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SIMULACRA

Yar Kremen



Kremen Yar

Simulacra

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Аннотация

On Simulacrum Station, Míáus hides from pain by creating thousands of digital copies of himself. The Cheese-Eaters crew — led by obsessive cleaner Gluk — must navigate childhood traumas, paranoia, and anger rooms to help him forgive himself. A philosophical sci-fi adventure about identity, copies, and why cleanliness without forgiveness is just sterility.

Содержание

SIMULACRA	5
CHAPTER 2. DEPARTMENT OF CHILDHOOD GRIEVANCES	20
CHAPTER 3. PARANOIA DEPARTMENT	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	41

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SIMULACRA

CHAPTER 1. GHOST STATION

Riddle: Why does an abandoned station look like a residential complex?

Part One. Arrival at the Simulacrum

The Norka slipped out of hyperspace with a soft click. Gluk pulled away from polishing the deck. — We've arrived? — We have, — Cheddar answered. — Where? — To Simulacrum Station. — That name sounds like a disease, — Iskra noted. — Maybe it is.

Cheddar activated the external screens. Before them hung the station. It was old. Very old. Rusty docking nodes, peeling paint, dark viewports. Antennas broken. Hull dented. — Looks like junk, — Gadget said. — Looks like something nobody has cleaned for years, — Gluk corrected, horror in his voice. — Is there a difference? — Dirt is junk. But junk can be thrown away. Dirt has to be scrubbed.

Iskra ran a finger over the sensor. — Scanners show a weak pulse. Oxygen present. Temperature — twenty degrees Celsius. — Habitable? — More like dying.

Shadow said nothing. She always stayed silent before landing. Then she asked: — Is SYRO-MAX sure Myaus is here? — Coordinates are exact, — Cheddar replied. — Then let's go. —

Let's go, — he agreed.

The shuttle detached. The crossing took three minutes. Gluk managed to wipe the viewport twice. Krylatik sat on his back and diligently repeated the movements with his little brush. — Peek! — he chirped happily as the shuttle touched the docking node. — Good boy, — Gluk said. — You're cleaning better every day. — Peek-peek!

The hatch opened. Inside the station, it was dark. — Flashlights, — Cheddar ordered. They turned on their headlamps. The beams cut through the darkness, revealing a corridor. Narrow, long, with rusty pipes on the ceiling. — Smells like mold, — Iskra said. — Mold is dirt, — Gluk noted. — Sorry we're torturing you. — I'm used to it. Cleanliness requires sacrifice.

They moved forward. The corridor ended in an airlock. Shadow opened it. And everyone froze. Beyond the airlock was light. Bright, white, sterile. — This is... — Iskra began. — This can't be, — Gadget finished.

They stood in a lobby. Perfectly clean. The floor gleamed. The walls shone. Plants in pots were green and alive. Gluk rolled forward. — There's... there's nothing to clean here, — he whispered. His voice held awe and dread at once. — It's suspicious, — Iskra said. — What's suspicious about cleanliness? — Gluk protested. — That an abandoned station can't be clean. — What if someone cleaned it? — Who?

Gluk thought. — Ghosts? — Ghosts don't clean, — Shadow

said. — They scare people. — What if they're ghost-cleaners? — Gluk, they don't exist. — They do. I saw it in a show. — You watched a show about ghost-cleaners? — It was a documentary. — On which channel? — The "Everything About Cleanliness" channel.

Iskra rolled her eyes. — Let's move.

They walked through the lobby. The walls were covered with signs. DEPARTMENT OF SUPPRESSED MEMORIES — What's this? — Gadget asked. — Looks like an office, — Cheddar replied. — What kind of office? — Psychotherapeutic.

LABORATORY OF FORGOTTEN GRIEVANCES
SECTOR OF SELF-ESTEEM ARCHIVE OF UNFULFILLED
HOPES — It's an office, — Shadow said. — A huge one. — Who needs an office on an abandoned station? — Someone who wants to figure themselves out. — Or someone who wants others to figure them out, — Cheddar added.

Meanwhile, Gluk rolled up to one of the signs and ran his brush over it. — Clean, — he said. — Even here, it's clean. — You should be happy. — I am. But it's strange. When everything is clean for no reason, it's... — What? — Iskra asked. — It's scary. — You're afraid of cleanliness? — I'm afraid of cleanliness without a cleaner.

Shadow smiled. — Smart fear.

They walked further. The corridor widened, and before them appeared a reception desk. Behind it sat no one. Only a hologram. It activated as they approached. A woman in glasses, with

a pleasant smile. Too pleasant. — Welcome to Simulacrum Station, — she said. Cheddar stopped. — Who are you? — Your guide. To proceed to the self-reflection stages, you must register. — We didn't come for psychotherapy.

The hologram smiled wider. — Everyone says that. — It's a trap, — Gluk whispered. — Don't whisper, she hears you. — I hear you, — the hologram confirmed. — And I recommend not whispering. It causes anxiety in other visitors. — There are no other visitors, — Shadow said. — You just don't see them yet. They are registered.

Iskra placed her hand on her blaster. — We're not registering anywhere. — Then you won't be able to proceed further. — And we don't need to. — You do, — Cheddar said. — Otherwise we won't find Myaus.

Iskra gritted her teeth. — I hate bureaucracy. — Nobody likes it. But it's everywhere. Even in space.

The hologram extended a tablet. — Fill out the form. Name, age, purpose of visit, list of traumas. — List of what? — Gluk asked. — Traumas. Psycho-emotional. Everyone comes with them. — I don't have traumas, — Gluk said proudly.

The hologram looked at him. — You're lying. — I'm not lying, I'm compact. — That's a defense mechanism. Fill out the form.

Cheddar took the tablet. Wrote: Cheddar. Captain. Looking for a cat.

