

## The Salvation of the Ooze

by Laura E. Goodin (2006)

"Hell's bells," I thought as I dangled over the lava pit. My wrists were aching, my skin was stinging from the heat, but what tormented me most was the sight of Dr. Hypatia Garoux cackling and dancing on the edge of the pit.

"Jeez, Pace, what did I ever do to you?"

But I knew. There was a paper in the *Journal of Applied Fluvial Geomorphology* with my name on it. And the research was hers.

"You were never going to publish!" I gasped. "You kept wanting to run the models 'one more time!'"

"It's too early! We know the sediment is alive, but we don't know its intentions."

"INTENTIONS!" I screamed. "It's SEDIMENT! It hasn't got any intentions except to float down the river and silt up the delta. The sediment isn't the problem!"

Pace knew what I meant. The department head, Dr. Kortnoz, had disappeared two years ago, just after Pace had defended her dissertation. Not long after, the

sediment load in the Purple River had increased fivefold. Pace had this idea that the sediment had consciously decided to leap into the river to seek its fortune. I had a different theory: Kortnoz was at the headwaters, stirring up trouble as well as sediment.

I'd thought if I could draw enough attention to the sediment increase, someone with more firepower than I had would go after Kortnoz. But the paper had been completely ignored.

Meanwhile, Pace was enraged that I'd gazumped her research. I couldn't blame her, but I still thought being barbecued over a lava pit was a bit of a disproportionate reaction.

"Pace, I can publish a retraction! I - I'll use my fellowship money to fund the field research you and Jasper need to finalize your data. You can have lunch with the sediment, whatever you want. And I'll run the sims for you with my server time. I swear it."

Pace was tempted. "If you betray me again, I won't bother having fun. I'll kill you immediately." She picked up a rope with a vicious-looking hook on the end, whirled the hook around her head, and flung it out, jerking back on it to snag the rope I hung from. She pulled me roughly over to the side of the pit; I raised my knees just in time to avoid slamming my face

into the rock. She stepped backwards, dragging me up, and I wriggled my legs and body onto the ledge. Pace cut the cords on my wrists, and I stood.

"Right," said Pace. "I'll phone Jasper. We'll bring you by the office to do the paperwork for the funds transfer, then we're off to the hills. You're coming with us."

Surprisingly, as this was a university after all, the admin details went off without a hitch. Far sooner than I wanted, I was shoved into the back seat of Pace's dual-cab pickup. Her weedy little minion, Jasper, rode up front with a proprietary air. I wondered what he thought he owned: the truck, the research, or Pace? Jasper wasn't long out of the master's program; I thought he was getting above himself.

Nobody said much as we drove into the hills. The road was rough; we even had to ford a creek now and then. The foliage was lush and untouched here on the windward side, which ruled out deforestation as a cause of the turbidity.

Pace's theory was ridiculous. Still, if you assumed muck could have a life goal, it fit the data: the silt was building up in the delta precisely where it most disrupted the shipping channels. The fish that

made a break for cleaner water were the ones the tourists loved to eat. And the smell of the dying remnants put off even the most determined of the remaining vacationers. If the sediment really was trying to drive humans out of the delta, it was going about it fairly effectively. Or Kortnoz was.

But there was a flaw in my theory, much as I hated to admit it: it didn't make sense for Kortnoz to destroy his own city. After all, that's where the university was. Where else would he be able to earn a living? There were precious few universities left. They'd faded away, victims of plummeting academic standards, funding cuts, falling birthrates, and in one rather dramatic case, coastal erosion. Although the new cliffs were a godsend to the geologists.

The road levelled out. "Ha!" said Jasper. "Over there." He pointed off to the right, where an orange tent was set up near the riverbank. This high up, the river was small and quick, scouring the grit that would eventually settle out where the river slowed and spread into a fertile floodplain. Someone crouched on the bank next to a rack of equipment. As we got closer, we could see him pick up a fist-sized stone from the bank and heft it aggressively. It was Kortnoz, all right. Star of the department's softball team. Never missed a

throw to home. Right now he had a look on his face like the runner was rounding third.

Pace shut off the engine and got out, motioning for us to follow. Jasper leapt out and opened my door for me. He was no gentleman; he just wanted to make sure Pace's whims were obeyed. When I hesitated, he reached in and yanked me out.

"Tyrone!" hollered Pace. That in itself was a shock: I hadn't known they were on a first-name basis. I hadn't even known for sure Kortnoz *had* a first name. "Ty! It's Pace!"

Kortnoz squinted into the summer glare, the sunlight flashing on his glasses. "Pace? Who's that with you?"

Pace started walking slowly toward him. Jasper followed, tugging me along. "Celeste Carlucci and Jasper Smith-Fennel."

Kortnoz brayed with laughter. "Smith-Fennel? Is that what you're reduced to? He can't even use consistent style in his footnotes. *And* he missed several crucial primary sources in his survey of the literature for his thesis. Pathetic." Jasper's grip tightened on my arm. "And Celeste – good to see you again. How'd that fellowship application go?"

