

Toby awoke to unaccustomed bright white light coming in his window, and for a moment thought he was still in his dream. As he sat up, and saw the moon Tobusi shining against the black of space, he remembered why he was on the station. Today he would begin his 14 month journey from the orbit of Tobus to Lad, the cloudy fifth planet of the system. He was feeling old and tired, and looking forward to experiencing the rejuvenating effects of Lad's atmosphere and lower gravity. He dressed in his finest uniform, trimmed with gold and covered with the many medals he had awarded himself over the years, pulled his boots on, and walked towards the kitchen to meet with the technical team, and get a report on readiness for the launch. Roberto the crew chief was already there, methodically chewing on his eggs and ham. He stood and bowed respectfully as Toby entered the room. "Good morning, soldier. Be at your ease" intoned Toby, and the astronaut sat back down and continued his chewing. "The technical team is late", said Roberto. "I hope there is no delay in the countdown".

There was no delay. The crew assembled in the Explorer II, made a final check of all systems, and prepared for launch. The craft undocked, and slowly drifted away from the station. Strapped into his seat, Toby felt the jolt as the booster was lit, and was pressed even more forcefully by the thrust than he was during the uncomfortable ascent to the station 2 weeks ago. He was not built for space flight, and being older than all of the crew did not make it any easier for him. He wondered if he would be able to endure the journey back home from Lad. He thought again about whether it would be best to just stay on the planet.

The star Tob is the center of a system with several planets and moons at a temperate distance; planets capable of supporting life. The planet most ideal for life is known as Tobus. Tobus has one large moon, Tobusi, which, with a diameter half that of the planet, makes the pair a sort of binary system. 2 smaller, warmer planets, Ba and Bu, orbit closer to the star, and 5 more are further away. Had and Lad, the next 2, are similar to but a little smaller than Tobus. Lutus is the largest of the system, and has 2 large moons, Lutusca and Lutusco, and a number of small ones. The 2 outter planets, Hog and Dag, are colder, and relatively inhospitable.

The ship, one of the 2 constructed at great expense, normally carried a crew of 40. The living quarters were modified for this trip, sacrificing 4 of the cabins in order to create a suite for Toby. 2 of the personnel were dedicated, one as a personal servant, and another as a chef, for his comfort. One more passenger reduced the crew further. As a personal favor from Toby, Godfrey Lipito, vice president of marketing of SpaceTour Corporation, was also aboard. The unfortunate individuals were not looking forward to the many months of travel. They knew that the king would be uncomfortable, and bored, soon after they started out, and they would bear the brunt of dealing with his moods.

Roberto was worried about what would happen after he landed on Lad. There was not much to do during the 14 month voyage other than worry. Were the natives looking forward to Toby's arrival, or were they worried that the leader's appearance would threaten their way of life? The planet had already been changed by the sudden arrival of the first ship from Tobus 20 years ago. The technology introduced to them had made their lives easier, and increased harvests of the fish from the wet planet had improved their health. He knew that Toby's claim that he was going to Lad to honor the population, and make an alliance to his government was only partially true. He was well aware of Toby's condition, and desire to extend his life, and rule of the system.

There was not much to do during the trip from Tobus to Lad, so private Sally Freud spent much of it on her main interest, history. The story of how Mark Farvul started as a poor farm boy, and rose in stature to eventually declare himself Toby, king of the entire Tob planetary system, was fascinating. Yes, deception and treachery was certainly part of the story, but a unique intelligence played a big part as well. His immediate grasp of the development of the technology for interplanetary travel gave him an advantage, and his plans to use this for his advance were meticulous. The use of machines for intelligence gathering and weaponry allowed for easily vanquishing opponents who favored a kinder, gentler approach to government. Since his ultimate victory 30 years ago, his determination to spread his power throughout the system trumped all other initiatives. She wondered what sort of government the people of Lad had developed. Would they acquiesce easily to Toby's plans, or put forth a feeble effort to resist? The carrot of technology to make their lives easier was certainly a large incentive to cooperate. She was having second thoughts about having signed up for the mission, but her thirst for knowledge drove her onward.