The hologram read it. — Reason is not deep enough. — A cat is deep. It has a soul. — A soul is not grounds for access to

personal levels. — Then what is? — Pain.

Shadow stepped forward. — I have pain. Write it down. She snatched the tablet and wrote something. The hologram fell silent. Then nodded. — Access granted. Follow me. — What did you write? — Gadget asked. — The truth, — Shadow answered. — Nobody expects that.

Part Two. Reception

The hologram led them upstairs. There was no elevator. Only stairs. The steps were perfectly clean. Gluk walked and stroked the railings. — They're warm. — It's plastic. — Warm plastic. I want one at home. — You have a home. — I have the Norka. It's not a home. It's work. — What's a home then? — A place where you can clean without a reason.

They reached the second floor. The corridor here was long. On both sides — glass capsules. In rows. Dozens. Inside each capsule, someone stood. — These are... — Iskra began. — Copies, — Shadow said. — Whose? — Look.

Iskra stepped up to the first capsule. Inside stood Iskra. Identical. But different. The copy had a blaster. And a smile. The real Iskra didn't smile. — You're weak, — the copy said. The voice was the same. But colder. — I'm strong, — Iskra replied. — Strong people don't doubt. And you doubt. — That's normal. — It's weakness.

Iskra gripped her blaster. — Open the capsule. — Don't, — Cheddar said. — I want to talk to her. — She'll provoke you into shooting. It's a trap. — I don't shoot at myself. — You're already

shooting with your eyes.

Iskra turned away. — You're right. But it pisses me off. — Pissing you off is normal. It means you're alive.

Cheddar approached his own capsule. Inside stood a captain. Perfect. Straight back. Not a trace of fear. Eyes confident. — He's handsome, — Gluk noted. — I'm handsome too. — You're tired. That's different.

Cheddar's copy looked at him. — You're afraid, — she said. — I can see it. — I am, — Cheddar agreed. — That's normal. — Normal is being perfect. — Perfect people don't exist. — They do. For example, me. — You're not me. You're my caricature. — Caricature? — the copy smirked. — I'm what you could have been. — You're what I refuse to be.

The copy fell silent.

Gadget approached his capsule. His copy was fixing something invisible. Hands moved fast. Eyes burned. — He's even fixing the air, — Gadget marveled. — That's abnormal, — Shadow said. — It's efficient, — the copy countered without looking up. — You waste time thinking. I waste time doing. — Action without thought is automation. — Automation is speed. — Speed without meaning is noise.

The copy paused. Looked at Gadget. — You're smart, — she said. — But slow. — I'm alive, — Gadget replied. — Life requires time.

Shadow approached her capsule last. Her copy stood in the corner. Looking at the floor. Trusted no one. Not even herself.

— You came, — the copy said. — I did. — Why? — To find the truth. — Truth doesn't exist. There are only interpretations. — That sounds like an excuse. — It sounds like experience, — the copy raised her head. — You've spent years hiding. Fearing. Suspecting everyone. And I'm just an extension. Your best extension. — You're my shadow, — Shadow said. — Without a body. — A body is a burden. — A body is a chance to feel. — Feel pain. — And joy too.

The copy smirked. — You believe in joy? — Sometimes. — Then you're dumber than I thought. — And I thought you were smarter.

They fell silent.

Meanwhile, Gluk found his capsule. It stood at the end of the row. Small. Neat. Inside — a perfect Gluk. Clean. Flawless. Fur shone. Eyes glowed. And he was silent. — I... — Gluk swallowed. — I'm beautiful. Shadow approached. — You're already beautiful. — No. You don't understand. This copy is more beautiful. — By one letter "e"? — By three. More-beautiful-er.

He pressed against the glass. — She's not moving. Not speaking. Just standing. And cleaning herself with her gaze. — That's creepy, — Cheddar said. — It's perfect! — Gluk protested. — She's me, but without my mistakes. — Your mistakes are you. — My mistakes are dirt. And I love cleanliness.

The Gluk copy blinked. Once. Gluk stepped back. — She's alive! — Of course she's alive, — Iskra said. — They're all alive.

— But she's silent! — Silence isn't a sign of death. — For Gluk — it is, — Shadow smirked.

The Gluk copy opened her mouth. — I... — she said. Gluk froze. — What? — I... want to clean. — I do too! — Gluk cheered. — Everything. — Me too! — Perfectly. — Me too! — But you're not me.

Gluk blinked rapidly. — Why? — Because you doubt. And I don't. — Doubting is normal. — For the original — yes. For the copy — no.

The copy closed her eyes and fell silent. Gluk stared at her, his bulbs blinking in deepest confusion. — She's strange, — he said. — She's you, — Iskra answered. — I'm not like that! — You are. You just don't notice it. — I notice everything! I'm a cleaner! — Cleaners notice dirt. Rarely themselves.

Gluk thought. Then pulled out his brush and ran it over the capsule glass. — Clean, — he said. — But inside... inside something's wrong. — What? — Cheddar asked. — She's empty. Clean, but empty. Like... like a new vacuum cleaner without a bag. — Poetic, — Gadget noted. — It's the truth, — Gluk replied. — I feel it. Cleanliness without a soul isn't cleanliness. It's sterility. — Is there a difference? — Sterility is death. Cleanliness is life.

He rolled away from the capsule. — Let's move on. Nothing to clean here. — And them? — Iskra asked, nodding at the copies. — They'll stay. Until they understand that cleanliness isn't just the absence of dirt. — What else then? — Love, — Gluk said

simply. — And cheese.

He rolled forward. The team followed.

Part Three. The First Double

The corridor behind the capsules widened. Now it resembled a gallery. The walls were glass. Behind the glass — rooms. Tables, chairs, lamps. And people. In every room, someone sat. — Are they working? — Gadget asked. — Looks like employees, — Shadow replied. — Without salary. — And without days off.

