

York Book Seminar Scholarship application

The Ex-Biblioplist

I wiped away the rain-slicked hair matted to my forehead, just in time to see the midnight Nachtkomme regime change. I teetered on a rail just above my next attempted visit. I don't think I've been dry for millennia. I grimaced between my own teeth, but the cargo is there. Although, I'm wearing an impenetrable woad tunic, plexiweight kaftan, and byterunner boots, I felt the drench. I reached down to my oilskin pack underneath my drenched neoprene tunic to feel the small goatskin bound block resting snugly against my side and a small glass bottle of undisclosed liquid. Good... dry paper, no broken glass, but damn, I'm soaked.

Quietly, I cursed for a hot stone in my pocket. Only a few days ago, I was in underground metroCentre stealing noodle wrapped hot figs when I spotted the white flag sticking out barely between two bricks. Oh fang! I guess the Dealer needed a run and I could use the bitrations. I better snag that blasted flag. Everyone looks suspicious down here, so my raised cowl is both familiar and cautious; luckily for a DarkAge like myself, I blend in.

With spindly reflexes, I slid behind a Tunisian peddler wearing a maille armor apron, wielding a machete, hoping he was stimulating enough of a distraction, so I can snake by and nab the marker. The Dealer pays fine coin for these peculiar jobs, usually involving a delivery of printed goods. Printed; meaning, books, papers, newspapers, journals, letters, etc. anything that the Nachtkomme forbids circulating. Yes, printed text is forbidden, handwriting, even worse. The new regime controls communication in digital form only, anything else is decommissioned, archaic, censored, even destroyed, toppled with the Athenaeum. Thus, the Dealer operates on a level of secrecy, delivering paper goods to "clients," for reasons, I don't personally don't ask. CryptoSmugglers, we don't ask, we deliver.

I pressed my back against the greasy wall, camouflaged by canopy and shadow, and gently pulled the flag out of the crevice. A quick glance down, yep, "EX." This means a jaunt over the Boilerquad to Bosch Row. Bingo. Satiated with the idea of nettleleaf cakes for a week, I barely noticed the two monoliths approaching my left side. I rolled the white cloth between my fingers in a snap and tucked it into my sleeve.

"I've always wanted to play with a DarkAger," the Rotter one chortled, "Me, three," the other snorted. Man, these two were big, ugly, even uglier with oblong pus-filled faces, and even worse breath. "Don't you guys have something better to do, like, I dunno know, wilt the plants in the Gypsum district?" my eyes darted back and forth for a diversion. "We know you have rube [slang for bitcoin cards]," the bigger sloppy one said, "you look smart." "And rich," Rotter two slobbered, spit flying through his two teeth.

"Yes, I'm so rich which is why I'm wearing this skin sack I poached off a Rhodesian trader who cuffed me for a single digicard. Class, fellahs. Now, if I can bear to pass through your abominable air, I should be on my way." A long finger quickly pierced my shoulder, "You should give us way and give us your rube," a wave of stench hung over his threat. With quick thinking, I retorted, "I think you

should look over your shoulder and prepare for that Prickleback to rip your ear off!" I leapt over my own words hoping for a word trap. "HUH!?" exclaimed both Rotters, in unison, as they turned around in pure idiocracy, while I skillfully maneuvered a bucket pulley system to make my escape, chuckling at my repeated attempts to fool those idiots. "Every time," I marveled at myself and subsequently, climbed up the rope slowly drowning out the ingrate shrieks below. I cloaked myself once again in the darkness and traipsed through the protruding brass instruments.

About 30 minutes later, I tiptoed along the top tiers of the BoilerQuad, slithered down a couple of steam ladders to the slate streets of Bosch Row, remnants of the old city, the Athenaeum. This district has row houses with doors, not slides, and in some cases, like the Dealer, attics and basements. I'm looking for a plain door, single brass blank plaque. I approached the door with slight caution, as I have been jumped by a pair of gravediggers before, thinking I was an Alchemist with good loot. A digiprompt suddenly materialized, "Code or visitor," spoke a cool robotic voice. I unrolled the flag and typed "Ex Libris" on the touch pad as the green scanner swept over the stamped EX. "Accepted," it purred, "Enter" as the door swung open to the small, dark vestibule. A quick snap behind me and I was in, the light flicked on to a dull glow, "I was hoping it was you," a monotone voice hummed.

