

GREEN
LIGHT
DELIVERY
ANNE E. JOHNSON



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Candemak & Gleam

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For information, address
Candlemark & Gleam LLC,
104 Morgan Street, Bennington, VT 05201
info@candlemarkandgleam.com

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For Ken,
who cherishes my imagination
and encourages it to dance.



 anpril Webrid, carter for the Bargival district, handed a clod of jamboro cake to the blue-skinned businessman. He took a dendiac note in payment. “You stayin’ here?” Webrid asked, “or can I bring my cart into your space?”

Obviously pretending that he hadn’t heard, the fellow closed his window and sucked the cake down whole through a slimy blue mouth.

Webrid hated these commuter types. Somehow, they never learned the basic courtesies of urban interaction. And they were always in Webrid’s way. So he tried again, louder this time. “Can I use your space, mate?” He enunciated clearly. “How long you stayin’?”

“Bivisher! *Braaap!*” came the reply, the first word being an expletive, the second a burp.

“Fine. I’ll go somewhere else.” Webrid knew when he’d been licked. But he couldn’t just keep rolling along. He needed to get off the street for a while, after several hours of selling cakes to commuters, pushing his cart through the hot afternoon smog.

As he thought about how tired he was, Webrid realized that someone was standing next to him.

“Yeah? I got cakes today, friend,” was his automatic response. Then he turned his head and focused his eyes. This guy did not want a jamboro cake; he could tell that much for sure.

For one thing, this “guy” didn’t appear to be biologically based. Webrid could see the wires at its joints. A great metal head lowered itself on a slender tube of a neck. A brace of digital cameras absorbed the features of Webrid’s face, which made him squirm.

“Like what you see, sailor?” he joked, but only to hide his fear. This wasn’t a Vox police robot. Not one like he’d ever seen, and he’d seen them all, what with parking tickets and contraband searches every few days. The Vox, always watching and listening, seemed to be after him constantly for one thing or another.

The robot’s head came closer to his face. Webrid pulled back. Maybe it *was* a cop bot after all. “I ain’t parked wrong. I’m on the move, in search of a legal space, officer.”

The robot responded with a mechanical buzz and a series of clicks. A door retracted into its central chamber, revealing a speaker. Somebody—somebody biological—spoke. “Ganpril Webrid, Second-State Licensed Carter,” it announced.

That voice! Icy snakes of déjà vu scuttled up Webrid’s spine. Clear as the bot hovering before him, he pictured the squalid back alley where he used to play with his cousins when he was a kid. Webrid huffed and shook his head, chasing away the random vision.

“Ganpril Webrid,” the voice repeated. “You have been called.”

“Eh?” Webrid had just spoken this syllable when a delicate feeler came flying out of the robot’s head and wiped

across his forehead. It stung. “Hey, now, what’s the idea?”

But the thing was gone. Upward. Out of sight.

Webrid felt a headache coming on, and a strange green light pattern was starting to flicker in one eye. The light coalesced into a shape. It was not a very familiar shape, but after a moment of painful concentration, Webrid thought he recognized it. A tree? There weren’t any trees in Bargival, or on the entire planet of Bexilla. Webrid had only seen trees in pictures at school years ago. But now there was one floating in front of him, made of a green cloud. Then its particles dispersed, and there was nothing to see but the comforting grunge of the Bargival streets.

Webrid decided he needed a drink. Some company would be nice, too.

He noticed a fine, lean Entra woman clinging to a shop window. There was a possibility there, he felt, if only he could find a place to lock his cart. Webrid pulled over near the shop where the woman had her four midriff suction arms stuck tight against the pane.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he called. It was always worth a shot. He clicked his right and left tongues in a sultry syncopated pattern that had taken years to perfect. “So, uh, you see somethin’ you like in there? Maybe I know the guy that owns the place. I know pretty much everyone in these parts.” No answer, so he kept up the schtick. “I don’t believe I know *you*, though, sweetheart. Wanna turn around and show me? I just know your front side’s as fine as your backside.” He was some smooth talker, no doubt about it.

