

Day One Portland, Oregon, Sunday, September 4th

“Inside this building our equipment has been protected from the CME.” Sitting in the conference room Major Franklin frowned as he tried to imagine how the people of the city would react when they woke to no power, water or communications. “Beyond these walls, we have very little information. We need to know what happened to get an idea of what will happen over the next few days and weeks.”

“I’m sure the electromagnetic pulse burned out most modern technology worldwide.” Pool leaned his elbows on the table. “Several pulses, probably. A lot of people are going to die.”

Pool sat directly across the conference table from Franklin. A single LED lamp between them left most of the room in darkness and cast deep shadows on the lieutenant.

“You’re right Major, we need facts.” General Sattler stepped from the blackness into the gloom.

“We know that commercial power is out along with internet and military networks,” Pool said.

“But this might be a localized problem,” the general replied.

Pool shook his head. “I doubt it.”

Sattler strode to the head of the table. “Major Franklin, if Lieutenant Pool is correct, we no longer have a Cyber Intelligence Center and we won’t for a very long time. What I need now are real world facts. At dawn, take Sergeant Keller along with two of the security squads and, if needed, add some of your specialists. Then investigate the local situation. If power and communications are out across Portland, go to Salem. Advise the civil authorities of the situation, and then report back here.”

“Yes, sir. Shall I also check on unit families in the area?”

“Good idea.” Sattler nodded. “I’ll handle those close to base. You check on the ones further out. Also, bring water and extra food.”

Franklin nodded. This was a mission he would gladly accept because the family checks would include his own.

* * *

Standing in a shadow, Franklin zipped his ACU jacket a bit higher and then strapped on a holster for the first time in many years. Then he watched an orange sun climb over the hushed city of Portland. It seemed as if the entire world held its breath waiting for answers.

In the distance a lone dog barked.

Medic Karen Bickel lugged a large pack of medical supplies toward one of the trucks. Franklin hoped she wouldn’t need them.

Sergeant Keller jogged over to him and saluted. “I’ve secured the supplies you ordered along with four vehicles, two Humvees, a fueler, and the deuce-and-a-half truck with that plow blade you wanted. We’ve been working on the cars, but can’t get any to run.”

“What’s wrong with them?” He felt foolish for asking.

Keller shrugged. “The dash lights come on, the windows even go up and down, but the engines don’t turn over. They just click.”

“The CME probably damaged the computer processors.” Franklin jaw clinched. If the storms inflicted that level of damage on their cars, what would he find as they traveled through Portland? “Ensure all the men are armed, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, Sergeant, when you’re ready lead with the deuce and have Braun ride shotgun.” Franklin reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved a handheld transceiver and a paper. “Take

these. The paper is a map of our route. The radio was in our building and so it still works. I've got one and I'll get more for the other drivers. Any questions?"

"Yes, sir." Keller pointed to the map. "I understand the stop at the airport and city hall, but there must be twenty other stops marked all over the city of Portland. What are they?"

"Twenty-two stops, Sergeant. We're checking on unit families. You'll see your address noted on the side of the page."

Keller ran a finger along the paper. "Thank you, sir. Also, why did you want the plow blade on the truck?"

"Clear the way for the convoy, and keep us moving."

Keller raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be in the Humvee right behind you."

When Franklin returned with the additional radios he spotted the flag fluttering in the cool breeze. He shivered as he handed out the first radio. When finished, he climbed into a Humvee with Private Thomas. "Do you have family in the area?" he asked.

"No, sir. I'm single. My parents live back east."

Franklin nodded. He hoped that Thomas would see them again, but he doubted that opportunity would arise any time soon. Clicking the radio he said, "Head out."

As the convoy pulled from the parking lot, the deuce slammed into an abandoned car and pushed it aside with the plow. Franklin grinned. Keller would have a memorable day.

After the deuce banged past a couple more vehicles Franklin clicked on his radio. "You don't need to smash into every car on the road, Sergeant, just the ones in the way."

They crossed under a silent freeway and for the next half mile the convoy weaved around abandoned cars as they drove along quiet streets. Most homes and businesses appeared untouched, but then the convoy passed a burned out strip mall. Shards of glass sparkled across the parking lot in the early morning light.

