

THE FUNG

(DRAFT 11 – Present Tense)



THE FUNG - Draft 11

PROLOGUE - THE ARRIVAL (Past Tense)

The fung spores between water and gray sky a mesmeric haze, rowing arms fatigued to the point of over-cooked spaghetti, he was to succumb to a powerful delirium in the humidity and heat, imagining in the approach of each and every amorphous floating form upon the eutrophic waters the mutants known to have evolved throughout the archipelago. Cindy had done her best to reassure. When at sunset, he was at last to see the near distant shimmer of the diggings jetty just above the waterline, he could only believe it yet another product of an exhausted delirium, a conviction reinforced with the jetty seemingly to recede further into the distance at each stroke of the oars. Yet, quickly enough, the jetty's fung-grown height had risen before him and he had needed only the strength of arm to throw out the landing line, looping it to the rusted landing cleat. The leaking Whitehall moored, boots, socks and workcase rescued from the stern seat, he came to step quickly upon the landing, the fung spores coming to burst in a puff around him. The spores settled, he stood a picture of travail, Panama hat and round-rimmed, gold-wire glasses resting askew, red neckerchief loosened, khaki safari suit shirt sweat-stained front to back, and the trouser ends blackened from the water having overtaken the boat floor. The boots and workcase rested to his right and left respectively, he was then to hear the bubble of water behind him. Little surprised, swinging back around, he was to find the Whitehall rapidly sinking, tilting stern first into the dark, fung infected waters, having undertaken its last heroic Odyssey.

ONE - THE AGED ATTENDANT

The triangular form of the silver Mythos glints on the landing pad at the end of the pier. The red of the machine's markings, and the interlinking yellow cogwheels of the RoadCorp logo, wavering in the heatwaves out from the craft and across the pier. In their enigmatic way, the fung spores pocket the air all around, creating patches of dark and light.

'Cell won't take no fresh charge, mister.'

The old station attendant stands bent over the open floor compartment of the Mythos. He wears grease-stained, heavily torn coveralls, a faded red, RoadCorp, peaked cap, and holed rubber boots.

'Noticed the service sheet's short on entry. Explains everything, mister, sorry to say. These new cars, got prototype bugs. Run in checks have to be kept regular.'

The attendant disconnects the charge cable with a bony, shaking hand, and nods his head, as if this was the end of the matter. The seat resecured, he backs from the aircar, facing around. 'So ... expect you'll be asking about a fresh cell.' He faces up with rheumatic eyes looking to water.

Stanton listens from beneath the arch of the driver side birdwing door. He struggles for words to explain, can't, and forced to prize himself from the man's gaze, raises his eyes above the attendant's withered shoulders to look to Cindy, standing by the charge station just out from the perimeter of the landing pad.

'Another fine mess we got ourselves into, John.' Cindy telelinks.

Stanton faces about to stare back over the archipelago waters.

TWO - THE FLIGHT

They'd set out before dawn. They'd wanted the best possible deal

on a city hire car, and Inner Circle Air was to win out. The company had offered the Mythos, the latest addition to the RoadCorp aircar line, 30 credits cheaper per day hire than the best offer from any other hire firm, a promotional deal. They'd accepted this for what it was worth, only they'd lied about the use of the craft. By order of Citizen Profile Security (CPS), city hire aircars could not be registered for long hops into the outer archipelago rings.

Well into the flight, they'd good cause to congratulate themselves on their choice of car, only then to hear the cell charge monitor give out its sharp staccato warning. Very quickly, they found themselves left to a desperate zigzag over the dark waters in search of a charge station.

The island had come into view against the rising sun, a sole savior, thirty kilometers from zero.

Like nearly everywhere, the fung had come to cover the island entirely, a merciless assimilation. The pier extended from a reed mudflat, running twenty-five meters out into the open water, a four-meter high, half-fallen structure, the boards, silver-browed by the fung.

They were to bring the spluttering aircar down on manual, landing with a solid jar on the landing pad at the end of the pier. Stanton exited first, Cindy joining him, edging across from the passenger seat. A short distance out from the troubled craft, they took in the small EasyFormMiraclePlastics All-Purpose hut, standing just to the right of the pier entry steps. The hut stood in sharp contrast to the rotted pier, the defensive nanotech incorporated into its surfacing stemming off the fung. The hut's yellow corrugated sheets gleamed, the front windows each side of the screened door shone silvered, the steps gleaming. The door opened, the aged attendant stepping out. Cindy was the first to comment. 'Where there is life, there is hope.'

THREE - A BAD HIRE

'A bad hire,' Stanton answers, his attention retuning to the aged attendant.

'Humph! That you say,' the attendant tips his head, beginning the winding of the charge cable as if this was the end of the matter. He takes care, looping it between thumb and forefinger, and the elbow of his left arm, keeping the coils tight. The fung spores flee the activity in a darkening haze, soon dispersing across the pier.

Stanton faces away from the attendant to stare across the landing pad.

Cindy stands by the charge station just out from the perimeter. She flickers photon shot in the bright sun, Asian features, fresh-faced in the way of youth, China-doll bob, wearing a dark-blue jumpsuit and black-leather, laced boots, the jumpsuit snugly cinched at the waste, the only concession to her utilitarian form.

Stanton leaves the aged attendant to the winding of the cable and begins his way over the landing pad.

'A good summation, John,' Cindy happily telelinks. 'Well done.'

Stanton halts a meter from her.

FOUR - THE PROPOSITION

'I feel a little sorry for him, John. He must be lonely out here.' Cindy goes on to question. 'What do you think?'

'RoadCorp,' Stanton answers, facing back around to view the aged attendant, following Cindy's gaze.

'It can't be that simple, John,' Cindy cautions. 'Let's wait and see.'

The old man has begun towards them over the landing pad, moving with a slow, bowlegged gait as he continues the winding of the cable. As he draws nearer, blurred by the heatwaves over the pier, he seemingly floats through the air, until coming to a descending stop directly before the pair.

'Car's good and dead, mister, sorry to say,' the attendant announces.' The charge cable is near to fully coiled. He lifts it free from the length of his forearm, hangs it on the crook of the elbow, and tugs a heavily dirtied rag from a back pocket of the coveralls to rub at his hands, adding, 'You might want to think on what you'll do?'

'John,' Cindy speaks up. 'Now's the time.'

The aged attendant moves on towards the charge column. He secures the cable on the hook, and then faces back around.

'Time's come,' he begins, tipping his head in the direction of the troubled aircar. 'Figuring you to understand. Couldn't help but note, illegal flight. Didn't ask any questions at first. Just wanted to see what all the fuss was about on you setting down. Liked to give you a chance to explain. Speak the best truth, mister.'

A whirligig of fung suddenly erupts upon the pier, spinning out from behind the aged attendant, enveloping him, and he then coming to a stand directly before Stanton and Cindy, the fung diffusing away. The attendant holds out his hand. 'The name's Dean. Dean Roberts. I mean you no harm, mister. Got a job to do. That's all.'

Stanton waits a moment, as if uncertain of his response, and then, taking the hand firmly, answers. 'John, John Stanton.' Releasing the hand, he extends his left arm out to the side, inviting Cindy into full view for the first time. 'And this is Cindy.'

Cindy tips her head, smiling. 'We're bio-investigators,

representing the firm EVOLVE.' She brings up her right palm, a holo forming in the cup. A double helix shows. It spins off the letter E, and then the letter V, until the word EVOLVE spells itself out. 'We're an independent concern, and new to the game. Certainly not large players. We've heard of a suspicious death out on the Thirteenth Ring. No other details. We were hoping to be the first to investigate. Get some name recognition.' The holo refreshes, showing a twin-posted, tin sign reading:

SCOTT'S VILLAGE

THE BRYSON GROUP

Behind the sign, mounds of torn earth show. The holo soon closes on a shallow, water filled hole, a barely identifiable body showing in the water, covered in fung. 'We were on our way to investigate, but for the aircar. Sorry to be dropping in on you like this.' Cindy concludes, bunching her fist, and closing the holo.

Dean does little more than blink, facing Stanton, saying, 'Thought so, Mr. Stanton. Got a personal,' and then turning to Cindy in greeting. 'Pleased to meet, miss. Bio-investigators, you both.' He pinches at his lower lip a moment with his brown and chipped top teeth, picking up his thoughts. 'Guess you know you're in a bad fix, city hire car and all. Got some sympathy. I'll make no call to the water rangers. Want to help as much as I can.' He suddenly rocks back on his rubber boot heels, grinning happily. 'Got a surprise for you. Have a boat hidden off to the side of the pier. Should get you to where you want to go. Only the boat's not in the best of repair. You take your chance or stay out here. Face the rangers. 'This way.' Dean motions towards the left of the pier with an arm. 'Let me show you.'

