

### El Dorado Covered with Clouds – Chapter 3

“It’s hoooooot...”

The elevator that connects Rio Grande and El Dorado pierces through the bedrock ceiling of El Dorado and the long cylindrical pillar extends to the town’s floor in a straight line. The elevator lets out in the center of the city and, from there, from which the streets spread out like a spider web in all four cardinal directions. The thin elevator shaft is visible from anywhere, sprouting toward the ceiling. Having reached the exit door, I threw Billy on the ground, stretched deeply, and wiped a bead of sweat trickling down my forehead. El Dorado was so small that you could walk from one end to the other in not even 40 minutes. From where the bars are (more accurately *were*) in the outskirts, you could get to the center of town in two seconds just by walking a bit. Even still, carrying a person in this hot ass weather is a little too much to bear.

“You deserve a rest” said Melfina as she opened her umbrella.



“You’re taking this heat in stride, Mel. You haven’t even sweat at all.”

“Oh. It seems that my body can metabolize as long as it’s just this hot.”

Melfina’s body was intricately designed. Countless nanomachines regulate and amplify her bodily functions to maintain an optimal environment. That’s how she can perform such a feat, even if she’s none the wiser.

“That’s high technology for you. I’m jealous” I said nonchalantly and immediately regretted my carelessness.

Mel is always worrying about how she’s some kind of *thing* that resembles a human.

She probably wouldn’t be so worried if she looked super different from the known alien races let alone humans. No one would feel great being called an imitation of someone. But yeah there’s no use worrying over that. No one chooses how they’re born, but you can choose how you want to live. That goes for any intelligent lifeform. That’s just what I think. It doesn’t matter how much I say it if she doesn’t think that way too.

“If it were Suzuka, she’d probably act like it was a part of her training if she were thrown in hellfire. Jesus, what kind of training is this...?”

Melfina let out a small smile. Looks like I’m in the clear this time.

“Welp, let’s get a move on.”

I picked Billy, still unconscious, up again. He had been down for the count for quite a while a that point, so I got worried that I had hit him in a bad spot, but he seemed to be okay; he started snoring while we were walking. The alcohol he had at the bar began to take effect.

“You’re not going to wait for Jim and Suzuka?”

We didn’t think we’d get our business done so fast, so we sent Jim and Suzuka check out and pick up the luggage.

“We can just wait where the Outlaw Star is. They’ll catch up soon. If what the sheriff said is true, we’d best get out of here with this guy.”

I was in a hell of a rush. We would need to make it to at least to Rio Grande, not to mention the Outlaw Star, before we get anymore company.

“We should’ve come here with the Outlaw Star.”

“Well, they don’t have a port so...”

Yeah. Our spaceship, the Outlaw Star, has a stronger hull than regular ships. Plus, it’s got some improvements that’ll make even the best submersible wet its pants. Unlike other regular space ships, it’s able to come to the altitude where El Dorado floats automatically, in the middle of all that gas giant goodness.

As for the upgrades, I got them before I went on a treasure hunt on this gas giant in the Heifong Star Cluster after being talked into it by some old coot. While I did find some dragonite, the repairs required after the mission was over were too expensive. By the time everything was said and done, it wasn't worth it at all. <sup>1</sup>

That's why I'm gonna get that bounty reward, even if it's half of the full amount.

"What's done is done. Let's get a move on."

"Okay-" as Melfina replied there was a deep rumbling and our legs shook a bit. It wasn't so bad that we couldn't stand, but it was enough that we could feel it well enough. It went on for about five seconds and gradually went away.

"What could that have been?"

"Dunno, but I've got a bad feeling about it."

There was no use in thinking about it. I approached the elevator ticket booth with Billy slumped over my shoulders.

Inside the booth sat a slender, middle-aged woman. The vestiges of her beauty from two decades ago were overlaid with a severe expression that illustrated all the vice and discontent 20 years in this world could entail. Her damaged white hair, which seemed to have been a rich ash blonde, spoke to the harshness of time.

"Two for Rio Grande. Actually, make that three, I guess."

"Nope," the woman said nonchalantly. She gazed at the dangerous article I was carrying on my back.

"What?"

"Hard of hearing? Can't give you a ticket."

"Why is that?" Melfina piped up from behind me.

"Elevator's been stopped."

"Hey now, we're not talking about some elevator in those buildings you have other there. This thing's the town's lifeline!"

The woman juttred her face toward the display terminal which sat on top of her desk.

"There was a notification from management. Looks like something's gummin' up the elevator, so they stopped it as a safety precaution."

"Any word on when it's gonna be up again?"

"Hmm... 's not written here," she said not looking up from the screen.

"I suppose we shouldn't have checked out of the hotel," Melfina said as I felt a shiver run down my back.

This timing's too perfect and I don't believe in coincidences.

"Hey, doesn't the head of management go by McLaughlin?"

The woman stabbed her gaze into me.

