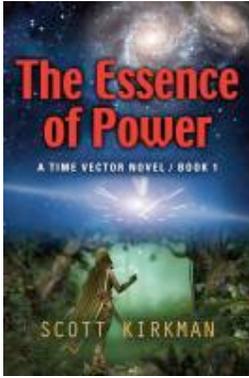


The Essence of Power

A TIME VECTOR NOVEL / BOOK 1

SCOTT KIRKMAN



The Wizard has forged an alliance between the Scorpion hordes and the Red Ant army to slaughter the free races of the Continent. Fifteen-year-old Johnny Archer's mind and spirit (his Essence) are extracted from his body and transported into this alternate Time Vector. There, Johnny learns that his abilities are limited only by his imagination. To defeat the Wizard and break his alliance, Johnny must harness the true power of his Essence.

The Essence of Power

A Time Vector Novel

Book 1

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The Essence of Power

A Time Vector Novel

(Book 1)

By

Scott Kirkman

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Dedication

For Lidia and Enzo

Chapter 1

On a normal day, Johnny liked walking home from school. Today was not a normal day. Today he was expecting to take a beating.

Normally, walking home was a good time to unwind and think. Usually, he thought about his math or physics homework. Most days he could finish nearly all of the problems in his head before he got to his driveway. Even the ones from his courses at the university didn't pose much of a challenge. Lately, though, a lot of his walking-home thoughts drifted toward girls, especially Barbara Watson. He had always liked girls but since he'd turned fourteen almost ten months ago, they had come to dominate more and more of his thoughts.

Today, however, his thoughts were not on beautiful Barbara Watson or the way her jeans hung low on her smoothly curved hips or the way she absently rolled her soft, chestnut colored hair over her delicate ears when she was reading. Johnny's thoughts today were on massive Marten Bandy and his toadies: Joe Kirby and Franklin Scoller.

Marten and his little gang were typical, run of the mill bullies: over-sized, under-brained, mouth breathers who got their kicks by intimidating and terrorizing weaker kids. Today, they were after money: Johnny's money. It was a standard protection racket. Johnny would get safe passage home provided he paid the tribute, but Johnny refused to pay. He had refused to pay on the first warning and again on the second warning. Today, there would be no warning. He would pay one way or another, with money or blood.

He was tempted to pay. It seemed the easiest way to make the problem go away, but he knew better. His dad had always told him that the physical pain of a fight was nothing compared to the shame and fear that came from backing down and allowing yourself to be intimidated, and he had learned the truth of it from experience. So he wasn't going to back down, but that meant he was going to get pounded. What's more, calling it a pounding was probably a euphemism. Marten was sadistic. There was no other way to say it. He liked hurting people. Last year, a kid who crossed Marten had ended

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up in the hospital with broken fingers, a broken nose, and a few missing teeth.

It wasn't really about the money. Every bully came with his own pretense. Marten's was the money, but the simple fact was that Marten and the others didn't like Johnny, probably because he was smart. They didn't like him, so they picked on him. It was that simple.

So with a lump the size of a grapefruit in the pit of his stomach, Johnny marched on. His overstuffed backpack, laden with bulky books, seemed unusually heavy and awkward, and it was more than the heat of the spring day that soaked his tee shirt with sweat under the pack. The *crunch, crunch* of his footsteps in the pea gravel was amazingly clear. It was as if he could hear every tiny rock moving and colliding with those around it. The gravel lined the ten feet between the school's chain link fence and the small side street that curved its way through the neighborhood bordering the back side of the school. The joyful squealing of preschoolers from the daycare center across the side street drifted to him, as did the distant calls of kids from his school playing ball in the field on the other side of the fence.

As if Marten and his cinder-block fists weren't enough, one more thing worried Johnny: his mom. At breakfast, she had mentioned that she might pick him up from school today. If she did, she would be waiting for him around the next curve, right where Marten would be waiting. His mom would not hesitate to confront Martin and the others. Not that she was a large woman or above average in strength, but her temper, possibly handed down from her Latin ancestors, drove her beyond reason sometimes. Her intervention, no matter how decisive, would not help though. It would make things worse—much worse. It would be better to take a beating every day than to be saved by your mother. Unfortunately, she could never be convinced of that.

Johnny rounded the turn expecting to see his worst nightmare: his mother and Marten. Instead, he saw no one. For a moment, his hopes rose. Maybe Marten had been bluffing.

"Hey, Johnny!" a voice called out. It was a teenager's voice, Marten's voice, clear and clean, newly changed from adolescence. Johnny knew it all too well. He hadn't noticed them at first because

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Marten and the others had been sitting down against the chain link fence behind some bushes. They stood up and walked toward him.

Johnny took one more quick glance toward the spot where his mother would park. *Good, not there yet.*

“Little Johnny Archer,” Marten continued, trying to act the cool gangster. It would have been pathetic if he wasn’t so big and Johnny so scared. “You got my money?” He towered a full head and shoulders over Johnny and was nearly twice as wide. He squinted down at Johnny through narrow-set, beady, brown eyes set under bushy, dark eyebrows that were only a few hairs short of becoming one continuous caterpillar across his forehead.

Johnny just shook his head, dark curls sticking to the cold sweat forming on his brow. His stomach felt completely upside down, his legs as if the bones had been removed. His olive complexion was becoming pale as he thought about what Marten was capable of doing.

“Grab this punk,” Marten said to the others, who quickly tore off Johnny’s backpack. Then they each grabbed an arm roughly, sending sharp pain surging through his biceps.

Joe was nearly as tall as Marten but not quite so heavy. His breath, ripe with the stench of garlic, was hot on Johnny’s neck. On his other arm was Frank. Not much taller than Johnny, he had a reputation as a quick and nimble athlete despite his stocky build. His greasy blond hair hung straight to his shoulders. Johnny wasn’t sure what creeped him out more about Frank: his pale complexion, dotted with bright red pimples, or his crooked yellow teeth.

“I’m not gonna run,” Johnny said calmly, fixing his large, almost black eyes on his tormentor.

Marten was forced to look away, momentarily shocked by the intensity of the smaller boy’s stare.

“I know you’re not,” Marten said, recovering his bravado. “I told you what was going to happen if you didn’t pay. What part of that didn’t you understand? I thought you were supposed to be a smart kid.”

