



**AUTOMATIC ASSASSIN : EPISODE 1 : ENTER
XOLO**

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Published: 2011

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): "Cyberpunk Space Opera" Zombies Satire

Chapter 1

Episode 1

Chapter 1

There is nothing like a blue sun to get on your nerves. Looks so cool, burns so hot. And as everyone knows - from the TV ads - the only way to enjoy the full glory of a blue sun is from a yacht. So what you have here is a cosmological entity with a surface temperature of 11,000 Kelvin that is also a constant reminder that you do not have a yacht.

Hidden beneath the sand on a large, unconvincing island on the planet Belaarix, was a man who could afford a yacht, but did not have one due to the fact that he was probably the most wanted man in the extended human domains of space. Through the synthetic eye he wore on the back of his head, he looked up at the blue sun.

And he said to himself, "My yacht would be awe inspiring. It would have ionic water slides that would retract when the girls left and during those lonelier times I would recline under a thin polymer canopy and read a paper book retrieved from Earth."

He was not the type of guy who would play a game he didn't like. The game was dead to him. The whole yacht thing was beneath him.

So why was he thinking about yachts?

He looked at the surface of his glove and tapped it in the way that turned it into a mirror. He saw his face: long nose, brutal eyes, sharp eyebrows. Clear steady stare. No obvious signs of heat stroke in those eyes.

He tapped the glove again and checked for the possibility of a high level microwave attack being emanated from the fleet of Haja Gukkool (just on the off-chance that someone like Xolo was trying sneak up and put awful holes in everybody.) No signal. Gukkool was not going to fry all of the animals he had shipped out from his father the Old Haja's planet. Not when he was surrounded by paracoverters, sharkmen, satdeath, ninjas-autenticos, and all of the usuals.

Something was stopping him from remembering why it was he was thinking about yachts. Tossing a coin in his head [because all of this

thinking was slowing him down] he decided that this was all the side effect of some scheme he was pulling and that he had hypnotized himself to forget.

Now he moved on, as a man must move on if he is the kind of man who basically does nothing but fucked up shit.

He popped cover and scuttled forward on his belly. Pure white sand shook from him like salt as he snake crawled thirty meters forward to a rock outcrop. This rock was fake. It lacked internal logic. It looked like some dumb fucking kid had drawn it. Trillionaires were irritating that way. Their obsessive attention to detail extended in all directions except when it came to making the world beautiful. Literally making the world beautiful. Even gravity and that dreadful blue sun had less of a claim to the authorship of this planet than Haja Gukkool. And on the day they picked the rocks out he was looking at a spreadgrid of his money and waving his hand in agreement as the holograms of these rocks had been trotted out.

This was the third such rock that Xolo had seen during his three weeks on Haja Gukkool's planet. It might be possible to brain Haja Gukkool with one of the smaller clichéd rocks that had been accumulating in Xolo's memory. When he found a particularly glib one that was about fist sized it would go in his pack.

He drained some water from the tube in his suit. Yes, it was recycled water. That was really what you would do on planets like this if you were not floating in a typographic lake.

Except for those three little kids wandering around on the other side of the rock. They were not in survival suits.

Wait a second...

Kids?

Chapter 2.

Holding hands, the three children walked down the slope in the general direction of the huge, entirely flat aquamarine lake that ate the horizon. They were wearing flimsy foil jackets and burning with the brightness of tiny sparks from the cruel star above.

The one in the middle was bigger, fifty centimeters that therefore gave him or her all the burden of guiding the other two to their death, which was probably located about halfway to the lake. Unless they hit a security sweep earlier than that and missed out on their chance to dehydrate to death [dehydration comes with hallucinations, you see, which is nice.]

Xolo watched the children toddle off, away from life. This toddle, so innocent, touched something in his heart. Something that felt foreign to him, but was real nonetheless. He couldn't let the children die.

He whistled, hoping that they wouldn't turn around and reveal the faces of hairy trained midget guards. He should have thought of that before the whistle. What was happening to his edge, the keen seventh sense that had kept him alive when there was really no way his body parts should still all be connected and functioning if you took a cold hard look at the risks he had been taking these past nine years?

The children turned and indeed they were children. A girl in the middle leading twin boys. She looked to be about nine or ten standard years and the boys maybe four. They had typically brown skin, thin noses, freckles. The girl had green eyes that looked at Xolo with absolute calm and even a touch of authority. Not the kind of authority you saw in the eyes of maniacs like Gukkool, which was really an attempt to use anger to remind you of his tangible, heavily armed power. This was a rarer kind of authority, which Xolo had not seen for a long time. This was the kind of authority that said, 'follow me and win, cross me and lose,' the authority that suggested following this person would lead to glory.

Xolo shook his head to ground himself. All it would take is one SingRay to flap by and scan them and those green eyes would soon be slowly sinking into a pile of warm red jelly with bones in it. He summoned the girl over with a hand gesture. The three kids ran across the sand, and Xolo was impressed by the decisiveness. As they ran their survival capes flapped and he saw that underneath they were wearing tattered dark emerald robes and boots that looked stolen from soldiers and modified with knife and tape.