This gorgeous creature popped just enough suction to allow her to turn her head. She took one glance at him and snarked, “Buzz off, carter.”

Now Webrid knew what he was dealing with. “I don’t need none of your classist garbage,” he snapped, and it was true. “I can get a date hotter than you without the attitude.”

That was maybe *not* so true, but saying it made him feel better.

What was it with the social atmosphere in Bargival today? Sure, Webrid was used to being looked down on a bit. Because most carters had at least some Yeril blood, they were often hulking and hairy, with unsightly claws. Webrid was pure Yeril. Still, the good folks of Bargival appreciated their carters, even if they didn't want their daughters to marry one.

A carter was a useful member of the community, transporting things or people from one place to another. Sometimes Webrid provided a simple delivery service, but other times he'd be commissioned to sell the wares he was carrying, like today. Webrid's mother had been a carter, and her father before her. In fact, his grandfather had given him the velancium-alloy cart he still pushed through the streets of Bargival, thirty Standard Raralt Years later.

"People will laugh at you when you tell 'em you're a carter, boy-o," Grandpa used to say. "But once they need your cart, they won't be laughing anymore."

They were fine words to live by. Webrid usually grinned through any derision he came across, and most days even made a few dendiacs in profit. Being a carter wasn't such a bad life, normally, but today it was all getting him down.

His head throbbed, and another spray of green light shot across his vision. But Webrid wasn't the sort to run to the doctor. Instead, he focused on finding that drink.

He considered heading to Joolo's Skinny Dip Club. He often carted items to this particular establishment, and the management relied on his discretion. He didn't ask what was in the packages, but he could well imagine what a high-end pleasure palace would need regular deliveries of in unmarked polyurethane cartons. As an unspoken exchange for keeping his mouth shut, Webrid felt entitled to use the

club gratis. Through the back door, of course. It wouldn't do either party any good to draw too much attention to an impecunious carter frequenting a fancy joint like that.

But tonight even the lure of bare Prushaskian flesh couldn't interest Webrid. His headache was getting worse, focused strangely in the center of his brow. And now everything he looked at had a slightly green cast. Or was that his imagination? Screw the drink—what he really needed was to lie down.

No surprise, he hadn't even been able to sell all these damned jamboro cakes he'd taken on commission. Bargival was just too hot and crowded this time of year for baked goods, and Webrid should never have agreed to hawk them. Since he couldn't afford to buy groceries now, they might as well become his dinner. Webrid took a dry cake from his cart and shoved it into his mouth. Heavy as a stone. No wonder they called it a clod. He gummed it without enjoyment, as if in penance for his poor business sense.

He headed home. Turning into his alleyway, he was comforted by the voice of Dengel, his neighbor's little son, greeting him from a window high up in the tenement building. "Hi, mister carter," the voice wafted down, like a silk ribbon. Webrid found the heart to lift up his arm and call back, "Hiya!" But that was all the energy he had. Slowly, he lowered his cart into its usual spot in the stairwell. Every muscle ached and his vision was interrupted by pale green wisps of light. At least that tree hallucination hadn't returned. Locking down his pathetic livelihood for the night, he lurched into the lobby.

Webrid put his palm on the handprint lock to open the door to his elevator. Of course, it wasn't working. He'd only called management about it four times. Sometimes if he polished the scanner with his sleeve and smacked it swiftly in the upper right corner, he could get it to flicker back to life.

Before he tried it this time, he said a little prayer: “C’mon, let me catch one break.”

And it worked. The lift door opened, speaking in the Vox’s soothing female voice, “Override,” which it repeated in the Raralt Planetary Circle’s six most common languages. “Override. Please command.”

“Floor eighty-three,” he said in a flat voice.

“Floor eighty-three,” repeated the computer, sounding perkier than Webrid felt. Up they went.