"Celeste thinks you're the one who's been silting

up the delta," said Pace. "Tell her what we found on that field trip up here two years ago. Tell her the sediment is alive!" She had a pleading sound in her voice that I had never heard before.

Kortnoz let the rock drop. "You finally believe me?" He stared into Pace's eyes. I suddenly realized they'd been on much more than a first-name basis.

Pace nodded. "The day after you left, I started telling everyone you'd had a fight with the board of directors. Everyone knows how cranky you can get. Nobody bothered to cross-check my story. With the time that bought me, I went back over your data. I asked Celeste to collaborate" — she gave me a venomous look — "but instead of helping me fill in the blanks like she was supposed to, she decided to leap to conclusions."

"Celeste! That's not like you," chided Kortnoz.

He was right, but I needed to keep them talking while I looked for a chance to grab the keys from Pace and make a break for it.. "What proof do you have that the sediment is alive?"

"It can flow upstream," said Kortnoz. "And it's self-aware."

"Yeah, right."

"I didn't believe it either. But the data two years ago suggested it. Pace was with me, she

remembers. I hypothesized that a confluence of minerals, water, and specific organic substances unique to the flora of this microclimate spontaneously produced sentience. Then, on my second trip, I marked a sample a hundred metres or so downstream with some of the nanotrackers from Bretton over in Robotics. I was careful not to contaminate my clothes or shoes with either the trackers or the silt. I don't know if you can imagine my shock when I came back to the research station here and the tracker detectors went wild. The sediment had followed me."

"Uh-huh. And how do you know it knows you from, say, Isaac Newton?"

"It...."

"Go on."

"It saved my life."

This was too much for Jasper, who snorted explosively. Pace rounded on him. "Shut up, *Mister* Smith-Fennel." Oo, that was harsh.

"Sorry, *Doctor* Garoux," he snarled.

Pace took a few steps closer to Kortnoz. "How did the sediment save your life?"

"A gnawfish was about to chew open my wrist as I took mud samples in that backwater there. I swear to you that the mud within a 20-metre radius suddenly

coalesced underneath the fish, raised it up, and heaved it back into the center of the stream. The sediment knows me. It knows I'm listening – that I'm on its side."

"And just what is 'its side'?" I asked. "What does it want? An end to strip mining and nuclear power?"

"Nothing so trite," he said dismissively. "It's trying to get our attention. According to the binary information it's encoding by way of the trackers, it's actually developed a sophisticated and profound literature, which it says will revolutionize our understanding of the planet. Change our approach to how we're dealing with climate change, terrorism, everything. Maybe save us all, if we can bring it to light before it's too late. It wants us to bring the draft to the Department of English and get it edited and published."

"Department of English? Are you serious? An *interdisciplinary* grant proposal? Not a hope in hell," said Jasper. Everyone ignored him.

"The sediment – and its art – need a champion," Kortnoz said, taking Pace's hand. "A hero. Maybe a few heroes."

"We can't be heroes," cried Jasper. "We're *academics!*"

"That's the best kind," said Pace.

"This is insane!" Jasper yelled, and ran toward the truck, taking something from his pocket.

"So that's what happened to the spare keys," said Pace. "Little twerp. He'll discredit us all and get our funding redirected."

"Isn't there a place where he's got to drive across a stream?" said Kortnoz. "He won't get far. Even those monster tires can get bogged."

"We were fine coming up," said Pace.

Kortnoz raised one eyebrow. "He won't get far," he said again. "Before we head down to rescue him, why don't you have a look at the tracker data? It's remarkable."

"Love to," said Pace warmly. "I'm in no rush."

They hunched over the equipment, murmuring to each other. I sat a bit apart, an embarrassed intruder. So I was the only one who saw Jasper trying to sneak back up the path. It seemed that life in your parents' basement doesn't do much to make you a great outdoorsman. I saw he'd gotten a gun out of the lockbox in the truck.

Whether or not I agreed with Kortnoz's mission of championing the philosophical ooze, and regardless of my differences with Pace, I couldn't sit by and watch Jasper kill them. I was pretty sure he wouldn't notice me doubling back to tackle him. He had eyes only for Pace, and cold, murderous eyes they were.

When he paused, bent double and gasping near the top of the hill, I saw my chance. I burst from my cover, knocked him over, and threw the gun as far as I could. Pace and Kortnoz came running over as Jasper struggled, but I was in pretty good shape, and, well, Jasper was Jasper. He quieted down once he realized he had no chance.

"Gee, Celeste, um, thanks," said Pace. "That was pretty impressive."

"I guess academics really can be heroes," said Kortnoz.

"You with us?" Pace asked me.

"Only if I get to wear a cool cape," I said. "Don't heroes wear capes?"

"I don't know. I've never been one."

"Never been a cape?"

"A hero, chump."

And suddenly we were colleagues, friends, again. That's good, I thought. Heroes work best that way.