The day had finally come, Echo Team would begin the treacherous journey to Tralta. Launch was set for 4:00 P.M. on May 14, 2087. The crew was excited, but also apprehensive about the voyage to the distant and dangerous planet of Tralta. Echo Team would be the fourth team to attempt to reach the planet. The first team’s rocket boosters failed before launch so that mission had to be aborted, and the next two ended disastrously. The second mission had a nuclear power failure in the primary engine core that resulted in a violent explosion just after the ship breached the stratosphere. The third ended three days into the mission when an unpredicted meteor shower caught the crew off guard and destroyed their ship. Unfortunately, none of the crew survived the two most recent journeys.

Echo Team had an extremely dangerous journey ahead, more than they could have ever imagined. They were all afraid, even their highly skilled and determined leader, Skyler. However, they all felt a need to finish the work started by those before them. Their mission, Operation Hydration, was to collect and bring back water to Earth, which was in a tragic state of emergency. As the human population boomed, the sources of fresh water dwindled. Massive wars broke out between countries in desperate need of fresh water. The United States even resorted to placing large bombs underneath huge salt deposits that lay under the Great Lakes and threatened to detonate the bombs, destroying the world’s greatest and nearly last source of fresh water, if a country attacked the United States. Many underdeveloped African and Asian countries simply dried up and died out.

Several countries tried to make up for the lack of water by using a process called desalinization, which is the turning of salt water into fresh water. However, the process is lengthy and doesn’t produce the vast amounts of water needed. NASA discovered a planet that was nearly 45% fresh water, about the size of Earth and roughly a three day journey at light speed. The most important aspect though was that the planet was uninhabited. Every major government agreed that no planet should be visited and harvested if it had living, intelligible inhabitants.

Echo Team was Earth’s last hope of survival. Nearly all of Earth’s fresh water would run out before another venture could be initiated. To guarantee success Echo Team was
comprised of Earth’s finest astronauts, ecologists, pilots, and soldiers. Skyler was the best pilot the world had ever seen at six feet two inches tall and 189 pounds with dark brown hair and a fairly muscular build. He was the only pilot to fly the U.S. Air Force’s ultimate flying machine, the SR-81 Blackbird. It was the new high-tech and militarized version of the former fastest plane on the planet, the SR-71 Blackbird. He flew the SR-81 in WW3 on over forty missions and was known to have shot down over 350 planes, never once being hit. His co-pilot Jeremy was an Osprey Z-22 pilot and one of the best in “tight” situations; he could maneuver his bird through any oncoming obstacles.

There were four astronauts: Ben, Calvin, Lydia and Horatio. They had a combined 43 years of mastery in engineering, physics and astronomy. Their job was to keep all the machinery working and the mission on track. The ecologists, Katie and Edmund, were there to make sure the water was clean and safely contained. Finally Trish, Antonio and Yuri were the guns of the operation. They were the highest skilled soldiers from North America, Europe and Russia respectively. They were there for protection; however, if there were an extra-terrestrial attack, no one knew if Earth weaponry would even faze a potential alien aggressor. Also Trish and Skyler had dated before and during the war, but were torn apart when the military sent Trish out to Russia to fight on that front. They hadn’t spoken since the day she was sent away. Trish was about five feet ten inches tall and 136 pounds with a very petite but toned body. Despite her size she could fight better than any MMA fighter and had the best shot on the planet with a Beretta .60 caliber M112. Their ship, “The Ark,” could hold 2.5 billion gallons of water. It was easily the largest ship ever made, dwarfing even many manmade buildings, at a quarter-mile tall and a little over a third-mile wide. It would bring back enough water to keep the U.S. and Europe running stably until the other three ships, nearly finished in production, could all be sent in a little over one month.

“T-minus 5 minutes until launch” echoed over the mics in each of their headsets. Skyler thought to himself, this mission must succeed. We are Earth’s last hope. “All systems check, we are ready for take-off,” Control states. One minute to take-off, a bead of sweat rolled down Skyler’s brow.

