

Damon Harker was chosen for a new program designed to produce warriors using methods similar to ancient Sparta. While friends played sports and went to dances, Damon shot down MiGs and battled drug lords.

THE SPARTAN INITIATIVE

By Robert A. Tayler

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Robert A. Tayler

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THE PLAYERS

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY (CIA)

Assistant Deputy Director of Operations – Steve Tolliver

DEFENSE SECURITY AGENCY (DSA)

Director – Wanda Harris – Washington, DC

Deputy Operations Director – Theresa Prince – Indianapolis and DC

Supervising Agent in Charge, Indianapolis – Lucinda Cooper

Doctor Kevin Urban – Physician

OMEGA TEAM

Commander – Major Damon C. Harker

Assistant Commander – Chief Warrant Officer Jake “Trip” Tripley

Operations Sergeant/Scout – Eddie Black Elk, full-blooded Oglala Sioux

Assistant Operations Sergeant – Staff Sergeant JJ Diaz

Communications Sergeant – First Sergeant Alarico Pancho

Engineering Sergeant – Brandon “UM” Long

Medical Sergeant – Patrick Chen

Medical Sergeant – William “Billy” Morris

Weapons Sergeant – Gunnery Sergeant David Kang

PROLOGUE

**Da Nang Air Base
South Vietnam
Thursday, July 5, 1973**

My lungs burned as I double-timed it through the gates of the sprawling Da Nang airbase. Breathing was difficult in the thick, humid summer air—like trying to breathe underwater in a hot tub.

Sweaty and gross after my long jungle patrol, I made a beeline for the showers. Stripping off my olive-drab jungle fatigues, I stepped under the cold running water, the coolness a welcome relief from the sweltering tropical sun. I stayed in the shower longer than usual, necessary to scrub off the critters and crud that clung to my skin.

I belonged to Special Operations Group Three, which was a unique unit based at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis. Unique because our age skewed much younger than typical Army soldiers. Pentagon planners wanted to give us "real world" combat experience, which is why twenty-four SOG Three members were now stationed at Da Nang. This week we had joined search-and-destroy patrols along the railroad tracks that stretched north of Da Nang, to root out

any Viet Cong or North Vietnamese troops that might be loitering nearby.

It was tiresome, frustrating work because the enemy were like cockroaches; impossible to see during the day, swarming over the countryside at night.

After showering, I donned a fresh pair of skivvies and socks, then put on a dry shirt and pants. I was off duty, so my field jacket would go back in the BOQ room I shared with fellow Spartan Reggie Lawson. The last thing to do was shake out my boots before strapping them on. In 'Nam, you always checked your boots, unless you enjoyed sharing them with a host of nasty, biting things.

On the way to my quarters, I thought about the absurdity of my situation. The last US combat soldier had left Vietnam on March 29. There were 7,500 Department of Defense “advisors”—including SOG Three—left in South Vietnam, to guard the Saigon embassy and train South Vietnamese forces to fight on without US help. From what I had observed, it was an exercise in futility.

Such things were above my pay grade, so I wasted no time thinking about them. Leaving the showers, I stopped by my room, hanging my jacket on a wall hook. My stomach rumbled impatiently, reminding me I had not eaten for hours. I hustled out the door, jogging toward the enlisted men's mess. There was an Officer's Club nearby, but it was off-limits to officers as young as Reggie and me. Supposedly, seeing us made too many people nervous. The "O" Club served excellent food; the enlisted mess not so much, but I needed the calories. Even from soggy corned beef.

“Lieutenant Harker!” Annoyed, I turned to see who was yelling at me. A green-uniformed man was chasing me, waving his arms.

“What is it, Corporal?”

He stopped, panting in the jungle heat. “Sir, the Colonel needs you ASAP!”

“Now? But I haven't eaten in—” Just then, a loud, baritone voice hollered from an open doorway: “HARKER!”

Pivoting on my heels, I sprinted toward the Da Nang Operations Building while trying to tuck in my shirt. My ID tags were hanging loose, smacking me in the face as I ran. Fortunately, I

got everything squared away right before arriving at the door to Colonel Hildebrandt's office. Peering inside, I saw William "Bucktooth Bill," overall commander of US forces in Da Nang, sitting at his desk, his massive frame threatening to overwhelm his rickety desk chair. Gunnery Sergeant David Kang, a shorter but muscular man with jet-black hair, stood beside his desk. The Sarge was not happy.

"Colonel, this whole thing blows. We should—"

"Negative. Look, I know how you feel, Gunny. I'm not crazy about sending the kid out, either, but I've got my orders, and now, so do you." Kang opened his mouth, but Hildebrandt stopped him cold. "Matter's closed. Your objection is noted, but I'm not throwing away my birds"—he pointed to the silver eagles pinned on his collar—"disobeying a direct order from the Army Chief of Staff. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." Hildebrandt looked up, scowling as he spied me by the door. "Ah, Harker, there you are. Get your butt over here."

I strode up to his desk, executing a smart salute. "Sir, 2nd Lieutenant Damon Harker reporting as ordered, sir."

Kang rolled his eyes while the Colonel cackled, jerking his thumb at me. "See, Gunny? We got us a bonafide Yankee Doodle dandy here, all ready to go!" Kang made a face but said nothing.

"At ease, Harker!" Hildebrandt barked. "Boy, you're wound up tighter than a priest at a Rockettes show." He waited for a laugh, got none. "You completed sniper training at Quantico, correct?"

"Yes, sir." I had completed a compressed five-week course at the vaunted USMC base in Virginia, earning extremely high marks in the process.

"Excellent. Kang's a decent shooter himself. I want you two to train together for the next three days, with him spotting you. If I'm satisfied, I've got an important assignment for you."

