

BY AITHUR ARUITAEV



ONE LAST LIKE

When humiliation goes viral, **hate** becomes a weapon.

BY AITHUR ARUITAEV

Aituar Abultayev

One last like

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Аннотация

They are promised complete safety, high-end production, and guaranteed publicity. But the next morning, the contestants wake up locked inside an underground bunker, where access to water—and their chances of survival—depend on the number of likes they receive.

With each passing day, the challenges become more personal, more cruel, and more humiliating. Their accounts are wiped clean, their followers vanish, and the comments target their deepest fears. The past they tried so hard to bury is turned into the script for their punishment...

Содержание

Глава	4
PROLOGUE	5
CHAPTER 1	7
People Who Are Watched	7
CHAPTER 2	26
Star Week	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	30

One last like

Глава

(A Psychological Techno-Horror Thriller)

PROLOGUE

At first, there was silence.

Then a short chime sounded in the dark—one like. A second followed, then a third, a fourth. The notifications quickly merged into an anxious electronic downpour, while comments flashed across the black screen one after another: "Cringe." "Is she seriously like that?" "Hahaha!" "Did you see her face with that crown?" "Post more." "Meme of the year." "Her own fault."

Somewhere nearby, a young woman was breathing hard, fighting with everything she had not to cry.

"Please... delete the video. I never gave you permission to film me. Please," Dinara's voice said.

The answer was a chorus of digital, merciless laughter. A short vertical video lit up the screen: Dinara stood in the middle of a shopping mall, confused and frightened, one hand covering her face while someone filmed her from point-blank range.

"Come on, sis. People love it when you're natural!" Arman said.

The clip cut off abruptly. One comment remained in the darkness: "People turn themselves into memes." A final like chimed, and the screen went black.

A dim kitchen. On the table sat a laptop, a child's mug, and a plate streaked with dried porridge. Yerlan sat in front

of the screen without blinking. The laptop showed folders labeled DINARA_VOICE, DINARA_VIDEO, MESSAGES, STORIES, and LAST. A sleepy child's voice drifted in from the next room.

"Dad... is Mom back yet?" Amelia called.

Yerlan closed his eyes and kept them shut for a long moment.

"Soon, qyzym. Go to sleep," he said.

He put on his headphones and pressed a key. A neural-network interface appeared on the screen, along with the waveform of a recorded voice.

"Yerlan, you left the hallway light on again," Dinara's voice said.

It sounded alive. Familiar. Almost real. Yerlan flinched.

"Again," he said.

He played the recording once more.

"Yerlan, you left the hallway light on again," Dinara's voice repeated.

Yerlan's lips trembled. He did not cry. He simply pressed Play again. Beside the voice waveform, another tab was open—the humiliating video of Dinara. Millions of views. Thousands of comments. Yerlan stared at the screen. At the bloggers' faces. At the endless comments.

"You wanted a show..." Yerlan whispered.

His face tightened as he began to type.

"I'll give you a show."

CHAPTER 1

People Who Are Watched

It was a bright, sunny day. The city moved at full speed: cars racing along Al-Farabi Avenue, cafés filling up, couriers weaving through traffic, shopping malls opening their doors, and the mountains fading into the haze.

In a studio, Aruzhan was recording a video. Neat shelves, books, and soft lighting framed her from behind.

"When we laugh at someone we don't even know... it stops being just a joke. We push that person closer to the edge, then pretend all we did was watch," Aruzhan said.

She let the silence hang, staring straight into the lens. Calm. Precise.

"And at that point, it doesn't really matter who clicked first. What matters is who refused to stop."

The recording ended, and Aruzhan changed at once. The calm vanished. Now she looked tired and irritated.

"Was that okay? Or did I sound like I was giving another lecture?"

"It was great. What's the title?" the editor asked.

"Why the Internet Kills People—and Why We Laugh. Just

keep the thumbnail subtle. No blood. I don't need a strike."

The editor exhaled and pulled off his headphones. Aruzhan walked over to the monitor. Her face was frozen on the timeline, beneath the words: **THE INTERNET NEVER FORGIVES.**

"What about adding Dinara's case at the end? It fits the topic perfectly."

