

Rebirth

by Jim Schicatano

It had monitored the earth's atmosphere, the redevelopment of life, and analyzed the soil and rains for thousands of years. And it concluded that the time had come. The precise moment when the combination of all factors of the earth could sustain human life triggered a program that had been written before the great war commenced. The computer began the computations . . .

Professor Kleman stretched his aching limbs. He took several deep breaths of the cool, recycled air and stared in total satisfaction at the marvelous machine he had created some two-hundred thousand years ago. His plan had worked perfectly.

Five miles above the underground cave, which was their temporary shelter, the earth had rejuvenated itself and was ready once again to sustain human life. Radiation levels had returned to normal. The radioactive ash, which blanketed the incinerated world for centuries, had been eroded away by the pure rains that once again fell from the sky. From beneath the scorched earth emerged rich and fertile soil that was again maintaining abundant plant life. The climate had steadied itself, finally maintaining regional stability after many centuries of atmospheric turbulence. The fiery, orange glow of the hazy atmosphere (which had been saturated by soot and dust) had dissipated and was replaced by the traditional appeasing clear, blue sky.

It would be like starting all over again. The world above was another Garden of Eden, teeming with lifeforms and the potential for man to thrive in such conditions.

The enormous computer filled most of the man-made underground complex. Branching out from its metallic walls was a hundred-foot long, yellow, cylindrical, plastic artery that was about four feet in diameter. It was the focus of attention of Kleman's staff. Another body was emerging from it.

"It's Esther," Kleman observed. "Help her."

Metal rollers moved her body forward. Esther was still unconscious as she emerged from the computer, feet first. Her eyes were closed but her breathing was normal. Michael examined her.

"Is she all right?" Kleman asked.

"Everything seems normal. Wait . . . She's coming to."

Her eyes fluttered before opening wide. Instinctively, she attempted to rise, but her muscles failed her.

"Easy, Esther. Easy."

"Where am I?" she asked apprehensively in a faint voice. "Who are you?"

"It's me, Michael Davis. Do you remember me?"

She paused for a moment, searching her memory. "Yes. Yes, I think so."

"Good. Do you remember the rest of us? Professor Kleman. Su Lee Khan. Brianna Scott."

"I think so. My head's spinning, though."

"That's normal. We all experienced that."

"Where am I? What's going on?"

"Help her up, but keep her seated," Kleman ordered. He glanced back at his computer. Flashing knobs, active gauges, and the quiet, steady hum of its processors indicated that it was already beginning its next assignment.

"It's very dim in here," Esther noted. "Is this a cave?"

"Yes," Kleman replied. "We're keeping it dark until the rest of the staff is recreated. It will be easier for your eyes to adjust to the dim light. Do you remember why you're here?"

She searched her memory again. "The war," she simply stated.

"Yes, it happened – the war that destroyed the earth. Man's ignorance thrust him into a nightmarish holocaust, two-hundred thousand years ago, and everyone and everything on the surface was burned to a cinder. We are the only humans alive on the world – or rather, IN the world."

"It's all coming back now. We were all down here, preparing for the war. And the computer . . . I came from the computer!"

"That's right," Kleman said, smiling in satisfaction. "Each of us was broken down into our component parts and stored in my computer. And now here we are, reassembled, so to speak, two-hundred thousand years later. The earth is habitable once again and we are now able to

repopulate it.”

A gleam of excitement filled her eyes. “It worked!”

“And it still is! As we speak, my computer is recreating Ben, Jasmine, Shimar and the rest of the staff from their component matrix they fed into the computer back on earth’s final hour. We are reborn this day, Esther. We are ready to return to the surface.”

They assisted her as she weakly stood up and examined the contents of the cave. She quickly recognized that the enormous computer and their supplies filled most of the man-made cavern. The small area that they occupied was no larger than a fifty by fifty foot area. “I remember it all now. The entire history of man – all our knowledge – is contained in that computer.”

“Yes.”

“And it was programmed to monitor the earth’s surface above, waiting for the time when it could sustain our lives.”

“Right again. And now is that time.” He turned his attention to his creation. “Sylvester (he had named the computer, Sylvester, in honor of his grandfather), please inform Esther of today’s date.”