Next morning, Webrid couldn’t even remember going to bed. He had the hangover of a man who’d drunk six flagons of Valestin hundred-proof, but he was pretty sure he hadn’t had a drop. The headache! The center of his forehead burned deep into his brain, and his right tongue was sluggish. A pulse of alarm shot through him. Maybe he’d had a stroke? Was his medical card still valid? Was he going to puke right then and there?

The answer to the last question was yes. His stomach felt better afterward, but his head felt worse. Hauling his sorry carcass upward like he was fighting the gravity of Rada-2, poor suffering Webrid felt his way to the bathroom. There must be some drugs in there. Pretty much anything would do at this point.

Before he could reach into the medicine cabinet, Webrid caught his reflection in the mirror. He assumed he was delirious, so he leaned in closer. But the sharp green light between his eyebrows wouldn’t disappear no matter how much he squinted.

“Wha’ZAT?” he quite reasonably demanded. He swatted the air in front of his face. “WhaTIZZ-at?” He weaved his head from side to side, as if a laser was shining at him and he

could move away from it. But the dot was stuck there in the center of his forehead, clearly giving off its own light.

Grabbing a cotton swab, he poked at it, as he might at a dead rodent. “Aaah!” That hurt. The light source was implanted in his head somehow, and the flesh around it was raw.

“Malady?” asked the Vox. Apparently his healthcare dues were paid up after all, because the medicine cabinet was trying to help him. “Malady?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Malady?” It wasn’t going to stop.

“Great freaking headache.”

“Headache,” it confirmed.

“Damn straight.”

Two aspirin clinked into the dispensary slot. When Webrid laughed at the understatement, he thought his skull would split from the pain. “You’re killin’ me here.”

With a shaking hand, he grabbed the pills. But doubt came with them. “I didn’t pay,” he said, thinking of his healthcare tax. He distinctly remembered not paying.

The medicine cabinet obligingly said, “Payment of fifty thousand dendiacs processed as of yesterday. Thank you for participating in the Bargival Common Weal, Ganpril Webrid. We look forward to healing you.”

Fifty *thousand* dendiacs? Webrid hadn’t had that kind of money...well, ever. That was payment for the highest level of healthcare, four levels above what he could occasionally afford. He hadn’t thought he could get more confused, but this was doing it. Then the ceiling said, “Ratchor Miggs visiting.” Webrid’s headache got worse.

“I’m not home,” he said, realizing it was pointless. His landlord would know he was in by the use of his key card last night. That wretch Ratchor also had his own key, so not answering the door would do no good.

“Ratchor Miggs visit...”

“Okay, okay. I’m coming,” he moaned, crawling along the hallway toward the door. He tried to think of another excuse for his late rent, but he couldn’t even remember how many months’ worth he owed. Heck, he was lucky to make it down the hallway without passing out. There was a cloth hat on the hall table, so he put it on and pulled it down low over his glowing forehead.

With a mind emptied by pain, Webrid opened the door and braced for an eviction notice. Instead, he got a fruit basket.

“You take this.” Basket in hand, Ratchor Miggs stretched his wooly face into an unfamiliar shape. It took Webrid a minute to realize that his landlord was smiling.

“Um, for me?” he asked, puzzled.

“Ya, ya, ya. I say thank you.”

“You say *what*?” It wasn’t just Ratchor’s Prellgan accent and double row of teeth that was making him hard to understand.

“I say thank you,” Ratchor repeated with a patience, even an obsequiousness, that was altogether new.

Webrid decided to play along. “Well, you’re welcome there, sport.”

“You take basket.”

“Okay.” He took it.

“I say to you thank you. You pay year advance.”

“Uh-huh,” said Webrid, mystified.

Rather than forcing his way into the apartment, as Ratchor normally did when trying to extract his rent money, the fibrous landlord bowed and backed away. The door slid shut, mercifully blocking Webrid’s view of Ratchor’s pate bobbing up and down.

