

Recompense:

A Dark Times Saga Story

Battlelord Ric Palpatater

The Crash Landing Bar – Nar Shadda

The low murmur of conversation, broken only by the clink of glasses and the occasional laugh, had become just a normal noise these days to the two men seated in the dark corner booth. The men had been here for almost three days standard time and were hunting another man, not for personal reasons, but his name had come up on a bounty puck. Three days and there had been no sign of him and it was beginning to look like the information they had gotten might have been wrong.

Finally, the facial recognition software in the man's heads up display pinged and their prey finally made an appearance. From the looks of it, he wasn't alone. Surrounding him were at least ten armed men who had the looks of professional soldiers. What he had done or who he was was not important to the two men in darkened armor. All that was important to them was that he represented a paycheck.

The security spread out around the bar to cover any avenue of attack and scanned the place for threats. Their target had taken a seat in the booths near the stage and had sent the serving droid off to fetch drinks.

The man in the Katarn Clone Commando armor looked at his partner and nodded. Their time here was almost over and they were about to get paid. The two armored men rose from their seats and split up, each approaching the target from opposite sides. As they moved towards the booth, several members of the security detail moved to intercept them. With the ease of a well oiled machine, the men fell as they were brushed aside. With four already dispatched, the other six surrounded the target and pulled blasters out. They fired at the men but the advancing bounty hunters seemed to move between shots and they could never hit them. The Mandalorian raised his Blastech EE-3 and returned fire as the other drew his own EE-3. It didn't take long for the six men to be disabled. Both men were very proficient in their jobs.

The target was crouched under the table as the men approached. He looked like he was trying to melt into the floor to get away from the hunters. He knew that his days were numbered and when that finally sank in, he did what most targets did... he tried to buy his way out.

"I have lots of credits. You can have them all you have to do is let me go," he begged.

"Dead or alive, doesn't matter. You are coming with us," The man in the darkened Clone armor said. With that, he stunned the man and holstered his blaster.

The other man in the Mandalorian armor looked at his friend in shock. "Now we have to carry him."

"I brought a sled..." he replied with a short chuckle. "I planned ahead."

There was no more trouble in the bar. This was the type of place where this happened a lot and no one even noticed.

'The joys of Nar Shadda,' Ric Palpatater thought to himself.

YT-1300 'The Holdout'

As soon as their bounty was loaded and secured in one of the holding cells, Ric sat at the controls of the ship, beginning launch prep. He started the pre-flight and sent his droid, R2-K9a, off to finish. Malodin dropped into the copilot seat and helped. He knew that the sooner

they got out of there the better it would be. With the ship in the air and headed for space, Ric let K9 take the ship over and set a course for Sullust. The sooner they got paid the better.

"I'm going to go get cleaned up and I'll let Tully know we have the bounty," Ric said as he left the cockpit. Tully was their contact from the Hunters Guild. Tully had helped them find jobs since the men had left Scholae Palatinae after the whole incident with the Final Order had finally played out.

Ric slipped out of his armor and stepped into the shower, washing three days of ick off of him. He had spent three days in that armor and even though it had a cleanser in it that kept him clean, he could still feel it. He thought about his path since his old friend, Dante, had set him free. Malodin had been waiting of course, he had grabbed the Holdout and they had jumped away with no real pursuit. Ric had learned later that the Empress, Shadow Nighthunter, had pardoned him as he had only acted under the orders of a control chip.

That had not mattered to him. He still did those things, even though he had been controlled. He had blown up Imperiums headquarters, tainted the investigation, and murdered Major Harkness. Chip or no chip he needed to make amends.

Ric dried off after his shower laid on his bunk to get some very much needed sleep. It had been a long three days after all.

Hunters Guild Offices - Sullust

"Nice work," Tully said as they delivered their target. "And alive even, there is a bonus for that. I got more if you want them."

