

THE PERFECT ASSASSIN

By K. Linden

The rifle was set. There was little else that he had to do, save pull the trigger. He brushed off his navy sweater and sat back on his heels, smiling at the representative with him. He had never missed a target with his first shot, not once in thirty years. His was an excellent record, a superb record; but not one to satisfy his latest clients. He wasn't happy with his escort, but he could afford to be generous.

A dumpy man in brown tweed left the building; Dr. Rasov. There were a few people around, but they were in no danger. He had never taken an innocent life, another record that he was proud of.

He frowned. A woman walked up to Rasov and began to talk with him. She could be a student, or a colleague. He had not expected her.

Still, he waited. His finger on the trigger, he waited for that inner call, more precise than any sighting device.

He pressed the trigger. The woman with Rasov glanced upward at that instant. He saw her, alert and ready. She pushed Rasov to the ground. A woman behind them screamed when the bullet hit her, then fell.

He was stunned. Thirty years and this had never happened! He pulled a handgun and shot the representative before the man could react. Then, he dropped the pay envelope on the body. The clients would not be after him for that.

The assassin paused and looked across the street. Rasov and the woman were gone. She had destroyed his perfect record. She would pay for that. With her life.

Purdey didn't have to ask, the look on Gambit's face was enough.

"Nothing," he said in disgust. "A dead man and some money, but no gun. No killer." He looked as if he wanted to hit something.

"Typical," noted Steed. "Remove the only witness and leave the pay-off money for the client. Very neat and tidy, no loose ends." He tipped his bowler back with the handle of his umbrella.

Purdey knelled down when she heard a groan. She shook her patient gently. "Dr. Rasov?"

Rasov groaned and sat up dizzily. "Oh, how I ache!"

"Look at the bright side," said Purdey sheerfully. "At least you're alive."

"Thanks to Purdey's reflexes," noted Steed. He offered her a hand up.

"Now what?" asked Gambit.

Purdey sighed. "Back to square one," she concluded.

"It's not that bad," said Steed. "In fact, what Gambit turned up almost clinches the case."

"But there was nothing there!" protested Gambit.

"Precisely."

They waded through the files in the comfort of Steed's home.

"How old are these?" asked Purdey in despair.

"Thirty years worth," answered Steed.

Gambit threw another one onto the pile. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"That's the common denominator," explained Steed. He poured himself a scotch. "An assassin so perfect, he's never needed more than one shot."

"So that's why there wasn't a second try," mused Gambit. "He had plenty of time for it. And plenty of opportunity."

"That's not his style," said Steed. "When the first shot missed, his record had ended."

"He must be a legend in his own time," said Purdey.

"He is. The only name we have on him is A-Prime. He is, was, the top assassin in the business."

"Why was?" asked Purdey. "Surely one miss does not an ex-assassin make?"

"That was part of his myth. The hierarchy of assassins normally has a high turnover rate, but A-Prime has been the top assassin for thirty years. No one ever succeeded in removing him. He seemed infallible."

"But we've proved he isn't," continued Gambit. "Which means he's fair prey for any assassin out to make a name for himself."

"There must be hundreds!" exclaimed Purdey. "They'll all be after him."

Steed tapped the files with his hand. "Which is why we have to get to him first...."

Purdey lounged on her couch, flipping through the files she had taken home. A man had to make one mistake in thirty years. She had to find it, fast.

The phone rang. She half-consciously answered it, still skimming the file. "Hello?"

"Hello. May I speak to Purdey?"

Male, she didn't recognize the voice. "Speaking. Who's this?"

"You have a lovely voice. Your file doesn't do you justice. By the way, I'm the man who's going to kill you."

Purdey whisked the files from her lap and reached for a button that would tape the call.

"Don't hang up," he said. "I'll just have to call back. And don't bother to tape or trace the call. I've seen to your machine."

"You've gone to an awful lot of trouble," admitted Purdey. She was far more curious than afraid. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"You may know me as A-Prime. You disrupted my business yesterday."

"You do realize that every assassin in the country will be looking for you. If you turned yourself in, we could offer you some measure of protection."

The assassin laughed. "No, I'm far safer where I am, thank you. Which is more than I can say for you. There is no where you might go that I could not follow you. I was hoping that we might arrange your death conveniently, so that it would be easier for all concerned."

"Do you actually believe I'll stand still and let you kill me?"

"I think you will. And I am certain that you will choose that course of action over any other. What if your 'associates' should be involved, hm? I would have to kill them also, if only to cover my tracks. Neither one of us would want that; it would only make me more visible and...well, you might have your reasons. I could kill them at any time. I'll prove that to you tomorrow...."

