

***Giò dente di ferro / Giò Iron Teeth***

by

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*English translation by Stefano Bortolussi*

## CHAPTER 1

“Sit down and eat, but do not litter.” The voice of the teacher rose above the kids’ cheers as they scattered on the lawn of the Archaeological Park and began opening their backpacks.

“Hey, Giò Iron Teeth, what did your mother give you for a snack? A bolt sandwich?”

Giovanni had recently started to wear braces on his teeth. “Everyone wears it at your age,” his dentist had told him; in his class, though, he was the only one, and seeing him appear with that glow of steel in his mouth Tommaso, the group’s bully, had immediately nicknamed him Giò Iron Teeth.

When his classmate called him that and the others laughed, he felt as if someone had thrown a rock at his back. He wanted to become as small as a mouse, hide in a hole and never come back out.

In his mind, he had created at least ten nicknames for Tommaso: Cauliflower Ears, for example, since he had large protruding ears with curly edges. Or Goat Poop Eyes, for his little eyes were precisely like that: small, round and black. Or yet again, Tommy Rotten Feet, given that when he changed his shoes to play basketball, his feet stank worse than gorgonzola. He felt a choking rage deep inside him; but it seemed to him that reacting would make everything bigger. As big as a boulder that would crush him. Tommaso was much taller than him, and how could he face a guy like that if all had ended in a fight? He had been suffering his taunts since first grade. On top of that, he was always accompanied by two minions who laughed at everything he did.

So today, as any other day, Giò pretended not to hear.

He sat on the grass and looked for a snack in the outside pocket of his backpack, but found it empty. Instead of the yellow pizza bag, there was a sheet folded in four. Giò was dumbfounded for a moment. Was it possible that he had forgotten his snack at home? And above all, where did that paper come from?

He opened it. At the center of the page was a drawing of a red heart pierced by an arrow and a name written with colored markers: “Viola.”

His heart, the real one, began to beat as if a herd of horses was galloping inside him. He had been in love with Viola since first grade, but in five years of school he

had never found the courage to tell her.

And yet, their mothers were friends.

And yet, he had gone to all her birthday parties.

And yet, she always cheered for him when he played five-a-side football.

And yet... and yet... nothing.

Whenever she looked at him with her sun-specked golden eyes, he felt as if a hand was squeezing his stomach and making his tongue stick to his palate.

Now he turned furtively toward the little girl, who was having a snack nearby with two of her girlfriends. They seemed to giggle as they watched him.

He looked back at the drawing.

He had to find the courage to answer her. Right, but how? With a text on her phone?

No.

If she had written him a note, it meant she wanted an answer on paper. One that did not disappear, that existed forever, that could be kept in a diary or hidden in a secret place. He was so happy that he could have started doing somersaults right there on that lawn. He realized that he was smiling to himself.

He tore a sheet from his notebook and concentrated. He was good at drawing. He drew himself first, smiling, with no braces. He chose a beautiful yellow for his straw-colored hair and a beautiful blue for the eyes. He looked at the result, satisfied.

*I look better here than in person*, he thought.

Then he drew Viola, with those long curls he liked so much. And finally, above them, holding hands, he drew a comics balloon, and inside it he wrote: "Forever."

He signed with his full name: "Giovanni."

Having done that, he got up and went to the drinking fountain. He wasn't really thirsty, but this way he got very close to the little group of girls. Then he passed by Viola, accidentally on purpose, dropped the note inside her open backpack and retreated. His knees felt soft, and he was out of breath as if he'd run a marathon.

*Now she'll read it! Now she'll read it! Now she'll read it!*

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Viola's best friend plunge her hand into the backpack and retrieve the message.

No! No! No! She had no right to do that!

But the girl waved her trophy and read it aloud. "*Forever!* Hey, Viola, you've got yourself a boyfriend. *Giò Iron Teeth loves you. He loves you forever!*"

The other girlfriend triumphantly produced a yellow paper bag. Giò's eyes widened in surprise: it was his snack! "Good pizza, Giò," she said, biting off a piece of it.

The two girls started laughing, passing the note back and forth. Viola snatched it from their hands, read it and turned abruptly away. She had turned redder than her hair, and her eyes sparkled. She opened his mouth, but no sound came out of it. She crumpled the piece of paper and threw it in the grass, then she got up and ran towards the teacher, who had begun to gather everyone.

"Hurry up, kids, I'm afraid it will rain very soon. Recover all your bags and cans. You are not to leave a single crumb on the ground. Have I made myself clear? Follow me and our guide."

Giò was crushed. He felt like he was seeing everything through a fog, and did not immediately understand that it was caused by his tears. He mechanically picked up the crumpled piece of paper that Viola had thrown at him, put it in his pocket and crouched behind a tree. All we needed was for them to see him cry.

His classmates were moving away, as their guide explained in a resounding voice: "The rock carvings on the large sandstone rocks you see on your left date back to the Upper Paleolithic, and thirty thousand years ago the cave we are going to visit was inhabited by Cro-Magnons. Do not touch the rocks, do not climb on them, do not..."

A powerful thunder covered the man's last words. Now the sky was overcast with huge, low gray clouds.

His arms crossed over his knees, his head resting on top of them, Giò did not move until his last classmate disappeared behind the curve of the path.

What did outrage taste like? Did it have the acidic flavor of the saliva he felt in his mouth? Because he was angry. No, more than angry. He was furious. He gritted his teeth so hard he almost felt the braces boring into his gums.

He hadn't asked for it. It wasn't him the one who sent a pierced heart. He hadn't sought out Viola during their outing. He hadn't done anything.

Large raindrops began to fall, and Giò heard his classmates laughing as they sought refuge from the downpour.

He did not move. He let the rain stream down on him. Then, suddenly, as if seized by a sudden fury, he took off his shoes and socks and climbed barefoot the

great engraved rock. He slipped, held on and kept climbing while the pouring rain drenched his hair and trickled down his shirt collar.

Finally he reached the top. He stood up, raised his arms to the sky and screamed at the top of his lungs, with all the anger he had inside him, with all the despair he had in his body, into the summer storm that shook the trees around him.

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!”

Lightning flashed in the sky and crashed stunningly close to him, and Giò passed out.

## CHAPTER 2

Suddenly the storm abated, as is often the case with summer squalls.

Giò felt the cold rock against his back. He opened his eyes and cautiously touched the bump on the back of his head. What a blow!

The sun barely made its way through the canopy of trees.

Had he fainted? How much time had passed?

He looked around, puzzled. The vegetation surrounding him seemed to have grown vertiginously, forming a thick tangle of branches, vines and bushes. The landscape itself looked different. Luckily, except for the lump on his head, he didn't feel any other pain. He touched his chest to check for wounds... and discovered he was naked.

Or rather, almost naked. Not only did he no longer have a T-shirt on, but instead of jeans and underwear, he wore a strange little leather skirt reaching his knees. He looked at himself, bewildered. Someone had stolen his clothes, substituting it with this strange... thingy.

He hurried down from the rock to look for his backpack and shoes.

They were gone.

Yet he had left them down there, right before he climbed the boulder.

Surely this was one of Tommaso's practical jokes. Perhaps he had come back and, taking advantage of his unconscious state, he had stripped him and made him look foolish in front of everyone. This time, though, he would pay for it. Yes, he would pay dearly for it.

Except that for the time being, Giò was basically naked and had no idea what to do.

He hid behind a bush, pricking up his ears. Where had his classmates gone? Last thing he needed was for Viola to see him like that.

Hearing a rustling behind him, he whirled around. "Ahhh!" he screamed. Above him towered a giant with deep, sunken eyes under frowning eyebrows. A reddish beard covered his face and crept up until it joined his long, matted hair. Even his half-naked body was covered with bristly hair. The man – because he was certainly a man, albeit strange – kept staring at him, pointing with a long stick to which a chipped flint was tied.

"*Armalok!*" he shouted in a guttural voice.

