

The Church of the Whills had prepared Marl for many things, but none were quite as uniquely powerful as the Children of Mortis. The enemy that had become a plague in dire need of eradication was encroaching on the Jedi Praxeum in search of their precious stones. Powerful crystal trinkets that Gondor and his House were expected to protect as Guardians of their order.

*A task that they did not take lightly...*

The main spire of the Praxeum reached towards the sky as crystalline formations sprouted throughout its courtyard. The life that was sparse on Kiasat was being overtaken and overrun by abominations. The fight had been a long and gruelling one as the Jedi of Odan-Urr fought hard to repel the invaders. What was left were stragglers that were culled from the herd.

"They're breaking formations!" shouted an excited Padawan. A lovely little thing, so naive before the arrival of the Children, but that day something was awakened within. Her journey to unlocking her full potential was seemingly much more possible now than she had ever hoped. But things which were that delicate were destined to break without proper care. Marl had sensed that the Padawan's eagerness was becoming reckless as she charged forward. The corner of a large docking platform she had run to was left unchecked, a novice mistake.

Shivers ran up Marl's spine as he panted, recovering from the throes of combat as he watched this unfold. What seemed like an eternity, had in reality been happening so quickly.

"Get back!" Marl shouted as he simultaneously tugged the Padawan back, sending her sliding with the Force just as the tail-end of a lightwhip snaked around the corner. It shrieked as it met with the other side of the wall rather than flesh and much to the surprise of the Padawan, what was hidden around the corner would have meant certain death had it not been for the veteran Jedi. She cast a quick nod in thanks but was left in awe as a being, unlike the others, in that it seemed more powerful and in control, spun out from around the corner.

The being was human once but now corrupted beyond recognition as sparkling crystals pierced its skin. In its left hand was the lightwhip that it so cleverly tried to use and in its right hand, a lightsaber streaked to life. Both blades burned an intense purity of white.

The Padawan kicked her heels, pushing herself back and away before hopping back to her feet. Her blade was green, which was common for Consulars. But she had recently transferred to the Guardian Corps for lightsaber training. Marl had gotten to know her well, she showed promise, but while strong in the Force, her skills and elegance with a blade were still immature and had been untested until the invasion.

"I have come at the behest of my father," it shrieked, "join us and you will be unharmed." its words were toxic and Marl wondered just how many of his brothers and sisters were offered the same compassion before they were slaughtered.

Instinctively Marl ignited his own weapon. The relic groaned at first but as he channeled his energy into it, the fractured hilt became more compliant and willing to serve. Rolling his hand and adjusting his grip allowed him to flourish into a ready stance.

"No more ground will be given to you today."

"A bold claim." The Ascendant slipped forward with uncanny speed, his lightwhip stretched out as he spun and clipped the tip of Marl's blade. It was the taste before the satiation.

Allowing his blade to flow with the momentum of the strike, Marl used the redirection to create another flourish which would end with a vertical parry to his enemies' off-handed follow-up strike. To steal control, the Soresu master planted his feet and coiled his weapon into defensive patterns that would only discourage the desperate hunger of the invader. The weapons popped upon contact as the two engaged in mental Dejarik.

Marl's arms shook for the first time in a long time as he braced himself against his opponent's attacks. A growl grew more audible until exploding into a roar. Feet ground into the coarse stone to provide grip for his boots. His saber fell, released from his grip. The other hand slid forward to catch, instantly rolling up and away. The tip of the blue blade caught the hilt of the whip. A splatter of sparks and two smoking halves lay. The red-hot outline traced by the cut gave the Purified Monstrosity pause.

Again, Marl bent at the knees to absorb another blow. The sizzle from the collisions stirred the Padawan as the seconds that seemed like an eternity came rushing back to real-time. Finally, she snapped out of the trance which was invoked by the duel happening before her very eyes.

Foolishly, she charged, wildly swinging her lightsaber with a zeal that would be her undoing. Disengaging from Marl, the abomination swelled with a surge of internal power before releasing the manifested tendrils of lightning that rode the liquid current of the Padawan's bloodstream.

She screamed in agony and fell to the ground where she would uncontrollably jerk between blasts.

The Ascendant spun away with superb speed and thrust his hand forward. Using the Force, he rolled the Padawan off of the platform and suspended her over the depths of Kiast.

"You have a choice to make, Jedi," the abomination spoke to Marl as he caught the Guardian's incoming strike with the saber in his right hand. "You can save the girl, or you can save..." the Ascendant paused but Marl could feel a disturbance in the Force. An overwhelming dread emanated from the cave that the Jedi had instructed the younglings to shelter in if they were ever to become separated from the Praxeum. "Them," a gnarly smile crossed his face. "Oh, you thought they were safe?" it added as it used its power to begin cracking the cave ceiling.

Waves of uncertainty washed over the Jedi Quaestor as he weighed his options.

Marl was exhausted. He had spent the entire day fighting, only to be tossed into the fire against another creature. A being far more powerful than him.

"Sa-save the-" the Padawan choked on her words, her life up until that point had been about sacrifice. What greater sacrifice than to give your life for others?

A single tear rolled down Marl's cheek but he quickly fought back his emotions, his attachment. The last thing this beast needed to see was a moment of weakness.

"I choose to save her."

Marl knew that this being would destroy whatever he cared for the most. It was the nature of the Dark Side.

Just then, the creature released the Padawan. She fell with grace as she surrendered herself to the will of the Force. What the creature didn't expect, however, was Marl's lack of reaction. It almost appeared to be disappointed. The Jedi had already sheltered his mind to the possibility of the Padawan's demise.

It slightly dropped its weapon, a cue that Gondor had been waiting for. As the ascendant's lightsaber twitched, Marl lunged in and smacked the opposing blade, it rattled against the ground from a loose grip and before the trooper knew what had hit him, Marl continued his calculated offensive. His blade slashed from left to right, right to left, vertically, unleashing strikes that began chipping away at the Purified One's armor. It stumbled back with each strike and was unable to use its speed as every time it moved, Marl trapped it with a well-timed strike and all the power he could muster. Another step back, closer to the edge. It was time.

With a roar of raw power, Marl thrust his hand forward. The ascendant's eyes grew wide with a terror that it inflicted on those it slaughtered. It was time. Time for Gondor to end this conflict.

With galeforce energy, the Child of Mortis was swept from the platform and sent crashing into the abyss. It crashed and rolled against rocks, clawing at them but unable to find a true grip as the surface of Kiast dragged him down, seeking to swallow him whole.

Marl dropped to his knees and disengaged his lightsaber. He could feel her in the Force, but only briefly until her signature vanished entirely. She had finally reached the surface. His heart sank, in that moment he was reminded that to a Jedi, the preservation of life was everything. But he also realized that the hefty price of saving many sometimes came at the expense of few.

Her dedication would haunt him, as would her porcelain face.