

RED
SPAWN
DELIVERY
ANNE E. JOHNSON



SAVING THE WORLD. EH. IT'S A LIVING.

Webrid is a carter.
He's also a world-saver.
Is it so much to ask that he get a break,
and get to enjoy the simple things
in life—like booze and babes—without
being asked to drop everything
and save the day? Again?

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*

PRAISE FOR BLUE DIAMOND DELIVERY:

Author Anne E. Johnson has a delightful (if dense) hero in Ganpril Webrid who somehow always manages to save the day and the world in spite of himself /.../ guaranteeing at least two laughs per chapter.

— *New York Journal of Books*

ALSO BY ANNE E. JOHNSON



[THE WEBRID CHRONICLES]

GREEN LIGHT DELIVERY
BLUE DIAMOND DELIVERY

RED
FRANK
DELIVERY

ANNE E. JOHNSON



Candemark & Gleam

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For Ken, as always.



|||| hate picnics,” Webrid grumbled. Here it was his day off, but he was tiring out his arms pushing his delivery cart across a rocky field. “How come I gotta carry all this crap? It’s your picnic—you carry it.”

He looked down at Zateell. Even with all thirty of her limbs extended, she barely reached Webrid’s hip. “How am I supposed to carry that much stuff?” she asked. “Anyway, you’re a carter and you have a cart. What’s the problem?”

Webrid felt his foot claws drag through the weeds as he tromped along. “This here’s a solid valencium cart with military-grade wheels,” he reminded Zateell.

“Yeah? And your point is?”

“You’re makin’ me use it to carry sandwiches ’cross a freakin’ field.”

“You *love* sandwiches,” Zateell laughed.

Webrid shook his head. “Not when the air’s this clean. It makes ’em taste weird. Also, I hate fields. Did I mention that?” Just then, one of his toes got stuck in a Seleefer’s burrow, nearly sending him sprawling. “*Oof!* Yup. I really hate fields.”

Giggling, Zateell cartwheeled in a circle around him. “Who hates fields? Nobody hates fields.”

“I do,” Webrid assured her. “Me and fields? We’re like *that*.” He opened up the mighty span of his hairy arms.

“You’re just a hoongofl, that’s what you are,” Zateell said, slapping his right calf. “Now put your ugly Yeril fingers on that bar and push the cart, wimp.”

Webrid did as he was told, but he made a point of not enjoying it. He ignored the cool breeze tickling the fur on his neck and scowled at the Fan-Winged Brengseys chirping as they flitted from rock to rock. “How much further?” he growled.

With five or six little hands, ZateLL pointed to a copse of prickly snargon shrubs. “Just there,” she promised.

“Thank the gods for that,” Webrid nodded, adding, “There better be some beers in this cart, is all I gotta say.”

“Of course, Webbers,” she laughed. “I’m not an idiot. Unlike some Yerils I could mention.”

“Whatever you say,” he responded absently. The thought of all the sandwiches and beers hidden under the metal lid of his cart gave him renewed strength.

He squinted at their goal. What he’d taken as twiggy shrub surprised him by scuttling away from the brush. Ten long, stick-like legs carried a wide black thorax and abdomen attached at a dramatically narrow waist. Webrid was about to say “What the hell is *that*?” when the walking shrub raised a large pincer and called, “I’m heeere, ZateLL!”

Webrid stopped cold. “Wait. *That’s* your friend we’re meeting for the picnic? She looks like two pointy meatballs with broken toothpicks stickin’ out o’—ow!”

With the ferocious grip of ten miniature fists, ZateLL grabbed the fur on Webrid’s right leg. “Narmoi is my friend. You better be nice.” Her voice rasped like a Seven-Nosed Snardos warning her children about the olfactory perils of public lavatories. “I’ve known her since forever, and I never get to see her. So don’t mess this up.”

Webrid, wishing he hadn’t worn shorts, was amazed to feel her pull even tighter on his leg fur. “I *get* it,” he gasped, wincing. But he could tell by the urgent look on her puckered face that ZateLL had something else to say. “*What*? Spit it out.”

“Narmoi’s husband just died. She’s a widow now.”

“Aw, crap.” Webrid couldn’t take it. “Mopey people give me a toothache.”

“Tough Snoor sinews, Webbo. You’ll have to suck it up.” ZateLL let go of his fur and began rolling toward Narmoi on her thirty little hand-feet. “We’ll cheer her right up with this picnic!” Her promise

had a little too much zing.

Webrid watched, horrified, as ZateLL leapt toward the meatball lady, who was four times her size. Disturbingly, the meatball lady's jaw dislocated and fell halfway down her thorax. Neither woman seemed to care, so Webrid figured this was a sign of—joy? Hunger? He wasn't sure. The jaw rose and snapped back into place.