FIVE - THE WHITEHALL

They come to stand at the edge of the step rails leading to the boat landing, looking down. Most of the landing's boards lie sunken in the black water, the few boards above, holed through. Not far along the landing to the left of the steps, a tarp stretches out over the water. Dean slowly makes his way down the ladder and pulls back the tarp.

There is a boat.

'A Whitehall,' he shouts, looking up at Stanton and Cindy. 'Sea boat mostly, but has its uses in the waters. That deep forefront,' he points to the stern. 'Good for cutting through the muck.'

The fung has been at work on the boat. The craft lies moored as if to a lifeline, listing to one side, the white hull paint peeling, the brown of the surface timber heavily grayed, and the rowlocks looking to break at the first stroke of the oars.

'Totally fung rotted, John,' Cindy speaks from beside Stanton, shaking her head. 'We won't get far.'

Stanton hitches up the knee points of his trousers, bending slowly to rest on his haunches, as if a closer inspection of the boat might reveal some unseen aspect of its sea worthiness. He sees nothing.

'Kept up the repairs as best I could, but the fung.' Dean speaks again from the landing. 'Hard to keep ahead of the spore.'

Stanton nods his head in sympathy. 'How much for the hire?'

'No charge, Mr. Stanton.'

Cindy looks on aghast as if she hadn't heard.

Dean begins back up the ladder, head down, speaking as he takes the steps. 'Don't expect on the boot's return either. Leave it at the diggings if you want.' He reaches the top of the steps, stretching his thin legs to stand on the pier proper. 'Trust a company employee will get you back home.'

'We'll need water. Some rations,' Stanton says hurriedly. 'We

didn't plan on an extended day setting out this morning.'

'No problem there, Mr. Stanton.' Dean nods his head, smiling broadly. 'Always make sure to keep a good supply out here on account of being so deep into the rings.'

'John,' Cindy interrupts, facing Stanton directly. 'This isn't exactly going to be merrily, merrily row the boat gently down the stream. You've never even sat in a boat.'

'Take your time folks,' Dean offers, speaking behind him as he begins his way down the pier towards the EasyFormMiraclePlastics All-Purpose. 'Not easy on deciding I know. I'll ready the supplies anyways.'

Stanton faces back towards the Mythos. The craft has faithfully flown them far from its ideal of city life and a charge station at every corner, only now to come to sit this charge pad at the distant outer reaches of the coastal archipelago, the raised arch of the birdwing door as if in a forlorn goodbye, perhaps in the understanding of its sudden abandonment to fung and green. All that was needed from the craft was the workcase - an aluminum affair of average size, not particularly heavy, but bulky, twenty-centimeters in depth - resting on the rear seat. Stanton turns back to Cindy.

'What choice do we have?' he answers her; the aged attendant disappearing from view inside the All-Purpose.

SIX - THE OAR OVER THE WATERS

Wished good luck, Dean waves a slow, said goodbye from the end of the pier, he soon to be lost to the shimmer of fung and light. Stanton is left to the oars.

'Love your optimism, John.' Cindy materializes on the bow seat opposite him, legs crossed. 'But by my reading, it's thirty kilometers to the diggings. How will you manage?'

Stanton sweeps once more with the oars, then allows the ends to clatter together across his thighs. He can't keep the strokes synchronized, his right stroke always stronger than the left, the boat more often than not dipping and wavering than going forward. But the rowlocks had managed to hold this far. The boat now at rest, it drifts across the fung-greened, eutrophic waters. Stanton takes Cindy in; he slumped in the row seat.

'Allow me to help, John,' she continues her address, keeping her legs crossed and sweeping her right hand directly before her. A molecular screen forms in the air, lending a sparkling shimmer to her utilitarian look, she brushes at various points on the interface, and explains, 'Calculating our current speed at half a knot, would put us in at the diggings well after nightfall, but at best speed, three to four knots, we could reach the diggings in the early afternoon. May I suggest, John?' Cindy swings her upper leg lazily, 'That you get yourself into a rhythm of six even strokes, and then to rest for a count of three deep breaths before beginning again. That would give us an even chance for sunset.' She waves away the screen.

Stanton raises his head with some effort. Failing to answer, he turns instead to stare over the archipelago waters. Large patches of yellow-green fung scum float freely, the fung forever on the move. The infected islands dot the endless distance. They might have to make their way around the larger of these, he reflects, increasing the length of the row.

'I've taken this into consideration, John.' Cindy catches his thoughts. 'Best we hurry.'

Stanton soon falls into the rhythm formulated by Cindy. Six even strokes, followed by a rest, and then picking up the rhythm again. The boat wavers less, continuing on a more forward path. The kilometers fall away.

'John, the hull's leaking.' Cindy suddenly announces.

Stanton looks up on the next sweep of the oars. At random points along the hull, black water can be seen swelling through the boards.

'John, however, there's a good chance that we could reach the diggings before sinking. I've made the calculation.'

There begins Stanton's frantic oar over the archipelago waters.

SEVEN - THE LADDER

Much as might a long-drowned Nimue, the Whitehall comes to gaze forever upwards through the dark water from amidst the lacy bottom fronds.

'That's our return ticket sunk, John, poor ticket that it was.' Cindy materializes beside him. 'Now its best we get off the jetty before total dark.'

Stanton faces from the Whitehall to view over the land. The picture is greatly hindered by the jetty pylons. A ladder leads upwards from the landing. He would have to make the climb to gain a vantage point. First needing to don his boots, he feels the fung grown moss squeezing up between his naked toes, shakes each foot in turn, and then sits himself on the landing edge to dress. The socks are heavily wetted from the archipelago waters. Finding the socks heavily wetted from the archipelago waters, he pulls them free of the boot hollows, brings them to the space made by his raised knees, and squeezes. Where struck by the spray of water, the moss immediately flattens to the boards, only to quickly raise itself back, waving stalk and capsule. Stanton springs to his feet.

'Flight and fight response, John,' Cindy hurriedly informs. 'The water fung and land fung have come to evolve independently, no longer recognizing each other. I fear this is the result of a rapid mutagenesis. Finish dressing, John.'

Stanton reseats himself, quickly dressing in the boots, as if in fear of further incident, and studies the ladder.

A change has come about.

The ladder appears to extend beyond the jetty itself, taking on a narrowing perspective in reaching the clouds, and passing beyond, as if to Heaven itself. An immediate fear takes hold of Stanton, that he remains within the hallucinatory delirium experienced during his travail over the waters, that he has yet to reach the diggings jetty.

'Sorry, John, I can't explain,' Cindy is quick to help. 'You are experiencing a hallucination. Please ... continue up the ladder.'

Stanton removes his glasses with some hope, rubbing at his eyes with forefinger and thumb. The glasses replaced with shaking hands, he finds the view returned to normal, the ladder leveling with the jetty, no longer the Jacob's ladder of his ascension. He stands puzzled, yet happy, and takes up the workcase, Cindy winking away. By the ladder, he braves his first step and, keeping his head down, counts twenty-four rungs until heaving himself onto the jetty proper. There he stands about midway along the jetty, measuring its length at fifty-meters, the boards carpeted with the same thick, unbroken moss as the landing. The moss is unmarked. No-one has set foot here for some time.

EIGHT - SCOTT'S VILLAGE

The view is clear.

The green runs flat to the horizon, a land assault of unbroken fung-infected forest. The setting sun casts the last of the light, burnishing the trees a dusky yellow, a pall of mist steaming their tips from the day's heat. Immediately out from the jetty, lies a wasteland of torn earth, a deep wedge of fallen and half-fallen trees driving out from there back into the green.

It is clear that mammoth machinery had been at work. Deep ruts crisscross the earth at every conceivable angle, each chasm deep. Mounds of earth lie thrown up either side of the ruts, as if by volcanic eruption, and everywhere, ripped tree branches stick out, as if staking the very air itself, and where whole trees lie tipped, their masses of fibrous root lie stuck with lumps of cloying, muddled earth. A few meters out down from the jetty, stands the Scott's Village sign, as if only too eager to stake its claim from the waters.

