

*The Quantum Series: Book 5*

A futuristic landscape with a large yellow sun and a red ring. The scene is set against a dark, starry background. The sun is a bright yellow sphere, and the red ring is a glowing, circular structure. The landscape below is a vast, flat expanse with a dark, rocky foreground and a hazy, orange-tinted horizon. The title "PRODIGAL SUN" is written in large, blue, 3D-style letters across the center of the image.

**PRODIGAL  
SUN**

A complex, futuristic circuit board pattern. The pattern consists of numerous interconnected lines and shapes, creating a dense, intricate network. The lines are primarily blue and white, with some yellow highlights. The overall appearance is that of a highly advanced, multi-layered circuit board.

*Christina Engela*

# **Prodigal Sun by Christina Engela**

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## Prodigal Sun

Imagine, if you will:

Life is a cheap thing in the cold of space, out here in the black – a place where the only witness is space.

And space is silent.

It is here – far from home, in the fiery face of an alien star which burned bright with the light of loneliness – that a small ship from far away now found itself through a peculiar combination of unfortunate circumstance, coincidence, timing and a large helping of terribly, incredibly bad luck.

It was said, by some, that space is like an ocean. “Never turn your back on it,” they said, “...it’ll kill you! Go into it unprepared, and it will chew you up and spit you out like leftover Martian Quail stew. Whether it’s radiation poisoning or a micro-meteorite punching through the hull of your ship, space is a very perilous place. Treat it lightly – or play with it, and it will kill you when you least expect it.”

As a panting Tracy Ferris scrambled into the life-pod, this thought was precisely what was running through her already agitated mind. From the very beginning of their association, she’d had a bad feeling about Brandon Carver! Something about that guy just never seemed to fit! Sure, he was good looking – but so were many of the other out of work space bums hitch-hiking from place to place she’d also had the misfortune to meet!

Carver himself had claimed to be a bounty hunter down on his luck – and having been in that position more than once herself, Tracey felt empathy for him. That was her first mistake right there! Her second was to take so him on as a member of her crew against her better judgment – just for the trip – one way! That was all he needed to get back on his feet again, or so his story went... Both added up to a disaster on such a grandiose scale that it had almost cost her, her life!

It seemed in retrospect that Carver had been a very bad call on Tracey

Ferris's part – because twelve hours out of Aldus Prime, he got into an argument with the crew over dinner. Well, not over dinner itself – dinner was chicken ala king – it was at dinner, but the argument was about vampires. Vampires! That's right – all this drama and inconvenience was the result of an argument at the dinner table – about creatures of fiction and fantasy! The guy actually believed vampires were real, and claimed to be a bona fide vampire hunter!

“Idiot!” She cursed mentally, not really sure whether she'd directed her anger at Carver, or herself for giving him the opportunity to burn her like this! Carver lost his cool when he got laughed at – and started a heck of a fracas by shoving Mak around the ship's tiny diner! The fist fight escalated into a full-blown melee' with guns and blasters – and somewhere along the way, someone shot the nav-computer and they dropped out of light-speed here – wherever here was!

Both Mak and Splinter, the other two members of her crew, were killed in the shootout with Carver – leaving her to fight for her survival alone against the raging madman! One thing led to another as they say, and now the whole inside of the small starship was a blazing inferno! She paused to grin tensely to herself – a rather naughty grin, because – well, at least Carver was still in it, somewhere... It was his problem now!

Tracey hurriedly shut the door behind her to prevent the flames that had been licking hungrily at her caboose all the way down the corridor, from following her inside. Then, almost falling into one of the gravity couches, she hurriedly strapped herself into it before punching the emergency release – she hoped the escape system still worked – it did. The explosive dead-bolts fired, shaking the pod loose, dislodging it from the rapidly disintegrating wreck, just about shaking the crap out of her on its bone-jarring way into the great wide open.

As soon as she could make out just one of everything around her again, she toggled the nav-system. A small display on the control console less than a foot away from the tip of her pointy little nose showed her the state of her largest and only possession, which was rapidly receding in the rear view. Flames were starting to sear through the hull plating, fuelled by the escaping oxygen and fuel, and licking the void like angry demonic tongues. From there, she couldn't tell if the other life-pod had been launched, but she certainly hoped not! She hoped she'd seen the last of Brandon fucking Carver after what he'd done!

