

~ Official Document ~

Galactic Security Services

Historical Record #B54-99-727

Subject: Summary - Vega-Lyrans

Race: Vega-Lyrans

Origin: Vega Star System

Description: Humanoid race with advanced affinity to energy and advanced psionic abilities. For detailed listing of abilities refer to classified record #F95-12-843

Security Assessment: Very High Risk

Status: Hunted to extinction. At the time this record was created, no verified Vega-Lyran has been detained by the GSS for over a century.

Chapter One

Profits were up.

Relda Dela-Cruz smiled as she tapped a long red nail against the Sync communicator screen, studying the figures for her fortune-telling business. Outside her tent, she heard the busy sounds of the market starting to quiet. Dusk had fallen and Souk's moons would be on the rise.

Relocating to the market planet of Souk four years ago had clearly been an excellent decision. She loved the old-world charm of the planet, and much preferred it to the glass-and-steel megacity worlds of the central systems.

Her two stores here in the planet's capital, Medina, were doing very well. She tapped the screen to study the next page of information. Her new branches in the neighboring market towns weren't quite in the black yet. But they were close.

Souk was situated not far from the edge of the galaxy, a perfect location to cater to the explorers and adventurers heading off into uncharted space. She smiled. And while they bought supplies or hired crew, they liked to learn their fate before they jetted off into the black.

Relda leaned back into the plush cushions scattered across the floor of her tent. The sweet scent of the incense she loved to burn filled the air, the roof of the tent dipped low, and on a nearby table a beautiful orb the size of a VelocityBall glowed silver-pink.

All the embellishments were for her clients. When people came to discover their fate, they

expected it to hear it in surroundings like this. The ancient art of fortune-telling was a time-honored tradition of old Earth. The planet's destruction in the Great Terran War millennia ago hadn't killed off people's need for hope.

Of course, Relda knew most of her clients didn't *really* believe what she told them was true. They came for that glimmer of hope. They wanted to believe that whatever made them unhappy was going to change, improve, get better.

For some, life promised wonderful things—a mate, family, children, wealth, success. For others, there was no happy ending. She knew that better than most.

Pain was a bitter sting under her heart. Annoyed with herself, she set her Sync aside and rose. She needed some tea. Something soothing. The sash around her waist—adorned with beaten gold coins—tinkled. Her full red skirts swished against her legs and she dug her toes into the plush rug, enjoying the decadent sensation.

What her clients didn't know—what her fellow market-stall holders didn't know—was that every fortune Relda gave was true.

Seeing the future, reading the energy auras that surrounded every living being, were among her least powerful abilities.

And none of them would ever know the truth.

She'd made the mistake of trusting someone with her identity once. It wouldn't happen again.

She moved to the tiny area cordoned off by a wall of colorful fabric and ordered a tea from the small food-printer sitting on the table. Lights flashed and the machine gave a discreet beep. Taking the small, green mug, she let the fabric fall back into place. Couldn't have technology spoiling the effect of her tent.

Fragrant steam drifted upward and she breathed deep, enjoying the scents of zhoma-berry and taxx root. Taking a sip, she stepped back into the main area, savoring the hot, spicy taste.

The past no longer held power over her. And even though her future would never hold the things she'd once hoped for, her life was exactly as she liked it. She had a thriving business, took lovers when it suited her, and she surrounded herself with the small pleasures she enjoyed.

She took another sip of tea and with her other hand she lifted the mass of dark curls off the back of her neck. She needed to get these financials finished and then head home to take a long, hot bubble bath.

Suddenly the flap of her tent was thrown back and a body barreled inside. Relda almost spilled hot tea over her white blouse.

“Relda!”

Alia was eighteen, with a long, reed-slim body and an exquisitely beautiful face. She'd been living on the streets—barely avoiding the men who preyed on the vulnerable—for over a year when Relda had caught her trying to steal Relda's favorite Vedian chocolates from the back of the tent. She now ran Relda's second tent in the market.

“Alia, honey. Are you okay?” Relda set her tea on a low table and stood and held out a hand. The girl's aura was shot through with streaks of orange and black. Stressed and fearful.

Alia nodded, but after a good look at the girl's face, Relda's stomach hardened with rage. The entire left side of Alia's face was swollen. It would probably bruise before Relda got her to a medbooth to heal it away.

“Relda—” a choked sob “—I'm so sorry.”

Relda pulled the girl into her arms. “Tell me what happened.”

“The tent, all your beautiful things...they're ruined.” Alia gave a hiccupping cry.

“They’re just things, honey. Who did this?” Once she knew, she’d take them apart into tiny, little pieces.

“Two men. They thought I was you. Called...called me Relda.” Alia’s brow creased. “They were after something.”

