

Merchant of Darkness

by Joe Mignano

Outer Rim territories. Sluis Sector.

852 years before the Battle of Yavin.

Nash Kaynor was in trouble. A lone merchantman trying to make a name for himself along the Rimma trade route, Nash's small one-man freighter, the *Ryloth Tumbler*, wasn't designed for prolonged hauls. Rather, its designers intended it for short hops between worlds. Nash made a living of doing just that, transporting vital cargo for a modest fee. The work had served him well for a number of years, but now, everything was in jeopardy.

Nash signed a contract that took him from one end of the trade route to the other, because he needed the sizable amount of credits that the job paid. He hadn't counted on his hyperdrive failing half-way through the trip, though. All of his power systems ship-wide were also fluctuating, for reasons he could not determine.

Without a crew, or even a droid for company, Nash Kaynor was on his own. He preferred it that way, actually, but it wasn't until now that he realized how his preferred way of life could also be fatal.

Fortunately for Nash, his barely-functioning nav system registered a habitable world within several days travel time, via sub-light. If he could coax his small crippled vessel just enough, he would attempt to land there. In the meantime, he would send out a distress beacon, and prepare the few belongings he had for what would hopefully become just a temporary new home.

As the *Ryloth Tumbler* entered orbit of the planet, which was perplexingly absent from any astro charts, Nash could tell that the inevitable crash landing would not be a very-well controlled one; his repulsor-lift generators began to fail. Instead of panicking, however, he closed his eyes, and concentrated. Nash wasn't sure exactly what he was concentrating on, and his instant act of meditation surprised even him. It was an instinctive reflex, an involuntary pulse of self-preservation he didn't know he had.

The ship crash landed in a bog. It was literally a muddy swamp, as far as the eye could see. It teamed with life, but not of a sort that Nash Kaynor considered friendly.

There was little left of the ship. However, a few cargo containers remained intact, one of which, Nash was relieved to see. It was a family heirloom, something he insisted on traveling with, even though it took up precious cargo space on his small vessel. Now, he was glad that he did.

Nash opened the cargo container that housed his inheritance. Armor. And it fit him well. It had belonged to his grandfather, during the war against the Sith a standard century and a half before. Cal Kaynor was a Jedi that fought in General Hoth's Army of Light against the Brotherhood of Darkness and its Sith army. Kaynor's unit had been wiped out by an elite group of Sith Army commandos. Kaynor fought one of them hand to hand, the famous Sergeant Dessel, as he would later recall. Cal Kaynor was wounded and left for dead. But he survived. Renouncing the Jedi Order and deserting the army he had served in, Cal Kaynor entered the life of a simple space-faring merchant, and started a family of his own. Nash Kaynor was the last surviving member of that family.

He hoped that his grandfather's armor would help protect him from any native fauna that might think him an easy meal. Nash had a blaster holstered to his thigh with only enough of an energy charge to get off a few shots. He also had his grandfather's lightsaber hooked to his belt. He had never used it before, never felt the need to. But it gave him some inexplicable comfort, anyway.

As soon as Nash Kaynor adorned himself with his ancestral accoutrements, the cargo containers around him that were left from the *Ryloth Tumbler* violently imploded, smashed by an unknown force. Kaynor instinctively dashed away from the container that housed his armor just in time, to his own dismay, and gazed upon the creature that destroyed the only remaining part of his ship, and his only shelter. It was a dragonsnake. Kaynor had heard about them on Nal Hutta once, but this was the first time he had ever seen one. It eyed Nash, showed its fangs, then positioned itself to strike.

Nash squeezed off the only few shots his small personal blaster would allow, but the bolts were seemingly absorbed by the defensive scales the creature naturally possessed. He would have to find another way, and he only had a second to think.

Kaynor activated the lightsaber. It felt natural in his hand, and sprang to life not because he pushed a button, but because he willed it to turn on. As the dragonsnake lunged at him, he lunged at it, thrusting the teal-colored blade deep into the creature's snout, and then kept going, nearly halving the head of the monster lengthwise, before he retracted the blade in triumph.

At first, Nash Kaynor felt exhilarated. Not only did he not understand how he defeated

the monster, but he now had a source of sustenance that he could subsist on for days.

Then, Nash thought back to when he meditated before the crash. He had never meditated before in his life, but he did then instinctively, and it had saved his life. His grandfather was a Jedi once, that much he knew, and they practiced meditation techniques all the time. Nash decided that he would try and meditate again. Perhaps, it would save his life again.

He found a cave, and took refuge there. It was cold, dark, and foreboding. Yet, Nash was not intimidated by the feeling of uneasiness that swept over him. In fact, he hadn't felt any fear at all. Not during the crash of his ship, not during his encounter with the dragonsnake, and certainly not now. He had crash landed on an alien world, was met with hostility; yet he conquered his attacker, found renewed strength from his victory, and sheltered himself from the elements, all with ease. For the first time in his life, Nash Kaynor realized that he had every reason to be afraid, and yet he wasn't.

While in the cave, he meditated. He saw visions from the past, of the war in which his grandfather fought, and he saw glimpses of what he surmised might be the future, of a small ship landing in the swamp he crash landed in, of a young human being trained in the ways of the force by a small being of a species he'd never seen before in all his travels.

Nash Kaynor awoke to the sound of engines passing by overhead. He looked outside the cave, and recognized the design of the ship that was landing nearby. It was from Bpfassh, a Outer Rim world also of the Sluis sector. Nash realized now that he was force-sensitive, and he could tell that the near-human Bpfasshi crew of the ship before him was, as well. But they were not Jedi. He wanted to learn more about this new force-power that he seemingly had a natural gift for. It enlivened him like nothing else had ever before, and he would do anything to control it, to use it to his advantage. If these Bpfasshi beings would not help him, then he would dispose of them, and help himself.

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