The front line of the eastern offensive against the fung begins here, at the thirteenth ring, the housing estate of Scott's Village the first of many planned estates in ever increasing ring cycles outward. The recruitment posters pictured the nuclear family, they to blaze the trail to the New Promised Land, shovel in one hand, building blueprints in the other. 'Take back your world, build a parking lot.' The Scott's village sign is as yet untouched by the fung, lending confidence to the hoped success of the campaign. No lights show anywhere, and despite the lateness of the hour, all was quiet, certainly not the bustle and frenzied activity expected from the leading assault upon the fung. And then, as if brought about by the explosion of a giant flare in the sky, light bursts upon the scene. Stanton finds himself forced back on his feet, bringing up a hand to shield his eyes.

NINE - THE PIT

Twin-paneled, double-sided, tower lights reveal a huge pit, casting their glare deep within, and over the rutted earth beyond. On the far side, colored, EasyFormMiraclePlastics worker's huts stand arranged in rows gradually arcing outwards, tool and utility sheds randomly dispersed between. The worker's huts are largely nondescript, serviceable in form and function, each with central

entry steps, chimneys, and electric-wire screens to windows and doors against the fung. Furthest out, penned within a wire-mesh compound, stands the giant earth moving machinery, poised like a tableau of the mechanical lost in the absence of their pilots. Of a sudden, a cacophony of noise breaks out, rises up from excavation: the rumble of generators, the thudding of compactors, the judder of jackhammers, the screaming pitch of stone cutters, and the general hubbub of the workers.

'A worker is approaching, John.' Stanton hears from Cindy. 'Best we meet with them.'

Stanton works his fingers beneath the frame of his glasses, rubbing at his eyes, relieving himself from the glare. He manages to look out. A worker is indeed making their way over the torn earth. He steps off, making his way to the front of the jetty.

TEN - THE WORKER

The worker strides confidently forward, wearing the light and dark brown coolskin of the construction sector, blending them with the brown of the earth, the impression only lost by the yellow hard had, the worker appearing to bob up and down as they traverse the deep ruts of land.

'John, there's a camera to your right. We're being monitored,' Cindy informs, holding herself from view.

Stanton sees the camera for the first time. It is mounted on a pole by the steps, pointing along the jetty the way they had come. He returns his attention to the worker.

They have picked up their pace, soon coming to a stop on the jetty landing below, there shouting upwards, 'What brings you out here, mister?' The worker shouts upwards. 'The site manager sent me to ask. He saw the boat row in and hitch to the landing.'

Cindy interrupts. 'There must be another camera by the

landing, John. I'm sorry we didn't see it.'

Stanton steps directly between the handrails of the steps and shouts down in return. 'The name's Stanton. John Stanton. Bio-investigator, representing the firm EVOLVE.' Cindy comes into view directly beside him, squeezing in by the guardrail, and picks up the narrative. 'We heard there's been a death. We took it upon ourselves to investigate.'

The worker remains looking up, blinking a little stupidly, as if unsure what to make of Cindy's sudden presence. 'You a team, then?' he says, recovered. 'That body. That'll be Sam Henry. A plumber under contract. My name's William Jessop.' He reaches his right hand up along the steps, offering to shake. 'You can call me Jessop, or Will, I don't mind either way. I'm with New Shore Concrete. The site manager said if you answer right, to bring you on over. I guess you answered right.'

'Head on down, John. I'm not reading any trouble,' Cindy announces confidently, disappearing from view.

Stanton takes the steps. Reaching the landing, he accepts the shake, transferring the workcase to his left hand, and they begin on their way, edging around the pit. Stanton, however, finds himself outpaced by the sure-footed concreter, and also disconcerted by the lack of perimeter fencing enclosing the diggings. He treads carefully, yet dares a look down.

ELEVEN - THE THIRTEENTH RING

The excavation appears bottomless. The west side is marked by a gradual slope. A conveyor system operates along this, ferrying carts loaded with soil upwards, and empty carts downward. The far side is marked by a series of elevators, cages descending and ascending, carrying workers or goods. The cacophony of noise is ear-shattering. The yellow, heavy, pointed arch of a machine rises

from below, halting just short of the pit edge.

'See that hut there, that's the concreter's.' Stanton barely hears Jessop, but looking ahead, retreats from excavation rim to note that William stands waiting, pointing towards a EasyFormMiraclePlastics worker's hut directly to the left. A sign above the door, in plain block lettering, reads:

NEW SHORE CONCRETE

Stanton hurries awkwardly across the ground to make up the distance.

'The top outfit in concreting post-Tipping,' the concreter goes on to proudly explain. 'New Shore uses RoadCorpQuickSet for pit reinforcing and any slabs that need laying. Keeps the work going around the clock. Got giant lights for night, as you can see.' William needlessly points out the tower lights ringing the pit, before starting forward again.

Stanton draws in a deep breath. Feeling the welt of water through the tops of his boots, and the workcase growing progressively heavier.

TWELVE - THOMAS RHODES

'Right here, Mr. Stanton.'

The concreter is again at stop. They have wound their way to the middle of the housing constructs. The concreter indicates to the left.

'That red-colored hut.'

The hut differs markedly from those all around, not so much in construction, but looking to be a part of some permanent encampment sadly in disarray. From the door, a tattered, bright-orange awning stretches out, covering approximately ten-meters of EasyFormMiraclePlastics faux grass, at the end of which sits a sky-blue EasyFormMiraclePlastics outdoor setting. The table's two

chairs have been knocked over, the chair nearer the door resting forward against the table, and its opposite, completely upon its side on the faux grass. As for the table, it is littered with countless papers, books, and discarded food wrappers, while beneath, and across the mat, lies an equal countless number of dried and semi-dried lemon quarters, and further food wrappers, along with enough emptied food cartons to defy a catalogue. And over the table and mat, looks to crawl or hover the entirety of the nearby forest's insect population. The only sense of order comes from the console, sitting flipped open, and facing the chair by the door. A curtain of fung hangs over the scene.

'This is going to be interesting, John,' Stanton hears from Cindy. 'I'm reading an unstable mind occupying the house.'

'The site manager goes by the name of Thomas Rhodes, Mr. Stanton,' Jessop goes on to explain. 'You might want to wait here. Guessing he'll be out soon enough. That's his RTC right there. He gets around in that mostly.'

To the right side of the hut stands a RoadCorp Construction Transporter (RCT), a big-wheeled monster of a machine, biofueled. Stanton closes the distance on the concreter. As he does, the wire screen of the house bursts open, and fung curtain parts, as if on cue.

THIRTEEN - ICED TEQUILA

The site manager is clearly drunk. He wears heavily soiled, three-quarter length, white cargo pants, an oversized, floral-patterned red shirt, a battered, wide-brimmed straw hat, and brown leather Birkenstocks. He leans his extreme bulk against the door, and hanging on, allows the door to swing him down the steps and onto the faux-grass matting. There he stands swaying a moment, before taking two wavering steps towards the concreter.

'I've brought him in, Mr. Rhodes.' Jessop is the first to speak. 'Like you wanted.'

Rhodes turns fierce, pale-grey eyes on the man. 'Thank you, Jessop. You can go.'

The concreter remains standing, seeming hesitant to leave.

'Anything wrong, Jessop? Not enough work to do?' Rhodes demands, one eye to Stanton.

Jessop shakes his head. 'I was hoping'

'Hoping what, Jessop?'

Jessop looks down, skimming his boots across the mud.

'I was hoping, Mr. Rhodes, on staying. Is Kat'

'You're here to work, Jessop,' Rhodes barks. 'Nothing else. I suggest you get back to it.'

The concreter looks to the door of the house. He then quickly faces away, this his answer, and offering only a cursory nod to Stanton, before making his way back over the torn earth.

Rhodes turns towards Stanton. 'You better make this good.'

Stanton offers his hand. 'The name's John Stanton. Bio-investigator, representing EVOLVE. Like to ask some questions concerning the recent death.'

Rhodes nods absently, answering, 'The plumber,' as if that was all that needed to be said, and then takes a step back. 'If you'll excuse me a moment. The table's a little light on refreshment. I just need to step back inside.' The site manager makes his retreat, soon returning, by some miraculous effort, balancing an unopened bottle of tequila, a silver metal pale of ice cubes, and a glass decanter holding fresh lemon quarters. He continues on towards the tipped chair, seats himself, and unloads the items to the left of the console.

'Iced tequila, Mr. Stanton. My invention.' Rhodes looks up, seemingly very proud of himself. He indicates the fallen chair lying on the mat opposite, whilst drawing two unseen glasses from

the right and left thigh pockets of his cargo pants, beginning the preparation of the drinks.

