

STAR WARS

A CHOICE TO BE BETTER

By Aura Ta'var

***The Day Before
Dandoran orbit
39 ABY***

Aura Ta'var sat in the converted mess hall of the *Screeching Osprey*, a Quasar Fire-class Frigate owned by the Revenants. She had a bottle of Dandoran rum in front of her and several other pirates around her table. Five small glasses were filled with the amber liquid by a Weequay. The crowd around them all shouted "Drink! Drink! Drink!" The Jedi grabbed her glass and toasted her fellow pirates, each of them a different species and a different look altogether. They ranged from Twi'lek's to Devaronians to species she wasn't quite sure of. All of them wore the strangest collection of patchwork clothes, almost as if they had stolen each item and put it all together into one outfit. One of them even had a decorative hat. Aura wrinkled her nose at the general smell and then downed her drink with the rest of the pirates, hoping it would make her forget the stench in the air. Finishing the shot with little effect, she slammed the glass down at the same time as the Twi'lek across from her. The rest barely made it back on the table.

"YESSSS!"

"She's really doing it. Gearbox might lose this one."

"Nah, I have 200 credits that say he will win. No one holds their liquor like Gearbox."

"I'll take that bet."

Aura rolled her eyes and waited for the next shot to be poured. The rest of the ship was here drinking as well if they weren't on duty. The tables were full of dirty pirates talking way too loudly and moving a bit tipsy. Some were already passed out. Some were somehow awake and took this moment to sing as loudly as they could a space shanty decrying the Severian Principate's deeds. The Zeltron's gaze went back to her table as she heard the glasses slosh with liquid.

"Sooo w-why is a goody goood Jedi...here anyways? H-heeere to turn u-us in?" slurred Gearbox accusingly.

Aura paused for a moment and then said something very loud she normally kept to herself or at least much quieter. Alas, the Dandoran rum was finally starting to hit her. "Why you scurvy son of a hutt?! You think I would support the Imperials?!"

"Whhy—"

"NO YOU SHUT UP," she shouted to cut him off. "Imperials killed whole planets. They destroyed the Jedi Order. They killed innocents. They used slaves as labor. What makes this new Empire any better? They always go back to their old ways in the end. Someone has to stop them. IT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN! ANOTHER!" she finished with a flourish as she threw her cup at

the floor and shattered it into a thousand pieces. The room went quiet and stared at her. Somehow Aura found herself standing but wasn't sure how she got there.

“What? Isn't this what we do?!”

The atmosphere was so tense she could cut it with her lightsaber. Most of the pirates were dazed as if still comprehending her words, but others were deciding to either shoot her or smash their glasses. One by one, each of the pirates yelled out to the ceiling and slammed their glasses into the duracrete, the sound of broken glass and metal cups clanking off the floor overpowering.

“YEAH DOWN WITH THOSE IMPS!”

“DOWN WITH THE IMPS!”

“DOWN WITH THE IMPS!”

“DOWN WITH THE IMPS!”

The Twi'lek's wary gaze turned into a smile. “Aallriighty then. Ms M-meiloorun—”

“Hey, I'm not a fruit! You stop calling me that,” she retorted.

“Oonly if you w-win,” he said in a challenge. “Iit's ourr ship. O-our rules. Yooou get the name wee give you,” he said as he pushed his finger into the space in front of her face.

Aura simply glared and stole the glass next to her. “Pour, Squeaky,” she said to the Weequay demandingly, finally using his pirate name. Appreciative chuckles from the other pirates could be heard, the whole room (or what was left of it that was conscious) turning around to see the finale. Thud after thud after thud could be heard as the two heavyweights tried to outdrink each other. After the 5th shot, they started pouring Rancor Tequila in with the rum and things started to get serious.

Both the Zeltron and the Twi'lek had their heads on the table, both not wanting another glass but too stubborn to admit losing. The Weequay poured another glass for each of them, but both of them had their heads on the table. A minute passed before a sudden death was called.

“Alright, you two, first to down their drink and break the glass on the floor wins the challenge. Go!”

