

KNOWLEDGE IS CARNAGE



THE
ATLAS
SIX

OLIVIE BLAKE

The Atlas Six

Olivie Blake



A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

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to my physicist boy
and my starry-eyed girl

and to LORD OLIVER,
for all the punches.

BEGINNING.

PERHAPS IT WAS A TIRED THING, all the references the world had already made to the Ptolemaic Royal Library of Alexandria. History had proven it endlessly fascinating as a subject, either because the obsession with what it might have contained was bounded only by the imagination or because humanity typically longs for things most ardently as a collective. All men can love a forbidden thing, generally speaking, and in most cases knowledge is precisely that; lost knowledge even more so. Tired or not, there is something for everyone to long for when it comes to the Library of Alexandria, and we have always been a species highly susceptible to the call of the distant unknown.

Before it was destroyed, the library was said to contain over four hundred thousand papyrus scrolls on history, mathematics, science, engineering, and also magic, which advanced in scope and progress as much as any other topic of study. Many people incorrectly assume time to be a steady incline, a measured arc of growth and progress, but when history is written by the victors the narrative can often misrepresent that shape. In reality, time as we experience it is merely an ebb and flow, more circular than it is direct. Social trends and stigmas change, and the direction is not always forward. Magic is no different.

The little-known truth of the matter is that the Library of Alexandria burned down to save itself. It died to rise again, in something less metaphorically phoenix-like and more strategically Sherlockian. When Julius Caesar rose to power, it became obvious to the ancient Caretakers that an empire could only sit successfully upon a chair of three legs: subjugation, desperation, and ignorance. They knew, too, that the world would forever be besieged by similar pursuits of despotism, and therefore determined that such a valuable archive of wisdom would have to be carefully hidden in order to survive.

It was an old trick, really, death and disappearance so to start again, which depended entirely on the library's ability to keep its own secret. The medeians, the most learned among the magical population, were permitted to use the pieces they

squirreled away so long as they accepted an equal obligation to care for them. In the society that grew from the library's remains, privileges for its members were as unmatched as their responsibilities. All the knowledge the world possessed existed at their fingertips, and all they had to do in return was continue to nurture it, to make it grow.

As the world spread—expanding beyond the libraries of Babylon, Carthage, Constantinople to the collections of Islamic and Asian libraries lost to imperialism and empire—so did the Alexandrian archives, and as their influence expanded, so did the so-called Society itself. Every ten years a new class of potential initiates was chosen. The candidates spent one year in training, learning the functions of the archives and what would eventually become a lifelong craft. It was, in many ways, comparable to a doctorate or a fellowship. For one year, each individual selected for the Society lived, ate, slept, and breathed the archives and their contents, with five of the six potential candidates being inducted at the end of the year. Following that, the new initiates rigorously pursued their course of study for an additional year before being presented with the opportunity to stay and continue their work, or, more likely, to accept a new offer of employment. Alexandrians typically went on to be political leaders, patrons, CEOs and laureates. The truly curious would remain behind and vie for positions as Caretakers. What awaited an Alexandrian after initiation was wealth, power, prestige, and knowledge beyond their wildest dreams, and thus, to be chosen to sit for initiation was the first in a lifetime of endless possibility.

This was what Dalton Ellery relayed to the most recent class of initiates, none of whom had been informed why they were there or what they would be competing for. Likely they did not yet grasp that by virtue of standing in that room, Dalton Ellery was himself a uniquely skilled medeian, the likes of which they would not encounter again for generations, who had chosen this path over the many others he might have taken. He, like them, had once discarded the person he might have been and the life he might have lived—which would have been ordinary by comparison, most likely. He would have had a profession of some sort, perhaps even a lucrative one, folding into the mortal economy in some useful way, but witnessing nothing like what he'd seen by virtue of his acceptance. He might have done exceptional magic, but would have fallen shy of extraordinary himself. Inevitably he would have succumbed to mundanity, to struggle, to boredom, as all humans eventually did—but now, because of this, he wouldn't. The pittance of a shrunken existence would count among the many things he would never again encounter from the moment he'd taken his seat in this room.

He looked out at their faces and imagined again the life he might have lived; the lives they *all* might have lived had they never been offered such... riches. Eternal glory. Unparalleled wisdom. Here they would unlock the secrets the world had kept from itself for centuries, for millennia. Things no ordinary eyes would ever see, and which no lesser minds could possibly understand.