Webrid chose an over-ripe geffir fruit from the basket and wrapped his left tongue around it pensively. No angle of contemplation could cast a sheen of sanity on the day’s events thus far. It was time to ask the Vox service for some

answers. Sure, the Vox's constant peeping put the populace on edge. But it could also be a useful source of info.

"Bank balance?" Webrid asked the ceiling.

A fuzzy voice answered, "Bank balance, twelve million dendiacs."

Webrid wanted to say, "Repeat," but his face was frozen. Twelve million dendiacs was more than he, his parents, and his grandparents had made in their combined lifetimes.

Being Webrid, he didn't assume he'd won the lottery. Instead, his spirit plummeted, imagining the crash he would surely feel after this colossal mistake was discovered and they took all the money away. "And I bet they'll charge me interest, too, or fees," he grouched, hobbling back to the bathroom.

That pinpoint of green light shining from his forehead surprised him all over again when he took off his hat and saw it in the mirror. It was a little less sore now. Instinctively, he dug a clawed finger at it. It looked like a pimple, something that he should be able to squeeze out. But all his impromptu surgery did was break some blood vessels and launch him into a whole new universe of pain. It took the limit of his muscle control not to hit his head on the steel sink as he collapsed.



"Message."

Webrid re-entered the conscious world. The Vox said it again.

"Message."

"Who?" he asked hoarsely.

"Joffl Mar of Briziu Bakery."

At first, the carter panicked. This was the guy who'd hired him to carry and sell the jamboro cakes. He'd be wanting his

money, but all Webrid had for him was a few dendiacs and half a cart of stale clods.

A green beetle skittered across the bathroom floor, making Webrid jump. Expecting it to hide when he got nearer, Webrid was shocked that it stayed still for him to get a closer look. It was, in fact, a spot of green light. Now he remembered how he'd ended up down there. Sure enough, cupping a hand over his forehead made the light disappear from the floor.

"Info!" he commanded. "Transfer fifty dendiacs to the account of Joffl Mar." That was more than generous, he congratulated himself.

"Transfer complete," said the Vox.

"Oh, and a message," Webrid added. "Tell Joffl Mar that he can go tie them blasted cakes around his neck and jump into the Rebeten Lava Flow."

"Message sent."

For the first time in ages, Webrid the carter was filled with a sense of well-being. He also realized that he needed to get the hell out of town.



And Cheed is nice this time of year.” The Vox had been blathering on as Webrid packed furiously. “Travel details,” he requested.

“Planet Cheed, three hours’ journey from Bargival Central Spaceport via Rogdin Shuttle Lines. Shall I book passage?”

Webrid wondered if having a laser implant in his forehead would upset spaceport security. “Cheed details,” he said.

“Cheed requires no portable air supply. Southern hemisphere is a popular tourist destination.”

“And northern hemisphere?”

The Vox was silent for a moment, as if retrieving obscure information. “Northern hemisphere: Wilderness. Uncharted. No civilization.”

“I’ll be staying in the south, then. Book passage for tonight.” To his own surprise, he added, “One-way ticket.”

He also booked a few nights in a hotel—a really swank hotel—just so he had a place from which to mull his next move. The more Webrid packed and planned, the more it became clear that he was kissing Bargival goodbye forever. But this miraculous windfall of money might also be the end

of his freedom. If he accessed it, he was traceable. The Vox could always find him. Somehow he needed to get his hands of a lot of those dendiacs and disappear from the system.

“Maybe I could withdraw...”

The Vox said, “Withdraw from which account?”

Damn, he had to stop talking to himself. The Vox could hear him scheming. Webrid laid a clawed hand over his mouth and twisted his tongues together just in case. Obviously, a large withdrawal of cash would be noticed. That would cause an investigation, followed quickly by a manhunt when the authorities realized the money wasn't really his.

“I wonder what poor bastard was expecting this dough,” he said aloud, then clapped his hand across his mouth again, so hard it stung. Cursed habit, this muttering. It would take him down yet.