Aura tried to see if Gearbox was moving but tilting her head made the room spin too much. She could hear the room chant around her, encouraging her to drink. A movement from her opponent made her startle and she eased up on her right elbow. The Twi'lek was somehow not out yet but he didn't look good. Moreover, he was going for his cup. The Zeltron tried to slap his hand away but all that came out was a dismissive wave and a miss. The crowd yelled in an uproar.

“HEY ARE WE PIRATES OR NOT?!” she yelled back. Ignoring them, she took a steady breath and picked up her glass.

Gearbox had done the same and both were looking at their glasses as if they would rather not. Aura put the glass to the mouth with a flourish and downed it, flinging her cup to the floor triumphantly. Gearbox was still halfway through his drink before spitting it out on Squeaky.

“And our winner is the Zeltron! Thanks for tuning in and come to me to claim your winnings!”

The Weequay cackled gleefully as he mentally counted all the lost credits, only having to hand out a little of the day’s pot. The Twi’lek eyed her maliciously and then relaxed, holding out a hand. Aura took it.

“Alright, Ms. M-meiloorun, what s-should we calll ye?”

Aura opened her mouth to speak but the crowd chimed together as one.

“RUMMY. RUMMY. RUMMY. RUMMY.”

“And yeee shall be R-rummy. W-welcome aboard the ship,” offered the Twi’lek.

The crowd cheered and congratulated her. Aura could help but smile in her intoxicated state. At least she wasn’t fruit anymore. Her mission nagged at the back of her mind but the rum was making it hazy. She was supposed to do the thing..yes. *But do I want to?* She thought to herself, looking around at her current arrangement.



The Next Morning
Dandoran orbit
39 ABY

The rest of the night she couldn’t quite remember, having at some point passed out on the table. She woke up the next morning with a pirate hat on top of her head and a strong smell of alcohol lingering on her breath. As she lifted her head, she could see most of the room still passed out, but a few were already up and functioning. She sat up straight and patted the spot inside her robes where her saber was hidden. Breathing a sigh of relief, she stood up and felt a painful ping of pain on her upper arm. Rolling her right sleeve up she sighed as she saw a tattoo newly emblazoned on her newly agitated pink skin, the black Tenixir Remnant symbol interwoven with the ship’s osprey insignia. *Never going to live that down. Guess I really am part of the crew.* As she lowered her sleeve again, one of the ship’s enforcers, a tall Devaronian with a menacing stare, came up behind her.

“Captain has a job for you. He wants to see you.”

“Does he now? What if I have a headache and want to take a nap?” she asked without turning around.

“You made the oath, Rummy. Time to earn your keep. Let’s go,” he said forcefully as he grabbed her right arm and pulled her away from the table.

Aura spun around and pulled her arm out of his grip, using the Force to help her headache go away faster and to ensure she didn’t fall.

“I can walk for myself, thank you very much. Next time you grab me like that you’ll be on the floor,” she threatened for a moment as the two locked eyes. A few heartbeats went by and neither moved. “Now show me to my new Captain. If I’m late to meet him I’m blaming you.”

The Devaronian rolled his eyes and gestured for her to follow. The Jedi walked behind him, making a mental note of the ship’s layout as best she could along the way. It was a fairly standard ship all in all with a few added on bits here and there for flavor or some as yet unknown utility. Once they reached the Captain’s office the enforcer walked away and a pleasant-sounding “Come in” greeted her.

The Zeltron walked into the office to see an older human with black-gray hair and a generally pleasing demeanor. He smiled as she entered and offered her the seat across from her. She gladly took it and for once in her life waited for the pirate captain to talk first.

“Nice hat,” he said offhand, gesturing to the black tri-corner hat someone had magically bestowed on top of her head at some point last night.

“Thanks,” she said sheepishly, somewhat glad it hid her crystal blue hair for the most part.

“I’m Captain Silver Tongue. Nice to meet you, Rummy.”

The Jedi nodded her head. “Likewise.”

“I’ve heard much about you. I’m impressed you’re awake already but glad all the same. I have a unique problem that needs to be solved and you’re the perfect one for the job. Want to show the imperials some justice?”

Aura smiled. “Why do you think I’m here? What’s the job?”

Silver Tongue smiled. “Come with me.”

