

*The Quantum Series: Book 3*



**DEAD  
MAN'S  
HAMMER**



*Christina Engela*

# **Dead Man's Hammer by Christina Engela**

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## Dead Man's Hammer

Imagine, if you will:

Somewhere in deep space, a bright yellow star lit the darkness around it, completely unaware that its light could be seen across enormous amounts of distance – and of course, time. During its enormously long lifetime – most of which had been spent in the company of its rather dysfunctional family of nine ordinary-looking planets – countless beings had named it from the far ends of distant telescopes, wondered whether there was any life there, and included it into numerous imaginary star clusters and constellations as they were perceived from their respective vantage points.

Once in the lifetime of this star– or maybe twice, beings had risen from the dust of their own worlds to look up at it in their skies, and called it names that meant “Light-bringer” or “Great Day Maker” before the illimitable dark blanket of extinction hid their faces from the universe. More recently however, beings from a faraway world that orbited a distant sun not unlike this one, gave it a name also. They called themselves *Human*, and they travelled here on a starship named the *Edsel* to establish a new colony on one of its chil – er, planets. The Humans called the star *Ramalama*. The name they gave to their new home? They called that *Deanna*.

Right from the start, the first Human colonists to arrive on *Deanna* found very little at all there to laugh at – which could account for the whimsy in the names given to various things they encountered on Deanna – as many a Deannan would attest, if asked politely over a cup of Hot Stuff Blend at Albrecht's Takeaways. *Ploplar* trees, *cherebub* bushes, *flatular canaries* – and *strato-penguins* all added to the charm of Deanna – and not just because they'd been given creative names! In most cases, the idiom “It is what it does”, applied. *Obsidian Crows* might seem funny at first, unless you just happened to ride over one with your jeepo five miles out of town and didn't have a spare tire – and although there was some reasonable expectancy of hitting one of these solid, diminutive brutes on the roads, it didn't happen nearly as often as one might think.

Deanna was pretty much as boring a lump of rock as could be expected – and

it had promised the settlers who founded the colony some eighty years prior, nothing but hardship and lean years at first, until they could get things going properly – and delivered on that promise! So, with the stoic determination of frontiersmen in all manner of times and places, they simply got on with the business at hand – making a life here in the outback, where at first, everything had to come from the supply ships. There was little in the way of entertainment, aside from the hardships and struggles of everyday life – so they looked up into the sky, and saw the sun called Ramalama, who ruled the day. At night, they saw the two mad little moons in close orbit around the planet – and named them *Ding* and *Dong*.

*Dong* had been described most often as “a huge lump of nothing much, about one kilometer in diameter” while *Ding* was only about fifty feet around, consisted entirely of titanium and was a known navigational hazard to approaching ships. Despite being bright and shiny, pilots simply didn’t see it – either at all, or until it was far too late. This was where the saying “you’ve got a *Ding* in your fender”, popular among local space-jockeys, came from – and in fact, it wasn’t long before the small moon *Ding* was knocked out of orbit for the first time! Because the night sky looked so dull and lifeless and depressing without it, the colonists co-operated in putting it back up again – which became something of a regular occurrence as space traffic to Deanna – and collisions with the small moon increased over time.

In more recent times, since Deanna catered for a moderate slice of the tourism industry’s pie, the Tourist Office was given jurisdiction over the small moon. On average, it would take three specially dedicated heavy-duty space tugs to get the spherical lump of titanium out of its crater, and to put it back in orbit where it belonged. The usual administrative delays would hold up the process, usually while a specialized team working for the Tourist Office had it polished up again first. Suppose someone saw greasy fingerprints on it? Oh, the shame! Ahem – anyway, the tiny, shiny moon called *Ding* had become such a popular feature of Deanna that it had a whole page devoted to it in the *Galactic Tourist Guide*, and even in the prestigious *Encyclopedia Galactica*. Local jewelers even sold miniature silver, gold and titanium Dings as pendants, in various sizes, on chains.

By now, almost a century later, the planet *Deanna* was still just another third-rate colony in the vast and growing Terran Empire. Deanna was an average-sized world with a land-sea ratio of only 35 percent – which meant there was far less

sea than land – and with such small moons, there were hardly any tides or waves to speak of at all – which meant that if you were a tourist looking for a great place to surf – then dude, *this wasn't it!* Deanna had only one ocean, the *Landlocked Ocean* – which was fresh, shallow and – as you could probably tell by its name, landlocked.