The girl pointed the boys behind the rock. They complied, she followed, and soon they sheltered like any family from any time in human history hoping that war would pass them by.

"What are you doing here, young woman?" Xolo asked in a very flat voice.

She paused long seconds before replying. Xolo's instincts struggled in vain to extract clues and meaning from the silence but it was a very pure and well done silence.

"We survived a crash. Everyone else is dead. Our ship is a few hours back in the desert."

Xolo instinctually looked back. There were no traces of smoke, but the wind was very intense and low back there so smoke couldn't rise far

even if it existed. The girl had told him something immune to proof or disproof.

"Where were you going?"

"They don't tell us things like that."

"Where do you come from?"

"We don't tell people things like that."

"Are you intentionally going to get me killed?"

"No"

And she answered with no pause, no deception and in her regal little voice.

"I have no choice but to believe you, princess. So I am going to get you to safety as best as I can. I am going down to the lake. I'll set you and your brothers up with a hiding place. Then I have to kill the owner of this planet and escape the planet. Unless I mess up - you know... die - I'll have plenty of time to come and get you, assuming you stay where I put you and I'll get you off-planet and then we'll figure out where you belong."

They shook on it.

The kids didn't make his life much more difficult because they followed instructions well and were patient even in sandstorms which is a rare trait. The way he worked was to make a hundred meter move, do a sweep with his gadgets and his senses then plan the next hundred meters. So he just basically had to add on some time for the kids to move to the next save point.

The long evening began: several peach hours were ahead of them. Gukkool loved to enjoy cocktails on the deck of his supercarrier, so he had specified to his engineers a planet that liked long evenings too and they had called in the Titans from their distant cages to tilt the axis of the planet just so.

That liking of twilight would help Xolo to kill Gukkool. Twilight sneaking was his specialty. He understood soft fields of light like a painter and could cross great distances in them even without the aid of clumsy camouflage capes. It was quiet, as deserts patrolled by ninjas almost invariably are.

The ninjas were too good, actually. How could that be? Well, just that there is something about a clone that is obvious when one thinks about it but which seems to pass by most security planners and which Xolo knew and kept well to himself. Namely, clones are rather samey. Especially when they have just arrived from the factory. They move in a very similar way, and assess threats in predictable manners. They prioritize their

weapons and their attacks using rules that have never had time to mutate in the sticky heat of real combat. All this means that if you manage to kill one of a batch of untested NinjasAutenticos, you can knock the others off rather easily.

Xolo felt himself garroting a human being and it sent him on a trip back through time, the garrote linking twenty-six necks and nine hours and fifteen kilometers. The Ninja stabbed back with the knife and Xolo's block was already ready to intercept it and then the knife swooped back and burst into the ninja's chest in a saddeningly familiar way and then he dropped dead with the usual sound. Probably even the kids were getting bored of this now. For Xolo there was at least the quest to slightly improve his high score each time but it didn't pay to experiment too much. If he tried too hard to kill them faster or quieter it increased the randomness and risk and could get him killed.

Behind a boulder, the kids stripped the gear from the ninja and split his drink. Xolo zoomed on the shore. He could not make out where in the water the sharkmen were lurking. There had to be at least thirty of them between Xolo and the ship, probably in an inverted pyramid with denser coverage at the surface and lighter in the depths.

But all he needed was one.

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As he set the kids up in their little shelter, now armed to their teeth with enough looted swag for several nursery schools to playfully obliterate each other with, he told the girl to make sure the boys didn't do anything stupid, but after saying it he knew it was he who had done something stupid by condescending to her.

"Hey what's your name, princess?" he asked.

She bit her lip. She was probably considering his chances of being churned into bloody shark chum within minutes, and finding them convincingly high decided to release this sensitive information.

"Sunny," she replied.

"Sunny, you'll know if I made it if there are big explosions. Little explosions will mean I didn't make it, because I am relatively small and easy to explode. So if you hear big explosions then gather the boys up and get ready to jump into whatever vehicle I end up hijacking, probably an orbital paracooper. Then we'll get you off into space, where all directions are available."

She bowed a thank you to him for his work so far. Then Xolo turned and strolled down to the edge of the lake. Off on the horizon he could see Gukkool's cruiser sitting like a streamlined, arrogant whale with a

swarm of choppers around it, ten smaller cruisers, a hundred yachts, a thousand junks and hovering overhead the spherical form of a sky-defense system to prevent this whole impressive scene from being vaporized by some unlikely throwback to the days of war.

The sultans and other potentates didn't vaporize each other anymore. No one wanted to go back to the old days when the gap between ruler and vapor was a small one. potentates played by sporting rules now. Which was why someone like Xolo who frequently killed sultans, dukes, shoguns and the like - and did it thoroughly to make sure it couldn't be undone - was so dangerous.

Now to capture a sharkman and ride him over to the cruiser. The problem with doing this - in addition to all of the things that were obvious to anybody who knew what words meant - was that unlike the ninjas, who were in deep stealth mode, the sharkmen were headnet connected. They were low enough down the food chain that their movements were logged and their optical inputs were crowdmapped. So if you got sighted by a sharkman, you were fucked. Even if it didn't manage to rip all your limbs off. Which it probably would.