Tracey noted that they seemed to have dropped out of hyperspace in the

middle of a planetary system – which was a really, really good thing, because it dramatically increased her chances of survival. The blazing wreck of her ship was still drifting towards a small planet nearby and, seeing as the small engine of the life-pod hadn't fired yet, so was she. A quick check of the system proved that it wasn't going to either. She cursed. It was quite a foul curse to come from such a pretty mouth, but who aside from her and any gods who might be listening, would hear it anyway?

The main motor was offline, but the landing thrusters seemed to be okay. They were online at least, so after re-entry she could make a controlled descent, or at the very least, a hole in the ground at the location of her choice.

The planet she was rushing towards was unknown to her, and there wasn't time to interrogate the pod's computer about it just now. When the ship's stardrive crapped out, they'd dropped out of warp right here. It was highly likely they were off all the regular trade routes – and she had no real weapons left to speak of, so she could only hope she didn't run into any trouble down there. There seemed to be a breathable atmosphere – and there were a couple of viro-suits and atmo-masks in storage bins inside the pod – but still, the last thing she needed was to get eaten by the locals! After all, she was in enough trouble up here as it was!

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire...” She cursed again. It was Tracy Ferris's First Rule of Holes in action – when you're in one, stop digging. Boy, was she getting in deep!

The life-pod drifted for a few minutes before gently bumping against what could only be described as the surface of a very small, very shiny moon, and began falling rapidly towards the ground – slowly at first, and accelerating. Before too long, it became really hot inside the pod, and Tracy Ferris was beginning to wish she'd remembered to pack her bikini – and maybe some sun-block with the friction resistance factor of silica. By the time got the thing under some semblance of control, she was already on the night-side of the planet, doing a pretty good imitation of a shooting star.

It was a rough ride, and probably not the worst she'd ever had – but then again, life-pods weren't designed to be comfortable. People didn't take life-pods out for a quick joyride around the block – they were single-use devices intended to be used in case the worst happened and the best course of action was to leave

your ship and take your chances out in the black. A life-pod basically gave survivors of a calamity in space slightly better chances of reaching the nearest ship – or the surface of the closest habitable planet alive – than they had in their underwear. Which, statistically speaking, was most frequently what survivors of space disasters happened to be wearing at the time of said disasters. Go figure.

A few minutes later, her head still ringing from the jarring impact of a ‘landing’ so not ‘text-book’ she hoped nobody had seen it, and after checking the atmospheric readout, Tracey Ferris popped open the hatch. The cool night air streamed inside, giving her sweaty body a sudden welcome chill. She was alive! At least that was one less thing to worry about! Tracey took a moment to breathe deep, then picked up a spanner from the tool bin and wielding it like a weapon, climbed all the way outside.

The outside of the hull was still hot to the touch and bits of it glittered in the moonlight where the paint had been scoured off by soil and rock. The life pod had made quite a crater in um – whatever this planet was – a shallow crater about half as deep as the pod was high... and it was at the end of a half-mile long shallow trench scoured into the landscape of what looked like a large ploughed field. She saw what looked like burning vegetation in the distance, at the other end of the trench leading away from the crash site! Boy was that farmer going to be pissed!

“Well, that’ll endear me to the locals,” Tracey thought, hoping that they wouldn’t invite her over for dinner at the business-end of a knife and fork!

The stars glowed faintly above in the night sky. Where was she? She scrambled back down the side of the crater to the pod. The communications system was out of action – and the pod computer had also fried some of its circuits in the crash perfectly ordinary landing she hoped nobody saw, and would be of no further help to her – unless she wanted to hang around and listen to music. There was nothing else much of value left inside – just the viro-suits, which she didn’t need, and a survival pack containing a canteen or two of water, some food packs, and a survival knife which contained a line-fishing kit in the handle, with a built-in GPS receiver in the handle cap – which incidentally, was of no use on a non-colony planet without satellites. Was this a colony planet?

She grabbed the survival pack and slung it over her shoulder, and turned on the GPS receiver in the hope that this was a colony world and not... nowhere.

