





Anthony Grafton Saves the World

The Magic Scroll & the Unspeakable Word



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After many days of long travel, countless changes of airplanes, long hours in bus stations, airports, and train terminals, and, finally, a long walk in Princeton's dark and cold night, he had arrived at his destination. He had gotten off the New York-to-Trenton bus at the wrong stop. Instead of stopping at Washington Ave, he had gone all the way to Palmer Square. A kind soul he found hurrying along the streets, buried in scarf, hat, and coat, stopped long enough to point him the way to Hartley Ave. He followed the instructions carefully, as he walked along the deserted streets that lead to Lake Carnegie, with only an occasional car breaking the silence of the night. After an almost thirty-minute walk and fairly paralyzed by the cold wind, he stood in front of the house of Anthony Grafton.

Only one window was lit in the otherwise sleeping neighborhood. He approached the house apprehensively, since by now it was close to midnight. He peered cautiously through the window, partially hidden by some dinosaur sculptures that dotted the front garden of the house. The fantastic sculptures reassured him that he had arrived at the right address. Now, looking through the window, he was further assured that the early part of his quest had



concluded. The most difficult part, he well knew, still lay ahead.

Through the lit window, seated at a strange chair/desk contraption and donning the hat and robe peculiar to a Renaissance magus, was Anthony Grafton. Although the young man had never seen him before, he could not fail to recognize him. Most of the world knew him as one of the greatest scholars of the early modern period. His vast erudition, scholarly generosity, and prolific and insightful body of published work

had long propelled him to that status of academic stardom to which many aspire and few achieve. For the young man, however, it was not Grafton's brilliant achievements in the humanities that had led to his long journey from the plains of Central Asia to Princeton. For him, it was Grafton's unparalleled reputation as a magician of great powers and as a man wise in ancient lore beyond the grasp of most humans.

The young man advanced slowly to the lit window and lightly tapped on the glass. Grafton, absorbed in his work did not at first



hear the young man's fingers' quiet tapping. The young man persisted, and Grafton looked up from the book opened before him. Looking straight into the young man's eyes, he signaled to the door of the house. The young man walked to the door and as he approached it, the door opened and Grafton stood by the doorframe, inviting him to enter in a whisper.

"I expected you to arrive much earlier," Grafton said. "The stars told me of your visit, but not why you seek my help or on whose behalf you have traveled so far. Please do come quietly into my study. My wife is asleep and I do not wish to wake her up. There you can tell me how I can help you. "But," he added, "you must be cold and hungry after such a long journey. Let me offer you some bread, cheese, and wine." The young man was surprised that even though he had taken every precaution to keep his voyage secret upon strict instructions of his masters, Anthony Grafton was already waiting for him. But he was comforted by his gracious and hospitable reception. He sat close to the fireplace, ate a few morsels of cheese, bread, and some grapes, but did not touch the wine. He rested the plate on a nearby table and began his story.



“My name,” he said, “is Joshua bin Halorqui. “I was,” he added, “strangely enough, named after a famous converso in fifteenth-century Spain who my family believed to have practiced Judaism in secret. But I am a descendant of an ancient Fustat family. The family settled in Samarkand more than a thousand years ago. Many members of my family were merchants along the Silk Road, trading in spices and silk. A branch of the family, however, dabbled in magic and that secret knowledge passed from generation to generation. I descend from that branch of the family. I am now an apprentice in a school of magic and mysteries that is over a thousand years old. The masters of the school, most of all the headmaster Muhammad bin al-Idrissi, a descendant of the fabled al-Idrissi who was an important Muslim scholar in the court of Roger II of Sicily, have sent me to humbly request your help.” “I have known of your school of magic and of your fabled master for a long time,” Grafton answered, “but continue with your story.”

“Around two years ago,” Joshua continued, “we found, hidden at the bottom of a very deep, dried-up well, a very ancient manuscript. It was written on a long papyrus roll in a language



unknown to any of us. The scroll had glosses on the margins of the text, written in ancient Chaldean. Those glosses told us that the scroll contained magical incantations and unspeakable curses. One of them, in particular, the unutterable word, could destroy the world. More alarming, the glosses and other material we found at the bottom of the well, such as bones, sacrificial knives, and mutilated bodies, alerted us to the great evil present in the scroll, an evil so deadly as has never been seen or experienced in this world. This is why I am here. We would like to humbly ask you to come with me to Samarkand, take a look at the scroll, and help us decipher and neutralize that evil, an evil that is palpable on the surface of the scroll. I have brought with me a copy of one of the pages for you to see.”