"I think we can take another on. In a week or so. I am not ready to get back out there and want a vacation," Malodin replied. His red eyes sparkled with a mischievous glee, knowing that Tully would take it as flirting. Which she did of course. She looked at Malodin and then at Ric and back again.

"I sort of agree actually," Ric said. Malodin looked at his friend with a surprised expression, not knowing what to make of it. Ric had been pushing for job after job to keep busy and now he wanted a break.

"Okay, if that's the case, how about a drink Tully?" Malodin asked.

"Remember, I don't date the help... but I will take the drink," She smiled and took Malodin's offered arm and headed towards the bar. Ric sat in a booth facing the door and

ordered a nice Rum. He felt he needed a break and this was as good a time as any. After all, he had a feeling he would need the rest.

Captains Quarters – YT1300 “The Holdout”

Ric had just fallen asleep when the comm unit started to beep for attention. It never failed, as soon as he was close to sleep, something would always interrupt him. With a hint of annoyance, he rolled off his bunk and made his way to the unit.

“This had better be good,” Ric said as he activated the display. Ric was a little shocked when he saw that it was his apprentice, Kiera on the other end. She looked a little more ragged than he had ever seen her. “Hello Kiera. How are things?”

“Master, I am glad I caught you. Are you able to meet me here?” Kiera asked, getting to the point.

“Don't call me Master, Kiera. I'm not anymore. What do you mean 'here'? Caelestis City? You know I'm not really welcome there,” Ric replied.

“You will always be my Master, Ric. And yes, here in Caelestis. Things have happened and we need you. Grab Uncle Mal too and get back here. Lanis has taken Shadow,” Ric drew in a surprised breath. For them to be so bold there must be something big happening.

“Alright, we are on our way. Be there soon. Ric out,” he reached for the comlink and sent a quick recall signal to Malodin, knowing the Chiss would be annoyed. It had taken Mal a very long time to get Tully to even talk to him let alone go for drinks. Maybe a Chiss in a bad mood was a good thing to have right now.

Later – YT1300 in Hyperspace headed towards Caelestis City

“I don't know how happy they are going to be to see me,” Ric said. “Last time I was there I sort of broke Imperium.”

“I'm pretty sure that Shadow decreed that you were to be pardoned. No one is going to dispute the words of the Empress,” Malodin replied.

“Ex-Empress. Remember that. Things changed while we were gone. Kiera sort of kept me updated but I haven't really kept up. I guess if there is still a bounty on my head when we land, you'll be rich at least,” Ric smiled, trying to hide the uncomfortable feeling he had been having.

Malodin grunted in reply and started preparations to exit hyperspace and enter the system. Malodin knew that Ric still had a lot of friends in the clan, even if he didn't feel it. He had been there way too long not to. After all, glancing at the middle finger on Rics right hand, he was a Son of Palpatine after all.

The ship exited lightspeed and began its approach to Scholae Territory when the proximity alarms began to whale. Ric grabbed the manual controls and sent the ship into evasive maneuvers avoiding the fire that was pouring in at them from a half squadron of E-Wings that had dropped onto them. Last Ric knew there were no E-Wings in this system, nor was there an MC-40 Mon Cal Cruiser attached to any faction, yet here they were bearing down on him and his ship.

Ric let his training take over and guided the ship through various tactics, trying to break contact and get away. The E-Wings were just too quick and would just lock back on.

“Take over, I'm going for the guns,” Ric said as he left the pilot station and went aft. He was knocked sideways by an impact on the shields that sent a shudder through the ship. He got back to his feet, leaning against the wall and made his way to the center of the ship. Ric slid down the ladder into the gunwell and strapped himself into the chair, bringing the guns online. He plugged his headset into the port and Mal let him know the relative position of the enemy ships around him. Ric grabbed the control yoke and began to fire at the enemy fighters buzzing around him. Off in the distance he could see the MC-40 trying to come around and block their escape.

