

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

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The only thing merciful about World War III was that it lasted only six hours from start to finish, on March 29, 2025. Iran launched its nuclear attack on Jerusalem at 5:48 A.M. local time that day. Within minutes, Israel responded with massive nuclear attacks on major Iranian cities and military facilities. The whole Middle East erupted into warfare. For a time, there was a feeble hope that the conflict could be restricted to the Middle East, and both the U.N. Secretary-General and the Pope attempted interventions, but by +3 hrs. Russia and NATO members launched the first nuclear strikes at each other. The strikes escalated as the generals and their game-playing software took control. A North Korean strike on Tokyo at +4 hrs. plunged the entire Pacific Rim into the conflict. For a time, there seemed to be hope that the Indian subcontinent would escape relatively unscathed, but Pakistan launched a nuclear strike on India at +5 hrs. and India responded massively. By +6 hrs. Moscow, London, Rome, Berlin, Washington, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Beijing, Tokyo and New Delhi were no more. The nuclear strikes ended about +6 hrs. after all the silos had been emptied. About five billion of the world population of eight billion perished during the six hours of World War III. Just as there were never any declarations of war to mark the beginning of the conflict, there were never any cease-fires, armistices or peace treaties to mark its end.

About twenty thousand leadership team members split among perhaps twenty heavily protected underground “pods” survived. Some teams attempted to assert control over the surviving civilian population in their territories, but it was soon clear that only raw military force could prevail. The remaining undestroyed major cities—St. Louis was the largest in the U.S.—were left without electricity, water, and sufficient supplies to maintain their surviving populations. Control from the pods was feeble at best, and populations soon deserted the cities in the hope of eking out an existence in rural areas. But the destruction of earth’s flora and fauna wrought by World War III was as severe as the destruction of the human population. It soon became apparent that nuclear winter would set in. Over the next three years the surviving world population of three billion gradually starved to death. Even the primitive tribes of the Amazon basin and the aborigines of Australia perished.

Only the most highly developed of the “pods” survived, largely through the use of hydroponic agriculture. The smaller “pods” which relied solely upon stored supplies gradually perished when the supplies ran out. By +3 yrs. the world human population had been reduced to perhaps 10,000 in five surviving “pods.” The largest pod was buried under tons of stone in a remote section of the Rocky Mountains. Europe, the Middle East and the eastern seaboard of the United States had basically been levelled by the conflict. The largest survival of the “relics” of civilization was in South America and in sub-Saharan Africa. But finally at +4 yrs. the sun was seen again and the surviving “pod” dwellers began to ponder what they would make of what survived on planet earth. Even then, there were military elements among the “pod” population who wanted to maintain a state of war. But electronic communications among the “pods” had long been restored, and the so-called “scientists’ coup” transpired on August 3, 2030. About 2,500 “hardliners” were eliminated, and the surviving leadership, led by members of the scientific community, proclaimed a world government. Kinshasa, left relatively unscathed by the war, was to be the new world capital, because of surrounding agricultural resources. Brasilia and Jakarta were also planned as outposts. It was considered prudent that the surviving population not be concentrated in one area exclusively.

The surviving “pod” populations emerged to these centers in 2033. The world census of September 15, 2033, counted 9,438 surviving human beings on the planet. Because of the rigid control of life in the “pods,” there was no survivor under fifteen years of age. Since mortality remained a fact of life, planning for the future human population of the earth became a major preoccupation of the world government. Demographic specialists and actuaries were among the most sought-after talent in the postwar world. Of course, much of the human knowledge base—and virtually all books and periodicals—had perished in the conflict, but there was a significant survival of digital resources and knowledge. A university was one of the first new institutions founded by the world government in its Kinshasa capital. As worked out by the world government and its specialists, human reproduction was to be strictly controlled. The entire surviving population was tested using both genetic and intellectual criteria, and semen specimens were gathered from the males achieving the highest test scores and frozen. Each year, a small number of the highest-testing females were chosen to be artificially inseminated. To reduce fetal stress, only Caesarean delivery was allowed, although the occasional vaginal birth still occurred when the period between the breaking of waters and delivery was extremely short. The number of births was carefully planned so that the population would be sustainable—it was anticipated that world population would gradually fall to 5,000, until increasing births gradually began to fill back the decedent population.