He glanced behind him: nothing but nubby meadow. He knew he'd never escape to the road on foot without abandoning his cart. He'd sooner abandon his left eye—or his spleen. Turning back toward the hugfest, he wondered whether he could make the best of the situation. Two women, a few beers, a blanket, and a handsome Yeril. *Definitely got some potential*, Webrid thought.

He started clicking his two tongues together in the seductive rhythm that dames always dug. After the third jaunty repetition, Narmoi pulled away from ZateLL's embrace. *She's mine*, Webrid congratulated himself.

His supposed conquest pointed her pincer at him and said, "Oh, you poor thing. Is there something stuck in the back of your throat? I *hate* when that happens."

Webrid's tongues went limp and silent while ZateLL's giggles spiraled up to the sky. He entertained a brief fantasy of plucking out every one of her dinky limbs. But the next thing Narmoi said changed his opinion of her drastically.

"I am *starving*. However many sandwiches you've got in that cart, buster, it's not going to be enough."

"Right on!" Webrid crowed, pushing his cart into the shade of a large boulder. "Let's eat while we get to know each other, sweetheart." *She really ain't bad, in a certain light*, he assessed, checking out the widow as he handed sandwiches and beer bottles to ZateLL. "So, you girls go way back, eh?"

"We were roommates at Eastern Bexilla U," said ZateLL, who was now using a dozen hands to hold all the sandwiches and bottles at once. She seemed unsure where to put them.

The mention of college made Ganpril Webrid, high school dropout, squirm. He tried to change the subject. "Are we gonna use this or what?" he asked, pulling a large blanket from his cart.

But it was too late; campus reminiscences had already begun to

flow from the mouths of the aging co-eds. “Do you remember our RA...what was her name?” As Narmoi talked, she grabbed a sandwich from Zatell, snipped it in two with her pincer, and popped one half daintily into her mouth. “She was so *mean* to everyone!”

“Vinky Oro, the RA from hell,” cried Zatell gleefully, dropping all but one of the sandwiches onto the blanket, but being a little more careful with the beer. She took a big bite and kept on laughing.

Webrid tried to pretend he knew what “RA” stood for. Deciding it meant “rotund ass,” he joined in the laughter.

“Hey!” Zatell said suddenly, spraying breadcrumbs from her mouth in a way that made Webrid feel right at home. “Did I tell you, Webbers?”

“Tell me what?” He took a huge bite, fitting half a sandwich in his mouth to keep up. No chance he would let some female out-eat him.

“Narmoi and I knew Kaforrisin back in college. He went to EBU, too, a year ahead of us.”

“You don’t say,” he garbled in genuine surprise. Kaforrisin was a black-market engineer whose genius rivaled even that of his boyfriend, their buddy Stravin. “I didn’t think superbrains went to regular schools,” he mused, but the ladies ignored him.

Turning excitedly to Narmoi, Zatell said, “Kaf and his man got back together after some time apart and a lot of confusion.”

“The red dude thought the white dude was dead,” Webrid explained helpfully. “And the other way around, too, I think.”

Again, he was ignored. “Anyways,” Zatell went on, “they threw a great party once they found each other again. Talk about a *spread*.”

“I gotta admit,” said Webrid, “the food and booze was epic.”

To Narmoi, Zatell whispered, “He’s a pretty good dancer if you get him drunk enough.”

“I’d like to see *that*,” Narmoi said with a shimmer in her eye.

Mortified by this turn in the conversation, Webrid tried again to change the subject. “So, um, you live around here?”

“Fregnis 1,” Narmoi answered.

“*Damn!* That sure ain’t around here!” Webrid marveled, wondering what it was like to live on the moons of the planet Prellga. “The Fregnis Outer Colonials are about as far from Bexilla as you can get.”

“True,” said Narmoi, “but they’re very affordable.” She raised two stick-legs in a shrug. “I work on Prellga and I used to live there. But things are—” She sighed deeply. “Things are different now.”

Webrid groaned while Zatell comforted the grieving widow. No matter what he tried, this conversation crashed and burned. He longed to be home in his little tenement apartment, watching visi-shows in his underwear, popping deep-fried pa chips onto his tongues. This girly picnic crap was just not his scene.

“Webbers!” Zatell’s shout jolted him back.

“What?”

“Narmoi’s feeling sick. Can you get her some water from your cart?”

Oh, great, he thought, complying with the order. *Now one of ’em’s got food poisoning.*

Narmoi definitely did not look well. Her black skin had turned glassy, and she was emitting a sickly-sweet odor that made Webrid want to retch. “You eat a bad sandwich?” he asked, wrinkling his nose and backing away.

