

Abandoned world



AWAKENING



Vladimir Anderson

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Abandoned World: The Awakening

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Аннотация

We haven't seen our creators and we don't know where they came from. We don't know anything at all. Twenty-four years ago, the first of us woke up, and then the other seven thousand. We are the second generation to live on this earth and not know the details. That world that has been entrusted to us has very few colors, and its main one is gray. We see gray on this planet everywhere outside of our station. We can breathe freely only when we are on the station itself, and even the ability to walk normally is only on our station too. And outside of it, we will die without spacesuits, and our ability to move around turns into light hops across the surface. Whoever left us all this didn't even bother to tell us what we were all doing there, or what our mission was.

A station on the dark side of the moon, where people woke up from cryosleep not knowing where they were or what to do.

Содержание

Prologue	5
Natalie	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	39

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Prologue

We haven't seen our creators and we don't know where they came from. We don't know anything at all. Twenty-four years ago, the first of us woke up, and then the other seven thousand. We are the second generation to live on this earth without knowing the details.

That world that has been entrusted to our care has very few colors, and its main one is gray. We see gray on this planet everywhere outside of our station. We can breathe freely only when we are on the station itself, and even the ability to walk normally is only on our station too. And outside of it, we will die without spacesuits, and our ability to move around turns into light jumps on the surface.

The one who left us all this didn't even bother to tell us what we were all doing there, or what our task was. Let alone explain to us why we were treated so cruelly – left alone without the right to live a full life.

Now we are ruled by the Supreme Council of Elders organized by ourselves. In the beginning, everything was decided by a general meeting, but we quickly realized that it was inefficient and caused more discussion than practical use.

Natalie

The main dining room, where Natalie was eating now, was quite spacious, unlike most of the other rooms in our large common house, Appollo-24. That's what we call it, because the word is written literally everywhere – on the seal doors, in the headers of the bulletin boards, on dishes, clothing, and exterior paneling. We all know for a fact that this is the name of our station. And this name bored us so much that already on the first clothes, which we began to make ourselves, and not to get from warehouses, we wrote anything else or nothing, as long as not to write this ubiquitous Appollo-24, the meaning of which nobody knew.

Natalie had synthetic porridge and two sausages on her plate. Despite its humble appearance, she found it delicious, from the beginning to the point of satiety, a clear sign that it was not only hunger that made her appetite grow, but also the food itself. I always want to go and ask for a refill, but we all know we're not entitled to a refill; each of us has been assigned an exact portion by a decision approved by the Council of Elders.

There were separate conversations about this, of course. After all, none of us saw what would happen if we didn't eat as much as we were allowed. We had a case three years ago when one of us, Wyatt Maverick, lost a family member – after a few days of a strange fever, one of the waking twenty-four year olds died

prematurely. The grief was such that Wyatt stopped eating, and despite entreaties from administration, friends, and even a few Council members, continued to do so for nearly a week until he collapsed. He didn't look very healthy before that, but after he stopped eating, he began to pale, lose strength, and sleep longer than usual. Thus we learned what can happen to us if we stop eating – we become pale, lack strength and faint. Some have suggested the opposite in that if we eat more than allowed – becoming red, powerful and with insomnia. The picture is not much better. And since that is the case, it is better to listen to the elders once again – since they were the first to wake up, they know best.

At Natalie's table was Taylor from the extraction department, a guy three years younger than Natalie – she was thirty-two now, and like him, she was of the generation that woke up as a child. He'd been hitting on her for a while now, and once she'd even heard him rave about her breasts, calling them "firm balls" that he'd love to fondle. She had heard a lot about her figure, and she knew very well how many desires men had when they passed by – the jumpsuit fit her breasts and hips very tightly, and even though it was a little tight in places, she didn't think of changing the

size of her clothes. She loved the fact that she was attracting so much lust, though she wasn't attracted to Taylor at all. He was too much of a pushover, and that, as always, only served to repel. But as a conversationalist, he was very nice.

– Nat, you know what I found last night? After lights out... I was up all night. – Taylor would sometimes start talking to her like that, thinking he could get her interested, and sometimes he did.

Natalie didn't say anything back-she knew it was worth it to pretend to be interested, and he'd drag on with the story, as if it would give him some points in her personal conquest. As if her interest in his story would make her want him more than not at all. And there's no way to explain it. We've all learned that multiplying 0 by any number is useless, it's still 0. Or maybe he doesn't realize he has a 0. He thinks there are other numbers after the decimal point.

– Or are you not interested? – Apparently, Taylor was beginning to realize over time that the tactic wasn't working and needed to be changed. Or at least try.