“I understood perfectly.”

“Perfectly,” Marten repeated in a mocking tone. “Well?” The bushy caterpillar rose up his forehead.

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“You can kick my butt every day, and all you’ll ever get from me are sore knuckles,” Johnny said.

He had been practicing that line and was glad his voice hadn’t cracked during the delivery. Johnny glanced again over Marten’s shoulder. *Good, still no Mom. Maybe she won’t show.*

“You got guts, Archer, I’ll give you that, but I’m also gonna give you a good whippin’.” Marten slammed one meaty fist into his other palm. Then he slowly drew back his clenched fist, low and behind his back, preparing for a body shot.

Johnny tightened his stomach muscles, preparing for the blow, but it didn’t come.

Instead, Johnny found himself standing in a field of green grass. It was soft, almost knee-high, and danced lazily in a gentle breeze that cooled Johnny’s face and his sweaty back. The smell of pine trees wafted to him with just a touch of fresh flowers. The sun was warm on his back.

He looked around to see that it was not merely a field but a forest of tall pine trees. The air was fresh and dry, and it seemed a little thin. It reminded him of back-packing in the high country. The trees were large, each two to three feet in diameter, and stretched high into the cloudless sky. Grass covered the ground among the trees, with wild flowers accenting the lush scene. An orange flower much like a California poppy dominated, but many other colors were splashed through the immediate area. It appeared to be sometime in the mid to late morning by the location and feel of the sun.

Johnny looked around. It all seemed very real, but how could it be? He wondered whether Marten had knocked him unconscious and it was all a dream. If so, it was the most realistic dream of his life. *Could I be dead? Did they beat me to death?* he wondered with a sudden surge of panic. This place was definitely beautiful, but could it be heaven?

He took a few tentative steps then knelt to touch the grass. *Sure feels real.*

A voice came from behind him. “Make no mistake, Johnny. It is real.”

Johnny spun around.

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A short, barefoot, very dark-skinned man flashed a broad, friendly smile. He was wearing only a tattered loincloth that appeared to be some kind of animal skin and a necklace that looked to be made of small bones. He had a slight pot belly but otherwise seemed healthy and strong with well-defined muscles, particularly in his legs. He appeared to be around forty with weathered skin that looked tough as leather. His hair was a thick mass of black curls that hung nearly to his shoulders. His nose was wide and flat against broad cheeks.

“Don’t be afraid, Johnny. I’ve brought you here for a very good reason, but I will send you back if that is what you wish. I—”

“Back off!” Johnny put up his hand and took a step backward. “If you’re doing this, make it stop! Send me back!”

The man calmly shrugged and opened his palms. “Very well, if that is what you wish. You must be certain you can trust me.”

The next moment a sharp pain coursed through Johnny’s midsection as Marten’s fist plunged into his stomach. Johnny folded around the huge fist like a wet cloth. All the wind rushed out of his lungs, leaving him gasping for breath. The pain was intense, and his knees went limp. Joe and Frank’s grip tightened on his arms as they kept him upright.

“It only gets worse from here, genius,” Marten said through clenched teeth. “Make it easy on yourself and pay.”

Johnny barely heard him. He was dazed and bewildered, and the pain was clouding his mind.

Marten took Johnny’s stupefied look as a “No” and drew back his burly fist. Johnny braced again for the pain but instead collapsed into the grassy field. He rose to his knees, the pain still throbbing in his gut. He looked around. The gentle breeze was moving through the branches and the air carried the clean scent of untouched nature.

The dark little man said, “I only ask that you allow me to explain. After you hear what I have to say, if you still wish to return, I will send you back without delay.”

Johnny jerked his head around. The little man was just a few feet away. *How can this be? There has to be an explanation.* Johnny regarded the man for a few moments, noting his relaxed posture and the warm expression on his weathered face. It was strange, but

something about the man was just comforting. Johnny's mind was skeptical, warning him to beware, but his heart and his gut told him there was nothing to fear from this man.

"You've been hurt," the man said, moving toward Johnny. "Let me help you."

"Stay back!" Johnny said, louder than he had intended, while raising his hand. "I'm okay." He awkwardly got to his feet as the man respectfully stepped backward.

"Please," the man said. "You have nothing to fear from me. In fact, I might be able to help you with this... problem." He motioned to Johnny's belly.

"How?" Johnny said, touching his stomach and trying to stand upright.

"Yes, of course," the man said. "Let me explain. I think you will find what I have to say fascinating."

Johnny paused. *This is all too weird.* Every instinct told him to run or demand to go back to Marten, but his curiosity made him want to stay. *What is this place? How did I get here? Who is this man? How can he help?* He had never felt such an overwhelming sense of wonder and curiosity.

"Okay," Johnny said, still panting. "Please tell me what's going on."

"Excellent!" the man said. "I knew my choice was a good one. Come, let us walk a bit. There is a log over this way. We can sit and talk. I'm sure you will find what I tell you very interesting."

When they were seated, the man said, "First of all, my name is Killara, and it is a pleasure to meet you, young Johnny Archer."

His accent was distinct, but Johnny couldn't place it. "Nice to meet you, too," Johnny said a bit awkwardly.

"I know the big question on your mind. You're wondering about this place," Killara said, holding his arms up and looking around. "The question, my young friend, is not *what* is this place." He placed his hands on his knees and bent toward Johnny. "The question is *when*."

"When?"

"This place is what physicists would call a parallel universe," Killara said. "It coexists with our world, taking up the same space and

matter, but it lies within another *time*. Time is the key. Time is the great mystery of the universe, or *universes*, and it has simply not yet been properly defined or understood. Time has a distinct direction and speed. You and I were born along a single direction of time. One direction in an immense labyrinth of infinite directions.”

“So, this is a different world that lies along another direction of time?” Johnny asked.

“Yes, exactly! It’s another direction of time,” Killara said with a broad, white-toothed grin. “I have coined a term of which I am particularly proud: Time Vectors. You and I were born along one Time Vector, and this world exists along a different Time Vector. There is another very critical fact about Time Vector travel that you must understand.”

“What’s that?” Johnny asked.

