Berenika Goździk

# Osteoderms

The ride was incredibly long, an eternity spent wedged into a leather seat in the back of a BMW. The gravel road was in such bad shape that we were crawling along at turtle speed. Outside, the day promised a perfect sunny afternoon, ideal for basking. Inside, the driver had the AC blasting at full power. I'm not cold-blooded like an actual reptile, but it still made me feel drowsy.

"Turn the AC down or I'm gonna jump out of the car," I murmured, barely audible. I was struggling to stay awake, but I couldn't fall asleep either. I was stuck in that awful limbo where your mind tries to form coherent thoughts and fails miserably.

The driver didn't answer. He hadn't spoken once during the whole trip.

I fumbled for the door handle — it took me a while, but I finally found it.

"Man, this sucks," I said as I unbuckled my seatbelt and opened the door.

The situation had been suspicious from the start. Three random people showed up at my apartment claiming to be part of a private research team hired by some businessman, and apparently they were cave-diving in a lake. I don't remember the details — I zoned out halfway through their explanation. Then they mentioned my brother, said he was in some kind of danger, and that they specifically needed me because of my family's "special ability."

They must have assumed that the moment I heard my idiot brother, I'd sprint to his rescue. Instead, I asked about the pay. They looked genuinely shocked, but they recovered fast and offered me a sum large enough that you take it without asking questions. Naturally, that's when it occurred to me that maybe I was being kidnapped. It wouldn't have been the first time someone tried that with my family, but this would've been the most elaborate attempt yet.

I fell out of the car onto the gravel road. It didn't hurt at all — my body was covered in red scales. That's the ability they were talking about: scales, tail, the whole package. I could pose for the cover of a pseudoscience magazine if I felt like it. Most of the time I look human; I have full control over my appearance. Right now I'd only armored my back and limbs — just enough to break the fall without stretching my clothes.

When my consciousness finally drifted back, my first thought was that I don't actually like the color of my scales. They stand out too much.

What I definitely wasn't thinking about was my brother. I didn't care whether they actually had him or not. If he let himself get captured by losers like these, that was just Darwin's law doing its job.

I stayed lying on the gravel for a moment, letting the sun soak into me. I'd jumped out of the car half-asleep and hit the ground harder than I meant to, so I needed a second to pull myself together. And honestly? The warmth felt amazing after hours of being blasted with arctic AC.

Eventually I lifted my head and noticed the driver had gotten out of the car.

He was red in the face and glaring at me like he wanted to kill me with his eyes alone.

"The camp is a hundred yards away, at the end of the road. I'd say it's impossible to miss, but considering you jumped out of a moving vehicle, you might just be stupid enough to manage it. I quit. I'm done driving people. I always get weirdos like you!" he yelled, slamming the door. Then he turned the car around and headed back the way we came. I didn't bother moving off the road, so he had to maneuver around me, cussing the entire time.

I stayed there a little longer. The ground was warm, the path was clearly abandoned, and for once nobody was yelling at me — so why rush?

II.

I finally made my way down the road to the research station. Since nobody came after me, I figured I'd been wrong; they weren't kidnapping me, just running some shady operation that genuinely needed my help. Unfortunately, that also meant Lars would be there.

My brother is the purest definition of a loser you could imagine, and his only real talent is hiding it. In school he had the best grades, did all the reading, studied constantly — but he didn't enjoy a single subject. It was like when our mother was pregnant, my sister and I absorbed all the personality traits along with the nutrients. Lars was the runt too, half our size.

The only reason he worked so hard was to be better than us at something. He had no friends and never bothered to develop social skills. He wasn't an introvert, I could tell he was painfully lonely: he was just lazy. He never left the house, and it drove me mad. And despite all that, he still had the audacity to criticize me.

I used to bully him a lot, but honestly, he was just so punchable. Then we fell out hard once we became adults. I haven't seen him since I left that house.

I reached the lake, well, it looked more like a hole in the ground someone had filled with water as an afterthought. The longer I stared, the stranger the whole area looked. Something that resembled ruins jutted out of the middle, the shoreline was worn bare as if trampled by constant foot traffic, and yet we were deep in a forest, miles from the nearest town. Not that anyone would willingly swim in that soup of water plants anyway.

The camp sat at the edge of the trees: two tents, maybe twenty people, and a patch of grass beaten down but still clinging to life. The researchers noticed me but pretended they didn't. They made it very clear they had no interest in dealing with me.

I walked to the water's edge. The plants were strange too. At first glance they looked normal, but then I realized I'd never seen anything like them — and I've swum in plenty of rivers and lakes. The leaves were flat, shaped like a cross between pondweed and black locust, and instead of floating on the surface to catch sunlight, they were tangled together in dense mats like green spaghetti. Well, what do I know? I'm just a high-school dropout.

I suddenly remembered that Lars was supposed to be here. I looked around for a skinnier version of myself, but he was nowhere to be seen. Was I disturbed by that? Nah. If Lars was here and saw me, he'd probably go drown himself anyway.

I took a deep breath and yelled,
"AY, BRO! WHERE ARE YOU?"

The whole camp jumped. I'd given half of them a mini heart attack. They started murmuring among themselves, drew lots, and eventually the unlucky loser shuffled toward me.

"You're Mr. Leonardo Tide, right?" he asked.

I put a hand dramatically over my chest, like he'd stabbed me.
"I don't know what makes me cringe more — the 'Mr.' or the 'Leonardo.' I'm Leo, and that's it. And yes, our parents named all of us with the same letter, and yes, they regretted it."