This was the world in which Demographic Specialist III Xu, age twenty-eight, and Electronics Specialist II Myun, age twenty-five, lived in the year 2038. They had been lovers for three years. Officially, the world government discouraged romantic relationships, but realizing that human needs remained, the government made birth control pills and barrier contraception available. However, it remained a rigid rule that children could only be born within the government’s official breeding program. Children conceived outside the official program were subject to mandatory abortion. All females were subject to mandatory pregnancy testing on a quarterly basis, and mothers found with child were forced to consent to an abortion. The father’s identity was proven through genetic testing of the aborted fetal tissue. Then both mother and father would lose their positions and be assigned to penal brigades. The economic organization of the surviving human communities was relatively egalitarian, and all but the top leadership shared cleaning, cooking and laundry duties. However, much of the heaviest labor—work in traditional agriculture and construction—was assigned to the penal brigades. The world census of 2033 had counted very few in these brigades, but by the quinquennial census of 2038, some 546 of 8,859 surviving citizens were serving in penal brigades. Officially, brigade members served fixed terms, but unofficially it was well known that very few citizens ever returned from penal service.

Xu had bad news to deliver to her lover Myun that day in 2038. “I’m pregnant,” she told him. “I have missed my period for two months running. My pregnancy test is coming up in two weeks. We’re going to lose our jobs and our baby. We’ll be assigned to the punishment brigades.”

“You shouldn’t have gone off your pills,” said Myun. “I told you that the barrier contraception was unreliable.”

Xu began to cry. “I told you that the pills were poisoning me,” she said to Myun. “You agreed to use the condoms.”

“Well, they didn’t work,” said Myun, holding Xu tightly to him. “We’ll just have to surrender our baby and take our punishment.”

“You’d give up our baby so easily?” asked Xu. “This world needs far more babies than the government is allowing to be born. The government’s central planners would like to obliterate the word love from the dictionary.”

“Do we have any choice?” asked Myun.

“Do you remember my old friend Leah?” asked Xu. “She was Medical Specialist IV, but got assigned to the punishment brigade as a result of becoming pregnant herself. We’ve kept in touch. Of course, letters to and from punishment brigade members are censored, but they’re allowed a monthly visit, and I visited Leah last month. She told me she thought we could hide out near the punishment brigade barracks. She said that she could take a sick day to help deliver our baby.”

“Even a former Medical Specialist IV without the right equipment might not be able to insure a safe birth,” said Myun.

“Unofficially, Leah helps in the penal barracks clinic,” said Xu. “She’ll have all the basic tools. Why shouldn’t I take a risk for the sake of our baby? Women have been doing that for millennia.”

“We and our baby will be living in primitive conditions,” said Myun. “We might be executed if we’re discovered.”

“It comes down to whether we are willing to take the risk in order for our baby to survive,” said Xu.

“Then your mind is set?” asked Myun.

“If you won’t come along, I will run away myself,” said Xu.

“You won’t do that,” said Myun. “I will come with you. But if we steal a boat to get out to the penal barracks, won’t we leave an easy-to-follow trail?”

“It’s thirty miles,” said Xu. “If you’re willing to walk, we could probably make it in two days. We could try to fake a joint suicide by leaving notes.”

“Without any bodies, that won’t be very credible,” said Myun. “I suggest that we disappear with as little notice as possible.”

“We’ve only got two weeks until my pregnancy test,” said Xu. “If we’re going to do it, we have to do it soon.”

“Well, I’ve got two days of food in my quarters,” said Myun. “How about you?”

“The same,” said Xu.

“I think we should leave tonight, before we leave any hints of our intentions,” said Myun.

“Tonight?” asked Xu. “With no farewells? Not even to our parents?”

“Especially with no farewells,” said Myun. “The guards wink at couples setting out for late walks along the river. It’s the perfect time. There’s no moon tonight.”

“What should we take?” asked Xu.

“Just as much food as we can pack in our ordinary satchels,” said Myun. “Anything more would attract notice.”

“No extra clothing?” asked Xu.

“I don’t think so,” said Myun. “Just dress as you would for a hike down lovers’ lane. Just like the night we probably made our baby.”

