

## THE HOLE

Elliot's friend Jason posted it—seven seconds of video from the depths of sublevel two-ninety-eight in which a disembodied leather glove swiped at the camera, then grabbed a door by the knob and slammed it shut. Elliot searched every frame for signs of forgery.

“Gotta be fake,” he said.

“It's real, bro,” said Jason, “we're gonna check it out. Meet us at the hideout.”

A warm perfume of cinnamon and butter wormed into Elliot's closet, distracting him from his tablet.

“I'll think about it,” he said, then disconnected from the chat and snatched his earbuds from his head. He burst into the living room where his three sisters were crowded around the table in their usual spots. They were giggling and stuffing their faces with morsels from a perfect white box in the center. His dad stood nearby, beaming.

“Eliot!” said his dad, “come have a treat.”

Hunger overtook him as he pushed into his seat, elbowing between Aria, the youngest, and Elissa, his twin. Inside the box was a memory from his childhood—back when his father's work permit was still accepted on the upper levels—a clump of cinnamon rolls, pasted with frosting. He ripped off a corner and popped it into his mouth.

Sweet heaven.

After a few more bites, he came to his senses. “How did you get this?” he asked.

“Son, my ticket finally came due.”

“What do you mean?”

“I got an interview with Allied Nine,” he said, then scooted around Elliot and searched through his wardrobe.

“Ha-ha, Dad, very funny.”

“I’m serious.” His dad pulled a shoebox from the bottom drawer and dumped the contents on the table—neckties. He held two of them up to his chin. “Which one of these says, *I’m the man for the job?*”

“Allied Nine killed Simon,” said Elliot.

“You don’t know that.”

“Everyone on sublevel forty-nine disappeared. Dad, you can’t work for them.”

His dad slammed a palm on the table. “What else am I supposed to do?” he said. Elliot’s sisters stopped giggling. “I can’t keep scraping by in Utility Support. That job is sucking the life out of me and it barely pays for groceries.”

“But, Dad—”

“Enough,” said his dad, raising a finger. “With this job, you and your sisters won’t have to eat surplus rations anymore. And, I’ll be able to afford training so we can claw our way out of this pit. It’s a done deal. The interview is at 10.”

His dad cinched an orange tie around his collar. “Clothes make the man, Elliot, and with this job I can put some clean ones on your back. Now, how do I look?”

Elliot slumped and analyzed his dad. The tie was nice, but dated, and he hadn’t shaved in days—razor too rusted. “You look great, Dad,” said Elliot.

His dad stepped over him and opened the door to their compartment. “I won’t be back until late tonight. There’s a pack of P9’s in the hopper you can hydrate for dinner. Make sure Aria doesn’t stay up late.” The door slammed and Elliot was left in silence with his sisters.

“I don’t know why you argue with him,” said Elissa. “It’s not like he’ll get the job.”

“Leave him alone,” he said.

“He’ll mess it up like always and have to ask Grandpa for money.”

She probably was right. Their dad had struggled with everything since mom died. “At least he’s trying,” said Elliot.

“Why do you have to defend him all the time?” she said.

“Stop fighting!” shouted Amalie. She was two years younger than Elliot and Elissa, but older than Aria so she paid attention when her siblings talked.

Elissa ran her fingers through Amalie’s hair. “Sorry, chunky-monkey,” she said.

“I gotta go,” said Elliot, then ran out the door before anyone could protest.

Their compartment was located inside Chu’s Fish Market on sublevel seventy-three. How exactly Chu managed to acquire fresh seafood this deep in the complex was a question nobody could answer. As for Chu, she was an ancient woman who would tattle on Elliot if she caught him, so he hid behind a bin of old squid, holding his breath and waiting for a customer to distract her. His opportunity came when Myrtle, the sublevel’s resident busybody, burst in to complain about the new family that had moved into Noam’s vacant cubicle.

“Honestly,” said Myrtle, “they’re not even trying to meet their neighbors.”

“Do they like fish?” asked Chu.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” said Myrtle. “Orna saw them move in—a man with a young boy—she said they were skin and bone. The father looked like a fedora wearing a trenchcoat and nothing much else. If I had to guess, they’re probably vegan—not that anyone here has eaten more than a morsel of real protein in ages.” She looked at Chu’s inventory. “No offense.”

“None taken,” said Chu.