The scientist wasn't much for banter. He rolled his eyes and got straight to the point. "You see those stones in the water? That's the entrance to some kind of channel. Definitely man-made, but it doesn't match any known architecture from this region, colonial or native, and so far we haven't found any records of this structure. Your brother was part of a group of four who went down to investigate. They didn't come back. We on the surface felt the ground shake, so we assume the tunnel collapsed, but we don't know for sure."

"All right, I see. I'm supposed to go down there and rescue those idiots. And you seriously went all this way just to get me to do it? I'm flattered. But I feel like you guys think I'm magic or something. I'm not, okay? I am, however, a very strong swimmer, and I can hold my breath for about an hour!"

The guy stopped listening halfway through and just walked away. Rude.

I didn't know what else to do, so I started stripping down. Most of the researchers kept ignoring me, but one young man looked genuinely alarmed.

"Whoa—what are you doing?!"

I stood up, spread my arms, and lifted my tail so he could see it clearly.

"I'm getting ready for the dive. You just said that's what I'm supposed to do."

"Oh," he said. "Do you want some… equipment?"

“A freaking headlamp would’ve been nice. Preferably waterproof.”

The researcher stared at me for a few seconds, then wandered off.

“Any of you care to join me?” I yelled so the whole camp could hear. They all stared at me with pure disdain. One of them eventually handed me a flashlight.

“You don’t have a headlamp?” I asked. The scientists immediately resumed pretending I didn’t exist.

I sighed, taped the regular flashlight to my head so I could keep my hands free, and ran straight into the lake.

III



Berenika Goździk

The lake itself was pretty shallow; the water didn’t even reach my waist. It reminded me of a busted water pipe, just spilling everywhere with no real depth or purpose. The plants were packed so densely I could barely walk through them.

I finally reached the opening of the channel. It looked like the entrance to some ancient tomb, and the passage itself was anything but narrow. For a moment it felt like I’d stepped straight into an adventure movie. I went in. The moment I started descending, the water grew deep and dark fast. I switched on the flashlight and swam down.

The plants were everywhere, latching onto me like burdock. I couldn’t feel them through my scales, so every few strokes I’d get yanked backward without warning. Then I’d have to stop, peel them off, swim another twelve feet, and get tangled all over again. I kept wishing the plants would just end — and then I realized something.

I was in complete darkness, deep underground. How were the plants down here as lush as the ones on the surface? Don't they need sunlight to live? Whatever. I had more important things to focus on, and I'm no biologist anyway.

I kept swimming, hoping to find a pocket of air, but there was nothing. Then a thought hit me like lightning: it was the first time I realized Lars might actually be dead. I felt cold and hollow. I hated his guts, and he hated me even more, and yet…

The channel had basically turned into a giant vertical shaft. I couldn't see the walls; sometimes I bumped into them — rough natural rock, but otherwise it was just down, down, down. For a long stretch it was nothing but monotonous swimming through endless curtains of plants.

Until I found the first corpse.

Oh no. This better not be Lars.
My heart was racing. I tore at the plants, ripping them away in frantic handfuls, searching for the head. I was struggling to hold my breath, fighting the urge to scream. When I finally uncovered the face, or what was left of it, I saw it wasn't my brother. Half of it was gone, but even in that state I could tell. The guy was wearing a diving suit: it wouldn't make sense for Lars to be wearing one. But he was always weirdly shy of his natural abilities, especially the ones that came with being part reptile. I would've sighed in relief if I hadn't been underwater.

I took one last look at the body before moving on. It was tangled deep in the foliage, half the foam of the suit and the skin beneath eaten away. It looked digested.

I found two more bodies in the same condition, neither of them Lars. I desperately wanted to see him. My eyes were stinging like I was crying, and I was shivering. I had no idea how long I'd been underwater at this point.

Eventually the chasm (at least, I assumed it was a chasm; I still couldn't see anything through the plants) split off into a side passage. I swam into it and finally reached a spot with no vegetation. Shredded pieces of plants floated freely around me, clearly torn apart.

I looked up. The ceiling had a hole in it, and dangling from it was a long, thin tail, so pale it looked white. It was supposed to be bright green.

I yelped. My chest tightened; I couldn't hold my breath anymore. I grabbed the tail and pulled, and to my shock it twitched. I shot upward and found the rest of my brother.

That lucky bastard had managed to find probably the only pocket of air in the entire cave system. He was barely keeping his face above the water, but when I shone my flashlight on him, he jerked his head up.

I wrapped my arms around him and rushed toward the surface. I never thought I'd care if Lars got himself killed — like I said, he's an idiot — but there I was, swimming as fast as I could with that said idiot in my arms.

Once we reached the surface, I think I cried for a good half hour while they examined my brother. They had a doctor and a couple of biologists on site, so I let them take care of Lars there. He wouldn't have been better off in a hospital anyway, since we weren't entirely human. Thankfully, he turned out to be just malnourished, dehydrated, and completely exhausted.

While I waited for my twin to wake up, they had me retrieve the bodies. When Lars finally came to the next day, I yelled at him for quite some time. He would've yelled back if he hadn't been so weak. And when he found out *I* was the one who saved his life, he shut up completely.

I ended up calling my sister and my mother, just to check on them. I couldn't bring myself to tell them what happened to Lars. I wasn't brave enough to call my father. But after those calls, I felt… good. Better than I had in a long time. I decided I'd drag Lars over to our sister's place for a visit.

As for the plants, the biologists managed to get samples under a microscope. Turns out they weren't plants at all, but fungus. One giant fungus. The "leaves" were actually modified mycelium the fungus used to digest whatever it managed to coil around. Lars had torn apart the strands near him because the wretched mushroom had been trying to eat him.

But the researchers didn't get to learn much more. The team, along with the businessman funding the project, decided to destroy the anomalous hole entirely. It was an odd choice.