Giò crawled back, looking around in terror. What was this guy doing there? Then he reasoned and laughed at his own fears. Of course: he must be an actor paid by the Archaeological Park. Like when he went to Disneyland with his parents and the cartoon characters walked around the attractions to be photographed with the children.

He observed the man carefully. Wow, the make-up people did a really good job on him. He was scary, alright.

“*Armalok*,” the man repeated, grinding his big yellowish teeth.

*They even invented a language*, thought Giò with a smile.

“I don’t know what *armalok* means, but I’m here with my class – fifth grade, section B. We came to visit the Archaeological Park. I was left behind, but I was about to join my classmates.”

He tried to move away, but the big man pushed him roughly against a tree. This actor was taking his part a bit too seriously.

“Hey, chill!” he protested. “I understand you must sound real, but how about taking it down a notch?”

The stranger gave him a baleful look and raised his spear as if to hit him. But before he could lower it, a wild-looking girl jumped between them and spoke rapidly to the man in an unknown language.

Giò gaped at her. She looked weird. She could not be described as beautiful, yet she had a resolute air about her. Her very long hair was roughly tied up in the back with a leather string. Her legs were covered with scratches, and she wore a kind of short tunic made with an animal skin.

The man raised his voice threateningly and lifted his spear again, ready to hurl it, but the girl clung to his arm until she forced him to lower it.

“These people are crazy,” Giò whispered to himself. He turned to the girl, who seemed to be the more sociable of the two. “Listen, tell this guy that he has to let me go. I’m on a school trip. My classmates are waiting for me...”

She gave him a curious look; then, instead of answering him, she cautiously approached and touched him with the tip of a stick, as if he were a dangerous animal.

“*Grakoi*,” she said. Was she a foreigner? Right, but what language was she speaking?

“*Grakoi!*” the girl repeated impatiently, nudging him again between his ribs.

“What do I know about *grakoi*?” Giò piquedly retorted. “I don’t speak foreign

tongues. And move that stick away, you're hurting me!" He grimaced in pain, and in doing so, he revealed the metallic glow of his braces.

The girl jumped at him and unceremoniously lifted his upper lip. She touched the steel thread, then she gave an astonished look to the big man, who was watching the scene with his arms folded on his chest.

"Hey, I'm not a dog!" Giò protested. "Keep those filthy fingers away from my teeth."

The big man, who until then had insouciantly watched the proceedings, suddenly grabbed him by his arms, roughly pulled him up and pushed him in front of him, urging him on with the point of his spear.

"*Nak!*"

Giò hesitated a moment. "Do you want me to walk? Alright then, I'll walk. As if I would try to contradict you. But I really wanna see how this masquerade will end," he grumbled. "Can I at least look for my shoes? Walking barefoot on these stones is really painful, you know?"

"*Nak!*" the man shouted again.

"Calm down, I got it. *Nak!* If you treat all your visitors this way, I'm afraid you'll lose a lot of customers."

They set off along a semi-hidden path that led through the thick vegetation. The girl walked fast ahead of him, while the big man closed the line.

Giò tried to keep up. As soon as he slowed down he felt the tip of the spear pricking his back, a threatening *Nak!* urging him to go on.

Now he was thoroughly disoriented. He remembered that when he was younger, in a tourist resort, they had organized a "tribal evening" and everyone had dressed up in straw skirts and eaten grilled sausages. Now that he thought about it, he wouldn't mind a sausage at all, given that Viola's girlfriend had devoured his snack.

They finally arrived at the mouth of a cave, and Giò stopped for a moment. He wondered if his classmates were already inside.

"*Nak!*" the man urged him on.

"Okay! Okay!" he grumbled, then he entered the cave.

Beyond the narrow opening there opened a large cave that seemed to go on and on, melting into the belly of the mountain. Its walls were black with smoke, and a large fire in the center was the only source of light.

Giò looked around, trying to get his eyes accustomed to the shadows, and gasped



in surprise. His friends were not there. Instead there were about twenty adults of different ages and as many children, summarily dressed with garments made with animal skins. As soon as the trio entered the cave, everyone interrupted whatever they were doing.

Then they gathered around Giò.

The girl spoke to the cave dwellers in her strange tongue, gesticulating with her arms, pointing at him and making him open his mouth and show the steel wire that bound his teeth for the great amusement of the younger children.

An old woman with a hooked nose approached him and touched his gums with a withered finger. Giò tried to dodge her, but it was no use.

Suddenly he lost his temper. This was no longer a joke. Even if it was a show put on by the Archaeological Park, it had already outstayed its welcome.

“Enough!” he shouted. “I want to go back to my classmates.”

A wary silence followed his words. The circle of strange cave dwellers tightened imperceptibly around him, and Giò felt a shiver run down his spine. Their eyes were no longer curious: they were attentive, in some cases even hostile.

And suddenly he understood. This was not a show.

Perhaps the lightning that had crashed on the painted rock had caused some sort of reaction.

Perhaps, as it happened in video games, he had fallen into a time hole. Maybe this was really the prehistoric world.

“What do I do now?”

### CHAPTER 3

Giò backed away towards the exit of the cave, but the strange girl who had led him there grabbed him by the arm and forced him to sit by the fire.

She had freckles on her nose and a wide-toothed smile. *She needs braces, too*, he thought.

“*Ka!*” she said, patting her chest. Then she pointed a finger at him and waited.

What was she asking? The girl repeated the gesture. “*Ka!*” What if Ka was her name? Giò thought. He might as well try to make friends, since she was the only person in that cave who wasn’t glaring at him.

He beat his chest like she did and said his name. “Giò.”

“Giò!” the little girl repeated.

He gave a furtive look around, trying to figure out where he was.

The cave was immense, its vaulted ceiling very high. Over the fire, the carcass of a big animal oozed fat on the embers, making them sizzle. The men approached it one after the other, tore off large slices of meat with a sharp flint and ate them. The women collected the bones, picked almost clean and thrown to the ground, and passed them on to the children, who gnawed eagerly at them.

Giò realized he was looking longingly at the food. Despite the absurdity of the situation, he was really hungry.

Ka, who had followed his gaze, handed him a piece of meat.

He turned it over in his hands doubtfully, then he found the courage to sink his teeth into it. It was tasteless and almost raw, and he couldn’t hide a grimace of disgust.

Then he noticed that a boy with oddly styled hair was looking at him with what looked like derision in his eyes. He was sitting on a log, and when Giò walked past him to find a place a little to the side, he tripped him up and sent him belly-up on the ground.

The boy recovered the haunch that had slipped from Giò’s fingers and bit into it with a snicker.

Picking himself up and still aching from the fall, Giò found himself facing Ka. She was offering him a large club.

“What should I do with this?” he asked.

She pushed him toward the boy who had tripped him.

Giò looked at her, astonished. Did she really expect him to pick a fight with someone he'd never seen before? Someone, moreover, who was bigger and stronger than him? He peered hopefully at the entrance to the cave, but realized that he could not escape.

Meanwhile the boy had armed himself with a big stick, and now he stood boldly before him, while all the others interrupted what they were doing to get closer.

It was an impossible challenge. Giò had never handled a club in his life.

The cave dwellers began to chant the name of their champion: "*Ulm! Ulm! Ulm!*"

"At least now I know your name is Ulm," Giò muttered.

The boy was skillfully passing his club from one hand to the other, pointing his piercing black eyes at him. He looked like a juggler.

Then he suddenly attacked. Giò had barely time to jump on a big rock before his rival's weapon fell on the exact spot where he was standing a second before. He knew immediately that, if he wanted to save his skin, all he could count on was his own agility.

He began to jump, backing away, dodging, lowering himself, twirling, trying his best to parry the other's blows.

The cave resounded with shouts of encouragement. The circle of onlookers left him no escape. He had to fight.

"*Ulm! Ulm! Ulm! Ulm!*"

The boy, who had expected to get rid of his opponent with just a couple of blows, followed Giò's feints and jumps with his gaze, trying to push him towards the rock so that he could no longer avoid him.

Giò stumbled and fell to the ground. As he desperately tried to get back on his feet, his rival advanced on him, grinning.

