

*If you gaze for too long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.*

-Unknown Ancient Philosopher,  
Preserved As Achura Wisdom.

# The Abyss

**An unofficial EVE-online Short Story**

## **Chapter 1**

**By Jack McSwain**

“...the leader of this self-styled 'Cartel', a young Sebeistor woman by the name of Skira Ranos. emerged from complete obscurity a few months ago. Concord has no record of her past beyond a birth date, and even her Republic Military School graduation certificate appears, upon summary research, to be a fabrication. Despite her apparent rookie pod-pilot status, Skira began to gather to herself a band composed of both experienced cut-throats and novice pirates alike, starting this recruitment drive just days after her supposed “graduation” took place.

Indeed, the profiles of her more experienced associates indicate a disturbing trend; all of Blood Money Inc.'s original veteran pilots share one thing in common; they are all former associates of the notorious Civire Ex-Pirate Ren Tales.”

-Excerpt from a news article titled: “New Menace In Lonetrek: Blood Money, Danger or Joke?”

**February 22nd, 111 YC**

**02:10 EVE Standard Time**

**Oursulaert VIII – Modern Finances Corp Vault Station, Private Residence**

Skira took a deep breath, her eyes closed. Basking in the darkness behind her eyelids, she took a moment to calm herself. When she opened them, she resumed speaking.

Her voice bore a tone that sounded simultaneously playful and venomous: “You *must* try to understand our... stance on this matter, mister Cullyn. I am afraid we simply cannot abide by the publicity at the moment. Had you made the decision to publish your little article another time... Perhaps another place; perhaps a few months down the road, we would have embraced such attention. But matters with the Cartel are somewhat, how shall I say...” Skira chewed her lower lip thoughtfully, allowing an almost innocent look to grace her thin face, “*delicate* right now. You do understand, don't you mister Cullyn?”

The reporter's eyes remained frozen wide open in terror, though to the man's credit he did attempt a slight nod. His movements were, of course, stiff and tentative, as he *was* being forced to make them from under the weight of the massive pulse rifle that was currently pressing his head into his exquisite Ser'Ani-era throw rug.

“Good,” she continued, her smile fading as her voice hardened, “because if you don't, the next time we come into your office, my associate?” she inclined her head in the direction of the hulking Brutor who was currently standing over Lerik Cullyn (polished silver sunglasses coolly reflecting the rich green of the carpet, one foot on the Gallente man's body, both muscle-corded arms employed in task of supporting the SS1-70 Shock Cannon that was currently pressing down on the prone reporter's head...) “Well, let's just say he'll leave your rug's coloring... that much more vivid.”

Lerik Cullyn's face drained white, and he whimpered through his gag. Skira stood up slowly, vacating her seat in the man's soft recliner. As she walked out of the room, the Brutor hefted his weapon and let Cullyn fall fully to the ground. The reporter's eyes closed, and he let out a relieved sob as the Skira and the large man left the room.

As soon as she was downstairs, Skira activated her comlink. She uplinked it to her contact's pre-

assigned carrier code, and began to speak into it immediately upon establishing connection.

“Problem solved. Now lets talk damage control.”

“I've got some good news and bad news for you there, miss Ranos,” Siri's quiet, almost toneless, voice responded.

“Tell me.”

“Well we managed to pull all the copies of the story from all the central news channels, and every secondary news outlet as well. Luckily, it appears we managed to nip this one in the bud.”

“Do we have an estimation on many people saw it before we got to it?”

“Initial estimates are running at about 200,000 planet and station-side accesses to the story.”

“Not bad. Any record of how many capsuleers accessed the article?”

“Now thats the bad news. We're tracking at least twenty separate pod-pilots, and it appears that some of them may have downloaded backups of the story to their personal archives.”

Skira cursed under her breath. She was almost to the hanger now, her personal retinue of bodyguards in tow. “Well it sounds like we're going to have our hands full. See if you can trace the callsigns of those pilots: I want their real names, current locations, the names of their corporations, their favorite hangouts, any records of what ship types they are cleared to fly, what weapons and ammo they bought on the market in the last 20 days... any and all information that may be relevant to *every last one* of those pilots, on a file, in my inbox, as soon as humanly possible. Faster, preferably.”

“I anticipated just such a request, and I was working on it before you even commed.”

“...and that is exactly why I pay you as much as I do.”

“Skira, you know I don't do this for the money.”

“Of course not. Well, I'll leave you to it. Skira Ranos out.”

Laying face down in his office, drool trickling out from under the gag onto his priceless carpet, Lerik's heartbeat slowly returned to normal. When at last his terror started to recede, and his breathing began to relax, he began to wonder just how long it would be before the servants found him. As the hours ticked by in silence, he began to suspect it would be very long indeed.

\*\*\*

**August 15th, 108 YC**

**19:20 EVE Standard Time**

Skira was young, barely out of the Academy. She had started off doing easy trades, running from one hub to another, buying low and re-selling high. The first ten million isk went straight to her brother and sister: they themselves were going through the Republic Military School with her money. But that money wasn't enough: she'd had her first taste of the easy wealth her skills as a capsuleer could bring, and she could not make herself stop there.

After that, she plied more dangerous runs. Bringing ships and supplies to the border systems: buying low from manufacturers in safe space, she resold them much higher in the more dangerous regions. While some were navy agents and alliance soldiers, her clients were often desperate men and women: bounty hunters, smugglers, exiles, mercenaries, and pirates.

One day she brokered a particularly lucrative deal with a Brutor man by the name of Skar Kai: bring six 220mm Vulcan Autocannon II turret mounts and 2,000 crates of Barrage M from a place of her choosing to a low-security system one jump from safe space. The collateral she was offered more than covered the cost of the items, and the reward for successful completion was higher still.

It was then she learned one of the harshest lessons of New Eden: 'If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.'

