

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.

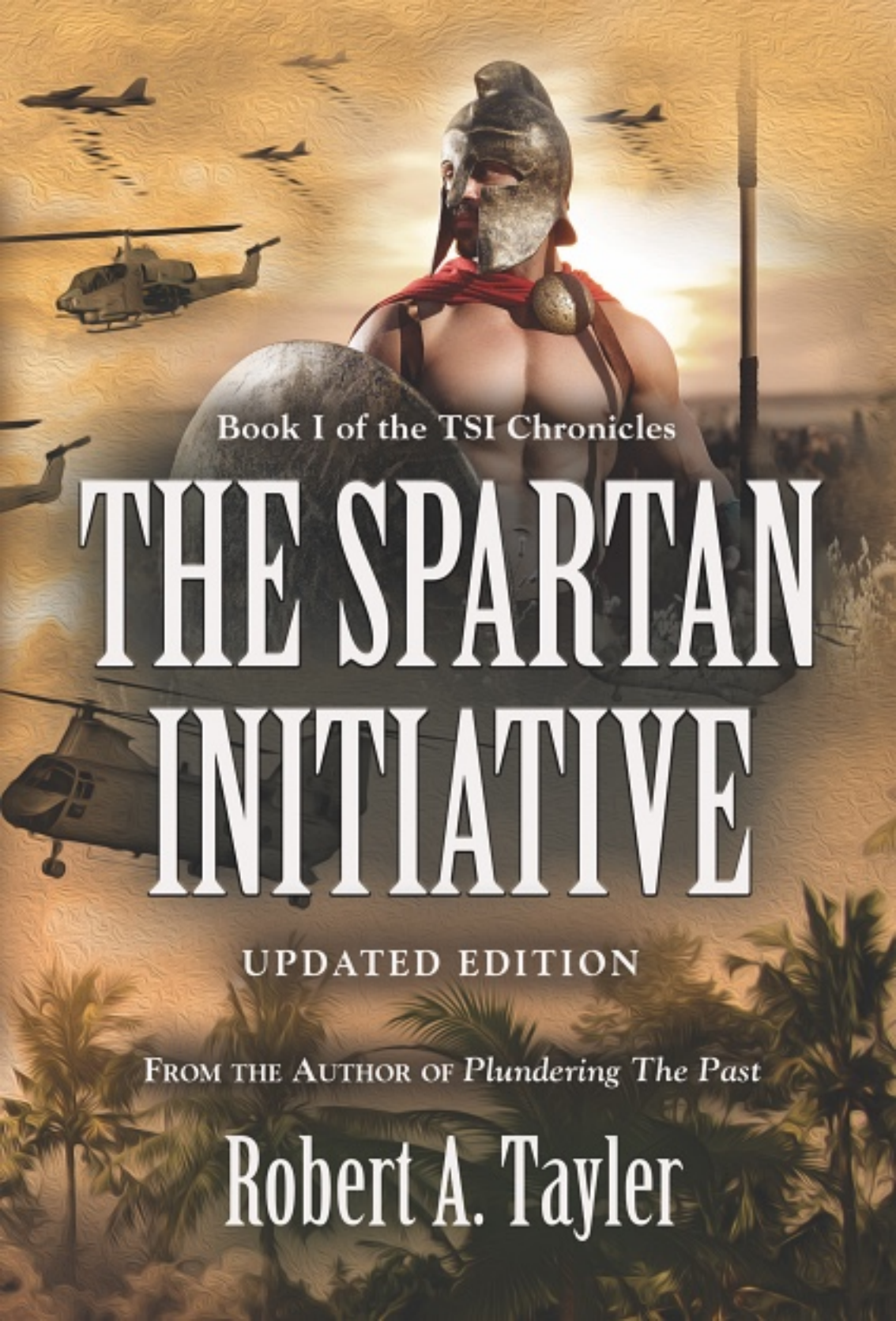
THE SPARTAN INITIATIVE

By Robert A. Tayler

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Book I of the TSI Chronicles

