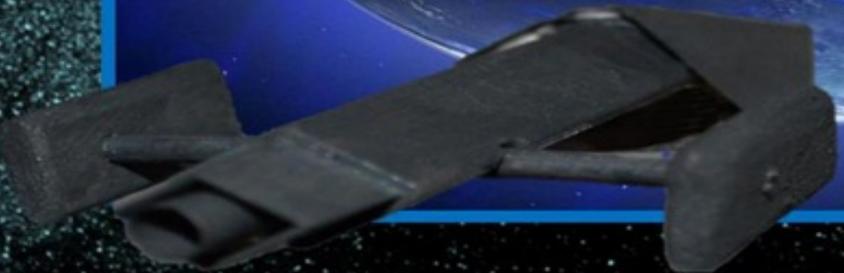


The Quantum Series: Book 6

HIGH STEAKS



Christina Engela

High Steaks by Christina Engela

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High Steaks

Imagine, if you will:

Somewhere in the black void called deep space, a bright yellow star shone seemingly with the determination to make the universe a brighter place. Nine ordinary-looking planets circled it on more than one plain, so that occasionally, this little star system would resemble some kind of atom – perhaps representing a new element – one that should eventually earn a place in the next update of the periodic table under ‘Wr’, for weirdness... or perhaps even ‘Su’ for surprise. And why not? The small backwater Terran colony called Deanna certainly deserved it – it was the center of weirdness in the galaxy... and as the many tourists who visited it each year found out for themselves, it was full of surprises.

The star it orbited was called Ramalama – and its two little moons, Ding and Dong. Yes, the first humans who landed on Deanna to colonize the planet – and to civilize it (with dubiously inconclusive results in the case of the latter) as it turned out, had a very strange outlook on life –but then, who could blame people who lived on a world where one of the moons – a small perfect sphere of solid titanium about fifty feet in diameter – would fall down occasionally?

Of course that didn’t happen too often – most of the time, whenever a visiting loderunner failed to notice it and accidentally bumped it out of orbit – but most importantly, when it was actually funny. Timing, as the saying goes, is everything, and the knowledge that the Tourism Office actually had three space tugs specially reserved just to put the small moon back into its orbit again, was commonplace on Deanna. After all, Ding was a matter of local pride!

Dong, the larger moon, was by comparison just plain ordinary – boring, even. It just stayed where it was and hadn’t fallen down once in the century since the colony was founded – and considering its slightly larger size (and high iron content) that was probably just as well.

Atro City, on the coast of the Landlocked Ocean, was the capital city of Deanna and home to a million plus inhabitants. The city, being the center of local government, was also occasionally referred to by critics of the Planetary

Governor, Thomas Kelsy Landry, as ‘the crapital’.

Lupini Square was roughly at the center of Atro City, which was appropriate since it was also very much at the center of public life in the city. It was also really far more of a large circle than an actual square – and very crowded at the moment, for reasons we’ll go into later. It is here where our story picks up: inside the hallowed walls of the Governor’s Palace, which stood on the outside of the road that encircled Lupini Square and faced onto it. Things were very tense inside. Things were tense outside too, but again, for reasons that will be revealed.

The aptly named Situation Room – which was a crowded chamber on the ground level of the building – was at this very moment occupied by the Governor himself, his Aide, members of the Governor’s staff, the Mayors of Atro City and San Fedora – Deanna’s two largest cities – and the chief of Atro City’s police force, Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller.

A fresh dead body occupied a space on the floor near the holographic map-table, its former occupant having earned for himself the unflattering name of Piss Pot – at any rate in the memory of the Sheriff, who generally went by the name of Peg – at least to her friends – and she was reasonably certain there was nobody there with her that was any closer than the classification of colleague, or even superior. On an ordinary everyday basis, Peg had to answer to either the Mayor of Atro City or the Governor, depending on context – but these were anything but ordinary everyday circumstances!

For starters, Peg would never have considered threatening a room full of friends with her regulation side-arm before uttering the fateful words “Anyone else want to be on the wrong side of history?” and Piss Pot had been a colleague – at least, he had – until he pulled out his side-arm and tried to take the whole room hostage!

