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# GIONA'S WINTER

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## Chapter I

I don't have a single memory from when I was little, not a single one. And yet I, too, must have been a child; but there is nothing left of those years in me. I remember yesterday, the day before yesterday, and the one before that. I remember the things I do, and how they have to be done but not the moment I learned the most important things. When I learned to walk or to speak. When I hurt myself for the first time and didn't cry. I live in a time that is immobile, where memories don't exist, where a before doesn't exist.

I don't know why I started thinking about memories. Maybe because my mind begins to wander when my hands are busy working, and thoughts come to me all by themselves. Like now while I balance the bucket of water my grandpa Alvisè told me to take down to the cellar.

I turn on the lamp as I close the kitchen door behind me, and I put one foot on the first step. With my back leaning against the wooden planks, I hang the bucket of water on my forearm and hold the lamp in my hand; I use the other hand to make sure the door is closed just as he says it should be. The light of the lamp spreads over the stone floor, which is drowned in darkness, and paints it in yellow hues. I imagine that these colours are guiding my path, which stretches before me silently as I descend one stair at a time. It's a warm light that envelops me in a circle. My hands, which are usually pale, are tinged in a softer colour as the shadows crowd around me.

I move forward slowly, careful not to spill a single drop. I know that Alvisè will check every stair afterwards. When I get to the room, I place the lamp on the floor, and the flame responds with an annoyed waiver. A waft of black smoke rises to the ceiling, which is no taller than I am, in sign of protest, fading into the darkness, losing itself in the soot that layers the blackened beams.

I'm about to set the bucket down when a gust sweeps down the staircase making the light flicker. The door must have come open: maybe I didn't close it well enough. I turn suddenly, and my knee catches on the handle of the bucket and sends it rolling on the floor. I turn just in time to see the bucket land on its side in a huge wide incomplete circle and the water spill onto the floor. The light

of the lamp dances on the wet stones, which, in the instant before turning opaque, reflect the shadow of my face. I try to understand my expression, but the mortar soaks it up along with the water I've spilled. I'm frozen with fear. I can do nothing but stand perfectly still and wait for my mistake to be drunk up by the stone floor. I know it's no use pretending to myself that grandpa will not notice; and yet I trick myself into thinking that he won't, that I can turn back time, that what I have done never happened. The last drop of water gets soaked up by the mortar, and a darker ring remains. It is the only evidence of my mistake. My hopefulness is useless here: it only makes the situation worse. Grandpa will punish me because for every action, right or wrong, there is always a lesson to be learned.

I hang the lantern on the hook that is hanging from the ceiling and stand totally still for a long time, searching for the courage to go back upstairs. Then I pick up the bucket and climb the steps. I open the door. I trick myself into thinking I'm transparent. I move towards the barrel that is standing near the sink and dip the bucket into it to fill it again. Alvisè is sitting at the table making a small bundle with some twigs. Maybe he didn't hear me coming. Maybe I really am invisible. I fill the bucket and turn slightly, trying to hide it from him with my body as I move back to the stairs.

"Take your sweater off, Giona."

His voice is colourless and pounds in my ears. My body freezes. I watch my legs fold, and my hand open as I place the bucket on the floor. Then, as if they were someone else's, my arms cross, my fingers grab hold of the tattered edges of my sweater, and I raise it over my head, pulling it off. I can see every movement my body has learned to make to carry out Alvisè's commandments.

I hold my sweater in my hands and stare at the floor until my shadow, which is projected onto the door, is not covered by my grandfather's.

"Turn around," he says, and I obey him.

Then he stretches his hands towards my sweater. I observe his nails as they move towards the woven wool like blades and separate it, tearing the threads. He pushes his fingers through it. Then, very slowly, he pulls them out again. Ten gaping holes in my sweater, one for each finger. He lifts

his eyes and gives it back to me.

“Now bring the bucket downstairs, and do it right this time.”

“Yes, grandpa,” I say, and I pronounce every word carefully, the way he wants me to as I start descending the stairs again.

I can feel his strength following me on every step, his breath pressing against the nape of my neck until I reach the centre of the room. I glance secretly at the floor. It’s dry now. Maybe he wouldn’t have noticed I spilled the water if I had been able to come back down without him seeing me. Something which, I know, is impossible. He never misses anything. I place the bucket in the middle of the floor and move towards the corner where the tub, Alvise’s chair, and my stool are piled. I know I can’t dare get the order or how they should be placed in the room wrong. One at a time.

