

Something Bigger

By A.C. Hall

Remember your training.

It was simple enough advice and for a little while it worked for twenty-four year old Keith Granderson. When they first stepped off the helicopter on the edge of the battlefield he had still remembered, even though it felt like his heart was beating hard enough to break right through his sternum. As his Sergeant led them towards the nearby firefight Keith had to struggle against puking out his guts, but he still remembered most of his training. When the first explosion went off near them he remembered about half of it, and when the Sergeant got his head blown off a few seconds later he was down to around ten percent retention.

Now that he was down in the trench, crouched on top of bloody and twisted corpses, his unit mostly dead, he barely remembered how to fire his weapon. The situation was beyond messed up, describable by a fistful of curse words that his god-fearing parents had raised him not to say.

For some reason, the thing that bothered Keith most about war was how loud it was. His ears were assaulted by the rumble of distant vehicles, the screams of the dying, the thump of machinegun fire. He tried to focus, knowing that remaining in such a state of panic and confusion was sure to get him killed. Scanning the trench, he saw just three other surviving members of his unit. One was lying in the fetal position bawling, one was frozen, his eyes wide in horror, but one, a burly Hispanic man named Hernandez, was standing up and firing at the enemy.

Keith crawled over to him, feeling as if all would be right if he could just reach this stalwart soldier. Through the mud and gore he moved, until finally he was at the foot of Hernandez. He reached up and yanked on the man's pant leg, getting his attention. As soon as Hernandez stopped firing and looked down a bullet struck him in the head. Blood splashed over Keith as his fellow soldier collapsed next to him, dead.

Even though he knew he was responsible for what had just happened, Keith felt no guilt or shame. There was no room left in him for any emotion other than panic. It crowded his very being, pushed out all other thought. An enemy grenade tumbled over the side of the trench and landed beside the soldier in the fetal position. Keith stared at it, marveling at how different it was than his own grenades. When four more grenades rained down into the trench he snapped back to reality. He dug his fingers and toes into the muddy walls of the trench, climbing up as fast as he could. Just as he reached the top and hoisted himself up the grenades detonated, sending up a spray of shrapnel, gore, and dirt.

Keith was exposed now and as he got to his feet he looked around for another place to hide. A few hundred yards away he saw a radio tower and suddenly he remembered what their mission had been. They were tasked to locate and destroy the radio tower. He locked his eyes on it, ignoring the nearby gunfire, the screams of enemies and allies alike. Keith was a fast runner, one of the fastest in the army, and he took off towards the radio tower.

He barely noticed the first bullet that struck him. It felt like a bee sting, a thought that Keith dismissed after the second and third bullets hit. Those felt a lot like what he had figured being shot would, and as bullets four, five, six and seven ripped through him he fell to the ground, his rifle clattering away from him. In training they said to never get separated from your rifle, but he didn't figure that mattered much now.

Dying was something Keith tried not to think about too much, but now that he was experiencing it he found the process to be something of a letdown. His body burned, and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't seem to get a deep breath. As his eyes scanned the battlefield he felt like dying was cheapened by the fact that so many other people were going through it at the same time. Keith couldn't imagine anyone winning a war like this, as it seemed like all anyone was doing was dying out here.

His eyelids closed and try as he might he couldn't get them to reopen. A few seconds later he took his last breath, and then the pain ceased and he died.

For a while there was nothing but silence and Keith was glad for it, glad to be away from the unnatural sounds of war. Then there was a scream and a chill came

over him. Was this hell? The thought was almost too much to bear. He had grown up in the church and never strayed from it, believing its teachings and following them as best he could. Surely this wasn't hell. But the scream was growing nearer.

Seeing nothing else he could do, Keith opened his eyes. He was lying in some grass in a spot that looked like it wasn't far from where the battle was taking place. The source of the scream was instantly recognizable. An enemy soldier was rushing towards him, knife raised. Keith knew he should move, do something to protect himself, but his eyes were entranced by the grievous wound on the soldier's head. A portion of his head, at least fifty percent by Keith's quick calculations, was gone. How he was still on his feet and fighting was a mystery seeing as half his brain was missing, but on came the man.

Keith rolled as the soldier dove at him. The knife struck the ground and Keith lashed out with his foot, kicking the man's hand. He dropped the knife but was on his hands and knees in a flash. He crawled forward and flung himself on top of Keith. The furious assault was overwhelming and soon the enemy soldier had his hands around the throat of his prey.

At last Keith was able to get his wits about him and fight back. He kicked and clawed, trying anything to get this madman from atop of him. Every few seconds his eyes would settle on the gruesome wound in the enemy soldier's head. It looked as if it had to be fatal, but then again so had Keith's bullet wounds just a little while ago.