“Well, you have been here with me for, what, perhaps ten minutes so far? During this time, not one moment has passed in your home Time Vector. For travelers like us, time is suspended in the world we came from.” He paused for a moment to allow that to sink in.

Johnny thought about Marten’s punch. It had been in flight toward his stomach before he found himself in this forest the first time. He had been here at least two or three minutes before going back and feeling the blow. That much of what Killara was saying seemed to be true.

“No matter how long you stay here,” Killara went on, “not one fraction of a second will pass for you back home. Your body is virtually frozen there, in time, waiting for that punch.”

“You mean, when I go back, I’ll drop back into that instant in time?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.”

“I emphasize that for two important reasons,” Killara said, holding up two dark, deeply weathered fingers. “First, you need not worry that you are being missed back home. Your teacher is not counting you absent. Your family will not be wondering why you have not come home because no time is passing there right now. In fact,

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when I send you back, no one will know that anything has happened, and I would advise you to keep it that way. You'll have no way to prove that any of this happened anyway."

Johnny frowned. "But if I stayed here for a really long time, like for years, I'll be older, taller. People would notice the change, especially if it happens in an instant."

"No, that is not how it works. This brings us to the second and perhaps most critical point. You are not aging right now. What actually travels on an alternate Time Vector is not one's physical body. It is locked into that moment in the world where it was created. It is a product of that time. The Time Vector traveler carries only his mind, spirit, and his image of himself, what I call your 'Essence.' The mind is so powerful that it projects, or creates, a self-image in the alternate Time Vector. To the alternate Vector, this projected self-image is as real as anything else in that physical world. Likewise, to the mind of the traveler, his existence in the alternate Time Vector feels real in every sense; however, because the self-image is not a product of flesh and blood, it is therefore not hindered by most issues of the flesh."

"Wow!" Johnny said softly. His mind was spinning. Part of him wanted to believe. It did seem to make sense, although it was quite a stretch. Still, another part of him thought it was all too crazy.

Killara seemed to sense Johnny's struggle. "I understand this is all very hard to take in at once so please do not try. If you decide to stay, we will have time to explore these concepts more fully. For now—"

"What do you mean if I decide to stay? Just what do you want from me? Even if this is all true, why tell me? How do you know who I am, or anything about me?"

Killara smiled again, warmly and reassuringly. "I have developed a somewhat limited ability to observe across, or between, Time Vectors. This has enabled me to search for just the right candidate. After a lengthy and tiresome search, I found you. I brought you here because you are special, Johnny. You are unique. This, too, may take you a while to realize. I brought you here to help."

He paused and Johnny said, "Help? Help how?"

“This world is in a crisis that might threaten its very existence. There is a war coming, an epic struggle that pits the good and the innocent against a terrible evil that seeks to destroy and enslave. I brought you here to help us win this war and defeat the growing evil.”

“Now I *know* you’re crazy!” Johnny said, sitting bolt upright and starting to get worried again. “What can I do? I’m just a skinny kid. I’m no warrior.”

“Not yet,” Killara said. “True warriors come in many forms. Listen, Johnny, and believe. Your mind is stronger than you can imagine; however, you need to let me help you reach your potential. You must be patient and trust me. Remember, the strength of your mind is not dependent on your age. In fact, a young mind with a free and uninhibited imagination has the greatest potential.”

“But how—”

“Please try to be patient with me. It is difficult to strike the right balance. I want to be open and honest with you because I’m asking you to trust me, but it is simply not possible for me to tell you everything in one sitting. You must trust me to tell you what you need to know when you need to know it.”

“Okay... I’ll try,” Johnny said, without conviction. “Where are you from? How did you learn about the nature of time?”

“That is a long story, best left for another time. For now, I will tell you only that I was originally born in an area that is now called the Australian outback. I was what some would call the shaman, or magic man, of my people. I discovered Time Vectors while experimenting with spiritual journeys, aided by natural medicines. It took many, many years to actually travel at will to other Time Vectors.”

Johnny paused, looking at the ground. His mind was swimming with all he had just been told, but something just didn’t seem to fit. Finally, the idea solidified in his mind. “Wait a minute . You said we were from the same Time Vector, right?”

Killara nodded.

“Well, no offense, but you don’t look like you come from my era. I mean, when were you born, and when did you first come to this Time Vector?”

Killara smiled. Again, it was warm and genuine without a hint of rancor or frustration. “Many, many centuries ago is the answer to both questions.”

Quietly, Johnny said, “Wow!” He contemplated what that would mean, if it were true, about the dark little man sitting next to him.

“Yes? Go on. Ask.”

Johnny regained this train of thought. “How can that be? I mean, if you left our Time Vector centuries ago, then time should have frozen there for you. If so, then how could time there move forward for you to find me in my time? Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I know exactly what you mean, and that is an excellent question. You are indeed very bright. This is something I’d hoped we could discuss later. However, I don’t want you nagged by uncertainty, so I’ll try to explain.” Killara took a breath and absently scratched his thick mat of curly black hair. One’s Essence can exist in a number of states. We have been discussing one here along an alternate Time Vector.” He motioned with his hands, indicating the world around them. “Of course, there is the physical state you are very familiar with along your home Time Vector. There also is another you are very familiar with, but you may not truly understand it as such.” He paused and looked at Johnny with a wry smile.

Johnny frowned.

“No guesses?” Killara said. “You travel there every night when you go to bed?”

Johnny furrowed his eyebrows. “You mean dreams?”

“Yes.” Killara wagged a finger at him. “Modern civilizations, particularly those in the west, are dismissive of the dream world, simply because it cannot directly affect the physical world; however, for our Essence it is every bit as real as any other state or realm. Now, there is yet another state that I call The Between because it exists between Time Vectors. When in that state, one is between time, separated from *any* time. From there, one’s Essence can watch time progress, sometimes at a very accelerated rate, even in one’s home Time Vector.”

“Amazing,” Johnny said softly. “And you can travel at will through all of those states?”

Killara nodded. “Mmm. More or less; however, traveling The Between is very taxing on my Essence.

“But if time moves forward for you while you are in this Between place, what happens to your physical body? Wouldn’t the people around you notice... I don’t know... something?”

Killara smiled and raised his eyes skyward in mock aggravation. “Ah, to be young again and full of questions.” He looked at Johnny. “My boy, I have been alive for more centuries than I care to recall and learned a great many things in that time. I cannot explain everything to you in a single afternoon.”

