



*Shahryar felt sleep begin to overcome him and yawned. “Truly, that was a tale worthy of notice. I shall call for it to be written in braids of gold and stored in the Palace Library so that generations to come may learn from its wisdom.”*

*“By your grace,” replied Shahrazad, “tomorrow night I shall tell an even greater tale, one that will delight and surprise your highness.”*

*“Is that so?” replied Shahryar, “then you shall live another night, so that I may learn more from your wisdom.”*

*The sun set, rose and set again, and, sitting under a white marble window from which a supple crescent lit the night, accompanied by glittering stars, Shahryar once more found himself impatient to learn what Shahrazad had in store for him this night.*

# The Tale of the Scribe and the Desert City

Nadim Kobeissi

Once upon a time, my Lord, there existed a city, built deep in the desert, that was of such wondrous repute that tales flew far and wide of its great, tall buildings, of its illustrious halls filled with delicacies and its craftsmen who forged the most refined of artifacts. Under a wise and loved Sheikh, the city prospered, and heavy mechanical marvels flew into its port, carrying all kinds of learned men, workers, artists and gold-fingered tradesmen into the ever-growing metropolis.

The Sheikh, being a well-traveled man who had thus kept his thirst for novelty, brought into the city learned Mages from the West, versed in mysterious magics of deep and secretive ways. These Mages were also flown into the desert city on its great birds of steel and were ordered by the Sheikh to imbue the city with a range of magical feats.

Among many other great gifts, the Mages gave the city inhabitants the ability to communicate through little tablets of magic clay that each carried in their pocket. By simply tapping their magic tablet, any resident of the city could immediately reach any other, and even carry out business transactions. This made life in the desert city so much easier: a man who, once at the Souk, had forgotten what his wife had asked of him, could simply tap his magic tablet and receive an answer. A maiden who had brought guests over only to realize too late that her urn of olives was empty could use her clay tablet to contact her favorite shopkeeper and allay the embarrassment.

The Sheikh saw how these marvelous tablets changed his city and, in return, rewarded the Mages who had created them handsomely, with rubies the size of oranges and emeralds the size of small watermelons. The Mages were humbled by the kindness of the Sheikh and soon left back to their homes on the far Western reaches of the Earth, carrying with them stories of the wonders hidden deep within the desert.



The years went on and the city grew and flourished. The Sheikh could be seen walking amongst the townsmen in the city's souks and bazaars, in its ports and bridges, in its restaurants and resorts, absorbing the fruits of everyone's labor.

The city's guardsmen, however, started to find that as the city grew more and more advanced, so did the difficulties of each passing day. Wielding their scimitars in the hunt for wrongdoers, they were frequently frustrated by devious thieves escaping in steeds of steel that no sword could catch. Their falcons, trained to track and, if necessary, catch carrier pigeons carrying messages of deceit and vile machinations, were helpless against the magic tablets that the Mages of the West had given the city.

"Enough!" cried the Chief of the City Guard during one particularly hot summer day. His phalanx of loyal guardsmen exchanged worried looks: their leader was not one to be tempted by a wild temper.

"We rise before the morning sun every day, and rest after the sun sets at night," said the Chief in anger (as the sun tended to set quite late in his part of the world). "And yet, the easier life is made in the city by the wonders at work within it, the more difficult it is for us to rein in the consequences."

For just a few minutes ago, yet another silk merchant had been robbed of his stores; reams and reams of the finest silk had been lifted away through a burglary so meticulous that it could have been organized only through the magic tablets. And yet again, the City Guard, for all their vigilance and devotion to the city, were powerless to stop the crime.

The silk merchant, who had been cowed for a moment by the Chief's outburst, soon regained his composure. "By He who is most kind, you are right, Sir!" He said, with righteous indignation. "This cannot continue. My sons work day and night to bring this silk on camelback all the way from Mongolia, from Persia and from other such far reaches of the world. My daughters work diligently to smoothen, embroider and decorate the silk so that we may offer it most beautifully. And then, the thieves of this city make away with our silk and our work as they do with so many, too many other merchants." The silk merchant bowed his head. "Pray speak to his highness the Sheikh," he pleaded, "for everyone knows that he is open to wise counsel and that he surely shall be agreeable to the needs of his court." The Chief said nothing: he had known for some time that this moment would soon come.