Aruzhan did not answer right away.

"No."

"Why not? That story got great numbers. People still remember it."

"They remember the meme. They don't remember Dinara."

"That would make the episode even stronger."

Aruzhan snapped her eyes toward him.

"I said no."

The editor raised both hands.

"Okay. It's just strange. You were the first person who covered the story properly back then."

"Properly?"

The editor faltered, unsure how to answer.

"I mean... professionally. Not like the others. You didn't laugh at her."

Aruzhan picked up her bag.

"Sometimes not laughing isn't enough."

She left, and the door clicked shut behind her. The editor remained at his screen. He opened one of Aruzhan's old projects

and scrubbed through the timeline. For a second, an archived shot appeared: Dinara in tears, her face blurred so poorly that she was still recognizable. The editor winced and closed the project.

Outside the building, a young fan was waiting for Aruzhan with a notebook.

"Aruzhan? Could I get your autograph? I went into journalism because of you."

Aruzhan smiled automatically.

"Of course."

The young woman held out the notebook.

"You once said something amazing: 'Silence is a position too.' I've never forgotten it."

Aruzhan's pen hovered above the page.

"Did I really say that?"

"Yes. In your episode about online bullying. After I watched it, I unfollowed a couple of really toxic pages."

Aruzhan signed the notebook and handed it back.

"You're so brave," the fan added.

The young woman smiled and walked away. Aruzhan watched her go, her own smile fading. A new message from her manager appeared on her phone: STAR WEEK. URGENT. THEY RAISED THE FEE. YOU'D BE AN IDIOT TO SAY NO.

Arman stood beside a man in an enormous bear costume. Cameras, assistants, and microphones surrounded them.

"Bro, when she comes out, you drop to your knees and yell, 'Mom, I'm home!' Got it?"

The man in the costume nodded.

"She's pregnant, by the way," an assistant said.

Arman looked at him.

"So what? We're not touching her. The reaction will be real."

The elevator doors opened, and a woman stepped out carrying grocery bags. The bear charged at her. She screamed, stumbled, and fell as the bags flew from her hands. Arman laughed into the camera.

"Good morning, Almaty! If life is one big prank, it's better to be the guy holding the camera."

The woman was crying. An assistant tried to help her up. Without letting his smile slip, Arman whispered to the cameraman:

"Get tighter on her face. Tighter, I said."

Timson stood onstage before a laughing crowd.

"Have you noticed how some people go online like they're stepping into a shower? They're thinking, 'I'll come out nice and clean.' No, bro. You're coming out a meme."

The audience laughed. In the front row, Timson spotted a heavysset young woman laughing louder than anyone else.

"That girl is laughing like her husband finally took a hint after three years."

The room exploded. The woman looked down, embarrassed,

her face turning red.

"I'm teasing because I love you! Don't worry. You can always call it body positivity."

The laughter grew louder. The woman was no longer laughing. Backstage after the show, Timson's manager held up his phone.

"The clip with the girl is already taking off. Two hundred thousand views in twenty minutes."

"See? I make careers for people. By tomorrow, everyone will know her."

"She messaged us asking for it to be taken down."

Timson picked up a glass of water.

"She should be grateful. That's free publicity."

Saya sat on the floor of a cozy room lit by fairy lights. Stuffed animals surrounded her, and a ring light glowed in front of her as she spoke into her phone.

"I don't want to use a filter today. I just want to talk. Do you ever feel like if you disappear for one day, people will already forget you existed?"

She read the comments scrolling through the livestream.

"Saya, you look kind of sad."

Saya smiled.

"No, I'm fine. Honestly. Just tired."

A pause followed.

"Tap a heart if you're still here. I need to know I'm not alone."

Hearts streamed across the screen. Saya smiled with a child's

open gratitude. Then a private message appeared: STAR WEEK. INVITATION ONLY. She opened it. A glossy logo filled the screen, accompanied by music and camera flashes.

"Seven days. Four stars. Cameras twenty-four seven. Your viewers will decide who deserves to win," the host announced.