“*Unh,*” she gasped, struggling to her ten legs.

Webrid had seen his share of dames ready to hurl, so, always the gentleman, he searched for a good spot to guide her to. He noticed a buzzing sound, a little like aircraft but not quite, coming from the sky. Looking up, he saw nothing but clouds and sun. “I hate nature,” he assured the sky, just for good measure.


Zatell was cartwheeling anxiously around Narmoi. “What’s wrong?” Zatell asked in a squeaky voice. “How could a sandwich make you sick so fast?”

“It’s time,” Narmoi answered in a monotone. “I thought I could make it back to Fregnis 1, but it’s time right now.”

“Time for what?” Webrid and Zatell asked together.

Narmoi squinted at them like she couldn’t believe she was stuck with such idiots. “I’m pregnant, obviously. Why else do you think I ate my husband? I’d stand back if I were you.”



 ebrid did not need to be told twice to back up. He figured he would just be in the way anyhow; the only thing he knew how to nurse was a bowl of Val-Hundred booze.

The sudden changes in Narmoi were enough to make him hide behind his cart. She lay on her back, her legs in the air, moaning. That's where the scene's similarity to anything Webrid had ever heard about childbirth ended. Peering from behind his wheeled fortress, he expected to see the baby's head popping out from her abdomen. She was swollen and ready, all right, but her waist was still V-shaped.

"What's happening to you?" ZateLL shrieked, circling Narmoi as four of her formerly sticklike limbs puffed up and oozed mucus. "What happened to your legs?"

Narmoi managed a weak smile as she groaned, "My spawn sacs are in my legs."

Supporting himself with one hand on his cart lid, Webrid puked well and heartily, grateful he'd located that nice patch nearby earlier.

"You're having babies through your legs?" ZateLL sounded as fascinated as Webrid was repulsed. "But you could walk and wave and stuff just a little while ago. How's that possible?"

Narmoi's voice came out as a sort of whinny, and she took a breath every few words. "We Glospra-Sharozdas...grow our spawn in our legs. The last sprint of...prenatal growth happens...very quickly. When it's time, a good dose of...protein...really helps speed things along."

“Hey!” Webrid objected, standing up so quickly he nearly passed out. “Using sandwiches for stuff like that is a *crime*. Oughta be illegal.”

He was startled to see Narmoi laughing. “Your friend’s pretty funny, Zatell.”

Zatell shot Webrid a glance that showed she didn’t get it, either. “Generally he’s more stupid than funny,” she countered, “but he has his moments. What’s the big joke?”

“That he thinks a few bites of sandwich would give me enough protein to induce labor,” Narmoi cackled.

Webrid knelt down behind his cart. He could hear Zatell whimper through a fake laugh. “Oh. Yeah. Ha ha. A *sandwich*. So, what was your husband’s name, again? If it’s not rude to ask that.”

As opposed to eating him, he thought wildly, *which was the most polite thing ever*.

“Barmoi,” Narmoi sighed, shivering as her legs swelled up even bigger. They looked like the suction system after the sudden-death round at the Effalanian Shampoo Showdown. Webrid had seen a visi-show about it once when he was very drunk.

Zatell tiptoed courageously onward through the minefield of spousal cannibalism. “So, um, I’m sorry about Barmoi?” she asked, clearly wondering whether she should be sorry.

“’Swat he...signed up...for,” Narmoi panted. Her eyes teared up, but it seemed to be more from physical pain than from grief over her husband. “Barmoi was a...real good sport. He wanted...our kids to be...healthy, you know?”

“Uh-huh?” Zatell wrung her many hands in pairs. Webrid was only too glad to keep his cart between himself and the shvitzing maneater. Picturing the sorry loser Barmoi getting slurped into that shiny maw for the sake of a bunch of kids he’d never know—it made Webrid woozy all over again. That’s why he didn’t pay much attention to the shimmering prisms that seemed to appear against the clouds; he figured he was just dizzy. The faint, swirling buzz, he decided, was his flight instinct telling him to get the hell out of there.

You never know, he reasoned unreasonably. *Those kids might be hungry when they’re born*. For once in his life, he really didn’t want to be the only male in sight.

Zatell's squealing voice cut through his panic curtain. "Webbers! Look out! She's gonna blow!"

She wasn't kidding. Narmoi's quivering legs bulged to the thickness of two Yerils' chests put together. As she let loose with a demented moan of pain or ecstasy, a gooey seam opened along the length of each leg. The coating of translucent mucus gave way to a river of black bile.

"This is awesome!" cheered Zatell.

"This is my destiny!" sang Narmoi.

"This is why I hate picnics," groaned Webrid.