Stanton makes no move towards the chair.

Rhodes continues with the drinks, adding four cubes of ice into each glass, following this with the juice of two quarters of lemon, then fills from the opened bottle of tequila, while throwing the lemon peel over his shoulder. He lifts his glass and sips, keeping hold of the glass.

'You're not sitting Mr. Stanton.' He takes a draught from the glass, setting it down with a satisfied flourish. The glass is strangely empty, even of the ice cubes.

'John ... be very careful of accepting the drink,' Cindy warns telepathically. 'I don't like this.'

FOURTEEN - A GLASS OR TWO

Rhodes removes his straw hat, slapping it down on the table to the right of the console. The entirety of the nearby forest's insect population seems to take flight. The hat removed; Rhodes reveals thinning brown hair that somehow manages to look artificial. Rhodes represents a complex picture, Stanton reflects. It is clear that the site manager is severely drunk, yet aspects of his demeanor remain in sharp focus.

'I'm waiting Mr. Stanton. I don't like to drink alone.'

Stanton looks to the faux grass matting. Some of the insect population appears to have returned. A haze of midges swarms over the discarded food wrappers and lemon peel. New on the scene, humping and squirming its way onto the far side of the mat is a giant centipede, half a meter in length.

Stanton dares his first step. A food wrapper immediately sticks to the sole of his right boot. He scuffs vigorously on the rough synthetic of the matting, failing to remove the wrapper, and

then continues grimly on. Reaching the fallen chair, he corrects it and seats himself opposite Rhodes, resting the case to the right of the chair.

Rhodes smiles and, leaning forward, pushes over Stanton's drink.

'Relax Mr. Stanton, unfortunate this death, Sam Henry. Drink up.'

Stanton looks to the glass. Beads of sweat glisten and run down its side. He decides to simply lift the glass and toy with it, buying time.

FIFTEEN - THE SWARMING

'The fung,' Rhodes continues. 'I don't think I need to explain the difficulties of hiring out here. Let's not start any unnecessary stories.'

Stanton looks to his drink. It is half-empty. He stares puzzled. 'John,' he hears from Cindy. 'I'm sorry to have to warn you again. Be careful.' Stanton returns his attention to the glass. It now rests completely emptied and, as with Rhodes glass previously, devoid of ice cubes. 'Let me prepare a refill,' he hears from Rhodes.

The site manager reaches over the table, taking up Stanton's glass. He refreshes the cubes, squeezes in the lemon, and as before, discarding the peel over his shoulder. He slides the glass over towards Stanton, and resting back in the seat, tabs at the console's keyboard, appearing to study awhile.

'I have compiled a full report,' Rhodes goes on in reference to the plumber. 'That's all you need to know. Forget about any further investigation.'

'But the fung,' Stanton finds himself saying. 'We'll need to examine the body.'

'I'm sorry,' Rhodes is quick on the defence. 'That won't be possible.'

'John,' Stanton hears from Cindy. 'Tough it out.'

'We demand it! The truth is out there!' Stanton abruptly finds inspiration, referencing words from somewhere he can't explain. 'And so are lies.'

'Demand it! And so are lies!' Rhodes parrots in return. 'What if I tell you we've already disposed of the body.'

'That would be an illegal act.' Stanton studies his drink. It rests empty once more. He frowns, feeling a deepening anxiety. 'I believe you're bluffing, Mr. Rhodes,' he goes on to say. 'That's denial of the right to investigate.'

'And, John,' Cindy hurriedly breaks in. 'Don't forget to tell him that EVOLVE has a vested interest on investigating the case. EVOLVE will become a household brand name. We'll be famous.'

'A right?' Rhodes continues to parrot in return, drinking down his glass.

'This is an opportunity for us,' Stanton hurries to follow on from Cindy's thread. 'We break the case, EVOLVE will go everplay on holocaust. We'll be everywhere, all the time, at once.'

'That's it, John, keep it up. Make sure he knows what's what.' Cindy encourages, in want of maintaining Stanton's pep. 'You've got him on the ropes.'

'I'd like to tell you what's what, Mr. Rhodes,' Stanton blurts out. 'You're on the ropes. The secret gets out. That's the knockout punch.'

Rhodes sits momentarily quiet, as if assessing. 'You're talking blackmail, Mr. Stanton. My interests against yours. I see you need another refill. Here ... let me help you.'

Stanton once more notes that his glass is empty. He happily accepts the refreshed glass, replying, 'Thanks, feel like I need it. Very refreshing. The ice.'

'You rowed in on a boat, Mr. Stanton,' Rhodes goes on to defend his argument. 'Twelve rings out from NLAX. Some achievement. I would have thought an aircar would have made the trip easier.'

Stanton doesn't bother to correct the misconception, even if partly true. 'Twelve rings out, nothing but a short hop, Mr. Rhodes. I see that you haven't heard? EVOLVE qualified and competed in last year's Water Olympics. We took back three gold medals, starting with the endurance trials. '

'I see, Mr. Stanton. And the boat now rests beneath the waters. What plans do you have for your return?'

'Can I have a refill,' Stanton asks, failing to answer the question, and pushing his glass towards Rhodes.

'Only too happy to oblige Mr. Stanton,' Rhodes answers.

Stanton suddenly notes that the EasyFormMiraclePlastics table is protein with movement. A sea of black. Divisions form within the black, segregating into lines, the divisions peeling out like waves.

'Tocandira ants, Mr. Stanton,' Rhodes begins on his explanation. 'Carnivorous. They've been rather a nuisance of late, but don't let that worry you, I've a way of settling them down.'

Rhodes draws the bucket of lemon quarters closer. Lifting out a lemon quarter, he proceeds to squeeze the juice over the black mass. The lines break, forming Rorschach patterns. 'The juice confuses their senses Mr. Stanton.' Rhodes explains, smiling openly. 'Let's continue.'

SIXTEEN - KATARINA MENDEZ

The door to the hut suddenly opens.

A young woman of Latino cast stands slouching against the door frame, wearing no more than an over-sized white shirt, unbuttoned the length of her cleavage. She carries a glass, the

loll of her head suggesting a drunkenness on the level with Rhodes.

Rhodes swivels around in the chair, facing her. 'Katarina!' He almost tips from the chair, but recovers with a desperate grip of his arms. 'Mr. Stanton has been waiting.'

She harrumphs, chuckling. 'Sorry, I was preoccupied.' She shakes the empty glass. 'I've been working on getting good and loaded. Maybe then Mr. Stanton and I can fuck?'

Stanton sits, eyes wide to the interruption, and then directs his gaze to his drink. A small, black speck floats amongst the ice cubes. Stanton brings the glass closer and squints. It is an ant.

'John,' Stanton hears urgently from Cindy. 'Don't drink that.'

Stanton drinks down the glass.

SEVENTEEN - THE REEF CELL

The EasyFormMiraclePlastics complex, reserved for the Mechanized Citizen Class (MEC), is one of many within Neo-Manhattan's West Village District. The cell is a one room rectangular cell, more often simply referred to as an ORC, measures 50-square meters; the walls and ceiling decorated coral reef themed, featuring an array of tropical fish swimming in an ocean of blue. Additionally, the cell is furnished from the EasyFormMiraclePlastics catalogue reef range, one short wall taken up by a coral-colored deskset, and the opposite picture wall by a green-colored couch, patterned with seashells, and a yellow-colored coffee table, equally patterned along the marine line, with bronze anchors. The only furnishing not of the EasyFormMiraclePlastics catalogue reef range, is the stainless-steel docking bed, positioned directly at the center of the floor space. Currently leasing the ORC is the newly minted S&C Detective Service, partnered by Mechanical citizen class 1, John Stanton, and the acquired learning evolving consciousness AI

(ALEC) Cindy, the Service granted licence by the StadtKummerDienst (SKD). John sits the deskset, wearing a finely cut brown suit, and brown fedora, he running his right hand up and down the length of the left forearm, feeling out the soft-wool fabric, this having become a habit. Cindy occupies the ten-centimeter high, black glass, tetrahedral-pyramid TeleHouse before him.

'Good morning, John,' Cindy wakes from the TeleHouse. materializing within the tetrahedral holo, her tone excited and perky. For the morning Cindy has chosen the look of a blue-eyed, honey-haired-blond, tan complexion grade 3, she dressed in low-heeled, red pumps, and otherwise holding the look of a Pan Am flight attendant, wearing a light-blue jacket, skirt, and flight cap. She rests her hands to her hips, kinking on knee suggestively to the side and forward. The hour is 05:58. Are you ready for your Beaky Snacks?'