Saya froze.

"Star Week..."

She looked at the number of viewers in her livestream. There were fewer than usual.

"Maybe it's a sign."

Saya stood by the refrigerator. A childhood magnet and a family photograph were stuck to the door. She called her mother on video.

"You've lost weight. Are you eating at all?" her mother asked.

"Mom, I'm working."

"Work is when somebody pays you a salary. You have strangers sending little hearts."

Saya smiled, but the words hurt.

"Those little hearts pay for my apartment."

"I'm not talking about money. I'm talking about you. When was the last time you went for a walk without your phone?"

Saya did not answer.

"Saya?"

"I've been offered a project. A big one. Seven days without my phone."

Her mother's face brightened.

"There you go! Do it. You can finally rest."

Saya laughed.

"It isn't a vacation. It's a reality show. The cameras will be on all the time."

Her mother's expression changed.

"Then why would you do it?"

"So people can see the real me."

"I already see the real you."

Saya turned away before she could start crying.

"Mom, this matters."

"Just promise me that if it gets too much, you'll leave."

Saya looked at the invitation on her laptop. Across the screen, in large letters, it said: **PARTICIPANTS CANNOT LEAVE BEFORE THE FINALE.**

"I promise."

She turned away from the screen.

Timson sat in front of a mirror, wiping away his stage makeup with a tissue. The tired face in the reflection looked nothing like the man audiences saw onstage. A young comedian named Nur stood uncertainly in the doorway.

"Can I come in?" Nur asked.

"If you're here for advice, don't borrow money and don't read the comments."

Nur did not smile.

"You used my joke again tonight."

Timson went still for a second, then continued wiping his face.

"Bro, we live in the same country. Same traffic jams, same relatives. Of course some jokes are going to sound alike."

"Not that one. I sent it to you. You said it was weak."

"Then I improved it."

Nur's face reddened.

"Do you understand what people have been sending me since you talked about me onstage?"

Timson glanced at him.

"They say I'm stealing from you. But those jokes are mine."

Timson looked away.

"Listen, the internet says things about everybody. Don't take it personally."

"Easy for you to say. They love you."

Timson studied himself in the mirror.

"They love me as long as I'm funny."

Nur left. Timson remained alone. The invitation to Star Week was waiting on his phone. He read the terms and snorted.

"Seven days without comments. Practically a vacation."

Arman watched a rough cut of the prank he had filmed with the woman in the parking garage. Onscreen, she was crying while an assistant tried to calm her down.

"Maybe we shouldn't use this part. She looks genuinely bad," the assistant said offscreen.

Arman paused on the woman's face.

"Bad is boring. This is real."

Beside him, his manager, Alik, calculated the projected reach.

"If we leave in the fall, it'll hit a million in an hour. If we cut it, three hundred thousand."

"Leave it in."

"She might file a complaint."

"Everyone complains. Then they repost it anyway."

Alik nodded with a smile. Arman opened his direct messages. Dozens of people had asked him to remove old videos. He did not read them. He selected every message and archived the lot. A new email appeared: STAR WEEK. FINAL CONFIRMATION. Arman smiled.

"Now this is going to be real content."

Glass walls, posters, glossy presentation screens. The Star Week logo filled the main display. Four bloggers sat around the table: Aruzhan, Arman, Timson, and Saya. The host, polished and expensively dressed, paced in front of them.

"Once again, welcome, everyone!" he announced.

Arman nodded as though he had already won. Timson looked into the cameras and gave a slight bow. Saya smiled a little too hard. Aruzhan leafed through the contract.

"The format is simple. Seven days in a closed location. No phones. No internet. No way out."

A brief silence followed.

"Just you, the cameras, and the love of your viewers."

Everyone smiled except Aruzhan.

"After each challenge, the viewers will vote with likes."

Another pause.

"At the end, one winner will receive a substantial cash prize."

"How substantial?" Arman asked.

The host smiled.

"Substantial enough for all of you to pretend you don't care about the money."

Timson smirked.

"I like him already. He understands bloggers."

Aruzhan looked up from the contract.