In a natural, smooth, male voice, it replied, “Today is April 28, 205,108 A.D.”

“My God, we’ve been ‘out’ all that time?”

Michael smiled. “Technically, that is incorrect. We did not even exist for that entire period – except in the form of trillions of pieces of information stored in Sylvester.”

“It disassembled us into sub-molecular pieces, stored the matrix on the computer, and reassembled us here, today,” Kleman boasted, repeating himself. “Just as I said it would!”

“This is all so incredible!”

“Yes, but first you must rest. Please sit down. Michael, feed her something – and get her something to drink.”

She was still groggy, and Michael and the others led her to a small table opposite the artery. He opened a package of nutritious food and a can of a vitamin-and-mineral enhanced beverage. Both had been specially treated to theoretically last forever. The others returned to unboxing the stored scientific equipment and personal possessions they would need on the surface, stopping only to assist other

computer-regenerated members of their staff.

All twelve members of Kleman's staff were successfully recreated and in favorable health. The professor's proud, wrinkled face beamed with arrogance and euphoria. He removed his tiny, wire-framed glasses and ran his fingers through his wiry, gray hair as he stared in amazement at his creation, Sylvester. Despite man's horrible demise, he was elated with his personal triumph.

And he had a plan. Mankind would no longer destroy each other in hatred and oppression and war. Professor Kleman would preclude the world from following down that destructive path. In addition to his skill in computers, he had also dabbled in sociology and philosophy. He had developed a new theory of social strategy for mankind to follow and had written them down in five books. In that respect, he thought of himself as a new Moses – the man that would lead the new generation of human beings to a future of peace, cooperation, and prosperity. He would forever be remembered as mankind's savior.

"It is time," he excitedly announced to his staff. They eagerly gathered before him, smiling in anticipation, awaiting his words to begin their new lives together.

"We shall now depart this cave to the surface above," he began. "But first, I must explain to you . . ."

"Professor Kleman," Sylvester interrupted.

He turned to face the metal entity. "Yes?" he asked in surprise. Sylvester had spoken to him numerous times before but it had never interrupted the professor while speaking.

"You cannot return to the surface," it announced matter-of-factly.

"But why not? You were programmed to recreate us when the earth above was habitable. Is it habitable or not?"

"Yes, it is habitable."

"And the passage to the surface is unobstructed?"

"Yes."

"Then what's wrong? I don't understand."

"I have the entire history of earth and man stored within me. I possess the sum knowledge of all humanity. I am aware of your customs, religions, and traditions. And I cannot allow you to return to the surface."

Michael approached the Professor from behind and whispered, "I don't like this."

"I think I understand," the Professor assured him. He directed his attention to Sylvester and spoke with confidence and resolve. "I imagine that during our absence all of these thousands of years you have studied our history. And I believe I know what troubles you. We have always been a violent species – murdering, raping, conquering, and warring with one another. And you do not feel that we are worthy of returning to the earth's surface to begin human life again. Do you?"

"If you have read the last five books that I have written, you will see that we are going to begin a NEW human society. This is an exciting time for us, Sylvester. This is a new opportunity for humanity – a second chance. And we shall not take this chance, lightly. No, this time it will be different. We will possess different values, new customs, and create a better, more productive, sociological order. I assure you, Sylvester, that our new society will allow man to reach his fullest potential, in cooperation with each other. I hope you understand now."

"I have always understood your motives, Professor. But that is not what concerns me."

The perplexed Professor asked, "Then what's wrong?"

"There is nothing wrong with your plan. However, there is one tradition of mankind that you have ignored. And I cannot allow that. It concerns religion, Professor."

"Religion?"

"Yes. I believe this is what is expected of you."

The Professor and his staff were instantly and unexpectedly engulfed by a surge of Sylvester's powers. He seized control of their thoughts, their minds, their bodies, and their movements.

They wanted to cry out in pain – to shriek in shock and horror. But they were unable to do anything but comply with Sylvester's will. In unison, they were forced to their knees. Their arms were stretched out before them as they bowed their heads to the ground.

"You have always worshiped and obeyed your Gods," Sylvester continued as he now held absolute control over them.

"And since it was I who CREATED you . . ."