



OPERATION GIFT DROP

a short story
connected to the
Chasing Liberty trilogy

THERESA LINDEN

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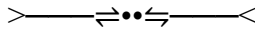
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Operation Gift Drop

A dystopian Christmas story by Theresa Linden

In the not-so-distant future, unbeknownst to the all-controlling government, a group of rebels deep underground watch over the city of Aldonia. In order to rescue the few who refuse to fall in step with the government's bad ideologies, who cannot fit in, who long for true freedom, they train and prepare. They are the Mosheh.



“Move out.” Detric’s rough, commanding voice came from a distance.

Seventeen-year-old Bolcan dropped the last of his opponents to the ground with his signature sleeper’s hold and stooped over to catch his breath. Sweat dripped from a lock of Bolcan’s golden hair and into his eyes, stinging and blurring the view of Detric’s dark, stealthy form against the evening sky and the buildings around them.

Anxious to complete this mission, Bolcan jogged toward Detric. His heart raced with the impossible speed that only came from a rush of adrenaline. He’d enjoyed the hand-to-hand fight against four burly men—even though

they were only 3D foes in a virtual reality environment. The sensors and devices on his body had made it feel freakishly real . . . especially if he compared it to the full-on fight that had gotten him thrown out of Secondary for the last time. And sent to Re-Education for the last time too.

Man, he was thankful the Mosheh had rescued him a year ago. And that today he was training to rescue others.

Bolcan slowed as he drew near.

“Gotta switch gears and take it down a notch, Bolcan. Remember the mission.” Dedrick Ryder, an athletic dude in a black t-shirt and urban camouflage trousers, was one of the Mosheh’s youngest trainers.

“Do you always leave your comrades hanging when they’ve been ambushed?” Stopping two meters away, Bolcan brushed his shoulder-length hair off his neck then clenched a fist to emphasize his muscles. Sure, Dedrick was the trainer and testing Bolcan’s choices and moves, but he could’ve given a hand in the fight.

“I took care of the last two that you didn’t even notice.” Dedrick walked backwards as he spoke. “Besides, it depends on the comrade and the trouble he leaves behind.” He turned and jogged toward their destination, a three-story manufacturing building.

Bolcan kept pace with him. “Trouble? So I knocked over a pedestrian. Big deal.” Just before the ambush, the instant their destination had come into view, Bolcan’s legs had itched to sprint the last four hundred or so meters, but a long line of people blocked his path. Creeping along at a snail’s pace, most walked down the sidewalk by twos and

left little space for a person to get through. He'd had no choice but to break the line.

"That pedestrian was an old lady. Most of them were old. Didn't you see a few had canes? Probably all live at the senior center, out taking a walk, and you just plowed through them."

"Out taking a walk . . ." Bolcan laughed. "How often does that happen? Once they move in, they rarely leave the place."

"They left the place today."

"This is *virtual* reality, Dedrick. I've noticed that you take these training games too seriously." Granted, Dedrick was a colony boy so he hadn't grown up with 3D games, probably never played electronic games at all until he joined the Mosheh, and they did look real. As an Aldonian, Bolcan had played them practically since birth. The technology was no big deal to him. He knew what he could get away with in a game. Some obstacles were silly, others serious challenges.

Slowing as they neared the building, Dedrick gritted his teeth. Typically self-possessed, maybe his impulsive and overly sensitive response to the situation embarrassed him. Once Bolcan had blown through the line of pedestrians, a few shrieks and a shout in his wake, Dedrick had run to an old woman's aid—a computer-generated woman who had nothing to do with their training mission. He should've kept up with Bolcan. If Bolcan and Dedrick had been together, maybe those four dudes would've thought twice about an ambush.

“All right. Well, we’re running out of time.” Dedrick motioned Bolcan closer and then checked the scenario-monitoring device clipped to his belt.

Curious, Bolcan tried to glimpse the device too. Dedrick would see Bolcan’s ratings for the combat portion of the exercise. He’d been running training operations for new Mosheh members all week. Maybe Bolcan’s ratings would impress him. Or . . . more likely, he was just gathering details for the next stage of the exercise.

How’d a mere twenty-year-old get that role anyway? Well, if Dedrick could do it—a kid nowhere near as muscular and capable as Bolcan—Bolcan could do it too. Maybe in a couple of years, he’d be training the new Mosheh members.

A cool breeze kicked up, refreshing Bolcan’s clammy skin while he sized up the three-story building before them. They needed to get inside and up to the third floor to leave a message for a certain dude ASAP, and Dedrick had left it up to Bolcan to get the job done.

“Door’s locked,” Dedrick said, though Bolcan hadn’t seen him try the knob.

“It’s late. The windows are dark. I’m sure no one’s inside. We wouldn’t be sent on a mission during operating hours, would we?”

Dedrick shrugged. “Sometimes. Not everything is done in stealth mode. It’s not always necessary.”

“Yeah, well, as long as someone like *you* didn’t design this training program, I’m sure no one is here.”

Dedrick shrugged again, his expression neutral as if Bolcan’s insult had simply rolled off him. He must’ve

known this training exercise by heart, but he wouldn't want to give anything away.