The second door slid open to reveal the familiar bungalow, low lit with stacks of books floor to ceiling, some toppling over each other. Other shelves held rolls of honeycombed scrolls, layers of magazines, and sandwiched bricks of papers, bundled together like wet cement. The old moth sat behind a peeling oak secretary, peering at me like a weathered tombstone. "How would you like a splendidly ripe delivery?" they tossed out, eyes barely twinkling.

"By any means necessary," I answered, "What are you offering this time?" With penetrating eyes, they croaked, "This one is multi-faceted. You'd be compensated...appropriately," the words feathered off slightly, making me a bit suspicious. I narrowed my focus, "What's appropriately?" a single eyebrow emphasized. "I chose you, serendipitously, because you're consistent. If not,...dangerously curious." I snorted at their comment briefly, "What's the track?" In an almost serpentine movement, "This book..." they pulled out a dull, black miniature rectangular object from beneath the folds of their muslin wrap, "I need you to take this parcel to two separate places...and gather the necessary items and return. I need you to trust the..." he paused, "Coefficient."

"Are you kidding me?" my eyes bulged out of my sockets. Trusting a Coefficient is like trusting a Minotaur on a frozen lake with a flamethrower. "What kind of exchange are we talking about here?" Their head fell back revealingly, "Ahhhh... the very reason I'm sending you. Your curiosity drives your capability."

I'm standing arms crossed in this fortress of obsolescence, yet I can't help wonder why these texts are so important. I grew up beyond the destruction of the printed word, even diverse languages, an afterthought and lethal. One language, one format. I'm here to do a job, survive, and here I am subjecting myself to the whim of a desiccating antiquarian. I came back into the local orbit by the slither of their voice, "You'll take the trick, yes?"

I huffed, "Coordinates?" The Dealer paused for a moment, "I'll transmit the data momentarily. Until then, it is very critical the Coefficient understands the transaction. They will need to translate the text and then supply the elements." The conditions of this job, while obscure, remained increasingly fascinating, yet I did not reveal my interest. All the fabric culminating this run was laced with risk. Beyond my need for rations, the participation in an aggregated supply was exhilarating. It was like; I would be part of the narrative, regardless of the story.

I synced the coordinates with my coreGPS, wrapped the book carefully in my seal sack and turned to go. I heard a throat clear behind me, "If you get caught...cinder it." Well, that's new. "De-mass the book?" I quipped, slightly bemused. "Destroy and do not return. However, your account will be uploaded if you return with the book and the supply." The lights seemed lower when I first entered the space, and the Dealer looked more animalistic with a beastly stare and mouth of knives. "It's terminal." With that, I smirked and turned heel, and retreated to the street outside only to be greeted with a barrage of sideways rain. "Lovely." Hood up.

It is five night cycles later; again I'm teetering on a steel railing in Chyrsalium City. It is still raining, like the chemclouds knew I was pining away for a one-night stay at the Lava Club and to punish me for indulgent behavior. Thus far, I've had to outwit and outrun a trio of recycled hybrid Gammabots. One of them claimed I scammed her for some faulty malware, not true. Secondly, I tripped a sting wire across the plank bridge from where I am now. This set off a tele-audio, probably waking the whole district, luckily the digiwall I installed in my processor, blocked the Nachtkomme from tracking my signal. I managed to gain two hours of hydrosleep, because I had to spend 6 hours in a steam pipe above a Rusk gulag waiting till the place closed for transactions. That was my first destination, before the Coefficient. In mere moments, I'll be out of the rain, thank the old gods.