I go up and down three times under my grandpa’s gaze. Each and every time I move one object and place it on the floor. It is a ritual I have carried out many times: first the tub, then the chair, and finally the stool. My grandpa always wants everything to be done the same way. He wants everything to be in the same place. Tidy. In the end, I take the little box of wood with the needle and thread. When I’ve finished placing the things in their place, he takes the bucket and pours the water into the tub. Without spilling even one drop. As always. Then he places the chestnut twigs in the water and sits down.

“Sit down and work, Giona. Mend what was broken because of you,” he says, and I obey him.

Rays of light filter through the window, and they move along the walls until they touch the ceiling; meanwhile, I poke the needle into the sweater and start mending the holes. Every stitch brings with it the knowledge that I did something wrong.

Now the sweater is fixed. My hands are so cold and stiff I don’t know if my fingers are still holding the needle. They have become the same colour as the walls of the cellar. The countless tears in this tattered blood red rag, which is so patched up it has lost its original shape, have been mended once more. Like everything else, it too has soaked up the smell down here. The same odour you

find in the woods when the air smells of rain and the leaves rot. Down here, it is mixed with the smell of mortar. And yet Alvisè spends a lot of time here in this underground cell, and he makes me stay here too. I have been holding my head down and sewing for so long that it feels as if I have never held my head upright. I'll live the rest of my life staring at the tips of my toes. I'll learn everything about knees, about stone floors, about cellars. There are more stitches now than wool in this sweater, but I don't have anything else to wear that is warm.

“The mountain can be tremendous if you don't adapt to it. I'm not talking about the cold, Giona. You know what that is, and you know how to fight it. I'm talking about the solitude.”

Grandpa, as often happens, has forced himself into my thoughts. He can do that because he knows everything about me. Every gesture, every beat of my heart, every fear. I remain silent as I know I should and am careful not to look at him because he doesn't want me to. I observe him from under my eyelids as he weaves the basket into shape. Alvisè's hands are like pliers, and his teeth are like those of a saw. He bends the chestnut twigs using only his fingers, and he cuts them with his mouth, without using any tools.

Four, sixteen, thirty-two. Twine. Skip three, then two, then one, and up. The pattern is always the same, repeated until the basket starts to take shape. Until the twigs are bent to the shape he wants.

“Can I get dressed now? I'm cold.”

“No, Giona. You should have thought about that before you spilled the bucket of water,” he says without looking at me.

Alvisè's voice is flat, monotone as he speaks his truth. The only truth that counts. I lower my eyes just in time to avoid his.

“You made a mistake, and these are the consequences. You know that well. I explain how things are done, but you continue to make mistakes. You don't learn. That is why I punish you. Knowledge, Giona, is gained through suffering,” he says, “It is the way it must be. Do not trust those who learn with pleasure because anything that is learned without suffering is as easily forgotten.”

Alvise always says that we must be conscious of everything in order to change things, and that is why he must beat me. It's to drive knowledge into my bones. And he says that he has to continue beating me because after knowledge has scored my flesh and the pain has started to subside it is right that the memory lingers on my skin.

"I know," I say, "but why must it hurt so much?"

And I realize that I have already asked him this question many times before. He, as always, replies in the same way.

"Look at the cherry tree. The one near the house. Do you know how a fruit tree grows? Not spontaneously, not according to nature. Not alone. Choose a wild, resilient plant, break the wood, and graft it with a good branch, one with buds. Then you mutilate it for years by pruning it, you leave only the strong branches, and you deform them to make them right for the picking. Through pain, Giona. It is only through pain that you learn."

The crackle of the twigs twisting to shape the basket accompanies Alvise's words. Dry, round sounds, age-old laws.

Four, sixteen, thirty-two. Twine. Skip three, then two, then one, and up.

The mastery with which he is able to bend the twigs without ever breaking the wet, dark bark fascinates me. I mustn't look at him, and yet I can't help myself: it's as if his hands are moulding the future or, just by moving, taming numerous serpents that are rising from the tub of water.

"The cherry tree is planted near the house because it keeps harm at bay," I say while Alvise takes another twig.

His hands stop. I can hear him breathe in. My shoulders stiffen in response to the almost imperceptible quiver that shakes the young branch.

"You're stupid, Giona. Stupid and irrational."

Alvise takes the twigs and the stakes and starts weaving them again.

