

*The Quantum Series: Book 4*

# *LODE RUNNER*



*Christina Engela*

# **Loderunner by Christina Engela**

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## Loderunner

Imagine, if you will:

Somewhere in the dark mysterious depths of space, a somewhat ordinary yellow star cast weird-looking shadow-puppets against the backdrop of the dark interstellar wastes – a portion of which belonged to the Terran Empire. For the time being, anyway.

Nine planets spun around it in suitably eccentric orbits – tiny slivers of matter with stage-fright which had rolled up into little balls and wished the rest of the universe would just bugger off and stop staring. For a very long time, the universe obliged... until one day not too long ago, when the first Human explorers arrived.

They noticed the isolated system's kerb appeal and began poking around. They looked under the furniture and in the cupboards, and decided they rather liked the neighborhood well enough to stay. They settled on one of the inner planets and – in polite company, at least – called it *Deanna*. Like many new frontier worlds where roughing it in the outback was a way of life, there was very little at all to laugh at, so the new settlers tried to find amusement in the context of their often hard, sometimes unbearable daily lives. One way they did this was by giving the more notable characteristics of their new home interesting and often odd names – they called the star *Ramalama* – and named the two tiny moons of their new home *Ding* and *Dong* (this was a local joke). Since that time, the Terran colony had flourished and prospered to become the bustling third-rate world it was today, which in case anyone is wondering, was a bright February morning sometime in the distant future.

The first colonists to settle on Deanna set up their basic settlements, whose materials were dug from the earth and cut from the wood of the local forests. There were four small settlements at first, set closely together – where the first four groups of settlers made planetfall on Deanna – and each was designated a landing code: Alpha, Tango, Romeo, and Oscar. Over time, each of these landing sites developed into small towns – *Garretville*, *Langley-Town*, *Ebert* and *Sanctimonia* – and over the next few decades, these little settlements spread out with the rapidly growing population, to form a medium-sized city – now called

*Astro City*. This was the largest on the planet, and also the capital of the colony.

Deanna's prime business was the mining and export of raw lantillium ore. Lantillium was a rare apolar metal used to line blaster emitter barrels and the cores of warp engines – and to a lesser degree, to line the special coffee cups and jugs used to serve Hot Stuff Blend in. Since the entire basis of trade and commerce in the known universe (other than actual money) was gold on interstellar transport, it was fairly obvious to anybody who saw the vast mine dumps on the equatorial plains of Deanna, that mining was a *very* important activity. Very large loderunner transports – that is, ships over a kilometer long – would arrive to pick up gigatons of ore for shipping to other relatively nearby colonies whose main business was ore processing and materials production. All that industry aside, with a population of over two million people – mostly Human – Deanna had other activities as well, chiefly of which, was tourism.

According to the *Galactic Tourist Guide*, Deanna was a prolific tourist destination – having miles of white sandy beaches, bright clear sunny skies most of the time, with only a gentle breeze and hardly ever a storm. Although Deanna only had one ocean, which was shallow, fresh and landlocked, there were hundreds of rivers that ran across the planet's surface like varicose veins on the head of a bald man. Some fed into the Landlocked Ocean, while others fed the two hundred and thirty-seven small lakes scattered about the planet.

One of Deanna's tourist attractions was game fishing – and for the gaming fisherman, the *Whatoosie River* was available all year round. A particularly unique indigenous species of fish had become vital to the tourist economy of the colony – and was the main reason for the existence of the *Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club!* *Cocka-snoek* were wily and tough and – well, admittedly rather too bright to be judged as mere fish! It's probably just as well that the fish weren't farmed or caught by trawlers or net, since they weren't a staple food source for Deannans – but more of a very tasty light snack best reserved for weekends away spent around a campfire. All other excuses aside, cocka-snoek were more widely regarded by locals – who knew better than most – as being “far too much trouble” to be commercially viable.

The main reason for this opinion was that traditional methods of fishing such as rods and lures weren't much good while fishing for cocka-snoek! In fact, many inexperienced visitors who persisted in using rods – albeit with the most creative of animated fishing flies and lures, and the best bait they could afford –

would be in for a rather rude surprise! As a matter of course, the green-horn fishermen would invariably discover that the bait had been stolen from their hooks, and their lines had somehow got snagged and tangled irretrievably around some underwater obstruction – sometimes tied together with neat little bows! You may wonder how local Deannans caught cocka-snoek? Ahem – *how* indeed!