"*Ulm! Ulm! Ulm! Ulm!*" the others kept shouting.

Giò was starting to think he was toast when, in a moment of lucidity, he remembered the suggestion of his judo teacher. Whenever he complained about his own meagre physique, his *sensei* would tell him that in order to win you didn't need to be big and strong: all you had to do was use the adversary's strength and thrust in your favor.

So, when Ulm threw himself at him for the final blow, Giò used his instincts and tried a move he'd learned in the gym. He was the first to be amazed when he saw the boy fly over his head and fall heavily to the ground.

The incredulous silence that filled the cave was interrupted by Ka's cheery laugh, followed by a literal deluge of hilarity.

The only one who was not laughing was Ulm: he got up, shot Giò a baleful look and took refuge in a corner.

The girl recovered the leg of meat from the ground, but Giò chewed it half-heartedly.

The sun fell quickly and, with the coming of darkness, the cave was lit only by the glow of the fire. The man who had attacked Giò in the clearing tied his foot to a large trunk to prevent his escape.

That was a difficult night for Giò.

All the children slept close to their mothers like puppies. He was the only one left alone in a corner, curled up on a stinky animal pelt. The night was cold, much colder than it should have been in the middle of May.

The shadows cast by the embers on the walls looked like the dark shapes of scary monsters. From the outside came the noises of the night, so different from those Giò knew.

He was afraid.

What was in store for him? Thanks to the girl, today they had let him live. But what would happen next morning? He dared not close his eyes for fear that the boy who had challenged him would come back from the shadows.

Plus his parents must be so worried, not seeing him back home that evening. And he couldn't even warn them.

He regretted not having followed his classmates. Even Tommaso, in his memory, appeared like a friend.

And Viola?

"When I'll be dead, she'll regret teasing me!" he muttered to himself with a hint of satisfaction.

And he fell asleep nursing that thought.

## CHAPTER 4

The following morning Giò was awakened with a kick by one of the cave dwellers.

He opened his eyes, disoriented. It had been a troubled night for him, and for a moment he could not remember where he was.

The light of dawn barely seeped into the cave, yet everyone was already on the move. The women were reviving the fire, while the men had gone hunting.

Even the young males were arming themselves with short lances and sticks.

Passing him by, Ulm gave him a scornful look and spat at his feet.

“*Moi!*” he sneered.

“Luckily I don’t understand your language,” Giò muttered. “*Moi* is probably a dirty word.”

Ka approached him, then she untied the rope that held him to the trunk and handed him a big leaf with some sort of mash on it, gesturing for him to eat it.

Giò sniffed at it doubtfully. At least it didn’t smell bad. It did look as if it contained a few wriggling little worms, and looking at it Giò felt his stomach turn. But hunger would not listen to reason. He dipped his fingers into the gruel, closed his eyes and took a mouthful of it. He was surprised: incredible as it was, it was not disgusting. It was sweetish and, all in all, almost pleasant. Ka, for her part, greedily ate all the little worms that he had carefully discarded.

Giò was still curious about the meaning of “*moi*”, the word that Ulm had hissed at him.

“*Moi?*” he asked her.

She looked at him, surprised that he knew a word of her language. Then she pointed to a group of women in the corner, each of them busy pounding some roots between two stones.

“*Moi*”. She touched herself and repeated: “*Moi!*” Then she pointed at Giò and at the other males in the cave and said: “*Tui*”.

Giò laughed. “I got it! *Moi* is female, *tui* is male. So basically, Ulm called me a sissy! “

Ka touched his eyes, nose, mouth and hands, naming each body part in her language. Then she demanded that Giò tell her what they were called in his tongue.

At a certain point the women left the cave, gesturing for Giò to follow them. Many carried their small children tied on their backs and wrapped in animal skins.

Giò was disappointed in realizing that the way back to the Archaeological Park would not have been easy to find: the forest was very thick. Long vines hung from the branches of gigantic trees, on which perched birds he had never seen before. It was cold, and Giò shivered. He missed his clothes.

Ka taught him how to look for large caterpillars by digging into the ground, how to catch crickets and grasshoppers and store them inside the leather bag she carried over her shoulder and how to remove the bark from certain trees in search of larvae.

Giò touched those soggy bodies with disgust. He remembered that his teacher had explained that many people ate them because they were very nutritious.

“My dear larva, you can be nutritious all you want, but I’ll never eat you” he whispered.

The children climbed the highest branches of the trees in search of nests, stealing the eggs and then passing them along to the women.

They returned to the cave loaded with roots, firewood and fruits. Giò had to drag a sort of sled made of intertwined branches, carrying the largest trunks felled by the storm. Trudging behind the women, he cursed the steep slope. “Ugh! If only they had already invented the wheel...”

Back in the cave, he was offered the usual ground concoction of mysterious ingredients. This time it tasted good, almost like peanuts, and he licked his fingers. He pointed to it and gestured for Ka to tell him what the ingredient was. She grabbed a stick and drew something on the sand.

Giò almost choked. “Ants?!?”

She nodded and smiled.

He had eaten a grub made of ant eggs!

*I think I’ll throw up*, he thought. Yet the taste was pleasant.

Everything he saw around him was unusual. Some of the women pounded seeds with large stones. Even the children were busy carrying branches to the fire.

In one corner, the old woman with the hooked nose was scraping an animal skin, holding one of its ends in her teeth. Giò approached her, intrigued, and the woman, without saying a word, removed the skin from her mouth and put it in his hands, drool and all, gesturing for him to keep it taut. Giò grabbed it, grimacing in disgust, and did his best to help her in her strange endeavor.

The kids returned at sunset. Each one of them carried a small animal: a porcupine, a dormouse, a bird.

Ulm had caught a big badger, which he defiantly threw in front of Giò.

“*Moi!*” he said again before turning his back on him.

The men arrived when the sun had already set. They entered the cave shouting with joy. Four of them carried on their shoulders a long stick from which a giant stag was hanging.

The hunt had been good, but one of the men had sustained a large gash on his arm, and the wound wouldn't stop bleeding.

Muttering to herself, the old woman opened a leather bag and dabbed some red dust on the cut, and soon after that the blood stopped.

While they waited for the meat to cook, Ka drew her family on the sand. Giò discovered that his captor was the girl's father and that the old woman he had helped with the animal skin was her grandmother.

“And your mother?” he asked, pointing to the empty space she had left beside her on the drawing.

Ka shrugged, closed her eyes and flung herself backwards, as if simulating a death.

Giò gave her a pained look. He couldn't even conceive that his own mom could die.

Later, the men told the story of their difficult pursuit of the stag. One of them pretended to be the animal, placing a couple of branches in front on his forehead as if they were horns. Their gestures and signs were so effective that, even without understanding a word, Giò managed to follow the story.

Then it was Ka's father's turn to talk. Everyone started snickering, looking at Giò and slapping each other's back.

It didn't take long for Giò to glean that the man was describing his capture, and that the whimpering and trembling thing he was imitating was none other than him.

Ulm was the one who laughed loudest.

When her father was finished, Ka pushed Giò in the middle of the circle. What followed was the deep silence of anticipation.

Giò looked around, bewildered. What did they want? Ka gave him a curt nod. He had to do something. Anything.

But alas, his mind was totally empty. Even at school he'd always try to shirk the

performances, let alone open his mouth in front of a tribe of men from thirty thousand years ago who didn't understand a word of his language! He was terrified. He saw Ulm shooting him a look of derision, and it was all he could do not to burst into tears. He didn't want to stay here a minute longer. He wanted to leave, go back home to his family.

Then the memory of a lullaby that his mother used to sing to him as a child surged from the depths of his memory, as if to comfort him. Without even thinking, Giò began to sing it in a whisper. Gently, his voice trembling.

Men, women and children listened even if they did not understand a single word. They were enraptured.

When Giò's voice died down, the silence stretched a moment longer. Then a man began to stamp his feet on the ground, and all the others followed suit. They had liked his lullaby.

Ka smiled at him.