Jeremy informed jokingly, “Everyone please fasten your seatbelts and keep all arms, legs, and loose articles inside the ride at all times. We will be arriving at our destination in a short three days; enjoy your flight.”

Nervous laughs filled the cabin. Katie said, “Should he really be making jokes at a time like this?”

Edmund replied, “He is just trying to ease the tension.” His normally calm British voice cracked in apprehension. Horatio said a silent prayer and made the sign of the cross.

“Ignition,” the nuclear powered shuttle lurched off the launch pad. Smoke billowed from the rockets, and the bright flame nearly blinded those in the space station. “We have
lift off,” called Control. The shuttle gradually picked up speed until it rocketed through the atmosphere. The world watched as its last hope disappeared into the mid-afternoon sky. The primary rockets disengaged and fell back to Earth as the secondary rockets engaged. Those carried them through the atmosphere and into space. Then those fell off and the shuttle’s main rockets powered up.

“Prepare for light speed!” shouted Skyler. A thunderous clap erupted, and the ship disappeared out of the sky as it hit 300,000,000 meters per second, a speed unimaginable by any human mind until actually experienced. The crew was temporarily sucked into their seats until the cabin pressure normalized and gravity restored.

“You are free to get up now and move about the cabin. Calvin, you can change your pants now,” Jeremy joked.

“Very funny,” Calvin retorted. As they sped away from Earth, they all looked back and saw dark, ominous clouds settle over the Earth.

Everyone got up and began to go about their assigned tasks. The soldiers took lookout shifts, and the astronauts checked supplies and rehearsed how best to extract the water. The ecologists went over the best places to obtain the water and how much they would need. Meanwhile the pilots plotted the course, checked system operations and watched for potential hazards. However, what took up most of their time was simply waiting for their arrival on Tralta.

It was the third day of the expedition, the day of arrival. The journey had been routine, no surprises so far, and Tralta was beginning to come into sight. The tiny, blue orb appeared to be about the size of a small marble through the cockpit window.

Skyler said, “We will be arriving on Tralta in around one hour.”

“We may want to make a quick landing once we get there,” warned Lydia. “There appears to be an object trailing us on the radar, and it’s moving at or near light speed. It’s probably just a meteor, but we will need to be out of the sky and its path as soon as possible.”

“We can do that,” assured Jeremy.

Trish turned to her fellow soldier Yuri and said “I can’t wait to get off this ship. Do you think we will see any action?”

Yuri replied in his thick monotone Russian accent, “No, we are just babysitters. We will not see anything.”

“Good, because when we get back to Earth, I’m taking the reward and buying a secluded house with a pool so I can live in luxury as the world dries up,” said Trish.

“Everyone please take your seats. We will begin landing shortly. Control, this is Jeremy, we are going to commence landing in twenty minutes, will confirm safe landing when it is completed.”
Light speed disengaged as the shuttle rocketed toward the blue planet. The shuttle rockets changed direction and pushed away from the planet to help slow the ship to a landing speed. Then they were into the planet’s atmosphere and slowed, but still went slightly too fast.

Ben fearfully pointed out, “We’re going too fast, we’re not going to make the landing!”

Jeremy in his calm demeanor replied, “No way, I have landed planes before going much faster than this oversized tub.” He affectionately patted the control panel in front of him as he said this. The landing gear groaned as it opened up underneath the ship.

“Check altitude!”
“Level out!”
“Keep her steady!”
“Good, we’re almost there,” and other things can be heard shouted back and forth between Ben, Skyler and Jeremy.

Meanwhile, in the cabin Antonio asked, “Is that meteor still behind us?”
Lydia answered curiously, “Yes, it appears to be following us and looks as if it’s glowing bright green. That is either the strangest meteor I have ever seen or something very different. Calvin you’re the space rock expert. What is this thing?”

Calvin thought to himself, and then said, “It’s unlike anything I have ever seen. My only explanation is that since humans until now haven’t been this far out in space, we haven’t known about this alternate type of meteor, and we are simply the first to witness its beauty in action.”