Grabbing the metal knob—his gaming gloves making it feel cold and solid—Bolcan found Dedrick's assessment true. It was locked. Then he checked the contents of his virtual backpack: large box, water bottle, medical kit, hatchet, pistol, lockpick . . .

He reached for the lockpick but then grabbed the hatchet and pistol instead. He hadn't mastered using a lockpick yet and doubted he had the time to waste. But he could swing a hatchet.

Dedrick backed up.

Bolcan handed him the pistol, assuming he would cover Bolcan if necessary. Without giving it a second thought, he swung hard, cracking the blunt end of the hatchet against the doorknob. A few swings later, the knob hung askew and the door cracked open.

Proud of himself, Bolcan laughed and made a move to push it open further with his shoulder, but the door swung freely and he lost his balance, falling into a foyer.

Angry figures came from doorways and a cacophony of shouting surrounded him.

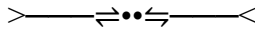
His knee cracked down on the hard floor.

Then everything and everyone froze in place, and Dedrick's sigh replaced the shouting.

"Look, Bolcan, not every problem is solved with brute force." Dedrick grabbed Bolcan's upper arm and yanked him backward and to his feet. "See this box in your inventory?"

Bolcan shook the hair off his forehead and glanced.
“Yeah, so?”

“So”—Dedrick locked his steady brown eyes onto Bolcan’s—“we knock on the door first. And, yes, people are here. Then we easily gain entrance by saying we’re delivering this package to our man. The Mosheh does not regard everyone as an enemy. We don’t want to hurt anyone if we don’t have to. We don’t destroy things without good cause. To succeed as one of us, you need humility.”



One week later, 2:00 a.m. December 25th in the underground Mosheh facility . . .

“You heading for the control center?” A dark-haired girl caught Bolcan at the foot of the wide ramp leading to the expansive Mosheh Control Center. Without waiting for his answer, she handed him a big plastic bag. “Give this to Miriam, huh?” She beamed a smile and took off.

Her good mood elevating his even more, he slung the lightweight bag—felt like a load of laundry—over his shoulder and continued up the ramp to the center.

Groups of kids near glowing screens and workstations spoke over one another in excited voices. Laughter echoed in the open area that stretched out to darkness on either side. Joy and anticipation had been mounting all day. And now that the elders had retired for the night, the younger

Mosheh members were gathering for an annual excursion called Operation Gift Drop.

Bolcan had tried to get someone to explain this operation to him, but he'd only gotten answers like "Come and see," "It's a tradition," and "You'll love it."

The indoctrination and re-education he'd known over the years as a citizen of Aldonia had left him empty and hungry for something real and deep, so he appreciated these people with their organic history, heartfelt dedication, and meaningful traditions. And he was glad they allowed Aldonians to join them.

Halfway through the control center, he spotted Miriam, the only person over forty who hadn't retired for the night, as far as he'd noticed. She stood near several waist-high crates, talking to a kid whose tense gestures made him seem like the only one with a negative attitude tonight.

Wait—

She was talking to Detrick Ryder. He stood with his back to Bolcan. Neither seemed to notice Bolcan approach, and he soon made out their conversation.

"So let him do something inside. He can help disrupt the surveillance. That's an important job," Detrick said. "He's not ready to go out."

"Look, Detrick, this isn't a dangerous rescue mission. It's just a bit of fun." Miriam playfully shoved Detrick's arm, the one he'd been waving as he spoke.

"There are still risks and he's too—"

Miriam's eyes shifted to Bolcan and a genuine smile stretched across her face. She wore her hair in a ponytail, a few gray strands showing on the sides, and a fuzzy red

sweater—not her usual attire at all. Bolcan had only seen her in somber colors or camouflage.

“You talking about me? I’m too what?”

Dedrick glanced over his shoulder and then turned toward Bolcan with a sneer. “Oh, hey. Didn’t know you were eavesdropping.”

“You don’t think I’m ready because you’ve never really tested me one-on-one. We only do those lame simulations.” He wanted to say more. Either he needed a new trainer or Dedrick needed to lighten up. Dedrick was one of many trainers, not the one in charge of formation. And as a trainer, he was too rigid—cautious, judgmental, something of a perfectionist—more like one of the elders even at his young age. He had no idea what it was like to grow up in Aldonia. And he knew nothing of Bolcan’s abilities.

“Those lame simulations tell me more about your readiness than you’d guess.”

“Oh, I’m ready. You can try me right now.” Conscious of their difference in size, Bolcan grinned and flexed a bicep.

Dedrick held Bolcan’s gaze for a second then glanced at the darkness overhead and shook his head, a smile spreading across his face.

Putting his irritation in check, Bolcan swung the bag off his shoulder and offered it to Miriam. “I was told to give this to you.”

“Oh, thanks.” Her face lit up. She set the bag in an open crate—on more bags, these ones made of weathered canvas and stuffed with lumpy contents. “Here, Dedrick,

put this on.” From the bag Bolcan had brought her, she drew out a red cloth hat with fluffy white trim and a bell on the pointy end.

