's good! — Gluk exclaimed. — Gentle monsters are happy monsters.

— For monsters — yes, — Dave sighed. — But for me — it's a catastrophe. If ratings drop any lower, the Guild takes everything. I'll be left with nothing.

— And if ratings go up? — Cheddar asked.

— How? — Dave smirked. — I don't have money for new attractions. No ideas. No strength. I can't even shoot a film — my hands don't listen to me.

One of his hands, the one that loved petting, reached out to Gluk again.

— See? — Dave said. — They do what they want.

— Maybe they know what they want, — Shadow said quietly. — And you don't.

Dave looked at her.

In his eyes was something new — maybe hope.

— What do you suggest? — he asked.

— We'll help you raise the ratings, — Cheddar said. — But not with fear.

— Then how?

— With laughter.

Part Three: The Problem

— Laughter? — Dave stared at Cheddar like he was crazy. — You're suggesting I make comedies? Now? When my monsters are turning into plush toys?

— Exactly now, — Cheddar nodded. — You said it yourself: monsters can't scare anymore. So we change the format.

— But the ratings...

— Ratings will drop, — Cheddar agreed. — But if we don't change, they'll drop anyway. And if we make the park funny, we'll have a chance.

Dave pondered.

His hands froze, and the hall went quiet.

— I tried, — he said. — Tried to film funny things. But I can't. I forgot how it's done.

— You didn't forget, — Shadow countered. — You're just afraid.

— Afraid?

— Afraid it won't work. Afraid it won't be funny the right way. Afraid people will laugh at you.

Dave lowered his eyes.

— Maybe, — he admitted. — But I don't know where to start.

— With the monsters, — Gluk said, rolling closer. — They're already funny. When you clean them, they rumble and melt. That's funny.

— Rumbling monsters aren't funny, they're... touching.

— And touching can be funny too, — Gadget argued. — Like if a big scary monster is afraid of a tiny mouse.

— Or if it tries to scare, but a butterfly flies out of its mouth, — Spark added.

— Or if it roars, but it comes out “meow”, — Gluk chimed in. Dave looked at them.

Then at his hands.

One of them, the one that loved petting, carefully rose.

— Meow, — it said quietly.

— That's not me! — Dave yelled. — It's her!

— Then try to negotiate with it, — Gluk suggested. — It's yours. It should listen.

— It never listens!

— Because you don't love it, — Gluk said. — You're afraid of it. And it feels it.

Dave looked at his hand.

It froze, as if waiting.

— I... — he began. — I'm not afraid. I just...

— Just what? — Spark asked.

— I just don't know how to handle it.

— Then try to pet it, — Gluk suggested. — Like I clean. Circular motions.

Dave carefully raised another hand and touched the one that was petting.

It flinched, then relaxed and wrapped around it, as if hugging.

— Oh, — Dave said. — That's... nice.

— See? — Gluk said. — They just want love.

— Everyone wants love, — Shadow added. — Even monsters.

Even octopuses.

Dave stared at his hands for a long time.

They had finally stopped fighting and just lay there, intertwined.

— Alright, — he said. — I'll try. But I need help.

— We'll help, — Cheddar nodded. — But first — Barsik.

Where is he?

— Below, — Dave answered. — In the deepest lab. Where they make the emotion cheese.

— Why didn't you get him out?

— I can't. The only way there is through the factory, and the factory is guarded. The Guild doesn't let anyone in.

— Then we'll go through the factory, — Cheddar decided.

— It's dangerous, — Dave warned. — The cheese there... is alive. It reads emotions. If you get scared, it will absorb you.

— And if we don't get scared? — Spark asked.

— Then you'll surprise it. And cheese doesn't like surprises.

— Even better, — Cheddar smirked. — We love surprises.

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