The small display blinked... and blinked... and then brightly displayed a name in small letters. 'DEANNA', it said.

“Where the hell is that?” She wondered.

So there were satellites here – and that meant she was on a colony world of some sort! That also meant there were people here – and right now, people were a most welcome change – especially people who wouldn't want to put her on a menu!

A little arrow indicated the direction of the nearest settlement, and a distance. 17km. Lovely! 17 was a lot better than 170 or 1700! Strapping the utility belt around her waist, Tracey Ferris scrambled back up the slope to the ploughed field above. Once at the top, she shifted the weight of her baggage before starting her long walk. The phrase 'every journey begins with a single step' popped into her head, causing her to roll her eyes dramatically. Steadying herself, Tracey Ferris took a determined step forward. Something in the grass went 'eek', faintly.

\* \* \*

Quite some distance away, a man who went by the name of Brandon Carver was smoking – but not in the usual way that a man would casually sit and smoke a cigarette – for relaxation, for instance – or after sex for example – or to satisfy an addiction, or for the sake of image. No. Oh, no.

Wisps of smoke slowly rose from the tangled and soot-smearred locks atop his aching head as Carver sat brooding inside his life-pod, pondering just how fucked he might have been at the present moment – and once again, probably not in a way he would've enjoyed. Together – he and the life-pod – were currently plummeting toward the planet below at a speed he'd rather not think about.

He'd only just got out of the ship in the nick of time – in fact, he felt quite tender in a medium rare sort of way, as though sunburned – as one might get trying to swim the breaststroke through a fireball! He realized with considerable discomfort as the pod shuddered and jostled around him, that his tender bits were chafing against the body harness that kept him in the seat. Tugging at the straps proved futile, as gravity and g-forces were set against him. He checked the small control display to make sure there was nothing more he had to do to assist the

autopilot in controlling the craft. There wasn't – so he allowed his mind to wander.

Bluffing his way onto the merc ship was as easy as getting sparks out of a Flirpavian Flormbird... no, wait, dammit – a Florpavian Flamebird! Sure, there were easier ways for a merc – or even an aspiring vampire hunter to travel – he could've bought a ticket on one of the many tramp freighters and loderunners traveling this part of space... but therein lay his boggle. He was broke – as in on the bones of his ass broke. And yes, you read that right – Brandon Carver was a vampire hunter – well, at least he believed he was. Not that he told most people that, because they would just laugh at him and wave him off dismissively – but that's what he did sometimes, as a freelancer. Or, more accurately, what he really wanted to do. He wondered if people dismissed him out of hand as some kind of crank because they thought he was crazy – or because they worried that if he wasn't, it meant the things he was supposed to be hunting, were real! They were. Or at least, he believed they were. That is, they seemed real to him.

“Not to worry,” he consoled himself, “a lot of people go about building their lives on things they believe to be real!”

Carver also knew, with some certainty, that if enough people believed the same thing, it would make that thing true in the same sure-fire way that if you repeat a lie enough times and get enough people to repeat it as well, it would become true. Of course, there was quite a lot of money to be made on that principle alone, he knew – otherwise he had no other explanation for the religion business. As far as having enough belief to physically manifest something like an entire society of vampires living under the radar of Humanity, the jury was still out on that one.

The small ship he'd conned himself onto only had a crew of three, and during meal time just an hour or so ago, the subject came up (it always did if he had anything to say about it). They didn't believe him either, and then – well, things got ugly – and well, uglier than he'd intended it to. Mak and the other guy started to laugh and trade insults with him over his mental capacity, and well – Mom always did say he'd inherited his dad's impulsivity and violent streak! The two dudes went down without much fuss, but the chick – well, she was another story! She put up so much resistance he'd just barely made it to the escape pod himself before the ship turned inside out! His clothes had caught fire too, and he'd lost all his kit!

Thump-thump, his head pounded. The fight had got very intense and personal very quickly. A fire had started during the fight and quickly got out of hand, and he was left with no choice but to use one of the escape pods! Of course, none of this had been planned – well, except for the timing of bringing the ship out of hyperspace – because this is exactly where he needed to be! The gunfight hadn't been part of the plan, though – or him getting lit on fire and sitting inside this blasted life-pod! He'd screwed up – he'd lost his temper and lost control of the situation. Again.

