

PHEONIX GHAT

BY WHITSTEEN



Deep in the snowy woods of Luminous Borealis lay a complex of intersecting, multi-levelled buildings called Arcadia.

Being long abandoned, a faction of contract workers was sent to restore it to its former function, facilitating a big-deal excavation operation. Caverns in the vicinity yielded a rare ore known as Floridium. The gold-tinged nuggets burned as high-energy fuel for a new model spacecruiser by Orb Genesis, the Pheonix Ghat. The novelty vehicle was to be their home-run hit in the market. However, after the original mining crew at Arcadia mysteriously disappeared, Orb Genesis was left with a professional catastrophe. After much deliberation trying to figure out what happened, no answers were found. The only solution was to pick up the project where it left off with a new crew.

Icy mountains and jagged precipices backed a blizzard strewn forest outside the office window. Garron Tadbound sipped his morning coffee, a bottle of Jiggle Juice cream liqueur beside it. He wrestled momentarily with the ethics of the alchemy, deciding quickly it was the best chance he was going to get for a sliver of warmth and comfort today. He sunk back in a leather-bound chair at the desk watching the morning news show “Galaxy Now!” on the com-terminal. It was the usual stories; riots on Bulbon, civil war on Thora, UFO’s outside the Sigma Sector - all progressions of an established narrative.

The squad had been deployed for coming up on a month. Ominous tales of the previous team’s fate lingered in ghost stories amongst the others. Garron wasn’t a superstitious man. He kept the main focus on the job, being finally set up to provide for his far away wife and young son, at least for a while. It hadn’t always been the case. An existence rife with unemployment (which was never his fault in his opinion) contributed greatly to his turbulent marriage in the past. Now it seemed like he was on the redemption path. All he had to do was get through this.

Gewn Fawn was sweeping debris out of the surrounding hall outside the office. Garron could see her through the hall window. Her pale complexion accentuated the gross, crusty red rash on her cheek. She may have been sort of cute when she was younger. Whatever happened in her life had mostly depleted that. All he really knew about her was she had two kids who she obsessed about and was determined to regain custody of them. It must be a long-term dream, because that would be impossible while spending four months at Arcadia. She looked over at Garron. Their eyes met. She smiled. He didn’t. He thought he saw a lost little girl in there. It creeped him out. She went back to work. Unfortunately, the work she decided to do was usually pointless.

The general mission was to make the place as clean and hospitable as possible for when the real occupants arrived. The new mining fleet would be spending the foreseeable future here, some of them possibly making a life-career out of it, sucking all the ore the subterranean veins had to offer.

Orb Genesis must have been fairly confident there was a sustainable amount of Floridium down

there to base their new ship on it. There was even a Pheonix Ghat parked outside the station. It had transported them here. A presentation of the luxurious comfort and sleek riding capabilities of Orb Genesis' new product, a reminder of the end-game reason for their presence, at least from their employer's point of view.

Cryme Dillinger happened to be verified to fly the Pheonix Ghat. He was mopping the upper-catwalk over a huge, circular chasm framing a dark abyss in the center of the complex. The ceiling was a translucent dome caked thick with snow. The chasm was in the middle of a once-cultivated garden area gone awry from negligence. The plant-life grew fast here. Vines were wrapped around poles and ladders, moss swarmed the metal-grate corridor floors. Inside Arcadia was well insulated and heated electrically, so the cold didn't antagonize the garden, allowing it to flourish rapidly over time with no landscapers to trim it. A mechanized watering system called the Botany Aquafier collected moisture from outside and filtered it into the garden bed. Garron didn't know about it, but he was about to find out.

Cryme carelessly knocked something across the platform with a wide swoop of the mop. It clattered against the wall and skittered away from him. Bending down to pick it up, he inspected it. It was some kind of sharp bone, possibly a tooth. If it was, it was a big one, about the size of his index finger. Brown-yellow gradient stains colored the root end. *That's a little creepy*, he thought. He hadn't heard anything about saber-tooth tigers being part of the indigenous wildlife on Luminous Borealis.