The minute she jumped through the gate she knew something was wrong. Five battlecruisers were waiting on the low-security side: her overview HUD highlighted them in the flashing-red of outlaw capsuleers, with a small skull denoting that each pilot was marked for death by Concord. Her insides went as cold as ice.

Every single ship was piloted by a capsuleer, and each one was a pirate.

A blockade.

With an adrenaline surge that bordered on panic, Skira pushed her Vigil's Micro-Warp Drive to maximum thrust. Her ship broke through the fragile bubble of jumpgate insulation, becoming visible to the pirates' sensors as she accelerated to a breakneck 3,500 meters a second. The faint 'beep, beep, beeps' of lock-on warnings sounded through her aural feedback system, the seemingly innocent noise further fueling her rising terror.

"Shit, shit, shit, SHIT SHIT FUCK!" she yelled, momentarily forgetting that her real body was still suspended in capsule gel, as the solid black 'Warning! Warp Drive Disrupted!' message blipped across her overview.

For the briefest of instances, everything froze. *Do NOT panic*, she thought, *remember your training, Skira! You didn't go to school to be some fates-damned trader, you graduated from The Republic Military School. USE YOUR SKILLS NOW!* She ground her teeth, and swallowed her terror.

And as she did so, reality came screaming back. WARNING, SHIELD BREACHED flashed across her vision as shell after shell slammed into her tiny ship and lancing laser-pulses began to heat her armor plating. *Time to show these assholes what a real pilot looks like.*

Skira pushed her guidance thrusters for all they were worth, dragging her Vigil-class frigate into a steep vertical turn. Inertia sent the ship hurtling into an arc, causing the pirates' next few shots to go out wide. She was already out of stasis webifier range: her first burst of speed had insured that. Now all

she had to do was survive until her ship was out of warp disruption range.

With another savage jerk on the maneuvering thrusters, Skira dodged the next volley, her ship turning barely in time to avoid the massive explosion of an aptly-named Widowmaker heavy missile. With a final burst of the main engines, her ship sped beyond the 24-kilometer mark. Arcing into alignment to the system's farthest station, she was finally able activate the warp drive. With a loud pop on her audio feedback, the Vigil reached its velocity threshold and ripped into warp.

\*\*\*

**February 23rd, 111 YC**

**01:05 EVE Standard Time**

**Hysera V – Moon 14 – Expert Distribution Warehouse, Cartel Private Offices**

Skira reviewed the list of names on the projected grid of her ocular implants, the capsuleers' names seemingly floating in the air in front of her as she reclined in her well-appointed office's central armchair. Skira had little need of a desk and the formality of a stiff Caldari-like work environment: her office looked like other peoples' sitting rooms, with warm couches arranged around a central armchair, from which Skira could command the attention of any guests or business associates. All the upholstery was a deep, rich blood red, in vivid contrast the black fur carpet. The walls, however, were harsh steel, un-altered from the stations original base.

Twenty-one capsuleers in total.

**Six Caldari Navy agent mission operatives, all but one based out of Kaunokka...**

No surprise there, Skira thought. Most of them had probably tangled with the Cartel themselves already. Still, she marked the one who wasn't based in Kaunokka for later review.

**Five Caldari Militamen, four Gallente militiamen...**

Also easily dealt with; while gossip might travel through the herds of the Militia pilots almost as quickly as venereal disease did when they were in port; news and tall-tales mixed easily, and were just as easily forgotten.

**Five bounty hunters...**

These pilots were the real issue: there would be no easy way of dealing with *them*. Likely many of them were already hunting Cartel pilots when they read the article. They would not so easily forget what they had found, and such pilots almost always knew the risks inherent in their professions. They would have well-protected clones, and backups: assassination by wetgrave of mindlock was out of the question. The Cartel would have to deal with them in space, one by one, and Skira would have to console herself by hoping they would not share their little piece of intel with too many others before it became time for the Cartel to reveal itself in full.

**And one... oddity.**

Taitrenis.

Siri could find no last name, no callsign other than that: Taitrenis. A Khanid, with a record of hard drinking and a trail of brothel bills behind him. Even the market had no record of the man beyond that: no tax record, no recent purchases; nothing beyond the name. Concord had him on record as a Capsuleer, but Siri could find no record of what school he had graduated from to earn the distinction. Docking records placed him in both a Punisher-class frigate or, more recently, an Incursus, but there was no record of him having purchased either.

An enigma. A man with something to hide. And this enigma was the one loose end on Skira's list. Mysteries were dangerous in Skira's line of work. If the solution could not be found quickly enough, a mystery could become like an itch, a burning, glaring hole in the wide network of information that existed at Skira's fingertips. The solution to particular mystery?

Taitrenis would have to die. Permanently.

For a Capsuleer with such a well-hidden past, Taitrenis was either very naïve or very arrogant when it came to his clones. He only had one contract; no backups, no second policy, and not even a contract for an (albeit unreliable) out-of-pod neural transmitter. He might be a capsuleer, but this “Taitrenis” was as mortal as any normal cattle outside of his pod.

Skira knew exactly which agents she would call on for this particular job. Taitrenis would lie bleeding on the deck plates of some backwater station before the week was out. If Siri's research was correct (and Skira had the utmost faith in her closest agents thoroughness) the man would die alone and unmourned.

Problem solved.

*Now, back to that Caldari mission-runner...*

\*\*\*

**August 15th, 108 YC**

**20:01 EVE Standard Time**

**Hysera V – Moon 14 – Expert Distribution Warehouse, Standard Capsuleer Captains Quarters**

Skira fell to the ready-room floor gasping, spitting up pod-gel. She was immediately assaulted with the room's automatic high-powered shower heads. She cursed the icy-cold blasts (“Gods-damned Caldari BULLSHIT! Would warm water be so fucking hard?”) for the umpteenth time since deciding to base herself out of Caldari space. Even the routine indignity of exiting her pod couldn't quite drown her excitement this time, however: She had just run a pirate blockade. A capsuleer blockade, no less! She laughed aloud at the thought, though her voice was covered by the roaring SHISH of the still-active

shower nozzles.