The news from home helped keep Toby's journey from being too monotonous. He was surprised, but also a little annoyed, that the business of governing Tobus was going along as usual without his daily guidance. The plans to refurbish the Explorer I for trips to the other planets of the system were well under way. He started wondering again about the people of Lad. Was their extreme longevity, twice that of a typical Tobus resident, more a result of their genetic composition, or was it because of the lower gravity and superior shielding of the thick atmosphere? The Lad people were tall and pale compared with those from his own planet. Would one of his people adapt well to that kind of climate? He was looking forward to meeting them, and getting his own impressions. It had been 7 years since the first visit to Lad, but there was still much to be learned.

Sally unstrapped herself from her seat in the command cabin after the orbital

insertion burn was deemed a success, and along with the other crew members, started floating her way towards the hatch, where the warning lights were turning from red to yellow before it could unseal and allow access to the spinning artificial gravity section of the craft. As she made her way through the hatch, she thought about her role as communications officer. She would be one of the first to contact the planets natives, and her role would be important to pave the way for Toby's interaction with them. After a month of orbital surveillance and planning, she would be aboard the first 10 person landing craft to descend to the surface.

The descent through the dense clouds of Lad was bumpy, and Sally was glad as they broke through, and the buffeting smoothed. She could see that Roberto, strapped to the seat next to hers, was unphased by the reentry. She heard audible sighs of relief from the other 8 astronauts, in the 5 rows of seats in the bridge of the craft. The craft approached a field a little to the northeast of the village of Lango, tipped steeply to a nose up position, and eased to the ground as the descent motors fired, and they impacted with only a gentle bump. There was a low murmur of conversation as the crew chief confirmed that all systems were working, and they sat briefly getting used to the gravity of the planet before unstrapping.

Phil Rollins was unloading the final bale of the hay delivery onto the platform at the side of the Lango Farm Store, on the outskirts of the town, when he heard the roar as the descent engine of the lander fired up. He looked up to see the brightening fire beneath the craft as it neared the surface. He saw a puff of dust as the gleaming cylinder settled on the plane, about a mile away from where he stood. He had heard that a new visit was expected, but there had been no word about where the landing would occur. He did not have much more work planned for the afternoon, so he went into the store to tell his clerk that he was taking some time to go out and greet the visitors. He jumped on the electric tractor, and headed out east along the Lower Lin River Road. He could see the spacecraft clearly once he topped hill, and he steered his tractor off the road and south towards where the vehicle stood on it's spindly legs, on the plane. As he neared it, a section near the bottom of craft split from the fuselage, and lowered a long staircase to the ground. He had stopped and gotten off of the tractor by the time the hatch opened and 2 figures started down the steps. He had heard that the people of Tobus were different, but was still surprised at how short and stocky they appeared. He waited until the first of them alit on the turf, and said "Hello, welcome to Lad. I saw your landing, and wanted to be the first to greet you." The man in the lead responded "We're glad that someone came to meet us, we feared that we would have to explore the area to find someone. I am Roberto, crew chief of the Explorer II, and this is Sally, our communications officer." Rollins invited them to visit his store, to tell him about their mission. Sally took a small silver pod from her belt, and spoke

into it, telling the crew on the ship that they had made contact. The pair jumped up onto the bed on the back of the tractor, and Rollins turned around and headed back to the store. They arrived, and followed him up the steps to the store. The 3 of them settled into 3 of the chairs arranged around the pot bellied stove, which was cold during this warm day. He learned that the journey from Tobus had taken 13 months, and that they had a special passenger on board. He was surprised to learn that Toby, whose name was known, but was still a mysterious person, was on board the lander. Roberto and Sally told them that Toby wanted to form a partnership between Tobus and Lad, and that Toby, the king of the Tob system, was here introduce himself to their people. The conversation turned to where a meeting should be held, and they learned that Laton, the largest village on the island, would be the sensible site. Phil agreed to contact someone there, to arrange a meeting between Toby and an assembly of islanders. They reboarded the shuttle, drove back to the lander, and said their goodbyes. The next day Rollins made a visit to the home of the villages's electrician. The electrician, based on his experience, was the holder of Lango's cell phone. The call would be made tonight, to Henry Higgins, in Laton.

Life on Lad was still not easy. It took a lot of toil to enrich the soil to coax plants to grow under the cloudy, shrouded sky. It was fortunate that it was a very wet world, and that people could harvest a variety of creatures from the many ponds, lakes and oceans. There was little need for rules for the commerce between the many villages on the large and small islands. Most were able to make due with fishing and farming, so trade was limited to the few commodities that were unique to certain areas of the planet. Few of the inhabitants had ever been to any islands more than a few miles from their own.

