

Sirius, Book III

The Essence

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 1

Alps had a great deal to think about now. After everything he had been through, he felt he'd have enough to keep his mind and heart busy for months and months, but now, Nita had asked him to marry her. It was usually the female who proposed, this was true, but never someone of Nita's social standing to someone that was so far beneath her that the marriage might meet with serious opposition from her people. Still, Alps was seen now, at least locally, as a hero after the victories based on his avalanche tactic had worked so well. Perhaps it would not reflect on Nita badly at all. Perhaps it would even be a political boon to the queen. Alps looked out the window of the council chamber and thought of all these things. So much had changed, and it had only been... what... less than a year now?

"A lot on your mind, Alpsie?" came a feathery and soothing voice from behind him. It was Misty. She had entered with Nita and Nidaja. They were here for a reason of course. Now that Alps had been able to rest, and settle down again, there were a lot of questions, and a lot of tests to be run. Misty was holding a blue crystal sphere, which glowed softly. Alps got to his feet from the small wooden chair he'd been sitting in.

"Only a wedding and the recent bizarre adventures." came his smooth reply. He bowed courteously to Nita and the others.

"Soon, they will have to bow to you, you know." Nidaja said, nudging her sister a bit. Nita had told everyone the morning after Alps had accepted. How could he possibly refuse? It was an order by his mistress. Even though he really wanted to do it anyway, he was in no place to refuse her. He could not have been happier though. Alps wagged his tail slowly, and nodded.

"I know. It will take a lot of getting used to." he stated. He sat down on the plush velvet couch, and Misty handed him a pillow. Alps looked at her blankly, and then got pushed to his back on the couch by Nidaja. Alps grinned sheepishly. "Had I known you were bringing me here for this, I would have taken a bath." he churred. Nidaja pinched his nose.

"It's not for that." she said, putting the pillow under his head. She then nodded to Misty, who pulled a chair over beside Alps. Nita and Nidaja did the

same, leaving Misty in the middle, everyone alongside Alps. He looked at them with measured curiosity. Misty plucked a few hairs from Alps' cheek, which didn't really hurt, since he was shedding a bit, and she placed them on top of the mutely glowing orb. They faded away, and the orb glowed a bit brighter.

"You are going to feel sleepy soon, Alps." Misty said softly, placing her hands on his temple. Nidaja and Nita did the same, all of them touching his head softly, their eyes closed. Nita's tail was wagging.

"What is this for?" Alps asked softly.

"There are some questions that I have that you cannot answer because they are locked away in some of your earliest childhood memories. There is only one way for us to see them. This is a Mindwalk Sphere. It's an old Letai relic. It will let us move through your memories... your thoughts and dreams, until we find the answers we are looking for. Don't worry, this won't hurt at all. You will wake up feeling pretty rested, okay?" she said happily. Alps was already feeling groggy.

"Just make sure to put everything back where you found it. I don't wanna forget anything else." he said. Before, the thought of someone invading his mind and poking around in there, looking for things might have unsettled Alps, but nothing about this came close to the nature of being locked in that crystal. Besides, only his most trusted friends were going to be playing around in there. He kept no secrets from them. Anything they asked was open for them to know. There was no harm in letting them in there now. Besides, while he was not yet married to Nita, he was still very much a slave. His mind and body, now, and after he was married, as far as he was concerned, was property of his queen.

"We won't start in the same place in his mind." Misty said, more to Nidaja and Nita than to the white slave. "When you get into his mind, you will be disoriented and some things won't make sense. The laws of nature don't even really apply for the most part. Concentrate on finding earlier and earlier memories, okay?" she said. Nita and Nidaja nodded their heads, and the soft bobbing of their heads seemed to go in slow motion for Alps, as he felt almost wrenched from his couch, and into the air, and then tossed afloat upon the wind. Darkness came. Warm, comforting, embracing darkness. His friends could not get any closer to him than they were now. Alps slept.