Her joyous pride at the accomplishment lasted all the way to her locker, as she began to peruse her wide wardrobe in anticipation for meeting her (rather handsome, if she did say so herself...) Brutor contact.

Her contact.

Her shady, smuggler contact. The one who's all-too amused tone she had ignored, telling herself he was only flirting. The deal, too good to be true. Too much money for too little work.

Skira's joy melted immediately into anger as the realization hit her.

Pushing aside her more elegant outfits in her haste, she grabbed a simple one-piece jumpsuit and slipped it on quickly. As soon as she was dressed, she stormed from her captain's quarters and made her way rapidly to the bar where she was slated to meet Skar.

Though she had initially doubted he would show after that stunt, she found the Brutor right where he said he'd be. He stood leaning over the bar, talking to a lean and clean-cut Deteis man in his early twenties. Like Skar and herself, he too bore the tell-tale neural jacks of a capsuleer: Skira could see two of them above the high collar of his shirt. Ignoring the Deteis, she walked straight up to the Brutor smuggler, her face a mask of fury. Holding herself back for now, she tapped him on the shoulder.

"Why, now here she is," Skar said as he looked over his shoulder and began to turn around, his voice holding back laughter. "And man, does the little girl look ANGRY today!"

At the last comment, Skira could no longer hold herself back. She hit him across the jaw with a right hook, her punch betraying strength much greater than her thin Sebeistor frame appeared to hold. The Brutor's head was thrown to the side with the force of her blow. Skar clutched his jaw and growled. For a moment, Skira began to feel she had made a mistake. She was fast, of that there was no doubt, but this man was a typical Brutor: six foot six, seemingly as broad as he was tall, and all muscle. She felt a twinge of fear as she heard the savage rumbling coming from Skar's throat.

But as he slowly stood upright, his face turning back into view, his mouth split into an enormous grin, and his growl turned into a deep, throaty laugh. "Looks like this kitty's got claws!" he rumbled through his laughter.

Skira didn't know whether to be relieved or even more furious at his nonchalant reaction. Her tongue took the initiative and, before she could think, it made the decision for her. "F... FUCK YOU!" she yelled, then clenched her jaw, eyes narrowed with rage.

"And fuck your little pirate tea-party back there!" she continued, her fists clenched so hard her nails almost drew blood.

"Relax babe, you're a capsuleer remember? God you must be green if you think you were in any real danger out there," Skar responded, his tone and posture still completely at ease despite her obvious anger.

Skira's jaw dropped at the Brutor's arrogance. "Relax? Relax?! What if I had been in an industrial? A

cruiser? A ship with a full crew compliment?! What of all the lives aboard, the crew... MY CREW?!"

Skar shrugged. "What of um? Fuck em. They're cattle. Fuck the mortal bastards." He paused. "Er, no offense Tom," he said to the bartender, almost as an afterthought.

"None taken mate," the Chivre man countered. Judging from the wide grin on his scarred face, the bartender had heard this all before.

"I mean they're not exactly difficult to replace," Skar continued without missing a beat, "What mortals do now on pod-fit ships is basically slave labor: move this from point A to point B, swing a hammer, use a wrench. Not exactly skilled. And every dock is clamoring with young wannabes desperate for a place on one of our vessels. Practically CRAWLIN' with em. So a whole crew gets vented into space? Well, let's just say that's god's way of telling us we don't have to cough up severance pay."

Skira gaped. "You... you... heartless... Bastard!" the last word was weighted with all the venom she could muster.

Skar laughed once more; and this time his Deteis friend joined in, adding his refined chuckle to his companion's deep, rumbling laughter. "In some ways you *are* pretty green Skira, and it shows," Skar said through his wide grin.

"Not in space, it doesn't." At this, Skar's laughter died abruptly. The two men looked over Skira's shoulder, their expressions like those of children caught with their hands in the cookie jar. "Unless my eyes were lying to me, and you never can tell nowadays, can you?" the voice was as deep as Skar's, but rougher; gravely; and it bore the bite of authority.

Skira spun to face the source of this new voice. Standing mere inches behind her, a tall, handsome Chivre in full body armor met her gaze with powerful golden eyes. Skira stumbled backwards, startled. She only stopping herself from falling with the thought of being caught by Skar, and stepped deftly sideways to catch herself on the bar instead.

"We're all seeing through camera drones out there, after all... maybe the drone-manufacturers are feeding us false information, you know?" the joke fell flat, but Skira thought it sounded like it was meant to. "But with that said, you *were* the little rabbit that slipped through my blockade, were you not, Ms. Ranos?"

Skira was caught, frozen, truly and completely unsure of herself for the first time since she had woken up today. Her anger still simmered in her gut, waiting to be released, but something about this man; his tone maybe' almost comforting; or his air of complete and utter confidence, but without the obvious arrogance of many capsuleers; kept it in check. This man had shot at her, attempted to destroy her ship, and had it been manned, would have killed all aboard in cold blood just to get at her. And yet...

The man smiled slowly at her expression, with a wolfish look in his eyes. "Skar, you told me the woman was skilled in the capsule, but you neglected to mention how... *Ravishing* she is outside of one." Skira was suddenly keenly aware of just how form fitting her jumpsuit was as he gazed at her. Her anger and interest fought in her stomach, and she could feel her face flush red with both. He extended a large hand to the dazed young woman. "Ren Tales."

"Skira... Ranos" she said, taking the offered handshake, unable to hide her uneasy shock at his

entrance. She took a deep breath to calm herself, then stood up straight and tried to size up the new situation.

Ren stood no more than three feet away from her, turned towards her. A few feet behind him stood a tall Amarrian in a long black robe, his features hidden save for his old and grizzled chin and the piercing white of his eyes. She could see his disgust at her even so, from his posture and the set of his elderly jaw. To her left, both Skar and his Deteis companion now appeared cowed, embarrassedly looking at their boots and trying not to be noticed by Ren, who was obviously their leader in some respect.

