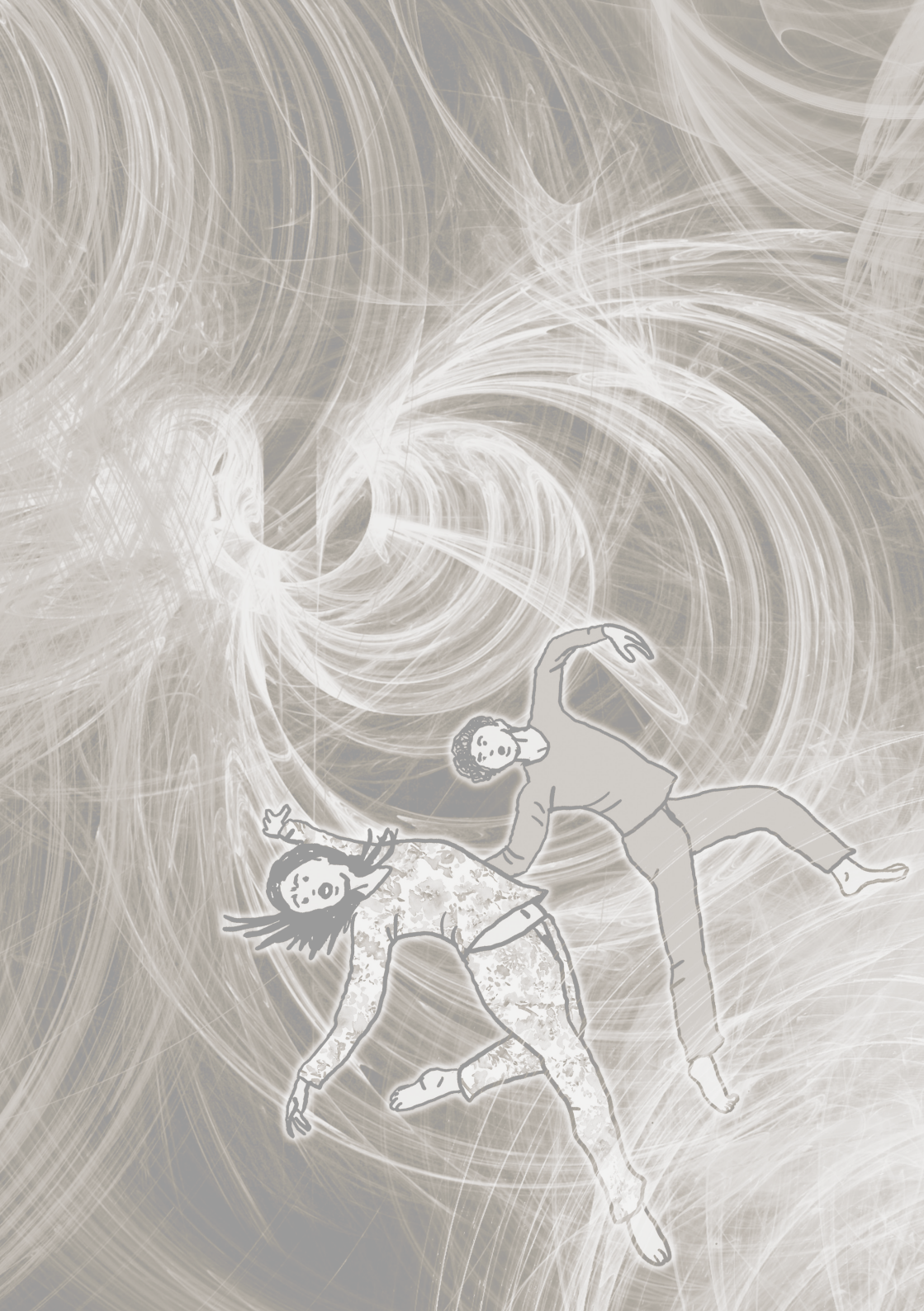


Görg Mallia Melanie and Karl's Enchanted Adventure

A story
for children
who are
home
because
their school
closed down



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Gorġ Mallia

Melanie and Karl's Enchanted Adventure

A story for children who are
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NISSE

Malta 2020

This first edition 2020

A Nisse Publication
Msida, Malta

www.gorgmallia.com

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Maltese version proofreading: Joe Cassar
English version proofreading: Pia Zammit

ISBN: 978-99957-1-725-4

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For all Maltese and Gozitan children
– so they can live in their imagination
the fantasy that is life

Foreword

A gift book for children (a note for parents)

Right now, all Maltese and Gozitan children are at home, because schools have closed down as a way of combatting the Covid-19 virus pandemic that has practically paralysed the world and ruined all normalcy.

I have no doubt that children are finding things to do at home, helped by their parents who are themselves stuck home with them. I am hoping that reading is among those things being done. This time has provided a golden opportunity for children to read... to escape from the not so wonderful reality that they are living through and getting lost in the fantastic worlds that books can feed their imagination.

I too am at home because the University where I lecture is also closed. I am still teaching by means of my computer... communicating with staff and students all the time by means of the marvellous electronic media that we have today. But I also have a little bit of time to myself in which I give vent to my creativity... painting, drawing, writing... letting my imagination carry me and take me places far away from the home in which I am trapped right now.

And one of the things I have created because of this isolation, is a book for children. I got the idea that it might not be a bad thing for our children to have a book that is actually set against the background of the massive change in which we are all living at present.

I also decided that this book should be in the form of an e-book in a popular format so that every girl and boy that has a computer, or some sort of tablet, or smart phone, can see and read it. That is why I preferred to use the .pdf format instead of the other formats used for e-books, because this is one format that can be read by a lot of applications.

But forget the technical aspects for the moment. The book is a fantasy, although it does go into certain problems related to the destruction of our environment, which is a very favourite theme of mine and which is often the main thrust of many of my children's books. But it is still a fantasy... with the intention of being read for fun. What learning happens, if any at all, is at the core and not in the main content of the book. There is an aim for this book which is topmost of all intentions. That children read. Not because we make them do it, but because they enjoy it. Because the books they read entertain them... because they open up their imagination, which is enormous... much larger, perhaps, than anything we adults can ever imagine.

As I was writing this story, I put myself in the heart of a little boy, narrating one of the stories I used to create often before I grew up and reality intruded and told me that all I had dreamt of could not come true.

Let the children dream. Encourage them to read only what they enjoy. Yes, I am hoping that this gift adventure will be one of those books. It introduces two sweet characters... typical of Maltese children who are right now bouncing off the walls, driving you crazy with comments, with complaints, with the fact that they cannot understand why what is happening is, in fact, happening.

Maybe it's not such a bad thing to explain to them that we too are not understanding much of what is happening around us.

The Maltese version of this book went viral, almost making my website crash because of so many visits. Teachers and schools endorsed it, and so many parents. The feedback has been sweet and very encouraging. Many asked me for an English version of the book, and here it is. Thank you to Pia Zammit who kindly read through the book after I finished translating it and gave me her very useful comments and suggested changes. Thanks to the media who promoted the Maltese version so vehemently and thank you for downloading it and reading it... for yourselves and for your children.

Görg Mallia

April 2020

1.

Schools Close Down

“Does that mean that we can’t go outside?” Melanie asked with wide open eyes that were on the verge of tearing up.

“We can go out,” said mummy, “but you can’t get close to other children. There’s no problem with us going for a walk, but we need to keep well away from people.”

“So how cruel is this sickness?” asked Karl suddenly. He had been silent so far, just listening to everything. “It must be really bad since we can’t even be close to other people!”

“It can be cruel to those who are unwell and to old people,” said daddy. “That is why we need to be careful... because we might catch the virus and then pass it on to those people without even realising it.”

That was when Melanie finally burst, sobbing so hard it sounded like she was crying her heart



out. Mummy hugged her to her chest and tried to calm her down.

When the sobbing subsided a little, Melanie's eyes rose up to meet her mummy's, "But I love our grans!" she said with half a screech as she started crying again.

"And absolutely nothing is going to happen to them if we don't go visit them for the time being and they stay alone at home," said mummy, stroking her hair and holding her close. "Don't worry, everything will be all right, but in the meantime, we need to stay at home as much as possible."

"Can't I even go to Paul's house?" asked Karl, who seemed not to have understood at all. "I'm going to miss him a lot now that school has closed down."

"Not for now," mummy said. "What do you say, when all this is over, we throw a party and invite all your friends, eh?"

Daddy's brow furrowed. "Martina, don't you

think that after everything is over we still shouldn't meet up in large groups for a while?"

Mummy kicked him under the chair and frowned at him. And he understood. They could not say that to the children who were already terrified by a situation they had never gone through before. He was a bit worried but knew that if they managed to stay inside as much as possible, as a family, and keep away from everybody else, everything would pass and be all right again.

He and his wife had already talked a lot about how they were going to manage to keep their two children occupied. They were absolutely not used to being cooped up inside... not even for a day, let alone for whole weeks. If the weather was nice, they could go for a walk in the countryside, keeping their distance from whoever might be passing by... but the rest of their time had to be spent in other ways.

"Come on, let's go watch Frozen on television," said mummy as she forced a smile.

That was their favourite film of the moment, because they had watched the second one in the series at the cinema before news came out about the virus that was going round the world and infecting many people.

The moment schools were closed, and Martina and Tony both found that they could work from home, the decision to stay there as much as possible was a simple one. The more people there were who were willing to do what they were doing, the less of a chance there would be of the illness spreading quickly, and the fewer the people in danger would be.

But Melanie and Karl were both hyperactive... they would much rather run around all over the place than sit down for more than fifteen minutes, else they'd go mad.

