

*Define your meaning of war
To me, it's what we do when we're bored
I feel the heat comin' off of the blacktop
And it makes me want it more
Because I'm hyped up, out of control
If it's a fight, I'm ready to go
I wouldn't put my money on the other guy
If you know what I know that I know
It's been a long time comin'
And the table's turned around
'Cause one of us is goin'
One of us is going down*

*I'm not runnin'
It's a little different now
'Cause one of us is goin'
One of us is going down*

From the song; "You're Going Down" By Sick Puppies

***Monolith
CSP Capital, Elaya
Caperion System, Seraph***

Xendar stood at the far end of the Monolith's observation deck. Cloaked in the Force, he was unseen from sight and the senses from all but the most strongly attuned force sensitives. Xendar turned his gaze toward the garden area; at its center stood Emperor Thran, accompanied by Lady Rayne. The two were engaged in a sparse but reserved conversation.

Since the fall of Lord Kamjin, Lord Thran had taken up the fallen emperor's mantle of leadership in his stead.

After a successful takedown strike on Claudis the Hutt's operations, Xendar found himself ordered to some very unusual assignments, everything from a wild goose chase of a supposed insurgent leader through the sewers of Caelestis city to acting as a dignitary bodyguard and tour guide (A job he personally loathed) to his current assignment, literally working as part of the security force here at the Monolith. These busy work assignments kept Xendar in locations that locked him down, leaving him very little time for his family or investigating in the Imperial Missions.

The reigning thought in his mind as to why he had been given those particular assignments had to do with the conversation that he had with a dying Bes'stine Heriz, which Xendar had refused to divulge details of that conversation with an outright lie when questioned by Lord Reiden and Lady Rayne.

While it irked him greatly that someone was questioning his loyalty to the clan, he did understand why; it was still an annoyance. Especially when questioned about his beliefs, he had stated on more than one occasion that his loyalty was to the clan and the people, not to its leadership. And if certain lines were crossed, he would not hesitate to fight what he saw as treacherous actions against the clan.

But inevitably, there were some who thought the leadership of the clan and the clan itself were one and the same.

Xendar shook his head, trying to clear those thoughts. *Watch, listen, and wait*, he thought to himself. *If someone is culpable of a crime, they will expose themselves in time. Besides, You can't run this like a plausible deniability mission. Not only do you have parents and a daughter, but you now have a wife and her family to think about.*

A flash of movement caught his eye. Emperor Thran was leisurely strolling toward the exit while Lady Rayne spun around and angrily strode away from the center of the garden area. Her footsteps rang across the rough duracrete as she walked toward Xendar's assigned station.

"Operative Shadow Walker," she said in a neutral voice as she turned to watch Emperor Thran exit the observation deck.

"As of this moment, you are relieved of duty. You are to report to the Emperor aboard the *Palpatine* in two weeks' time. Be mindful that the Emperor is according you this privilege even in light of your recent performance." Rayne said as she turned and started to walk away, then stopped.

"Do not disappoint him!" She added with an angry snarl as she looked over her shoulder before she walked off.

The space near where Rayne was standing began to shimmer slightly. It began to take the vague shape of a humanoid figure before being replaced by a black-cloaked figure.

Xendar watched as Rayne left the observation deck. His mind reflecting on what she had said. *I can see why the Emperor values what she thinks. To find someone that fiercely loyal is truly a rare find. And while the Emperor may be accused of quite a few things, being a fool is not one of them*, he thought to himself as he made his way toward the exit. He then started to ponder his own situation, his mind played upon an old adage he had heard long ago: *There are two ways to deal with someone you consider a dissident. If they are useful and or valuable, you keep them close, and you keep them busy. If they are a liability, you eliminate them.*

50 km west of the capital, Elaya Caperion System, Seraph

For the next two weeks, Xendar put the entirety of Scholae Palatinae out of his mind. He knew that as a precaution, the Emperor had ordered a few sets of eyes to watch him and what he was doing. Not that he cared for the most part. They could watch all they wanted until they died of boredom. For most, his schedule bordered on the mundane and banal; it consisted of the upkeep and maintenance of his family's new home and land, helping his father set up his architectural firm in one of the spare rooms, exploring the countryside with Daesha after she came home from school while training her how to use her force powers, helping with meal making and clean up afterwards or spending as much time as he could with Oriyanna as they were coming up on their first month wedding anniversary.