The Zeltron followed him to the lower levels of the ship, where a small old supply room had been converted into a makeshift prison. A single chair under a bright light was occupied by one bound man, a Twi’lek by the look of him. On either side of the door were two pirates that were

equipped like the enforcer she had seen earlier, armed with a heavy E-11 type blaster rifle along with an array of grenades and knives. A repurposed imperial interrogation droid was in the middle of a torture session when she came in. The victim didn't scream oddly enough but rather grimaced in pain with a sort of determination few held under such duress. Aura reached out to the Force and felt fear, anger, and hatred. But a song of sadness wove through the room, all coming from the man in the chair himself. Aura paused for a moment and then finally spoke.

"This is him?"

"Yes. He has key intel we need and won't give it up. He won't even speak. We even stole the Severian Principate's special military interrogation droid and no luck. I was hoping someone with your talents might have better luck," he said hopefully.

"What do you want from him?" she asked.

"Just the information. Then he can be sentenced for his crimes," said the Captain.

"What specifically do you need?"

"Clearance codes for a hidden military facility illegally holding and executing dissidents like ourselves. I even heard experiments were done on them for super soldiers. We need more intel on it so we can stop it and he won't talk."

"Alright, send away the torture droid. I'll see what I can do. No one tries anything funny though. This is my job," she said in a serious tone.

The Captain nodded and the interrogator droid whizzed away to the wall, leaving the physically beaten man in front of her. His mind however seemed quite intact as he spitted upwards towards her face, forcing Aura to take a step back. The Jedi grimaced and put her hands on her hips. *It was time to use some of her friend Alethia's tricks.*

"Well hello to you too. Here I thought you were different from the rest of the crew and it appears I was wrong."

The Twi'lek merely glared at her but refrained from spitting at her further. The Zeltron waited for him to calm down and then tried again.

"Hello there, my name is Rummy. I'm a Jedi and I think you can help me out," she said cryptically before continuing, "Tell me about yourself. How did you end up in this mess?"

The Twi'lek remained silent but appeared much more cautious. Aura waited for several heartbeats but still nothing.

"Do we have any intel on any known associates?" she asked Silver Tongue.

He shook his head back and forth.

“Any personal effects on him that you found?”

“We searched him already but he had nothing of value,” said the Captain.

“What did you find?” she asked again, this time more pointedly.

“Just his dog tags. They seem to have seen a lot of action though.”

The Jedi’s interest was piqued.

“Hand them to me please,” she ordered.

Aura let them rest in her hands and reached out to the Force, images of the man’s past etched within them. They flowed through her mind like a river of holovids going further and further back in time. She wasn’t sure what she was looking for yet but she kept mental notes of anything that felt “personal” or particularly traumatic. Most of his past with the dog tags was standard soldier-type missions. She frowned as she got to the parts that showed his involvement in the secret prison and the lab attached to it that appeared to be experimenting on augmented soldiers. Righteous anger started to build but she put it aside for now.

As she was going through one of his old missions against the Tenixir Remnants she finally hit gold. The Twi’lek was on the bridge of a frigate firing on a fleeing pirate corvette. Green lasers pounded into the hull mercilessly until its captain finally surrendered. *This is Freedom’s Call. We Surrender. Repeat. We Surrender.* Their prisoner could be seen on the bridge of the frigate, a cruel expression on his face as he ordered their execution. As missiles were launched towards the pirate’s almost-destroyed craft a plea for mercy went out. *Father, no! It’s Tasha. Mother and I are—* A brilliant orange explosion cut off her last thoughts as the Twi’lek panicked and ordered a recovery crew. The scene cut to him kneeling next to two dead bodies holding a red sash he had taken as a token from his dead daughter, her expression set in fear. The man cried angrily, cursing the pirates for what they had cost them.

The Jedi had seen enough. Focusing on the energy around her, she called some of it to her aid to replace what she had just lost and then returned to her prisoner. He was still stone-faced but seemed to want the dog tags. The Zeltron obliged and slowly clipped them around his neck once more. Aura walked around the man looking for anything of distinction. The prisoner was still in his combat gear.

“Take off this piece of armor please,” she commanded the guards.

The once stone-faced prisoner did his best to thrash about as the pirates overwhelmed him and finally took off his torso armor. As it came off, the corner of Aura’s mouth went up ever so slightly at the sight of a red bit of cloth around one of his biceps.

“Hold him completely still for a moment, please,” she ordered once more.

