

BLUE

DIAMOND

DELIVERY

ANNE E. JOHNSON



SAVING THE WORLD.

EH. IT'S A LIVING.

Using the cart to pull himself up, Webrid called to the heavens: “Why does it always gotta be me? Look at me! I’m a millionaire, but I been wearing this shirt for three days ’cause I only got two shirts. I’m scared to bet on loping-car races ’cause there’s so many numbers on the form. I had cookies an’ beer for breakfast this morning. Do I seriously seem like the guy you should ask to fix your messes for you?”



**PRAISE FOR
GREEN LIGHT DELIVERY:**

The book’s joy lies in the humorous prose (“Her wink could have clipped the wings off a beetle”) as Webrid blusters his way across the galaxy.

— *Publishers Weekly*

ALSO BY ANNE E. JOHNSON



[THE WEBRID CHRONICLES]

GREEN LIGHT DELIVERY

RED SPAWN DELIVERY

**BLUE
DIAMOND
DELIVERY**

ANNE E. JOHNSON



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For Mom, Sue, and Reid,
who showed me the saguaro dawn.

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 anril Webrid woke up in midair.

“What the...?” He landed with a painful crunch, his wide shoulder wiping out his shelf of commemorative Valestin Hundred-Proof bottles (“Collect all twelve!”).

“Oof!” He pulled a shard of broken glass from his matted fur. That’s when he noticed he was naked. Though at least he was naked at home. “I guess it wasn’t a bar fight,” he slurred, as surprised as his muzzy mind would allow.

Home or not, something was seriously wrong. Looking around, he saw that most of his meager belongings were capsized or shifted. “Damn. How much did I drink?”

Webrid figured that since he was on the floor anyway, he could think better if he stretched out on his back. That’s when he noticed the naked Entra lady suction-cupped to the ceiling.

“Drarra, honey? Is that you? What you doin’ up there?”

With a resounding *pop! pop!*, Webrid’s favorite paid companion loosened her head from the metal ceiling plates and bent backward to face the floor. “Oh. You still alive?” She didn’t sound thrilled.

“What the hell happened?” Webrid tried to do the gentlemanly thing and look at her face while he spoke to her. He wasn’t having much luck, so he closed his eyes. “Were we attacked by Blennf initiates, or what?”

“Nice one, Web. Mocking people of faith. Very classy.” Her sigh

seemed rooted in her lower guts, in that way Webrid had heard from so many whores in his time.

“Seriously, though, what went on here?” he asked again.

Drarra pointed across the room. “I went flying off the bed, same as you. Only I’m lighter and stickier, so I grabbed the ceiling instead of crashing into everything. Help me down,” she ordered, pushing a long, flexible limb toward him.

Webrid stood up in stages, fighting through aches in his hip and shoulder. “Grab hold, babe.” He reached up to get a firm grip on her appendage. “Here we go.” With gentle yanks, he unstuck her, cup by cup, *pop! pop! pop!*, until she was draped over his arms. “Flew off the bed, huh?” Webrid racked the one dusty corner of his brain that seemed to be working. “You’d think I’d remember sex that good.”

“Oh, please. What sex? You couldn’t manage anything but passing out when we got home last night.”

Webrid was hurt. “You gonna tell me how come we flew off the bed, or do I gotta read it in the paper?”

“It was a quake, I guess.”

Webrid picked some wax out of his ear. “You say quake?”

“Yeah, you know. Ground shaking? People flying off beds? Buildings collapsing, too, probably.”

Webrid rubbed his bruised shoulder. He vaguely knew stuff like that was possible, but it didn’t seem like the kind of thing they’d let happen in the city. “Quake. Weird. And listen to that.”

“What?”

“Outside.” Webrid was used to the sounds of downtown Bargival. He loved the wailing sirens and the vendors shouting at the honking commuters. The revving of engines was like a lullaby to him. But this morning sounded different. A whole new level of chaos. The screeching machinery sounded a lot bigger than usual, some of it hovering in the air. And more people were screaming louder. He’d have looked out the window if his tiny apartment had one.

“Sounds crazy out there.” He let Drarra drip onto the bed and started searching for his pants. “Never been a quake my whole life. And then, boom, there’s a quake? What’s that about?”

“How do I know? Something makes the rocks in the ground shift.”

Webrid, bending over painfully to look under a haphazard sculpture of piled-up furniture, turned his aching neck. “Why would the rocks in the ground shift?”

“What am I, a scientist now? It shakes, is all I know. Just look around you. This mess is your scientific proof.” Drarra slid off the bed. “I’m hittin’ the ladies’. Don’t bother me in there.”

Webrid dragged his gaze around his four dingy walls. “Too bad about my building.”

“What about it?” Drarra called from the bathroom. “It’s still standing.”

“Yeah. That’s my point. This lousy building stays upright, but I lose my Val-Hundred bottle collection. Where’s the justice, man?”

“Ha! You drink enough, you’ll have a whole new collection in half a moon.”

