

THE ALLIANCE.

In the top floor of an old apartment house in the bohemian part of town lives a single man who seems to live an ordinary single man's life, but in fact he is an alchemist. Most people do not know that he is an alchemist, though.

To earn his money he works as a freelance web designer. He looks how one might expect a web designer to look like; he wears jeans and glasses with a thick, black frame. He often works late in the evening and at night, and when he gets up in the morning he is too sleepy to comb his hair and too absent-minded to notice and greet the other tenants in the staircase. He starts his days going for a double-espresso to a fashionable café close by. In the afternoons and evenings the place is filled with people who look quite similar to him, but in the mornings it is empty and he only has to shortly nod towards the waiter to order his standard. He slowly wakes up while he reads the daily newspaper. He never reads more than the culture section though, which he finds rather depressing, but not as depressing as the politics section. Afterwards -whenever the websites are not occupying all of his time- he starts his alchemist chores.

Sometimes he dreams of being a full time alchemist. Designing web pages can be fun, as he enjoys the programming and puzzling around with the code. Still, he is every time anew amazed when those lines of words, letters and signs he puts together suddenly transform into a functioning website, with a layout, images and links.

But he hates dealing with the clients. First he hates having to advertise himself and flatter them to get the jobs. Later, once he works for them, he hates their ignorance, their bad taste, their stubbornness and also their inclination to forget to pay, forcing him to request his well-deserved money over and over again.

But unfortunately being an alchemist is commonly not considered to be a proper occupation; most likely because there cannot be any certainty for alchemists to ever actually produce gold or something similarly valuable. And alchemical experiments are just not scientific enough to be a generally accepted research method.

So he sticks with the web design and not even his closest friends know about his additional pursuit.

In the same building, a young girl lives on the ground floor. Her parents might be about the same age as the web designer and sometimes visit the same café for a beer with friends in the evenings. The girl looks like a quite normal little girl. She has long blond hair which is usually tied in a ponytail. Her eyes are green, her favorite color purple and her favorite food is ice cream. But hardly anyone -not even her two best friends- know that the girl is actually a collector.

In the mornings the girl eats a bowl of cornflakes and drinks hot chocolate, and then leaves the house together with her parents. While her parents are at work the girl goes to school. She attends the 2nd grade of elementary school and most of the time she enjoys it. She usually finds what she learns there quite interesting, but she hates sitting still. The first lesson in the morning is alright because she is still a bit tired, but the further the day proceeds, the harder she finds it to be tied to her chair and desk. Since she knows that the teacher's words are going to every corner of the classroom and not only to her desk, she is certain that learning would be so much easier if she was allowed to walk and run around the class while listening.

In the afternoon, when school is over and her parents are still at work, she usually plays with her 2 best friends. If there is not too much homework, they like dressing up as princesses, or dancing to the radio in the kitchen. That is not allowed when the parents are at home, because the wild dancing steps, giggling and singing along makes them go insane; especially after coming from work and trying to prepare dinner.

The schoolgirl and her 2 best friends are also collecting stamps, of course in the hope to some-

day accidentally come across the deep blue Mauritius stamp or another really valuable one. Her friends take it very seriously, but the schoolgirl sometimes gets bored sitting and looking through the albums. To her the stamps are nothing but a hobby, and a way to spend her time when their parents want them to be calm. About her serious business as a collector, the girl has never told her best friends.

One day the alchemist who works as a web designer was on his way home from a walk. He had been unsuccessfully searching for material for his alchemical experiments and was a bit tired, unsatisfied and deep in his thoughts. When he turned into his street he almost stumbled over the schoolgirl who is a collector. She had been kneeling down on the sidewalk but then threw her head back to stare at him. He had stopped and as he looked down on her, she recognized him from short encounters in their staircase.

"Look," she said to him, pointing at an accurate little „X" carved into the sidewalk. The X was surely made by some sort of machine, constructed to carve X's into sidewalks, he thought, since the right angle was accurate and the lines perfectly straight. It might have been put there to mark a spot of importance for future construction sites. Who could know what was about to be built there, or what kind of cables or pipelines were running underneath that needed to be fixed?

