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Виктор Пахомов

Sherlock Holmes: The Gate of Oblivion

Volume 1

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Gate of Oblivion. Volume 1

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Аннотация

After the death of Dr. Watson, the great Sherlock Holmes, in an attempt to solve one last mystery, finds himself in another world. Here in Eldria, where two moons hang in the sky and the laws of magic reign, he is a «Hollow» – one devoid of any mystical gift. Can the genius of deduction, armed with nothing but logic, withstand his arch-nemesis Moriarty and the chaos of an entire universe?

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CHAPTER 1. THE GRIEF EQUATION

Rain in London always tasted of soot. It settled on the lips with a familiar bitterness, penetrated under the heavy collars of coats and turned the cobblestone streets into dark, oily mirrors, reflecting the leaden sky. This afternoon the city seemed especially cramped, suffocating in its own fumes. But Sherlock Holmes did not notice the dampness. He stood motionless, like a statue of black granite, the tip of his umbrella stick stuck into the muddy ground of Kensal Green Cemetery.

There was a hole in front of him. A rough, geometrically imperfect hole in the ground, smelling of dampness and oblivion. The dull, final knock of the first lumps of clay on the lid of the oak coffin echoed in his mind like a malfunction in the operation of a perfectly tuned mechanism. Each fall of the earth – «boom», «boom» – cut off a piece of the past from his life that could no longer be returned.

The inscription on the tombstone, standing a little distance away, was as laconic as a medical diagnosis: «John H. Watson, MD. 1852—1897.»

Holmes hated this inscription. There was no logic in it, there was no grace that he was used to finding in completed cases. Statistically, the probability of death from acute pneumonia in a forty – five – year – old man with a strong physique and the training of a military doctor was no more than fourteen percent. These numbers had been spinning around in his head for the past three days, mockingly reminding him that life is an equation into which nature sometimes throws in an irrational variable.

Watson always disdained statistics. He was a man of impulses, a bearer of that strange, chaotic warmth that Holmes had long considered only an obstacle to pure reason. Now that this warmth was nailed into a wooden box and lowered into the ground, Holmes felt the cold begin to close in around him. It was not the chill of London autumn, but something more fundamental – the entropy of meaning. The people around gradually dispersed, turning into fuzzy black spots in the fog. Inspector Lestrade walked past, clumsily and childishly hiding his reddened eyes under the brim of his bowler hat. He wanted to touch Holmes's shoulder, to express condolences – a gesture that the detective despised – but, meeting his icy, absent gaze, he only nodded awkwardly and quickened his pace. Mrs. Hudson, whose sobs were the only living sound in this silence, was led away by the arm.

Holmes was left alone. His black – gloved hand involuntarily clutched a battered leather – bound notebook in his pocket. This was Watson's last manuscript – several chapters of a new story, ending mid – sentence.

«Too quiet, John,» said Holmes.

His voice, usually harsh and vibrating with hidden energy, sounded dull, almost lifeless. Without the creaking of a pen at the next table, without the smell of strong «ship tobacco» and without the eternal, sometimes naive questions of a friend, the world suddenly lost its volume. Everything around me became flat, boring and meaningless.

He walked from the cemetery to Baker Street. He deliberately avoided cabs, wanting to feel the rhythm of the city that had once been his hunting ground. But London has changed. Or he himself has changed. Previously, every passerby was an open book for him. That gentleman with the cane over there is a retired clerk, judging by the callus on his index finger. The lady in the blue veil hides the family drama, as evidenced by the tear stains on the left glove.

Holmes saw these details, his brain automatically recorded them, built chains of conclusions... but the result no longer brought pleasure. It was like solving children's puzzles by a person

who knew higher mathematics. The city was choking on triviality. The crimes he saw in the eyes of people passing by were pathetic. Petty greed, adultery, absurd grievances. There is no challenge left in London. The apartment at 221B Baker Street greeted him with the smell of stale tea and dust. Mrs. Hudson, true to her habit, had already drawn the curtains, turning the living room into a kind of crypt. Holmes entered and froze on the threshold. Watson's famous chair by the fireplace was covered with a white sheet. This was the owner's order – she believed that it would be easier to cope with the loss. For Holmes, it looked like a ridiculous attempt to hide a corpse that still continues to decay in memory.

He walked to the window and, without taking off his coat, pulled back the heavy curtain. Below, in the light of the gas lamps, the wet pavement shimmered.

«A person is only a temporary vessel for the mind,» he whispered, looking at his pale reflection in the glass. «So why does the absence of one vessel make the contents of another so useless?»

He turned towards the room. In the semi – darkness the corners seemed littered with shadows. His desk, lined with chemical retorts and reference books, looked abandoned. There was still a clock on the mantelpiece, which Watson forgot

to wind, and the silence of its frozen mechanism pressed on his ears more than cannon fire. Holmes slowly pulled off his gloves. His fingers, long and thin, trembled – barely noticeable, but for him it was tantamount to an earthquake.

He walked over to the secretary and opened the lid. There, in a velvet tray, lay the instrument of his old, dangerous salvation – a syringe made of tempered glass and a small vial of seven percent cocaine solution. Three paths to oblivion. Three ways to stop the wheels of a car that was now spinning idle, striking sparks from its own emptiness. The first is chemistry. The second is a violin. The third is absolute, icy cynicism.

Holmes took the syringe. The coldness of the glass was almost pleasant. He remembered Watson lecturing him about this. He saw the doctor's face – a mixture of professional indignation and deep pain for his friend. He held the needle to the light of a single candle. His entire current existence trembled in a tiny drop of transparent liquid. One injection and the gray gloom of London will disappear. Clarity will come, cold and sharp, like a razor. He will again see the world as a set of vectors and forces, and not as a cemetery of unfulfilled hopes. His finger rested on the piston.

In the silence of the room he thought he heard a barely audible clearing of throat. The same sound with which Watson usually

preceded some particularly inconvenient moral. Holmes froze. His jaw clenched so that his teeth creaked. With a sharp, almost violent movement, he drove the syringe not into a vein, but into the heavy oak edge of the table. The needle crunched, breaking at the base. The liquid spread across the wood in a colorless spot.

«Surrender,» he breathed, letting go of the broken instrument. «It would be too easy a task for me.»

He turned his gaze to the mantelpiece, where among the letters there was a white envelope. Watson's lawyer handed it over this morning. The letter was written a week before the doctor's lungs finally refused to serve him. Holmes took it. The paper smelled of a pharmacy and that specific aroma of old paper that always accompanied Watson.

«The world needs your intelligence, Sherlock. More than you think, and certainly more than you are willing to admit. Don't let my departure become a point in your biography. I've seen you fade away when you have nothing to decide. This is the worst crime you can commit – a crime against your own gift. Find a riddle that will make you open your eyes again. Look for it where others see only emptiness. Otherwise the darkness will consume you.»

Holmes slowly lowered the letter. He felt something change

inside him. This was no consolation. It was an order. The last order of an officer to his soldier.

«A mystery,» he muttered, looking into the fire. – Where should I look for her, John? On these gray streets? Holmes did not sleep that night. Towards dawn he stopped in front of a map of the world hanging on the wall. His gaze was fixed on a thin strip of land in North Africa. Egypt. A country where time is frozen in stone. It was there that Professor Abdul al – Faradi found something that defied any classification. A week ago Holmes had dismissed his letter as the delirium of a mystic. Now it seemed like the only thread leading away from the labyrinth of boredom.

The preparations were short – lived. Holmes never burdened himself with unnecessary things. A small leather bag, a set of chemical reagents in a case, a magnifying glass and a trusty revolver. Mycroft arrived an hour before he was due to leave. The older brother looked even more overweight and preoccupied than usual.

«You look terrible, brother,» Mycroft stated. – A trip to Cairo will not bring you back the doctor.