'Each and every morning, Cindy.' John delivers her a broad smile, repeating his behavior of feeling out the soft-wool fabric of his suit forearm. Cindy takes note, responding, 'I understand your anxiety, John, but this only third day since opening. Perhaps Beaky will offer us a case? We are only three seconds away.' Cindy shrinks, positioning herself in the upper right-hand corner of the holo. 'Streaming now, John, *Mornings with Beaky Snacks.*'

John alters neither his straight-backed seating position, nor his smile.

EIGHTEEN - BEAKY SNACKS

Beginning the thirty-minute broadcast, emerging from deep within the holo, is the animated CWN logo. An oval-shaped world map, CWN inscribed in bold-blue within, it backflips over and over, until come to a stop, showing the logo clearly, and then tumbling back down through the holo. A quirky, electronic tune follows,

introducing the show's title star, Beaky the Pelican.

Beaky stands on a sun-drenched, blue-skied, yellow beach, kicking about a rainbow-colored, EasyFormMiraclePlastics beach ball, simultaneous to his beak scissoring the air in order to catch pink marshmallow fish into his beak sack. The last of the marshmallows caught, Beaky then suddenly faces the audience to announce in a high-pitched, excited voice, 'It's Mornings with Beaky Snacks, folks, wake and have a Beaky day.' A flash cut then follows, bringing on the animated logo of the shows principal sponsor, GeneDesign.

The animation begins with a bright-yellow, unblemished banana spinning and peeling. The fruit falls away, and in the empty space, *Your very own splice variants, your splice of life*, writes itself out, the words quickly morphing into the DNA helix, and then in a whir and blender dissolve, into an idealized piece of cherry cake. This ends the animation to bring on the host of Mornings with Beaky Snacks, Wade Robinson.

Wade rides in on his dental work. He introduces the show, his trademark beam impossibly increasing in length and breath, and then the beam to suddenly freeze after introducing the first of the show's secondary sponsors, RoadCorp.

RoadCorp's animated promo involves an eight-second Beaky bite. Beaky's trick is to snip away at the air with his beak, magically cutting out letters that eventually arrange to form RoadCorp's catchphrase, 'You'll talk the high road, and we'll take the low road, forever RoadCorp afore you.' Wade then returns to announce the sports roundup with Randy Wallis.

Wallis delivers for Blade Pursuit fans. Michael Paterniti, the lead waller for the Dallas All-Blacks, is again in the news; this time over an illegal leg bump that is to leave the runner for the Chicago Lights, Steven Gertner, in traction. Gertner is shown in hospital, legs suspended, saying, 'He's an animal. He doesn't

belong in Blade Pursuit, maybe skirt pursuit.' This is in reference to Paterniti's alleged stalking of long-time girlfriend Stephanie Steph. The sports roundup ends on this, bringing on the Beaky bite for the second of the secondary sponsors, Beck Industries.

'Turn on, tune in, drop in on Beck,' Beaky snips out the catchphrase in the same fashion as with RoadCorp. It is then back to Wade with split second timing, his trademark beam in full glow as he introduces Katie Shaw for the entertainment spotlight.

Line modeled from GeneDesign's starlet range, type: Venice Beach, Katie's blond gloss is set to max. She spins the gloss on TransRealityPlay (TRP) megastar Pete Egevang. Egevang's latest TRP, 'Noware,' once again breaking all monthly interactive play records. In Katie's interview with the virtual actor, Egevang first acknowledges his fans, before going on to state that 'Noware' is the first of a new franchise, Egevang's virtual beam almost to outshine Wade's trademark. This ends the entertainment spotlight, Katie handing back to Wade.

Wade wastes no time in acknowledging the third of the secondary sponsors, EasyFormMiraclePlastics. This gives Beaky the chance to bounce his EasyFormMiraclePlastics, rainbow-colored beach ball, it quickly to assume escape velocity seeming from holo itself. The clock now read 6:24:30

'Now for the breaking news, John,' Cindy announces proudly from her corner position.

John sits further erect, correcting the line of his shoulders.

NINETEEN - THE NEW CALIFORNIA SWAMPLANDS

Wade comes on, his trademark beam ready to light past the Earth itself. He reports: Folks, here is the breaking news. The citizens of New Los Angeles are being warned of the possibility of something mysterious and deadly looking to be lurking in the New California

swamplands.

Residents of the exclusive NLA domain, Maxim Heights, Mark and Michelle Shaw, after celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary last night with a dinner in New Hollywood, had been returning home along the Chaplin Highway at the edge of the New San Andreas Mountains (NSAM), when something was seen to loom over the darkened road. The hapless couple's pearl-white and chrome Mercedes AIEV was soon to find itself skidding in its wake, crashing the vehicle through the guardrail, and into the swamp below.

Both Mark and Michelle got out, and both got back onto the road. The AIEV's skid marks were clearly seen to be etched in the slime on the road. Mark was to run a finger in the mess, have it burn him, causing him to jump back and slip in the slime. He then found himself sliding down the steep incline deep into the mouth of the returning behemoth.

Michelle, reporting to authorities and the media upon her later rescue, recounted, 'It looked like a big fat worm, or the biggest Amazonian python you could imagine, only it had a large, circular orifice of a mouth that seemed to work like a giant vacuum cleaner.' Later, her description was to expand on detail: 'A total length of about ten meters, the majority of the length being taken up by a long tapering tail.' And Michelle was especially to know about the tail, as she went on to explain.

'The monster zigzagged back up the hill towards me super-fast after Hoovering up Mark. I thought I was gonna. Yet it rushed past. Perhaps it was satiated, having just eaten Mark, only its tail swept me back over the guard rail.'

Luckily for Michelle, alerted by EV's responder, she was soon found in the swamp reeds by the rangers, unconscious, but otherwise unharmed. A search for Mark followed immediately, yet the search was sadly to end with Mark's regurgitated, skinless and shriveled

body discovered upon a mound of swamp muck approximately three kilometers from where he was taken.

The swamp rangers now believe further deaths could be likely from this unknown menace. Citizens of the New California swamplands are being urged to observe extreme caution going out day or night.

This ends the breaking news.

Wade Robinson winks out with his smile, the CWN world map again rising from deep within the holo before returning down, and then it is immediately onto The Weather Wheel with Sunshine Bill.

TWENTY - KNOCKED OUT LOADED

'Mr Stanton, wakey, wakey.'

Rhodes snaps his fingers beneath Stanton's nose, his thick right arm extended around the console. 'A fresh drink perhaps?' he goes on to say, pointing down at the refilled glass beside the hapless investigator.

Katarina stands behind the bio-investigator's slumped form, giving massage to shoulders and neck, her large breasts spilling from the open shirt as she bends in. She gives up on her efforts, pushes herself erect, and reaches for the refreshed drink, downing the whole glass. 'Wasted on him, I'm afraid Thomas. And I was waiting on a good fuck.'

Rhodes sits back, saluting, downing his own refill, refilling, and looking to the bottle. 'Time for a fresh bottle. Allow me.'

The site manager struggles from the chair. He walks as if a marionette, pulled by strings, raising the knees high, and his arms in a flap. Coming to the steps and door, he soon disappears inside the hut. Then there is quiet. Katarina takes up his chair.

'Bio-investigator, you claim, Mr. Stanton. I'm sorry, you disappoint me. I would have thought your kind to have more

stamina.' She rubs at her breasts with one hand, extending it down between her legs. 'By God, don't you just want to fuck. This heat.'

Beneath the awning, and over the table, the fung spores thicken the air. A silence sets in.

TWENTY-ONE - RAFTING THE GREAT MISSISSIPPI

The picture wall displays a monochromatic collage of an old world, mega metropolis. No city in particular. The zigzag of tower roofs show silhouetted beneath a cloudless, but starless night, the windows of the towers lit, collectively burning thousands and thousands of kilowatts of energy. A reminder of another world. Certainly, a world long gone. The optical interface refreshes.

Two boys that might have been Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn ply a raft on what easily could be taken as the wide Mississippi, but isn't. One boy wears green three-quarter length cargo pants and a black tank top, and the other, khaki trousers and a red t-shirt. Each grip long poles, guiding their raft made out of blue plastic barrels and rusted, corrugated roof sheeting. In the distance, the peaks of suburban roofs show just above the waterline, stretching away like rocks to be hopped along. It is the obvious reminder. The Big Swim.

