

WIGHTSTEP

C L E S

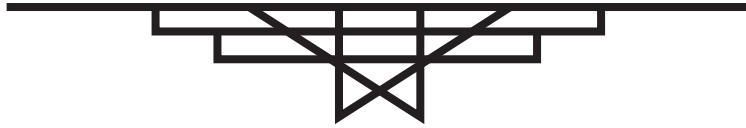


UNCOMMONER'S GENE

A NOVEL BY IVAN BRANKOVIC



Part one
**THE
TRIAL**



Chapter I

Desire must not overwhelm reason.

That was the sentence he was repeating to himself right now. He whispered it, then began to mumble to himself. After a few seconds, he stopped, since he knew the whole room was wired, and he didn't want to leave the impression of a broken, crazy man. He tried to play his part as best he could - the part of a cold, calculated person.

Hide your weaknesses, nobody will do it for you, quite the contrary.

He sighed deeply and raised his head. The cell he was in was small. He could only take four short steps from the bed to the front door. The walls were made of metal, smooth as glass and dark as the destiny of those who were trapped inside. The ceiling was high above his head, enough that he couldn't reach it, no matter how high he jumped. The only window was behind his back, above the bed. The window couldn't be opened, and its only purpose was to show the prisoner all the things he had lost as a consequence of his regrettable decisions. Through it, you could see the whole city, hear its sounds, even smell it. He was so close to freedom, and yet so far. Windows were one of the torture methods. Many prisoners broke and confessed everything just to feel the outside world one more time.

Eidur knew all that, and that was one of the reasons he sat with his back turned to the window. He knew what he would lose the moment he made that decision.

He got up, stretched a little, and then made those four short steps. He stopped by the cell door. The door was narrow and tall, with a triangular top. There were no visible openings of any kind on it. No lock, no handle, nothing. All doors were automatically controlled by guards, and food was delivered by small robots which entered the cell through an opening on the wall. All things considered, this prison was impenetrable. For over two hundred years, nobody managed to escape.

Eidur wasn't even thinking about escaping. He wanted a trial. He wanted to tell his story from the beginning, to tell them everything, to get the answer to the question that had been bugging him since he was a kid. The biggest question of them all.

Who was he?

He turned around, tried not to look through the window and sat on the bed again. He looked at his uniform. It was the uniform of an army mechanic. Bright green with black sleeves. Mechanics had these uniforms so they could be easily spotted by approaching ships.

He was a tall young man with a diamond-shaped face and thick dark hair. A moon sliced in two stood on his chest. The official insignia of the Void Runner Squadron. Under it, his rank: 'Senior mechanic'. The highest rank for a commoner. So close to becoming a dragoon, and yet so far. He could watch their trainings, he repaired their bladeships, he

could do anything but sit inside the ship and become one of them. That was one of the reasons why that window couldn't break him as easily as it could break other prisoners. All his life he was so close, and yet so far from fulfilling his dreams.

The noise from the outside became louder. Actually, the sound was coming from small speakers hidden around the room. Guards saw that he wasn't reacting to it, so they increased the volume. Until now, he could hear just a faint murmur, but now the murmur became clearer. It became a cluster of voices of many men, women and children. But it was still an incomprehensible cacophony. Nothing that could break his concentration.

You can close your eyes to avoid looking, but you can't close your ears to avoid hearing.

Zebet was right. The easiest way to distract someone was with sound. But, he had also taught him a few tricks on how to avoid distraction. The first one was to start talking, or at least murmuring loudly.

Make yourself louder than the noise.

That was an easy thing to say, but too hard to do. Eidur started humming a melody. It was a momentary improvisation, nothing more than that. The guards heard it and increased the volume of the noise. Now he could hear the voices more clearly. He heard two men arguing about the price of vegetables. He heard a woman calling her child, and the child calling her back. Time slowed down, and for an hour Eidur was immovable, and then, all of a sudden, he stopped singing. He saw no point in it. After all, as far as he was concerned, that sound was more irritating than tempting. He got up and started walking around his cell like an animal in a cage. He was nervous because he was bored. There were no books, no computers, nothing in here. Just him, the walls and the window.

The guards probably realized that he wasn't paying attention to the outside world and they stopped increasing the volume. Eidur walked for a few more minutes, and then stopped. He heard a voice which distracted him. A boy was speaking to someone, probably his father. With the enthusiasm natural only to kids, he was describing the bladeship in the sky.

"Daddy, look! A bladeship! Look how it ref... ref... refills the light."

"Reflects, Willy, not refills," the calm voice of his father was an opposition to his excitement.

"Yes, daddy. Hey, I'm gonna fly in one of them when I grow up, I'm gonna become a dragoon, you know that?"

"Yes, Willy, you will," his father said, knowing that he was too young to understand that he would never do that.

Eidur stopped in the middle of the cell. That kid was his distraction. That kid was excited like he had been a long time ago and, like him, that kid believed he could become a dragoon.