Rivers from all around the planet ran from the ice caps and melting glaciers at the poles, into each other and into various lakes – great and small, and emptied into the Landlocked Ocean – which happened to be the largest and deepest part of the surface, and held all that water. The Landlocked Ocean straddled the equator, and covered an area roughly the size of the African continent on Earth.

There was plenty of arable land around the Landlocked Ocean, which was just as good for farming and building as it was for mining (and in certain cases, snorting). Deanna was a good place to farm, either with crops or livestock, and there was enough *Lantillium* to last a lifetime or two. Lantillium was a kind of nonferrous, nonmagnetic (apolar) metal used to line warp cores in stardrive engines – and also the inside of blaster emitter barrels. Because lantillium formed the backbone of the Terran heavy weapons industry, it was understandably a rather valuable commodity to the Terrans.

Over the eight decades since the establishment of the colony, the local population grew impressively with the help of new settlers, adding their expertise and skills to the workforce and economy. There were miners, farmers, businessmen, administrative staff and generally, just *people*. There were generations of them now, using schools, hospitals and shopping malls as if they'd always been there. Within the space of a single Human lifespan, amazingly enough, Deanna had already become home to over two million citizens of the Empire – and somewhere around thirty thousand aliens.

There were friendly alien races known to the Terrans, and many of their citizens passed through Terran space, and some stopped on Deanna – just passing through, as the saying goes – but some stayed longer than others. The largest number of non-human residents on Deanna were Jim-waians.

Jim-waians came from Jim-wa, a planet far from Deanna, and the Jim-waians who lived there were all identifiable by their unmistakable gray skin tones, even if they weren't wearing their traditional *seri-pha* (a kind of woven

head-scarf). A great many of the Jim-waians who left their home world to settle elsewhere tended to be refugees of a sort. Jim-waian culture back home was very oppressive, Spartan, and fanatically religious – and those who moved off-world tended to be the sort looking to get away from all that harsh, violent, zealous interference in their personal lives – or, perhaps more aptly – to settle down where they *could* have personal lives.

Almost without exception, Jim-waians lived peacefully among Humans, tended to keep to themselves, formed little communities in the cities on Deanna, with their own little neighborhoods, and ran little corner convenience stores, tailor shops, or café's – like the *Insug'h Bahss* – a popular Jim-waian café on the corner of Lupus and Grain streets, in the lower down-town center of the capital of Deanna – where, technically, everybody was an *alien*...of one kind or another.

High above Atro City, the passenger liner *Ossifar Distana* had just entered orbit around Deanna. A huge red star on the even more ginormous white tail-fin proclaimed this gargantuan a ship of the Red Star Line, the largest and most successful star liner company in like, *ever*. The liner was one of the most luxurious of its kind *anywhere* in space, and ferried the cream of society across the void in opulence and style. Only the wealthiest could afford an apartment on this ship for a trip of any duration, even a short one around the proverbial block – in fact, even the crew was obliged to pay rent, which was deducted from their monthly salaries with the unerring precision of a pendulum slice.

On any given day, the *Ossifar Distana* carried around five thousand passengers, the actual figure varying slightly depending on where she was on the vast elliptical cruise that took her around the Terran Empire. When she'd entered the system that morning, she carried four thousand, nine hundred and eighty four passengers, five hundred crew, one dead body and one very puzzled Captain.

Captain Harald Biscay rubbed his graying temples as he stared, deep in thought, at the vast star-field on the large navigation display. The bridge of this luxury liner was usually bustling and busy whenever the ship entered a port, but today it was quiet, sullen and muted. It had been a pretty rough, worrying few days for him, in particular. Of all the things Captain Biscay had seen in his time, he didn't rate too many worthy of being remembered. Of the few examples of such items Captain Biscay rated that highly, was his uncle Jock – from the slightly insane Scottish side of his mother's family – the Petrucelli's. Pretty much anything uncle Jock did was memorable – he'd lit up a smoke inside an

