

# The Space Farmer

Lyle Garford

## Dedication

This one is for Ryan and Mike

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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## Chapter One

Harlan rubbed his tired eyes for the fifth time in the last hour, knowing this was a sign he was losing focus. Despite that he was far too puzzled and on edge at the same time. He also wasn't ready to quit despite the doubts gnawing at his insides. But every time his inner cynic dismissed what he was seeing as just another false lead, the spark of hope alight in his soul at the thought this could be the real thing refused to disappear.

But figuring out whether he really had found something was the challenge.

He pulled out his mobile phone to check the time and groaned aloud at what he saw on the display. Now a bare few minutes away from midnight, the streetlights and signs on the nearby shops in the area around the rental apartment building he called home were already on. His alarm would go off far too early in the morning and it already felt like a long, tiring week at the office. But the light pollution from the city around him made the job of his telescope that much harder and he needed as many of the city lights as possible around him off. Fortunately, the property manager of the apartment building he lived in was generous enough to give him access to the building's roof three floors up from the ground to indulge his hobby.

With a sigh, he decided to try once more to find what he was looking for. This was the second night in a row he was up late engaging in the same search. The night before he was too tired and, being certain he would discover some sort of painfully obvious error was the cause, he dismissed what he found and put it aside for the next night. He fully expected to find whatever was wrong with what he did would now be clear. In his years working as a programmer, he learned one lesson many times, over and over again. If debugging needed to be done, fresh eyes and a clear mind were always good to have.

He looked at his notes one final time and made certain he was entering the right coordinates to the tablet computer he was using to guide his telescope to the right spot. After checking it twice, he sighed and crossed his fingers in hope this time he would succeed. With the most expensive eyepiece he owned attached, he knew this was his best shot at solving the small mystery now nagging at him so much that sleep this night would be hard to find if he didn't succeed. Carefully grasping the eyepiece, he once again peered into the depth of night sky above in search of an answer.

And, as before, the answer eluded him.

"Gahhh!" he said to himself in frustration, tearing himself away from the telescope and running his hand through his hair. "I don't bloody get this."

Harlan felt certain something anomalous was up there in a geostationary orbit. But in reality, certainty was proving impossible to find. When he focused on the coordinates and stared into the darkness to find it, what he got was simply more of the same mystery. Each time he looked, his brain registered what seemed an infinitesimally tiny wobble, which within a millisecond resolved into simply more of the emptiness of space.

And paradoxically, this made both perfect sense and seemed utterly nonsensical at the same time.

Harlan stood staring at the telescope with his shoulders slumped in frustration. After a moment of indecision, he began packing up his equipment to head back downstairs to his apartment. He shook his head as he thought about what to do next.

"God, why do I do this to myself? I should take up knitting or something," he muttered, for he knew a hard choice was coming. But his mind strayed back to how he reached this point, failing to see what else he could have done to figure out what was happening.

Most of the people he knew enjoyed some sort of hobby to occupy their time when not drudging away at whatever job they had drifted into in life. While more than a few of his friends dabbled with diversions linking to scientific endeavours, specifically searching for extra-terrestrial life wasn't a hobby he shared with anyone else. Of course, he knew a broad spectrum of people in the world beyond his circle of friends were engaged in the same search as he was, but after a few hesitant attempts to connect with them he decided to keep his distance. Some of the serious science geeks out on the fringe could be downright weird.

Harlan acknowledged an objective observer might easily think of him as yet another member of that fringe element. As an unmarried single male, a few months shy of thirty years old, he was already uncomfortably close to the stereotype his friends readily assured him he was fitting. True, he had the luxury of a stable job as a computer programmer with a software company, although he was seriously underpaid. He would have moved on or tried to set up his own company long ago, but the boundless ambition he felt ten years ago somehow disappeared when contemplating at the thought of losing a steady paycheque and job benefits.

He'd had girlfriends along the way, but none of them stuck with him. They either revealed their true, high maintenance selves soon enough or decided someone who seemed to be an introverted science geek, spending most of his time staring at a computer screen, wasn't for them. That his spare time was spent searching for aliens didn't help. When the women he met learned of his hobby, their faces usually struggled to hide varying degrees of wary disbelief and dismay. Most simply rolled their eyes and took their attention elsewhere.