Chapter II

20 years earlier

The royal palace of the planet Garez was bathing in the summer sunshine in its capital, Hiliapolis. From outside, it was hard to look at it without some kind of eye protection, because its smooth walls reflected sunlight like mirrors. The smoothness added more magnificence to an already magnificent object. The palace was actually a complex that had grown through the ages. Centuries ago, the central part, 'the old court', was built on the hilltop for the royal family. As the family grew, so did the complex. At first, it was smaller buildings adjoining the main one. Over time, noble families built their palaces in the vicinity of the royal one. Not long after, new buildings rose between the palaces, connecting them. It grew like a living thing, until it took on the grotesque, but magnificent form it had today. It was a mixture of all architectural styles that ever existed on the planet. Tall needle-shaped towers leaned on the round, massive auditoriums. Square, modern structures, with landing strips on their roofs, looked like overgrown children among flamboyant houses from the old times. In some places, glass towers rose from the foundations of old houses like some kind of gigantic parasites. Among all of them, passages, streets, parks and lakes formed a maze complicated even for the people who lived there their whole lives. The entire complex was surrounded with a tall smooth wall. The wall had no defensive purpose, since it was built long after the last airforce-free war was waged. Its purpose was to separate the complex from the city around it. The wall was a physical example of the separation of classes. For the commoners, it was a symbol of the world they weren't part of. Underneath it, a city of Hilapolis buzzed like a beehive, with modern residential areas on its rims and the old court, square, and the prison tower at its heart.

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A group of kids ran through the streets of Lowerlands, a middle-class part of the city that lay on both sides of the river. The whole neighborhood was made of identical gray concrete skyscrapers positioned in a pattern, with small patches of grass between. The kids stopped on one of the patches and looked into the sky. There were five of them, three boys and two girls. They were all around the age of ten, and dark-haired, like all commoners. The tallest of them stood in front and said,

"Come on, guys. If we get to the outskirts on time, we can watch their whole training session."

"Eidur, don't be a fool, you know we are not allowed to go there", said the girl who stood next to him.

"But listen, I know a way. We can hide in the remains of the old hangar and watch it from there, nobody will see us." Eidur was persistent.

"I don't feel like going there", one of the boys said, "I'd rather go to the playground. We can organize a drone race on the new track?"

The others agreed with his suggestion, but Eidur was not in the mood to withdraw.

"But fellas, come on! This is a unique chance to watch the training of Lightstep dragoons. They don't have many trainings on the surface. Lucy, you understand me."

"No, I don't", the girl said. "If you want to chase after them, go! I'm joining the others on the playground."

"All right!" Eidur was a bit angry. *"Your loss, not mine. See you later."*

Eidur turned around and ran toward the river, while the rest of the group returned to the playground.

Eidur easily found his way to the city outskirts. He knew the streets like the back of his hand, and that was strange even to his parents. They had the feeling that the boy could remember a whole city block after passing through it just once. As he approached the outskirts, the density of the buildings, streets and people started to diminish. In a moment, Eidur found himself at a huge abandoned construction site.

The site had been planned for a new residential block but, in the middle of construction, planners and investors realized that nobody wanted to buy an expensive condo in an area surrounded by a troublesome poor neighbourhood in the north, and an endless wasteland in the south. The army used the wasteland as training grounds, and the construction area was a perfect border between the city and them.

Eidur moved like a cat through the overgrown weeds and bushes that grew in the rubble, paying attention not to step on a forgotten nail or piece of wire. He reached the remains of the steel frame of the skyscraper and climbed on it easily. He found a terrace from which he could have a good view of the wasteland. Scrawny bushes and patches of grass grew here and there, but mostly it was bare yellow dust. In the middle of the valley was a hangar for blade ships and a landing zone.

Right now, two bladeships were outside the hangar. Their blade wings were retracted and used as stands, which made the ships look like giant insects. Eidur could see mechanics in their green uniforms around them, making final preparations. A few moments later, two dragoons stepped outside and approached the ships. Dragoons wore cadets' blue uniforms, and today they had their atmosphere training session.

Eidur was trembling from excitement; he couldn't wait to see them in action. He knew that these ships were training ships, and that the fight he was going to see was nothing more than practice, but it was the best he could hope to witness in the foreseeable future. He certainly wasn't old enough, or noble enough, to watch real fights in space.

Two cadets, Will and Morgan, entered their ships and rose vertically into the air a few moments later. Their mission was to fly straight toward each other. At one point, one of them would get a command to steer, and the other one would have to steer the opposite

way. The goal was to test the 'chrono zen', the precognition skill, since the distance was shorter each time, and therefore there was less time to react.

They climbed for a few minutes, and then steered in opposite ways. They flew like that until they were unable to see each other. Then they got a simultaneous order to turn around.

For Will, this was his first real flight. He had done his time at the simulator, but this was the real deal. As soon as he got the order, he turned and grabbed the handles on both sides. He took a deep breath and accelerated.

Morgan was not as inexperienced as Will, but he was still far from a senior dragoon. He turned around and accelerated straight towards Will's ship, a tiny dot in the distance.

