

A Darkness Within

Hi honey,

I've just packed everything up and I'm about to leave. This is one of the most beautiful systems I've surveyed. It'll be such a shame to leave it behind. I wish I was allowed a bigger data stream through the portal then I could include pictures, but Centre are still taking a firm line that personal comm's is low priority.

It's taken me three days to complete the report. The probe had collected so much data I needed to verify and then there were notes regarding the failed signal. I know I've often complained about the size of the pods I have to live in, but you really can't believe how difficult it is to spend so many days eating, sleeping and working in this thing. By the end of the second day I had almost decided to go for another trip out in the suit with the drone just for a break.

Still, it's done now and I'll be gone from here in about fifteen minutes. The next site will be my last for this tour so I should be home in less than a week. Three months on my own, away from you and the kids, has been far too long, but isn't it always.

I hope everything's okay back home. If you get chance send me a mail so I've got it when I revive. Give my love to the children and think of me when my image is bounced back through the hub.

Ciao. xxx

Thanks for both the notes. I've been awake for two days now and I've read them so many times. Jimmy winning at sports day must have been fantastic. Tell him I want to see a re-enactment of the race when I get back. Your description of the vase you've got for Roberta sounds like something she'll love, so maybe you've finally made a good choice of presents. <wink> You know I'm glad it's you going to her party and not me, I just couldn't stand hearing about the ever-so-wonderful David and what a talented artist he is. I can imagine it now, "Oh, and you should see David's latest piece. I've told him so many times that he should have won the Fredrickson Award. Don't you agree? The way he can capture movement with a couple of brush strokes. Did I tell you about that etching he sold last year to the government? It's going on display in Concourse One, you know." Ha! If I had to listen to that story one more time I'd be beating her with that vase. She'll probably have all her fawning friends there as well. Make sure you don't have too good a time, now, won't you. <grin>

This new system is interesting. For once the probe has picked up some signals. You know I'm never one to get excited about initial readings, but these do look promising. It would be great to find something that isn't yet another anomaly. I can say for certain that it's not a glitch with the sensors, so I'm feeling hopeful.

The course adjustment I've set will bring me in closer to the planet where the signal came from. Hopefully I'll be able to get a better idea of what's there.

Keep well, my love and don't give in to the children too easily. (It's no use denying it, I know you always do when I'm away. <wink>) I'll send another mail in a few days when I'm packed up and heading home. I'm really looking forward to being able to see and touch you again.

Ciao. xxx

I know I said I wouldn't send you another message until I was about to come home, but this is so exciting. Not only have I confirmed the signal and found its source but it turns out it's coming from what appears to be a structure.

When I got closer to the source of the signal I discovered that it wasn't on the planet at all but a small asteroid in orbit. There is plenty of debris out here so it could be what remains of a ring that was forming around the gas giant. I'll let someone back at Central make that call, I've been concentrating on the building.

I'm not sure exactly what the structure is I've not got close enough, but I'm pretty certain it's been built on the rock and from what I can tell it's not human in origin. Imagine a low set bunker made from a dark material pressed against the asteroid. There aren't any lights and no openings I can make out; all sealed up, I guess. It's odd that the pod hadn't closed in while it's been here, but then it hadn't picked up the signal until a couple of days ago. I'm not sure why. It's something I'll have to check when I have time. For now I want to get over there and have a good look. Central have given me the go ahead to do some inspecting before I come home and someone else is sent out. I suppose it'll be a scientist next, or maybe someone to enlarge the size of the pod. At least that way they'll be able to send more than one person through the portal.

Regardless of who it is I'm thrilled I was here first. My whole body is tingling. If there was enough room to jump around in this thing I would. I can't find any signs of life and there aren't

any signals from anywhere else in the system so I'm not sure what to make of it. My mind is in overdrive with theories.

I'll tell you more when I know myself.

Hey,

I thought I'd give you a quick update on how the exploration is going. I got into a holding orbit over the asteroid and was able to get a closer look. Even from that distance it was clear the building wasn't of human design; it spreads across the rock like a fungal growth. There is a glistening to the surface of the thing as well. If it was in an atmosphere I'd speculate that the exterior was wet, but the effect must be something to do with the material it's made from.

Control confirmed I was to take it carefully, but that I should go look, so I put on the suit and detached the small survey drone. Apparently I'm to make sure everything's safe. I can't imagine there'll be any problems so nothing for you to worry about, but I'm an explorer not a scientist and it's what they pay me the danger money for.