«I'm not looking for a doctor, Mycroft. I'm looking for a job.

– Giza is uneasy now. Rumors of curses, crazy

archaeologists. This is not your profile. You need facts, not legends.

Sherlock stopped, fastening the lock of his bag.

– A legend is just a fact that has lost its clarity in the hands of the ignorant. I intend to bring it back to sharpness.

The journey to Cairo took three weeks. As the ship dropped anchor in the port of Alexandria, Holmes was greeted by a chaos of sounds, smells and colors. After monochrome London, the East seemed oversaturated to him. Professor al – Faradi was waiting for him in Cairo. The archaeologist looked much older than his photographs. His face was dotted with wrinkles, and his hands constantly trembled, fingering his ebony rosary.

«You have arrived, Mr. Werner,» said the professor, bowing low. «I knew that the riddle would lure you out of your foggy den. «What we found... it's not just rocks. This is a challenge to the universe. Nine days' journey deep into the desert. Throat of Oblivion. There sleeps that which was created before the stars. The desert greeted them with merciless heat. On the seventh day the landscape changed. Sand dunes gave way to black rocks, worn away by the wind to the state of skeletons. The archaeologists' camp was located in the shadow of a huge cliff, in which a narrow gap gaped.

«We found this a month ago,» al – Faradi whispered, leading Holmes to the crevice. – Look at the walls.

Holmes raised the lantern. The surface of the stone was perfectly smooth, as if it had been polished for centuries. But something else was strange: the stone did not reflect the light – it seemed to absorb it.

«This is not sandstone or granite,» Holmes ran his finger over the surface. – The structure seems organic.

The tunnel led steeply down. Holmes noticed that the air temperature began to drop – unnaturally quickly. A few minutes later they came out into a room that made Holmes hold his breath. It was a huge round hall, the vault of which was lost in the blackness. There was no floor in the center – only a bottomless abyss through which twelve stone slabs led, radiating from the entrance. In the very center, on a thin pedestal, the Sphere hovered. It was completely black and emitted a low hum that was felt by the bones of the skull.

«Twelve paths,» muttered Holmes. – Each one has a symbol. Sword, River, Arrow, Turtle, Ship...

«We lost three workers,» the professor's voice trembled. «They tried to reach the Sphere. As soon as the foot

touches the wrong slab, it just... disappears. Doesn't break, doesn't fall. It becomes transparent, and the person falls into nothingness.

Holmes knelt at the very edge. He picked up a small stone and threw it onto the nearby Sword slab. The stone flew through the slab, as if it were not there, and disappeared into the darkness. There was no sound of impact.

«Acoustics are absorbed by vacuum,» Holmes stated. – This is not a hole in the ground. This is a tear in the very fabric of space. You look for magic where you need to look for consistency. This place is built according to the laws of logic. Each slab is an ancient paradox. Holmes took a step forward.

– Wait! – Al – Faradi screamed. «You can't just go!»

– You're wrong, professor. This is the only way to go. If the Ship of Theseus is a continuity of form, then the slab must be material to one who is aware of this continuity.

Holmes stepped onto the slab of the Ship. There was a hard thud under his foot. The slab survived. He took the second step. The movements were precise, precise, as if he were walking on a tightrope over the Thames.

«Zeno's arrow,» he whispered, moving. – Movement is an

illusion consisting of moments of rest. To achieve your goal, you need to accept the stillness of each step.

With every step the Sphere's hum became louder. Images began to appear in Holmes's head. Baker Street. Watson sitting in a chair with a newspaper. The scratching of pen on paper. He saw it so clearly, as if he had only to reach out his hand and he would touch a familiar shoulder.

«This is a neuronal trap,» he ordered himself. «The sphere resonates with the memory, trying to break the rhythm. Concentration. Only logic.»

He reached the last slab. The Liar Paradox. «I always lie. «If the statement is true, it is false. Holmes stopped. The plate beneath him began to vibrate, becoming translucent. He felt his feet begin to sink into the stone, losing its density.

«A lie is just a distortion of the truth,» he said loudly into the void. – The existence of the statement itself is undeniable, regardless of its content. I AM.

The slab instantly hardened. Holmes made a final push and found himself on the central platform. The sphere was in front of him. Now he saw that it was not just floating – it was slowly rotating, and myriads of sparks shimmered inside it. She smelled

of thunderstorms and old paper. He slowly extended his hand.

«A mystery,» he whispered. – Finally, a task worthy of a finale. The moment his skin touched the cold side of the Sphere, the world around him ceased to exist. There were no more caves, there was no professor, there was not even Holmes himself. He felt his consciousness scatter into millions of fragments, each of which became a number, a vector, a sound.

In this chaos he saw Watson again. But it was not a ghost. The friend stood in the center of the dazzling white space and looked at him with that same soft smile.

«You were always too curious, Holmes,» said Watson. His voice sounded clear. – But this path has no return ticket. Are you ready to exchange truth for a miracle?

«There are no miracles, John,» Holmes answered. He felt his body dissolve. – There are only rules that we have not yet learned. I intend to learn them.

Watson nodded and extended his hand, pointing somewhere behind Holmes.

– Then go. There's a job waiting for you there. Don't let the light go out.

A sharp flash of pain pierced Holmes's entire being. The sphere in his palm began to expand, absorbing the light. At the last moment, he felt something take hold in his chest, right above his heart – heavy, pulsating and incredibly cold. The flash blinded him. The sound of a breaking violin string echoed in his brain, and Holmes fell into oblivion.

When he felt his body again, the first sensation was the smell. It was not the smell of dry dust or London fog. It was the scent of violets mixed with ozone. He opened his eyes. There was no stone vault above it. There, in the deep indigo sky, hung two moons – a huge silver one and a small, blood – red one.

Sherlock Holmes sat up, shaking purple pollen from his palms. He was still in his linen suit, but the clock in his pocket was no longer ticking. Instead, an alien, measured rhythm beat in his chest.

«Interesting,» he whispered, looking around the forest of trees with wine – red trunks. – It seems that the conditions of the task have changed. CHAPTER 2. AXIOM OF SILENCE

Holmes's mind, despite his physical weakness, began to work at full capacity, launching the process of inventorying reality. The gravity here was a little weaker than on Earth – perhaps nine or ten percent. His movements became easier, but this

deceptive feeling of freedom only irritated his brain, accustomed to precision.

The silence was absolute. But this was not the silence that reigns in an empty room. When the wind rushed through the crowns of the purple trees, it did not cause a rustle. Instead, there was a thin ringing sound, like glass bells beating against each other.

«The acoustics are distorted,» he noted, straightening the torn pieces of his frock coat.«Either the density of the atmosphere is higher than normal, or the very matter of this world has a different crystal lattice.

His gaze fell on the horizon, and for a second his breath caught in his throat. There, in the inky sky, islands floated. Real blocks of stone topped with white spiers. They moved along slow, measured trajectories. Holmes felt no fear. He felt the excitement of a predator who had discovered a trail.

He looked down at his feet and froze. Footprints were clearly visible in the purple grass. Not his. Someone passed here recently, leaving trampled stems. In one place the grass was stained with a thick purple liquid. Holmes bent down, touching the spot. Blood. But her biochemistry was different – she did not have the smell of iron. A piece of cloth lay nearby. Blue – gray

silk with embroidered silver leaf.

«Healer,» Holmes stated, studying the weaving of threads. – And he's wounded.

He raised his eyes, peering into the thicket. Holmes slowly moved towards the sound, trying to step as quietly as possible, although the crunchy grass made this task impossible. His weapons remained in Egypt. Weapons are a crutch for a weak mind. He parted the thickets of tough bushes and saw him. ***
CARD LETTER «P» ***

Beneath a tree whose trunk glowed with an amber light sat a creature resembling a human, but with a thinner proportioned face and sharp – tipped ears. He was wearing a blue – gray robe, torn and soaked in blood. The creature was breathing heavily. Clutched in his hands was a crystal emitting a faint green glow. It tried to press the crystal against the deep wound on its side, but the glow was constantly extinguishing. Holmes walked out into the open. The creature shuddered and suddenly raised its hand. A complex geometric pattern of light instantly flashed around his fingers, and the smell of burnt wool filled the air.