That night they did not tie him to the trunk. For a moment he thought he might try to slip out of the cave, but the world outside was rife with the threatening sounds of unknown beasts that made him tremble with fear. And even if he tried, he thought, he wouldn't be able to take more than four steps, because his feet hurt. He was not used to walking barefoot and the rocky ground had filled his soles with blisters and cuts.

Yet he had to find a way to get out of there. *But not tonight*, he thought. He was too sleepy.



## CHAPTER 5

The next day they woke him up at the break of dawn. The men had already left, and the kids were preparing their weapons for the hunt. Giò stood quietly aside, watching the scene and thinking that they would make him go to collect fruits and wood with the women like the day before. But Ka handed him a short spear with a chipped stone tip.

He looked at her, puzzled. “What should I do with this?”

She replied with a long, gesticulating speech, of which Giò understood basically nothing.

“Listen, it’s useless to explain. I didn’t catch a single word.”

Ka snatched the spear from his hand, impatient, and pretended to throw it. Then she brought her fingers to her mouth, as if she were eating. Finally she gave him back the weapon.

The message was clear: he was supposed to go with the other kids in search of food.

“I got it. You’re saying I should go hunting and bring you back a steak to eat. Well, I’m afraid you’ll have to start dieting.”

Ulm, who was preparing himself nearby, gave him a mocking look and started confabulating with his companions. The only word that Giò managed to understand was the usual *moi*.

The old woman he had helped treating the pelt put two hairy bundles in his hands, then pointed to his bare feet. She had made him footwear.

Giò put them on: they looked like two big socks with gut strings to fasten them around his calves. He tried to walk. They were soft and very comfortable.

He smiled at the woman, and she replied with a dismissive gesture of her hand.

Giò followed the group of kids. They walked along paths hidden among the bushes that he would never have found on his own.

He was the last one in line and, unlike the others who moved very quietly, he kept tripping over stones, breaking twigs, making so much noise at every step that everyone was giving him the stink eye. It was clear that they considered him a burden.

Every so often they stopped with no apparent reason, until suddenly one of them dove into the bushes to reappear a little later holding a small prey. Some of these

animals Giò had never seen in his life, not even in books or TV documentaries.

Whoever captured something went back to the end of the line.

They walked for hours, without ever stopping to eat or drink. The sun was already high in the sky, and each and every boy had his own haul: a small mammal, a rodent, a bird. Ulm had caught a large reptile and wrapped it around his neck like a scarf. Giò looked at him in horror. He was terrified of snakes.

He couldn't endure that forced march any longer. The undergrowth was full of biting insects, although it was a marvel of colors. There were bright-hued, fleshy flowers with leaves so large they looked like umbrellas. Spellbound, he observed a giant butterfly resting on a branch.

Then the kids stopped for the umpteenth time in front of a den hidden between the roots of a tree, and all their eyes focused on him.

It was his turn to make a prey.

Giò felt his insides give a little twist. He had always shied away from any hunting, even when the object of his classmates' pursuit were common lizards. In the countryside he had made friends with an old tortoise and a big toad that he saw year after year, whenever he visited his grandparents.

The kids were staring at him, impatient. They had formed a circle around the tree to prevent his escape.

Giò bent down slowly and glanced into the den, wondering what animal could live inside.

He saw only a tangle of reddish fur with two small, dilated eyes in the middle, staring at him in terror. He stood still, spear in hand.

Something akin to a message traveled between them. The animal wanted to live, the boy didn't want to kill.

Giò dropped the spear to the ground and ran away.

Behind him he heard a scuffling noise, followed by excited shouts and a sort of yelp.

Then silence.

When he regained the nerve to turn around, he saw that Ulm had captured the small fawny fox.

The kids looked at him with contempt. Only Ulm uttered a word before turning his back on him and resuming his march.

*"Moi!"*

The journey back was rowdy. His hunting companions laughed and joked, but no one spoke to Giò. He followed them from a distance, in silence.

He wondered if he had made a mistake. But the idea of killing that little creature that had looked him straight in the eye from the safety of its den had been too upsetting.

When they arrived at the cave the women came to greet them and take delivery of their prey. Ka was waiting for Giò, and when she realized that he was empty-handed she looked surprised. “Giò?”

He shrugged and took shelter in a far corner.

Ulm stopped to talk to her, and seeing his grimaces Giò guessed that he was explaining to her how much of a coward he had been. At the end of the story, he picked up Giò’s spear, broke the handle in two and threw it on the ground. He did not consider him worthy of a weapon.

Ka took him by the hand, led him to the end of the cave and pointed to some figures drawn on the wall. They were hunting scenes painted in red and black. Giò recognized the image of a deer similar to the one they had eaten the night before. But there was also a bison, a wild boar and a large animal with long curved tusks. Impressed, he pointed at it.

“Wow! You hunt mammoths, too?”

Ka smiled at him and touched her own belly, showing him that they had eaten it.

Giò was quiet. The girl obviously was telling him that this was their way of life and survival. He felt foolish.

That evening, after the men had come back, the cave dwellers gathered around the fire, waiting for the meat to cook. The old woman had put the big reptile caught by Ulm on a stick and was roasting it. The cooked meat was distributed among all.

All except Giò.

There was nothing for him. Those who did not hunt did not eat: that was the rule.

Later, Ka stealthily brought him a small piece of roasted snake, but Giò turned it down in disgust.

He preferred to fast.

## CHAPTER 6

When he woke up the next morning, Giò kept his eyes closed, although he sensed that the cave dwellers were already in motion. He hoped they would forget about him. He didn't want to go back hunting, he didn't want to go out with the women; he just wanted to curl up in a corner.

Evidently, though, no one could escape his or her duties. Ka forced him to get up.

He felt that she, too was treating him more coldly since the night before. Now she was giving him a sort of wooden harpoon, long and sharp-pointed. Giò took it and turned it over in his hands.

“And what should I do with this? Hunt mammoths?” His tone was ironic: Ka had already seen that he had no talent for the hunt. Did she want him to make a fool of himself yet again?

The girl drew a shape on the sand.

“Is that a fish? Are you saying that today we'll go fishing?”

She nodded. “Fish. Eat.”

Giò cheered up and smiled. *That* he could do. His father was an expert diver, and when they went to the seaside he always took him along to explore the shoals with mask and snorkel. He liked to observe the marvels of the underwater world, and had taught his son how to swim underwater and hold his breath for a long time. And during the winter, his mom took him to the pool. No, water did not scare him.

He joined the group of departing boys. They walked in single file and he, as usual, was the last in line.

Today the path went downhill, and they proceeded quickly. Wearing the shoes that Ka's grandmother had made for him, Giò could keep up with the others. Suddenly they came out of the forest, and he gasped in wonder. They were on top of a hill, and below them a valley stretched out for miles, crossed by a river that shone like a silver ribbon in all that green. The tall, rocky mountains in the background were like fingers of a huge stone hand raised to the sky.

“I can't believe it,” Giò murmured.

He recognized the mountains. He had photographed them with his cell phone from the bus during the school trip to the Archaeological Park.

He realized he was retracing the same route the bus had covered the other day. In that same green valley, thousands of years later a city would rise, and crossing that

river there would be a long bridge.

Right. Too bad he was there thirty thousand years too early! He reflected on how naive his escape plans had been. Even if he managed to get away from the cave, he wouldn't find anything familiar.

The city did not exist yet, the bridge across the river was yet to come, and there was no one he knew.

He felt lost. Would he have to grow up in the Paleolithic?

The other boys nudged him, urging him to continue.

They stopped near a bend in the river. The kids, under the guidance of Ulm, formed a circle at a point where the water reached their knees, trying to push the fish in the middle and capture them.

Giò was left alone. No one wanted to fish with him.

Looking around, he spotted a jutting rock that seemed to offer some seclusion. He dived into the river and swam quietly, careful not to splash. Then he immersed himself and searched the riverbed. As he had foreseen, under the rock there was a den, and the belly of a huge, strange-crested fish reflected the rays of the sun. Giò resurfaced to catch his breath, then dived again. A moment later he came back, howling with joy and holding his gigantic, wriggling prey in his hands.

