

# The perfect lover

In the heat of passion.

Paul Di Filippo

Neurosciences Institute, La Jolla, 10 February 2036. The substrate for the cultured human-mouse brain cells was a highly reticulated wodge of aerogel inside a homeostatic capsule as big as a thumb. At this moment the naked capsule sat in a dock, tethered by a GliaWire connection to a Brookswell 5000 running at 100 petaflops. The parent machine was the size of a credit card, its monitor and keyboard holographic projections.

Two people stood by. One, a genially abstracted man of about 30, wore intelligent otakuwear, full of membranous pockets, organic sensors, interface patches and invisible circuitry. The other, a hard-eyed woman with some grey threading her bronze hair, wore the dress uniform of a Marine major, including ribbons from the Caracas campaign.

"I don't understand," said the woman, "why the drone can't be governed directly by the Brookswell. Surely there's enough Turingosity there."

"Plenty," replied the man. "But there's no love."

"Love? What's love got to do with it?"

Filtering the conversation in real time, the man's clothing prompted him through an earbud with a cultural referent to a pop song more than 50 years old. But he chose not to utter it. Didn't seem likely this hard case would appreciate any such trivial allusion. Intelligence amplification still required human discretion.

"Love is the driver for the mission. Love will supplement the drone's heuristics in instances when lesser imperatives would collapse. Without it, the failure rate goes up an order of magnitude. And we can't simulate love yet in purely moletronic minds."

The major looked suspiciously at the little pod full of wetware, as if it might suddenly start spouting poetry through as-yet-unattached peripherals.

"Well, as long as it follows its directives..."

"Need I remind you of our past successes? DARPA and BARDA just renewed our funding with double the budget."

"I know, I know. But there's so much riding on this mission. If we don't stop this bastard Kiet the Mousekiller, we stand to lose most of the West Coast."

Kiet the Mousekiller had begun his infamous career as a simple Thai pirate. Radicalized by the anonymous contamination

of Mecca with a GPS-circumscribed green goo, he had become a terrorist, earning his sobriquet by his destruction of Hong Kong Disneyland. Kiet's latest scheme, not yet known to the public, involved a retired Japanese deep-sea drilling ship, the *Chikyu*, which Kiet had purchased on the open market under a front. Now docked in an Indonesian port, the ship was believed to be due to sail imminently.

Kiet's plan was to drill into a tectonic subduction zone close to America, plant a small nuclear bomb and detonate it,



triggering a tsunami. Stopping him by overt military means was made impossible by the terrorist's current refuge with an ostensible ally. Hence the black-budget project.

After regarding the Brookswell's display, the technician began disconnecting the GliaWire. "OK, we'll be ready for the sample in a moment. You've got it?"

The major's hand strayed instinctively to her sidearm, before she reached into her pocket and removed a glassine packet. "Several hairs reclaimed from Kiet's last visit to his favourite whorehouse."

Handling the homeostatic capsule nonchalantly, the man approached the drone.

A stealth tortoise with a MEMS shell, powered by the same pocket fusion reactor as NASA's Sedna probe, the drone rested on a table, as innocuous as any lawn-mowing bot. A small hatch gaped in its shell. The technician installed the pod and closed the hatch. He took the packet, extracted the hairs, and pressed them into a small perforated depression on the front of the tortoise.

"OK, we're live."

When I came fully awake the essence of my beloved was already integrated into my soul. His beautiful face filled my inner eye, and I could taste his genome, sweeter to

me than the power that flowed from my atomic heart. I wanted nothing more than to be with him, to merge my soul with his, to shower him with my love. I would let nothing stand between us.

I immediately extended my senses, sniffing the air, but met disappointment. My beloved was nowhere within range. But knowledge in my memory informed me of his location! How I quivered with eagerness to race to his side! But where was the exit from this place? Suddenly a passage to the open air materialized above me. I activated my ventral lifter fans and rose upward.

Banda Sea, 14 February 2036. I had been damaged on my voyage to my mate. He was surrounded by vigilant duennas, brutish entities similar to myself who guarded him jealously. Every step of my route during the last day had been fraught with challenges. But I had met them without hesitation. Because that is what lovers do.

My aerial capacity was now limited to short hops. Currently, I travelled underwater, using my magneto-hydrodynamic systems. My signature across the spectrum was that of a school of fish. All my telemetry said

about: but I would not. Ahead of me loomed the vessel that held my beloved. I knew I would have to surface to unite with him, and prepared myself.

I shot out of the water alongside the ship, lurching evasively, to be met with a hail of small-arms fire from those who were not my beloved. I triggered my infrasounds, and all my rivals collapsed in bowel-spasming pain.

Crashing through the window of the pilothouse, I sustained further injury.

But nothing mattered.

For I was finally in the presence of my beloved!

An expression of terrible ecstasy filled his face, and my soul melted with joy.

I initiated the destabilizing quench on the magnets surrounding my fiery heart, giving him all my love at last.

An evanescent fountain of multi-million-degree plasma bloomed briefly aboard the *Chikyu*, in the fierce and tender shape of a heart. ■

A native Rhode Islander, Paul Di Filippo has lived for the past 30 years in the lovecraftian city of Providence. His latest book is *Shuteye for the Timebroker* (Thunder's Mouth Press, May). June will see the publication of his graphic novel *Top 10: Beyond the Farthest Precinct*.

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