



Anja Fislage / Verena Wugeditsch

The Polidoris

...and the Pact with the Darkness · Vol. 1

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Chapter 1

The Tower Room

Petronella Polidori was annoyed at the excited tingle that was running up and down her spine. No, she wasn't going to like the house! At best, she was going to ignore it. She'd made a firm decision about that. But now these goosepimples were ruining her plans. How very inconvenient! And just a moment ago, she'd been filled with anger, sadness and exhaustion. "Do you really think someone lives here?" Roberta called out with a laugh. It was supposed to sound scornful, but Petronella knew her big sister well enough to notice the quiver of joy in her voice. "It's one of *those* houses. Totally typical! You know what I mean. I bet there's a skeleton lying in a bathtub somewhere. Just wait and see!"

Petronella looked up at the crumbling walls. Wild vines were growing over half the facade, and had already engulfed several windows. What might be hidden behind them? Everything about this house seemed to be telling her: Stay away from me! I'm dangerous! The thought gave Petronella a kind of... anticipation. Very confusing.

"Abandoned in the wastes of East Frisia – by the scouts!" Roberta cried enthusiastically. "If that isn't the start of a totally hair-raising story, I don't know what is!" She adjusted her feathered hat and strode cheerily onwards. [...] She was going through a posh-old-lady phase. The numerous hats were part of it. [...]

"My feet and my back hurt. The sun's burning my skin," Pellegrino announced – in the tone of a scientist summarising the results of his research. "I'm also suffering from terrible hunger, and... Oh! What do we have here?" Overcome by a sudden eagerness, he dropped his hat box, suitcase and rucksack in the dust and hurried over to the weather-beaten fence, to examine it thoroughly with his little magnifying glass. "*Physeter macrocephalus!* No doubt about it."

Petronella sighed, but only inwardly. Pellegrino's love of science and Latin terms was always a bit inappropriate, but especially here and now, she thought. She liked animals herself, but mainly living ones (having a pet had always been her greatest wish, or at least her second greatest), while Pellegrino was more interested in their component parts and what they were called.

Anyone who builds a fence of animal bones around his house can't be a very nice person, she thought – a feeble attempt to combat her inappropriate excitement.

[...]

Since the morning, her mind had been occupied by this one sentence, which had whipped up a fierce storm in her head and was now bouncing around in there like an echo: ... *We regret to inform you that the Snowstorm has sent no further signals for the past seven days, and search efforts have so far been fruitless...*

The sentence came from a letter from the Society for Deep Sea Research, which the surly leader of the Little Ibexes camp had read aloud to them that morning in an expressionless voice. After that, he had personally taken the siblings to the station, given them the Little Ibexes secret handshake with a mournful look on his face, and disappeared, relieved to get away.

It had been an abrupt end to their stay at the Alpine scout camp, where they were spending the summer holidays while their parents were off on a research expedition in the southern Atlantic. This wasn't actually all that unusual, because the two of them were deep sea researchers. Although until this point, they had been the sort of researchers who preferred sitting at their desks to going on dives. At least, their father certainly did, while their mother kept urging him to go on a proper expedition at long last. This time, she'd got her way. And now the thing their father had always feared had actually happened: Dr Oscar and Dr Stella Polidori had vanished in the Atlantic.

Yes. Maybe this wasn't just the end of their summer holidays, but the end of the life they had known up to now. At this thought, Petronella felt hot tears burning behind her eyelids. She threw her head back and looked up at the little turret on the dilapidated roof. The turret window seemed to stare back defiantly. Strangely, the sight made her forget her tears. After the ten-hour train journey north [...] the sun was now low in the sky, and she was casting a long shadow on the path of broken seashells. It led up to an imposing front door made of ebony and brass.

Roberta rang the bell and nodded first at Petronella, then at Pellegrino. That probably meant: *Pull yourselves together, you peanuts* (one of Roberta's favourite words), and Petronella realised once again that she really wasn't scared. No: she still felt that unfortunate tingling up and down her spine.

A very loud, majestic bell rang out. Only a second later, the heavy door was flung open and a posh old lady – a real one, unlike Roberta – was standing before them in a gold dressing gown.

