**Korlat Station, in orbit of Cerea, Semagi System, Mid Rim**

**39 ABY**

Raleien sat at a small table situated in front of a large viewport on Korlat station. In one hand he held a datapad, forgotten in the moment as he examined the thriving planet just beyond. It seemed almost close enough to touch, like an orb of bluish-green glass he could scoop up in two hands. Yet he knew there was a distance of a few hundred kilometres between him, the void, and the planet beyond.

The trade platform, which held a stable geosynchronous orbit above the paradise world of Cerea, had a number of rounded windows outfitted with radiation-resistant materials which allowed the denizens of the station the chance to admire the picturesque world from above. While these apetures could be seen as a generous privilege aboard a trade station, Ye the old loyalist knew there was a more sinister meaning behind their function. The viewports allowed a glimpse of paradise from afar. From a distance. The implicit message behind their existence was that outsiders – non-Cereans, mostly – were mostly unwelcome on the surface. They did have good reason for this, as Cerea was an ecologically pristine world unimpacted by the consumption of galactic urbanization and industrialization. It was a world of peace, where its denizens lived in balance and harmony with nature. And though some privileged few were allowed on the surface in the aptly named Outsider Citadels, most guests of the system were relegated to stay on Korlat station or its sister platform, Oponn station, located on the other side of the planet.

Korlat station was a trade platform, and the old Pantoran had arrived to meet with a client who desired his deadly talents. The Cereans were known to be a peaceful people that embraced a low technological life. But like most others in the galaxy, if enough credits flowed, they would look the other way when bounty hunters and mercenaries did business here. The unspoken rule was business took place off-world, and never on Cerea. Breach of this unspoken contract could mean death, or worse.

The Pantoran looked down at the datapad and read its contents for what seemed like the hundredth time:

*Captain Sonavarret,*

*My name is Kenath Voron ad Vizsla. I’m participating in a killing game known as the Pro Bowl in five days. I have a squad roster to fill.*

*I’m not a man of many words, so this will be direct.*

*You know how to fight and wage war. I need that. You were also recommended by one of our mutual associates, the Alderaanian duke.*

*There are three reasons you should do this. First, the prize money. Millions of credits per person. But if money isn’t for you, there’s also recognition and connections. Some of the top mercenary companies and bounty hunters will be watching, looking for new blood.*

*But third and most important for you is the chance to kill one of your sworn enemies on the opposite team. The former Stormtrooper captain TK-9412, better known as Mera Kos.*

*If you’re in, the coordinates for the squad rendezvous can be found in this datapad. Also before you ask yes, we are the Rotworms. No, I did not choose the name. And yes, we’re stuck with it.*

*Make sure to wear a mask when you’re here. Removing the mask is a symbol of your commitment. The Pro Bowl will have an agent stationed within our meeting, so if you take that off too early your stuck with us.*

*If you’re out, just don’t show up.*

*Your call.*

*KV*

Mera Kos. The Butcher of Mimban. A soldier so deadly and cruel that even the Empire had to issue disciplinary action for going too far.

The name made Raleien shake with nearly uncontrollable rage. He tried breathing, but it didn’t work. Instead, the Pantoran gripped the datapad in both hands, his knuckles growing pale at the strength of his grip. Tighter. He channeled his feelings and anxiety and horror into the grip he held on the datapad. Tighter still. The touchpad surface of the slim datapad was cracking under the pressure. Finally with a grunt the screen shattered and the datapad was ripped in half lengthwise in brief crescendo of his mighty anger.

He dropped the pieces of the datapad, its data luckily already copied onto another on his belt, to the floor. Forgotten, he looked up again to gaze out upon Cerea. Through the gloom of his diminishing anger, the dazzling world seemed les s

Their history was one of bile and blood. Mera had commanded a company of troopers in which Raleien had been a senior squad sergeant. She had gotten them all killed. Every last member of his squad had been sacrificed to buy Mera time to escape an ill-advised offensive. And then she had burned an entire city on Mimban to the ground.

He had made up his mind. Raleien stood, turned away from the viewport and began to make his way toward the docking ring. He would play this killing game. And he would kill Mera if it was the last thing he ever did.

**Uninhabited Planet, System XR-1509, Unknown Regions**

**39 ABY**

*12 hours later…*

The team, code-named Rotworms, had finally assembled in the dank underground chasm deep in the Unknown Regions. The temperate planet they had all landed on was unnamed and mostly uninhabited, save for themselves or others who sought solitude in an increasingly accessible galaxy.

It had taken a few hours for everyone to arrive. Folks had received their coded signals or direct invitations from across the galaxy at different times, depending on where they had previously been located. Yet at long last, the nearly three dozen or so masked figures of every race and gender and class waited on the damp rock, uncertain and on edge. The tension in the room could have been cut with a butter knife.