And yet he taught me that, I'm sure he did. I'd like to say so but if I did it would mean having to bear another beating to teach me the meaning of respect. I can handle the cold, at least, if I don't

think about it. If I can keep from thinking that I'm sitting in this cold cellar with just trousers and a t-shirt on. My shoes and wool socks aren't enough to keep the damp cold that rises from the stone floor from seeping into my bones. And yet the old man doesn't seem to notice, even if he isn't wearing much more than I am. He always wears the same cotton trousers, and, if it's colder out, he puts a plaid wool shirt over his t-shirt, the same one he's been wearing for years. I don't think I've ever seen him wear anything else. He keeps on weaving his basket as if the world were nothing but a bunch of chestnut twigs that needed bending and shaping. As if he were repeating a story out loud, one that has already been written. He dips his hand into the huge tub filled with icy cold water, pulls out a twig, fits it into the end of the wooden hoop, and starts moving up along the stakes.

Four, sixteen, thirty-two. Twine. Skip three, then two, then one, and up.

It's a circular motion with no beginning and no end. With no uncertainties or pauses to underline any pride in his ability to create things.

I've never seen Alvise smile. I don't think he's capable of it. Everything about him is planned, precise, defined. Every action is weighed, identical to the one he's already carried out when doing a particular job. Talking, watching. Weaving baskets, cutting, eating. Standing up and sitting down. Beating me.

Even his body speaks of precision and exactness. Of control.

His hair is white with no grey strands to interrupt the absence of colour. His body is just solid enough to carry out his errands and to instil fear in others. His hands are big but not excessively so, just enough to twine wood or impart lessons. His eyes are the only exception: they are deep blue, in contrast with his pallid face. It is the colour of lips that are frozen with cold. There is no soul in those eyes. No anger or hatred. They are used only for looking, nothing more.

A twinge of pain cuts my left arm as the chestnut twig bites into it.

“If you're done thinking, you can go upstairs and make dinner.”

My mind was wandering, and the old man punished me again. He says I shouldn't think about anything but what he tells me to do.

“Tomorrow you can put some clothes on, after you’ve had the whole night to learn your lesson. Now take your sweater upstairs, and use it to warm your hands on the way up.”

I get up off the stool and count the stones that separate me from the door. I move slowly: I’ve learned that I mustn’t move brusquely, or worse, carelessly. Then I turn and feel his eyes boring into my back as I walk towards the stairs that lead up to the kitchen. The weight of those eyes is as bad as the memory of the lashing he just inflicted and all the ones that came before and that continue to burn inside me.

I start climbing the stairs, which were worn down by who knows how many others in the past, others who have woven baskets or mended sweaters down here. The fact that they are steep makes reaching the kitchen seem easier. There are twelve stairs. I’ve counted them so many times that my foot knows each and every one. Once I even gave them names: *Getusedtoit*, *Getloadsofit*, *Getitright*, *Getitdone*, *Getgoing*, and so on. I did it so they would keep me company when I had to climb them in the dark. I still greet them that way on bad days, calling them by their names as if they were friends.

I climb one stair at a time, careful not to brush my arms against the sides of the staircase because grandpa doesn’t want me to dirty them with my smell. The stone and mortar passage is so narrow that all I would have to do is spread my elbows a little to touch the sides. I climb the stairs slowly, hugging my sweater close, trying to get warm like *Alvise* said. Even if the wool is rough and matted, I rub it between my fingers to get warm. But by the time I can feel the warmth spread to the tips of my fingers, I’ve reached the top of the stairs. I lift the latch and open the door.

In the kitchen there is a smell of damp smoke even if the windows are wide open and the wind has already swept the icy cold onto the fields over the town. Nothing that belongs to grandpa can leave the house. Not even the smoke.

The corners of the kitchen are dark with humidity. They are crowded at the margins of the dirty plaster that covers the walls, and they create the illusion that the whole room is slouched as if it wanted to close in on itself for protection. Corners, like me, confined to the margins. Forgotten like



me, and useless like me, if not to lean a stick against, a stick that Alvise has brought into the house.