Dedrick finally smiled, and he did nothing to stop Miriam from arranging the silly thing on his head.

“You too,” she said to Bolcan, producing a second hat from the bag.

“Oh, we need a picture!” Camilla, the ever-cheerful colony girl, bounced up as Miriam pulled the bright red hat down over Bolcan’s ears and arranged a lock of his shoulder-length golden hair. She grabbed Dedrick by the arms and positioned him next to Bolcan, Dedrick’s eyes rolling the whole time, though he continued to smile.

Bolcan threw his arm around Dedrick’s shoulders for the shot and grinned as big as he could, as if they were best friends and not rivals.

“Better not let an elder see the pics,” a kid said in passing.

“Now you two need one of these.” Miriam shoved a big, loaded canvas bag between Dedrick and Bolcan. “And if you hurry, you’ll catch the next tunnel kart.”

Eyes on Miriam, Dedrick stepped back and lifted his hands. “If he’s coming along, he can carry it.” He strode toward the tunnel entrance.

Glad that Miriam hadn’t changed her mind because of Dedrick’s counsel, Bolcan grabbed the bag and took off after Dedrick. He’d prove himself to Dedrick one way or another tonight.

“What’s so different about this mission that the elders can’t know?” With the heavy sack slung over one shoulder,

Bolcan walked alongside Dedrick. “You trainers have always pounded it into us that we are to honor, obey, and respect the elders, and to trust in their wisdom over our own. Now we’re sneaking around without the elders’ permission.”

The beam of Dedrick’s flashlight lit up their concrete path. High walls rose up on either side, gradually getting lower the further they walked through the tunnel. Laughter, voices, and a few points of light came from ahead.

“It’s a tradition that goes back to the beginnings of the Moshéh.” Dedrick glanced at Bolcan, his look less rigid now. “The younger members carry out this assignment in secrecy.” A smile made its way to his face. “I don’t doubt the elders know all about it, but this night we go out without permission. Don’t get me wrong—obedience to the elders is essential, but Operation Gift Drop reminds us that God is our highest authority and serving Him our highest goal.”

Bolcan nodded as if it now made sense, though he’d need to think on it another time. Aldonia’s all-controlling government, the Regimen Custodia Terra, had always taught about the earth as if it were the highest good, a goddess not only to be protected and cared for but almost worshipped. Humans, left to themselves, were akin to parasites. Those teachings had never sat right with him, but he could not grasp the idea of a god as the colonists saw it either.

The colonists’ God did not need to be protected. He protected His people. And they worshipped Him, even

without seeing Him. No, that was wrong. They did see Him . . . at every Mass, they claimed.

Bolcan had attended only once. The songs, bells, incense, and prayers in a strange language had stirred his soul with a longing for something great and wonderful. But when the priest had lifted high into the air a tiny, circular-shaped piece of bread and the person next to Bolcan said it was God, Bolcan had not understood. And he'd never gone back. What kind of God would make Himself so vulnerable and weak as to become food?

A few minutes later, Bolcan sat with one leg hanging off a tunnel kart, clinging to the back of a seat and smashed up against another kid. Six of them had piled onto a kart that seated four, three bulging canvas sacks precariously balanced or stuffed between bodies. The engine whined at a higher decibel with its extra load.

Without warning, the kid next to Bolcan began a chant and the others joined in, repeating it about a dozen times. "Hail and blessed be the hour and the moment when the Son of God was born . . ."

Bolcan tried tuning it out. The repetition stirred up disturbing thoughts of Re-Ed, though the cheerful spirit of this group and their reverence while praying reminded him of nothing he'd known in Aldonia.

Ten minutes later found everyone but Bolcan singing jolly songs, one about snow and sleighs, and another about heaven and nature. He'd heard that tune before, but the words were different, so he sang along inside his head—with the words he'd known as an Aldonian.

Joy to the world, the time has come,

*let earth her bounty bring,
let e-everyone prepare Her-r room,
and earth and nature sing . . .*

Before long, they approached an intersection of dark tunnels and Dedrick hollered, “This is our stop.”

As the kart squeaked to a halt, Bolcan jumped off, glad to stretch his legs. A faint gray light shone at some distance down the tunnel to the left, nothing to the right. He didn’t know which way to go because Dedrick—probably hoping he wouldn’t come along—hadn’t prepared him for this mission.

“We’ve got a twenty-minute hike ahead of us. Through the tunnels.” Dedrick gestured into the darkness, came around the back of the kart, and shoved the canvas bag at Bolcan.

Bolcan considered telling Dedrick to take a turn carrying the bag, and his expression may have communicated that, but he kept his mouth shut and swung the bag over his shoulder.

“Godspeed,” Dedrick shouted to the others as he adjusted his droopy red hat.

They responded with a few hoots and well wishes, and the driver took off down the tunnel with the distant light, heading toward the next drop-off point. Leaving Bolcan and Dedrick alone.

“What’s our destination?” Bolcan asked.