THE SPARTAN INITIATIVE

UPDATED EDITION

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *Plundering The Past*

Robert A. Tayler

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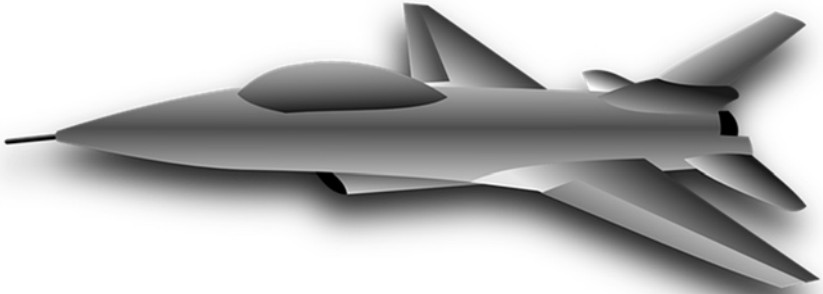
-Plundering the Past

Coming Soon:

-The Penitent Pirate

-Black Flag, White Death

-The Olympic Gambit



PROLOGUE

Da Nang, South Vietnam
Friday, June 22, 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 a 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 body.

I belonged to Special Operations Group Three, a unique unit based at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, formed under the auspices of the TSI program. Unique because our age skewed years younger than typical Army draftees. Pentagon planners wanted to give us “real world” combat experience, so they assigned twenty-four SOG Three members to Da Nang. This week we performed search-and-destroy patrols along the railroad tracks that stretched north of Da Nang to root out any North Vietnamese troops that might loiter nearby.

It was tiresome, frustrating work because the enemy was 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 I would return my field jacket to 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 shoes 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 left Vietnam on March 29. The US left 7,500 Department of Defense “advisors”—including SOG Three—in South Vietnam to guard the Saigon embassy and train South Vietnamese forces to fight without US help. From what I had observed, it was an exercise in futility.

Intriguing, but such things were above my pay grade. Leaving the showers, I stopped by my room, hanging my jacket on a wall hook. I had ceased wondering where the Army found uniforms small enough to fit me and my friends. My stomach rumbled impatiently, reminding me I had not eaten for hours, so 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.

“Hail, Spartan warrior!”

I whirled around, wondering who would call me that, and saw my mentor, CIA Assistant Deputy Director of Operations Steve Tolliver, walking across the tarmac toward me.

“Mr. Tolliver? What are you doing—”

“Never mind that. Are you ready for some flying, Damon?” he asked. “It might amount to nothing, but it’ll be good practice for you, anyway.”

“What’s the gig?”

“Well, the Navy is knee-deep in Operation End Sweep in the Gulf of Tonkin, cleaning up all the mines they laid the last few years. North Vietnamese fighters are buzzing their ships, and they’re demanding air cover. So, it’s a great opportunity for you and your fellow Spartans to showcase your skills while dissuading any North pilots from feeling too adventurous. Interested?”

“After slogging through the jungle, Mr. Tolliver, flying a kite would be fun.” I paused, then continued, “Will it be dangerous?”

“Crossing the street is dangerous, Damon. This will be no different. Don’t worry. I think you can handle it.”

A pretentious thing for a high-ranking intelligence officer to say to a twelve-year-old boy. “So, I’ll be facing actual enemy fighters?”

“Yep. Practice is over, Damon; this is the real thing. We’re using this operation to determine if we selected the right people for TSI. Prove to us you belong, Damon. Do that, and the sky’s the limit. Literally.”

I was concerned about the risk, but Dad and the military had drilled several ideals into my head: Obey your elders, follow orders, and do your best the first time.

It was the Spartan Way.

The eight Spartans left in the country, including my friends Andre, Chris, and Reggie, boarded a Huey helicopter going north to our new base of operations, an airfield outside of Nha Trang, South Vietnam.

