**Forceless**

Version 1.0

Dedicated to God

# **Chapter 1: Leo**

“Good luck bros,” I encouraged my friends as we walked down a long corridor to the training arena.

“Psssh, oh yeah; we’ll need it,” Joe stated, banging his fist into the palm of his left hand, “With so many trainees graduating, and so few available spots for Padawans, we all stand a slim chance of being picked.”

“Actually, we stand a near one hundred percent chance!” Jake calculated, “Pod Seven and us are the only pods not to have finished our duels yet, and there are still two Jedi that have not picked Padawans yet.”

“How do you know that?” Tay wanted to know, punching him in the arm.

Jake carefully glanced at our pod’s director who was leading us down the hallway and whispered back to us, “I Force-read the mind of Srel.”

“Bro!” I exclaimed, “You can really do that?!”

“SsssHHH!” Jake shushed me, “Not so loud, and yes, I’ve been practicing!”

“Dang,” George said, “That’s slick.”

“Has anyone in Pod Seven gone yet?” I asked Jake.

“Everyone but the Fighting Twins,” Jake replied, “I guess they got into another argument and had to be delayed.”

“Figures,” George chuckled, “They’ll most definitely have to fight Jake and Tay.”

“Awe man, I don’t want to fight them,” Tay mumbled.

“Why not?” Jake smirked, “You got the hots for one of them?”

“Do not!” Tay said too quickly.

“Well, I mean, if you like Ember, I won’t say a thing,” George teased.

“I don’t like Ember! I like…” Tay trailed off as soon as the words came out of his mouth.

“Whoops,” I laughed, “Looks like Amber’s got an admirer!”

The rest of the boys slapped Tay on the back as we reached the end of the hallway and Srel opened the main doorway.

“Wait here guys,” Srel told us, “I’ll go inside and check to see if The Board is ready yet.”

As soon as Srel disappeared into the main arena dome, Jake turned to me, “Don’t think you’re completely out of it either, buster.”

“Huh?” I asked, confused.

“Ember likes you.”

“Wait, really?” I said, dumbfounded.

“That’s the rumor anyway.”

I narrowed my eyes as George and Tay burst out laughing.

“Even if it is the case, I’m going to be a Jedi, so feelings can’t go along,” I stated firmly, “She’ll have to go marry some Republic commander or something.”

“Oouucch man,” George spoke up, “Are you predicting her and Amber will fail to best Jake and Tay?”

“Hey, I’m just calling it like it is,” I smirked, pointing finger guns at Jake and Tay, “Our pod has the better trainees, and Jake and Tay have been training for years.”

“Bring it on!” Jake cried out, “We’ve got this in the bag!”

At this point, Srel popped his head out of the door and beckoned to us. I had been in the training arena countless times ever since I had started my Jedi training here at the Republic’s state-of-the-art facility, but now, it was different. This time, there was a panel of four of the school’s highest-regarded instructors as well as a large number of chairs where there were supposed to be Jedi and high-ranking generals in the Republic’s army sitting. However, now there were only two Jedi and a handful of the Republic’s army leaders left, as Jake had informed us. I recognized the older Jedi, his name was Bob, and he was infamous for his relentless pursuit of foes, but the second was a younger guy that I couldn’t remember seeing before.

“Welcome Pod members Two and Seven to the final rounds of Graduation Day,” the head speaker of the panel announced to us through the speaker system, “As you may know, the best two-person team and the best single fighter will be chosen by these last, two remaining Jedi to be trained in the art of the Force. However, the losers will still be transferred to the Republic’s army and be promoted depending on their prowess in the arena. We’re looking for style, form, Force abilities, graciousness, and agility in these last two tournaments, and we all wish you the best.”

“All right!” Tay cheered, fist bumping all of us.

“For our first competition, we will have trainees Tay and Jake facing off against twins Ember and Amber. Gentlemen and ladies please step up to the equipment area.

George and I slapped Tay and Jake on the back as they made their way along the short aisle and to the actual arena where they would be fighting. Across the room from us, Pod Two’s leader high-fived Ember and Amber as they followed suit.

“Ember’s looking at you,” George teased me.

“Shut up,” I said, “It’s obvious she’s looking at the Jedi.”

“That’s not what it looks like from here,” George smirked.

“Why haven’t I heard this rumor before?” I sighed, plopping into a nearby chair to watch the excitement.