– Tell me if there's anything. I'm all ears. – The girl still didn't show that she was really interested, continuing to realize that it was the only thing that protected her. After all, learning something new was always something she wanted to do, because the knowledge itself was almost nonexistent. She had long believed that the elders knew much more, but they just didn't tell the others for their own, probably far-fetched reasons. Or maybe they were waiting for something. And if that's the case, then you have to be able not to pretend that you are waiting for some moment that may never come. You are waiting for the truth, which may not be there, but certainly won't be if everyone

sees that you need it so much.

– Starcraft. – He finally announced very quietly and conspiratorially, so that no one could hear but her. – I found Starcraft yesterday...

– What's that? To brush your teeth? Back scratching? What do you do with it? – From time to time, everyone found different objects, and then they worked together to figure out their purpose, leaving it for the use of the one who found it. Sometimes it happened to find a thing together with a manual, and then the elders copied it, rewarding the finder separately for the find.

– No..." Taylor said even more quietly. – It's a game... On a computer...

Now that was a crime. In school, from the very beginning of education, it was taught what a crime was and how it could be punished. There were two kinds of crimes: negligent "misdemeanor" and intentional "felony". The former concerned mistakes made in one's work, or accidentally slipping out a forbidden phrase that could be overheard. For example, one could not publicly question the assigned lessons of our history. Since we were taught that our planet was third from the sun in number, the smallest in the solar system, then it was. If we were told that we had once polluted it to the point where it was no longer safe to be on the surface without a hazmat suit, then that was also true. Since we were taught that all other planets were uninhabited, there was no point in doubting it, at least not

publicly. No one told you not to think what you want to think. The elders directly said – you have freedom of thought, it is a very important gift, no one can take it away from you. But don't break other people's thoughts – keep your own to yourself. For breaking other people's thoughts you could get a warning from the elders, as an unintentional crime.

The second category of crimes, intentional, concerned those things that were done with the purpose of violating the foundations of our society, such as hiding found materials. Whether it was information on a computer or a separate medium, when found, it was supposed to be immediately handed over for study by the elders themselves, because it could be something sacred, which was supposed to be known only to them. Otherwise, one could be imprisoned in the so-called prison of longing or simply "Toska", a separate structure from the main station, where one could be placed for a period of time equal to the crime committed, which was also determined by the elders.

– Are you making this up to get me into your room? – Natalie really didn't believe that Taylor would be willing to break the law so severely, even if it gave him something to actually be interested

in. He might be obsessed with the idea of fucking her, but not to the point where he'd risk being trapped for years in Tosca, where he'd have another desire, now just to get back to normal.

– No, no... I'll tell you... Anyway, there are different planets

out there. And it's not just people like us. It's not just humans. There's also protos and zerg. Protos are like us, only with blue blood and oblong shapes. They seem to have technology that's cooler than ours. And the Zerg are like cockroaches, only bigger. And they can breathe without a spacesuit...

– And what are they all doing?

– They're fighting. They're fighting over resources. There's crystals and green gas. It's strange, of course. We don't mine that kind of stuff here.

– Maybe you wouldn't have taken such a risk then, and just given this game to the right people to study?

– Yes? And once again we'll be given back an empty stump with one story, as they tell us? Or even with fiction, which can't be?

– From what you're telling me, it's already fantastic as it can't be... So you'll apparently get it back the same, and everyone on the station will just end up getting a new game.

Taylor was a little offended. He didn't seem to be fully telling what he knew, and he hadn't decided if he should. On the one hand, it showed that he wasn't lying about the game. On the other hand, there was nothing interesting about it.

– That's not all I found on this flash drive....

– A flash drive?! – so he didn't just find one program in a hidden folder on his computer, he found a whole media with something new, and now he's sitting there on his own, digging through it. You might not come back from Tosca at all.

– Quiet, you... Yes, a flash drive... There are more movies. I haven't seen them yet. But it looks interesting... I was going to suggest that we go together. Will you go?

It seems that the concern has blown his mind, and he wants her to keep him company in Tosca, too. It was an interesting plan, though – he'd have no competition there, and she might forget what those she liked looked like. It looked like he'd thought about how he was going to spend the next thirty years.

– Taylor, I have no desire to spend the rest of my life watching you in a jail cell And it looks

like that's where it might end up. Give that flash drive to the elders, and then you can tell me what you get back. – Natalie got up from the table and took the tray with the leftovers and moved towards the exit.

It was not the first time she had heard of similar finds. People had found flash drives, memory cards, and even whole laptops in completely different places. Of course, most of them had been found in the first year, when everyone woke up, but they still found bits and pieces. And, as it usually turned out, they were tidbits that only fueled the intrigue for such things, despite the threat of prison. And there was something about it We had an official history of our planet and

everything around it, and there was no good reason to suggest that it wasn't. Except for the very beginning of our present life.