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” Xu told Myun. “If I am the only one who disappears, there will no proof that you conceived a child, although doubtless you will be questioned closely. You might even be able to see me and the baby if I make arrangements with Leah. You could claim to be visiting her.”

“Too risky,” said Myun. “Plus, I told you, I’m going with you and our baby.”

“Then I’ll see you at the gate in ten minutes,” said Xu, as she kissed and embraced her lover.

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Xu and Myun stayed to the side paths and travelled only by night. They caught sight of patrols on two occasions, but fortunately were not seen. Dirty, exhausted and full of brambles, they arrived at the agreed-upon rendezvous point after two nights of travel. Xu left the agreed-upon signal for Leah to observe, and then she and her lover retreated to the bushes to sleep. The next night, Leah came to see them, with much needed food, water and clothing.

“These are penal brigade uniforms,” Myun complained.

“That’s the least conspicuous clothing out here,” said Leah, who was herself garbed in a penal brigade uniform. “If a patrol discovers you, you can claim to be on assignment out here. In fact, I have hidden two hoes for you in the bushes. You should start to clear a garden plot. Along with food, I will bring you seeds to plant. You will be less conspicuous if you’re working on cultivating a garden plot. It will do you good to have hard work to do. You’ll sleep better.”

“Xu is pregnant. That’s why we ran away,” said Myun.

“She’s a young woman and can work hard while she is pregnant,” said Leah. “In fact, it will do her good. She’ll probably have an easier delivery when your baby comes.”

“Leah is probably right,” said Xu.

“I could do all the field work,” said Myun.

“Xu will help you,” said Leah. Xu nodded her agreement. “I’ve also brought you flints. There are a few cooking implements hidden with the hoes. You can boil water from the stream which is just behind us. Be sure to boil your drinking water—we can’t risk your coming down with dysentery. You can wash your clothing in the stream. I’ve also brought you two pieces of mosquito netting, which may save you from a lot of itching and scratching.”

“Are there any wild animals to trap?” asked Myun.

“I suggest that you stick to the vegetarian diet to which you have become accustomed in the Kinshasa headquarters,” said Leah. “There are a few surviving animals, but I am not sure that it is safe to eat their flesh. There could still be radiation contamination, plus possible parasites.”

“How will you know when Xu requires your assistance?” asked Myun.

“I will watch for the signs of impending delivery,” said Leah. “I will bring you some information for use in case your baby comes unexpectedly.”

“What if there is a major problem?” asked Myun.

“Shush!—think of what Leah has already done for us,” said Xu. “You agreed that we and our baby would have to bear some risks ourselves.”

“You are right,” Myun acknowledged.

“I will try to come to see you every other night,” Leah promised. “If I miss a night, don’t panic. Emergencies do happen at the barracks. Next time I come, I will show you some of the edible plants in the vicinity. It will be good to have some substitutes for the food which I bring in case of emergency.”

Xu and Myun both gave Leah a hug before she disappeared into the night.

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Over the course of six months, Xu and Myun built themselves quite a snug little dwelling place. With only two hoes, they put about an eighth-acre under cultivation. Xu’s belly swelled day by day until she was ready to deliver. As it happened, the work of maintaining the plot had put her into top condition, and once her waters broke, she delivered very quickly. Myun had to make do with the instructions and instruments which Leah had left for his use in case of necessity. Myun cut and tied the baby’s cord, and helped to clean Xu of after-birth.

“It’s a girl!” Myun told Xu, as he laid the new-born child on Xu’s breast. The little girl let out a lusty, healthy cry before beginning to give suck.

“Now I really feel I really am a Demographic Specialist III,” Xu said to Myun. “We have increased the world population by one—no thanks to the government’s central planning.”

“Despite the central planners,” said Myun. “For the first time since the great starve-out, the world has a free population again.

“You and me and baby,” said Xu.

“What shall we name her?” asked Myun.

“I’ve always liked Cai,” said Xu. “How about Cai?”

“That’s fine with me—Cai it is,” said Myun.

“Cai, the first citizen of a new, free world,” said Xu.

“Let’s hope the first of many,” said Myun.

“Let’s hope,” Xu echoed.

Myun made a simple meal for himself and Xu. Leah came with supplies, and shared their joy.

Then father and mother and baby slept—their observance of the first night of the first child born into a new, free world.