

A New Home for the Wild Oof

By Michael Petrowitz

Chapter One: The Letter

“Not long now and I’ll finally have found the Oof! I’m *this* close. I can feel it in my big toe,” Professor Dr Dr Othenio Snaida said to Churchill and struck a victory pose. Churchill was in no position to reply. He had been dead for millions of years. Churchill, the professor’s only friend, was an amber-encased mosquito.

“Soon I will prove to the entire world that this unknown living fossil exists! Then everyone will admire me and nobody will be able to call me a crackpot ever again! I will find this Oof and it will belong to me, and me alone. And then I will be rich and famous!” Professor Snaida exclaimed, displaying a diabolical grin.

The professor’s construction trailer stood in an abandoned quarry and served as both living space and research lab. Here, fossilised crustaceans, snails and dinosaur bones that were millions of years old sat next to bottles filled with corrosive acids and colourful chemicals. It was the typical workspace of a cryptozoologist – a scientist who searches for as yet undiscovered creatures like the Yeti or the Loch Ness Monster.

Professor Snaida was British, but he had travelled half the world on the Oof’s trail until he had finally ended up in this quarry in Germany. Here, he was convinced, he would find the Oof very soon indeed.

The professor tied his thin hair into a ponytail and looked at the clock. “*Five o’clock! Tea time, my dear Churchill!*”

The professor opened the valve of a gas bottle, ignited a Bunsen burner and began to heat water in an Erlenmeyer flask. When the water started to boil, he dropped a handful of nettle leaves into it and let them steep for five minutes. Like every

afternoon, he slurped the green brew directly from the Erlenmeyer flask, accompanied by a raw onion.

“*Don’t worry*, Churchill, my friend,” he said as he ate noisily. “Soon, the cheque from the foundation will arrive. Then I will buy a new jackhammer and we can continue to dig.” The professor rinsed with a sip of nettle brew. “And then we will finally have black tea and bacon and beans again, too. I’m sick and tired of eating onions.”

A yellow car drove up to the quarry gate and honked. TOOOT, TOOOOOOOT, TOOT, TOOT, TOOT, TOOOOOOOT!!!

The professor looked out the window. “Finally! Talk about the devil ... – the mail!” He did a little happy dance.

The postwoman honked again and got out of the car.

“Express letter for Professor Snaida!” she called across the fence.

Professor Snaida bolted from his construction trailer and hurried excitedly towards her.

“You’re an angel, *my darling!*” he said, ripping the envelope from the postwoman’s hand. With shaking hands, he opened the letter and skimmed its contents:

Dear Prof Dr Dr Othenio Snaida,

we regret to inform you that we are no longer able to support your research project.

Due to a lack of progress in your work, we are forced to cease our payments, effective immediately.

However, should you be able to present proof for the existence of a previously unknown living fossil – an Oof, as you call it – within the next five days, you will receive a new cheque. Please note that we will verify your results in person and on location.

Yours faithfully

Horatio von Clausewitz

Chair of the Funding Assessment Committee for Cryptozoological Research Projects

PS: Your esteemed colleague Prof Dr Dr Dr Julius McDenver from New York has applied to take over your research funding.

No cheque?! No money?! No fame?! The professor turned white as a sheet.

“In ancient Rome, they would have summarily thrown you to the lions for a letter like that!” he yelled at the flummoxed postwoman. “Get out of my sight, and fast, you purulent lump, you!”

Furious, he fled back into his construction trailer. He had work to do. Professor Snaida only had five days left to prove the existence of the Oof. And nothing and nobody was going to stop him from doing that. He was sure of that.

Chapter Two: Crash in the Quarry

“Not so high!” Simon shouted. Lio Peppel was madly pushing buttons on the remote control, trying to land the helicopter.

Lio and his friend Simon, along with Joni and his gang, stood in a small clearing in the forest, surrounded by tall firs. By rights the ideal location to fly the Air-Spider 325. Hardly any wind, no people and enough space to fly a few audacious loop-the-loops.

