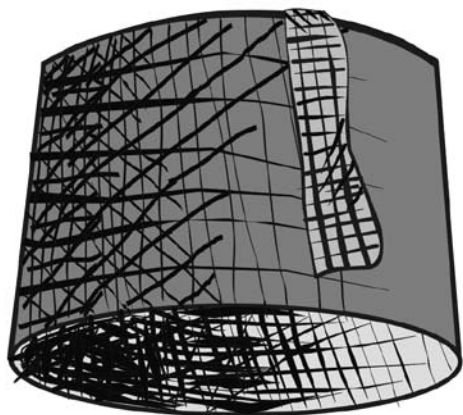


The Red Fez



Leopold
McGinnis



Many rare treasures you will find, my friend...

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ISBN: 0-9738535-1-4

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handle the natives gave him a stomach ache. Putting on his cap he said, “It looks as if I must cut our visit short again. Perhaps after all this is over we can sit down and have a good meal that ends on its own account sometime?”

“It would be a pleasure.”

“Good. Then I will see you. The lunch is on me; I will pay at the front. Enjoy the rest of your meal.”

Habibi relaxed in the afternoon heat slowly digesting his meal.



“May I help you?” Habibi asked the short hunch-backed man going through his drawers as he entered his house late that afternoon. Afiz quickly turned around in surprise and snarled, “So the snake returns to its lair.” He pulled a gun out of his kaftan. “Sylvia requests your presence,” the hunchback said with a slimy grin. Socks and other garments were strewn across the floor and some over the hunchback’s hunch.

“Do you think I would actually hide the artifact in my own house?” Habibi began, “It’s interesting how you two work together. Sylvia’s the brains and you’re the brute. She covers all the areas that the intelligent criminal would while you cover all the basics. Together you have got the market

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covered.”

“Close your mouth, pig face.”

“Ah, I see your wit is as sharp as ever.”

Afiz grunted and jerked his gun towards the door in a brutish manner, motioning Habibi to move. As they walked down the hot and humid streets Afiz never let the gun hidden in his kaftan stray from Habibi’s back. How he wished Habibi would make a false move...so he could kill him. But he could not kill him. Sylvia would be displeased. And Habibi was too confident in himself to make such a foolish move. Habibi felt comfortable and the brassiere he wore under his robe made him feel strong. They wandered through the streets until the sun began to slip behind the skyline. In a shadier area of the city, when the merchants had packed up and left, they turned into a small apartment. Habibi was led up the stairs.

“In here, Slime,” the hunchback shoved Habibi into the room with the tip of his stubby little gun. Habibi stumbled into a dimly lit room with windows overlooking the empty city streets. The light was coming from a desk in the corner where Sylvia Longshot’s silhouette sat. She had a glass of sherry in her hand.

“Habibi, welcome.” There was a long pause. Habibi stood in the dark staring at the soapy moonlight that slipped through the arched window and pooled on the floor. Afiz stepped forward and shoved Habibi again before retreating

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again into the shadows. Habibi now stood before the desk. Conversation was as dark and empty as the room for a few moments while Sylvia sipped on her sherry as if Habibi wasn't even there.

"I have a book here," Sylvia finally said in her staunch English accent. "A bound translation of the scriptures of Sargos. These are the translations of the hieroglyphics on the outside of the tomb of Sargos. I imagine you know of it. It was all the news when it disappeared five years ago. Priceless, really, since it is the only copy available and its translator died a few years before it's theft...by me. I took great care in stealing this. Its value is little to the average prince, thief or beggar, but I am quite a collector. I like to think of myself as somewhat of a rogue archeologist at heart. I only dabble in other crimes to pay for my historical passions." Sylvia flipped briefly through the time-worn pages. "This book was a must for my collection. Not to mention the fact that I someday hoped to have the key of Sargos (which, coincidentally was discovered and stolen only a few short days ago) and use this translation to find the temple and gain access to incredible wealth of riches, artifacts and opportunities that have lain peacefully for centuries inside, waiting for someone like me to come along and make them glorious again. But this book is essentially useless without the key. And vice versa. All this is of no consequence to you however, the asking price for the key

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drops significantly without the book,” she said smiling at Habibi.