Struggle as he might, Keith just couldn't win out over the zeal for death that the enemy soldier had. The thumbs pressed deep into his neck, and Keith could feel himself fading into... what? Death had already claimed him, and his still human mind couldn't comprehend what may lie beyond if one was killed a second time in the same day. Nonexistence? Oblivion? The thought of such was highly appalling to Keith, but as his eyes rolled up into his skull he saw no way around it.

Just as his vision faded fully he saw movement. His heart sank as he realized it was another enemy soldier, but this man crashed into the first, knocking him off of Keith and breaking his brutal chokehold. Keith gasped for air and turned on his side. The new arrival had knocked the first enemy soldier to the ground and was kicking at him viciously. When the partially headless soldier was subdued, Keith's

rescuer raised his foot and brought it down upon what was left of the man's skull, crushing it beneath his boot.

The man walked back over to Keith and looked down at him. This was the face of the enemy, the man that Keith was supposed to be out killing right now. The man's features weren't so different from his own. The skin tone was a little darker, the nose a little wider, but beyond that they were separated only by age.

"You alright?" the man asked.

Keith nodded, unsure if he could speak since his neck had been so effectively wrung just moments before.

"I'd offer you a hand but, well," the enemy soldier said, flashing a crooked smile as he held up his arms. Both were blown off at the elbow, leaving nothing but gnarled and bloody stumps.

Keith slowly got up but kept his distance, still not quite sure how to take this man.

"Sorry about him," the man said, gesturing towards the soldier whose skull he had just crushed. "Some of them just can't accept it."

"Can't accept what?" Keith croaked, testing his voice for the first time.

The man regarded him for a moment before answering.

"That we're dead."

The words shouldn't have impacted Keith all that much. He had already pretty much made the realization on his own, that the bullets on the battlefield had killed him and whatever this was wasn't being alive, but hearing someone else vocalize it shocked him. He must've looked as dumbfounded as he felt, because the man frowned at him.

"Surely you knew," he said.

Keith felt embarrassed and quickly nodded.

"I get it," he said.

The man turned and shuffled away. Seeing nothing else to do, Keith followed close behind him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Hans," the man answered without turning around.

"Thank you for saving me back there, Hans. I'm Keith."

Hans grunted but continued walking. Keith sped up until he was beside the man.

“What is this place?” Keith asked, looking out at the sprawling countryside.

“This is my country,” Hans said, his voice sad. “This is the field upon which our nations do battle.”

They were standing on top of a small hill and Hans gestured to the base of it. At first Keith saw nothing, but as he squinted he saw the faint outlines of war. Ghostly figures, those still living, remained pitched in a bloody conflict. He watched it for a time, a barely perceptible silent war. He turned to ask Hans a question but the man was already walking away. Keith jogged until he was again walking beside the man.

“Do your people believe in an afterlife?” Keith asked.

“Yes. We’re deeply religious.”

“So am I. My parents loved going to church, so me and my sister both grew up going there all the time,” Keith said. “She ended up turning her back on it, feeling like mom and dad shoved it down her throat and never let her believe what she wanted, but I never did. I’ve never doubted that God is real.”

Again, Hans grunted.

“It is good to believe in something bigger than yourself,” he said.

They walked in silence for a few minutes but soon Keith had more questions he needed to ask.

“Do you think this is hell?” he asked quietly, barely able to get the words out.

Hans looked around them before answering.

“Where we were was hell,” he said. “This is peace, comparatively.”

Keith nodded, liking the point this man made. But still, his mind grappled with more big thoughts.

“But this isn’t heaven,” Keith said.

Hans stopped and again looked at the countryside. He smiled, pleased to see his nation as it was before the war, the fires and conflicts and bodies all just a ghostly specter now.

“Close, but no,” Hans agreed. “More like something in between.”

“So then why are we here?” Keith asked, giving voice to the question burning white hot in his brain. “Why haven’t we moved on?”

If the question bothered Hans he didn't show it. He was walking again and just shrugged. But Keith wasn't ready to just accept the situation so quickly.

"I've always been taught that upon death, as long as you've accepted Jesus as your savior and have asked him to forgive you of your sins, you get into heaven."

Hans said nothing to this.

"But we both agree, this is not heaven," Keith continued.

Hans sighed.

"This heaven of yours, one enters through marble gates, do they not?" Hans asked.

"Pearly gates," Keith corrected.

"And these pearly gates, how wide are they? How many men can they allow through at once?"

Keith found the question strange. It was something he had never thought about, why would he have? He struggled to find an answer.

"I have no idea," he admitted.

"Think about what you've seen in these battles, Keith. Our peoples are choking the earth with corpses, sending hundreds of thousands of souls to the afterlife daily."