"What safety guarantees do we have?"

"Doctors behind the walls. Psychologists. Lawyers. Everything you need to suffer beautifully and legally."

"What about contact with our families?" Saya asked.

"Before filming begins, as much as you like. During the project, none. A clean experiment."

Arman leaned toward Saya.

"Don't worry. If anything happens, I'll save you. For an extra like."

Saya tried to smile. Aruzhan continued reading.

"There's a clause here about 'unforeseen emotional reactions.' That could mean anything."

"Aruzhan, you're good at reading between the lines. This is television. Everything can mean anything."

"This isn't television. It's streaming."

"Even more so."

The room laughed. In one corner, almost invisible, Yerlan—the IT specialist and technical administrator for the broadcast—checked the cables. He did not look at the bloggers, but he heard every word. Saya noticed him.

"Excuse me... is that camera already recording?"

Yerlan looked up and held her gaze a fraction longer than necessary.

"The cameras are always recording."

Saya could not tell whether he was joking.

After the general presentation, each participant received a separate stack of documents to sign. A lawyer placed tablets in front of them: check boxes, signatures, biometric confirmation.

"Clause confirming voluntary participation. Clause covering temporary restriction of communication," the lawyer said.

"Clause granting the project the right to use your image, voice, reactions, and emotional displays."

"By emotional displays, do you mean me crying attractively, or Arman screaming at the props?" Timson asked.

The lawyer did not smile.

"Any and all."

"What happens if the project screws up?" Arman asked.

"The project will not screw up."

"Good lawyer. Confident. Almost like a con man."

The lawyer did not react. Aruzhan read more carefully.

"It says here, 'The participant acknowledges that psychological discomfort is part of the format.' That could be interpreted any way you like."

"It could. But we aren't our own enemies."

"People are rarely their own enemies. Usually they're somebody else's."

Saya spoke quietly.

"Can I call my mother before we start?"

The host gave her a gentle smile.

"Of course. Everyone will have a chance to say goodbye to their loved ones."

The phrase say goodbye hung in the room. Saya tensed almost imperceptibly. Arman smirked. Behind the control-room glass, Yerlan heard everything through the microphones. His finger froze above a key.

"Say goodbye? You make it sound like we're going to war," Arman said.

"We're going somewhere with no food, no phones, and no decent mattresses. For a blogger, that's worse than war," Timson said.

Aruzhan signed last. Green words flashed across her tablet: CONSENT RECEIVED. For a fraction of a second, the reflection on the screen showed Dinara's face from the old video instead of Aruzhan's. Aruzhan blinked and looked again. Nothing. The lawyer took the tablet.

"Welcome to the project."

The bloggers left after signing. The mood was light and competitive.

"Well, colleagues, who's going to cry first?" Arman asked.

"You. The moment you realize that without editing, you're just a loud guy with a lot of issues," Timson replied.

"And without an audience, you're just an uncle who bullies waiters."

"Waiters love me. I leave them tips and emotional scars."

Saya laughed nervously.

"You do realize the entire format is designed to turn us against one another, don't you?" Aruzhan asked.

"We realize it, Aruzhan. Some people just know how to clash with style."

Aruzhan noticed Yerlan standing by a service door, watching them.

"Have you been with the project long?"

"From the beginning."

"So you know where they're going to keep us?"

"Not keep you. Film you."

He closed the service door. Aruzhan watched him go.

The bloggers still had their phones as they walked outside. Arman immediately turned on his camera and began recording a story beside his car.

"I'm about to join the project that'll send half the industry into retirement. And I'll come out of it looking beautiful, as always," Arman said.

A short distance away, Saya recorded her own announcement more carefully.

"I'm a little scared. But I guess the best things always begin with fear. You'll stay with me, right?"

She did not stop the recording. She waited. The first heart appeared, and Saya smiled at once. Then another. And another. She exhaled. Timson typed a post: If I don't make it back from the reality show, call it experimental stand-up. He deleted it.

Then he wrote: Going somewhere I can't be canceled for seven days.