[...] Despite the white and gold walking stick Grandmother was leaning on – or perhaps because of it – she was particularly elegant in a strange, old-fashioned way. Her eyes were barely visible behind her large, tinted glasses. Her mouth looked severe, but then it twisted into a very broad grin, her teeth gleaming between her pink, shimmering lips like perfect rows of pearls.

[...]

“PERNELL!” Grandmother roared, without taking her eyes off the three of them, and for a moment Petronella thought they were being greeted in a foreign language. But Grandmother was calling Grandfather, who was still somewhere in the depths of the house. “Come and see, the little birds are here!”

[...]

Grandfather's head appeared out of the darkness; he stood very straight and tall beside Grandmother, laid a hand on her shoulder and cleared his throat. “My grandchildren. You're just in time for tea.” His voice was deep and calm. “Enter in.”

“It's *come* in, Pernell,” Grandmother corrected him. “Or just *enter*. But not enter in. That's bad German, do you hear?”

[...] She spread her arms and boomed: “Welcome! Here we are then. Hurrah! The Polidoris are united.”

Not quite, thought Petronella, but she didn’t say anything.

“This is all totally weird,” Roberta whispered to her, beaming like the sun.

Petronella sighed, but only very quietly. “Totally weird” was fairly standard for her family – and her grandparents didn’t seem to be an exception here.

She saw her grandparents exchange a meaningful glance as they were all swallowed up by the cool darkness of the entrance hall. It smelled of damp wood, dust, lilies and something unknown, and scarcely had the front door closed behind them when Petronella could no longer imagine it was twenty-eight degrees outside.

[...]

The house with its wonky walls might have looked gloomy and dismal from outside, but its inner life was a riot of colour and chaos! It was filled from top to bottom with all kinds of curious things. The dead eyes of a stuffed crane stared out at them from a glass cabinet. Beside a colourful collection of snail shells sat ships in bottles of several sizes, and round jars of preserved sea creatures. *Oh, great*, thought Petronella, ignoring her leaping heart. *Someone seems to share your fondness for dead animals, Pelle.*

[...]

Petronella felt even smaller than usual surrounded by these high walls, and the long corridors with their countless closed doors. This house had at least a hundred of them, or so it seemed to her.

“Alright my little birds, first we’ll show you to your rooms.”

Petronella’s heart leapt again. Another unfulfilled wish: a room of her own! [...]

“Pernell will show you the rooms. We’ve put you in the tower room, my little bird.”

Roberta and Pellegrino were also Grandmother’s little birds, who were to have their own rooms, though Roberta folded her arms and announced that she wasn’t anyone’s little bird and if she was getting a room, then she would choose one herself, yes she would, after a thorough inspection, because a room was an important source of inspiration for a writer, and no grandmother who she had never seen before in her life should think she could just stick her in any old room. What if it prevented her breakthrough? Despite all this, she was given the mother-of-pearl pink room.

The words *tower room* had a magical effect on Petronella. She wasn’t getting just any room; she was getting the *tower room*! Her heart pounding, she followed her grandfather up a winding stone staircase and stopped in the doorway, speechless. The room was round. Grandfather loped across the floor and opened one of the five windows, all of which had a view of the blue-green sea. At once, seagulls’ cries wafted in on a salty breeze.

“Oh,” murmured Petronella. She looked around, feeling overwhelmed. To her, the room seemed gigantic. Scientific drawings of fish and birds she had never seen before hung on the ocean-blue walls, along with an old map of the world. But her eyes were drawn to the mighty desk that stood in the middle of the room. This desk had a lockable drawer! She could hardly believe her luck. [...]

Grandfather cleared his throat and whispered in a conspiratorial tone: “If you don’t like it, then maybe... although your grandmother doesn’t really appreciate it when her decisions are, how should I put it...”

“No!” Petronella blurted out, interrupting him, and then added in a soft voice: “I like it.”

Grandfather smiled at her. He reminded her of a heron, standing there very upright and thin, dressed in dark clothes, with his grey-black hair combed carefully back from his forehead. She liked him, she realised.

“This was once your father’s room, you know.”

That gave Petronella a warm feeling. She tried to imagine Dr Oscar as a child, sitting at the desk here in his room and dreaming of one day becoming a famous deep-sea researcher. It was impossible.