"The Dealer sent youk?" a very broad shouldered man in suspenders and a fishing net jumper barked at me. His eyes darted back and forth from me to the door and back again. Probably didn't help I crashed through the ceiling after he bolted the gate. The kukri he held wasn't as disturbing as the string of drool on his chin. "MB Kunin? His eyes widen, and then narrowed, "Yakol", he replied almost losing his tongue. "Yes, I'm on a run. I'm transmitting this to you for review and supply." I unfolded the silver parchment encapsulation and handed over the book. For a man with such large hands, he cupped the book like a rescued kitten. His eyes seemed wet, was I mistaken? "Stay on the side wall, no window. Ein." He began muttering in a weird dialect, something I have never heard, since Angelican is the official language. His head bobbed and weaved around the musty warehouse and finally returned with a small bottle of clear liquid. "This must reach the Dealer," he eyes pleaded. I repacked the book and the bottle, headed for the fire escape, and stopped with a half-turn, "What is so important about this?" I almost bit my lip for my query. A stubby finger tapped his temple, "Always a problem, always a solution." My brow creased with my pause and I disappeared down the back escape.

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The Chyrsalium City is a haberdashery for “organic” and/or synthetically grown botanicals. The residents are even more photosynthetic than the plants, reactive and hermetic, they stay inside trimming and collecting various species to ship off to the Kapitel headquarters for research. More recently, though, activities of data-culling are under suspicion, as information not recorded digitally and transmitted through the database is confiscated. Probably one of the most dangerous and heavily guarded districts to do any dodgy transfers of goods.

I have about 7 minutes for this transaction between Nachtkomme shift changes and at this point, given the risk, I’m cursing myself for taking this retrieval. What is embedded in this book that is so important, again? I slink along the edge of the railing and then cherry drop down to a large unsuspecting pile of dirt, make that, muddy compost. I’m not going to look suspicious at all, however, if the Coefficient is who I think it is, easily tracked. I made way to the compactor, trash in/trash out, and with a slight bit of leverage I hoisted myself down between a level and a conveyor belt. I’m in. Chyrsalium City is deceiving, in that, above it is a spotless like a sanitized pharmaco, down below, a cesspool of earthen must. Glad I have gutter camo.

Within minutes, I’m in an ecological labyrinth, only us worms, snaking through the underground. People, if you’d call them that, are muted greys and greens draped in mycological arrangements. I’m getting hushed looks, but that’s to be expected, I’m of an old line supposedly dating back to analog days of physicians. I continued to pace on, all stalls and doors in here are arranged by a numbering system leftover from before the takeover. I’m looking for SB959.C3...and after a couple of wrong turns and swapped numbers, I found a perspiring door with the number and a small sign that read: *aurantifolia*. I walked in.

It smelled of wet paper [incidentally have smelled once, trapped in a French laundry where they washed paper strips after ecocycling purging]. Everywhere I looked a spot of green, leaves and vines encircling the ceiling, branches tickling my cheek at every turn. I approached a moss throne resembling a counter and cleared my throat. With a slight gasp, I shifted into defensive stance, as a small green figure suddenly emerged from the greenery like a Magritte trompe l’oeil. “I’ve almost been expecting you...” its voice trailed off much like the flutter of a butterfly. “It is most appropriate time.” I considered this, as one would assume the Dealer could have transmitted an encrypted vitatext of my arrival, but not normally the case. “Yes, I have a delivery and pick-up from the Dealer,” subsequently unveiling the book. Almost chameleon like, the clearly now woman, transformed into a more fleshtoned person, but with wild red hair as if tossed by the sea. Her eyes were a deep cerulean, the kind that make the earth shudder.

“Oh, this is lovely.” she purred. “I have waited a long time to set my eyes upon this.” Confused, I blurted out with dismay, “Ok, what is so special about this book?” She laughed softly, and then her eyes turned wide to capture my confound gaze, “Many things start with an end. This book has no start or end.” With that she flittered back into the primordial tunnel, “But!...” I rolled my eyes. Great, risking my

skin here for riddles. I'm fairly lucky, however, this job is well over my prediem. For once, I'd like to see some mind-blowing result, I dunno like, maybe a couple of days at the Rokketplatz. I hear the vernal pools are transformational.

