

## Borehole 109

A short story by CG Hatton

Over the sound of the jets and the pounding hail, he didn't hear the counter clicking until it screamed at him from the red. He stopped, walked back a few steps and placed the box on the ground. Hailstones bounced green around it. He put out a marker – the others would stake out the sphere – picked up the box and stepped forward again. A fuzz of static buzzed around his ear.

He'd have to put on a suit, he thought. Frozen peas were painful at this velocity. Few more steps ahead and the pointer shot up again. Nearing the critical zone already. He stopped and looked around. A haze lay over the charred grass up ahead. There was a perfect circle of smoking grey that jumped out two inches as he watched. The hailstones began to ease off, becoming a chill drizzle – probably not good to be out in. The green faded and the rain took on the red from the dampening dust sprayed out by the jets.

Another couple of steps and the receiver in his ear sparked clear for a second. "Come in De..." then nothing. He backtracked until he found the window again. The comm was still chattering, "... and then they took his parrot."

He listened to the laughs and waited for another "Come in DeMario, update's overdue and the clock's ticking."

He looked at his watch. "DeMario here," he said. "I'm coming back. Get the suits ready."

"Was that 'suits'? Plural, sir? Are we...?"

"Draw lots for it," and he walked forward back into the static. He held the box at arm's length, hand protected by the glove. Soon as it screamed again, he put out the second marker and set off back to base.

Smurf was waiting in the sunshine at the shield. "Drillers have all gone," he said. "Site Manager's taking a bluey. And Hymek wants to see you."

Great. "How come he always gets to these things before we do? Maybe it's him causing it all! Do they know what happened yet?"

"Reckon they hit a pocket, back blast blew out the crater." He looked out across the plain. "Contamination seems to be spreading fast."

DeMario nodded. "It's a Red Four. Get that up on the board. And get suited up. I want you and Danny." He pulled off the gloves. The fingertips of the left hand were glowing softly. "So where's Hymek?"

The Sector Chief of Security was standing over by the huts. DeMario was grinning as he walked up. He shielded his eyes. "Hope you boys have got your sun creams on. We're measuring RVs sky high in the vicinity." He threw a glowing green golf ball of ice towards Hymek. The man caught it, glared at it and dropped it as if he'd been poisoned.

"You're breaking regulations, DeMario." Hymek stared at his clipboard. "I know you're breaking regulations and I'm going to prove it. You've got three hours."

"We've got a Red Four here," DeMario said. "We're moving the perimeter back five K's. Suggest you move with it. And Hymek," he turned away, "I want my parrot back."

Smurf handed him the chit as he returned to the unit. DeMario tore it up without a glance. Three hours. It had been six since the blast. They'd left it way too late to call in. No one had realised what was happening. They'd all thought they were going crazy. Hadn't occurred to them that it could be a leak.

Nine hours it said in the regs. Nine hours then all hell breaks loose. DeMario didn't believe it for a second but he wasn't about to hang around to find out.

"Hymek wants us to go out and be heroes," he said.

Smurf grinned. "Did you ask him along?"

"How come Danny gets to go?" Fenton confronted DeMario.

"Always need a Danny," he said. "Danny's the one gets pushed through the doorway to see if there's any traps. Danny's always the cute kid who dies at the end."

That didn't go down well. "I'm not going to die at the end." Danny protested. "And at the end of what?"

Smurf pushed him forward. "At the end of the world when the clock stops ticking and we're sucked back to nowhen."

"How is the clock?" DeMario asked.

Smurf looked at his watch. "Stopped," he said and thumped his wrist. "Either it's happened already and we haven't noticed," he looked about, "or the shields are failing. Maybe we should let Hymek know."

"Maybe we should let him get a taste of it. Might stop him bugging me."

Fenton sniggered and caught an evil look. Peanut trotted up with the field glasses.

"Peanut, you're on watch," DeMario said and snatched a look. It was obvious already that the contamination was past his original markers. "I want obs and samples every ten minutes," he said, climbing into his suit, "send them to Hymek. Fenton, map out the sphere. Any blips or bulges, let me know." He paused as he sealed up and snugged on the helmet. Then took it off again. "Keep Hymek busy with numbers. And tell him it's worse than it is however bad it gets."

It took forty minutes to get to the hole. Three times longer than he'd reckoned. They made heavy work of trudging across the plain as if the air was thicker, the ground turned to mush all of a sudden. The long-range comm was out, not even a flicker of static any more.

It was raining outside the crater, pungent acid rain they could smell through the suits that sizzled as the drops hit the ground, mini craters steaming. They stumbled down. Smurf was carrying the probe. He dropped it twice, watched the reaction then let it bounce gently, low-g slow motion down the slope, splashing pink acid. DeMario was watching Danny. First time out was always difficult. Hang onto your senses and ride the storm.

A tangled thickness of undergrowth began to spring up to meet them half way down. They had to push through, waist high then shoulder. Smurf suddenly had jungle cream smeared across his face, precision stripes of green and brown shadow that DeMario could see through the faceplate. Smurf caught the look and shrugged. Could be worse. It could be pink lipstick appearing in kisses across his cheeks.

Next thing, Danny was walking along cradling a rifle in his arms. "I swear I didn't bring it," he said staring in disbelief but no doubt happy he had it now. Danny was ex-Marine. Not so much ex-, DeMario had kidnapped him. Papers just hadn't come through yet.

They found the drilling rig on its side, corrosion set in beneath twisting vines. The source of the contamination was about fifteen metres down according to the drillers' logs. DeMario set Smurf and Danny to finding the hole while he checked the rig. The cab was empty. Eerie silence. He scouted around quickly, established that there was no poor fool still in the area and slithered back down.

They lost the probe at nine metres. It sent a flurry of nonsense then vanished. DeMario stared at the hole. A tremor rippled out, sending his knees buckling inside the suit. Danny stepped back, aiming his rifle as if it could protect him. He'd learn. Puffs of smoke and sparks flicked out at them, ignited the grass at their feet. Smurf started stamping. DeMario pulled the box around.

"Set it for eight and a half," he yelled at Danny and began reeling cable down that endless darkness. It hit a block at four metres. Started piling back at them, whipping round into neat coils on the ground until the compiler on the end popped out and swung round hitting Smurf on the arm and coiling cable around his legs until he toppled over with a shout. A cloud of black crept out of the hole and began to spread fingers toward them. Danny fired at the nothing until DeMario screamed himself hoarse to be heard over the silence, yelling him to stop. Then he

threw himself at the compiler and broke every rule in Hymek's precious regulations, twisting around to ignite the sealant in a mid-air jet towards the hole.

Decontamination was calculated at sixteen hours. Peanut let them out after four. "Happy hour," he explained and handed round beers. Smurf had a nasty burn on his arm and a bill waiting to cover repairs to the suit. Danny was chuffed that he'd survived one more mission than Fenton.

They took their happy hour back to DeMario's quarters where Hymek was waiting, watching his troops trash the room again. The parrot was flying rings around them.

"Hullo," DeMario said.

"Hullo," the parrot said as it flew by. "I'm a parrot."

Hymek glared at them, then smirked as one of his men called out and held up a sock between heavily gloved fingertips. "I've got you now, DeMario," he murmured and ushered the troops out with their prize.

"Who's the bigger fool, Hymek? The fool or the fool who follows him?" DeMario misquoted to his back. He loitered in the doorway and watched them off down the corridor. He polished the black and yellow sign on the door with his sleeve: "Warning – Contaminated Reality – Do Not Loiter".

"How are you doing, door?" he said.

"You're crazy, DeMario," the door replied and gave him a wink.

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