"That'd be Pat. Old man McLaughlin's eldest. I'm sayin' this for your own good, you'd best throw away what you got there and make a run for it. If you lay low while the elevator's getting fixed, you just might be able to make it outta here alive."

"Huh, the sheriff said something like that, too. You guys sure are friendly 'round here. Warm's my heart, it does."

"Look fool, it'd break my heart if doll face there got wrapped up in whatever you're schemin'. I dunno how you got her to get involved with you, but she's too innocent to be taggin' along with a ne'er do well such as yourself."

The woman cast a wistful gaze at Melfina.

"I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine. Besides, I have an obligation to him," Melfina said, all smiles, in her most innocent and bright tone of voice. If that didn't tug at the old heartstrings...

The woman gave me a cold shower of a leer. She must've thought I was a marriage swindler or something.

Then, Melfina's expression turned grave.

"Gene... three aircraft approaching from the east, possibly combat helicopters."

"There we go..."

I pulled out the double barrel shotgun I kept in my coat's secret pocket along with all the ammo I had stuffed in there and handed it to Melfina.

"We'd be at a huge disadvantage fighting an open place like this. I'm gonna take Billy and make a run for tighter quarters. Cover me, yeah?"

"Okay!"

Melfina sat the shotgun at her side with one fluid and practiced motion.

"Find somewhere to hide. You're closed for today anyway," I spoke at the ticket lady, who's eyes had grown wide seeing Melfina's display.

"Here they come!" Melfina shouted in a low voice.

I heard them at the same time I first spotted them, three helicopters them flying in formation heading straight for us.

"Watch your eyes and ears, Mel!"

I got three shock grenades from the bag I had on my belt and waited for the helicopters to get close enough. I pulled the pins and threw them in the air and then closed my eyes and my ears.

Even though my eyes and ears were covered, I could still very well see the flash and hear the bang the bombs made. When I opened my eyes, smoke began to shroud the area around us.

I use these grenades on shit heads that hole themselves up with hostages. Although they don't have too much destructive force, the bright light and loud sound deprives the person of the use of his senses. The particulate in the smoke absorb infrared, diffract light, block thermo-optics and nullify lasers. They're made for use in close quarters, so their effect in open spaces isn't too great, but it's better than nothing.

“GO!”

I ran without looking back as soon as I yelled.

Relying on memory, I ran through the white smoke looking for the closest alley I could find.

From behind me, I could hear the characteristic high-pitched whine of pulse lasers being launched mixed with the low sound of a shotgun going off.

Running into the alley, I pulled out my ray gun and used a dilapidated house's porch for cover.

Melfina leapt out of the smoke. Just then, I could barely make out helicopters flying higher in the air. I aimed at the faint shadows and pulled the trigger on my ray gun. Regardless of the effect, the three aircraft retreated back into the smoke. Melfina came rocketing out of the smoke with a slide.

“Nice slide!”

“Think I could play baseball?”

“You'd be in the running for most stolen bases!” I said as I ejected the ray gun's battery magazine and replace it with a new one.

The roar of the helicopters drew close again.

“I wonder if things will let up at all...” Melfina implored as she started to stand again.

I took her hand went further into the alley.

“Maybe... They wanna get Billy back alive, so they probably can't go balls to the wall.”

“Jim told me...”

“Not to believe me when I say 'probably,' huh?” I said as I dropped Billy to the ground and aimed upward. I emptied the magazine as soon as I saw the hull of one of the helicopters. Shooting the lasers at point-blank range melted the combat helicopter's armor and hit the engine.

The helicopter made a loud noise and blew up. It dropped to the other side of the alley, flinging pieces of itself every which way.

“Like a moth to a flame. And this one’s hot.”

One down, two to go.

It would stand to reason that they would pincer attack us in this alley way. And, just as I thought, the helicopters showed themselves at both ends of the alleyway. They came at us firing pulse lasers from both ends. The lasers carved divots into the ground as they hit.

Overwhelmed, Melfina screamed.

“Stay still and don’t worry. It’s just a bluff. They’re fucked if they shoot Billy.”

That’s why they’ve been completely relying on beam ordinance and not live weaponry. They’re probably scared that a piece of shrapnel’s gonna hit him.

“Typical. Such a good little ‘copter, you’re gonna’ make papa cry.”

I swapped out the ray gun’s magazine and then let loose some lasers at the cockpit of the helicopter that was at the closer end.

I was sure I had hit it, but I had to deal with a bit of range between me and the target. The atmosphere had scattered the shots a bit, reducing their potency, and I wasn’t able to do any damage.

Still, the helicopter, startled by my shooting I guess, took refuge in a nearby house.

“This is gonna be another one of my infamous ‘probabilities,’ but I’m guessing some help should *probably* come if we hold out for about two or three minutes,” I chuckled to Melfina as I swapped out the magazine on the ray gun.

“Excuse me?”