“Maybe it is an alien spacecraft!” Horatio said with a glint of fear in his eye.
“Don’t get your panties in a bunch, Horatio. Even if it were an alien spacecraft, why would it have any business with us?” Edmund asked rhetorically.

Trish wondered to herself if going on this mission was a good idea after all, especially since Skyler was the captain. Did he still have feelings for her and if so, would he show them?

“We have 30 seconds till touchdown,” Skyler said. The ship slowed to landing speed and hung just above the landing zone.

“Wait! We can’t land here. That whole clearing is mud! Tralta must have just had an awful storm. We will have to move to landing zone B,” shouted Ben.

“Control, we had a minor problem with our primary landing zone. There appears to have been a storm, we’re on our way to zone B.” Skyler said. They pulled back up and accelerated toward the next landing site, a small flat island in the middle of the biggest fresh water ocean on the planet. The Russia-sized ocean was completely fresh water and had
several islands inside it, the biggest of which was the one Echo Team was headed for, which was about the size of Ohio.

The team made it to the island and landed safely. Once every one had confirmed that everything was secure and it was safe to go outside, they opened the main hatch. Tralta actually had a higher oxygen level and no more noxious gasses than Earth, so there was no need for suits or oxygen tanks. Skyler was the first outside; he couldn’t wait to see the planet in person. He also wanted to take this chance to talk to Trish alone. His first glimpse of the planet from outside the ship was breathtaking. The planet was extraordinarily similar to Earth from the vast blue sky to the tall green trees and clear blue ocean. It was beautiful and untainted by the disastrous ways of society. He thought to himself about how alone they were on this amazing and unknown planet.

Then Trish came out, her shoulder-length, dirty-blond hair flowing lightly in the mid-afternoon breeze. To him she was the only thing more beautiful than this planet. He convinced himself to approach her, his much larger frame making her appear quite small.

“Wow, this planet is amazing, isn’t it?” commented Skyler.

“So that’s it, huh? Years apart without even an email and you think we can just pick up where we left off?” scrutinized Trish.

“Well, kinda yeah,” Skyler replied awkwardly as he scratched the back of his head and his cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

“It’s not that simple; I have changed, and so have you. I mean c’mon, look at you; you used to be tall and scrawny. Now look at you. Are those pec muscles?” she teased him.

“Please, let’s try again. I never stopped loving you,” Skyler pleaded.

“Let’s just finish this mission, and then we can talk about us,” Trish said as she walked off to help unload the equipment. The thought on both of their minds as she walked away was that each still cares.

Once everyone had stretched their legs they began unloading the machinery for sucking the water into the huge water storage compartment. They worked hurriedly for time was against them. Horatio directed the assembly and instructed them in how to operate the machines while they worked. The work took several hours, and the four industrial-sized rigs were up and running at full capacity. The rigs took in 2.5 million gallons of water for 28 of the 30 hours in one day. They would work for eight days then shut them down and head home. Doing this they would be just under their 2.5 billion gallon limit, but still with plenty of water for those left in the U.S. and Europe. Only one person needed to watch over a rig at a time and had to shut it down for two hours every day so it didn’t overheat. They each decided to take turns between lookout duty, rig duty, and exploration duty. In addition to obtaining the water, they were on Tralta to explore the planet. They wanted to know more about the planet for knowledge purposes and in case a mass exodus from Earth was needed.
The next seven days went by uneventfully except for the green “meteor” that was seen overhead several times. Skyler and Trish were back on speaking terms and growing closer and closer every day. On the eighth day Ben, Lydia, Antonio, and Edmund were on rig duty. Horatio and Yuri were on lookout duty while Trish, Skyler, Katie, Calvin, and Jeremy went out to search the surrounding area. Skyler, Katie and Trish went to search up the coastline and Jeremy and Calvin went inland. Skyler’s team had a rough map, several rock samples, and other scientific data and findings covering about ten miles of the beautiful, northern coastline when the wind picked up, and it began to sprinkle.