Which was partly because Dr Oscar had never told her very much about his childhood. If the subject was conches or pipefish, he could give hours-long lectures. But he almost never said a word about himself. Not for the first time, she felt annoyed about that.

“So what was Dr Oscar like back then? As a child, I mean,” Petronella asked.

“Hmm?” Grandfather seemed to be climbing back out from the depths of his thoughts; his eyes were fixed on the world map on the wall. “What was that?”

“I was asking what Dr Oscar – Papa – was like! As a child!”

She had got used to calling her parents Dr Oscar and Dr Stella, rather than saying Mum and Dad like most children do. But Grandfather couldn’t have known that. What *did* Grandfather know about them?

“Oh, Oscar. Well, you know.”

“No, I don’t! That’s why I’m asking, Grandfather.”

Then a cry came from downstairs at a deafening volume: “It’s time, my little birds!”

“Aaah, tea’s ready,” Grandfather said eagerly, seeming almost relieved at not having to tell her anything else about his son. Clearly Dr Oscar wasn’t the only one who didn’t like talking about himself.

“I’d prefer a Coke,” said Roberta.

Petronella, Roberta and Pellegrino, squeezed tightly together, were perching on the coral pink sofa, while their grandparents were enthroned in their armchairs. The wallpaper in this room was patterned in green, blue and gold. It must have looked very elegant at one time, but now it was peeling in several places. Large windows looked out onto the overgrown garden.

“Poppycock,” went Grandmother, dropping three pieces of rock sugar into each of the mother-of-pearl pink porcelain cups with a tinkling sound, and then pouring the black tea in an exaggeratedly long stream. “It’s five o’clock, and five o’clock is tea time. And now please take off that monstrosity of a hat, Roberta!”

Grandfather passed the little jug of cream around.

“Stop!” he cried, as Petronella picked up her spoon. “No stirring!”

Petronella froze on the edge of the sofa and watched her grandparents pouring cream into their tea with great care.

“Look at that, Gloria, what a lovely little cloud you have there.”

“Yes, Pernell, our little clouds really are especially pretty today.”

Roberta looked at Petronella, grinned and made windscreen-wiper gestures with her hand. [...]

“My little birds,” Grandmother began, without looking up from her tea. She gazed into her cup for so long that Petronella wondered whether she had got stuck like that. But then Grandmother raised her eyes and looked into the unlit fire in the fireplace.

“Even if the reason for it is a serious one, Pernell and I are extraordinarily glad to have you with us at long last. [...] Family is the most important thing in life. We would like to show you what it means to be a member of the Polidori family. You are at home now.”

Pellegrino put his hand up like he was at school.

“Wait, please, my little bird,” Grandmother said. She took a sip of tea, bringing the delicate porcelain to her mouth and setting it down again as if in slow motion before going on: “We Polidoris are the sort of people, who – alright, what is it? It’s impossible to have a conversation like this,” she snapped at Pellegrino, who had started clicking his fingers in the air.

“Question,” said Pellegrino. “The old woman in my room – is she part of the family, too?” Grandmother, who was just tinkling some rock sugar into her cup, paused and gave Grandfather a long look. It was probably supposed to seem casual, but if there was one thing Grandmother was bad at, it was being inconspicuous – that much Petronella had already realised. Grandmother straightened her spine and turned back to her tea ceremony. “My little bird, there are no old women in this house.” She gave a fake laugh.

“It isn’t a real old woman. I don’t think she’s a member of the *homo sapiens* species.” Pellegrino pushed his glasses back up his nose with a forefinger. They were always slipping down because the thick lenses made them so heavy. “Please don’t get me wrong. It’s probably not a *homunculus*, either. Don’t hold me to it, but my first instinct is to say: an optical hallucination. Though she did also say something, which would make it acoustic as w-”

“Am I very much mistaken,” Grandfather interrupted him in his deep bass voice, “or does the boy have a varied imagination?”

“It’s *vivid imagination*, Pernell. And yes, I rather think he does.”

“Oh no,” Pellegrino objected. “I have almost no imagination at all.”

“Absolutely,” Roberta nodded. “I’m the one with the imagination.”

Petronella tried to catch Pellegrino’s eye. It was true – he was extremely well-read when it came to science, but it was pretty much impossible that he’d made up this obviously very peculiar encounter in his room.

Honestly, Nelli, I did see her, his eyes told her. There it was again, that tingling.