Abandoned cars and trucks filled the intersection just ahead. The screech of metal on metal resounded as Keller plowed a path through. Two blocks beyond, the convoy turned down a residential side street. Curtains pulled back and people gazed from dark homes as the convoy stopped in front of an older blue two-story house.

A woman stepped out and walked to the middle of the yard.

Franklin glanced at the list for her name and then joined her on the lawn. "Mrs. Gray, we're checking on unit families are doing."

"I'm fine." She let out a worried breath. "I watched the news until the power went out. Is Jake okay?"

"He's fine. Do you have enough food and water?"

"I do for a couple of days. When will the electricity and water be back on?"

He had little hope that the utilities would be functioning any time soon but said, "We'll be checking on that today."

At the second home, Franklin spoke to a man whose wife served in the unit. He asked similar questions and received similar answers.

After several other family checks, the convoy drove through an older part of the city. When the vehicles stopped, a pregnant woman walked out of a small craftsman-style home.

After asking about her husband, electricity and receiving supplies from one of the trucks she inquired about the nearby hospital. "Is it still open? Can I have my baby there?"

"We'll check." Franklin glanced at his map. "That's our next stop."

Older wood homes and brick buildings surrounded the modern steel and glass hospital. Men and families walked up and down the streets, but few women walked alone.

As he stepped from the Humvee near the hospital main entrance, the first thing Franklin noticed was the sound of engines. Generators? Perhaps the hospital remained operational.

The smell of diesel fumes and wood smoke hung in the air.

“Sergeant Keller, stay here and guard the vehicles. I’ll take the medic and a couple of armed soldiers and check the hospital.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pungent smoke hung unseen in the air as they approached the agitated crowd that blocked all view of the main entrance.

“Make way,” Franklin said as he edged his way into the crowd. “Stand aside.”

“How come you get to go in? We need things too,” a man on crutches said.

Franklin ignored him and pushed on with the other soldiers.

An even larger crowd of people, some in wheelchairs, others with walkers or crutches, packed the lobby. Just in front of him a man with a towel around his arm dripped blood on the floor. Several children and babies cried.

Franklin and the soldiers pushed their way through to the counter. Three women attempted to direct patients to doctors, nurses, and wards.

After watching the turmoil for a moment, Franklin said, “I’d like to speak to the hospital administrator.”

The nearest woman scowled and threw down her pen. “So ... would ... I.” Her face grew redder with each word. “Through there.” She thrust her hand in the direction of two security guards blocking the way to a nearby hall. “Fifth floor, room 515. You’ll need to use the stairs. The elevators aren’t working.” The woman stood and shouted. “Bill, let these soldier guys go through.”

As Franklin strode down the hall, he felt comforted by the glow of fluorescent lights above. He pushed open the stairwell door. Above, doctors and nurses hurried up and down illuminated flights.

The three soldiers joined the climb. By the time they reached the fifth floor sweat beaded on Franklin’s forehead. He put his hand on a nearby vent. The air felt warm.

When they reached the office, Franklin knocked on the door, opened it, and entered.

“Who are you?” The man behind a large desk jumped to his feet.

“I’m Major Franklin on a fact-finding mission for the area commander.” He held out his hand and they shook. “You’re the hospital administrator, correct?”

“Yes. My name is Emerson Montgomery. Please sit down.” He pointed to chairs and everyone sat. “Normally I’d ask how I could be of help to you, but today I’d really like to know if you can help me.”

Franklin shook his head. “We won’t be able to assist you today but, tell me about your situation and we might be able to get help in the days ahead.”

Emerson sighed. “We have generators, but everything ... MRI, X-ray, ultrasound, heart monitors ... everything is down. Also, the toilets don’t work ... there’s no water. Dysentery ... hepatitis ... e-coli ... we’re going to have a huge problem very soon. ”

A drop of sweat ran into Franklin’s eye. “Does the air conditioning work?” he asked as he rubbed his face.

“No. Ventilation is functioning, but not cooling or heating.” The administrator shook his head. “When will power and water be back on?”

