

THE GIVER



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Seven

NOW JONAS'S GROUP had taken a new place in the Auditorium, trading with the new Elevens, so that they sat in the very front, immediately before the stage. They were arranged by their original numbers, the numbers they had been given at birth. The numbers were rarely used after the Naming. But each child knew his number, of course. Sometimes parents used them in irritation at a child's misbehavior, indicating that mischief made one unworthy of a name. Jonas always chuckled when he heard a parent, exasperated, call sharply to a whining toddler, "That's *enough*, Twenty-three!"

Jonas was Nineteen. He had been the nineteenth newchild born his year. It had meant that at his Naming, he had been already standing and bright-eyed, soon to walk and talk. It had given him a slight advantage the first year or two, a little more maturity than many of his groupmates who had been born in the later months of that year. But it evened out, as it always did, by Three. After Three, the children progressed at much the same level, though by their first number one could always tell who was a few months older than others in his group. Technically, Jonas's full number was Eleven-nineteen, since there were other Nineteens, of course, in each age group. And today, now that the new Elevens had been advanced this morning, there were *two* Eleven-nineteens. At the midday break he had exchanged smiles with the new one, a shy female named Harriet.

But the duplication was only for these few hours. Very soon he would not be an Eleven but a Twelve, and age would no longer matter. He would be an adult, like his parents, though a new one and untrained still.

Asher was Four, and sat now in the row ahead of Jonas. He would receive his Assignment fourth.

Fiona, Eighteen, was on his left; on his other side sat Twenty, a male named Pierre whom Jonas didn't like much. Pierre was very serious, not much fun, and a worrier and tattletale, too. "Have you checked the rules, Jonas?" Pierre was always whispering solemnly. "I'm not sure that's within the rules." Usually it was some foolish thing that no one cared about—opening his tunic if it was a day with a breeze; taking a brief try on a friend's bicycle, just to experience the different feel of it.

The initial speech at the Ceremony of Twelve was made by the Chief Elder, the leader of the community who was elected every ten years. The speech was much the same each year: recollection of the time of childhood and the period of preparation, the coming responsibilities of adult life, the profound importance of Assignment, the seriousness of training to come. Then the Chief Elder moved ahead in her speech.

"This is the time," she began, looking directly at them, "when we acknowledge differences. You Elevens have spent all your years till now learning to fit in, to standardize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group.

"But today we honor your differences. They have determined your futures." She began to describe this year's group and its variety of personalities, though she singled no one out by name. She mentioned that there was one who had singular skills at caretaking, another who loved newchildren, one with unusual scientific aptitude, and a fourth for whom physical labor was an obvious pleasure. Jonas shifted in his seat, trying to recognize each reference as one of his groupmates. The caretaking skills were no doubt those of Fiona, on his left; he remembered noticing the tenderness with which she had bathed the Old. Probably the one with scientific aptitude was

Benjamin, the male who had devised new, important equipment for the
Rehabilitation Center.

He heard nothing that he recognized as himself, Jonas. Finally the Chief Elder
paid tribute to the hard work of her committee, which had performed the
observations so meticulously all year. The Committee of Elders stood and
was acknowledged by
applause. Jonas noticed Asher yawn slightly, covering his mouth politely
with his hand.

Then, at last, the Chief Elder called number One to the stage, and the
Assignments began.

Each announcement was lengthy, accompanied by a speech directed at the
new Twelve. Jonas tried
to pay attention as One, smiling happily, received her Assignment as Fish
Hatchery Attendant along
with words of praise for her childhood spent doing many volunteer hours
there, and her obvious
interest in the important process of providing nourishment for the
community.

Number One—her name was Madeline—returned, finally, amidst applause,
to her seat, wearing the
new badge that designated her Fish Hatchery Attendant. Jonas was certainly
glad that *that* Assignment
was taken; he wouldn't have wanted it. But he gave Madeline a smile of
congratulation.

When Two, a female named Inger, received her Assignment as Birthmother,
Jonas remembered that
his mother had called it a job without honor. But he thought that the
Committee had chosen well. Inger
was a nice girl though somewhat lazy, and her body was strong. She would
enjoy the three years of
being pampered that would follow her brief training; she would give birth
easily and well; and the
task of Laborer that would follow would use her strength, keep her healthy,
and impose self
discipline. Inger was smiling when she resumed her seat. Birthmother was an
important job, if lacking
in prestige.

Jonas noticed that Asher looked nervous. He kept turning his head and glancing back at Jonas until the group leader had to give him a silent chastisement, a motion to sit still and face forward.

Three, Isaac, was given an Assignment as Instructor of Sixes, which obviously pleased him and was well deserved. Now there were three Assignments gone, none of them ones that Jonas would have liked—not that he could have been a Birthmother, anyway, he realized with amusement. He tried to sort through the list in his mind, the possible Assignments that remained.

But there were so many he gave it up; and anyway, now it was Asher's turn. He paid strict attention as his friend went to the stage and stood self-consciously beside the Chief Elder.

"All of us in the community know and enjoy Asher," the Chief Elder began.

Asher grinned and scratched one leg with the other foot. The audience chuckled softly. "When the committee began to consider Asher's Assignment," she went on, "there were some possibilities that were immediately discarded. Some that would clearly not have been right for Asher.

"For example," she said, smiling, "we did not consider for an instant designating Asher an Instructor of Threes."

