

10,000 DAWNS



A CHRISTMAS MEH RACONTEUR

Written by James Wylder
Art by Rachel Johnson

Shona ducked back down behind the chunks of concrete she was using as cover just as a round of bullets went right where her head had been. That was close. Looking down, Shona saw a bag of cheese curls, and using her combat knife to open it, stuffed a handful in her mouth before ducking back up to pepper their opponents with fire.

“You know, Shona, that’s really gross.” Shona ducked back down, looking at Chantelle, cheese curls hanging out of her mouth. She chewed and mostly swallowed.

“What’s gross?”

“Oh my God, those cheese things. They have to be stale.”

“They’re not super stale. Just sorta stale.” Shona shoved another fistful in her mouth, before reloading, and popping up to fire again. Chantelle didn’t pop up to fire again, she just stared at Shona, a sour look on her face. Jack came barreling towards them, crouched.

“Chantelle, we have to keep up the fire.”

“Sorry Jack, just uhhh.” She pointed at Shona. He looked at the bag, and looked up at her.

“Gross. Shona, stop trying to get an infection.” Shona looked at him, mouth once again full of puffs.

Jack cursed and grabbed the bag (“noo!!”) and chucked it over the side, where it got shot into bits.

Shona watched sadly as the exploded stale snack food rained down as orange dust. “Songbird will be flying in momentarily, we just have to keep them occupied till then.” Jack said, then popped up, firing at the edge of the enemy hold out, just in time to see someone change their mind about trying to slip

out. As this happened, Songbird shot across the sky, dodging fire and rockets, and slipped down to land seamlessly next to Jack.

"What's the status?" Her modulated voice said from the suit.

"We've got the Centro sympathizers penned in. There's no way out at this point." She nodded.

"So we're rushing them or waiting it out."

"Looks like."

"Maybe we could get Trevon to blow a hole in their fortification, that might force their hand to fight or surrender." Chantelle suggested. Songbird nodded again.

"That's a good idea. He'll need lots of covering fire though."

"Yi will be back with more ammo soon." Jack said, "Gerald is up on that mound with a sniper rifle, when she's back we should be more than ready. Songbird's armor slid up over her face, revealing the Alice beneath.

"Well then, I guess its time to wait." Naturally, their foes chose this moment to open fire again. And in unison, Shona and Jack popped up to fire, ducked down, and Chantelle popped up to fire again.

"Hey, hey do you think if we were dinosaurs we'd be like, really small ones? Like I can't imagine being a really big dinosaur can you?"

"Shona we're trying to kill people." Alice said.

"Sorry boss."

"Wait though, like do you think we'd be herbivores or carnivores?" Jack said. Alice shook her head. Shona rubbed her chin.

"Well, humans are omnivores." Something exploded.

"But what dinosaurs were omnivores? Like, I get the feeling they were the tiny ones."

"Like, the size of a dog?" Jack asked.

"Yeah!"

"So you could kick them?" Shona said as she unloaded at the encampment. Someone cried out in pain, hit.

"Whoa, I would not kick a dog."

"But what about like, a dinosaur sized dog?"

"Shona, Jack! We are literally shooting people right now!" Alice yelled. Yi and Trevon arrived, and Yi passed out the new ammo.

"I'm out of 9mm, did you bring any?" Chantelle asked.

"Sorry, I didn't, but you can have some of mine!" Yi said cheerily. Looking at his watch, Jack sighed.

"This is gunna be a siege isn't it. We're waiting them out. I just want to get home before Christmas."

Alice paused, "I forgot it was Christmas soon."

"Well you already celebrated the Solstice, I'd expect you'd forget."

"It's more like I've been so focused rooting out these insurgents I nearly forgot my own holiday till Shona asked when the party was." All eyes turned to Shona, who was firing again. She looked back, finally, like a deer in headlights.

"What I like parties? Well, small parties. Well, I like buffet tables and those coolers with free drinks in them. Well-"

"Okay anyways, we're gunna be here a while. How should we pass the time?"

Chantelle tapped her cheek, and then replied, "Story time. Lets just all tell something about ourselves, not about the war, something else. Get Gerald down here to."