“How am I supposed to control that thing if you keep interrupting me?” Lio shouted back. He stared fiercely at the helicopter, which was normally the size of a shoebox. Now it hung far away in the sky and looked more like a cough drop.

“Ha, ha,” Joni taunted him, pulling a few strands of his wildly styled hair onto his forehead. “Are those the awesome loop-the-loops you were going to fly, Lio?”

The other boys in Joni’s gang laughed.

“I doubt Peppel can still make out anything,” one of the boys called. “Maybe you should clean your glasses, four eyes!”

Everyone laughed again. Even Simon couldn’t suppress a little smile.

Lio was only half listening. The radio link had obviously been completely lost now and he had lost control of the Air-Spider for good. A gust of wind seized the helicopter, whirled it through the air across the forest of firs and, just like that, ... it had disappeared behind the treetops.

“Crap!” Lio cursed.

“Looks like it’s skedaddled,” Simon commented drily.

“On the plus side, at least it almost looked like a loop-the-loop,” Joni jeered.

Amused, the other boys laughed and applauded.

Lio felt sick. “We *have* to find it. The Air-Spider is my birthday present!”

“But isn’t your birthday two weeks away?” Simon said surprised.

“That’s the problem! I found the helicopter in my parents’ bedroom closet and ...”

“You secretly took it? Whoa!”

Lio nodded, downcast.

“If he’s lucky, the ‘copter will be hanging in a tree somewhere,” Joni said to his boys.

“And if he’s unlucky?” one of them asked.

Joni gave a mean laugh. “It’ll be in the quarry.”

The quarry was located directly behind the forest. Access was strictly forbidden. A tall fence and numerous warning signs were intended to keep adventurous intruders away from this dangerous place.

Lio and Simon had searched every single tree and bush in the vicinity. No trace of the helicopter.

Eventually, the two crash pilots stood at the fence along with Joni and his gang and looked down into the pit. Far below in the quarry, they spotted the tail rotor, which appeared to have broken off when the helicopter crashed.

“I guess that’s it, Peppel. It’s gone.” Joni shrugged. “Come on, guys, show’s over.”

“Nothing’s over!” Lio exclaimed and started to climb over the fence.

“Lio, are you nuts?!” Simon was speechless. “Come back right now! Don’t you know how dangerous the quarry is?! This could be FATAL! Once, a child died here in a rock fall!”

Lio knew that story. Everyone in the area knew that story. Lio's parents had told him that story at least one thousand three hundred and twenty-four million times. And of course he knew that it was strictly forbidden to even approach the quarry. But there was no way he was going to leave the helicopter down there.

Lio had quickly scaled the fence and was slowly climbing down into the quarry.

“Be careful and hold on to something!” Simon called out to him.

“No worries!” Lio called back. “I'm sticking to the three-point rule: Keep at least three limbs in contact with the rockface at all times. I'll be fiiiiii... AAAAAAAAAAHHHH!” The rock ledge under Lio's fingers had come loose. Lio lost his balance, hurtled down into the quarry and ended up lying motionless on the floor of the pit, enveloped in a thick cloud of dust.

Above him at the fence, Simon, Joni and the others stood and looked down into the quarry in horror. They could no longer see Lio.

“Lio!? LIO!? LIIIIIOOOOOOHHH!?” Simon screamed.

But there was no reply.

Chapter three: An exceptional discovery

Lio was slow to regain consciousness. He was lying in a heap of rubble. Dazed, he got to his feet and checked his arms and legs. He had been lucky! Only a few scrapes, and torn pants. He dusted off his clothes and looked around.

Next to him lay the broken-off tail rotor of the helicopter. Lio was reaching for it when his gaze suddenly fell on a blue bundle of fur.

Huh? What was that? He cautiously tapped the blue bundle with his toe. It rolled to its side and a strange creature emerged.