So the worst was still to come.

2.

The Pawnbroker's Book

That evening, Karl went into Melanie's room. She was on her bed reading a book she had got as a gift at Christmas but had had no time to read till now.

"What are you doing?" asked her younger brother. He had a habit, Karl did, of asking questions for no reason whatsoever. Just like that, so he could be Karl.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" asked his sister with that tired look that she always had on her face whenever Karl asked something stupid.

"What book is that?" he asked then and jumped onto the bed next to her.

"Hey," she shouted as the mattress bucked underneath her.

"This is the book that Aunt Guza gave me last Christmas," she told him.

"What's it about?" Karl insisted. He obviously

had nothing to do, so it was logical for him to irritate his sister.

"A mysterious adventure," she said, "now leave me be so I can continue reading. Why don't you go get a book too? Your shelf is full of books you've never read."

"You know I don't like reading," said Karl, and pouted.

"Yes, I know, but maybe this is the perfect time to start," said his sister, who never went anywhere without a book. She had been given an iPad as a gift for her birthday and Daddy had bought her a lot of children's e-books that she read every chance she got.

But not Karl. Video games, yes, but not books. But it seemed that right now he didn't even feel like video games.

"Tell me the story," he said... and it became very clear to his sister that he had no intention of moving from where he lay.

Melanie took a deep breath. She knew that



when Karl was in this mood, she would not be able to pull him out of it. So, she surrendered.

"The book is about a girl called Katie who finds a mysterious book at a pawnbroker's," she told him, and showed him the picture of a girl looking through books in a dark, old shop.

"What's a pawnbroker?" Karl had not understood.

"A pawnbroker is someone that people give things to in exchange for money. If the money is not paid back after a certain time, the things they leave can be sold," said his sister.

"So, like a second-hand shop."

"Sort of, I suppose."

"Go on, go on," Karl had no patience.

"As I told you, she found this book and it sort of called out to her, and..."

"Called out to her how?" asked Karl, who was now lying on his tummy on the mattress, his chin on both his hands, waiting for his sister to continue narrating.

“Sort of... like it sang to her in her mind and her heart... she felt it more than heard it.”

“And what was the song?” Once Karl started asking questions, he just did not stop.

“It told her to buy the book and take it with her home,” said Melanie, who had really got hooked by the plot of the book.

“Did she buy it?”

“Yes.”

“What happened then?”

“When she got the book home, she found that it was full of empty pages. There was nothing printed on them. And it did not call out to her anymore,” she told him. “She went through all of it, but it was useless. There was nothing there.”

“What a disappointment!” said Karl.

“Yes, that’s how she felt, and she put it up on her bookshelf and went to bed.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know. That’s how far I’ve read. Now we too need to sleep, because you’ll soon hear Mummy getting angry,” said Melanie as she

closed her book. Karl realised that he was not going to convince his sister to continue reading so she could tell him the story, so he gave up and went back to his room.

And it was not long before the two of them were fast asleep.

3.

The Singing Book

Two days passed. Melanie and Karl, along with Mummy and Daddy, managed to fill their days. Every now and then they would do a bit of homework that their teachers had sent to them by e-mail, occasionally they would assemble a jigsaw puzzle, sometimes they watched a bit of children's television, helped their parents with what they were doing... and Melanie read lots. And Karl would pester her to tell him the story, instead of reading it himself.

"If only you knew how much you would benefit if you were to start liking reading, Karl," his mother had told him many times... but the boy never paid attention to that. He had a lot of books in his room, but although sometimes he used to pull one down from the shelf and browse through it, he quickly lost patience and just left it there after a short while.

Having said that, Karl was a clever boy. His marks at school were not out of this world... but he used to do very well, because he did work quite a bit. But for him, the enjoyment of reading hid behind a large wall that he found impossible to jump over.

Melanie was not like that. Every time she stopped from something she was doing; you would see her immediately grab a book and read a few pages. And at times she got so lost in her reading that she didn't even reply to Mummy when she talked to her.

And Martina would take this with a smile and leave her be, lost in worlds created by the author.

That evening, as she was in bed, entirely immersed in her book, Karl silently came into her room again and startled her when he leapt onto the mattress.

He continued bouncing, with Melanie doing the same to the point where she could not continue reading. She was angry with him

and told him to stop, but he wouldn't hear of it. With a teasing smile he continued to jump up and down until she launched herself at him and pressed him down against the mattress so hard that he could not move.

"Let me go," he shouted, but Melanie was bigger than he was and managed to pin him down.

When, after a while, he stopped struggling, she let go. "Now go back to your room so I can continue reading," she told him.

"No. You haven't yet told me how Katie's story continued," he told her, with that look on his face she knew all too well.

"The moment I finish the book, I'll tell you all about it," his sister said. "I still have quite a bit to go to finish it. Now go sleep."

"No," said the pest again. "Tell me what happened since the last time."

She knew it was no good arguing. Her brother was like an annoying mosquito that buzzes round your head at night. It wakes you

up, you put on the light, you try to find it and not see it anywhere, but the moment you lie down again it begins its buzzing again until it drives you mad. She knew that the only way that she could stop him annoying her was by giving him what he wanted.

She put the book down on the bed and started telling him the story.

“Katie was sleeping soundly that day she bought the book,” she told him, “when suddenly she heard the book sing to her again. It was a very sad song that entered her dreams and turned them into a nightmare.”

“How?” Karl jumped in.

“Before the song she had been dreaming of being in a huge garden, full of flowers and big trees... everywhere around her was green, apart from where the flowers splashed patches of colour and where the blue sky was. But the moment the song started, the flowers died suddenly and the green grass turned yellow, like straw. And the leaves fell from the trees, and all

that was left were bare branches as though it were the middle of winter.”

“How scary,” said Karl, who, however, did not look one little bit scared.

“She continued walking to try and find where the song was coming from, and there, at the edge of a very steep cliff, she saw the book that she had bought. Open. And she felt that the song was coming from it. She got closer to it and saw that the two pages that were open were no longer empty, but there was printing on them... printed in an old-style font, with a lot of circles and decorations... as if it had all been written by hand.

“And what did it say?” asked Karl, suddenly eager to find out.

“That was the problem,” said Melanie. “The writing was in a language that Katie could not understand. So, she couldn’t know what was written there. And when she approached the book and tried to turn the pages, the book closed suddenly and disappeared in her hands.”



She stopped to take a deep breath.

"The second the book vanished, she heard a loud noise and woke suddenly from her sleep. She found that the book she had bought had fallen by itself from the shelf and crashed to the floor. She got out of bed, picked it up and leafed through it, but the pages were all empty again."

"And then?"

"I don't know. That's where I stopped reading."

"Uff, why didn't you read more?"

"Because I have a brother who constantly annoys me and stops me from doing that, that's why," said Melanie angrily. "Now are you going to bed, or not? It's late and because of you I won't have time to read another bit."

He knew there was nothing more he could get out of his sister. Nonetheless, he tossed a pillow at her head before he leapt off the bed. Yes, that was Karl all over!

And silence fell in the home of Melanie and Karl as the night made Malta dark and silent.

4.

That Night

Melanie woke with a start.

For a moment she didn't even know where she was, or what time it was, she was so confused, but then she realised that it was still dark and the clock on her bedside table told her that it was four o'clock in the morning.

What had woken her? Not a sound, something else. Something had touched her.

She looked around her, but in the darkness of the room she could see nothing. She didn't even have a night light, because any sort of light stopped her sleeping. She shook her head. It must have been a dream, then. And she pulled the blanket up to her chin and decided to try and sleep again.

And that was when she heard the light soft voice, speaking in English.

"Don't make a noise, please... it's ok."

Her eyes opened wide and her hand automatically switched on the lamp. The room filled with light and Melanie jumped.

There, at the edge of the bed, was a girl, thin and with blonde hair. She was standing quite rigidly and holding to her chest a beautifully bound book.

Melanie struggled not to scream, and only just barely managed not to.

“Who are you?” she whispered, realising too late she’d asked in Maltese.

The girl shook her head. “I don’t understand your language,” she told her in English.

Where did she know her from? Melanie kept on thinking that the girl looked familiar. But she was certain she had never met her before because otherwise she would have remembered her.

“Who are you and how did you get in here?” she asked her in English. She was now sitting up in bed.

“My name is Katie,” said the girl, “and I don’t

know how I got here. I don't even know where here is."