“We’ll hit one of the primary residences. It’ll be a first for them.” Dedrick glanced at him, the light of his flashlight revealing the hint of a smile. “I wish we could hit all of them, but Aldonia’s too big and there aren’t that

many of us. We try to deliver to different places every year, different factories, government offices, retirement communities. Everywhere we can. Eventually, over the years, we'll hit them all."

Fifteen minutes later, a cramp in his arm and the rough canvas digging into his palm had Bolcan transferring the heavy bag to his other shoulder. "You ready to take a turn carrying this?"

"Huh?" Without slowing his stride, Dedrick studied the TekBand on his wrist. Not only a communication device, the TekBand provided an abundance of information that the rescuers needed—things like maps, stats, and direction. Bolcan had yet to be issued one. "Nah, we're almost there. You can handle it."

"I know I can." Attitude slipped out in Bolcan's tone. "I can handle a lot more than you give me credit for."

Dedrick merely glanced at him.

Bolcan's irritation grew at Dedrick's lack of response. "Any day you want to try me, I'll prove it."

"You're proving the opposite with comments like that."

"Oh yeah?" Taking Dedrick's reply as fighting words, Bolcan swung the bag to the cold concrete at his feet and raised his fists. "Why don't you test me right now? I'll have you immobilized within a couple of minutes, if that long. Then you carry the bag."

Dedrick took six more steps. He stopped and turned to face Bolcan, the beam of his flashlight hitting the floor between them. A tilt of his head and quirk of a grin on his

shadowy face made him look amused, but his squinted eyes told otherwise. “You want to fight me right here?”

Realizing he still wore the silly red hat and imagining what he must look like, Bolcan yanked it off and tossed it. “Right here. Right now. And when I win, you stop doubting my abilities. There’s nothing you can do that I can’t.”

“Really, Bolcan, it’s not about your ability to fight. I’ve been trying to tell you, there’s more to it—”

“But you don’t think I can beat you.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You say it with your attitude.”

Dedrick shook his head and pressed his lips together—thinking it over or holding back a retort? Then he set his flashlight against the wall, leaving the beam to illuminate the floor, dropped his red hat beside it and shrugged out of his jacket. “Push the bag out of the way. I don’t want any gifts ruined. First one to restrain the other wins. Loser carries the bag.”

“Which you think will be me.”

“Look, I just want to deliver gifts. You want to fight. So let’s get this over with.”

A bit surprised that Dedrick was agreeing to this fight but more than happy for this chance to prove himself, Bolcan shoved the bag next to the flashlight, pushed his hair behind his ears, and took a fighter’s stance: elbows in, fists at cheek level, and chin tucked.

Dedrick staggered his feet and brought his hands up and open as if he really didn’t want to do this. “There are better ways to prove yourself.”

“At the moment, none come to mind.” Bolcan swung first, aiming for Dedrick’s jaw but hitting only air as Dedrick twisted and slapped Bolcan’s arm aside with a look of disinterest on his face.

Bolcan had seen Dedrick fight other Mosheh members in demonstrations. His moves were smooth and refined, but he’d never fought someone like Bolcan. Bolcan didn’t need smooth moves; he could street fight.

Aiming for Dedrick’s side and throwing his weight into the move, Bolcan swung.

Dedrick blocked the punch with his elbow and another twist, and then threw a body shot that hit its mark.

Exhaling sharply, Bolcan forced himself to ignore the jolt of pain in his abdomen and jumped back to avoid Dedrick’s arm around his neck. Maybe Dedrick meant to end this in a few moves, but Bolcan wasn’t having it.

More thoughtful this time, Bolcan readied himself to make another attack. He didn’t need a bunch of shots but only power behind a few good ones. A solid shot to the ribs could knock the wind out of Dedrick, then Bolcan could get him in a hold and claim victory.

He feigned a throw to the head and went for Dedrick’s side.

As if foreseeing it, Dedrick twisted, avoiding the headshot, and yanked Bolcan’s other arm, throwing him off balance. Dedrick swung his arm toward Bolcan’s throat and might’ve taken command right then, but Bolcan regained his balance, forced himself forward, and had Dedrick staggering back instead.

Now Dedrick was on his toes, throwing shots and dodging to avoid Bolcan's attacks, not acting so casual and disinterested as Bolcan took control of the space between them.

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, maybe annoyed that he hadn't taken Bolcan down yet, he said, "We're wasting time here, Bolcan. This fight won't convince me of anything except that you're lacking in self-control and humility."

"Humility?" Bolcan's right hook met with Dedrick's palm.

Shaking his hand out, still bouncing on his feet, Dedrick said, "You're Aldonian, so that's a tough one," and he landed a low kick on Bolcan's shins.

Unwilling to react to the pain, Bolcan circled Dedrick and let loose a few rapid jabs, one or two successful. Then it happened.

Dedrick wound up with his back to the wall, the canvas bag tangling his feet, and he tried to recover ground with a clinch. He wasn't prepared for Bolcan's muscular build, one he worked on every day while Dedrick wasted his time in the Mosheh Control Center or ventured out on rescue missions.