Lio first recognised two legs, then two arms and a head that – plop! plop! – suddenly stared at him from two huge eyes.

“Aaaahhh!” Lio screamed and jumped backwards.

“Aaaahhh!” the hairy creature screamed. It reached for a rock and said threateningly: “Don’t even try to eat Oof! Or this rock will land between your gogglyeyes, got it?”

Lio was convinced he was dreaming. Had the creature just spoken to him? The fall must have done more damage than he’d thought. Lio squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, the strange creature was still staring at him warily. It had blue, fluffy fur, long arms with just three fingers on each hand, and naked bird’s feet with rough bristles and dark claws. It actually looked quite cute. Well, apart from those feet maybe.

Cautiously, Lio took a step towards the creature.

The hairy little guy took aim and hurled the rock towards him. The stone sailed past Lio at quite some distance. Embarrassed, the fur ball squinted at its presumed attacker. In order to gloss over its atrocious throw, it grumbled: “Stay where you are! That was only a warning throw! Don’t get too close to Oof!”

Lio hesitated. “Um, hello? Can you understand me?” he asked and took another step closer.

“Oof understands you just fine. *You*, on the other hand, seem to have moss in your ears. Stop breathing down Oof’s neck like that, got it?!” The creature threw yet another stone at Lio, this one missing by a country mile as well.

“Okay, okay, fine! I don’t mean you any harm,” Lio tried to calm it down.

“Yeah, right, that’s what they all say. And then – hey presto! – they gobble us up with hide and hair.”

“Well, I’m definitely not going to eat you. I’m Lio, by the way. And you are?”

“What’s it to you?”

Lio gave a shrug. “I bet you don’t even have a name, am I right?” he asked slyly.

“Ha, of course Oof has a name,” the creature boasted. “The most beautiful name in the world, as a matter of fact! Oof’s name is Oof!”

“Oof?” Lio marvelled. “I’ve never heard of an Oof before.”

“You haven’t?” Oof was scandalised. “Then I’d say it’s about time!”

“How come you speak our language?” Lio asked and wondered whether he might not be concussed from his fall off the rock face after all.

“Oof could ask you the same thing. How come you speak *Oof’s* language, huh?” Oof grumbled back and went up on tiptoes in order to appear taller. He still barely reached above Lio’s knees.

Lio couldn’t help but smile. The little guy was a pretty big talker.

“Where are you from? Did you escape from the circus or something?”

“Circus? I don’t even know what that is supposed to be! Oof is from around here.”

Oof proudly spread his arms and looked around. He only seemed to realise now that they were standing in the middle of a quarry. “The area has changed quite a bit, hey. Oof was only going to have a little nap in the Oof Cave,” he said, stretching.

“A cave? There are no caves here. There’s only debris and fossilised crustaceans and snails and stuff like that,” Lio explained.

Oof looked up. He seemed to be looking for something. “Ah, there!” Oof exclaimed excitedly and pointed to the rock face Lio had fallen from.

“Wowdiboom! That’s where Oof’s cave WAS!”

About halfway up, a small cavity was visible in the middle of the rock face. It looked like Lio had destroyed Oof’s cave when he fell and dragged Oof down with him.

Lio was struck by a thought. Normally, fossils were excavated here in the quarry. Ancient, fossilised remnants in the rock strata – crustaceans, snails and insects that had been dead for millions of years. How on Earth could Oof have a cave ...?

“How long were you in this cave for?” Lio asked.

“How long? No idea. I was taking a little nap, like I said,” Oof replied, trying his hardest to remember.

“Hey, what are you doing here?!” a croaky voice suddenly rang out behind them.

Startled, Lio whirled around. A man was angrily stalking towards them. It was Professor Snaida, his long, thin legs making him look like a stork in a salad.

At the sight of the professor, Oof panicked and screamed:

“Attention! Unknown Fangy approaching! All Oofs take cover!” Then he took a leap, jumped into Lio’s backpack and disappeared.