

**I AM  
SLEEPLESS:  
SIM 299**

A novel

Johan Twiss

***DO NOT COPY  
OR  
DISTRIBUTE***

Twiss Publishing, Copyright © 2015  
Author John A. Burger (pen name Johan Twiss).  
All rights reserved.

Editor – Heather Monson  
Cover Illustrator – Sky Young  
Interior Sketch Artist – Adrienne Burger

No part of this book may be reproduced in any format or in any medium without the written permission of the author. This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, places, and dialogue are either products of the author's imagination, and are not to be construed as real, or are used fictitiously.

ISBN-13: 978-1517166335  
ISBN-10: 1517166330

## CHAPTER 1: THE PIT

*I have come to believe that there is no escape from war. The only solution is to control it. Control is key, and the Prime Initiative offers that control. It is the only way to save our worlds. Hashmeer is overtaken and soon Omori and Ethos will fall. Even if I could sleep, I would fear the nightmares that are coming for us.*

- Doctor T.M. Omori,

*Man's Quest for Destruction: A Case for the Prime Initiative*

Do you really think he is the key to ending this war?" General Estrago asked. "He is just a boy. True, he possesses two rare gifts, but I do not see how they translate into victory on the battlefield."

Director Tuskin flared his nostrils in annoyance. "Estrago, in all of my lifetimes he is the only other prime, besides myself, born with multiple gifts and without defects. Despite your benighted observations, his two rare gifts are the most important to our cause. Not even I am a puzzler or a vibrunt."

General Estrago shifted his bulk to the left side and winced as a painful crack emanated from his lower back. The thick protruding scars on his face tightened as he clenched his jaw against the pain. The scars zig-zagged from his forehead, down his dark brown face, through his neatly-trimmed beard and crept down his neck like a spidergoose web, until hiding from view beneath the high brown collar of his uniform.

He had grown another three inches in the last year and stood nearly twelve feet tall, but the pain was becoming unbearable. He wondered how much longer his body would hold out. Few eidetics lived to his age-- even fewer grew to his stature. General Estrago waited another moment for the shooting pain to dissipate before continuing.

"He is unique. No other puzzler on record has lived past the age of eight. He will be twelve next week and will join the upper-coterie in the trials, but only three of their original twelve coterie members remain. They are the youngest and smallest group in the trials. They do not have a chance in the Pit."

Director Tuskin stared at the image of Aidan on the holoscreen.

"Thank you for your input, Estrago. What you don't realize is that I've been slimming down his coterie over these last few years for this very purpose."

"You have?" General Estrago questioned, alarmed by the revelation. "But they were only prime cadets, sir. We need all the primes we can train for the war."

Director Tuskin dismissed the accusation with a wave of his hand.

“You forget your place, Estrago. You forget who I am. You forget what I did to your coterie when you were a boy.”

General Estrago paled. He closed his eyes to block the memories and subconsciously ran his fingers along the web of scars on his face.

Director Tuskin rose from his chair and walked to the holoscreen, his face inches away from the image of Aidan.

“Everything I do is for the survival of this planet. Ethos and the human race cannot be wiped out. We must continue to push this boy to develop his gifts. If I am right, he is the key to ending this war.”

\*\*\*

“DUCK!” Aidan yelled into his commlink.

Fig dove backward, watching in horror as a boulder the size of a bipod flew overhead.

“Thanks,” Fig trembled, sweat beading along his blue forehead. “I didn’t see it coming.”

“No problem. I can hear their whole coterie on the other side of the ridge. Four lugs, two meks, two agulators, and one eidetic.”

“Tuskin’s fury!” Fig swore. “Remind me how this is fair? Nine fifteen-year cadets against the three of us. We’re so dead. And this sun is absolutely blinding me.”

Aidan dashed behind a destroyed bipod. Smoke rose from the towering heap of a crashed hover vehicle as it lay amongst the goblin-like pillars of red stone protruding from the canyon floor. The shadows cast by the bipod’s crunched, charcoal-colored metal, camouflaged his own gray skin and his two-tone gray and green uniform, but it did little to hide his bright green hair and one bright green eye.

“Relax, Fig,” Aidan said between breaths. “This is what we’ve trained for since we were kids. Now we have a chance to test our skills against other cadets. Plus, we have an advantage.”

“We do?”

“Yeah. I just stepped in bearcat dung.”

“What? Gross. How does smelling like you haven’t showered in a month an advantage? We’re so dead. Dead I tell you. Dead. Dead. Dead.”

“Fig. Calm down. I also know where they are hiding their trophy and they have no clue where to find ours.”

Aidan bent over and touched the ground. Closing his eyes to concentrate, he used his gift as a vibrunt to vibro-scan the Pit, focusing his mind to feel the pulses in the earth and listen to the air waves around the surrounding canyon. A multi-dimensional image of the battlefield came clearly to his mind. On the far end of the wide canyon stood the fifteen-year prime base, protected by a natural wall of red rock with jutting spires along the wall edge.