Gaining some distance from the wall, Dedrick tried to break the clinch, and Bolcan used that instant to come up beside Dedrick and get his arm around his neck. He was about to own Dedrick with a sleeper hold.

Dedrick latched onto Bolcan's arm but couldn't lessen the grip no matter how he tried. One second, two seconds, three . . . He must've known it was over—

To secure his position, Bolcan shifted his weight and took a step, but something caught his foot and . . . and wouldn't let go. That lousy canvas bag!

Thrown off balance, Bolcan stumbled to the side.

Taking advantage of the moment, Dedrick jerked forward, took a wide stance and squatted, breaking Bolcan's hold. He swung a fist down and back, cracking Bolcan's knee.

A jolt of pain had Bolcan curling forward in agony. Then Dedrick's fist sailed over his shoulder and landed on Bolcan's nose.

Seeing stars but not giving up, Bolcan formed a fist and readied a swing.

Before he could even think about executing a move, Dedrick spun to face him, grabbed his fist and elbow, and twisted, overextending Bolcan's shoulder and making him lose balance.

In the next instant—somehow—Dedrick slammed Bolcan down.

The air shot from Bolcan's lungs and white dots filled his vision. Forcing himself into action, he tried to roll over to get up.

Dedrick's knee landed on one side of his head, pressing his cheek to the cold, hard floor. "I think we're done here, don't you?" Dedrick said coolly, backing off. He straightened, caught his breath for a second, and reached a hand down to Bolcan.

Struggling to accept defeat, Bolcan took Dedrick's hand. Aching all over, he got to his feet. "I had you. If not for that bag . . ."

Dedrick shuffled to the canvas sack and squatted. “Aww, look.” He groaned. “We probably broke some of them.” A partially unwrapped gift lay at his feet. He rifled through the bag, mumbling something.

Bolcan wanted to say something sarcastic, wanted to harbor a grudge, but he had asked Dedrick for this opportunity. And Dedrick had granted it.

With a few breaths, Bolcan let his embarrassment and resentment fizzle out. “What are we delivering, anyway?” he asked. “And why? I don’t understand the importance of Operation Gift Drop.”

Leaning against the wall, Bolcan wiped grit from the side of his clammy face and felt a trickle of wetness on his forehead. It stung as he wiped it. A glance at his finger showed a dark smear that he assumed was blood in the dim light.

Holding his side and grimacing, Dedrick straightened and handed Bolcan the half-wrapped gift. “Check it out. And figure a way to wrap that thing back up. It must’ve had a tie.” His gaze dropped to the ground.

Curious about the gift, Bolcan pulled the fabric wrapping back. A decorative wooden box held a tiny carved owl and a long strip of thick paper with something Aldonians rarely saw—handwritten words. “What is this?”

Easing his jacket on and wincing, Dedrick looked up. “Oh, that’s a bookmark.” He took it from Bolcan and flipped it over. “They usually write an invitation to faith on one side and a Christmas verse on the other. A verse, uh, from the Bible. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Of course.” Bolcan acted like the question offended him, but it was a reasonable one. Aldonians were raised without faith, without sacraments, without church, and without Bibles. He’d heard about it all from various members of the Mosheh, though, both colonist and Aldonian believers. They’d likely read from the Bible at that Mass he’d attended too.

Dedrick picked up the red hats and the flashlight, which he then shined along the ground around them.

Tilting the bookmark to the light, Bolcan read the verse to himself, the meaning at first alluding him, then a strange sensation prickling his skin and touching him in some deep place. He stuffed the bookmark back into the box and arranged the soft wrapping over it.

“Oh, here.” Grunting as he stooped, Dedrick snatched something off the ground. “It was probably tied with this.” He came up to Bolcan with a length of twine and tied the gift while Bolcan held it.

“A bookmark seems like a useless gift. Aldonians only read electronic books or listen to audio. Physical books belong in museums.” Bolcan stuffed the gift back into the canvas bag and hoisted the bag off the floor.

“Yeah, I know. And the bookmarks get confiscated by the authorities—because of the verse—but the colonists still include them.” Dedrick clipped his flashlight to his belt. Red marks on his cheek and chin disappeared once the light no longer shined on his face. “Maybe the verse or the invitation to faith will stick with a few people.”

Bolcan lifted the bag higher, ready to swing it over his shoulder.

“Oh, hey, I’ll take that.” After adjusting the red hat on his head, Dedrick took the bag from Bolcan and swung it over his shoulder, the action making him wince.

It took Bolcan a moment to respond. “But you won.”

The humble tilt of Dedrick’s head contrasted with his crooked grin. “I wouldn’t have. If not for you tripping on the bag. You really had me there.” He turned and started off down the tunnel.

Stunned, Bolcan didn’t move for a second but then bolted after him, one knee screaming as he hurried to catch up. “You’re admitting I would’ve won?”

Dedrick shrugged. “Yeah, I admit it. And, hey, sorry about the crack against Aldonians. But you really get under my skin sometimes.”

“I get under *your* skin?”

Bolcan donned his droopy red hat, and the two of them walked side by side at a less aggressive pace than earlier.

