

Zemekis' note: Continued directly from my first post...Chapter 2 of the El Dorado Covered With Clouds Light Novel! Sorry for the wait guys, life's been busy but this will get finished. I've written a few annotations throughout to help with terms that may be vague without understanding the reference.

But, our ship, the Outlaw Star, wasn't docked in El Dorado, but instead over on the first satellite¹ in its outer orbit called Rio Grande. El Dorado floated in the atmosphere of the dense, high-pressure gas giant, Aurum IV, so regular space vessels would either be ripped in half before they got there or blown every which way by the winds, which explains why it has no ports. The only way to get to it is from an elevator that's situated on a long-ass tether from Rio Grande's satellite orbit to the city itself.

Actually, El Dorado was suspended from Rio Grande via the tether and dropped to its position above Aurum IV. The rock mass that formed the base of El Dorado used to be an asteroid that became trapped by Aurum IV's gravity.

It would've just fallen into Aurum IV if it hadn't been for the orbiting proximity of Rio Grande and the fact that Rio Grande's orbit nearly matched the equatorial geosynchronous orbit of Aurum IV, a detail which was noticed by some prospectors who threw all their money into making a super-tensile, monomolecular fiber to connect the two. In addition, they set up several GCUs² to control gravity along the way, increased the length of the tether and ultimately changed the orbit of both bodies, resulting in El Dorado's positioning within Aurum IV's atmosphere.

Of course, both El Dorado and Rio Grande's orbits are stable. If you're looking at it from the gas giant, the two planets look like a thin, upright stick just floating over the equator. Using the altitude of the geosynchronous orbit as their points of gravity against the gravity of Aurum IV, the two remain at a standstill, as if they were two sides of a perfectly balanced scale, ignoring the orbital elevator connecting them to the surface. There was this Old Earth novel called the Spider's Web or something. I played one of its film adaptations on holovideo recently. There was this thing. A thin spider's web descending from Heaven to the depths of Hell. The tether floating in the midst of the raging Aurum IV atmosphere must look like that from the outside looking in. In the story, there was a ghost on the end of the web that wanted to go to heaven; but, in El Dorado's case, it looks like a prisoner forever suspended midair in the fires of Hell.

The reason the prospectors went about this batshit plan was to excavate the natural resources slumbering beneath Aurum IV (well I guess the phrase "pump up" would be more precise in this case). In that high-gravity gas giant shrouded in impregnable mist lay treasuries of heavy hydrogen for use in nuclear fusion and all sorts of heavy metals for use in the chemical industry; however, harvesting these is quite difficult and you'll pay an arm and a leg if you screw the pooch³. El Dorado was founded on the principal that the initial costs of development would be compensated by abundant harvests and safe work environments.

But everything's not butterflies and daisies in this world, as you're probably aware. They couldn't find any precious or heavy metals worth writing home about on El Dorado. While they did find fuels like hydrogen and heavy hydrogen (so there was at least *some* profit to be had), it wasn't anything you could get rich quick from.

Prospectors came in waves when the getting was good, but just like waves they went back to where they came from and now it's a derelict city, one step away from becoming a ghost town. If it wasn't a stone's throw of five days from the metropolis Hei Fong by sub-ether drive, then it would already be a ghost town today.

El Dorado.

Means "city of gold" in Spanish. It refers to the city the Spaniards looked for during their conquests that would make them unbelievably rich. Such a place didn't exist on Earth in the end, but as soon as people were able to use hyperlight travel in the Toward Stars Era and went extrasolar, more and more people began to dream about that kind of shit all over again.

This city stands as the withered remains of their dreams.

Oops, don't really have the time to be getting all sentimental!

"Hey, I found him first!"

"I care not."

"I knocked him out first!"

"I was not witness to that."

"You didn't even *touch* him! All you did was wreck that droid!"

"That matters not."

"..."

My seething rage toward her cold-as-ice and sharper-than-icepick retorts had me at a loss for words. If I had a mirror in front of me, no doubt the veins of my temples would be bursting out of my head.

"Hey bro, can we save the chit-chat for after we hand this guy into the police? Just standing here's getting to be kind of awkward," Jim called as he jangled the chain on Billy's handcuffs. Billy was sitting on the ground, dazed out of his mind.

Even still, I stood there bickering with Suzuka about splitting the reward in the middle of that empty road.

"How about we talk about this calmly over some nice warm tea? Come on, how about it?" Melfina proposed as she brandished a flower-patterned umbrella to get out of the sweltering sun rays. Where'd she get that thing anyway? Whatever...

Ah I see, this place's climate control device is busted. It's so hot, so bright, and I'm so frickin' thirsty. Who'd make an artificial biosphere so rough to live in?

Jim turned and said, "Hey why don't we try to find a police station?"

“Could you be quiet for a sec? I’m so pissed off right now. ‘Sides, looks we won’t have to make the trip ourselves. We got company.”