The Twi’lek braced himself and then tried his best to fight back as the Jedi put her hand on the red scarf and reached out to the Force once more. Memories of his daughter and the prisoner’s private moments of grief post since her death flooded her mind. Aura could see the mother and daughter attending a rally decrying the methods the Restorers were using in the military, definitely fighting for the Tenixir Pirates as they made supply runs, worrying about breaking the bad news to father, and at the end crying for forgiveness from a man they both never believed would ever hurt them. The Zeltron quickly stepped away and released the guards. *Gotcha*, she thought to herself.

“Commander Pike,” she said, recalling the last name on the dog tags, “we can do this the easy or hard way. Let’s see what you choose.”

The Twi’lek merely stared at her defiantly.

“Let’s go back in your history a bit shall we? Remember the accident with your wife and daughter? Did you ever figure out why they were on that ship in the first place?”

Whatever he expected to hear it was not that. The prisoner opened his mouth in shock and then snapped into a defensive rage. She could feel it through the Force despite the lack of talking. Aura kept talking.

“They were on the Tenixir corvette, weren’t they? By the way, I’m just going to keep revealing more details about them until you answer my questions.”

Pike grimaced and begrudgingly nodded in the affirmative.

“Good. Did you find out why they were there in the first place?”

The Twi’lek nodded affirmatively again and glared at her and her fellow pirates.

“No, it wasn’t them. It was you. It was your devotion to a violent cause that pushed them away into the waiting arms of the very people you disliked. It was only ever you.”

Pike’s face contorted with anger but Aura did not relent.

“You joined that secret prison facility. You did those experiments on prisoners. You killed dissenters to your glorious empire. It was all you. You wanted a return to the old ways of the empire. Well, now you’ve got it. It was an empire that tore apart families and murdered innocents for revenge, all for a secure society. And this ‘cause’ you cared about split apart your family until you killed them as well.”

Aura let the accusation hang in the air. The Twi’lek avoided her gaze but remained defiant.

“So I have one question for you. What are the clearance codes for the hidden prison facility you worked for? We both know it should not exist. The Restorers were wrong to do that and we both know that *your family* would want you to tell me the codes so we can decommission it for good.”

Pike didn't say anything but felt torn in the Force as if two sides of him were battling it out. The Jedi waited patiently, ignoring the anxious energy from her fellow pirates. After what felt like a thousand heartbeats but was probably a lot less, the Twi'lek merely stared back at her defiantly. The choice was clear.

“Fine. Hold him still,” she ordered once more.

As the guards kept him from squirming she untied the red scarf and asked for one of the enforcer's blasters. The Captain smiled and let her have it. Meanwhile, Pike was thrashing like a wounded animal. Aura placed the scarf on the floor and aimed the blaster rifle at it. The Twi'lek froze instantly.

“Okay, this is how we will do it. I will give you until the count of three to agree to tell us the information and if you do not comply this scarf turns into space dust. If you lie to use and the codes are incorrect, I will also turn this scarf into space dust. Do you understand?”

Pike nodded affirmatively.

“Okay, one more time. Tell me the clearance codes to the Restorer's secret prison facility so that others can investigate what they are doing. Do it for Tasha. 3”

The Twi'lek looked at the scarf with panic and strained to go after it. He was kept still by his captors.

“2”

Aura stared down at the prisoner and didn't move the gun a centimeter.

“1”

“OKAY OKAY. DON'T SHOOT IT!”

The Jedi relaxed the weapon again. “Okay. Tell us the clearance codes.”

The prisoner started to cry as he punched in the info into a datapad that Silver Tongue held out to him. Once it was inputted, the captain whistled in appreciation. Pike merely hung his head and stared at the still unharmed red scarf on the floor.

“Will you look at that? He told you the truth. Good job, Rummy. One hell of a first day.”

“Thanks,” she said, noticing that the Captain had pocketed the datapad and had already told most of the onlookers to leave, save for himself and the two enforcers.

“Now, Commander Pike, I declare you guilty of crimes against the Tenixir Revenants and sentence you to death,” he said with some degree of satisfaction. “Rummy, do the honors.”

Aura turned around in mild shock. “But he told you what he wanted. He should get a trial.”