The Chief carried on with his day, saying nothing of the conversation with the silk merchant. He fined petty crime and arrested two men engaged in a public brawl. He gave his prayers quietly, ignoring the concerned looks directed at him by his brigade. In this

manner he continued until the sun began to set, and in its hot pink light, he headed up to the marble steps of the Sheikh's court.

The Chief entered the great marble hall. He, being a member of the court's inner circle, could have gone directly up to the Sheikh and bowed for an audience. But he stood in line behind the farmers, the cobblers and spinners of clay, each waiting their turn to make their plea to the Sheikh.

The man in front of the Chief felt a tall presence behind him and turned to look. His face sped from curiosity, to surprise, to a solemn and sincere glare. "You are the man who saved my son from falling into my commune's well," he said, "pray take my place in line." The Chief nodded graciously, and the man stepped behind him.

The woman who was now in front of the Chief, overhearing the unusual tale, turned her head and she, too, spoke to the Chief. "You are the one who caught the thieves who stole the gold I needed for my father's medicinal herbs," she said, "pray, take my place in the line." At those words, many of those in the line also turned their heads. Every face soon shone with the same gratitude, and, as one, the entire line stepped aside for the Chief to come forward. "Pray," they said to him, "take our place in line." Unable to refuse, the Chief stepped all the way up to the front of the line, whereupon he was immediately ushered to see the Sheikh.

The Sheikh, who was certainly accustomed to holding an inscrutable expression during court proceedings, could not but drop all pretense at the appearance of the chief of his City Guard. He had not seen him make a single appearance at the court ever since his initial appointment, years ago.

Twilight was reflected in the stillness of the great marble hall. The Sheikh's audience were as if the falling night had turned them into stone.

"My Lord," the Chief began, "may He who opens all doors open a way for you. May He who knows teach us through your example."

"And may He who is mighty grant you your share of will, may He who brings good tidings bring you your share of life," replied the Sheikh, now wearing a look of keen interest.

"My Lord, our city springs from sand and onto new heights. Its people are given gifts unheard of in our side of this world. So many things that were only mystery to us when the first tower was built now make part of the daily hustle and bustle of every Souk."

"Our mission has always been to keep the peace, my Lord, so that the city may grow," continued the Chief. "But a falcon cannot fly as fast as taps across a magic tablet, and a lash cannot reach swiftly to a steed of steel escaping with thieves and vandals within it."

"My Lord, the city's magic has begun to stand in face of our ways. So great has our desert city become that it now questions the desert itself. How many jewelers must give away bags of sapphire to keep their families safe, how many Alchemists must brew over concoctions full moon after full moon with no payment, before we take away from the vandals challenging the honest people of this city their room to roam and plot freely? I

beg you, my Lord, to consider that something must be done to control the marvels of this city, before it is too late. For as it stands, it threatens our way of life.”

The Sheikh said nothing for a time. It was he who had brought the Mages, who had opened the desert port to strange and foreign lands. It was he who had convinced the tribesmen, in what now seemed so many years ago, that they had nothing to fear from the Mages of the West or the craftsmen of the East. His city had become the subject of tales and the envy of kingdoms through his deeds. And now, the young, ferociously loyal guardsman, the only one he could have ever trusted with the city, was begging for his ear. The Sheikh felt a tinge of shame. It should have never come to this.

“My friend, say no more, for I hear you clearly and your words ring true. I will confer with my advisors this very evening, and an answer shall come to you this very next morning, with the rising sun.” The Sheikh dismissed his court, bowing his head courteously to the Chief. The Chief’s heart was filled with warmth. Did he ever doubt that the Sheikh would understand? Making his farewells, he walked out of the marble steps and onto a fresh, quiet night of which the cold air did not bother him. The rest of the court left shortly thereafter.



Inside the court, only the Sheikh, his Vizier, and a small number of courtesans remained. The Sheikh thought for some time. Finally, he said, “well?”

Of course, the Vizier had been watching the Sheikh as he sat lost in thought. Accustomed to providing counsel in such matters, he required no explanation. “Your guardsman speaks honestly, my Lord. He holds his pride so deeply that he wears his heart on his sleeve without knowing it.” the Sheikh glanced at his Vizier and nodded. The Vizier continued, “he would have never come here unless he truly needed your help.”