Being trainees, and not even Padawans yet, none of us had a lightsaber. Instead, we trained with similarly sized and weighted metal lightsabers which were much safer and easier to train with. Both teams were handed their weapons by the coordinator; then they walked across a thin metal walkway to the large platform in the center of the arena.

The arena was a massive fifty square yard, circular, concrete, pit in the middle of the ground filled completely with ice cold water – except for a single solid pillar that rose out of the water and supported the twenty square yard platform that contestants would battle on top of.

The rules of the duel were simple; don’t get thrown into the water.

Amber and Ember quickly chose the far left side of the platform, while Jake and Tay chose the right side. As the board of instructors shuffled around some papers, the contestants tensed, and so did I.

“Alright,” boomed the all-too-familiar voice over the speakers, “Fight!”

Instantly, Jake and Tay Force blasted their opponents, except they both went for Amber first. With quick thinking, Ember used the Force to grasp ahold of Amber and swing her around – using the strength of the Force blast from Jaky and Tay as radial acceleration. Before Jake and Tay realized what was happening, Ember was hurled through the air using split-second timing and smashed right into them – sending Jake cartwheeling along the platform while Tay was flattened underneath Ember. Much to my horror, Jake completely lost control and plummeted over the edge of the platform – splashing into the water below.

“Ugh!” groaned George next to me, “That hurts.”

Tay quickly crawled out from underneath Amber but was immediately attacked by Ember who wielded her metal lightsaber with impunity. Tay caught the initial attack and dueled back, managing to gain some ground by utilizing a Fluid Riposte, but just as he started to do this, Amber rejoined the fight. Tay may have been a skilled dueler, but he was not as good as both Ember and Amber combined, especially since they were skilled in Form IV. Despite George and I’s encouragement, Tay quickly succumbed to the relentless lightsaber attacks and was slung painfully backwards onto the platform.

“Time to finish you off!” Ember cried, Force grabbing Tay.

“Hey! That’s what I get to do!” Amber argued, attempting to Force grab Tay.

“No silly,” Ember argued, “I always get to finish our opponents off.”

“Says you,” Amber spat back, “This is my time to shine.”

“*Your time?!*” Ember exclaimed, relaxing her grip on Tay to punch Amber in the arm.

“You fool!” Amber replied, punching Ember back.

“WHOMP!” Tay dropped to the ground, but when he stood up; he had a grin on his face a mile long. Stretching his arms back, Tay released a surprisingly powerful Force blast for someone that wasn’t even a Padawan. The twins were so busy arguing that they were already flying off the platform and plunging into the ice water before they realized their fatal mistake.

George and I exploded out of our seats and pounded each other on the back.

“YAHHHOOO!!!” I cried out, “You go boys!”

“Nice return Tay!” George added.

The board of professors nodded their approval, and the retractable metal walkway emerged to allow Tay to safely cross the moat. Ember, Amber, and Jake crawled up a nearby rope ladder, and, shivering uncontrollably, trudged over to our instructors.

“Well done,” our head of piloting and aircraft accolated the trainees, “You all showed some quick thinking out there, but I’m sure you realize who will be chosen by our esteemed guests tonight.”

“It was Ember’s fault,” Amber mumbled.

“Not true,” Ember argued.

The younger Jedi quickly stood up and strode over to Jake and Tay, shaking their hands.

“I’d be excited to help train you two,” he said, “You’ll both make wonderful Jedi someday. Follow me!”

And, with an excited wave at George and I, Jake and Tay quickly followed the Jedi outside. Meanwhile, Ember and Amber were handed towels and instructed to go sit down in the chairs while George and I were called forward.

“And you two,” the head instructor informed us, “will be dueling for the last Padawan spot.”

I shook my head, “This totally sucks.”

George agreed, “Whatever happens, you’ll stay my friend.”

I nodded my head. Having never known my parents and only growing up with my uncle and aunt, I had never known a truly loving family member. George was my closest friend. I knew that whatever happened, George had a bright future because he was just that friendly guy that everyone knew and loved. I on the other hand was that quiet dude that you easily forgot was nearby. This has its pluses, but the fact that I couldn’t seem to draw out my inner Force powers put me at a large disadvantage.

We were handed our “lightsabers” and then directed to the platform.

“I wish you the best of luck in your new job in the Republic army,” George smirked as we took our positions.

“I’ll visit you every now and again when I get a break from my Jedi training,” I teased back.

“You wish,” George laughed.

“For the last fight of this graduating class,” the head professor called out, “FIGHT!”