The Governor’s Palace was just in the process of being sealed off, with Landry’s Security guards scampering about the building to ensure all the doors were securely locked from the inside. The reason for all this unusual drama, in brief, was because that very morning – only minutes before – a visiting member of the imperial family had been assassinated during a welcoming parade, right outside, on Lupini Square!

The unfortunate Prince Justin, who was up to that point, thirteenth in line to the imperial throne, had met his end only about eighty meters away from the Situation Room – in the back of a convertible on Lupini Square.

The cause of death? Poor security. That is, somehow the assassin had managed to wangle a job where he would freelance as the Prince's driver in the motorcade – and once they arrived on the Square, he turned around and blasted the bejesus out of him with a sonic-pulse pistol set on fully-automatic at a range of less than two feet! Peg was still wondering how the hell he managed to get away – vanishing into thin air seconds before the Prince's team of body guards could even get their guns pointed in his direction!

Their woes didn't end there. In the minutes before the assassination, SOD (Sheriff's Office Deputies) cars that had been stationed around the city and along the parade route for the duration of the parade, had mysteriously begun to vanish in quick succession. Communications appeared to be on the fritz as well, and her attempts to contact any law enforcement units in the city proved futile. As though that weren't bad enough, in the confusing moments just after the shooting, a column of mysterious soldiers just appeared seemingly out of nowhere – and began marching across the Square!

After that, as if things couldn't get more surreal, some guy calling himself a General, who brought along his own podium, made a speech proclaiming a revolution – and blamed the assassination of Prince Justin on 'terrorists'. To top it all off, the 'General' declared martial law! Nobody seemed to be laughing, because apparently there were around three thousand well-armed troops outside, who agreed with him! They must have been shock-troops – because everyone was, well – shocked!

Peg tried again to raise the SOD head office, dispatch, a patrol vehicle – anyone, to no avail! All the building phones were offline too. She dropped her phone on the map table in disgust. She had no idea if something bad had happened to her deputies, or if something was just preventing her from contacting them!

She'd been trying to formulate a plan of some kind, but so far she'd only managed to get as far as 'lock the doors'. As far as she knew, the doors of the Palace, front and back, were the only way in or out of the building. In the absence of any secret tunnels in the basement she didn't know about, she

fervently hoped the next phase of her plan wasn't going to be something along the lines of '...and hope they don't try to come in'.

The others in the room began chattering nervously amongst themselves, debating courses of action. Nerves were frayed and everyone left in the building – pretty much all that were in the situation room – was tense. Someone had covered the body of the former imperial security liaison with a bed-sheet. White, Peg considered, was probably not the best choice of color for that job, since the sheet had now partly turned blotchy red and pink where Peg had shot him.

“Governor!” McCracken, the portly, elderly Mayor of San Fedora bellowed. “What’re our chances of rescue?”

Governor Landry straightened up in the chair he was sitting in, seemingly having an internal debate with himself.

“Well... er...”

“Expecting a rescue is beyond hope under the circumstances!” Sam Barthoff, Mayor of Atro City, interrupted grimly, throwing up his hands in hopelessness. “Hopeless!”

Politicians, thought Peg, massaging her temples with tense fingers. She'd never been in the military, had no idea about military strategy, and in her position, never had access to information about the military, such as whether the Empire had any secret bases anywhere closer to Deanna than, say, Turnkey Station – which was, well – a good way away!

Peg considered herself a realist. Sure, this was a shitty situation to be in, but they weren't going to get out of it by getting hysterical! Anyway, she thought, she didn't have to be a military genius to know that it would be a good long time before the Terran Fleet could react or mount any kind of military intervention – and probably – if the folks outside knew what they were doing, they wouldn't even know something was wrong for at least a few days! Longer, if those people had some kind of ace up their sleeves!

“Sheriff!” Landry lashed out at Peg, regaining her full attention. “Your SOD's are clearly not a match for whatever is going on out there – not a sodding match, er – if you don't mind my saying so! We have to call out the Reserves!”

“Now just a crabby-grass kickin' minute, Governor – sir!” Peg began, raising

an irate finger. “I...”

“Umm... Sir?” The Governor’s aide interrupted. He was a tall thin man wearing an expression that might have been #255 Diplomatic Deadpan, “Sorry, Sheriff – Governor, Deanna hasn’t got any military Reserves!”

