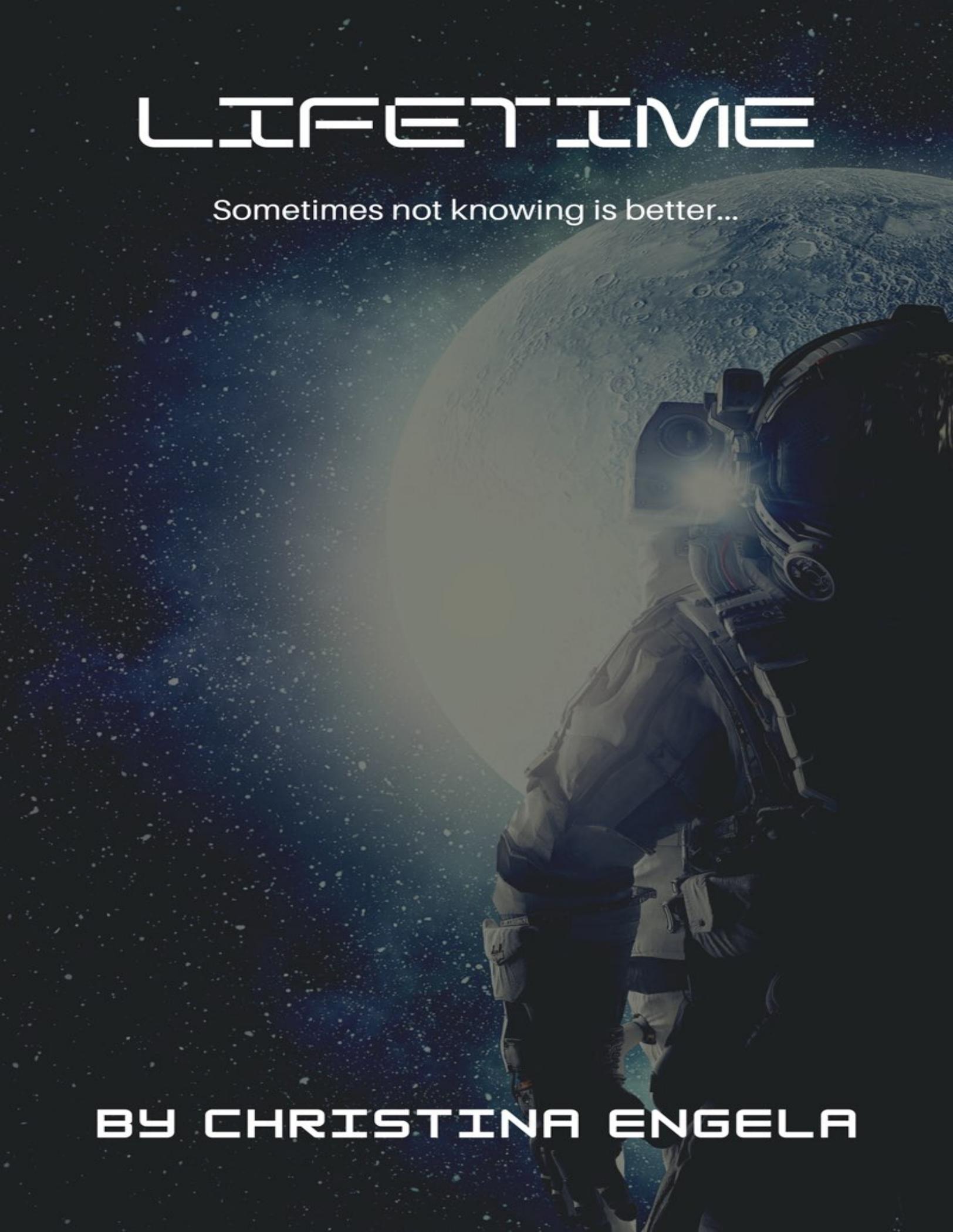


LIFETIME

A full-page background image featuring an astronaut in a white and blue space suit floating in space. The astronaut is positioned on the right side of the frame, facing left. In the background, a large, detailed view of Earth is visible, showing continents and oceans. The sky is a deep blue with numerous white stars scattered throughout.

Sometimes not knowing is better...

BY CHRISTINA ENGELA

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LIFELINE BY CHRISTINA ENGELA

TERRAN ECOSPACE INC. was a small company in the modern sense – that is, it had over the last ten years grown to around 50 admin and technical staff who worked at its head office in Mars City – which was also its only office. The company had started with just one ship in the beginning, and still had just three fairly modest ships – all medium-sized loderunners set up for deep space exploration and prospecting, and each of them had a small crew of ten.

