

# THE GIVER



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## Four

JONAS RODE AT a leisurely pace, glancing at the bikeports beside the buildings  
to see if he could spot  
Asher's. He didn't often do his volunteer hours with his friend because Asher  
frequently fooled  
around and made serious work a little difficult. But now, with Twelve  
coming so soon and the  
volunteer hours ending, it didn't seem to matter.  
The freedom to choose where to spend those hours had always seemed a  
wonderful luxury to  
Jonas; other hours of the day were so carefully regulated.  
He remembered when he had become an Eight, as Lily would do shortly, and  
had been faced with  
that freedom of choice. The Eights always set out on their first volunteer hour  
a little nervously,  
giggling and staying in groups of friends. They almost invariably did their  
hours on Recreation Duty  
first, helping with the younger ones in a place where they still felt  
comfortable. But with guidance, as  
they developed self-confidence and maturity, they moved on to other jobs,  
gravitating toward those  
that would suit their own interests and skills.  
A male Eleven named Benjamin had done his entire nearly-Four years in the  
Rehabilitation Center,  
working with citizens who had been injured. It was rumored that he was as  
skilled now as the  
Rehabilitation Directors themselves, and that he had even developed some  
machines and methods to  
hasten rehabilitation. There was no doubt that Benjamin would receive his  
Assignment to that field  
and would probably be permitted to bypass most of the training.  
Jonas was impressed by the things Benjamin had achieved. He knew him, of  
course, since they had  
always been groupmates, but they had never talked about the boy's  
accomplishments because such a

conversation would have been awkward for Benjamin. There was never any comfortable way to mention or discuss one's successes without breaking the rule against bragging, even if one didn't mean to. It was a minor rule, rather like rudeness, punishable only by gentle chastisement. But still.

Better to steer clear of an occasion governed by a rule which would be so easy to break.

The area of dwellings behind him, Jonas rode past the community structures, hoping to spot

Asher's bicycle parked beside one of the small factories or office buildings.

He passed the Childcare Center where Lily stayed after school, and the play areas surrounding it. He rode through the Central

Plaza and the large Auditorium where public meetings were held. Jonas slowed and looked at the nametags on the bicycles lined up outside the Nurturing Center.

Then he checked those outside Food Distribution; it was always fun to help with the deliveries, and he hoped he would find his friend there so that they could go together on the daily rounds, carrying the cartons of supplies into the dwellings of the community. But he finally found Asher's bicycle—

leaning, as usual, instead of upright in its port, as it should have been—at the House of the Old.

There was only one other child's bicycle there, that of a female Eleven named Fiona. Jonas liked Fiona. She was a good student, quiet and polite, but she had a sense of fun as well, and it didn't

surprise him that she was working with Asher today. He parked his bicycle neatly in the port beside theirs and entered the building.

"Hello, Jonas," the attendant at the front desk said. She handed him the sign-up sheet and stamped her own official seal beside his signature. All of his volunteer hours would be carefully tabulated at

the Hall of Open Records. Once, long ago, it was whispered among the children, an Eleven had arrived at the Ceremony of Twelve only to hear a public announcement that he had not completed the required number of volunteer hours and would not, therefore, be given his Assignment. He had been permitted an additional month in which to complete the hours, and then given his Assignment privately, with no applause, no celebration: a disgrace that had clouded his entire future.

“It’s good to have some volunteers here today,” the attendant told him. “We celebrated a release this morning, and that always throws the schedule off a little, so things get backed up.” She looked at a printed sheet. “Let’s see. Asher and Fiona are helping in the bathing room. Why don’t you join them there? You know where it is, don’t you?”

Jonas nodded, thanked her, and walked down the long hallway. He glanced into the rooms on either side. The Old were sitting quietly, some visiting and talking with one another, others doing handwork and simple crafts. A few were asleep. Each room was comfortably furnished, the floors covered with thick carpeting. It was a serene and slow-paced place, unlike the busy centers of manufacture and distribution where the daily work of the community occurred. Jonas was glad that he had, over the years, chosen to do his hours in a variety of places so that he could experience the differences. He realized, though, that not focusing on one area meant he was left with not the slightest idea—not even a *guess*—of what his Assignment would be.

He laughed softly. Thinking about the Ceremony again, Jonas? he teased himself. But he suspected that with the date so near, probably all of his friends were, too. He passed a Caretaker walking slowly with one of the Old in the hall. “Hello, Jonas,” the young

uniformed man said, smiling pleasantly. The woman beside him, whose arm  
he held, was hunched  
over as she shuffled along in her soft slippers. She looked toward Jonas and  
smiled, but her dark eyes  
were clouded and blank. He realized she was blind.  
He entered the bathing room with its warm moist air and scent of cleansing  
lotions. He removed his  
tunic, hung it carefully on a wall hook, and put on the volunteer's smock that  
was folded on a shelf.