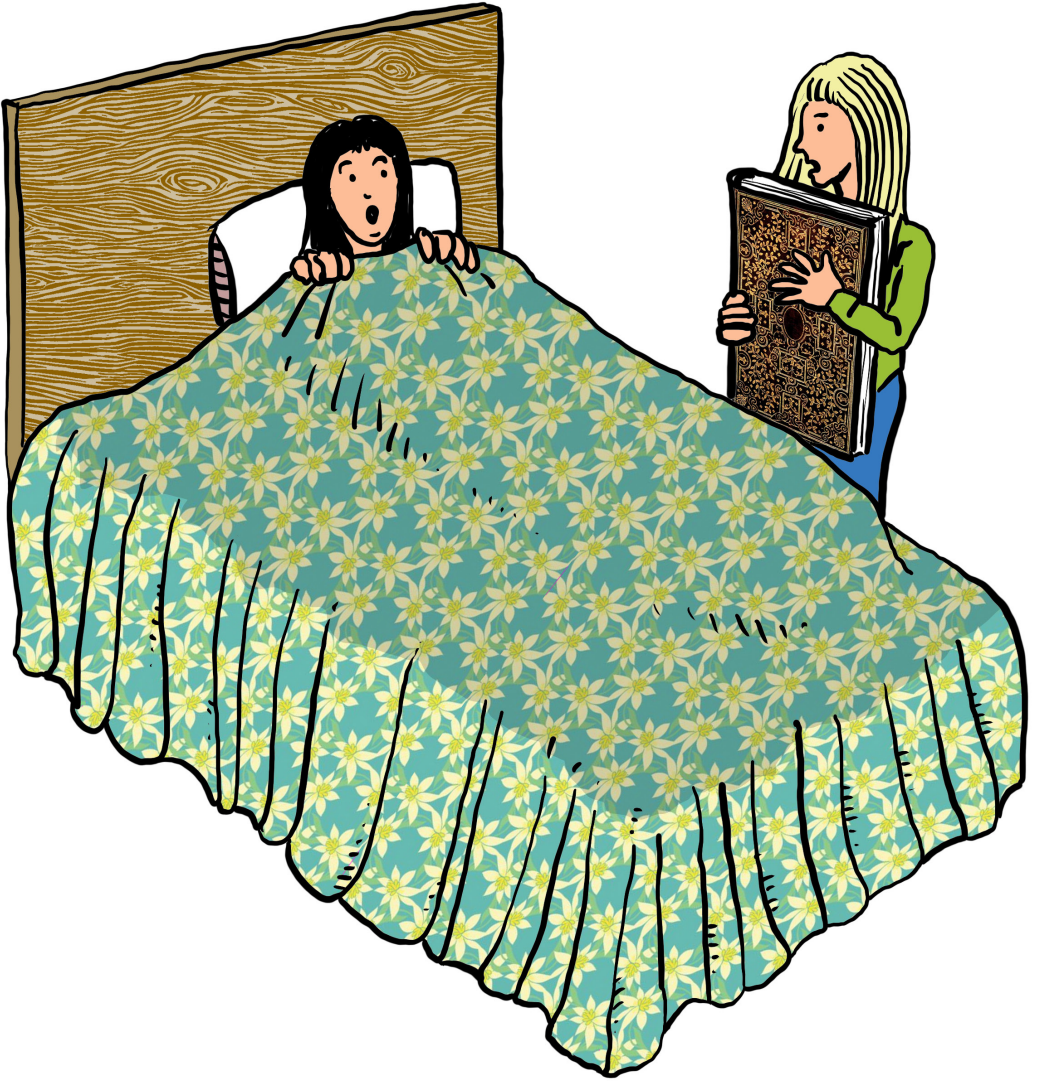
And suddenly she realised where she had seen the girl before. In the drawings that were in the book she was reading! That was the girl who had bought the pawnbroker's book. And what she had with her had to be the book itself.

She shook her head. She must be dreaming. In a short while she would wake up and the dream would have already disappeared from her mind.

So why was there that overwhelming sense of reality? Why did everything seem so real? But when we dream we think things are real as we dream them, she told herself again.

She couldn't get up to touch that girl to see if she was real, because her Mummy had told her many times in the last few days that she couldn't touch other people, because of the virus that was making people sick.

But that girl who had said her name was Katie



solved the dilemma herself by coming close to her.

Melanie pulled back. "No," she said. "The virus..."

Katie shook her head violently. "Where I come from there is no virus," she told her. "Don't worry..."

"Where do you come from, then?"

"From a country created by a writer. I am not real, Melanie. I am a character in a story. But this book has made me come to life."

Melanie could not believe her ears. If this girl wasn't real, how was she standing in front of her right now?

She sat down on the bed next to Melanie's feet.

"Do you want to hear what I think has happened?" she told her.

Melanie nodded. She was still convinced that this was a dream, but the more time passed, the more real it was seeming to be.

"I think I came here because you are

reading my book... the book in which I am the main character, I mean," she told her. "That must be the bridge. Back in my world, when this book fell off my shelf, I opened it and there was no writing in it again, but I was curious and kept on going through every page, till suddenly I came to two black pages... completely black. Only they weren't black pages... it was a hole, and some sort of force pulled me into it." Katie looked confused. "And suddenly I found myself here, at the foot of your bed. I noticed the book on your bedside table and pieced the whole story together in my mind."

Melanie shook her head again. This was a fantasy. This was a figment of her imagination. How could all of this be real?

"Please come with me inside the book," Katie told her. "It keeps on singing to me to do that... because the world is in great danger and it knows how to save it... or at least help save it."

Melanie was really confused now. This was

madness. And she was still not believing that this was really happening.

And that second, she saw the door to her room open a crack, and Karl was there, looking in.

"Come in, Karl," she said in a ferocious whisper. Karl came in, but he could not take his eyes off Katie.

"Who is she?" he asked, his eyes as big and round as saucers. "I couldn't sleep. I was playing a game on my mobile when I heard voices coming from your room."

"That is Katie... the character in the book that I'm reading."

Karl looked at her in a way that told her he knew she had gone nuts.

"No... really... who is she? And how did she get in here?"

Melanie picked the book up from her bedside table and opened it on the page where there was the picture of Katie approaching the open

book. She showed it to Karl, who looked at her, then at Katie, then at the picture again. He put his hand to his face and shook his head violently.

"How is this possible?" he asked.

"I don't know... but she's here."

In the meantime, Katie remained silent, sitting down at the edge of the bed. She wanted to let the siblings trash things out, even though she could not understand anything of what was being said between them.

"She wants me to go with her inside the book," she told him, after she explained what Katie had told her.

"Of course you can't!" Karl said without even thinking about it.

"The book is telling her that the world is in terrible danger... and it can help."

Karl was silent. "The virus?" he then asked.

"I don't know," said Melanie. "Maybe. Which means I'm prepared to take the risk."

Karl shook his head again. He suddenly looked a lot older than he actually was. "And

how are we going to explain all of this to Mummy and Daddy?" he asked.

"No... we don't tell them anything. We're only going to take a look to see if any of this is real. I am sure this is a dream." And she pinched her arm to check... and the look on her face told Karl that she had really hurt herself.

"OK," he said. "OK."

Katie seemed to understand that the siblings had agreed to what she'd asked for and she got up from where she was sitting. She put the large book on the bed and began leafing through it until she found the black pages.

Karl grabbed Melanie's hand as they got closer to Katie, who was now looking into the large hole, which, from where they stood, seemed bottomless.

And, suddenly, and without them understanding what was happening, what seemed to be a very strong wind came out of the hole, whirled around them and in a flash pulled them into the massive darkness.

5.

Where the Book Took Them

They just could not understand what was happening.

They felt themselves spinning, like when on the roundabout at the playing field, turning and turning with no control whatsoever... and their bodies going faster than their minds as both raced against each other.

The darkness they had fallen into did not last long and it was replaced by circles of colour... round rainbows encircling each other were flying around them. And their bodies had no weight. They were feathers caught in a gale... no, in a hurricane, a tornado, making them dance from one side to the other as their senses still made absolutely no sense to them and their thoughts

exploded in a thousand hues and a thousand flashes and a thousand explosions of fantasy.

Then, suddenly, everything vanished, and their feet were planted solidly on the ground, and they stood next to each other and looked around at their surroundings.

"Where are we?" Karl asked. Melanie had no doubt that it would be Karl who would ask something like that.

"This is where I was before," said Katie. "And look... my book is gone! Did we leave it back in your room?"

It was true, the book had not come with them to that place. Yes, it was probably still back in Melanie's room.

Or not?

A sweet-sounding song full of the whistling of a light and bouncy flute filled their minds.

"That's the book's song," said Katie at once.

"So the book is here," Melanie told Karl. "If we want to be able to get back home, we need to find it."



Not that they had much of a choice when it came to that. The song, like a happy lilt sung by a thousand joyful birds, was pulling at their thoughts... almost like it was a thin but very strong rope that at one end had a hook that was deeply embedded in their brains. And someone or something was pulling the rope and with it pulling the children towards an unknown place.

Melanie looked around her. They were in the middle of a very large field... it was so large that she could not see where the horizon was in the distance. The ground was dry and apart from a few strands of yellow straw nothing grew in it. Around them, the branches of a dead tree filled everywhere, stripped naked of every leaf, as if stretching lifeless, skeletal arms towards a grey sky. Everything was silent and there was no joy at all, except in the book's song that filled their minds.

They walked very quickly, but it seemed as if they were getting nowhere, because all around

them there was still the same ugly, very sad scene.

Then, suddenly, they saw what looked like a flickering light far away.

“Over there,” Karl was quick to say. “I think that’s where the book is.”

They sped up, their legs flying over small, pointy gravel that they barely felt, because their thoughts were filled with the song and nothing else was important.

And after more walking, for such a long time that it felt like an eternity, they arrived at the place the song had pulled them to. There was the book, in front of them, open, exactly as described in the story that Melanie had been reading, and the same story which she had told her brother.

“The writing is there again,” Katie told them. “But it’s in a language I don’t understand, so I don’t know what’s in it.”

The children got closer to the book. Slowly, as if it was something terrifying, or as if they were

waiting for something to happen that would startle suddenly them. But nothing happened. The book remained open, open at two pages that were roughly in its middle and on which were lines of writing.

And this is where they got the shock.

"This writing is in Maltese," shouted Melanie, not even realising in her surprise that Katie wasn't understanding her.

"It's in Maltese," Karl explained to Katie.

"So that's the other connection," said Katie. "You reading the book with my story in it was one, and the text here being in Maltese is the other. That's why it led me to you."

Karl was trying to read the elaborate writing, but he was finding it difficult. His reading in Maltese was also not perfect. "Help me read what's written here," he told his sister.

Melanie went down on her knees in front of the book and very slowly started reading.