Who will be the first... he thought while he was approaching the dot that was rapidly taking the shape of the vessel. Two seconds later, he saw the green light.

To turn left or right... was his thought for a fraction of the second, and then he squeezed the left handle.

Will was ready for that move, and as soon as Morgan's ship steered left, he did the same thing.

They missed each other at a great distance. A few moments later, it was time for the next round. This time, Will was the one who steered first, and he chose to steer right. They did the same several times, and then they were ready for the real thing.

This round, they were supposed to miss each other by no more than a few centimeters. Will and Morgan flew to their starting positions.

Will closed his eyes and tried to calm down. *Only a calm body can achieve precognition.* As his pulse decreased, he opened his eyes, grabbed both handles, and his ship rushed toward Morgan's. It was Morgan's turn to get the green light and to choose sides. He looked at the approaching ship with his whole body on edge. *Left or right, left or right* he was repeating to himself, trying to focus on only one thing. Morgan was close, they had already passed the mark set in the first round. The time started passing slowly for Will. *Left or right...* they passed the second round mark. To Will, it was like a minute had passed, though it was only two seconds. *Left or right...* he slowed his body down to a level where he could almost see the movement of the air around the ship. *Left or right...* it was high time to steer, they had passed the last round mark. Morgan should be steering at any moment...

Green light. No, it's not his turn! It's Morgan's! To steer or not? Left or right? The dilemma lasted for a tenth of a second. Enough to be a fraction of a second too late.

Will tried to steer right, but he was too late. Morgan steered right too, but Will's wing caught the bottom part of Morgan's ship, tearing it like it was made of paper. Morgan heard a creaking sound underneath him, and tried to climb up to avoid a bigger crash. Unfortunately, his ship wasn't capable of doing such a thing. The vessel started climbing,

but then it started turning around uncontrollably. Morgan felt he was losing consciousness due to a huge G force. He only managed to do one thing before he fainted. He pressed the eject button, and the whole capsule separated from the vessel, a moment before the ship broke in two.

Eidur watched all this from his hideout. The thrill he felt when they almost missed each other changed rapidly into shock. The shock paralyzed him, and he didn't notice a part of the ship that was going straight at him! The piece approached rapidly, and when the boy saw it, it was already too late to move.

A hand grabbed Eidur and pushed him a few meters into the bushes, a moment before the ship piece crashed where he was standing. Eidur got on his feet, unaware of the cuts and bruises he got from landing in a thorny bush. He made a few weak steps, and then he heard a loud, commanding voice.

"What are you doing here, boy?! Are you insane?! Do you know this is a restricted area?"

The voice belonged to an old, tall dragoon, who at this moment looked like a giant to Eidur. He wore the gray uniform of senior dragoons, his hair was almost completely white, and Eidur couldn't take his eyes off his huge hands, that looked like shovels to him.

"I... I just wanted to see the training...", Eidur muttered, still recovering from the shock.

"Who let you come here? Do your parents know what you're doing?"

"No... sir... I... I just love to watch ships..."

"Then you should do it from a safer distance. You were lucky that I spotted you when the drill started, or right now you'd be nothing more than minced meat." He said and pointed to the spot where Eidur had stood.

The piece of the ship cut the terrace in half like it was made of plastic and hammered into the rubble underneath it. Eidur now understood what had happened. The dragoon pushed him and jumped at the last moment.

"I'm... I'm sorry, sir." Eidur was still frozen from the shock.

"Hmm, what should I do with you", the dragoon said, and Eidur didn't notice the change in his voice, *"Well, maybe I should punish you."*

Eidur bowed his head, expecting the punishment.

The dragoon looked at him, and smiled.

"Come on, I was joking. You really scared me, kid. Listen, you're a commoner, aren't you?"

"Yes sir, I live in the Lowerlands.", Eidur was still in the same position, expecting to be slapped at best.

"Raise your head! I understand everything, I can see that you are fascinated with ships."

“Yes. I love flying. I know everything about bladeships. One day, when I grow up, I’m going to be a dragoon too!” Eidur’s voice was getting that childish, excited tone once again. He knew that the danger had passed.

“Yes you are”, the old dragoon was smiling, *“but you’ll have to survive until then. That’s why I don’t want to see you here anymore, do you understand?”*

“Yes, sir!”

“Now, take this.” The dragoon reached into his pocket and took a small badge out of it. *“One day, when you’re old enough, this will help you become a dragoon.”*

Eidur took the badge like something sacred. He held it in his hands, too afraid to put it in his pocket. He looked at the old dragoon and said with a faint voice,

“Thank you... good sir.”

“You’re welcome. Now take off before the others arrive. They certainly don’t want to find you here.”

Eidur ran like never before, leaving the wreck and the old dragoon behind. He didn’t stop until he reached the playground. He wanted to tell everybody about his adventure, but unfortunately, they had already gone home.

**The Uncommoner's Gene
will be available soon in its entirety.**

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