

THE DELIVERER

Brad Pauquette

IN THAT TIME, each man did what was right in his own eyes...

Yasef led three boys through the desert—a gift for the magistrate, each eight years old, chosen personally by Yasef from all of the available tributes. All three had dark hair and colored eyes, just like Yasef—an oddity among the Journeyman. They wore tunics, covered with makeshift leathers—this one with a borrowed jacket that only came to the waist, that one with mismatched gloves, an aviator cap pulled over the ears. Only one had a real rebreather, an old model, pre-war, and the other two wrapped cotton scarves over their mouths.

Yasef stood six feet tall and wore a long leather coat of a striking but dusty honey brown, which hung down to his black boots. A scimitar adorned his belt. His right hand was covered by a black glove, his left metallic and bare to the elements. He wore a rebreather of the imperial design, a sleek silver mask with a circular filter over his mouth and nose for radiation, toxins, and dust...mostly dust.

It was a three-day journey across the western plain from the City of Palms. After two silent days, on the third morning, as the sun

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peeked over the horizon, they left the last inn in Covenant, and walked past the guidestones. Yasef pulled his hat down over his eyes and ignored the stones. “Keep it moving,” he told the boys, his voice robotic through his mask. Yasef tapped the side of his goggles to change from red polarity tint to sun gray.

“Do you remember when the sun stood still?” one of the boys spoke up, “for the armies of Donumdonair to defeat the imperials?”

Yasef looked back as he walked, “Shut up.”

The boy seemed to shake his head, but it was difficult to tell through the pile of discarded fabric he carried over his head and body. “My uncle told me that the guidestones are a reminder to tell the stories,” the boy’s voice was muffled through the scarf over his mouth. “You have to tell the stories when you pass the stones.”

Yasef stopped and turned. “You’re wrong.” His voice was flat like the desert. He tapped a button on his goggles to clear the tint so that he could look the boy in the eyes. “The ancient ones said that when you pass the guidestones, fathers should tell their sons the stories.” He looked them over, one by one. “You don’t have any fathers.”

Yasef turned and continued on, the boys trudging dutifully behind him. A full minute passed, then two.

“Then why don’t you tell us the stories?” one of them piped up.

Yasef laughed, dropped his chin to his chest, didn’t turn. “Because I don’t have a father either.”

They walked on over the cracked dirt in silence. Not a bird, not a gust of wind...only the sound of the dust cracking, beneath their feet and all around them. Yasef scanned the horizon in twenty-degree segments, looking for bandits, Desperados, and sand-rats.

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A muffled voice began to fill the space. “Do you remember when the river stopped like a wall of water for the people of Donumdonair to pass...”

Yasef ignored it and continued on.

It was a lie of sorts; he’d had a father once. Of course, everybody did. In the first years after the imperial war, his father had given him to the magistrate—to Bryden the Great. The old man had said god told him to. But not before Yasef’s birthday, the one where they pronounced him a man. What was it that the prophet had spoken of him? “You will be the arm of Donumdonair...”

Well, it fit. Donumdonair—the giver of gifts. What irony, isn’t that exactly who Yasef was? Marching these boys through the desert to give them in tribute to the magistrate, the Great Eldon?

“Do you remember when...” the boy droned on, he fumbled over the words, “when Donumdonair sent a deliverer...”

Yasef ignored the boy, and grimaced when his left arm shorted and jittered. He worked the fingers and rapped on the control box in the elbow with his other hand.

Donum had given his people over, and Yasef was just following suit. *Follow in my ways*, that was the command of Donum.

Four nights ago, Yasef sat in a pub on the outskirts. Rupert had brought in a pelt, and they planned on drinking all night with the proceeds.

Rupert was a man like Yasef, a man without welcome.

A traitor to the Kosmoan empire, a traitor whose usefulness to the occupiers had evaporated, but who was not even worth being respectably assassinated. Now Rupert was only as respected as the pelts he brought in, and the drinks he shared.

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So they shared a table. Yasef's drinking buddy leaned in conspiratorially. "You could kill him you know."

Yasef laughed. "Please tell me you're joking."

Rupert pushed his drink aside. "Think about it!" he shouted, then looked around, whispering through his teeth now. "Think about it." He leaned in farther, his voice wet in Yasef's ear. "Think about it, you know the whole place, you can come and go, you take stuff inside. Nobody even searches you!"