Although it felt good to have a destination, and exciting to be breaking from his life's daily drudgery, Webrid was conflicted about his decision not to return. His family had been in Bargival for three generations. Webrid had only been out of the city once in his life, to visit some old relatives as a child. He'd never been off the planet Bexilla. It could be accurately said that he didn't know what he was doing.

Looking around at all the belongings that didn't fit into his suitcase, Webrid was amazed by how much he owned. He was reminded again of the vision from his childhood alleyway that had overtaken him the day before. It had been years since he'd thought about the old days, and the housing block shared by all his Yeril cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. And, of course, his domineering mother. Not so well these days, old Mom, although Webrid never went to see her. A mix of nostalgia and nerves brought on a soliloquy. He spoke out loud, of course.

“My folks are from Bargival.” He picked up a bowl his mother had given him. Although it was chipped and stained,

he'd kept it all these years. "Still, my ancestors must've come here from somewhere else. So maybe," he said to a shirt he couldn't quite bear to leave behind, "just maybe, I'm a natural-born traveler and I don't even know it."

Webrid ran his hand over a scuffed-up table. "But all this stuff, it's my history." The table, he suddenly realized, was made of wood. Therefore, it had to have belonged to his grandfather.

Reminded of the cloudy green tree that had haunted him the day before, he thought of a crazy aunt he hadn't seen since he still had his baby claws.

"What was her name?" he asked the table, pointing at it like it was one of his Yeril cousins. "You made her so mad. She hated when anything was made of wood. Had a thing for trees, like they were alive, had feelings. That was some crazy dame. Naggrid, right? Yeah, Auntie Naggrid." He shook his head. "Whatever happened to weird Auntie Naggrid? *She* must've gone traveling, while I've been stuck here."

Webrid smacked the table angrily and hurled his full weight down on one of his suitcases. But that sucker was not about to close. "Maybe this is why my life stinks. 'Cause I'm not doing what I was born to do. Who says I hafta be a carter? Huh? I gotta explore my options." On the last word, he rammed his rear down onto the suitcase again.

Rather than bouncing back up, Webrid just sat there. His speech took on a brooding tone. "But my people are carters. It's in my blood somehow. I don't know nothin' else." He stood, inspired. His voice grew louder. "How could I be so stupid? I'm a carter." He shouted it. "I'm a *carter!*"

Realizing at last that he could be heard, he mouthed the next statement silently through a goofy grin. "And being a carter is my permanent ticket out of here."

He called out, "Yo, Vox! Cancel that booking tonight." Webrid's heart raced at his own brilliance. "And give me info

on getting a carter's license on Cheed."

The Vox took its time while Webrid paced manically around the room. Between self-congratulatory smirks, he considered the inevitable bureaucratic hoops he'd be put through. He was prepared for a massive licensing fee, interplanetary taxes, ten hours' worth of forms to fill out, a business ethics exam, a road rules exam. It was all worth it. He'd smoke some leposso stems to stay sharp and just barrel through all the nonsense in a couple of days.

"Bring it on!" he roared at the ceiling. He was prepared for anything they might throw at him. Anything but what he heard next.

"Ganpril Webrid. First-State Universal Carter's License valid. Fees paid in full for three Raralt Standard Years."

Webrid, struck dumb, plunked down onto the suitcase. It clicked closed under him, but that didn't matter now. He'd never even known anybody with a first-state universal license. It meant he could work anywhere. Any city. Any district. Any planet. Those licenses cost half a million dendiacs per year.

Far from being elated, Webrid felt punched through with defeat, as if he'd been violated. He certainly didn't feel free. Someone was trying to control his destiny, and he resented it.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Please rephrase query."

Webrid sighed and thought. What exactly did he want to know? "Who bought that carter's license for me?"

After a few seconds, the Vox answered, "Rempener Dras."

"Who?" He'd never heard that name before. The Vox repeated it.

And now a question he should have asked hours ago: "Is there another carter named Ganpril Webrid in Bargival?"

"No."

