

WEIRD CREATURES CLUB – book 1:

THE SECRET SANCTUARY

by Giorgos Panagiotakis

Twelve-year-old Marco Haloran lives with his father in a densely populated neighborhood of a large city. He is lonely and often wrangles with other children. The biggest problem in his life is the dolphin fin that is stuck on his back. He is forced to keep it hidden, folding it underneath his clothes, a fact that causes him great physical pain. At the same time, he endures great fear of the sea, perhaps because the sea swept away his mother, Liberty Jones. One day, Marco is called into the Principal's office of his school, where a mysterious visitor is awaiting him.

A few hours later, in another school within the same city, a girl named Alila Obi enters the Principal's office. There is a peculiar man (Darius Megabazus) who informs her that she has been accepted at a special school. The Principal tries in every way to convince her to leave. Quickly we come to understand the reason. Whenever Alila cries, tremors follow in her wake around her. And she cries often, for example, when she thinks about her parents and her brother who were all killed earlier in a war somewhere in Africa. Also, when thinking about her wretched life with her guardians or remembering her beloved stuffed teddy bear that her guardians trashed years ago by way of punishing her. In light of the sobbing and the tremors, Alila agrees to change schools.

Marco has also accepted Darius' related proposal. And so, on the agreed-upon day and time, he boards the school bus which has arrived to pick him up. His initial good mood vanishes quickly. The driver (Tatiana) and the school bus attendant (Felix) are rude and obnoxious, while the sole co-passenger is Alila. With every one of Alila's sobs, the vehicle sways precariously. They pass through yet another neighborhood to pick up a third child, who, as it turns out, never shows up.

The journey is long and tedious, and Tatiana and Felix's behavior continues to worsen. The school bus travels up and down mountain roads, and eventually arrives at a dirt road that runs through the forest and arrives at a military outpost. Tatiana bribes the guard not to check the students' papers. Then – while flying above them is a gigantic black and white eagle – they arrive at a small village in a clearing. There, Tatiana makes a stop in order to fetch food and water.

Then, as seen from the car's window, a blonde girl appears, carrying a message: Marco and Alila are at the wrong school and are at risk. As we learn later, the girl, Louisa Petra, is the third child, who was to have been picked up by Tatiana and Felix. Because her mother had signed her up for too many activities, she acquired the ability to display an *alter ego*. Marco

and Alila follow this *alter ego* into the woods and find Darius Megabazus waiting with considerable anxiety outside of another school bus. The driver of the vehicle is Jason, who has three arms and three legs.

Chased by Felix, they come to a huge hollow rock that serves as the school's parking lot. They continue on their way, atop some strange animals, donkey and goat hybrids, to a steep ravine. The eagle is still flying above them, appearing to be on a spying mission. Eventually, they reach a secluded coast where the school, hugging a vertical cliff, is located. There they initially meet Homer Swift, a decrepit and regressive librarian who looks like a small child. He gives them an initial update in a manner that reminds one of "shadow theater."

We learn that the school was founded by fraternal twins, Medea Krakatoa and Magnus Manifico, who had horrible weird characteristics. Their purpose was to help such similar children become educated and to be able to stand on their own two feet. As the years went by, Manifico became ambitious and power-hungry. He wanted to impose military discipline and to transform students into feckless pawns, so that he himself might amass unlimited power and authority. Krakatoa, by contrast, stayed true to her liberal pedagogical perceptions. The twins clashed violently and eventually Manifico left with the most teachers, founding his own school on the other side of the bay. Tatiana and Felix work for him.

After Swift's update, children get a first taste of the school and get acquainted with their classmates. One boy, Harry, appears to not have any unusual characteristics, and he maintains that he is at the school by mistake. Arising between him and Alila is a moment of mutual emotion, to which both of them embarrassedly admit. We come to know better the remaining first-grade children, as well as the afflicted teachers, through a school project initiated by Louiza Petra. The only person who remains invisible is Medea Krakatoa herself, about whom there is a rumor that she is a ghost.

As the days pass, the newcomers become increasingly familiar with their new environment. Marco's back doesn't bother him anymore, since Darius has altered Marco's clothes to allow for the dolphin fin. He's still fearful of the sea, but he enjoys looking at, and listening to, the waves from afar. Gradually thanks to various unusual school lessons, he feels increasingly able to stand on his own two feet.