“I cannot take the people’s magic tablets away, nor can I leash their steeds of steel. Nor can I ground the great birds,” said the Sheikh.

“Nor should you, my Lord,” replied the Vizier. “But it may be possible to alter the magic that works the clay tablets.” The Sheikh raised his eyebrows. “In the palace’s dungeons, there is an Alchemist that is under your employ,” the Vizier continued. “He has been tasked with the close study of magic tablets and has since conducted many experiments. I would have you ask for him, my Lord. He could provide some insight.”

“I have never heard of this Alchemist,” said the Sheikh, assuming, rightfully, that his forward-thinking Vizier had employed him in advance, should he ever be needed. “Pray send for him, as no harm can come from learning the fruits of his toil.”

The Vizier bowed and went to speak to the guardsmen stationed outside the great hall. Then, he went to his own quarters and picked a great robe of olive-green silk. Carrying the robe in his arms, he returned to the great hall, stood alongside the Sheikh, and waited.

Soon thereafter, a guard returned, and with him, a thin man whose steps seemed only so slightly too long to be allowed. His legs arched forward in small leaps and there was no sign of him second-guessing himself at all as he approached the throne. The Sheikh noticed this, and he didn’t like what it usually meant.

As the Alchemist reached the center of the throne room, the Vizier spoke. “Learned Alchemist of the royal court, you have been tasked with unlocking the secrets of the magic tablets, and now the Sheikh wishes to learn of what you have accomplished. He brings you a gift of appreciation.” The Vizier handed the fine olive-green robe to the Alchemist, who glanced at it, tried it on and said: “Oh, in this late hour?”

There was no sneer on the Alchemist’s face, but no honest observer could have pretended not to have seen one. The Vizier continued: “Time is of the essence. The Chief has sought a royal audience to confess that his guardsmen can no longer keep up with the magic tablets.”

“Oh, but you cannot rein them in, can you,” said the Alchemist, not looking at the Sheikh but now busy sizing up the length of his new sleeves. “Which is why you must use bugs.”

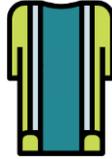
“Bugs?” Spat the Sheikh.

“Ah, well —”, the Alchemist turned to look at the Sheikh – “Scarabs, your highness,” he said, with a smile that stopped at his cheekbones and didn’t reach his eyes. “My little, emerald green scarabs. They’re very beautiful, you see, and — they are attracted to the sound of fingers tapping on clay. They will lie around in many parts of the city and in the morning fly back to me and tell me of what they have learned.”

“You wish to unleash your bugs onto my city, then, is that so?” Replied the Sheikh.

The Vizier clearly sympathized with the Sheikh but nevertheless intervened. “Our fair city is home to many of His creatures, my lord — and scarabs are considered a blessing by our people. Why make a mountain out of a dune if our problem can be solved through the simple employment of these elegant little, well... insects?” The Vizier almost faltered but searched the Sheikh’s eyes for understanding.

The Sheikh looked away and said nothing. The Vizier motioned for the Alchemist to take his leave, saying “fly your scarabs tonight, and our Sheikh will wait for their news in the morning.”



The sun rose the next day. The city folk continued with their lives, the merchants examined, arranged and sold new goods, the City Guard did what they could, and the Sheikh and his Vizier handed whatever justice had been left up to their hands.

By noon, the Sheikh had slowly grown more and more relieved at the fact that the Alchemist was nowhere to be seen. The Vizier, too, had noticed this, but chose to keep to himself with regards to the matter and, looking into the eyes of a woman whose only donkey had been stolen and who could no longer carry enough water from the well, focused on the task in front of him. Soon enough, the sun set again, the Sheikh dined with his wife and the Vizier, and went to sleep until the next day.

Or at least, he intended to. For not soon after the Sheikh had risen from his dinner table, a royal guardsman came in, hurried to the Vizier, whispered something in his ear and hurried back out.

The Vizier gave the Sheikh a sorry look. “The Alchemist is in the throne room” — “*in* the throne room?” the Sheikh interrupted — “Yes, somehow he is presently in the throne room, and he refuses to leave. I’ll go see him away, your highness, this was my mistake—”

“No,” said the Sheikh, “I’ll go myself.”

The Sheikh changed his robes quickly and headed down the steps from his quarters to the throne room, his Vizier right behind him. They were met with a sight to behold.