The Air Force had parked a small contingent of F-105 Thunderchiefs and F-4 Phantom IIs on the flight line, including my beloved F-106A Delta Dart “Betty Lou.” After squaring ourselves

away in dormitory-style quarters, my three friends and I headed for the pilot Ready Room, eager to learn what was happening. Because of our young age, our arrival caused quite a stir, but everyone settled down after the briefing officer arrived.

“Welcome, pilots,” the grizzled Air Force Lt. Colonel said after all thirty pilots had taken a seat. “I’ll make this quick. Earlier in the war, the Navy mined the crap out of Haiphong Harbor. As part of the ongoing peace negotiations, they agreed to clear all the mines starting last February. We didn’t expect trouble, but de-mining operations have stopped twice because of threatening conditions. Since no carriers are nearby, Navy brass has asked us to fly combat air patrols over their minesweepers just in case any MiG pilots get a little too... friendly.”

“Is that a possibility, Colonel?” I asked, hoping I did not sound too eager. But thinking about mixing it up with North Vietnamese MiGs sent a delicious thrill through my body.

“Why, Lieutenant, you got a death wish?”

“No, sir, just want to be ready.”

I was confident Betty Lou could handle anything the enemy could put up. US Vets thought I was crazy because enemy MiGs could outperform the F-106 at low altitudes. Plus, the Dart’s primary weapon, the AIM-4 Falcon, had sucked in actual combat. I did not care; I loved the Six and would live and die with it.

I hoped I lived. I did not want my folks to get that telegram from the Defense Department saying their son was “missing.”

Over Haiphong Harbor North Vietnam Sunday, June 24, 1973

“Mustang, bogies below you at your two o’clock,” Andre “Killjoy” Macklin, my wingman—so named because he never laughed, rarely smiled—informed me as our two-plane element of Delta Darts burst from cloud cover.

The distinctive profiles of MiG-19 Farmers appeared off my nose, with their swept-back wings and twin engines. Each fighter

carried two underwing drop tanks along with gravity bombs and heat-seeking missiles. These guys were not here merely to observe the mine-sweeping operation.

“Roger, Killjoy, bringing it right. You take the left bogie; I’ll take the right.”

“Copy that.”

The MiG-19 was a capable aircraft and sported three powerful 30mm cannons, which could wreak havoc with thin-skinned Navy minesweepers if they attacked. Most of the VPAF fighters we had seen so far flew high above the harbor in racetrack patterns, but the flight profile of these two Farmers was different.

I had to contact air control about this situation. “Bulldog, Voodoo leader. Following two Farmers who look to be in attack formation, altitude angels fifteen. Request authorization to fire.”

There was a brief interlude of static, then the reply came. “Voodoo leader, Bulldog. Do not engage unless fired upon or the bogies make for our ships, over.”

“Roger, Bulldog.” A rush of anxiety and anticipation swept through me. This was it! All the training and all the briefings were about to be tested. Killjoy and I would shadow these varmints, ready to bounce them if they did anything stupid.

I did not have long to wait, as the North Vietnamese jets passed over a formation of US Navy ships far below. They reversed their turn, positioning themselves for a strafing run. Remembering my lessons, I reduced power, not wanting to overshoot. Air Combat Maneuvering was all about managing your energy and working the angles in three-dimensional space. My adversary was in a shallow righthand turn; after quickly working out the dogfight geometry in my head, I eased forward on the control yoke, tapping the right rudder pedal to slice inside his turn.

Early in the Vietnam War, enemy fighters gave a good account of themselves. In order to regain dominance, the Air Force and Navy instituted aviation weapons schools to teach pilots how to dogfight. Fresh from their Top Gun air combat school, Navy fighter pukers had scored an impressive six-to-one combat ratio over enemy pilots in the

latter days of US involvement in Vietnam. Macklin and I wanted to see how our Spartan training measured up.

Abruptly, the two MiGs rolled sideways and dove.

“Okay, Killjoy, let’s nail him them!”

“On it!”

I was now in a right hand dive with the MiG, his fuselage centered in my optical gunsight. Evidently, this pilot had not spotted me even with the MiG-19’s excellent field of view.