"Sounds good to me." Yi said. Alice nodded.

"Works for me, someone go get Gerald." Jack grumbled, like someone had volunteered him, as went ahead and moved to go get Gerald. When they returned, Alice asked, "Okay then, who will start?"

"I've got a story," Yi said, "Not too exciting, but well, its a story."

Yi's Story

“When I was nine, my mother got on this weird 'from the Earth' food kick. You know, she was one of those people who wouldn't eat anything that was printed or vat grown, even though it was healthier than the 'natural' stuff. So we had to sit through all these days of going to the farmers market, and picking out food to eat. Which wasn't so bad, the farmers themselves were pretty nice, even if the food wasn't always great, and it was annoying we couldn't always just pick out whatever we wanted and print it out. But I digress. So, long story short, my mom started packing my lunches. Now this was a very confusing thing for the Centro Schools, as no one had brought their own lunch in that district in over a hundred years. But there I was taking out an apple, and a peanut butter and jam sandwich, and all the kids just staring at me. The principle actually took me into his office and awkwardly and redfacedly tried to give me a lecture about my wrongdoings, while also making it totally clear he had no idea why he was, in fact, angry. They sent a letter home to my parents, who sent back a picture of their Gold-Level Centro Citizenship, which proved they had more cash than the principle, and he had to back down. So I got to keep eating my lunch, and even though it didn't taste as good and was mighty inconvenient, guess what? All the rich kids started bringing their lunches. Suddenly, the farmers market was filled with my classmates parents, who had to shop there for social standing reasons. Some of them bought food there, and then printed what they wanted and boxed it up at home pretending it was what they'd gotten at the market. When it became popular, my mom lost interest, and I went back to getting school lunch in a much shorter lunch line.”

They all laughed, and they heard some gunfire from the enclosure, which seemed a bit confuse they weren't shooting back.

“I'll go next.” Jack ventured.

Jack's Story

“Okay, Alice has heard this story, but its a good one. I used to have a job hover-biking handmade stained glass between this guy's art studio, and a church that was being renovated. It was tough, not everyone is good enough at flying to get the job done quickly without damaging or breaking the glass. I was, so for a brief time it was pretty good pay. One day though, things went wrong. Like a lot of couriers, I kept the engine running. I was in a hurry, and there was just no point turning it off, especially since the bikes were all insured and protected by a mob-run company that rented them out just for that purpose. They took a cut of the check, but if anyone took your bike or your product, they'd never see the light of day again. Most of us considered it a fair trade off, if kind of creepy and brutal. Thing is, all the bikes looked the same. So one day, some guy parks his bike by me, and I rush in to get the plates, put them on the bike, and then get called in for something else, I don't remember what else. I come back out, and there is only one bike, engine running. So I hop on, and drive to the church. I open up the crate when I get there to see that nothing is busted, and well, there was a puppy with a bow on it's head and a tag that said “For my lovely daughter, Annabelle”.”

“Wait- did you say a puppy?” Shona cut in.

“Let him finish!” Alice said.

“It was a cute lil thing, and I realized what had happened, so I called the company and told them what happened. The guy on the phone told me to drive to this big sky scraper, which I did, and take the package up to the top floor. I was very out of place there, it was very... Posh. Lo and behold, on the top floor was the head of the mafia corporation, yelling at the other courier with my box of glass plates on the table. I politely gave him is box, and he thanked me, gave me a tip, and told me to never speak of this to anyone. Naturally I told Alice ten minutes later, but still, that's the time I accidentally delivered a puppy to a mob boss.”

Everyone was a bit slack jawed, which allowed Alice to give a small lecture on how the Mafia had become a subsidiary of Centro systems like everything else, which was pretty weird come to think of it.

“I’ve got one.” Trevon said. “Nothing like that, though.”