He knitted his brows and was about to walk on, when a sudden occurrence made him hesitate. A car passing by caught a bit of the last afternoon sunlight. As it turned into the street, the spots of light reflected by the chrome flitted over the shadowy corner of the sidewalk and the two figures, almost unnoticed. But for a glimpse of a second one ray of light shed its powerful beam exactly in alignment with her pointing finger, right onto the "X". For an elusive moment the narrow, amber light clearly distinguished every little bump in the sidewalk and made him see what he hadn't noticed before. Now he realized that the sharp, carved lines of the "X" alluded clearly to its solemn, concealed impact.

He turned his head to look at her again -her ponytail, purple bow ribbon, and schoolbag- how could she have seen it right away?

"I'm collecting crosses, you know?" she said and started to explain her collection to him. This one was already her 26th cross, and she knew there were more to be found. According to what she read in a book, 39 crosses existed throughout the town. She found that to be a believable and useful information, even though she admitted that the book might have been referring to a different kind of cross.

He knelt down with her to have a closer look as she gave him detailed information on the kind of crosses she was looking for. To be added to her collection, it didn't matter whether the crosses were more like an "x" or more like a "+". It also didn't matter if one of the lines was longer than the other and whether they were carved or painted. The crosses had to be deliberately made, though. X-shaped cracks in the sidewalk were meaningless.

They rose up from the sidewalk again, and slowly walked on together towards their house. Now he was looking down as well and tried to help her searching for crosses.

But this part of the street, close to the house, was well known to her; there were no more crosses to be found. She sighed and then told him that from some point of view it could seem as if she had collected only 18 crosses so far. The actual amount of 26 derived from her practice to also count those crosses that appeared in her dreams at night. While speaking she focused on her new found initiate closely, to check if he was supporting her rather unusual approach. He wasn't batting an eye and just wanted to know if she ever counted them double, when walking by one of them a second time. He was happy to hear that it was out of the question. She kept careful records of all of her crosses so in case one would reappear in another dream, she would recognize it. There was no risk that any could be included in her collection twice.

As they were approaching the house it was his turn to closely observe her reaction as he said: "I'm actually collecting gold."

Instead of entering, they sat down on a small wall on the opposite side of the street, and he explained. First she had been suspicious, but she raised her brows as he told her that the gold he was looking for was of a different kind than the precious metal. It only revealed itself in a short, specific moment of time.

Of course he was solely interested in the rare occurrences of ordinary things that unexpectedly turned to gold.

He went on to say that he basically didn't only collect gold, but a lot of things. A long time ago he had started out with gold, but then discovered that it was not so rare after all. It actually revealed quite frequently when the light happened to have for a while a special quality to make ordinary things change their disposition.

Nowadays he was mostly after more sophisticated occurrences. He collected almost anything that essentially changed its nature by what could be considered pure magic; for reasons that remained beyond explanation.

Since she had been listening carefully, he continued and told her that his collection was not in the first place a treasury, but served him as scientific research material. He hoped to gain a glimpse of understanding of the magic that was evidently taking place, disregarded and denied by the vast majority of people.

He paused and looked around to see if anyone was watching before he lowered his voice to tell the reason behind his research. He whispered: "It's because I am an alchemist!"

Since she didn't exactly know what an alchemist was, he explained that he was making experiments, in which he tried to mix and combine the factors he discovered to be the ingredients of those magical changes, in order to produce gold himself. His experiments were likewise aiming at any other thrilling result, unknown and unseen.

For a while they both were silent, but then she looked at him and said: "When you succeed one day, you have to tell me. I am going to collect the gold you make!"

He nodded, but warned her, that in these kind of magical things, the underlying principles were overwhelmingly complicated. The conclusions he was drawing from his research were sometimes leading a vague direction, and unfortunately they were never totally reliable. He knew the magical processes would remain a mystery, because the thread of causes, effects, and interferences was too complicated to ever be completely comprehended. He smiled apologetically because he could not promise any results, but she didn't mind. "I will just wait", she said.

They got up from the small wall. With a sincere handshake the collector and the alchemist sealed the deal and their secret alliance before they went inside to continue with their business.