Sorry about your luck, I thought, preparing to fire.

Grasping the right side of my control yoke, I tapped the armament trigger with my right index finger. My ship shook as the M61A1 Vulcan 20mm cannon fired, spewing out fifty high-velocity rounds in three controlled bursts. Tiny puffs of white smoke billowed as my cannon shells hit home, stitching a line from his engine up to his wing root. Immediately, oily smoke began pouring out of the MiG as it slowed and leveled out.

Reducing power again, I sent another quick burst through his right wing. It blew up in a spectacular fireball, spraying debris across the sky. I stomped on my left rudder, evading hard left to avoid the cloud of wreckage. I rolled again, checking my six before watching the doomed PAVF jet corkscrew into the muddy harbor.

“Mustang, congrats, that’s a confirmed kill,” Killjoy radioed. “My guy bugged out after my first few shots. Oh well, better luck next time.” I was momentarily taken aback by the word “kill,” but I felt better seeing the enemy pilot’s chute blossom far below.

We orbited for five more minutes, ensuring no other enemy aircraft were sneaking up on our guys. I briefly caught sight of a MiG-21, vainly pursuing him for a short period, but he had too much of a head start on me. Unfortunately, the F-106’s MA-1 radar had limited range and was unreliable, lacking the power and tracking ability of the Phantom’s APQ-72. I fired a Falcon anyway. The radar-homing missile whizzed off into the distance, hitting nothing.

“Dang, Killjoy, these fricking Falcons are useless! Why didn’t they refit our birds so we could use Sidewinders and Sparrows?”

“Beats me, Mustang. From what Colonel Unger said, they didn’t want Darts over here anyway.”

True enough. The F-106 was a high-altitude interceptor, not a dogfighter, designed to engage incoming Soviet bomber formations. The Dart's radar and Falcons had performed poorly over Vietnam, so my shot missing spectacularly was not surprising.

A broadcast over the command net rudely interrupted our afternoon activities: "All units, this is Bulldog. Disengage and RTB. Repeat, disengage, and return to base."

"Roger, Bulldog. Voodoo flight RTB," I acknowledged, disappointed we couldn't loiter around to see if other VPAF fighters had the stones to challenge us.

**Nha Trang Air Base
South Vietnam
Saturday, August 4, 1973**

"Heard you got a couple, Mustang," a familiar voice called.

Turning, I spied Mr. Tolliver standing outside the Ready Room. How did he always manage to sneak up on me like this? "Sorry, Mr. Tolliver, I didn't see you standing there."

"Might need to work on your situational awareness skills, then," he chided. "But I enjoyed watching my prize pupils in action. Well done, Damon."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, flushing with pride.

"No need to call me sir, Lieutenant; I'm not military. But I wanted to congratulate you on your continued success. Two Nineteens and a Twenty-one. Not bad at all." He draped his arm around my shoulders, leading me to the flight line. A sleek business jet was waiting, engines idling, boarding ladder extended.

"You've proved our point, Damon. Time to go home and continue your training. We're expecting big things from you." Then, noticing my reluctance, he added, "Don't worry, I'll have someone collect your things."

Guess we were leaving right away. Hearing the door behind me, I turned, smiling as the other Spartans joined us. Our unit had flown

twenty combat sorties, suffered no casualties, and downed five enemy aircraft while protecting Navy ships. No reason not to be proud of that.

He sensed hesitation on my part. "Something bothering you, Damon?"

"Well—I *was* hoping to get a few more sorties in."

To my surprise, Tolliver threw his head back and roared. "So you could what? Become an ace?" He squeezed my shoulder. "That would be an outstanding achievement, no doubt."

Fighter ace—shooting down five or more enemy aircraft—was a coveted achievement among military pilots.

"Who knows? In two more weeks, you might have made it. Though the Air Force could never publicize it."

"Why not?"

He laughed again. "Damon, imagine what the American people would say if they knew twelve-year-old pilots were flying around, shooting down MiGs!"