Trevon's Story

“When I was a teenager, there was this boy I was all about. He had that real kind of manly stubble, though in hindsight that was basically as far as he could grow it out without looking weird. So, there was this big dance coming up, and I decided to invite him. But, I was pretty shy, so I decided the only way I could make sure he noticed me was to make it a big event. I set the whole thing up, I got my friends to set up this big thing where they’d come marching around where he always left the school to go get lunch, and they’d break out in this big dance routine, and unfurl a banner that said “Will you go to the Winter Ball with me?” While I stepped out from behind a tree with flowers. All set, good to go. We even did a dress rehearsal at night. That’s when it all went to heck.

We get there, we set up, and he comes out, and bumps into another guy, someone I’d never seen before. Turns out he was from another school there for a swim meet. They start talking. They keep talking. We’re all set up, waiting, and they start flirting, laughing. They lightly touch each other. Their eyes are glittering, and he turns around with the guy and goes back into the school. My friends and I are just standing there dumbstruck. So, I’m near tears, everyone’s confused, and then this other kid, I don’t know him, comes out of the school and my friends are just like, “Whatever, we’re doing this, we’re here, why not.” So they jump out in front of this guy, do their dance routine, and I step out with flowers, and the kid is so confused, but he takes the flowers, and that folks is how I met my husband.”

“You’re kidding.” Yi said.

“Nope.” Trevon said, “I’ve got it on hologram to. Its something to see.”

“That’s amazing, Tre.” Alice said, smiling.

“I guess I can go next?” Gerald said. Another explosion. Someone yelled something from the building. More gun fire, this time sporadic, unfocused.

Gerald's Story

“My dad was a cook. You have to be really stellar to be a cook, you have to be able to offer something on par with a machine that can replicate the best chef’s in history by programming. So the guy had a lot of pressure. My dad was cooking for some hotshot lawyer, not really a big deal, but thought he was, and the guy was backseat cooking. In the end, the food my dad made while following the guy’s instructions was terrible, but he had to serve it. Still, if he served it, he’d be blacklisted, no one would want to hire him again. But if he didn’t serve it, same thing. So he came up with a plan. I went out into the room where the guests were, and served them up wine. When I stopped by each guest, I asked, “Since its such a rare delicacy, are you aware of the proper wait to eat Rathi stew?”

“Why of course!” Every guest would answer, insulted.

“Oh good. We just want to make sure. Only the most refined palates can enjoy the taste of it, and we knew that eating it the improper way ruins the subtle flavor. Of course, you would know.” They’d of course get to be angry at the nerve of us, but when the time came for the terrible over salted under spiced food to be served, they were all ecstatic. Several asked to thank the chef personally. It was a good day.”

There was once again laughter, this time punctuated with an awkward silence from the compound.

“My turn.” Alice said.

Alice's Story

"I'll keep mine short. Once, in high school, I tried to dye my hair a deeper red. Like, revolutionary red. Unfortunately, I didn't know about how chlorine could affect hair dye, and we had mandatory swimming lessons that week. So I went into school with hair as red as the flag of Mars, and came out with bright green hair. Until I dyed my hair back, I actually told everyone I had dyed it green to show my support for the environment, trying to make it look like I hadn't just radically messed up. I ended up being forced to join a march for environmental regulations, which I totally supported, but I didn't know enough about to actually fit in at, so I just stayed quiet there and tried not to get noticed. Naturally, a reporter tried to interview me, and on the news I went, green hair and all, with the amazing statement, "I love the environment, and we should do things to make things better, and stuff." Which was actually my verbatim quote, gods help me."

More laughter. A few puzzled shots from the compound.
"I've got a good one." Chantelle said.

Chantelle's Story

"I used to paint, a lot. Not because I was good at it, but because I liked it. I'm not an artist like Annie, I'm just a hobbyist. I can't even paint people well. In fact, usually, I painted the same thing. There was a river by where I grew up, and it had a bend in it. I used to sit on a hill overlooking it, and paint the bend. I'd paint it in different seasons, on different days, in different weather. It wasn't the only thing I painted, but I painted it a lot. There I would sit, a hat on my head, watching the weather change the world, and the only thing that didn't change was the old woman. Every day she would arrive at 10 AM, and start knitting. She'd eat lunch at noon, and then keep knitting till 4PM, when she'd take what she'd finished, and hang it on a tree. I would always wait for her to leave, and then see what she knitted. It always varied. Sometimes it was baby blankets, sometimes it was tiny sweaters or socks. They were never there in the morning. So I waited one night, and just stayed to watch. A woman came, took what was hung on the tree, and left. The next day, the woman came back, so I asked her why she knitted these things. What she told me amazed me.