And if he felt that those prying eyes were getting a little too intrusive in certain personal matters in his life, he certainly had ways to deal with them, and deal with them he did.

Emperor's Private Room

CSP Palpatine

Caperion System, orbiting over the planet Seraph,

"Operative Shadow Walker, reporting for duty as ordered," Xendar said as he respectfully bowed to the Emperor after he let go of his force cloak.

In the dim light of the room, Emperor Thran stood in front of the observation port, his back to the room. He did not show the slightest hint of surprise or acknowledgment of Xendar's sudden appearance.

"We will soon be departing for the Crannix space station, where we will be starting negotiations with the delegates of the Shusno System," Emperor Thran stated. He then paused for a moment.

He stared intently at something, as if some object in the depths of space had caught his attention. "We have a certain item in our possession that they desperately seek. And while I do believe that they will hold to their principles and take the honorable path. But with that being said, I cannot rule out that some within their society may stoop to extreme duplicitous means to attain what they desire. That is where you come in."

Xendar remained silent, waiting for the Emperor to continue. As he stood there, Xendar began to feel a sensation through the force, like ripples on the surface of a body of water, moving outward after a stone was thrown into its depths; another presence had manifested itself in the room. Behind the black void that he wore as a mask, Xendar smiled. *Lady Rayne*, Xendar thought to himself. *That should be of no surprise.*

"You are to ensure that the delegates of the Shusno system honor this meeting and that no chicanery will be allowed."

"I understand, my lord, in the event that I find those malcontents, how do you wish me to proceed?" Xendar asked

"That, is at your discretion," Thran said quietly. "Do what is the most expedient for your mission. If you need to eliminate them, ensure that their deaths cannot be linked to the clan," Thran stated as he turned around to look at Xendar.

The door to the room opened, and the figure of Lady Rayne appeared, silhouetted in the light from the door.

"As you wish, my lord," Xendar respectfully stated. He then turned and started walking toward the now open door, "Lady Rayne," Xendar said with a respectful bow before stepping past her and through the open door and literally disappearing from sight.

"Quite the magniloquent language; it seems wasted when simplistic and succinct would have been a better choice," Rayne stated after the door slid shut.

"One must play the part that is expected of them," Thran stated, turning back and looking out the observation port.

"I understand that. But is it wise to use someone like him?" Rayne asked.

Thran chuckled, "Don't worry about Xendar Thendaris; he's one of the more fairly predictable sorts. With someone like him, you just have to point him in the direction of someone threatening the clan."

"Perhaps. Although, I would feel more at ease if he wasn't given this assignment." Rayne said with a feral growl.

Thran slightly turned his head and smiled at Rayne. "Worry not about our errant friend; from reading his psychological profile assessment and by his own admission of his own beliefs, that even if I had committed the smallest of transgressions that he may think that I have done. He has figurately has tied his hands behind his own back. Unless Xendar Thendaris has overwhelmingly irrefutable evidence, he will do nothing but wait and watch. And while he may have some imagined grievance, what he lacks; is evidence to support it. Just remember Rayne, while he is an annoyance, for the moment, he is still of some use to us."

Recreational Sector
Crannix Space Station
Caperion System

Xendar scanned the street from the interior of a darkened doorway, cloaked from sight and from the perceptions of other force users; he watched as a small group of cloaked and hooded individuals slowly walked by. He had been aware of this group for the last two days and had been actively following them for the better part of a day. He watched as they walked into a tapcafe and settled into the seats of a nearby table, arranging themselves in such a way as to watch for any kind of suspicious activity. Xendar gave a nod of approval as he watched as one of them pulled out a small sound scrambler to prevent any electronic eavesdropping; they had also taken the extra precaution of speaking low with their hoods pulled over their faces to prevent anyone from reading their lips. Not that Xendar needed to know what they were saying, as he already knew what they were conversing about. After spending quite some time playing the part of an overworked, incredibly depressed, massively befuddled but slightly paranoid security officer assigned to guard over a seemingly trivial item that required his constant attention. To add an extra layer of believability, he had hired a small squad of mercenaries to guard the "Item" while he went out and quietly vented his problems at the local cantinas while giving the appearance of running up a rather large tab.