Elliot slipped out and ran through the market, pushing through the crowd toward Noam's Gadgets 'n Gifts. Noam saw him coming and stepped on the loose manifold cover that led to the balcony on sublevel seventy-four.

"Where're you off ta?" asked Noam.

"Hideout."

"Gotta pay the toll."

Elliot thought for a moment. "What can you never eat for breakfast?"

Noam scratched his stubbled chin and stared into the distance. A sparkle of curiosity glimmered in his eye when he answered, "Salad?"

"Lunch," said Elliot, grinning.

Noam exploded into laughter, slapping his knee and opening the path to the sublevel below. Elliot noticed he was wearing brand new leather Oxfords, polished to a perfect shine.

"Nice shoes."

"Ain't they fine? Traded a month in the cubicle for 'em."

Elliot peered at the six square doors that lined the back of Noam's shop. His friend Simon used to live in the one on the top right, but he disappeared three months ago. Everyone said his father got hired by Alpha Nine—that they had fled to a new community and never looked back—but Elliot didn't think Simon would have left without saying anything. He wondered about the new kid who moved in, but that made him miss Simon a little more so he shrugged it off.

He waved goodbye to Noam and slipped under the manifold cover into the old exhaust system that ran between sublevels. The network of unused pipes and fans eventually led to a balcony on sublevel seventy-four. He leaned over the edge and looked up, hoping to catch a

glimpse of Sol, but the gap between buildings was obscured by thick smog above. Disappointed, he climbed out to a maintenance ladder and made his way down.

The hideout was an old maintenance room on sublevel eighty-six that the kids had converted into a staging area for the spoils they hauled up from below. Nobody lived lower than sublevel eighty-one, and the uninhabitable Barrens didn't start until sublevel ninety, so the hideout was relatively safe and secluded. Jason and Carline were already there.

"Told ya he'd come," said Carline.

"Of course I came," said Elliot. "You guys never make it out of the Barrens without me."

"We'll see how brave you are once we're below one-fifty," said Jason. None of them had ever gone lower than sublevel one-twenty-four. There was a deadly plasma burn blocking the way down. The fire had burned for a hundred years and it had enough fuel to keep burning for a hundred more.

"I'm telling you, the video is fake," said Elliot. "Nobody can get past the fire, let alone make it all the way down to two-ninety-eight."

"I found a hole," said Jason.

Elliot looked at Carline. She shrugged and looked back at Jason.

"You went down there alone?" asked Elliot.

"If you get stuck down there, you could die, idiot," said Carline.

"It's not a big deal," said Jason, "we've been through every level from here to one-twenty-three a hundred times. I took the same precautions as always."

"You found a hole?" asked Elliot.

"It's in the dry cleaners," he said with a mischievous nod.

Passage to the lower levels was a dream. Scavengers like themselves had claimed everything of value from the upper Barrens. If they could get below the fire there's no telling what riches they'd find.

"Show us," said Elliot.

They spent the next hour navigating the desolate subsystems and abandoned compartments that were the Barrens. The air below sublevel one-thirteen was toxic, so they activated their rebreathers before pushing onward. Eventually they arrived at one-twenty-four where the heat from the plasma burn raised the temperature to uncomfortable levels.

Jason guided them to the dry cleaners, then held up two fingers and pointed at a broken window about fifteen feet up. Elliot unrolled a cable ladder from his pack and launched it at the window. The ladder's pinions dug into the metal siding of the shop, then flashed a green LED indicating that it was secure. One by one they scaled the wall and dropped down into the cleaners. Once inside, their sensors indicated safe levels of toxicity, so they removed their rebreathers. The shop was dark and humid, like standing in a giant mouth.

"So, where's this hole?" asked Carline.

"In the back, behind one of the big loaders. I never would have found it if I hadn't fallen asleep."

"You did what?" asked Elliot.

"Crazy, right? Coming down alone wore me out. When I woke up I felt a light breeze. There's a draft—"

Jason's eyes went wide. "Who's there?" he shouted.

Elliot caught a glimpse of a kid darting through a back door. He seemed puffy, like he was inside too many sweaters, and he wore several baseball caps, the brims of which jutted in different directions.

“Who else did you tell about the hole?” asked Elliot.

“No one, I swear.”

“Maybe he’s reasonable,” said Carline, “we can work together and split what we find.”

“That’s a big maybe,” said Elliot, “but we gotta catch up to him first.”

