

## The Ascension of Man

My hands were on autopilot inside the craft. Piloting these old frigates had become second nature years ago. The controls were more an extension of my fingertips than a mechanical device; nevertheless, I tried to bring my mind forward to the present as I brought the ship in close to dock.

*Squawk*, "This is the United Federation Lunar Base. You have entered flight space under the control of the United Federal Space Fleet. Please declare name and purpose for entry."

The loud voice over the intercom snapped me to attention in my chair. I looked around trying to find the intercom button. Above, a red button glowed indicating the transponder signal coming from the lunar base.

"This is ...err Titan," I said to the microphone. "I have a delivery for the refugee base." I hoped that would be enough.

"Titan, please declare cargo and personnel onboard." The red light dimmed as the transponder signal faded. My pulse picked up a bit. I looked around for a flight manifest, cargo brief—anything of information.

"Lunar 1," I said, trying to fill the dead air on the intercom. Where could it be? I patted my jacket for any signs

of a thick paper stack—the inside breast pocket felt stiff. I pulled out a trifolded stack of papers.

I unfolded the worn paper, tearing along the crease in my haste. The contents were listed in the middle of the paper. Item one: F-113, MRE, 5000kg. Item two: T-165, Basic Essentials, 5000kg. “Lunar 1, Manifest says we have about 5000 kilos of MREs and about the same in what’s listed as *Basic Essentials*.” The operator confirmed. My heart rate relaxed a little. Thank God I put on the jacket.

“And onboard personnel, Titan?” said the operator over the intercom.

“Personnel?” I paused for a moment. “Personnel onboard include myself and a few droids.”

“And who are *you*, pilot?”

I looked down to the manifest.

“Dex Alterman. Owner and operator of the frigate, Titan.”

The intercom was quiet except for the soft static.

“Titan. Please proceed in docking capture.”

I looked at the giant port as the ship approached it. Its glittering lights danced in the darkness of space. Numerous ships of all sizes and age rounded the perimeter like cars on a Ferris wheel. Titan was the largest of them all.

The craft shuddered as it secured to the dock, hydraulics pumping as the ship made contact. I glided to the exit hatch,

and waited for the door to open. The mechanical gears whirred as the clamps secured around the door on the outside. The indicator light flicked from red to green and a loud pop came as the door locks opened. Before exiting, I took a last look around. It wouldn't be unusual for customs to inspect the ship after I left, now was not a time to be sloppy.

I entered the main area, a cylindrical room with a single door in the middle. The place was cold and empty. This was typical for ports. Most of them were either remotely controlled or used some low level artificial intelligence for operations. Tethered to the moon's surface, the port drifted thousands of feet above the surface between the Moon and Earth. I entered the elevator that would coast down to the surface. Outside the window, the androids began to unload the cargo from under the ship, sending it down the banded freight cart that rode the tether. I watched as the crates locked onto the lift and started down the line.

I looked away from the lift to the large rock floating in the distance. It was a ghost of its former self. I had looked at it a thousand times before, watching dawn break on one edge as dusk settled to twinkling lights on the other, oceans outlining each continent, each one as unique as the others—all of these were just memories now.

"Base floor please." The intercom light came on.

"Pilot Dex Alterman?"

I hesitated for a second. "Yes."

"Please make sure you have all information ready at the checkpoint." I felt my breast pocket once more for reassurance.

"No problem."

"We are also confirming identification via retinal scanner. We have had a rash of fraudulent papers from smugglers ever since the crash, so we are doing 100% inspections now."

I wasn't sure if it was the acceleration downward or my nerves, but I began to feel queasy as the elevator glided down to the surface. Papers were one thing, a retinal scanner was another ordeal entirely.

I exited the elevator quietly. Now would be the only time to slip away without detection. Perhaps I could hide somewhere and come out after a few hours. I looked around. Ahead, beyond a glass wall, the area was surrounded by cots and blankets arranged neatly in rows and columns. Tables made lines along supply crates that provided rations to the refugees. I was surprised to see people in good spirits. You wouldn't have guessed these were the same people whose family and lives were obliterated a month ago.

"Mr. Alterman," a woman asked. I looked over to my right to see an armed guard standing next to me, quietly. She was standing up straight at attention, her brown hair tucked under

her beret, her gun slung over her athletic frame. She had probably been waiting for me. "Right this way," she said.

I walked up to the checkpoint, escorted by the guard. The officer behind the desk stared at me blankly.

"ID and craft registration," he said in an authoritative tone. I pulled the papers out and slid them across the counter. The officer glanced over the forms. The pilot looked around the desk. A sign hung above the desk.