And now all he had to do was wait for them to make their move, which didn't take long. After fifteen minutes, they started leaving the table in ones and twos. After the last one of the group left the table, Xendar left the doorway to follow them.

With the last light of the setting sun fading away and the darkness sweeping across the land, this allowed Xendar to increase his movement speed while cloaked from slow and cautious to almost reckless, though using the Force to dampen most of the noise he had made. He watched the figure stop and turn down an alleyway. He then heard the clang of metal as the figure pulled down a low-hanging ladder and began their ascent to the rooftops.

Xendar started a slow count to 10. This action would allow the figure to get started across the rooftops, allowing Xendar to jump onto the rooftops undetected. Xendar took a deep breath, dropped the cloak, and then force leapt onto the rooftops. Landing silently, he watched as the

figure began to pick their way across the adjoining rooftops. The figure then climbed up on a higher-rising rooftop. Then crouching behind a permacrete wall, they pulled out a pair of electrobinoculars, then began to intently scan the area.

Xendar quickly and quietly made his way toward the figure moving his Armorweave cloak out of the way, he reached around and up between his shoulder blades and silently pulled a vibroblade out of its sheath. Xendar crouched low as he drew closer to the figure. Then in one fluid movement, lunged forward, clamping one hand over the figure's mouth, and drew the vibro blade against their throat with the other.

"Make a sound, and you're dead," Xendar whispered in a cold, lifeless voice. The figure apparently understood the situation as they closed their mouth and relaxed their body. "Face down on the ground. Hands behind your back,"

The figure slowly knelt down to their knees and laid face first on the roof, then placed their hands behind the back.

Xendar reached forward with the thumb and first finger of his right hand, grabbing the back of the figure's head at the base of their skull just below their ears, and used the Force to overload their senses, rendering them unconscious.

Bending over, Xendar pulled back the hood, exposing a Chiss male roughly about his age. He then began to search the unconscious figure, finding a small Charric pistol and a Chiss comlink. Then reaching down to his belt, Xendar pulled off a pair of wristbinders from his belt and slapped them on the wrists of the unconscious figure. He then pulled a scanner from a pocket on his left leg and opened a small compartment on it. Pulling out some small leads, he connected them to the comlink.

Thank you, Slicer, Xendar thought gratefully to himself. Slicer was one of the few people outside his family that he trusted. She and her husband, who ironically was a Chiss, had upgraded most of Xendar's electronic equipment and showed him how to use it.

He watched as the scanner came to life, displaying an overview of his location aboard the space station. Xendar gave a quiet grunt of satisfaction as the scanner now also displayed eight other figures on the screen. Hacking into the comlink, the scanner had sent out an undetectable hidden tracer signal to the other seven comlinks.

As he stood up, Xendar ran some tests to ensure that the locator chip embedded within the wristbinders was properly functioning and sending a coded signal. He then tapped his earpiece comlink.

"Viper-Wasp has stung a Pantoran. The Hawk-Bats can move in," Xendar whispered as he cloaked himself in the Force and started toward his next target.

In ten minutes time, Xendar managed to capture another prisoner. This sentry was a female who happened to be carrying, in addition to her electrobinoculars, a Charric sniper rifle. Xendar had just slapped the wrist binders on the unconscious female Chiss when both his comlink, which he had linked to his scanner, and the sniper sentry's comlink crackled to life.

"*Sqibs ch'at Nightstinger, vacosetahn can Nightstinger?*" A voice called out. It repeated itself several more before going silent for a few seconds. "*Sqibs ch'at Howlrunner, vacosetahn can Howlrunner?*" Again, it repeated itself several times before again going silent.

"*Sqibs ch'at Mynock, k'ir vah csah ch'a veb ror Howlrunner ch'auh Nightstinger?*" The voice called again.

