



THE MAGIC OF THE ANCIENTS

by S. Gallic

PROLOGUE

The Armorie Plain, centuries ago.

The wind had finally surrendered. Across the Armorie Plain, nothing remained but a wasteland of warm ash. The grass had been reduced to charcoal, crunching underfoot. The standing stones — once proud guardians raised by the druids — lay cracked and leaning like giants with severed hamstrings. The air reeked of struck flint and molten metal. It vibrated, pulled taut like a harp-string ready to snap.

Three silhouettes dragged themselves through the chaos. Sir Johnson led the way. His cape, reduced to a smoking rag, whipped at his heels. His wand slipped between his fingers, black with soot. With every step, the wood tugged at his tendons as if he

were dragging a ship's anchor through the ash. Beside him, Lady Elo, her face streaked with grime and dried tears, supported Lord Kaelanit. Kaelanit let out a hiss through gritted teeth every time his boot hit the ground. His face, livid under the filth, contorted into a convulsive grimace as he pressed his arm against his chest.

No one spoke. The silence weighed on their eardrums, more painful even than the thunder of spells. Only the crackling of embers tore through the void. Every breath burned their lungs like a mouthful of crushed glass.

In the distance, the inky clouds split open, releasing a sickly yellow glow. The light crashed onto the ash without casting a single shadow. The world remained trapped in a gradient of gray.

“Dead?”

Elo's voice was nothing more than a hoarse breath. Johnson didn't answer. His eyes scanned the patches of mist, stopping on every suspicious mound and every swirl of smoke.

“No,” he finally let out. “Not yet.”

They reached the chasm, a gaping wound in the earth. The rock had melted into black glass — pure obsidian that crackled as it cooled. Upon this polished surface, human shadows were etched: silhouettes with wide-open mouths and hands reaching toward a sky that hadn't saved them. Fragments of twisted artifacts lay fused to the ground, like insects caught in amber.

Johnson stopped dead. Beneath their feet, shards of magic pulsed with a dying light.

“I can feel him,” Kaelanit growled, clenching his teeth.

The air at the bottom of the crater rippled like the heat rising off hot asphalt. A shape tore itself from the ground. It unfolded with jerky movements, swaying from one shoulder to the other before finding a precarious balance. Malbonne.

The air around him twisted in unstable spirals. His black rags fluttered in this hot draft like fingers clawing at the void. His face was hidden by a polished silver mask, covered in red runes that throbbed with the rhythm of a diseased heart. The glow of the glyphs projected a blood-colored spiderweb onto the ash.

“You have defeated nothing,” the sorcerer’s distorted voice rumbled. “This world belongs to me as long as it fears this mask.”

“Then that mask will fall.”

Johnson stepped forward. The wind held its breath. Malbonne raised his hand, and the runes embedded in his steel face flared to life. Johnson struck back with a sharp gesture.

The impact was silent. The white stream hit the artifact, and the air froze. For one eternal second, the plain became a silent photograph: the dust hung suspended in mid-air, and the wizards’ clothes were pressed against their skin by the pressure.

Elo’s hair stood up on her head. Then the sound arrived: a high-pitched shriek of tortured metal that made the last standing stones tremble.

Kaelanit erected a shield of light. His good arm buckled under the effort. Elo reinforced the circle, her own wand vibrating until it burned her palm.

“Johnson, look! The runes are flickering!”

“I see them.”

Johnson closed his eyes. He inhaled the poisoned atmosphere and drew from his final reserves — the kind that eat away at the soul. He spoke the forbidden words in a deep voice:

“Veritas Runarum!”

The runes on his wand shifted frequency. They pulsed in unison with those on the mask, then violently inverted. The magical flow surged backward. A low sound, like a cracked bronze bell, shook the plain. Malbonne’s red glyphs splintered. The scarlet glow turned a feverish orange before choking out into a dull purple. His scream warped into a death rattle from beyond the grave.

The mask broke free and hit the ground with a clear chime.

Under his hood, now devoid of the artifact, there was no jaw, no gaze. No skin, no flesh. In place of a head swirled an absolute void. A singularity of darkness, a miniature black hole that swallowed the morning light without giving anything back. The horizon lines warped toward the center of the silhouette. Space itself gave way under the weight of this emptiness.

Kaelanit recoiled. His fingers lost their grip on his wand. His eyes widened, reflecting the abyss that sucked the color from his irises. A spasm made his lower lip tremble.

Johnson raised his wand. A mineral-white light, pure as marble, burst forth and dove toward the silhouette. The beam embraced only emptiness. The shadow had already contracted, imploding into a tiny point before dissolving into the wind. The spell hit the vitrified ground with the crash of shattering glass. Too late.

The din vanished. Only the crackle of fire and the whistle of the morning air still inhabited the plain. At the bottom of the crater lay the silver mask, inert. Lady Elo approached it with a cautious step.

“If a single spark remains, he’ll come back.”

“Then we won’t leave a single one.”

Johnson descended into the crater and pointed his wand at the cursed object. He channeled all his energy.

“*Cinis Aeterna.*”

The mask vibrated. One last red rune tried to ignite, then went dark. The silver cracked like dry ice. It sublimated into a luminous dust that spiraled upward before being carried away by the wind.

Kaelanit let out a strangled sigh and slumped against Elo. Calm finally returned to Armorie. The sun broke through the clouds, and the ashes took on a golden hue.

Sir Johnson climbed out of the crater, then knelt by the nearest standing stone. With the tip of his wand, he traced a symbol: an eye at the center of a circle. The Rune of Memory. Elo and Kaelanit followed suit. Kaelanit stared at the empty crater, his gaze haunted.

“They’ll forget,” the young man whispered. “In a hundred years, this will be nothing but a legend to scare children.”

“Perhaps,” the old wizard replied, placing his palm against the rough granite. “But the stone... the stone will remember.”

The three runes carved into the rock lit up. The glow merged, then shot like a golden serpent through the veins of the stone.

With a hiss of steam, the image of their battle was imprinted in relief. An oath had been sealed for eternity.

Dive deeper into this world!
Check out Tony Millard's website at:

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