Thinking back carefully, Carver couldn't tell if Ferris had made it off the ship – things were too desperate at the end, but if she hadn't, well – no problem. He couldn't afford to keep making screw-ups like that – he had to keep his shit together. But – yeah – the planet looked about right – this seemed to be the right one! All he had to do now was survive the landing and the rest would take care of itself!

\* \* \*

It was well past midnight on a brand new Thursday morning, near what was perhaps the most well-known river on Deanna. The Whatoosie River, which had long ago been made famous by the Galactic Tourist Guide under the “Fishing” section, wound its way from the northern mountain ranges across the southern plains and finally through Skeggs Valley, to where it ultimately met up with the ocean. The Whatoosie River was probably the only river on Deanna (or possibly anywhere for that matter) that had signs along its banks that read “DANGER! FISHERMEN BLASTING!”

The valley itself was a quiet place, mostly, except for the odd weekend, maybe once or twice a month or so, when members of the local fishing club would be out on the river in canoes. It was just before dawn, and the water on this particular section was still and the stars were out. Reclining in the back of one canoe near the center of the river, a male figure was singing a song, badly.

“Mister Jordan?” Came the genteel, restrained voice of a more senior gentleman in the front of the canoe.

“Yes, General?”

“Please shut up.” The General said curtly. “You're scaring the fish.”

General Albert McIntyre-Smythe (retired) was 75 years old. He was the

highest ranking former officer in charge of the Imperial Officers Reserve on Deanna, which consisted mainly of pensioners and veterans. This bunch of refugees from the old age home, whose company he shared this fine morning, also happened to be most of the Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club, of which he was, naturally, the Chairperson.

Young mister Jordan at the back of his canoe, was the only member under 60 years of age – being in his mid-thirties, and himself a former Lieutenant in the Starmarines who had been cashiered because of his persistent fondness for Hessian Chill Weed, and a tendency to make things more interesting than they had to be.

Perhaps this was not the nicest way to end a military career, Smythe had thought, but he was handy to have around when there were more physical things that needed doing, like heavy lifting. And he didn't complain much – and besides, he never asked to be paid for anything – at least not in cash – it just tended to make him – well, a little slow.

The General was still an active and healthy man for his age, having retired only about twenty years previously after a career spanning 36 years in the Starmarines. These days though, the closest he got to his former professional life was paddling in a canoe, sleeping under a bivvy by a warm camp-fire and (of course) blowing several different shades of crap out of cocka-snoek in the river with live military surplus hand grenades. Okay, okay, he corrected himself – not so 'live' anymore! After that unpleasant accident several years ago, when they lost their last qualified medic, the Club decided to switch over to stun grenades instead! Well, Smythe conceded – after a stern talking to by the Sheriff... and the Mayor of Atro City. Er – and the Governor of Deanna afterwards. Anyway, it was a lot safer now – and although the stunners made the same sort of loud bang as the real thing, he had to admit, it did sort of take the fun out of it.

Occasionally one of the good ol' boys would still sneak in one of the old stock, for old time's sake – just to keep things interesting and real. In the back of the General's canoe, Jeremy Jordan finally wondered what the hell could scare a fish that needed to be stunned with a grenade before it could be caught and eaten.

Three other canoes were on the river, paddling to prearranged positions. The light from Deanna's crazy little moons above, Ding and Dong, helped guide their

way. The river gently whispered around them, and there was the sound of paddles being dipped in the fresh water, nearly silently. Nobody made a sound otherwise, aside from the sounds made by a cluster of very old men trying very hard to be quiet.

Cocka-snoek were tough critters. It would normally take a direct hit with a stun grenade to get just a handful of the critters to float to the surface. They were smart too. If startled, they could play hide-and-seek for hours – and a bunch of geriatrics in canoes didn't have hours to play games with dinner – besides, they'd all been raised not to play with their food. Canoes also didn't have bathrooms – and the last time someone tried to go over the side, they all did – and the Whatoosie River was not that narrow in places... or that shallow!