“They’re taking a defensive position,” Aidan said. “I think they’re testing us before attacking. They’ve never fought a coterie like ours.”

“You mean they’ve never faced a prime like you.”

Aidan nodded, though Fig couldn’t see him. He knew he freaked out all the upper-coterie. They hid their fear through the usual name calling, insults, and unfriendly hand gestures back in Mount Fegorio.

A distinct tapping, their private comms code, echoed in their earpieces.

“I read you, Palomas,” Aidan said. “You’re right. We need to draw them out. Ideas, anyone?”

“I say we throw them our trophy and call it a day,” Fig answered.

“Better idea,” Palomas tapped into her earpiece. “Fig jumps into their base shooting fireballs and then runs away like a baby.”

Aidan chuckled.

“No! That’s a horrible idea. In the history of ideas that is the worst,” Fig complained. “I may have the awesomest mek suit ever, but all nine of them would smash me into nanobits.”

“You’re such a wuss,” Palomas tapped. “They can’t really kill you.”

Fig huffed. "I know that. But remember what General Estrago always preaches: 'If you break a leg during the trial it will feel like you broke your leg in real life.' Which means if you die in a trial you get all the pain of death. I'll pass, thanks."

"She does have a point," Aidan countered. "We need a distraction and your suit makes you the fastest. They also won't leave the base unguarded with Palomas still hiding in the canyon. So here's what we do."

Aidan quickly laid out a plan and promised Fig his dessert ration if he would cooperate.

*For such a tiny mek, he eats as much as a lug*, Aidan thought. "Okay, everyone ready?"

"No!" Fig exclaimed.

"Perfect--let's go," Palomas tapped.

Palomas darted from her hiding spot against the canyon wall to hide behind a pile of large boulders in view of the enemy base.. Her rich golden skin and long golden hair, pulled back in a tight bun, sparkled in the sunlight. Her matching golden uniform, of the Ethos army, left no mistake that she was a lug.

"How far away?" Palomas tapped.

"About 500 feet. Think you can make it that far?"

Palomas rolled her eyes and heaved one of the massive rocks toward the enemy. It hit the ridge wall of the enemy base and the crash echoed throughout the Pit.

"Nice! You got their attention, but now aim 10 feet to the left and 15 feet higher," Aidan called.

He vibro-scanned, watching as Palomas tossed the next giant boulder into the heart of the enemy base. Aidan cringed when the boulder crushed two of the opposing coterie. Their screams pierced the air.

"They're down one lug and an agulator. And they look mad. You're up, Fig."

Fig adjusted his sweaty hands on the controls of his suit. They turned a lighter shade of blue as he squeezed the controls.

“You are the man. You can do this. Breathe,” he whispered to himself.

“Fig! Go now you little blue midget!” Palomas tapped impatiently. “A lug and an agulator jumped the wall and are on my tail.”

Letting out a final breath, Fig stepped out from his hiding place behind a giant red boulder. He stood on a long platform of red rock about forty feet up the canyon wall. The feet of his mek suit gripped the sandstone rock as he dashed toward the edge of the cliff, yelled a warcry, and jumped. Fig looked out his mek suit window in awe as he soared through the air in a wide arc. To his surprise, and relief, he landed safely in the main clearing at the center of the canyon. With nowhere to hide, he took off at a sprint toward the enemy base.

“Can I just say that I hate both of you right now?” he shouted over the hum of his exoskeleton mek battle suit.

“Noted.” Aidan answered. “Palomas, be careful. There’s a second lug on your left trying to flank you.”

“Got it,” Palomas tapped while dodging a boulder.

Approaching at full speed, Fig lifted his mek suit arms and shot two fireballs toward the ridge wall surrounding the enemy base. It exploded with flames, sending a lug sprawling backward. Two enemy meks emerged, jumping over the ridge. They fired a round of mist rockets at Fig, creating a smokescreen that spread out across the center of the canyon.

A harpoon, with a chain attached to it, shot through the smoke directly at Fig’s chest.

Fig barely dodged the first projectile when a second harpoon struck him in the right leg of his suit, exploding into a gooey mess which hardened in seconds.

“Spidergoose!” Fig swore. “They’re using plaster rounds, Aidan. They don’t want to kill me. They want to capture my suit, steal my tech, and then kill me.”

“I figured they might,” Aidan replied. “Keep them busy. I’m almost in their base. They were nice to create that smokescreen for me to sneak in.”

Fig swore again as the other mek landed a second plaster round to his torso. The two enemy meks began retracting their chains to reel him in.