Hans said no more, leaving Keith to puzzle over his words. The physical properties of the pearly gates wasn't something they covered in Sunday sermons, and Keith had to work hard to wrap his mind around the concept that he was pretty sure Hans was putting forward. Keith had always thought of everything in heaven as magical, thinking it would be foolish to assign human traits to such a realm. But was it impossible that the entrance would be a certain size and that the war was overwhelming it with new entrants, causing a delay?

Time seemed to have little or no existence to them now, so Keith had no accurate idea of how long he silently mused over these ideas. He looked all around him, thinking of the countryside now as some sort of unintentional purgatory. Eventually he was at peace with the concept and his beliefs led him to feel that it was only a matter of time before he would be gone from this place and in the presence of his creator in heaven above.

With the turmoil in his mind settled at last, Keith realized something and suddenly stopped.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

Hans had been walking ceaselessly since he had met him and now Keith wondered what purpose or destination the man had in mind.

“Away,” Hans answered, conveying a profound sadness in the simple reply.

Keith turned and looked in the opposite direction. In the distance he saw what looked to be a small village.

“Away from that village?” he asked.

Hans stopped and grunted, but didn’t look back at the village.

“What is that place?” Keith asked.

“Kruhlstach,” Hans answered. “My home is there.”

This surprised Keith and he squinted so he could see Kruhlstach better. It looked like a nice place, somewhere you could be proud to live.

“Why are you going away from it?” Keith asked.

Several moments passed and Hans didn’t answer. When Keith turned he saw that Hans’ head was bowed and his shoulders were slumped. Tears fell from his eyes and crashed to the ground below and many minutes passed before he answered.

“Because I am a coward.”

Keith stepped closer to the man.

“That’s not true, Hans. You’re a soldier.”

Hans scoffed bitterly.

“A soldier,” he spat. “I ran from the front lines in conflict after conflict. The only reason my superiors didn’t have me hanged was because I was a master of fixing engines. I kept their war machines in top condition and they allowed me to continue my pathetic existence.”

“But, your hands,” Keith said. “Didn’t you lose them in combat?”

Hans laughed. It was a bitter, sad laugh.

“An apprentice of mine, a dimwit named Rudolfo, made a mistake in the shop,” Hans recalled. “He started a fire near a container of petrol and I tried to move it away from the flames. Just as I reached out...” he trailed off, his two stumps telling the rest of the story just as well as he ever could.

Keith searched for another argument.

“But you saved me from your countryman,” he said. “I would’ve been dead had you not come along!”

“I blindsided a man and stomped on his head,” Hans answered. “Had he even turned to look at me I surely would’ve ran away.”

There was something about their situation that drove Keith to want to make the man feel better. They were together between life and death, and while Keith hoped their time would be short in this place he didn’t want either one of them to spend that time in misery.

“If you’re a coward then so am I,” Keith said.

Hans turned towards him.

“This was my first taste of battle and I completely panicked. I forgot all that they taught me, forsaking the cause of my countrymen,” Keith said. “I panicked and ran about like a fool until I died.”

He chuckled darkly as he vividly recalled his short time as a soldier.

“I never even fired my rifle,” Keith added.

Hans was staring at him and their eyes met. Hans nodded slightly.

“I’m sure your heart was in the right place,” Hans said.

“As I’m sure yours was too, my friend,” Keith said.

Slowly, Hans lowered himself to the ground, his eyes fixed on the distant village of Kruhlstach. Keith sat in the grass beside him and the two stayed like that for a time until a new thought entered into Keith’s mind.

“What does walking away from your village have to do with being a coward?” he asked.

Again, Hans’ head drooped low and he looked upon the ground.

“When I first awoke in this place I made my way there, hopeful to see my wife and child one last time before I moved on to the next realm,” Hans answered quietly. “I know they would be but ghosts, but I believed that they would recognize my presence and would be comforted to feel it one last time before my spirit moves on.”

Keith remained silent, allowing the man to continue the story whenever he was ready.

“But when I arrived I found a group of enemy soldiers, men from your side. They were dead, like us, and had gathered in the town. I thought maybe they

would leave me alone, except that we were no longer enemies, but then I saw what they did to two others.”

Hans shuddered as he recalled the memory.

“These two men were brothers from my village. I’m sure that like me they just wanted to return home one last time to look in upon their loved ones, but your countrymen viciously attacked them for no reason, continuing their assault until there was nothing left.”

Hans paused for a long moment, then finished his tale.

“And so I ran away, just as I’ve been doing for this entire war.”

Revealing his secret shame caused Hans to break into sobs. Keith didn’t disturb the man, but his mind was churning, a plan coming together. He closed his eyes and continued to formulate this idea, not opening them until he was sure of the details.

Keith stood and stepped in front of Hans.

“We don’t have much time so you need to pull yourself together,” Keith said.