Yasef did know the whole place. He knew the secret passage in the closet of the cold chamber in the penthouse. The room where Eldon spent his days in bed. They kept the temperature ten degrees below normal so that the fat man wouldn't sweat to death.

Yasef had served Bryden the Great faithfully. He grew as a man in that house under his tutelage, as a servant of the magistrate. He learned to serve, learned to think, learned to fight. His arm was Bryden's own design.

He'd hidden in that closet when Eldon killed his own father, Bryden the Great. He'd watched him plunge a knife into his father's stomach, watched the old man bleed out. The old man lay dying on the floor as Eldon stood over him. The old man saw Yasef through the slats in the closet door and ever so subtly shook his head.

Eldon left the old man to bleed out, closing the door behind him. Yasef rushed from the closet.

"You must go, my boy," Bryden whispered in the voice of death. "Eldon will have them looking for an assassin." And Bryden told him about the secret passage through the closet, the one even Eldon didn't know about.

"Your god will see..." Bryden had said, mouthing the phrase over

and over as he died. “Your god will see.”

And Yasef had fled. And Eldon had taken the chamber, the power. The edict upon the journeyman changed. Eldon wanted the boys younger and younger. In his wisdom, Bryden raised up the tributes as trusted servants of the Kosmoan empire, to bind the empire’s authority among the Journeyman. Eldon treated them as chattel. No more noble sons—orphans...orphans with dark hair, colored eyes. That was the only rule. When Eldon was done, he passed them about among his nobles, never to be heard from again.

And here was Yasef, the courier. The one who delivered the tribute. The one who kept the peace, honored the treaty, respected the edicts. Yasef, the arm of Donum. The deliverer. *Do you not see? Or do you not care?* If Donum didn’t care, then Yasef had decided he didn’t either.

His friend in the pub rapped on the table. “The Kosmoans are weak. Eldon is weak,” Rupert slurred. “...but he’s still the glue. You topple Eldon, you topple it all.”

A heavy, drunken silence lingered between them. There were a few other patrons in the pub, but each drank alone, the only sound from an old tinny speaker in the corner.

“You know what happens to those boys,” Rupert murmured.

“I just deliver the tribute. We all agreed to it, it’s in the treaty. Somebody’s got to do it.” Yasef pawed at his nose, then lifted his glass for a long drag.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Rupert giggled, “aside from this stuff.” He drained his glass.

“I just deliver. I mean, really, how would I know anymore about what happens than anybody else.” Yasef’s eyes glazed over. “I’m just

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the deliverer—the delivery man.”

“Maybe it’s time for a dose of their own medicine, if you know what I mean,” Rupert winked and nudged an imaginary person with his elbow. Then his face turned serious. “Cause whatever that old roach Bryden did to you...” Rupert shuddered. “I can’t—no, correction, I refuse to imagine what that fat rike is doing now.”

Yasef had stopped listening, gazing into the bottom of his glass. “If you don’t shut up, I’ll make sure you get the death you deserve.”

His friend waved him off. “Fine, not you then. If someone did, surely they’d be the arm of Donum.” He clinked his glass against the metal of Yasef’s left arm and winked. Rupert laughed as he picked up the bottle of spirits and refilled their glasses.

“Donum has his own arms,” Yasef said. “What’s he need me for?”

Yasef stared at the stones as he walked back across the parched and cracked dust of the western plain.

The fat man had his delivery. The only thing “great” about Eldon was his size. The man had ballooned to four hundred pounds, and they said he never left his bed chamber. His fat lips were purple to match his shadowed eyes. Like usual, a kimono hung loosely around him revealing a hairless chest.

As Yasef reflected on the delivery, he shuddered. Eldon had made a point to speak more than usual this time. He had leaned in conspiratorially next to Yasef. “You could stick around,” the words lingered in Yasef’s mind. “I could make time for you...” Eldon had raised his eyebrows, his mouth had parted, tucking his bottom lip behind his teeth, and caressing his chin with his finger. Then his eyes came alive, as if by inspiration. “Better yet, pick one,” Eldon had

gestured to the boys being delivered. “There is much to be done in the palace...together”

Yasef had stared straight ahead, in the custom of the royal court. His voice unfazed as he asked, “Isn’t it against the edict for you to socialize with me, Great One?”

Eldon had snickered, his jowls jiggling. “But since when are you a Journeyman, Yasef?”

