

STARFLEET ACADEMY THE ASSASSINATION GAME.



## Chapter 1

### CH.01.30

#### TAG

“Ladies, gentlemen, hermaphrodites, cogenitors, and asexual life-forms,” Nadja Luther said, her eyes sweeping the Starfleet Academy cadets gathered around her, “welcome to the Assassination Game.”

Leonard McCoy rolled his eyes as Jim Kirk grinned and nudged him.

“I don’t know why I let you talk me into this nonsense,” McCoy grouched.

“You know *exactly* why, Bones, and if you don’t be quiet, she’s going to think you’re not interested.”

Jim was right. The only reason he’d come along for this damn fool business was because of the senior cadet leaning against a desk at the front of the classroom. Nadja Luther. She was lean, tall, and as cool as a mint julep in July. Her auburn hair reminded McCoy of a Mississippi sunset, and her blue eyes reminded him of Romulan ale. Perhaps most importantly, *nothing* about her reminded him of his ex-wife.

“The Assassination Game is simple,” Nadja told them. “Each of you will be given the name of another player. Track down and assassinate that player. When you score a kill, you inherit your victim’s target. If *you* are killed, you’re out. The game ends when only one player remains.”

The cadets around the room broke into quiet but animated discussions.

Kirk clapped his hands and wrung them like a supervillain in an old holo-novel. “This is going to be *great*.”

“There are only two rules,” Nadja went on, her easy voice bringing them all back to order. “One: You can only score a kill when you are alone with your victim. If there are any witnesses, whether they’re players or not, there is no kill.”

“Great, just great,” McCoy said as the cadets in the room talked excitedly among themselves again. “Just what we all need—a little more paranoia in our lives.”

Kirk smiled. “Just think, Bones—this is the perfect opportunity for you to get Cadet Luther alone.”

“Yeah. If I can catch her.”

“Rule two: The only weapon that counts for a kill is *this*,” Nadja said, and she held up one standard-issue titanium Starfleet Academy cafeteria spork.

Those cadets whose species had a sense of humor laughed, and Nadja placed a tray of sporks onto the desk beside her.

“Do I have a volunteer to help me pass them out?” she asked sweetly.

McCoy felt a hand push him off the computer console upon which he sat, and he stumbled forward. He turned to glare at Kirk, but his friend was, at present, innocently examining his fingernails. McCoy cleared his throat, tugged at the bottom of his tunic, and tried to regain what little cool he previously possessed. Nadja smiled and put the tray of sporks in his hands.

“It’s ... Bones, isn’t it?” she asked him.

“Leonard,” he told her. “Leonard McCoy. But you can, um ... you can call me Bones if you want to. My friends call me that. If you wanted to be my friend, I mean.”

Nadja raised an eyebrow and grinned at him, and McCoy turned away, cursing himself. *Smooth, Leonard. Very smooth.* He shot a look at Kirk. Jim had his eyes closed and was shaking his head.

McCoy soldiered on, handing out sporks. There were at least two dozen cadets playing the game, including Humans, Saurians, Deltans, Tellarites, Efrosians, Andorians, one enormous Orion, and a catlike Caitian who purred as he took a spork. McCoy had just begun to calculate the odds that he would make it out of the room alive when there was a stir over by the windows.

“The Varkolak!” someone said, and within moments every cadet had warped to the other side of the room. McCoy hurried over himself, unable to resist curiosity. It was hard to see well from this high up in the math and sciences building, but he could just glimpse a mob of leather and metal and fur—*lots* of fur—in between the battalion of Starfleet Security personnel who escorted the visitors to the empty barracks building where they would be staying. It was the first time McCoy had ever seen a Varkolak outside of holo-vids and medical journals, most of which were acknowledged to be inaccurate at best and wholly misleading at worst. He and the rest of Starfleet Medical hoped the upcoming Interspecies Medical Summit the Varkolak were there to attend would clear up some of the confusion.

“I’ve heard they bite the heads off live animals and drink their blood,” whispered a cadet.

“My uncle says Varkolak howl at the moon,” said another.

“You know how you get a promotion on a Varkolak ship? You kill the officer ahead of you.”

“Professor Entarra says they’re really here because they want Theta Cygni,” bellowed Braxim, the big Xannon cadet who had become McCoy and Kirk’s friend.