Here, their lives would change. Here their former selves would be destroyed, like the library itself, only to be built back up again and hidden in the shadows, never to be seen except by the Caretakers, by the Alexandrians, and by the ghost of lives uncrossed and paths untaken.

Greatness isn't easy, Dalton didn't say, nor did he add that greatness was never offered to anyone who couldn't stand to bear it. He merely told them of the library, of their paths to initiation, and of what stood within reach—if they only had the courage to reach out and grasp it.

They were entranced, as well they should be. Dalton was a very good at breathing life into things, ideas, objects. It was a subtle skill. Optically his skills were less magical and more professional finesse, which made him an exceptional academic. In fact, it made him the perfect face for the new class of Alexandrians.

He knew before he started talking that they would all accept the offer. It was a formality, really. Nobody turned down the Alexandrian Society. Even those pretending at disinterest would be unable to resist. They would fight, he knew, tooth and nail, to survive the next year of their lives, and if they were as steadfast and talented as the Society presumed them to be, most of them would.

Most of them.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY IS THIS:

Beware the man who faces you unarmed.

If in his eyes you are not the target, then you can be sure you are the
weapon.

I: WEAPONS



LIBBY

Five Hours Ago

THE DAY LIBBY RHODES met Nicolás Ferrer de Varona was coincidentally also the day she discovered that *incensed*, a word she had previously had no use for, was now the only conceivable way to describe the sensation of being near him. That had been the day Libby accidentally set fire to the lining of several centuries-old drapes in the office of Professor Breckenridge, Dean of Students, clinching both Libby's admission to New York University of Magical Arts as well as her undying hatred for Nico in a single incident. All the days since that one had been a futile exercise in restraint.

Incandescence aside, this was to be a very different sort of day, as it was finally going to be the last of them. Barring any accidental encounters, which Libby was certain they'd both furiously ignore—Manhattan was a big place, after all, with plenty of people ravenously avoiding each other—she and Nico were finally going their separate ways. She'd practically burst into song over it that morning, which her boyfriend Ezra presumed to be the consequence of the occasion's more immediate matters: graduating top of her class (tied with Nico, but there was no use focusing on that), or delivering the NYUMA valedictory speech. Neither accolade was anything to scoff at, obviously, but the more enticing prospect was the newness of the era approaching.

It was the last day Libby Rhodes would ever set eyes on Nico de Varona, and she couldn't have been more exuberant about the dawn of a simpler, superior, less Nico-infested life.

"Rhodes," he acknowledged upon taking his seat beside her on the commencement stage. He slid her surname around like a marble on his tongue before sniffing the air, facetious as always. "Hm. Do you smell smoke, Rhodes?"

Very funny. *Hilarious*.

"Careful, Varona. You know this auditorium's on a fault line, don't you?"

"Of course. Have to, seeing as I'll be working on it next year, won't I?" he mused, and then peered into the crowd, half a tick of laughter tugging at the corner

of his mouth. “Ah, Fowler’s here too, I see.”

Libby bristled at the mention of Ezra. “Why wouldn’t he be here?”

“Oh, no reason. Just thought you might’ve leveled up by now, Rhodes.”

Do not engage, do not engage, do not engage—

“Ezra’s just been promoted, actually,” she said coolly.

“From mediocrity to competence?”

“No, from—”

Libby broke off, tightening one fist and counting silently to three.

“He’s a project manager now.”

“My goodness,” Nico said drily, “how *impressive*.”

She shot him a glare, and he smiled.

“Your tie’s crooked,” she informed him, giving her voice a lilt of impassivity as his hand reflexively rose to straighten it. “Did Gideon not fix it for you on your way in?”

“He did, but—” Nico broke off, catching himself, while Libby silently congratulated her success. “Very funny, Rhodes.”

“What’s funny?”

“Gideon’s my nanny, hilarious. Something new and different.”

“What, like mocking Ezra is suddenly revolutionary?”

“It’s not my fault the subject of Fowler’s inadequacy is evergreen,” Nico replied, and were it not for the fact that they were in front of all of their classmates and a great number of their faculty and staff as well, Libby would not have paused for an additional centering breath and instead entertained whatever her abilities compelled her to do.