Nita looked around for a while. Misty was right. She felt very, very disoriented. She was unchanged in any way, which was oddly comforting. She

had feared arriving without clothes for some reason. She was standing in a small, fenced in yard outside of a wooden building. She walked around to the other side of it, and looked with curiosity at the sign that hung out front. The sign made no sense. She scratched her head. It just looked like an unintelligible jumble of letters and lines that resembled letters. Was she not able to read inside of his mind? She shook her head, understanding suddenly how very different being in someone else's mind would be. She could still read. Alps couldn't. his memories didn't know what the sign meant. He could not relay that to her, even if his memories of his earlier life were sharp.

Nita heard laughter. She turned quickly. There were four young lupines... children, dressed in white and tattered clothing. They were playing with a leather ball, almost bigger than they were which was apparently immense fun for them.

"Orphans..." she said to herself. "Oh, that's right... for Alps to legally be a slave, he had to have grown up in an orphanage and not been adopted." Nita slapped her forehead, feeling silly. She walked up to the four children. They could not see her. The memories of other places and other people only represented that. Memories. Nita looked around for something more familiar. A white-furred orphan. That's what she was meant to find. This was a very early memory, and his childhood mind might hold the answers to Misty's questions, and secretly, Nita's own.

Finally, not seeing Alps out here with the children, she decided to go inside. After all, no one would tell her to leave. She could go anywhere she wanted. She opened the large, heavy wooden door. It seemed a lot heavier than it should have been, but she realized that she was experiencing this from the point of view of Alps' memories. To a little orphaned wolf, this door had been terribly heavy.

Nita found Alps in the main hall, almost immediately after she had opened the door. She gasped, and held her hands in front of her chest, clasped tightly.

"Oh my love... Oh you sweet little thing, how cute!!" she squealed. She moved over to the white cub, and stood before him. "This has to be him. He's the only white lupine I have ever seen." She looked at him carefully. The child, perhaps only about six years of age, was very thin and scrawny, his fur a bit unkempt, and he was barely even dressed. He was wearing ripped shorts, a bit too small for him, and no shirt. He was on his knees, scrubbing the polished wooden floor. This was likely why he wasn't wearing much. He didn't want to get his clothes dirty doing these chores. Nita canted her head. "How come you are in here cleaning, when the other boys are outside playing with the oaf-ball?" she asked.

"They don't want to play with me..." he said softly, looking up at Nita. The emerald lupine queen gasped, backing up a bit.

"Alps?" she asked. Misty had not told her that Alps would be able to see her in his memories. This made things very different, and new questions cranked away quickly in Nita's mind.

"That's what Priestess Akeena named me, yes." he said softly. Nita's eyes widened. Alps had another name? Before he was an orphan? She had heard of new names being applied to children to separate them from painful pasts by priestesses who found them. Alps was looking at Nita now. She felt her heart swell. At this age, he was adorable, even as unkempt and sullen as he looked now. This pleased Nita for very selfish reasons. She would eventually be a mother, and seeing Alps at this age made her feel more content with that. One questioned burned as bright as the sun now in Nita's mind, and she had to ask it.

"What was your name before?" she asked, her heart pounding hard. This is something Alps had very possibly forgotten, and this little trip into his past would answer. She looked into his large, violet eyes as he gazed back up at him.

"Will you adopt me if I tell you? What name would you like me to have?" he asked. Nita felt her heart nearly break. It was so easy to forget how lonely Alps must have been as an orphan, especially with white fur, which had made it impossible for him to get adopted. The queen inhaled deeply, and, not able to really help herself, she leaned down and scooped up the cub into her arms. Alps rested in her arms limply. He was so very light. Nita wanted to take him someplace and get him cleaned up, and feed him, but it didn't really matter. This was not real. It was all in his mind.

"I cannot adopt right now. I am traveling." she said, being as honest as she could.

"I understand." Alps said, seeming to not really care very much. Perhaps asking to be adopted had become a lot like panhandling. Maybe at this point, he asked everyone.

"Will you tell me your name?" she asked.

"Alps." he answered.

"No, the one you had before that." Nita said, amazed at how distracted or perhaps even cynical he was at this age. He looked up into her eyes and nodded slowly.