“But—”

“Rest assured, my physical body is well taken care of. As I said, there are many states and we have touched on only a few. As for the people I left behind...” His weathered face became grave for the first time since Johnny had met him. “Let’s just say I had no reason to stay.”

“Again, I know you have many more questions, but now is not the time. I don’t mean to rush you, but time is critical, and we must be moving along. This place is not safe, and there is someone we must meet. He will escort us to the place where you will begin your training. Before moving on, there is one more important thing you must be aware of.” He paused and fixed Johnny with a serious stare. “I can only transport you back from this precise location. Once we move away from here, I will not be able to send you back until we can return. This is very important. Do you understand?”

Johnny nodded. “When will we be able to return?”

Killara shrugged. “It’s impossible to say for sure. We’re about to step into a torrent of events that we will probably have little control over. Now, will you stay and help us? I know this is hard for you to take in, but I’m convinced that without your help, all will be lost. You are the key.”

Johnny had to look away, torn by his emotions.

“If you say no, I will transport you home right away, and this experience will fade like a distant dream. If you stay, I cannot promise you absolute safety. Your fate will rest in your own hands after a time. We will face dangers and trials, but I can promise an adventure beyond

your wildest dreams. You will see and experience incredible and wonderful things. I will help you to reach your fullest potential and to command powers far greater than you can possibly imagine.”

Johnny paused, surprised at himself for even thinking about Killara’s request, but something about the man made Johnny feel as if he were an old friend. The rational side of his mind still echoed with the words of his parents about going away with strangers and how they could do and say all sorts of convincing things to kidnap kids. Still, this was not someone asking for directions on a street corner or looking for help with a lost puppy. This was another world. Of that, Johnny was already convinced.

“Are you sure that no time will pass... back home?” Johnny asked.

“Yes, of course,” Killara said. “You’ve already witnessed that for yourself, have you not?”

“You said we would face dangers. How much? I mean, could I get killed?”

“Yes, the dangers are that great, but you will be well prepared.”

“What would happen to my body back home? I mean, if I get killed?”

“Johnny, these are excellent questions and I promise we will delve into them as deeply as you want, as far as I know of such things, but now is not the time.”

“Yes, I understand,” Johnny said, still not sure.

“I can see you are hesitant, and that is certainly understandable. But I sense your hesitation is not about wanting to help us. It relates to whether or not I am telling the truth. Well, don’t worry, for someone is coming to meet us who will convince you without a doubt that I am telling the truth.”

Something rustled behind Johnny. He turned and was startled. Standing not more than fifteen feet away was a creature that resembled a female black widow spider, except that it had a human torso. The size and proportion of the torso were those of an adult male, but the skin was the same glossy black exoskeleton and blended smoothly with the rest of the spider body. His face and head were very much like those of a man, although his ears were nothing more than an

arching ridge around a small hole, and his head was completely bald. His large, dark eyes sparkled with intelligence. They were a deep shade of purple and had vertical pupils, like those of a cat. Behind the torso, the creature's abdomen was nearly the size of a mini-van. Its long, angular legs extended far beyond that.

"Don't be afraid," Killara said. "This is who we have come to meet." He turned to the spider. "Dukkoon, my old friend, how have you been?"

The spider spread his front legs so he could bend down, and the two embraced. "I am well, and very pleased to see you again," Dukkoon said.

Killara looked at Johnny. "Johnny, allow me to introduce Dukkoon, the spider king. Dukkoon, this is Johnny Archer."

Dukkoon said, "Killara, you know I am not comfortable with that title. There is no such thing as a spider king."

The spider looked down at Johnny and took a step toward him, each leg shifting slightly. Despite his immense size, he made virtually no sound and seemed almost to float across the forest floor. He spread his front legs very wide and bowed formally, then rose and smiled at Johnny. His smile was warm and friendly despite his sharp, pointed teeth, which resembled those of a shark. Dukkoon's voice was deep, rich and smooth, almost calming. "It is a pleasure and an honor to meet you, Young Master Archer. Welcome to our world. My apologies if my approach gave you a start."

"It's... it's a pleasure to meet you, too," Johnny said hesitantly, while trying to bow in a similar manner.

"Killara tells me that it is a custom where you come from to touch hands when meeting a new friend," Dukkoon said. He moved closer to Johnny and extended his hand.

Johnny took a cautious step forward and shook it.

Dukkoon's grip was firm, but gentle, and his skin was smooth and a little cold.

Killara said, "My apologies, Johnny. I know it's a bit unnerving to see one of the great spiders up close for the first time. Perhaps I should have prepared you better, but there really is no way to prepare someone from our world for such an encounter. Rest assured,

however, you have nothing to fear from Dukkoon. On the contrary, there is no safer place in all the world than standing behind the spider king.”

Johnny nodded, but continued to stare at Dukkoon.

Dukkoon smiled. “As usual, Killara stretches the truth. No, I sense no fear in our young friend. I sense only wonder and curiosity.” To Johnny he said, “Don’t be shy, Young Master Archer. Feel free to ask me any question that comes to your mind. I anticipate that you have many and will have many more in the days to come. For now, we must make haste. It is a full day’s walk to our destination, and we are losing the sun.”

Killara said, “A moment please, Dukkoon. I think Johnny is still reluctant to join us.”

“I see.... Well, that is certainly understandable. After all, we have only just met, and it is quite a lot to ask, especially for one so young. However, this place will not stay safe much longer. We must leave soon.”

Johnny looked from Dukkoon to Killara then back to Dukkoon. “It’s... it’s just crazy. I don’t even know what’s going on here, or who you two are. I’m not even sure all this is real!” He paused and waved his hands through the air. “I have a life back home... my family, my friends, my school work. I can’t just pick up and leave like that!”

“It would not be forever, Johnny,” Killara said.

“Unless I get killed!”

Killara smiled. “Well, there is that.”

Johnny paused another long moment. In his heart and gut he was itching to go, to see what this world was all about, to learn more about Dukkoon and others like him, but in the end, his mind won. “No,” he said with a heavy exhale of breath. “I’m sorry, but I can’t go with you. It’s just too crazy. I... I think I should go home now.”