Grafton caressed his long beard, put aside his magician hat and robe, and putting his fingers together, reflected on what the young man had told him, and on the perils ahead. Unbeknown to the young man, he had already some knowledge of the mysterious scroll and of the great peril it presented to mankind because of the hidden power and evil that lived in the scroll. He also knew that other magicians and lore masters throughout the world were overcome by fear of the future.

Taking on this very dangerous adventure, a quest really, meant missing classes, conferences, and most of all, missing seeing his grandchild in Brooklyn, but he knew, right then and there, that for the sake of the world, and of that very grandchild, he had no choice. As perilous as this quest might be, he must meet this evil head on. He adjusted his glasses and reached to the scroll page that Joshua held fearfully between his fingers in front of him.

Handling the facsimile of one of the scroll pages with great care, Grafton examined the script. Although he could not immediately make sense of the entire page, he recognized some



words in Hittite, others in Akkadian, and, most surprisingly, some in Zuni and in Mayan. But the entire language of the page was older, much older than any of these ancient languages. The flow of the sentences harkened back to the beginnings of humanity, to one of the original languages of mankind, which Grafton's unique philological expertise allowed him to recreate. Far more troubling was the evil that lived on the page, even in this copy of the original.

Grafton stood back from the page, placing it carefully on his desk. Even in a facsimile, the page represented a great threat and he did not like something so evil to be in his home. He sat behind his desk and, without saying a word to Joshua, wrote some e-mails and a handwritten note to his wife, children, and grandchild, informing them of his quest. He put his magus hat on his head, his magician's robe over his shoulders, and grabbing a long walking stick, really his magician's staff, Grafton took Joshua by his elbow and said: "Let's go! It is about time that we went to Samarkand."

Joshua was speechless. He noted that it would take many days of travel to reach Samarkand and that arrangements needed



to be made for transportation. Regardless of the daunting journey ahead, he was profoundly grateful that the eminent sorcerer Grafton, il Grafton, as he was known in Italian magic circles, had so willingly agreed to accompany him back to Samarkand.

Grafton, still holding Joshua by his elbow, directed him to the backyard. There, in a darkness barely lit by starlight, Grafton raised his hands and made a series of complicated finger gestures, accompanied by a long incantation in Phoenician. It took a little while, as the strange words, words that had not been heard or uttered for more than two millennia, began to work. Grafton told Joshua to hold on to his staff and by this powerful and ancient magic they vanished from the backyard of Hartley Avenue in Princeton, New Jersey and appeared, in emerging daylight, outside the ancient ruined wall of Samarkand. Because Grafton roughly knew the location of Muhammad bin al-Idrissi's school, he had planned to materialize as close as possible to the Afrasiyab quarter, which dated back to the seventh century before the Common Era. It was also close to one of the gates through which the Silk Road trade flowed in and out of Samarkand.



Joshua was, of course, astonished by the ease with which they had come from so far in such little time. He now oriented himself to his surroundings and told Grafton to follow him into Samarkand's oldest neighborhood. After walking almost twenty minutes through the maze of little alleyways, they finally stood in front of an ancient and decrepit house that had once being a madrassa in the eighth century. Its heavy wooden door showed a series of inscriptions and symbols that aimed to ward off strangers and evil spirits. The door opened silently, and they walked inside. A dark, narrow hall led to a flight of stairs leading down. Slowly,



they made their way down almost six floors to a deep basement. The stairs came to an end and opened into a cave-like setting, a large circular room lit by torches.

In the middle of the room, positioned on a rectangular, altar-like table made of black basalt stone, was the scroll. Around the scroll, sitting in a circle on low chairs or reclining on beautiful ancient carpets, were more than fifty magicians and lore masters. Among them, Grafton recognized the famous Muhammad bin al-Idrissi with his long white beard, but still fierce eyes. He rose to his feet with some effort and, bowing in front of Grafton, welcomed him with these words:

“Welcome, Master Grafton. We are most grateful that you have chosen to come to our aide. Without you, we are very vulnerable to the power of the scroll. We have been casting spells and incantations on the scroll, without respite. But our energies are flagging, and some unutterable word is fighting our spell, ready to come out of the scroll and be spoken. We are now coming to the end of our power and soon the word will escape, and the world will come to an end.”