**DSA Executive Office
Downtown Indianapolis
Thursday, August 9, 1973**

Sweat beads glistened on my forehead as I sat in Wanda Harris' office. She was the Director of the Defense Security Agency, an integral partner of the TSI program. Harris was the person who introduced me to TSI, and I had requested a special meeting with her after arriving two days ago from Vietnam.

She strode into her office from a rear entrance, very formal and businesslike. Taking a seat behind her massive mahogany desk, she folded her arms and steadily gazed at me.

"Damon, this is an unexpected pleasure. What's on your mind?"

I decided a direct approach was best. "Mrs. Harris, I'm... unclear of what your objectives are for me."

She straightened, clearly surprised. "In what way, Damon?"

"Well, five years ago, your people pitched an 'educational advancement' program to my parents and me, through which I'd have

exposure to colleges and private industry. And that these things would give me a decided advantage when I chose a college and interviewed with civilian companies.”

Harris shifted in her chair. “And you think that’s not what’s happening?”

“No. After my recent experiences, I don’t think that was ever the goal.”

A spark of anger swirled in her deep brown eyes. “And what do you suppose the goal of TSI is?”

“I think you’re training us for war.”

Harris glowered at me for a long minute. “Damon, let me lay it out for you. Yes, there are obviously military aspects to your training. But the program’s benefits go far deeper than that, as I think you intuitively know. Your mind and body have been engaged on a level you never thought possible.” She took a breath, then continued. “You’ve had ample opportunities to withdraw, but yet, you’ve stayed on. And excelled. Why is that?”

To my dismay, I had no answer for that.

“I’ll tell you why,” she firmly said, pointing her finger at me. “Because you know we’re doing the right things. And deep down, you love it. Plus, you know the values your parents have instilled in you are worth protecting and fighting for. Am I right?”

Slowly, I nodded.

“Thomas Jefferson stated that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. Now, we’ve cycled over a million young Americans through Vietnam. But, unfortunately, some died, and too many came back broken men. It’s tough to be vigilant when those you depend on are missing or unable to fight, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her expression softened as she regarded me. “Damon, we’ve made mistakes. There’s no denying that. So, we want to change things and provide a better, fresher perspective for our national defense. That’s where TSI comes in. Putting people with extraordinary abilities in a position to do what we can’t. Doing things right the first time.”

I hated to admit it, but not only was she making sense, but what she was saying appealed to me on a deep, visceral level.

“Do you feel better now?”

I had to crack a smile. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

She visibly relaxed and leaned back. “I’m glad. Don’t tell anyone I said this, but you have the most potential of all the TSI trainees. I’d like to think you’re on board with all this.”

“I am.”

“Excellent. Will there be anything else, Mr. Harker?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Fine. Have a good day.” With that, she slipped on a pair of reading glasses and rummaged around in her desk, pulling out a file, opening it, and began reading, all without looking up. I assumed our meeting was over.



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 two mothers and seven fully armored soldiers of the Council's

guard. The Tabernacle was an octagonally shaped twenty-foot diameter slate slab 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 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. I will take boys not selected 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—they would choose him for training for war or cast him 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 and his reaction to external stimuli. They examined his bones, joints, and sinews to ensure 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 began the 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 flooding through her. Arcadius would face many hardships in the coming years, 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, a characteristic unbecoming a Spartan warrior.

It seemed cruel and unjust, but the military chiefs chose only superior boys to join the world's fiercest army. It was how Sparta protected herself. The Spartan Army trained the worthy boys and weeded out and discarded the unworthy boys.

It was the Spartan Way.

**White House Situation Room
Washington, DC
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 that the White House Chief of Staff Walter Jenkins had given him moments before.

“Dang, you boys don’t pull punches, do you?” Johnson said, tapping the folder in front of him. “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, you want to mobilize our children to meet this threat?”

Secretary of Defense Bob McNamara spoke up. “Mr. President, we all feel strongly about this new program, as the future of our Republic may be at stake.”