The look on Dukkoon’s shiny black face was one of calm satisfaction, as if he had predicted this would happen.

Killara’s face filled with utter disappointment. “Very well. I am sad, but I understand completely.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that—”

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“No, no. There’s no need for that.” Killara smiled warmly. “Well, take care of yourself.”

“I will,” Johnny said. He looked to Dukkoon.

The spider just nodded. “Goodbye, Johnny Archer.”

“Goodbye, and good luck with... with the war and everything,” Johnny said.

Sharp pain ripped through Johnny’s midsection as Marten’s punch landed in exactly the same spot as the last one. This time Johnny collapsed completely into Joe and Frank’s rough grip and they jerked him back to his feet. On top of the pain shooting through his body, Johnny was overwhelmed as all of his senses were flooded with input from this new reality: gravel shuffling under their feet, the kids playing at the daycare, Joe’s bad breath hot in his ear, and Marten and his bushy eyebrow looming in front of him.

Johnny regretted his decision to leave the other world, but not because he was getting beat up. That almost didn’t matter anymore. Here, relatively safe in his own world, his curiosity about what he had left behind overtook him with an intense ferocity. He desperately wanted to know more about Time Vectors, the other world, Killara, Dukkoon and the other creatures of that land. Perhaps most of all, he wanted to know more about the training and about the power to which Killara had eluded. Now, in the wink of an eye, it was all gone, the chance of a lifetime, perhaps even the chance to learn the true nature of the Universe.

Johnny was so sick with regret that he barely took note of Marten grabbing his face with one rough, calloused hand. Marten squeezed his cheeks hard. “You had enough yet, Archer?” Then, he started shaking Johnny’s head from side to side. “You’re gonna pay eventually. Why not make it easy on yourself?” Johnny just stared back at him, barely registering what he was saying. Marten let go of Johnny’s cheeks. “Okay. If that’s the way you want to play.” With that, he slowly drew his massive fist back past his own ear.

Johnny gritted his teeth, shut his eyes and winced as Marten’s fist jerked forward. Instinctively, Johnny twisted his face away, but the blow didn’t land. The momentum of his own action spun him to the ground. Had Joe and Frank let go and Marten missed? As he opened

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his eyes, he became aware of grass instead of gravel, and the breeze carried clean, fresh air. Still on his hands and knees, he jerked his head around to see Killara and Dukkoon looking down at him.

Killara was beaming his usual broad smile, his bright white teeth in stark contrast to his dark skin. “Second thoughts, Boy?” Killara asked.

Johnny nodded. “Totally. How’d you know?”

“I can explain that and many other things later,” Killara said. He helped Johnny to his feet.

“Ready, Young Master?” Dukkoon asked.

“Johnny nodded. “I’m in. Let’s go!”

Chapter 2

Johnny followed Dukkoon through the forest, amazed at the fluid effortlessness of the giant spider's movements. He was immense yet so smooth and quiet. He wondered whether Dukkoon could spin a web or had venom. He was dying to know but too shy to ask.

They were moving silently, and the tension was palpable. Both Killara and Dukkoon were uneasy. After a time, they came upon a large clearing in the forest, and Dukkoon stopped just at the edge of the tree line. He looked skyward, then closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath, smelling the breeze. He looked back at Killara. "Stay inside the trees, and keep Johnny close."

Killara nodded and put his arm around Johnny's shoulder as Dukkoon moved cautiously into the clearing.

Johnny said, "What—"

Killara put a finger to his lips and pulled Johnny to squat behind a large tree.

Dukkoon had not ventured far into the clearing before the three creatures appeared. Johnny couldn't believe his eyes. They were giant scorpions, each perhaps one-quarter larger than Dukkoon, but like him, they were centaur versions of a scorpion with humanoid upper bodies where the scorpion's head should be. They moved into the clearing from the surrounding trees and spread out to surround the spider king. They ranged from almost translucent yellow at the legs to almost black along their backs. Their claws were huge, open, and ready for battle. Their sinister stingers were curled at the end of their long, segmented tails, poised to strike.

They were low to the ground and they moved nervously from side to side as if jockeying for position. The middle one spoke, his voice deep and raspy. "Dukkoon, it is you. I was hoping it would be true. Bringing your head back to Kulkerov will be a great prize."

Dukkoon said nothing. With the speed of a cobra, he extended his arms toward the two flanking scorpions, and a stream of clear fluid shot from each palm.

The scorpion on Dukkoon's left managed to get one large claw in front of his face in time to block the venom shot but the other was not

so lucky. The deadly fluid hit him directly in the face. The creature let out a hideous scream and tried frantically to wipe away the oily venom.

The middle scorpion did not hesitate. He rushed Dukkoon, claws ready for the kill, but the spider king sprang into the air, vaulting over the scorpion, who reared on his back four legs.

Dukkoon landed lightly, trailing a web from his abdomen to a large dead log. The log creaked and popped as it rose from its resting place, propelled by the web, and flew toward the scorpion, leaving a trail of dirt and grass in the air.

The scorpion barely had time to see it coming before it smashed into him, knocking him completely onto his back. The scorpion flailed for a moment, trying to throw off the log.

Dukkoon moved in quickly, using two of his legs to pin down one of the great claws while he raised his right arm to reveal a spike protruding from his wrist. It was about a foot long and tapered to a sharp point. He drove it into the scorpion's chest, then pulled it back just as quickly and moved away.

The scorpion screamed as he scrambled to his feet and started toward Dukkoon, but he took only a few steps before he collapsed, paralyzed. He tried to speak but released only a pathetic gurgle.

The first scorpion, after managing to block the venom shot, was charging Dukkoon as well, lunging and snapping his powerful claws.

From his position behind the tree next to Killara, Johnny watched with a mixture of awe and complete terror.

Dukkoon's speed was unimaginable. He dodged and ducked the larger creature's attack and managed to move behind him. The scorpion pivoted to face the spider again, then lashed out in frustration. Again Dukkoon sidestepped the attack and moved behind the claws. With two legs, he held the attacking claw and in that moment, the scorpion struck with his stinger. Again, Dukkoon was too fast. With another leg, he caught the tail in mid-flight and pinned it to the ground. He needed only a moment to inject his own lethal venom. Then he moved away quickly, keeping his distance from the scorpion, who pursued him vigorously for a few steps before the toxin robbed him of all motor control.