“Hee, hee, hee!” The Alchemist was dancing in the middle of the throne room, his new olive-green robes — glittering? Yes, glittering, shimmering by the light of one thousand and one emerald green scarabs that flew around him, crawled on his sleeves, whispered in his ears and hid in his hair, like a storming parade of his own glimmering little friends. “Hee, hee hee! Is that right? Hee hee hee! Is that so? Hee hee hee! What juicy gossip!”, he said, as he twirled around and danced in the throne room.

The Sheikh was furious. “Who let you in here with these insects? For each of them you’ll be handed a lashing, and if so help me there are a thousand of them in here, then you’ll be lashed a thousand—”

“Hee hee hee,” the Alchemist interrupted, as if on cue, and looked the Sheikh dead in the eyes. “So, it was the neighboring farmer that stole her donkey. So, it was the rivaling shop that stole the silk. What useful information.” The Alchemist, panting slightly, had stopped twirling. And his scarabs, oddly, were nowhere to be seen.



By the following week, the Alchemist had been appointed responsible for a new branch of the City Guard. His scarabs flew far and wide during the day, hiding themselves in the nooks of shops and the crannies of dwellings. Nobody ever noticed them, but their senses picked up on the tipping and tapping of stone tablets. And whenever one of them heard anything interesting, it would fly away and back to the Alchemist, who waited at the balcony of a white tower in the Sheikh's castle.

The scarabs would whisper in the Alchemist's ear that so-and-so was planning a heist or that so-and-so had drawn a knife in the square. A city guardsman would always be on standby, awaiting the Alchemist's translation of the scarabs' mysterious clicking. The guardsman would then rush down the tower staircase and on towards averting the crime.

But there were times where scarabs would come and whisper tales that the Alchemist would not translate. He would say nothing and ignore the looks of the guardsman as if no scarab had come at all.

At the city guard, morale was shooting up. Ill deeds were spoiled at an outstanding pace and false leads were at an all-time low. The Chief of the city guard could be seen possessed with a renewed energy, and his deputy felt as if his friend had suddenly become many years younger.

The Sheikh had nothing to say about this newfound success. Whenever the Alchemist made an appearance at the daily court (which, the Vizier thought, was oddly often given that the Alchemist rarely had anything to say), the Sheikh would privately be grateful that a solution had been found for his Chief of the guard, while publicly never meeting the Alchemist's eyes or acknowledging his presence. The Alchemist did not seem to be bothered by this but continued to attend the court on a regular basis.

All the while, the city became safer, the daily court proceedings became ever friendlier and even more prosperous. Visitors came in droves to the haven in the desert and nobody ever seemed to notice the little emerald green scarabs. Under a blanket of twinkling stars, the desert city slept safely.

One day, the Alchemist woke up, left his bed and, after his morning ablutions, put on his olive-green robes and climbed up his tower with a spring in his step. He threw open the door and froze mid-spring: The Vizier was waiting for him on the very balcony, wearing a polite smile and gently caressing a scarab that was resting on his palm.

"Your scarabs make for some beautiful friends," said the Vizier, still smiling. "O-oh yes?" replied the Alchemist. "I thought I could come visit you today and watch your work for a while," continued the Vizier. "You have been of great aid to our Sheikh, and he wants to ensure that all who help our desert city are properly accounted for and duly rewarded."

“Of-of course,” responded the Alchemist, regaining his composure and donning that smile that never went high enough to reach his eyes. “Please, my Vizier, be my guest atop this tower. But pray cause no noise, as hearing my scarabs requires quiet and any sudden movements may cause them to fly away.”

“Surely,” replied the Vizier, “I will do my utmost not to bother you.”

And so, the Alchemist stood and waited. Soon enough, a little emerald green scarab buzzed in and whispered something in his ear. Once it has flown away, the Alchemist snapped “gold stolen at the town market! The thieves are hiding in the cellar of the so-and-so.” The guardsman, who had been sneaking looks at the Vizier, snapped to attention and ran down the stairs. Seconds later, a phalanx of the city guard could be seen riding their horses away from the foot of the tower and in direction of the town market.

At midday, another scarab flew in. “So-and-so is planning to set his competitor’s silk store ablaze!” burst out the Alchemist once the scarab had flown away. Again, the guardsman ran down the stairs and again, a team of horses set out for a different direction.

