

# Abandoned world



*Awareness*



СОДЕРЖИТ  
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ  
БРАНЬ

Vladimir Anderson

18+

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## Abandoned world: the Awareness

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### Аннотация

Part Two of the Abandoned World Saga

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Heddock faces a terrible disease that pierces his soul in an attempt to destroy him. Together with Sierra, he searches for answers, delving into the darkest corners of the station's inner life.

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Meanwhile, Peyton, barely recovered from a micro-infarction, explains to the citizens of Apollo 24 the need for new changes. He is driven by an overwhelming desire to torture Delaney, the girl he used to love so wholeheartedly.

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Natalie searches for the missing Morgan, realizing that her whole life can now only go hand in hand with him. Finding new feelings reveals to her the many nuances of human nature.

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A tightening regime threatens the delicate balance between survival and the mysteries its inhabitants are trying to solve. And a mystical disease seems to be not only trying to destroy everyone, but also has an intelligence of its own.

# Vladimir Anderson

## Abandoned world: the Awareness

Heddock

The darkness in the room became even more palpable. Warm. Enveloping. Heddock was well aware of his surroundings, and had a separate sense of the distance to the switch on the wall, knowing that if he turned on the light, he would immediately lose that sensation. The sensation of darkness that could hold him in its embrace.

He moved toward his desk, treading carefully and putting his hands out slightly in front of him. After a couple steps, he reached his destination and walked around the desk, sitting down in his desk chair. The folding knife he was going for was in the second drawer on the right next to the TV remote. It occurred to him that it would be more comfortable to sit not in total darkness, but just by turning on something, so that that something would light up the room only slightly.

Finding the handle, Heddock yanked it and slid his hand inside. Then he pulled out the knife and the remote, pressing the first button he could find. The TV across the room from him lit up, showing the eight most important surveillance cameras in

Apollo 24, showing the movements of citizens in the mess hall, the main assembly hall, the auditorium, the central passageways, and the administration building.

Given that his eyes were already well accustomed to the darkness, Heddock could see everything around him even in this light. Especially the knife. Yes, all these steps were primarily to see the knife better. And to better understand what actions would be most appropriate. Actions that could stretch and release the left side of his body that was weighing him down. He could directly feel that everything on his left side felt like it was shrinking and preventing the rest of his body from functioning properly, especially his heart. After all, it was on his left side too. It was moving too much and too often. And it felt more and more uncomfortable each time. Like if you took it out, there would be relief. You could do anything you wanted....

But you have to get to that point. You can't just pull a heart out. If you could, everyone would have done it a long time ago. Right away, no questions asked. Everyone would have been walking around without a heart long ago, and rejoicing at the ease they had as a result of it It was

clear that this was a difficult stage. It was clear that few understood it. And that perhaps no one had achieved what they wanted for some reason of their own. They hadn't succeeded. But he would

succeed At least there was no doubt about it now. It must succeed, one only had to do it

gradually...

Heddock picked up the knife, opened it, looked at the blade-it wasn't sharp enough. He'd done something with it a long time ago, and for years it had just been sitting in a desk drawer, idle...

It had never been sharpened... Or cut Now he had to cut the nasty side of blood and flesh, and the

sharpness of the knife wasn't quite right for that. Nevertheless, Heddock rolled up his left sleeve and ran the knife fairly hard along the part of his arm below the elbow, but on the other side of the vein. He knew that if he cut through the veins, the blood would come out of him quickly and he could lose consciousness, which meant he couldn't cut out the heart. It takes strength And at the same time,

you can't cut out the heart at once, because you have to prepare the side for it. It is necessary to release blood from the left side of the body so that there is relaxation, so that the oppressive condition that was there at that moment is released.

He put the knife on the table and began rummaging through the drawers, looking for something to sharpen the knife against. After a few minutes of searching, he found an old ceramic mug, the bottom of which was rough enough to sharpen anything steel. Heddock began sharpening his knife on it, and no sooner had he finished than the door to his room opened.

At first it was very frustrating that his forgetfulness had played such a part, but after seeing Sierra's frightened eyes, reason began

to take a back seat.

– Charlie?! – Sierra shouted, turned on the light, and walked quickly over to him. She looked at the knife and mug in his hands, and at the cut on his arm, though not bleeding much. – What the hell are you doing?!

Heddock looked around, beginning to realize where he was and what he was doing. His arm began to ache as his mind began to come to rest. It wasn't too bad, but it was starting to whimper and tingle in some places, though given that it was coming out of the part that wasn't a vein, there wasn't much blood on the table. Sierra took off her blouse, leaving her bra on, and tied it around his arm, pulling it tight:

– Charlie, what were you doing just now?