We are officially on the third planet from the Sun, called Earth. It is the smallest in the solar system and therefore has no satellites, unlike most other planets. And a few thousand years ago, it was of a completely different kind than it is now: with beautiful seas and oceans, evergreen forests and lots of wildlife in it. Back then it was still possible to walk freely on the surface and live without a spacesuit. But for a long time everything was polluted to such an extent that the cataclysms that occurred led to what we have now – a gray lifeless desert with no air. At one point we agreed to immerse ourselves in a centuries-old cryosleep to wait for better times. But waking up after the dream, we realized that we had lost our memory in the process, and now we are recovering it bit by

bit. And to keep the truth from weighing us down, all information must first go to the elders, who understand the importance of dosing information. That was the story we were taught from birth in school. But it was not readily believed by everyone.

After all, there were a number of contradictions. Some said that it was safe to walk on the station, because special engines were working there, forming a stronger attraction. While outside it – you can easily jump without much difficulty for a dozen meters.

Others have found a contradiction in the fact that textbook maps have many mountains and other kinds of high altitude

landscapes that are not even close to being on our planet. Okay, that everything died out, vaporized, and became impossible to breathe, but why did the topography change so much. Of course, only a few people were allowed to walk everywhere, and even more so to ride far away on overcars, and they kept silent in front of everyone else, but from any window one could see the complete absence of any mountainous systems on all sides of Appollo-24.

Others went even further and began to study the movies that we got on various kinds of media and that we were allowed to watch. And the biggest question that came to mind was why the technologies we see in the movies are not very different from ours, but the surrounding reality is completely different. They can breathe fresh air, they have seas and forests, and the same technology. If it came out that we've screwed up our own planet, it couldn't have happened overnight. Which means the movies we've seen are far from catastrophic. But it can't be, because technology certainly doesn't stand still – how much we've managed to invent in our twenty-four....

There were no answers to all these questions – only doubts. Some people had tried to dig into them, but it had been 14 years since they had been forbidden to discuss them publicly. The new found materials began to be turned in after the incident when Oscar Midnight, an engineer of the energy block, was put in Tosca's cell for concealing a hard disk he had found. No one even knows what he saw there, or if he saw it at all, but when

he was taken away he shouted that everyone was being lied to, that the place we were on was called the moon, not Earth, and on that word he was hit in the back of the head. Fourteen years have passed since then, and no one has ever seen him again, and everyone began to share their thoughts only in whispers.

It was very strange to look at. Could just renaming his planet to something else be such a threat? The fact that he called the Earth Moon wouldn't change it, even if it did. It will still be the third planet from the Sun, even if it has a different name. Everything will be just as bleak as it is now, and just as hopeless. The best we can do now is to adapt to the conditions we have and still live our lives. And let them call this planet whatever they want, but she, Natalie, is thirty-two years old now, and she still gets so underdressed she wants to climb the wall.

It wasn't hard for her to admit it to herself, but she didn't like the men who were always chasing her. She had short romances, but even if in bed, some of them were okay, there was nothing to talk about with them. And they clearly valued her breasts and ass, not her intelligence. She didn't even doubt that, just as she didn't think she could get very far with that.

And that was important, after all. She had been preparing herself since birth to use her own brains for the common good, and now she was proud to say that she had succeeded. She was now the lead researcher in the science department, and it was her job to study primarily the matter around them for any benefit. And her recent discovery, the extraction of helium-3 from soil,

was truly a breakthrough.

It's a shame so few people knew about it. Even if someone had given them access to this information, it would hardly have made a difference. Few people realize that the thermonuclear power plant we have at the station could not work forever without a new boost. At first, the generation of electricity was considered something supernatural, believing that it didn't need to be managed. But very quickly they realized that without human intervention such a system would not work all the time. And that it, like everything else, also needs to be fed with something. The material

was found quickly enough, but it was only six months ago that the department under Natalie Jackson realized how to separate one thing from another so that something else could be used as fuel.

Then Natalie was quietly rewarded by being moved to a larger room in the New York block. She had two rooms, each larger than her previous home. And the people who lived there were much more educated than those who lived with her in the Texas block.

There were four blocks in all: northern Illinois, eastern New York, western California, southern Texas. Appollo-24 was in the shape of a cross with a voluminous center with a branch off to each side with a separate block. Texas, where she'd lived before, was dominated by people from the mining and food section –

more laboring and less thinking. Among them were just most of her suitors, with whom she was so dissatisfied. In New York, in addition to the science section, there were also people from the energy section, who were notable for their intelligence and ability to find complex solutions. One of them, Morgan Blackwood, whom she had recently met, had even taken a liking to her.