He couldn't help it, though. The possibility of alien life existing somewhere beyond the known limits of the planet humans call home was so alluring he couldn't let it go. He'd grown up devouring stories of early explorers sailing into the unknown and it was no stretch to see the spirit of those people was alive and well in the space program. While no one ever admitted it, he knew it was a given everyone attached to the space program secretly harboured a fervent hope they would have the thrill of making humanity's first contact with alien beings. Harlan was no exception, convincing himself it was actually little different than winning a lottery with really bad odds. But sooner or later, he was certain someone would win.

The hard reality of putting food on the table and paying the bills forced those young dreams to take a back seat as he grew older, for his family wasn't rich. His other problem was while his marks in school were good, those of others were excellent. So his only option was to finish school and focus on the day-to-day, mundane needs of building a life. But he was in the grip of the mystery of whether alien life existed and, as soon as he could, he began occupying his spare time with the search.

With the limited resources at his disposal, he quickly turned to focusing on the efforts of others. The Search For Extra-terrestrial Intelligence or SETI was a longstanding area of interest to scientists everywhere, but in recent years the efforts began to grow exponentially. Early work involved large telescopes like the Arecibo dish in Puerto Rico, but the amount of time available to spend specifically on SETI searches was restricted due to competition from other scientific projects. As such, the data gathered was limited in scope and volume.

This changed with the installation of a large telescope array in the California mountains almost twenty years ago. As the array was using new technology and was dedicated solely to SETI work, what used to be a relatively manageable trickle of SETI search information soon became a massive flood. The SETI scientists resorted to software to sort the most promising bits of information for detailed review. And all of it was made publicly available to the worldwide ranks of amateur SETI fans like Harlan.

Reasoning that even the best scientists could overlook important information at times, Harlan decided to see if he could find something they somehow failed to notice or something they were seeing and totally misunderstood. He spent several evenings designing his own program to sift through the masses of data he downloaded from the SETI site and began running tests, focusing on searching for tiny anomalies that otherwise could be missed. Although any hint of success eluded him, he continued to make modifications. With the ability to work its way through data provided on its own, the program gave him free time to do other tasks.

But now, the reason he was up on the roof two nights in a row was that the program finally produced a result. After working its way through the data fed to it for several weeks, Harlan was stunned to find an automatic report from his program waiting for him when he woke one morning. The irony was he ended up cursing himself for having slept in on this of all mornings. With no time to review it, he was forced to rush off to work. He shouldn't have bothered, for his mind kept drifting to what was waiting for him at home. The day ended being one of his less productive efforts for the company.

The second he walked into his apartment after work that evening he made straight for his computer to dive into the details of what the program found for him. Within a few minutes he digested the gist of what the report covered and he frowned in response.

"Wow. That can't be," he said, muttering to himself. "It's ridiculous."

Pulling up the original source file he pinpointed the specific section which revealed the tiny anomaly his program found, a miniscule oddity in the data so small he was amazed to have picked it up. Harlan rubbed his face in confusion, for if this was a flaw it was beyond belief it could be there. After all, the SETI instruments were simply doing their job of recording what they found. And if it wasn't a flaw, the only possible conclusion was something was in fact there to produce the strange data.

His immediate reaction was to suspect it was a tiny bit of space junk causing the reading. But even as the thought came he dismissed it. The problem was things like satellites or even various bits of tiny space junk out there appeared very different in the SETI data, which was annotated automatically by the advanced software programs the researchers used to flag such elements. The SETI people knew exactly where each bit of junk was, regardless of size.

Still working on the assumption a problem was buried in the source data, he soon downloaded a fresh copy and compared it to the one his program generated the result from. He shook his head as he realized the outcome was the same. After puzzling over it without success he put it all away and went to fix himself dinner, but the mystery was still there when he picked it up again to look at it with fresh eyes. He knew he had no choice but to stay up late and turn his gaze to the stars, for he wouldn't sleep if he didn't.