"I am the oracle of Astorett, the wizard of Mehti.

Read well what is here and do what you find in it.

Find the red river that flows out of the source of sickness.

Find the purple fish that gives the precious gift.

Heal the river so the world can live.

Take the first step by turning this page.

Courage and strength are the tools that will get you there.

Those and the love of others.”

She stopped. “That’s all there is,” she said.

“I’m not understanding anything,” Karl said, his eyes large in his face.

“Me neither,” said his sister, confusedly shaking her head.

“What does it say?” Katie asked them. And Melanie translated the strange words that she had just read into English.

“But... but... I know where the red river is!” she said with great enthusiasm when Melanie had finished explaining.

“You do?”

“Yes. I dreamt of it. But,” and her eyes suddenly turned dull, “that was another dream. Another place. So it’s no good to us.”

“But hang on,” said Karl. “Doesn’t the writing say that we need to turn the page?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Melanie, who had got so befuddled that she had forgotten that part. And she turned the page.

Suddenly an explosion of rainbow colours hit them with such a great force that they lost consciousness and fell to the ground.

6.

The Desert World

At the beginning there was just darkness. Total darkness in which one could see nothing. If at all possible, a darkness much darker than the pitch-black darkness of night.

Then, what looked like a crack of light... like a thin white thread, appeared on the horizon. And it increased very very slowly, until it exploded suddenly and became as strong as the sun in the morning.

Melanie sat up where she lay, and she saw Karl slowly sitting up too. She could not see Katie anywhere, however.

“What happened?” asked Karl in the voice he usually had when Mummy tried to wake him up for school. “Where are we?”

Melanie was about to tell him that it was no use asking questions when he knew that neither

of them had answers... but she was too dizzy and said nothing. Instead she looked around her.

They were no longer in the field where the book had been. Now they were in the middle of a long road that went on till it disappeared in the distance. And around the road there was nothing... like a desert without sand, but which had nothing in it. Not one tree. Not one plant or flower. Nothing. Total emptiness.

"The book must have sent us here for a reason," she told her brother when she found her voice again. "Somewhere around here there is that river that was mentioned in the writing."

"The red river," said Karl. "I wonder, how does a river become red?"

"Hopefully not with blood," said Melanie, her eyes as big as saucers.

"No, no, what are you saying?" said Karl... but his voice had an uncertainty to it, as if some sort of bad thought had just told him that his sister might have been right. "What do we do?"

“What can we do? Walk,” said Melanie, and she wished again that they had been wearing shoes when they fell into the hole in the book. The ground was hard, and their feet were really going to hurt as they walked.

“And where is Katie?” asked Karl. Again, a question he knew that his sister could not answer.

“I think the book must have sent her somewhere else. It's no good trying to guess where. Shall we go?”

And they started walking, at first at quite a speed, but they quickly got tired and the bottoms of their feet were feeling really raw.

And in the meantime, they still saw nothing and no one, apart from the stretch of road ahead of them, which seemed to be never ending.

“I'm tired,” groaned Karl.

“We can't stop,” Melanie told him. “we need to arrive at some place at some point. Somewhere. It can't be that this road goes on forever.”

“How do you know?” her brother asked

angrily. "Maybe that's exactly what it does! And how do you know we're going in the right direction? Couldn't we also have gone the other way?"

This was a thought that had been worrying Melanie for a while, but she hadn't mentioned it to her brother. It was intuition that had told her which way they had to walk. Nothing else. But it could easily not have been intuition at all, because there was nothing that could really justify her choice of direction.

They kept on walking and noticed a change in the air. While up to now the air had been dry, as they imagined the air in a desert to be, suddenly the air seemed to be a bit more damp and they felt it very lightly against their faces.

"Do you feel it?" Melanie asked.

Her brother nodded. "What do you think it means?"

"I don't know, but it could mean that there is water somewhere close. A lot of water... so much so that it affects the air around it."

This was new hope, and for a while they sped up their pace, until suddenly, far away they saw that the road came to an end. They aimed for that spot and almost ran now, ignoring the pain in their feet.

"That seems to be a shore of some sort," said Melanie. They were now close enough that she could see it.

Karl said nothing, because he was gasping for breath.

A tiny bit more and they arrived at what Melanie had called a shore. In fact, it was one of two sides of a wide canal. The sides were built of red bricks. The children stopped at the edge and looked down.

And there was the red river that had been mentioned in the oracle's writings.

It was red because its bed was covered with weeds of a reddish-purple colour, and the waters of the canal reflected these colours to the point where they almost seemed as if they had been dyed.

The children sat on the shore and looked down.

"So the book has again sent us where we were supposed to go," said Melanie, and she spoke in a whisper, even though she knew there was no one around to hear her.

"Yes, but we still don't know what we're supposed to do," complained Karl.

"According to the book, this river comes out of a source of sickness," said Melanie, putting her thoughts into words. "I have no clue what it meant by that, though."

"Do you think it's talking about the virus pandemic that is spreading so quickly around the world?" asked Karl, eyes wide open.

"I don't know... but there are lots of different sicknesses, not just that one. It could have been referring to another sickness." She stopped and stood up. "Let's walk along the riverbank and see where we get to."

"This could go on for a very long stretch," Karl complained again. He was now really tired.



“But there is nothing else that we can do,” said Melanie. She grabbed him by the arm and helped him stand up.

And they started walking again. Because the shore was built of bricks, their feet hurt them even more now and they could not hurry.

They walked for an hour and nothing changed, but Melanie finally noticed that the river canal seemed to be narrowing, and after a while she saw what looked like a large shadow in front of them, hidden in the mist that was everywhere.

They walked a bit more and very slowly the shadow became more solid, and the sky became darker and they noticed that they were finding it very difficult to breathe easily.

After a while they realised why. The waters of the river were coming out of a huge hole in the wall of an enormous building, with no windows and covered in soot. It was a building that had a gigantic chimney on top of it, from which a huge plume of smoke came out, covering the sky.

7.

The Black Building

“That comes out of the source of sickness,” said Melanie in a whisper as she looked up at the horrific building.

“Could that be what the oracle was referring to when it mentioned sickness, then?”

“I think so,” said Melanie. “The disaster we’re making of the air is killing more people than the virus right now!”

“So, when Katie said that we need to save the world... she was talking about this,” and he pointed at the black smoke that filled the sky.

“It could be,” she said. “I don’t know. What I do know is that the waters of the river are probably poisonous and that is why the weeds on the riverbed are red. Some sort of chemical.”

“So fish can’t live in it.”

“No... which means that we’re not going to

find the purple fish that the oracle mentioned in this river."

"If the river is poisonous... it's little wonder that everywhere here is a desert," said Karl, who sometimes came across as much older than he actually was.

"That's true," said his sister. "But I really can't imagine what gift a purple fish can give us that will help us heal the river."

Karl shook his head. "I understood absolutely nothing." Then, "What are we going to do, Melanie?"

"Shall we try to find out what's in this place?" she asked.

"Why? It's not going to help us get back home."

"But right now, this place is the only thing there is... maybe we'll find something in it that will help us find the book that can take us back. The book knows about this place because what was written in it is actually right here."

“As you wish, but I don’t think it’s going to get us anywhere.” However, he did not complain when they began walking around the black building.

They could not even see a single window, but when they went round to the front of the building there was, in fact, a small door, cracked open, that the children opened and went through. But there was nothing but darkness inside, so they left the door partly ajar so that at least the outside greyness would throw a hint of light inside, enough to see where they were walking.

They noticed from the onset that there was nobody in the building.

“So where is the smoke coming from?” Karl asked.

“We just have to search this place to see if we can find out,” said Melanie, who wished she had her favourite keychain with her, the one that had a little torch hanging on it, which did not really throw a huge beam... but it would still have been a great help here.

The building was composed of one large

hall on the ground floor – which is where they were, and it looked like there was another, just as large, hall on the floor above. Down where they were was completely empty. There was nothing at all, and when Karl found the staircase leading upstairs on the left-hand side of the hall, it took them a long time to decide whether to go upstairs or not. In the end they decided to climb the stairs. Melanie opened the door wide so a little bit more light could come in and by means of that they could see enough not to trip on the stairs.

At the top of the stairs they found a large hall, and that was where everything was. A gigantic machine in the middle of the hall was whirring and humming, a wheel revolved within a wheel, that in turn revolved within another wheel, continuously, with flames spitting out of tiny windows, and sparks flying everywhere. Everything fed the chimney - the bottom of which was exactly above the machine. Although they could not see how this was happening, the children were certain that this was the cause of

the destruction of the environment. That machine must have been built by people, but now there were none of them... only the machine was left, and the machine was destroying that world.

“Can we stop it?” asked Karl, very afraid.

“How?” asked Melanie. “We don’t even know what it is, let alone how to stop it.”

“So we’re just going to do nothing?”

“There is nothing we can do,” said Melanie, and tears began trickling down her face. “This is like our own world,” she said, sobbing, “we, the children, are living in a world full of bad air and we’re not the cause of it. It’s caused by those who use their cars for no real reason, those who build non-stop and fill the air with dust, those who cut down trees and kill all the greenery.” And now she was really crying so hard it felt like her heart would burst.

This was something that was very dear to Melanie, but she never talked about it, because she was afraid that the adults would hold it against her... or just pooh-pooh it. Now, in this



world, so far away from ours, where she was seeing with her own eyes a machine that did not seem to have any use whatsoever, but which was wreaking so much destruction... here she burst like an over-inflated balloon.

When she calmed down, she was angry with herself for having let go like that. "Don't pay any attention to me," she told her brother, wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her pyjamas.