"On Bexilla?"

“No.”

“Anywhere in the whole Raralt Planetary Circle?”

A pause, then: “No.”

The carter tried a new approach. “Info on Rempener Dras.”

No answer. He asked again. Silence.

“Vox, will you give me info on Rempener Dras?”

“No.”

Webrid wasn't really surprised. Sighing again, he stroked his grandfather's beat-up wooden table. “I could score some serious money for this. Nobody can get wood stuff anymore.” But he knew that ugly table was as much a part of him as his own legs. “What do I need with money, anyway?” he said to it kindly. “Seems I'm a millionaire now.”

Since he'd bothered to pack and his life was in a tumult anyway, Webrid decided to go on that trip to Cheed anyway, and got the Vox to re-book it. He thought he might take advantage of the fancy license, so he dumped his suitcases and a few boxes into his trusty cart. He left the jamboro cakes on the ground for the neighbors and pests to fight over.

After a few failed experiments with bandages, he pulled a leather cap down over his forehead to hide the fierce green light. What would happen when he was searched at the spaceport, he couldn't imagine. One problem at a time. At least the headaches had lessened.

Webrid decided to ride to the spaceport on a WideSide Trans-Shipping vehicle, a hovering platform normally used by commercial enterprises. The little boy, Dengel, hung around with bare feet and open mouth while Webrid loaded his belongings.

“Where you go?” Dengel asked.

“Going on a trip,” was all Webrid would say.

“Good life,” said the boy, waving. “Good life.” It was a common colloquial phrase of farewell, but its literal meaning

smacked Webrid hard when it came from those innocent lips. Webrid hoped the kid could tell the future.

“Please,” he prayed silently to gods he’d never believed in, “let me have a good life.”

On the WideSide craft, the carter found himself traveling with a young fellow taking an expensive double-engine loping car across the mountains for a race. The spaceport was apparently on the way. Spoiled brat would barely acknowledge Webrid’s presence.

“I bet I’m richer than you,” Webrid longed to say, but there was no point. While he was still dressed in his grease- and smog-stained workman’s overalls, no one would believe he was a millionaire. He barely believed it himself, although he’d had no problem paying for this lift from WideSide. It cost what he used to earn in a month.



At the spaceport, security was a breeze. They did make Webrid remove his cap and had a robot scan his implant. But after gathering around its readout monitor and nodding solemnly, they let him right through. He heard them say the name “Rempener Dras,” or rather intone it as if it were a holy word.

“This Rempen-Whose-It character has a mighty long arm with a mighty strong pull,” Webrid muttered to himself. He looked at the electronic claim check for his cart. “What if they search it?” he whispered to a urinal in the men’s room. But that was the beautiful nature of his situation: Webrid himself had not committed a single misdeed. For him, this was remarkable. On a normal carting day in downtown Bargival, he’d have earned at least a parking summons by now. Here he was, behaving like a model citizen, but spending like a Lepriectian queen planning her daughter’s

wedding. You just never knew.

“Psst.”

Webrid could have sworn he heard something.

“Psst!”

Definitely there was someone behind the disinfectant where Webrid was cleaning his hands. He’d heard stories about spaceport restrooms, so he was loathe to turn around.

“Psssssst!” It sounded more urgent now.

“Not interested, friend,” Webrid said quietly, hoping to get out of the restroom without making eye—or any other kind of—contact with this person.

“You’ll need a bnarli,” said a tenor voice with a lugubrious Akardian accent.

Webrid, self-conscious about his lack of traveler’s savoir-faire, was embarrassed that he didn’t know what a bnarli was. It could be anything from a special boarding pass to a type of condom.

“You can buy one from me,” said the voice, whose owner Webrid finally turned to see.

The hopeful salesman was undoubtedly Akardian. Webrid saw this race around Bargival all the time and recognized the chaplet of droopy ear-like projections growing around the man’s head. His lips were droopy, too. Akardians tended to be gifted salespeople. Normally, upon spotting one, Webrid would push his cart to the far side of the street just to avoid a hard sell. Now he was cornered in a public restroom with an Akardian holding a...what?...a “bnarli” up to his nose.