The floor, made of old planks of wood of a greyish brown colour, echoes under my steps. Even the worn wooden boards curve in towards the centre, strengthening the optical illusion. Over everything there lingers the smell of Alvise. Subtle, just slightly different from the smell of stone. So similar to my own but not the same. The room closes around my body as I take the few steps that allow me to distance myself from the stairs. The sideboard, whose insides preserve the tableware, is always ready to spy on me as is the sink, the chairs, the table, the wood cook stove, and the unpretentious stone fireplace. Even the window, which pierces the wall like the eye of a blind man, has no other function other than that of reflecting Alvise's passing. The kitchen is always dark. The only lamp, which hangs from the ceiling, has long-ago given up its task of keeping the shadows out. Alvise keeps the fire in the wood stove too low for our eyes to pretend we can see the sun, which never actually shines in the town. Nothing shines here. Everything remains stooped down under a layer of grey as if the light was afraid to lift its head and had abandoned itself to the idea that nothing can change. The only thing I know about change is the word that defines it. Everything in the town always happens in the exact same way, and change has no meaning. I move near the staircase, the one that leads upstairs, and I am still holding the sweater that I am supposed to bring to Alvise's room. I'm about to climb the first step, trying to remember its name, when I stop and turn. Without knowing what I am doing or why, I place the folded sweater on the chair in front of the stairs. Maybe, if he sees the sweater, he'll change his mind and let me wear it. I smile as I imagine the warm wool against my arms and stomach. It lasts less than a breath, and then I put aside the idea of warmth and look around me. I have to prepare dinner now. On the sideboard, covered in a kitchen towel, is the triangular shape of a huge slice of cheese that one of the townspeople brought to him. They bring grandpa a lot of gifts. It doesn't matter whether it is salami, bread, or cheese. The only thing that matters is that they are useful things and that he can cut them with the knife. Alvise is the only one who can use the knife in this house. I have to make do with my hands because he doesn't want me to touch it. He says that someone like me would only do

damage with that thing. I have to move and stop thinking of certain things. I mustn't think about anything. What I have to do now is prepare the meal for grandpa. He doesn't eat much, but he wants me to put everything carefully in its place: the plate must be a palm's distance from the edge of the table, the fork on the left, the spoon on the right, hollow side up, and the glass in front. It's as if he cares less about the food than he does about the daily routine of nourishment. He never eats with me. We never do anything together. I'll eat later perhaps. When he's finished.

I put the cheese on the table, fill the water jug, dry it, and place it on the table. I break the bread in two parts and set it on the wood stove, which is used to heat the house and also to cook. There is a fireplace, but I've never seen it lit. It is not what Alvisé wants. People sit around the fireplace and tell stories. This never happens to us. For the most part, he speaks and I listen; he orders and I obey; he teaches and I try to learn. I watch the bread to make sure it doesn't burn. When it's ready, I wrap it in the kitchen towel with the cheese and remove the crumbs from the stove top. I've learned to be so fast that I don't get burned. All it takes is speed and dry hands, that's the trick. And tonight I need it to warm me up a little too.

I have to keep everything tidy. Alvisé always says that tidiness is everything. Tidiness and doing things in the right order. Otherwise you start to become slow and untidy, and you end up upending the world. Learning these rules cost me two black fingernails: the index finger and the thumb of my right hand. I haven't made a mistake putting the cutlery on the table since. The fork goes on the left.

*Don't think about it, Giona. And remember not to look into his eyes when he comes upstairs.*

This is my voice. The voice that keeps me company in my head. The voice that helps me do things.

But he isn't here: he's still in the cellar weaving baskets.

*No, he's here. He can always see you. He can sniff out your thoughts from afar, and you know it.*

Yes. Right. I'd better not think. I open the sideboard, take his plate and his glass and place them on the edge of the table, according to his rules. When I'm finished setting the table and everything

is ready, I look outside the window, and I can just see the stars coming out. It's not long before sunset. I've learned to measure time with my eyes.

“Grandpa, dinner's ready.”

As always, silence answers me.

This is how he likes it. No reply and I stand waiting. He says that in this way he is teaching me patience and subjugation. I stand waiting next to the table for him to come upstairs. He's always very quiet, Alvise. He could follow you around for half a day, and you would never know it. Then he'd do something, at just the right moment, and you'd turn around to find yourself staring into those eyes. You'd see your reflection in them a thousand times over.

I can hear his footsteps on the stairs. They are hardly perceptible, but I have learned to understand even the slightest sound that denotes his presence. The soft tread of the soles of his boots, the crackling dry-wood sound of his knees, and his breathing, which becomes slightly heavier as he climbs the stairs. I understand the silence. That's why I know he's there. Alvise's movements are just a slight alteration in the silence. The door on the staircase opens slowly, and grandpa enters without saying a word. I keep my eyes fixed to the ground. I can hear him stop as if he were hesitating. This interruption doesn't last long, not even the blink of an eye, but it's enough to make the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I'd like to see what he's doing, but that would only make things worse. So I try to relax my hands and hope he can't see them shaking.