"No, you are right, Melanie. I think about this too sometimes... but I tell myself I'm a small child and there is nothing I can do to stop the adults destroying our world."

Yes... sometimes Karl sounded a lot older than he actually was. He touched her heart and a large tear trickled out of her eye, onto her chin and then fell to the floor next to her feet.

And there, where the tear fell, the ground opened, and a marble column suddenly slid out and stopped in front of Melanie.

And on it there was a small statue.

Of a fish. Painted purple.

8.

Astorett of Mehti

The children looked at it bewildered! Where had it come from? And was it really Melanie's tear that had made the column suddenly shoot out from where it was hidden in the ground?

Karl shook his head. "You do know that all of this is impossible, right?" he told his sister.

She nodded. "Yes, I know. Nothing makes sense. How did whoever planned all of this know that I would be crying in exactly the same place where the column was hidden?"

"Or maybe," said her brother, "that column was not there... but appeared there specifically because you cried."

She shook her head. "It's no use trying to understand," she told him. "Nothing makes any sense at all. But now we have found the purple fish that is supposed to give us a precious gift."

Melanie put her hand on the statue of the

fish. She couldn't recognise the type of material from which it had been sculpted. Some sort of alabaster? It was some type of stone, in any case. The sculpture was beautiful and incredibly detailed, with the fish standing on its tail, and its head pointed upwards. She examined it, one part at a time, trying to see if there was any place where something could be hidden... somewhere the gift the oracle spoke of could be kept. But it was no good. It seemed solid.

"Maybe the fish itself is the gift," said Karl when they stopped going over the fish and had found nothing. "Can we take it with us?" And he tried to move it from where it stood... but it seemed to be stuck to the column. He gave up. "No," he said.

Melanie decided to try for herself. She grabbed the fish with both hands and pulled it up as hard as she could and, wonder of wonders, although the fish stayed stuck to the column, it did pull up, extending the column, opening a sort of drawer underneath it.

And in the drawer was a ring, with a large jewel on it, that even in the darkness, was sparkling and flashing.

The children both took a deep breath and Melanie stuck her hand out and picked up the ring. Without thinking... as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do... she slid the ring onto the middle finger of her right hand and was startled. The ring was warm, and it began to vibrate lightly. She felt her hand being lifted... as if she had lost control over it... and pointed the ring into the emptiness in the middle of the hall.

And a ray of light leapt out of the ring.

The children were dazzled and for a moment they could see nothing except for massive flashes in front of their eyes, but when their sight returned, they saw in front of them something that they never expected in their wildest imagination.

They were no longer alone.

In front of them there was an old man, with a long white beard, wrapped in a cloth that

looked like a bed sheet. He was barefoot and held a long staff on which he was leaning.

“Don’t be afraid of me, children,” he told them in perfect Maltese. “I am here to help you... in the same way that you have helped me.”

Karl and Melanie were so taken aback that they could not open their mouths! Not a single question popped into Karl’s head! The shock had really had an effect on him.

The man smiled and his face lit up. And that was the moment the children were convinced that this was a good man... someone they could trust. They had absolutely no idea where this thought came from, but there it was, as solid as steel.

The light from the ring had faded a little, but it was still there, lighting up the figure in front of them.

“I am not really here,” he told them. “The ring you’re wearing on your finger, Melanie, is projecting me from the city of Mehti... and, in



fact across thousands of years." His smile grew larger.

"I am Astorett... and the book that Katie found at that pawnbroker's is mine. Even though Katie, in actual fact, does not exist... except for the one who wrote her, and for all those children who read the book that tells her story... my book exists and it was what brought you here."

The children had begun to calm down a little, although they were still in shock... and they still could not believe their eyes and ears.

Astorett continued to speak.

"You are in my world as it is today. Humans, animals, even the plants that were once here, have all died. Mehti was a very beautiful world, with flowers the whole year round, and people of all types and forms, all living happily together. The animals were our friends and helped us in everything. For thousands of years that was the system and it was a good one."

He stopped for a moment, as if overwhelmed by some powerful emotion.

“Then things changed. Greed developed and some of the most influential people in Mehti wanted to add to what they already had. They commissioned engineers to build huge machines that belched out a lot of smoke, but by means of which, industry progressed a lot. When the trees started dying, nobody cared, because only the machines were important... machines that became bigger and bigger, stronger and stronger, so there would be progress.”

He stopped again, and the children were certain they saw a tear shining in his eye.

“Without trees, the air became very cruel to us. Many got sick. But the machines grew ever larger, producing more, but blowing out more smoke in the process.”

“If you want to stop telling us the story, it’s ok,” Melanie interrupted him. Her voice was hoarse, but her heart was touched seeing him so emotional.

Astorett shook his head. “No... it is very

important that you, the chosen ones, should know the full story," he said. And continued.

"When people and animals started dying, only those who were close to them noticed and mourned. The others continued to build ever larger, ever finer, ever stronger machines. Until the machines themselves started building new machines. Humanity was no longer involved. The machines took over Mehti."

And now he really was crying.

"And when the last person died, there was no one to notice."

9.

A World Within a World

“Does that mean there is no one left in this world?” asked Karl, deeply shocked.

“No one and nothing,” Astorett said, “except for this machine... the last of the large machines that destroyed Mehti. It feeds itself, which means it will never stop in its continuous destruction. Unless...” he paused for a second. “Unless you stop it.”

“Us?” screamed the children together.

“What can we do?” Melanie asked.

“First I need to explain to you why you are here,” said Astorett. “You are part of a plan that I created many many years ago... before my death and the death of my world.”

“You mean you’re dead?” Karl’s eyes were as large as saucers again.

“In the time in which you are living, yes. I left this world many years ago. But the me who is

talking to you is an enchanted man who knows what happened at the time when I lived as a human being, and even what happened after that human being died in Mehti.”

“In Mehti I was the Wizard of Wizards. This was a title that was only given once in every generation. And it was given to the most powerful wizard in the world. That was me.” The look on his face was not one of someone who was bragging. The look was that of a person who was stating facts... who was speaking the truth.

“I was the one who realised what was happening to my world, and by means of spells that very few even knew existed, I could also see what was going to happen. And that is why I devised the plan that brought you here today.”

“There are many worlds in the universe and not all are planets that exist inside a solar system. You probably had lessons at school about the nature of the universe, right?”

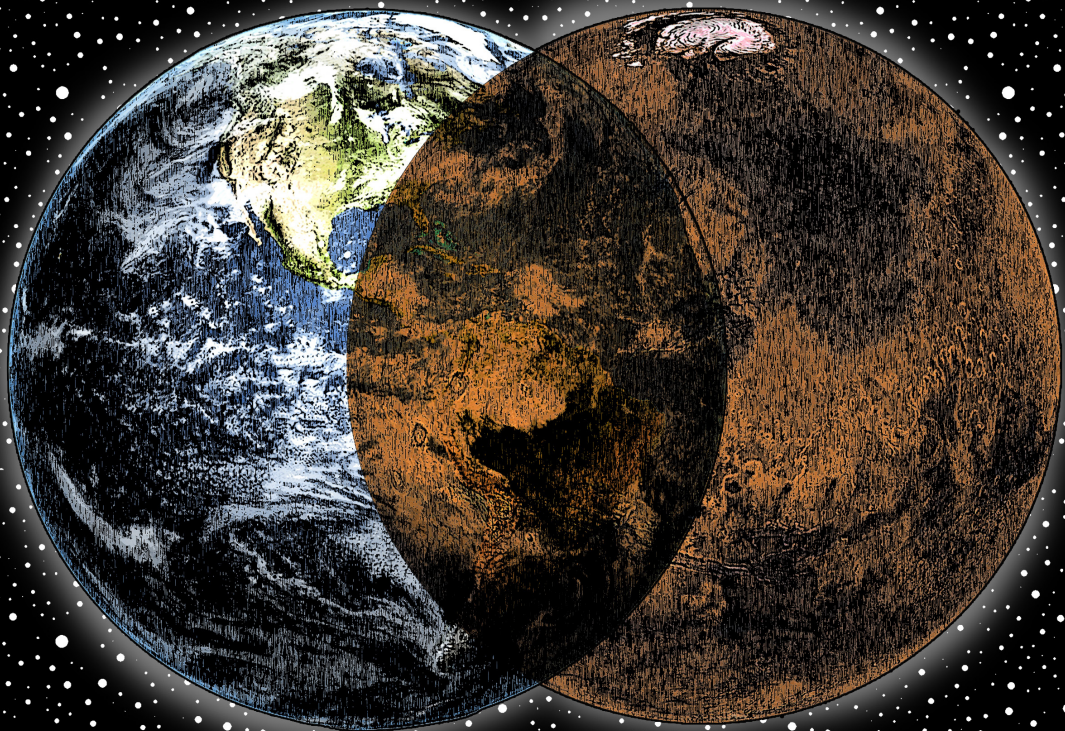
Both Melanie and Karl nodded. Yes, Teacher had given a whole lesson on that.

“But what you don’t know, and what the scientists of your world don’t know, is that there are worlds that occupy the same space as other worlds. Your science fiction writers call them dimensions. Which means that the worlds are like links in a chain... very different from each other, but a part of each occupies the same space. This is very difficult for me to explain. But you must understand that because of this, one cannot build a rocket to go to another of these worlds, you need to use a particular science, or wizardry to be able to cross from one world to another, both of which exist in the same dimension.”

Karl looked dubious, but Melanie indicated that she was understanding what he was saying.

“Does this mean that our world and Mehti share the same space?” she asked.

