

## “Our Lady of the Red Star”

By Rebekah Wheadon

“Well, boy, you’re here.” She huffs out a throaty sound, eyebrows pulled to the centre of her forehead. But sure enough, there he is — the boy an inky smudge in the growing dark, red sun slouching its way below the glittering horizon as the city lights gut to life beneath them.

He straightens. Nautilia can make out the shape of his scowl through the gloom.

Before he says anything, she has the blade in her hand. “Looks like it’s time to see who deserves to live,” she growls, voice a rumble beneath the cartilage in her throat.

“This is ridiculous,” he snaps, but his hand is at the gun on his side nonetheless, thumb stroking the cold metal. The air around them carries a chill, despite the sludgy humidity. It’s been a long and wet spring, but the planet’s nights are long, and so cold they make her bones ache.

“Why? What about this is so ridiculous?” she murmurs, shifting her weight from one leg to her core. She coils her muscles, slow and sinuous as a snake, and she waits.

The boy, skin so dark his smile looks just like teeth hovering in the gloom, snorts. “I’m the one with the license. You can’t just —”

“You’re not from here,” she hisses, stepping forward, and the boy with the gun shuffles back, back toward the edge of the rooftop, to where the sandstone meets darkness and the fall down to city streets. His heels bump against the lip.

“The people here know me,” she adds, “They know me, and they trust me, and I’m the one who keeps them safe. You’re nothing except a thief.”

“I’m licensed,” he says. The edges of his voice shake, but his hand stays steady on his holster. “Regents-sanctioned. Free agents are criminals, nothing more than thugs. You need to be licensed to be a guardian, even on a backwater planet. Besides, if you try anything, you’ll get arrested.” The words sound weak, and he scowls, like he’s heard the whine in his own voice. So he adds, almost petulant, “If I don’t kill you first.”

A sharp laugh snaps past her teeth, and she can’t help but roll her eyes. “Boy,” she says, words tangy in her mouth, edged with danger and the hot taste of adrenaline, “if you can kill me, I deserve to be dead. And I don’t care. I don’t care about the piece of paper you carry, and I don’t care about the Regents. You’re taking my business, you’re edging in on my territory, and that means I’ll fight you. Only the strong survive here, and if my strength has failed— Well,” and she

shrugs, “Then I guess I’ll be dead.”

The darkening red light from the large star catches the shine of his eyes. He’s watching her, gaze jittering over the blade in her hand, the curl of her mouth. “This planet is crazy,” he mutters. “You people are crazy.”

Her smile sharpens, lips pulled tight. “We are,” she admits, before shooting forward through the dark.

He hadn’t expected her to move so quickly, the boy startled into skittering sideways, and he’s trying to pull out his gun, but she moves faster than the wind. Nautilia has worked for this, she’s spent her life doing this, so she drops and snaps back up, and even his little license can’t stop her blade from sinking deep into his belly, down below his navel. She wrenches it sideways, jagged rip through skin and cloth, and his guts spill, hot and wet and slippery, across the roof. The boy’s eyes are wide as the sprawl of sky above, and his mouth has puckered into a surprised, wet shape. The halo of quills around her head rustles, as heat and anger and sheer joy shivers up and down her spine.

This, she thinks, as the boy at her feet sputters for breath, fingers limp around his silly little gun, this is worth going away for. This feeling, the rush and the quiet, the smell of blood and shit. Carefully, Nautilia wipes the tacky viscera off her blade, and she slips down over the edge of the building and away into the buzz and hum of the awakening city. The night is before her, and she has clients to see, money to collect, contracts to finish, all before the boy’s handlers find the loose-limbed sprawl of his corpse. She has the night, before they find her and haul her off-planet, away from her heady city, from her red star, from the ugly freedom she calls her own, and into the endless and close dark of the Empire.