“Mal, turn to point oh two seven. We need to avoid that cap ship. Last thing we need is to get tractored,” Ric lined up and led a fighter, finally scoring a hit that sent the ship spinning out of control away from him. That just left five more standing between them and a safe landing, hopefully.

The old YT, a very fast and agile ship, turned to the new vector and began to escape its pursuers. Ric kept firing at the fighters as they made pass after pass and scored a few more hits but it was not enough to discourage pursuit.

“YT 1300, this is the Imperial Star Destroyer Palpatine. Come to course four four gamma two and we will provide cover for you,” a voice called from the comms.

“Roger, Control. We are glad to hear from you,” Malodin replied as he turned the ship towards the new course. The remaining fighter pursuit also turned to follow but decided to flee when the intercept squadrons from the Palpatine came into range.

Ric leaned back in his gunners seat and felt relief as the adrenaline finally stopped. He unbuckled and climbed the ladder to the main deck and made his way up. This was a very unusual attack and its not something that he would have ever thought possible when he had left the system. He had been gone about two years and things had pretty much settled into defined factions. Something must have changed in the time since.

“Palpatine control, this is Battlelord Ric Hunter. I am transmitting my clan identification and request a priority vector to the surface,” Ric keyed in his ID code and waited for a response. He half expected the Destroyer to just light him up as he wasn't on the best of terms when he left.

“ID confirmed. Proceed on course four four three. Welcome back, Palpatine out,” Ric watched as the planet grew larger in the viewport and finally the sky turned blue.

Imperial Throne Room -

“We cannot let you pass, my lord,” the Praetorian Guard was saying.

“I am here to help. Either you let me pass or I show you how a true Praetorian acts,” Ric was getting irritated by being blocked entry. He only wanted to find out where he was needed by whoever was now in charge of the Empire. When he had left he knew that Shadow was the Empress but he really hadn't kept up on the rest since then. He did owe her a debt, one he could never repay.

“What is all the commotion out here!?!” a voice rang from inside the chamber bellowed.

The Praetorians dropped to a knee as the door swung open to reveal Kamjin Lap'lamiz. He was wearing the cloak of command that was reserved for the ruler of the clan. Ric remembered him from the stories told around the cantina during his days in Praetorian Squadron. He knew that he was an old timer who commanded great respect, yet Ric had problems kneeling to almost anyone.

“My lord, this man has demanded an audience with you. He does not have an appointment,” The guard said. With a laugh, Kam waved Ric into the throne room and closed the doors.

“I am here to do what is needed for the clan, My lord. I came as soon as I heard,” Ric did give a bow as he said it, showing respect.

“I know of you. I kept track of the big names from my old squadron of course. I also watched you grow as a member of Scholae and to be named as a Palpatine. I was expecting you to show up of course,” Kam led Ric to a tactical display and showed him what had happened the last few days. It led up to the part where Shadow was taken and the current layout of all forces.

Ric became engrossed in the layout, noting a thoroughness he had not seen since the days of Empire. He looked at the force that had attacked him and was surprised that it was a newer ship and fighter set up than what he had seen here before.

“You might want to take a few of these fighters off the board. I took a few of them out on my way in,” Ric said. Kam chuckled and shook his head.

“That's after your arrival. This is updated every three minutes,” Kam turned from the display and moved towards the sitting area. Ric followed and sat opposite of him. He knew that he just needed information as he was way past asking for permission.

“I need to find and rescue Shadow. I owe her a debt that I can never repay but this will be a start,” Ric said finally.

“I understand that. I know how devotion drives people and I respect that. So in that sense, we are alike and I will see that you get what you need,” Kam gestured to the door and Ric left, on his way out, he glanced back.

“You look good in that robe. Fitting that a Prae would finally get to wear it again,” Ric turned and was gone.

Hanger Bay -

Malodin was just finishing loading supplies into the hold and was headed down the ramp to do a visual inspection of the hull before they left when he heard a squeal. He turned towards the noise and was almost knocked down by Kiera.