Alila discovers that she doesn't cry very easily anymore. Not even when staring at the photo of her family or when she thinks of her lost teddy bear. She's starting to miss the strength she originally had that stemmed from her freakish affliction. One morning, under a blanket of very thick fog, Alila disappears without leaving the slightest trace. A major distraction erupts. Teachers search everywhere, without result. Various rumors begin to circulate. One was that a long time ago, under similar weather conditions, a boy named Ben had disappeared. In order to protect the children of the class, the teachers arrange for them to sleep in the school library. Medea Krakatoa, as it turns out, is incorporeal (without any physical form), but visits them there. She tries to allay their fears

while not hiding her belief that Alila has gone voluntarily. Harry doesn't embrace this theory, and believes that Manifico's people kidnapped her.

During the night, Marco wakes up and sees in front of him a gigantic and very wild fluffy bear. It's Harry – this ultimately was his affliction. And he has decided to run away to find his beloved. Marco fails to dissuade him and eventually the two of them arrive at dawn at Manifico's school. On their way they encounter many birds, something rather strange for that season.

Harry returns to his normal state. He admits that his idea was not a good one and they decide to return. But it's too late. Felix sees them, captures them and takes them to Magnus Manifico, who, like his sister, is incorporeal. He tells them that Alila is not there. He will admit that he wanted her to be, because he saw in her a huge force. But now, after Alila's having formally enrolled in his sister's school, it is impossible to take her by force. He also wanted Marco, since it had been years since he had acquired a sea creature. The last person, a girl named Liberty Jones (Marco's mother), ran away because she wanted to have a family and live like an ordinary person. But she couldn't bear it, and now she can be found somewhere on the high seas, having surrendered to nature, and having forgotten that she once had a son.

The information upsets Marco. It brings out anger and unhappiness in him, and for the first time in years, he sheds tears. A short while before Darius and Jason arrive with a boat to pick up the children, Manifico drops an innuendo regarding the flock of birds. On the trip, Harry discusses with Darius the various rumors that are circulating. Darius talks about Ben, an old pupil who had been exhibiting delinquent behavior. He was styled as Lord of the Birds because he could hypnotize and overpower birds. After he passed successively from the two schools, Ben left one day from his dormitory window with the help of his winged associates. He engaged in numerous illegalities, and eventually wound up at the Montecristo foundation, a secret prison for freakish creatures.

Marco isn't listening to the conversation. He has surrendered to the feeling of the sea that is so close to him. Before realizing it, he allows himself to dive. He immediately grasps how his body changes and adapts to water. Moreover, he is able to communicate with the creatures of the deep. But gradually his mind becomes confused, and he stops thinking like a human being

Following a dolphin, he arrives at the rear side of Micro Baron, an uninhabited island. Thousands of birds circle around a rusty old ship that is tied to the rocks. There's the black and white eagle, who turns out, like a 2nd officer and spy, to be serving Ben. The latter fervently hates his former professors. To punish them, he sent several thousands of his winged associates to bring Alila here. He keeps her imprisoned in the hold inside a gigantic nest created by the birds. Her crying causes vibrations in the ship's hull, but are not felt on land.

Marco hears her screams and tries to set her free. Ben arrives and with the help of the birds encloses Marco inside a nest-cage. Ben reveals his intentions: he'll ask for ransom in order to upgrade his ship. Then he will head for a deserted island in the South Pacific, where he'll establish a bird empire that will terrorize people. He will not liberate the two children, since they already know too much. Instead, he'll feed them to his carnivorous birds.

As Ben prepares a letter to the teachers, Harry appears in the hold in the form of a giant bear. He drives out the birds, repels Ben and frees the children from the nest. He informs Marco in a low voice that the dolphin led them there and makes him swear not to reveal his identity to Alila. When Alila is freed, she's dumbfounded. Disregarding size, her liberator is identical with the stuffed teddy bear of her childhood years. She feels that this was Harry and falls into his arms. The boy regains his human state, but this romantic scene is interrupted by Ben's croaking, who calls the birds to return. They arrive by the thousands in the hold and attack the three children. But by that time, Darius and Jason had arrived. Darius reveals his oddity (exhaling flames) permanently causing the birds to take flight. Jason immobilizes Ben. Then they call for reinforcements on the ship's wireless.

On the way back to school, Marco asks to swim. Once in the water he meets up again with the dolphin, who gives him information about his mother. The dolphin meets her several times far out at sea. Sometimes she remembers her son and asks about his fate. Marco expresses his anger towards her with horrific screams.

Arriving at the school's port, everybody rushes out to welcome them and to embrace them. Krakatoa thanks them and apologizes for not having listened to them. She reacts magnanimously towards Ben and promises to do her best in order to avoid Ben's returning to Montecristo prison. Marco escapes from his friends and dives once again into the sea. He finds the dolphin and asks it to relay to his mother, should it see her, that he is well.

As winter approaches, the Secret Sanctuary returns to its normal weird rhythms.

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