Her gentle voice with a note of concern calmed him down a lot. Just a few moments ago, it had seemed like she'd be screaming and hysterical, not understanding what it was or where it came from. That it was some kind of crime that she shouldn't tell anyone about. But there was no reproach or anger on her part, only complete incomprehension.

– I... I was sharpening a knife to cut my arm... I remember exactly that I thought it was too blunt for that... And I needed to cut my arm to lighten the left side of my body... To make it airy and light. And then you could cut out your heart.

– What?!

– Yes... I remember it well... I had such a thought... Just a minute ago it seemed to me completely natural. I can't

even describe the feeling, but it was a complete certainty of rightness... It seemed to me that if I cut out the heart, nothing inside my body would interfere with each other anymore... That it would free the whole body....

Sierra walked around the table, pulled up a nearby chair, and sat down close to Heddock:

– Charlie, are you saying you were gonna kill yourself? Why?

– That's the thing... I wasn't going to kill myself It's a different feeling. All I wanted to do

was cut out my heart. I had the complete feeling that I was gonna go on living my life as before. Or almost like before, only better... I can't describe it It's clear to me now that it's delusional, but at

the time it seemed perfectly normal. Not even normal, but natural...

– Charlie, there's something I have to tell you that probably everyone on the station is hiding from you.....

– That eight months ago we had our first suicide who was buried outside? About that?

– Yeah. I see someone already told you.

– Yes, Sierra. Someone told me. Why didn't you? Why did you keep it from me?

– Why do you need to know that, Charlie? You know it all You teach people to be good for

themselves and everyone else. You teach them to think about the future. You give them confidence. Why would you want to

know that someone gave up not just that, but the very possibility of life?

– Because we've already got four of these crazies. And it looks like there just might be a fifth...

They both fell silent. It was clear to both of them that everything had just gone exactly to the

point where a fifth citizen of the station would have killed himself by cutting himself up with a knife. And the hardest thing to say was that there wasn't much he could do about it – he was just going crazy without realizing it. And it had happened before, when he'd tried to tell her about these suicides. When he'd stabbed himself in the palm of his hand with his fingernail. It's already happened, it's happening now and it'll definitely happen again. Until he kills himself completely.

– Charlie, we really need you... I need you," Sierra said, hugging him with both arms.

– I know... I know... I don't know what it is myself... And it seems that those who have already done it have come to it in some similar way... And you know what I'm most interested in?

Did this really only start happening eight months ago, or has it been going on for a long time and we just haven't noticed?

– It's a suicide, Charlie... Everyone would have noticed... A corpse doesn't clean up after itself.

– Yeah, you're right... Except for the ones who got away before they started killing

themselves... And I think I'm getting something clearer..." Haddock rose from his seat, pressing the tattered blouse tighter against his wound and glancing at Sierra. She looked very sexy now, sitting there in her long skirt and bra that emphasized the rounded shape of her breasts, and when combined with the fact that this was the office and the de facto head of the entire station, very provocative. These thoughts in another situation would have blown Haddock's mind, but now they only cleared, forming fresh thoughts of decision in his head:

– Put something on upstairs, we need to go check something out....

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The archives department consisted of only one room, where several computers stood, arranged in an even row. No windows, no desks, nothing extra. Just four computers with slide-out keyboards and chairs in front of them.

Haddock thought of the phrase that the corpse would not go away by itself. After all, the station was surrounded by a huge mass of territory, which no one really controlled, and that if you wanted, you could disappear by yourself in a very simple way – just by putting on a spacesuit and getting far away. Of course, no one would be able to open a heart there, but to part with your life would not be a problem. And now there was no doubt that the thoughts that were formed at the moment of an attack could be

of a completely different kind, but definitely leading to the same result – inevitable death.

Heddock and Sierra were now pairing up reports on the number of lost, inoperable, decommissioned spacesuits from previous years. After Heddock realized that he was far from having complete control over Apollo 24's activities, the possibility that his own mistakes were being hidden from him no longer seemed so impossible.

And the answers started coming almost immediately. It turned out that four years after the awakening, there was some loophole for manipulating the reports with the written-off inventory. The thing is, the original models of spacesuits were only supposed to be usable if a second person closed the suit door from behind, and then opened it upon arrival to let the person out. Four years later, new models were developed that allowed one to close inside oneself and also open later. And judging by the reports, the next eight years only went by in an upward trend: as time went on, more and more new spacesuits were developed, and older models were put aside for storage. But then the trend began, when some of the new models were again replaced by the old ones for various reasons "damage to the sleeve", "damage to the closing mechanism" and other fairly easily correctable flaws. But instead of eliminating them, they were written off completely and disposed of as if into the void, because after the instructions for disposal there were no parts left, which could obviously be useful both for replacement and in the production of new spacesuits.