“Bam!” Our lightsabers collided, reverberating through their metal frames and across the large training room. I quickly followed my initial attack with a drop spin and back-hand slice, inevitably forcing George backwards. George desperately tried to block my blows, but I knew exactly what I was doing. I swirled my lightsaber in quick motions, undermining his weak blocks and allowing me to quickly gain ground.

George then performed a precise, fake parry and caused me to momentarily lose my balance, but I used this to my advantage and back flipped over him. George spun around quickly to meet me, but I obviously foresaw this, and locked my lightsaber around his, whipping him around. Losing his grip as he was throttled backwards, George spun out and slid across the smooth marble platform, heading straight for the edge. Just before he fell off into the freezing cold water below, George released his grip on his lightsaber and dug his fingers into the platform, slowing his momentum for just long enough to roll back into a defensive stance. Unfortunately, his lightsaber, once being released in the critical moment, was dropped promptly into the water below with a satisfying “Plop!”

I swished my lightsaber over my head in short, intimidating movements – approaching him confidently, visions of a life of adventure swirling through my mind. Cutting off any chances of escape, I approached George, ready to throw him off the edge, but that’s when George set his jaw and mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

In the split second that he did this, I realized that getting the last Padawan spot was more important to George than letting me get it. Immediately, George shoved his hands out towards me in a quick movement, and I was immediately thrown through the air. This wasn’t the first time that I had been force thrown, and neither would it be the last I imagined. Despite being hurled through the air, I kept my wits about me, retained a firm grip on my weapon, and somersaulted through the air, desperately trying to draw out my Force powers that I never seemed to have. George threw me so hard that I flew straight over the moat and onto some chairs on the other side. The fight was over, but I knew from last year that sometimes the instructors would overlook the ultimate loss if you displayed unusually skilled prowess. Without skipping a beat, I sprinted back up the hallway, vaulted over the three foot chain link fence and Jedi barrel-rolled through the air – a lot like a missile. I could see George on the platform, leaning over and catching his breath. Apparently, he didn’t expect me to be hurtling towards him like a human torpedo.

“WHUMP!”

George looked up just in time to see my spinning head plunge straight into his stomach. George was instantaneously jettisoned off the platform, collided with the chain link fence on the outside of the moat and dropped right into the water below. I pumped my fists in victory, but it was short lived, because George came sputtering to the surface and Force yanked me into the water with him.

“AAaack!” I cried out after resurfacing, “This water is *freezing*!”

“You little back-stabber!” George accused me, although laughing at the same time.

“Hey, if I’m going to lose, I'll lose in style!” I replied, swimming as quickly as possible for the rope ladder. We both crawled up it and collapsed onto the ground in a heap of wet clothes and dripping hair.

“You gave me a run for my money,” George breathed, flopping onto his back.

“That was some impressive work,” the last veteran Jedi informed us, walking over; “I have to say that you are both incredibly talented, BUT, I can only have one Padawan.”

I sat up and hung my head, “I know.”

“It’s not your fault that you don’t have Force powers,” the Jedi said, laying his hand on my shoulder, “But the Republic army needs skilled warriors like you – who can rival a Jedi without having any Force powers.”

I sniffed back some tears and nodded my head while George wrapped me in a bear hug.

“I’m so so sorry, Leo,” he said to me, “I wish this didn’t have to be so.”

“I know,” I told him, “I would have done the same if I was in your shoes. You go be the best Jedi there has ever been or ever will be!”

“I’ll do just that!” George replied confidently, slapping me on the back again, as he and Bob left.

Still feeling cold and very wet, I sloshed over to the chairs nearby and plopped down while the instructors debated over their many sheets of paper. Presently, the school’s principal strode over.

“Well kids,” he addressed the twins and I, “You’ll be proud to know that you scored higher than all your other trainees that will be transferred to the Republic’s army. Leo, you will be promoted to Lieutenant, and you, Ember and Amber, will both be Lieutenant Assistants.”

“Great,” Amber replied sarcastically, summing up all of our feelings.

“Don’t be so gloomy! That’s a great accomplishment,” the principal insisted, “Go pack your bags now, the shuttle will be here shortly.”

This Republic’s academy used to be the galaxy’s best training center for young recruits wanting to get jobs with the republic, but with the addition of more numerous and specialized academies, this school was almost exclusively for those interested in being a member of the Republic’s army, air force, or a Jedi Padawan. I knew it was still a remarkable accomplishment to be promoted to a lieutenant at only fourteen years of age, but when you have your eyes set on becoming a Jedi’s Padawan, all other results are technically a failure.