About twenty meters away, in the front of another canoe, it suddenly dawned on Commander Michael John Atkins, (67, ex of Space Fleet) – why it was that young people called them old farts. And the bit about sound traveling further over water, well – that was true too.

“Sis, Andy! That was disgusting!” He chided his paddling partner in the awkward silence.

Warrant Officer class 1 (retired) Andy Wilkins, (80 – former Starmarine RSM) stopped paddling and looked at him with a blank expression.

“Eh?” he shouted, cupping a hand by his ear. “Deaf as a doorpost, poor old codger!”

From the lead canoe, Smythe watched in a supervisory manner as the others formed a large circle and prepared to start tossing a few stun grenades in the center. The cases of surplus military ordnance were opened, grenades were picked, pins were pulled and –

“Ready everyone?” The General said, preparing to give the order. “On my signal...”

There was a sudden deafening boom and a large waterspout shot up into the night sky, right in the center of the circle! The churned water rained down again, splashing over them in a heavy downpour! When the deluge had passed, sitting in the now bobbing canoe, soaked, spluttering and coughing, and wiping water

out of his bushy white eyebrows, the General carefully replaced the pin in his grenade, before laying it gently in the puddle by his feet. Then, swearing genteelly under his breath, he wrung out his hat and chucked it beside the grenade.

“Bloody hell!” Someone else said across the water. He could see the other canoes bobbing on the small waves rippling across the water.

“Who the blazes did that!” The General demanded. “I said to wait for my signal!”

“Wasn’t me!” Atkins replied hoarsely, instantly on the defensive.

“Wasn’t us!” Replied Col Riley, (69, Starmarines Armored Division) from behind glasses as thick as bullet-proof glass. He was trying hard and unsuccessfully to smear them dry with his soaked jersey sleeve.

“Jordan?” Smythe asked suspiciously, turning round. But Jordan was still lazing in the back of the canoe, sopping, but just as relaxed as before. He hadn’t realized he was drenched yet – and would probably only catch up in another eight minutes or so, as he usually did – like clockwork.

The plastic case of grenades between them was still closed anyway. He just shrugged at him. Then Atkins shouted to draw everybody’s attention.

“Look! Over there!”

Where it had suddenly surfaced in the center of the circle, an object was floating, bobbing in the water. It was quite large, looked metallic and almost spherical in shape. There were no lights on it and judging by the steam rising from it, seemed to be quite hot. They brought out some flashlights and suddenly the thing was lit up from all sides.

“What is it?” Someone asked.

Just then, cocka-snoek started popping up around it, floating upside down on the surface, quite still, steaming. Keen and experienced fishermen all, this did not go unnoticed.

“Well, bugger me!” Riley cried.

“This is no time for your quaint sexual fantasies, George!” Smythe cried, nearing exasperation. “A man your age! Ahem! Now, what is it? Is it

dangerous?”

The cocka-snoek were out cold, which was reason enough to wonder, wasn't it? Something about the shape... A memory prompted Atkins.

“That's an escape pod, that is!” He said, convinced. “I recognize the shape!”

“Where'd it come from?” Shouted Andy Wilkins, cupping a hand over one ear.

“It fell off a truck! Where d'you think, you putz?” Atkins replied sarcastically. “From a ship in orbit, where else!”

“Eh?”

“From up there!” Atkins shouted back, pointing upwards while adding under his breath in frustration, “Idiot!”

“Oh! You think we should call someone?” Wilkins shouted, now cupping his hands over both ears. He failed to notice as his paddle slid overboard and drifted away.

“Who – the Navy?” Suggested Nathan Forrest (Formerly a WO in the stores) from his canoe.

“There isn't one – leastways not on Deanna!” his doddering paddling partner, Major Willingsly (63), retorted.

“Think someone's inside?” Riley asked. “Hello?” He shouted. “Hello! Is anyone there?”

There was no reply from the pod.

“Right, that'll do! I said, that'll do! Ahem!” The General shouted, waving for silence and order. “Come on men, let's take a closer look – Jordan, start paddling!”

Right then, Mr. Jordan suddenly wriggled and writhed and squealed – and did a little dance sitting down in the back of the canoe. “Yup – that's him all caught up again!” Smythe thought, paddling solo. In eight minutes time, they'd already be at the life pod, he grumbled.