“We should head back. I don’t want to be lost in a storm on a different planet,” said Skyler. They turned their all-terrain Humvee around and headed back for the ship. They got back to the ship just as the storm hit full force with hurricane winds over 170 mph.

As they ran into the ship, Ben saw someone walking towards the ship. “Look it must be Jeremy and Calvin!” shouted Ben. Skyler rushed out into the storm to help them in, they battle through the winds and finally reach the ship.

“Jeremy, where’s Calvin?” asked Katie.

“What do you mean? He is right behind, oh no. We have to go find him!” said Jeremy.

“No! You can’t go out in this!” said Trish.

“We have to find him,” answered Skyler.

“I can’t lose you again. I won’t lose you again,” pleaded Trish.

“If we haven’t found him in one hour, we will come back and search for him in the morning. Give me the Tralta GPS so we won’t get lost,” said Skyler ignoring her pleading.

“O.K. but when you get back, turn off the rigs. They must not be allowed to overheat,” said Ben.

Skyler and Jeremy went out into the storm, barely able to see more than six feet in front of them. “Lead me in the direction you came from and turn on your belt spot lights so he can see the light from afar,” commanded Skyler. They walked through the hurricane slowly calling out Calvin’s name even though their voices were muffled in the fierce winds.

“It’s been over an hour. Where are they?” asked Trish worriedly.

“They will be back shortly, but just in case, someone needs to go turn off those machines,” said Horatio.

“I’ll do it. Antonio will you accompany me?” offered Ben.

“Sure, let’s go,” agreed Antonio. They stepped out into the gale and made their way towards the rigs.

A few minutes later someone spotted Skyler and Jeremy walking towards the ship, the storm having lessened somewhat since they left. When they got inside, Lydia asked, “Did you find him?” Solemn faced, they shook their heads no.
“Did you see Ben and Antonio?” asked Horatio. Suddenly a blood curdling scream is heard outside. Skyler and Yuri sprinted outside to see a dark figure attacking what appeared to be Antonio. Ben’s lifeless body lay next to him. The figure lunged forward and sunk a shiny blade into Antonio’s stomach and then sprinted away at an inhumanly fast speed.

Skyler reached them first and yelled to Antonio “Antonio! Wake up, don’t fall asleep. We need to get you inside!” Antonio choked and let out his final labored breath.

“Come on! We need to get inside before it comes back!” yelled Yuri ferociously. Skyler ran back to Yuri. He had his AR-21 drawn and ready, his eyes appeared pure white; he was in full killing mode. They reached the ship only glimpsing the shadow of the figure once more.

“What happened? Where are Antonio and Ben?” asked Lydia.

“I have no idea. Something was attacking them,” explained Skyler. “It was sort of humanoid shaped, but seven and a half feet tall, with spikes coming out of the back of its head about two feet long, a very muscular build with arms that you could put a huge watermelon inside, a mouth big enough to fit your head in, and the lower jaw separated in the middle revealing two-inch long teeth. It was all black and carried a short jagged dagger and a rifle bigger than Yuri’s AR. Despite all those features, the scariest part was its eyes; they were pitch black and looked as though they alone could kill you.” Katie and Lydia began sobbing, and Horatio sat in a corner with his head in his hands.

“We have to get out of here right now!” Trish said as pure terror filled her eyes.

Skyler summoned up all his courage to keep a level head so he could show his crew that they had hope and said, “No, Jeremy and I can’t take off in a hurricane. We will hold out inside this ship till morning. The storm should be clear by then, and the alien won’t be able to get us as long as we stay inside.”

“So it is an alien!” exclaimed Horatio.

“It can’t be anything else. I think we should kill it so it doesn’t follow us or hitch a ride,” said Yuri, the intensity of the hunt still showing in his eyes.

“No, absolutely not. No one is going outside,” declared Skylar.

“Wait, isn’t the water entrance hatch still open? It could climb in through there,” Katie reminded the group.