John continues with the habit of rubbing at his forearm. He then returns to the coral-colored deskset, seating himself back before Cindy's telehouse. She waits from her position in the corner. 'John, you've missed the Weather Wheel with Sunshine Bill,' she says sorrily, adding, 'Precipitation imminent.'

'Cindy,' John is quick to respond, ignoring her sentiment. 'Get me CWN, head office, Neo-Manhattan.'

'I'm sensing you've had an epiphany, John,' Cindy is quick to understand.

'Something in the water, Susan. Monsters?'

'I understand, John. CWN as you ask.'

A fresh window expands on the projected holo.

CWN reception proves itself to be EvoCorp's base model, a studio tanned, pert-nosed, blue-eyed, bob cut blond with a peachy smile. She wears a fever-green dress and sits a canary-yellow EasyForm-miracle-plastic deskset, a combination that needs only a watering can. She blinks awake, unwrapping herself from her acetate packaging, and stares out, high-curled eye lashes blinking. 'REP rewards, citizen. Welcome to Corporate World News. My name's Debra. How can I help?'

Assisting the new enterprise of Stanton & Cindy Detective Services is the compilation of the first edition of the **S&C Detective Services Handbook, A Comprehensive Guide to Better Detecting**, the guide largely assembled from nearly 180 years of detective film and literature. Opening the work on the lower right of the holo, John turns to film, and then lead actors, discovering the Bogart Affectation under Humphrey Bogart. Answering Debra, he brings a twitch to the lefthand corner of his lips, and sucking back through his teeth, says, 'REP rewards, returned, citizen. The name's Stanton, first name, John, representing S&C Detective Services. Here's the lay, sister. I'd like the chief wisenheimer running Beaky Snacks. And make it snappy. No runaround. Want you to know I got knuckles.'

Debra's blue eyes light with a twinkle. She then strokes a hand across the desk, the tips of the fingers showing perfectly manicured, metallic blue nails. 'My, my detective! Why the attitude? Did your bed give you a rough sleep last night?'

John thinks his riposte through.

'I don't sleep in a bed, sweetheart. That's for the soft type.'

'And I take it that's not you detective?' Debra's eyes light for the second time. 'But sorry as I am at not having you in a

bed, you're going to have to explain yourself a little better if you want the Beaky exec, that's unless you're happy to settle for the gaffer boy.'

Cindy suddenly interrupts.

'John, I've been monitoring. Did you notice the repeated twinkle in her eyes. She's a MOTWIS, a model other than what it seems. We might be in trouble.

John, quickly losing confidence, abruptly begins to rub vigorously rub at his arm. At best, he thinks, he might be able to tough it out. He grits his teeth, again sucking back through his teeth, saying, 'You're some doll Debra, but this gaffer boy, maybe he's running your organization, I don't know. I'm calling about Mark Shaw's big kiss off. I want the tomatoes. And no more runaround.'

Cindy slaps a hand to her forehead, gasping, 'John, I don't believe you had that last idiom quite right. Try again.'

John quickly corrects, 'Sorry, I meant potatoes.'

Debra seems to develop several smiles at once, Cindy breaking into a strangled cry. Debra goes on to say, 'Here we have a conversation getting more and more interesting, detective.' Debra answers, adding another smile. 'You're talking about the New California swampland. I hope you've got a big enough gun if you intend going out there to investigate. There've been reports of something mysterious and deadly inhabiting the waters.'

John abruptly finds inspiration, snapping out, 'Thanks for the concern sweetheart. Concerning that gun, anytime you care to measure my Roscoe, I'll lay it out for you. Goes the same with gaffer boy. Only on him, I'll lay it out double.'

Debra waits before responding, 'Very well, detective. We'll skip the gaffer boy for now. You'll be speaking with Ronald Horace Maxwell, executive in charge of production for the New East Coast (NEC). I've forwarded him your details. And just a small warning.

You'll need to keep both barrels loaded on that Roscoe interviewing Maxwell. He's not exactly one for straight talk. REP rewards, citizen.'

Cindy gives her immediate response, telelinking, 'John, she's right. I have the research. Maxwell was a teenage resident in old Chicago when the Big Swim was to see Lake Michigan fill with enough water to have it reclassified an ocean. His parents lost everything like nearly everyone, but for Ronald, after losing his parents to the funny farm, his options on recovery have put him at the head of the line as a standout candidate in need of a pharmaceutical health bath.

John waits on the opening of the link to Ronald Horace Maxwell, increasingly rubbing at his forearm.

TWENTY-TWO - THREE AT A TABLE

It is morning, the sun a furnace, the fung blackening. Three occupy the sky-blue EasyFormMiraclePlastics outdoor setting beneath the tattered, bright-orange awning, Stanton, Rhodes, and Mendez, each is asleep, Stanton and Rhodes with their heads pillowed on the table, and Mendez slumped by Stanton's side, head against a thigh. Along with the sleeping table occupants, a fresh bottle of tequila rests to the left of the console, and opposite, the condiments, the metal pale of ice cubes, the cubes sadly melted, and the glass decanter of lemon quarters, the quarters as fated as the cubes, each dried.

'John,' Cindy telelinks. 'I'm sorry, too much tequila. I did warn you.'

Stanton does not stir.

TWENTY-THREE - SOMETHING FEEDING THE FLOWERS

A bleep sounds from the tetrahedral housing. Ronald Horace Maxwell shows on holo.

The executive producer sits an electric-purple, EasyForm Plastics deskset. He presents as the archetypical news producer, holding a thick, smoldering stogie in a fat fingered hand, having a square jaw and face, thick black moustache above thick lips, curled, black hair graying at the temples, and hairy forearms exposed by folded back, white shirtsleeves, and otherwise wearing a green, sunflower patterned vest, the flowers themselves looking to have something feeding them, perhaps Debra's watering can, the flowers seeming to grow past the vest and into the room office itself. Maxwell barks out, 'REP rewards, detective, like to congratulate you, you got past Debra.' This said, he pauses to puff on the stogie, blowing out a thick cloud of gray smoke, and then continues, adding, 'And let me tell you, she's more than your standard sun-studio blond, never mind the watering can. Now, how can I help you, detective? See you also have a personal, Cindy. Expect you're a class team.'

After a moment, David telelinks Cindy, questioning, 'Cindy, how do we handle this one?' and hears, 'Just keep with the Bogart Affectation, John, throwing in some light banter. That should keep him off guard.' John wastes little time, quipping, 'REP rewards returned, citizen. Nice vest,' to which Cindy sends a thumbs up from the corner of the telehouse.

'That's functional adaptive biofabric, detective. FAB for short.' Maxwell chomps down on the stogie, proceeding to work it left to right around his mouth. 'Glad you like it. New on the market. Kind of grows on you, don't you think. That's the claim at least!'

'I think it's working out swell, Mr. Maxwell.' John thinks to continue with the banter, and then gets straight to the point. 'Hear you're the exec on Beaky Snacks. Concerning this morning's

show, S&C would like to know if you could add more to the Beaky on Shaw?'

Maxwell's stogie immediately comes to a sorry stop, sagging at the righthand corner of his mouth. 'The Shaws,' he barks out, pinching the stogie from his lips. 'A pair of swells. What do I care? The Devil should have taken then both!' He returns the stogie, renewing its returning movement. 'What's your interest, detective?'

John thinks hurriedly. He must appear sympathetic to the producer, whilst understanding that a detective agency is always pressed to make ends meet, fielding clients a craps shoot, and that in the end there might be nothing in this case for S&C Detective Services. He answers, 'I believe I can put that simply, Mr Maxwell. S&C Detective Services would like to think Michelle would pay handsomely for answers. For example, what was it exactly that had her husband end up a skinless sausage?'

Cindy sends on a further thumbs up from her corner position of the telehouse.

'Solid reasoning, detective.' The producer exhibits a curt nod. 'And good business sense. Can't fault you there.' He removes the stogie a fresh and makes a case of studying it before going on to say, 'I hear your just starting out in the gumshoe game, but I can see going by your smarts that your agency has a big future in detecting. I'd like you to know that we're in the shoe business ourselves. We got a different angle on it though. Investigative reporting, we call it. We got the best reporters covering the best stories delivering the best possible reportage. In fact, got some breaking news to let you in on right now. How's this for a headline?' Maxwell brings up his left hand, holding the fingers in the air as if about to catch a ball, and moving the hand left to right, air writes, saying, '**MAN SLEEPS WITH ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE,**' and then dropping the hand, adds, 'Headlines don't get much bigger

than that, detective. Happy to run with that as the opener on Beaky Snacks tomorrow. Now detective' the executive producer pauses for a stogie break, dragging on the stogie heavily before blowing out a thick cloud of gray smoke, and then going on to explain, 'Here's what I have to confess detective. We sent Our Best down on the Devil case. That's your competition right there. Walter McKay. Suspect you've heard of him?'