Franklin had no answer, but knew it wouldn’t be soon. “Conserve fuel for the generators, triaging your patients, and post an armed guard in the pharmacy.”

Color faded from Emerson’s face. “So, it’s going to get worse?”

“I think so.” Franklin bit his lip. “Make a list of your most urgent needs and give it to Corporal Bickel, our medic. That is the best I can do today.”

As Franklin left the hospital and walked back toward the vehicles, gray smoke hung heavy in the air. He unfolded his map and looked for their next destination.

Keller hurried to him with wide worried eyes. "There, my home. That's next," he pointed. "We've got to go, now!"

Franklin followed his gesture. Smoke rose from a white wood-frame apartment building a couple blocks away. "Why didn't you say your home was on fire?"

"I just spotted the flames." Keller continued to stare at the burning tower.

"Mount up," Franklin ordered. "Let's go!"

The convoy arrived in less than a minute. The lead vehicle lurched to a stop. Keller jumped out and pushed through the families clustered outside. Ash drifted in the air from orange and red flames that had blackened one side of the building and continued to burn up the wall. Beyond, the charred ruins of dozens of homes scarred the landscape for blocks beyond.

"Stay here and guard the convoy," Franklin shouted to others as they jumped from their vehicles. Then he followed Keller into the burning building.

Franklin coughed and his eyes watered as he scanned the lobby. Only a few people hurried down the stairs, and they darted through the smoky lobby like ghostly specters as they hurried out. Franklin held the page close and read the apartment number. Somewhere in the smoke above him a baby cried. He started up the stairs.

"Major, sir, I'm here."

Keller, burdened with suitcases, hurried down the stairs with his wife Katie and their baby. Handing the cases to Franklin, Keller said, "Please take these, sir," and disappeared up the smoke-filled stairwell.

Eyes wide with fear, Katie stared in the direction her husband had gone.

Anger gripped Franklin as he choked on the smoke. Had Keller returned to the fire to get more from his apartment? "Let's get your baby out of here," he said to Katie. "Then we'll find your husband." Outside, he pointed to three soldiers. "Go to apartment 214 and get Keller. Drag him out if you have to."

The three disappeared into the growing clouds of smoke.

Families clustered around the convoy seeking answers.

The soldiers couldn't provide much information, but they handed out water bottles to all that asked.

Katie opened one, drank deeply and then washed her infant's face.

Leaning over, Franklin struggled to inhale. Then he drank, coughed, and spit. When he could both breathe and see he focused on the lobby entrance.

Why had Keller gone back?

Smoke billowed as the door swung open. A soldier stumbled out and fell to his knees coughing. The medic ran to his aid as a second and then a third soldier emerged from the burning building.

Franklin hurried to the soldiers he had sent in as others provided water. "Where's Keller?" he asked the men kneeling near the entrance.

One of them pointed back inside.

Franklin's gut churned. During his career he had lost several men under his command. He didn't want to lose another to a fire.

Two forms emerged from the smoke. As they slumped to the concrete steps Franklin recognized Keller and a woman holding a baby.

The mother coughed and gagged. Still struggling to breathe she jiggled the baby. "No ... no."

The infant made crying motions, but no sound escaped. Franklin felt helpless. "Medic!"

Corporal Bickel took the child and thumped it on the back. The infant whimpered and then wailed.

Still holding the baby, Katie ran to her husband with water for him and the woman.

Franklin turned to Keller as he poured the water on his face and then drank.

“Why did you go back in? Is that woman a friend?” Franklin asked with growing irritation. “Is that why you went back?”

“No, I heard the baby crying when I came out of the apartment. I had to try to find them. Is everyone out?”

“I sure hope so.” Franklin’s ire softened. “I’m not sending anyone else in. Load up your family and things in the truck.” He allowed a weak grin. “We’ll pin a medal on you later.”

An angry inferno now consumed the upper stories of the apartment building.

“Mount up,” Franklin ordered. Over the radio, he said, “Drivers, we’re leaving in one minute.”

“What are we supposed to do?” a man shouted.