Sniper flat, Xolo watched for the first shark leap. After about ten minutes it came: the magnificent sight of the blue-grey form ripping itself free of the liquid in a great splash. At the apex of the leap, it fanned out its arms and legs to snag another half second of air and scan its surroundings. Then back in the water where its ampullae of Lorenzini kicked in and it soaked in the electromagnetic presences and pressures of deep down.

Before it had landed, Xolo was in the water, entering like an eel with almost no ripples. He coasted on momentum, breathing gear allowing him to stay mouth-down in the water as he log-floated in.

A few minutes later, another beast hauled itself out of the water and Xolo was able to swim hard and fast for almost thirty seconds as the lake was full of distracting information about the size and speed of unruly and unrestrainable shark/human hybrids at play. Then he did the eel float again.

If one day Xolo got to be old and to bounce kids on his knee - and if those kids were allowed to discuss murder and carnage - he would let them know that (to his mind) the characteristic that made the best killer was patience. Not so patient that you waited for the target to just drop dead - since that was against the spirit of the job - but theoretically you had to have that level of limitless patience, a devoted belief that whatever it was you were doing now was the perfect thing to be doing.

You had to be able to forget not just about watching television or eating halva or having sex but also about maybe just standing on the beach and throwing grenades in the shark pool and swimming in through the blood storm, because you had already considered and eliminated that possibility and the eel thing was what you were going to do even though time seemed to drag and the time spent near the eye of the enemy always feels long and heavy.

Eventually (since although Xolo has limitless patience, we are dependent on words such as 'eventually',) Xolo found himself very close to a sharkman. And then the sharkman eventually dove down and Xolo swam into his wake and followed him down. It was dark down there and signal was poor so Xolo was able to quickly stab the shark man in the back of the head and carve out the parts of his brain that were not to Xolo's liking. His eyes were turned on, and his limbs still worked but his skin was numb. He didn't feel Xolo on his back.

Xolo clung tight with static pads on his hands and using a very subtle pheromone lure he steered the sharkman past junks, and through warships. When need be, he rolled his half-tamed sharkman over to show its smooth belly and grotesque genitalia to watchmen and cameras and almost comically soon, he was boarding the cruiser and setting the beast free.

Xolo infiltrated the cruiser. The cruiser was just too big. Everyone knew it. The designers knew it as they drafted them in floating blue ink. The salesmen knew it as they practiced their pitches in the dark where you can't see yourself sweat. The sultans knew it as they leafed through the catalogs.

They were too big. They were indefensible. Even with sensors everywhere and considerable outsourced human brains processing the security signals, theoretically a small and determined force could figure out a way to get around the cruiser. Because you had to be able to have fun on these things. You had to have women and men in rubber things crawling around. You had to have a river of kiwi juice and one of kiwi blood. You had to have all these things otherwise why were you a sultan? Why didn't you just build yourself a thick black cube of lead, bury it in the middle of the planet, masturbate for a while and then kill yourself?

Xolo was coming. All of the sultans sort of knew it. They didn't know who Xolo was, or if he even existed as an individual, but they knew that once or twice a year one of them was assassinated. No one knew who was behind it and that was what bothered them most. After all, even a sultan must die one day and this assassin was no sadist. He killed you

quick with a clinical shot to the head, like they used to kill cows during the days when everyone ate meat, back on the old world. What bothered them most was the sense that someone else was winning. That there was a game going on, with surely the most massive stakes imaginable, and as they were being picked off one by one someone else was moving forward an agenda that would, presumably, one day topple the galactic order and end the days when you could have a planet and a cruiser on it and have thousands of brains doing all of the tedious parts of living for you. The magnificent days.

The days were five or six percent less magnificent just because of this assassin.

Today was the turn of Sultan Gukkool. Xolo made his way through the defenses like you make your bed. There were moments when it seemed difficult and frustrating, but you knew that it had to be done, would eventually be done and that eventually you would luxuriate in the quality of your work, smooth and relaxed.

Now Xolo was standing on the main deck of the yacht, behind an enormous palm tree, stripped down to his pale grey survival suit, his pistol, his grenades, his scimitar. His face was covered by a pale mask with light green goggles. He had the pale, slick looking aspect of a maggot. A green-eyed maggot.

Xolo rolled out from behind the palm tree. His pistol was pre-targeted on eight guards and he let off a killer combo that took them all down in a couple of seconds. At the first shot, Gukkool's force bubble had surrounded him, anticipating a sniper round. Xolo never made the rookie mistake of trying to take out the main target with a sneak shot. No projectile was fast enough, no energy beam reliable enough to get through modern shell-tech.

But once his eight guards were down, his hookers were running, his counselors paralyzed with fear, and you had a good scimitar at hand, the force bubble was just a place where the assassin kept his prey while he executed his moves.

The sultan wished that he were not about to be split in two. He wished that he had built a roof on his Planet.

In a bloody whirlpool, Xolo jumped onto the dais where the sultan traditionally surveyed his revels. With just one slash and a flash of meaningful sparks on its surface, Xolo's scimitar disrupted the force shield, defying all of its recent firmware updates. Firmware updates meant exactly jack shit to Xolo.