"Wait...."

A-Prime hung up. Purdey dropped the phone into its cradle. She reached down to pick it up again, then stopped.

A-Prime seemed capable of killing her at any time.

Fact: a surprise attack might lead others to him.

Conclusion: he would arrange her death conveniently.

Fact: he had removed her tape system, rather neatly, in the last twentyfour hours and she hadn't seen any sign of his work. Conclusion: he could probably do what he claimed.

Fact: he had claimed that he could kill Steed and Gambit. Conclusion: ...She didn't want to think about it. But A-Prime didn't want to kill them, it would draw attention to himself.

Fact: he said he would prove to her that he could kill them, not that he would kill them. Conclusion: he planned a simple demonstration. Hopefully.

Purdey retraced her logic five different ways and came to the same conclusion each time; A-Prime was planning a non-lethal demonstration. If she warned Steed and Gambit, and A-Prime noticed something unusual, the demonstration might be more deadly.

She paced, knowing that she should call them, but not daring to. It was going to be a long, sleepless night.

Steed caught up with her at the front door of the Ministry building. "Good morning."

Purdey stifled a yawn. "Good...morning."

"You look tired. Is something wrong?" asked Steed with concern.

"I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Yes, I understand." Steed indicated the files under his own arm. "A-Prime, is it?"

"Pardon?" asked Purdey in alarm.

"You're working too hard on this one, Purdey. I'd tell you to take the day off...."

Purdey smiled. "But I wouldn't."

"I know. Oh, almost forgot. I was given something for you this morning. Not a poison pen letter, I hope." Steed handed her a yellow envelope.

Purdey scrutinized the envelope. Her name was scrawled across the front in red crayon. "Where did you get this?"

"A boy handed it to me as I was getting out of my car. He said that he was a friend of yours. Why?"

"Nothing..."

Gambit strolled over. "Is this a closed debate, or can anyone join?"

"We were just discussing this envelope," said Steed.

Gambit pulled an identical envelope from his jacket. "A girl gave me this when I left the car. Important?"

"They're identical," noted Steed. "Purdey, what does this mean?"

Purdey opened the envelopes. Both contained a single white card with a time on it, 9:00. She laughed. "I'd almost forgotten. An old friend was supposed to call me tonight. He said he'd make sure I remembered. I certainly won't forget now."

"That's one mystery cleared up," said Gambit. "Too bad A-Prime won't leave cards around. Speaking of which, anything?"

"Perhaps," said Steed. "His last clients weren't pleased when he disposed of their cover man. It seems that he was related to their boss...."

Purdey wasn't listening. A-Prime had said that he could kill Steed or Gambit.

Fact: he could get to them without putting himself in danger. Conclusion:

She was on her own now.

The clock struck nine. Purdey let the phone ring twice before she answered it. "Hello."

"Ah, Purdey. You received my message then. Are you convinced?"

"That you can pass a card to them, yes. But killing them is another matter."

"Yes, I agree with you. But it would be costly, for both of us. No, it must be you and I, alone. I shall even offer you an incentive, you may bring a weapon. If you so much as wound me before I can kill you, I will surrender. Though, I do not think that likely. Does that meet with your approval?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"Yes, you do. You may live and watch your friends die. But, I am fair. Choose the place of our duel."

"You make it sound like a party. All right, there's a field with a cabin about three hours drive from here...."

"Yes, a friend's cabin. You vacation there. I know all about you, Purdey. I have the address. Shall we say noon, tomorrow? Will you have your affairs in order by then?"

"It seems like I'll have to. Noon it is."

"Goodbye Purdey. You shouldn't be offended if I don't wish you luck." He hung up.

Purdey replaced the phone, then picked it up and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Mike?"

"Purdey, nice to hear from you. It's absolutely dead over here...."

"That's nice. Listen, will you leave a message for Steed for me. He said that I should take some time off and I think I will. I'll be away for the weekend, leaving this morning."

"You're all right?"

"I'm fine. I...just need to get out to the country for a while."

"This A-Prime thing, huh?"

"What?"

"She heard files scatter on his side of the phone. 'It's absolutely discouraging, almost makes you want to get out of the business. No man is that perfect.'"

Purdey sighed. For a moment, she was certain that he knew. "Just leave that message for me."

"You...wouldn't be interested in coming down here and giving me a hand with these files...?"

"No, I have a lot of...letters to write."