oxygen tent once, all innocent-like, and blew out the 53<sup>rd</sup> floor of Olympus Mons City General Hospital. The entire floor. Another time, while working for TexaCor as a mineral prospector, Harald's unusually accident-prone uncle forgot the shuttle's airlock door open – much to the brief annoyance of his late colleagues. *But*, right at the top of Harald's list – when Harald was a young man, his then rather elderly uncle would often play the bagpipes at strange hours of the night – shortly before being put away in a 'home'. Yes, *that* rated a mention, because Harald thought – or remembered it – as being rather funny. On the other hand, what he'd seen... just days ago now... *wasn't!* In fact, it was as far away from funny as...as... well, as far away as Deanna was from Earth!

On his regular scale of *Things That Went Wrong*, Harald rarely had to contend with anything more troubling than being maybe two or three minutes late at a destination, or a menu mix-up in the galley. A hefty passenger got stuck in the loo once, in suite 104 – took a couple of strong lads and a cargo strap to pull him free. No, his career working for the Red Star Line company – which he'd done pretty much all his life – had been pretty much all plain sailing, from beginning to end. Biscay had never served in the Imperial Space Fleet, nor seen anything more violent in person than a chef dropping a live crayfish into boiling water – and he'd been around the same proverbial block more times than he cared to count! *This* though, was a first for him! Something like *this* was bound to have a negative effect on business too, Harald thought, for the company anyway!

The corpse, ready for its trip to the surface, was being loaded up in shuttle bay two – kept away from the passengers in shuttle bay one, where they were boarding shuttles in an orderly fashion, for their visit to the planet below.

Captain Harald Biscay had never even seen a dead body in real – um, life before, leastways a body of any murder victim – and yet, almost magically, *there* it was. ...and it was downright mysterious!

Nothing unusual had been noted during the voyage; in fact everything had run smoothly until Security alerted Biscay about the stiff in suite 407. There were no indications of who'd committed the murder – there were no suspects – and no witnesses. Nobody'd heard or seen anything suspicious – and none of the passengers or crew were missing or acting suspiciously. No airlock doors had been opened, or any transports allowed since their last stop four days prior either – in fact, Ossifar Distana hadn't encountered a single ship during that time! A

Careful examination of the passenger list revealed nothing – there were no notorious names there, nor any unsavory persons among the ranks of his crew... One thing was certain though, Biscay mused – the stiff in suite 407 hadn't offed itself!

Sumone Yiden Smiff was a businessman of note. *Was*, past tense! Through years of sweat and swearing, and amazingly smart (or incredibly lucky) deals, he'd built up a business empire that spanned the sum of known space! At 74 years, he'd stood at the apex of a career stretching half a century! Smiff wasn't famous, or ostentatious, and largely kept to himself. Smiff kept a low profile, and when he traveled on business – which was reasonably often in the earlier part of his empire-building years – he did so on the cheap, flying on loderunners and low-budget econo-liners. He often did so under assumed names, claiming to be anything from a banker to a (very) successful life insurance salesman.

Mr. Smiff had liked anonymity. In fact, he only ever made the cover of *Fortune One Billion* once, twenty-five years ago, and even then, he'd half-covered his face with one hand before the mammarazzi got off a shot! He'd managed successfully to avoid press and media attention, and lived reasonably comfortably without getting involved in any scandals or sinking to the level of installing golden toilets and doorknobs in the family mansion. He'd never married, although there were rumors he had a few kids scattered around space, which should keep his lawyers busy a while, Biscay thought. Smiff was wealthy, but he was also generous – and supported a list of charities as long as Biscay's right arm. According to his Chief of Security, that passenger had never broken the law in his life, at least not irreparably. Nothing about Sumone Yiden Smiff's life gave Biscay any reason to suspect the man deserved what he'd got in the end... which is why it was so surprising that he'd been found floating face down in the private spa in his suite, murdered. He *had* been murdered, unless it was a freak shaving accident – those old razors weren't called *cut-throats* for nothing! Yikes!

This was the unfortunate Mr. Smiff's first trip on the *Ossifar Distana*, and – as the man had related to him over dinner at the Captain's table on the first night of his voyage – his first real splash in life! All those years working hard and denying himself a luxury holiday, and look what it got him!