Thus, by keeping the number of suits at the same level, the managers were obviously hiding the disappearance of spacesuits. And it would not look so obvious, if it did not turn out that all the time only new models are utilized, and the old ones are sent for repair.

It seemed that all the past suicides had been found, bravely leaving the station and settling scores with their lives somewhere out there, obeying strange impulses that Haddock himself had had recently. Of course, there were still questions about where exactly they were going, and why had the process of "leaving" been abruptly replaced by a process of "mowing down" on the station itself? The news was, of course, that there was a very palpable eyewash in the supposedly very correct accounting structures at the station.

Come to think of it, why can't we just report that someone has voluntarily left the station and not returned. Maybe they should go out looking for him. Maybe some new controls should be put in place to keep people from going out on their own... But no, they just draw up the reports so that there's no question about it... Haddock was not only amazed, but also very disappointed that he'd let an entire system that had a life of its own flourish for so long, and his thoughts didn't stop there. How much more of this could there be in Apollo 24?

How many other areas of the station's life could there be, where in reality he had no control over anything? He didn't want

to truthfully answer that question, but the answer came forward on its own – everywhere. It could just be everywhere. Here's the problem. He allowed himself to break the rules and not be afraid of it, because, as everyone knew, even for a Felony the punishment was a stay in Tosca, where you might be lucky enough to become a warden.

The only thing that can fix this is a visual demonstration of death. Fear and death. They quickly sober the mind, the body, the soul. When everyone sees that they have something to lose, and that it could be any of them who break the rules. All that's left is to come up with a louder name for it than felony. And for that, there's Peyton Cross, capable of creating the necessary, showing everyone that it's new.

Natalie

Natalie had been to all sectors of the energy section, to the administration office, then to the security office, and then back to the living quarters of the New York building, where she spent considerable time knocking on Morgan's apparently empty apartment. He was nowhere to be found and no one knew where he might be except at his workplace in the lab. The administration had even hinted to her that she should not inquire about such matters during working hours, and that if a man was not at his workplace, his immediate superior, namely the head of the energy section, should always know about it.

Natalie didn't say that he wasn't at his workplace either, and

that since they didn't know, they should just say so. She'd recently begun to notice that the people around her were more fucked up than she'd realized before. In fact, before she'd met Morgan, before their first night together, she hadn't noticed anyone else's fuck-ups at all. People grumbled when they didn't want to answer or didn't know the right answer. That's how people are. Of course, there had to be some reason behind it, but it had never occurred to her that most of these people had the same reason. So much depended on physiology, and the most primitive one at that... She was also surprised that people of different ages behaved like that, both those younger than her and those older. It manifested itself in a few different ways, but still the same disgusting shade of something inferior was in all these faces at the same time. In fact, it gave away the very general similarity of nervous grouchiness and caustic behavior in all these faces.

– You could have fucked each other," Natalie said, staring at the locked door of Morgan's apartment. – I don't want to be like that.

She turned around and went back to the administration office, after all, Sierra was a close friend of hers, and maybe she could find out something through her. It was also worth supporting her now, after she'd complained about what was going on with Charlie. They were all the same problems, all because of men.

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Sierra wasn't there either, and her assistant said she hadn't shown up since morning. This was becoming not just surprising,

but suspicious. Something was happening on the station that was no longer a possibility, but a given. At least two section chiefs were missing, Morgan, without whom

the life of their only power station was impossible, was missing. The only thing left to do is to kidnap her herself, so that everyone will immediately forget about the new helium-3 possibilities.

The administration building included the main hall, inside of which there were small cubicles of ordinary clerks, and in different corners offices of chiefs. There were almost no people, and it seemed that today the office work at the station was more dead than alive.

What was the point of having so many hookworms anyway? – Natalie thought and turned to leave this seemingly useless mess. It wasn't even the files in the computer, it was the sheets of paper, which took so many resources to produce that it could probably feed a second station. It's a separate block with growing wood, which is worth it. Of course, the materials from there were used not only for paper production, but the fact that people were doing not what was necessary for survival, but for the formation of this fiction, was already disconcerting.