Franklin stared at the desperate and now homeless families as he struggled for an answer. “Go to the nearest fire station.” Would anyone be there? They hadn’t responded to this fire. “Maybe the Salvation Army or one of the other area churches.” The words sounded callous and hollow, but what could he do? His resources were limited and he held out little hope of resupply. Looking out at the blocks of charred rubble, he worried about Carol, James and Logan. Were they now homeless—or worse?

The convoy drove along several burned out streets and then reached a major boulevard that had acted as a firebreak. Seeing the unharmed homes beyond, Franklin drew in a deep breath and prayed that his family had been spared.

Keller and his plow blade swept several cars aside as the convoy crossed from blackened ruins into a typical residential neighborhood. Every night Franklin went this way, past familiar homes, to his own house and this portion had never taken long, but today the Humvee seemed to only inch forward. He forced himself to sit still and breathe as they passed the last couple of side streets.

When the convoy turned down the road toward his home, Franklin smiled with relief. The entire street appeared unscathed.

Several people stepped out and watched as the convoy slowed. When the vehicles neared his home, Carol hurried onto the porch with Logan.

Franklin jumped from the vehicle and nodded to Ted, his nosy neighbor, watching from his kitchen window.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.” He hugged Carol tight and, despite regulations, kissed her. Then he hugged Logan. “I’ve been worried about all of you. Where’s James?”

“He went to check on a friend.”

“Sarah.” Logan snickered.

“The next block over.” Carol pointed. Her father is a police officer.

Franklin relaxed a bit. “Keep the boys close. How are you doing?”

“We’re fine now.” Carol shook her head. “But you smell like smoke.”

Franklin explained what had happened.

“Did you see the fire, Dad?” Logan asked. “It was huge!”

“I saw some of it and the burned homes.” Franklin turned to his wife. “The thought of it reaching you scared me.”

Carol nodded. “We were packed and ready to run if the flames got close. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. We’re out trying to assess current conditions.”

“I was still watching the news when the power went out. How bad is it?”

“We still need to check the airport and then head downtown to city hall and police headquarters, but it’s looking like the EMP affected at least the metro area.”

Carol shook her head. “It wouldn’t be just here.”

Several times during the years of their marriage he had tried to hide the full truth of troubling events from her, but she always seemed to know. He nodded. “It’s probably worldwide, but we don’t know yet.”

They talked for a few minutes and then he asked, “Were you able to get more food before the power failed? How much do you have?”

“I got some, but people were in a panic ... buying everything. I’ve got eight days maybe. Ted’s been talking to the neighbors. Word is that none of the nearby stores are open and some have been looted.”

Franklin could imagine the looting and didn’t want Carol near it. “Don’t try to get more. If you need anything go to the Intel Center.”

“The car doesn’t work. How would I get there? On a bike?”

He frowned. His home was a short fifteen-mile commute in a car, but now most vehicles didn’t function. Those he loved were on their own until he could return. “Keep the guns loaded and ready. I’ve got to go to Salem and report, but I’ll be back at the intel center by tomorrow morning, long before you run out of food.”

Minutes later, the convoy climbed an onramp to the freeway. From this vantage, Franklin spotted several columns of smoke drifting high into the still air. Only a few motionless cars and trucks dotted the freeway, allowing Keller to increase speed as he led them toward the airport.

On the far side of the freeway, a man pushed a shopping cart filled with suitcases.

“Look at all those people around that church.” Private Thomas shook his head.

“Eyes on the road private.” Franklin continued to stare at his map. What could a church do at a time like this?

“Where do you want me to go when we reach the airport?” Keller asked over the radio.

Franklin shrugged at the device in his hand and pressed transmit. “Arrivals.”

Clusters of people stood along the road near baggage claim. If not for the lack of vehicle traffic it might have been a normal day. The sidewalk crowd moved toward the convoy as others scurried out of the terminal. Seeing the mass of civilians caused Franklin unease as the vehicles rolled to a stop. Again, he pressed transmit. “Drivers, stay with your vehicles. Soldiers, deploy with your rifles.” Then he stepped from the Humvee as the crowd swept toward them like a wave.

“Are you in charge?”

“When are flights resuming?”