"My name used to be Aris." he whispered. "I'm not s'posed to tell anyone though." he added. He looked around a bit fearfully. "Mick will tell on me if he hears. He always tells on me." Alps whispered. Nita nodded. Mick was likely another kid. She was more interested in what she'd just learned. It felt like

getting parts of a puzzle. Aris. His name had been Aris as a child. That name seemed familiar somehow.

"Aris is a very nice name." Nita said. "I know... this might be difficult for you..." she said, inhaling deeply. She toyed with simply not asking this, as it might be painful for the cub in her arms, which seemed so very fragile. But it was the second piece of the puzzle, as far as she was concerned, in finding out who this unusual slave really was. She wanted to know who he would have been if he were never a slave.

"Can't be any more difficult than finding a home." he said softly. "Can you put me down, lady? I will get in trouble if I don't finish scrubbing the floor." he said. Nita nodded, realizing that Alps was not consciously here. She was speaking to him deep into his past subconscious. It was so strange. He resumed scrubbing the floor.

"Alps... er... Aris... How did you... become an orphan?" Nita asked cautiously, expecting his mood to change sharply. It didn't. He remained as icily calm as he had been since she got here. Was Alps really like this as a kid? It would explain a few things, that was for certain. His answer chilled Nita.

"Orphans are orphans. They either get that way because their parents die, or because they get abandoned. They tell me I was abandoned." he says. "Probably for the same reason no one adopts me." Nita frowned, actually feeling a pang of guilt. At first, she too had judged Alps because of his odd fur-color. She wished she could just hold this cub, and let him know what happened to him later in life. To tell him everything would be okay, but if it did make a difference, it might completely change who Alps grew up to be. She would say nothing. She got on her knees, and watched him scrub the floor a little longer. She gazed at his face for a while. He'd been beaten up pretty frequently it seemed. That was to be expected though. He was scrawnier than the other kids, and an outcast. She felt so sorry for the poor cub.

"Where... were you found? Did someone leave you on the steps here?" Nita asked. Alps looked up at her almost sickly. Nita backed up a little.

"I wish..." he said, resuming scrubbing quietly. "I was found about two years ago in the ruins of an old shrine. I was left to the spirits they said. I was not supposed to survive. Some kids found me." he said. Nita went dead silent. Left alone? How old would he have been? Four or five, perhaps? Just a baby. It seemed like such a sad beginning for Alps. What kind of mother would have done that to him? Was his white fur that terrible for him? How could he have grown up to be kind and loving after all of this?

"You seem to regret... having survived..." Nita said softly, choking on her words. "Do you... wish you had died?" Suddenly, the queen began to feel that

Alps plunging the knife into his chest at her command when they first met might not have been blind obedience. It may well have been a long time coming. That didn't make her feel any better about it.

"Why would I wish to die?" Alps asked. Nita was taken aback, and canted her head slightly.

"Everyone is mean to you... The boys tease you. Your life has been so hard," she said. "What keeps you from just wanting to... throw it all away? What makes you not want to release your soul, and go back to the life essence?" Nita asked. She had to know. What had been his ray of hope? What had been the light that guided Alps through all this, and delivered him to her arms ultimately?

"Priestess Akeena," Alps stated. "She made sure to keep me from making the mistake of ... killing myself to release my soul... She told me the reason that it would be a really stupid mistake to do that," Alps said, barely even a whisper now.

"She said things will get better?" Nita said softly, suddenly wanting to commend that priestess if she was still alive. She had made sure Alps could make it through these years with less emotional damage, surely. "Did she tell you that you will someday know true happiness?" Nita asked, petting Alps' ears.

"No," Alps said softly, though not continuing to speak. He simply scrubbed as Nita pulled her hand away. What then? What revelation had kept Alps from giving up? How had he survived a life of such unfair treatment by almost everyone he ever knew? For his age, the boy seemed remarkably, almost eerily intelligent. He seemed mentally far older. This may have only further displaced him from adoption, and from being friends with the other children.