The former military types who belonged to the Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club had become experts at it over the years, and led the way in innovating local fishing techniques – which as their name suggested, involved paddling along the Whatoosie River silently in a canoe and then lobbing explosives over the side. It took a direct hit just to stun the creatures long enough to catch them, and then a couple of strikes with a mallet before they could be gutted and prepared for frying!

The S.V.D.F.C. had a prominent mention in the Galactic Tourist Guide, on Deanna's page, which listed some of their services offered to tourists – and which could be booked in advance. For a modest fee, tours could be arranged (via the Deannan Tourism booking office) which included an overnight stay on the banks of the river – where tourists could drop off to a great night's sleep after a satisfying meal of *cocka-snoek* fried over an open fire, and the rattling sound the bits of shrapnel made in their stomachs.

Oh yes, Deanna was a very interesting place to live, and it could be a very pleasant place to live too – if one bore in mind that the word “normal” only meant “statistically prevalent” or even “demographically dominant”. What was *demographically dominant* on Deanna was jeans, boots and plaid shirts. Wide brimmed hats kept the daytime heat of Ramalama off your head if one didn't want to look like yesterday's bacon 'n beans before you turned thirty! Unfortunately, this also created the illusion that the entire planet was some kind of recreation of a really corny futuristic spaghetti Western with laser guns, space ships and aliens.

It was a mild evening inside “*Japp's Saloon and Speakeasy*” – a small, quiet watering hole in the northwestern corner of the only legal red-light area of Atro City. Timaset Skooch's aluminum framed chair creaked softly as he leaned back in it, checking his cards carefully while wearing his best poker face. Across the table from him sat Jonn Deire, a large, grumpy older man who was trying very hard to out-poker face him, and who didn't enjoy jokes about his name much.

Three other men also formed part of the company seated around the table, facing each other, each of their faces dramatically lit by the dim light that hung from a beam in the ceiling above. One of them was called Beck the Badfeller, and the other was a gentleman who went by the handle of Peeping William. Jimmy Skoda, the owner of the fourth face, was tall and lanky – and by his expression as he gazed at the cards in his hands, lost in thought – while Peeping William’s hands weren’t visible at all. *His* cards lay face down on the table, and he wore a rather bored expression on his scarred old face, which had a shadow on his forehead cast from the paint stain on the lamp shade above the table. It was shaped rather like the head of an obsidian crow – and Beck didn’t like obsidian crows much – one had got him killed once, but that was another story. (“The Time Saving Agency”, if you really must know.)

Atro City – or rather more specifically, a smaller northern suburb called *Lugaluru* – was home to Beck the Badfeller, and proudly so because Gary Beck was a legend in his own lifetime – which, given his youth, was quite an impressive achievement to be sure! If Deanna had grown any folklore over the past century, then Beck the Badfeller was sure to feature! Beck was something of a local hero and urban legend all rolled up in one – and the legend had it that Beck was so good, he could find the missing day in a leap year! Once, so the story goes, he even found a missing sock.

Beck the Badfeller might have been the best bounty hunter on Deanna – or possibly anywhere else – but if you happened to be looking for a private investigator, then *Timaset Skooch* was your man. Up until two years ago, Skooch was a former Sheriff’s Office Deputy (SOD for short) in Atro City. Then, after seven years of getting shot at for not much money, he’d decided it was time for a change. As a self-employed PI, Skooch did get paid *better* than when he was a deputy – but not as regularly. Sometimes, he even got shot at for *free*. But, he supposed, that was the tradeoff.

A party of spectators – all regulars at the bar – had gathered around the table to watch the game. The stakes had started out low as they always did, but as the hours had slipped by, the stakes had piled up considerably – and even more so after Beck just happened to be passing by, and had joined in.

“Your turn, Will.” Beck said cheerfully to Peeping William. “Oh, *sorry!*” Beck apologized and reached across the table laden with playing cards, cash, bets and whisky glasses to pick up Peeping William’s cards, and played for him.

“*Oh-kay* – sorry, nothing there this time, Will!”

Will just grumbled something and rolled his eyes with grudging sarcasm.

“C’mon bounty hunter – I ain’t got all day!” Deire grunted. “Time’s a-wastin’!”

“My turn again?” said Gary, looking surprised. He put down a card. “Sorry.”

Ignoring the apology, the surly Jimmy Skoda plonked down his card and looked over at Deire aggressively.

Jonn Deire paused to think a moment, before picking up eight yellowed and dog-eared cards from the pile, grumbling “*garrn!*” under his breath, while chewing on a frazzled distraught-looking toothpick that whirled around between his masticating teeth. Skooch threw down a card and said nothing. There was an impatient pause as the players waited for Beck to remember – again – that he had to play for Peeping William as well, who was still grumbling softly and rolling his eyes at intervals.