“Yes. You have understood me. That’s right. We, the wizards of Mehti, had known for generations about the existence of these dimensions and the Wizard Asartio had found a way of peeking through a sort of hole in the shared



space so he could see what was happening on the other worlds that shared the dimension with us. But nobody had managed to cross from one to the other."

"But you managed, didn't you?" Melanie said.

He nodded. "Yes, because I had a plan and the only way it could succeed was by means of my crossing from one intradimensional world to the other."

Sadness overshadowed his eyes. "In the meantime, I knew that there was no hope for my world. I knew that everything was going to die, and that the world itself would never be resurrected because the machines would go on working forever. And that was what I wished to stop. I could find no way of stopping the last animal from dying... of stopping the last person from dying... but there was a way of resurrecting my world after all of this happened."

He stopped. He looked as if he was wondering how to form his next words.

“What you see as a book, is in fact a doorway that traverses the different worlds in the same space. I had to prepare all that was needed so that when the right time came, it would be used. The oracle’s prophecy in your own language in the book, for example. The enchanted column with the statue of the fish attached to it was to appear if there was a sign of emotion linked to the destruction of the environment. Yes, Melanie, your tear set off that spell.”

“I thought as much. Realised it the moment I understood what you were telling us,” said the girl, her face flushed with excitement. Because suddenly she was feeling important. She and her brother. They were “the chosen ones”. That is how Astorett had described them. But she still did not know what “the chosen ones” had to do. She hoped that Astorett would tell them.

And in fact, he had resumed speaking.

“The ring that the purple fish gave you is the key by means of which this projection of me could cross time and space,” he said. “There

was no other way. I had to explain everything to you in person. No amount of writing, or any other means of communication would have managed to explain exactly what happened, and that which is still to happen."

"There is only one last part of the oracle's plans left to activate," he said. "That you heal the river for the world to live."

Melanie shook her head. "I don't know why you chose us," she told him, "but I think you made a mistake. We have no power with which to heal the river and we definitely have no clue how to help your world live again."

"You were chosen from among millions of children of your world," he told her. "Your Malta, a tiny island that should be a paradise on earth, is going through a horrible time, because of the destruction of its environment. And the terrible sickness that is threatening you all right now is underscoring what should be your priorities. The Maltese, locked up inside their homes, are missing the green of the countryside, the beauty of trees,

the blue sky not covered up by high buildings. The problem is that even when the time comes for them to be able to go out of their homes, they are still not going to find those things."

"This means you are at the stage in which you realise exactly what you have lost. Because of this, Maltese children could put my plan into action. Not only them... but they were ideal."

"Apart from the fact that we still don't know what your plan is," said Melanie, who was now impatient and really wanted to know, "I can't understand why from all the children of Malta you chose us."

Astorett smiled.

"Because you have magic in you... because, without knowing, you are the descendants of the high priest wizards from the ancient times of your country."

10.

Hidden Magic

The children stared at him. They had heard him well, but still could not believe their ears.

“You’re joking, right?” it was Karl who spoke first. “Where on earth did you get that from?”

“We love our family a lot,” Melanie continued where her brother left off, “but I don’t think we’re more special than anybody else. I cannot imagine that our forefathers were the ones that you are mentioning.”

Astorett smiled and remained silent for a few seconds.

Then, “You cannot know,” he told them, “but I have traced the genealogy of all the families on your island. Only with yours is there a direct line to the high priests of an age so far in the past that it is lost in the mist of time. They were priests that practiced magic because they had natural powers that grew inside them.

And so did their descendants. Villagers used to look to them to have their sicknesses healed, for seeds to grow in years when it did not rain, so their animals wouldn't die. They were revered as the most important members of society, until religions came to the island that did not accept magic, and your forefathers stopped practicing it, because they were scared of losing their lives."

"And as the years passed, the skills of magic were forgotten and the children of those last wizards, and the children of their children, all the way till today, have not used the powers that they have hidden inside them."

"We are not wizards!" Melanie shouted. "Something like that would never even cross my mind!"

Astorett smiled again.

"Melanie, have you ever in your life wished for something that you knew would be impossible for you to have and a bit later your wish came true?"

Melanie thought for little while. She

remembered the ring with hearts on it that cost a lot of money that she wished for secretly a few years ago. And she told nobody about it... but for her next birthday that was Mummy and Daddy's present. She remembered the series of books by a favourite author, but which were entirely out of print... but Aunty Marie still bought them for her.

She nodded. "Yes... but... you don't mean to say that I was using magic powers I did not even know I had to get what I wanted, right?" She was afraid of his answer.

"Yes," he said, "and no. The powers are buried inside you and inside your brother. But they are there. And when the desire for something is strong enough, a crumb of those powers works all by itself for the wish to come true. You did not know that you were doing this, which means you did nothing wrong."

But the whole thing still saddened her. Had she made her parents and her aunt do something against their will?

However, alongside the sadness there was also an element of excitement. She looked at Karl and there was no doubt that he too was remembering moments that he could not explain... of wishes come true without explanation.

"I still don't know how we can help you," Melanie told Astorett.

"But I do," he said. "The plan was written a long time ago. All that's left is for it to be brought to fruition."

He signalled with his left arm and suddenly the dark room was flooded with a powerful light. It was so dazzling that the children had to cover their eyes. When they uncovered them, the room was still lit up, but the light was now so strong that it hurt them.

And in the meantime, the machine went on working, the wheels going round the wheels, the flames, sparks and embers jumping and flying and the smoke pumping up into the chimney. The fact that they could see the machine better

only added to their horror at this monster, created by humans, but which had destroyed its masters and their world.

It was at that point that they realised that Katie was behind them. And she had the book with her.

"This is for you," she told them, and she put the book down on the floor next to their feet.

"Children," Astorett said, and the smile was no longer there, "it is time to awaken in you that which has been sleeping since your birth. Are you ready to accept this so you can save this world?"

Karl shot a very scared look at Melanie. He shook his head a little. He did not know what he should think. He did not know what he should do. His eyes were imploring his sister to decide for both of them. But Melanie too was very confused. What would it mean to them to be wizards? She did not like the idea at all. She wanted to remain normal. Like everybody else. Wasn't it bad enough that their normal life was

completely disrupted right now? School closed. Always at home. Not being able to play with their friends... this was all that was needed!

But the look on Astorett's face triggered pity inside her. Here was a person whose life had not just changed, but his whole world had ended. Yes... it was true that the environment of her own country was going through a terrible change... but not to the extreme of total destruction! She could imagine what must have gone through his mind when he discovered what was going to happen to all the people in his world... what was going to happen to the world itself that he loved so much because it was his home.

"I think we have to say yes, Karl," she whispered. "We can help save this world... and I don't think we should say no."

Karl nodded very slowly. He was not liking the idea at all. Although he was naughty, you could not say that Karl was an adventurous boy, and this was one huge adventure. But he understood his sister and was ready to accept her decision.

Melanie turned to Astorett. "We accept," she said in a quiet voice.

Astorett bowed in front of them. "On behalf of my world," he said, "thank you." He straightened up, he moved his hand, and the book opened in front of them. Not to the pages they had seen before. Not even to the pages of the black hole. These were empty pages, except for pictures of two pairs of hands. There was a pair on one page and a slightly smaller pair on the other.

"Go down on your knees and put the palms of your hands on those pictured in the book," said Astorett in a voice which now sounded solemn... like that of a priest giving his blessing during the high mass of the village feast.

They did what he told them to do.

Like the ring, the pictures of the palms of hands were vibrating softly and the slight warmth passed from them to the children's own hands. They stayed like that for a few seconds. Astorett was now singing something in a language they did not understand. Melanie lifted her face and



got a shock. The wizard was surrounded by lashes of flame and by flashes of coloured light. His arms were stretched in front of him, with the fingers pointed at them.

And suddenly, out of those fingers, a powerful ray of light leapt up that hit the book they were leaning on, and the book sort of folded around their arms, and then covered them like a large blanket, and they felt a massive turbulence inside their bodies.

Melanie realised that she was screaming and above the sound of her own scream, she heard her brother's. For a moment she thought that the book was going to suffocate them, because it covered them completely and they were in total darkness... but then... suddenly, it unwrapped itself from around them and again formed itself into the shape of a book.

And the children felt incredibly dizzy. Darkness descended on them as if they had been hit over the heads with a large rock, and they fell to the ground unconscious.

11.

Heal the River

They could not tell how long they had been out. It could have been minutes, or it could have been hours. Suddenly time meant nothing to them. It was almost as if nothing meant anything to them. The darkness into which they fell was total and nothing broke it. It was as solid as dense steel. It was a very silent darkness. It was a darkness that made its way into every corner of their mind and heart. It was a darkness that did not recognise the existence of light.

They came-to together. And suddenly. There weren't those moments of drowsiness that come after a long sleep. They sat up together and all their senses were alive.

More than alive, in fact. They felt the massive change inside them. They felt each groove and scratch on the floor beneath them; they tasted every molecule of the air they breathed; their

minds analysed the form taken by what light there still was, created by Astorett.

They stood up, again, together. As if they were one person.

Astorett was still standing in front of them, his eyes shining, inspecting them.

"How do you feel?" he asked at last.

A simple question. But the answer was not as simple. They did not know how they were feeling. Their senses had exploded. They were feeling everything... not just seeing and hearing and smelling, but feeling, as if everything that was around them was an intrinsic part of their very bodies. Astorett seemed to know the answer as his eyes continued to rove over them and he did not wait for their reply.

"The river," he said, "comes out of a source underground here. The machines that built this machine passed the waters through it to cool it down. It did not matter to them that in the process they were also making the river sick, with the weeds on its bed... the only thing left alive in

this world, becoming radioactive and poisoning the waters, killing every other living creature in them.”