“He did, now as your Captain, I am saying shoot him. He’s an imperial and our enemy. What’s the problem?”

Aura paused for a moment. “None,” she found herself saying before her mind frantically raced as to what to do. *He’s a murderer and worse, he worked with the Restorers. You know he’s guilty,* thought one side of her mind. *No, he deserves a real trial. The Harmonists will decide his fate,* said the other.

Turning around she steadied the gun at the Twi’lek’s head and took a deep breath. And then another and another.

“Shoot him, Rummy!” ordered the captain more forcefully.

I saw what he did to others. He would deserve this, she thought as she placed the gun directly against his head. Her heart was oddly calm as she did so.

“Do it. I don’t deserve to live,” said Pike quietly without coercion.

Tears flowed down his face as he kept his eyes locked on the red scarf. The Force was awash in his sadness, anger at himself, and a tinge of raw emotional remorse. Aura kept her finger on the trigger but didn’t squeeze. She recognized this person, this look, this feeling in the Force. Except for last time, it had been her begging for a killing stroke.

At that moment, all became clear and a breath later she turned around and shot the two enforcers with two stun bolts at point-blank range. She sensed a third bolt coming from the Captain and reached out with the Force to freeze it in place for a moment, quickly sidestepping it and firing off a third stun bolt toward Silver Tongue. The human leaped out of its way and as his feet left the ground the Jedi forcefully pushed the man into the wall. As the man slumped to the floor and a prior blaster bolt she was holding with the Force was released into the wall behind her with a burning sizzle, she shot the captain once more with a stun bolt. Aura reached out to the Force and didn’t sense anyone else coming but knew it was only a matter of time. Grabbing the datapad of the unconscious form of the Captain, she quickly scooped up the red scarf and approached the prisoner with it as a peace offering.

“Look, I know you don’t like me and I don’t like you, but if you want to live you’ll follow me off this ship and listen to my orders till we get to safety? Don’t try anything funny with me, agree?”

“Why should I trust you? You’re just like them,” he said accusingly.

“Because I chose not to kill you when part of me really wanted to. Lucky for you, the Force has other plans for you. Now, we have very little time. Do you want to stay here and mope or do you want to help me escape?”

“I’ll help,” said Pike warily. “What choice do I have?”

“You always have a choice to pick the better path, even if it's harder,” she said as she undid his bindings. “If you want to stop suffering, you’ll need to learn that one day,” she added before she took the explosive bandoliers off of the two enforcers and threw them over her torso. “You grab a gun and I’ll take point. They still trust me,” she said as she put back on her pirate hat that had fallen off in the short scuffle.

Aura walked confidently outside of the room but saw no one. Waving Pike forward, she led the way towards where she expected the engine room to be based on her study of the ship type schematics and the tour the pirates had given her of the ship so far. She had to stun a few more pirates along the way but she could sense them before they could see her. The Twi’lek was cooperative for the moment or at least knew the value of silence. Once they reached the engine room, she finally spoke to Commander Pike.

“Okay, we need to kill the engines so this ship can’t go anywhere but also won’t destroy the ship. Which ones should we use?” she asked as she pointed to the two bandoliers slung over her.

The Twi’lek sighed and said, “You really are a Jedi, aren’t you?”

“Yes, now which ones?”

“These will at least fry the systems until more reinforcements come,” he said, pointing to a particular type of grenade.

“Once I pull the pin on these, we run directly to my ship.”

“Got it,” said the Twi’lek as he checked the hallway once more.

Aura nodded and used the Force to float them into the ship’s engine. She pulled the small pins out of each of them, let them go, and then ran towards the hangar bay where she knew she could find her shuttle. The pair of them ignored the sounds of the grenades and focused on running. Commander Pike ran as best as he could to keep up but his earlier torture sessions had taken their toll. Thankfully, he was a good shot and the pair of them were able to knock out the meager patrols on their way to the elevator. As it shot up to the hangar level, alarm klaxons went off.

“I think they found my handiwork. Are you ready for the last run to the hangar?” she asked, concerned that he might not be able to keep up.

“I can handle myself, Jedi. Where is your magical laser sword anyways? That would come in handy about now,” he quipped through panting breaths.

“Not on me. Pirates like to steal things of value, after all,” she replied wryly.

