

Excerpts From

ARIA KALSAN FOUNDATIONS

By KD Larson

Foursided MFNA

Cleveland

Aria Kalsan: Foundations

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PROLOGUE

“Why, if we create a world, must we also destroy it? Could it be to prove to ourselves that God has the ability to do both?”

– Ethan Hale

Able Team, Group 3 Coalition Defense Forces

Grissom, Nevada

Local Time 0547:10

She had a real name once, and she tried to remember the last time she had heard it instead of her call sign “Able 5.” She smiled at a memory -- her father calling out to her years ago. Then, she heard something in front of her that snapped her attention back to the present. She looked across the road at the ruins of the old city but could not see anything moving except shadows in the darkness, the fires placed the empty skeletons of the buildings in dancing silhouettes against the night sky. No, it all seemed quiet, at least for the moment.

She had been at Grissom Station for only a few days, and the desolate beauty of the surrounding city and mountains beyond still mesmerized her. She thought about the city and the people who had once lived among the winding streets. None of the soldiers deployed at Grissom Station knew anything about its geography or history. So, she made the effort to find out something about the place.

She found an old map in the Coalition database and discovered they were in the northeastern foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in what was the North American State of Nevada. Two brothers founded the city that would bear their name; the oldest brother was a hard working and prosperous trapper, while the younger brother’s reputation came from his love of the bottle and a penchant for trouble. Never the less, after the younger brother brought a bag of brown dirt mixed with yellow dust to a surveyor in the summer of 1848, he attracted quite a following.

As the story goes, the surveyor ignored the brown dirt but regarded the yellow dust as a remarkable, newsworthy find. This discovery, along with others like it, helped to spur the Western expansion of the 19th century, known as the California Gold Rush. By the turn of the 20th century, Grissom had grown to become one of the more prosperous and enduring of the gold rush camps, as its population swelled to almost 23,000.

By the turn of the next century, Grissom had evolved yet again into a city that no longer relied on its mining operations, which had long since dried out, but on other industries such as technology and commerce. Grissom boasted a rich and diverse history and its climate and natural grandeur made it a sought after place to retire or settle and raise a family. By the time of the crisis that polluted the earth beyond habitability, Grissom counted within in its limits almost a million souls. The story on the map ended there, but the rest she knew already, they all did.

Like other cities, provinces, and nations, they ignored the warning signs until it was too late, and Earth fell into ruin as apathy and indifference finally caught up to them. They soon discovered that they were ill equipped to deal with the series of nearly simultaneous and cataclysmic consequences that quickly enveloped both the atmosphere and eco-system. Grissom

shared the fate of the planet, as catastrophe after catastrophe struck in rapid succession. In a three-week period, the population dropped to only a few thousand. In the end, the dead would count themselves as one of the largest killers of the city's population, second only to the environmental holocaust itself. By the time the evacuation of the planet began, no one in Grissom would know that humanity had survived.

Looking back, when you considered the extent of the devastation no one could have guessed that decades later someone would come across another remarkable and news worthy discovery. Excavation crews found trace elements of essential resources in that same brown dirt ignored so many years before. Within a year, the survivors of Earth returned and Grissom could once again boast a population--although under much different and agonizing conditions.

The shadows came slowly at first. As the sun rose over the city, a low hanging fog shrouded everything. The rising temperature caused heat waves to radiate off the cracked and decaying surface.

Abel 5 looked across the roadway at the deserted remains of the buildings. She noticed that that the surface seemed to be moist with a black substance that produced its own mist. The intense heat radiating on the planet's surface had burned up practically anything combustible long ago yet fires seemed to be smoldering all around the city. Dense pockets of smoke and ash, fanned by the high winds, were shifting direction, partially obscuring their position.

The remains of thousands of metal containers of all different shapes and sizes sat on small round metal wheels rusting. Many appeared to have run into each other and in several places — larger metal containers were protruding from buildings. This confused her until she remembered reading that they had died trying to escape, using their individual transports to run.

'Run to where?'

She envisioned the panic and hysteria that must have overcome them and the image burned inside her. *What would she have done? What would any of them do?*

The sun was low in the eastern sky now — looking as if it were so close you could reach out and touch it. The haze, layers of heat and gas, created an aura making it appear several times larger than it really was.

She paused a moment, looking out again at the remains of a seemingly unending number of structures in every direction. The air was thick with a pale orange tint that obscured the tops of many of them. She had seen in the images that many of them had been quite tall, extending far into the air. She tried to imagine what it had been like for them to live in such a place. She had come from a flat, horizontal existence on the Moon and this place seemed to be the exact opposite, vertical, elevated high above the surface.

The morning light revealed little more than she had already learned from the database. She merely caught a glimpse at the mass confusion and death of the past. In death, that culture had revealed itself as both individualistic and self-centered. It was impossible to tell, but Able 5 imagined that the great majority of the people had died alone, divided, and quite possibly at odds with itself.