He was very different from all the others, especially in his intelligence. He literally understood on the fly what could be the cause of some process and began to work in this direction. There was no ostentatious show-off from him – he carefully and systematically considered all the pros and cons of some statement, and then said aloud how they could be perceived. And what was especially attractive was his patience – he didn't seem to lose his temper at all, and the emotions coming from him, which were few, were usually positive.

But the difficulty was that for some reason he wasn't paying much attention to her. It looked like he liked her too, but he didn't really need much of anything. Morgan could keep up a conversation with her, make jokes, show her something, but nothing more than that. As soon as work time was over, he'd retreat to his room.

And the more original way to look at it was that the last project she had to conduct was with him. Morgan was the head of one of the departments in the energy section responsible for monitoring the fusion reactor. Checking, measuring, predicting and being sure of everything that happened to it – that was his central task.

Natalie was assigned to investigate the possibilities of expanding its power at maximum efficiency while using Helium-3, which she had just learned how to adapt to use from the surrounding ground.

Morgan showed and told her everything about the reactor's operation. In places where the data was highly classified, he'd said so. He'd even recommended that the two of them petition to release the data to her, but she'd thought that was premature. In truth, though, she just wanted to spend more time with him. He felt safe and secure, as if he was a shield from the problems around him, and when she was in the same room with him, she felt safer than ever.

On this day, she wanted to know more about him. Maybe it would encourage him to do something. After all, there weren't that many people on Apollo 24, and he'd pick someone eventually.

– Do you ever get tired here? When you're working. – she asked, after they'd been working on the schematics of one of the fuel rods for an hour and a half, trying to figure out how to configure it for helium-3.

– I'm more tired when I'm not working," Morgan answered without looking at her. – I'm here on my day off, too.

– And you don't get tired of it? – she moved a little closer to him. Just a little. The office they were sitting in didn't even have windows to the outside, and given that the entire area was three by four meters, but it was hard to imagine a more intimate

setting.

– It happens. – Morgan turned to her and looked straight into her eyes, and there was something in those eyes that showed his returning interest in her. – But it passes quickly when I go back to work... I'm more interested in where we're going to do all this...

– I don't understand you. You mean "where"? What are the options? – She really didn't know what he meant.

– You see, what's working now is a nuclear reactor. And judging by the processes that are going on in it, it's safe to say that if it were to explode, the whole of Apollo 24 would be wiped out. Maybe it wouldn't hit something standing in the distance, but the station itself would be turned inside out in seconds... What we're studying right now is a fusion reactor. Even though it's probably the size of this room, it will be three times more powerful... And the question is, will we be allowed to build it on the station itself?

She really hadn't thought about that at all. To her, even the talk about the explosive danger of their already operating reactor seemed more like scare stories told to keep people awake on the job and to make them more responsible. After all, if it went out, for example, they were just as likely to die as if it exploded, just longer.

– Yeah, you can blow up if you work every day..." she said with a sigh, starting to think it wouldn't work at all. He's too immersed in his activities, obviously, which he enjoys day after day. They say you can fight abusers, but you can't fight

workaholics. It's a perfectly legal withdrawal from your personal life, certainly in the conditions we live in.

Morgan smiled, and she thought he looked at the curve of her breasts in the jumpsuit for what seemed like an eternity, but still:

– You say that like you don't even want to live.

– How can you call it life when everyone around you is just thinking about how to do a better job... You know, they often hide behind the desire to get some results, but that's not the point. I've seen how they work – they sit idle, they spend their time for nothing, and there's no use... You need a spark – a desire to find something. When you have it, then you'll get results. And then you will do something with interest, and at some moments you will also delay until you finally get what you are looking for. And you will be satisfied with yourself, and you will want to spend time after that in pleasure... Because you will know that only after having a good rest, you can get a new spark, which will also lead you to the next success... That's what I mean. – Her eyes directly glittered as she said this, with a tone that wasn't instructive or haughty. She just wanted to say that everything has its own time, and the time that you are entitled to should not be thrown away as something unnecessary.

Morgan shook his head affirmatively, looking at the blueprints again. Still, he was handsome, too. Not just smart and calm, but handsome, too. It was the kind of masculine beauty that was not immediately apparent and could not be boasted of as a picture. This beauty is more charismatic, radiant, as if there was

a difference between a face made of bronze or shabby paper. This one was made of bronze.

– I take it you didn't have a good time in Texas? – he finally said.

– Not really... You can't argue... Have you ever wondered why our blocks are called that? Like states?

– No... Somehow I never thought about it... But they are quite logically located on the sides of the world.