Cheddar stopped at the first room. Inside sat a rodent. He was writing something. With a pen. On paper. — This is an archive, — Cheddar said. — An archive of memory. — Whose? — Myaus's.

The rodent looked up. — You've come, — he said. — I was waiting. — Who are you? — Iskra asked. — I'm a memory. One of many. — Which one? — Loneliness, — the rodent answered. — The very first.

He stood and approached the glass. — Little Myaus sat in a room. Alone. All day. Nobody came. Nobody played. — Why? — Gluk asked. — Because he was different. Not like the others. — Different how? — He saw what others didn't. Felt what others couldn't. Said what others didn't understand. — And they didn't love him? — Shadow asked. — They feared him. And fear isn't love.

The rodent placed his paw on the glass. — You came to help? — Yes, — Cheddar said. — Then go further. At the end, you'll find him. — Who? — Myaus. The real one. — And you? — I'll

stay. I'm part of him. But not the most important part.

The rodent returned to the table and resumed writing. — Go, — he said without looking up. — Time is short. — Why short? — Iskra asked. — Because the copies are waking up.

They exchanged glances. — What copies? — The ones in the capsules, — the rodent answered. — Soon they'll realize they're copies. And then... — Then what? — Then they'll want to become originals.

He fell silent. The glass between them turned frosted. A second later, nothing was visible behind it anymore. — He disappeared, — Gadget said. — Or we left, — Shadow replied. — Where? — Further.

They moved on. The corridor twisted. Ups, downs, stairs. Signs everywhere. DEPARTMENT OF CHILDHOOD GRIEVANCES PARANOIA DEPARTMENT LABORATORY OF PERFECT COPIES — It's like a museum, — Gluk said. — A museum of one soul. — You're right, — Cheddar replied. — A museum of Myaus. — And we have to find the main exhibit. — Yes. — What if he doesn't want to be found? — Then we'll look harder.

Gluk nodded. — I'll help. I have a brush. — A brush won't help find a cat. — It will. If the cat is dirty, I'll clean him. If he's clean — I'll pet him.

Iskra chuckled. — You and the cat are the same breed. — We both love cleanliness, — Gluk agreed. — And cheese.

They entered a large hall. In the center stood a pedestal. On

the pedestal — an empty chair. — He was here, — Shadow said, checking her tablet. — Recently. — And where did he go? — Don't know. But the signal leads down. — Then let's go down.

They found a staircase. It went deep underground. — It's dark here, — Gadget noted. — And dusty, — Gluk added with horror. — Will you clean it? — Later. First we find the cat.

They began descending. The steps creaked. The walls were bare. No signs, no inscriptions. — This doesn't look like an office, — Iskra said. — It looks like a basement, — Cheddar replied. — A basement of the soul. — Or a basement of fears.

They went down three flights. And saw a door. It was metal. Heavy. With a code lock. — Need a code, — Shadow said. — Don't need one, — Gluk said and ran his brush over the panel. The lock clicked. — How do you do that? — Gadget marveled. — Cleanliness, — Gluk replied. — Dirty locks work poorly. Clean ones open. — That's unscientific. — It's practical. Science comes later.

The door opened. Behind it was a room. Small. Dark. In the center — a chair. In the chair, someone sat. — Myaus? — Cheddar asked. Silence. — Myaus, it's us.

The cat raised his head. He was old. Tired. Eyes dim. — You came, — he said. — We did, — Cheddar replied. — Why? — To help. — You can't help someone who buried himself, — Myaus replied. — You can, — Gluk said. — If you dig him out. Carefully. Circular motions.

Myaus looked at him. — You're strange, — he said. — I'm a

cleaner. Cleaners are always strange. It's part of the job.

Myaus chuckled. For the first time in a long while. — Alright, — he said. — Tell me what you need. — The truth, — Cheddar said. — All of it.

Myaus sighed. — Sit down, — he said. — This will take a while.

They sat on the floor. Gluk pulled out his brush and began sweeping dust around the chair. — Don't get distracted, — Myaus said. — I'm not distracted. I'm working. Cleanliness helps thinking. — Really? — Really. Try it.

Myaus looked at him. Then at the dust Gluk was sweeping from the floor. — Fine, — he said. — I'll begin.

Part Four. Humor at the End

— I created this station three years ago, — Myaus began. — After they fired me. — For what? — Iskra asked. — For thinking too much. Management doesn't like thinking employees. They like obedient ones. — Familiar story, — Cheddar noted. — The story of everyone who ever tried to think at work, — Myaus agreed.

He leaned back in the chair. — I decided to create a place where I could hide from myself. — You don't hide from yourself, — Shadow said. — You do. If you're a cat. — Cats hide in boxes, — Gluk said. — Not on stations. — I'm not an ordinary cat. — I can see that, — Gluk nodded. — Ordinary cats don't smell like dust.

Myaus looked at him. — Are you always this...

straightforward? — I'm clean. Cleanliness requires honesty. — Is that philosophy? — It's hygiene, — Gluk replied. — But also philosophy.

Myaus shook his head. — Fine. In short, I created levels. Each level — my trauma. Childhood grievances, paranoia, anger, loneliness. Everything I accumulated over my life. — And you uploaded your copies there? — Gadget asked. — Not me. They appeared on their own. The system began copying everything that entered it. Emotions, thoughts, fears. And then it started creating... personalities from them. — Copies, — Cheddar said. — Yes. Perfect copies. Without flaws. Without doubt. Without pain. — Sounds like a dream, — Iskra noted. — Sounds like death, — Myaus replied. — A personality without pain isn't a personality. It's a program. — Like Liking Cheddar, — Gluk said. — Who? — Long story, — Cheddar waved it off. — We'll tell you later.