In the center of what had been a large structure once, a cross shaped object leaned over toward the ground. Someone had carved something into the surface of the wall beneath it so that it gave you the impression that the cross was pointing to it, an ancient warning to a future unknown reader. Though wind blasted and faint, she could just make out the words as she read them slowly under her breath.

“I am death, and death becomes me”

She looked up at the remains of the city, wondering if it was an epitaph or an omen of things to come.

“AMMO CHECK!” The voice screamed inside her headset, snapping her attention back to the present.

She looked down and checked her weapon, noting she had a quarter of her clip remaining. She listened as the surviving members of her team were calling out similar numbers.

She dug around her leg bag to search for spare ammunition, and she pulled out her last two clips. *‘Not enough for another attack if they bring one again,’* she thought.

‘No,’ she reminded herself, *‘not if, just when.’*

“Able Leader, Able 5, I have two,” she replied.

The crossroads her team was trying to hold was the extreme left flank of their group’s line. Behind them was nothing. If they failed to hold, then Grissom Station would fall without much resistance, and they would have to surrender their foothold here. The losses Able Team had suffered were very high; the group had lost almost two-thirds of its strength trying to defend the line and the extraction facility. Unknown to her was that this was typical for the entire command. What was common knowledge was that the Coalition Senate was prepared to sacrifice all of them in order to hold the station.

Able 5’s unit knew even less about the enemy army that had taken them by surprise. Grissom Station, like the other three extraction stations, kept a token Coalition reserve militia for the general security of the facility. Her unit was not prepared for a full assault. Able 5 heard something across the street and tensed up, brining her weapon to a firing position. The Alliance had rushed her unit’s position three times since sundown. Each time Able Team had been able to hold them off, forcing them to withdraw to what had been a church across the street. A week ago, Able

Team had numbered one hundred and thirty-two but the last attack had cut their numbers to eighteen remaining with two wounded and probably dying.

'Not enough of us either,' she thought. She tried but could not recall the names-- the real names-- of the wounded. All that came was their call signs, Able 1-7 and Able 8, which troubled her. She adjusted her position and peered through her scope at the church but could not see anything except for the words dug deep into the wall. Bodies of the fallen, some of them still writhing in pain, covered the street. Able 5 tried to ignore that, and instead focused on the left flank. She could see between the walls if anyone moved beyond the gap next to the church. She stared at that spot, and then she heard the COM link in her headset crack with a high-pitched tone.

"Able Team listen up, we have trips on the left flank motion sensors. Able 2, 14, and 6, move to cover Able 5. Able 5 do you copy movement. Able 5?"

Distracted, there was a pause before she remembered that she was Able 5. "Negative, nothing here."

She peered through the scope again, slowly surveying the area between the wall and the church. Suddenly, there was a bright flash, and she pulled her head away to try to divert the blinding effect that the flare would have. She turned back to look through the scope again, listening at the same time to the sudden burst of chatter that filled her head.

"Able 5, Able 2, movement, prepare to suppress."

"Able 6 cover the hole."

"Here they come, hold your fire until they are in the KZ."

"Able 4..."

"Dead, sir."

"Oh, Able 8..."

"Down, about to be dead sir."

"Great, Able 6 suppressing fire, support Able 5's position."

"Able Leader, Able 9, I'm down to one clip. What the hell am I supposed to do then, throw rocks at them?"

There were a couple of nervous chuckles but the team leader — a woman with a notoriously bad sense of humor was not amused.

"Able 9 shut up. Able Team, look for...Shit, HERE THEY COME!"

Able 5 pulled back the firing mechanism and heard the familiar metallic click of the next round entering the firing chamber. Another bright flash flared to her left, and suddenly Alliance troops poured out from the church--filling the street in front of her. With a tremendous roar, they charged across and over the bodies of the dead and wounded. It seemed like there were more of them this time, there was energy behind this charge that was not there in the last one. She guessed

reinforcements, brought up to finish the job. As the Alliance company crossed the road and got within the KZ, the kill zone, she opened up.

'I am death...' The sounds of Able Team's weapons drowned out the charging troops. Her weapon had three firing actions, single, semi and full auto and she quickly switched from semi to auto as their numbers increased. There were too many this time to worry about conserving her remaining magazines. She could hear the sounds of the team, heavy breathing at first, groans and then the anguished cries and pleas as one by one they were over run.

'No, no, no there are too many this time,' she thought as she fired into the mass of humanity pushing towards her. She jammed in her last clip as each flank began to collapse, overrun with Alliance troopers.

She sensed something on her right and swung around, instinctively firing at the movement. The form toppled over, and as she swung back to face the rush that was coming, she felt something punch her hard in the shoulder, spinning her around. Her right arm and hand went numb and the weapon dropped to the ground. Able 5 pulled her sidearm with her left hand and started to fire at anything that moved as she fell backwards, hitting the wall hard. She had only gotten off a half-dozen rounds when the world went blindingly white, then deathly quiet and still.

Nineteen-year-old Miranda Haller, call sign Able 5 suddenly remembered her name as she pitched backwards and then fell on her side, onto the arid, scorched earth.