The bunker is all dips and depressions, each one rolling smoothly into the next. On my first close flyby I couldn't see anything that looked interesting, just the uniformity of that surface shinning in my lights. Then, on my second trip over it I found a door.

It was on the side of a dip that I thought I'd checked, but it must have been hidden by a shadow. What really knocked me for six was that it was open: an airlock close to human design with the outer door left gaping to space. There was even a manual control system which operated it. Very odd!

The inside of the structure is as strange as the outside. What bits I've seen so far are all just tunnels which have the same organic look as the exterior. There isn't any light in there and the door mechanism was only mechanical or electrical I've found. The corridors I explored just wound deeper into the asteroid. There were no rooms, no sign of what the place could have been used for. It was creepy moving through those empty tunnels with just the lights from my suit and the drone.

I'm going to try to get some sleep now. I didn't get much last night as I kept being woken up by dreams. Weird, mixed up, things with you and the children in. You were all calling to me from those corridors in that bunker. It took me a few hours this morning to shake off the feeling you were here with me. I guess the strangeness is making me restless.

I'll tell you more tomorrow.

xxx

I think the isolation, with just the building for company, is starting to get to me. I've had another disturbed night filled with strange dreams: me chasing you and the kids through the asteroid this time. I'll be happy to be out of here if I'm being honest. Control has confirmed that tomorrow will be my last day. As you would expect there is now a queue of people wanting to take shifts.

Those strange corridors in the complex make it easy to lose track of time: I spent all day in there when I thought it had only been a couple of hours. It goes far deeper than I first realised, the entire asteroid is riddled with tunnels. Last night I tried some external imaging so that I'd

know a bit more of the structure before I went in, but the outer shell blocks everything, so today I started mapping the place.

I must have been tired yesterday. The tunnels which seemed to go on forever don't go that far before they open up. There's still no sign that anyone has been here before. All the rooms are empty, like the place was built but no one moved in. I started to wonder if I'd find anything, then I discovered the most beautiful place: a large cavern with plants in it.

It was a forest. Imagine walking down dark corridors and then stepping around a corner into an enormous room, sunlight seeping through a canopy of leaves high above. I have no idea what the plants in there are. When I got the drone to take some samples back to the pod it wasn't able to match them with anything in the records. I also got the pod to swing around to the other side of the asteroid to find out how the light was getting in, but it couldn't detect anything. The plants in this mini forest are producing oxygen as well. Readings indicate there's enough for me to breathe.

The forest wasn't the only thing I found today: at the centre of the complex I discovered what appears to be a hub. Four tunnels lead up to it, each ending in a large door. Unfortunately I couldn't find any opening mechanism. From my measurements it's circular, about fifteen metres across. The strangest thing occurred while I was looking at one of the doors: I thought I heard movement from inside. The sensors didn't pick anything up so I must have been imagining it, but what with those odd dreams I'm wondering if I've started imagining things.

I've already started getting everything ready for when my tour ends so I'll see you all soon.

xxx

I've come back to the pod to pick up some extra equipment for the drone, but I thought I'd send you a quick mail while I was here as I'm so excited. I've done it! I've opened one of the doors to the central room.

It was surprisingly easy once I'd spent some time studying them. I can't believe I missed it before, but each of the doors had a pull-out panel next to it which covers a handle. The interior of the room is disappointingly bare. I was hoping I'd find information on who built the bunker, but the only thing in there is a large circular object lying on the floor.

If I was in an abandoned human base I would have said it was a portal. It's a lot bigger than any of those we use, big enough to fit two or three people through. Like the rest of the place it looks as though it's been grown out of the floor.

There was a pressure difference in the room as well. It wasn't large, but there was certainly a higher pressure inside than the rest of the complex. At the moment I opened the door I thought I saw something flash in the room, or maybe something shoot out through the doorway. It must have been particles escaping that got caught in the lights from the drone, as I spent some time searching and didn't find anything. I'm glad, I don't think I could cope with the thought of something else being here with me.

I'm heading back now to make a few more tests and then I'll be done for the day. See you soon.

Ciao.

I've dictated this message from the suit and I'll get the drone to take it back to the pod. I want you and everyone to know about this as soon as possible so I'm sending it to you as well as Control.

I got the ring working. It is a portal!

I don't know where it leads, but there is something dark in there. As soon as the portal was open things started seeping out. Black fingers I can feel. They make my skin crawl as they pass around me.

I'm going to attempt to close the portal. If I can't I'll destroy the pod. I don't want to take the chance that this thing will be able to make its way into the network.

If I don't make it home, give my love to the children. Tell them great stories about their mother. I will wait for you on the other side, my love.

xxx