“If we stop the river from going through the machine, the river will be purified and with time heal.”

“And the machine?” asked Melanie... and was startled because that was not her voice. It was more strident than hers. More certain of what it was saying.

“If there is nothing to cool the machine down,” said Astorett, “it will heat up so much that it will either stop working or explode. One of these options. This is the last of the machines that destroyed the world. If it is destroyed, then the world will rest.” And his eyes teared up again and Melanie felt his grief as if it were her own.

“And how are we going to do that?” Even Karl sounded a lot more sure of himself in his question.

“We need to use the magic that we three have inside us,” said Astorett. “Since I am not

really here, I can only guide you step by step. You are the ones who need to do the work."

"Whenever you're ready," said Melanie and never in her life had she felt so sure of herself.

Astorett nodded. "Good," he said. "Come with me." And he started walking towards the stairs with the children close behind him.

They went downstairs and found themselves in the lower chamber, the place where they had entered that large building. But Astorett did not stop there. He walked towards a corner of the room and brought the base of his staff crashing down on the floor three times.

And a hidden trapdoor creakingly slid to one side. He signalled to the children to follow him and went down the staircase that was uncovered when the trapdoor opened.

They now found themselves in another room, as large as the two above it. But this one was not empty like the ground floor. There was what looked like a large watermill, with a massive wheel turning and scooping up the clean running

water from a canal in the ground, and it then fed the water into a large pipe that disappeared into the ceiling. But a tiny bit further on, another larger pipe descending from the ceiling was bringing the water back down again. But this time the water was dirty and red, poisoned by the machine monster on the second floor.

Astorett pointed to the watermill. "We need to destroy that," he said.

Melanie looked at him thoughtfully.

"But, just thinking out loud... if our aim is to destroy the machine, why don't we begin with that first?"

Astorett shook his head.

"Your magic powers... the magic that is inside you... is still very much in its early stages. You do not have the power that you would need to break that monster," he said and there was sadness in his voice. "But this is smaller. Made from tempered steel that was developed by the scientists of Mehti. Which means no person would be able to break this wheel with strength

or tools. The only way is through magic that, in certain ways, is stronger than science.”

“We are ready,” said Karl. “What do we need to do?”

“Hold each other’s hands,” said Astorett. “Close your eyes and concentrate on the destruction of the watermill. Think of nothing else, only of that. Do not let any thought deviate you. Just think of that.”

The children nodded in agreement and stood up straight in front of the watermill. Karl grabbed his sister’s hand and pressed it. They closed their eyes and thought of the destruction of the watermill. They wished for it with all their hearts... because in their minds there wasn’t just Astorett’s world, whose environment had been destroyed by those same humans who then could not live without it, but also their own world, which seemed to be going through the same process. Their thoughts were strong, and they were one in them.

The white light around Astorett’s projection



was shining much more brightly now, as he intoned a spell in his own language. To the children's ears it seemed as if he was singing... a melancholic song, of sadness, rising as if it desperately wanted to escape the sadness, but then suddenly being pulled down again.

And very slowly they started feeling it. The huge power that started rising gently inside their bodies, snaking through the hands that were clasping each other, entering and exiting from the one to the other. That too was a song, but not a melody of sadness. It was a bombastic symphony, with all the instruments of the orchestra in perfect harmony. It was an explosion of massive strength that they never knew they had.

And powerful flames, which, however did not burn them, came out of them and danced around them, and they heard... at first gently, but with a sound that constantly increased, the tearing of metal; slamming and breaking, until an ear-splitting sound filled the room, which

sounded like the clang of an enormous hammer on a gigantic anvil.

Then there was silence. And they felt the flames die down around them. And very very slowly they opened their eyes to see what this, their first act of magic, had done.

12.

So the World can Live

The watermill no longer existed. It was now a shapeless block of crumpled metal. Their and Astorett's magic had annihilated it!

And the river waters were no longer being fed into the pipe that led into the roof. And the second pipe had dried up, with only drops of water trickling lightly from it.

The running waters, clean now, were flowing through a large canal in the ground. This had been dry before because the waters that were supposed to flow through it had been deviated into the pipe. Melanie could swear that the sound of water rushing towards the hole from which it would then fly into the river, was singing a happy song.

"It is now very important that you leave this place as quickly as possible, children," Astorett

said. He had already started climbing the stairs to the trapdoor.

The children understood his urgency and ran after him. They climbed up to the next floor and went straight to the door that led to the outside. But as they were about to go through it Astorett stopped them.

"I will leave you now," he told them. "The ring given to you by the purple fish was created to project only in the context of this dirty building."

"How will we get back home?" asked Karl, who was terrified they would never be able to leave Mehti.

Astorett smiled. "Don't worry about that," he told them. "I will be leaving here, but in one way or another, I shall always be with you... even more so at the moments when your magic powers will grow. Whenever you need me, you shall find me. Not any more in this form, but in many other different forms. Now I need to say goodbye. Thank you. Thank you for all that you have done for my world. I sincerely hope that

you and all the other children of your country will succeed in also fixing what has been broken there... because without it your lives will not be happy ones."

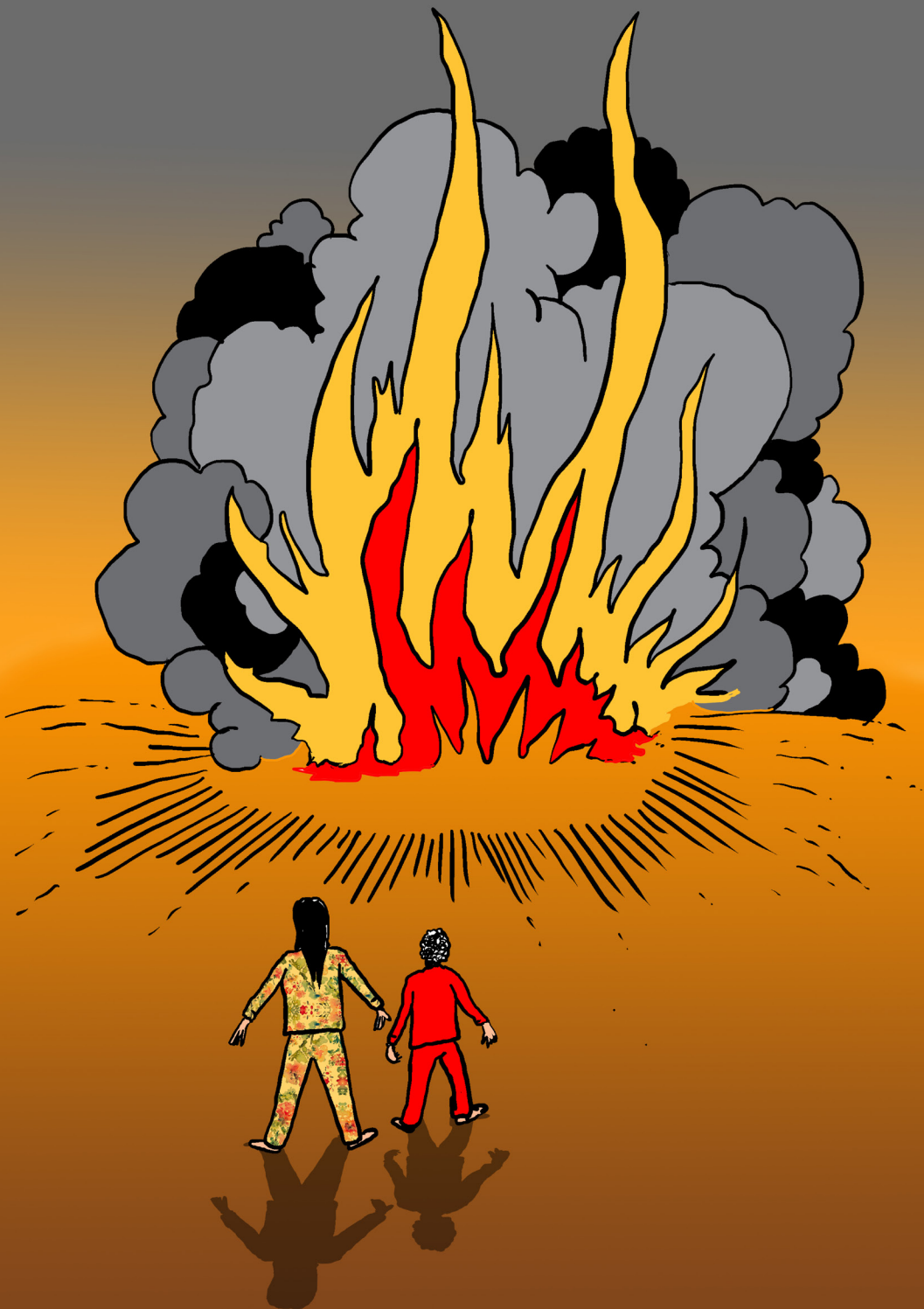
He waved to them, began to mist over and soon vanished completely.

"We need to leave now and go as far away as possible from here," said Melanie when not a trace of him was left.

And that is what they did. They ran as fast as they could and after a while, the gigantic black building was only a stain in the mist that seemed to be there constantly in that part of the world.

And it was then that a massively loud noise boomed, and it was so strong that they could not stop themselves falling to the ground. Imagine the sound of a thunderclap that comes from right above you... multiply it by a hundred. That was the sound.

When they had the strength to look up, they saw a huge fire burning where before there had been the black building. A ferocious fire that



pushed enormous flames up into the grey skies seemed like it was swallowing it whole.