On one hand the anomalous data seemed to indicate something was in a geostationary orbit over the earth. But it was so unusual the data could equally be a simple, strange glitch of some sort. He was fully expecting to find nothing as he pointed his telescope to the sky that first night and was thus stunned to find the ever so tiny wobble each and every time he looked at the coordinates the SETI data produced for him.

And this was why after two nights of staring at the same thing and considering every possible reason for what he was seeing, it remained paradoxical the data would lead him to something which made no sense whatsoever. Logic told him there must be some sense to it, however bizarre it may be. Harlan always subscribed to the notion the law of cause and effect was a universal principle, and that there was indeed order to the universe. In his world, if the reason for

something happening wasn't clear, it was because we were suffering from an imperfect understanding of the universe and how it worked.

But now, after two nights staring at the same strange phenomenon with no resolution, Harlan's mind was wrestling with his new problem as he made his way back down to his ground floor apartment with his equipment. Despite the late hour and how early he knew his alarm would go off, he put his gear away and sat at his desktop computer. Pulling up his email program, he hesitated for a long minute before creating a new message file to send. With his fingers hovering over the keyboard he hesitated once again, before finally slumping back into his chair with a groan.

"God, do I need to do this?" he muttered to himself.

He sat in front of his computer with the blank email on his screen for almost a full ten minutes considering the problem thoroughly. The angst he was feeling over what he was thinking of doing was real, for he would be exposing himself to a very tough audience. The opinion of one person he in particular didn't want to disappoint weighed on him. After going over every possibility in his mind, it remained all too likely he was missing some mundane element that his audience would find and the ensuing ridicule he'd endure wasn't a pleasant prospect. But the tiny, inner flare of hope which kept him glued to the spot was the thought he was on the cusp of beating the dismal odds against him. Finding something everyone else was missing was too great a prize to ignore.

And maybe, just maybe, that something was alien.

Harlan sighed, for he knew he needed a reality check and a discussion with the others about this. Having made his decision he began typing with ever increasing speed. If he sent the email, he knew he would get what he was looking for one way or another. The words flowed almost without effort onto his computer screen, for the possibilities were boundless and inspiration seized him.

What if, he asked himself as he typed, this was indeed an alien craft hiding in plain sight? Maybe it was employing some kind of technology like the military used to hide from enemy radar? It would need to be very, very good in order to elude the prying eyes of various militaries around the world, and who knew, this could even be some sort of advanced satellite. But if it was an alien ship, what was it doing in a geostationary orbit?

Harlan included the detailed coordinates of the anomaly in his email, making certain the people reading his message would know exactly where and how close the object was. The thought it was beyond belief no one found the anomaly before this kept nagging at him, but each time it surfaced so did the same notion that even in lotteries with the absolute worst odds, someone was going to win.

Several minutes later the flood of words finally slowed to a trickle and he finished his message. After reading it through twice and making a few small corrections he was satisfied with the result, but he couldn't bring himself to hit send. Feeling the angst well up again, he sat back in his chair trying to decide how he felt about it. The thought came that the torment he was feeling was a measure of how truly important it was to him that what he found was the real thing. If the outcome was the opposite, he knew his spirits would be crushed, although that was nothing new. He shook his head, realizing everything he was thinking probably meant he was fitting the profile of nerd science geek far more than he wanted to admit.

His moved his hand toward the computer keypad to hit send two more times, but pulled it back in indecision each time. He rubbed his chin and sighed in frustration over what to do,



searching for an answer that wouldn't come. The late hour and his tiredness didn't help. And neither did the large bulk of Spock landing on the desk beside him with a thud.

"Shit!" said Harlan, his concentration jarred in momentary surprise, before he realized who it was.

"Maaoorrw!" said the big orange and white tabby cat in response, staring back at Harlan.

Harlan sighed as he reached out to scratch behind the cat's ear.

"Don't do that, Spock. You scared the crap out of me."

But Harlan knew he shouldn't have been surprised. Living on the ground floor in his apartment building meant he could enjoy a small patio deck outside his suite like Spock's owner, his next-door neighbour Isaac. With the pleasant early summer weather they were enjoying Harlan got to know the old man and his cat who earlier in the spring moved into the suite next door, having good conversations together when they were both outside in the evening. Harlan usually left his patio door open in summer evenings, giving free reign as a result for Spock to visit in search of the kitty treats the cat knew Harlan would have for him.