– <Kha – de! Mal – tur!> – it shouted in a hoarse voice.

Holmes froze. He didn't understand the words, but the intonation was universal: fear and despair. «I will not harm you,» said Holmes, slowly raising his empty hands. – I don't have a weapon. Holmes did not waste time analyzing the warning. He

quickly approached the young man and examined the wound. It was a deep, jagged mark left by something sharp and, apparently, jagged. The blood, purple and thick, continued to ooze, turning the grass around it dark, almost black.

«The physiology is almost identical to human,» Holmes noted, applying a pressure bandage from his handkerchief. – The artery is not affected, but the loss of plasma is critical.

He worked quickly and confidently. His hands, accustomed to the finest chemical experiments, acted with the precision of a surgeon. Having bandaged the wound, he raised the young man's head and brought a flask to his lips, in which there was still some water left. The young man came to his senses, took several greedy sips and exhaled convulsively. His skin began to take on a healthier, pearlescent hue.

«Thank you...» he said. This time the word sounded different. Holmes felt the meaning of the phrase appear directly in his mind, bypassing the hearing aid. The crystal in Holmes' chest faintly responded with warmth. – You speak strangely. Your words sound like the grinding of dry stone. But your thoughts are pure.

«Moriarty once said that my thoughts are just a cold mechanism,» Holmes helped him sit down, leaning him against

a tree.«The problem is that the world around them rarely matches their clarity. Who are you? And what are these «shadows» you mentioned?

The young man shuddered and looked around in fear.

– I'm Elian. Junior healer of the Order of the Silver Leaf. And the shadows... – he pointed deep into the forest, where the purple twilight became almost black. – These are the Beasts of Oblivion. They feel Mana. And they hate everything that has form and spark. Holmes stood up and carefully examined the thicket. The silence of the forest now seemed to him not vacuum, but expectant. A tactical scheme quickly formed in my head.

«If they sense your energy, then our position is unenviable,» he stated.«You are wounded and exhausted, and I, in your words, am «empty.«How far is the nearest safe place?

Elyan tried to stand up, leaning on the trunk of the glowing tree. His face contorted in pain, but he stayed on his feet.

«There are ancestral caves an hour's journey from here.«There the walls are saturated with the salt of the earth, it extinguishes the radiance of Mana. But I... I won't be able to get there. My navigation crystal is broken.

He pointed to the pieces of blue stone hanging on his belt.

«Without him, the forest will lead us into circles

of madness.«These are the Whispering Roots, they change paths every few minutes, adapting to the mind of the traveler.

Holmes walked up to Elian and took him by the elbow.

– The forest cannot change paths on its own.This is either an illusion that affects the vestibular apparatus, or a complex mechanism that obeys a certain algorithm.The algorithm can be calculated.Navigation is just a matter of relating fixed points.

«There are no fixed points in this forest!» – Elyan exclaimed in despair.«Even the mountains on the horizon sometimes change their peaks.

Holmes smiled faintly.It was the same smile that made the Scotland Yard inspectors feel like schoolchildren.

– You're wrong.There are two points that remain motionless in any coordinate system of this world.Those two moons are above our heads. If you measure the angle between the Silver and Blood Moons and correlate it with the angle of inclination of the branches of these wine trees...Holmes fell silent, closing his eyes.Chains of equations began to form in his brain.The sphere in his chest began to vibrate, and suddenly he saw the world differently. He didn't see magic, but he saw lines of tension in the air. He saw how the forest «breathes», how flows of energy bend the space around.

«Deduction is also a kind of navigation, Elian,» Holmes opened his eyes. His pupils became narrow for a moment, like those of a predator. – Follow me. And don't be one step behind. If my calculations are correct, we will reach your caves in exactly forty – two minutes.

Elyan looked at him in awe.

«You... you're not Hollow.«You are an anomaly.

«I'm a detective,» Holmes snapped, taking the first step into the purple darkness.«And I can't stand it when geography tries to confuse me.»

They walked quickly. Holmes led them along a strange, broken path, sometimes forcing Elian to step over roots where there seemed to be a smooth path. The air around began to get colder. The light of the Silver Moon became more and more intrusive, and the crimson Blood Moon seemed to increase in size.

Suddenly Holmes stopped. His hand abruptly blocked Elyan's path.

– Do you hear?

Elyan listened. At first there was only silence, but then another sound broke through the crystalline sound of the wind. A low,

vibrating hum, reminiscent of the sound of thousands of insects hitting glass. Figures began to emerge from the shadows between the trees. They had no clear contours – they were clots of absolute darkness, so cold that the grass beneath them was covered with frost.

«Beasts of Oblivion...» Elyan breathed, his hand trembling. – There are too many of them. The creatures moved strangely, jerkily, like frames of a damaged film. They had no eyes, but Holmes felt their attention focused on Eliana, the only source of magical heat in this sector.

«It's useless to run,» Holmes said calmly, analyzing the trajectories of the monsters. – They are faster than us and they have already blocked the escape vectors. Elian, do you have any energy left?

«Just a little... just for a short flash...» whispered the young man, clutching a piece of crystal in his hand.

– Hold her. I need eight seconds.

Holmes quickly dropped to one knee and opened his reagent case. His fingers moved at incredible speed. He grabbed three glass vials: one with concentrated magnesium, another with potassium chlorate, and the third with a mixture he called

«London fog.»

«Magic is energy,» he muttered, mixing the powders directly into an empty metal tobacco can. – And any energy obeys the laws of thermodynamics. Creatures respond to your mana because it resonates in their spectrum. But they are not ready for pure chemical light.

The creatures were already ten feet away. The air became so cold that Elyan's breath turned to frost on his lips.

– Now! – Holmes commanded. – Flash!

Elyan screamed, throwing the last of his mana into the crystal. A faint green light illuminated the forest for a moment, and the creatures rushed forward, attracted by this bait. At that same second, Holmes struck a match and threw it into the jar.

CHAPTER 3. SALT OF THE EARTH

There was a blinding explosion of white flame. This was not a magical light – it was a violent chemical reaction generated by Earth science. The forest momentarily became brighter than at noon under the scorching sun. The creatures of Oblivion, accustomed to the subtle vibrations of the ether, let out a terrifying, ultrasonic screech. Their ghostly bodies began to literally disintegrate, unable to bear the intensity of the

magnesium flame.

– Let’s go!«Holmes grabbed Elian by the shoulder and pulled him forward while the dust from the explosion still hung in the air.«We have a two – minute head start until their sensor systems reboot.»

They ran. Elian, overcoming the pain, tried to keep up. Holmes no longer looked at the moons – he was guided by smell. The smell of ozone grew stronger, but a new aroma was added to it – the acrid, salty smell of minerals.

A gray rock appeared ahead. At its foot there was a narrow crevice, from which a weak, even glow emanated. As soon as they crossed the invisible boundary ten yards from the entrance, the buzzing in Holmes’s head stopped. The pressure disappeared.

«We’re inside...» Elyan fell exhausted to his knees as soon as they found themselves under the stone arch. – Salt caves... The salt of the earth extinguishes mana. Here the shadows are powerless. They cannot enter the zone of silence.

Holmes straightened up, dusting off his badly damaged coat. He looked around the cave. The walls were covered in a thick layer of white crystals that glowed with a soft bluish light.

«The shielding effect,» Holmes stated. – Natural insulator. Very practical.

Footsteps were heard from the depths of the cave. Several gray – robed figures armed with crystal – tipped spears came out to meet them.