“Uncle Mal!” she cried and then let out another excited giggle. Mal grabbed the petite Zeltron and lifted her off her feet in a bear hug. He had missed the little pain, even more than he would ever admit. After a few spins, he set her down and they walked around the ship together catching up.

“You look well, Kiera. It's really good to see you,” Mal told her.

“You have been gone way too long, Uncle Mal. I was about to go looking for you and then this happened,” She smiled. “I guess this is one good thing to come from the situation.”

“I'm not sure how long we are going to be here, kid. Ric is restless and has been going non-stop for two years now. I tell him he needs a break but it's like something is driving him. He's not who he was anymore,” Mal watched as Kiera became serious.

"I can feel something different about him. He used to shine on the Force like a fire. Now, I don't see more than a candle. I haven't seen him yet," she said with a sad look on her face.

"Hang around here kid. I guarantee he'll be here soon," They finished the walk around and went into the ship to wait.

As Ric approached the hanger, he began to sense his apprentice. He knew that she was excited to see them but he didn't know how he would feel seeing her. After what had happened with Major Harkness, Ric had tried to keep Kiera away so she wouldn't get tainted by his actions. Dante had made sure that she was going to be okay. That was the only thing that he had asked his old friend. Now Ric owed him one.

Ric walked up the ramp and entered the ship, not knowing what he would say to Kiera. Last time he had seen her, she had been a teenager and now she was a fully grown woman. As he entered the main living area, Kiera rose from the couch she had been sitting at and walked towards him. She stopped an arms length away and looked at him for a minute. Ric was prepared for a slap but it never came. She smiled and hugged her former master.

"I have missed you so much, Master," She said, tears flowing down her face.

After a moment, she pulled back and walked him towards the sitting area. Malodin decided to go get the ship ready for flight and gave them some privacy.

"It's so good to see you, Kiera, but I'm not your master anymore. I'm very proud of you. I've been told you have passed your trials and are now a full on Knight," Ric still had a few friends around to give him back channel information after all.

"You know you didn't have to leave. Shadow pardoned you and you could have stayed," she said.

"I know but I had to walk a different path. I can't explain about where I've been or what I've done but I am not who I was," Ric began.

"You are the man who found me, took me in, gave me a home and was as a father to me," Kiera cut him off. "That's all you need to know. Now, I need to know something."

"Anything," Ric replied.

"Why can't I feel you in the Force?"

"Well, that's where it gets complicated..." Ric began.

The YT left the hangar bay with a squad of troopers and a few dark Jedi in tow. Ric had been surprised that he had gotten so many but he had done more with less after all. Malodin sat in the copilot seat and behind him, manning the sensors and communications station sat Kiera. It had been a really long time since they had this many people on the ship and all the stations manned. Ric grinned to himself and was eagerly awaiting the assault.

From the reports that they had received, there was an old Marauder out here that may hold information on the location of Shadow. Ric engaged the stealth equipment and turned off the running lights. He knew that the ship would be almost invisible floating around the stars. They found the Marauder floating out near the main hyperspace buoy into the system. It looked like it might have been used as a command and control ship, keeping tabs on who jumped in and out of the system. Ric took a deep breath and relaxed.

He firewalled the throttle and the ship leapt towards the Marauder. Ric was hoping to get in close before it could bring its weapons online and fire at them. Being a pirate ship, there was no way to tell what kinds of modifications the ship had. He knew that there would be something.

When the YT got within six hundred meters, the forward Ion cannons fired and bathed the Marauder in bluish electricity. As soon as the ship's systems were off line, Ric got in close to a rear hatch and docked.

"Hatch secured, we have pressure. Blow it!" He yelled in the comlink. As he was making his way towards the upper hatch, he could feel the vibration of the boarding, from the small explosive charges set to open the other ships hatch to the armored boots thumping on the ladder. He knew that the soldiers he brought were already aboard the other ship and had secured the airlock area.