“If I had a dadgum dollar for every time one of you geniuses said that the Rockefeller’s would ask *me* for money,” Johnson grouched. “Now, you want to tell me what this is really about?”

“Bear with us, Mr. President,” McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Advisor, said. Then, turning to CIA Director Richard Helms, he said, “Dick, can you give us a 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, with the goal of serving it someday. We aim to develop these individuals’ unique talents and abilities, expecting that they would use them later to perpetuate the American way of life.”

Johnson stared at him in disbelief. "Wards of the state? Are you kidding me?"

"Well, sir," Bundy replied, coming to Helm's aid. "We wouldn't be taking children from their parents. Instead, 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, if I remember correctly?"

"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 results we were hoping for." He paused, then pushed home the main point. "As you know, our efforts in Vietnam have not proven that successful. Frankly, casualties are far worse than we expected, and the drain on our resources will be enormous if that trend continues, not to mention that there will be a void of young men to carry on once we're through." His tacit admission unsettled everyone, especially Johnson.

"Walt, you've been awfully quiet. What do you make of this?"

"Mr. President, Bob is right," Jenkins said carefully. "We discovered most of the teens had already developed firm political views by the time we interviewed them. The program failed to generate much action, so we had to look at our younger population. Especially since many young American men will not return from Southeast Asia."

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?"

His cabinet members exchanged glances. Finally, Helms broke the silence. "I wouldn't phrase it in those terms, sir, but we need a fresh approach. We want to bring together the best and brightest and have them work with us to keep America great."

"That sounds great, Dick, but what will you train them to do? What will they do when they're supposed to be at band practice or little

league games?” No one spoke. “Okay, who would spearhead this so-called plan?”

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

“Well, shoot, that kills all my concerns.”

“There are challenges to be met,” Helms retorted, “but the idea is to give written and physical tests nationwide to identify children with hyper-intelligence *and* superior physical skills. We would then train those chosen, according to their biases, for military, scientific, or political science applications, so that when they reach adulthood, they can protect and defend this country. The current generation has too many wimps, sir. 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 because he had worked his entire term to help the average American. What if these “exceptional individuals” disliked 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 your plan, Dick?”

“We hope to test in the Spring of 1968, sir. We’ve already laid the groundwork and chosen the curriculums. Vetting of candidates should be complete by December, with initial groups of trainees placed by early 1969.” When Johnson opened his mouth to object, Helm added quickly, “Sir, we will encourage our recruits to think for themselves, like ‘ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.’ That resonates with younger children. We’ll train the candidates without forcing them into a line of ideological thinking.”

“All right,” Johnson said, tired of talking about it. “Let’s 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, 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 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 held the folder, which was stamped “TOP SECRET” in large red letters. Flipping the folder open, he saw printed across the top 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 outside, I noticed that more teachers and adults than usual inhabited the playground. Most held a clipboard, and there were other grownups, too, though I did not recognize them. The adults had us 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 at a table, eight tables divided by boy-girl, still excited

from recess. Mrs. Furman smacked a ruler on her desk to get our attention.

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

“Class, please welcome these 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 upfront 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 four piles 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 James Bond or something.

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, eager to see what questions were in them. Boy, was this interesting! The questions started out simple, like what town we lived in, our address, and things like that. Then, 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 most intelligent 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 fundamental problems in math and science that got progressively more complex. 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, and 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, covering 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; I had trouble with a few questions at the end, 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 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 speak with them while you talk with these men, okay?”

“Okay.” She left to find my older siblings, leaving me alone with the two men. They waved me 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. I’m 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 of 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 tough 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 continuing, “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, named Bill Prescott, laughed. “That would be a drag, going the entire 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 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 must 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, sure.”

“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 that 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 about 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 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 from the living room.

Mom was talking to a young thirty-something 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 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 high for a big man. "We're fine."

Kirsten leaned forward. "We don't want to waste your time, so I'll get to the point. Damon is a special young man, and we'd like to offer him opportunities to... enhance his education."