Staring past the stones now at the desert beyond, the first finger of Yasef’s left hand twitched, then his wrist spasmed and curled in. He absently reached over and pressed the reset button behind his elbow. His left arm fell limp at his side, then three seconds later began its boot sequence. First each finger closed, then opened, the wrist rotated in a complete circle, and the elbow worked three times.

Yasef grimaced and cocked his head as the neuro connections clicked back on. “Piece of trash,” he muttered to himself.

He approached the guidestones and stopped. His fleshy right hand, covered by a leather glove, massaged the stubble of his beard that stuck out from beneath his goggles. Yasef was a head taller than any of the other Journeyman, his muscular physique could be discerned even beneath his desert leathers. He knew why he was chosen for this task by that sick despot, and it wasn’t Donumdonair.

All twelve stones remained, but only eight were standing. Yasef could hear the voice of his father telling of the erection of the stones. Each stone carried by six men. Each stone, edges rounded into smooth shoulders by the river when the water still ran.

Not a single stone bore a mark, but to any Journeyman of honor, they told a story. They carried a story, and there was an instruction, to tell of the works of Donum before he dropped them in this forsaken lawless land.

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Follow in my ways. Wasn't that the call of Donumdonair—the “giver of good gifts”? Was Yasef giving as Donum did?

Yasef tried not to picture what Eldon was doing, but his imagination ran on its own authority.

Yasef could still feel the fat man's fingers as they lingered over his shoulder. What was the phrase he always used, “I'm always looking for company...” Yasef shuddered, and sank to his knees in front of the stone of his own tribe, the smallest stone in the line, long since fallen.

Yasef fell face down in the sand and his body shook with guilt. He cried and shuddered, but only the wilderness heard.

Finally, he stopped. The grief remained, but there were no more tears. “Is this how Donum gives?” he called out.

Only the emptiness of the wilderness responded.

Then he heard the voice. A gentle whisper of so many grains of sand running along in the wind.

The god who sees, Yasef could hear the voice of the sand. *The god who sees.*

His mind began to play a different voice. Yasef grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut tight as the voice began to play in his mind. The voice of his father, whom he could feel standing at the guidestones.

And in those days, Donum saw. Donum saw his people greatly oppressed, and the sins of the oppressors had come due.

His father's voice continued, but it began to tell a story Yasef had not heard before. *So he raised up a deliverer, a man of neither this people nor that one. A man whose arm was mighty, the arm of Donumdonair. A man given the secrets of the Kingdom, a man who opens the door to freedom for the captives, release for the prisoners.*

Yasef cried out and the voice stopped. He pounded his fist into the

dirt and clawed at the ground with his fleshy right hand. Something cut his finger. He worked his hand into the dirt and found the object, tenderly excavating it.

As the sand parted, a dagger emerged. A simple thing of two edges, straight blade, bearing the seal of Bryden the Great in the hilt.

As Yasef crossed the threshold into the cold room, he removed the rebreather from his face. He looked up and his eyes locked with Eldon's. The corner of Eldon's mouth turned up and he nodded once.

Eldon's lips curled into a smile, and he snapped his fingers. "Everybody out." The servants looked to Eldon, then to the man in the doorway, and fluttered out of the room.

"Close it." Eldon instructed Yasef.

Yasef closed the door, then turned back to Eldon. He set his rebreather on a chair next to the door.

"Please, please...make yourself comfortable," Eldon said. Yasef stood and a silence settled in the room.

Finally, Eldon spoke, "I've been watching you since you were a boy in my father's court, you know" He drew out the words *watching you*.

Yasef swallowed hard. "I know," he said. "And I've been watching you."

The fat man's eyes widened with delight, and he covered his smile with his hand.

"Would you like to sit down?" Eldon rubbed the bed beside him, smoothing out the covers that were bunched under his weight.

Yasef approached the bed, slowly, one deliberate step at a time, his boots barely making a sound on the marble floor. He removed his

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long coat, and threw it back towards the chair that held his mask. The muscles of his arms showed through his undershirt, long and hard.

Sweat broke out on Eldon's forehead, and he inhaled in a short gasp. He looked towards the spot on the bed, licked his lower lip, and raised his eyebrows.

"There's something I have to do first," Yasef said, only two steps away.

Eldon's eyebrows narrowed quizzically, and his mouth parted. Yasef put his hands on Eldon's knees and leaned in.

"I have a message from god for you," Yasef whispered, his voice breathy in Eldon's ear. The stubble on Yasef's face brushed up against Eldon's cheek, as if they shared one beard. Eldon looked toward the ceiling then closed his eyes, inhaled sharply again. Yasef could feel his fat, wet lips begin to nibble at his ear.