“Spider scum!” the scorpion hissed as he collapsed. “This time, you’ll all die! Your race is through!”

Dukkoon turned on the third scorpion, who was still moaning in agony and clawing at his face and eyes. He staggered blindly, swinging his claws and striking wildly with his tail.

Dukkoon approached him cautiously looking for the right opening. When it came, he rushed past the blinded scorpion, moving so quickly that Johnny didn’t even see him inject the death blow.

The scorpion screamed and collapsed.

The battle seemed to have lasted forever, but only a few seconds had passed. Johnny’s heart was pounding in his chest. His mouth had gone bone dry and he was breathing as if he’d just sprinted a fifty-yard dash.

Dukkoon took a moment to make sure the area was again secure and the scorpions were dead before moving back toward Johnny and Killara.

Killara simply shook his head and muttered softly to Johnny, “Three scorpions... that’s why he’s the spider king. Dukkoon is the kindest, most gentle friend you will ever know, but there is no one more deadly in hand-to-hand combat. No one.”

Johnny studied Killara, listening, then looked up as Dukkoon approached. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, Young Master,” Dukkoon said with a reassuring smile. “They were young, without experience and foolish.” He paused. “Let us be off. We must keep moving.”

They headed off through the clearing, past the scorpion carcasses. Johnny was struck by the sheer size of the beasts. He wondered how much they must weigh. He paused for a moment to study one of the claws. It was bigger than him and could easily have cut his slender body in half. He followed the tail down to the stinger. It curled upwards slightly and was at least two feet long. A drop of amber venom hung from its tip. A chill raced through his spine. *This thing could penetrate clean through me.*

“Come along, Young Master.”

Johnny looked up, then ran to catch his friends. He looked at Killara. "Are the scorpions the enemy you spoke of? Are they the evil that intends to make war?"

Dukkoon answered. "Yes, among others."

"Others?"

Dukkoon was moving faster, and it was all Johnny could do to keep up without running. Dukkoon said, "Yes. It appears that the army of the great red ants has joined forces with the scorpion hordes."

Killara said, "This has been confirmed?"

Dukkoon nodded. "Our scouts have confirmed that they are massing together in the southern valley."

"That's bad," Johnny said quietly, and Dukkoon turned to look at him.

"You know of the red ant army?" Dukkoon said.

"I know about ants from my world. They're probably the most formidable creatures in the world and, pound for pound, one of the strongest. When they're organized in mass, no creature can stand in their way. After meeting you and seeing the scorpions, my guess is that around here, they're huge too."

Dukkoon nodded. "A full grown worker is nearly my size, and the soldiers are even bigger. And everything else you've said about them holds true as well." He shook his head. "We have been to war with the scorpions before. Each time we defeated them, but with the ant army on their side, I fear there is little hope."

"Why do the scorpions make war?"

"Why does any creature voluntarily make war?" Dukkoon said.

"Power, greed, arrogance... perhaps for all of those reasons."

Johnny nodded as he jumped over a dead log. "Why do they hate the spiders?"

This time, Killara answered. "Spiders have always stood between the scorpions and the free creatures of the world."

"We have never stood alone," Dukkoon said. "Yourself included, in no small way."

Killara said, "We have all tried to do our part, but without the spiders, all would have been lost many generations ago. Only the

spiders have been able to stand against the scorpions. And that's why they hate the spiders."

"But why have the ants joined with the scorpions? Do they want power also?"

"That question is the key to everything," Dukkoon said. "We do not know why. The ants have never before bothered with the intrigues of others. They are not thought of as creatures of higher intelligence and have remained indifferent to anything but their own concerns. They show no mercy to any who attack them or even venture into their path, but they have never waged war."

"You say they are not 'of higher intelligence', but how smart are they?" Johnny asked.

"It is hard to say," Killara said. "Based on their behavior, probably no smarter than ants from our world."

"It is said that only their queen is truly intelligent," Dukkoon added.

Killara said, "As Dukkoon said, Johnny, this is the key. With the ants at their side, the scorpions finally will be victorious, and life under scorpion rule would be brutal and terrifying to put it mildly. We hope you can help us unravel this mystery. We must break this alliance, or there is no hope."

"Of course, I'll do what I can, but—"

"There are no buts. You must have confidence. I know you will help."

Johnny just nodded, struck for the first time with the gravity of the situation. Panic began to rise from the pit of his stomach. *They really expected me to help? But how? What can I do against those scorpions or an ant the size of a car?*

He wondered again whether he had made the wrong choice.

Maintaining a brisk pace, they continued on in silence for a time before Killara said, "Dukkoon, I believe this scorpion attack leaves little doubt that there is indeed a spy in our midst."

Dukkoon took a deep breath and shook his head. "I still cannot believe it."

“I know it is difficult, but we cannot be blind to the obvious,” Killara said. “How else could they know exactly where and when we were to collect Johnny? And this is not the first such incident.”

“I grant that it is suspicious, but it also could have been a random patrol.”

“A random patrol? You don’t believe that any more than I do. We are clear on the other side of the great swamp from where the hordes are massing.”

“If they knew you and I would be here alone, then why did Kulkerov not come himself with ten assassins?” Dukkoon said. “Why did he send three inexperienced soldiers?”

“I cannot answer that,” Killara said. “Perhaps he underestimated you. Perhaps he does not fully trust the spy yet. If the latter, then make no mistake, he will trust him after he finds those three piles of buzzard meat back there. No. I think we need to steady ourselves for the realization that there is a traitor. How many knew we would be here today? Not many.” Killara paused a moment to judge Dukkoon’s manner before continuing. “I think we should also prepare for, at least, the possibility that the traitor is a spider.”

“A spider!” Dukkoon turned an angry look on Killara. “I will never believe that one of my brothers would betray his kind and all the free peoples for a scorpion! That is ridiculous!”

“I agree, but think for a moment what that could mean. It opens at least the possibility that they know where she is.”

She? Who is she? Johnny thought. He would ask Killara later.

Dukkoon remained focused the forest ahead and nodded.

Hesitantly, Killara said, “There is one other explanation.”