Myaus nodded. — In short, I locked myself in here. Thought I'd figure myself out. Instead... I lost myself. — That's why we're here, — Cheddar said. — To help you find yourself. — What if I don't want to? — Then we'll find the one who does.

Myaus chuckled. — You're persistent. — We're cheese-eaters, — Gluk said. — We're always persistent. Especially when it comes to cleanliness and cheese. — Cheese has nothing to do with it. — Cheese always has something to do with it. It's a law. — Whose law? — Mine, — Gluk said. — And the law of cleanliness.

He finished sweeping the floor around the chair and rolled back. — Now it's clean. You can continue. — Thank you, — Myaus said. — It's been a long time since it was this clean here. — You're welcome, — Gluk replied. — Cleanliness is my duty. — And passion? — Iskra asked. — And passion. But duty comes first.

He put his brush away. — Continue. I'm listening.

Myaus sighed. — So, the copies. They'll wake up soon. — We saw, — Cheddar said. — And when they wake up, they'll want to get out. — Where? — Into the real world. They think they're the real ones, and I'm the copy. — Nonsense, — Iskra said. — For them — it's not. For them, I'm the mistake. And they're the ideal. — Ideals are boring, — Gluk noted. — Tell that to them.

Gluk thought. — I will. I'm not afraid of ideals. I clean them. — Even ideals? — Especially ideals. They're the dirtiest.

Myaus chuckled. — I like you, cleaner. — I like myself too, — Gluk replied. — But it's not important. What matters is we'll find a way out. — There is a way out, — Myaus said. — But it goes through all the levels. Through all my traumas. — We'll pass through, — Cheddar said. — What if you can't handle it? — We will, — Iskra replied. — It's not our first time. — It will be your first time walking through someone else's soul. — A soul is like a room, — Gluk said. — If you clean it, it gets lighter. — You clean souls too? — Trying to. But souls are harder than floors. They have many corners.

Myaus stood up from the chair. — Alright, — he said. — Let's

go. I'll show you the path. — And the copies? — Gadget asked. — The copies will wait. They haven't woken up yet. — What if they do? — Then we'll find out who's real.

He headed for the exit. The team followed.

Gluk glanced back at the empty chair. — You forgot the dust in the corner, — he said. — Leave it, — Myaus replied. — It's my last dust. Without it, I'll fall apart.

Gluk thought. — Then I won't touch it. For now. — Thank you. — You're welcome. Dust is personal. I respect the personal.

He rolled after the team. Ahead were new levels. New traumas. New copies. And the main question: which of them is real? Gluk checked his brush. It was clean. Which meant he was ready.

CHAPTER 2. DEPARTMENT OF CHILDHOOD GRIEVANCES

Riddle: Why is everything scaled down here?

Part One. Entrance to the Department

Myaus led them down a corridor that gradually narrowed. First Cheddar walked straight. Then he ducked. Then he almost crawled. — Your station is getting smaller, — he noted. — It's not the station, — Myaus replied. — It's my soul. In childhood, I was small. — And now you're big? — Now I'm old. That's worse.

Gluk, who was rolling ahead, suddenly stopped. — I won't fit through further, — he said. — Why? — The doors are small.

Indeed, before them stood a door. It was the size of a pot lid. Bright yellow, with painted flowers and hearts. Above it hung a sign: DEPARTMENT OF CHILDHOOD GRIEVANCES. Below it — another: Please wipe your paws and do not cry without reason. — This is a kindergarten, — Iskra said. — This is a trauma, — Myaus replied. — The first one. — Did you go to kindergarten? — All cats do. In the galaxy, there's mandatory preschool education for sentient felines. — And what happened there? — Everything, — Myaus said. — Enter and you'll understand.

He stayed outside. — Aren't you coming? — Cheddar asked. — I can't. I'm not ready to experience it again. — And are we

ready? — You're cheese-eaters. You're ready for anything.

Iskra snorted. — Flattering. — Trying, — Myaus replied and vanished.

Only the small door and the team remained. Gluk tried to squeeze through first. He got stuck. — But you're small, — Iskra said. — I'm not small! I'm compact! — A compact cleaner got stuck in a kitten-sized door. — The door is defective! — You're defective.

Gluk jerked. Nothing happened. — Help! — he pleaded.

Cheddar grabbed him by the brush and pulled. Shadow — by the chassis. Gadget — by Krylatik, who sat on Gluk's back and chirped helplessly. — Peek-peek! — Don't be scared, little one, — Gluk said. — We'll get out. — Peek! — He says you're too wide, — Cheddar translated. — I'm not wide! I'm plump! Plumpness isn't width, it's volume! — Volume doesn't fit in doors, — Gadget noted. — Then widen the door! — You can't widen someone else's trauma, — Shadow said. — That's unethical. — And is getting stuck in someone else's trauma ethical? — You're stuck in the door, not the trauma. — The door is part of the trauma! — Gluk jerked again, and this time flew forward with a crack.

He rolled across the floor, tumbling, and hit the wall. — I'm alive! — he announced. — And the door is three millimeters wider now. — You broke someone else's door. — I adjusted it to fit me. It's called ergonomics.

Iskra shook her head and stepped through the door. Easily.

Because she was thin. Cheddar squeezed through after her. Gadget — after him. Shadow — last. — It's cramped, — she said. — It's childhood, — Cheddar replied. — It's always cramped in childhood.

They found themselves in a long corridor. The walls were painted pink and blue. On the floor — soft mats with numbers. On the ceiling — garlands of paper cheese heads. — Cute, — Gadget said. — Too cute, — Iskra replied. — Like in horror movies right before the bloody massacre begins. — There won't be blood here, — Cheddar countered. — Here there will be tears. — Tears are worse than blood. Blood can be wiped off. Tears can only be cried out.