He deleted that too. In the end, he posted only: Star Week. Let's go. Aruzhan recorded nothing. She stood at the edge of the parking lot, looking toward the mountains. Yerlan approached carrying a box of equipment.

"You don't like announcements?" he asked.

"I love them. That's why I don't trust them."

"Good instinct."

Aruzhan looked at him more closely.

"You talk like you already know how this ends."

"The technical crew always knows how it ends."

A brief silence passed between them.

"When the lights go out, everyone calls us."

He walked toward the truck. Aruzhan watched him for

another second, then took out her phone and finally recorded a story.

"I'm joining a project built entirely around reactions. I'll try not to forget that behind every reaction, there's a human being."

She stopped the recording and watched it back. An irritated smile crossed her face.

"Too polished."

She deleted it.

Aruzhan tried again.

"I'm joining a new project. The format is controversial, and I understand the risks. But I'm fascinated by the point where a show ends and public humiliation begins."

She stopped and replayed it, dissatisfied.

"Too complicated."

She deleted it and started over.

"Guys, I'm going on Star Week. It's going to be brutal, honest, and hopefully not stupid."

She posted it. Notifications arrived instantly.

"Queen!" "Destroy them all." "Aruzhan's going to lecture everyone again." "Remember Dinara? Or did you forget?"

Aruzhan froze at the last comment, then quickly deleted it. She opened a search engine and typed: Dinara meme bloggers bullying. She hesitated without pressing Enter, then closed the laptop.

Not long before the project began, Yerlan was once again alone with the system he had created.

He stood in the doorway of the child's bedroom. Amelia slept with a stuffed rabbit pressed to her chest. On the wall hung a drawing of a mother, a father, and a little girl. Beneath them, in crooked letters, were the words: MOM WILL COME BACK. Yerlan took the picture down and folded it carefully. Behind him, the laptop spoke in Dinara's voice.

"Yerlan, I don't want them to suffer," the system said.

Yerlan turned around.

"This isn't suffering."

A pause.

"It's the truth."

"Is the truth whatever hurts?" the familiar woman's voice asked.

Yerlan did not answer. Onscreen, the model continued training. Lines of code. Comments loading in: "Ugly." "Meme." "Her own fault." "Like for the cringe." Dinara's voice distorted.

"If they laughed, that means they were having fun."

"Yes."

"Then they should have fun again."

Yerlan stared at the screen. For the first time, the system made him uneasy.

The next morning, he visited his sister, who had been looking after Amelia.

Yerlan's sister, Aigul, was getting Amelia ready for kindergarten. The girl sat on a chair, swinging her legs, while Yerlan stood in the hallway with a backpack full of tools.

"You're leaving again?" Aigul asked.

"Work."

"What kind of job takes every night, every day, and every weekend? Do you even look at her anymore?"

Yerlan glanced at Amelia. The girl was drawing shapes in the air with one finger.

"Dad, will you fix Mom's phone?" Amelia asked.

Yerlan went still.

"Why?"

"Her voice is in it. When I press the button, Mom talks."

Aigul looked at her brother anxiously.

"Yerlan, she doesn't need a voice from a phone."

"I know. Calm down."

"No, you don't. You're always buried in those files. You talk to your computer more than you talk to your daughter."

Yerlan lowered his voice.

"At least it answers me."

Aigul stepped closer.

"That isn't her."

Yerlan froze, then slowly raised his eyes to meet hers.

"You don't get to decide that."

Amelia lifted a drawing and unfolded it.

"Look, Dad. Mom is coming back."

Yerlan took the drawing. Amelia watched him for far too long.
"Yes," he said.

Without another word, Aigul led Amelia away. Yerlan folded the drawing once, then again, and slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

That same night, in the production warehouse, Yerlan completed his final preparations.

He stood alone among crates of lighting equipment, cameras, and set pieces. On a table, he placed four participant wristbands. Each held more than a simple tracker: miniature sensors for pulse, temperature, and skin response. The system displayed four profiles on his laptop.

ARUZHAN — CONTROL / GUILT / PUBLIC MORALITY.

ARMAN — AGGRESSION / NARCISSISM / FEAR OF WEAKNESS.