"Colonel, if this is so important—"

"Belay that, Gunny!" Hildebrandt snapped. "Bottom line is, Defense has poured a ton of money into training super soldiers like

Harker, and they're looking for a payoff. So, you spot, he shoots, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Kang grunted, looking even unhappier.

Hildebrandt pointed a fat finger at me. "Listen, Harker. I know you're young, but this is critical. You do the job, and it could save hundreds of lives. Might put a major kink in the North's plans for a while." He sat back and smiled. "Hell, Harker, you'd be an honest-to-goodness American hero, you pull this off. You game?"

"Sir, yes sir!" I enthused. We exchanged salutes, and I pivoted to leave, grinning from ear to ear. My exuberance faded somewhat when I noticed the expression on Kang's face. "Is there a problem, Gunny?"

"Nah, Lieutenant, just wondering why the Colonel chose me for this honor."

I chucked his shoulder good-naturedly. "Don't worry; it'll be easy as pie."

"Whatever you say, kid, whatever you say."

East of Svay Rieng, Cambodia Friday, July 13, 1973

This assignment was not what I had been expecting, but orders were orders.

"Target acquired, seated far right at your eleven o'clock, range eight hundred fifty-seven yards," Kang informed me.

At last, some action! A welcome relief after spending the previous two days hunkered down in our ambush site. My sweat-soaked tiger stripe camouflage fatigues itched like crazy. After staying hidden for forty-eight hours to escape detection, I figured leeches now covered my entire body.

"Sure you're up for this, Lieutenant?" Kang asked, watching me move into a prone firing position.

"No problem, Gunny. Especially if this will save lives, like the Colonel said," I managed to say without throwing up. My earlier

excitement had ebbed, replaced by a growing sense of dread at what I had been asked to do.

“Boy, do you have a lot to learn, kid.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Geez, Harker, the brass says that about every mission. Back in '67, a Major fed me the same line of bull while I was digging a latrine.”

Ignoring his cynicism, I gripped my Remington M40A1 sniper rifle. The gun weighed almost ten pounds, so manipulating it was a chore for my slight frame. I flipped the bipod down, resting it on the rock ledge of our perch. Satisfied, I drew back the bolt and chambered a seven-point six-two-millimeter round.

Eight hundred fifty-seven yards was a long shot, at the outer edge of the M40's operating envelope. Necessary, because moving closer to the massive North Vietnamese supply base below us would be too risky. We were sitting on a small rise just across the Cambodian border, a perfect blind for an ambush.

“Altitude eighty-six, wind SSE at ten, gusting to fifteen,” Kang reported.

“Roger that,” I acknowledged, drawing a deep breath before peering through the 3-9x power Redfield telescopic sight. It featured a rear hooded aperture with one-half minute adjustments for windage and elevation. I had the ballistic tables memorized, so adjusting for distance, height, and wind would not be a challenge.

Our target was People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) Colonel Cao Van Truong, the mastermind behind North Vietnam's military logistics program. He had set up this base to supply PAVN and Viet Cong elements operating in the lowlands of South Vietnam. Now that American combat troops were gone, Saigon reasoned that eliminating Truong would deal North Vietnamese efforts to arm rebels in the South a significant blow. A blow that Hildebrandt had ordered Kang and I to deliver.

Is this really happening, I thought as my target swam into view in the scope. The jungle was sweltering, but my sight picture was good despite intermittent heat mirages. *Am I ready to do this?*

I could not entertain such thoughts. Positioning the scope's crosshairs at the base of Truong's skull, I made minute adjustments while my mind computed the necessary ballistics needed to put round on target.

I scrunched around until I was comfortable, getting a good cheek weld to the gun, becoming one with the weapon. My breathing was ragged and shallow, so I took a few deep cleansing breaths until it slowed. The barrel steadied, rifle dialed in for distance and elevation, ready for the shot. *He's the enemy* I kept telling myself.

"Send it."

I let out my breath, timing my trigger pull between heartbeats. The rifle fired, recoiling painfully into my right shoulder as its report echoed across the shallow valley. It was so loud I was sure everyone within a hundred miles heard it.

Kang peered through his spotting scope. The M40 had a muzzle velocity of 2,550 feet per second, so it would take one second for the round to travel from muzzle to target. If I missed, Kang would recalibrate for another shot, provided the enemy did not rain mortar rounds down on our heads first.

My aim was true, and the bullet found its mark. There was a puff of red, and Truong toppled violently from his chair. He would not be getting back up. *I can't believe I just killed a man.*

"Headshot, that's a confirmed kill," Kang said. "Not bad, Harker. Most shooters go for center mass their first assignment, and a lot miss, especially at this distance..." His voice trailed off when he noticed my stricken expression. Patting my shoulder, he said softly, "The first one's always tough. Come on, Lieutenant, let's get the hell out of here."

We packed our gear in silence and made for the egress route. It was not the first time I had fired a weapon in anger, but it was the first where I had seen the effects of my shot. I felt queasy, but we needed to vacate the premises pronto. Self-recrimination would have to wait, though I wondered why Command had sent someone my age to execute such a critical mission.

I was twelve years old.

ONE

Sparta, 412 BC

It was an arduous climb.

The wind whipped Lyteta's hair about her face as she stumbled along the steep stone path toward the Tabernacle of the Oracles. She clung tightly to the precious bundle lying against her chest—her firstborn son, Arcadius. Glancing down, she saw his eyes were open. He made no sound, observing in silence as she ascended to the isolated outpost where the Spartan Council of Inspectors held court.