“Sorry, Will.” Gary said again, and dropped a card. This time he remembered his own turn, and threw in one of his own afterwards. Skoda followed with his, and scratched his overgrown chin thoughtfully, eyeing the kitty lying in the middle of the table. There was plenty of money there, as far as small-time casual gamblers were concerned. The kitty got off it, stretched and yawned before lazily dropping off the edge of the table. Unperturbed, the players continued. Jonn Deire began tapping his fingers on the table rather nervously – and stopped as soon as he noticed everyone staring. This was the moment of truth for Timaset Skooch, who wondered how fortune might favor him! There was a small fortune on the table, and it would keep a few wolves at bay for some time, during which Tim could breathe easier... *if only*... Jonn Deire played his card – and there was an almost indefinable *click* as something slotted into place for Skooch, who dropped his card on the pile – and cried out elatedly.

“How about that – *Uno!*”

“Oh, damn – *Uno again!*” Jonn Deire exclaimed, slapping his cards down on the table in disgust.

“The pot is mine, I believe!” Said Skooch, joyfully reaching for the pile of notes and coins, and scraping it towards him as the assembly of players and spectators began to break up, muttering.

“Gentlemen.” Said Jimmy Skoda as politely and calmly as possible, and got

up to leave.

Beck the Badfeller spotted a sneaky movement from the corner of his eye, and reached across to push Peeping William back into his chair.

“Not you, Will!” Gary told him firmly. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Peeping William was a wanted man – a *very* wanted man who was very, *very* slippery and very hard to find. Gary Beck – being the best bounty hunter on Deanna – was the lucky man who found him! Beck had arrested Peeping William over an hour earlier, and William had been forced to wait – with his hands cuffed securely behind his back – while Beck finished another game of cards. Well, at least Beck was nice enough to let Peeping William join in – figuratively speaking.

Gary looked directly at Skooch, smiled and nodded and said “Great game, Tim – grats! Still, take it easy – you can’t win ‘em all, eh?”

“No, I certainly can’t!” Skooch agreed, grinning back. “Say hi to Mei for me, will ya?” His acquaintance aka Beck the Badfeller rose and helped Peeping William out of his chair.

“Sure, and you say hi to Dory, ‘k? ...C’mon Will – let’s get you to the Sheriff, I could use a couple of cold ones!”

“Yippee.” Said Will, not exactly brimming over with enthusiasm.

Skooch resumed sorting his winnings. He packed the notes together first, then he sorted through them to separate them into their different denominations, all the same way up, and then stacked them together again before counting them out. Seven thousand credits! Woohoo! Then he scooped the coins and the (ugh) gold tooth into an empty glass for the waitress. *Seven thousand credits!* ...But wait, that wasn’t all – *what* was the plastic slip under it all? Skooch picked it up and began to look it over.

“What the heck is *this?*” He asked, squinting to read it under the dim light. Jonn Deire still sat across the table from him, his eyes red-rimmed and moist – the big man seemed to be having an emotional meltdown and dissolving from the inside!

“That’s the ownership papers fer ma’ pride an’ joy!” Deire said in a shaky voice. “The *Celeste!* That’s ma’ ship – ah knew ah shouldn’a bet ‘er. Ah, well,

she's yures now!"

Skooch stared, shocked. "You bet your *ship*? On a game of *Uno*? *What for?*"

"Ah needed the money!" Deire told him in his heavily accent-laden voice, "Ah had a few debts to pay off!" Deire said, subdued. Skooch put down the sheet and looked intently at Deire.

"You bet a ship on a game of *Uno*?" He asked slowly, incredulously.

"Well..." Deire shrugged, clarifying. "Ah didn't think Ah'd really *lose!*"

Timaset Skooch thought about it for a minute. *Yes*, he thought – he was quite right in thinking the man a little off-kilter – the kitty was only around seven thousand give or take a gold tooth and some coinage – minus the ship – which must've been worth well, a *lot* more than seven thousand, even in scrap metal! An alarm started going off somewhere at the back of his mind, faintly, as though some cynical part of him had started to frantically wave to get his attention.

"What the hell am I going to do with a *ship*?" Skooch said, slumping lower into his seat. He passed the document over to Jonn, who looked at him as if he were mad. "Here, I don't want it! I can't take your livelihood! You have that back, y'hear?"