They ran to the door, then carefully entered the back of the shop.

“This is different,” said Jason. Clothes were sprawled everywhere, plastering the walls and floor. Sweaters, socks and pants spiraled in patterns, culminating in a tight vortex behind a large machine that long ago loaded the nearby washers. The kid with too many sweaters and baseball caps was struggling to squeeze between the wall and the machine.

“Stop,” shouted Elliot, “we’re not gonna hurt you.”

The kid froze, then turned to look at them.

There was no face.

Elliot blinked. The hair stood out on his neck as he looked through the empty space where the kid’s head should be and instead saw the neckline of the sweaters and the underside of the baseball caps. The not-kid’s sweaters flattened against the wall and it slipped behind the machine.

“What did I just see?” said Elliot.

“Help me move this thing,” said Jason, grabbing the machine.

“Maybe we should go back,” said Carline.

Elliot put his shoulder next to Jason and they pushed. The metal feet squealed against the floor, resisting their effort, but after a long struggle they shifted it away from the wall. The pattern of clothes spiraled to an opening in the floor about two feet wide. Elliot leaned over the edge and looked down. A warm fragrance of cleaning chemicals wafted up from the dark hole, stinging his nose and making his eyes water. He couldn't see deeper than a few feet.

"What do you think this is?" he asked.

"Maybe there's a whole civilization down there," said Jason, "living under the fire. Maybe they evolved to be invisible."

"Takes way more than a hundred years to evolve something like that," said Elliot.

Carline was white as a sheet. "We can't go down there," she said.

"I'm not leaving a score like this," said Jason, "passage to the lower Barrens is a goldmine."

Elliot put his hand on Carline's shoulder. "Let's send the drone down," he said, "at least get some video."

Carline hesitated for a moment, then nodded. She took off her pack and withdrew a utility drone she had scavenged from the Barrens years ago. This little buddy had helped them find countless small treasures hidden in the crannies where other scavengers failed to look. She activated the gyroscopic systems and the three of them stared at the control panel's monitor as she hovered the drone over the hole and sent it slowly down.

The hole ran down vertically for about thirty feet before sloping forty-five degrees for another ten, ending at a metal grate. The bars of the grate formed tall diamonds covered in ancient lint, hanging in clumps and threads out into a large chamber below. There was no sign of the kid.

“It’s some kind of ventilation system,” said Elliot.

“Can you squeeze through there?” said Jason.

“Maybe,” said Carline. She maneuvered the drone to one of the diamonds, rotated it onto its side and glided smoothly through the opening.

“Poggers,” said Jason.

The large chamber was lined with barrels along one wall, and access panels exited the room in each cardinal direction. The floor was also grated, but slop and grime clogged most of the holes below.

“No sign of the... kid,” said Elliot.

Carline flew the drone over to the barrels. “Might be fuel,” she said.

“Probably just cleaning chemicals,” said Jason.

The drone rotated around them, searching for a label. “Got it,” she said, lining up on a brittle piece of parchment peeling off of one of the barrels.

Elliot read the label aloud. “Colloidal Habiliment. Allied Nine.”

“What’s that?” asked Carline.

Before anyone could answer, piles of clothing flooded into the drone’s room and smothered the camera. “What the eff?” said Carline.

“Did you see that?” shouted Jason.

“The drone isn’t responding,” she said.

A loud, groaning roar rumbled up from the nearby hole.

“We better fall back,” Elliot said, “I don’t think—”

A barrage of clothing erupted from the hole and spun around them in the air. Jason bolted for the exit, screaming like a small animal. Elliot grabbed Carline by the arm and followed him.

“My drone!” she cried. She pulled away and ran back to the hole. A pair of socks tied themselves into a knot around her neck. She opened her mouth but it was stuffed with a glove before she could scream. A long jacket wrapped around her as she vanished silently into the hole.

Elliot ran from the clothes. Jason was already in the window, reaching to help him up. Elliot grabbed his hand and they tumbled out.

The air was knocked from Elliot’s lungs. Jason was lying next to him, choking and fumbling for his rebreather—the toxic air! Elliot couldn’t yet breathe, but he put on his rebreather anyway. The world retreated from his eyes, blackening the edges and fading to nothingness.

When he woke, he was covered by a shirt with a familiar orange tie under the collar. Although he still wore the rebreather, the faint aroma of cinnamon rolls permeated the filter.

He was alone.