The sultan dropped down into silk pillows, like in the old days. The blood of a sultan belongs on silk.

Xolo had a split second to act before backup systems kicked in. Once the sultan was dead, his funds would be escrowed and then only the most basic security systems would be left active and he could easily get away.

But in that split second, the plan crumbled and the nine-year reign of terror of the assassin came to an end.

Fifteen dead sultans, plus collateral damage and huge impacts to the galactic political and economic system. It was an impressive total and would probably never be equaled, but now it was over. Those who admired audacity, verve, determination and were not so rich as to fear him and not so poor as to be too busy in ceaseless mental and physical labor and not give a shit about him, would raise a glass to his long unbeaten run. If they ever found out, which they probably wouldn't. It didn't pay to share information like this.

But tributes have outraced narrative! What happened that Xolo would fail? Fail to put holes in a fat thing on a pillow? That doesn't sound like the shark-surfing Xolo we have come to know.

But as the Sultan landed on his pillows, Xolo saw something shiny buried down there waiting for him. It was the three kids in their capes, sitting with little handcuffs and gags.

Xolo knew that he could take out the sultan, but that would be death for the kids. No way he could get them out of here in the bloodbath that would follow.

Xolo was not a cold man. He liked the kids. But there was more than that behind his decision to not pop the sultan open and complete his assignment. He knew - in those fine tuned instincts of his - that the kids were linked to something big. He knew that they offered him the chance to take his campaign of violence into a new direction. And he felt like it was time. His reflexes were slowly degrading. And the last time he had been kicked in the balls, it had hurt. He needed to find a way to assassinate which was not dependent on reflexes or balls.

Or one day - in maybe two years time - he would get his brains blown out. And as the parts that remained in his skull leaked out all his meaning, he would remember the little dead silver kids. And one thing he wanted more than almost anything else was a perfect death.

He dropped his gun and got on his knees with his hands on the top of his head. He looked to Sunny and said, "I'll get you out of this."

She admired him enough to stay quiet, but not enough to show any kind of confidence on her face.

“I will,” he said.

No movement on the sandy little face.

Ninja knees breaking all limbs.

Rib xylophone.

Garlic breath.

The High counselors starting with high-pitched shrieks of orders.

And by the time Xolo blacked out these fancy counselors sounded like working men, watching chicken-lizards kick each other dead, momentarily just a few inches above the absolute bottom of the ladder of exploitation.

Then unconsciousness.

The usual unconsciousness.

The thing that was absolute nothingness but which somehow managed to end.

A little universe.

Chapter 3

Nowadays torture was done within the jelly.

Xolo floated in the jelly. It was a pale blue one. That was the worst kind. It was extremely expensive. Sales of it had gone up every year since Xolo had begun his reign of terror. Xolo knew these things.

It now filled his lungs, eyes, ears, nose and yes his etc.

It was his world now.

Outside the world, he could make out two counselors. Level 3, it looked like. They were rocking ridiculous Mohawk pompadours of blonde over their blue-black skins. Other than the size of their noses they were functionally identical, although one had sharper eyebrows.

Big Nose and Small Nose were figuring out their interrogation strategy when the little jelly master informed them that the subject had regained consciousness. A lot of people could only torture a ‘Subject’ and not a ‘Person’. This was one of the single tiny grains that gave Xolo any hope for the human species.

How sad is that?

Big Nose stepped to the edge of the Jelly.

“Ambient pain: up!” he barked. Or yapped. If you were as tough as Xolo [or close to as tough as him [I think we’ve already seen that he is at

a hard-to-obtain level of toughness]] very, very few yaps ever even got to bark level.

Xolo swam a little in the jelly. This was supposed to be impossible, since it was full of trauma inducing hormones. But he had prepared in a vat of his own. He knew it only FELT like swimming in razor blades. And there was ZERO chance of detaching your nutsack. It was just jelly. And he knew an amazing cocktail, not actually that hard to make (as long as you had pineal glands available) that was an excellent tonic for post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Counselor. Don't torture me. It doesn't work the way you want. It ends up with me stuffing you face first into a turbine. This isn't a threat or a promise. This is the history of the future.

"I'm happy to talk high level though."

The big nosed counselor put his face close to the glass.

"You know your face doesn't show up in any records."

Xolo nodded.

"So, did you alter your face...or the records?" continued the counselor.

Xolo shrugged.

"Both, right? Clever. That's what I would do."

(No you wouldn't. You would never do anything.)

"Anyway," he continued, "I have to torture you because the psych scanner is showing up some abnormalities and so I have to stress your personality."

"Don't think your rulebook will protect you," said Xolo. A little blood-lust was pooling in him. As someone who killed in microseconds, torture was a particularly alien thing. Well, not alien. It was like a cockroach. In your fridge.

The torture began. The cold torture of a knob you can twist. Intangible pain. Could be fake. Anyone can scream. Who really knows how much pain another feels? Isn't it possible that what they consider agonizing is my everyday? Maybe I am always in agony and no one knows. Maybe my skull is too small. Maybe I have a cancer that no one knows about that means I am always on the edge. Or I was just born this way. In pain and in tune with pain. Naturally tough and just not making a big deal about it. And what this guy is going through now... that's what I get while taking a rugged crap.