A chill swept through Relda, but before she could ask more, she sensed they were no longer alone.

Two men stood in the doorway.

She turned and cocked a hip. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, I’m closed for the day.” From the way Alia whimpered, Relda didn’t have to ask if these were the men who’d hurt her.

The biggest one stepped forward. He was some sort of aquatic species with wide-set, large eyes and gills on the side of his neck. His aura was mostly greens and yellows—he was alert and cautious. “We aren’t here for a fortune, we’re here for the jewel. You cooperate and I won’t get my weapon out.”

The other man circled around. He was a regular humanoid with no distinguishing features except for his obnoxious smell—sweat and grime. His energy was a muddy brown, with streaks of light green. Immoral and greedy.

“The Trojan Moon. Where is it?” His accent with thick.

Oh, no. Relda’s gut tightened. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No games. We heard it was seen here with you. Hand it over.”

Relda forced her breathing to stay even. She needed a weapon. She had one—a very powerful, dangerous one—but she didn’t dare use it.

Instead, she leaned to the side and snatched up her favorite lamp. The beautiful, slender light had a hefty base. She tested its weight, getting a good grip.

“Just hand over the Moon and we won’t hurt you,” Smelly Man said.

But Relda wasn’t stupid, she heard the eager edge in his voice. He wanted to hurt them, he’d enjoy it. Alia was hers to protect, and Relda had no qualms about doing it.

“Gentlemen, you aren’t welcome here. Last chance to leave.”

The aquatic laughed, a phlegmy sound that wrung another whimper from Alia.

Relda moved fast, leaping forward and swinging the lamp at the same time. It connected with the aquatic’s head. A hard thud and he went down, the surprised look on his face almost comical.

Smelly Man tackled Relda from behind and they skidded across the rug. She shot her elbow back, catching him in the face. He roared and Relda managed to push him off her.

He came at her again and damn it, her skirts were tangled around her legs. She kicked, trying to get free. The man swung out with a large fist, but Relda rolled. She avoided the blow but hit a side table. It tipped, spilling all her pretty ornaments and candles over the floor. Some bounced across the rug, others broke in a shatter of glass.

The man roared. “I’m gonna mess you up, bitch.” He kicked out, catching the low table. It flipped, her tea spilling on the rug.

Relda leaped to her feet. She still clutched the remains of the lamp, righteous anger hot in her blood. She swung again, all her weight behind it.

It hit the man in his side. He howled. “You broke my ribs!”

Relda aimed for his head, but this time the man ducked. He lunged forward and grabbed handful of her hair. He yanked it and pain burst across her scalp, tears pricking her eyes.

She turned, ignoring the sting. She got a knee up and drove it into the man’s groin.

This time he didn’t make a noise, he just fell on the floor, writhing as he clutched himself.

His mouth was open with a soundless scream.

Suddenly, shouts sounded outside the tent.

“Clear the way, the marshal and his men are coming!”

“The marshal’s coming!”

Relda’s hands flexed on the lamp, her chest heaving.

“I sent Bindi to get the marshal,” Alia said from where she huddled on the far side of the tent.

“Good girl.” Relda shot Alia a smile and fought to calm her breathing.

Without warning, the aquatic leaped to his feet. He knocked into Relda, pushing her into the side of the tent. By the time Relda caught her balance, the aquatic had scooped up his friend and tossed him over one broad shoulder. He cast her a scathing look before he yanked a knife out, sliced open her tent and dived through the gash.

Damn it, they were getting away. Relda felt a tingle along the back of her neck. Her power wanted out. She could stop them. It would be so easy.

No. She closed her eyes and fought the urge back.

Seconds later, the door flap snapped open and a tall man stooped through the opening before straightening to his full height.

Relda managed to keep her face blank but inside her mental groan was loud and long. Of all the men she wanted here right now, this was the last one.

Medina’s new marshal was big. She guessed he was around six foot five by the way his head nearly brushed the top of the tent. His shoulders were broad, his legs were thick and muscled, his large hands cradled a laser rifle with practiced ease...everything about him was big. A sly thought twisted through her brain that he was probably big in other places, too.

His body was encased in black cargo trousers and a starched, white shirt that was covered by some sort of black vest that looked vaguely military to Relda. It had lots of pockets and affixed to the front was the shiny, silver star of the Marshal's Office.

And his aura...well, it always made her a little breathless to see it. The beautiful shades of blue of someone who knew who he was, was centered, protective, solid. And whenever he looked at her, she saw the alluring tints of deepest red appear. Heat and desire.

Behind him, two uniformed deputies and a little girl entered. The marshal nodded at the slash in the back of the tent and the taller of the two deputies disappeared through the opening.