– That's true. But then why is the station itself called Apollo and not America or the United States, for example? We are told that we live in the former USA in North America. Would that make sense? Or if it's a city, why not just call it that city?

– Natalie, this kind of talk... You've only known me for a couple months and already you trust me so much....

– All right. If you can't be trusted, then I'll know... And I'll know what a bore you are. Now

do you see why you're talking about something you can't call life? Everybody's either horny or boring. Sometimes both at the same time.

It sometimes seemed to her that it was true that all men were strictly divided into these two types. Some think with their dicks, others only with their heads. And the ones who could think with their heads and only satisfy her with their dicks had never been

found. That would be ideal, and it seems she's not going to find one. They're all either all about cock or all about brains. I mean, it's like he looked at her breasts, he was attracted to something. But he didn't. That's exactly what it seemed like.

– When you made the helium-3 discovery, what were you thinking? – Morgan turned to her again and stared into her eyes. Her beautiful, bright green eyes. And so appealing that she immediately stopped thinking of him as a nerd.

– I was just interested... I studied it because I was interested. Not to do any good for anyone.

Or to get a better place to live. No... But because I was interested... And I can definitely say that's why I did it... Interest is the spark that drives us to something more....

– What about our fusion reactor project?

– That's up to you. – Natalie said the words slowly, first averting her gaze and then returning it to Morgan's eyes at the end of the sentence. She wanted him to be interested in something. If not her figure, her beauty, or her intelligence, then at least some mystery, even if there wasn't one.

And it seemed to work, because he smiled. He smiled just a little, and shook his head affirmatively:

– Then we can definitely make it work. We could go have coffee at my place once we're done. Is that okay with you?

A small stone flew off her shoulders, though there were literally many other stones still on her back as she did so:

– Well, unless you insist.

– I insist. So here's the deal We've got another half hour on these drawings today. And to

keep our conscience clear, we should finalize them properly...

His quarters consisted of four separate rooms, not just two like hers, but four at once-not just luxurious by our standards, but unprecedented. Natalie hadn't even known it was possible to live like this, or that there were private rooms of this size on the station.

– How's the coffee? – Morgan asked. Before he poured her a mug, he asked about what kind she liked to drink it in, what she liked to put more of, and, most interestingly, how she understood the process in general. It was strange and surprising at the same time – she had never really thought about the fact that people could do the same things while inwardly understanding completely different things. It wasn't until he asked specifically about her way of seeing that she realized that it was something that came out completely different for everyone. She was the one who drank coffee to relax, smelling the delicious aroma and nothing more. And someone else drank it to perk up, to take a break, to think about something. And probably a lot of other things she couldn't even think of. And these thoughts about coffee made her think that all things people could do in the same way, from the simplest to the most exclusive.

For example, to do something that brings you income as a

useful member of society – this people could consider from the position of personal satisfaction, and from the position of recognition by others, and just not to sit idle, dying of boredom, and to communicate with someone, including not on everyday issues. It turned out that not everyone and not everything people do as it seems at first glance, simply because we have long been accustomed to perceive it that way. And that opens up the next level of this cognition.

After all, since everyone perceives even basic things differently, therein lies the difference in results and approach. In this context, this conclusion becomes obvious, although initially it did not even come to mind. And all because we are used to perceiving people everywhere as we have

already decided to consider them. If we see, for example, someone diligent at work, we automatically think that he is a diligent person, forgetting that this is only the attitude that we see exclusively in relation to his work. And in this case the reason can only be that he finds comfort for himself in his work. And what is more, if he seeks this comfort from his personal life, then it is fair to assume that in this case in his personal life he will be the exact opposite of the way he behaves at work – he will be lazy and apathetic.

The problem is that we don't see a person from all sides of his life at the same time. And even if we see several different sides of him, we still consider him as the main one in some of

them. Whether he is primarily our friend or our colleague. He can be both at the same time, but we will always perceive him only from one side. And if he is a friend, he will be a friend at work, not a colleague.

– Your coffee turns your brain on properly. – Natalie replied, really already thinking that the drink was exceptional. Whether from Morgan's ability to elicit specifics or from the fact that the questions added fuel to the fire of Natalie's already regular musings.

She was now sitting on the black leather sofa, a red mug clutched neatly in both hands. For all Morgan's obvious wealth, the interior was modestly furnished, and it was obvious that most of the things he'd made himself rather than ordering them from someone else. It created not only a certain coziness, but also a sense of self that wasn't present in other places, because it was obvious that someone had done it with a heart, not just for the sake of beauty.