"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 nationwide. Damon was one of twelve people his age nationwide who completed it. He solved 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 to offer 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. "We're giving gifted children like Damon the opportunity to experience a world-class education through special events."

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

"I appreciate your skepticism, Mr. Harker," Franklin said, shifting in his seat. "Let me put your mind at ease." He leaned toward Dad. "Damon would attend school as usual while we tailored a program to explore his interests and talents. For instance, this might involve classes or workshops at local career centers or universities. In addition, we would invite him to attend seminars on advanced subjects like math, Science, and languages." 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, he could write his 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. How and when would he have to repay you for this great honor?"

"That's a great question, Mr. Harker," Franklin said. "I know you served in the armed forces, so I get why you'd be cautious. But, to us, there is no downside. Damon gets advanced education, and we benefit from whatever he does."

"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, 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 got 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 we had caught his hand 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 and a small courtyard in the middle.

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. The law prohibited warriors from living in their own homes until age thirty, so 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, Lyteta,” he had laughed. “He is preparing for the Agoge next year.”

“How does this help him?”

“We encourage boys his age to do anything to develop their physical skills and 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 the 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 road, naked boys were racing and wrestling. They played this way regardless of the conditions, because exposure to the elements acclimated them to 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; Sparta discouraged such nurturing because it made boys weaker and less likely to survive independently. So instead, 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 well, especially since it was three to one." He swatted Arcadius on the rump, sending him scampering away.

Spartan men were supposed to defend themselves in any fight. She had witnessed several such brawls, noticing that adults watching often spurred the boys on rather than separating them. There was no standing down, stepping aside, or quitting. Cowardice was unacceptable and often severely punished.

It was the Spartan Way.

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

Today was the big day when I would start the TSI program. On a US Army base, no less, which my parents questioned, but I did not know why. Finally, I told them it probably had something to do with the National Education Foundation.

According to Kirsten, army medics would give me the same medical exams as regular soldiers. After checking in at the main gate, soldiers directed us to the medical building. Ft. Harrison was immense; its extensive buildings sprawled along broad streets as far as I could see. The medical facility 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 friendly smile. Reminded me of someone I had seen on TV - Tina Turner? Of course, Mom wanted to stay, but Mrs. Harris assured her she would look after me.

"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 went into Room Four, where I took off my clothes, nurses took my vital signs and a blood sample, and they poked and prodded me with various instruments. Finally, 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 call you back to ask some questions.”

“Okay.” There was one other boy 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 ensure 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? Did 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 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 distinct set of questions for me and 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 we treated you well today?” he asked amicably. “I know this can be difficult 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 much 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 brighter 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. So, for example, 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. What it boils down to, Damon, is you have an incredible intellect.” He paused, wiping off his glasses. “And your memory is remarkable. You apparently can 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. Then, 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 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. “I have a few things I need to finish, Damon, so why don’t you have a seat in the lobby until I’m through?”

A short time later, I was back in the front lobby. I saw Dr. Fenwick and Mrs. Harris huddling in a corner. 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. But, like my other senses, my hearing was abnormally acute.

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

“I’ve encountered nothing 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 also possess eidetic memories that go beyond photographic. Total recall, in excruciating detail.”

“Intriguing. Anything else worth noting?”

“Yes. Most people must hear something multiple times before fully understanding what they’ve heard.”

“I’m aware of that,” Mrs. Harris said.

“With Damon and Reggie, it’s only once. No matter if we gave them instructions visually, orally, or written, the results were the same. Show them once, and they can solve the problem, perform the task, or understand the information with high 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 about the extent of their intelligence. Also, I want to do more physiological tests because they both displayed remarkable physical skills and dexterity. I feel 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 selected children proved 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. So 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 reason and 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, you’re saying their brains are growing faster than normal?”

“That’s oversimplifying things, but there is cerebral hyperdevelopment in both boys, areas that mature in adolescence or adulthood. As a result, 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 sometimes. With boys this young, several adverse outcomes include 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.”