After much commotion of paddling and splashing, the four canoes drew up to the little floating dock that was the escape pod. It was just slightly warm by now – like the water that surrounded it, and they tied up to it. The hatch was somewhere on top, out of sight. Wilkins reached out to the water and grabbed a

fish off the surface. It was warm and quite dead, probably partly cooked – perhaps even well done, and felt a bit rubbery to his fingers. He smacked it against the side of the canoe a few times, just to make sure – it bounced off, wobbling slightly and curving from side to side with the impact. Then, satisfied it seemed dead and quite cooked, the old man turned it over a few times in his hands.

“Well, that’s breakfast sorted then!” Wilkins muttered, satisfied, and dropped it inside the canoe.

Forrest was standing in his canoe and lightly leaning against their anchorage, watching Wilkins casually with interest. “Think that’s wise?” He asked. “That could be radioactive, you know.”

Atkins withdrew his hand as if stung and bent down to wash it in the lukewarm river. A splash followed as Potential Breakfast went back overboard.

“Fine time to think about that now!” Wilkins muttered angrily. “Damn! Couldn’t you have said that sooner?”

Smythe sighed. The trouble was, this little lot were excellent at throwing grenades at cocka-snoek – if they were all pointed in the same direction – but deep thought and co-operation seemed to be something of the past. So was concentrating on anything for longer than five seconds – and quite a lot could happen in five seconds with this bunch – anything from fondly remembering something that happened thirty years ago, to arguing among themselves about what happened thirty minutes ago – in between frequent toilet breaks. Sometimes even the seemingly small task of getting them to throw grenades in the same direction was a daunting (and hazardous) experience – which is why the General regularly made certain his Will was in order – and why Jeremy Jordan was the only member of the club forbidden to handle explosives – even stun grenades – unless they were still in their cases, and even then, only under strict supervision.

The main reason for this ban was the time Jordan took a dare and tried to juggle a couple of live hand grenades to amuse some tourists. “It’s amazing,” Smythe had been heard to remark many times since, “how often, the only thing left of a man is a pair of smoking boots – and sometimes a hat!” Well, Smythe supposed, fishing was an industry – like tourism – and no industry is without its share of industrial accidents, right – so why should dynamite fishing be any

different? Or tourism for that matter?

Game fishermen would travel to Deanna from – well, everywhere – just to have a go at catching cocka-snoek. Most were lucky enough to go back home again, with all their bits attached and no more harm suffered than a trip to the doctor to remove bits of shrapnel from their derrière’s – or to the local dentist – though nowadays that was part of the past, along with using live grenades! Though, it was really fun, wasn’t it? After all, the Club’s fees were modest and it was kind of fun watching the greenhorns picking bits of metal out of their supper around the campfire, while trying to act all macho about it. Especially later, when they had to take one or two of them to the Institute for the Dentally Challenged – where the Club had a special arrangement with the local dentist. Nowadays, the most entertainment they had in using stun grenades, was when gun-deaf tourists kept shouting “what?” at everyone even more than the club members.

“Yes sir?” Said a perplexed and delayed Jordan from behind. “Wasn’t me either, sir!”

Smythe ignored him – except to quickly roll his eyes, because suddenly a deep hollow ‘clonk’ sound came from the pod.

“Watch out – it’s opening up!” Atkins warned, pointing with a trembling hand. The hatch lifted, opened and fell back with a loud thud, allowing a faint light to stream out the opening like a vague searchlight. Then they heard the sounds of somebody enthusiastically trying to climb a ladder, while possibly unsure which way was up, and probably with a bit of a concussion.

“Fire-in-the-hole!” Riley yelled suddenly.

Completely without warning – and before anyone was likely to even attempt to stop him – Riley lobbed an object at the pod. With uncanny and wholly improbable precision, the object curved through the air, and dropped neatly through the opening, and landed inside with an echoing metallic clang – at which time the climbing sounds came to an abrupt stop.

A terrified, echoey, but very human-sounding scream emanated from inside the pod, followed in short order by a muffled, distorted explosion – and a stunned silence from the rest of the Club, who were probably trying to calculate the odds of something like that actually happening... and if it was time for the little white pills yet, thank you, Matron.

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