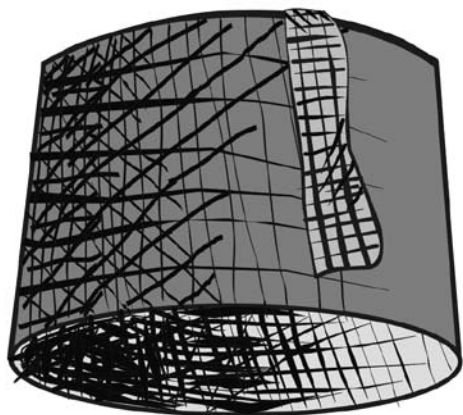


The Red Fez



Leopold
McGinnis



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The Red Fez

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The ‘old man’ in the corner got up and left slowly. Habibi followed him out.



The last of the police officers were leaving Habibi’s house when he arrived home the next afternoon. Chief inspector Pierre followed them out.

“Ah, Habibi,” said the inspector wiping his brow, “While you were away I took the liberty to search your house again. I was shocked to find your drawers a mess. I always thought you were a much neater man.”

“There have been others searching through my drawers as of late.”

“Yes. I suspected as much. I had my men fold everything up nicely for you.”

“Thank you. You always do such a nice job of ransacking my house.”

“Well, what are friends for? Strange that you should have been out the entire time that we searched.” the police chief subtly probed for information.

“Strange that you should search my house twice in as many days.” Habibi replied.

“If there has been one thing that I have learned in my dealings with you over the years it is that I can never search

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your house more than enough.”

“True. Should I expect you again?”

“Perhaps,” the chief inspector grinned. “Well, Habibi. I must be off. I have some rather interesting leads,” Pierre took off his chapeau and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “I think I might even make an arrest tomorrow. We’ve narrowed the grapefruit smugglers down to a few.”

“Good luck,” Habibi grinned.

“Yes, but I don’t suppose I will need it.”



Habibi watched Pierre waddle slowly off in the direction of the police department, wiping his brow as he went. Habibi stopped watching him and entered his house as the chief turned at a distant street and disappeared. Pierre walked a few steps and then pulled up beside an officer in plainclothes. They were in a deserted alley, away from the heat. Pierre took a small sip from the canteen that he had begun carrying with him and wiped his brow.

“Did you find what you were looking for sir?”

Pierre sighed. “Alas, no. You’ve been watching him?”

“Yes,” said the man, removing his broad hat.

“Very good. And what have you observed?”

“He is definitely up to something.”

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“Yes, well, I wouldn’t have you watching him if he wasn’t. But as to whether what he is up to involves the artifact is entirely another question. In the presence of chaos such as this any criminal would be a fool not to be hatching some plan...especially an unrelated one. What’s he been doing?”

“He met with Savid Al Durat. I couldn’t hear them very well. They were talking prices. And the Red Fez mentioned Sylvia Longshot a couple of times.”

“Hmmm.” Pierre smiled to himself. “I thought Mrs. Longshot was curiously out of the picture.”

“I thought she was a British public servant. An explorer, sir.”

“Humpf. She’s no explorer. We have a file on her. I suggest you read it,” he said with a smile. “She first came to our attention when her husband mysteriously disappeared. Most of us believe she did him in...but nobody’s sure exactly. And sometimes I doubt that she did. It’s a big mystery... and so is she.” Pierre thought momentarily about the great archeologist Egmont Longshot. He would have proved invaluable in an investigation like this. Oh well.

“Yes sir. Do you want me to keep an eye on her?”

“No. You stick with Habibi. Something is up. His pockets are bulging with mustache wax. I know he’s deeply involved in this – not from any evidence, but from a gut feeling. Only he would be shrewd enough to set up this grapefruit chaos. I imagine he was the one who bought the original

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crate...before this whole thing started. I thought a couple of surprise searches might help...but he's too smart to hide the thing in his house...at least for long...so we must find where he has hidden it...or if he doesn't have it...what he's up too. He'll definitely lead us in the right direction. Report to me if anything of consequence happens."

"Yes sir."

"I'll have someone check Madame Longshot out. She has been strangely absent from this mess...which typically means one thing...she's been left behind. I imagine she's trying to get back into the loop through Habibi."

"Yes sir. And what about the other suspects?"

Pierre fanned himself with his chapeau. God, it was even hot at night here. As if the frenzy of the city was manifesting itself in centigrade. "Of course, by all means keep on them. Be obvious about it. I don't want the Red Fez or Mrs. Longshot thinking we have a clue. The police department's reputation for idiocy is our greatest asset."

"Of course, sir."

Pierre Rensoir was getting a headache from all this. It had been nearly a week now since the artifact disappeared. Already the contradicting orders from Paris were piling up. Find the statue, use all your resources. Be inconspicuous, offer a reward. Put up an embargo but take it down as soon as you can. Do whatever you can to get it back, but the recovery can't cost more than the artifact itself. They were

I can't get a job because...

I have no experience...

...I have no experience because
I work at Electronics Pit...



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constantly giving him power and rendering it useless in the same breath. He would be unable to rest until this was all over. France would not let him rest, but at least he could allow the favour to his officers... “Go home, Michaud. Get some rest. I have Henry watching from the other block.”

“Yes chief.” The young man turned and walked down the path into the sunset.

Pierre pulled a cigarette out of his metal case and lit it. He headed down the road towards his Reinastella parked between two palms and started pondering the rumor he’d heard that the Red Fez had been to an antique shop the day before he last disappeared. Still there were so many pieces missing, he cursed to himself.



“Habibi, so glad you could make it,” Sylvia stood up and smiled, “Have a seat.”

Habibi stepped up to the chair and sat down.

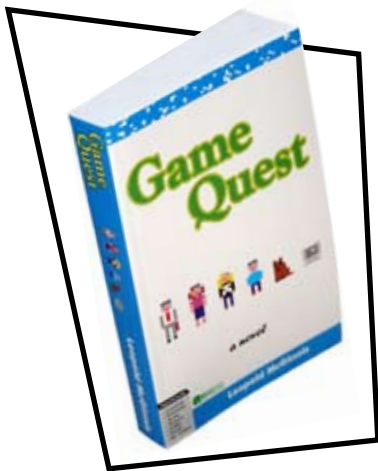
“You can put your gun away, Afiz.” Afiz did so and tucked himself away into a corner where he watched the proceedings with his usual contemptible snarl.

“Sherry?” Sylvia asked, slipping off the crystal top to her fashionably 1/3rd full flask.

“None.”

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