Casting a sidelong glance at Melfina, I aimed at the helicopter at the other end of the alley. Just then, I heard Jim’s energetic voice coming from the piercing on my ear.

“We take our eyes off of you for two seconds and this is what happens.”

At that moment the helicopter split in two, both halves falling to the side, and subsequently exploded.

I could just barely make out a figure in the fire. In her hand she was holding a run-of-the-mill wooden sword.

Yup, Suzuka.

Emerging from beside her was a small shadow that ran toward me. Yup, there’s Jim.

Jesus. Two minutes? They were here all along. I knew I could count on you, partner.

Finishing my soliloquies in my head, I called out to Jim who was running with all our luggage:

“Jim! My Caster!”

“Comin’ right up!”

Jim pitched the somewhat largish gun to me. I snagged it out of the air by the hilt.

“Ammo!”

“Already seven in there!”

I turned around as Jim replied to me and I shot the helicopter with my newly acquired Caster as soon as I saw it peeking its head at the entrance of the alleyway.

“Jackpot.”

I pulled the trigger. In an instant, I could feel something flowing from my body, toward the gun, and then to the bullet in the gun. The Caster’s spell became an energy ball and leapt forward, ripping through the air. Its target? The last combat helicopter. The spell hit the helicopter’s flank making a direct hit, creating a whirling ripple that engulfed the aircraft. It turned red hot and then blew up into tiny pieces. There was nothing of it left, unlike the other ones.

That’s only a fraction of the Caster’s power.

In the olden days, magic used to be everywhere. They sealed it in bullets and by shooting those bullets you could hurl attack magic at your opponent. That’s why they call it a Caster. Its power is the real deal, but what makes it a pain in the ass is that it’s a product of a magical civilization that’s long gone; the gun and its bullets are all antique. While I did happen to get my hands on it in a strange, yet fortunate, turn of events, I’m always scraping for bullets. I’d probably have a better chance of finding bullets if I went to an antique store than a weapon store, honestly.

I took out the empty shell from the Caster to find that Suzuka and Jim had made it over to us. Jim set down the trunk with our things on the ground and handed me my gun belt.

“Oh, thanks.”

I wrapped the gun belt around my waist and holstered my Caster on my right hip. Often, I don’t have it so close ‘cause there’s no point in having it at my waist when I can only use it as a last resort since the bullets are so hard to come by. Even still, it feels better this way.

“That was fast.”

“Well yeah, I mean with you making such a mess of the place can you blame us? No one other than you could make as much of a ruckus.”

“Suzuka, sorry, but change of plans. They’ve stopped the elevator,” I said, ignoring Jim’s jests.

“It’s to be a war of attrition, then.”

“For now, yeah, until we can find a way out of here I guess. No other option, really.”

“Considering the number of combat helicopters they can brandish at a moment’s notice, it would seem that we cannot underestimate our enemy. It would not bode well to fight a war of attrition in such a shoddy castle-“

My chuckle cut off Suzuka's words.

"Think I've got just the thing."

"Uggh... I ron't fweel so good..."

At our feet, Billy proceeded to vomit. It seemed that he came to during our conversation.

"Are you okay?" Melfina asked with one hand rubbing Billy's back and the shotgun still in the other."

"Ugh... you proolly got shaken up like a martini while you were on my back."

"That might not have been the best..."

"Oh, motion sickness, then?"<sup>3</sup>

The peanut gallery, Jim and Suzuka, piped up without a moment's delay. Quite the comedic duo they've been. I had just poised my face to bark at them but Melfina got serious again.

"Gene... Now I'm picking up a lot of cars."

"A second wave, huh? They sure are prepared."

I picked up the still-babbling Billy and saddled him on my back.

"Let's head out."

I began to walk forward and peaked my head out of the alleyway onto the street. I saw a big group of cars, blazing down the road coming from the Western outskirts of the city. There must have been ten of them. In each one were suspicious characters hanging out of the windows with guns in their hands.

"Oh, that's kind of lame compared to what they just sent at us."

"Even still, they are very many of them. We won't be able to oppose them." Suzuka said in a tone that didn't seem all too worried.

"True... Jim, Mel? Got your things?"

"Yessir"

"Yes"

"Welp, we're runnin' for it."

I ran along the road. Obviously in the opposite direction are pursuers were approaching from.

"This is just like back when we captured Billy!" yelled Jim. I yelled back:

"Shut up! Don't be a downer!"



Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to the OLS anime. Episode 16, "*Demon of the Water Planet*".

<sup>2</sup> As I understand things, these aren't helicopters in the sense you might be thinking. They are what we would call "drones" in the modern day. Keep in mind that this light novel was written about 20 years ago before drones were really a thing.

<sup>3</sup> Jim and Suzuka are teasing Gene about his history with motion sickness during space travel. They find it ironic that Gene would lack compassion for Billy's motion sickness when Gene has the same issue.