“So now you know what we’re delivering.” Dedrick readjusted the canvas bag he carried over his shoulder. “Homemade gifts. Things like yo-yos, stuffed toys, candy, soaps, little stuff that the colonists make all year long. And the reason we do it is we’re celebrating Christmas.”

“I figured as much. We learned about Christmas in school. It was a commercial holiday invented by capitalists so that people would spend more money.”

Dedrick laughed. “No, Bolcan, Christmas is a celebration of the gift from God the Father. Over two thousand years ago, He gave us His Son, sent Him into the world to save us. His Son, who is also God, took on human

form and was born in a stable. He gave us Himself. Gave us everything. That's why we give gifts tonight."

"So we give gifts to people who have no clue what it means."

Dedrick shrugged. "Few people knew what it meant on that first Christmas night either."

They walked to the sounds of their clothing swishing, soft footfalls, and an occasional clank and drip in the distance. The steady movement worked the aches out as they plodded down one dark tunnel and another. Utility pipes lined the walls of the third tunnel they turned down. The walls came closer together, the ceiling lower.

"It's not that I think you can't fight," Dedrick said out of the blue, rubbing his side under his jacket. "Before we rescued you, I saw you take down several kids at once. And, man, you've got some power behind your punches." He glanced with a look of admiration that faded quickly. "Being one of the Mosheh, it isn't just about defending people, rescuing people from Aldonia. The Mosheh practice self-discipline. We aim for humility."

Dedrick paused and adjusted the heavy bag on his shoulder, carrying it now with two hands. "Sorry I'm not the best example."

"No, you're not," Bolcan said, satisfied to hear Dedrick admit it.

Dedrick threw him a look, but he spoke without his usual hint of annoyance. "The Mosheh, we come to serve Aldonians, even though Aldonians don't know it and wouldn't welcome it."

“Aldonians are raised to bow to a controlling government, to serve and obey without having the freedom to think and choose.” It burned Bolcan to know that Dedrick, who hadn’t experienced such a life, would probably never understand. “The Mosheh rescue people from oppression so they no longer have to live like slaves. Whether a member has humility or not, the Mosheh are not—and have never been—slaves.”

“Freedom without humility is another form of slavery,” Dedrick said, his tone critical. “To be Mosheh is to serve.”

“I want to save, not to serve.” Bolcan’s jaw tensed. “I have the skills I need to do that. I have self-discipline.”

Dedrick looked at him and huffed. “You were trying to use the sleeper hold on me. Were you seriously planning to knock me out?”

Bolcan didn’t answer. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. If Dedrick hadn’t broken away and if he couldn’t have shaken off his fighting instinct, maybe he would’ve. But he didn’t want to remain a student in Mosheh training forever—and rendering a trainer unconscious might not work in his favor—so maybe he wouldn’t have. In a real-life situation, he certainly would have knocked his opponent out.

A few minutes later, the tunnel narrowed even more so that they had to walk single-file. Pipes around them creaked and hummed and tinged.

“Almost there.” Dedrick released one hand from the bag and unzipped a pocket inside his jacket. “We must

work with absolute silence, and quickly. One gift on each bed, the rest on the first table we see, and we leave.”

“At least one nanny is supposed to be awake at all hours.”

“Right. Was it ever like that when you were growing up?” Dedrick pulled something made of fabric from his jacket pocket.

“You have a point.” When Bolcan lived in Primary, many a night he’d awoken and wandered in search of a nanny only to take care of his business on his own: a glass of water, a trip to the bathroom, finding a friend to sleep with to keep the nightmares at bay.

“If we do come across one, let me handle it.” Dedrick gave Bolcan a hard look that said he expected full compliance with that command.

“And how will you handle it?” He assumed Dedrick had a trick up his sleeve or a device on his TekBand.

“Don’t worry about that.” Dedrick unfolded and shook out the fabric, which turned out to be a second bag, this one made of thin material. Then he lowered the canvas sack to the floor and began dividing the goods.

“You had that all along?” Bolcan stared, dumbfounded. “We could’ve shared the load.”

Dedrick flashed a smile as he transferred one last gift to the second bag and stood. “Nah, loser carries the bag, we decided, right?” He turned his attention to a panel in the wall and produced a ratchet from a pants pocket.

After breaking in through an access panel in the utility room, they eased another door open to a tidy kitchen with a single nightlight illuminating a couple of old appliances on

a counter. Catching no signs of a nanny, Bolcan followed Dedrick down a hallway that ended at a large dark bedroom.

A hint of antiseptic and ammonia carried on the sleepy air. A tiny green light over the bathroom gave form to the bunkbeds nearest it. And a tiny red dot over the nannies' bedroom illuminated a few posts of other bunkbeds, but darkness swallowed up the other rows of beds. A murmur came from one part of the room and raspy breathing from another.

A dull light appeared in Dedrick's hands. He gave the nightlight to Bolcan and pointed to the first aisle between beds. Then he pulled a gift from his bag and turned the opposite way, moving in the direction of the red and green lights.