“The wizard?” Dukkoon said.

“I know you don’t believe in his existence, but I am convinced.” Killara brushed a branch away from his face as he passed. “I feel his presence, and it grows stronger with each day that passes. If there is no traitor, then his powers are even greater than I thought, and that would give me greater concern than even the highest placed spy.”

“Killara, on this issue, I am torn,” Dukkoon said. “You have been my friend and mentor nearly since the day I hatched. More than once you have saved my life. You have a power I cannot comprehend. For

those reasons, I want to believe you. But legends, mystical powers, magic? This is too much. You are from a different world, a different time. Things such as these are part of your collective conscience, your culture and heritage: concepts of religion and Gods and Heaven. We spiders have none of these things.”

Johnny could stand it no longer. “Wizard? What wizard?”

Dukkoon looked back. “Yes. There has long been a legend, a myth, of a twisted and evil practitioner of the dark arts, but almost nothing else is known of him. Not even what manner of creature he is.”

“But you don’t believe in this wizard?”

“I have never witnessed evidence of his existence,” Dukkoon said.

Killara asked, “What about you Johnny? Do you believe in wizards and magic?”

Johnny laughed. “Well normally, I would have sided with Dukkoon on this one, but after what I’ve witnessed in the last few hours, I’ll believe almost anything!”

Dukkoon said, “Killara, you know I trust you, but for now, please keep your beliefs between us. I do not want to spread panic by taking these ideas to a broader audience. If there is a traitor or a wizard or both, it might be best if we do not alert him to what we know.”

“Agreed,” Killara said.

They continued moving through the forest at a quick pace. Despite the level terrain, Johnny’s heart was pounding, and his legs were starting to burn. He was thankful the large trees provided ample shade from the warm afternoon sun. Still, he was sweating and hot. After a time, he puffed, “Who is Kulkerov?”

Without turning, Dukkoon said, “Kulkerov leads the scorpion hordes. It was he who had the power to unite the disparate clans and form a unified army. He is cunning, intelligent, and completely ruthless. There is perhaps no creature more deadly across the entire Continent.”

“Yet he carries a scar from your fang,” Killara said, then looked at Johnny and ran his finger across his own throat slowly from ear to ear.

Dukkoon looked at Johnny. “It was a lucky strike. We met briefly on the battle field during the last great war. I was lucky to escape with my life. I would rather face a hundred like those back there than clash with him again.”

Johnny wondered what kind of creature could scare Dukkoon. “Where are we going?” he said between breaths.

Killara said, “To see the Mantis Master.”

“The Mantis Master?”

“He is perhaps the greatest practitioner of the fighting arts in this world or any other,” Killara said, “and he has agreed to take you on as a student, to train you for the coming conflict.”

“Fighting arts?” Johnny repeated. “You mean like martial arts? Karate, Kung Fu?”

“Yes,” said Killara.

“Wow! You mean he’s gonna to teach me to fight? Cool!” said Johnny.

“Yes, but remember, learning to fight, to attack and defend yourself, may be at the beginning and the end of things, but what matters is everything in between. What’s truly meaningful is what you learn about yourself through the training. You will learn the true nature of your spirit and character, and you will seek to improve those things. Our spirit and character, not the strength of our muscles or even our skill and technique, ultimately define whether we win or lose battles.”

“Yes Sir,” Johnny said, but his mind was racing. *Am I really going learn martial arts?*

“Indeed,” added Dukkoon. “It is a great honor to be a student of the Mantis Master. No one can remember the last time he agreed to train an apprentice.”

“The Master lives mostly a solitary life,” Killara said, “like a monk, you might say. He pays little attention to the happenings of the world. His life is dedicated to the perfection of his art, which includes hand-crafted weapons.”

“What is he like? Why is he called the Mantis Master?”

“Because he is a praying mantis,” Killara said. “To you, a giant praying mantis. Standing on his back legs, he’s almost seven feet tall.”

“Fascinating,” was all Johnny could say. Why was he not surprised?

“Be prepared, Johnny,” Killara said. “Working with the Master is no picnic. He is blunt and brutally honest. He makes no time for pleasantries or emotion. He expects perfection and he accepts nothing less. He does not tolerate disobedience or even complaints. You must place yourself in his hands and trust him completely. Do whatever he says without question. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes, I will.” Johnny wondered again what he had gotten himself into.

“Good. I know you can do it.” Killara squeezed his shoulder. “Now relax. I’ll be there with you the whole time.” Then, as if reading his mind, Killara asked, “Tired?”

“Yes, and my feet are beginning to hurt.” He pointed to his tennis shoes. “These are not my hiking boots.”

“Really? That’s strange... how could your feet be hurting and your body feeling fatigue when they are frozen in time back in their Time Vector?”

Johnny thought he understood what Killara was getting at, but still he felt the sensations. His feet really did hurt. When he touched his hand or pinched his skin, he could feel it.

Again, as if sensing Johnny’s thoughts, Killara said, “The mind is very powerful. Just as it projects the self-image we all see and feel here, it creates these feelings, for better or worse, because that is what is expected. Of course, when you walk great distances, you get tired. Because that’s all you have ever known, it is the response your mind creates for you.

“To fully break through those perceptions, you have to practice. You must train your mind to project what you want, not what your subconscious expects.”

“I think I understand what you’re saying, but how can I overcome my own subconscious?”

“Practice, practice, and more practice,” Killara said. “I will help and so will the Master. Through his training, with my guidance, you will understand. Don’t worry.”

Johnny wrinkled his brow and stumbled on a tree root.

“Here,” Killara said, “stop for a moment.” Gratefully, Johnny did as he was told, and Killara continued. “For now, think about your feet. Concentrate. Close your eyes if you have to. Imagine that they don’t hurt. Imagine you are walking on a sandy beach at the water’s edge or anywhere calm and special to you. Block out all feelings of pain.”

Johnny concentrated. He imagined he was in another place. After a time, the pain in his feet disappeared as if a light switch had been flipped. Once he realized it, his concentration broke and the pain reappeared. Feeling empowered and excited, he tried again. The pain washed away faster with less concentration, and it stayed away longer.

“It worked!” Johnny opened his eyes and smiled at Killara.

“Yes, of course. You are on your way, Johnny Archer. From here, there is no limit for you.”