"What did she tell you?" Nita asked. "Why do you keep going?" Alps looked again at Nita with his calm, gentle, intelligent eyes, and said something that scarred Nita's heart forever. It showed Nita the deepest depth of cruelty that could ever have been done to her beloved. Nothing could have prepared her for the shame and viciousness of what Alps had been led to believe. Yet, his words came out so calmly and casually, that it seemed as if he were merely telling her a simple fact, like what day it happened to be.

"I have no soul."

Nidaja looked around blankly. The dusty street was rather lonely, since it was dusk here, in whatever memory she had walked into. Nidaja had done this before. The Mindwalk Sphere was a tool used by the Amanian army now to examine their foes, find spies, and even in counter intelligence. Misty used it for her duties as a counselor, as she was now, but Nidaja was, perhaps, the most knowledgeable in the practical uses of the Mindwalk Sphere. Still, there was never a way to be certain of where in someone's mind you would be when you first made contact. The lupine general looked up and down the street. In the middle of the courtyard she was standing in was a well. By the well was a small stage. Across from it was a large house. Beside that house was a blacksmith's shop. On the other side of the house was a bakery of some kind. Nidaja could smell the bread baking.

"I know this place." Nidaja said, blinking a bit. "This was where I first met you." she said. "This is the town of Luca, where you used to live. Please don't tell me I am going to see your memory of meeting me. That would be useless even if a little entertaining." she laughed. Nidaja heard a shout from the house. It was a female voice, which sounded very, very angry. She looked over at the house as she approached it slowly. Nidaja tried the door carefully. It was locked.

"Oh Alps... you don't want me to go in here?" Nidaja said softly, hearing another angry shout, and a dull thump. Her ears perked. That was a sound she knew. Someone was being beaten up. She growled softly. "Oh this better not be what I think it is..." she said. "You can't hide this from me. I know the power of this sphere a lot better than you." Nidaja jumped up with both feet, and kicked both out in front of her, practically splintering the door apart. She landed deftly on her feet, and walked inside.

"This simply cannot be." Misty said softly, looking around. The place was rather dark, but it was a style of architecture that Misty had simply been dumbfounded to see in Alps' memories. She caressed over a white marble column. This room seemed to be the living room of perhaps a rich socialite, or something of that nature, but its design was very old. It was similar to the ruins of Letai temples that Misty had seen. "Is this from your experience in the Shadowfall Crystal? Where you met the death priestess?" She looked around the dark room, whispering to herself. "No... This can't be it... Where is this in your past? Am I close to the answer?" she asked.

Misty slowly wandered around the room, looking at everything she could find. There was nothing tangible here, but many of the things that would have

been shiny, like candleholders, or a key hanging on the hearth of the fireplace, were very easy to see. Misty looked beyond the fireplace. There were winding stairs which went up. They were marble, like the rest of the structure, and a deep, rich green carpet went up into the spiraling darkness. Misty followed it up slowly. There were pictures on the wall, but Misty could not make out what they were.

"You must be pretty young Alps, to not even know what these pictures were," she said softly. "Why are you in this place? This looks like the living quarters in a Letai Life Temple. I don't know that any of these ever existed in your lifetime. Where is this Alps? Where are you in this place?" The long-furred Misty found herself in a hallway. There was a door all the way at the very end. Hanging on the door was a very cute-looking smiling crystal mask. Misty rubbed her chin curiously. "A Letai Spirit Ward," she said softly. "Things are just getting stranger and stranger... And it's all supporting what I suspected. Oh Alps... how can this possibly be?" The counselor moved to the door, opened it, and walked inside.

In a very nice silver crib, padded with warm, soft pillows and blankets, Misty found what she had been looking for. She scooped up the two year old and looked at him, as he opened his eyes. Alps was wrapped in a silk nightshirt, and seemed very healthy and comfortable. His eyes slowly opened. They were already their normal purple hue. He gazed at Misty quietly, reaching out with his little hands, trying to touch her nose. Misty hugged him to her chest, suddenly very much in love.