Ric climbed the ladder into the other ship and dropped down to the deck, his ship was inverted in comparison to the gravity of this ship. In space, up and down is a matter of perspective after all.

The troops were stacked up near the hatchway and looked at Ric for the go ahead signal. He nodded his head once and pointed forward and they began to take the ship. Two sticks of soldiers entered the corridor and split up each going a different direction. Ric joined the stick that was going towards the forward part of the ship so that he could get to the bridge. Malodin joined the stick going aft to take command of the engine room.

Ric was following the progress in his heads up display and was happy that they were meeting minimal resistance towards their objectives. He knew that bridge and engine rooms would both be heavily defended and that was where time would be used. The soldiers moved forwards and checked each compartment as they passed by, sometimes finding crew in the midst of trying to reboot the systems. When they found these people, they were stunned and secured for possible interrogation later if needed.

Ric signaled a halt and began to set charges to blow a hole in the floor of the bridge. The place that they would take the most casualties would be at the doorway to the bridge but it seemed that no one had actually noticed that they were aboard. Ric sent half the troopers to the hatch and he kept the other half with him to enter through the hole. Once the squad was set to cover the main entrance, the demo trooper called out...

"Fire in the Hole!" With a flash and a large bang, the ceiling opened and sent pieces of the floor into the bridge, scattering and knocking around the bridge crew. The troopers charged into the smoke filled bridge and began to stun the bridge crew with an almost mechanical efficiency.

"Forward areas are all secured, sir," The Captain reported. "Engine compartment is also secured with no damage."

"Good work, Captain. Secure all stations and begin to download everything that we can get. I want to be out of here in thirty minutes," The Captain nodded and got his men to their tasks. Ric moved towards the ships command console and pulled out a slicer data spike to do his part. He pushed it into the droid port and waited while the command computer rebooted and gave him total access to the systems. He began looking for any information on the location of Shadow.

Thirty Minutes Later...

The YT 1300 cut loose from the Marauder and moved away. Ric and his crew had the command staff of the ship in a cell in the hold and all the intel that the ship carried with them. As they passed around a thousand meters from the ship, it began to buckle from the charges his team had left. With a short spasm to the superstructure of the ship, it flashed and began to drift apart.

Ric set course for the Palpatine and a resupply. They would drop off the troopers there and head to Caelestis City. From the information that they had gotten, the enemy had a network of safe houses there and that was where they were holding Shadow. It made sense as everyone was looking everywhere else, they would never consider looking in their own yard. From what Ric could tell, they were also holding Dek there too. Ric had known the man before... the event. He knew that he wanted him dead. Ric didn't hold that against him, that was the way of the Sith after all.

Ric checked his heads up display and say that the location was located in the Old Town section near the warehouse district. That made sense as there was little people traffic in the area and no one would notice strange activity easily. He had to give it to them, they had some

tactical sense. On the other hand, they would be able to see anyone coming a mile away for the same reasons.

The speeder that the small strike team was riding in traveled a long the almost deserted streets headed towards the water front. It wouldn't be long until they were at their target and wouldn't be long after that the whole place would know they were there.

Malodin checked the display showing the outside view and began to notice more cameras than were really required for this area. It seemed that they had upgraded surveillance to make sure no one could approach without them knowing. The Scholae troops who had been tasked with this mission had been equipped with cooling armor that masked their body heat and made them undetectable by the scanners. Ric wore his Katarn Armor and it hid his signature as well. The only one that might show up was Malodin as his black Mandalorian armor wasn't quite as shielded. On the one hand anyone scanning the transport would only show one person, if he did show up, and on the other why was there one person in a droid driven speeder?

The transport came to a halt and settled to the pavement. The lead trooper slid open the floor hatch and opened the grate leading into the underground service tunnels under the street. He dropped down into the pitch black hole and was followed in quick order by the rest of the squad and Ric. There was no need for lights as each trooper had night vision built into the visors of their helmets.