*Identity fraud, illegal trade and theft are Class D felonies. Under new emergency protocol, all persons found guilty will be terminated by evacuation without exemption. Please have proper identification and manifests ready for the officer.*

My chest tensed. Termination by evacuation. A more formal way of saying "chucked out an airlock". Even before the crash, the federal fleet had little tolerance for smugglers. This was a convenient time to clean house.

"Step up to the retinal scanner and place your head here," he said pointing to the device. The contraption looked like a device you would find at the optometrist's office. I slowly made my way to the machine, trying to buy as much time as possible to think of an escape plan.

"You know, I've been out in the deep for a few months now. My doctor told me to avoid bright lights immediately after. I

have a note from him somewhere." I patted my jacket, feeling for the imaginary note.

"That's fine," said the officer, "you can always try your luck the other way." He slapped the sign hanging above him.

I forced out a chuckle and placed my head on the chin strap of the device. With a click of a button, the machine's lens opened and shined a red light into my eyes. What would the results show? I tried to read the officer's expression, but his face was turned away staring at the results on the screen.

"Stay here," the officer said turning around. "I just need to check something with my superior officer."

Now I began to panic. Stay here? I watched the officer walk into the room behind the glass wall, handing his tablet over to the officer behind the desk. They took turns looking my way—neither giving me any facial clues. Now would be a good time to run. I casually looked behind me, the guard was still there. Damn. Even if she wasn't there, I couldn't get past the locked door.

The officer came back out to the desk. This was my moment. If I was going to do something, it had to be now. The ship? The ship! It wasn't a permanent solution, but it could buy my more time.

"Mr. Alterman," the officer said. Was this it? Is he going to arrest me? He reached behind his back, I assumed for

handcuffs. Act, damnit! I stepped forward, shoving the officer to the ground. Shifting on my feet, I began sprinting to the elevator. I stepped forward: left foot, right foot, left—my legs betrayed me, going numb from my nerves. I watched the ground come up to meet my face as it slammed across my right cheek. As I rolled over, I saw the brown haired guard standing over me, fading into blackness.

I could feel the swelling of my face as it pulsed with warm blood, spilling out of capillaries, forming bruises on my face.

"Easy there, you're not going anywhere."

I opened my eyes, the face of the officer came into focus.

"What was that all about?" said the guard.

I tried to speak, but my tongue felt swollen. As I tried moving it about, the taste of iron filled my mouth.

"You see, Mr. Alterman," the guard leaned in closer, "it appears, you have missed several attempts to update your profile with the fleet. We don't have any retinal records for you. Normally this would incur a pretty significant investigation—what with smugglers buying fake IDs wholesale right now."

I gulped the warm blood in my mouth, unable to move otherwise.

"However, considering the fleet is short pilots right now—and the mountain of paperwork to process fraudulent papers—my superior is inclined to let you off with a fine for an expired ID, as long as you keep quiet about this whole matter."

The guard gripped my shoulder tightly with his large hands, "Isn't that right Mr. Alterman?"

What did he say? My mind began to catch up as the room stopped spinning.

"You just need to take an eye image for the Fed records," he said as he pulled me up from the ground.

I tried to reply, eventually managing to nod in agreement.

"Now, if you don't mind, we will just take a few more minutes to update your profile and you can be on your way."

The officer sat me down and tapped on his computer keyboard. The brown haired guard brought over an ice pack and placed it on my face.

"Here you are Mr. Alterman. You are free to go."

My legs still numb, I hobbled forward and grabbed the registration and ID from the officer.

He patted me on the back, "I would get to the sick bay and have yourself checked out. Lots of people are having fits of hysteria lately, doing stupid shit like running from base police. Maybe the doctors can give you something to help with



the nerves," he leaned in close, "and next time, a simple bribe will do."

I nodded at the guard in disbelief as I made my way to the door. The electric locks clicked as the door opened, letting me into the main cargo bay of the base. In front of me, people bustled forward to a line at the new cargo coming into the bay. Larger men began shoving forward, knocking people to the ground. A small girl lay on the cold composite floor, crying as she held her scraped knee. The cargo crate being unloaded was number T-165, the Basic Essentials. What could be so damn important at this point? I walked closer to the opening, standing on an empty box to get a better view. The uniformed men began unloading the boxes, making a bucket brigade to pass them down. I hopped down, and headed to the end of the line for a better view. The contents rolled down the arms, heaped from person to person until in my view. The boxes were stacked behind a transparent polycarbonate barrier. As the first of the boxes lay on the floor, I tried to get close enough to read the side of the cardboard box.

Toilet paper.