And so the knob gets twisted.

Xolo felt intense pain. It went beyond the point where you can be sensible about it. His body began to fear reality. When that happens, the

mind is suddenly homeless. The homeless mind seeks solace. It runs to the next flesh it can find.

Life
Goes
On

...

Xolo got his stomach pumped, but he was tied up with barbed wire and naked. It was a clumsy scene.

The two counselors watched him from behind glass.

"So what did we get?" said the smaller nosed one, the one who had found something really important to do during the torture but was back now that the would-be-killer had been brain-pulped.

"Okay, I will come right out and say it because I can't stand the thought of the snide comments you are going to make if I try and hide it: basically nothing."

"I like how you had to say basically...you couldn't just say nothing."

"Counselor Chang, you would do well to hold your tongue. When I ascend to a higher rank, I shall surely remember these indignities."

"Oh come on," said Chang, sipping a mint tea. "Whichever one of us gets promoted first is going to have the other one killed. So I might as well enjoy the opportunity to wind you up now. So what scrap did you find?"

"Well, he locked up his brain very tightly, and we started trying to break in the usual way and we were getting plenty of recent memories. Namely, sand. And bumping into those children. Then some images that didn't fit. A yacht. A beautiful antique yacht, but with modern trimmings. On a very rough and unmanufactured looking sea."

"Did you like the little yacht, Counselor Boyle? It sounds like you did."

"Chang, I once found your idiocy frustrating but now I find it comforting, since you have openly declared your hostility to me. It will make your defeat all the easier, and my revenge on you even more satisfying."

Chang sipped on that tea some more. Although there was a chance that the cup was empty and Chang was faking it as a pose. Boyle would give half of his fortune to discover that it was empty. But then what would his line be? 'Oh stop sipping on that empty cup, you poser'? That was to the point, but clumsy. 'Your head is as empty as that tea cup!' had a touch of flair but it would sort of be coming out of nowhere.

'More tea, Chang?' Yes! That was it! But of course he could only use it if he knew with absolute certainty that Chang's cup was empty.

Otherwise Chang would say that he already had tea, was Boyle an idiot but thanks for being my tea-boy. Something like that.

Fuck!

Boyle realized he had drifted away from the conversation into a day-dream and Chang looked at him with that all-purpose dick-smile.

Well, the day was pretty much ruined now, so might as well just share all of the torture results.

"We think he is wearing a para-personality. We found all the recent stuff and we found a bunch of tough-guy soldier memories. Plenty of stuff about how he assassinated fifteen other sultan-level individuals. We were starting to get further into his past even though he was fighting hard. But I became concerned that he was about to die, so we only had a few minutes left and I couldn't stop thinking about that yacht. Because it was incongruous, Chang. Not because of any feelings I myself may have about yachts. Which frankly leave me rather cold, since the topic has arisen. But the yacht meant something. We went back in that area and we found that the alpha waves of the subject morphed when we dug around the yacht. Then I realized what was going on..."

"A paraperpersonality."

"Exactly! He's cloaked. All that stuff about the previous assassinations is fiction. He's probably some brainwashed yachtsman from the planet Nowhere who has been sent in by...probably by Sultan Menendez...to kill our master and distract and deceive us."

"Boyle, stop it. You are dangerously close to impressing me."

Xolo was being encased in a plascrete shell that showed only his face. His face looked waxy and removable, free of any muscular content.

"So," continued Chang, walking over to the teapot and refilling. "You went under the paraperpersonality and started digging in on the real deal. What did you find?"

"Ah... well he went into cardiac arrest once we stared looking back for the yacht."

"Lovely. Well, I'll handle the second interrogation."

"There will be no second interrogation."

"You what?"

"The sultan wants an execution."

"The sultan...since when is the sultan making decisions. Did someone give him a banana?"

"The sultan did not receive any fruit. But may I remind you that the charter of decisions is clear on this point. An assault on a sultan is punishable by immediate death. The sultans know this stuff you know."

"But we've already had him for an hour. Can't we have him for an other half-hour."

"Sultan's nap time is coming up."

Chang regained his cool, smoothed out his point eyebrows.

"Well, whatever. We live to serve. How does he want it done?"

"Arrows in the eyes."

"Always the arrows in the eyes..."

Chapter 4

The magnificent throne deck of Sultan Gukkool had been hastily repaired. Fresh flowers hung from the golden buttresses that framed the immaculate sky. The dancing girls got an extra high dose of pleasure drugs and so were able to dance over the trauma of the recent attack.

Gukkool stroked his beard. He looked at himself in a little mirror. Was he too fat? Not fat enough? Or was fat not even important now? Was it all about nose length or number of fingers? His people were not keeping him up to speed. He was sure that the other sultans had better people and that they looked better too. That was probably why he had been targeted for assassination. And now he would have to hold a council of sultans and they would probably give him a hard time about his security procedures and how he was letting the sultans down and how it would probably have been better if he had died in the attack and then they could have reformatted his planet with its vulgar font choice.