It was a stupid name. He doubted whoever named this planet had ever actually been here. There was nothing luminous about it.

He put the bone in his pocket to show the others later. For now, he stuck to his mundane task, not wanting to get a reputation for being a slacker. The dynamic between them all was fragile. The relationships needed to be carefully handled if they were going to make it through on good terms. This wasn't the most glamorous job. Each of them must have been in a desperate situation employment-wise to agree to this.

The fourth and final person on the crew was Josephine Parnell, who was down in the garden shed gathering tools to start taking care of the overgrown foliage. She tied her blond hair into a ponytail and picked up a pair of rusty hedge clippers, then waddled her gigantic body out into the patchy mounds of dew-strewn tall grass beside the huge chasm. She was a halfwit, but surprisingly useful. Not like Gewn. As Josephine began shearing the blades she made a mental note to watch her step. One false move and she was going to be lost down the void. Maybe that's what happened to the old crew, though it was hard to imagine a situation where every one of them had fallen into oblivion.

Josephine had made a career out of working for the mastermind behind the gig, Frank Stutton, a friendly, aging fellow with alopecia and tattoos all over. Each of them knew Frank from some prior point in their lives at varying levels of familiarity. His talent was charisma and being personable, making a living getting other people to work for him. It was easy when you employed struggling people and mesmerized them nicely. This being so, he wasn't actually at Arcadis. If anyone had a question or issue, they could call or text him. Frank was prudent at responding politely.

A vid-call interrupted the news show Garron was watching. The name "Frank" popped up on the screen next to a little phone icon. Garron answered it.

"Hi, Frank. How are you?"

"Oh, so good. How are you?"

"Good."

Now that that was done they could get down to the meat of it.

"So, I'm being asked to use you to empty out the Auqafier Bath," Frank said.

"What's the Auqafier Bath?"

"It's part of the Botany Aquafier, the machine that gathers water from outside. It stores it and

rations it out for the garden. It's long overdue. It probably hasn't been done since the last crew was there. The problem is if it overflows it could mess up the electrical equipment down there and blow the whole thing. Then you won't have any electricity. The really fun part is it's located down the chasm in a little alcove."

It infuriated Garron to hear, but he hid it.

Why wouldn't Frank tell him this sooner? Why was the Aquafier Bath located in a cliffside cave? But the guy who signed his checks was telling him to do something, so his opinion on the matter became moot. Garron bended.

"How are we supposed to get down there?"

"There's a pulley with a rope and a harness. You can go down that way. There's a map in the main office desk somewhere."

"That's pretty dangerous isn't it? I don't exactly have the most acrobatic athletes with me to do this. Or brave."

"It's not as hard as it seems. How old are you? You can do it. It's safe, just make sure you get someone to help lower you down. Get Cryme to lower you."

Garron didn't like this at all, but his options for rebuke were next to nothing. It was a gross situation to be in.

"I'm forty. So, when I get down there what do I do? How do I drain the thing?"

"There's a lever."

"Why doesn't it just auto-drain?"

"I don't know. It's old. It's just part of the job. I'm just telling you what needs to be done. If the bath overflows and the electricity goes out, we're all going to be in deep shit. It's actually pretty critical. I didn't tell you before, because I didn't know. I'm getting this stuff from some pencil pilot at Orb Genesis. Busy people forget these types of things and there's miscommunications. They're telling me and I'm telling you. But you know, God only gives his toughest challenges to those who can take them."

"I'm not religious," Garron said.

"Neither am I."



That was the end of that discussion. It pissed Garron off because he felt like he was picking up after other people's sloppy negligence. The reality was that was basically the whole job description. Hanging over that chasm was serious. If you fell into that, it was the end. You didn't even know what you were going to hit at the bottom.

Garron climbed the ladder to the upper-catwalk where Cryme was mopping.