*Oh no you don't*, Fig thought, pushing the button labeled ‘Lug-Mode’ on his control panel. The hum of his suit dropped deeper as the torque increased throughout its limbs. Lug-Mode was one of his newest upgrades. It made the suit sluggish, but incredibly strong. He wasn’t quite as strong as Palomas when he went into Lug-Mode, but he was pretty close.

Gripping both of the attached chains, Fig yanked. Before they could react, the surprised enemy meks found themselves being dragged across the ground like play toys.

“Way to go, Fig,” Palomas tapped. The smoke began to clear and Palomas came into view on the opposite side of the base. She raced toward Fig with three enemy primes close behind.

“Hope you don’t mind. I’m bringing my friends over to play.”

Aidan smiled as he watched the scene unfold. This was turning out better than he had expected. Slipping over the southernmost part of the enemy wall, he landed softly in their base. He vibro-scanned the area, taking note of the two lug’s and agulator lying on the ground, already taken out by Fig and Palomas.

*All I have to do is get by the eidetic*, Aidan thought, spying the seven-foot-tall, dark brown eidetic teenager guarding the trophy.

He felt bad for eidetics. Their size and photographic recall were amazing, but they never stopped growing. This did make them stronger than all the other primes, besides lugs, but the non-stop growth led to excruciating non-stop growing pains. It was the eidetic defect.

Pushing his sympathy aside, Aidan crept closer to the eidetic and reached into his pants pocket, removing a bag full of the bearcat dung he had stepped in earlier.

*Now for the fun part*, Aidan thought. Taking off his pack he gingerly reached inside and retrieved another bag, but this one was full of burning beetlants.

“I’m so glad I found your nest in the cave,” Aidan whispered to the tiny insects. “Hopefully my aim is as good as Palomas’.”

Aidan opened the bag full of sloppy, noxious bearcat dung, stood from his hiding place, and threw it at the eidetic.

*Splat!* The dung found its mark.

“Why, you little twerp!” the eidetic bellowed as he lumbered toward Aidan. The eidetics dark brown uniform and dark brown skin made him look like a walking tree trunk as he approached.

Aidan shook his head sorrowfully. “Hey, man, for what it’s worth, I really am sorry about this.” He opened the second bag and tossed the burning beetlants at the eidetic’s feet.

“You missed,” the eidetic boy sneered.

Aidan frowned. “No. I didn’t.”

The beetlants, now released from the bag, caught a whiff of the bearcat dung and swarmed. The poor boy swung his hands in futile attempts to swat them away, but it was no use. Hundreds of tiny beetlants bit and bored into his skin, leaving fiery red welts and pinpricks of brown blood in their wake. The boy collapsed to the ground.

“I’m really sorry about this,” Aidan muttered again, feeling sick as he walked past the writhing eidetic boy on his way toward the trophy.

He reached out to grab the thin trophy disc, but stopped. Puzzler mode took over. Something was wrong.

*It’s a trap*, his mind spat out. *The two lugs and the agulator are faking their injuries and the trophy on display is a counterfeit. The real trophy is with one of the meks in the center of the Pit.*

“Tuskin’s fury!” Aidan swore into his commlink. “Palomas, Fig, the trophy is with one of their meks. You’ve got to find it now!”

No answer.

“Fig? Palomas? Do you hear me?”

Aidan felt vibrations in the air and dove to the side as a boulder flew toward him from behind.

“Lucky move, punk,” the agulator taunted as she floated through the air toward Aidan. Her white facemask and billowing white cloak gave the agulator an eerie appearance of an angel floating in the air.

*An angel of death*, Aidan thought.

The two golden-skinned lugs skulked behind the agulator, each carrying massive rocks.

“Since my two lug brothers can’t speak, let me tell you how this is going to work, you two-toned freak. You tell us where your trophy is hidden and I will kill you quickly. No pain.”

“Fig? Palomas?” Aidan whispered.

The Agulator smiled. “Oh, our meks jammed your commlink,” she said matter-of-factly. “I have to say, though, for your first trial you losers did better than expected. But even with your freak powers, you never had a chance.”

*What to do?* thought Aidan as he stared at the approaching agulator.

The agulator changed her density and came crashing to the ground with the force of a meteor, leaving a small crater.

“Time’s up, freak. Tell me where your trophy is.”

Aidan felt the trophy under his shirt, secured to his chest with the special vest he made to hide books that General Estrago, the headmaster of Mount Fegorio, smuggled to him each week. The small metal disc felt cold and tingled against his warm skin. It was an exact replica of a real trophy disc, used to power all the war machines of the Ethos military. But these trophy discs were mere replicas and held no power charge.

*Maybe keeping the trophy with me wasn’t such a good idea after all*, Aidan thought.

“Okay, I’ll tell you,” Aidan said, trembling and feigning panic. “I’ll tell you where the trophy is, but you don’t have to kill any of us. Just keep me here, go get the trophy and you win.”