She tried to remember what it had been like twenty years ago, when she was still a little girl, and she remembered the long lines that crowded into this room, waiting for some permits, coupons, certificates. What she remembered well was that at that time

more people just stood there and wasted time than did something concrete with those papers, but now there were almost no queues, but the number of papers had grown exponentially. This is a very strange logic – either there are more papers, then there are more queues for all these papers, or vice versa....

– They must have invented their own jobs. " Natalie said aloud and turned toward the exit.

Before she could take a step, a hand with a piece of paper clasped between her thumb and forefinger popped out in front of her.

– This is for you, Miss Jackson! – proclaimed a young and very caustic-looking girl.

Natalie remembered her. Her name was Daisy, and she'd hit on Morgan several times in the corridors of the New York block without success. Despite her rather unassuming appearance, she was remembered well enough for the expression on her face-it was completely unnatural. She had the impression that it was not real, but glued on, and expressed emotions different from those expressed by her eyes. Obviously, she had a radical problem with underfucking, something Natalie had suspected even before the moment of her insight into Morgan's satisfaction.

Natalie picked up and opened the paper handed to her, where at the very beginning in large letters was written "Warning", followed by a text stating that she was being issued a warning due to permanent absence from her workplace, which put other station employees at risk, undermined the morale of the team,

and had an immoral effect on all life at the station, and therefore it was demanded that she return to her workplace and not leave it until the end of the shift.

It even looked ridiculous. Not only was it written in the obvious spirit of something official, but it didn't refer to any statutes or regulations. But what made it especially funny was that Daisy didn't realize that Natalie's workplace at the moment was with the very Morgan she was jealous of.

Realizing all that, realizing that Daisy was no match for her in any way, shape or form. Not her body, not her clothes, not her demeanor—nothing could even come close to matching Natalie. And there was no need to talk about her perpetually tricky face, because it was unlikely that anyone would want to get caught in it.

Natalie was now wearing a pencil skirt that emphasized her hips and a dark blue blouse that showed off her ample breasts. Daisy wore baggy pants and a white, almost see-through blouse with a lacy bra behind it. She probably thought it would attract men, but it seemed rather pretentious and tasteless. Even though it was obvious that there was no rivalry, Natalie got angry, tore the paper she'd been handed into four pieces and threw it toward Daisy:

– I'm looking for Morgan. And shove that piece of paper up your ass!

Daisy started to shout something in her direction, though not very loudly, and then ran toward the Chief of Staff's office. Let her tell Sierra, who wasn't there right now. It would be

interesting to hear how it would all play out. How stupid and petty people can be at the same time, when they don't want to realize that the reason for their troubles is in themselves.

Natalie was almost to the exit and then some strange force stopped her from getting out.

She felt something grabbing her by the shoulders or by the waist, keeping her from getting out. And that something also began to climb from the left side of her head right inside. She jerked back, looked around, and looked back. There was nothing strange going on, but the part of the hall closest to Sierra's office stood out in the distance.

There's something wrong here. Something is going to happen, and that something is dangerous for all of us. There was some confusion in Natalie's head, but still she understood what was going on around her. And it was obvious that those around her didn't have a similar feeling. And a couple of men on different sides of her were just looking at her with glances that were assessing her graceful figure.

Natalie moved back with quick steps. Let nothing happen to Sierra. I wish nothing would happen to her. She only had two close friends. Sierra and Delaney. I wish nothing would happen to them... Why would anything happen to them? In fact, Sierra wasn't even in the office. There's no way she could have gotten in bypassing her. Why would anything happen to anyone right now?

But as she approached Sierra's office, she saw her assistant

lying unconscious near her desk. Her cubbyhole was just around the corner from the main room, so no one could see what had really happened. A few work folders were lying around, the chair was on its side, in short, all the signs that it was more than just a faint. Did Daisy do that to her?!

Natalie took a step toward the door to the study and noticed that the door was slightly open. There was a strange shuffling sound coming from there. It was as if someone or something was sharply and progressively running an iron over the couch. The girl quickly opened the door and almost shrieked, clamping her hands over her mouth.

Sitting at the Chief of Administration's desk, Daisy was cutting her left thigh with a clerical knife. In even rows, leaving more and more cuts over and over, she wielded it as if she were simply sharpening the knife. After each spurt, she would gently wipe the knife against her white blouse, leaving a streak of blood, and then make another swipe across her leg. The pupils in her eyes were so dilated that they seemed as black as night.

Natalie yelled, "Help!" and moved a little away from the entrance. She immediately thought that Daisy was going to leave the activity to do this to herself and run after her with the knife. But instead Daisy stopped and looked with her eyes full of terror right at her. It seemed as if she were looking not into her eyes, but straight into her soul. Straight into the innermost corners, where all the most secret and innermost thoughts of every human being lie. And yet her gaze expressed neither hatred, nor reproach, nor

anything else.

