

## The Last Hole?

Stanley walked out onto the 'lake'. Pushing his shovel into the ground, he thrust his foot onto the blade and began the morning's work. As he lifted each spade-load filled with baked dirt out of his hole, he could hear the rhythmic pats of soil hitting the ground from the inmates around him. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine he was on a tropical beach, lifting sand to build a majestic castle.

The heat began to rise, bringing a sweat to Stanley's brow, as dawn cracked the murky skies open. Stepping out of his hole and discarding his shovel, Stanley paused to take a swig of water. Looking around him, he could see X-Ray, Squid and Magnet gathering slowly, their eyes fixed in his direction. Squid covered his mouth as if to whisper something. Stanley was about to turn back to his hole when a sound made him stop.

The unmistakable, unearthly and disturbing rattle chilled Stanley's blood. He froze. Sliding towards him, with skin the earthy shades of the lake bed, was a rattlesnake, its tongue flickering in and out of its mouth. His eyes fixed on the slightly raised tail, Stanley felt the sun's rays beating down like a relentless drumroll. He wondered if the hole he was standing by would become his grave. Closer and closer the rattlesnake slithered, until it was no more than six feet away. Silently, Stanley began to pray.

A metallic crash filled the air. The snake whipped its head around towards the noise and an instant later, Stanley turned and sprinted in the opposite direction. His heart pounding relentlessly, he slowed when he passed the other campers, who were stood casually, leaning on their shovels. Turning to stare back at his hole, he saw Zero's water canteen lying in a fast-drying puddle where it had been thrown to land on the blade of Stanley's spade.

Zero's eyes tracked the retreating snake scuttling off into the distance. The thumping of Stanley's pulse began to recede and he exhaled loudly. He wondered why Zero had taken the risk to move the rattlesnake's focus from Stanley and potentially onto himself. Shrugging one shoulder, Stanley returned to his hole.