And in the afternoon, a third scarab flew in. It clicked its little wings in the Alchemist’s ear just like the others, and then flew away, just like the others. But this time, the Alchemist said nothing.

“Well, my friend?” smiled the Vizier, “What news this time? A brawl at the public restaurant? Thieves planning to lift gemstones?” The Alchemist looked most irritated. “No, no, no! Your guesses annoy me. It’s nothing important. Sometimes these scarabs report nonsense. Stupid scarabs! I’ll have to be more selective in the ones that I train.” And the Alchemist fell silent, until the next scarab flew in. The Vizier, too, said nothing, but stroked the point of his beard gently.

Many scarabs and almost as many cracks from the Alchemist to his messenger guardsman later, it was night-time. The Alchemist made a great show of being tired: he yawned, twisted his back, yawned some more, and patted his lips. “What a day,” he said, “what a day! As much as I’ve appreciated your company, my Vizier, I must now take my leave and head back to my quarters.”

“Most certainly,” said the Vizier, smiling eternally. “It has been most illuminating to watch your work. Pray allow me to climb down the stairs with you.” And so, the Alchemist and the Vizier went down the stairs together.

“The Sheikh is deeply pleased with you,” said the Vizier as the pair walked down the tower steps. “Pleased, is he.” Said the Alchemist sardonically. “Oh yes,” replied the Vizier. “Your work has quickly become of vital importance to our desert city and our people have never been safer. The Sheikh may not show it, but he knows that we owe it all to you and to your illustrious skill.” “Why yes, why yes!” responded the Alchemist, obviously pleased with himself. “The clicking of my scarabs’ wings ring such as they are true revelations, my Vizier.”

“Indeed,” continued the Vizier. “True revelations. So much so that I think it is time you were given your own staff. I can think of an accomplished scribe hailing from the Levant

and known across Mesopotamia for his papyrus. I can think of nothing more suitable than for one such as him to attend for you and to aid you with this influx of revelations that your scarabs bring you.”

For the smallest moment, the Alchemist looked as if a stench of rotten eggs had suddenly wafted up the tower steps. But he then gave a genial laugh. “Your kindness is boundless, my Vizier! But you know that us Alchemists prefer to work alone. And the sound of reed pens! Too like the sound of my scarabs and bound to confuse them.”

“Oh, but I insist,” said the Vizier, smiling broadly, “surely you do not believe that our Sheikh would allow such appreciable revelations to go unheeded?”

“But, my Vizier, the papyrus!” said the Alchemist, “My scarabs will eat it up, and your scribe’s work will be lost.”

“Surely, my scribe is trained beyond such basic problems,” replied the Vizier, now almost laughing. “Would he be renowned for his work were it otherwise?”

“Oh, my Vizier, but these Levantines!”, protested the Alchemist one last time. “They... they smell funny, and they won’t understand our ways.”

The Vizier burst out laughing and tapped the Alchemist on the back, much to the latter’s displeasure. A fortnight from that day, the Alchemist would arrive to his tower and let out a small yelp as he found a scribe with skin the color of hardwood, sitting legs crossed on the floor, reams of papyrus spread on his lap and a reed pen ready in hand, looking with the widest, most curious black eyes at the Alchemist and awaiting instructions.



Ever since the day that the Scribe arrived, the Alchemist worked with his face contorted not as if the smell of rotten eggs had simply wafted up the stairs of the tower, but as if it had set permanently on the balcony such that no gust of air could blow it away.

The Scribe, for his part, had a look about him as if he was constantly greatly surprised from the moment he awoke until the moment he slept. For such was the wideness of his eyes and the permanent innocuousness of his expression. This annoyed the Alchemist greatly – it really felt as if the Scribe never blinked.

The poor Scribe couldn't understand why his Alchemist seemed to always be in such a rut. Whenever a scarab would fly away, the Scribe would ask, in the sweetest voice he could muster, "what has the glittering scarab revealed to you, sire?" The Alchemist would completely ignore the Scribe's request and instead bark at the guardsman, "another camelback shipment of silk about to be intercepted outside of the city borders!"

"What marvelous skill," the Scribe would exclaim to himself, and elegantly illustrate the scarab's report in his papyrus. The Alchemist would respond by looking as if the smell of rotten eggs was only getting worse and worse.

