

LET SLIP THE DOGS

The art of soldiering on.

BY WILLIAM T. VANDEMARK

In Abuja, Nigeria, fresh from an open-air market, a woman dressed in black walks with a melon balanced on her head.

“Yeah, baby. William Tell time,” says Specialist Browning, a Marine bored out of his skull. He and his squad have been on duty 100 hours straight, hopped up on orexin-z to counter sleep deprivation.

“Don’t even,” says Sergeant Knox, but Browning’s beam rifle sings, melon splatters, and rind flies like shrapnel. The woman stands in disbelief, arms spread, while juice — thin as artificial blood — drips from her abaya.

“Huzzah,” says Browning. The woman fixes his position. She gestures wildly and advances.

Knox steps from the checkpoint’s ceramic-plated kiosk. “Lady, stop right there,” he shouts.

A small crowd gathers. Someone tosses a bottle. As it arcs through the air, an AI built into an auto-turret atop the kiosk assesses the risk. The bottle shatters in the street.

Knox unholsters his pistol and waves it at the woman, trying to dissuade her from entering the checkpoint’s no-go zone — an area mined with cybernetic fleas. He hates having to fill out reports when civvies need to be deloused. But without pause, the woman steps into the orange dust, and it comes alive. She stomps, swats, screams in frustration. Stepping back, she points at Knox as if he is the one to blame and reaches into her sleeve.

Someone flings a tin can at the Marines. A magnetometer chatters as if it’s a grenade. The auto-turret sizzles, spitting streams of nano flechettes at hypersonic velocities. The can and its contents vaporize; the superheated air rebounds with a thunderclap.

Knox flinches; his pistol discharges.

In sudden silence, the woman drops to her knees and slumps forward until her forehead touches the ground. But this isn’t sajdah, a prostration to her God; the back of her skull is gone. Tangled hair, flaps of skin and remnants of her hajib drape the exit wound like a shroud. In an outstretched, angled hand, she clutches a melon rind.

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The cyberfleas ignore the fruit. They gorge on blood.

Deep within a hospital ship, off the coast of Nigeria, Sergeant Knox lies on a polyglass table, head encircled by a halo. A psych-tech asks for specifics. She wants a description of the woman, of the market, of the three-



legged dog Knox saw earlier that day; she wants childhood memories of pets; she wants Rorschach associations of the woman’s blood spatter pattern.

As she works through Knox’s story again and again, teasing new details from his narrative, she walks about an enlarged, holographic projection of his brain. Within the stereotactic model, neural pathways flicker and fluorescent voxels coalesce: a memory trace.

“You’re on a hippocampus block,” the tech says. “So you won’t remember any of this, but informed consent requires me to explain that when we strip the problematic engram, secondary pathways may be affected. Although the goal is event-removal, phantom reconstruction will occur. The mind heals by filling in gaps. But really, you’ll be fine. And tomorrow, you’ll wake up on R&R, unaware of the synaptic pruning. No Post Combat Stress Disorder for this Marine. Right, Sergeant?”

In Abuja, Nigeria, fresh from an open-air market, a woman dressed in black walks with a melon balanced on her head.

“Oh, baby. I want a taste of that,” says Specialist Browning, a Marine bored out of his skull. He and his squad have been on duty 100 hours straight, hopped up on orexin-z.

“Stand down,” says Sergeant Knox, but Browning lets loose with a wolf-whistle.

Before the sound dies, a three-legged dog

lopes from a shaded doorway. Knox recognizes it as the stray he’d fed while on patrol. He laughs. “Yeah, Browning. You sure can attract the ladies.”

At Knox’s voice, the dog makes a beeline for the kiosk and heads straight into the no-go zone.

“Git!” Knox shouts.

But the dust awakens. The dog yips, bites at its legs, snaps at the air. It spins about, activating even more of the cybernetic fleas.

The woman with the melon gestures at the dog and yells at Knox in a language he doesn’t understand, but her message is all too clear.

“No,” Knox says. “Not my fault. You want him? You get him.” Trying to wrangle a feral dog, near rabid with pain, isn’t Knox’s idea of gallantry. Besides, he’s allergic to the fleas’ caustic discharge.

As if to plead its case, the dog howls, its distended voice raw and unearthly.

Jesus, Knox thinks. Why doesn’t it just run away?

The bustle of the market has stopped. Everyone is watching. Even the kiosk’s auto-turret seems transfixed, its barrel jerking in micro adjustments as its AI rips through algorithms. Assessing. Assessing. Assessing.

But it won’t pull the trigger. Of course not. Such dirty work always falls to Knox. Cursing, he unholsters his pistol and takes aim . . .

The dog is dead before it hits the ground. It’s disconcerting the way its limbs splay. Almost humanlike.

Knox glances at his pistol. Although smoke is curling from its barrel, he doesn’t recall pulling the trigger. He looks up. His own men, the people in the market . . . they’re staring at him. He catches sight of the woman and for an instant it seems as if her face is alive with bugs.

The world cants.

Knox drops to his knees and rocks back and forth as waves of guilt wash over him.

Keep it together, he tells himself. It was just a dog. Just a dog. Just a dog.

He closes his eyes, leans forward and rests his forehead on the ground, wishing to God none of it were real. ■

William T. Vandemark chases storms, photographs weather vanes and prospects for fulgurites. His work has appeared in *Apex Magazine*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show* and assorted anthologies.