Hoisting herself onto the rock ledge beneath the Tabernacle, she saw there were already two mothers there, along with seven fully armored soldiers of the Council's guard. The Tabernacle itself was an octagonally-shaped twenty-foot diameter slab of slate, with soaring fifteen-foot-high columns at each point.

“We will wait for the others to arrive,” Proteus, Captain of the Guard, said, pointing to other women climbing the path.

After an hour, the entire group of twelve mothers stood on the rock outcropping, each carrying a newborn son. Proteus held out his hands in greeting. “Mothers of Sparta, welcome to the Tabernacle of the Oracles. You have brought your sons to the Gerousia, as is our

custom. They will select the boys they deem worthy of training as Spartan soldiers. Boys not selected will be taken to Mount Taygetus, where the gods will determine their fate.”

Though she remained outwardly calm, Lyteta shivered. This moment would determine the trajectory of her son's life. If he passed inspection, he would enter the Agoge, Sparta's famous military education-training program. If he did not, she would never see him again.

“The Council is ready to inspect your progeny, to determine if they will continue Sparta’s proud heritage.” He bowed his head to the women. “May they find your sons worthy.” He motioned for Lyteta to step forward.

“Name?”

“Arcadius, firstborn to Egan and Lyteta.”

“Give me the boy.”

She held her head high, handing over her baby boy to him. He cradled the child, turning to step onto the Tabernacle’s stone platform. There were eight elders seated there, one before each column. Proteus presented the infant to the Chief Inspector with little ceremony.

Lyteta watched as the older man unwrapped Arcadius. The other elders stood and approached, forming a circle around him. Arcadius' future depended on their opinions—he would either be chosen for training for war or cast out to perish cold and alone. Spartan women accepted this as a normal rite of passage; infanticide was quite common in Greece.

Sparta just took the practice to a whole new level.

They turned Arcadius this way and that, testing his reflexes, his reaction to external stimuli. They felt examined all his bones, joints, and sinews to make sure his frame could withstand the rigors to come. They scrutinized his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Spartan soldiers relied on quick reflexes, keen senses, and superior speed and strength to overwhelm their adversaries. This inspection was the beginning of a process designed to cultivate the world’s most proficient warriors, a process that had succeeded for centuries.

The inspection ended as abruptly as it had begun. Proteus returned Arcadius to his mother's arms while the Chief Inspector spoke to her. He was smiling.

"A beautiful boy, Lyteta. He will do Sparta proud."

She nodded and withdrew, momentarily dizzy from the relief now flooding through her. Arcadius would face many hardships in the years to come, but he had passed the most crucial test. Lyteta would assist in his upbringing for the next seven years, though Sparta would control raising Arcadius more than his parents. Nurses would be Arcadius' primary caregivers. They would not coddle him, for coddling led to weakness and combat ineffectiveness, characteristics unbecoming a Spartan warrior.

Not all mothers had been so fortunate, nor had every boy been selected. It seemed cruel and unjust, but only certain boys were fit to join the world's fiercest army. The military chiefs chose their charges carefully; the unworthy boys needed to be weeded out and discarded.

It was the Spartan Way.

**White House Situation Room
Washington, D.C.
Friday, April 21, 1967**

The eight men of President Lyndon Johnson's National Security Council were restless, waiting for him to finish reading the report which the White House Chief of Staff Walter Jenkins had given him moments before.

"Dang, you boys don't pull any punches, do you?" Johnson said, looking up from the pages laid out before him. He read a section aloud. " 'The pattern of unrest now prevalent on college campuses and urban areas threatens to upend American society. Unless we take meaningful action to ensure the participation of younger Americans in the democratic process, this country could descend into anarchy and chaos within the next ten years. The resultant rise of anti-American, anti-capitalist ideologies and policies would eventually threaten the freedoms and liberties we take for

granted, leading to a fundamental transformation of American society as we know it.’ ”

He set his glasses down, rubbing his nose. “I’ll say one thing, y’all have a flair for the dramatic. So, now you want us to mobilize our children to meet this threat?”

Secretary of Defense Bob McNamara spoke up. “Well, Mr. President, we all feel strongly about this new program. The future of our Republic is at stake.”

“If I had a dadgum dollar for every time one of you geniuses said that the Rockefellers would be asking *me* for money.”

“Bear with us, Mr. President,” McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Advisor, said. Turning to CIA Director Richard Helms, he said, “Dick, can you give us a brief summary?”

“Mr. President, what we’re envisioning is a counterpoint to what the Soviets are doing with their youth,” Helms began. “Lenin knew if he indoctrinated children early, chances are they would not deviate from their beliefs later in life. He stated, ‘*Give us the child for eight years, and it will be a Bolshevik forever.*’ ”

Johnson studied his advisor’s faces. “And our plan is different...how?”

“We want to identify exceptional individuals at an early age, say seven or eight, and encourage them to embrace classic American ideals,” Helms answered. “They would become de-facto wards of the state, to someday become servants of it. Our goal is to help develop these individuals’ talents and abilities, with the expectation that they would later use them to perpetuate the American way of life.”

Johnson stared at him. “Wards of the state? Are you kidding me? How is that any different from what the dang Russians are doing?”

“Well, sir,” Bundy replied, coming to Helm’s aid. “We wouldn’t be taking children from their parents. We would “borrow” them for short periods, training them to use their gifts for the common good.”

“Didn’t y’all have a plan for this before? A plan I committed several million dollars to?”

“Yes, sir, the Liberty Project,” McNamara responded. “A program directed at young men aged twelve to seventeen, to entice them to explore careers in government service.”

“But it failed?”

“Not failed, Mr. President, but it did not yield the, ah, results we were hoping for.”

