

JAKE BLANDFORD

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## *Address*

The screen's black. I'm waiting for the words to appear. A thousand eyes stare directly at me, with a half billion more behind the cameras. The collar feels tight on my throat but I won't adjust it.

*'Your opponents read weakness in anything, so monitor what you do. Don't blink too much—you'll seem nervous. But don't stare either, you'll look dumb. The herd will eat whatever they're offered—regardless of where it comes from—as long as it comes from a place of confidence. We can't afford to be second guessed.'*

I wonder if paranoia is a common trait among PR people when the red light glows and the broadcast director chops their hand at me.

The yellow text crawls towards me; I already know what it says but that doesn't make it any easier.

A whisper in my ear.

"Madam President?"

I take a second to savour the last moment of normality.

"Good morning. Please forgive the intrusion. I have—"

My presidency was built on a campaign of understatement. Might as well let it carry me through.

"—troubling news."

How much of this will be new to them? Government secrecy is one thing but it's hard to completely blanket a nuclear detonation, let alone fifteen.

"At 4 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, I—with the agreement of

the United Nations—passed the order to strike at the mass that appeared in our orbit last week. At 4:12, thirteen Endecott B-90 warheads were launched from Fort Greely. Detonation occurred three minutes later at 4:15.”

I wish I could gauge the room, see what effect these words are having. I’m the second President to issue a nuclear strike and the first to do it in peacetime.

The collar grows tighter, my mouth’s drying up.

*‘Don’t touch the water. It’s not for thirst. Use it to play for time when the questions start.’* I resign myself to tacky-mouthed discomfort.

“We had reason to believe—”

*“We” is good, it suggests unity.*

*“Reason” is good, it suggests logic, control.*

*“Believe” is good, it appeals to emotion while allowing leeway on culpability.’*

“—that the mass’ orbit was unstable. Based on projections from a consensus of Space Agencies, the mass would’ve breached our atmosphere within three days, impacting along the East African coast. Needless to say, the results would’ve been catastrophic.”

*‘Breached, impact, catastrophic. Explain the damage, explain what was at risk. Justify your position, sweeten them with good news first. It’s imperative we control the panic of the herd.’*

I wonder if sociopathy is a common trait among PR people.

“The resulting tidal wave alone would have wiped out many of the Southern Asian islands and caused devastation along the Indian coastline. The estimated loss of life was projected to be in the billions.”

The studio lights are too bright. I can’t make out any faces in the audience. An understanding nod from someone—anyone—would make this so much easier to bear.

“Following detonation, we estimate that 28% of the mass was destroyed—” A strange choking sound comes in place of words. I give up and loosen the collar, PR be damned.

“Excuse me—”

Sipping the water—room temperature, stagnant—I imagine the PR team punching their cubicle walls in anger.

“Follow up strikes were planned for this evening with the

intent to fracture the mass to the point that, should they enter our atmosphere, any remaining parts would simply burn up.”

I leave a pause.

Hopefully, in years to come, analysts will praise it as an act of kindness.

“However...”

Here it comes.

“While our data on the mass’ trajectory—and by extent, its potential for devastation—were correct, we have since learned more about the mass’ being. We previously believed—”

There they are again.

We. Believe.

*‘Unity. Culpability.’*

“—That the mass was inert. That it lacked life or sentience...”

I can feel my lip tremble, struggling to keep hold of the awful truth.

“On this, we were wrong.”

The silence in the room changes. There’s a tension now—everyone still with bated breath.

“While we don’t fully understand the nature of The Mass, we received a communication from the Gateway Space Station at 4:32. Major Garland.”

I try not to picture Major Garland—nose bleeding, eyes black, veins dark and swollen beneath his skin.

*‘This video will never be made public. We’ll sell a total systems failure. No survivors. The folded flags are already in transit.’*

I wonder if cold-blood is a common trait among PR people.

“Major Garland spoke with me personally. The Mass made contact with the Gateway team through some sort of ‘neural link.’”

*‘Don’t say psychic. “Psychic” sounds like “psycho”, “psycho” connotes chaos. “Neural” is better, it sounds like “neutral”, “neutral” connotes calm. Calm is good for the herd.’*

“The Mass has asked for reparations. While it has not taken our initial strike as an act of war, our refusal to make amends will be.”

Major Garland appears in my mind again. His voice hoarse, filled with shudders and gasps, like he forgot breathing was a part of speaking.

He talks of an amalgamate—sentient and curious, spanning the stars, learning, consuming as necessary.

They are not destroyers, they are not warriors.

They are merely ‘whole’. Their number incalculable.