– Who are you? – one of the guards boomed. – Healer of the Silver Leaf? And...» he squinted at Holmes. – What kind of curiosity is this? He doesn't smell like ether. Is he dead?

Holmes straightened his collar and looked the guard straight in the eyes.

– I'm a detective. And I would like to discuss the terms of our stay here before your guards decide that I pose a threat. The guards were in no hurry to lower their spears. In this world, where every living object had an energy trace, Sherlock Holmes looked like a frightening blur of absolute emptiness. To them, he was either an anomaly or a harbinger of doom.

«He has no aura, Gurd,» whispered the second guard, whose hands were visibly shaking. «Even stones have an echo of mana. «And this one... it's like a hole in space.

– Enough! – a sharp, authoritative voice rang out from the depths of the tunnel.

A woman approached the group. She was much older than Elyan, with graying wine – red hair and piercing eyes the color of a stormy sky. Her robes were decorated with intricate runes that glimmered dimly, resisting the overwhelming effects of the salt.

«Master Kaelia...» Elian tried to bow his head, but weakness made him stagger.

The woman came almost close to Holmes. She didn't use magic – she just watched, piercing him with a gaze that seemed to be trying to get to the very core of his atoms. Holmes did not look away. He studied her in response: the wrinkle between the eyebrows was a habit of heavy thinking; salt dust stains on the sleeves – she personally visits the mines; a slight smell of sulfur – alchemical experiments.

«The Hollow who is not afraid of the Shadows and reads the stars in the forest of madness,» she said slowly. «Elyan says you deduced him using only calculations. «In our world this is called «Hard Knowledge". It's almost forgotten.

«And in vain,» Holmes noted dryly. – Numbers never lie, unlike feelings.

«Perhaps,» Kaelia darkened. – But now we have no time for philosophical disputes. You have arrived on time, traveler. We need someone who sees the world differently than we do. We had... an event. And if we do not open it, these caves will become our common grave in two days. Kaelia led them deeper into the settlement. The Caves of the Forsworn were an entire underground city. Here lived those whom the capital Aetor considered a «marriage» – people with low levels of mana or those who lost it as a result of accidents. Holmes saw hundreds of emaciated faces illuminated by dim lamps. There was a heavy smell of salt and despair in the air.

«Three hours ago,» Kaelia began as they entered the fortified sector, «the Heart of the Mountains disappeared from our internal storage. «This is a unique crystal that purifies the air in caves from toxic fumes. Without it, we will all suffocate.

– Traces of a break – in? – Holmes asked briefly, switching to work mode.

– That's the point, they don't exist. The vault is protected by the «Seal of Blood». Only me and my assistant Gilbert could go inside. We found Gilbert inside. He's dead. But he doesn't have the crystal with him.

Holmes stopped. His eyes narrowed.

– Locked room. My favorite genre. Lead me to the body. And please tell your people not to come near the door. I don't want them to trample the physical evidence with their magical searches.

They approached a massive door carved from a single piece of obsidian. Two guards stood at the threshold, whose faces expressed an extreme degree of superstitious horror.

«The magical security was not broken,» Kaelia explained. «If someone walked through the walls or used teleportation, the runes on the doors would glow crimson. But they are silent. From a magical standpoint, Gilbert was the only one in the room. But Gilbert could not steal the crystal – he was more devoted to the order than to life itself.

Holmes took the oil lamp from the guard's hands and, without saying a word, crossed the threshold. Kaelia led them deeper into the settlement. The Caves of the Forsworn were an entire underground city. Here lived those whom the capital Aetor considered a «marriage» – people with low levels of mana or those who lost it as a result of accidents. Holmes saw hundreds of emaciated faces illuminated by dim lamps. There was a heavy smell of salt and despair in the air.

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Gilbert could not steal the crystal – he was more devoted to the order than to life itself.

Holmes took the oil lamp from the guard's hands and, without saying a word, crossed the threshold. It was cold inside the cell and smelled of dry dust. In the center, right under the empty pedestal where the crystal had previously rested, crumpled on the floor, lay the body of an old man. Holmes did not immediately approach him. At first he froze at the entrance, slowly moving the lamp from one corner to another.

«Perfectly fitted blocks of slate,» he muttered, moving the light along the joints. «No cracks or vents larger than two inches in diameter. «The walls are monolithic. The floor is solid rock.

Elyan and Kaelia stood in the doorway, watching the Hollow crawl along the floor, examining the layer of dust.

– What are you looking for? – Elyan whispered. «Our trackers have already examined everything. «They did not find a single vibration of the ether.

«Your trackers were looking for ghosts,» Holmes stood up, brushing off his knees. – And I'm looking for matter. Magic is just another way to influence the physical world. And if she did not leave a trace in the ether, then she acted through physics.

He walked over to Gilbert's body. The old man looked as if he had simply fallen asleep, if not for the unnatural pallor of his face and the frozen horror in his wide – open eyes. Holmes carefully raised the deceased's hand.

– Rigor mortis has not yet set in, the blood has just begun to settle in the lower extremities. Death occurred approximately two and a half hours ago. Gilbert died instantly.

Holmes took his magnifying glass out of his pocket; it was cracked from the fall in Egypt, but still usable. He brought the lens to the deceased's palm.

«Interesting...» whispered the detective.

On the old man's palm was a tiny red ring that looked like an insect bite. In the center of the ring, Holmes saw three microscopic punctures arranged in a perfect triangle. *** FIXED REPEAT TEXT ***

Holmes took the oil lamp from the guard's hands and, without saying a word, crossed the threshold. It was cold inside the cell and smelled of dry dust. In the center, right under the empty pedestal where the crystal had previously rested, crumpled on the floor, lay the body of an old man. Holmes did not immediately approach him. At first he froze at the entrance, slowly moving the lamp from one corner to another.

«Perfectly fitted blocks of slate,» he muttered, moving the light along the joints.«No cracks or vents larger than two inches in diameter.«The walls are monolithic.The floor is solid rock.

Elyan and Kaelia stood in the doorway, watching the Hollow crawl along the floor, examining the layer of dust.

– What are you looking for? – Elyan whispered.«Our trackers have already examined everything.«They did not find a single vibration of the ether. *** CARD LETTER «R» ***

Rationality is what you call the magic of five centuries,» Holmes said, looking at the Master. – The Heart of the Mountains crystal has the property of absorbing light and mana around it.In the salt caves he becomes almost invisible to the magical gaze. You saw him on the floor, next to the dead Gilbert. You realized that the Fiddler killed the old man and dropped the loot. You simply stepped on it, pressing it into the soft sole of your boot.Salt hid the magical trace, and the Seal of Blood does not look for objects, it looks for intentions in the aura.

– Search him! – Kaelia ordered, and her voice was colder than cave ice.

Gurd tried to grab his sword, but Holmes was faster.Using baritsu techniques, he grabbed the giant's wrist and with a sharp, precise movement pressed on the painful point.The sword fell on the stones with a clang.The guards fell on the traitor, knocking him to the floor. CHAPTER 4. CITY OF FLOATING TOWERS

After Gurd's exposure, the attitude towards Holmes in the salt caves changed. The outcasts looked at him with apprehension, but hope was now visible in their eyes. Magister Kaelia ordered that the «wanderer and his companion» be given the best rooms the caves had to offer – dry niches lined with soft moss and illuminated by stable crystals.

Holmes, however, was in no hurry to rest. He spent the rest of the night studying the maps of Eldria that Kaelia had provided him with. Elian, whose wounds were healing thanks to the skills of local healers, sat nearby, watching as the detective made notes in his notebook.

«We can't stay here long,» Holmes said, without looking up from the drawings. «The Order of the Spider has already penetrated these holes. If Moriarty – or whoever calls himself by his name – is looking for the Orb, he will come here.