"Frank just called me. He wants you to drain the Aquafier Bath," Garron said. Cryme groaned and looked at Garron disbelievingly.

"I don't even know what that is," Cryme said.

"It's a bath filled with water drainage from outside. It waters the plants in here, basically. If we don't drain it it's liable to overflow and blow the electrical shit down there."

"What do you mean down there?"

"It's down *there*," Garron pointed vaguely over the railing downwards into the hole. He had found the map Frank spoke of. It really was in the desk. Whatever intel Frank was getting was correct, which was eerie, knowing the puppet-masters had far more knowledge of the surroundings than Garron did. "Orders are orders, I'm just doing what I'm told. So should you."

"How am I supposed to get down there?" Cryme looked very uneasy, understandably so.

“There’s a pulley. I checked it out already. There’s a map showing where the whole thing is and there’s rough instructions for how it works, I think it’ll be pretty straightforward though.”

So that’s what that pulley’s for, Cryme thought.

“Why do I have to go? Why don’t you go? You’re the one who talked to Frank about it, not me.”

“Because he asked for you specifically. He said he trusted you the most.”

“I didn’t sign up to be cliffhanging over that abyss. I didn’t even realize what I was getting into with this job until I got here.”

“Well, you’re here now so you’ve got to do it. I’ll watch over you with the pulley.”

That made Cryme angry. He *didn’t* have to do it, and he didn’t appreciate being bossed around by Garron. The alternative would be to refuse and create a confrontation, which he didn’t want to do either because he was stuck with these people for a long time.

“You know how dysfunctional everything is here. I don’t feel good about this at all,” Cryme said.

“Neither do I. Why would you? I don’t think any of us took this job because we thought we were going to feel good.”



The pulley was a tired looking rope wound on a cylinder bolted down to the metal platform protruding out on the grassy overhang next to the cliff. The saddle was a worn leather diaper strapped to the rope. Cryme and Garron stood surveying the mechanism.

“You’d think they could come up with something better than this. They have the technology to colonize other planets, then they build a piece of crap like this?” Cryme said.

“It’s not ideal. But it’s what we’ve got,” Garron said.

“No, it’s not ideal. It’s a piece of crap.”

Gewn walked up behind him.

“What’s going on?” She said.

“We’re draining the Aquafier Bath.” Garron said.

“What’s that?”

“I’m not completely sure.” It was true and he didn’t want to explain it again. “Frank called me and asked me to do it. It’s down the cliff. Here’s the map, see for yourself,” Garron said. He took the map out of his pocket and thrust it towards Gewn. She took it and read, as if that was going to be any help to them. She was one of the most irritating people Garron had ever met. He wasn’t exactly a social wizard either, but Gewn had gone from mildly tolerable, to begrudged, to hated. She would only hamper them.

What if he just threw her over the cliff right now? There would be witnesses. Then *he* would be the bad guy. Josephine was watching too, lamely, from the other side of the pit. It occurred to him how fast things could degenerate into total caveman barbarism here.

“Let’s get this done,” Garron said, simultaneously turning his attention back to Cryme and his back on Gewn. Maybe if he ignored her as much as possible she would just go away. Cryme sighed and begrudgingly started strapping on the harness. He checked how taught the rope was, seeing if the pulley would stay bolted down, then precariously teetered over the edge.

Garron was holding onto the pulley base, one hand on the rope, letting it slide through his burning palm as Cryme descended. There was a general vibe of frustration with the ridiculous task between them. Except with Gewn. She would do anything she was told unquestioningly, and not well.

It took an ample amount of strength to not let Cryme fall flailing into the abyss. The pulley

wasn't safe. The impact weight of a fall could probably tear the whole thing out of the ground.

Just get through it this time, then never do this again, Cryme thought.

Cryme reached the cave after a few minutes and dangled inside. He released the harness, dropping his booted feet on the plateau for sturdy purchase. There were sparse gold-glittering chunks embedded in the rock walls. A light bulb was surprisingly on in the back, highlighting a bizarre contraption. It looked like an almost overflowing bathtub with metal tubes jutting out attached to a tall, rectangular metal encasement with an LED red light.