Hans looked up, his eyes red and watery.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going to see your family,” Keith said, a confident smile on his face.

Hans hesitated for a moment as he let the words sink in. He shook his head.

“No, I can’t do it,” he said. “I thank you, but I can’t.”

Keith knelt down and put his hands on Hans’ shoulders.

“You might not be able to, but WE can,” he said.

Hans looked at him hard, searching his face. Keith continued to smile, and finally Hans stopped crying.

“We’d need a plan,” Hans said.

“I’ve already got one,” Keith replied.

They crouched down in the tall grass on a hillside overlooking Kruhlstach. Hans showed Keith where the soldiers were. The five of them were gathered in the center of the village, and even from this distance their laughs could be heard. The vague specters of the living could barely be seen, going about their lives in the village that remained untouched by the war.

Hans stood and took a step towards the village, but paused when he realized that Keith wasn't with him. He turned around to see his unlikely ally still among the grass, frozen in place. Hans frowned.

"If you're having doubts we can call this off," Hans said.

"No, it's not that," Keith said quickly, even though that was exactly what it was.

When he had learned of Hans' situation there had been no doubt that helping him say goodbye to his wife and child was the right thing to do. But now that they were about to go into the village, Keith thought again about what might happen if he was killed here in this in-between place.

"Your eternity in heaven is much more important than what we're trying to do," Hans said, sensing the dilemma. "If you have fears then we should not go through with the plan."

"No," Keith said confidently.

He stood up, his expression hardening as he stared down at the men in the village, his one time brothers in arms. He forced the doubts from his mind and nodded confidently as he stepped forward.

"God will not forsake me," Keith said. "Let's go say goodbye to your family."

The five soldiers lounged in the middle of town. They exchanged crude stories and rough jokes, laughing loudly at the end of each. Keith had seen this type of behavior before, some soldiers seemed to devolve into adolescents when gathered together. They fell silent as they saw a soldier approaching wearing a uniform that matched their own.

"You there," one of the soldiers called out.

The stranger kept his head turned away from them. It was odd but he wore the colors of their country, so they remained relaxed as they called out to him again.

"Over here soldier," one of them said. "You've stumbled upon our little rallying point here."

Still the approaching stranger walked on, head cocked away from them. As he neared the soldiers grew suspicious and the five of them stood ready.

"We're talking to you, soldier!"

Two of them stepped forward and were about to grab the stranger when a voice at the end of the street grabbed their attention.

“DIE!” Keith screamed.

The five of them turned to see a man wearing an enemy uniform at the end of the street. Keith felt silly in Hans’ uniform. It was several sizes too big, but it had done the trick and fooled the five soldiers.

“Get him!” they shouted.

They took off after Keith, allowing Hans to pass by unmolested. Keith ran as fast as he could, hoping to stay out of reach of the angry soldiers. After hearing how they had treated the other enemies they had discovered, he wanted to avoid any physical contact with these men.

He picked his way between small buildings and over parked wagons, zigging and zagging across the village. The men screamed and cursed at him as they followed, overcome with bloodlust. Keith ran for as long as he could, trying to keep them off balance, but soon they were splitting up in order to corner him.

When he recognized the part of the village he was in he slowed down as he passed the home that Hans had identified as his own. Looking in through the window, Keith saw Hans down on his knees, the ghostly outline of his wife and child gathered around him. Even though slowing to look in on this likely gave his pursuers the edge they needed to catch him, Keith was glad that he had done so. He was still smiling when two of the men tackled him to the ground.

They pinned him until the other men could catch up, and soon Keith was staring at five very angry soldiers.

“We’re on the same side,” Keith said. “Look at my face.”

It seemed a logical thing for them to do, but they set about beating him senseless instead. Keith looked into their eyes, but there was no reason there, these men were broken by their wartime experience, by their deaths and then rebirths here in this in-between place. Even as a heavy boot broke his jaw and two pairs of hands wrenched his arm back and shattered it, Keith whispered.

“I forgive you.”

His vision was filled with a flurry of violent movement, but he rolled in the dirt, trying to get a clear view of Hans’ home. Finally he could see it, and he smiled again as he thought about what he had seen through the window.

“Time to die,” one of the soldiers growled.

Keith looked up to see a heavy combat boot coming down towards his face. A warm glow came over him in an instant and all of the pain went away. In a flash he was gone and the soldier’s boot slammed down into the dirt of the street.

For a while there was nothing but silence and Keith was glad for it. He was lying on the ground, but his body felt fully mended, better than it ever had before in his life. When he finally opened his eyes he found them overwhelmed with a light brighter than any he had ever imagined possible. As his vision adjusted he saw the outline of a figure, its hand outstretched in an offer to help Keith to his feet.

“Sorry for the delay, my son.”

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