The children sat down where they were and watched it burn. It was so strong that it did not burn for very long and it seemed to fizzle out very quickly, leaving in its stead a light smoke and emptiness in the place of the building that housed the monster machine.

They gave in to their curiosity and walked very slowly towards the banks of the river. When they got there, they looked down at it... and, wonder of wonders, the redness had already melted and they saw green weeds and clean water.

They looked at each other, bewildered.

"How is it possible that this happened so quickly?" Karl asked.

Melanie shook her head. She did not have an answer for her brother. Instead she looked around her. A tiny, surprised yelp escaped her lips before she could stop it.

“Look, Karl,” she said, pointing in a circle around her.

Karl looked and stared in shock.

Around them, the ground that had been a desert, was slowly being covered by green grass, almost as if it were a carpet being unrolled by an invisible hand. And there too, out of the ground, they could see what looked like plants coming out, that quickly changed into thin trunks of trees.

“It’s almost like those videos we watch on YouTube,” said Melanie. “The ones they speed up. What do they call that?”

“Time-lapse,” Karl quickly replied. He knew them well. He really enjoyed watching them.

“Yes, but this is real. There is no camera or software speeding up what we are seeing. This really is happening at impossible speed.”

They were now in a sparse wood, surrounded by young trees.

“So this was Astorett’s plan,” said the girl.

“But humans and animals won’t grow like this,” said Karl sadly.

“No... but one can never tell how new life might be born now that this world is no longer a desert.”

“It’s time to go home,” said a voice from behind them. They turned and saw Katie, smiling, hugging the big book to her chest.

“You did a really good job,” she told them. “But your work here is done. You need to go back to your own world for your work to begin there.”

They smiled at her and she put the book on the ground and opened it to the two black pages. “This is goodbye,” she told them. “I might not really exist except for people who like to read, but it has been a pleasure to meet you.” And her smile grew broader. The children hugged her, turned and approached the book. And that same wind from before grabbed them and pulled them into it.

They went round and round again and danced with rainbows and other circles of flashing colours and very soon they found

themselves on Melanie's bed, in the silence of her room.

"How are we going to explain all of this to Mummy and Daddy?" asked Karl thoughtfully. "They must have been frantic about us. We left here a long time ago. All that walking took ages."

But Melanie shook her head. "Look at the clock," she told him. "You might remember we left here at around a quarter past four in the morning... I remember checking the time when Katie came into the room, and it was four o'clock then. Look at what time it is now."

Karl looked. "How is that possible?" he asked, completely confused. "How can it be that it's still only a quarter past five in the morning?" And as he checked the mobile that Melanie had on her bedside table, he continued, "Yes, it's still the same night we left here."

"It must be that time there and time here are calculated differently. What took a long time on Mehti, only took an hour here."

"This means that Mummy and Daddy needn't know about all we've been through."

"And do you think that if we could tell them they would have believed us?" said Melanie. She smiled. "But we'd better go to the bathroom and wash our feet, because they're really dirty from all the walking. Remember that we walked barefoot."

Karl nodded. But he had a sad look on his face.

"What's wrong?" his sister asked.

"We're locked up inside again... we can't meet our friends. Schools are closed. I miss them," he said. "How I wish we could have another adventure."

"You can have as many adventures as you like while we're locked up in here for as long as the virus still spreads around the world," she told him.

"How?" her brother asked.

"By means of these," she said. And she picked

up a few of the books that were on her shelf and put them down in front of him. "Remember that all of this adventure started from a book," she said with a laugh.

"That's actually true. Our bodies are going to be locked up inside the house, but our mind can go wherever it wants to. Okay... you've convinced me. Tomorrow I'm going to start reading the books in my room." And he smiled, because suddenly he was really liking the idea.

"It's a pity we can't use our magic powers here to fix our own environment," he said whimsically.

She shook her head. "No, we can't," she told him. "But I had a thought. The Maltese people locked up in their homes to avoid the virus don't drive cars. Mummy won't be driving us to school any more. Maybe our environment is going to win in this horrible time for all of us. In the same way that the people of Mehti suffered a lot so that their world could be reborn... maybe our

suffering is helping our country's environment be born again."

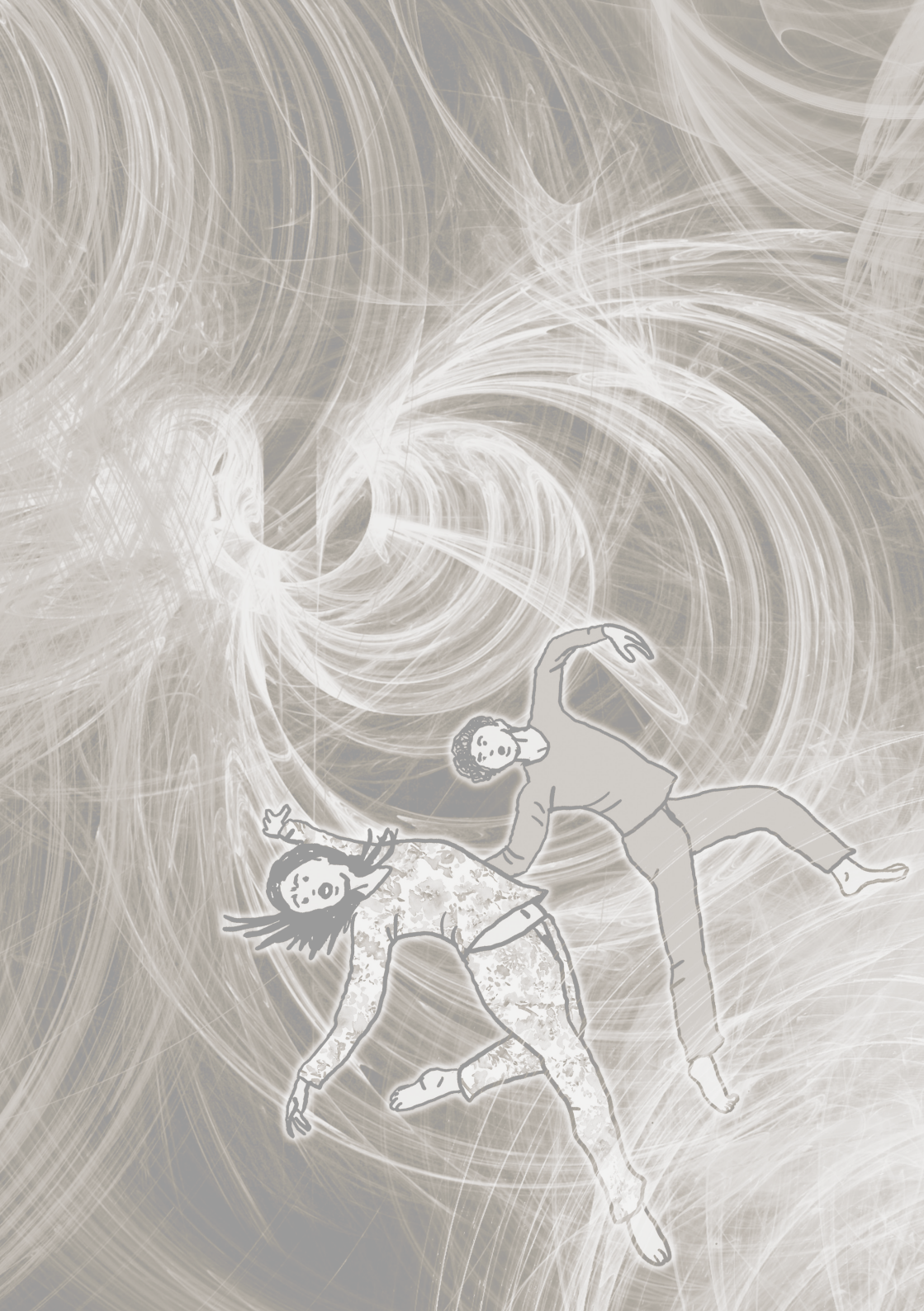
Karl shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Now we'd better get on with things so when Mummy and Daddy wake up they find us asleep."

And he jumped off the bed and walked to the door. He turned and looked at his sister where she sat on her bed. "We didn't dream all of this, did we?" he said.

His sister raised her hand high and what looked like a wave of light came out of it. Karl raised his and caught the wave, and for a moment both children began to glow with a light that came out of each of them. After a few seconds, the light faded and then disappeared.

"No," said Melanie. "We did not dream it."





Melanie and Karl's Enchanted Adventure

All Maltese and Gozitan schools have closed down because of a pandemic caused by a cruel virus that has infected all countries in the world. Melanie and Karl, too, have ended up at home with their parents, not knowing what to do with their time, although Melanie really likes to read.

She recounts to her brother the story she is reading... about a girl called Katie who buys an old book which, however, has no printing in it. But the book sings to her and takes her to a place away from our world.

Then, suddenly, Katie and the old book visit Melanie. And that is where a story full of fantasy starts, in which the children face dangers and fantastic adventures.

And they learn something about themselves that they definitely had never known before.

A book written by author and illustrator Ġorġ Mallia specifically to be given away free as an e-book gift to all Maltese and Gozitan children who are home because of the school closures.

Apart from being a writer, illustrator and cartoonist, Professor Ġorġ Mallia is the Head of the Department of Media and Communications in the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences at the University of Malta.

His children's books include the series about *Pullu* (Klabb Kotba Maltin), *Il-Professur Ġhasfur* (Merlin), and *Sigurd and the Tree of Life* (Horizons). He has just published a collection of poetry (*My love had eyes of blue and dreams*) and in March he had a solo exhibition of digital paintings, that he called visual poems, (*Rhapsody-in-Pain*) at 111 Art Gallery.



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