"*Nao Squibs. Ch'ah don't csah ch'a veb.*"

"*Sqibs ch'at Jurgoran, k'ir vah csah ch'a veb ror etah?*"

"*Nao Squibs. Ch'ah am ran'cuazo mah csar nezat. Etah ran'cuazo vizan't gotten csei accident cleared vim ran'bin'he'asas carcir seah.*"

"*Nah are finished sah csah. There carcir ch'a vipisbi csei nah csah been compromised. Tset'an'r Nightstinger vim Howlrunner dead ch'auh captured. K'ir nah return ch'at k'ror'bican't! Cset'at k'ir nah return ch'at k'ror'bican't. Von'zan'ami mah coordinates: rar, g'ev, ba, in'a, niuh rat. By vzo, rar g'ev.*" Squibs announced.

Xendar smiled to himself after hearing that outburst. While he didn't have a clue as to what they were saying, he did understand the tone. *Well, time to earn my pay*, Xendar thought to himself. He then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Xendar opened himself up to the force, allowing it to flow through him. After a moment of centering himself, Xendar took off in a burst of Force-assisted speed for the back entrance of the hotel.

The hotel had a single solitary light hanging over the back door; its flimsy glow did little to diffuse the looming shadow of darkness. Which was exactly how Xendar wanted it.

Xendar pulled out his scanner unit and studied the display. The two outlying figures were of no interest to him. His interest was held by the four figures leaving the room of the hotel establishment he was renting it from. Switching the scanner to the hidden cameras he had placed around the room.

As the recording played back, Xendar had to admit that he was impressed with the speed and efficiency of how they accomplished their mission. Although, he found their methods for disabling his extra "Security" forces to be a bit sloppy.

Changing the screen back to an overhead map of the space station, Xendar watched as the four descended down the stairwell at the back of the hotel. *And there they are*. He thought to himself as the back door slowly opened, and an arm holding a Dissuader KD-30 pistol with some kind of suppressor on the barrel. The gun gave a barking cough, and the overhead light burst into a bright flash before disappearing.

Putting the scanner back into the pocket on his leg, Xendar quietly made his way to the stairs. In the darkness, three figures had already slipped out and down the alleyway. Taking up the rearguard position, the final figure through the door, shut it; and stood there with their back pressed against the wall for a few moments before slipping down the stairs.

The stillness of the night was broken by strange sounds. The sounds were a combination of weird click-like noises, whistle-like growls, and bird-like honks from close behind them. This brought the figure to a complete stop; slowly reaching into the folds of their cloak, they pulled out a small blaster. Whipping around, they brought the blaster up to fire, only to be greeted by a Dynamic hammer of a punch from Xendar's right fist, which caught the figure square on the jaw, spinning them around and dropping them to the ground like a sack of wet duracrete.

"Don't like my impression of them, or are you Scared of Fluties?" Xendar said in a mocking voice. He was a fairly decent mimic of people and animals; he was particularly proud of his barely passable Ssi-ruuvi impersonation, as it was incredibly difficult to even try to and mimic. It had taken him a long time to even make a single noise similar to the Ssi-ruuvi language.

He then rolled the figure over and began to remove their weapons and equipment. After finishing that, he slapped a pair of wrist binders on them while changing his comlink back to the standard Scholea Palantine channels. He sent another message to the Hawk-bats for them to move in and claim another prisoner.

Abandoned Industrial sector Crannix Space Station Caperion System

The sound of heavy breathing and running feet and the occasional splash of water as Squibs skirted several deep puddles as she raced down a darkened alleyway.

If there was some kind of purgatory in the universe, Squibs was convinced that she had inadvertently stumbled upon it. Or at least awakened some evil denizen from it.

She and her group were being hunted like wild animals by some unknown entity. After losing Howlranner and Nightstinger of the observation team. She changed the mission objectives and ordered the group to rendezvous at one of the many acquired safe houses. The problem worsened as they were regrouping; she lost Ice and Locks from her infiltration team. Soon after that, it got worse.

Squibs was sitting in one of the upstairs rooms of the safe house near an abandoned industrial section of the station; she and the remnants of her team were waiting for transportation back to the fleet.