The audience howled with laughter. Asher laughed, too, looking sheepish but pleased at the special

attention. The Instructors of Threes were in charge of the acquisition of correct language.

"In fact," the Chief Elder continued, chuckling a little herself, "we even gave a little thought to

some retroactive chastisement for the one who had been *Asher*

,

s Instructor of Threes so long ago. At the meeting where Asher was discussed, we retold many of the stories that we all remembered from his days of language acquisition.

“Especially,” she said, chuckling, “the difference between snack and smack.
Remember, Asher?”

Asher nodded ruefully, and the audience laughed aloud. Jonas did, too. He
remembered, though he

had been only a Three at the time himself.

The punishment used for small children was a regulated system of smacks
with the discipline

wand: a thin, flexible weapon that stung painfully when it was wielded. The
Childcare specialists

were trained very carefully in the discipline methods: a quick smack across
the hands for a bit of

minor misbehavior; three sharper smacks on the bare legs for a second
offense. Poor Asher, who always talked too fast and mixed up words, even as
a toddler. As a Three, eager

for his juice and crackers at snacktime, he one day said “smack” instead of
“snack” as he stood

waiting in line for the morning treat.

Jonas remembered it clearly. He could still see little Asher, wiggling with
impatience in the line.

He remembered the cheerful voice call out, “I want my smack!”

The other Threes, including Jonas, had laughed nervously. “Snack!” they
corrected. “You meant

snack, Asher!” But the mistake had been made. And precision of language
was one of the most

important tasks of small children. Asher had asked for a smack.

The discipline wand, in the hand of the Childcare worker, whistled as it came
down across

Asher’s hands. Asher whimpered, cringed, and corrected himself instantly.

“Snack,” he whispered.

But the next morning he had done it again. And again the following week. He
couldn’t seem to stop,

though for each lapse the discipline wand came again, escalating to a series
of painful lashes that left

marks on Asher’s legs. Eventually, for a period of time, Asher stopped
talking altogether, when he

was a Three.

“For a while,” the Chief Elder said, relating the story, “we had a silent Asher!
But he learned.”

She turned to him with a smile. “When he began to talk again, it was with
greater precision. And
now his lapses are very few. His corrections and apologies are very prompt.
And his good humor is
unfailing.” The audience murmured in agreement. Asher’s cheerful
disposition was well-known
throughout the community.

“Asher.” She lifted her voice to make the official announcement. “We have
given you the

Assignment of Assistant Director of Recreation.”

She clipped on his new badge as he stood beside her, beaming. Then he
turned and left the stage as
the audience cheered. When he had taken his seat again, the Chief Elder
looked down at him and said

the words that she had said now four times, and would say to each new
Twelve. Somehow she gave it
special meaning for each of them.

“Asher,” she said, “thank you for your childhood.”

The Assignments continued, and Jonas watched and listened, relieved now by
the wonderful

Assignment his best friend had been given. But he was more and more
apprehensive as his own
approached. Now the new Twelves in the row ahead had all received their
badges. They were
fingering them as they sat, and Jonas knew that each one was thinking about
the training that lay ahead.

For some—one studious male had been selected as Doctor, a female as
Engineer, and another for Law
and Justice—it would be years of hard work and study. Others, like Laborers
and Birthmothers,
would have a much shorter training period.

Eighteen, Fiona, on his left, was called. Jonas knew she must be nervous, but
Fiona was a calm

female. She had been sitting quietly, serenely, throughout the Ceremony.

Even the applause, though enthusiastic, seemed serene when Fiona was given
the important
Assignment of Caretaker of the Old. It was perfect for such a sensitive, gentle
girl, and her smile was
satisfied and pleased when she took her seat beside him again.
Jonas prepared himself to walk to the stage when the applause ended and the
Chief Elder picked up
the next folder and looked down to the group to call forward the next new
Twelve. He was calm now
that his turn had come. He took a deep breath and smoothed his hair with his
hand.

“Twenty,” he heard her voice say clearly. “Pierre.”
She skipped me, Jonas thought, stunned. Had he heard wrong? No. There was
a sudden hush in the
crowd, and he knew that the entire community realized that the Chief Elder
had moved from Eighteen to Twenty, leaving a gap. On his right, Pierre, with
a startled look, rose from his seat and moved to
the stage.

A mistake. She made a mistake. But Jonas knew, even as he had the thought,
that she hadn’t. The

Chief Elder made no mistakes. Not at the Ceremony of Twelve.
He felt dizzy, and couldn’t focus his attention. He didn’t hear what
Assignment Pierre received, and
was only dimly aware of the applause as the boy returned, wearing his new
badge. Then: Twenty-one.
Twenty-two.

The numbers continued in order. Jonas sat, dazed, as they moved into the
Thirties and then the
Forties, nearing the end. Each time, at each announcement, his heart jumped
for a moment, and he
thought wild thoughts. Perhaps now she would call his name. Could he have
forgotten his own
number? No. He had always been Nineteen. He was sitting in the seat marked
Nineteen.

But she had *skipped* him. He saw the others in his group glance at him,
embarrassed, and then avert
their eyes quickly. He saw a worried look on the face of his group leader.

He hunched his shoulders and tried to make himself smaller in the seat. He
wanted to disappear, to
fade away, not to exist. He didn't dare to turn and find his parents in the
crowd. He couldn't bear to
see their faces darkened with shame.
Jonas bowed his head and searched through his mind. *What had he done
wrong?*