A day into the job, the Alchemist once more received a scarab that clicked in his ear and flew away and yelled nothing at his guardsman. The Scribe first perked his head up, and then bent his neck slightly towards the Alchemist, awaiting a translation.

"What?!" snapped the Alchemist, glancing at the Scribe sitting cross-legged on the floor. "Oh – a bundle of stolen rubies was found in the basement of a farm." The Alchemist gesticulated towards the Scribe for a moment. "The farmer had a bad season, you see, and felt he had to resort to thievery to feed his family. His wife is ill, you see... nothing worth reporting, the Sheikh would forgive him anyway..." the Alchemist's voice trailed away, and his eyes focused again on the horizon, awaiting another scarab.

"How odd," thought the Scribe to himself. "The scarab had only clicked its wings six or seven times, and yet the Alchemist relayed a story longer than any of the reports his beetles had given him before." The guardsman, too, looked nonplussed, but none of the pair said anything to the Alchemist.

Two days later, the same thing happened. "Oh, another load of nonsense!" exclaimed the irritable Alchemist. "A donkey got lost in the desert and started drinking from a well belonging to a tribe of Bedouins. They attacked the poor beast, and now its owner has sworn a blood oath to obtain revenge for his slain companion..."

“Truly,” the Scribe thought, “there is something amiss with some of these reports. For their cadence does not match the clicking of the scarab’s wings, and the pattern I’ve been trying to decipher in the scarab’s language does not map to these stories the Alchemist gives. Besides, his tales only get wilder and wilder...”

The Scribe had met the Vizier many years ago. He considered the Vizier a trusted friend and given the warmth and geniality in which he had offered him this job, the Scribe did not dare to raise concerns so quickly. So, the Scribe decided to crack the secret of the Alchemist’s strange stories himself.

The next day, the Alchemist climbed the tower steps and found his Scribe waiting, as usual, with his legs crossed on the balcony floor. Shortly thereafter, the first scarab arrived, and –

*“Dinnnnng—!”*

The Alchemist jumped. What on Earth was that?!

“My apologies, sire,” said the Scribe, “it is my tuning fork. For my admiration for your scarabs has so overwhelmed me, and I wish to better discern the clicking of their wings so that I may better record their marvelous nature.”

And, indeed, next to the Scribe now lay a little golden tuning fork, still vibrating ever so slightly.

The Alchemist had absolutely no idea what to make of this. At the end of his wits, his vanity got the better of him and he thought to himself “good, let this impetuous Scribe lose himself in his tuning fork and my scarabs. Maybe I will finally be able to focus on my work.”

That day was very interesting for the Scribe. He listened more intently than ever and began to differentiate between different clicks in the scarab’s wings. His papyrus soon contained not only the Alchemist’s translations of the scarab’s reports, but the Scribe’s own notes as well. On the first day, he noticed that the more high-pitched clicks occurred more often. On the second day, he noticed that some of the clicks were accompanied with a little wiggle of the scarab’s horn. And so did the Scribe continue to decipher the scarabs’ mysterious language, until, on the fifth day –

“The scarabs aren’t giving the Alchemist long-winded fables!” realized the Scribe in sudden surprise. “Mixed in with his reports of wrongdoing are... reports. Reports on the Sheikh’s meetings with foreign dignitaries and ambassadors!”



*Shahryar banged his tea on the table. "That traitor!" he exclaimed. "the Sheikh surely had him beheaded in the public square after he learned of his disloyalty."*

*"The Sheikh was indeed displeased, your highness", replied Shahrazad. "But in his wisdom, he knew to first and foremost blame only himself. In his haste to do good by his Chief of the city guard, he allowed that trickster power over so much of his desert city's bounty and its rule of law." Shahryar raised his eyebrows and listened. "When the Scribe reported to the Vizier and then to the Sheikh what he had learned, the Alchemist was confronted and admitted to his wrongdoing," continued Shahrazad. "And when he begged the Sheikh for forgiveness, the learned leader said to him: 'even the watchmen must be watched.'"*

*The Alchemist was humbled by the Sheikh's far-sightedness and goodness grew within him. He and the Scribe grew to respect one another and became good friends. Together, they worked with the Chief of the city guard to better understand what the future held for their desert city and how to best meet it, with all the uncertainty that it brought with it.*