Raleien and those around him looked up from the chasm floor to the metal balcony a few metres above. Footsteps rang in their ears, and an unmasked human man in unmistakable Mandalorian armour appeared at its edge, peering down at his flock with predatory, violent eyes.

“So, the kriffing pile of poodoo who invited us decides to show his ugly mug,” said one of the masked individuals from the crowd. It was a man’s deep baritone voice, perhaps another human. Raleien wasn’t sure.

The Mandalorian man raised his hand in a mock greeting. It placated the crowd, who fell silent from their snickering. The man let the silence stretch, looking over the assembled misfits and murderers from across the galaxy who had agreed to participate in Operation Pro Bowl, a twisted battle for survival between two teams with some of the most lucrative prize winnings in the entire galaxy. And the man above, Kenath Zoron ad Vizsla, was their captain. One of them, anyway.

“And so, you’ve come,” Kenath began with a relaxed, easygoing tone. “You’ve all answered the call. Filthy rich or stinking poor, principled or the scum of the galaxy, you’ve decided to show up. Congratulations.

“But that isn’t going to be enough. I need you all to dig deep and reflect on why the hell you’ve decided to be here. Is it the money? Is it the killing?” He paused for effect and looked at the crowd, meeting the masked eyes of everyone below him.

Finally, he continued, “You don’t have to make a choice yet. Stand there and listen. Allow me to be your guide to the final choice of participating in this killing game, or walking away without another word.”

He held up both hands. In one was a pile of credits. The other was one of his blasters. He gestured to the as he continued to speak.

“You’re here because you’re greedy. Or you’re insane. But all of you, you think you’re a winner. You’ve got something to prove. Or a reputation to keep. And you at least think you’re willing to lay down your life for a chance at not only the prize money…” There were hoots which cut Kenath off momentarily in the crowd, but they subsided quickly. He continued, “But also the honour, glory and legacy of *victory*.”

Kenath dropped the credits, holstered his blaster, and then balled his right hand into a fist and brandished it before the crowd.

“That’s how we’re going to win. We are going to be the baddest batch of bastards in that damn arena. None of you are going to go into this thing expecting anything short of absolute victory. If you have doubts, get rid of them. None of you are going to leave this chasm until you have it in your heads that you’re going to win no matter the cost. I want you to hammer into your damn souls that anyone opposing us is not going to gain a single inch of ground, or kill a single one of us, before we absolutely slaughter them. We *will – not – YIELD!*”

The Mandalorian colonel was silent for a moment, and his expression was feral. He was mad with the desire to win at any cost. But he was persuasive. The crowd of masked figures nodded or hollered in triumph. Some called Kenath’s name.

“Now… now, you get it. You’re all here because you some of the most talented killers this galaxy has to offer. But more importantly, you’re here because I believe that you – that *we* –are winners. Victory is out there. All we do is go out there and seize it.

“Every move our opponents make, we will respond. Every attack, every retreat, every feint, we will predict, adapt, and overcome. We will be victorious, as long as you remember to believe.

“But I’ve spoken enough. For those of you still wanting to be a part of this team, climb up the ramp and join me through this passage up here. It leads to the landing pad with our transport. You have thirty minutes to decide before it takes off. Your gear is packed.”

Without another word, Kenath turned and strode back the way he had come.

Every single masked person on the chasm floored moved as one. Masks fell to the stone floor. No one would be left behind.

*10 minutes later…*

As the shuttles which would carry the Rotworms prepared to depart, Raleien focused on preparing his weapons and gear for battle. He picked away at his now deconstructed blaster pistol, cleaning its innards with an adept grace.

“Sonavarret, a moment,” said a voice from behind.

Raleien turned to see Kenath standing behind him. The Mandalorian exuded confidence bordering on arrogance, and he seemed eager for the fight ahead of them. From what little he knew of the warrior humans called Mandalorians, it seemed very on brand.

“What can I do for you, Kenath?”

“Two things,” the human man replied. He held up two fingers. “First, you’ll be serving as one of my command team. I’m placing you in charge of our assault teams, and you’ll advise me with tactical recommendations.”

“Okay, can do.”

“The second thing is this. You need to promise me that the moment Mera Kos is in your sights you won’t drop everything to kill her.”

Raleien froze. He *had* been considering it. He needed to take his chance and shoot his shot. Who knows when the target could re-appear again? And yet, if he abandoned a team he now had command over, he might commit the same heinous acts Mera had done by getting his entire assault team killed over petty vengeance.

“You see it, don’t you?” Kenath asked, his voice only soft enough for the grizzled Pantoran to hear over the sounds of loading cargo and personnel.

“Aye, I see it.”

Kenath grinned.

“Listen, stay bloodthirsty. We need that drive, that passion. But remember this killing game is a team sport. If the weak die, let them. But the group I have here, these Rotworms – we’re a damn strong lot.”

“I’ll keep my head on right. Mark my words, I will.”

“Good. Then let’s load up. Time for the Pro Bowl.”