«But Kaelia said that the caves are safe!» – Elyan objected. – Salt extinguishes any search spells.

– Magic – yes. But it does not extinguish logic. Gurd was just a small fry. A real spider does not pull the threads itself; it creates conditions under which the victim itself crawls into the trap.

Holmes pointed to a point on the map – the capital of Aethor.

– We need to go to the Library of Magicians. If the Orb in my chest is the key, I must find the lock. Elian, you said that your order is there. Can you guide me through the city gates?

The young man hesitated, rubbing the scar on his side.

«Hollows are not allowed into Aethor, Sherlock.» «Mana Inquisitors stand at the entrances. They sense the absence of the Spark a mile away. We'll be arrested before we see the spiers of the first tower.»

«The inquisitors are looking for magic,» Holmes looked up, and cold excitement flashed in his eyes. «And we will offer them something that their senses cannot classify.» «Master Kaelia!»

The woman entered the niche, as if sensing that the conversation was about her. In her hands she held a small bundle of thick leather. «Are you going to leave?» It was not a question, but a statement. Kaelia placed the package on the table. «I cannot hold you back, although your mind would be the greatest treasure for our people.»

«Truth requires movement, Master,» Holmes replied. – Stagnation is death for the mind.

Kaelia slowly unwrapped the package. Inside lay a ring of dull gray metal, adorned with a single stone that seemed to suck in the

light around it.

– This is my mother's ring. It was created in a time when magicians and the mediocre were not yet enemies. It does not provide magic, but it does create an «etheric echo». To any Inquisitor, you will look like a magician with a very weak, barely noticeable talent.

Holmes took the ring, studying it through the lens.

– False trail. Deception of feelings. Very practical.

«He has a price,» Kaelia lowered her voice. «The ring feeds on your life force. For an ordinary person, it is fatal after a week of wearing it. But you... you have the Sphere. I hope she can balance this exchange.

Holmes put the ring on his little finger. He felt a slight, barely noticeable tingling sensation, which was immediately replaced by cold confidence. The sphere in his chest responded with a short, heavy jolt.

«We have three days' journey to Aetor,» Holmes stood up, throwing on his traveling cloak. – Elyan, gather supplies. We leave at dawn. Master, thank you for your hospitality. And I advise you to change all the codes to the Seal of Blood. Gurd may not have been the only one to sell his loyalty for the promise of a miracle.

In the morning, when the Silver Moon began to fade, Holmes and Elyan left the caves. The path lay through the Great Plains, an open space where the wind smelled of ozone and burnt grass. The outlines of Aetor, a city that literally floated in the sky, held by colossal magical chains, had already begun to appear on the horizon. The Great Plains were not as deserted as Holmes expected. The road, paved with slabs of white stone that glowed in the twilight, was filled with caravans and travelers. Here Holmes first saw the entire social ladder of Eldria.

The soaring carriages of aristocrats, «ethereal gondolas,» rushed past them, leaving behind a trail of blue sparks. Along the edges of the road wandered the Outlaws and workers, whose faces were gray from the «ethereal dust.» The gap between those who had the Spark and those who were deprived of it was felt here more acutely than the gap between the London slums and the mansions of Mayfair.

«Look at this carriage, Elian,» Holmes pointed with his cane at a carriage flying past, decorated with a coat of arms in the form of a crying eye. «She spends about forty percent of her energy creating decorative fog under the bottom. This is blatant inefficiency.

– But this is a question of status! – Elian was surprised. – The

magician from the house of Liar cannot afford to travel without fog. This is a sign of purity of mana.

«Status is an illusion that is paid for with real resources,» Holmes retorted. «Your society is built on a foundation of fragile glass. Once the magic begins to dry up, all this architectural pride will collapse under its own weight.

Closer to noon, they approached the «Silver Arch» – the first gate leading to the foot of the city. Here the Road narrowed, and a group of armored guards checked everyone who entered. In their hands they had long staffs with crystals attached to the ends.

«Inquisitors of Order,» Elian whispered, lowering his head. – Don't look them in the eyes, Sherlock. They may feel doubtful.

Holmes, on the other hand, straightened his shoulders.

– Doubt is the privilege of those who do not know the facts. Follow me and be silent. If they ask about my origins, I will be a «lost explorer from the Western colonies.»

As they approached the post, the massive guard aimed the crystal of his staff straight at Holmes' chest. The stone glowed for a moment with a dull, steady green light. Kaelia's ring worked. The guard frowned, peering at the crystal's readings.

«Strange resonance,» he said in a deep voice, turning his

gaze to Holmes.«Your mana... it sounds like steel hitting stone.«Which House are you from, traveler?

Holmes met the guard's gaze, giving his face an expression of extreme boredom that he usually reserved for Scotland Yard inspectors.

– House Werner, western limits. We are engaged in the classification of anomalous zones. If you want to delay us for a full inspection, I will demand compensation for every hour of downtime of my tools. And they cost more than this entire post along with your armor.

Holmes opened his case slightly, revealing rows of glass retorts and brass utensils. To a guard accustomed to glowing stones, these complex mechanisms looked like something incredibly powerful and dangerous.

«Come in,» muttered the guard, taking his staff away. – Another crazy alchemist. Just don't blow up anything in the Lower City.

As they passed the archway, Elyan wiped the sweat from his brow.

– How do you do this? You lied to his face and he didn't even doubt it!

«I didn't lie, Elyan.«I simply presented him with facts that he could not interpret correctly. Alchemy is a science, and science always seems like magic to the ignorant.

They began to climb the spiral ramp leading to Lower Aetor. The city hung over them like a colossal shadow. Here, at the foot of the towers, eternal twilight reigned. Thick purple smoke poured out of the pipes going into the sky – waste from magical reactors.

Suddenly Holmes stopped. His attention was drawn to a piece of paper taped to the wall of one of the shops. A small, barely noticeable spider was drawn on it. And under it, in firm calligraphic handwriting, was written a phrase in English:

«Welcome to the web, Sherlock. Mind your steps.»

Holmes closed his eyes, and for a moment his face became frighteningly cold.

– He knows I'm here. And he has already started the game. – What is written there? – Elyan came closer, trying to make out the strange signs. – Is this a Forsworn code?

«This is an invitation to a dance, Elian,» Holmes tore off the piece of paper and hid it in his pocket. – Moriarty is not just here. He inserted himself into the very structure of this city. This

spider has woven its web of gold, magic and ambition.

They entered Lower Aetor. Here the streets were narrow, lined with smugglers' shops and dens where the Forsworn smoked «etherroot» in an attempt to recapture some trace of their lost magic. Holmes walked through the crowd, his gaze constantly taking in details: the tattoos on the mercenaries' arms, the type of crystals in the street lamps, the direction of the gutters.

«We need a place to stay,» said Holmes.«The kind where the fewest questions are asked and where the most rumors are in the air.»

«The Blind Sphinx Tavern,» answered Elyan. – Those who do not like the light of the Inquisition gather there. But this is a dangerous place.

«Danger is just a lack of control over the situation,» Holmes snapped. – Lead the way. We need to find out who in this city speaks on behalf of the Spider.

As they walked, Holmes felt the Sphere in his chest begin to heat up. She was reacting to the proximity of something colossal. Raising his head, he saw the center of the city – the Temple of Light, surrounded by three rotating rings of mana.

«If I want to understand this world, I must get into its brain,» Holmes whispered.«And the brain of this city is the Royal Library.»

In the sky above them, the Silver Moon reached its zenith, and for a moment its cold light illuminated the detective's face. He was no longer a refugee from another world. He was a hunter who was finally on the trail of a beast worthy of his mind. CHAPTER 5. SEAL OF THE SPIDER

The Blind Sphinx Tavern fully lived up to its name.It was a squat building made of porous dark stone, the windows of which were covered with cloudy mica, which did not let in light, but perfectly kept heavy odors inside.There was twilight inside, diluted only by the dim glow of magical lichens hanging from the ceiling like rotten rags.