Cindy hurriedly interjects, telelinking, 'John, I really thought Debra was trouble, but Maxwell's pharmaceuticals have him hitting the ball clear over the bleachers. You have to keep on with the Bogart Affectation. I believe that's your only chance of winning the game.'

John hurriedly returns to bringing into play the full strength of the Bogart Affectation, maximizing the twitch to the left upper corner of his lips, and sucking back through his teeth as if to take in a huge sip of sherbet. 'Listen good Max, you've sent a rookie newshawk down into the swamplands of NLA. When do you expect him to file? Maybe he's bought the farm.'

It takes a while for the producer to get the stogie back between his lips and smoldering.

TWENTY-FOUR - MIDMORNING

It is midmorning, the fung curtain opening as if on a new set. Will Jessop approaches the site manager's hut, stepping over the rutted, muddied earth determinedly, but also with some hesitancy, occasionally slowing in his stride. Coming to within ten meters of the awning, he halts and takes in the scene.

Stanton, Rhodes, and Mendez remain frozen asleep in a tragic tableau, as if one taken from a morality play. Rhodes appears the sorriest, his head side down upon the sky-blue EasyFormMiraclePlastics table, the flab of the cheek splayed out,

oozing away. Stanton almost equally sorry, as if a flopped fish, head tipped into his hat, and arms dangly either side of the table corner. Mendez is the most composed within the tableau, an Eve succumbed to sinful temptation, finely sculptured Latino features in tranquil relief against Stanton's thigh, eyes closed as if enveloped in pleasant dream, breasts firm and falling through the open white shirt, bronze legs folded under her, gleaming gold in the sun.

Jessop continues to take in the scene, moved by the tragedy, and then recovers. Quickly beside Mendez, he squats beside her, and brushes at the fall of a dark wave of hair across her cheek, sweeping it behind the ear. Mendez abruptly wakes. Shocked by Jessop's presence, she stands and kicks at the concrete with a bare foot. Jessop falls back violently, hit clean beneath the chin. Mendez then makes an immediate grab for the fresh bottle of tequila, unscrewing the lid, and taking a huge swig.

'You useless prick,' she shouts, glaring at the concrete and cackling. 'I'm interested in getting good and loaded. Nothing like fucking on the glow. Only -.' She glares over at Stanton. 'He's just as useless as you. She drinks a fresh and stumbles away towards the hut steps, 'This bottle's not going to last long. Time to open a new crate,' but she stumbles and falls face down on the steps, leaving her buttocks and black lace g-string exposed.

Jessop looks towards Stanton. The bio-investigator has slipped from the chair, coming to lie amidst the lemon peels and discarded food wrappers. Jessop struggles to his feet, resolved to take his part in the tragic interplay of events, lifts Stanton, and with Herculean effort, carries him back across the torn earth.

TWENTY-FIVE - OK DETECTIVE

'Farm you say, detective?' Maxwell centers the stogie in his mouth

as if making a full stop. He then hurriedly plucks it free, going on to query, 'Don't quite know what you mean there, detective. McKay's expense account didn't extend to the purchase of real estate. But I guess you wouldn't know that. Can't blame you there. McKay's only been with a short while. One week in fact.' Maxwell extends his left hand out to the side, returning it in the grip of a thick glass ashtray that looks to hold enough dead stogie to repopulate a plantation if only they were fit enough to grow again. He secures the current stogie in the tray, producing an eruption of gray ash and stogie relocation, going on to explain. 'Only you could be onto something about why McKay hasn't filed, never mind the real estate. We were expecting a Pulitzer from him on first assignment. That's the faith we had. But nothing!' Maxwell extends his left hand out to the side once more, this time has it returns with a huge, pink-colored, EasyFormMiraclePlastics humidor. He flips the lid, digs out a fresh stogie, produces a palm sized chrome Zippo from his flowered vest pocket, flicks it open with the characteristic Zippo ping, but strikingly louder, and lights with a flame that reaches as high as his nose. Drawing in heavily, almost lost in the cloud of smoke when he exhales, he offers, 'I'd like to extend your agency a proposition, being a top outfit in detecting. Want you to find McKay. CWN will spare no expense. First tier flight on a ClayFord dirigible. The best hotel in Stink City. The Paradise Gate. And CWN is prepared to triple your normal rate of pay for as many days as you need on the assignment. That's because we know talent.

'We've got a real track record here at CWN for hiring only the top players in a field. But I suspect you know that, detective, that's why you came to us. Take Wade Robinson for example. Woody Osheroff is how he started out. Naturally we knew we had some work to do. His name, firstly. John and Jane Public like a tag they can get a handle on. Nothing foreign sounding. We came up with Wade

Robinson. Talking desk names, Wade Robinson's one straight out of the books. Probably heads the list. And what about those pearlers? Miracle of orthodontics right there. Turn the light on in a room at first break of a smile. Not at first though. Wade's teeth looked like they'd done ten rounds with a gorilla before we set to work. That's how we take care of our stars. Next, we set to work on the tan. It's not from a bottle you know. Genetically modified epithelial skin cells. MESC for short. Simple procedure. We sit him out in the sun each day. No more than a minute for the right glow. We got a roof for the job right here.' Maxwell points upwards with a finger. 'Express lift takes him direct from his room in the chair. Timer counts off and he's back straight back. The way we have it worked; surprised Wade doesn't outshine the sun!' Maxwell suddenly makes a considered study of the fresh stogie pinching it from his mouth. 'Well ... probably not the sun. Full moon on a dark night maybe.'

John sits uncertainly, rubbing at his arm, and fidgeting about. Perhaps this was a real test for S&C Detective Services? Maxwell seemed to be working his own game of scrabble. Letters connected, but not sentences. He questions Cindy to have her reply, 'David, let's not worry. Think about it. We set ourselves the job of investigating Shaw's death. Now CWN want us investigate the disappearance of Walter McKay, giving us a second case. If the two are linked, we could be investigating Shaw's death at CWN's expense. This is what's known as a windfall. Flatter the producer. Let's here out his deal.' John nods, beginning, 'Good to have you in bed with us, Mr. Maxwell. Here's to sleeping with you.' Cindy gives her first thumbs up.

Maxwell sits frowning, as if not understanding the reference, then suddenly lights up. 'Bed! right, sorry. You had me there a moment. Want you to know I'm a married man. Married to CWN in fact. Never leave the office. Got my bed right here in this chair. That's

my sleeping arrangement.' The producer draws heavily on the stogie, the end glowing red hot. 'So I take it you're accepting the offer. You've made the right decision. I can see the copy already.' Maxwell repeats his earlier habit of air-writing, bringing up his hand and speaking out, **OUR MAN IN THE SWAMP SAVING OUR BEST**, and then dropping the hand to add, 'I'll have Debra draw up the paperwork right away. Wash ... expect she already has it ready. That's Debra for you, one step ahead before you make any move. Want you to remember that, detective. She'll be your principle contact on assignment. Indispensable. Like I've been explaining. We only the hire best in field. Said it right there on her packaging in large type. NO BASE MODEL. PROVIDED WITH OWN WATERING CAN. And I can tell you that's some can. Used it myself. Look at these flowers.' Maxwell puffs out his chest, the sunflowers seemingly brighten, the yellow taking on a glinting gold. 'And regarding the paperwork. Want you to feel confident there to. The standard contract. Small print to a minimum. Only twenty-two pages. See you in the swamp, detective.' Maxwell suddenly blinks away, immediately to be replaced by Debra.

'Like to congratulate you, detective,' Debra begins. 'You survived the Big Swim. I have the paperwork ready. I believe you'll find everything in order. You can just sign and return. And, detective,' Debra's eyes suddenly light with the familiar twinkle. 'As much as I understand you've no need for a bed, as your principal contact on assignment, I'm hoping you'll find some inspiration in alternative sleeping arrangements. The Paradise Gate. I can't wait to be sharing that bed. REP rewards, citizen. Goodbye for now.' Debra blinks away, seeming to leave an afterglow through the holo. From her default position at the corner of tetrahedral telehouse, Cindy stares after Debra, as if trying to catch some of the glow, and then faces David directly.