Gluk rolled up to the first door. A sign on it read: GROUP NO.3: MIDDLE-AGE KITTENS. He peeked inside. The room was empty. Only small chairs, small tables, and one large aquarium with water. — Where are the children? — Gluk asked. — The children grew up, — Shadow replied. — But the traumas remained.

They moved further. The corridor twisted. Up and down. Doors everywhere. Each with a sign. HYSTERIA ROOM NO.1 CORNER OF GRIEVANCES EMOTIONAL SHUTDOWN ZONE — This isn't a kindergarten, — Cheddar said. — It's a concentration camp for feelings. — Concentration camps are scarier, — Gadget noted. — Not for a child, — Shadow replied. — For a child, a kindergarten can be a concentration camp.

They stopped in front of the largest door. It was

green, with painted trees and a sun. The inscription read: GRIEVANCE ROOM. ENTRY ONLY WITH PSYCHOLOGIST'S PERMISSION. — Did Myaus have a psychologist? — Iskra asked. — Myaus had a trauma, — Cheddar replied. — A psychologist is a luxury. — And what instead? — Cheese. Cheese was the psychologist.

Gluk shook his head. — Cheese doesn't cure grievances. Cheese masks them. Like mold. — You're speaking like a philosopher, — Iskra noted. — I'm speaking like a cheese-eater who's been offended by dirty floors many times.

He pushed the door. It opened.

Part Two. The Grievance Room

The space was huge. Much larger than it looked from the outside. The walls here were soft — covered in something like foam rubber. The floor was rubbery, like in a gym. In the corners lay toys: plush mice, rubber cheese heads, rattles shaped like blasters. But the main thing was in the center. There sat a kitten. Huge. The height of the shuttle. He was a hologram. Transparent, shimmering, but very realistic. And he was crying. Tears rolled from his eyes the size of tennis balls and fell on the floor. There they turned into puddles of light and vanished. — This is Myaus, — Shadow said. — Little. — Why is he crying? — Gluk asked. — Because they offended him. — Who? — Everyone, — Cheddar said, looking at the screen hanging over the kitten.

On the screen, inscriptions scrolled: "You're strange" "Nobody wants to play with you" "You have no friends" "Your

cheese stinks” — The last one is especially cruel, — Gadget noted. — That was the most painful, — Shadow said, reading data from her tablet. — Little Myaus had cheese. He brought it to kindergarten to share. And they said it stank. — And what did he do? — He cried. And hid in a closet. Sat there for three hours.

Gluk stared at the crying kitten, his bulbs blinking in sadness mode. — That’s dirty, — he said. — Very dirty. — What? — Iskra asked. — Offending a little cat over cheese. Cheese can’t stink. Cheese smells like life. — To children it stank. — Children are stupid. If I were Myaus, I’d punch them in the face. — You don’t punch faces. You clean them. — I’d clean their faces. With a stiff brush.

Cheddar placed a hand on Gluk’s head. — Don’t, — he said. — They grew up. Probably. — I hope they became cleaner. — I hope so.

Meanwhile, the kitten continued crying. His sobs were loud, like distant thunder. — How do we calm him down? — Gadget asked. — We need to pity him, — Shadow said, reading the instruction. — It’s written on the wall.

They looked at the wall. There, in childish handwriting, it said: PITY ME. THEN YOU MAY PASS. — Blackmail, — Iskra noted. — Childish blackmail, — Cheddar corrected. — The most honest kind. A child doesn’t lie about feelings.

He approached the hologram. — Hello, — he said softly. — What’s your name? The kitten raised his head. — Myaus, — he answered, sniffing. — I’m Cheddar. I came with friends.

— Why? — We want to pity you. — Please, — the kitten whispered. — Nobody pities me. The caregiver says: “Stop whining, you’re big already.” But I’m not big. I’m only three years old. — Three years is small, — Cheddar agreed. — Small ones have the right to cry. — Really? — Really. Even big ones cry sometimes. But they do it in the shower, so nobody sees.

The kitten laughed through tears. — In the shower? Like washing? — Exactly, — Cheddar said. — Washing is also crying. Only with water.

Gluk nodded. — Washing is cleanliness. Cleanliness is happiness. So crying in the shower is the path to happiness. — You’re strange, — the kitten said, looking at Gluk. — I’m a cleaner. Cleaners are always strange. — Do you clean? — Everything. — Will you clean me? — You can’t be cleaned, — Gluk said seriously. — You’re not dirty. You’re sad. Sadness isn’t washed off with a brush. — Then with what? — Kind words. And cheese.

He pulled a small piece of cheese from his pocket — an emergency reserve — and handed it to the hologram. The kitten took it. Paws passed through the piece. — I can’t eat, — he said sadly. — I’m not real. — Your feelings are real, — Cheddar replied. — That’s what matters.

The kitten cried again, but quieter now. — They offended me, — he said. — We know. — They said I wasn’t like them. — What “not like”? — I don’t know how to play like them. Don’t like what they like. I like sitting in the corner and reading. And

they like running and screaming. I don't know how to scream. — You don't need to scream, — Iskra said. — Screaming is weakness. — Then what do I do? — Stay silent. And wait. When they get tired of screaming, you'll still be sitting in the corner with a book. And then you'll win.

The kitten looked at her. — You look like a warrior. — I look like someone who was also in the corner, — Iskra replied. — Only I didn't have a book. I had a blaster. — Is a blaster better? — A book is better, — Iskra said. — A blaster shoots, but a book teaches. I realized that too late.

The kitten sniffled. — Were you all in the corner? — Yes, — Gadget said. — I was in the corner with a soldering iron. Fixed toys for other kids, and they never said thank you. — And I was in the corner with a tablet, — Shadow said. — And trusted no one. Still don't. — And me? — Gluk asked. — I wasn't in the corner. I was in the center. Because there's more dirt in the center. And I have to clean it.