“Yes it is, but it takes two people to close. One from the outside near the rigs and one from the inside in the water control chamber. And it closes off with a scan of Skyler’s, Ben’s, Horatio’s, Calvin’s or my eyes,” said Lydia.

Skyler responded, “Fine, Edmund and I will close the gate outside and turn off the rigs. Yuri, you will go with Horatio and close the inner gate. Jeremy, stay here with Trish, Katie and Lydia. All right everyone, grab a flash light and an AR-21. Let’s head out.”
Trish stopped in front of him, “No, I’m going with you, and that’s final. I let you go to find Calvin. I’m not letting you go again.”

Skyler stared at her for a moment and decided not to argue. “O.K. you can come. Edmund, you go with Yuri and Horatio. Good luck, everyone. See you all soon,” Skyler said.

Skyler and Trish ran out into the hurricane praying the alien is far away. In a matter of minutes they reached the rigs.

“Trish, you turn off the rigs. I will close the outer gate. Horatio, I am closing the outer gate. Are you in the water tank control room?” asked Skyler.

“Yes, the inner gate is closing as we speak. Wait! What was that? There it is. It’s inside the ship! Shoot it!” screamed Horatio.

A terrifying, frightful cry echoed in the mics. “This is Yuri. The alien got Horatio, but the gate is closing, and Edmund is retreating. I’m going to send this creature to hell.” Yuri gave a fierce war cry and the mic went silent.

“No! Yuri go back to the cabin! Jeremy we got the outer gate closed and the rigs are shut off. We’re on our way back,” Skyler said. They sprinted back through the cargo door and heared gun shots being fired.

“Good, Yuri is still alive,” Trish said in a dark and desperate attempt at humor.

“We need to get back to the cabin to help Jeremy,” said Skyler. A loud bang is heard, and Edmund yelled for help. Then he suddenly went quiet. They heard Yuri say “I’ve got you now!” and shoot his assault rifle. While the monster and Yuri brawl in the main chamber hall, Trish pleaded for Jeremy to let them into the cabin.

The huge steel door opens to Katie standing in front of it, terrified. A glistening metal blade came whistling through the air and missed Trish’s neck by a hair, but hit the slightly taller Katie in the chest, and she was killed on the spot. Lydia screamed, and Trish and Skyler ran inside and try to close the door. The alien caught the closing steel door with one hand and threw Yuri’s gun into the cabin with the other.

The alien threw the door open and jumped into the cabin where he leaped onto Jeremy and punched him in the heart with enough force that it exploded inside his chest. It pulled its rifle out with one hand and fired on Lydia at nearly point blank range and was deadly accurate.

Skyler stood up from behind a cabin wall and looked at the creature in the eyes; cold black death stared back at him. He pulled up his rifle to his shoulder and shot the alien with three quick but inaccurate shots. The alien was hit in the knee and chest and crippled badly. It fell to the floor with a loud boom. Skyler slowly walked up to the creature, gun still trained on his target. The alien showed no fear and tried to stand up for one last fight. Skyler, within two feet of the terrorizing threat, puts his finger on the trigger. The alien made a high-
pitched hissing sound and took one last swipe at Skyler with its massive and deadly hands. Skyler pulled the trigger and silenced the monster. The great menace was been defeated.

Skyler urged Trish to get up, “Come on we have to go to the cockpit. The storm has subsided. Let’s get off this filthy rock.”

“Yes, I’m ready to go home,” Trish said exhausted. She kicked the alien’s body as they walk by it.

They walked into the cockpit and Skyler said, “Wait, look, Jeremy wirelessly prepped the ship for take-off. He never did stop thinking about others; I am going to miss him.”

“Oh God no! Look! There are at least thirty or more aliens! They’re running towards the ship! Quick! Take off!” Trish yelled.

“Hold on!” Skyler thrusts a lever forward and the engines roar as the ship commences take-off. “Control this is Skyler, there was an unfriendly extraterrestrial encounter. Only Trish and I survived the attack, but we do have the water. We’re launching now, but prepare the world’s armies. We may be accompanied by some uninvited guests. Be ready, they’re coming!”