Daisy smiled and solemnly slit her throat.

Elder

Peyton thought he'd be better in a month. He really hoped it would be sooner, at least a

week. In fact, he was better the very next day. His eyes burned with a new passion, and all he could think about was Delaney. About what he would do to her when he got the chance... And most of all, he couldn't understand how he hadn't gotten to that point before. How he'd just fucked her without violence before. How he'd done it and never even considered that it might look completely different. Not at all the way the old him wanted it to. And not the way he wanted the renewed one....

He couldn't call himself young. No. It's not for him. Young people make more mistakes than they do right. He's not like that. He's wise and precise. Every move he makes is a properly calibrated final combination. One that deserves respect. And on this day, he has something new to explain to

people. Something new that they couldn't even think of before, because it's a new step. A new next right step. One of the twenty-four right steps in achieving the goals of Apollo 24.

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The stream auditorium was full to capacity. Everyone knew that now one of the elders, Peyton Cross, would be announcing a new achievement of their station, a new successful step the station had come to.

This auditorium hadn't fit the entire population, or even half of it, in a long time. Only two and a half thousand out of seven. And now Peyton, looking at this meeting from the podium, remembered how he had cleverly thought of announcing that it was necessary to gather here, because from a certain moment only the chosen ones should listen to the speeches and be the first to know about new events. And how then, the obvious disadvantage of the lack of a suitable room had become a significant advantage to divide citizens, even nominally, into those who deserved to know everything firsthand and those who did not.

Then it was a lesson even for Peyton himself, who saw by his own example how one can successfully turn a given thing inside out, portraying disadvantages as advantages. After all, the most important thing is not what happens. The most important thing is how to tell about it. Because the one who tells about it will also keep silent about the most important thing in all this – will keep silent about himself, because without him all the above mentioned will not make sense at all... All this will not make sense without Peyton. The Peyton who's gonna get what's coming to him, not because he's the best. Not even because he deserves it. It's because he decided to.

– You know, every time, I worry a lot. I worry that I won't be able to find the right words... put those words in the right order even... I worry that I'll go hoarse while I'm saying something... But you know... I never worry about being heard I'm proud to say that all the time, all the years that

I've been serving Apollo-24, I've spent hand in hand with the most loyal and worthy people on Earth, who have survived and who are capable of any task... – having finished this phrase, Peyton took the water bottle that stood on the podium and poured some liquid into the glass that stood next to it.

He knew perfectly well that the only thing people would hear now was the slight clink of glass against each other, and then the sound of water being poured.

Moreover, he knew very well how this sound was heard from different points in the audience, because once he had specifically asked his assistant to pour water into a glass while Peyton himself would run around the empty auditorium and listen from different places to see how well this sound could be heard in the speakers. Then he did the same thing with a slight toss of the pen from his hand to the podium stand. Then with a deep sigh. Then with a cough And so on until

the entire list he had prepared in advance was complete. Sometimes he even added something new to it and went back to experimenting, each time finding something new for himself.

Of course, he did not stop there. And then he asked the assistant to look in different directions: straight ahead, to the

right, to the left, while he himself was also in different places at that moment and looked at how it should look.

And then he began to experiment with "climbing" out of the grandstand. The thing is that the rostrum itself, due to its massiveness, seriously separated him from everyone else. It turned out that he was hiding behind it. And he would have been happy to throw it away, but some of the elders could not stand more or less long without its help, so he had to leave it as it was. And that was completely at odds with his goals of being as close to everyone as possible, so that they could all be easily controlled.

The only thing that could be done under such conditions was to bring his hands beyond the edges of the podium – to place them on the edge, or to bring them higher so that they would appear as something omnipresent to the audience. And in this configuration, he decided that the barely noticeable could make the difference in this competition for attention. The thing is, people often pay

attention to some little thing out of the ordinary. They start to focus on it, or even fixate on it... And Peyton chose his index finger, which could literally jump out of the outer part of the edge of the podium a little bit upwards – Peyton would put his hand on the edge of the podium, wrapping his hand around it a little bit and pretending that his hand was either holding this edge firmly or resting freely on it. And then in bursts of his phrases he would raise his index finger sharply, admiring what he said

as an exclamation mark.

At first it seemed to him that such a configuration, in general, was nonsense, and he even considered getting rid of this maneuver. Especially since most of the poses formed in this way were the most uncomfortable for his body. But looking at the changed for the better performance, it became obvious that in combination with all the other elements to influence the mass of people, such a practice works very effectively.