The room was a guest room, with four doors leading to other rooms. There was a large black leather sofa in the middle, a low glass table in front of it, and a large armchair farther away, right in front of a panoramic window that was two meters long and one meter high – the most important indicator of wealth on the station. Such windows began to be put already after awakening, having developed alloys stronger than the cladding itself. And it turned out that the more vulnerable section appeared to be stronger, so it was put on the outside, which at the same time

allowed to get a magnificent view of the surrounding area.

And these surroundings from his position turned out to be amazingly gorgeous, because from his side began the now dried up, and formerly existed Atlantic Ocean, going down to the bottom, allowing to observe a wider space. And although everything was covered with the same gray regolith, the sheer volume of the view was literally breathtaking.

– You wanted to talk about how logical everything was. – Morgan began, sitting not quite close but at arm's length from her. – Now, the first thing I'm going to show you is the view from my window. You see this expanse... We all know that this is the Atlantic Ocean, which dried up years ago... Isn't that what they tell us?

– Uh-huh. – Natalie carefully took another sip of coffee, remembering again her thoughts about people's different attitudes toward the same process. Truly today's discovery.

– So it's not the Atlantic Ocean... You've been candid with me today, and I'm just responding in the same way... This is all red-hot talk, of course, but it's not the Atlantic Ocean, and I don't just think that, I've proven it.

– Prove it how?

– I found maps of the seabed in quite a bit of detail. Accuracy up to 10, in some cases up to 50 meters. Then I took pictures of my view from different angles. Nobody's stopping me from doing that. Then I digitized it all into one technical unit, and compared my datum with what was stored as data on the Atlantic

seabed, trying to find my location... And there was nothing. Just nothing...

Where we are now is not the Atlantic seabed.

– Maybe it just wasn't preserved the same way? Didn't you do some kind of comparison?

– Exactly. Parameters. I was sure I wouldn't find a 100% probability, that much is clear. But the results I got were less than one percent similar. 0.00002 percent. A 0.00002 percent location match means that the system just hit some points in the sky.

– And what versions do you have on all this? Are the maps wrong? Or what?

– I would have thought, of course, that they were wrong, outdated or something, but on this scale... It's only been millions of years. But if that were the case, there'd be nothing left of our station... But that's not all. I'm not just talking about the view from the window... When you observe everything so volumetrically every time, you start to compare many things.

– Like what else?

– For example, sunrise and sunset.....

He looked out at the horizon, and she thought at that moment that it looked like a somewhat romantic scene was about to begin. And the view was good for it-after all, the vastness of the view from his apartment was impressive. Something similar could be observed only in the dining room, but there the view was of

the starry sky, not of the earthly expanse. And slowly doubts began to creep in that it was not only because of the high cost of production of such glass....

– You've probably noticed how many of the movies we're allowed to watch have the main characters get up at the crack of dawn, right?

– Of course you do. It was the main topic for romantic delights among girls. " Natalie smiled.

It was indeed a frequent topic of discussion and personal fantasies – waking up at dawn with your lover and going to bed with him at dusk. In the movies it was shown with incredible ease, while in the realities of the world dawn and dusk happened once every 14 days. There were 14 days for each daylight period, and the same number for each night. Hollywood portrayed everything as if all the most important events took place necessarily in those days when dawn or dusk occurred, apparently to make a more tangible impression on the audience. Why it was necessary to build the entire cinema in this way, was still quite unclear, but the traits of romance penetrated the girls when watching these films from an early age.

– Well, both sunrise and sunset in reality look very different from what is shown there. And they don't last the same amount of time that they do. There it happens literally in an hour, and what I see lasts for 24 hours. And I could believe that the ancient filmmakers waited two weeks each

time for the right day to shoot everything for the best

commercial benefit. But to make a day into an hour, that's just silly.

– Good. – Natalie nodded and took another sip of coffee, remembering the interesting discovery about the multifaceted nature of perception. – What is your conclusion?

– I don't have a conclusion yet. But what I can tell you is that what we're being told is a blatant lie. And all these measures of handing over found materials to the elders first are just a way to keep the truth out.

– That's a very immodest thing to say for your position of authority. – Natalie was beginning to like what he was saying. Sure, it was the kind of talk her buddies like Taylor were talking about, but it was still a lot better than boring on about new kinds of electrification and testing. And after all, they're talking about all this while sitting on the couch in his apartment, not over blueprints in the lab.

– Yeah, I know... And who better than me to remember such things when my best friend designed Tosca. – Morgan got up and headed for the bar. – You want a drink?

– Oh, so much news at once! – Nathalie laughed, also because she was glad that things were taking a more intimate turn. Alcohol was available in very small quantities on the station, and it was given out in very limited quantities on and before holidays. There were rumors that some of the higher administration had unlimited access to booze, but it never got any further than talk.

Especially after an engineer from the mining section had been deprived of his alcohol vouchers for a year for making such a public statement.