“Uh... Yessir, she is indeed sir.” Skar said, his boisterous tone now replaced with an almost fearful one.

Ren's eyes narrowed. “I hope I didn't interrupt your sport, boys,” he said, his voice low, with a hint of anger.

“Sorry Ren,” the Deteis said, quietly, “you know Skar, he was only joking around...”

“Out,” Ren said, his voice quiet but harsh. At this command, both Skar and the Deteis stood rapidly, only pausing to grab their drinks, and walked out as quickly as they could without breaking into a run. Surprisingly, the tall Amarrian did likewise, though he moved slowly and deliberately to the door.

As soon as they had left the establishment, Ren took up a seat at the bar and indicated the stool next to himself in an almost gracious manner. “Tom, you know what I like. Oh, and anything Ms. Ranos desires on my tab, please, for the rest of the day. Hell,” he said, grinning his wolfish grin at her, “Make that any and *every* time she comes into your little shithole, eh?”

Skira flushed a bit again at this, but by now she had composed herself somewhat. She took the stool one farther from him than he had indicated and turned to face him, her expression now cautious.

“What do you want, pirate?” she said, coldly.

“Heh, a woman with a bit of backbone to her. I like that. Well then, right to business. I must apologize for our little gatecamp back there,” the pirate slang rolled easily off his tongue, as if he was well accustomed to using it, “it was a test. Needless to say, you passed with flying colors. And since you did, indeed, pass: I have a business proposal for you to consider...”

\*\*\*

**February 27th, 111 YC**

**03:15 EVE Standard Time**

**Hasmijaala System**

“Four vessels, Skira. One Osprey-class cruiser, one Retriever, and a pair of Caracal-class cruisers. All four ships are registered to capsuleers, members of Virtue Ventures Incorporated: a capsuleer-run

Caldari mining firm. The Caracals appear to be running guard duty. They are positioned approximately 30 kilometers from the warp beacon, aligned to the system's sun. Both appear to be bearing full heavy missile complements. A preliminary combat-record analysis shows no capsuleer kills on record for either Caracal pilot, and it looks like they are both recent Academy graduates... ”

“That's more than sufficient for now, Siri, thank you” Skira interjected, knowing that if she didn't say something now her scout was likely to continue rattling off facts until well after the mining operation was complete. “Nothing... *worrying* on scanner, I assume?”

“Of course not. I would have mentioned it first, would I not?” Siri's nigh-toneless drone almost seemed to hold a hint of pride as she responded.

“Of course.” Skira thought for a moment before speaking again. *Tackle the retriever, initial primary target is the osprey. If the Caracal pilots are proper guards, they'll stick it out and try to fight. Take them out next. If they aren't any good, they'll shit themselves at the sight of a pirate and cut and run. Either way, no problem: Caracals can't survive sustained fire worth a damn, as they're practically made of spit and wet paper, and the salvage is never worth very much anyways. Mining barge is the prize: a ransom is in order for that one. Easy money.*

“Alright, Siri. What's your status?”

“I am still here, Ms. Ranos. As are they.”

“You have a warp disruptor on your ship, correct?”

“Technically, yes...”

“But?”

“Speed only goes so far. Both combat cruisers have light Hobgoblin defense drones deployed, and my Cheetah can hardly sustain fire from two missile ships at the same time regardless.”

“Alright. In that case, just give me a warp in point.”

“From your current position, warp to me at 20 kilometers for maximum coverage.”

“Affirmative.”

With a now-familiar rippling CRACK, the Hurricane sped into warp. Skira felt her heartbeat accelerating as the wavy distortions of the warp bubble surrounded her ship. She still got a thrill out of combat, even relatively easy situations like this was shaping up to be. In a matter of moments, her warp bubble disintegrated and her battlecruiser began to decelerate. As the Hurricane came sliding into the belt, Skira felt her adrenaline spike.

Game on.

With practiced speed she assigned her ship's sensors to acquire target locks on all five vessels. At the same instant, she turned on the ship's Micro Warp Drive and began to pull on the maneuvering thrusters, arcing towards the mining vessels.

Skira heard the four simultaneous “clicks” as the locks were attained, and immediately activated her Warp Disruption module on the retriever, disrupting any subspace frequency lock-on attempts the pilot might make.

“Gotcha,” Skira whispered under her breath. But something immediately struck her as strange; none of the vessels were attempting to align for warp out.

“Unidentified outlaw pilot,” a young Caldari voice came to Skira's ears from the local system channel, “this is Lieutenant Cos'Keren of Virtue Ventures Incorporated: Security Division. I demand you cease your hostile action or we will be forced to respond with lethal force.” Skira nearly laughed out loud at the rookie's gall. Did he honestly think his cruisers stood any chance against her? Skira's grin grew even wider as she prepared to send them her response. With a thought, she freed the guns and trained them on her first target.

With relish bordering on glee, Skira unleashed a torrent of hellfire on the Osprey cruiser: all six of her vessel's high-caliber autocannons firing in tandem as she put shell after shell into the little mining ship. In a single volley, its meager shields were overwhelmed, and the high-explosive shells penetrated into its hull. The ship exploded in a blast of blue-white light, sending fragments of scrap metal in every direction. She didn't stop there, however. Releasing her drones, Skira turned her guns on the first of the defense cruisers.

Her drones streaked across the space between her Hurricane and the security officers' cruisers, chasing Skira's first volley of autocannon shells and Widowmaker missiles with savage efficiency. The targeted Caracal's shielding immediately began to fail. In response, both cruisers attempted to make good on their threats: their missile launchers snapping into position as they returned fire. Their missile volleys streaked across space, trailing fire and carbon particles into the void. Though the missiles' massive blasts looked impressive as they slammed one after another into Skira's ship, the Scourge warheads barely had the force to penetrate her shielding.