And then the babies came. Out of the seams they spewed, little goo-covered balls, flying in arcs in every direction, each landing with a wet *thunk* in the grass. They popped and they plopped, raining down like multi-syllabic insults at a Himplean Puzzle Championship. While Zatell cartwheeled around with joy, crying "Hello! Welcome to the world!" Webrid pulled into an even tighter crouch. He'd rather get slapped with a parking summons than by one of those oozing embryos.

Plop! Something landed near his left foot. Twisting his tongues together to prevent either barfing or screaming, he dared to look. "*Damn!*" he said to the glistening brown ball with short purple strokes ornamenting it. "My eyeball's bigger'n you. An' you're s'posed to be a baby?"

Plop! On his right side something else landed. Less terrified now, Webrid peered at it. This one was different, larger, and shiny red with thin black stripes, like a pinwheel. "Now that's better," Webrid said to it approvingly. "You *look* like somethin'."

The slurpy sucking of childbirth was slowing down. Narmoi's screams quieted to hoarse whimpers.

"What do we do now?" Zatell asked energetically. "Should we scoop 'em up? I'm a great scooper." She formed several hands into little shovels, and demonstrated by collecting a dozen rocks in a few seconds.

"Please, yes, *gently*," slurred Narmoi. "Place them on the blanket."

"Help me, Webbers," Zatell commanded, pointing behind him. Ten or fifteen strides away, he could see more snotty, quivering baby balls. Sighing at how much he'd rather be downing bowls of

Val-Hundred at Joolo's Skinny Dip Club back in downtown Bargival, Webrid tried to look on the bright side. *At least it's just gross and smelly, and not the end of the world. Again.* This thought encouraged him as he pulled out the plastic sack he still had in his cart from an old take-out order. He sighed again, figuring he'd have to throw the sack away after this. *That's a real shame.*

The buzzing he'd heard earlier came back, suddenly deafening. As Webrid looked up, he was dive-bombed. He didn't get a close look, except to notice that his attacker was every possible color, and had clear wings that moved so fast they blurred. Before he could register what had happened, another one came from the other direction. And then another.

"Get off me!" He flapped his hairy arms wildly. One of his claws caught a wing for a second, but the creature got away.

More winged prism beasts dived down into the picnic area. Webrid could see now that they had squared-off bodies, like someone had cut them out of rock. Their translucent arms ended in talons.

Zatell was screaming and twirling in a frantic circle. Narmoi was trying to prop herself up, or maybe even get up. While she swatted and clipped the air with a menacing pincer, she kept repeating something louder and louder. On the fourth repetition, it hit a volume that Webrid could hear over the buzzing. "They're grabbing my babies! They're *grabbing* my babies!"

Webrid froze with his arm in the air. Zatell ceased her rolling.

"Get my babies!" Narmoi shrieked. Then her jaw came unhinged and she passed out cold.

Webrid saw one of the evil predators swoop down and snatch a red and black baby ball in its wiry feet. "Oh no you don't!" he growled, grabbing his plastic bag as he stumbled toward the thief. Fortunately, the spawn was slippery and Webrid was able to catch it as it shot out of the winged creature's grip. "Nyah-nyah!" Webrid couldn't help sneering, holding up the red and black ball in triumph. Bad move. Another creature swept by and plucked it from his fingers.

"Aw, man," he complained. "That just ain't right."

"Don't worry about that one, Webbers," Zatell ordered as she rolled by. "Get the other ones." She was leading by example, scooping

up the little balls and adding them to an already impressive pile. Webrid, not willing to be shown up as baby rescuer, started dashing around, collecting the vibrant spheres. Sometimes he even got a chance to connect his fist to the head or underbelly of one of the flying things. They were softer than they looked.

Webrid felt so clever, picking only the plumpest, reddest spheres to save. He noticed Narmoi coming to, so he held up a particularly juicy-looking spawn near her swimming eyes and beamed proudly. “That’s a real healthy one right there, Mama,” he said, force-feeding a knuckle sandwich into the chin of an approaching babysnatcher. To Webrid’s amazement, Narmoi did not gush with teary gratitude. Instead, she let loose a shrill, “Nooooooooo!” and smacked Webrid in the temple with her pincer.

“What’s the matter?” Zateell asked, four red spheres in her hands.

“Not the big red ones!” Narmoi moaned. “The little brown ones are the real babies!”

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Anne E. Johnson grew up in Wisconsin but has lived in New York City long enough to feel like a native. She even married a Brooklynite, the playwright Ken Munch. Anne writes for children, teens, and adults, including nearly a hundred short stories and several novels. Of all the characters she has created, Webrid is her favorite.

Learn all about Anne's writing on her website,
AnneEJohnson.com.

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