The kitten smiled. — You're funny, — he said. — And kind. — We're cheese-eaters, — Cheddar replied. — We're always kind. Especially after cheese. — Do I have cheese? — the kitten asked. — You did. You brought it to kindergarten to share. And they said it stank.

The kitten cried again, but louder now. — That was untrue! — he shouted. — My cheese didn't stink! It smelled like home! Like Mom! Like warmth! — We know, — Cheddar said. — We believe you. — But they didn't believe. — They were

stupid. — All children are stupid, — the kitten sobbed. — And the caregivers too. Especially the caregivers. — Caregivers are people who never grew up, — Gluk said. — Adults don't offend children. Adults clean them. — Clean them? — Well, morally. Teach them good things. — Nobody taught me good things, — the kitten said. — They taught me I was bad. — That's the dirtiest lie, — Gluk said firmly. — You're not bad. You're little. And little ones can't be bad. They can only be sad.

The kitten fell silent. The tears stopped flowing. The hologram began to shimmer more calmly. — Thank you, — the kitten said. — You're the first to pity me. — You're welcome, — Cheddar replied. — Pass through. The door is open.

Indeed, in the far wall, a door appeared. Large, normal size. — Let's go, — Cheddar said. — And him? — Gluk asked, nodding at the kitten. — He'll stay here. But now he knows someone pities him. That will make him stronger. — And cleaner? — And cleaner, — Cheddar agreed.

They moved toward the door. But at that moment, the room shook.

Part Three. The Trap

The walls began to close in. Slowly, but surely. — What's happening? — Gadget asked. — A trap, — Shadow replied. — Emotional. — But we pitied the kitten! — You did. But someone on the team lost patience.

Everyone looked at Iskra. She stood, fists clenched. Her face was red. — What? — she asked. — This crying gets on the

nerves! — You lost patience, — Cheddar said. — And the room started closing. — Is it my fault? — Not you. Your emotion. The trap reacts to negative feelings. You got angry — the room closed. — I'm not angry! I'm just... nervous. — It's the same thing for the system.

The walls continued to move. The distance between them was now about ten meters. In a minute, it would be five. — What do we do? — Gadget asked. — Calm Iskra down, — Shadow said. — Not possible, — Iskra replied. — I don't calm down on command. — Then calm the room. — How? — Someone needs to cry. — Why? — The trap is tied to tears. The kitten cried — the door opened. Iskra got angry — the walls moved. If someone cries, maybe the system will switch. — Who will cry? — Cheddar asked.

Everyone looked at Gluk. — I don't know how to cry, — he said. — I don't have tear ducts. I'm a robot. — What about Krylatik? — Iskra suggested.

Krylatik sat on Gluk's back and chirped in terror. — Peek-peek-peek! — He's already crying, — Gadget noted. — Just not with tears, but with sounds. — Not working, — Shadow said, looking at her tablet. — The system doesn't react to chirping. Needs real tears. Organic. — I have cheese, — Gluk said. — Cheese can cry if you cut it. — Cheese doesn't cry, it releases oil. — That's also a liquid. — Not the right one, — Cheddar cut in.

The walls kept closing. Eight meters now. — Gadget, — Cheddar said. — Can you hack the system? — I'll try, — Gadget

replied, pulling out his tablet. — But I need time. — How much? — About three minutes. — We have one. — Then help.

Cheddar looked at Iskra. — You need to calm down. — I'm trying! — Try harder. — I don't know how! — Remember something nice. — Like what? — Cheese.

Iskra closed her eyes. — Fine. Cheese. Icy Brie. Cold, salty, with noble mold. — Not mold, noble rind, — Gluk corrected. — Doesn't matter. It's tasty. I eat it on the Norka. Cheddar slices it. Gluk cleans the plate. Shadow watches. — I don't watch, I observe, — Shadow said. — What's the difference? — You calming down? — A little, — Iskra admitted.

The walls slowed down. — It's working, — Gadget said. — Keep going. — What else? — Iskra opened her eyes. — Coffee. Morning coffee. When the Norka flies smoothly, and I drink coffee on the bridge. Nobody's there. Just me and silence. — And dust? — Gluk asked. — And dust, which you scrub later. — I don't scrub dust, I scrub order. — Doesn't matter. Silence. Coffee. Order.

The walls stopped. — A bit more, — Gadget said. — I almost got it. — What do you need? — Cheddar asked. — Another thirty seconds. — But the walls are stopped. — They're stopped because Iskra is calm. But if she gets angry again... — I won't get angry, — Iskra said. — I'll keep thinking about cheese. — Think faster, — Gluk said. — I want to eat too. — You don't eat. — But I want to. Morally.

The walls trembled. — Don't get angry, — Cheddar warned.

— I'm not angry, I just want to eat. — Gluk, don't help.

Gadget tapped on his tablet. His fingers flew across the touchscreen. — Got it! — he said. — I disabled the emotion sensors. The walls won't react to mood anymore. — Will they stop? — Iskra asked. — They won't stop because they already stopped. But if someone gets angry again, nothing will happen. — Hooray, — Gluk said. — I can get angry now? — Why would you want to? — I want to check. — Don't. — Pity.

Cheddar approached the door. — Let's move. Before the room changes its mind. — Rooms don't think, — Gadget noted. — This one does. It has Myaus's emotions.

He pushed the door. It opened. Behind it was a new corridor. Normal size. — We passed, — Cheddar said. — Almost, — Shadow replied. — There's one more thing. — What? She nodded at the corner of the room. There, where the crying kitten had just stood, now sat a small hologram. No longer a kitten, but a teenager. — This is the next level, — Shadow said. — Teenage grievances. But they're behind the door. — And this? — This is memory. About what was.