Grafton bowed back, acknowledging and thanking Muhammad bin al-Idrissi’s welcome and hospitality. He was handed a cup of sweet mint tea, and now he looked quickly around the room, recognizing some of the magicians present. Joshua, his guide, was in a far corner, kneeling with his eyes closed while casting spells against the scroll. Close to the scroll was the famous Athanasius Kircher. Sitting on a low seat on the opposite corner, was Giordano Bruno, and, occupying an important place





among the magicians, he saw Moses of Leon. It was an impressive gathering of the best magical minds of centuries.

“May I approach the scroll?,” Grafton asked.

They all nodded their assent and stood back, as Grafton raising his hands, moved his fingers in precise and methodical fashion, casting complicated spells on the scroll in an ancient and unrecognizable language. The effect was immediate. The scroll emitted a long and shrill cry. It was a terribly menacing sound that echoed throughout the walls of the circular chamber. Now the unreadable pages, under the power of Grafton spells, rearranged themselves into a series of cryptograms, signs, and click sounds that reminded Grafton of the speech of Bushmen in the Kalahari, the most ancient of all human languages.

With a loud voice, Grafton addressed the scroll now. The pages and the script became a living shadow, a dark and ominous figure that reflected no light and from which no light escaped. The shadow leaped from the now burning pages of the scroll and grabbed Grafton. They struggled mightily, as they levitated from the ground into the roof of the cave. As they rose into the air



outside at great speed, Grafton wrestled with the shadow, both physically and by an endless stream of incantations and curses, going back to the first and most ancient magic. Grafton realized that he was fighting a primal evil force, filled with hatred for humanity and for the world. It was one of the main fallen angels from the beginning of time. It had survived in the words of the scroll and was now loosed upon the world.

The stories recounted later by Muhammad bin-al Idrissi do not tell us how long Grafton and the shadow struggled or how fierce and taxing their combat was. What we know, however, is that the final outcome came when Grafton and the dark shadow,



embraced in a deathly struggle, landed on Acama, the butte or mesa in New Mexico. Acama is one of those magical places on earth where ancient cultures still survive under the varnish of newer civilizations. They had landed right by the old cemetery across from the ancient church.



With his two feet now solidly on the ground, Grafton wielded his staff and slowly got the shadow to bend to his command. Casting powerful Zuni spells, Grafton kept the shadow bound to the earth and prevented it from escaping. With great difficulty and numerous incantations, Grafton forced the shadow to slowly enunciate the unutterable word that would vanquish the world. He did this with great precautions, not allowing the word to escape into the air or be heard. The letters and syllables of the Unspeakable Word formed slowly in the air in front of Grafton with no sound attached to them, held in place by a burst of light coming from the tip of Grafton's staff.

The word was very long, formed by characters and syllables from different human and non-human languages. It was pure evil, and, although we do not know how it sounded, it was clear that this was a word of unbounded power. Grafton knew immediately that it was the secret and unknown name of the Evil One. It was a magical word of such evil that its primordial power could overwhelm all the goodness in the world, even, horror of horrors, all the footnotes in the world. With great effort, Grafton put his



two hands around the word. Slowly and forcefully, he compressed the word between his hands until it became a small and compact sphere. Grafton then opened his mouth and swallowed the word.

A huge and piercing cry rose into the night sky, the earth rumbled, and the shadow vanished in a puff. A whirlwind rose from the desert below and carried Grafton into a huge wind funnel. He was barely conscious when he landed, once again, in the hidden magical chamber in Samarkand. In the middle of the room, the ancient scroll still burned in a ghastly green flame. The magicians and lore masters hugged each other and shouted with joy. Gathering around Grafton, they patted his shoulders, kissed him, and thanked him for his courage and wisdom. And now bin al-Idrissi came with two small boxes made of sandalwood. One was filled with ambergris, and the other with frankincense. Both of these substances were filled with powerful, protective magic.



“We can never say enough or do enough to thank you and repay you for what you have done for us and the world,” said bin al-Idrissi, “but these are small gifts for your granddaughter. When she reaches her twenty-first birthday, she will open these boxes and know what happened here.”

Grafton took the two boxes and placed them underneath his robe with many thanks and bows. Although he yearned to talk to Kircher and Bruno, he must not be delayed. He tapped the ground with his staff and, in a manner of seconds, was back in Hartley Ave. He took off his robe and his hat, and placed the staff in a corner of his study. Sitting down at his desk again, Grafton opened a heavy volume that had a marker from when he had interrupted his reading and, turning to his computer, he wrote another footnote.

Teo Ruiz

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In honor of “the master of those who know.”