Following the system schematic, the assault force moved towards the target when they ran across a trip wire attached to a mine. The trap didn't take long to defuse for the highly trained commandos and they were moving again within moments.

Once they had reached the building that had been identified, Ric signaled the team to begin to penetrate the building. There would be no big bang as they had done on the Marauder, this time stealth was the key. Ric had hoped to not have to fire a shot during the entire mission if at all possible. He checked the time and saw that they had only about an hour before dawn and that would make the rest of the mission just that much more difficult.

The lead trooper opened the hatch and stepped out of the way as the next one moved through the door. They filed into the building quietly and headed towards the targets. Ric entered followed by Malodin and two other troopers. Their job was to get to the holding area and free Shadow and Dek if they could get to them.

As they rounded a corner, alarms began to wail and lights began to flash. The lead team had been spotted nearing the control center and Ric could hear the troopers reports over the comlink.

"So much for surprise, stay sharp. They know we're here," Ric raised his EE-3 and moved forward. The troopers moved forward and stacked up outside the target room that was supposed to be a holding area. Ric signaled the trooper to breach and he would go in first. As soon as the small charge on the lock exploded, the door flew inward and Ric tossed a flashbang

inside. He knew that if Shadow was in there, she would not be happy about it but it beat the alternative.

As soon as the grenade went off, Ric entered the room and began to clear it. Malodin followed and they began to check the cells on their side of the room.

“Sir, we found Dek. He looks to be in very bad shape. Shall we extract him?” Ric hesitated and thought back to Dek wanting him dead. He decided to let that go and do what was best for the clan.

“Yes, get him out of here and back to the transport. We should have pick up here any minute,” Ric checked his tactical display and saw the other squads were fighting it out with EIR forces on the far side of the building. He knew that they only had at the most five minutes before reinforcements would arrive and overwhelm them so they had to be quick. He checked cell after cell and did not see any sign of Shadow.

“Anything Mal?” He asked his partner.

“Not here. She has to be close though. Shall we move on?” Mal replied.

“Yeah. According to the plans there is a big room at the end of this hallway. Seems like a great place to put a torture chamber,” Ric poked his head out of the door and ducked back inside as blaster fire erupted from the direction of the big room. “Looks like there might be something here they do not want us to see.”

Ric threw a smoke grenade into the hallway and gave it a full ten count before he followed. Malodin waited a half a minute and then followed. Each man moved up different sides of the hallway and the people in the room began to fire down it. They were just spraying fire at them with no real aiming going on but Ric knew that they could get lucky. He ducked into a small office that had a connecting wall to the room they were trying to get to and checked it for gas lines or some other form of explosive potential. He had seen too many breaches fail because of something so small and was determined that he was not going to have it happen to him today.

Ric set the breaching charge on the wall and ducked under cover. With a bang, there magically appeared a hole the size of a bantha and the two armored men rushed through it. Blaster fire rang out and flashed in the darkened room. When the smoke cleared, Ric and Malodin carried a dazed and confused Shadow from the room.

“Jackpot,” Ric called over the comlink. The surviving troopers began to fall back to the main entrance and regroup. It would not be long before their ride was there to carry them back to the spaceport and then onto the Palpatine that sat in orbit.

As they exited the building, LAAT/i gunships dropped into the street and the surviving troops rushed to board them. As they did, it seemed the entire neighborhood opened fire at them. One of the transports exploded as they began to lift off. It had taken a rocket hit and slammed into the building they had just exited. The explosion lit up the darkness and blinded

most of the enemy on the ground. It gave the remaining two gunships enough time to lift off and flee into the darkness of night.

Ric stood over the medical capsule that held Shadow. His debt wasn't paid entirely but he had put a small dent in it. As they flew over the city, he looked out and was amazed at the fighting that had erupted. This was finally it. The end. Finally...