The hologram raised its head. — Thank you, — it said. — You helped me. — You're welcome, — Cheddar replied. — No, really. I cried for thirty years. Thirty years, you know? And you came and pitied me. — Thirty years is a long time, — Gluk said. — In that time, you could have cleaned a lot. — I didn't know you could clean tears. — Tears can't be cleaned, — Gluk replied. — But they can be wiped. And then the face becomes dry. And

a dry face is the first step to a smile.

The hologram smiled. — You're strange, — it said. — I know. — But kind. — I try.

The hologram vanished. The room fell silent.

Part Four. Humor About Cleanliness

They exited into the corridor. Gluk stopped. — I want to do something, — he said. — What? — Iskra asked. — Go back and clean the hologram. — It's gone. — Its tears remained. On the floor.

Indeed, on the rubber floor, dark spots were visible — places where holographic tears had fallen. They weren't real, but they left marks. — It's a metaphor, Gluk, — Shadow said. — Traces of memory. — Metaphors also need cleaning, — he replied, pulling out his brush. — Don't. — I must. If a metaphor leaves a trace, it's material. And material dirt must be removed.

He rolled up to the spot and ran his brush over it. The rubber squeaked, but the spot didn't disappear. — See? — Iskra said. — It's not dirt. — Then what? — Memory. Memory can't be washed off. — Everything can be washed off, — Gluk said stubbornly. — If you know what with.

He pulled out a spray bottle with cleaning solution, sprayed the spot, and ran the brush over it again. This time the spot became lighter. — See? — he said proudly. — You're erasing Myaus's memory, — Cheddar noted. — I'm not erasing. I'm lightening. Dark memories should become bright. It's called therapy. — Therapy with a brush? — What else? Conversations?

Conversations don't clean. They only make dust.

Iskra rolled her eyes. — Move along, philosopher. — I'm a cleaner, — Gluk corrected, but obediently rolled after her.

The corridor led to an elevator. Adult, normal size. — Next level — Paranoia Department, — Shadow said, checking her tablet. — Sounds fun, — Gadget noted. — It's only fun for paranoiacs. — And Shadow is a paranoiac, — Gluk reminded. — I'm not a paranoiac, I'm cautious. — You suspect everyone. — Because everyone wants to deceive me. — Even me? — Gluk asked. — You want to clean me. That's also deception. Cleanliness is an illusion. — Cleanliness is reality, — Gluk said offended. — And I'll prove it. — On the next level, — Cheddar said. — First we go up.

They entered the elevator. The doors closed. The cabin began to rise. Gluk stared at his bulbs, blinking in thoughtful mode. — I'll still go back and clean those tears, — he said. — Metaphor or not, cleanliness must be everywhere. — Even in someone else's traumas? — Iskra asked. — Especially in someone else's traumas. Other people's traumas are the dirtiest. Because nobody cleans them.

The elevator stopped. Doors opened. On the sign it read: PARANOIA DEPARTMENT. ENTRY ONLY FOR THOSE WHO TRUST NO ONE. — Welcome, — Shadow said. — My element. — Your element is Myaus's trauma, — Cheddar noted. — Sometimes other people's traumas match your own. It's called empathy. — Or projection. — Or truth, — Shadow said and

stepped into the darkness.

The team followed. Gluk glanced back at the elevator. — I'll remember this room, — he said. — I'll come back and clean every millimeter. — Even the crying kitten? — Especially the crying kitten. Kittens must be clean. And happy.

He rolled forward. Behind him, the elevator doors closed. Ahead lay paranoia. And new tears. But Gluk knew: cleanliness would win. Even if he had to clean metaphors.

CHAPTER 3. PARANOIA

DEPARTMENT

Riddle: Why does every step here watch them?

Part One. Entrance

The elevator closed behind them with a soft, almost gentle “ding.” Gluk flinched. — Did it lock us in? — It let us out, — Cheddar replied. — Into a new department. — I don’t want a new department. I want to go back to the kitten. At least he was cute. — The kitten was a hologram. And he was crying. — But he didn’t watch me. — How do you know?

Gluk froze. — You think he was watching? — I think that on Simulacrum Station, everything watches someone. Even the walls. — Walls can’t watch, — Gadget said. — They don’t have sensors. — Are you sure? — Shadow asked.

She stood at the corridor entrance and didn’t move. Her eyes scanned the walls, ceiling, floor. — There are cameras here, — she said. — Lots of them. — Where? — Iskra asked. — Everywhere.

They entered the corridor, and Shadow was right. Cameras were everywhere. Tiny, nail-sized, in every corner, on every panel, even in the floor. They gleamed with black pupils, rotating, clicking. — Creepy, — Gluk said. — It’s paranoia, — Cheddar replied. — Literally. — Whose? — Myaus’s.

He was afraid they were watching him. So he built a place where everyone is watched. — But that's irrational! — Gadget exclaimed. — Why create what you fear? — To control the fear, — Shadow said. — If you create the cameras yourself, you know where they are. And then they aren't scary. — What if you don't know? — Then you're inside someone else's paranoia. And that is scary.

She took a step forward. The cameras all turned toward her in unison. — They're watching, — she said. — They like you. — They suspect me. In paranoia, everyone suspects everyone. Even the cameras.

Above the entrance hung a sign. Large, metal, with stamped letters: HERE YOU ARE ALREADY SUSPECTED Below it — in small print: If you are reading this, you are already under surveillance. Do not try to hide. It is useless. — Welcome to hell, — Iskra said. — Hell is cleaner, — Gluk noted. — Hell has fire. Fire sterilizes. — Have you been to hell? — No. But I read about it. There's a lot of dust. — Dust from burnt sinners. — Then it needs cleaning. — Gluk, not now.