Webrid shook his head and pulled a glass shard from between two calloused toes. No point trying to explain to her that those were *commemorative* bottles. He’d have to deal with black market types to replace that set. Those Akardian salesmen made him cringe, skins covered in floppy lobes and tongues dripping with sweet lies. Webrid sighed. A quake. Whoever heard of a quake in Bargival?

“You ever heard of a quake in Bargival?” he called to Drarra while he tried to pry the legs of his kitchen table loose from a ball of gelatinous Gahh mold growing in a corner. “I kinda remember my mom telling me there used to be quakes.” Drarra didn’t answer, so he kept talking. “But she said a lot of weird shit. I mean, she says even weirder shit now, since she’s old and in the kooky-lady home and all. But when I was a kid, she used to talk about the old days. Like before the Vox. And how Grandpa used to tell her ’bout quakes. Right? Am I makin’ that up or do I really remember that?”

Still no answer. The table leg came loose suddenly, sending Webrid sprawling. “I’m prob’ly just makin’ that up.”

From his vantage point on the floor, he could see his pants from yesterday, poking out from under an overturned chair. They were good as new once he shook the glass dust out of them. He had the claws of one foot caught in the first pant leg when someone knocked on his door.

“Crap,” he said to the universe. “Yeah, comin’!” he called to his

visitor. He bumped his head on a wall lamp while hopping down the hallway. "Who is it?" The question was followed by a musical *rrrrrip* as his claws sliced through the cloth. "Aw, freakin' hell."

The athletic feat turned out to be a waste of energy, since the door opened before he reached it anyway. Locks had a way of not working right since the Vox communications meta-system had been partially dismantled a year ago.

A very small person waddled in, round as a planet, with no discernible feet. The moment Webrid saw that distinctive body shape, he moved fast to get the other foot into his trouser leg so he could back up. It was a Henterly man. They stank. And sprayed when they talked.

"Can I help you, buddy?" Webrid asked from a safe distance.

"Offfffficial messssage card!" the guy squeaked. Webrid would have to wipe down that wall later.

"Okay, just leave it on the hall table there."

"You gotta ssssssign for it."

Webrid groaned. "Whatever it is, I ain't interested."

"You the Yeril carter?" the Henterly asked.

Drarra laughed from the bathroom. "You have to ask if that big lug is a Yeril?" she called through the closed door. "Look at those claws. Look at that hairy face."

"And don't forget the bulging, sexy muscles." Webrid waited for Drarra to agree with him, but she just laughed again and flushed the toilet.

"Ssssssign, pleassssse, sssssir," the ball-man sibilated in a fountain of saliva. "It'sssss a job offfffffer."

"Sign it, Web," Drarra ordered from her concealed throne. "My rates are going up."

Webrid's jaw clenched. "I don't need money. I got plenty o' money."

The Henterly messenger spun in a slow, complete rotation. "Doesn't look like it, sssssir. Your apartment ssssssucks."

Anything to get rid of this joker. "Okay, I'll sign. But don't talk when I come over there." Webrid drew in a huge breath and held it. In two giant steps, he was close enough to grab the stylus and sign the sensor board. Having rolled the Henterly out with a mighty push,

Webrid slammed the door shut and gasped for air.

“That was nasty,” Drarra said as she popped her way out of the bathroom. Webrid was disappointed to see she’d put on her feathery pink dress. “I’m outta here.” She wriggled her spineless form past Webrid by crawling halfway up the wall, then reached for the door. “If you really have money, you sure are funny about spending it.”

“Hey, I spend it on you, don’t I?”

She placed a suction cup against his cheek and Webrid’s blood stirred. “Yes, you do, sweetness. Yes, you do.” Another suction cup was resting against his chest, and it tightened now, yanking at his heart in an alarming way. “You owe me a hundred dendiacs, plus a little extra for the inconvenience.”

“What inconvenience?”

She released him. “The quake. It messed up my clothes.”

Webrid was too tired to argue. Reaching into a pocket of what was left of his trousers, he pulled out two notes. “Here. A hundred Ds. And there’s an extra fifty, ’cause I made the whole world shake with my bad, bad lovin’.” He leered as she snatched the bills from his claws and slunk out the door.



 Webrid struggled to pick up the flat silver message card the effervescent envoy had left on the table. “Why’s it hafta be so thin?” His claws couldn’t grab it, so he used the side of one hand to sweep it into the other palm. He had to think for a minute before he could remember what to do with one of these things. At moments like this, he really missed the Vox system, anticipating his every need and providing more info than he even knew to ask for.

“Someplace around here there’s a gadget for reading these cards,” he assured himself. “I just haven’t used it in awhile.”

A very small voice in the back of his brain said, “You ain’t done *anything* in awhile, you lazy meathead.”

Figuring there was no way the message card contained anything as painful as his conscience could dish out, Webrid searched harder. “Message reader!” he announced triumphantly as he noticed the slot in the wall by the door. He wanted his reasonable inner voice to know he was getting along fine without its advice.

