Chapter 1 - The Pipes

I go by Dorin Kols. Landed on sunny, paradisiacal Lyntessa not long ago, not a native. Human, Aether-attuned, and only 1800 to my name. But I've got the basics, a mesh vest, basic blaster pistol, and my motospeeder.

I'm no marshal; I'm a bounty hunter, green and grafted-on to this planet. 'Tessa isn't my home, and that suits me; strangers move cleaner here.

They call themselves the Guardians, a band of scavengers with flashy tricks and illegal hardware. Word is they've been slipping contraband through Lyntessa's pipes, and someone wants them gone.

They're holed up in a working district, a water treatment plant that smells of metal and old rain. The problem's simple: I know where they are. Getting inside is the question.

I visit a shop for gear and purchased a concealable holster, basic medkit, breather mask, waterproof datatab, and stun baton. Only Cr766 left in my cred wallet

I check the public facility map on my datatab. Water flows into the plant from the northeast. I plan to wait until night and enter via the intake system, hence the breather.

A short fifteen minute trip through scenic views and I am there. I park the motospeeder on the far side of the feed line, hidden in foliage. I don the breather mask, submerge, and begin the 90 m swim. The water is cold; Lyntessa is mild and the dark doesn't help. Night swimming is uncomfortable but it's the best way in for a man like me. The intake system pulled me through like a Ruqos oil-wrestler, and then I was inside.

I emerge shivering into a room with a computer terminal. The outflow leads elsewhere; two doors flanked the room. No one else present. A second glance at the terminal shows a monitoring system: the plant is compact, nine rooms total, and the feed shows only one active subject, a single guard. He's a Ruqan in battleplate, armed with a blaster carbine. And he is big, over two meters, over a hundred kilos.

I go through the north door and find a storage area full of crates blocking the path. No tools for opening crates at hand, but there's an ion prybar nearby. I crack open the first crate.

Contraband.

Blisscoil. I've heard of it, from giant mushrooms of Tyssara, rolled into little spiral tinctures. First it floods the brain with light, then it takes the last few hours with it. Leaves you grinning, hollow, and forgetful.

Street talk says addicts "merge with the Aether." Maybe they just stop caring which side of it they're on. Either way, it's banned on half of all settled worlds and sold in every shadowport worth the name. Harnak space runs on this stuff, they say. Dreams and amnesia.

Yes, this is good evidence. But is this what I came for? Not yet. I snap a few images with my datatab for evidence, then try to disable the facility's security monitoring system. If I fail, I'll retreat to the crate room and set up an ambush for the Ruqan.

I link my datatab to the terminal and start the bypass procedure. Immediately, alarms blare throughout the complex. I bolt for the next room, taking cover behind a large crate and leveling my blaster toward the only entrance.

Footsteps echo down the hall - heavy, metallic. The Ruqan's coming fast. I hold my breath and steady my aim. I've got the angle and the cover, but if he stops to check the system first, he might just toss a thermonade inside. Either I'll drop him cleanly… or the whole plan's about to go up in steam.

Lucky, not a smart one. No thermonade, just footsteps, loud as a Rim Dragon. Plenty of time to train my blaster on the door.

I see him then: lizard-like features, Ruqan, and clearly having a bad day. A bright flash and a sharp crack, right between the eyes. He drops like a sack.

I search him for credentials, fingers through pockets, and feel the fool when I find the security card on a lanyard around his neck. Quick work. I jack the terminal, kill the alert, and write a false-positive into the logs: system glitch, brief spike, cleared. Commit.

I holster my blaster and unclip his carbine. Better reach, better leverage. Now for the rest of the job.