Before the Caracals could release another impotent barrage, “Lieutenant” Cos'Keren's shielding crumbled. Weak Caldari armor-plating giving way instantly, and the reactor erupted, engulfing the vessel in a familiar blue-white flash. Even as she turned her weapons on the one remaining Caracal, Skira relished the feeling of power: so many lives ended with so little effort: a testament to her prowess. The second missile cruiser fell even quicker than the first: its shields flickered out under the force of a single shot. With a final, deeply satisfying, *ca-CHUNK* of the autocannons, Skira blasted the final enemy cruiser to shrapnel. The Caracal's second (and final) missile volley went wide, ship-linked guidance failing as the parent vessel exploded.

As the resounding BOOM died down in Skira's audio-feedback, she could hear Cos'Keren sputtering indignantly in local, listing off the number of CONCORD laws (and moral imperatives) Skira had just broken. Skira had made sure to obtain a target lock on the man's capsule the instant his ship exploded, however, and, with delight, she ordered her drones to send the man to a wet and insulting rebirth. His wingmates had already escaped in their own pods: both had warped themselves to safety upon ship destruction.

*And now for the finale*, Skira thought, inviting the Retriever pilot to her private ransom channel as she began to move leisurely about the wreckage, scanning for salvage. The miner wisely did not even feign to put up a fight, and Skira kept him easily within warp disruption range as she worked through

the debris.

The pilot accepted her invitation, and as he came into the channel a pre-recorded message of Skira's voice (modulated to be both calm and unnerving) played: "Do not panic. Do not attempt to escape. Do not fight back. Your ship is being ransomed by the Blood Money Cartel. Do EXACTLY as we say, or you will be destroyed."

"Puh...puh...please!" the Achura man gulped, his reedy, heavily-accented voice cracking, "No more violence! No more killing! I do anything; just don't kill any more of our good mens!"

"Really? You'll do anything?" Skira responded calmly, doing her best to sound charming and polite. "Hmm.... Does anything extend to, oh, let's call it.. thirty million isk?"

"Thur-ty? Oh... oh... god... please no... I do not have access to such fund!" the man responded, his voice bordering on outright panic.

Skira sighed. "Well then, I might just have to finish you off." She casually put half a volley into the Retriever's shields. They melted under the firepower, dipping below 25% strength.

"NO! NO! WAIT!" the Achura howled, "I can get for you... Fifteen! Fifteen millions! PLEASE! Do not do this thing!" the Caldari practically sobbed into the channel. "They told me this would be danger, they did not say you would" Skira's translator stuttered over the next word before settling on 'slaughter', "us like this! Please, think of the many lives!"

Skira's mind snapped to attention, and her stomach filled with ice. "Who?! Who told you?!" she demanded, suddenly back on alert.

"The bounty-hunters, they said-" Skira cut him off by kicking him from the channel, and blasted the Retriever apart without a second thought as she aligned to warp out.

"Skira...." Siri's normally calm voice sounded almost worried.

"I know, I know! Quickly, what am I in for?!"

"Harbinger, Harbinger, Arbitrator, Thorax, Crow..." But as Siri responded, the bounty hunters vessels were already exiting warp. Skira strained the maneuvering thrusters, praying to whatever gods were listening that she make in into warp before they locked.

'Warp Drive Disrupted!' blinked across her vision in maddeningly calm black text. Her overview blinked, alerting her to the Crow-class Interceptor's successful target lock.

"FUCK!" she yelled, feeling a mix of anger and terror. Then, for the thousandth time since becoming a capsuleer, she quelled her fear. *No time for emotion now, Skira*, a low, gravelly voice sounded in her mind. She knew the voice instantly. *Now take them out, or go down fighting like a demon!*

Her eyes narrowed in concentration as she pushed her ship to its maximum. With deadly efficiency, she turned her guns on the Interceptor; her microwarp drive straining to push her ship to top velocity as she did so. Like many 'ceptor pilots before, the bounty hunter learned the power of long-ranged Barrage ammunition as his vessel was ripping out from under him, his pod blasted into space. *Too*

*little too late, Skira.* The other three had her locked already, and her warp core was thoroughly jammed.

No matter. She was still outside of web and scrambler range, and her superior speed (further augmented by her elite Serpentis “Snake” implants) would carry her out of range of the two Harbinger-class battlecruisers with relative ease. *The problem will be those two cruisers,* she thought, watching intently as they chased her. The Arbitrator was the faster of the two, and her Radial Velocity meter indicated that it was gaining on her at a rate of two-hundred and fifty meters per second. *Now that won't do,* she thought, retraining her guns on the Amarrian drone cruiser.

This vessel was a much tougher nut to crack than the Caracals had been, but even so, her raw firepower prevailed. The Arbitrator crawled ever closer, from 15 kilometers, to 13, to 11.... And finally its armor was breached, and the vessel collapsed into a satisfying orange explosion. *There! Now I can escape,* she thought, but something held her back. *No, you don't have to run, she thought, you have the ability to take them on, you know you do. Turn around and show these bastards what happens when you cross our Cartel.*

With renewed vigor, Skira slammed on the starboard thrusters, sending the Hurricane into a sharp turn. As she came back around, she re-assessed the situation. In the attempt to escape, she had pulled out to nearly 80 kilometers at a downward angle from her original location. The bounty hunter vessels had all attempted to follow her, but at varying speeds: The Thorax was practically right behind her, a mere 30 kilometers back, but the closest Harbinger battlecruiser was 60 kilometers behind, and the other Harbinger was practically still at the original warp-in point.

*They let themselves be split up,* she thought. *They might be professionals, but they're not flawless. Use their eagerness against them!* Skira's sensors indicated that the closer Harbinger was using a microwarp drive to follow her, as opposed to the father Harbinger's afterburner. A microwarp drive fit Harbinger would likely be easier prey, as she knew the Amarrian battlecruiser design did not have sufficient powergrid or CPU-units to bear proper defenses and weapons along side an MWD. But first, she'd have to separate them just a little bit more.