And now, as he stood on the podium, he saw, heard and literally felt himself from all sides, realizing perfectly well how this murmuring of water in a glass is felt by everyone in this audience. And how he himself looked to each of them.

And that is why he began to make this movement now, after he had said that he was sure that he would be heard by the people who had gone through the most difficult things, who had survived and were already obliged to accept whatever he had to say, simply because it was natural. Nothing in the world is as indestructible as the natural. Like the water that's flowing right now, and everyone can hear it in the speakers. And even though it's just for a couple of moments, it's so self-evident that it starts to be associated with that common flow of I – we – water, that everyone loses any logic and starts to take what's being said as undeniable truth.

Peyton took the glass in his hand and drank a few sips from it, placed his right hand on the edge of the podium in front of him, and then continued:

– I even got a lump in my throat... I got a lump in my

throat because I could finally announce that we had reached the next step (index finger jerked upward and spun back a little bit) in our accomplishments in Apollo 24... It's always hard to take in something new, but when it's something new that makes us stronger, we feel completely different... We feel stronger. Stronger and more experienced (index finger sighed upward again). And we know that we can withstand all the trials, all the difficulties that come our way... Because we are one family (he shook both hands in front of him, representing something big). One big family that lives together, solves its problems together... We are responsible for each other at the end of the day... (he shook his index finger from top to bottom).

Peyton turned his head sharply to the side and fell silent. He wanted to listen, to get a better sense of how he was perceived by those around him. He wanted to listen, to get a better sense of how he was being perceived by the people around him, to catch their waves, to make that wave his own and start manipulating it in the direction he wanted it to go.

He could see now that at least three of the two and a half thousand people in the audience were not listening to him. Of course, those were only the people who were showing obvious signs of not listening: looking away or leaning back in their chairs, perhaps even asleep.

Peyton, when he saw this, remembered one of his golden rules of a contest called "Peyton vs. Mankind," where he had to win the minds of others. And he knew full well that if he could get

the attention of those who wouldn't listen to him, he was sure to have a successful outcome. Most importantly, these three. Peyton called them "blocks" that had to be moved. And it was necessary to do everything to make them listen to him, to take the posture of agreement, to nod at his words, and perhaps even to agree to listen.

– I have two pieces of news for you: good and bad! – Peyton announced and noticed that one of the three blocks moved and turned its head towards him. – And I will start with the bad news...

My dear fellow citizens, we have been walking to this stage for a very long time! Longer than

expected. Because it turns out there are those among us who don't want our cause to succeed. Who want to destroy our society! Yes, you heard right. We have enemies among us. There are those among us who want to turn the world inside out. Who want to see blood and murder of our citizens. We are in mortal danger!

Peyton looked around the room carefully: the effect was not too strong, but enough to make all three blocks start listening to him. He realized that the more high-flown expressions he gave out, the more difficult it would be for him to move on, because in order to keep his attention, he had to keep raising the degree. And you can't do it indefinitely. Therefore, it is necessary to spend this resource wisely, and we can only hope that spending it now

was the right decision.

– That was the bad news... And the good news is that we made it... My dear beloved citizens of Apollo 24, we made it... We can be proud of ourselves because we found this man. We found this pest. We were able to stop this disease in time. We proved to be stronger than our trials...

Peyton saw two of the three clumps turn away again. Which meant he had to raise the degree further. Raise it to bring them back. It was either him or them. Someone had to win, and it was going to be Peyton Cross, not some lousy laborers who decided to think they were above the Elder.

– Now tell me, what is to be done with this pest? – Peyton asked threateningly, and several people from different parts of the hall immediately shouted "Kill him," "Destroy him," "Hang him." They shouted, waving their hands, standing up a little from their seats and showing a literal personal rage against the yet unknown man, but as soon as Peyton raised his hand, they all instantly fell silent.

Peyton had been practicing something like this for a long time. Actually, it was not his own invention, but part of the theater life of the 19th century, which he read about in one of the textbooks on theatrical skills. This textbook described specially hired people for a play who were located in the auditorium itself, on an equal footing with the regular audience. They were called clackers, and it was their duty to respond as publicly as possible to pre-prepared phrases, and while in the 19th century they were

used to create excitement and cheer up the crowd, in his use Peyton extended these possibilities right down to the throwing in of an entire opinion. The very same opinion that he could put forward as the opinion of the people, received by him at a public speech.