After clipping the little light to his belt, Bolcan pulled a gift from his own canvas bag and stepped toward the first bed. Head of the bed? Foot of the bed? Remembering Dedrick's command to work quickly, he placed the gift at the foot of the top bed, placed another on the lower bed, and zipped to the next bunk while reaching for two more gifts. Moving from bunk to bunk, the rubber soles of his shoes silent, his heart racing for fear of getting caught, he unloaded the canvas bag.

What if a nanny came out? What if a child awoke? Seeing a strange man in the dark, a kid might even scream.

Bolcan's heart beat harder. The nannies would rush into the room and they'd be caught. They'd be caught!

He'd be caught.

An image of Re-Ed flashed in his mind. Pushing it away, he focused on grabbing two more gifts and moving to the next bed.

As he turned the corner, he glimpsed Dedrick working on the last row. He wanted to finish before Dedrick did. But as his bag grew lighter, he had to reach deeper to retrieve the gifts.

Twisting toward the next bed and fumbling to grab a gift, the soft beam of his nightlight fell on the figure on the lower bunk, a seven- or eight-year-old boy who was sleeping with one arm over his head, the other straight out, and his blankets tangled around his legs.

Sadness teased Bolcan's heart. This boy should live free. They should all be free. The shoulder-length mane of pale locks and the boy's sprawled body reminded Bolcan of himself at that age. The way he thrashed around at night, he often lost his blankets by morning and awoke chilled to the bone.

Bolcan pulled the blankets up to the boy's chest and set the gift between the pillow and the headboard. Maybe the gift would still be on the bed in the morning.

A glimpse of Dedrick racing toward him snapped him from his thoughts.

"How many do you have left?" Dedrick whispered.

Bolcan reached into the bag and counted. "Eight."

"Good. I got these." Dedrick motioned to indicate the last row of bunks. "Set them on the dining room table and return to the utility room."

Anxious to get the job done now, Bolcan practically jogged down the hall, attentive to the sound of his rubber

soles on the tile floor and to the mad thumping of his heart, aware that they could be caught at any second. He passed the kitchen and turned the corner too quickly.

Eyes snapping open wide, heart ready to explode, one shoe squeaking, he came to a full stop.

Someone else stood in the room.

A young woman in a long sleep shirt and loose pants had come through a dimly-lit doorway on the opposite wall. One of the nannies. She jerked back, her mouth falling open, light from a nearby nightlight revealing fear in her eyes. Then her gaze lifted to Bolcan's sily red hat.

A long table stood between them. She could easily turn back the way she had come. He could not allow her to do that. She'd call for help.

Grasping the bag to keep it from slipping from his hand, he rushed toward her. He could not allow her to scream and draw attention. He had to stop her. He could not get caught. Could not return to Re-Ed.

She stood frozen in place, staring at him through wide eyes.

As Bolcan moved around the table, his thoughts returned to the sleeper hold he'd tried to use on Dedrick. "Don't make a sound," he whispered, conveying a threat with his tone and eyes. Could he grab her around the neck and cover her mouth at the same time?

Her head shook and her mouth moved, but no words came out at first. "Who . . . are you?" she finally said, wrapping her arms around her waist. "Why are you here?"

A breath away from lunging at her, Dedrick's words shouted in his head. *We come to serve Aldonians*. The verse on the bookmark followed.

*Though Jesus was in the form of God,
He did not count equality with God
something to be grasped at;
rather He emptied Himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in the likeness of men.*

A wave of something unearthly washed over him at those words. Profound truth zipped through his mind. God who made heaven and earth, the All Powerful, who could do all things, humbled Himself, abased Himself, emptied Himself, becoming like one of His creatures. Taking the form of a slave . . . of a baby . . . of a tiny, circle-shaped bread.

God did that.

Who was Bolcan to behave with such pride? Maybe he wanted to join the Mosheh for all the wrong reasons. He did not see himself as a servant. Whenever he trained—especially with Dedrick—he wanted to prove that he was not just capable, but better. He couldn't even go on this little mission without challenging Dedrick to a fight. He knew everything. He could do everything. On his own. Dedrick had tried to explain it to him: humility was needed to be Mosheh, humility that imitated their God. To save, He served.

Bolcan stopped an arm's-length away from the nanny and fell to one knee. "I-I come as a servant. Don't be afraid."

She shook her head again, confusion in her eyes. “A servant? What?”

He pushed a damp lock of hair from his forehead and considered how to explain. “I’m sure you’ve heard others speak of receiving gifts on one special night.”

“Oh . . . yes, I-I thought that was just made up. A silly rumor.”

Despite the slight trembling in his body, Bolcan pushed his fear back and smiled, wanting to gain her trust. He could do this. “It’s real. This is the night and that’s why I’m here.” He stuffed his hand in the bag and withdrew a gift. “See? This is for you. But it’s my mission to deliver these without being caught.” Peering up at her, he gave her a flirtatious grin. “Looks like I blew that.”

Fear left her expression, she released her tense hold on her abdomen, swung her hands to her sides, and smiled. “Oh, wow,” she whispered, sounding awestruck. “Thank you.”