Unfortunately, setting fire to Nico de Varona’s undergarments was considered unacceptable behavior.

Last day, Libby reminded herself. Last day of Nico.

He could say whatever he liked, then, and it meant nothing.

“How’s your speech?” Nico asked, and she rolled her eyes.

“Like I’d discuss it with you.”

“Why on earth not? I know you get stage fright.”

“I do not get—” Another breath. Two breaths, for good measure. “I do not get stage fright,” she managed, more evenly this time, “and even if I did, what exactly would you do to help me?”

“Oh, did you think I was offering to help?” Nico asked. “Apologies, I was not.”

“Still disappointed you weren’t the one elected to deliver it?”

“Please,” Nico scoffed under his breath, “you and I both know nobody wasted any time voting on something as idiotic as who should give the commencement speech. Half the people here are already drunk,” he pointed out, and while she knew he was more right than she’d ever admit to him being, she also knew it was a sore subject. He could pretend at nonchalance as much as he liked, but she knew he never enjoyed losing to her, whether he considered it a subject of importance or not.

She knew it because in his position she would have felt exactly the same way.

“Oh?” she prompted, amused. “If nobody cared, then how did I win?”

“Because you’re the only one who *voted*, Rhodes, it’s like you’re not even listening to me—”

“Rhodes,” cautioned Breckenridge, breezing by their seats on the commencement stage as the processions around them continued. “Varona. Is it too much to ask you to be civil for the next hour?”

“Professor,” they both replied in acknowledgement, forcing twin smiles as Nico once again fussed impulsively with his tie.

“No trouble at all,” Libby assured the Dean, knowing that even Nico would not be so idiotic as to disagree. “Everything’s fine.”

Breckenridge arched a brow. “Morning going well, then?”

“Swimmingly,” said Nico, flashing her one of his charming smiles. It was the worst thing about him, really, that he could be such a non-headache with everyone who wasn’t Libby. Nico de Varona was every teacher’s favorite; when it came to their peers, everyone wanted to be him or date him, or at the very least befriend him.

In some highly distant, *extremely* generous sense, Libby could see how that was understandable. Nico was enormously likable, unfairly so, and no matter how clever or talented Libby was, students and faculty alike preferred Nico to her. Whatever gift it was he had, it was like Midas; the effortless turning of nonsense to gold, more a reflex than a skill, and Libby, a gifted academic, had never been able to learn it. Nico’s brand of easy charm had no metric for study, no identifiable markers of finesse.

He also had a monstrous capacity to fool people into thinking he knew what he was talking about, which he resolutely did not. Sometimes, maybe. But certainly not always.

Worse than anything Nico happened to be as a person was what he *had*, which was the job Libby had really wanted—not that she’d ever admit that. Sure, being hired at the best magical venture capitalist firm in Manhattan was no small thing.

She'd be providing funding to innovative medeian technology, able to choose from a portfolio of exciting ideas with massive potential for growth and social capital. Now was the time to act; the world was overpopulated, resources drained and overused, alternative energy sources more imperative than ever. Down the line, she could change the very structure of medeian advancements—could choose this start-up or that to alter the progression of the entire global economy—and she'd be paid well to do it, too. But she'd *wanted* the research fellowship at NYUMA, and that, of course, had gone straight to Nico.

As Breckenridge took her seat and Nico decided to pretend at reasonability, Libby pondered what it would be like in her blissful future where things didn't always come down to the two of them competing. For four years Nico had been an inescapable feature of her life, like some sort of bothersome vestigial organ. Physical medeians with their mastery of the elements were rare; so rare, in fact, that they had been the only two. For four long, torturous years, they'd been shoved into every class together without respite, the extent of their prowess matched only by the force of their mutual antipathy.

For Nico, who was used to getting his way, Libby was purely an annoyance. She'd found him smug and arrogant from the moment they met and hadn't hesitated to tell him so, and there was nothing Nico de Varona hated more than someone who didn't adore him on sight. It was probably the first trauma he'd ever suffered; knowing him, the idea that a woman could exist who didn't worship at his feet must have kept him up at night. For Libby, however, things were far more complex. For all that their personalities clashed, Nico was something far worse than just an average asshole. He was also an obnoxious, classist reminder of everything Libby failed to possess.