The other sultans hated his font choice. Well, Gukkool's Mom had loved that font and had smiled when she saw the photo of the planet that had her name tastefully drawn out in lakes across its surface. The other Sultans should get over it. Since they were all basically illiterate it was unbecoming to even have a favorite font, if you thought about it. Which Gukkool did. He was a thinker among sultans.

"Bring him in!" shouted Gukkool and so it was done. The jugglers stopped juggling; the broncotron was turned off.

The plascrete cocoon was floated in, coaxed by two bare-chested, hormonally adjusted bodyguards with smooth skin, bald bodies and disturbing pectorals. Disturbing to all except the Sultan and probably his mother.

Gukkool stretched his bow. He never missed a flying squid or a concrete-trapped eyeball. He took out two arrows, all he would need. He had an idea that he was amazed it had taken him forty years to discover.

An arrow that split like a fork at the end, spaced for the typical eyeball spread.

He called over counselor Chang to discuss this plan and Chang took it with his usual spearmint efficiency. "We shall commence the measurements my Sultan.

As they lined up the target and brought in the mysterious children to witness the barbarity, Gukkool started to consider how rarely he would be able to actually use the binoculararrow. Firing it at hired hands was beneath tacky. Perhaps he would have to slacken his security procedures so that more would-be assassins made it on board. And then... Pwing!

The little boys were crying, but in a very fetching and kittenish way. The little bitch was still steadfast. He'd see how she held up when the first drops of eye jelly spattered.

Gukkool looked up at the killer's face. It was just as he would have wished it to be. Tan, aquiline, fiercely, intelligent, nice hazel eyes.

"Well, hitman, don't beg for mercy but if you tell us who sent you I'll make this quick."

"I can't do that," he replied somewhat surprisingly. Gukkool was sure he would be silent until death.

"And why is that?" Gukkool asked.

The hitman replied, "Because no one sent me. I am the automatic assassin."

Chapter 5

The court was interested. The counselors gathered from levels 7 up to Level 2. The level 1 counselor was in bed, resting for crucial moments. It seemed like he might need to be waking up soon.

"What is this nonsense?" asked Sultan Gukkool, loosening his bowstring and losing his focus.

"I don't work for anybody. No one called me up and told me to come and get you. I have no grudge, either. Nothing personal."

Xolo was not exactly playing for time, since no backup plan existed. He was playing for time's cousin: probability. He knew the truth of his life was loaded with novelty and unlikelihood, and that the richer you were the more these were the greatest treasures life could provide. Once you have fucked, killed and eaten everything - often in one mammoth session - your beast mind retires and your baby mind dominates. Babies love to play peek-a-boo, but they love it more than anything if instead of

Mommy or Daddy's face appearing when the blanket comes down, it is the face of a scary monster.

Try this with a child, sometime.

But at any rate, sultans are strange fish and they like strange waters. Xolo span a story that just happened to be true.

"So why do you kill? Are you naturally evil? Do wish to make yourself more attractive to me?" asked Haja Gukkool, son of Old Haja.

"There's this thing," Xolo said, "called money. My goal is to have more of it than anybody else. When I achieve this then my second goal kicks in, but let's not get too far ahead of ourselves.

"So: money. Through the usual piratical means, I made a lot of money in wars. But the money per head in a war is shitty. Eventually I would get tired and my earning potential would go down and eventually I would get potted and that would be that.

"But I noticed how the markets went up and down when one of you sultans were killed. I sat down with some great mathematicians that I hired. We came up with a great algorithm that could predict how the markets would swing when a sultan died. Very predictable. Practically a sure way to make a lot of money. The only issue was..."

"You could never know when a sultan was going to die!" said Gukkool. The counselors looked among themselves. These foreshocks of meaningful brain activity from the sultan were very, very worrying. This 'Automatic Assassin' talk would have to be shut down soon. But it was Gukkool who held the bow and now it was lolling around like an old teddy bear dangling from a kid's hand.

"Precisely. But there was another complication. Let's say a Sultan like you had access to this information. You'd start acting strange. You'd throw the map off. And as I became richer and richer I too would start to become part of the equation, right? So I set it up like this. The algorithm works. It figures the value of a dead sultan or duke or whatever. It moves my investments around. And when it gets to a point where the kill would return way above the market rate, it sends me a letter just saying who has to die and by when. Then I act.

"My client...? I'll tell you who he is. He is the invisible hand of the market. A blind machine."

Gukkool sat down on a stool of coral. It made a lot of sense. The sultans had come into a kind of balance during his father's time. Once everyone had a planet or two, they calmed down. But an outside force like this could soak up all of the energy that it required just to do nothing to each other and capitalize on it.

“So, let’s talk more about this algortith...”

“Your majesty!” it was Magrega, one of the level two counselors, a tall jet-black woman with no hair in the public domain. “I would just like to remind you that there is a time limit on the immediate execution rule, and if you don’t kill this man within the next minute or so, this will move back into the coverage of the Standard Decision Making policy and, well...those arrows will be staying dry for at least a while.

Magrega’s counterpart, Dubloon, stepped forward too, booming his words through his beard...a beard that somehow amplified and clarified rather than muffled his words. Unless when beardless he had a voice of crystal purity. I suppose that’s more likely isn’t it. It was just a beard, not a trumpet.