"Worth a try, anyway. See you Monday, then."

"Mike?"

"Um? What?"

"...Never mind. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Purdey. Sweet Dreams."

Purdey hung up the phone. There was no sense in delaying it. She had a lot to do in case...well, just in case.

Gambit gathered up the files and trudged back upstairs. Almost one o'clock. He hadn't thought that it would take that long. He didn't even bother turning the light on, he'd only have to turn them off again on the way down.

He passed a room, then stopped. The sound of a metal drawer sliding open was unmistakable. Mentally, he catalogued the contents of the room; a desk, a few chairs, and files. Personnel files. He put down the files he was carrying and tried the door.

It was open. Gambit slipped into the room, drawing his gun. He flipped on the lights.

There was a woman dressed in a black jumpsuit going through the files. She closed the drawer, leaving one file on top of the cabinet. She turned slowly, smiling.

Gambit appraised her quickly. Young, twenty-twentyfive, pretty in that outfit, probably stunning in anything else. Her hair was red, he couldn't call it any other color, but it was subdued, not very bright, and curly. She was probably an amateur.

"You do have a perfectly rational explanation for being in a ministry filing room," said Gambit.

"Of course, I'm checking the files. What else does one do in a filing room?"

"Funny. Who are you? Who do you work for?"

"Mind if I sit down?" Gambit motioned her to a chair.

"The name's Foxfire. Currently...."

Foxfire looked as if she were sitting down, but she used the chair to launch herself across the room, at Gambit. If

he had been a third of a second slower, she might have succeeded in reaching the door. As it was, she only knocked the gun from his hand.

Instinctively, Gambit backhanded her across the room. She went into the filing cabinet, then fell face down on the floor. She seemed as if she were trying to push herself up from the floor, her hands near her head. Then she stopped moving.

Gambit moved toward her cautiously, but with concern as well. She didn't seem to be breathing. He hadn't meant to hit her that hard.

The girl jumped up from the floor. Something covered her nose and mouth. She held a small container in her hand. The gas was under pressure, and it hit Gambit before he knew it was there. A few seconds later, he was sprawled on the floor, unconscious.

Foxfire left the room quickly. She had found what she had been looking for.

The locked door proved no problem for her. She had called Purdey's apartment earlier, but there had been no answer. The place was still empty. She cursed angrily. If she hadn't been so clumsy, she would have seen more of Purdey's file and gotten an idea of where she would meet A-Prime.

There were three envelopes on the table, plus an open letter. Foxfire read the letter and thanked whatever lucky star she was born under. The letter contained the address where Purdey would meet A-Prime, actually where they would both meet A-Prime.

Foxfire left the letter and reset the lock. It was four o'clock. If she hurried, she might get there before A-Prime. If not, she would be accused of murdering Purdey.

Steed wondered at his more than minor success at tracking A-Prime. The man hadn't made a mistake in thirty years, but when he missed that shot, the thirty year career was at an end. People remembered him, the man so obsessed with something that he'd walked into them. A-Prime was making mistakes and that could lead only to his death. There had to be some last detail, something that so filled A-Prime's thoughts that he did not remember to cover his tracks.

He didn't want to try it alone, but he had no choice. Neither Purdey, nor Gambit could be found, which annoyed him slightly. He couldn't afford to wait for them, A-Prime might move at any moment.

There was no answer when he knocked at the apartment door. Breaking in seemed the sensible course of action. His efforts were in vain, for the room was empty. There was a note on the table and some money, presumably for the payment of the bill. By the telephone was a sheet of paper with an address and telephone number on it.

The number was more than familiar. It was Purdey's.

He went through the drawers quickly. Then the trash. It was there that he found a duplicate of Purdey's file. Steed flipped through it and found the address, a reference place to look if she were on holiday.

Steed tried Gambit's number again, but got no answer. Purdey's number was the same. He could only fit this new development into his theory. A-Prime was concerned with only one thing, killing Purdey. Steed left the room, taking the file with him. He had to find out what was going on, and fast.

Purdey's life was on the line.

Gambit wearily pulled himself up from the floor and over to the door. Foxfire, if that's what her name was, was long gone.

He checked his watch in surprise. It was five o'clock. Whatever she had thrown at him was potent, enough to keep him out for four hours. He had a tremendous headache, also.

The file she left was still on the cabinet. He opened it curiously and flipped through it.

It was Purdey's.

Suddenly, he put the phone call and the cards together. The thought made him nervous. He called her place, but there was no answer.