– I confess that I too have thought of such a solution, but it is too harsh... Even in spite of such fierce violations (the index finger went up). Even in spite of the felony (index finger back down)... And I've always told you to be friendly. Helping each other... That the rules shouldn't be too rigid. That you should give second chances (index finger up again)... And now you see where it led (index finger down again)... It led to an attempt on Delaney Stormrider's life. Our dear and beloved food section employee. The person who is responsible for making sure that we are fed... That we eat healthy... That we live... Taylor Redwine! (index finger with the whole hand pointing forward as if threatening everyone around her) The person who tried to kill her is named Taylor Redwine! This villain made an attempt on her life a few days ago, and the investigation found that he planned it in advance. And then he was going to continue his horrible crimes... Tell me, what does our duty tell us to do with such a man? (arms out to the sides)

Again several men rose from their seats and shouted "Execute him," "Destroy the wretch," "Hang him." Peyton pretended to look out over the hall, while he watched his clumps who were defeated – all of them listening to him, waiting to see what

decision he would voice. Waiting to see what time would now come on the station.

– I'm afraid it's the only right decision... As hard as it is to make, we have to nip this contagion in the bud... We have to show that our intentions are more serious than ever. That we will fight for our victory in this battle... We must execute him! And to prevent this from happening again, we must properly evaluate this crime... After all, an attempt on a manager's life is a brutal act. It's

not just a violation of some rule. It is a threat to our existence. It is treason against our world, against our nation. It is treason against ourselves... And it should be called accordingly... Treason....

– Execution for treason! – shouted one of the clackers, and immediately several supported him with a shout of "Yes!". People were driven to a frenzy in which they could not deny that something was going wrong, or not the way they wanted it to. They only began to want to agree with everything, to be in a common rhythm, to be part of the whole that was behaving right. Right means safe, because the new understanding of the world order included first of all the preservation of one's own life. Which now depended primarily on following the logic established by the rules.

Rules that could change, as they had just done. Which meant that the only way to remain intact, to stay alive, was to be

compliant.

– And if anyone still thinks that's too harsh, let him have his say now! – Peyton thundered, throwing his pen on the podium table. At the same moment the clackers instantly froze, and there was a deafening silence in the hall, which lasted only a few seconds. Peyton defiantly looked around the hall, imagining that everyone could see his confident and formidable silhouette from their seats, and then solemnly proclaimed:

– So it's unanimous. Execution for treason.

Chief of  
security

Bill Sterling was an elder. He was also chief of security. And he was also the only one of all the elders who was himself in charge of one of the sections on the station. And in all the time he'd possessed all of that, the thing he'd learned the most was restraint. It was the cornerstone of his whole policy, his whole system for staying on top.

There was no need to inconvenience the other elders. That was the first point of restraint...

He sometimes wished he could take on the task of cleaning up what was going on in the Supreme Council of Elders. At least once to clean it of those people who just waste other people's time, take other people's place, use other people's powers, and do nothing in their place. As much as he wanted to interfere, he would not allow himself to do so.

You can't show citizens that you're doing things on your own. That's the second rule. And for his ostentatious duties, he had Tannet Knight working just fine, listed as a deputy and showing up in person whenever someone important from security was needed. Tannet was no-nonsense and executive, which was why he'd held the job for as long as Sterling had been Elder and Chief of Security.

The third rule kept him in check. Restraint as a character trait of a man with power. How many women he wanted to fuck at the station and in what positions. To change every day one girl for another, and sometimes to have sex with several at the same time. He wanted to do it, but Sterling didn't do it, because he considered it dangerous for his position. Dangerous for his self-perception, because it would be easy to go off the rails. That's why he slept with only one girl at a

time and didn't change her at least once every two years. For two years no one would think anything bad about him, and certainly not say anything bad about him. After all, others in his place would not have observed it, and he had not long to live. He's already in his seventh decade.

As for the fourth rule of restraint, it wasn't for him, it was for everyone else. Everyone must be restrained. Order is achieved in this way. As long as people don't overstep their boundaries, then safety is achieved all around. Everyone knows these boundaries, knows what will happen for violating them, and, thinking with their own head, they do not violate it. They restrain themselves.

All of these rules had been in place for twenty-four years, and what-not, but Bill Sterling wasn't about to change them. They're time-tested. And no one had ever come up with a better

one... But then it turned out that the boundaries themselves were changing. And they were being changed by a complicated term: treason.

He'd read about such a term in the books that were forbidden to the public, but that the elders and section leaders had in their possession. Those books, of course, were determined by the Curator, but there was no doubt that something of value would still fall into their hands. And Sterling had two favorite books: Hanni Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, especially the part about totalitarianism itself, and Jean Delarue's *History of the Gestapo*.