As for the construction of Tosca, there were only rumors about this process. Those who returned kept their mouths shut, and if they answered anything, it was only that they had seen nothing but an aluminum box of a cell with one toilet, a sink and a bed. What was known, however, was that the prison itself was separate from the general structure of the station, and was taken there by overcars. Given the way Morgan had just spoken of Tosca, he obviously knew a lot more than the others.

– I take it that's a sign of agreement. – Morgan concluded, opening a door in the bar and squatting down. – Whiskey, gin, cognac?

– To be honest, it doesn't tell me anything... I've tried whiskey a couple of times. It was interesting, of course, but I was thinking so much about Helium-3 at the time... And not only..." Natalie remembered her state of mind at the time. It had been three years ago, when she had been thinking more and more about the fact that she had never found someone. It was all the more difficult because she had begun to realize that she was somewhat detached from the rest of the group. After all, she was one of the few who had awakened on the station as a child of only 8 years of age, and she had to start not by living but by growing up among strangers. She often wondered if maybe her parents were among the others, just not remembering it. Don't remember, just like

everyone else... That maybe there were sisters and brothers who didn't know about each other.

Because they all went to sleep and woke up not remembering anything, not even their own names, which they then proceeded to pick out from fashion magazine catalogs and movies and whatever else they could find. And when she was then asked what name she wanted for herself, she said "Natalie." She loved that song, with that name, where someone sang in what she now knew to be Spanish that name, as if gently embracing her. She wanted so much to be hugged then, too, and repeated that word all the time. It seemed so light, airy and charming... But when she grew up, she noticed that they didn't treat her so romantically... And some relief came when she tried to drink. She was tired from work and regolith research during the day, so she took a bottle of whiskey she was entitled to, and drank a little of it. Then she wanted to sleep almost immediately, so she lay down and listened to the song "Natalie" in her mind, dreaming of being held in the arms of a nice man.

– What did you try? – Morgan turned around and asked.

– Whiskey. It's still in my closet... It's probably dried up by now.

– Good thing my staff can't hear that," Morgan grinned, took out a bottle and poured two glasses from the bottle, then took out another and poured the same amount into each glass, then tossed ice cubes into them and took them both and returned to the couch.

– Is this cocktail just like in the movies? – sniffing the liquid, the girl asked.

– Well almost... I think they were doing things differently though. What we make here is obviously more synthetic than real. We're more imitating the flavor than producing it. Just like alcohol itself, actually. With the ancients it was therefore quite harmful, and with us it's safe, while giving the same effects... Well, if you don't overdo it, of course. If you do, I guess our disadvantages are even worse than those of real whiskey.

Everyone knew the story. One of the chiefs of the security section, Reagan Cross, was suffering from what the ancients called alcoholism. Everyone, in general, didn't mind it, because he performed his duties the same as before. He did not miss anything, did everything according to the rules, and what he did in his free time, no one really cared. Maybe that's why his passions crossed the line. The very line when one day he didn't show up at his post in the morning. They sent for him and when they entered his room, they saw that everything was turned upside down and he had cut himself with a broken bottle neck. Those photos were shown to everyone to show them what excessive alcohol consumption can lead to. And they were not even afraid to criticize the fact that only the highest administration had access to alcohol in such quantities – they pretended that he had stolen those bottles secretly. In short, the decisions of the elders, as always, turned out to be correct

– alcohol should be dosed with coupons, and violations lead

only to death.

– With memories like that, I wouldn't be thirsty. – Natalie moved the glass away from her, but didn't put it back on the table.

– But I don't think you're going to be able to taste what I just made anytime soon. It's very mild, just a little stupefying. – Morgan himself took a little taste and showed me how to taste it with his tongue. It was very infectious.

Natalie took a small sip, and the initially icy liquid began to warm inside after a couple seconds – he was right. It was a very mild flavor indeed, and just relaxing. She'd always thought whiskey was very tart and more of a man's drink.

– And how often do you stir such things? – the girl asked.

– Not really... When I see that the conversation is difficult to get into.

– So you think we're having a difficult conversation? I thought you were gonna tell me about Tosca? Or am I? Was I wrong?

– You can... After all, there are no witnesses here. And there's something I can tell you that doesn't violate any secrecy in any case... The cells there are really all as they are described: a sink, a toilet and a bed. And they're kept there most of the time. But, firstly, from there they take you out for a walk in a separate room – there are no windows, but there is a glass-covered ceiling, through which you can watch the starry sky, like in our dining room, only smaller. Secondly, it is not quite dreary there, because they turn on the radio in the morning when you get up, in the afternoon and in the evening before you go to sleep. And, finally,

thirdly, those who don't go out of there don't really continue to sit there either... This, of course, can already be called a secret, but if you tell anyone, they won't believe you anyway. Although I don't think you'd want to tell anyone.