How and why a man like Smiff had met such an unpleasant end was a mystery – but one thing was clear: it had been planned and executed by someone

with an obvious streak of cruelty. Theft was not considered a motive, since nothing was missing. All right, Biscay considered, nothing *seemed* to be missing. It's not as though Smiff had a manifest of his belongings or anything, alright? Nobody could tell if anything was taken because, quite simply, if it had, it was missing after the fact – and Smiff wasn't saying much. Pity. It would've been nice if he could say who killed him – sort of a retro-active solution to the murder, as it were! It wasn't even as simple as the deceased victim saying "the butler did it" ... for if the butler *had*, there were a hundred butlers on the staff to see to the needs of the wealthiest passengers!

So rich a client having suffered such a messy death was an unsettling embarrassment to the company – and in turn, to Captain Harald Biscay! It was bad for business – and there was no way around that. He'd taken all the necessary precautions right away, of course – he had the murder hushed up immediately, and his security staff was investigating the matter covertly but thoroughly. Ossifar Distana had five and a half thousand souls onboard – which meant five and a half thousand suspects! Three days, they'd been at it – and so far, not a thing. Now that they'd arrived at Deanna, the investigation would be taken further by the planetary authorities. Somehow, Biscay was of the opinion that this was going to be another contender for the *Unsolved Murders* show.

A forensic team (cunningly disguised as a cleaning crew) had arrived a few minutes before, led by a pair of detectives who introduced themselves as Birnbaum and Nirkman. The SODs were now rummaging through Smiff's stuff, examining every single particle in suite 407 and discreetly asking the crew uncomfortable questions. Biscay had a feeling – a *strong* feeling, about what they were going to find.

\* \* \*

It was a Friday evening on Deanna. The *Ramalama*-set was spectacular, and back-lit the cityscape with a blaze of bright reds, oranges, yellows, and bronze, before settling low on the horizon into a dark, bloody red, before giving way to the comforting dark of night.

The lights on *Bottlenose Bridge* lit up, and lent the grand finale a fairytale kind of effect, as though to suggest that although the day had ended darkly – as all days do, there was still light in the world – and seemed to promise more yet to come.

In a central part of Atro City, in a penthouse atop a tall office building, a cocktail party had just started and jazz music played softly in the background. It was no coincidence that this was the tallest building in the area – taller than the Plaza by a whole five extra floors. The loftiness of the penthouse provided an excellent view of the surrounding city and the Bay, which was all laid out before Bartholomew Farrow – and all his guests – and tended to create the impression that they could just reach out and take something if they wanted it. At his 57 years, Bartholomew Farrow – the Managing Director of Mace-Polythorp Enterprises LLC – was vain and arrogant enough to think that’s how it really was too! After all, the building belonged to him, and as a matter of fact, so did three of the surrounding city blocks.

For years, Farrow had ridden – nay, *surfed* the crest of his wave of success – and had been having a whale of a time doing it! When he wasn’t at the office lording his success over his worker bees, he hosted exclusive private parties and went on vacations to display his wealth and power for all to see. His company held an impressive local portfolio – which included controlling interests in the mining industry, in construction, deconstruction, tech, medical, communications – pretty much anything one cared to name! Despite having everything most people would think would bring happiness, Mr. Farrow had no known friends. He was a loner, a man who didn’t need people – just what they could do for him. Prevailing public opinion – which had been fueled by tabloid rags like the *Deannan Inquirer* and *Starstruck*, a glossy magazine – had it that Mr. Farrow was not a nice man at all – no matter what his company’s PR department said. He had the reputation of being greedy, unscrupulous, and a cruel vicious streak ran through him like dye through wool. A number of missing local hookers lay at the root of some incendiary rumors about the way he treated ladies of the night – and somewhere at the bottom of Hobo’s Gorge. In spite of how bad he was supposed to be, Bart had turned out quite the handsome man about town that evening – and Atro City was the town, and he was the man. He looked devilishly dashing in a tux, especially for a man his age – but then, wasn’t that what money was *for*? After all, didn’t the same tabloids that slandered him on a daily basis also claim that fifty was the new thirty?