In one smooth motion, Yasef pulled the sword from his inner thigh with his mechanical left hand. He leaned forward still, and rested his shoulder against the fat man's chest as he thrust the dagger into Eldon's belly.

Eldon's eyes widened in shock and a gurgle followed a breathy gasp. Eldon breathed out sharply, again and again, his lungs racked for air.

In that moment, Yasef's arm glitched, and his arm shot forward, his hand following the dagger inside of the man, buried up to his wrist in fat, as if Eldon's stomach was birthing a mechanical arm.

Yasef grunted, pulling his body back.

The fat man just sighed, a long, grievous tone, before he died, the heft of his head and chest slumping down over his enormous belly.

Yasef stopped for a moment, to look over the man. He died the way he lived, in his bed, half-dressed—a caricature of the imperial way of life.

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Yasef tried to remove his hand from the man's body, but it was stuck.

"Not now, you piece of trash..." Yasef whispered, as he pulled at his arm. The elbow mechanism wouldn't release and the shoulder was jammed. He reached over to pull at it with his right hand, even bringing his foot up to push against the side of the bed. His arm was locked inside, held tight by the man's girth. Yasef's eyes moved repeatedly to the door as he pried, but there was no movement.

Finally, Yasef shook his head in disgust. He reached behind his left elbow and pushed the reset button. The arm fell limp.

Yasef nervously observed the chamber, noting the door, the windows. There had been almost no noise, and even if a servant had heard it, what would they think it was? The room was clean, in immaculate order, save for the fat man's bed sheets, and the pool of blood dripping down the mattress, coagulating on the tile floor.

Three seconds later, the boot sequence began. He could feel the fingers move, one by one, squishing inside of the man's gut. He could hear the servos move to twist the wrist. The elbow tried to move through its sequence, the gears of the hydraulic pump clacking as the corpse's flesh resisted the movement.

Finally the arm was free, the joints moved freely. With a panicked burst, Yasef withdrew his hand from the man's stomach, a tangle of shredded intestines wrapped around his fingers, dripping of feces.

"Ahh, rike this..." Yasef muttered, shaking out the hand to relieve it of some of the residue. Without warning, the smell assaulted him, and he nearly threw up on the floor. Yasef waved off the body, abandoning the dagger.

He stepped into the closet, crouching to find the access panel.

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Six months later, a man with a mechanical arm kneeled in the desert. He stood a head taller than most Journeyman. He wore a honey brown leather coat, battle scarred. Next to his scimitar, a pistol hung on his belt, and two swords, stained in blood, were strapped to his back.

He knelt before a group of boys, eight of them on this day. The boys had dark hair and colored eyes, just like the man. Their young eyes carried pain like iron shackles, and their feet were sore from running, a half day from the Kosmoan capital.

Behind the man stood twelve stones. Though they did not bear a single mark, they told a story. The desert man, the deliverer, removed his rebreather, then his goggles and began to speak.

“Do you remember when the sun stood still...” and as Yasef told the stories, he looked into their eyes, each one, and imagined he could see a spark of hope.

This story is inspired by the Biblical book of Judges. Find the story of Ehud in Judges chapter 3.

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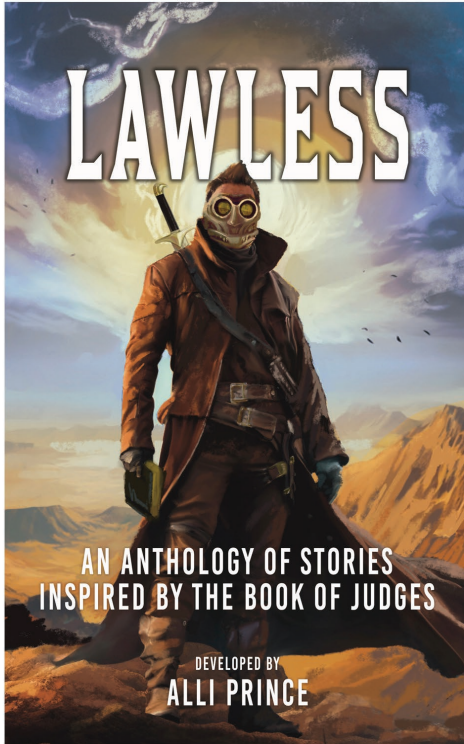
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