– Do they execute them? Decide they aren't needed and just execute them? – Natalie was surprised by that. What could you do to get executed? It's all right there, you broke the rules, you blabbed something. Yeah, it's punishable by loss of contact with everyone else. But to be executed... There's only 7,000 of us here, not like billions of people before. How can anyone else be executed in this situation?

– Are you sure you want to know the answer to that? Especially since, if executed, how? – Morgan sipped from his glass and looked out at the horizon, where he could see the hollows, the rises, the cliffs against the marvelous starry sky. It was gray, of course, but it was still very romantic.

– The only thing I'm sure of right now is that I'm going to be upset..." Natalie thought her mood was blowing away. That had once been a good expression. Now it could only be blown away by a fan, which meant it wouldn't happen by accident. Why did she start asking him about Tosca? It was understandable that secrets and all that only added to the intimacy, but who knew that he was aware of these details. And he started telling her. And just a few minutes ago, things were so much better.

– In our position, you can't be too upset. – he turned back to her. – We're the few who woke up as children, not adults.

Everyone else was an adult, or grew up with their parents when they were born here... And we must have grown up once, then fallen asleep, then woke up and started growing up again....

– What do you mean? I thought you were... About forty years old " Natalie looked at him in

surprise: his face seemed even more handsome now than before, his brown eyes more intelligent than before, and his appearance more predatory than before. He would be like a hunter looking out for his prey. It was both frightening and enticing at the same time. For a moment, the thought arose that even if he wanted to eat her now, he would have to give himself up to it willingly....

– No, Natalie. I'm thirty-three, and I'm only a year older than you... We even had lessons together when we were still in school... If you remember, I came up to you one day and asked if you had algebra lessons. You didn't have any with you, so you told me to come back another time. But I never did, because I thought it was you who didn't want to talk to me.

She remembered that moment in a flash. She had liked him a lot then, but she didn't even know his name. He had seemed very intelligent and quiet. In some ways even too modest, which, in her opinion, made it impossible for him to get to know her better. And she was already so excited then about his question about algebra, which she didn't have with her. That day she didn't take anything else with her except a physics notebook out of

spite for the teachers, although she had algebra that day. After that incident, she carried her algebra notes with her every day, whatever she had. But that boy never showed up again, and a week later another boy met her, and she decided that was it. After all this time, of course, it didn't look the same as it had then. She worried and thought about it, and in the end she still met the one she wanted to meet.

– Wow," Natalie replied and laughed. – I really didn't have it that day. And then I carried all my algebra lessons with me, hoping that you would come again... So what do I do now? I don't have algebra with me again.

Morgan smirked. Apparently, he, too, was amused by the fact that their fates had come together in the end. Perhaps even more interestingly than before.

– I think we can do without her..." He moved closer to her and stopped just a few centimeters from her lips. – If you don't mind, of course...

She didn't mind... He kissed tenderly and, carefully putting her glass on the table, began to embrace her. Hugging and stroking, first around her waist, then her hips and then her waist and finally her breasts. She felt as if her nipples were about to burn through her overalls... And when his hand circled the back of her head and then squeezed her hair a little, her groin clenched as well.

Apparently he knew well how to drive a woman to frenzy....
The phone rang. The emergency phone that everyone had in

their apartment. It wasn't supposed to ring at all during off hours, but there were times when the safety of the entire plant was at stake, which meant that the more a person decided, the more often he or she might have something like this ringing. One could only hope that there was only a question there, and not an indication that something had happened to the nuclear reactor.

Morgan immediately opened his arms and ran to the tube located in the front door:

– Morgan. I'm listening.

It didn't show on his face that this was something important, urgent, something you couldn't go on living without, or anything else imaginable. He just stood there and listened to what was being said on the other side. With a glassy stare that held nothing. It was beginning to frighten him.

– I'll be right there. – He summarized and hung up the phone, then turned to Natalie. – We're gonna have to go. We have a suicide in the lab.

Natalie had never seen dead people before, and she couldn't even imagine the picture she had seen in the lab. It was next door to the room where, a few hours ago, she and Morgan had been studying the blueprints for the new fusion plant. And she didn't even want to think that maybe this death was already there. It was so close.

Reagan Shadow lay with his head on the table covered in blood. It was on the table, on his blond hair, on his lab coat, on the

floor, and everywhere around him. It looked like he was literally throwing the blood around, just to get more of it on everything around him. And it was also strange that nothing was actually broken or scattered. Considering that there was obviously a hell of a thing going on here, the neatness with which everything was standing around was even more striking.

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