'When I was growing up, people thought I was a boy. Luckily, I got the money for the surgery and replacement organs to remedy that. When I got pregnant with my first child with my husband, oh, it was a joyous time for me. But my family, well, they were jerks. They had essentially disowned me at that point, and even though I had all the things I needed for my children, my siblings got hand knitted garments from my mother, but I didn't. I hated that. After Johnny passed away, I had a lot of time on my hands, and I realized I could do that for other people. I could be the grandma for people's children, whose grandmother's didn't want them. So every day I come here and knit something, and there's an online group who chooses who gets what. I'm just glad I can give a baby a hand knitted blanket.' I thought she was wonderful, and gave her one of my paintings. We even started eating lunch together. Still, one day she passed away, and the knitting stopped. It stopped for two days. On the third, a woman and a man came together, and each started knitting. They hung their work up on the tree at the end of the day, and came back the next morning. I gave them each a painting. Soon, others came. I gave them a painting to. Eventually, people who didn't even know the old woman came, and I gave them paintings to. I didn't stay there forever though. I moved on, and someone else took up painting the river. Now, it's called the Riverbend Club, and they've started a home for homeless mothers and fathers. Every member gets a painting of the Riverbend. Not all of them know why anymore. But that's how it goes, our stories go on without us."

"That's amazing." Alice said, in wonder, "What an amazing woman, what an amazing group."

"They really are." Shona agreed.

"Why don't you go next Shona?" Alice asked.

“Oh, I don't think I can follow that up.”

“Give it a try Shona!” Yi encouraged. She smiled, and had a go.

Shona's Story

“A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a young woman rode her dinosaur over the prairie.

Suddenly- there was movement. Her dino-mount turned its head and let out a roar to note the Halzi clan was coming over the blue grassed hill.

'Halt strangers.' The woman said, 'Where do you come from?'

'We bring word from King Punelia, the Last Ordinance has been obtained.'

The woman narrowed her eyes, this was worse than she thought.”

“Shona, we're telling non-fiction stories.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She thought for a moment, and her face soured, but she began to speak.

“The last day I spent with my dog was the best day I spent with my dog. He was old. We used to run in the park together, but his heart couldn't take it anymore. He'd lived far longer than a dog should live, and had all sorts of treatments, but there is just a time, you know? We had to carry him to move him poor guy was in so much pain. It was Christmas Eve when we put him down. We spoiled him that day, and he lay with his head on my lap, and I stroked his head. He got to eat all sorts of tasty treats, an open his Christmas presents early. After we got out of the clinic, I cried by a tree for twenty minutes, but then I stopped, and looked up at the stars. I thought about those stars, some of them were actually planets, and people had dogs on them too. There were parks with people and lives in them, and they were living their lives. My dog Charlie had been a good boy, and I'd loved him, but he loved life, and living life was what I should do. Even when it looks silly, life life. Even when people make fun of you for it, as long as no one is hurt, enjoy yourself. I know it sounds silly, cause it was a dog and not a person, but I really felt that. I still feel it. I looked up in the sky and saw life in the starlight, and my dog was somewhere up there, and I went home and enjoyed my Christmas.”

Chantelle smiled, and put a hand on Shona's shoulder. She smiled back.

“Hey, you, World Revolutionary Council Army?” A voice yelled. Cautiously, they popped their eyes over the side. “Look, we know you're planning something, you haven't been firing back, so we'd like to surrender if its all the same to you?”

“Sounds great!” Alice yelled back. “Lay down your arms, and Merry Christmas.”

“And a Happy New Year.” Jack added.

As the enemies filed out, the squad led them back to the base for processing, and giving each other hugs, went their separate ways for Christmas. They went home to families, loved ones, and sometimes each other. But the stories stuck with them, and when they met again, their hearts were filled with starlight.