“Yeah, well, the Federation wants the Gavaria Sector, and I don’t think the Varkolak are going to be giving that up soon,” said another cadet.

“We have met the enemy, and it is them,” Kirk said quietly.

“I don’t think that’s exactly how the expression goes,” McCoy told him. Down below, the Varkolak contingency and their escorts disappeared into the barracks. “Show’s over,” McCoy announced.

“Yeah,” Kirk said. “And can we wrap this up? I’m actually supposed to be down there on Added Security Detail at 1300 hours.”

McCoy finished handing out the sporks, and Nadja jangled a black felt bag that focused them all on her again.

“Each of you has given me a spare Academy badge with your name and serial number on it. Those badges are here in this bag. When I come around, you’ll each draw one. The name you draw is your first target. If you draw your own name, drop the badge back into the bag and draw again.”

McCoy tried not to stare at Nadja Luther as she started around the room, holding the bag out to each player as he, she, or it drew a name. *Why her?* McCoy asked himself. Why had Nadja suddenly become the object of his affections? She was mature, yes. As a senior she was at least close to his relatively advanced age, a result of his having attended eight years of medical school before joining the Academy. She had a take-charge, no-nonsense attitude he loved too. She was one of those people—like Jim Kirk—who you knew was going to be a captain someday. Someday soon. And then, of course, there was her smile, which lit up her face and sent shivers running down McCoy’s spine.

Nadja stepped in front of him, and he blushed like she could read his mind. It was his strong suspicion, based on years of experience but no hard scientific evidence, that women were, secretly, telepathic. At least the girls he’d dated had been. He tried to smile as Nadja offered him the bag, but he suspected it came out more like a grimace.

McCoy cleared his throat, pulled a badge from the bag, and barely glanced at it long enough to see that it wasn’t his. McCoy hardly cared about the game, the Varkolak, his upcoming xenobiology exam, or *anything*, for that matter, that was not named Nadja Luther. Nadja smiled at him and moved on to Kirk, leaving the scent of lavender and apple blossoms in her wake.

*Probably just her damn shampoo*, McCoy grouched to himself. *Forget a cure for the common cold. What we really need is a vaccine for falling in love.*

Beside him, Kirk pulled out a badge, read the name, flipped it into the air, and caught it confidently. Nadja moved on, and soon she was back in front of the room, where she put her own hand inside the bag and drew the last of the badges. She looked at the name, smiled, and slid it into her pocket. McCoy found himself hoping she’d pulled *his* name from the bag, and realized probably half the cadets in the room were thinking the same thing.

“That’s it,” Nadja told the cadets. “You have your targets. There are no safety zones and no time-outs. The Assassination Game begins *now*.”

The cadets in the room eyed one another warily and began to leave in groups of three and four. McCoy was about to suggest that he and Kirk leave with Braxim when his friend's eyes told him something else was up. He turned to find Nadja coming their way.

"I was thinking, Leonard McCoy," she said, "that I would like to be able to call you Bones. But as I understand it, that name is reserved for friends."

She was smiling coyly, but McCoy still went red at the reminder of his earlier flub.

"I was wondering," she went on, "what a girl has to do to become ... your friend?"

McCoy observed almost intuitively that he was exhibiting symptoms of dyspnea and tachycardia, which he diagnosed as shortness of breath and an increased heart rate due to exposure to an actual potential date. He swallowed and tried to take a deep breath.

"Well, a friendly drink together at the Warp Core around 2100 hours would be a good start," he told her.

"The Warp Core at 2100 hours then ... Leonard," Nadja said, and she left with the last group of cadets.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Kirk said, clapping him on the shoulder. "She's interested in you, Bones."

"Either that or she's just trying to get me alone to kill me."

"Oh, I don't think it's that," Kirk told him.

"Why not?"

McCoy felt something poke him in the ribs, and he looked down to see Kirk sticking him with the business end of a standard-issue titanium Starfleet Academy cafeteria spork. In his other hand, Kirk wagged a golden Starfleet Academy badge with McCoy's name and serial number engraved on the back.

Kirk grinned apologetically. "Tag."

"Jim," McCoy told him, "sometimes you're a real bastard."