I believe you, Pelle, Petronella answered in the same way.

“Now, where was I?” Grandmother pressed her thumb and forefinger against the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes, before making an inviting gesture and raising her index finger.

“The Polidori family –”

“What we’re trying to say,” Grandfather butted in, [...] “is that we’re here for you at this difficult time.”

“Is there any news of the ship?” Roberta asked. [...] She was kneading her ladies’ hat between her fingers, and it had already lost a few of its feathers. Petronella was almost surprised to see a shimmer in Roberta’s eyes. Of course, when it came down to it, she was no more than a fourteen-year-old girl who was scared for her parents. (That was difficult for Petronella to believe, though, because to her knowledge, her big sister had never yet been frightened of anything.)

“I’m sorry, my dears,” Grandfather said, “Still no sign of life from the Snowstorm.”

“It’s as if the Atlantic has swallowed her up,” Grandmother cried in a dramatic, choked voice, at which Grandfather laid a calming hand on hers.

“Does that mean... their ship has sunk?” Roberta asked.

Don’t cry! Don’t cry! thought Petronella.

Grandfather smiled regretfully. “We don’t know anything yet. It’s hard, but we have to wait. But we will do everything we can to make this difficult time easier for you. Isn’t that right, Gloria?”

“Question,” Pellegrino interrupted, and only Petronella noticed that his bottom lip was quivering a little as he hastily went on. “Purely hypothetically: how great is the probability

that our parents' ship has sunk, but has landed, for instance, on the back of a *Physeter macrocephalus*, which has then carried them to the nearest bit of dry land? In percentage terms? Five? Or ten?" As he spoke, his voice swelled, and the final sentence emerged as a shout: "I mean, sperm whales are comparatively intelligent animals!" "Pelle, don't talk nonsense," Roberta said drily. Just then, a shrill cry ripped through the air.

Chapter 2

The lockable desk drawer

All heads whipped round to face Grandmother, who was suddenly standing in the middle of the room with a long object in her hand. Petronella had seen something like it once before, in a drawing in a book... What was it called again? Luckily, Grandmother wasn't pointing the arrow-shaped end at the other Polidoris, but towards the window.

"Mmmhhoohoo," she panted, before disappearing from the room with the fireplace, surprisingly nimble despite the weapon and the walking stick.

"My love, please put the harpoon down!" Grandfather said, hurrying after her.

A harpoon! Petronella thought in horror. That's what you use to kill whales!

The children followed their grandparents down the hallway into a library, where shelves several metres high were filled with dusty old books. On the floor was an unusual rug decorated with a map of the world.

Grandmother was standing on Greenland, one long arm outstretched, aiming into the garden. "Don't come any closer!" she whispered to the others. "They're back!"

As Petronella's eyes followed the direction the arrow tip was pointing, she saw who "they" were. A large, open double door led out into the cursed garden. Along with the distant sound of waves, the salty evening air carried a collection of non-human noises into the room – a great rustling and mumbling.

"Wow," she whispered, in a daze.

They were standing at the foot of a moss-covered flight of stone steps: animals. Petronella could hardly believe her eyes – in her life in the city, she had never seen such obviously wild animals so close up that she could inhale the scent of their fur. She saw a deer, several rabbits, two foxes and... were those snails, there in the grass? The air was filled with the buzzing and humming of various insects, and in the branches of a majestic lime tree she spotted a flock of black birds. For the blink of an eye, the Polidoris – with Grandmother and her harpoon at their head – and the horde of animals stood facing one another, unmoving.

"But Grandmother, why do you want to kill these sweet animals? They're not doing anything to us!" Petronella said, breaking the spell. She felt a wave of outrage surging through her.

"Ha! You're the only one who believes that, my little bird," Grandmother snorted, without lowering the harpoon. "I won't allow this wilderness to gain the upper hand and wreck our house as well. Not as long as I live!"

At the sound of her voice there came a crowing from the lime tree, and the flock of black birds rose into the evening sky with a polyphonic "Caw! Caw!"

This seemed to be the sign for the whole horde of animals to run away. As Petronella rushed outside to watch them go, a bird circled over the garden one last time. Petronella had the feeling it was looking her right in the eye and... recognising her. A shudder ran down her spine.

[...]