In the first one, he picked up on the fact that people tend to idealize. It doesn't matter what... What they are offered. Even the most disgusting thing can be served with the right sauce and it will be devoured by the masses. You can say anything and say anything you want – what matters is the subtext that is emphasized to the masses. And thus, the process of execution and the process of pardon are absolutely no different from each other. Except for the name. People do not care what happens to someone, they may be more or less involved in the general process, but they will not oppose it. All this, of course, applied to large masses. As for individual personalities, it is exactly the

same with them, only in the opposite direction – there will always be someone who is against it.

There will always be someone who is against it. Again, it does not matter whether it is a question of narrowing or expanding the rights of all others – there will always be someone who will tell everyone that it is done wrong. And relying on these initial data, Bill Sterling has identified for himself two stages into which what can be considered the achievement of absolute power over the masses, called totalitarianism, is divided.

The first stage – individuals, opponents, can act on the basis of generally known norms of law, and sometimes exceeding them. This stage is very important in order to show the masses that there was once an option in which the system is not working properly, the system is weak, and the masses themselves are not safe.

The second stage – individuals, aka opponents, are reduced to the point where they are opposed not by their main opponent in the form of the current government, but by the masses themselves, who consider the actions of these individuals to be nothing but violations of the established rules and the law. Bill Sterling paid special attention to the latter because the established rules were not something official, documented, or even legal. The rules were ephemeral concepts created by the demagogues of the system, and it was impossible to orient oneself accordingly, because they changed from case to case. But at the same time they always led to the same charge – treason.

The term seemed absurd to Bill Sterling at the time. What

kind of treason could we talk about if there were no oaths, no promises, no paltry contract? How could you cheat on something you didn't officially recognize? But, on the other hand, it was essentially genius, because it also meant that all citizens by default accepted the rules by their very existence. Exactly the rules, not the laws. And, returning to the previous point, it was safe to say that anyone could be accused of treason, because the rules were ephemeral and changed from case to case.

It seemed as ingenious as it was cynical. Sterling didn't care what had happened on Earth in years past, but when he heard the familiar term, he thought he wasn't the only one who'd read such literature.

And in this connection it also became very important to him what was written in his second favorite book, "The History of the Gestapo", where the main protagonist was a government body that called itself in direct text an instrument for finding state traitors, whom it could easily appoint on its own.

From time to time, the masses dream of a firm iron hand that will bring order. Because they associate this order with security. And this happens precisely because those same powerful demagogues know how to serve any dish with the necessary sauce. Tougher rules equal more

security, because fewer people will want to violate them, and the violators are easier to catch. The same people in power equals stricter rules, because they are able to set them without fear of

being overthrown. All this could be beautifully united under the flavor of mutual love of masses and power, because it was easy to show that it was mutually beneficial for both sides.

And to regulate this under such conditions was no longer a matter of any difficulty for the secret police, represented by the Gestapo. It had all the tools, all the powers, and, above all, a comprehensive moral right in the form of the necessity to search for traitors.

Bill Sterling looked at the excerpts from the Taylor Redwine case, at Peyton Cross's speech, at what was to come, and began to realize clearly what times were coming to Apollo 24. Times when his security section would have so much power that it would be a rare hypocrisy to speak of any restraint. He didn't want any of that. He'd lived his life and knew that any relatively major change entailed changes in all areas of life, which meant constant monitoring, sleepless nights, and most importantly, mental breakdowns.

Bill Sterling was most worried about the latter. As time went on, he noticed that he would start doing some things and then forget why he was doing them. Can sometimes get angry for almost no reason, let alone reasons. Getting confused by the faces of his subordinates and sometimes by what was assigned to them. It was even scaring him. He was beginning to realize that old age was defeating him, that he wasn't what he used to be. That he was only keeping afloat on the basis of what he had built long ago. And any change seemed especially dangerous to him, above

all for himself.

At the same time, he had already realized that it was inevitable. Because of what had been announced. Because the Curator apparently wanted to make life on the station completely different. It didn't matter for what reason... What mattered was that it might be the last change for Bill Sterling himself. And that means sticking to his own old principles of restraint.

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Of course, the first execution in the history of Apollo 24 was assigned to security chief Bill Sterling. And he didn't even think about turning it down – who better to do it than him. Who better than him to hold his nerve at the right moment. Not let up where he needed to be tough. Not overreach where he needed to be confident. Despite his age, Bill Sterling was the best man for the job. That's what the Curator thought, and that's what Bill Sterling thought.

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