Hearing his cry, everyone turned around. Meanwhile, Giò climbed on to the rock with the fish. It was longer than his arm.

The other kids immediately ran up to him, issuing a cheerful clamor by which he vaguely understood that no one had ever captured such a large specimen.

Giò could not help himself: this time it was he who shot Ulm a superior look.

The result of his catch was that all the kids moved to the shore near the den he had discovered. But no one dared swim in high water. It was he who kept diving and re-emerging each time with yet another fish, which got passed along to his companions waiting for him on the rock.

Left alone, Ulm watched the miraculous catch from afar with a crooked smile on his lips. Then he decided to reach another stretch of the river where a protruding rock seemed to suggest the presence of another submerged den.

Swimming awkwardly, he moved away from the shore, holding the long harpoon between his teeth. Suddenly he found himself at a point where several currents created a whirlpool, and he was dragged underneath. He screamed, letting go of his spear and starting to flounder.

Giò, who had just emerged from the water, stopped and saw Ulm's head disappear and reappear from the current. Once, twice, three times. He threw the fish he had just caught to his companions and started swimming rapidly toward Ulm. But the strong current in the middle of the river was dragging the boy away. No one else dared jump in from the shore. They all had helplessly witnessed other drownings in that same treacherous stretch of river.

Giò was swimming with all his might.

"Hold on!" he shouted.

But then, before he could reach it, Ulm's head disappeared for good. He dunked his head underwater and searched for a long time, keeping his eyes wide open. Alas, there seemed to be no trace of the boy. Giò caught his breath again, then dived once more.

From the bank, the boys scrutinized the river. No one was resurfacing from the current.

For the longest time nothing happened.

Then suddenly Giò reappeared fifty yards downstream. He had one arm around the neck of a seemingly unconscious Ulm, and was trying to keep the boy's head above water.

"Here! We're here!" he cried, exhausted.

The other kids ran downstream and helped him drag Ulm to the shore. Panting, Giò looked at the motionless body on the rocks. Had he managed to save him? For a long minute nothing happened; then finally Ulm coughed and started spitting water. His recovery was saluted by a great cry of joy, and everyone clapped Giò on his shoulders.

Ulm sat up with an effort, his head bowed. Then he glared at his savior.

The journey back was cheerful. The kids had woven a leafy wreath out of a green branch and put it on Giò's head. His gait was full of a new bravado. His companions had only caught one prey or two each, whereas his harpoon was festooned with fish. The gigantic sturgeon dangled by itself from a long staff held by two boys on their shoulders.

Ulm was the last in line, and followed them in silence.

Giò realized that he was starting to vaguely understand some of the words exchanged by his companions. It was a rough language, but all in all a simple one. For the first time in days he was feeling less lonely.

When they almost reached the cave, the kids gave a call, and the curious women appeared at its mouth. When they saw their extraordinary booty, they laughed in happiness.

Ka went to meet Giò and smiled. In her eyes, which had the color of autumn leaves, he could discern minute specks of sunny light.

The fish were put onto the coals. Giò was given the head of his giant sturgeon, which caught him off-guard. He had never eaten a fish head, and frankly he would have preferred a nice piece of roasted meat, but he understood that they wanted to honor him, and so he plucked up his courage.

A shadow fell upon him in the firelight. He looked up. Ulm sat silently next to him.

## CHAPTER 7

Ka herself had begun to understand some of Giò's language. Now, partly gesturing and partly speaking, she asked him how had he ended up in their territory. Where did he come from? Did everyone in his parts have shining teeth?

Giò hesitated for a moment. How could he explain such a different world to her friend? Then he made up his mind. He made some space around him and began to trace a large drawing on the sand, reproducing houses, bridges, people with umbrellas, others with dogs on leashes, others still on bicycles, and then cars, a motorcycle, a train, an airplane...

As he kept adding details, Ka looked more and more amazed; then other kids approached them, commenting on the strange world that was being pictured.

The girl pointed to the long train with the people at its windows. "Caterpillar?"

Giò gave it his best shot. "No, this is not a caterpillar, this is a train carrying people. How can I make you understand what a train is?"

Ka touched her belly, wide-eyed with shock. "Do it eats *moi* and *tui*?"

Giò laughed. Where did the idea of a giant, man-eating caterpillar come from? Then he realized that Ka's world was inhabited by enormous beasts that could gobble up a man without any problem, and that the people he had drawn at the windows could look to her as if were peeking out from the train's belly. Exactly as if they were inside a giant caterpillar.

"No. Look, this is how it works: this is a very fast caterpillar that carries around you and me, women and men. But it doesn't eat them."

"Caterpillar-train!" Ka clapped her hands. The idea of being taken for a walk by a giant, very fast caterpillar sounded absolutely fantastic to her.

Ulm pointed his finger at the drawing of the plane, then mimed a bird's wings with his arms.

"Actually yes, that one is built like a bird and flies in the air, but it has no feathers," he said. "That also transports men and women. It is made of steel... of iron..."

Ka did not understand. "Iron?"

Giò touched his own braces. "Yes, steel! Like this on my teeth. Iron."

She laughed. "Giò Iron Teeth!"

So my nickname is plaguing me even in prehistoric times?, Giò thought. Then



again, for the first time it sounded friendly, and he started laughing with Ka.

“Yes, you’re right: I am Giò Iron Teeth!”

The adults, intrigued, had also approached to observe the strange drawing, and now they started to discuss animatedly.

Ka’s father asked his daughter to translate his thoughts to the boy. She pointed her finger first at Giò, then to the shining stars and mimed something falling with her arms: “Fallen”.

The men around them nodded. “Fallen! Fallen!”

They all agreed with Ka’s father. This strange, pale boy, his teeth held in place by a steel wire that shone like a star, could not be like them. He had to come from a distant and unknown world. From the sky, in fact.

Giò did not reply. He was the first not to know how on earth he got there. How could he explain it to them? He spread his arms. “Perhaps”.

Ka’s grandmother drew close and put a hand on his forehead, as his mother did when she checked his fever. Then she shook her head with a grimace and raised her forefinger to her temple, indicating to the others that in her opinion the boy was simply a bit strange. He gave him a comforting caress on his hair. The adults laughed and went back to their occupations.

Ka pointed out the family Giò had portrayed in a corner, drawing them in front of a house with a garden.

“Holes, Giò?”

“Holes? What holes?” he asked; then he realized that Ka was referring to the windows. After all, the girl was right: the windows were holes. Yes, it was his home. And that was him, between his father and mother. And that was his sister, with whom he constantly fought and with whom now he so wanted to keep fighting. Then there was his cat Palla, who every night slept at the foot of the bed. He felt a lump in his throat and nodded silently. Would he ever see them again? They were interrupted by a strange, drawn-out sound that came from a corner of the cave. Giò got closer and saw an old man playing a rudimentary bone flute with three holes along its body. The melody was hypnotic and quite simple, at times sweet and poignant, other times cheerful and rhythmic, occasionally frenetic. Little by little everyone gathered around the player and added their voices to the music. Giò himself shyly joined in, and Ka smiled at him, merging her voice with his in a sort of counter melody.

The old woman started clapping her hands in time, and the other women did the

same.

A man got up and started dancing. He went around in circles, stamping his feet on the ground to the rhythm of the music. Then, little by little, the younger males also joined in, and Ulm beckoned to Giò: he too had to dance.

Giò shook his head. Dance? No way! As if he'd ever danced in his life.

Then a strange joy overtook him. There was no Thomas to criticize him in this cave. There was no Viola, laughing at him with her girlfriends. There was not even a teacher who could grade his performance. Giò got up and started whirling and stamping his feet with the others. At the beginning he was uncertain, but then he grew more and more surefooted. The music became urgent.

How nice it was to dance! You felt free as a bird in flight.

Giò was happy.

## CHAPTER 8

The following day he was assigned again to the group of women gathering wood, fruits and roots.