“Huh?”

From the other side of the road, I could see a bike. It was beat up, old, and making sounds that were none too savory. It couldn’t have been electric. That was the sound of a high-powered hydrogen engine, dilapidated though it may be.

The paint on the bike was peeling, so much so that I couldn’t even tell what the original color was. The rider was wearing a whitish, open-collared shirt and brown Bermuda pants. He looked like the manager of a swimming beach. Nothing in his appearance suggested that he was a cop, other than the silver badge on his chest that is.

He stopped in front of us and turned towards our group as he straddled his bike.

He was a white guy like Jim and I.

There was some white mixed in with his shortly cut hair. Shouldn’t cops be wearing helmets?

His rough, sunburnt face was battered with age. If I had to make a modest estimate, he couldn’t have been any less than 45 years old.

As I said before, he was sporting some resort gear and, getting a closer look at him, I could see that his shoes were in fact sandals; however, holstered on his right hip was a ray gun, and on the right side of his bike frame there was a beam rifle.

They appeared to be pretty high-caliber and from what little was poking out of the polished muzzles, I could tell that I had to be on my guard around this guy.

He didn’t even have a gut for being as old as he was. His hairy limbs that stuck out of his clothes were covered in sinewy muscle.

Anyway, I could tell that he was a pro because he stopped his bike where he could see all of us in his field of vision and left his bike to idle so that he could be ready to move at a moment’s notice.

“So, what’s all this ruckus about, hm?” He asked me.

His voice was lower and gruffer than I thought it would be.

“Little boy had too much fun with his toy,” I said as I pointed to Billy with my left thumb without taking my eyes off the man.

Of course, he cast a quick glance to Billy while still keeping me in his sights. I caught him clenching his jaw when he looked at Billy, but he managed to remain expressionless otherwise.

“I take it you’re... bounty hunters?” He implored with the same casual tone as he had before.

“Who’s askin’?” I retorted.

I’m not good at keeping up a poker face, but I have to see what his angle is.

“Name’s Hawkes. I’m the sheriff of El Dorado.”

Suzuka walked briskly toward the man named Hawkes and pointed toward Billy.

“Wanted across the universe for serial murder, Wanted Bulletin Number: 10283H25, Billy McLaughlin. I will be handing him over to your custody. I kindly ask that you conduct the necessary procedures for criminal extradition and bestowment of the reward.”

“That’s gonna be a no.”

“Excuse me?”

Suzuka’s hand, gripping her wooden sword, turned stark pale. She must’ve been choking the life out of the poor thing.

“This here town ain’t signed the FTS’ criminal extradition pact.”

Oh boy. Looks like this man came prepared to die.

I came up behind Suzuka. I placed my hand softly on her shoulder and gave a large grin in order to dispel the tension. We were gonna be at each other’s necks pretty soon.

“Can we get you to take him in as a *flagrante delicto*⁴, then? We’ll handle the bounty and federation sheriff dispatch order stuff, yeah?”

Although this backwater hasn’t signed the pact, a federation space officer or sheriff should listen to the request if he’s a functioning member of human society. Although the frontier space sectors are crawling with pirates and outlaws (that’s us I guess), he couldn’t deny that.

“Where’s yer proof?”

“I’m a witness.”

“That’s not gonna cut it. If you ain’t got a story then...”

“The proof’s in there.”

I turned to the dilapidated bar.

“Well ain’t this a sight for sore eyes. And just how’d’ya ‘spect me ta look in there, huh?”

“Use a fuckin’ crane or something, I dunno, man. Did you come here just to talk, mister sheriff?” Jim cut in abruptly. Guess he got a little impatient.

“You this ankle biter’s sitter?” the sheriff asked me without so much as looking at Jim.

“And what if I said I was?”

“Spare the rod, spoil the child.”

“Better watch your mouth. Jim’s my partner, buddy. I let him speak his piece.”

The sheriff gave us a once over and shrugged.

“Bunch of wannabe tough guys are ya? Guess that rabid little Chihuahua’s the perfect mark for you.”

Did that mean that we should quit the poker face? What’s his angle?

“Rabid little chihuahua? You know Billy?”

“Coming into this town being so ill-prepared speaks to the fact that yer all just a buncha stupid little kids.”

“You mind telling me what you know for future reference?”

And just then

“Dead, dead, dead. You’re all fucking dead,” Billy cackled out of nowhere.

Looks like he’s among the living.

“Die, die, die. No one crosses me and gets away with it.”

I think I might’ve hit him a little too hard.

“This town ain’t here for you outsiders all to come in here and act like you own the place,” the sheriff, said ignoring Billy.

“Only one family of founders runs this town. Every molecule of oxygen, every molecule of water, and every joule⁵ of energy belongs to them. Not one person, yours truly included, dares not to follow that rule.”

“I don’t give a shit, man. You said it yourself: we’re just a buncha outsiders. That’s got nothing to do with us.”

