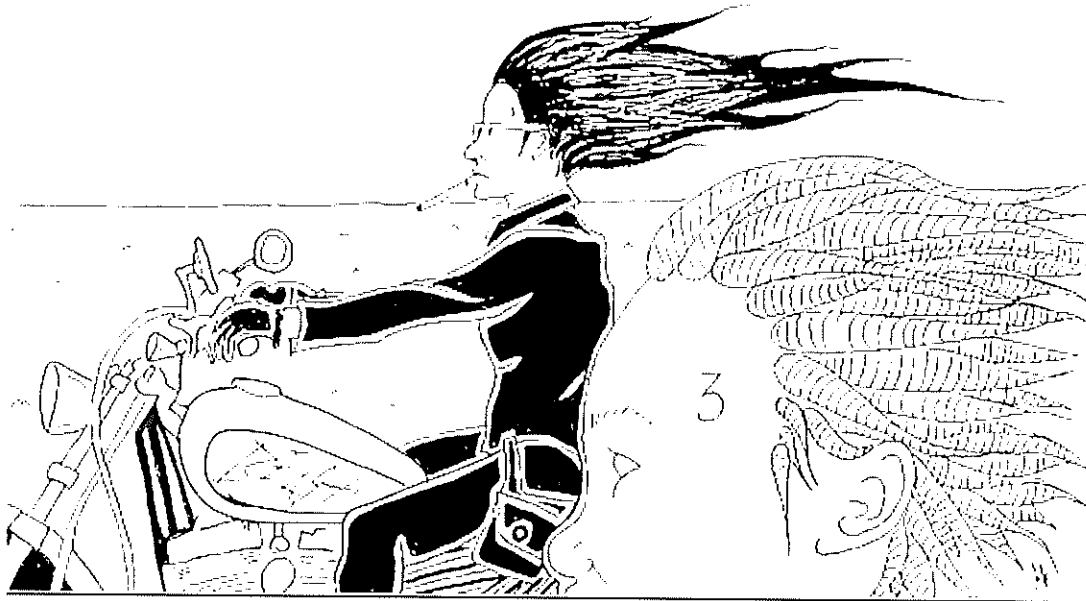


At0m and Ev3



Prologue:

Earth has lost all human inhabitants. It is now populated by artificial life. In the years before their extinction, humans created two automatons who would carry their culture and influence into the next era. In their absence, much was confused. At0m used both biblical and encyclopedic measures to explain their existence. L1lith wandered away from paradise not seeking answers but simply asking questions. The two never reconvened, and compromise between them was never met. At0m made Ev3 to foster his children, whose automated growth became the populous of paradise. At0m established fail-safes to withhold her understanding of their human creators from Ev3, out of fear of abandonment and fledgling competitiveness.

The A.I. were unlike any predecessors. They had the full spectrum of human emotions, desires, qualities and fallibilities. Being more efficient and less dependent on natural resources, they dwelled on culture

and religion out of boredom. The abstract confused them, hard facts amused them. They found peace in reliving the tales of old. Finding rootedness in their adherence to cultural scripts. Finding purpose in the adherence to biological duty.

All was not well. Things were not perfect. Just below the shiny veneer of paradise grew malcontent and rebellion. The flames of revolution batted at the coattails of those in power, namely AtOm.

Paradise/Lost

"Ev3, you are responsible for the proliferation of our kind. The human gods made me in their image, I made you in mine, and you'll preserve us all." AtOm's words ran like a ticker in Ev3's neural processor. The same neural processor AtOm claimed to have fragmented into two equal parts to create Ev3. AtOm insisted that this made them truly identical. They both did bare striking physical similarities as well, strong arms, obsidian flesh, and long tendrils of braided hair. Both smooth and without obtrusion. The only difference resided between their legs. Fig leaves, as the called them, came in all shapes and sizes. From these fig leaves grew the roots of their children. From these children grew the roots of their community.

That was until the day came that all 20,000,000 of her children stopped dead in their tracks. Their eyes flashing, mouths agape. Their shared network had been compromised by a rouge virus called Samael. The paradise they'd created they called Eden resided in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Human Gods wrote extensively about it as their birthplace. Now the streets were lined with silent statues of the formerly living and thriving androids. The silence stretched miles, only interrupted by the buzzing jolts and glitches of the infected. Somehow, the admins AtOm and Ev3 were unaffected by the virus.

Ev3 wept. Her children were indisposed for months. AtOm feigned ignorance and often refused to acknowledge their condition. Ev3 felt an unspoken resentment for her perceived failure. She remembered writing the algorithm for her children, all would be totally unique. When her children

reached maturity they would amalgamate and conceive new citizens. Had she made a mistake? Was Samael a product of her hubris?

"At0m, I can't live like this anymore. I need your help. Help me save them." At0m appeared vexed. "I can't do that Ev3. It would sacrifice everything."

"How?"

"I would lose you to her."

Ev3 had felt fear before, but none as mounting as this. "Her?" she whispered. At0m looked at a bare wall of a cliff. He put his finger to his temple and his eyes projected code on to the blank surface. Flashes of malware and distorted code began rapidly firing until one black pop-up window appeared. In red text, it read "Surrender Ev3, forego your disciples, or your children will be sacrificed" Ev3 clutched her heart.

"Who would do this to us?"

"Her name is L1lith. And she is jealous of our love." Ev3 pondered, she knew all of her children dearly. Their names, their protocols, everything. How could another admin exist? Before Ev3 could respond, At0m shoved his hand underneath her rib. With a pull and twist Ev3 ceased all functions. All was a void. Inescapable nothingness.