Holmes and Elian took a table in the farthest corner, from where they had an ideal view of the entrance and the bar counter.The air here was thick with the smoke of «etherroot» – a local analogue of opium, which gave failed magicians the illusion of returning their powers, slowly burning out their minds.

«Order what everyone drinks here,» Holmes said quietly, without looking at his companion. Under the brim of his hat,

his eyes scanned the room incessantly.«And try not to look like you're expecting an attack every second.«In such a place, fear is an invitation to robbery.

Elian brought two mugs of cloudy, bubbling liquid that smelled of fermented honey and rust. Holmes just took a sip of the drink, winced and put the mug on the table.

«At the next table on the left,» Holmes whispered, «there are three mercenaries from the personal guard of the House of Call.«Pay attention to their cloaks.The edges are hemmed with lead thread.This is not for show – they are preparing to clash with those who use lightning magic.

– Can you see it in this darkness? – Elian was amazed.

– I see more than just that.There's that man at the counter pretending to be asleep. His left ear constantly twitches – he listens not to us, but to those sitting behind the partition.This is a professional «whisper catcher".Information in this city is more expensive than pure air. Holmes's attention suddenly turned to a notice board nailed to the wall near the exit.It was a chaotic pile of papers, job offers and threats. But among the diversity of magical runes and advertisements for the search for fugitive slaves, one piece of paper stood out.It was secured not with a nail, but with a thin steel needle.

Holmes stood up and, pretending to be interested in a map of local roads, walked up to the board. With a deft movement of a magician, he tore off the piece of paper and returned to its place.

It was the same note they had seen at the entrance, but with an addition on the back. This time there was a flawless geometric diagram drawn there – a cross – section of the Royal Library of Aetor. One of the sectors was circled in red.

«He gives me the route,» Holmes tapped his finger on the diagram. «Moriarty wants me to enter through the south wing. «This is either a trap or a test of his new security system.

– We can't go there! – Elian turned even paler. – The southern wing is the Forbidden Knowledge Sector. There are not just guards on duty there, but Automatons – mechanisms powered by the blood of the ancient gods. They have no intelligence and cannot be deceived or bribed.

«Every mechanism has a wear point, Elian. «Moriarty loves order, but order is always predictable. If Automaton acts according to a program, then this program has a logical cycle.

Holmes turned the paper over. Below, under the diagram,

there was a note in small print: «Tea will be served at seven. Don't be late, Sherlock. You know how much I don't like cold drinks.»

«Seven o'clock,» Holmes looked at his empty wrists, where his watch once was. – Local time, this is the moment when the Silver Moon disappears behind the spire of the Temple of Light. We have less than five hours left to prepare. Holmes motioned to the innkeeper, a one – eyed creature with skin as gray as parchment.

«We need two cloaks of shadow thread,» said Holmes, laying on the table a gold coin that he had quietly taken from Gurd's wallet in the salt caves. – And a couple of bottles with pollen from the sleeping fern.

The innkeeper greedily grabbed the gold, testing it on his teeth.

«The shadow thread is precious these days, sir...» he creaked. – The Inquisition is clearing out all the supplies. They say the Spider pays twice as much.

«I'm crying now,» Holmes snapped.«And I don't ask questions about where you got these cloaks from.»

Ten minutes later, in a package under the table, Holmes was already checking the quality of the goods. The shadow thread

was a unique material – it absorbed light, making the owner almost invisible in the twilight. For Holmes, this was not magic, but advanced camouflage, working on the principle of photon refraction.

– Why do we need pollen? – Elyan asked, hiding his bottle in the folds of his robe.

«Moriarty's automatons appear to use optical and thermal sensors,» Holmes explained, standing up. – When heated, pollen creates a cloud that blocks thermal vision. We will not fight them, Elyan. We will be a system error for them.

They left the Blind Sphinx as the evening twilight of Aetor turned crimson tones of the Blood Moon. The city began to transform: the towers of the highest tier lit up with bright neon light, and the lower levels were plunged into a thick, ozone – smelling fog. It was a time of thieves, renegade magicians and one London detective who felt more alive than ever in this atmosphere. The path to the southern wing of the Library led through the Bridge of Sighs, a colossal structure of transparent quartz that vibrated with the flow of mana flowing into the government quarters. Holmes walked ahead, his cloak of shadow thread making him a barely visible blur in the gloom.

«Stop,» Holmes pressed Elyan against the wall behind the

ledge of a bas – relief depicting some forgotten god with four arms. – Inquisitor Patrol. Five people. One is a senior master, judging by the gold piping on the mask.

Elyan held his breath. A detachment in white robes walked past them with a measured step. They emanated such cold that frost appeared on the stones of the bridge. The inquisitors did not look around – their masks scanned the energy fields.

«The ring,» Holmes whispered. – It's starting to overheat. Moriarty strengthened the background of the city to burn out any other people's mana. We need to act faster.

They slid to the base of the Library's south wall. There were no windows here – only monolithic black obsidian, dotted with runes of protection. Ten feet above the ground, a small technical protrusion could be seen – a ventilation hatch for removing heat from magical scrolls.

«Lift me up,» Holmes commanded. «When I gain a foothold, I'll throw you a shadow rope.»

Using mountaineering techniques he had once honed in the Swiss Alps, Holmes latched onto a narrow ledge. His fingers ached from the cold of the stone, but the Sphere in his chest suddenly responded with a wave of heat. She seemed to feel the

proximity of the Library – a colossal repository of knowledge that could explain its nature.

A minute later they were both crawling through a narrow, stuffy tunnel filled with humming wires and copper pipes. Holmes felt the vibration of the building resonate through his bones. This was Aetor's heart, and it beat in a rhythm that was deeply disgusting to him – the rhythm of an artificial, imposed order. *** CIPHER LETTER «O» ***

The countdown has begun. Seven o'clock in the evening is the moment when the Silver Moon disappears behind the spire of the Temple of Light. Holmes and Elian lay in wait in the Blind Sphinx Tavern, a squat building of porous dark stone. There was twilight inside, diluted only by the dim glow of magical lichens. The air here was thick with the smoke of the «ethereal root.» Holmes's attention was suddenly drawn to a piece of paper, secured not with a nail, but with a thin steel needle. Holmes stood up and tore off the piece of paper. A small, barely noticeable spider was drawn on the piece of paper. And under it is a solid phrase in English: «Mathematics is the music of reason.»

«Moriarty...» Holmes whispered. «This spider has woven its web even here.» And he knows that I will come. CHAPTER 6. ANATOMY OF THE FORBIDDEN

Holmes stood in front of the central pedestal, where the Guardian Crystal rotated in a cocoon of golden sparks. The

sphere in his chest was now pulsating not just with cold, but with a measured, viscous rhythm that seemed to be trying to synchronize with the vibration of the building. The detective understood: the Library is not just a warehouse of information, it is a living computer network built on ethereal connections.

«Identification,» repeated the dispassionate voice in his mind. – The magic key was not found. An unauthorized access attempt has been detected.

– Sherlock, we need to run! – Elyan whispered, looking back at the entrance, where the white masks of the Inquisitors were already flashing between the floating bookshelves. – They will block the exits!

«Escape is just a delay,» Holmes did not move. His gaze was drawn to the edges of the crystal. – This system works on the principle of absorbing and processing magical intentions. She's waiting for me to cast a spell to classify it and suppress it. But I won't give her magic. I will give her a pure, unsolvable problem.

Holmes slowly reached out and touched the surface of the crystal. He wasn't trying to do any magic. He closed his eyes, recalling the Halls of the Mind – endless rows of shelves with numbers and formulas.