We were almost at the door, when one of the other instructors shouted over to us, “Oh! And apparently you, Ember and Leo, will be stationed together at the base on Hoth! Amber, you’ll be stationed at Mearer.”

“Cool!” Ember said.

“Oh great,” I moaned.

The girls’ dorm was on the opposite side of the training center, so we quickly parted ways. I shortly found myself back at Pod 2’s room, where I threw what little possessions I had into my duffle bag in a matter of a few minutes. Jake, Tay, and George’s beds were already cleared out.

“Feeling depressed?” a voice from nearby broke the silence.

I jumped and quickly pin-pointed the voice which appeared to be coming from behind the large Republic Recruitment poster hanging on a pole slightly offset the wall. Sure enough, a hooded figure stepped out from behind it and offered me his hand.

“So you’ve been cut,” he told me bluntly.

“Thanks for making me feel worse,” I sighed, uncharacteristically unconcerned about a complete stranger being in my room.

“You accepted your position in the Republic army?” he asked me, keeping his face pointed at the ground.

“I mean, it’s better than nothing I guess,” I replied.

“Have you considered other options?” he quizzed me.

“I mean, a Jedi obviously,” I countered.

“I may be able to help you,” he told me, “How do you feel about joining the most elite group of warriors in this part of the galaxy?”

I narrowed my eyes, “What kind of elite group?”

With that, the man threw off his hood and stared me straight in the eyes. I instantly recognized the red eyes and battle-hardened face of the man – it was Jek-10 – the most infamous, Force enhanced, clone deserter in the history of the Republic. He had been strengthened using kyber crystal power, but after many years of faithful service, he switched to the Dark Side - disappearing all together shortly thereafter

I gasped, “But how…? I thought you disappeared without a trace.”

“That’s what I wanted everyone to think. Look at me,” he said, “I’m as old as hell. The group I started is a non-partisan collection of mercenaries and warriors that only participate in the highest-profile missions.”

“So not a Sith?” I asked, suspicious.

“I mean, we do work for them from time to time, but that’s not our main goal anyway,” Jek replied, “I mean; you know I became famous fighting for the Republic.”

“So I’ve heard,” I stated, “I’m going to need some time to think this over.”

“There’s no time,” Jek quickly replied, “That shuttle will arrive shortly; then I won’t be able to contact you. It’s now or never.”

“Um, uh…,” I said slowly, “Why would you want me though? I have no force powers, and I was cut from this program.”

“Because I sense a great power within you,” Jek said slowly, “You have the ability to become a great tactician, regardless of the Force. Plus, we need *young* people in our group.”

“I still don’t know,” I said, “A Jedi only sticks to the light side, and your group sounds a bit morally hazy.”

“Have you ever considered that you aren’t a Jedi?” Jek asked me.

“Well that’s obvious,” I said.

“Here, check this out,” Jek said, pulling something out of his robe, “You know about lightsabers, right?”

“Yeah,” I replied quickly, “What trainee doesn’t?!”

“Check this out,” Jek said, depositing an ornate, metal lightsaber hilt into my hands, “What do you notice about it.”

Actually being able to hold a weapon of this caliber was nothing short of thrilling, and I carefully turned it over in my hands.

“Woah, this is a custom dual-bladed lightsaber! Where did you get it?” I asked Jek.

“I know a guy who specializes in rare and valuable weapons… for a price,” Jek answered, “It’s brand new. You can have it.”

“What?!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, but you know,” Jek continued, “That this isn’t your standard weapon. The first time you turn it on, it’s color will align to what side of the Force you are and what your abilities are.”

“Yeahhhh,” I said slowly, “But I don’t have any Force powers.”

“Turn it on anyway,” Jek commanded me, “You might be surprised

“But… but…,” I stammered, as I picked up on the sound of footsteps from far outside the doorway.

“Hurry!” Jek said, laying his hand on mine as I debated whether to turn it on, “Ignite it kid!”

Taking a deep breath, I pressed the trigger. Instantly, a long stream of kyber crystal energy flooded out of the hilt creating a double-bladed saber. It was so long that it almost burnt a hole through my bed’s posts. However, neither of those two observations caused me to gasp – it was the blade’s color that surprised me.

“C’mon,” Jek said, “We’ve got two more new members to pick up.”