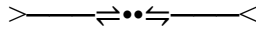
Then she bounced on her toes and pointed over her shoulder. “I’m going back to bed.” She gave him one last smile, the pink in her cheeks visible even with the scant light, and she dashed from the room.

Bolcan exhaled and doubled over, slapping his palms to the floor as the trembling seized him. He didn’t move for a moment, not sure what had just happened to him.

A swishing sound came from behind, then Dedrick’s whispered voice. “Bolcan, you okay?” He grabbed Bolcan’s arm and tugged, helping him up.

Bolcan looked at the bag with the remaining gifts and froze.

Dedrick whipped the last gifts out and set them on the table. “We gotta go.” Clutching the empty bag with one hand, he wrapped an arm around Bolcan’s shoulders and forced him to move.



Some time later, Bolcan sat leaning against the cold wall of a dark tunnel, Dedrick at his side, the details of how he got there a bit blurry. His heart had calmed completely, and his sweaty neck gave him a chill. What had happened to him? Must’ve been one of his panic attacks.

He didn’t want to see the look in Dedrick’s eyes. Though he still had nightmares, he hadn’t had an attack like this in months. Maybe even over a year. Would it disqualify him from performing rescue missions?

Dedrick’s head turned, no look of condemnation in his eyes. “Well?” Sitting with his legs stretched out before him, he took a deep breath and rubbed his thighs. “We ready to get going?”

Bolcan climbed to his feet, his strength and mind restored.

Dedrick handed him the empty canvas sack. “You can carry this one. I’ve got the other.” He tapped his jacket pocket and grinned.

They walked side by side through one dark tunnel and another to the pick-up point, Bolcan ready for the lecture that never came.

Dedrick talked on and on about his family Christmas traditions back home—wherever that was. They decorated

pine trees, baked special cookies, attended midnight Mass, and exchanged gifts in the morning. He said nothing about Bolcan's panic attack or the success or failure of the mission.

Did it matter that the nanny had seen him? Dedrick likely realized it. Maybe he'd even seen Bolcan on his knee before her. What would Dedrick have done in that situation?

The tunnel kart came into view, and the cheerful voices of the other young Mosheh members telling tales of the night carried through the cold, dark tunnels.

Compelled to know the answer, Bolcan whacked Dedrick's arm to stop him.

Dedrick checked his TekBand then gave Bolcan his full attention.

He struggled for a second with whether he should bring it up at all, but then the words tumbled out. "Do you know a nanny caught me?"

"Yeah." Dedrick looked unfazed.

"You told me to let you handle it but . . . well, you were in the other room."

"No, actually, I was a few seconds behind you."

"Oh." Bolcan averted his gaze, embarrassed at the thought of Dedrick seeing the whole thing, but then curious. "Why didn't you intervene? My first impulse was to use a sleeper hold. On the girl."

A smile flickered on Dedrick's face then faded. "That would not have been a good idea."

"How would you have handled it?"

The smile returned. “I like what you did. It was very humble.” He cupped Bolcan’s shoulder and proceeded toward the tunnel kart.

~ ~ ~

Early the next morning at the Mosheh Control Center, having caught only a few restless hours of sleep after the night’s adventure, Bolcan stood with other young Mosheh members, watching an array of surveillance videos, the live feed coming from the government’s intrusive Citizen Safety Station.

Children in primary and secondary facilities sat on each other’s beds and in groups in the bedrooms, appreciating their gifts. The nannies, who normally clung to the schedule, let the children have their fun while they marveled at their own little gifts.

Bolcan spotted the nanny from last night. Her smile was bigger than the others, but then, she alone had seen one of the mysterious deliverers of these gifts.

The rest of the Mosheh reported no incident. They’d crept into factories, grocery stores, government buildings, and the hospital, delivering gifts undetected. A few brave souls had even delivered gifts to the Citizen Safety Station for the workers who supposedly watched Aldonia day and night.

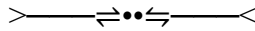
As Bolcan gazed at the monitors, the verse on the bookmark played in his mind, comforting him, challenging him, striking him somewhere so deep that he knew he would never be the same.

*Though Jesus was in the form of God,
He did not count equality with God*

*something to be grasped at;
rather He emptied Himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in the likeness of men.*

He could not comprehend such a humble act from the Almighty One. And he had to admit that Dedrick had something of that humility too, despite his over cautiousness and inflexibility with rules. Now Bolcan hungered for more of the traditions and gifts and the faith that the colonists had, the faith that allowed them to be both free and servant at the same time.

In imitation of their God.



If you'd like to know more about Ddedrick, Bolcan, the underground Mosheh, and the dystopian world these characters live in, check out the Chasing Liberty trilogy. You'll meet Liberty, a young Aldonian woman who desperately wants to avoid her government-assigned vocation. She has two weeks to escape but little hope of success until she encounters the secret group you met in this short story. You can also read "Bound to Find Freedom," another short story prequel to the trilogy. It is available for free at www.SilverFirePublishing.com and www.CatholicTeenBooks.com