Sweating under the weight of thick trunk that scraped his shoulders, he staggered behind the old woman. She was carrying a branch as big as Giò's, and yet she advanced nimbly as if it didn't weigh anything.

“Ugh!” he grumbled “One of these days I'll have to invent the wheel!”

They finally stopped to rest in a clearing, and he took the opportunity to give the last touches to a small gift he wanted to give Ka. The day before at the river he had picked up some shells, then he had pierced them with a pointy flint, meaning to thread them together on a thin gut cord. He wanted to make a necklace for his friend and give it to her when they returned to the cave.

Ka was sitting apart with her grandmother, and she smiled at him from afar. Suddenly they heard shouting, and a woman with a child tied on her back came running, chased by a huge wild boar. The beast stopped at the edge of the clearing, pointing its big fangs and nervously beating a hoof on the ground.

The woman found shelter behind a rock, and suddenly Ka and her grandmother were the only ones left on the animal's path.

Giò had taken refuge behind a tree. He did not have a weapon with him, and was way too far away to intervene. He picked up a large stone and hurled it at the boar, hoping to make him change direction, but he missed it.

“Scat! Go!” he shouted.

The beast showed no sign of having heard him. It lowered its huge head and lunged toward the little girl. Ka had risen in a hasty attempt to escape, but the boar was too fast, and it was about to reach her. It was almost upon her when the old woman got in its way, sheltering her granddaughter. The beast did not slow down: it charged her with its sharp fangs and swept her aside like a rag doll, then continued its mad run and disappeared into the bush.

The old woman lay on the ground, a large gash across her belly. Giò hurried to her rescue.

A screaming Ka was trying to stop her grandmother's bleeding, applying pressure with her hands, but she stopped her with a grimace. She had treated too many people in her life to not realize that there was nothing to be done.

Giò leaned over her, supporting her head with his hand.

“Don’t move. We’ll take you home... home... home...” he kept repeating.

She shook her head, raised a hand to her granddaughter and lightly caressed her hair. Then her arm fell back.

The other women came fearfully out from behind the trees where they had taken shelter with the children and crowded around the three of them.

Ka was crying in despair. After her mom’s death, her grandma had been like a second mother to her. Now she was gone, too. Giò took her hand and squeezed it. He couldn’t find the words to console her. Perhaps the right words did not exist.

They laid the old woman’s body on the leafy sled and he slowly dragged her back to the cave. Giò refused to be spelled. This way he felt like he was doing something for Ka.

At sunset, when the men returned from the hunt, they gathered around the body that had been laid on a big animal’s fur. Ka’s father bent down and stroked his mother’s forehead. Then he exited the cave and started digging a hole in the ground not far from it.

The women surrounded the body with yellow ochre and colorful flowers. Then they laid her work tools next to her: the scraper with which she scoured the skins and the long bone needle she had used to sew Gio’s footwear.

He finally mustered the courage to go to her. It was the first time he had lost someone he knew. The old woman had been kind to him. They had never exchanged words, but they understood each other. She looked serene, and cuddled up like that she seemed to be sleeping.

Impulsively he took the necklace of shells he had prepared for his friend and laid it on top of the fur, next to the other objects.

Ka gave him a grateful look.

Someone had gathered up a handful of black powder from a corner and mixed it with animal fat.

Now all of them used the resulting mixture to paint their faces with a line that started at their foreheads, traced their noses, crossed their mouths and ended at their chins. Ka gestured for Giò to do the same.

“Grandma,” she said.

Giò dipped his fingers into the dark mush and painted the line on his face. It

smelled of iron.

They wrapped the body in the fur and laid it in the hole outside the cave. Then they covered it with earth and stones to prevent the animals of the forest from digging it out.

That evening no one felt like talking.

Giò sat down in front of the cave. The night was full of stars. Ka joined him, and for a long time they kept quiet, looking at the sky above. Then she pointed to it.

“Home?”

Giò was taken aback. Did they really believe that he came from space? His father had taught him how to recognize the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper. He looked for the brightest star, the North Star, and pointed to it.

“There.” And for a moment he believed it, too.

## CHAPTER 9

Giò was awakened by the buzz of excited voices. When he opened his eyes, he realized that everyone around him was in frantic motion.

“What is it?” he asked, leaping to his feet.

Nobody paid any attention to him. He looked around and saw Ulm, his face and arms blackened, intent on camouflaging himself with branches with the help of Ka.

He had basically become a sort of walking bush.

“What’s happening?”

Ka answered without interrupting her work. She just touched her own face and pointed to the ashes of the campfire.

Giò laughed.

“Am I supposed to blacken my face, too? What is this, Mardi Gras?”

“Mammoth,” Ulm said.

Giò thought he had misunderstood. What did mammoths have to do with this masquerade?

Ka urged him on eagerly. “Black!”

Puzzled, Giò drew up to the fire, rubbed some ashes on his face, arms and legs and went back to her. “Here. Am I black enough? What kind of game are we playing here?”

Ka turned him roughly around and began to tie leafy twigs on his body, just as she had done to Ulm. While she was dressing him up she finally deigned to answer him. “Mammoth,” she repeated.

Giò’s mouth fell open. “I don’t believe this. You’re telling me we’re going to hunt mammoths? But... but... a mammoth is as big as a bus!”

Ka shrugged with impatience. “No bus hunt. Mammoth hunt.” Now even Giò resembled a bush with legs. So did all the other kids in the cave. He looked at them and felt like laughing. Too bad mirrors did not exist in prehistoric times!

The men were arming themselves with elongated staffs to whose ends they had tied razor-sharp flints. Some of them were making torches by touching the flames with clubs soaked in grease.

Ka’s father gave some orders that Giò did not understand. Ulm handed him a short spear, then started toward the exit of the cave without waiting for him.

“Hey, where are you going? Shall I come, too?” Giò called to him. “Well, I’ll

come.”

Even before he knew it, he found himself walking with the others on the rocky path that led to the other side of the mountain.

Once his parents had taken him to the Natural History Museum, and there he had seen a mammoth skeleton. It was as tall as a two-story house, and its huge curved tusks were several meters long. He vainly tried to get Ulm to explain how they thought they were going to confront a beast like that by using spears that by comparison looked like toothpicks.

Every now and then the leader made the column stop and listened.

Finally they reached the top of the hill and laid down on the ground to survey the valley without being seen. In the middle of a clearing there was a herd of a dozen mammoths. Giò’s eyes widened in wonder. They were even bigger than the skeleton he had seen at the museum, and when they raised their trunks to the sky they looked majestic.

They moved slowly on legs as big as columns, swinging their big heads heavy with long, curved tusks.

Apparently the wind was not in their favor, because they kept calmly grazing even as the men reduced their distance.

Giò was sticking close to Ulm, putting his feet exactly where his companion had placed them to avoid making noise.

They stopped a few hundred yards away, and all the kids crouched near the rocky path. Covered with branches as they were, they seemed to form a giant bush.

No one could have imagined that there was someone under those leaves.

Giò felt strangely calm.

*Even so, he thought, if one of the mammoths smells us and charges us, we’ll end up as flat as pizzas.* He peered between the leaves and saw, not too far away, the big beasts crossing their tusks with loud cracking sounds.

Suddenly Ka’s father let out a yell, and the men with the torches set fire to several patches of the clearing’s dry grass.

The flames flared up at a dizzying speed toward the herd, and after a moment of surprise the mammoths started stampeding along a wide path overhung by a rocky ridge.

Six of the men positioned themselves above the ridge let the beasts pass, all but

one that had remained behind. They pushed and rolled a huge boulder, blocking the straggler's path.

The frightened beast backed away and started to run toward the hiding kids. Before it reached them, Ulm leaped to his feet, shouting and jumping up and down, imitated by his companions.

Even though he didn't really understand what was happening, Giò himself stepped up and screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Aaaaaaaahhhhh!”

The valley echoed their cries until the whole mountain seemed to resound with them.