Gambit broke open the door without bothering to knock. He looked around, no sign of a struggle. Then, he saw the letters.

The open letter caught his eye first. In it, Purdey assumed that she was missing, presumed dead, after not returning from her holiday. She mentioned the letters to be delivered, the location her body might be found....

Gambit crumpled up the paper in his fist, throwing it angrily across the room. The letter said that she was to meet A-Prime at noon. It was fivethirty. He didn't know how to get there, but he would be there at noon.

He turned to go, then saw the sealed letter, with his name on it. He looked at the envelope, then shoved it into his pocket. Gambit hoped that he wouldn't have to open that letter.

Purdey checked the clock again, almost eleven. She had expected to arrive earlier, but the roads were quagmires. She was as prepared as she could be; two guns, a knife, and a grenade, if all else failed. It should keep A-Prime busy, if she had a chance to use it.

She jumped when she heard the knock at the door. Her hand ready for the pistol, she crossed to the door and opened it.

A very muddy woman stood there, smiling sheepishly. "Can I use your phone, please? I wrapped my bike around a tree. A bright thing to do out here in the middle of nowhere, huh?"

Purdey smiled in sympathy. "Just bad luck. The phone's on the table."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." The woman pulled off her helmet, revealing her curly red hair.

Purdey closed the door, almost glad to have some company. "Wherever you're going, it's not much of a day for it."

"I was just on a joyride. You're right, though, the road is mud and not much else." The girl leaned against the table, helmet in her hand. She dropped the helmet, revealing a gun. "Don't try it!"

Purdey sat back down again. "A-Prime? I thought I had another hour...."

The woman laughed. "No, I'm Foxfire. I'm not in his league, yet. He's in his own league. Always has been, until...."

"...He missed Dr. Rasov?"

"Until you threw him off. Not that I hold it against you. I might never have gotten this chance to kill him."

"You sound as if you're doing him a favor."

"I'm number two and I want to be number one, is that so awful? He's good, but I think I'm better. I plan to prove it. I don't kill for sport, just for business."

"I may be great at growing plants, but that doesn't mean I have to be a gardener. What if I decide to stay here and not be your bait for A-Prime?"

Foxfire smiled. "I can kill you here, or he can kill you out there. Either way, you're dead. Let's say the difference is about twenty minutes of life. Care to decide?"

Purdey shrugged. "I'd rather face A-Prime. He prides himself on being able to kill with one shot. Besides, he's probably a better shot than you are."

Purdey rubbed her arm thoughtfully. Foxfire had dropped her guard once, the opportunity that Purdey had waited for. She had fought, hard. But Foxfire had guessed her moves. If martial arts was the science of falling, Foxfire was a master. Every time she seemed to be down, she was up again in the blink of an eye, usually in an advantageous position. She would have loved to have seen Gambit fight this hell-cat.

It was all academic now. Foxfire had sent her into the field unarmed. She looked around the field, but Foxfire was nowhere to be seen. Foxfire was there, though, waiting and watching.

He was there, but she didn't see him until he was barely twenty feet away from her. The man looked like a businessman, suit and tie slightly rumpled, but altogether respectable and hard working. He was the best in the business, the top executive, A-Prime.

He seemed to be appraising her also. "You are on time," he noted pleasantly. "I admire that."

Purdey smiled. "It's bad manners to be late for your own funeral."

A-Prime laughed. "It almost bothers me that I have to kill you."

"Then don't. You can still turn yourself in to...."

"And gain a few minutes more before another kills me to take my place? No, my life doesn't mean that much to me. I would die now, rather than die in a cage. I'm too old for this. I've gotten sloppy. Your death will be my last triumph, my last kill. You should be honored."

Purdey shifted her footing and a gun appeared in A-Prime's hand. There was no place to run. If Foxfire didn't kill her, A-Prime would.

"No cigarette or blindfold?" she asked.

"If you wish...."

Purdey smiled again. "I don't smoke. It could kill you, you know. And I'm not afraid of you. Or dying."

"Commendable. Would you like me to deliver some message for you. To your mother, perhaps...."

Purdey almost stared in surprise. Foxfire was almost directly behind A-Prime, though some forty feet away. "Would you believe that there's an assassin behind you. I'd suggest that we drop...."

A-Prime chuckled. "An old trick, but well revered. I'm surprised you bothered."

Foxfire's gun came up steadily. "I'd listen to the lady, if I were you."

A-Prime whirled, just as Foxfire fired. He fell, a surprised look on his face.