Turning at a right angle to her previous course, Skira switched her own MWD into overdrive to compensate for any speed she might lose in the turn. Her system monitors began to scream almost immediately in protest, the module's icon blinking red on her maneuvering overview as it began to overheat. Skira ignored it for now (the heat-damage was well within acceptable operating parameters) and continued to pull range.

Sure enough, all three bounty hunter vessels shifted course to follow her new heading. They continued to burn after her, becoming further and further apart.

*Just a few more seconds... just a little farther...*

When the bounty hunters were separated to a degree she was comfortable with, she turned her ship about and made directly for the closer Harbinger. Switching her Barrage ammo for maximum-penetration Hail rounds as her ship blazed back into range, she re-launched her drones and began unloading missiles at the enemy battlecruiser. As she hit the 20 kilometer mark, the Harbinger opened fire. Armor damage indicators flashed as Skira turned on her nano-repair arrays; warning her of the intense heat and radiation the Harbingers pulse lasers were blasting at her. Within seconds, she was under 3 kilometers, and she unleashed her guns, cutting power to the engines as she did so.

The Harbinger's shields fell instantly, and its armor plating was no match for the massive 220mm armor-piercing Hail shells. Cracks began to appear almost immediately, and Skira's combat-analysis readout showed the extent of the Harbinger's armor damage in savage red. Skira overheated her guns now, bringing their re-fire rate up to a staggering speed as she slammed shell after shell into her opponent.

“Die, scum!” she hissed to herself, concentrating her every thought on the assault.

The armor plating finally gave way, and the bounty hunter battlecruiser exploded in a blast of fiery shrapnel. Skira now turned her attention to the Thorax.... which was, she realized with a sinking feeling, right on top of her.

*No matter! TAKE IT OUT!* her mind yelled, blood-lust now overriding all logic. *You still have Hail ammunition loaded; it's time to put it to good use once more!* Still overheating her guns, Skira began to unload into her new opponent, ordering her drones to engage simultaneously.

From her cloaked vantage point 20 kilometers away, Siri was almost screaming into her coms. When Skira had entered her battle fury, she had stopped responding to all outside stimuli. Siri cursed in her native tongue as she watched her own tactical readout (which was now indicating that Skira's armor integrity was dangerously low). The Thorax alone could not breach Skira's nano-repair rate, but Siri's commander seemed oblivious to how thoroughly damaged she had become under the first Harbinger's guns; she seemed equally oblivious to the fact that the second bounty hunter battlecruiser was crawling towards her at a steady pace. At this rate, Siri calculated that the remaining Harbinger would enter gun range in under twenty seconds. Skira's Hurricane could not possibly hold together under such sustained fire.

“Damn it Skira, listen to me! You've got to get out of there!” Siri yelled, before finally giving up on getting the pirate commander's attention. It was hopeless, she could see, and unless Siri herself could intervene, the situation was going to become critical in exactly ten more seconds.

“Skira Ranos, you will be the death of me, I know it!” she swore. Throwing caution to the wind, Siri deactivated her cloaking device and began to lock the Harbinger. With her afterburner blazing, she arced into orbit almost immediately. Upon achieving target lock, she instantly activated her ship's Tracking Disruptor: hopefully, with the optimal-range disruption script active, the Harbinger's guns would be unable to hit her or Skira until her commander came to her senses.

Skira watched with savage glee as the Thorax's armor plating was stripped away by her massive guns. *Taste my wrath, little bounty hunter;* she thought, as her diagnostic readout showed his armor give way and his cruiser's internal structure begin to crumble. Then, something extremely unexpected happened.

The badly damaged cruiser accelerated away from Skira at an extreme pace, entering warp to a nearby planet. Skira was stunned. She had made the simplest of rookie mistakes: forgetting to warp-disrupt her prey.

With the shock of this realization, Skira returned to reality. With further shock, she realized her Hurricane's armor plating was almost compromised, and her ships nano-repair arrays, gun turrets, and stasis webification projector (as well as number of subsystems) were all badly damaged by her overheating. Her ship was strained nearly to the breaking point.

She saw how close she had allowed the Harbinger to come in her carelessness, and realized the massive personal risk Siri had taken in order to save her. At the same time, she noticed the Harbinger was still coming closer.

“Siri?” she said tentatively, briefly unsure of herself.

“For fuck's sake Skira! Run for it!” Siri yelled, her voice louder and more passionate than Skira had ever heard it before. This time, she didn't think twice.

Praying her badly-damaged microwarp drive would hold, she turned it on once more and accelerated out of warp disruption range. The minute she could, Skira selected her pre-set warp coordinates and slipped into subspace.

Siri breathed a sigh of relief, then quickly activated her cloak. As the Harbinger pilot had yet to lock on to her, she was easily able to fool his sensors into losing her position. With that done, the covert-ops pilot was able to follow Skira to safety.

“Skira Ranos, you will be the death of me,” she said once again on the fleet channel, her normally deathly-calm tone beginning to reassert itself.

Skira was lost in her own thoughts already, and did not respond.

\*\*\*

**August 15th, 108 YC**

**20:45 EVE Standard Time**

**Hysera V – Moon 14 – Expert Distribution Warehouse, 'The Drunken Preacher'**

“My agents tell me you graduated from The Republic Military school recently,” Ren continued.  
“Graduated with top honors, in fact.”

Skira shifted uncomfortably on her barstool. “How is *that* relevant?” she asked, still unsure of her opinion of this man.

“Well you went to Military school, didn't you? Did you really plan on being a border runner when you got out?”

Skira narrowed her eyes. “I don't like where this is going Mr. Tales.”

Ren chuckled. His laugh, like his personality, was rough, but with an almost reassuring undertone.  
“Come on, humor me.”

“No, of course I didn't. I had planned to become a bounty hunter, after I had gained some initial capital from my trade runs,” she replied tersely. “I still plan on that, in fact.”