I'm brought back to the present by a light wind and she emerged from a clump of ferns, just to the right of me. Her translucent hand presented me with the book, and before I could react, the other hand griped mine with a fierce intensity I could not defy. "You know why I am the Coefficient?" she whirled. I froze with her grasp and shook my head. "I determine the variance of the future," she mused. Her touch softened, as did her features and was enveloped once again in a cacophony of plants, as I stood there befuddled, again, by this recipient. I returned the book to its safe zone, and retreated out the front. More people were bustling about in the arena, but I stopped a moment to reflect on her words. I turned, as if to question, and the whole entrance has been consumed by a green blanket of leaf, no number, no sign, nothing. I thought, never before have I been so challenged in my endeavors and mystified at the importance of a book, yet for some reason, I am comfortable for once with the strength and curiosity of it all has brought me.

I blindly pondered this entire grand trivia like some manifest destiny and without realizing it; I'm out back on the street having walked straight into a mob of uniformed Nachtkomme officers. So much for ambiguity, there goes my mind. "Oh, what do you we have here?," the brawny one said with a curled lip, "A DarkAge sneaking around the Chyrsalium City, ay! Looking for some scum weeds for your high?" They have my arms pinned behind me and one groped around my back. "Yeah, uh, watch it!" I snarled out of fear. "No, but the urchin has this!" One of the smug-faced sidekick perverts found my skin pack and pulled out the book. Oh, all hell. It is pretty dark, but I can see the grimace on the leader's mug turn to a contortion of evil. "A bibliothief, no less! This is some serious inflammatory contraband, you have here, young fawn." His malevolent face got closer. "No trial. Where you are going, will reveal the abysmal folly of your intellectual awareness."

While I don't believe in theology or any higher power of direction, in lightning speed, while this monstrosity barked my fate in face, I noticed the outlines of razor sharp fur, a triad of shapes, no less approaching this calamity. Most of the population had cleared the street, undoubtedly because of the black boot faction. I underestimated the time of the regime change, but I also underestimated the fact this part of the city was adjacent to the area's largest garden grove of undisciplined creatures. Spitting both glee and fire, I responded, "And you reveal the abysmal folly of your uncalculated stupidity of scientific awareness." A pack of Pricklebacks emerged from the shadowy hedge, towering over the fascist squad, leaping within moments to sink their saw teeth into their vulnerable prey. The two that had me pinned released my arms to grab their armored devices, but these creatures are too fast. They had my captors by the appendages in seconds, and in the scuffle, I saw the black book lying near a tuft of grass. I raced over to my prize, snatched the book, and upon turning to flee I felt a fierce tug at my hood.

"Your kind has always been a disgrace to civilization," the Nachtkomme commander fired at me, while gripping my hood, dragging me backwards. I pirouetted around to his gashed face and hunched form, and yelled, "Oh yeah, well at least my kind respects the wildlife," and with a lifted boot I kicked him in the

abdomen with all my Medieval force, releasing his grasp and sent him flailing into the saw-toothed jaws of his demise. I didn't even flinch and turned with Mercurial speed, leaving the bloody scene in my wake. I wasn't even sure where I was going, but even with my panting breath and hypersensibility, I found a cargo lift to elevate myself and reset my navigation system back to Bosch row.

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The Dealer's front door seemed like a gift when I approached with my spaghetti legs almost trailing behind me. I did notice an eerie light had swept over the street, desolate and eclipsed as I made way to the door. I didn't wait, but a half-second, and the voice of the Dealer reverberated into the silence, "Please enter immediately. There is not much time." I skirted into both doors quickly and walked into an astounding scene. The once floor to ceiling cavern of books and papers was scrubbed clean, as if someone peeled them off and rolled up the walls like a throw rug. I looked around in amazement; the only piece visible was the solitary secretary in the middle of the room. Thousands of materials vanished. I stumbled over my words, "What hap..." but before I did, the Dealer interrupted, "I assure you nothing is really gone, another layer of the archive," they mused. I frowned, "I don't understand."