Foxfire walked up slowly, her gun on Purdey. "Don't go for the gun. I'd rather not have to kill you."

"Fine with me," said Purdey. "But you do have a gun on me."

"I didn't let him shoot you, did I? There was no reason to. I told you, I only kill if I have to. A-Prime was my target. If you had interfered, I would have killed you too. The air's gone from your tires, but I left the phone in. You can call for help, unless you have an air pump...."

"Purdey!"

"Damn!" exclaimed Foxfire. She held her gun on Purdey as she watched Gambit approach them from the left.

Gambit slowed when he saw the situation. His gun was on Foxfire.

"A Mexican standoff," announced Steed, as he came in from the right.

"Stay where you are," warned Foxfire. She saw the scheme of things in her mind; the four of them in a diamond formation. The man on the right didn't have a gun, but she couldn't be sure. She was cornered. The smart thing to do would be to drop the gun. She had never been known for doing the smart thing.

"There's no place for you to go," cautioned Steed. "You know that. Drop the gun."

"I can't," muttered Foxfire under her breath. "I'm not moving," she added firmly. "Back off, drop your guns. I'll leave here, no shots fired. If not, I'll kill her."

"We drop our guns and you shoot us down," said Gambit. "Not on your life."

"I'm betting my life!" shouted Foxfire.

Steed shifted, she turned her attention toward him.

Suddenly, she saw what they were doing, drawing her attention away from Purdey. Purdey was going to try something, but what? A-Prime's body wouldn't offer much cover.... Damn! She'd only been number one for three minutes and she'd already made the fatal mistake. A-Prime's gun was still near his body!

Almost unconsciously, the gun shifted slightly, her finger pressing slowly on the trigger....

Gambit had been waiting for Purdey to make her move when he caught the minute motion of the gun. He fired, aiming at her hand in an attempt to throw off Foxfire's aim.

First Gambit's gun, then Foxfire's went off. All Foxfire knew was that the bullet went through the palm of her hand, exiting on the other side. She doubled over in pain, her hand clutched against her chest.

Gambit ran over to her, his gun still in his hand, his finger still on the trigger. He yanked Foxfire to her feet with one hand.

Foxfire looked him straight in the eyes and didn't like what she saw. Every instinct told her that she was dead and, momentarily, a bullet would rip into her heart to prove it.

He didn't shoot, but dragged her over to Steed and Purdey, and released her.

"You're all right?" said Gambit anxiously. "You went down...."

"Well, I wasn't going to stand there and get killed."

Steed glanced at the body. "A-Prime?"

"Yes," answered Purdey.

Foxfire fumed. "Would somebody mind doing something, before I bleed to death...." Suddenly, she saw flashes of light. Then everything went black.

"But she did save my life," protested Purdey again.

"Purdey, she broke into the Ministry. She's an assassin!"

"Did she take anything, hurt anyone?"

"No, but she did knock me out."

"Ahah! So you're jealous!"

"Jealous! Of all the...."

"And she led you to think something was wrong, didn't she? You wouldn't have known where I was, would you?"

"Yes...No.... Oh, it's hopeless," said Gambit angrily. He brightened. "One good thing came out of this."

"What?" asked Steed. The phone rang. He moved to answer it.

"A letter. You left it on the table, Purdey. Remember?"

"Letter? Oh, that letter." Purdey crossed the room nonchalantly. "You didn't look at it, did you?" She picked up a cigarette lighter and began toying with it.

"No, didn't get a chance. But I have it right here...."

Gambit reached inside his pocket. His face fell. "It's gone!"
"No, it's not." Purdey held the letter up, touched the lighter to it and, as Gambit reached for it, dropped it out the window.

He turned on her angrily. "Purdey...."

"What?" she asked innocently.

"If I ever get my hands on your pretty little neck...."

Steed hung up the phone. "She's gone."

"Who's gone?" asked Purdey.

"Foxfire. They didn't even question her. She was still unconscious when they let the doctor see her, right after we left as a matter of fact. They finally became suspicious when the doctor didn't answer an emergency call, a half hour later. The doctor was tied up inside. Foxfire was gone."

Gambit chuckled and was quickly rebuked by Steed. "Sorry."

"I did say that she was good," said Purdey.

Gambit saw something slipped partially under the door. He picked it up, looked at it, then opened the door and checked the hall, even though he didn't expect to find anything.

"You did say that," noted Steed. "Now, it's A-Prime all over again. We have nothing for the file."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Gambit threw the card onto the desk. It was the caricature of a fox's head, crowned by flames.