Cryme sauntered over to the machine. The dirty water had a layer of frothing film on it. There was a rat's nest of cables coming out of the bottom of the tub. He inspected the casing. There was a door on it. He opened it. Inside was a circuit board and a lever. The lever had the word **DRAIN** printed on. Cryme pulled the lever. The tub gurgled. Some bubbles erupted from beneath the surface where the drain hole must be, but the water didn't budge. A low-rumbling filled the cave. Droplets were dripping from cracks in the ceiling, dribbling down the stalactites, falling off the tips and making small puddles on the floor. He figured the thing was supposed to be emptying like a bathtub, but it wasn't.

That's when he heard a submerged hiss. The pool in the tub seemed to be gaining volume instead of releasing it. The electrical box next to the tub did look like a liability. He was cursing the idiots who built this thing.

He turned his attention back to the bath. There was a vague, perverted reflection of his face through the scummy, dirt-filtered froth. He was ugly. Uglier than he remembered. He thought himself to be a good looking man once. Now he was viewing a jaded, rippling ghoul with sad eyes. Something red started glowing inside the pool. *Was he going insane?* No, he was a competent person with no serious history of mental illness. Luminous red stared up at him from the bottom. Despite all rational reason otherwise, he reached down to feel what it was, thinking it would be some kind of mechanism, possibly a switch that would miraculously drain this thing so he could get the hell back up the cliffside and get on with this forsaken planet prison sentence he'd signed up for. Instead of hard cold metal, what he felt was slimy and bulbous. Bubbles started coalescing rapidly before him. The red light divided into warped stars in a liquid galaxy.

A horrible proboscis burst forth from the splashed surface and suctioned itself to Cryme's face. He writhed as it began sucking. His hands reached up to his raping mask and tried to claw it off. New fear struck when prying did nothing. Cryme screamed but the sound was muffled by the suffocating membrane over his head. His mouth lent the vulnerability to have his esophagus and duodenum and stomach and subsequent rest of his digestive tract sucked inside out and swallowed. His eyes and brains came out the skull sockets. When the monster was satisfied, there was only an empty husk of Cryme's body left on the ground in a bloody pool of disgusting discharge.

Then the water began draining. The LED light on the cover of the machine switched to green. The slithering murderer got out of the emptying tub. The nourishment it just received caused it to grow. The flappy weird skin of the open-bagged mouth slowly began teething. The thing opened its squirming orifice and roared a high-pitched, ice-scraping-metal squeal so obnoxious Garron, Josephine and Gewn heard and covered their ears to shield against the mind-drilling pain.



"Cryme?" Garron called out.

There was no answer.

He tried again.

"*Cryme?* What's going on down there?"

"Cryme?" Gewn called, as if *she* tried it might make a difference. "He's not answering," she

said.

“I know,” Garron said. He grumbled. Cryme was within earshot. He should be able to respond.

“Maybe you should go down there and see if he’s okay,” Gewn said.

“I can’t. This pulley’s all wobbly. No offense, but I don’t trust you to keep it steady. Why don’t *you* go?”

“My wrist is sore. I don’t know what happened to it. My thumb doesn’t work.” She held up her limp hand to illustrate how useless she was. Garron sighed.

“Cryme!” He called again. Doing the same thing and expecting a different result was the definition of insanity, he’d heard.

It seemed unlikely Cryme would be overcome with a bout of narcolepsy whilst descended in a cave beside a giant pit with an imperative job to do. That reminded Garron, the bath still needed to get drained, if it hadn’t already. Gewn was already texting Frank reporting the situation. She relished in putting a slant on her choice of words painting Garron as the bad guy.