“Do you know the name of the oldest man of that family, the name of that founding prospector?”

“Survey says?”⁶

“Oh, I know! Howard McLaughlin,” Jim spoke up from beside me again.

“And you mind telling me this one here’s name?” the sheriff asked Jim as he looked at Billy.

“Billy... McLaughlin... Is he a relative of his or something?”

“Old man Howard’s got three kids. Billy’s the youngest. He’s the shining apple of his eye, ‘prolly ‘cause he had him so late in his life.”

I guess that meant that he’d harbor a serial murder without so much as a second thought.

“Baha! Hahahah! You guys are as good as dead if my dad loses his shit! You too, sheriff. You shouldn’t just be sitting here with your thumb up your ass talking to these morons when all this shit’s happened to me. Fucking do something or I’m gonna get my dad to light up that sheriff’s office like a bonfire, you good for nothing!”

So, he’s crazy *and* a daddy’s boy. Gimme a break.

“Suzuka. I have a favor to ask.”

“Whatever is it, Jim?”

“Make this idiot shut up.”

“Say no more.”

With a swing of her wooden sword, Suzuka silenced Billy with a hit to the back of the head which made a dull sound. He fell to the ground face-first, kicking up sand.

“Whoa, that was some sound.”

“He’s not dead... is he?”

Jim and Melfina looked nervously down at Billy who was prone on the ground.

“I would never slay someone who was bound.”

After making so sure a declaration, Suzuka also peered down at Billy with a flicker of concern.

“I... might have overdone it.”

“Don’t worry about it. People can’t get any stupider than that” I said as I hoisted Billy up and put him on my back.

“What are you doing, Gene?” Suzuka asked.

“Gonna take him back to Hei Fong in the Outlaw Star. Might as well take him to an FTS allied station if we can’t do it here.”

“Why the Outlaw Star?”

“Judging from what the cop said, this place is gonna go to hell in a handbasket if we wait for the next ferry at Rio Grande,” said Jim, soothing an angry Suzuka.

That’s my partner. Nothing but net. ⁷

“I don’t think you’d lose to a bunch of country bumpkin gangsters, but there’s no point in going through the trouble if no money’s gonna come out of it. How about we do an equal split of the reward?”

Just then Suzuka flung her retort at me:

“7/3”

“What a joke.”

“6/4!”

“Sorry about the reward, Jimmy boy. Guess we’re going home empty handed.”

“Yuup. It’d be terrible to steal someone else’s work, you know,” Jim played along.

“Grrrr... fine. Half and half is fine.”

Sweet!

“Oh, so you’ll be coming back with us, Suzuka? On the way, could you show me that Japanese dish that we had recently?”

Even Melfina’s happy at this request. The nuance is a bit different though...

“It’s for your own good, you best to leave him and this place too while you’re at it. Rather, while you can. If you don’t...” the sheriff kept on with his doom-saying. Seems like he actually cares about us.

He looks like he knows his stuff nor does he look like he’d run from a fight. Why’s he here being the McLaughlin’s bitch in this podunk town?

“Or what? Is his old man like a werewolf or something?”

“Do you what you want,” the sheriff sighed.

“That’s the plan.”

And with that I trudged to the elevator platform with Jim and Melfina in tow. Suzuka gradually shrunk away without taking her gaze away from the sheriff. Probably one of her hitwoman habits, but I think she’s just being a worrywart.

“Hey, kid,” the sheriff called out from behind me.

“Guess I should ask your name at least.”

I turned and gave him my name.

“Gene. Gene Starwind.”

And then I added with a smile:

“My other name is Gene, the Outlaw Star. Don’t forget it.”⁸

Annotations, putting them here because unique page footers are too much of a bitch to work with:

¹ a celestial body orbiting another of larger size. Not a mechanical satellite in this instance.

²GCU – This is mentioned in the manga, art/design books, and I think perhaps the anime or angel Links. Stands for Gravity Cycling Unit or something similar. Artificial gravity.

³fuck up

⁴ ***In flagrante delicto*** (Latin: "in blazing offence") or sometimes simply ***in flagrante*** (Latin: "in blazing") is a legal term used to indicate that a criminal has been caught in the act of committing an offence. The colloquial "caught red-handed" or "caught rapid" are English equivalents.

In Japan, the phrase's translation, Genkōhan (現行犯), is used to refer to citizen's arrest.

⁵ a derived unit of energy in the International System of Units.

⁶ "Survey says" is a phrase commonly heard on the TV game-show *Family Feud*

⁷ In basketball the term "Nothing but net" implies that a player shoots the ball and gets the basketball inside the rim without touching the rim with the ball. Similar to saying "hole in one" or "jackpot" to imply that someone has made a perfect guess/comment.

⁸ A reference to Gene's self-awarded title in the manga. The phrase has a slightly different connotation in the manga, whereas it is simply the name of the ship in the anime.