The child raced forward, dodging around the marshal to hover by Relda's legs. Bindi was one of Medina's street urchins. Lucky to be seven years old, Relda paid the girl to run messages between her tents. Relda could have used her Sync to contact her employees, but the street kids needed the money.

Relda barely managed to stop herself brushing at the blonde curls escaping Bindi's dirty cap. Relda knew the girl didn't like to be touched. "Thank you for getting help, Bindi. Can you sit with Alia?"

With a nod, Bindi hurried over to plonk down beside Alia.

"Ms. Dela-Cruz, seems you've had some trouble." The marshal's laser-sharp, blue gaze took in state of the tent and then hovered on Alia's bruised face. As he slung the rifle over his shoulder, a muscle ticked in his jaw.

"You're a master of understatement, Marshal Calder."

His face was too rugged to be called handsome, but there a solid toughness to it that was appealing. Dark eyebrows slashed over eyes of the palest blue, like chips of ice. She knew that with once glance he'd catalogued everything in the tent and could list what was broken and all of

Alia's injuries.

He raised a brow. "You going to hit me with that?"

Relda blinked and realized she was still clutching the lamp. She dropped it and hurried over to Bindi and Alia. Gently, she put an arm around Alia's thin shoulders.

The marshal crouched beside them. He'd recently moved to Souk to take up the role of Marshal for Medina after retiring from the Galactic Security Services. She'd heard all kinds of rumors about him, but most said he'd been some sort of Special Forces soldier.

Looking at him, she believed it. It wasn't just his tough look, it was the way he held himself. Still, controlled, and prepared for anything. And his watchful gaze didn't miss a thing. When he'd first started the job, he'd toured the market and met all the stall owners. She'd made him tea, which he'd taken a suspicious sip of before drinking. And for once, Relda hadn't pulled her usual flirting routine. Marshal Calder wasn't someone she wanted to have notice her.

She had secrets she wanted to keep hidden. And he was man who'd dig until he'd uncovered everything.

"Two men attacked Alia. I need to get her to a medbooth."

"Relda fought them off." Alia's voice was a little shaky, but edged with awe. "She was amazing. Not afraid at all."

Calder glanced at Relda for a second, his eyes glinting, before he looked back at the injured young woman. "I'm not surprised to hear that. Alia, I have a couple of quick questions, then we'll get you to the medbooth, okay?" His tone smoothed out as he ran through his questions—what the men looked like, what they wanted, what they'd done. His no-nonsense style seemed to calm Alia. She answered in a shaky voice but thankfully her tears had dried up.

Calder went through every step of the attack, taking notes on the Sync he pulled from one of

his pockets. He was very focused on what the men wanted. Relda managed to keep her face blank.

The Trojan Moon. How could anyone have recognized it? And what was she going to do about this mess?

“Okay—” Calder tucked his Sync away “—tomorrow I need to you come to my office and work with my artist. I want images of these attackers.”

Alia nodded.

Calder looked over his shoulder at the deputy standing at attention in the doorway. “Deputy Hasan, can you please take Ms. Alia to the closest medbooth?”

Relda stirred. “I can take her—”

“I have some more questions for you, Ms. Dela-Cruz.”

His tone had hardened and his gaze said he wanted to talk to her alone. Resigned, Relda straightened her shoulders and nodded.

The young deputy hurried forward. “Of course.”

Relda flowed into the act she’d perfected over the years. She shot the boy a slumberous smile and grabbed his hand. “Now, you’ll take care of my girl, won’t you, Deputy Hasan?”

His face flushed and he stammered. “Yes, ma’am.”

She squeezed his fingers. “I knew you would. Thank you.”

Alia hesitated for a moment, but something about the fresh-faced deputy must have soothed her because she accepted his hand. With one last look at Relda, Alia let Deputy Hasan lead her from the tent.

Relda sank back onto the cushions, trying to stay relaxed. She knew she needed all her wits about her to deal with Marshal Calder.

He arched a brow. “No flirtatious smile for me?”

She tucked a curl back behind her ear. “Something tells me it would be wasted on you.” He wasn’t the kind of man to flush and stammer because of a woman’s smile.

The corners of his mouth lifted for the briefest moment. “You might be surprised.”

That small, unexpected smile transformed his tough face. Relda felt a flush of heat on her skin. *Oh, no.* She was *not* attracted to this man. No way.

His features sharpened on her for a second before they turned serious again. “Are you hurt anywhere I can’t see?”

A traitorous image of him peeling off her clothes and examining every inch of her skin made the heat intensify. “No.”

He nodded. “Okay, then I have a question for you. What is the Trojan Moon?”