"So this was the start of your life..." she said, sitting on a chair by the crib, and holding the child in her lap. "It doesn't look so bad. How on earth did you go from this... to being a slave? Your parents seem to love you, even with your pure white fur," she said. "I know everyone always assumed that your parents abandoned you, but by seeing this, I rather doubt that. I hope Nita and Nidaja find some information about how you ended up alone like that. And better yet... I hope they find out where this is. I should like to see what's here in the present," she said. Misty jumped slightly, as she heard the door open. Candlelight spilled into the room. Misty found herself wanting to hide. She scolded herself, knowing full well she was not an active part in what was really going on here. She placed the child back in the crib though, and backed up. A robed figure moved through the room, and Misty cursed herself softly, since she was not standing where she could see the figure's face.

"Hiya sweetie..." came a strangely familiar feathery voice. "I know it's very late. Your mother's here though. I bet you are so hungry," she said softly. She sat down in the chair by the crib, holding the child to her chest. She looked up, smiling happily, seeming so content at herself now. Seeing the happy mother's face, Misty staggered backwards, and choked back a cry of surprise. Finally, holding her face, she coughed out,

"Impossible! How... How can this be?!"

Nita sat up slowly, having slumped over in her chair. She was sitting back in the council chamber where she had linked with Alps' mind. Nidaja and Misty were both still asleep, it seemed. Alps was nowhere to be found. She looked at the empty couch curiously, and the softly glowing Mindwalk sphere. Nita reached over and shook Misty and Nidaja both awake.

"Hey! Wake up!" she chimed. Misty snerked and rubbed her eyes, and then gasped. She looked at Nita very excitedly, wagging her tail from the things she'd discovered.

"Oh dear heavens... Nita! You won't believe this... I don't even know how it's possible but-" Nita cut her off and pointed at the couch.

"Where is my fiancé?" the queen churred expressively. Misty blinked and shook her head, as if just snapping back into reality. She looked at the couch.

"He... left?" she asked, rubbing her ears. "I have such important news for him though!" she cried. Nita nodded softly.

"I do too!" she said. "I found out some very important stuff, and I have something I really need to tell him!" She thought back to the last thing he'd said before their link ended. She just had to make sure he didn't still believe something so unfair.

"I'm right here." Nidaja said softly, expressing a bit of confusion. Nita and Misty both looked at her.

"Yes, we can see you. We are looking for Alps though. Did you see him leave?" Nita asked, seeming a little confused by Nidaja's statement as well.

"No... I didn't leave. I'm right here." Nidaja said. There was something timid in her voice that Nita felt was very out of place. Misty's ears slicked back. She suddenly looked a bit fearful. Nita looked into Nidaja's eyes. They were round, confused, and a little fearful looking. They were the same as...

"A... Alps?" Nita whispered, looking at her sister.

"Yes?" she asked. Nita covered her mouth, gritting her teeth.

"Oh, Misty... It *is* him... Then where is Nidaja?" she said, touching the empty couch.

"Oh... By the lights..." Misty said. "Nidaja... must have switched her mind with Alps'."

"Why?!" Nita fairly cried. Nidaja squealed in shock. Nita and Misty looked at her. With wide, fearful eyes, she was looking at her chest. A little slow on the uptake, Alps was now fully aware of the reason for confusion.

"How did this happen?!" Nidaja cried. "Can you *fix* it?!" Misty reached out and stroked the general's face soothingly.

"Yes. We can fix this... We just have to find Nidaja! She's got your body." Misty said. Nidaja hugged herself, Alps' mind adjusting to a completely different body.

"Was this an accident?" Nita asked. "Maybe Nidaja was afraid and ran off?" the queen offered.

"No." Misty said. "Nidaja has mastered the Mindwalk Sphere. She knows exactly what she's doing. We just have to figure out why!"

"Nita?" Nidaja said in a shaky voice. She was still clutching her chest.

"Yes... Alps?" she said, her mind seeming to warp at the concept of his mind being in a different body.

"How do you walk without falling over..? These things are heavy." Nita looked at Alps-turned-Nidaja and part of her mind metaphorically threw itself out the window.