Nico came from a family of prominent medeians, and had trained privately from his opulent palace (she assumed) in Havana since he was a child. Libby, a Pittsburgh native whose suburban lineage had no medeians or even witches to speak of, had planned to go to Columbia until NYUMA, via Breckenridge, intervened. She had known nothing of basic medeian principles, starting off behind in every aspect of magical theory, and had worked twice as hard as everyone else—only for that effort to be dismissed in favor of *yes, that's very good, Libby... and now Nico, how about you try?*

Nico de Varona would never know what that felt like, Libby thought again, as she had countless times. Nico was handsome, clever, charming, rich. Libby was... powerful, yes, equally as powerful and likely to become more so over time given her sense of discipline, but with four years of Nico de Varona as a yardstick for

magical achievement, Libby found herself unfairly measured. If not for him she might have breezed through her studies, perhaps even found them dull. She would not have had a rival, nor even a peer. After all, without Nico, who could even hold a candle to what she could do?

No one. She'd never met anyone with anything even close to hers or Nico's proficiency with physical magic. The little tremors from the slightest flaring of his temper would take a lesser medeian four hours and herculean effort to create from nothing, the same way a mere spark from Libby had been enough to secure a full scholarship to NYUMA and lucrative full-time employment after that. That sort of power would have been revered, even exalted, if either of them had been singularities—which, for the first time, they would be. Without Nico for comparison beside her, Libby would finally be free to excel without having to push herself half to death to stand out.

It was a strange thought, actually, and strangely lonely. But still, thrilling all the same.

She felt a little rumble under her feet and glanced over, noting that Nico looked lost in thought.

"Hey," she said, nudging him. "Stop."

He gave her a bored glance. "It's not always me, Rhodes. I don't go around blaming you for forest fires."

She rolled her eyes. "I know the difference between an earthquake and a Varona tantrum."

"Careful," he cautioned, gaze flicking to where Ezra sat beside her parents. "Don't want Fowler to see us having another row, do we? Might get the wrong impression."

Honestly, this again. "You do realize your obsession with my boyfriend is childish, don't you, Varona? It's beneath you."

"I didn't realize you thought anything was beneath me," Nico replied lazily.

Across the stage, Breckenridge shot them a warning glance.

"Just get over it," Libby muttered. Nico and Ezra had loathed each other during the two years they'd all been at NYUMA together before Ezra graduated, which happened to be a separate matter from Nico's opposition to her. "You never have to see each other again. *We*," she amended belatedly, "never have to see each other again."

"Don't make it sound so tragic, Rhodes."

She shot him a glare, and he turned his head, half-smiling at her.

"Where there's smoke," he murmured, and she felt another rush of loathing.

“Varona, can you just—”

“—pleased to introduce your co-valedictorian, Elizabeth Rhodes!” came the voice of the commencement announcer, as Libby glanced up, realizing that their entire audience was now staring expectantly at her, Ezra giving her a little frown from the crowd that suggested he had observed her bickering with Nico yet again.

She forced a smile, rising to her feet, and gave Nico’s ankle a kick as she went.

“Try not to touch your hair,” was Nico’s parting benediction, muttered under his breath and of course intended to make her fixate on her bangs, which for the entire two minutes of her prepared speech threatened to fall into her eyes. One of his lesser magics, getting under her skin, and by the time she finished, she wanted very badly to kick him again, falling into her seat and reminding herself how marvelous life was going to be in approximately twenty minutes, when she would be free of him forever.

“Well done, you two,” Breckenridge said wryly, shaking their hands as they departed the stage. “An entire commencement ceremony, impressive.”

“Yes, we are very impressive,” Nico agreed, in a tone that Libby would have slapped him for, only Breckenridge gave a low chuckle of amusement and shook her head fondly, departing in the opposite direction as Libby and Nico made their way down the stairs.

Libby paused to conjure something terrible; a final, devastating parting malediction. Something to haunt him while she walked away.

But then instead, she held a hand out to him, deciding to be an adult.

Civil.

Et cetera.

“Have, you know. A good life,” she said, and Nico glanced skeptically at her palm.

“*That’s* the line you’re going with, Rhodes?” he asked, pursing his lips. “Come on, you can do better. I know you must have rehearsed it in the shower.”