“What *is* that?” Webrid pulled away. The thing had straps, which set his imagination racing.

Blue teeth like stalactites gleamed behind the drooping ears and lips. “Try it on. Yeah. Try it on. You’re gonna need it.”

“Are you kiddin’, fella?” Webrid erupted. “What could I need that for?”

The Akardian tapped his forehead between two tear-shaped lobes, then stretched his finger out toward Webrid's implanted laser. He repeated these motions a few times until Webrid caught on.

"Oh." Webrid spoke almost soundlessly, indicating his lighted brow. "You know what this is?"

The Akardian nodded vigorously, making all his ears wobble.

"Well?" Webrid demanded. "What is it?"

"The light?" the salesman smirked. "You require info, sir?" He pulled a black card from his pocket and spoke into it. "Open account."

To Webrid he said, "It's a thousand Ds for the info. Hundred more for the bnarli. You put the bnarli over here," he raked his fingers across Webrid's forehead, "and keep light safe, and you, too."

Webrid sighed, more at the principle of the thing than the actual money. He wasn't often bested by an Akardian shill. But he had no choice this time. He spoke into the card, "Ganpril Webrid. Transfer eleven hundred dendiacs." Once the card flashed an acknowledgement, the Akardian flashed a mouthful of teeth.

"So?" Webrid was not in the mood to be messed with. "I've paid you. Now spill."

The Akardian beckoned with a droopy finger, so Webrid followed him out of the restroom and over to a sparsely populated corner of the spaceport. Twirling his finger in a circle above his head, the wily hawker showed that they were safe from security cameras. He spoke in a lolling hum.

"Laser." He pointed to Webrid's forehead. "Laser is info."

"What kind of info?"

"Any kind. Why don't you know?" asked the salesman. The one eye visible beneath his ears was squinting suspiciously.

"Watch your mouth!" Webrid lashed out in a loud voice,

but when a couple of heads turned his way, he continued *sotto voce* with a forced smile. “I’m asking the questions here. This thing was put in me without my say-so.”

“They tell you nothing?”

“Look, pal. I don’t even know who ‘they’ are.” Webrid thought back to the police robot—or whatever it was—that had called him by name and brushed a limb against his brow. And he thought of the green cloudy tree. “I’ve got no idea what’s happening to me.”

“Okay. I see. Let me show you this.” The Akardian helped Webrid strap the *bnarli* around his head. It was similar to an eyepatch, but its surface was flat and made of pliable plastic. It lay comfortably over the implant.

“Nobody sees the light now,” the Akardian said, probably not intending to sound philosophical. “You can stay safe, take it where it belongs.”

“What do you mean, where it belongs?”

“You’re carrying the light.”

“Where?”

“It’ll guide you.”

“How can it guide me? Does it talk?”

“Don’t worry, man. It’ll guide you. This I know.”

Webrid thought he could feel his chain being yanked. But then something sank in. “Hey, did you say I was carrying this for someone?”

A hundred ears bobbed in affirmation.

Grinning widely, Webrid put out his hand (claws upward, as good manners required) and shook the Akardian’s floppy paw. “Pleasure doing business with you,” he said, and walked off, oddly satisfied. Although he was still missing most of the details, it made a world of difference to know that he’d been hired as a carter for this laser light. That explained the massive influx of money, at least.

And now it was time to make his way to the spaceport

bar, to get properly tanked up before boarding his first interplanetary flight. He stopped first at a dendiac dispenser to get a pile of cash. For the moment, Webrid didn't care what the Vox thought about that. His client would protect him.

"This sure must be doozy of a gig they hired me for," Webrid explained patiently to a brimming bowl of Valestin hundred-proof. "High risk. Worth millions to somebody. But it's okay." He took a gulp. "I'm a carter. It's in my blood."