“Walt, you’ve been awfully quiet. What do you make of this?”

“Mr. President, Bob is right,” Jenkins said. “We were hoping to inspire a groundswell of patriotism in the targeted demographic. But we discovered most of them had already developed political views that they were not going to change. The program failed to generate much action on their part.”

Johnson let out an exaggerated sigh. “So, this Liberty Project was a bust. Now, you're saying if we don't do something even more drastic, our beloved Republic is going down in flames, and the Commies will inherit the earth correct?”

Men shuffled papers and shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, not wanting to answer. Helms broke the silence. “I wouldn't phrase it in those terms, sir, but we need a new approach. We want to bring together the best and brightest and have them work with us to keep America great.”

“That all sounds great, Dick, but what will you be training them to do? What will they be doing when they're supposed to be at band practice or little league games?” No one spoke. “Okay, who would be spearheading this so-called plan?”

Another moment of silence. “Ah, CIA would be in charge of initial testing, Mr. President,” Jenkins said at last.

“Well, shoot, that fills me with all kinds of confidence.”

“There are challenges to be met,” Helms retorted, “but the idea is to roll out written and physical tests nationwide, geared to identify children with hyper-intelligence *and* superior physical skills. They then would be trained according to their proclivities, for military, scientific, or political science applications. When they reach adulthood, they would be in prime positions to protect and defend this country. The current generation has too many wimps. We need Warriors.”

“Warriors?” Johnson scoffed, slapping the table. “You want to turn our kids into killers? Whooee, that takes the cake. I assume this program would be off-the-books because if the people ever found out about it, they'd tar and feather us.”

Johnson fretted about what was happening because he had worked hard for four years to help the average American. What if these “exceptional individuals” decided they did not like the American way? The idea of infiltrating CIA-trained people into all walks of American life was unsettling. But so was the alternative—to do nothing while unrest raged from coast to coast could be disastrous.

“How long would it take to implement this plan of yours, Dick?”

“We hope to begin testing in the Spring of 1968, sir. Training sites need to be selected, curriculums chosen, that sort of thing. Follow-up vetting should be complete by December, with initial groups of trainees placed in their various programs by early 1969 if all goes well.” Seeing Johnson open his mouth to object, he added quickly, “Sir, our recruits will be encouraged to think for themselves, along the lines of ‘ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.’ That resonates with younger children. They'll be educated and trained, but not forced into a line of ideological thinking.”

“All right,” Johnson said, tired of talking about it. “Let me see what you've got.”

Clark Clifford slid a manila folder stamped with NSC Directive 431371 in front of Johnson.

“Any significance to 431371?”

After an uncomfortable silence, Clifford said. “Mr. President, ah, those were the dates that ancient Sparta was at the height of its power.”

“Sparta?”

“Yes, sir. Sparta's military training methods were famous throughout the ancient world. They started children into their warrior-building program at age seven. They stressed allegiance to the state above all else.” He held up a hand to quell the President's

protest. “We’re not advocating going to their extremes, sir. But there are some aspects to Sparta’s methods we can use to our advantage. That’s what this program is all about.”

Johnson had a deep sense of foreboding as he pulled the folder close. It was sealed and stamped “TOP SECRET” in large red letters. Flipping the folder open, he saw printed across the top on two lines:

THE SPARTAN INITIATIVE

TWO

**Public School 55
Indianapolis, IN
Thursday, May 9, 1968**

It started like any other school day. Then recess happened.

Once we were outside, I noticed that teachers dotted the playground. Most held a clipboard, and there were other grownups, too, though I did not recognize them. The adults had us do things like run sprints, jump over obstacles, and climb the monkey bars. They then coached us while we played tag and tug-of-war. It was weird.

Afterward, our class piled into Mrs. Furman's Second Grade classroom, running around until she told us to shut up and sit down. We sat four to a table, eight tables in all divided by boy-girl, still excited from recess. Mrs. Furman smacked a ruler on her desk to get our attention.

Something was different. Two big, hulking white men were standing by her desk. They both had short hair parted on the side; one's was dark brown, the other's blonde, and wore identical, dark blue suits. Their faces looked serious, like Dad did before he lectured me.

“Class, please welcome these nice gentlemen from the National Education Foundation,” Mrs. Furman said. “They’re going to pass out a special test, designed to help our school find better ways to teach you. Please take one and do not start until I tell you to. I understand parts of this test are difficult—fill out as much as you can, and don’t feel bad if there are questions you can’t answer. Hand them to me up front when you’re finished.” She nodded to the men.

They picked up stacks of stapled papers off her desk and walked down the center aisle, plopping stacks of four on each table. I watched them make their way to the back. Educators? I did not think so. They looked more like secret agents, like from the *Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

Derek grabbed the pile set on our desk, handing a test to the rest of us at the table. Once everyone had a test, Mrs. Furman told us to begin. We all scribbled our names on the front and opened our copies.

I flipped through the pages, anxious to see what kind of questions were in it. Boy was this interesting! The questions started out simple, like what town we lived in, what our address was, things like that. After page three, they got harder. Thumbing further, I saw there were things we had never studied before.

Neat, but I doubted this test would help our school teach us better. More likely, it was to figure out who the smartest kids were. Having read through Dad’s dictionary and encyclopedias three times each, I saw stuff from the Stanford-Binet and Wechsler Intelligence Scales, plus the Johns Hopkins Perceptual Test. There were basic problems in math and science that got progressively harder. This thing covered all the bases: English, Reading, Math, Science, plus Psychology. Whoever graded my test would know if I was book smart, how I thought and reasoned, how aware I was of the world around me.

Not a test aimed at your average seven-year-old.