“Magrega speaks the truth, sire. And I think we have got all of the juicy stuff out of this man now. His algorithm won’t work for us, and probably now he is exposed it won’t work at all anymore anyway. And look at those eye sockets, sire!”

Gukkool’s brain was now full of words that he didn’t like. He wanted to be done with this and masturbate into the ocean for a while. He lifted his bow, pulled back the string and locked his aim on the right eye. The eye did not blink or close. Awesome!

Just before the shot that everyone – almost everyone – was waiting for, a loud clear, bell-like voice filled the room. The little girl had got to her feet and spoke and her manner alone would have commended attention but she also said something really surprising.

“Listen all! I, Princess Sun-Moon of the Planet Earth, heir to the Terran Throne and the Human Empire, declare that this man is henceforth under my majestic service in the office of Royal Guard and that accordingly all the protections of my Father’s throne must be afforded him on pain of death and the surrender of your titles.”

Gukkool fired his arrow high in the air. It got close to the sun, as far as human perspective is concerned, then fell into the ocean.

Inside their cloistered selves, everyone was swearing.

Chapter 6

The girl’s credentials matched up. She knew all of the secret words and gestures. Gukkool’s air fleet was able to find the wreckage of her downed starship exactly where she had said it would be, decorated with the royal crest. It was an ancient ship that had been given the king in tribute: his escape ship in the event of a planetary emergency. The only

starship left on planet Earth. They also saw that the ship had been able to send off a partial distress beacon before the crash, so if they shot Princess Sunny in the head and threw her to the many and various teeth below, there was still a decent chance that this would ultimately all come and bite them in the ass.

The sultan went to bed. Counselor 1 was awakened and then brushed his teeth.

They got Xolo some nice clothes and some nice food, and the same for the little royal kids. Xolo and Sunny conspired in the corner, while the young princes marveled at cage full of Grapple Slugs.

The level 8 counselors sent out data calls. They gathered as much info as they could about what was going on back on old Earth. The answer they got was, as usual, not much. The old Earthers still did their work, the mad old king still roamed around his beloved mudball. There was no reason at all why he should be sending his beloved children wormhole-bouncing into the edges of busy space unless he was conspiring with someone. It was possible that some sultan was seeking to harness the old king's almost forgotten but still enforceable legal prerogatives. One, for example, was that he owned all swans in the galaxy, of which there were none.

But many other of the King of Earth's rights were much more troublesome, such as the inviolable sanctity of his person and that of his family and household. The thought of this Automatic Assassin with the shield of the King of Earth over him was a horrifying one.

A ton of data moved up to level 7, where trends were observed.

Patterns moved up to level 6, where consequences were measured.

Consequences moved up to the 16 counselors of level 5.

By the time the counselors of level 4 met for their ten-minute stand-up, there were four alternatives on the table.

The level 3 counselors came in and chased the level 4 counselors away with sticks. They skimmed over what the level 4 guys had done and threw it in the trash. They drank huge cocktails and then came up with four plans all of their own. Only one of them noticed that they were basically identical to the plans that had come in from the level 4 guys, but what was the point of mentioning that?

The two level 2 counselors met quickly. The endless and recursive sexual frisson between them limited them to few words. They chose the two most compelling plans. 1) Kill all of the outsiders, sink the cruiser, come up with some story 2) Send Xolo and Sunny back to earth, Xolo

with a hundred-million-dollar contract to spy on the King and make sure no-one else left that mudball alive.

They then assigned each plan to a different fruit. Plan one would be a mango. Plan two would be a star fruit. They assessed the fruit that was tendered to them by the galley master and, in honor of the standing of their offices, picked only the very freshest examples. They then sent the fruits to the Level 1 counselor. He placed them on the sacred dishes. And carried them to the Sultan's quarters.

As usual Gukkool said, 'What's all this about?' and as usual Counselor 1 said nothing. A sweet aroma of stars met Gukkool's nose and he reached down for the star fruit and then rammed it into his mouth.

Counselor 1 bowed and left.

"That fruit guy is alright," thought Gukkool.

Chapter 7

Xolo expertly piloted the starjumper away from the surface of the cruiser. He noted to himself that when he had signed the contract and taken the implant there had been no explicit clause in there about not dropping bombs onto the cruiser and killing all on board. But there was a troublingly vague clause in there about doing no harm to the interests of Haja Gukkool or his clan and this attractive little bombing would fall right in the middle of that.

Just asking the question set off a kind of fizzy sensation along the plane that divided the two hemispheres of his brain. Xolo had never been fitted with a mind-bomb before and this new morality that it imposed was freaking him the hell out.

He breathed. He focused on making the best of the new fucked-up.

Earth was calling him.

The kids were in cute little orange spacesuits with helmets and everything: totally old school. Xolo decided to just go with a simple g-suit, made of purply black webbing. They popped out of the top of the planet, and you could see the weird calligraphy of lakes and mountains.

Xolo had a moment of "Oh what's the point of it all," like we all do from time to time. As it happens, the very worst time for this to happen is as you exit a planet and see the black gash of space, speckled with dandruff stars.

He shook it off, the weightless mass of life.