An awkward silence fell.

“No... military reserves on Deanna?” Landry repeated, his voice shooting up a whole octave. The aide shook his head.

“None!” Peg added, feeling her patience wearing a little thin.

“But...” Landry spluttered. “I remember seeing some mention of a reservist association in some files a little while back!”

“Yes, Governor.” His aide agreed – those are mostly pensioners and retired veterans – they do Sunday picnics, pensioner discounts, specials at the prosthetic devices counter at C.J.’s – maybe a little dynamite fishing on weekends, that sort of thing – they aren’t formally part of any actual military reserve unit!”

McCracken sighed loudly. “That’s it, we’re screwed!” He moaned, and sank hard into a wheelie-chair, placing his head in his hands. “Screwed, I tell you!”

“Well – call them up anyway!” Landry continued. “If they can still blow the ack out cocka-snoek, they should be able to do something about this!”

“Governor,” Peg interrupted. “I agree with you that the veterans in the Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club probably have way more combat training and experience than anyone on Deanna – but for now, we’ve got no way to contact anyone! Perhaps, if we can find a way out of the Palace, and even the city, then we can call Shady Palms and see if the Matron will let them out to deal with the fuckers that shot Prince Justin! In the meantime, we still need a way out of here, and as fast as possible!”

“Right.” Landry nodded enthusiastically in agreement. “First thing’s first then, capital!”

“Okay.” Peg sighed, wishing she had remote access to the headache pills in her desk drawer back at the station – this was turning out to be a very long damn day!

“Well?” Asked Landry expectantly.

“Well, what?” Peg asked in turn.

“What’s the first thing?” He asked.

What was the old man smoking? Peg wondered. Just then, the building’s chief of security returned, entering the room through the door into the lobby, accompanied by two of his colleagues, who were also dressed in the beige and brown uniforms of state building security. He went right up to Peg, giving the Governor a nod, sending a drop of sweat falling from the tip of his chin. His face was wet and shiny with perspiration – clearly he was not handling this very well.

“The doors are locked, Sheriff!” He said in a nearly trembling voice. “All entrances to the building secure!”

“Thank you.” Peg said, placing a hand firmly on one of his shoulders.

“What’s your name?”

“Phil.” He said. “Phil Roberts. Er – they have the place surrounded! We saw ‘em movin’ out back through the windows! Just...thought I’d mention that...”

“Sterling job, Phil.” She said reassuringly. “Just stay calm and we’ll all get through this, okay?”

Phil nodded weakly, closing his eyes for a moment. Clearly Phil was in this job for the perks and benefits, and not an adrenalin-junkie.

“Is there anyone else in the building, Phil?”

“No ma’am.”

“Y’sure?”

“Yuh.” He nodded. “Everyone that wasn’t involved in the welcoming went outside to watch the show. The reception lady, my security detail, and everyone in here – that’s all of us that’s left inside!”

Peg did a quick head count. That made fifteen people, excluding her. From the look of things, only about five of them had weapons, including the pistol belonging to the dead guy on the floor – and that meant handguns, no rifles, not even an assault blaster between them!

“What do we do now?”

“We work this out, Phil!” Peg said, as leader-like, confidently and inspirationally as she could muster under the circumstances. “We work this out!”

“Okay.” Phil said, before breathing deeply in and out.

“Now.” Peg said, looking Phil in the eye, looking hopeful, “Is there any other way out of here except through those doors?”

Just then, a loud thump came from the direction of the front entrance on the far side of the lobby, amplified by the echo.

“Better hurry, Phil!” She breathed. “We don’t have much time!”

Peg had barely uttered her warning when suddenly, a weird sound like a cross between a guitar twang and Mozart being played backwards at high speed, came from the situation room doorway and the lobby. Already tense, Peg automatically drew her sidearm and turned to face the potential threat – which turned out to be an attractive male figure wearing dark slacks and a blue long sleeve tee. She did a double-take. The cowboy hat was conspicuously absent.

“Who the hell’s that?” Governor Landry demanded. “Where’d he come from?”

“Why, that’s Beck!” Said Phil in amazement. “Beck the Badfeller! An’ without his hat!”