“And what is this supposed to mean, Giona?”

His voice is calm. Flat as always.

I lift my head a little and see his eyes going from me to the chair in front of the staircase, and from the chair to the table.

“Nothing, grandpa,” I say as I turn around, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

*Why didn't you take your sweater upstairs?* the voice asks.

And I have no answer, neither for the voice nor for Alvise.

“Nothing? What did I ask you to do, Giona?” asks Alvise as he directs his gaze to the sweater.

“To take it upstairs,” I say.

“And did you do that?” he asks again.

“No, grandpa. But you said to take it upstairs, not to your bedroom, and I thought that—»

“Well then. Given the fact that you think but can’t distinguish one room from the other, the kitchen will be your bedroom tonight.”

His words interrupt mine. It’s not fair. He hadn’t actually said to take the sweater to the bedroom.

*Who cares, Giona? You knew what he meant when he told you to take the sweater upstairs. You chose to leave it here. You disobeyed him, and you know it.*

Grandpa moves closer to the table. He passes next to me with deliberate slowness, careful not to touch me. I can’t help but freeze. I expect him to turn quickly any minute now and to start beating me. His hands are used to boxing my ears until all I can hear is a buzzing sound inside my head. But he doesn’t do that this time. He sits down, opens the table drawer, takes out the knife, places it next to the spoon, and starts eating.

I have to keep standing there in silence for the whole dinner. Without uttering a word or even a sound. Like every night, Alvisè eats unhurriedly. He breaks the bread into equal parts, takes a sliver from the block of cheese using the tip of the knife, places it on the bread, and then puts it into his mouth. He makes bite-size pieces and chews at length. He keeps on like that until the bread is finished. Only then does he wipe the blade of the knife on the towel and place it back in the drawer. He sits back, and that is my cue to start clearing the table.

He watches me take the fork, spoon, plate, and glass to the bucket in the sink, place them slowly inside and then wash them without making a sound. One at a time. My hands sting as they touch the cold water and the skin on my arms crinkles again. I don’t know if Alvisè is still sitting down. He could be just a step away. I can feel my shoulders stiffen. After all these years, I still can’t get used to his presence. I concentrate on the ceramic plate. It’s old but not chipped. It has lost its glossy finish, and the glasses are no longer transparent. I can hear the water run along my arms to my

elbows. For fear of wetting the floor, I bend over the sink as if I wanted to dive into it. Not a drop of water must fall. When I'm finished washing, I set the plate and the other things on the stone worktop. I dry them and put them back in the sideboard. Every one of them exactly where they were before.

Only then do I turn around and find Alvis there behind me. My eyes go from his feet to mine, which are in a pair of boots that I have repaired tens of times. I lift my eyes to the hem of my trousers. It is short: it goes only mid-calf. The rest, the bottom part, is made of a different fabric. Who knows if I will ever get a new pair or if I'll have to add more fabric like I did last time? I stop breathing and wait for his next order.

"Why didn't you take your sweater upstairs, Giona?" he asks again.

"Because I was cold and I thought that maybe you had made a mistake," I say.

I realise the enormity of what I have just said only after the words have left my lips. I would like to stick out my tongue and take them back, but it's too late. Alvis flings his arm out and grabs my chin

"Now I will teach you what it means to be cold and what it means to choose. Burn the sweater in the stove, or leave it where it is and leave this house."

I don't understand. Grandpa has never done this before.

"It's easy, Giona. Throw the sweater in the stove, and get out of here. His voice is different. Sharper. If it were a colour, it would be grey, like the blade of a knife.

*Don't you know what to do, Giona? It's easy. Burn the sweater, the old man said. Burn it and sit on the ground near the stove. At least you'll be a bit warm for an hour or so until it gets cold. And you can worry about it tomorrow.*

But then I'll lose it, and I'll be cold forever.

*Well then, go through that door, spend the night in the freezing cold, and hope that by tomorrow he'll have got over it. Hope that he will let you back into this house. Hope that he'll give you your sweater back. But you can't be sure he'll do that. What is the right thing to do, child?*

I don't know.