Of course, he put the card in backward, so the mechanism spat it out vehemently, smacking Webrid in the nose with its edge. He was quick, though, and caught the card on the rebound, trying again with a violent shove. “Get in there!” he threatened. The message slot, surely terrified, swallowed up the card.

“Ganpril Webrid. Voice-verify.”

He growled out, "Yeah, that's me."

In an average transaction, a reading slot would require a more formal verification. But this one, apparently realizing that it faced a hungover Yeril, lowered its security standards accordingly. "Verified. Message transmitting now."

"Wait," said Webrid. "I gotta lie down."

There were speakers all over the apartment, relics of the old Vox days. Webrid fell face-first onto the bed, figuring he could listen just as well from there. Drarra's scent lingered on the pillow, and Webrid's two tongues lolled out with desire. Then he fell asleep.

"Message pause timed out," said the ceiling. "Please continue or terminate playback."

"Wha...?"

"Message pause timed..."

"Oh, shit. Yeah." Webrid rubbed his eyes. "Play it."

The voice from the ceiling changed to that of a businesslike, educated male. Webrid didn't recognize the voice, but he hated the type.

"Mister Ganpril, I am Ghen Nestro, Liaison for Societal Affairs."

Webrid raised himself onto his elbows. "What the hell does that mean?" he asked the ceiling, although he was pretty sure it couldn't hear him.

Ghen Nestro's pre-recorded speech continued. "We wish to hire you as a carter."

"I'm retired." Webrid liked how that sounded.

"The Raralt Planetary Circle Federated Government requires your services."

"Say what?"

"You are needed for a top-secret mission that can save millions of lives."

"Oh, come on."

"Right now, you are surely doubting the truth of this claim."

"You think?"

"By the time you receive this message, there will have been at least one quake."

Webrid sat up so fast, it made him dizzy. "How'd you know that?"

"You will be wondering how I know that. I cannot divulge

specifics in this unsecured environment, Ganpril Webrid, but believe me: Those quakes will get worse. You and your cart may be the only tools we have to stop them.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.” Webrid swung his big feet onto the floor and tried to think of something dumber he might have heard. Once, they said on the news that the Gargenart School District had considered removing children’s eyeballs so they couldn’t cheat on tests. And there was that time when his neighbor claimed, “You’ll get more nutrients from your food if you chew more thoroughly.” Webrid hadn’t stopped laughing about that for a week. But no, this was even dumber.

“You are doubting that it is necessary for you to take on this job. I assure you, it’s true.”

This mind-reading act was freaking him out. Webrid decided the message must be able to hear him, so he tried to talk some sense into it. “I just ain’t too good at, you know, quests. I have trouble goin’ out to buy food without accidentally comin’ home with porn instead. I just wanna be left alone. I’m retired. You got the wrong guy.”

The voice on the message sounded unmoved. “As soon as possible, come to the north side of Ekrit Street, between Fourth Avenue and the Capital Parkway.”

The address made Webrid cough with surprise. “Are you kidding?”

“Bring your cart.”

“I ain’t settin’ foot in that gods-forsaken neighborhood.”

“Please come, Ganpril Webrid.”

“Crooks are scared to go there.”

“Please come. Your world needs you.”

There was a click, and the standard message voice said, “End of transmission.”

Webrid lay back down and laughed without humor. “Who do they think they are, sendin’ me a crank message like that?” He didn’t truly believe, deep in his bones, that it *was* a crank. He’d been involved in big, world-saving stuff before. But right now, he had too little energy to consider another round of that nonsense.

And anyway, he was retired. He lived just fine off his inheritance from crazy old Auntie Naggrid. He pointed accusingly at the ceiling.

“You’d quit your job, too, if you got the chance. You know you would.” He picked up a shard of Val-Hundred bottle and threw it across the room. “Why can’t they leave me alone?”

Bunch of morons. He would just ignore them. “I’ll think about somethin’ else,” he announced, not sure what that something else might be. Nobody around to have sex with, so he might as well eat. Webrid rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and used his claws to comb the knots out of his facial hair so he’d get less breakfast stuck to him. Staggering into the corner of his apartment that barely passed as a kitchen, he sliced a claw through the seal on a package of cookies. “Breakfast of champions,” he called out defiantly, and wrapped a tongue around each of the two cookies balanced on his palm.

“I ask you,” he asked no one in particular, “why would I ever come out of retirement and give up this easy life?” He opened the fridge door and gazed into the emptiness. “Crap. Out of straliem juice.” A beer from the case wedged under the radiator would have to do.

“But seriously,” he continued, taking a few chugs and coughing on some crumbs, “what coulda got their knickers in such a twist that I should give up all this freedom?”

He flipped a cookie into the air. Hand on hip like a lounge dancer, he reached out his right tongue to snag it. But by the time it came back down, Webrid had been thrown clear across the room.