It was Gary Beck, aka Beck the Badfeller – who was without argument, the greatest bounty hunter on Deanna of all time – but why he’d just appeared out of thin air, looking puzzled and holding a half-empty mug of coffee, very few people would be able to say. Gary Beck wasn’t too sure about that either.

“Gary!” She said, giving a relieved sigh before lowering her weapon. “Where’d you come from? When did you get back? Weren’t you on Mars?” She said in quick order. Then, after the reality of things set in, and a funny look had finished crossing her face, she asked “And – how the heck did you get in here?”

“Oh, hi Peg!” Gary Beck said, smiling innocently. Suffice to say, despite having just been at the Time Saving Agency with Cindy-Mei, where they were entertained by Johnathan Scrooby for what seemed like several days, Gary was well aware that they’d just landed on Deanna about an hour before they actually left Mars!

Gary hated time travel – that is, he hated the complicated quantum physics in everything that explained it – especially when it gave him a headache! Just the thought that right now, at that very moment, another Gary Beck and a different Cindy-Mei Winter from the one standing across the room from him – were sitting in Mei’s apartment in Mars City, sipping coffee, oblivious to current events back home on Deanna and chatting to their friend Johnathan Scrooby –

was a four-alarm migraine in the making! That said, Johnathan Scrooby – their friendly agent at the Time Saving Agency, had brought them up to speed on current events, and they were here to do some old fashioned arse kicking!

“Yes, Mars! Just now, actually! Long story! Tell you later!” He said, evading all of Peg’s questions at once. Trying to explain a second-hand version of Johnathan Scrooby’s ten minute lecture using candles as props probably wasn’t a good idea. Besides, he didn’t see any lying around.

“Sure, sure.” She nodded, then after a pause she asked. “Gary?”

“Yea?”

“Why do you have a half-empty mug of coffee in your hand?”

Gary raised the half-empty mug of coffee and stared at it like he’d never seen it before. It was still warm! Then it hit him –

“Scrooby!” He breathed, and shook his head, appreciating the joke. It was the same mug he was holding when Scrooby time-shifted them out of Mei’s apartment earlier. No, later! Damn – he was never going to get the hang of this! He knew Scrooby had a warped sense of humor, but this was a bit silly, even for him!

“Uhm...” He said.

“Lemme guess...” Said Peg. “Later?”

“That’s the one!” He nodded, smiling brightly.

Just then, another loud thump on the front doors carrying a faint note like a big bell ringing, echoed in the lobby. Some of the people in the room flinched nervously. Obviously someone was trying to batter the doors down! Gary seemed unsurprised. He swallowed the contents of the mug, nodded approval, and put it down on the map table. Then he smiled at Peg again in that maddening way she knew too well.

“Excuse me!” A voice called. It was Landry again. “What’s going on here? Are we being rescued?”

“Governor!” Peg replied, smiling. “I’d say our chances of making it out of here alive just went up – by a lot!”

Peg only just noticed Mei standing at the other end of the room, her medium length blonde hair tied back in a short pony, a blaster in one hand. Somehow, for some reason even she couldn’t explain, she’d arrived there dressed in what

looked like the same black simulated leather outfit she'd worn on her first night on Deanna – right after the Ruminarii hammerhead bombed Atro City!

“How?” Mei asked, looking at Gary, puzzled. Gary was just examining her, and craning his neck to look past Peg. That was quite a sight for sore eyes!

“Don't ask!” He grinned back. “Same answer!”

Gary thought Mei looked amazing! He supposed Scrooby thought that outfit was a little more appropriate under the circumstances than the summer dress and heels she'd had on the previous day – er... no, on Mars right now! Good thinking on Scrooby's part!

“Mei.” Peg greeted tersely, looking her over.

“Peg.” Mei returned, with a curt nod, as they launched into a brief exchange. “Good to see you.”

Peg: “You too.”

Mei: “Everything okay?”

Peg: “No. You?”

Mei: “I've been better.”

Peg: “Same old, same old, huh?”

“Yup. 'fraid so.” Mei smiled. This was after all – clearly – not their first adventure together. Luckily for her, Peg thought, at least she knew it probably wouldn't be their last.

“So what do we do now?” Peg asked, turning back to Gary. “What's the plan?”