The sooner we get that thing out of here, the better." she fumed, looking over at the medium-sized nondescript lockbox sitting on the table in front of her. *This operation has already cost us four team members! I hope it was worth it.*

A horribly offkey caterwauling from the outside cut short her fuming tirade.

"Jurgoran to Squibs," Jurgoran called over the comlink; he and the other two members of the team were downstairs, watching for the transport.

"Squibs here. What is it Jurgoran?"

"I have what looks to be a drunk male Zeltron making a disturbance outside. What do you want me to do?" Jurgoran asked.

"Give him an extra headache and throw him down the street," Squibs stated in a peevish tone.

From what Squibs had heard, the drunks in this section were the absolute worst. They would constantly cause trouble, by disturbing the peace, forcible entry into someone else's establishment, or by just standing around singing and yelling as loudly as possible.

She stopped for a moment and furrowed her brow; something seemed off, a drunk Zeltron, something seemed off about that. Then, it hit her like a massive weight.

"Jurgoran, get back in here! That Zeltron is a fake!" Squib started to shout.

"Hey, what the..." Jurgoran started to say before he was abruptly cut off by an animal-like scream of something that sounded like a cross between a Nexu and a Reek. A heavy thud shook

the walls; as if someone or something had been flung against the side of the building. It was followed by a metallic screech of the front door being ripped out of its housing; the sound of maser fire added to the cacophony of noise.

Squibs had figured that the best course of action was to get out of there as fast as possible.

Grabbing the lock box, she ran out of the room and into the hallway. Barreling toward a window, Squibs pulled out her KD-30 and fired two shots into it. The glass frosted as the bullets impacted and began to melt away as it came into contact with the acid from the bullets. Holstering the pistol and jumping through the now-empty space, Squibs landed on the roof of the veranda above the front door. She dropped to the ground. But as she landed, her grip on the lock box slipped, and it hit the ground with a quiet bang. She whipped around to grab the box, and what she saw, chilled her to the bone.

Jurgoran had been flung against the house near the front door. Shootist, lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. And Mynock, he was flailing around about a meter in the air, struggling to break free of the one-handed grip of the figure who held him there. And then there was the figure itself, it was standing there with its back to her, though she couldn't see much of it, as most of it, other than an arm clad in some kind of light, black colored armor was holding up Mynock, the rest was obscured by a long black cloak and hood.

Squibs gave a gasp and started to back away. The figure slowly turned to face her. Its face was nothing but a black void of darkness that even the light from the safehouse could not dismiss. Its eyes, or what could be considered its eyes, were glowing, blood-red orbs of malevolent light that seemed to narrow as it looked at her. Throwing Mynock's unconscious limp form away, the figure began to walk toward her.

Squibs began to slowly back up. *Why am I feeling so frightened?* She thought to herself. She and her team were seasoned veterans who had tackled various high-stress situations. But this was something different.

A quick movement caught her eye. Something moved from the belt to its right hand. It was some kind of metallic cylinder. Was this one of those hated *Ch'ittoco bazehn ect'aseo*? As if to answer her question, the figure changed its stance, stepping forward with its right foot and holding the cylinder upright; the figure brought its hands together at its shoulder's height, and with a strange *Snap-Hiss* sound, a one-meter blood-red shaft of light with an onyx core appeared.

Somewhere in Squib's mind, she remembered that force users couldn't parry anything like a slugthrower or projectile shot.

"Rvashn csei s vah ch'itt'osaho g'evipo!" Squibs shouted as she pulled out her KD-30 and fired several rounds at the figure.

The figure reacted differently than what Squibs expected. Instead of going into some form of defensive posture, like jumping away or erecting some kind of shield, the figure made a fast slashing gesture with its left hand.

This gesture confused Squibs, that was until she was hit with the force power it projected.

The Force Wave that Xendar used, started out powerful enough to stop the KD-30 slugs in flight, but it weakened as it moved forward. By the time it had reached Squibs, it was still powerful enough to stun and make her stumble but not enough to harm her.

Struggling to remain upright, it took several seconds for Squibs to regain her footing. While this was happening, Squibs felt a strange coldness running down her left arm.