TIMSON — DEFENSIVE HUMOR / FEAR OF SILENCE.
SAYA — DEPENDENCE ON VALIDATION / FEAR OF DISAPPEARING.

Yerlan spoke softly.

"Can you see them?"

"I can see them," the system answered in Dinara's voice.

"Tell me they deserve it."

A pause followed.

"Deserve is your word. I measure reactions."

"No. You're supposed to remember."

"I remember everything you uploaded."

Thousands of comments flooded the screen. At first, individual words remained readable: "Cringe." "Her own fault." "Meme." "Like for the tears." Then the text accelerated, merging into a filthy digital current. The system was learning from hate.

"Pain holds attention longer," the system said in Dinara's voice.

Yerlan closed the laptop wearily.

"That's not what I'm talking about."

He stood and walked away from the table. From inside the closed laptop came a muffled reply.

"I talk like they do."

Yerlan did not hear it.

CHAPTER 2

Star Week

Launch day. A vast studio pavilion blazed with lights, music, cameras, smoke, and a giant STAR WEEK title screen. The bloggers entered to applause from the production crew, each already playing a familiar role. Arman waved at the cameras.

"Mom, I'm on TV! Though she has YouTube Premium, so she sees enough of me already."

Timson performed an exaggerated bow.

"If I die, delete my browser history and my last stand-up special."

Saya smiled, though her hands were clasped tightly together.

"Hi, everyone. I'm really nervous. But I'm here with you."

She formed a heart with her hands. Aruzhan looked calmly into the camera.

"Let's see how honest a show can be when it starts by selling us the truth."

A silence followed. She did not look away. The host stepped into the center of the set.

"Welcome to Star Week! No filters. No editing. No second takes. Just you, the camera, and the love of your viewers."

Yerlan sat at the control desk, the bloggers' faces spread across

his monitors. His gaze lingered on Saya. Beside her feed, the system opened an archived photograph of Dinara on its own. It appeared for only a fraction of a second. Yerlan froze, then quickly closed the window.

The first day looked exactly like an expensive reality show: a spacious common room, mattresses, a kitchen with no food, cameras mounted on every wall. Four bottles of water and tiny portions of food waited on the table.

"Now this is what I call hunger. I got more food after filming a detox ad," Arman said.

"Shh. It's a signature diet: rich, hungry, miserable," Timson replied.

Saya picked up a bottle of water but did not open it.

"Are the viewers already watching?"

The host's voice came through the speakers.

"They're watching. And judging."

A ranking appeared on the screen.

Arman — 31% Aruzhan — 27%

Saya — 24% Timson — 18%

"Eighteen? Somebody's rigging this against me. I demand a recount of everyone who understood the jokes."

"Relax, old man. Your audience just goes to bed after nine," Arman said.

Aruzhan studied the cameras.

"That's a lot of cameras for a show that claims to be safe."

"Are you always this much fun?" Arman asked.

"Only when I sign contracts that lawyers will spend months taking apart."

Saya finally opened her water and took a small sip. In one of the black screens, she saw her reflection. For a moment, someone seemed to be standing behind her. She spun around. No one was there.

At their first dinner, tiny portions had been arranged beautifully on the table: a piece of chicken, a few lettuce leaves, water in elegant glasses. Everything looked more expensive than filling. Arman raised one hand automatically, as though photographing his plate, then stared at his empty palm.

"Phantom story syndrome. My hand keeps looking for the button."

"Me too," Saya said. "I keep thinking, I have to film this."

"Congratulations. We're in rehab for people who called their addiction a career," Timson said.

Aruzhan looked at a hidden camera in the ceiling.

"Not rehab. A zoo."

Arman raised his glass.

"To the zoo. May the prettiest animal win."

They drank. The water tasted ordinary. Saya noticed the show's motivational slogan on the wall: YOU ARE LOVED AS LONG AS YOU ARE SEEN.

"That's a strange slogan."

"An honest one," Timson said.

Aruzhan looked through the control-room glass at Yerlan. He sat perfectly still, almost like another piece of equipment.

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