Harald Vanderbilt had built the company up from nothing – a former loderunner pilot himself, the forty year old gent had spotted an opening in the Terran space commerce industry for services other than just delivering necessities to far-flung outposts in Terran space and collecting various produce such as ores and exotic crops or produce from them, and conveying these up and down across the black for the remainder of his days; he had ambition.

Early on in his career as a pilot he'd realized there was room for prospecting – that is, for someone with their own ship to explore uncharted space and making it into charted space – while checking asteroids and planets for rare

minerals and ores that drove Terran industries – and were highly sought after. Finding these ores and marking their locations on star-maps was one thing – but exploiting them was another – and Harald knew that the mining corporations would be eager to save on the costs of financing and sending their own prospectors out into the nothing by simply buying the astro-geological scans and reports from an independent contractor, just to increase their own percentages. As far as he knew, there were no independent prospecting contractors yet. Yes – as time went by, the young man became convinced that was a brilliant idea. Over time, Harald Vanderbilt decided that would be his ambition one day – to build up enough capital to leave his job, buy his own ship, and hire a crew for that purpose.

To that end, he began to save and excelled on whatever courses and opportunities his job offered to him, including advanced piloting and safety courses and taking several inter-ship transfers which offered him a wider variety of experiences on different routes in different parts of the Terran Empire. Some years later, he enrolled in a correspondence course and earned his skipper's ticket – although his employer never utilized him in that role – in fact, the highest position he held in his employer's structure was the rank of Pilot First Class. People tended to stick to a good job in those times – and rarely left unless there were fairly exceptional circumstances. Basically the only things that opened any vacancies were if people got fired – or died, or retired, and although Captain Justinian and his First Mate Mr. Mikelson were already on the wrong side of fifty, they both had excellent, spotless records of service, and neither of

them was close to retirement – and barring accidents, seemed reasonably healthy.

Finally, after fifteen years on the job, Harald Vanderbilt had finally saved up enough – even despite the costs of a wedding and honeymoon trip to Ursa Minor with his bride Virian five years prior – and shortly before his thirtieth birthday, Harald handed in a formal letter of resignation at his employer's offices at the spaceport on Mars, and embarked on his new career. He left the employ of Inter-Terra Space Cargo LLC with his full pay for the month, his pension package, and his savings.

Virian – his wife of five years – was a highly qualified astro-geologist, and shared his dreams and ambitions. Virian worked as a researcher at Mars City University at the time, and handed in her notice as well. She added her own savings to the pool, and as if driven to it, the two immediately set out to buy their first ship. The money they had available was enough to purchase a ship, outfit it for prospecting, and to hire a crew for one voyage lasting around three months. They were very careful in each step of the journey at the outset: in choosing a ship, they picked an affordable fairly recent model of loderunner only a little older than the type Harald had been used to piloting. Virian used her contacts in the field to locate a range of good quality used prospecting equipment and secured it at a significant discount, which resulted in them being able to pocket some extra change at the end of the costing exercise.

Once the ship had been registered and the prospecting equipment delivered and installed aboard, the next step for the Vanderbilts was to secure a crew. Since Harald had a

skipper's ticket, that meant he would be heading up the crew. Virian Vanderbilt, as an astro-geologist, would handle the actual prospecting end – handling the specialized sensor equipment and instruments, and overseeing any prospecting field-trips on the surface of asteroids or planets where they detected valuable ores and so on. For the rest, they only needed the bare minimum number of crew to meet the total of ten as specified by safety regulations for a ship of that type.

A month after Harald resigned, the *Alluvion* – the Vanderbilt's first ship – set out on its first voyage. Harald chose a swathe of uncharted space which he knew had been untouched by commercial exploitation so far. The crew of the *Alluvion* struck it very lucky at the outset; charting numerous finds of great value – rare metals, materials, gasses, stones and ores precious and vital to Terran industry for a myriad of diverse uses on a string of unexplored worlds, moons and asteroids. Virian, Harald knew, was in her element – and even identified three new previously unknown minerals, two of which appeared to hold promise for future industrial use. In fact, when the *Alluvion* returned to the space port at Mars City three months later, their entire list of finds was snapped up by EuroTerran, one of the up-and-coming mining franchises operating from Earth – and the Vanderbilts were paid a great deal of money.

After that first voyage, Harald and Virian were tempted to take the money and settle down – they had after all, just made more than their anticipated life's earnings in salaries from both their jobs in just four months! They could've lived very, very comfortably if they had – and they might even

have started that long-postponed family they often talked of in tender moments. Instead, they decided it was wiser to expand their business. They registered Terran Ecospace Inc. and set up a small office in one of the buildings beside the spaceport in Mars City. The next step was to buy more ships – and they bought two more similar to Alluvion, and had those all repainted in the colors of the company, turquoise and gray. The two new additions were also renamed after geological terms, *Galena* and *Moya*, and the Vanderbilts eagerly sent their small fleet off to prospect for three more months.