Josephine was in the hallway coming around to join them. Her lumbering, wart-ridden legs pummeled loud, reverbed footsteps throughout the echo-chamber of the lengthy encasement. She pulled a bag of chocolate bars out of her plain grey, sweat-stained hoodie, picked a Mr. Nutto, unwrapped it and chewed down the nutty bar. Chocolate bars were like a soother to a baby to Josephine. She loved it. Almost as much as Garron loved Jiggle Juice, or pretty much any other kind of alcohol.

Garron was mad at Cryme all of the sudden. It was a simple job. Go down there, flip the switch, drain the goddamn thing and come back. Then they could get on with their miserable existence for the next three months and get the hell off this planet. But no. He had to go AWOL right in the middle of an important job like this. That was unacceptable.

“*Cryme?*” Gewn called, louder this time.

“He’s not able to answer, obviously,” Garron said.

“Well, I just thought I’d try.”

“We’ve *been* trying. It’s not working.”

Gewn carefully shuffled up to the ledge and looked over the wall of rock down into darkness, the cave opening barely visible.

“I can’t go down there. My hand’s not working,” she said.

“I know. You’ve said.”

“I think you should go. Josephine can hold the pulley. She’s strong.”

Josephine was walking out of the hall across the grass to meet them. Gewn’s idea made sense, much to Garron’s dismay. Josephine was far more trustworthy than Gewn. The only thing you could trust Gewn to do was annoy the shit out of you and disappoint you. She had earned that trust.

“Frank says to go down there and find him. He also said why didn’t *you* go in the first place, Garron?” Gewn said.

Garron sighed again. He never thought it would come to this. It was a simple, stupid task coming from on-high. He delegated. He was basically the leader here. Why should *he* go down there? What if something happened to *him*? The rest of them would be totally screwed.

Gewn thought she outranked Garron. Where she was getting that idea, based on evidence in reality, was beyond everybody. She acted like she was the mother of the whole squad, possibly stemming from her inability to be the actual mother she desperately wished to be. It was sad but Garron had no sympathy, and Josephine lacked the capacity to hold a grudge.

Then the rope was tugging. They silently watched. The pulley bolts creaked. Gewn looked over the edge again. This time the scene was a lot less barren. Now there was a gigantic worm with dozens of gleaming eyes, slobbering, suction-cup mouth and tiny jagged teeth worming up the rope towards

her. She screamed, but the sound only enraged the thing further. Its back-quarters slung around and pointed at her. For some surreal reason, it was a case of jaws even larger than the nub-toothed foreskin on its front, engulfed by a huge wet mane. It vomited a burst-projectile of purple steaming bile laced with half-digested bodily organ into her face. She fell back, skin melting, gasping and screaming. It was horrific to see. Even though Garron didn't like Gewn, he didn't wish harm upon her, and this was a fate that he couldn't even imagine. He didn't know what to do. Instinct said *HELP*, but the next semi-rational thought was self-preservation. He was paralyzed, perplexed. The disgusting pink forefront of the beastly worm reared over the ledge and bit onto Gewn's leg. Whatever searing liquid the creature had spewn acted fast. Garron saw her smoldering skull where the flesh had sizzled off her face. Then it flung her wretched, wailing body over the edge.

That was the last Garron ever had to see of Gewn Fawn.

In her place now was this dual-headed beastworm.

Josephine screamed. Garron was scared, but he stayed silent. He had some semblance of authority and leadership left in him.

"Monster!" Josephine screamed, *"MONSTER! Monsterrrrrrr!"*

They turned and ran. The only escape would be with the Pheonix Ghat. Cryme was the one who knew how to fly it. He was almost certainly dead. It didn't matter. It was the only way out. The keys were in the office. Panic was disabling rational thought. The voice of responsibility was telling Garron he couldn't run away, he still had a job to do. He was under contract.

This wasn't part of the contract.