The all white agulator half-floated, half-stepped her way to stand directly in front of Aidan. She settled to the ground slowly this time as she changed her density.

*I wonder if she's pretty under that mask,* Aidan thought.

Agulators rarely took their masks off in public. Aidan had only seen one agulator's face before-- a girl in their coterie named Mesqule. Aidan remembered her happy, beautiful, snow white face. But sadly, Mesqule died last year, and the deadly female agulator standing before him was definitely not Mesqule. This was Kara, captain of the fifteen-year primes, and she had hated Aidan for as long as he could remember.

*"Shhh,"* Kara whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you... much."

Pulling back her arm, she punched Aidan square in the chest, changing the density of her arm to that of a war hammer. As Aidan tumbled flat on his back, the two lugs let out breathy laughs, though no sound came out. Muteness was the lug defect.

Luckily the trophy strapped to his chest took the brunt of Kara's blow, but Aidan knew his ribs were definitely bruised, if not broken.

Changing to the weight of a feather, Kara floated above Aidan while he lay on his back gasping for air.

"You have until the count of three before I let myself fall down on you with the weight of a hippopotamus."

"ONE."

*I'm so dead,* Aidan thought.

"TWO."

*If I give her the trophy, she'll just kill me anyway and their coterie will get more points for collecting our trophy.*

"THREE"

Aidan closed his eyes, preparing to be squashed.

"Time's up freak. Enjoy your first death in the Pit."

Aidan's eyes snapped open, his senses heightened like never before. He felt his mind and body meld between vibrancy and puzzler mode in a new way he had never experienced.

Kara came crashing down and Aidan rolled to the side at precisely the right moment to avoid her smashing assault.

His mind cleared and focused acutely on the world around him. Everything seemed to move in slow-motion as he processed every minute detail of his surroundings. He ran toward the lugs as they heaved jagged rocks at him, easily sidestepping their throws. He knew exactly where their throws would land before they released them.

Recovering from her miss, Kara turned, ran a few steps to build-up momentum and then jumped, changing her density to rocket toward Aidan. With his back turned to the Kara, Aidan dodged the deadly punches of the lugs, then sidestepped as Kara changed her density to smash into him. But instead of hitting Aidan, she flattened one of her brother lugs.

Aidan's stomach churned as he heard the lugs bones and joints break under the weight of the agulator. No doubt he was dead this time.

Fuming, Kara rushed at Aidan, swinging ferociously. She jumped in the air, flying around him while she attacked from multiple angles. Aidan easily dodged her punches and those of the remaining lug. In one swift movement he slipped his arm through Kara's defenses and grabbed her fastened mask in just the right spot so he could swipe it off her head. The agulator screamed as the sun's rays burned her exposed pale white flesh.

*UV rays, Aidan thought sadly. The agulator defect.*

Sensing the lug approaching from behind, Aidan calculated the perfect movement to guide the lug's swing directly into Kara's path. A resounding crack filled the air as the lug's fist connected with the Kara's skull, sending her down for good. Milky white blood oozed from the side of Kara's mouth and began to boil and bubble on her lips and cheek. The surprised lug bent over his sister, shocked by what he had done and terrified as he watched her face and blood burn and sizzle in the sunlight.

Aidan scrambled to the top of the ridge wall and took one last look at the remaining lug.

“Sorry about all this,” he said sincerely, waving his hand in the direction of the lug’s fallen comrades. He really was sorry they had to fight, but he knew he needed to taunt the lug for his plan to work and to save Fig and Palomas.

“Just remember,” Aidan said with a wink of his gray eye. “You were the one who hit her, not me. Hopefully Kara will forgive your clumsiness.” Aidan smiled and winked his green eye this time.

The lug’s face flushed a deep gold. He grabbed a nearby boulder, just as Aidan knew he would, and heaved it at Aidan with all his strength. Aidan’s mind precisely judged everything as he took a running start, jumped off the ridge toward the oncoming boulder, and landed safely on top of it as it flew like a bipod into the sky.

Aidan rode the aerial boulder toward the center of the Pit where Fig and Palomas fought for their virtual lives. Aidan’s weight sent the trajectory of the boulder careening toward one of the meks Fig was fighting. Just before it collided with the mek, Aidan jumped off the boulder with a graceful tuck-and-roll.

The projectile smashed the mek suit hatch open, revealing a tiny, three-foot tall, blue mek at the controls. Next to him lay the trophy.

Aidan scrambled to the disc and grabbed it. Immediately their virtual surroundings changed from the bright blue sky and rocky red terrain of the canyon to multiple rows of trainer seats lined at the front of a spacious assembly hall with dozens of spectators. They had survived their first trial competition in the Pit.





BURNING BEETLANT