Giò felt exhilarated. The fear deep inside him mixed with the taste of metal in his mouth and the chills that spread all over his body.

The mammoth turned in fright and began to run in the only direction left, which led straight to a precipice hidden among the rocks.

Pursued by the torch-bearing men, he tumbled ruinously down for at least a hundred yards, causing an avalanche of boulders, bushes, trees, dust and stones. It looked as if the entire mountain was falling thunderously after the animal, which now lay motionless on the bottom of the narrow crevasse.

The men ran to the edge and threw their harpoons.

Ka's father descended cautiously, clinging to the rocks. Every so often he stopped and shouted, as if to wake the animal. If the mammoth had risen again, for him there would have been no escape. He threw a last spear at the beast, and when he was sure that it would not move again he gave a shout of victory.

“Agooooook!”

The other hunters repeated his cry as they swooped down into the narrow gorge.

“Agooooook!”

Giò observed the scene from a distance. Even if he had participated in its capture, he felt a sort of sorrow for the great, noble-looking beast with its gigantic tusks. Then he thought that Ka would not understand his feeling: a prey like that meant weeks of provisions for the whole extended family of cave dwellers.

He roused himself and went down to help.

They worked all afternoon, cutting large chunks of meat to take back to the cave. Next to that huge body, they looked like a tribe of ants.

It would take them many days and many trips to finish the job.



The journey back was a sort of triumphal march. It took ten boys to carry a single tusk, and Giò was among them.

Their arrival at the cave was cause for celebration. That evening, even Giò had to have a taste of mammoth meat. It was tough and gamy. Later, he tried to explain to Ka that he had been sorry to see the big beast die. She gave him a serious look and did not laugh. Then she drew a rough outline of the beast on the sand and pointed to the various parts with a stick, as if they were in class. She started with its belly.

“Grass”.

Giò scrunched up his nose. “You mean to say that you also eat what’s in the mammoth’s stomach? Inside his belly?”

Ka nodded. “Meat”.

“Well, of course,” Giò agreed. “Lots of meat, there. Enough to feed you all for a month.”

“Skin”.

“Sure. With the pelt of a mammoth you could cover a five-a-side field!” he laughed.

“Teeth. And long... long...” Ka pointed to the tusks she had drawn.

“Tusks?”

“Yes, tusks.”

Giò was silent for a while. He was thinking that the leather shoes he wore had been sewn by Ka’s grandmother with a thread of gut. But then, what was that something that he felt remonstrating deep inside?

He smiled. “You’re right. With a mammoth, every single part is useful.”

That night he could not sleep. He kept seeing the day’s scenes in his mind’s eye. The herd of big animals. The fire, the cries, the stampede. It was as if he were still walking on that path. And he felt the weight of the long tusk on his shoulder as they carried it to the cave.

“Giò Mammoth Hunter”: that should have been his new nickname.

What a pity not to be able to tell anyone!

## CHAPTER 10

The next morning the sky was covered with huge, gray, low clouds, and a milky fog blocked the view like a wool blanket.

It was impossible to get out of the cave.

Ka taught Giò how to cook tubers under the ashes without burning them, but he didn't put much stock in eating mysterious, insipid roots for breakfast. He missed his morning mug of milk with cookies and cocoa powder. Even the zucchini that he once so detested seemed exquisite in comparison. For a moment he tried to picture the faces of the cave dwellers if all of a sudden he'd show up with a nice plate of fries. His mouth watered, and with a sigh he bit into the scorched root.

Then he scratched the scabs on his knees. By dint of walking through the forest, in just a few days his legs had become a layout of scratches. Only a week ago he would have asked his mother to medicate them with ointments and band-aids, whereas now they almost felt like an achievement. He endured those scrapes without a grimace, just like the other kids.

He saw that an old woman had taken the place of Ka's grandmother in the corner and was intent on scraping an animal skin.

Giò felt sorry for Ka. That corner had belonged to her grandma. But when he told her, the little girl shrugged and placed her hand on her heart, indicating that her grandmother lived was her.

"You're right. Now your grandma is in your heart. She was a good grandmother, wasn't she?"

Ka showed him the leather pouches that the old woman used to cure the rest of the tribe. Then she opened them, extracting little mounds of various powders and crumbled leaves.

"Snake... blood... tooth... bones..." Then she pointed to herself.

Giò understood that one day Ka would become the tribe's new healer.

The girl turned her finger toward him. "You?"

In his other life, Giò thought, whenever someone asked him what he would do when he grew up, he always replied that he wanted to invent videogames... but now? In this cave, what would he become when he grew up? A hunter? Impossible. After all, every time an animal got killed he found himself on the poor creature's side.

"I'm going to build the wheel!" he exclaimed on an impulse.

Ka gave him a puzzled look. “Wheel? Eat?”

“No, you don’t eat the wheel,” he laughed. “It is an important thing, though, because it makes everything easier. See, a wheel is...” He took a stick and drew a two-wheeled cart on the sand.

Ka looked at the drawing, baffled. “Wheel...”

Right at that moment her father, who was intent on preparing new spikes for his spear, called to him: “Giò!”

Giò went to him and the man, without another word, handed him a rock and a large, half-chipped stone and showed him how to beat one against the other to obtain sharpened fragments. Giò tried, with the sole result of banging his finger and making the stone fly away.

“Ow!”

The man shook his head, laughed and took back his tools.

No, Giò thought. He definitely would not become a hunter.

He wandered a little around the cave. Everyone seemed busy with some activity. He was the only one who didn’t know what to do, and he was starting to get bored.

Ulm was tracing signs on the wall in a corner. Giò went to check and was amazed to see that the boy was drawing figures with a stick that he dipped in the black mixture they had used to paint their faces. So *that* was what they used to paint: iron powder mixed with animal fat.

Ulm was drawing a beast that Giò had never seen. Giò felt a touch of envy. He was good at drawing, but Ulm was much better.

Despite the primitive tools, his figures expressed power and movement. His animals, by the light of the fire, seemed to want to jump out of the wall. He was the author of the images Ka had shown him the other day.

Who would have thought that a kid like that, who seemed to be all muscle and no brains, could create such beauty! He was a real artist.

“You’re good,” Giò said.

Ulm gave a careless shrug. Then he stopped, took Giò’s hand and quickly smeared it with the stinky black concoction.

“Hey, what are you doing?!?” Giò tried to shrink back from him, but Ulm gestured for him to wait. He took the paint and spread it on his own hand. Then he placed his palm on the wall, leaving an impression.

“Friend,” he said.

It was the first word he spoken in Giò's language. He gave him an encouraging look.

Giò was dumbfounded. "What do I have to do?"

Ulm pointed to the rock, and Giò finally understood. He put his hand next to Ulm's print.

"Friend," he confirmed.

Behind them came Ka's voice. "Me!"

The girl quickly put the paint on her palm and laid it on the wall, next to theirs. "Friend".

Together they contemplated the impressions of their hands on the rock and smiled. Now they were really friends forever.

The weather suddenly changed, the sky turning dark as night.

The rain began to fall so torrentially that it looked like a waterfall.

Water invaded the cave.

Everyone stopped their activities and rushed to roll the pelts up and place them on the highest ledges and store away all tools and supplies. The women tied the younger children on their backs and ordered the older ones to climb the rocks.

Thunder echoed in the cave, amplified by its hollowness, and lightning slashed the sky.

The men ventured out into the storm to retrieve large stones and build a rudimental dam in front of the entrance. The kids went to help them, and after a moment's hesitation Giò followed suit. It was raining so hard that he could not see his own nose, but he did his best, hauling the biggest stones he could carry.

He had strayed a little, looking for more stones, when he lost his bearings. The rain swirled all around him, lashed by the wind. Broken branches flew in all directions.

"Hey, where are you? I can't see you!" he shouted.

The voices of his companions seemed very far away. Yet he was sure he had only taken a few steps away. He dared not move for fear of falling into a crevasse.

"Help! Where are you?"

