

# WAVEHITCHER

*The course of true love.*

BY PAUL DI FILIPPO

At a point roughly 100 nautical miles northeast out of its home port of Hilo, Hawaii, on a routine fisheries patrol, the US Coast Guard Cutter *Kiska* encountered a wavehitcher.

Standing on the bridge and peering through his digital recording binoculars, Captain Don Ruffin swore, heedless of how his intemperance would look on the official record. This idiot of a wavehitcher was going to cost him endless paperwork and delay. Briefly, he debated letting the fool perish. But then, unbidden, came the lyrics of the Coast Guard's service song, *Semper Paratus*. "To sink the foe or save the maimed, / Our mission and our pride." Captain Ruffin sighed, put down his binocs, and addressed Lieutenant Commander Billie Schafer with more wistfulness than hope.

"Have you pinged that AUV yet, Lieutenant? Maybe it's authorized to carry a technician or a scientist on a short-term basis."

"Negative, sir. It's a Liquid Robotics MANTA model, licensed to the C-More group at the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology. Strictly an autonomous underwater vehicle. Tasked to conduct a survey of microbial ecology."

"All right then. We've got an illegal rider. Let's haul him in." Submitting to a sudden impulse, Captain Ruffin added, "I'm going on the pick-up ride, Lieutenant Commander. You have the *Kiska*."

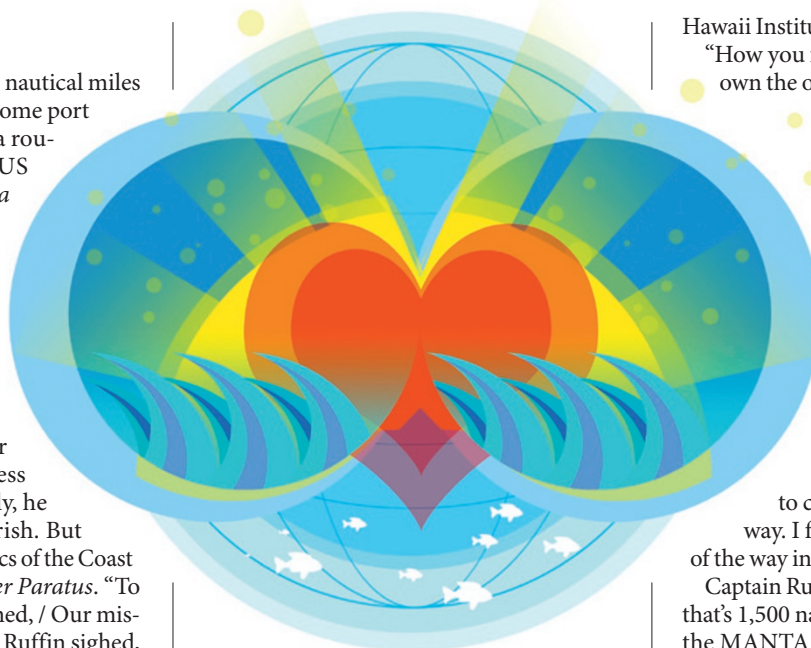
At the starboard side, seamen were unlimbering the cutter's rigid-hull inflatable and getting it launched. Wearing his smart life-vest, Captain Ruffin was soon aboard and skimming across the warm green waters.

The wavehitcher must have sensed their approach, through vibrations alone. But there was no place he could flee, no action he could take. So he just continued to trail the slowly moving AUV at the length of the tether he had secured to its stubby mast.

The MANTA craft was a sleek hull bristling with sensors, solar panels and communications devices.

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Unseen, well below the surface, was the attached set of vanes that propelled the



AUV simply by taking advantage of the constant up-and-down movements of the craft.

Captain Ruffin had been prepared to see the wavehitcher clad in a typical joyrider's amateur rig. But no, this wavehitcher sported very high-tech gear. Could he be a pirate — or a terrorist even? What could be his objective, out here in the middle of nowhere? He wasn't even in a registered shipping lane, and the MANTA was no doubt programmed to avoid such busy corridors. Still, Captain Ruffin could take no chances, so he ordered one of his men to train a weapon on the trespasser.

Soon they had grappled the man aboard. He put up no resistance, and the only difficulty arose in dealing with a capacious seine of some sort that had been attached to him, trailing unseen beneath the sea.

Sitting under armed guard, the wavehitcher exhibited no nervous body language in his superhero wetsuit, which covered even his head. Instead, he slowly lifted his hands up to remove his goggles and breathing apparatus, the latter just a simple snorkel. Friendly blue eyes in a tanned surfer's face and a big ingenuous smile greeted his captors.

"Hey, sapes, what's filtering? You need my help with something?"

Captain Ruffin stared incredulously. "What is your name?"

"Andy Weeden. But you can call me 'Weed'. Everybody does."

"Mr Weeden, are you aware that you were trespassing on the property of the

Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology?"  
"How you figure that, sapes? They don't own the ocean. Nobody does."

"But this is their registered drone, legal property of the institute."

"I know that. I was just drifting friendly like alongside."

"Nonsense! You were tethered to its mast!"

"All right, all right, so I was hitching a ride. I wasn't hurting it none."

"And exactly where did you think you were heading?"

"This probe is programmed to come within ten miles of Midway. I figured on swimming the rest of the way into shore."

Captain Ruffin's jaw dropped. "But — but that's 1,500 nautical miles away! At the rate the MANTA travels, it would take you six weeks to get there!"

"No problem, sapes! My goggles are smart, my earbuds high-quality and my haptic controls totally sizzling. The Internet feed I tapped from the MANTA was zealous! Besides, I had a lot of thinking to do. Six weeks would have been just about right. You see, my girlfriend is on Midway. We had a scandonkulous fight, and she left before I could apologize and make up. She works for the Fish and Wildlife Service on the Atoll, and they've interdicted all civilians, 'cuz of that stupid Chinese situation. This was the only way I could get to see her."

"How did you intend to survive?"

Weed was happy to explain. His smartsuit used nanoporous graphene membranes to desalinate plenty of drinking water. An array of pulsed magnets repelled sharks. And his seine caught krill and processed it into a nutritious paste routed into a CamelBak reservoir.

"Just call me a one-man cruise ship!" Weed boasted.

The inflatable pulled up next to the *Kiska*. Weed looked forlorn.

"C'mon, sapes, you're not gonna stand in the path of true love, are you?"

Captain Ruffin looked at his grinning seamen, then said: "Throw him back, he's undersized." ■

Paul Di Filippo's 35th book, a story collection titled *The Great Jones Coop Ten Gigasoul Party, Will Make its Appearance this year from Wildside Press.*

JACEY