I knew my parents thought I was smart for my age. Mrs. Furman got mad at me—a lot—for daydreaming or talking to kids around me, mostly because I was bored. Mom and Dad wondered if I

needed extra work to keep my mind occupied. Probably, but no way was I going to tell them that.

Since I could write with either hand, I used my right hand for odd-numbered pages and my left for even-numbered ones. It was fun. I looked up at Mrs. Furman once, having to cover my mouth to keep from laughing. She was staring at me, mouth wide open, while the two guys were smiling at each other. It took me forty minutes to finish the exam; there were a few questions at the end I had trouble with, but I felt good about it. Mrs. Furman took my test, giving me a funny look after she had glanced through it.

At the end of class, Mrs. Furman came and stood by our table. “Damon, these gentlemen would like a quick word with you, please.”

“I always walk home with my brother and sister, Mrs. Furman. They’ll be mad if I’m late.”

“I know Shannon and Timothy. I’ll go speak with them while you talk with these men, okay?”

“Okay.” She left to go find my older siblings, leaving me alone with the two men. They waved me up to the front table, where we all sat down. There were nametags clipped to their left jacket pockets: Dave and Bill.

Brown hair spoke first. “Hi, Damon, my name is Dave Hartfield. It’s good to meet you.” He held out a meaty hand, which swallowed mine when I reached out to shake it. “Nice job on completing your exam. Most kids struggled to get past page three.”

“There were some tough questions, but I understood most of it.”

Dave smiled. “Don’t sell yourself short, Damon. I checked your answers—you passed a difficult test with flying colors. That makes you a special person, and we’d like to speak with you and your parents about some great opportunities for kids like you.” He paused briefly before going on, “I imagine you’re bored most days, huh?”

Bored was an understatement. “Yes, sir. Most of what we go over I already understand.”

Blonde hair, given name Bill Prescott, laughed. “That would be a drag, going the whole school year knowing you knew more than the teacher does.”

“She’s just doing her job.”

Hartfield chuckled. “That doesn’t make it any better for you. We also noticed you did quite well out on the playground. Your strength, speed, and agility were impressive. Not a bad showing, young man.”

“I did okay, I guess,” I shrugged, not wanting to seem too conceited.

“We know you have to get home, Damon,” Dave interjected. “We’d like your permission to speak with your parents about some cool opportunities that might come your way. Is that all right with you?”

“Yeah, that’d be okay.”

“Good.” They both reached out to shake my hand. “Damon, it’s been a pleasure,” Dave said. I noticed Mrs. Furman had returned and was standing by the door. “We’ll hand you off to Mrs. Furman, so she can get you on your way home.”

“Thank you, sirs,” I said, turning to walk out with Mrs. Furman. I bet Shannon and Tim were mad having to wait this long. We always watched *Dark Shadows* after school; if we missed it, they would make me pay.

I always wondered how my life would have turned out had I not aced that stupid test.

Harker Residence, Indianapolis, IN Monday, May 20, 1968

A strong smell of cigarettes blew through our house, right after I heard the front door close.

“Damon, can you come here, please?” Mom called. Sighing, I got up, turning off the den TV. Walking through the kitchen, I heard strange voices coming from the living room. Visitors.

Mom was talking to a thirtyish-looking man and woman sitting on our couch. The woman was of medium build, with her yellow hair pulled back into a bun. The other person was a large black man with a short hair like Bill and Dave's. Both wore dark blue suit jackets and sat with perfect posture. They introduced themselves as I sat in an armchair.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Harker, Damon, my name is Kirsten Honeywell. I'm from the Federal State Education Board, and my partner here, Franklin Hurst, is from the National Endowment for Education." They both flashed cool-looking credentials.

"Please come in. Can I get you anything? Coffee, tea, water?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Harker," Franklin said, his voice kind of high for a big man. "We're fine."

Kirsten leaned forward. "We don't want to take up a lot of your time, so I'll get right to the point. Damon is a special young man, and we'd like to offer him opportunities to...enhance the education he's currently receiving."

"What do you mean 'enhance' his education? We know he's smart, but—"

"Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Harker, but you may not realize *how* smart he is," Franklin interjected. "We administered a standardized exam last Thursday, part of a national roll-out. Damon was one of twelve people his age nationwide who were able to complete it. He solved some complicated problems for someone his age, making him a prime candidate for our new program."

"New program?" Mom asked, looking worried.

"Yes. We're launching a new initiative aimed at offering gifted and talented children opportunities that supersede what he's getting in public school."

"What does that mean? Would we have to send him away?"

"No, Mrs. Harker, nothing that drastic," Kirsten answered, chuckling. "Gifted children need a more stimulating environment than they're currently getting. We're in the process of setting up special events where kids like Damon would be exposed to world-class education."

Dad looked unconvinced. “That all sounds great, but what are the specifics? What kind of time commitment will we have to make for this fabulous opportunity?”

“I appreciate your skepticism, Mr. Harker,” Franklin said, shifting in his seat. “It’s natural to be wary when the welfare of your child is concerned. Let me put your mind at ease.” He leaned toward Dad. “Your normal routines would not be affected. Damon would attend school as usual while we tailor a program designed to explore his interests and talents. This might involve classes or workshops at local career centers or universities, for instance. We would invite him to attend conventions and seminars on advanced subjects like Math, Science, and Languages, the whole gamut.” Dad frowned, so Franklin hastily added, “With your permission, of course.”

“What would Damon get out of this?” Mom asked.

Kirsten smiled, looking more relaxed now. “A lot, Mrs. Harker. These events would feature leading academics and business executives. If Damon impresses those folks, well, he could write his own ticket, to college and beyond.”

Mom looked pleased, but Dad cut in: “What’s the catch?”