"Sorry, Spock," said Harlan, stroking the cat absentmindedly and staring back at the computer screen. "My mind is on other things."

The cat seemed to sense it. Strolling across the desk with his tail in the air to stand in front of Harlan, the cat turned and stared at the screen for several long moments as if reading the email for himself. Harlan could only laugh as all he could now see in his line of sight was Spock's raised tail and ass.

"All right, Spock, I probably deserve that. Now get out of the way...no, don't do that, for God's sake!"

Spock was stepping forward unexpectedly onto the keyboard, shuffling back and forth a bit in search of a prime spot, before promptly flopping down on it as if it were the most comfortable bed anywhere. Harlan groaned and picked him up, moving him back off to the side. Stroking the now aggrieved looking cat for a few moments to placate him, Harlan turned back to the computer screen to focus once again on his task. His jaw fell open as he did, for the draft email was no longer on the screen. Quickly checking his sent mail, he confirmed it was indeed already in the inboxes of all of his friends. Somehow, Spock seemed to have made his decision for him.

"Oh, damn..." said Harlan, turning to glare at the cat.

Spock was now sitting there licking a paw as if nothing was happening, but seeing Harlan watching him he stopped.

"Meooww!" said Spock once again.

Harlan knew that if a cat could smirk, the expression now on Spock's face was what it would look like. And Harlan also knew exactly what was being expected of him.

Harlan sighed. "Come on then, you silly beast. Let's get you a treat."

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Fridays were usually Harlan's favourite day of the week. Although his work as a programmer paid the bills and some jobs held greater challenges than others, the same routine elements of the work were long since beginning to wear on him. The thought of a career change crossed his mind on more than one occasion, but the question was what to change to. Even worse to consider was whether he wanted to pay the price for doing so.

As a result, Fridays were the day Harlan felt like a flower coming into an ever so brief bloom that would last the weekend. But the other problem with his job were demanding clients that changed their minds about what they wanted as often as they put on new clothes.

While normally he could muster more patience, today was particularly difficult as he tried to meet the needs of one of the most finicky clients of the company. If it weren't for the fact he knew the two business owners he was dealing with were highly educated professionals, he would have sworn they both had the brains of a gnat. In reality they were actually nice people, which made his job all the more challenging, but the importance of freezing the design when working to create something new was a critical need to understand, especially if they wanted to stay on budget.

As Harlan finally walked out the door of the office in relief his phone pinged with an incoming text. He glanced at the time before he checked the message, groaning to himself on finding it was already almost an hour past when he was supposed to be free of the clutches of his employer. He was thus unsurprised to see the text was a brief query as to where he was. This time he sighed and stopped a moment to send a quick reply he was on the way. No responses came in since the email was sent two nights before, but that was exactly what he was expecting. He would learn soon enough what the recipients of his message thought.

The Lamplighter Diner was several blocks away in a much older and rather seedier part of town, away from the business district. Affectionately known as The Lamp by his friends and everyone else that congregated there, it was a combination diner, pub, and music venue serving anything it could to make a buck. Although out of the way, The Lamp survived by having good, cheap food and, even better, an array of decent, cheap beer on offer.

Harlan knew the usual crowd of his friends would already be there, for the unspoken agreement was no matter what was going on in their lives, Friday nights were for hanging out at The Lamp. Occasionally a musician or two would appear later in the evenings to help The Lamp sell more beer. They all stumbled home from The Lamp well past midnight on more than one occasion as a result.

Normally Harlan looked forward to heading for The Lamp as a place to decompress to start his weekend, but he remained on edge and preoccupied as he made his way down the street to meet his fate. Because of that he failed to notice a van pull away from where it was parked outside his office and begin following him slowly down the street, stopping and slipping back into a parking spot periodically to ensure it didn't overtake him as he went. The van was black and didn't stand out in any way, except for the small array of strange looking antennas on the roof and the slightly darkened, tinted glass of its windows which made it hard to see inside.

And it followed him all the way to The Lamp.