Most of the business of the village of Laton, on the southern shore of the island of Lad known as Ladla, was transacted in the town square, where the roads leading from the bridges over the Lo River and the Lin River came together. Until recently, barter was the primary means of trade, based on informal agreements between the farmers, fishermen, and craft people who convened every afternoon in the square. With the recent improvements to communications, facilitated by the ships from Tobus, came increased trade, and coins were minted to make trade with other islands more convenient.

Nadia was tired from wielding the plow around her farm on a small plot south of her town of Laton, and dusk was falling. As she shut down the machine, a bright flash in the sky made her look up. An orange glow, brighter than the nearby moon, lingered in the sky before it faded, leaving a bright white dot which slowly faded. She wondered about it for a moment, but soon turned to make her weary way back to the house. She had not heard about Toby's journey, and thought it was just another of the ships had been arriving, delivering tools to the scattered villagers.

Several days after seeing the flash, Nadia got an early start on the planting, on a cool, misty morning. A loud bang from the sky interrupted her thoughts about the chances for a good harvest this summer. A bright orange flame flared in the sky, and a distant roar became slowly louder. The early rays of Tob glinted against side of a large pointed cylinder, slowly descending over her head. The roar increased as the thing disappeared over the nearby hill, and then vanished completely. The morning became deathly quiet, and it was quite a while before the birds that had been greeting the morning returned to their songs.

A good breeze was blowing that day, and by afternoon, it was a rare, brightly sunny day with just a few high clouds in the sky. Nadia arrived at the house just as her older brother Joseph was arriving with a large pail on his back, a good share of the fish he had caught during the day. He recalled seeing something bright in the sky from the corner of his eye, but heard nothing over the roar of the engine as he was heading out to the fishing grounds. They related their experience to their grandmother who was busy stoking up the stove, getting ready for dinner. This arrival seemed somehow different than the others. They felt that some change was ahead, but why or what was hard to tell.

Laton is the largest village on the Isle of Ladla, and lies along the harbor where the Lo River, fed by Lake Lia and Lake Lin, empties into the sea. The Lake Hills overlook the small burg, with about 2000 residents. Nadia's farm is just south of Laton, with its fields spreading down to the banks of the river.

The cafe in Laton was busy on a weekend night, when the cellphone assigned to Henry Higgins, the town's engineer, rang. They were still startled every time a call was received. Global communications were still a novelty on this world. The government of Tobus, in deliberating what would be a suitable gift of technology to this new planet, had decided on a communications system. About 4 years ago, after the Explorer II arrived in orbit, they launched 2 geosynchronous satellites. Each had an antenna for communications to Tobus, and one for each of the ground stations to be deployed on some of the islands of Lad. The lander went to the island of Lavia, where the first station, with a large cellphone antenna, was deployed on a mountain top. Over the next year, ships were sent to several other islands, with ground stations to be deployed. The station on Ladla was installed near the peak of Listy Mountain, in a new village dubbed Comton. It was a call from Lango, the village over the hill where the ship had landed. They had made contact with the vessel, and had been informed that the emperor Toby would be visiting Laton in 2 days with news from Tobus. He would be expecting a formal reception, and accommodations at the best quarters available. He was told that Toby has important news, and would want a chance to address the people in the town. Conversation immediately turned to

who would lead the greeting party, but all agreed that even though the so called Grand Hotel was a modest inn, it would be best to install the king and his entourage on the top floor.

Word of Toby's call quickly spread throughout the town, and soon the cafe was full of people, eating, drinking, and wondering what news Toby would bring. Higgins, as keeper of the cellphone, was the unofficial mayor, and he banged on a large pot brought from the kitchen, to get everyone's attention. "People! I'd like to propose that we greet the king at the concert hall, that being the largest building here. All in favor?". Yeses and ayes rang out through the cafe. "We'll need a committee to prepare for the meeting. Who would like to help?" Nadia, and a number of other townspeople, stepped forward, and a group of seven claimed a table, and sat down to discuss the plan.