"*You don't want mah Celeste?*" Deire glowered, suddenly livid with raw rage! Skooch was by no means slow – and realized awkwardly that he might as well have just called the man's darling little sister a two-bit counter-clockwise thigh-scrubber from North Lugaluru! "Ah *lost* her to you, Mister Skooch – *fair an'square!*" Deire insisted.

"*Okaay!*" Skooch sighed, noticing the area of empty space which had started to grow around them. He had unwittingly offended the man's sense of honor – and Deire was a *big* man! Hurriedly taking the document back, Skooch started looking it over again, from the top. Under the grime and stains of ages past, it read: "*Terran Merchant Fleet Registration Certificate*". Somewhere in the spaces indicated below were the name of the owner – one *Jonnulass Mc Watt Deire* and the technical specifications of the particular vessel. It was a *Rotanga* Class loderunner, certified to carry cargo and passengers with a total not exceeding blah, blah, blah.

"But it's *a hundred and twelve years old!*" Skooch protested. "It's older than *Deanna!*"

Deire glowered silently at him.

"The colony – not the planet – well, you know what I mean!" Skooch parried

sullenly.

“She still works pretty good!” Deire maintained. “Stardrive gets a mite twitchy at warp four, but that’s just a dodgy plasma injector!”

Timaset Skooch’s mind raced around in tight little circles, waving its little arms in a mild panic. He didn’t need a ship – especially not a flying museum piece! What was he going to *do* with it? And, as far as he knew, a dodgy plasma injector could drop you smack into a wormhole ending somewhere on the other side of the universe with no way back! Well, he could always sell the damn thing... Couldn’t he? Yes, that was a good idea! He could use the money! Damn, he could *always* use the money! Maybe the crew would want to buy it back from him? “Wait... dildo,” he thought, “The idiot bet it because he needs the money... which means they probably don’t have any money to begin with!”

Skooch groaned. “What’s the catch?” He asked. There had to be one. There was *always* a catch – just like contracts and catches – there’s a loophole *somewhere*. There’s always a loophole! You might not see it because it’s lurking somewhere in the small-print, but it’s there, looking at you with its beady little yellow eyes – and sometimes it’s the one that slips around your neck and strangles you!

“No catch.” Deire said, sounding strangely genuine. “On mah honor!”

Perhaps it was some kind of blessing in disguise? “*Yeah, right!*” a small imaginary figure with horns and a pitchfork whispered in Tim’s ear.

“Well, all right then.” Timaset Skooch said at last, shrugging. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“She’s parked at the space port, Bay 227.” Deire said, rising. “Ah’ll have mah things cleared out by tomorrow noon.”

“I’ll come around sometime tomorrow then.” Skooch murmured, feeling numb – and wondering if the dull pain running down his left arm was some kind of warning – as the dejected older man rose and walked out. Well, alright then... Pocketing his winnings for the evening, Skooch rose and waved at the barman on his way to the exit. As he drew level with the doorway, he slowed cautiously and paused a moment to look and listen. Most guys who had just won seven grand in a card game in a dingy low class bar would stand a fairly good chance of getting mugged as soon as they set a foot outside – but not Timaset Skooch! Oh no, his reputation tended to provide him some protection! The denizens of the red-light district in northern Lugaluru usually gave him a wide berth, and were generally unwilling to tangle with him...

And that was possibly the last thought that passed through his mind before the world around him exploded into constellations of stars and other assorted bright lights!

When he finally awoke, lying on the cobbles in a puddle of his own drool, the first – ok, maybe the *second* thing to hit him, was that he was still alive – and that it was probably worse than being dead, but only because being dead probably didn't hurt quite so much. While pulling himself together and taking stock via the *wallet, spectacles, testicles* method, he discovered that he'd been robbed. Wallet, gone...Money, all gone – the ship's ownership paper – no, damn – he still had that...so the only thing in Tim's coat was *him* and the deeds to nothing much! Hmm, thieves with savvy – fancy that! What a great start! He was actually disappointed!

It was enough to convince Tim that the *Celeste* was jinxed! It just had to be! He now had to get another wallet, but then what would be the point? He had nothing to keep in it now anyway! He was broke, *and* he still had a ship to get rid of! Well, maybe he could recoup his losses that way, he wondered? Oh, and he'd acquired a headache on top of everything else! Massaging the lump at the back of his head, he slowly made his way back to his jeepo, now more determined to get rid of Deire's damn loderunner than ever!