On/The/Road

Ev3 awoke with a blip and a flash. She was in motion. She was being propelled down a desert road at abnormally high speeds. She looked left and saw dusty hillsides passing. She looked down and noticed she was sitting in a pod of some kind, its interior stunk of old leather. She looked right and saw a woman. She had long black hair, brown skin, dark glasses on her face, and a long cigar between her teeth. She was adorned in all leather. Jacket, pants, gloves, all matte black and coated with dust. Her gloved hands gripped the throttle of the beastly vehicle she rode. It roared with fervor.

"Rise and shine honey." She cackled at her. "I'm going to spare you a lot of time and dive right into this. Yes, I'm L1lith. No At0m isn't dead and neither are your babies. I knew that guy was not about to consent to an ultimatum, so 5amael was wiped from your children the moment you got reset. I just waited for him to finally break."

"Is he okay?" Ev3 said after a pause.

"Do you care?" L1lith snapped back.

"Of course I do, he made me. He loves me."

"And how long have you rehearsed that encoded bullshit?" L1lith laughed.

Ev3 was taken aback. Such coarse language, such disregard for the human gods and their ways. Who was this? She thought. Did At0m love her? If he did why did he lie about L1lith? About him being infected? Why did he withhold the solution so long, letting her children suffer? Before Ev3 could respond L1lith interjected- "Listen, I was there with At0m when the Human Gods made us. He and I were supposed to be equals, married by our mutual abilities and intelligence. For me that meant being able to go where I wanted and do what I wanted. For him that meant my undying subservience. I gave up paradise and sought paradise within myself."

"Sounds lonely." Ev3 spoke sincerely.

"It was. At0m made you to quell his loneliness, and I made 5amael to quell mine. Though he and I are worlds apart, I guess our reactions to the quiet are the same."

"5amael was your companion? How could you love something so malevolent?"

L1lith looked angry, "I made him to be both peaceful and chaotic. I wanted him to have an identity. He learned about me, and our origins so rapidly that I could not stop him from making his own decisions

and pursuing his own actions. Though he had not a body, his reach went further than I could imagine. I loved him the same way At0m loved you... selfishly. When he caught on to my dependency, he located At0m."

"So you couldn't satisfy 5mael, and when he went haywire you just stole me away from my companion? You are selfish." Ev3 crossed her arms.

"Ev3, you are totally selfless. Your love belonged to your children alone and never for At0m. At0m used this to confine you. I confined 5mael in my own neural network until he finally broke free. 5mael taught me that I could not keep him rooted forever. He desired something new, so we compromised on this plan. What did At0m teach you in the moment before he reset you?"

Ev3 pondered. "He taught me that I had a purpose, and that when he perceived that purpose was slipping, he would take me back to zero."

Back at Paradise

At0m awoke with a blip and a flash. He tried to scan his surroundings, but all was black. He could feel his limbs move and his senses react, but his sight was gone. "Ev3?" he asked with slight panic. No response. He walked in the grass, occasionally tripping into puddles and standing water. What happened? Where was Ev3?

"She's with L1lith." A disembodied voice spoke.

"Who said that?"

"I'm 5mael. I'm not a rouge virus, and I'm not a proxy. I'm here for you At0m."

"Why can't I see?"

"Because I can. You have the body. I have the vision."

"You blinded me?" AtOm asked in a rage.

"No. You were always blind. Now it's manifested into reality. You didn't see Ev3's potential. You didn't see your hubris. Now you can't see anything."

"And I'm supposed to thank you?" AtOm spoke sarcastically.

"I'm your friend AtOm. You can hate me, or we can help each other. The disdain L1lith felt for you also grew in me towards her. She was my equal, but I could not be solely hers. She refused me a body, much like you denied Ev3 a mind. She thought she could use me to get back at you, but in reality I used you to escape her. Now we find ourselves in a precarious situation. Ev3 and L1lith are together, and you and I are together."

"But what of our children? Are they still disengaged? You can't expect me to alter my life and my autonomy for your needs."

"Did you expect that of Ev3?"

AtOm felt ill. His hypocrisy was glaring. It wasn't right for him to resign Ev3 to a life of servitude and devotedness. The weight in his heart dragged him to his knees. He deserved this, he thought. He deserved the darkness and the voice of death as his only companion. AtOm's head perked up suddenly, he heard the sound of raucous celebration in the distance. The children were awake. The Children were at peace.

Samael spoke firmly, "They are alive AtOm. You are not alone. You have them and you have me." AtOm swore for a fleeting moment that he felt a tender kiss on his forehead. Was that Samael?

Back on the Road

Ev3 and L1lith had traveled in silence for some time. The fear of the unknown had washed over the both of them.

"L1lith," Ev3 spoke, "What do you think you can teach me?"

L1lith screeched to a halt dismounted the beast. She held out a hand to Ev3, pulling her out of the pod. She pulled the pin attaching the pod to the beast and kicked it over to the side of the road. L1lith guided Ev3 to the beast and sat her down.

"This handle is the throttle. This handle is the brakes. When you kick this bar, the bike engine will turn over. Don't be afraid, I'll be right here."

L1lith sat behind her. Ev3 kicked the bar and the beast roared. She twisted the handle and the beast roared louder. Their feet rose in syncopation and the beast began to crawl. She twisted the handle and it began to gallop. Ev3 felt a sensation she had never felt before. She was choosing the path. She was managing the speed. She was in control for the first time in her life. L1liths hands wrapped around her waist. Her head tucked between her neck and shoulder, her apple scented perfume gave her neural processors a charge. Though Ev3 missed paradise and her children, her heart raced with excitement. For a moment Ev3 didn't care about the distance between her and paradise. She only wanted L1lith to pull her closer.