Suddenly lightning zigzagged in the sky and hit a tree above him. Giò closed his eyes in fear and curled up against a rock, trying to make himself as small as possible as the tree crashed on the ground.

The last thing he heard was the terrible explosion of thunder following the flash of lightning.

## CHAPTER 11

The storm abated as suddenly as it had come.

Soaked to the bone, Giò did not move a muscle.

“Giò, where are you? Giòòòòò!”

Someone was calling him; when he finally dared opening his eyes, he saw his teacher bending over him.

“Giovanni! What are you doing here? Were you under the rain this whole time? Why on earth did you take off your shoes? And how many times did I repeat that you were not supposed to climb the painted rocks?” Suddenly her tone became less aggressive. “Did you hurt yourself?”

Confused, Giò answered mechanically to her last question. “N- no, I don’t think so.”

His head was spinning. He didn’t understand where he was. He checked himself and realized that he was wearing his jeans and that, apart from his shoes, he was completely dressed. Wet, but dressed.

He was totally bewildered.

How did this happen? A minute ago he was collecting boulders with Ulm to dam the cave’s entrance, and now...

Besides, he had been away for days. So many things had happened. Why was his teacher talking to him as if she hadn’t noticed anything, as if he’d only been away for five minutes?

He had fought, he had lost a person he knew, he had saved another, he had dragged logs, picked up roots, sang, danced, tanned hides, spoke a different language, caught fish he’d never seen before... and now she was just asking him if he was hurt? What was the deal?

He sat up. Around him, his classmates looked on in silence. One of them handed him his backpack and the shoes he had found at the base of the rock. The teacher rummaged inside the bag.

“Lucky for you, your mother is a provident woman. You have a spare t-shirt in your backpack. And socks, too.”

As Giò took off his wet clothes and changed, the teacher bombarded him with questions.

“What’s gotten into you? Were you left behind? Did you get lost? You didn’t try to run away, did you?”

Giò did not answer. His mind was whirling with thoughts. As he slipped his dry socks on, he noticed there was not a single scratch on his legs. How was it possible? He remembered perfectly well that he had scraped his shin against a bush of brambles while they were hunting. And when he had plunged into the river to save Ulm he had rubbed his knee against a rock and it had bled for a long time. And when they had returned to the cave, Ka had put a leaf on his wound...

Ka. Where was Ka?

Instinctively he looked up at the faces of his companions and met Viola’s gaze. She was watching him intently, and she seemed to the point of saying something.

“Do you think you can walk?” the teacher asked, and Giò nodded silently. “In that case, we’ll resume our visit to the park.”

How was it possible!?

He had just come back from an incredible adventure and his teacher was resuming the walk in the park as if nothing had happened?

The teacher reached the head of the line.

“Now our guide will take us to a cave that thirty thousand years ago was inhabited by Cro-Magnon men. Just think about it: thousands and thousands of years ago, in this area there were already human settlements. It sounds incredible, doesn’t it?”

Giò thought that what the teacher called “human settlements” for him were people: men, women, old people, kids. They were Ulm, and Ka, and Ka’s grandmother...

“Stay together and please do not stray!” the teacher called.

The class moved and Giò, still uncertain on his legs, followed them mechanically.

Viola drew up alongside him.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, but kept walking without turning his head. There was just too much to make sense of. He certainly could not tell her he had lived in a cave and hunted mammoths: she would have thought he had gone mad.

But it was Sophie who spoke. She talked fast, as if her words were pushing to get out. “Listen, I had nothing to do with it. It wasn’t me who stole your snack. And I didn’t know that those two would leave you a card in my name. It was all them. Then

you slipped your reply in my backpack, and I wasn't expecting it, and I was embarrassed. That's why I threw it away."

Right. But all that had happened a long time ago. *A lifetime ago*, Giò thought. And compared to what he had experienced, it no longer seemed so important.

Nevertheless he stopped on his tracks, rummaging in the pockets of his jeans until he found the note that Viola had thrown away and that he had picked up. It was crumpled and damp.

Viola took it and opened it again. His drawing was slightly smudged by the rain, but it was still clearly visible: the two of them holding hands and smiling and, above, the comic balloon with the word, "Forever".

"I'd like to be friends forever, too" Viola said. Minute specks of sunlight swam in her golden eyes.

She took his hand and resumed walking.

Giò said nothing. He didn't trust his own voice. He was afraid he would sound like a croaking chicken. But deep inside he was suddenly happy. She was not in on the joke! She was not involved!

Then Tommaso's voice reached him from behind, and it was as if someone had hit him with a stone.

"Giò Iron Teeth, didn't you rust away under all that rain?"

For an instant, Giò was tempted to pretend he had not heard him. As he had always done before. But then the moment passed. He realized that something important had happened deep inside him. Something that suddenly made him say no to all that. He wouldn't let it go. Enough with fear. Even if Tommaso was taller than him by a palm. And bigger. And more of a bully. Enough was enough.

He waited for him along the path. Tommaso stopped in front of him, his legs wide, his hands on his hips.

"What is it? Wanna fight, by any chance?" he asked him, looking him from top to bottom as if to let him know that he could get rid of fleas like him with a single brush of his hand.

His two minions stopped to watch the scene. Tommi was just too much. You always had fun with him.

Giò looked at him and, instead of the boy who'd scared him for years, he saw only a lumbering lug who acted the bully while one tail of his shirt was coming out of



his pants. He thought of Ulm and smiled. How could he have remained silent for so long?

“I’m not fighting with anyone,” he replied. “Especially you. And do you know why? Because you’re nothing. You make fun of others only because you don’t have anything intelligent to say, and because you are a coward. Yes, a coward.”

Tommaso could not believe his ears. How dare he challenge him?

“Hey, Giò Iron Teeth, be careful or I’ll make you eat your teeth with your snack!”

Viola pulled Giò by the arm, trying to drag him away. “Forget him, he’s nothing but a blowhard. He’s not worth it”.

But Giò didn’t move. “Right, I’m Giò Iron Teeth, and you better be careful, because I’m a warrior. Everyone is capable of foisting nicknames around, you know? But I won’t do it. Have I made myself clear, Hamster Face with Cauliflower Ears? You don’t even deserve a nickname.”

Then, without another word, he turned and resumed his walk, leaving Tommaso in the middle of the path, agape and red-faced. How was it possible that this skinny guy he’d teased since first grade suddenly found the courage to speak to him this way?

His two minions started laughing.

“Hamster Face! He called him Hamster Face! That’s hilarious!”

Giò felt really good. He wasn’t angry nor scared. Just happy.

Just free.

When they approached the cave, he gave a start. He thought he recognized those corners, those rocks... But no, it was not possible.

The guide gathered the group around him and began a long-winded explanation on how man lived in the Upper Paleolithic. What they ate, how they hunted, what tools they knew how to build...

But Giò was not listening. He really thought he knew that cave. Then again, maybe he was still confused by the recent events. He tried to pay attention to the guide, who kept droning on and on.

“About thirty thousand years ago, Cro-Magnons lived in caves like this. And do you know how we know this? Because they left a visible trace of themselves. In addition to the rock engravings you saw before on the sandstone rocks, this cave contains drawings made by an unknown prehistoric painter...”

Gesturing theatrically, he led the class to the end of the cave.

On the wall, barely visible but recognizable, there were beautiful hunting scenes. The animals were represented so powerfully that they seemed to want to burst out of the rock. A deer, a bison, a boar and a large beast with long curved tusks.

Giò felt suddenly excited. These looked exactly like Ulm's drawings.

The guide went on. "Thanks to these drawings we were able to find out which animals populated prehistoric Earth. And there is even a sort of artist's signature. Cro-Magnons obviously didn't know how to write, but do you see these prints?"

He indicated the imprints of three small hands side by side on the wall. Giò's eyes welled up with tears.

"In order to 'sign', prehistoric humans placed their palms on the rock; and to obtain the black paint they used to leave their prints they used..."

"Iron powder and animal fat," Giò interjected instinctively.

The guide looked at him, amazed. "Did you study this at school?"

Giò smiled. "No, I just know it."