As the elevator door started to slow down she sensed a small group of pirates above her. “Be ready for a welcoming party. I’ll stand in front of you to cover us and you shoot them.”

“Roger.”

As the doors whooshed open, Aura willed the Force to form a barrier around her, the pings of deadly blaster bolts harmlessly dispersing on her shield. Commander Pike edged around her and fired from either side of the door, picking off the pirates one by one as they focused on the Jedi. Once the last shooter was down, Aura put down her shield and ran the rest of the way to her shuttle, breathing a bit heavier than when they had first started this escape. As they entered the hangar, she urged the Twi’lek to ignore anyone firing at them and led him into a particular shuttle. Locking the hatch behind them, she entered a coordinate location and ordered the piloting droid to take off.

The shuttle powered up in response and soon after the repulsors kicked on and moved them upward. It was at that moment with Aura’s back to him that Pike chose to strike, already putting his finger on the trigger. Aura grabbed her saber within her robes and activated it with a *snap-hiss* as she swirled around, cutting the barrel of the gun in half midway through its discharge. The blaster exploded in his hand as the melted metal blocked the only path out for the bolt. The Twi’lek cried out in pain and fell to the floor. Her shuttle vibrated for a moment and then shot out of the *Screeching Osprey*, the droid already heading towards hyperspace.

Aura pointed her saber at Pike and stared down at him with fierce determination, the blue of her blade showing the fear in his eyes as he pressed himself into the wall behind him as much as possible.

“I thought you didn’t have a saber!”

“I lied. Now, listen to me closely because I’ll only say this once and you are trying my patience.” To emphasize her point she put the tip of her saber right under his chin. The Twi’lek went still again, despite the burns on his hand. “I am taking you back to the Severian Principate to answer for the crimes you have committed against the Tenixir Revenants and your own people. You will be under the care of the Harmonist from this point forward and I highly suggest you cooperate with them. This is your chance to make up for what you did to your family and make it so that others don’t have to feel that pain. Don’t you see this war is causing too much death and destruction, all for old imperial ideas that should have stayed dead? Don’t you see that you are only hurting others around you because you are suffering too much yourself?”

“I didn’t—”

“Yes, you did,” she interrupted. “When I touched that red scarf you care about so much, I saw their last moments. They were pirates! They feared what you would do to them so they didn’t tell you, but they were pirates trying to help the very people they saw oppressed. And when you found out you proved them right. You shot them out of space without even considering terms of surrender.”

Aura let that hang in the air. The lurch of the shuttle swayed them ever so slightly as it entered hyperspace towards a Harmonist-controlled facility. No one was pursuing them so she assumed the grenades had done their job.

“I told you I didn’t deserve to live,” he shot back. “Did you really expect me to go quietly with you as your captive?”

“No. You do deserve to live. I felt your remorse and your pain and suffering. You know you could use that to ensure no one else has to feel that way or you make everyone else feel that as well. It’s always your choice. It always was.”

Aura turned off her saber and gestured for Pike to sit in one of the passenger seats. The Twi’lek grunted in pain and sat down willingly, trying to stave off fainting.

“See. That was my choice not to kill you. Take your energy and use it for the good of the Severian Principate. The Harmonists are trying to make it a happier place and I think you should hear them out. Whether you choose a different path from now is up to you, but I hope you do.”

Pike was pensive but made no commitments for now. She expected as much. “Do you have any medical supplies for this?” he asked hopefully, trying to change the conversation.

“I do, but I’ve already spared your life twice now. You brought that pain on yourself. Your hand will be fine once we reach the facility and you are treated at their medical bay. If you want to sleep, I can arrange for that at least though,” she offered.

“Please,” he confirmed. “What’s your real name, Rummy?”

Aura ignored him and took a stim out of her medical kit. “Noneyabusiness,” she replied as she stuck it in his arm.

As it put him to sleep she simply said, “May the Force be with you.” She hoped he would take what she had said into consideration but as she put on his cuffs for extra precaution she knew he had a long way to go. If he could take one small step toward the right direction though, who knew what was possible. She smiled despite the hectic past couple of days. That’s what it all came down to, wasn’t it? One small step followed by another until you no longer recognize your old self. All it took was a choice to be better over and over again.