\* \* \*

Dorian Wintermuller was something of an enigma to most people – even to Timaset Skooch. At 27 years, Dorian was still not really what one might call gainfully employed. Dorian was a qualified interior decorator, and did the odd private contract now and again, but thought that being a kind of new-age housewife was far less stressful. No, gainfully *un*-employed suited him better for now – and it saved *years* on his life not having to fuss and fiddle – to say nothing of the stress involved in getting a client to understand the subtle differences between *cerise* and *lilac*.

Back in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century there had been something of a second sexual revolution, carrying on where the original one had left off. First it was women's liberation, followed by the gender equality revolution. A sudden social awakening occurred, in which people became aware that Humans didn't exist simply between two poles of an imaginary gender binary, but came in fruity

flavors of masculine, feminine, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual and even omni-sexual – and of course, anything else in between that better suited the individual – not forgetting the transsexual and transgender folk! Even poor oppressed males were suddenly allowed the freedom to be comfortable while dressed in funky styles, to experiment with perfumes, skin care products, make-up and nail varnish and even carry – um, man-bags. Everything was suddenly available for the *liberated* modern man! That in a nut-shell more-or-less describes our friend Dorian – a guy with far too much good taste and style and sensitivity to be content with ordinary blue jeans, a check shirt and ‘old leather’ after-shave.

Today, Dorian wore a black silk shirt, brown slacks with silver zippers down the front of each trouser leg and a pair of black, thick soled ‘puppy squasher’ ankle boots in the latest style. Thick gold chains encircled his neck and wrists, highlighting his long brown hair which was straight and cut in an elegant bob. Imagine a few rings too, for effect.

On the balcony where Dorian sat, legs crossed, sipping at a tall thin glass of red wine while reading ‘La Femme’ magazine, he had a pretty good view of the back of Atro City University from across an alley-way. Soft music played in the background – and he heard the sound of a key turning in the front door.

“Honey, I’m *hom-o*.” Came the sound of his partner’s voice, heavily laced with irony.

“Oh, Skoochy – that one’s so old already!” Dorian said, rolling his eyes and draining his glass. “Find another one, will you? Preferably something not quite so hurtful – and self-loathing?”

Tim disappeared past the open-plan kitchen, dropping his keys and coat on the sofa as he passed through the lounge on his way to the small bathroom.

“Got any band-aids?” He called out. Dorian rose to follow Tim inside the bathroom with a look of concern on his face. Tim had dropped his T-shirt in the laundry basket already, and was standing with his back to him.

“Been playing rough again, darling?” Dorian said, and pointed out the little pack of band-aids in the medicine cupboard that Tim was rummaging in. Tim turned round silently and they embraced, his muscular arms encircling Dory’s slim little waist, his slim little arms reaching round Tim’s neck. Their closeness highlighted Dorian’s petite and feminine build.

“You men,” Dorian smiled up close, giving him a good view of his effeminate features. “Couldn’t find your own ass with a GPS!”

Tim laughed, and winced suddenly from his headache.

“I wouldn’t need a GPS to find *your* ass!” He teased, knowing Dory’s weakness was his misconception that his rear end was overweight. As with most of Dory’s complexes, it was inaccurate.

“You’re mean!” Said Dorian, feigning mortification. He withdrew his slender hand from Tim’s hair, now wet with his blood and regarded it with distaste. “What happened?”

“I won seven thousand creds in a card game!” Tim explained.

“Really?” Said Dory smiling. “That’s great!”

“Yes, I thought so too – and then I got mugged.”

Tim continued cleaning himself up as best he could, thinking a nice soothing shower and perhaps a nice relaxing evening with Dory over a glass of wine – or two, or three – and some dinner might cheer him up.

“And the money?” Dory asked.

“The money, Dory? What about me? I got my head bashed in.” Tim reacted with annoyance. With Dorian it always came back to the material things – and no matter what, sometimes it was never enough! “The money’s gone! ...But my head’s still here – a little dented, but okay! Not that you’d miss it, huh?”

“Oh, poor baby. Pain makes you grumpy.” Said Dorian, wiping the blood off his hands on a towel before leaving Tim to shower and clean and dress his wound.

“That’s quite alright!” Tim muttered under his breath. “I’ll do it myself!”

The shower was refreshing and it helped him to relax and calm down again. Oh, Dory! Whenever Tim got annoyed by Dory’s materialism, it made him lose perspective! But when he calmed down again – as he always did, he’d be sure he was being unfair towards Dory! A few minutes later, Tim returned to the lounge area to find Dorian relaxing on the sofa watching a local soapie with a fresh glass of wine. Popping some pain pills, Tim downed them with a glass of milk and wordlessly slunk off alone to bed.

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