He stood at the balcony railing, turned and smiled to his guests. He raised his glass at an attractive lady of slender athletic build, who wore a flowing, glittering black halter-neck evening gown, which appeared to have been drowned in black sequins. A black feather boa complimented her curly black

hair, which had been pulled back into an up-style. Black rhinestones glittered from within the *do* as well. She wore a slender face mask which covered her nose and eyes. It was adorned black sequins and had a frill of small black feathers around it. She raised her petite wine glass to him with a dainty hand; drawing his attention to the long black velvet gloves she wore. Something inside him stripped a few gears and drooled involuntarily, but oh-so-enjoyably. He knew the names and faces of everyone at the party – including his employees – and he'd never seen *hers* before. Of course, that created a few problems of its own. It meant that she was either a gate-crasher, or a very, *very special* employee. Well, of a sort.

The mystery lady smiled a businesslike smile in reply with full dark red lips, while Farrow's other guests milled serenely around them, chatting, drinking, and raiding the buffet snacks at the table. He smiled again and adjusted his own mask, which was covered in bright peacock feathers and made his nose itch just a little. Although somewhat unexpected, this guest made a change from the ordinary yes-men, corporate moles, back-stabbers and Judas Iscariots that usually surrounded him. The shady lady in question sidled up to him, still smiling attentively. It wasn't often that he had a *genuine* assassin as a guest at one of his parties.

"Ms. Smith, I presume?" Mr. Farrow greeted with the warmest fake warmth he could muster.

"Indeed, Mr. Farrow." The lady replied rather more pleasantly than he expected.

"I got your card." He began. "In my bedroom, on my dresser. Um, I do wish you would tell me exactly how you got past my security system? Er, twice? Just so I know who to fire, you understand? In the interests of my personal security..."

As it was, the rest of Farrow's security crew on duty tonight were for the high-jump – though they didn't know it yet. Somehow, this very talented killer-for-hire had made it through three tiers of security checks required to gain access to his apartment, and that was no easy feat by the current standard – and not even for his employees – whose bio read-outs were all on file on the central computer.

"Secrets of the trade, Mr. Farrow." His mystery guest replied with a naughty smile not unlike that of the Cheshire Cat. "Secrets I prefer to keep. ...In the interests of – *my* – security."

“Ahem. No worries.” Farrow said, covering up his discomfort. “I take it everything is well in hand with your task, Ms. Smith?”

“Well in hand, Mister Farrow.”

“Don’t you even want to know why I hired you?” He mewed.

“Not really, Mister Farrow.”

Farrow smiled. The delight he felt was all over his face – well, over the bits that weren’t behind a mask – delight he felt over a secret joy he’d been keeping from bubbling over inside him – one he all too rarely experienced in real life!

“You see?” He said to her. “That’s exactly *it!* Everybody wants to know *why*, *where* and *what!* People these days can’t just get the job over with! Mind their own damn bloody business! Why can’t they be more like you?”

Ms. Smith – at least, for now – seemed to be paying him her full and ardent attention.

“Thank you Mr. Farrow.” The lady purred. Her eyes seemed to hold him in place like those of a well-fed cat watching a mouse scampering cheekily past it. “I’m so...very, very flattered!”

“Interfering do-gooders!” Bart Farrow continued, clearly wanting to confide in *somebody* about his plans, very badly – at least, in someone he felt would be able to appreciate matters on his level, and was unlikely to divulge them to anyone else. “I can’t stand them! They don’t take bribes, they don’t fall for threats! Lousy liberals! What really pissed me off was preventing me from securing the deeds to a really lucrative mining site here on Deanna!”

“Ah yes,” Ms. Smith observed, sipping her champagne. “The famous lantillium deposit under the Grauffis ranch.”

“Er. Yes – how’d you know?”

“It’s my business to know everything about my prey.” The shady lady teased, evading his question.

“Er, right. Well, it took my own people *years* of continuous failure, Ms. Smith. *Years!* Now, ever since – er, *you know who* entered the picture, none of my people want to go near the place!”

“As you say, Mr. Farrow.” She said with suddenly vague disinterest. “It’s none of my business.”

“You know,” Farrow said, eagerly – undeterred, “I still don’t know your name. Or your beautiful face!”