Shaking her head clear, Squibs felt the barrel of a gun being pressed into the side of her head. Her first thought was that the figure was acting as a distraction and that their backup had just come on the scene. Risking a quick side glance, Squibs was shocked to find that no one was there, and it was her own gun with her own finger fluttering against the trigger.

Slowly looking back toward the figure, Squibs realized the gravity of the situation.

"Run," the figure hissed in a cold, lifeless voice.

Squibs needed no further prompting. Dropping the KD-30 and holding tightly to the lockbox, Squibs turned and ran for her life.

After about five minutes of running, Squibs tried her comlink several times, only for it to give some kind of high-pitched squeal. Which meant that someone was very obviously jamming the comlink transmissions. She decided that enough was enough, and it was time to take a stand and fight.

"Fight me," Squibs shouted defiantly.

"I know you are out there. Come on and fight me, you coward! You like to hide in the shadows and ambush your prey, but not this time! You and me, right here, right now!"

"As you wish," came a soft, shadowy voice. Off to Squibs's left, she could see a slight shimmer, which became a humanoid form, and finally, the black-clad figure she had fought with earlier.

"None of your force powers, no weapons, just straight combat!"

"Very well," was the reply.

Squibs watched as the figure took off what looked to be two sets of armored gloves, then reached down and pulled the lightsaber off their belt and put those items on top of a nearby container, then made a gesture indicating that it was now her move. She dropped into a fighting stance and slowly edged forward as the figure moved away from the containers.

Letting loose a yell of defiance, Squibs launched into a five-strike combination pattern, starting with a low punch to the midsection, then flowing into an uppercut to the jaw, and ending with a vicious spin kick to the face. After that, she launched into a three-kick combo.

The figure almost perfunctory blocked each of her strikes, which surprised her greatly, but infuriated her when it did not counterattack.

"Fight, you coward! Or do you think that I am so weak that I cannot take a hit?"

The figure just shrugged its shoulders, then stepped forward and hammered Squibs with a vicious uppercut that knocked her unconscious and sent her flying to the duracrete.

When Squibs came to, she found herself in a stupor, staring up at the exhaust stack studded skyline. She heard the sound of footfalls as the figure suddenly appeared in her sight. Reaching down with one hand, the figure grabbed Squibs around the throat and hoisted her up into the air.

"Pathetic," The figure said in the same cold, lifeless tone as when it told her to run.

Squibs's sight began to grow dim as she began to lose consciousness again, as the figure pressed its thumb into the base of her skull, just behind her ear, overloading her senses.

Emperor Thran's private room

CSP Palpatine

Caperion System, in orbit near the Crannix Space Station

Emperor Thran walked into his private room aboard the Palpatine. He had just received a message from his personal security force that an intruder was found in that room. As he walked in, he was greeted by a great surprise.

In the middle of the room, laying on her stomach, bound and gagged with colorfully festive bindings, lay a very angry Chiss woman. When she heard the sound of his footfalls, she looked over at him in surprise for the briefest of moments before shooting him a look that might have killed a lesser man.

"We found this datapad affixed to her back. Security has cleared it, no explosives or poisons." One of the guards said as they handed him the datapad.

"Who is it from and what does it say?" Thran asked, looking at the datapad.

"I do not know; the pad can only be accessed by you, my lord," The guard stated.

Looking the pad over, Thran noticed that it was an operative's style pad. If it were accessed by anyone other than the intended recipient it would scramble and destroy its memory, permanently deleting the contents of the pad.

Pressing his thumb into the proper location, Thran watched as the pad came to life and displayed the following message:

I have brought you a present that might aid you with your negotiations with the Chiss. Also included in this datapad is a holo vid of the Chiss malcontents participating in a raid on the hotel establishment where a supposed high-value item was being kept. If the Chiss are feeling particularly willful, and you are in need of more leverage in that negotiation, there are seven more malcontents in the brig.

"Indeed, quite interesting. I don't know if it will aid in negotiations, but it will prove to be a most interesting card to play," Thran said, moving his eyes from the datapad and looking down at Squibs.