"Hi, Jonas!" Asher called from the corner where he was kneeling beside a  
tub. Jonas saw Fiona  
nearby, at a different tub. She looked up and smiled at him, but she was busy,  
gently washing a man  
who lay in the warm water.

Jonas greeted them and the caretaking attendants at work nearby. Then he  
went to the row of  
padded lounging chairs where others of the Old were waiting. He had worked  
here before; he knew  
what to do.

"Your turn, Larissa," he said, reading the nametag on the woman's robe. "I'll  
just start the water  
and then help you up." He pressed the button on a nearby empty tub and  
watched as the warm water  
flowed in through the many small openings on the sides. The tub would be  
filled in a minute and the  
water flow would stop automatically.

He helped the woman from the chair, led her to the tub, removed her robe,  
and steadied her with  
his hand on her arm as she stepped in and lowered herself. She leaned back  
and sighed with pleasure,  
her head on a soft cushioned headrest.

"Comfortable?" he asked, and she nodded, her eyes closed. Jonas squeezed  
cleansing lotion onto

the clean sponge at the edge of the tub and began to wash her frail body.  
Last night he had watched as his father bathed the newchild. This was much  
the same: the fragile

skin, the soothing water, the gentle motion of his hand, slippery with soap.  
The relaxed, peaceful  
smile on the woman's face reminded him of Gabriel being bathed.  
And the nakedness, too. It was against the rules for children or adults to look  
at another's  
nakedness; but the rule did not apply to newchildren or the Old. Jonas was  
glad. It was a nuisance to  
keep oneself covered while changing for games, and the required apology if  
one had by mistake  
glimpsed another's body was always awkward. He couldn't see why it was  
necessary. He liked the feeling of safety here in this warm and quiet room; he  
liked the expression of trust on the woman's  
face as she lay in the water unprotected, exposed, and free.  
From the corner of his eye he could see his friend Fiona help the old man  
from the tub and tenderly  
pat his thin, naked body dry with an absorbent cloth. She helped him into his  
robe.  
Jonas thought Larissa had drifted into sleep, as the Old often did, and he was  
careful to keep his  
motions steady and gentle so he wouldn't wake her. He was surprised when  
she spoke, her eyes still  
closed.  
"This morning we celebrated the release of Roberto," she told him. "It was  
wonderful."  
"I knew Roberto!" Jonas said. "I helped with his feeding the last time I was  
here, just a few weeks  
ago. He was a very interesting man."  
Larissa opened her eyes happily. "They told his whole life before they  
released him," she said.  
"They always do. But to be honest," she whispered with a mischievous look,  
"some of the tellings are  
a little boring. I've even seen some of the Old fall asleep during tellings—  
when they released Edna  
recently. Did you know Edna?"  
Jonas shook his head. He couldn't recall anyone named Edna.  
"Well, they tried to make her life sound meaningful. And of course," she  
added primly, "all lives

*are* meaningful, I don't mean that they aren't. But *Edna*. My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in Food Production for years, until she came here. She never even had a family unit."

Larissa lifted her head and looked around to make sure no one else was listening. Then she confided, "I don't think Edna was very smart." Jonas laughed. He rinsed her left arm, laid it back into the water, and began to wash her feet. She murmured with pleasure as he massaged her feet with the sponge. "But Roberto's life was wonderful," Larissa went on, after a moment. "He had been an Instructor of Elevens—you know how important that is—and he'd been on the Planning Committee. And—goodness, I don't know how he found the time—he also raised two very successful children, and he was *also* the one who did the landscaping design for the Central Plaza. He didn't do the actual labor, of course."

"Now your back. Lean forward and I'll help you sit up." Jonas put his arm around her and supported her as she sat. He squeezed the sponge against her back and began to rub her sharp-boned shoulders. "Tell me about the celebration."

"Well, there was the telling of his life. That is always first. Then the toast. We all raised our glasses and cheered. We chanted the anthem. He made a lovely good-bye speech. And several of us made little speeches wishing him well. I didn't, though. I've never been fond of public speaking."

"He was thrilled. You should have seen the look on his face when they let him go." Jonas slowed the strokes of his hand on her back thoughtfully. "Larissa," he asked, "what happens when they make the actual release? Where exactly did Roberto go?" She lifted her bare wet shoulders in a small shrug. "I don't know. I don't think anybody does,"

except the committee. He just bowed to all of us and then walked, like they  
all do, through the special  
door in the Releasing Room. But you should have seen his look. Pure  
happiness, I'd call it."

Jonas grinned. "I wish I'd been there to see it."

Larissa frowned. "I don't know why they don't let children come. Not  
enough room, I guess. They  
should enlarge the Releasing Room."

"We'll have to suggest that to the committee. Maybe they'd study it," Jonas  
said slyly, and Larissa  
chortled with laughter.

"*Right!*" she hooted, and Jonas helped her from the tub. his pale, solemn,  
knowing eyes.