'She's a real sweetie, John. Just want you to know about those

sleeping arrangements. No jealousy on my part. She's a MOTWIS after all.

John rubs at his forearm, answering, 'Listen, kid, my bed's for one, and you're the one. Got my Roscoe locked and loaded.'

Cindy glows with a smile that lights the holo interface to white hot.

TWENTY-SIX - A TEQUILA STRAIGHTENER

'Roll over baby. Time for a straightener.'

Rhodes has his hand to the bottle, pinched from Mendes as she lies on the hut steps. He sways on his feet, looking about, slurring, 'Hey, Kat, we're missing someone?'

Katarina struggles awake. Soon on her feet, she grabs the bottle from the site manager and immediately take a huge swig. She then pours the remainder of the drink over her naked breasts, soaking the white shirt, having it cling firmly to golden tanned sides, she yelling out, 'Do you like baby? Suck on this. Tequila milk,' as she thrusts her breasts forward.

Rhodes, swaying violently on his feet, makes a grab at the breasts, only to have Katarina kick him directly between the legs and shout, 'Later baby. Need a fresh bottle first.' She tosses the bottle down, leaving it clanking down the steps to lie of the site manager, and then turns back towards the hut door. 'I remember now. Need to open a new crate. Six more bottles. Plenty to get through the day.'

Rhodes, falling onto his back, moans and thrashes on the litter strewn faux grass EasyFormMiraclePlastics mat, the emptied Tequila bottle knocking about between his feet. 'More, baby, give it to me, pour it from your lips.' Rhodes glares at the bottle, seeing the fung spores swirl over it. An arrowhead of fung spores forms, aiming directly at the open bottle neck, and enters. Rhodes

makes a grab for bottle, manages to take hold, sits up, and drinks.

TWENTY-SEVEN - THE PAPERWORK

David continues to sit quietly, differing only with a look of smugness to his otherwise bland, emotionless features. The CWN paperwork shows on the telehouse holo as a yellow cube wrapped with red ribbon, spinning slowly about. Cindy brings up LegalEase, represented as an old-fashioned, brown leather, double-latched work case. She opens the case and drops the paperwork within. The paperwork is immediately spat back out.

'John,' Cindy immediately replies, staring out from the holo sorrily, and going on to say, 'Sorry to say, bad news on the paperwork. I have the summation from LegalEase. It reads, *This is complete bullshit.* End quote. Just give me a moment. Cindy quickly dives into the suitcase, soon to remerge. 'Ok, John, I had a chat with LegalEase. The firm believes we can sign, arguing ...' Cindy pauses a moment, as if refusing to accept the clarification she is about to give, finally blurting out, 'It's all account of the paper work. At twenty-two pages as you know, LegalEase claims that it can't even untangle the first page, never mind the rest, so we can claim that we signed an uninterruptable contract, affectively meaning we can't be held to responsible for anything within. We're safe.'

Confident now, John begins an immediate A to Z search of the S&C Detective Services Handbook, laying it out. 'Okay, kid, what a grift. We got noddles for paper work, two on the lam, one from a giant hoover, the other from a dingus, a broad pulling a dutch, and we're booked on the Hindenburg, first tier seat to Swampsville. What a pair of boobs?'

Cindy responds. 'Good kale, though.'

TWENTY-EIGHT - A PICTURE OF GRAY

The interior of the New Shore Concrete's EasyFormMiraclePlastics worker's hut represents the latest from the EasyFormMiraclePlastics corporate catalogue, no expensive being spared for the Thirteenth Ring Project. The living room is a picture in gray, navy gray walls and ceiling, navy-gray, EasyFormMiraclePlastic faux wool carpet. A deskset of stainless steel occupies the center, the couch, along with matching chairs, is of a dark-gray, EasyFormMiraclePlastics soft foam, the coffee table sitting its length formed of tightly-meshed reinforcing steel. Stanton lies unconscious on the couch, head cradled on the arm. Dean Jessop sits the deskset occupied with the molecular screen. He shifts and manipulates frames, making a careful study of each, while every now and then casting a look over his shoulder to check on Stanton.

TWENTY-NINE - THE WEATHER WHEEL WITH CITY SUNSHINE BILL

The next day begins with the 0600 broadcast of CWN's Weather Wheel. John Stanton sits the coral-colored deskset, Cindy taking her default corner position within the tetrahedral holo. As each wait, John rubs at his left arm, as his habit, and Cindy corrects the side tilt of her Pan Am flight cap. She announces, 'One second till streaming, John.'

The Weather Wheel is on. CWN's animated logo plays out first. Quickly thereafter, the holo fills with animated, pitch-black storm clouds flaring with electrical charges. The clouds burst, showing down hundreds of unfurling, brightly colored umbrellas. Twelve citizens wait in a circle on the street below, each wearing coolskins that run the gamut of types from designer, service, to everyday. Catching the umbrellas, the twelve begin on a circular

march, twirling the umbrellas above their heads. An overhead, kaleidoscope point of view is then taken, Busby Berkeley style, the circling and twirling of the colored umbrellas quickly picking up speed until reaching whiteout. The white soon fades, bringing the circle of colored umbrellas back into view, they then to dramatically morph into the show's real life pictorial Weather Wheel. Seen on a neon-lit, gaudy, pollutant streaming sidewalk, massed with coolskin-clad citizens, a gap suddenly forms in the crowd, and through this, as if first to have seen the Wheel, springs City Sunshine Bill, host of the Weather Wheel, to stand himself beside it.

Bill is dressed in his trademark ensemble, a gold lamé coolskin, over which he wears a green overcoat heavily embroidered with weather symbol decals. His hair is as gold as the coolskin, and worn swept back in a high, brilliant quiff that crowns a golden-tanned, chiselled, matinee idol handsomeness. Bill bows to the rapidly assembling crowd before the wheel with a flourish, and with cheery smile, delivers the trademarked lead in, saying, 'Wash of a morning. folks, it's CWN's Weather Wheel, giving you the real weather, for real folk, in real time, right when you need it. You can't beat that, folks.' City Sunshine Bill now winds up his arm, circling it three times wildly through the air, and then with a showy push of the hand, brings the Weather Wheel into play, saying, 'What's your guess for today, folks? A sudden precipitation? A cloud break? A rise in humidity?'

The surrounding citizens jostle and shove at each other in want of getting closer to the wheel. Others join from up and down the street.

The wheel continues its spin. The selector flap kicks vigorously over the pins, the wheel threatening never to stop. The citizens press closer.

'Only on CWN for the real weather folks,' Bill announces, he

suddenly looking to the wheel, it seemingly slowing. At last, the selector flap catches limply between two pins. Bill bends in closer, studying the pictorial. Then punches his arm high in the air, exclaiming, 'How about that, folks, a cloud break at 10:35 hours.'

The coolskin clad citizens can barely contain themselves as they jump up and down and cheer. Bill returns the excitement with a broad grin, adding, 'Looks like it's going to be a sunny day right here in Neo-Manhattan, folks. You be sure now to go out and catch those rays, you hear. And have a wash of a day, seeing you back again tomorrow for CWN's Weather Wheel, giving you the real weather, for real folk, in real time.'

The citizens immediately disperse up and down the street, as if only to eager set about the task of the day, to catch the rays of the 10:35 hour cloud break.

The Weather Wheel now starts on its closing animation. This begins with City Sunshine Bill breaking into a huge smile that rounds out into a facsimile of a bright sun, the sun increasingly brightening, until bleaching out Bill and the scene in a golden haze, the haze then morphing back into the animated weather wheel, followed by the circling, umbrella twirling citizens, and finally the storm clouds, which blaze with the closing credits.

David gives his immediate response, intoning flatly, 'We better be sure to get out of here for the break,' leaving Cindy to add, 'For all its worth.'

DRAFTING

THIRTY - JESSOP

From where he sits at the stainless steel deskset, Jessop continues to manipulate the frames on the molecular screen, enlarging and

shrinking. The frames are being fed around the clock from multiple camera points within the construction site. His is a shared duty. Two other concrete managers are in employ. Each on eight-hour shifts in an alternating pattern, one-hour desk, one-hour patrol, and repeat. A relentless schedule, induced by what RoadCorp was proud to refer to as QuickSet's flora and fauna biome. The enzymatic activity of the biome was fixed to have the concrete cure within five-minutes from mix to release. A fresh frame comes in. Jessop stares in shock.