The two visitors exchanged puzzled glances. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re offering Damon the dream of a lifetime. In my experience, that comes with a price. Would he have to someday compensate the government for this great honor?”

“That’s a great question, Mr. Harker,” Franklin said. “I know you served in the Air Force and FBI, so I get why you’d be cautious. To us, there is no downside. Damon gets advanced education, and we benefit from whatever he chooses to do in life.”

“Damon, what do you think?”

I shrugged. “I’m bored most days at school, Dad. This whole advanced learning program sounds neat. I’d like to try it.”

“I still don’t know what to think about this.”

“Mr. Harker, you’d have full access to Damon every step of the way. I can promise you that if you feel this program is detrimental to him in any way, you can pull him out, no strings attached.”

Dad looked dubious. “When would this start?”

“The second week of June, if that doesn’t interfere with any vacation plans,” Kirsten answered.

The adults talked some more. I zoned out because it was boring. To my surprise, they managed to get Mom and Dad’s okay to begin the process. Saying goodbye, Franklin and Kirsten stepped out the door, saying how much they looked forward to working with us. Franklin was carrying a folder stamped ‘TSI’. Dad noticed it, too.

“TSI, is that the name of the program Damon’s enlisting in?”

Franklin paused, looking like his hand had been caught in the cookie jar. “Ah, yes, it is.”

“What does it stand for?”

“Oh, it’s one of those silly government acronyms that doesn’t have anything to do with the actual nature of the project. We all call it TSI, for advanced teaching and instruction.”

“Sure, you do,” Dad muttered as he closed the door.

THREE

Sparta, 406 BC

Lytetia shut the front door behind her, ready to begin her errands. Her home was typical of Spartan architecture—sun-dried mud-brick walls, topped by a red clay-tile roof. There was a small courtyard in the middle of the building.

Her husband Egan had visited last night, to fulfill his marital duty to her. Per Spartan custom, he did not live with her but with other soldiers. Warriors were not allowed to live in their own homes until reaching the age of thirty. Egan had three years to go.

Lytetia had asked, “Egan, how is Arcadius? He’s come home with some frightful wounds, but he won’t discuss them with me.”

“No self-respecting Spartan boy speaks to his mother about such things, Lytetia,” he had laughed. “He is preparing for the Agoge next year.”

“How does this help him?”

“Boys his age are encouraged to do anything that will develop their physical skills, help them deal with harsh weather and terrain. What Arcadius does now will form the foundation for becoming a warrior.”

Sparta did not encourage emotional attachments amongst its couples, thinking love was a weakness to be avoided. But Lyteta was fond of Egan. Sighing, she took her basket and headed uptown to market. Like all Spartan women, she prided herself on being strong and independent.

Here and there, groups of youngsters played in segregated groups. To one side, ten boys engaged in a spirited game of tug of war. Across the street, girls were chasing each other, laughing hysterically. Down the street, boys were racing and wrestling, all of them nude. The boys played this way regardless of the conditions because being exposed to the elements acclimated them for combat.

Nothing should hinder the fighting proficiency of a Spartan warrior.

As she neared the town center, Lyteta saw Arcadius being tended to by a soldier. His face was bloody, his lower lip cut and swollen. She fought the urge to race over and embrace him; such nurturing was discouraged because it made boys weaker, less likely to survive on their own. Lyteta casually strolled over to where her son stood.

“Arcadius! Well, this is unexpected.”

He looked up eagerly, pride shining in his eyes. “Mother, you should have seen it! I’ve just been in a tussle. It was grand!”

She eyed the soldier questioningly. “Erastus, my lady,” he said, bowing his head slightly. “Your son was involved in a scuffle with several other lads. Seems their game got rather heated.”

She willed herself to not reach out and caress his face. “Well, he looks none the worse for wear. Thank you for your ministrations.”

Erastus withdrew the cloth from Arcadius’ face, blood dotting the white material. “My privilege. You would have been proud of your boy, my lady. He acquitted himself quite well, especially since it was three to one.” He swatted Arcadius on the rump, sending him scampering away.

Spartan men were supposed to be strong, able to defend themselves in any fight. She had witnessed several such brawls, noticing that adults watching would often spur the boys on rather than attempt to separate them. There was no standing down, stepping

aside, or quitting. Cowardice was unacceptable, often punished severely.

It was the Spartan Way.

**Ft. Benjamin Harrison
Indianapolis, IN
Monday, June 17, 1968**

Today was a big day, the day I would start the TSI program. On a US Army base, no less. My parents questioned the location, but I told them I did not know why. Something to do with the National Education Foundation, probably.

According to Kirsten, army medics would be giving me the same medical exams as regular soldiers. After checking in at the main gate, soldiers directed us to the medical building. My head spun as we drove, the base's long buildings sprawled along broad streets as far as I could see. The medical building was off to the side, painted yellow with a big white circle and a red cross on the green steel roof. We parked, then entered the lobby, where a stout, attractive black woman named Wanda Harris greeted us. She had a round, friendly face, long straight hair, and a nice smile. Reminded me of someone I had seen on TV - Tina Turner, maybe? Mom wanted to stay, but Mrs. Harris assured her I would be well taken care of.

"How are you feeling today, Damon?" she asked cheerfully once Mom left.

"Okay, I guess. A little nervous."

"There's nothing to be nervous about," she assured me, putting her arm around me. "This is the beginning of a wonderful adventure for you." We stopped at the front desk. "Damon Harker, for the TSI project."

"He's right on time." The nurse behind the desk had a warm smile, too. "Come on back, Damon, we're ready for you." She led me back to a hallway containing a lot of examination rooms. "We're going into number four."