Ren's expression was grim on hearing this, and for a moment Skira began to fear once more that she had made a fatal blunder. Ren knocked back a shot of clear alcohol and looked away from her before replying. "I had the same plan once," he said, almost wistfully. He seemed to take control of himself then, and his face lightened slightly with his subtle rogue's half-smile.

"Days long past. Dreams of a deluded youth, and all beside the point. You planned on using your combat training for something. Well, I can tell already that you don't like me or my men. Such is understandable: we're rough people, outlaws and scumbags every one. I won't deny that for a second. Hell, sometimes I even take pride in the fact. But beneath that, Ms. Ranos, we're people. Good people. Capsuleers just like you, and CONCORD may frown on what we do, but we turn a damn fine profit out here, and we have fun doing it. The way I see it, I do my job just the same as any idiot mission-running drone; I blow up some ships, and then, if I'm lucky, I get paid. But out here, I don't have to listen to some pencil-pushing little weasel give orders from behind his desk, putting good men at risk for the benefit of the few in power." Ren paused, pouring himself another shot, and turned to her before continuing.

"Ms. Ranos? Or, may I call you Skira?" she begrudgingly nodded her consent. "Skira. Forget bounty hunting. Outlaws with prices on their heads big enough to consider hunting down are men like me: murderers. Combat veterans with years of experience and ten times the firepower you could bring to bear."

He was now staring her straight in the eye, his golden eyes reminded Skira of an eagle's: wise, but deadly. "They will eat you alive and spit you back out, again and again and again until your spirit is broken, or until the day your clone malfunctions and the void finally claims you. Trust me, it's a dead end."

Skira broke his gaze and chewed her lower lip. After a long pause, she spoke: "You said you had a business proposal. What of it?"

"Heh, good. Direct. I like that. Bounty hunting is a dead end, but that doesn't mean you have to whore yourself out to some empire mission agent or join some massive, oppressive, alliance to use your combat skills." Ren shifted his weight, and his manner became a bit more serious. "A man double-crossed one of men a few months back. Until now, we've been unable to touch him. Like us, he's marked as an outlaw by CONCORD and DED, but unlike us, he isn't a capsuleer. Since CONCORD doesn't consider non-capsuleers to be anywhere near as massive a threat, he can move around high-security space with relative ease compared to my men. I want him dead, and that's where you come in."

Skira contemplated the offer in silence for a minute before responding, chewing her lip the whole time. "I'm not sure I'm entirely comfortable doing a pirate's dirty work."

"Well whatever suits you, of course, but the offer is on the table. You would be compensated with a considerable sum should you decide to accept. Might I point out the man is, indeed, an outlaw. You would be doing nothing illegal: in fact, you'd be helping CONCORD" he spat the name out, "cleanse New Eden of a hated criminal. So what if you make a little... side money doing the job?" Ren smiled again at this.

"Okay, Ren Tales, I'll consider it. But first, tell me; why me?" she asked.

“Ah, yes. Couple of things,” he said, “first off, a report I got out of Kubinen. Said some little border-runner girl had dealt with a pair of Guristas thugs. They'd been trying to take her cargo by force outside of a jump gate, and she basically fed them their own testicles at the end of a 150mm Autoannon.” Skira flushed, recalling the incident in question. “Those two thugs were a particular thorn in my side, to the report got my attention. So latter I heard you pulled some pretty slick maneuvers outside of a station in Tama, blew up a capsuleer pirate who tried to gank one of your little border-running frigates.” Once again, Skira recalled the incident, and yet again felt her color rise. “That capsuleer was one of my rookies, but lucky for you he was impressed rather than pissed off by your actions. So I had Skar engineer an accidental meeting and drop the bait, and you followed right though to my test, which, if I may repeat myself, you passed gloriously.”

Skira had to suppress a sheepish self-satisfied grin at the praise. At the same time, she couldn't quite get over her passionate distaste with this man's profession, and his casual attitude towards murder. “Those were both in self defense, and I didn't exactly ask to be shot at in your blockade,” she responded, her temper rising.

“Heh, but you did enjoy it, didn't you? Don't lie to me on that one. There's no shame in enjoying the rush, the power of our position as capsuleers. Take a step back from you naïve ideals and you'll see we're not so different, you and I.”

Skira stood up abruptly, her anger flaring once again. “How dare you. I am nothing like you, Pirate.” She glared at him with all the contempt she could muster. “Here's what I think of your deal,” she said, and she spat on the ground at Ren's feet. With that, she turned and started walking away. Ren's burst of deep, rich laughter behind her startled her, then served to further fuel her fury as she walked.

“Ah, well that a pity. Well the offer is still open any time you chose to accept it, you merely have to contact me and say the word,” he said to her retreating back. “Oh! Before you go!” he yelled, “I had my dock crew unload the guns and ammo as per our contract. Check your wallet balance: you'll find the agreed upon payment and, of course, a bonus.” Skira paused at the door of the bar upon hearing this. “Consider it an apology for the gatecamp.” Skira resumed walking, and before long, she was out of sight.

“Women,” Tom said, polishing a glass as Ren stared after her, “what can you do, eh?”

“Still,” Ren said contemplatively, “there's something about that one.” He sighed and turned back to the bar. Downing another shot, he couldn't help but let his mind wander back to the young woman's form-fitting jump suit, and her entrancing, fiery personality. “Probably never hear from her again. Ah, fuck it. Give me another bottle Tom. Quick, before I go all sentimental.”