The Vanderbilts had made enough off that first voyage to formalize and establish their business – prospecting and selling the resulting information to the mining corporations. They set out to do the same again – threefold. When they returned after three months – each ship having scoured unexplored, uninhabited systems and listed sites of precious minerals and materials – Terran Ecospace Inc. again approached EuroTerran, expecting the same outcome. Sadly, they were in for a disappointment. In the inter-rim, other small start-up companies and solo operations – encouraged by Terran Ecospace’s success – had sprung up and begun prospecting and selling their lists of sites to the mining companies as well. They were offered slightly more than half of the previous payment, for all three ships lists! Shocked, Harald approached Precious Materials – which was a mining company slightly higher up on the food chain, only to be presented with a similar lackluster offer.

“The market’s flooded – everybody’s doing it now!” Precious Metals buying officer told them. “But I gotta hand

it to you – you guys sure started something!”

“Oh, you’re prospectors?” The buying officer of X said, sounding impressed before adding: “My nephew just started doing that! Straight outta college, he and his best friend bought an old star-shuttle and went out prospecting near Nanucia 4 last month!”

Very unimpressed, Harald signed off and took another look at the fledgling company’s list of corporate contacts. A star-shuttle was about a third the size of the Alluvion, which was the smallest ship they had – and had no living quarters or room for sophisticated sensors needed for mineralogical detection. It would be cramped and uncomfortable, and since the smaller vessel had a much shorter range than the Vanderbilts ships – he had no doubts that their results would reflect that.

It took nearly a week before the company managed to find a buyer willing to pay anything close to what they were expecting, and even though disappointed, the Vanderbilts still came out of it extremely and suddenly wealthy. Their company was profitable – and despite the competition, of which there was plenty – it was still viable in practice. They set out on their third voyage toward the end of their first year with the company, hoping to repeat the same result a second time.

Prospecting in deep space was a lot harder – and more perilous than a lot of people thought, apparently – so most of their early competition dropped out. Some gave up for whatever reasons – repair costs to their aging or decrepit ships, difficulty in locating materials without the right sort of prospecting equipment – which was quite expensive and

hard to find in working condition used, and of course the other less talked about reasons... danger and risk. It was downright dangerous. Most prospecting voyages sailed into uncharted unexplored space – which also meant it was off the beaten path, far from main space lanes carrying traffic. Ships suffered damage or systems failures – or accidents. Some – a good number in fact – were lost and never heard from again. Many quit, and went back home with their tails tucked in behind them – although almost as many were keenly stepping up behind them, ready to take leaps of faith of their own.

Terran Ecospace Inc. continued to operate and grow steadily over the rest of that decade. In the meantime, Harald and Virian set up an unexpectedly modest home near Mars City and started that family they'd talked about. For a while they remained at home, appreciating the novelty of a Mars-bound lifestyle. Harald occupied himself with the management of the business, making daily trips to the office at the spaceport and joining Virian in the evenings, and spending time with their children in their formative years. After about five years of that, Virian began to have itchy feet. Virian missed the joys of discovering minerals on planets she'd never seen before and cataloging them. Harald also missed the adventure of skipping a ship into the unknown, but the business needed attention at that stage. So they compromised – Harald would stay, while Virian went along on the next three month voyage of the Alluvion as chief astro-geologist.

The Vanderbilts already had a small staff at their floating house above Typhus Bay, so it was a simple matter to hire a

nanny to care for the kids while Harald was at the office during the day. The first few days were hardest for Harald, but the first two weeks with only the kids and housekeepers for company at home. By the end of the first month, he was already acclimatized to getting up to the usual breakfast prepared by the housekeeping staff, and being taken to work in the company-owned hover-car that waited for him on the landing deck each morning. His workdays were taken up with meetings, both with heads of the company's various departments as well as with representatives of other companies with which Terran Ecospace had dealings.

At least he was able to stay in touch with Virian via the company's communications with the ship. She was having a good time, in spite of the workload of being a ship-board astro-geologist. Most of the time, the calls were taken at home, and the kids were allowed time to talk to their mom – which frequently took up the lion's share of call-time anyway, and after two months of this separation, the solitude and distance between himself and his wife became painful to Harald.

It was on an otherwise ordinary Thursday night that Harald Vanderbilt last saw his wife Virian's face on the vid-screen in his study at home. Linny and little Erik had already had their time talking with her, had said goodnight, and their nanny had led them out of the study, to bed. Virian smiled in her usual fashion, her features illuminated flatteringly in the slightly dimmed lights of the lab aboard the Alluvion, and told him goodbye.

“I love you!” She said, then pressed a finger to her lips, kissed them – and then placed it on the screen over his face.

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