The beautiful face beneath the mask, which in a sense was really only

another mask, smiled seductively at him.

“That’s the only reason you’re still breathing, Mr. Farrow.” Ms. Smith purred, making the icy and very real threat behind it sound almost like an invitation to bed. Yes, and part of Mr. Farrow would like very much to keep it that way – breathing, that is. Farrow’s survival instinct began tugging furiously at his sleeve.

“You’re not exactly what I expected.” He continued, straining to make conversation with what he was still trying to classify somewhat unsuccessfully as an *employee*. It didn’t seem to be working, somehow, and it felt that he was doing a two-step somewhat awkwardly, in a patch of quick-sand. *Employee?* No – perhaps an equal? Farrow had never considered *anyone* an equal before! Hmm – a kindred spirit perhaps? Someone with... similar interests? Almost as though she’d been listening in on his thoughts, Ms. Smith doubted it. She leaned in closer to him, seductively he thought, but more in order to be heard more distinctly over the moderate noise on the balcony.

“Were you expecting someone taller, perhaps a blond – a waif wearing tight black latex, who would come flouncing up to you, holding a handgun with a long delicate-looking silencer on the end, who would introduce herself by saying: ‘*Good evening, Mister Farrow – my name is Evelyn Smith and I will be your hired killer for the evening*’?”

“You are indeed a *fascinating* woman, Ms. – uh, Smith.” Farrow chuckled, utterly enchanted in the way that some people found themselves wondering what snake venom tasted like and if it went well with sherry or port. “Your name Evelyn, is it?”

Ms. maybe-Evelyn, maybe-Smith gave no reply; she just sipped her champagne further. Silence can also be an answer. Farrow, grew slightly uncomfortable and fidgety, finally realizing that although he could probably charm or buy his way into the undergarments of any woman there (and probably some of the men as well) – with *her* he stood no chance whatsoever! It came as shock to him that he might, perhaps, be completely out of his league – and out of his depth, with *her*.

Bartholomew Farrow hadn’t become a billionaire by the seat of his pants – he was far from stupid. It’s just that, like most males, he found himself more easily persuaded by ...perfection? Had he really just thought that? He cursed

himself silently. “*Curiosity killed the cat!*” he was just thinking – and he realized that right now he might have been per-meowing at exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time! He smiled an automatic defensive smile, and surreptitiously took a short step back. This woman gave him the absolute chills. She seemed so cool, detached, calculating – almost mechanical, even. She was utterly *perfect!* What a sublime impact she could make in the business environment – a real hit!

“So tell me, how did you know *I* was your client?” He asked, genuinely intrigued. Of course, she could have replied “*How did you know I was your assassin, Mr. Farrow?*” and all too obviously, he would have been forced to admit “*Because you told me, Ms. Smith, and for no other reason.*” The truth was, other than this one face-to – er, *mask* meeting, Farrow still had nothing on her. Nothing at all!

“How sweet,” Ms. Smith thought. Corporate types – hiding behind their smoke screens and fire walls and Security and Personal Assistants, thinking they were tough and mean and forces to be reckoned with! They might leave a trail of figurative bodies a mile wide on the corporate battlefield – but to someone of *her* skills and talents – who thought and lived *outside* the box as a means of survival, it all looked rather insignificant and trivial! Besides, the trail of bodies *she* left behind was a *real* one, and it stretched halfway across the galaxy, like a bloody red spiral!

The shady lady had carefully imagined the shock of a client unexpectedly meeting the assassin he’d hired *anonymously* and thought he would never ever *see* – especially, ironically, in his own living room. The realization that she knew who they were, tended to scare the fear of all gods and numerous underworlds into even the most atheistic of her clients, and made them think *very, very* carefully about their own Human frailty. Ms. Smith, for the evening, knew only too well by then that this had the desired effect of inspiring deep thoughts about the consequences of divulging anything to anyone in Law Enforcement, or else they might just meet her *again* one day, very briefly, one last time, and just as unexpectedly.

“Good night, Mr. Farrow.” She smiled at him. “I really must be going.”

“Leaving so soon?” He asked, feigning disappointment surprisingly well, “Places to go, people to *do*, eh? *Ha ha.*”

“Ha ha. ...As you say, Mr. Farrow.”

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