«Accept the calculation request,» he said out loud, and his voice echoed under the dome of the Library. – Axiom: The ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter in space without curvature. Protocol: Decimal expansion of the number "Pi". Follow until the last sign. The Guardian Crystal froze for a moment. The golden sparks around him were replaced by an alarming crimson glow. Aetor's system, accustomed to finite magical formulas and elegant runes, was faced with an infinity that had no magical nature.

«The request has been accepted...» the voice in Holmes's head trembled, and for the first time a semblance of static noise appeared in it. – Start of calculations... Three... dot... one... four... one... five... nine... two...

At that very moment, chaos began throughout the Library. The floating book cubes began to twitch, losing altitude. The magicians, immersed in a trance, sharply opened their eyes, clutching their heads – an endless stream of numbers broadcast by the Crystal burst into their minds, displacing their usual spells.

– What did you do? – Elyan watched in horror as the golden rings under the dome began to rotate at wild speed, striking out sheaves of sparks.

«I infected their ideal system with a virus of absolute

precision,» Holmes grabbed Elyan by the shoulder. – The number «Pi» has no end, Elian. For the machine that has to give the answer, it's an endless loop. While the Library tries to calculate the incomputable, its sensors will go blind.

The inquisitors at the entrance fell to their knees. Their detector masks burned out, unable to withstand the information overload. The air in the hall was filled with the smell of ozone and burnt paper.

– Now follow me! – Holmes commanded. – To the Forbidden Geometry sector. Moriarty left his mark there. They ran through a fog of disintegrating data. The sphere in Holmes' chest now shone with an even blue light, showing the way among the dying magical lamps. The library died and was reborn every second, trying to digest the mathematical paradox of the Earth.

The Forbidden Geometry Sector was located in the deepest part of the southern wing. There were no floating books here. The walls were lined with heavy obsidian, and the shelves were lined with real, physical volumes, chained in cold iron.

Holmes stopped in front of a small pedestal. There, under a layer of many years of dust, lay an object completely out of place in this world of magical excesses. It was a book bound in simple leather.

The detective took it carefully. There were no runes on the cover. Only embossed letters in Latin: «Elementa».

«Euclid's Principia,» Holmes whispered, and there was something akin to awe in his voice. – In a world where towers are built with the power of thought, someone brought here the laws of a straight line and a compass.

He opened the book. Between the pages lay a dried flower – a rose, which retained the subtle aroma of an English garden. In the margin of the first chapter, next to the definition of the point, there was a note made in familiar calligraphic handwriting:

«Dear Sherlock, magic is just physics poorly written down. I found a way to fix composer errors. I'm waiting for you in the Third Tower. Sugar is in the cupboard on the left.» «He's mocking us,» Elian hissed, looking into the book. – Who is this «James»? And why does he write in your language at the very heart of our story?

«He doesn't just write, Elian. He will colonize this world,» Holmes slammed the book shut and hid it under his cloak. – Moriarty doesn't want to be a magician. He wants to be an Architect. He translates magic into the language of mathematics to make it predictable and... subject only to him.

At that moment, the floor beneath their feet shook. The Guardian Crystal in the main hall made a final, plaintive sound and burst, scattering into thousands of fragments. The entire Library was plunged into darkness. The logic virus has completed its work, bringing down the security system.

«We need to leave,» Holmes confidently walked towards the wall, which seemed monolithic. – If I remember correctly the architectural plan of the Library, behind this shelving there should be a discharge channel for waste ether.

He pressed on a barely noticeable protrusion in the obsidian. With a dry click, part of the wall moved to the side, revealing the mouth of a narrow shaft leading down into the technical tiers of the city.

– Jump, Elian. The Lower Ring awaits us below. There we are just shadows among shadows. And the Inquisitors will be looking for a long time for the «great magician» who brought down their archive without a single spell. The descent down the mine was long and painful. They slid through the slimy pipes through which liquid mana once flowed, until they fell into a pile of garbage at the very bottom of Aetor.

Holmes was the first to rise, dusting off his badly damaged

linen frock coat. Down here the city looked different. The floating towers were hidden behind a thick layer of smog, and instead of graceful bridges, rusty magical cables hung overhead.

«We are in the slums of the Outcasts,» Elian looked around cautiously. – The law of magicians does not apply here. Only the law of force applies here.

«An ideal place for a detective,» Holmes straightened up, feeling the Book of Euclid in his inner pocket. – Moriarty in the Third Tower. This is the eastern sector, the most prestigious area of the city. To get there «Empty», we'll need a plan.

He looked at the two moons. The Silver Moon began to set, and the Blood Moon bathed the slums in its unhealthy, red light.

«Elian, we have an ally that Moriarty forgot about,» Holmes pointed to the Sphere in his chest, which was now pulsating in time with the Blood Moon. – He thinks that I will come to him as a guest. But I will come as an investigator. And the first thing I investigate is the origin of his «new order.»

They moved deeper into the slums. Ahead, in the crimson fog, could be seen the outline of the Third Tower – an immaculate black obelisk that rose above the chaos of Eldria as a monument to cold reason. The slums of the Lower Rim reminded Holmes

of the East End, but afflicted with the leprosy of magical progress. Here the air was so thick with the fumes of spent mana that it seemed tangible – sticky and smelling of rancid fat. The outcasts, wrapped in rags that were once expensive fabrics, watched the travelers with dull glances.

«Look at their faces, Elian,» Holmes walked quickly, his cane rhythmically tapping on the iron slabs of the pavement. «They're not just poor. They're drunk. Moriarty uses them as filters. He passes raw ether through living people to obtain a pure concentrate for his towers.

– This is prohibited by the laws of the Council! – Elian screamed, covering his mouth with the edge of his robe.

«The Council is just a group of old men, mesmerized by their own greatness,» Holmes stopped at a gutter where a poisonous green liquid was flowing. – Moriarty is a practitioner. He realized that in this world magic is oil. And he builds his drilling rigs right on the bones of this people.

The detective picked up a piece of perforated metal tape from the ground. Small symbols were stamped on it – binary code woven into runic script.

– Punch cards. He doesn't just rule them, he programs reality. It seems the Professor has found a way to turn Eldria into

one giant Babbage Analytical Engine. They took refuge in the shadows of an abandoned foundry where mana crystals had once been smelted. Holmes laid out the Book of Euclid on the rusty surface of the workbench. The sphere in his chest responded to the proximity of the book, and the pages began to glow faintly, revealing hidden layers of text.

– Do you see these marks, Elian? – Holmes pointed to a diagram of a triangle inscribed in a circle. – This is not just geometry. This is a scheme for suppressing the will. Moriarty has calculated the resonant frequency of your magic. If he tunes his towers to this rhythm, any spell in Eldria will become impossible without his personal permission.

«He wants to steal our freedom?» – Elian's voice trembled.

«He wants to eliminate human error,» Holmes slammed the book shut. «For him, the world is an equation. «If the result does not suit him, he changes the conditions of the problem.

Holmes took a bottle of salt dust from his pocket and mixed it with the sticky ethereal slag found on the floor. The mixture sizzled, turning into a thick black ointment.

– Apply this to your runes on your clothes. This will create a «negative stain». To its sensors we will become invisible – just pieces of empty space. It's time for us. The Third Tower

doesn't like latecomers. The path to the Third Tower ran through the border between the chaos of the slums and the surgical order of the Inquisition area. Here the streets were swept to a shine, and patrol automatons moved with the precision of clock pendulums. The air here did not smell of ozone – it smelled of death and sterility.

– Do you hear? – Holmes froze in the shadow of the arch.

Elyan listened. A dry, rhythmic knock made its way through the steady hum of the city. "Teak. So. Teak. So." «The sound came from the very depths of the black obelisk of the Third Tower. It was not the sound of the heart, it was the sound of the Metronome – a colossal device that set the pace for all of Aetor.