Nadia felt exposed by the bright lights on the stage, and was anxious for Toby to arrive. After what seems like an hour, but was really only a few minutes, the door at the other end of the hall opened, and Henry stepped aside as Toby strode up the aisle. She had to stifle a giggle as she noticed how short and stout he was, not the kingly appearance she was expecting. He wore a blue tunic, covered with medals, but the shine from the top of his balding head was mainly what Nadia noticed. He slowly scaled the steps at the end of the stage, and the crowd hushed as he took his seat next to Nadia. Nadia rose, stood behind the podium, and started. "People of Laton, of Ladla, and of Lad. You are fortunate to be here, to witness a landmark event in our history. The visitors from another planet of the Tob system have already begun to change our way of living. We are thrilled that the ruler of Tobus has chosen our village to begin his journey to learn about our planet and our people. Lady's and gentlemen, please welcome Toby, the king of Tobus!". The crowd, not knowing exactly what to expect, applauded politely. Toby rose up onto the extra step Nadia discretely placed behind the podium, and peered out at his audience. "Lady's and gentlemen of Ladla, thank for the wonderful reception to your town. I am delighted to bring news that will change the lives of everyone in this land. Prosperity and security will reign on everyone. During our visits to your planet over the last 5 years, we have learned much about this land. The unique shielding power of your atmosphere, which contributes to your long lifespans, has recuperative capabilities for anyone who resides or visits, according to my scientists. We are highly motivated to make this planet accessible to visitors, and to begin a formal relationship with Tobus. To that end, I am delighted to announce that Ladla will be the site of the new interplanetary space port. A location on the equator, and the highest mountain on the planet, are ideal for launches, and for a communications and tracking facility. The space port will be built on the eastern end of the island. Commerce with Tobus will make Ladla the wealthiest place on the planet. Our first factory ship is under construction now, and if all goes according to plan,

will orbit Lad in about 3 years. With this ship, we will process raw materials to use in building the port, factories on the planet, and fuel production capabilities. I will be staying here and meeting with officials to plan this exciting progress that will benefit everybody. Thank you again for welcoming me to your charming village." Most of the crowd seemed a little stunned by this announcement, but after a few officials clapped, the room followed with applause as Toby left the stage and proceeded down the aisle and out the door.

The village of Laton was fairly informally organized, and there were few actual officials. The small committee who arranged for Toby's speech included Nadia, Higgins, and the innkeeper from the Grand Hotel. Susan Smith, the librarian and historian of the town, was another volunteer. A builder, the owner of the foundry, and the teacher at the small school rounded out the group. They offered to meet with Toby in his suite to begin the planning in 2 days, and he eagerly accepted their offer.

They gathered in the small room that had been furnished as Toby's office, with him and his aide, beside the blazing fireplace to take the chill out of the morning. Toby's desk was covered with maps and papers, and he rose to shake their hands before they took their seats in a semi-circle in front of the desk. Toby declared "We have some big plans for this island, so take a look at this map I had made." He held the large map up in front of his desk, and the committee immediately noted that Laton had tripled in size, and that the entire northeast corner was covered by a series of roads and lines. The road from Listy Mountain to that corner of the mountain was covered over by a dark line, and another dark line ran to the west of Lake Adia, leading to Laton. More development was evident along the side of Listy Mountain. Susan asked what the dark line was, and Toby told them "That's the mag-lev line that will connect the space port to Listy Mountain and to Laton. This is a high speed train that will move passengers rapidly around the island." The team members were stunned by the scope of the changes Toby was talking about. "Who will build all of this?" asked Higgins. Toby described how a team from the factory ship would mine Lad's moon for materials, and would train the natives of Ladla to build the facilities. A new school would be constructed, and residents would be retrained to learn about manufacturing and building technology. Construction that could begin before the factory ship arrived would involve housing for visitors, and a new resident suitable for Toby during his time on Lad. Toby dominated the meeting, gushing about the plans, and how the lives of the lowly farmers and fishermen would be improved. He tasked the committee with recruiting more islanders to get started with the design and building of the new residences, improvement of roads, and getting the news out to their countrymen.

Nadia was glad to be free of Toby after lunch was served, and made her way back to the farm to check on the progress of the latest crops. She felt bad about

walking away from her responsibilities to serve on the committee, and was glad to see that the farm was doing well. Joseph arrived late in the afternoon, with another good haul of fish, and their grandmother again started the fire to feed the family. Nadia wondered how these changes would affect their simple lives of fishing and farming. Would everyone feel as confident about the wisdom of these plans as Toby was. She went to bed still thinking about all of that, and woke after a disturbing dream; buildings and roads had taken the place of the lakes, rivers, hills and mountains she had grown up with.