I obediently turned into Room Four, nose wrinkling at the smell, like how our kitchen smelled after Mom cleaned it. I took off my shirt, shoes, and pants, then climbed up onto the exam table. Another nurse entered, holding a syringe.

“Do you mind needles?” she asked, strapping a plastic strip to my upper right arm.

“No, ma’am, not really.” I was keenly aware of how my slight frame compared to regular Army recruits standing in the hall, my voice sounding high and squealy.

She smiled. “Don’t worry, it’ll only sting a little. Small guys like you tend to sail right on through a blood draw, no problem. Big, hulking guys like some of those guys outside? Bring out a needle and they faint dead away.”

“Really?” Some of the guys waiting were huge—the thought of them fearing a little needle was funny.

Afterward, I shuffled from station to station as nurses took measurements, consulted instruments, poked, and prodded me. After an hour they told me to get dressed and return to the lobby.

“Have a seat, Damon,” the front desk nurse said. “Doctors will be calling you back to ask some questions.”

“Okay.” There was one other boy there my age, about my height but thicker, with jet-black hair that stood straight up. I thought that was cool—my brown hair hung down in the classic bowl cut. I did not care enough to try different styles.

“Hi, I’m Damon. Damon Harker.” I sat in the chair next to him, checking the room to make sure no one else could hear. “Are you a Spartan?”

“Yeah. You too, huh? That’s neat.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Reggie Lawson. This is kind of weird, huh? They stick you with needles and stuff?”

“Yeah,” I said, flexing my sore arms. “I wonder what all this has to do with teaching us cool stuff.”

Before he could answer, the desk nurse called out, “Damon? Damon Harker?”

“That’s me.” Getting out of my chair, I gave Reggie a fist bump. “Good luck, Reggie. I’ll probably see you around. If they don’t suck the life out of me first.”

There were a LOT of doctors in the building. Each one had a different set of questions for me, other tests they wanted me to do, and they all wrote a ton of notes. It seemed to go on forever.

A nurse brought me into yet another exam room, with another doctor waiting for me. “Damon, you’ll be happy to know this is your last stop today.” What a relief!

“Hello, Damon, I’m Dr. Fenwick,” the smiling, white-haired man said, motioning me to sit down. He wore thick black glasses and had a bulbous nose. Thumbing through a stack of papers, he pulled out several sheets, setting the rest to the side. “Have you been treated well today?” he asked amicably. “I know this can be a lot to handle for such a young man.”

“Everyone’s been super nice, thank you.”

“Great. We’re trying our best to make you comfortable.” He adjusted his seat, reading notes he had written on a pad of lined paper. “You’re an unusual young man, Damon. I’m sure you’ve never heard that before.” He chuckled, continuing, “Our ability to study the human brain leaves a lot to be desired, but yours seems to operate on a different level than the average person’s.”

“I kind of figured,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. I often ‘dumbed’ myself down, so I would not appear to be smarter than those around me.

“I’ll bet. You understand how the standard IQ test works?”

I nodded, having read about them in the encyclopedia. “For kids like me, it measures the difference in mental age versus physical age, right?”

“That’s right. You’re given a mental age based on your ability to perform age-appropriate tasks. If you as a seven-year-old could perform tasks appropriate for a ten-year-old child, your mental age would be ten, and your IQ would be $[10/7 \times 100] = 142$. Such approximations are more difficult in your case, however.”

I squirmed uncomfortably. “Because I can perform tasks meant for much older people.”

“Correct. The bottom line, Damon, is you have an incredible intellect.” He paused, wiping off his glasses. “And your memory is remarkable. You appear to be able to sop up information like a sponge.”

“Yes, sir. I can skim through books and remember most of what I saw.”

“That was our finding, too,” he agreed. Consulting his notes, he continued, “But your tests showed this ability translated to oral and visual information, too. You hear or see information or instructions, and you can reproduce the data or perform the task yourself, almost flawlessly.”

“I wouldn’t say flawlessly, sir. My dad says there’s always room for improvement.”

“Yes, there is,” he said with a smile. “Still, your mental acuity is amazing.” He checked his watch. “We have time for one more session today, Damon. Do you know any foreign languages?”

“You mean, like Spanish or German?” He nodded. “No, sir, I’ve never needed to learn one. Is it hard?”

“For most of us, it takes years of study to become fluent. I’d like to see how your brain approaches it. If you want to follow me, I’ll get you set up.”

After ninety minutes in the language lab, I was back in the front lobby. Dr. Fenwick was huddled with Mrs. Harris in a corner across from the receptionist. I pretended to read a magazine while I waited for Mom, doing my best to eavesdrop on their conversation. Like my other senses, my hearing was abnormally acute.

“Well, Doctor, what’s your impression so far?” Mrs. Harris asked.

“I’ve never encountered anything like Damon or Reggie. It’s not just what they learn, it’s *how* they learn. They have a combination of advanced cognitive processes and eidetic memories that staggers the imagination.”

“In English, please.”

“It means their brains process information much faster than normal, with the ability to manage multiple high-level tasks simultaneously. That’s extraordinary by itself. But they pair that with phenomenal eidetic memories that go beyond photographic. Total recall, in excruciating detail.”

“Intriguing. Anything else worth noting?”

“Yes. As you know, most people need to be told something multiple times before they fully understand what they’ve heard.”

“I’ve heard that,” Mrs. Harris said.

“With Damon and Reggie, it’s one time and boom, they have it. No matter if commands are given visually, orally, or written, the results are the same. Show them once and they can solve the given problem, perform the given task, or understand the given information, with a high level of proficiency.”

“Impressive.”

“Impressive? It’s superhuman. Scary, even.”