God, he was infuriating. “Forget it,” she said, retracting her hand and pivoting away. “See you never, Varona.”

“Better,” he called after her, pairing it with careless applause. “Bra-va, Elizabeth—”

She whipped around, curling a fist. “What was *your* line, then?”

“Well, why bother telling you now?” he asked, with a grin that was more like a self-satisfied smirk. “Maybe I’ll just let you ponder it. You know,” he added, taking a step towards her, “when you need something to occupy your mind over the course of your monotonous life with Fowler.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” she snapped. “Pigtail-pulling isn’t sexy, Varona. In ten years you’ll still be alone with no one but Gideon to pick out your ties for you, and believe me, I won’t spare you a single thought.”

“Whereas in ten years *you’ll* be saddled with three baby Fowlers,” Nico retorted, “wondering what the fuck happened to your career while your patently unremarkable husband asks you where dinner is.”

There it was again:

Incensed.

“If I never see you again, Varona,” Libby fumed quietly, “it’ll still be *too soon* —”

“Pardon me,” came the voice of a man beside them, and Nico and Libby both rounded on him.

“What?” they demanded in unison, and he, whoever he was, smiled.

He was dark-skinned, his head shaved and slightly gleaming, appearing somewhere in his forties. He was also exceedingly British, from mannerisms to dress (tweed; very much tweed, with an accent of tartan), and quite tall.

Also, enormously unwelcome.

“Nicolás Ferrer de Varona and Elizabeth Rhodes?” the man asked. “I wonder if I might make you an offer.”

“We have jobs,” Libby informed him irritably, not wanting to wait for Nico’s inevitably patrician response, “and more importantly, we’re in the middle of something.”

“Yes, I see that,” the man replied, looking amused. “However, I am on something of a tight schedule, and I’m afraid when it comes to my offer, I really must have the best.”

“And which of us would that be, exactly?” Nico asked, holding Libby’s glare for a gratuitous moment of conceit before smoothly turning towards the man who stood waiting, an umbrella hooked onto his left arm. “Unless, of course, the best is —”

“It’s both of you,” the man confirmed, as Nico and Libby exchanged a heated glance akin to *of course it is*, “or, perhaps, one.” He shrugged, and Libby, despite her disinterest, frowned slightly. “Which of you succeeds is up to you, not me.”

“Succeeds?” she asked, before she quite realized she was speaking. “What does that mean?”

“There’s only room for five,” the man said. “Six are chosen. The best in the world,” he added.

“The *world*?” Libby echoed doubtfully. “Sounds fairly hyperbolic.”

The man inclined his head.

“Well, since you asked, I’m happy to verify our parameters. There are nearly ten billion people in the world at present, correct?” he prompted, and Libby and Nico, both a bit bewildered, nodded warily. “Nine and a half billion, to be more specific, of which only a portion are magical. Five million, give or take, who can be classified as witches. Of those, only six percent are identified as medeian-caliber magicians, eligible for training at the university level at institutions sprinkled across the globe. Only ten percent of those will qualify for the best universities, like this one,” he said, gesturing around to the NYUMA banners. “Of those, only a fraction—one percent or less—are considered by our selection committee; the vast majority will be cut without a second glance. That leaves three hundred people. Of those, another ten percent *might* have the requisite qualifications; specialties, academic performance, personality traits, et cetera.”

Thirty people. Nico gave Libby a smug look like he knew she was doing the math, and she shot back a contemptuous one like she knew he wasn’t.

“Then comes the fun part, of course—the *real* selectivity,” the man continued. “Which students have the rarest magic? The most inquisitive minds? The vast majority of your most talented classmates will go on to serve the magical economy as accountants, investors, magical lawyers,” he informed them. “Maybe the rare few will create something truly special. But only thirty people in total are good enough to be considered extraordinary, and of those, only six are rare enough to be invited through the door.”

The man smiled slightly. “By the end of the year, of course, only five will walk back out of it. But that’s a matter for future consideration.”

Libby, who was still a little taken aback by the selection parameters, allowed Nico to speak first.

“You think there are four people better than Rhodes or me?”

“I think there are six people of equally remarkable talent,” the man corrected with an air of repetition, as if that much had already been established, “of which you may be qualified or may not.”