They walked down the corridor. The cameras followed their every move. Each step echoed. Somewhere far away, something clicked. — What's that sound? — Gadget asked. — Shutters, — Shadow replied. — Cameras are photographing us. Every second. — Why? — To compare with our copies later. To figure out who's real and who's not. — What if we're all real? — Then the cameras will look for what we're lying about. — What if

we're not lying? — Then they'll find what we're afraid of. In paranoia, fear is proof of guilt.

Gluk stopped. — I'm not afraid of anything, — he said. — You're afraid of dirt. — Dirt isn't fear. It's an enemy. — An enemy you're afraid of.

Gluk thought. His bulbs blinked. — Maybe, — he admitted. — But I'm not ashamed of it. — Shame is also paranoia, — Shadow said. — Fear of others' opinions. — Then I'm not a paranoiac. I don't care what they think. — Even when you're cleaning the floor, and someone says it's already clean? — Then I think that person is an idiot. Idiots don't count.

Iskra chuckled. — You're a philosopher. — I'm a cleaner. Cleaners see the world as it is. Dirty. — And after cleaning? — Clean. But that's no longer the world. That's an ideal.

The corridor ended. They entered a large hall. The hall was round. Walls — solid screens. On each screen — themselves. From different angles, in different lighting, from different cameras. — We're everywhere, — Gadget said. — There are many of us, — Cheddar added. — Those aren't us, — Shadow said. — Those are our reflections. The system projects our images to make us feel watched. — Working, — Gluk said. — I already feel it.

He looked around. One camera stared straight at him. — What do you want? — he asked. The camera clicked. — Did it answer? — Gluk asked. — It took a picture. — That's not an answer. — For a camera — it's the best answer. It collected data.

— What kind? — Your fear. You asked “what do you want?” — which means you’re afraid it has a purpose. And it does. To watch. — I’m not afraid, I’m curious. — The camera can’t tell the difference. For it, any question is anxiety. And anxiety is proof of guilt.

Gluk fell silent. Then pulled out a rag and threw it over his head. — What are you doing? — Iskra asked. — Hiding, — Gluk said from under the rag. — Seriously? — I’m invisible! — You’re a robot with a rag on your head. The cameras see you. — Through the rag? — They have thermal imagers. — And I’m not warm. I’m a robot. — They also have motion sensors. — I’m standing still. — You move when you talk. — I talk with my mouth. My mouth doesn’t move. — You’re moving your whole body, Gluk. You’re only invisible in your head.

Gluk pulled the rag off. — This system is unfair, — he said. — Paranoia is never fair, — Cheddar replied. — It always looks for what isn’t there. — And what do we do? — Understand the logic, — Shadow said. — Like in any detective story. Find the rule. — What rule? — The one this level runs on. If we figure it out, we can pass.

She approached the wall. The screen showed her face in close-up. — Do you want to deceive me? — the screen asked in a voice resembling Myaus’s. — No, — Shadow replied. — Then why are you hiding your thoughts? — I’m not hiding them. I’m just not saying them out loud. — Not speaking means hiding. — Not speaking means staying silent. Silence isn’t a lie. — Silence

is suspicious. — For a paranoiac — yes. For a normal person — no. — You think I'm abnormal? — I think you're a trauma. Traumas are always abnormal.

The screen went dark. Then lit up again. Now it showed Cheddar. — You're lying about your intentions, — the screen said. — I'm not lying. — You say you came to help. But you want to shut down the station. — I do. Because it's killing Myaus's personality. — Personality can't be killed. It can only be copied. — A copy isn't a personality. — Then what is? — The one who suffers. The one who doubts. The one who cleans floors for no reason.

Gluk nodded. — That's me, — he said. — I'm a personality. — You're a robot, — the screen said. — Robots don't have personalities. — Yes, they do, — Gluk countered. — I love cleanliness. I love cheese. I love my team. That's a personality. — That's a program. — A program is an instruction. And I'm a choice. I choose to clean. — You're forced to clean. It's your function. — Function is work. And I work with joy. Which means it's a choice.

The screen flickered. — You're... strange, — it said. — I've been told that already. Today. Twice. — Because it's true. — Truth doesn't make me strange. Truth makes me real.

The screen went dark. This time — for a long time. — Did you break it? — Iskra asked. — I made it think, — Gluk replied. — That's worse than breaking it.

Part Two. The Rule

They walked to the center of the hall. There stood a pedestal. On it — a monitor. On the monitor — text: LEVEL RULE To pass further, perform an action that cannot be tracked. — What does that mean? — Gadget asked. — It's a riddle, — Cheddar replied. — Like “do something impossible.” — Impossible doesn't exist, — Gadget said. — Everything can be tracked if there are enough sensors. — And here there are thousands, — Shadow added. — Cameras, microphones, motion sensors, thermal imagers, smell analyzers. — Even smells? — Gluk shuddered. — They track smells? — Smell is data. You smell like polish and cheese. — That's a good smell! — For cameras — it's just molecules. They fixate on them.

Gluk sniffed himself. — I'm clean, — he said. — My molecules are in order. — Molecules aren't in order. They just exist. — I have order! — You have an illusion.

Gluk frowned and fell silent. Cheddar approached the monitor. — An action that cannot be tracked, — he repeated. — Maybe it's something mental? A thought? — Thoughts can't be tracked, — Gadget said. — There are neurointerfaces, of course, but not here. I checked. — Then a thought is an option. — But how will the system know we thought it? It needs confirmation. — So not a thought. — Maybe a feeling? — Iskra suggested. — Love, hatred, fear. They can't be tracked directly. — Only through indirect signs: pulse, pressure, pupils, — Shadow countered. — And there are sensors for all that here. Even pupils, the cameras see. — Then nothing works, —

Cheddar said. — Everything is tracked. — Seems so. — But there's a rule. Which means there's a solution.

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