“Mei?” Gary asked Mei, who nodded to him meaningfully that she was ready for action. “If you please!”

“Okay, listen up!” Mei said, channeling the voice of former CIA Agent Winter, formerly of the Colonial Intelligence Agency. “We've got approximately five minutes before they break through, so we're getting out of here now! We need to travel light, so we're taking no baggage along! Please – make no attempts to salvage little Jemma's school photo on your desk upstairs on the way out! We go, and we go now – green?”

There was a general round of nodding and murmurs of agreement. Everyone was antsy and very eager to get out of there – and with extremely good reason! The fascist conquerors of Atro City hadn't to their knowledge, actually killed

people yet – except for the unfortunate Prince – but they didn't want to push their luck!

“Yo, Phil!” Gary called. The head of building security of the Governor's Palace looked startled.

“Beck the Badfeller knows my name!” He said, shocked. “Yes, sir?”

“We need to get to the basement, pronto – you lead the way!”

“But...” Phil protested, reluctantly finding himself being pushed toward the doorway of the lobby by his eager followers – the Governor and the two Mayors jockeying for first place. “There's no exit in the basement – we'll be trapped!”

“Not yet! There's no way out up here either, Phil – but don't worry, leave that to us!” Gary smiled, stepping aside and coaxing Phil to pass and lead the others ahead of him. Mei brushed past him at the tail-end of the group, and paused to give Gary a kiss.

“Hm-m-m!” Gary smiled at her sexy little swagger as she moved on after them, heading down a dimly lit corridor. “Agent Winter sure is starting to grow on me!”

Gary turned his attention back to the task at hand. He could hear a commotion outside the large windows on either side of the door. While at the TSA, Scrooby had used a device called a Projector, which seemed really like an overcomplicated video player that used holograms (among other things) to show them the time-stream – what had happened, what was happening – and what was going to happen.

Scrooby, being the thorough and precise Time Agent that he was, also showed them what should happen – and what would happen if what should happen didn't happen – which, believe me, wasn't pretty. But, neither was what should happen... but there was no way round that. And, as if that wasn't confusing enough, he'd also showed them what was happening outside the Palace right at that very moment.

People had come to Lupini Square that morning to watch the parade and the motorcade – hoping to see Prince Justin make his speech – but instead, they'd witnessed a horrible assassination first-hand. Now they were trapped inside a cordon of fascist troops who had encircled the Square – troops from an army that now controlled Deanna. Right at that very moment, not too far from where he

was standing, people were being separated and sorted through a form of crowd-control funnel, into two groups – those the fascists approved of, and those they didn't. Those they approved of were sent home – while there would be dire consequences for those they didn't. Gary felt a wave of anger rising within him, and tightening his grip on his determination to see this thing through, surfed it out.

There was another commotion on the other side of the large white double doors as the rapidly tiring and grunting team of fascist soldiers charged it again. They managed to gather enough momentum to ram their improvised battering-ram into the door a little harder, making the hollow bronze statue ring like a bell on impact. A slew of fine gray dust fell from the surrounding lead-wood door jamb.

Gary smiled grimly to himself, as the last sounds of Mei and the party of refugees from the situation room faded from hearing. He knew the door was made of solid Deannan lead-wood. It would take a hell of a lot more than that to break it open!

He sidled past the reception desk nearby the entrance, and risked a stealthy peek outside through the window on that side, taking care not to disturb the lace curtains. One of the big boys at the front of the statue groaned with fatigue and frustration, and let the heavy weight sag to the tiled floor of the verandah.

“Why don't we just shoot the lock out? Or blow it up?” He heard another trooper suggest. A shorter, rounder man of similar age looked to another who seemed to have more authority, for guidance. He saw the tall blonde man standing to one side of the group operating the battering ram – which he recognized as a statue taken from the large fountain at the center of the Square.

“Hmmpf.” Gary muttered under his breath. “Adriano Lupini! Who says you can't fight city hall?”

The guy in charge wore what looked like an officer's cap and insignia, and Gary recognized him as the dude who was running the show. He shook his head. Gary knew the fascists wanted the Palace taken as intact as possible – after all, it was to remain the seat of government! The officer looked round, seemingly gauging the large windows along the wall either side of the door.

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