I wonder at what point Major Garland stopped being Major Garland

“We caused great damage to The Mass. As such it needs to repair itself. Primarily The Mass requires protein.”

I can hear the understated death-rattle of my career in the distance.

“In the interest of peace we have agreed to help it.”

The room’s still silent. No one’s made the connection yet.

Why would they?

“The Mass requires roughly 13 million tonnes of protein, calcium and carbon combined.”

*‘Remain dispassionate. Use statistics, technical terms. Calm must be maintained as long as possible. The herd must not panic.’*

A couple of chairs grate against the floor. Hurried footsteps hit the fire-door. I assume the science journals have it figured out.

“Working with both United Nations and external observer states, we have agreed upon a course of action.”

But I get the honour of spokesman.

*‘Take the lead, maintain control. In the long run this will be good for your presidency.’*

“Given the time frame and requirements, we calculate that at least nine hundred and eighty million volunteers are needed worldwide.”

I reach for the water again—empty.

Two gentle taps on the side of the podium—a signal for the aide.

“Each country involved has agreed to contribute, based on a relative percentage. Based on our population, we require 27 million people to participate. As a democracy there will be a national vote within the hour as to how we will proceed but understand we *must* contribute. I implore everyone of voting age to participate and—God willing—volunteer.”

*‘A vote is good. It’s the voice of the people. You gave them the option but everyone takes responsibility. ‘God willing’ is a nice touch, provides reach to the more secular states, remind them of certain religious obligations.’*

I think of the options. Some countries are already emptying their prisons; others are rounding up their poor, their homeless.

I wonder how delicately that can be phrased on the ballot.

"Having examined the possibilities, I'm sad to say this is the only way. Livestock was considered. Logistics aside, the damage that would be caused to our food infrastructure—and by extent, our ability to feed ourselves—would be impossible to come back from.

In short, we would starve."

The glass is still empty. I tap again.

"Regarding ways to reduce the number of volunteers, we will—amongst other things—be offering a monetary incentive to those suffering with weight and obesity. Based on mean representation, a person weighing four hundred pounds can take the place of two-point-eight averagely weighted people."

I glance up, the lights still glaring in place. I suddenly find myself thankful for them, shielding me from looks I dare not imagine.

"I understand this sounds callous—monstrous even—but please understand, with the right support from the obese community, the number of volunteers needed would be closer to seventeen million. That's ten million lives saved. Your family will be provided for. Please think what's at stake."

I think of the PR team, smirking at their prescient use of 'the herd.'

*'Think of what's at steak.'*

"The Mass assures us there will be no pain upon absorption."

I think of Major Garland, propping his body against the wall, legs askew. The Mass allows him a moment of clarity.

"Tell my wife..."

*'The folded flag's are already in transit.'*

A slim hand finally places a fresh glass of water in front of me. I reach for it.

*'Don't talk about human lives being absorbed and then show how simple it is to absorb something. Are you insane?'*

I wonder if I've spent too much time around PR people.

The teleprompter flickers and a new reel of text creeps in.

I thought we decided against this.

"This may be an impossible situation but please understand, the

alternative is so much worse. We've at least been given some form of control; The Mass has enabled us to make this as easy as possible for ourselves."

*'Don't give thanks to The Mass but note its courtesy. The landscape will be in upheaval after this. We shouldn't burn bridges.'*

"While it may be hard to see a positive in all this, we should note that there will be benefits across multiple strata."

*'The herd must know that there's something in it for them beyond the obvious. After all, they all assume they'll be the ones that will live to see it.'*

"For the first time in over a decade, the global poverty rate will see a marked decline. Alongside this, the economy—both globally and domestically—will see a notable upswing. Employment, healthcare, housing, general quality of life; all will improve thanks to our selfless volunteers."

*'What if we implement a nomination system? Utilise public shame to our advantage? Stalin and Mao had great success with this approach. The herd that herds itself.'*

I wonder if the PR team have ever known love.

"If all goes well, The Mass can be repaired within two weeks."  
*'And if not, there's always the National Guard.'*

I drain the water. At least it's cool this time.

"I want to thank everyone for their support in the coming weeks."

Maybe I'll volunteer. Cement my status as a giver.

"If I may, I'd like to end with a quote by Thomas Fuller:

*'Ending on a quote is good. Something that combines optimism with intellect, gives the herd a sense of reassurance. The older, the better.'*

"It is always darkest just before the day dawneth.' Thank you."

*'That's a good quote. Think I saw it in a movie once.'*

I wonder if I can order the PR team to be at the front of the line.

The lights go down. The room's completely empty.

I'm completely alone.