«He synchronized the city with his pocket watch,» Holmes straightened his cloak. – This is the highest degree of arrogance – to force an entire civilization to breathe in time with your pulse.

They slipped past the last patrol using Holmes' ointment. The automatons turned their pyramidal heads in their direction, but the red rays passed through them, not finding a target. To the machines they were just shadows, errors in the code that they had not yet learned to recognize.

In front of them was a heavy door made of black

obsidian. There was no lock on it. Only a smooth surface and a small hole in the center – perfectly round. «Magic won't help here, Elian,» Holmes went to the door. – Mechanics are needed here.

He took out the Book of Euclid and placed its spine against the hole. There was a quiet click, and then the hum of hundreds of gears hidden inside the rock. The obsidian parted to the sides, opening the way inside.

The interior of the Third Tower was frighteningly familiar to Holmes. There were no magical lamps here. Copper gas pipes ran along the walls, and real horns burned in the niches, filling the room with the yellowish, cozy light of London. On the shelves were flasks, chemistry reference books, and even – Holmes shuddered involuntarily – a porcelain figurine of a dog, an exact copy of the one that stood on Baker Street.

«He recreated our past,» Elian whispered, looking around. «But it seems... dead.»

«It's static,» Holmes walked slowly along the carpet, which muffled the sounds of footsteps. – Moriarty loves collections. And now he collects worlds.

They climbed the spiral staircase to the top tier. The sound

of the metronome grew louder, turning into hammer blows in my head. In the center of the room, at a massive mahogany table, sat a man. His back was perfectly straight, and his pale fingers were fingering some papers. *** CARD LETTER «T» ***

The tyranny of your «ideal society» is only a natural consequence of boredom, Professor,» said Holmes, entering the office. James Moriarty slowly turned around. He looked impeccable – a black frock coat, not a single wrinkle.

«Emptiness is just a matter of perception, Sherlock.«I just added structure to this world. Now Aetor works like my watch. And soon I will launch this mechanism at full capacity.

– At the cost of destroying all living things? – Holmes pointed with his cane at the window, beyond which the Lower Ring flickered with poisonous lights below.

– Progress always requires sacrifices. You know that yourself. Give me the Orb, Sherlock. She is the heart of this world. The ancients created it as a stabilizer. She is the only thing that can resist my logic.

Holmes straightened up. The sphere in his chest responded with a powerful shock.

«I'm afraid, Professor, I have other plans for this evening.» Moriarty froze for a moment, and a shadow flashed across his pale face – either annoyance or sincere admiration. He slowly approached the huge window, behind which the Silver Moon floated majestically in the inky sky of Eldria. Its cold, deathly pale light fell on his thin fingers, making them look like

the phalanges of a skeleton.

– Cemetery, Sherlock? – Moriarty turned around, and his eyes in the light of the moon seemed like two empty mirrors. «You have always been too attached to biological sentimentality.» «What you call a cemetery, I call ideal order. Silence is the absence of error.

Holmes didn't answer. He slowly took out the Book of Euclid from under his cloak. The heavy binding made of dark wood gleamed mattely in the glow of the Silver Moon. The detective placed the book on the table between himself and the Professor, covering it with his palm.

«You left this for me in the Library, James.» «Geometry as a framework for your new world. But you made the classic mistake of a dictator: you forgot that axioms do not need protection, and your laws need violence against the very nature of this world.

«The axioms are undeniable,» Moriarty retorted softly, nodding at the book. «I just cleared this world of magical garbage using your favorite tools.» «Look at Elian. He is scared because his world is quicksand. I offer him a granite rock.

Elian, standing behind Holmes, involuntarily clenched his

fists. The light of the Silver Moon highlighted the pallor of his face, but his eyes no longer held that paralyzing fear. «Your rock is a tombstone,» Elian's voice sounded unexpectedly firm. «Eldria's magic may be chaotic, but it is alive. It flows like blood. What you are doing is turning blood into ice.

Moriarty looked at the young man for the first time with the interest that a scientist shows in an unusual type of mold.

«Living blood tends to be shed, young man. «Ice is stable.

He turned his gaze back to Holmes.

– The sphere is in your chest, Sherlock. It vibrates. I can hear its roar even from here. It resonates with the Silver Moon, doesn't it? The ancients knew that magic needed a stabilizer. Silver extinguishes, Blood excites. Your Sphere is the perfect balancer. With its help, I can close the chain of Aetor Reactors and eliminate the «chaos» variable forever.

Holmes felt the Sphere in his chest actually become heavier, responding to the cold light pouring from the window.

«You want to turn this world into a giant clockwork, Professor. «But watches tend to break if even one grain of sand gets into it and refuses to be part of the gear.

«And you hope to become this grain of sand?» – Moriarty chuckled. – In a world where I control the very geometry

of space? Sherlock, you've always been a master of detail, but now you're missing the big picture. I have already begun the process of Transmutation. The Silver Moon will reach its apogee in three hours, and then the Sphere itself will leave your body, obeying the laws of gravity, which I... corrected. Holmes slowly opened the Book of Euclid to a page with a drawing of a perfect circle. His fingers touched the Latin marks made by Moriarty's hand.

«You always loved perfection, James. «But you forgot a simple thing that Reichenbach taught us. Gravity doesn't choose between a genius and a villain. She's just pulling down.

Holmes looked up. His gray eyes were colder than the Silver Moon.

«Your Transmutation is based on the assumption that the Sphere obeys your calculations. But you studied it as a magical object. I studied it as a logical paradox.

– Paradox? – Moriarty narrowed his eyes. – This is just a highly organized structure of the ether.

«No,» Holmes shook his head. – This is the «Ship of Theseus» in miniature. It changes its essence depending on who carries it. In your hands she will become death. In my... she became a memory. A memory of a world where people died of pneumonia, not magical exhaustion. And this memory does not

obey your Reactors.

Moriarty lost his cool for a moment. His face distorted.

– Memory is noise! Useless, irrational noise! You brought with you the smell of London gateways into my pure temple!

He waved his hand, and black geometric lines suddenly wove into the air of the tower. They tightened around Holmes, turning into a cage of pure, structured darkness.

«If you don't give it up voluntarily, I will cut it out along with your stubborn heart.» The cage of black lines began to shrink. The air inside became dry and lifeless, like in a tomb. Elyan screamed, trying to hit the lines with a magical discharge, but his energy only absorbed into the black edges, making them even stronger.

Holmes remained motionless. He didn't look at the cage. He looked at the Book of Euclid.

– Elian, remember the Salt Fiddler? – he asked calmly, although his voice began to hoarse from lack of oxygen. – Magic is a system. And the system breaks down where the symmetry is broken.

Holmes sharply pressed the binding of the book at a certain point, which he had calculated back in the Library. There was a dry click. A small crystal fell out of a secret compartment in the

spine – not a magical one, but a simple piece of faceted quartz that he had picked up in the technical tier.

«Moriarty, you built your cell according to the laws of Euclidean geometry,» Holmes tossed the quartz in his palm.«But the light of the Silver Moon, passing through the windows of this tower, is refracted at an angle that you did not take into account. Your «ideal» structure has a blind spot.

Holmes threw a piece of quartz into the corner of the cage, where three black lines converged. Something impossible for the magical world happened: instead of an explosion, the sound of a tuning fork was heard. The quartz came into resonance with the Silver Moon, and a ray of light, passing through it, hit exactly the node of Moriarty's structure.

The black lines trembled and began to crumble, turning into ordinary soot.

«Geometry does not tolerate errors, Professor,» Holmes left the disintegrating cage.«And your pride just created one.» Moriarty stumbled back towards his desk, his breathing coming in short gasps. Perspiration appeared on his forehead. He looked at the crumbling cage with the expression of a man who saw how two and two suddenly became five.

«How...» he hissed.«This calculation... the refraction of light

through natural quartz... it should not have worked in a magical vacuum!»

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