He burst through the office door and frantically searched through the drawers, flinging paper and items out. The keys were there. He remembered they belonged to the Pheonix Ghat because they had a cute little green alien figurine attached to the keychain. Its smug smile was laughing at him as he stuffed the keys in his pocket, sweating with sheer terror. Josephine was moaning and mumbling inanities from outside in the hall like some idiot mantra. The worm squirmed soundlessly with its front reared in the hallway window. It passed the office. It was going for Josephine. That was a relief.

Garron carefully approached the door. He could see through the window on the opposite side of the hallway into the large chasm room. Josephine was coming out of the shed. She was holding an axe. Garron hadn't known about that axe. Josephine was the one who had been doing all the yardwork.

What had *he* been doing?

There was no time to repent now.

He saw Josephine start to climb the tall ladder up to the catwalk. The beast was missing. He thought to run outside into the blizzard, get in the Pheonix Ghat and take his chances in space. That would mean abandoning the whole mission. Leaving Josephine behind was also inadvertent murder. He didn't want to live with that guilt for the rest of his life. If he didn't go, the rest of his life wasn't going to be much longer. It was a tough dilemma.

The wormbeast wriggled out the door next to the shed and writhed across the grass. It wrapped itself around the bottom of the ladder and began ascending by squirming around the bars, propelling itself towards Josephine. Josephine was yelling inane sounds, struggling to get to the top of the ladder. Her heavy frame coupled with one hand holding an axe was making the climb difficult. The wormbeast was much faster. Garron watched with horror as it gained traction fast. He left the hall through a door into the main garden area of the chasm room.

"Josephine! Behind you! Watch out!" He called.

She turned her head and looked down. The creature was right under her now, a trail of slime left in its wake on the ladder rungs. Josephine started swinging the axe in savage downward swipes. It dodged. With an influx of impulse courage, Garron ran across the plateau through the grass towards her. He stepped on something hard. Stopping momentarily, he looked back on the ground. It was a pair

of big rusty shears. He picked them up and ran towards the ladder, not knowing what he was going to do, but he had to try to do *something*. There was a fine line between cowardice and intelligence. He wasn't a superhero. He wasn't going to climb the ladder and fight the monster with gardening shears. That was suicide. Something hissed from behind. He turned around. There was another worm now. It was climbing up the rope from the cave in the chasm, wearing the tattered rags of Cryme's clothes.

"*Cryme? Dear god, no.*" Garron's voice was barely a whisper. It squeaked out so pathetically it would have been embarrassing if anyone were around to hear. He didn't care. He was too distracted by utter fear. The second beastworm reached the grass and started towards Garron. The evil bastards weren't dumb. They knew exactly where their prey was. It was mindboggling to see. Somehow Cryme had mutated into one of those unholy *things*. Garron was so dumbstruck with fright he couldn't move. His brain was trying to make sense of it all. It wasn't working. The thing was upon him now. He acted on instinct. Primal survival mode had him slashing the hedge cutters at the worms head. It danced and dodged from side to side, hissing and drooling. Then it pounced, stuck to his face and started sucking. Garron's scream was stifled by suffocation. He could feel his eyeballs being sucked out, internal organs rising inside him like they were on the receiving end of a super-powered vacuum. His last attempt to save himself was to blindly thrust the shears forward. He felt it pierce. He held on tight, felt violent wriggling. The grip on his face started to slacken. Then it let go. His face was covered in rank slobber. He coughed and hacked, gasping for air. The monster was reeling with the shears stabbed in its body, oozing black blood. It toppled over the edge of the chasm and plummeted squealing into nothingness.

At the top of the ladder on the catwalk, the original wormbeast was half dangling over the edge, the other half was pinned to the catwalk with the axe squashed in its head. Josephine had an ecstatic, triumphant look on her face. She gave Garron a thumbs up.

He breathed a sigh of relief. That was harrowing. He wanted some Jiggle Juice. He wanted to get off this planet. This job was over. Now they had a good idea what happened to the old crew.

Garron was going to have to learn a new skill and become a self-taught Pheonix Ghat pilot. He just didn't want to be stuck lost in space with Josephine.