“Unless you have the book and want the key, then the price rises significantly.” Habibi grinned, retorting her conclusion.

She smiled in the darkness and there was a long pause. “You are a shrewd man, Habibi.”

“But of course.”

“And that was quite clever what you did with the grapefruit. You cover your tracks very well. You even had me thrown off for a few days. I should have known information like that doesn’t travel that fast without...help. Amazing how suddenly when there was such a demand for grapefruit...there was a big supply as well. Very clever... and I’m sure it gave you enough time to safely hide the artifact.” She motioned Habibi to sit down, which he did, smiling business-like thanks.

“Of course. But you have not brought me here to complement me.”

“No. I want to know what you intend to do with the artifact...the key.”

“I intend to sell it.”

“I see. And do you really think there is any one in this city who could afford to pay its price, whether in cash or in the punishment that would be meted out were they caught with it?”

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“No. But I don’t intend to charge a lot.”

“It’s not a bauble!” Sylvia’s temper began to show. “It belongs in the hands of someone who can appreciate its value: artistic, historical *and* commercial.”

“Yes. That’s why I intend to sell it to Savid.”

“SAVID?! You can’t sell it to him! This is a priceless historical artifact! He is only concerned with value! You can’t treat it like a trinket from the market!”

“However, Savid knows buyers outside of Algiers, outside of French occupied territory who have money to spend and do not care to have the book of Sargos nor to ever explore its temple. They will pay a pretty price and don’t care about your book.”

“You think of everything don’t you? But you’ll never get it through customs. Your little grapefruit extravaganza has the port is locked down tighter than the governor’s mansion. There will be an embargo on the entire city in a day. Nothing in, nothing out in any direction. You’ll never be able to sell it to him under those conditions.” She took a breath and calmed down, “I, on the other hand, don’t intend to export it.”

“Perhaps,” Habibi grinned stroking his mustache. “Are you making a proposal? Of course, I am willing to sell it to the highest bidder.”

“I don’t buy anything.” Sylvia insisted.

“Well, then, there is not much purpose in my presence

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here.” Habibi got up to go.

“Habibi. You have less than a week to sell this artifact. The police are narrowing down. This is a hot poker you do not want to be caught with. Pierre runs a forgiving ship, but when those--”

“Good evening Sylvia.” Habibi cut her off and rose to go.

The hunchback threw his body in front of Habibi at the door. His gun pointed towards Habibi’s gut.

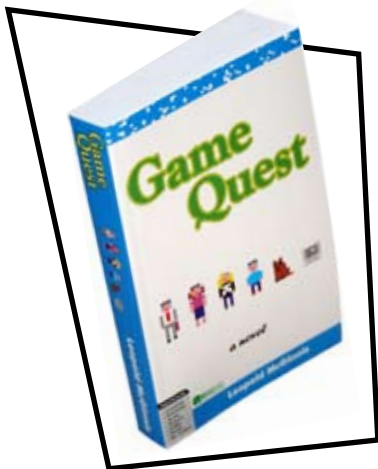
“Good evening, Habibi,” she said and motioned Afiz to step aside. He did so and Habibi left, stroking his mustachio. He stroked his mustachio with short movements this time. Those who knew Habibi well could tell that these were the strokes of a mastermind working out the last details, the very fine points to a perfect conclusion.



The Midnight Oasis was busy...considering the lock on Savid’s gambling tables. There was a Dutch couple in the corner sharing coffee under the moonlight slipping in through the window and an older man (who was really a French officer in disguise) in the corner also drinking coffee. Savid and Habibi sat nearer the back of the Oasis at a table in solitude, covered by shadow.

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a novel



The Red Fez
a novella

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