Without missing a beat, they asked, "Please hand over the book, I repeat, there isn't much time." A robotic feeling came over me, and I pulled out the book and handed it over. The Dealer carefully scanned the first page with one finger, smiled, "And the bottle" without even looking at me. Their other hand disappeared to a drawer to reveal a small glass. When the cork popped from the bottle a wave of flora hit me, my senses filled with the lavender fields of Provence. [I had only experienced the smell in a simulation, but I felt as if I was there.] I watched the Dealer with awe and moved closer to the demonstration. The next act was unexpected, the entire text block of the book wasn't a text at all, but a compartment and in the back portion near the endpaper was a small door that popped open to reveal two square spaces. One was a small white cube and the other a small bright green wedge.

A weathered hand plucked the small cube from the book and simultaneously poured the fragrant liquid into the glass and they spoke, "You see, Alex, sometimes context will outweigh content." I gasped, "How did you know my name?" The cube dropped into the glass and started to dissolve. They smiled softly and reached for the green wedge, "Alexandria., I've known your curiosity for a while, you've been cultivating it for years. Now you must continue your search for knowledge." I lost my cool, "What exactly is in this book?!!!" I grabbed the book and flipped back to the first page and written in a beautiful script in crude Angelican was a very simple list:

- 1 simple of lavender infused vodka
- 1 sugar cube
- 1 juice of Athens lime

Fin de Siècle

“You mean to tell me I almost died, got arrested, and died again for a drink?” I fumed, slamming my fist down. The Dealer squeezed the lime into the glass, took a bit of a swirl and drank, as I watched their throat condense the liquid joy. “You will soon discover that sometimes, it is not what is in the book that is important, but what it represents.” It was at that moment, a loud buzzer exploded our conversation with a frantic voice repeating, “Unauthorized Clearance.” Dazed, I looked at the serene Dealer again for an explanation and in a calm retort, “You should go, out the back,” they nodded, “You will be compensated, as promised, but you were tracked, you’ll need to go. The saga is just starting to be revised.” A brief wave of both empathy and fear washed over me, “I don’t know what to say...” The Dealer gestured towards the back, “Go.”

Just then, a bang, and the computer voice stopped and scuffle of heaviness attacked the inner door, “Attention, open at once, we know you are holding an illegal library operation!” I gave the Dealer a brief glance, as they closed their eyes, I darted out the back, finding a small door that retreated into a crawl space. I followed this briefly to a ladder that led me out to ledge and I hopped to the balcony of another building. As I did, my device notified me of an upload and a text that read: Upload complete. Coordinates: 38.8886° N, 77.0047° W

I slipped down to a street three buildings over and immersed myself into a bustling night market; at least I could grab some nourishment. I pondered the last few days, both almost in sympathy with my exchange with the Dealer, but also with wonder. Don’t know the fate of the Dealer. I still feel like I don’t have all the information, but my desire to uncover the recent complexity is intriguing. Where did all the books go?

I found a quiet corner to devour my spiced pie and pondered those words written in the book, *Fin de Siècle*. I recognized the language, an old language. I also wondered what the correlation was to the Dealer. Perhaps more than one variable. I was about to take my last bite and market exploded with activity, people running back and forth, some shouting, some cheering. I ran out and nabbed a woman with a microptic scarf, “What’s going on?” She grinned at me, “You didn’t hear? The Kapitel Headquarters was destroyed by fire and the underground consumed the Chyrsalium City administration building! It’s the beginning of the end!” I looked around at my surrounding and took a step back a moment to assess myself. The last few days were a sequence of events, a brush with critical individuals, a near miss of incarceration, a book, and a cocktail. What if, I was part of this obscure, but crucial narrative? My first instinct was to return to my small hutt, retrieve my belonging and head to the out-zone, but what if there was something else? I needed answers.

I walked into the middle of the stone platz; the masses rushed around me, and entered the Dealer’s transmitted coordinates into my coreGPS. I knew right then, my next run from the text displayed: Library of the Athenaeum. I felt for my pack, pulled up my hood and disappeared into the darkness.

Kim Schwenk
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