\*\*\*

**February 28th, 111 YC**

**01:15 EVE Standard Time**

**Hysera V – Moon 14 – Expert Distribution Warehouse, Cartel Private Offices**

**Raku Saverak.**

Verokior Male, age 35

**Affiliation:** Black Viper Company

**Occupation:** Mercenary, Bounty Hunter.

**Known Vessels:** Crow Interceptor, Raptor Interceptor, Hawk Assault Ship

—

**Kar Fi'sus, Callsign: “KforKiller”**

Jin Mei Male, age 30

**Affiliation:** Black Viper Company

**Occupation:** Mercenary, Bounty Hunter.

**Known Vessels:** Thorax [Cruiser] Ishkur [Assault Ship]

--

**Aurora Mirana**

Khanid female, age 22

**Affiliation:** DAWS Group

**Occupation:** Mercenary, Bounty Hunter.

**Known Vessels:** Arbitrator [Cruiser] Maller [Cruiser] Omen [Cruiser] Punisher [Frigate]

—

**Celeste Mirana**

Khanid female, age 22

**Affiliation:** Silver Shield Initiative

**Occupation:** Mercenary, Bounty Hunter.

**Known Vessels:** Harbinger [Battlecruiser] Prophecy [Battlecruiser]

—

**Ai'Yid Sorian Callsign: “AYSorian”**

Intaki male, age 30

**Affiliation:** DAWS Group

**Occupation:** Mercenary, Bounty Hunter.

**Known Vessels:** Harbinger [Battlecruiser]

—

Skira re-read the pilots' profiles for the third time in the last hour. The combat logs showed a match: all five bounty hunters that had attacked Skira had also read Lerik Cullyn's troublesome little article. The

match was not a coincidence. She could see now the connections: five bounty hunters, each having previously been involved in high-profile criminal take-downs. Five killers, professionals who would only be drawn by the promise of a very large sum of money. She had been careless when she first assessed their names several days before; she had missed the patterns. Now they stood out plain as day.

Five bounty hunters had read the article, but it was not a coincidence. They had likely been searching for references to her specifically, if the sting operation Skira had so narrowly survived was any judge. These were no ordinary bounty hunters either: the public bounty currently set to Skira's head, a mere 12 million isk, was hardly the kind of money that would attract professionals like these, nor could such a sum justify the vast amount of coordination and manpower that went into the trap. There was only one possibility: Someone, somewhere had put out a very lucrative private contract up for Skira's execution.

Normally such a discovery would have amused Skira, or even caused her to swell with pride. However, right now she was finding it very hard to be amused. Skira stroked Kali's fur. The panther lifted her large head, nuzzling back to show her appreciation for the attention. Skira found herself wishing she could so easily find comfort. Her last battle had ended with a kill count of four cruisers, a battlecruiser, one interceptor and a mining barge, with no losses sustained. Normally, such a victory would have had her soaring, even considering she was forced to leave the salvage behind and retreat.

Not today, however. Her escape had been far too narrow for comfort. Although the thought of losing Reaver (her custom-rigged, extensively customized and expensively fit flagship Hurricane,) was a painful one, both for sentimental and financial reasons, it was hardly the biggest issue. Reviewing the camera-drone footage from both Reaver's record and those of Siri's ship 'Whisper', as well as the tactical data downloaded from Reaver's interface logs, Skira was stunned at the amount of errors she had made. Even discounting her lapse in judgment in returning to the fight after she had guaranteed her escape the first time, the number of tactical mistakes and ship-management slip-ups was staggering. It was a testament merely to her ship's top-of-the-line fittings and design that it hadn't been destroyed outright, and the margin she survived by was exceedingly slim. Reaver's hull, armor plating and equipment were currently undergoing extensive repair and restructuring, and at a staggering cost. Her flagship would likely be out of commission for several days after her reckless escapades. And for what?

Skira did not like losing control. As she reviewed the combat tapes over and over again, she saw how she attempted to simultaneously use two completely different styles of combat doctrine, and the nearly disastrous results. On one hand, she saw the finesse-based style she herself developed, utilizing speed to avoid enemy gunfire, remaining mobile and able to withdraw above all else. On the other, she saw the distinctly savage, in-your-face style of her old mentor: reckless, ruthless and, usually, brutally effective. Independantly, either combat style would have served her well, but together they blended into an imperfect disharmony.

*Clumsy, clumsy, clumsy!* She told herself, as she forced herself to re-watch the footage over and over again. *I cannot go losing my grip in the heat of battle like that. No reason for it.* Lauren would have accused Skira of “losing her edge” for such a performance, an insolent comment that Skira had heard all too often from her younger officer recently. And maybe Lauren would have been right. *Losing my edge. Losing my grip.*

Skira was startled out of her self-deprecating reverie by a young Gallente aid.

“Uhm, er, excuse me... Executor?” he said. The young man looked extremely nervous to be entering her

office, and, looking at him, Skira found herself wondering if his nerves were merely due to facing the intimidating leader of the Cartel for the first time; or if he came bearing bad news. She dismissed her ocular overlay with a thought and directed her attention to him.

“Yes?” she asked coolly.

“Uhm, well, er, I was told to tell you, erm...” the man stutmbled over his words, obviously unsure of himself.

“What is it, operative? Because if it's bad news, I can assure you that you are quite safe. You'll find I'm much more even-tempered than my reputation might lead you to believe. Not to mention I cannot really imagine anything that could put me in a worse mood right now. So please, tell me.”

“Well,” he replied, still obviously a nervous, “do you recall a capsuleer by the name of Taitrenis?”

*Hmmm, Taitrenis.* The name did ring a bell. “It was decided he should be eliminated recently, yes? That Taitrenis?” she asked nonchalantly.

“Uh.... Yeah. Well, Siri Alahandra sent me up here to tell you she has some.... er... well, as she put it 'very worrying' security camera footage for you, er, relating to him.”

Skira groaned and leaned her head back. “Ah. Faaaaantastic.” She sighed. “Thank you for the message, I will contact her immediately. You may go.” The man looked relieved, and skittered out of her office as quickly as he could without breaking actually running. Skira rubbed her temples in vain attempt to hold off the headache that was forming there. Well, best to get this over with sooner rather than later.

“Siri?” she thought into her neural uplink.

“I am here Skira. Shall I assume you got my message?”

“I did. I would appreciate it if you didn't torture the new recruits like that, in the future. We have a private channel for a reason.”

“Apologies, Skira. I could not resist the temptation.”

“Apology more than accepted Siri. Now, whats this about some security footage?”

