

# The Mouseion

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The man sat so calmly among the flames had come to be known as the Mouseion. His eyes glisten, though not only with the reflections of fire. His skin glistens as well; in fact, his entire body glimmers and glows as if it were an extension of the fire, not its prey.

It has been a negligible amount of time since the Mouseion entertained a perplexing guest. He was sat at his desk, just as he is now, immersed in himself as his eyes only barely managed to skim the darkness of the surrounding walls. The boy wended his way into the basement with the hesitancy of a rodent, but attacked the Mouseion with the force of a predator. He did so first with his sharp flashlight and then with his inquisitiveness.

“Are you the Mouseion?”

This first question was answerable enough, and so the Mouseion nodded. He ran his hands along the edge of his desk, as he tended to do, and gestured toward the chair at its other end. Please, have a seat. His visitor scowled, but obliged, keeping his flashlight focused on the Mouseion’s wrinkles. The beam transformed the Mouseion into a bright (if weathered) enigma floating against the murk; an enigma disadvantaged by its temporary blindness.

It seemed the guest felt no need to introduce himself. Though his face bloomed with youth, his smooth grey jumpsuit and the logo stitched onto it rendered him a Man Worthy of Respect, as well as an agent of the Company Everybody Knows. The Mouseion fathomed as much, and so his voice rang with caution rather than warmth when he asked the visitor what he would like to know.

“Why are you the Mouseion?”

The words did not reach their recipient immediately; instead, they lingered in the air and swirled around the basement and slid down the damp walls and then up again. Only then did they sneak into the Mouseion’s brain, still spinning around to confuse him. He obstructed the discomfiture.

The older man took a deep breath. He was named after the Mouseion of Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy I Stoer sometime around the third century Before Christ. The institution included the famous Library of Alexandria, which transformed the city into the centre of knowledge and –

“Stop,” the guest demanded. “You know I wasn’t asking that.” He paused, clearly wondering whether the Mouseion truly knew so. “Besides,” he added, “that library was burned down.”

See, that was where he was wrong. Contrary to common belief, the Library of Alexandria underwent gradual degradation leading to its eventual dissolution, including an accidental fire in the year 48 Before –

“Stop,” the guest pounded his palm against the desk. “What I...” he straightened himself up, “what we’re asking is why you are isolating yourself from knowledge.”

The Mouseion stood up and eyed him with a look of curious contempt, or perhaps contemptuous curiosity. The boy’s flashlight followed him around the basement. He wasn’t the first of his kind to visit the basement, and neither was there any reason to expect from him eagerness to grasp the Mouseion’s responses. Such visitors ignored his explanations, refused his affirmations. Their flesh and their bones hadn’t been protected from heat or sunlight, and so the Mouseion’s basement spewed them out as rancid milk.

But the wording of the guest’s question intrigued the Mouseion. Agents of the Company Everybody Knows asked what, when, sometimes even how; but never before had the Mouseion received a why question from his like. The corners of his mouth turned the slightest bit upwards.

I’m afraid I cannot truly answer your question, he glanced at his guest, lest you define exactly what you mean when you speak of knowledge.

The boy scoffed and kept his flashlight beam unwavering. He fixed a smirk on his face and smoothed out his uniform.

“Knowledge is knowing what’s true, and that’s that.”

In that case, knowledge is precisely what I keep up here, the Mouseion tapped his frail hair. I keep it up here, everything that I know is true, so that I can answer the questions of anybody who visits and anybody who asks. That is, including you – but your question is operating on false presumptions. My efforts are the polar opposite of isolation. A sparkle crossed the Mouseion’s eyes as he noticed the confusion wrinkling the boy’s forehead. Or do you wish to change your definition?

The boy turned around in his chair to face the Mouseion.

“Why are you asking so petty questions? You’re not my teacher. I don’t need a teacher.”

Pure interest, the Mouseion shrugged, eyeing the guest carefully. No, clearly you are of age, and most certainly you do not need a teacher. But you are here for a reason, and perhaps setting clearer definitions may help this interrogation of yours.

The boy propped himself up, unsure if he was being attacked or ridiculed or neither. He stood up at level with the older man, and he secured his grip on the flashlight with his second hand.

“You’re asking for knowledge? Well, here’s a piece: knowledge changes. What’s true now can be false next year, or tomorrow, or in five minutes. Science is so fast that new discoveries change knowledge all of the time. And discoveries of history.

And everything. So, knowledge is what's true exactly now! Which is what's online!" He drew a shaky breath. "So, what I'm - we're - saying is that you - you just must be deranged."

The lines on the Mouseion's face hardened as he took a step closer to the boy. If you are so convinced of my ineptitude, then why are you here?

The boy lowered his flashlight, its beam illuminating his soft grey boots. They both lowered their gazes to the glowing shoes, as if they shone out all the knowledge of the world.

"Endless browsing and rapid connection for just 5.20 a month," he whispered.

The Mouseion sighed as he sank back into his seat. He gestured toward the ladder leading back up. I am not interested in your services. I do not want to buy anything. I am just here to answer.

They maintained this freeze frame - luminescing shoes, bowed head, pointed arm - for seconds and seconds and seconds and then, with one click, it all disappeared into the dark. Somehow, they still both felt they were locked in eye contact.

"So, if I ask..."

The Mouseion slid his hands along the edge of his desk; then I answer. That is how it goes.

The boy took a few more breaths of darkness to gather his words.

"So, the library of Alexandria didn't burn down?"

No, not really. If you care to know-

"And how do you know this?"

The Mouseion muffled a gulp; he was not used to such questions. Back when I could read anything, I read as much as I could. These walls - the Mouseion waved his hand around the room - they used to be stacked with towers and towers of books. And when they had to leave, I stole their insides and now I keep them - he tapped his forehead again - here.

"And how can you be so sure it's all true?"

My knowledge? The Mouseion's words echoed around the basement and the boy felt them bouncing off of one wall onto the next. I cannot prove my knowledge correct, but I can be certain it remains the same. My grip on this knowledge is unfaltering, limited only by the degradation of memory. To anybody who comes here, I offer the peace of mind that comes with knowledge that has not been manipulated and sold as truth.

The Mouseion held his breath in anticipation of the boy's response, eager not to miss a word. But all the boy's direction produced was a slight shuffling noise, a short stumbling of boots. He breathed in and opened his mouth, then clamped it shut again. He made a number of such futile attempts, and so the Mouseion's wrinkles

were already interweaved with acceptance when the boy cut through the darkness with a single click.

Now the Mouseion sits calmly among the flames, blinded by light so much brighter than the boy's flashlight. Yet the light comes from the boy; upon his staggered retreat up the ladder, he must have gathered all the prepared lures and combined them with all his emotions. They always did. This one threatened inconsistency, but in the end they always did. They picked up the matches and the gasoline and fumbled around until they decided in favour of the one solution they could fathom - to ignite. The one solution they also considered their duty.

The Mouseion lifts a finger to his temple and presses the machine behind his ear. Candidate 8341, he says, passed.