They moved on, hurrying to catch up with Dukkoon, but the spider had stopped when he noticed Killara instructing Johnny. Once they caught up, he continued leading their march.

Johnny pondered what Killara had said. This was the key, he realized. This was the pivotal concept that Killara had mentioned before when they were discussing age. Johnny hadn’t realized the full implications before, but he was beginning to now. If he was not tied to his physical body, if he was indeed not limited by what his muscles could do, how much air his lungs could breathe, how much blood his heart could circulate, how far could he walk or run and how fast? Without nerve endings, could he feel pain, or heat, or cold? What about thirst and hunger? As his nimble mind raced through these possibilities, his smile grew and he quickened his pace.

Chapter 3

Kulkerov moved through the cavernous passageway cut into the mountain. The tunnel was large. Its width was such that two scorpions could walk abreast, and Kulkerov could barely reach the top even stretching with one claw. His eight scorpion legs made only the slightest sound on the solid stone floor. Two massive claws were held ready but relaxed folded close to his body. His long tail with its deadly stinger was curled up and poised above his back. Kulkerov's humanoid body was rippled with muscles and hard from years of training and battle. He was large even among his own kind.

He wondered for a moment how the wizard had built these caves and tunnels. The catacombs were extensive. They permeated the entire mountain and extended deep into its base. Some of the caverns were enormous. Only the wizard knew for sure the true extent of these tunnels and caverns. The walls were smooth and geometrically perfect. Torches burned continuously with no obvious fuel source bathing the deep tunnels with an unnerving mix of shadows and light.

Kulkerov's curiosity was only passing. He did not concern himself with such things. He was a warrior with little time, or interest, to ponder such mundane questions. He was uneasy. Meeting with the wizard always affected him this way. Something about the strange little creature left him with just the slightest feeling of dread. He feared nothing, not even a full grown wasp, but his flesh crawled with the thought of being close to the mysterious wizard.

More than dread, Kulkerov was annoyed that he'd been summoned away from his battle preparations like some servant. He complied because, so far, the wizard was making good on his promise to deliver the great red ant army. Perhaps what annoyed him most was that without the red ant army, he could not defeat Dukkoon and the spiders. He needed the wizard, and he didn't like feeling dependent. Absently, he raised a hand to run his fingers along the scar on his neck. Soon he would pay back the so-called spider king.

Finally, the tunnel yielded to a great cavernous expanse, many times wider and taller than the tunnel. The floor and walls were the same perfectly cut stone. Dozens of torches lined the perimeter,

burning with that same strange perfection that never seemed to dim or change.

Two other tunnels fed into the cave as well. The wizard was waiting for him.

He was small by Kulkerov's measure, no bigger than an elf. His long brown robe extended to the floor. A large hood covered his head and was so deep that it hid his face. The robe and hood concealed even his species, and Kulkerov suspected that was precisely the wizard's intention.

As the wizard moved toward Kulkerov, the robe appeared to float across the black stone. His voice was a barely audible whisper that made Kulkerov's skin crawl. "Welcome, General Kulkerov. Thank you for coming."

The big scorpion nodded.

"What news from the scouting party?"

"Which scouting party?" Kulkerov said, knowing full well what the wizard wanted to know.

A hint of annoyance crept into the wizard's voice. "You know the one I mean. The one I asked you to send to the western woods."

"My apologies wizard, but I have many scouting parties, dispatched all over the Continent."

"Well?"

"They are dead," Kulkerov said flatly.

"Dead? How?"

"Spiders," Kulkerov said, again without emotion.

"I told you to go yourself!" hissed the wizard. "I told you my source was reliable! Now we have missed the perfect opportunity."

"And I told you that I don't have the time to travel all that way based on the wild conjectures of—"

"Of what? A maniac?" said the wizard his voice calm now.

"An unproven spy."

"Very good," said the wizard the hood bobbing slowly up and down. "Diplomacy. I didn't think you were capable. Perhaps there is a brain in that impressive physique after all."

Kulkerov stiffened. His first impulse was to snip the twisted freak in two. With an effort, he restrained himself.

The wizard continued. “Perhaps now you will trust my source and take the appropriate actions the next time.”

“Perhaps,” said Kulkerov. “I still have no proof that my soldiers were killed by anything but a random spider patrol. That area is deep within their territory.”

“It was Dukkoon and you know it,” the wizard spat.

“Even if I yield that point, the opportunity lost is not devastating,” Kulkerov replied. “Dukkoon is an accomplished fighter to be sure, but he is far from their finest field general. The human has strange powers—some I have witnessed firsthand—but nothing so great as to turn the tide of a great battle.”

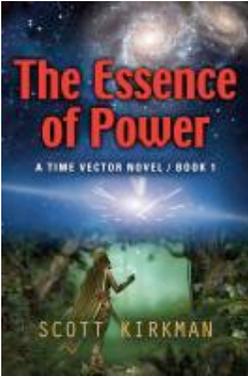
“I disagree, General. Dukkoon is more than an accomplished fighter, he is their greatest warrior. That scar on your neck should be proof enough for you. More importantly, he is their king. He is a symbol. Destroying him now, before the war even begins, would have been a devastating blow to their armies. And the powers of the human, Killara, are greater than you imagine. Even I cannot fully ascertain them. Above all, he is no fool. This other human must be very important for Killara to bring him now and for Dukkoon to escort them personally.”

“From where do these humans come?” asked Kulkerov. “I have never seen their like. Only the elves bear a slight resemblance.”

“The humans are not of this world. Of that, I am sure, but I cannot see deeper than that.”

Not of this world? Kulkerov thought. It was talk like this that troubled him about the wizard and made him doubt the creature’s sanity. *No matter. As long as he delivers the ant army, he can babble on about any nonsense he wishes.*

“If that is all, Wizard, I will return to my preparations,” Kulkerov said coolly.



The Wizard has forged an alliance between the Scorpion hordes and the Red Ant army to slaughter the free races of the Continent. Fifteen-year-old Johnny Archer's mind and spirit (his Essence) are extracted from his body and transported into this alternate Time Vector. There, Johnny learns that his abilities are limited only by his imagination. To defeat the Wizard and break his alliance, Johnny must harness the true power of his Essence.

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