“What about languages?”

“It’s the same thing. After an hour’s exposure to Spanish, their comprehension and usage levels are astounding. It’s the craziest thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

She whistled, clearly impressed. “Okay, what’s next?”

“I want to confirm today’s initial findings, provide additional depth to the extent of their intelligence. Also, I want to do more physiological tests. The boys both displayed remarkable physical skills and dexterity, which we believe are the result of unnaturally strong joints, connective tissues, and enhanced natural explosiveness. I have a feeling we’ve only scratched the surface of their abilities.”

“How are other training centers faring?”

“Funny you should ask. I checked on that this morning, and the results are decidedly mixed. Seems we underestimated the psychological factors. Many of the selected children proved to be too emotionally fragile to handle TSI. We thought progress would be slow until they matured, but the rejectees showed signs of cracking right from the start. We cut them loose before they suffered psychological damage.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s about brain development, especially the prefrontal cortex.” She made a face, so he explained, “Typically, the emotional centers of the brain mature faster than the reasoning centers, which don’t fully develop until after puberty. A mature prefrontal cortex allows a person to think rationally, develop the skills necessary for goal-directed behavior. It’s like this—when presented with an obstacle, a normal child will respond without thinking. It cannot organize its thoughts or analyze the situation to respond logically. It’s why we have drinking, voting, and conscription ages—we don’t want children making decisions they aren’t capable of.”

“So, what you’re saying is, Damon and Reggie’s brains are growing faster than normal.”

“That’s oversimplifying things, but there is cerebral hyperdevelopment in both boys, areas that tend to mature in adolescence or adulthood. They’ll display the ability to make sound, logical decisions much earlier than normal. It’s simply amazing.”

“Is there any danger to that?”

A pause. “Whenever we see atypical growth in body structures, there’s always a chance of abnormalities forming later in life, even premature death in some cases. With boys this young, there are several possible adverse outcomes including early-onset dementia, psychotic episodes, or nervous breakdowns. It’s hard to predict because this is exceedingly rare.”

“When will we know?”

“If any problems develop, we’ll know.”

Mom picked me up right at four o’clock, opening the car door for me. After I buckled up, she drove off the Fort, getting on the highway and driving north. I did not feel much like talking after what I had seen and heard.

“You’re awfully quiet, Damon.”

I stared out the passenger window, thinking about what Dr. Fenwick had said. Early onset dementia? Premature death? Was that what my future held? Was all this stuff necessary for an “education

enhancement” program? Dad was always saying things were never what they seemed. Bet that went double for this Spartan Initiative business.

“Did something bad happen? You seem troubled.” She cast a worried glance my way.

“No, Mom, they just threw a lot at me today, that’s all. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Okay,” she said, unconvinced. “Hey, how about we go to DQ for a Dilly Bar?”

“That sounds great,” I said, relieved at the change of subject.

She was right to be worried. Everyone had been polite, smiles pasted on their faces. They tried—too hard—to make things seem normal. But I had heard others talking, whispering about Reggie and me. I doubted my parents had been told the real purposes behind all this.

It felt like we were being readied for something. Something big. Something that needed to be hidden from plain sight.

What had I gotten myself into?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For the record, Robert A. Tayler is not, nor has he ever been, a superspy.

Born and raised in the heartland, Robert grew up with solid Midwestern values and a love for military history, his father having served in the Air Force, and his uncle in the Navy during WWII. Some of Damon's exploits bear some similarity to experiences related to Robert by friends and relatives who proudly served in the United States Armed Forces.

Tayler hopes his passion for military life shone through on the pages of *The Spartan Initiative*, as well as the vital importance of personal relationships in dealing with the ever-present struggles of life.

On a personal note, Robert cherishes faith, family, and friends the most. He loves traveling, fishing, and is equally at home in the mountains or the beach. He lives with his beautiful wife in central Indiana, where he is hoping to write many more books for people to enjoy.

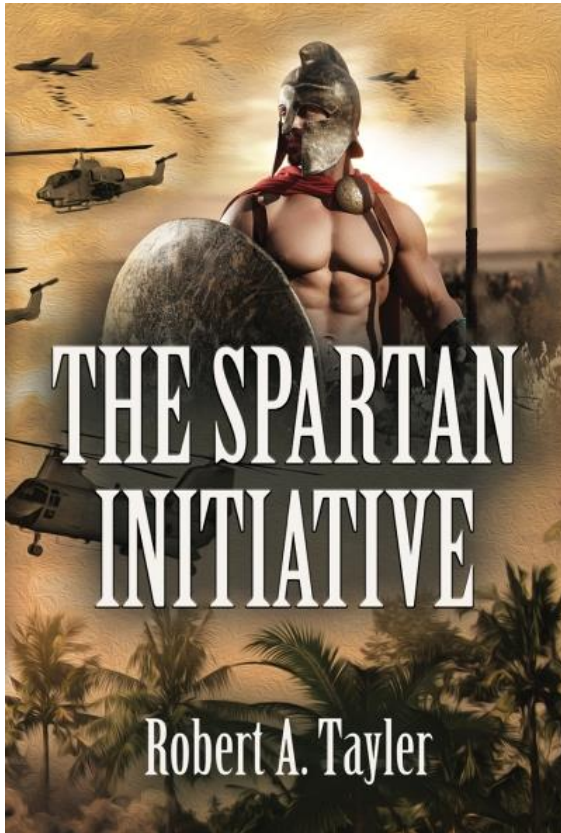
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Damon Harker was chosen for a new program designed to produce warriors using methods similar to ancient Sparta. While friends played sports and went to dances, Damon shot down MiGs and battled drug lords.

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