Without a word, Franklin strode into baggage claim surrounded by his men. Light shined in through windows and from fixtures above. The airport had at least some power. Cots, burdened with weary passengers, lined the walls on either side of the baggage turnstiles.

A police officer ran up to the soldiers. “Are you here to relieve us?”

“No.” Franklin shook his head as he stepped forward. “We’re checking on the situation in the Portland Metro area. What’s the status of the airport?”

“Closed,” the police officer said with a frown. “Well sort of. Last night, after the final plane landed, the port authority closed the departure terminal, but a lot of people weren’t able to leave before the power went out. Then cars and buses wouldn’t start.” He shrugged. “Eventually, they got some power back on, but radios, phones and computers aren’t working. We got the cots and blankets out.” He pointed to several police offices and TSA agents that had joined growing swarm around them.

“Where’s the manager?”

“I have no idea,” the police officer snarled.

“Why aren’t there any flights?” a woman in a gray business suit shouted from the growing crowd. “Is FEMA working to restore power?”

A man in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt pointed at Franklin. “Are you in charge?” He pushed to the front of the crowd. “I need to get to my family.”

“Stand back,” a soldier ordered.

Others moved to block his way with rifles at the ready.

“I missed my flight,” a woman with two small children said. “We live in Atlanta. How can I get there?”

Franklin stood on a chair and looked over the growing crowd of confused, tired, and angry people that now encircled them. What information or guidance could he give them? He held his hand up and the questions hushed. “The president has declared martial law. The electric grid appears to be down throughout the city and possibly worldwide. Until communications are restored no civilian flights will be departing.” He didn’t know that for certain but couldn’t imagine a civilian aircraft going anywhere without air traffic control.

“When will power restored?” another man shouted.

“We don’t know. You’ll need to provide for yourself for the next three to five days ... perhaps longer.”

A gasp rippled through the crowd. Several adults and children cried.

“Are you kidding me?” a man in a dark business suit and red tie bellowed. “That’s not good enough. My car won’t start. What do you expect me to do? Walk to a hotel or restaurant?”

“Well you could.” But Franklin doubted any of those were open.

A few people asked questions, but more shouted them. Others screamed angry curses.

Realizing the mob might turn violent at any moment, Franklin stepped down from the chair. “Fall back and mount up.” He clicked transmit on the radio. “Drivers, we’re leaving ASAP.”

Soldiers pushed back through the crowd as the Humvee engines rumbled.

Several men pressed against the soldiers.

A man struck Private Parson on the jaw. Parson hit him with the butt of his rifle. The man stumbled backward and then dropped to the floor.

“There’s a dozen people standing in front of the deuce.” Keller’s worried voice came over the radio. “I’m not sure they’ll move.”

“Push through, Sergeant,” Franklin replied over the radio as he opened the door to his Humvee.

“Are you sure, sir?”

Franklin nodded at the radio. “Very sure.” He slammed the door shut.

A gunshot boomed.

Screams and shouts filled the air as most civilians ran. A few men fought with soldiers for their rifles.

More shots echoed off the glass and steel.

Three civilians lay sprawled on the curb as the last of the mob fled.

The convoy sped away.

* * *

At city hall six police officers stood outside the lobby keeping a couple dozen citizens out. While the people were angry, compared to the hospital and airport, this stop felt like a rest stop. They officers directed Franklin to the Portland emergency operations center, a small room crammed with computers, phones, radios, maps, and whiteboards. There, Franklin found. Thanks to a generator, lights were on, but everything else didn’t work. Around a conference table Franklin

briefed the mayor, police commissioner, the fire chief, and a few others about what he had seen in the city.

The mayor frowned. "That's similar to what we're hearing from the police and fire stations."

"How are you staying in contact with them?" Franklin asked.

"We have a few tow trucks clearing major streets and a few squad cars running," the mayor said. "Can you help us with communications and radios?"

Franklin shook his head. "My orders are to go to Salem and report. Perhaps officials there can provide assistance."

"I hope so." The fire chief frowned.

As the convoy rumbled south into the night Franklin considered the situation. Most people relied on a complex system to deliver food, water, and medicine.

That system no longer existed.