He pointed the ship towards the nearest blackwarp and then engaged the solar sails. The sails rejoiced in the blue light and flipped away from

the shiny rock. Speed upon speed upon speed. This was a nice ship. They headed into the blackwarp, a young rent in space that looked like a hollowed out tree that had been blasted to charcoal by lightning.

The children shivered, even Sunny. This was a fresh evil hole. The speed it gave you was different than the speed of the sun. This was the speed of the phrase 'would you jump in my grave so fast?'

This was falling through the floor.

This was hands coming from nowhere and pulling you down.

Outside (the outside of the inside of the underside of the real side,) black and grey knotted veins swished past at increasing speed. Soon the trends were all you could see as even those hyperlight channels began to blur.

Ahead Xolo saw the main junction where this branch merged with the main artery to earth, the Auschwitz Autobahn. He cruised them around a right angle that contained huge volumes of inhuman space. They hit AA1, diving through screams, faces, and other real illusions.

Children shouldn't see this. Children shouldn't go into space. He tried to cover Sunny's eyes, but she swatted his hand away.

"I've seen it before," she said. "Also it knows how to go through your eyelids, doesn't it?"

After about twenty subjective minutes Xolo started to see signs of insanity on the kids' faces. The metal inside the ship had started to ring with resonant screams. Xolo had a stun gun that was very very non-fatal so he popped the kids with it. They plopped rag-doll style in their g-seats.

Then he sat in the control seat and watched the vast insult they were traveling through. Proof that people were unable to face reality was all about him. Firstly the large window at the front of this ship. Despite the fact that space travel was disgusting to look at, people had always expected spaceships to have beautiful windows where you could admire the delicate architecture of things. How many billions had been spent developing a window that could handle trans-light speeds and pressures?

So there was that.

The next proof that people couldn't handle reality was the very existence of blackwarps. In the year 2101 an itinerant, so-called psychic started to notice that his clairvoyance was strongest when he visited sites of mass-murder and genocide. This would all have been ignored if he had not been married to a highly tolerant quantum physicist. She took measurements for him and found that indeed, there were unusually high levels of quantum tunneling in areas like that.

Governments got wind of this. Corporations too, more importantly. Sadly it was proven that human trauma creates holes in space. Genocide-level events create holes big enough to fly through. Every place on earth that had ever witnessed a genocide became a gleaming spaceport. The more focused the genocide the better. The Auschwitz Autobahn led to a beautiful sector of the galaxy that was loaded with human-friendly stars and strong trade winds.

Once the galactic empire got going, and once all this “government” and “corporation” shit got finally merged, thankfully and inevitably massive wars broke out, reddening the freshly occupied planets.

In a dark room - actually, the lights were on in this room and there were bagels and flowers... actually, it had an amazing view... actually, hookers brought the bagels - in this room, plans were made for Concentration Bombs. These bombs were dropped from the abstract heights of space onto a warring army who were trying to hold a muddy field. The bomb would explode overhead and shoot millions of micro bullets that would pierce armor and inject the men with tailor-made hallucinogens. The soldiers would quietly start to ramble across the fields and blindly gather close together. They had a herding instinct that the bullets unlocked. Meanwhile, in their minds, they were in a hellish death camp: tortured, starved, their children farmed. The months of their minds passed. Old friends became unrecognizable, or rather indistinguishable: they all had the same skullface. The tortures were unimaginable, or no... we can all imagine them. We could all sit on a bench with a pencil for thirty minutes and design them.

And then, about thirty objective minutes after the hallucinations began, the second phase of the bomb would arrive. A conventional explosive that killed all the soldiers and ripped open space. Then engineers would descend and get to work finding the new hole in thingness: folding space back, pinning its skin, making sure the blackwarp stayed open and mapping where it went and determining if it was somewhere their lords and masters would like to go to. These engineers had signed agreements when they got their jobs where they agreed to be preemptively driven insane so as to see which ones could still do engineering work with their minds wasted.

Back up copies of their minds were kept by the sultan who hired them, but the small print was that a restoration had never been successfully achieved.

So these lunatics got to work. They slavered, chattered and usually one of them killed one of the other ones, but they got those damn holes open.

Soon, the galaxy was a web or a tree rooted in deep old earth. Along the web (or tree) moved the treasure you can get when you are willing and able to crack small planets open like walnuts and drain them.

Massive wealth, slavery of the mind and body, the flight from Earth. Ships that sailed through genocidal seas.

People would plan a trip on these black seas and when they got there they would drink cocktails and dance the lambada. They would do their duty, do their work, raise their kids. They would honeymoon on clear and objective proof that the mind is the substance of things; that all of this dirt and hate is our responsibility. The universe is composed of the same substance as our pain.

One day Xolo would be the richest man in the universe and on that day things would change pretty damn quick.

But for now he was falling back to Earth, planet of the farmers.

CONTINUED IN "AUTOMATIC ASSASSIN" THE NOVEL

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Automatic Assassin : Episode 2 : The Man with the Mantis Horse (2011)

A cyberpunk space opera about Xolo, a man who replaced his conscience with a machine.

"An extremely funny and wild and poetic science fiction story. Lots of wit, interesting characters, wild locales, fantastic imagery," Berit Ellingsen, author of The Empty City

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