“So you want us to compete against each other, then,” Libby observed sourly, flicking a glance at Nico, “again.”

“And four others,” the man agreed, holding out a card for them both. “Atlas Blakely,” he informed them, as Libby glanced down, eyeing the card. *Atlas Blakely, Caretaker*. “As I said, I would like to make you an offer.”

“Caretaker of what?” Nico asked, and the man, Atlas, gave him a genial smile.

“Better that I enlighten all of you at once,” he said. “Forgive me, but it is quite a lengthy explanation, and the offer does expire in a matter of hours.”

Libby, who was never particularly impulsive, remained warily opposed. “You’re not even going to tell us what your offer is?” she asked him, finding his recruitment tactics needlessly furtive. “Why on earth would we ever agree to accept it?”

“Well, that part’s really not up to me, is it?” Atlas prompted, shrugging. “Anyway, as I said, I do have quite a pressing schedule,” he informed them, tucking his umbrella onto his arm again. “Time zones are a tricky business. Which of you may I expect?” he asked, glancing pointedly between them, and Libby frowned.

“I thought you said that was up to us?”

“Oh, it is, of course, eventually,” Atlas said with a nod. “I merely presumed, given how eager you both seemed to be to go your separate ways, that only one of you would accept my invitation.”

Her glance collided with Nico’s, both of them bristling.

“Well, Rhodes?” Nico said, in his softly mocking tone. “Do you want to tell him I’m better, or should I?”

“Libs,” came Ezra’s voice, jogging up to her from behind. “Ready to go? Your mom’s waiting outs-”

“Oh, *hello*, Fowler,” Nico said, turning to Ezra with a disdainful smile. “Project manager, hm?”

Libby inwardly flinched. Of course he’d said it like an insult. It was a prestigious position for any medeian, but Nico de Varona wasn’t just any medeian. He would go onto be something big, something... *remarkable*.

He was one of the six best in the world.

In the *world*.

And so was she.

For what, though?

Libby blinked, startling herself out of her thoughts, when she realized Nico was still talking.

“—in the middle of something, Fowler. Perhaps you could give us a moment?”

Ezra slid a wary gaze to Libby, frowning. “Are you...?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “Just... wait one second, okay? Just one second,” she repeated, nudging him away and turning back to Atlas before realizing, belatedly, that Ezra hadn’t given any indication he’d noticed anyone else standing there.

“Well, Nicolás?” Atlas was asking Nico, looking expectant.

“Oh, it’s Nico, please.” Nico slipped Atlas’ card into his pocket, giving Libby a look of pompous satisfaction as he offered his right hand to be shaken. “When should I expect to meet with you, Mr. Blakely?”

Oh no.

Oh *no*.

“You’re welcome to call me Atlas, Nico. You may use the card for transport this afternoon,” Atlas replied, turning to Libby. “And as for you, Miss Rhodes, I must say I’m disappointed,” he said, as her mind raced in opposition, “but in any case, it’s been a pleas-”

“I’ll be there,” Libby blurted hastily, and to her fury, Nico’s mouth twitched with expectation, obviously both entertained and unsurprised by her decision. “It’s just an offer, right?” she prompted, approximately half to Nico, half to Atlas, and a sliver of whatever remained to herself. “I can choose to accept or reject it after you explain what it is, can’t I?”

“Certainly,” Atlas confirmed, inclining his head. “I’ll see you both this evening, then.”

“Just one thing,” Libby said, pausing him after a quick glance at Ezra, who was observing them from a distance through narrowed eyes. “My boyfriend can’t see you, can he?” To Atlas’ head shake in confirmation, she asked hesitantly, “Then what does he think we’re doing right now, exactly?”

“Oh, I believe he’s filling in the blanks with something his mind considers reasonable,” Atlas said, and Libby felt herself pale a little, not overly enthralled about what that might be. “Until this afternoon, then,” Atlas added, before disappearing from sight, leaving Nico to shake with silent laughter in his wake.

“What are you snickering at?” Libby hissed, glaring at him, and after a moment to compose himself Nico managed a shrug, winking over her shoulder at Ezra.

“Guess you’ll find out. See you later, Rhodes,” he said, and departed with an ostentatious bow, leaving Libby to wonder if she didn’t, in fact, smell smoke.