A tall, blonde woman with a severe, pointed face interrupted my spying. “Damon, Reggie, we’re all done here. There’s just one thing left before your parents pick you up. If you’ll follow me over to the armory, please.” She looked back to ensure we were going after her, giving us what I’m sure she thought was a reassuring smile. It was not.

“Come along, boys. Your wonderful adventure is about to begin!”

They herded ten of us—eight boys and two girls—into an enormous building that reminded me of the Indiana State Fair Coliseum, where Dad had taken me several times to watch the Indiana Pacers play. Except there were no bleachers or brightly colored advertisements, just drab green walls, columns, and rafters.

An angry-looking man lined us up shoulder-width apart, then marched smartly up to the end of our line. He ambled past us, glaring into our faces and looking us up and down.

“Kids, I am Drill Sergeant Anthony Morris. You will address me as Drill Sergeant. Is that clear?” Thoroughly cowed, most of us mumbled a response, which made the Sergeant’s face turn several shades of red. “I said, IS THAT CLEAR?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

“That’s better,” he growled, glowering at each of us. “Now, I don’t know who I pissed off in this man’s army, but a ranking officer above me clearly hates me enough to saddle me with a bunch of losers like you. They hate me, so I hate you. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

“Good. Now listen up. I’m not your mommy, I’m not your daddy, and I’m not your friend. Got it? You *will* forget everything you think you know about life outside these walls. Your butts are mine for

the duration of your initial training, understand? So, buckle up, my little babies, because playtime is over.”

We tentatively exchanged glances, saying, ‘What is going on here?’ to each other with our expressions. Sergeant Morris saw us and cackled, clapping his hands together.

“This is going to be some fun, huh?”

Mom picked me up at four o’clock. After I buckled up, she drove off the Fort, getting on the highway and driving north. I did not feel like talking after what I had just experienced.

“You’re awfully quiet, Damon.”

I stared out the passenger window, thinking about what life would be like taking orders from a psychotic drill sergeant. What happened to the “wonderful adventure?” And what was with 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 subject change.

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 true purpose 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 on the beach. He lives with his beautiful wife in central Indiana, where he is hoping to write many more books for people to enjoy.

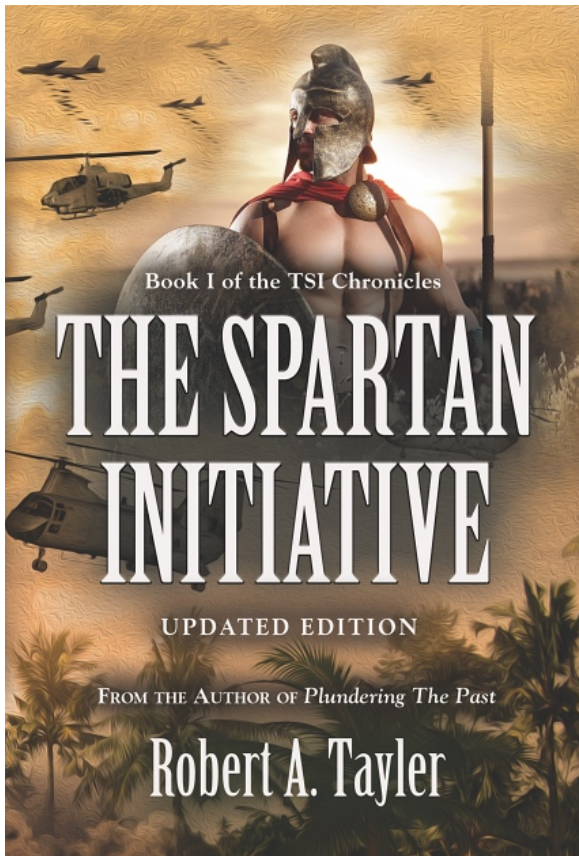
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Damon Harker was chosen for a new program designed to produce warriors using methods similar to ancient Sparta. While friends played sports and went to dances, Damon shot down MiGs and battled drug lords.

THE SPARTAN INITIATIVE

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